



# CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN SCRIPTURE - COVENANT AS TREATY

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*MINISTER AND BIBLICAL SCHOLAR, PETER HATTON, LOOKS AT BIBLICAL COVENANTS AFRESH IN THE LIGHT OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TREATIES.*

Biblical covenant theology marries a stark realism about our relationships with an astonishing vision of what, by God's grace, they can become. John Wesley's promotion of the Covenant Service sought as it were, to 'popularise' covenant theology; to help 'the people called Methodist' to pray that which was believed. Now, scholarship has shed new light on what covenants involved in biblical times. We'll look at some of these findings under three headings: Conflict Resolution, Unequal Partners and Power Subverted, before reflecting on how they might help us in our relationships with Jesus and one another.

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Early in the last century scholars deciphered the text of several treaties that aimed to end conflicts between the High King of the Hittite people (who inhabited present-day Turkey in the second millennium BC) and minor rulers. They discovered these followed a set form that included: a sketch of what had happened to make the treaty necessary; lists of rules about how the parties would relate from now on, and solemn vows to observe them; the names of witnesses to the agreement, often gods; descriptions of blessings if the parties kept faith with one another and of the curses that would fall on anyone breaking the treaty.

Sounds familiar? It did to Catholic scholar Denis McCarthy who, in 1963, showed that the basic structure of such a treaty, although not the precise content, closely resembled that of the book of Deuteronomy! Was the biblical book patterned on these precise Hittite examples? Not necessarily; similar treaties were used throughout the ancient Near East - versions have been found from Egypt and from the neo-Assyrian

Empire (1000-600 BC). Of course, Deuteronomy's concern with covenant is no surprise; the book looks back repeatedly to God's great covenant with Israel at Sinai; it ends with its renewal. However, this discovery about the overall form of the book confirmed what many scholars had long suspected; namely, that the Hebrew word *berith*, generally rendered 'covenant', is best understood as meaning 'treaty'; as an agreement between two parties that aims to transform toxic relationships; to turn conflict into a flourishing life together, albeit in what we might call a very 'top down' way.

This understanding is confirmed if we look at biblical examples of covenants between humans. When Abraham and Abimelech make a *berith* at Beersheba in Genesis 21:25-26, they settle a potentially violent dispute about a water supply - still a frequent cause of conflict in the present day. When Jacob and Laban finally resolve the many arguments between them in Genesis 31:43-55 - like so many of the bitterest of disputes - one within a family - they do so by means of a *berith*. Jonathan's covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:1-4) is particularly moving; it transforms what might have been a deadly enmity between the heir to Israel's throne and a potential rival into a relationship of deep faithfulness and affection.

But surely, no matter whatever may be the case between humans, covenants between God and his people don't presuppose a conflict between them? Aren't they all about unconditional love and positive regard? Really? We can only hold on to such a view if we read Scripture, as many do, with blinkers that blind us to its portrayal of a persistent conflict between a faithful God and a faithless people, between a loving Lord and his rebellious servants.

Moreover, as our knowledge of how ancient treaties were made has increased, we have come to realise that the underlying conflicts were represented in powerful symbols. For instance, very often a ruler imposing a treaty on defeated rebels is pictured as holding out a bow in the ceremony to



remind his former enemies of his overwhelming military might - the power that had brought them to submit and could be unleashed upon them again if they dared to revolt. So, in the 'Black Obelisk', a column celebrating his victories, Shalmaneser III of Assyria (859-824 BC) holds out a bow to the defeated king of Gilzanu who grovels as he accepts the terms of a (we may suppose) rather harsh treaty.

So ancient readers would, initially, have seen the bow in the sky in Genesis 9 - when God gives the first covenant in Scripture - as a threat, not a sign of hope. Again, when, in Genesis 5:7-21, the Lord seals his covenant with Abram, the gruesome spectacle of five sacrificed animals, each cut into two pieces, is mandated for the ceremony. Such carcasses formed part of ancient treaty rituals in which both parties walked through the dismembered animals and asked the gods to deal similarly with them should they fail to honour the treaty's terms! Indeed, we may now be thinking that covenants were unpleasant instruments of power politics. We would be right; although as we shall see, when God adopts them he subverts, indeed reverses, their power dynamics.

### UNEQUAL PARTNERS

We've probably already realised that ancient covenants were rarely concluded between equal partners. In the human examples already mentioned, there were big discrepancies between the social standing of the parties involved. Abimelech is a powerful king while Abraham is a landless nomad; Laban is a prosperous patriarch while Jacob is a hired man, almost a slave; Jonathan is the heir to the kingdom while David is the youngest son of a minor clan and a common soldier.

