Contract versus Covenant

Reprise

_outlook’s_ previous five issues — entitled “Origins,” “The Dawn of Self-Consciousness,” “The First Temple: United Monarchical Period,” “The First Temple: Divided Monarchical Period” and “The Second Temple: Persian Period” — have addressed the history of God’s Chosen People in the context of covenant. Because of the complexity of this history and the diversity of views on the subject, it is now necessary to interpolate a series of reviews in order to clarify the ground already covered and to prepare for subsequent issues on succeeding history. The following extensive excerpt is drawn from an online essay entitled “Salvation History: One Holy Family,” by Catholic scholar, Scott Hahn.¹ The following text attempts to make an explicit distinction between the concepts of “covenant” and “contract.” However, it does not state that the Old Testament covenants are anticipatorily and proleptically designed to reflect a promised future fulfillment.

“The Series of Covenants God Established Down Through the Ages

“God established a creation, a covenant bond, with humanity, with A-dam. Adam’s name is not only the name of an individual, the founding father of the human race, but it’s also the Hebrew word for humanity, much like we use the word Washington to denote the founding father of our country and the capitol of our country as well.

“So Adam is [the] name of the father and of the entire human family. The [Adamic] covenant . . . is in a sense the foundational covenant from which all

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the others in the Old Testament spring. The second covenant that God establishes with the human family is with Noah and his household. The third covenant . . . is with the patriarch Abraham. . . . Abraham was a chieftain over a tribal household that God was willing to identify as his own and administer through the covenant.

“Then Abraham had a son Isaac, and Isaac had a son named Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons, who all in a sense fathered large families which became the twelve tribes of Israel. Why Israel? Because God had changed Jacob’s name to Israel. So the twelve sons of Israel became twelve tribes and formed under Moses a national covenant.

“At Mt. Sinai . . . God established a covenant with Moses and Israel to make them his people. Then the last covenant that we will focus upon . . . will be the Old Testament covenant with King David and his son Solomon, because there the nation of Israel was granted by God . . . prominence [with respect to other nations].

“There we have the Old Testament covenants in sequence leading up to the coming of Christ. First with Adam, second with Noah, third with Abraham, fourth with Moses, and fifth with David. Then Jesus Christ comes to establish the new covenant.

“How to Understand Covenant

“Now there are various ways to understand covenant. Some people might use the word interchangeably with contract, as in 20th-century American parlance . . . [That, however,] is a misleading usage. The difference between covenant and contract, in the Old Testament and throughout scripture, is so profound [that] the difference could almost be highlighted by saying it’s the difference between [1] prostitution; contract, and [2] marriage; covenant. Or between [1] slavery; having a slave, and [2] having a son.

“Contractual relations usually exchange property, exchange goods and services, whereas covenants exchange persons. So when people enter into a covenant, they say, ‘I am yours and you are mine.’ So God uses the covenant to enter into a relationship with those whom he created in his own image: humanity and all human persons. . . .

“Based on the scholarship of countless scholars over the decades, covenant can be properly understood . . . to be a sacred family bond. In ancient Israel there was no word for family. Somebody could conclude, ‘Well, maybe for the ancient Hebrews family is not important.’ But you can’t read very far in the Old Testament before you realize that for them tribal bonds, kinship obligations, marriage and parenthood and brotherhood — all of these family relations are unbreakable bonds that God himself has instituted. So, obviously for the
ancient Hebrews, family was very important. But then why [was there] no word for it?

“...[C]ovenant’ was that word ... [for family. W]hen you establish a covenant, you establish a family bond; and ... when God covenants with humanity in that series of Old Testament covenants, ... he is fathering his people. He’s fathering his family. So in order to clarify and simplify [what] he did in the Old Testament, we can think of the first covenant with Adam as the marriage covenant. ‘He created man, male and female he created them, and he blessed them and bid them be fruitful.’

“So he established humanity in a marital covenant, and then the second covenant is with Noah. Now, when a covenant is made with Noah, it’s made with Noah who is married, but he also has three sons who are also married. Together they form in Hebrew what would be known as ... a household or a family. ... [T]hen the third covenant with Abraham is made with the chieftain who, in a sense, leads and rules over what you would call in Hebrew ... a tribe.

