

The Mystery of Covenant

An excerpt from the second chapter of the *Mystery of Zion – Israel and the Last Days*

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Before discussing God’s role for Israel in the end times, it is imperative to take a look at Israel from a historical point of view as well as from a biblical or, more importantly, a prophetic perspective. God’s initial purpose for Israel’s existence is crucial in identifying and accepting His future plans for the Hebrew people. This initial step requires a brief examination of the various covenants associated with the nation of Israel, including the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Priestly Covenant, and the Davidic Covenant.

It is important to note, however, that there is one amazing particular regarding God’s covenants that cannot be ignored. As John Hagee states, “Israel alone received the glory, the covenants, the Laws, the directions for tabernacle worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, the prophets, and ultimately, they are the human source of Jesus Christ. Israel alone is referred to by God as ‘My son.’”ⁱ Therefore, the mystery of covenant binds the nation of Israel to God Almighty in ways that no other nation has ever experienced or can ever comprehend.

A “covenant” could be defined as an unbreakable promise or a sovereign promise to man by God. According to numerous dictionaries, it can also be defined as a formal alliance or agreement made by God. According to the *Prophecy Study Bible*:

In the Old Testament there were three ways by which covenants could be made: a shoe covenant, a salt covenant, and a blood covenant.

In the blood covenant, the contracting parties would agree on the terms of the covenant. They would take an animal, kill it, split the carcass in half down the backbone, and place the divided parts opposite each other on the ground forming a pathway between the pieces.

The two would join hands, recite the contents of the covenant, and walk between the divided halves of the slain animal. The blood covenant meant they were bound until death, and if either broke the terms of the covenant, his blood should be spilled as the blood of the slain animal. A blood covenant was a permanent and unconditional covenant. . . .

God was binding himself, unconditionally, by a blood covenant to Abraham and his descendants forever saying, “To your descendants I have given this land.” Confirmation that the promise to Abraham and to his seed was unconditional is presented in Psalm 89:30–37.

Recent decades of Old Testament studies have been revolutionized by research about the concept of “covenant.” Many scholars, conservative and liberal, maintain that “covenant” is the organizing principle around which Old Testament theology must be constructed and understood. It has become clear that in the near eastern world of the second millennium before Christ, formal covenants were the primary way people who were not blood relatives related to one another.ⁱⁱ

The importance of covenant in this context focuses on the realization that God has a plan for the salvation of humanity—the creation whom He loves. Each of the covenants He entered with mankind were specific as well as necessary for the final realization of this divine plan of redemption.

There are eight recorded covenants that God made with man, starting with the Edenic and Adamic Covenants, which He entered into with Adam and Eve in the Garden. God also made a covenant with Noah before entering into covenant with Abraham. Essentially, these covenants were for the purpose of fully sharing in the fellowship of His creation, either at that particular time or for some point in the future. These covenants could be viewed as stepping-stones that allow humanity a means to move closer to God’s ultimate desire of once and for all realizing the intimacy of a personal relationship between the Creator and His creation. This will only be realized in its fullness and entirety at the end of the “Age.”

John Hagee notes, “The covenants God makes with His people are everlasting, without end, and actually translated ‘longer than forever.’ These covenants are not based on man’s faithfulness to God; they’re based on God’s faithfulness to man. Those who teach that God has broken covenant with the Jewish people teach a false doctrine based on scriptural ignorance and a narcissistic attitude.”ⁱⁱⁱ

For this brief synopsis, we will look at just a few of these covenants regarding Israel, starting with the Abrahamic Covenant. Then, we will briefly discuss the particulars associated with the Davidic Covenant before finishing this part of the series by revealing the intricacies of the New Covenant with Israel.

The Abrahamic Covenant

The significance of the covenant takes on increased importance when one realizes that “Israel is the only nation founded by a sovereign act of God.”^{iv} However, at the time of Abraham, the human race was one undivided people. There was neither Jew nor Gentile. The human race had become engrossed in idolatry, and God chose to form a separate people and nation that would represent Him to the world, picking a man named Abram (it was who God later changed his name to Abraham, Genesis 17:5). God entered into a formal, lasting covenant with His newly chosen people in order to redeem the world from the sin that separated humanity from relationship with Him.

But as time went on, even within the parameters of this covenant and God’s desire to bring salvation to the world through the lineage of Abraham, humanity continued to turn their backs on God. In spite of His professed purpose and desire for them, and the provision, providence, and faithfulness He poured out and exhibited toward them, they regressed to living as if there was no God.

