



## “His Unspeakable Gift”<sup>1</sup>

IN ANCIENT TIMES MANKIND DEVELOPED contractual law to regulate the exchange of property, goods and services. Then, sometime after the domestication of plants and animals (ca. 10,000-5000 BCE), mankind began to apply contractual law to human beings in order to dominate, control and possess “others.” War and law were used to assure the submission, enslavement and even elimination of human rivals. In this context, “sin” was the refusal to submit to contractual law. “At-onement” involved the violent, sacrificial possession and even elimination of “others.” “Religion” was the ceremonial invocation and celebration of “sovereign freedom” from and over “others.”

In contrast to contractual law, covenantal agreements emerged during the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2500 BCE) to distinguish human beings from contractual property and thus to define the exchange of persons.<sup>2</sup> Originally, covenants were suzerainty treaties involving mutual agreements between a monarch and his submissively obedient subjects. The purpose of such covenants was to preserve the “sovereign freedom” of the king and to assure the loyal service of his subjects.<sup>3</sup> Many have long assumed that God or the gods also relate to others in this vertical manner. In this setting, “sin” was the rejection of covenantal submission. “At-onement” evolved to allow the sovereign party to offer itself as the sacrificial substitute on behalf of the subordinate party. “Religion” became the official recognition and sacramental fulfillment of the covenantal terms.

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During the axial age (ca. 800-200 BCE), another concept of covenantal relationality emerged in which mutual parties were regarded as equals. Known as a “parity covenant,” this relationship inaugurated what has become known as democracy. Not surprisingly, the parity covenant was extrapolated to the relationship between God and mankind. For example, in Genesis the serpent tempts Eve and Adam with the assertion that if they will eat the forbidden fruit, “Ye shall be as gods, knowing [*yada* = covenantal knowing] good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).<sup>4</sup> The Edenic temptation was to assume that mankind had the capacity to become a full and equal party with God and his covenant. Such fallacies have been propagated for millennia through pantheism, panentheism, Gnosticism and even “orthodoxy.” These contend that mankind *is* God, *possesses* God, or is destined to *become* God. In this context, “sin” is mankind’s ignorance or rejection of its own divinity. “At-onement” involves the termination of the “flesh” and the return of the divine soul to its cosmic oneness. “Religion” celebrates the anticipated reunion of estranged divinity with itself.

Over against the age-long concepts of contractual law and of suzerainty and parity covenants, there stands the unique truth of the biblical covenant.

## The Biblical Covenant

The true biblical view is that God alone constitutes the Covenant. God is *El-Berit* – the God of the Covenant.<sup>5</sup> Covenant is thus a metaphor for the Godhead. The One God, as Spirit, Father and Son, constitutes both the primal relationality and the consequent entities that define the covenant. The term “covenant” is therefore a fundamental symbol for defining the Godhead. As the Dutch-American pastor and theological professor, Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965), declared, “. . . [H]e is the God of the covenant, not according to a decree or according to an agreement or pact, but according to his very divine nature. . . . Covenant is . . . a necessary feature of the divine nature, and men enjoy friendship with God by this same covenant life being extended to them in a derivative way.”<sup>6, 7</sup>

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Hoeksema further develops this covenantal truth:

. . . [N]owhere in the first three chapters of Genesis do the Scriptures speak of a mutual agreement between God and Adam. On the contrary, it is God that acts throughout, and He alone. . . .

To Noah, both before and immediately after the flood, God declares that He [not “we”] will establish His covenant with him and with his seed (Gen. 6:18; 9:11). The covenant is God’s, and He alone establishes it. The same expression is employed to denote the establishment of God’s covenant with Abraham: “I will establish my covenant” (Gen. 17:7). And thus it is presented throughout the Scriptures. Through Isaiah God declares to His people: “I will make an everlasting covenant of peace with you” (Is. 55:3). Through

Jeremiah He says: “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel” (Jer. 31:31), and this passage is applied to the covenant of the new dispensation in Hebrews 8:8-10.

