

# Scripture Terms—I: 'Testament'

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The word which we translate as 'testament' could equally well be called an alliance, a pact, an agreement, a covenant.<sup>1</sup> And when we speak of a 'new covenant', we are implicitly appealing to an 'old' covenant—we mean that our present relationship with God is the conclusion and climax of a relationship which already existed in some form. Therefore, if we are to understand this basic institution of our religion we have to see it in its original setting.

For practical purposes we may begin with Abraham. Abraham was a semi-nomad wandering on the outskirts of civilisation in the second millenium before Christ. His position was not unique or strange: it is quite a normal way of life, one that is still lived by people in the same circumstances in the Middle East today; it is even a necessary way of life for people who depend for their livelihood on animals which have to keep on the move in search of pasture and water.

One of the most striking characteristics of such a way of life is the importance of the family. In the town, a man is surrounded by a whole network of relationships on which his life depends—shops, schools, police, government and so on. But away from the towns, in no dependence on its polity, the family comes into its own as the basic unit of society; and all the props and stays of communal living must be found within the narrow circle of the family.

Above all the family must ensure its own protection. For in the desert, there is no guarantee that the group of figures which approaches over the skyline will be friends rather than foes. Life in the desert is often hard, and one must always be alert against marauders who may carry off food and herds. Grazing grounds and water points, too, are precious and intruders are not welcomed.

A man, then, must rely on his family for help and protection: Abraham, going so promptly to the rescue of Lot, is doing no more

<sup>1</sup>The Latin chose the word 'testament' rather than 'covenant' or some other word like that, in order to stress the one-sidedness of this agreement: a covenant with God is not an equal agreement between two equal partners, but one in which God freely binds himself - as in a 'last will and testament'. The term also draws attention to the part played by our Lord's death in this covenant, as when a man bequeaths his goods at death by his last testament. cf. Heb. 9. 16.

than family duty demanded. But for greater security, two families or groups of families could make an alliance; we have an example in the Bible in the case of Abraham and Abimelech—these two powerful sheikhs find their followers disputing over a well, so they come to an arrangement and seal their agreement with a covenant. When this happened, the resulting relationship was looked on as being the equivalent of blood-relationship: they were 'blood-brothers', and were bound by the same ties of allegiance and loyalty, the same obligations of protection and help.

This was the relationship that Abraham entered into with God. God was, as it were, the patriarch of his clan; to him Abraham owed allegiance and loyalty—'faith': God's word was his law. And God on the other hand promised protection and help; just as a member of a powerful clan with many strong allies would be respected throughout the desert, so would Abraham be strong, for God was with him; he was responsible for God's good name, and God's reputation was at stake in his fortune.

God thus became his 'redeemer'. The word used for this—*go'el*—originally referred to the rite of blood-vengeance, which is a typically tribal method of ensuring justice; where there are no police and no universally acknowledged system of law, it was the family which had to make itself jointly responsible for ensuring justice for its members. Thus, if one of them were killed, the rest would ensure that his death was avenged, and this threat would act as a sanction against bloodshed. In later, more peaceful days, the term came to be used in a wider sense of the next-of-kin who is responsible for the rights of the family; it is used, for example, of the kinsman who takes on the debts of another member of the family in order to prevent his property being alienated; and Boaz acts as a typical *go'el* to Ruth when he secures her possession of her husband's land, and even marries her to make sure that the family name does not die out. It is in a similar sense that Job cries out: 'I know that my redeemer liveth . . .'—he sees himself going down to the grave with unmerited ignominy, and he calls on God to act as 'next-of-kin' in assuring the triumph of his good name after death.

And so the Israelites, descendants of Abraham and like him bound in covenant with God, can call on God for protection and help, precisely in virtue of the covenant, precisely in virtue of his position as *go'el*: 'Hear my words, O God, my rock, my redeemer' (Ps. 18. 15): 'When he brought death on them, they hastened back to him, and remembered God their rock, their redeemer' (Ps. 77. 34). The relationship that God

has bound himself to is one of firm allegiance, rock-like in its firmness and reliability.

