

THE TWO COVENANTS

When Bill Clinton was given the Democratic Party's presidential nomination last July, in New York, amidst the usual euphoric reception and uproar from supporters, he gave what has been described as the greatest speech of his political career. The event was relayed on British T.V. and viewers heard, near the end of the speech, Mr. Clinton's promise that, if elected, he would seek an early opportunity to enter into a "Covenant" with the American people. "Covenant" is, I suppose, a rather old-fashioned word and when Mr. Clinton used it, his huge and emotionally charged audience were very noticeably taken aback by it, and there was a stunned silence for a few moments before the ecstatic cheering resumed. Mr. Clinton went on to describe what he meant by the word; i.e. that the proposed covenant would involve any future government of not only giving good conditions to the people but expecting, in return, a contribution of social awareness and co-operation from every individual in the nation. As I say, the word "Covenant" seemed to me to be an odd choice for a current political speech, and one would have expected him to have used words more up-to-date, like contract, compact, agreement or partnership. There is nothing whatsoever wrong with the word Covenant, of course; it just sounds a bit legalistic (Deed & Covenant), and a bit Biblical. Yes, the word is very Biblical and the first covenant between God and man appears at the very dawn of time (Gen. 2). Bill Clinton's reference to this word suggested to me that it might be of interest to have a quick glance at Covenants and Covenant-making in Bible times.

Probably the best-known Covenant in the Bible is the one made between God and His Creation, just after the great flood. **"And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I behold, I will establish My COVENANT with you and with your seed after you. And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you: from all that go out of the ark."** Here was a covenant that God made not only with man, but with fowl, cattle and indeed every living creature: made entirely at the behest of God's own grace: no conditions being required of man or beast. The animal kingdom is quite unaware of God's solemn undertaking on their behalf, embodied in this covenant, and so are most men. Often-times Tokens were given, or exchanged, at the making of covenants and the above covenant was no exception. **"God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations. I do set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for A TOKEN of a covenant between Me and the earth ... And I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh: and the waters shall no more**

become a flood to destroy all flesh" Gen. 9:13-17). Men, and the animal world, are beneficiaries of this early covenant today and every day.

Covenants Between God and Man, and Man and Man

"Covenant" is from Old French, and also from the Latin: *convenire*; "to agree". In the O.T. it is from the Hebrew *Berith* the root word of which means "to cut". It is interesting to note that in the LXX (Septuagint) the translators preferred to translate *Berith* into Greek *diatheke*, meaning 'Appointment', rather than *suntheke*, meaning "Contract". Why the root word for *Berith* should mean "to cut" is probably explained by the following.

The following three steps were usual in the making of covenants. (1) The terms were hammered out. (2) these terms were sworn to in some way. (3) the parties to the covenant walked between the severed pieces of slaughtered animals, apparently invoking upon themselves a like fate to the animals, should they violate their contract. From this kind of practice may have sprung up the phrase in common currency at that time, "**God do so unto me, and more also**": the phrase surviving long after the ceremony was obsolete. The terms eventually agreed between the parties in any covenant clearly depends upon the parties being on an equal footing. If they were on a largely equal basis, they would have an equal say in the formulation of the terms of any eventual arrangement. Under the old feudal system, where the participants were anything but on an equal footing, the wording of such agreements referred to the "superior" and the "inferior". At the end of a war (such as World War 1 and 11) the victors sit down with the vanquished to agree the terms of the surrender, where obviously those surrendering are in no position to dictate the conditions of the contract. This point is fairly self-evident in compacts between men and men, but it is also worth remembering when we consider covenants between God and man. God does not depend upon man for anything whatsoever, and indeed does not need man. Man, on the other hand, depends upon God: for God is the Great Provider and Sustainer. In dealing with God's covenants with man we remember, therefore, that God is never motivated by need or self-interest, but solely by His love for man and by His gracious benefaction.

