

## THE COVENANTAL BIBLE

A **biblical canon** or **canon of scripture** is a set of texts (or "books") which a particular religious community regards as authoritative **scripture**. Believers consider canonical books as inspired by God or as expressive of the authoritative history of the relationship between God and his people. The Christian biblical canon of scriptures was generally established by the 5<sup>th</sup> century

**The church** in its inception possessed a canon of sacred books of the Old Testament, both in Hebrew and in Greek translation.<sup>1</sup> There was clearly a fixed canon long before Christ was born. When tempted, Jesus referred to this canon as the very word of God. It is plain from the New Testament writings that the Law of Moses, the prophets and Psalms were recognized and vested with unsurpassed authority.<sup>2</sup>

**The structure of the book of Deuteronomy** is remarkably similar to that of the International Suzerainty Treaty of the time of Moses, who was schooled in the royal palace of Egypt. At that time, Egypt had one of the largest libraries in the world. The covenant between the LORD<sup>3</sup> and his people Israel was kept in the Ark of the Covenant. The prophets called by the LORD documented and kept historical records of both parties (i.e. the covenant LORD and the people of the nation Israel whom he had delivered from Egypt and were redeemed by his power) Based on the legal documentation written by the prophets, Israel had broken the covenant, and was banished from the promised land and in exile. However, the prophets also wrote of the gracious plan of God due to the covenant that he had previously made with Abraham, the ancestor of Israel. All the prophets appealed to this covenant of grace in their effort to point the way to God by His gracious mercy, love and compassion.

**The New Testament canon** has the similar structure of the Old Testament and was written by the apostles, who were called to the task like the Old Testament prophets. They were given plenipotentiary authority by the LORD like the OT prophets. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament as we know today had been scrutinized and accepted by the consensus of the early church fathers. In his Easter letter of 367, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, gave a list of exactly the same books that would formally become the New Testament canon. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Western Church was unanimous concerning the New Testament canon.

**THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION** - This was whatever the apostles taught. All over the early Christian writings are found such excerpts:

Since the Lord Jesus Christ sent the apostles to preach, no others ought to be received as preachers than those whom Christ appointed ... What that was which they preached ... can ... properly be proven in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the Gospel directly to them themselves, both *viva voce* (i.e., by voice), as the phrase is, and afterwards by their letters. (*Prescription against Heretics* 21)

Therefore, brothers, hold fast to the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bjrl/nt-canon\\_bruce.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bjrl/nt-canon_bruce.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bible.ca/b-canon-council-of-jamnia.htm>

<sup>3</sup> N.B. As in the NASB the use of LORD for the covenant name of God (Heb. YHWH)

Now I praise you, brothers, that you remember me in everything and keep the traditions as I delivered them to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

The earliest Christians after the apostolic age honored the apostles as absolute authorities. For them, the apostles themselves were inspired, which is why they made every effort to gather up anything written by or approved by them. It was in this way that our New Testament was gathered together. (See also Apostles Quotes.).

## THE COVENANTS

- **ADAMIC COVENANT (GENESIS CHPTS 1-3)**

Between God and Adam (Federal head of the human race)<sup>4</sup>

Stipulation regarding probation tree – “*but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.*” (Genesis 2:17)

- Blessing of obedience: Reward of glory – Eternal Life
- Curse of disobedience: Death – 3 kinds of death (spiritual, physical and eternal) came upon Adam, federal head of all mankind.<sup>5</sup>

- **COVENANT OF COMMON GRACE (GENESIS 9:9-17)**

Covenant between God and Noah plus every living Creature for all generations. (Note the 7 occurrences of the word “covenant” (בְּרִית) (*berith*)) (Genesis 12:9-10))

<sup>9</sup> *Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth.* <sup>11</sup> *And I establish my covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.”* (Genesis 9:9-11)

**\*Sign of Covenant = Rainbow (Genesis 9:12-13)**

- **ABRAHAMIC COVENANT OF GRACE (GENESIS 15, 17:1-17)**

Between God and **the seed** of Abraham

<sup>17</sup> *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.* <sup>18</sup> *And in your **seed** all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”* (Gen 22:17-18)

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<sup>4</sup> Berkhof, L., *Systematic Theology*, (MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), pp. 215-217.

