



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 3 – 2011

**Divine Covenant Faithfulness in the
Face of Human Covenant Unfaithfulness**

W. Creighton Marlowe, Associate Professor of Old Testament,
Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Belgium

Introduction.....	1
A. Investigation and Use of OT “Covenant” (<i>b^erit</i>)	2
B. Understanding of OT Covenants between God and His People.....	4
1. The Covenant with Noah.....	4
2. The Covenant with Abraham	6
3. Covenants with the Remaining Patriarchs.....	9
4. The Covenant with Israel through Moses.....	14
5. The Covenant with David	27
6. The Covenant from Solomon to Jeremiah.....	29
C. The New Covenant.....	30
Conclusion	36

Introduction

Is *Yahweh’s* covenant faithfulness ultimately contingent on human obedience? What follows will investigate this question by surveying the Old Testament covenants and claims. One stream of interpretation historically has maintained that God’s covenant promises in the OT are unilateral and unconditional in relation to human obedience. These promises are secure because they are based on divine determination and character and not on human aspirations and abilities. This has been challenged by those who have emphasized that such promises, at least in some if not all cases, are conditional or contingent upon human obedience. The projected outcomes were or

will be realized only if the Jewish believers stay(ed) faithful to God’s commands or covenant stipulations. Since perfect obedience is impossible, most or all would agree, then it might be asked at the outset, what level or degree or percentage of obedience was/is necessary to keep God committed to His vows? Would anything less than perfect obedience kill the deal? A fresh consideration of these covenant promises and any related conditions may help us answer such questions and, more importantly, the key question of whether human obedience is at all a condition of or cause for God granting His proposed or promised covenant blessings. Historically Covenant Theology and theologians have recognized numerous OT covenants, although variously numbered and named, with: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Israel. There also is the matter of the New Covenant, which suggests an Old Covenant, and begs the question, does “old” mean abrogated? This essay will consider all of these so-called covenants in terms of their conditional or unconditional nature and their application to Christian faith. When, if ever, is divine covenant faithfulness dependant on human covenant unfaithfulness?

A. Investigation and Use of OT “Covenant” (*b^erît*)

The Hebrew word translated “covenant” in the OT is *b^erît*. It appears 287 times in 267 verses in the OT.¹ It can be translated as

¹ Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11–13, 15–17; 14:13; 15:18; 17:2, 4, 7, 9–11, 13–14, 19, 21; 21:27, 32; 26:28; 31:44; Exod 2:24; 6:4–5; 19:5; 23:32; 24:7–8; 31:16; 34:10, 12, 15, 27–28; Lev 2:13; 24:8; 26:9, 15, 25, 42, 44–45; Num 10:33; 14:44; 18:19; 25:12–13; Deut 4:13, 23, 31; 5:2–3; 7:2, 9, 12; 8:18; 9:9, 11, 15; 10:8; 17:2; 28:69; 29:8, 11, 13, 20, 24; 31:9, 16, 20, 25–26; 33:9; Josh 3:3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17; 4:7, 9, 18; 6:6, 8; 7:11, 15; 8:33; 9:6–7, 11, 15–16; 23:16; 24:25; Judg 2:1–2, 20; 8:33; 9:4, 46; 20:27; 1 Sam 4:3–5; 11:1; 18:3; 20:8; 23:18; 2 Sam 3:12–13, 21; 5:3; 15:24; 23:5; 1 Kgs 3:15; 5:26; 6:19; 8:1, 6, 21, 23; 11:11; 15:19; 19:10, 14; 20:34; 2 Kgs 11:4, 17; 13:23; 17:15, 35, 38; 18:12; 23:2–3, 21; Isa 24:5; 28:15, 18; 33:8; 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 56:4, 6; 59:21; 61:8; 3:16; 11:2–3, 6, 8, 10; 14:21; 22:9; 31:31–33; 32:40; 33:20–21, 25; 34:8, 10, 13, 15, 18; 50:5; Ezek 16:8, 59–62; 17:13–16, 18–19; 20:37; 30:5; 34:25; 37:26; 44:7; Hos 2:20; 6:7; 8:1; 10:4; 12:2; Amos 1:9; Obad 1:7; Zech 9:11; 11:10; Mal 2:4–5, 8, 10, 14; 3:1; Ps 25:10, 14; 44:18; 50:5, 16; 55:21; 74:20; 78:10, 37; 83:6; 89:4, 29, 35, 40; 103:18; 105:8, 10; 106:45; 111:5, 9; 132:12; Job 5:23; 31:1; 40:28; Prov 2:17; Dan 9:4, 27; 11:22, 28, 30, 32; Ezra 10:3; Neh 1:5; 9:8, 32; 13:29; 1 Chr 11:3; 15:25–26, 28–29; 16:6, 15, 17, 37; 17:1; 22:19; 28:2, 18; [Footnote continued on next page ...]

treaty, agreement, or alliance. Scholarship has found this noun neither in any other Semitic language nor unquestionably linked to any Hebrew or Semitic root word. OT usage, therefore, is our best basis for its understanding, along with (possibly) the similarities between OT and ANE treaties.² The other key term used for covenant, forty-four times, is *'edut* meaning testimony or witness.³ Some have concluded that “relationship” is the key underlying factor in OT covenant agreements. In the OT, covenants are made between two people or between God and His people.⁴ This latter category is our concern.

² Chr 5:2, 7; 6:11, 14; 13:5; 15:12; 16:3; 21:7; 23:1, 3, 16; 29:10; 34:30–32. (Search results via Accordance Bible, by OakTree Software, version 9.4.1, 2011).

² “Covenant,” I:709-11 in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and David B. Barrett (Grand Rapids: Wm/ B. Eerdmans, with Koninklijke Brill NV in Leiden, 1999).

³ Exod 16:34; 25:16, 21–22; 26:33–34; 27:21; 30:6, 26, 36; 31:7, 18; 32:15; 34:29; 38:21; 39:35; 40:3, 5, 20–21; Lev 16:13; 24:3; Num 1:50, 53; 4:5; 7:89; 9:15; 10:11; 17:19, 22–23, 25; 18:2; Deut 4:45; 6:17, 20; Josh 4:16; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 11:12; 17:15; 23:3; Jer 44:23. (Search results via Accordance Bible, by OakTree Software, version 9.4.1, 2011).

The Latin Vulgate uses *testamentum* often or usually to translate both OT covenant terms (hence the English use of Old and New Testament).

⁴ Cf. Gordon J. McConville, “*b'rit*” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, gen ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (1997; Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc. Version 2.0), I:738-39. M. Stevens speaks of several types of covenant relationships as human-human or God-human: (1) leader-leader, (2) leader-people, (3) people-people, (4) God-person or God-nation. See Marty E. Stevens, *Theological Themes of the Old Testament: Creation, Covenant, Cultus, Character* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 39-83.

B. Understanding of OT Covenants between God and His People⁵

1. The Covenant with Noah

Noah's parents gave him this name because it is similar to the word for "rest" and they said, "He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed" (NIV). By the "age" 500 Noah had three sons (5:32; 6:10). Humanity by then had become very wicked (6:5, 11-12), so wicked (i.e. violent; 6:11) that God determined to destroy all human life except Noah and his family (6:6-8, 13-14). Noah was favored [graced] by God (6:8). Grace to modern Christians means "unmerited favor." But 6:9b tells us right away that Noah was righteous and blameless and (like Enoch) walked with God. So was he saved from destruction due to his goodness or God's gracious choice? 6:9 makes the point that he was righteous in comparison to others living at the same time. It should be noted, however, that this involves deliverance from an earthly disaster not from eternal death. When the NT speaks of salvation based on grace through faith it speaks of salvation from the consequences of sin, not from physical harm. Still Noah provides a picture of God's freedom to choose who he will favor. Noah of course was not sinless. Being righteous and blameless only means he was law abiding and was not guilty of any offense that would make him a corrupt person or a criminal. He was a good, obedient person as many in the OT. Note how the text repeatedly observes that Noah did everything exactly as

⁵ Sometimes a covenant with Adam is mentioned, but most studies of covenant proper (between God and Israel/Church) begin with Noah, which this essay also will do since Noah is the start of God's process of building the Hebrew nation after the Flood destroyed the human race from Adam, except Noah and his family. Also, while Adam is an important study theologically, the inclusion of the Adamic covenant here would lengthen the essay beyond essential necessity and its publishing parameters.

Also of interest are the types of covenants used throughout the ancient Near East. None is exactly like the OT covenants but there is occasionally some overlap in features; e.g. parts of the Hittite suzerain and Assyrian vassal treaties are echoed by the structure and/or content of the Ten Commandments and the Book of Deuteronomy. But, while they do provide a cultural backdrop to the binding nature of such treaties, these ANE documents offer little directly to help us answer the question at hand about *Yahweh's* faithfulness in relation to human obedience as presented in the OT.

God commanded him (6:22; 7:5, 9b, 16b). When the NT says “none is good” or “righteous” (Rom 3:10-12; = Psa 14:1-3 = 51:1-3) it means neither Jew nor Gentile is sinless and all are sinners (some more than others,. naturally).⁶ All are under the curse and cautions of Genesis 2:16-17 and 3:14-19, 22.

The agreement God made with Noah was that He would rescue Noah and his family from destruction along with the rest of humanity. Noah was to build a large wooden boat and bring his family and samples of all clean and unclean animals on board. God kept His word and Noah and his family were spared drowning and exited safely from the ark on dry land. They and the animals were expected to multiply on earth and be prosperous. (See Gen 6:13-8:19; 9:1, 7). Then Noah worshiped God and sacrificed animals on an altar (8:20). God was pleased and promised never again to “curse” (flood) the earth due to human sinfulness (8:21-22). Noah was commanded as Adam to rule the earth (9:2-3) but also forbidden to eat blood (9:4) and to enact capital punishment for murder (9:5-6). Then the covenant was formally established with Noah, his descendants, and all animals (9:8-10) to never again flood the earth so as to kill off all life (9:11). The (rain)bow was made the symbol of this promise (9:13-17).⁷ God has been faithful to this promise based on His own character and apart

⁶ Cf. W. Creighton Marlowe, “Righteous People in Proverbs,” pp. 267-83 in *Das heilige Herz der Tota, Festschrift for Hendrik Koorevaar*, ed. Siegbert Riecker and Julius Steinberg (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2011).

