

Foreword

Alec Motyer – A Personal Appreciation

It is a privilege to introduce this little book – not only to underline the inherent value of these pages but also to express a few words of personal appreciation for its author, Dr Alec Motyer, and to try to say about him what many of us who admired him were never able to say to him.

I first heard the name Alec Motyer when I was still in my teens, I had gone to St George's-Tron Church in the centre of Glasgow to listen to a 'landline' broadcast from the Keswick Convention. Re-imagining the scene now almost requires an exercise in time travel! For this early 1960s version of a live web stream involved a group of people sitting in silence in a Glasgow church listening to disembodied voices from a massive tent pitched 140 miles away in the English Lake District. For all practical purposes it was a group-listen to a publicly broadcasted telephone call!

In those days, echoes of the original pattern of 'The Keswick Message' could still be heard, although the message itself had gone through a process of considerable transformation (no doubt in part due to the influence of men like Alec Motyer). A 'Bible Reading' or consecutive exposition of a book or series of chapters occupied the mornings. During the rest of the day several half-hour-length sermons were preached on the theme of the day, moving systematically from sin to forgiveness to the ministry of the Spirit and then spiritual 'fulness' and service. In the evening

gatherings two messages were preached with the singing of a hymn in between. All of the speakers sat together on the platform behind the preacher, like so many Aarons and Hurs holding up the hands of Moses. By the 1960s their experience was slightly less nerve-racking than it must have been in the Convention's earlier days when such was the emphasis on the Spirit's ministry that it was said only the chairman knew which of the speakers would be invited to preach on any given evening!

On that, to me never-to-be-forgotten evening, Alec Motyer was introduced as one of the preachers. If memory serves he expounded the closing section of Galatians 6. It was a model of Christ-honouring, cross-centred, expository ministry.

The New England pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards once wrote that the critical issue in preaching is the impression made on the hearers *at the time* and suggested that any after-effects are likely to be related to that impression. As though a confirmation of that principle, I date from that exposition my first sense of the spiritual force of Paul's words 'I bear on my body the marks of Jesus' (Gal. 6:17). I suspect I have never thought about them without remembering that July evening.

Over the following years, as this sermon remained in my memory banks, and I encountered Alec Motyer's many books, and had fragmentary contact with him, I realized that my teenage assessment of the value of his ministry had been, if anything, an undervaluation. For now, I discovered that coupled with his scholar's learning and his evident love for the Scriptures and for those to whom he expounded them, was a rapier-like wit, and an endearing desire to encourage the next generation of ministers. An irresistible combination.

Thankfully for us all, these features are embedded in his books – including expositions of (at least) Exodus, Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Isaiah (two different commentaries and a devotional guide!), Amos, Zephaniah and Haggai,

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Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and James, as well as outstandingly helpful guides to Old Testament Theology and preaching. It is a testimony to his work that two friends who have been among the most listened-to preachers in my lifetime, the late Tim Keller of Redeemer Church in New York, and Alistair Begg of Parkside Church in Cleveland – men in very different situations, and with differing preaching styles (as it should be), felt a common debt to his works. Indeed, Tim once commented that ‘my young self was thunderstruck’ the first time he heard Alec Motyer speak.

But these would simply be the better-known names in a long litany of ministers and preachers who would gladly acknowledge how much they have benefitted from his ministry and in some cases to his personal friendship. Many of us certainly owe him a debt of which he almost certainly knew little or nothing. When he entitled his study of Old Testament biblical theology, *Look to the Rock*, he was referring to the Lord God. But Alec Motyer himself was also something of a lighthouse rock. With one or two other men of similar stature he stood out in his generation and did so without the vast volume of evangelical scholarship to which we have access today. His genius lay in his appreciation of the sheer livingness of Scripture not merely as a document to be analysed for purposes of scholarship but as the word and words of the living God to his people. He thus stood in the great tradition of men who were spiritually minded biblical scholars, and standing on their shoulders helped us to see a little further.

