

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS

REASONS TO STUDY THE COVENANTS

Because Covenants are the Backbone of the Biblical Story

- They advance the storyline of the Bible...and they provide a framework for understanding the overall plan and purpose of God as revealed in Scripture
 - Understanding how the covenants function in the Bible provides us a good grasp of how the Bible fits together...if we see the big picture in Scripture, we will do a better job of interpreting the details
- Understanding the covenants is like putting the edge pieces of a puzzle together first
 - When the edge pieces are put properly in place, the rest of the pieces can be put in their proper places
 - To try to put the details of the Bible together without an understanding of the covenants would be like trying to put a puzzle together without the framework of the edge pieces in place
- Thus, a proper understanding of the biblical covenants is vital for knowing God and understanding the plan he is working out through time...our ability to understand the Bible in particular and God's dealings with humanity in general depends on how well we understand the biblical covenants
 - Covenants are central to the fulfilling of God's purposes...they are the vehicles through which God's kingdom purposes unfold

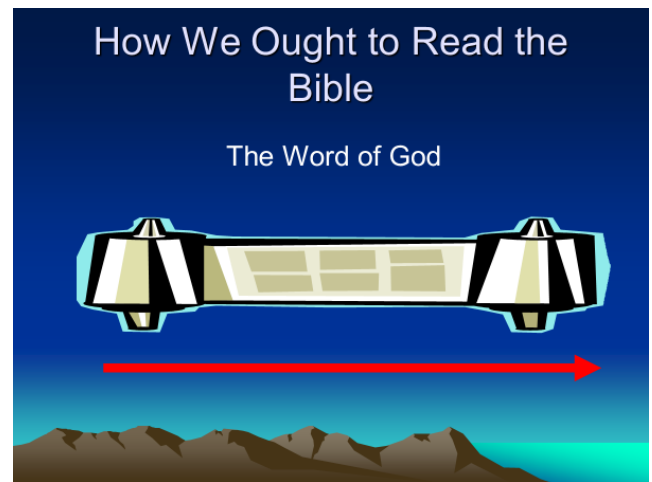
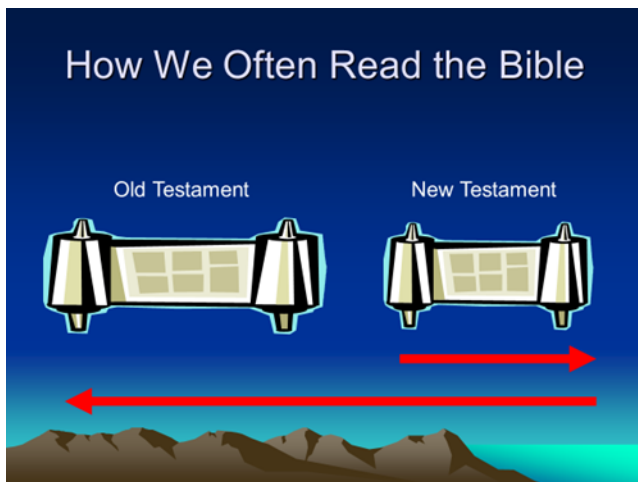
Because It Provides Glimpses Into the Character of God

- Understanding the covenants helps us understand God in terms of his character, his will, and his plan
- Each of the covenants can be associated with a particular attribute of God's character
- The following list presents an association of a divine attribute with each covenant
 1. "Abrahamic Covenant: God is *good* (or kind), the source of all blessing (Ex. 1:20; 18:9; cf. Gen. 15:13–16).
 2. Mosaic Covenant: God is *righteous* and the source of all righteous laws, judgments, statutes and decrees (Deut. 4:8; 32:4; Ps. 119:137–138).
 3. Priestly Covenant: God is *holy* and calls His people to holiness through the activities involved in sacrifice and priesthood (Num. 25:10–13; Ezek. 48:11).
 4. Deuteronomic Covenant: God is *faithful* to fulfill His promises, of which the land promise attains prominence for Israel (Jer. 32:41; cf. 2 Cor. 1:18–20).
 5. Davidic Covenant: God is *sovereign* and intends through the greater "Son of David" to fulfill the Creator's original intent regarding man as vice-regent over the earth and its creatures (Ps. 2:4–9; 8:6; 22:28; 72:8–11; 110:2; cf. Gen. 1:26, 28).
 6. New Covenant: God is *forgiving* (or merciful). His final covenant focuses on this significant aspect of His redemption program (Jer. 31:34; Eph. 4:32; cf. Ps. 32:1–2; Matt. 9:2–6; Luke 24:46–47).
- Thus, the Biblical covenants reveal a wealth of instruction about the actions and attributes of God, the covenant Maker."¹

