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Essay Paper

THE CENTRAL FOCUS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:
PROPER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

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INTRODUCTION

Old Testament Biblical Theology refers to the main theological teaching for which the Old Testament contains.¹ The Old Testament consists of four logical divisions: the Pentateuch, the Historical books, the Poetical books, and the Prophetic books. The Pentateuch consists of the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Historical books consist of Joshua through Esther. The Poetical books consist of Job through Song of Solomon. The Prophetic books consist of the remaining books of the Old Testament, Isaiah through Malachi. Old Testament theology spans all four.

A prominent theological idea in the Old Testament is covenant, where God enters into a special relationship with his people. Covenant is the most widely used concept to describe the nature of the relationship between God and His people.² Gleason Archer defines covenant as:

A compact or agreement between two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other's behalf. Theologically (used of relations between God and man) it denotes a gracious undertaking entered into by God for the benefit and blessing of humanity, and specifically of those who by faith receive the promises and commit themselves to the obligations which this undertaking involves.³

Archer emphasizes that there is a dual aspect of "conditionality" and "unconditionality" in God's covenant relationship with Israel.⁴ This is understandable since man, in

his unfaithfulness, is often falling short of his obligations towards God, Who is always faithful. While God's overall purposes and redemption for humankind will be fulfilled in history, each human is given a choice to abide in a proper relationship with God and receive the benefits of the covenant. "No child of the covenant who presents to him [God] a faithless and insincere heart shall be included in its blessings."⁵

"Torah" is a pervasive characteristic of the Old Testament that includes "the comprehensive list of instructions and stipulations by which Israel's covenant [relationship] with God is controlled."⁶ Thus, torah was the terms of the covenant and manner of life that had to be adhered to in order to maintain Israel's relationship with God. Consequently, Wyckoff concludes that the Old Testament is all about the living God being in relationship with His people.⁷

This paper will show that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man, especially as it reflects in the covenant concept. This paper will concentrate on showing support for this thesis primarily from the five books of the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Additionally, this paper briefly discusses support for the thesis in broad terms from each of the other main sections of the Old Testament: the Historical books, the Poetical books, and the Prophetic books.

SUPPORT FROM THE PENTATEUCH*Genesis*

The book of Genesis, which is the first book of the Pentateuch, supports the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The fifty chapters of Genesis consist of two parts: chapters 1 through 11 deals with the early history of man, from Adam, who fell into sin, to Abraham; chapters 12 through 50 deals with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and how God worked out his redemptive purposes through them. These two parts pivot around Genesis chapter 12, which describes God's call of Abraham and His desire to enter into a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants.

After God created Adam and Eve and enjoyed a proper relationship with them,⁸ Adam and Eve sinned, thus causing damage to their relationship with God.⁹ God then promises redemption from sin through the seed of woman¹⁰ and thus restoration of humankind to a proper relationship to God. Later, God gives the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12:1-3:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."¹¹

This covenant made with Abraham, which promises land, nationhood, and blessing, is further ratified in Genesis 15:1-21 and subsequently renewed by Isaac,¹² Jacob,¹³ and Joseph.¹⁴ Within the Abrahamic covenant, the promises made by God will surely come to pass in God's timing. While nothing will frustrate God's plan, "the individual children of Abraham are to receive personal benefit only as they manifest the faith and obedience of Abraham"¹⁵ toward God. This conditional aspect of the covenant that required proper relationship to God is amplified in Exodus.

Exodus

The book of Exodus, which is the second book of the Pentateuch, supports the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The book of Exodus "formalizes the covenant relationship between God and his people"¹⁶ and consists of three parts: chapters 1 to 14 describe Israel's oppression and slavery in Egypt; chapters 15 to 18 record Israel's exodus; chapters 19 to 40 record Israel at Mount Sinai, entering into a covenant and receiving the terms of the covenant. Having established a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants--the people of Israel, God dramatically redeems and delivers Israel from Egyptian oppression to form a covenant relationship. After Israel's exodus, God guided His redeemed people through the

desert to Mount Sinai, providing them with food and water along the way. Chapters 19 through 40 record Israel's experiences at Mount Sinai, including the establishment of the covenant and the giving of the Ten Commandments and ordinances. Having redeemed His people, God desired to enter into a covenant relationship with Israel and lay out the terms and behaviors for Israel to maintain a proper relationship with God. God spoke to Moses a word to deliver to the people in Exodus 19:5-6:

'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.¹⁷

The Israelites ratified this covenant, "Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!'"¹⁸

The Israelites vowed to keep the laws of God, for they were conditions of the covenant and thus requirements to maintaining a right relationship with God.

