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Many Religions - One Covenant
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II

THE NEW COVENANT

On the Theology of the
Covenant in the New Testament

*1. Testament or Covenant? From an Analysis
of the Word to the Subject at Issue*

We call the slim volume that forms the basis of the Christian faith the "New Testament". However, this book constantly refers back to another book, to which it refers simply as "Scripture" or "the Scriptures", that is, the Bible; this Bible grew throughout the history of the Jewish people right up to the time of Christ, and Christians call it the "Old Testament". So the totality of the Scriptures on which the Christian faith rests is God's "Testament" to mankind, issued in two stages, as a proclamation of his will to the world.

This text was produced for a series of lectures by the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, Paris, on the theme "Contract, Pact, and Covenant". A. Chouraqui presented the concept of covenant in the Old Testament; my task was to present the New Testament counterpart. It was first published in *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 24 (1995): 193-208.

The word “testament” was not imposed on the Scriptures: it is found in the Scriptures themselves. The title that Christians give to each book is not only meant to sum up the essential meaning of the book; it also brings to light the central theme of Scripture itself, thus giving a key to the whole of it. This very word “testament” is, in a way, an attempt to utter the “essence of Christianity” in a single, summary, expression—which is itself drawn from this fundamental source.

Agreement or ordinance?

But is the Latin word *testamentum* a good choice? Does it translate the basic meaning of the Hebrew and Greek text properly, or does it lead us on a false trail? We can see the translator’s problem in the contrast between the old Latin version and that used by St. Jerome. The old Latin version says *testamentum*, but Jerome opted for *foedus* or *pactum*.¹ The term “testament” won out as a title for the book, but when considering what it contains, we follow Jerome and speak of the New and Old “Covenants”, both in theology and in the liturgy.

Which is correct? Scholars have come to no agreement regarding the etymology of the Hebrew word *b'erith*; the meaning intended by the biblical authors can only be gathered from the particular biblical contexts. One important pointer for an understanding of

¹ M. Weinfeld, “Berit”, in: G. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, 1:781–808 (here 785).

the word is the fact that the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible translate 267 of the 287 instances of the word *b'erith* by the Greek *διαθήκη*; that is, they did not use the words *σπονδή* or *συνθήκη*, which would be the Greek equivalent of “pact” or “covenant”.² Evidently, their theological insight into the text led them to the view that the biblical content was not that of a *syn-theke*—a reciprocal agreement—but a *dia-theke*: it is not a case of two wills agreeing together but of *one* will establishing an ordinance.

God’s free ordinance

Exegetical scholarship today is convinced, as far as I can see, that the men of the Septuagint were correct in understanding the biblical text in this way.³ In the Bible, what we call “covenant” is not a symmetrical relationship between two partners who make a contractual agreement involving reciprocal obligations and penalties: this idea of a partnership among equals cannot be reconciled with the biblical concept of God. According to the latter, man is in no position to create a relationship with God, let alone give him anything and receive something in return; it is quite out of the question that man should bind God to obligations in

² Ibid.

³ This becomes clear in M. Weinfeld’s article (ibid.). Also see G. Quell and J. Behm, *Διαθήκη*, in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 2:105–37.

return for undertakings on his own part. If there is to be a relationship between God and man, it can only come about through God's free ordinance, in which his sovereignty remains intact.

The relationship is therefore completely asymmetrical, because God, for the creature, is and remains the "wholly Other". The "covenant" is not a two-sided contract but a gift, a creative act of God's love. This last statement, it is true, goes beyond the philological issue. Although the covenant is patterned on Hittite and Assyrian contracts between states, in which the lord imposes his law on his vassal, God's covenant with Israel is far more: here God, the King, receives nothing from man; but in giving him his law, he gives him the path of life.

The contractual act of a love story

This raises a question. Formally, the Old Testament type of covenant corresponds strictly to the genre of the vassal contract with its asymmetrical structure. But its concept of God has a dynamism that transforms from within the whole essence of the event, the whole meaning of this sovereign ordinance. If it is seen no longer in terms of a contract between states but in the image of bridal love (as in the Prophets, most movingly in Ezekiel 16), if the contractual act is presented as a love story between God and the Chosen People, what happens to the inherent asymmetry? True, even marriage

in the ancient Near East is not a matter of partnership but is seen in patriarchal terms from the point of view of the man, the master. But the Prophets' portrayal of God's passionate love goes beyond what is to hand in the purely legal forms of the Orient. On the one hand, given God's infinite "Otherness", the concept of God must seem to be the most radical heightening of the asymmetry; and, on the other hand, the true nature of *this* God must seem to create a two-sidedness that is totally unexpected.

