

Roughly 2000 years ago, an old man and his wife were preparing to have their eight day old baby circumcised. People in the neighborhood were ecstatic. They had known how badly the couple had wanted children, but had long ago given up on the idea of raising a family. Then early that past summer, the old woman made the announcement that a baby had been conceived in her womb. Now the time had come, the baby had been born perfect – no blemishes, no problems – and it was time to give the baby boy, a future priest of Israel, his name.

It was customary in that day, to name the children after one of the near relatives – usually the father, who in this case was named “Zacharias”. So it seemed quite odd that the mother, when asked what his name was to be, said “John”. Why John, they thought. Then to get a confirmation of the boy’s name, they asked the father to scribble on a pad (since he had previously lost his voice) what the child’s name was to be. The father wrote “John”.

Miraculously, the old man regained his voice and began to prophesy, saying:

Luke 1:68-73 ^{ESV} “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to **remember his holy covenant**, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham . . .

Zacharias considered the miracle that had happened to them to be as a result of the covenant promises made to Abraham. This boy, their son, would be the one who would prepare the way for the coming of Israel’s Messiah.

What is it about the Covenant that caused the people in John’s day as well as the Jewish people down through the ages to ascribe such meaning, dedication, and attachment to it?

In this two-part study, we will look at the subject of covenants in order to get a better understanding of what it means in a Hebraic context, to be “in Covenant” with God. We’ll discuss the meaning of the term ‘covenant’, a historical overview of the pattern of the various covenants given by God to mankind with a focus on those given specifically to Israel. Then we’ll compare various Old Testament covenants to see if they stand alone and/or are negated by later covenants. Finally, we’ll discuss the signs of the various covenants. Hopefully, we’ll see the importance of having a covenant relationship with God and the importance of bearing the signs of the various covenants.

In this first part, we’ll define the word covenant and show what a covenant meant to the people of ancient Israel.

What is a covenant? Wikipedia defines a covenant as –

“a solemn promise to engage in or refrain from a specified action.”

Searching deeper, we see another definition, this time from a Biblical perspective. Again from Wikipedia –

“A **biblical covenant** is an agreement found in the Bible between God and His people in which God makes specific promises and demands.”

So far, this is true, but is it complete? For instance, many of us have engaged in a ‘covenant of matrimony’. Hopefully, we did not enter into this covenant pure physical reasons. Yes, we all understand that there are physical responsibilities in marriage – looking out for the welfare and wellbeing of the other party, but we also

got married because of a love and concern for the man or woman we became married to. In ancient Israel, many unions between man and woman were arranged, but because to the care and concern the father's had for their children, these unions were such that the couple quickly grew into the love that one would desire in marriage. Take the case of Isaac and Rebecca. When they came together for the first time, even though they had never courted, the text says that -

Genesis 24:67 . . . Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her . . .

The kind of love Isaac had for her is described by the Hebrew word "ahav" (אהב) (0157) with is an intimate love, the same love that is often used to describe the love God has for His people.

Now days, the true meaning of covenant as it relates to marriage has become so skewed that a new form of marriage has been created in some states called – "Covenant Marriage" with the intent of slowing divorce rates by making the couple attend counseling before granting a divorce. In this type of marriage, the couple agrees in advance to take steps to preserve their marriage before seeing a lawyer. But that's another topic . . .

Therefore, taking into account that we see a number of marriage covenants in the Bible, should we not consider love and concern to also be a part of the 'covenant relationship'?

There are two primary words used for "covenant" in the Bible. The first, found in the Tnakh, is "beriyt" (ברית) (1285) which comes from the word "barah" (ברך) (1262) which means "to cut". Notice some of the definitions given by Strong's – alliance, agreement, pledge, treaty, and constitution.

The Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon gives this definition for "beriyt":

"a covenant, so called from the idea of cutting, since it was the custom on making solemn covenant to pass between the divided parts of victims".