I first encountered this material in a photocopied transcription of lectures Alec Motyer gave at the annual conference of the Theological Students Fellowship¹ over the New Year period of December 1972 and January 1973.

1. The sub-section for theology students of what was then Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF), now The Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF).

How they came into my hands is now, like Nebuchadnezzar's dream, hidden from me! But here, to my surprise, was an *Irish Anglican* underscoring the biblical theme of the covenant that had once been front and centre in *Scottish Presbyterian* theology but had largely fallen on tough times.

Thus, Alec Motyer had become a kind of modern equivalent of the 17th century Irish Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher (also Dublin-born and Trinity College Dublin educated) who had put Scottish Presbyterians like me in his debt by the influence the covenant theology of his *Irish Articles of Religion* had on the composition of our *Confession of Faith*! Here, albeit in modest photocopied form, was a fresh injection of covenant-centred, biblical theology. On the south side of the Scottish Border appreciation of the centrality of covenant theology had long absented itself; and on the north side by the time of the mid-19th century one of the country's great theologians, Hugh Martin, was lamenting its demise. Thankfully now expositions of biblical teaching on God's covenants can readily be found. But in many ways these lectures were like the cloud the size of a man's hand Elijah's servant saw – the harbinger of what was yet to come.

So, the discovery of the transcriptions was both a surprise and a joy. Looking back now I wish a publisher in the early 1970s had urged Alec Motyer himself to work the material into something like this book. For the original lectures provided in brief compass is a readily accessible, rich, and clear exposition of a biblical theme that belongs to spine of the Bible story, gives coherence to our understanding of its message, helps us better to know Christ, and puts marrow into our spiritual bones. But now, through the good offices of Dr Steve Motyer, the wish is a reality. He has not only been willing to allow the publication of his father's lectures but has also given his own time and energy to editing and

formatting the raw materials of the original transcriptions with an understanding and sensitivity only a son could have. Do not miss his own reflections in his Postscript!

I met Alec Motyer only once, although we had some contact thereafter. He was everything I might have hoped: welcoming to a much younger man, easy to talk to, with a well-honed sense of humour and a generous spirit of encouragement and ongoing interest. He was not impressed with himself, and he knew not to be impressed by externals. He loved the church of Christ and the people of God. All that was obvious. He seemed to me to be the same in personal form as he was in book form – which is always both a relief and a delight to find whenever you meet people you have admired from afar through their writings.

The last report I heard of Alec Motyer the preacher came from one of our sons. He had come, along with his friend the late Richard Bewes (formerly rector of All Souls Church in London), to speak at the mid-week meeting of his congregation in Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. Our son's first reaction on seeing him was a sinking feeling that he had invited such a frail-looking elderly gentleman to preach! But when the time came, it was as if new life had been breathed into him – so energized was he by his love for the word of God and the people of God. No wonder then that Alec Motyer's name is still honoured, and that many of us are ongoingly grateful for the influence of his life and ministry, for his friendly encouragement, and for the inheritance he has left to us in his books.

Fifty years ago, the lectures on *Covenant Theology in the Old Testament* seemed to me to be just what was needed – a clear, concise, biblical account of the covenants of God and the God of the covenants. It still is. And so, thankfully, with *Covenant Foundations: Understanding the Promise-Keeping God of the Bible* now in our hands we can say of

Covenant Foundations

Alec Motyer what was said of a figure from the early pages of the Hebrew Bible he loved so much: ‘through his faith, though he died, he still speaks’ (Heb. 11:4). And thanks to Christian Focus Publications and Steve Motyer, a new generation of readers can continue to hear his voice.

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Old Testament Covenant Theology

Why have you picked up a book on ‘Covenant Theology’? You must already have some idea that this is a great theme to study and think about, in spite of the off-putting title! Let’s face it, both ‘covenant’ and ‘theology’ are not words on everyone’s lips. You don’t hear them at the supermarket checkout or the school gate. ‘Covenant’ feels like a lawyer’s word, technical and abstruse. ‘Theology’ feels intellectual and distant from everyday life, and the cause of some bitter arguing. But do you already think that there might be more to it than this? You’re right to think so.

