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Christ, Our Covenant

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The idea of Covenant is inherent to our place in Christian history and indeed the world. When we say "Covenant Theology" or "New Covenant Theology" we are saying something about what we believe to be true, not only about the interpretation of Scripture, but our view of the world around us. Our view of reality itself is inseparable from the idea of Covenant. This makes it very important when we say that NCT is identified as a theology not only of New Covenant, but a Covenant that is Christ Himself. This is a defense.

What is a covenant?

While, the idea of covenant is central to both God's revelation of Himself to man and His redemption of man to Himself in Christ, covenant is very nearly a presumed notion in the text itself. It does not occur with detailed explanation as to its definition, identity, function, or purpose. Yet it is inextricably linked in the text to human history and most importantly, the history of a redeemed people. So we would expect to find much in the Scriptures that indicate what it is that a covenant is and does and in that expectation the Scriptures do not disappoint, both in text and picture form.

Meredith Kline has a helpful definition from his magnum opus, *"Kingdom Prologue"*, which will function as a starting point for our understanding of how the text develops the theme of "covenant":

"...a berith is a legal kind of arrangement, a formal disposition of a binding nature. At the heart of a berith is an act of commitment and the customary oath-form of this commitment reveals the religious nature of the transaction. The berith arrangement is no mere secular contract but rather belongs to the sacred sphere

of divine witness and enforcement. The kind of legal disposition called berith consists then in a divinely sanctioned commitment. In the case of divine-human covenants the divine sanctioning is entailed in God's participation either as the one who himself makes the commitment or as the divine witness of the human commitment made in his name and presence." – Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, pp. 1-2.

From Kline's definition, we can make several observations about "covenant" (all of which are intertwined with each other and may be true of "covenant" all at the same time):

1. Legal arrangement
2. Formal disposition
3. Bond
4. Act of Commitment
5. Oath-swearing
6. Contract
7. Divine Sanctioning

It's interesting to note that Kline nowhere uses the word "promise" in this definition, though certainly promise is wrapped up in "oath", "bond" and "commitment". There is a tendency by some in contemporary scholarship to reduce covenant to merely "promise", when certainly the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, speak of covenant in terms that are richer, deeper, and more contextualized than can be conveyed in this one word.

Another point of note is the legal or forensic nature of the covenant. Again, there is a tendency in contemporary scholarship to speak of "covenant" merely in terms of "commitment" (i.e. Graeme Goldsworthy, who defines covenant as "a biblical concept which refers primarily to God's commitment to his people"). Such a limiting of the term amounts to a reductionism that does not account for all that the Scriptures say about covenant, especially its legal and contractual nature. The contract was a legally binding arrangement which was made effective

in the shedding of blood. Such a contract came with “notarization” or inauguration (as Hebrews 9:18 puts it) complete with witnesses to the solemn occasion in which the two parties were bound to each other. In regards to the Sinaitic Covenant, the law laid out the terms of the covenant. Thus, law and the Sinaitic Covenant are inseparably bound. To violate the law is to violate the covenant. This legal aspect of the covenant is especially important when we consider the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant and the context for the Isaiah passages.

A final word may be said in regards to Kline’s definition. While he terms “covenant” as a “divinely sanctioned commitment”, he does not include in the definition the number of *assenting* parties necessary to constitute a covenant in the scriptures. Kline, here, makes no commitment on his part as to whether covenants are unilateral or bilateral and he does not do so because the text of scripture reflects both kinds of covenants. Nor does Kline make the mistake of identifying the covenant as “conditional” or “unconditional”. Again, there has been a tendency in contemporary theology (one that must be resisted) to summarize all of the biblical covenants as unilateral and unconditional when in fact conditionality is the dominant strain of the dominant covenant of the Old Testament, the Sinaitic covenant.

If “covenant” is a legally binding contract of divine promise, then what are its elements and what is its purpose or function? Again, while there does not seem to be a passage that explicitly details all of the elements, purposes or functions of the covenant idea in Scripture, it is possible to piece together its elements, how the contract functions, and its intended purposes.

