



FEED MY SHEEP

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The Covenants of the Bible *Part 1—Introduction and Survey*

With this issue, we are commencing what will be an in-depth study of the covenants of the Bible. The importance of understanding covenants cannot be overstated. Any Christian who wishes to understand even the rudimentary doctrines of the Bible must be cognizant of the various covenants and their overarching importance. Let us begin with these two verses from the Pentateuch.

Deuteronomy 4:31 (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he swore unto them.

Deuteronomy 7:9 Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

It will take several issues to introduce and provide an overall survey of the covenants. Necessarily, we shall provide important definitions. Later, we will get into a plethora of details of the various covenants.

I stressed above the importance of the covenants. It will be beneficial then at the outset to explain *why* we should study them; i.e., why they are so important. As Christians, we believe that the entire Bible is God's Word and it is His revelatory message to His creatures; indeed, to all of humanity, as we will demonstrate in due time in this study. At the same time, we recognize that His Word is mediated through His chosen people, Israel. In other words, God's purposes for all creation and His message to all creation is given and administered through one man's family, the family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob-Israel and his descendants. See flier

for the book, *One Man's Destiny*, enclosed with this mailing.

Many of my readers have come to understand that they themselves are descendants of that family via the so-called "lost tribes of Israel," (not to be confused with the people today called "Jews"). We are the offspring of Jacob-Israel, and as such, we have a special responsibility before our Creator God. That is because we are God's covenant people. God made many of His covenants with our forefathers specifying those responsibilities. That fact alone should pique the interest of these readers—these descendants of Jacob-Israel.

Other of my readers are not of that Israelite ancestry. Let me make this clear from the outset. No one's eternal salvation depends on physical lineage. Salvation is by grace, not by race. A person of physical Israelite ancestry who rejects Jesus Christ is just as lost as anyone else—of whatever ancestry—who likewise refuses Christ. Furthermore, non-Israelites (often called "strangers" in the Bible) have always been permitted to "take hold" of God's covenant with Israel. (See Isaiah 56.) So, to those readers, (and I am thinking of a number of them by name as I write) I love you dearly and am overjoyed that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. That we of Israel are God's covenant people is reinforced by the apostle Paul when he identifies himself with his kinsmen as he states in ...

Romans 9:4 Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises;

Paul states that the covenants pertain to Israel, and therefore, since we are Israelites, we ought to know as

much as we can about these covenants which pertain to us. This is not to say that all the covenants in the Bible involve ONLY Israel. That is not the case, and we will demonstrate that also in due course.

This Bible is God's Word and every single word of it is truth and is of utmost importance. We cannot say that the book of Genesis, for example, is more important than the gospel of Luke, or vice versa. All the books are important and each book is a necessary part of the whole of God's revelation to us.

But in trying to *understand* God's revelation to us, in trying to make sense of these 66 books, we can state without fear of contradiction, that understanding the covenants of the Bible is a *sine qua non*. That is a Latin phrase which literally means "without which not." In this case, it means *without* understanding the covenants, we are *not* going to understand the Bible. Having a working knowledge of the covenants is absolutely essential to perceiving the Plan of God and His purpose for man on the earth.

They are essential because throughout history, whenever God gave a major revelation of part of His plan, it seems nearly always to be centered around, or take the form of a covenant. In that sense, we can say that the covenants of God provide the skeleton or the structural framework upon which all the rest of His revelation is hung.

I am not meaning to imply that the covenants are the only *sine qua non* of the Bible. For instance, one that is near and dear to all of us is the correct identification of the major players in the Bible story. It is obvious to any rational person that if one is misidentifying the Israelite people in the world today, then that person's understanding of Bible prophecy is going to be totally skewed, totally mistaken.

As it turns out, those two *sine qua non's* are so intertwined as to make them almost inseparable. Because we cannot study and understand the covenants of the Bible and how they have been fulfilled in history if we cannot correctly identify the people among whom the covenants have been fulfilled.

To sum up the answer to the question then, concerning why should we study the covenants of the Bible, let me put it this way: If I were to give you that question right now on a little pop quiz, you might answer something along these lines: We should study the covenants because without understanding them, we don't have a clue as to what the Bible is really all about. I would go on to remark that oh, yes, we can select the fact that the Bible is about personal salvation—and that is true. But someone did a study many

decades ago and discovered that when you take all the text of the Bible, approximately 29% of it has to do with personal salvation, while 71% of it has to do with *national* salvation.