Let me let you into a secret: these words will change your feelings about God, and about your relationship with God, and will give you new confidence about your faith, your family and your future. That’s worth having! Keep reading.

You see, ‘covenant’ is not a lawyer’s plaything: it’s a great biblical word, which takes us to heart of what God is doing in the world through our Lord Jesus Christ, who came as the fulfilment of what God had been doing through Israel. The whole Bible is held together by the word ‘covenant’. At its heart, the biblical covenant is about God making and keeping promises to rescue us and establish us as His people.

And ‘theology’ simply describes what we do, when we study things like the biblical covenant, and put together

the story of God's action, first in Israel and then in and through the Lord Jesus. 'Covenant theology', therefore, is just telling the story of God's action to make and keep His promises to save us, His people. If you're like me, you will want to be involved in that story. You won't want to miss out on anything that God is doing through His 'covenant'. You'll want in!

The Bible is a unity. We have it in two bits, of course, which we call the 'Old Testament' and the 'New Testament', and for us the second bit is especially important because that's where Jesus comes in. But for Jesus the Old Testament was simply 'the Scriptures,' the Word of God. And when we look at the Old Testament simply as 'God's Word', we realise that it prepares the way for Jesus, so that we can rightly understand Him. The foundations for the biblical covenant are all laid in the Old Testament, and first we need to understand it correctly there. Then we'll have our ducks in a row, so that we can rightly understand the New.

That's the purpose of this little book. We focus on the Old Testament, although we'll be glancing frequently across to the New. And here's a really fascinating fact: the covenant theme in the Bible really does begin at the beginning. We will spend most of our time in the 'books of Moses', the five books with which the Bible begins, often called 'the Pentateuch'. And within them, our focus will chiefly be on Genesis and Exodus, the first two. Of the seven chapters ahead of you, chapter one focuses on Genesis, and chapter two, on the first part of Exodus. Then in chapter three, we land up at Mount Sinai in the middle chapters of Exodus. Chapter four focuses on the last part of Exodus, and Leviticus. In chapter five we are chiefly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, with a few little glances ahead to the prophets. Chapter six moves on to

Judges and the books of Samuel, and then in chapter seven we land up firmly in the prophets and look ahead to the New Testament. So you can see how absolutely foundation-laying the covenant is, for the message of the whole Bible.

I hope very much that you will enjoy this journey through the Scriptures with me. I have a goal, in writing this book. Will you add your own goal, in reading it? My goal is that together we can gain a clear biblical understanding of God's covenant love for us in Christ. Will you make it your goal, truly to grasp that covenant love for yourself and see yourself as part of God's great covenant story?

1

Covenant and Promise —Noah and Abraham

We begin our study of Old Testament Covenant Theology at the start of the Old Testament!—specifically, with the stories of Noah and Abraham in the book of Genesis. These stories mark the point at which the covenant theme begins to take shape, and give us clear indications of the *theology* involved in the idea of ‘covenant’. In the case of both Noah and Abraham, we can see clearly how the covenant focuses upon *salvation*.

The ‘covenant’ idea in the Old Testament can be very simply summarised in the statement, ‘God makes and keeps promises.’ And if we press behind the idea and ask the great question ‘Why does He do it?’ we discover that, in making promises, God is moved simply by His own nature. Whatever the human circumstances to which He responds, the pressure God feels to make promises comes from His own heart. And then when it comes to *keeping* them, God acts in His own all-sufficient strength.

As we shall see in this book, the word ‘all’ in the expression ‘all-sufficient’ needs to be emphasised. God does not take anyone into partnership. He is not only

totally able to keep His promises without assistance, but He insists upon doing so. Our first focus in this chapter is the story of Noah, where the idea of ‘covenant’ first appears, very dramatically and without any forewarning. Noah’s story will teach us that *the God of the covenant reveals Himself as God the Saviour*. The point of God’s promises is that He pledges Himself to a total work of *salvation*—the central theme of the covenant.

