



UNIT 1 - INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

LESSON 6

THE OLD TESTAMENT CONVENANTS

The idea of "covenant" is very important to an understanding of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word "berith" occurs more than 200 times, many of these referring to covenants or treaties or agreements made between men. The covenant between Laban and Jacob is an example of this type (Genesis 31:44,45). But we find that the same term is used to describe God's dealings with mankind. God chooses something familiar to people in order to impart divine truth, and the Old Testament covenants are a striking example of this.

Covenants between God and humans show the free movement of God towards humanity, in grace. The initiative and form of such covenants are within God's authority, not humans. Unlike human covenants, these are not made between equals. God is active, blessing, giving, commanding, arranging: humans are passive, receiving, submitting, believing.

In this study, we will briefly examine several Old Testament covenants between God and people.

1. The Noachic Covenant (Genesis 9:1-17) The important points about it are:
 - a) God initiates and establishes it.
 - b) It is universal in scope.
 - c) It is unconditional.
 - d) Humans have no part in its performance: God alone does this.
 - e) It is everlasting.
2. The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15)

Abraham had followed the call of God (Genesis 12:1f) and has received a threefold promise:

- a) He would inherit the land.
- b) His descendants would become a great nation.
- c) Through his descendants, all families of the earth would be blessed.

God's covenant with Abraham was a confirmation of these promises, following Abraham's questioning about their fulfilment. The symbolism of cutting the animals into two and passing between the pieces, has a parallel in Jeremiah 34:18,19. In this form of covenant, the parties called on themselves the curse of becoming like these pieces of the animals if they broke what they had pledged. In the covenant of Genesis 15, Abraham does not pass between the pieces. Only God does so, for He is making the covenant with Abraham. God calls upon himself the curses of dismemberment if His promise to Abraham is not fulfilled.



In Genesis 17, God commands Abraham to circumcise his household as a sign that they are included within God's covenant. Thus, the idea of a person's response to God's covenant is included.

3. The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19-20)

This covenant follows on from the covenant with Abraham, and in fulfilment of the promise of that covenant (Exodus 2:24; 3:16; 6:4-8). The new feature of God's working seen through this covenant is redemption. Israel has been in Egypt, but Yahweh has acted to redeem His people from the bondage of that land (Exodus 20:2).

In the days of the Old Testament, there were two distinct types of covenants used by the people. They were:

- a) Parity covenants where the participants were on a par with each other. They were equals.
- b) Suzeran covenants where the participants were not equal; e.g. a king with a person or group.

God's covenant was like the Suzeran covenant and J A Thomson, in his book "Archaeology in the O.T.", chapter 4 explains what a typical Suzeran covenant was like.

- a) Based on deliverance.
- b) King promised protection.
- c) People called upon to keep the king's law.
- d) Law was in 2 parts.
 - i) Concerned with relationship of people and king.
 - ii) Relationship to each other.
- e) After the ceremony, the laws were stored in a shrine. This was the symbol of the covenant.

There are obvious parallels between the Suzeran covenant and the Mosaic covenant in Exodus 19-20 and also in chapters 24 and 25.

- 1. Based on deliverance (Exodus 19:4).
- 2. God promised special relationship and protection for the people (Exodus 19:5,6).
- 3. Called to keep God's law.



4. Law ~ Ten commandments.
 - a) First 4 concerned with relationship of people with God (Exodus 20:3-11).
 - b) Last 6 involves relationship of people with others (Exodus 20:12-17).
5. After the ceremony (Exodus 24:3-8) the laws were stored in the Ark (Exodus 25:21).

Previous covenants have taught people of God's grace. This covenant teaches of God's redeeming grace. For those who are redeemed from Egypt, God's covenant requirements are declared in the Ten commandments. The law given at Sinai is the way of life for God's redeemed people.

The covenant ceremony of Exodus 24:3-8 is an important repetition of this truth. The blood points back to their redemption; the law is their response of obedient faith. Only as they are obedient to the covenant can they enjoy its blessings.

The ceremony in Exodus 24:4-8 involved sacrifice and blood, which showed that the covenant was accepted as binding by the people. That is, the covenant was ratified. A second manner of ratification was the communal meal in Exodus 24:11.

4. The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-17)

While the term "covenant" does not occur in this passage, it is clear from references elsewhere that this is God's covenant with David (e.g., Psalm 89:3,4). God's grace is clearly seen in such promises, and their certainty of their fulfilment is emphasised.

These promises must be seen as Messianic, finding their perfect fulfilment in Christ, who establishes David's seed forever in the new Israel, the Church.

5. The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34, foreshadows the making of a New Covenant. The problem with the Old Covenant was that people constantly broke it by disobeying God's law. In the New Covenant there will be a difference: the law of God will be written on people's hearts. In other words, the New Covenant involves a regeneration of the human heart. At the same time, God will deal finally with sin, remembering it no more. All who share in this covenant will have a personal knowledge of God.

The Old Testament is an unfinished book. It foreshadows the New Covenant, but it is only in the New Testament that we see the institution of this final covenant.



QUESTIONS

Question 1:

In Genesis 9:1-17, what promises does God make? What are the human's obligations? What sign does God give?

Question 2:

In Genesis 15, what animals were cut in two and why? Why did God pass between the two cut pieces?

Question 3:

In the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19-20), on what deliverance was the covenant based (v4)? What was the promised special relationship (vs. 5, 6)? What was the people's responsibility (v5)? Explain what this law was.

Question 4:

What is the difference between a covenant made between two people, and a covenant made between God and a person?

Question 5:

What promises did God make to David and how is God's grace displayed in the covenant?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

What is new and different about the "New Covenant" in Jeremiah 31:31-34? What 2 aspects of the covenant ratification in Exodus 24:1-14 are also involved in the "New Covenant" which we as Christians experience?