

# THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE NEW AND ETERNAL COVENANT

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One of the basic premises of contemporary Catholic Scripture scholarship is that the Old Testament is the necessary background for understanding the Testament we Christians call New.<sup>1</sup> The present study will focus on the New and Eternal Covenant, and will try to show that this Covenant cannot be adequately understood except in the light of the Old Testament.

## *Treaties in the Ancient, Non-Biblical World*

One of the most striking results of recent scholarship is the insight into the importance of treaties in the ancient, non-biblical world<sup>2</sup> for understanding the concept of "covenant" in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> A treaty in the Ancient Near East was a "sworn political agreement between two parties, at least one of which was a nation or king."<sup>4</sup> There were two principal types of treaties, (1) international and (2) domestic.<sup>5</sup> International treaties were of two kinds, "parity" and "suzerain-vassal". Parity treaties were between equal powers and sought to establish nonaggression. Suzerain-vassal treaties, i.e., between a major power and a lesser one, sought to strengthen the power of the suzerain.<sup>6</sup> The establishment of a treaty was designed to create a situation of amity between the two contracting parties. Parity treaties from the second millenium B.C.

1. Useful for purposes of the present study are various articles in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* [henceforth ABD] (ed. D.N. Freedman) (Doubleday: New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Auckland 1992)
2. See M.L. Barré "Treaties in the Ancient Near East", *ABD*, VI, 653-656
3. See G.E. Mendenhall - G.A. Herion, "Covenant", *ABD*, I, 1179-1202
4. Barré "Treaties", 654.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*

used such words as “peace”, “brotherhood”, “friendship”, and “love”.<sup>7</sup> Suzerain-vassal treaties replaced “brotherhood” with “servitude”, and made use of language expressing dependence, such as “father/son” and “lord/servant”.<sup>8</sup>

Treaties followed a conventional structure. In the suzerain-vassal treaties, for example, the structure was as follows:<sup>9</sup> 1) a preamble, giving the titles of the suzerain; 2) an historical prologue, giving the past good deeds of the suzerain in order to establish authority; 3) the terms of the treaty, which could be either expressed in an imperative/precative form (“apodictic”) or, more commonly, in conditional clauses (“case law”<sup>10</sup>); 4) a requirement that the document be deposited in a temple of the major deities of the respective parties and be read at regular intervals; 5) an invocation of divine witnesses; 6) blessings and curses which would result from obedience or non-obedience of the stipulations or terms of the treaty.<sup>11</sup> Copies of treaties were deposited in a temple so as to be placed under the protection of the local deity. Provisional reading was provided for, the implication being that the contents of the treaty were binding upon the people.

Against this ancient Near Eastern background certain biblical texts spring to new life. For example, Joshua 9,15, with its term “peace” in connection with Joshua’s treaty with the Gibeonites. Or the phrase “Covenant of brotherhood” in the accusation of the Lord against Tyre in Amos 1,9.<sup>12</sup> But much more important for the understanding of the Old Testament is the fact that the inspired writers used the ancient Near Eastern treaty form and terminology as a basis for understanding the relations of Israel with its God. For example, in Hosea 13,4 the Lord appeals to the exclusivity of the suzerain in his condemnation of Israel’s failure to acknowledge him through its worship of strange gods.<sup>13</sup>

7. *Ibid.*, 654-655

8. *Ibid.*

9. Mendenhall-Herion, “Covenant”, 1180-1182.

10. See: S. Greengus, “Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Law”, *ABD*, IV, 245; R. Sonsino, “Forms of Biblical Law”, *ABD*, IV, 252-254

11. *Ibid.* The structure given here is taken from Hittite treaties dating from 1460 to 1215 B.C. Not all elements of the structure appear in every treaty.