Clarence Larkin notes, “After the Dispersion from Babel, the descendants of Noah and his sons became idolaters. No doubt God had His witnesses, but there is no record of any. Even Abraham’s father was an idolater. So God decided to single out one family and start afresh. Abraham was chosen and he proved a mighty man of faith, but his righteousness waned in his descendants. Isaac was a good man, but not so good as his father, and Jacob, Isaac’s son, who succeeded to the birthright, was still less so, and the twelve sons of Jacob, with the exception of Joseph, greatly degenerated from the parent stock, and that short Dispensation of only 430 years ended with all of Abraham’s descendants working as abject slaves in the brickyards of Egypt.”^v

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1–3 NIV).

According to the *Prophecy Study Bible*, “The Abrahamic covenant is the basis of all other Old Testament theocratic covenants and provides for blessing in three areas. First, the covenant anticipated that Abraham’s descendants would become a special nation in the work of God—‘I will make you a great nation’ (Genesis 12:2). Second, it promised that Abraham would accomplish great things—‘I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.’ Finally, God promised Abraham that He was going to start a spiritual movement through him that would influence every nation of the earth—‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (v. 3).’”^{vi}

The importance of this covenant cannot be overstated, as it was through Abraham’s lineage that Jesus, the Son of God, entered into this world and became the atonement for sin. As the King of kings and Lord of lords, there has never been anyone who has had a greater impact or played a more significant role within the history of the world! Just as significant is the realization that it was through God’s grace, His desire to seek us out, that salvation has been freely offered to anyone who believes. His grace is divinely evident through His covenant.

Again, according to the *Prophecy Study Bible*, “The covenant with Abraham is the first of the theocratic covenants (pertaining to the rule of God). It is unconditional depending solely upon God who obligates Himself in grace, indicated by the unconditional declaration, ‘I will,’ to bring to pass the promised blessings. The Abrahamic Covenant is the basis of all the other theocratic covenants and provides for blessing in three areas: (1) national—‘I will make you a great nation,’ (2) personal—‘I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing,’ and (3) universal—‘in you all families of the earth will be blessed.’ The Abrahamic Covenant constitutes an important link in all that God began to do, has done throughout history, and will continue to do until the consummation of history. It is the one purpose of God for humans into which all of God’s programs and works fit.”^{vii}

Most Christians today seem to overlook the importance of this covenant, yet God has made its significance apparent in His Holy Word—the Bible. As Sir Robert Anderson writes, “Eleven chapters of the Bible suffice to cover the two thousand years before the call of Abraham, and the rest of the Old Testament relates to the Abrahamic race.”^{viii} There are a multitude of critics who believe the Bible is a disconnected compilation of stories containing no real connection from one book to the next. There are also those who believe that the Old

Testament has no merit within the Age of Grace and that the New Testament is the only part of the Bible applicable in today's society. But when you begin to look at the Bible as a compilation of historical record that not only promises, but also points to, a Messiah, you realize all of the Bible—both the Old and the New Testaments—is actually a divinely inspired record of Jesus. The history of the Bible is actually “His-story!” It's the story of Jesus and God's plan to seek out His lost and broken creation!

The Davidic Covenant

After the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land, Israel lived for centuries through a system of social governance that depended on a loose tribal system governed by judges. For 400 years, they were caught up in a cycle of rebellion and judgment. The nation as a whole would sin, just as they turned away from God in Egypt. God would then raise up a neighboring nation to discipline His children through military conquest. The Israelites would cry out to God in repentance, God would hear their cries, and He would raise up a judge to deliver them from their bondage. God would free the land from military oppression for the rest of the judge's life, and then the cycle would start all over again. There were seven cycles of rebellion, judgment, repentance, and deliverance during that 400-year time span.

Max Anders notes, “The book of Judges records the darkest period in Israel's history, following one of the brightest eras: the Conquest Era under Joshua. The breaking of God's Law and the record of Israel's subsequent moral degradation are sad indeed.”^{ix} Through it all, the nation of Israel began to cry out to God for a king to call their own. It is probably safe to assume at least part of that desire stemmed from the cycles of judgment placed on the nation for their disobedience and inability to abide by the Law, along with the statutes associated with the Mosaic Covenant. The enormity of such a calling is humanly impossible. In our society today, it's impossible to imagine the enormous burden associated with trying to constantly abide by the extensiveness of the Law. Phillip Yancey writes, “They had atomized God's law into 613 rules—248 commands and 368 prohibitions—and bolstered these rules with 1,521 emendations. To avoid breaking the third commandment, ‘You shall not misuse the name of the Lord,’ they refused to pronounce God's name at all.”^x

