

# Research paper on what is covenant in the hebrew bible

[Environment](#), [Disaster](#)



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## **Introduction**

Covenant refers to a mutual agreement between two people that carries a pledge or promise for the future. One of the most important themes of Hebrew Bible is a covenant between the almighty God and His people or followers. In biblical interpretation, the word covenant contains more underlying meanings than a simple contract or agreement between two people. Derived from the Hebrew word ‘berith’, a covenant is " an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance" (Mendenhall and Herion 1 : 1179). The word ‘covenant’ has been mentioned in the Old Testament about 286 times in many contexts. There are various types of covenants. The biblical covenants can be divided into two types: 1) A covenant made between people without any reference to

God and 2) A covenant made with God. The Old Testament carries references to many covenants made between people such as the ones between Abraham and Abimelech, Isaac and Abimelech, Jacob and Laban, David and Abner, David and the seniors of Israel and Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre. Marriage is also recognized as a covenant. The Old Testament also includes examples of covenants made between god and man. The covenant made between God and man is divided into two categories - conditional and unconditional. The fulfillment of conditional covenants rests on the fidelity of man whereas the fulfillment of unconditional covenant relies on the fidelity of God. This paper would touch upon the five covenants made between God and man - Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic covenants and the new covenant.

## **Covenant with Noah**

In Genesis 9 God entered into a covenant with Noah and his family blessing them to " be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Robertson 1981). God also gave Noah permission to eat every moving thing. Perhaps the permission was given to eat meat because at that time after the flood, the earth became less productive due to ecological changes and hence God permitted Noah to eat meat. But He also mentioned that the animal flesh could not be eaten with its life in it. God also promised Noah that every beast on the earth would be afraid of him and this implied that if man started eating meat then the animals would be fearful of mankind. God also promised to Noah in the covenant that thenceforth He would never try to destroy the world with flood. The Noahic covenant was unconditional. God

didn't demand any obedience nor injected an element of fear through consequences in case of noncompliance.

Noah belonged to a time when the world was rife with violence but Noah never allowed the evil of his day contaminate his soul. Because of his righteousness and piety, God chose Noah from all the men of his time to accomplish the great task. Distraught at the increasing depravity and vice in the world, God decided to demolish the world with a universal flood and commanded Noah to build a gigantic ark that would save him and his family from the flood. Noah started building the ark simultaneously preaching God's benevolence and mercy warning the unfaithful about their impending doom. But the unfaithful and ungodly men continued with their evil ways bypassing all the warnings and requests of Noah until the flood inundated them. Before the flood arrived, Noah entered the ark with all sorts of animals " and the Lord shut him in", saving him from the flood (Robertson 1981). To show his gratitude to God for saving him and his family from the universal flood, Noah built and dedicated an altar to God. After the ritual sacrifice was made by Noah, God promised him and his family that he would never ruin the earth again by a flood, imparting rainbow as a symbol of his promise, " My bow I set in the cloud, sign of the covenant between myself and earth. When I cloud the sky over the earth, the bow shall be seen in the cloud" (Genesis 6).

## **The Covenant with Abraham**

In Judaism, Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish people because it is only for him the covenant made with God flowed into future generations. God in the covenant made with Abraham promised to endow him and his

children with blessings and in return Abraham had to give promise to keep faith in God serving as a bridge between God and the rest of the world. After Abraham migrated with his family from Ur of the Chaldeans in Babylonia to the thriving trade center of Haran, he at the age of 75 received a command from God to go to a new unknown land, " Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." (Kim & Kim 2005). God also promised to make a nation for him and his descendants.

Though the promise seemed unbelievable to Abraham as he was childless, but he kept faith in God and followed His command by moving from Haran via Shechem and Bethel to Canaan, a populous place occupied by Canaanites. The relationship shared between God and Abraham is a covenant relationship in which Abraham by agreeing to go to an unknown land betrayed his faith in the God and God agreed to fulfill his promise. It was common in those days for childless families to adopt a slave as an heir to the properties. Abraham proposed to adopt his slave Eliezer of Damascus as an heir but the idea was declined by God and He challenged Abraham " Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them" and He told him " So shall your descendants be" (Kim & Kim 2005). God blessed Abraham to be fruitful and entered into a covenant with him. Abraham agreed to God's command that circumcision would be a sign of covenant for him and all his descendants. In Abrahamic covenant God made his demands for obedience explicitly known and he rewarded Abraham for showing indubitable faith. He rewarded Abraham with a descendent Isaac and fulfilled His promise of multiplying his descendants. Abraham's covenant

is passed down from his son Isaac to his grandson Jacob and Jacob's descendants. Jacob acquired a new name 'Israel' after he wrestled with an angel and thus the nation promised by God came to be known as 'The land of Israel'.

