

March 14th, 2021

# What Is Covenant Theology?

Joshua 9:1-15, 2 Samuel 21:1-9

## The everlasting covenant

Covenants means very little *if anything* in our contemporary culture. The word *covenant* is used rarely, and when it is used, it has lost its gravitas. But with God, the idea of covenant is the weightiest of all truths. Covenant reaches into eternity past, can be traced all through the history of mankind, and then extends into eternity future. In other words, covenant has existed and will exist as long as God Himself.

## How seriously does God take covenant?

To get an idea of how weighty covenant is in the mind of God, let's turn to 2 Samuel 21. Here we pick up near the end of David's life. Most of his enemies had been dealt with, the reigns of the nation are firmly under his rule. However David, it seems out of nowhere faces a devastating hardship. Picking up in v.1.

Now there was a *famine* in the days of David for *three years*, year after year. And David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, *because he put the Gibeonites to death.*" So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. [Picking up in v. 5] They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD." And the king said, "I will give them."

## 1. The nature of a famine

Three things to observe from this text. **First**, the nature of a famine. In verse one we read that ‘...there was a *famine* in the days of David for three years, year after year.’ A famine is not simply missing a meal, or two or three, or ten. Remember that a famine is what caused the children of Israel to leave their land and settle in Egypt for four hundred years (**Genesis 45:11**). Famines drove wicked parents to eat their own children before the Assyrian captivity (**Deut. 28:57**). A famine is essentially the worse thing that can happen to a nation next to its annihilation. This was happening for three years in David’s time. No body knew what it was from, so David inquired of the Lord.

## 2. God’s answer to David

**Secondly**, notice how the Lord answers David. ‘the LORD said, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, *because* he put the Gibeonites to death.”’ This is a curious statement. Saul was long dead. The Gibeonites were not even part of God’s people. What’s going on? To understand what’s going on here we must travel backwards in time some 500 years to Joshua 9. Here Joshua is leading Israel into the promised land, and they are subduing all their enemies. On particular group of people—the Gibeonites—knew they couldn’t defeat Israel, so they came up with a plan. Picking up in **Joshua 9:3-6**:

“...when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their part acted with cunning and went and made ready provisions and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, with worn-out, patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes. And all their provisions were dry and crumbly. And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, ‘We have come from a distant country, so now make a **covenant** with us.’”

At first the Israelites were doubtful and interrogated these strangers, but the Gibeonites responded by pointing to their worn-out provisions. Picking up in v. 14-15

“So the men [the Israelites] took some of their provisions, *but did not ask counsel from the LORD*. And Joshua made peace with them and made a **covenant** with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.”

So the Israelites made a covenant with the Gibeonites to spare them, even though they did not seek the counsel of the Lord, and even though this was disobeying the command of the Lord to destroy the inhabitants of the land. This is the very *covenant* that God was referring to when David inquired of Him in **2 Samuel 21:1**. It could be objected: ‘But God, that was 500 years ago, and the people who made that covenant on both sides have long since died. Why are you punishing us for that?’ The answer: man may have forgotten the binding nature of covenants, but God does not.

### 3. How did the famine end?

**Thirdly**, observe how this famine ended. David handed over these ‘innocent’ men over to the Gibeonites to be hung before the Lord. **v.7-9**:

But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the LORD that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

Now Mephibosheth—Jonathan’s son—was spared. Why? Because of the covenant [oath] that David made with Jonathan (1 **Samuel 20:14**) to protect his children after he died. But these other sons died. One was spared because of covenant. The others died because of covenant. However, when this blood was spilled, God healed the land. **v14** says “...*after that* God responded to the plea for the land.” God remembers covenant. Even after 500 years. Even after the people who made the covenant died. He fulfills the covenant and punishes the guilty party. He even punishes those on the side of the guilty party, though they might not have been directly responsible for breaking the covenant. God always remembers and upholds the covenant.

☆The Definition of Covenant

☆The Details of Covenant

☆The Design of Covenant

## I. The Definition of Covenant

### 1. An agreement between two or more persons

I want to give you two quick definitions of covenant in order to help emphasize the different aspects of a covenant. The first definition comes from the children’s catechism.

Q.22 What is a covenant?

