

## STUDY 5

# Wisdom and Covenant

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The matter of covenant is one which has occupied us often in our studies and schools. The major question before us in this session concerns to what extent God's covenant faithfulness directs our thinking and our living. Given God's wise purpose to work out his plan in history through Israel, will lead us to examine afresh aspects of his dealings with them. Karl Barth put it that:

The place where we discover the wisdom of God, the place where it really exists and is known in the fear of God is . . . the place where God gives Himself to be recognised as Creator, Sustainer and Lord of the world. And that place is His holy and righteous, gracious and merciful dealings with Israel.<sup>1</sup>

However, Israel did not exist in isolation. Neither its origin nor its goal lay in itself. Certainly, its writings were not an end in themselves, especially as they leave many questions unanswered and end in relative defeat for the chosen people.<sup>2</sup> But from the standpoint of the fulfilment of Israel's purpose in Christ we can say with Paul that the scriptures will make us wise *with a view to*<sup>3</sup> salvation through faith in Israel's Messiah, Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). The goal of Israel's wisdom was Christ himself, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3),<sup>4</sup> and whom God made to be our 'wisdom from God' (1 Cor. 1:30). Here is the last Adam, the man of true wisdom, in contrast to the first Adam who claiming to be wise in himself (Gen. 3:6) became a fool.

While Christ is the goal of Israel's place in the plan of God, we should note that he is also the source of it. With no rationalisation of it, Paul simply says that we were chosen in the Jewish Messiah before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and the identification of Messiah with Adam is implicitly made in Ephesians 1:22, quoting Psalm 8:6, while the Adam–Christ contrast is regularly drawn (especially in Rom. 5:12–21 and 1 Cor. 15).

The framework within which God's wisdom is seen is Christ and his place over all history. We have used the language of God's eternal purpose being the provision of a bride for his Son, and this was drawn, not uncritically, from Jonathan Edwards:

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *CD*. II. 1, p. 432.

<sup>2</sup> The place of the Old Testament documents will be treated in Session 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gk. εἰς (*eis*).

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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... 'Why then, did God incline farther to communicate himself, seeing he had done [it] completely' in his own triune life?

Edwards' answer takes us finally to the center of his systematic reflection, to—'as it were'—his notation of the universal melody's fugal structure: 'To this I say, that the Son is the adequate communication of the Father's goodness . . . But yet the Son has also an inclination to communicate *himself*, in an image of his person that may partake of his happiness: and this was the end of the creation, even the communication of the happiness of the Son of God . . . Therefore the church is said to be the completeness of Christ.' It is as and only as a factor in the plot of the triune God's inner life, that God has a need to overflow. In the *Miscellanies*, Edwards is beautifully simple: 'The end of the creation of God was to provide a spouse for his Son Jesus Christ, that might enjoy him and on whom he might pour forth his love . . . ' [H]eaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse.' The church is *with* Christ the object in the triune love and so the purpose of creation.<sup>5</sup>

It is not hard to see this as guiding Revelation chapter 21. Also, Ephesians 5:31–32, as referring to the inner meaning of Genesis 2:24, shows that Paul saw the creation in the light of that goal. Furthermore, his language of 'the body of Christ' (Eph. 5:30; cf. 1:22–23) links directly to this.<sup>6</sup>

### THE COVENANT WITH JESUS CHRIST THE SON

Paul wrote that 'in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him' (Col. 1:16). The 'him' is 'his beloved Son' of verse 13 and, since he is described as 'the image of the invisible God', I think that the primary reference is to the incarnate Son, the one through whose shed blood peace is effected (Col. 1:20). That Son is the one who is before all things, in whom all things hold together, *because* (?) he is the head of the body, the church. All the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him. We might understand that as including the Father's delight in the Son of his love who is never to be understood apart from his dear bride.

While there is no explicit reference to a covenant made or established between the Father and the Son,<sup>7</sup> the overarching principle of the marriage of the Son and the bride is clearly regarded in covenantal terms (Mal. 2:14; Jer. 31:32). What is plain, though, is the glory which the Son has with the Father and the Father's deep love for his Son before ever the creation came into being (John 17:5, 24).

It seems valid to say that, prior to the act of creation and prior to the history of creation, all things were purposed in wisdom and secured by what we would call covenant. That covenant is the 'commitment' by the Father to secure a pure bride for his Son. The covenant is founded on the love of the Father for the Son (John 3:35) and secured by the Father's covenant faithfulness, which is his *hesed*.

