



Introduction to “Contract versus Covenant”

Review of Previous Article

Early in the Second Temple period, Judaism became a recognized theocracy in the presumably “messianic” empire of Persia. Working together, Ezra and Nehemiah defined the Jews as the people of the Law, as the people of Torah. In fact, Judea claimed to have become “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6).

There are profound implications to this development. Not discerning YHWH’s promised covenantal embodiment, birth and subsequent life as human, the priesthood determined that the Chosen People would themselves fulfill the covenants. However, although carefully chosen with the best of intentions, theocratic power could not bring the ultimate fulfillment of God’s covenantal relationship with mankind. Tragically, the divine concept of covenant (involving personal relationships) became misconstrued as contract (involving property, goods and services). Furthermore, the termination of the prophetic office and the divorce of theology from history would lead to a millennial misapprehension of God’s true purposes.

Overview of This Article

The accompanying review is derived from an online essay entitled “Salvation History: One Holy Family,” by the Roman Catholic scholar, Scott Hahn. In this essay Hahn considers the fundamental differences between contract and covenant.

Throughout the self-conscious history of mankind, the almost universal assumption has been that humans are beings made under contract and bound to contract. The concept of contract involves the exchange of property, goods and services. And if viewed as a form of property, goods or services, mankind must either possess or be possessed, dispossess or be dispossessed. It was only with the emergence of the Hebrews that God challenged the concept of human contract and introduced the new concept of human covenant, which implied the ultimate, free and open relational exchange of persons.