

Old Testament Overview from a Covenant Perspective.

The unity of the Old Testament can be seen in the concept of covenant relationship. A covenant is a relationship. Today, we most often associate covenant with the marriage relationship. The amazing story of the Old Testament (and indeed the New Testament) is that Almighty God has graciously entered into covenant relationship with humanity. Through his own sovereign initiative, God has worked to establish a people for himself. The history of the OT is one of the establishment and outworking of covenant relationship.

This study will look at the five OT mediators of covenant, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. We will describe how God graciously affirmed his covenant with these men and then describe how history played out in relation to this covenant.

The Covenant of Creation.

By the very act of creating humans in his own image, God established a unique relationship with himself and creation. It is just this fact that humanity was created in the image of God that provided for the ability to relate with God. This gracious provision to man makes covenant relationship possible.

Genesis 1:27-28

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

The covenant of creation is marked also by the covenant obligations of man. These obligations are seen in verse 28 and can be summarized in the phrase “fill the earth and subdue it.” Humanity was called by God to increase in number and to rule over the rest of creation as God’s representatives.

Genesis 2:16-17

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

A further obligation of created man was the prohibition from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This relationship between God and created man required that the creature live as creature and not supplant the creator. Furthermore, to disobey this covenant obligation would result in death.

As we well know, Adam and Eve did not live up to the obligations set forward by God, and in their desire to be like God, they ate from the tree. Although the relationship

between created man and Creator God was not eliminated, through the breaking of covenant relationship, mankind was separated from God.

As history bears witness, from the Adam to Noah, the results were disastrous as humanity grew in wickedness and suffered the loss of blessing.

The Covenant of Preservation

Because human wickedness was rampant after the fall, God purposed to wipe out mankind from the face of the earth. However, God reestablished his covenant relationship with Noah and his family.

Genesis 6:17-18

I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. 18 But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you.

Through Noah, God reestablishes his covenant with created man and blesses man unto fruitfulness.

Genesis 9:1

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.

This covenant with creation is then expanded in God's promise to not destroy the earth. This covenant was sealed with the rainbow.

Genesis 9:8-16

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 9 “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you 10 and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12 And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. 16 Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

Humans are also given covenant obligations and these center around the taking of life and the eating of blood.

Genesis 9:4-6

“But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. 5 And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

6 “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.

Humanity has received the grace of preservation and the blessing to increase, but is prohibited from taking the life of an image bearer and from eating the blood of animals.

The Covenant with Abraham (God sets apart a people for himself)

Thus far, God’s covenants have been mediated through individuals, but have been directed to all humanity. Through the covenants of creation and preservation, God has given all people the capacity to relate with him and the grace of life.

With Abraham, God begins a new work in history, the first significant step in his redemption program. In covenant with Abraham, God graciously promises to make Abraham a great nation, to give him the land of Canaan and to make him a blessing to all people. This covenant is established in Genesis 15.

Genesis 15:5-7

5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. 7 He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

This covenant is reaffirmed in chapter 17.

Genesis 17:6-10

6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. 8 The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” 9 Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. 10 This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

At this point we see a further aspect of this covenant relationship. In the latter part of verse 7, we see that part of the covenant relationship established with Abraham is that God will be the God of Abraham and his descendants. God is entering a special relationship with Abraham and his descendants in that they will be his people and he will be their God.

Furthermore the sign of this covenant relationship is circumcision.

This covenant is reaffirmed with Abraham's son Isaac

Genesis 26:2-5

The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. ³ Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws."

It is reaffirmed again with Isaac's son Jacob

Genesis 28:13-14

¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

God graciously and sovereignly established his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Through them he established for himself a people who would serve him as God.

The Covenant of Law

Fleeing famine in Canaan, Jacob's family finds refuge in Egypt, but generations later God's people are found themselves oppressed as slaves. God, in faithfulness to his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, delivers his people from Egypt through the leadership of Moses.

It is important to see the exodus as an act of God's faithfulness to his covenant. Through the exodus, God establishes the Hebrew people as a nation and gives them the land promised to their forefathers. The not without difficulties, the stories of Exodus and conquest must be seen as God's fulfillment of covenant promises.

Exodus 2:24

24 God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.

During the exodus experience, God reestablishes his covenant with his people. This reestablishment of the covenant, but not be seen as a completely new work of God, but one that flows out of the covenant relationship established with Abraham.

This covenant relationship finds its core description in Exodus 6:7

Exodus 6:7 I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God....

The covenant relationship at its essence is that God is creating a people for himself that would honor him as their God.

In the formal reestablishment of God's covenant, an important new aspect is introduced and that is covenant law. Although covenant obligations are not new, and can be seen in all the previous covenants, the Mosaic law is far more extensive. It is important, however that law is always subservient to covenant. The law is not the basis of covenant relationship, it is the response to covenant relationship. Before the law was ever given, God had already made his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and had already graciously delivered his people from Egypt. Law represents a new way of administering an already existing covenant relationship.

The distinctive aspect of the Mosaic covenant is that rather than being a covenant with an individual, it is now a covenant with a nation and as such required the external law in order to administer the covenant. The basic covenant relationship with God remains, the promises remain, but now God's commands are made explicit. The ten commandments embody the Mosaic covenant

Exodus 34:27-28

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." 28 Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

Notice that the ten commandments are called the words of the covenant. Notice also that the covenant is with the nation Israel and is in accordance to the ten commandments.

This covenant relationship is reaffirmed with the next generation before they enter into the promised land.

Deuteronomy 5:1-3

Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. 2 The LORD our God made

a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.