A. An agreement between two or more persons.<sup>1</sup>

This definition is helpful to see the bi-lateral agreement that happens in human covenants. Both parties are agreeing to something. Israel and the Gibeonites agreed to a peace treaty between their two nations. Remember the famous

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://reformed.org/historic-confessions/the-childrens-catechism/>

account when Joshua told the sun to stand still (**Joshua 10:12**) so Israel could defeat her enemies? The enemies that Israel fought were the nations that went to war against the Gibeonites. Because Israel had made *an agreement* with Gibeon (covenant) they were bound to protect them. So that's the **first definition**: A covenant is *an agreement* between two or more persons.

## 2. A commitment that establishes a relationship

The second definition comes from Kevin DeYoung

A covenant is a commitment that establishes *a relationship* between two or more persons.<sup>2</sup>

This definition focus on *the relationship* that is established. Covenants at their very heart establish *a relationship*. The reason why David would not hand Jonathan's son Mephibosheth over to the Gibeonites was because, David was in relationship with Jonathan's family by covenant. Jonathan says to David in **1 Samuel 20:14-15** "If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord, that I may not die; and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.' And Jonathan made a *covenant* with the house of David." So that's the **second definition**: A covenant is a commitment that establishes *a relationship* between two or more persons.

## II. The Details of Covenant

### The different types of covenant

In Scripture there are essentially six different types of covenants. 1) A covenant between the Persons of God 2) Covenants between God and man; 3)

---

<sup>2</sup> *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological and Historical Perspectives*, Ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, & John R. Muether, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2020), pg. 589

Covenants between God and nations; 4) Covenants between man and man; 5) Covenants between nation and nation; and 6) Covenants between God nature.

### 1. A covenant between the Persons of God

This might sound strange at first, but there was a covenant made between the Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that they would redeem a people unto themselves. Jesus said in **John 6:38** “For I have come down from heaven...” Why did He come down? He answers: “to do...*the will of him who sent me.*” The Father and Son *agreed* that Jesus would come down from Heaven. What for? To establish a *relationship*. **John 17:6** “I have manifested your name to the people *whom you gave me* out of the world. Yours they were, and *you gave them to me.*” That is covenant, it’s called the Covenant of Redemption by theologians.

### 2. Covenants between God and man

Both the Covenant of Works (**Genesis 2:17**) and the Covenant of Grace (**Genesis 3:15**) are covenants initiated by God in order to enter into a relationship with man. Included here would be the Noahic Covenant (**Genesis 9**); the Abrahamic Covenant (**Genesis 12**); the Davidic Covenant (**2 Samuel 7**); the New Covenant (**Jeremiah 31**) all of which are different chapters of the Covenant of Grace.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Covenants between God and nations

God also covenants with whole nations. These are called National Covenants. God clearly covenanted with Israel as a nation (**Deuteronomy 29**). The prophet Ezekiel tells us that all nations are in a covenant with God (**Ezekiel**

---

<sup>3</sup> I hesitate to say the Mosaic Covenant here not because I believe it belongs to the Covenant of Works, but rather because I think it has a dualistic nature to it. The moral law (Exodus 20) certainly belongs to the Covenant of Grace since it is the law that is written on the hearts of God’s elect (Ezekiel 36). Yet it is the Mosaic Covenant that is decidedly called the Old Covenant in Hebrews 8. It is that National Covenant that Israel was under, obedience to which would have brought blessing to their nation (Deut. 28:1-14) while disobedience would have brought the curse ejecting them out of the land (Deut. 28:15-68)

14:13). And then in the book of Jeremiah we see the prophet pronouncing covenantal curses upon those pagan nations that broke faith with God (**Jeremiah 46-51**).

#### 4. Covenants between man and man

As we already saw, there was a covenant made between David and Jonathan in **1 Samuel 20:14-15**. David also made a covenant with Abner in **2 Samuel 3:12-13**. Abraham and Ahimelech covenanted together in **Genesis 21:23**.<sup>4</sup> Marriage between husband and wife is another example of covenant between man and wife. **Malachi 2:14** "...the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth...she is your companion and your wife by *covenant*."

#### 5. Covenants between nation and nation

All the treaties that you find in Scripture between nations are covenants. King Asa, representing Israel, made a covenant with King Ben-hadad, representing Assyria in **1 Kings 15:19** "Let there be a covenant between me and you, as there was between my father and your father. Behold, I am sending to you a present of silver and gold. Go, break your covenant with Baasha king of Israel, that he may withdraw from me." Likewise King Zedekiah, representing Judah, made and then broke his covenant with King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (**Ezekiel 17:13-15**).

