

The Covenant Pattern by Justin Killam

There have been, and continue to be, many Christian problems that theologians and theological philosophers have, throughout history, attempted to solve. Many of these problems can be dealt with separately, but the borders between most theological problems tend to blur together and many of these problems, in order to gain a better understanding of them, must be studied in relation to the roots of Christianity, the Hebrew scriptures. One such problem is the sudden shift of justification by law or acts to justification by faith alone, which is the founding principle of Christianity. The four major covenants in Hebrew scripture follow a set pattern in their development of the law that Judaism bases salvation on, yet the fifth covenant of the New Testament shatters this pattern and introduces a complete shift from this to the justification by faith alone. This pattern may itself account for a reason that this sudden break from the established beliefs was, eventually, so successful. It is also interesting that even though Christianity is based on this justification by faith it still has become caught up in this pattern in a way.

The first two covenants made by God, although not formal covenants, are found in Genesis 1:28 and 2:15-17. The first covenant God makes is the command given to the newly created male and female human beings, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, and every living thing' (Genesis 1:28). Although there is no recorded agreement, God does make a sort of pact or promise with them. In exchange for them to populate his newly created world he will give them dominance over all other living things. This is a very simple and straight forward covenant, only two humans are a part of it, although it will pass down to their descendants, and there are no law like ways that they must observe, just an action. The second covenant is similar in that it is to a small number, just man, and that he is still in a state of sinlessness, but there are a few differences. God's giving them paradise as long as they don't do one thing, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and look after it. 'You may eat from any tree in the garden', he told man, 'except from the tree of knowledge of good and evil; the day you eat from that, you are surely doomed to die' (Genesis 2:15-17). The one action that is given them to do is to till and maintain the garden, however the emphasis in this covenant is to NOT do a specific action, eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This covenant also states a clear consequence of breaking the pact, death. These two covenants are the first and most simplified forms of the covenant pact between human and God, yet still show traces of legalistic form before sin even exists. However these pacts are early forms of the traditional covenant, which develops into a more focused form after sin emerges from mankind.

The first of the four major covenants in the Hebrew scriptures is the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:1-17. This is the first pact between God and Human in the format that a covenant has traditionally been seen to follow and the further covenants continue with this tradition. The previous two may not be covenants in the strictest sense, but are pacts between God and human. The Noah Covenant is a development from this simplistic pact into a strong agreement by both human and God which is called by God in this instance the covenant. In this new and stronger format the covenant takes on a clear statement of what is expected of each participant as well as a sign of the act of making the covenant. God promises again to give dominance over all living things to humankind as long as they repopulate the world, a recurrence of the very first pact made between God and humankind. However there is more to this covenant, God promises to never again threaten to destroy

the world and all living things with a flood, "to lay waste the earth" (Genesis 9:11), as long as Noah and his descendants observe a dietary restriction as well as respect the life of animals as well as their fellow human beings, "Anyone who sheds human blood, / for that human being his blood will be / shed; / because in the image of God / has God made human beings." (Genesis 9:6). This covenant also introduces the use of a sign to represent the pact, in this case the rainbow.

The development of the pact into a formal covenant follows the development of the human as a spiritual pure being into a sinful one. After the break of the second pact, original sin, the descendants of Adam and Eve, all humankind, exist in a state of sin that leads them to the brink of annihilation. It is only after this flood, when there are again only a few who appear to be the most righteous, does God again attempt to make a pact with humankind. This time however he is more clear on his requirements, reflecting that the state of humankind requires this in order to maintain the pact. This is the first developmental step of the covenant pact towards a law-like contract.

The second major covenant in the Hebrew scriptures is the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 15 to 17. This covenant follows the covenant format established with Noah, both sides of the pact are clearly stated and agreed to by God and a small number of people, in this case just Abraham. Abraham is a man that has kept the previous covenant made with Noah and is chosen by God from the rest of the worlds population as a representative of spiritual righteousness. This is perhaps the reason why the covenant takes a large leap back to the first pacts God made with humankind. God promises Abraham children and a whole nation of descendants even though he and his wife are old and barren as well as land for them, but has no requirement for them in return. The circumcision can be seen as a requirement, Abraham's part of the pact, but this is seen more as a sign of the covenant than a requirement, like the rainbow.

However this new covenant is not as one sided as it first appears. The circumcision is an act, like that of the command to populate the world, and thus is definitely a requirement for Abraham and his descendants to uphold their part of the pact. Those that are not circumcised are "cut off from the kin of his father; he has broken my covenant" (Genesis 17:14). As well as this the covenant can be seen as an addition to the previous covenant with Noah, which must still be upheld in order to prevent God from bringing another flood. Thus this covenant appears to be a second chance given to a righteous man, with whom God is impressed with, to attempt to uphold a more spiritual covenant pact instead of a continued development of the strict law-like contract covenant. This covenant follows a similar format as the one with Noah, with perhaps the hope that at least someone is learning, without the continued law-like development of the covenant format.

The third major covenant is the Mosaic Covenant of Exodus 20, the next radical development of the format of the covenant into the law focused bases for worship and belief that dominates Judaism. When God creates the Abrahamic Covenant it appears that he has hopes of spiritual obedience, that his followers will not need a strict code of worship. This is not to be so. Throughout Exodus they continue to disobey even the simplest of commands by God, such as when they were told not to save any manna for the next day and some do so anyway. Even in the face of their deliverance from slavery under Egypt by his will alone and the many miraculous events that they witness, the people of Abraham display their complete inability to follow anything other than the letter of the law given to them. This is exactly what they receive. The Mosaic Covenant is the heart of the Torah, divine instruction, and becomes the basis for Jewish theological thought, law, regulation and restriction.

