

the book of
the covenant



The Bible's unfolding story of
relationship with God

B N Howard

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To Jonathan Fletcher

*How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news*

Isaiah 52 v 7

Preface

There has been a rediscovery in recent years of Biblical theology. It's an approach to the Bible that seeks to understand any individual part of Scripture in the context of the whole. It asks the question: *What is the "Big Story" of the Bible, of which this is just a part?* It's an important question that has opened up new ways of thinking about the gospel message, new ways of preaching, and a new attitude to the Old Testament that has rescued believers from using it unhelpful ways – as though it were merely a story book of morality tales.

Out of this, there has come an exciting proliferation of books and study courses that call themselves "Bible overviews". The average reader could be forgiven for being a little confused by the differences between them, until we realise that there are many different kinds of overview. Because the Bible is a rich and complex story, there are many different routes through that are legitimate ways of revealing the magnificence of God's loving purposes in the world.

Some are *historical* – they trace the timeline of God's saving acts chronologically, because the order of the books of the Bible as we have them are not arranged in time order.

Others are *thematic*, based on a variety of theological strands that run through the Bible – of the King and his Kingdom, or of God's promise to make for himself a blessed people in a blessed land, or of the promise of a saviour and the fulfilment in Christ, or of the gathering and scattering

of God's people. It's important to recognise that these are not *competing* views of Scripture. They are simply different ways to read the Bible that yield their own unique insights, and combine to give us a fuller view of the wisdom and glory of our great God.

This very readable volume is a further addition to this helpful body of literature. It is an overview that focuses on *covenants* in the Bible – the “deals” that God made with his people which all find their fulfilment in the new covenant made through Jesus' death on the cross.

This is an important and foundational strand to understand, because these covenants are the basis on which the faith of Old Testament believers rested, and to which they constantly referred in their worship and in their daily lives.

The author (Bernard to some, Nick to others), has done a brilliant job of presenting and applying here much of the seminal work of O. Palmer Robertson, whose book *The Christ of the Covenants* remains a key text for many theological students, but is indigestible to most at over 300 pages!

For clarity's sake, you need to know that this is *not* a book that rests upon, or is about what is sometimes called “federal vision”, a different theological approach entirely.

But it *is* a book that takes the Bible seriously, and not only informs us about how the various covenants of the Bible work together, but also explores the ways that they are still relevant today to those of us who are beneficiaries of *the eternal covenant* through faith in Christ.

My prayer is that you enjoy and benefit from reading this book as much as I have from helping to bring it into being.

Tim Thornborough
Editor, February 2013

Introduction

I was standing on the edge of the English village of Burmarsh, looking out over Romney Marsh. After bad experiences getting lost in the past, this time I'd brought a detailed map with me, showing every single house and footpath. After finding my position and working out where I was going, I started folding up the map so I could tuck it away again.

Fifteen minutes later, already exhausted without having taken a step, I'd produced a messy bundle of paper that hardly resembled the original compact rectangle. I knew I needed to use the map's built-in creases, but I couldn't figure out how to do that correctly.

Just as maps help us find our way in unknown terrain, so the Bible guides us through the hopes, trials, disappointments and joys of life. It's easy to take wrong turns in this world. Proverbs 19 v 2 warns us:

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,
nor to be hasty and miss the way.

The Bible gives us the knowledge we need to choose the best paths. It speaks to us of God and his glory, tells us how to receive his salvation, and teaches us how to please him in all things.

The trouble is, reading the Bible can be very similar to using a large map. It's such a big book that we can struggle

to handle it properly. It's not hard to end up with an untidy bundle of misunderstandings. In the Bible's case, the "creases" that make all the difference are the seven covenants between God and mankind. **Part One** of this book will explain what a covenant is, and show how the Bible's seven covenants fit together to be one united covenant (which is why the Bible is "the Book of the Covenant"). **Part Two** will look into the meaning of each of the seven divine covenants. And **Part Three** will explain how to use these "creases" when reading the Bible.

Today, in the west at least, we have free and easy access to the Bible. There are multiple copies on our shelves. But in practice there are huge chunks of Scripture that might as well not be there, because we never read them. We encounter the Bible through sermons in church, home-group studies, and the portions measured out to us in daily reading notes. As a result we're not complete strangers to the Bible, but we don't know the whole book anything like as well as we should. Getting familiar with the covenants can change that. They show how the entire Bible fits together, so we can engage more comfortably with all its different parts. The aim of this Bible overview is to help our generation truly become "people of the Book", to the glory of God.

Part One

God's Offer of Covenant Relationship

What Is a Covenant?

Many Christians would agree that covenants are very important without being able to put their finger on what exactly a covenant is.

It's right to note their importance. Take some of the Bible topics most likely to be taught in children's groups at church: Noah's ark, "Father Abraham", the Ten Commandments, King David, and the Last Supper. In each case a covenant is central.¹ As a recent book puts it: "Covenant spreads its wings throughout the Bible. It is a theme we cannot ignore if we desire to know the God of the Scriptures, because he reveals himself as a 'covenant making and covenant keeping God.'"² The IVP *New Bible Dictionary* says that the covenant theme is "the most important link between the Testaments."³ And J.I. Packer points out: "The whole Bible is, as it were, presented by Jesus Christ to the church and to each Christian as the book of the covenant."⁴

So it crops up often and is obviously hugely significant, but what does this word "covenant" actually mean? To put it as simply as possible, *a covenant is a deal*. But covenants are especially meaningful and serious deals, as we can tell from looking at some of the relevant Bible passages.

Let's start with a minor covenant in the book of Genesis – not one of the covenants between God and mankind, but a covenant agreed between Isaac and Abimelech, a Philistine king:

Genesis 26 v 26-29

Meanwhile, Abimelech had come to [Isaac] from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his personal adviser and Phicol the commander of his forces. Isaac asked them, “Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?”

