

Israel, the Church and the Covenant
Lecture 1: God's Covenant with Adam and Noah

Introduction

God has always had a relationship with all mankind through covenant. This is illustrated throughout the history of the world since the creation, as we see in what the apostle Paul says in Rom. 1:18-20. Paul tells us that the whole human race is under condemnation because they have always refused to accept what the creation reveals about God, and so they have rejected His covenant with them from the beginning.

Rom. 1:18-20.

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Paul is saying that all human beings have an instinctive sense of what God is really like because of the way He is revealed in his creation; also they have an in-built, God-given, moral sense for what is right and wrong.

Rom. 2:14-15.

“Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law (of Moses), do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”

This innate sense of God and of morality in the human race implies that God has always been active in his world through a covenant relationship with all mankind, and that he is just as much at work in our present world as he was in Bible days. God was active in the world from the beginning of its creation: from the time of Adam, going on to the new beginning after the flood with Noah and his sons; progressing in an even more personal way with Abraham and his sons, known as the patriarchs; moving forward to when their sons became the nation of Israel in the land promised to them; and so through all the vicissitudes of Old Testament history to the Diaspora or the scattering of the Jews throughout the world, and then to the end of the Old Testament times.

But God’s activity did not stop at the close of Old Testament history. It led on to the confirmation of the old covenant in the new covenant through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That new covenant has been working out its course through the centuries of the history of the Christian church. Yet God’s new covenant is not limited to the church; it embraces all that God is doing in the world today, not least with regard to the modern State of Israel. The new covenant will reach a vital stage in its unfolding when the nation of Israel comes into a spiritual relationship with the Messiah, which will enable their role in the world in these last days to be finally fulfilled.

We shall be considering what all this means for us now and in the near future. It will involve

us in understanding the concept of covenant; a concept which is absolutely basic not only to comprehending the Bible as a whole, but also to understanding the modern State of Israel as the inheritor of all that applied to its ancient counterpart. We shall also have to arrive at an understanding of the relation of modern Israel to the Christian church, and the nature of the Kingdom of God in the age to come. These important themes make up the substance of these lectures.

Bible History and Secular History

Bible history may be said to be different to any other kind of history. The Bible shows that the history contained within its pages is God-permeated, especially with regard to his chosen people, ancient Israel. Having said this, we should not fall into the error of thinking of all other history as secular because it is to do with non-Bible events: the rise, the flourishing, and the passing away of the various peoples which have existed and do exist throughout the world, including their empires and civilisations. Historians write of these world events and analyse them in purely naturalistic terms, usually with no thought that there is a God in heaven who governs the world and all that goes on in it. They often treat Bible history in the same way, depending on their view of the Bible and the degree of seriousness with which they may or may not view its presentation of itself as the authoritative Word of God.

We are so used to a secular slant towards history – that world events just simply happen without any reference to a Divine Being – that even Bible believers are prone to approach history, even to some extent the history of the Bible, in the same way. In fact there are some theologians who hold such an extreme naturalistic concept of history that they deny the possibility that God intervenes in world affairs, or that miracles could ever happen. Rudolph Bultmann, for example, a very influential 20th Century theologian and son of a Lutheran pastor, believed that the real historical Jesus is obscured in the Gospels by the myths and legends which surround Him, especially in the form of miraculous events, and so in order to get the actual Jesus of history he maintained that we need to “demythologise” the Bible text of these elements. Bultmann’s supposition was that God does not interfere in history, and so miracles do not happen. We, however, who are convinced that the Bible is the Word of God, and accept its account of the miraculous as evidence that God has always been active in His creation, need to assert that all history, whether in the Bible or outside of it, comes within the ambit of God’s control. We may speak of so-called secular history, as though whatever happens in the world happens by chance, but actually that is not the way of things because this is God’s world; and so, though we may speak of history in general as secular, as distinct from the history contained in the Bible, there is no such thing as history without God.

Yet we do need to see Bible history as special. It does, after all, deal with God’s chosen people Israel and His plan of salvation for them, and, indeed, for the whole world. Though Israel was (and these lectures contend, still is) a chosen people, they and the peoples of the world should not be viewed as totally separate entities. It is necessary to stress the importance of the truth that God has always been concerned with, and involved in, all that happens in His world, including our world today.

This course of lectures, therefore, emphasises the importance of the history of Israel, and how that history not only influenced what went on in the rest of the Near Eastern world in ancient times, but also how it still impinges on recent and contemporary world events – not just with regard to Israel in the ancient world but the modern State of Israel. This is where so many Christians draw a false line between sacred and secular, ancient and modern. They may say that the history of ancient Israel is sacred, while at the same time insisting that the modern State of Israel is a secular phenomenon, an anachronism that should not exist. This, they think, is supported by the belief that God replaced historical Israel with the Christian church, a spiritual ‘Israel’.

