

TWO GREAT THEMES IN THE BIBLE

The Bible has many themes which give it structure. Understanding those themes helps us to read the Bible in the context of the overall purposes of God, revealed through them. Here we briefly trace the two major themes... COVENANT (testament) and KINGDOM

Covenants: Creation



The word covenant is not used too frequently these days. We are more likely to use expressions like, promise or agreement. We may think of examples like contracts and warranties, but these hardly come close to the richness of the solemn and binding agreements that God enters into with his people. Although it is too frequently devalued these days, the Christian marriage ceremony perhaps comes closest to describing the biblical concept of God's covenants.

Covenants of the Old Testament were also part of the cultural background. There were PARITY agreements or treaties made between equals, ROYAL GRANTS usually of land made to a subject, and SUZERAINTY TREATIES drawn up by a conquering king for the vassal nation. This last treaty spelled out the benefits of serving the suzerain, and the dire consequences of not doing so. God's dealings with Israel tended to take the form of a suzerainty treaty, but God also entered into Royal Grant covenants which had no particular conditions attached.

Covenant often arose from failure and death and marked a new beginning, often with physical signs as reminders.

The concept of Covenant is evident in the Creation stories. God the benevolent ruler gives the fruits of the earth and places certain restrictions along with the consequences of disobedience. *Genesis 1-2*

Noah



The promises to Adam and Eve, are repeated to Noah, with the sign of the Covenant—the rainbow. (Gen 9:1-7)

Abraham



Following the breaking of the Covenant (The Fall) the consequences play out in Genesis 3-11. In Genesis 12:1-3 God enters into a Covenant with Abraham and then with Isaac and Jacob. The Promises entail many descendants, blessings, The Land and the assurance that through Abraham and his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Genesis 15 recounts the custom of “cutting a Covenant” which God gives as a sign to assure Abraham of the promise of Land. The condition for the Covenant was Abraham's faith and obedience.

Moses



The deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt is the basis of God's claim over the fledgling nation, embarking on a wilderness journey to the Land promised to Abraham and his descendants. God's Promise was: You will be my special people and I will be your God. God's Conditions: Love the Lord your God with all your heart... have no other gods — The Commandments. The signs of this Covenant were many: The stone tablets, the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant and so on.

David



God's promise to David: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” *2 Samuel 7:16*

Jeremiah



The continual breaking of the Covenant conditions by Israel, and the decline of the nation in division and then into Exile brought a revival of God's Covenant relationship, through the prophets: “The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will write it in their heart... for I will forgive...” *Jeremiah 31:31-34*

Jesus



Paul records in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 that Jesus, as he took the cup at the Last Supper, said, “This cup is the **new covenant** in my blood... as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”

Jesus, of the line of Abraham and David, who fulfilled the law given to Moses and was perfectly obedient to God, ushered in the age of the Spirit through his obedience, death and resurrection. Forgiveness and reconciliation into God's family, for all nations was now possible through God's grace.

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The Kingdom of God

The Bible asserts that the superpowers of the world are puny alongside the power of God's Kingdom, and that we only hold our own destiny in our hands in so far as we have a choice - to respond to God's overtures to us, or to reject them. Whatever we choose, past, present and future are in God's hands, and it is that Kingdom which will prevail.

We often think of God's Kingdom as another name for Heaven. Of course Heaven is a major part of God's Kingdom, but the Kingdom is not just some geographical place. Rather it is anywhere that God rules, and it especially applies when *people* submit to God. We see God's Kingdom most clearly when God's authority and power are in evidence, and when people willingly submit as God's subjects.

Graham Goldsworthy in his book *Gospel and Kingdom* helpfully describes the Kingdom of God as,

**“God's people,
in God's place,
under God's rule,”**

but we might also add...

“under God's provision” since this King cares for his subjects.

Although the terms, Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven are used frequently in the New Testament, it is *the principle* which is evident in the Old Testament.

Creation



The Covenant of Creation reveals God who is Creator and also in charge. It is God who provides both the bounty and the boundaries. The Kingdom here is characterised by God's People (Adam and Eve) living in God's place (Eden) under God's rules and provision.

Noah



Noah is obedient to God and builds an ark. God's people number eight. Preserved in God's place to begin again under a restated covenant

Abraham



The obedience of Abraham leads him to God's place (The Promised Land) to eventually become a people under God's Kingship.

Nothing would jeopardise this Kingdom plan. Later in Genesis, Joseph's brothers found themselves serving God's purposes (Genesis 50:19-20) even as they tried to do away with Joseph.

Moses



It is through Moses' leadership that God formed a special people to be examples of a good Kingdom, living in God's Land and with every aspect of life ordered by God, to remind them of their status in the world and their relationship with their deliverer and King. (Exodus 19:5-8)

Joshua



After settling the Land Joshua calls the people to decide whom they will serve (Joshua 24:14-15). Their promise is to serve God. God's people living in God's Land, under God's rule and protection.

Judges



The period of the Judges is a cyclic record of the tribes of Israel stepping out from under God's rule, serving idols, and suffering the consequences of invasion and loss. As they call out to God a deliverer is raised up by God and peace is reestablished.

Kings



The request by Israel to have kings like the other nations to deliver them from external threats, is seen by the priest, Samuel as a failure to trust in God's Kingship. God's concession is that if the King will submit to him then all will continue to be well.

The Golden Age under King David and the early reign of Solomon bear witness to that promise. Here we see God's Kingdom on earth. But as Solomon turned to idols and the nation split North (Israel) and South (Judah) so most of the following kings went from bad to worse.

The prophets attempted to bring the people back to the Covenant promises, but to no avail. The end was Exile. The symbols of God's kingship over Israel destroyed—The Temple and Jerusalem. The Land was lost.

Books such as Daniel and Esther, set in the Exile, affirm that God is King even over the conquering nations. God's everlasting Kingdom would outlast the super-powers of the day. The Return to the Land was tangible evidence that God was at work.

Jesus



When God's time was right, Jesus came on to the scene as the perfectly obedient Son of the King. Jesus was God's person, in God's place, under God's rule, blessed of God. He was the servant King

Now, those who are his followers are also God's people, serving where God has placed them, seeking to be obedient to God, and “blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”. (Ephesians 1:3-10)

And it is in heaven where the Kingdom will one day be experienced by God's people in Christ, in all its fullness and glory.