COVENANT, GRACE, THE KINGDOM OF GOD, AND AN ETHIC OF GRATITUDE: GOD AND HIS PEOPLE IN "TIES THAT BIND"

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

You shall be my people and I will be your God.
Jeremiah 30: 22

The purpose of this research is to take two familiar theological ideas--covenant and the Kingdom of God--and to cast them in a new light. In particular, these ideas are joined to show (1) that the concept of a "suzerainty" covenant (or "covenant of gift and obligation") more nearly characterizes the structure of both Old and New Testaments than does either the "covenant of grant" or the "parity covenant," (2) that there is no break in the essential covenantal concept used to identify God's relationship with his[1] people between Old and New Testaments; in other words, while "Old" and "New" covenants appear, they speak essentially of one idea--that of God's gracious relationship with his people, (3) that the covenantal language in the Old Testament finds new usage and new language in the New Testament in the concept of the Kingdom of God as Jesus presents it, (4) that the concept of covenant is important in the ministry of the apostle Paul; in particular, he writes to the people at Rome, advising them about how to become a

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[1]Since the "covenant," "Kingdom of God," and "grace" language uses male nouns and pronouns, I use that same language, hoping to show that whether God is male, female, or both, the suzerainty covenant based on response to the good gifts of God best defines God's relationship to humankind in the Old and New Testaments.

covenant community, and (5) that there is a continuum of a relationship with God that focuses on grace, covenant, Kingdom of God, and an ethic of gratitude that begins in Genesis,[2] comes to full fruition in Jesus's ministry, and still obtains for twentieth-century Christians.

Therefore, the research follows this pattern: In Chapter II, the history of the concept of covenant is discussed. In addition, this chapter examines why suzerainty covenant is an important part of both Old and New Testaments. In Chapter III, the central chapter of the thesis, the correlation is drawn between covenant and Kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus. This chapter is the linchpin that holds the thesis together and underscores the importance of Jesus' teachings for today's Christians in community. Chapter IV focuses on Paul's ministry as it reflects covenantal concepts. In particular, this section examines Paul's concept of covenant community in Romans; that is, he uses covenant to "shift the emphasis away from questions of individual sin and salvation toward a greater concern for the community of faith as the context in which one believes and lives obediently."[3] Finally, Chapter V draws all of these ideas together in a chapter that seeks to answer several questions: Does not the concept of suzerainty covenant avoid dealing with the

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[2]"It emerges first with Adam and Eve. . . ; the gift is (communal) existence and garden, the obligation (characteristically) a prohibition." Jack L. Clark, "Notes on 'Suzerainty Covenant.'"

[3]R. David Kaylor, Paul's Covenant Community: Jew and Gentile in Romans (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), iii.

angry, jealous, and sometimes outright malicious God of the Old Testament? How does one believe in the gracious God of the suzerainty covenant and deal with the issue of theodicy? Given that the concept of suzerainty covenant is so important for both Old and New Testaments, can we say to what degree it retains its importance for twentieth-century Christians? How can a concept of covenant that uses male-dominated language speak to all of today's Christians, male and female alike? Can we rule out a parity covenant or a covenant of grant as a more viable contract between God and people than a suzerainty covenant? Does the very concept of covenant dictate that it function in communal worship?

While there are critics of the concept of suzerainty covenant in the Bible (in particular, Dennis J. McCarthy[4]), the preponderance of scholars who find the concept appropriate for explaining the relationship between God and his people (among them John Bright[5]) leads to the conclusion that God's suzerainty covenant was the architectonic by which the people Israel lived their lives. Furthermore, we conclude that it remains viable for

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[4]McCarthy primarily criticizes research which seeks to see only one kind of covenant (suzerainty) in the Bible; he also questions the validity of a covenant whose whole structure "is based on one support, the apparent formal similarity between the ancient oriental treaty and the Old Testament Covenant . . . . a narrow base indeed." Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J., Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1972), 5, 13.

[5]"The covenant idea is so important that W. Eichrodt has reconstructed the entire Old Testament theology around it. The writer is in fundamental agreement." John Bright, The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 27.

today's Christian community in its search for ways to be "people of God."

Now we move to Chapter II with its discussion of the history and types of covenants, and their importance.

CHAPTER II

COVENANT, ITS HISTORY, AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

History

The suzerainty covenant concept that is so prevalent in the Old Testament did not originate there. George E. Mendenhall explains:

> [T]here is a type of covenant preserved in ancient oriental sources that may be of use. . . . This is the suzerainty treaty by which a great king bound his vassals to faithfulness and obedience to himself.[6]

Mendenhall's research indicates that covenants have been discovered among the Old Sumerian texts of the third millennium B.C. He thinks it likely that covenants might be dated "many centuries if not millennia before."[7]

More important for the research into the covenants in ancient Israel are the covenants that have been discovered from the Hittite Empire, 1450-1200 B.C., because they are contemporary with the beginnings of the people of Israel. However, it appears that the covenant form from the Hittites was not original with them, either; that is, it seems to have come from "Mesopotamian sources,

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[6]George E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955), 26.

[7]Ibid., 27.

and consequently it must have been common property of any number of peoples and states in the second millennium B.C."[8]

In order to determine precisely the authenticity of the ancient covenants, each covenant is classified on the basis of both the terminology and the text of the covenant. Such classification of texts and terminology does exist in the Hittite treaties. It appears that the same terminology and text exist in Old Testament documents. The language of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, while not containing all of the criteria specified in a suzerainty covenant, are enough like the ancient treaties that we concur with Mendenhall that there is vast similarity between the ancient Hittite treaties and the Old Testament documents of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua.[9] In addition to these examples of suzerainty covenants, there are also "innumerable incidents and ideas in the entire history of Israel [that] can be adequately understood only from this complex of covenant patterns of thought."[10] These include covenants of grant between God and Noah (Genesis 9:8-17), between God and Abraham (Genesis 17:4-8), and between God and David (2 Samuel 7). There is also one example of a parity covenant in the relationship between David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:1-3).

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[8]Ibid., 28.

[9]Ibid., 30.

[10]Ibid. However, it is not the intent of this writer to explore every example of covenant in the Bible (it is literally infused with them), but to provide examples which describe and illuminate the forms of covenant.

While the ancient history of covenant is abbreviated here, it serves the purpose of placing the research at the beginning history of the people of Israel--where the concept of covenant in the Old Testament is explicated.

Covenants and Their Differences

> "Covenant" in Hebrew is B^{e}rith and is generally used to refer to a treaty or agreement. One use of the term (parity) designates a relationship between equals, such as in the marriage ceremony, NATO, or the Warsaw Pact; another use is between a greater and a lesser partner (suzerainty). The Greek equivalent in the Septuagint and the New Testament is Diatheke, which refers primarily to a "testament" or "will."[11]

Before we begin the chronology and theology of the covenant forms in the Old Testament, Delbert Hillers reminds us:

> . . . we are apt to miss much if we look only at those texts where the term "covenant" itself occurs. . . . An even greater difficulty with "covenant" is that it is not necessarily one idea. . . . there were various ways of conceiving of the covenant with God in ancient Israel. . . .[12]

Many of the Old Testament covenants arose out of paradigmatic events in the life of the people Israel. There are three events in particular: Moses-Exodus-Sinai, David's Monarchy, and the Division of the Kingdom in 922 B.C. into "Israel" and "Judah," with both kingdoms finally being destroyed (Judah in 587 B.C. and Israel in 721 B.C.). All of the other significant events of Israel's history are related to these three paradigmatic events.

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[11]Jack L. Clark, "The Vocabulary of Hans-Joachim Schoeps."

[12]Delbert R. Hillers, Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 5-6.

Paradigmatic events are orienting events and root experiences. The three paradigmatic events share common characteristics: (1) These are public, not private, events. They are participated in by all of the people at the time. (2) The crucial significance of these events has remained effective for thousands of years and into the present. That means that each successive generation has deferred to the superiority of what was seen and heard by the original generation or testimony. A liturgical worship of God is evolving. What does the liturgy do? The liturgy is a way of remembering, a reappropriation: "What my father did, I do, and reappropriate the meaning in a dramatic reenactment." By means of this liturgy, faith is refreshed and hope is renewed. (3) These events are also problem events. It sometimes is difficult to see God in events when things "turn sour." In the Moses-Exodus-Sinai event, it was difficult for the people to see that God was leading them to freedom and covenant. The whole Exodus trek is peppered by complaints from the people who were sure God had them brought on this long journey so they would die of hunger and thirst. The monarchy of David was a high point in Israel's history, but it was followed by a time of division and destruction. Solomon was not the kind of king David was.[13] "The organization man turned monarch refused to acknowledge that the Mosaic covenant affirmed

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[13]This discussion of paradigmatic events is excerpted from "Bible 110 Notes," and the lecture is by Jack L. Clark.

freedom and equality for all Israelites."[14] The harsh requirements placed on the people by Solomon resulted in the beginnings of the divided Kingdom. It is difficult to see the Suzerain God acting graciously in such circumstances.

