

33: Covenant

The possibility of a covenant between God and his people first appears in the Old Testament in embryonic form with Noah (Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17). However, it is with Abraham and God's promises to him in Genesis 15:18 of land and in Genesis 17:2 of many descendants that the significance of the covenant between God and His chosen people is developed. The Mount Sinai tradition (Exodus 24:1-8) leads into the covenant between God and the Davidic royal family (2 Samuel/2 Kingdoms 7:8-13), with later attempts to recover the covenant during the reigns of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:10) and Josiah (2 Kings 23).¹ Over a period of more than a thousand years in the midst of many different traditions, "it is theologically important to notice, however, that in each tradition, whatever the stress of obligation, the initiative in establishing the basic covenant relationship lies with God. It is the gift of God's grace."²

Although the initiation of every covenant has been through God's grace, it should be noted that the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were each associated with a specific sign that could be seen by humanity—the rainbow in the case of Noah (Genesis 9:12-13), circumcision with Abraham (Genesis 17:11), observance of the Sabbath with Moses (Exodus 31:16-17) and Samuel's anointing of David with oil (1 Samuel 16:12-13). Thus covenants should not be regarded as *fiats* from on high (with the origin of the word *fiat* from the Latin meaning "let it be done"), but rather as God's offer to build a long-term relationship with particular persons who were being asked to lead their people in response to God's initiative.

¹ For a balanced description of the different traditions associated with the covenant, see Robert Davidson, "covenant" in Adrian Hastings (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 141-143,

² Davidson, pp.141-142.

After the Exodus, the Hebrews are molded into a people dedicated to Yahweh by their experiences in the desert, grounded in a relationship with God as defined in terms of a sacred covenant mediated prophetically by Moses. The very harshness of the desert brings a life and death realism to the attitudes and choices that the people must make in order to survive; and these choices radically depend in turn on their faithfulness to God. Later generations will be called back by the prophets to this desert experience in order to renew their first love and obedience to the Lord, precisely because in these first encounters with God, the people (then as now) were NOT always faithful. Speaking of this time some 500 years later Hosea declares God as saying:-

“And there she will be brought low as in the days of her infancy and as in the days of her coming up out of the land of Egypt” (Hosea 2:15b).³

We might recall that it was to the Egyptian desert that God called St. Anthony the Great, St. Pachomius and thousands of other monastic pioneers of the Christian Church when the “fleshpots of Egypt” (Exodus 16:3) once again tempted the People of God; and to this day there is a monastery dedicated to St. Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai.

The desert is indeed a “humbling place.” People are still not toughened up to the demands of following where God led in the wilderness. They frequently do not trust Him for daily survival needs. For example, the people alternately grumbled, muttered and rebelled against Moses and even against God Himself in the notorious incident of the crafting of the Golden Calf—simply because Moses was “a bit late” coming down the mountain from his encounter with God. If the inconstancy of the People wasn’t enough for Moses, then the constant attacks of the Amalekites presented their own challenges. This might lead observers to conclude that the salvation of the world, was being entrusted to a not very promising bunch

³ Translations from the Old Testament in this lecture are from *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, Albert Pietersma & Benjamin G. Wright (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). A free copy of the full text is available on line at: www.ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition .

of inconstant and disloyal ne'er do wells. "Is Yahweh among us or not?" they pitifully lamented, seemingly forgetting so soon what He had done to save them from slavery in Egypt.

Of course, the Lord did provide for His people's daily needs in the form of manna, quails and water from the rock, but the development of a trusting obedient relationship within the terms of the covenant was to take time and patience—a patience that Moses himself had to learn after he had destroyed the first set of Tablets of the Law in his disbelief and anger at the people's apostasy.

