

# Support in the Whelming Flood

One hymn writer put it that:

His oath, his covenant, his Blood,  
Support me in the whelming flood;  
When all around my soul gives way,  
He then is all my hope and stay.<sup>1</sup>

The matter of *Covenant*<sup>2</sup> is not a mere theological item but a great joy to people who are only too aware of their own weakness and remaining sin. When confronted by our own obvious inability to do any good thing, so that our best efforts are persistently tainted by our corruption, what confidence can we have that we will ‘persevere to the end’? And when we are opposed by the seemingly triumphant evil of the world and the powers of darkness, and when the church stands helplessly impotent, what can sustain us?

A possible cause of our sense of unease may be the misunderstanding of the basis God’s action with us and with the world. It may be that we do not know of covenant, or it may be that we have a view of covenant which is distorted. Either way, there can be great rest for those who come in simple trust to the God of the covenant who has revealed himself to us in Christ and in all the scriptures.

## THE NATURE OF COVENANT

The word ‘covenant’, in English, refers to a compact, where parties are joined to each other, formed as the result of a process of bargaining in some way. In legal terms it is a formal agreement. Generally, the word is synonymous with ‘contract’. However, what concerns us is the way the word is used in the scriptures. This is because the basis for our knowledge of God is his revelation of himself. Dictionaries, English or otherwise, only reflect the way words are used today. At the same time, words used in the Bible had to be intelligible to the first readers, so we must ask what they understood by covenant. Then we can discover whether the modern usage reflects the biblical usage or not.

People formed covenants between each other. The Old Testament Hebrew word *b<sup>e</sup>rith*<sup>3</sup> and the New Testament Greek *diathākā* were used to refer to human contracts. Abraham formed such a contract with Abimelech (Gen. 21:27), as did Isaac (Gen. 26:28) and so on, and the New Testament uses *diathākā* to refer to the will made by someone prior to death, as in Galatians 3:15 and Hebrews 9:16.

But the primary use in the Scriptures is of the covenant between God and humanity. Here that pattern was set by the way a covenant was imposed on a conquered people by a victorious king. In such cases, there was no possibility of a bargain or of mutually acceptable terms and conditions being discussed. In Israel’s

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Mote, ‘My Hope is built on nothing less’.

<sup>2</sup> A brief but very helpful introduction to *Covenant* is by Geoffrey Bingham, *Comprehending the Covenant*, N.C.P.I, Blackwood, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Another word, *eduth*, sometimes translated as ‘testimony’ or ‘treaty’ is also used.

case, God had created and formed them, redeemed them, called them by name, so they were his (Isa. 43:1).

Israel's whole identity, then, was understood in those terms. Their name reminded them of their history, a history of God's call of and covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Their land was 'the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them' (Deut. 1:8 etc).

Israel's formation and redemption from Egypt was because God remembered his covenant with these three men (Ex. 2:23-25). Their continued existence, too, was a matter of God's covenant:

But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them; he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them; nor has he banished them from his presence until now. (2 Kings 13:23)

And even the significant circumcision was a matter of the covenant.

You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. (Gen. 17:11)

Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. (Acts 7:8)

So also was the observance of the sabbath:

Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. (Ex 31:16)

Israel's behavior was largely prescribed in the Torah, which was essentially a covenant document.

Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' (Ex. 24:7)

The LORD will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law. (Deut. 29:21)

Israel could not regard its obligations as in any way optional. They were the possession of the LORD alone. They must not be a multi-covenant people!

For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars. (Judges 2:2)

Israel was bound to the LORD.

Its prosperity or its suffering were to be understood not as the inevitable results of the global economy but of the blessing or cursing of the LORD as he had set out in the covenant. But while blessing or cursing were a feature of covenant life (as they were with ancient covenants of this type<sup>4</sup>), the covenant remained operative because God remained the covenant God. Israel might suffer judgment, but it simply could not cease being the covenant people. That was never an option.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Meredith Kline: 'This element of promissory and penal sanctions which [Deuteronomy] chapters 27-30 have in common [finds] its counterpart in content, context and function in the extra-biblical covenant documents' (*The Treaty of the Great King*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1963, p. 33).

## COVENANT FROM THE BEGINNING AND TO THE END

Why should Israel be in covenant with God.<sup>5</sup> Why were there covenant obligations placed upon them? Put another way, why should we be at all interested in Israel and its covenant?

The answer is that Israel's covenant was not first in the plan of God. First was God's covenant with creation. That can be seen from the way the word 'covenant' was initially used. The first occurrence of the word is in the story of Noah (Gen. 6-9). Genesis 6:18 says: 'But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you' (cf. 9:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17).

The phrase '*establish* my covenant' is significant. The usual way of saying that a covenant was being commenced was to '*cut* a covenant', but here the implication is that an existing covenant was being established or ratified. Following the flood, the covenant was established in language almost completely identical with the language of creation: 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'(Gen. 9:1). Genesis 9:9-10 make it plain that the covenant being established is not only with Noah and his family (a new Adam and Eve?) but:

As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,<sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. (Gen. 9:9-10)

The covenant is later described as being with all the earth;

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. (Isa. 24:5)

The conclusion must be that all creation, including the nations (see Acts 17:26<sup>6</sup>), came into being 'in covenant' with God. It was not that he had somehow conquered a rebellious creation, but that he was and remains its Lord.

