

Searching For Israel (Part Three): The Old Covenant

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, June 2004

**"Indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them;
but the word which they heard did not profit them,
not being mixed with faith in those who heard it."
—Hebrews 4:2**

Exodus 19:3-6 records a promise God made to the children of Israel encamped about Mount Sinai. Speaking to Moses, God says,

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: "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 will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Exodus 23:25-31 provides the first hints of what this would mean to the people as a *nation*. God says He

will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land. And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the [Euphrates] River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

In part, these passages frame the establishment of the Old Covenant. Moses inscribed the words God uttered in a book, the Book of the Covenant, and read them to all the people. Three times (apparently twice before they even heard the words of God) the people asserted that they would do "all the words which the Lord has said" (Exodus 19:8; Exodus 24:3 and 7). Moses confirmed the covenant by an animal sacrifice, sprinkling blood on the people (Exodus 24:5-8).

Deuteronomy 29-30 records Moses' reiteration of the Old Covenant just before his death. Just before he died, Joshua, too, renewed the same covenant, when he called the people to Shechem (Joshua 24:1-28).

A covenant is a contract, an agreement, between two parties. When God is one of those parties, it is a very serious contract, a sacred agreement. In fact, God looked at the Old Covenant as a "marriage" contract between Himself and Israel. Through the prophet Jeremiah, He tells Israel, "I am married to you" (Jeremiah 3:14). He considered Israel to be His wife! Almost a millennium after the covenant's

ratification, Jeremiah quotes God as He remembers the events of Mount Sinai: "the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness" (Jeremiah 2:2).

In Ezekiel 16:8, the prophet Ezekiel, quoting God, connects the Old Covenant with marriage:

When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine.

Conditional Promises

The promises God made to the patriarchs, as recorded in the book of Genesis, bear a great deal of similarity to the promises He made to the children of Israel in the book of Exodus. In both groups of promises, God pledges to give the blessings of land, population, and prosperity. There is, however, a fundamental *difference* between the two sets of promises.

To see that difference, it helps to compare just one promise from the Genesis set and one promise from the Exodus group. Notice carefully Exodus 19:5, which summarizes the Old Covenant.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.

Reminding Israel that He owns the land and therefore has the power to make good His promises, God demands Israel's loyalty, its commitment to obey His voice. His expectation is for Israel to be faithful to the terms of the covenant. With the words "My voice," God refers to the Ten Commandments, which He "spoke" (Exodus 20:1) from Mount Sinai, as well as to the statutes and judgments (which He also spoke to Moses) recorded in Exodus and Leviticus. God reiterates His requirement for obedience in Exodus 23:21-23. Speaking of "the Angel" He will place before Israel, He asserts:

Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.

God then commands Israel to display its loyalty to Him by shunning the false gods and religious practices of the people of Canaan: "You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works" (verse 24). In short, in the Exodus promises, the promises that entail the Old Covenant, God promises Israel protection, land, population, and prosperity in return for its loyalty to His commandments, statutes, and judgments.

Note, however, the presence of "the biggest little word in the English language" in both the Exodus 19 and the Exodus 23 passage. That word is *if*. God says He will fulfill the promise *if*. The fulfillment is dependent on some action (or complex of actions) on the part of the fold of Israel. These are *conditional* promises; their fulfillment is conditional upon Israel's performing its side of the bargain.

The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are full of conditional promises. For example, the promises of prosperity, plenty, and power outlined in Leviticus 26:4-12 are *conditional*: The children of Israel would enjoy them only "if you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them"

(verse 3). Conversely, God promises poverty, disease, famine, war, and even national destruction "if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise my statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments" (verse 14-15). To do this is to "break My covenant" (verse 15).

In the later rehearsal of His covenant, as recorded in Deuteronomy, God reiterates His conditions:

The Lord your God will make you abound in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your land for good. . . . if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 30:9-10)

Unconditional Promises

Now, compare these scriptures from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy with Genesis 22:16-18. This is one of the iterations of God's promise to Abraham.