#### 6. Covenants between God and nature

Surprisingly there are even covenants between God and the physical universe, or between God and creation. Meaning God has established an order—an agreement as it were—with time and space *itself*. **Jeremiah 33:20-21** "Thus says the Lord: 'If you can break my *covenant* with the day and my *covenant* with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then

---

<sup>4</sup> Some might contend that a Biblical oath is not the same as a covenant, but evidence proves otherwise. Ezekiel the prophet rains down cursing on Zedekiah, king of Judah, for violating both oath and covenant. Ezekiel 17:19 says "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely it is my **oath** that he despised, and my **covenant** that he broke. I will return it upon his head."

also my *covenant* with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne.”<sup>5</sup> Now our time together for the next 10 weeks will be focusing on the first three types of covenants.

### The ingredients of a covenant

Next consider the different ingredients in a covenant. In every covenant, there are the *parties* that are involved, the promises made, the conditions required and the curse threatened.

COVENANT	The parties	The promise	The conditions	The curse
The Covenant of Works	God + Adam (Gen. 2:16)	He would forever live in God's presence, God would be his God (implied)	"...but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen. 2:17a)	"...for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17b)
The Abrahamic Covenant	God + Abrahamic (Gen. 12, 15, 17)	"And I will establish my covenant...to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Gen. 17:7)	"Go from your country... to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1)	The cutting of the covenant (Gen. 15:8-17)
The National Covenant with Israel	God + the nation of Israel	"I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of (Egypt)...I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God"	"...if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God" (Deut. 28:1)	"...if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God... then all these curses shall come upon you" (Deut.28:15-68; ch. 29)
		Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenantal promise (Matthew 1:23)		Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenantal curse (Galatians 3:13)

<sup>5</sup> also cf. v.25-26



### The ultimate promise of covenant

Two things I want to highlight from this chart. The first is the promise. The heart of every covenant, the promise above every other promise is what O Palmer Robertson called *the Immanuel Principle*. Do you remember what Immanuel means? **Matthew 1:23** "...they shall call his name Immanuel which means, *God with us*." This "Immanuel Principle" is a summary of the divine covenant relationship. In a phrase it's "*I shall be you God, and you shall be my people*" This is the heart of every covenant promise. God promised to be Abraham's God (**Genesis 17:7**); to be Israel's God (**Exodus 6:6-7**); and that is the great promise at the end of this age, **Revelation 21:3** "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." The climax of "God with us," is when Jesus Christ became man, and dwelt among us. Robertson says here: "In this Single Person all God's [promises] find climatic fulfillment. He is the head of God's kingdom and the embodiment of God's covenant. In his person "I shall be you God and you shall be my people" achieves incarnated reality."<sup>6</sup>

### The ultimate curse of the covenant

The second thing I want to highlight is the curse. Whenever a Divine covenant is broken, there is always one penalty: death. The root meaning of covenant is to cut.<sup>7</sup> To make a covenant is to cut. Cut what? Please turn with me to Genesis 15. God tells Abraham in **v.1-4** "I am your God, you are my son, and I will sustain you and all your offspring after you." That is the *promise* of the covenant. Abraham believed God in **v.5**, and it was counted to him as righteousness. So he meets the required *condition* of the covenant. Then we arrive at **v.8** "But [Abraham] said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall

<sup>6</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.,: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pg. 51

<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H1285&t=KJV>  
Accessed November 24, 2018

possess it?” God then tells him to bring these a heifer and other animals in **v.9**. And then Abraham cut them in half, he covenanted with God. So here is this bloody mess of half cut up animals on the ground, with this trail of blood between them. Now in all other covenants, the two parties who were entering into the agreement, would walk through these cut up animals together, and it symbolized that if either of them broke the covenant, that they would likewise be cut up by the vengeance of God.<sup>8</sup> Only Abraham doesn't walk through the pieces. **v.12** says that Abraham fell into a deep sleep. And then in **v.17**, something mysterious happens. “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.” The idea is that God mystically walked through these pieces. In other words, God Himself promised to uphold the conditions of the covenant, *and* He promised the curse of the covenant would fall on Him if it was broken.

