

One, Two or More Covenants? Covenant in Christian Jewish Relations

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I want to begin with some comments on a word that always causes problems for us. The word is 'and'. Take the phrase that theologians use: 'God and the world'. Now this cannot mean the same as 'John and Mary' because the world is not added to God in the way that Mary is added to John to make two. In the phrase 'God and the world', the word 'and' carries all the connotations of relatedness, dependence, communication, revelation, union, and a destiny of ultimate blessedness. The world is not alongside God but is grounded in God's act, so in the phrase 'God and the world', 'and' signals a deep relatedness.

Take another little phrase: 'creation and covenant'. In that phrase, how do we understand that same word 'and'? Is God's covenantal love added on to a creational relationship, like those little bonus points you get at the supermarket? No. In the relation God has with the world, the moments that advance our awareness of the character of God are not something extra. God's relation to the world as creator is dynamic and unfolds, advances and deepens: what begins as God 'making be' unfolds into loving self-gift. And events unfold in the world as moments that advance and illuminate that self-gift and for Jews and Christians some moments are privileged intensifications of the gift that originates at creation. What begins in the big bang at the start of creation comes to fulfilment in the life of the world to come, and between those two points, a loving engagement with God is generated, and that is what we signal by the metaphor of covenant. So, in the phrase 'creation and covenant', 'and' signals a deepening relatedness.

Take a third phrase: 'the Sinai covenant and the covenant through Christ'. And you know what I'm going to say about that. Here, 'and' also signals a deep relatedness which, unless it is seen and valued, can lead to misinterpretation. You can get it wrong by isolating them one from the other, comparing and contrasting them and say, 'this one does this, but the other one does that', without seeing the relatedness. I want to point to two approaches which, in different ways, seem to me to undervalue the relatedness and to lead to unfortunate results.

The first is the perspective of the Epistle to the Hebrews which sees the covenant through Christ as 'better' than the first. Christ's ministry is 'as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second' (Heb 8.6-7). In this passage, the Sinai covenant is found wanting because it is old, obsolescent and ineffective, contrasted with the new, definitive and effectiveness of the covenant which Christ mediates. The theology of supersession opens up through the adoption of a hermeneutic of 'correspondence,

contrast and superiority' which characterises the whole Epistle.¹ And no one can deny the considerable influence on Christianity of this way of thinking which relegates the Sinai covenant in order to exalt the later covenant through Christ.

Now we should not accept this uncritically. To what extent is the formulation in Hebrews shaped by a Christian self-definition which was too keen to establish contrasts between 'old' and 'new'? In a rapid process of Christian consolidation, a contrastive relation between the Sinai covenant and Christ was too quickly adopted in some parts of the New Testament. The self-definition of Jewish faith over against what it saw as Christian revisionism, and the corresponding Christian consignment of Jewish faith and the Jewish covenant to the preparatory stage of Christian pre-history, are the characteristic positions which emerge in this foundational period. But that need not be prescriptive for later generations.

The second approach, popular among those concerned with Christian-Jewish relations, thinks of a bifurcation between the covenant through Moses and the covenant through Christ in terms of different constituencies. One approach says that the particular covenantal dynamic from Abraham to Moses gives rise to the Sinai covenant only for the people of Israel, and that the universal covenantal dynamic, begun with Noah and culminating with Christ, gives rise to a separate covenant offered by God to Gentiles. This is the 'dual covenant' scheme in which God has one way of dealing with Israel and a different way of dealing with Gentiles. It has the effect of tidiness and of giving scope to the continuing particularity of Israel, but there are difficulties with it for Christians which I think cannot be ignored.

First of all, the whole of the New Testament opposes such a bifurcation: no text in the Christian Scriptures supports such a religious and ethnic division of separate dispensations of grace.

Secondly, it seems to suggest that God does different things in a sequence, first this and then that, as though God's action is disparate and divergent. If God is one, God's action is unitary; God's action may hit the world in a way that exhibits divergence, but that is because the world is divergent according to space and time. The divergence between Sinai and Calvary is not because God is doing first this and then that, first giving Torah to covenanted Israel and then acting through Jesus to bring non-Jews into covenant with Him. It is because it is very difficult to hold different moments and their dynamic together.

All the features of God's revelation, however conflictual they may be in their refraction within human history, belong together as aspects of God's self-gift and must not be set in opposition or divergence from one another, since God's action is always unitary and is never at variance with itself. The instinct of Catholic Christianity is to hold together the constitutive aspects of God's revelation and resist its reduction to a simpler pattern such as 'superiority and supersession' because in their unity the aspects are all willed by God for his purposes.

¹ Susanne Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 44: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 117.

At its best, Christian theology respects the varied dimensions of the mystery it contemplates but cannot regulate. It tries to revere the mystery of God's love with a sense that all its historical aspects (Sinai and Christ, Israel and Church, Jewish Scriptures and Christian Scriptures), however divergent they may appear at particular times, must not be set in mutually exclusive opposition. The God who gives the Torah and establishes eternal covenants through Abraham and Moses is the same God who acts through Jesus: these are the 'inner moments' within the dispensation of love which belong together. God does not do different things.

