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THE COVENANT CONCEPT AMONG THE QUMRAN SECTARIES

by J. G. HARRIS

DR. HARRIS'S qualities as a student of the Qumrân texts have already been shown by contributions appearing in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY as also by his monograph "The Qumrân Commentary on Habakkuk" (S.P.C.K., 1966). A further study, dealing with a central aspect of Qumrân theology, has now come our way, and it gives us pleasure to publish it.

IT need hardly be said that the use of the term *Covenant* to describe the relationship between God and His elect holds a central place in the faith and teaching of the Bible. No one can enter into the inner meaning of the Bible without paying the closest attention to it. The notion protrudes to the earliest beginnings of the Bible's revelation, when God and His people first came together, and it continues to be used in the latest strands to express the nature of God's continuing acts and purposes.

In the light of the Bible's affirmation of the *Covenant*-relationship which God had entered into with His people, and its delineation of the corollaries which this relationship carried, it is understandable that the Jewish sectarian community at Qumrân, whose organization and way of life was deeply steeped in the traditions and precepts of Judaism, should give pride of place to the *Covenant*-concept between God and His elect. The literary remains of this community illumine in a number of important respects the nature of the *Covenant*-relationship, the image of God on which such a concept rested, the ways in which the *Covenant* was enacted and sustained, the duties and obligations it conferred upon those who entered into it, and consequences that would befall those who wilfully remained outside its provisions or who abrogated its responsibilities.

I

We may begin by observing that at Qumrân it was taken for granted that the *Covenant* originated with God. The concept of the *Covenant* was implicit in the character of God Himself. It was the result of God's free initiative, His voluntary and self-motivated act. God had acted of His own volition and without reference to any merit on man's part. In this respect the *Covenant*-theology of

the Qumrân sectaries was directly in line with the Bible's teaching. There is no indication that the Covenant was other than the expression of God's free grace. In the Qumrân *Book of Hymns* or the *Psalms of Thanksgiving* God's initiative in establishing the *Covenant* finds repeated expression. Such expressions as "Thou has illumined my face with the light of Thy *Covenant*", and "Thou has brought me into Thy *Covenant*" are frequent. Such self-determinative action as God had taken gave expression to His essential character and its attributes. As well as implying the independence of the divine actions, and His self-conceived purposes, the establishment of the *Covenant* revealed His grace and mercy, His goodness and compassion. It expressed the loving kindness implicit in the divine nature. Thus in the *Manual of Discipline* we read "For He, in His compassion, has drawn me near unto Him, and His judgment upon me shall be rendered in His mercy", or in the *Book of Hymns*, "in Thy bounty Thou has given me a place among those to whom Thou art pledged". Such expressions abound in the psalm literature from Qumrân ("in loving kindness to man", "in abundance of mercy", "Thine abundant goodness", "Thy plentiful mercies"), and they convey God's free choice of His elect, the sphere through which He bestows His blessings upon them, but above all the quality of the relationship which God sought graciously and deliberately to create with His people.

Because the *Covenant* was established by God's free act and love for His people it could not be other than an everlasting *Covenant*. "God ever made His everlasting *Covenant*" is how the *Zadokite Document* states it. As emanating from God the *Covenant* must have an everlasting continuance. Indeed, God would keep it in perpetuity and it would stand for ever, as this *Document* clearly states (vii. 1-6; cf. *A Formulary of Blessings*). God was irrevocably committed to His chosen people, and this constancy and stability which characterized the *Covenant* was expressed in hymns of praise and adoration of the divine triumph in times of battle:

Blessed be the God of Israel
 Who keeps the loyalty of His *Covenant*
 And constantly brings salvation . . .
 O God of mercies,
 Who keepest the *Covenant* sworn unto our fathers,
 And throughout all our generations
 Hast shown forth Thy mercies . . .

(*War Scroll* xiv, 2-17)

There is striking evidence in the Qumrân scrolls that God mediated a fuller knowledge of Himself and His purposes through the *Covenant*-relationship than He would otherwise have done. The

Covenant was the medium of divine revelation and those whom He had brought into the *Covenant* were recipients of special knowledge from God Himself. The people whom God had pledged to Himself experienced the goodness and love of God in a special measure (*Zadokite Document* viii. 1-21); to them God revealed hidden things, even His holy Sabbaths, His glorious festivals, His righteous ordinances, the ways of truth, His purposes (*ibid.* iii. 12ff.; cf. *Manual of Discipline* ii. 1-18). But no aspect of the benefits conferred upon the faithful within the *Covenant* surpasses the experience of salvation. Although there is no systematic treatment of salvation in the Qumrân documents it may be inferred that the offer and means of salvation are implicit in the terms of the *Covenant*. Indeed, it may be said that salvation, not as conformity to a particular ritual formula, but as a liberating experience into a life of abandonment to God's sovereign rule, is only possible through the *Covenant*. God is a God of salvation (*Manual of Discipline* ii. 1-18), and those with whom God has established His *Covenant* shall see salvation at His hand (*Zadokite Document* xx. 27-34). God's self-commitment to the *Covenant* is an assurance in itself that the people whom He redeemed would also be the heirs of salvation (*War Scroll* xiv. 2-17).