⁷ Stevens draws attention to the covenant passage of 9:8-17 containing the word “covenant” seven times in ten verses and the word “all, every” twelve times. Three times we have “my covenant” and three times “sign of the covenant” (cf. n. 9 below). The implication is a literary strategy to emphasize completeness and universality (comparison being made to the sevens and threes of the Creation Story in Genesis). Per the ancient Near Eastern treaties, the prohibition of eating blood (9:4) may be seen as the stipulation of the covenant. There were blessings and curses (9:1-6). The “sign” (the bow) could be seen as the deposit for public reading and the witness (the “bow” some argue is a weapon, so God vows to cease from warfare against humanity, which etymologically led to a connection between the rain that stopped and this bow, thus the rain-bow). Thematic parallels (bow, flood, human destruction, animal and human rescue) are found in the much older *Enuma Elish*, *Epic of Athrahasis*, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. See Stevens, *Theological Themes*, 52-54.

from human obedience, as proscribed in 8:21. Noah died at age 950 (9:29). Noteworthy is *Yahweh's* comfort of His people through Isaiah (Isa 54:1-10), where a comparison is made of God's promise to Noah to never again flood the earth and His present promise (conditioned on the suffering of God's servant, Isa 53) to never again rebuke Israel in anger (v. 9), i.e. never remove His "covenant of peace" (v. 10; וּבְרִית וְשָׁלוֹם). "*Yahweh* your Redeemer" (v.8; גֹּאֲלֶךָ יְהוָה) swore (v. 10) by His compassion (רַחֵם) and unfailing love (חֶסֶד).

2. The Covenant with Abraham

Violence, sexual deviation, and civil strife and wars continued to spread (9:20-27; 10:8-30; cf. 13:13). People wanted to be feared and famous so they built formidable fortifications (11:4; cf. 10:8-12). People and nations were divided by loyalties and languages (10:25-11:4). The earliest settlers of Babylon experienced chaos and confusion, leading to dispersion (11:5-9). One of Noah's sons, Shem, whose descendants settled in Mesopotamia (10:22-31), had a descendant named Abram (11:10-26). His father had moved the family from Ur in southern Babylonia to Haran in the northwest area along the Euphrates River (11:27-31). Abram's wife Sarai was barren (11:30). His father died at "age" 205 (11:32).

Later God spoke to Abram and promised him, as with Adam, a land (12:1), a lineage (12:2a), and a long, fruitful life (12:2b). Those who treat him well would also receive rewards, but those who treat him as unimportant would be punished (12:3). Abram was told to go to a yet unrevealed country (12:1) and like Noah he obeyed (12:4). The land he was to go to was Canaan (12:5). Soon after arriving God pledged to give him and his descendants this land (12:7a). He responded with worship (12:7b) by building an altar for sacrifice at that place and later near Bethel (12:8a), where he "called upon the name [power, authority] of God, *Yahweh*" (12:8b; meaning "He will always exist [the same]"; i.e. God is faithful forever; He is eternally existent as Creator, so separate from all that is created; cf. Gen 21:33, where *Yahweh* is called "the eternal God"). God's promise was not in response to Abram's obedience but vice versa. This promise seems unilateral and unconditional.

Abram ("great father"; later called Abraham, "father of many") was a sinful as all humans at times, but these events did nothing to change God's promise to him. Twice he lied, saying his wife was his

sister, to save his own skin when he thought powerful rulers would kill him to take her (12:10-20; 20:1-18). Even after such failures he was enriched (13:1-2; 20:14-16; 21:1-2). Later the covenant was re-affirmed on more than one occasion (13:14-17; 15:4-7, 18-21; 17:1-8; 22:15-18). Abram and his descendants, in these verses collectively, were promised perpetual possession of the land of Canaan, between Egypt and the Euphrates (although they would come and go as a nation), a large number of offspring nationally and internationally, prosperity, and power. When Abram asked how this is possible since he has no son (15:1-3) and how he could be sure of this (15:8) it was ratified by a ceremony in which Abram was asleep and God pledged on His own character to deliver what was promised (15:9-17).⁸ Because Abram trusted what God said he was considered righteous (15:6; but this righteousness was not a basis for God's promise and provisions): "In this instance, the smoking firepot and the flaming torch obviously represent God; Abraham is a silent partner in the covenant ceremony: the recipient of divine blessing with no explicit reciprocal responsibilities."⁹

Ironically but predictably he and his wife (whose idea it was) showed a lack of faith as human and tried to gain an heir by Abram sleeping with his maidservant, Hagar (6:1-4a, who conceived a child).

⁸ The text literally says God "cut a covenant" with Abraham (. 18). What became a typical expression for "making" a covenant has behind it the ancient ritual of cutting animals into pieces as a way of vowing "may the same be done to the party that breaks his part of the bargain."

⁹ Stevens, *Theological Themes*, 57. Stevens finds a parallel here with the ancient land grant covenant in which property was granted to someone by a more powerful party. Although a prologue is partially present, the other features of the suzerain treaty are absent: stipulations for blessing or curses, witnesses, and provision for public reading. But a curse is implicit in the ritual cutting (see n. 8 above). Another telling of the Abrahamic covenant is found in Gen 17, where more of a formal structure like a suzerain treaty is evident as well as similarities with the creation liturgy in Gen 1 and the covenant with Noah in Gen 9. In 17:1-14 "covenant" appears ten times ("my covenant" seven times; cf. n. 7 above). Ten times may be understood as a mnemonic device for memorization. Abram's new name serves as a reminder of God's promise. Circumcision, another kind of "cutting," is involved as the sign of the covenant. The blessings of obedience are posterity and property (prosperity); ironically, the curse for disobedience (not being circumcised) is being "cut off" (17:14). In 17:15-22 "covenant" is used three times as is Ishmael's circumcision. (see Stevens, *Theological Themes*, 58-62).

This sin, however, in no way altered God's plans and promises. But it did have tragic earthly consequences in that it led to an enduring hatred and conflict between the descendants of this son Ishmael and Abram's (now Abraham) eventual son, Isaac, through Sarai (now Sarah; 16:14b-12, 15; 25:12-18). Ishmael, as a son of Abraham, also was blessed with many and powerful and prosperous offspring (16:10; 17:20; 21:8-19). And "God was with him" (21:20a) but he became a warrior-archer (21:20b) and took an Egyptian wife (21:21). The covenant between God and Abraham was humanly signified and ratified by accepting the rite of male circumcision for the current and all future generations of Abraham's descendants, born or bought (17:9-13, 23-27). Any such male not circumcised was excommunicated (17:14). The covenant was also between God and Sarah, blessed to bear a son though barren (17:15-16). Even though Abraham did not believe God would do such a miracle, the promise stood (17:17-18). It would continue to be established with Isaac and his descendants (17:19, 21), and Ishmael as well would be favored with fruitfulness, although not with these covenantal blessings and bindings (17:20). Despite his weaknesses in faith (and Sarah's, 18:10-15) and the flesh, Abraham maintained a close communion with God (17:22). Abraham had not chosen God but God had "chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (18:19; NIV). Still for those outside the covenant judgment could come due to prolonged and purposeful wickedness (18:20-19:25) and to covenantal people who disobey and do not leave the condemned world emotionally or physically (19:26). However, neither her sin nor Lot's and his daughters' (when they slept with him in drunkenness and rebellion; 19:30-35) preempted God's promises. Again, though, there were serious earthly effects: the sons born from this incestuous merger were the fathers and founders of the Moabites and Ammonites (trans-Jordanian Semites), who like the Ishmaelites (Arabians), remained bitter enemies of the children of Abraham (Israelites; 19:36-38). Despite Abraham's conflicts with and concessions to the inhabitants of Canaan, he continued to gain territorial holdings and God's blessing was evident to those watching him (21:22-31). Abraham continued to erect and plant things as witnesses to his trust

in the Eternal God's authority (21:32-33). He lived among idol worshipers a long time (21:34); he was in their world but not of it. He proved his unwavering trust in God when God ordered him to sacrifice his one and only son and he obeyed, knowing that God would fulfill the promise He made to bless the world through him and his descendants (Gen 22:1-12).¹⁰ When Isaac was spared Abraham again worshiped God with an animal sacrifice and named that place "Yahweh will Provide" (22:13-14). Then God, through a messenger, declared:

because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me. (italics added; NIV; 22:16b-18)

This is significant because now it sounds like God's promise is contingent on Abraham's obedience. Yet it does not say "if you obey then I will provide" it merely shows that Abraham's trust in God's promises caused him to be obedient to the point of doing what humanly seemed to contradict the promise (Heb 11:17-19). Isaac would have lived either way to produce heirs, but Abraham would have failed a test of faith. Following this episode the text tells of Sarah's death, which led to the purchase of a cave for a tomb in Canaan from a Hittite and the beginning of Hebrew land possession (Gen 23:3-230).

