

Dr. Tiberius Rata, Old Testament Theology, Session 3, God as Covenant Maker

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata in his teaching on Old Testament Theology. This is session 3, God as Covenant Maker.

Hello everybody. Today, we're going to talk about God as a Covenant Maker. So the Bible reveals God as the Creator, who created everything, who created us in his image. But then he is described as a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God.

Now, the word covenant appears for the first time in Genesis in the flood narrative in verses six through nine. That's for the first time the word covenant appears. When we look at the different definitions, a covenant is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises on their oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.

A covenant is a solemn agreement between two or more parties made binding by some sort of oath. So, when we look at the ancient Near East, we see that a covenant is not a strange thing. It's like a treaty.

It's like an agreement. There were covenants made between people. There were covenants made between kings.

And then you actually had covenants made between kings and regular people. But the covenants that we're talking about are the covenants God makes with his people. And that's why when we start to talk about covenants, we start with the Abrahamic covenant, God making a covenant with Abraham.

And that says the trajectory for the entire scripture. And then God makes a covenant with Moses. And again, that affects everything that happens after that.

God makes a covenant with David. And then, of course, we have the new covenant. So when we look at the Old Testament, the terms employed, the main term employed for covenant, is the term *berit*, which appears over 100 times in the Old Testament.

When we get to the New Testament, the word is *diatheke*. It's translated as testament, covenant, or will and has been used around 30 times. And if you look at your Bibles, you will see that they are divided into the Old and the New Testaments.

But you can actually call it the Old and the New Covenants, or as some Old Testament professors like to say, the First and the Second Covenant. I remember my

friend Walter Kaiser used to say the New Testament is the appendix to the Old Testament. Of course, he was only kidding.

But when we look at the ancient Near East, again, I want us to understand that covenants were very, very common. You had treaties of all sorts, again, made between regular people or between kings. International treaties between kings were made by using covenant language.

A lot of these had if then language. So, a king would say, if you give your daughter to my son in marriage, then I will not invade your land. Actually, that's probably a covenant that Solomon made with Pharaoh.

Then, you have suzerain treaties where one would be in charge and dictate the terms of the agreement. So, if a king makes a covenant with, let's say, a lesser power or just a regular person, that would be a suzerain treaty. They're not equal parties.

One is a suzerain over the other. And that's what we have in the biblical covenants. God is the suzerain, and we are his followers.

You know, we don't negotiate with God. God doesn't say, hey, I'm going to give you 10 commandments. Moses doesn't negotiate and say, hey, how about nine? No, there's no such thing.

There is a suzerain agreement and covenant. So, sometimes, covenants are made between equal parties. For example, you have in Genesis 21 a covenant made between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21.

Abimelech recognizes that God is with Abraham. He says, now they swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or to my posterity. But as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will do kindly with me, with the land where you have sojourned.

And Abraham said, I will swear. And then, they go on and make a covenant with each other. In 2 Samuel 19, you have a similar covenant, but this time is David the king with Barzillai, 2 Samuel 19.

But again, the covenants that we want to look at are the covenants that God makes with his people on behalf of Israel. When we look at these covenants, Abraham is the first one. And then we're going to Moses and David and, of course, the new covenant.

But what I want us to see about Yahweh's covenants are unilateral. Unilateral also means they can mean a few things. One of them is that God says the terms and conditions of the covenant.

Again, we do not negotiate with God. Nowhere in this covenant do we see Abraham, Moses, or David negotiating with God. When God comes and makes a covenant with us, we either accept or reject the covenant stipulations.

Now, a point of contention is whether or not some of these covenants have obligations or conditions. I say here that God's covenants have both promises and obligations. Now, again, are these obligations conditions? Is there a difference in semantics? What's going on? The reason this is important is because some people say, well, some of these covenants are unconditional.

But we have to be careful what we mean by that. For example, the promises given to Abraham are unconditional in the sense that, yeah, God could have raised the children of Abraham from stones, from rocks. But if Abraham had not obeyed the covenant stipulations, God could have chosen someone else.

An example of this is in the case of circumcision, where Moses does not circumcise his own sons, and God is looking to kill him. So, the covenant would have gone on, but Moses would not have benefited from the blessings of that covenant. So, yes, it's possible to circumcise all the males.

Again, it's a condition, and it's an obligation. Whatever we call it, it is not one of those things where we can say, well, I can do whatever I want because God is gracious to me. That's a misunderstanding of the biblical text.

So, first, we need to look at the promises. And the promises first appear in Genesis 12. So, when we look at the Abrahamic covenant, chapter 12 is important because that's where we have the promises for the first time.

In chapter 15, we have the ratification of the covenant through the oath. And then in 17, you have the sign of the covenant through circumcision. So first, you have the blessings and the promises.