And most of all this relationship will come into play when they find themselves dispossessed and enslaved in Babylon. Just as he had brought them into being and made them his first-born sons by rescuing them from the slavery of Egypt, so now also he will act his part as *go'el*, redeemer: 'Fear not, Israel; I will come to your help, I the Holy One of Israel, thy redeemer . . . ' (Is. 41.14).

Another effect of the covenant relationship—or rather, another way of expressing the same effect—was to call it 'salvation'. In English this word has negative connotations—we are saved from something or someone. This is true also in the Bible: it is 'salvation from our enemies and from all those who hate us' (Luke 1. 71), but it is not there restricted to the negative. It includes also the prosperity and power that God promised to Abraham, the blessings of wealth and fertility that are attached to the law.

This is even more true of another covenant-term: *peace*. This means absence of war, of course; but it is absence of war as a means to acquiring the blessings of life untroubled by conflict, a life in which each man will live at peace under his own vine and his own fig-tree. That is why it becomes the normal greeting: 'Peace be on you'—not merely in the sense that there should be cessation of hostilities, but in the sense that all that is good should come to him. 'The evil are at peace', says Job, and then goes on to describe what he understands by peace: 'Their cattle are fertile, their children are healthy, they sing and dance to the music of flute and harp . . . ' (cf. Job 21. 9-13).

But it is not merely material comfort that this word 'peace' implies. It means 'the good life' in all its senses. The Hebrew word for 'peace' is *shalom*; and the root-meaning of this word is 'to be full'. To have peace, then, means to be living a full life. It is especially a 'civic' quality, because it is in the cities that this full life is most easily fostered. That is why Isaias foresees an ideal city in which the very name of the government will be 'Peace' (Is. 60. 13); and why the king of such a city, the child who shall be born to rule, shall be called 'Prince of peace', and equipped with the wisdom, strength, and prudence to ensure this quality (Is. 9. 5).

It is peculiarly a quality which community life exists to foster. In the city men live secure within strong walls, protected by government and law, with some internal organisation to ensure order and armies to ward off the attacks of enemies. And there in peace they go about their

daily tasks: agriculture flourishes, and trade and commerce; and wealth gives leisure for learning and spiritual pursuits, music and literature, beautiful buildings and sculpture. And most of all, a man's mind and character will expand by the mere fact of contact with his fellows, by the exchange of ideas, by the assimilation of thoughts.

Most of us are so used to urban civilisation that we do not realise how much we depend on the society in which we live: not only for the simple material things like food and clothing, but how our minds have been formed by the people we live with and by the books we have read—for better or for worse, by assimilation or by rejection. You cannot live with people and be unaffected by them. We cannot escape the pressure of society, and it has made us what we are.

Now, it was away from such an urban civilisation that God called Abraham. Many people profess to long for freedom from our crowded cities, from the clamour of communal living, from the pressure of people upon us. But in fact, they do not usually mean it quite literally. If you have books, you are still to some extent in contact with society, you are *communing with another mind*. If you have a radio, if you have music, you have not left society quite behind you. And if we did, how arid life would be. It would be a sort of solitary confinement, in which our spirits would wilt and wither.

God called Abraham away from this 'good life'; and Abraham's spirit did not shrivel away. On the contrary, his personality expanded and flourished, became more generous and noble. For in his covenant with God Abraham found *shalom*, peace, fullness of life. All that men provide for each other in the interchange of social living, all that and infinitely more Abraham drew from the rich source of all personality: his spirit nourished and fed from God, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So far we have been talking of the covenant in terms of a tribal league, an alliance between two sheikhs. But when circumstances change, and the term 'covenant' comes to have a slightly different meaning in human institutions, the divine reality is rich enough to adapt itself to the new pattern also.