The Hebrew word *Berith* is used of covenants in the O. T. irrespective of whether between God and man, or between man and man. For instance in the oath and covenant between Isaac and Abimelech. Isaac said to Abimelech and his friends, "**Wherefore come ye to me, seeing ye hate me, and have sent me away from you? And they said, We certainly saw that the Lord was with thee and we said, Let there be now an oath betwixt us, even betwixt us and thee, and let us make A COVENANT with thee. That thou wilt do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done thee nothing but good And he made them a feast, and they did eat and drink.**" (Gen. 26:27-30). I don't know if the present practice of extravagant parties, wining and dining to celebrate the signing of big contracts dates back to Isaac, but he certainly appears to have sealed his covenant with feasting and rejoicing. There are many similar examples in the O.T. of covenants between men and men (as between equals). In the case of the covenant between Laban and Jacob, a cairn of stones was produced as a tangible token of the agreement. Laban said, "**Now therefore Come now, Let us make A COVENANT, I and thou, and let it be a witness between thou and me. And Jacob took a stone and set it up for a pillar. And Jacob said unto his brethren, gather stones: and they took stones, and made an heap: and they did eat there upon the heap. And Laban said, This heap is a witness between thee and me this day ... The Lord watch between thee and me when we are absent from one another.**" (Gen. 31:44-49).

Old Covenants

The most important covenant God made with man in the O.T. must surely be the one He made with Abraham. In Gen. 15 we read, "**In the same day, the Lord made A COVENANT with Abraham, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land from**

the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates." This chapter also refers to the "cutting"; the cutting of carcasses (splitting them into two) and the passing of the parties between the two halves; in this case (v.9) the carcasses of "an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove and a young pigeon." This would seem to confirm that Berith is a word with roots meaning "to cut". And Jeremiah also seems to allude to this when he denounces covenant-breakers, and writes, "And I (God) will give the men that have transgressed My covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, **WHEN THEY CUT THE CALF IN TWAIN, AND PASSED BETWEEN THE PARTS THEREOF**, the princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs and the priests, and all the people of the land **WHICH PASSED BETWEEN THE PARTS OF THE CALF**, I will give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life." (Jer. 34:18). I suppose the cutting of the carcasses performed the same function as the heap of rocks built by Jacob. We further learn that this covenant made between God and Abraham was to be confirmed by a token: serving the same function as the rainbow (a reminder). The token in this case was circumcision. "Every man child among you shall be circumcised ... and it shall be **A TOKEN OF THE COVENANT betwixt Me and you.**" (Gen. 17:11).

Some 430 years later, God entered into another very important covenant: this time with Moses, and the Children of Israel, at Mount Sinai: a covenant referred to spasmodically throughout the O.T. and N.T. (after the giving of the law) as the 'Old Covenant'. Moses wrote "all the words of the Lord" (Ex. 24:4) and this was described as "The Book of the Covenant" (v.7) and later, the original tablets of stone were deposited in "The Ark of the Covenant". In this connection the sabbath was given "and the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, as **A PERPETUAL COVENANT. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel for ever.**" (Ex. 31:16).

Then there was the "Royal Covenant" between God and David. (2 Sam. 7:12-17 and Ps. 89:28). Also the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel at Shechem, Joshua, on this occasion being the intermediary. "And the people said unto Joshua, **The Lord our God will we serve and His voice will we obey. So Joshua made A COVENANT with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.**" Apparently Joshua considered it not enough to record these events in words but, like Jacob, resorted to something more tangible and obvious – a huge rock. "And Joshua said, Behold this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which He spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God." (Josh. 24:24-27).

The New Covenant

When Paul spoke of the Jews he could honestly describe them as "My kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertaineth the adoption; and the glory; and **THE COVENANTS**; and the giving of the law; and the services of God; and the promises..." (Rom. 9:4). The Jews had had it all: the adoption, the glory, the law, the service of God, the promises and the Covenants. When, however, Paul describes the Gentiles he says, "Wherefore remember that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh ... that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, the **STRANGERS FROM THE COVENANTS OF PROMISE, having no hope and without God in the world.**" (Eph.2:12). The Gentiles were aliens and strangers to God's covenants and promises, without God and hope. All that was to change in due time, not as an afterthought of God's but in the fulness of time, predicted some 630 years earlier by the prophet Jeremiah. "**Behold the days come, saith the**

