

MAKING SENSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PT 3

What are the two major divisions in the Bible? OT and NT. Actually, what we call the Old Testament and the New Testament should be called the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The actual term used is a Greek word, and that Greek word is a transition of the Hebrew "Berit." These words actually mean covenant.

Today I want to talk about covenants. Because covenant is the key organizing principle of the Old Testament. We have used the analogy of a messy cupboard to consider how people view the OT. We have lots of stories and info but they are all jumbled up. We need a key organizing principle.

We have the big picture now. The Bible is the story of God's rescue plan, his redemptive plan. We have the 3 key locations. We have the 5 key people from last week. Now we have the key principle; that of covenants.

God makes covenants with our 5 key people. Agreement with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, with Noah after the flood, with Abraham concerning his descendants and the land of Canaan, with Moses and the people of Israel at Mt Sinai, and with David concerning his dynasty. You cannot understand the OT without an understanding of covenant.

The word covenant is a bit like the word redemption. It has become spiritualized. And its meaning has become lost because we don't really use it in English anymore. (we do in land deals) Again, like the word redemption, covenant does not have spiritual roots. It is a secular word, that came from ancient culture. A covenant is like a contract; an agreement between two parties in which one or both would make promises in advance as to what they would do or not do. They could be made person to person, tribe to tribe or between nations.

Abraham made a binding covenant with his servant around finding a wife for his son Gen 24. Issac and Abimelech made an agreement at a tribal level. Abimelech as a Philistine king (more like a king of one of the tribes of Philistines) Issac's tribe and the Philistines have been niggling with each other for quite a while. Then they made a covenant to not keep hassling each other.

In Joshua 9 we read of the Israelites making a covenant with the Gibeonites at a national level. How did these work?

First of all we need to understand a term called "fictive kinship." You don't really need to remember that term. You just have to know the concept (which you do, even if you don't realize it.) Society was ordered around the household. I.e. Extended family. And the oldest male in the family had an extra responsibility because he would become the patriarch, responsible for the well being of this group. That is why the oldest son got a double inheritance. He had special privileges but with it extra responsibility. This is why in the prodigal son parable, the oldest son is so angry.

The younger son has put at risk the whole household. This is why in the story of Joseph it is Reuben who tries to save Joseph from being killed. He has a responsibility for his younger brother and will have to report back to his father. So in ancient society the closer the blood connection, the greater the responsibility.

So how, in this type of society would one go about establishing a relationship with someone who is not kin. I.e. family. You would have to make family out of someone who is not family. Fictive kinship is where both parties agree to act like family. In a sense it is a legal fiction. That might seem really abstract but actually we do this all the time. When someone gets married, two people who are not blood related become family. When you adopt a child into your family, they become as if they were your own child.

So in the ancient world, covenants were the legal mechanism to create relationships between those who were not blood related. It set out the privileges and responsibilities for each party. There were two types of covenant. A parity treaty between two equal partners and a suzerain/vassal/treaty (suzerain means superior ruler, vassal means subservient party). This is between two parties that were not equal.

Parity treaties were typically of military nature. Canaan had lots of little kings, tribal groups. Canaan was between super powers who would often try to get control of this region as a buffer zone. So these little groups would make a treaty that said, if one got attacked, they would all come and defend that kingdom. All for one and one for all. NATO is an example of this today. This kind of treaty would use the word "brother" to describe the relationship. I.e. they were using the language for family. They were not brothers but would behave as if they were brothers i.e. fictive kinship.

A suzerain/vassal treaty was very different. The suzerain was the much more powerful party. So they had the right to demand submission from the weaker party. In this kind of agreement, the parties referred to each other as "father and son" or "lord and servant."

The suzerain had authority over the people and the land. The vassal could continue to rule his people and keep their traditions. The suzerain owned all the land and the produce and would expect a percentage of the produce. If the vassal was threatened by another power, the suzerain was expected to step in and defend the vassal. But equally the vassal was expected to give his army to help the suzerain in whatever war he was fighting. If or when the vassal wanted to rebel, they would not pay the percentage fee. You read of this often in the OT. A vassal was expected to be totally loyal to the suzerain. The vassal could not make another treaty with any other suzerain. To do this would be an act of treason. In a parity treaty you could have multiple



partners. But in a suzerain vassal treaty, the vassal could only have one suzerain. This covenant loyalty is described in Hebrew with the word “Hessed”. It is a very common word in the OT, used so often that different words are used. ie Loving kindness. Faithfulness. Covenant loyalty

This is the type of loyalty that comes from blood. i.e. first born to father. A first born son would never commit to another father or household. That was unthinkable. The same with a vassal to a suzerain. It was high treason for a vassal to make a treaty with another suzerain.

