

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH: TRAGEDY AND BLESSING

Part 3

The Danger of Misunderstanding God's Covenants

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The promises of God are a cherished part of our belief system. They raise the issue of His trustworthiness and His compassion. They play an indispensable role in giving us hope. Indeed without God's promises, the Bible would lose its ability to inspire confidence, and it is very likely Judaism and Christianity would never have survived.

Most significant among God's promises are His covenants. Altogether there are nine biblical covenants:¹

- Edenic (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15-17)
- Adamic (Gen 3:14-19)
- Noahic (Gen 9:1-17)
- Abrahamic (Gen 12:1-3,6-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18)
- Mosaic (Ex 19:5; 24:7; Lev 26:1-46; Deut 11:1-32)
- Land (Deut 29:1-30:0)
- Priestly (Num 25:10-13)²
- Davidic (2 Sam 7:8-16; 1 Chr 17:10-14)
- New (Jer 31:31-34)

Each of them contributes important aspects of God's overall plan for this world. But when they are misunderstood, there is great potential for yielding unsound theology. In particular a flawed handling of the covenants is at the core of replacement theology. This errant perspective is manifested several ways:

- Some replacement theologians teach that because of unfaithfulness by Israel, they have been disinherited and the promises made to Abraham have been transferred to the Church.³
- Some teach that the covenants should not be interpreted literally, and thus they apply to the Church.⁴

¹ Some commentators combine the Edenic and Adamic covenants.

² It is important to note that the priestly covenant promises a perpetual role of priesthood to the descendants of Phineas, grandson of Aaron, because of his lone faithfulness at a time of grave idolatry. A later descendant of Phineas was Zadok (1 Chr 6:50-53) whose priestly order is the only one that is promised the privilege of ministering in the millennial temple (Ezek 44:15; 48:11). The continuity of this perpetual covenant illustrates the way that a plain reading and a grammatical-historical hermeneutic maintains the integrity of Scripture, something that the allegorical method fails to achieve.

³ Richard Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 30.

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 6th ed. (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 258-287, 712-13.

- Some who are proponents of fulfillment theology teach that the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.⁵
- And others say that there is only one divine covenant, manifested in different forms, so that Christ is the fulfillment of all of them, leaving no possibility of any kind of fulfillment outside the person of Christ.⁶

In each case, you end up without a literal fulfillment of God's promises to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And along the way, you obtain a muddled understanding of the nature of the covenants that even obscures the extent of our salvation. So it seems wise to have a solid understanding the nature of covenants and how they relate to Israel and the Church.

That task first calls for a consideration of the cultural context behind the words of Scripture. Covenants were actually common practices in the Ancient Near East, including those that are described in Scripture.⁷ Typically these were not mutual agreements, but were promises of protection and aid by a stronger party in exchange for loyalty by a weaker party. There were two primary forms of covenants:⁸

The Royal Land Grant

These agreements took place between a king and a servant because of the faithfulness of the servant. The king granted certain rights and benefits to a servant, based on the past performance, not the future performance of the servant or his descendants. So covenants that follow the Royal Land Grant format are unconditional in nature for the recipient. In addition, the king was free to establish the degree of permanence of those rights.

So it was a generous deal for the servant and demonstrated both the sovereignty and compassion of the king. But it also had the potential for provocation because it would naturally polarize the community. Some fellow servants and neighbors might be happy for the one receiving the grant. But others would be tempted to become jealous and try to undermine the validity of the agreement. For that reason, this kind of covenant would include a provision with blessings for those who supported the servant and consequences in the form of cursings for those who violated the rights granted to the servant.

The following elements were incorporated into Royal Land Grant types of covenants:

- Acknowledgment of faithfulness—a description of the loyalty of the servant to the king.
- Stipulations—description of the rights granted by the king to the servant (based on the past performance, not the future performance of the servant or his descendants) and the permanence of those rights.
- Means of succession—the provision for descendants of the servant to assume the rights

⁵ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1987), 27.

