

ARE YOU PARTY TO THIS CONTRACT? ⇒THE COVENANT WITH ISRAEL - 2⇐

In each of the previous three chapters we have looked at one of the covenants or contracts between God and men: Noah, Abraham, the tribe of Israel. In this chapter we shall remain with the last, made through Moses. How did the nation of Israel get on with it?

One of the promises of the contract was that God would give them the land of Canaan. That particular generation failed because they were afraid of the existing inhabitants. (For this story see Numbers chapters 13 & 14). Forty years later, under the command of Joshua, the next generation entered Canaan. (Joshua chapters 1 to 5).

After Joshua, Israel did not have a system of national government. The so-called “Judges” came to the rescue as occasion required, particularly to lead in battle against neighbouring nations. The last of these judges was Samuel.

The spiritual life of the nation was in the hands of the priests. Moses had appointed his brother Aaron as chief priest with his, Aaron’s, descendants to be priests after him. Aaron himself was an initial failure when he made the golden bull for Israel to worship, and that mixture of faith and failure continued with the priests throughout the centuries. In Samuel’s day the end of the priestly line of Eli was prophesied. (1 Samuel 2:27-36).

Around 1000 BC came the first kings: Saul, David, Solomon. Then came the split in the nation, between North and South, about 922 BC. Spiritual decline in the Northern kingdom led to their exile at the hands of the Assyrians about 722 BC. The Southern kingdom, dominated by the tribe of Judah, had its many ups and downs until it was finally removed by the Babylonians around 587 BC. The age of the kings was also the age of the prophets and they have some comments to make which are very relevant to our primary interest, which is the covenants.

Faced with Israel’s national pride in its special relationship to God, Amos said: “Are not you Israelites like Cushites to me? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor, the Arameans from Kir?” and he goes on to announce the coming end of the Northern kingdom: “Behold, I, the Lord God, have my eyes on this sinful kingdom, and I will wipe it off the face of the earth.” (Amos 9:7-8). And God did. The Northern tribes did not return from their exile under the Assyrians.

The Southern kingdom fared relatively better under some enlightened kings, but in the end they too failed. Jeremiah was the most prolific prophet at the time of their downfall. Look at what God said to him when he called him: “From the North disaster shall flare up against all who live in this land; for now I summon all peoples and kingdoms of the North, says the Lord. Their kings shall come and each shall set up his throne before the gates of Jerusalem, against her walls on every side, and against all the cities of Judah. I will state my case against my people for all the wrong they have done in forsaking me, in burning sacrifices to other gods, worshipping the work of their own hands.” God then turned to Jeremiah and said: “This day I make you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze, to stand fast against the whole land, against the kings and princes of Judah, its priests and its people.” (Jeremiah 1:14-19). All were implicated in the downfall: the people, their kings and princes, who were their civil leaders, and the priests, who were their religious leaders. They had broken the covenant.

Jeremiah witnessed the downfall of the kingdom, but he also had a vision of hope for the future with a New Covenant. He said: “The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Something more than an external law was needed. It needed to be in men’s hearts.

The southern tribes of Judah, Benjamin and part of Levi did return from exile. The covenant with Israel had achieved a tradition of the worship of one God, the creator, but it was time for something new. After briefly looking at some aspects of the Old Testament which are not part of the Old Covenant, we shall look at God's new act.