

A COVENANT GUARANTEE

God created human beings with the ability, even the deep need, to be in relationship with him. When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke the friendship between God and his creatures. So God developed a plan of salvation that would restore his children to himself. To help them understand the depth of his love and commitment, God chose to seal the relationship with a familiar cultural form: the covenant.

A COVENANT IS A RELATIONSHIP

The people of the Bible understood covenants well. In fact, they made covenants daily to define and describe their relationships with each other. Abraham made a covenant with the Philistine king Abimelech to resolve their conflict over a water source ([Gen. 21:22-34](#)). David and Jonathan made a covenant that established their everlasting friendship and that affirmed David's right to the throne of Israel ([1 Sam. 18:3](#) and [23:18](#)). Jacob and Laban, his father-in-law, made a covenant in which each promised never to harm the other and Jacob promised to provide for Laban's daughters ([Gen. 31:43-53](#)).

The fundamental difference between covenants and other agreements is the relationship established between the covenant makers. Each party made specific promises and could expect certain benefits (and penalties, if the promises were broken) based on the terms of the covenant. But this relationship went far beyond legal concepts. Covenanted parties viewed each other as friends who were bound together permanently. Abraham's covenant with Abimelech allowed these two very different men to live peaceably in the same area ([Gen. 21:34](#)). The covenant between David and Jonathan was one of mutual loyalty and love ([1 Sam. 18:3](#)). The legal obligations of a covenant relationship were based on the friendship established by the covenant itself. To be in covenant was to be in relationship.

Covenants were made before witnesses sometimes things ([Gen. 31:52](#)), sometimes God himself ([Gen. 31:53](#)). Often, symbols were used to remind the parties of the obligations and benefits established by the covenants. Jacob erected standing stones as a reminder of his relationship with Laban ([Gen. 31:45-46,52](#)). God sealed his covenant (his promise to never destroy the earth with another flood) with Noah by placing a rainbow in the sky for everyone to see.

A COVENANT IS "CUT," NOT MADE

Though our biblical translations refer to people "making" a covenant, the Hebrews described the establishment of this type of relationship as "cutting" a covenant.

The cutting, symbolized by the [slaughter of animals](#) ([Ex. 24:5,8](#)), indicated that each person in the covenant promised to give his or her own life to keep its terms. To break a covenant was to invite one's own death as a penalty. There are no more serious relationships than those that are a commitment of life itself.

Thus God's use of covenants to describe his relationship with his people ([Gen. 15](#); [Heb. 13:20-21](#)) is striking for several reasons. It shows that God wanted to bond eternally with a people who persistently rejected him. It shows that God was willing to prove his devotion to the relationship by offering his own life. Finally, and probably most stunning of all, it shows that God not only was willing to offer his own life to keep the covenant, but he also was willing to pay the price for any covenant failure on the part of the human beings with whom he was in relationship. This promise certainly exceeded the limits of human covenant-making practices.

UNEQUAL COVENANTS

Many of the human covenants in the Bible are between equals. Marriage is such a relationship ([Mal. 2:14](#)). In the culture of the ancient Near East, there were also covenants between unequal parties. These relationships were defined and established by the superior party and could not be changed by the lesser party, such as when great kings made treaties with conquered kings who became vassals. The lesser party could either accept the offer of relationship or reject it and exist in conflict with the greater party.

COVENANT FORMS

Ancient Near Eastern covenants, especially those between unequal parties, were complex relationships. There were many factors that had to be considered for example, the right of the greater party to make the covenant, the obligations of each party, the penalties and benefits of the relationship, and the history of the relationship. Because of the large number of issues involved, covenant documents were usually quite long. God's covenant with Israel through Moses is recorded in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. God's covenant with us in Jesus is described in all 66 books of the Bible.

Because of the length of covenants, a certain pattern was followed so that people could make sense of them. This pattern governed the material contained in a covenant, including its content and form. A summary document representing the entirety of the relationship and following the accepted form of a covenant document was also provided. If the Torah is God's covenant with Israel, the Ten Commandments, inscribed on stone tablets, are a summary document.