1. Noah.

The promise of salvation comes to Noah (Gen. 6–9) in relation to a very real and objective *threat*. Noah’s whole world was under threat from God’s wrath. A glance back at the chapters preceding Noah’s story sets the scene for us: following the story of the fall in chapter 3, Genesis 4 and 5 are entirely given to showing the appalling spread of sin. In chapter 4 sin spreads to the descendants of Adam, and corruption increases. In chapter 5 we see sin’s universal impact, for even though the men of that pre-flood generation lived to enormous ages, just one epitaph is written over each of them: ‘and he died.’¹ However they managed to prolong their days, the power of sin and death prevailed and ‘reigned’ over them, as Paul puts it in Romans 5:14.

Genesis 6 then begins with a mysterious story which seems to mark a line across history for God. The action of the ‘sons of God’ in seizing ‘the daughters of men’ leads God to say, ‘My spirit shall not abide (or ‘strive’²) with humans forever’ (6:1-3 NIV). God’s determined ‘No!’ is then unpacked in detail:

1. See verses 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31.

2. It is not clear what this Hebrew verb really means. Either translation is possible.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them. (Gen. 6:5-7)

Notice how the word ‘man’ rings out repeatedly in this narrative. Verse 5 gives us the divine *assessment* (God sees human wickedness). Verse 6 tells us the divine *reaction* (God regrets creating human beings). Then verse 7 summarises the divine *resolve*: He determines to destroy the human race. And Noah belongs right in there! The story does not explain that God determines to destroy every human being except Noah. He starts with the rest of the world, under God’s ‘wrath’, facing the objective threat of divine judgment, a corrupt man in a corrupt world heading for destruction.

But the covenant God is a Saviour. When humans are under threat of destruction—even by Him!—something impels Him to rescue them. That’s what the story of Noah is all about. Let’s lift this truth out of the narrative and explore three aspects of this divine impulse to act in response to human corruption, as they emerge in this story:

(1) The judgment of God.

There is no need to say much more under this heading. God is the sole sovereign in His own world. He does not have to ask permission to pass judgment. When He sees a situation requiring a universal judgment (as here), He says ‘I will destroy.’ But into this determination to judge there comes—

(2) The mercy of God.

After God's declaration of the coming destruction of humankind and of all other living creatures (Gen. 6:7) comes the simple comment, 'But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD' (6:8). Older translations have 'grace' here, rather than 'favour', and the expression that someone 'found grace' in another's eyes occurs frequently in the Old Testament (some twenty-seven times, in fact). We meet it, for instance, later in Genesis with Lot and the angels (Gen. 19:19), and with Joseph before Potiphar (29:4)—and elsewhere in the Old Testament with Moses before the Lord (Exod. 33:12), with Gideon before the angel (Judges 6:17), and with Ruth before Boaz (Ruth 2:10). We must notice something vital about this phrase: wherever it occurs, it points to the *meritlessness* of the one 'receiving' the grace. In fact, we could well focus its meaning simply by understanding it backwards: 'grace found Lot / Moses / Gideon / Ruth / Noah'—grace reaches out and lights on an unworthy object. The scriptural understanding of 'Noah found grace' is indeed that 'grace found Noah': into his meritless situation, under God's wrath and impending judgment, came the unmerited grace of God.

It is really important to notice how Genesis safeguards this truth against misunderstanding. The next verse (6:9) introduces Noah as 'a righteous man, blameless in his generation' who 'walked with God.' Some, of course, have suggested that we should read these verses the other way round—arguing that verse 9 supplies the *reason* for verse 8, that Noah 'finds grace' before the Lord *because of* his righteousness. But verse 9 begins with a new heading, in fact with one of Genesis' own chapter headings: 'These are the generations of Noah.' The introductory phrase 'These are the generations of

...’ occurs some twelve times in Genesis, and makes a very interesting study in its own right. It always has the effect of drawing a line across the narrative and focusing our attention on a new phase or element of the story.³

