

The Biblical Meaning Of Covenant

1. Introduction: The Meaning of The Word

The word 'covenant' is, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word 'berith' and is used some 286 times in various contexts. Whilst its active meaning is not difficult to understand from its contexts, yet the exact meaning of the term is not easy to ascertain. There are a number of views as to its literal meaning, and as to the principle of covenant as found in secular and religious literature. From various roots of berith it has been thought to derive from 'fetter' or 'obligation' or from eating at a meal which the two contracting parties ate, especially in the context of sacrifice offered to the deity or deities. Some trace it from the verbs 'to perceive' or 'to determine', the basic idea being 'vision'. However, the weight of scholarship comes down upon the idea of 'bond' relating to the root 'bara', that is 'to bind'.

As to the use of the word in Scripture it is not difficult to get the general idea, especially as it is used in many contexts of secular and religious nature. At the same time there were different grades of covenant. In one a person such as a king or ruler, in which case the ruler controls the covenant, and sets his condition. This is seen in Ezekiel 17:13 where the king of Babylon sets one of Zedekiah's seed in his place - under certain conditions. In this case there is a certain, though not full surrender of the liberty of the superior to the inferior. The inferior is the one who primarily benefits. Another covenant is that of parity in which both parties bind themselves by an oath such as with Laban and Jacob (Gen. 31:44-50). Similarly the covenants between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:25-32) and Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26:27-31) are parity covenants. There are also covenants in which one acts as the patron of the other. This would be God with Israel, but in the Biblical covenants God effects promissory covenants. He not only acts as patron but gives certain promises, and we will see, later, what these are and so define the nature of covenant in the biblical sense.

Generally, then, the idea of covenant is that of a pact, contract, arrangement or agreement. As we have seen these elements will vary in their nature and degree according to the kind of covenant made. Incidentally, the idiom was to 'cut a covenant' and there is an allusion to cutting both in Genesis 15:7ff and Jeremiah 34:18. Other terms are 'establish', 'enter a covenant', 'give', 'command', 'cause to enter', 'issue' and so on.

2. The Biblical Covenants

These covenants can be divided into two sorts,

- (a) Those between persons or peoples without particular reference to God, and
- (b) Those issuing from God, or made with God. Often those of the first kind may be sworn before God.

(i) Covenant In The O.T.

(a) Covenant Rituals

To understand covenant in the O.T. we must remember the social character of life in tribes, clans and peoples. Persons whilst being persons were very much members of their social unit, and so living outside any society, as a single individual, would have been looked upon with horror, dismay, and perhaps inability to understand. Hence even covenants between persons were made within the context of the society. Marriage, for example, was always a societal thing, and gained its strength by reason of this.

Roughly a covenant took the following form:-

- (a) A statement of ideas was agreed upon (Gen. 26:29, 31:50-52).
- (b) The agreement was sealed with and by an oath (Gen. 26:31, 31:48-52).
- (c) The invocation of a curse was often present to ensure it would not be broken. This was not always explicitly stated, but as in the case of Laban and Jacob it is clearly inferred (Gen. 31:51-53). In the covenant between God and Israel it is made very clear (Deut. 27:15-26).
- (d) The covenant was ratified by some external act, often a ritual. It is suggested that the first human covenants were those of drinking the other's blood, primarily to ensure an unbreakable bond of brotherhood. Gen. 31:54 speaks of a meal shared, and this probably included both parties to the contract. Certainly in Israel the covenant was sealed with the ritual of blood-letting and sprinkling, and the sacrifices offered were almost certainly eaten in fellowship with Yahweh. This principle is inferred in I Cor. 11:14-22. The eating of the Passover was a constant memorial of the event of the Passover and its meal which itself formed some kind of a covenant of grace on God's part.

(b) Human Covenants

By this term we simply mean covenants made by men with men or peoples. The number of these makes it difficult to include all. Examples, however, are the following:- Jacob and Laban, the Gibeonites and Israel (Joshua 9), David and Jonathan (I Samuel 20), David and Abner (II Sam. 3:12ff), Jehoiada and the royal guard (II Kings 11:4) and Hezekiah and Sennacherib (II Kings 18:31f).

(c) God's Covenants with Man

We should note, first of all, that often within the basic covenant other minor or sub-covenants existed. They were really the outworking of the main covenant. For example, the covenant of salt (Numbers 18:19f) is within the covenant with Israel. Again Joshua 8:30ff shows the covenant with Israel being sealed

afresh by Joshua and the people. Also in Joshua 24 there is a fresh presentation or demand of the covenant. The covenant of Joshua 8 is the fulfilment of the blessings and cursings of the covenant enjoined in Deuteronomy 27. Other renewals or fresh memorials are the covenant of Josiah (II Kings 23) which was a re-presentation of the original demands of God in covenant. Likewise in Nehemiah 8 we see the Ezra-Nehemiah renewal of the covenant and law with the people. All of these are contained within the covenant itself, and indicate the principle of covenant, namely that because of the agreement and contract it must be continually observed so that its blessings may be experienced and its curses avoided.

Having noted this we now proceed to the various covenants God made with man, and especially with those He calls His people. They are:

The Pre-Flood Noahic Covenant

In the corruption and violence that spread across the earth God made a covenant with Noah which was of grace, and which was a saving covenant (Gen. 6:11-22). God said, 'I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your son's wives with you.' God had chosen Noah - 'Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.' As God promised so He did.

The Post-Flood Noahic Covenant

This covenant is seen in Genesis 9:9-17. It is a covenant with Noah. It is also with all mankind - being universal. It is totally of grace. There is no idea of a bilateral agreement. God is the Covenant-Maker and He does it in grace. 'Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you.' The covenant is understood in the light of the judgement of the Flood which has just taken place. Man will fear rain unless such a covenant is made. It is not that man will not be worthy of similar judgement, but that God promises not to execute such judgement. The rhythm of the seasons will not be impaired. Man now will live by grace even though he may well deserve judgements of a similar kind.

The Abrahamic Covenant

This covenant may only fully be understood by seeing that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are really 'pre-Abrahamic history', that is the story of creation, the fall of man, the Flood, and the post-Flood events are all intended to lead up to the importance of God's covenant with Abraham. It is also noteworthy that Abraham comes out of a civilisation which history tells us was corrupt. God's promises to Abraham as recorded first in Genesis 12 concern not only Abraham but all the nations of the earth. 'I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

Abraham is promised a numerous progeny but being aged and having no children he actually asks God for something to believe (15:2f). God then seals this promise - which Abraham has believed - by 'cutting the covenant' (15:9-21). The covenant is of grace. Again it is not bilateral. It is not dependent upon obedience although God certainly requires the response of obedience (cf. Gen. 26:4-5). Obedience should always spring from grace, but of course never merits it.