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1981), 28-54.

⁷ For a description of the use of covenants by non-Israelite nations, but structured in the identical way as Israel, see L. W. King, *Babylonian Boundary-Stones and Memorial-Tablets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1912).

⁸ See Bruce Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, Avraham Gileadi, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 124; and Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970), 185.

and responsibilities of the agreement.

- Witnesses—the acknowledgment by persons or natural phenomena in heaven or earth who are present at the transaction.
- Blessings and cursings—the benefits for those who support the servant and consequences for those who violate the rights of the servant.

The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty

These occurred between a suzerain (great king) and a vassal (lesser king).⁹ In this case, the stronger party would offer benefits like protection through an alliance. In turn he would dictate obligations to the weaker party, such as a prohibition against alliances with other kings and specific tasks that the vassal would carry out. That is a big distinction from the Royal Land Grant in which the obligations were expressed in the opposite direction from the king to the servant.

There were also consequences for non-compliance by the weaker party. So covenants that follow the Suzerain-Vassal Treaty format are conditional in nature for the recipient. And unlike the Royal Land Grant, the success of the agreement is dependent on the faithfulness of both parties to their obligations.

Suzerain-Vassal Treaties included these elements:

- Preamble—an introduction of the parties to the agreement.
- Historical prologue—a description of the accomplishments of the stronger party and the history of his relationship to the weaker party.
- Stipulations—the obligations of the weaker party to the stronger party and any specific conditions such as the duration.
- Means of succession—the optional provision for succeeding parties to assume the rights and responsibilities of the agreement if the primary parties no longer exist.
- Witnesses—the acknowledgment by significant parties or natural phenomena in heaven or earth who witness the transaction.
- Deposition of the agreement—the provision for safekeeping copies of the agreement and for its periodic public reading.
- Blessings and cursings—a description of the benefits of compliance by the weaker party and the consequences of non-compliance.

Both of these types of covenants were binding legal agreements. It is apparent that God chose to utilize these existing forms of covenants in order to communicate His intentions for humanity. It makes sense that God would employ a very familiar format so that the people would understand the implications. The same is true for us. When we identify the corresponding type of agreement for each of the biblical covenants, it assists us in describing its nature, such as whether it is conditional or unconditional, or what the obligations are.

The Hebrew word translated as covenant is בְּרִית (brit). It is derived from the verb בָּרַח (barah) which is typically rendered as “to select or choose.” But it comes from a root with a

⁹ For a detailed description of this association, see George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, PA: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

word picture of “cutting apart flesh.” So it is like having a piece of meat that you cut into pieces and then select a piece to eat.¹⁰

We see that meaning reflected in the way that both kinds of covenants were normally ratified by a sacrificial ceremony. In order to confirm such an agreement between two parties, at least one animal was slaughtered and cut in half. Then both parties would pass between the two pieces and the meat would be eaten in a shared meal. By participating in this ritual, the parties were declaring to one another, “If I fail to keep my part of the covenant, may I be cut apart in the same manner.” Your word was based on your very life, so a ceremony of this sort sealed a covenant with a great measure of seriousness and strengthened the likelihood of its perpetuation.

Three of the covenants are critical for our understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church—the Abrahamic, Mosaic and New covenants.

Abrahamic Covenant principles

The Abrahamic Covenant was instituted by the Lord during a series of encounters He had with Abraham. The initial promise of the covenant is found in Genesis 12:1-3. It is important to note that this is God’s declaration of what He would do, not yet the enactment of the covenant, which is described in chapter 15. Additional aspects are then chronicled through the 22nd chapter of the book. So you have to consider all of these passages in order to have a full portrait of the covenant. It is important to know that this is a promise with very distinctive characteristics, and to regard it as a binding legal agreement.

