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The Davidic and Sinaitic Covenants

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The Davidic and Sinaitic Covenants

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Although the books contained in the Old Testament are extensive and diverse, it remains difficult to argue that the covenants created between God and Moses and God and David are central pieces upon which the subsequent writings in their entirety are based. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines the term covenant as —[a] bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges himself to do something for the other."¹ This basic definition did not derive theological connotations until it was utilized by Old Testament writers to signify a commitment between Yahweh and the Israelites whom God chose as God's people.² In the book of Exodus, God initiates a covenant with Moses that is repeatedly violated by the newly formed nation of Israel. The covenant evolves during the time of David when God reaffirms God's commitment to the people of Israel despite their rebellious nature. These two covenants and their implications will be discussed in greater detail during the remainder of this work."



Katie Kreutter

The Davidic and Sinaitic Covenants

Introduction

Although the books contained in the Old Testament are extensive and diverse, it remains difficult to argue that the covenants created between God and Moses and God and David are central pieces upon which the subsequent writings in their entirety are based. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines the term covenant as “[a] bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges himself to do something for the other.”¹ This basic definition did not derive theological connotations until it was utilized by Old Testament writers to signify a commitment between Yahweh and the Israelites whom God chose as God’s people.² In the book of Exodus, God initiates a covenant with Moses that is repeatedly violated by the newly formed nation of Israel. The covenant evolves during the time of David when God reaffirms God’s commitment to the people of Israel despite their rebellious nature. These two covenants and their implications will be discussed in greater detail during the remainder of this work.

¹ Eds. F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 428.

² Ibid.

The Sinaitic Covenant

Despite an uncertainty surrounding the authorship and composition dates of the book of Exodus, much insight can be gleaned from the literary content contained therein, a significant portion of which can be found in the narrative regarding the covenant-making process between Yahweh and Moses.³ In chapter 19, God extends the covenant to Moses, who relays the message to the people of Israel as a mediator between God and the Israelites. The New Jerome Biblical commentary attests that this covenant was God's response to "the condition of the people," offering an opportunity for restoration by turning from their wicked ways and obeying God's will.⁴ This covenant was not imposed upon the Israelites, however, but rather appealed to their freedom to either reject or accept its conditions. Israel remains unique in that it was the first nation of its time to profess that their God was directly involved with them in the establishment of a covenant, even though covenant-making was a common practice between both individuals and groups of neighboring societies.⁵

The following four chapters outline the content and stipulations of the covenant. The prominence of this section within the book appears to be indicative of its significance to and impact on the overall text. This segment begins with a list of prohibitive statements known as the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue. Although these statements appear to be orders, their properties are much less legalistic than other writings of the

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1261.

⁴ Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 51.

⁵ Paul R. House, Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 59.

same period and seem to emphasize living practices for a right relationship with God rather than meaningless demands.⁶ This is further evidenced by the first statement of the Decalogue, which warns against idol worship and indicates that “[s]ole allegiance to ‘the LORD’ lies at the very heart of the covenant relationship.”⁷ It would be senseless to attempt to adhere to any of the other principles if one’s focus was not yet on the God who instituted them. This commandment and the following three all address this concept of right relationship with God while the following six address issues pertaining to general life in society.⁸ In the case of the Sinaitic covenant, the blessings promised to Israel are conditional as they are offered as a response to obedience.⁹ There are no punishments directly listed, although it seems to be implied that there will be dire consequences to quality of life for disobedience with such phrases as “so that your days may be long in the land” in Exodus 20:12. After the Decalogue, there follows additional directives concerning daily living practices, such as Sabbath and religious festival observance, which are elaborated upon in a more detailed manner than the previous statements.

This covenant appears to be a continuation and fulfillment of God’s original promise to Abraham,¹⁰ which stated Yahweh would make him “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” in Genesis 17:4. The generic element of this statement becomes specified in Exodus as a nation belonging to God.¹¹ This promise is developed even

⁶ Eds. G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, R.T. France, *The New Bible Commentary*, 21st century ed. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 107.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Paul R. House, Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 59.

⁹ Paul R. House, Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 61.

¹⁰ Timothy Dwyer, “The Biblical Era: Evangelism, Missions, and Church Growth” (lecture, BHT511NE, Session 2.2, Northeastern Seminary, September 23, 2010).

further in 2 Samuel between God and David.

In chapter 24, the people of Israel must determine whether or not they choose to accept the terms of the covenant and respond with faithfulness to God's invitation. The text suggests that the people agreed immediately without reservation, yet according to the narrative it is not long before they disobey.

The Davidic Covenant

Although the term 'covenant' is not used in 2 Samuel 7, the text outlines God's promises to David, and it can be argued that this pivotal section serves as the crux to all Old Testament writings leading up to and away from it.¹² This portion of the text describes a time late into David's reign, and concerns the fate of two prominent institutions that were integral components within the lives of the people at this point in history and for centuries afterwards-the Jerusalem sanctuary and the Davidic monarchy.¹³ This covenant is given despite David's repeated offenses against God and God's people.

With the creative and complex use of the term 'house,' it is established that this covenant is everlasting. In addition to meaning a literal house or dwelling, the Hebrew word signifies a temple as well as a dynasty. God declares that a temple will be built, but not by David, and that David's descendants will endure.¹⁴ As with the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant again parallels God's initial promise to Abraham with the divine

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 156.

¹³ Eds. G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, R.T. France, *The New Bible Commentary*, 21st century ed. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 325.

¹⁴ Ibid.

declaration that the Lord will create a name that is great for David. According to theologian Paul H. House, “God has made [David] the father of an eternal household.”¹⁵ The consequences for refusal of these promises or disobedience to Yahweh are lacking in any great detail from this chapter of the text. However, it is evident that there will be punishment for iniquities even though God will never withdraw God’s love.

These promises to David are also significant because they appear to foreshadow the coming of a messianic figure, a theme which is expounded upon through the New Testament and the person of Jesus.¹⁶ This text declares that “the Messiah, Israel’s Savior, will come from David’s family” and it “unites the Old and New Testaments because it eventually leads to Jesus.”¹⁷ David responds to God’s promises with joy and thanksgiving, establishing his commitment and allegiance to God and God’s will. This passage of within Scripture, although relatively short in length, displays the hope and encouragement that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament and that the promises of God are true, steadfast, and restorative.

Conclusion

The Sinaitic and Davidic covenants are foundational components of the Old Testament and remain relevant today despite their context within history. There appears to be a natural progression contained within them concerning the relationship between God and humankind. At first, the covenant is extended conditionally in order “to form the basis of Israel’s covenant relationship with God” and ensure right living before God.¹⁸

¹⁵ Paul R. House, Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 136.

¹⁶ Paul R. House, Eric Mitchell, *Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 136.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Later, it is extended without measure to David and his descendants. Despite the distinctions between the covenants, however, the primary elements of the nature of this relationship with a full reliance on God remain consistent throughout both agreements and the generations of Israelites. Today, they serve as a reminder of God's faithfulness, holiness, and unending love, which are extended to and must be accepted by the people of God for the development of a fruitful relationship between Creator and created.



Morning Bible Study
(Photo by Melissa Jadlos)

¹⁸ Eds. G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, R.T. France, *The New Bible Commentary*, 21st century ed. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 107.