

## 16 A Covenant with the Gentiles

“This cup is the Covenant in my blood, shed for many.”

And who are those many?

God had established his covenant with Israel. When Abraham stood in the dark of night, waiting with the carcasses he had so jealously guarded from the carrion birds, Yahweh had come to him, passing between the two halves of the slaughtered animals, and so, by ritual enactment, committing himself under pain of death to deliver his promise to Israel.

“To your descendants I now give this land,  
from the wadi of Egypt to the Great River.”

Though Jesus spoke of “my blood of the covenant”, it is not immediately clear what is meant by the “blood of the covenant”. It’s not as if blood was spilt as a way of earning God’s favour or persuading God to enter into a covenant supporting his people. When Moses spoke of “the blood of the covenant”<sup>1</sup> it was the blood of a communion sacrifice sprinkled on the people to remind them of their obligations to God – their duty now to obey his commands – since he had already so generously bonded himself to them. Centuries later (much closer to Jesus’ time) in an oracle attached to the prophecies of Zechariah<sup>2</sup>, the blood is like a symbol or reminder of the bond between God and his people: because of it, God calls to mind the covenant, and his commitment to his people.

What is clear is that neither “the blood of the covenant” nor Jesus’ death is a price paid to win God’s support. Blood is not the gruesome condition that sways the decision of God. Jesus’ death is not required by God as the price of granting his covenant or extending it to the gentiles, but the effect and so the indisputable sign of God’s commitment to be with his people, to be with a wicked humanity through all that they will require of God. Jesus’ death, as the cost of Jewish pride and gentile power - as innocent death is always the cost of every system of pride and power that human history has ever created - interprets for us the sacrifices that preceded it.

And especially it interprets the national celebration and sacrifice of the Passover. It was at Passover that Jesus died, quickly executed so as not to interfere with the great festival of thanksgiving. But his death establishes God’s commitment to Jew and gentile as reason for a thanksgiving that will last as long as history. Passover celebrated God’s faithful fulfilment of his promise to Abraham when he rescued Abraham’s descendants from slavery in Egypt, gave them his laws and led them into their land; but in Jesus’ death we discover that Passover was really pointing not back in history but forward into the whole work of God that was still to come.

The other great figure of God’s covenant commitment was, of course, David. The covenant, or bonding of God to his people had never been a simple and singly defined idea. It had been a promise to Abraham; it had been rescue from Egypt and the

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 24:8    <sup>2</sup> Zec 9:11

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lawgiving in Moses' time; it had been a commitment made by the tribes to be faithful to Yahweh, when Joshua gathered them at Shechem;<sup>1</sup> and it had been a further promise, underpinning the order, peace and security of Israel, to David as their king. And when even the kings failed Israel, the prophets had seen the covenant as hope for the future, a secure and permanent bonding still to be accomplished out of God's faithful commitment to God's people.

The "covenant" was always open to the future, always a firm commitment by God on which God would never go back, but one from which God and God's people would always go forward, God in faithfulness and they most often in failure, to all that was in the heart and intention of God. Already, in the stories of the covenant, it is suggested that the covenant will be more than a confirmation of the past. It will be Israel's opening into all the future.

We have already seen that, the way Mark reports it, it is not a question of God, or God's justice, being appeased by blood, but of God's bonding with his people. But about that bonding we still have a question. Can we say that God is bonded to God's people or the people bonded to God by the blood of Jesus? And if so, Why? Was it simply because in the past, the shedding of blood in sacrifice for the remission of sin (for the healing of a broken relationship) had restored and renewed the people's bond with God? Or was it because the Passover sacrifice, which had long been the celebration of the bond between God and Israel and a thanksgiving for God's faithfulness, sets a pattern for the death of Jesus? Or was it because the blood of that same Passover lamb had marked their houses and saved them from death?

We do look to the Passover in connection with Jesus' death, but we have to reverse the order of explanation. The blood of lambs does not explain, but itself needs to be explained by, the death of Jesus. What happened and was enacted on this Passover gives to the sacrifice of lambs and all the other animals its real and its final meaning as a preparation and sign for the covenant which is now to be confirmed in eternal reality in Jesus' death. We should not look back to the history and practice of sacrifice, even the sacrifices of the covenant, in order to explain Jesus' death, but we should look to Jesus' death to give meaning to the whole history of sacrifice that preceded it.

Jesus' death, an act of political expediency and murder, is the moment of bonding between God and humankind because it is the moment when God accepts all the wickedness that humankind will hurl against God and against anyone who comes in God's name. God's covenant, if it was ever to engage and save anyone, could not be by agreement reached with a faithful and obedient people, for there is no such. Mark's gospel makes it clear that God didn't perversely hunt out wickedness and betrayal in order to use it. There are no sinless people for God to prefer. The people God had cherished and nurtured for generations rejected his rule. The Messiah's chosen friends deserted and betrayed him. The gentile power that claimed to stand for civilisation and order, killed the Messiah because it was expedient. For God to secure God's own commitment to humankind, it had to be a commitment to the wicked. There are no others. The Messiah who comes in sinless obedience to God stands

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Joshua 24; cf my book The Warrior God ch 2

alone before God and before all humanity, and because he stands alone, embarrassing the highest powers, exposing the most sacred pretences, he has to be killed.

