

Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.*

1285 בְּרִית [bâriyth /ber-eeth/] n f. From 1262 (in the sense of cutting [like 1254]); TWOT 282a; GK 1382; 284 occurrences; AV translates as “covenant” 264 times, “league” 17 times, “confederacy” once, “confederate” once, and “confederate + 1167” once. **1** covenant, alliance, pledge. 1A between men. 1A1 treaty, alliance, league (man to man). 1A2 constitution, ordinance (monarch to subjects). 1A3 agreement, pledge (man to man). 1A4 alliance (of friendship). 1A5 alliance (of marriage). 1B between God and man. 1B1 alliance (of friendship). 1B2 covenant (divine ordinance with signs or pledges). **2** (phrases). 2A covenant making. 2B covenant keeping. 2c covenant violation.

1696 דָּבַר, דִּבֶּר, דִּבְרָה [dabar /daw-bar/] v. A primitive root; TWOT 399; GK 1818 and 1819 and 1820; 1143 occurrences; AV translates as “speak” 840 times, “say” 118 times, “talk” 46 times, “promise” 31 times, “tell” 25 times, “commune” 20 times, “pronounce” 14 times, “utter” seven times, and translated miscellaneously 38 times. **1** to speak, declare, converse, command, promise, warn, threaten, sing. 1A (Qal) to speak. 1B (Niphal) to speak with one another, talk. 1c (Piel). 1c1 to speak. 1c2 to promise. 1D (Pual) to be spoken. 1E (Hithpael) to speak. 1F (Hiphil) to lead away, put to flight

1697 דְּבָר [dabar /daw-baw/] n m. From 1696; TWOT 399a; GK 1821; 1439 occurrences; AV translates as “word” 807 times, “thing” 231 times, “matter” 63 times, “acts” 51 times, “chronicles” 38 times, “saying” 25 times, “commandment” 20 times, and translated miscellaneously 204 times. **1** speech, word, speaking, thing. 1A speech. 1B saying, utterance. 1c word, words. 1D business, occupation, acts, matter, case, something, manner (by extension).

423 אָלָה [’alah /aw-law/] n f. From 422; TWOT 91a; GK 460; 36 occurrences; AV translates as “curse” 18 times, “oath” 14 times, “execration” twice, and “swearing” twice. **1** oath. **2** oath of covenant. **3** curse. 3A from God. 3B from men. **4** execration.

Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*.

COVENANT Arrangement between two parties involving mutual obligations; especially the arrangement that established the relationship between God and his people, expressed in grace first with Israel and then with the church. Through that covenant God has conveyed to humanity the meaning of human life and salvation. Covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible, where some covenants are between human beings, others between God and human beings.

The covenant theme in the OT is developed from Noah to Abraham and reaches its first climax in the covenant formed between God and Israel at Mt Sinai. After King David's time, the history of the covenant becomes a less prominent theme.

At a low point in covenant history the Bible introduces the prophet Jeremiah's prophecy of a "new covenant" in Israel's future. Christians believe that Jeremiah's prophecy eventually found fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is not accidental that the two volumes of the Christian Bible have been called the Old Covenant and New Covenant (the word commonly translated "testament" means "covenant").

PREVIEW

- The Meaning of Covenant
- Human Covenants
- Divine-Human Covenants
- Beginnings of the Covenant Tradition
- The Sinai Covenant
- The Covenant with David
- The New Covenant Predicted in the Old Testament

The Meaning of Covenant The essence of covenant is to be found in a particular kind of relationship between persons. Mutual obligations characterize that kind of relationship. Thus a covenant relationship is not merely a mutual acquaintance but a commitment to responsibility and action. A key word in Scripture to describe that commitment is "faithfulness," acted out in a context of abiding friendship.

In the OT the word "covenant" was used in an ordinary human sense as well as in a theological sense. An understanding of human covenants provides a starting point for understanding the covenant between God and human beings.

Human Covenants A variety of human relationships, from profoundly personal to distantly political, may be described as covenantal. The deep brotherly love that David and Jonathan shared led to a formal covenant between them (1 Sm 18:3). Their covenant of friendship was more than a token of esteem; it bound them to demonstrate mutual loyalty and loving-kindness in certain tangible ways. Jonathan's covenant faithfulness was typified on an occasion when David was out of favor with the king; Jonathan braved his father's wrath to speak favorably for his friend. Subsequently, he warned David secretly to flee into hiding (1 Sm 19–20).

To appreciate the many OT laws on marriage and divorce, one must understand that marriage itself was a covenant relationship (Mal 2:14). The solemn promises exchanged by a man and woman became their covenant obligations. Faithfulness to those promises brought marital blessing (cf. Ps 128; Prv 18:22); violation brought a curse.

An individual could, at least figuratively, make a covenant or vow with himself or herself (something like a New Year's resolution). Job, arguing his integrity before God, referred to a

covenant he had made with his eyes to keep him from looking at women licentiously ([Jb 31:1](#)).

Covenants could also have a national or international character. The elders of Israel made a national covenant with King David in Hebron ([2 Sm 5:3](#)). Probably it contained explicit promises both from the elders on behalf of the people to submit themselves to the king's authority and from David to rule the nation justly and according to the law of God ([Dt 17:15–20](#)). The covenant relationship described mutual obligations between a senior partner (the king) and junior partners (the Israelites). In international relationships OT covenants were similar to modern treaties or alliances. King Solomon entered into such a covenant with Hiram, king of Tyre; that covenant, like many modern international treaties, was a trade agreement between the two nations ([1 Kgs 5:12](#)).

Covenant is thus an interpersonal framework of trust, responsibilities, and benefits, with broad application to almost every human relationship from personal friendship to international trade agreements. In Scripture covenant is also the most comprehensive concept covering an individual's relationship to God.