When the promises of the covenant are examined we see they are many, that they stretch through time, and include a number of blessings, some of which are to be universal. The whole of the land of Canaan is promised to Abraham, although his descendants are not to possess it until the Amorites' evil ripens to the precise point of judgement. Abraham's children are to be numberless as against his

and Sarah's seeming impotence. Genesis 17:7 shows that the covenant is to be in perpetuity. Everything is initiated by God and so is correct and authentic. Moreover it is all based on the promise of God.

Covenant and promise are bound together. Without covenant there is no sealed promise. Without promise the covenant is pointless and baseless. A study of Paul's notions on promise in Galatians chapter three is very enlightening. Hebrews 6:13-20 shows that God is as good as His Word, that is His promise is of the very essence of Himself and therefore unchangeable, and can be fully trusted.

The Abrahamic covenant is associated with blessing. The blessing is of grace. It is universal, in that all the nations will be blessed, but certain blessings are particularised to the blood children of Abraham, i.e. the possession of Canaan, and the number of progeny who hold Abraham as their natural (fore-) father. The blessings, nevertheless, are more than these, especially according to the New Testament. The blessing which Abraham received was that he had children, he was to inherit the earth, and he was justified. As we shall see the blessing which the true children of Abraham will receive through his (single) Seed, i.e. Christ, will be justification by grace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3: 13-14).

This Abrahamic covenant was sealed, eventually, by circumcision, and this included Ishmael. The faith of Abraham was sealed by circumcision but the necessary sign of being in the covenant was circumcision, and especially at infancy. At this point we will not discuss the essential elements of grace, promise, obedience and fulfilment but simply note the fact and nature of this covenant.

The Mosaic Covenant

Before God makes a covenant with Moses and the people of Israel there is a continuity, so to speak, of the Abraham covenant down to Jacob. In Genesis 22 Abraham is tested as to his obedience to God and the believing of the covenantal promise. Abraham vindicates his faith. At the same time Isaac is involved in this test, and he, against Ishmael, had been selected as the successor to the promises given by God to Abraham. God reiterates the promises given to Abraham, telling Isaac that he will inherit these (Gen. 26:1-5). He again encourages Isaac in Gen. 26:24. Virtually at the birth of Esau and Jacob which was a birth of twins, Jacob the younger is set for the Abrahamic promises. He obtains these somewhat by guile, although he must have known that he was elected to them (Gen. 25:19-23). In Genesis 28 God personally renews the promises given to Abraham, indicating that these are for Jacob and his family.

When Jacob and his sons join Joseph in Egypt hundreds of years pass in which time the people of Israel become a slave community within the wider nation of Egypt. Just as Abraham was unable to fulfil in the normal way of nature his desire to have children, so there is no conceivable way in which Israel may be liberated from Egypt. What God does for them is a divine intervention of grace. He redeems them from slavery and bondage. That Israel was sovereignly chosen is seen from Exodus 2:24, Deut. 4:37, 7:68, 8:17-18, 9:4-6, 14:2, Hosea 13:5 and Amos 3:2. In fact God had given Israel filial status (Exodus 4:22, Deut. 32:6, Hosea 11:1).

God's treatment of Israel in bringing them to the specific Mosaic contract is based on the Abrahamic promise. In Exodus 2:23-25 it is shown that Israel suffered and 'God heard their groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ...'. Some of the elements of this covenant agree with the Abrahamic promise. Exodus 6:7 - 'I will take you for my people, and I will be your God'. This is the signature note of covenantal promises as Deut. 29:13

says, '... that he (God) may establish you this day as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.'

The actual making of the covenant followed the promises. In Exodus 24 the covenant is sealed by sacrifice and the sprinkling of the blood on the book of the covenant, the altar and the people. Obedience is demanded, and holiness is the essential condition of the covenantal life. The whole sacrificial cultus with all its implications, qualifications and ramifications indicates a very living and dynamic agreement. A reading of Exodus 24 might seem to indicate that obedience would be necessary before God could make such a covenant, but again it is a covenant of grace in that it is unilateral. Obedience is expected to be the response of grace as seen in Exodus 20:1ff. Here obedience to the ten commandments is enjoined on the fact that God has redeemed the people from Egypt. He has set them free to serve Him.

The physical side of the covenant is that they shall possess all the land that God gave to Abraham. The nature of the sacrifices allows them to keep 'covenant-level' continuously by offerings for the removal of guilt and the forgiveness of sins. At the same time conditions are laid down so that the covenant people will be a healthy community. Breaking of the covenant when done with a high hand will bring dire judgement and punishment. The nation, even, can be driven into bondage or exile. Hence the thought of grace as a cover for licentiousness is entirely absent. The Mosaic covenant is well designed for every aspect of life. Initially it covered the nomadic conditions, and then made provision for settlement, and the prospect of a national kingdom. It took into consideration family and community life, including matters of hygiene, health, the strangers within the community, and so on. Without doubt the regulations, precepts and laws of this covenant were meticulous and richly functional.

Many of the principles and ethical and moral implications will be examined later. For the moment we see the Mosaic covenant as a particularisation of the Abrahamic covenant. In some ways it embraced that covenant as also it was embraced by that covenant. However, it was not to be the perpetual expression, action and fulfilment of that Abrahamic covenant.

The Davidic Covenant

Some scholars discover what they call a Palestinian covenant, i.e. the manner in which Israel contracts to live in the land God has given it through the promise to Abraham and the leadership of Moses and Joshua. However, it is best to see this as totally covered by the Mosaic covenant. What is important nevertheless is the Davidic covenant. This too is related to the Abrahamic and Mosaic elements of covenant for it concerns the people of God (Israel) and their possession of the land, as also the figure of the coming Messiah, '1, great David's greater Son'.

The fact of this covenant is intimated in Psalms 89:3-4, 26-37, and 132:11- 18. In Psalm 89 the Psalmist says, 'Thou hast said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations'. The same filial principle obtains: 'He shall cry to me, 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.¹ And I will make him the first born, the highest of the kings of the earth.' Psalm 132:11-18 speaks in a similar vein. II Sam. 7:12-17 is the locus classicus of the great promise, and although the actual word 'covenant' is not included, the same thrust is there. Indeed only by it the Psalms mentioned become intelligible. The king of this passage is also called 'the son', as indeed in Psalm 2 where the Messiah-King is also the Son.