These three paradigmatic events issued in covenants, but covenants also arose out of other milestones in the life of the people Israel. The kinds of covenants include "covenants of grant"--unconditional divine gifts--and "covenants of gift and obligation"--covenants in which the deity undertook no specific obligation, but the human partners swore to abide by certain stipulations and to accept dire consequences if they did not,[15] and a parity covenant--a covenant between man and man.

Covenants of Grant

A "covenant of grant" is an unconditional divine gift to some man or men. The deity alone undertakes obligations. It "functions as a kind of charter myth, validating and guaranteeing forever some desirable state of affairs."[16] In the Old Testament, covenants of grant were made between God and Noah (Genesis 9:8-17), God and Abraham (Genesis 17:4-8), and God and David (2 Samuel 7).

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[14]J. Kenneth Kuntz, The People of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Old Testament Literature, History, and Thought (New York, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1974), 225.

[15]Mircea Eliade, Editor in Chief, The Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. 4, s.v. "Covenant," by Delbert R. Hillers, 135.

[16]Ibid.

Covenants of Grant with Noah and Abraham

The first two examples of covenants of grant in the Old Testament are those between God and Noah, and between God and Abraham.

The promise to Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) after the flood is a striking example of the covenant of grant:

> Then God said to Noah, and to his sons with him, "Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you. . . . I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. . . .[17]

The sign of the covenant is the rainbow: "And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth'" (Genesis 9:12-13).

The covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17 is another covenant of grant. From Genesis 17:4-8:

> God said to him: "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; . . . I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

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[17]All scriptural quotations are from The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

The sign of the covenant is circumcision, "a reminder to God like Noah's rainbow."[18]

What we see in these early covenants of grant is a blossoming relationship between God and the people Israel. The move from impartial deity to Father God is beginning to take place. The people with whom the covenant is made are expected to walk righteously before God, but they take no oath; God alone assumes obligation.

Suzerainty Covenant of Gift and Obligation

The "covenant of gift and obligation" is the concept on which "suzerainty covenant" is based, but with alteration: "God gives the covenant--as at Sinai (Exodus 20) or Shechem (Joshua 24) --based on his past gracious actions. . . . The human partners are bound to specific obligations toward him and one another."[19] A suzerainty covenant is an "unilateral covenant between God and his people, who provides protection from above and receives loyalty from below. . . . Gift precedes demand; grace precedes law; the God who commands is the God who first gives."[20]

> **The concept implies with the utmost clarity that we are not dealing with a mere idea of God but with an act of God in the remote past. God's will elected the children of Israel, who then for their part**

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[18]Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1964), Vol. II, s.v. "Covenant," by Gottfried Quell, 134.

[19]Ibid., 135.

[20]Jack L. Clark, "Notes from 'Bible 110' Class."

> elected God, obligating themselves to him in the covenant. God is the electing God of the elect.[21]

Implicit in the way the people respond is an "ethic of gratitude," which is defined in conjunction with its opposite: an "ethic of calculation." An ethic of gratitude simply means "let us love [God] because he first loved us." It is a gracious and loving response to a gracious and loving God who has acted in deeds of generosity to his people. "Motivation for obedience lies not in the future reward but rather out of gratitude for what has been already accomplished."[22] An "ethic of calculation," on the other hand, is characterized by an attitude of greed: "Let us do good so that God will reward us."[23]

Also implicit in the people's response to God is a response to grace freely given:

> It can be said without equivocation that the *whole* Bible is a book of the grace of God. It begins with the gift of creation and ends with that of the new Jerusalem, but inbetween grace upon grace is experienced and proclaimed.[24]

Moreover, grace is complemented by generosity (Hebrew *chesed*, usually translated "mercy, lovingkindness"). *Chesed* gives the suzerainty covenant a gentler cast. Justice is commanded by

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[21]Quell, "Covenant," 120.

[22]Jack L. Clark, "Lecture on Hans-Joachim Schoeps."

[23]Jack L. Clark, "Reflections on Prayer," 2.

[24]J. M. Myers, Grace and Torah (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 1.

the Torah and the classical prophets, but generosity--evoked by God's generosity--is what makes it truly effective and humane.[25]

The suzerainty covenant has six principal parts, which may vary from case to case:[26]

> (1) the preamble, giving the title of the one who is granting the treaty; (2) the historical prologue, describing past relations between the greater and lesser parties; (3) the stipulations or obligations of the lesser party or vassal; (4) provisions for deposit of the text and for public reading; (5) a list of divine witnesses to the treaty; and (6) blessings and curses.

The progression of the relationship between God and Israel, then, results in suzerainty covenants or "covenants of gift and obligation" (or, as Hillers puts it, "[the other of] two very different conceptions of a relationship with God"[27]). These covenants occur at Sinai (Exodus 20) and at Shechem (Joshua 24).

The Covenant at Sinai

The most important Old Testament covenant, the one at Sinai, was preceded by the Exodus:

> The Exodus was viewed as a sheer act of God's grace. . . . It was grace because it was absolutely unmerited. The covenant concluded in Sinai could then be understood in Hebrew theology only as a response to grace. Man's *hesed* for God's *hesed*. When *hesed* is used of God, it refers to the favor of God which summoned Israel into covenant and the steadfast love which he shows them even in spite of unworthiness. When used of man, the word denotes the

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[25]Jack L. Clark, "Notes on 'Suzerainty Covenant.'"

[26]Hillers, Covenant, 29-39, and Mendenhall, 32-34.

[27]Hillers, "Covenant," 134.

> proper response to grace which is utter loyalty to the covenant God and obedience to his will.[28]

Without giving voice to the incredible story of the Exodus, we next see the people at Sinai, where God has promised Moses that he will speak to them. The decalogue from Exodus 20 takes on the form of the suzerainty covenant.

> As it stands, the classical decalogue (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5) manifests clear signs of development from a much earlier (oral) form. Note the formulaic imbalance . . . , the fact that there is only one threat ("will not hold him guiltless") and one promise ("that your days may be long"), and that most of the obligations (perhaps originally all of them) were prohibitive. In brief, God enumerates what one will not do lest the already established covenant be broken![29]

First, the prologue is stated: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."[30] Then the commandments are stated "in such a way that [they] appear to [their] hearers as [those] that they will obey because of a relationship that has already been established."[31] God lists the acts that are intolerable, but then the rest of the affairs are left to the management of the people.[32]

While not all of the stipulations of a suzerainty covenant as defined above are met in Exodus 20, there are enough

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[28]Bright, 27.

[29]Clark, "Notes on 'Suzerainty Covenant.'"

[30]Hillers, Covenant, 48.

[31]Clark, "Notes from 'Bible 110' Course."

[32]Hillers, Covenant, 50.

similarities to convince scholars that the Sinai theophany can be called a suzerainty covenant.[33]

> For the confirmation and furtherance of his deliverance, Yahweh entered into a covenant with his freed people. He revealed to them directly his will for them by an announcement of principles by which they could remain free and his forever. [This is] best expressed in Deuteronomy 26:9-10: "He brought us unto this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."[34]

There is an almost identical suzerainty covenant in Deuteronomy 5:6-21, and it is believed that they come from the same common oral source.

The Covenant (Renewal) at Shechem

As with many of the occurrences in the Bible, the history behind the covenant at Shechem (Joshua 24) has varied interpretations. Hillers suggests that the people involved in the covenant at Shechem were "groups within later Israel which had not taken part in the Exodus and had not stood at Sinai, and the classic league of twelve tribes comes into full existence only on the soil of Palestine--at Shechem, to be exact."[35] Clark, on the other hand, says that "Joshua 24 portrays a covenant-renewal ceremony (with a people already liberated and commanded/prohibited

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[33]Among those who agree: Delbert Hillers, Covenant; J. M. Myers, Grace and Torah; Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament; George E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East; J. Kenneth Kuntz, The People of Ancient Israel; and Jack L. Clark, "Notes on 'Suzerainty Covenant,'" "Reflections on Prayer," "The Vocabulary of Hans-Joachim Schoeps," as well as various class lectures.

[34]Myers, 18.