Yet God's covenants with Abraham and Moses were still simultaneously in effect in conjunction with the Davidic Covenant. This covenant between a “man after God's own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14 NIV) and the God whom David sought out provides another piece to the Messianic puzzle. This piece was necessary not only for the incarnation of Jesus, or Immanuel (“God is with us”), but also for a much later time prophesied as the “Day of the Lord.” According to the *Prophecy Study Bible*, “God's covenant with David focused on the Son who

would succeed him and build ‘a house’ for [the Lord’s] name’ (2 Sam. 7:12, 13). On a physical level this prediction referred to Solomon, who built the temple in Jerusalem and consolidated the Davidic family’s hold on the throne of Israel. However, on the future, spiritual level, God had in mind David’s eternal Son, the Messiah (Heb. 1:8).”^{xi}

In a sense, just as Moses was a form of a Messiah, David was recognized in the same way. Just as Moses took the Abrahamic Covenant to the next level, so the Davidic Covenant builds on the Mosaic Covenant so God’s plan of salvation could come to fruition. The *Prophecy Study Bible* notes, “In this covenant David is promised three things: (1) a land forever (2 Samuel 7:10); (2) an unending dynasty (vv. 11, 16); and (3) an everlasting kingdom (vv. 13, 16). The virgin birth was absolutely essential, not only to assure the sinless character of Jesus but also to fulfill the Davidic covenant. Jesus receives His ‘blood right to David’s throne through His earthly mother, Mary, and His ‘legal right’ to David’s throne through His adoptive earthly father, Joseph.”^{xii}

Many people are confused about the length of David’s dynasty. There are those who believe it ended hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus when the Babylonians conquered the land and destroyed Jerusalem. After all, at the time of Jesus’ birth, Israel was occupied under Roman rule and was no longer a nation under their own authority. But this thinking is flawed, as the Davidic Covenant actually has a place within the future Millennial Reign of Christ. Again, the *Prophecy Study Bible* notes, “After David’s hold on the throne over the kingdom of Israel was firmly established, God made a covenant with him that established the Davidic dynasty as God’s choice to rule His people in perpetuity (2 Samuel 7:14–17).”^{xiii}

Therefore, the Davidic Covenant is an eternal one. It began nearly 3,000 years ago and is still a promise from God today. However, it is obvious in this life-altering drama that there has been a long intermission between the first act of this covenant and the promised finale. Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears write, “The glory of God’s kingdom comes briefly in the rule of David and in the promise of the Messiah’s coming as the kingdom king. (2 Samuel 7:1–17; Psalm 89) Nonetheless, David’s very serious sin ruins the glorious reign (2 Samuel 11–12), and conflict rules through the rest of his time on the throne. In the following years, the twin sins of idolatry and injustice dominate in the land. The whole nation goes into exile in Babylon until God rescues them.”^{xiv}

The Millennial Reign of Christ is one of the mysteries of the Bible that most scholars can’t completely describe or understand. While we know that after the second return of Christ (not to be confused with the rapture of the Church), He will set up an earthly kingdom for a thousand years. Much of how that looks and what to expect is up for debate, but we can be confident that Christ will take His place on the throne of David during this final chapter of

earthly history, where “every knee will bow” and “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10–11 NASB).

According to the *Prophecy Study Bible*, “Scripture looks further into the future for the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant in the millennial kingdom. Isaiah 49 traces this story. The servant of the Lord, the Messiah, introduces Himself as One called from His mother’s womb (v. 1) not only to redeem Israel but to take salvation to the ends of the Gentile world (v. 6). He will embody God’s covenant of salvation and hope for the entire earth (v. 8). While the earth rejoices in deliverance (Is. 49:13), Israel feels deserted and forgotten (v. 14; Romans 11:25–27). The Lord assures Israel that their future will be glorious (Is. 49:15–21). They will become the grandest nation on the earth (vv. 22, 23).”^{xv}

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Samuel 7:12–13 NIV).

He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever (2 Samuel 22:51 NIV).