What is the difference between the
"Old" and the "New Covenant"?

At this point it is necessary to take a preliminary look at the philosophical treatment that the theme of "covenant" has received in the history of Christian theology. If covenant is an image that originally comes from the sphere of law, what corresponds to it in the sphere of philosophy is the category of *relatio*. In the ancient world, from an entirely different starting point and with an almost opposite significance, it was clear that the *relatio* between God and man could only be asymmetrical. Greek philosophy deduced, on the basis of the logic inherent in metaphysical thinking, that the immutable God could not enter into mutable relationships and that relationship is proper to mutable man. In the relationship between God and man, therefore, one could speak only of a *relatio non mutua*, a relatedness

without reciprocity: man refers to God, but God does not refer to man. The logic seems unavoidable. Infinity requires immutability, and immutability excludes relationships that come and go in time and as a result of time.

But does not the message of the covenant say the very opposite? Before going into the questions arising from this analysis of the meaning of *b'arith* and *diatheke*, we must address the most important New Testament texts on the subject of covenant. They present us with a further question: What is the difference between the "Old" and the "New Covenant"? What constitutes the unity of the concept of covenant in the two Testaments, and in what way does it differ between them?

It is impossible, of course, to examine the whole span of New Testament covenant theology in the present article. I would like simply to shed some light, by way of example, on a number of central passages in the Pauline Letters and on the idea of covenant in the texts concerning the Last Supper.

2. *Covenant and Covenants in the Apostle Paul*

What strikes us first of all is that Paul makes a firm disjunction between the covenant in Christ and the Mosaic covenant; this is how we usually understand the difference between the "Old" and the "New" Covenant. Paul's sharpest contrast between the two

Testaments is to be found in 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 and Galatians 4:21-31. Whereas the term "New Covenant" comes from prophecy (Jer 31:31) and so forms a link between both parts of the Bible, the expression "Old Covenant" occurs only in 2 Corinthians 3:14. By contrast, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of the "first covenant" (9:15) and calls the New Covenant—in addition to this classic term—the "aeonic" or "eternal" Covenant (13:20), an expression adopted in the "words of institution" of the Roman Canon of the Mass, where it speaks of the "new and everlasting Covenant".

The covenant in Christ and the Mosaic covenant

In 2 Corinthians, Paul sets these two in diametrical opposition: the former is transitory; the latter abides perpetually. Transience is a characteristic of the Mosaic covenant; Paul sees this symbolized by the stone Tables of the Law. Stone signifies what is dead; anyone who remains exclusively in the realm of the Law written in stone remains in the realm of death.

Here Paul was no doubt thinking of Jeremiah's promise that, in the New Covenant, the Law would be engraved on the people's hearts; also he may have been thinking of Ezekiel, who had said that the heart of stone would be replaced by a heart of flesh.⁴

⁴ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther* (Göttingen, 1976), 76.

While the text initially stresses most strongly the fact that the Mosaic covenant is now a thing of the past, doomed to collapse, a new and altered perspective emerges at the end: Anyone who turns to the Lord will find that the veil is taken away from his heart, and he will see the Law's inner radiance, its pneumatic light; so he will be able to read it correctly.

The multiplicity of images used by Paul here, as so often, somewhat obscures his meaning; but, at all events, the image of the removal of the veil indicates a modification of the idea of the Law's transitory nature: when the veil is removed from the heart, what is substantial and ultimate about the Law comes into focus. Thus the Law itself becomes Spirit, identical with the new order of life in the Spirit.

The covenant with Noah,
with Abraham, and with Jacob-Israel

The strict antithesis between the two Covenants, the Old and the New, that Paul develops in 2 Corinthians 3 has fundamentally marked Christian thought ever since, whereas the subtle interplay between "the letter" and "the spirit"—expressed in the image of the "veil"—has been hardly noticed. Most importantly, it has largely been forgotten that other Pauline texts portray the drama of God's history with men in a much more nuanced way.