3. Covenants with the Remaining Patriarchs

Isaac then married an Aramean not Canaanite (idolatrous) woman, who like Sarah was also barren but whose prayer was answered and she had twin sons, who fought in her womb (25:19-22). The eldest son, first-born (Esau), sold his birthright to his brother (Jacob) and, as predicted at birth, the older brother would serve the younger (25:23-34; cf. 27:1-29, where Jacob steals Esau's blessing

¹⁰ The author of Hebrews reasoned that, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Heb 11:17-19).

from Isaac for prosperity and power). Later God directed Isaac to stay in Philistia in Canaan and not flee to Egypt to avoid famine; and there God reaffirmed His pledge to favor him with that land and many descendants because his father had followed God's commands and laws (26:1-6). This statement stands in contrast to the obvious times, which the text emphasizes, when Abraham was disobedient or less than fully ethical; and this promise to Isaac comes in the midst of his own moral failure, doing just as his father and lying about his wife in order to save his own skin (26:7-11). While faithfulness to *Yahweh* was an essential ingredient in determining *how* Abraham and Isaac or Jacob *experienced* God's blessings, perfect obedience was not a condition that controlled whether or not God fulfilled his promise to place the Hebrews in Canaan and use them to reveal Himself to the world. In spite of his weaknesses God still used Isaac's time in Philistia to enrich him (26:12-16). This led to conflicts with the inhabitants of this land, causing him to settle in other areas, making them productive and to proclaim that *Yahweh* had given his people room to flourish (26:17-22). Later he traveled to the site that would become Beersheba (26:33), where *Yahweh* again renewed His pledge to favor him with many descendants "for the sake of My servant Abraham" (26:23-24). As those before him he built an altar and sacrificed to the God of Abraham and placed his truth in His character and authority (26:25). Clear evidence that Isaac was being helped by God led those like the king of Gerar in Philistia to seek a peace treaty (26:26-31). Isaac's son Esau married two Hittite and later Canaanite (idolatrous) women (26:34-35; 28:8-9) to spite his parents (27:46; 28:6-7) who had sent his brother to get a related (theologically and socially) Aramean wife (as Isaac had done), and who had pampered him and allowed him to take what belonged to Esau (after stealing his birthright Jacob tricked Isaac and received the fatherly blessing intended for Esau; 27:5-29). This deception led Esau to Canaanite loyalties and hatred of his brother, to the point of wanting to kill him (27:30-41; cf. 36:6-43, where Esau is the forefather of the Edomites). The only "blessing" Isaac could offer him was a life of hostility living in the desert outside Canaan/Palestine and eventual rebellion by his descendants against his brother's descendants' yoke of oppression (27:39-40).

When Jacob went to Aram for a wife and stopped along the way, he had a dream in which God promised the land where he slept (Luz later named Bethel; 28:19) and many descendants, and the result that his people would bless the world (28:10-14; cf. Gen 12:1-3). God added that He would protect him, bring him back to Canaan from Aram, and be an ever present help until His promises were fulfilled (28:15). In return Jacob promised to make *Yahweh* alone his God, to build a house for Him at Bethel, and to sacrifice to him a tenth of all his resources (28:20-22). Noteworthy is that this covenant is not passed on to Joseph as to Israel/Jacob.

The time he spent in Aram with Laban (29:1-31:55; cf. 32:4-5) resulted in Jacob's enrichment of wives, children, and possessions (cf. 32:13-15), in spite of being deceived by Laban, which was some measure of justice and payback for how he treated Esau, although he tricked Laban in return. However the outcome was a continuation of the blessings promised by God to Abraham's descendants. As his forefathers, Jacob also experienced a barren wife (Rachel, 29:3) whom eventually was touched by God and enabled to have children and no longer be disgraced (30:22-23). Her son was Joseph, whom God would allow to become a high-ranking official in Egypt and use to protect the Hebrews by bringing them there during a time of severe famine in Canaan (37:2-50:26). Jacob even made a covenant with Laban, who called the God of Abraham as a witness (31:53a), promising not to marry any other women besides Laban's daughters or mistreat them (31:50). They agreed not to cross an established boundary in order to harm the other (31:51-52). Jacob swore an oath on the "F/fear" (פֶּחַד; God?) of his father Isaac (31:53b). Upon leaving Aram and fearing Esau's reprisal, Jacob reflected upon God's promise to prosper him if he returned to his homeland, and expressed his unworthiness for God's *faithfulness* (אֱמֶת) to him, in that he had left with only a staff and is now the head of two groups (32:9-10). He prays for safety from the hand of Esau based on God's promise to make his descendants too numerous to be counted (32:12). This logic is interesting. If he knew God's promise was absolute or unconditional, why would he have to ask God to honor it? Since God cannot lie or deceive (we assume he believed this) then He would have to live up to the terms of the agreement. Asking Him to do so would be superfluous it seems. He appears to be twisting God's arm

(much as it appears when David pleads in the Psalms for God’s rescue based on theological presuppositions). He reminds God of the promise almost as if he thinks God may have forgotten. This seems to be more his concern than that God would not honor His Word. Jacob expresses his fear that, although God had pledged to do something, an earthly event could still occur to make the conditions such that God could not fulfill His part although, otherwise, He still would do so (like Jacob being killed). God is summoned to act in order to ensure that Jacob stays around to experience that which God plans to do as long as Jacob is living. The issues here have more to do with Jacob’s fears and faith (or unfaith) than with God’s faithfulness to what He has agreed to, or announced He will, do.

God’s purpose to settle the Hebrews in Canaan is further strengthened by Jacob’s purchase of land near Shechem (cf. 33:18-20), where he built a sacrificial altar and named it “Mighty God of Israel” (Jacob had received the new name “Israel” [‘he who struggles with God’] in 32:28 (cf. 35:9-10) from a heavenly messenger with whom he wrestled for a blessing; cf. 32:22-32).¹¹ Later (see 34:1-21) a man named Shechem raped one of Israel’s daughters (Dinah). Shechem’s father came to Israel and offered him intermarriage and trade rights as well as land. So even a sinful act like this was used to further accomplish God’s purposes for Israel (the man and the nation). As a bonus all the men in the city agreed to be circumcised in return for Jacob/Israel allowing Shechem to marry Dinah; but while they were in pain Israel’s sons attacked them and killed them all (34:22-26; which devilish deed, while it allowed them to plunder and pillage the city, should not be interpreted as God’s plan for enriching the Hebrews; cf. 34:27-29). Even Israel, whose daughter was raped, accused his sons of making them a poor witness to the Canaanites and of risking their safety (34:30).

¹¹ The verb *śarah* means “to struggle” and “God” is *El* (abbreviated) or *Elohim*, thus *śara-el* with an added 3ms pronoun prefix (*y*) becomes *y-śara-el* or Israel. The Canaanite god who was chief of the pantheon was named *El* (“Power”). In OT times *El* had been usurped in a coup by *Ba’al*, the storm god, with the help of the Sea god (*Yamm*) and the god of Death (*Mot*) and the Sea Monster (*Leviathan* in Hebrew or *Lotan* in Ugaritic).

Curiously (some say contradictorily or anachronistically) the giving of the name Israel to Jacob is restated (35:9-10), but of importance here is that God restates His intention to give him a nation (*goy* from which we get the term *goyim* or “Gentiles”) of descendants (Israel is a nation to be distinguished from all other nations, *goyim*) including royal figures and the land of Canaan for him and his descendants as promised to Abraham and Isaac (35:11-12). Jacob calls the place Bethel (35:15).¹² The future heads of the twelve tribes of Israel were Jacob’s/Israel’s sons (35:22b-26; cf. 46:8-25). Joseph eventually revealed to his family that God had sent him to Egypt (via his brothers’ sinful deed of selling him to merchants) to save them from death in the famine, and they should not regret their actions because now they are preserved as a remnant of Abraham’s ancestors (45:4-8; 70 persons, see 46:26-27), presumably in line with God’s purposes and promises to the Hebrew Patriarchs. On the move to Egypt with his family Israel stopped in Beersheba and sacrificed to God, and God spoke to him in a dream/vision and repeated His plan to make a great nation out of his offspring and bring them back to Canaan some day (46:1-4). Initially in Egypt the Hebrews had property in the best part of the country (47:11). The famine ravaged both Egypt and Canaan, but Joseph was able to sell grain for money and then for barter and then bought all the land (except that of the priests) and made slaves of the people for the Egyptian King in return for seeds (47:14-22). The Israelites increased in numbers and property (47:27b). When Israel/Jacob was near death he made Joseph promise to bury him in Canaan (in the cave Abraham bought from the Hittite) and reminded him of God’s promise at Luz/Bethel to favor him with many and mixed descendants and perpetual ownership of Canaan

¹² The word “Bethel” means “house of God” and has been mentioned before: 12:8 (in relation to Abram) and 28:19 (earlier in relation to Jacob before he was Israel). This term is not necessarily a proper name each time mentioned (contra some English version) but can just mean “house of God” (a name many places could have just like many churches or synagogues or temples, etc.) or can be used by a later editor anachronistically to tell his current readers which location is meant. In this instance Israel set up a stone pillar and poured a drink offering on it as a place of worship (35:14).

(48:1-4; cf. 49:29-32).¹³ Then he wished for Joseph that God would lead him back to Canaan, and gave him (the deed to?) some land he had taken by force from the Amorites (48:22). He next blessed and told the fortunes of the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel in the land of Canaan (49:1-28). When Joseph was near death he told his brothers that God would certainly bring them from Egypt back into Canaan as He swore (עֲשֶׂה) to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (50:24). And since he was assured of this he made his brothers swear to take his dead body with them back to Canaan (50:25).

4. The Covenant with Israel through Moses

The story in Exodus quickly gets to the matter of Israel's growth as a nation in Egypt (Exod 1:7). Hebrew women had become famous for their birthing stamina and abilities (1:19), viewed as evidence of God's intervention and the midwives' fear of God so that God's promise of fruitfulness is fulfilled (1:20-21). Even a plot to kill every newborn male child was circumvented when a Hebrew boy was hidden and then found and protected by a member of the royal Egyptian household (1:22-2:9), who named him Moses (2:10b) and raised him as an Egyptian nobleman (2:10a). As a young adult he committed murder (2:11-14) but even that did not keep him from fulfilling his destiny to lead the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to freedom and eventually to Canaan (3:10). Having fled to Midian to avoid imprisonment or worse in Egypt (2:15), Moses encountered the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, revealed as *Yahweh* (3:4-7a; cf. 3:15-16), or "I Am" (3:14), Who announced His intention to rescue the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and take them to Canaan, where there was plenty of open space for new settlers (3:7b-8, 10-12). *Yahweh* recalled the promise He made to bring Israel out of bondage to Canaan, a land of plenty (3:17).