The New Covenant with Israel

The *Prophecy Study Bible* notes, “In the last of his Suffering Servant passages, Isaiah identified that Israel’s justification under the new covenant will yet come about in the future because ‘a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people. He was stricken’ (Isaiah 53:3, 8). The Lord concluded, ‘He shall see the travail of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities’ (v. 11). The apostle Paul anticipated a day when Israel, as a nation, would accept Jesus as Messiah and His death as the sacrifice for their sins when he wrote in Romans, ‘Hardening’ in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion. And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them. When I take away their sins’ (Romans 11:26–27). God’s new covenant with Israel, based on the life-transforming ministry of God’s Holy Spirit, will become the means by which the Lord brings to fruition the promises He made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). Abraham’s faith (Genesis 15:6) eventually called forth the sacrifice of the Messiah and the new covenant that springs from it.”^{xvi}

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:31–34 NIV).

Again, according to the *Prophecy Study Bible*, “God’s new covenant with the nation Israel, introduced in Jeremiah 31:31–34, was made as a replacement for the old covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:5–8). But nothing could be clearer than the fact that the entire New Testament is named after and expands on this new covenant as the basis for the church of Christ. For the time being, a covenant that ultimately will complete God’s work with Israel is providing spiritual rebirth for both Jew and Gentiles in the church of Jesus Christ. Paul explained the puzzle of Gentiles benefiting presently from the future promises of Israel by means of imagery from the science of horticulture. He compared Israel to a domesticated olive tree that drew its life from the root of God’s covenants (Romans 11:16, 17). The Gentile nations are a wild olive tree. To deliver Gentiles from their spiritual barrenness, God broke off branches from the domestic olive tree and grafted in wild olive branches that became fruitful because of the root of God’s covenants (v. 17). Paul contended that God broke off the natural branches because of their unbelief (Romans 11:20). He rejoiced that the branches of Israel could be grafted back when the nation turns in faith to Christ (v. 23). In fact, Paul predicted just such a national restoration of Israel at the time of the millennium (vv. 26, 27).”^{xvii}

Walter A. Elwell adds, “The Gospel’s good news also meant that God’s word of salvation will prevail in another sense. That is, his promises to his people, Abraham’s descendants will not fail (Romans 9:1–6). In Paul’s day the question could be raised: How can Jesus have been the Jewish Messiah when so many Jews do not think he was? If Paul is right, doesn’t this imply that God’s promise to save his people has failed? Paul’s answer: Abrahamic descent is not primarily a matter of ethnicity. To share Abraham’s blessedness before God means rather to share Abraham’s faith in God (Rom. 9:8). Paul goes to considerable length to explain that God is true to his promises, that no human action (or inaction) can derail his good purposes, and that God will never reject the people who he awakens to faith. Romans 9–11 is too rich and complex to discuss at length here, but its general message is clear: the Lord has not abandoned his people and never will.”^{xviii}

The question that arises from the covenant dialogue is this: Is it possible that God is capable of maintaining two separate covenants with two separate groups of people? In other words, is it possible that God could offer the New Covenant to the world and allow Christian believers, called the Church, access to salvation while at the same time maintaining a covenant or covenants that are thousands of years old with Israel and the Hebrew people? What is apparent is that mankind cannot possibly exist under both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant simultaneously. It has to be one or the other.

But is it possible that the Abrahamic Covenant, along with the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants, can either now and/or in the near future be applied to the Jews and the nation of Israel, while the good news of the gospel under the New Covenant is applied to the rest of the world—including Jews who accept the free gift of Jesus Christ? The answer is yes! As Ken Garrison concludes, “We must not interpret Hebrews 8 as indicating that God has abrogated His covenant with the nation of Israel. This is precisely what the Church fathers of the second, third, and fourth centuries did conclude. This has, in turn, provided the basis for the concept that the Church has now replaced Israel. We conclude therefore that God has two major active covenants to accomplish His purpose in the earth. Each covenant has a great people who have been joined to God by the covenant.”^{xix}

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- ⁱ John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown* (Lake Mary, FL: Frontline, 2006), p. 129.
- ⁱⁱ *Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1997), pp. 20, 26.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown*, p. 130.
- ^{iv} *Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version*, p. 20.
- ^v Clarence Larkin, *Dispensational Truth* (Philadelphia, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Est., 1918), p. 38.
- ^{vi} *Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version*, p. 24.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ^{viii} Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Classics, 1957), p. 149.
- ^{ix} Max Anders, *30 Days to Understanding the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988, 1994, 1998, 2004, 2011), p. 67.
- ^x Phillip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 132.
- ^{xi} *Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version*, p. 345.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 343
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 1175
- ^{xiv} Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), p. 413.
- ^{xv} *Prophecy Study Bible: New King James Version*, p. 1600.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 893.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 1419.
- ^{xviii} Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998, 2005, 2013), p. 264.
- ^{xix} Garrison, *Hebraic Roots*, p. 11.