[35]Hillers, Covenant, 59.

beginning to experience the fulfillment of the promise of land)."[36] Suffice it to say that the covenant or covenant renewal is appropriate in the discussion of covenants, "for the [Pentateuch] anticipates the realization of Yahweh's promise to Abraham that his descendants will acquire the land of Canaan."[37] Whether covenant or covenant renewal, what is also important is the form of the covenant (suzerainty). In Joshua 24, the descendants of Abraham conquer the land promised by Yahweh, and the assignment of the tribes to their respective territories is the main concern of Joshua.

The covenant or covenant renewal at Shechem, then, at the end of wanderings and warfarings, is "of supreme importance in the drama of ancient Israel's faith, for it meant that a covenant now existed between Yahweh and a united Israelite people."[38] From Joshua 24:

> **Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.**[39]

So we see that the covenant at Shechem is a simplified version of the decalogue; it specifies only that the people have no other God but Yahweh. The people agree, but, as time passes,

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[36]Clark, "Notes on 'Suzerainty Covenant.'"

[37]Kuntz, 137.

[38]Kuntz, 146.

[39]Joshua 24:14-15.

covenant breaking and covenant renewal become somewhat of a pattern: (1) Apostasy--The people of Israel desert God or their faith; (2) Punishment as Discipline--God permits Israel's enemies to oppress her; (3) Repentance/Penitence--the people cry out and repent (Hebrew *shuv*--return); and (4) Deliverance and Peace--God raises up a judge who delivers the people.[40]

It is at this point in the chronology that it appears that God reluctantly agrees to appoint a monarch. Saul is appointed king, but has no "Standard Operating Procedures" guidebook. He does well in war, but poorly in keeping religious ties intact. It is in the relationship among Saul, David, and Jonathan that the framework is laid for a look at two additional covenants--one is a parity covenant and one is another covenant of grant.

Parity Covenant Between David and Jonathan

In a parity covenant, both parties are bound to obey identical stipulations.[41] An instance of a parity treaty is that between David and Jonathan, which is the only "unequivocal"[42] example in the Old Testament of a covenant between two relative equals. The story is told in 1 Samuel 18:1-3.

> When [David] had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day, and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And

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[40]Clark, "Notes for 'Bible 110.'"

[41]Mendenhall, 29.

[42]Quell, "Covenant," 112.

> **Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his girdle.**

While this exchange may sound more like sentimentality between two young men than a covenant, the legal and religious implications are there nonetheless. "The legal concept intrinsic to the covenant relationship is thus brought into relation with the strongest sense of fellowship and is thought to be adapted both to support it and indeed to maintain it in every possible crisis."[43]

The friendship and covenant between David and Jonathan comes to an abrupt end when both Saul and Jonathan are killed while fighting the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. But in the ensuing chapters of 2 Samuel, we see a return to a covenant of grant--this one between God and David.

The Covenant of Grant Between God and David

Scholars are divided on the question of whether the covenant between God and David is indeed a covenant. Instead, it seems to be what may be called a "divine gift." The difference between the Davidic covenant and those covenants of grant with Noah and Abraham is that there is no stipulation at all as to how David must perform his obligations to God. In the Noachic and Abrahamic covenants, there are at least "signs" which can be interpreted as placing some obligation on Noah and Abraham. David's covenant is "a gift, a free gift, no strings attached."[44] Mendenhall calls the contract

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[43]Ibid.

[44]The quote is not biblical. It is from The Way of the Wolf, by Martin Bell (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 15.

between David and God "the breakdown of the covenant form."[45] McCarthy indicates that there are some problems: in the relation of the Abrahamic covenant with the Davidic [how are they both covenants of grant?], and in the relation of the Sinaitic and the Davidic covenants [if the suzerainty covenant made at Sinai is a true covenant, can the Davidic covenant be compared with it?].[46] These problems are solved if we remember that there is more than one covenant form in the Old Testament. But the Davidic covenant shows a new relationship:

> In place of the old tribal confederation there developed a monarchy in which the basis of Yahweh's relationship with Israel shifted from the Mosaic covenant with its emphasis on Yahweh and the community to that of Yahweh and David.[47]

In addition to the divine covenant which indicates that "David has been selected for greatness and blessed because of divine grace . . . , and that leadership of God's people is now to be determined by dynastic succession,"[48] connections can be made that indicate that the land which was promised to Abraham by covenant is put under the dominion of David. "David and his house are the favorites of God, and this takes the form of a divine

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[45]Mendenhall, 44.

[46]McCarthy, 84-85.

[47]Myers, 24.

[48]Cokesbury Basic Bible Commentary, "First and Second Samuel," by Frank Johnson, 108.

covenant in David's favor, an 'eternal covenant.'"[49] From 2 Samuel 7:

> **But your house and your kingship shall be firmly fixed forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.**

Under David's monarchy, stability returns to Israel. In addition, "no sooner was David king than he embarked upon that course of action that was utterly to transform Israel . . . the people of Yahweh become the Kingdom of Israel, the citizens of the Davidic state."[50]

But things did not go well in Israel or the monarchy as time passed. The people, being removed from the original covenant, began to doubt its promises and stipulations and reverted to apostasy. Then, following the covenant-breaking formula, God allows Israel's enemies to oppress her--indeed, to capture her people and lead them into exile:

> **It was especially easy to question the continuing significance of the exodus when the Israelites found themselves, quite unexpectedly, in exile, in a different house of bondage.**[51]

It is out of the exile that the words of comfort from Jeremiah predict a "New Covenant," one which combines the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

> **Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those**

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[49]Hillers, Covenant, 108.

[50]Bright, 37, 39.

[51]Hillers, 166.

> **days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.**[52]

God is promising a new day for Israel. Jeremiah gives voice to God's promise. "Here, perhaps more than elsewhere, the Old Covenant reaches out in longing for the New."[53] We will see Jeremiah's "New Covenant" become the central focus of the New Testament. It will have new language (the Kingdom of God) and a new prophet (Jesus), but the same God will initiate and sustain it.

In sum, the Old Testament provides us with three forms of covenant: (1) a firmly regulated form of a fellowship between God and man, or man and God (suzerainty covenant); (2) an unconditional gift from God to man (covenant of grant); and (3) a half-legal, half-sacral form of fellowship between man and man (parity covenant).

The discussion in this chapter contains an implicit question about covenant: Why does God want to enter into covenant with people? The answer is simply, "God is in love with his people."[54] In addition, he wants them to live in harmony with their neighbors, and he wants them to be free from whatever holds then in bondage and keeps them from wholeness.

Let us reiterate what God says in these covenants: The covenant with Noah says God remembers his promise not to flood the

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[52]Jeremiah 31:31, 33.

[53]Bright, 126.

[54]Marcus J. Borg, Jesus: A New Vision (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 102.

earth again. The covenant with Abraham says God will elect a people and give them a land. Exodus says God delivers and saves. Sinai says God commands them to do his will in a condition of liberation--the suzerainty treaty. David's monarchy means God keeps his promises.[55]

So we see several covenants by which God commits himself to his people, most of which can be classified as suzerainty covenants. Even the "covenants of grant" with Noah and Abraham can be interpreted as suzerainty covenants, because they are not given totally as a divine gift as was God's covenant with David. That which sources have called "signs" of the two covenants can be interpreted as stipulations by which the people commit themselves to God in covenant.

In our next chapter, we will see that God continues his relationship with his people by sending a prophet who radicalizes and restates God's covenantal promises and expectations.

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[55]Clark, "Notes for 'Bible 110.'"

CHAPTER III

JESUS, THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND SUZERAINTY COVENANT

Making the connection from Old Testament to New Testament is not difficult when we consider that

> **Pharisaic Judaism offers the clearest transition between the Hebrew canon and Jesus--as it does for Paul. . . . The center of gravity here lies in the Pharisaic effort to "democratize" and potentially to "universalize" the human side of covenant obligation.[56]**

Therefore, before we describe the ways by which the kingdom of God is articulated by Jesus, it is necessary to look at the milieu out of which he began his ministry--Pharisaic Judaism.

Pharisaic Judaism[57]

Pharisaic Judaism did not exist until about 10 C.E. It began *in medias res* (to say it began in the middle of things is a slight understatement!); that is, Pharisaic Judaism began as a revolutionary movement over against the Sadducean aristocracy of wealth and hereditary priesthood at a time when the Jews were trying to retain their authenticity during the occupation of

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[56]Clark, "Notes for Thesis Reflection."

[57]The information given here on the Pharisees comes specifically from three sources: Jack L. Clark, "Early Judaism in Medias Res: The Pharisaic Revolution"; Ellis Rivkin, A Hidden Revolution (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978); and Jacob Neusner, From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973).