And verse 7 gives us the third promise. To your offspring, I will give you this land. So great nation, great name, great land.

Again, these are important promises that will set the trajectory for the rest of Scripture. So very, very important promises. God will bless Abraham.

But the point is not just to bless Abraham. Abraham is supposed to be a blessing to the other nations. All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.

So, from the beginning, we see that God always wanted to be a missionary God. He was not just interested in Israel. Through Israel, He wanted to bless all the families of the earth.

And, of course, the great nation, the great name, and then the great land. Think about how important the land is in the history of Israel. It's always been a very important part.

God promises to give them the land. When they disobey, God says, I'm going to take you from the land. And God says when He restores them, I'm going to bring you back to the land.

So, the land plays a very, very important part in Israel's history. Then, in chapter 17, when we have the sign of the covenant, circumcision, we also have what's called the covenant formula. The covenant formula appears in 17.

Seven. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you to your offspring after you the land of your sojourners or the land of Canaan for an everlasting covenant.

And I will be their God. So, I will be their God, and they will be my people. This is called the covenant formula.

And it appears again. It appears again in the Mosaic Covenant. It appears all throughout the scripture because, from the beginning, God wanted to be in a covenant relationship with his people.

So, God, the creator, is also God, the covenant maker. But there's an important passage in chapter 15 that talks about the ratification of this covenant. And this is what led some scholars to say, see, this is an unconditional covenant.

Again, God gives them instructions on how to bring a heifer to bring a goat. And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid them half against each other. But he did not cut the birds in half.

And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram, and behold, dreadful and great things fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, will be servants there, and will be afflicted for 400 years.

But I will bring judgment on the nations that they serve, and afterward, they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in

peace. You shall be buried in good old age, and they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

When the sun had gone down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking pot, fire pot, and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. And on the day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, to your offspring, I will give you this land. So, this is a very interesting passage because there's nothing in the text that explains the ceremony except one passage again in Jeremiah.

Again, that is in conjunction with judgment, which says, if you don't fulfill the promises, I'm going to cut you in half like these animals. So, the idea here is that the oath was this. If I don't keep the end of my bargain, may I become like these carcasses?

But what's interesting in this text, again, is that usually, if you make a covenant with someone, both of you will pass through. But in the text, it seems that only God passes through, which again would make some call this an unconditional covenant, which again makes a very good point here. The idea is that God says, look, no matter what, I'm going to keep the end of my bargain.

You will become a great nation. I'm going to make you a great name, and I'm going to give you a great, great land. Now, how long did it take for God to fulfill his promise? Well, when we get to Exodus chapter one, it seems that God fulfilled his promises, and Israel became a great nation.

Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation, but the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong. So, the land was filled with them.

So, it seems that a few hundred years later, the promises and the covenant are fulfilled. The promise, the covenant promise, is fulfilled. Not only that, not only are they a great nation, but they also have a great name in the sense name means reputation in the ancient Near East, in the biblical account.

Their name is great. How? Well, Pharaoh is afraid of them. We see that in the next verses.

Now, there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to the people, behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them as they multiply.

And if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against them and escape the land. Therefore, they set us masks or taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy, heavy burdens. So, we see that the first two promises are fulfilled.

Also, in Exodus 19, God gives Israel a very interesting name—a great name in chapter 19, verse five. Therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession.

The Hebrew word Segula. So, it seems that this also is another aspect of the fulfillment of the promise. So, according to the book of Exodus, Israel is a great nation, and it has a great name.

There's one problem. There's no land yet. They don't have the promised land yet.

The promise is that Israel will inherit the land only when we get to Joshua's chapter one. So again, that will take another some, again, some hundreds of years because we know the Exodus event took place in 1446. But when we look at the promises and the fulfillment of these promises, we also need to look at the ultimate fulfillment.

So, there's an immediate historical fulfillment. But if we listen to the words of Jesus, who said that the Old Testament speaks about him, then we need to look at how this Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled in Christ. And when we get to the New Testament, we learn that we have a great name because of Jesus.

In 1 John 3:1, we read and see what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called the children of God. Do we have a great name? Yes, we have a great name. We are called children of God.

We are called his people. You can go. We are a great family.

If you can go anywhere in this world and find brothers and sisters in Christ, we will be part of this great nation of believers. But what about the promised land? Do we get a piece of land? Do we get a real estate in Israel? Well, I hope that our promised land is better than a piece of real estate in Israel, especially in the Negev.

You don't want to be in the in the desert. And Paul actually says our inheritance is much, much better than a piece of land in the ancient Near East or in Israel. Today, 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 the tree so that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham, I come to the Gentiles so that we may receive the spirit through faith. Not only do we get the Holy Spirit, but we get heaven. Now, heaven, I would argue, is much better than a piece of land in Israel today.