The plan was to force the king's hand via wondrous deeds and to so impress the citizens that they would give an abundance of material goods to the Hebrews upon their departure (3:18-22; 11:2; 12:36); but

¹³ In Gen 48:1-4 Joseph's sons (Ephraim and Manasseh and their descendants) are promised Canaan as had been Jacob. Ephraim eventually settled in central Palestine and his brother in the trans-Jordanian region east of Galilee. This is called an "everlasting possession" (48:4) but such a phrase by itself does not discount the possibility this is an intention that could be voided.

the plagues that God used to punish Egypt for not releasing the Hebrews only made matters worse (5:1-21). Moses complained to God, who reminded him that He had established a covenant with the Hebrew Patriarchs to give them the land of Canaan (5:22-6:4). God also explained that the suffering of the Hebrews led Him to “remember” His covenant (6:5). This is remarkable and troubling if taken too literally, because God would be admitting He had a mental lapse, or when His people suffered enough He decided grudgingly to give in and help them since He had offered anyway. Many translations give this impression by their wording of this text. It should be understood not as a direct quote of God but as an editorial and ancient way of describing God’s care for His people, ascribing human characteristics to the Deity. *Yahweh* then declares He will free the Hebrews from bondage, will judge Egypt (fulfilled by plagues, see 7:1-12:30), will be their God, and will give them Canaan to possess (6:6-8). The wording of 6:7 “I will become God to you and you will become people for Me” became the core and code of the covenant:

The language of “become” indicates a process of growing in relationship not immediately obvious in the English. Also, the Hebrew indicates the benefit of the relationship: God for you and people for me. There is a willingness in the relationship . . . The biblical notion of covenant is essentially relational and beneficial in nature.¹⁴

It was not until God killed the first-born Egyptian males that the nation gladly set the Hebrews on their way (12:31-33). According to many versions of 12:37, 600,000 Hebrews departed from Egypt. Such numbers are disputed in Scripture, but regardless, whatever the number, it would be an affirmation of God’s faithfulness to grow the nation significantly from the 70 who had entered Egypt ca. 400 years earlier (12:40-41). The intention of honoring the promise of Canaan is reinforced when God gives Moses instructions for the Passover, explaining how these ceremonial rules have to be followed when they are living in Canaan (13:4-5; cf. 13:11-13).

When the Egyptian army was drowned in the Reed Sea and Pharaoh defeated, a song of victory and praise was sung (“*Yahweh* is a Warrior”) in which some lyrics speak of the coming day when

¹⁴ Stevens, *Theological Themes*, 63-64. Cf., e.g., Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28.

peoples in Canaan like the Philistines, Edomites, and Moabites will fear the Hebrew army or God's arm (15:14-16). God will settle Israel in its land of inheritance, "the place, O LORD, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established" (NIV; 15:17). Even if such lines were added much later in time, it still shows the understanding that God would be faithful to His promises in spite of Israel's failures (explained in sad detail in the rest of Exodus).

The first we read of the covenant in relation to contingencies is in Exod 19:5-6, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession . . . you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (NIV). Technically this does not speak of God's but the peoples' responsibility to do what they vowed to do; if not they would not become a special nation to God. Yet God previously did vow that He *would* be their God and they *would* be His people (6:7). So far disobedience has not been a deal breaker, especially failure at complete obedience; but now it seems less than full obedience to their commitments will make the covenant null and void. Also technically this only speaks about the positive: when you obey you will be rewarded. It does not say anything, except by implication, about disobeying and being punished. Logically they could disobey and still live in Canaan and be numerous and rich (as promised to Abraham et al.), but they would not be special as a nation with a priestly role. The word "covenant" (Heb. *b'rit*) basically means "agreement" and can refer to any particular or general pact between two parties, so does not always have to indicate The Covenant between God and Israel or the Patriarchs in all its parts, and can refer to a number of laws or regulations the Hebrews accepted as Divine government for their lives. Very soon in the narrative the Ten Commandments are put forth (20:1-17). The fear of God was supposed to keep them from sinning (20:20). Then numerous stipulations and commands are adjudicated (21:1-23:19) to regulate life in the Land (Canaan > Israel). That's a lot of wasted ink if it would only take unfaithfulness on the Hebrews' part to stop progress towards gaining Canaan.

A very interesting passage comes in 23:20-26, where God tells the Hebrews that He will send a messenger (traditionally “angel”)¹⁵ to guard and guide them to Canaan. He must be obeyed fully and will not forgive rebellion because he acts with God’s “name” or authority. If they do all he commands then God will fight their enemies and destroy all the Canaanite armies.¹⁶ But the Hebrews must not become idolaters. If they worship *Yahweh* exclusively then He promises to “bless” their food and water, heal them, make miscarriages impossible, and grant long lives to all. Again this agreement if broken leads to a loss of years, poor agriculture, water shortage, and infant death. They still could experience what was promised apparently unconditionally to the Patriarchs: life in the Land, many descendants (although less than optimal), and wealth. This text would not make God unfaithful to Abrahamic Covenant promises due to human sin. Then note, however, that connected to this agreement in Chap. 23 of Exodus are the Land dimensions (23:31a). This would suggest that this “promise” is not unilateral and unconditional. Acquiring these limits of the Land from Egypt to the Euphrates is dependent on meeting the conditions of 23:21, 24, 25a, 32-33a (i.e., completely obeying the messenger; no idolatry and breaking the idols, worshiping only *Yahweh*; not making any “covenants” with idolaters and removing them from Hebrew soil). Prophetically God says to worship idols will be a snare for them (23:31b), and those who have read the last chapter know that unrepentant idolatry (apart from all other sins) became Israel’s Achilles heel, which led to defeat and deportation by the Assyrians and Neo-Babylonian and the end of the Israelite nation,

¹⁵ The translation “angel” is problematic because it is not a translation at all but an Anglicized transliteration of the Greek word *angelos*, which translated the Hebrew word *mal’akh* “messenger.” These messengers may be human or holy/heavenly in the OT, context making the difference, although in some cases what kind of messenger is not clear.

¹⁶ Cf. 23:27-30, “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land” (NIV).

which never achieved the boundaries named to Abraham and to Moses (although King David's and Solomon's empires came close). Now we have what looks like a conflict. The limits of the land seemed not contingent on human obedience when revealed to Abraham but they do now when revealed to Moses. If absolute and unconditional then they have to come about in future history at some point as promised, or God is unfaithful. Israel clearly was idolatrous and was exiled from Canaan. If the promise was conditional on obedience and relative to circumstances, then the potential Land ownership has been lost and cannot be expected. The logic is easy enough, if a then b, if not a then not b, but the problem is what to do with two texts that appear to contradict each other. Was land possession from Egypt to the Euphrates promised unconditionally or conditionally or both? If idolatry is predicted by God as a snare then Israel certainly was snared in some way (23:31b) because it was no doubt idolatrous. The snare could be seen as a temporary loss of the promised borders. The promise of the largest extent of the Land is unconditional (Abrahamic), but *when* this is achieved is or could be conditional (Mosaic). Idolatry caused Israel to be dispersed to the nations with a promise of return. The Israelites did return under Persian rule of the ANE but so far in history never to gain the extent of the Land expressed to Abraham and Moses, at least literally. Israel has returned as a nation since 1948 CE but this may or may not be the holy people prescribed as the renewed Israel of prophecy, although it could be a precursor. The problem is solved (or stepped around) in one way, although new problems are created, by taking the view that the Church is the "New Israel" and the promises have been fulfilled in Christ spiritually. Another curiosity is that, read at face value, the text in Exod 23 begins with the pledge by God to give His people borders from Egypt to the Euphrates (v. 31a). Israel will defeat the inhabitants because God will hand them over (v. 31b). Therefore (having taken these lands) the Hebrews must not worship their false gods (v. 32). They must eventually drive out all foreigners (v. 33a), otherwise they will sin via idolatry and suffer the consequences of such an offense to *Yahweh* (v. 33b). Read this way Israel did gain this territory, did have military victory with God's miraculous help, did fall into idolatry, even Solomon, and much worse afterwards during the divided kingdom period, and was punished by conquest and captivity. The

catch is, how did they gain this territory? All the rest is clear from the remainder of the OT. The only way to take this approach is to say these lands were acquired (if not spiritually in the Church then) in principle, since certainly these borders were never held in practice, literally. How in principle? The most consistent answer to all this is to say the unconditional promise to Abraham is fulfilled by the Church as the New Israel and the promises are fulfilled spiritually; while the conditional promise to Moses could have led to these actual borders for ancient Israel if it had not become idolatrous, yet it did so these Land limits physically were lost forever.

