

source. How else could the account, which is given us of Melchizedek, be so strikingly in accordance with what we now know to be the facts of history? The letters written by Ebed-Tob make it clear that there were books and archives, readers and writers, in Jerusalem before the time of the Exodus, and we have no reason for thinking that the clay books were destroyed, or the literary continuity of the city interrupted. Jerusalem was never overthrown by the Israelites, and when it

was at last captured by David, its own population was allowed to remain undisturbed (Josh. xv. 63; Judg. i. 21; 2 Sam. xxiv. 18, 22). Why, then, may we not believe that its ancient annals were still accessible when the materials of the Book of Genesis were compiled, and that not in the case of Jerusalem only, but also in that of other Canaanitish cities the biblical writer, or writers, had ancient documentary authority, for the history which has been handed down?

## The Notion of Divine Covenants in the Bible.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR CANDLISH, D.D., GLASGOW.

THE notion of a covenant between God and man is one that is frequently presented in Scripture, and has been very largely made use of in theology. Indeed, a school of Christian divines have made this idea the basis or principle of arrangement of their whole system of doctrine, and many others, without making it so entirely dominant, have made very considerable use of it. The federal theology, or theology of the covenants, has played an important part in the history of Christian thought since the Reformation; and if it was at one time extravagantly admired and insisted upon, has more recently been unduly disparaged. Since it was founded, not on a mere philosophical idea, but on what is in terms a biblical phrase, it may be of some use and interest to consider how far it has Scripture warrant.

In order to this it is necessary to inquire—

I. What is the true biblical notion of a divine covenant?

II. Is there reason for applying this notion to God's dealing with man from the beginning?

III. Is it a mere figure of speech, or a real and valuable category of thought?

The first and third of these questions are the most important, and deserve fuller consideration; the second needs to be noticed only because, unless it can be answered in the affirmative, the conception of divine covenants, even though it may be true and valuable as a mode of viewing God's work of grace and salvation, cannot give us a complete scheme of doctrine since it would not include the topics of the fall of man and its consequences. It is the inclusion of this that forms the special

characteristic of the federal theology, and this question, though one of detail, cannot be entirely overlooked.

### I.

What is the biblical notion of a divine covenant?

The word covenant in the English Old Testament is uniformly the translation of the Hebrew *בְּרִית*, which is probably derived from a verb meaning to cut, and denotes a solemn agreement, having got that meaning from the ancient custom of ratifying important engagements by killing an animal in sacrifice, after which the parties sometimes passed between divided parts of the victim (Jer. xxxiv. 18, 19), and sometimes partook of a common meal (Gen. xxxi. 54). The phrase commonly used for making a covenant is literally "to cut a covenant," like the Greek *ὄρκια τέμνειν*, and the Latin *icere foedus*. So the expression in Ps. l. 5, "Those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice," is literally "cutters of my covenant upon sacrifice."

This word is used in the Old Testament for agreements of various kinds among men, as well as for transactions between God and man. Thus it is applied to the agreements between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. xxi. 27), Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. xxvi. 28), Jacob and Laban (Gen. xxxi. 44), Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh. ix. 6 foll.); to the friendly alliance between Jonathan and David (1 Sam. xviii. 3); to the treaty between Ahab and Ben-hadad (1 Kings xx. 34); to the league between Jehoiada and the rulers to make Joash king (2 Kings xi. 4); to the compact between David and the elders (1 Chron. xi. 3); to the treaty between

Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar (Ezek. xvii. 15, 16); and to the marriage union (Mal. ii. 14; Prov. ii. 17). Its employment in reference to human relations is therefore very wide and various, including those of tribes and nations to one another, of a king to his subjects and to other sovereigns, of individual friends, and of husband and wife. In all these cases, however, it seems to include the notion of a religious sanction or appeal to God in some form; and so it may be observed it is not used in the description of mere political leagues (as in Ps. ii.), or worldly associations (as in Prov. ii. 10-19), in which divine sanction was not and could not be sought.

In the Aramaic of the Targums the Hebrew בְּרִית is translated כְּתִיבָה, which, in Dan. vi. 8, 16, denotes the decree of Darius according to the law of the Medes and Persians.

