

Covenants

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Noahic Covenant

Adam and Eve's fatal decision to seize life on their own terms and their own wisdom continued in the following generations. Genesis 6:5 offers a window into the state of humanity not long after Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden, "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." Despite humanity's evil ways, God chose a faithful and righteous man, Noah and his family, to be a remnant in which He was to redeem creation. God gave Noah special instructions to build a boat to withstand a global flood that would wipe out every person and animal except for Noah and those with him in the ark (Gen. 7:21-23).

Once the flood waters had receded, God called out Noah and all those on the ark with him and made a covenant, or a binding promise that is relational in context, with Noah saying, "Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11). God's binding promise came with no strings attached. He unilaterally and unconditionally made the promise to Moses despite humanity's sin nature, saying "never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (Gen. 8:21). This is a covenant known as common grace for it was not only a promise God made solely to Noah and his family, but also a promise to all generations.

The Noahic Covenant is an everlasting promise to all humanity that will reach its fulfillment in the coming of the new heaven and earth. The Apostle John described this eschatological phenomenon, "then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea...there will be no more death or

mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:1-4). A rainbow in the sky serves as a sign of God’s covenant between Noah and Himself. The Hebrew word used in Genesis 9:14-16 is *qeshet*, a bow that is used a weapon of war (Gen. 48:22, Josh. 24:12, 1 Sam. 2:4). Michael Lawrence comments that God put a bow in the sky, facing towards the heavens instead of his rebellious creation below, as a sign that final judgment has been postponed until redemption has been fully accomplished.¹

Although, this is the first covenant God made with humanity, there is significant parallelism between the Noahic Covenant and the creational mandate given to Adam and Eve in the garden. T. Alexander comments on the concord between the two, stating “God’s covenant with Noah serves to reaffirm God’s original creational intent which had been ‘disrupted’ by the flood.”² As God’s *rûah* hovered over the chaotic waters as He began creating the cosmos, so we see God’s *rûah* blow away the chaotic flood waters in Noah’s day for Him to create once again (Gen. 1:2 ;8:1). God’s creation of mankind in His image and instruction to rule on His behalf are themes that are interwoven into the blessing God gives to Noah and his family upon exiting the boat (Gen. 1:26-27; Gen. 9:1-6). Also, we see Noah emerge in an Eden like garden atop a hill where God instructs Noah and his family to be fruitful and multiply, echoing the very words He spoke to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28; 9:1-20). While God’s covenant with Noah did not provide redemption, it was the preservation of life in which redemption will be realized.³

Abrahamic Covenant

¹ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 59.

² T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 421.

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 39.

Through Noah, creation again experienced fruitfulness and multiplication but the hearts of the people seemed no different than their ancestors. When it seemed impossible for salvation to come through humanity, God called upon a man named Abraham. God spoke to Abraham on three separate occasions, offering covenant promises for descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, the land of Canaan, and to be a blessing to all nations through his offspring (Gen. 12, 15, 17). The Abrahamic Covenant continues God's original purpose with Adam, readministered through Noah, and solidified his promises to Abraham.

There is no denying the tension observed between God's bilateral call of Abraham to display faith and obedience to receive his promises versus God's unilateral promises demonstrated in His solo journey through the split animals. On one hand, the biblical text portrays Abraham's obedience to God demonstrated in his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the chosen seed of Abraham, as a reason for receiving God's promise (Gen. 22:16-18). The biblical authors also confirmed that Isaac would inherit the promises made to Abraham on "account of Abraham's obedience to God's voice, keeping his charges, commandments, statutes, and laws" (Gen. 26:3-5). On the other hand, God made an undoubtedly unconditional and unilateral covenant with Abraham. God ratified the covenant by cutting animals in half and walking through them. In the ancient eastern culture, walking through cut animals was one's way of staking their own life on faithfully adhering to covenant terms. The significance that the Lord alone passed through the animals revealed He would call a curse down upon himself if He failed to fulfill the promises to Abraham and his heirs.⁴ It should be said then to deny either stance is to diminish the beautiful picture captured through God's covenant to Abraham.

⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

The sign of the covenant was circumcision. All males who wanted to share in the inheritance of the Abrahamic Covenant had to be circumcised. To Abraham, circumcision was of great significance. As a display of His judgment, God had Abraham cut off the part of his genitals he used to oppress and abuse his slave, Hagar. He used sex and his body as tool of oppression and abuse symbolizing when man seeks life on his own terms. Circumcision also displays God's mercy and grace, as He alone is responsible for the promises of numerous offspring. God marks the part of the male body that generates life and blessing, symbolizing the faith and trust one puts in Him.⁵ The covenantal blessing was a promised people and land that would live under God's rule and be a blessing to all the nations. It is worth noting that the five accounts of blessing administered to Abraham demonstrate a literary inversion from the five curses against the fallen creation in early Genesis.

To a large degree there was early fulfillment of the covenant promises. The promise of numerous generations was fulfilled in King Solomon's reign (1 Kings 4:20) and the promise of land was fulfilled when Israel was freed from Egypt and led into Canaan (Josh. 21:44-45). But it was not until the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we see the complete fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. T Alexander observes that "the apostolic interpretation of the ancient promises proclaimed that their fulfillment was in Jesus Christ and His church."⁶ Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham that is shared with those who put their faith in Him (Gal. 3:16, Rom. 4:16-18, Gal. 3:29). The promise land "was realized proleptically in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for His resurrection represents the arrival of the new creation, and it will find its

⁵ Tim Mackie. "Exodus Scroll." Podcast. The Bible Project, June 22, 2022. <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/did-god-try-kill-moses/>.

⁶ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 145.

final fulfilment in the new creation- the new temple over which God and the Lamb will reign.”⁷
 The universal blessing came through Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:7-9).

While there are no discontinuities between the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants, there are a few continuities. God’s instruction to Adam and Noah to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with offspring is brought into focus under the Abrahamic Covenant. What was instructed to Adam and Noah before had now been promised to Abraham. Another theme that continued to Abraham was the inhabitation of land. God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the creatures and land, then He put Noah back into a garden where he started anew with a fresh inhabitation and lastly, God promised Abraham land that would not only nationalize His people but also give them a place to dwell with Him again. In conclusion, the basis of the Abrahamic covenant was the initial promises of blessings bestowed to all humanity-fruitfulness and multiplication, dominion over the creatures and land, and image bearers that live in the unyielding blessing of God, would be fulfilled exclusively through the family of Abraham.⁸

Mosaic Covenant

After the promise of offspring, land, and nationhood the Israelites found themselves exiled, living as slaves in a foreign land. Following hundreds of years of enslavement, God heard the cries of Israel and chose a man named Moses to be their representative and lead them out of slavery, into the promised land of Canaan where He would make them His very own people and He would be their God (Ex. 2:6-8). Prior to entering the promised land, God made a covenant with Israel, giving them six hundred and sixteen laws to follow, telling them “If you obey Me

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, 57.

⁸ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 143.

fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). Israel’s covenant faithfulness would result in the blessing of the promise land while failing to abide would result in a curse of exile from the promise land.

The Mosaic Covenant is a bilateral agreement between God and Israel where God would make Israel unique from every other nation, setting them apart to be His special treasure, priestly kingdom, and holy nation. To be such, Israel needed to keep God’s covenant by walking in step with all the laws laid out before them. Unequivocally, it seems to be a conditional, works based covenant. For example, on the first day of marriage, Israel became unfaithful and broke their covenant with God by creating and sacrificing to an idol. As a result, God initially decided to wipe out all the Israelite nation and start over through Moses, but after Moses reminded God of His unconditional covenant promise with Abraham, God relented (Ex. 32:1-14). Then God told Moses He would not go with them to the promised land, but because Moses pleas with God once more, God’s presence remained with Israel (Ex. 33:1-17). God’s decision not to go with Israel into the promised land revealed a conditional, works based covenant. Because the covenant was meant to allow Israel to live in proximity to a God who decided to dwell amongst them, removing Himself from their midst would nullify the covenant because Israel would not need it anymore. T. Desmond Alexander notes that the primary concern of the Mosaic covenant was to maintain the unique divine-human relationship between Yahweh and Israel and the means to sustain communion between a holy God and a sinful people were required.⁹