In chapter 9 of Romans, Paul sings the praises of Israel: among God's gifts to his people are "the cove-

nants", and according to the Wisdom tradition they are a plurality.⁵ Indeed, the Old Testament speaks of three signs of the covenant: the sabbath, the rainbow, and circumcision; these correspond to three stages of the covenant, or three covenants. The Old Testament relates the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Jacob-Israel, the Sinai covenant, and God's covenant with David.

Each of these covenants has its specific nature, and we shall have to return to them. Paul is well aware that, prior to the Christian history of salvation, the word "covenant" had to be understood and spoken of in the plural; out of these various covenants he selects two particularly, sets them up in mutual opposition, and refers each one to the covenant in Christ: these are the covenant with Abraham and the covenant with Moses. He sees the covenant made with Abraham as the real, fundamental, and abiding covenant; according to Paul, the covenant made with Moses was interposed (Rom 5:20) 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant (Gal 3:17); it could not abrogate the covenant with Abraham but constituted only an intermediary stage in God's providential plan.

Legal prescription and promise

God's pedagogy with mankind operates in such a way that its individual props are jettisoned when the goal

⁵ Rom 9:4. Cf. H. Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (1977), 287.

of the educational process is reached. Particular paths are abandoned, but the meaning remains. The covenant with Moses is incorporated into the covenant with Abraham, and the Law becomes a mediator of promise. Thus Paul distinguishes very sharply between two kinds of covenant that we find in the Old Testament itself: the covenant that consists of legal prescriptions and the covenant that is essentially a promise, the gift of friendship, bestowed without conditions.⁶

In the Pentateuch, in fact, the word *b'erith* is often equivalent to "law" and "commandment". A *b'erith* is something that is commanded; the Sinai covenant in Exodus 24 appears essentially as "the imposition of laws and obligations on the people".⁷ This kind of covenant can also be broken; Israel's history in the Old Testament continually appears to be a history of the broken covenant.

A unity in tension: The one Covenant
in the plurality of covenants

By contrast, the covenant with the Patriarchs is regarded as eternally in force. Whereas the covenant imposing obligations is patterned on the vassal contract, the covenant of promise has the royal grant as its model.⁸ To that extent Paul, with his distinction

⁶ Weinfeld, "Berit", 799f.

⁷ Ibid., 784.

⁸ Ibid., 799.

between the covenant with Abraham and the covenant with Moses, has rightly interpreted the biblical text. This distinction, however, also supersedes the strict opposites of the Old and the New Covenant and implies that all history is a unity in tension: the one Covenant is realized in the plurality of covenants.

If this is so, there can be no question of setting the Old and the New Testaments against each other as two different religions; there is only *one* will of God for men, only *one* historical activity of God with and for men, though this activity employs interventions that are diverse and even in part contradictory—yet in truth they belong together.

3. *The Idea of the Covenant
in the Texts of the Last Supper*

The interrelatedness of the many covenants and the one Covenant brings us to the heart of our topic. We have to tread with particular care here, because we are dealing with deeply rooted Jewish and Christian habits of thought, which must be illuminated—and in part corrected—through recourse to the original biblical message.

The accounts of the Last Supper are decisive for a correct understanding of the New Testament concept of covenant. They constitute, so to speak, the New Testament counterpart to the account of the Sinai

covenant (Ex 24), and thus they provide the foundation for the Christian conviction about the New Covenant in Christ. Here we do not need to enter into the complicated exegetical discussions regarding the relationship between text and event and the genesis of the texts and their chronological relationship (these issues remain matters of dispute): our aim is simply to examine what the texts say, just as they are, in response to our questions.

The new unity of covenant ideas

What is not disputed is that the four "institution" accounts (Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:17-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26), on the basis of their textual form and the theology it manifests, can be divided into two groups: the Markan-Matthean tradition and what we find in Paul and Luke. The main difference between them lies in the word referring to the cup. In Matthew and Mark the words uttered over the chalice are: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." Matthew adds, "for the forgiveness of sins". In Paul and Luke, however, the cup is referred to in these words: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood"; and Luke adds, "which is shed for you". "Covenant" and "blood" stand here in grammatical apposition. In Matthew-Mark the gift of the cup is "the blood", which is further defined as "the blood of the covenant".

In Paul-Luke the cup is "the new covenant", which is described as ratified "in my blood".

