

## Why Does God Use Covenants?

By James R. Hughes

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There are many aspects of God's work about which we could ask 'why' questions. For example: Why did God permit man to sin? Why did he not provide salvation for angels? Why did he reveal himself in various ways (e.g., visions, dreams, prophets, and through his Son)? We must be careful when we ask these questions. If we enquire too deeply into questions where God does not give us answers in the Bible, we may be led into dangerous speculation. In the end, the answer to these questions, and many others like them, must always be, "for his own good reasons and for the glory of his being".

However, there may be instances where it can be useful for us to ask a 'why' question and to explore the *possible* reasons that God chose a particular course of action. I believe that this applies to asking why God uses a covenantal relationship as a key means of forming his relationship with mankind. Even though the Bible does not explicitly state the reason why God uses this form of relationship, it appears that if we can understand the possible reason(s) we can strengthen our relationship with him and better understand his character and attributes.

In the Bible, God describes his relationship with mankind in various forms: creator-creature, father-son, root-branch, husband-wife, king-subject, etc. Each of these relationships brings out different aspects of God's character and providential care for mankind in general, and of his particular love for the elect.

One of the primary forms he uses for expressing his relationship with mankind is through the legal agreement of a covenant. I suggest the following may be included among the reasons why he uses the covenantal form of relationship:

- *It is consistent with his nature.* As a triune-God, there is a multi-faceted relationship among the members of the trinity. In the Bible, we read of love, fellowship, and common purpose, among the members of the Trinity. We also discover a self-imposed hierarchy with authorities and responsibilities (i.e., the Father sent the Son; the Son obeyed; the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son). The agreement among the persons in the Trinity to fulfill their respective responsibilities is essentially a covenantal agreement. God exists in a covenantal relationship in himself, and he uses a covenantal relationship between himself and mankind as an extension of his nature to the image-bearer he has created.
- *It provides accountabilities.* The nature of a covenant provides for explicit accountabilities within a hierarchy of responsibilities. Obligations are imposed on both the superior and subordinate parties in the relationship, with associated penalties if the obligations are not fulfilled. God as the supreme monarch (as creator and providential governor) has placed man over the rest of creation as a subject/vassal lord (Gen 1.28-30) and has required obedience to the laws of the realm and payment of tribute from our time and wealth. He has also placed obligations on himself to fulfill the promises he made to support man in his capacity as a subordinate ruler. A covenantal agreement is a form of relationship documenting these mutual accountabilities.
- *It is a legally binding relationship.* God is a God of law and order who communicates his laws to those who dwell within his dominion (i.e., all of the created order). A covenantal relationship provides a basis for structuring formally (in a legally-binding way) the relationship between God and mankind. God has documented the legal covenant in written form—first in the Ten Commandments, then in Deuteronomy, and finally in the Bible. He has also sealed the covenant with his blood through Christ.
- *It binds man to God.* Summing up the two preceding points above, a covenant formally binds man to God in terms of his being a subject under law. It reinforces God's ownership and sovereignty rights over man.

- *It provides a clear line of demarcation* in four ways:
  - It forms the basis of demonstration for God as the covenant-keeping *God* and man as the covenant breaker. God never fails to keep his promises; man consistently breaks the obligations of the Covenant (as provided in the Law).
  - The first Adam failed to keep his covenant obligations, and 100% of mankind since Adam (born through natural generation) sinned and has failed to keep the covenant. God, in the Last Adam—Christ, the God-man—fulfilled perfectly the covenant obligations placed on man. This shows clearly the failure of natural man, and the success of man empowered by God.
  - It serves as a means of establishing membership in the Kingdom of Heaven. All men, women, and children are under the obligations of the covenant (and therefore are required to obey the entire Law). There are people who are covenant breakers and people who are covenant keepers. These are the only two classes into which mankind can be divided; there is no middle ground. Autonomous, self-willed man is a covenant breaker; man indwelt by the Holy Spirit is a covenant keeper.
  - It provides a means of visibly distinguishing those who are participants in the Kingdom of Grace from those who are not. This is accomplished through the administration of the covenant signs. There is a portion of mankind that has been circumcised (OT) or baptized (NT), and a portion that has not been.

It is clear that God uses a covenantal form for administering his relationship with mankind. We may also have correctly identified some of the reasons why he uses this form. But where did the covenant form of relationship come from? Did God introduce the covenant form as a creation institution like marriage, which men have applied to their own legal relationships? Or, did God adopt a human institution for his purposes?

As Meredith Kline<sup>1</sup> has pointed out, Deuteronomy is structured as a covenant treaty in a form that is similar to that which was used throughout the ancient Near East (particularly around 2000 BC). The covenant renewal found in Nehemiah 9 and 10 has the same basic elements as are found in the covenant documented in Deuteronomy. Was this particular model for covenant administration invented by man and adapted by God for his purposes? Or, was it introduced by God and adapted by men?