In the LXX. this Hebrew word is uniformly rendered not by συνθήκη, which would most literally express the notion of covenant or contract, but by διαθήκη, which means, etymologically, disposition, and very frequently will or testament—*i.e.* a man's disposition of his property in view of his death. The reason for the choice of this word would seem to have been that בְּרִית is often used where no separate parties are concerned, but only an appointment or promise on the part of God is meant. Διαθήκη suited very well, because it was sometimes used in classical Greek for an agreement, especially of a solemn kind, sanctioned by an oath (as in Aristophanes, *Aves.* 439), and so would not be inappropriate for those places where the Hebrew word is applied to a covenant among men; while the verb διατίθημι is used in the apologue of the choice of Hercules for the deities disposing all things, so that blessings are the rewards of virtue (see Xenophon, *Mem.* ii. 1. 27); and the noun διαθέτης denoted an arranger of oracles (Herodotus, vii. 6), while διαθήκαι was a title given at Athens to sacred mysterious deposits, on which the welfare of the State was thought to depend. This was a word, therefore, which, from its use and association, would very naturally occur to the Greek translators as an appropriate rendering of the Hebrew word which we generally translate by covenant. It is uniformly employed in the New Testament also, in quotations and references to Old Testament passages where בְּרִית occurs.

In the New Testament, however, διαθήκη and its cognate verb is only used of sacred transactions

between God and man, and secular agreements are expressed by a different word (συντίθεσθαι), as in Luke xxii. 4; John ix. 22; Acts xxiii. 20. Many of the instances of its occurrence are simply allusions to the Old Testament, such as Luke i. 72; Acts iii. 25, vii. 8; Rom. ix. 4, xi. 27; Eph. ii. 12; Rev. xi. 19. But in all the accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Christ is recorded to have used the word in connection with the forgiveness of sins by His blood; and in the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Hebrews use is made of the meaning of the word and of the analogy of the human transactions to which it is applied.

In Gal. iii. 15, Paul is speaking of God's gracious promise and engagement to Abraham, which is repeatedly spoken of as a covenant (בְּרִית, διαθήκη) both in Old and New Testaments; and he argues *a fortiori*, that if even a man's διαθήκη, when ratified, is unalterable, much more is that of God. The expression, "when it hath been confirmed" (κεκυρωμένην), seems to denote something additional to the transaction itself, which makes it inviolable; and this may be illustrated by two passages in the Old Testament, where the same Greek word is used in the LXX. In Gen. xxiii. 10, after Abraham had bought the field of Mamre, and actually buried Sarah there, it is said "the field was made sure to Abraham,"—that is, the sale was confirmed by his actually taking possession; and in Lev. xxv. 30, when a man bought a house in a walled city, there was a right of redemption by its former owner within a year, but if he did not redeem it in that time, the house was established to the buyer in perpetuity. In this latter case, we see that the transaction was ratified or confirmed by the fulfilment of a condition which was legally involved in it, previous to which the other party could have annulled it. Both these cases are mutual agreements, though neither they nor any mere sales are ever called covenants in Scripture. But the divine transaction of which Paul is speaking is very emphatically described by him as being of the nature of a promise, and it is said to have been ratified, not by Abraham's acceptance of it, but by God Himself. Possibly the reference is to the institution of circumcision, of which God says (Gen. xvii. 7), "I will establish my covenant with thee;" while previously it had been said (Gen. xv. 18), "In that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram." So in Ps. cv. 10, the repetition of the promise to Jacob is called a confirming of the

covenant with Abraham. The best expositors differ as to whether Paul uses the word here in the sense of covenant or of testament; but probably the more general notion of disposition, which corresponds literally to the Greek word, most exactly represents his meaning. He speaks only of one party, "a man's disposition," not a contract between men; and he states what is true of all dispositions, whether federal or testamentary, or of whatever kind.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the word *διαθήκη* occurs in several places in the course of the argument for the superiority of Christ's office to the Levitical priesthood. In vii. 22, it is said that inasmuch as He has been made priest with an oath, He has become surety of a better *διαθήκη*; and in viii. 6, that because He is a minister of the true heavenly tabernacle, of which the earthly one was only an image and shadow, He is mediator of a better *διαθήκη*, which has been legislated upon better promises; and then this is identified with the new covenant promised by God through Jeremiah. There the word is clearly used as equivalent to the Hebrew term; but it may be noticed that the new covenant, as described in the passage quoted in full from Jeremiah, has in it no elements of a contract, but consists entirely of promises. Then, after showing (ix. 1-10) that the old covenant had not a cleansing from sin in the conscience, but only pointed to that in the future, he goes on to show that Christ has effected this by entering into the true holy place with His own blood (ix. 11-14). Therefore he says (v. 15), "He is mediator of a new *διαθήκη*, in order that, death having taken place for the redemption of the transgressions under the first, the called might receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." Then follows an argument (v. 16, 17) in which it is impossible, without great straining of the words, to understand *διαθήκη* otherwise than as testament or disposition by will. But if we remember that the word really means simply disposition, that there is nothing in the previous context to restrict it to a covenant in the strict sense, and that a testament in the Roman law was originally viewed as a covenant, this will not seem a mere play upon words. There is a real analogy between a will taking effect on the death of the testator and a covenant being ratified by sacrifice. The reason why a testament is of no force while the testator lives is twofold: first, because his death is the condi-