Covenant type: Royal Land Grant (unconditional)	
Element	Description
Acknowledgment of faithfulness	God promised the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants after he traveled there from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 12:4; 13:14-17).
Stipulations	<p>As a Royal Land Grant type of covenant, it was based on the past performance, not the future performance of the servant or his descendants. And it was an expression of the sovereignty of God, as emphasized by the first use of the name שַׁדַּי (Shaddai) – “Almighty” in the Bible in the context of this covenant (Gen 17:1). In this type of covenant the obligation was placed entirely on the king. Note how the language of this covenant is all based on God carrying out these specific obligations in Genesis 12:</p> <p>“I will make...” (v. 2) “I will bless...” (v. 2) “I will make...” (v. 2) “I will bless...” (v. 3) “I will curse.” (v. 3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abram would be the father of a great nation (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:5;

¹⁰ *Barah* is in fact translated as “eat” four times in Scripture when used in the context of food (2 Sam 3:35; 13:5,6,10) and once as “choose” (1 Sam 17:8).

	<p>17:1-2,7; 22:17) and other nations (Gen 17:4-6).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abram’s name (which would later be changed to Abraham in Gen 17:5) would become great and he would personally be blessed (Gen 12:2). • He would be a blessing to others to the extent that through him it would reach all peoples (Gen 12:2,3). The nature of the blessing was unspecified but from the greater context of Scripture it refers to the blessing of the Messiah who descended from Abraham (Gal 3:16). • His descendants would be given possession of a specific territory, the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:17-21; 17:8). <p>In this type of covenant, the king was free to establish the degree of permanence of those rights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The granting of the land would endure עַד-עוֹלָם (<i>ad olam</i>) “forever” (Gen. 13:15) and as בְּרִית עוֹלָם (<i>brit olam</i>) an “everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:7-9). <p>Some argue that although the Heb. עוֹלָם (<i>olam</i>) normally means “everlasting,” it can also mean “a long time,” thus implying an endpoint of the covenant.¹¹ But this reasoning is a forced rendering that lacks any corollary evidence in the immediate context of Genesis to suggest deviating from “everlasting,” the normative use of the word. This divergent use of <i>olam</i> reads into the text because of the compulsion to deny any possibility of a literal millennial kingdom.</p> <p>A proper understanding of <i>olam</i> in its Hebraic context, on the other hand, recognizes its root meaning of “a vanishing point”—it is something that continues on past the horizon. It is like traveling on a road to a destination that is presently concealed or hidden, but you comprehend in your mind that the road continues on past the furthest point that you can see. There is nothing in the context of this covenant to suggest anything other than the normative use of <i>olam</i> applies—it is everlasting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abraham and the male descendants of the covenant nation were to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11). <p>Note the absence of conditional stipulations. Replacement theologians say that the covenant is conditioned on Abraham going to Canaan. But that fails to note that his journey occurred before the covenant was enacted in Genesis 15. This verse is the turning point in the sense that prior to that moment, God spoke in the Hebrew imperfect tense (incomplete action), but beginning with Gen 15:18 He used the perfect tense (completed action, akin to the past tense). No “if...then” conditions are found in the covenant itself.</p>
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¹¹ e.g. H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1942), 517-19. He prefers the phrase “into the hidden future” so as to “correct. . . the extravagant opinion that Canaan is to be the inalienable possession of Israel, perhaps even into the Millennium.”