This covenant then speaks of a kingdom, or a king who is Messiah, and of the accomplishment of things even greater than David has accomplished. The reference now becomes universal. Thus the great Messianic passages of Isaiah 42:1, 6, 49:8, 55:3-4, which deal with the messenger of the covenant, or the suffering (covenant) servant, may also be linked with the messenger of the covenant of Malachi 3:1 (cf. Luke 1:32, 33, Acts 2:30-36). The Servant of the Lord, in Isaiah is to be given as a covenant to the people. Messiah himself is the covenant because his person, work, and accomplishments are bound up with him. He in fact is their embodiment, and so the embodiment of the blessings the covenant both promises and effects. When such passages are linked with other Messianic scriptures such as Genesis 3:15, 49:10, Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7, and the like, then the Davidic covenant emerges as one of great significance. In fact if it does not in some way equate with the New Covenant then it might almost be seen to vie with it.

The New Covenant (In the O.T.)

As we have seen, it would be wrong to think of any covenant as an entity in itself. Whilst each certainly is an entity yet also each springs from the same and unvarying grace of God. The Noahic covenant is universal, and remains so, obtaining until the end of time. The Abrahamic covenant, amidst other things is the covenant of redemption. The Mosaic covenant is redemptive in its initial promise and action, and supportive and life-sustaining in its continuing operations. The Davidic covenant is an act of grace by God towards the dynasty of David whilst at the same time being so for the people of God, Israel initially and then the nations of the earth.

In all of this the Abrahamic covenant does not cease to obtain. Israel received the promises, the glory, the covenants, the worship and the sonship, and in fact the promise in particular of Messiah (Romans 9:4, cf. Ephes. 2:12). At the same time the Abrahamic covenant was proceeding in a particularised way with Israel. Yet the Mosaic covenant, whilst it left nothing to be desired, did not succeed in the sense that Israel broke it many times, and was chastised by exile and punishment. Hence the necessity for a 'new' or 'fresh' covenant, and one which would cover the exigencies raised by living under the Mosaic covenant which was at heart a covenant of law, albeit grace was there to impel and aid obedience to that law.

The Promise of the New Covenant

1. Jeremiah.

The promise of the new covenant is given very clearly in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This we will later examine in detail. The heart of this promise is Abrahamic: 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' This is amplified in Jer. 32:36-41. In this passage God repeats this thought, and says, 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' However, this must be seen in the full context of the promise:-

'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more.' (Jeremiah 31:31-34.)

The promise in Jer. 32:40 concerns an ‘everlasting covenant’, and Jer. 31: 31-34 implies the Mosaic covenant will be superseded, it not being ‘everlasting’. Jeremiah 50:4-5 speaks of exiled Israel coming to repentance and God, and from their point of view, joining themselves to the Lord in an ‘everlasting’ covenant.

2. Isaiah.

We have already noted that in the latter portion of Isaiah the Suffering Servant in his being personifies the covenant. Isaiah 42:1-9 speaks of this messenger of God. Verses 6 and 7 speak of him as (a) ‘a covenant to the people’, so that (b) He can ‘open the eyes that are blind, to bring prisoners out from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.’ It is the same Servant in Isaiah 49:1-13 and in verses 8-12 this one who is given ‘as a covenant to the people’ is again to release the prisoners, and to lead them to liberty from prison. In Isaiah 55 an invitation is given to Israel to come and receive the grace of God. Part of this is set out in verses 3-4, ‘Incline your ear, and come unto me; hear that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, for a leader and commander to the peoples.’

In Isaiah 59 God is amazed that there is no intercessor, no one to intervene for Israel, so that He raises up one that will. In one sense it is the Lord Himself, and in another it is again the special Servant.

God says, ‘And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord. And as for me, this is my **covenant** with them, says the Lord: my spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children’s children, says the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore.’

In chapter 61 the Servant says, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to the bound....’ In the passages of chapters 42, 59, and 61 the Spirit is upon the Servant. In the passages of 42, 49 and 61 the Servant is the Liberator from slavery and imprisonment. In the passages of 42, 49, 55 and 59 the Messenger is the covenant embodied, the person given to effect the covenant of the Lord.

On any reckoning this covenant is new in contradistinction to the covenant which Israel had under Moses, which it broke. It may be argued that the new covenant is really the old one renewed, and this may well be true from one point of view, but there is something about this covenant which supersedes the old. God says, ‘I am doing a new thing’ (43:19). A number of things in the Isaianic passages parallel those of Jeremiah, namely the liberation, forgiveness and renewal which will come with the new covenant.

3. Ezekiel.

In this prophetic book there are explicit references to covenant. We will see later that there are also implicit references. In 16:59-63 God speaks of Israel having despised the covenant which God had made with Israel in its youth. He says, ‘Yet I will remember my **covenant** which I made with you in your youth and I will establish with you an **everlasting covenant** ... I will establish my **covenant** with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord.’ In 20:37 the Hebrew has ‘I will bring you into the bond of the covenant’, whilst it is also capable of

being translated 'I will make you pass under the rod (crook)', i.e. of the shepherd as he leads exilic Israel back to renewal and blessing.

In chapter 34 the theme of the Shepherd and the sheep is repeated, and in verse 25 God promises to make with them 'a covenant of peace'. It is the same principle as seen in chapter 20, and indeed many other chapters. The 37th chapter is again one of restoration of Israel, and the promise is repeated - 'I will make a covenant of peace with them'. This covenant is called 'an everlasting covenant', whilst the theme 'I will be their God and they shall be my people' is repeated. At the same time the many references to the restoration of Israel to Palestine, and the restoration in Palestine of the kingdom should be noted. The famous passage of Ezekiel 36 where God restores and renews by forgiveness, cleansing and the Spirit must be allied with the whole of ch. 37 where the Spirit regenerates Israel. Likewise in chapter 39 the theme of Israel's faithlessness, chastisement and restoration is repeated. Here, also, the Spirit regenerates. This is when 'I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel'.

4. Other References.

The famous passage of Daniel 11 speaks of a covenant, a holy covenant, and the prince of the covenant. Like much in Daniel, especially the predictive elements of prophecy, it is debated whether this is indeed the 'covenant of grace' which appears in the New Testament. There is much evidence to show that it is since the passage is primarily concerned with Messiah.

Again in Hosea 2 God is speaking of wooing Israel afresh. On the one hand He will chasten her, and on the other He will 'make a covenant with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground'. The general tenor of the passages is that of other prophetic treatments of restoral and renewal of Israel in covenant love and mercy.

We conclude then that in the O.T. there are indeed many promises of a new covenant. It is difficult to see them in their settings and not to be influenced by the statements in the N.T. regarding the covenant and law as against the covenant of grace (II Cor. 3). It is difficult to view them as an Israelite would see them, especially if in exile. Nevertheless it is safe to say that to him they would appear as the promise of a new hope, and a hope that was even better than the Mosaic covenant which he and his people had violated.

(ii) Covenant In The N.T.