¹ <https://dispensationalpublishing.com/defining-and-identifying-the-biblical-covenants-with-israel/>

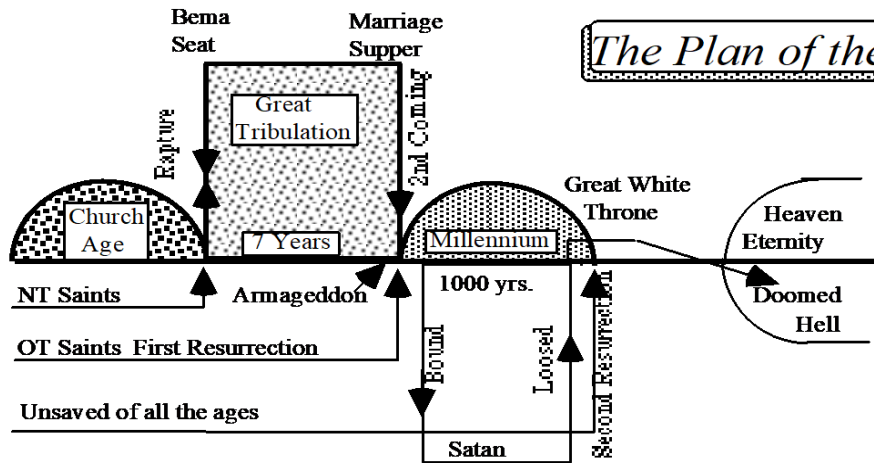
Because It Helps Us Appreciate the Old Testament

- Because all of the Biblical covenants are described in the OT, a proper understanding of the covenants necessarily forces us back into the older testament
- Doing so makes us realize how essential a proper understanding of the Old Testament really is, even for NT believers
- 2/3 of the Bible is in the OT and the NT can only be properly understood against the background of the OT
- Since the Bible of the NT writers was the OT, they often quote from the OT and assume we are familiar with its characters and contents
- Since God is the author of both OT/NT, we cannot know well the character of God if we don't study the OT
- Many OT prophecies are fulfilled in the NT (but many are not)
- When we read the Gospels, we are reading about events that took place under and OT economy
- Many of the OT's teachings are timeless principles
- Two basic but very essential themes of the Bible begin in the OT: 1) Kingdom; 2) Covenant



Because It Allows Us to Understand God's Ultimate Future Purposes

- A proper understanding of the Biblical covenants is critical to a correct understanding of God's purposes for the future
- MBC is premillennial in its end times position because of:
 1. A grammatical-historical method of interpreting the Bible
 2. The promises contained in the OT prophets
 3. The Biblical covenants
- Since the covenants point to a future fulfillment with the nation of Israel, we believe that when Christ returns he will establish his earthly rule and reign during the Millennium, leading his 1,000-year kingdom prior to the eternal state



WHAT IS A COVENANT?

