COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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In the Old Testament the theme of 'covenant' presents itself as quite a prominent one, even central. Quite early in the book of Genesis God is said to make a covenant with all humanity, in the person of Noah, immediately after the flood. Not many chapters later he makes a covenant with Abraham which involves promises to him and his descendants, and is confirmed to Isaac and Jacob who succeed him. After the exodus from Egypt God makes a covenant with the people of Israel on Mount Sinai, in which the Lord promises to be their God but at the same time demands from them obedience to his law, which includes the rejection of all other deities. At various points later in the Old Testament this covenant is recalled, reaffirmed, or appealed to. Later, when the monarchy is established, a covenant is made with David, promising him a dynasty that will last for ever. In the light of all this, it appears not to be in doubt that the covenant theme is fundamental to the thinking of the Old Testament writers, and that when they speak of the relationship between their people and their God, they find the covenant a very helpful model to use.

We need first to ask, what is a 'covenant'? What did Israelites (or the people of the ancient near east in general) understand by the word? It will be worth asking: how early did the idea of a covenant with God enter into Israel's thinking, and is it really as central as it appears to be? This last question is prompted by the observation that when we get down to detailed examination of the texts we find that the covenant idea is actually prominent only in some of them and that some Old Testament writers have little or nothing at all to say about it.

So what is a 'covenant'? The word 'covenant' in modern English is a word we do not use very much. We come across it in rather specialised contexts, e.g. We may be asked to 'covenant' our subscription to a charity, so that the charity can claim back the income tax. If we buy a house our solicitor may tell us that there are restrictive covenants on the property, which might prevent us (say) from using the premises to run certain kinds of business, or might even prescribe what sort of fence we have around our garden. Apart from such specialised uses, it has a slightly archaic flavour: we might occasionally hear it in church and come across it if we read our bibles.

The equivalent word in ancient Israelite usage had nothing archaic and nothing specialised about it. It was a very common term, of ordinary social, political and economic life, and a very broad term, covering all sorts of contracts and agreements. A military alliance between countries, an international trade agreement, a peace treaty, a business contract, a marriage, a private and informal agreement between two young men to be 'best friends' – all of these are labelled 'covenant'. In ancient Israel there was certainly nothing specially religious about the term 'covenant'. If it was employed in religious contexts, which it could be, it was as a term borrowed from secular life. If Israelites were told that there was a covenant between Israel and her God this would have
meaning for them because they knew what such a contract meant in the business world, or in the world of international politics, or wherever.

Perhaps in distinguishing sharply between the secular and the religious we are in danger of falsifying the picture, since ancient Israelites themselves would have made no sharp division between secular and sacred spheres. In one sense all covenants could be called 'religious' in that God was appealed to as a witness to the covenant and a guarantor that it would be kept. But not all covenants were religious, of course, in the sense that God was a party to the contract.

It will be apparent from all this that there must have been many different varieties of covenant formulated in different ways.

One of the broad distinctions that has to be drawn is between covenants made by parties who are equals, and those made by parties who are unequal. A covenant may be imposed by a stronger party upon a weaker one, but is not therefore regarded as invalid. Old Testament scholars have paid a great deal of attention to covenants between unequals because these are the ones that provide the closest parallels to the covenant between Israel and Yahweh. Students sometimes get the mistaken impression that these unequal covenants were the norm, or somehow typical of ancient near-eastern covenants in general. They were not; they just happen to be the ones that offer the closest points of contact with the Old Testament covenants between God and nation.

Classic examples of unequal covenants were those brought to scholarly attention first in the 1950s by G. Mendenhall. These were treaties between Hittite emperors and their vassal kings, and they mostly belonged to the period of the Bronze Age, a little before the Israelite settlement in Canaan.

Mendenhall noted the existence of what he called 'parity treaties' which were covenants made by the Hittite emperors, but focused most closely on the 'suzerainty treaties' which they imposed on their vassals. Mendenhall claimed that the formula according to which these unequal covenants were constructed was a very rigid one, and that the people who wrote the accounts of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh were guided by the same formula. The Old Testament contains a number of accounts of the covenant, but in none of them is the formula identified by Mendenhall exhibited in complete form. The most complete one is in Joshua 24, which tells how the Israelites were called upon by Joshua, after the conquest of the land to reaffirm the covenant made earlier on Sinai.

Mendenhall believed that his identification of the suzerainty treaty form also enabled us to answer our second question, about thinking the date at which the covenant idea became current in Israel's religion. He believed that the fixed form of the suzerainty treaty passed out of use after the end of the Bronze Age and that the fact that Israel had made use of it proved that the idea of a covenant with Yahweh really did go back to a period no later than the settlement, and therefore close to the time of Moses himself.
Mendenhall's work has been criticised by other scholars who are not convinced that the suzerainty treaty form is as rigid as he claimed, and are not persuaded that its evidence can be used so decisively to prove an early date for the notion of a covenant between nation and deity.

Nevertheless the distinction between equal and unequal covenants does have to be taken account of, and there is certainly a parallel between Israel's covenant with God and the sort of relationship between emperor and vassal in which the emperor feels able to demand loyalty from the vassal and impose upon him obligations of service, in return for the emperor's protection of the vassal from attack by rival empires.