So, the promise is given to Abraham, whether you believe they're unconditional or unconditional. They definitely have obligations, but they are ultimately fulfilled in the

person and work of Jesus Christ. And I want us to see that not just with the Abrahamic covenant.

That's true with the Mosaic. That's true with the Davidic. That's true with the new covenant.

They are made for the people of Israel, no doubt, but ultimately, they are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And if you look at the Mosaic covenant, which comes next, what we see in the Mosaic covenant is something very interesting. Look at all the promises.

God will bless his people. God will multiply his people. God will give them the land of Canaan.

God will make them a great nation. And then we have the covenant formula. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Have we seen that somewhere else before? Yeah. These promises are not new promises. These are the same promises given to Abraham.

So instead of looking at these covenants as the Abrahamic covenant first and then comes the Mosaic, no. We have to look at them in parallel. They are running in parallel until again they find fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Because the promises are the same, what's different in the Mosaic covenant is that if there's a question about the conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant, there is no question about the conditionality of the Mosaic covenant. Because here you have the if-then language that's very, very clear.

If you do this, you'll be blessed. If you don't, you will be cursed. So, the if-then language is clear, and the conditionality of the covenant is clear.

And, of course, we have the Ten Commandments given in Exodus 20. They are repeated in Deuteronomy 5 because they are given to the new generation who will enter the promised land. Because from the first generation, only the children 18 and under went into the promised land.

As you know, not even Moses made it, and only Joshua and Caleb from the old generation made it through. Again, these promises were fulfilled. They eventually get the land in the book of Joshua, chapter 1. We start the narrative there.

Then, the fulfillment, just like with the Abrahamic covenant, is in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And when Jesus, on the Sermon on the Mount, by the way, helps us to understand a lot of what's going on here in the law, because Jesus was

the only one who fully fulfilled the letter of the law. Now, some people say, well, Tiberius, the law was this high thing out there.

Nobody could keep it. And God wanted to show them that they couldn't keep it. But that's not true.

The law was really the minimum requirement. And living under grace, not under the law, actually, Jesus raises the bar, doesn't lower the bar. We'll look at that later when we talk about God as a lawgiver.

But Jesus here on the Sermon on the Mount actually points to the fact that living under grace, not under the law, doesn't lower the bar but raises the bar. That's what Jesus says here in chapter 5. Do not think I came, of Matthew, do not think I came to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

And then you have these passages about you have heard that it was said, but I tell you. Again, when Jesus raises the bar, you hear that it was said you should not murder. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

You have heard that it was said you should not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So, we have this Jesus again raising the bar, not lowering the bar.

So, was the old covenant bad? Was the Mosaic Covenant bad? No, God, through Ezekiel, says, I gave them good laws. These were not laws, but the book of Hebrews points to the fact that this Mosaic covenant was temporary in nature. Until the new covenant would come, Jesus would fulfill, again, Jesus' death and resurrection, life, death, and resurrection fulfilled the promises of these covenants.

In Hebrews, you have twice the author of Hebrew quotes from Jeremiah 31. The New Covenant is quoted in its entirety one time, making it the longest passage from the Old Testament quoted in the New Testament. And again, here in Hebrews 8 through 10, the author of Hebrews talks about the fact that the Old Covenant was temporary in nature until Jesus came to be the sacrifice once and for all.

So, everything is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Later, I'm going to mention and quote from the new covenant here when we talk about the new covenant. So, very importantly, God wants to make a covenant and wants to be in a covenant relationship with people.

First through Abraham and Moses, and then we get to David. In 2 Samuel 7, we have the Davidic covenant, and the promises are now a little different from those of the Abrahamic and Mosaic. You know, the great nation, great name, great land.

Now, in 2 Samuel, you have perpetual love and perpetual kingship. Chapter 7, verse 15, starting in verse 14. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.

Your throne shall be established forever. So, these are very important promises. I will love you forever and you will never lack a king to be on the throne.

But very important here, this note. God's promise to raise up a descendant is unconditional, but a continuous, uninterrupted reign is not. Actually, Solomon says that in his prayer at the dedication of the temple.

And a conversation with God and Solomon there, it's very, very, very clear. Again, you have then language. And we know that Solomon, unfortunately, consistently disobeyed and systematically disobeyed God.

So, God is angry with Solomon. 1 Kings 11 says, and God says, I'm going to tear the kingdom in half. And indeed, he does that.

922, the kingdom is divided. In 722, the kingdom, the Northern Kingdom, falls, sticking into captivity. And then, in 587, the southern kingdom falls.

What happens after 587? No more king. Well, but God promised. Exactly.