We must be careful to recognize that there are many covenant forms and that God does not always use existing practices (which he caused to develop anyway) in dealing with his people. But once we understand what a covenant relationship meant and how it was established, we will realize the extent of God's love for us and his desire to restore the relationship sin destroyed. Keeping in mind that God cut covenants as the superior party so he alone determined their content, let's briefly review the components of the covenant God made with the Hebrews.

In general, ancient Near Eastern covenants had five sections:

1. The Preamble

This section identified the two parties of the covenant. In the Torah, God established the identities of the parties in the creation story. He was the Creator, and Israel was his creation. In the covenant summary, the Ten Commandments, he said simply, "I am the LORD your God" ([Ex. 20:2](#)).

2. The Historical Prologue

In this part of the document, the history leading to the cutting of the covenant was recited to prove the right of the superior party to make it. In the Torah, the stories of the Fall, Noah, Abraham, and the Exodus are detailed as the basis for God's making the covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai. In the Ten Commandments, the summary is simply, "... who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" ([Ex. 20:2](#)).

3. Requirements (Commandments)

The Torah contains 613 of the requirements God placed on the people with whom He was in relationship. The number of obligations he placed on himself was even greater. In the summary of the commandments, these requirements were simplified to 10 ([Ex. 20:3-17](#)). Some scholars have noted that Jesus reduced his summary even further, to just two ([Matt. 22:37-40](#)).

4. Blessings and Curses

Keeping a covenant brought specific rewards, and breaking a covenant brought specific penalties. In the Torah, such blessings and curses are many and varied. Moses summarized both in Deuteronomy 28 in a powerful challenge to the Israelites. The summary document also contains curses and blessings scattered throughout the discussion of the requirements (see, e.g., [Ex. 20:5,7](#) for curses, and [Ex. 20:6,12](#) for blessings).

5. The Summary Document

The summary document served two purposes. Because it was short, it could be easily read and stored. Because it summarized the entire covenant, it represented the total relationship between the parties. Normally, two copies of this document were made, and each party would take a copy and put it in a sacred place for safekeeping.

Because the Bible is silent about what was written on each tablet of the Ten Commandments, and because the culture demanded that two identical copies of a covenant always be made, it seems clear that each tablet contained all 10 commandments. One copy was God's, and the other belonged to the people of Israel.

Thus when God gave both tablets to Moses, he was making a profound statement. Since God trusted Moses with his copy of the covenant, it indicated that his sacred place was the same as Israel's: the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle.

PRESERVING A COVENANT

A covenant was carefully recorded and preserved. It was to be read regularly and obeyed always. Moses wrote down the words of God's covenant with his people in the Torah and commanded that it be read every seven years ([Deut. 31:9-13,24-26](#)). The summary document, the Ten Commandments, was stored in the most sacred place: the ark of the covenant, God's earthly throne.

CONCLUSION

The Ten Commandments were God's covenant with Israel, and they are his covenant with us today. To read the commandments is to learn God's will for human society. It is important to remember that the commandments, as a summary document, represent the total covenant the total relationship between God and his people. To read them is far more than to review a checklist of God's requirements. It is to hear God say, "I am God, and I love you enough to make a covenant (be in relationship) with you through my own blood."

It is only in the person of Jesus that we can fully understand this love. In Christ, God fulfilled the promise he made to the Hebrews of giving his own life to seal the covenant he had made with them. For this reason, Jesus could say, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" ([Matt. 5:17](#)).

God's choice of the covenant to describe his relationship with his people highlights the degree of his love for us. Not only does the great sovereign Creator of heaven and earth descend to be in relationship with sinful human beings, but he offers his own life to provide escape for covenant breakers. Understanding what a covenant was in ancient Near Eastern culture made relationship with God an indescribable gift to those who believed in him.

It should be no less for us.