Divine-Human Covenants The same basic characteristics of a strictly human covenant are present in a divine covenant: (1) a relationship between two parties (God and a human being or nation), and (2) mutual obligations between the covenant partners. To the OT believer, religion meant covenant. OT religion was faithfulness to the covenant relationship between God and his chosen people; religious responsibilities for both the faith and practice of Israel were covenant responsibilities.

The concept of a divine-human covenant in the OT was not static. Although the fundamental character of covenant remains the same throughout the Bible, the specific nature and form of the covenant changed and developed in the course of ancient Israel's history. A brief survey of covenant history will further clarify its dimensions.

Beginnings of the Covenant Tradition

Adam Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden. God was their Creator; they were his creatures. The meaning of their lives was to be found in relationship with each other and with God, the giver of the Garden. The fall, however, brought a disruption of the divine relationship, and they were expelled from the Garden.

The fall substantially influenced the nature of subsequent religious covenants. The separation of humankind from God clarifies the nature of the human predicament. Created for a relationship with the Creator, sinning humans are excluded from that relationship and cannot, on their own accord, reestablish it. From that circumstance emerges a distinctive feature of divine-human covenants, namely, that God alone can initiate the relationship of covenant.

Noah The first explicit mention of covenant in Scripture refers to the initiative taken by God to bind himself again to human beings in a covenant, despite human faithlessness. When God warned Noah to build an ark in order to escape the impending Flood, he also promised to establish a covenant with him ([Gn 6:18](#)). The corruption and violence of the human race had provoked God's anger, but his grace was shown in his dealings with Noah. The promised covenant provided that God would maintain a relationship with one family, even though other divine-human relationships were being formally severed. Significantly, God's covenant promise to Noah came in a context of demand: God ordered Noah to build an ark ([v 14](#)). Noah's receipt of the covenant blessing depended on his obedience to a divine command.

The covenant was elaborated only after the Flood, when Noah had made an offering to God ([Gn 8:20–22](#)). The covenant with Noah was in fact a universal covenant with humankind and all

living creatures (9:8–10). God promised never to send such a flood again as judgment on the world. The sign of that covenant was the rainbow.

The covenant with Noah affords some perspective for understanding the “covenant God.” Although human beings may deserve destruction because of their wickedness, God withholds that destruction. The covenant of Noah did not establish an intimate relationship between God and each living being; nevertheless, it left open the possibility of a more intimate covenant. Human beings, in spite of their evil, are allowed for a time to live in God’s world; during those years, they may seek a deeper relationship with that world’s Creator.

Abraham The first explicit reference to God’s covenant with Abraham is in [Genesis 15](#). When the Lord called the 75-year-old Abram (as he was first called) to leave his home city of Ur and set out on a journey, a relationship already existed between God and Abram. In that relationship, which enabled God to command Abram’s obedience, God made certain promises to him: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” ([Gn 12:2](#), [RSV](#)).

Formal establishment of the covenant with Abram is described in [Genesis 15](#) as a profound religious experience. The initiative lay entirely with God, who approached Abram in a vision and spoke with him. Abram raised a fundamental objection: how could he experience the blessing of God if it was to come to him through a son he did not have? His wife Sarai was past the childbearing age, and he himself was “as good as dead” ([Rom 4:19](#)). God assured the old man that he would have a son through whom his descendants would eventually be as numerous as the stars of heaven. Abram’s belief at that point introduced the theme of righteousness central to the covenant concept: Abram “believed the LORD, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” ([Gn 15:6](#), [RSV](#)). At the end of that day, Abram knew that his own future and the future of his descendants were firmly in the hands of the covenant God. “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land’ ” ([v 18](#), [RSV](#)).

The covenant is more fully expressed in [Genesis 17](#), which probably records a renewal of God’s covenant with Abram. The initiative once again lay with God ([Gn 17:1](#)). God addressed the 99-year-old Abram in words that made clear that the covenant was not a relationship between equal partners. God was the Almighty; Abram was a human being to whom an extraordinary privilege had been granted.

Yet the details of the covenant in [Genesis 17](#) show that both partners assumed responsibilities. God committed himself voluntarily to Abram and his descendants while requiring certain commitments from Abram. The blessing Abram would receive as a covenant partner became clear from the new name God gave him. “I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram; now you will be known as Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations” ([Gn 17:5](#), [NLT](#)). God would give to Abraham, through his descendants, the land of Canaan as an everlasting gift and would be the personal God of Abraham and his family in perpetuity ([vv 7–8](#)).

God’s giving required a response of obedience from Abraham: “Live a blameless life” ([Gn 17:1](#), [NLT](#)). Those simple words indicate the essence of covenant relationship: to relate to God is to live in his presence; since God is holy, one who knows him is expected to live a life of integrity and blamelessness.

The covenant also had a more formal aspect. Abraham and the male members of his household were to undergo the rite of circumcision as a symbol of covenant commitment. Abraham was an old man when he was circumcised ([Gn 17:24](#)), though male children born into the covenant family were to be circumcised when they were eight days old ([v 12](#)). Circumcision was not in itself a ritual peculiar to the Hebrews; it was practiced in most societies in the ancient

Near East (the Philistines were one exception). The distinctiveness lay in what the act symbolized: among other things, a continuing and faithful relationship with the living God.

God's covenant with Abraham was characterized by both present and future realities. The covenant established a continuing relationship between Abraham and his Creator. Yet its thrust pointed to future blessing—in the children yet to be born, the “chosen people,” and in the land that eventually his descendants would call their own.

