



ERIC J. TULLY

READING *the*  
PROPHETS  
*as* CHRISTIAN  
SCRIPTURE

A LITERARY, CANONICAL, AND  
THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

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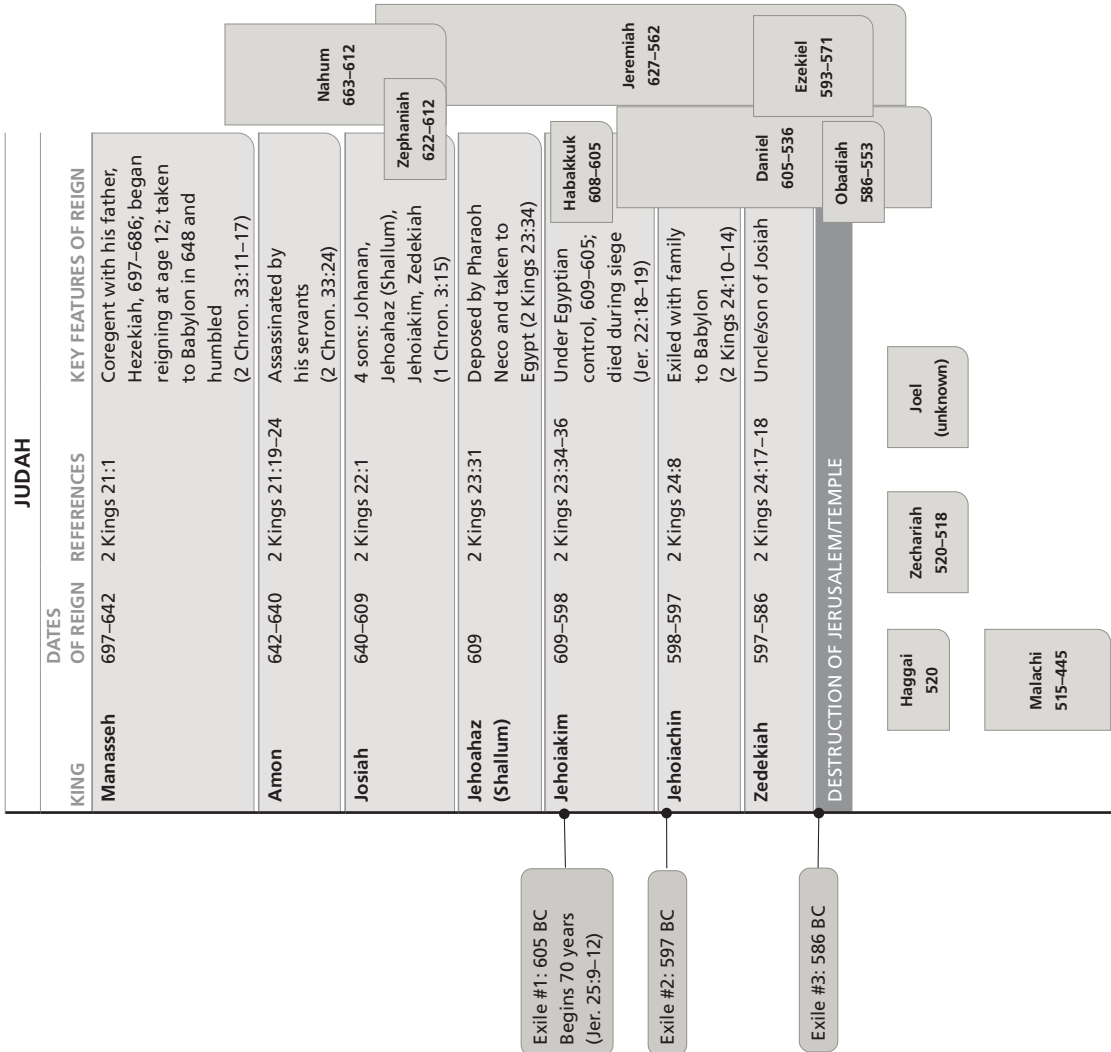
# TIME LINE OF THE PROPHETS

ISRAEL					JUDAH				
KING	DATES OF REIGN	REFERENCES	KEY FEATURES OF REIGN	KING	DATES OF REIGN	REFERENCES	KEY FEATURES OF REIGN		
Jeroboam	930–909	1 Kings 12:20	Took throne in the last year of Solomon (1 Kings 14:20)	Rehoboam	930–913	1 Kings 14:21			
Nadab	909–908	1 Kings 15:25	Assassinated by Baasha in 908 (1 Kings 15:27)	Abijah	913–910	1 Kings 15:1–2			
Baasha	908–886	1 Kings 15:33	Killed all the house of Jeroboam (1 Kings 15:29)	Asa	910–869	1 Kings 15:9–10			
Elah	886–885	1 Kings 16:8	Assassinated by Zimri while drunk (1 Kings 16:8–14)						
Zimri	885	1 Kings 16:15	Attacked by Omri, then suicide by fire (1 Kings 16:17–18)						
Tibni	885–880	1 Kings 16:21	Civil war with Omri (1 Kings 16:21–22)						
Omri	885–874	1 Kings 16:23	War with Tibni for first five years; became sole ruler in 880						
Ahab	874–853	1 Kings 16:29	Died in battle (1 Kings 22:33–37)	Jehoshaphat	872–848	1 Kings 22:41–42	Coregent with Asa, 872–869		
Ahaziah	853–852	1 Kings 22:51	Died childless (2 Kings 1:2, 17)						
Joram/Jehoram	852–841	2 Kings 3:1	Killed by Jehu (2 Kings 9:24)	Jehoram	853–841	2 Kings 8:16–17	Coregent with Jehoshaphat, 853–848; married to Athaliah		
Jehu	841–814	2 Kings 9:13	Killed Joram in chariot and executed Jezebel (2 Kings 9:24, 33)	Ahaziah	841	2 Kings 8:25–26	Killed by Jehu in Israel (2 Kings 9:27–28)		
Jehoahaz	814–798	2 Kings 13:1		Athaliah	841–835	2 Kings 11:3	Ahaziah's mother (2 Kings 11:1)		
Jehoash	798–782	2 Kings 13:10		Joash	835–796	2 Kings 12:1–2	Began reigning at age 7 (2 Kings 11:21)		
				Amaziah	796–767	2 Kings 14:1–2	Assassinated at Lachish (2 Kings 14:19)		