12. These texts are mentioned in Barré, “Treaties”, 655.

13. *Ibid.*

### *Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Book of Deuteronomy*

Perhaps the Old Testament Book which most clearly manifests the influence of the ancient Near Eastern treaties is the Book of Deuteronomy. One particularly striking fact is that Deuteronomy uses the word “love” to express Israel’s basic attitude toward the Lord as regards observance of the Law, which is Deuteronomy’s overriding concern. In this the inspired author seems to be relying on his acquaintance with traditional vocabulary proper to treaties in the world about him.<sup>14</sup> In suzerain-vassal treaties the vassal must “love” the suzerain: in the eighteenth century B.C. a writer to the then king of Mari, Yasma-Addu, states that he is “the one who loves you”.<sup>15</sup> The Amarna tablets show that in the fourteenth century B.C. the Pharaoh was expected to “love” his vassal, and the vassal was expected to “love” his suzerain, the Egyptian Pharaoh.<sup>16</sup> In the seventh century B.C. the Assyrian Esarhaddon insists that his vassals must “love” his successor, Ashurbanipal.<sup>17</sup>

In the Old Testament this juridical vocabulary is reflected in 1 Kings 5, 15, where Hiram of Tyre is called David’s “friend” (in the Hebrew, “one who loves”). The context - 1 Kings 5, 15-26 - is quite accurate in its expression of the relations between two sovereign states at the beginning of the final millenium B.C.<sup>18</sup> In 2 Samuel 19, 6-7 the use of the word “love” by Joab with regard to David’s contact with his “servants” recalls the obligation of love involved in a treaty.<sup>19</sup> And 1 Samuel 18,16 mentions how the northern kingdom, Israel, “loved” David, implying *de facto* recognition and allegiance.<sup>20</sup>

What makes the interpretation of the term “love” in the Book of Deuteronomy in the technical sense proper to ancient Near Eastern treaties so plausible is not only the obvious acquaintance of the biblical authors with the technical terminology

14. See W.L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963) 77-87.

15. *Ibid.*, 78-79

16. *Ibid.*, 79-80

17. *Ibid.*, 80.

18. *Ibid.*, 80-81

19. *Ibid.*, 81

20. *Ibid.*

of ancient Near Eastern treaties, but the fact that the form of the suzerain-vassal treaty is so clearly influential in the theology of Deuteronomy.<sup>21</sup> Deuteronomy is presented as covenants made on two separate occasions between Israel and the Lord through the mediation of Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 28,69). But whatever the historical relation of the Book of Deuteronomy to these two events, its contents represent a maturation of the whole covenant tradition in Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Of particular interest in Deuteronomy from the standpoint of the ancient Near Eastern treaty form are the blessings and curses in 28, 1-69. These represent an undoubted presence of the ancient Near Eastern treaty tradition.<sup>23</sup> They are a statement setting out the consequences of fidelity or infidelity. The exhortation is aimed at the people as such (cf. Deuteronomy 28, 9.36.47.64): if the people remain faithful, blessings will result: if not, curses.<sup>24</sup>

The blessings which are recommended so vigorously at the end of the Book of

21. See especially D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Analecta Biblica, 21A, Biblical Institute Press; Rome 1978)
22. "Deut[eronomy] is, first of all, a law book... The purpose of the law is to outline a level of moral performance compatible with the self-revelation of Israel's God and Israel's high calling... Although the covenant certainly goes back to ancient ideas and events, its mature formulation is found for the first time in Deut[eronomy]" (J. Blenkinsopp, "Deuteronomy", in R.E. Brown - J.A. Fitzmyer - R.E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall; Englewood Cliffs, NJ., 1990) §6:4 (p.95). Blenkinsopp reckons that in its present form Deuteronomy was composed no earlier than about 560B.C. (Ibid., §6:3[p.95]). When the meaning of Old Testament "laws" is discussed, the essentially theocentric nature of biblical "law" should be borne in mind: "Most generally, the 'law' meant 'divine revelation' [sc., in the Old Testament]. It could refer to the totality of revelation or to any part of it. It included commandments ("do not murder"), admonitions and advice ("treasures gained by wickedness do not profit"), theological affirmation ("the Lord is one"), stories (the Exodus), worship (the Psalms), and more" (E.P. Sanders, "Law in Judaism of the New Testament Period", *ABD*, IV, 254).
23. Blenkinsopp, "Deuteronomy", 95. See also McCarthy, *Treaty*, 172 "...the blessings and curses are of the sort found in the treaties from Mesopotamia and Syria, and for that matter in a wide range of ancient documents".
24. "...neither a genre nor particular examples worked out with care like Dt 28, do not 'just grow'. It had i[t]s specific function. Here in Dt 28, once one looks for it, this function leaps to the eye. The structure reveals a clear intention. The stipulations, the definition of a special relationship to Yahweh are enforced by a powerful statement of blessings and curses conditioned on fidelity to them. A faithful people is Yahweh's people ...given to His service. This sort of purpose, enforcing obedience to ensure a relationship, is a function of the blessings and curses of the treaties" (McCarthy, *Treaty* 181).

