CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

Exploring Covenant in a World of Faiths

William H. Bellinger
Baylor University

Delivered at the Houston Clergy Institute, March 6, 2007

Good morning. It is a great honor to be with you today. My thanks to Rabbi Lyon and the Planning Committee for the opportunity. All of us here owe a debt of gratitude to those who have worked to make this gathering possible. I am grateful to Congregation Beth Israel for the vision of establishing and supporting this Clergy Institute. Such programs have much to contribute in our world and are a cause for hope among people of faith. I also thank Rabbi Langer and look forward to learning a great deal in this conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Our topic, "Exploring Covenant in a World of Faiths," recognizes that we live in a world in which pluralism is the order of the day. It also recognizes that the notion of 'covenant' is one that is shared by Jewish and Christian faiths. I bring to this conversation my background as a scholar-teacher of the Old Testament.[1] I am a Christian reader of these Scriptures, in the Baptist tradition. I believe we all read from our traditions, and I hope we all learn by engaging reading partners in other traditions. With that opening word I move to some explorations of covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Hebrew term commonly translated 'covenant' is *berit*. The etymology of the term is disputed, but basic meanings can be approximated as a self-imposed obligation or promise or as a structured relationship between two parties, binding upon both.[2] The topic of *berit* could easily overwhelm us for the term 'covenant' has pervaded much of modern Old Testament scholarship.[3] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have shown in their volume *Metaphors We Live By* that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action."[4] The metaphor of covenant is central to the life of the community of faith portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures and to its relationship with God.

I could thus take many tacks in exploring the topic; what I want to do today, however, is look at two streams of covenant expressions in the Older Testament, note how they flow into the

[1] In this presentation I will use Hebrew Scriptures, Old Testament, Older Testament, and TANAK to identify this canonical literature. This practice is meant to reflect an awareness of the difficulty of determining an appropriate label for the literature.

[2] *TLOT* I, 256-266.

[3] For influential theological treatments, see Walther Eichrodt, *Old Testament Theology*, OTL (2 vols., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961-1967); H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995-1996).

[4] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 3.

Newer Testament, and then reflect on their significance for us. One of my concerns is that I still often hear Christians suggest that when we get to the New Testament, everything begins afresh and the old covenant (testament) ceases and the new covenant (testament) takes over. I don't think that kind of supersessionism works; the biblical traditions are much more complicated. It is my hope that out of these explorations a little magic will be forced to rise and our conversation can enhance our reflections on faith.

COVENANT IN GENESIS

First a note on reading Genesis. Most modern scholarly treatments of these Pentateuchal texts begin with the identification of the sources brought together in the text and treating those sources distinctly. Today there is great debate among scholars about the question of the origin of the Pentateuch; the question is very much unsettled. A number of scholars question the whole approach of focusing on origins. In such a context, I find it helpful to read Genesis holistically with attention to the narrative artistry of the texts. At the macro level, I am still essentially persuaded by the view usually traced to Gerhard von Rad that the primary theme of the narratives in Gn 1-11 is the growing power of sin in the world, with the, almost hidden, counter theme of the growing power of grace in the world.[5] When readers come to the end of the story of the Tower of Babel in Gn 11, the question is where now is the sign of divine grace found in the earlier narratives of the Garden, Cain and Abel, and the flood. The suggestion is that the divine grace is seen in the call of Abram and Sarai and their descendents as a means of bringing blessing to all nations. The call of Abram in Gn 12:1-3 forms a pivot in the book and serves as a preface to the ancestral stories that follow. This preface announces their theme of the ancestral promise: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing" (v 2). Readers realize when moving through these narratives that there is also a counter theme of threats to the promise. In the Abram and Sarai cycle of stories, the threats are infertility and the dangers in which Sarai finds herself on occasion. The drama of the narrative runs on the tension between the promise and threats to it. At the end of the book of Genesis, however, it is clear that the promise continues. In that context now, I want to read texts centering on *berit,* and I hope we will see some noteworthy things in the text. As my boyhood hero Yogi Berra said, "You can observe an awful lot by watching."

A first important text is the account of the flood in Gn 6-9. The theme of the growing power of sin reaches something of a climax in the bone-chilling introduction to the narrative in which God sees that the wickedness of humans "was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gn 6:5, NRSV). The text even says that God sorrows at having made humans so that it grieves God even to the heart. And God said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (Gn 6:7). But the divine act of hope in the narrative is the provision of a means of survival for Noah and his family and the animals so that creation can begin again after the "blotting out" of the chaotic flood waters. Chapter 9 of Genesis signals a kind of re-creation with language echoing that of Gn 1. It is in the paragraph beginning with Gn 9:8 that we find the language of covenant. Verse 11 says, "I will establish my *berit* with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the water of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." In a remarkable narrative sweep, we have moved from "I will blot out" to "never again." A number of biblical scholars have pointed to the turning point in the structure of the narrative in Gn 8:1: "But God remembered

[5] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961).

Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals there were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided."[6]

The emphasis on the divine memory continues in the discussion of covenant in chapter 9 as God designates a sign of the covenant, the bow (vs 13-15). "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." In this remarkable text, "But God remembered Noah and the animals" makes it possible to move from "I will blot out" to "never again." God remembers. The text is clearly a narrative of God's self-imposed obligation or promise. What is more, the sign of the covenant is not simply the beautiful rainbow, but the undrawn weapon of the bow. God is preoccupied in compassion with the covenant partner, creation.[7] The last word is not chaos, but the divine promise, "I will remember my covenant." I suggest that this covenant text is echoed in the prophetic voice at the beginning of Is 43, spoken in the chaos of exile: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (vs 1-2).

The additional two texts in which we find the language of covenant are Gn 15 and 17. Gn 15 begins with a theophany in which God says, this time to Abram, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abram takes exception by noting that he is childless. God again shows a sign in the sky, the many stars in the sky, and affirms that Abram's descendants will be that numerous, so numerous that they cannot be counted. And remarkably, Abram believed God. That leads to the concluding statement of the paragraph in v 6: "He trusted in the Lord, and he reckoned/counted it to him righteousness." We can read the Abram-Sarai cycle of stories as the history of their learning to trust God with the promise, particularly in the face of threats to it.

What follows in Gn15 is a parallel account related to the covenant promise of land. Here the sign of the promise is the enactment of an ancient covenant practice. Animals often associated with sacrifice are brought and cut in two. The phrase in Hebrew for making or establishing a covenant is *karat berit*, literally "to cut a covenant." It is often suggested that the phrase derives from this ceremony of cutting the animals. Abram then falls into a deep sleep and God affirms again the promise of land, though the promise will be delayed. What is striking is that in v 17 "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces." The smoke and flame are theophanic elements and so indicate that God is the one who passes between the pieces. The ceremony reflects an ancient practice in which the participants in a covenant oath passed through the dismembered parts of an animal and proclaimed a similar fate on themselves if they disobeyed the terms of the agreement. So it is God who here takes on the self-imposed obligation. In Gn 15, we find covenant promise of progeny and land.

The other passage in which we find the language of covenant is Gn 17. The promise is repeated. As an indication of the promise, Abram's name is changed to Abraham, "exalted ancestor" to "ancestor of a multitude." The second paragraph of the chapter brings us to response to the covenant promise; now Abraham will keep the covenant with the physical sign of circumcision. The name Sarai also becomes Sarah, princess, and the promise now takes the

[6] See the treatments of the narrative in von Rad, *Genesis*, and Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

[7] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 84-85.

form of the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah. It is important to note that the traditions in chapters 16-17 make it clear that there will also be a future for the son Ishmael.

These covenant traditions in Genesis mark covenant in terms of promise. They are related to the later tradition of Davidic covenant. In the Noachic tradition, the "never again" is reminiscent of the never again spoken to David in II Sm 7:15-16: "I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever." The promise of land in Gn 15 is also reminiscent of the Davidic kingdom, and three references in Gn 17, vs 6, 16, and 20, make the promise into a royal promise connecting the text to the Davidic promise in II Sm 7. In Christian tradition, Davidic covenant comes into the New Testament in terms of messianic promise. Texts like Acts 2:30-36; 13:33-37; and Rm1:3-4 put Jesus in the stream of covenant tradition from Genesis through the David traditions to the New Testament.

COVENANT IN EXODUS

A second stream of covenant tradition in the Older Testament or TANAK is associated with the name Moses. Here covenant is somewhat different. The context is the story recounted in the first half of the book of Exodus. A summarizing text is Ex 19:4-6: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." God delivers the people from slavery in Egypt and calls them into a covenant relationship. The same tradition is reflected in the beginning of the Decalogue in the next chapter. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Therefore, do not worship other gods.[8] These covenant traditions are a way of talking about the divine-human relationship in which God initiates the relationship in this act of deliverance and thus says, "I will be your God." The people respond, "Yes, we will be your people." What follows is instruction in living as God's people, Torah, and how the people respond in living by Torah makes or does not make a future. Different from the promissory character of covenant in Genesis, Mosaic traditions emphasize direction in living by Torah, that is, how to live as God's covenant people. At the same time, it is important to note that the initiative in this relationship is on the divine side. As an example, Jos 24 is a text centering upon renewal of this Sinai covenant tradition. Most Protestant treatments of this text emphasize the call to covenant obedience with the famous quote from Joshua: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." I would simply point out that fully the first half of this covenant renewal text, vs 1-13, is a recounting of God's benevolent deeds on behalf of the covenant community.

