

COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS

October 11, 2015

What is a Covenant?

In modern society the word "covenant" has lost some of the fullness and richness that it had in Bible times. In order to discover its meaning consider its definitions in English, Hebrew and Greek.

A. English definition:

In English the word "covenant" signifies a mutual understanding between two or more parties, each binding himself to fulfill specified obligations; a legal contract; a binding agreement; a written agreement.

B. Old Testament, Hebrew definition (berith):

1. An agreement, which implies the thought of cutting a covenant;
Gen 15:9-21 Abraham cuts the covenants and God passes between the cut pieces.
Jer 34:18-19 God holds the nation of Israel accountable for violating the cut covenant.
2. An arrangement, agreement or treaty between two parties with each assuming some obligations or mutual obligation.

C. New Testament, Greek definitions:

In the New Testament there are two Greek words for covenant.

1. **Diatheke** = means "a disposition, arrangement, testament or will".

This word is found 33 times in the NT; and is translated in the KJV as:

"testament" 13 times (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1Cor 11:25, 2Cor 3:6,14; Heb 7:22; 9:15,15,16,17,20; Rev 11:19);

"covenant" 20 times (Lk 1:72; Ac 3:25; 7:8; Rom 9:4; 11:27; Gal 3:15,17; 4:24; Eph 2:12; Heb 8:6,8,9,9,10; 9:4,4; 10:16,29; 12:24; 13:20)

2. **Suntithemai** = means "to put together, placed together, to make arrangement."

It refers to an arrangement between people; it is never used in God and man's relationship.

This word is found 4 times in the NT, and is translated as: "covenanted" (Lk 22:5); "agreed" (Jn 9:22; Ac 23:20); "assented" (Ac 24:9).

It is not accidental that the two volumes of the Christian Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) have been called the Old Covenant and New Covenant.

Covenants between people in the Bible:

The general purpose for a covenant is to provide a binding sense of trust and commitment to an interpersonal relationship. The essence of a covenant is found in the kind of relationship between these people. Mutual obligations characterize that kind of relationship. Thus a covenant relationship is not merely a mutual acquaintance but a commitment to responsibility and action. A key word in Scripture to describe that commitment is "faithfulness," acted out in a context of abiding friendship. Those who enter into covenant obligate themselves to that relationship and provide it with a strong sense of security.

A. Types of covenants:

1. **Mutual protection**; not to harm each other (Gen 26:28-29; 31:50-52).

2. Military alliance and assistance in war;

Gen 14:1-3 four kings made an alliance (covenant) against five kings.

Gen 14:12-17 Abraham goes to battle for Lot because of his alliance (covenant).

Israel was told not to make such a covenant with the inhabitants of the land (Ex 23:32; 34:12, 15).

Jos 9:6-16 Joshua and the leaders of Israel made this kind of covenant with the Gibeonites.

1Ki 15:18-19 king Asa with the king of Aram.

3. Constitution, ordinance (between monarch and subjects)

2Sa 3:12-13 Abner with David

2Sa 5:3 David with all of Israel

Jer 34:8-18 Zedekiah with all the slaves of Israel

4. An alliance of friendship

David and Jonathan; Their covenant of friendship was more than a token of esteem; it bound them to demonstrate mutual loyalty and lovingkindness in certain tangible ways. (1Sam 18:3;

20:8,16-17,42; 23:18; 2Sam 21:7)

5. Promoting commerce

Solomon and Hiram, (king of Tyre) business agreement is a covenant (1 Ki 5:12).

6. Selling land

Gen 23:14-16 Abraham buys land for a grave.

Jer 32:10-12 Jeremiah purchases land from the relative.

7. An agreement between people

2 Ki 11:4 Jehoiada the priest made a covenant with some guards to protect the king's son

8. Marriage is a covenant between husband, wife and God.

To appreciate the many OT laws on marriage and divorce, one must understand that marriage itself was a covenant relationship. The solemn promises exchanged by a man and woman became their covenant obligations. Faithfulness to those promises brought marital blessing (Ps 128; Pr 18:22).

Mal 2:4 your wife is your companion, ... and your wife by covenant (Pro 2:17).

9. Personal covenant

An individual could, at least figuratively, make a covenant or vow with himself or herself (something like a New Year's resolution). Job, arguing his integrity before God, referred to a covenant he had made with his eyes to keep him from looking at a woman licentiously (Job 31:1).

B. Illustrations:

Abraham and the Amorites (Gen. 14:13).

Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:22-32; violated, 26:15).

Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:26-31).

Laban and Jacob

First contract between them for Rachel (Gen 29:15-30; violated, Gen 29:23-27).

Second contract between them for wages (Gen 30:28-34; violated, Gen 30:37-31:7).

