

Session 3 Theocracy Covenant Community National Failure

The **Church** (as an institution) has, at various times and in various places sought to function as a theocracy - e.g. post-Constantine, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Puritan, Anglican - in association with the governmental structures of the day. **Islam** is fundamentally a theocracy with unified religious, social, and political law - the Sharia - with headquarters in the Mosque and claiming jurisdiction over the whole earth.

Both are modelled on the Old Testament structures given to Israel, adapted (the church) or "corrected" (Islam).

The theocracy of Israel was different in that it was **for a single unique nation** and only practicable **within a defined territory**. God always intended that Israel should have a king, Deut. 17:20, of a kind that would reflect God's original creation order, Gen 1:26-28 - a regent, acting under God, Acts 13:21-22.

Jerusalem was the "city of the great King" with the Temple as His palace, Ps. 48:1-3, Isaiah 6:1-3.

This caused David a problem; he had a palace and God had a tent, 2Sam. 7:1-2, c.f. 1Chron. 29:1-5.

Theocracy, other than this unique case, has no support in the Word of God.

God's relationship to Israel was defined by covenants that arose from the two great seminal events of their history - the choice and call of Abraham, and God's act to redeem the nation from bondage in Egypt.

The covenant with **Abraham** involved promises to His physical descendents through Isaac and Jacob that are repeatedly stated to be **"everlasting", particularly in relation to the Land**, Gen. 13: 14-18, 17:4-9, 18-19, 48:3-4.

The covenant at Sinai was as a consequence of the gracious act of redemption in fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, Gen. 15:13-21, confirmed to Jacob, 46:2-4, and then activated in the time of Moses, Ex. 3:4-10, 19:1-8. The Sinai covenant **prescribed the conditions under which the blessings of the former covenant could be enjoyed at any particular time in Israel's history.**

Complete observance of the covenant regulations was impossible before Israel entered the Land or when exiled/dispersed. **Worship and festivals were centralized** to "the place where the LORD your God chooses ... to put His Name for His dwelling place", Deut. 12:1-14 (note vv 5, 10-11, 13-14). This was only revealed several hundred years after the conquest of the Land, "When the LORD had given David rest from all his enemies all around" 2Sam. 7:1, 10-11, and made an additional **Covenant with David** v16. It was **similar in nature to the Abrahamic covenant** in that it was **permanent** but, as with the Sinai covenant, blessing **could be interrupted for a time**, v14-15. This paved the way for **the Temple**, elevated above the royal palace, **with the Ark and the glory of God at the centre** of the life and worship and festivals of Israel. This defined the character and purpose of the nation as a nation under and around God.

There was no secular law in Israel - the Torah covered everything, personal holiness, family life, agriculture, climate and rainfall, cultic activities (priesthood, sacrifices etc.), celebrations and festivals, Sabbath observance, war, justice and penalties, property and inheritance etc. (c.f. Sharia for Muslims).

Obedience to the Torah would result in blessing; disobedience would lead to a curse, Deut. 11:8-32, 27:1-30:20.

The Land, with its strategic position between great empires and its unusual topography and climate, made for **vulnerability and the need to depend on God for protection and rain** (agriculture/food). a community living in shalom, in obedience to their Creator and Redeemer God, and, potentially, becoming **a prototype for restored Eden/Paradise**, Deut. 11. Torah was (is) unique to Israel but contains principles that have been incorporated into the laws of many countries, to their benefit.

It formed a boundary for a holy people, maintaining separation from the surrounding idolatrous nations by means of rituals, holiness codes, and social and dietary customs. **The long term objective was the Promised Seed and twin blessings on the Gentile nations - justification and the outpouring of the Spirit**, Gal. 3, (see esp. v7-9 and 13-14).

However **nowhere in the NT was the gift of the Land to Israel abrogated or transferred to the spiritual descendents of Abraham**. Enjoyment of that blessing could, and was, suspended for varying periods of time in response to disobedience. God had, in justice, destroyed the previous inhabitants just as He had said to Abraham, Gen. 15:13-16.

If Israel behaved in the same way they would, temporarily, lose the right to live in the land, Lev. 18:24-30, **but with the promise of restoration following repentance** Deut. 30:1-10.

Restoration could also happen as a sovereign act of God, with a view to repentance, Ezek. 20:42-44, 36:22-36.