Deuteronomy, i.e. at the end of the Torah, can be viewed as balancing the blessings which stand at the beginning of the Pentateuch, in the story of primeval times and in the Abraham cycle.<sup>25</sup> Further, as one looks in the other direction in the Old Testament, the blessings and curses which figure so prominently in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy are picked up at key points in the “Deuteronomic History”, which extends from Joshua through Kings. Thus, for example, the emphasis on covenant observance in Joshua 24 and I Samuel 12, the blessings of Solomon in 1 Kings 8, 14.55, the consternation of King Josiah at the prospect of the possibility of the covenant curses in 2 Kings 13, 1-15.<sup>26</sup>

The above evidence indicates that the covenant scheme of obedience issuing in blessings and disobedience issuing in curses can be said to be one of the main axes of the Old Testament. The covenant scheme serves as a fundamental guideline in the way the faithful of Israel thought of their relations as a people with their God.

### *The New Covenant in Jeremiah*

It is against the background of the Mosaic Law’s presentation of blessings or curses that the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a “new covenant” which will occur as a replacement of the Mosaic covenant outlined so forcefully in Deuteronomy.<sup>27</sup> This Covenant is at the centre of the expectations of the prophets for the relationship between the Lord and his people in the promised future.<sup>28</sup> This future will contain elements of both continuity and discontinuity with the past: the obligation to comply with the original Torah still exists, but in conditions considerably changed, because the Lord promises to write his Torah on the human heart.<sup>29</sup> This promise of the Lord to write directly on the heart is expressed in Jeremiah’s prophecy at Jeremiah

25. See W.J. Urbrock, “Blessings and Curses”, *ABD* I, 760: “The stories of the primeval times and of the Abrahamic family in Genesis, arranged to reflect the J and P schemata of blessing, are balanced by the repeated Deuteronomic invitations to choose life and blessing rather than curse and death in Deuteronomy 27-33”.

26. *Ibid.*

27. See J.R. Lundbom, “New Covenant”, *ABD*, IV, 1088-1094.

28. Cf. *Ibid.*, 1088-1089.

29. *Ibid.*, 1089: “Whereas the *tôrâ* remains in the new covenant and the obligation to comply with its demands still exists, conditions for compliance are vastly improved because Yahweh promises to write his *tôrâ* on the human heart”.

31,33: "Within them I shall plant my Law, writing it on their hearts."<sup>30</sup> This would seem to imply a new mode of communicating this covenant.<sup>31</sup> As regards the content, Jeremiah 31,34 gives an indication of what this is: "... they will all know me, from the least to the greatest, Yahweh declares, since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind". That is to say, in some way the new covenant will eliminate the effect of sin. The prophecy does not say that there will be no more sin; it states that the Lord will forgive their guilt and not call their sin to mind. This in contrast with the Mosaic covenant, where sin called down communal punishment in the form of curses, i.e., the Lord kept the guilt of His people very much in mind.