Palestine by the Romans. Of the three Jewish sects that existed at the time of Jesus--the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees--only Pharisaic Judaism survives as a vital Jewish movement. Their motto could have been, "Pharisaic Judaism Is An Aristocracy of Learning and Instructive Worship,"[58] for they taught not in the temple, but in the synagogue--an institution of learning and worship which emerged during the exile (387-538 B.C.E.) when no temple existed. The "learning and instructive worship" segment of Pharisaic Judaism informs our own Christian Sunday Schools. Their emphasis on "A new 'hermeneutic' of scripture, with proof texts and principles, was that (1) God is always Father, (2) Torah is always dual, and (3) salvation means resurrection and eternal life."[59] These three tenets of the Pharisees cast them immediately and irrevocably against the Sadducees, who had almost opposite principles: (1) instead of God the Father (who "dwells . . . in the human life and conscience"[60]), the Sadducees saw their own function as life-long intermediaries between the people and God, (2) their scripture was primarily, if not exclusively, the written five books of the Torah (no written ***and*** oral Torah for them), (3) they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, but stressed a mode of life in this world that was informed and punctuated by the correct observance of ritual worship.[61]

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[58]Clark, "Early Judaism in Medias Res," 5.

[59]Ibid., 11.

[60]Ibid., 1.

[61]Ibid., 5-7.

The Pharisees were called revolutionaries, then, because they offered an alternative to the Sadducees, in addition to providing a vital Judaism in the midst of Hellenization. The Pharisees taught the demands of the twofold law (oral and written), and urged the people to study and to teach themselves an universal "twofold law which was binding on the individual wherever he might be, whether in Jerusalem, or Antioch, or Corinth, or Ephesus, or in Rome itself. Adherence to it was independent of the comings and goings of state sovereignty."[62] Moreover, a democratic stance informed the Pharisees' assignment of preaching and teaching duties. They were not assigned to any one class or individual (such as the Sadducean priests), but to those whose intensive study of the scripture was well-known or those who would offer edifying discourse.[63] The Pharisees, in essence, transformed "the Jewish people into a 'kingdom of priests.'"[64]

The radical nature of the alternatives offered by the Pharisees cannot be overstated. They were a philosophic school in the manner of the Greek schools of Athens,[65] but they were also

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[62]Rivkin, 296.

[63]Jack L. Clark, "Notes from 'Jesus' Course."

[64]Borg, 89.

[65]In fact, says Rivkin, "Its teachers taught without pay, like philosophers; they attached themselves to particular disciples who followed them around and served them, like philosophers; they looked to gifts for support, like philosophers; they were exempt from taxation, like philosophers; they were distinguished in the street by their walk, speech, and peculiar clothing, like philosophers; . . . they discussed the questions philosophers discussed and reached the conclusions philosophers reached," Rivkin, 8-9.

proponents of a combination of prayer, praise, scripture reading, and instruction that constituted an act of worship.

That Pharisaic Judaism arose out of persecution is sure; that it gave security and comfort to its people who had only known exile and oppression is certain; that it provided not only the physical setting but also the religious underpinnings for Jesus' ministry is recognized. Were it not for the "wandering synagogues," the Jews in the small provinces such as Galilee might never have maintained their ties to their faith in the midst of Hellenization. It was through these revolutionary institutions of instruction that Jesus learned to be the person that he was. The Pharisaic Jews' adherence to a Torah that is both written (Mitsvoth--commandments) and oral (Halakoth--paths to walk),[66] (which are based on the theory that God had given to Moses not only written commandments, but also oral instruction that had not been transmitted to the priests, but to others) plus the Psalms, the Prophets, and other writings, appear early and often in Jesus' teachings.

Recall that Jeremiah wrote about a "New Covenant" that would be written on the hearts of the people. This visionary idea begins to take form with the Pharisaic teaching that stresses the need to internalize the twofold law, to look inward for discerning the divine, to relate to God as Father, and to accept salvation of the

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[66]Clark, "Judaism in Medias Res," 5.

individual, resurrection from the dead, and eternal life in the world to come as a reward for fidelity.[67]

It was into this Pharisaic Judaism that Jesus was born. Jesus "was a Jew, a very devout practicing Jew, until his last breath, when he died with a Jewish prayer to the Jewish God on his lips."[68]

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, which was under Roman rule:

> **The governors sent out from Rome to rule Judea beginning in A.D. 6 were second-rank and often second-rate Roman colonial administrators, sometimes simply incompetent, sometimes corrupt, sometimes deliberately provocative of Jewish loyalties.**[69]

The Jews responded to such persecution by adopting a "politics of holiness . . . which was a continuation in intensified form of a cultural dynamic that had emerged in Judaism after the exile. . . . the holiness code affirmed, '*You shall be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy.*'"[70] The Jews withdrew, as it were, into themselves "to be faithful to God in order to avoid another outpouring of the divine judgment."[71] (Recall that the way God dealt with the breaking of the covenant was to allow Israel's enemies to oppress her.) The Pharisees particularly stressed ritual purity and tithing (in spite of Rome's double taxation), and

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[67]Ibid., 9.

[68]Leonard Swidler, Yeshua: A Model for Moderns (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed and Ward, 1988), v.

[69]Borg, 84.

[70]Ibid., 86.

[71]Ibid.

if one failed in either category, he was punished by being ostracized, which included being called a Gentile, losing his identification as a child of Abraham in the life to come, and losing the privilege of table fellowship. In short, that person became a "sinner and outcast."[72] It is apparent already where Jesus will come into conflict with the Pharisees, for he ate with "sinners and outcasts" and disobeyed other laws of ritual purity. He abrogated the "politics of holiness" for "politics of compassion."[73] But this conflict was "a conflict among [Pharisaic] brothers, quite unrelated to the charge on which Jesus was condemned."[74]

The Pharisaic Revolution, then, not only rescued and comforted the Jews under persecution, it also

> served as the bedrock of emergent Christianity. Jesus was nurtured on the twofold law. At the very dawn of his intelligence, the grand faith of the Pharisees . . . was inscribed within his conscience. God was indeed the loving and caring Father. God had revealed his will to Israel in the twofold law. God had promised that everyone who served with love and loyalty would enjoy eternal life and resurrection.[75]

We turn now to the man Jesus, his "politics of compassion," and his teachings about the Kingdom of God--all of which reconfirm God's suzerainty covenant with his people.

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[72]Ibid., 92.

[73]Ibid., 160.

[74]Clark, "Judaism in Medias Res," 3.

[75]Rivkin, 303.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

We see, therefore, that Pharisaic Judaism is the vehicle by which the connection is made from the concept of covenant in the Old Testament to the concept of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament. We also see that Jesus was a Pharisaic Jew who knew from the twofold law that God lives in covenant with his people. The term "Kingdom of God" is how Jesus chooses to express that "new" covenantal relationship. ("In fact, from the inception of the covenant at Sinai, *Kingdom of God* was in the air."[76])

> . . . "Kingdom of God" is a symbol that evokes the whole range of meanings associated with the myth of God's activity as King, of his visiting and redeeming his people, not in the sense that it is simply a future reality proved by the demonstration of literal signs, but as a present reality available already through the preaching and activity of Jesus.[77]

The Kingdom of God is never actually defined by Jesus in so many words (except metaphorically--"the Kingdom of God is like . . ."), but the idea is an integral part of his teachings and continues a concept that existed in the Davidic state and perhaps as far back as Moses himself:

> . . . it is linked with Israel's whole notion of herself as the chosen people of God, and this in turn was woven into the texture of her faith from the beginning.[78]

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[76]Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 40.

[77]Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, The New Testament (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982), 415.

[78]Bright, 19.

Thus, Kingdom of God is intimately related to covenant (if not identical with it) and to God's relationship with his people in both Old and New Testaments. The concept also is tied to Jesus' ministry as "restoring to health" and to covenant "Israel's lost sheep."[79]

The accepted method for describing Jesus's ministry is to focus on his presentation of the Kingdom of God in prayer, parables, miracles (or mighty works), and fellowship meals.[80] There is no intention to depart from that method here. We wish to clarify that we are not holding covenant and Kingdom of God in juxtaposition to each other; rather, we are saying that they are nearly identical in that both stress God's grace, lovingkindness, and generosity as gifts that precede grateful response by his people. That there is an ethical responsibility in the response, both to Old Testament Covenant and New Testament Kingdom of God, is mandated. The form of the suzerainty covenant includes "stipulations," how the people will act in response to God's gifts to him. Those stipulations are inherent in Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God, too. Jesus is placing no less of a responsibility on those who would be people of God than did the Old Testament prophets. If anything, he is radicalizing and restating

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[79]Jack L. Clark, "History, Tradition, and the Gospel," 3.

