

The Final Part in a Series on Old Testament Covenant Theology

## The Perfection of the Covenant

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The Old Testament envisages a perfection of the Covenant. Jeremiah was the man who used the expression 'the new covenant' (Jer. 31:31), but the idea is more widespread than the expression. The root of the idea of an envisaged perfection of the covenant was planted with Moses.

### 1. The Vengeance or Curse of the Covenant

In Leviticus 26:14 Moses alludes to the possibility that at the human end the covenant may be broken. He speaks in verses 14 and 15 of the people failing to do all these commandments. When such a situation arises then God 'will bring a sword upon you which will execute the vengeance of the covenant' (v. 25). That is to say, on God's side there is no repudiation of the covenant, but an act of vengeance within the covenant.

Now the central problem which calls for this vengeance is described to us in verse 41: the people are uncircumcised in heart. That is to say, the promises of God have not got through to the place that matters. But when the vengeance of the covenant is in operation because of the uncircumcised heart, God has by no means abandoned his purpose. We read in the following verses, 'Then I will remember my covenant . . . with Abraham . . . I will not reject them. Neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant' (vv. 42, 44-45). They may break the covenant, but he won't.

Look now at Deuteronomy chapter 30. 'And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath driven thee, and shalt return unto the LORD thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, that then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity' (vv. 1-3). 'The LORD thy God will gather thee' (v. 4). 'The LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed' (v. 5). 'The LORD thy God will circumcise thy heart' (v. 6). The Lord envisages a covenant action which will reach into the heart where the failure took place, an action which will remedy that wherein the defect was discerned and bring his people into a new place of covenant blessing.

### 2. The Failure of Covenant Institutions

Right throughout the story of the covenant it was at the point of failure that hope was prompted. I want to mention two things briefly and dwell in more detail on the third.

a) *The Covenant Priesthood* Within the main covenant of God, there was a particular covenant which God made with the priesthood. It is mentioned to us in Numbers 25:10-13. But the priests allowed their priestly privilege to be corrupted into a superstitious ritualism, and therefore they came under the prophetic flail. Malachi at the very end of the prophetic movement looks at the priesthood of his day and finds it to be far from what God intended (see particularly Mal. 2:5-7). The priests had not only corrupted their God-given ritual into a superstition, but they had abandoned and corrupted their office of teacher. The covenant institution of priesthood was a

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failure.

b) *The Covenant Institution of the Tabernacle/Temple* This symbolised the perfect indwelling of God amongst his people, guaranteeing their security. This is the message which Zechariah brings in chapter 2 of his prophecy. A young man runs out with a measuring rod to measure the ruins of Jerusalem. He wants to determine the future by the measurements of the past, to limit the coming Glory to the glory of David and Solomon. He wants the security of a wall around the people of God. And the reply of Zechariah is that there is a coming glory which would outshine and outmeasure anything that has gone before, and that there is no need for a wall because God himself is dwelling in the midst of his people.

Yet both the tabernacle and the temple were destroyed. There is a perfection which could not be realised in the old institutions, else they could not have fallen. Of course, part of the reason why they fell was that the people corrupted them. Jeremiah tells us in 7:11 that they had made the house of God into a den of robbers. There is need therefore both of a fuller, more complete and more operative indwelling of God, and of a reformation in the heart of man, whereby he will see and respect the holiness of the divine indweller.

Nevertheless, the vision of the perfect tabernacle, of the perfect temple, was never lost. It shines out so clearly, for example in the teaching of Micah: 'Zion for your sake shall be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest. But in the latter days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established . . .' (3:12—4:1). The vision was never lost, even though the glory had not yet been fully and properly realised.

c) *The Covenant Institution of Monarchy*

(i) Two views of monarchy in the Old Testament? The founding of the monarchy is given in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. The majority view at the moment is that this literature is full of 'tensions, repetitions, parallels and different points of view' (cf. Fohrer's *Introduction to the Old Testament*), so that there are two views of the monarchy in these chapters. The first view of the monarchy, which is in 1 Samuel 9:1—10:16, is that the monarchy was set up by command of Yahweh and with Samuel's wholehearted co-operation. The other view is that there was popular pressure for a king, which Samuel resisted and which was not wholly according to the mind of God; for he said concerning it, 'It is not you they have rejected, but me.' (1

Samuel 8, 10:17-27).

But it is not possible to disentangle and to hold apart the 'two accounts' of the institution of the monarchy. 1 Samuel 10:22 is well within the favourable account of the monarchy and we read that 'They asked of the LORD further, Is there yet a man to come hither? And the LORD answered, Behold he hath hid himself among the stuff.' Now why would he do that? In the favourable view of the monarchy Saul has no reason to suppose that the choice is going to fall upon him, unless he knows that someone has rigged the ballot. We need the evidence of 10:1 which falls within the other view and which explains that Saul had previously been privately anointed by Samuel, and it is only if that belongs with the other account that the two things together make sense.

