



## **Biblical Covenants: “Think Globally, Act Locally”**

By Richard J. Bautch

If you are teaching introductory biblical studies at a high school, college or university, a class or two on the topic of covenant would be challenging but, in fact, quite important to offer. Covenant is challenging because it is one biblical concept that students who have not read the Bible extensively might recognize and think that they understand. For example, they might report that Hosea had a covenant with his wife, or that Jesus has given Christians the new covenant. The covenants associated with Hosea (Hos 2:18-23) and with Jesus (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25), however, could serve — and have been used — to support **misogyny** and **supercessionism**, respectively, and so each requires careful interpretation and presentation. Before exploring with your students what biblical covenants are and do, you may need to define the term “covenant” and point the students toward a more nuanced understanding of covenant texts in the Bible.

Covenant may be defined as an articulation of the relationship understood to exist between God and the people of Israel. To be sure, in a cursory reading of the Bible one finds many covenants, some of which are rarely cited, such as the covenants of salt (Lev 2:13; Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:5) and of death (Isa 28:15, 18). Conversely, the biblical text indicates that there are other, more prominent covenants that extended over several generations with special significance. Their significance lay in the fact that these covenants were thought to reflect the ongoing relationship between God and Israel.

The first example is the covenant with Noah, to whom God pledges that the earth will not again be destroyed. Joined to this pledge are the divine promises of multitudinous progeny (Gen 9:1, 9) and a habitat in which they may live (Gen 9:11). Reading on in the Bible, one finds prominent covenants made with Abraham (Gen 15:5, 7, 16–21) and with Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exod 19:5, 24:7–8). In all three instances, covenant represents an understanding of the trans-historical relationship between God and the people of Israel.

The covenant that God made with Moses at Mt. Sinai is in the background of Hosea’s covenant. In the prelude to the action, Hosea’s wife is chastised in graphic terms for being unfaithful. Then the tone changes. In covenantal language Hosea describes his reunion with his wife and thus provides an analogy to the covenant that God has made with once wayward Israel. About this passage, scholars have asked, if the issue is the misdeeds of an entire people, why dramatize this fact in terms of one gender, female, and in terms of one behavior, sexual? To explore the text through these questions can be instructive, though it is not the lesson your student expected when he or she brought up Hosea in class. Moreover, there are other significant and often overlooked aspects of Hosea’s covenant to reflect on with students, such as the ecological expression of God’s love for creation. Hos 2:18 suggests that God is in relationship with all creatures: “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety.” This verse, an echo of the covenant with Noah, could open up a discussion that encompasses questions of sustainability, global learning, and peace studies.

In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed at table with his followers and sharing a cup “of the blood poured out for you.” Jesus calls this cup “the new covenant.” An interpretation that students may propose is that the new covenant is Christian life, and that the traditions of Israel or the Judaism out of which Christianity emerges is the *de facto* old covenant. Such an understanding breaks down, however, in light of the fact that the expression “new covenant” is also found in the **Hebrew Bible/Old Testament** book of Jeremiah (Jer 31:31) and in Jewish texts from the time of Jesus found at Qumran. Moreover, the expression “covenant of blood” is also found in the Old Testament (Zech 9:11) and so is not uniquely Christian. The lesson is that Jesus’ “new covenant” is not a useful means of differentiating Christianity from Judaism. To the contrary, Jesus uses an expression that associates him further with his context, Second Temple Judaism. The point to emphasize, rather, is that in Jesus’ day the “new covenant” was a venerable concept – going back to Jeremiah – that allowed the New Testament writers to describe God’s favor as something fresh and given ever anew. These writers tell how God established a relationship with the followers of Jesus in traditionally covenantal terms.

Up to this point, the teacher and student have learned about covenant by identifying different forms and types of covenant and resituating the text in a critical framework. The reward of this work, pedagogically, is that it provides us with trenchant questions to spur our thinking rather than easy answers that end discussion. Moreover, covenant can and should be studied for positive results that will further the students’ learning and their larger understanding of the Bible and the world. To make this point I introduce the covenant of Josiah, who was king in Jerusalem and over the realm of Judah late in the 7th the century **B.C.E.**

Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. The king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant. (2 Kgs 23:1-3, **NRSV**)