[80]This is the format used by Jack L. Clark in his course on Jesus at Gustavus; James P. Mackey does the same in Jesus: The Man and The Myth (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); John Reumann follows suit in Jesus in the Church's Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), as do Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, The New Testament: An Introduction.

the stipulations from the suzerainty covenant of the Old Testament.

As we weave the story of the Kingdom of God as expressed by Jesus in prayer, parables, miracles, and fellowship meals, we also provide a look at the man behind the message.

The quest for the historical Jesus heretofore has ended in frustration, but from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we can infer what kind of person he was: "a charismatic who was a healer, a sage, prophet, and revitalization movement founder."[81] In the context of this discussion, being charismatic means "being a person who is in touch with the power of the Spirit to enter the world of ordinary experience."[82] Being a "healer" is open to various interpretations, but we prefer to use it in the sense of returning people to wholeness, of rescuing them from whatever makes them unable to live life fully. So it is a healing both psychologically and physically. "Sage" requires little explanation--we connect it with wise people who can tell us how to deal with life. "Prophets," like those in the Old Testament, are persons to whom the will of God is revealed (this writer believes that Jesus, too, was a prophet in the fashion of the Old Testament prophets). They seek to impart God's revelation to the people. "Revitalization movement founder" is just a more sophisticated way of saying that Jesus came bringing news of a different way of life --a way of life marked by wholeness, peace, and joy under the loving eye of the Father.

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[81]Borg, 15.

[82]Ibid., 16.

But Jesus was also a revolutionary.

> Jesus had a divine mission to tear away all the blocks and hindrances standing in the way of humanity's thirst for the water of life. He met with the fate that in some form always befalls those who dare to challenge the rigid, tradition-encrusted orthodoxy of the religious and political-economic status quo: the religious and political authorities had him crucified.[83]

How did this ministry begin that ended so tragically? Jesus seems to appear out of nowhere[84] to listen to John the Baptist and to ask to be baptized. Here the first manifestation of the Spirit appears: "Jesus saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove" (Mark 1:10). Jesus sees and hears that which not even John the Baptist, another charismatic, sees and hears: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). This visitation of the Spirit is followed by another: he is driven out to the wilderness. "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (Mark 1:13). It is this period of fasting and solitude that introduces Jesus and us to the importance of the Spirit. We examine first its importance with prayer as one of the ways in which Jesus expressed the Kingdom of God.

Jesus and Prayer

> All of the Gospels witness to the fact that earnest prayer was a central feature of Jesus' own spiritual life. There is no point at which we sense his full

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[83]Tom Harpur, For Christ's Sake (Boston, Beacon Press, 1987), 3.

[84]Indeed, we do not know from where he came. The middle part of his short life is without documentation.

> humanity, his essential oneness with ourselves, more powerfully than when we see and hear him praying to the Father.[85]

Almost all writers about Jesus and prayer focus on two prayers: the prayer which he taught his disciples, "The Lord's Prayer," and the prayer which he prayed in Gethsemane. That is our point of departure, too, although we want to stress the activity of the Spirit in Jesus' prayers. We know that as a Jew he began and ended each day with the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."[86] But, especially after the descent of the Spirit, Jesus became a person increasing involved in what Borg calls

> . . . deeper levels of prayer characterized by internal silence and lengthy periods of time. In this state, one enters into deeper levels of consciousness; ordinary consciousness is stilled, and one sits quietly in the presence of God. . . . One enters the realm of Spirit and experiences God.[87]

It is with this same intensity that Jesus responded to his disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), and they may have made the request because when Jesus returned from prayer, they saw "a man--tired maybe--but a man . . . ***renewed inside***, and

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[85]Harpur, p. 42.

[86]Borg, 40.

[87]Ibid., 44.

new strength shining in his eyes."[88] They saw what an effect prayer (and the Spirit) made on Jesus.

The Lord's Prayer

It is interesting to note that the disciples, Jews as was Jesus, had been praying parts of the Lord's Prayer all of their lives. More interesting still is the fact that it has not been changed to reflect doctrine or dogma. It remains essentially the prayer Jesus taught the disciples.

There are two versions of the prayer, one in Luke 11:2-4 and one in Matthew 6:9-13. The prayer in Luke is shorter, perhaps "Hellenized," but it can be completely enclosed in the Matthew version. Jack Clark retranslated the prayer back into Aramaic, with the following the result:

> Father,
> May your name be hallowed,
> May your Kingdom come.
> Bread for the morrow
> Give us this day;
> Forgive our debts
> As we forgive our debtors;
> And do not let us fall victim to temptation.[89]

John Reumann followed the form in Luke but employed some details from the wording in Matthew:

> Dear Father,
> Hallowed be thy name;
> Thy Kingdom come;
> Our bread for tomorrow, give us today;

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[88]John Reumann, Jesus in the Church's Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 94. He is quoting a play by J. B. Phillips in which the disciples watch Jesus go off to pray, and comment on his demeanor when he returns.

[89]Jack L. Clark, "The Lord's Prayer," 1.

> And forgive us our debts, as we also
> here and now forgive our debtors;
> And let us not fall into temptation.[90]

Both Clark and Reumann offer interpretations of the prayer. Clark suggests that the prayer was probably requested by the disciples because "Palestinian-Jewish religious groups such as the Pharisees, the Qumran Community, and the disciples of John the Baptist were characterized by distinctive rites of prayer. . . . we may conclude . . . that Jesus offered his prayer as a form of worship intended to unite and focus the ministry of his disciples."[91] Reumann essentially agrees with Clark, but adds that some words may have been added because of the hesitancy of his Jewish disciples to use Jesus' intimate and familiar way of addressing God (such as adding "Dear" in front of "Father" in the version in Luke).[92]

There are sections of the prayer which are original with Jesus: "(1) the way Jesus speaks of the kingdom; (2) the manner in which he addresses God; and, in some ways, the concept of forgiveness."[93] "The way Jesus speaks of the kingdom refers . . . to a kingdom which already exists. The kingdom comes as God's will is done."[94]

> The prayer that [God's] Kingdom may come does not
> contradict other sayings to the effect that God's

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[90]Reumann, 92-93.

[91]Clark, "The Lord's Prayer," 2.

[92]Reumann, 95.

[93]Reumann, 99.

[94]Reumann, 96, quoting Luther's Small Catechism.

> reign is already at hand or within our innermost selves. It has yet to come in all its fullness. . . . As long as there is still injustice, war, or other misery upon the earth, to that extent it has not yet been fully born of realized.[95]
>
> Jesus spoke of God with new directness and of the intervention of God's kingdom with new certainty.[96]

The manner in which Jesus addressed God (as "Our Father" or "Abba,") denotes a new relationship between God and his children (the "New Covenant" of which Jeremiah spoke). Speaking in this way about God affirms that

> God is my Father, and so everything and everybody, including myself, is his gift, which he values and cherishes. . . . God cherishes all things great and small, and all people, good, bad, and indifferent, as a father cherishes his children.[97]

The petition in the prayer which says "forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors" is sometimes perceived as a "sticky wicket" which conflicts with the idea of God's grace. It is here where the "ethic of gratitude" vs. an "ethic of calculation" re-enters our discussion. An ethic of gratitude simply means "let us love God because he first loved us." With an ethic of gratitude, we do not have the problem of answering, "What shall we do now that we don't have to do anything?"[98] We know that we respond out of thankfulness for God's good gifts.

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[95]Harpur, 47.

[96]Reumann, 98.

[97]Mackey, 143.

[98]Edgar Carlson, "Luther and the College: Five Great Ideas," a series of chapel talks in 1983. Carlson is quoting Professor Gerhard Forde of Luther-Northwestern Seminary, Justification.

If we then define grace (in the New Testament, *charis*) as meaning "God's graciousness towards mankind,"[99] which encompasses God's love freely and generously given to people who are completely undeserving, we see that "forgive us our debts as we forgive others" means

> . . . having experienced the generosity of God, we should be inspired to be generous in turn. . . . In this way the experience of the reign of God as Jesus depicted it, an experience of being graced and cherished [should] inspire us to generosity also.[100]

So the prayer Jesus taught his disciples is our prayer, too, and our covenant with God, "in which acts of divine benevolence both precede and motivate obedient response by humans."[101]

Jesus' Prayer in Gethsemane

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane immediately precedes his arrest and subsequent crucifixion. It depicts a man in agony over what he anticipates will happen to him, but also a man who trusts in God.

> The prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane remarkably reflects the content of the prayer that Jesus had taught his disciples to pray. The praying Lord and the Lord's Prayer become one. . . . Jesus puts the contents of the prayer he had taught into words that fit the situation of the moment in his life.[102]

The prayer becomes not merely an example of how Jesus prayed, but how Christians ought to pray. The prayer is a prayer of the

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[99]The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, s.v. "Grace," by E. J. Yarnold, 243.