God's covenant with Abraham was a relationship between two individuals. But from Abraham a whole people grew; and when God entered into covenant with them, it was visualized on the model of the covenant between a nation and its suzerain lord. Several examples have come down to us of such 'treaties of peace' imposed on a subject people by their overlord, and they are strikingly similar in form to the coven-

ant at Sinai. Such treaties usually begin with the titles of the overlord; and a reminder of the obligations which the subject people owe to him (as, at Sinai, 'I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of bondage'). Then there is the claim to obedience (as 'Thou shalt not have other gods before me'); and the other obligations imposed on the subjects. Blessings and curses were then appended to the treaty (like those which are found at the end of the legislation in Leviticus or Deuteronomy); and the treaty itself was placed in the shrine, in the safe-keeping of the god.

There are obvious differences between the Mosaic covenant and the one which God made with Abraham. The most striking difference is that the first covenant involved simply a promise, while the second imposed an obligation, a law. The Old Testament remains faithful to both traditions, without apparently noticing the conflict between them; but with the coming of the New Testament the underlying conflict was brought to the surface. It was St Paul who brought matters to a head, and he sided uncompromisingly with the Abraham covenant against the Mosaic form. It is not by the Mosaic law that we are saved, he says, but by faith after the pattern of Abraham's. The covenant with Abraham is the earlier and more essential form of the relationship between God and man, and one which the law cannot disavow: 'God made a covenant with Abraham first; can the law, made four hundred and thirty years later, annul this, and make void the promise?' (Gal. 3. 17). Paul recognises the fact that the law is good, holy, just, spiritual (Rom. 7. 12-14); but nevertheless its results were evil, because of our weakness: 'The law is spiritual, but I am weak, enslaved to sin' (Rom. 7. 14); and its temporary role, as a guide and guard till Christ comes as the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, must not be made into a permanent principle of salvation.

But actually the conflict between the two is not really so radical. In the first place, the same attitude on man's part is demanded by both—faith, loyalty, sincere and whole-hearted allegiance to God. It was this, and not simple fulfilment of the law, which achieved salvation—this is what St Paul clings firmly to through all his anguished and tortuous dealing with the subject. This was the failure of the Pharisees—not that they respected the law, but that they tried to make it an independent and automatic key to salvation.

But the law, as a mere list of commands, cannot give salvation. The only way in which it could do that—the way that the Pharisees tried to choose—would be by making a strait-jacket for our unruly nature. But

our unruly nature will always find a way of breaking out of this strait-jacket, and then the law becomes, as St Paul saw so clearly, merely an added occasion of sin: 'The law enters in that sin may become truly sin, in order that sin may yet more abound' (Rom. 7. 13).

But the law was never intended to be merely an obligation. It was something much deeper than that—it was a revelation, and a revelation of the character of God himself. It told men what God was like, and offered this ideal to them as their own ideal: 'Be ye holy, as the Lord thy God is holy'.

Since it was a revelation, then, it was by faith that it had to be received. And it was in that faith, no less than Abraham's, that Moses and the people of God went into the desert and forward to their promised land. This faith united them with God; and the law—the actual series of commandments—was no more than a description or definition of the character of the God with whom they were joined in covenant. No human eye could see God; and they were not to have idols of him as had the pagan peoples. In place of such idols, they had the law: 'There is no other nation that has its god so close to it as our God is to us, in commandments and precepts . . . ' (Deut. 4. 7-8). As such, then, the law was not a shackle on their liberty; on the contrary, it was the charter of freedom and a pass-word to a liberty they could not have dreamed of—the freedom of the sons of God.

In other words, the Mosaic covenant was like Abraham's covenant—a promise, and a promise of peace in the sense that we have discussed—the full development of personality, of the personality of God himself.

And in the new covenant, the new testament, this promise is fulfilled. We are called to live as strangers and wanderers in this world (Heb. 11. 13, 13. 14; I Peter 1. 1); and in place of the props and stays of human society, we rely on the covenant with our liege lord. But with that liege lord we are united in a real, mystical unity; his law is not externally imposed on us, but written in our hearts (Jer. 31. 31). As our kinsman, he will give us 'redemption'; as our lord, he will give us *salus*, well-being, salvation; and most of all, in that union we will find that fullness of living, that full development of personality by sharing in the personality of God himself, that we call *peace*.