

COVENANT AND UNIVERSALISM

Guide for a missionary reading of the Old Testament*

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The great theme which easily manifests itself as one reads the Old Testament is, without a doubt, that God has chosen Israel as his people and has made a covenant with her. It is because of this that W. EICHRODT has been able to construct all his theology of the Old Testament around the theme of the covenant. We may therefore ask ourselves the question: what about the salvation of nations? Is there a universalism in the Old Testament?

Some studies have been undertaken on this subject¹, but too often it has been treated as a separate subject. For a typical example of this approach we may quote the eminent English exegete, H. H. ROWLEY. The author has published one book on the election: *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London, 1950), and another one on the universalism of the Old Testament: *The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (London, 1955). We can therefore easily see the problem which presents itself: must we speak separately of the election of Israel and, on the other hand, of the salvation of the nations; or should we not see a very intimate link between the two? The question remains very relevant for the Church; don't we too often speak of the Church *and* the missions, rather than of the Church *which is* mission?

Perhaps the research of the past fifteen years which has been devoted to the study of the covenant² allows us to look the question over and to conclude that there really does exist a very intimate link which unites the theology of the covenant with that of universalism in the Old Testament.

It is now an established fact that the sacred authors have been inspired by certain practices of extra-biblical international politics to express the ties which unite Yahweh to Israel. They have considered this relationship between Yahweh as Suzerain and Israel as Vassal, in the light of the types of vassal treaties especially as they are employed by the Hittites.

* The reflections which follow are the major divisions of a course entitled "Covenant and Universalism in the Old Testament" given at the Institute of Mission Studies of St. Paul University (Ottawa) and at the Divine Word, International Centre of Religious Education (London). Each point could have been developed, but we preferred to present a guide for personal reading, and one can illustrate the different points with many other texts.

¹ For a recent study and a bibliographie on this subject, cf. J. BLAUW, *The Missionary Nature of the Church. Foundations of the Christian Mission* (London, 1963)

² For a total picture of the latest research, cf. W. VOGELS, *La Promesse Royale de Yahweh préparatoire à l'Alliance* (Ottawa, 1970) especially pp. 13—19

The literary outline is clearly established: (I) The Suzerain presents himself with his name and his titles: "I am Yahweh, your God"; — (II) then follows a list of past benefits that the Suzerain has brought about for his vassal. In the Scriptures the two great benefits which constantly reappear are the flight from Egypt, "I have brought you out of the land of Egypt" and the entry into the promised land, "I have given you this land". — (III) What precedes is the basis of the tie which is now created between the two partners of the treaty: "I will be your God and you will be my people". This comprises the promises of protection for his people on Yahweh's part, but also a mandate for recognition and submission by observation of his commandments on Israel's part. — (IV) As is the case in each contract, the witnesses are convoked. With the Hittites it was the gods of the two parties, or the deified elements of nature, the sky and the earth. The Scriptures have likewise retained this last element; again we find the sky and the earth as witnesses, sometimes it is an erected stone which is the witness. — (V) And finally the blessings or curses are enumerated, depending on whether the vassal remained faithful or became unfaithful to the mandates of this covenant.

We can easily find these elements in some texts; for example: *Ex* 19,3—8; 20ff.; *Jos* 24.

Now what is the importance of these conclusions for the problem of universalism in the Old Testament?

I. *The Primitive Universal Covenant*³

As we have said, this idea of the covenant is central to the theology of the entire Old Testament, so we could never insist sufficiently on a significant and important fact which appears in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. When the Yahwist described his prehistory, he described the relationships between God and men with descriptions borrowed from the theology of the Covenant. Thus in his mind, the divine plan for man was universal, the tie which existed between Yahweh and Israel was nothing else than the bond which existed between God and mankind from the beginnings of the history of the world.