What was this covenant and how was it to be sustained practically speaking in the worship of these now desert nomads before they could enter and settle the Promised Land? Covenants, then as now, come in two basic forms. First, there are covenanted relationships where there is parity between the partners (as in contemporary marriage perhaps) and suzerainty forms of covenanted submission where one party is dominant but protective and caring for a subordinate other who must remain faithful and obedient within the relationship. Empires generally run on the suzerainty model in respect to their client states or nationalities. In contemporary biblical scholarship, much has been made of Hittite exemplars of such suzerainty covenants in the context that the Ten Commandments and associated divine law seem to follow a similar if not identical pattern. "Your Lord has done 'this' for you, so you owe him 'that,' yet perhaps the similarities can be pushed too far. What characterizes the Law as Moses delivers it in words from God to His people is essentially a way of life in thankful response to His saving action. There is an expectation of obedience and exclusive loyalty to Him and no other gods, but only out of love and for the benefit of all. This is no mere master-slave power relationship as we find in the Hittite and most if not all subsequent human empires.

A crucial question—one that preoccupies much of the Old Testament subsequently—is: “Can the covenant be broken?” There are two possible responses to that question; and both have Biblical weight and warrant. The first of course is to say “yes”—the covenant is conditional on the people’s faithfulness, not capriciously so or in a fleeting manner but with the accumulated weight of generations of choices both invested and squandered by the people themselves. The so called Epic Tradition in the Pentateuch, the Jahwist (J) and Elohist (E) traditions, seem to adopt this approach as do many of the prophets of Israel subsequently. This is most movingly expressed in that key text which joins the Exodus to the Covenant, the so called: “Eagles’ Wings” passage:

“Then Moses went onto the mountain of God, and God called him from the mountain, saying, ‘This is what you shall say to the house of Jacob and report to the sons of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and I took you up as though on eagles’ wings, and I brought you to myself. And now if by paying attention you listen to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be for me a people special above all nations. For the earth is mine. And you shall be for me a royal priesthood and a holy nation. These words you shall say to the sons of Israel (Exodus 19:3-6).

Yet there is a tension here even for prophets such as Amos who incline toward conditionality of the covenant holding forth the hope that God will rebuild His kingdom and rule from the seed corn of a faithful remnant (Amos 9:11-15). The conviction that the covenant must in some sense be unconditional is based on that most beautiful of Hebrew covenantal words, *chesed*—translated loosely and inexactly as “God’s steadfast loving kindness”—which, as a Biblical scholar has noted has three basic meanings which always interact—“strength,” “steadfastness” and “love.”⁴ The word is used 240 times in the Old Testament, of which there are more than 20 instances in the Psalms. For example, King David pleads in Psalm

⁴ See James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: 2010), p.93 in the Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary, word #2617.

142(143):8: “Make me hear your mercy [*chesed*] in the morning, because in you I hoped. Make known to me, O Lord, a way in which I should go, because to you I lifted up my soul.”

The Priestly tradition most strongly represents this search for the experience of God’s loving kindness; and this tradition places the Sinaitic covenant in the context of the everlasting covenant (*berit olam*) granted to Noah and Abraham—a promise that could not fail even if the people should fail and a promise signified by the Sabbath. The Priestly tradition thus links the Exodus to a remembrance of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 2:24, 6:2-8). Unsurprisingly then, for the priestly caste which served them for generations, the sacrifices that sealed the covenant at Sinai and the abiding presence of God in the Tent of Meeting were the marks of a covenant that could not be broken.

Some traditions misread the Sinaitic material in the Pentateuch as if it simply concerned the ethical requirements of the Torah. The Priestly contribution reminds us that God makes provision for both sacrifice and cult in order that true worship might support true faith and right action. The sacrificial aspects of the blood sprinkled against the altar and the thank offerings of the people all speak to the need for forgiveness and purity, without which the Ten Commandments and the requirements of the Law generally become impossible to fulfil.

The conditional and unconditional aspects of the covenant raise essential questions for both Judaism and Christianity. Indeed a much deeper understanding of the covenant should also inform a future Orthodox Christian assessment of the viability of the old covenant for Jews after the Incarnation—a conundrum—that is, a confusing problem which St. Paul first considered in Romans 9-11. On the one hand, as St. Paul recognized in Romans 7: 11, “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” However, on the other hand as Hebrews 7:18 stresses this “former commandment” highlighted throughout the Old Testament has a certain “weakness and uselessness,” because as a modern Biblical

commentary notes about this verse, the weakness of the Law lies in the realization that the Law “is not able to make right those who sin by breaking it, nor can it give the power necessary to fulfill its demands.” Nevertheless, the sacrificial and cultic sealing of the covenant, sustaining it both through pedagogy and celebration, carries forward into Christianity through and in Christ who both fulfills and transcends the Law by Love.

