

# Biblical Covenants

In the ancient world, a covenant was a promise or agreement between two parties that (1) established a relationship as close as blood kinship between them and (2) obliged each party, thus related as if by blood, to certain attitudes and actions in regard to the other. A covenant was sealed in a religious ritual, and obligations accepted by each party were legally binding. A covenant could be made between equal or unequal parties; the latter form was sometimes called a *suzerainty treaty* or a *vassal treaty*, a treaty made between a great ruler (suzerain) and a lesser, subject state (vassal). In this form of covenant, the ruler made a general promise of kindness toward the subject people, while the vassal agreed to observe a lengthy list of specific obligations. The Bible presents the Sinai Covenant as one between unequal parties: YHWH, the ruler, takes on a responsibility simply stated in the general promise: "I will be your God." Israel, the lesser party, promises, "We will be your people," and the responsibilities thus accepted are spelled out in detail in the commandments and statutes of the Torah.

The Hebrew word *Torah* most fundamentally means "teaching" or "instruction," but it is commonly translated into English as *law*. One reason lies in Hebrew culture, which regarded covenant promises as legally binding. Another reason derives from Hebrew understanding of law, which differs significantly from many modern views. For the Israelites and many other ancient peoples, law was intended as instruction; the various commands and statutes of the law taught people how to live peaceably and harmoniously in all relationships. Therefore Israel did not think of the laws, commands, and statutes of YHWH's Torah as a set of impersonal rules. Instead, the Torah represented the gift of YHWH's instruction about how to live in covenant relationship with the God who had chosen and delivered them. Further, because the entire community of Israel was included in the covenant, the Torah also taught them how to live rightly in relationship with one another and with all material things. To view the Torah in a legalistic sense is to misunderstand it completely.

In English translations of the Bible, the word *law* most often refers to God's teaching given through Moses on Mount Sinai, and so it is often called the Law of Moses. Over many years these instructions developed into a collection of laws, statutes, and commandments that spelled out the people's covenant responsibilities, and no Israelite, including the king, was above the Law. The precise relationship of Torah / Law and Israelite legal practice is difficult to determine. What is evident is that Israel considered observing the Law of Moses a matter of great importance, because it represented the people's response to divine instruction. Israelites were expected to revere the Torah as God's gift, guiding relationship with YHWH, other people, and all created things.

Following the Torah involved an entire way of life patterned on the attitude and action of God toward Israel. God's mercy and compassion in delivering the Israelites served as the model for their own behavior in all relationships. This way of life, combined with public ritual praise of YHWH, constituted Israelite worship, and so the Torah regulated both religious ritual and social relationships. Many particular commands of the Law prescribed observance of religious feasts and offering ritual sacrifices to YHWH. But the Torah also governed life in society, addressing such issues as personal security and dignity, marriage and inheritance, property rights, fair wages, and even welfare of animals, crops, and the land itself. For Israel, keeping the Torah meant worship of YHWH through both public religious ritual and a moral life rooted in the covenant relationship with God.

In the Sinai Covenant, also called the Mosaic Covenant because Moses served as mediator, God freely assumed the obligation of continuing to protect, save, and give life to the elect people, while they promised to worship YHWH alone, to live as "God's people." YHWH's fundamental attitude and action toward Israel is often summarized in the Hebrew word *hesed*. No single English word captures the meaning of *hesed*, which is translated into English in numerous ways: *love, mercy, compassion, pity, devotion, fidelity, and loving kindness*. *Hesed* points to an enduring faithfulness rooted in love, or a love that is always faithful, under any circumstances. Hence, the meaning of *hesed* can be summarized as



“faithful love” or “loving fidelity.” Israel’s proper attitude and action in the covenant relationship was often summed up in the Hebrew word *shama*, which means both “listen” and “obey.” In other words, in covenant with YHWH, Israel promised a life of listening to God’s teaching and carrying out in obedience what was heard and understood in this instruction.

