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The Hebrew Root of Covenant

Genesis 26:28

They said, “We see plainly that the Lord has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you.

We will begin this study with the Hebrew word for a "covenant," which is ברית (b'riyt, Strong's #1285).

This noun is derived from the verb ברה (Barah, Strong's #1262), which means "to select the best."

Samuel 17:8

He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me.

In this passage the Hebrew verb ברה is used for the choosing of the best man to fight Goliath. This word can also mean to eat, in the sense of selecting, such as we see in the following verse.

2 Samuel 13:6

So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, “Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand.”

The Hebrew language is a root oriented language, meaning that every Hebrew word is derived from a root word and that root word is the foundation to other Hebrew words. Each word derived from one root will be closely related in meaning to all the other words derived from the same root.

In the case of the word ברית (b'riyt) we found that it was derived from the root verb ברה (barah), but also derived from this verbal root are the nouns ברות (barut, Strong's #1267) meaning "choice meat" and בריה (bir'yah, Strong's #1274) meaning "fattened."

Livestock that will be slaughtered are fed special grains to make them fat and thereby making the meat of the fattened livestock the choicest.

So how is fattened choice meat related to the word for "covenant?"

The phrase "make a covenant," such as we saw in the verse that began this study, appears eighty times in the Hebrew Bible and in every instance, it is the Hebrew phrase כרת ברית (karat b'riyt), which literally means "cut a covenant."

A covenant was instituted by the two parties of the covenant who would take a fattened animal, the best of the flock or herd, and "cut" it into two pieces.

Then the two parties of the covenant would pass through the pieces symbolizing their dedication to the covenant and by this action are saying, *"If I do not hold to the agreements of this covenant, you can do to me what we did to this animal."*

This methodology of "making" a covenant is clearly recorded in Jeremiah 34:18-20.

Jeremiah 34:18-20

And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts— the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

With this understanding of a covenant, we can better understand what is going on in Genesis chapter 15.

Genesis 15:9-10

He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.

Genesis 15:17-18

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD (YHWH) made (Hebrew - karat) a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

YHWH is cutting a covenant with Abram however, Abram does not pass through the pieces, only the pot and torch, representations of Yahweh himself, pass through the pieces. Because Abram did not pass through the pieces, the actions of Abram, or his descendants, are not a condition of the covenant. The only person responsible for the fulfilling of this covenant is YHWH and YHWH alone.

Besides this covenant, YHWH has made several other covenants with his people, such as the one he made with Noah and his descendants (Genesis 6:18, Genesis 9:9) and the one he made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 24:8

And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made (Hebrew – karat) with you in accordance with all these words.

Unlike the unconditional covenants that YHWH made with Noah and Abram, this covenant will be upheld only on the condition that Israel obeys the words of YHWH.

Leviticus 26:14-20

“But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you. And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.

And in Deuteronomy 31 YHWH foretells of the day when Israel will break this covenant by following after other gods.

Deuteronomy 31:20

For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant.

It is interesting to note that when Israel does break this covenant, YHWH "cuts" Israel into "two" nations, Israel and Judah, just as we mentioned as conditions of breaking a covenant.

Again, as part of the cutting of a covenant, two parties of the covenant would pass through the pieces symbolizing their dedication to the covenant and by this action are saying, *"If I do not hold to the agreements of this covenant, you can do to me what we did to this animal."*

But YHWH promises that he will make a new covenant with the children of Israel and he will unite these two nations into one nation again.

Ezekiel 37:22

And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms.

Jeremiah 31:31-33

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord (YHWH), when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord (YHWH). For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

If this topic interested you, and perhaps even raised more questions, we might suggest checking out our teaching titled, The Threshold Covenant.

We pray that you have been blessed by this teaching, and remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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