Having noted that Israel had obligations under the covenant, we should now observe that, as covenant Lord of creation, God has indicated that *he* is committed to the creation. He is not some watchmaker who winds up the creation and sets it loose on its own. He is 'the faithful creator' (1 Peter. 4:19) who continues to sustain his creation.

He has a purpose in all this, although the best that Israel could know of it was that its given role was to be the agent through whom blessing was restored to all the nations. Indeed, Israel was able to see itself almost as the new Adam and Eve and their land as the new Eden.

It could be seen that the many covenants described in the Old Testament were all contributing parts of this plan, which rested on the covenant with creation. And we might add that while the obligations laid upon Israel were unique, in that the laws and commandments etc. were intended for Israel alone, to mark them out as distinctively belonging to God, they were still an expression of the eternal nature of God and so his requirements for his whole creation. Israel's law, the *Torah*, was the God-given

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<sup>5</sup> In the words of Norman Ewer (1885-1976; in *Week-End Book*, 1924):  
'How odd — of God — to choose — the Jews'.

<sup>6</sup> Possibly also Deut. 32:8. 8 'When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods'.

expression of the eternal law of God. An example of this would be Israel's sabbath observance. Simply taking the ten commandments and applying them directly to Christians may overlook the fact that Moses was told that the law of sabbath observance, with its severe penalty for failure, was expressly for Israel.

The LORD said to Moses: <sup>13</sup>You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: 'You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. <sup>14</sup>You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. <sup>15</sup>Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. <sup>16</sup>Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. <sup>17</sup>It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.' (Ex. 31:12-17)

Later, Paul told the Romans that

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. <sup>6</sup>Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. (Rom. 14:5-6).

This was not indifference to the *Torah*; it was merely recognising that the role of *Torah* was to lead Israel to be the source of blessing to the nations, not so that the nations could become observant Jews. True sabbath observance is to be found in the new creation, in Christ.

*Torah* was always intended to 'pass away' (Matt. 5:17-18), because its distinctive role would be accomplished. But the eternal law of God never changes. Put another way, the *old* covenant had to be superseded, not because it was evil, but because it could only ever lead to the new covenant. The plan of God was always the new covenant, the renewed, fully effective covenant, where the curse on the ground because of humanity's sin was completely removed and the first blessing restored.

God's covenant commitment to creation is not for the sake of creation itself. Here we must be clear that we are Christians and not merely an extension of Judaism. In Christ, something totally new has come. No Jew, no member of Israel, no matter how godly or faithful, could know what has been revealed to us:

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit... (Eph. 3:5)<sup>7</sup>

So what has now been revealed? Well, much in every way but, in particular, the following statements indicate the scope of God's plan for the whole creation.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-17)

yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

Creation came into being *through* the one Lord, Jesus Christ, but the purpose of the Father is that the creation is *for* his Son (Col. 1:13-14), who, as incarnate, is the image

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<sup>7</sup> Paul's point that what was not made known was the participation of the Gentiles in the promises of God in Christ Jesus is based on the premise that until Christ was revealed nothing could be known of the full plan of God.

of the invisible God, the second man, the last Adam. God is committed to the creation because he is committed to his Son.

The Son, Jesus, knew that. He told the people: ‘Everything the Father gives me will come to me’ (John 6:37). He then said:

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. (John 6:44)

On the last day, creation will be complete. There will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. That does not mean merely moral correctness; it means that the eternal law of God will not be challenged at any point. The ‘very-goodness’ of the creation will not only be restored, it will be fulfilled.

## THE HEART OF COVENANT

What is it that tells the parties to a contract that all is secure? At some levels it may be a handshake or perhaps just a pledge given, at a higher level the signed documents. But even these can be voided at times. However, covenant is not contract. God is not a contractor; his relationship with the creation is in no way dependent on the response of his creation. The heart of covenant is the love relationship of Father, Son and Spirit which has moved out and caught up the creation. So, for example, John 3:35: ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands’ and John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’.

This is a matter of great significance. Speaking of Malachi 2:13-16, Geoffrey Bingham has written:

This passage shows that marriage is a covenant, and a covenant which is a relationship of love to which the couple are to be faithful. Today many look on marriage as a contract. That is part of the reason marriages often do not last. The couple live not by covenant obligation but by contract. They watch each other to see whether the contract is being kept. What a dreadful situation! If we could only see that God did not create us to be contractors with a God who is a Contractor, then we would view Him differently. It is a fact of life that many people view God as a Contractor. They feel heavy guilt if they do not keep the imagined contract, and they are angry with God for having put them under this arrangement. They look at God as the God of law, and they do not know the real meaning of law, which is certainly not a contractual one.