There also seems to be unconditional grace intertwined with the Mosaic Covenant. Before God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, He had already freed them from

⁹ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 424.

slavery in Egypt and adopted them as His children (Ex. 4:22-23). In Exodus 20, before the laws were given, God reminded Israel of His fulfillment of the unconditional promises. Schreiner picks up on this, noting that before the covenant stipulations were declared, the Lord's covenant mercy was rehearsed. The God who called for covenant loyalty in keeping His commands is the God who showered his love on Israel by freeing them from slavery. His grace and mercy precede and undergird His demands. Ultimately, Israel's covenant with God did not depend on perfect obedience, since sacrifices could be offered for covenant violations.¹⁰

The sign of the covenant between God and Israel is the Sabbath, rest. Sabbath is of great importance to God from the beginning. In Genesis 1, every day of creation ended with "there was evening and there was morning" except the seventh day, when God rested. That day of rest is depicted as having no end. This literary design was to demonstrate God's presence alone was sufficient for His creation to live life abundantly in His peace. The Sabbath is also of great significance to Israel as God tested them on their journey in the desert on their way from Egypt to Mount Sinai. God told Israel to take a seventh day rest from collecting manna to test to see if Israel would trust in God for His abundant life that He alone offers or if they would choose to live life on their own terms. It is only fitting then, that if God were to dwell with His people, they must find their rest in Him alone.

The Mosaic Covenant finds its fulfillment in the redemptive story in Jesus Christ. Paul writes that "if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory...will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious" (1 Cor. 3:7-9). Moses and the Prophets foretold that to be a holy nation and set apart, Israel would need to be a renewed and transformed people. Schreiner observes that God's covenant with Israel was quite different from

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, 61,65.

the beginning, for there were not any promise of ultimate fulfillment. As we will see in future covenant, God's covenant with Israel had a built-in "obsolescence". It was not intended to last forever because it did not transform the heart of those who heard the covenant demands.¹¹

Through the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, and the gifting of His Spirit, God removed from Israel (anyone who believed in Jesus as the Christ) a heart of stone and instead, gave them a heart of flesh that will allow them to follow His decrees and keep His laws. For it was a sign that they are His people and He as their God (Deut. 30:6, Ez. 11:19; 36:26, Jer. 31:33, Heb. 8:10).

There are major themes of continuity between the previous covenants and the Mosaic Covenant. First, we see the continuity of the promised land. Although the focus of the Mosaic Covenant was how Israel would conduct themselves within the promised land and not what the Israelites must do in order to obtain the land, land was still a continued prominent theme throughout.¹² Second, God's purpose in making Adam in His image, as an image bearer was to represent Him before all creation. This theme was continued in the Abrahamic Covenant as God promised that his seed would be a blessing to all nations. It is continued in God's promise to set the Israelites apart as a kingdom of priests. The role of a priest was to mediate, or restore, the relationship between two parties. The only other characters in the story at this point are Yahweh and the nations. Israel's role, then, was to reconcile all the nations to Yahweh. Again, God chose one out of the many, so that the many would be blessed.¹³ Lastly, the continuity of circumcision is evident. The covenant sign given to Abraham was circumcision, but the law, was given as a

¹¹ Ibid., 68, 72.

¹² T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 424.

¹³ Carissa Quinn. "Who Has God Chosen? And What about the Rest of Us?" *Bible Project*, 2020. <https://bibleproject.com/blog/who-has-god-chosen/>.

“guard” until the promised Seed, Jesus Christ, came to offer a circumcision of the heart (Gal. 3:23-29, Rom. 2:29).

Davidic Covenant

When it came to the establishment of the Davidic Covenant, Israel was living in the promised land under the Mosaic Covenant. Saul was the first appointed king of Israel but was soon rejected because of his failure to trust in and obey God. David, a man after God’s own heart, was anointed as the king of Israel after Saul (1 Sam. 13:14). David’s humble posture along with his trust and obedience in the Lord set him apart from all others (2 Sam. 22). While David was king, he desired to build a house for the Lord to dwell in. But God did not allow David to build a house for Him. Instead, God told David “The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you...I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands...your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:11-16). Despite the word covenant not being explicitly stated, Psalms 89 and 132 reveal God’s promise to David to be a covenant. Although there is no offering or meal that ratifies this covenant, the sign of the covenant seems to be with the birth of a son for successive generations of kings. The blessing is to rule on the throne as king of Judah, while the curse, as we will see, is to have the throne stripped from David and his offspring.