But this is like saying that God has not been interested in political events since the Bible ceased to

be written, or at least he has taken no cognisance of the Jews since the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Such a view is completely out of line with the Old Testament promises to Israel and the way the Bible historians viewed world events in their day: events, which for them were contemporary. For them God was involved in His world, especially for the good of Israel. Should this be any less true today, given the everlasting nature of God's promises in the Old Testament? Contrary to the thinking of some, the Old Testament does not belong strictly to the past, as just so much 'dead' history, without any impact on events subsequent to its close. The Old Testament has not been replaced by the New Testament, and the Christian church has not taken the place of historical Israel.

We shall show in these lectures that God is still working out his purposes today for the nation of Israel because, as already stated, there can be no history without God, and that is doubly true where Israel is concerned. To think otherwise is to fail to realise the fact that God made promises to ancient Israel, which are everlasting and so cannot be broken. If those covenant promises do not apply today in all their original detail then we can go so far as to say that neither can there be any covenant in Jesus Christ. The new covenant in Jesus is built on the old covenant promises. Though we may speak of an old and a new covenant – and the Bible does speak of a new covenant – in reality the two covenants are intimately linked as one continuous saving act. The promises of the new covenant find their historical context in the promises of the old covenant. Bible history, within the context of world history, is an onward march of covenant history.

It is on the basis of the concept of Bible covenant that we must understand what God has done in the past, what He is doing now and what He is about to do in the near future, culminating in the return of Jesus to the land of Israel, when He will set up His everlasting kingdom.

Bible Words which Express the Concept of Covenant

The Hebrew word *b'rit* means "covenant" in the Old Testament, occurring some 286 times in the Masoretic (traditional, vocalised Hebrew) text. Depending on the context *b'rit* can be translated as "treaty," "pact," "agreement," "solemn promise," "obligation" or more familiarly as "covenant".

The Greek word for "covenant" is *diatheke*. It is used about 270 times in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word *b'rit*, while in the Greek New Testament *diatheke* occurs 33 times, 7 times citing the Old Testament. It has a similar range of meaning, which was commonly used in the Greek world, that of a "testament" in the sense of a last will and testament. This meaning is added to the concept of covenant by the New Testament writers and forms a distinct development, particularly in the theology of Paul and the writer to the Hebrews.

Our word "testament" derives from the Latin *testamentum*, meaning "a last will", which is a rendering of the Bible term "covenant".

An Illustration of Covenant-Making from the Ancient Near East

Archaeology provides us with examples of covenants from various nations of the ancient Near East, particularly from the Hittite nation, which occupied the lands we know today as Turkey and Northern Syria. The Hittites had a powerful empire, which flourished from about the time that the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt and for at least a few hundred years afterwards, though as a nation they impacted history in the Near East long before and long after the years of their empire.

There were in the ancient world two main types of covenant. The first was an agreement between equals called a parity agreement, as between Jacob and Laban in Genesis Chapter 31, when they agreed never to enter each other's territories with hostile intent. The second was between a lord or a king of a powerful nation and a vassal state, and this is called a vassal treaty. Typically the parties of the former type of covenant referred to each other as "brothers" because they were equals, while

parties to the second called themselves “lord” and “son”, because the “son”, the vassal state, was inferior to the senior party, the foreign “lord” or king.

Eight basic elements can be identified in the structure of the Hittite covenant:

- 1) The Preamble – This identified the giver of the treaty, his titles and the nature of the relationship between the two parties, whether in a parity or vassal relationship. In the case of the latter the vassal nation was bound by an exclusive relationship with their lord.
- 2) The Historical Prologue – The history of the relationship between the two parties was recounted. In the case of a vassal treaty this was done in order to make the vassal nation feel obligated to their lord because of the benefits they had received in the past. Out of gratitude the vassal state would then seek to fulfil their lord’s wishes.
- 3) The Stipulations – These took the form: “If you do such and such a thing, then you break the covenant.” The stipulations commonly included the following requirements: no alliances were allowed with other nations; no enmity was permitted with other vassal states; the vassal nation had to mobilise their armies when called upon by their lord; the vassal nation had to be loyal, and representatives had to appear before their lord annually, usually with a tribute.
- 4) The Terms of the Covenant - These had to be read periodically to all the people of the vassal state.
- 5) The List of Witnesses – The deities of both the lord and the vassal state were called upon to witness and enforce the treaty.
- 6) The Blessings and the Curses. Obedience to the terms of the covenant brought corresponding blessings, and disobedience resulted in curses – similar to those described in Deuteronomy Chapter 28 with regard to the covenant relationship between God and Israel.
- 7) The Oath and the Solemn Ceremony – The most common method of ratifying a treaty involved the cutting up of an animal as a blood sacrifice. The unspoken implication was that if the covenant was broken, then the offending nation would become like the animal. It is thought that from this ceremony is derived the common Hebrew idiom karot b’rit – “to cut a covenant”.
- 8) The Sanctions – If the treaty was broken the lord could attack the vassal kingdom.