Among the identifiable elements of the covenant¹ are (again, covenants will have some, if not all of these elements and these elements help identify commonalities between covenants):

1. God’s self-identification
2. Reminder of God’s great acts in the past
3. Description of relationship between God and recipient

¹ Helpful resources include: Meredith Kline, “Kingdom Prologue”; Michael Horton, “Covenant and Eschatology”; John Bright, “Covenant and Promises”

4. Sacrifice as terms
5. Man to man regulations
6. Witnesses
7. Blessings and curses
8. Call to trust in God
9. Accompanied by a sign
10. Ratified in blood
11. Some have suggested that a covenant has its meal... though this characteristic is only readily identifiable in the Mosaic and New Covenants, and implied in the Abrahamic.
12. Messianic in trajectory

Having identified the elements, just how did the covenant function? As a legally binding contract setting the terms between two parties, the covenant functioned as a binding agreement between God and his people, most notably, God as King and his subjects. No covenant in the scriptures is between equals. All covenants stipulate what God will do for his people and in some cases will stipulate what God expects from his people. All covenants place God's people in a subjective or subservient role to God himself (and this includes those so-called unilateral arrangements such as the Abrahamic Covenant). Kline, Mendenhall, Bright, and others have pointed out the similarities between the covenants found in the Bible and the treaties of the ancient near east, especially those of the Hittite nations. While it is not our place here to consider the merit of understanding the Biblical covenants as Suzerainty Treaties between the Overlord and His vassals, we must note that all Biblical covenants certainly flow out of God's rulership over his people... it is through the covenant that God exercises his rule and reign over those who are His. The covenant is unmistakably theocratic. It sets the terms for the theocracy. It gives the King "court-jurisdiction" over His people through which he rules and

judges His people. Thus, for Israel, the Sinaitic Covenant functions as a national constitution, binding her and her undivided allegiance to her King, the One and only YAHWEH.

Finally, these elements and purposes of the biblical covenants are not merely given to God's people in word form. God doesn't merely verbalize the covenant and its terms to His people. The Bible's major covenants are accompanied by significant events that symbolize in picture form the covenant and the terms between King and subject. Thus, the pictures and the imagery of Genesis 15 (the torch and firepot), Exodus 24 (the elders on the mountain and the ratification with the people), and Joshua 24 (Joshua's great discourse) all help shape our thinking as to what a covenant is and does. It is in these pictures we find meaning and purpose to the covenants. The significance of these events has been underestimated in our theology of covenant. Through the images, pictures, and prophetic discourse, God shows (and tells) His people what He will do for them and what is expected of them.

Isaiah 42:6

In the course of redemptive history, by the time we get to Isaiah something is drastically wrong. Israel has not been keeping covenant. The glorious events of Sinai are a distant memory. The land is no longer flowing with milk and honey but with injustice and the blood of the righteous. One part of the kingdom divided is no more. The blood thirsty Assyrians have marched through Samaria and have obliterated all traces of its rebellious people. The northern 10 tribes pursued the prostituting idolatry of the nations around them bringing upon themselves the curses of the covenant. God wasn't kidding in Deuteronomy when he said "if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you that you shall surely perish." Israel has been crushed by Assyria. Samaria is no more. But it isn't merely the northern tribes who have broken covenant. Judah feels the heat from Assyrians bearing down on Jerusalem. There is a divine reprieve, but it is quite evident that Judah has broken covenant as well. Will Judah escape Israel's fate? The answer, as it

comes from the lips of Isaiah and other like-minded prophets, is a resounding “no”. As sure as the judgment for covenant-breaking in Deuteronomy had come to pass on northern Israel, it will descend on Judah. The question then becomes, what will become of God’s people? If God has obliterated the northern 10 tribes for breaking covenant, does this mean there is no hope and no future for the Israel that is left?