Lord, that I will make A NEW COVENANT with the House of Israel, and with the House of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, which covenant they brake, although I was an husband to them saith the Lord. But this shall be the COVENANT that I shall make with the House of Israel; after those days saith the Lord I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts: and will be their God and they shall be My people ... for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34). This well-known prophecy came to fruition in Paul’s day and so he talks of just two covenants “the old” and “the new”. He did this often, and in Gal. 4:24 uses the allegory of Abraham’s two sons to justify it. One son (Ishmael) was by a bondmaid whereas the other (Isaac) was by a freewoman, “**which things are an allegory; for these are THE TWO COVENANTS; the one from Mount Sinai which gendereth to bondage which is Agar. For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.**” And so the “old covenant” is represented by Agar, the bondwoman, given at Sinai, and also represented by physical Jerusalem; but the “new covenant” is represented by Sarah, the freewoman, represented by the heavenly Jerusalem: the covenant of Christ and the gospel. (How the pre-millennialists can read that and still seek entry into literal Jerusalem is a puzzle). Paul confirms his “two covenant” belief when extolling the virtues of Christ, he says, “**He (Christ) is the mediator of A BETTER COVENANT, which was established upon better promises; for if that FIRST COVENANT had been faultless then should no place have been sought for THE SECOND. For finding fault with them (the Jews) He (God) saith, “Behold the days come saith the Lord when I will make A NEW COVENANT with the House of Israel ...”** (Paul continues to complete the whole quotation from Jer. 31 – just previously mentioned) and says at v.13 “**In that he (Jeremiah) saith ‘A New Covenant’ he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.**” (Heb. 8).

Here in Heb. 8 Paul (if he was author of Hebrews) talks of only two covenants: old and new. He says the old has decayed and vanished away, and that the new is the one predicted by the prophets: quoting Jeremiah quite specifically (and indeed verbatim). In Heb. 9 the same writer draws contrasts between the two, and says, “**Then verily the FIRST COVENANT had also ordinances of divine service and a worldly sanctuary**”. In v.15 he refers to Christ as “mediator of the new testament” (and that word “testament” should be “covenant” as in the R.V.) and goes on to say (v.18) that “**Neither the FIRST COVENANT was dedicated without blood**” and describes how Moses “**when he had spoken all the precepts to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the Book and all the people, Saying, this is the blood of THE COVENANT which God hath enjoined upon you.**” Paul continues and declares that, likewise, THE NEW COVENANT has also been ratified with blood; not, however, with the blood of bulls and goats, but with the precious blood of Christ; “**Neither by the blood of goats or calves, but by His own blood, He entered in once into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifyeth to the purifying of the flesh. HOW MUCH MORE shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.**” (Heb. 9: 12-14). And thus the New Covenant was, like the old, ratified with blood and in the closing verses of the Hebrew letter, in the “apostolic benediction” Paul prays “**Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of THE EVERLASTING COVENANT, make you perfect in every good work to do His will.**”

And this harmonizes with the words of Jesus at the institution of the Lord's Table, when He took the cup and said, **“For this is My blood of the NEW COVENANT, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins.”** (Matt.26:28).

Thus, this New Covenant is the **final** covenant with man: Jew and Gentile alike. Jew and Gentile must be saved by the gospel of Christ, or not at all. Paul's **“heart's desire and prayer for Israel is that they might be saved”**. Yet Paul knew that they must be saved under the NEW COVENANT, the gospel era, or not at all. There will be no THIRD COVENANT to save Israel in the manner expected by pre-millennialists. There are no late contingency plans by God to save the Jews who rejected, and still reject, Christ. If there was such a plan Paul need never have shown such great vexation and concern over his kinsmen in the flesh, or fretted over the future of his fellow Jews.

Conclusion

Regardless, therefore, of the many Covenants made in the O.T., and I have mentioned only a few of the more important of them, none compare with the present one, through Christ, for He **“is the Mediator of A BETTER COVENANT established upon better promises”**. I am sure that we do not ever fully appreciate how greatly honoured and privileged we are to have a part in this New and final Covenant with God. We probably regard with disgust the ways in which the Jews continually broke their Covenant with Jehovah, and so, perhaps we should spare a thought for ourselves, and reflect upon our own performance in the Kingdom of God, and how we ourselves measure up to the great favour and blessing bestowed upon us. If Mr. Clinton ever comes to power it will be interesting to see if his “Covenant” ever sees the light of day, and human nature being what it is, how many will be prepared to subscribe to it.

EDITOR.