ISRAEL				
KING	DATES OF REIGN	REFERENCES	KEY FEATURES OF REIGN	
<b>Jeroboam II</b>	793–753	2 Kings 14:23	Coregent with Jehoash, 793–782	Jonah 792–753
<b>Zechariah</b>	753–752	2 Kings 15:8	Assassinated by Shallum (2 Kings 15:10)	Amos 767–753
<b>Shallum</b>	752	2 Kings 15:13	Assassinated by Menahem (2 Kings 15:14)	
<b>Menahem</b>	752–742	2 Kings 15:17	Made an alliance with Pul, king of Assyria (2 Kings 15:19–20)	
<b>Pekahiah</b>	742–740	2 Kings 15:23	Assassinated by Pekah (2 Kings 15:25)	Hosea 755–725
<b>Pekah</b>	752–732	2 Kings 15:27	Reigned in Gilead, 752–740, overlapping with Menahem; reigned over united Israel, 740–732; assassinated by Hoshea (2 Kings 15:30)	
<b>Hoshea</b>	732–722	2 Kings 15:30; 17:1	Appointed by Tiglath-pileser III	

JUDAH				
KING	DATES OF REIGN	REFERENCES	KEY FEATURES OF REIGN	
<b>Uzziah/Azariah</b>	792–740	2 Kings 14:21; 2 Chron. 26:3	Coregent with his father, Amaziah, 792–767; began reigning at age 16 (2 Kings 14:21); struck with leprosy for offering incense in 750, then lived in a separate house while his son governed (2 Chron. 26:16–21)	
<b>Jotham</b>	750–735	2 Kings 15:32–33	Coregent with Uzziah, 750–740; removed from the throne in 735	
<b>Ahaz</b>	735–715	2 Kings 16:1–2	16 years counted from death of Jotham in 732 (2 Kings 15:38)	Isaiah 740–695 Micah 742–686
<b>Hezekiah</b>	729–686	2 Kings 18:1–2	Coregent with father, Ahaz, 729–715; Sennacherib attacked Judah in 701 BC (2 Kings 18:13)	



# Introduction

But Paul said, “. . . King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

Acts 26:25–28

**W**hen we think of Scripture that explains the essence of the Christian faith, or what might persuade someone to be a Christian, our minds probably go first to books in the New Testament like John or Romans. But for the apostle Paul, whose Bible contained only the Hebrew Scriptures, the essence of the Christian faith was taught in the Old Testament prophetic books. King Agrippa also recognized that the Prophets speak about God’s redemption in Christ—that is why, in the passage quoted above, he becomes defensive in response to Paul’s question. Both Paul and Agrippa believed that the Prophets of the Old Testament were not just Jewish Scripture; they were *Christian* Scripture.

This book is an introduction to “The Prophets” of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture (as the series title indicates). These books include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They are complex books that present the conversations, actions, preaching, and predictions of the classical prophets, who spoke for God in particular historical circumstances.

## Reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture

I have given a lot of thought to the word “as” in the title of this book. Perhaps it gives the impression that these prophetic books are not inherently



Christian Scripture, but it is possible to read them “as” Christian Scripture. Far from it! The Old Testament does not *become* Christian Scripture through our reading it with a certain technique or according to a certain set of rules, nor does it become something else if read in a different way. The prophetic books of the Old Testament *are* Christian Scripture. They may not use the name “Jesus” or contain the word “church” or “baptism,” but they speak of God’s great plan of salvation, which stretches from God’s creation of the world and the sin of Adam and Eve to God’s eternal kingdom at the end of time. And they speak of God’s Messiah—from the family of David, born in Bethlehem, suffering for the sins of his people, rising again in victory, and ruling as king in peace and justice.

In the New Testament, Paul writes to a young pastor named Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man [or woman] of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). At the time when Paul wrote this, the books of the New Testament were still in the process of being written, identified, and collected, so Paul is referring to the *Old* Testament, including the prophetic books. They are God’s Word, intended for us to strengthen our faith, teach us about God, and equip us to serve him.

We do not read the prophetic books in a special way to make them Christian Scripture; but recognizing that they are Christian Scripture does have some important ramifications for the way that we read them. First, the prophetic books of the Old Testament are part of the Christian canon of Scripture, including both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word “canon” refers to what is official, what counts. It refers not only to what is included as Scripture but also to what is excluded. Consider this nerdy example: some people talk about the “Star Wars canon” and which movies and books really count for the *real* Star Wars story and universe. I could sit down and write a story about Luke Skywalker, but it would not be canon, and no one would be required to take it seriously. But perhaps you are a longtime fan and do not like one of the new Star Wars movies: too bad! If it is one of the official movies, it counts. It is canon, and the story is authoritatively part of the larger universe long, long ago whether we like it or not. Similarly, each of the prophetic books in our Bible is part of the biblical canon. That means that they are recognized as being official—the Word of God—and just as authoritative as Genesis or 1 Corinthians.

In the quote above from 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes that “all Scripture is breathed out by God.” This is what we call “inspiration.” The human authors of the prophetic books wrote in a particular language (Hebrew or Aramaic), in a particular time, in a particular place and circumstance, to a

particular audience. For that reason, they are all quite different from each other, with different personalities addressing different concerns. However, because they are all “breathed out by God” and part of the biblical canon, there is one ultimate, divine author (God) who is speaking in them. They represent many prophetic voices, but these voices are all speaking for one living God who does not change. Therefore, the prophetic books do not contradict each other. They may give different perspectives or look at an event from different angles, but they do not offer *conflicting* perspectives. They do not have opposing understandings of what God is like or what he has done in history.

Second, because the Old Testament prophetic books are inspired, canonical, Christian Scripture, we approach them as readers under their authority. There are different ways that we *can* read a text. When I find a piece of “junk mail” in my mailbox, I read it with suspicion, assuming that I am wasting my time. When I read a news report about something happening in the government, I am open to learning, but still cautious because I know that every reporter has an agenda. When I read the instructions on my income tax forms, I seek only to understand and obey. Income tax forms are authoritative—it does not matter if I agree with them or not. We adopt a particular stance when we read anything: a sweet note from a parent or spouse, instructions from a supervisor at work, or someone’s ramblings on social media.

Because the Old Testament Prophets are Christian Scripture, we approach the text not to critique it or find fault with it but to hear God’s Word and know him. In addition, as Christians we read the Old Testament Prophets as *insiders*. If we are disciples of Jesus Christ and members of his church, then we are part of the true people of God and can anticipate, not dread, what God has in store for those who love him. Whatever the prophets demand, we will obey. Whatever they critique, we will purge from our lives. Whatever they assert about God, we will incorporate into our theology and take seriously.

