



The Covenantal Presence

THE SECTARIANS OF first-century Judaism included the Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees and Zealots. Although they appeared to be diverse, these sectarians had common interests.¹⁻³ They all longed for the restoration of Judaism's historic power structures — the kingdom, priesthood and prophetic office — as well as universal submission to the Torah.⁴ Of course, this restoration required deliverance from Imperial Rome. The sectarians' aspirations for power also involved reducing a commanding God to an incorporeal, intangible and invisible essence.⁵ Imagining such a diminished God, they generally divinized themselves through the assumed possession ("immanence" within) of uncreated souls, spirits or minds thought to be derived from (to have "emanated" from) the divine essence.

These aspirations of first-century Judaism differed little from "Adam and Eve's" rejection of the Edenic covenant. Although given "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth . . .," our "first parents" were not satisfied with submission to God. They determined to possess the divine essence of "knowing [*yada* = to know] good and evil" (Genesis 1:26; 3:5, RSV).

. . . [T]he Hebrew word *yada*, which means to know, to understand, and to have sexual intercourse, also has a legal treaty meaning. In that context, *yada* means that parties to a treaty recognize each other in terms of the treaty . . .⁶

"Adam and Eve" implicitly determined to gain equality with the covenantal God through the possession of divinity. They thus fell under the satanic delusion, "Ye shall be . . . [covenantal] gods" (Genesis 3:5).

Millennial time witnessed no change in mankind's passion for covenantal power, a diminished God, and the possession of divinity. In fact, with the emergence of the great Near Eastern empires with their science and technology, man (male and female) imagined that he could not only subdue heaven and earth but also his fellow man. Thus began

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the age of “grand domestication” and its possessional practices of human suppression, slavery and sacrifice.⁷

The Covenant with Abraham

It was in this setting that God “brought [Abraham] . . . out of Ur of the Chaldees” (Genesis 15:7). God’s purpose was to deliver mankind from *possessional* delusions and from the resulting power structures. He thus created a covenantal *relationship* “with an individual man, Abraham, with the explicit aim that this relationship would ultimately benefit every family on the earth ([Genesis] 12:3; 18:18; 28:14).”⁸ Tragically, Abraham’s descendants saw and heard but did not understand God’s purpose. So it was that they became bondservants in Egypt.

The Egyptian power structures were designed to give man dominion over the natural world, over mankind, and even over God himself. Egypt therefore became the leading “grand domesticator” of human beings. To

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accomplish its goals, Egypt made use of advanced scientific, technologic and linguistic discoveries. It also made extraordinary use of mythology. Primal gods were either assigned to the chaotic ooze of nothingness below or exalted to the unapproachable, incorporeal, invisible, self-existent heavens above. Only successive “emanations” (derivations) of the gods prevailed on earth. These “emanated” demigods were ostensibly “immanent” to (within or possessed by) the Pharaohs, who regarded themselves as divine domesticators.⁹

The Covenant at Sinai

God heard the cries of those oppressed by the divinized power structures of Egypt. He acted personally — though metaphorically — and through Moses to deliver his people from divinized possession and consequent domination. Having miraculously led the children of Israel across the Sea of Reeds, God brought them to Mount Sinai. There he made a number of explicit declarations:

1. He declared, “I am the Lord your God [YHWH] . . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2, 3, RSV).

2. YHWH declared himself to be the One God, who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is” (Exodus 20:11). As the Creator-God, YHWH means “that which causes to be.”¹⁰

3. YHWH addressed his covenantal partner as individuals: “You . . . [2nd person singular] will not . . .”¹¹ He thus made clear that the covenant excluded the nonrelational implications of all inner “immanence” and

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possession and of all intervening power structures. God would act for his people as an individual and to his people as individuals.

While on the mountain, Moses received from YHWH the tables of stone upon which YHWH himself had engraved the moral and ethical conditions of the covenant (Exodus 20:3-17). On three separate occasions the people had covenantally declared, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7, RSV). Nevertheless, during Moses’ absence on the mountain, the people emphatically broke the covenant by persuading Aaron to make a molten calf-god to lead them. Thus, upon descending the mountain, Moses threw the covenantal tables out of his hands and broke them (Exodus 32:19).

The Promise of a New Covenant

In the aftermath — and as a “proleptic” (anticipatory) measure — God told Moses to hew two other tables of stone like the first and to engrave the words that God dictated to him. However, the people did not covenantally swear to obey these engraved stipulations. Instead, they responded by bringing an abundance of offerings for the “work of the tabernacle” (Exodus 35:21). Through the distinct “otherness” of the tabernacle’s dwelling with and among (not “in”) his people, God foreshadowed a new covenant.

