

October – December 2023

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## Part 2

*“But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.” (Jonah 1:3-6)*

The previous article contained an historical and geographical introduction to the little Book of Jonah. He was a fully accredited prophet in Israel, to whom was given a command by God to break off his ministry among the Jews and go to the Gentiles – even to the capital city of Assyria, and cry against them. This went ‘against the grain’ for Jonah, who was a patriotic descendent of Abraham. Thus against the divine instruction he rebelled, and betook himself to the farthest point then known – Tarshish, on the south-west coast of Spain. Embarking ship at Joppa, he paid the fare and went down into the boat, with the phrases “*paid the fare*” and “*went down*” both being spiritually significant. Even more noteworthy is the fact he was fleeing “*from the presence of the Lord*”. Jonah was not ignorant of the omnipresence of the Almighty, but rather sought to escape from Divine authority; an opting out of responsibility and ignoring the Word of God. It was a ‘going down’ indeed, for which he would have to pay. Such action would most assuredly cost him the Lord’s blessing and presence, and in this, application can be made to every disobedient believer.

To continue with verse 4: “*But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken*”. One of the most strange and striking features of this whole book, is that Jonah himself must be its author – a fact to be remembered throughout. How long a period expired between the events themselves, and the record being made is unknown – but Jonah tells all. How that, being commanded of God to go to Nineveh he rebelled and set sail for Tarshish, paid his fare, got on board, went down below deck and was soon asleep. In all this he frankly admits that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. This is certainly a unique autobiography; the writer does not spare himself. ‘I was fleeing from the Lord’ (cf v3) “*but the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea*” (Jonah 1:4). Had this man not been divinely inspired as he wrote, he could not have used this kind of language. He might have said: ‘on the voyage, unfortunately, we came into a bad storm’. But no! He says: ‘The Lord sent it’. So at the very outset it is shown that no man can ever flee from God’s presence. God knew that Jonah was in that ship; His eye was upon him as he slept. There was no escape from God’s presence at all, which Jonah admits to, as he writes. ‘The Lord, the great Creator and Ruler in earth and seas and skies sent out a great wind, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, even to the degree that the ship was likely to break up’.

“*Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.*” (Jonah 1:5). This verse emphasises the point made earlier; it is quite astounding that Jonah should give such detail when he himself was the cause of all the trouble! He tells us that the crew were working flat-out, and jettisoned the cargo in an effort to save the vessel. These men were afraid, states the verse. Sailors are not usually frightened at a gale or rough sea; they are a hardy race and accustomed to high winds and turbulent waters; but this was no ordinary storm. It was a “*great wind...and...a mighty tempest*”, states verse 4, and it struck fear and

terror in the hearts of even the most experienced and hardened mariner. 'I was fast asleep', writes Jonah. An incredible story, but at least he gives us an honest record, though it be against himself.

Then is included the phrase: "*and every man cried unto his god*". It is a fact that, when in situations of extreme danger, even the most irreligious and godless of men will give some kind of acknowledgement to a supreme being. Merry, pleasure-loving passengers aboard the Titanic turned to prayer as that vessel began to sink, and they were plunged into the deep. Godless soldiers on the battlefield, when enemy fire has become so devastating that all have despaired of life, will also attest to the same fact. People buried by earthquakes, or caught in other natural disasters, though professing no religious beliefs, will unashamedly say that when entombed beneath hundreds of tons of rubble, with little hope of being rescued, they prayed to God. Deep within every human heart, there is a vague impression that, somewhere outside of this world, there is a supreme being, some kind of a god, or an abstruse mysterious power. They cannot explain it, neither would they admit it, let alone discuss it – but situations of crisis reveal the fact. Every religion in the world has some kind of god. Though it be entirely fictitious, yet the adherents of these systems desire to seek after something, even a deity of their own imagination.