“God’s family now has moved from a marriage to become a household, to become a tribe. ... Then, when the twelve tribes of Israel are covenanted to God at Mt. Sinai under Moses, there you have ... one national family of God, made up of twelve tribes, hundreds of households, and presumably thousands of marriages.

“So the structure of the covenant is always familistic, domestic. God administers kinship relations and obligations through the covenant. It’s a blood bond. Ultimately the covenant he establishes with David is intent upon raising Israel to the level where Israel can ... [urge other nations] to come up to Jerusalem annually in order for the nations to learn the wisdom that God has given. ...”

“In other words, God, through these covenants, is doing his best to take that one human family which has been broken apart by sin, which has been torn apart by violence and injustice; he is trying to reunify this disunified human family we know as the human race.”

“The Creation Account

“...[W]e have to approach Genesis as an ancient Hebrew narrative that is telling history that’s religious, not secular, that is family history, not political-military history like we like to tell; and it’s telling this religious family
history using many figures and symbols. For instance, why does God create in six days and rest on the seventh? Because he couldn’t get the whole thing done in one? I mean, if he’s God, he could . . . just go ‘presto’ and the whole cosmos comes into being. . . . So why did he do it in six days and rest the seventh?

“There are various interpretations and explanations given. The one that impresses me the most is built upon the recognition that the Hebrew . . . verb ‘to swear a covenant’ is literally built upon the Hebrew term ‘to seven oneself.’ I remember back in Hebrew class in seminary, the Hebrew professor giving out a vocabulary list, and I saw the word, ‘to swear a covenant,’ and then there was a comma [followed by] or ‘to seven oneself.’ I raised my hand and said, ‘Professor Huggenberger, which is it? Is it to swear a covenant or is it to seven oneself?’ And he said, ‘Well look, the verb [for] to swear a covenant is built upon the number seven’ . . . Then, of course, that explains why God’s creation is depicted in seven days, because what is God doing in the act of creating the cosmos? He’s swearing a covenant to his world. He’s not just master. We’re not just slaves. He’s not just creator and we’re creatures. That’s true, but it doesn’t go far enough. If he had stopped on the sixth day, we would be creatures, slaves and private property of God. But he went on and blessed the seventh day and took a rest and invited us into that rest that represents the covenant relationships that he establishes with his creation.

“Now what is a covenant? A family bond, a sacred family bond. That is why I suspect, if you turn to Job 38, Psalm 104 and other passages in the Old Testament where the whole world is described, you don’t read about quasars and galaxies and black holes and solar systems. You don’t have a scientific description. Every time I find creation being described, it’s described in one of three terms . . . [I]t’s described as a house, a palace or a temple. It’s got foundations. It’s got a cornerstone. It’s got pillars. It’s got a door. It has windows. It’s got a roof and it’s got gardens and it’s got . . . other things that you have when you decorate a house, a palace or a temple. “When God creates in seven days, he creates a house. He builds himself a home that he can move into so that he can dwell in our midst as a father, not just a creator. So we are not just creatures; we are his children. . . .

“What Was God Doing Before He Created?

“Let’s consider creation a little more closely now. We’ve considered what in general the six- and seven-day pattern might refer to, but let’s take a quick look at that phrase, . . . ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ Now we could tear that apart . . ., but let me just ask you a question . . . What was God doing before he created?

“It’s a hard question. Now there are two approaches to answering it. One was taken by [the] . . . Protestant reformer, John Calvin. . . . [John Calvin] said
that [God] was preparing hell for people who ask such impertinent questions. There might be a certain propriety in such a response. But I prefer what St. Augustine said. . . [Augustine] was trying to be subtle and ironic when he said, ‘What was God doing before he created?’ He answered, ‘Nothing. He didn’t have the time.’ . . . [F]or Augustine, time and space are relative properties for creatures but not the creator . . .