Therefore, to insist that the story of the Bible is about you and me getting saved, is to miss over 2/3 of what the Bible is really all about. And that is where our study of the covenants comes in. It follows also that any study of the covenants of the Bible which misidentifies the Israel people is necessarily going to come to greatly erroneous conclusions.

Have I impressed upon you enough about the importance of learning about the covenants of the Bible? Incidentally, by conventional usage, the Bible has been divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. Most of us realize that it is synonymous with saying "the Old Covenant" and the New Covenant. That fact by itself ought to provide even more motivation for us to seek enlightenment about the covenants. I will have more to say sometime later on about those terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament."

The sad fact is, however, that most churches teach, and therefore most Christians possess, only the most rudimentary understanding of the covenants of Scripture. Moreover, when they totally misidentify one of the major players, one of the major people groups in the Bible, and who their descendants are in the world today, the result is that their understanding of the covenants goes very seriously astray.

After our introductory material, we will begin with a necessarily "milky" overview of the covenants. Then we shall proceed to mine deeper and deeper within the mineshaft labeled "covenants." By the end of this study, we will possess a very substantial—though never complete understanding, because God's Word is inexhaustible—but we will have an understanding of the covenants which I daresay will far surpass that which you will ever find in at least 95% of the churches in Christendom. I make that statement with no bragging or arrogance intended because it's all there in the Word. I am no one special, but I have been given the privilege of leading us on this journey to discover the wonderful truths hidden in that mineshaft called the covenants of the Bible.

With that, let us turn to Genesis 21 where we will see an example of a covenant between men. Our primary focus in this series will be upon the covenants of God, but just to introduce the subject and to illustrate a covenant between men, we turn to the time when Isaac was born. Verses 9 through 21 of chapter 21

deal with the casting out of the bondwoman and her son; i.e., Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, are sent away from Sarah, Isaac and Abraham. By the way, the Bible states only that Ishmael was mocking Isaac, and then it says that Sarah demanded that Abraham send them away.

The average Bible reader might get the impression that little Isaac was a whiner and a cry-baby and that his mother, Sarah, had to protect him from his big step-brother Ishmael's incessant teasing and mocking—bullying, to use a word much in the headlines today. But that was really not the case. The book of Jasher adds a number of very interesting details. It explains, for example, that as Ishmael grew up, he learned to handle the bow very skillfully. Then one day when Isaac was five years old and Ishmael was 19, Ishmael comes up to Isaac, loads an arrow into his bow and is drawing it back intending to kill Isaac.

Sarah had heard the taunting and the mocking, and maybe she heard little Isaac shout something like: "Ishmael, quit pointing that arrow at me." And so just then Sarah happens to come on the scene and witnessed an attempted murder. And *that* is what caused Sarah to demand that Hagar and Ishmael be sent packing. It wasn't just a simple matter of not wanting Isaac to be bullied by Ishmael. It was a serious attempt on his life. So hurrah for mother Sarah—otherwise, you and I wouldn't be here talking about it. Now let us begin in verse 22, which according to the book of Jasher is some 26 years later.

Genesis 21:22 And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God is with thee in all that thou doest:

23 Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: *but* according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.

24 And Abraham said, I will swear.

Let's pause here to notice that Abraham readily agrees to Abimelech's request. We can surmise that he agreed so readily because all Abimelech was asking Abraham to do was to treat them fairly and kindly...which is all that Abraham had really wanted in the first place. You see, this is that same Abimelech who years earlier had thought that Sarah was Abraham's sister—not his wife. And if you recall the story from chapter 20, the fear of God came upon Abimelech in a dream during the night and so the next morning he gave Sarah back to Abraham along with flocks and

herds and menservants and maidservants and a thousand pieces of silver.

According to the Jasher account, the reason Abimelech had sallied forth to visit Abraham at this time was because he had just been informed that his soldiers had tangled with Abraham's men concerning a water well, and Abimelech still retained the fear of Abraham's God. He didn't want to get on Abraham's bad side, as it were.

25 And Abraham reproveth Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away.

26 And Abimelech said, I wot not who hath done this thing: neither didst thou tell me, neither yet heard I of it, but to day.