Even so with these sailors of Jonah's account; they were in imminent danger of a watery grave, and they were terrified. They had never shown any religious inclination before, but now, unashamedly, they are praying. But to whom were they praying? 'Every man to his own god'. When faced with such peril and even death, every one of them gave evidence to this secret notion within, that there was a god, or power, out there somewhere, which might help. But every one of them had a **different** idea or belief to which they clung. Now, in this extreme circumstance, it all comes out. This man is praying in one direction, that man in another; this man calls upon one god, that man is crying out to another supposed deity. What utter confusion! And did any of their

prayers avail or bring relief? They did not. This is how it will be in that Great and Terrible Day of the Lord when the last and final storm of judgment sweeps upon this guilty world. Men, women, and young people have their own ideas and notions to which they cling, but in that Day, it will be of no avail. They will cry unto the very mountains and rocks to fall on them to hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne (cf Revelation 6:16). It is not without reason that the Spirit of God states in Job 36:18: “*Because there is wrath, beware lest He take thee away with His stroke: then a great ransom cannot deliver thee.*” While not wishing to stray too far from the subject, one cannot refrain from sounding this evangelistic note on the trumpet, to any reading this who are not saved: “*Prepare to meet thy God*” (Amos 4:12). For we must all certainly meet Him one day, so prepare”.

The distressed mariners were praying, every man to his own god. But – who sent the great wind? Who brought about the mighty tempest? Surely, He must be the one to contact? It was the Lord. He alone controls the elements, but sadly, none of these men knew the Lord. They were strangers to the only One who could help and save them. Again, an application must be made to the sinner. Such are strangers to the one and only Saviour – but it is to the Lord that the sinner must come. “*Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace*” is the word from Job 22:21.

Was there no-one on board that ship who could help? Was there not one among the whole crew and passengers, who knew the true and living God? Yes, there was! What is more, he was a prophet. But Jonah had “*gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep*”. This seems almost unbelievable! Such a perilous situation as this – a mighty tempest engulfing men, every one turning to this and clinging to that – and God’s prophet right in the midst of them, fast asleep! Is not this an apt analogy of the present day? 2 Timothy 3:1 states: “*This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come*”; and in Luke 21:25: “*... upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring;*

*men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken*". Look at the distress in the world today! Consider the problems and perplexities which confront nations. The various countries of the earth are driven this way and that, as by a great wind. They rise and fall upon the waves of economic prosperity, then recession; peace and war; stability and insecurity. Do what they will, politicians and statesmen of every nation are not able to remedy this. World governments and powers are as the sea and the waves roaring. A never-ending turbulence – "perilous times" indeed, just as the Scriptures predict. The hearts of thinking men and women are "*hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth*". Do we not often hear it asked: 'what is the world coming to?' Well, it is coming to judgment! It is all heading up to the Last Great Day. That is what the world is coming to!

Heathen religionists invoke their deities, the Buddhist, the Muslim, and so on. What of the so-called Christian religion? What a variety of beliefs and characters are here on stage – the ritualist, the sacramentalist, the experimentalist, the legalist, the Antinomian, the Arminian, the hyper-Calvinist, the Charismatic; all have their own ideas and notions regarding to belief and manner of approach to their God. What utter confusion amidst the turbulence and uncertainty of these perilous days. One says 'lo, here', and another 'lo, there' (cf Matthew 24:23). At one extreme we have the papistic invocation of the virgin Mary, and at the other, the so-called 'slaying in the Spirit' and animal-noises of the charismania. All this is unbiblical propaganda inspired by the great Adversary himself. Where then are the true witnesses to God and to His truth? Are there no prophets in the land? Yes, but in the main, sad as it is to have to say, **they are fast asleep!** They have settled down in the sides of the storm-tossed vessel that is Earth. Like Jonah, they are not prepared to face the issues of confronting a guilty world and an apostate church with the real truth. They have fled from their duty and

God-given charge, and now they are complacently sleeping in a storm for which they are largely responsible! The bunks of the so-called evangelical, reformed wing of the church are well occupied by sleeping Jonahs. It is because the salt loses its savour that corruption sets in. It is when truth falls in the pulpit that it falls in the street. Am I being too imaginative? The picture of Jonah fast asleep is a true representation of many a minister and pastor today. They will not arise and speak the truth in this hour of great need.