According to the Yahwist, Yahweh is already known by these first men under his own name (*Gen* 4,26). The benefits which God had given to man are also a departure and an entry: Yahweh created man in a desert and from there he removed him to place him in a promised land: "Yahweh God *took* man and *established* him in the garden of Eden" (*Gen* 2,15). From these benefits therefore, flow the mandate of submission for man, "Then Yahweh God gave man this admonition: you may

³ For a more technical justification of this question, cf. W. VOGELS, "L'Universalisme de la Préhistoire, Gen. 1—11", in *Eglise et Théologie* 2 (1971) pp. 5—34

eat ... you are not to eat ..." (*Gen* 2,16—17). Afterwards we see in the rest of prehistory more precisely what these mandates consist of. The sacred author shows how mankind was already supposed to live according to the decalogue, the charter of the covenant. Adam and Eve rejected the first commandment (*Gen* 3,5 cf. *Ex* 20,3—6); Cain, the fifth "you shall not kill" (*Gen* 4,8 cf. *Ex* 20,13); Lamech, the sixth (*Gen* 4,19 cf. *Ex* 20,14); Cham, son of Noah, the fourth (*Gen* 9,22ff. cf. *Ex* 20,12). And upon this observance or rejection, depends the blessing or the curse, "for on the day you eat of it you shall most surely die" (*Gen* 2,17).

All this Yahwist prehistory is thus a history of divine benefitssins of man — divine chastisements — but also of pardon. Thus the application of whole outline of the history of salvation to the history of mankind becomes apparent. The Yahwist author thus attributes to all of mankind what Israel considered to be her own privilege, without explicitly using the word "covenant". Many centuries after him, when the priestly author will write his prehistory, he will clearly state that God has made a covenant with humanity: God has drawn up a "covenant" with Noah (*Gen* 9,8ff.).

Meanwhile all of this Yahwist prehistory culminates in total failure when, at the moment of the construction of the Tower of Babel we are present at the dispersion of the peoples: "It was from there that Yahweh scattered them over the whole face of the earth" (*Gen* 11,9). It is truly the "Exile" of humanity. And at the end of the account one question remains without an answer: does this Exile mean the end of the history of salvation for mankind?

The answer is given to us in the history of the patriarchs and more particularly by the call of Abraham (*Gen* 12,1—3). This text gives as well the key for the interpretation of the whole history of salvation which is to follow: "I will make you (Abraham) a great nation" (*Gen* 12,2), God will choose himself a people first; but "in you (i. e. in Abraham, but through him in Israel) all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed" (*Gen* 12,3). Thus all history which will follow and which will begin with the election of a people will have as its final purpose to reestablish this first universal covenant for all men.

II. The Place of the Nations in the Historical Covenant of Israel

God, according to his plan of salvation, first made a covenant with a people Israel, to finally reestablish (finally) the universal covenant, but what is the destiny of the nations in this historical covenant itself?

a. *This Covenant is at the service of the Nations* — The text of the Sinai Covenant strongly underlines the link between election and universalism. God, universal master, has chosen Israel among the nations, "you of all the nations shall be my very own for all the earth is mine" (*Ex* 19,5); but this election is in view of a service to be rendered to others, "I will count you a kingdom of priests" (*Ex* 19,6).

As the priest is placed between God and men, Israel is placed apart as a priestly people. Israel must serve Yahweh in the name of the nations and bring them the Good News of Salvation.

b. *The Nations are treated according to their attitude towards the two partners of the covenant: Yahweh (Suzerain) and Israel (Vassal)* — In the Hittite treaties the Suzerain committed himself to help protect his vassal in case of attack. This explains therefore the protection that Yahweh bestows upon Israel. Israel must be able to become a people and live faithfully according to the covenant, hence the numerous texts where Yahweh-Suzerain promises victory over all those who would oppose or threaten his vassal-Israel. We can quote the reference which shows most clearly the way in which we must understand the numerous passages against enemies: "If you listen carefully to his voice and do all that I say, I shall be enemy to your enemies, foe to your foes. My angel will go before you and lead you to where the Amorites are and the Hittites, the Perizites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, the Jebusites; I shall exterminate these" (*Ex* 23,22—23).

The vassal in his turn must promise absolute fidelity to the Suzerain, he was also obliged to come to the Suzerain's aid if he was attacked, and he was forbidden to draw up any other covenants which would constitute a revolt against his master. It is in this manner that, in order to remain faithful to Yahweh, Israel would oppose any of Yahweh's enemies, i.e. the idolaters. The continuation of the text from Exodus that we have just quoted, well illustrates Israel's rule of behavior with regard to the nations, at this period of her history: "You must not bow down to their gods or worship them; you must not do as they do..." (*Ex* 23,24); and, in an even clearer manner, "Make no pact with the inhabitants of the land or, when they prostitute themselves to their own gods and sacrifice to them, they may invite..." (*Ex* 34,14—17). Thus Israel is admonished and condemned by the prophets, when the people want to make a covenant with the nations, because they are lacking faith in Yahweh (*Os* 7,8ff.; 12,2). On the other hand we notice that certain individuals are accepted into the community or that certain covenants are made with groups, in the event that these strangers recognize Yahweh and respect Israel, in other words where the covenant is not placed in any danger. For example we can cite Jethro's case (*Ex* 18,1—12), or of Rahab who recognizes Yahweh, "I know that Yahweh has given you this land" (*Jos* 2,8ff.), or again of the treaty between the Israelites and the Gibeonites (*Jos* 9).