I would suggest that the ambivalence within these accounts, that the monarchy is both approved of and disapproved of, is entirely within the mind of Samuel himself. It is simply the reaction of the elderly, prejudiced, conservative, disappointed Samuel.

How then are we to understand God's words, 'They have not rejected thee, but me have they rejected?' (1 Samuel 8:7). The

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previous theocracy, exemplified with the judges, left the leadership in the hand of God only in this sense, that it all depended upon the Lord himself to take action to provide a leader for his people at the moment of crisis. In asking for monarchy the people departed from that principle by desiring the perpetuation of a human leader under the kingship of God; so that at any moment within the institution of monarchy there would be a built-in guarantee that the leader would be there.

And now, I can only promise you that if you take this as a clue and read 1 Samuel 1—12, you will find no need of the concept of two accounts of the monarchy. The ambivalence is entirely the old man's reaction which was partly selfish, partly sour, partly good and partly godly, but within the one man's mind. But Samuel, being the godly man he was, once he had received direction from God, wholeheartedly identified himself with what God was now ready to do.

(ii) The motivation for the Monarchy. The first motivation for monarchy was *dissatisfaction*. The last chapters of the book of Judges focus around the phrase, 'There was no king in Israel and every man did that which was right in his own eyes.' (17:6, 18:1 and 19:1). In 17:6 it has a *religious* context; the man Micah is setting up his house of God. In 18:1 it has a *political* context; there is unrest amongst the tribes of the people of God and the

tribe of Dan is on the warpath. In 19:1 it was a *moral* context in the fearful story of the Levite and his concubine. The monarchy, then, was seen as the solution of all the people's ills. And yet the monarchy proved a failure. If therefore it is right to follow the clue and say that failure gives rise to hope, then the hope of the ideal king is as near as does not matter co-terminus with the origin of the monarchy itself.

The second motivation for the monarchy was *insecurity*. Samuel himself speaks the cutting words, 'When ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said to me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us.' (1 Samuel 12:12). He throws that into contrast with the faithfulness of God who had raised up Jerubbaal and Bedan and Jephthah, and Samuel himself (v. 11). They saw Nahash the king of the Ammonites, and suddenly insecurity took hold of them, and instead of looking to God to raise up a leader they said to Samuel, 'Make us a king.'

The third motivation for monarchy was *divine mercy towards a distraught people*. 'Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man out of the land of Benjamin, and you are to anoint him to be prince over my people Israel, and he shall save my people Israel out of the land of the Philistines, because I have looked upon my people, because their cry has come to me.' (9:16). In Exodus 2:25 and 3:7-9 there is a most remarkable parallelism of phrasing: the Lord looked upon his people in Egypt and heard their cry and the Lord said, 'I know their sorrows and I am come down to deliver them.' Monarchy is a covenant reaction of the same merciful God. When the initial form of the theocracy (the judge) had done its work, God brought in as an act of mercy towards sinners a new theocratic form within the covenant which he purposed to bless and to use.

That new theocratic form, the monarchy, reached its climax in 2 Samuel 7 when the Lord entered into his everlasting covenant with the house of David. The climax of it was this — and this seems to me to be the point at which monarchic expectations began to take their characteristic form — that God said, 'I will be his father and he shall be my son.' (2 Samuel 7:14). What a dramatic thing to say, that the son of David should be the son of God! You see at once where it is going to end: the son of David who is the Son of God. (It is the Psalms which open this up. See particularly Psalm 2 and Psalm 72).

So you see the cluster of expectations which centred around

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the king who would be the son of David and the son of Yahweh. Do not let the greatness of them alarm you. Remember that the Lord constituted Israel to be his people by overturning the forces of the world. He destroyed Egypt in order to bring out Israel. Do not be alarmed therefore that, when they looked at this Yahweh-king upon his throne, reigning there at Yahweh's right hand, they saw him implicitly as monarch of the whole earth. Their faith would not allow them to see less, for he reigns as the covenant monarch by virtue of the covenant God who overthrew the nations in order to bring his people into this kingdom, tiny as it is at this point. And yet the monarchy was a

failure. David had failed morally, Solomon had failed politically, Rehoboam had failed religiously: the kingdom was divided, and a schismatic religion took hold of the North. The monarchy did not bring the people that religious, political and moral security which the rhapsodic author of Judges thought it would. It failed; but yet the vision remained, the vision of a righteous king who would be a son of David and a son of Yahweh.