	<p>Some have claimed that the requirement of circumcision makes the covenant conditional.¹² But while the eligibility of individuals to experience the benefits of the covenant is based on their personal obedience to God’s commandment, that does not have a bearing on the certainty of the covenant made with the nation. In other words, the failure of an individual in keeping the stipulation of circumcision would not negate the validity of the covenant for succeeding generations.¹³ Altogether the Abrahamic Covenant is consistent with Royal Land Grants as being unconditional on the part of the recipient of the grant.</p>
<p>Means of succession</p>	<p>Over time God repeated the promises of the covenant and granted the same stipulations to Abraham’s descendants (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:7-10), specifically through Isaac (17:19; 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen 28:13-15), Jacob’s twelve sons (Gen 50:24), and the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel (Ex 2:24; Ps 105:42-44) ultimately to a thousand generations (Ps 105:8). This latter passage is particularly worth noting:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“He has remembered His covenant forever, The word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac. Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as <i>brit olam</i> – an everlasting covenant, saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion of your inheritance.”</p> <p>Yes, there were times when the people of Israel were removed from the Promised Land and, as a result, they could not enjoy the privilege of the covenant that God had made with them. But it did not annul the covenant itself. And, in time, they were restored once again to the Land. Each time, God made it clear that His covenant remained secure. It was reconfirmed time after time, in spite of continual disobedience because it was based on the sovereignty of God, not on Israel’s faithfulness.</p>
<p>Witnesses</p>	<p>Abraham was told to acknowledge the heavens right before the cutting of the covenant (Gen 15:5).</p>
<p>Blessings and cursings</p>	<p>As a Royal Land Grant type of covenant, other people shall be blessed or cursed according to their treatment of Abraham and the descendants of his covenant nation (Gen 12:3; cf. Gen 27:29; Num 22:6). The cursings will be addressed later in this paper, but regarding the blessings that God promised, the remainder of the Bible tells about them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The written Word itself. • The scribes who painstakingly preserved the Scriptures. • The prophets who spoke God’s truth.

¹² e.g., Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 31-36, 56-58.

¹³ For examples of non-forfeiture in this regard among nations of the Ancient Near East, see Weinfeld, 189.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The priests who carried out godly worship. • The greatest blessing of all—Messiah. <p>Surely all the families of the earth have been greatly blessed through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.</p>
Ratification	<p>After declaring the covenant enacted, a sacrifice was made in which God alone (represented by a fiery torch) passed between the animal parts unilaterally, while Abraham slept and was thus exempted from the responsibility of making the covenant efficacious (Gen 15:9-17). Had this been an agreement requiring conditions upon Abraham and his descendents, he, too, would have had to pass between the sacrifice.</p>

There is one additional key principle regarding the Abrahamic covenant:

It was based on the character of God

All human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, including those who consider themselves as entitled to the promises made to Israel, have no intrinsic rights to anything in God’s creation. It is by His grace alone that we are credited with His righteousness and thus able to enjoy the blessing of salvation and everlasting life (Rom 4:3). And the same is true for the privileges we receive here on earth in the meantime.

The manner in which God affirmed His covenant with Abraham is significant. Two different means of affirming promises are evident in Scripture: שְׁבוּעָה (*shehvuah*) – “a sworn oath” and נִדְרָה (*neyder*) – “a vow” (Num 30:2).

Oaths were unconditional in nature. There were no contingencies for the commitment to be broken. So they were absolute and legally binding. In fact Numbers 30:2 reinforces this aspect of an oath with the phrase, “to bind with a binding.” That phrase is used elsewhere to describe the way that ropes are tied securely so you cannot escape (Judges 16:11; Ezek 3:25) and the way that animals were tied up when placed on the altar for sacrifice (Ps 118:27). Swearing an oath meant that no matter what happened, you would do exactly as you said you would do. And whenever they were used in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) there always an expectation of fulfillment, regardless of the circumstances:

- It didn’t matter if it was given as a result of deception and manipulation, as in the case of Jacob obtaining the birthright and demanding that Esau swear an oath to seal the deal (Gen. 25:33). At that time, Isaac also used the familiar words, “May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed” (Gen 27:29).
- It didn’t matter if it was made carelessly, like Saul did by putting the people of Israel under an oath that forbid them from eating food during their battle with the Philistines (1 Sam. 14:24).
- Even Josephus talks about an oath that was made erroneously, but still could not be broken (Vita, 53).
- Oaths were considered so absolute that the book of Ecclesiastes refers to people being afraid to swear them (Eccl. 9:2).

Vows, on the other hand, were conditional obligation. They were worded in such a way that the conditions were explicit, typically modified with an “if. . . then” statement (cf. Gen 28:20,21; Num 21:1-3; 1 Sam 1:11).

