

A New Covenant

Over the past couple of years, I have become increasingly convinced that I have underestimated the significant nature of “covenant.” For too long, “testament” was just a way of differentiating between the two major sections of the Bible. There is the Old Testament and the New Testament, or the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. But “covenant” conveyed an idea to our ancient counterparts that we often miss. Certainly, they saw the covenant as an agreement as we often say, but covenants had very specific forms.

In the ancient near east (the time and location of biblical events and writing), covenants had seven distinct portions. While not every treaty had each one, you can see the distinct parts in most, even in the Bible. The seven parts are:

- 1) Preamble: naming the participants in the treaty
- 2) Historical Prologue: explaining the historical connection between the participants in the treaty demonstrating that the vassal had good reasons to be loyal to the suzerain besides the superior’s ability to defeat the subject party.
- 3) Stipulations: The requirements of the covenant for all participants.
- 4) Documentary Clause: a clause about the writing or record of the covenant, often stating that the covenant needs to be read on a repeated basis.
- 5) Witnesses: someone or something called on to testify to the existence of the covenant reminding the participants to keep the covenant.
- 6) Sanctions: Curses and consequences if the participants violate the covenant.
- 7) Ratification Ceremony: A ceremony in which all parties involved agree to the covenant and commit to it.

We can even see the ancient covenant between Laban and Jacob in **Genesis 31:43-54** contains 5 of these seven. There is no prologue, but **Genesis 31:43-44** are the historical prologue stating that Jacob’s blessings came from Laban. **Genesis 31:50, 52** show the stipulations: neither would pass the heap of witness to do harm to the other and Jacob would take care of Laban’s daughters. **Genesis 31:52** shows a heap of witness, a pile of rocks that were to remind the participants of the covenant. **Genesis 31:53** declares the judgment of Jehovah would be the sanction against breaking the covenant. Finally, in **Genesis 31:54**, the two participants ratified the covenant with a sacrificial meal. The prologue and the documentary clause are not here, but you can see the treaty form even in this narrative.

With the exception of the documentary clause, we can see the treaty form in God’s covenant with Abraham in **Genesis 15, 17**. The preamble can be seen in **Genesis 15:7; 17:1** when God declares, “I am the LORD” and “I am God Almighty.” The historical prologue is found in **Genesis 15:7** when God added to His identification “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” The stipulations are found in **Genesis 15:5, 12-16; 17:1, 6-8, 10-13**. Abraham was to walk before God and be blameless. Note that there were stipulations for God as well. He was going to bless Abraham’s offspring, multiplying them, giving them the land, and providing a blessing to the whole world through them. The covenant with Abraham does not have a documentary clause, per se, but note that it is documented in this narrative for all of Israel to know and read throughout their history. The witness is proscribed in **Genesis 17:11**: circumcision was the sign of the covenant or the witness to the covenant. The sanctions are stated in **Genesis 17:14** stating that the uncircumcised will be cut off from the LORD. Finally, we see two distinct ratifications ceremonies. We see a sacrifice in **Genesis 15:9-11, 17** and the circumcision of all the males in **Genesis 17:22-27**.

If you have been following our God Filled Bible Reading Program, you just read **Deuteronomy** over the past week and a half. What is really phenomenal is that **Deuteronomy** is actually written in the form of this covenant treaty and we see all seven parts.

Deuteronomy 1:1-5 is the preamble, stating Moses, Israel, and Jehovah as participants in the covenant. **Deuteronomy 1-3** is the historical prologue as Moses recounts the history of God carrying Israel through the wilderness and then giving them victory on the east side of the Jordan. **Deuteronomy 4-26** contain the stipulations and requirements of this covenant. **Deuteronomy 10:1-5; 31:9-13, 24-26** contain the documentary clause as God says He will record the covenant on tablets of stone and store them in the ark. They were supposed to read it again every seven years. There is even an inscriptional curse in **Deuteronomy 4:2** explaining the Israelites must not add to or take away from the covenant record. According to **Deuteronomy 30:19** the heaven and earth itself are the witnesses of the covenant. That is, seeing God’s creation should remind God’s people that He is there and has a covenant with them. God also has Moses teach the Israelites a song that is to be a witness to

them of the covenant in **Deuteronomy 31:19-22**. The song is found in **Deuteronomy 32**. And the book of the Law is itself a witness of the covenant according to **Deuteronomy 31:24ff**. **Deuteronomy 27-28** contain the sanctions and curses for disobedience. Finally, **Deuteronomy 29:10-15** shows that Israel was standing before God to ratify the covenant. In **Joshua 8:30-35** we see Joshua lead Israel in a ratification ceremony for this Deuteronomic covenant.

Here is the interesting part. When we consider the New Testament/Covenant as a whole, we can see all of these very same aspects of a covenant treaty.

The Gospels serve as Preamble, showing God and the church Jesus would establish as the participants. The Gospels and Acts serve as a Historical Prologue, showing the history of salvation and God's preservation of the church in the face of persecution. While we can find stipulations throughout Jesus' recorded teachings, the Epistles definitely serve as stipulations (consider the great example of **Ephesians 4-6**). We even find documentary clauses throughout the New Testament: **John 20:31**; **I Corinthians 4:6**; **Ephesians 3:3-4**; **I Timothy 3:14-15**. We see another inscriptional curse in **Revelation 22:18-19**. Our spirit and the Holy Spirit are described as witnesses in **Romans 8:16**; **Ephesians 1:13-14**; and **Hebrews 10:15**. **Revelation** is an apocalyptic vision of the sanctions. Those who do not submit to the covenant are judged, condemned, destroyed, and cast into the lake of fire (remember the inscriptional curse listed above in **Revelation 22:18-19**). Finally, the ratification ceremony is the sacrifice of Jesus Himself, which we ratify in our baptism as we follow Christ in death, burial, and resurrection. And we also re-ratify (for lack of a better term) as we remember Jesus' sacrifice and eat of the sacrificial meal each Lord's day in the Lord's Supper.

When we talk about Old and New Covenants, we have to keep this in mind. We are not part of that Old Covenant. We are part of the New Covenant. We have different stipulations and different sanctions. We have a better ratification sacrifice, better promises, and even a better history. Don't go back to that Old Covenant for your stipulations. Stay with the covenant in Jesus Christ, enjoy the blessings of salvation.

—Edwin L. Crozier