It is difficult to determine whether the Abrahamic covenant is conditional or unconditional because there seems to be some elements of both conditionality and unconditionality present in his covenant with God. God directs commands to Abraham on many occasions in Genesis and obligates Abraham and his descendants to undergo circumcision for making participation in the covenant. God also says that he would fulfill all the promises He made to Abraham because of his faithful obedience. All these considerations imply the covenant to be conditional in nature because it appears that God will fulfill His promises only if humans respond with obedience.

However, there are strong elements of unconditionality present in Genesis. God orders Abraham to cut animals in half and spread the mutilated parts on the ground so that the covenant ritual of walking through the parts of the animals could be followed, but in Genesis 15 we see that God alone is walking through the parts and not Abraham which makes the covenant unconditional in nature.

## **The Covenant with Moses**

During the reign of Joseph, the Israelites migrated to Egypt. All the Israelites were turned into slaves at the dictat of a new Pharaoh. The people prayed to God and He responded to their prayers by inflicting ten consecutive plagues

on Egypt and thus God delivered the Israelites from miserable plight. Upon leaving the land of Egypt, the Israelites went to Mount Sinai and there God declare the Ten Commandments as part of a covenant. When God was touching upon the conditions of covenant, everyone got tired except Moses who heard the whole of the covenant laws. He wrote down all the conditions of the covenant in a book, made a sacrificial offering to God and sprinkled blood on the book and people to bind the covenant. The Mosaic covenant was conditional with an element of fear that the conditions of the covenant needed to be complied with at all cost. There are three kinds of law mentioned in this covenant - commandments, the judgments about the social life of Israelites and the ordinance dictating the religious life of Israelites (Niehaus 1995).

### **The Covenant with King David**

Another important covenant was the one made between King David and God. King David transported Noah's ark to the city of Jerusalem and the city became a center for Judaism. David having the entire kingdom under his control and no enemies to put his life at threat expressed his wish to build a temple in honor of God to house the ark. But God wanted a descendent of David's line to build the temple. He promised David a great name, house and throne for a great kingdom with further pledge that " Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (Robertson 1981). This covenant was made with a kingdom and not with family, nation or tribe. The sign of covenant offered by David was the temple that would be built by his son Solomon. God fulfilled

his promise to David with the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ was a descendent of David's lineage. The Davidic covenant was unconditional in nature as it was based on the fidelity of God rather than of Israel.

## **The New Covenant**

The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for deliverance of mankind from all sins gave rise to a new covenant that grants true forgiveness to all the men for their sins. The new covenant refers to the agreement made between God and mankind upon the death and resurrection of Christ. In the new covenant, God promised the Israelites that their land would abound in productivity and happiness. The cities would be rebuilt and the number of herds and flocks would increase. The spiritual provisions of the new covenant incorporate transformation of heart in which God would inscribe the laws into the hearts of men. He would further deliver men from all sins by forgiving them and establish a consummated relationship as God said, " I will be your God and you will be my people" (Robertson 1981). The new covenant is conditional in nature because it depends on the fidelity of man if he wants to receive blessings from God.

## **Conclusion**

Covenant is an agreement that is made between either two people or between a man and God. Covenant is followed with a sacrificial ritual in which bloodletting is a salient attribute of solemnity. The Old Testament contains many references to covenants made between two people and between God and man. This paper has touched upon the covenants made



between man and God. Covenant with Noah was an unconditional covenant in which God wanted Noah to build an ark and in return God saved his family. In the covenant with Abraham, God tested Abraham's faith in Him and in return God made a nation for him and his descendants. Mosaic covenant was a conditional covenant with an element of fear of dire consequences in case of non-compliance. The Davidic covenant was an unconditional covenant made with the kingdom of Israel. God fulfilled His promise to Israel through Jesus Christ whose sacrifice for the sake of mankind ushered in a new covenant made between God and mankind promising transformation of human hearts, deliverance from all sins and prosperity of Israel but this covenant was conditional in nature as man has to show faithfulness to receive all these blessings of God. The covenant of Jesus Christ thus fulfills all the promises the previous covenants could not accomplish.

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