At Qumran, the Essene covenant community thought of itself as living in "the last days", i.e., the time of fulfilment.<sup>32</sup> The community regarded the new covenant as the Mosaic covenant in that it still had both blessings and curses. But the blessings and curses now fall on individuals, not on the community as such. The Manual of Discipline of the community did not envisage any non-compliance of the community which would lead to the community's being destroyed.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Christian Community and the New Covenant*

The Christian community from the earliest times thought of itself as witnessing the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant. The text of Jeremiah is not

30. Translations are taken from the *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

31. See J. Swetnam, "Why Was Jeremiah's New Covenant New", in *Studies on Prophecies: A Collection of Twelve Papers* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, 26; E.J. Brill; Leiden 1974) 111-115. This paper supposes that Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant was realized in the immediate future in the form of a new availability of the text of the Mosaic covenant for the people. The content of this Mosaic covenant was basically unchanged, but carried with it the divine promise that the sins of the past would be disregarded. In New Testament times this immediate realization of the prophecy of the New Testament was long past, and the people of Qumran and of the New Testament looked on the prophecy as being realized for the first time in their own day. It is this latter realization, which is discussed in the body of the text.

32. See Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1090.

33. "This covenant [i.e. the new covenant at Qumran] had its obligations, and like the Mosaic covenant, these obligations were fortified with blessings and curses (1QS 2:1-8). The *Manual* reads much like Deuteronomy. The main difference between the two is that in the *Manual* the older corporate sense is gone; the blessings and curses, for example, fall now upon individuals. The *Manual* does not foresee any abrogation of the covenant as a whole nor does it imagine the noncompliance might lead to the whole community being destroyed" (Lundbom, 1090).

cited or alluded to with great frequency, but the allusions and citations which do exist indicate that the text played a crucial role in the community's understanding of itself in its relations with God. At Luke 22,30 the phrase "new covenant" is used at Jesus's institution of the Eucharist.<sup>34</sup> It is also found at 1 Corinthians 11,25 and Hebrews 9,15, the former with unmistakable reference to the Eucharist.<sup>35</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews at 8,8-12 uses a lengthy citation from Jeremiah involving the passage about the new covenant (Jeremiah 31,31-34)<sup>36</sup> to begin the central discussion of the epistle, which involves the nature of the new covenant.<sup>37</sup> At Hebrews 10, 16-17 comes a citation of Jeremiah 31, 33-34 as an inclusion involving the previous citation at 8, 8-12; the verse containing the words "new covenant" is not cited, but the allusion is clear. The centrality of the Eucharist in the New Testament shows how central the new covenant was for the identity of the early Church.<sup>38</sup> That identity merits further investigation.

At 1 Corinthians 10,16 Paul refers to the Eucharistic wine as the "cup of blessing" or "blessing-cup":

- 10,16      The blessing-cup, which we bless, is it not sharing in the blood of Christ; and
- 10,17      The loaf of bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the Body of Christ? And as there is one loaf, so we, although there as many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf.

34. See Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1090-1091

35. The present writer would maintain that the reference in Hebrews also involves the Eucharist, but it would be beyond the scope of this paper to develop the point. Cf. J. Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews", *Biblica* 70 (1989) 74-95.

36. It is the longest citation of an Old Testament passage in the New Testament.

37. Again, the present writer should submit that the central section of Hebrews has the Eucharist in mind. Cf. above, n. 35.

38. If one does not hold for a Eucharistic allusion in the central section of Hebrews one is faced with the need to explain how a "new covenant" can be absolutely central to the epistle and yet to have no relation to the "new covenant" of Luke and Paul. And not only Luke and Paul, but Matthew and Mark as well: the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist at Matthew 26,28 and Mark 14,24 are also dependent on the Old Testament traditions concerning covenant, including Jeremiah 31, 31-34. See Mendenhall-Herion, "Covenant", 1197-1198.

