

# CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS NEW COVENANT RENEWAL

## COVENANT IS AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING BIBLICAL VISION OF THE GOD-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

- Brevard Childs concludes, "regardless of the age and circumstances lying behind the Deuteronomic covenant formulation, its theology became the normative expression of God's relation to Israel and served as a major theological category for unifying the entire collection comprising the Hebrew scriptures."<sup>1</sup>
- George Mendenhall and Gary Herion, in their recent *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article, simply declare: "'covenant' in the Bible is the major metaphor used to describe the relation between God and Israel (the people of God)."<sup>2</sup>

## LINKS BETWEEN COVENANT AND "LITURGY" (WORSHIP AS EVENT)

### a. covenant renewal liturgies/ceremonies

A covenant is sealed by ritual ratification. The common pattern for covenant ratification has been described most thoroughly by Klaus Baltzer.<sup>3</sup> Six elements are common to the ratification ritual: an account of a history of any previous relationship between covenant partners, a summary of the intended future relationship, further details about that relationship, an invocation of gods to witness the covenant, and a pronouncement of curse and blessing. Accompanying such a covenant statement may be a ritual meal (Gen. 31:54, Exod. 24).<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, the covenant is also frequently ritually *renewed* in a pattern resembling covenant ratification (Ex. 34, Deut. 31:9-13; Jsh. 24; 2 Kgs 23; 2 Chr. 15; Neh. 9-10; Ezra 9-10).

### b. other uses of the term 'vow'

PS 22:25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

PS 56:12 My vows to you I must perform, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.

PS 66:13 I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows . . .

PS 116:14 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.

### c. Psalm-song texts as enactment of a relationship, as the script of a conversation

The psalms themselves are often scripts of conversations. Often they express prayer to God, words to God. At times, they depict proclamation, words from God. Petitions alternate with oracles. Psalm 12, for example, begins with the plea: "Help, O LORD, for there is no longer anyone who is godly," which soon is interrupted by an oracle: "Because the poor are despoiled . . . I will rise up, says the Lord." This pattern of alternation depicts what Raymond Jacques Tournay has called the "prophetic liturgy of the temple."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the psalms teach us, to use Walter Brueggemann's phrase, that "biblical faith is uncompromisingly and unembarrassedly dialogical."<sup>6</sup> This, in turn, reflects the larger pattern covenant reciprocity that is prominent in the Deuteronomic history, and undergirds large portions of both Old and New Testaments.

#### PSALM 81 (one of scads of examples)

→ Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.

Raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp. . .

↓ I hear a voice I had not known: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me

### d. Institution narratives of Lord's Supper

<sup>1</sup>Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 419.

<sup>2</sup>George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, 1179. See also "Covenant and Canon as Context," which is part two of Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 135-216.

<sup>3</sup>See also Paul Kalluveetil, C.M.I., *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>Gillian Feeley-Harnack, *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup>Raymond Jacques Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup>Walter Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 68; "Report of the Liturgical Committee," *1968 Acts of the General Synod* (Grand Rapids: CRC Board of Publications, 1968), and in *Psalter Hymnal Supplement* (Grand Rapids: CRC Board of Publications, 1974), 70-75.

Perhaps surprisingly, each of the New Testament accounts of the Lord's Supper refers to the concept of covenant. The Lukan and Pauline accounts speak of "the new covenant in my blood" (Lk. 22:20, I Cor. 11:25), hearkening to the famous prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the "new covenant" that the LORD would make with the people of Israel (Jer. 31:31).<sup>7</sup> The Matthean and Markan accounts, in one of the more significant departures from the earlier Lukan/Pauline tradition, record Jesus speaking of "my blood of the covenant" (Mt. 26:28, Mk. 14:24), recalling both the covenant ratification rite described in Exodus 24, which also had its "blood of the covenant" (Ex. 24:8), and a messianic prophecy (Zech. 9:11).

## SOME DEFINITIONAL FUN WITH THE COVENANT METAPHOR

*Christian worship is*

<i>a renewal</i>	<i>of the <u>new</u> covenant</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>have with God in Christ.</i>
<i>an enactment</i>	<i>of the promise-based relationship</i>	<i>the church</i>	" "
<i>an expression</i>	<i>of the marriage vows</i>	" "	" "
<i>a dialogic conversation</i>		" "	" "

## THE COUNTERCULTURAL NATURE OF THIS UNDERSTANDING

In our culture, we go to events

- To be entertained (a sporting event)
- To be inspired (perhaps a Christian music concert)
- To learn (a lecture)
- To experience community (a potluck supper)
- To support someone else (a wedding of a co-worker)

Worship doesn't fit squarely with any of these categories. Worship is so much more profound!  
We are constantly tempted to reduce worship to one of these categories.

Perhaps only once in our life (perhaps never) do we go to an event to make a vow—our wedding day. But that is the closest analogy to what we do in the worship-event. Getting inspired, learning, experiencing community, etc. are *byproducts* of worship. And when they become the main goal, things almost always go a little (or a lot) haywire. . .

One of our biggest pastoral challenges is not only to lead the mechanics of a worship service, but to lead people into an understanding *and experience* of worship that is this rich, deep, profound . . . and . . . altogether fabulous.

(For the record, let it be said that this is one of life's grandest privileges!)

*Antonyms* of Covenant Renewal. . .

Worship that is:

- a) not relational between God and gathered community. . . merely horizontal.
- b) one-way conversation.. God to us
- c) one-way conversation .. us to God
- d) not covenantal, but contractual (think of a bad marriage).
- e) covenantal. . but not between God and *community*. . .

<sup>7</sup>The Lukan text does present some vexing textual issues. Verses 19b-20 do not appear in all the earliest manuscripts. See Heron, 5-6, for summary of the wealth of literature on this topic.