*“So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not”* (Jonah 1:6). Jonah now describes how the shipmaster came and woke him, severely reproving him for his indifference in such a desperate situation. *“What meanest thou, O sleeper?”* ‘Everyone on board is terror stricken – and you are asleep?! Everybody on this ship has been crying to their god for intervention, but nothing has happened. Wake up, man, and call on your God, if so be that God will think upon us that we perish not’! It appears that the captain of this ship, at least, had an inkling that this man Jonah was a Hebrew – one who claimed that their God was the true and living God. Maybe he had heard something of the mighty deliverances which Israel’s God had effected for these Jews. ‘It could be that this God will think upon us’, says the shipmaster. ‘Call upon him, O sleeper. If you are so sure of your God, if He has wrought such wonders for your people, why are you not praying? Why are you so inconsistent?’ What a rebuke coming from a heathen man! But does it not still happen? Does not the world scoff at inconsistent Christians? They know what is expected of those who profess the name of Christ; and when a Christian does not live and speak according to those Biblical principles so clearly laid down, although they may not say it, the worldling certainly thinks, ‘weakling’, ‘hypocrite’! ‘These Christians say they believe this, that, and the other thing, then why do they not live up to it?’ Can they be blamed for thinking that way? ‘Come on, sleeper! The situation is well-nigh hopeless; can’t you say anything? Can’t you pray? Let us see a bit of action on your part!’

How Jonah felt to be thus reprimanded can only be imagined; but he deserved it, and reported the facts himself, for worldwide publication in an imperishable Book! So it is today: when docile, smooth-talking, mealy-mouthed professional religionists (who say nothing relevant to conditions in the world, or the church, and certainly take no action to warn against or arrest the appalling decline of the age) are derided and scorned by the worldling, they, like Jonah, deserve it. It is the reputation which they have earned. Men and women of the world expect Christians to live up to the standard that they profess. If godly sincerity and consistency is not seen, then the world's disdain is justified, and deserved.

May the Lord ever keep His people from repeating the errors of Jonah.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

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“Jonas’ sleep signifieth two things: **First**, that when we think ourselves most at rest, then be we most in danger, as it is to be seen by Belshazzar in the prophet Daniel (cf Daniel 5:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8, Luke 12:37-39). The **second** is to declare the nature of sin. Whiles it is a committing, the prick and danger thereof is not felt, but it delighteth rather man: so without fear ate Adam and Eve the apple; Peter denied Christ. And because God out of hand punisheth not our sin, the devil bewitcheth our minds and wits, and beareth us in hand that He will never punish, and that God seeth not our sin, or is not so grievously offended with our sins. So yet sleepeth the sin at this day, of them that persecute God and His holy word; the sins of false or negligent bishops and priests; the sin of the corrupt judges and seditious people: but it will awake one day, as ye may read (cf Genesis 4:10) and here by our Jonas. At the hour of our death sin will awake, and with our own sin the devil will kill us eternally, except we awake betime.”

John Hooper (ca. 1495 – 1555)



## SLEEPING IN THE STORM

But stay; did one of God's elected number,  
(Whose eyes should never sleep, nor eyelids slumber)  
So much forget himself? Did Jonah sleep,  
That should be watchful, and the tower keep?  
Did Jonah (the selected mouth of God)  
Instead of roaring judgments, does he nod?  
Did Jonah sleep so sound? Could he sleep then,  
When (with the sudden sight of death) the men  
(So many men) with yelling shrieks, and cries  
Made very heaven report? Were Jonah's eyes  
Still closed, and he, not of his life bereaven?  
Hard must he sleep, that shuts his eyes to heaven.

O righteous Israel, where, O where art thou?  
Where is thy lamp, thy zealous shepherd now?  
Alas! The ravenous wolves will take the sheep;  
Thy shepherd's careless, and is fall'n asleep;  
Thy wandering flocks are frightened from their fold,  
Their shepherd's gone, and foxes are too bold:  
They, they, whose solemn words become the altar,  
Their works desist, and first begin to falter;  
And they, that should be watch-lights in the temple,  
Are snuffs, and want the oil of good example;

Lord, if Thy watchmen wink too much, awake them;  
Although they slumber, do not quite forsake them;  
The flesh is weak, say not (if dullness seize  
Their heavy eyes) "sleep henceforth, take your ease".  
And we poor weaklings, when we in sleep we drop,  
Knock at our drowsy hearts; and never stop,  
Til Thou awake our sin-congealéd eyes;  
Lest (drowned in sleep) we sink, and never rise.