Israel had no territorial mandate outside the Land (and, apart from brief periods, no ambitions). They were **expressly forbidden from occupying lands that God had given to other nations**, Deut. 2 - Edom v4-6, 22, Moab v8-9, Ammon v18-19, Philistia v23, c.f. Amos 9:7.

Wars of conquest were almost confined to the time of Joshua, at the command of God as an act of judgement, Gen. 15:16, Deut. 9:1-6, Lev. 18:24-25, Josh. 11:1-23. The Amalekites were a special case, Ex. 17:8-16, 1Sam. 15:1-3. Saul's wars were probably defensive, 1Sam. 14:46-48. David was a warrior king and extended the borders of Israel, 2Sam. 8:1-14. V14b says that "the LORD preserved David wherever he went; it is not clear whether this indicated that the LORD approved of all that David did and David was disqualified from building the Temple because he was a "man of blood", 1Chron. 28:3. Maybe he went too far.

The period of conquest was unique and did not act as a model for future behaviour.
Israel fought many defensive battles in Biblical times and also in recent history, **but not wars of aggression.**

Jews have no particular interest in converting Gentiles; it is possible, although not easy, to convert on a voluntary basis, e.g. Rahab, Ruth. Jews think it peculiar that anyone would wish to do this, believing that Gentiles are accepted God on the basis of the covenant with Noah and need not take on the burdens of being part of a chosen people, with all the attendant difficulties.

Essentially they would like to be left alone to live as Jews and make a contribution to the world from that context.

The LORD revealed Himself in Scripture as the God of Israel and the Church, and as the God of the nations. Large sections of prophecy, e.g. in Isaiah, deal with this subject. These can seem far removed from personal relevance to modern Christians but they are, in fact, telling us something important about God's way of acting in His world.

We need to realize that the Land is still an essential element in the purposes of God as (I think) we approach the end of the age and thus understand why it has become such a "cause celebre", totally out of proportion to its size and resources. Before we address other issues we have to settle this foundational one. Hamas and others wish to eliminate Israel completely and many others, including Christians, have no sympathy with Israel's presence and minimise consideration of the existential threat to her survival when prescribing solutions.

Breaking the Covenant

The path from the call and covenant with Abraham and the formation of the covenant community of Israel to the production of the Promised Seed would not be smooth. The failures of Israel, despite the privileges of being an elect nation, would highlight the radical brokenness of God's creation. At the same time this journey would demonstrate the extent of God's faithful love and His determination to complete the good work that He had begun.

Israel could not, cannot, break the covenant with Abraham - God is the sole Guarantor, Gen. 15see v17, 22:15-18. **They could and did break the Sinai covenant** immediately, Exodus 32:1-10, and repeatedly, 1Kings 11:4-10, Jer. 11:13.

God knew that this would happen and factored it into His plans, Deut. 31:24-30, 32:43.

Restoration would follow judgement, Isaiah 54:4-10. Exile from the Land would not be permanent, Deut. 30:1-10, Ezek. 36:16-24, and will be followed by spiritual restoration, 36:25-29, Zech. 12:9-13:6, Rom. 11:25-35.

This restoration would ultimately result from the New Covenant that God promised to make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, Jer. 31:31-34, Luke 22:14-20, Heb. 8:8-13.

Failure, warning, judgement, exile, and restoration were central to the message of the prophets. Over and over again they reminded the people of the stipulations and conditions in the Sinai covenant and the judgements that would follow persistent disobedience. They gradually became so deaf that they could not hear, Isaiah 6:9-12; judgement was then unavoidable but the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants remained, although reduced to a strand, 6:13, 11:1.

The Messianic Hope.

The abject failure of the chosen people became the seedbed for a fresh revelation of how the "seed promise" of Gen. 3:15 would be fulfilled - the Messianic hope, the true heir to David's throne, Isaiah 9:6-7, Ezek. 34:23-25, 37:18-28. In a vision **Ezekiel had seen the glory of God depart from the temple**, soon to be destroyed, 10:1-5, 18-19, 11:22-25. The Ark of the Covenant disappeared forever when Jerusalem was destroyed. In a later vision Ezekiel saw the glory return, 43:1-5, but the Ark was not recovered and the Holy of Holies remained empty.

One day all the hope of Israel, Acts 28:20 would come, the true Son of David, the glory of God in human flesh, John 1:14.