

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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THE DAVIDIC COVENANT IN HEBREWS

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To continue our study of the Davidic Covenant, we turn to the Book of Hebrews. In an earlier issue of Covenant Renewal, I briefly touched on the covenant grant theme in the book. Since I have been discussing the Davidic Covenant as a specific covenant of grant, however, the time has come to return to a fuller treatment of the Book of Hebrews. For, I believe that the entire epistle functions as a covenant of grant. By seeing the letter to the Hebrews in this way, the Davidic Covenant emerges quite clearly.

If the reader recalls, a covenant of grant has five parts to it:

1. In the Covenant of Grant, the suzerain or "great king," on demonstration of the exceeding loyalty of the vassal king, may bestow on him the unconditional right of an enduring dynasty to rule over a particular city-state.
2. The establishment of a "father-son" relationship between the suzerain and the vassal (by means of a declarative adoption formula) creates a legal basis for the gift of an enduring dynasty, alongside the vassal's covenantal designation as "son" of the suzerain, he is also known as his "servant."
3. As part of ancient Near Eastern treaty formulary, the great king guarantees the protection of the vassal or his ruling heir by undertaking to annihilate a common enemy – provided the current ruler is loyal to the great king, and reports any evil word against the great king.
4. The suzerain undertakes to protect the people of the vassal by virtue of the suzerain's agreement with the vassal, though on occasion the suzerain may contract an agreement directly with the people of the vassal. In such an instance, the separate agreement between the suzerain and the people serves as the complement of the suzerain's (primary) agreement with the vassal.
5. In the Covenant of Grant, the curse formulary is directed against those who violate the rights of the vassal or his ruling descendants. If a vassal is himself disloyal, he will be disciplined by the great king, often to be replaced by an heir of the dynasty loyal to the great king.

There are several vital issues in a Covenant of Grant. First, the suzerain specifies the covenant treaty in a unique way. He literally makes the vassal a son. No longer is there a simple suzerain/vassal treaty, nor is there a normal father/son relationship. The vassal becomes a son. This happens through a legal, adoptive process. How else could it occur? The vassal is not naturally part of the suzerain's household. Action other than the biological must take place. The only other binding union of equal status with the natural is the legal. The Covenant of Grant legally changes the

relationship through the declaration that the vassal is a son.

Second, when the suzerain adopted the vassal as a son, promises were extended to the children of the vassal/son. After all, the vassal became part of the "family," which meant that the descendants' status was changed as well. They became the heirs of the specific covenant of grant bequeathed to the vassal/son. What belonged to their father would some day be theirs.

Third, the ultimate issue regarding the Covenant of Grant, therefore, is inheritance. The suzerain for some significant reason, usually an act of specific loyalty, wanted to reward the vassal with something special, most of the time land. To do so, however, he had to make the vassal a son. There was no mechanism for simply giving away what belonged to him. His possessions were part of his estate, to use modern language. He could only give up a portion of his inheritance by making the recipient a legal heir. Hence the adoptive process of sonship became necessary.

Thus, the Covenant of Grant was the ancient near eastern procedure for giving up a slice or even all of a suzerain's inheritance. It had everything to do with the disposition of the estate, which could only result if a prior step of adoption took place. This is precisely what we have uniquely seen with the Davidic Covenant.

Davidic Sonship

David was declared to be God's son! The Lord made the shepherd a child of His in a special way. He legally declared the former vassal an adoptive member of the household. He said,

I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever. According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David (II Samuel 7:14-17).

In the Psalms, the Psalmist provides more details of this sonship relationship.

He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgements; If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod,

and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah (Psalm 89:26-37).

Notice what is added in this statement of the Davidic covenant. Not only was David made a son by the Covenant of Grant, he became the "firstborn"; he became heir of everything. In addition, his seed would enjoy the same status. They were promised that they would always be part of the Covenant of Grant. The guarantee stated is the process of discipline. God further proves, therefore, that He has truly made David firstborn by promising to chastise his children should they break the commandments. He will do this because His own reputation is at stake. God forged this covenant on His own character, His "holiness." He will make certain that the covenant is always fulfilled through the seed of David by disciplining them to the point of faithfulness. Discipline becomes a significant indicator of the Davidic Covenant.