So we are not invited—in fact we are not even permitted by Genesis—to reverse the order of verses 8 and 9. This would not only ignore the significance of Genesis’ own chapter heading, which marks a new start in verse 9, but it would also put Genesis out of line with the rest of Scripture. Scripture forbids the thought that God rewards us for our goodness when He chooses us and shows us ‘grace’. Verse 9 does not tell us *why* Noah was chosen, but shows us the evidence *that* he was chosen. Noah displays the *marks* of the truly elect, the marks of the man or woman upon whom mercy has come from God. Noah found grace; grace found Noah—and transformed him.

This man, found by grace, is the first to hear God speak the word ‘covenant’ in the Bible:

I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark ... (Gen. 6:17-18)

‘My covenant’ is shorthand for ‘my promise of salvation’. Like all other human beings, Noah is death-bound, destined to ‘perish’: but into this deadly situation comes the covenant, expressed in the provision of the ark. And the word ‘establish’ is important—frequently used in connection with the covenant in the Old Testament. It is a vivid word, literally ‘I will make the covenant

3. See e.g. Gen. 2:4, 5:1 (Adam), 10:1 (Noah’s sons), 11:27 (Terah), 25:12 (Ishmael)—etc.

stand up': as though the covenant was inoperative or in suspense, and God is bringing it to life, making it leap to its feet. So its inner meaning is 'I will set my covenant in operation, I will make it take action—and you will enter the ark!' If on the one hand the wrath of God is flooding in, overwhelming a corrupt world, on the other hand the agency of the covenant is springing into action, laying hold of Noah in order to protect him while the world is perishing.

(3) The righteousness of God.

It is important to note that God is not denying His own nature as judge, by showing mercy. Noah still has to endure the flood. God doesn't say to him, 'My covenant is like a divine helicopter which is going to lower an escape harness and lift you up to heaven until I have finished with the earth.' The 'escape' was an ark, which wrapped him around and preserved him in the midst of the waters of judgment. He was so secured by the covenant, that the very form the judgment took guaranteed his salvation—because 'the ark floated on the face of the waters' as they rose (Gen. 7:18).

After all, it is no salvation—not even a pleasure!—to be locked up in an ark for nearly ten months.⁴ It is like living in a zoo with your in-laws! There is nothing saving about the ark in itself. It was a single-use vessel, designed just for this one occasion, to keep Noah and his family safe. This covenant-making and covenant-keeping God is a God of the utmost righteousness who remains just. He is not dealing with Noah on the basis of favouritism or special action. He is acting in response to what sin deserves, and *yet* He sets Himself forth as the Saviour of sinners.

4. See Gen. 7:11, 8:13.

The covenant sign.

We must look briefly at this before we move on to Abraham. The story of Noah reaches its climax in Genesis 9 with God's promise to Noah, 'Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you' (Gen. 9:9-10). Specifically, this covenant promise is that 'never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood' (9:11), and it is *actioned* by the giving of a sign:

This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. Whenever the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. (Gen. 9:12-16)

Covenant signs are given by the covenant God, to declare covenant promises to covenant people. They are tokens and guarantees of God's word. It is fascinating to notice that, in this case, the sign is not first and foremost a 'word' to Noah at all. Rather, God gives it as a reminder *for Himself*: 'When the bow is in the clouds, *I will see it and remember* the everlasting covenant' (9:16). God lets Noah—and us—into the secret: He tells us what the rainbow means to Him, so that the sign of the covenant begins to speak to us, too, assuring us of God's commitment. The sign reminds first God, and then us, of the covenant promise He has made.

2. Abraham.

As in the Noah narrative, we discover that God is the *sole agent* in Abraham's story, in making and implementing His covenant promises. This is sometimes called 'monergism', a technical theological term that underlines the thought that we cannot contribute anything to our salvation, but God does everything. In fact, nothing else is tolerable or possible.