Thus at the beginning of this epoch the point is to solidify the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Yahweh will protect Israel against all those who place her existence in danger, and Israel must oppose all those who might be a source of danger for her faithfulness to her Suzerain.

c. *The Nations are the witnesses of the Covenant* — The nations nevertheless occupy an even more positive role in this covenant between

Yahweh and His people. If, in the Hittite treaties, the gods of the two partners were summoned to be witnesses, in the Scriptures it is the nations who are sometimes witnesses to the contract; because they were witnesses to the benefits that Yahweh had afforded to his people, which is expressed by a very classical formula: "in the sight of the nations", "For their sake I will remember the Covenant I made with those first generations that I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I would be their God, I Yahweh" (*Lv* 26,45; very often in *Ezekiel* 5,8.14; 16,41 etc.; cf. also "in the sight of Pharaoh" *Ex* 7,20; 9,8). Yahweh did in this way because he had a precise goal in mind, the nations themselves also "will know that I am Yahweh" (*Ez* 36,23.36). Thus when Yahweh brings to trial his people who have been unfaithful to the covenant, the prophet Amos does not hesitate to summon the nations as witnesses at this trial (*Am* 3,9).

d. *The Nations, Yahweh's instruments for the execution of the curses or blessings of the Covenant* — The gods, witnesses to the Hittite covenants, were the ones who had to inflict the curses or bestow the blessings upon the vassal. In the Scriptures on the other hand it is Yahweh, the principal partner, who will do it; but many times we see that He will do it through those who were witnesses to the Covenant, the nations.

The nations will inflict the chastisement upon Israel who has become unfaithful to the clauses of the covenant (*Am* 6,14; *Os* 10,10; *Is* 5,26ff.; 7,18 etc.), but they could equally become the instruments of the blessing and of the mercy of Yahweh for His people; the most obvious instance of this was certainly Cyrus (*Is* 41,1ff.; 45,1: "Cyrus, his anointed one"!).

Thus even in this covenant between Yahweh and Israel, the nations are not forgotten. The covenant is in view of their salvation; if they constitute a danger for this same covenant, they will be exterminated; but they already play a positive witness role, not as a simple spectator witness, but as an active one, executor of the judgment, according to the juridical practice employed in Israel (*Dt* 17,7).

III. *Parallel Covenant with the Nations?*

During this period of salvation history which constitutes the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, we come across a few texts which throw some interesting light on the relations between Yahweh and the nations and always in the perspective of the theology and language of the Covenant.

The escape from Egypt and entry into the promised land which are the historical benefits "par excellence" and foundation of the covenant, are still not a unique feat in the history of the world. Other peoples have had their "exodus-experience" as well: "For, is it not true, that I had Israel come here from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from

Caphtor, and the Aramaeans from Kir?" (*Am* 9,7b). And if it is benefits which are the basis of a tie of partnership, other nations therefore also have a tie of partnership with God, "Are you not mine, sons of Israel, as the Cushites are mine?" (*Am* 9,7a).

Consequently Yahweh has a right to the recognition and submission of the nations as well, and, like Israel, if they become unfaithful, they will be judged and punished (*Am* 1—2). This very chastisement resembles to a remarkable degree the purification of Israel, "I intend to reduce the land of Egypt to a waste among wasted countries; for forty years..." (*Ez* 29,12).

But again, as God has shown His mercy in announcing restoration to Israel, a similar restoration is promised to the nations: "After forty years have passed, I will gather the inhabitants of Egypt from the nations where they have been scattered. I will bring the Egyptian captives back and reinstall them in the land of Pathros, the land they came from" (*Ex* 29,13—14).

Thus the texts clearly show that Yahweh concerns Himself with the nations in a manner very similar to his behavior with respect to His people. The question therefore presents itself: do many parallel covenants exist? Are there many ways to be saved, or is there only one?

