

Part 2 of a series on Old Testament Covenant Theology

The Normative Covenant

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1. Exodus: The Covenant Continued

The whole action of the book of Exodus begins at this moment which is recorded for us in chapter 2:23 'And it came to pass in the course of those many days, that the king of Egypt died; and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried and their appeal for help came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. And God saw the children of Israel and God took knowledge of them.' People were the object of the genocidal impulse of Pharaoh, and there the matter would have rested except that God remembered his covenant.

Again, we read in Exodus 6:2-8: 'And God spoke unto Moses and said unto him, I am Yahweh and I showed myself unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, in the character of God Almighty, but as to my name Yahweh, I did not reveal myself to them. And I have also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan the land of their sojourning, wherein they sojourned. And moreover I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered my covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am Yehweh, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, . . . and I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and ye shall know that I am Yahweh thy God. . . . And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning which I lifted up my hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you for an inheritance: I am Yahweh.' The covenant notes ring through this passage. Not only does the word 'covenant' appear but also the main covenant ideas. The great covenant promise is stated here in its normative form, 'I will take thee to me for a people and I will be to you a God.' God had said to Abraham that he would be a God to him and to his descendants after him and had promised him the inheritance of the land. That promise is taken up here, and the action which is now going to take place is a direct continuation of God's covenant with the fathers.

Even more significant than the actual occurrence of the word 'covenant' is the situation in which the book of Exodus is set. Pharaoh, the king of the world, had determined on the utter destruction of this people. Little did he know that he was challenging the promise that God had made to Abraham. God had said to Abraham, 'I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse.' (Genesis 12:3) Pharaoh, therefore, all unwittingly, was setting himself up to challenge the covenant. When his covenant was challenged God rose to defend it. Both the vocabulary and the setting of the book of Exodus proclaim to us that it is the continuation of the covenant narrative.

2. Exodus: The Covenant Perfected

In the covenant with Noah in Genesis 8 and 9, the basic idea was that God makes and keeps promises and that those promises home in on the idea of salvation: God pledges himself to save sinners; and so he does. In the continuation of the narrative there are two features upon which the narrative focusses some attention. First there is the feature of sacrifice.



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The first action of Noah after the flood after his exit from the ark is to offer burnt offerings, consecration offerings, to the Lord. The narrative does not at this point stop to say what the relationship of sacrifice is to the covenant, nor does it stop to explain how sacrifice works. It simply records that the covenant man offered a burnt offering to God. And immediately following that, God comes to Noah with a declaration of his law, saying to him in so many words: 'You are a covenant man, I have redeemed you, now this is the way you are to live.' Therefore, alongside the covenant idea of God making and keeping promises, there are these two ideas in association: sacrifice and law.

In the covenant which God made with Abraham, you will remember these same two elements: sacrifice and law. The first time that God drew near in covenant with Abram was in Genesis 15, where we read in verse 18: 'In that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.' That is to say, in the day that God went on oath by means of a specified sacrifice. So the idea of sacrifice is no longer lying in some sort of loose, undefined relationship to the idea of covenant, but has been brought into the very heart of God's covenant dealings, though we are not told what it means. In the same way we noted earlier how circumcision by its nature committed Abraham to a life of obedience. Circumcision was the first act of the obedient man,

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and it is interesting to note that Genesis 17, in which circumcision becomes the sign of the covenant, begins on a note of law: 'He said unto him: I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be thou perfect.' So law is brought into the heart of the covenant. But it is not a very informative law. It does not declare what constitutes an obedient walk and a perfect

life.

But now we come to God's covenant dealings with Moses and with Israel in Egypt. We turn to that sequence of events which includes both Passover and Mount Sinai. Here sacrifice is seen to be at the heart of covenant and is explained; law is seen to be at the heart of covenant and is elaborated. Thus, in this Exodus covenant document you have the perfection of God's covenant dealings with his people. You have the covenant in its normative form. The promises remain constant and the other constituents are brought into their appropriate places and are given their full explanation and elaboration.

