

## *The Everlasting Covenant\**

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THIS PAPER is a brief investigation into the relationship between the concepts of the 'everlasting' and the 'new' covenants of Scripture. The first term, בְּרִית עוֹלָם, occurs more than a dozen times in the Old Testament, and just once, διαθήκη αἰώνιος, in the New. The latter instance involves no real doctrinal teaching – it is merely a phrase in a benediction: 'Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will . . .'<sup>1</sup> The phrase is, then, distinctively Old Testament in character, however implicit in New Testament doctrine. On the other hand, the phrase 'New Covenant', בְּרִית הַדְּשָׁה, occurs once only in the Old Testament – Je. xxxi. 31 – but is found several times in the New Testament, both in the Gospels, at the institution of the Eucharist, and also in the Epistle to the Hebrews. And of course the Greek phrase καινή διαθήκη, has given the New Testament its very name. There can be no doubt, however, that the New Testament references are all based on the passage in Jeremiah, and it is true to say that this concept too is Old Testament, at least in origin.

A glance at the Scofield Reference Bible indicates that to Scofield, at any rate, there was little distinction between the two ideas; the mention of an everlasting covenant in Is. lxi. 8, for instance, is classified under the heading 'Covenant (New)'. It is of course true that Je. xxxi. 31 must be taken together with Is. lxi. 8; Je. xxxii. 37ff. and Ezk. xvi. 60. Clearly the Prophets of this period anticipated the inauguration of a new era in God's relationship with Israel in which there would be a new covenant between the two contracting parties which would last for ever.

\* Being the substance of a paper read to the Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Group, 1960.

<sup>1</sup> Heb. xiii. 20f.

The everlasting covenants of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, then, lay in the future, and could be both new and eternal. But what of previous covenants styled 'everlasting'? Surely the new era predicted by Jeremiah would render the ancient covenants outmoded and obsolete, or at any rate obsolescent, to paraphrase Heb. viii. 13? If so, in what sense – if any – were these ancient covenants 'everlasting'? Is not Is. xxiv. 5 a contradiction in terms, in fact? 'The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant'.

The solution is simple if we translate בְּרִית עוֹלָם 'covenant of indefinite duration'; in other words, the phrase may imply nothing more than that the contracts so described, though concluded with a specific individual (or generation), affected his (or its) posterity as well. A good Old Testament example is the case of Phinehas, who earned God's approval, and received a 'covenant of a perpetual priesthood', בְּרִית כֹּהֵנִית עוֹלָם.<sup>2</sup> This covenant could only last so long as male issue of Phinehas survived; once his line died out, the covenant automatically terminated.

But can we accept this interpretation in every case? The answer must surely be no, in view of the Old Testament stress on the importance and irrevocability of the spoken word. If man's word could not be recalled – as in the case of Joshua and the Gibeonites,<sup>3</sup> or Jephthah and his daughter<sup>4</sup> – *a fortiori* the Almighty's promises and contracts could not lightly be set aside. It is entirely foreign to Old Testament thought that God's covenants should be of limited duration. Furthermore, promises made to Israel ought presumably to endure so long as the nation endures. Might the explanation not be, then, that if one party to the contract defaulted, the Other was no longer under any obligation? No, the same objection still holds; this is made quite clear by such verses as Ezk. xvi. 59f., 'Thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you . . . and I will establish with you an

<sup>2</sup> Nu. xxv. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Jos. ix.

<sup>4</sup> Jdg. xi.

everlasting covenant'. (In passing, it should be pointed out that the Hebrew verb here translated 'establish' is **הָקִים**, which usually means to 'establish' a covenant, but once or twice means to 'confirm' one, e.g. in Dt. viii. 18. Perhaps here in Ezk. xvi. 60 **הָקִים** should be translated 'confirm'.) In the New Testament, Paul makes a similar statement in Rom. xi. 29: 'The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable'. God cannot deny Himself.

Another possible solution is that the word 'new', **חֲדָשָׁה** in Je. xxxi. 31 needs re-interpreting. Can we legitimately translate it 'renewed'? In other words, did Jeremiah envisage restoration or innovation? If restoration, then Jeremiah expected little or nothing more than the revival of the ancient covenant. This possibility will need careful examination; the question is by no means merely an academic one, for Christian and Jewish apologetics are completely opposed on the interpretation of Je. xxxi. 31. What we call the New Testament is politely called **הַבְּרִית הַחֲדָשָׁה**, for convenience, by Hebrew-speaking Jews; at the same time, a non-Jew, Christian or otherwise, may be described as **אֵינוֹ בֶּן-בְּרִית**, 'not a son of the covenant'. The reference in such a phrase is probably to circumcision, which is always referred to as **בְּרִית**, the 'covenant' of circumcision. Covenant, meaning a relationship, appears relatively little in Rabbinic literature, possibly because of the use of Je. xxxi. 31 in the New Testament and Christian theology, or merely because the relationship is basic to Judaism. The right relationship with God could only be found in a right relationship with the community, **הַצִּבּוֹר**. The advice of Hillel was ever 'Separate not thyself from the community', **אֵל-תִּפְרֹשׁ עִצְמְךָ מִן-הַצִּבּוֹר**<sup>5</sup>. The word **בְּרִית** in Judaism is used regularly for a rite, especially those of circumcision and Sabbath observance.