### **Hung on the mountain of the Lord**

Recall the disturbing narrative that we began with. Famine all over Israel. David prays. God tells him it's because of a broken covenant. So David hands over seven sons of Saul to the Gibeonites, and they slayed them, and hung them up on poles for everyone to see. Two of those sons had a mother named Rizpah. She attended to her sons's slain bodies. **v.10** says “...Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night.” Here the bodies of her boys were being hung for all to see. As one commentator says:

“The moment we allow our imagination to dwell on the details of her situation, we recoil: the bodies just hang there, exposed to the elements.

---

<sup>8</sup> I would commend for your reading Jeremiah 34 where God rebukes Israel for their covenant unfaithfulness and tells them in **Jeremiah 34:18** “And the men who transgressed my *covenant* and did not keep the terms of the *covenant* that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.”

The stench and sight of decay can hardly be borne by an outsider let alone a relative - and Rizpah is a mother who, day in day out, week in week out, is forced to experience this with her own children! The horror defies description.”<sup>9</sup>

If you know your Bible, you might say at this point, “How can God be for this? **Deuteronomy 24:16** says “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” So what do we do with this?

The fact of the matter is, that these sins are not *merely* individual sins. Saul broke the covenant, but this covenant was with the whole nation. Therefore the curse rested on the whole nation. But it was these men who died. This is a disturbing scene. And it is meant to be. Sons who had nothing to do with a covenant being broken are torn away from their families and are slain. And God lifts the curse. It should push us to be more disturbed at what happened at Calvary. There was another Son. A Son who was completely innocent, unlike Saul’s sons who were born in sin, and were in fact sinners. He was hung on the mountain of the LORD. He was delivered over to be slaughtered for a crime he did not commit. A crime thousands of years old. But God never forgets His covenant. He was the one whom our covenant curse ultimately fell on. **Galatians 3:13** “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” This is why we say that everything in the Scriptures point to Jesus Christ. The covenants were designed to point to Him, and He is the ultimate promise of the covenant, and the ultimate curse falls on Him. In Him all of the covenants find their unity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Focus on the Bible: 2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, (Great Britain,: Christian Focus, Reprint 2013), pg. 272

### III. The Design of Covenant

#### Only two covenants<sup>10</sup>

Outside of the Covenant of Redemption (the Intra-Trinitarian Covenant) and the National Covenant with Israel, there is essentially on two covenants that God has made with humanity: The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. All of humanity is under one of those covenants. The condition for life under the Covenant of Works is essentially “do this and live.” **Romans 10:5** talks about “...the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.” That is perfect summary of the Covenant of Works: if you obey God’s law perfectly, you shall live. Jesus says the same thing to the rich young man “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (**Matthew 19:17**).

Next is the Covenant of Grace. The condition for life under the Covenant of Grace is faith. **Romans 10:6** says “But *the righteousness based on faith* says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down)” What Paul is saying that “we do not have to do *the work* of Christ as redeemer.”<sup>11</sup> What’s required of us is found in v.11 “For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’” That is a perfect summary of our obligation in the Covenant of Grace: “Trust Jesus Christ and you will live.”