The narrative now turns to the reading of the Book of the Covenant (24:7). Having heard God's requirements, the Israelites responded by pledging to do all that He commanded (24:3), which Moses had recorded (24:4). Sacrifices were made and Moses read this document to which again the people agreed wholeheartedly (24:5-7). This covenant was then ratified in blood from the sacrifices, sprinkled on the people (24:8). Moses was summoned by God to receive laws from God (24:12). He met with God for forty days and received detailed instructions for the construction of a tent for meeting (tabernacle), its furniture, priestly garments and other ritualistic items, and a box (ark) for the recorded Covenant terms or Testimony (as it is later named; 24:18-31:17). Moses returned to the Israelite camp from Mount Sinai with two stone tablets, upon which was inscribed the Testimony (עֲדוּת), which was to be housed in the Ark of the Covenant (31:18; 25:10-16). The nation's inability to keep its side of the agreements made with God is quickly exposed when Moses finds the people had begun to worship a golden calf idol while he was away receiving God's Ten Commandments (32:1-8; cf. 32:22). Most interesting is that *Yahweh* comments on them as extremely stubborn people and speaks His intention to destroy them after He spend some time alone with His anger (as if He is pouting and plotting; 32:9-10a). Then He adds that after He destroys them He will still make a new great nation through Moses alone ("you" masc. sing. 2nd person suffixed pronoun as direct object; 32:10b). The promise to build a sizeable and significant nation continues but this generation is doomed. God seems to truly intend on not fulfilling the part of the promise to build this nation related to Abraham's descendants. But then Moses argues with God and convinces Him to relent; and He

does (32:11-14). He asked God not to “fly off the handle” in anger and to remember what He had promised and not to allow the Egyptians the opportunity to gloat and claim that *Yahweh* only rescued them with the deceitful (“evil” is not a good translation here) purpose of killing them later.¹⁷ Moses pleaded with God to forgive them, however the people were struck with a plague for their sins and God swore to remove them from His book (32:30-35). Then God restated His plan for them to go to Canaan and occupy it, after God’s messenger has wiped out the Canaanites (33:1-3). Having seen something of God’s revealed nature as both compassionate and just, Moses asked God to change His mind and forgive them and travel with them to Canaan (since previously He had said He could not be with them on the journey without losing His temper; 34:8-9; cf. 33:2b). Then *Yahweh* made a conditional covenant with Moses (34:10-28). Here the Ten Commandments were renewed and other laws and regulations related to success in Canaan were stipulated (most or all related to an avoidance of idolatrous practices, a snare for them if they make a treaty with the inhabitants of Canaan; 34:12, 15; The Book of Leviticus is an expansion of all regulations). God’s promise to drive the Canaanites out of the Land is connected to a command for obedience to what was being legislated that day (34:11). Three times a year they had to give sacrifices (tithe?) and God would cleanse the Land of Canaanites (34:23-24). Statements like Lev 25:2 could be translated “if” or “when” you enter the Land. Still God’s intention to place them in Canaan is clear (25:38 unless such a text is only a Jewish interpretation of history). In 26:9 God pledges to keep His covenant, but this could be taken as a promise that He will certainly keep His part of the bargain all things being equal. If conditional and they broke the conditions, that would not make God unfaithful to His agreement. In 26:14-39 this is born out: God declares that IF they disobey and are punished and then repeatedly disobey (i.e. unrepentant idolatry) THEN eventually He will make Israel “perish

¹⁷ One cannot help but reflect on such a story as accurately exposing the attitudes and beliefs of the ancient Hebrews in light of their religious milieu in the ANE. If taken at face value God comes off as emotionally immature and not true to His word; although what should be noted for the purposes of this study is that the plan to punish the people can be related to previous conditions wherein judgment was promised for idolatry (cf. e.g., 23:33; inter alia).

among the nations,” wasting away in foreign lands for their sins (26:38-39). However even after that, God declared that IF they confess their sins and WHEN they have paid (רצה) for them, THEN He would “remember” the covenant with the Patriarchs regarding Canaan (26:40-42). These sins are defined as transgressions of God’s laws and the penalty as exile (26:43). God promises for the sake of the covenant he made with the forefathers not to completely reject and destroy Israel (vv. 44a, 45a) because He is *Yahweh* their God (vv. 44b, 45b). Here returning to Canaan after exile depends on what God has promised: disobedience causing deportation and then repentance as a contingency for God keeping His part of the bargain. Still the nation was dissolved in captivity and there is no record of such a national repentance prior to Cyrus’ edict to allow a return to Palestine in 538 BCE. A spiritually restored Israel (the Church) is perhaps the best explanation of how God was faithful to His covenant in spite of ancient Israel’s failure.

Later, on the plains of Moab, *Yahweh* told the Israelites through Moses to drive out (ירש) the inhabitants of Canaan and possess the Land because God had given it to them ((Num 33:50-53). Then they were to divide the land into tribal territories (v. 54). Then God added that if they fail to drive out (ירש) the Canaanites, those left would cause them much trouble and God would drive the Israelites out as well (vv. 55-56). The boundaries of the land they will possess are described as basically Palestine extended from the border of Egypt to unknown northern sites (34:1-12). But at the beginning of Deuteronomy this land is specified as going into Lebanon and to the Euphrates (Dt 1:6-7). They were expected to take possession of these promised boundaries (Dt 1:8). Still many who had been among those receiving the promise of this land were not allowed to enter due to their bad behavior, including Moses (1:35, 37; 4:21-22). The promised Land was west of the Jordan (2:29). The Israelites were reminded that keeping God’s laws would allow them to live in the Land (4:1-5). Godliness in the Land would be the key to witness (4:6-8). They are not to forget the covenant and turn to idols unless they be consumed (4:23-24). Idolatry will certainly cause their loss (אבד) of the Land and destruction (שמד; 4:26). Only a few would survive dispersion and they would become idol worshippers; yet when they repent and return to *Yahweh* in obedience, He will keep His side of

the bargain because He is merciful (4:27-31). Israelites are reminded that no other God has ever so miraculously created a new nation, which proves He is their God,¹⁸ who loves them and plans to give them Canaan as pledged as an inheritance (4:32-38; however, such a statement does not demand the conclusion that this will happen regardless of any conditions, just that *Yahweh* by His own initiative will not back out). In fact this is followed by the affirmation that Israel's life in the Land is dependent on its acknowledgement that He is the supreme God (at least for this nation)¹⁹ and its obedience to His commands (4:39-40). Remarkably the Ten Commandments are then reviewed (Dt 5:1-22). Moses shared with the people *Yahweh's* concern that they fulfill their promises of obedience to ensure that all would go well for them (5:28-33; cf. 6:1-3). Such faithfulness was possible only if the people only loved *Yahweh* and served Him wholeheartedly (6:4-5). This is the function of this *Shema* passage (cf. 6:13-15). Israel must be obedient to God's decrees in order to take the Land and defeat enemies (6:16-19). Perfect obedience of course was not even possible, so what kind of obedience is here required? How much could they sin and still receive the promises? Biblically we know that they sinned through idolatry and in other ways very much and still gained the Land, but not fully. They achieved dominance over the Canaanites during the Israelite monarchical period, but soon

¹⁸ The proof is not that *Yahweh* is the true or only God (although that may be the case), but here the import is that He is Israel's God. Israel is to know she can trust *Yahweh* based on his past faithfulness and favor and forceful presentation of his care and calling of this nation. The emphasis in this ANE setting is not the philosophical or ontological issue of God's existence (although other Scriptures might state or suggest his uniqueness) but Israel's obligation by treaty or covenant agreement to be faithful to Him Who is faithful to the nation (4:35 is speaking of the necessity to know *Yahweh* is the only God for Israel and no other should be worshiped, since many gods were available to serve in practical reality). When Israel turns to other gods it shows that mentally they perceive a polytheistic world, regardless of how the modern reader perceives the absolute existence or not of gods other than *Yahweh*.

¹⁹ Again "there is no other" probably is not intended as an ontological proposition but the practical matter that Israel is to have no other God or gods (cf. the first of the 10 Commandments, the basis for all the others commands and the entire covenant relationship). This is the contextual sense of the passage, although theologically Christians may see it as moving towards *Yahweh's* exclusivity.

became divided, invaded, and exiled. So did Israel ever actually experience what was promised? If God is to make it happen regardless of Israel's faithfulness, then it has not happened yet. *Yahweh* commanded obedience, according to Moses, to ensure prosperity (6:24-25).

Then the language becomes stronger regarding the removal of Canaanites from Canaan. Now seven tribes are named and their total and merciless destruction (חרם) is mandated (7:1-2).²⁰ This could point only to the leveling of these cities and their inhabitants (which would still leave many Canaanites living in the countryside, whose deaths are not commanded). This may be why the narrative continues by telling the Hebrews not to intermarry (vv. 3-4) with these people and to break down their idolatrous shrines (v. 5; since they still would be around). *Yahweh* had chosen Israel alone because of its inferior status and loved it by redemption from slavery, so the people must realize that He keeps His word to all generations who love Him back through obedience (vv. 6-9; cf. 7:12-15; cf. 8:1). But He will quickly destroy those who show hatred through disobedience (v. 10). In 8:18 *Yahweh* (as represented by Moses) confirms the covenant, but in v. 19 qualifies this by saying they will be destroyed (אבר) if and when they “forget (שכח) *Yahweh* as God” and become idolaters. Here “confirm” seems to imply that God *reaffirms* His intentions UNLESS the Hebrews default. Historically many did turn from God but not all. Malachi several hundred years later (at the time the nation is being destroyed and dispersed) would tell them:

See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the **messenger of the covenant**, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; **he will purify the Levites** and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the **offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable** to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. (NIV; Mal 3:1-4; emphasis added)

²⁰ In 7:16 Israel is told to destroy (אכל; literally “eat; devour”) them, not pity them, and not serve their gods. In 7:22 God vows to drive them out (נשל) gradually until they are destroyed (שמד).

Upon their initial conquest under Joshua God does not give them the Land of Canaan due to their own righteousness (Dt 9:4a, 5). Rather the Land will be made free of inhabitants by God Himself due to its wickedness (9:4b). And like these nations Israel will be destroyed (אבד) for disobedience (8:20). At Sinai God pledged to destroy (שמד) and exterminate those who worshiped the golden calf, and promised to build a better nation through Moses (9:12-14). They were saved by Moses' intercession (9:18-21). They rebelled when they could have entered Canaan (9:22-24), and again God pledged to destroy them (שמד; 9:25); and again Moses' intercession saved them (9:26-10:11). The people must observe God's commands SO THAT they may live enter and endure in the Land (Dt 11:8-9, 13-15; cf. 16:18). However idolatry would cause God to stop the rain, bring famine, and make the people "perish" (אבד) from the Land (11:16-17). Living in the Land is equated with keeping the Commands (12:1) and not allowing any idolatrous Canaanite worship practices (12:2-14:21). Expressions like "land that *Yahweh* our God is giving us" (e.g. Dt 1:25; cf. 16:20) may show that the gift of the Land is valid at that point but not necessarily forever.²¹ The gift of the Land is called an "inheritance" (נחלה) or "possession" (e.g. Dt 24:4). While "everlasting" is not inherent in such terms, the whole land of Canaan was called an "everlasting possession [NIV]" (לְאֶחָזָה עוֹלָם) in Gen 17:8. But here the term is actually "landed property"; while HALOT defines נחלה as "inalienable, hereditary property." The Land was promised by oath (Dt 26:15) but clearly could be lost at least temporarily.²² *Yahweh* will be just as pleased to ruin (אבד) and destroy

²¹ In 28:52 the "land *Yahweh* your God is giving you" is used in a context where this land is being besieged and lost in battle.

