

CHAPTER ONE

The Purpose of God's Covenants

The notion of a covenant is unfamiliar to many. But the practice of a covenantal life was an integral part of the ancient cultures in the Near East. Tens of thousands of documents unearthed in the last decades show a wide range of legal agreements between individuals and between nations. Already in the eighteenth century B.C., such international covenants attached religious sanctions that involved the slaughter and cutting up of sacrificial beasts for the making of covenants. The technical phrase for making a covenant was “to cut” a covenant (Heb.: *karat berit*). A common element was the cursing formula: “Just as this beast is cut up, so may X be cut up.” The person who recited this formula thus declared that what had happened to the animal would happen to him if he broke his treaty obligations. J. Arthur Thompson states:

The contracting parties took an oath in the name of the gods, who both witnessed their solemn agreement and would act as its guarantors. Such solemn agreements were made between individuals, tribes, states, or nations....The narrative [of Moses] in Ex. 19-24 has many links with the Near Eastern covenant pattern.¹

This historic background of the ancient *suzerainty treaties* between Hittite overlords and their vassals provides revealing parallels of the covenant relation between God and Israel. The Sinaitic covenant both corresponds and contrasts with the legal customs of its time and culture. Regarding the formal parallel with the Sinai story in Exodus 19-24, George E. Mendenhall, in his epoch-making work *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (1950), mentions that

there are six characteristic elements found in the covenant structure of the Hittite treaties texts:

1) The *Preamble* identifies the author of the covenant, giving his titles and attributes; 2) The “*historical prologue*” describes the previous benevolent deeds which the Hittite king has performed for the benefit of the vassal. This important feature stresses the favors received as the reasons why the vassal is obligated to perpetual *gratitude* toward the great king; 3) The “*stipulations*” of the covenant describe in detail the obligations imposed upon and accepted by the vassal; the vassal was required to appear before the Hittite king once a year; 4) Provision for *deposit* in the temple of the vassal state and periodic public reading of the document; 5) The list of gods as *witnesses* and enforcers of the covenant; 6) The *curses and the blessings formula* as the reactions of the gods.²

God’s covenant-making with Israel shows a remarkable parallel structure to the legal customs of the contemporary culture. YAHWEH first mentions what He had done to Egypt and how He “carried you [Israel] on eagles’ wings” to Himself (Exod. 19:4) before speaking His “words” (*debarim*) of the Decalogue to them. The Preamble of the Decalogue itself begins with a brief reminder of His redemptive act of delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage—establishing His identity and the reason for Israel’s obedience to this Redeemer God (Exod. 20:2). The stipulations of the covenant are spelled out in the Decalogue in Exodus 20, supplemented by social laws in Exodus 21-23. Three times Israel made a pledge to obey everything the LORD said (Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7). The covenant was ceremonially ratified with the sprinkling of sacrificial blood (Exod. 24:4-8). Curses and blessings are contained within the Decalogue (20:4-6, 11-12) and were pronounced later from two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim (Deut. 27-28). There is also specific mention of the covenant book that was read to the people during the covenant making (24:7). The tablets of stone had to be deposited within the “ark of the Testimony” (Exod. 25:21-22), while the “Book of the Covenant” was to be placed “beside the ark of the covenant” (Deut. 31:26). The same procedure seems to characterize Israel’s periodic *covenant renewals* under Moses in the plain of Moab in Deuteronomy 29-30,

under Joshua at Shechem in Joshua 23-24, and later in the days of the Davidic kings Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

All of this shows that Israel's history, law, and cultus were bound together in an unbreakable unit from the very beginning. These three aspects were characteristic of Israel's covenant with God from the start. It indicates that the law of Israel should never be removed from its covenant setting. The prophets described Israel's history of exile and of restoration as a history of Israel's covenant relationship with God, as can be seen in Nehemiah 9 and in the historical Psalms 78, 105, and 106. The prophets assured Israel that in the final analysis God would be faithful to His covenant with Israel and usher in the *Messianic* era of peace and prosperity, despite Israel's repeated breaking of His covenant, because God's name and honor were at stake (Isa. 11; 43:25; Ezek. 16:60-63; 20:44; Dan. 9:17-19). Nevertheless, their prophetic messages are structured as indictments or divine "lawsuits" because of Israel's breach of covenant (Isa. 1; Jer. 2; Mic. 6).

No wonder that hope for the Messianic fulfillment blossomed in the darkest hours of Israel's history when the Jews suffered under the cruel oppressions of Syria and Rome, as is evident in the apocalyptic writings of Late Judaism (see Psalms of Solomon 17; 1 Enoch 7; 4 Ezra 7). The concept of "covenant" is thus essential to an understanding of Israel's Scriptures.