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<sup>5</sup> This complicated paragraph is taken from the chapter, 'The melody of history' in Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1988), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> References to 'the body of Christ' and the discussion of the gifts within the body in 1 Corinthians 12 should, to my mind, be included in his purview.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 89 recalls the covenant with David.

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By this we see that the Son is fully confident that ‘[e]verything that the Father gives me will come to me’ and his unity of will and purpose with the Father means that ‘anyone who comes to me I will never drive away’ (John 6:37). Those who come to him have been drawn by the Father (John 6:44).

### THE COVENANT WHICH INCLUDES CREATION

Many times we have examined the covenant with creation.<sup>8</sup> Two issues prompt us to see that creation stands in a covenant relationship with God. The first is the explicit, if perhaps poetic, statement that such a covenant actually exists:

Thus says the LORD: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time,<sup>21</sup> only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with my ministers the Levites (Jer. 33:20–21).

The second is the way that God declares that he will ‘establish’ his covenant with Noah. This language presumes the existence of a prior covenant, since the usual terminology for the formation of a new covenant (not ‘new’ in the sense of Jeremiah 31:31–34) is not used. The usual way of saying that a covenant was being initiated was by the use of the phrase *karat berith*, to cut a covenant, whereas in Genesis 6:18 the phrase *heqim berith*, meaning to *confirm* a (prior) covenant is used even though this is the first reference to a covenant in the scriptures.<sup>9</sup>

The way that prior covenant has been understood was to identify it with a previously unidentified covenant with the creation. Jeremiah 33:20–21 above, and Isaiah 24:4ff. may indicate this, and possibly the imposition of the curse of Genesis 3:17 (cf. Isa. 24:6) would also point in that direction. If we accept that Deuteronomy is based on a covenant framework<sup>10</sup> then the place of ‘blessings’ and ‘cursings’ is significant (Deut. 27–28). Thus the ‘blessing’ of Genesis 1:22, 28 and 2:3 and the curse in 3:17 can be understood as having meaning within the framework of a functioning covenant.

Since Genesis does not identify a covenant prior to that with Noah, this is possible, but is it *necessary*? Could we not also surmise that the creation came into being within the framework of a covenant left unidentified at that point? It would not be the only unexplained feature of the early chapters of Genesis. Besides we may also need to ask why a covenant with creation was required.

What we can say, in the light of the later revelation which explicitly concerns Christ, is that the prior covenant may well be the one which secured the creation’s being and continuance and so the fulfilment of the ‘very good’ purpose which creation declared. The covenant with the eternal Son may well be that covenant,

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<sup>8</sup> I am referring mainly to previous Pastors’ and Ministry Schools and to the various classes. See also, Geoffrey Bingham, *Love’s Most Glorious Covenant* (Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997) and *Comprehending the Covenant* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See W. J. Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant: An Old Testament Covenant Theology* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 15–26.

<sup>10</sup> See Meredith Kline *The Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1963) and Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, pp. 114–126.

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unidentified because unknown by the writer of Genesis. That covenant by which the bride of Christ was secured, included the provision of the heavens and the earth and secured its continued existence. Even the flood, which was essentially a return to Genesis 1:2, was not a violation of the covenant since that covenant was confirmed with Noah prior to his entering the ark.

### SECURING THE COVENANT

The *hesed* of God is the faithful action of God in ensuring that the covenant he has made does not fail to be fulfilled. The word *hesed* is one which had currency in human affairs.<sup>11</sup> As such, *hesed* contains an element of action, of relationship and of endurance; it also carries the expectation of *hesed* in return, that is, mutuality (cf. Hosea. 4:1), including the expectation of justice and righteousness (Micah 6:8). But the basis for *hesed* amongst the people of Israel, or at least the basis for its expectation, lay in the fact of the *hesed* of God.

Referring to the phrase *hesed w'emet*, 'mercy and truth' (AV), 'loyalty and faithfulness' (NRSV), Zobel says:

... true goodness is not an isolated act but rather an enduring attitude towards one's fellows . . . In Hos. 4:1 . . . [t]he emphasis, therefore, is on the transitory nature of the *hesed* practiced by the inhabitants of the land, which derives in turn from the absence of enduring knowledge of God.<sup>12</sup>

It is this element which is conveyed most strongly in Psalm 136, where *hesed*, though variously translated,<sup>13</sup> is seen to govern all of the acts of God, from creation (4–8), to the redemption of the exodus and the entry into the land (10–22) through to his continued providence (23–26).