²² The NIV in 26:19 has God "declaring" Israel would be exalted and "promising" Israel would be holy to God. But only the verb "to speak" applies to these statements. If "to declare" is also "to promise" then God's promises are all the more relative to circumstances. Both statements in this verse are "declared." So if "promise" is a substitute term then we can say both are promised. If Israel's fame and fortune is promised the same as possession of Canaan, then the latter can easily be seen as highly circumstantial. So NIV is perhaps too loose with the translation "promise" in such a case. However in 28:1 Israel's exaltation (and victory in battle; cf. 28:7, 13) like its life in the Land is contingent on full obedience. God promises a curse (the opposite of the listed blessings) on Israel if disobedient to His commands [Footnote continued on next page ...]

(שמר) Israel for disobedience as He was to make it prosper for obedience (28:63). There also is nothing inherently permanent about a possible future loss of land. In fact when the curses for disobedience are pronounced the expected or predictive sense of “when this happens” is apparent. Return is not ruled out. But other verses will have to decide if the return is a permanent extension of the promised possession under Joshua.²³ In Dt 29:12-15 the covenant being sealed with an oath and confirmed is that *Yahweh* will be current and future Israel’s God as promised to the forefathers.

In 29:16-21 the person who agrees outwardly but not inwardly to the covenant, thinking he or she is secure by an oath, and then becomes an idolater, will never be forgiven and will experience the promised curses. In 30:16 (cf. 31:1-6) keeping God’s laws is necessary to ensure that Israel will keep living and increasing in Canaan, which Israel is at that moment beginning to enter and own.²⁴ In vv. 17-18 Israel’s time there will be cut short if it is idolatrous, and it will be destroyed (אבר). It was within the people’s power to choose life (and blessings) or death (and cursing) with heaven and earth as a witness (30:19). Destruction had already been decreed as the end

(28:15-44). Included is the curse of exile to a foreign land (28:36-37; cf. 28:49-52) and servitude to the inhabitants of Canaan (28:43-44). When these happen they will be signs “forever”(28:46; עולם, the same word as “everlasting” in Gen 17:8).

²³ In 30:1-10 dispersion to other nations is practically predicted; and the promise is that only true repentance and complete obedience of the Law will lead to restoration or wealth, re-gathering in, and re-possession of, Canaan. In Dt 31:16b God tells Moses unequivocally that “They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them” (NIV). He says “they will be destroyed” (אכל; NIV, v. 17). Of course Israel was dispersed as a nation and the land ruined by invasion, but was it destroyed? There was a return or sorts and Judaism continued and flourished, and then a State of Israel was created by the Allied Nations after victory in WWII. But this in no way is a purified Israel. One could say physical Israel was never to return as it had been. But the conclusion then has to be that either another physical Israel is coming in righteousness or the new Israel is all those purified by God through His coming Lord and messenger of the covenant in Mal 3:1-4.

²⁴ In 31:6 Moses promised the people that God would never leave or forsake (עזב) them. In 31:16-17 God predicts the people will forsake (עזב) Him by breaking the covenant agreements; and as a result He will get angry and forsake (עזב) them. Meaning He will turn away from them and allow them to be destroyed (“eaten up” אכל) by disasters and difficulties. Verse 18 defines the breaking of the covenant as wicked idolatry. Cf. 31:26-29.

game for idolatry. And this was eventually the choice. But later covenant-related comments speak of a future for God's chosen community after disobedience and death-of-the-nation by dispersion. At the end of Deut 31 Moses recites a poem in which he reveals that the nation rejects God, God then rejects them (vv. 15-20) and scourges and scatters them, blotting out the memory of their name (vv. 21-26), yet *Yahweh* who dispenses life and death will have mercy on them (vv. 36, 39) and cover their sins (v. 43). Still they cannot experience life apart from God's laws (v. 47). The question is just how God carries out this renewal in light of His promises of perpetual possession of Canaan and power in spite of spiritual failure and the imposition of the also promised punishments. At the end of Moses' life *Yahweh* shows him the land promised by oath to Abraham (34:1-4). Here this land is described as the region from the east-of-Jordan settlements, west to the Mediterranean Sea, then from the southern desert regions (northeast of Sinai), including the Dead Sea area, to Dan (north of Galilee). This is a far cry from other texts that depict the Promised Land as going from Egypt to Babylon and north through Aram/Syria,²⁵ which is immediately promised to Joshua (as far north as Hittite country) when he is about to cross the Jordan to conquer Canaan after Moses' death (Josh 1:1-4). Individual rebels certainly would be executed (Josh 1:18).

Throughout the time of Moses God's covenant with Israel had grown to include, in addition to the Abrahamic pledges, all the laws they agreed to keep and all the blessings and loyalty God promised for obedience along with the curses for disobedience and destruction for idolatry. In the Book of Joshua covenant usually refers to the box holding the covenant stipulations and law codes. Once Joshua made a treaty with the people at Shechem (24:25). On another occasion "covenant" refers to an agreed-upon regulation not to keep anything as booty that God had ordered to be destroyed, which Israel had vowed to obey but broke (7:10-12). Otherwise in one other verse (23:16) violation of the covenant is, as before, summarized ultimately or mainly as idolatry, the real deal breaker, for which loss of the Land is vowed. Again the question is if this is permanent or temporary loss

²⁵ Cf. Gen 15:18; Num 34:6-7; Deut 11:24; Josh 1:4; Ezek 47:15, 19-20; 48:28. Cf. 2 Sam 8:3; Mic 7:12.

in physical terms. In Judges 2:1-2 *Yahweh* reminds the Hebrews He had said: I will not break “My agreement” (בְּרִיתִי) about the promised land; and they had agreed not to make any covenant with the Canaanites, yet they did. The consequence was that God now reversed a former pledge to drive all the Canaanites out of the Land (v. 3; cf. Exod 23:29; Deut 7:17; 9:3-5).

5. The Covenant with David

As seen “covenant” (ברִית) is used in several ways in the OT so far. It can be any one of many “agreements” or “stipulations” of an oath or vow or treaty among two parties (David and Jonathan make a friendship pact in 1 Samuel); or it can refer to an entire and special set of vows or promises made between God and a people or a representative of that nation. It is even possible for God to ceremonial ensure His promises while the human partner in the covenant is asleep, making God responsible to keep His pledge irrespective of human faithfulness. But is this intended to apply to all aspects of the covenant vows between *Yahweh* and Abraham, and Moses, and others?

The word for “covenant” actually is not even used in the passage dealing with what is known as the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7; although later David refers back to it as an “everlasting covenant” in 2 Sam 23:5). Neither is a word like “promise” used; rather God “declares” (נָדַר) what He will do through Nathan the prophet to David. The tone of the passage is indicative and intentional. No direct reference is made to past covenants. God rejects David’s plans to build Him a House or Temple, and instructs Nathan to tell David that God will (1) make him have a rare and powerful reputation; (2) provide a place for Israel His people to live and own, where they will be safe always from oppression; (3) give David peace from his enemies; (4) continue David’s kingdom through a male descendant, who will build a Temple to *Yahweh*; and whose throne will be “everlasting” (עוֹלָם), and therefore also David’s (his father’s) kingdom and throne (2 Sam 7:9b-13, 16). The way Solomon’s or David’s rule can be eternal or even perpetual on this earth would seemingly have

to be in some spiritual manner.²⁶ A physical or material fulfillment would require the rise of a Davidic descendant who rules a Hebrew nation, controlling the Near East, that is free from conflict from that point forward in history. Regardless the question is if in some way these “promises” are how God plans to fulfill his covenant with Abram and/or Moses.

The next reference to these pledges and David comes in 2 Sam 23. There the last days of David are in view, and he asks rhetorically: “Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an **everlasting covenant** [ברית עולם], arranged and secured in every part? Will he not bring to fruition **my salvation** and grant me my every desire?” (2 Sam 23:5; NIV, emphasis added). David expected to be rescued from all his enemies (his great desire), from evil people who would be destroyed by fire: “But evil men are all to be cast aside like thorns, which are not gathered with the hand. Whoever touches thorns uses a tool of iron or the shaft of a spear; they are burned up where they lie” (2 Sam 23:6-7; NIV). What did David actually have in mind when he used a word like עולם (“everlasting,” “eternal,” “forever,” “perpetual”)? For him could it just mean “life long”? He expected God to make good on His oath to give Israel victory and territorial possessions to ensure prosperity, power, and peace, or at least to allow David vengeance over his personal and political enemies, which he had achieved in the end (with the help of his mighty men, 23:8-38).²⁷ In Psa 89:26-37 God says of David:

²⁶ God adds, in relation to this descendant of David, that He will be his father and will discipline him but will never stop loving him as He did Saul (vv. 14-15). This cannot be an allusion to the Messiah or Christ because this “son” is described as being sinful at times. Still how is Solomon’s throne or David’s extended “forever”?

²⁷ Even with such sureties God almost destroyed the nation when David sinned by carrying out an unauthorized census for military purposes (2 Sam 24). As part of his repentance David bought a threshing floor on Mt. Moriah and there built an altar for sacrifices (2 Sam 24:18-25). Jewish traditions equates this place with Jerusalem. 2 Chron 3:1 says Solomon built the Temple there (cf. 1 Chron 21:15-22:1). The Davidic House takes ownership of the site of Solomon’s Temple. This may also be the Moriah where Abraham bound Isaac (with a view to sacrificing him, yet a lamb was miraculously provided in his place).

