

Biblical Covenants

The word “covenant” has a rich meaning, that includes: agreement, alliance, compact, contract, treaty, commitment, obligation, bond, relationship. Except in certain theological circles, we don’t really use this word today. We do use it in a somewhat hidden form, however, on a regular basis, since our English “testament” reflects the Greek word for both will and covenant. So the OT and NT are more precisely the Old and New Covenants. Covenant is the main way the Bible talks about the relationship between God and his people. It implies an ongoing, long-term commitment of loyalty and trust on the part of both parties, not just a short-term contract.

Covenant is not an exclusively biblical word. Ancient Near Eastern nations regularly made covenants, which had a political and legal meaning, not a religious one. Archaeologists have discovered many of these, and scholars have noted that the idea of covenant in the Bible has a specific form that follows closely the structure of Ancient Near Eastern international treaties between an overlord and his subject peoples (vassals). The form was widely known and used in the second millennium BC and there are lots of extra-biblical documents as examples. The typical covenant had these elements:

- 1) **Preamble**, identifying the overlord and giving his titles
- 2) **Historical prologue**, setting forth the previous relationship between the parties and emphasizing the lord’s kind deeds to the vassal. These are grounds for the vassal’s gratitude and future loyalty. The mixture of history and law is an essential part of these treaties. In theological terms, grace is the foundation of law.
- 3) **Stipulations** of the treaty, both general demands for allegiance, and specific terms or requirements for the relationship. Here is where the commandments or laws fit into the biblical covenants. It is the idea of the covenant that binds the legal and narrative texts together. The Law, the commandments, always come as part of a larger narrative about the covenant relationship between God and his people.
- 4) Provisions for **writing** the treaty and keeping copies safe (usually in a temple) as well as periodic public **readings**. Two copies were made, one for each party (hence the two tablets of the law). Both God’s and Israel’s copies were kept in the Ark of the Covenant in God’s presence in the Holy of Holies.
- 5) A list of **divine witnesses** to the treaty, invoking the gods.
- 6) **Curses and blessings** invoked on vassals for breaking or keeping the covenant. The list of curses was usually extensive and detailed.

Not every covenant followed this exact order, but these elements are common to most.

In secular covenants, provision was often made for a formal ceremony to ratify the treaty, usually with sacrifices and a meal. The Hebrew phrase for “to make a covenant” literally means “to cut a treaty,” referring to the usual practice of cutting up an animal as part of the oath ceremony: “may this happen to me if I am not faithful to the agreement” (see Genesis 15). The oath to keep the covenant was binding on both parties.

We can see these elements in many biblical covenants (see Exodus 20-24, Joshua 24), and some have argued that the whole book of Deuteronomy follows this pattern. #5, the list of gods witnessing the treaty, is notably absent from most of Israel’s covenants because, of course, there were no other gods to invoke, although Moses calls heaven and earth to witness the agreement they are making that day (30:19) and God gives Moses a song to be His witness to the Israelites (31:19-22). The tablets of the Law (and later the Ark of the Covenant) also function as a witness, but ultimately it is the people themselves who are to be witnesses of this covenant. Hence the strong emphasis on remembrance and passing on the *torah*.