- Though not totally foreign to present-day vocabulary, the English term *covenant* is seldom used
- Outside of legal documents and marriage ceremonies, the word is mostly absent from normal conversation
- But covenants played a prominent role in OT life...they were very much a part of life in the culture of the ancient Near East...they were the foundation of society and all people knew what a covenant was
- Covenants affected people and nations socially, politically, and religiously
- In fact, the covenant idea itself, first mentioned in Genesis 6 during the time of Noah, is woven into the fabric of the biblical record all the way through to Revelation 11 where the “ark of the covenant” reappears in the temple
- The word *covenant* occurs in 27 of 39 OT books and 11 of 27 NT books
- So, it is evident that covenants were common in the normal life of those in the ancient Near East
- Definition: “A covenant was an agreement between two parties that bound them together with common interests and responsibilities.”²
- It was “a compact or agreement between two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other’s behalf”³
- It was a solemn and legally binding agreement between two parties to do or not to do certain things
- It incorporates a legally binding obligation...a covenant is a formal agreement or treaty between God and people that places obligations and regulations between the parties involved
- Some covenants are unconditional or non-nullifiable in that once the covenant is ratified the covenant must be fulfilled (examples of such unconditional covenants are the Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants)
- The Hebrew word for “covenant” is *berit* (בְּרִית) – an agreement, a covenant, a contract
- “In Old Testament usage, a [berith] means a league of friendship, either between man and man or between God and man, solemnly inaugurated, either by words alone or by words and symbolic ceremonies, in which obligations are undertaken on one or both sides. The obligations are often accompanied by an oath, and have the character of solemn promises.”⁴

² Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 32.

³ Archer, “Covenant.” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.

⁴ Roger Beckwith, “The Unity and Diversity of God’s Covenants,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 1987, 96.

- The Greek word for “covenant” is *diatheke* (διαθήκη) – covenant, agreement...it does not in itself contain the idea of joint obligation, it mostly signifies an obligation undertaken by a single person
- Sometimes covenants were negotiated between individuals (i.e. between David and Jonathan)

1 Samuel 18:3-4 ~ Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt.

- Sometimes covenants were negotiated between families (i.e. between Jacob and Laban)

Genesis 31:43-48 ~ Then Laban replied to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.” Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me this day.” Therefore it was named Galeed,

- Sometimes covenants were negotiated between nations (i.e. between Israel and the Canaanites)

Exodus 23:32 ~ You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods.

Exodus 34:12, 15 ~ Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst...otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice,

- Covenant terminology is also used to describe the marriage commitment

Proverbs 2:11, 16-17 ~ Discretion will guard you, Understanding will watch over you...To deliver you from the strange woman, From the adulteress who flatters with her words; That leaves the companion of her youth And forgets the covenant of her God;

Malachi 2:14-16 ~ “Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the LORD of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”

- Covenant terminology is also used to describe international trade agreements

1 Kings 20:34 ~ Ben-hadad said to him, “The cities which my father took from your father I will restore, and you shall make streets for yourself in Damascus, as my father made in Samaria.” Ahab said, “And I will let you go with this covenant.” So he made a covenant with him and let him go.

THE DIVINE COVENANTS IN SCRIPTURE

- The covenants that are the most theologically significant, and the ones that we are going to be looking at in our study, are the covenants between God and men
- Because of God’s great superiority to man, his covenants are not negotiated
- God alone sets forth the conditions, and his faithfulness ensures that the stipulations of his covenants will be carried out
- There are 7 dominant covenants in Scripture, 6 of which are made with the nation of Israel

- God entered into these 6 covenants with the people of Israel when he unilaterally and unconditionally announced their terms and stipulations
- It is these 6 covenants and their attendant promises which lay out the Lord's kingdom plan that he began when he created man to be his vice-regent on planet Earth

The Noahic Covenant (Unconditional)

- A covenant with all mankind, including both the redeemed and the unredeemed, in which God promised never to destroy the earth by flood again. Instead, God would provide a regular cycle of seasons for as long as this earth remains
- Found in Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17

The Abrahamic Covenant (Unconditional)

- God's covenant with Abraham is the foundation of all of his covenants with Israel, specifying a land, a multitude of descendants, and Abraham as a means of blessing for the other nations
- Found in Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-22

The Mosaic Covenant (Conditional)