tion on which he disposes of his property; and secondly, because as long as he lives he can revoke or alter his will. Now, in the same way a covenant becomes effectual when its condition is fulfilled, and in the cases where it was ratified by sacrifices this was meant, by solemn religious sanctions, to preclude the parties from retreating from their engagements. The death of Christ fulfilled the condition necessary for the bestowal of the forgiveness and renewal promised by God, and so made His disposition of grace effectual and unchangeable. The general sense of disposition seems to be that in which *διαθήκη* is used in Hebrews, and it is illustrated by the analogy both of federal and of testamentary dispositions.

Another passage in the New Testament deserves notice, as throwing light on the meaning of the word. In Luke xxii. 29, Jesus uses, not indeed the noun, but the verb from which it is derived; and the translation in the margin of the Revised Version is, I think, the most natural: "I appoint unto you, even as my Father appointed to me a kingdom, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and ye shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Here *διατίθεμαι* means "I dispose," and is applied both to the Father disposing the kingdom to Christ, giving all things to Him, giving Him all authority, appointing Him heir of all things, and also to Christ disposing to His faithful adherents places of honour and authority in that kingdom. There is no mention of two parties, as in a proper contract—in both cases it is an act of authority; nor, on the other hand, is the notion of bequeathing at all suggested, so that the idea that we most naturally gather from the passage is neither the specific one of "covenant," nor of "testament," but the more general one of "disposition," of which the other two are particular kinds. This passage may fairly be regarded as determining the sense in which Jesus used the word at the institution of the Supper; and while the manifest allusion to Jer. xxxi. 31 makes it proper that it should be rendered "covenant" there, the meaning is more general than the English word commonly conveys.

Let us look now at the instances in which God is spoken of in the Old Testament as making a covenant, to see whether they involve the more specific notion of an agreement between two or more parties, over and above the general meaning which the Greek word has in the epistles of the

New Testament. The first of these instances is in Gen. ix. 8-17, where God is said to have made a covenant with Noah and his seed and all living things, of which He made the rainbow the token. This was a simple and absolute assurance that all flesh should never again be cut off by the waters of a flood. Next in Gen. xv. 18, and xvii. 1-14, God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising to make him fruitful, to give his seed the land of Canaan, and to be a God to him and to his seed; and though this is accompanied with the moral precept, "Walk before me and be thou perfect," and the positive ordinance of circumcision, the promise comes first, and in its first revelation is unconditional. Then we have the covenant made with Israel at Sinai (Ex. xix. 3-8, xxiv. 1-11), which has more distinctly the form of a solemn agreement on mutual conditions, though it should be observed that this covenant is represented in some places as a renewal and confirmation of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. vi. 4, 5; Ps. cv. 8-10). Another divine covenant was that by which God gave the priesthood to Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, in reward for his zeal (Num. xxv. 12, 13), perhaps referred to in Mal. ii. 4, 5, as the covenant with Levi. God's covenant with David and his descendants as the royal family is spoken of in Ps. lxxxix. 19-51; and there is the promise of the New Covenant in Jer. xxxi. 31. Now, of all these cases, the transaction between God and Israel at Sinai is the only one in which there are distinct parties making reciprocal promises, in all the others the divine declaration is the most prominent if not the only element mentioned.

It is observed by Vitranga, on Isa. lv. 3, that in the phrase "to make a covenant with any one" the preposition "with" is in Hebrew sometimes *אִתְּ*, sometimes *בְּ*, and sometimes *לְ*, but that the last is used by preference when the transaction is entirely of grace. But this distinction cannot be strictly carried out.