A second difference is that only Luke and Paul speak about the *new* covenant. A third important difference is that only Matthew and Mark give us the words "for many". Both strands of tradition base themselves on Old Testament covenant traditions, but each strand selects a different reference point. In this way all the essential covenant ideas flow together in the ensemble of utterances at the Last Supper and are fused into a new unity.

The Sinai covenant heightened to a staggering realism

What traditions are we talking about? The reference to the cup in Matthew and Mark comes straight from the account of the making of the Sinai covenant. Moses sprinkles the sacrificial blood first on the altar, which represents the hidden God, and then on the people, saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex 24:8). Here very ancient concepts are taken up and elevated to a higher plane.

The scholar G. Quell has defined the archaic idea of the covenant as it appears in the stories of the Patriarchs: "To make a covenant means both to form a blood association with an alien and to include this alien covenant-partner in one's own community, thus enter-

ing into juridical fellowship with him.” The fictitious blood relationship thus created “makes the participants brothers of the same flesh and blood”. “The covenant creates a whole, which is peace”⁹—Shalom.

The Sinai blood ritual means that God does with these people, on their way through the desert, what until then only particular tribal associations had done; namely, he enters into a mysterious blood relationship with them, in such a way that he now belongs to them and they to him. True, the content of the relationship established here, between God and man (in itself a paradox), is defined by the word publicly declared, the “book of the covenant”. It is by appropriating this word, by the life that comes from it and with it, that the relationship—represented cultically in the ritual of the blood—comes into being.

When Jesus offers the cup to the disciples and says, “This is the blood of the covenant”, the words of Sinai are heightened to a staggering realism, and at the same time we begin to see a totally unsuspected depth in them. What takes place here is both spiritualization and the greatest possible realism. For the sacramental blood fellowship that now becomes a possibility brings those who accept it into an utterly concrete—and corporeal—community with this incarnate human being, Jesus, and hence with his divine mystery.

⁹ Quell and Behm, *Διαθήκη*, 115f.

A new relationship with God

Paul described this new “blood relationship” with God, which comes about through fellowship with Christ, in a bold and shocking metaphor: “Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, ‘The two shall become one’ (Gen 2:24). But he who is united to the Lord becomes *one* pneuma (one spirit) with him” (1 Cor 6:17). These words present us with an entirely different kind of relationship: a sacramental relationship with Christ—and hence with God—detaches man from his own material and transitory world and lifts him up into the being of God, to which the Apostle gives the word pneuma. The God who has come down thus draws man up into his own new realm. Being related to God means a new and profoundly transformed level of existence for man.

But how can what is specific to Jesus be communicated to men? We have seen that, in the Sinai covenant, it is through acceptance of the word, acceptance of God’s legal code, that people are incorporated into his mode of being. The Last Supper texts do not speak of this directly. Instead, what we have is the word that recalls Isaiah 53, the Song of the Suffering Servant: “. . . which is shed for many”. In this way the prophetic tradition is linked to, and interprets, the Sinai tradition. Jesus takes others’ destiny into his own; he lives for them, and he dies for them.

Covenant renewal in its highest possible form

At this point we can confidently follow the Church Fathers in going beyond what is directly found in the text, without losing its fundamental sense. Christ's death only brings the fulfillment of what was begun in the Incarnation. The Son has taken humanity into himself and now brings it home to God: "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me. . . . Lo, I have come . . ." (Heb 10:5-7; Ps 40:7-9). It is because the Son has handed himself over to God that his "blood" is now given to men as the blood of the covenant. Body has become word, and word has become body in the act of love that is the specifically divine mode of being; from now on, through participation in the sacrament, it is to become man's mode of being.

With regard to the issue of the nature of the covenant, it is important to note that the Last Supper sees itself as making a covenant: it is the prolongation of the Sinai covenant, which is not abrogated, but renewed. Here renewal of the covenant, which from earliest times was doubtless an essential element in Israel's liturgy¹⁰, attains its highest form possible. In this perspective we should see the Last Supper as one further renewal of

¹⁰ Mowinckel, in his search for the *Sitz-im-Leben* and origin of the Sinai covenant, even put forward the thesis that it reflected an annual celebration including a theophany and the proclamation of the Law; cf. Weinfeld, "Berit", 793f.