The Damascus 'Covenanters' claimed that the prophecy of Jeremiah found its fulfilment in their company; but they certainly considered themselves to be in the direct and true Old Testament line, and would never have made such a statement as Heb. viii. 13. This interesting branch of Judaism, then, saw nothing intrinsically new in their covenant. Orthodox Judaism likewise repudiates any but the ancient Sinaitic covenant. Thus both Qumran and the centres of Rabbinic learning might prefer

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah, *Aboth*, ii. 5.

to translate תְּדַשֶּׁה 'renewed' in Je. xxxi. 31. As Christians, however, we should perhaps hesitate to accept this solution to the problem, especially in view of Heb. viii. 13. To be sure, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was after all striving to convince his readers of the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, and therefore needed to be outspoken. Is it possible that he exaggerated the position somewhat?

As has already been stated, Jeremiah alone in the Old Testament describes the covenant as 'new'. G. Pidoux, however, makes the following statement: 'Repeatedly in the course of history, the covenant is renewed by impressive ceremonies: by Joshua on Ebal and Gerizim, by Josiah, by Ezra and Nehemiah.'<sup>6</sup> Will these incidents throw any light on the problem? Were the incidents listed by Pidoux mere restorations, or were they the inaugurations of something new, involving innovations? The first of them, recorded in Jos. viii. 30–35, helps us not at all; it was merely a renewal, and in fact the word 'covenant' is not mentioned. Ne. viii records a restoration, after the Babylonian exile, when a new beginning was clearly necessary, yet the details were intended to follow the ancient lapsed pattern as closely as possible; here again the word 'covenant' does not appear. The third incident, related in 2 Ki. xxiii, is more interesting. King Josiah, putting into effect the Book of the Covenant, as it is called, proceeds to make a covenant with Yahweh. The English versions convey the impression that he made a new covenant here, the rsv for example rendering 'The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant'.<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew is לָפָנַי יְהוָה נִכְלַת אֶת-הַבְּרִית, the word 'covenant' having the definite article. Ambiguity results; the article might be prophetic, as the English versions take it, or it could make the covenant the existing one, the old Sinaitic covenant. But even on the assumption that the English versions are correct, the question is in no way resolved, for two reasons. First, this covenant was made by Josiah, not by God (as was Jeremiah's), so was inevitably new as far as he was concerned – his covenant was, in fact, new to him, but the ancient covenant as far as God was concerned. Second, even if Josiah's covenant was not

<sup>6</sup> *Vocabulary of the Bible*, ed. von Allmen, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Ki. xxiii. 3.

an innovation of any sort, it does not necessarily follow that Jeremiah's was not intended to be, for the speedy failure of Josiah's reforms may well have led Jeremiah to believe that something quite new, and not merely renewed, was essential.

A philological investigation makes it clear that the word 'covenant' is sometimes virtually synonymous with 'commandment'. God 'commands' (צִוָּה) a covenant, which man must 'observe' (שָׁמַר or נָצַר) and not 'break' (שָׁבַר) or 'transgress' (עָבַר בָּ). Is. xxiv. 5, already quoted, corroborates this, setting the word 'covenant' in parallelism with 'laws' (תּוֹרוֹת) and 'ordinance' (חֹק). Elsewhere בְּרִית is apparently used in a more concrete sense: God sets it up (שָׁם or הִקִּים), and man either clings to it (הִחְזִיק) or else treats it lightly, in a variety of ways, forgetting it (שָׁכַח), forsaking it (עָזַב), being false to it (שָׁקַר בָּ), rejecting and despising it (מָאַס), or even making it valueless (הִפְרָ). This last verb has a variety of meanings — annul, frustrate, break, destroy, render ineffectual.