The Hebrew Scriptures clearly present the Sinai or Mosaic Covenant as bilateral, meaning that both parties in the relationship freely choose to assume certain attitudes and actions in regard to the other. The paired statements “I will be your God” and “You will be my people” often summarize this view of bilateral responsibilities. Another important covenant in the Bible, however, appears as unilateral: the Davidic Covenant. In this case, one party promises certain attitudes and behavior toward another party, without stipulating a specific response from the other. In 2 Samuel 7:8–17, YHWH enters into covenant with King David with these words: “Your house [dynasty] and your kingdom shall endure forever before me” (verse 16). Here God promises always to preserve and defend Davidic kingship, but does not state any specific obligations for David and his royal descendants. In Israelite history the Davidic Covenant sometimes led to overconfidence and false security. According to the biblical narrative, at times God’s Chosen People behaved as if only YHWH had obligations in the covenant relationship; they forgot that the Mosaic Covenant required the elect people to worship YHWH alone, both by community ritual praise and by their way of life rooted in God’s instruction.

## Tension between Covenants

Tension between the Sinai Covenant and the Davidic Covenant reveals profound biblical insights. The bilateral Covenant of Sinai illustrates faith that God’s faithful love calls for a similar response: those who recognize God as the one who gives and preserves life are called to respond whole-heartedly, with their entire way of life.

On the other hand, the unilateral covenant of God with David expresses Israel’s insight that God’s love does not depend upon the people’s response. Even when Israel forgets or turns away from YHWH, God does not withdraw faithful love. Even though Israel forsakes God, God will never forsake Israel: “God’s love endures forever” (Psalm 136).

The biblical understanding of righteousness also relates to the bilateral Sinai Covenant and points to fulfillment of obligations accepted by both God and Israel. Righteousness, then, is fundamentally a matter of “right relationship” within the covenant. Because two parties are involved, the Bible speaks of both the righteousness of God and the righteousness of Israel, or of the individual Israelite. According to the Sinai Covenant, the righteousness of God consists in extending faithful love toward Israel through acts of deliverance and protection. In other words, God’s righteousness is summed up in God’s *hesed*. On the part of Israel, righteousness is summarized in the word *shama*; Israel is righteous when she listens to and obeys the Torah, which details behavior required for right relationship to God, other persons, and the whole created world.

The Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, considered the core and summation of the entire Law of Moses, includes this whole complex of right relationships. The first three commandments speak of proper relationship to God; Israel is to worship only YHWH, the God who chose and redeemed her. The remaining commandments address relationships with other persons and material things (see Exodus 20:1–17, Deuteronomy 5:6–21); these relationships are to be patterned on the attitude and action of YHWH toward Israel. Though the commandments of the Decalogue summarize the Torah as instruction on how to live in covenant relationships, the Bible reveals a very human tendency that can still be observed today. At times, people treat biblical commandments or laws as ends in themselves, forgetting



their foundation and purpose: to guide a relationship of faithful love with God, other persons, and all created things.

In the New Testament, Jesus implies that righteousness also includes right relationship with oneself: “You shall love your neighbor as [you love] yourself” (Matthew 22:39). In his Gospel, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus brings the Law of Moses to completion; he presents Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah who calls for a greater righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew, chapters 5–7), Jesus tells his disciples, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). This greater righteousness, he continues, lies not only in external behaviors but in the orientation of human hearts, where choice and action begin. Jesus teaches that fulfilling “the law and the prophets” depends upon two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34–40, cf. Mark 12:28–34, Luke 10:25–28).

(This article is adapted from *Beginning Biblical Studies*, by Marielle Frigge, OSB [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2009], pages 160–163. Copyright © 2009 by Marielle Frigge [Sacred Heart Monastery]. All rights reserved.)

The scriptural quotations in this article are from the New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms. Copyright © 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. Used by the permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.)