Christian appropriations of Mosaic covenant traditions have gone through a famous text in Jer 31 with its reference to new covenant. That text describes this covenant as broken and, in the midst of the devastating judgment of exile, sees a new possibility. This new covenant is still about divinely initiated relationship with the house of Israel and Judah and still centers on Torah, but now the covenant is promised rather than made. Further, the covenant instruction is written on the heart, on the will, and each one will fully know the gracious covenant God. This new

[8] Important in the history of scholarship on covenant is the view that ancient Near Eastern treaty formulas are reflected in the structure of covenant in Exodus and Deuteronomy; see "Covenant," *ABD* I, 1179-1202; "Covenant," *IDB* I, 714-723. A more contemporary view is that common ancient Near Eastern cultural means of expressing a suzerainty relation include indicating the benevolent acts of the suzerain toward the covenant partner and then describing the nature of the relationship.

covenant is taken up in the New Testament, commonly referred to as the new covenant; the Greek is *diatheke*. This tradition is reflected in the central Christian practice of the Eucharist or communion, with the text that the wine is the blood of the new covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin in Mt 26:26-29, Mk 14:22-25, Lk 22:19-21, and I Cor 11:23-26.

CONCLUSIONS

So now you might well say, "OK, Dr. Bellinger, but what does all this Bible have to do with the topic today?" Here are my responses. First, we live in a world characterized by pluralism. I live in Waco; it is good for me to come to the big city of Houston and escape the Baylor bubble. Houston is filled with people of many different faiths. Waco could fairly be labeled the buckle on the Bible belt. The last census had Waco's population at nearly 114,000. We have about 130 churches associated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. So that does not even count all the Baptist churches. There is nearly a church on every corner. But even in Waco, Texas, there are Islamic communities and Jewish communities and a Bahai community, and a wide variety of Christian communities. Pluralism is indeed the order of the day, even in Waco. I want to suggest that the covenant texts I have commented upon give us much to reflect upon in this context. First notice that the Noachic covenant is with creation. Gn 9:13 articulates the covenant as between God and the earth, and v 15 describes the covenant as between God "and every living creature of all flesh." What is more, the Abrahamic covenant promise is not for the benefit of the descendents of Abram and Sarai so much as it is for the blessing of all the nations. And in Gn 16-17, there is also a place for the blessing of Ishmael. The covenant traditions in Genesis have a striking universal dimension that suggests we reflect on God's relation to all creation in all of its radiant plurality. The Noachic covenant has not been much present in Christian tradition; perhaps it could be a helpful resource for us and could help us expand our dialogue partners.[9]

On the other side of the ledger, when I look at how the New Testament appropriates covenant traditions, I realize how we pick and choose according to our agenda. When Paul wants to emphasize our common faith, he goes to Abraham. When he wants to emphasize sin and forgiveness, he goes to Moses and Jeremiah.[10] My point is that there are distinctives and peculiarities to our traditions. Biblical tradition calls us to claim and perhaps even confess those idiosyncrasies. They are part of our identity, and we all have them.

Second, the claim of covenant traditions is that communities and persons are grounded in "Another" who initiates the relationship and stays bound to the communities in loyal ways for their benefit.[11] God initiates the covenant established in the Noah story and the blessing initiating the promissory ancestral covenant. The Mosaic covenant finds its initiative in the act of deliverance from bondage in Egypt. I take that affirmation to be a contradiction to the current temptation to self-groundedness and its accompanying gospel of militant consumerism. The American myth is that life is a problem to be solved and attained by self-made people. The consequence of this deceptive gospel is fear, for people begin and end with themselves and must attain at the cost of others in order to have and have life and have it abundantly. "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." My fear is that is precisely where we are – overwhelmed by fear. The biblical metaphor of covenant is an antidote. The Noachic and Abrahamic covenant traditions begin with "fear not," as reflected in Is 43. The covenant-making and covenant-

[9] The Noachic covenant could provide the context or even pattern for other covenants; see Rolf Rendtorff, "Covenant as a Structuring Concept in Genesis and Exodus," *JBL* 108 (1989) 385-393.

[10] See Charles H. Talbert, "Paul on Covenant," *Review and Expositor* 84 (1987) 299-313.

[11] Walter Brueggemann, "Covenanting as Human Vocation," *Interpretation* (1979), 115-129.

keeping God holds the covenant community close. Indeed, Torah is a kind of binding to God for it provides direction for living in a growing relationship. The relationship opens the possibility for full living.

When I think about covenant in our world, I am also reminded that imbedded in all the covenant traditions is the notion of dialogue. I have today emphasized the divine initiative, but, especially in the Abraham and Exodus traditions, there is much dialogue between the covenant partners. Baptists have traditionally stood for religious liberty, that is, respecting another's tradition and dialoging or conversing with those of other traditions in respect. I believe it important that Christians do their reading of the Scriptures in partnership with Jewish communities. I believe we learn much in so doing. I am fond of saying that it keeps me honest. I also learn much about my own perspectives and about biblical texts. In that spirit I look forward to Rabbi Langer's comments and to our conversation together. Thank you.