Nowhere is the certainty that God's salvation would be an abiding experience amongst His elect more clearly portrayed than in the frequent references in these texts to the survival of a holy remnant. As in the Bible, so at Qumrân the existence of a remnant ensured that God's purposes could not ultimately be defeated. Such a concept is firmly grounded in the *Covenant*—whenever He called to mind the *Covenant* God spared a remnant (*Zadokite Document* i. 1ff.). To them God would bring reviving qualities, refining them and purging them of guilt (*Book of Hymns* vi. 1-35). Truth and light would be their lot (*ibid.* xiv. 1-27), compassion, inner strength, spirituality, obedience to God's judgment would be their hall-mark (*ibid.*), whilst the remnant would ever be the recipients of God's mercy and prevail against evil, even against the dominion of Belial (*War Scroll* xiv. 2-17).

One further aspect of the *Covenant* as an act of God's own purpose may be mentioned. God is the source of holiness, His name, i.e., His character is holy (*Zadokite Document* xv. 1ff.), and everything that originates from God bears the stamp of holiness. The *Covenant* is holy, and only those who are themselves holy can enter into it. Persons and things which profane God's holiness have no part or lot in His *Covenant*. The notion of holiness is persistent throughout the Qumrân texts, which is not surprising when we

remember that the community itself was conceived as a holy community. The holiness of God communicated itself through the *Covenant*, and those who were called into the divine sphere and enacted the terms of the *Covenant* became holy themselves.

II

We turn now to look at what the *Covenant*-concept in vogue at Qumrân implied for the members of the community. The fundamental essence of the *Covenant* on its man-ward side was that it represented man's own response to God's initiative and free grace. The members of the community had entered into the *Covenant* voluntarily. The impulsion of inner response to the obligations that the *Covenant* implied was the motive of entry and not external compulsion. The first step was the individual's personal pledge of allegiance to God (*Manual of Discipline* i. 1). Such a pledge laid no further obligations upon God, because He had already assumed every obligation fully by His inception of the *Covenant*, but it brought new obligations to the individual, and to the community of covenanted individuals, as the *Covenant* was entered into. The acceptance of the terms of the *Covenant* was an essential part of the whole concept. A goodly portion of the indigenous literature of the Qumrân sect deals with the obligations which became morally binding upon the members of community who had entered upon the *Covenant* which God had initiated. Four of these conditions may be mentioned here as being illustrative of the whole range of duties that befell those who entered into God's *Covenant*.

Firstly, on entering into the *Covenant*-relation with God the individual embarked upon a life of self-surrender and of personal piety. He must respect God and man, he must do what is good and upright in God's sight, he must live in obedience to the divine commands, and walk blamelessly before God (*Manual of Discipline* i. 1ff.). The impulse of such piety was inward and spiritual, for the covenanted individual had the inner springs of his thought and action purified by the truth of God's precepts and his whole strength controlled by God's ways (*ibid.*). By surrendering himself to an utterly God-directed life, without at any time deviating a single step from carrying out God's orders or turning aside from the ordinances of God's truth, the individual went a long way towards meeting the conditions of the covenanted-life.

Secondly, according to the Qumrân documents life within the *Covenant* necessitated the fulfilment of social responsibilities and service of a high order. The *Covenant*-relationship involved more than God and isolated man. The *Manual of Discipline* is very much

a social charter for members of a community that was self-conscious of its commitment to God's *Covenant*. These social duties ranged from the observance of those fundamental conditions, which are the *sine qua non* of any truly stable and coherent communal life, to the conception of social relationship in high moral and spiritual terms. The concept of holiness carried a decidedly social ethical significance (*Zadokite Document* v. 7-20), and the social obligations of the *Covenant*, like the maintenance of law and order, the paramountcy of honesty and truthfulness, etc., are rules to be performed "in holiness unimpaired" (*ibid.*). In the keeping of these social obligations "God's *Covenant* will be made good" (*ibid.* vii. 1-6).

Thirdly, ritual observances fall within the obligations of the *Covenant*. There is no antipathy between ritual and ethical duty. Cultic religion can be of a high ethical standard, and this seems to have been recognized at Qumrân. The observance of "His holy Sabbaths" and "His glorious festivals" (*Zadokite Document* iii. 12ff.) fell within the prescribed conditions of the *Covenant* (cf. x. 14-xi. 18), as did also the ritual of restitution which was to be enacted as a condition of maintaining the *Covenant* (*ibid.* ix. 10-15). Likewise the conditions governing offerings at the altar (*ibid.* xi. 18-xii. 2) and the performance of worship (*ibid.*), acts which were tinged with holiness, were seen to be among those obligations which came to a *Covenant*-people.