This appears especially through the focus on Abraham's childlessness. His story begins with the childless state of his marriage to Sarah (Gen. 15:2: 'I continue childless ...'), but it then focuses on how God specifically *disallows* any contribution from Abraham to solve the problem. It was possible, according to the law of the time, for Abraham to take a second wife and to have a child who would be recognised as Sarah's. And, prompted by Sarah herself, this is what Abraham does, having Ishmael by Hagar (the story is in Genesis 16). But God firmly disallows this as a contribution to the fulfilment of His promises. He leaves Abraham to cool his heels for thirteen further years—and then steps in and takes His own action to enable Sarah to have a child. The narrative is very careful to tell us that this happens totally by God's enabling.⁵ God's promises are fulfilled by God's means at God's time—full stop!

So a simple story of a childless marriage turns into a wonderful demonstration of how God keeps His promises. Isaac was born by the normal processes of human reproduction, but both the initiative and the outcome were totally God's. The book of Genesis is like so much of the rest of Scripture: as Leon Morris says of John's Gospel, it is 'a pool in which a child may wade,

5. See Gen. 17:17–18:15, 21:1–7.

and an elephant can swim.’⁶ Many of us have loved and revelled in the stories of Genesis from early childhood, but the more we read them, the deeper we realise they are. Profound biblical theology emerges from a simple story about a childless couple to whom children were promised.

The stories of Noah and Abraham hold the same message, in relation to a different threat. In Noah’s case the threat is external, from God’s wrath. In Abraham’s case the threat is internal, from his and Sarah’s inability to have children. But both Noah and Abraham were in no position to ‘co-operate’ in their own rescue. They both had to take action, but the initiative and the outcome were God’s, and His alone. All Noah and Abraham can do is take the servant’s place, submit to God’s will and do what He tells them. As we have just seen, the story of Abraham in particular disallows the whole notion of human co-operation with God in the fulfilment of the divine promises. The covenant points to a salvation which is *all of God*, both in dealing with our ‘internal’ factors and in safeguarding us objectively, as His elect, from His own wrath.

The story of Abraham displays God’s action in at least three ways:

(1) God chooses: His work of election.

There is a pivotal moment in Abraham’s story, described in Genesis 15:6: ‘He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.’ Faced with his childlessness, Abraham chooses to believe God’s promise that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5). When Paul unpacks this story in Romans 4, he finds here the glorious doctrine of ‘justification

6. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (New International Commentary; Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 7.

by faith', and underlines that Abraham simply took his stand on the promises of God:

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith ... (Rom. 4:19-20)

His human situation was totally hopeless, but Abraham simply believed in *God's* outcome. A tremendous moment in his story! But in case Abraham should think that in any way he was being rewarded for his faith, God immediately reminds him of where his story began:

I am the LORD, who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess. (Gen. 15:7)

Behind Abraham's story lie the choice, the impulse and the movement of God alone. Paul makes precisely this point in Romans 4.⁷ Scripture simply insists on the priority and primacy of God's work in Abraham's life. Because God is at work in him, Abraham has come to this moment of total human failure and inability—and so also to this moment of faith.

(2) God commits: His work of self-obligation.

The story continues in Genesis 15 with Abraham's question, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it [the promised land]?'⁸ How can Abraham be sure that God will keep His promise? The incident that follows gives us the answer. God tells Abraham to set up a very elaborate sacrificial arrangement. He has to take a variety of animals, great and small, to kill them and arrange their carcasses so as to leave a pathway

7. See Rom. 4:3-5.

8. Gen. 15:8.

between the slaughtered bodies of the animals. There are two vital things to notice about this strange story:

(a) *These sacrifices are set up for God's sake.* Literally translated, God's command begins 'Take *for me* ...' (Gen. 15:9), and then the next verse repeats the words 'for me' in describing Abraham's response. He did precisely what he was told, aware that this action is not for him but for God. Sacrifice is not a technique whereby human beings can twist God's arm. It is a provision that *God* makes for Himself.