3. Exodus 1-12: The God Who Speaks

How does God reveal himself? Now the current emphasis in Old Testament studies is on the God who acts. Revelation is by the acts of God; G.E. Wright has written a book under that title, *God Who Acts*. But the idea itself is considerably older than contemporary Old Testament theologians. One of the most striking statements of this view is to be found in William Temple's book *Nature, Man and God*. Temple puts it in this way: 'There are no revealed truths; there are only truths of revelation.' That is to say, God does not commit himself to propositions; he acts, and people contemplating these acts perceive what God is like. Revelation comes by correct thinking about the acts of God. According to this view, Holy Scripture is the first of a potentially long chain of attempts to interpret the acts of God.

Now that is not what Exodus 1-12 asserts happened. Exodus 1-12 insists that the word of God comes first and the deed of God follows, and that revelation is not contained in a word which arises by *interpretation* from a deed. Revelation consists rather in a word which is subsequently *confirmed* by a deed. Moses is not an interpreter after the event: Moses is a man made wise before the event.

Here are the truths which God made known to Moses: a) He told Moses that he was the *God of the Fathers* and the God of the covenant, and that what he was proposing to do was in pursuance of that covenant. b) Before anything else, God reveals himself as the *God of holiness* (Exodus 3:5). It is interesting to note that this is in fact the first time in the Bible

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that holiness is directly ascribed to God. c) God informs Moses that he *purposes to bring his people out from Egypt* (3:7-8). d) He makes Moses aware of Israel's position as God's adopted son. 'Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, my firstborn' (4:21, 22). e) Moses is made aware of *the actual course that events will take*. 'When thou goest back into Egypt, see that thou do before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go. And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, my firstborn: and I have said unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me; and thou hast refused to let him go: behold, I will slay thy son, thy firstborn.' (4:21-23). The whole sequence

of events is in principle stated here before Moses — the mighty deeds of God which provoke increasing opposition and the climactic deed in which it is either Pharaoh's firstborn or God's firstborn. f) Moses is made aware that God is a *God who purposes redemption*. In Exodus 6 when the people are in Egypt and things look at their blackest God commits himself to redeem (Ex. 6:6). This is the first time that the verb 'to redeem' is used in the Bible in what afterwards became its normative sense; indeed it is only used once at all in the book of Genesis. g) But chief among all the things which God revealed to Moses before sending him into Egypt was *the significance of his own name Yahweh*. The name 'Yahweh', which appears in some Bibles as 'Jehovah' and in most Bibles as 'LORD', is related to the Hebrew verb 'to be'. It is helpful to understand something

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of the significance of the verb 'to be' in Hebrew. Over and over again in the Old Testament you come across the familiar phrase, 'The word of the LORD came to . . .' Now in Hebrew that is: 'The word of the LORD was to . . .' The verb used is the verb 'to be', not a verb of motion but a verb of realistic experience. 'The word of God became a living reality to . . .' The verb 'to be' in Hebrew means living reality, living presence, not just some bare abstract idea of existence as compared with non-existence. When God focusses attention upon this divine name, 'I am Yahweh', he is saying, 'I am the God of living presence with my people. I am the God who is with you to redeem you and to overthrow your enemies.'

4. Exodus 1-12: The God Who Acts

Things happened in Egypt exactly as God said they would happen; that is to say Moses goes to Pharaoh and begins to perform the wonders which God commanded him to perform. The reaction of Pharaoh was as God said it would be; that is to say, this series of plagues effected no salvation. Rather, the situation worsened until things reached a climax where Pharaoh broke off diplomatic relations with Moses saying, 'Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in the day thou seest my face thou shalt die.' (Exodus 10:28). So Moses is made aware that the moment of climax has come; it comes at the beginning of chapter 11, the contest of the firstborn, God's firstborn or Pharaoh's firstborn. But the contest of the firstborn, contrary to anything which has hitherto been told to us, is set in the context of the Passover.

Let us ask two questions. First of all, *Why the plagues?* Before anything has happened, God tells Moses that they will not do any good, that Pharaoh will harden his heart. Only when the contest of the firstborn comes will there be release. Why then the plagues? I suggest that the answer is this: God is giving us here an object lesson, spelling out the fact that he ever mingles forbearance with his judgment. He does not spring catastrophic

judgment upon people. He approaches them with gentler, less disastrous judgment. When they fail to take the warning he will try again. In all he will try nine times, so that when the judgment comes it has been established beyond doubt that here is a people set in its opposition to God and unwilling to hear his word. He will only bring judgment when forbearance has been exhausted.

