

STUDY 5

The Kingdom in Action in History

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INTRODUCTION

When we sing, ‘Before He planned the world He made, He planned His family’,¹ we are saying that the family is prior to the created order. The term ‘family’ refers to the Triune Godhead—Father, Son and Spirit—and created humanity which is to exist in a relationship of love with the Creator. Therefore creation is not to be understood merely as material existence but a relational existence.

The creative act of God brought the material world into existence and so ‘all the earth is mine’ (Exod. 19:5),² says the Lord. Creation is not the starting point. On the one hand, we may extol the created order because of what we can see, while on the other, because the created order is subject to decay,³ we may regard the created order as of lesser importance. Put in another way, we must not drive a wedge between the created order and the relational. Our faith is a historical faith and we cannot ignore creation and secular history. God is intimately involved with His creation. As a rebuff against the abstract metaphysical god, Wright’s book, *God Who Acts*,⁴ provided a timely correction 50 years ago. However, with the emphasis on the acts of God and God’s intimate involvement with His creation, we need a framework in which we can interpret the acts of God. So it is timely to be reminded that ‘Before He planned the world He made, He planned His family’. This reminder was put before Israel at Mt Sinai:

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴You have seen what I did to the

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *New Creation Hymn Book* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2001), no. 294:

Before He planned the world He made,
He planned His Family;
Planned from His Godhead’s fellowship,
Planned as the Holy Three.
Full intimate the race was made
In warm affinity.
Man was His son, His image true
Of Holy Trinity.

² Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the Revised Standard Version.

³ Rom. 8:21, ‘because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God’.

⁴ G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts*, SCM, London, 1952.

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Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, ⁶and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel' (Exod. 19:3–6).

THE GOD WHO ACTS

Before we consider the passage above, we need to paint a brief background of the struggles against a scholastic approach to the Bible. In the early part of the last century, the study of the Bible according to an atomistic, critical method was well established. The theological dimension of the Bible just about disappeared and was replaced by an evolutionary developmental understanding which assumed that Israel borrowed its perspective from the religious environment. This understanding of the Bible reduces it to a human book and squashes it into an artificial framework of sociological, political and cultural contexts. The God who acts in history could hardly be considered in such a milieu.

The biblical theology movement developed around the middle of the last century and provided a timely correction to the distortion of biblical records. G. E. Wright's book, *God Who Acts*, argues for the continuity of the Old and New Testaments, as they are not to be treated as separate disciplines. Indeed, this paper will show the continuity of Israel in the church of the New Testament. However, this movement could not go all the way as it remained captive to the thought processes and presupposition of a liberal theology. Fretheim's comments sum it up succinctly:

[The biblical theology movement] provided the basic lyrics and the melody, and the song was taken up with gusto by preachers and teachers. Its reverberations deeply affected formulations in every theological discipline. The tune proved to be so catchy that the song lingered long after theologians began to question its centrality, accuracy, uniqueness, and value. One still hears its echoes, even in sophisticated theological formulations. Once a tune gets into your head, it is difficult to shake. Most of the notes still do capture the biblical perspective, but we must somehow change the tune.⁵

His paper also highlights the deficiencies in the movement.⁶ Be that as it may, G. E. Wright provided the corrective and we shall refer to some of his comments in this paper.

THE DIVINE INTENTION

Before He planned the world He made, He planned His family.

Exodus 19:3–6 is the prelude to the covenant at Sinai. This prelude is highly significant as it speaks of what God did and what the Israelites would be:

⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, 'The God Who Acts: An Old Testament Perspective', *Theology Today*, Apr. 1997; p. 6. The article also highlights the areas of inadequacy of the approach taken.

⁶ T. E. Fretheim, 'The God Who Acts', pp. 8–18.

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What God did

- ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians’
- ‘how I bore you on eagles’ wings’
- ‘and brought you to myself’.

What the Israelites will be

- ‘you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine’
- ‘you shall be to me a kingdom of priests’
- ‘and a holy nation’.

What the Israelites would be is the result of what God did to the Egyptians and how He bore Israel on eagles’ wings and brought them to Himself. Between what God did and what the Israelites would be is what appears to be an injunction: ‘if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant’ (Exod. 19:5a). A superficial reading may lead us to think that here is the condition for the fulfilment.⁷ It is not.

A closer examination of Exodus 19:4–5 does not allow us to make that interpretation. Firstly, when God says, ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself’, this implies that Israel is already the possession of God. So, in the next verse, ‘you shall be my own possession among all people’, is simply stating the result of what God had done. The insert, ‘if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant’, cannot be taken as the condition for Israel to be God’s own possession.