Francis Quarles (1592 – 1644)

## SHECHEM AND BIBLICAL INERRANCY

*“So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers, And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem.” (Acts 7:15-16)*

The Word of God is subjected to continual attacks in regard to its accuracy and consistency. Detractors and doubters of every kind – humanistic, atheistic, or even allegedly ‘Christian’ – constantly call the Scriptures into question. One popular area for fault-finding and criticism is the inspired sermon of Stephen’s, recorded in Acts chapter seven – whether in relation to his dating of the Abrahamic covenant and the Exodus (cf Acts 7:6), or in the text quoted above (v. 16) where it is frequently asserted that an error must have been made, the patriarch Abraham confused with his grandson Jacob, and two different events erroneously conflated. In a book published by North Road Chapel in 2020 (*The Selfsame Day*), Mr R. D. Boswell helpfully explained the time-periods involved between God’s appearances to Abraham, the Egyptian bondage, and the giving of the Law. Now in a new volume (*Shechem – its Central Place in the Covenant*), Mr Boswell explores the Biblical record of that town, further defending the reliability of Scripture in regard to these details. It is from this new work that the following article is derived. (Editor)

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Thirty miles north of the capital, on the familiar highway from Jerusalem to Galilee . . . one arrived at Jacob’s Well, or Shechem. Spelled variously ‘Shechem’, ‘Sichem’ (cf Genesis 12:6), or ‘Sychem’ (cf Acts 7:16) this ancient city was rebuilt in the late First Century, and renamed Neapolis (literally translating as ‘new city’, as was Naples and Napoli), which afterwards became corrupted and was known as ‘Nablus’ in the Arab tongue.

Jacob had dug the well (where the Lord Jesus stopped, cf John 4) in the time he spent there after his return from Padanaram, at the entrance to a pass between two mountains – Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. About a mile and a half to the west the valley spread out into a wide and fertile vale, at which point, where the mountainsides broadened out, lay the city of Shechem. Although Shechem has a Hebrew meaning (‘shoulder’), there is no geographical feature to prompt such a name, which seems instead to derive from an earlier language, as do the names Gerizim and Ebal. Unlike many Canaanite cities, it was not built in a defensive position, but beside and amongst the abundant springs at the foot of Mount Gerizim and close to the fertile region. This suggests that it was a very early settlement by the first peoples to arrive, when there was no fear of pressure on land occupation.

‘Shechem’ is the name both of the city, and a ruler of that place with whom Jacob and his family had various dealings: “*And Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padanaram; and pitched his tent before the city. And he bought a parcel of a field, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for an hundred pieces of money. And he erected there an altar, and called it El-elohe-Israel ... And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country...*” (Genesis 33:18, 34:2).

This leads to speculation whether Hamor named his son Shechem after the city or vice-versa, but this is a circular argument. When the sacred record was written, is it not most likely that it was known to later generations of Jacob’s descendants as the city of the man Shechem? Whatever Canaanite name it had previously been known by may have been forgotten. It is the prerogative of any writer to use the currently familiar name retrospectively rather than some obscure long-lost name, and is common practice among writers today. For example, at school we were taught that Queen Boudicca burnt London and Colchester, names that did not exist then (it was actually Londinium and

Camulodinum); and the Emperor Constantine was born at York (actually Eboricum). Using obscure or obsolete names is confusing and unhelpful, so writers use the familiar place names for common-sense reasons. Surely, we cannot deny the Holy Spirit the same prerogative!

The next recorded event is the purchase of “*a parcel of a field*” (Genesis 33:19) from the people of the city. This is a matter that causes unnecessary confusion and dispute. In Stephen’s address (cf Acts 7:15-16) he states concerning the sons of Jacob: “*our fathers ... were carried over into Sychem [Shechem], and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor [Hamor] the father of Sychem*”. A superficial reading leads to some suggesting that Stephen ‘being under stress’ was confusing this with Abraham’s purchase of the cave of Machpelah (cf Genesis 23:9); or (even worse, if that be possible) that Luke was mistaken in his record of the words of Stephen.

A proper analysis of these events shows that this is not the case. Abraham had made purchase of a cave at Hebron. Jacob purchased a parcel of a field. Stephen, in Acts 7:16, reveals a previously unrecorded purchase by Abraham of a sepulchre at Shechem – so there were **three** transactions:

1.) **Abraham’s purchase of a sepulchre at Shechem.** At the time of purchase (corresponding to Genesis 12:6), Abraham likely intended it for his own use. However, the circumstances of the death of Sarah at Hebron, and the availability of the cave belonging to Ephron the Hittite led to the burial of the first patriarchs at Machpelah. Consequently, in the providence of God, the sepulchre at Shechem was then available for the sons of Jacob, (“*our fathers*”, cf Acts 7:15). Although a tomb 1000 yards north of Jacob’s well is known now as ‘Joseph’s Tomb’, rightly it should be called the ‘Patriarch’s Tomb’. Joshua 24:32 leaves no room for doubt as to the burial place of Joseph. There was a sepulchre in Shechem, originally purchased by Abraham, later re-secured by Jacob.