The New Covenant: The Abrahamic Covenant

The key reference to the new covenant in the N.T. is that of the Lord's saying at the last supper, i.e. 'This is my blood of the new covenant' or, 'This is my blood in the new covenant'. The term used in Greek is **diatheke** and has a somewhat different meaning from the Hebrew **berith**. Nevertheless it stands in for, and does the work of berith, although the N.T. uses its current meaning also, namely of a testament, and one which is not available or fulfilled without the death of the testator.

A key reference also is that of Luke 1:67-79, namely the Benedictus of Zechariah the father of John the Baptist. This passage refers backwards to the Abrahamic covenant, and forward to the coming of Messiah and the forgiveness of sins. The latter two elements are linked with the promise of the new covenant

in the O.T., as we have seen. The promise also of deliverance from enemies is included. It is clear that the promise of the new covenant and the promise of the Abrahamic covenant are closely linked, and are, indeed, the one.

In Acts 3:25 Peter links the Abrahamic covenant with the coming of Messiah. He says, 'You are the sons of the prophets and the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' He adds, 'God having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness'. It would not be difficult to link the latter with the Messianic-covenant promises of Isaiah, and with the forgiveness promised in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Paul in Romans 9:4 speaks of the special privileges the Israelites had in having (amongst other things) 'the covenants', and these are linked with 'the promises'. In Ephesians 2:12 he says the Gentiles were 'strangers to the covenants of promise', whilst in Galatians 3 he points out two principal elements, (a) That there are two covenants, these being of law and grace, and the latter being the Abrahamic covenant, and (b) That men of faith are children of Abraham, to whom pertains the covenant (of grace). Whilst he does not speak specifically in this sense of a 'new' covenant, yet to him the Abrahamic covenant with its promises and its blessings equates with the new covenant. In II Corinthians 3 he makes a vivid contrast of two dispensations or economies. One is of law, the other of grace. One is of Moses, the other is of Christ. One is of death, the other of life, and one is of bondage and the other of liberty, i.e. one of law and the other of the Spirit. Paul speaks of himself and others as 'ministers of a new covenant' (verse 6).

In the epistle to the Hebrews the whole matter of a new covenant as against an old is clearly discussed. The material is profuse. To the writer the old covenant is obsolete, outmoded, superseded. It is 'old' whereas the fresh covenant is 'new'. The one is temporal, the other eternal. One has as its mediator Moses, the other has Christ as its mediator. The writer liberally quotes the passage of Jeremiah 31:31-34, and is confident that all Jews should see its fulfilment in Jesus the Messiah.

Surprisingly enough, in Revelation 11:19 there is mention of the 'ark of the covenant' within the temple of the Lord. Why it should be here is something we need to understand. We may conclude then that a whole vista of grace opens up with the claim that the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled in Christ, and the inescapable conclusion that this Abrahamic covenant is related to the new covenant promised by the prophets. Indeed it is difficult to believe that the two are not the one, with perhaps certain qualifications relating to their epochal fulfilment. It is our task now to trace the whole principle of covenant and to see its meaning in the Scriptures.

3. The General Principles of Covenant

Since the covenants within Scripture operate over a long period of time there must have been room for variations in the background and meaning of covenant in general, and covenants in particular. This would go for both religious and non-religious covenants. At the same time, although research cannot definitively establish the precise nature of covenants, there must have been a general understanding of what a covenant is. It is an agreement, contract or pact made, whether by the decision of a sovereign, the kindness of a benefactor, or the parity agreement of two parties who would benefit equally. In any case, a covenant presupposes a vow of some kind, as well as contractual obligations, and in many cases conditions. It is not difficult for us to trace certain general

principles which obtained in the covenants God made. In viewing these we must remember they are unique. The gods make covenants, but without love. They have legal demands upon their devotees, but without grace or mercy. They receive but do not give, and yet they expect obedience. With God it is different.

(i) Covenant and Obedience

All God's covenants are made in grace. This was so with the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New Covenants. It does not always appear so at first sight. The Noahic covenant is made unconditionally. God promises, even in spite of man's sin, not to destroy the earth by another flood. There is no demand made for obedience. Yet disobedience is not set at a premium. The inference may well be that sin will again appear. Yet the thrust of God's goodness in providence is self-evidently a motivating power for obedience.

In the Abrahamic covenant explicit demands for obedience are not made, yet God rewards Abraham with justification for his faith (Gen. 15:6, cf. Rom. 4:3). He rewards Abraham for his obedience in offering Isaac (Gen. 22:16-18) 'because you obeyed my voice'. At the same time the promises to multiply his descendants had already been made. God says to Isaac (in later years), 'I will fulfil the oath which I swore to your forefather Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars in the heaven ... and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws' (Gen. 26:4-5). It is interesting to note that no laws as such were explicitly given to Abraham apart from the command to go into a land which he did not know. Yet law and the laws of God were known to Abraham. Faith without obedience would be a misnomer.

In the Mosaic covenant obedience is presupposed where law is given. It is even written on tablets of stone. There is the book of the law, the book, too, of the covenant. In Exodus 20:1ff, obedience is enjoined, but on the basis of God's deliverance, i.e. 'I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage ... thou shalt have no other gods before (but) Me.' In Exodus 24 at the sealing of the (already given) covenant, the people say, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient' (verse 7). This promise of obedience is solemnly sealed with, and in, blood. Already in Exodus 19:5-6 God had said, 'Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession of all peoples, for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

The Mosaic principle of obedience God has set out to Pharaoh, 'Let my people go that they may serve me.' First liberation, then obedience of service. The Mosaic covenant was not built on obedience. By this we mean God did not make a covenant with Israel that they obey him. He made a covenant of deliverance (based incidentally on the Abrahamic grace-promise: Exodus 2:23-25) and then demanded obedience on the basis of grace given and liberation (already) effected. What is more, the Mosaic covenant made provision for constant forgiveness and cleansing of guilt except for sins done with a high hand, i.e. presumptuous sins.

The Davidic and New Covenants overlap. Sometimes they are seen as separate, sometimes as one. In II Sam. 7:14 the Son-King must obey or be punished. However, this one delights to do God's will. The whole thrust of the Davidic covenant is the renewal of Israel and David's dynasty by a king who is 'great David's greater Son'. He will usher in a Kingdom loyal to God. The New Covenant, far from dispensing with law, dispenses only with the old modes of ritual which effect forgiveness. Christ's statement that his blood will now effect the forgiveness of

sins means the old ritual has passed away. However, in the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 God writes His law in the heart and puts it in the inner parts. Here obedience is spontaneous, motivated doubtless by the forgiveness of sins and iniquities. As for obedience it is from the very heart, and the law is written there in perpetuity, a reminder that Jesus said the law would not pass away, and that all things must be fulfilled. The New Testament states that the New-Covenant love of God constrains the heart to obedience. True liberty is true obedience.

(ii) The Covenant and Love

(a) O.T.