God's Covenant Promises

From a biblical perspective, it seems fitting to start with the first covenant God made with Adam and Eve in Paradise, traditionally called the *creation covenant*. This covenant sets the stage for the purpose of all post-fall covenants of God. Genesis 1 and 2 provide the ultimate purpose of God's covenant of redemption: the restoration of the original covenant relationship with redeemed humanity. From the start, God's covenant with Adam and Eve established a bond or relationship with the Creator, stating that they were created "in His image." The account specifies certain privileges and obligations for His covenant partners (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15-17). At the heart of God's covenant is His personal interrelationship with His

people. He graciously committed Himself to a bond with human beings, expressing the basis on which He would relate to His creatures. God's faithfulness implies His commitment to redeem and restore humankind.

From Adam to Jesus, God dealt with humanity by means of a series of covenant promises that centered on a coming Redeemer and which culminated in the Davidic covenant (Gen. 12:2-3; 2 Sam. 7:12-17; Isa. 11). To Israel in Babylonian captivity God promised a more effective "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31-34) in connection with the coming of the Davidic Messiah (Ezek. 36:26-28; 37:22-28).

The prophet Ezekiel reveals that God's new covenant promises to Israel aim at a higher purpose than the gathering of Israel. "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name....Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes" (Ezek. 36:22-23). John H. Walton rightly concludes from this passage that the ultimate goal of God's covenant promises is the disclosure of His holy character before all nations: "God's self-revelation."³ But this "holiness" revelation will manifest itself visibly *through* the covenant people of Yahweh before the eyes of the world.

The questions persist: What is the God of Israel revealing in each successive covenant concerning Himself and His redemptive will for fallen humanity? What is the unique contribution of each covenant that supplements His previous covenant? How do God's covenants relate to each other? Does any successive covenant of God simply replace the former one? Or does each build on the former, so that each new covenant modifies rather than radically supplanting the earlier ones? An initial answer is found in Paul's argument for the organic union of the Sinaitic and Abrahamic covenants:

What I mean is this: The law, introduced [by Moses] 430 years later [than Abraham], does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise....Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!...It [the law]

was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. (Gal. 3:17, 21, 19)

This declaration of Paul rejects a one-sided stress on contrast and replacement of God's covenants. Paul sees the law "added" to the promise, the opposite of a replacement thinking. While the Sinaitic covenant has added new revelations of God to the Abrahamic covenant, such only intended to clarify the plan of salvation. The history of salvation demonstrates progressive revelation, an unfolding of a larger plan of redemption. God's covenants can therefore be understood as being one in essence, because God is the same gracious God yesterday, today, and forever.

The divine covenants with Adam (Gen. 2:2-3, 15-17; 3:15), Abraham (Gen. 12; 15; 17), Israel through Moses (Exod. 19-34), and David (2 Sam. 7), along with the promised "new covenant" to Israel (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36), can be viewed as successive stages of God's single covenant of redeeming grace that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul pointed to this aspect: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20). Paul's Christocentric interpretation of God's covenant promises in the Old Testament implies their essential unity in Christ. This theological unity finds its source in the eternal covenant of God the Father and His Son *before* the creation of the world, as stated in Ephesians 1:4 ("He chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world"; cf. 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8).

The covenant God made with humankind in Paradise before the Fall remains of fundamental significance because God's covenants after the Fall intend to restore the original covenant relationship of Paradise (see Isa. 11). From Jesus we learn that we should remember how it was "at the beginning of creation," that is, what God's original purpose was with humanity. Accepting the trustworthiness of the creation accounts of Moses, Christ quoted from Genesis 1 and 2 (see Matt. 19:4-5, 8; Mark 10:6-8). He hands us the "key" to understanding the abiding purpose of all God's covenants in salvation history: God's creation covenant. The redemptive purpose of the gospel of Jesus is to restore people to their original covenant relationship, so

that men and women will walk again humbly with God and can be restored to the “former dominion” under God (see Mic. 4:8; 6:8).

The *imago Dei*

It should be especially noted that both man and woman were created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27), the meaning of which has received much speculation. This phrase should be understood not as a special attribute of human personality but as a theological term that captures humanity’s unique relationship with God. The author uses the same phrase later to indicate a father/son relationship: “[Adam] had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth” (Gen. 5:3).

As Seth was made in his father Adam’s image, so Adam was made in his heavenly Father’s image. He was created to relate to God as a Person, to live in loving communion with God, and to follow God as his pattern of character and source of inspiration and wisdom. This relationship implies that God actually spoke to Adam and instructed him regarding the purpose of the seventh-day resting of God: to celebrate the completed work of God’s creation and to enter into God’s own rest and joy. In short, God spoke to Adam and Eve, just as a good father speaks intimately with his son or daughter, and informed them of their task: “Be fruitful and increase in number; and fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28).

Human beings were given the privileged position to be festive partners with God in acknowledging the Creator’s work and His supreme power, authority, and wisdom. The Creator alone was entitled to prescribe His moral will and standard of good and evil for humanity, because humans were creatures made to live in keeping with the character and moral will of their Maker. Human beings were held accountable for their obedience or disobedience to God. This paradisiacal trust and responsibility has been called the creation covenant or *Edenic* covenant by Protestant theologians. God placed Adam immediately in a covenant relationship to Himself with a clear mandate and a testing command (Gen. 1:28; 2:15-17).