---

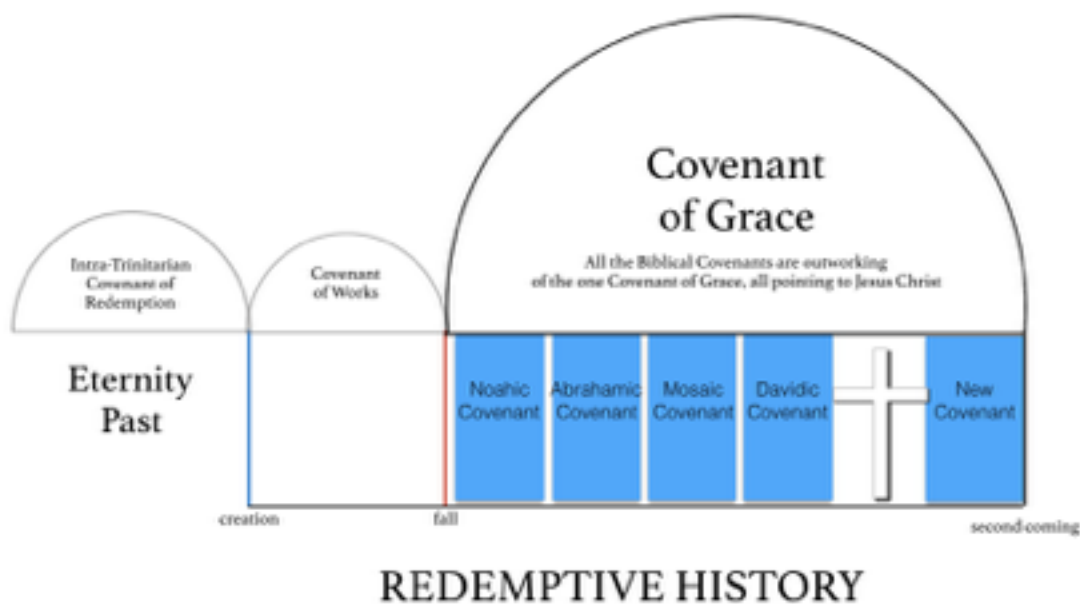
<sup>10</sup> Now these two covenants find their expression are all over Scripture, only they are described in various ways: As *two different trees*, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life (**Genesis 2:9**); as *two seeds*, the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (**Genesis 3:15**); as *two Adams*, the first man of the old race and Jesus Christ of the new race (**1 Cor. 15:45**), as *two mountains*, Mount Sinai and the Mountain in Jerusalem, (**Gal. 4:21-31**); as *two laws*, the law of works or the law of faith (**Romans 3:27**). In other words, there are only two races of people—the people who belong to God—the church; and the people who don’t belong to God—the world.

<sup>11</sup> *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, Ed. Joel Beeke, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), pg. 1632

## How can there only be two covenants?

But you will say to me, how can there only be two covenants if you've already spoken of the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant etc? All these other covenants are essentially different expressions and different outworkings of the same Covenant of Grace. Listen to how Reformed Baptist Pastor Sam Waldron puts it.

“The covenant of Noah is given as a framework in which creation will be preserved by common grace until the fulfillment of the promise [What promise? The “I will be your God and you shall be My people” promise]. The covenant with Abraham formally initiates that community through which the promised Redeemer will come. The Mosaic covenant provides the necessary regulation and legislation for that community at the time when it has ceased to be a family and has become a nation...In the Davidic covenant..the line through which the Redeemer would come is specified {and promised the everlasting throne}. In the New Covenant the Redeemer appears and accomplishes redemption, thus bringing to fruition all the types and predictions of earlier covenants.”<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Gerald R. Procee, *Holy Baptism: The Scriptural Setting, Significance and Scope of Infant Baptism*, (Ontario, Canada, : The Free Reformed Church of Hamilton, 1998), pg. 104

## Appendix

### What's the difference between a covenant and a testament?

At this point chapter one Robertson seems to make an intrusion that makes no sense, but that's not the case. He acknowledges similarities between a covenant and a 'last will and testament' in that they both involve death. Death inaugurates a covenant, and places before the parties involved the promise of life for fulfilling the covenant and death for breaking it. In the case of a testament however, death does not inaugurate it, the testament does not come into effect UNTIL a death occurs. The main point regarding these differences is this: The death of Jesus Christ is meant to be understood primarily in terms of covenant and not in testamentary death. "*Christ died as a substitute for the covenant-breaker.*"<sup>13</sup> A last will and testament has no category for substitution. The testator dies and that's it. That death cannot be substituted for. Christ death was substitutionary for a covenant breaker, it was not testamentary. He became the curse of the covenant for us, on our behalf because we broke the covenant. The curse still must be carried out. One might argue at this point that we are heirs of Christ, and by definition that means we have been included into a testament of sorts. In fact the book of Hebrews is explicit in terms of Testament and how the testator must die in order for the effects of the testament to go into effect. All true. But it is not on the basis of a testament that we are included into the family of God. Covenant is the *cause* of us being adopted into Christ. Once in Christ, we are heirs, and we THEN take part in promises laid out in the testament. Point and case of this would be found at the last supper. In Matthew 26:26-28 Jesus said

"Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

---

<sup>13</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.,: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pg. 12

In other words, 'this is my blood, the blood that is required to relieve the curse of the covenant that is dreadfully resting on my people.' A covenant is not the same thing as a testament. The former is the cause of us being included in the later.