I want us to understand that this idea of digging a well was no small thing. In those days, they had no power equipment, no drilling rigs, no backhoes and front end loaders with which to excavate tons of dirt. They dug wells by hand. Picture it: These wells were at least room-sized holes, and often much bigger than that, depending upon how deep they had to dig before they struck potable water. Into the side of one wall of this excavation they would carve out or build a staircase, so that the women could get down there and fill the water jars and climb back up the stairs with them.

So after your crew has been doing the backbreaking labor for perhaps days excavating a well, and then some gang of armed men comes along and confiscates the well by force and violence—well, that was a very serious offense. A lot of sweat and man-hours had gone into digging that well. We can assume that Abimelech assures Abraham that he meant no harm by what his soldiers had done. With that reassurance...

27 And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant.

28 And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.

29 And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What mean these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves?

30 And he said, For these seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I have digged this well.

In other words, Abraham is swearing an oath that he (that is, his men) had indeed dug the well. They weren't just wandering in the pasture and happened to find the well already dug by someone else.

31 Wherefore he called that place Beersheba; because there they swore both of them.

32 Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines.

33 And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God.

34 And Abraham sojourned in the Philistines' land many days.

We can see from this incident that two of the meanings for the word covenant would be “treaty” or a “compact.” These two men made a treaty. They made promises to each other, and Abimelech asked Abraham to swear by his God that he would keep his word.

In this case, there was no sacrificing of animals, no blood involved; but we see that animals were given by Abraham as a token of his good faith. And there were also seven female lambs which were used for the special purpose of being a testimony that Abraham’s declaration that *he* had dug the well was, in fact, the truth. From this story we can summarize several features which might be involved in the process of making covenants.

(1) the parties to the covenant speak forth their words in a promissory fashion. More briefly, they give their word.

(2) They might call upon some recognized higher power or higher authority as a means to assure the other party that one’s word is trustworthy.

(3) They might give gifts one to the other, or perhaps it might be a one-sided gift-giving. This is done as a sign or token of good faith.

(4) There might also be something given, in this case, Abraham gave the seven ewes as a witness or testimony to his assertion that he had dug the well.

Let’s jump forward to Genesis 26 now, where we will see “sonny boy,” Isaac, in a similar situation. Truth be known, Isaac was quite a chip off the old block, because just as his daddy had done, Isaac pulls into town and promptly tells all the Philistines that his beautiful wife, Rebekah, is his sister. But Abimelech says, “Wait a minute! I’ve seen this song-and-dance before. I’ve heard this story years ago.” And so he warned his Philistine subjects not to touch Rebekah because she was married to Isaac. That’s in the first part of chapter 26. Just as pappy Abraham had done, Isaac also managed to inflame the natives by his successful well-digging enterprises. After a while, that finally cooled down, and then here comes Abimelech again.

Genesis 26:26 Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, and Ahuzzath one of his friends, and Phichol the chief captain of his army.

27 And Isaac said unto them, Wherefore come ye to me, seeing ye hate me, and have sent me away from you?

28 And they said, We saw certainly that the LORD was with thee: and we said, Let there be now an oath betwixt us, *even* betwixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee;

29 That thou wilt do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done unto thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace: thou *art* now the blessed of the LORD.

30 And he made them a feast, and they did eat and drink.

31 And they rose up betimes in the morning, and swore one to another: and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace.

32 And it came to pass the same day, that Isaac's servants came, and told him concerning the well which they had digged, and said unto him, We have found water.

33 And he called it Shebah: therefore the name of the city *is* Beersheba unto this day.

In the next installment, we will continue to analyze these two covenants which were made a generation apart in time, but which concerned the same issue of water rights and well digging.

(To be continued)

As noted in the first paragraph, this will be a lengthy study. How lengthy? Probably well over a couple of years because it is based on my lecture series of the same name which encompassed 48 lectures of nearly an hour each. From time to time, I will break up this FMS series and write about other topics which I may want to address at a particular time. There are many benefits to *hearing* a lecture, as opposed to *reading* the text of a lecture. One is that the hearer can discern many nuances in the voice version as well as detecting certain humor, sarcasm and other emotional components which may not be apparent in the written version. Readers can obtain the entire series now, or parts of it, as you wish. See the flier enclosed with this month’s mailing for more details.

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