The Firstborn Issue

A careful student of the Old Testament, however, will have his (her) interest piqued at the reference to David as the firstborn. This signalled a major change in redemptive history, for up to this point, the levites had been uniquely the firstborn. A quick review of the history of the firstborn is quite important.

Israel as a body politic was called the firstborn. God told Moses,

When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go. And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, "Thus saith the Lord, 'Israel is my son, even my firstborn'" (Exodus 4:21-22).

The issue in Egypt was inheritance. The firstborn received the inheritance, indeed a double portion. When a former Pharaoh had adopted Joseph, he had essentially made Israel the firstborn of the land. He had given the young Israelite all of the signs of sonship.

Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, "See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck; and he made him to ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried before him, "Bow the knee": and he made him ruler over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without thee shall no man lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-paaneah; and he gave him a wife Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On. And Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt (Genesis 41:40-45).

Significantly in this passage, the eon became the priest to Pharaoh. The firstborn took on a priestly role, which meant God's people were allowed to serve this pagan monarch. They were on loan to the Pharaoh. But because Jacob was God's son, he was elevated through Joseph to be Pharaoh's son. What was Pharaoh's became Joseph's because of God. A double portion had been given to Jacob, Israel and Egypt. The eon of God was entitled

to both because he was God's anointed. And, what Pharaoh was either wittingly or unwittingly realizing was that what belonged to him should also belong to Jacob. His land had been saved by Jacob's heir and to Jacob therefore his inheritance would be given.

The ancient patriarchal covenant with Abraham was being fulfilled before their eyes: "I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Genesis 17:6-7). And in the interpretative words of the Apostle Paul, "For the promise, that he would be heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect" (Romans 4:13-14).

Thus, the issue was inheritance. The descendants of Abraham were under his covenant. Although Pharaoh did not enter the Abrahamic covenant, he became an accomplice to its establishment. A later Pharaoh failed to realize precisely this point. The complexity of the situation begins to unravel in light of the firstborn theology. Pharaoh over Moses was reneging on an ancient covenant made by his own ancestor. More importantly, he was attempting to reverse the covenant made by God with his son. This could not be allowed to happen. God the Father stepped in and dealt with this pagan leader who would dare to do such a thing to His son. When the Lord did so, He fulfilled another promise that had been made to Abraham, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance" (Genesis 15:13-14). In other words, God promised an inheritance to His firstborn. He fulfilled when He led out the nation from the bondage of Egypt.

But something quite significant happened on the way to the Promised Land. While God issued the terms of His new covenant with Israel, they apostatized at the foot of the mountain. When Moses returned, he issued a challenge to the people, "Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me" (Exodus 32:26). The Levites came to Moses side as a tribe, which redeemed them from previous sins (cf. Genesis 32). They were commanded to go and execute 3,000 Israelites with the sword. As a result, they became the new firstborn in substitute for the nation, which meant that the inheritance passed to Israel through them. They received no land as an inheritance because all of the things of God belonged to them.

And 1, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore the Levites shall be mine; Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn of Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the Lord (Numbers 3:12-13).

Thus, the progression of firstborn could be summarized as beginning with Israel, narrowing to Levi as a representative of Israel, and contracting even further to David, who is called the firstborn of God (Psalm 89:27). The final step to be noted is that, as I have tried to make abundantly clear, sonship has everything to do with inheritance, especially firstborn sonship. David had become the heir of Israel. As such, just as Israel had become a joint heir through the representation of Levi, so Levi and Israel now became joint heirs through David. Moreover, David's heirs

had become part of the inheritance, which brings us to Jesus Christ.

The New Testament speaks of Christ as the firstborn. The Apostle Paul says, "But now Christ has risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Now the progression of firstborn contracts even further to one, Christ Himself. Everything in the estate of God passes to Him. But, the progression does not stop here. Just as the firstborn had shrunk to Jesus Christ, it expands to the Church.

In the time of the New Testament, however, this raises an important question. What about the other firstborn, Israel and the Levites? To answer this question, apparently there was confused thinking, which leads us to a consideration of the Davidic Covenant of Grant in the Book of Hebrews where the question of inheritance is answered.