Into this scene comes Isaiah. Isaiah has a thankless job. He is motivated and carried along by a vision of God’s glory. While Israel has been faithless to the covenant, the covenant-making God is still on his throne. God is still king. He is high and lifted up and his train fills the temple, the real temple of which the earthly temple now is merely a corrupted and abused copy. Against the backdrop of this vision Isaiah proclaims judgment to a people who refuse to hear him. In the courtroom of heaven, Israel is placed on trial with YAHWEH as prosecutor and judge. Israel, charged with crimes against the King of Heaven, her true King, is found guilty of breaking the covenant. Even Hezekiah, a king who embraces the gospel of Yahweh and His glory, exhibits faithlessness. For the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, covenant-breaking, faithlessness, and judgment dominate the prophet’s message. When we reach the end of chapter 39, one can almost sense the despair. 10 tribes are gone. God’s longsuffering patience will eventually run out with the remaining tribes. The specter of the covenant curses of Deuteronomy raining down on rebellious and whoring Judah looms very large. Chapter 39 ends with Hezekiah speaking about peace, yet God has promised war against the house of Israel (Isaiah 40:2). His justice will be satisfied against a people guilty of breaking covenant.

And then there is chapter 40. Into the darkness of God’s wrath being poured out against a covenant breaking people “a voice cries: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” God’s people have broken covenant and his vengeance will be poured out against them, but it doesn’t end there. He doesn’t leave his people there. God will destroy Israel; but He will save His people. The movement between Isaiah 39 to Isaiah 40 is almost surreal... Isaiah’s message of judgment shifts, almost as if mid-sentence, to a message of comfort (and not

coincidentally, at the request and commissioning of God, just as he had earlier in the book). There is such a stark contrast between chapters 39 and 40, there have been those who have suggested that Isaiah 40-66 was written by someone other than Isaiah and after the exile. Yet this is not the case. God's salvation of His people follows the judgment of the nation and in fact is set over against that judgment.

At the center point of God's salvation of his people is the Suffering Servant. The covenanting YAHWEH isn't simply going to allow bygones to be bygones. He isn't simply going to return His people to their land, only to have history repeat itself, with repentance followed by ever-increasing covenant breaking. YAHWEH has said as much in Deuteronomy. The punishment of Israel will be followed by something that is completely different: a new people with circumcised hearts. But how will this be accomplished and exactly what is YAHWEH going to do for His people? For an Israel facing judgment what is it that gives her hope if there is any hope to be found in the prospect of Assyrians and Babylonians who seemingly stand ready at God's command ready to execute His judgment? Against the gloom and terror of a King who will keep his covenant promise to rain curses down on a disobedient people, is the glory of a Suffering Servant in whom His people will enjoy covenant blessings forever.

Chapter 39 ends with the chilling promise "behold, the day is coming". This is that terrible day of the Lord in which His wrath is poured out against a covenant-breaking people. But chapter 40 begins with words of comfort and a promise set over against such a terrible day, "Behold, the Lord GOD comes..." This King who reigns from His temple on high is going to come and save His people through a Suffering Servant. Through this Suffering Servant, the problem of a covenant that has been broken and cannot be obeyed will be resolved. The law which hangs over the people of Israel pronouncing guilt and exacting judgment in the courtroom of heaven will be dealt with.

And if we are to understand the nature of the work of the Suffering Servant in the passages we are considering, we must pay attention to a series of passages that are the glue

holding these passages together. Much has been made of the fact that inherent to Isaiah's message of deliverance are Songs to be sung. As God pronounces comfort for His people in their restoration from the hands of the Babylonians, the melody line is connected by a series of promises as to how he is going to act in righteousness on behalf of His people; the One who does not grow weary, the Suffering Servant, will bring relief to the downtrodden and the weary by again dwelling with His people. The opening chapters of Isaiah 40-66 are linked together by these promises: Isaiah 40:28-31, 41:17-20, 42:16-17, 43:2-7, 45:13-19, and 48:17-22. These literary markers highlight God's activity in the salvation and restoration of His people:

“The LORD...does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.²⁹

He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength...they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31).