It goes on to say that the word implies "eating together" since it was customary among the Hebrews, as well as the people of the ancient Near East, to eat a meal when entering into a covenant. This tradition may have been carried all the way to New Testament times as we see Messiah Yeshua eating a meal when he confers the Covenant of Jeremiah 31 on His disciples.

Jeff Benner is a self taught Hebrew linguist who has a web site called [Ancient Hebrew Research Center](http://www.ancienthebrewresearchcenter.com). On his site, he explains why the word "beriyt" means covenant. He says:

"While the Hebrew word beriyt means "covenant" the cultural background of the word is helpful in understanding its full meaning. Beriyt comes from the parent root word bar meaning grain. Grains were fed to livestock to fatten them up to prepare them for the slaughter. Two other Hebrew words related to beriyt and also derived from the parent root bar can help understand the meaning of beriyt. The word beriy means fat and barut means meat. Notice the common theme with bar, beriy and barut, they all have to do with the slaughtering of livestock. The word beriyt is literally the animal that is slaughtered for the covenant ceremony. The phrase "make a covenant" is found thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew text this phrase is "karat beriyt"¹. The word karat literally means "to cut". When a covenant is made a fattened animal is cut into pieces and laid out on the ground. Each party of the covenant then passes through the pieces signifying that if one of the parties fails to meet the agreement then the other has the right to do to the other what they did to the animal (see Genesis 15:10 and Jeremiah 34:18-20)."

The ancient Hebrew (paleo Hebrew) glyphs that make up the word (beit-resh = son, yud = work, deed, or hand, tav = sign or cross) suggest the thought behind the word to be "the sign of the work of the son" or "the cross is the deed of the son".

The Greeks did not have a comparable word to the Hebrew "beriyt", so they chose the word "diatheke" (**1242 διαθήκη**) which means "an arrangement". It's the word from which we get "testament" as in "New Testament" or "last will and testament".

Looking back at the definitions given for covenant, we notice that the word "law" is absent. Though a covenant can certainly include laws, a covenant is not law. Thus, a change of laws within a covenant would not necessarily mean a change in covenants. For instance, God and Israel joined into covenant in Exodus 19:1-8. At this point, Israel had not even heard the terms of the covenant, though they had already agreed to them. They had only heard that God had been their deliverer and savior, and that by joining into the covenant, they would become His special people. It was after they joined into the covenant that God began to add stipulations (laws). After a number of stipulations were spelled out and read to the people, they again agreed to the covenant, as well as the terms of the covenant, and thus it was ratified in blood. Additional stipulations were added to refine the peoples conduct as a result of the Sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 34:27).

There has been much documentation over the past 50-60 years of the research done by scholars such as George Mendenhall, Meredith Kline, and others. They have compared the covenant forms found in the Torah with other historical documents of the same time frame. They have found that the written treaties between nations and their conquered (vassal) nations are very similar to the covenants God made with man. These findings shed much light on the intent of God's covenants and help answer many questions about them.

Much of the following information is derived from a paper written in 1963 by J.A. Thompson entitled The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament. The paper can be found on the Internet at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/treaties_thompson.pdf. There is a much shorter version at http://www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_1963_13_01_Thompson_ANETreatyPattern.pdf.

The biblical covenants, especially those between God and man, appear to be structured after one or both of the following ancient covenant types:

The first is the **suzerainty covenant**.² While some covenants between human parties are like negotiated agreements, God's covenants are more like a suzerainty covenants. These are covenants between a strong (suzerain) king and a weaker (vassal) king whereby the suzerain king promised to help and protect the vassal and the vassal in turn pledged to swear allegiance, fidelity and exclusive loyalty to the suzerain. This relationship could come about for a number of reasons, but two possible scenarios come to mind.

1. One nation becomes subject to another due to war or fear of war, such as when the men of Jabesh offered to make a covenant with the Ammonites.