By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.

God does not condition His fulfilling this promise on any expected behavior on the part of Abraham. Its fulfillment is not dependent on Abraham's *doing* something in the future. This promise, unlike the promises in the later books of the Pentateuch, is an *unconditional* promise.

Consider, as a second example of an unconditional promise, Genesis 12:7: "Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." That is all there is to the promise. God attaches no *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts* to it at all. God simply says, in effect, "I will do it. Period."

The same could be said of *any* of the promises we looked at in the first article in this series. An analysis of Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 13:15-16; 15:18-21; 17:6-8; and 35:11-12 will yield this conclusion: *In every single instance, the fulfillment of the promise does not depend on any future action or behavior God expected on the part of Abraham, Isaac, or Israel (Jacob).* All of these scriptures record unconditional promises.¹

In summary: God's promises to the children of Israel were conditioned upon their obedience to Him; His promises to the patriarchs were *not* conditioned by their subsequent obedience. This difference is not specious. In fact, it has broad implications:

» First, because God made unconditional promises to the patriarchs, we can be absolutely sure He *will* fulfill them. Although He always responds to individuals' faith—or lack thereof—God will not allow people's actions to frustrate His purposes. God is resolute in His commitment to keeping His promises to the patriarchs. As a result, we can be sure that the search criteria we identified in the first article of this series are firm. God will not change His mind about fulfilling them.

» Second, God's unconditional promises to the patriarchs do not preclude Him from punishing disobedience or faithlessness. God has not put Himself into a straightjacket; He still has the latitude to punish sin. Individuals, everywhere and at all times, still reap what they sow (see Galatians 6:7).

God's unconditional promises to the patriarchs meet His conditional ones to the children of Israel at these crosshairs: God never said that *all* Abraham's descendants would receive the promises. *Some* of Abraham's descendants—the obedient ones—will see God's promises fulfilled, while others—the disobedient ones—will not. Whether we speak of Abraham or of the least of his descendants living today, the promises have the same audience: The promises are for the faithful. Only the faithful will inherit the promises.

The history of the children of Israel illustrates this principle clearly: Had they been obedient, they would have inherited the land under the hand of Moses, but "because of unbelief," as Hebrews 3:16-19 points out, they did not. "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (verse 19).

This is a vitally important concept. Without violating His promises to the patriarchs, God can defer their fulfillment. We will see in a later article that this is exactly what He did. *He even tells us how long He will defer the promises' fulfillment.* As we will see, that timing factor, in itself, becomes a crucial search criterion for isolating modern-day Israel.

In the first article of this series, we saw that God promised Abraham that "kings shall come from you" (Genesis 17:6; see also 35:11). The promises God made to at least one of these kings, David, provide us with more search criteria to point us to modern-day Israel. We will look at those promises next month.

End Note

¹ In making these unconditional promises, God revealed His purpose to the patriarchs, at least in outline. It is a purpose to which God is *absolutely* committed. He will not allow anything—or anyone—to stand in the way of His executing it. A good example of His resolute determination to carry out His purposes, no matter what individuals may do or think, is an incident which took place as God was about to lead the children of Israel into Canaan.

Fearful of the indigenous population, the children of Israel refused to enter the land—refused, in effect, to believe that God meant what He said when He promised Canaan to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. In their rebellion, they even determined to "select a leader and return to Egypt" (Numbers 14:4). God's people, lacking faith, were actually trying to thwart His purposes. He was so angry with their lack of faith that He thought to "strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and . . . make [Moses] . . . a nation greater and mightier than they" (Numbers 14:12). To fulfill His unconditional promises to Abraham, God was willing to destroy an entire people and raise up another through Moses, through whom He could honor His promises to the patriarchs.

As Numbers 14:13-20 indicates, Moses dissuaded God from taking such drastic action. Nevertheless, the episode illustrates the zeal God displays in honoring His promises. He means business.