In light of these invariable practices, when we consider the Abrahamic Covenant, if the nature of the covenant was conditional, God would have affirmed it with a vow. But that is not the case. Instead of a vow, God swore an oath since it was based solely on the faithfulness of the one giving it, not the one receiving it. We see that principle at work when Abraham demonstrated his faith in the Lord by his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice:

“By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Gen. 22:16-18).

Just before entering the promised land, Moses upheld the unconditional nature of God’s commitment by saying it had nothing to do with Israel’s righteousness or stubbornness, but was God following through on His word:

“It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that Adonai your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which Adonai swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Deut. 9:5).

This principle was confirmed in the New Testament by the writer to the Hebrews:

“For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you. . .’ In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us” (Heb 6:13-14,17).

It was an affirmation based on God’s own name and His unchanging nature that His promise to Abraham and his descendants would be kept. Yet the concept of God’s sworn oath regarding the Abrahamic Covenant is consistently ignored and neglected by proponents of replacement theology.

Clearly based on the evidence, we can conclude that God’s covenant promise to Israel is secure and irrevocable. It has never been annulled. The attributes, then, of the Abrahamic Covenant are:

1. It is unconditional
2. It is everlasting
3. It is based not on the character of the *people*, but on the character of *God*.

The key to understanding this covenant is that when God makes a promise, He will surely keep it.

Mosaic covenant principles

Covenant type: Suzerain Vassal Treaty (conditional)	
Element	Description
Preamble	Adonai and the people of Israel with Moses as their mediator are identified as the exclusive parties of the covenant (Ex 19:3; cf. Ps 147:19,20).
Historical prologue	Adonai states His accomplishment by delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Ex 19:4)
Stipulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel was to keep the commandments of Adonai (Ex 19:5) and to maintain absolute loyalty to Him (Ex 20:3). • Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). • Select priests of Israel, acting on behalf of the people, were to conduct blood sacrifice as means of atonement for sin (Lev 16:34; 17:11). • The people were to observe the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant (Ex 31:16,17).
Means of succession	All generations of Israelites were bound to the covenant (Ex 31:16; Lev 23:14,21,31,41).
Witnesses	Heaven and earth called to be a witness (Deut 30:19).
Deposition of the agreement	The written covenant (Law) was read publicly by Moses (Ex 24:7), the stone tablets were placed within the ark of the covenant (Ex 40:20) and the Torah was placed beside the ark (Deut 31:26).
Blessings and cursings	<p>Unlike the Abrahamic Covenant and all related Royal Land Grant treaties where the blessings and cursings apply to the treatment of the recipient of the grant, in the Mosaic Covenant and all related Suzerain-Vassel Treaties, the blessings and cursings apply directly to the weaker party of the agreement.</p> <p>So we see abundant blessings for Israel by obeying the commandments (Deut 7:11-14; 28:1-14) and severe cursings for disobeying them (Deut 28:15-68). The distinctions are clearly conditional in nature using “if...then” statements (Deut 28:1,15).</p>
Ratification	The people agreed that “All the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex 19:8; 24:3) and both God and the priests (acting on behalf of the people) continually participated in atonement sacrifices (Lev 16:2-16), analogous to “passing through them.”

	<p>It is significant to note that when Israel failed to keep its obligations, the violation principle of covenant ratification was carried out. That failure meant facing the same fate as the sacrificed animal:</p> <p>“I [Adonai] will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf—I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth” (Jer 34:18-20).</p>
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The problem with the Mosaic Covenant, which came to be known as the Torah or the Law, is that no one could observe it to perfection. The remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures is a tale of success and failure by the people in keeping their end of the agreement. As a result, there was chastening for the nation of Israel, time and time again.

New Covenant principles

Because of individual and national failure of keeping the Mosaic Covenant, God foretold a better way—the New Covenant:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord” (Jer 31:31-32).