Perhaps this sounds naive. Will we not read critically? Yes, we will be critical in the sense that we will try to be detailed and analytical. And we will attempt to take the text on its own terms, not foisting our own preconceptions on it. Sometimes this will mean rejecting common ideas and interpretations that we have heard all of our lives.

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## The Old Testament Prophets Are Difficult

The Old Testament is important for the church, but it is not always easy to understand. In its pages we read violent stories, laws that seem strange, lists

of kings or geographical districts, and wild visions and symbols. For many modern Christians, the Prophets are particularly difficult to comprehend, and it is challenging to see their relevance for today. It will be helpful to identify some of the reasons that the Prophets are difficult, since these are the very issues that we will seek to address in this book.

First, the Old Testament Prophets are often difficult for us because they assume that the reader is well acquainted with all that came before in God's dealings with Israel and his revealed word. The prophetic books assume that we understand this *theological* context. The ethics of the Prophets are based on the law given to Moses in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. God had made specific demands of his people that they (typically) rejected and failed to obey. Nevertheless, these laws reflect God's values, and he holds his people accountable to them. Much of the prophetic message is related in some way to the covenants that God had made in Genesis, Exodus, and 2 Samuel. The more we understand the rest of the Old Testament, the more these theological references will be obvious and make sense. The Prophets are just one part of a grand theological vision given to us in Scripture. They do not start at the beginning and catch us up. When we enter a prophetic book, we are stepping into the middle of a discussion already in progress.

Second, the Old Testament Prophets are difficult because they are often so closely tied to a particular *historical* context. They speak against specific sins that characterize ancient society. They refer to religious movements and the actions of priests and false prophets. They urge their listeners to trust God in the face of actual invading armies on their way to steal, rape, murder, and oppress. They speak against the evil of neighboring nations that have victimized the poor and built wealth by exploiting others. In the pages of the prophetic books, we hear about the persecution that a prophet suffers at the hands of the king or those in political power. In many cases, the message of the prophet is anchored in these specific events. And yet they do not provide us with the background that we need to understand—they assume it. Therefore, in order to read the prophetic books well, we must make extra effort to study the historical background and situation.

A third reason that the prophetic books are difficult is that they are complex literature. They are not straightforward narratives (like 2 Samuel), nor are they short poems (like many Psalms). They are a mix of narrative and poetry, sermon and prophetic oracle. They are often emotionally raw and intense: identifying terrible sins, lamenting over total destruction, and trying to grasp the glory and holiness of God.

Fourth, a prophetic book does not have a table of contents. I remember attempting to read a book like Isaiah when I was in high school, and it

seemed like its contents had been put into a blender and scattered around the sixty-six chapters. I could not discern how one prophetic oracle or story related to the next one. To be sure, biblical scholars have also struggled to discern the structure of prophetic books. One scholar says that the book of Amos is “arranged with almost no regard for content or chronological order.”<sup>1</sup> Another scholar writes that one would be correct in thinking that the prophetic books are “a hopeless hodgepodge thrown together without any discernible principle of arrangement at all.”<sup>2</sup> We will need to discuss this question of structure as we investigate each prophetic book. (Spoiler alert: each prophetic book *is* arranged in a meaningful way!)

The prophetic books are difficult for these four reasons and others as well. All of these features have to do with the “genre” of these works. Genre is crucial for interpretation of any text. If I say to you, “A clown, a priest, and a duck walked into a bar,” you interpret my statement as a joke. Then, you decide whether my next statement (the punch line) is humorous. Or if I say to you, “In witness whereof the parties hereunto have set their hands to these presents as a deed on the day, month, and year herein before mentioned,” you interpret it as part of a legal document. In this case, you look for the place to enter the date below your signature.<sup>3</sup> As we negotiate a variety of types of texts in society, we are constantly evaluating not only what they mean, but how they create meaning and how we should read them in that light. In the same way, we must understand what Old Testament prophecy is, how it works, how prophets communicate, and so on if we are to read them competently, faithfully, and on their own terms.

## The Structure of This Book

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Because the Old Testament prophetic books have such a distinct genre (or genres) and because they are difficult for the modern reader to understand, the next seven chapters will deal with these issues in more depth. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the *context* of the prophetic books. Chapter 2 addresses the theological context, situating the prophetic books within biblical theology and the story line of God’s plan of salvation. Chapter 3 surveys the historical context, providing an overview of major events in the history of Israel and how the Prophets relate to each other chronologically.

Chapters 4–8 deal with the phenomenon of prophecy. In chapter 4, we explore the essential “job description” of an Old Testament prophet. This examination of the prophetic task continues, from the opposite perspective, in chapter 5, where we examine false prophets in Israel and in the surrounding nations. The true prophets of God were often in conflict with false

prophets and distinguished themselves from them. In chapter 6, we will survey some of the key messages that come to us in the Prophets. In chapter 7, we look at the particular strategies used by Old Testament prophets to communicate (often) unpopular messages to an audience that is (often) hostile. Finally, in chapter 8 we will discuss the origins of prophetic books themselves, how they were formed into biblical books, and the implications for interpretation.

In chapters 9–24, we will spend one chapter on each of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. As you might imagine, the chapters on the long or complex books (such as Isaiah or Ezekiel) are longer, while other chapters are much shorter. Each chapter has a similar structure: We begin with “Orientation,” in which we consider the identity of the prophet and his particular situation. Next, in “Exploration” we examine the literary structure of the book and then discuss its contents, section by section. Finally, in “Implementation” we summarize some of the key theological points in the book and consider their particular significance within the whole Christian Bible and our faith. Each chapter ends with some discussion questions for further consideration.

## A Worthy Journey

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It is my hope that this book will be a helpful guide as you read the Prophets for yourself. But it is just that—a guide. The real value comes from reading the text of Scripture. It is God’s holy Word, living and active, and able to make us “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16). As I have read the Prophets in the preparation of this book, my faith in God and his redemption in Jesus Christ has been encouraged and built up. It is my hope and prayer that your faith will be bolstered as well as you work through these books of the Bible. The prophets lived long ago, but the Word of God does not pass away, and their message is crucial for the church today as we seek to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

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## Christian Reading Questions

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1. In your own words, describe what it means to read the Prophets as Christian Scripture. Other than Acts 26:25–28 and 2 Timothy 3:16–17, which texts inform your answer?
2. With what stance have you previously read the Prophets? How might that stance need to change as you approach them moving forward?
3. What have you found most intimidating or difficult about reading the Prophets? Which topics do you hope to learn more about, or what skills do you hope to acquire as you engage with this material?