<sup>5</sup> Turretin, Francis *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Trans. Giger, George Musgrave, Ed. Dennison, James T. [NJ:R&R Publishing, 1994], Vol. 1, p. 672

Paul explained the promise above:

<sup>15</sup> Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. <sup>16</sup> Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. <sup>17</sup> What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. <sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. (Galatians 3:15-18)

<sup>6</sup> Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." <sup>9</sup> So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (Galatians 3:6-9)

**\* Sign of Covenant between God and Abraham – circumcision of every male (Genesis 17:9-14)**

Stipulations - Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before me, and be blameless" <sup>6</sup> "And I will establish my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly." (Genesis 17:1-2)

• **MOSAIC COVENANT (BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY)**

BETWEEN GOD AND MOSES AND NATION ISRAEL

**\* Sign of Covenant = Sabbath Observance (Exodus. 31:13, 17)**

• **INTER-TRINITARIAN COVENANT (COVENANT OF REDEMPTION) (EPHESIANS 1:4 FF.; 3:11; 2 THESS. 2:13; 2 TIM. 1:9 <sup>7</sup>**

BETWEEN GOD THE FATHER AND GOD THE SON (LAST ADAM)

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, <sup>4</sup> just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love <sup>5</sup> He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup> **In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace,** <sup>8</sup> which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him <sup>10</sup> with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ,

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew תָּמִים (*tamim*) means without blemish, blameless, whole perfect. It is used to describe Job repeatedly for emphasis. (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3).

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof, L., *Systematic Theology*, (MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), pp. 266-271

things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him <sup>11</sup> also we have obtained **an inheritance**, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, <sup>12</sup> to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. <sup>13</sup> In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, <sup>14</sup> who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:3-14)

<sup>7</sup> "Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (In the roll of the book it is written of me) to do Thy will, O God.'" <sup>8</sup> After saying above, "Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast not desired, nor hast Thou taken pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the Law), <sup>9</sup> then **He said, "Behold, I have come to do Thy will."** He takes away the first in order to establish the second. <sup>10</sup> **By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.** <sup>11</sup> And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; <sup>12</sup> **but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God,** <sup>13</sup> **waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet.** <sup>14</sup> **For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.** <sup>15</sup> And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, <sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant that I will make with them After those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, And upon their mind I will write them," He then says, <sup>17</sup> "And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." <sup>18</sup> Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin. (Hebrews 10:7-18)

CHRIST'S ACTIVE AND PASSIVE OBEDIENCE FOR HIS PEOPLE<sup>8</sup>

- **THE NEW COVENANT (COVENANT OF GRACE)**

BETWEEN CHRIST, THE REDEEMER AND HIS CHURCH/ZION/THE  
ESCHATOLOGICAL ISRAEL

\* SIGN OF COVENANT = BAPTISM (Indication of the spiritual benefits of the life, death and resurrection of Christ in the regeneration of the person).

<sup>1</sup> "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, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> **"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. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)**

<sup>15</sup> And for this reason He is the mediator of a **new covenant**, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (Hebrews 9:15)

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<sup>8</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, [London: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1988], con. viii. 4. Cat. 38, 39, 48, 49, 97. Con. xi. I. cat. 70

*<sup>2</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, <sup>23</sup> to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to **Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant**, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)*

### **THE MISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET**

#### **A. TO BE THE SPOKESMAN FOR GOD**

“To be caught up in the Spirit” was to be received into the divine assembly, the heavenly reality within the theophanic glory spirit. The hallmark of a true prophet is that he had stood before the God of glory in the midst of the council of the angels. While the false prophet is one who had not done so; and so lack divine legitimating and essential qualification. It was by such a vivid rapture into the heavenly council that the prophets’ call came to them, raised them up as potential emissary of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned in the heavenly court. Such was the call that came to Isaiah and Ezekiel, who were ushered into the council. Privileged to hear of the Lord’s purposes, the prophets were ready to be sent to earth as God’s authoritative spokesman as the very mouth of God. Those who were in the prophetic office were the LORD’s messengers, not only in the general sense, but were inspired agents of revelation. They performed a distinctive diplomatic function as well. They had a specific covenantal function.