There is doubtless a link between love and obedience. Obedience follows the experience of love, and especially of knowing that God is love. The key to this is seen in Psalm 103:17-18, 'But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments We saw in Genesis 26:4-5 that God rewarded Abraham's descendants because Abraham obeyed His voice, commandments, and charges. Doubtless Abraham did this because the 'God of glory appeared unto Abraham' (Acts 7:2) and this was incentive for obedience.

Joshua 22:5 links obedience and love together in covenant, 'Take good care to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God and to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cleave to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.' First, however, there must be the love of God in covenant, to inspire love and obedience in the recipients who are graced by covenant.

In Deuteronomy 7:6-11 Moses outlines the love of God in covenant: 'It is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers... Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.' Here the order is (a) God loves, (b) the covenant people love, and (c) they therefore keep His commandments. Deut. 4:37 says, 'And because he loved your fathers, and chose their descendants after them ...' Sometimes the word for love is *chesed* (loving kindness), and sometimes it is *ahabah* or the verb *ahab*. However, more than simply tracing through a word study is to trace through the loving action of God with His people. In the Noahic covenant it must have been love which constrained God not to judge all sin immediately. In the Abrahamic covenant God wishes to do well for the whole of mankind, that is to give them the opportunity to share in His love. In the Mosaic covenant Israel knows that she is not entitled to the love of God and indeed forfeits such through her wilful disobedience. Nevertheless Daniel sees the covenant love as everlasting. He says (9:4), 'O Lord, the great and terrible God, who keepest covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

Deuteronomy 10:15 shows that the Lord took the initiative in (covenant) love. In Deut. 30:6 Moses promises that the Lord will circumcise the hearts of the children of Israel and will give them a heart to love their God. Hence we conclude that covenant and love are linked together. The Book of Hosea is constantly expounding this theme (cf. Isaiah 43:4, Jeremiah 31:3), and in fact Hosea 9:15 '...I will love them no more' infers that should God cease to love them then they would cease to have God. Doubtless the love is covenantal, but none the less love for this. When God says, 'Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated', He is not speaking of what we call emotional love, but of selective, electing love.

(b) N.T.

As we have seen, covenant is not greatly mentioned in the N.T. but the times it is mentioned are deeply significant. In Luke 1:68-79 Zechariah is linking the Abrahamic covenant with forgiveness. Forgiveness in the O.T. and N.T. is also linked with covenant, and with love. Hence in Luke 7:47-50 Jesus links the knowledge of love with the experience of forgiveness. Doubtless this is referred to in Matt. 18:21ff, where a man forgiven of his debt fails (in grateful love) to forgive another. In Romans 5:5ff Paul is showing God's love through the Cross, and John also does the same in I John 4:7-19. However, it is in Matthew 26:28 that Jesus links the covenant with forgiveness, a principle we see enlarged in the letter to the Hebrews. Matt. 26:28 and Jer. 31:31-34 are closely linked.

The theme of forgiveness and love, followed by obedience is certainly within the principle of the New Covenant in the N.T. It is rarely stated literally in this way but the thrust, nevertheless, is there. Obedience is based on love in the N.T. as we see from John 14:15 ('If you love me you will keep my commandments'), II Cor. 5:14 and I John 4:9-16. Forgiveness by God is so deep a thing as to cover the whole of man, in all his dimensions. Hence it brings the response of a very deep love, and so a full obedience.

(iii) The Covenant and Law**(a) O.T.**

In many ways the principle of which we speak under this heading is contained in what we commented under 'Covenant and Obedience' (Pp.10-11). We need, however, to see it in greater detail. If we take the moral law of the universe to be contained in creation (cf. Romans 2:14-15) so that a sabbath rest rises from creation, the law of marriage from the creation of man and woman, and so the whole law of relationships with God and man, then such adds up to what we call the decalogue or ten commandments. These were not written as such until the exodus of Israel from Egypt, but their explicit writing adds nothing to their actual being. Abraham, as we have seen, must have kept such commandments, amongst the special charges God gave to him.

Certainly Israel had its basic laws in the decalogue. This is clear from Exodus 20:1ff, and kindred passages. The Mosaic law both morally and cultically was woven around the decalogue. In the Christian centuries since Christ a number of scholars have sought to show that the decalogue has been abrogated. They oppose 'grace' to 'law', but these are not opposed. Grace is not the opposite of law. Sin is transgression of the law, and grace, rightly understood, covers that. Grace aided the Mosaic covenanter to make up the level of his failure by sacrifice. The law must on all accounts be honoured. This is clear from a reading of Psalms 1, 19, and 119 (amongst others). God will not acquit the guilty (i.e. those who retain their guilt and will not confess it). Nor may one presume upon grace and so sin with a high hand'. That is 'the presumptuous sin

When, then, the promises of the New Covenant are made, there is no promised abrogation of law. We have seen that in every promise regarding the New Covenant there is a promise of renewed obedience, and that obedience is to God's laws, ordinances and commandments. Jeremiah 31:31-34 says God will write His law in their hearts, and put it in their inward parts, and this must mean innate knowledge of law, and spontaneous obedience to it. Ezekiel 36:27 (amongst other similar passages) says, 'I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.' Of course this is precisely what the people promised initially at the making of the covenant (Exodus 24)

and at the various renewals of that covenant which happened during their history. The law was always held in high esteem, and well it might be. Some scholars have described the law as ‘the outshining of the nature of God’, ‘the true moral expression of God as He is’ and have warned against detaching the law from God and so making it a separate entity outside of God even though seen as linked with Him.

(b) The N.T.

The study of law in the N.T. requires a great deal of application and depth of understanding. Doubtless the statement ‘The law came by Moses but grace and truth through Jesus Christ’ might seem to denigrate law, but such was not intended. It is grace which erases the penalty of the law, but never the law itself. It is grace which covers sin and obliterates impurity, but the law is only honoured and substantiated thereby. Christ’s great law passage in the sermon on the mount makes it clear that behind legal structures as interpreted by men lie deeper levels of true and dynamic law.

The grace, therefore, of the New Covenant, gives a deeper obedience, a greater thrust to delight in the law of God after the inward man (Romans 7:22, Psalm 119:32). In Psalm 119:32 the writer says, ‘Enlarge my heart and I will run the way of thy commandments’. It is not only gratitude for God’s grace which liberates, but the very knowledge of God Himself and the union that comes with Him through the work and person of Christ. Romans 7:6 says clearly, ‘But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit’. Paul amplifies this even further in II Corinthians, chapter three. There he suggests that the law as expounded by Moses had a temporal element about it, i.e. the glory was to fade. Likewise the law-person of Israel had a veil over his eyes. When the heart turned to the Lord (through Christ), then the veil was taken away, and the glory of the covenant of grace as against the covenant of law was seen in its fulness. What must be noted, however, is that the modern idea of ‘the letter of the law’ and ‘the spirit of the law’ must not be read back into those phrases as used in II Cor. 3:6 and Romans 7:6.