PART 1

# The Context of the Prophets

# The Theological Context of the Prophets

And [Jesus] said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the *prophets* have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the *Prophets*, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24:25–27<sup>1</sup>

**I** imagine that you are at a party and you walk up to several friends in the middle of their conversation.

“. . . and that’s why Kate quit her job on Thursday.”

“Are you serious? I thought she was trying to get the Hamilton account!”

“I know! But I think she’s been hoping to go to Tokyo next year.”

We have all had this kind of experience. Your ability to catch up and follow the conversation depends on two things. First, you need to know some specific details. Who is Kate? Where was she working? What is the “Hamilton account”? Second, for a full understanding, it would really help to know the bigger picture of Kate’s life: her personality, values, and dreams. Did she like her job? Is she usually an impulsive person, or is it likely that she had a good reason to quit? What has it cost her to lose the Hamilton account? Why does she want to go to Tokyo?

When we pick up a prophetic book in the Old Testament, it is similar to walking in on the middle of a conversation. Without a theological context, some statements seem odd at best! For example, the prophet Jeremiah lived about four hundred years after King David, but he says that in the *future*, the Israelites will “serve the LORD their God and David their king” (30:9).



Comments like this may seem strange in isolation, but they make key contributions to the overall “conversation”—the grand narrative of God’s plan of salvation that starts in Genesis, builds throughout the Old Testament, comes to a climax in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and concludes in the book of Revelation. The Prophets make a unique and significant contribution to the great theological story of the Bible, but they do not stop to introduce concepts or review what has already taken place. Therefore, if we want to understand the Prophets, we need to be acquainted with where we are in the conversation: what has come before and what the Prophets are building toward.

In Luke 24:25–27, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus says several important things. First, he mentions the Prophets as a distinct collection. There is a part of Scripture called “the Prophets,” and they have something specific to contribute to theology and faith. Second, the Prophets contribute to the message of “all the Scriptures.” In other words, there is a unified message to all of Scripture. Of course, there are many different messages in the Bible’s different books, but they all interconnect to form one great message. Third, the Prophets ultimately speak of God’s great plan of salvation, which culminates in Jesus himself. Therefore, Jesus says, failing to “believe all that the prophets have spoken” leads to misunderstanding his ministry and missing his offer of salvation.

In this chapter, we will undertake a basic survey of the great theological story in the Old Testament. There are many lengthy and complex books that deal with Old Testament theology, each from a different angle or approach. Each one has a different idea of what constitutes the “center” of Old Testament theology, a theme around which everything else revolves. For one it might be the theme of land, for another it might be kingship, Messiah, promise, God’s glory, covenant, or some combination of these. We will consider the story of the Old Testament by focusing on the last of these: covenant. This is because the Prophets are particularly focused on God’s covenants with Israel as major turning points in redemptive history, including what God will accomplish in the future.

## Covenant

The word “covenant” (Hebrew: *berit*) occurs 287 times in the Old Testament. It is sometimes translated “treaty” or “agreement.” The following is a working definition: “A [covenant] is an enduring agreement which establishes a defined relationship between two parties involving a solemn, binding obligation to specified stipulations on the part of at least one of

the parties toward the other, which is taken by oath under threat of divine curse, and ratified by a visual ritual.”<sup>2</sup> There are some key points in this definition. First, a covenant is “enduring” and does not have a sunset clause indicating when it will no longer be valid. Second, a covenant defines a relationship with specific expectations and benefits for the two parties. This is different from a contract, which does not necessarily have a relational component. I can sign a wireless contract for my phone with no personal relationship to the company. I’m obligated to pay them for a certain amount of time, but that does not mean that if I switch carriers later, I have been unfaithful! But in a covenant, it is the relationship that is the basis for the obligations. Third, because of this relational element, covenants are taken very seriously: breaking the covenant results in the breaking of a relationship, animosity between the parties, and consequences. Therefore, the covenant is made in a special ceremony with built-in reminders for the parties so that they might avoid consequences for unfaithfulness.

We might say simply that a covenant is a formal agreement that establishes a new relationship between two parties, with obligations for at least one of them. In the ancient Near East, there were political or military covenants between a great king (a “suzerain”) and the lesser kings who ruled over territories within his domain (“vassals”) (more on this below). Another example of a political covenant is the agreement that King Zedekiah makes with the people of Jerusalem that they will set free all of their slaves (Jer. 34:8–10). In Genesis 14:13, the word “covenant” refers to a military treaty between Abram/Abraham and some Amorite brothers; there it is often translated as “allies” in English versions. Covenants can also be personal agreements, such as the one in which Laban insists that his son-in-law, Jacob, treat his daughters well (31:44). Marriage is also called a “covenant” in Malachi 2:14. It is not just a contract with legal language that will hold up in court—it establishes a relationship that begins a new reality for the man and the woman.

Because covenants were a regular part of political and daily life in the ancient world, God uses them as models for establishing and defining his relationship with his people. People knew the concepts and components of covenants, so they would be better equipped to understand the significance of living in relationship with God, including the expectations for each side of the relationship. There are five major theological covenants in the Old Testament (see table 2.1).<sup>3</sup>

These covenants are the critical junctures at which God carries along his plan of redemption. They form a framework and trajectory for the combination of God’s promises and action in which he uses his people to bring about a Savior for the sake of all people, for deliverance of the world from

Table 2.1. Major Theological Covenants

Covenant	Key Passages
Covenant with Noah	Genesis 6:18; 9:1–17
Covenant with Abraham	Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–21
Covenant with Israel	Exodus 19:3b–8; 20:1–24:18
Covenant with David	2 Samuel 7:4–17
New covenant	Jeremiah 31:31–34

sin, and for his glory. For each covenant we will discuss the *reference(s)* where it is found, the *participants*, the central *promise(s)* that God makes in the covenant, the *obligation* that God imposes on the participants, and the formal *sign* of the covenant that God designates as a solemn assurance of his fidelity.

It is noteworthy that the story of God’s salvation does not begin with God’s creation of Israel in the wilderness but with God’s creation of the world in the book of Genesis. The relationship between God and his people, told and regulated in the Bible, is set within God’s larger purposes for all of the created order.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning—of Genesis—we are told that there is only one God. He has created everything and he rules everything. He has created humans to know him and to be in relationship with him. Humans are to rule over creation as God’s representatives. They find their purpose in serving God, and they relate properly to each other as they are properly related to God. All the world is properly ordered. In the garden there is peace and freedom.