They answered, “We saw clearly that the LORD was with you; so we said, ‘There ought to be a sworn agreement between us’ – between us and you. Let us make a treaty [literally: cut a covenant] with you that you will do us no harm, just as we did not molest you but always treated you well and sent you away in peace.”

The final sentence shows that covenants are deals that create lasting relationships. Abimelech wants to be on good terms with Isaac, so he suggests they make a covenant to bring about that new relationship.

For a covenant to be successful, words need to be involved. Lasting relationships are not created by a wink and a smile. The covenant between Isaac and Abimelech must have included spoken terms because Abimelech says he wants a “sworn agreement”. Spoken terms of agreement are so essential to covenants that in Psalm 105 the psalm-writer uses “word” as an alternative way of saying “covenant”: “He remembers his *covenant* for ever, the *word* he commanded, for a thousand generations” (Psalm 105 v 8).

Perhaps what we’ve seen so far brings marriage to mind – two people entering into a new relationship by making an agreement with spoken vows. It’s right to think of marriage as an example of a covenant because the Bible itself describes it as a covenant (Malachi 2 v 14).

But we haven’t quite got to the bottom of covenants yet. The Bible speaks of people “cutting” a covenant, and there’s a reason for that violent-sounding expression. When a

covenant was agreed in Old Testament times, there was usually a ceremony with some fairly gruesome cutting.

In Jeremiah chapter 34, for instance, when King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem make a covenant with the LORD (verse 15), they cut a calf in two, place the pieces either side of a pathway, and then walk between them. We find out the reason for the blood and guts later on, when God rebukes Zedekiah and the others for failing to keep the covenant they've only just made:

Jeremiah 34 v 18, 20, NKJV

I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it ... I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

By walking through the pieces of the carcass, the people had effectively said to God: "May we become like this dead calf if we don't keep the covenant we're making today." God's terrifying decree, after they've broken the covenant, holds them to their word. He's saying: "It will be as you said it should be when you walked between those torn animal pieces. You will end up like that calf."

So the blood-soaked opening ceremony is a way of announcing the punishment for covenant failure. By agreeing to this punishment, it's as if the participants are lifting a sword above their own heads. "If we fail to keep the terms of this covenant," they're saying, "may the sword suspended today fall down upon our own necks."

In his book *The Christ of the Covenants*, O. Palmer

Robertson puts it like this: “The parties of the covenant are committed to one another by a ... process of blood-shedding. This blood-shedding represents the intensity of the commitment of the covenant.”⁵

Covenants in the Bible are made between people, and also between God and humanity.⁶ It’s worth pointing out a major difference between those two kinds of covenant. When Isaac and Abimelech make a covenant, they operate as equal partners, which means they both have a say on the terms and conditions. But a glance at any of the divine covenants makes it clear that God alone decides the terms of the covenant. There’s no opportunity for the people involved to negotiate a better deal. Their choice is simply to take it or leave it. There’s no other way to enter into relationship with God.⁷

It’s time to sum up...

A covenant is an agreement establishing a relationship, with life or death consequences. That definition captures the three distinctive elements of a covenant: agreed terms, the resulting relationship, and the fatal consequences of falling short. To compress the definition further, we could say it’s **a relationship-creating deal with teeth.**⁸

- **God's willingness to make covenants with mankind shows that he wants to be in relationship with us.** *That's extraordinary.* We have every reason to feel very small and very sinful before God. He's the omnipotent Lord of hosts: thousands upon thousands of powerful angels wait on his command (Matthew 26 v 53). To him, our nations – with their flags, governments, armies and economies – are like a drop of water at the bottom of a bucket (Isaiah 40 v 15). What's more, God's character is unchangingly pure and unfailingly good, while we're so often lazy, selfish, thoughtless and unkind. Time after time we act in a way that grieves God, and that we ourselves know is wrong. And yet God is willing to cut covenants with people like us, proving that he wants to be in relationship with us. We shouldn't respond to this truth by thinking more highly of ourselves, as if we deserve to have covenant dealings with God. No, as Paul reminds new covenant believers: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5 v 8). The right way to respond to this truth is with deep wonder, as we meditate on God's willingness to stoop down and make covenants with the likes of us.
- **God's covenant-making teaches us that there's only one way to enter into relationship with him.** We need to reject the "one mountain, many paths" view of God, as if he were sitting at the top of a spiritual mountain with many very different religious paths leading up to his throne at the summit. It's God who determines how people should relate to him. As we've

seen, he's the one who sets the terms of the covenant – it's not as if he and mankind negotiate around a boardroom table. When people practise a religion other than Christianity, it's as if they're trying to persuade God to accept their own alternative agreement. They haven't understood that God is the one who decides the terms and conditions, which have been fully and finally revealed in the Bible – the book of the covenant.

- For a similar reason, **we need to keep a close watch over the message we proclaim.** We've seen that covenants are built around carefully chosen words. The good news about Jesus is a covenant – the new covenant – and like other covenants it contains specific terms of agreement. We must therefore take great care to put the correct message across when we're reaching out to non-Christians. If we get the terms and conditions wrong, we'll misinform people on how to be in relationship with God.
- Finally, **the grisly “cutting” feature of covenants explains why blood is so frequently found on the pages of Scripture.** The Bible is a blood-spattered book. Some Bible readers may think the constant references to blood are distasteful. But we've seen that covenants are agreements with life or death consequences. If a covenant isn't kept, blood must be spilt. People conscious of their sin will understand that blood needs to be shed as a result of their failure to keep the covenant. It will either be their own blood or – could it be true! – the blood of a substitute in their place. Believers should rejoice in the substitutionary blood found throughout Scripture's pages.