The third thing that seems to be wrong with this is that it ignores the role of Jesus as an active participant in Israel's covenantal life with God. A liberal Christian theology which sees the Gospel and Christian life as a corrective adjustment of Israel's covenant and Torah can only be cast out by prayer and fasting, and one of the benefits of recent scholarship is that Christians now have a better sense of Jesus the faithful Jew whose life is shaped by Israel's covenant. What arises in Jesus flows from Israel's covenant: that's the deep relatedness I mentioned at the beginning and that is why if we speak of a covenant established through Jesus, it is not a separate thing from the Sinai covenant.

To develop this, I want to refer to some parts of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It sees a positive significance in the fact that when the Son of God enters human history, he is born under the Jewish law, circumcised into the covenant God makes with Israel and is trained in the observance of the Torah. He celebrates the Jewish feasts and exercises his ministry in both the synagogues and the temple. He comes, as Paul says, as a 'servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God' (Rom 15.8). Consequently, nothing in his ministry and teaching annuls the validity of what Paul lists as 'the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Torah, the worship and the promises' which God bestows on the Jewish people. He draws this framework of blessings, practices and guidance into his life and confirms them by offering himself to the Father as a faithful Jew whose identity is rooted in Israel's experience of covenantal faith. So what arises through his ministry cannot be separated from its source without severing the person from his context and without severing his witness from Israel's witness.

The Catechism says that Jesus 'was to fulfil the Law by keeping it in its all-embracing detail – according to his own words, down to "the least of these commandments". He is in fact the only one who could keep it perfectly' (579). 'In Jesus, the Law no longer appears engraved on tables of stone but "upon the heart" of the Servant who become "a covenant to the people", because he will "faithfully bring forth justice"'. In his visit to the Rome Synagogue in 1986, Pope John Paul made a statement of considerable importance for our discussion: 'Jesus took to its extreme consequences the love demanded by the Torah.' This statement and the others from the Catechism – and we are seeing here the emergence of a new Christian tradition or perhaps a re-surfacing of insights from the earliest Jewish Christianity – invite us to see the whole of Jesus' life as a faithful observance of Torah, a perfect enactment of covenantal *halakah*.

This is a Christian perspective which Jews will not want to endorse and I respect that. But if this approach is permitted, then Christ's contribution to humanity's relationship to God is that what is embedded in Israel as gift and call, covenantal love and obedience, is so intensified in his identity and life, is so internalised and lived out in all its consequences that it becomes significant for all human beings. This is not a separate covenant, but it is the living out of Israel's covenant in a way that touches all. In this way, the word 'and' in the phrase 'the Sinai covenant and the covenant through Jesus', contains a deep relatedness which Christian theology has only just begun to explore and which it must not deny.

In summary: there is a single stream of divine self-gift which comes to the world; it unfolds in the life of Israel under the metaphor of covenant, is actualised in the religious observance of Israel and in the person of Jesus is lived out faithfully with consequences for all human beings in their relationship with God. Israel shares in that self-gift and so does the Church, although their understanding of its character differs. Rather than speak of two covenants, one for Jews and another for Christians, I would prefer to speak of a differentiated participation by Jews and Christians in the one self-gift of God, focused on Torah and Christ because both are constitutive moments within God's self-gift.

To explore theologically the relation of Torah and Christ is a topic for another paper, but let me indicate a possibly fruitful approach. Sirach 24 speaks of Wisdom, active in all the aspects of God's dealings with the creation, taking up a dwelling place in Jacob, in the 'book of the covenant of the Most High God'. (Christians still evoke this by saying that the Bible is the Word of God.) On this scriptural basis, it is open to Christians to think of Torah as a divinely sustained modality of the Word's presence for a particular purpose:

Torah is the enbibliation of the Word forming Israel as a responsive people.

It is that same Word (hence the Johannine Prologue) which comes to human beings in the person of Jesus, full of grace and truth, radiating the divine glory:

Christ is the enfleshment of the Word, embodying in himself the completed union that is the creation's destiny and making that available to all.

Torah and Christ, then, are not divergent and oppositional revelations (one for Israel and one for Gentiles), but are inseparable modalities of the Word's presence and action. It might then be open to Christians to think of Torah and Christ as the created realities in which the self-expression arising in God becomes 'enbibliated' and 'enfleshed', *for Israel and for all*. And so, Christ's life and self-gift in death, at the same time as it brings mercy to all – he 'saves' – brings Israel's relation to God in Torah fidelity to consummate expression – he 'fulfils Torah'. A reflection along these lines, developing the *theologoumenon* of the Word's relation both to Torah and Christ, could be important in avoiding the contrastive supersessionism that relegates Torah-faithful Israel to the role of the preparatory context for Christianity.