

4: A Holy Nation

Covenant-keeping God, **Jon Garvey** reveals the hope of a covenant-breaking people

By the time of Moses, God's promise to Abraham was partly fulfilled, in that his descendants were 'exceedingly numerous'¹. Exodus 1 is full of expressions of fruitfulness – seven in v7 alone. But they had no land because they were in Egypt and they had no blessing because they were slaves. God's promise, however, was not chained...

Because of His Covenant with Abraham² God achieves the Exodus through Moses and meets the people at Sinai expressly to make a Covenant with them as a holy nation³. Despite common misapprehensions this is a Covenant of grace, not works, though it sets conditions for Israel which will prove its downfall. It is best to see it as a specific application of Abraham's Covenant, which neither supercedes it nor completely fulfils it⁴.

Neither Israel's righteousness nor any other quality, but God's covenant love (Heb. *chesed*) led Him to rescue them⁵, and to choose them above all the nations⁶. The Passover was unconditional. This sovereign deliverance forms the basis of the Covenant relationship⁷, which promises what was lacking before: the blessing of God's presence⁸ and the possession of Canaan⁹. The stipulations in the Covenant are only the conditions necessary for a redeemed people to live with a holy God.

The fourth Covenant – with Moses

Exodus 20 echoes the treaty covenants of the surrounding culture (though details are scattered through Exodus and Leviticus). So too does the whole of Deuteronomy, which re-establishes the Covenant prior to the entry into Canaan¹⁰. In Exodus 20 Yahweh (God's covenant name) first introduces Himself as the Covenant-giver, and states its historical basis¹¹ (expanded in Deuteronomy 1-3).

The ten words (commandments) that follow are the stipulations for those within the Covenant. In fact they represent God's own character, which is why they remain God's standard for all mankind.

Finally, there are blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience, which are in Leviticus 26. The blessings picture the land at peace, a large population and God dwelling with His people – the original state of Eden. But the curses are the opposite, culminating in



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'I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts...' (Jeremiah 31)

the people perishing from the land under the actual hostility of God. Yet even in that event, as we shall see, He will not forget His promises.

Like all such treaties, the Covenant is recorded – by Yahweh Himself – in a document, the tables of stone, which will be stored as testimony in the Ark of the Covenant. It is solemnised by blood, sprinkled on the people¹².

Torah and the Covenant

It is worth a small diversion to show how the contents of the Pentateuch complement this Covenant structure. After its establishment in Exodus 20, the rest of the laws prepare the people and their camp for the blessing of God's actually coming among them, which He does in the final verses¹³. Previously He dwelt apart upon Mt Horeb, where only Moses met Him as their mediator.

The Leviticus laws govern how Israel must live with such a holy God amongst them. This involves the ritual and sacrifice necessary to purify them to dwell in His presence, and holy behaviour towards God and their neighbour. In effect this is a constant reminder of their lack of holiness, which ought to have led to faith in God's mercy but sadly brought rebellion.

In Numbers, Israel sets out for the promised land, just eleven days away¹⁴, but rebellion leads to their forty years wandering, during which the whole exodus generation, rejected by God from the promise, dies in the

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GOD
with us!

the covenants of God

desert. But the Lord remembers His Covenant, and by the end a new generation, just as numerous, has gathered on the borders of Canaan.

Deuteronomy is largely a restatement of the Covenant for that generation, and an adaptation of the laws to settled life in Canaan.

The Old Testament and the Covenant

The rest of the Old Testament is largely the story of God's faithfulness to His side of the Covenant, and Israel's unfaithfulness to theirs. The Hebrew Bible reflects this better than ours, because it ends at 2 Chronicles with the people exiled from the land, reduced numerically to a remnant, and fallen from blessing to servitude¹⁵. Yet the very last verse gives a note of hope that despite all this, God has not finished with Israel¹⁶.

I want to show how this disaster fits the terms of the Covenant, and the basis on which the Old Testament closes in hope rather than despair. When he came down from Horeb with the two stone tablets, there is no doubt that Moses considered that breaking its terms would annul the Covenant. When he sees the Israelites have already turned to idolatry, he breaks the tablets, demonstrating it has ended before it began¹⁷. Yet knowing God he undertakes even now to intercede.

God's reply shows that, in sheer mercy, He will still keep his promise to the nation, yet will exclude individual sinners from it¹⁸. Even so, ch33 shows that the Covenant is dead – they can have Canaan, but the Lord will no longer be with them. Moses, realising that this would destroy the main blessing of the Covenant, pleads further with God until He literally gives them a second chance. The Covenant is renewed, and Moses again comes down from Horeb with the tablets of the Testimony¹⁹.

Nevertheless, the curses of Leviticus 26.14-49 retain the same penalty. If Israel continues to break the Covenant, they will be destroyed by it. In the light of this God's longsuffering mercy throughout the centuries is wonderful. But as in Noah's day judgement could wait no longer, so there came a time in Israel's history when, as the Chronicler says, there was 'no remedy'²⁰.

That is what makes God's command to

Jeremiah to cease praying for Israel²¹ so terrible. It is not just that punishment will come, but that the Covenant will be lost irrevocably. The tablets of the Testimony disappeared when Nebuchadnezzar came. Despite Indiana Jones they will never be found – or if they are, they will be found to be broken.

The true 'replacement theology'

Does this leave Israel without hope? No, for Leviticus 26 says that God will remember the Covenant even in their exile²². But He will not restore it – He will give them a New Covenant. This is the true 'replacement theology' – not the replacement of Jews by Gentiles, but of an inadequate Covenant with one that works. The old must go for the new to come²³.

This whole sequence is foretold in Deuteronomy, but seldom noticed. Deuteronomy 5 restates the Sinai Covenant, stressing that 'it was *not with our fathers* that the Lord made this Covenant, but ...with all of us who are alive here today'²⁴.

But Moses has already warned them that they will be exiled if they disobey²⁵. His warning ends in hope, however, for they will find God if they subsequently repent. Yet the basis of this is not the Sinai Covenant, but 'the covenant *with your forefathers*, which he confirmed to them by oath'²⁶ – in other words, the unconditional promise to Abraham.

The post-exilic writings, despite the return from Babylon, lament for better days, and long for the consolation Messiah will bring. The New Covenant has been foretold, specifically in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but its consolation is still awaited and will only come in Christ.

We will examine Israel's New Covenant after we have seen where God's Covenant with King David fits in.

1 Exodus 1.7
2 Exodus 6.2-5
3 Exodus 19.6
4 Galatians 3.17-19
5 Deuteronomy 4.37; 7.7-8; 9.6
6 Deuteronomy 10.14-15
7 Exodus 19.3-6
8 Exodus 6.7
9 Exodus 6.8
10 A full treatment is in Walton, John H, Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context (Grand Rapids, 1989) ch.4.
11 Exodus 20.2

12 Exodus 24.4-8
13 Exodus 40.34-38
14 Deuteronomy 1.2
15 2 Chronicles 36.20
16 2 Chronicles 36.23
17 Exodus 32.19
18 Exodus 32.34
19 Exodus 34.29
20 2 Chronicles 36.16
21 Jeremiah 7.16; 11.14; 14.11
22 Leviticus 26.45
23 Hebrews 8.13
24 Deuteronomy 5.3
25 Deuteronomy 4.25-28
26 Deuteronomy 4.31

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