“So what was God doing before he created? Nothing. He didn’t have the time! Time began when God created it. He created out of nothing. He didn’t use a pile of pre-existent matter that he had in the side yard. He created out of nothing. Matter is what he spoke into existence by the powerful word of God. So likewise, time was created and space and matter. These were the things that God created when he said, ‘Let there be light,’ and he pronounced these various ‘fiats’ . . .

"The Earth Was Formless and Empty"

“So in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and it goes on to describe a problem. It says, ‘Now the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.’ Now there are two words in the Hebrew that denote a kind of problem. The earth was formless and void or empty. In other words, God had to do two things. He had to create structure, and he had to fill [it] with inhabitants. It was unformed and unfilled. There was no habitation in the beginning, and there were no inhabitants.

“Then, in the six days of creation, he first creates by his own word day and night. What does he create the second day? He creates the sky and the sea. On the third day he creates the land. What he just did in those three days was to respond to the first problem. If the heavens and the earth were formless and empty, what he just created in those three days was form. He created form to creation. He created day and night, that’s time. He created sky and sea, that’s space. And then he creates land so that the inhabitants can dwell and live.

“What does he do the second set of three days? You can see a correspondence. The fourth day corresponds to the first, the fifth to the second, and the sixth to the third. He creates the dwellers of the day and night. He creates the sun, moon and stars to rule over the day and the night on the fourth day. On the fifth day he creates those beings that will rule over the sky and the sea, namely the birds and the fish. Then on the sixth day he creates those that will inhabit the land that he created on the third day. In other words, the Hebrews understood this as kind of a home-building project. God creates the structure in three days, and then he fills that structure with living beings on the second three days. And on the seventh day he covenants himself to that creation so it becomes for him a kind of temple-palace, his own home. The
creator enters into a family relation and becomes, as it were, a father to his creatures.

"The Doctrine of Man: Created in God’s Image and Likeness"

"When God the Creator creates man in his image and likeness, . . . it suggests that our Creator, in the act of making us, is fathering us . . . so that we are the children of God."

"Now that gets us into the doctrine of humanity. What does it mean to be man, male and female. First of all, we see in Genesis 1:26 and 27 that it means that we are created in the ‘image of God.’ What does this doctrine of the *imago dei* suggest? Some people said that the image of God denotes the rationality that humans possess over and against animals. That’s true, as far as it goes. But in the Hebrew narrative of Genesis, the image of God is a phrase that suggests even more. For instance, we read elsewhere in chapter 5, verse 3, ‘When Adam had lived 130 years he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image, and he named him Seth.’

“That’s the very next time ‘image and likeness’ is used as a phrase, and what does it there mean? To father a son. So that when God the Creator creates man in his image and likeness, what does that suggest? It suggests that our Creator, in the act of making us, is fathering us. He is creating us to enter into a father-son relationship so that we are the children of God. We are given the grace of God from the moment of our historical existence.

“Now this is a key point that theologians often debate . . . , but I think that it can be made very simple, and that is this: By nature we would only be creatures and servants of God. That is, if all we had were human nature to go with, we’d be God’s servants, God’s slaves, God’s possession, his property. But from the moment of our historical existence, when he first created us, he gave to us his grace; so that Elohim, God the Creator, becomes Yahweh, the covenant Lord, the family God who calls us into his own home, into his own family life.

“Some people say, ‘Well, there are two creation accounts in Genesis. We have one in chapter 1, and we’ve got another one in chapter 2. . . .’

“Now some people say, ‘Well, therefore you’ve got contradictions. No, we’ve got complementarity. In Genesis 1 we see God, Elohim, the Creator, bringing the cosmos into existence, at the end of which he creates his own image and likeness. The cosmos is being transformed into a home. These creatures are being transformed into his children. So that obviously leads right into Genesis 2 and this alternative understanding of creation which is purely covenantal in the sense that God fashions man into a married couple, and then he says, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ And they behold each other, and they are enraptured and thrilled, and they are in love, and so on. . . ."
“So we see the sanctity of human life, the dignity of the human person. . . . I would . . . suggest that one of the most fundamental truths that you find in Genesis 1, 2 and 3 is the brotherhood . . . , the sisterhood, the siblinghood . . . [of humanity].

