

The Unfolding of God's Covenant Purpose

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(see generally Chapter Two *God, Justice and Society* which includes full references to the sources quoted in this handout)

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Introduction

The word covenant basically consists of an obligation or an agreement between two parties. Covenants were an everyday fact of ancient life, like writing a cheque, making a promise or doing a deal.

1. Use of covenants in the Bible

There are many different kinds of covenant in the ANE and the Bible, including: (1) a treaty between independent nations (e.g. 1 Kings 5:26); (2) a constitutional agreement between a king and his subjects (e.g. 2 Samuel 5:3); (3) the marriage relationship (e.g. Malachi 2:14); (4) a pledge between friends (e.g. 1 Samuel 20:8); (5) a treaty between an empire and a vassal state (e.g. Ezra 17:11-21) (Joosten 1998) and (6) settlement of a dispute between parties (e.g. Genesis 21:27).

2. The 'covenant formula'

Covenant is a mode of interaction between God and human beings. It is a universal form of divine relating (cf. Genesis 6:17-18 and Genesis 9:1-17). However, we will concentrate on the primary way in which covenant is worked through in the Bible, namely, in the context of the specific relationship between God and Israel.

Although there are many different forms of covenant in the Bible, the covenant between God and Israel is presented in terms of a basic 'covenant formula': 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (e.g. Leviticus 26:12).

Text	Formula
Exodus 6:7 [God speaking]	"... I will <i>take</i> you to be My people, and I will be your God"
Exodus 19:5 [God speaking]	"... if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples"
Exodus 29:45 [God speaking]	"I will <i>abide among</i> the Israelites, and I will be their God"
Leviticus 26:12 [God speaking]	"I will be <i>ever present in your midst</i> : I will be your God and you shall be My people"
Deuteronomy 26:17-18 [Moses speaking]	"You have affirmed this day that the LORD is your God... And the LORD has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people..."
Jeremiah 31:33 [God speaking]	"... I will be their God, and they shall be My people"
Jeremiah 32:38 [God speaking]	"They shall be My people, and I will be their God"
Ezekiel 34:30 [God speaking]	"They shall know that I the LORD their God am with them and they, the House of Israel, are My people..."

The heart of the 'everlasting covenant' is YHWH's commitment to being God for Israel. Variations in the covenant formula arise because the 'everlasting covenant' is inevitably coloured, to some degree, by the nature of the issues facing the human parties.

3. Key turning points

We can identify some of the key turning points in the history of covenantal relations between God and Abraham - and his descendants (see Table 2). This is not a comprehensive tour of every covenant mentioned in the Bible but rather a synopsis of key transitional moments.

4. The covenant at Sinai

Mount Sinai dominates the landscape of biblical law. Its centrality is well-founded in the biblical texts themselves. The stopover at Mount Sinai accounts for a massive one-third of the Pentateuch (from Exodus 19:1 through Numbers 10:10). This is all the more remarkable when one considers the huge time span which the Pentateuch claims to cover, from the creation of the universe to the death of Moses.

Biblical covenants are integrated with narrative; thus the Sinai covenant is a narrative presentation of the establishing of an agreement between God and Israel. *Exodus* (and *Deuteronomy*) contain accounts of covenant-making rather than the covenant itself. Despite – or perhaps because of – its importance, the Sinai event has the most complicated narrative structure of any aspect of biblical law. There is not just one account of the 'giving of the Law' but several: Moses ascends and descends the mountain three times and even the Ten Commandments are issued twice. How do we make sense of the Sinai story?

5. The 'Ten Commandments'

The most famous aspect of the Sinai event – and indeed of all biblical law – is "the ten commandments" (Exodus 34:28); also commonly referred to as the Decalogue. The picture of Moses coming down the mountain carrying "the two tablets of the Pact [or 'covenant']" (Exodus 31:18) is the most iconic image of the *Torah*, if not the whole of the Hebrew Bible.

(a) *The meaning of 'commandments'*

The translation of the Hebrew word *devarim* as "commandments" is misleading. The noun *davar* simply means 'speech', or a 'word' or a 'thing' and so "the ten commandments" are better translated "the ten proclamations", or "the ten utterances" or "the ten words". The trouble with translating *devarim* as "the ten commandments" is that it tends to flatten God's 'words' to Israel into a set of rules. There is, however, much more to the ten *devarim* – and to biblical law. Translating the ten *devarim* as "the ten proclamations" immediately brings to mind God's 'utterances' and 'words' at creation (cf. Deuteronomy 4:32-33).