That God accepts all this, is God's commitment to humankind, no longer differentiated as Jew and gentile. It is the Messiah's role, the role that Jesus faithfully accepted, to stand in the midst of this commitment and to be this commitment, in flesh and blood. Here, made and fulfilled in the body and the very blood of Jesus, is God's utter commitment to the human race.

The covenant made centuries before when the blood of animals was shed, was indeed a covenant established forever. It was already a commitment on which God would never go back. And yet, on this Passover night, Jesus proclaims that his blood is now to be shed as the blood of the covenant. It is not that an old bond has worn out, failed, and now has to be replaced, for the life and strength of that bond was the promise of God – as Miriam and Zechariah had proclaimed – which never wears out or fails. Rather it means that the covenant which has stood so long, has in reality stood in anticipation of its own fulfilment, which is now come. When Jesus speaks of his blood being now the blood of the covenant (he does not say a new covenant - not in Mark's account) he must mean that the covenant is now being established in a way that is the realisation, the fulfilment of everything the covenant has ever ment.

The Messiah has come, and in the Messiah, the covenant. For centuries Israel had celebrated the covenant as if it were already real, and so it was; but compared with the reality in which the covenant is now finally established, it was only a foreshadowing. Only there is no "only" about it: to be "only" a foreshadowing of this reality, is to be more real than anything else in history. The covenant celebrated in Israel outlasts the empires of Egypt and the might of Babylon, and will still stand when Imperial Rome is a crumbling jumble of ruins for the curious to gaze at. And yet its true glory is that it foreshadows the reality enacted this night and this day. Not the blood of the sacrificial animals, but "this cup is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which shall be shed for you and for many."

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Jesus death is the declaration of the covenant, and as such the inauguration of the Messiah. In the presence of the highest Jewish council and in the presence of the power of Rome, Jesus declared that he is the Messiah and King. And by decision of the High Priest, confirmed by acclaim of the people, enacted by the gentiles, that declaration was sealed in his blood.

They decided that the covenant, the bonding of God with God's people, should take this form, and in spite of the exclusivity of its foreshadowing – a covenant with Israel alone – extend to all the gentiles. First and ultimately, God decided, and that is forever the richness and wonder of it. But just as important, they decided: Jew first, because they were already God's acknowledged people, bonded to God; and then the gentiles, falling into line. God's decision about the covenant was one with the decision about Jesus' death, taken by the High Priest, the Sanhedrin, the Jerusalem crowd and the Roman Governor, carried out by gentile soldiers and attested in the end by their centurion.

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In the end, it was not Abraham, but soldiers of the Roman legion who stood guard over the body.

But of course the High Priest and the Governor and all the others didn't know. So how can we say that they decided, as if they knew what it meant? But who can know what they are doing when dealing with God? We should know, when we enter into the sphere of God and make judgements about blasphemy or the life of a prisoner, that we are treading where angels fear, and if we ignore the healthy and humble doubt that should always be there, then that is our decision.

And even more to the point, who can know what they are doing when they decide for the whole people, as leaders, priests and governors? Only the arrogant and complacent claim to know what they are doing when they decide for the nation. The humble and realistic know that they tread on holy ground, and that such decisions, decisions of life and death in pursuit of national policy, are always much more than we realise, with ramifications and consequences we cannot possibly foresee. It is the responsibility of a ruler to know this and so to decide wisely, reflectively, reluctantly. Rulers who ignore the vast parameters of God, and the length and the breadth of humanity affected by their decisions cannot complain or disclaim responsibility when, in their rashness, they decide more than they realised they were deciding. They speak, whether they choose to recognise it or not, for the people and for God.

The High Priest should have known this. He should have known that, even if he acted in ignorance, his decision would be the decision of God. He should have known that Abraham and David, the great covenant representatives of Israel, the one the Father of the nation, the other its ruler, knew only that they were committed to God and relied on the promise of God, not knowing how it would or even could be fulfilled. That is what the covenant is all about: not knowing, but still acting in belief and trust. It is the love and the goodness of God, that instead of punishing them for not believing, God chose to work thru their not knowing, to confirm them in their roles and to let their decision stand as God's decision too. Jesus had to die, at the hands of Jew and gentile, and God would not reject Jew or gentile, but would turn their decisions, even those taken in malice, into decisions standing forever, the binding commitment of the Messiah to the salvation of Jew and gentile alike.