There are indications of conditions and stipulations in God’s covenant to David. Similar to the Mosaic Covenant where the nations were judged (exiled) by failing to remain faithful to

the covenant, the Davidic Covenant brought judgment, discipline, and the curse upon the kings who failed to keep the prescriptions of the covenant (Ps. 89:30-32). Later in Israel's history, we see King Jeconiah, of David's line, violate God's decrees so grievously that God pronounced the curse of the covenant by not having any of his offspring sit on the throne of David or rule Judah anymore (Jer. 22:30). These two examples give good reason to believe God's covenant with David was conditional.

Ultimately, God makes it very clear that His promise to David is an unconditional, unilateral, covenant of grace. God says to the Psalmist "I will maintain my love to [David] forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure" (Ps. 89:28-29). God's promise to David to have a son/seed to sit on the throne will not be revoked, even if any subsequent kings from David's line disobey God and lose out on the blessing. God speaks to Ezekiel, saying "I will place over [Israel] one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken" (Ez. 37:25). How then does one resolve the tension between the conditional and unconditional statements of the covenant? The answer is meant to be realized only with an obedient King.¹⁴

God foreshadows the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant to Jeremiah, reminding him that a day is coming when He will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a king that will reign as king and deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness (Jer. 23:5-6). The fulfillment of God's promises could only be depended on Jesus Christ- the Davidic King who was a new Adam, righteous and blameless like Noah, a seed of Abraham that will bless all nations, and a truer intercessor than Moses. John's vision of the throne room in heaven reassures that Jesus is the

¹⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, 78.

only worthy one, the lamb who was slain, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who is standing at the center of the throne room, who everyone bows down before and cries out His holiness and worthiness (Rev. 5).

The Davidic Covenant is filled with an abundance of continuity from previous covenants. Just as God set Israel apart as a holy nation in the Mosaic Covenant, God anointed King David and his sons to represent Israel to the nations. They would be blessed through his throne's obedience to Yahweh and their reign over the people. Their righteous rule would display to the world what it means to live as children of God, set apart.¹⁵ There is also continuity with the Abrahamic covenant as the promised king would be fulfilled through the throne of David (Gen. 17:6, Gen. 35:11, Gen. 49:10). God's promise to Abraham of universal blessing will now be realized through a son of David. In other words, a Davidic King, Jesus Christ, will be the means by which the promise of land, offspring, and worldwide blessing will be realized (Ps. 72:17). The Davidic Covenant continues the theme of ruling. The initial mandate God gave to Adam was dominion over all creation. Then, when the nation of Israel was formed it was tasked to be a ruling nation through the Mosaic Covenant. And through a Davidic King, the one who will rule all creation will be realized. Isaiah writes of this saying "And the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of government and peace there will be no end" (Isa. 9:6-7).

New Covenant

Solomon succeeded his father, David, as king of Israel and initially followed in his father's footsteps as an obedient representative of God. Eventually Solomon turned away from

¹⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, 73.

God's commands. As a result, Israel split in two kingdoms: a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah. Both kingdoms departed from God's ways and remained unfaithful to their covenant with God. Because of their sin, God's people were exiled from their land as nation after nation dominated and ruled over them (Jer. 30:14-15). Amidst exile, the Lord promised restoration through a new covenant, saying "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:31-34).

In addition to Jeremiah's prophesy of a "new covenant," Isaiah also announced a covenant, calling it a "covenant of peace." Isaiah testified that God would raise up one individual from within the many—a chosen messiah—who will fulfill this role of revealing Yahweh to the world. This messiah will be a "light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6) and "salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). Then, in the early first century, a man named Jesus of Nazareth was born. When Jesus finally revealed himself, He claimed to be this chosen one, calling himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and commissioning his followers to spread the good news of his resurrection from the dead "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). He was the perfect image (Col.1), the promised seed (Gal. 3), the true Son (Matt. 3) and the messianic King (Matt. 21). One night while Jesus was sharing the Passover meal with His disciples, He unveiled that the new covenant the Prophets spoke about was realized in Him and would be ratified through His sacrificial death on the cross. Matthew captures this moment, writing "Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my

blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:27-30).