The Covenant of Grant in Hebrews

If the firstborn progression has been followed, the way that previous covenant groups were validated through a new heir should be clear. Israel was preserved in its inheritance through Levi, Levi through David, and David through Jesus. But for the First Century Christians, an important step of the firstborn progression had been lost, the effect David's Son would have on the priesthood. Nevertheless, many Hebrew Christians apparently began to think that the Old Covenant had been somehow preserved through Christ. In a twisted sort of logic, they saw that Jesus restored the Old Covenant priesthood. The Levites, therefore, continued as the true priesthood.

To this confusion, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Hebrews Christians, probably of Jerusalem.¹ What the early Hebrew Christians failed to comprehend, however, was the nature of the Davidic Covenant, and specifically the way a covenant of grant functioned. The Israelites had their inheritance preserved through the Levites. But when sonship shifted to David, a new priesthood was raised up which meant a new configuration on inheritance. With this, let us analyze the Book of Hebrews as a covenant of grant.

Recognition of Loyalty: Hebrews 1:1-4

In the Covenant of Grant, the suzerain or "great king," on demonstration of the exceeding loyalty of the vassal king, may bestow on him the unconditional right of an enduring dynasty to rule over a particular city-state.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners Wake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they (Hebrews 1:1-4).

The parallels between a normal covenant of grant and the first verses of Hebrews are obvious. The author cites the superior faithfulness of the Son. Jesus Christ is the final revelation (1:1-2), the creator (1:2), the redeemer who

has "purged our sins" (1:3), the ascendent one who sits at the right hand of God (1:3), and one who has "by inheritance obtained a more excellent name" (Hebrews 1:4). These are all feats that surpass any accomplishments of anyone who has ever lived.

The last achievement, namely, "by inheritance obtaining a more excellent name" is most significant for our understanding of Hebrews as a covenant of grant. Inheritance has provided Him with a better name. In other words, Jesus is the recognized heir. He has always held a superior place in terms of accomplishments but moreover He is the Son who inherits everything. Through Him the covenant of grant comes, which takes us to the second aspect of the covenant of grant.

Father-Son Relationship (Hebrews 1:5-14)

The establishment of a "father-son" relationship between the suzerain and the vassal (by means of a declarative adoption formula) creates a legal basis for the gift of an enduring dynasty, alongside the vassal's covenantal designation as "son" of the suzerain, he is also known as his "servant."

For which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? And again, when he bringeth in the first begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.... But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom (Hebrews 1:5-6, 8).

The Davidic Covenant pattern continues. After recognizing Christ's superior achievements, the Father-Son relationship is declared. In the specific context, the author points out that Christ is above the angels in the hierarchy. The real point being made is that Jesus is the heir through whom the inheritance and access to the Father come.

Hebrews 2:1-10:39

As part of ancient Near Eastern treaty formulary, the great king guarantees the protection of the vassal or his ruling heir by undertaking to annihilate a common enemy - provided the current ruler is loyal to the great king, and reports any evil word against the great king.

This section, as might be suspected, is the largest. It is the ethical stipulations segment according to the standard covenantal pattern. God is in essence saying to the Hebrew Christians that He will protect the integrity of His Son. They are in danger of apostatizing and going back to the Old Covenant, the evidence of which is cited in terms of the warnings. Should they not heed the warning, they will be annihilated, which is what happened in A.D. 70. The following outline organizes the material according to this purpose.

Covenant Warnings: 2:1-10:39

A. First Warning: Christ is the superior Revelation 2:1-4 and thus rejection of Him is more serious than any previous rejection of the revelation of God. Besides, Christ took on revealed humanity in a way like none other. To reject Him is to reject Him who understands humanity more than another.

1. Superiority of Humanity 2:5-18
2. Superiority of Service 3:1-6

B. Second Warning: The Rejection of Jesus More Serious than Moses 3:7-19.

1. Christ Accomplished True Rest 4:1-13
2. Christ Became High Priest 4:14-5:10
 - a. Christ's High Priesthood 4:14-16

1. Some such as, J. Danielou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity* (1958), pp. 18ff., and C. Spicq, "L'Épître aux Hébreux, Apôles, Jean-Baptiste, les -- et Qumran," *Revue de Qumran*, 1 (1958-59), pp. 365ff. as quoted in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 14-15., have actually argued that the epistle was written to converted Levites. This view has some plausibility in light of the thesis I am advocating but such a position is too exclusive. Certainly converted Levites were perhaps a predominant part of the target audience but italy should also be kept in view.