For both Jews and Christians, there is a need to experience the new covenant foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (31/38:31-34) and repeated in full in the book of Hebrews (8:8-12) when the Law of the old covenant is transcended by the covenant that occurs through faith in the hearts of all of those who believe deeply in God. By His sacrifice on the cross and by His institution of the meal that re-presented that sacrifice—the Eucharist—Christ became the author of the new and more perfect covenant. As Christians, each time we receive the Eucharist, we take the chalice which is “the new covenant” sealed in the blood of Christ; and we remember Him. The route from Moses to the Incarnation, from the old to the new covenant, is clear for those who still ascend Mount Sinai in their hearts if not in their boots, searching over the centuries for oneness with God (cf. St. Gregory of Nyssa in *The Life of Moses*).

A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a 3 level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally: -¹

Lecture 33: Covenant—Exodus 19:3-6; 20:1-20

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
Exegetical	Historical / Contextual <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	<p>The vast time spans of the different covenants is difficult to comprehend. The key covenant with Moses was possibly in the 13th century B.C.; the covenant with Abraham some 600 years earlier; and the covenant with David many hundreds of years after Moses.</p> <p>Exodus 34: 28 states that the Lord “wrote these words on the tablets of the covenant, the ten words.” Deuteronomy 4:13 also states how the Lord “announced to you His covenant, which he commanded you to do, the ten words.” The Hebrew words here mean literally “ten words,” leading to the term “Decalogue” of Greek origin.</p>	<p>When the people are frightened as they stood at a distance while Moses received the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20.20, “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.’” God continues to test His people today, that they may know Him and themselves better.</p>
	Allegorical / Typological <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	<p>In his <i>Commentary on 1 Peter</i> at 2:9, St. Bede explains that “The apostle Peter now rightly gives to the Gentiles this attestation of praise [from Exodus 19:6] which formerly was given by Moses to the ancient people of God, because [the Gentiles] believed in Christ. . . . [and have become] ‘a royal priesthood’ . . . because they have been joined to His body who is their real king and a true priest. . . .”</p>	<p>Citing Matthew 22:40, the fifth century bishop, St. Caesarius of Arles, pointed out that: “We should also know that the ten commandments of the law are also fulfilled by the gospel precepts, love of God and love of neighbour.”</p>
Interpretative	Spiritual / Ethical	<p>Exodus 19:4-5 links God’s action in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt “on eagles’ wings” explicitly with obeying the covenant. The implication is clear that only “if by paying attention you listen to my voice and keep my</p>	<p>To pay attention to God, we need to listen to Him. That means it is essential to pray, to read the Bible, and to attend</p>

		covenant, you shall be for me a people special above all nations. For all the earth is Mine.” The French phrase, <i>faire attention</i> ” is lived out by the Fathers and saints—literally, “to do attention.”	The Divine Liturgy and receive the Eucharist. God tests us by teaching us to leave our comfort zones and grow spiritually and ethically.
	Personal / Social	Exodus 24:7 refers to “the book of the covenant” which, strictly speaking refers to Exodus 20:22-23:19, setting out how the many laws necessary to live out the Ten Commandments. The response of the people in the Septuagint translation of 24:7 is: “All that the Lord has said we will do and heed.” Modern translations focus on the promise that “we will be obedient.” The question of how to be obedient to God might have different responses in different cultures, especially in the context of whether it is the old or the new covenant that is seen as paramount. Furthermore, Biblical interpretation needs to be grounded in the Church Fathers and the saints, rather than private speculations.	How we chose to live out the Ten Commandments in our own lives is a personal choice. Reflecting on Exodus 24:18 when Moses entered the cloud, St. Ambrose challenges us that if we wish “to behold this image of God” in the cloud with Moses, we “must love God so as to be loved by him, no longer as a servant but as a friend who observes his commandments, that [we] may enter the cloud where God is.”
Transformative	The Call to Holiness	<p>Commenting on Exodus 19:3 in <i>Theological Orations 2.2</i>, written in the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nazianus challenges us: “Now when I go eagerly into the mount—or, to use a truer expression, when I both eagerly long and at the same time am afraid (the one through my hope and the other through my weakness), to enter within the cloud and hold converse with God, for so God commands: If any be an Aaron, let him go up with me, and let him stand near, being ready, if it must be so, to remain outside the cloud.”</p> <p>Ultimately, how close one comes to the cloud depends on the place to which God chooses to bear you up “on eagles’ wings” as well as on how we each obey</p>	As we each become aware of the unity of the old and new covenants, and their power to guide our lives into God’s will, we can experience with St. Gregory of Nazianus both the longing to be one with God as well as the fear of coming too close to Him. We may or may not be called “to enter within the cloud and hold converse with God,” but we can each seek to find and follow His will for each of our lives. As long as we seek God, where He leads us is essentially up to Him.