The Mosaic Covenant is similar to the previous two covenants in that it is well stated what is expected from each party, but differs in that it is so much clearer, stricter and developed. The

situation in which this covenant is given differs radically from others in that the human receivers of this covenant are many instead of a few select people. Indeed it is only through the intervention of Moses that God does not destroy them and again choose to make a covenant with a select few, Moses himself. Of course Moses himself was continuously questioning God's will throughout Exodus, so even he by himself is a degeneration of the spiritual strength of faith when compared to his ancestors. This has a large effect on the form that the covenant takes. Instead of leaving anything important open God creates a specific list of basic requirements for the Hebrews to follow. The basis for these laws are the Ten Commandments, which begin the hundreds of following rules, regulations and laws.

The Ten Commandments make up the bare minimum requirements for the Hebrew people to be accepted into the covenant with God. Not only are they important separately, but as a collective whole they follow a specific order of importance. Starting with the most important commandments, those pertaining to the proper obedience to God and God only, followed by the proper reverence for his creation, then one's parents and finally the commandments pertaining to proper behavior. God's general commandment for his creations to properly worship him above all things, including themselves, now has to be spelled out step by step for his chosen people, the Hebrews, in order for them to grasp it.

Finally one of the most important aspects of this covenant is similar to the previous covenant with Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant was, basically, an addition to its previous covenant with an additional benefit placed in reward of Abraham's faith and obedience to the Lord. The Mosaic Covenant is similar in that nothing radically altering is introduced, just added to the previous covenant. However this addition is placed with the requirements, the stricter guide of laws that must be followed in order to maintain the covenant. The apparent hope that God has in making the Abrahamic Covenant, that people are learning and returning to a spiritual obedience to him, falls apart at the thoughtlessness of the Hebrew people.

What has been established so far in this paper is that the covenant between God and humankind develops in response to the continued shift of inability for his people to properly worship him. This inability must be compensated for by a process of spelling out everything in a continuously enlarging list of strict rules, laws and regulations. The basis for righteousness shifts throughout this process from a spiritual faith to an observance to the law.

The fourth major covenant in Hebrew scripture is the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:8-17 is another radical change in the tradition of the covenant. Here is a covenant in which God promises something, but requires nothing in return. David is promised that his line shall forever possess the throne. This is indeed a shift that is radical, considering the great change from the Abrahamic Covenant to the Mosaic Covenant, but it does establish a pattern. The first major covenant is an establishment of regulations in response to God's disappointment in his people, thus the focus is on requirements instead of benefits. The second major covenant is a focus on new benefits in response to God's satisfaction with his people. The third major covenant is again an establishment of regulations in response to God's great disappointment with his people and the fourth major covenant follows this pattern and is focused on benefits in response to God's satisfaction with David. However, none of the covenants in which benefits are focused on, instead of stricter regulations, change the current established law like tradition of proper faith and worship. The fourth and final major covenant is radical in that God requires nothing in return for this new covenant, however the previously established set of laws from the Mosaic Covenant is in no way effected. The legalistic tradition of Judaism continues to dominate and develop.

The covenant pattern is well established by the covenants within the Hebrew scripture, when people do good God rewards them, when people do bad God sets down more rules and regardless of what happens the previous set of laws is always unaltered, just added to or clarified. People require this because they are in a state of sin and the pattern flows from punishment to reward, back to punishment and again to reward, justified by their acts in accordance to the law. Yet it is from this theological thought that the origin of Christianity takes place in the form of a fifth covenant, one so opposed to the norm of the Hebrew legalistic tradition developed by the previous four covenants that an entirely unique religion would be formed by it.

The fifth covenant is brought about by the event of Jesus Christ. His message and new covenant is truly a new pact with God. The pattern of punishment, reward, punishment, reward is then broken by reward, but a reward far beyond any other given before, the liberation of all humankind from the state of sin that all other covenants responded to. Suddenly the legalistic tradition is ignored and in its place comes faith, a gift to all humankind. This important Christian covenant breaks the pattern of Hebrew covenants in an attempt to return the traditional righteousness by observance of the law to its beginnings when righteousness was justified by faith alone. Paul uses previous justified men, before the law, in order to show that, "For what does scripture say? 'Abraham put his faith in God, and that faith was counted to him as righteous'" (Romans 4:3). Faith was the original process by which God justified men, not law. Law was in fact a response to man's inability to find faith. This is a potent argument in that by using the Hebrew scriptures to prove the validity of the new covenant Paul can show that, although the previous covenants achieved a great law, its purpose was always to lead men back to faith, not away from it.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the covenant pattern, so forcefully attempted to be broken by Jesus and the early Christian church founders, such as Paul, still continues to again shift towards a law-like justification, instead of faith, throughout the history of the Christian religion. However this no longer comes in the form of covenants, but in theological development. The strict obedience to tradition and law within the Catholic Church, Luther's protest against this and return to faith and scripture, the theology of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas. All of these theological studies, while not Jewish, have their roots very deep in Hebrew history and this continued struggle between justification by faith or blind observance of the law. Perhaps the greatest development and preservation of the legalistic form of religious worship has been the continued development of a legalistic society. People are raised surrounded by laws that restrict them. It has been my experience that the common Christian, who supposedly worships within a system of justification by faith, judges others based on their acts alone. However the common Jew has a stronger spiritual faith within a system supposedly based on adherence to the law. Jewish people tend to be more close within their communities and families, perhaps forming a sort of barrier against common legalistic society. This is however by no means a generalization, just my personal experience, but still it seemed paradoxically odd enough to mention.

Works Cited

The Oxford Study Bible, (Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha). Oxford University Press, 1992.

Genesis 1:28, 2:15-17, 9:6-11, 17:14. Exodus 20. 2 Samuel 7:8-17. Romans 4:3.