The text deserves particular comment in the context of the present paper, for it mentions the Eucharistic wine (v. 16) before the Eucharistic bread (v. 17). The explanation of this reversal of the usual order gives a precious insight into the role of the Eucharist and the new covenant into the thought of the early Church: the reversal of the customary order indicates that the death of Christ (symbolized by the cup) is the source of the blessings which accrue to the Christian community (symbolized by the loaf). The emphasis on the idea of "sharing" (*koinōnia*) in the text with regard to the cup indicates communion with the death of Christ (v. 16a).<sup>39</sup> The communicant receives the benefit of Christ's death, which is viewed as a blessing.<sup>40</sup> And the communicant is considered not simply as an individual but as a constituent of the "body" of Christ through "sharing" (v. 16b). The basic thought of the text moves from the "sharing" in the sacrificial death of Christ (v. 16a) to the "sharing" in the body of Christ, i.e., the Church (v. 16b).<sup>41</sup> Here is a key text for seeing how the death of Christ is viewed as a blessing which flows to the community which forms His body the Church, through the medium of the new covenant which is the Eucharist.

The "cup of blessing" has its source in the death of Christ. That death is not only the cause of blessing; it is also the cause of the removal of a curse. In Galatians Paul says that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by being cursed for

39. "The basic idea is that of the atoning power of the blood. Does *koinōnia*, then, mean 'communion' or 'participation'? For the answer, we have to take account of the word 'is', and then of the commentary which Paul himself provides in v. 17. It becomes plain that the proposed alternative is not a real one. The starting point is certainly the meaning 'participation': the partaking of the meal confers a share in the blood, and that means in terms of content, communion with the death of Christ, H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1975), 171.

40. The "cup of blessing" is initially the cup which has been blessed, a reference to the Jewish practice of blessing cups of wine at meals. In 1 Corinthians this expression has been subsumed into a Christian context so that the "cup of blessings" refers not only to a cup which has been blessed by the words of institution of the Eucharist, but which also brings the blessing of the blood, i.e., the death of Christ, which the cup represents. See also W. F. Orr- J. A. Walther, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation* (Anchor Bible, 32: Doubleday: Garden City, New York 1976) 251

41. See Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 172. The "realistic" view of the nature of the blood and body of Christ which is characteristic of Catholic and Orthodox tradition's view of the symbolism of the cup and bread immeasurably deepens the meaning and significance of this "sharing".



our sake since scripture says: *Anyone hanged is accursed*,<sup>42</sup> so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus..." (3,13-14a). Here Christ's death is viewed as a sacrifice ("for our sake" - *hyper hēmōn*).<sup>43</sup> And the effect which is in view here is the removal of the "curse of the Law". This phrase "Anyone hanged is accursed" is taken from Deuteronomy 21,23; it alludes to the citation of Deuteronomy 27,26 at Galatians 3;10: "Accursed be he who does not make what is written in the book of the Law effective, by putting it into practice." Paul takes the phrase "in the book of the Law" as summing up the entire Mosaic Law by changing Septuagint text from "what is written in all the words of this law" (i.e., the prescriptions laid down in Deuteronomy 27,15-26) to "what is written in the book of the Law".<sup>44</sup> He is thus evoking the curse provisions of the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>45</sup> For Paul, Christ has liberated mankind from the curse provisions of the Mosaic Law as summed up in Deuteronomy.<sup>46</sup> These results, then, only the blessings of