- The Mosaic Covenant was the means by which God would fulfill the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant
- It set Israel apart to God as a holy nation and it regulated the entire life of the nation
- God promised blessing to the nation when they were obedient to the stipulations of the covenant, and curses upon them when they were disobedient
- And it would be through this nation that all the other nations would recognize who the true God was
- This covenant was initially made with Israel at Mt Sinai.
- Found in Exodus 19:5-6; 20:1-17

The Priestly Covenant (Unconditional)

- In the priestly covenant God promised a perpetual priesthood to the line of Phineas that carries all the way through to the future millennial kingdom
- Found in Numbers 25:10-13; Ezekiel 48:11

The Land/Palestinian/Deuteronomic Covenant (Unconditional)

- In the Deuteronomic Covenant God renewed his covenant relationship and requirements with the new generation of Israelites that were about to enter the promised land, promising blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience
- There are questions as to whether this is a separate covenant or part of the Mosaic Covenant
- Found in Deuteronomy 29:1-30:2

The Davidic Covenant (Unconditional)

- God's rule upon the earth through the nation of Israel included the idea of an earthly kingdom, a monarchy
- In the Davidic Covenant, God promised to David that such a rule would always remain in his family, that David would never lack a man to sit upon the throne of Israel
- Found in 2 Samuel 7:4-16

The New Covenant (Unconditional)

- In the New Covenant God promised an enablement whereby his covenant people would have his law written upon their hearts and would finally fulfill their designated role as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to the rest of the world
- Found in Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:22-32

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS CONCERNING GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL

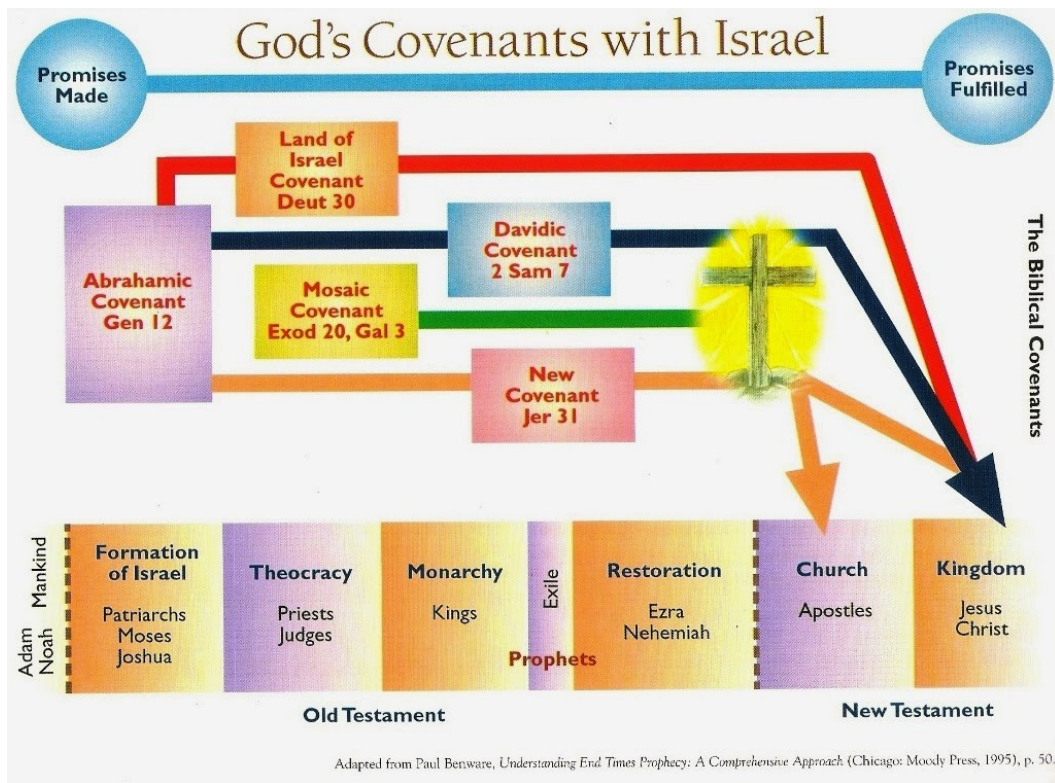
- These covenants were established by the Divine Sovereign (God) on behalf of his people (Israel)
- The authority of the covenants resides in God and God alone; there is no human "wheeling and dealing" involved
- Each one of the covenants is made with Abraham or his descendants (i.e. Israel), not with anybody else

Psalms 147:19-20 ~ He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His ordinances, they have not known them.