Yet, surely, in the most primal ancient covenant of all, that of marriage (Genesis 2:24 and Malachi 2:14), an essential equality between husband and wife is presupposed? Well, given that the Hebrew word for 'husband' is ba'al which means, literally, 'lord' (also, of course, the name of a 'pagan' god!), this can't be taken for granted. While biblical justification for the teaching that men and women are essentially equal may be found in the creation story - where they are together created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) - it cannot easily be read off the institution of covenant.

However, it is striking that, in the covenants between humans, at which we've already looked, God's blessings don't flow

through the more powerful parties but through Abraham, Jacob and David, the weaker parties. This already hints that, in the parallel covenants between God and humanity, something more may be going on than God acting like a powerful imperial ruler to keep his rebellious subjects in their place. Nevertheless, while we may, accordingly, begin to suspect that in scripture the power dynamics of covenant treaties are going to be radically subverted, we should also note that differences in social status, function here as a marker for other profound differences.

Conflicts arise when people differ; differing approaches, even, perhaps, differing identities, cannot easily be reconciled. However, what if the most profound differences can be honestly faced and worked through in the sort of secure framework that a covenant provides?

Might not these very differences then make possible an even more profound unity than any that very similar, like-minded people could achieve?

### POWER SUBVERTED

When the parties in a covenant are the God who created the heavens and the earth and his creatures, then it might seem that the differences between them are so vast as to be irreconcilable. At the very least, a totally 'top down' approach in which God's power and authority are central seems mandated. Given the role of the institution of covenant in the imperial power structures of the ancient Near East, it would appear to lend itself well to such a demonstration of divine power. All the more remarkable then, that the biblical witness repeatedly undermines such an understanding of covenant.



The first hint of this might be seen in the way the rainbow in Genesis 9 is transformed from a grim threat of punishment into a sign of hope; of God promising to limit his power to permit the life of the cosmos to continue. The enigmatic story of the Lord's covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, shows even more clearly God's commitment to transform covenant relationships. You'll recall that the ritual involved both the parties walking through dismembered animals as an enacted curse on themselves if they should break their pact. However, in Genesis 15, Abram is not required to take this perilous walk; instead, a torch and a firepot, representing the presence of the LORD, float eerily between the animals. The inference is clear, any curses for breaches of this covenant will fall on God alone!

Arguably, even taking into account the tragic history of disobedient Israel, which the subsequent biblical books will reveal all too clearly, it is indeed God who will suffer most from Israel's covenantal violations, as his plans for the redemption of the cosmos are thwarted again and again and his holy name is blasphemed among the nations.

Be that as it may, Christians may see in Genesis 15 an astonishing prophecy of how God would - in the person of his Son, Jesus - take upon himself alone the penalty for our failure to keep covenant with him. God's new and gracious covenant, sealed as the curses for breaches of the old treaty, fell upon Jesus at Calvary and has become a means of empowerment in which humanity's angry disobedience can be transformed into peace and harmony.

### VIVE LA DIFFERENCE!

Paul sees in the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman a great mystery which speaks of the relationship between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:31-32). This insight shows us how deeply Paul understood the dynamics

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of biblical covenant theology. He sees that, in the church's covenant relationship with Jesus, a sinless Lord and a sinful people, creator and created, heaven and earth are united by God's grace. On the cross that which divided such apparent irreconcilables was transcended and conflict was transformed into peace and unity.

The covenant of marriage between husband and wife can bear the weight of referring to the incomprehensible but glorious unity of Christ and his people, precisely because men and women are so different. Paradoxically, mysteriously, these very differences make possible a transcendent unity in covenant, one richer and deeper than if they were more similar.

Moreover, that covenants involve bringing peace to deeply conflicted parties, reminds us that relationships, even those between people who love each other, are fraught with conflict. However, when such conflicts are acknowledged and worked through - and this always involves profound intentionality and no little pain and effort - then even toxic relationships can be transformed. In the course of circuit ministry I prepared over 120 couples for marriage and worked with many others who were experiencing big problems in their marriages. So often we discovered that the place of renewal in relationship, paradoxical as it may seem, was hidden in the things couples argued about most fiercely; for, indeed, there were the places of reality where true feelings were being expressed. The grace lay in finding the framework in which such conflicts - as well as yearnings for renewal of relationship and growth in love - could be contained. There is a name for such a framework - covenant.

I cannot conclude this brief exploration of an endlessly rich subject without expressing my sadness, indeed my incomprehension, that, given the significance of covenants in scripture's understanding of relationships, the topic received such scant attention in *God In Love Unites Us*. That the discussion of such a biblically significant, indeed normative, means of relating should have been so limited - (one brief subsection and some passing references) - is deeply regrettable, although I guess, such neglect did make it much easier to sustain the report's conclusions.

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