The writer of Hebrews speaks of a new obedience through the New Covenant, but as we have observed the very law once written is now innate in the heart.

II Cor. 5:14 speaks of the new constraint of love. Yet Paul is careful to say that the whole law is summed up in one word, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ (Gal. 5:14). This does not except loving God for Paul presupposes this, and the point is borne out in Romans 13:8-10. James likewise calls the law ‘the perfect law of liberty’ which he expounds in 1:22-25 and 2:8-12 in his epistle. Paul speaks of ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2), and of being ‘under the law of Christ’ (I Cor. 9:21), and it would not be difficult to show this as the law of love, which, properly speaking is also the decalogue. Rightly understood the Pauline corpus is stressing obedience as the result of covenant, and that is obedience to law.

John in his Gospel and epistles does not refer explicitly to the covenant.¹ Yet a number of factors make his approach congruent with covenant. Forgiveness is a strong theme in John 20:19-23, and in his first epistle, and forgiveness, as we have seen, is basic to covenant. Obedience with John is the criterion of

¹ The closest to an explicit statement by John is John 1:17, ‘For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ In fact John’s writings must be seen in the light of this statement.

knowing God. This is seen in I John 2:1-5 where again it is linked with forgiveness. In I John 5:1-5 obedience is again the criterion of loving God, 'This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome.' The greatest commandment here is to love the brethren. This is the ethos of Deuteronomy, and the Psalms which refer to love and covenant-keeping. Also in John 14:21-23 Jesus speaks words which are reminiscent of Deuteronomy 4:37, 7:6ff, 10:15, Psalm 25:10, Joshua 22:5, and similar passages:- 'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me: and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him... If a man loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words...' This is consonant with the principle of love, i.e. God loves His people and they respond and love Him and so, 'All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies ... The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.' (Psalm 25:10-14, cf. Psalm 103:17-18.)

Peter in his first epistle does not refer explicitly to covenant, but his application of Exodus 19:5-6 to the new people of God in I Peter 2:9-10 makes it clear that Peter sees obedience as the criterion of being the true people of God.

We conclude then that the New Covenant, far from dispensing with law, in fact establishes the law, the true moral law which is the law of liberty. It does this by (a) Destroying the guilt of sin by which sin has its power (Romans 6:14, I Cor. 15:55-56), and (b) By giving a revelation of God's love through forgiveness and so bringing the powerful motivation of love to induce grateful obedience and glad submission.

(iv) The Covenant and Grace

We have already established that all God's covenants are those of grace. This is clearly so of the Noahic covenant, but that covenant refers to the mode of judgement God will not use, but it does not promise the cessation of judgement itself. Hence the basic covenant into which all covenants fit is the Abrahamic covenant, and that is a (or, the) covenant of grace. God promises for mankind what mankind in its sinfulness does not deserve. As we have seen, this covenant is universal in its scope. We have also seen that the Mosaic covenant has the grace of law, in that the law - as according to Psalms 1, 19, and 119 - is the true way of life. In addition to this the sacrificial cultus of the law enabled the member of the covenant to keep at 'covenant-level' by the corporate and personal sacrifices for sins and forgiveness.

The Davidic covenant, as we have seen is linked with Messiah and the Kingdom. This Suffering Servant is God's covenant to His people. The Isaianic passages indicate God's grace through His liberating Servant. Yet the Davidic and New Covenants are linked together, especially in passages such as Ezekiel 34 and 37. The New Covenant is clearly one of pure grace, and as we have seen in Luke 1:69ff, the coming of Messiah and the Abrahamic covenant are linked, for this is the 'Seed' to which Paul refers in Galatians 3. Our question is how obedience can be so much demanded in all the covenants, and they still remain covenants of grace, or, better still, how they can all be contained within the Abrahamic covenant as one covenant, demand obedience and remain that of grace?

The answer must surely be that God is the God of grace. Ephesians 1:3-7 indicates that before creation He was the God of grace. Doubtless this is axiomatic, but it needs to be pointed out. Passages such as II Tim. 1:9 ('God, who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works, but in

virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus before times eternal'), Isaiah 63:16 and I Cor. 2:6-7 show that He has ever been the God of grace.

When, then, we come to the forgiveness which is inherent in the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gen. 15:6, Luke 1:72-79, and Gal. 3:13-14) we must view such forgiveness in the light of the holiness of God, His wrath upon sin, and the provision of the New Covenant sacrifice, Christ, who bears away the sin of the world. Grace must be seen against this background or forgiveness will seem to be gratuitous without basis, an affront both to the holiness of God and His irrevocable and eternal law. Seen against the background of His holiness and wrath, grace is deemed to be of amazing nature.

Nevertheless it is the grace which accomplishes objective goals. It bears and destroys the sin of man. It identifies man with Christ in his death and so liberates man by fulfilling the demands of the law, i.e. bearing its penalty. Man is crucified with Christ, taken down into death and brought up into life (Romans 6:1-10). Hence this is the grace of God which becomes manifest, bringing salvation (Titus 2:11).

We may now revert to our question, which is how the covenants can demand obedience, yet being covenants of grace. The answer is that grace, rightly seen and experienced, motivates to obedience. It is incongruous to think of receiving grace, and failing to be obedient. Love and grace motivate to obedience, and where failure occurs, the fresh experiences of grace even more deeply motivate to new obedience. There is, therefore, no opposition between grace and obedience. The first stimulates the second.

4. The Trinitarian Nature of The Covenant

We speak in particular of the New Covenant, which we equate with the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant, for the ends or conclusions of both are identical. By the New Covenant one inherits what was promised to Abraham (Rom. 4 and Gal. 3), i.e. the world, the Kingdom of God, all things.

We say that the New Covenant is Trinitarian in that the Father initiates it, the Son mediates it, and the Spirit acts for it, and within it as Agent. The work of each can be seen under the following heads, but we are reminded that the three Persons act in the true unity of the Godhead, as Love.

