

Covenant

An Introduction to the Christian Texts

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Covenant

A “covenant”, in the sense we are considering here, is a binding agreement between God and human beings – an agreement initiated, offered and regulated by God himself. The Lord freely and voluntarily offers blessings and promises, and he stipulates duties and responsibilities.

Romans 2:25-29

The verses in Romans 2 deal with one of the elements that God stipulated. I did not choose this passage, but it can serve well as an introduction to the subject. Paul does not want to abolish circumcision. In the next chapter (3:1,2) he says that there is “much value” in it. In Acts 16:1-5 he has one of his companions circumcised (Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother), and in Acts 21:20-26 it is made clear that he does not preach against Moses or against circumcision in Jewish families. In Romans 2, Paul is developing the thought of the prophet Jeremiah: “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh – Egypt, Judah, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart” (Jeremiah 9:25,26 – compare Jeremiah 4:4, and Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6).

Later, in Romans 4:9-12, Paul points out that Abraham’s entry into the covenant relationship with God did not depend on circumcision, for, in his grace, God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18), but gave the rite of circumcision fourteen years later (Genesis 17:23-25 – compare Genesis 16 in the time-sequence). The as-yet-uncircumcised Abraham received God’s promise in faith, and the Lord counted that to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Similarly, entry into the new covenant is not by circumcision, but by God’s gracious gift of union with Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit, also to be received by faith. Union with Christ is shown by baptism, which identifies believers with him in a death to sin and a resurrection to new life (Romans 6:1-4). This death to the sinful old life and change to a new life in God’s grace are equivalent to “circumcision of heart”, and so all these concepts are combined in Colossians 2:9-13: “For in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fulness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him, you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with a circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.”

The Letter to the Hebrews

The main theme of Hebrews is the absolute centrality of Christ. A covenant relationship with God depends on a relationship with Christ. The words and arguments are different from Romans and Colossians, but the underlying thought is the same.

Hebrews 8:1-13

The argument of this chapter draws on several passages from the Jewish Scriptures. In verses 8-12, the prophet Jeremiah is quoted at length to show that God promises to make a new covenant, in which his laws will be written on people's hearts. We can compare the thoughts we met just recently about "circumcision of the heart". The quotation here is from Jeremiah 31. The word for "covenant" in the Greek makes it clear that this is no agreement between equals – it is God who decides, God who promises and God who arranges the conditions. The Lord, in his grace, comes to save. The writer of Hebrews also draws from Psalm 110:1-4: "The Lord (Yahweh) says to my Lord (Adonai): Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. The Lord will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies... The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek". The writer of Hebrews identifies Jesus with this priest-king who is the mediator of the new covenant.

Hebrews 9:13-15

In this chapter also, the writer bases his thought intimately on the Jewish Scriptures. In these verses, he speaks of the animal sacrifices that were used to cleanse from sin and impurity. Later in the chapter, he will talk about the sacrifices that inaugurated the covenant at Sinai and the sacrificial blood sprinkled on the people as a sign of the covenant. In the light of this, he presents Jesus as the perfect priest who is also the perfect sacrifice: the priest offers himself to inaugurate the new covenant. His blood cleanses us inwardly (compare "circumcision of heart"), enables us to serve God (compare "laws written on the heart"), and leads us, not to a physical promised land, but to a "promised eternal inheritance".

The letter to the Hebrews contains about half of all the references in the New Testament to "covenant". The book is a closely woven argument. Some of the atmosphere of the letter is shown by the extracts here, but the teaching can be fully appreciated only by reading the whole context.