So far so good. But if in fact it is the last judgment, the contest of the firstborn, that is going to bring the people of God out from the land of Egypt, *why the Passover?* The answer to that question is this: because when the wrath of God is applied in its essential reality, no one is safe. There were two nations in the land of Egypt, but they were both resistant to the word of God. If God comes in judgment none will escape unless God makes some prior provision which will guarantee the safety of those whom he has chosen to save. The provision which God made was the Passover lamb and its blood, and the smearing of the blood, and the safe sheltering of the people in the place where the blood had been shed.

I want to set before you the five key words in which the theology of the story of the Passover may be expressed.

a) **Propitiation.** The chosen setting for the passover is a setting of divine judgment. God purposes to come wrathfully into the land of Egypt. He says so in Exodus 12 verse 12: 'For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and I will smite . . .' Any Israelite who was abroad that night, having failed to heed the Passover regulations, is implicated; the fact that he is an Israelite does not exempt him. Verse 23 makes that clear: 'For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood upon the lintel and on the two side posts the LORD will pass over the door, and will not allow the destroyer come into your houses.' So apart from the Passover blood, the destroyer would enter. All alike are under the wrath of God that

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night. Nevertheless it says in verse 13, 'The blood shall be to you a token upon the house where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over.' Not 'when I see you', but 'when I see the blood I will pass over.' The blood is a token to me that you are there; but it is 'when I see the blood that I will pass over.' Putting the matter bluntly, there is something about the blood which changes God. The God who comes in wrath looks upon that household with absolute satisfaction. There is nothing there to move him to wrath any more, and he passes by. That is the truth which is safeguard by the word 'propitiation', that which appeases divine wrath. There is no reference in this narrative to any subjective state of the people of God, and therefore words like 'expiation', which signify the wiping away of sin in the heart of man, will not suffice.

b) **Security** or salvation. Verse 22 reads, 'Ye shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike

the lintel and the two side posts with the blood in the bason; and none of you shall go out of the door of this house.' The people of God are secure from destruction while they shelter in the place where the blood has been shed. God-ward the blood works propitiation, manward security.

c) **Substitution.** Is there any clue in the narrative as to why the blood of the lamb has such amazing efficacy that it can propitiate a wrathful God? We can see the answer to this most clearly if we remind ourselves that the judgment of God was in terms of death. But a death had taken place in every Israelite house already. The narrative is perhaps more truthful than the narrator intended when he says in verse 30: 'There was not a house where there was not one dead' — in every Egyptian household the death of the firstborn, in every Israelite household the death of the lamb. We cannot resist the word substitution. The narrative rubs our noses in the exact equivalence of that lamb to the people of God. See verse 3: 'They shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household: and if the household be too little for a lamb, then shall he and his neighbour next unto his house take one according to the number of the souls; according to every man's appetite ye shall make your count for the lamb.' The lamb represents exactly the number and the needs of the people of God. That was the lamb that died; that was the precious blood under which they had sheltered, the lamb that was exact in its measurement to the number and needs of the people of God. If that is not substitution then you must be very hard to please!

d) **Deliverance**, or accomplished redemption. The death of the lamb did not make redemption *possible* for the people of God; it made redemption *actual* and *inevitable*. Redemption was accomplished through the death of the lamb. Before the lamb died they could not go; after the lamb died they could not stay. We read that the Egyptians were urgent upon them to make them leave. The death of the lamb effected redemption.

e) **Pilgrimage.** Exodus 12:11 reads: 'Thus shall ye eat it; with loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD'S Passover.' They must eat it as those who are already committed to pilgrimage. They cannot eat the Lord's Passover and live in Egypt. They can only eat the Lord's Passover if they have made a free commitment to go walking with God out of this place wherever he will lead them. The people who went into safety through the door plastered with the blood of the lamb came out through the same bloodstained door into pilgrimage. The blood which ushered them into safety ushered them out to walk with God.