

## **ARE YOU PARTY TO THIS CONTRACT? ⇒THE COVENANT WITH ISRAEL - 1←**

We have seen in previous chapters that God's contracts with men have a number of features in common with men's contracts with each other. There are two sides to the contracts. On one side is God, on the other there is a man or a group of men. In the terms of the contract there are conditions and promises. Each contract has a sign to remember it by and the contract is sealed by a ceremony. In the case of the contracts involving God there is an animal sacrifice.

In this chapter we shall look at the contract between God and the ancient tribe of Israel made at the time of Moses. The details are to be found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The tribe of Israel were descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. We all know the story of Joseph which explains how they came to be in Egypt on its North-Eastern border. Hence God's promises to Abraham in the contract or covenant with him still applied to the tribe of Israel at the time of Moses. That is, they were promised the land of Canaan and they had to keep the contract by continuing to circumcise their sons a week after their birth.

We all know the story of the birth of Moses, his upbringing in the court of the Pharaoh, God's appearance to him in the burning bush, the plagues that led to Israel's escape from Egypt and the giving of the ten commandments. This was all background to the contract. So who was the contract between? It was between God on the one hand and the tribe of Israel on the other. This is the first contract we have seen with a whole nation. Because it is with a whole nation and not individuals we should not be surprised to find that it includes a comprehensive legal system for a nation in that stage of development.

The core of the conditions imposed on Israel are seen in the ten commandments. (Exodus 20). But these are introduced by the statement: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery". This is important. God had already done his part in the contract, though there are promises that he will do more in the future. The first few commands relate to God. The people are to be faithful to him and punish those who are not faithful. The command about keeping the sabbath is of special importance in relation to the covenant and we will look at it later. Further commands relate to what we would call criminal activity such as murder and theft, adultery, which is no longer considered a crime in this country, coveting, which is the source of much crime, and giving false evidence, which can destroy any system of justice.

Following the ten commandments, there are many details of how they are to be interpreted, and many other laws are given as well. The ten commandments are sometimes thought of as moral laws. But this is to misunderstand the situation. There is nothing moral or immoral about honouring God. Those laws were there because they were part of the contract between God and Israel. It is difficult to describe the observance of the sabbath as a moral requirement or not observing it as immoral! All these laws were national laws. They included laws which we would describe as criminal laws, laws which we would describe as civil laws, such as those relating to contracts, and they include religious laws. Because religious laws were included we would describe the Israeli state as a theocracy, that is a religious state.

Another reason for rejecting the description of the laws as moral laws is that they were enforceable by the state. Murderers are to be put to death. (Exodus 21:12). Whenever there is deliberate injury, the person performing the injury was to have the same injury done to him. (Exodus 21:23-25). Moral laws are not like this. National laws are. This does not mean that there is no moral content to any of the laws; there clearly is for some of them. But in this contract between God and the nation of Israel they were national laws to be implemented by judges on behalf of the state.

We still need to look at the ceremony by which the contract was made. This is described in Exodus. (Chapter 24). Moses built an altar and put up twelve pillars to represent the twelve clans of the tribe of Israel. Then the young men of Israel sacrificed bulls. It is important to note that this crucial sacrifice was performed by representatives of all the clans. It was not given to the professional priests who were shortly afterwards appointed from a sub-clan of only one clan. Then the people stated aloud their agreement to the contract. Finally, Moses threw some of the blood over the people.

What then was the sign of the contract? It was the observance of the sabbath: “Above all you shall observe my sabbath, for the sabbath is a sign between you and me in every generation ..... If anyone profanes (the sabbath) he shall be put to death.” (Exodus 31:12-17). Few of us today would see breaking the sabbath as worthy of death. But in the context of the contract, to break it would be an explicit rejection of the contract as a whole.

So is this contract for us? Not unless you are a Jew, one of the modern descendants of the tribe of Israel. The Jews of course have had a problem since AD 70. Their contract with God required the existence of a state for its full implementation, but they have not had a state until very recently. They have of course done what they could, but large areas of the contract have been of necessity neglected.