Most Old Testament scholars now observe that the idea of the Yahweh/Israel covenant is prominent in the Old Testament only in literature which is under the influence of the Deuteronomic school. In the Old Testament as a whole it looks as if the notion of the divine covenant is a controlling idea, fundamental to the Old Testament's theology. But careful examination suggests that it only gained that controlling status following the publication of Josiah's law book in 621 B.C.E. and the subsequent 'Deuteronomic Reform' which Josiah carried out.

Before that time it seems not to have been central to the thinking of the Old Testament writers. The book of Jeremiah has a great deal to say about the covenant with Yahweh, but the finding of the law book and Josiah's reform took place during his lifetime, and it is very difficult to find unambiguous references to the covenant in prophetic material earlier than this. If the covenant idea had been a familiar one earlier than the 7th century, it would have been a very obvious one for the prophets to appeal to, yet they do not appear to do so. This fact seems to drive us towards the conclusion that the centrality of the covenant theme in Israel's religious thinking goes back no further than the 7th century and the work of the Deuteronomists.

Some scholars resist this conclusion, arguing that the covenant idea is implicit in the work of the 8th century prophets, and that though they do not characteristically use the word 'covenant' they do refer to the history of salvation and take it for granted that there is a special relationship between God and his people established by his deliverance of them from Egypt and by subsequent events.

The question of how early the covenant idea entered Israel's thinking should probably still be regarded as an open one. That from the 7th century onwards there was great emphasis on the idea and that from that point on it became a controlling one in Israel's theology is not in dispute. The argument is about how far back in time it goes, and this discussion depends largely on technical arguments about the dating of particular traditions and particular texts.

The Deuteronomists make covenant the basis of Israel's relationship with God. He saved them from Egyptian bondage and made them a nation. They have accepted an obligation to obey him and to worship him only. As long as they maintain that loyalty he will protect them. But the Deuteronomists represent the whole history of Israel since the
Exodus as a history of disobedience. They structure their history round a series of prophets who they see as being sent by God to recall their people to covenantal obedience. God attempted to discipline Israel by periodic punishments. But they took no notice, either of discipline or of prophetic warnings. The inevitable result of their intransigence was the ultimate punishment, the exile, which brought with it the loss of their land, their temple and their king.

This is the case laid out in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which owe their shaping to Deuteronomic editorship.

The group whom we call the Priestly school, who made their contribution to the Old Testament during the exilic and post-exilic period, and therefore, in a sense, took up where the Deuteronomists left off, also made the covenant theme central to their work, but as the Priestly school see their nation's story it is organised around not just one covenant, the Sinaitic, but a whole series of covenants, beginning with Noah and going on through the patriarchs.

Mendenhall's work was illuminating, even if not all his conclusions have found general acceptance. But it illuminated mainly the Sinaitic covenant, the one made in the wilderness through the agency of Moses. This was firmly two-sided, it involved a commitment by the Lord to sustain and protect His people, and a commitment on their part to be loyal to Him, and recognise no other Gods, and to obey Him, by keeping His laws, i.e. The Sinaitic covenant is emphatically conditional.

But in the Old Testament there are other covenants between God and human beings which are not of this type. The covenant with Abraham contains divine promises, that Abraham will have many descendants, and that they will possess the land, but says nothing explicit about any obligations on Abraham's part: that is to say, it appears to be unconditional.

Likewise, the covenant made with Noah after the flood appears to be unconditional and purely promissory, and so is the other important covenant, previously mentioned, the covenant made by God with the dynasty of David.

This last is said to have been introduced through the agency of Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 7) and is referred back to elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. According to this Davidic covenant God established the dynasty of David in perpetuity, and promised that there would always be a member of that family to occupy the throne of Judah. In fact the Northern tribes seceded after the death of Solomon and set up a rival monarchy of their own. In the South, the dynasty of David did prove to be remarkably stable until the beginning of the 6th century when the Judaean monarchy was decisively brought to an end at the time of the exile, with the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 B.C.E. This was a traumatic experience for Judah, because it looked as if the divine promise had gone for nothing. Since the faithful could not believe that a divine promise could lapse in this way they had no option but to maintain that eventually a king from the house of David would be restored to the throne. This was an important
stage in the development of what we call 'messianism'. It could be argued that the covenant with David had proved to be something of a snare since it gave Judaeans false confidence that God was unequivocally committed to their protection. It is often said that the covenant with David is unconditional, in that it makes promises to David and his descendents, but places no explicit obligations on them in return. It does need to be observed, however, that this covenant with the kings operates within the context of a covenant with the nation as a whole, which is very firmly a conditional one, and this must affect our perspective on its apparent unconditionality.

In conclusion, we may summarise: in the Old Testament as it come down to us the idea of a covenant with God is central. There is in fact a whole series of covenants of different types. But enquiry shows that not all parts of the Old Testament are equally dominated by the covenant theme, and suggests that the theme has developed over time. Just how early it entered the tradition is still debated, but a decisive point in its development was the work of the Deuteronomic school in the 7th century and subsequently.