

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS: What do the Stars Really Tell Us?

THE COVENANTS AND THEIR HEAVENLY WITNESSES

1A. Introduction

- 1b. The covenants of the OT are central to all of biblical theology. They are, as Craig Blaising notes, the vehicle God used “to formalize divine promises and blessings.”¹
- 2b. In other words, in order to understand God’s plan for the ages—his historical redemptive plan for mankind—we must understand the covenants, for they are the means by which he has determined to deliver his promises and blessings.
- 3b. Yet an unexpected and understudied thread binds these covenants together. In each major covenant passage, the sun, moon, and stars perform a crucial role—they are witnesses to the divine covenants and guarantors of the promises.

2A. The Noahic Covenant

- 1b. In many ways, the OT covenant system rests upon the foundation of the Noahic Covenant.²
- 2b. The announcement of the Noahic Covenant constitutes the first explicit use of the term “covenant” in Scripture (Gen 6:18) and the establishment of the covenant occurs just following the global judgment of the flood.
- 3b. The universal catastrophic event of the flood is central to the covenant promises that follow.
 - 1c. All terrestrial life on earth was obliterated (Gen 6:21-23)

¹ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Bridgepoint Books, 1993), 128-29.

² Paul R. Williamson, “Covenant,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 141.

- 2c. Torrential and tectonic activity effectively reconfigured the surface of the earth.³
 - 3c. The flood dramatically changed the earth—life on it would never be the same again.
 - 4c. For those who perished in the watery torrent, the judgment was literally the end of the world
 - 5c. For the 8 individuals held up aboard the ark, the flood represented the near dismantling of the divine promise.
- 4b. Genesis 8:21-22 comes at a critical time in the flood narrative. Following Noah's exit of the ark and the offering of a burnt offering, God initiates the universal promise of the Noahic Covenant by outlining in broad fashion what he will develop more specifically in Gen 9:9-17.

Genesis 8:21-22 Yahweh smelled the soothing aroma; and Yahweh said to himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."

- 5b. It is clear from the text that the flood did not change man's fallen state—he was just as sinful as he had been before the flood (cf. Gen 6:5-7).
- 6b. But the thrust of God's assertion is that judgment would not be the ultimate end of man. Instead, God was determined to ultimately bless mankind.
- 7b. The Noahic Covenant ensures God's ultimate blessing on humanity by confirming "the divine intention expressed in creation (Gen 1-2) that there be an earth inhabited by life, filled with a humanity in communion with God."⁴
- 8b. "The world had not been restored to its pristine, pre-Fall condition. Rather, it is still marred by human sinfulness, significantly described in the same terms that previously provided the rationale for the deluge (Gen 6:5); what earlier explained the necessity of the flood now highlights the necessity of the covenant that God is about to establish. Thus understood, this postdiluvian covenant (Gen 8:20-9:17) reaffirms God's original creational intent, which the flood had placed in abeyance and which humanity's inherent sinfulness would otherwise continue to place in jeopardy."⁵

³ William D. Barrick, "Noah's Flood and Its Geological Implications," in *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*, ed. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008), 275-78.

⁴ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 128.

⁵ Williamson, "Covenant," 140.

- 9b. God connects this promise of ultimate blessing to the very order of nature.
- 10b. The Noachic Covenant will remain as long as the earth does. This qualifies God's later statement that the covenant will be "everlasting."
- 11b. The essence of the covenant is that God will not alter the order of nature until the covenant is fulfilled. The continuing cycles of nature would and still do confirm that Yahweh remains faithful to his covenant. Just like the rainbow served as a sign of the covenant promise, the regular solar and lunar activity would ensure that the day/night cycle would continue, guaranteeing the perpetuity of cold/heat, summer/winter, and seedtime/harvest.
- 12b. In other words, central to the promise is that God would never again allow his plans to "be interrupted by a suspension of the natural order."⁶
- 13b. Even though localized events (e.g., extensive droughts, devastating floods, perpetual arctic darkness, etc.) may appear to cancel the promise, the universal nature of the promise (Gen 9:9-10) guarantees the cycles on a global scale.