In passing, I would observe that if we see God as a Contractor, then we will see human beings in the same way, and so the husband-wife covenant is viewed as contract. We will see that the Fatherhood and the sonship of Man are of the essence of covenant. In a family, a true father will not have a contract with his family but a love relationship, however inadequate he may be to express it. This would be the same for the mother and the children. All—father, mother and children—live in a relationship which is covenantal, but not contractual. Certainly there will be a law of family living and an obligation of love to obey that law. We are by no means claiming that this is the way all families live, but it is the true way of family living.<sup>8</sup>

This is not the point to focus on marriage and family, but the emphasis is clear. God’s commitment to his creation is based on his unswerving love for his Son.

There was in Israel a visible expression of the covenant which took place at Sinai. The covenant with Israel, which was itself patterned on the eternal covenant (see Ex. 25:40), according to Exodus 24, was ratified with the sacrificial blood being ‘dashed

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<sup>8</sup> *Comprehending the Covenant*, p. 11f.

against the altar' (representing God, verse 6) and the other half on the people. That being done, Moses declared:

See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words. (Exodus 24:8)

Why should Israel be confident that there would be future deliverance? Obviously not because of any contractual arrangement with God, but:

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. (Zech. 9:11)

The covenant with Israel was 'cut' once, and the 'blood of the covenant' shed once. It did not require repetition since the heart of the covenant was God's faithfulness and love. But when the covenant with Israel had fulfilled its purpose, when the renewed covenant was declared, then the words of Jesus ring out.

...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26:28)

and the letter to the Hebrews sets the matter out in great detail.

For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, <sup>20</sup>saying, 'This is *the blood of the covenant* that God has ordained for you.' (Heb. 9:19-20)

<sup>13</sup>For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, <sup>14</sup>how much more will *the blood of Christ*, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb 9:13-14)

<sup>20</sup>Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by *the blood of the eternal covenant*, <sup>21</sup>make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20-21).

It is small wonder, then, that believers should look back with delight and faith to that once for-all-sacrifice by which the eternal covenant was ratified (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Faith consciously participates in that sacrifice which is the powerful declaration of God's covenant faithfulness (Rom. 5:8-9; 1 Cor. 10:16).

In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, <sup>18</sup>so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. (Heb. 6:17-18)

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. (Rom. 8:31-34).

## THE BLESSINGS AND THE CURSINGS

As we have observed above, Israel had no option about the covenant of God, primarily because they were not the object of the covenant, the Son of God was. They were the recipients of great privilege in the calling, and if they would live in

obedience to the covenant then they would know rich blessing. If, on the other hand, they refused to be obedient then the cursings would be on them. Deuteronomy 27:1-29:1 set this out with great force. In summary, Moses said:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 30:19-20)

Now if we keep in mind the purpose of the covenant, namely the presentation of all things to the Son, and the provision of a pure bride, richly adorned with righteous deeds (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:8), then we will understand that refusal on our part to participate in that goal must bring the discipline of God upon us.

It is not that God is vindictive or spiteful; on the contrary, it is because he is love that he will not permit the objects of love to fail to reach the goal of love. 'I reprove and discipline those whom I love' (Rev. 3:19). The letter to the Hebrews, with its strong emphasis on covenant, *must* issue the warning:

For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, <sup>27</sup>but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. <sup>28</sup>Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' <sup>29</sup>How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? <sup>30</sup>For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' <sup>31</sup>It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26-31)

How could it be otherwise? The letter continues:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children —  
'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
or lose heart when you are punished by him;  
<sup>6</sup>for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,  
and chastises every child whom he accepts.'

<sup>7</sup>Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? <sup>8</sup>If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. <sup>9</sup>Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup>For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup>Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:5-11)

The experience of the Corinthians was recorded for our learning:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup>Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup>For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. <sup>30</sup>For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup>But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup>But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

While his oath and covenant and blood will support me in the whelming flood, they will certainly not encourage me in any presumption upon his grace or permit me to indulge in ungodly behavior without consequences (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6-13). It is by God's pure mercy that he disciplines his church. Where there no discipline for the children of God, then God himself would be in violation of his own covenant.

The final word will be God's. When the new heavens and the new earth are seen, when the bride is revealed in all her God-given splendor, then we will see Eden fully restored. No longer will humanity feel afraid at the voice of God; instead, it will be said:

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' (Rev. 21:3-4)

Then God himself will then pronounce the words of the covenant, heard in a different form so many times before:

Those who conquer will inherit these things, and ***I will be their God and they will be my children.*** (Rev. 21:7)

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Another hymn writer put it:

1. A debtor to mercy alone,  
Of Covenant mercy I sing;  
Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on,  
My person and off'rings to bring.  
The terrors of law and of God  
With me can have nothing to do;  
My Saviour's obedience and blood  
Hide all my transgressions from view.
2. The work which His goodness began,  
The arm of His strength will complete;  
This promise is Yea and Amen,  
And never was forfeited yet.  
Things future, nor things that are now,  
Not all things below or above,  
Can make Him His purpose forego,  
Or sever my soul from His love.
3. My name from the palms of His hands  
Eternity will not erase;  
Impressed on His heart it remains  
In marks of indelible grace.  
Yes, I to the end shall endure,  
As sure as the earnest is given;  
More happy, but not more secure,  
The glorified spirits in heaven.

Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778)