the covenant, but one in which what heretofore was performed ritually is now given a depth and density—by the sovereign power of Jesus—which could not possibly have been envisaged. This may also enable us to understand that both the Letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel of John (in Jesus' high-priestly prayer) go beyond the traditional link between the Last Supper and the Pasch and see the Eucharist in connection with the Day of Atonement; the institution of the Eucharist is to be seen as a cosmic Day of Atonement—an idea also suggested in Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans (3:24f.).¹¹

The New Covenant established by God
is itself present in the faith of Israel

Before proceeding, we must take a brief look at the Lukan-Pauline tradition of the word over the cup. As we saw, what the cup contains is "the new covenant in my blood". This is an unmistakable reference to the prophetic tradition we find in Jeremiah 31:31-34, which begins with the words, "They broke my covenant" (31:32). God, according to the Prophet, will replace the broken Sinai covenant with a New Covenant

¹¹ The connection between John 17 and the liturgy of Yom Kippur is convincingly brought out by A. Feuillet, *Le Sacerdoce du Christ et ses ministres* (Paris, 1972), esp. 39-63. Cf. also H. Gese, "Die Sühne" in: H. Gese, *Zur biblischen Theologie* (Munich, 1977), 85-106 (here especially 105f.).

that cannot be broken: this is because it will not confront man in the form of a book or a stone tablet but will be inscribed on his heart. The conditional covenant, which depended on man's faithful observance of the Law, is replaced by the unconditional covenant in which God binds himself irrevocably.

We are unmistakably here in the same conceptual milieu as we found earlier in 2 Corinthians, with its contrast between the two covenants. However, the Last Supper words make it clearer than 2 Corinthians that it is not simply a question of the opposition of the Old and New Testaments as two separate worlds; rather, both ideas, that of the broken covenant and that of the other, new covenant established by God, featured in the faith of Israel.

Admonished by the Prophets, and as a result of the suspension of the Temple cult during the Exile and the recurring trials that followed it, Israel well knew that it had broken the covenant more than once. The broken tablets at the foot of Mount Sinai were the first, dramatic expression of the broken covenant. And when the restored tablets were lost forever after the Exile, it was all the more evident that that fateful hour had resulted in a permanent condition. Israel also knew that the constantly repeated celebration of the renewal of the covenant could not restore the tablets, for only God could give them and fill them with his handwriting. It also knew, however, that God had not withdrawn his love for Israel; it knew that God himself renewed his

covenant and that the promise of the New Covenant was not merely in the future: because of God's unfailing love, the covenant was already present in the promise.¹²

Covenant renewal is not superfluous
in the New Covenant

Conversely, Christians must be aware that the definitive nature of the unbreakable New Covenant, present to them in the flesh and blood of the Risen Christ, does not mean that their infractions of this Covenant are insignificant. Covenant renewal has not become superfluous in the New Covenant; in fact, it is characteristic of it. The command to repeat the words of the Last Supper, which are an expression of the making of the Covenant, means that the New Covenant is continually confronting man in its newness. It remains ever new and is always one and the same Covenant.¹³

¹² Cf. E. Zenger, ed., *Der Neue Bund im Alten: Zur Bundestheologie der beiden Testamente*, QD 146 (Freiburg, 1993), esp. the articles by C. Dohmen, "Der Sinaibund als Neuer Bund nach Ex 19-34", 51-83, and A. Schenker, "Der nie aufgehobene Bund", 85-112; E. Zenger, *Das Erste Testament: Die jüdische Bibel und die Christen*, 4th ed. (Düsseldorf, 1994); also the review by H. Seebaß and the reply by E. Zenger in: *Theologische Revue* 90 (1994): 265-78. In his *Der Römerbrief* (Freiburg, 1977), 340, H. Schlier puts it well: "The radiant hope of eschatological salvation and homecoming . . . rests on everyone who is an Ισραηλίτης."

¹³ It seems to me that this is what is meant when Hebrews 3:13 applies to Christians the "today" of Psalm 95 and its warning against that hardness of heart which can lead to loss of the "land of rest".

Two central questions

Having endeavored to establish the New Testament idea of covenant from the Pauline covenant theology and the words of the Last Supper, we must sum up our results and decide what answers to give to the two central questions that arose in our examination of these texts:

How are the individual covenants related to each other, and, in particular, how is the New Covenant related to the covenants we find in Israel's Bible?

What is the ultimate relationship between testament and covenant? Should we speak of a one-sided or two-sided covenant?

