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The Five Main Themes of the Old Testament

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The Five Main Themes of the Old Testament

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by
Laura E. Mumme
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Covenant

The Old Testament is a work saturated with the theme of covenant. The ebb and flow of the epic of history, and therefore of Scripture, is a constant reaction to this covenant. According to Routledge, “a covenant was not just an agreement or a contract; it was a solemn bond established between two or more parties (usually on the basis of a promise or pledge) and involved a firm commitment to the relationship established by the covenant and to its obligations.”¹ A covenant also differs from a contract in that covenant involves a person’s whole being for the duration of life.² Theologically, the covenant provides history with aim and purpose; it gives it a goal toward which all events are culminating. In this light “events can now – when viewed in relation to this program – be decisive or *crucial*.”³ For the purposes of this discourse, a covenant will be defined as a contract that has a religious foundation.

Parity and suzerainty covenants were two common forms of covenant in the Ancient Near East (ANE). A parity covenant was generally initiated by one party and then agreed upon by both parties. Parity implies negotiating and compromising by both parties and therefore does not present the best picture of the idea of covenant found in the Old Testament.⁴ A better image of the covenant that God initiates is found in the Hittite practice of suzerainty covenants. Suzerainty covenants were understood in the ANE to be the arrangement of a superior with an inferior. The two parties were not on equal standing; an independent suzerain would guarantee

1. Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 165.

2. Ronald F. Youngblood, Frederick F. Bruce, and Roland K. Harrison, “Covenant,” in *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1995), 306.

3. Ibid.

4. Merrill C. Tenney and Moisés Silva, “Covenant (OT),” in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 1:1052-1053.

protection and other benefits to weaker, dependent vassals or subjects. In return for these benefits, “the vassal was obligated to keep specific stipulations certifying loyalty to the suzerain alone.”⁵ This format of a suzerain inviting a people group into relationship is closer to the depiction of Yahweh, the King, and His covenant people seen in the Old Testament.

There are three main covenants in the Old Testament: Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and Davidic covenants. God’s promises to Abraham include: 1) progeny – Abraham would be the father of a “great nation” (Gen. 12:2 [ESV]), 2) the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 17:8), 3) blessing to the nations through his offspring (Gen. 12:3), and 4) kingship (Gen. 17:6). Abraham, in return, was to “walk before [God] and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1, ESV) and to circumcise himself and every male in his family line perpetually (Gen. 17:9-14). The Sinaitic covenant was later established between God and the nation of Israel, which shows the partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the aspect of raising up a nation from Abraham’s seed. Here God declares Israel to be His “treasured possession” and “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” on the condition that Israel “obey my voice and keep my covenant” (Exod. 19:5-6 [ESV]). Israel is singled out from all other nations for special relationship with Yahweh. This was not an end in itself but, as understood in the nation’s priestly call, it functioned to attract all nations to Yahweh: “They were called to be holy and distinctive: a people among whom God’s presence would be seen, and to whom other nations would be drawn – seeking to share Israel’s relationship with God.”⁶ The Davidic covenant emphasized God’s fulfillment of his promise of kingship to Abraham: “Through this covenant God gave David the assurance that his house and kingdom would be

5. Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

6. Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), p. 173.

established for ever.”⁷ In 2 Samuel 7, God promises to make David’s name great, to plant Israel, to establish his throne forever. There does not appear to be any reciprocity required from David in this covenant.

These covenant establishments are not unrelated events; on the contrary, they are under the umbrella of God’s plan. There is a tension between God’s promise and reciprocal obligation that produces a question: can human behavior within the covenant reach so far as to expunge the existence of it? God clearly charges both Abraham and Israel to walk in His ways and obey His voice, but what happens if they do not? It is important to note that in these covenant passages God always states His promises *before* he gives obligations. He makes a promise and then describes the proper response of the beneficiary. From this pattern, the reader can make the interpretation that God’s promise is unconditional no matter what, but the behavior of the people will prescribe what blessings or curses found *within* the covenant will unfold.

Kingship

Just as ANE covenants were between a king and his subjects, so also God’s covenant with Israel implies His kingship over them: “Kingship was the main pattern of political organization in the ANE ... and the king was recognized as a shepherd appointed by the god(s) to help society function in a harmonious fashion.”⁸ A king in the ANE was seen as having a close relationship with divinity, an elevated sense of justice, as well as a leadership role in religious practices and military operations.⁹ God’s plan of covenant was directly tied to kingship as

7. Ibid., 233.

8. Marc Zvi Brettler, “King, Kingship,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 3:506.

9. Ibid.

evidenced in God's pattern of imparting and establishing the covenant through a chosen leader.