However, Adam and Eve refuse to submit to God’s instructions and to rule over creation as representatives of God. When they sin by disobeying God, there are catastrophic and wide-ranging consequences that affect all of creation. But unlike a giant conventional bomb, which does great damage one time and then ceases in its destructive power, the sin of humanity is like a nuclear weapon, which wreaks havoc when it detonates and then continues to destroy, kill, and cause suffering year after year through its deadly radiation.

We can point to four fundamental consequences that come to humanity because of the fall into sin. First, sin leads to death. Although the first sin might seem relatively insignificant (eating the fruit), it causes the undoing of creation; and while Adam and Eve do not die immediately, death is unavoidable (Gen. 2:17; 3:19). This is not what God intended for them: death is not a natural part of the created order but an unnatural consequence. Second, relationships are broken. The most fundamental relationship broken is between humanity and God. This is illustrated when God comes to the garden to meet with Adam and Eve, and they hide themselves because



### The Scope of Creation and Sin

Figure 2.1



of their shame (3:8–10). Later, it becomes clear that horizontal relationships between people are also deeply damaged. In Genesis 4:1–16, Cain kills his brother, Abel, also breaking his relationship with his parents. A third consequence is that their rule over creation is damaged. Rather than being subdued and ruled by humans as God had intended (1:26), now creation will work against them and make life difficult (3:16–19). A fourth consequence is that this new state of suspicion, animosity toward God, and disordered relationships is now intrinsic to their makeup as human beings. They not only sin, but they have a propensity to sin. And even worse, this new nature is passed to their offspring, and then to their offspring. God’s conclusion is not only that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth” but also that “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5).

Figure 2.1 represents the scope of God’s creation and the universal reality of sin. It is a very simple diagram because it is all-inclusive at this point in redemptive history: there is one world that is dying, hostile toward God, and failing to fulfill the purposes he has for it. ✂️

## God’s Covenant with Noah

The first of the major covenants is God’s covenant with Noah. When we get to Genesis 6, God has two responses to the universal wickedness that he sees on the earth. First, he determines to destroy all living things in a great flood as an act of judgment. At the same time, he also determines to save one man and his family. When the flood subsides and the danger is past, God makes a covenant with Noah, indicating that saving Noah’s family from the flood is not only pragmatic (to preserve the human race), it is also revelatory (see table 2.2). God’s actions in history, combined with this covenant relationship, are the first step in revealing the nature of his ultimate salvation.

Table 2.2. Covenant with Noah

References	Genesis 6:18; 9:1–17
Participants	God and all creatures on earth (9:10, 12, 15, 16, 17)
Promise	Negative: Will never again destroy all life with a flood Positive: Will create positive conditions for life
Obligation	Respect for life (cf. 9:4–6)
Sign	A “bow”



## The Scope of the Covenant with Noah

Figure 2.2

Covenant with Noah



God first mentions this covenant to Noah in Genesis 6:18 in connection with his instructions on building the ark, the means of his salvation. The primary discussion of the covenant is in 9:1–17. We often refer to this as God’s covenant with Noah, but it is really a covenant between God and all living things on the earth. Note the repetition in the passage: God has killed almost “every living creature” (8:21) and saved some of “every living creature” on the ark (9:10), and now he will make his covenant with Noah, his family, and “every living creature” (see 9:12, 15, 16). God says that the covenant is established between himself and “all flesh that is on the earth” (9:17). Therefore, our diagram of this cov-

enant is as seen in figure 2.2. The diagram looks very similar to figure 2.1 because, in terms of scope, the covenant relates to all of creation. It reflects God’s desires for the whole world that he has made, in spite of the sin that has done so much damage. 🍌

The central promise of the covenant has negative (what God will not do) and positive (what God will do) aspects. The negative promise comes in Genesis 9:11: “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Positively, God intends for there to be life on the earth, not death. This is not explicitly stated, but it becomes clear in his instructions to humanity. First, they are to be fruitful and multiply (9:1, 7). This is an echo of God’s original intention in the garden (see 1:22, 28). Second, life is so important to God that, paradoxically, the only appropriate punishment for murder is the death penalty. God says:

Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
by man shall his blood be shed,  
for God made man in his own image. (9:6)

In a sense, this respect for life is also the obligation that is required by the covenant. Just as God cares deeply about life, he expects people to respect and preserve life as well. The sign of this covenant is the rainbow in the sky. It is not miraculous, since it occurs naturally when light hits water particles in the air, but God designates it as an enduring reminder that he will never again destroy all life with a flood (9:15, 17).

The covenant with Noah (and all creatures on the earth) reveals that in spite of humanity’s wickedness, it is God’s preference and intention to bring life rather than death. We cannot take this mercy for granted! It is, in fact, a great surprise in Genesis that God would respond to rebellion by

seeking life for humanity rather than death. Sin's just consequence is worldwide destruction, but God is unwilling to let that be the last word. His covenant with Noah and all life on earth indicates that he is a God of grace. Of course, this covenant is very restricted in what it reveals. There is no hint here of how God will deal with the problem of sin, and there is no hint of a Messiah or of what God's plans entail. Yet, it is enough to know at this point in the progress of revelation that he is planning to bring grace rather than judgment.

Unfortunately, soon after this, Noah plants a vineyard and ends up drunk, naked, and in a shameful situation with his sons (Gen. 9:20–25). This is evidence that although God has saved Noah's life and the lives of his sons, their hearts have not been cured. One scholar writes, "The sin of Noah sheds light on the human plight. At one time or another, most people become disgusted with what is going on in the world—the intractable problems among people: hatred, prejudice, and greed that lead to cruelty and war. . . . In response, the idealistic ones among us ask: 'What if we started over? What if we expunged history and wiped the slate clean?' The account of Noah puts the lie to that solution."<sup>5</sup> It is significant that this story of salvation from judgment concludes with a sordid episode. We are being warned that physical deliverance will not be enough to fix the ultimate problem that lies in our hearts.