(i) The Father and the Covenant

In Acts 7:2 Stephen says, 'The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham'. This is a significant statement because Abraham saw God as the God of glory. Other portions of Scripture (cf. Exodus 34:6-7, Jer. 9:23-24) show that God's glory is moral, that is He is the God of love, justice, righteousness, goodness and mercy. He is the Holy God. It is in the context of knowing God in this way that covenant is comprehensible to Abraham. Israel comes to know God as Father, and primarily as Covenant Father. Covenant is always linked with the theme of the people of God, and Israel is in filial relationship with Him. Exodus 4:22, Deut. 32:6, Jeremiah 3, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8 and Malachi 2:10 are a few of the Scriptures which convince us of that. In Romans 9:4 Paul can say - in the same breath - 'Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants ... the promises'. The actual theme of the people of God is seen in the promises of the Abrahamic covenant and is formed into this typical statement, 'I will be your God

and you shall be my people'. (Cf. Gen. 17:7-8, Exodus 20:2, 29:45, Deut. 5:2, 3, 6, Jer. 24:7, 30:22, 31:33, Ezek. 11:20, Zech. 12:8 II Cor. 6:16, Heb. 8:10, and Rev. 21:3.) Thus covenant-Israel is called 'the house' or the household of God. Hebrews 3:2ff refers to Moses as being over the house of God. Numbers 12:7 speaks of '...Moses; he is entrusted with all my house.'

In Jeremiah, chapter three, God constantly refers to Israel as His children and says, 'I thought you would have called me, 'My Father!'' It is, however, when Israel is in exile and suffering that it sees its failure to live in filial loyalty. It recognises that Abraham and Jacob would have been ashamed of their failure, yet says, 'For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from eternity is thy name.' It is interesting to note that they include the redeeming nature of God within His Fatherhood (Isaiah 63:16). Again in Isaiah 64:8-9 Israel says, 'Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand. Be not exceedingly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity for ever.'

The thought of God's paternity and the covenant is very strong in Malachi 2: 10. 'Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?' 'Have we not all one father?' could mean Israel or Abraham, but it seems the Hebrew parallelism would make it ask, 'Have we not all one Father?' Hence having one Father, God, and being faithless to one another would be a contradiction, especially in the family or household covenant God has made with them.

When we come to the New Testament the whole matter of God's Fatherhood is very richly portrayed, especially in John's Gospel. It is also present in the Synoptic Gospels, especially in the sermon on the mount (Matthew, chs. 5-7), and in Matthew 11:27. Even so the Epistles display a settled understanding of God as Father. The Son as portrayed in some of the Psalms is now an established understanding. So is covenant, i.e. the New Covenant. God's Fatherhood is linked directly with His Kingship and the Kingdom. Kingdom and covenant are linked, especially in the Davidic Messianic understanding. Hence the New Covenant is seen as having its Father-Head in God. There is of course no such statement explicitly but it is the new era, anyway, of 'God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ'. Hence the children of the covenant are the children of God (Cf. Acts 3: 25).

(ii) The Son and the Covenant

Matthew 26:28 makes it clear that Christ's death is to effect the New Covenant, 'This is the New Covenant in my blood'. Paul amply shows that the old dispensation of law has been superseded by the new dispensation of the grace and the Spirit (II Corinthians 3). In Galatians 3 his contrast of the two covenants is by implication, but verses 13 and 14 show that Christ in becoming curse brought 'the blessing of Abraham', i.e. justification of the Abrahamic covenant, to mankind, for Paul proceeds to talk about the promises of this Covenant with Abraham.

It is the writer of Hebrews who makes much of Christ as the Son. In the first chapter he establishes his conformity to the prophetic elements of Psalm 2 where the Messiah is the Son and the King, and Psalm 110 where he is Lord and sits at the right hand of God. In chapter five he conflates Psalms 2 and 110. Having established that the priesthood of the Son is greater than that of Levi, he proceeds in chapter eight to talk of the new covenant, showing the old (Mosaic) covenant to have been outmoded and superseded. He quotes liberally from Jeremiah 31.

In chapter nine he concludes, 'Therefore he (Christ the Son) is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.'

The writer of Hebrews also makes something of the Greek concept of testament (**diatheke**) which is sealed by death. He points out that the first covenant had to be sealed by blood (Exodus 24), 'Hence the first covenant was not ratified without blood...' So Christ seals the New Covenant by blood, by his sacrifice. This is clear in both the 9th and 10th chapters. Consonantly with covenant the blood of Christ effects the forgiveness of sins. It purges the conscience from dead works to serve the living God, and it 'puts away sin' (9:14, 26). In 10:12-18 the sacrifice Christ offers effects total forgiveness of sins, and so Jer. 31: 31-34 is quoted in essence. In his final benediction of 13:20-21 the writer speaks of 'the blood of the eternal covenant'. In this context which parallels Isaiah 63:11 ('Where is he that brought up from the sea the shepherd of the sheep') the writer is saying, 'The blood of the covenant shed by Christ, and typifying his sacrifice, has been so acceptable to God that He has brought him up out of death (i.e. in resurrection), and just as the sheep followed Moses out of the sea, so the new flock follows the Son out of death'. This, of course, is the new covenant. This accords with 9:15, 'Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance...' The writer uses the term 'everlasting covenant' to distinguish it from the temporal (Mosaic) covenant, hence the inheritance is not merely Palestine but the riches of eternity, however they may relate to God's creation.

The Son, then, is the Mediator of the New Covenant. He is the one by whom the forgiveness of sins obtains. As to 'the people of God' and 'the sons of God' which are all elements of covenant, Christ is the one who leads to the Father, by him people are incorporated into one body, and they are called 'sons of the living God' (Gal. 3:26-29, II Cor. 6:16ff). They are the new people of God (Exodus 19: 5-6 = I Peter 2:9-10). The death and resurrection of Christ seal the New Covenant.

(iii) The Spirit and the Covenant

We have already seen that the promise of the New Covenant is also the promise of the Holy Spirit. The references in Ezekiel 36:16-31, 37:1ff, and 39:25-29 have in common the prediction that God will restore Israel. They also have in common the promise of the Spirit. In 36:26-27 the Spirit will be placed within the heart (regeneration). In 37:1-14 he will be poured out upon the slain of the army of Israel, and also in 39:29 he will be poured out. In Ezekiel 34 the 'covenant of peace' is the same restoration as shown in the passages above, whilst in 16:60-62 it is the everlasting covenant. Covenant is also mentioned in 20:37, and 37:26. We cannot escape the fact that covenant and the Spirit are closely linked.

In the latter portion of Isaiah the prophecies concerning the Suffering Servant are also linked with promises of the outpouring of the Spirit (43:19, 44: 1-3, 48:16, cf. 42:1, 61:1. We have seen that promises of the Davidic Messiah in Isaiah are linked with the Suffering Servant, and so with covenant. Hence the anointed one, Messiah, has the Spirit upon him to accomplish the promises of restoration of Israel.

In Jeremiah the references to covenant (31:31-34, 32:36-41, cf. 50:4-5) are linked with the same promises of the regeneration of Israel as are found in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel the promises are linked with the Spirit. Since the 'new heart' is the same in both Ezekiel and Jeremiah, it means that regeneration will be effected by the Spirit. Again, in Joel 2 the promise of the renewal of Israel

after judgement is accompanied by the promise of the Spirit, and here he will be poured out upon 'all flesh'.

In the New Testament John the Baptist does not primarily refer to the covenant, but there are covenant references in connection with him. We saw the prophecy concerning his birth and ministry related to the Abrahamic covenant and to the forgiveness of sins which is linked in the N.T. with the New Covenant. The 'messenger of the covenant' (Malachi 3:1) is linked with John (Matt. 11:10, cf. Mark 1:2, Luke 1:17, 76, Luke 7:27). It would appear that the true 'messenger of the covenant' is Jesus, whilst the 'messenger of the Messenger of the Covenant' is John. Malachi 3:1, and Isaiah 40:3 are conflated.

John testifies that Messiah will baptise in (with) the Holy Spirit. He links the outpouring of the Spirit, forgiveness, and the Kingdom together and relates them to Messiah. Jesus certainly links his death with the covenant (Matt. 26:28), and Paul reiterates this fact in I Cor. 11:23ff, and in Gal. 3:13-14 he links the death with the 'blessing of Abraham' and the gift of the promised Spirit. This, too, is in context with covenant. In II Corinthians 3 he makes it clear that the dispensation of grace is the dispensation of the Spirit and that it is the dispensation of the New Covenant. Hence we are permitted to see that the work of the Spirit when he comes (e.g. I Cor. 6:11, Titus 3:5) is in accordance with the promises of renewal and regeneration as in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel. Such is evident on the day of Pentecost and the time following. The new heart is effected by the new birth, the new birth being of the Spirit. The new obedience of which we have talked is by the Spirit who pours love into the heart (cf. II Cor. 3:17, Rom. 5:5, 8:13-14, Gal. 5:16-18, 25). It may also be seen that the covenant people, the true household of God is aided by the Spirit who is at once the Spirit of love, unity and fellowship. Through him worship, proclamation and ministry is effected.

(iv) Conclusion

It is obvious in Scripture that all work of the Godhead is Trinitarian in nature, i.e. creation, redemption, and the recreation of the universe. Whereas the fall of man makes it impossible to have immediate access to God, he has covenant access. This was mediated in the O.T. by the high priest who was set apart for this purpose. In the N.T. the mediator of the better covenant is the Son- Priest-King. The covenant of grace gives access to the Father (Romans 5:2, Ephes. 2:18, 3:11, Heb. 10:19-22). The eternal purposes of God for His creation are thus fulfilled: the Father, the Son and the Spirit constantly working on these (cf. John 5:17, Phil. 1:6). Covenant, then, is part of God's eternal intention.

5. Conclusion: Covenant and Eschatology

In Genesis 12 and kindred (covenant) passages God reveals His time-wide programme for the nations. Their destinies are directly linked with and related to, the (Abrahamic) people of God. Their blessing and their cursing are dependent upon the way they relate to Abraham and his seed. We have seen that the Mosaic covenant is a 'covenant within a covenant' and that the New Covenant and the Abrahamic covenant are the one, and as such, co-terminal. We saw in the prophets (especially Ezekiel) that God was going to make an everlasting covenant. Jeremiah repeats this thought. The writer of Hebrews sees the covenant of Moses as outmoded and superseded. What gradually emerges is that the New Covenant or the Abrahamic covenant is (are) eternal. The covenant has eschatological connotation. Even the Noahic covenant has more than a hint of eschatology: 'As long

as the earth remaineth...’ It suggests that judgement must ultimately come.

There are many ways of viewing the New Covenant, and often these are by contrast with the old, the Mosaic. We have seen that in Hebrews 13:20 Jesus by the blood of his everlasting covenant is brought up as the Shepherd of his sheep, leading them out of death into life. In the transfiguration Moses and Elijah speak with him concerning his exodus which he is to accomplish at Jerusalem. Hence Paul speaks of ‘Christ our passover sacrificed for us’, and certainly the Last Supper was held with this in mind. The new Lord’s Supper is related to (a) The new exodus, and (b) The end-time. Jesus effects the new liberation by means of his blood, and that blood has covenant connotation. He says, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ and Paul adds, ‘You (thus) proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (I Cor. 11:25-26).

We have seen that the outpouring of the (Covenant) Spirit is also eschatological. He is poured out upon all flesh, and strange signs and portents will eventually appear ‘until that great and terrible day of the Lord comes’ (Acts 2: 14ff). The restoration of the Kingdom will be not only to Israel but beyond (Acts 1:6-8). In fact Covenant and Kingdom may be thought of together for the Mediator of the first is (simultaneously) the King of the second. Davidic covenantal promises also have eschatological connotation.

Yet again the great theme of calling and inheritance are related to covenant. In Romans 4, Abraham (and his seed) is to inherit the earth. The covenant, having become ‘everlasting’ puts the true inheritance forward into the eschaton. The Benedictus of Luke 1 shows us that there is a promise of deliverance from all enemies, as well as the forgiveness of sins. God had promised peace and victory to His people through the Mosaic covenant, and Zedariah the father of John the Baptist asserts both triumph over the enemies, as also the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is eschatological in nature, as also is justification (cf. Gal. 5:5). Likewise, in the end, or in the new age, the (covenant) people of God will be the very dwelling place of God (Rev. 21:1-5).

One very strong reminder of the eternal nature of covenant is the ark of the covenant as seen in Revelation 11:19. The passage preceding this verse speaks of a climax reached and the imminence of judgement. John says, ‘Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.’ What then is the significance of the ark in heaven?

The answer is that on earth this ark epitomised for Israel the covenant- promises of God. These included victory over Israel’s enemies and the gift of forgiveness. It signifies all that that covenant contained. As the ark was the symbol of the complete relationship of God with His people, John the Divine sees that amidst all the conflicts and judgements this covenant stands unmoved and eternal. It signifies that God is still working out His covenant promises. Indeed the great disturbances that follow are signs of the divine activity. Also as the ark is revealed from the very holy place itself it shows that God’s forgiveness stands unchanged. Men of faith may take heart. They may continue to live the life of faith in the context of the New and Everlasting Covenant.

Conclusion

We recognise that our study has but opened up the great subject of God and covenant. The links of covenant with the people of God, the Kingdom of God, the household of God, the triumph over evil, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of

the Holy Spirit are but some of the elements which pertain to covenant. Whilst many of the saints of the O.T. were enraptured with covenant and the God of covenant love, yet covenant in the old economy is but a faint shadow of the brilliant new covenant, the Abrahamic covenant come-of-age. The revelation of the God of grace through covenant comes when we begin to penetrate the mystery of this superb and unique action of God. No wonder we do not find cultural parallels in the annals of man's history. The covenant is superb, transcending what man can envisage.

It is, in many ways the revelation of the God of grace; hence it imparts great hope to sinful man.

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