2.) **The Cave at Machpelah**, near Hebron, became the burial place of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Leah (cf Genesis 49:31). Finally, the body of Jacob was carried with great ceremony from Egypt to be buried there, as recorded in Genesis 50:12-13. Centuries later, after a rival temple was built on Mount Gerizim, it was so galling to the Jews that their ancestors were buried in the Samaritan territory at Shechem, they began to claim that the sons of Jacob who died in Egypt were also buried at Hebron. Many writers, including Josephus, perpetuate this incorrect tradition.

3.) **Jacob's Parcel of a Field at Shechem**. The purchase of the field must have occurred early in their time there (before the violent breakdown in relations with Shechem). Jacob's purpose was to re-possess the site of Abraham's sepulchre purchase, and the former altar. The New Testament (cf John 4:5) reveals that Jacob later gave possession of this plot "to his son Joseph". The occasion of this gift is unrecorded, but it could not have been during the years Joseph was missing, and believed dead; it seems far more likely to have taken place when they were in Canaan, than after they were re-united and Joseph held high office in Egypt, when the title to a field in distant Canaan may have seemed of little relevance.

Joseph received from Jacob the "*coat of many colours*" (Genesis 37:3); this was not some 'fashion accessory', but a mark of noble rank given to the son and heir, when his father formally recognised and nominated him as such. It is most likely that a ceremony to recognise and install Joseph occurred, in which the robe was placed upon him and on the same occasion the transfer of land was made. To see their youngest brother honoured in such a public manner would have been particularly galling to the older ten, and undoubtedly led to the events that, in the providence of God, took Joseph to Egypt.

There is a further event concerning this field recorded in the words of Jacob near the close of his life (cf Genesis 48:22), it is remarkable to find

the word ‘portion’ that Jacob speaks here is actually the Hebrew word for shoulder – i.e. ‘shekem’. The “*one portion above thy brethren*” refers to the double portion of the firstborn, which Reuben forfeited and was granted instead to Joseph.

An incident involving this plot of land to which Jacob refers: “*which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow*” (Genesis 48:22) is not referenced anywhere else in Scripture but serves to make this ‘parcel of a field’ significant in another way, since it appears that Jacob both bought it, and fought for it. This ‘twofold’ acquisition of the land makes it a lovely type of the Church which, like the field by Shechem, was acquired both by purchase, and by conquest. Moreover, this field also resembles the Church in a second manner: it was a gift bestowed by a father unto a son: “*I pray not for the world, but for them which Thou hast given Me, for they are Thine*” (John 17:9).

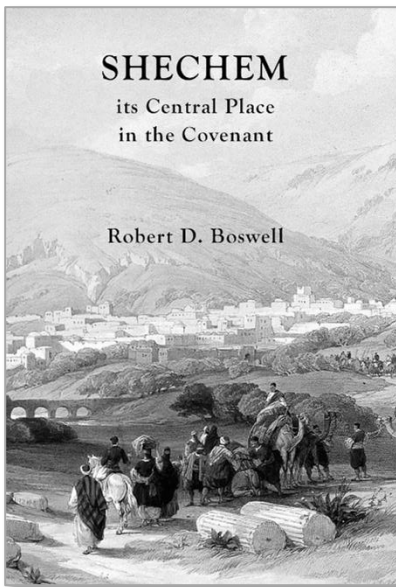
A further question to be resolved concerns the names of the persons involved in the transactions of Abraham and Jacob at Shechem. It is highly improbable that the same “*Emmor the father of Sychem*” (Acts 7:16) could have been selling a sepulchre to Abraham over 120 years before conveying the field to Jacob. But the term ‘Children of Hamor’ makes more sense if it is a tribal name of the inhabitants of the city which came to be known as Shechem, just as the ‘children of Israel’ are a tribal group, or when in Genesis 23 “*the sons of Heth*” is used as a generic description of the Hittites.