## God's Covenant with Abraham

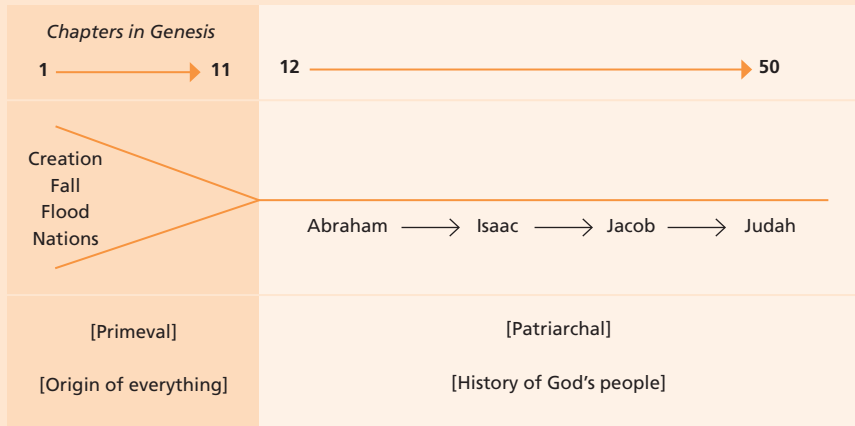
God's covenant with Abraham is the second of the major covenants in the Old Testament. The first eleven chapters of Genesis have a worldwide scope, dealing with universal issues such as the creation of the world, the fall into sin, the flood, and the creation of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). However, in Genesis 12, the discussion shifts dramatically to center our attention on one man, Abraham, and his descendants (fig. 2.3). This structure of Genesis suggests that God's particular dealings with Abraham (chaps. 12–25) are the beginning of his answer to the universal problems put forward in chapters 1–11. Whatever God is doing with Abraham and his family line is intended to benefit everyone else. This becomes explicit when God states in Genesis 12:1–7 that he will make Abraham into a great nation and that he will be a blessing to all of the other families of the earth. Mysteriously, the people of the earth will need to be properly oriented toward ("bless") Abraham in order to receive blessing from God. 🍷

A second important conversation between God and Abraham comes in Genesis 15:1–21. God repeats and amplifies his promises to give Abraham



### Abraham within the Structure of Genesis

Figure 2.3



offspring and a land to possess. To seal the promises, God instructs Abraham to divide animal carcasses. After sundown, God passes through the halves as a symbolic way of binding himself to his word (15:7–11, 17).

The formal covenant comes in Genesis 17:1–21 (see table 2.3). God makes several promises to Abraham, some of which were anticipated in 12:1–3 and 15:1–21. First, he will give Abraham offspring that will grow into nations, although as we saw above, one of those nations in particular (Israel) will be the focus of God’s attention (17:5–6). Abraham’s offspring are the result of this covenant, but they are also participants in the covenant. God says in 17:7a, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant.” Therefore, we can illustrate the scope of this covenant with figure 2.4 (which is obviously not to scale!). Whereas the covenant with Noah was between God and all life on earth, the covenant with Abraham and his offspring has a very limited scope: it is between God and one man and his descendants. However, the text is explicit that the covenant is still

Table 2.3. Covenant with Abraham

<b>References</b>	Genesis 17:1–21 (cf. 12:1–7; 15:1–21)
<b>Participants</b>	God and Abraham and his descendants
<b>Promise</b>	Offspring → nation (17:5–8) Relationship with God (17:7) Land (17:8)
<b>Obligation</b>	Faith in God’s promise (17:1)
<b>Sign</b>	Circumcision (17:10–14)



ultimately intended to bring blessing to all the families of the earth. In the illustration, Abraham and his family line are represented by the small white dot, and the arrows indicate the implications of the covenant. Abraham and his descendants will somehow be a source of blessing for everyone else. 🍷

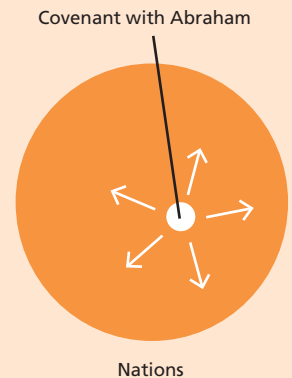
The book of Genesis has already shown a great interest in tracing a particular genealogical line from the very beginning. We learn that the godly line continues through not Cain but Seth (4:25). Seth's descendant is Noah (5:6–29). Noah singles out his son Shem, not Ham or Japheth (9:26). Shem's descendant is Abraham (11:10–26). Now, with the covenant to Abraham, the particular lineage through which God is working becomes a focal point of the narrative. God has chosen Abraham's son Isaac, not Ishmael (17:18–19), even though Ishmael is older. He has chosen Jacob, not Esau (25:23–26), even though Esau is older. At the end of the book, in spite of the narrative attention on Joseph (who saves his family in Egypt), it is Judah who continues the promised line (49:10). It is this particular family line (going through Judah to David and all the way to Jesus Christ) that will be God's means of salvation for the world.

A second promise is that Abraham and his offspring will have a special relationship with God. He states in Genesis 17:7b that he is establishing this everlasting covenant “to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” Further, he says at the end of 17:8, “I will be their God.” A third promise is to give Abraham's offspring a land. A nation cannot exist without a place to live. God promises Abraham, “I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (17:8).

The obligation of this covenant is that Abraham must have faith in God and his promises. At the beginning of Genesis 17, God says, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you” (17:1–2). Abraham had already demonstrated this faith in 15:6, where the narrator says that Abraham “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” This faith is a crucial component of taking part in the blessings of the covenant. And, because the covenant is not ultimately intended to bless only Abraham but to bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth, faith is required for *anyone* who wants to be the recipient of that blessing. Reflecting on this, Paul writes in Galatians 3:8–9, “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall

## The Scope of the Covenant with Abraham

Figure 2.4





all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

Finally, the sign of the covenant with Abraham is circumcision (Gen. 17:11). We have seen that this covenant is primarily concerned with Abraham’s offspring. Thus, it is appropriate that the sign of the covenant be related to reproduction. God states that every male of Abraham’s line should be circumcised throughout the generations, even those who have been brought into the household from outside (17:12). Like the rainbow, which signifies the covenant with Noah and all life, this sign has nothing miraculous about it either. In fact, circumcision was a fairly common practice in the ancient world. But it is now commanded of Abraham as a permanent reminder of God’s promises and Abraham’s new status as the source of God’s blessing to all the families of the earth.

## God’s Covenant with Israel

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As God promised, Abraham did have many offspring. His son Isaac had Jacob. Jacob, later named “Israel,” had sons and grandsons who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. The end of Genesis relates how Jacob’s sons and their families moved to Egypt in a time of famine because of Joseph’s influence and protection. When we open the book of Exodus, four hundred years have passed, and there are two new realities. First, Abraham’s offspring have exploded into a great nation. Exodus 1:7 tells us that “the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” The Hebrew word translated “increased greatly” is often used for *swarming* insects. This is a vivid way of describing the vast number of Israelites. However, there is a second new reality. The political and social situation has changed in Egypt, and the descendants of Jacob have gone from being favored subjects under Joseph to being mistreated slaves under a new king who did not know Joseph (1:8).