He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.’ I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth. I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness — and I will not lie to David —that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.” (NIV)

Yet David claimed: “But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one. You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust” (vv. 38-39; NIV).

6. The Covenant from Solomon to Jeremiah

In 1 Kgs 1-19, besides the ark of the covenant, the covenant made with the Hebrew ancestors is recalled as being in the ark and as a covenant of love (1 Kgs 8:21, 23), and as the agreement which Solomon broke, being the basis for his loss of rule (11:11) and the beginning of the end for united Israel. Two other times Israel’s rejection of the covenant is mentioned (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). In 2Kgs 11:12 Jehoiada the priest crowns the seven-year old (11:21) Joash as king in a coup d’état and then gives him a copy of the covenant. Then in 11:17 he (having heard from God?) makes a covenant between *Yahweh* and King Joash and the people. The people pledge to serve only *Yahweh* as God. This is a re-affirmation of a part of the Mosaic covenant. In 2 Kgs 13:23 we see *Yahweh* showing compassion on people deserving destruction due to His covenant obligations made to the Patriarchs. One conservative commentator remarks characteristically: “This record is a further indication of the inviolability of God’s word and God’s continued faithfulness to the basic covenant made with the patriarchs.”²⁸ Still the people were

²⁸ “2 Kings” by R. D. Patterson in *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker & John R. Kohlenberger III, (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1994). Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc. Version 1.1.

disloyal to their commitments made from patriarchal times not to become idolatrous and imitate the Canaanites (2 Kgs 17:15, 35, 38; 18:12).

Later Josiah (2 Kgs 23:1-3) recovered the ignored Book of the Covenant and had it read to the people. Then he renewed the covenant that had been made through the Patriarchs and Moses. The people again pledged to obey all its rules and regulations (cf. 23:21). This was done “in *Yahweh*’s presence” (v. 3) but nothing is said about God’s oath.²⁹

C. The New Covenant

Isaiah (or *Yahweh* through him) prophesied that the settlers (יִשְׁבֵי) **have ignored** (passed over, עבר) God’s laws and have **already broken** the *b^eri^yth ‘ōlām* (24:5). Some versions use present tense here but the verb forms are typically past tense suffixed conjugation (*qatal*). God declares (Isa 54:10) that even an earthquake cannot shake loose His loyal love (חֶסֶד), compassion, or “covenant of peace” (*b^eri^yth sh^elōm*). One wonders if it is the New Covenant here that is established as eternal in place of, or as a continuance of, the former agreement with the Patriarchs (which contained conditions). The anticipation of this continuance could be why the older covenant is spoken of as permanent from God’s perspective and provision yet contingent on human obedience. The issue then becomes “both-and”; i.e. the covenant in its two forms has both a conditional and unconditional aspect. In Isa 55:3 *Yahweh* calls His people to listen (meaning hear and obey) to gain life, and promises **He will make** (future tense prefixed conjugation verb, *yiqtol*) an “everlasting covenant” (*b^eri^yth ‘ōlām*) with them (cf. 61:8). This covenant has not yet been made, but is also compared to the loyal love given to David. So it would seem that this New Covenant is how the “everlasting” aspect of the Davidic Covenant is carried out. In 59:21 *Yahweh* tells Isaiah that His Spirit and speech **will now stay** with His people. The future will not be like the past.

²⁹ For parallels in Chronicles see 1 Chr 15:25–26, 28–29; 16:6, 15–17, 37; 17:1; 22:19; 28:2, 18; 2 Chr 5:2, 7, 10; 6:11, 14; 13:5; 15:12; 21:7; 23:1, 3, 11, 16; 29:10; 34:30–32. Other pertinent passages from Psalms are: 25:10; 78:10, 37; 105:8-10; 111:5, 9; 132:12.

From these quotations we could conclude that the covenant promises were *intended* to be “forever” (1000 generations) but that God’s faithful love is only for those who keep the covenant demands. The “everlasting” covenant can be broken. Still the covenant with Israel was decreed, ordained, and remembered forever. We also see a new emphasis on the ministry of God’s Spirit in relation to the covenant. This paves the way for the message of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah speaks of a coming time when people will not even give a second thought to the ark of the covenant (Jer 3:16). Israel’s God (11:3) tells Jeremiah to tell the people that anyone who transgresses any of the terms of the covenant will be “cursed” (ארר, severely punished; the same word as in Gen 12:3, what God promised to do to those who mistreat [קלל] Abram and his descendants). In 11:4-5 this covenant is defined as the stipulations commanded during the Exodus from Egypt, and summarized as the people’s responsibility to obey and *Yahweh*’s pledge to ever be their God and to give them Canaan (described as the land they currently possess in Jeremiah’s time). God then ordered Jeremiah to remind the people to obey the covenant (11:6), but He shows this will be to no avail given their history (11:7-:

- (1) From the Exodus onward they have repeatedly been told to obey (v. 7)
- (2) They chose stubbornly to disobey continually so all the promised punishments were unleashed, but to no avail (v. 8)
- (3) They conspire against Me now as in the past, choosing to serve other gods, thereby breaking the covenant made with the Patriarchs (vv. 9-10)
- (4) Therefore a new disaster will be unleashed and be inescapable and un-reversible (since I will not respond to their pleas, their false gods will not help them, and Jeremiah is forbidden to pray for them; vv. 11-15)
- (5) So the lovely, living “tree” (Israel and Judah) will be broken and burned because of idolatry (vv. 16-17).

Not even a remnant would be left alive in Jeremiah’s home town (11:23). God now hates His inheritance (12:8), which will be forsaken and abandoned (12:7). He will show no mercy to Jerusalem (13:14). Jeremiah pleads with God to remember His covenant and not break it,

but God replies that He could not be dissuaded by Moses and Samuel together (14:21-15:1). Because they are more idolatrous than their forefathers and brake more laws, God affirms He will remove them from the Land to an unknown land (16:10-13). But a time is coming when people will swear not by the God who brought the Hebrews out of Egypt but by Him who brought them from captivity in the north and restored them to Canaan (16:14-15). If they are careful to obey the Sabbath laws then Davidic kings will occupy the throne in Jerusalem forever (17:24-25). However disobedience will cause *Yahweh* to burn Jerusalem with an unquenchable fire (17:27). The Babylonian captivity of Judah is then revealed (18:1-21:10). Still Jeremiah preaches that repentance and a return to law-keeping and justice can avert disaster and ensure continued Davidic rule (22:1-5). But when destruction does come and people ask why, the answer is that they broke the covenant and served false gods (22:6-9). Some are so wicked they will never return under any circumstances (22:24-29). Those who should have been good shepherds over Israel failed miserably; but one day *Yahweh* declares He will raise up leaders whom the people do not fear and a righteous and wise king from David's family tree (23:1-5). He will make the people safe and saved and be called "*Yahweh* Our Righteousness" (23:6). This is the time when people will swear by the God who returns His nation to its promised Land (23:8; cf. 16:14-16 above).

The text of Jeremiah now turns to the time after Nebuchadnezzar has exiled Judah's leaders and professionals to Babylon (24:1). Certain notable exiles will be favored and returned to the Land, planted there not to be uprooted, and God will give them a renewed passion to know that God is *Yahweh* and to serve Him fully and faithfully (24:5-7). The captivity seems inevitable, but the text at times indicates that if idolatry had been avoided so would have such harm as exile for 70 years in Babylon (25:4-11). *Yahweh* tells the current king of Judah that if the people turn from evil the planned disaster will be stopped; otherwise Jerusalem will be an object of ridicule among the nations (26:1-6). That exile is certain is underlined by *Yahweh*'s assurance that after 70 years in Babylon "I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10; NIV) . . . "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity

and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess” (30:3; NIV). And there will be a time when “no longer will foreigners enslave them. Instead, they will serve the LORD their God and David their king” (30:8b; NIV) . . . “I will punish all who oppress them. Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will come close to me” (30:20b-21; NIV). New things are happening (Jer 31:22).³⁰ God declares He will “make a new covenant” (31:31), unlike the former covenant with the Patriarchs, since it could be broken (31:32). The new covenant will be one whereby God will place His law in people’s hearts and minds so that they will be faithful followers (31:33). This speaks of the people’s passion and perception regarding the laws of God. Evangelism will be unnecessary because all will already know God and be forgiven of their sins (31:34). The expression “everlasting” is now applied to this new covenant situation (32:40). Perhaps this had always been anticipated by earlier references as something that was said of the former covenant (and its variations) only because God knew it would come into effect once the old covenant was broken and then replaced with the new.

We now encounter in the text a Jerusalem of health and healing, peace and security, cleansed of sin, full of praise and prosperity (33:6-9). This “Israel” is unknown in history in a physical or material sense. Perhaps it is coming in the near or distant future. The modern State of Israel does not fit such descriptions and does not seem headed in this direction. But historical forces can shift suddenly and bring great changes in a few decades. Alternatively such language could be seen as a shift to metaphor. All these changes do fit a spiritual revolution. They could be viewed as describing the arrival of the Messiah and founding of his spiritual congregation composed of Jews and Gentiles, wherein “all born of Israel are not Israel” (Rom 9:6). This goes a long way in helping us understand how Paul could say “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26a, the in vv. 26b-27 paraphrasing Isa 59:20-21, that a deliverer will come from Zion and remove the sins of

³⁰ Although exactly what this verse is about is unclear and debated (the Church Fathers related it to the virgin birth), the statement about God doing something new is a “sign of these times.”