Another dimension of the covenant lay still further in the future: “All the families of the earth will be blessed through you” (Gn 12:3, *NLT*). Early in the OT, the idea of election (God's unconditional preference; cf. 2 Thes 2:13) is present. God chose to enter into a covenant relationship with a particular man and his particular descendants. Yet God always elects a person to serve: Adam, to cultivate the Garden; Noah, to build an ark; Abraham, to leave his home for another land and to live blamelessly before God (cf. Eph 2:8–10). Further, the “particularity” of Abraham's election contained within it a universality: through his descendants the blessing of God would be offered to all.

Thus, the future aspects of Abraham's covenant reflect two stages. From Abraham's perspective, in the relatively near future his descendants would possess a land given them by God. But in the more distant future was the prospect of a universal blessing, the culmination of God's work in the world. The initial fulfillment of that distant future is perceived in the NT, but the more immediate fulfillment of God's promise was the Sinai covenant at the time of Moses.

The Sinai Covenant The covenant established between God and Israel at Mt Sinai is the focal point of the covenant tradition in the OT. It was anticipated in the covenant of Abraham and lay behind the covenant of David and the proclamation of the prophets. It was central to OT religion, laying down the foundations of Judaism that continue into the modern world. The Sinai covenant was the formal institution of a relationship between God and his chosen people, Israel.

In order to appreciate the impact of the Sinai covenant, one must understand its historical context. It was preceded by the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The exodus was an extraordinary act of liberation in which God intervened in the normal course of history to free his people from slavery in Egypt. The exodus is interpreted in the OT as a divine act comparable to Creation, the act through which God “created” the nation of Israel. Examination of the two versions of the fourth commandment (Ex 20:8–11; Dt 5:12–15) shows that the exodus from Egypt directly parallels the creation of the world as a basis for Sabbath observance. Although Israel was created in the exodus, the nation had neither a constitution nor land. The covenant provided the nascent state of Israel with a constitution, making it a theocratic state (a state ruled by God).

The basic account of the Sinai covenant is contained in Exodus 19 and 20. The initiative came from God, who gave instructions through Moses to prepare for the covenant; God spoke the words that contained the covenant offer. There was no doubt that the God of Israel was the senior partner in the relationship made formal at Sinai. The God who had revealed himself through his acts in the exodus then revealed himself in words. Those two aspects—the God who acts and speaks—are central to OT theology. And although the covenant contained law, it was preceded by the exodus, an act of divine grace.

God's offer of covenant carried with it a divine promise: “You will be to me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation” (Ex 19:6, *NLT*). The promise was one of extraordinary privilege; an entire nation was called upon to represent all other nations before the God of the universe. But the priestly office, though it carried privilege, was also a demanding office. A priest had to be pure and had to know the God whose presence he was required to enter. Thus Israel, the priestly

nation, received a law that would provide direction in living, in loving God, and in serving all people. The law given with the covenant expressed the requirements for God's covenant people.

The Covenant Law The covenant law had two principal parts. First, the Ten Commandments expressed God's requirements of Israel in a concise form (Ex 20:2–17). The commandments specified the covenant people's relationship both to God and to other human beings. Although the tendency in the present day is to view the Ten Commandments as a system of ethics or morality, they had a different role in ancient Israel. The covenant law was the foundation or constitution of a new nation, a special "nation of priests." The head of the nation-state was God. Hence, in ancient Israel the status of the Ten Commandments was approximately that of the code of criminal law in a modern nation-state. To break one of those laws was to commit a crime against God, the head of the state. Yet the laws had a positive purpose. They set down a way of life that would result in a full and rich communion with God and community with others.

The second part of the covenant law was a detailed law code covering the activities of everyday life. Examples of such laws are found in Exodus 21–23. These laws were compiled and recorded in the "Book of the Covenant" (Ex 24:7). Although many laws were contained in this book, it was impossible to codify every aspect of human behavior. The diversity of the examples given indicates that for the covenant member no area of human life was beyond the influence of the covenant. Persons who entered into a relationship with God entered into a relationship that impinged on every possible aspect of their lives.

Covenant Renewal The covenant at Sinai was made with a particular group of people under the leadership of Moses but was binding on future generations. Consequently, the covenant was renewed from time to time. Covenant renewals are recorded in the time of Joshua (Jos 8:30–35; 24:1–28) and, much later, during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kgs 23:1–3).

The most important passage in the Bible for understanding covenant renewal and the nature of covenant is the book of Deuteronomy. The entire book describes a particular covenant renewal ceremony that occurred at a critical juncture in Israel's early history. The Sinai covenant was renewed just before Moses' death, before the transition of leadership to Joshua, and before a major military campaign to possess the Promised Land.

The covenant since the time of Abraham had contained a promise of land. Immediately before they entered that land (ca. 1250 BC), the covenant vows were renewed with a new generation of Israelites, most of whom had not stood at the foot of Mt Sinai some 40 years earlier. Although covenant renewal is the central theme of Deuteronomy, the writer focused primarily on Moses' sermon rather than on a detailed account of the renewal ceremony.

Many aspects of the ceremony were simply a repetition of what happened at the original ratification of the covenant. The Ten Commandments were repeated (Dt 5:6–21), and the laws of the Book of the Covenant were expounded in greater detail (Dt 12–26). Two points emerging in Deuteronomy are particularly significant for an understanding of covenant: a clear statement of covenant love and a detailed statement of the blessings and curses that accompanied the making and renewing of the covenant.

The Covenant with David The covenant tradition underwent modification during the time of King David (c. 1000 BC). The Sinai covenant had been established between God and Israel, with Moses acting as mediator. In David's time an additional element was added: God entered into a covenant with David as king. That royal covenant was intimated to David through the prophet Nathan (2 Sm 7:8–16), indicating once again the divine initiative. It was to be an everlasting covenant with David's royal lineage (23:5).