Secondly, ‘if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant’ may indeed be a literary parallel construct.⁸ So, to keep the covenant is to obey the voice of God and we shall see that the context of this is a living relationship rather than in a legal setting.

Thirdly, the reference to covenant needs amplification. Is it the Sinai covenant which has not yet been given? It is not likely. The preceding verse (Exod. 19:4) states an existing relationship with Yahweh and the context of this is relational rather than legal. As a relationship with Yahweh already exists then the covenant referred to must be the Abrahamic covenant.⁹ The relationship with Yahweh did not begin with the Sinai covenant, but with the call of Abraham. The context points to a prior relationship with Yahweh.

The use of the preposition ‘if’ has been the subject of much discussion. We have argued that the conditional use of the term is rejected. However, to appreciate its use relationally, there are several comments of which we need to take note. Motyer says that the ‘if’ refers to Israel’s ‘enjoyment’ of what God has done.¹⁰ Alan Cole agrees with this in his comments on the passage.¹¹ John Durham views this a little differently. He says:

⁷ An example of this legalistic interpretation is found in a commentary by W. H. Gispen, tr. Ed van der Maas, *Exodus*, Regency Reference Library (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1982), p. 180. His comments on 19:5–6: ‘The Lord now would adopt Israel as His people; the only condition was that Israel had to obey the Lord fully and keep His covenant (v. 5a). Then Israel would be the Lord’s treasured possession.’

⁸ W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1984, p. 122.

⁹ W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 122–3.

¹⁰ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of our Pilgrimage*, Bible Speaks Today Series, IVP, Leicester, 2005, p. 200.

¹¹ Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP, Bath, 1973, p. 144.

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... 'so now, if' sets the frame for Yahweh's expectation of Israel in voluntary response. Yahweh is not forcing these people to serve him, as some conquering king might do; that is but one of the drawbacks of too close an equation of this and other OT covenant passages with ANE covenant formulary, both real and conjectured. This 'so now, if' is not even the offer of a 'choice between obedience or disobedience,' as Muilenburg (*VT* 9 [1959] 353) has suggested. Yahweh is here offering Israel the means of appropriate response to what he has done for them, if they choose to make it. The correct comparison is with Joshua 24:15, 'choose for yourselves this day' (also introduced by כִּי), rather than with the 'you shall ...' of those who have made a commitment to Yahweh. What Israel is to do *if* they choose to make a response to what Yahweh has done is to pay the most careful attention to his instruction concerning what is expected of them and then to 'keep,' that is, to abide by, the terms of his covenant.¹²

J. B. Torrance made the distinction on the use of the preposition 'if' in his lectures. He distinguished between the use in a conditional and an obligatory sense. The 'if' in this context cannot be understood in a conditional sense, in that case Israel's future as God's own possession would be dependent on keeping the covenant. We know that Israel failed in this. 'To obey the voice of God' is the obligatory response because of what Yahweh has done for the children of Israel. Failing to do that would be unfaithfulness on the part of Israel. It was the call to faithfulness that Israel so dismally failed. Soon after this, the incident of the golden calf did not annul the covenant. Conditionality is firmly discarded. So, far from being a conditional clause, the implication of the way of forgiveness within the covenant is embedded in this statement.

The text is saying that what Israel shall be is dependent on what God did. The intimacy in the relationship with God as a result of God's action demands the obligation of obedience on the part of Israel. 'If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant', is not set as a condition. It is a statement of Israel's obligation in the light of what God has done for her. That is, what we are or what we shall be is because of what God has done. That is what Israel is supposed to be as she is called to live within the relationship of the covenant of love.

G. Bingham calls this the divine intention. He sums it up from creation to the new heaven and earth in this short paragraph:

What was—and is—God's intention for creation, and especially the creation of Man? The first intimation is from Genesis 1:26–30, namely that Man, being in the image of God, is to be fruitful and multiply, to fill up the earth, to subdue the earth and be ruler over it, thus showing the image reflects God's own Being and what He does. As the Scriptures develop we see that because of sin the fulfilment of this commission is hindered and that grace is needed, especially for God's people of faith, for the mandate to be completed. Throughout the Old Testament and the New, God's ultimate purpose becomes revealed. We see that God's community of faith has eschatological connotation which we will later examine, but let us conclude that God will ultimately have His *am segullah*—'a people for His own possession' (Exod. 19:5–6; cf. Deut. 7:6–11)—otherwise known as His *laos periousios*, i.e. 'a people of His own' (Titus 2:14; cf. Deut. 4:20) who will one day be 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:3–4). This community will be constituted of members of the *koinonia* (fellowship, community) of God who will be 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people' (1 Pet. 2:4–10; Exod. 19:5–6) and who will reign on the earth for ever (Rev. 5:10; 1:6; 21:3) as they inherit the whole of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:7). To be participators in the divine nature is to share with God in His plan for, and work of, eternity.¹³

¹² John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC, vol. 3, Word, Waco, 1987, p. 262.