The earliest example of the ancient Near Eastern covenantal form found in the Bible is the covenant administered by God with Abram, recorded in Genesis 15. The most fully formed example of the Near Eastern covenantal form in the Bible is found in the book of Deuteronomy. However, covenant enactments earlier than that made with Abram are found in the Bible—the covenants made with Noah and Adam. These earlier covenants have some, but not all, of the elements found in the covenantal form of Deuteronomy **that do not correspond** in their detailed structure to the Near Eastern model.

If God directly introduced the covenantal model as an institution, and men followed his example, we should expect to find the various elements of the form in the earliest covenant administrations. The form God first introduces is simpler than later covenant models. Men appear to have enhanced the form; and by the time God made the covenant with Moses, a complex model had been developed in the Near East. At this point, God used the form that had developed between human covenanters as the basis for his covenant with Moses.

If, as I suggest above, God uses the covenantal form because it is consistent with his nature and is an effective means of revealing his purposes, then why does he appear to adopt a form invented by humans for documenting legal relationships?

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King – The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963.

To answer this question, it is helpful to consider some examples of God's using means invented by men to fulfill his providential administrations. For example, the writers of the Bible used written narrative and poetic forms similar to those used in their cultural contexts (e.g., chronologies, proverbs, thought parallels, acrostics, word-plays, chiasms). Civil leaders (Moses, Joshua, David, etc.) under God's direction published laws on tablets and pillars and used scepters and crowns as symbols of permanence and authority like the nations around them. In these instances, we find that God adopted the forms invented by sinful men—even pagans—to communicate his purposes to mankind.

What we should not forget, however, is that all of man's ways are under the providential superintendence of God. He prepares institutions and cultural artifacts within human societies under his providential governance so that they are available for his direct use at the appropriate time. Some examples will help us understand this providential preparation for his purposes:

- Ancient Near Eastern societies develop written methods of preserving their records. God uses this method for preserving the record of his covenant with man. One writer noted: "The Bible is written because it is a covenant document. It is clear, both by the existence of Scripture as well as the early importance of writing as a means of preserving and communicating God's Word, that written communication is an essential aspect of man's fulfillment of his cultural calling. In this respect the Bible is similar to other covenant documents. Real estate ownership requires a written deed. Mortgages are written agreements. So are marriage licences. *Important* documents are written to prevent the corruption of agreements and contracts in a fallen world. The more important an established relationship the more critical is its being written."<sup>2</sup>
- God announced, about 150 years in advance, that he had prepared Cyrus to fulfill his redemptive purposes (Is 44.28; 45.1, 13).
- God used the human form of government (1 Sam 8.5, 20) organized around a king, removing the pagan aspects, to fulfill his purposes through Israel (Acts 13.22) and to reveal himself as the Great King (Ps 2.4; Rev 17.14; 19.16).
- God used the Roman census at the time of the birth of Christ to direct Joseph and Mary to the ancestral home (Lk 2.1, 2).
- God used the Roman instrument of torture and execution (the cross) as the means of procuring redemption for his people. In this he fulfilled a prophecy that he had made over 1,000 years before Rome became a nation (Dt 21.23; Gal 3.13).

Commentators, since the early Church Fathers, have noted that God prepares in advance human institutions and cultural artifacts that he plans later to use for the work of the Church. Israel's plundering the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus (Ex 3.21, 22) has been used as an illustration of the principle that God prepares and adapts human instruments for the advancement of his Church. For example:

- Gregory Nazianzen, on Easter Sunday, 383 AD, in the last (recorded) sermon he preached, said: "What then? Dost thou come out for nothing and without wages? But why wilt thou leave to the Egyptians and to the powers of thine adversaries that which they have gained by wickedness, and will spend with yet greater wickedness? It does not belong to them: they have ravished it, and have sacrilegiously taken it as plunder from Him who saith, The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine, and I give it to whom I will. Yesterday it was theirs, for it was permitted to be so; to-day the Master takes it and gives it to thee, that thou mayest make a good and saving use of it."

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001) p. 316.

- Augustine, in his book *On Christian Doctrine*,<sup>3</sup> written in 397 AD said: “Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God, the Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, providing them with things which they themselves, were not making a good use of; in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. Their garments, also—that is, human institutions such as are adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life—we must take and turn to a Christian use.”

In the same way God prepared, in advance, human legal instruments that he would later use to reveal himself and his truths to mankind. God providentially controlled the ways of men so that they developed covenant institutions among themselves that would be ready for his use in redemptive history.

God's use of the covenantal form of relationship teaches us about the relationship among the members of the Trinity and the definition of obligatory roles within that relationship. This implies that mankind is bound to God by the same obligatory relationship as God binds himself. The use of the covenant form by God also teaches us about his providential governance of history by which he prepares in advance the institutions and artifacts he will need to unfold his redemptive plan.

Just as God used the covenant legal form defined by men for his direct redemptive purposes, so he can and does utilize other inventions created by men, under his providential governance, for extending his Kingdom—for example, the printing press at the time of the Reformation. Without compromising truth, we should continue to ‘plunder the Egyptians’ today and utilize the inventions of men, such as the Internet, for the advance of God's Kingdom.

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<sup>3</sup> Book 2, chapter 40—‘Whatever has been rightly said by the heathen, we must appropriate to our uses’.