

# Covenant

Dr. Steve Schell | Genesis 15 | Week 5 Essential Doctrines

There are certain concepts that are absolutely foundational to the Bible. Unless we understand them, much of what we read will not make sense. We will have no idea why certain things are being said or done. And the topic we are going to look at in this lesson is one of those concepts. It's not easy to explain because it takes us back to a very different time and culture. It takes us back 4000 years to the ancient Near East.

We're going to study an ancient Near Eastern covenant ceremony, but we won't go into a lot of interesting but nonessential details. We will look only at its most basic elements. Then once we have that knowledge we will watch as God conducts a covenant ceremony with Abraham. That particular event had a lasting effect on the spiritual life of Israel and ultimately governed what was done to Jesus Christ on the cross.

We will also look at the covenant God made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai and recognize the relationship between the blessings and the curses that were announced there and the message of the Old Testament prophets over the centuries that followed. Let's begin by examining some facts about covenants and then watch an ancient Near Eastern covenant ceremony in action.

Q: What is a covenant?

A: A promise reinforced by the threat of a curse if the promise is broken. And some covenants are also reinforced by the assurance of blessings if the promise is kept.

1. In the ancient Near East the curse was solemnly acted out in a very gory and vivid way. An animal or multiple animals were slaughtered and cut in half. The halves were laid on two sides of a trench and the blood from the animals was allowed to run down into the trench.

2. Then the participants walked side by side down that blood-filled trench and as they did, they called upon their God or gods to curse them if they broke the promise they were making.

3. As they walked between the part of the slaughtered animal(s) they said to God or their gods (Genesis 21:27 Abraham and Abimelech), "If I break this covenant, may this happen to me!"

(See: J.A. Thompson, "The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament." Tyndale Press, London, 1964. [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/treaties\\_thompson.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/treaties_thompson.pdf) )

4. Jeremiah refers to this same practice 1400 years later when he writes: Jer 34: 18-20.

## **God's covenant with Abraham**

- Ge 15:1-21
- a three-year-old cow that has not had a calf  
a three-year-old female goat  
a three-year-old male goat  
a dove (a nestling)
- Abraham cut them down the middle and laid each piece opposite its other half, but he did not divide the dove.
- Then he waited for God's next instruction, and as he waited, he had to drive off the vultures, hawks, eagles, crows etc.
- When the sun was going down, the power of the Holy Spirit came over that place and Abraham was "slain in the Spirit." When he came to, he became terrified, aware that God Himself was present.
- Then the Lord spoke to him answering the question he had asked "...how shall I know that I shall possess it?"
- When night arrived and it was fully dark, a brilliant fiery light passed alone between the pieces while Abraham watched.
- The Lord told Abraham the dimensions of the land He would give his descendants.
- By passing alone between the parts, the Lord was saying, "May this happen to Me if you break this covenant."
- Think of what He was saying! The answer explains why Jesus was brutally savaged in His crucifixion. He was bearing the curse for Abraham's family (which includes us).

## **What happened at Mount Sinai? Ex 24: 1-11**

- The sacrifices in the tabernacle/temple were the same animals (plus sheep) as Abraham's covenant.

## **What happened at Mount Moriah?**

- Ge 22:1-19
- v14 In the mount of the Lord (Moriah) The Lord will provide His own sacrifice (the ram caught by his horns)

- When the shofar (ram’s horn) was blown (Mt. Moriah was where the temple was built), Israel was reminding themselves of God's promise, and saying to the Lord, “Lord, you promised to provide a sacrifice for our sins.”
- God was telling Abraham that he wouldn’t have to sacrifice Isaac, but in that very place the Father would give His Son as a sacrifice. This was the price God would pay for passing between the parts alone.
- The cross was placed on Mt. Moriah.
- Jesus died at 3pm when the shofar was being sounded from the nearby temple (Lk 23:44)

### **Ancient Near Eastern Treaties**

#### 1. the preamble

- identifies the author of the treaty and gives titles and attributes

#### 2. the historical introduction

- the benevolent deeds of the king on behalf of the vassal are recounted and made the ground of the suzerain’s appeal to the vassal to render future obedience in gratitude for past benefits.

#### 3. the treaty stipulation

- general principles on which future relations were to be based
- specific stipulations

#### 4. divine witnesses and guarantors of the treaty

#### 5. curses and blessings

6. normally some provision for depositing the treaty documents in the sanctuary, for the periodic public reading of the treaty document, for the oath of acceptance by the vassal, and for a religious ceremony, often with blood sacrifices, in which the treaty was ratified.

The standard elements were present in every treaty document.

- Joshua 24
 

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specific stipulations	v25
oath	v16, 21, 24
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