We are told that God has compassion on the people in their suffering because of his prior covenant with Abraham *and his offspring*. These are already God’s chosen people—he is already in relationship with them—because that covenant is still in effect. The following verses illustrate this connection:

And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. (Exod. 2:24)

And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” (3:6)

God also said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’” (3:15)

God also alludes to his prior covenant with Abraham in Exodus 4:5; 6:3, 8; 32:13; and 33:1.

With great power and wonders, God brings his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. There he makes a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. God indicates the primary purpose and promise of this covenant in Exodus 19:5–6 when he says, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” There are two key elements in this statement. First, the primary promise of the covenant is that God will have a special relationship with Israel. They will be his “treasured possession” and a “holy nation,” which means that they will be set apart for a special purpose. Second, they will be a “kingdom of priests.” The task of a priest is to mediate between God and people. A priest does not come before God primarily for himself, but for the sake of others. This foreshadows the role that Israel has in God’s future plans of salvation, which also goes back to the covenant with Abraham—that God would use Abraham’s offspring to bless the nations.

Because this covenant is central to the life and governance of the nation of Israel, it is not restricted to a few passages as we saw in the covenants with Noah and Abraham. Rather, it dominates the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Furthermore, it lies in the background of the historical books (Joshua–Kings), and it is the basis for much of the messages of the prophets. Key passages include Exodus 20:1–23:19, which present the initial covenant obligations; Exodus 24:3–8 and 25:16, which describe the ratification and deposit of the covenant; and Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, which set forth the blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience. See table 2.4.

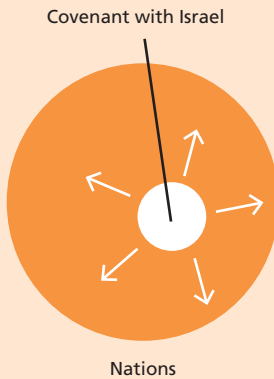
**Table 2.4. Covenant with Israel**

<b>References</b>	Exodus 19:5; 20:1–23:19; 24:3–8; 25:16; Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28
<b>Participants</b>	God and the nation of Israel
<b>Promise</b>	Relationship with God Priests for the nations
<b>Obligation</b>	Obedience to the law of Moses, including total and exclusive loyalty to God
<b>Sign</b>	Sabbath (Exod. 31:13, 16–17)



## The Scope of the Covenant with Israel

Figure 2.5



As noted above, the participants of the covenant are God and the nation of Israel. The following diagram illustrates the scope of the covenant (fig. 2.5). The larger white circle (in comparison to fig. 2.4 on the covenant with Abraham) represents Abraham’s offspring that have now become a nation. Just as the previous covenant was with Abraham and his offspring, this covenant is also with Abraham’s offspring. The arrows continue to indicate that the purpose of the covenant is ultimately for the benefit of the rest of the world. The covenant is between God and the nation of Israel, but it quickly becomes clear that not everyone who belongs to ethnic/national Israel is faithful to God. Some of the members of the covenant community are included by birth rather than by faith. In other words, the community is *mixed*:

composed of those who walk in Abraham’s footsteps, righteous as a result of their faith in God, as well as those who reject obedience to God. One indication that the community is mixed is the distinction between typical sins and those that are done defiantly. The following is an example: “And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins . . . , to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. . . . *But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him*” (Num. 15:28, 30–31). To sin with a high hand does not mean “deliberate” (for as we all know, most of our sins are deliberate), but rather “unrepentant.”<sup>6</sup> This passage recognizes that some in the covenant community of Israel do not want to submit to God and do not care about his commands; the consequence for a defiant, unrepentant sin is removal from the community. 🍷


We also see the mixed nature of the covenant membership in narrative passages. In Numbers 16:1–35, a group of Israelites rebels against Moses and Aaron, whom God has placed in authority. As a result, God kills the leaders of the group (16:31–33), and then fire from heaven kills another 250 men (16:35). These are members of the covenant with Israel, but they are under judgment.

One of the most pronounced examples comes from the book of Joshua. God instructs Israel to destroy utterly the city of Jericho and all of its inhabitants. This will be judgment for the great evil of the Canaanites in the land. In Joshua 2, Joshua sends spies to scout out the city before the attack, and they meet a woman named Rahab. If there is anyone who meets the

## Members of the Covenant with Israel

Figure 2.6



criteria for judgment among the enemy population, it is Rahab: a Canaanite prostitute in Jericho! And yet, because she fears YHWH and wishes to join his people, she is saved (Josh. 6:17) and lives as a member of the covenant community in Israel “to this day” (6:23–25). In sharp contrast, an Israelite man named Achan disobeys God after the battle of Jericho (7:1). If there is anyone who meets the criteria for membership in God’s covenant community, it is Achan from the tribe of Judah, the foremost tribe in Israel and the one that will produce King David and eventually the Messiah! And yet, because of his faithlessness, Achan and his family are utterly destroyed (the same fate that God intended for the Canaanites) (7:24–26). This is a significant episode, because it illustrates that *ethnic* Israel and *believing* Israel are not the same thing. This can be illustrated by a Venn diagram (see fig. 2.6). In this diagram, the dark area around Israel represents the surrounding nations, which are not followers of YHWH. Achan is a member of ethnic Israel, but he is not a follower of YHWH, and so he is judged like the surrounding nations. Joshua is both an ethnic Israelite and a follower of YHWH. Rahab is from the nations, but because she believes, she is included in Israel as well. The point here is that because God has made the covenant with the entire nation of Israel, the membership includes both those faithful and those unfaithful to God. They live together in the community, enjoying the blessings of the covenant and (later) experiencing the consequences of breaking the covenant as well. This concept is foundational for discussions in some of the Prophets. 

The covenant with Israel is modeled after common political covenants from the ancient Near East (ANE).<sup>7</sup> Table 2.5 is a simplified comparison between a Bronze Age ancient Near Eastern covenant and the covenant with Israel as presented in Exodus 20–25. Looking at the center column, we see that a typical covenant might begin with the great king identifying himself and announcing a covenant relationship. He then reviews what he has already done to benefit his subordinate or lesser king (vassal) within his territory. Perhaps he came to the aid of the subordinate king and helped defend him from attacking enemies. This historical event was the foundation for the covenant, which now requires obligations on the part of the vassal. These obligations would be clearly stated: for example, the vassal might be required to provide military or financial support on a regular basis. The king might also have ongoing obligations to the subordinate king. Once the covenant was ratified, it would be deposited in a sacred place or inscribed in a public location, where it was an ongoing witness to the necessity of obedience and faithfulness on the part of the subordinate. The covenant giver would invoke his deities as witnesses to the covenant who would ensure either blessings on the recipient (for faithfulness) or curses and consequences (for unfaithfulness).