THE DOCUMENTARY FORM OF THE COVENANT

Modern biblical scholarship has established that the Sinai covenant and its renewals were formally patterned after a particular type of human covenant, namely the suzerainty treaty of the ancient world (an agreement between a great power and a lesser power). Archaeological discoveries in the 20th century brought to light a number of such international political documents, the most interesting coming from the ancient Hittite Empire and dating from approximately the 14th century BC. Study of those treaty documents has revealed a fairly consistent pattern. Comparison with biblical passages describing the Sinai covenant shows a remarkable parallel.

In Deuteronomy, the Hebrews seem to have adapted the form of international suzerainty treaties to express their own covenant relationship with God. Why did they choose that particular form? Perhaps the Hebrews had been bound to their Egyptian masters by that kind of treaty, so they wanted to dramatize their liberation by making a new treaty, this time with their God at Sinai. Also, the Sinai covenant formed the constitution of a new but small Near Eastern nation. Whereas other small nations commonly depended for their existence on the generosity of a suzerain power (e.g., Egypt), Israel was to be a free nation, owing allegiance only to God. Israel's "treaty" with God meant that it could acknowledge no other master. Its freedom and strength lay in its wholehearted commitment to God alone.

Christians generally interpret the covenant with David as a messianic covenant. For several centuries the dynasty established by David ruled a united Israel, then ruled the remaining southern kingdom of Judah. But in 586 BC Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. At that point a descendant of David was no longer ruling an independent kingdom of God's chosen people. The everlasting nature of the covenant with David was brought out, however, not in the pages of ancient history but in the expectation of a Messiah who would be born of David's descendants. Matthew and Luke both pointed to Jesus' Davidic descent (Mt 1:1; Lk 3:31). The NT thus extends the covenant acts of God into the new age in the person of Jesus.

The New Covenant Predicted in the Old Testament Although David's covenant with God was eternal, in a sense the covenant established with Israel on Mt Sinai was temporal. The Sinai covenant included conditional clauses, stated in the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy. Israel's disobedience of the covenant law would at worst bring exile from the Promised Land, a central covenant theme from Abraham to Moses and beyond.

The Hebrew prophets often perceived the danger of an end to the covenant as a result of Israel's sins. Some of the prophets, especially Hosea and Jeremiah, also perceived a deeper truth; namely, that the covenant was rooted in divine love and that therefore even the curse of God could not be final.

Hosea dramatically expressed that truth through the "living parable" of his marriage (Hos 1–3). He married Gomer at God's command, but later, as a result of her unfaithfulness, the marital covenant was dissolved by divorce. Although Gomer's adulterous acts compelled Hosea to

divorce her, he did not cease to love her. God later commanded Hosea to go back to Gomer ([Hos 3:1](#)). Despite her unfaithfulness, the prophet was to take her again into the covenant relationship of marriage. That acted-out parable depicted God's actions with Israel. Israel's sin would inevitably culminate in a divorce from God, but Hosea perceived a new marriage. In the new covenant between God and Israel, Israel would be graciously accepted back into a relationship with God ([2:14–18](#)).

The new covenant is given powerful expression in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, who lived through the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries BC. In his lifetime Jeremiah saw the kingdom of Judah defeated in war. The nation lost its independence and became a vassal of the Babylonian Empire. In an external sense, that defeat in 586 BC marked the end of the Sinai covenant. Israel could no longer call the Promised Land its own. Yet Jeremiah perceived a truth beyond the contemporary political realities. God's work in the world, like his love for the world, was not over.

Thus Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant that God would bring into effect: "The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" ([Jer 31:31](#), *RSV*). The new covenant would be marked by an act of God within human hearts, a radical spiritual transformation ([Jer 31:34](#)). At the Last Supper Jesus declared to his disciples that "this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" ([Lk 22:20](#), *RSV*). To the writer of Hebrews, the new covenant was central to a full understanding of the ministry of Jesus Christ ([Heb 8:8–12](#)).

Conclusion Covenant is a concept central to the message and the history of the OT. The covenant theme continues into the NT as a way of interpreting the Christian gospel. Meaning in human life is to be found in a covenant relationship with the living God. Yet sinful human beings cannot work their way into such a relationship; God alone can initiate it. According to the NT, God's act in giving his son, Jesus, to die opened up the covenant relationship to all human beings. The forgiveness made available by Jesus' "blood of the new covenant" makes it possible for any individual to enter into a covenant relationship with God. Entry into such a relationship, today as in Abraham's time, hinges upon faith ([Gal 3:6–14](#)).

Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*.

COVENANT, THE NEW A gracious provision of God given through Jesus Christ for the redemption of fallen humanity—replacing and fulfilling the old covenant, which was expressed primarily through the Mosaic law. The expression “new covenant” is found principally in the NT.

Although the concept of a new covenant is found in several places in the OT (Ez 34:23–31; 37:24–28; Jl 2:12–32), the actual phrase occurs only once (Jer 31:31–34). That passage contrasts the new covenant that the prophet Jeremiah saw God making with Israel “after those days” (vv 32–34) with the covenant God had made with his people in the days of Moses. The contrast is seen, first of all, in the internal nature of the new covenant. Whereas the old covenant was written on tablets of stone (Ex 31:18; 34:27–32; Dt 4:13; 5:22; 9:11; 10:3–4) and in a book (Ex 24:7; cf. the phrase “old written code,” Rom 7:6, *RSV*), the new covenant is to be written on the human heart. One result is a clearer revelation of what God demands; another is the enablement of believers to fulfill those demands (see Rom 8:2–4). The interior nature of the new covenant is spoken of in several other passages (Ez 11:19–21; 36:26–27) and made explicit in the prophet Joel of a time when God “will pour out [his] spirit on all flesh” (Jl 2:28–32).

A second contrast is in the way God’s people know him under the two covenants. There is no doubt that Israel under the old covenant “knew” God; God had revealed himself, though at times the nation tended to forget this (Jgs 2:10; Hos 4:1, 6). What the prophets envisioned in the new covenant is a unique personal knowledge of God by each individual member of the covenant community.