By virtue of this rapture into heaven, the prophet took on the glory that diffused the heavenly court. The prophet was transformed into the likeness of the king of glory. As for Isaiah, as for Adam, the heavenly council was a place of origins. It was a place of creation in the likeness of God and of his angels. They were being called, and part of the transformation taking on to the nth degree of the image of God, which was part of the original thing imparted to Adam and of course restored to the redeemed by Jesus whom we are recreated in knowledge of the truth and holiness and righteousness.

#### **B. THE PROPHET IS THE LAWSUIT BEARER OF THE COVENANT.**

The major and minor prophets are not distinct by time of writing. There was a distinct office of the prophet. The book of Chronicles was not written by prophets. Joshua, Judges and Kings were written by prophets recounting the history of the people and of the judges and the kings. They documented God’s faithfulness to his covenant and they also documented the people’s unfaithfulness to the covenant. One of the functions of the prophets was to produce the records of the community. They were God’s lawyers conducting God’s lawsuits. They recounted God’s faithfulness and goodness and the justice of the lawsuit.

#### **C. THEY WERE THE ADMINISTRATORS OF THE COVENANT**

Word study and sociological analysis disclose the distinctive prophetic function of an office in Israel. God made his will known through effective proclamation. The establishment of the prophetic office was in itself a matter of treaty stipulation. Moses, the prophet mediator of the old covenant, arranged the Deuteronomy treaty. This covenantal task was to be administered by a succession of prophets (Deuteronomy 18:18). Right in the midst of the treaty we see a section dealing with the offices of the king, priest and prophet.

## THE PROPHET'S MISSION TO ISRAEL

### **The Prophets' Relationship to the Mosaic Covenant**

The prophets were prosecuting the people over the Mosaic Covenant. We have analyzed that the whole relationship of the prophets is to the covenantal administration of the kingdom. There is the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, and the New Covenant. The function of the prophets related differently to these covenants. In Deuteronomy 18 they are related to the Mosaic Covenant. They have their origin here.

Underlying the Mosaic Covenant is the Abrahamic Covenant of Grace. It involved the national election of Israel, an election to a typological kingdom and all of this is dependent on obedience. Jesus says to the lawyer regarding the law, "Do this and you will live" (Luke 10:26-28). The basic role of the prophet is to prosecute the people who failed to follow the terms of this works arrangement in corporate Israel and forfeited the blessings of this typological kingdom.

In the Old Testament, the historical documents recorded the failure of the nation Israel and they forfeited the Promised Land. The nation reflected the first Adam in paradise, who failed and was exiled from Eden. In 2 Chronicles 36:14ff, the Lord sent his prophets which the people despised and scoffed at until the wrath of God arose and there was no remedy. God dismissed his people and called them "*Lo Ammi*" (i.e. Hebrew for "not my people"). The prophets complained about the people's unfaithfulness and there is a call to repentance before the pronouncement of a lawsuit against the breaking of the covenant and the indictment followed by judgment, then the execution.

### **The Prophets' Relationship to the Abrahamic Covenant**

The Abrahamic covenant was still in place. The Mosaic covenant could not annul the promise. The Mosaic Covenant was a second layer formed by national election of a typological kingdom. It did not annul the Abrahamic Covenant which had to do with individual election. The conquest of Canaan was of the grace underlying the Abrahamic Covenant which came to expression in the sacrificial system which pointed to the Messiah, to the true Israel who will redeem them through the New Covenant.

The happy side of the prophetic industry was to announce that beyond the fall there was fullness of grace, that God in his wisdom used the fall of Israel as the occasion to work toward the coming in of the Gentiles and the fullness of Israel who are of the seed of Abraham in the fulfillment of his promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic covenant pointed to the new covenant. Like John the forerunner of the New Covenant, the prophets also were heralds who proclaimed the New Covenant, the promises of the Abrahamic covenant.

## D. THEY WERE THE HERALDS OF THE NEW COVENANT.

The prophets were kinsman to the Israelites and were in agony over them and longed to save them from judgment. Their message was one of salvation and judgment. They also had a priestly function and prayed and interceded for Israel.