Hamor is a name that is likely to be a hereditary title, similar to ‘Pharaoh’ in Egypt, or ‘Abimelech’ among the Philistines; it was common for a dynastic ruler to use the same name as their founding head or early leader, and is found in Scottish clans also. Hamor, the original patriarchal founder of the tribe, could be called ‘father of Shechem’ in the same way that the patriarch Abraham was styled the father of the Israelite nation (cf Isaiah 51:2; John 8:39). The Hamor of Genesis 33 –

34 was leader of the Children of Hamor at the time of Jacob's arrival, and in the normal course of events, Shechem would have succeeded and become the next 'Hamor'.

In Acts 7:16, the words "*the father*" are in italics, indicating that they have been supplied by the translators to adjust the syntax and aid the public reading. But in this case those two words actually alter the sense, which should rightly read: "...and were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor of Sychem." All the apparent anomalies are resolved if we accept that the Hamor with whom Abraham dealt was grandfather, great-grandfather (or even great-great grandfather) of the Hamor in Jacob's time; and that 'Sychem' refers to the place (as in the earlier verse) and not a man. This reading removes any excuse for commentators to make the appalling suggestion that either Stephen or Luke were 'confused' or 'mistaken' in their compilation of the inspired record of Scripture.

R. D. Boswell



*Shechem – its Central Place in the Covenant* by Mr R. D. Boswell, will be available free of charge from North Road Chapel.

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# LONG SHADOWS

## 2. Covenant Theology

In the middle years of the first century, through the medium of the New Testament Epistles, God, by His servant Paul, rebuked a prevalent and pernicious error that was afflicting the early churches – namely: the importation and imposition of elements of Judaism in Christian congregations. Those practices, divinely appointed for a time, had served their temporary purpose, and had no more place among the true people of God. There was no-one better able to speak of the weakness and deficiencies of that system than the former Pharisee and Jewish extremist, Paul – whom God raised up for that end. But these issues, and arguments are not confined to past millennia. The same fallacies persisted, were perpetuated by Rome and in some measure by the Reformers, and continue to cast their long shadow on churches in the present day.

The first matter to be considered in detail is among the more obvious and readily-identifiable, and might be called: ‘Covenant Theology’. To define this term more precisely, it should be stated, this is not a reference to ‘New Covenant Theology’ – that false teaching which has come into vogue over the last twenty years, and is nothing other than ‘Old Antinomianism’ dressed up in a fashionable guise as a licence for worldliness and sin. Neither do we deny the principle of ‘Covenants’ generally in Holy Scripture – the means whereby God was pleased to engage with man through the generations of human history, and thereby unfold more of His divine purposes. The error which this article seeks to expose and address involves the misinterpretation and misapplication of God’s ancient covenants, particularly in the form of ‘Covenant Succession’ – the notion that spiritual blessings devolve upon persons who meet certain criteria: in respect of nationality, ethnicity, lineage, or conformance to a legal code. This lies at the very root of the problem found within many denominations and churches today.



It is important to understand what ‘covenant’ means, in the Biblical usage of the word. In ordinary English the term denotes an ‘agreement’ or ‘contract’, usually of a formal, binding, and legally-recognised kind, between two or more parties. These definitions can apply to the ‘covenants’ in Scripture, but with some qualifications – for example, God as Supreme Being has no higher authority to commit Himself unto in these matters (cf Hebrews 6:13-18), and takes the prerogative in making and establishing His own covenants, not requiring mutual consent on the part of man. Some would make the word ‘covenant’ synonymous with ‘promise’, but this is not entirely valid. If a promise is made which depends upon conditions being met, then there are circumstances in which it will be legitimately broken, or not performed. A promise in the truest sense has to be unconditional to ensure its fulfilment. (This is the apostle’s meaning in Romans 4:13-16). Thus ‘covenants’ and ‘promises’ are listed separately in Romans 9:4 – while the fact that “*covenants of promise*” are mentioned in Ephesians 2:12 suggests something greater than the common, legal interpretation.

