

Read the following answer and produce a concise summary that will show the overall thrust.

The nature and significance of the covenant

In Genesis, Chapter 12, God made a covenant with Abraham (Abram) known as the Abrahamic Covenant: a covenant is an agreement or contract. The covenant asked Abraham to 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you'. In return for Abraham's obedience, God would make Abraham into 'a great nation', 'blessed', make his 'name great', and finally, stated that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

The idea of a covenant relationship was not something new, as making covenants between parties was regular practice in the ancient world. Covenants were also made for a variety of reasons, including for strength, protection or to keep people obedient.

The Abrahamic covenant was initiated by the word of God: it was authoritative and full of promise and is very significant for Judaism as it would later establish the Jewish community within the protection of God. For some, the significance of the requirement for Abram to leave his homeland was a symbol of him moving away from the idolatrous practices of his family. It also showed that God had chosen Abram to be a spiritual as well as a physical leader. The idea of monotheism is very important for Judaism.

By accepting the terms of the covenant, the relationship between the Jewish people and God was established. As a result of his faith, God changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning 'the father of many': 'No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.' (Genesis 17:5)

The Abrahamic covenant is what is known as an unconditional covenant, which is an agreement between two parties, but when only *one* of the parties is required to do something. In other words, Abraham simply had to obey God, but it was God that would perform the necessary details. The covenant signifies Abraham's obedient actions as a test of faith and trust in God, and that God will deliver on the promises made. It was also an everlasting covenant.

According to the Torah, all Abraham was commanded by God to do in relation to this covenant was circumcise himself, all the male members of his household, as well as all of his descendants. This,



according to the book of Genesis, was to be a sign of the covenant relationship between God and the 'chosen people' and another symbol of Abraham's bond to it. It states in Genesis 17, 'This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.'

Circumcision was to be an outward, physical sign in the flesh of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, and was the first commandment specific to the Jews. The Torah also says that: 'Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.' (Genesis 17:14)

The ceremony of brit milah is still practised amongst Jews today, and is an important event for the Jewish family. Brit milah is significant for many Jews because it is seen as the act which makes one a member of the Jewish community. Such is the importance of circumcision that not carrying out this particular sign of the covenant would signify, in some forms of Judaism, that the un-circumcised would no longer be considered to be part of the covenant community.

In summary, the covenant relationship between God and Abraham is unique. For the first time, there is a two-way relationship between God and man with God doing something for Abraham, and yet Abraham is not being required to do anything specific in return for God. As B W Anderson writes, '...the covenant was based upon the deity's oath, not upon human performance.'

Summary

The ancient practice of covenant making was the model used to describe the special relationship, initiated by God, and unique between God and the Jewish people. The covenant was unique in that it was unconditional, based upon faith and arguably the idea of absolute monotheism. The sign of the covenant was circumcision. The notion of covenant and the practice of brit milah binds together the Jewish community and maintains this unique relationship with God.

Task: Read the following answer and produce a concise summary. Consider how your summary differs from others in the class and discuss whether any of the differences are significant.

The role of Maimonides in understanding Jewish scriptures

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204), better known as Maimonides or simply as Rambam, was a prominent medieval Jewish intellectual, theologian and philosopher. He was born in the Spanish city of Cordoba, and was the son of the city's rabbinical judge. In 1148, however, the family was forced to flee as a result of Muslim persecution. Maimonides first settled in Fez, Morocco in 1160 where he received his training in medicine, but then moved to Egypt where he became the leader of Cairo's Jewish community.

Maimonides is a significant figure within Judaism, but especially within the Orthodox tradition where his 'Thirteen Principles of Faith' are now widely held as obligatory beliefs. Robinson describes him as: '...one of the giants of Jewish thought... He wrote the definitive study of the 613 mitzvot, some of the most incisive commentaries on Talmud and Torah, and the most distinguished work on explicitly Jewish philosophy until this century.'

Robinson divides the works of Maimonides into two groups: the halakhic and the philosophical. The writings on Halakhah include his Commentary to the Mishnah, which he wrote whilst in his youth, and which contains the aforementioned Thirteen Principles of the Jewish Faith. His work also includes numerous letters and responsa that were written in answer to queries from Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean at a time when these communities were under great pressures to maintain their Jewish identity.

De Lange attests that Maimonides is associated particularly with one of the best known answers to the question 'what must a Jew believe?' In his commentary on the Mishnah he lists thirteen 'principles of our pure Torah and its foundations'. This list, now known as The Thirteen Principles of Faith, has come to be regarded as the most famous list of the principles of the Judaism. They are perhaps best seen as a sort of unofficial Jewish creed, and have made their way into the prayer book in two forms, as a creed beginning 'I believe with perfect faith that...' and as a hymn. The hymn, called Yigdal (meaning 'magnify') is sung as part of the opening of the morning service and also as part of the close of the evening service at the synagogue.

The Mishneh Torah consists of fourteen books, each one dealing with a separate subject in the Jewish



legal system. The contents of the fourteen books can be grouped into four major subject headings: on God and humankind; on the life of the individual; on religion and ritual law; and on civil and criminal law. Unterman describes the work as 'a major, some would say the major, contribution to the field of Jewish law'.

Maimonides' contribution to the history of Jewish studies is also significant for his belief that philosophical investigation should be an integral part of the Jewish faith. The Mishneh Torah was very different in style to what had gone before. Solomon claims that its most remarkable feature is the way in which Maimonides expounds Halakhah in terms of his ethical and philosophical convictions, for instance by interpreting the commandment to love God as including a call to engage in natural science and comprehend the wonders of creation. Furthermore, Solomon describes the short sections on cosmology and medicine as 'masterpieces of what nowadays would be thought of as popular science writing'.

Maimonides also rejected rabbinic laws that he considered to be based on superstition, belief in demons and magic, and was particularly outspoken in his rejection of astrology. Twersky reasons that, 'Maimonides is not constrained by Midrashic explanations; he ranges freely and imaginatively in aligning laws with the ethical-intellectual goals he has defined or in correlating them with the historical-sociological conditions he has reconstructed.'

(Extracts adapted from Helen Gwynne-Kinsey, Judaism)