### 3. The Vision of Covenant Perfection.

I would like to set before you four suggested categories in which your own study of the Old Testament can take you forward under the heading of 'the perfection of the covenant that is yet to be.'

a) *The Perfection of Monarchy in the Person of the Divine David*  
The Davidic king was addressed on his wedding day, 'thy throne O God' (Psalm 45:6). It seems to me to be a great misunderstanding of the Old Testament which tries to avoid the straightforward translation of these words. The psalm continues, 'Thou has loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, who is thy God, has anointed thee' (v. 7). The Old Testament is taking account of a concept which it cannot wholly organise. If it takes seriously the covenant promise, 'He shall be my son', then it must address its king as God. But since he is manifestly not God, it must safeguard the concept and live in a conscious tension, by making it clear in the immediately following verse that God is his God also. The Old Testament does not and cannot resolve that tension, but it never loses its grip on the Divine Messiah. See Isaiah 9:6-7: the child who is to be born is the prince with the fourfold name; his name shall be called 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God.' In chapter 10 verse 21 Isaiah uses that identical expression for Yahweh himself; the translation 'Mighty God' cannot be resisted at that point, and we ought not under the dogmatic pressure of prejudice to alter the translation here.

Look next at Jeremiah 23:5-6 where David is again the subject. 'Behold the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise up to David a righteous Branch.' The branch springs out of David; he has a veritable human Davidic ancestry. 'He will reign as King and deal wisely, and execute judgment . . . In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell in safety: and this is the name by which he shall be called, the LORD is our righteousness.' The same hint comes in Isaiah 11: 'There shall come a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots.' That is to say, out of the line of David there will come this perfect King on whom the Spirit of God will rest in fulness. The branch springs out of the stock of Jesse in verse 1, but in verse 10 he is called the root of Jesse. Whereas by the way of family tree he springs out of Jesse's line, in reality Jesse exists for the purpose of the branch. The branch comes before the tree. He is the root from which Jesse comes — the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star.

b) *The Perfection of Priestly Ministry in the Lord's Servant*  
We turn here to Isaiah 53. Not the relationship between chapters 53 and 54. In 54:1 the topic is children without travail, children who have been born by some other means than human. How have such children come to birth? The answer is in chapter 53: 'he shall see his seed' (v. 10). 'He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied' (v. 11). Out of the work of the servant there come these children born not by natural agency. Then look at chapter 54:10: 'Neither shall my covenant of peace totter or shake'; the covenant of peace is the second theme in chapter 54. Where does it arise from? From the fact that the chastisement which brought our peace was laid upon him and by his stripes we were healed (53:5). Once more chapter 54 describes that which emerges out of chapter 53.

The third element in chapter 54 is righteousness; it is mentioned in verse 14, 'In righteousness shalt thou be established', and again in verse 17, 'This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness comes from me.' It is not a righteousness of their own; it is a righteousness which comes to them from God. What is the root of that righteousness? See chapter 53:11; 'He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied; by his knowledge shall my righteous servant provide righteousness for many.' (Excuse a little bit of personal translation, but that is what the text means.) Here is the doctrine of imputed righteousness in the Old Testament coming out of the priestly work of substitution.

Who is this servant? 'He is the arm of Yahweh' (53:1). That is to say he is Yahweh himself come to take personal action. Compare 52:10: 'The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all nations.' When the servant comes as the arm of Yahweh, he comes as God with his sleeves rolled up, himself to perform this tremendous work of substitution and priestly offering whereby the people of God supernaturally born inherit a covenant of peace and are established in righteousness.

c) *The Perfection of Regeneration by a Final Dealing with Sin*  
In Jeremiah 31 we read, 'Behold the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they broke.' There is the failure, 'they broke.' 'But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days . . . I will put my laws in their inward parts, and on their heart will I write it.' (vv. 31-35) God will come and will so transform the human heart that in its very nature it becomes a replica of the law of God, so that obedience and not disobedience becomes the natural life of the people of God. That is regeneration, the gift of a new nature by the work and act of God.

d) *The Perfection of the Divine Indwelling Secured by Princely Mediation*  
This is the covenant vision of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel takes up the failure of the tabernacle and says that God is going to set that right. 'Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them.' (He latches on to what Isaiah had predicted.) 'It shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will place them, and multiply them, and I will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle also will be with them; and I will be their God and they shall be my people' (Ezekiel 37:26-27). The covenant promise is fulfilled in terms of an envisaged perfect indwelling of God in the midst of his people.

The temple passage in Ezekiel chapters 40-48 is a spelling out at length of the reality and the security and the blessings which ensue when God perfectly tabernacles in the midst of his people. In 45:16-17 we learn that all of these blessings depend upon the activity of a prince who is also a priest. As mediator, he secures for the people of God the benefits of the covenant through the blood of the covenant. By this princely mediation the dwelling place of God is with his people, and they inherit benefits and blessings which had long been envisaged but had not previously been accomplished.