3A. The Abrahamic Covenant

- 1b. The Abrahamic Covenant sets forth the first significant progress in God's redemptive plan.
- 2b. In scope, it stands in stark contrast with the Noachic Covenant, which was made with Noah, his family, and every creature that exited the ark. The Abrahamic Covenant, on the other hand, was made with Abraham and his descendants.
- 3b. The ultimate goal of the promise, however, was worldwide blessing, just like the Noachic Covenant.
- 4b. The covenant is structured around three important elements: land, seed, and blessing.
- 5b. The second of these elements—the seed promise—is the element that God linked with the heavenly bodies.

Genesis 15:1-5 After these things the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." Abram said, "O Sovereign Yahweh, what will you give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since you have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of Yahweh came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And he took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

⁶ Ibid.

- 6b. Verse 5 is especially significant, for it follows Abram's question regarding the validity of Yahweh's promise. So God turns Abram's eyes upward to the heavens.
- 7b. The vast, uncountable stars serve two important roles in this exercise:
- 1c. They vividly illustrate the innumerable descendants that God will give to Abram. By turning his eyes upward, God provided Abram with a tangible means of contemplating the *magnitude* of the promise. Abram *couldn't* count the stars, and that was the point. The promise was far greater than Abram would fathom.
 - 2c. They confirm Yahweh's faithfulness to deliver as he had sworn. By turning Abram's eyes upward, God provided Abram a tangible means of contemplating the *reliability* of the promise. Abram couldn't count the stars, but *Yahweh* could. Since the God of creation is also the God of promise, "the 'seed' promise is as certain as the reliability of God."⁷
- 8b. The prophet Isaiah reinforced the validity of God's promise of restoration by reminding his readers of God's sovereign power, seen most prominently in creation: "Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, the one who leads forth their host by number, he calls them all by name; because of the greatness of his might and the strength of his power, not one of them is missing" (Isa 40:26; cf. 40:22; 42:4; 44:24; 45:12, 18; 51:13; Jer 33:2; etc.).
- 9b. There are echoes of God's promise to Abram detectable in Isaiah's words. The stars communicate to exiled Judah what they did to Abraham—if Yahweh can create and then control every aspect of creation, then he can certainly work to order time, space, and history in that creation toward the ultimate outworking of his covenant promises.
- 10b. The Genesis 15:5 promise becomes increasingly important throughout Israel's history:
- 1c. God uses this same imagery when reaffirming his promise with Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:17; 26:4).
 - 2c. It shows up from the lips of Moses following Israel's apostasy in Exodus 32:13.
 - 3c. Moses encourages Israel to consider God's faithfulness to the nation by reminding them that "Yahweh your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day like the stars of heaven in number" (Deut 1:10; cf. 10:22).
 - 4c. Moses warned Israel that covenant treachery would result in harsh judgment and a dramatic decrease in number, even though "you were as numerous as the stars of heaven" (Deut 28:62).

⁷ Keith H. Essex, "The Abrahamic Covenant," *MSJ* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 200.

- 5c. David abstained from numbering certain portions of the population on account of the fact that God promised to “multiply Israel as the stars of heaven” (1 Chron 27:23).
- 6c. Israel references it as they confess their sin during Ezra’s spiritual reform (Neh 9:23).
- 11b. Often, a second motif occurs in tandem with the stars—Israel’s numbers are linked to the innumerable sands of the seashore and the dust of the earth (Gen 13:16; 28:14; 32:12; Num 23:10; 2 Sam 17:11; 1 Kgs 4:20; 2 Chron 1:9; Isa 10:22; 48:19; Hos 1:10).
- 12b. The two appear together in Genesis 22:17: “Indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.”
- 13b. Taken together, they confirm the “seed” promise on a cosmic scale. They both illustrate the magnitude of Abraham’s promise and work together to confirm it. Both the heavens (i.e., stars) and the earth (i.e., sand/dust)—the entire creation—serve to verify Yahweh’s commitment to increase and bless the seed of Abraham.

