

Biblical Covenants and Normative Hermeneutics

Introduction

In this paper on what I have called “Biblical Covenantalism” I want to concentrate on the matter of interpretation as it relates to the Covenants of Scripture. I have alluded to this in an earlier article, but I want to say more because I believe this matter to be so vital for a proper understanding of the Bible.

As is recognized by most Dispensationalists, many of those brethren who denigrate Dispensational theology for its “literalistic” hermeneutics do so because they insist upon the determining interpretive role of the various “genres” of Scripture. Prophetic literature, for example, is to be understood according to the “genre” we call “apocalyptic”.

By utilizing the supposed insights of prophetic/apocalyptic genre, amazing transformations take place. Wild animals are changed into metaphors for our carnal passions (Isa. 11); detailed physical temple-plans are morphed into spiritual organisms (Ezek. 40ff); and seemingly inviolable promises are taken from the designees and altered so as to conform to what history after the cross is alleged to demand.

My concern in this article is to address this phenomenon of prophetic makeover. How can God express Himself in the most forceful language of commitment to Israel and not mean what He is saying (Jer. 31-33)? How can God make a solemn oath to accomplish stipulations which He and no one else has placed upon Himself and proceed to “expand” these stipulations beyond all recognition (Gen. 15)? And what, if anything, gives Christians the right to re-interpret the language of God’s unilateral promises to the Patriarchs? Where is the “wiggle room” in the covenant obligations which Jehovah placed Himself under?

Two Forms of Biblical Covenants

We have previously noted that a biblical covenant is a contract between two parties. The OT has two kinds of covenants. They are really two forms of the Suzerain-vassal treaties common in the 2nd millennium B.C. (the time of Moses). The Sinai Covenant (Exod. 19-24; 32-34) is a good example of this first version. In this form of biblical covenant the emphasis falls on the obligation of the vassal (Israel) to perform the will of the Suzerain (Yahweh) which it has agreed to perform upon oath. Failure to pursue the obligations of the covenant would result in the nation (not just certain individuals) being laid open to the curses affixed to the contract. Of course, the Mosaic sacrificial system was instituted within the covenant, at least in part, to stave off judgment. On the other hand, compliance would guarantee the blessing mentioned in connection with rewards of obedience contained within the covenant. Thus, blessing was experienced now and again in Israel, but the stipulations were too stringent for them to ever obtain the full blessing.

This is where the second type of biblical covenant comes in. Examples of the second kind of covenant are those to Noah (Gen. 9), Abraham (Gen. 15:1-21; 17:1-8) and Phinehas (Num. 25). In these covenants, and others like them, it is not human obligation which is stressed but the

unilateral obligation that God's freely entered into and has committed Himself to perform. Such a covenant is that which God made with Abraham. What is unique about this type of biblical covenant is that although it follows the Suzerain-vassal pattern, there is a special twist. As David Noel Freedman writes:

“Strikingly, it is the suzerain who is obligated, not the vassal. Then covenant is initiated by the suzerain who is obligated, not the vassal. The covenant is initiated by the suzerain, and is unconditional in the sense that no demands are imposed upon Abraham.” (*Divine Commitment and Human Obligation, Vol. 1: Ancient Israelite History and Religion*, 173)

Taking God's covenant with Noah as an example, we note that God's commitment to Noah (as the new head of the human race) was to never again bring a worldwide flood upon the earth. The rainbow is given as a token of Divine Self-obligation.

At this juncture, I wish to ask a hermeneutical question: “Did God mean what He said to Noah or did He really have a different fulfillment of His obligations in mind?” The answer, I think, is obvious. So the Noahic Covenant is an example of this second kind of covenant – what Freedman calls a “Covenant of Divine Commitment” – and it means just what it says. It ought not to be missed that it is on the basis of the literal meaning of God's oath that we know, “The regular cycle of seasons and the orderly processes of nature will persist.” (Freedman, 174). It is this which undergirds the Christian assurance of the uniformity of nature. It is no insubstantial thing!

Now if we move on to examine the Abrahamic Covenant along these same lines, what do we find? We see another unconditional Divine Commitment, this time to Abraham and his descendants (the nation that will come through the promised seed – Isaac). Taking only one of the times in which God freely commits Himself to fulfill, I incite you to read Genesis 15:13-16. Was this fulfilled literally?

Then, in verse 17, God, in the mysterious form/s of the “smoking oven and burning torch” is said to pass through the divided animals to seal the covenant. The specific covenant oath (“which was the central feature of the covenant ceremony,” 172) that God takes regarding the physical land then follows.