4. *The One Covenant and the Many Covenants*

Christian tradition generally, on the basis of Pauline theology and the eucharistic words of the Last Supper, has thought in terms of two covenants, the New and the Old. This picture of two alternatives is characterized by a series of antitheses. The Old Covenant is particular and concerns the "fleshly" descendants of Abraham. The New Covenant is universal and is addressed to all peoples. Thus the Old Covenant depends on the principle of inheritance, and the New Covenant on a spiritual relationship created by sacrament and faith. The Old Covenant is conditional: since it depends on the keeping of the Law, that is, on man's behavior; it

can be broken and has been broken. Since its essential content is the Law, it is expressed in the formulation, "If you do all this. . . ." This "if" draws man's changeable will into the very essence of the covenant itself and thus makes it a provisional covenant.

The irrevocable gift of friendship

By contrast, the covenant sealed in the Last Supper, in its inner essence, seems "new" in the sense of the prophetic promise: it is not a contract with conditions but the gift of friendship, irrevocably bestowed. Instead of law we have grace. The rediscovery of Pauline theology at the Reformation laid special emphasis on this point: not works, but faith; not man's achievement, but the free bestowal of God's goodness. It emphatically underlined, therefore, that what was involved was not a "covenant" but a "testament", a pure decision and act on God's part.¹⁴ This is the context in which we must understand the teaching that it is God alone who does everything. (All the *solus* terms—*solus Deus*, *solus Christus*—must be understood in this context.)



¹⁴ This is very clear in the article in ThWNT by G. Quell and J. Behm; cf. also the article "Bund", by Hempel, Goppelt, Jacob, and Wiesner in: RGG I (1957): 1512-23.

What conclusions can we draw from all this? It seems to me that we have become aware of two facts that complement the one-sidedness of these antitheses and make visible the inner unity of the history of God's relations with man, as it is portrayed in the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments together.

The inner continuity of salvation history

First of all we must remember that the fundamentally "new" covenant—the covenant with Abraham—has a universalist orientation and looks toward the many sons who will be given to Abraham. Paul was absolutely right: the covenant with Abraham unites in itself both elements, namely, the intention of universality and the free gift. To that extent, right from the beginning, the promise to Abraham guarantees salvation history's inner continuity from the Patriarchs of Israel down to Christ and to the Church of Jews and Gentiles.

With regard to the Sinai covenant, we must again draw a distinction. It is strictly limited to the people of Israel; it gives this nation a legal and cultic order (the two are inseparable) that as such cannot simply be extended to all nations. Since this juridical order is constitutive of the Sinai covenant, the law's "if" is part of its essence. To that extent it is conditional, that is, temporal; within God's providential rule it is a stage that has its own allotted period of time.

Paul set this forth very clearly, and no Christian can

revoke it; history itself confirms this view. But this does not mean that there is nothing more to be said about the covenant with Moses and "Israel according to the flesh". For the Law is not only a burden imposed on believers—as we are inclined to think, due to one-sided emphasis of the Pauline antitheses. As seen by Old Testament believers, the Law itself is the concrete form of grace. For to know God's will is grace. And to know God's will is to know oneself, to understand the world, to know what our destination is. It means that we are liberated from the darkness of our endless questioning, that the light has come, that light without which we can neither see nor move. "You have not shown your will to any other nation": for Israel, at least for its best representatives, the Law is the visibility of the truth, the visibility of God's countenance, and so it gives us the possibility of right living. Are not these our questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What shall I do to put my life in order? The hymn to God's word that we find—in ever-new variations—in Psalm 119 expresses this joy of being delivered, the joy of knowing God's will. For his will is our truth and therefore our way; it is what all men are looking for.