42. Paul draws his conclusions from Scripture on the basis of an exegetical category which subsequently came to be known in rabbinic exegesis as "equal category" (*gezēra shāwā*). This category legitimized inferences drawn from two different texts if the same phrase or even word appeared in each of the texts. In the case of the phrase "Anyone hanged is accursed" the key word is "accursed", with the same root appearing in the citation of Deuteronomy 27,26 cited at Galatians 3,10. See R.Y.K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (The new International Commentary on the New Testament; William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan 1988) 147.
43. Most likely, the statement is based upon a pre-Pauline interpretation of Jesus' death as a self-sacrifice and atonement (see also Galatians 1:4; 2:20)" (H.D. Betz, *Galatians. A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, (Hermeneia, Fortress Press; Philadelphia 1979) 151.
44. Cf. also 2 Corinthians 3,14 and the way Paul has coined the expression "the old covenant" to represent the Mosaic Law. On the interpretation of Galatians 3,12-14a see the discussion in Betz, *Galatians*, 145. The position being sustained here is that of M. Noth, "Die mit des Gestezes Werken umgehen, die sind unter dem Fluch", in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Theologische Bücherei, B6; Chr. Kaiser Verlag; München 1966). 155-171 [English translation by D.R. Ap-Thomas: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse", in *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Studies* (Fortress Press; Philadelphia; 1966) 118-131]
45. Paul's choice of Deuteronomy 21, 23 seems dictated by his need for finding a text which can be made both to refer to the crucifixion of Christ and to another text with the word "cursed" which can plausibly allude to the curses provisions of the Mosaic Law. He is constrained, in other words, by the logic of the technique of "equal category".
46. See the remarks of Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1091: "In Paul's view the law only brings people under its curses. But Christ, by dying on the cross, becomes himself a curse which redeems those under the law who have faith in him (Gal 3, 10-14)."

that Law, the blessings brought by the same sacrificial death of Christ and expressed as such in 1 Corinthians 10,16.<sup>47</sup>

### *Freedom from the Curse Provisions of the Law*

The freeing of mankind from the curse provisions of the Law results in what is known as the "New Covenant". In this covenant there are only blessings. The object of the blessing, of course, is the people as such, the "body/loaf" of 1 Corinthians 10, 16b-17. That is to say, the Christian people as such are no longer in danger of receiving a curse: their destiny is only blessing, i.e., success in attaining the spiritualized goals promised to Abraham, eternal life as the progeny of one who believed.<sup>48</sup>

Formal signs of this new covenant appear in other places in the New Testament writings. In Matthew there are the "blessings" of the beatitudes (5, 3-11) opposed to the "curses" which appear as the "woes" directed against the Pharisees (23, 13-26). The indefectibility of the Church expressed in 16, 18 is a manifestation of the certainty of the blessings for people as a whole who are constituted by sharing in the Eucharist.<sup>49</sup> The addition of "for the forgiveness of sins" by Matthew in the

47. On the theological strategy behind Paul's emphasis on the blessings of the Law see Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1091: "Paul might have said more about the new covenant were it not for his concern to establish a more ancient base than Jer 31, 31-34 for the new faith in Christ. The important promise for Paul is the one given to Abraham, that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Paul grounds the blessings through Christ in the Abrahamic covenant so that they may apply equally to Jews and Gentiles (Gal 3,14). Paul must short-circuit the Mosaic covenant if he is to realize his goal of evangelizing the Gentiles, for the Mosaic covenant was made only with Israel (cf. Rom 9, 4: Eph 2,11-13)." This is true, but it must be added that the blessing contained in the Mosaic covenant are of a piece with the gratuitous promise of God to Abraham; they are not to be considered as a result of human merit (See Noth, "Die mit des Gesetzes Werken umgehen", 171). Thus Paul's "short-circuit" strategy is not being false to theology of either the Mosaic blessings or the promises made to Abraham. On the Mosaic Law viewed as a "grace" cf. John 1,16-17.
48. The quasi-identity of the "promise" made to Abraham and the "blessing" of the covenant formula in Galatians 3, 14 should be noted. See Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1091: "The new covenant... contains only blessings which makes it just like the Abrahamic covenant".
49. Cf. Lundbom's comments on the new covenant in Matthew: "Jesus pronounces his 'blessings' on the new torah (5, 3-11); but on the old he pronounces "woes" (23, 13-26). These blessings and woes are structurally balanced in the gospel and most likely constitute an adaptation of the old covenant form found in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 11, 26-32; 28). The language, however, is toned down

institution formula at 2,28 is an allusion to the covenant language of Jeremiah 31, 34.<sup>50</sup>

The discussion of the new testament in the Epistle to the Hebrews, mentioned above, is the most extended treatment of the new covenant in the New Testament. Here again, as in 1 Corinthians and Galatians, the relation between the new covenant and the promises made to Abraham, and between the Eucharist and the new covenant, are paramount.