We need to ask which previous covenant is God alluding to? We have a direct statement by Yeshua that He came to fulfill the Law of Moses (Mat 5:17). But fulfillment theology proponents, in particular, lump both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants together and claim the New Covenant fulfills both of them completely. That would terminate every aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, so that there is no longer a promise of possession of the land of Israel for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is an assertion that is heralded by Palestinian liberation theologians and some pastors and seminary professors alike. Yet it is a position that is directly contradicted by Scripture:

- The prophecy itself limits the fulfillment to “the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (Jer 31:32). Clearly that relates to Moses, not Abraham.
- The New Covenant is about an improved way of living God’s Law (Jer 31:33). That also has to do with Moses, not Abraham.
- Hebrews 8-9 describes the New Covenant and its mediator, Yeshua, being superior over the Old Covenant of Law and Moses, not Abraham.
- In Gal 3:17 Paul declares, “What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant [Abrahamic] previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.”

It is clear that while the Bible affirms the fulfillment of the Law in Yeshua through the New Covenant, it denies the termination of the Abrahamic Covenant as taught by replacement theology. Returning to the prophecy of the New Covenant, God goes on to say:

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares The Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know The Lord,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares The Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer 31: 33-34).

These words refer to the very elements of salvation. It describes how God changes us inwardly (cf. Rom 12:2), symbolized in this picture of writing His truths on our hearts so that they supply our souls with spiritual vitality, forgiven of our sins, and able to remain in His presence throughout eternity.

It was this term—the New Covenant—that Yeshua used to describe His sacrificial death on our behalf. He said during the observance of Passover on the evening before His crucifixion, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Lk 22:20). Just like the act of ratifying covenants in the Ancient Near East, a life had to be given to seal the agreement (Heb 9:16).

As human beings, our great problem was how to have an enduring relationship with a holy God. And His effectual solution—one that is perfect in every way—was to dwell among us and to give His life as atonement for our sins. In keeping with the ratification of the covenant, Yeshua became the sacrifice, and we are given the opportunity symbolically to walk between it. So when Yeshua beckons us to “follow Me” in the midst of a discussion on His death (Mk 8:31-34), we can envision Him standing on one side of His sacrificial death and inviting us to “pass through” it to reach Him on the other side (cf. Mk 10:38,39; Rom 6:3,4). It is merely a matter of accepting His terms of the covenant by faith and believing that He died for us, thus ratifying the agreement.

God secures His covenant promise to Israel through the faithful remnant

But there is still another problem that has resulted in theological confusion. Based on the Abrahamic Covenant, God had sworn by His own name that Israel would exist as a nation before Him forever (Gen 17:7; Heb 6:13; Jer 31:35-37). But based on the Mosaic Covenant, He also had promised that because they were called to be a “holy people” (Ex. 19:6), disobedience would lead to national disaster (Deut. 28:63). The key question is this: How can we reconcile God’s promise to permanently preserve and bless the nation of Israel with His promise to judge and afflict the nation of Israel?

This dilemma seems impossible to resolve. And it has led some people to conclude that God has forever rejected Israel. But there is a solution, one that replacement theologians continually overlook. It is the remnant—individuals within the physical nation of Israel in every generation who have faithfully believed in the True and Living God.

The Hebrew word for remnant is **שְׂרֵיט** (*she’ar*, or its variant *sh’erit*), from a root meaning, “to swell up.” From this same root we get the word “leaven” (*se’or*). This word picture is helpful to our understanding. In the biblical world, bread could not be made by adding a packet of yeast to flour and water in order to make it rise or swell up. Instead, whenever dough was kneaded, a lump of fermented dough from a previous mixing was added to new flour and water, and its yeast would multiply throughout the batch and cause it to rise. Then another lump

was removed and set aside to ferment for the next batch. This is the way that modern sourdough bread is made.¹⁴

In this manner, a small portion of the original dough—a remnant—continues on and recreates a new batch that retains the traits of the original batch. In the same way, a small portion of the original faithful men and women of Israel—a remnant—continues on and recreates a new generation that retains the faithful traits of the original generation. This is the underlying meaning of the remnant—a remainder or a portion with the imprint of the original.¹⁵

Isaiah describes this principle well: “Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a remnant, we would be like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah” (Is. 1:9). In other words, because of the sinfulness of the nation, they should have been entirely destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. But God had preserved a remnant and thus the nation was still alive.