Finally, the two covenants differ in regard to God’s dealing with human sin. Jeremiah promised that God would forgive the iniquity of his people and blot out their sin. Israel already knew that God delighted in mercy and forgiveness (Ex 34:6–7), but Jeremiah was saying that God would never again remember their sin (Jer 31:34). Under the old covenant there was a reminder of sin year after year (Heb 10:3); under the new covenant no remembrance of sin remains (v 14).

A New Covenant The expression “new covenant” is found at least six times in the NT (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24; and probably Lk 22:20, according to some manuscripts). In certain Greek manuscripts the phrase is also found in Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24, where “new” seems to have been added by various scribes to “blood of the covenant,” in order to make these accounts conform to parallel accounts of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians or possibly in Luke.

Even though the term “new” is not found in the accounts in Matthew and Mark in the best Greek manuscripts, and was therefore probably not part of the original text, it is clear from all four accounts that Jesus saw the Lord’s Supper as instituting a different and therefore “new” covenant. The covenant was being sealed by his sacrificial death, that is, by his blood, just as the Mosaic covenant was sealed by the “blood of the covenant” (Ex 24:6–8). The cup of the Lord’s Supper symbolizes the blood of Christ’s sacrifice, sealing the new covenant God has at last made with his people. The new covenant, ratified by Christ’s death, is what the church therefore commemorates each time it celebrates the Lord’s Supper.

In his institution of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus did not elucidate what the “newness” of the covenant entailed. Elsewhere he mentioned a “baptism with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5; 11:16; cf. Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; and Jn 1:33, where this promise is found on the lips of John the Baptist; cf. also 1 Cor 12:13). Yet both OT prophecies refer to the same new covenant that God

would establish in the future, as shown in [2 Corinthians 3:6](#). There the apostle Paul stated that God “has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant” (RSV; cf. [Jer 31:31](#)), not “in a written code but in the Spirit” (RSV; cf. [Jl 2:28–32](#)), for “the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (RSV).

Superiority of the New Covenant In [2 Corinthians 3](#), Paul was showing that in contrast to the old (Mosaic) covenant (v 14), which was a dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone (v 7), the new covenant instituted by Jesus is one of far greater splendor (vv 8–9), written on the human heart by the Spirit of the living God himself (v 3).

The new covenant concept is treated most exhaustively and systematically in the book of Hebrews. In [Hebrews 8:8–12](#) the quotation of [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#) is the longest OT quotation found in the NT. In [Hebrews 12:24](#) a different Greek word for “new” is used, but the meaning remains the same. The theme of the new covenant dominates the book of Hebrews, which was written to encourage faltering Christians by demonstrating the superiority of the Christian faith over their old Jewish beliefs and practices. In Hebrews the new covenant is seen as better than the old “obsolete” covenant in a number of ways.

1. The new covenant has a better priesthood than the old covenant, since there is no longer any need for a continual change of priests due to death ([Heb 7:23](#)). One continual priest now lives forever to make intercession before God on behalf of his people (vv 24–25).
2. The new covenant priest is better than those of the old covenant, since Jesus does not have to offer sacrifices continually for his own sins and then for the sins of his people. He has instead made one complete and perfect offering ([7:27](#); [9:25–28](#); [10:12](#)).
3. The new covenant has a better sacrifice than the old covenant; what the blood of bulls and goats could not do, since the atonement they brought could at best be only partial ([10:2–3](#)), the blood of Christ has done once for all ([9:11–14](#); [10:1–10](#)).
4. The new covenant is built on “better promises” than the old ([8:6](#)).
5. Whereas the old covenant was imperfect ([8:7](#)) and thus became obsolete ([8:13](#)), the new covenant is perfect and eternal ([13:20](#)).
6. Whereas the old covenant provided a believer with no direct access to God ([9:6–8](#)), the new covenant provides a direct access to God that can purify and perfect the believer’s conscience (cf. [9:14](#) with [9:9](#)).
7. The new covenant possesses a better “surety,” or guarantee, an oath sworn by God himself ([7:20–22](#)).
8. The new covenant assures the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of each believer. The new covenant community has been touched by the promised Spirit ([6:4](#)), who, according to Paul, is both the seal and guarantee of their inheritance (see [2 Cor 1:22](#); [5:5](#); [Eph 1:13–14](#)).

Conclusion The new covenant and its accompanying new commandment are both fulfillments of what was implicit in the old. The new covenant is written on the heart of each member of the new covenant community by the Holy Spirit. The power of God’s Spirit within, enabling the believer to carry out the new commandment ([Rom 8:2–4](#); [Gal 5:16–25](#)), is a distinctive feature of the new covenant.

Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible Dictionary*.

covenant (Heb. berith), a formal agreement or treaty between two parties with each assuming some obligation. In the Hebrew Bible, a covenant might be a pact of mutuality concerning individuals, such as Laban and Jacob (Gen. 31:44-54) or David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:3; 23:18); states or other political units, such as Abraham and the Amorites (Gen. 14:13), Abraham and Abimelech, king of Gerar (Gen. 21:22-32), Abner and David (2 Sam. 3:12-13, 21), David and the people (2 Sam. 5:3), Solomon and Hiram (1 Kings 5:12), and Asa and Ben-hadad (1 Kings 15:18-19); husband and wife (cf. Mal. 2:14; Ezek. 16:8).

A covenant also might be imposed by a greater power upon a lesser one. The greater power demands loyalty and obligates itself to the protection of the lesser one, such as Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9) and the request by Jabesh-gilead of the king of Ammon (1 Sam. 11:1-2). The vast majority of the references to covenant in the Bible are to such a treaty—the covenant that God makes with Israel at Sinai. This covenant must be understood on the basis of political and judicial categories.