God's *hesed* 'endures forever'. So does his covenant. It is called an everlasting covenant on fourteen occasions in the NRSV, variously referring to the covenant at the time of Noah (Gen. 9:16), with Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 17:7), with Isaac (Gen. 17:19), with Israel (Ps. 105:10), and so forth. 'Everlasting' translates the Hebrew '*olam*<sup>14</sup> as does 'for ever' in Psalm 136. The word does not imply 'eternity', so much as 'a long time' viewed as history or in future prospect.<sup>15</sup> For instance, 1 Kings 1:31, 'May my lord King David live forever [*olam*]' does not mean may he never die but that he should live a full life and not die prematurely. Likewise, God's *hesed*, like the covenants he makes, will not cease: those covenants will be fulfilled and he will accomplish all that he has determined and declared:

He is the LORD our God;  
his judgments are in all the earth.

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<sup>11</sup> See Hans-Jurgen Zobel, חֶסֶד (*hesed*) in *TDOT*, vol. 5, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, pp. 46ff. Zobel calls this 'secular' usage.

<sup>12</sup> Zobel, *hesed*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>13</sup> 'Loving kindness' (NASB, ASV), 'mercy' (AV), 'love' (NIV), 'steadfast love' (RSV, NRSV).

<sup>14</sup> עוֹלָם

<sup>15</sup> See Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1906, pp. 761ff.

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<sup>8</sup> He is mindful of his covenant forever,  
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,  
<sup>9</sup> the covenant that he made with Abraham,  
his sworn promise to Isaac,  
<sup>10</sup> which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,  
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,  
<sup>11</sup> saying, 'To you I will give the land of Canaan  
as your portion for an inheritance' (Ps. 105:7–11).<sup>16</sup>

His covenant, his word, is everlasting, in that it is purposeful and will continue until the purpose is accomplished, not meaning that it will never cease:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
<sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10–11).

### HOW ODD OF GOD . . .

How do we understand the choice of Israel<sup>17</sup> in the plan of God. The little poem, 'How odd of God to choose the Jews' probably says more about us than about God or Israel. We do know that the decision to work history in the way he has, rests entirely with God. There is no place for us to rationalise the method:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup> It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, <sup>10</sup> and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him (Deut. 7:7–10).

The choice of Israel was entirely his. He chose to fulfil his covenantal promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through this insignificant people. As the LORD, the covenant God of Israel, he maintains 'covenant loyalty' (lit. 'he keeps covenant and *hesed*') with those who love him and who keep his commandments. This is the way he is and the way he will be for ever (to a thousand generations), yet he is not mindless of those who reject him. His patience is clearly evident, and the fact that he is 'slow to anger' (Exod. 34:6–7) does not contradict Deuteronomy 7:10, rather it indicates that he will not be provoked to expressions of bad temper but that his patient endurance is also true to his *hesed*:

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<sup>16</sup> It is notable that Hebrews 12:18ff. does not see possession of the land as significant now that Christ has come. It is more important to come to the heavenly Jerusalem. Also Rev. 21:1–2.

<sup>17</sup> For the sake of this session, covenants *within* Israel, such as with David and the Levites, are assumed.

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The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance . . . [So] regard the patience of our Lord as salvation (2 Pet. 3:9, 15).

The covenant with Israel, flowing from the covenant with Abraham, was a covenant with a goal. That goal was the completion of the wise purposes of God for Israel. The goal was multi-faceted with much lying beyond Israel's boundaries either in space or time, the restoration of blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3; Isa. 2:2–4), the removal of the curse on the ground which resulted from Adam's sin (Isa. 65:17ff.; 66:22–23) and so on. Other elements are delineated in Romans 9:4–5:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; <sup>5</sup> to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Paul's summary here is, of course, of primary significance, standing over against the relative ignorance of the Old Testament prophets (1 Pet. 1:10–12).<sup>18</sup> 'From them . . . comes the Messiah'; ultimately the prophetic word was from the Spirit of Christ (Rev. 19:10). The covenant with Israel was not intended to stand alongside the purpose of God for his eternal Son, but to conclude its unique function when he was revealed to Israel, not merely at his birth but through the entire action of the incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost.

Israel's wisdom, as we have seen, did not lie primarily in esoteric insights but in simple obedience to the issues revealed in the covenant. Israel was to stand in awe of the holiness of the name of the LORD, the name which identified them as distinct from all others. 'These are the people of the LORD' (Ezek. 36:20). 'LORD', Yahweh, is the name of the God of the covenant, and for that reason his name was not to be taken in vain.

Israel was to be a wise people and that wisdom was to be expressed by their obedience to the commandments of the Lord:

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' (Deut. 4:6).