- No Israelite was ever saved from his or her sin by obedience to covenant stipulations
 - God had already chosen and redeemed the people of Israel before the covenant was made at Sinai
 - The covenant stipulations were given as instruction for *maintaining* the relationship between Yahweh and His people, not for *establishing* it
- God remains faithful to his covenants despite the people's unfaithfulness
- None of the covenants superceded or nullified a previous covenant...Each covenant advanced God's program without abrogating earlier covenants
 - For example, the Mosaic Covenant did not nullify the Abrahamic Covenant; rather, the Mosaic Covenant was to be the means by which the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant would be fulfilled
 - The subsequent covenants also built upon the themes that were first laid out in the Abrahamic Covenant

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COVENANTS

- Understanding how the covenants relate to one another is critical to the understanding of the Bible them as a whole
- Without seeing the interconnection between the biblical covenants, the overarching theme of Scripture is less clear



BIBLICAL COVENANTS						
ELEMENTS	ABRAHAMIC	MOSAIC	PRIESTLY	DEUTERONOMIC	DAVIDIC	NEW
Seed	X				X	
Blessing	X	X	X	X	X	X
Land	X	X		X	X	X
Nation	X	X		X	X	X
Kingdom	X	X	X		X	X
Reference	Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-8; 22:15-18	Ex. 19-24	Num. 25:10-13; Jer. 33:17-18; Ezek. 48:11	Deut. 27-30; 29:1-9	2 Sam. 7:8-16	Jer. 31:27-40

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THE UNITY OF SCRIPTURE REVEALED IN THE COVENANTS

- There are many great themes in the Bible – promise, glory of God, holiness of God, salvation, etc.
- But is it possible to identify a central theme of Scripture that unites all of the subthemes?
- I would argue that the kingdom of God is the grand central theme of Scripture that functions as a hub or center in which all other biblical themes are connected

⁵ Taken from <https://dispensationalpublishing.com/defining-and-identifying-the-biblical-covenants-with-israel/>

- The kingdom is a thread that runs from the first chapter in the Bible to the last
- Genesis 1 begins with God as the Creator/King of the universe and man as God's image-bearer who is created to rule and subdue the earth for God's purposes and glory

Genesis 1:26-28 ~ Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

- The last chapter of the Bible shows God and the Lamb on the throne and God's people ruling on the new earth

Revelation 22:3, 5 ~ There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him...5 And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.

- Thus, the Bible begins with man in God's presence with a kingdom to reign over and ends with redeemed mankind in God's presence as God's people to reign over the earth forever and ever
- Additionally, the kingdom of God was central in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus

Matthew 3:1-2 ~ Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 4:17 ~ From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

- Both Christ and His forerunner made the kingdom the focus of their ministries
- And the covenants of the Bible are the instrument/vehicles through which the kingdom program unfolds
- Each of the covenants works together to guarantee that God's kingdom purposes will be fulfilled
- Thus, Dwight Pentecost is right that "God's kingdom program" is "the outworking of His eternal and unconditional covenants."⁶
- "The Noahic Covenant promises stability of nature as the platform for God carrying out His kingdom purposes. The Abrahamic Covenant reveals that Abraham will be the father of a great nation, Israel, who will serve as the platform for bringing blessings to all nations. The Davidic Covenant shows that the ultimate King will be a descendant of David who will rule and bless the entire world from Israel. The New Covenant explains how God will change the hearts of His people and grant His Holy Spirit so they will always obey Him."⁷

⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 9.

⁷ Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 26.