Theologian Robin Routledge comments as follows:

There is a crucial connection between the presence of God among His people and the institution of an earthly king, who would reign on Yahweh's behalf as His representative. This reflects the widely held view in the ANE that the king was the earthly steward of the deity, and that there was a correspondence between the political structure of the state and the cosmic order lying behind it.¹⁰

Kingship was not a development that God simply allowed to run its course; it was divinely purposed to facilitate His covenant plan and to give an earthly picture of His own kingly splendor.

Israelite kings were meant to serve the people as lawgivers. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 outlines that an Israelite king was not to amass horses or gold or wives for himself, but rather he was to "write for himself in a book a copy of this law" (ESV). The relationship of the king with the law was crucial to the success of the nation as a whole. The disobedience of the king in respect to the law was directly correlated to the disobedience of the entire nation.¹¹ In the ANE, law was considered a gift from the gods, useful for maintaining order in society, and the king "was seen as a channel of God's blessings to the people."¹² The blessing of law took on a unique feature in the Israelite community because of the personal nature of it; it was as though God was saying to Israel "I want to have a relationship with you and here is how it can happen."¹³

God first gave his law through Moses, who served as a mediator between God and Israel. This is a paradigm for God's plan of a covenant through a human leader who mediates the

10. Routledge, *Old Testament*, 233.

11. Christopher Lee Deaton, interviewed by author, *Crave*, October 2, 2012.

12. Routledge, *Old Testament*, 226.

13. Deaton.

covenant law to the covenant people. The king of Israel was to uphold the law and draw the people to the law as he himself was being drawn to it.

The kingship of God is a key consideration in relation to Israel's monarchy as well as to the metanarrative of Scripture. As Creator, God has both ownership and authority over all creation. He has been dispensing power and authority to men since the beginning when He commissioned Adam and Eve to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...every living thing" (Gen. 1:28 [ESV]). God has made a practice of granting authority to men for God made men in his image to reflect his creative and life-giving nature; He establishes kings and deposes them as He wills (Dan. 2:21). In this gift of His image there is concomitant *power*. A good king was to use this power to draw the people to the law, and therefore to God. He was to be a dispenser of justice and righteousness to the people, a shepherd of God's flock, and a defender of the weak.¹⁴ The king's authority was bestowed on him by God to enable him to model God who has authority over all things.¹⁵

Grace

Amidst the chaos of Israel's constant covenant infidelity, a lovely rescuing theme permeates the narrative. God's grace is the strong sustainer of his promise, and it is in the unity of His grace with His word that His promise finds its endurance, efficacy, and exceeding delight. Throughout history, God has been continually giving and sustaining life, the primary receiver being humanity. In Genesis, God gives Adam and Eve a relationship with him. He gives them His love, food, work, each other, His image, and authority over the remainder of his creation.

14. Ibid, 237.

15. Phil Logan and E. Ray Clendenen, "King, Kingship," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, eds. Chad Brand, et al. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 985.

Elaine Heath, Senior Pastor at Woodland Park United Methodist Church, remarks that “this is the beginning of grace, for God initiates loving acts toward Adam and Eve before they know their need.”¹⁶ They were created needy, yet all their needs were met. Grace is vital for all of creation’s relationship with the Holy Creator, and its sheer delightfulness gives unhindered rhythm to the ebb and flow of the epic of history.

God’s grace takes on a unique nuance in the context of the covenant. God shows *hēn*, or goodwill, to all of mankind in a general sense,¹⁷ but His *hesed* is reserved for His covenant people.^{18, 19} *Hesed* has no single English phrase to which it can be translated, but semasiological renderings include “mercy,” “kindness,” “covenant love,” “lovingkindness,” and “steadfast love.”²⁰ The word is “closely connected to the idea of covenant and found frequently in company with *emet / emuna, faithfulness / faithful*.”²¹ It is a term that finds its fullness in a relational context. Eugene Merrill further explains the presence of a hendiadys between *hesed* and covenant, particularly noted in Daniel’s phrase “covenant of *hesed*” (Dan. 9:4).²² H. J. Stoebe summarizes this hendiadys as follows:

Hesed does not refer to a spontaneous, ultimately unmotivated kindness, but to a mode of behavior that arises from a relationship defined by rights and obligations (husband-wife, parent-child, prince-subjects). When *hesed* is attributed to God, it

16. E. A. Heath, “Grace,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 373.

17. H. J. Stoebe, “חסד *hesed* kindness,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, eds. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:451.

18. Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 67.

19. Routledge, *Old Testament*, 108.

20. Ibid.

21. Merrill, *Everlasting*, 67.

22. Ibid, 69.

concerns the realization of the promises inherent in the covenant... It is a given that *hesed* always has to do in some way with the life of the other, and that one expects and hopes from the recipient of such *hesed* a similar willingness that in turn surpasses the obligatory.²³

It is a love relationship to which God was calling Israel. It is as though God were constantly saying, “I will bind myself to you. I will bind myself to you. I will bind myself to you” over and over again. The covenant endures, not on the basis of Israel’s obedience but on the firm foundation of God’s steadfast, faithful, loyal *hesed*. In short, *hesed* is the sustainer and perpetuator of God’s promise.

A particular need for grace is presented upon the giving of the covenant law at Sinai. Even within the law, provision is made for lawbreakers to be forgiven.²⁴ The law is a standard; it performs no action on a person but elicits action from the Law-giver based on the adherence of the law-receiver. This law is the avenue on which grace touches the people; it is a platform on which grace is made amazing. God’s giving of the law to Israel is in itself a gift for it guides them to remain in covenant with their God. God’s grace aims to *keep* his people continually and to rescue his plan perpetually.

Sacrifice

The sacrificial system was not unknown in the ANE world;²⁵ however, Israel’s sacrificial system was distinguished in purpose from those of other people groups. Many ANE peoples made sacrifices to appease and placate their god(s) and to increase the odds of a favorable rendering of a preferred outcome,²⁶ yet the idea that God could be manipulated by sacrifices was

23. Stoebe, *Theological Lexicon*, 451, 456.

24. Heath, *Dictionary*, 374.

25. Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 133.

26. Routledge, *Old Testament*, 188.

adamantly rejected in the OT narrative.²⁷ The Hebrew's sacrificial system was initiated by God and aimed at continuing God's presence among a holy community.²⁸ Within the covenant, sacrifice enabled the worshipper to approach the Holy God.²⁹ The idea of a god choosing a people group and then making a way to dwell with them was wholly unusual to the ANE culture.³⁰

The sacrificial system included voluntary and involuntary offerings. The voluntary offerings were comprised of the burnt, grain, and peace offerings. These were "offered spontaneously to God in praise and thanksgiving for blessings received or favors granted."³¹ The involuntary offerings were "those demanded by Yahweh on the occasion of sin in the Hebrew community," and encompassed the sin (purification) and guilt (reparation) offerings.³² The content and situation regarding each type of sacrifice is varied and will not be covered in this discourse; rather, the themes of atonement and holiness will be reviewed.

Ever since sin's entrance into the world through Adam, mankind has been permeated with the influence of sin which involves an absence of holiness resulting in the inability to approach God. Holiness is a central aspect of the covenant people because their distinctiveness matches their effectiveness in displaying God's presence among them to the nations.³³ It can be

27. Ibid.

28. Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 133.

29. R. E. Averbeck, "Sacrifices and Offerings," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 706.

30. Ibid.

31. Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 133.

32. Ibid.

33. Routledge, *Old Testament*, 172.

understood from the account of Adam and Eve that no human attempt at covering sin could succeed in obtaining God's forgiveness: "The man and woman could no more effect their re-creation than they could their creation. Unless the Lord provided the covering, they would forever remain in their spiritual nakedness before Him."³⁴ Forgiveness required justice, and in His kindness God would reveal to Israel a way for their sin to be atoned, for "kindness is not an apathetic response to sin, but a deliberate act to bring the sinner back to God."³⁵ It was because of God's dwelling among Israel that Israel had to maintain community purity and cleanness through constant sacrifices; God's dwelling summoned a specific environment of holiness.

God's plan for Israel to be His treasured possession was dangerous to sinful flesh because it entailed the exceedingly near presence of the Holy One of Israel.³⁶ In light of this fatal danger, Routledge writes the following statement:

The Sinatic covenant provided safeguards for the nation as a whole in their relationship with God; this included turning away divine wrath by offering appropriate sacrifices, and providing a worship environment in which sinful human beings could approach and meet with a holy God.³⁷

Atonement was made by the death of an animal and involved "a covering or a 'smearing' (Heb. *kpr*) of a victim's blood on an altar."³⁸ On the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place and sprinkled blood on the *kappōret* (also called the mercy seat) which was the

34. Merrill, *Everlasting*, 228.

35. "Kindness, Lovingkindness," in *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, eds. Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce and R. K. Harison (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 728.