- b. Qualifications of Priesthood 5:1-4
- c. Christ's Qualifications of Priesthood 5:5-10
- C. Third Warning: Spiritual Immaturity of Priesthood ("Teachers") 5:11-14.
 - 1. perseverance 6:1-20
 - 2. Permanency of Melchizedekal Priesthood 7:1-28
 - 3. Temporary Character of Aaronic Priesthood 8:1-10:18
- D. Fourth Warning: Wilful Apostasy 10:26-39 will result in final rejection.
 - 1. The Warning 10:26-31
 - 2. Final Call to perseverance 10:32-39

Oath with Covenant Witnesses (Hebrews 11:1-40)

The suzerain undertakes to protect the people of the vassal by virtue of the suzerain's agreement with the vassal, though on occasion the suzerain may contract an agreement directly with the people of the vassal. In such an instance, the separate agreement between the suzerain and the people serves as the complement of the suzerain's (primary) agreement with the vassal.

The previous section has in effect revealed a bad report about the Hebrew Christians. They had effectively misunderstood the covenant grant through Christ. They had not grasped how this would change the priesthood. In this section, however, the basis of the good report (11:2) is reviewed. In so doing, the writer to the Hebrews chronicles the faithful witnesses with whom God has entered and preserved covenant. The implication is that the covenant was established with them and kept. The same should happen with the Hebrew Christians.

The chapter is concluded with the following statement, "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided something better for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:39-40). The previous list were all the heirs of the covenant. Yet, they never saw the "promise," or inheritance. The present Hebrew Christians had seen the promise fulfilled. In order for past generations not to be cast off, the present generation needed to remain faithful. Covenant solidarity required the first century Hebrew Christians to be faithful covenantal representatives that their people (and all the Old Covenant people) would not be rejected.

Call of Witnesses 11:1-12:59

- A. Prologue: The Nature of Faithfulness 11:1-3
- B. The Faithful Witnesses 11:4-40
 - 1. Faithfulness of first children 11:4
 - 2. Faithfulness of Antediluvians 11:5-7
 - 3. Faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah 11:8-12
 - 4. Faithfulness of City of God 11:13-16
 - 5. Faithfulness of Patriarchs 11:17-22
 - 6. Faithfulness of Moses 11:23-28
 - 7. Faithfulness of Exodus and Settlement 11:29-31
 - 8. Faithfulness of Others OT Saints 11:32-38
 - 9. Epilogue: Faith's Vindication in Christ 11:39-40

The True Heirs (Hebrews 12-13)

In the Covenant of Grant, the curse formula is directed against those who violate the rights of the vassal or his ruling descendants. If a vassal is himself disloyal, he will be disciplined by the great king, often to be replaced by an heir of the dynasty loyal to the great king.

The epistle concludes with an emphasis on covenant loyalty. The author calls to "endure chastening" (12:7), one of the important closing covenant of grant concepts. Remember, David had been told by God that he and his seed would be chastened by God because of the true Father-son relationship that had been established.

Several loyalty themes are also developed. The new people of God are to live at peace with all men and "continue in brotherly love" (Hebrews 13:1). The emphasis on covenant loyalty is in terms of the two great mountains, Mt. Sinai at which instructions were given regarding the earthly tabernacle, and the heavenly Jerusalem on which the true tabernacle resides.

Thus, the book closes on priestly themes but in terms of the Davidic covenant of giant structure. The reason, as we have seen is due to the development of David as the firstborn, which replaced the previous firstborn, the Levites. The author calls in the final analysis for the recipients of the letter, "Let us go forth, therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach" (13:13). This is a Davidic charge, for the Levites were supposed to stay within the camp. Thus, the essence of the change of firstborn is expressed in the command to live out the covenant of grant bequeathed through David.