The new covenant found in Jesus Christ represented the culmination of God’s saving work for His people. The new covenant is unilateral and unconditional in its promises. Jesus Christ definitively fulfilled all God’s previous covenants with His people because His sacrifice offered complete forgiveness of sins, a renewed heart, and a transformed people. Yet, there remains a conditional, bilateral aspect as only those who believe and put their faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Lord will partake in the blessing of a new, righteous, and eternal life. Those who do not put their hope in Jesus as the Messiah will experience the curse of eternal separation from the source of life, Jesus Christ. The sign of the new covenant is baptism, exemplified in Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome, writing “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6:4). Baptism represents a transformed heart, anointed by the Holy Spirit. It also symbolizes one’s decision to deny themselves, pick up their cross and follow Jesus and in doing so, they cross over from spiritual death to life. This is something that was not possible with the previous covenants.

As we begin to examine the continuity and discontinuity of previous covenants, it should be noted that the new covenant is not the fulfillment of the Noahic covenant. The covenant with Noah was not redemptive, but rather, it guaranteed that the cosmos would endure in order to allow God to fulfill His saving promises found in the other covenants.¹⁶

The writer of Hebrews made it clear that the old covenant was obsolete (Heb. 8:13). But Jesus said He did not come to abolish the law but fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). Jesus no longer asked His

¹⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, 90.

people to follow the letter of the law. Instead, He expected His followers to follow the life guide of Holy Spirit. This elevates the life lived by His followers when compared to the old law as it requires complete transformation. There are continued themes from the old to new covenant however carried out in a discontinuous way. For example, the sign of circumcision in the Abrahamic Covenant is not fully done away with. It is true that Jesus no longer requires the physical circumcision as before, but He does require a circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29). The promise of land is still guaranteed but is no longer confined to Canaan. Rather, the land is widened to the entire universe, which becomes God's city and temple through Jesus Christ (Schreiner, 116). God's promise to David that his throne would be established forever was continued in the new covenant and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus came and testified that He was king, and his kingdom was not of this world, easily destroyable, but was an everlasting kingdom (John 18:26, Dan. 7:14).

There is discontinuity between the Mosaic Covenant and the new covenant because the old covenant did not provide lasting forgiveness of sins and it did not require transformation. The old covenant sacrifices had to be offered repeatedly and were inadequate because they never brought the people into God's presence. In the new covenant, Jesus' atoning death and resurrection achieved complete forgiveness of sins for those who put this faith in Him. Jesus' sacrifice was superior and absolute. He entered God's presence and acted as the mediator for all who believe so they could approach God's throne room boldly (Heb. 4:16). Next, the new covenant brought transformation through the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29). The indwelling gift of God's Spirit (2 Cor. 3:3) now writes His law on their hearts (Jer. 31: 32-33). Paul confirms this in His letter to the Corinth church, writing "And you show that you are a letter

from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:3).

The theme of offspring and seed is pervasive throughout all previous covenants and is continued into new covenant. The promised offspring of the women (Gen. 3:15) who will triumph over the devil by His death and resurrection is Jesus Christ. The offspring promised to Abraham is Jesus Christ, the true seed (Gal. 3:16). The promised heir and king of David’s throne is the eternal Jesus (Rev. 22:16). The promised royal priesthood and royal Israelite nation is the Church found in Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). In the Abrahamic Covenant, the promised offspring were identified by his genealogy. In the new covenant, Abraham’s innumerable offspring is fulfilled through Jesus Christ and His Church, made up of both Jew and Gentile. Paul made this clear in his letter to the Roman church, writing “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Rom. 2:28-29). The restored Israel and promised offspring consist of both Jews and Gentile who believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah (Schreiner, 108, 114).

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