4A. **The Mosaic Covenants**

- 1b. The Mosaic Covenant differs in several respects from the other covenants.
- 2b. While the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants correspond most closely to ANE royal grant treaties (unconditional promises to a servant for faithful service), the Mosaic Covenant more closely resembles a Hittite suzerainty treaty—a contract that governed the relationship between a servant and a conquering nation.
- 3b. These treaties often followed a set form and structure, including a list of deities that would serve as witnesses against the servant state should they break the treaty in any way.
- 4b. In similar fashion, the Mosaic Covenant also includes a list of witnesses, though they are stripped of any divinity. Throughout the exposition of these, five different witnesses are identified who would testify in the event of Israel’s treachery:

1. The song of Moses (Deut 31:19, 21)
2. The book of the law (Deut 31:26)
3. The people of Israel (Josh 24:22)
4. The stone erected at Shechem (Josh 24:27)
5. The heavens and the earth (Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; cf. 32:1)

- 5b. Quite appropriately, the heavens and earth are included in the list of witnesses (as they often were in ANE treaties), and they appear more times than any other on the list.

- 6b. No other witness was as obvious or ubiquitous as the heavens and the earth, for they stood day and night as ever-present witnesses, continually reminding the people of the covenant with Yahweh and ready to testify against them.
- 7b. Likewise, the heavens and earth were invoked as covenant witnesses throughout Israel's history when the nation fell into disobedience.
- 8b. The prophets often addressed the nation as a prosecutor, and they introduced their speech by appealing to the heavens and the earth as witnesses against Israel, the defendant.
- 1c. Psalm 50 expresses this form clearly through divine accusation against God's people. Before testifying of Israel's empty, hypocritical worship, Yahweh calls the original covenant witnesses to observe the court proceedings.

Psalm 50:4-6 He summoned the heavens above, and the earth, to judge his people: "Gather my godly ones to me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." And the heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge.

- 2c. Isaiah begins his prophecy with an appeal to the heavens from Yahweh, who was both the plaintiff and the judge in the lawsuit:

Isaiah 1:2 Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for Yahweh speaks, "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against me."

- 3c. Jeremiah also appeals to the heavens as witnesses to the idolatry that was prevalent in Judah during his time:

Jeremiah 2:11-13 "Has a nation changed gods when they are not gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, and shudder, be very desolate," declares Yahweh. "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water."

- 4c. In both these instances, Israel is under indictment for covenant treachery. They are characterized as rebellious sons and idolatrous fools, and heaven and earth both witness their behavior and respond in terrified shock.

5A. The Davidic Covenant

- 1b. The Davidic Covenant constitutes a pledge made by God in which he applies the aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant specifically to the house of David.
- 2b. In the Abrahamic Covenant, Yahweh had promised Abraham "first, an innumerable progeny through natural generation...; second, a guarantee of historical continuity by means of divine protection...; third, an everlasting and irrevocable title to a definite

land area on earth...; and fourth, a final world supremacy through which ‘great’ divine blessings would flow out to all mankind.”⁸

- 3b. In the Davidic Covenant, God reiterates these “regal rights and privileges” while providing that “these covenanted rights will now be attached permanently to the historic house and succession of David; and also that by God’s grace these rights, even if historically interrupted for a season, will at least in a *future kingdom* be restored to the nation in perpetuity with no further possibility of interruption.”⁹
- 4b. While the principle expression of the Davidic Covenant occurs in 2 Samuel 7:8-16, there are several texts that supplement the details of the covenant and introduce the heavenly bodies as a theme.

1c. Psalm 72

- 1d. Solomon authored this psalm as a petition for the blessing and prosperity of the Davidic ruler.
- 2d. It outlines the character and deeds of the ideal Davidic king. He is to uphold righteousness and justice and protect the poor and vulnerable from oppression (vv. 1-4, 12-14). He is to have permanent, global rule (vv. 5-11) marked by fertility and peace in the land and fame among the nations (vv. 16-17).
- 3d. In verse 17, the psalmist uses the enduring quality of the sun to accent the blessing of longevity of this kingly individual: “May his name endure forever; may his name increase as long as the sun *shines*.”

2c. Psalm 89

- 1d. This is the most significant text for the Davidic Covenant outside of 2 Samuel 7, and the richest source of cosmic imagery.
- 2d. Here, the psalmist seeks to resolve his confidence in Yahweh’s promises to David—that he would have “a continuing dynasty (v. 4), victory over his enemies (v. 21-23), and dominion over the whole earth (v. 25)”¹⁰—with the present collapse and dismantling of the Davidic dynasty.
- 3d. Cosmology has a prominent place in the psalm. Yahweh’s faithfulness is established in the heavens (v. 2), which praise his wonders (v. 5) and, along with the earth, belong solely to him (v. 11).