The “book of the covenant,” also known as the “book of the law,” is thought by many scholars to be an early form of the book of Deuteronomy. In effect, King Josiah and his people are pledging faithfulness to the laws in Deuteronomy, a text that reflects the concept of covenant in many different ways. They are affirming the relationship that God established with their ancestors on Mt. Sinai. But what *all* is going on in Josiah’s covenant? Of this text, the eminent biblical scholar Delbert Hillers suggested that Josiah’s covenant is more a matter of human resolution than an offer of God. That is, Josiah’s is a covenant between a king and his people reflecting largely human concerns, in Hillers’ view. Indeed, if one reads on in 2 Kings 23, the point of this covenant could appear to be the people worshipping exclusively in Jerusalem, a practice that would benefit Josiah considerably. In this sense Josiah’s covenant is different from the earlier covenant of Hosea, which describes mutual fidelity between God and God’s people in more generic terms. In contrast, Josiah’s covenant has been localized and made transparent with regard to politics. Beginning around the time of Josiah and extending to and beyond the covenants associated with Ezra (Ezra 9) and Nehemiah (Neh. 9–10) in the 5th century B.C.E., covenants display more of an emphasis on particular laws or

political issues, such as worshipping in Jerusalem and nowhere else. Has this emphasis eclipsed God's role in the covenant?

I would state the matter differently: the covenants of Josiah and, subsequently, Ezra and Nehemiah should be recognized and studied as hybrids. These covenants highlight a particular religious act or activity in order to meet the needs of the community while simultaneously invoking a universal sense of **Yahwistic** faith. To illustrate this point, consider Nehemiah 10, which describes covenant as a unilateral agreement that a group based in Jerusalem has sworn to uphold. Their agreement mandates the performance of certain commands or *mitzvot* (Neh 10:30, 33), which pertain to intermarriage or the Sabbath. The group even used covenant to establish who would bring wood to the Temple for sacrifices on a given day. The concern about particular *mitzvot* suggests that the group has been energized around a few select issues, and its covenant acts as a charge or mandate.

The same group, however, also understands itself more globally and projects its covenant broadly. How? As Neh 10:30 makes clear, the members of this group bind themselves together by a covenant in order to follow *all the laws of Moses*. At this time the covenant associated with Moses on Mt. Sinai was hardly passé and remained a font of ethics and law. The covenant makers in Nehemiah 10 speak of themselves as the heirs of Sinai's legacy, and as the voice of a future Israel, the *vox populi*. The group or coalition of groups assumes the voice of Israel and purports to speak for the collective and its best interests, with regard to the intermarriage, Sabbath observance, and implicitly a host of related issues that inform the common identity. Paradoxically, a single group presents itself as the vanguard of national values. In this sense the groups in Nehemiah 10 would, as the bumper sticker reads, think globally and act locally.

The covenant in Nehemiah 10 is not an isolated incident. Josiah's covenant is a precedent, and texts found at Qumran by the Dead Sea also articulate covenant in terms of local and global imperatives. A Qumran text known as the Damascus Document, for example, displays an overlay of two covenants upon one another. The first, one scholar has noted, is the covenant at Sinai, which the people of Israel swore to uphold. The second is the covenant of the community particular to Qumran, which causes the people there to engage in proper Torah practices.

This complex expression of biblical covenant as both local and global is established in the text but absent from our textbooks and classrooms discussions. I hope that this changes. As educators, we have the opportunity to build with our students a biblical framework that is contextualized, especially with regard to core concepts such as covenant. Put another way, it's worth knowing that when the Judeans of Nehemiah's day spoke about covenant, they could be indicating something as practical as who would bring wood to the Temple next week, among other things. The people's relationship with God was not esoteric, and it could touch on politics. When covenant took up real-life concerns as well as religious ideals, it suggested a harmony between the two. As the biblical writers understood covenant to blend matters mundane and transcendent, so might students today take that view toward transforming how they learn and think about ancient Israel and its God.

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## Glossary

**Misogyny:** A form of sexism, misogyny is the hatred or contempt of women.

**Supercessionism:** The belief that God has transferred Israel's election to Christianity, and that Christianity has thus replaced or superseded Judaism.

**Hebrew Bible/Old Testament:** The Hebrew Bible is the Jewish canon of scripture; the Old Testament is a Christian term for the religious writings of ancient Israel that Christians consider to be scripture. The two are similar in content but not identical.

**B.C.E.** Before the common era.

**NRSV:** New Revised Standard Version

**Yahwhism** The worship of the God of Israel as it took a more or less monotheistic form at various times.

**Mitzvot:** Commandments of the Jewish law.

## Bibliography

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