The idea of a parallel between the Decalogue and creation is fully consistent with what we have already argued, namely, that God at Sinai is engaged in a new act of creation which takes the form of "liberated Israel" (Niehaus 1995:199; cf. the reference to "the Creator of Israel" in Isaiah 43:15). From this perspective, the ten proclamations of the Decalogue are the words that bring this new creation into being. The Decalogue is not primarily about social restraint or social control but "possibilities for life" (Brueggemann 1999:42).

This being so, the utterances themselves are *not* to be understood, first and foremost, as a set of rules or commands, but as a *vocation*. This is not to deny that the Decalogue consists of rules, but it is to deny that it *only* consists of rules. The rules themselves are best understood as part of an overall calling. They are "a summons to, and authorisation for, membership in a quite alternative society" (Brueggemann 1999:26), where God is King. Because of this, the Decalogue is constitutive of Israel's identity (see generally Greifenhagen 2002). "In this new relation of covenant, the command is...manifestation of true self... [and] disobedience becomes a violation of one's own self" (Brueggemann 1999:32).

Cf. the idea that the Sinai covenant is a vocational covenant, as indicated by Exodus 19:5-6. Israel was to be God's "showcase to the nations" (Bosma 1999:114). In this sense, the Decalogue is not a list of demands, or requirements. Rather, it is an invitation to know, respond and demonstrate the character of God – a character that is reflected in the proclamations.

(b) *Their uniqueness in biblical law*

The Decalogue is unique in biblical law because:

- (1) It records the only words that are said to be spoken directly by God to Israel (Exodus 20:1-16);
- (2) The words upon the tablets were "inscribed with the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18).

What is meant by “the finger of God”? As used in Exodus 8:19 [8:15 MT] the words are an acknowledgement by Pharaoh’s magicians that “they have truly encountered the presence of a divine being” (Klingbeil 2000:415). More than that, they have come to acknowledge the power of a deity who is in fact the Creator God whose “fingers”, we learn elsewhere, created the moon and the stars (Psalm 8:3 [8:4 MT]). The phrase “the finger of God” thus signifies “the presence of God, his creative power and his involvement in human affairs” (Klingbeil 2000:415).

6. The golden calf

The famous story of the ‘giving of the law’ (Exodus 20-31) is immediately followed by the infamous tale of the golden calf and its consequences (Exodus 32-34). Making the golden calf was the worst imaginable breach of the Sinaitic covenant (cf. Exodus 20:3-5) – and “tantamount to an act of adultery committed on a honeymoon” (Schramm 2000:338). As a result, God was legally entitled to regard the Sinaitic covenant as abrogated (Exodus 32:7-10). There are parallels here between the Sinai story and the primeval history; although the key difference between Genesis 6 and Exodus 32 is that “unlike Noah, Moses refuses to become the new father of the nation” (Schramm 2000:339).

Moses apparently understands that any basis for resolving the breach between God and Israel must lie beyond the Sinaitic covenant. “A primary function, therefore, of the golden calf episode is to emphasise that the covenant of Exodus 19 does not and cannot stand on its own: were it not for Moses’ invocation of God’s prior promise to Abraham, Israel would have been destroyed then and there” (Schramm 2000:340). The story underlines the point, made above, that the Sinai covenant is a constituent element within the one, everlasting, covenant between God and Abraham (Schramm 2000:342).

7. The ‘new covenant’

The phrase “a new covenant” (*berit chadashah*) is used only once in the entire Hebrew Bible, in Jeremiah 31:31. This section of the Bible is doubly interesting because Jeremiah 30-32 contains the greatest concentration of references to the covenant formula in the Hebrew Bible (four times in all; Rendtorff 1998). Why? The reason is because the book of *Jeremiah* describes the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. Exile was the ultimate sign that the Sinai covenant had failed and that Israel was not the people God wanted them to be. We can thus see why Jeremiah would have been preoccupied with the covenant formula and why he would have found the idea of a new covenant desirable. Holladay (2003) suggests that the setting for the declaration of Jeremiah 31:31 (“See, a time is coming – declares the LORD...”) was the septennial reading of *Deuteronomy* which, it is argued, fell on the same year that the Temple was destroyed (587 BC). “The radical implication of Jeremiah’s announcement, that the covenant mediated by Moses was now a dead letter, would almost demand such a setting” (*op. cit.*, 189).