¹³ NCTM Monthly Ministry Study, 1st and 6th July, 2002. Series, 'The Church Living in the World' by G. Bingham, titled 'The Church Living in the World As Community—2'.

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THE FRAMEWORK OF HISTORY

If we are going to see the Kingdom of God in action in history, then we need an appropriate framework through which to view it. We cannot simply try to interpret history with any framework we like. We would then distort the meaning as another framework would lead to a re-interpretation of history. Having argued the meaning of Exodus 19:3–6, we now need to see that this text provides the framework through which we can understand history. If the intention of God is to be fulfilled in Israel and if all that Israel shall be is because of the work of God, then this work of God must be the basis on which we understand all history. In fact this text provides the framework on which the book of Exodus needs to be interpreted.¹⁴ Exodus 19:4 again:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Israel's years of slavery in Egypt and her final deliverance by the mighty arm of God is the basis on which Israel has understood her history; it is the redemptive work of God. Returning to G. E. Wright we read:

... it seems to me that the point at which we must begin is ... history as the arena of God's activity. Biblical theology is first and foremost a theology of recital, in which Biblical man confesses his faith by reciting the formative events of his history as the redemptive handiwork of God.¹⁵

The exodus event has become a creed for the history of Israel and this creed is prefaced by the mention of the patriarchs. In the life of Israel, the people were told to make this confession when they came to the altar for worship. This creed sums up the call to Abraham, the delivery from Egypt and the response from the people:

Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.⁵ And you shall make response before the LORD your God, "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous.⁶ And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage.⁷ Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression;⁸ and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders;⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me." And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God' (Deut. 26:4–10).

History has to be interpreted. A naturalistic view of history will only focus on human effort as the interpretative framework. This being so, history will be re-interpreted in subsequent generations according to the changing perception of the self. We have seen this in our day. Again G. E. Wright highlighted this:

The focus of Biblical man's attention, therefore, was not on the cycle of nature, but on what God had done, was doing and was yet to do according to his declared intention.¹⁶

¹⁴ T. E. Fretheim, 'Because the Whole Earth is Mine', *Interpretation*, July 1996, p. 231.

¹⁵ G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 38.

¹⁶ G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 25.

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We need to start with the divine intention. It follows that on this redemptive framework Israel must declare her election and look back to Abraham. On a time scale it may appear that this redemptive framework is post-creation. On the contrary, it is before creation, as the created order follows the redemptive love of God. Paul saw this and it is no wonder that he could write:

... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:4).

History, when viewed from this redemptive framework, is revelatory. Through this redemptive lens, history is no longer understood from the perception of the self, but from the acts of the Creator in His divine intention of calling a people and bringing them to certain fulfilment.

THE CONTINUITY WITH THE CHURCH IN CHRIST

The purpose that was intended for Israel apparently did not find fulfilment. This difficult issue was dealt with by Paul in Romans 9–11. He wrote:

But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but ‘Through Isaac shall your descendants be named’ (Rom. 9:6–7).

The failure of Israel must not be equated with the failure of the word of God. Because the ‘if’ of Exodus 19:5 is not conditional, the ultimate keeper of the covenant is God Himself. The success of the covenant was not dependent on the faithfulness of Israel but on the faithfulness of God.

Exodus 19:5 states, ‘Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine’. The covenant referred to here is the Abrahamic covenant. We have not argued the point earlier but will do so here. This is God’s call to Abraham:

Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Gen. 12:1–3, NRSV).

The Abrahamic covenant has the world in view—‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’. This is the divine intention and is re-expressed in Exodus 19:5, ‘for all the earth is mine’. As Israel prepared for nationhood at the foot of Mt Sinai, this divine intention with the world in view was spelt out a little more clearly in the words, ‘you shall be my own possession among all people . . . you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exod. 19:6).

It was intended that Israel would be a channel for the blessing of God to flow to the whole world. This is through her given role as ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ and this double expression is best understood as a parallelism.¹⁷ While the

¹⁷ W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 124.

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description given to them as ‘kingdom and nation’ implies a vocation to the world, their role as priest and their status as holy imply a separation to the service of God. Yet this role is not defined so much by what they do, but by what they are because of the way God has prepared them for it.