Israel as a chosen nation, a nation apart from others, has always been the ideal of the covenant. To be so blest, so bonded to God, had to be special, giving Israel a special and glorious relationship with God. But when it came to the crunch, to the practicalities of surviving and thriving, Israel was not always keen to be so different from any other nation.

In the earliest days they had come together as a loose confederation of tribes, their bond the one God Yahweh whom they all acknowledged, and who, as their permanent leader, gave them specific leaders in crisis as they needed them. But Israel of the tribes had been divided, squabbling and weak, and they had looked with envy on the strength in unity enjoyed by their neighbors (the Philistines in particular) who had kings to rule them. They had decided that they wanted a king.<sup>1</sup> They wanted to be not different from but like their neighbors. It was a momentous decision, and as they were

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<sup>1</sup> I Sam 8; The Warrior God ch 7

warned at the time, the kings they got sustained their strength by alliance with other kings. From Solomon to Ahab to Zedechiah, the last of the heirs of David, the kings, sometimes wisely, sometimes foolishly, tied Israel to their gentile neighbors, making them, for better and worse, a nation among the nations.

For all the distinction of the covenant, and the long history of Israel's special relationship with God, Israel was, as they had wanted to be, a nation among the nations, and God's commitment to them was to be worked out within that choice. When the High Priest called on Pilate to complete Israel's business with the Messiah, he was confirming what Israel had decided for centuries, that they would not, could not act without the gentiles: that Israel would receive her Messiah and her God, not as a people apart, different from the nations around them, but as one of those nations, in uncomfortable but necessary alliance with them.

Tho the covenant with Israel is profoundly unique, it is nevertheless God's promise of a blessing which will be, must be, God's blessing for all the nations. So Israel has chosen, in the messy and ambivalent way that nations choose. And so too God, giving freedom to Israel's choice, has decided.

I do not mean that God was bound to do so, or that there was some inexorable logic in this, to which even God had to submit. Everything was the utterly free decision and generous gift of God, in love. But in that loving, in that divine giving and freedom, God did not reduce the events of history and the deeds of people to a mere mechanical performance set in motion by God's decision. Rather, in God's own eternal power and freedom, God affirmed the possibility and reality of human choice and action, the significance and coherence that is in it, while lifting it, beyond anything anyone could have known or hoped or imagined, into a greater, gracious and generous meaning of God's own decision.

Acting thru their national leaders, Jew and gentile alike took their place in the covenant of God. And in Jesus the Messiah, God was saying, "I will be with you in everything you are going to do. I will not draw back." To that, the people said "Amen." God accomplished God's purpose not by deeds enacted in realms apart from us, with the angels to carry it out, but in the obedience of Jesus who in the garden accepted it and made it his. In the person of the Messiah, God faces up to the sinfulness of his own people and of the gentiles, and in that commitment rescues them.

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Jesus' death enacts the covenant, fulfilling God's commitment to be with God's people, and overcoming at every level and in every dimension of life the separation that sin would be between them. But only in his death is the veil torn apart and we come to see who are in fact God's people.

As a Jew, Jesus had stood with his people. There was no way he could abstract himself from the threads that wove them together, even those threads that would have to be torn and broken. But it was not the same with the order imposed by Rome. The rule of the occupying power with its governors and its legions was not his immediate and relevant concern. Their systems were certainly at odds with the rule of God, but

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God's engagement in Jesus was with God's own people of Israel. So Jesus did not go to confront the Roman governor. To the end he recognised that his task was to challenge and change the society of his own people, not their conquerors. In spite of all their power, if the Romans were to have any role in this encounter between God and God's people, it could only be by invitation. They would have to be let or invited in by those it concerned.

Mark has been careful to show us that throughout his life Jesus understood his commission, the commitment into which God had placed him, as an engagement with Israel. He had been sent to bring news of the kingdom of God to Israel, to whom it had been promised. He spoke to them, for them, to win them, for he was a Jew. Jesus went seldom into gentile towns or territories, and then most often to get away from the pressures of notoriety among his own people. He did not seek out gentile company.

And yet, by divine concession, which is often the very way of God's progress, the gentiles sometimes sought him out as the Phoenician woman had sought him out in Tyre, and so Jesus had learned how the gentiles too were held in the compassion of God.

Now in the end, when Jesus was hauled before Pilate, we learn, and perhaps Jesus himself then learnt, that in the glorious irony of God, the day of the gentiles has come at the end of that night in Jerusalem when the leaders of his people decided that he must die for presenting himself as the Messiah, and handed him over, for the end and fulfilment of his mission, to the gentiles.

In the end, it was the High Priest who gave it to a gentile soldier to proclaim the Messiah.

And God had decided that so it must be, for the Messiah and for the Jewish and the gentile peoples for ever.

And that is the gospel, the good news, of Jesus the Messiah.