“When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them.¹⁸ I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.¹⁹ I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together,²⁰ that men may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it. (Isaiah 41:17-20)

“And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them... (Isaiah 42:16-17)

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” (Isaiah 43:2-7)

“I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the LORD of hosts...Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. ¹⁸ For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other...(Isaiah 45:13-19)

“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. ¹⁸ Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; ¹⁹ your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me.” ²⁰ Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, “The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!” ²¹

They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and the water gushed out..." (Isaiah 48:17-22)

God is again going to gather His people. He is going to collect them not merely from Babylon, but the ends of the earth. What he did for His people in the first Exodus from Egypt will be far surpassed in one final exodus that is permanent. He is going to give water to the thirsty and healing for those who are blind; he is going to give relief for those who are oppressed and give righteousness to those who have none. Keep all of these things in mind as we consider our texts.

How is it that He will accomplish this? Will he merely recapitulate the events of Exodus by leading his people in a grand demonstration against the Babylonians? No. God has in mind something far greater and far grander. Chapter 41 ends with God again back in the courtroom reminding His people that He is their true King and admonishing them over their idols which rule over nothing. Chapter 41 ends like this: "Behold they (those illegitimate rulers and those false gods) are all a delusion." Israel's covenant breaking has been the pursuit of a mirage, leaving them poor, thirsty, needy, blind, and in darkness. But just as God himself as torch and firepot passed through the sacrificed animals as the keeper of the covenant who himself will bring the blessings of the covenant to pass, so too God is himself going to satisfy the demands of the covenant.

The end of chapter 41 is this: "Behold they are all a delusion". The opening line of Isaiah 42 is this: "Behold my servant". Over against the illegitimate rulers and false gods God presents his Suffering Servant who will embody His kingship over His people. Here is the text for our consideration:

¹ Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will

not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. ⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶ "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. ⁹ Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them." (Isaiah 42:1-9)

Our passages for consideration are Isaiah 42:6 and Isaiah 49:8. These are, within the context of this opening section of Isaiah 40-66, parallel passages, with Isaiah 49 actually beginning the next section and next song. It would be really tempting to take the time to completely unpack this entire section but we do not have that kind of time. Instead, we are going to focus our attention on one phrase in verse 6: "I will give you as a covenant for the people". There has been a lot of discussion among commentators about the meaning of that phrase, but most of the discussion falls in the typical fashion along the lines of the identity of the servant. Is the servant Israel? Is the servant unidentified? Is the servant an unknown Messianic figure who will arrive on the scene at a later point in Israel's history? And how that question is answered is determined far earlier in one's handling of the other so-called Messianic texts of Isaiah, those passages that point to some kind of King-Ruler yet to come in Israel's future. For reasons I will not go into here, I believe that the Suffering Servant is a Messianic King-Ruler who is yet to come in Israel's future, and not just a Messianic figure, but the ultimate Christophany, God come in human form to accomplish his own purposes on His people's

behalf. The torch and the firepot will take on flesh, not only walking through the carcasses as a covenant keeper, but suffering the fate of the carcasses as a covenant breaker.

There are several observations to be made about this Suffering Servant who will be made a covenant for the people. There has also been a lot of discussion about whether or not this is a covenant personified and what “for the people” actually means. Again, while some commentators are ambivalent about what it means for a person to be made a covenant, many others, some of whom will be quoted here are convinced (rightly so) that this is nothing other than a covenant that takes on flesh.

1. So the first thing we can say about this covenant is that the covenant promised here is a person, none other than the Suffering Servant of verse 1 in this passage. The Suffering Servant is going to embody a covenant.
2. The Servant-Covenant will be given. There are echoes here of an earlier prophecy, “unto us a Son is given”. This is a covenant that will come from outside of the people... an example of a unilateral action on the part of YAHWEH.
3. The Servant-Covenant will be commissioned by YAHWEH. Not only is he having an effect on the people, He is divinely ordained for this specific purpose.
4. This Servant-Covenant brings justice. Justice is mentioned 3 times in the first 4 verses. Here in this passage the divine commissioning is itself characterized by righteousness. Justice is inseparable from the nature of this covenant and its effects.
5. This Servant-Covenant will be a light. In fact, these two phrase “covenant for the people” and “light for the nations” are so connected that one could say that this Suffering Servant will be a covenant light. IOW, this is a covenant from which light proceeds.
6. This Servant-Covenant acts on behalf of the people. “For the people” suggests not only recipients, but those who are the beneficiaries of the giving of this new

covenant. There is a cause and effect relationship between the covenant and the people.

