



## **Abrahamic Covenant**

What is a covenant? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “covenant” is *berit*. The term probably derives from the verb *bara*, “to bind.” The noun *berit* originally denoted a binding relationship between two parties in which each pledged to perform some service for the other.

The technical language used when covenants were made was “to cut a covenant” (*karat berit*). This terminology referred to ritual sacrifices that accompanied covenant making. Often animals sacrificed would be cut in two. In some covenant rituals, part of the animal would be eaten by the covenanting parties and part burned in honor of their god. Sometimes the parties would walk symbolically between the pieces of the animal. In any case, the shedding of blood in such rituals signified the solemnity of the covenant, each party vowing not to break the covenant on pain of death.

The making of covenants often included signs as well. A sign served as a memorial, reminding the parties of their promises. We’ll see later in Genesis that Abraham gives Abimelech seven ewe lambs “as a witness” to their covenant (Gen. 21:30); the sign of God’s covenant with Noah was the rainbow (Gen. 9:12-15); and baptism is the sign of the new covenant with us (Col. 2:9-12; Rom. 6:3-4).

The Bible is full of human-to-human covenants. One particular covenant is of special interest to many of us and that is the marriage covenant. Malachi 2:14 clearly indicates that marriage was understood as a covenant.

Most significant in Scripture, however, are several covenants God makes with man. These divine covenants provide a unifying principle for understanding the whole of Scripture and define the relationship between God and man. The heart of that relationship is found in the phrase, “I will be their God and they shall be My people.” (Gen. 17:7-8; Exod. 6:6-7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 4:20; Jer. 11:4; Ezek. 11:20).

The Abrahamic Covenant comes when God calls Abraham out of Ur to go to Canaan, promising to make him a great nation which in turn would bless all nations (Gen. 12:1-3). God promised the aging Abraham that he would have a son and heir from his own body and that he would inherit the land of Canaan. Abraham believed God, which resulted in God declaring him righteous (v.6). Yet Abraham desired confirmation, a sign, asking, “How shall I know that I will inherit it?” In response God had Abraham cut several animals in two in accordance with the custom for *karat berit* (cutting a covenant). However, unlike the custom, God alone passed between the animal pieces, signifying that His promise was unconditional and certified by His own vow to suffer violent death if He failed to keep His promise to Abraham. God repeats His oath in Gen. 22:18, adding further that it would be through Abraham’s seed that all nations would someday be blessed.

Paul applies the singular noun “seed” as a reference to Christ (Gal. 3:16). It is through Christ, Abraham’s prophesied descendent, that the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant would come to every nation. Paul understands that the blessing the nations receive is, like Abraham, to be justified by faith alone rather than works, and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:8-14).

The covenant concept is a central, unifying theme of Scripture, establishing and defining God's relationship to man in all ages.

*Ref: Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary; The IVP Bible Background Commentary*