What of the Almighty's attitude to a covenant once established? We are repeatedly told that He remembers it (זָכַר), in contrast to man's forgetfulness. The implication is again that it is a concrete object of a permanent character. God states that He will never destroy Israel utterly, thus breaking His covenant with them.<sup>8</sup> Only in two passages in the Old Testament does God appear to break His covenant. The first is in Ps. lxxxix. 39, where the writer tells God, 'Thou hast renounced the covenant with thy servant'. The verb is נָאַר, which means to 'abhor' or 'spurn'. But that the action is only temporary is evidenced by verse 46, 'How long, o LORD?', and especially by verse 34, where God says, 'I will not violate my covenant', using the much stronger verb הִלֵּל. The other instance is Zc. xi. 10, in the passage about the two staffs: 'I took my staff Grace, and I broke it, annulling the Covenant which I had made'. The verb here is הִפְרָ, so it might seem that this verse contradicts Lv. xxvi. 44 and other similar passages. Zechariah is not a Prophet who exhibits a great deal of optimism, but in the following chapter, verses 6ff., we have a rather happier picture; and it may well be that Zechariah had in mind a temporary setting aside of the covenant. At any rate, apart from this highly poetic and

<sup>8</sup> Lv. xxvi. 44.

pictorial passage, there is no hint elsewhere in the Old Testament of God going back on His own covenant.

Finally, let us examine some of the everlasting covenants in the Old Testament. Though constantly referring back, the Prophets look forward to future covenants. The historical references are nearly all to be found in the Pentateuch, with the notable exception of the Davidic covenant, recorded in 2 Sa. xxiii. 5. There are several allusions to these historical covenants in the Psalms too. There are in fact three covenants designated 'everlasting', the Noahic, the Abrahamic and the Davidic. The first of these is recorded in Gn. ix: God promised not to send another Deluge, and made the rainbow the sign of His covenant. This covenant was of world-wide scope, and has never been abrogated. The Davidic covenant of 2 Sa. xxiii gives few details, but more are added in Ps. lxxxix. 28, where it is styled נְאֻמַּת (‘firm’), a unique description, and in Is. lv. 3–5. Did the Jews see in the fall of the Davidic line under Nebuchadnezzar the termination of this everlasting covenant? On the contrary, more than five centuries later a Messiah of David’s house was still expected to occupy the throne. Qumran expected two Messiahs, perhaps, with the emphasis on the one from the House of Aaron, but a Davidic Messiah was not excluded from their beliefs. The early church, of course, saw in Jesus of Nazareth the fulfilment of this prophecy. Paul in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch clearly referred to Is. lv. 3, the ‘steadfast, sure love for David’ as finding fulfilment in Jesus. Thus we can see that Christian theology did not consider the everlasting covenant abrogated; far from it. It seems unlikely, then, that the early church – and its Founder – would claim this covenant as immutable, and yet brush aside as of no importance the other, the Abrahamic. It can only be this covenant that Jeremiah viewed as renewed or replaced (whichever is the truth of the matter). The Noahic was universal in scope, the Davidic individual, the Abrahamic – renewed, of course, with Isaac and Jacob, and at Sinai – was national. Gn. xvii. 7ff. relates that Canaan was to be the national home, YHWH the national God, and circumcision the sign of this everlasting covenant. The question is, then, whether the New Testament writers considered this covenant displaced and replaced. In some senses,

perhaps, the answer is yes. Yet notice how careful our Lord was to state that He had not come to break the Law but to fulfil it; notice how the Church was considered to be the true fulfilment of the old Israel in every respect. Gentile believers are the children of Abraham through faith; they are fellow-citizens with the (Old Testament) saints; they are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people. Gal. vi. 16 even speaks of the Church as the Israel of God. The inclusion of the Gentiles now had after all been adumbrated in the promise of God to Abraham that all nations should find blessing<sup>9</sup> ultimately; so the New Testament order fulfils the Abrahamic covenant in a way that Judaism has never done. This is Peter's boast in Acts iii. 25. In applying the spiritual aspects Jeremiah had predicted, purely ethnic details (such as Canaan and circumcision) might disappear, but the kernel of the everlasting covenant remained undamaged. Paul does insist, however, in Rom. xi that the literal Israel could never be completely ousted by the spiritual.

A New Covenant? Yes, but only the unimportant details of the 'Old' were obsolescent, and even the author of Hebrews apparently could not quite bring himself to call the Old Covenant 'obsolete'.

It is the relationship between God and man that is the permanent feature — call it a covenant if you will. Whatever happened, however much man failed to keep his obligations, that relationship still existed. Hosea did not divorce Gomer; so in Is. l. 1 we read that Yahweh had not divorced Israel — Israel had (temporarily) effected a separation. (Here again in Is. l. 1 note the concrete associations. The demand for concrete evidence of divorce would indicate that there was as it were a marriage certificate that could be produced on demand.) But such separations did repeatedly occur, necessitating quasi-remarriage. But through it all, the basic relationship never varied. So בְּרִית as a relationship was everlasting; but where בְּרִית means a reconciliation ceremony, there could be, and indeed were, more than one.

<sup>9</sup> Gn. xxii. 18.