**Table 2.5. Ancient Covenants and the Covenant with Israel**

	ANE Covenant	Covenant with Israel
<b>Identification of the covenant giver</b>	The king bestows a gracious relationship on a subordinate.	God identifies himself as the covenant maker, who saved Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exod. 20:2).
<b>Historical prologue</b>	The past is the foundation for present obligation; the king had already benefited the subordinate, who must now respond.	
<b>Obligations</b>	The subordinate has obligations to the king.	The “Ten Commandments” (Exod. 20:3–17, expanded in 20:22–23:19) are Israel’s obligations to God.
<b>Ratification ceremony</b>	The king and his subordinate put the covenant into effect.	The people agree to the covenant (Exod. 24:3) and perform a ritual act (24:5–8).
<b>Deposit and periodic public reading</b>	The covenant was also binding on the vassal’s subjects.	Moses is to deposit the Ten Commandments in the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:16).
<b>List of witnesses</b>	The king calls on the gods to witness the covenant and hold the subordinate accountable.	The witnesses to the covenant are nature (Deut. 30:19; 31:28), a song (31:19), and the people themselves (Josh. 24:22).
<b>Blessings and curses</b>	The king makes threats and promises to the subordinate, depending on obedience.	God promises blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Lev. 26; Deut. 28).

We see this same pattern in God's covenant with Israel. In Exodus 20:2, God begins by identifying himself and announcing that the historical basis of the covenant is something that he has already done when he rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. Note that the obligations come next, as a *response* to a relationship that is already established. Israel does not create the relationship with God if they obey. Because God has already benefited them, they must reflect God's character and live in a community that corresponds to his values. The Ten Commandments in 20:3–17 are a summary of the covenant obligations, expanded on in 20:22–23:19. These involve everything from the regulation of worship (20:25; 22:29) to servants in the household (21:1–6) to cursing one's father or mother (21:17) to prohibition of magic and sorcery (22:18) to sexual ethics (22:19) to social justice and care for the poor (23:6–8).

The people of Israel ratify the covenant first by verbal assent (Exod. 24:3) and then by a ritual act involving the blood of a sacrificed animal (24:5–8). The people say, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." Moses then takes blood from the animals; half he throws on the altar, and the other half he throws on the people. The Levites deposit the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments (symbolic of the entire covenant) into the ark of the covenant as an enduring reminder of Israel's responsibility before God (Exod. 25:16; 40:20). In an ancient Near Eastern situation, a king can call on the gods to be witnesses to the covenant. But this covenant is between God (the only God!) and Israel, so who shall serve as witnesses? In Deuteronomy, God calls on heaven and earth as symbolic witnesses because they will last from generation to generation (30:19; 31:28). Moses also teaches the people a song as a witness to remind them of the commitment they have made (31:19). Later, in the book of Joshua, the people renew the covenant, and Joshua states that the people themselves are witnesses (Josh. 24:22).

The last component of the covenant is the blessings and curses. God first announces the blessings for obedience (Lev. 26:3–13; Deut. 28:1–14) and then the curses for disobedience (Lev. 26:14–39; Deut. 28:15–68). Table 2.6 presents a comparison of the passages. They contain distinctive blessings and curses, but there is also substantial overlap. Note the proportions: there is a total of twenty-five verses given to blessings, but sixty-eight verses (more than twice as many) given to detailed and troubling curses. Unfortunately, Israel will eventually break this covenant and experience all these curses, including land that does not produce food, defeat by enemies, cannibalism of their own children, and exile in foreign lands.

There is an awareness within Deuteronomy that the people will not successfully keep the covenant. The problem is that their hearts are inherently

**Table 2.6. Covenant Blessings and Curses**

Leviticus		Blessings	Deuteronomy
26:4	Fruitful agriculture	Blessed womb and agriculture	28:3–6, 11
26:5	Long harvests		
26:6	Peace in the land		
26:7–8	Victory over enemies	Victory over enemies	28:7, 10
26:10	Plentiful food		
26:11–13	God’s presence with them	Holiness before God	28:9
		Economic prosperity and power	28:12–13

Leviticus		Curses	Deuteronomy
26:16a	Panic and diseases	Pestilence and diseases	28:21–22, 27, 35
		Madness, blindness, confusion	28:28–29
26:16b	Vain agricultural efforts		
26:17	Defeat by enemies	Defeat by enemies	28:25–26
26:19–20	Unproductive land	Unproductive land	28:16–19, 23–24
		Curses and confusion until death	28:20
26:22	Wild beasts		
26:25–26	Sword, plague, and famine		
		Abducted wives, children, animals	28:30–33
26:29	Cannibalism of their own children	Cannibalism of their own children	28:53–57
		Unproductive land	28:38–40
26:30	Religious sites destroyed		
26:31–33	Ruined cities and exile	Exiled children	28:41
26:34–35	Desolate land	Desolate land	28:42
26:36–39	Fear before enemies	Submission to foreigners	28:43–44
		Defeat by enemies	28:48–52
		Diseases that kill	28:58–63
		Exile to foreign lands	28:64–68

faulty. What is needed is a change of heart, an internal transformation that will enable them to obey. Note the following verses:

But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. (29:4)

This people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them. (31:16)

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.  
(10:16)

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (30:6)

The ominous prediction of Israel's unfaithfulness makes clear that it will not be a question of the nation figuring out a way to be better; they will need a substantial transformation of their hearts. In the meantime, they will fail and break this covenant. However, there is hope if they "return to the LORD" (30:2). Leviticus 26:41–42 says: "If then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land." We will see in the course of our study of the Prophets that this is one of their fundamental messages to Israel. Their only hope in the midst of bitter consequences and death is repentance and wholehearted return to God. And yet they will need God's intervention to do even that.

The sign of God's covenant with Israel is the Sabbath. When God introduces the covenant with the Ten Commandments, he instructs Israel to keep the Sabbath day as holy. Of the ten commands in this list, the command to keep the Sabbath is accompanied by the most extensive elaboration: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work. . . . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exod. 20:9–11). Later in the book of Exodus, God states that the Sabbath is the sign of this covenant with Israel: "Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations" (31:13). He continues, "The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever" (31:16). This is such an important command that it is mentioned forty-two times from Exodus to Deuteronomy. Once again, it is not a miraculous sign. Rather, a period of time is designated by God as an enduring reminder that the people belong to God. The use of Sabbath as a sign and representation of the entire covenant helps explain why some of the prophets focus such attention on Sabbath as a marker of who is truly a follower of YHWH (see, e.g., Isa. 56:2–6 or Ezek. 20:12).