There are numerous references to ‘covenants’ in the Word of God, and it is necessary to properly interpret and categorise these occurrences. Failure in this will produce all kinds of false teaching. Some theologians have identified different covenants in Scripture and used them to divide up history into ‘dispensations’, and rigorously compartmentalise the Bible, robbing the present-day reader of most of God’s Word. Other theologians dishonourably depict the Almighty as making repeated but unsuccessful attempts to reform humanity, and having constantly to resort to new schemes. This represents one extreme of interpretation. But at the other extreme, those who fail to see the limitations of certain covenants, the restrictions placed upon their duration and application, and their real spiritual significance, arrive at different errors – and produce a form of Christianity marred by patriotism, prejudice, or spiritual nepotism. Their gospel, if preached at all, will present a confused way to salvation, “*corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ*” (2 Corinthians 11:3). These warnings heeded, let us carefully consider:

**The Everlasting Covenant** This form of words is found several times between Genesis 9:16 and Hebrews 13:20, in the singular, and often prefixed with a definite article, ‘the’. Whenever ‘eternity’ is invoked, as in these words, some important inferences may be drawn. Firstly: **nothing material can be described as eternal, or everlasting.** God has made the temporal nature of this present world abundantly clear (cf Psalm 102:26, Isaiah 51:6, 2 Peter 3:10), therefore, no Divine arrangements pertaining to physical thrones, geographical countries, or mortal men, can possibly be called ‘everlasting covenants’. This is a vital detail to grasp. Secondly: ‘eternity’, in the context of God, speaks of the past as well as the future; He is “*from everlasting to everlasting*” (Psalm 90:2, 103:17, cf Revelation 1:8); so **His ‘everlasting covenant’ is similarly pre-existent.** For this reason, at a relatively early stage in human history, the Lord could enter into contract with Noah (cf Genesis 9:15), but also speak of ‘**remembering** His everlasting covenant’ as thing already established (cf Genesis 9:16); indeed, that eternal covenant was “*confirmed before of God in Christ*” (Galatians 3:17) – before the foundation of the world (cf Ephesians 1:4).

**The Covenant with Adam** (also called the Adamic, or Edenic covenant, or by others, ‘the covenant of works’). Although the word ‘covenant’ is not specifically used to describe the arrangements that God made with our first parents, the essential features are there: blessings to be enjoyed (cf Genesis 1:28-29) by them and succeeding generations, upon particular conditions being met (cf Genesis 2:16-17), with ‘the right to the tree of life’ as a token or pledge of this contract.

**The Covenant with Noah** (or, the Noahic covenant). This was announced in Genesis 6:18, and confirmed after the flood (cf Genesis 9:8-17) – with benefits conferred upon Noah and his progeny, contingent upon the service and sacrifice that was rendered unto God (cf Genesis 8:20-22). For a token of the same, the rainbow in the sky was appointed (cf Genesis 9:13).

**The Covenant with Abraham** (the Abrahamic, or Patriarchal covenant). The terms of this covenant were reiterated on several occasions, which can be traced through Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-22; 18:18-19; 21:12; 22:15-18. It was confirmed again to Isaac (cf Genesis 26:2-5, 24-25) and Jacob (cf Genesis 28:3-4, 13-15, 20-22; 35:9-13). There were blessings described for the patriarchs and their descendants, with qualifications attached. The rite of circumcision was given as a sign of these arrangements (cf Genesis 17:11).

**The Covenant with Moses** (the Mosaic, or Sinaitic covenant, or more generally 'the Law'). The whole of the system of governance given by God through Moses at Sinai is described in terms of a covenant (cf Exodus 19:5), thus the commandments graven on tablets of stone are called 'the tables of the covenant' (cf Deuteronomy 9:9, 11, 15), and the written transcript of ordinances is 'the book of the covenant' (cf Exodus 24:7) – its prescriptions and prohibitions were the criteria to be met, and the rewards of obedience were the corresponding benefits. Central to this system was the Ark of the Covenant which contained the items mentioned, plus others of symbolic value (cf Hebrews 9:1-5) and served as the token of this covenant.

**The Covenant with David** (the Davidic Covenant). This is to be found in 2 Samuel 7:8-17, where God pronounces prosperity and longevity to the dynasty of Judean kings that commenced with David, upon fulfilment of particular conditions. The trappings of monarchy, such as the throne in Jerusalem, might be described as the covenantal tokens in this case.

Other instances of covenants being spoken by God, or reaffirmed by men are to be seen throughout the Old Testament (for example, to Aaron in Numbers 18, confirmed to his grandson Phineas in Numbers 25; to the Hebrews at the end of 40 years in Deuteronomy 29; by good kings Joash, Asa, Hezekiah and Josiah), but in each case, these either belong to one of the covenants here listed, or are a re-statement of them.