The Sinai Covenant: The framework of the Sinai Covenant has significant affinities with suzerain-vassal treaties from the ancient Near East, specifically, the Hittite treaties of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. and the Assyrian treaties of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. In these documents a suzerain makes a treaty with a lesser kingship. The main elements of the Hittite treaty, for example, are: the identification of the treaty-maker (i.e., the great king); a historical introduction (prior beneficial acts done by the great power on behalf of the smaller one); the stipulations (the primary demand is for loyalty); a list of divine witnesses; and blessings and curses. The treaty was recited, a ceremonial meal eaten, and the treaty deposited at the feet of the idol.

The narrative concerning the Sinai Covenant in Exod. 19-24 has similar elements: the identification of God and his saving acts for Israel (Exod. 19:4-6; 20:2); the stipulations (Exod. 20:3-23:33); the treaty recital (Exod. 24:7); and the ceremonial meal (Exod. 24:9-11). The other elements appear particularly in Deuteronomy. The deposit of the treaty in the Ark of the Covenant is mentioned in Exod. 25:16; 40:21; Deut. 10:1-5; and 31:25-26 (the Ark elsewhere is called the footstool of God, Pss. 99:5; 132:7-8; 1 Chron. 28:2). Witnesses appear in the form of 'heaven and earth' (Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31:28), in 'this book of the Torah' (Deut. 31:26), and the 'Song of Moses' (Deut. 31:19, 21). Blessings and curses are listed in Leviticus 26 and Deut. 27:11-28:68 (cf. 29:17-27). This political structure emphasizes the seriousness of the relationship between God and Israel and ipso facto eliminates the possibility of foreign alliances (e.g., Isa. 31:1-3; Jer. 2:18, 36).

The judicial element of the Sinai Covenant is manifested in the stipulations, which are the law of the nation. Now, any crime committed is against God, whether it be ritual or civil. Israel is apparently unique in its perception that all its law is divinely given.

A further social element contained in the Sinai Covenant is the familial one. The Israelites are called God's children in Deut. 14:1 (see also Exod. 4:22 and Deut. 32:9-12, 18 with Exod. 19:4). Furthermore, the stipulations and even the covenant are called *Torah* (Deut. 31:25-26), which originally means 'teaching' or 'instruction.' Within the context of the covenant it is equivalent to law, but if Proverbs (e.g., 3:1; 4:2; 7:2) uses *torah* in its original social context—as parent instructing child—then its usage in the covenant may suggest the analogy of God instructing Israel.

Covenants with Abraham and David: The Sinai Covenant is depicted as conditional; Israel must keep the stipulations (familial, societal, dietary, ritual, agricultural, etc.) or suffer severe punishment. The two other primary divine covenants, those with Abraham (Gen. 15) and David (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89:1-38), were originally perceived as unconditional. These two covenants are patterned after the promissory royal grant of the ancient Near East as, also, attested in Hittite and Assyrian documents. Under this kind of covenant, fiefs are granted to loyal servants by the king and require no further action on behalf of the grantee. Gen. 17:1-14 does demand circumcision of Abraham and his descendants, but this is only a sign of the covenant, and therefore of a loyalty that is to be expected.

The Davidic covenant assures David of a permanent dynasty in which the Davidic king is depicted metaphorically as the son of God (2 Sam. 7:14; Pss. 2:7-8; 89:27-28) in terminology reminiscent of other ancient Near Eastern documents. There is, however, a tendency to view the Davidic covenant as conditional and dependent on obedience to the Sinai Covenant (1 Kings 2:4; 8:25; 9:4-9; Ps. 132:12). This view was that of the minority and reflects the ideology of the editor of 1 and 2 Kings.

The Davidic covenant captivated the popular imagination, which saw in it a promise of permanent security in the continued stability of government, worship (centered in the Temple), and life of the people. As such, it ran contrary to the conditionality of the Sinai Covenant taught in the Pentateuch and understood by the prophets as dominant. The prophets did believe in the ultimate validity of the Davidic covenant, though, as expressed in their prophecies of messianic expectation.

Obedience to the stipulations of the Sinai Covenant was perceived by the prophets as necessary for the continued existence of Israel on its land. The covenant in its strict sense of a suzerain-vassal treaty, did not, however, totally define the relationship between God and Israel. It only served as a prevalent image of that relationship. When Israel broke the covenant, therefore, the relationship was not destroyed. According to the prophets, the relationship was permanent and the breaking of the covenant once it had taken place was viewed only as a momentary setback. Thus, Jer. 31:27-37 (building upon Hos. 2) predicts the people's return, growth, and prosperity followed by God's establishing a new covenant with Israel. The uniqueness of this covenant lies not in its content, which is identical to the Sinai Covenant (the Torah, v 33), but in its form—it will be given internally. The covenant will become part of the nature of each individual, so that obedience is guaranteed (v. 34). Thus, it is unbreakable, and its eternity is assured (vv 35-37; cf. Jer. 32:36-44). Thereby, Jeremiah was able to depict a future in which by an act of God's mercy, sin, the lack of repentance, and the consequent catastrophic punishment would no longer exist.

In the NT authors, influenced by the idea of a new covenant, saw in the death of Jesus of Nazareth the beginning of it (Mark 14:24; 1 Cor. 11:25) and saw his followers as members of that new covenant (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6), although that did not annul the first covenant given to Israel (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:17). The Letter to the Hebrews makes the greatest use of covenant language in the NT (e.g., Heb. 7:22; 8:8-13; 9:15; 12:24).

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PROMISE Declaration by one person to another that something will or will not be done, giving the person to whom it is made the right to expect the performance of whatever has been specified.