Moses' authoritative administration of God's covenant lordship over Israel was to be carried on by the prophets. In their effective judicial declaration of the covenant sanctions that God purposed to visit upon his people, the prophets were engaged in a constructive shaping of the

Kingdom house of God. Likewise in the extension of their mission beyond Israel, the prophets were appointed over nations and kingdoms to build up and to destroy. This is the ruling and the judging. This investment of the prophet with heavenly authority to shape the historical course of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms on earth in the name of the LORD was a renewal of the original assignment to man of a God-like dominion over the world, adapted now to the redemptive situation. In his ruling function, man was to be a true image of his royal LORD. The love of the holy will of the heavenly King of kings was essential to man's advancement from glory to glory in his reflection of the glory of the divine majesty.<sup>9</sup>

#### E. MISSION TO THE NATIONS

The prophets were apostles to the Gentiles. There was the anticipation of Paul and the other apostles to the Gentiles. Paul saw the call and task and quoted Isaiah that he was to build and to plant. The Gentiles were breakers of the covenant that God had with Adam at the beginning and faced judgment like those under the Mosaic covenant unless they come under the Covenant of Grace and accept God's salvation.

*"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. <sup>2</sup> "He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. <sup>3</sup> "A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. <sup>4</sup> "He will not be disheartened or crushed, until He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." <sup>5</sup> Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it, And spirit to those who walk in it, <sup>6</sup> "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, **And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations,** (Isaiah 42:1-6)*

<sup>46</sup> *And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup> **"For thus the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, That You should bring salvation to the end of the earth.'"** (Act 13:46-47)*

#### THE PROPHETS HAD A DOUBLE MISSION TO ISRAEL.

This is the second layer within the Mosaic Covenant that God had made with Israel. The Israelites were functioning under the covenant of works that God had made with national Israel through Moses, who had the unhappy mission of bringing the complaint and ultimately the judgment upon Israel for her covenant breaking. Beyond that, there is also task of the happy recalling of the promises God made with Abraham in the eternal covenant of grace which the Son has fulfilled. The basis of which he now mediates the blessings in terms of the covenant of grace as the Lord of the covenant, on the basis of the promises he had made with Abraham. They are sustained, not annulled under the Mosaic economy which will come into antitypical fulfillment in

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<sup>9</sup> Kline, Meredith G., *Images of the Spirit* [MI: Baker Book House, 1980] pp. 59-60

due course. Therefore the prophets are pointing towards that messianic salvation and thus were heralds of the new covenant.

This is their mission to Israel under the Mosaic economy and that involves the prosecution and the lawsuit against the people. The lawsuit was often a two stage arrangement where at the beginning the vassal is breaking the covenant and there is the complaint, which is the first stage. How come you are not fulfilling the stipulations of the covenant with its attendant warning that if you continue with it, then the curses which were invoked at the ratification of this would overtake you?

The first stage offers an opportunity of conciliation. The covenant breaker is on his way to doom, but it is not the final word yet. There is an indictment of their sin, but not yet beyond repair and there is a delay in the curses, and an offer of reconciliation. But failing that, there will be a second stage. Unhappily, in the history of Israel that was what they came to. It issued in the fall of Israel. There was not a covenant of sovereign grace for the nation. If there had been a covenant of sovereign grace, it would not have ended in failure. It will be a guarantee of success. God in his wisdom, on the occasion of the fall, the gospel was offered to the Gentiles. That does not change the fact that there was a fall and a failure in that arrangement with Israel. Sovereign grace issues in success. It is guaranteed by the success and merits of the Son in fulfilling the inter-Trinitarian covenant with the Father.

Here the covenant of works brings forth the understanding of the role of the prophets within the framework of the covenant. All the components of the covenant become parts of the prophetic message. God identified himself in the preamble. The prophets expanded on the theology of God, recounting the historical dealings they had with God and expounding on who he is. That is all part of the prophetic function and message. The stipulations also come to expression in the mission of the prophets. Yes, the prophets were reminders of what the Lord had been and given to Moses. The center of gravity, however, in the message of the prophets is not so much the preamble or the historical prologue but the stipulations and the sanctions. The curses and the blessings are the consequences of rebellion against God or obedience to God. The emphasis is quite obviously here—life and death, heaven and hell, the curses of the covenant.<sup>10</sup>

### **HOMEWORK/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Read Deuteronomy 30:1-14 and Romans chapter 10:1-10.

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<sup>10</sup> Kline, Meredith G., *Prophetic Books* (Lecture notes at classes taught at WSC, Spring 1998)

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