**The Old and New Covenants** The inspired Apostle, quoting Jeremiah 31:31, adds a further distinction: “*For if that **first covenant** had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the **second**. For finding fault with them, He saith, ‘Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in My covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to Me a people: and they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, know the Lord: for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more’.* In that He saith, a **new covenant**, He hath made the **first old**. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:7-13).

This essential proof-text speaks of the ‘first’ and ‘second’ covenants, respectively called the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. This distinction is confirmed elsewhere by Paul, when he records being made ‘an able minister of the ‘new testament’, unto those who were blinded by their misreading of the ‘old testament’ (cf 2 Corinthians 3:6, 14); whilst the Lord Jesus Christ Himself describes the cup instituted at His Last Supper as being symbolic of ‘His blood of the new testament’ (cf Matthew 26:28). The English translation ‘testament’ belies the fact that the same Greek word ‘diatheke’ (covenant) is used in all these cases also.

What then are these two covenants? Should our list be extended? Not so. The plural occurring in Hebrews 8:7, “*finding fault with **them***” is instructive: there are several covenants embraced under the general title of ‘old’, which all belong, quite literally, to the ‘Old Testament’: those made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. All these contracts

had a fundamental flaw in common. There was no fault on the part of God, nor in the terms of the covenants themselves, but with the other, human, parties. These covenants never resulted in the hoped-for blessings, because they were “*weak through the flesh*” (Romans 8:3); being made with sinful, mortal men, who could not begin to meet the conditions laid upon them.

The New Covenant is therefore ushered in, which is of a remarkable kind: instead of impossible conditions, an imparted conformity; instead of unfulfilled aspirations, union assured; instead of man-made exertion, God-given enlightenment. Shortcomings are forgiven, infractions are forgotten (cf Hebrews 8:10-12); this is a very different sort of arrangement – central to which is the person and work of Christ, who: “*is the mediator of the new [covenant], that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first [covenant], they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance*” (Hebrews 9:15). Surely, here is something entirely novel, and additional to anything that has gone before?

While this covenant is new by contrast with the failed contracts of yore, new in the manner of its declaration by the Incarnate Son of God (cf Hebrews 1:1-3), and new in the fullness of revelation now given (cf Romans 16:25-26) – yet it is one and the same with the ‘Eternal Covenant’ of which we have already read – a covenant at once both immeasurably old, and perpetually new. There has only ever been one way to secure paradise, work righteousness, obtain promises – and that is by the grace of God, and through faith in Jesus Christ. The catalogue of Hebrews 11, with so many other portions of Scripture, shows that the means of salvation have always been the same, whether to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses or David; for the Lord, “*put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith . . . we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they*” (Acts 15:9, 11).

**- To be continued, D.V. -**

R. J. Steward

## EDITORIAL

*“Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God”* (Psalm 90:1-2). The attribute of God’s eternity has many blessed implications for the believer. As Moses expounded the theme in the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm, he commenced with this application: since the Lord is eternal, and is the refuge of His saints, then all generations of His people have enjoyed the same, unaltered dwelling place in Him. Times and people may change, but not the believers’ security. The same truth may also be cast forward: *“We come unto our fathers’ God // Their Rock is our salvation: // The eternal arms, their dear abode, // We make our habitation”*. The statement of the opening verse is equally true today, and will be forever.

The eternal nature of God sheds a glorious light on all His other divine characteristics. Every attribute of the Almighty may be multiplied by the factor of eternity; all are without beginning; all are without end; and since transcendent of time, all are ‘without variableness or shadow of turning’. The Divine purposes of God do not change or alter course; do not require amendment in response to the inconstancy of sinful man, or the vagaries of this present world. The anxious believer worries that his hope might prove vain, his faith be unfounded, his salvation lost, his present sins jeopardise future glory; he misconstrues providences as proof of a change in God, an alteration of His divine disposition towards him. Such fears are groundless. The fact of God’s eternity cancels all these misapprehensions. They are inconsistent with His being, and in that sense – impossible. He loves with an everlasting love (cf Jeremiah 31:3), and He authors eternal salvation (cf Hebrews 5:9), so the believer may boldly say: *“I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever”* (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

“Our Saviour and our Lord art Thou,  
Eternal is Thy love;  
Eternal too, shall be our praise  
When with Thee, Lord, above.”