[100]Mackey, 144.

[101]Clark, "Reflections on Prayer."

[102]Reumann, 107-108.

Kingdom, the prayer in which we seek God's own assurance for our stability in the experience known as the reign of God.[103] It should issue in "renewed dedication to God, the restoration of incentive, the freshening of purpose."[104] We see Jesus respond by rising from prayer, rousing the sleeping disciples, and saying, "Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going . . ." (Matthew 26:45-46). Having given himself fully to God's leadership, he takes the path that is before him.

Our next section reveals how Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God in parables.

Jesus Teaches About the Kingdom of God in Parables

> A parable is a "brief metaphorical narrative." A metaphor occurs when a word or phrase is applied to an object or concept it does not literally denote in order to suggest comparison or analogy. . . . A parable, then, is a brief story which not only has its own intrinsic meaning, but also points to or symbolizes another story by analogy.[105]

Jesus was a storyteller. That much is clear from his use of story in parables to teach about the Kingdom of God. There are recurring characteristics in his parables: "There were always two outlooks, two sides. The listener was invited to pick a side. Jesus never did the choosing for anyone. He stopped each story

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[103]Jack L. Clark, "Notes from 'Jesus' Course."

[104]Clark, "Reflections on Prayer."

[105]Jack L. Clark, "Recommended Procedure for Developing Reports on the Parables of Jesus."

abruptly, leaving the hearer with the burden of choice."[106] Telling parables was Jesus' favorite form of "inviting people to see things differently,"[107] just as the beginning of many of them invited people to understand the Kingdom of God. Every parable has a message and a theology about God's Kingdom. "They are rather like a slow saunter round that singular, very complex experience [the Kingdom of God], lighting up its concrete facets, sometimes several at a time, as the circle is completed."[108] The thought of the parables falls into categories: (1) now is the day of salvation; (2) in God's Kingdom, mercy, goodness, and love are being exhibited, and (3) God's power will bring Kingdom to pass.

It is in the demands of the Kingdom of God as articulated in parables that we see the idea of suzerainty covenant and ethic of gratitude emerge once more. There is no cheap grace; one must repent and believe. There is a call to obedience that asks us to match our lives to the will of God based on a gracious response to prior gifts on God's part. Anyone who accepts the teaching of the parable will "go and do likewise." "Jesus demands a response of love from those who follow him--love for God, but above all, love at its most practical, love for one's fellowman."[109] Using examples from "the world of human experience or about nature,"[110]

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[106]Sloyan, 90.

[107]Borg, 99.

[108]Mackey, 130.

[109]Reumann, 175.

[110]Borg, 98.

Jesus told his parables in such a way that each listener could understand what was expected of him/her were s/he to participate in the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, his parables "which might have spoken to a limited time and place have been made to speak over the centuries."[111] Parables which seemed to speak of the eschaton have remained as pertinent for today's Christians (who still await the eschaton) as they were for Jesus' original listeners.

This discussion on parables as a means of identifying the Kingdom of God leads us to fellowship meals as another means by which Jesus taught about the Kingdom.

Jesus and Fellowship Meals

A discussion of Jesus and table fellowship generally begins with the Last Supper. However, it is our judgment that the Last Supper is part of a larger issue:

> The gracious image of God is implicit in one of the most striking features of Jesus' ministry, namely the meals which he shared with "sinners,"--that is, outcasts. Given that sharing a meal in first-century Palestine signified acceptance of one's table companions, Jesus' behavior signified his acceptance of them[112]

Recall that in our discussion of Pharisaic Judaism, we stressed that those who did not abide by the laws of ritual purity were denied table fellowship and called "sinners and outcasts." It is these very people with whom Jesus ate and drank, giving rise to a charge of being a "glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax-

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[111]Reumann, 198.

[112]Borg, 100.

gatherers and sinners" (Mark 2:15, Luke 19:7, Luke 15:2, Matthew 11:19).[113] Eating and drinking with outcasts "shattered the social world which pronounced them unacceptable, but it enabled the outcasts to see themselves as accepted by God."[114] Furthermore, "we gather from the gospels that, in the interests of being in the midst of common people, Jesus did not scruple about the prescriptions for purity that were enforced by the rigorists of his time."[115] Meals were of supreme importance to the Jews, a ritual intimately connected with the Exodus, but also connected with the true reign of God. "Meals [for Jews] were grateful celebrations of God's gift of life, celebrated in the shared food and the joyful fellowship, sacraments of the reign of God."[116] So we have no difficulty anticipating the problems Jesus will have in this conflict over who will eat with whom and how. Jesus' politics of compassion come into sharp contrast with the Pharisee's politics of holiness. Compassion is a feeling, or being moved by another's situation at a level lower than the head or intellect. "Jesus repeatedly emphasized the compassion of God"[117] in parables, in healing, and in table fellowship. It is helpful to think here of a festive act of sharing food and drink at a table rather than as a ritual. Jesus' fellowship meals are as symbolic of the Kingdom of

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[113]Borg, 132.

[114]Borg, 132.

[115]Sloyan, 115.

[116]Jack L. Clark, "Notes from 'Jesus' Course."

[117]Borg, 130.

God as are his words. The interrelatedness that runs through them is the foreshadowing of the feast of the coming Kingdom of God. Nothing could present a better image of what the final messianic feast will be like than that of a table laden with good food and good wine, surrounded by a comradeship of people who feel no discomfort at being there--no divisions and no differences.

Mackey gives a succinct summary about table fellowship:

> Both by reason of its intrinsic nature, then, and by reason of the convention of his culture, the table-fellowship practiced by Jesus proved a most effective symbol of the experience of the reign of God which he was trying to share with those who could open themselves to it.[118]

But, by focusing on table fellowship, we are not ignoring the Last Supper. Quite the contrary.

> Here in the upper room is the "New Covenant" forecast by Jeremiah and all the prophets announced and made actual. Here among the followers of the Lord is the new Israel to which has been given a new law of intention and heart. . . . The Last Supper was a covenant meal . . . which symbolized a fellowship--indeed, the fellowship of the Kingdom--in which the twelve disciples were bound to one another and to their Lord.[119]

We add that the "New Covenant" has come to us through Jesus and the twelve disciples as a gift from God through the Spirit.

Jesus and Miracles

> Miracle is an occurrence that awakens awesome fascination, astonishment, wonder. It is an event which, for the religious subject, has the character

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[118]Mackey, 150.

[119]Bright, 229-230.

> of the unusual and mysterious, evoking a perception of the divine power that is effective in it.[120]

Although most Biblical scholars write about the miracles Jesus performed, they also affirm that Jesus did not want them to be the foundation of faith. In addition, for those who see Jesus as the Spirit-filled charismatic, miracles are recognized as another form of Jesus' amazing openness to God as manifested through the Spirit. Most of those who clamored about Jesus sought to be healed of some illness, psychosomatic (evil spirits, possession by something other than themselves which cause convulsions, sweating, and seizures[121]) or physical (fever, leprosy, paralysis, withered hand, bent back, hemorrhage, deafness and dumbness, blindness, dropsy, severed ear[122])--and those are listed as only a few which are "typical"! We also must include here the resuscitations (from what looked like death). And, of course, there are the "spectacular deeds": stilling a storm, walking on the sea, the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand, a "miraculous" catch of fish, and the cursing and withering of a fig tree.[123]

The performance of miracles is not specific to either Jesus or the era in which he lived. There is a tradition of miracle stories in the Hebrew Bible (plagues in Egypt--Exodus 7-12, the

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[120]Jack L. Clark, "Reflections on the Concept of 'Miracle,'" 1.

[121]Borg, 62.

[122]Borg, 65.

[123]Borg, 66.

provision of manna, quails, and water in the wilderness--Exodus 16-17, the standing still of the sun and moon--Joshua 10:12-13, the springing up of fire from the rock--Judges 6:21, the falling of fire from heaven--I Kings 18:38, the ten-step backward movement of the sun on the sundial--II Kings 20:10-11, and, performed by Elijah and Elisha, healings, feedings, resuscitations, and even making a sunken iron axe head come to the surface of the water and float--I Kings 17-21; II Kings 4-8).[124]

There are in post-exilic Judaism additional miracle stories, and there are post-Resurrection miracle stories in the New Testament. So Jesus stands in the middle of a well-documented tradition. However, he uses miracles to stress the inbreaking of God's Kingdom:

> To the New Testament faith the miracles which Jesus performed were not incidental or peripheral, but integral to his person. . . . [T]hey were illustrations of the fact that in Christ the new age was even then intruding upon the present one: the power of the Kingdom of God was present in them and was grappling with the evil powers of this age.[125]

So, we have seen how Jesus revealed the Kingdom of God in his prayers, his table fellowship, his parables, and his miracles. Inherent in all of his teachings is the implicit concept of "God with us," another way of expressing God's suzerainty covenant with his people.