		God’s voice and keep His covenant (cf. Exodus 19:4-5).	
	The Call to Witness	As St. Augustine explains in Sermon 8.5 reflecting on Exodus 20:7, “The second commandment: ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain . . .’” should be linked to the awareness that “The name of the Lord our God Jesus Christ is Truth; He himself said, ‘I am the Truth’ (John 14:6).	St. Augustine’s interpretation of the second commandment urges Christians today to witness to Jesus Christ and to Truth itself in their families, work, prayer and worship.

¹ In *“The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,”* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: 1. Exegetical - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). 2. Interpretative – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). 3. Transformative – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages. In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration.

Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p.

115f, Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.

Exodus 19:3-6; 20:1-20 Masoretic Text: New King James Version

Exodus 19:3-6 New King James Version (NKJV)

³And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ⁴'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth *is* Mine. ⁶And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

20 And God spoke all these words, saying:

²"I *am* the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

³"You shall have no other gods before Me.

⁴"You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of *anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; ⁵you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

⁷"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold *him* guiltless who takes His name in vain.

⁸"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day *is* the Sabbath of the LORD your God. *In it* you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who *is* within your gates. ¹¹For *in* six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that *is* in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

¹²"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³"You shall not murder.

¹⁴"You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵"You shall not steal.

¹⁶"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that *is* your neighbor's."

The People Afraid of God's Presence

¹⁸Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood afar off. ¹⁹Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

²⁰And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin."

New King James Version (NKJV)

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Septuagint Version

3 And Moses went up to the mount of God, and God called him out of the mountain, saying, These things shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and thou shalt report them to the children of Israel. 4 Ye have seen all that I have done to the Egyptians, and I took you up as upon eagles' wings, and I brought you near to myself. 5 And now if ye will indeed hear my voice, and keep my covenant, ye shall be to me a peculiar people above all nations; for the whole earth is mine. 6 And ye shall be to me a royal priesthood and a holy nation: these words shalt thou speak to the children of Israel.

1 And the Lord spoke all these words, saying: 2 "I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 3 Thou shalt have no other gods beside me. 4 Thou shalt not make to thyself an idol, nor likeness of anything, whatever things are in the heaven above, and whatever are in the earth beneath, and whatever are in the waters under the earth. 5 Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them; for I am the Lord thy God, a jealous God, recompensing the sins of the fathers upon the children, to the third and fourth generation to them that hate me, 6 and bestowing mercy on them that love me to thousands of them, and on them that keep my commandments. 7 Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord thy God will not acquit him that takes his name in vain. 8 Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. 9 Six days thou shalt labour, and shalt perform all thy work. 10 But on the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God; on it thou shalt do no work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy servant nor thy maidservant, thine ox nor thine ass, nor any cattle of thine, nor the stranger that sojourns with thee. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth, and the sea and all things in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it. 12 Honour thy father and thy mother,

that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest live long on the good land, which the Lord thy God gives to thee. 13 Thou shalt not commit adultery. 14 Thou shalt not steal. 15 Thou shalt not kill. 16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. 17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife; thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house; nor his field, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any of his cattle, nor whatever belongs to thy neighbour.”

18 And all the people perceived the * thundering, and the flashes, and the voice of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and all the people feared and stood afar off, 19 and said to Moses, “Speak thou to us, and let not God speak to us, lest we die.” 20 And Moses says to them, “Be of good courage, for God is come to you to try you, that his fear may be among you, that ye sin not.”