The Relation of the Hittite Covenant to Scripture

Covenants found in the Old Testament to a great extent reflect those of ancient Near Eastern countries, such as those of the Hittites. In making a covenant with His Israel, God did something that was already well understood by Israel and the nations round about. That the Old Testament covenants follow a similar structure to contemporary treaties among the nations round about. That the Old Testament covenants follow a similar structure to contemporary treaties among the nations underlines the absolute historical reliability of the Bible covenants. The pattern of the Old Testament covenants places them in their authentic historical setting.

The Covenant with Adam

The first covenant in the Bible, though it is not described in the full and developed form of covenant, is that with Adam. He, of course, broke the covenant. Hosea mentions this in the context of the people of his own day being no better than Adam.

Hos. 6:7.

“Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there.”

A stipulation forms part of the covenant, which God made with Adam.

Gen. 2:15-17

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any free in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for then you eat of it you will surely die.”

The divine command given here was intended to prevent Adam from moving beyond his assigned sphere in what was essentially a non-parity covenant. Adam and Eve’s failure to keep the covenant and the tragic consequences following their disobedience are described in the account of their fall from grace in Genesis Chapter 3. Incidentally, we should note two points: the popular idea that they ate an apple from the tree of knowledge is without foundation since the Hebrew word *pri* in Gen. 3:2, 3 simply means “fruit”; also Satan appeared in the form of a snake, or spoke through a real snake, but obviously he himself was not actually a snake.

From the very start disaster came to the human race because of disobedience to a God-given covenant. Sickness and death became the lot of all mankind and the world of animals. Adam and Eve were banished from Eden and committed to a life of toil and pain. The fact that God “made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21) indicates that an animal sacrifice was made for them, the implication being that the shedding of blood through sacrifice had now become an essential part of covenant-making in order to cover human sin. This means that mankind continued to be in a covenant relationship with God, though not the idyllic one before the fall, which did not require sacrifice.

In the chapters of Genesis, which follow, the rite of animal sacrifice is seen without any explanation, it being understood by the people of that time that sinful humanity could not approach a holy God except through shed blood. The full explanation of blood sacrifice was not revealed completely in the Scriptures until the time of Moses. Even so the book of Genesis indicated that the ultimate defeat of Satan would take place through this means. This is intimated in Gen. 3:15, a prophetic statement where God says to Satan that though He would strike at man’s heel, man (the Son of Man) would crush his head.

Gen. 3:15

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

The principle of blood sacrifice was worked out through the centuries of Old Testament history. The general covenant with Adam and his race was superseded by the special covenant in all its stages, which God made with Israel, leading to Jesus, “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt. 1:1), giving himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin through his death on the cross. The apostle Paul explains the purpose and power of Christ’s death perfectly in terms, not only of the forgiveness of sins, but the utter rout of Satan and his forces of evil.

Col. 2:13-15

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

The crucifixion of Jesus was the final undoing of Satan. His head was crushed forever, and so the final phase of the patriarchal covenant, which we call “the new covenant”, between God and redeemed mankind, was established. The whole of Old Testament history, and indeed world history, found its meaning in Christ’s saving act on the cross. The sacrifice of Israel’s greatest son revealed the ultimate purpose for that nation’s existence.

The Covenant with Noah and with the Whole Creation

The first clear reference to covenant in Scripture is that made with Noah, found in Gen. 6:18.

“But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you.”

The utter corruption of the human race led to the destruction of the whole world through the Flood. After the Flood the covenant was re-established with Noah as the representative of both mankind and the creation. The element of command, as in Hittite covenants, is evident in the prohibitions against murder and the consuming of blood.

Gen. 9:1-17

“Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts...all the birds...upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea... Everything that lives and moves will be food for you... “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. As for you, be fruitful and increase in number...” Then God said to Noah and his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature... I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

This general covenant has never been annulled with mankind and with the creation. For this reason all human beings are answerable to God, and stand condemned before Him, as we saw from Paul’s letter to the Romans. But, as already intimated, for God’s plan of salvation to become a reality a further and more specific covenant was needed, and that covenant was made with Abraham and his descendants.