Probably we shall form the most worthy and adequate notion of the biblical meaning of the term if we remove from it the peculiar features of all the human analogies by which it is expressed, and retain only what is common to them all, and can be ascribed to God. The definition given by a Scottish theologian of the last generation, Dr. James Maclagan of the Free Church College, Aberdeen, is formed in this way, and it is, I think, about the

best that has been given, a declaration by God to His intelligent creatures "of the grace which He intends to show them, and of the allegiance which He expects at their hands" (*Lectures and Sermons*, p. 323). In most cases there is implied also the acceptance of God's declaration by those to whom it is made, and their promise of obedience. This we see in Abraham's believing God's promise and performing the rites of sacrifice and circumcision, in Israel's accepting God's commands at Sinai and promising to obey them. This furnishes the analogy to covenants between friends or between a people and their king. But in some instances there is no mention of such acceptance or mutual promise; and in any case it is not, as in proper covenants among men, where the parties are antecedently independent of each other, and come under obligation only by voluntary stipulation. Here God is absolutely sovereign, and it is only of His condescension that He gives men an opportunity of freely undertaking what they are naturally bound in duty to do, and also promises of His grace, a blessing to which they have no claim of strict right. A divine covenant, therefore, is distinguished from a mere command or appointment by this, that it has a promise in it, and this indeed is its most essential element. There may or may not be a condition. In some cases where in the Bible God is described as making a covenant there are conditions, in others there is none; but in all cases there is a promise. This conception of a divine covenant seems to agree with the usage of the word in the Old and New Testaments, and to involve nothing unworthy of God.

Another element in the biblical idea of a covenant of God with men is that it deals with men not only individually, but socially. This was the case with the Sinai Covenant. It was made with Israel as a nation, and not merely with that generation, but with all the succeeding generations of the race. So it was also with the Abrahamic Covenant; it included not only the patriarch himself, but his family and posterity. The same thing is true of the New Covenant in Christ. Now, this necessarily implies the principle of representation. If God is to deal with masses of men as unities, including those who are to live in many successive ages, he must do so by means of representatives acting for them. So Abraham entered into covenant with God for his whole

seed; Moses for Israel; and that generation of Israel for all succeeding ones. In like manner, we are led to believe Adam did for all mankind. The blessing pronounced on him at his creation belongs to the whole race (Gen. i. 28-30), and the sentence pronounced after his sin (iii. 16-19) is experienced also by all mankind. This may seem arbitrary, but it is in accordance with the analogy of other covenants described in Scripture, and with the facts of experience, which show that men frequently inherit the consequences for good or evil of what others have done. And it will not

appear unjust if we remember that the special characteristic of a covenant is not law, but gracious promise on the part of God. All mankind are under God's law by nature, simply in virtue of their creation, apart from the covenant altogether. What the covenant adds is no new duty or obligation, but an assurance of God's purpose to reward their obedience with a more explicit assurance also of His purpose to inflict, if they sinned, a punishment which would have been just even had there been no covenant.

*(To be concluded.)*

---

## Recent Biblical Study in Canada.

BY THE REV. HERBERT SYMONDS, M.A., LATE PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY, TRINITY UNIVERSITY,  
TORONTO.

THE activity in every department of Bible study, in Germany, England, and the United States, which forms such a remarkable characteristic of our age, can scarcely be said to have as yet extended to Canada.

The reasons for this backwardness are not far to seek. With an enormous extent of territory, we have but a scanty population, and whilst there is little poverty, we cannot be regarded as a wealthy people. Hence the interests of the active agricultural, commercial, or professional life are, as compared with older countries, out of all proportion to those of the leisure classes. Literature, art, and theology have an existence in Canada, but they are as yet in the stage of infancy, and need careful and patient nursing.

These features of Canadian life render it absolutely necessary that the Theological Colleges should devote their best energies to the cultivation in the Ministry of the practical virtues. It is not an infrequent remark of visitors that the average excellence of Canadian preaching is higher than that of Great Britain. The Canadian preacher is called upon to speak at all sorts of gatherings: public school openings, closings, and examinations; Sunday-school entertainments; meetings of Orange and other Societies; and the supreme virtues in the speaker are readiness, clearness, and directness.

Further, it is to be noted that though the population is sparse, denominationalism flourishes here as elsewhere. In a sense, our people are

intensely theological. No discussions are more frequent in the country districts than those which turn upon the comparative excellences or defects of the various religious bodies flourishing in the locality. Hence the need for the theological student to be carefully instructed in the history of his communion, the causes which led to its foundation, the main points of distinction which separate it from others. Not only are such questions eagerly discussed by the fireside or at the social gathering, but the public press freely offers its columns to the champions of Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, and any others who care to enter the lists.

"Apostolical Succession;" "The Churchmanship of John Wesley;" "Are Unitarians Christians?" such are the questions which absorb the attention of the theologians, and many of the letters written afford evidence of the careful study which has been devoted to the subject under discussion.

In treating of the subject of Bible study, it is impossible to avoid the delicate ground of biblical criticism.

The first question which rises to the mind will be, "What is the attitude of Bible students in Canada to the Higher Criticism?" It is but recently (and in view of what has been said it will not occasion surprise) that the results of the methods of Biblical exegesis, which almost universally prevail in Great Britain, have been