Another passage which throws light upon Genesis 15:17f. is Jeremiah 34:8-22, in which Zedekiah and the slave-owners in Judah are reminded by God that they are bound by a covenant similar to that of Genesis 15, wherein their forefathers agreed to release their slaves after six years of service in line with stipulations set down at Sinai. As Freedman takes up the narrative,

“The agreement here is described as having been ratified in the temple through a ceremony in which the participants were required to pass between the severed halves of a bull...In verse 18...the slave owners are condemned for violating their oath and repossessing the slaves whom they had released. Now the prophet assures them, God as the judge and executor of the curses of the covenant will make them like the severed bull.” (ibid, 172)

So the question arises once more, did God hold the citizens to the literal wording of this covenant or not? Certainly He did. If God held His creatures to the literal wording of the covenant would He not hold Himself to the same standard? Didn't God Himself employ "literal" hermeneutics when forging these covenants? And returning to the Abrahamic Covenant, I simply wish to ask a similar question: "Did God understand Himself to be committing to the literal sense of the words with which He bound Himself in Genesis 15:17-21?" The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the affirmative. In fact, this is precisely how the later prophets understood the Divine obligation. E.g. Jeremiah 31-33; Ezekiel 36-37; Hosea 2:16-23.

A Contradiction?

But now a curious tension arises when the first kind of biblical covenant – that stressing human obligation, is compared with the second kind – that emphasizing Divine Commitment. Israel was unable to keep its obligations to God and has been judged by God in line with the curses included (or embedded) in the Sinai Covenant. But God has promised to fulfill His commitments included in the oaths He took (e.g. to Noah and Abraham). And God is fully able to follow through on His commitments!

Is this tension between the covenants of Divine Commitment and Human Obligation irreconcilable? As Freedman expresses the problem, "Can covenant bond be broken – and at the same time persist? Can God sever a relationship as a result of covenant violations – and nonetheless maintain it in perpetuity?" (ibid, 177)

That is an interesting question. And it is made all the more interesting when one considers that Covenant theology requires the answer to be returned in the negative.

Whether one turns to Augustine, the great precursor of Covenant theology, who flatly denied any future hope to ethnic Israel and replaced Israel with the Church, or to Palmer Robertson, who uses the language of accommodation to absorb Israel into the Church and eradicate its national identity, what this form of theology demands is that the God who made oaths to Noah, Abraham (and David) did not actually mean what He said when He uttered them.

But Freedman, who is more liberal in his sympathies, can write: "The prophets were convinced that God's commitment to Israel persisted in spite of and beyond the destruction of the nation." (ibid, 177)

So can the tension be resolved so that both types of covenant can retain their literal sense?

"In the new age of the covenant – the new spirit and the new life – the conflict between the two covenant types is resolved in reciprocal fulfillment. Yahweh's irreversible commitment to Israel flows into the blessings which he bestows on an obedient people who, through the power of his Spirit, fulfill all the requirements of the covenant." (ibid, 178)

As a Bible believer who thinks God means exactly what He says, I believe Freedman has a point. So let me lower the boom: If covenant language must be (a) specific, and, (b) mean what it says (literal), it stands to reason that the biblical covenants must be interpreted literally. And if they

must be literally interpreted Covenant theology doesn't have a leg to stand on! "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (cf also Gal. 3:15 on human covenants).

I want to outline what I believe are the important issues which ought to affect anyone who believes that the Bible should be interpreted in the same "naive" way we read personal letters, sermons, novels and other books. We must always keep in mind that the Bible is written to the "common man" not the specialist scholar.

1. Although there are recognizable dispensations within the Bible story these are given too much emphasis by many Dispensationalists (I have already mentioned that the label "dispensationalist" is an unfortunate one. "*Biblical Covenantalism*" is a more accurate moniker). This is because the dispensations give a "man's-eye view" of biblical history and are merely markers to the way God has dealt with men under certain conditions. Doctrinally the dispensations carry in themselves little content for the Church.

I am saying that we can get our theology from the whole Bible whether we pay attention to the dispensations or not. One does not have to know what a dispensation is to know that we no longer build giant arks or sacrifice bulls and goats. As a result of this recognition it is clear that the dispensations themselves are of secondary importance. We must look for something that gives theological potency to the system. Most Reformed scholars find this underlying structure in the theological covenants – especially in the so-called "Covenant of Grace." The dispensationalist will find his underlying theological structure in the Biblical Covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Priestly, Land, Davidic and New).