For the author of Hebrews, the entrance of God's People into the Promised Land of God's Rest is absolutely certain; but the individual member of that People must remain united with it if they are to share in its blessing. Failure for the individual is possible.<sup>51</sup> Here the promises of progeny and land given to Abraham are being viewed in connection with the new covenant and its elimination of curse for the people as such, but the connection is implicit rather than explicit. The connection depends on the centrality of the new covenant in Hebrews and the fact that the new covenant is seen as replacing the Mosaic covenant and making possible the obtaining of the promises made to Abraham.<sup>52</sup>

The relation between the new covenant and the Eucharist has been touched on above.<sup>53</sup> The present writer would maintain that the Eucharistic Christ constitutes the New Covenant. It is He who is God's definitive and unqualified blessing in

by Matthew. The words *makarioi* (blessed) and *ouai* (woe) translate the Hebrew *'ashrê* and *hôy*, both less strong than the covenant words *bārâk* (blessed) and *'ârûr* (cursed). Jesus does not go so far as to curse the Scribes and the Pharisees. Also, with the blessings and woes spoken to different audiences, the new people of God receive neither woes nor curses, only blessings. This amounts to Matthew saying that there can be no abrogation of the new covenant and no destruction of the Church (Matthew 16,18)" (Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1092). On the relevance of the new covenant as constituting only blessings and the promise of the indefectibility of the Church see J. Swetnam, "Suggested Interpretation of Hebrews 9, 15-18", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965) 390, n. 50.

50. See C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (James Nisbet, London 1952; reprint: Collins [Fontana Books], London 1965) 45. See above, n. 38.

51. See Swetnam, "A Suggested Interpretation of Hebrews 9, 15-18", 383.

52. Cf. *Ibid.*, 380-382

53. On other points of contact between the covenant tradition of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East on the one hand and the Christian Eucharist on the other, see Mendenhall-Herion, "Covenant", 1198 ["There is no doubt that, in addition to the formal similarity to Iron Age loyalty oaths, the Christian Eucharist has significant connections to other Ancient Near Eastern covenant motifs..."]

which there is no shadow of curse. It is He who grounds the definitive People of God and it is He who is introducing them into the Promised Land where He already abides. It is He who is focal point of the blessings so that anyone who abides in Him cannot fail.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Covenant Theme and the New Testament*

The number of explicit references to the covenant theme in the New Testament is limited, even if the context in which they occur indicates that the covenant theme played an important, even a key, role in the way the early Christians thought of themselves as being related to God. Identification of other New Testament themes seems possible, but these are limited in number even if, again, their context shows that they were important. But the question remains why the explicit references and the identifiable themes remain relatively few, given their importance.

One reason suggested for this relative lack of discussion of the new covenant is that the legalistic connotation which the word had for the early Christians.<sup>55</sup> But this seems an exaggeration, for Jesus himself seems to have used the term in a crucial moment of His life. If He did not, his disciples did in a way which must have represented His thinking.

More plausible is the suggestion that there are many motifs of the covenant tradition to be found in the New Testament, and that these motifs were used, consciously and/or unconsciously, by the protagonists and chroniclers of early Christian history.<sup>56</sup> But the identification of the influence of covenant motifs in the New Testament must go beyond the listing of formal characteristics, for Jesus transformed these motifs so that while there remains a certain continuity between what He did and the covenant motifs of the Old Testament, the discontinuity is

54. See Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (above, n. 35). On the crucial importance of remaining united with Christ see 1 John 2,26-3,6.

55. See G.E. Wirght, "The Theological Study of the Bible", in *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (ed. C.M. Laymon) (Abingdon; Nashville -New York 1971) 986 [cited by Lundbom, "New Covenant", 1090].