This then is the profile of the Suffering Servant who is to be a covenant for the people. There is coming a day in Israel in which a Suffering Servant will be embody the covenant for His people. This Servant-Covenant will be a light to those whom he is given. As this covenant shines forth he brings justice to His people, a people that is broader than mere Israel.

And that leads us to consider a couple of other dynamics at work in this passage.

1. The first is that this “people” is not just Israel. Verse 2 says the Suffering Servant will bring forth justice to the nations. Verse 5 says God gives breath to the people on the earth. Verse 6 places these two words side by side... the covenant for the people is going to be a light to the nations. The benefits of this Servant-Covenant extend beyond Israel to the ends of the earth... including Gentiles. The reach of this covenant isn't limited to the nation of Israel, but is for all people groups.
2. The Servant-Covenant is Spirit empowered. Verse 2: I have put my Spirit upon Him. The same Spirit that has breathed life into creation (vs. 5) breathes life into the nations through this Servant-covenant for the people. The covenant-light is going to be a life source.
3. The Servant-Covenant effects a new creation. Verse 5 places the context of this Servant-Covenant in verse 6 in the original creation. Verse 5 is the language of Genesis 1:2, with the Spirit hovering over the waters in the creation of the heavens and the earth and Genesis 2:7 in which he is the life breath of God into man, or the original “generation”. Here the language of the garden is employed leading into verse 6 because what is needed is a new generation, or re-generation. And that's precisely the effects of this Servant-Covenant in verse 7: opening the eyes of the blind, releasing prisoners from the dungeons, and giving light to those in darkness. This is the language of a new creation. And indeed, verse 9 says as much: these

- are “new things”, an idea Isaiah continues in chapter 43 verse 19: Behold I am doing a “new thing”. The new creation has a Servant-Covenant bringing life to the nations.
4. The Servant-covenant is inseparable from a new law. Verse 4: “the coastlands are waiting for His law”, a law that will in and of itself effect justice.
 5. The Servant-covenant is set over against the false idols of the people. Verse 17 of chapter 42: it is the Servant-covenant that is going to render the idols of the unbelieving Israelites useless. The covenant will shame any and all comers who attempt to usurp the divine right of the King-Covenant.

So, how does this fit in with the rest of Isaiah? Israel has broken covenant. They have played the infidel. The Assyrians have threatened and YAHWEH in his mercy gave them reprieve. But the Babylonians, a rising power to the east, are coming. They will execute judgment as the curses of Deuteronomy rain down on unrepentant and unbelieving Israel. As he has already done with the northern 10 tribes, God is going to pour out his wrath on the covenant-breaking nation. Darkness will cover the land...Covenant-breaking Israel is in need of a new covenant and a new law that effects justice in its recipients. It is this Suffering Servant-Covenant that will satisfy God’s wrath (Isaiah 53). He will satisfy the terms, the blessing and curses, of the broken covenant and in so doing become a covenant himself.

This Suffering Servant-Covenant will “lead the blind in a way that they do not know...” This Suffering Servant-Covenant will “turn the darkness before them into light”. “When the poor and needy seek water and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst”, this Suffering Servant-Covenant will not forsake them, but indeed will feed them and give them drink. This Suffering Servant-Covenant is none other than the King of heaven whose train fills the temple. This King is Himself a Covenant... He not only sets the terms of his rulership of His new people, He *is* the terms of His rulership of His people, a rulership that is empowered by the Spirit who breathes life into a new nation, a new humanity, made up of all nations. God’s people, as they await judgment from a law that has condemned them, are in need of salvation. Salvation for

covenant-breakers comes in the form of a covenant keeper who becomes a covenant for them. Their kingdom will be destroyed. But the Suffering Servant-Covenant will bring a new kingdom.

Isaiah 9:1-7:

¹ But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. ³ You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴ For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.