The description of Israel as ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ does not apply to individuals within the nation but collectively, as a nation, they are to function as such. Within Israel there is the Aaronic priesthood, but that is not what is referred to here. The Aaronic priesthood functions on behalf of Israel. As the High Priest comes before the presence of God, he comes on behalf of Israel. So, as a kingdom of priests, the nation of Israel collectively subserves this function before their God on behalf of the nations so that ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’. This is important to note as we see the fulfilment of this in Christ. As priests who live in the presence of God daily, their holy lives must be the first prerequisite if they are to fulfil this function to the world. That is why the obligation for Israel to obey the voice of God as holiness is relational.

So Israel was judged according to this framework as they occupied the land promised to them. The whole history of Israel was assessed according to this injunction given to them at the foot of Mt Sinai.

Peter took this up in his epistle and applied it to the church. He did not simply state it, but as it is in Exodus, he put it in the redemptive context:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

¹⁰Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

This is a divine bestowal on the church, not because of her achievement, but because of the mercy of God. Peter added that the purpose of this divine bestowal was that the church ‘may declare the wonderful deeds of him’. This is not a new injunction as the declaration is a response to the gracious divine bestowal. The psalmist makes this point well:

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods (Ps. 96:1–4).

The context of this psalm was on the occasion when the ark of the covenant was brought into the city of David and in the celebration, David reminded Israel of the covenant made with Abraham and consequently ‘an everlasting covenant to Israel’ (1 Chron. 16:15–17).

And did Peter have the world in view when he wrote about this divine bestowal and declaration? Yes, he did. He wrote the epistle to the dispersion in Asia Minor and he followed this with an exhortation to ‘maintain good conduct among the Gentiles’ (1 Peter 2:12). In this statement by Peter, he alerted us to the fact that the injunction at the foot of Sinai is now realised in the church of Jesus Christ. G. E. Wright noted this:

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Judaism and Christianity are two different religions because in the former the Old Testament is made relevant, is seen fulfilled in the Talmud, while in the latter it is fulfilled in Christ.¹⁸

Peter simply inferred this fulfillment and did not reason out this connection with the church. For this we will have to look to the Pauline epistles for the thrust of the revelation given to Paul. In both 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, Paul contrasted the failure of Adam with the fulfillment in Christ:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ (1 Cor. 15:20–23).

In his argument, Paul implied the solidarity of humanity so that when Adam failed, then all that is Adamic has failed and cannot achieve what God has intended for His creation. A restoration has to be made and that is through the death and resurrection of the second Adam (Man). It is in this way that what was purposed through Adam—that is, the reign of the Kingdom of God—is now realised in Christ, ‘for God has put all things in subjection under his feet’ (1 Cor. 15:27). So humanity which is in Christ can then share in this reign.

However, there is a space between the now and the not yet. As Paul said, ‘For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet’ (1 Cor. 15:25), a quotation from Psalm 110:1, ‘The LORD says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool”’. We live in this time interval.¹⁹ God reigns but not all things are in subjection to Him. There remains a future event, but assuredly it will be so. The resurrection of Christ is evidence of this restoration and reign. Paul also pointed to the space in time between Christ’s resurrection and ours.

This argument of Paul was also taken up in Romans 5:12–21 where he put forward the way God dealt with the sin of the first Adam by the obedience of the second Adam. Again he argued from the solidarity of humanity with Adam and with Christ. The failure of the created order in Adam was not final. A new created order in Christ leads the creation to the fulfillment of the divine intention so that ‘where sin increased, grace abounded all the more’ (Rom. 5:20).

Therefore, history will find its fulfillment in Christ as He is the summation of all history (Eph. 1:10). So Paul said, ‘For Christ is the end [*telos*] of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified’ (Rom. 10:4). This is the fulfillment of the divine intention.

CONCLUSION

This then is the action of the Kingdom in history seen through the redemptive love of God for all His creation, firstly through Adam who failed, and subsequently through Abraham and Israel, and finally through Christ, the Victor—the climax of all history. The appreciation of this action in history is best expressed in the heartfelt praise to the Father who brought His family home:

¹⁸ G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 29.

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 27.

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Sons by the Cross and Spirit's love,
Hearts cry to Him anew,
'Father! Oh Father! Father God!
We have returned to You.'
Down through eternity the cries
Of men and angels come,
'Praise to the Father who has brought
His holy Family Home!'²⁰

²⁰ G. Bingham, *New Creation Hymn Book*, No. 294.