The story of Gideon is the clearest example of these treaties at work but they are throughout the OT. Lots of archaeological finds that show these concepts were very well known throughout the Ancient Eastern World

When Joshua set about capturing Canaan, the Gibeonites realized they were in trouble. So they tricked Joshua by pretending to come from a long way away, and offered to make treaty. They literally say. We are your servants. What they are asking is that Joshua be the suzerain. They want to literally cut a treaty. (see later)

Joshua doesn't consult God and they agree. The problem was the Gibeonite did not live a long way away but right next door. And they had a parity agreement with the other kings. So when the other kings hear their treaty partner had deserted them they get together to punish them. So the Gibeonites do what any vassal does when threatened. They call on their suzerain to defend them. And so despite Joshua being tricked, the Israelites have to go and help the Gibeonites from these other kings.

To make a covenant involved the sacrifice of animals, hence the term “cutting a treaty”. Often the animals would be cut in half, and the vassal was required to walk between them while he recited the oaths. What is symbolized is that if they did not keep the promises they would end up cut in half. A Powerful picture! Afterward they would roast the animals and have feast to celebrate the treaty as partners.

We see this happening in Gen 15:9 Abraham is old and the is struggling to believe that God is going to be faithful and give him descendants and that he will possess the land. So he asks God how he will know this is going to happen. The promise of God is decades ago and there is no sign that it is going to happen. God tells Abraham to get some animals and cut them in half. Then God puts Abraham into a deep sleep and God passes between the animals. Gen 15:18.

Two fascinating things about this. 1. God meets Abram where he is at with his doubts and fears, in a way the Abram understood. He could have said: “I have told you, that is all you need”. But he reassured Abram. 2. It is God who passes between the bloody animals. It is meant to be the weaker party. But instead the God of the universe says, “I will keep my word, I will not fail.”

Blessings were also an important part of a treaty. These were the benefits if the contract is fulfilled. If a covenant is

broken there are curses. In a party agreement the partners are now brothers. In a suzerain vassal treaty, the parties are father/ son or lord and servant. To keep a contract with a suzerain was to love him. To not keep a contract was to hate him. Does this sound familiar? This is the language used throughout the Old and New testament.

The format of a covenant These political covenants were so common that they developed a standardized form. Typical is the Hittite suzerain/ vassal treaties of the 2nd millennium BC of which there are lots of examples of.

Preamble: The king lists all his titles of grandeur

Historical prologue: This says why the vassal should take part in the covenant. The Hittite ones were based on gratitude. We have looked after you well. Assyrian ones were more ones of intimidation. We are very powerful

Stipulations. The suzerain would state his expectations. You will help in war. You will pay us so much. You will be totally loyal.

Blessings ie protection from the suzerain.

Curses These often say things like the gods will send you plagues etc. But in reality the suzerain would turn his military on them, get rid of the ruler who dared to rebel and take the land off them. If the vassal was really bad he would wipe them out or send them to exile.

Witnesses. The gods of both parties are named. Often there are hundreds listed to avoid loopholes.

Record made. Both parties would get a copy. The vassals were meant to read the treaty regularly to the people to remind them.

Now let's look at treaty at Mt Sinai. This follows the Hittite model. That is, God used a political form that was well understood to communicate to a people who were very fragmented. They had spent decades in slavery. They were not used to having their own laws and governing themselves. They had been abused and beaten. Those that came out of Egypt were not just Jews, but a mixture of races. The concept of just having one God was not common. In fact it would have been very confusing. Why would you not honour all the gods? Any religious person would offer sacrifices to everyone. How could this group of people become a nation? A People. God's plan was to choose a vehicle that they could recognize.

God offered to be their suzerain. Their ruler. Ex 19:5-6 “Now then, if you will indeed obey my Voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the people ...you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” By using this form God could teach and help the Israelites to become a people and nation, and they would understand something of what he is like

Preamble I am Yahweh your God. Very simple.