That the covenant is not a mutual agreement, but established by Jehovah alone, is also clearly revealed in the vision recorded in Genesis 15:9ff. Abraham is commanded to take several sacrificial animals, divide them into halves, and lay the pieces in two rows over against each other. Jehovah then, under the symbols of a smoking furnace and a burning lamp, passes through the midst of the pieces. The significance of the ritual of passing between the halves of the sacrificial animals must have been well known to Abraham. It was a symbolic act expressing the inviolable ratification of a covenant. The party passing through the midst of the divided animals thereby expressed that he would rather go through death than violate the covenant. Only, while in the case of a covenant between men both parties would pass through the midst of the halves of the sacrificial animals, thus expressing that the inviolability of the covenant depended upon the faithfulness of both, in the vision of Genesis 15 the Lord alone passed through them, indicating that He is His own party, and that He alone establishes and maintains His covenant.<sup>8</sup>

Hoeksema’s arguments could be carried further, but the fundamental reality is that God alone constitutes the Covenant! God alone is the beginning or formation of the covenant. God alone is the agent, agency or means of the covenant. God alone is the end or fulfillment of the covenant. Mankind, therefore, is not a party to the covenant. Mankind is not “part” of the covenant or the means of implementing the covenant.

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## Implications of the Biblical Covenant

Covenant is thus the fundamental concept for defining the personhood of God. From eternity God has been the primal relationality of Spirithood together with primal inner Fatherhood and primal outer, manifest Sonship. Because the fundamental nature of the divine relationality is *kenotic* – self-limiting, self-emptying, self-giving – God determined to create the relational universe. And God did so! But God was not satisfied to constitute relationality within the Godhead alone, nor separately or independently within the universe itself.

Therefore, in disclosing his covenant to the Chosen People, God revealed and foreshadowed the extension of his own covenantal relationality to the created order as the manifest Son. The Tabernacle in the wilderness and the subsequent Temples in Jerusalem symbolized God’s own promised embodiment and manifestation as the Human One. The children of Israel were chosen to *receive* this revelation. The Chosen People were to *witness* this astounding extension of the covenant. And the Chosen People together with all humanity were to be the ultimate *beneficiaries* of this covenant.

Thus, the constitution of the covenant has never been contingent upon mankind. Because the covenant is constituted by the Godhead itself, it is not

revocable. Therefore, mankind's disobedience to or rejection of the covenant is not the "fall" of mankind. Rather, the "fall" of mankind is mankind's age-long attempt to become a party to the covenant. Whether by individuals or groups, all human attempts to possess God or to declare its own divinity are actually attempts to intrude into the covenant of the Godhead. All assertions that mankind is a party to the covenant represent an invasion of the covenant. The common efforts of all religions – *re-* (again); *ligion* (to ligate, tie, bind) – to repossess God are attempts to violate the covenant. Any political, religious, economic or socio-cultural power structure that presupposes the possession of divine authority represents an attempt to bypass the covenant. All human efforts to fulfill the covenant through the divine authority of mediation, representation, appropriation or promotion only frustrate and delay the ultimate manifestation of the Covenant.

The painful truth is that mankind is neither the beginning of the covenant nor the end of the covenant. Mankind is not the author of the covenant or a party to the covenant. Mankind is not a "part" of the covenant or a means of fulfilling the covenant.

The tragic lesson of history is that mankind has determined to become a party to the covenant and, therefore, has continually retraced the "original sin" and the original "fall"! Now that we have crossed the threshold to the third millennium, this appalling history is being exposed. The eyes of humanity are being opened to the nakedness, rapacity and futility of mankind's political, religious, economic and socio-cultural power structures.

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The constant temptation of power holders is to believe that they are in secure control of all factors that might affect the well-being of the social organization under their control, and therefore they suffer under the delusion that they are in control of history. As a result, historians are hard put to try to explain how politicians could be so obtuse. . . .

Worst of all . . . is that this modern attempt to impose the norms of a religious community's customary ethic upon either a heathen secular population or upon a variant religious ethic seriously calls into question that religious ethic itself. The mere assumption that the religious ethic has to be upheld by . . . power structures [e.g., quasi-religious institutions, corporations, foundations and other eleemosynary organizations] demonstrates its weakness; if it is not thus enforced the ethic has no validity. In addition, those who engage in this misguided attempt to get their idea of morality and ethic enforced by the public secular institutions cannot see that they are reducing their own religious ideology to the status of a pawn in the struggle for power. In other words, religion is simply something to be used for the purpose of winning battles against opponents, and to assert domination by force over persons of diverse mores. It is precisely this motif of the divine delegation of power and authority over persons that characterizes the . . . worship of Baal, who was the personification of the ancient political power structures. The value system is founded upon the worship of coercive force as represented through the political institutions of war and law.<sup>9</sup>