But, we cannot dismiss the covenantal relationships between Old and New Testaments by saying that a covenant of works is

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[124]Clark, "Miracle," 2.

[125] Bright, 217-218.

replaced with a covenant of grace. Both covenants are seen as grateful responses to the unmerited grace of God, and both covenants display "ethics of the Kingdom," which enjoin believers to respond through obedience and righteousness.[126]

Next, we consider how the apostle Paul used the Christ event and covenant in his own ministry as he writes to the church at Rome about forming a covenant community.

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[126]Bright, 223.

CHAPTER IV

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S COVENANT COMMUNITY IN ROMANS

> Paul's fundamental conviction throughout his life derived from his Israelite heritage and centered on the concept of covenant: God's covenant, in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, is established anew through Jesus Christ for both Gentile and Jew.[127]

The purpose of this section of the research is not to explicate the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. What is proposed here to is to portray how the Christians in Rome were encouraged to live as a covenant community under the direction of Paul, and from that, to be able to discern how twentieth-century Christians can also participate in Covenant cum Kingdom of God.

> The emphasis upon covenant . . . shifts the emphasis away from questions of individual sin and salvation toward a greater concern for the community of faith as the context in which one believes and lives obediently. [I]t focuses on Paul's reiteration of "no distinction" . . . [I]t regards the formation of a new covenant community in which Jew and Gentile stand together in grace as central . . .[128]

Paul's Covenant Community

Christianity started as a sect within Judaism. According to the old prophetic scenario, once Israel had been returned to the covenant, the Gentiles, too, would wish to join God's people. We

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[127]Kaylor, 2.

[128]Kaylor, iii-iv.

suggest that Jesus, who confined himself essentially to addressing his fellow Jews in Palestine, was trying to return the "lost ones" of Israel to the covenant, and that Paul, who ministered to the Gentiles in several provinces, was endeavoring to convince the Gentiles to join God's people.[129]

Paul's concept of covenant restates the suzerainty treaty again:

> For Paul the Christ event was a new deed of benevolence, so naturally it led to a new covenant. Paul was therefore thoroughly Jewish in relating Jesus to what he had formerly known about God. When Jesus heals, they are not random acts. It is an effort to restore people to health. They were acts of covenant renewal. "You have not benefitted fully from the covenant, so I will make you whole."[130]

So Paul not only puts a new cast on the suzerainty covenant, he also goes back to the beginning (to Abraham). There is both continuity and freshness here. God has revealed himself to Israel in the covenants with Abraham and Moses and in his mighty acts on her behalf, but, says Paul, God has disclosed himself to the Gentiles, too: (1) He has created the world in such a way that it has always been possible to infer his lordship and purpose from the creation itself (Romans 1:20); (2) Gentile culture shows that non-Jews as well as Jews have a "conscience," so that "when Gentiles who do not have the Torah do by nature [culture?] what the Torah requires, they are a Torah to themselves" (Romans 2:14-15).[131]

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[129]Jack. L. Clark, "The Apostle Paul," 14.

[130]Clark, "Lecture on 'Hans-Joachim Schoeps.'"

[131]Jack L. Clark, "Reflections on Romans," 1.

> Paul's use of Abraham and Moses, then, expresses his desire to denationalize faith in the one God, and to harmonize two divisions of humankind into one community of faith. He uses positively those elements of covenant traditions which lend themselves to the universalizing of the gospel (those associated with Abraham); he evaluates negatively those covenantal traditions which are most closely tied to Jewish particularism and exclusivism (those associated with Moses).[132]

The theme of the whole letter to the church at Rome has been called "the righteousness of God," but much of the later part of the letter is filled with the practical requirements of righteous living in community.[133] Since there seems no way to cover all the points without covering all the points, we will engage in some Biblical exegesis.

> In Romans 12-15, Paul's primary concern is with "ethics," that is, with behavior in the new covenant community. Ethical concerns are in the forefront of questions about how human life can be renewed so that God's righteousness will be realized in human experience.[134]

First, Paul has to deal with questions posed by the continuation of a vital Judaism alongside a growing church (Chapters 9-11).

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[132]Kaylor, 181.

[133]This section is comprised essentially of a previous research project (presented orally) on Romans by the writer. Sources used for exegesis were: Peake's Commentary on the Bible, eds. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (United Kingdom: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. Ltd., 1982), s.v. "Romans," by T. W. Manson; The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1971), s.v. "The Letter of Paul to the Romans," by Edwin Cyril Blackman; Cokesbury Basic Bible Commentary (Nashville: Graded Press, 1988), s.v. "Romans," by Robert Jewett; and R. David Kaylor, Paul's Covenant Community: Jew and Gentile in Romans.

[134]Kaylor, 194.

What does it mean that Israel as a whole has not accepted the gospel in faith? Does it suggest that the ancient promises of a righteous God have become worthless, that He has abandoned the covenants with Abraham and Moses in favor of the new covenant in Christ? What is at issue here is not merely Paul's sympathy toward his fellow Jews, but the truthfulness and fidelity of God himself.[135]

Paul argues carefully, and with numerous references to the Scripture, that God has not left his promises unfulfilled. Those promises were neither directed to the whole of Israel as such nor limited to Israel alone. Moreover, they have begun to be fulfilled among the "elect" (cf. 8:28-30). God's will to elect some and reject others is absolute; it is not open to human assessment or complaint. He chose Abraham and no other, Isaac rather than Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Moses over Pharaoh. A natural human reaction to this kind of "predestinarian" thinking is to ask: If those are saved whom God chooses to save, and those are lost whom God rejects, then "why does he still find fault; for who can resist his will?" Paul answers this question in essentially the same terms that God is said to have answered the query of Job. "Who are you, a human being, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" (9:20-21). Then, speculatively, "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make

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[135]Clark, "Reflections on Romans," 4.

known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy . . . even us whom he has called not from the Jews only but also the Gentiles?" (9:22-24).[136]

And yet, Paul insists, God has not been arbitrary (cf. 2:11, "God shows no partiality"). Israel had tried to erect its own righteousness based on legal accomplishment instead of focusing its faith in the righteousness of God (9:30-10:21).[137]

When we get to Chapter 11, we cannot help but feel that Paul is a man in anguish trying to encourage the Jews to join among those who, like Paul, have decided that the way of Jesus is the better way of understanding God's message of righteousness and his offer of covenant. Paul knows that he was as vehement against the brand of Christianity he now espouses as are the Jews. He is walking a very fine line here, trying, as it were, to balance both sides (Judaism and Christianity). Paul asks in vs. 1, "Has God rejected his people?" His reply is a strong 'no'! Paul weaves an important, tactful argument by which to say that God has not rejected his people. He says that there has always been a remnant who accept the gospel--and here the argument grows even more complex: God has used Israel's rejection as a way by which the Gentiles could receive the good news of God's righteousness (Paul notes that the "ancient prophetic scenario, namely, first Israel

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[136]Ibid., 4-5.

[137]Ibid.

will be saved, then the Gentiles, has been reversed").[138] So Israel has stumbled, but not fallen, Paul reassures them. Through Israel's trespasses, salvation has come to the Gentiles "to make Israel jealous" (11:11)! Israel needs to be shocked into realizing the privilege of God's salvation by the sight of others who have received the good news. But implicit in all of this argument is that God knows what he is doing here and that he is not surprised at the rejection of Israel--in fact, the rejection may even have happened because of the hardening of their hearts by God! "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all" (11:32). Moreover, it is not the first time God has had to confront Israel's apostasy, but as in other cases, God's rejection is not final. (There is a whole book on covenant herein!) The implication is that after the required number of Gentiles come in, all of Israel will be saved, too.

Paul then turns his attention to the Gentiles, who arrogantly wanted to believe that God had rejected the Jews in favor of them. The wording Paul uses here seems to reflect an anti-Semitic feeling on the part of the Gentile Christians. Paul is quick to remind them that while the Jews were "broken off" (vs. 20) because of their unbelief, the Gentiles were "grafted in" because of their faith. Stand in awe of God, he seems to say. Gentiles *and* Jews are in the hands of the master potter. The doxology at the end of the chapter shows Paul's awareness that

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[138]Ibid., 5.