Types of Promise In biblical usage there are scattered examples of promises that people give either to one another (e.g., [Nm 22:17](#); [Est 4:7](#)) or to God (e.g., [Neh 5:12](#)), but the promises that God gives to man are far more significant. These divine promises are absolutely trustworthy because the one who gives them is totally able to perform that which he has promised ([Rom 4:21](#)).

Divine promises in Scripture assure their recipients of many spiritual and temporal benefits, including sonship ([2 Cor 6:16–7:1](#)), forgiveness of sin ([1 Jn 1:9](#)), answer to prayer ([Lk 11:9](#)), deliverance from temptations ([1 Cor 10:13](#)), sustaining grace for difficult times ([2 Cor 12:9](#)), provision for all needs ([Phil 4:19](#)), reward for obedience ([Jas 1:12](#)), and eternal life ([Lk 18:29–30](#); [Jn 3:16](#); [Rom 6:22–23](#)). God's promises are certain and sure, but participation in their blessing often requires that certain conditions on which they are predicated be met. Divine promises also are not always guarantees of blessing. Indeed, there are promises announcing the certainty of judgment on those who refuse to obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus ([2 Thes 1:8–9](#)).

In addition to the promises of God, which have subjective and individual application to many different people in widely different times and places, there are a great many promises that pertain to the programmatic unfolding of God's plan of redemption in a grand procession of historical events. These promises have neither repeated applications nor conditional natures. In such cases, promise becomes nearly synonymous with prophecy, and promises of this type, along with their subsequent fulfillment, are intricately intertwined in the entire fabric of redemptive history.

Promises in the Old Testament The highlights of the promise theme in the OT can be seen in the promise of what is often termed the protevangelium (i.e., the first announcement of the gospel) given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden immediately after the fall into sin ([Gn 3:15](#)). Subsequent promises are the covenants God made with Abraham (chs [12](#); [15](#); [17](#)) and with David ([2 Sm 7](#)), followed by the promise of a new covenant ([Jer 31](#)).

The Protevangelium [Genesis 3:15b](#) says: "Your [Satan's] offspring and her [Eve's] offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (NLT). This statement is a promise that at some future time the offspring of the woman will crush Satan. The offspring of the woman is individualized in the "he" of the last phrase. "He" shall strike you (i.e., Satan) on the head, although Satan will inflict a wound on the offspring of the woman. Here, then, is the promise that gives Adam and Eve, as well as their descendants, the basis to expect the eventual destruction of their adversary Satan through their offspring.

The Promise to Abraham In [Genesis 12:1–7](#) Abraham is told to leave his people and country and to go to a land that the Lord would show to him. God, in turn, promises him that (1) his offspring would become a great nation; (2) he would be blessed and his name made great; (3) through him other nations would be blessed; and (4) the land of Canaan would be given to his descendants. Of particular significance among these promises given to Abraham is that through his offspring he will bless many nations. This promise is repeated five times in the book of [Genesis](#) ([Gn 12:3](#); [18:18](#); [22:18](#); [26:4](#); [28:14](#)) and points back to the promise of [Genesis 3:15](#) as well as forward to Christ.

The Promise to David In [2 Samuel 7](#), God gave a promise to King David that his dynasty would

endure forever (2 Sm 7:16; Ps 89:34–37). It is with this Davidic covenant that the promised line, which had previously run from Adam through Seth, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, is now narrowed to the royal line of the house of David. David is to be the ancestor of the Messiah-King to come (Ps 89:3, 27–37). David thus became a central figure in the history of God’s plan to redeem the world. Jesus Christ is referred to as the son of David, the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1).

The Promise of a New Covenant In [Jeremiah 31:31–37](#), it is promised that in future days the Lord would make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. The content of this new covenant reemphasizes and extends the basic promises of the former covenant: “I will be their God, and they will be my people I will forgive their wickedness and will never again remember their sins” (vv 33–34, [NLT](#)). It would appear that the “new covenant” of Jeremiah is to be viewed as a restatement of the same basic promises included in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.

The new covenant was inaugurated with the first advent of Christ, and believers in Christ are now recipients by the Holy Spirit of the blessings of that new covenant ([Heb 8:6–13](#)). The complete and final realization of these blessings in all their fullness awaits the return of Christ, the complete establishment of his kingdom in its outward and final form, and the blessedness of life in the new heavens and new earth. In the intervening time, God’s people live in a day in which some of the benefits of the age to come are a present reality but the fullness of the new age is yet future.

The Promise Theme in the New Testament New Testament writers refer to the OT promises in a way that indicates that they did not view these promises as separate and isolated assertions but rather as portions of a unitary promise that is ultimately fulfilled in Christ (see [Lk 1:54–55, 69–73](#); [Acts 13:23, 32–33](#); [26:6–7](#); [2 Cor 1:20](#)). Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made to the patriarchs and David, and these promises are accordingly to be viewed as having a single focal point in him.

In the books of Galatians and Ephesians, Paul develops this idea in more detail, saying to the Gentile Christians that they are made “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” ([Eph 3:6, NIV](#)). In fact, Paul says that Gentiles who trust in Christ are incorporated into the seed of Abraham and are thus heirs according to the promise ([Gal 3:29](#)), and he even goes so far as to equate the gospel with the promise given to Abraham when he states, “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’” ([Gal 3:8, NIV](#)). These and other NT texts establish the close connection between the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of the promise. The promises of God find their point of convergence in Christ and all that he accomplished, and will yet accomplish, for his people.