This perspective reminds one that “Lincoln Steffens has a fable of a man who climbed to the top of a mountain and, standing on tiptoe, seized hold of the Truth. Satan, suspecting mischief from this upstart, had directed one of his underlings to tail him; but when the demon reported with alarm the man’s success – that he had seized hold of the Truth – Satan was unperturbed. ‘Don’t worry,’ he yawned. ‘I’ll tempt him to institutionalize it.’”<sup>10</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

The biblical concept of covenant is a metaphor for God’s own Being, Becoming and Effecting. In his own full divinity and in his own full humanity, God constitutes the party(ies) to and of the covenant. God constitutes the Covenant – in its beginning, in its agency or means, and in its “fillment.” In biblical terms, mankind is not a party to or a “part” of the covenant. Nor is mankind an agent or a means of establishing the covenant. Out of his own *kenotic* (self-limiting, self-emptying, self-giving) love, God, as the Covenant, has irrevocably, noncontingently and eternally given himself to mankind. God himself is the “Unspeakable Gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15). God has given himself. He is the true “At-onement.”

The determination of mankind to be, become and effect its partnership in the covenant is the “original sin.” We all have been guilty of this mistaken endeavor to intrude upon the “Gift.” We all have assumed that religious and other power structures were means to our essential ends. We all have tried, wittingly or unwittingly, to appropriate for ourselves divinity, the attributes of divinity, or the role of divinity. We all either have been or have adopted antichrists.<sup>11</sup> We all have strayed from the truth. “. . . [T]he times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent . . .” (Acts 17:30).

Lord, we have sinned by imagining that we could appropriate your attributes, your beginning, your ending, your agential role. It now is time for us to utter “Mea Culpa” (“It is my fault”). Lord, forgive us. You alone are the “Unspeakable Gift.” You alone are “the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” (Matthew 6:13).

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## Notes and References

1. 2 Corinthians 9:15.
2. See Scott Hahn, Salvation History: One Holy Family, at [www.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vvg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m2/slvhst1.html](http://www.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vvg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m2/slvhst1.html).
3. See 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), pp. 85-100.

4. “. . . [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 . . .” – Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 37.
5. “The divine name *El Berit* (‘God of the Covenant’) occurs . . . in Judges 9:46, where mention is made of ‘the house [i.e., temple] of *El Berit*’ at Shechem.” – Louis F. Hartman, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. “God, Names of.”
6. See Sherman Isbell, “The Preached Covenant: Part III,” at [members.aol.com/RSISBELL/preach3.html](http://members.aol.com/RSISBELL/preach3.html).
7. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Assn., 1966), p. 322. Herman Hoeksema was born into an impoverished family in the province of Groningen, Netherlands. At 18 years of age he left the Netherlands and found a home in America. After holding several jobs, he was able to get his mother and brothers to America. He then left for Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to study for the ministry. Hoeksema had a long and fruitful pastoral and scholarly ministry marked by repeated controversies involving his deep spiritual convictions. See Gertrude Hoeksema, “Herman Hoeksema: Theologian and Reformer,” at [www.rsglh.org/herman\\_hoeksema.htm](http://www.rsglh.org/herman_hoeksema.htm).
8. Herman Hoeksema, “The Covenant: God’s Tabernacle with Men,” p. 4, at [www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet\\_49.html](http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_49.html).
9. Mendenhall, “Suzerainty Treaty Structure,” pp. 95, 98-99.
10. Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1991), p. 5.
11. Of course, we should know that we are to render unto Caesar the contractual things that are Caesar’s – property, goods and services. But we also need to know that we have failed to accept from God the covenantal things that are God’s. The horrendous assumptions underlying all “religion” need to be exposed. “Religion” is mankind’s attempt to achieve what Adam and Eve in their deception failed to do – either to become God or to become God’s covenantal partner. In aspiring to this goal, “religion” is determined to violently exclude all covenantal competitors. As Carolyn Marvin explicitly stated, “Religion organizes killing energy. More precisely, it organizes men who wish to kill so they will kill the right people.” See Constance Warloe, ed., *I’ve Always Meant to Tell You: Letters to Our Mothers/An Anthology of Contemporary Women Writers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997), pp. 251-252.