Jesus the Messiah; the Torah of the Messiah

This can help us to understand what Paul means when, in Galatians 6:2, in line with the Jewish messianic hope, he speaks of the Torah of the Messiah, the Torah of

Christ. Paul's view, too, is that the Messiah, the Christ, does not make man lawless, does not deprive him of justice. Rather, it is characteristic of the Messiah—he who is “greater than Moses”—that he brings the definitive interpretation of the Torah, in which the Torah is itself renewed, because now its true essence appears in all its purity and its character as grace becomes undistorted reality. In his commentary on the Letter to the Galatians, Heinrich Schlier says, “The Torah of Jesus the Messiah is in fact an ‘interpretation’ of the Mosaic Law, . . . an ‘interpretation’ on the basis of the Cross of Jesus the Messiah.” His plenary power “manifests the Law, in its essential meaning, as the creative, life-giving message of the One who has fulfilled it.”¹⁵

The Torah of the Messiah is the Messiah, Jesus, himself. It is to him that the command, “Listen to him”, refers. In this way the “Law” becomes universal; it is grace, constituting a people which becomes such by hearing the word and undergoing conversion. In this Torah, which is Jesus himself, the abiding essence of what was inscribed on the stone tablets at Sinai is now written in living flesh, namely, the twofold command of love. This is set forth in Philippians 2:5 as “the mind of Christ”. To imitate him, to follow him in discipleship, is therefore to keep the Torah, which has been fulfilled in him once and for all.

Thus the Sinai covenant is indeed superseded. But

¹⁵ H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (Göttingen, 1962), 273.

once what was provisional in it has been swept away, we see what is truly definitive in it. So the expectation of the New Covenant, which becomes clearer and clearer as the history of Israel unfolds, does not conflict with the Sinai covenant; rather, it fulfills the dynamic expectation found in that very covenant. From the perspective of Jesus, the “Law and the Prophets” are not in opposition: Moses himself—as Deuteronomy tells us—is a prophet and can only be understood correctly if he is read as such.

5. “Testament” and Covenant

The question of whether what we are dealing with is a covenant or a testament, a two-sided interaction or a one-sided action, is closely bound to the question of the difference between the covenant in Christ and the covenant with Moses. The basic structure of all the covenants we find in the Old and New Testaments is asymmetrical, that is, it expresses a sovereign action, not a contract between two equal partners. The *law* is an action by which the king binds his vassals and makes them such; *grace* is an action that is freely given without any preceding merit.

not quite true

God binds himself to partnership

This idea, that the testament is one-sided, no doubt corresponds to the idea of God's greatness and sovereignty;

it is also determined, of course, by a particular social structure. The rulers of the ancient Orient always act one-sidedly, in a sovereign manner: no one can be on the same level as they are. But even this sociological context, with its asymmetrical order, is torn up and jettisoned in the Bible; thus our picture of God also acquires a new form. God acts, certainly; yet, practically from the outset, he binds himself, as it were, so that what comes into being is something like a partnership.

Augustine put this aspect very beautifully: "God is faithful, for he has put himself under a debt to us, not as if he had received anything from us, but by promising us so much. The word of promise was too little for him: he wanted to bind himself in writing, by giving us, as it were, a handwritten version of his promises."¹⁶ If we read the Prophets, we find that this is not perceived as a merely external, positive act: Israel's faith recognizes, in this act of binding himself, God's very nature. Thus it differs from the picture of God that one would expect in the context of an Eastern ruler. "When Israel was young, I loved him", God says, in the Prophet Hosea, of his manner of binding himself to his people. It follows that, even when the covenant is continually being broken, God, by his very nature, *cannot* allow it to fall. "How could I abandon you, Ephraim; how could I give you up, Israel? . . . My heart turns against me, my compassion flames forth" (Hos 11:1, 8).

What is presented here as a brief sketch is devel-

¹⁶ *En in ps* 109, 1 CChr 40:1601.

oped into a great story of futile love—or, rather, indestructible and hence ultimately not futile love—in Ezekiel 16.

The entire drama of broken faith on the part of the people ends with this pronouncement: "Then you shall remember and be ashamed; for shame you shall no more dare to open your mouth, because I have forgiven all that you have done" (Ezek 16:63).

Binding himself even as far as the Cross

All these texts presuppose the mysterious account of the making of the covenant with Abraham, in which the Patriarch, in oriental fashion, divides the sacrificial animals into two parts. As a rule, the covenant partners pass between the divided animal halves, thereby invoking a conditional curse upon themselves: let it be to me as to these animals if I break the covenant. Abraham has a vision of a smoking oven and a blazing torch—images of theophany—passing between the animal parts. God seals the covenant by guaranteeing his faithfulness in an unmistakable symbol of death. Is it possible, then, for God to die? Can he punish himself?

Christian interpretation was bound to see in this text a mysterious and previously indecipherable image of the Cross, in which God, through his Son's death, guarantees that the covenant cannot be broken; thus he hands himself over to mankind in a radical way (Gen 15:1-21).