If there are any very striking similarities between Israel's experience and that of the nations, as the texts show us, there is nevertheless an extremely important element which is absent when it comes to the nations: they have not received Yahweh's revelation. Even if Israel and the nations have had their "exodus-experience", only Israel was conscious that "Yahweh" directed this history, "but if they ask me what his name is,..." (*Ex* 3,13). The tie which is thus created between Yahweh and Israel is accompanied by a revelation of His person and of His will. Israel will thus be judged according to the norms of this revealed law (*Am* 2,6—16), whereas the nations will be judged according to the norms of a "natural" law (*Am* 1,3—2,3). The difference is such that we cannot yet speak of a real covenant between Yahweh and the nations, it is only to Israel that Yahweh will say, "I will be your God and you will be my people". It is here that the role which Israel has to play will appear, the profound meaning of her election.

IV. The New Universal Covenant

The knowledge of Yahweh and His revelation was lacking on the part of the nations to have a true covenant relationship with Yahweh. The role and the mission of Israel will now be to communicate this knowledge to the nations, as it had already been indicated from the first moment of her election. The salvation of the nations will thus be realized "in" and "through" Israel. It is here then, that we find again all the texts which the authors cite in their studies devoted to universalism. We can group them into two kinds.

a. Centripetal Universalism — These texts attribute to Israel the role of being a sign and witness, of attracting others. The nations come towards the center, towards Israel, Zion and Jerusalem to receive instruction, law, and revelation from her. "In the days to come the mountain of the Temple of Yahweh shall tower above the mountains and be lifted higher than the hills. All the nations will stream to it, peoples without number will come to it; and they will say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the Temple of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths; since the Law will go out from Zion, and the oracle of Yahweh from Jerusalem'" (*Is* 2,2—3; *Mi* 4,1—2). Therefore the nations receive what was missing: the revelation of Yahweh and his Law (cf. *Ps* 87; *Is* 25,6ff.; 55, 3b—5; 60; *Hg* 2,6ff.; *Zc* 14,1ff. etc.).

b. Centrifugal Universalism — Israel is not longer only a sign which attracts the nations, but Israel will go to the others to announce the revelation. Here we touch upon very debatable passages, which, according to some authors, will have a real missionary scope: Israel must go to the nations. These are some of the texts from Deutero-Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, . . . that he may bring true justice to the nations" (*Is* 42,1.3.4) or again "the light of the nations" (*Is* 42,6; 49,6); the revelation must be communicated to others. Certain Psalms are invitations to proclaim to the nations the revelation of Yahweh, "proclaim his deeds to the peoples" (*Ps* 105,1; cf. 18,50; 57,10—12) or else the nations are invited to unite themselves to Israel in praising Yahweh (*Ps* 66,8; 86,9; 117 etc.). Finally in the small book of Jonah, it is the Prophet who is sent to Nineveh. It is true that these texts are very debatable, Jonah after all does not yet preach the Good News, he preaches judgment: "Only forty days more and Nineveh is going to be destroyed" (*Jon* 3,4). Do these Psalms presuppose a mission on Israel's part? And what is there that is more debated than the songs of the Servant? Certain authors will go so far as to say that Deutero-Isaiah was very nationalistic.

It is therefore not certain that real "missionary" texts are already found in the Old Testament: but what remains absolutely certain, is that the salvation of the nations and their participation in this new covenant, which will again be universal, will pass through Israel. The nations will participate therefore in a revelation already given to the chosen people, and now they will also be able to be called "people of Yahweh" (*Is* 19,25; *Zc* 2,15).

Conclusion

Attentive reading of the Old Testament shows that the theme of covenant is at the same time the theme of universalism. One contains the other. God had made a covenant with a humanity which had become unfaithful. To restore this damaged order, Yahweh made a covenant with a particular people, Israel, which was to be his mediator, without

forgetting at the same time to concern himself with the nations; it is in this way that the universal covenant will finally be re-established⁴.

It is to the degree that Israel lives her fidelity to the covenant, that she will play her universalizing role. This is an important lesson for the Church herself, who, to the extent that she remains faithful, will be missionary.

⁴ Perhaps this concept permits a response to the famous problem of the relationships between Jesus and the pagans. It is at the moment of the Lord's death that the old covenant ends: "and behold the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom" (*Mt* 27,51; cf. *Mk* 15,38; *Luke* 23,45). The era of the nations may begin.