“We are family. That is not just some quaint metaphor that is meant to stir up emotions. That is biological, historical and theologically true. That’s bedrock certainty. We are God’s family. We are not just biologically and historically descended from one pair of humans . . . [B]ut ultimately . . . we believe that that human couple was created in the image of God, in the . . . covenant.”

**Commentary**

Throughout the self-conscious history of mankind, the almost universal assumption has been that humans are beings made under contract. The concept of contract involves the exchange of property, goods and services. If mankind is to be viewed as property, goods or services, then mankind must either possess or be possessed, dispossess or be dispossessed. Self-existence, then, is the only option; and without it mankind is nothing. For thousands of years the concept of mankind’s being bound to contract has been maintained through “the exercise of divinely delegated force through war externally and through law internally.”

It was only with the emergence of the Hebrews that the concept of human contract was challenged with the new concept of covenant, in which God inaugurated relationship with those whom he created in his own image. God determined to convey his covenantal purposes for and with humanity through a number of metaphors. These metaphors included the change in the name of God himself. At first God was known as El (singular)/Elohim (plural), meaning “gods,” “judges,” “great,” “mighty,” “very great.” But then God wanted to be known as YHWH (‘eheyeh ’asher ‘eheyeh), meaning “I will be for others, I will become for others, I will effect (create) for others.”

Additional metaphors included the Tabernacle and its services in the wilderness. These metaphors included the First Temple and its services in the center of the Edenic Promised Land. The Temple symbols represented the compassionate (racham = “womblike”) presence of God, the Creation by God, and the promised human embodiment and manifestation of God. Still other metaphors included the prophetic office, which symbolized the relation of God with mankind; the priestly office, which symbolized the relation of mankind with God; and the kingly office, which symbolized the relation of mankind with others. These metaphors were given to the Chosen People throughout the First Temple period. But God’s intentions were never discerned, accepted and embraced by his people. Finally, God disciplined Israel by sending them into Babylonian exile.

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After 70 years the exiles were encouraged to return to their home in the Promised Land. The Second Temple was built, and the Temple services were restored. But YHWH, the God of the covenant, was not symbolically present. The prophetic office was terminated. The kingly rule was ended. The entire concept of covenantal relationality was profoundly compromised. The priesthood basked in prosperity and power, exalting the rule of contractual law and demanding contractual obedience and submission. The people were chattel, inevitably suffering abject poverty and privation. Thus, the Chosen People were tragically reduced to property, to a transaction, to a form of goods and services.

Notes and References


2. Ibid. The fundamental difference between contract and covenant, expressed by Scott Hahn, is explicitly verified by Jewish tradition. "... [Thus, t]he Jewish law principles of contract are to be gathered from the various laws of sale, lease, gift, loan, suretyship, etc., and from the additional special laws accruing in the course of time." On the other hand, "the word bert ('covenant')... occurs mainly in the sense of a covenant of love between man and his neighbor... or a perpetual covenant between the Almighty and man or the people of Israel... as well as a covenant of peace between nations" (Menachem Elon, in Encyclopaedia Judaica, CD-ROM ed. [1997], s.v. "Contract [Hozeh]"). Furthermore, "the idea of a covenant between a deity and a people is unknown from other religions and cultures. It seems that the covenantal idea was a special feature of the religion of Israel... [T]he formula expressing the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, 'you will be my people and I will be your God' (Lev. 26:12; Deut. 29:12, etc.), is a legal formula taken from the sphere of marriage, as attested in various legal documents from the Ancient Near East (cf. Hos. 2:4). The relationship of the vassal to his suzerain or of the wife to her husband leaves no place for double loyalty, and they are therefore perfect metaphors for loyalty in a monotheistic religion" (Moshe Weinfeld, in Encyclopaedia Judaica, CD-ROM ed. [1997], s.v. "Covenant").


4. Again, all Old Testament references to "covenant" should be translated from the past tense to a future tense.