It belongs to God's nature to love what he has cre-

ated; so it belongs to his nature to bind himself and, in doing so, to go all the way to the Cross. Thus, as the Bible sees it, the unconditional nature of God's action results in a genuine two-sidedness: the testament becomes a covenant. The Church Fathers described this novel two-sidedness, which arises from faith in Christ as the Fulfiller of the promises, as the "incarnation of God" and the "divinization of man". God binds himself by giving Scripture as the binding word of promise, but he goes beyond this by binding himself, in his own existence, to the human creature by assuming human nature. Conversely, this means that man's primal dream comes true, and man becomes "like God": in this exchange of natures, which gives us the fundamental theme of Christology, the unconditional nature of the divine covenant has become a definitively two-sided relationship.

6. *The Picture of God and Man in the Idea of Covenant*

Thus we see that Christology is a synthesis of New Testament covenant theology, which always rests on the unity of the entire Bible. Of necessity, however, this christological concentration leads us beyond a mere interpretation of biblical texts; we are faced with the question of the nature of man and God; it becomes necessary to exert ourselves to reach a rational under-

standing. This means that theology must look for a philosophy that is acceptable to it. It is not my task here to say what that might be. I would only return, briefly, to the philosophical category we have already met, corresponding to the theme of the covenant, namely, *relatio*. For in asking about the covenant, we are asking whether there can be a relationship between God and man, and what kind of relationship it might be.

The God of the Bible is a God-in-relationship

We observed that, in the ancient world, man could orient himself to God through knowledge and love but that any notion of a relationship between the eternal God and temporal man was regarded as absurd and hence impossible. The philosophical monotheism of the ancient world opened up a path for biblical faith in God and its religious monotheism, which seemed to facilitate once again the lost harmony between reason and religion. The Fathers, who started from the assumption of this harmony between philosophy and biblical revelation, realized that the one God of the Bible could be affirmed, in his identity, through two predicates: creation and revelation, creation and redemption. But these are both relational terms. Thus the God of the Bible is a God-in-relationship; and to that extent, in the essence of his identity, he is opposed to the self-enclosed God of philosophy.

This is not the place to trace the complicated intellec-

tual struggle that sought to establish the interrelatedness of reason and religion. It had followed from the idea of God's unique oneness, yet now it was practically called into question once again. In the context of the present topic, all I will say is that, as a result of this struggle, a new philosophical category—the concept of “person”—was fashioned, a concept that has become for us the fundamental concept of the analogy between God and man, the very center of philosophical thought.¹⁷

Covenant as God's self-revelation,
“the radiance of his countenance”

The meaning of an already existing category, that of “relation”, was fundamentally changed. In the Aristotelian table of categories, relation belongs to the group of accidents that point to substance and are dependent on it; in God, therefore, there are no accidents. Through the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, *relatio* moves out of the substance-accident framework. Now God himself is described as a trinitarian set of relations, as *relatio subsistens*.¹⁸ When we say that man is the im-

¹⁷ This is beautifully clear in C. Schönborn, *Die Christus-Ikone* (1984), esp. 30–54 (English trans.: *God's Human Face: The Christ-Icon* [San Francisco, 1994], 14–33).

¹⁸ Even if the entire scope of the process is not yet clear, we can see the refashioning of the inherited categories in Augustine, *De Trin.* 5, 5, 6 (PL 42, 914): “Quamobrem nihil in eo (= in Deo) per accidens dicitur, quia nihil ei accidit; nec tamen omne quod dicitur, secundum substantiam dicitur . . . hoc non secundum substantiam dicuntur, sed

age of God, it means that he is a being designed for relationship; it means that, in and through all his relationships, he seeks that relation which is the ground of his existence. In this context, covenant would be the response to man's imaging of God; it would show us who we are and who God is. And for God, since he is entirely relationship, covenant would not be something external in history, apart from his being, but the manifestation of his self, the “radiance of his countenance”.

secundum relativum; quod tamen relativum non est accidens, quia non est mutabile.” (“Wherefore nothing in Him is said in respect to accident, since nothing is accidental to Him, and yet all that is said is not said according to substance . . . they [the Father and the Son] are so called, not according to substance, but according to relation, which relation, however, is not accident, because it is not changeable.”)