Fourthly, it was inevitable that at Qumrân much attention should be paid to the organization and maintenance of a proper communal life. It was expected that every member of the community should give loyalty and allegiance to every other member of the community and live according to the communal rule. But this was more than a matter of expediency or an ephemeral demand. It was necessitated by the nature of the *Covenant*. God's *Covenant* was with His people in community. Every individual had his status in the community of God but the community also had a status as God's creation. To break faith with the brotherhood or to break the communal rule was tantamount to abrogating God's *Covenant*. Thus the *Manual of Discipline* sets out religiously the steps to be taken in joining the community, clearly describes the importance of following the rule of the community, states why wealth is surrendered, why an oath must be made with other members of the community, shows why obedience to those of superior rank and order is enjoined, and the significance of communal dining, consultation, and of worship together, for the implementation of the *Covenant*.

III

We now pass on to observe that within the Qumrân community specially appointed individuals were set apart to be the intermediaries of the *Covenant*. Foremost among these are the priests and the levites. The former officiated at the initiation of new members into the *Covenant* community. They rehearsed "the bounteous acts of God as revealed in all His deeds of power" and they "invoked a blessing on all who cast their lot with God" (*Manual of Discipline* ii. 1ff.). The priests were persons with special knowledge of the *Covenant* (*ibid.* viii. 1-19), and were schooled to perfection in God's law (*ibid.*), so that they could set an example to the members of the community in truth, righteousness and justice. It fell to their lot to read aloud the provisions of the *Covenant* so that everyone would be conversant with the demands they must meet. The levites, on the other hand, had the duty of rehearsing the transgressions of the children of Israel when they abrogated their *Covenant* with God, and to invoke a curse upon those who cast their lot with Belial (*ibid.* ii. 1-18). In addition to the priests and the levites, the president of the community, whom God had specially appointed to represent His power, was charged with the renewal of the *Covenant* with the members of the community, and in times of distress to confirm God's holy *Covenant* with His elect.

All through the Qumrân literature it is implied that the *Covenant* is an unconditional one, and not one from which the members could withdraw whenever they chose. The *Covenant* was only violable from man's side. From many passages it is clear that the sect regarded the violation of the *Covenant* as a morally reprehensible act. It was an act of denial and treachery against God, and it was also an abrogation of moral and social obligations. The *Book of Hymns* (iv. 5ff.) speaks of the idolatry of those who turned away from God's *Covenant*. To betray the terms of the *Covenant* amounts to profaning the divine name or failing to keep faith with God (*Commentary on Habakkuk* i. 1ff.). But to indulge in guilty deeds, in frowardness, to associate with wicked men, to take no pleasure in God's *Covenant*, is tantamount to placing oneself without the *Covenant* (*Book of Hymns* iv. 5-40). To do so was also a breach of fellowship with the community (*ibid.*, xvii. 1ff.). There are several descriptions in these texts of those who put themselves outside God's *Covenant*. Whoever deviates in this way is set apart for misfortune, is cut off from the children of light, and has his lot among the accursed (*Manual of Discipline* ii. 1-18; cf. ii. 25-iii. 12). But very characteristic of the Qumrân viewpoint is God's persistence in pursuing the aims of His *Covenant*. Discipline, judg-

ment, punishment for wilful idolatry and the repudiation of the terms of the *Covenant* are clearly set out here (*Zadokite Document* xv. 1ff.; cf. *Book of Hymns* xv. 9-26), but such consequences upon wilful abdication from the conditions of the *Covenant* far from denoting God's variableness are the signs of His continuing purpose and favour as originally conceived. God had showed His love and faithfulness in the days of Moses, and this applies still to those who show repentance and turn away from evil. "The same love which God showed to the men of old who pledged themselves to follow Him will He show to their successors. The ancestral *Covenant* shall stand for them" (*Zadokite Document* viii. 1-21).

Other aspects of the *Covenant*-concept at Qumrân, such as the hope it engendered in the sectaries, have not been touched upon. But we may conclude by observing again the way in which the faith of this community held firmly to the belief that there would always be signs and manifestations of God's inviolable *Covenant* with His people. God alone knows the time when the *Covenant* He initiated will be fully and finally established, and its purposes completely satisfied, but the members of this community lived in the confidence that in God's good time and pleasure He would vindicate His chosen people and renew with them His *Covenant*. Then He would show them His glory, reveal to them the heights of eternity, and appoint for them a faithful shepherd (*The New Covenant*).

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