The new covenant therefore has a negative and a positive task. Negatively, it has to address the cause of the exile, which Jeremiah identifies as the corruption of the human will (Jeremiah 13:23; 17:9-10). Positively, the new covenant needs to put the relationship between God and his people on a new footing. To be consistent with Jeremiah’s preceding analysis, this will require “*unilateral* action on YHWH’s part on the heart [or will] of the individual” (Robinson 2001:203; italics original). This is exactly what we find in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Unlike the other forms of covenant we have been considering so far, this is not a work of confirmation or incorporation. Indeed, we are expressly told that this covenant “will *not* be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt” (Jeremiah 31:32; italics added). It is something ‘new’.

How precisely does the ‘new covenant’ prophesied by Jeremiah differ from previous arrangements?

(a) *What is new about the ‘newness’ of the new?*

Jeremiah 31:31-34 describes three main differences:

- (1) *Torah* is interiorised. The new covenant differs because its symbols are interior rather than exterior. The gift of *Torah* is said to be placed *in* the people themselves, rather than something external to the people, such as the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 10:2). It also contrasts with the Deuteronomic covenant, where the Israelite is supposed to “impress” God’s words “upon your very heart” (Deuteronomy 11:18; God speaking). In the new covenant, God does for the people what they clearly cannot do for themselves. The ‘writing on the heart’ alludes to ‘the finger of God’ at Sinai. There, we saw that the moving finger signifies “the presence of God, his creative power and his involvement in human affairs” (Klingbeil 2000:415). The picture of ‘writing on the heart’

thus signifies that *under the new covenant, the direct object of God's presence, creativity, power and involvement is the human will*. This is what makes the new covenant new;

- (2) There is no need for teaching. The divine inscription is effective because it brings knowledge of God. *Torah* on 'the tablet of the heart' is understood intuitively – as opposed to what we might call *Torah* on 'the tablet of stone', which is not so understood (cf. Second Corinthians 3:3). This is a radical departure because it means that instruction and exhortation, viz. "the entire legal tradition on which *Deuteronomy* is so insistent, will no longer be necessary" (Blenkinsopp 1997:123);
- (3) Wrongdoing is forgiven. This is placed at the end of the promise (31:34). This emphasises both "the need for the forgiveness of sins as the basis for the new covenant, and ... God's readiness to forgive, in order that this covenant may be maintained" (Rendtorff 1998:86).

But it is still the same *Torah* and it still expresses a relationship with God. In that sense, it is "not a new covenant at all; it is the same, unaltered covenant which the forefathers broke (31:32). What is new are the presuppositions for its acceptance and realisation" (Rendtorff 1998:73). The content is the same but the method of communication and practice is what differs. The "new covenant" of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is followed by reference to a "covenant of friendship" (*berit shalom*) in Ezekiel 37:26-28. This has the effect of extending the benefits of God's Presence to "the nations" (37:28), instead of just to Israel (Exodus 29:46). The increased depth of the 'new covenant' (being applied to the will) is matched by increased breadth (being applied to the nations).

What Jeremiah 31:31-34 does not make clear is "how the new covenantal relationship is to be socially embodied" (Blenkinsopp 1997:123). This brings us to the heart of the interfaith difference between Jews and Christians regarding the meaning of the new covenant.

(b) The 'new covenant' in the New Testament

According to the Christian New Testament, the 'new covenant' is inaugurated by Jesus at his final Passover meal with his disciples (traditionally referred to as the 'Last Supper'; Luke 22:20). It is not surprising that Jesus' reference to the new covenant takes place in the context of remembering the Exodus. In Exodus 6:6-7 the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt led into the use of the covenant formula; likewise, deliverance from Babylon leads into the (new) covenant formula of Jeremiah 32:37-39. In the *Gospels*, the Last Supper is inseparable from the crucifixion and death of Jesus – who is presented as a sacrificial Passover lamb. This is presented as leading onto a 'new Exodus' and to a 'new covenant'. Jesus' words anticipate deliverance from exile, like Jeremiah 32, although this time the exile is claimed to be spiritual and not merely physical.

The Christian New Testament claims that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah the full expression of the covenant formula – "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" – has finally opened up. Jesus' 'new covenant' is not only a *revision* of the Abrahamic covenant, but also an *incorporation* of a new body of people. The new covenant is for all who believe in Jesus – not only believing Jews but also believing Gentiles. Once again, we see how the idea of a biblical covenant is presented as holding together the particular (Jesus) and the universal (blessing to the nations; cf. Genesis 12:2-3). The new covenant of Jesus is seen by the New Testament as the ultimate expansion of the Abrahamic covenant.