56. See Mendenhall-Herion, "Covenant", 1198-1201.

more striking still.<sup>57</sup> Jesus was clearly regarded by the early Church as a covenant giver.<sup>58</sup> Jesus' ministry seems to have been implicitly regarded as constituting the "benevolent deeds" which constitute the implicit historical prologue of his covenant.<sup>59</sup> The stipulations imposed by Jesus are defined basically by what he did: forgive, forsake, preach, teach, heal, take up his cross, die. The stipulations are defined by the example of a blessing received.<sup>60</sup> Primitive Christianity had its "witnesses" whose testimony helped bring about the blessings contained in the New Covenant.<sup>61</sup> The "power of the keys" in Matthew 16, 13-20 is connected with the ancient blessings and curses, and has meaning with regard to individuals.<sup>62</sup> Two other points which may be added are the possible deposit of the Eucharist in early Christian places of worship in a way analogous to the deposit of copies of treaties,<sup>63</sup> and the linking of love and observance of the commands of Christ as expressed for example, in John 14, 15.<sup>64</sup>

The search for covenant motifs in the New Testament is important, for the new covenant was a central concern for the New Testament Christians. But this importance should not obscure a truth more important still: Jesus Christ was the central concern for the New Testament Christians. The new covenant and themes related to the new covenant were only one aspect of this crucial concern which was Jesus Christ. It would be ill-advised to conduct a search for covenant themes in the New Testament on any other basis.

57. ...early Christian community and thought each reflect sometimes subtle links with OT covenant traditions, and to appreciate this requires a scholarly sensitivity to something other than formal characteristics. It also probably requires the assumption that the historical Jesus played some role in articulating those old covenant traditions in a new idiom, although it is highly doubtful that even he understood the Sinai covenant in the formal terms of suzerainty treaty elements" (Ibid., 1199).

58. Ibid., 1199

59. Ibid., 1199-1200

60. Ibid., 1200

61. Ibid., 1201

62. Ibid., 1201

63. This suggestion is being made by the present writer.

64. For the second suggestion see Moran, "Love of God in Deuteronomy", 87"... the deuteronomistic love of service is... probably as old or almost as old as the covenant itself. If so, and if the old sovereign-vassal terminology of love is as relevant as we think it is, then what a history lies behind the Christian test of true *agape* - "If you love me, keep my commandments!"

### *Summary and Conclusions*

Treaties between sovereigns and between sovereigns and vassals were a normal way of formalizing and maintaining amicable political relations in the ancient Near East. The Old Testament texts make use of the treaty form used between a sovereign and his vassal to illustrate the relation between God and His people. Various aspects of the treaty form and treaty language can be adduced from the Old Testament to illustrate this use. The Book of Deuteronomy is particularly useful in this regard. Especially striking is the use Deuteronomy makes of the treaty provisions involving blessings and curses: obedience to the stipulations of the treaty resulting in blessings for the people; disobedience, curses.

The prophet Jeremiah foretold a "new covenant" in which there would be a fundamental change in the way the covenant would be regarded. Christians interpreted this new covenant as having a central role in their relations with God, so central that Jesus is pictured as using the language of the new covenant in relation to the Eucharist, the centre of Christian worship. This centrality is matched by the radical change which the Christians thought of as characterizing the new covenant: for them Christ's death had removed the curse provisions of the old covenant so that there was no more possibility of the failure for the new people of God. Only individuals could fail. This impossibility of failure is the basis of the indefectibility of the Church.

Various suggestions have been made with regard to the persistence of the Old Testament covenant form, language, and motifs in the New Testament. Such suggestions may prove to be illuminating with regard to the New Testament text. But the covenant theme should not be studied on the supposition that it is the only central theme of the New Testament. Christ is far richer in His fulfilment of Old Testament themes than that.

### *The Old Testament and the New*

One of the basic premises of contemporary Catholic Scripture scholarship is that the Old Testament is the necessary background for understanding the Testament we Christians call New. The present study has focused on the New and Eternal Covenant, and has tried to show that this Covenant cannot be adequately understood except in the light of the Old Testament. As we Catholics ponder the implications of the "new evangelization" we would do well to ponder the implications of the "new covenant", and how it is not fully intelligible except in the light of the old.