

# The Scriptures as a Covenant: A Legal Trust Document Between God and Humanity

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The idea of the Christian Bible as a covenant (Hebrew *berit*; Greek *diathēkē*)—a binding legal agreement or trust document between God (the Testator) and humanity (the beneficiaries)—is deeply rooted in both Scripture and historical theology. The term *diathēkē* appears 33 times in the Greek New Testament and is translated alternately as “covenant” or “testament” (as in Old/New Testament). In Greco-Roman law, a *diathēkē* was a last will and testament, an irrevocable trust that took effect only upon the death of the testator. This legal metaphor is explicitly invoked in Hebrews 9:15–17:

“For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant [*diathēkē*], that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant... For where a will [*diathēkē*] exists, there must also be the death of the one who made it. A will is valid only after the person has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is still alive.”

This passage frames the entire biblical narrative as a divine trust document with:

- God as the Testator/Grantor,
- Christ’s death as the legal trigger for inheritance,
- Believers as beneficiaries of an eternal inheritance.

Below is a historical and scriptural survey of how this covenant-trust evolved from the Old Testament (OT) to the New Testament (NT).

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## I. Old Testament: The Foundational Covenant-Trusts

### 1. The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 6–9) – A Universal Trust

- Legal Form: Unilateral, unconditional grant.
- Parties: God and “all living creatures” (Gen 9:10).
- Terms: God pledges never again to destroy the earth by flood; the rainbow is the legal seal (Gen 9:13–17).
- Trust Language: “I now establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you” (Gen 9:9). The perpetuity clause (“for all generations to come”) mirrors irrevocable trusts.

### 2. The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12, 15, 17) – A Hereditary Trust

- Legal Form: Unilateral promise with a cutting ceremony (*berit* = “to cut”; Gen 15:9–18).
- Parties: God and Abraham’s seed.

- Terms: Land, descendants, blessing to all nations (Gen 12:1–3; 15:18; 17:7).
- Trust Language: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants” (Gen 17:7). Circumcision is the trustee’s sign (Gen 17:11).

### 3. The Mosaic/Sinaitic Covenant (Exodus 19–24) – A Conditional Suzerainty Treaty

- Legal Form: Bilateral, suzerain-vassal treaty (mirroring 2nd-millennium BC Hittite treaties).
- Structure (Exod 20–23):
  1. Preamble (Exod 20:1)
  2. Historical Prologue (Exod 20:2)
  3. Stipulations (Ten Commandments + Book of the Covenant)
  4. Ratification by blood (Exod 24:7–8)
  5. Deposit of treaty document in the Ark (Exod 25:16; Deut 31:26)
- Trust Language: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then... you will be my treasured possession” (Exod 19:5). The tablets are the trust charter.

### 4. The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7) – A Royal Grant Trust

- Legal Form: Unconditional royal grant (common in ancient Near East).
- Terms: Eternal throne for David’s line (2 Sam 7:12–16).
- Trust Language: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me” (v. 16). This becomes the messianic trust fund fulfilled in Christ (Luke 1:32–33).

## II. Intertestamental & Second Temple Judaism: The Covenant as Legal Document

- Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., Damascus Document) treat the Torah as a binding legal code with covenant curses for breach.
- Philo of Alexandria (1st c. AD) uses Greek legal terminology, calling the Torah a *diathēkē*—a testamentary disposition.
- Josephus describes the Mosaic covenant as a *synthekē* (treaty) with God as the sovereign lawgiver.

## III. New Testament: The Covenant-Trust Fulfilled and Expanded

### 1. Jesus as the Testator & Mediator (Hebrews 8–9)

- Hebrews 9:15 explicitly uses Greco-Roman will terminology: Christ’s death activates the new *diathēkē*.

- Analogy: Just as a human will requires death to distribute inheritance, Christ’s death releases the eternal inheritance (Heb 9:16–17).

## 2. The New Covenant Promised in the OT (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts... No longer will they teach... ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me.”

- Legal Upgrade:
  - Old: External stone tablets → New: Internal heart inscription.
  - Old: Mediated by priests → New: Direct access via the Spirit.
  - Old: Repeated animal sacrifices → New: Once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

## 3. The Lord’s Supper: Ratification of the New Trust (Luke 22:20)

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

- Blood Ratification echoes Exodus 24:8 but now with Christ’s own blood as the seal.

## 4. Pauline Theology: From Slavery to Sonship (Galatians 3–4)

- Galatians 3:15–17: Uses Roman law to argue the Abrahamic covenant (a *diathēkē*) cannot be annulled by the later Mosaic law.
- Galatians 3:26–29: New Covenant believers in Jesus Christ are “sons of Abraham” by virtue of their Abrahamic faith.
- Galatians 4:1–7: Believers move from minor heirs under guardians (Law) to adult sons receiving the full inheritance through Christ.

## IV. Theological Synthesis: Evolution of the Spiritual Trust

Aspect	Old Testament	New Testament
Nature	Conditional (Mosaic) + Unconditional (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic)	Unconditional grace through faith
Mediator	Moses, priests, prophets	Christ (the “one mediator,” 1 Timothy 2:5)
Law Location	External (stone tablets)	Internal (written on hearts, Jeremiah 31:33)
Sacrifice	Repeated animal offerings	Once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:10)
Scope	Primarily Israel	All nations (Gentile inclusion, Ephesians 2:11–22)
Legal Status	Active but provisional	Fulfilled and superseded (Hebrews 8:13)

## V. Patristic & Medieval Confirmation

- Augustine (On the Spirit and the Letter): The OT was a “pedagogue” leading to the NT trust’s maturity.
  - Thomas Aquinas (Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 98): The OT law was a temporary trust administrator; the NT is the final disposition.
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### Conclusion: The Bible as God’s Last Will and Testament

The Christian canon is structured as a divine trust document:

1. OT: Establishes the trust corpus (promises, law, land, seed).
2. Christ’s Death: Triggers the distribution of the inheritance.
3. NT: Spells out the terms of enjoyment (faith, not works) and the eternal estate (adoption, resurrection, new creation).

As beneficiaries, believers are called to:

- Read the will (Scripture),
- Trust the Testator (faith in Christ),
- Live as heirs (obedience from the heart).

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” (1 Peter 1:3–4)

**Notes:**