(b) In line with this, *God is the sole agent* in the ceremony which centres upon these slaughtered animals. Just as Adam was anaesthetised when God took a rib to form Eve,⁹ so now God applies a divine anaesthetic and puts Abraham out of action, so that he can be no more than an observer. He is immobilised while God acts alone:

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram. (Gen. 15:17-18)

We learn from Jeremiah what this 'passing between the pieces' meant: it signified taking a powerful and terrible oath,¹⁰ illustrated also in 1 Samuel 11 when Saul sent the severed pieces of two oxen around the tribes of Israel in order to summon them to battle. The pieces carried a curse: 'This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not immediately down tools and follow Saul!' (1 Sam. 11:7).

In Genesis 15 God takes this total covenant obligation upon Himself, because Abraham is made to sleep and so is disallowed from passing through the sacrifice

9. Gen. 2:21.

10. See Jer. 34:18.

that enacts the covenant between him and God. God is saying, 'If this covenant is broken, I will take the covenant curse upon myself.' Genesis doesn't pause at this point to spell out the implications, but in the light of the rest of Scripture we can see Calvary coming, the day when God in Christ became a curse for us.¹¹ This work of *self-obligation* on God's part is a truly remarkable feature of Abraham's story.

(3) God transforms: His work of regeneration.

The third stress in Genesis' account of God's covenant with Abraham appears in chapter 17. Thirteen long years have passed since the dramatic promise and sacrificial enactment of the covenant in chapter 15. Ishmael has been born, but no other children. Abraham is now ninety-nine. Suddenly God appears to Him and breaks his silence:

'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.' Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.' (Gen. 17:1-4)

And before Abraham can react to this extraordinary re-affirmation of the promise, God underlines it:

'No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.' (Gen. 17:5)

God comes in regenerating power to make the man into a new man, symbolised by the change of his name¹²—to

11. See Gal. 3:13.

12. The point is not what Abram's old and new names mean, but simply the fact that his name—and thus his whole person—is being transformed by God. In fact his old name (Abram) meant 'exalted father' (a name which must have constantly reminded him of God's promise, through those long

give him capacities which he did not have before. He makes the childless man a father on a colossal scale. And then God wraps up this promise in a new covenant sign, the sign of circumcision.

Genesis 17:1-14 falls into two parts, which both focus on the word ‘covenant’. In part one (vv. 1-8), the covenant is defined in a series of *promises*:

- First, *personal*: ‘My covenant is with *you*, and *you* shall be the father of a multitude of nations’ (v. 4). In line with this focus on Abraham personally, God gives him a new name.
- Second, *domestic*: the nature of Abraham’s amazing future family is declared, ‘I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations’ (v. 6).
- Third, *spiritual*: ‘I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be your God to you and to your offspring after you’ (v. 7). God pledges Himself to live in a spiritual relationship with Abraham and his descendants as their God.
- Fourth, *territorial*: ‘I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession’ (v. 8).

And finally the promises are all wrapped up in the central and most important feature of the covenant promise, ‘and I will be their God’ (v. 8). Following the dramatic sacrifices in chapter 15, we know that these

years of childlessness), and his new name (Abraham) sounds in Hebrew like ‘father of many’.

promises are not passing thoughts but deeply serious oaths to which God binds Himself.

Then in part two (vv. 9-14) the covenant appears in a different way:

And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.’ (vv. 9-10)

The covenant was a series of promises in verses 3-8, but now it is circumcision. This is because circumcision (literally) *incorporates* the promises as ‘a sign of the covenant between me and you’ (v. 11). It is the covenant’s visible expression, just as the rainbow was for Noah. In both cases—the rainbow, and circumcision—something visible declares God’s promises and the status of the recipient of the promises. So every time Abraham (not Abram!) saw the mark of circumcision in his body he could declare ‘That means me! I am the man to whom God has made promises. God has gone on oath to me!’ Covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people.