The tabernacle was a metaphor or symbol that represented YHWH himself. The tabernacle represented his personal, covenantal presence and actions on behalf of his people. It was the metaphoric meeting place of heaven and earth.^{12,13} Furthermore, it was the metaphor for a new Creation (see Exodus 25:8; 29:45, 46; Zechariah 2:10). The tabernacle and its services were therefore entirely covenantal in nature. Not only did they explicitly symbolize YHWH and his actions for his people; they also symbolized the expected, reciprocal actions of the people that were fulfilled through YHWH as their Abrahamic representative (see Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 28:14).¹⁴ Thus, YHWH himself constituted the covenant.

The Tabernacle Metaphors

Within the gate of the tabernacle’s outer court stood the altar of burnt offering. Unlike the rituals of pagan worship, the wilderness tabernacle excluded traditional human sacrifice. Just as God had intervened to prevent Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, instead showing the patriarch a ram caught in a thicket (Genesis 22:1-14), so at Sinai God provided a substitute for human sacrifice. The lamb on the altar of burnt offering represented YHWH himself. On behalf of Israel, YHWH offered himself. He was “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). His promised sacrifice was the sacrifice symbolizing a new Creation.^{15,16}

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Death. The new covenantal Creation required a death that YHWH alone could execute, for inauguration of the new Creation required the death of the old order and of the old Creation:

1. There had to be the death of self-existent essence — an essence that is incorporeal, intangible, invisible and unapproachable. Because the principle of self-existence is contrary to relational coexistence, self-existence necessarily excludes everyone and everything else. Thus, only the death of self-existent deity could assure the relational reality of the covenantal parties.

2. There had to be the death of mankind’s delusional divine “immanence” (inner possession) that inevitably denigrates all “other” parties. This is because the principle of divine possession excludes human relationship and, therefore, covenant.

3. There had to be the death of non-being, of nonexistence, and thus of death itself. Only the “death of death” could provide a bulwark against the contingencies of nature and against the predatory, power-hungry animality that inevitably excludes and destroys all “otherness.” Thus, the altar of burnt offering and the sacrifice of the lamb were the “proleptic” (anticipatory) manifestation and promissory fulfillment of YHWH’s own creative sacrifice that he intended on behalf of mankind.

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Resurrection. The tabernacle metaphor of YHWH’s death was followed by the metaphor of his embodied resurrection. In ancient times Creation was believed to be composed of four elements — earth, water, air and fire.^{17,18} In the tabernacle service the sacrificed lamb was first taken by the priest to the cleansing water of the laver. The cleansed lamb was then symbolically carried into the first apartment of the tabernacle, where the seven-branched candlestick symbolized the element, fire; the “bread of the Presence” (RSV) symbolized the element, earth; and the altar of incense represented the element, air. Thus, in the first apartment the four elements — earth (*adamah*), water (*mayim*), air (*ruach*), and fire (*esh*) — ceremonially conveyed the resurrected embodiment of the sacred sacrifice. Through these metaphors YHWH intended his covenantal people to see, hear and understand the promise of his own embodied resurrection.

Enthronement. But YHWH’s embodied resurrection was not the end of the tabernacle metaphors. Once a year the veil between the first and second apartments of the tabernacle was lifted, and the ark of the covenant could then be seen. The ark held the engraved tables of the Law and was covered (*kaphar*) by the mercy seat (*kapporeth*). Over the mercy seat stood the cherubim, and between them shone the shekinah (*shakan* = to pitch one’s tent) — YHWH’s Presence.¹⁹ This artistry symbolized YHWH’s throne and his ultimate enthronement above the Law on behalf of his covenantal people (see “Enthronement” Psalms 24, 47, 89, 93, 96, 97, 99, 146).²⁰ The enthronement was the climactic fulfillment of the covenant. It embraced both parties — including all mankind. It represented the

termination of all profane and power-hungry predation. It fulfilled all the covenantal promises of the new Creation.

The tabernacle was therefore the metaphoric manifestation of YHWH himself. It foreshadowed his covenantal presence and actions to inaugurate a new and transformed order. Thus, YHWH covenantally “pitched his tent”

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on earth with mankind. As the children of Israel traveled through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, attended by the tabernacle, the existing powers were challenged, shaken and overthrown. No other God — be it Anat, Asherah, Baal, Dagon, Marduk or Rah — could stand before YHWH (e.g., see 1 Samuel 5:1-5).

Through the times of the judges, kings and thereafter, however, the chosen people failed to understand the symbolism of their own tabernacle and Temple. Judaism remained unaware of the “proleptic” (anticipatory) representation of YHWH’s impending death, embodied resurrection and ultimate enthronement. Like the pagan world around them, the Jews assumed that the Temple represented their own self-existence, their own possession of divinity (divine “immanence” within), and their own predatory prerogatives. As an interesting example of this, Judaism deposited its major assets in the Temple, and the ruling priesthood controlled these assets. The Temple thus became the central bank of Judaism.