36. Merrill, *Everlasting*, 352.

37. Routledge, *Old Testament*, 197.

38. Merrill, *Everlasting*, 228.

cover of the Ark of the Covenant where God's presence rested.³⁹ The *kappōret* is then understood as the throne of the King of Israel as well as the place where Israel's sins were atoned.⁴⁰ God provided for His people a means by which they could draw near and have fellowship with Him despite the ubiquitous wickedness of the nation.⁴¹ The point of all of this was for God's people to enjoy His presence.⁴²

The divinely instituted practice of sacrifice might cause confusion in seeing that God is portrayed as the Life-Giver, and yet His design for fellowship involves death. In the beginning God forewarned Adam that on the day he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he would surely die (Gen. 2:17). God knew that living presented the risk of dying. But if death is so contrary to God's nature, why then would He command and generate a practice of sacrifice in Israel? In fact, death now brings salvation to the world through Jesus Christ who became obedient to death (Phil. 2:8). It seems as though the Creator were now implementing the methods of the De-creator into his plan. On the basis of faith, this conundrum cannot be a result of divine error but of divine power to turn even the darkest of realities into glory and exceeding goodness.

Prophetism

Relationship indicates a connectedness between at least two parties and is identified by the communication between these parties. Two in a love relationship speak to one another differently than those in enmity. A father's communication with his child differs from his communication with a co-worker. In a similar fashion, God's communication with Israel denotes

39. Ibid, 353.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid, 354.

42. Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 132.

their covenant relationship. Through prophecy God reveals Himself; rebukes kings; judges, guides, warns, and comforts His people; indicts nations; and screams Triune passions for relationship with His chosen people.⁴³

Prophecy is, in effect, the “communication based intermediation between the divine world and human society.”⁴⁴ Prophecy was practiced in the ANE, but the concept of the covenant – “namely, God’s choosing a people as a means of revealing himself and carrying out his plan in history”⁴⁵ – made Israelite prophecy wholly unique. Pagan peoples sought to exert control and manipulation over the spiritual world through divination and sorcery,⁴⁶ but Israelite prophets aimed to declare the true word of God the King to His treasured possession. God purposed prophetism to function as a way of ingraining truth into the hearts of His people. A true prophet of God was one whose message accurately came to pass (Deut. 18:14-22) as well as one whose communication stemmed from the purposes of the Sinaitic covenant (Deut. 13:1-5).⁴⁷

The societal position of Hebrew prophets shifted as history progressed. Andrew Hill and John Walton categorize the prophets into three categories: 1) pre-monarchic, 2) pre-classical, and 3) classical.⁴⁸ Prophets in the pre-monarchy period functioned as leaders (e.g. Moses) and communicated with the people of Israel.⁴⁹ Pre-classical prophets (e.g. Nathan) generally filled

43. D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 27.

44. B. Buller, “Prophets, Prophecy,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 662.

45. Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 506.

46. Buller, 2003, 666.

47. Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 808.

48. Hill and Walton, *Survey*, 505.

49. *Ibid.*

roles as advisors to the king.⁵⁰ Classical prophets (e.g. Jeremiah) addressed the people in regards to their social and spiritual state.⁵¹ All of these prophetic variations served as a mouthpiece for God, communicating His personal messages to His audience.

The messages of the prophets are loaded with heated words of raw, divine desire. God lays a heavy message on the prophets and they in turn scream the resounding themes of divine hatred of sin and of an incomprehensible, tender love for Israel. The language of the prophets is unparalleled in power. Prophetic poetry attempts to communicate to unfeeling hearts not only the reality of Yahweh's disposition towards Israel, but also the depth and strength and writhing nature of this divine disposition. Human language does not have the capacity to fully convey deep spiritual realities, however, the poetry of the prophets fulfills the necessary effects of the divine thoughts, albeit incompletely.⁵² Accordingly, Brent Sandy writes,

Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented in poetry.⁵³

In short, the prophets describe reality with unreal word pictures,⁵⁴ and “the result is a very heavenly revelation in very earthly language.”⁵⁵ The extreme picture of God that the prophets attempt to communicate reveals a wild, relentless, furious lover. If there is any confusion as to

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Sandy, *Plowshares*, 26.

53. Ibid, 27.

54. Ibid, 19.

55. Ibid, 27.

God's character being monotonous and tiresome in relation to the law or the covenant, the OT prophetic writings vehemently obliterate such a delusion.

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