God promised perpetual love and perpetual kingship. But a continuous, uninterrupted reign is dependent on Israel. And unfortunately, they disobeyed.

And God takes them not only out of their land, but they have no more king. After 587, even the temple was destroyed. So how is this fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ? Well, it is fulfilled because Jeremiah promises the new covenant.

But not only that, Jeremiah connects Jesus to the priesthood. In Jeremiah 33, verses 15 and on. Well, first of all, in 14, it says, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

In those days, at that time, I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days, Judah would be saved, and Jerusalem would dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness.

For thus says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel. And the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn offerings, and to make sacrifices forever. But we have a problem.

After 587, there was no king, and there were no Levitical priests because there was no temple. So, what is happening, we have to look at the fulfillment later, and that happens in the person of Jesus Christ. And that's what we have in Luke chapter 1. After Jesus is born, Luke chapter 1, verses 32-35.

This is where Jesus' birth is being foretold. This is an angel speaking to Mary. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David.

And he will reign over the house of Israel forever. So, this is the promised king. This is the kingdom that will last forever.

It's in King Jesus. So, the Davidic promises are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The same thing happens on the day of Pentecost when Peter preaches during the day of Pentecost and has to explain what is going on here, that it is Jesus about whom the prophets are talking.

It is not David, but it is David's son. So, they're talking about Jesus. You have all these promises that are made from the book of Joel, from the book of Psalms.

For David did not ascend into heaven but himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, Set up my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. Let the house of Israel, therefore, know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you have crucified. So, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Why a new covenant? There was nothing wrong with the old covenants. The problem was with the people who failed to obey the covenant. So, then God comes through Jeremiah and says, I'm going to make a new covenant.

By the way, the expression of the new covenant appears only here in the entire Old Testament. Now, the concept is also present in the book of Ezekiel, but as far as the expression, the new covenant only appears here. And the word Hadashah, which is translated as new, can mean both brand new or renewed.

I think this is where we get into a little trouble in translation because when the Septuagint is translated, they're translating the word new as brand new. Making some then to understand that, oh, the new covenant has to be a brand new covenant. But no, if we look carefully, the promises of the new covenant, in many respects, are a renewal of old covenant promises.

They are not brand new. Now there are some brand new elements, which are very, very important. In Jeremiah 31, 31 through 34, we have the new covenant promised.

And now listen, as you listen, think about which elements are brand new and renewed. Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Have you heard that somewhere else before? Yeah, the covenant formula appears before. Now, what's new is the interiorization of the law. God says I'm going to put it in their hearts; I'm going to write it within them.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, I will remember their sin no more. Did God forgive covenants? Did God forgive sins in the old covenant? Yes.

It says you shall bring this, and your sin will be forgiven, it will be forgiven, it will be forgiven. But now, as the book of Hebrews explains, this is the sacrifice once and for all in Jesus Christ. How is it possible that God will put his law within us? Well, again, the expression doesn't appear, but the concept appears in Ezekiel 36 when we are given the answer of how God's law is put in our hearts.

Ezekiel 36, starting in verse 26, God says, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit that I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

So how is that possible? Only by the spirit. So, in the new covenant, what's new is the fact that the spirit now indwells the believer, which is something they did not have in

the Old Testament. In the Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit would come upon certain people to accomplish certain tasks.

But now in the new covenant community, we have the Holy Spirit in us. So, we are under the new covenant. We are not bound by the Mosaic Covenant, even though the Mosaic Covenant is very important because it is both revelatory and regulatory.

And it is very important for us to read it and understand it because it reveals who God is. But Jesus institutes the new covenant at the Lord's Supper when he says in Luke 22:20, And likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, This cup is poured out for you, is the new covenant in my blood. So, Jesus institutes the new covenant at the Lord's Supper.

So then he inaugurates it when he sheds his blood for us on the cross. Because that's when the new covenant is inaugurated. And in 2 Corinthians 3, then Paul says, Look, we are ministers of the new covenant.

And in the book of Hebrews, again going back to Hebrews, when the new covenant is quoted from Jeremiah into the book of Hebrews, again, you have it twice. Partly in chapter 8, not fully in chapter 8, excuse me, and partly in chapter 10. But in chapter 8, again, the author of Hebrews quotes the entire passage from Jeremiah 31 through 31 through 34.

But then, in Hebrews 10, he makes sure we understand that Jesus is the sacrifice once and for all. And that's what we have in Hebrews 10, 12 and on. Chapter 10, and by that, we will have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

See, the Old Testament saints had to go to the tabernacle first and then the temple. They had to go three times a year. And then Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, would be once a year.

The high priest would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat for his sins and the sins of the entire nation. But with Jesus, this is the sacrifice once and for all. So Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenants and the covenant promises.

Abraham, Moses, David, and the New Covenant are all fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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