3. Noah and Abraham together.

We round off this chapter by asking, ‘What did it mean for Noah and Abraham, to be covenant people receiving covenant promises?’ In a nutshell, it meant three things: that they were (a) chosen, (b) for a purpose, and therefore (c) placed under an obligation. It meant *election, purpose and law*:

(1) Election.

Noah and Abraham were both what they were because God *chose* them to be so. Their stories start with God’s

election of them. Noah was immersed in the world's corruption until grace found him (Gen. 6:8). Abraham was stuck in Ur of the Chaldeans until God brought him out (Gen. 15:7). In both cases—especially visible in Noah's case—God's *mercy* lay behind God's choice. God was fulfilling His own purpose, and so 'grace found Noah'.

(2) Purpose.

Both Noah and Abraham were chosen by God for the sake of others, to mediate God's blessing beyond themselves. The covenant God establishes with Noah is 'with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you ... every beast of the earth.'¹³ Several times the story underlines that Noah's family and the animals were 'with' Noah in the ark. They were not there in their own right, but because they were 'with' the covenant man. They came under the benefit of the covenant God had made with Noah.¹⁴

Similarly God's call to Abraham (then Abram, of course) begins with a dramatic promise of universal blessing which must have seemed bizarre and deeply unsettling to Abram, then living quietly with his father Terah in Harran:

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'
(Gen. 12:1-3)

13. Gen. 9:9-10; see also 9:12, 15, 16, 17.

14. See Gen. 6:18-20, 7:23, 8:1.

We cannot properly grasp this promise of universal blessing without looking back at the way in which Genesis paves the way for it, in chapter 11. The story of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) gives us the third great act of divine judgment in Genesis 1-11, following on from the expulsion from the Garden and the Flood. But in this case, there is no story of mercy woven into the judgment, as there is with Adam and with Noah. Babel is judgment without mercy, it seems, as God comes down to inspect the city and the tower by which human beings are trying to ‘make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth’ (11:4).

This attempt to save themselves is met by the divine negative with which God counters all such efforts, throughout the Bible: ‘Oh No you won’t!’—and God then imposes what they were trying to avoid, scattering human beings across the earth in confusion and division.

Is there no mercy in this act of judgment? Genesis seems immediately to change the subject, by taking us right back to Noah:

These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arphaxad two years after the flood ...
(Gen. 11:10)

—and there follows a list of eight otherwise completely unknown patriarchs, whose lives left no ripple on the surface of history except that their names are included here. But God knew them and traced their line, until at last into this confused, post-Babel world a man named Terah was born,¹⁵ whose son Abram will receive that enormous promise from God, ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ God’s purpose of mercy is still gloriously at work, addressing the judgment of Babel. Because of Babel, there are now ‘peoples’ scattered

15. See Gen. 11:24-27.

across the earth, and Abraham will mediate God's mercy to the entire world.

(3) Law.

As soon as Noah stepped out of the ark, God declared His law to him: 'God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."¹⁶ They have a God-given calling to fulfil. And then God specifies how this must be accomplished, giving Noah laws concerning food and the sacredness of human life: 'You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood ... whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.'¹⁷ Living under covenant promise means living under covenant law.

We see the same with Abraham, especially at the moment of his circumcision. In Noah's case, the covenant sign was entirely God's action. God hung up His warrior bow in the clouds to signify that the enmity was over between Him and all animate life. But in Abraham's case, God passed the action over to the covenant recipient. God did not become a divine surgeon and perform the circumcision Himself. Abraham had to do it, and his obedient action constituted the covenant at that very moment. The one action of circumcision brings together the promise and the obedient response to it—the two cannot be separated. So Abraham cannot look at the mark of circumcision and glory in the promises without also, at the same moment, being reminded of his commitment to obey God—to 'walk before me and be blameless' (Gen. 17:1).

So the law of God is written into the heart of the covenant idea. In our next chapter we will see how this theme develops as the story of the covenant moves on

16. Gen. 9:1.

17. Gen. 9:4, 6.

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into Exodus and we meet the next great figure in the story, Moses.