The book of Deuteronomy reaffirms the covenant obligations and then in chapter 28 outlines the blessings and curses. Covenant keeping results in the nation being blessed, but covenant breaking results in the loss of the land and in place of blessing, curses. Having heard the words of the covenant, the people reaffirm the relationship.

Deuteronomy 29:12-15

You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, 13 to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 14 I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you 15 who are standing here with us today in the presence of the LORD our God but also with those who are not here today.

This covenant is renewed once again after the conquest of the land. Joshua leads the people in covenant reaffirmation at Shechem. After admonishing the people to serve God and put away idols, the people pledge themselves to God.

Joshua 24:24-25

And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.” 25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws.

Although the people are faithful under Joshua and Moses, the Lord reveals to the people that in fact they will break this covenant.

Deuteronomy 31:16-18

And the LORD said to Moses: “You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. 17 On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and difficulties will come upon them, and on that day they will ask, ‘Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?’ 18 And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.

As a gracious establishment of hope, however, the people are told that even after covenant faithfulness, a return to repentance and obedience will mark the reestablishment of covenant relationship. It seems that even if the people are unfaithful, God will always be faithful to his covenant.

Deuteronomy 30:1-3

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, ² and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.

The people are faced with the revelation of God's will and presented with blessings and curses. The following stages of Biblical history are the outworking of these covenant blessings and curses as the people drift from God and return in repentance.

The Judges Covenant Blessings and Curses

After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel were not faithful to the covenant they made with God. As such, God permitted other peoples to oppress the Israelites. In the book of judges we see a cycle develop.

1. Covenant unfaithfulness of the people
2. The Lord gives them over to their enemies
3. The people cry out to the Lord.
4. God raises us a Spirit filled leader (judge)
5. The land returned to peace

For example: Judges 3:7-11

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. ⁸ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. ⁹ But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. ¹¹ So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

In the book of judges we clearly see the results of covenant unfaithfulness. On the other hand we continue to see the grace and faithfulness of God who delivers his people from their enemies as they call on his name.

The Covenant of Kingdom

The book of Judges ends with criticizing the days when Israel had no king.

Judges 21:25

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Although Israel's first king Saul was not much better, God chose to further his covenant relationship with the people of Israel through king and kingdom. God chose to relate to his people through the king as covenant mediator.

This enhancement of the covenant relationship is developed through king David. This is known as the Davidic covenant.

2 Samuel 7:11-16

... 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: 12 When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. 15 But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.'"

The basic concept is that God will rule over his people through the king as covenant mediator. Through the Davidic covenant God chooses David's line and through that line, Jerusalem and the temple as the manner by which he will rule his people.

Again we see that there are covenant obligations, for when the king does wrong, God declares that he will punish him. Interestingly, when David charges Solomon before he dies, he draws a strong link between the Mosaic covenant and the Davidic covenant, understanding that God's promises are conditional on faithfulness to the law.

1 Kings 2:2-4

"I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, show yourself a man, 3 and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, 4 and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'

The Davidic covenant stands in relationship with the Mosaic covenant. Although God is administering his rule through the king, he has not given up on his law.

The History of the Kings from a Covenant Perspective.

From the time of Solomon, we see that the Davidic line is unfaithful to the covenant and is chastened by God. Yet in this discipline, God remains faithful to his promise and preserves the Davidic line.

The most significant and first chastening is the division of the kingdom which happens during the reign of Rehoboam, Solomon's son.

1 Kings 11:9-13

9 The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. 10 Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. 11 So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. 12 Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. 13 Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."

The Northern Kingdom of Israel immediately was characterized by idolatry and rebellion. There was never a good king that ruled in covenant faithfulness. The longest dynasty was that of Jehu which lasted four generations (about 100 years). Because of their unfaithfulness, the Lord judged them and they were overthrown by the Assyrians

2 Kings 17:13-15

The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets." 14 But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. 15 They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, "Do not do as they do," and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah exhibited was a different story. They were a mixed bag. Some of the kings were faithful to God and the covenant, but many were not. Judah had an unbroken Davidic dynasty which lasted about 400 years, which is unparalleled in the ancient near east. Ultimately Judah too was judged for their unfaithfulness to God and were defeated by the Babylonians and taken into exile.

The Prophets:

Throughout the times of the divided kingdom, God sent his messengers, the prophets to the kings and people calling them back to covenant faithfulness. The message of the prophets are characterized by judgment on sin and the hope of restoration. This hope of restoration is often characterized in the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant by Messiah

Jeremiah 33:14-17

‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. 15 ”‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.’ 17 For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel,

The Return From Exile:

As Jeremiah predicted the Babylonian exile lasted 70 years at which time God used the Persian king Cyrus to allow his people to return. This return represents God’s continued faithfulness despite the unfaithfulness of his people. The returning exiles were able to rebuild the temple and walls of Jerusalem. However, the Davidic dynasty was never restored and the predicted restoration of Israel fell short.

The last of the prophets Malachi gives indication that although the people returned to the land, their hearts did not return to God.

In Daniel Chapter 9, Daniel makes a good summary of the situation in his prayer. He recognizes the Lord’s punishment as judgment against covenant unfaithfulness, and he pleads on behalf of his people for forgiveness. He pleads to God on the basis of God’s covenant faithfulness. An angel messenger gives Daniel an answer which basically says that the restoration of God’s people will be delayed.

In summary, the OT can be understood in terms of God’s gracious provision of covenant relationship. This covenant is based on God’s sovereign initiative and carries with it certain obligations. Although the history of God’s people in the OT is one of unfaithfulness and the resulting punishment, there is always hope based on God’s mercy and faithfulness. Despite these failures, God did not give up on his people. In fact the covenants of the OT are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.