Historical Prologue. This is the reason why the people should accept the covenant. This is so important to Israel's faith, you would be hard pressed to read more than 10 pages of the OT and not find this. “I am Yahweh, your



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God, who bought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery. “

Here is a really critical point. The Israelites were not asked to obey the stipulations in order to receive God’s grace. They were to follow the stipulations because they had received God’s grace, exactly the same as the New Testament gospel. Grace comes first. We are obedient to God because of this grace to us. Anything other than this is legalism which we often fall back on. Humans have this constant desire to try to make ourselves good enough for God before we think we can receive his love and then try to make others do the same.

Stipulations You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make idols or worship them and serve them. God is trying to communicate to them in terms they understood. A nation would never bind itself to more than one suzerain. So Israel was not to bind itself to any other deity. Then God sets out the other commandments.

Blessings/ curses. If you obey, you keep the land. If you disobey, you will lose the land.

Witnesses. God can’t call any other gods to be witnesses. So he calls on heaven and earth.

Copies Remember Moses came down the mountain with two tablets. Traditionally the idea is the five commands are on one and five on the other. This is highly unlikely. Ten commands easily fit on one with room to spare for the other treaty bits. Far more likely that these are the two copies of the treaty. One for each of the covenant partners. Each partner was meant to take one copy home and place it in the presence of the deity by whom the oath was sworn. But in this case there is only one deity, so both are kept in the ark. Then like the Hittite treaties there is a declaration to read the treaty regularly to all the people. Deut 31:11

When Moses came down the mountain the people all agreed out loud they would keep the covenant. There is a ratification ceremony. Bulls were killed and the blood is put in basins. Half was put on the altar the other half was sprinkled on the people. “Behold, the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” Ex 24:5-8. This is an amazing moment – a rabble of slaves transformed into kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Ex 19:6

Summing up. God uses a well known political form to introduce to this mixed rabble of people who had been in slavery about himself. God declares who Israel is. He gives them identity. They had none. They will be his vassal. They will follow his law and keep a calendar of holy days. If Israel loves God, he will bless them with peace and prosperity. If Israel hates God, she will be cursed with exile. Israel can rule itself but must pay a tribute in tithes. They must fight his wars, obey his laws and teach the next generation his stipulations. Israel may use the land but it belongs to Yahweh. So if Israel is faithful they can keep the land grant. I.e. the Promised Land.

The Old Testament can be organized around 5 people and 5 covenants. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. When

we grasp all this, suddenly there is a whole lot more depth to what we call the New Covenant.

Fast forward. We get to the last week of Jesus ministry. Jesus as a rabbi has gathered his disciples to celebrate the ritual Passover meal. Every Jew from oldest and youngest, from greatest to least was required to gather and celebrate the miracle of the exodus. Specifically they were to remember the night when the blood of a spotless lamb marked who would live and who would die, when the tenth plagues passed over the house of the Israelites but struck down the first born of Egypt. It was during this last supper that Jesus instituted communion.

26 As they were eating, Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, “Take this and eat it, for this is my body.” 27 And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them and said, “Each of you drink from it, 28 for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant

These words are not a coincidence. Jews knew the Torah inside out. They are echoing Exodus 24 where Moses said. This is the blood of the covenant. Jesus is saying something greater than the exodus was about to happen. Another rabble of slaves is about to be transformed into God’s covenant people

1 Peter 2:10 “Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God’s people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God’s mercy.”

And in this new covenant the God of the cosmos is both the suzerain and the sacrifice. Remember the old covenants were sealed with a sacrifice. God himself is the sacrifice.

Remember the covenant with Abraham. God himself passed through the torn flesh of the animals, guaranteeing the covenant promises. Remember what the animals cut in two are saying. If I break these promises my flesh will be torn in two. While Abraham was faithful his descendants were not faithful. But God was faithful to his side of the covenant

Now think about whose flesh was torn to pay the price for the broken covenant. It was Jesus: both the representative of humanity and the embodiment of Yahweh, whose flesh was torn, who became the sacrifice. Whose blood seals the sacrifice? The suzerain himself. Can you see the power of this. The new covenant replaces and surpasses the 5 previous covenants that were continually broken. This one is sealed with the blood of Jesus.



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REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

How does this teaching alter your understanding of the Old Testament?

How does it enhance your understanding of communion, and the New Covenant?

What does this teaching show us about the character of God?

“Grace comes before obligations.” How is the concept often distorted by Christians.

How has God given us identity, that brings such a diverse people together?

Suggestion: Celebrate communion together as a home group. Share what Christ has done for you.



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