God's judgments and ways are unsearchable and inscrutable (vs. 33), "For who has known the mind of the Lord?" (vs. 34).[139]

Beginning with Chapter 12, Paul concentrates on what is required for the Christians to live righteously and in covenant with God and each other (this is called the "ethical/hortatory" section). Chapter 12 follows a general outline of the theme (1-2), use of Christian gifts (3-8), the struggle between good and evil (9-21) [which includes guidelines for genuine love (9)], life in the congregation (10-13), life outside the congregation (14-20), and the conclusion (12-21). All of these admonitions sound somewhat like Paul's version of the "Sermon on the Mount." He tries to cover every aspect of the Christian's relationships with neighbor and God: first, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (vs. 1) as gratitude and in praise for God's covenant gift in Christ. He calls for transformation which leads to the renewal of the mind (vs. 2), stresses carefulness in use of gifts and the building up of the body of Christ (vs. 3-6), and gives a section of short aphorisms full of advice (vs. 9-10) on how to live communally.

Chapters 13-15 deal with the issue of how Christians are to live in righteousness in relation to the problems faced by the Roman house churches. "Paul writes to the Roman Christians as a subject of the kingdom of God, an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, and a citizen of the Roman Empire, and proud to be all

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[139]Ibid.

three."[140] The section may be divided into: Christians and government (13:1-7); love and the end time (13:8-10); and moral alertness in the final days (13:11-14). Chapter 14 offers guidelines for the weak and strong (14:1-23); accepting outsiders (15:1-6); and summary statements (15:7-13). We will focus on Chapters 14 and 15.

Peake's Commentary calls Chapter 14 "`Traditions and Taboos,' the small change of religion and morality, the scene of constant and often embittered conflict between the scrupulous and the emancipated, the traditionalists and the progressives, the old fashioned and the enlightened."[141] What Paul is responding to is the situation we see in nearly every church: judgments being made about each other in nearly every manner: the weak in faith, the strong in faith, he who eats vegetables, he who eats everything, etc., etc. Paul reminds the Christians that "None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so, then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (vs. 7-8). Paul is advocating ethical behavior with reference to the approaching eschaton, but he is also emphasizing that God is the one who is to be honored. "The impartiality that God manifests in calling both together into one covenant community is to be reflected in the impartiality of their acceptance of each other."[142]

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[140] Peake's Commentary, 950.

[141] Ibid., 951.

[142] Kaylor, 209.

Moving Paul's Covenant Community to 1992

If we change "Rome" to "St. Peter," we might not have much difficulty in seeing in today's Christians the same tendencies observed in the early Christians. We do not have the "Jew vs. Gentile" controversy, but we do a "black vs. white" one. We do not have to worry about the government interfering in our churches (at least, not yet), but we do have "lower middle-class" people who feel uncomfortable at First Lutheran Church. We have more than our share of gossips and nay-sayers. No wonder that Paul's letter to the church at Rome is so often the subject of church homilies!

Can we retrieve a covenant community for ourselves? Are we grateful enough to God for his good gifts to respond by lovingkindness and generosity to our neighbors? Does the church founded in Jesus' name stand a chance for survival?

Only we, individually and in community, can answer those questions. But it is important that we answer them and act on them.

Our final chapter gives a summary and a critique of the concept of suzerainty covenant as that which best illustrates the relationship between God and humankind, in Old and New Testaments, as well as for twentieth-century Christians.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

At the outset of this research, our purpose was stated: "to take two familiar theological ideas--covenant and the Kingdom of God--and to cast them in a new light." Further, we joined those two ideas to show that "the concept of a 'suzerainty' covenant (or "covenant of gift and grant") more nearly characterizes the structure of both Old and New Testaments than does either the 'covenant of grant' or the 'parity covenant.'"

Moreover, we have seen how suzerainty covenant is used in the Old Testament to define God's relationship with his people; and how the "Kingdom of God" language used by Jesus extends the suzerainty covenant to the New Testament. We also have seen that the apostle Paul felt so strongly about the "New Covenant" (whether voiced by Abraham, Jeremiah, or Jesus) that he wrote to the Christians at Rome to advise them to form their community around the idea.

In the Old Testament, suzerainty covenant best describes the relationship between God and people because its credo is gift followed by response. God acts graciously and generously in behalf of his people, and then "enumerates what one will <u>not</u> do lest the

already established covenant be broken."[143] " . . . God summoned Israel into covenant and the steadfast love which he shows them even in spite of unworthiness . . . [is followed by] the proper response to grace, which is utter loyalty to the covenant God and obedience to his will."[144] We have seen the anger with which God has disciplined his people when they have turned away from covenant promises, and the penitence which they express as they return to covenantal harmony.

In the New Testament, this "gift and response" relationship can be readily detected in the prayers, parables, fellowship meals, and miracles that were the benchmarks of Jesus' ministry. In his prayers, it is "Thy Kingdom come" as God's will is done, as well as "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Prayer is the way in which we seek "God's assurance for our stability in the experience known as the reign of God."[145] In Jesus' parables we see a combination of salvation offered, God's mercy and goodness extended, and God's kingdom realized as people match their lives to the will of God based on a gracious response to prior gifts on God's part. In fellowship meals, people receive a foretaste of the final messianic feast, but also learn how to live in fellowship with each other; it is in the Lord's Supper where people experience covenant renewal and the fellowship of the Kingdom. In the

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[143]Clark, "Notes on 'Suzerainty Covenant.'"

[144]Bright, 27.

[145]Clark, "Notes from 'Jesus' Course."

miracles, Jesus stresses the inbreaking of God's Kingdom to help people grapple with the evil powers of the age.[146]

However, there are questions and doubts about the concept of suzerainty covenant. We believe we have answered the question, "Can we rule out a parity covenant or a covenant of grant as a more viable contract between God and people than a suzerainty covenant?" We have said that because of its very form, and because of the nature of humankind, the suzerainty covenant is the best way to describe how God relates to his people, whether it is in the covenantal language of the Old Testament or the Kingdom of God language of the New Testament. We answer "How can a concept of covenant that uses male-dominated language speak to all of today's Christians?" by saying we can infer from the very concept of covenant that the male gender language used in the Old and New Testaments can easily be translated into language that encompasses people of God, regardless of "race, sex, color, etc." Indeed, what we see in Galatians 3:28 is an attempt by Paul to make covenant universal and free of gender/nationality language ("There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . male nor female"). We have seen that God's covenantal promises are directed to people in community, but we also have seen that God reaches out to individuals who suffer (remember Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane).

There remains one serious question to be answered: "How does one believe in the gracious God of the suzerainty covenant and deal with the issue of theodicy?" The Bible does not purport to

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[146]Bright, 218.

answer that question, but it does offer some responses to how we should view apparent evil and what we can do about it.[147]

1. God has established an orderly world, and yet human beings can authentically exercise their free will within that world. That is why we see the formula in the Old Testament for dealing with covenant breaking: apostasy-punishment-repentance-deliverance.

2. God, however, does not withdraw from the human community as it goes about its exercise of responsibility. The Suzerain/King is also Father/Husband/Partner in human affairs--that is, "God with us." Those who are victimized by the effects of evil in the world experience anguish not alone, but in the presence of God, who labors with and suffers with his children.

3. God strives to bring good out of evil. This suggests that occasions of suffering can become opportunities to glorify God. When confronted with evil and suffering, a person may respond with such wholesome qualities as realism, courage, trust, and self-confidence, which are inspired by the helpful presence of God.

4. The Christ-event of Jesus' ministry, execution, and resurrection become the focal illustration of the above:

> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17, 21). We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him (Romans 8:28).

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[147]This discussion on theodicy uses as its source "Further Thoughts About Theodicy in the Biblical Tradition," by Jack L. Clark.

Surely, in the rich interaction between free, responsible, and suffering humanity and the loving and trustworthy God, victory over very real and powerful evil can be obtained.

Finally, then, the research is summarized:

> Both Testaments of the Bible portray the relationship between God and his people as "covenants" in which acts of divine benevolence both precede and motivate obedient response by humans. It is Adam, created, honored, and saved from loneliness, who is asked to avoid the forbidden fruit. It is an Israel freed from bondage who is asked to observe the decalogue. It is Jesus' followers, made "blessed," i.e., "happy," by the good news . . . who are to observe the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount. And it is those redeemed and made "righteous" by God's act in Christ who are to respond to the injunction: "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."[148]

For the people Israel of the Old Testament, for the followers of Jesus, for the young Christians at Rome, and for the Christians of 1992--for all of the people of God, the suzerainty covenant is the means by which God and people are joined together.

> I will be their God and they shall be my people.[149]

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[148]Clark, "Reflections on Prayer."

[149]Jeremiah 31:33.

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