Conspicuously, it will be the commandments which point to Israel's wisdom (see Ps. 119:98). Her wisdom will not be seen as innate, but as coming from the torah which God had given. Israel's obedience to the commandments is at the heart of it. Psalm 111:10 puts it:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.  
His praise endures forever.

But law, as *Israel's* law, was not intended to continue forever. As with the covenant itself, the law had a goal. The torah must be fulfilled and would pass away when all is

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<sup>18</sup> I would suggest that the place of the apostolic testimony is of immense significance and should be primary and authoritative in developing an Old Testament theology. Too often Israel's role is treated outside the definitive framework which only the New Testament can supply.

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accomplished (Matt. 5:17–18), just as Jesus' baptism was with a view to the fulfilment of all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). That fulfilment was at the cross, when God did:

... what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,<sup>4</sup> so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3–4).

Christ is the climax of Israel's covenant. That does not mean that law, as the law of God himself, is concluded, but that the torah, the eternal law of God in specific covenantal terms, is no longer applicable.<sup>19</sup> Israel's unique role in salvation history is concluded.

But prior to that, Israel's place was central. Isaiah 40 sets this out. There was knowledge of God nowhere else than in that word given to Israel. Only in the word (40:8) which has dealt with Israel's sin (40:1ff.) because they are his people (40:9–11). True knowledge of God was not (and is not) in the other nations (40:15ff.), because their 'wisdom' is a counterfeit of God's wisdom, as it is a humanly derived wisdom or explanation of the true ground of life and creation and so of man himself. Nor is it in created paradigms (40:18f.). There are no comparisons in creation. Israel must look to the creator. They should see what he is doing and find all their resources in him (40:27–31), all their springs in him (Ps. 87:7). Now, they must look to Christ and to him alone (Acts 4:12), to the one in whom the torah has reached its goal (Rom. 10:4).

### THE COVENANT SECURED

Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant demonstrates that in the wisdom of God his purposes for and through Israel will remain intact and operative:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.<sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.<sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.<sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31–34).

If the reference is to the transformation of the covenant made with all Israel (Israel and Judah), then this would look to the time when Israel was restored to true covenant knowledge of God and the truth of the law.<sup>20</sup> This is evident when we see that the letter to the Hebrews, which makes much of the Jeremiah passage, is a call to

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<sup>19</sup> Note Paul's struggles against the insistence for circumcision, sabbath observance and dietary regulations.

<sup>20</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, pp. 291f.

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Christian Jews to persevere in their faith in Christ, and when we observe that Jesus' possible use of the phrase 'new covenant' was directed to his Jewish disciples in the context of the Passover celebrations (see Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20).<sup>21</sup>

That being so, then we can see that the new covenant meant that Israel was indeed forgiven and cleansed (so Ezek. 36:25–27), with the result that there was, on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish new covenant community, a new Israel. And until Acts 10, with the conversion of Cornelius, the church comprised Israel only. The presence of Samaritans only confirmed the extra element provided in Ezekiel 37:15–28 that Judah and Israel (the northern kingdom was feebly represented in the Samaritans) would be again joined together. Then from that new Israel the word did indeed go out to all the nations.

It took the apostle Paul to indicate that the new covenant community included Gentiles (1 Cor. 11:25). This was not because Gentiles became Jews, but that the original covenant was always with the nations in view. And that was so because the goal of that covenant was always Christ and his multi-ethnic bride.

The first covenant with Israel was secured by the sacrificial blood, 'dashed . . . on the people' by Moses (Exod. 24:8). So was the covenant renewed<sup>22</sup> by Christ (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). But what must be seen is that 'the eternal covenant' of Hebrews 13:20, with its blood offering, was always in the wise plan of God. Christ was the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8) and the 'great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white . . . have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9, 14).

The bride of the Lamb is secured by the blood of the one who loved her and gave himself for her, and the creation is secured as the Father's gift to his Son, whose blood ensures that nothing unclean can enter in. So I am sure that neither global warming, climate change, high oil and food prices, or anything else in all creation, can violate the security obtained by his oath, his covenant and his blood.

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<sup>21</sup> In Matthew and Mark the textual evidence is probably against 'new' being original. In Luke there is significant textual uncertainty about the place of verses 19b–20.

<sup>22</sup> It seems generally agreed that the distinction between the two words for 'new', νέος (*neos*) and καινός (*kainos*), lies in *neos* referring to something previously non-existent while *kainos* refers to that which replaces what is obsolete (Heb. 8:13). It is *kainos* which is used in 'the new covenant'.