Third contract / covenant not to harm each other (Gen 31:43-55).

Joshua and Israel with the Gibeonites (Jos 9).

Joshua and the people (Jos 24:25).

David, the leaders and the people of Israel (2Sam 5:1-3; 1Chr 11:3).

The people of Jabesh-gilead with the king of Ammon (1Sam 11:1-2).

David and Jonathan (1Sam 18:3; 20:8,16, 42; 23:18; 2Sam 21:7).

David and Abner (2 Sam. 3:12-13, 21).

Solomon and Hiram (1Ki 5:12).

Asa and Ben-hadad (1Ki 15:18-19).

Asa and all Israel (2 Chr 15:12-15).

Ahab and Ben-Hadad (1Ki 15:19; 20:34; 2Chr 16:3).

Jehoiada with King Jehoash, the temple guards and the people (2Ki 11:4, 17; 2Chr 23:1-3, 16).

Jehoiada with Assyria and oil is carried to Egypt (Hos 12:1).
Hezekiah and the people (2Chr 29:10).
Jehoshaphat with Ahaziah (2Chr 20:35-37).
Josiah and the people (2Ki 23:3).
Zedekiah with the people to release slaves (Jer 34:8, 15).
Zedekiah with Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon (Ezk 17:12-19).
People can agree, and make a covenant in opposition to God (Ps 83:5; Isa 2:6; 30:1).
Ezra, Nehemiah and the people (Ezra 10:3; Neh 10:28-39).
Husband and wife (Mal 2:14; Ezk 16:8).
The antichrist (he) will make a strong covenant with many for one week (Dan 9:27).

C. Covenant requirements:

1. Witnessed

Gen 23:16-18 between Abraham and Ephron, to purchase a grave site.
Ruth 4:9-11 Boaz purchases the right to marry Ruth.
Jer 32:10-12 between Jeremiah and relative to purchase land

2. Confirmed with an oath ["swear it"]

A. Defining "oaths"

Dictionary definition of oath = A solemn affirmation with an appeal to God for its truth.

OT Hebrew = SHEBOOAW; Something sworn; an oath, a curse. Signifies "to be complete; to seven oneself, i.e., swear (as if by repeating a declaration seven times)".

NT Greek = HORKOS; A fence, a limit, a sacred restraint placed on oneself.

Together these words show that the oath is a solemn affirmation. It is the giving of one's word which binds them to its fulfillment.

B. Biblical Perspective of taking an oath:

1. People made promises and then added an oath to assure another person that they would keep their promises.

Joseph took oath of his sons concerning his bones (Gen 50:25).

The spies made an oath of protection with Rahab (Jos 2:17-21).

Joshua made an oath with the Gibeonites not to harm them (Jos 9:18-20).

2. The oath and the promise bound the one who uttered it to its fulfillment
(Num 30:2, 10; 1Sam 14:26-28; Ac 23:21; 2Chr 6:22; 15:15).

3. In certain cases, only a person in authority could release someone from an unwise oath and promise (Gen 24:8,41; Num 30:2, 10, 13).

4. The oath made covenant promises irrevocable, so that they could never be annulled
(Mat 14:9; Gen 26:23, 33; Jer 11:5; Zech 8:17).

5. To break an oath was to inflict a curse upon oneself
(Neh 5:12; 10:29; Ezk 16:59; Dan 9:11; Num 5:19-25).

3. Specified (Gen 34:15, 22; 1Sam 11:1-3)

What is required of each person.

4. Written and sealed [signed];

Neh 9:38; 10:1; Jer 32:10-12

D. Consequences of breaking a covenant:

2Sam 21:1-6 David and Israel experienced a three-year famine because King Saul broke the covenant that Joshua and Israel made with the Gibeonites (Jos 9).

Jer 34:8-22 king Zedekiah and those who had Israelite slaves, made a covenant to release them. Afterwards, they broke this covenant by enslaving them once again.

Jer 34:17 "... Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you,' declares the LORD, 'to the sword, to the pestilence and to the famine; and I will make you a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth."

Ezk 17:12-19 king Zedekiah broke his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, to live in subjection to them. Consequently, Zedekiah (he was the last king in Israel) is removed, the temple is destroyed and a total destruction came to Jerusalem.

Amos 1:9-10 God was punishing Tyre for violating their covenant with Edom.

Hos 10:4 Israel is judged for making worthless covenants with empty words.

Mal 2:4, 13-17 marriage - prayers can go unanswered for breaking (violence, divorce) it.

Resources used in this study:

The Covenants, by Connors and Malmin
Nelson's Topical Bible
The New Topical Textbook
Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible
Collins Thesaurus of the Bible
Dictionary of Bible Themes