One further aspect of the promise particularly emphasized in the NT concerns the coming of the Holy Spirit. Paul refers to believers as sealed with the promised Holy Spirit ([Eph 1:13](#)), and as receiving the promise of the Spirit ([Gal 3:14](#)). The gift of the Holy Spirit is not only the fulfillment of an OT promise ([Is 32:15](#); [Ez 36:27](#); [Jl 2:28](#)), and that of Christ himself ([Lk 24:49](#); [Jn 14:16, 20](#); [Acts 1:4](#)), but it is also itself a promise of something yet future. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit’s presence within the believer as a guarantee of our inheritance ([2 Cor 1:22](#); [5:5](#); [Eph 1:14](#)). The Holy Spirit is the “firstfruit” of future glory ([Rom 8:23](#)).

One final aspect of the promise theme in the NT concerns the assurance of Christ’s second advent and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth (cf. [Jn 14:1–3](#); [2 Pt 3:4, 9, 13](#)).

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promise, an assurance of some future act. Although absent as a specific term in the OT, the concept of promise runs throughout its narrative. The prediction of innumerable offspring to childless Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 15:5; 17:6-7; 22:17-18), of a land for Israel (Gen. 15:18-21; 50:22-25), of the perpetual rule of David's descendants (2 Sam. 7:16), and of a future world to God's liking (e.g., Isa. 11:1-9) all function implicitly as promise. Later Jewish traditions explicitly link God's promises to the future world, giving it an eschatological character. The Syrian *Apocalypse of Baruch* says that already in Abraham 'the promise of future life was planted' (57:2) and will be harvested in the future world promised by God (14:13).

In the NT, the word 'promise,' both as noun and verb, is used extensively. Paul found scriptural authority for his Gentile mission in God's promise to Abraham through whom all nations (i.e., Gentiles) would be blessed (Rom. 4:9-25; Gal. 3:6-29). Through faith in Christ, God's promise was being fulfilled, and Gentiles were becoming Abraham's offspring (Rom. 4:16), members of the children of promise (Rom. 15:8-12) without reference to the law. The inclusion of the Gentiles, however, does not nullify God's promises to the Jews (Rom. 9:4). Ultimately, Jews and Gentiles will gather as one people of God (Rom. 11:25-26).

The author of Hebrews sees in Jesus the realization of the promises given to but not realized by the ancients (11:39-40). Even though the new promises surpass the old, the inheritance even of the new is uncertain without obedience (4:1; 6:11-15; 10:36). The continuity forged by Paul between the promise to Israel and fulfillment in Christ is, however, missing in Hebrews.

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OATH Solemn vow or promise to fulfill a pledge. There are two terms in Hebrew that mean “oath”: *'ala* and *sebu'a*. The latter, more general term in ancient times meant to enter into a solemn (even magical) relationship with the number seven, although ancient connections are lost. Even so, when Abraham and Abimelech entered into an oath at Beersheba (the well of seven, or the well of the oath), Abraham set aside seven ewe lambs as a witness to the fact that he had dug a well (Gn 21:22–31). The former term *'ala*, often translated “oath,” properly means “curse.” At times the two terms are used together (Nm 5:21; Neh 10:29; Dn 9:11). Any breach of one’s undertaking affirmed by an oath would be attended by a curse. The Lord affirmed that he had established a covenant and a curse with Israel—that is, a breach of covenant would be followed by a curse (Dt 29:14ff.).

An oath was taken to confirm an agreement or, in a political situation, to confirm a treaty. Both in Israel and among its neighbors, God (or the gods) would act as the guarantor(s) of the agreement and his name (or their names) was invoked for this purpose. When Jacob and Laban made an agreement, they erected a heap of stones as a witness (Gn 31:53). If either party transgressed the terms, it was a heinous sin. For this reason one of the Ten Commandments dealt with empty affirmations: “Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name” (Ex 20:7, NLT). The people of Israel were forbidden to swear their oaths by false gods (Jer 12:16; Am 8:14). To breach an international treaty, where the oath was taken in the Lord’s name, merited death (Ez 17:16–17). It was one of the complaints of Hosea that the people of his day swore falsely when they made a covenant (Hos 10:4). Judgment would attend such wanton disregard of the solemnity of an oath. Certain civil situations in Israel called for an oath (Ex 22:10–11; Lv 5:1; 6:3; Nm 5:11–28). This practice provided a pattern for the Israelite covenantal oath of allegiance between God and his people.

Christ taught that oaths were binding (Mt 5:33). In the kingdom of God oaths would become unnecessary (vv 34–37). At his trial before Caiaphas, Jesus heard an imprecatory oath from the high priest (26:63–65), and Paul swore by an oath on occasion (2 Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20). God himself was bound by his own oath (Heb 6:13–18) to keep his promise to the patriarchs (Gn 50:24; Pss 89:19–37, 49; 110:1–4).

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oath, a statement by which people give assurance that they have spoken the truth or by which they obligate themselves to perform certain actions. God is usually invoked as guarantor of the oath, with the expectation that a broken or false oath will be punished. Oaths thus are a holy ritual and to swear falsely is to profane God's name (Exod. 20:7; Lev. 19:12). Swearing by God's name was most solemn (Matt. 26:63), but people also swore by holy things (Matt. 5:36; 23:16-22) and by raising their right hands (Rev. 10:5-6). Covenant ceremonies demanded the swearing of oaths (Gen. 26:28).

The Hebrew word for 'oath' comes from the number seven, the sacred and magical number in Hebrew culture. In Genesis 21 seven lambs are used as witnesses to a covenant. Oaths and curses (a related type of statement) are often indicated in the Bible by abbreviated formulae, such as 'May the Lord do thus and so if...' (1 Sam. 3:17; 14:44) and 'As the Lord lives...' (1 Sam. 19:6). A full oath ritual for the wife suspected of adultery is found in Numbers 5. Peter responds to the inquiries of people in the high priest's courtyard with a simple denial, an oath and a curse (Matt. 26:69-74). The NT also contains a tradition, similar to one found among the Essenes, that one should not swear oaths (Matt. 5:34; James 5:12).