Jacob according to God's covenant).³¹ Paul can speak of the "mystery" of the Gentiles being heirs with Israel through the good news about Jesus the Messiah (Eph 3:6). Another "mystery" explained is that Israel was hardened until the Gentiles came in, and thus all "Israel" is saved (Rom 11:25-26; all can be saved if we understand "Israel" to be all who repent). The coming of the righteous king in David's line (the "righteous *Yahweh*") is what leads to "Judah" being saved and safe, in accordance with God's promise that "David will always have someone on his throne and the Levites will always have someone sacrificing before God" (Jer 33:14-18). Their descendants will be measureless and the covenant with David and the Levites can be broken only if the operation of day and night God has established can be stopped (33:19-26). This all has to work out historically, either physically or spiritually or perhaps both are involved, not either or. In 34:12-22 *Yahweh* explains to Jeremiah that He made a covenant with the Patriarchs that involved rules about freeing Hebrew slaves. The ancestors disobeyed, however. Recently the Hebrews repented of this and made a covenant again with God in the Temple. But now they have disobeyed again. Therefore the consequence is death and destruction of Judah going into exile. Sin can sever or suspend the covenant. The predicted exile to Babylon and execution of many occurs, and the remnant that fled to Egypt is exterminated (Jer 35-45). Israel will not be completely destroyed as other nations, but will be justly disciplined with deportation and scattering, then rescued and returned to their former Land in peace (46:27-28).³² The final mention of a covenant between Israel and God comes in 50:5. Babylon's downfall is proclaimed/predicted (50:1-3), followed by great sadness and prayer among the Hebrews (50:4).

³¹ In Isaiah the statement is that a redeemer will come to the repentant house of Jacob in Zion. *Yahweh* declares His covenant with them being that His Spirit (the one on these who have repented of sin) and His words/promises given to them will not depart from them (Jacob/Israel) or their descendants forever.

³² Such language obviously involves figures of speech like hyperbole, so a figurative or symbolic interpretation at this point is at least an option. These nations were conquered but not literally "completely destroyed." Israel returned under the Edict of Cyrus literally and historically but did not find peace and security in any ongoing or absolute sense. So when the text prophesies "peace and security" is it looking to a time of literal nationhood or spiritual "kingdom"?

They will seek to go to Zion and ask directions; and then will bind themselves to Yahweh in an “everlasting covenant” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) that will never be forgotten (50:5). God will raise up armies in other nations (Medes and Persians) to defeat Babylon, which will fall to rise no more (Jer 51). So ends Jeremiah’s words.

Ezekiel sometimes refers back to the Patriarchal covenant that was broken,³³ but is likely speaking of this new covenant when he says God will establish an “everlasting covenant” by remembering the (older) covenant He had made with youthful Israel (Ezek 16:60b, cf. 16:60a).³⁴ In 34:22-24 Ezekiel foresees a time when a Davidic shepherd and prince will tend Israel (no longer plundered) with *Yahweh* as God. At that time a “covenant of peace” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) will be made and a period of miraculous blessings and perfect peace will govern life in the Land (no wild animals or agricultural problems, etc.; 34:25-28). After exile and partial return the narrative seems to shift to covenant conditions that either are ahead in a surreal world or enter into the history we know already in spiritual terms. But this means that both the material and metaphorical realities of covenant promises are true; the former earlier and the latter later. Neither literal nor figurative language only covers all covenantal history. This “peace covenant” is also called an “everlasting covenant” in 37:26. Having re-gathered Israel to their own Land (37:21), *Yahweh* will unify them in the mountains of that land, with one king, cleansed of sin, never to be divided again or become idolatrous (37:22-23). In 37:24-25 “David” (clearly not meant literally) will be this king and shepherd and servant prince; and God’s people will be perfectly obedient, living in the Land promised to Jacob forever. With them God will make this everlasting peace covenant, and cause them to increase, and establish His “sanctuary” (מִקְדָּשׁ) among them “forever” (עוֹלָם; 37:26). The foundation of all the covenants is secure: they are faithful worshipers and *Yahweh* is their faithful God (37:37), as

³³ Ezek 16:8, 59-60a; 17:18-19; 20:37; 30:5; 44:7.

³⁴ Ezek 16:61-62 reads (N IV), “Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you. So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD.”

promised from the earliest mention of an everlasting covenant (before Jeremiah). The nations will know that *Yahweh* makes “Israel” holy (separate/distinct; 37:28).

Hosea also, besides recognizing the past treaty treasons of Israel,³⁵ describes a future covenant (ברית) made when Israel no longer loves idols (2:17). While Hosea does not use modifiers like everlasting or peace, he goes on to describe this covenant as one made with the animals, which will lead to a time of safety, since war and weapons will be abolished (2:18). God betroths Himself to Israel forever (2:19). Hosea 6:7 compares Israel’s covenant breaking (treachery, בוגד) to Adam, who was banished forever from the Land of Paradise. In 8:1 the Promised Land’s inevitable loss is trumpeted.

Zechariah predicts a time when a king will rescue Jerusalem from war and establish world peace (9:9-10). In 9:11 God declares that in view of the “blood of my covenant with you” (בְּדַם־בְּרִיתִיךָ; possibly the Mosaic Covenant, Ex 24:3-8) He will “send [rescue?] your prisoners from the pit that has no water” (perhaps as Jeremiah was imprisoned and released, Jer 38:10).³⁶ The second chapter of Malachi (2:4-5, 8) refers to the “covenant with Levi” (בְּרִיתִי אֶחָלָוִי). The blessings of the covenant continued only for those who were faithful to their calling as priests (2:1-9). Any Israelite who “profanes” (חָלַל) the covenant laws related to foreign and idolatrous intermarriage will be cut off (2:10-12). Last but not least God will send a “messenger of the covenant” (*mala'k habb^erith*) to the temple to prepare for *Yahweh*’s coming (Mal 3:1). This is likely the covenant with Levi because in 3:3 the result is that all the Levites will be purified.

Conclusion

The foregoing has looked at the major OT covenant promises or stipulations and their parameters and read them at face value in light of how they were or were not contingent on human obedience or faithfulness in order for God to remain faithful to His “promises.”

³⁵ Hos 6:7; 81. In 6:7 he compares the transgressions of the law codes to Adam’s sin. Adam and Israel were both guilty of being unfaithful to God’s commands (cf. how “covenant” is used at times of the Mosaic legislation, kept in the ark of the covenant).

³⁶ Cf. Matt 26:28, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (NIV).

These agreements or contracts were taken a historical events or perceived realities between God and His chosen people (regardless of how such communications actually occurred).

Clearly righteousness was not how Israel **earned** the Land. But righteousness allows them to **keep** the Land. Unrighteousness would **lose** the Land. But renewed righteousness would **regain** it. Apparently keeping the Land at this point in history, being acceptable to God and making righteous sacrifices, will require purification as if by fire by a longed-for Lord, an angel/messenger sent by *Yahweh* to the temple to prepare the way for this Almighty God (Mal 3:1-4). In this way God's promise of an everlasting possession of Land is ultimately dependent on His faithfulness. Getting the Land initially happened in spite of Israel's unrighteousness. Re-gaining the Land depended on repentance, but the spiritual renewal that would keep Israel in this new Canaan perpetually is dependant on a new kind of righteousness created by the refining and purification work of God's messenger/angel of the covenant. The time of obtaining and losing the Land is wholly a physical matter related to Canaan proper as a land possession. Staying in the Land was dependent on human faithfulness, as was apparently the historic return from captivity in "Babylon." The time of return to the Land and especially keeping it this second time takes on a more spiritual quality. Staying in the Land in this second and apparently final and forever stage is dependent on God's faithfulness regardless of human unfaithfulness (as was the beginning of the entire process when Israel first entered Canaan; suggesting a chiasm in history?). This new Jerusalem in Mal 3:4 of pure sacrifices is suggestive of an imputed and inward righteousness. So perhaps after Israel's exile the story becomes progressively more symbolic or engaged with figurative or spiritual language. Physical Israel returns under the edict of Cyrus as promised, but something greater is at work behind the scenes. Physical Israel is not the game plan at this point but Paul's spiritual "Israel" (Rom 9:6). The (Re-)New(ed) Covenant of Jeremiah is in effect (Jer 31:31-34):

"The **time is coming**," declares the LORD, "when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will **not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers** 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 house 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 a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘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.**” (NIV; emphasis added)

The author of Hebrews (8:8b-12) in NT times cited the same passage with this preface (8:7-8a): “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said.” And consider Paul’s claim that “Therefore ‘all Israel’ [all those who are purified by God’s messenger, or the Lord preceded by the messenger, John] will be saved” (NIV; Rom 11:26 // Isa 59:20-21).³⁷ A chiasm in history may be proposed:

- [A] Unconditional and Unilateral [Abrahamic Covenant]
*physical promises with spiritual implications
- A Enter Canaan based on **God’s faithfulness alone**
- [B] Conditional and Bilateral [Mosaic and Davidic Covenants]
*physical promises with physical implications
- B Exist in Canaan based on *human faithfulness alone*
- C Exit Canaan based on *human unfaithfulness alone*
- B’ Exit from “Babylon” based on *human faithfulness alone*
- [A’] Unconditional and Unilateral [New Covenant]
- A’ Enter and exist in “New Canaan” based on **God’s faithfulness alone**
*spiritual promises with physical implications

Is *Yahweh’s* covenant faithfulness ultimately contingent upon human obedience? The answer has to be yes and no. It depends on what aspect of the covenant conditions and promises are in view historically and theologically. As to the ultimate aspect, the answer is no. God’s old covenant promise to give Israel the Land and His ultimate and new covenant promise to restore and renew or purify and

³⁷ Where Paul paraphrases Isa 59:20-21: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. 27 And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins” (Rom 11:26b-27; NIV). Isa 59:20-21 reads: “‘The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,’ declares the LORD. ‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,’ says the LORD.” (NIV)

forgive all “Israel [Jew and Gentile believer]” in the “Land” are not contingent on human obedience but only God’s faithfulness and promises apart from human works. Between these, physical Israel’s quality and quantity of time in Canaan was dependent on human obedience as well as its return to Palestine (i.e., the end of its idolatry in exile).



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti