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COVENANT & PROMISE

AN ANALYSIS OF BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF COVENANT
*The interaction of conditionality and promise in covenant theology
and the significance for Israel today*

Frank Booth

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PART I – AN OVERVIEW OF THE COVENANT CONCEPT

Introduction

The concept of “covenant” is one of the most important concepts in the Scriptures. It is so important that traditionally Christians have used it to frame their reference to the Christian Bible. We talk of the Old Testament and New Testament, meaning of course “old covenant” and “new covenant”. Yet there is a good deal of confusion over just how these covenants functioned, about which covenant or covenants we mean when we talk about the “old covenant”, and, in particular, to what extent we can say that the old covenant or covenants have been overtaken or superseded by the new covenant. In both popular and theological thinking, there is also confusion over how the twin concepts of conditionality and promise fit together, and how this affects the durability or otherwise of the various covenants.

The purpose of this paper is to examine these concepts, to see if we can untangle some of the confusion, and in the process try to clarify how these issues might affect the position of Israel in God’s purposes today.

Origins

The Hebrew word used for “covenant” is *berit* (or *berith*). Basically it means a contract or agreement. It derives from a root word meaning “to cut”, as in “to cause blood to flow”, because that is how such contracts were originally sealed. The Greek word used in the New Testament and in the Septuagint¹ is *diatheke*, which again means contract or agreement, as in a will or testament.²

The original use of the word *berit* in the Ancient Near East related to trading contracts, and some of these early trading covenants have been identified in archaeological research. Later on, the word came to be used for agreements between nations. Usually the stronger nation would set the terms of the agreement, and the weaker partner would agree to adhere to the terms, in return for defence or trade or both. Probably the weaker nation would have little say in the covenant terms, but it might not be in a position to refuse. Nevertheless, the terms and conditions existed, and both sides would abide by them.

Covenant of Grant

Scholars also recognise another form of covenant, a “covenant of grant”, whereby a sovereign exercised authority to bestow power, favour or privilege of various kinds on certain of his subjects. David Anderson tells us that “grant covenants have been discovered in Israel from the time of David right on through to AD 200 in rabbinic circles”.³ Just

1 The Septuagint is the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek made by Jewish scholars around 200BC

2 See FC Fensham “Covenant, Alliance” in *New Bible Dictionary* p236

3 David Anderson *The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews* p297

because there are no stated terms and conditions spelt out in a covenant of grant to which the recipient is required to formally agree does not mean that there is no obligation or expectation of performance in response on behalf of the recipient.⁴ The parable of the talents illustrates this perfectly. Although the king simply gives his subjects certain gifts, there is an underlying expectation they should put them to good use. Essentially we are looking at a story based on the principles of a covenant of grant.

Conditionality and Promise

This leads on to the concept of promise. The words “covenant” and “promise” are often used together in Scripture. A legal trading covenant requires an agreement between two parties, a covenant of grant or promise is unilateral. The concept of a trading covenant is a legal one, based on terms and conditions, so conditionality is part of its nature, whereas a promise is unconditional; once given it will be fulfilled. However there is a good deal of overlap between these ideas in Scripture.

Theological Views on Covenant and Conditionality

It is generally accepted that conditionality and promise are both key components of covenant functionality. The theological understanding of writers of such books as Kings derives from the basic premise of covenant conditionality, that there is an element of judgement implied in the covenantal conditions if covenant requirements are not adhered to.⁵ From Wellhausen onwards, theologians have seen the term *covenant* as specifically used by Old Testament writers to emphasise dependence on conditions which might be dissolved through disobedience.⁶ According to Brevard Childs there was a “dialectic of promise and threat existing from the very inception of the law”,⁷ and “the prophets were simply executors of the threat of destruction always implicit in Israel’s obligation of covenant loyalty”.⁸

On the other hand, although conditionality is an integral part of an Old Testament theology involving divine retribution, there is, nonetheless, an inherent promise not to destroy utterly, which is rooted in the underlying promises and specifically the patriarchal promise.⁹ So sometimes the word *covenant* is used to talk about what is essentially a promise or covenant of grant, as in Genesis 9 and in other cases, even where there is clear covenant conditionality, there is also an underlying layer of promise.

4 See Walter Brueggemann *Theology of the Old Testament* p165, and p419ff

5 Paul House *1, 2 Kings* p34

6 Brevard Childs *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* p135

7 Childs *Biblical Theology* p137

8 Childs *Biblical Theology* p137

9 See 2 Kings 13:23. So Donald Wiseman *1 & 2 Kings* p22

PART II – THE VARIOUS COVENANTS IN SCRIPTURE

We will look at each of the five main Biblical covenants in turn, with particular attention to how the principles of conditionality and promise resonate in each case.

Noah. (Noahide covenant)

After the flood God makes a serious promise about the future of Noah's descendants (effectively the whole human race), so it is a promise not to destroy mankind. In terms of a blessing to the nations, it provides a backdrop to later Scriptures which will continue to offer and promise God's blessing to the Gentiles. Here the word *berit* is used six times, and, although it is called a covenant, there is no agreement, there are no conditions and it is essentially a promise from God.¹⁰

Abraham. (Abrahamic Covenant)

Initially God promises that because of Abram's faithfulness, his name will be changed to Abraham, and not only will all his descendants be blessed, but in turn all the nations of the earth will be blessed through them. In essence the nation of Israel begins here, and from the beginning there is a promise and an intention that the other nations would be blessed through Israel. God gives Abraham the promise of descendants,¹¹ together with the promise of the Land.¹² Note that in Genesis 15 the word "covenant" is not used, and while there is shedding of blood by offering animal and bird sacrifices, there is nothing for Abraham to agree to, there are no terms and conditions, so no hint of conditionality.

Further in Genesis 17 there is a restatement of the promises of descendants and of the Land, and now the word *covenant* is used 13 times.¹³ Although the covenant is "cut" by shedding of blood through circumcision, which is to be confirmed in each succeeding generation, there are still no terms or conditions. So although it is spoken of as a covenant in Genesis 17, it is a *covenant of grant* not of conditionality.

Noted scholar Walter Brueggemann comments that, "Yahweh swears to give, to hand over freely, and to guarantee. Israel is to be the recipient of a gift that is as sure as Yahweh's oath." He terms the oath by Yahweh "a solemn, public decree announcing legal rights and guarantees for time to come".¹⁴ Brueggemann notes, "Moshe Weinfeld has suggested that this oath on Yahweh's part to give Israel an unconditional gift of land is on the order of a land grant, whereby a king has power to bestow land to a privileged subject",¹⁵ and considers that Weinfeld "has provided the most compelling notion of unconditional

10 Genesis 9:8-17

11 Genesis 15:1-6

12 Genesis 15:7-21

13 Genesis 17:1-21

14 Brueggemann *Theology* p165

15 Brueggemann *Theology* p165; Moshe Weinfeld *The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* p184-203

covenant in terms of land grant”.¹⁶

Emphasis through repetition is a powerful motif in Scripture. To dramatically emphasise Yahweh’s intentions we find the promise to Abraham is confirmed to Isaac,¹⁷ and then once more confirmed to Jacob;¹⁸ a dramatic re-affirmation through three subsequent generations. To further emphasise the utter seriousness of what is happening, Jacob’s name is changed to Israel, together with the promise of descendants who will become a nation and who will inherit the Land.¹⁹

Because of this triple affirmation to three generations, the Abrahamic covenant is often referred to as the *Patriarchal Promise*. Later God chooses to identify Himself to Moses as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”, and subsequently this becomes a consistent formula to identify the God of Israel, recognising that His relationship with Israel is rooted and grounded in this patriarchal covenant of promise.²⁰

The Mosaic or Sinai covenant - Overview

It is usually considered that Israel became a nation at Sinai. It is to Sinai that modern day Judaism, and Judaism throughout the centuries, has traditionally looked to the birth of their nation. Brevard Childs comments that “the God of the Old Testament is Israel’s God because of His gracious covenant with which He bound Himself to a historical people”.²¹ This is the main covenant we refer to when we talk of the *Old Covenant*.

The Sinai covenant has terms and conditions, and it needs the agreement of both parties. If the terms and conditions are broken, then the covenant can be revoked. Indeed this soon becomes a dramatic feature of the whole episode involving the giving of the covenant at Sinai. Incredibly, at the very inception of the covenant, Israel has broken its conditions, through the worship of the golden calf, leading Moses to symbolically break the very stones on which the original covenant terms are inscribed.

The covenant is broken and revoked before it has even started, leading Moses to trudge back up the mountain and plead for its reinstatement. When it is renewed there is added a further preamble based on God’s name, which is to say His character. This implies the promise of His faithfulness based on His nature, yet still retains the conditionality of His justice.²²

Sinai Covenant - Analysis

The Ancient Near Eastern legal codes and trading covenants followed identifiable legal structures, which is the kind of pattern followed by the covenant offered to Israel at Sinai.

16 Brueggemann *Theology* p418

17 Genesis 26:2-5

18 Genesis 28:13-15

19 Genesis 35:9-13

20 Exodus 3:6 NIV

21 Childs *Biblical Theology* p355

22 Exodus 34:6-7

Gordon Wenham comments that many parts of the covenant codes “parallel laws from other Near Eastern texts, such as the laws of Lipit-Ishtar c2100BC, the laws of Eshnunna and Hammurapi c1750BC, the Hittite laws and the Middle Assyrian laws”. In addition there are

“thousands of legal documents ... spanning nearly three millennia, from Sumer to Egypt”, all of which shed further light on the structure of Israel’s codes under the covenant.²³ Wenham notes, “It is widely recognised that the Israelite covenant roughly follows the pattern of the Near Eastern vassal treaties made between great kings and their underlings. In the Old Testament setting the Lord is the great king and Israel is his vassal”.²⁴

Thus there is a deliberate structure to the giving of the covenant, its acceptance and ratification.²⁵ Notice the offer for Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” is conditional from inception, since it is qualified by “*if* you obey me fully and keep my covenant”.²⁶ As soon as we see the word *if* we are dealing with conditionality. First the basic conditions of the covenant terms are set out, as the main contract, if you like.²⁷ Then the secondary terms and conditions are summarised, or the “small print” in modern jargon!²⁸ Israel accepts the terms of the covenant,²⁹ so agrees to its conditions, and the covenant is ratified by blood.³⁰

However, no sooner has this happened than the Sinai covenant is dramatically broken and reinstated, which on examination is in fact a graphic illustration of how conditionality and promise work together. As soon as the covenant is broken,³¹ since conditionality is invoked, the result of breaking the covenant is clearly spelt out.³² The first result of the covenant terms being broken is that 3,000 people die.³³ Incidentally, note that the first result of the New Covenant in Acts 2 is that 3,000 people are saved, which can be seen as a deliberately parallel restitution. Then further consequences of breaking the terms of the covenant are also spelt out.³⁴

Moses, however, successfully appeals to the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel), as an underlying promise which underwrites the Sinai covenant.³⁵ When the broken covenant is renewed,³⁶ not only is Moses’ appeal to the Patriarchal Promise successful,³⁷ but this underlying promise is reinforced with quite an outstanding covenant

23 Gordon Wenham “Law” in *New Bible Dictionary* p672

24 Wenham *New Bible Dictionary* p674

25 Exodus 19:1-24:8

26 Exodus 19:5 NIV

27 Exodus 20:1-17

28 Exodus 20:22-23:33

29 Exodus 24:3; 24:7

30 Exodus 24:6-8

31 Exodus 32:1-6

32 Exodus 32:7-10

33 Exodus 32:28

34 Exodus 32:30-35

35 Exodus 32:11-14

36 Exodus 34

37 Exodus 32:11-14

promise of mercy, grace, *hesed* and forgiveness.³⁸ The previous covenant conditions are emphatically underwritten by promises of God's faithfulness based on His personal Name, which is to say His character. These become key attributes, by which the prophets will time and again refer, directly and indirectly, to God's covenant-keeping character.

Notice how intertwined the three concepts of God's name, His character, and His covenants are. Moses' appeal to the Patriarchal Promise is effectively regarded as an appeal to the Divine nature. Not only does the title of the *God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* become one by which Israel will continue to reference their God, but God as it were adds to this title by revealing His name and character in a much deeper way. Intoning *Yahweh, Yahweh* for dramatic emphasis, He reveals His covenant nature. He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in *hesed* and forgiveness, yet not leaving the guilty unpunished.³⁹

The twin parameters of a deeply compassionate and loving God, who will yet pursue justice, is identified as the heart of covenant theology and promise, to be worked out, not only throughout the history of Israel, but will form the tension of wrestling with the divine initiative for all Biblical writers. And it is this same tension which provokes and informs the juxtaposition of conditionality and promise within the covenant framework. This deepening of covenant revelation, or rather of revelation of the divine nature, is expounded within the covenant - giving process. In effect the covenant terminology and mechanism, a well-known structure within Ancient Near East cultural understanding, is used as a vehicle for expressing the divine Name and nature, and for exploring Israel's relationship with Yahweh.

There follows a further restatement of the covenant promise concerning the Land,⁴⁰ so emphasising that this is an inherent part of the promise, and therefore also an expression of the divine nature, as far as God's dealings with Israel are concerned. For Israel it is a constituent part of how their God, the God of Israel, is understood, and of who He is. To finalise this episode there follows (for emphasis) a restatement and enlargement of those particular covenant terms which were most relevant to Israel's idolatry in recently breaking the covenant.⁴¹ Subsequently, for further emphasis (or as modern legal jargon might say, *for the avoidance of doubt*), lest anyone were inclined to think any of this might die out with Moses, the Sinai covenant is once more ratified under Joshua.⁴²

So to summarise: while the Sinai covenant carries a deep aura of promise, at its heart is a conditionality which differs markedly from the promise to Abraham, which is (to quote Romans) irrevocable. Yet even within the episode of the breaking of the Sinai covenant, the patriarchal promise was clearly evidenced as being in force.⁴³

38 Exodus 34:6-7

39 Exodus 34:6-7

40 Exodus 34:10

41 Exodus 34:11-27

42 Joshua 24:1-28

43 Exodus 33:1. See Fensham "Covenant" in *New Bible Dictionary* p236

The Davidic or Royal Covenant

Donald Wiseman observes that many scholars see an inherent contradiction concerning the Davidic covenant between promise and delivery.⁴⁴ David is promised a successor of his own kin to follow him on the throne for as long as they remain obedient. You might think, given the antics of his offspring, it was not too difficult to see where this one was heading! Yet he is also promised an everlasting royal dynasty. Indeed, it is difficult to see how these two strands fit together, unless you separate them out and say there are two distinct parts: a conditional promise which is soon broken by his immediate successors, (but which nonetheless forms the backdrop to much of the action in the book of Kings), and a longer term prophetic promise to be fulfilled in the figure of a Messiah King.

The promise to David of an “everlasting” royal dynasty first appears in Samuel,⁴⁵ which Anderson understands as an unconditional Covenant of Grant.⁴⁶ Initially this might have seemed a temporal promise, but it soon came to be understood that behind it lies a Messianic prophecy looking forward to a coming King who will reign for ever.

Then, in Kings, we have what is, in effect, an unrelated, or at best only loosely related, conditional promise to David concerning his (earthly) descendants.⁴⁷ God reiterates to Solomon the conditionality of this aspect of the Davidic covenant,⁴⁸ and later there is a further re-affirmation to Solomon of the conditionality of this covenant, this time with reference to the Sinai covenant, itself of course conditional.⁴⁹ Yet again a covenant is broken almost at inception. When Solomon breaks the covenant the consequences are clearly explained,⁵⁰ but out of respect for David, the underlying promise is re-affirmed.⁵¹ David’s grandson will still inherit one tribe, despite his father Solomon breaking the covenant terms. Again we see the determination that conditionality will be undergirded by promise.

So to summarise, the royal covenant made with David is a mixture of a conditional covenant concerning his immediate successors, together with the promise of an “everlasting” royal dynasty.

The Messianic or New Covenant

The wealth and depth of messianic material in the Old Testament has been well rehearsed. As with the messianic promise made to David, there are many different strands in the Old Testament which the New Testament writers draw together in relation to the Messiah, Jesus. Not all these strands refer to a *covenant* as such, so we will focus on some scriptures which specifically look forward to a new covenant.

We have already seen how the promise to David of an “everlasting” royal dynasty was

44 Wiseman *1 and 2 Kings* p22

45 2 Samuel 7:8-16

46 Anderson *King-Priest* p48

47 1 Kings 2:2-4

48 1 Kings 6:11-13

49 1 Kings 9:2-9

50 1 Kings 11:9-13

51 1 Kings 11:36-39

introduced without the actual use of the word *covenant*.⁵² Later in Isaiah it is again re-affirmed as *an everlasting covenant* promised to David.⁵³

The well-known passage in Jeremiah introduces the promise of a *new covenant*,⁵⁴ which will be written on their hearts. It is deliberately differentiated from the Sinai covenant. It will be internal and individual, not external and corporate. Just a little further in Jeremiah⁵⁵ the Messianic hope in the Davidic covenant is dramatically and powerfully re-affirmed, in a way which interestingly and subtly ties it in to the Patriarchal Promise.

Ezekiel specifically speaks of a future covenant on two occasions. God refers back to “the covenant I made with you”, then in juxtaposition and contrast offers, “I will establish an everlasting covenant with you” which obviously sounds very much like a new covenant instead of the Sinai covenant.⁵⁶ Further on in Ezekiel, there is the promise of a future “covenant of peace” which will be “an everlasting covenant”, which is linked specifically to the Davidic covenant.⁵⁷

So Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel each point forward to a new covenant yet to be instigated. In each of these three books this new covenant is specifically tied in to the promise of an “everlasting” covenant with David, and in one instance, is also linked to the unconditional Patriarchal Promise.

In the New Testament there is great emphasis throughout on the Blood of Messiah, because the writers understood a covenant was “cut” in His blood. So we see the emphasis in the Gospels on His passion, and the institution of the practice of communion, which will continually “proclaim” and re-affirm the covenant in His shed blood. Each of the Synoptic Gospels affirms Jesus’ claim to the inauguration of a new covenant by referring to “My blood of the new covenant” during the Passover meal.⁵⁸

This emphasis is repeated and reinforced by Paul in Corinthians, which is significantly the only direct quotation he uses from the known sayings of Jesus.⁵⁹ In a further letter to the Corinthians, he again makes an appeal to a *new covenant*, which is a covenant not in a written code but in the Spirit, so echoing Jeremiah.⁶⁰

Much of the imagery in Hebrews compares themes from temple worship under the Sinai covenant to argue in favour of a parallel, but superior, covenant in Jesus, our *great high priest*. Effectively the old entitlement under the Sinai covenant is directly set against a new covenant in Messiah. In Hebrews 8 a direct quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 makes it absolutely clear that the new covenant foreseen by Jeremiah has now been offered through Jesus the Messiah, as the mediator of a better covenant, with the old covenant becoming “obsolete”.⁶¹

52 2 Samuel 7:8-16

53 Isaiah 55:3

54 Jeremiah 31:31-34

55 Jeremiah 33:14-26

56 Ezekiel 16:60 NIV

57 Ezekiel 37:24-28

58 Matt 26:28; So also Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20 makes a similar reference. .

59 1 Corinthians 11:25

60 2 Corinthians 3:6

61 Hebrews 8:1-13

PART III – HOW THE COVENANTS INTERACT

We now need to ask how these various covenants fit together and in particular, to what extent the new covenant impacts on all or any of the previous covenants. Those who talk superficially, as though there were only ever two covenants in the Scriptures, or who speak disparagingly of “two covenant theology”, are ignoring the depth and complexity of Biblical covenants.

Any informed theological commentator should be aware that there is more than one covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures, and should consider carefully the way in which the various covenants are impacted by the new covenant in Messiah. We will now look again at the various covenants, to see just how they are affected by the new covenant in Messiah, and to what extent, if any, each one may have been replaced.

II

Noahide Covenant

The Noahide covenant has no particular link to the nation of Israel or its history, and generally, there is no suggestion that it is altered by the new messianic covenant. Although it has now been updated by a later covenant, which carries a much deeper and more specific offer of blessing to all nations, the Noahide covenant, as such, is unaffected.

Abrahamic Covenant

We noted earlier how the Sinai covenant is underpinned by the Patriarchal Promise. However, that is not to imply that the Abrahamic covenant is in any way subsumed by the later covenants. If the Abrahamic covenant is the bedrock on which the Sinai covenant is underwritten, that does not at all compromise the unconditionality of the original promise.

In Galatians Paul specifically points out that the Sinai covenant does not annul the promises given to Abraham,⁶² and recognises Gentile believers as spiritual heirs, by faith, of the Abrahamic promise.⁶³ We must be careful how much or how little we read into this. Paul is writing into a specific situation, and he is writing to Gentile believers. His aim is to show that, as spiritual heirs of the promise (to Abraham), Gentile converts do not need to come under the law or need circumcision. He does not need to make any allusion to the ongoing fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise in terms of historic Israel (the nation or the Land), because that is not an issue.

At that point the nation and the Land both existed,⁶⁴ both were extant. Israel was not entering into their spiritual entitlement in Messiah (by and large) but their existence was not a point for discussion. It simply did not arise. Historic Israel at the point of writing was simply an extant fact, and as an obvious statement of the ongoing fulfilment of promise, its validity was not in question. So it would be equally wrong on this evidence to infer that, in

62 Galatians 3:17

63 Galatians 3:29

64 Galatians can be dated to about 48/49AD (So *NBD* p392)

seeing the Gentile believers as heirs of the promise, Paul believes there is no further role for Israel, as it would to infer the opposite. It is simply not an issue in his mind, as he writes to the Galatian Church.

Writing to the Romans, however, Paul does expand further.⁶⁵ Whether some reaction to his Galatian letter had raised this very point as a question is impossible to speculate, but although he deals in a similar way with the relationship of Gentile believers to the Sinai covenant, he also makes specific mention of the status of natural Israel.⁶⁶ While he deplores Israel's general lack of reaction to the Gospel, Paul insists they still have a place in God's purpose. He maintains that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.⁶⁷ The word "gifts" means much the same as a covenant of grant, and "calling" implies the responsibilities which follow from that. In case there should be any doubt, Paul makes it clear that he looks forward to a time when the remnant of Israel will be grafted back in to the one olive tree.⁶⁸

Reflecting on Romans 9-11, Brevard Childs comments that, "Paul sets out to demonstrate that God's promises to Israel have not failed" and continues, "God's election of his people has not been annulled" because, "in God's time, according to his mysterious plan, 'all Israel will be saved' (11:26)."⁶⁹ Discussing the relationship between the Church as the new community of faith and the Israel of the old covenant, Childs contends that while on one hand, "the true people of God is the eschatological Israel of the new covenant whose continuity with the past lies in the promise to Abraham fulfilled by Christ (Rom 4:8ff)",⁷⁰ he nonetheless avers Paul's "concern for Israel, *kata sarka* (according to the flesh 9:3) and his vigorous contention that the word of God has not failed, God has not abandoned his people".⁷¹ Childs warns that "against those Gentile Christians who have no further need of Israel, Paul makes it fully clear that there is only one people of God, that is Israel, into which *olive tree*, a *wild shoot*, that is the Gentiles, has been engrafted."⁷²

So there should be no doubt that Paul sees the Abrahamic promise continuing for historic Israel, in whatever vestigial format, until a time when the nation, in general, will realise its spiritual inheritance and once again become spiritual, as well as temporal, heirs of the Abrahamic promise.

Sinai Covenant

It is fair to aver in general terms, that when we refer to "the Old Covenant", it is basically the Sinai covenant which is intended. Although Sinai is inherently conditional in nature, nonetheless, as we have seen, there is an underlying degree of promise, both by reference to

65 Romans can be dated to about 57-59 AD (So *NBD* p1025)

66 Romans 10 & 11

67 Romans 11:29

68 Romans 11:23 ff

69 Childs *Biblical Theology* p248

70 Childs *Biblical Theology* p435

71 Childs *Biblical Theology* p435

72 Childs *Biblical Theology* p436

the Patriarchal Promise, and by reference to the Name and character of YHWH Himself.⁷³

In a previous Olive Press paper, ‘Elijah and Covenant’, I showed that Elijah’s meeting with God at Horeb (Sinai) should be viewed as a conscious sequel to Moses’ encounter on the same mountain, and that in effect, the conditionality of the Sinai covenant is invoked in Elijah’s encounter.⁷⁴ My treatment also demonstrated that, although the consequences were to be disastrous for Israel, leading eventually to the Exile, yet the underlying promise still remained, expressed as the promise of a righteous remnant, and that Paul recognises precisely this interpretation when he specifically quotes the Elijah incident in Romans 11.⁷⁵

It is the Sinai covenant which Paul and other New Testament writers intend when they refer to “the Law”, meaning the Torah as delivered at Sinai. It is the Sinai covenant to which Hebrews refers consciously and conspicuously, using temple and sacrificial imagery, such as the bloods of bulls and the Holy of Holies, in insisting that in Jesus we have a better sacrifice and a better High Priest. Some scholars even believe that Hebrews was not written to Jewish believers in general, but to converted Temple priests, and although this remains a minority view,⁷⁶ it reinforces the fact that it is the Temple worship of the Sinai covenant with which Hebrews is concerned.

Nonetheless, despite his powerful arguments and widely admired flowing rhetoric on the superiority of the new covenant, the writer of Hebrews does not go so far as to say that the Sinai covenant is totally extinguished. The best he will say is that the first one is “obsolete”. Having quoted at length the famous Jeremiah passage prophesying the new covenant,⁷⁷ the writer adds just the simple comment that, “By calling this covenant *new* he has made the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear”.⁷⁸

Scholars note how briefly and succinctly the Hebrews writer summarises the lengthy quotation from Jeremiah, notably and surely significantly the longest quotation from the Old Testament to be found anywhere in the New Testament writings. They also note that, although the new, by virtue of its introduction, supersedes the old, the old is **not totally abolished**. Harold Attridge comments that, “The implication of the mention of a new covenant is that God antiquated or declared obsolete the first. In legal terminology a new will or testament would annul a previous one”, so that, “what is antiquated and aged is tottering on the brink, as it were” and “the old is *close to or nigh* disappearance”.⁷⁹

Similarly Paul Ellingworth observes that: “the language of this verse is sufficiently general to leave open the question whether the author thought of the old covenant as old and moribund already from the time of Jeremiah’s declaration, or only from the time of Christ’s coming and/or death.” Significantly he points out that “statements about the supersession of the old dispensation appear to grow generally bolder as the argument

73 Exodus 34:6-7

74 Frank Booth *Elijah and Covenant* Olive Press Quarterly May 2008

75 Booth *Elijah and Covenant* p14

76 Donald Guthrie and FF Bruce are among those who have expressed this view.

77 Jeremiah 31:31-34

78 Hebrews 8:13

79 Harold Attridge *Hebrews* p228

progresses, yet the continued existence of the first covenant is never completely denied”.⁸⁰

David Stern makes a very similar analysis. “In this verse, the verb tenses are important. The Mosaic covenant has already been ‘made old’, but it is not already aged and it has not already vanished. It is in the process of aging and on the verge of vanishing.” He goes on to say “Even Christians whose theology posits the abrogation or passage of the Mosaic covenant in its entirety must therefore acknowledge that it has not yet vanished but still exists”.⁸¹

So the force of the argument in Hebrews is that even though the new covenant is vastly superior to the old, and while the old may be moribund and decaying, nevertheless the old is still extant and not yet extinct.

Davidic Covenant

We suggested that the Davidic covenant is best understood as having two parts which in effect function quite separately. The earthly conditional part was continually disrupted by disobedience on the part of Davidic heirs, and the book of Kings is attentive to record the nuances of such disobedience and its results. The division of the kingdom, the loss of the Northern kingdom, and the exile to Babylon in 597BC, are all seen by the author of Kings as playing out the conditionality of the temporal covenant. It can be argued that, to all intents and purposes, the validity of this temporal aspect expired with the Exile, though whether that concurs with the hopes and expectations of subsequent generations in Israel is another matter.

However, the prophetic Messianic promise, continually affirmed as “everlasting”, remained very much extant. A very extensive treatment of how the everlasting Davidic covenant is viewed by the writer of Hebrews is provided by David Anderson. According to Anderson, in Hebrews we find that, “Jesus is the Son promised to David who has inaugurated the Davidic Kingdom as signified by his exaltation to the right hand of his Father in Heaven”,⁸² and again “what is explicit is that Jesus is the Davidic King, the fulfilment of the ‘seed’ promised to David who will reign over the Davidic Kingdom”.⁸³ He also echoes a common view that there is both a future dimension as well as a present dimension to the fulfilment of the promise. So while “the Davidic kingdom [has] not been fulfilled”, yet “there are many present blessings ... which can be enjoyed now because the Davidic covenant with some of its blessings has been inaugurated”.⁸⁴

We find in Jeremiah that the everlasting Messianic promise within the Davidic covenant is also grounded in the Patriarchal Promise.⁸⁵ Both covenants are unconditional, but the inauguration of the Royal covenant in Yeshua need not imply any lessening of

80 Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p418

81 David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* p691

82 Anderson *King-Priest* p 173

83 Anderson *King-Priest* p 291

84 Anderson *King-Priest* p 296

85 Jeremiah 33:14-26

expectation regarding the promises to Abraham of a nation and a Land. So Anderson, following his assertion that the Davidic kingdom has been inaugurated but not fulfilled, also insists that the underlying “promises to the patriarchs have not been annulled”.⁸⁶

PART IV – CONCLUSION

From this survey it seems fair to observe that a simplistic assumption that the “Old” covenant has been replaced by the “New” is both superficial and theologically naïve. It fails to recognise not only the variety of different covenants operating in the Hebrew Scriptures, but also how the principles of conditionality, and its necessary corollary temporality, interplay with underlying unconditional and irrevocable promises.

We can say (with the writer of Hebrews) that the **Sinai covenant** with its emphasis on conditions of Torah and observance of Temple ritual has been rendered obsolete, but we need to note that it is not yet extinct. We can say (with Anderson) that the everlasting promises of the **Davidic covenant** have been inaugurated, but we need to note that they are not yet fulfilled. But we must also be clear that **the promises to Abraham** regarding the nation and the Land are not conditional, but rather **irrevocable**.

They are not tied either to the failure or otherwise of Sinai, nor to the fulfilment or otherwise of the Davidic covenants, nor is there any necessity to suppose they are overtaken by the coming of Messiah. Their temporality regarding physical Israel is not cancelled by believing Gentiles becoming spiritually heirs of Abraham. The one does not obliterate the other.

The promises to Abraham are not only fulfilled spiritually by Gentiles becoming heirs of the promise, but the irrevocable promises regarding a nation and a Land also maintain their temporal currency until such time, as Paul foresees, that all Israel will be grafted back in.

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