⁸ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 155.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰ Michael A. Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant,” *MSJ* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 244.

- 4d. This kind of language is preparatory for the covenant matters to come. The psalmist portrays Yahweh as sovereign creator, incomparable to anyone or anything. His absolute command over the cosmos demonstrates his divine ability to fulfill what he has promised, and his very creation reflects his commitment to these promises.
- 5d. Beginning in verse 20, the Davidic Covenant is more fully articulated, but the link between the covenant and the cosmos, before only implicit, is made exceedingly explicit:

Psalm 89:29-37 So I will establish his descendants forever and his throne as the days of heaven. If his sons forsake my law and do not walk in my judgments, if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes. But I will not break off my loyal love from him, nor deal falsely in my faithfulness. My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of my lips. Once I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David! His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before me. I shall be established like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.

- 6d. The text makes clear that even though disobedience on the part of David's sons will be met with harsh discipline, that will not constitute a breach of covenant (vv. 31-35). Not even the infidelity of David's offspring can cancel God's commitment, and he guarantees his oath by the testimony of a faithful witness.
- 7d. The identity of that witness has been debated among scholars, but the most natural interpretation is that the witness refers backward to the "moon" just mentioned. Here, the writer portrays the moon as a faithful "witness in the clouds."
- 8d. This text underscores two important points: (1) David's descendants will endure forever; (2) the moon will verify that fact by serving as a witness.

Both sun and moon stand before Yhwh (in the court in heaven) as true witnesses. They do that in two senses. They are witnesses to the undertaking that Yhwh is giving, like the heavens and the earth that Yhwh calls on as witnesses elsewhere. Usually Yhwh appeals to witnesses in an unfriendly way (e.g., Deut 31:28). Here the witnesses are there to testify in court on behalf of the people Yhwh is making a commitment to. They are also witnesses in the sense that they illustrate the nature of the commitment that Yhwh makes: the permanency of the Davidic monarchy will be the same as the permanency of sun and moon.¹¹

¹¹ John Goldingay, *Psalms—Volume 2: Psalms 42-89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 683.

- 9d. Thus, the enduring quality of the sun and moon emphasize the reliability of Yahweh's loyal, covenant faithfulness. In this vein, the words of Psalm 136:7-9 take on even greater significance:

To him who made the **great lights**,
 For his loyal love is everlasting:
 The **sun** to rule by day,
 For his loyal love is everlasting,
 The **moon** and **stars** to rule by night,
 For his loyal love is everlasting.

- 10d. Here, the repeated emphasis on God's everlasting loyalty is connected to his creation of the "great lights" and their function in the sky as rulers of day and night.

3c. Jeremiah 33:17-26

- 1d. Before describing the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet gives his readers one last word of encouragement about God's plans for the future of this apostate nation.
- 2d. Following the promise of the New Covenant (31:31-35), Jeremiah describes how God's promise of ultimate restoration for Israel and Judah are intricately tied to the reestablishment of the Davidic dynasty and the Levitical priesthood.
- 3d. At a time of gross national instability—when the threat of Babylonian exile loomed large on the minds of everyone—Jeremiah calms the hearts of those fearful of the dreaded possibility that present circumstances might bring an end once for all to the nation and the Davidic dynasty. Jeremiah promises that this will never happen, and he reinforces that promise by securing it to the permanency of creation:

Jeremiah 33:17-26 For thus says Yahweh, "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 before me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to prepare sacrifices continually." The word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah, saying, "Thus says Yahweh, 'If you can break my covenant for the day and my covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, then my covenant may also be broken with David my servant so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levitical priests, my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be counted and the sand of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister to me.' Thus says Yahweh, 'If my covenant for day and night stand not, and the fixed patterns of heaven and earth I have not established, then I would reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant, not taking from his descendants rulers over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them.'"