Through tabernacle and Temple metaphors, YHWH represented his own covenantal presence and acts. He represented his covenantal promises and their intended creational fulfillment. But his people did not, would not, could not understand. They had indeed returned, not from exile or bondage, but to the servitude from which YHWH longed to deliver them.

The Fulfillment of the New Covenant

It was in this setting that YHWH did the surprising, unexpected thing. As intimated to Abraham and foreshadowed by the tabernacle and its services, he proceeded to “empty” himself (see Philippians 2:5-11) — not now metaphorically but actually. Here on earth he manifested himself as a

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lowly, humble, poor man. Here, as a human person, he fulfilled the terms of the covenant broken at Sinai and “proleptically” (anticipatorially) renewed in the tabernacle. Here YHWH then offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice to inaugurate a new Creation. Here he awaits covenantal enthronement as the God who became the Human One.

As in the provisions of the covenant, this enthronement will embrace both parties. Humanity as individual persons will then be enthroned with the Human One. The millennial shift from divine presence to human presence will be completed.²¹ In this covenantal Creation, YHWH, who became the Human One, will shortly exercise final judgment over all delusional self-existence, over all

assumed divine “immanence” (inner possession), and over all the power plays of the old order (e.g., see “Enthronement” Psalm 89:28-34). YHWH will then be seen, heard and understood as having become the ultimate and eternal, relational and covenantal Presence.

Endnotes

1. See “Builders of the Wall,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.5).
2. See “Neither Greek nor Jew,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.6).
3. See “The Messianic Secret,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.7).
4. See *ibid.*
5. See *ibid.*
6. Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 37.
7. See Karl W. Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 22ff.
8. Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Hidden Face of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 8.
9. See Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire*, pp. 55ff.
10. Friedman, *Hidden Face of God*, p. 284.
11. George E. Mendenhall, “The Suzerainty Treaty Structure: Thirty Years Later,” in Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss and John W. Welch, eds., *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 92.
12. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 12-17.
13. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 205.
14. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 242.
15. See Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 11: “. . . [S]acrifice is . . . the repetition of the act of Creation . . .”
16. Those who cling to the presuppositions of first-century Judaism will object to the death/resurrection of YHWH and his subsequent enthronement. They will argue for the traditional distinction between pagan deities, who die, and YHWH, “who always has lived, and always lives, and who, accordingly, everlastingly creates and sustains life” (Sigmund Mowinckel and Douglas A. Knight, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* [Ithaca, NY: CUP Services, 1992], p. 138; see also pp. 136-140). For example, the Talmudic scholar, Hyam Maccoby, denounces the death/resurrection of YHWH as a Pauline borrowing from pagan mystery cultic thought (see Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996]). However, Maccoby fails to understand that making the tabernacle/Temple services — priesthood, sacrifice, table fellowship, enthronement, etc. — the metaphors for divine “immanence” within mankind, in fact, guarantees an eternal present, an everlasting status quo, and the unending persistence of power-hungry predation. Furthermore, claims of divine “immanence” lead to visions, tongues and other signs designed to disclose an imagined inner divinity and to exclude all relational “otherness” — an “otherness” that has been the fundamental contribution and understanding of Judaism from its beginning. Thus, denial of the death/resurrection of YHWH was used to justify rejection of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. However, if the tabernacle services that symbolically embrace YHWH’s enthronement include a preparatory sacrifice, that sacrifice must symbolize YHWH’s own death/resurrection. All arguments for the preparatory sacrifice of mediatorial or agential *created being(s)* in order to effect *Creation* are not only untenable; they are inconceivable.
17. See *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Chemical element: Historical development of the concept of element,” at www.britannica.com/science/chemical-element#ref81205.

18. See Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire*, pp. 206-209: “The sequence of emanations . . . attributed to Heraclitus begins . . . with the radiant fire. . . . Along the downward path of ‘condensation,’ fire transforms into moisture; moisture condenses into water; and water congeals into earth. . . . [Thus, according to Heraclitus,] ‘the sum of things flows like a stream.’” Cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 22:1-4.
19. See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 405.
20. See Mowinckel and Knight, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*.
21. In discussing the phenomenal historic shift from the preeminence of divinity to the preeminence of humanity in biblical times, Elliott Friedman cites the Talmudic principle that “the word of God from Sinai was subject to a democratic vote of a group of human authorities. Once that group voted, nothing could overrule them. Not even a prophet. Not even a miracle. Not even a voice from the sky” (Friedman, *Hidden Face of God*, p. 122). However, such a principle ignores the fact that suzerainty treaties can only be amended at the initiation of the superintendent party, and parity treaties can only be amended by the mutual consent of both parties or of their chosen representatives.

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