^{KJV} **1 Samuel 11:1** Then Nahash the Ammonite came up, and encamped against Jabeshgilead: and all the men of Jabesh said unto Nahash, Make a covenant with us, and we will serve thee.

² And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, On this *condition* will I make *a covenant* with you, that I may thrust out all your right eyes, and lay it *for* a reproach upon all Israel.

2. One nation becomes subject to another out of fear of a third nation such as when Ahaz, king of Judah became a vassal of Tiglathpileser, king of Assyria³ for fear of the Syrians.

2 Kings 16:7-9 ⁷ So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglathpileser king of Assyria, saying, I *am* thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me. ⁸ And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent *it for* a present to the king of Assyria. ⁹ And the king of Assyria hearkened unto him: for the king of Assyria went up against Damascus, and took it, and carried *the people of* it captive to Kir, and slew Rezin.

Though suzerainty covenants were made by many of the near eastern nations (the Syrians and the Assyrians), the Hittite form of suzerainty covenant seems to more closely resemble those between God and

men because of the air of benevolence incorporated within. One example of this is in the covenant Joshua made with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:1-27).

These covenants in no way resembled a negotiated agreement. They are an arrangement which originates unilaterally with the superior party. The inferior party may accept or reject the arrangement, but he cannot negotiate or alter the terms of the disposition in any way. These covenants are often confirmed by the cutting of the animal and walking between the pieces as described earlier. In many cases, the subject parties (or people) are required to wear a specific sign showing their allegiance to the covenant.

The book of Deuteronomy is, in essence, a recap of the covenant. In it we see all the various aspects of an ancient Hittite suzerainty covenant –

- ✧ Preamble (Deut. 1:1-5)
- ✧ Historical prologue (Deut. 1:6 - 4:49)
- ✧ Stipulations (Deut. 5:1 – 26:19)
- ✧ Provisions for treaty deposit & public reading (Deut. 31:9-13)
- ✧ List of witnesses to the treaty (Deut. 30:19)
- ✧ Blessings & curses for fidelity or infidelity to the treaty (Deut. 27 – 30)
- ✧ Accommodations for renewal of the covenant with a change of leadership in the vassal nation (Deut. 29:1-29; Deut. 31:1-8)

The second is a **marriage covenant**⁴. The Hebrew marriage covenant resembles a near-eastern ‘parity’ covenant wherein the two parties are on equal standing. The relationship is wholly initiated by God as an act of love. Here we see that God's covenant is unilateral in origin but bilateral in operation. God and His people are bound together by a covenant which includes various stipulations, which in Hebrew thought is a “ketubah”, a listing of what is expected by the bride of the groom and vice-versa.

In light of what we’ve seen so far, we can say that in Biblical terms, a covenant is a treaty, an oath, but most importantly, a bond of love. Its essential idea is union between God and man. God offers man partnership with Himself, but it’s based on stipulations. The thought of love in the covenant is expressed oftentimes in scripture, for example:

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 7:6-8** " For you *are* a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. ⁷ "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; ⁸ "but **because the LORD loves you**, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers . . .

Note: the Hebrew word for the first occurrence of “love” in the above passage is chashaq (**2836** אָשַׁק) which means to love, be attached to, long for, etc. In other words, YHVH wants to be attached to His people.

^{ESV} **Joshua 22:5** Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, **to love the LORD your God**, and to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul."

We’ll cover specific covenants next time.

Shalom Alechim!

¹ my reference - Strong’s 3772. See 2 Chronicles 29:10

² In 1954 G. E. Mendenhall, in *The Covenant Forms and Israelite Tradition*, was the first to demonstrate quite conclusively that the sacred covenant documents between God and Israel, as recorded in Exodus and Deuteronomy, follow a form similar to the suzerainty treaties of the Hittite kings.

³ Though not clearly a covenant, many of the attributes exist

⁴ see Ezek. 16:8, 60; Hosea 2:16; Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:14; 31:32