2. Dispensational theology, grounded not in the dispensations but in these Covenants is the theology of the Bible. It is in these biblical covenants that God has told us what He will do and is doing. God has made specific declarations in the covenants of the chiefest theological importance.

To give two examples: A). the doctrine of the Grace of God is exemplified in the covenants. Even the Mosaic Covenant was, of course, not a way of salvation, but pointed the sinner away from himself and toward the necessity of a gracious sin-Substitute. B). the great covenant with Abraham sets out promises which God commits Himself to fulfill. These include personal prestige for Abraham; a special nation through his physical seed (Isaac) which will occupy the Land of Promise (Gen. 15); blessings through Abraham for the nations of the world, etc.

These promises supply theological truths such as a theology of Israel in the land corresponding to the wording of the covenants. In the same way the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant to "all the families of the earth" come to us through the Church's participation in this particular promise (cf. Gal. 3:6-8,14-16,26-29) via its association with Jesus Christ in the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6). Though I agree that the New Covenant was announced to Israel and Judah (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:8f.) and must come to fulfillment with ethnic Israel, I do not see why we cannot speak of the Lord's supper and its institution (see Lk.22:14-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) as God's making the very same New covenant with the church so as to give access to the blessings of Genesis 12:3. If Israel needs the New Covenant to access all their covenant blessings, why should not the Church need to cross the same "bridge" to get at its covenant promises too? I know this seems novel, but

I can't see much against it and it may have quite a bit going for it – not least not avoiding the pretty obvious covenant language of Christ and Paul! Still, if one prefers the “participation” view I shall not rankle – it makes sense and has a better pedigree than mine!

There are, then, strong soteriological and eschatological links that are shaped by the covenants of Scripture. And this holds true for other doctrines too.

3. But these things are only true provided these covenants are left alone to say what they say and are allowed to form doctrines as they are seen unfolding. We must not impose foreign schemes which obstruct this unfolding. Let me give an example: If the Davidic Covenant is studied (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:4-17; 1 Chron. 17:16-27; Psa. 89; Jer. 33:14-26; Lk. 1:32-33, etc.) it becomes clear that Israel has a right to expect a Davidic King and earthly kingdom to arise in fulfillment of God's promises. The only way this can be challenged is if a teaching is intruded into these pledge-texts to nullify some or all of the wording of the original covenant. This is precisely what Replacement theology does with its claim that the Church is the “New Israel” and that Christ is now ruling from David's throne in heaven – so that there is little or nothing left to be fulfilled of the Davidic Covenant.

By the imposition of a non-biblical single “covenant of grace” and/or a misinterpreted NT verse or two (e.g. Rom. 9:6; Gal. 6:16; Heb. 11:8-16) the literal wording of the scriptural covenant is washed away or altered to point to something other than David or the Jews were led to believe.

4. What is the bottom line then? The fundamental unmovable tenet of interpretation is that the biblical covenants must be allowed to mean what they say. Their wording must be treated as sacrosanct, for when this is done they are treated as proper contractual agreements whose particulars must be honored by the contracting parties.

5. Now *two crucial points* come into view. Firstly, since the biblical covenants control much of the rest of biblical revelation their plain-sense interpretation must be extended to the other parts of Scripture. The full import of this is: *If the biblical covenants must be interpreted literally, the whole Bible must be interpreted literally.* If this rule is not followed, conflicting interpretations will quickly arise as a result. Thus, the covenants contain within themselves the hermeneutical key to the entire Bible.

Second, because the covenants provide the “God's-eye view” of God's purposes, they provide the foundational elements of the biblical worldview (something that a focus on the dispensations could never do). God's Self-disclosure and Self-naming is often given within a covenantal context (e.g. His personal name “Yahweh” is peculiarly associated with these covenants). And what God tells us about this world and its future, and about mankind as fallen, and the promise of redemption are covenantally conditioned. Hence dispensationalists can construct a “dispensational worldview.”

6. Stressing the biblical covenants in this way does not mean we ignore anything which does not appear to fit the covenantal structure. For example, the opening chapters of Genesis, which probably do not contain a covenant (though some find an “Edenic covenant” there), are

presupposed in the Noahic Covenant. On the other hand the doctrine of the Church does not contradict the covenants so long as it is not thought to be the fulfillment of those covenants.

Since the revelation of God in Scripture and in the natural world is complementary, we can affirm that a Systematic Theology built along these lines will be able, at least in theory, to assign each biblical teaching its correct place and importance. It will not need to rely upon interpretations which cut across the great contractual commitments of the Creator as laid out in the Covenants of Scripture.