By preserving a believing remnant down through the generations, God could remain steadfast in keeping His promises both to preserve and to purify Israel. In the midst of great chastening and judgment by God, a remnant of believers would survive and thus keep intact the substance of God’s promises to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In Yeshua’s day it was no different. Most people did not believe in Him as Messiah. But some Jews *did* believe. In the book of Romans the Apostle Paul bases his statement that “God has not rejected His people” (Rom. 11:1) on the faithfulness of Jewish men and women, saying “In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (v. 5). The majority of Israel may have rejected Yeshua, but God would not reject Israel as a nation because of the presence of the remnant who believed in the Messiah.

In that way, God could maintain the justice that was mandated in the Mosaic covenant and at the same time He could preserve Israel as a nation as He obligated Himself in the Abrahamic covenant. This is a critical understanding that proponents of replacement theology have unfortunately failed to recognize—that God secures His covenant promise to Israel through the faithful remnant.

Personal implications

There is a great danger in misunderstanding the truth of God’s Word.

There is certainly a danger when it comes to having a faulty understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant because God has made it known that *His* treatment of persons and nations would be a direct reflection of *their* treatment of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. History reveals a direct fulfillment of this clause:

- The **Egyptians** were cursed for enslaving Israel.
- During the Exodus the **Amalekites** were cursed for fighting against Israel,
- While the **Kenites** were blessed for their aid for Israel in the wilderness wanderings.
- **Rahab** was blessed by God for protecting the Hebrew spies.

¹⁴ It is likely that the fermenting lump was stored in a kneading bowl where the yeast could accumulate at the bottom (cf. Ex 12:34).

¹⁵ This biblical concept is very different from the most common understanding in contemporary Western culture of a remnant being an object that is insignificant and residual, especially a small piece of carpeting that has minimal use or is eventually discarded. This understanding of the word is a reflection of the way replacement theology views Israel as no longer serving a purpose and worthy of being discarded in God’s purposes.

- But the **Assyrians and Babylonians** were cursed by God for taking Israel captive.
- In the book of Esther, **Haman** and his **Persian** colleagues were cursed by God for their attempted annihilation of the Jewish people, even though this particular group of Jews had not joined the majority of their kinsmen in going back to the land of Israel, and was, therefore, not in the center of God's will.

The modern era has been no different. The tragedy of the Holocaust was great for the Jewish people. But it also led to calamity for Adolph Hitler and his cohorts. Their hatred most certainly invited the cursing of God.

Do you see a pattern here? Or is this something that we can dismiss as sheer coincidence? The evidence is strong that the promise of blessing and cursing is as poignant today as it was centuries ago. As part of His unconditional and everlasting covenant with Abraham, God's words of warning for blessing and cursing are still in effect. He will continue to bless or to curse individuals and nations as a result of their treatment of the Jewish people. And we all would be wise to take a look at our own hearts individually and as a nation to see if we are standing in the place of blessing.

In a more general sense, the Word of God is very plain about a number of things that declare God's intentions for our lives. But we human beings are very prone to discounting them to suit our whims, picking and choosing which principles we will adopt for ourselves. When we already have our minds made up on something, it becomes easy to ignore what God has declared. So we would be wise to be open to the totality of His message (Mat 23:23; 2 Tim 3:16,17).

There is much we can learn from the biblical covenants, and much that can go wrong if our understanding is inaccurate. We might confidently conclude that God has made us a generous offer of eternal and daily blessings when we follow Him by faith. May we all be willing to accept the offer exactly as it stands and resist the temptation to hold out for a better deal.