- 4d. There are obvious covenantal allusions in this statement:
 - 1e. Where else but the Noahic Covenant would Jeremiah reference a “covenant for the day” and a “covenant for the night?” This harkens back to Genesis 8:22 and God’s promise of ultimate blessing which he anchored in the very fixed order of nature.
 - 2e. Where else but the Abrahamic Covenant would Jeremiah reference counting “the host of heaven” or “the sand of the sea”? It was, after all, to Abraham that Yahweh first promised an innumerable lineage comparable only to the stars of heaven and the sand of the seashore (Gen 22:17).
- 5d. The intent of these references is abundantly clear: the creation “fixed” by God himself (v. 25), the counting of the uncountable—they all stress the *impossibility* of the Davidic line’s extinction and the end of the Levitical priesthood.
- 6d. By referencing the Noahic Covenant, the prophet affirms that the reliability of the Davidic and Priestly covenants is set in God’s plan of ultimate blessing.
- 7d. By referencing the Abrahamic Covenant, the prophet stressed the progress of the Abrahamic Covenant blessing through the perpetuation of the Davidic dynasty and the mediatory role of the Levitical priesthood.

6A. The New Covenant

- 1b. The New Covenant is touted by many as “Jeremiah’s greatest contribution to biblical truth.”¹²
- 2b. It is located at the heart of the “Book of Consolation” (Jer 30-33), a section in which the prophet offers a ray of light in the midst of exceedingly dark times for Judah.
- 3b. The nation faced imminent exile at the hands of the Babylonians, and Jeremiah’s career as a prophet of Yahweh involved the proclamation of Judah’s gross apostasy and covenant treachery.
- 4b. But Judah’s darkest hour would not constitute her final hour. A great and glorious future awaited her, a future built around a relationship with Yahweh established in a *new* covenant.

¹² Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:574.

- 5b. This was not a restoration to the old order (Jer 31:32). Israel's wicked, deceitful heart (Jer 17:9), which kept her from covenant faithfulness, would be replaced by a new heart, inscribed with Yahweh's law (Jer 31:33).
- 6b. It would be a relationship characterized by forgiven sin and intimate fellowship with God (Jer 31:34).
- 7b. Yet often this principle passage (Jer 31:31-34) eclipses the verses that immediately follow it. The New Covenant is just as much about the perpetuity of Israel as it is about a new relationship with Yahweh, and the verses that follow are critical to the promises of forgiveness and internal transformation set forth in verses 31-34.

Jeremiah 31:35-37 Thus says Yahweh, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; Yahweh of hosts is his name: "If this fixed order departs from before me," declares Yahweh, "then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before me forever." Thus says Yahweh, "If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done," declares Yahweh.

- 8b. The similarities with Jeremiah 33:19-26 are obvious. Both involve what Huffmon calls an "'impossible assurance' in which an impossible protasis prepares an apodosis expressing the reliability and endurability of God's favor."¹³
- 9b. Jeremiah had used this type of rhetoric negatively throughout the earlier portions of the book to stress Judah's moral emptiness (Jer 5:1), incapacity for self-transformation (Jer 13:23), and utter lack of faithfulness (Jer 2:32; 8:7).
- 10b. Just at the time when his readers expected a pronouncement of divine judgment and final termination of relationship, Jeremiah employs this same device to reveal the seemingly impossible reality of divine forgiveness and national continuance.
- 11b. Divine sovereignty dominates the text. It is Yahweh, creator and sustainer of the cosmos, who promises to sustain and restore Judah. His control of Israel's future matches his control of the created order so that the universe serves as a perfect demonstration of his sovereign power.
- 12b. Yet Jeremiah also clearly references the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants:

The rhetoric of 31:35-37 has few precise parallels. The appeal to the sun, moon, and stars, which are so predictable, and to the extent of the heavens and the depths of the earth, which are so beyond our count or our reach, provides the basis for the divine assurance that Israel cannot "cease" or be "repudiated" by God. In a similar way, the durability of the sun and the

¹³ Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Impossible: God's Words of Assurance in Jer 31:35-37," in *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes*, ed. Stephen L. Cook and S. C. Winter, ASOR 4 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 178.

moon underscores the perpetuation of the line of David (Ps 89:36-38), and the immeasurability of the stars, of the dust of the earth, or the sand of the seashore can reinforce the promise of uncountable descendants to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob..., a promise reiterated in Hos 2:1 [ET 1:10].¹⁴

- 13b. Just like with the Davidic Covenant, the New Covenant is rooted in God's intention to ultimately bless the world, a blessing routed through the seed of one man—Abraham.
- 14b. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant promise—not just promises of innumerable descendants but of universal blessing—rests upon the perpetuation of national Israel. If Israel as a nation is rejected, then the promised blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant mediated through his descendants will no longer be valid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 177.