Leviticus

The book of Leviticus, which is the third book of the Pentateuch, supports the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The book of Leviticus consists of two parts:

chapters 1 to 16 specify the sacrifices or offerings that God designated as a means for Israel to be redeemed from sin that had strained their relationship with God; chapters 17 to 27 specify the practical behaviors for Israel to abide by in order to maintain a proper relationship with God. Thus, it is through blood sacrifices that God enables a way for one to approach God: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement."¹⁹ The various sacrifices not only atone for sins for a believer, but the implication is that it also brings one closer to God in communion, worship, and service.²⁰ Additionally, it is through obedience to God's laws that one walks with God: "You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. And you shall keep My statutes and practice them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you."²¹ Yet, they often fell short.

Numbers

The book of Numbers, which is the fourth book of the Pentateuch, supports the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The book of Numbers records how God prepared the Israelites to enter the Promised Land (chapters 1 to 10), how the Israelites sinned and were punished by God to wander in the

desert for thirty-nine years (chapters 10 to 25), and how God prepared a new generation to enter the Promised Land (chapters 26 to 36). After entering a proper relationship with God at Mount Sinai in Exodus, the Israelites were prepared by God to do battle and enter the land promised, but the people lacked the proper faith and trust in God, which God required of His people, thereby causing damage to their proper relationship. Further, their complaining, rebelling, and disobeying led to God judging disciplining, and forbidding the current generation from entering the Promised Land:

Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it. . . . But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."²²

Ronald Allen says, "Because of their rebellion against God's grace and disbelief in his power to deliver them to the uttermost, the people of Israel were in breach of covenant."²³ However, in spite of God judging their rebellion, "God affirms that the people are his (chs. 17-18),"²⁴ for God is longsuffering and desiring for his people to come into a proper relationship. The book of Numbers centers on man having, or not having, a proper relationship with God through faith and its consequences.

Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy, which is the fifth book of the Pentateuch, supports the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The book of Deuteronomy recalls Israel's recent history (chapters 1 to 4), reviews and amplifies the main terms and obligations of the covenant (chapters 4 to 26), renews and confirms the covenant between God and the new generation of Israelites who would eventually inherit the promised land (chapters 27 to 30), and finally describes Moses' last activities and death (chapters 31 to 34). Overall, the main emphasis of Deuteronomy is to describe the covenant renewal, previously established at Mount Sinai, which would ensure a proper relationship with God as the Israelites responded in faith and obedience.

Two particular passages exemplify Deuteronomy's emphasis upon a proper relationship with God. First, in the process of describing Israel's obligations to their covenant with God, Moses also expresses that God desires love, affection, devotion, obedience, and loyalty:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?²⁵

Additionally, chapters 27 to 30 describe the blessings that would come upon God's people for obedience to God and the curses that would be accrued for disobedience to God. Thus, second, in obedience to God and realizing that a proper relationship with God was essential to their future well being, Moses led the people of Israel to renew their covenant and promise to walk in faith and obedience toward God:

These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb. . . . So keep the words of this covenant to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. . . . that you may enter into the covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath which the Lord your God is making with you today, in order that He may establish you today as His people and that He may be your God, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²⁶

Prior to departing from this life, Moses left important instructions for the leaders of Israel to read the law of the covenant to the people of Israel every seven years, so that they may hear, learn, and fear God and be careful to observe all the words of this law²⁷ to maintain a proper relationship with God. The succeeding history of Israel shows a pendulum swing between those who sought to abide by the terms of the covenant and those who did not—between those who maintained a proper relationship with God and those who did not.

SUPPORT FROM THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

The Historical books support the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. After Moses' death, several leaders within Israel's history called upon the people to remember the covenant relationship they had with God and to renew it in their hearts and minds and by their actions, to ensure they continued in a right relationship with God. Joshua, who served as Moses' successor to lead God's people, called the people of Israel together to remember the covenant and lead them in a declaration of faithfulness to its terms: "And the people said to Joshua, 'We will serve the Lord our God and will obey His voice.'"²⁸ The next generation of Israelites understood the covenant and the behaviors that God required of them to maintain a proper relationship, but subsequent generations often neglected the covenant, generating a need to have it renewed.

When Joash was crowned king, "Jehoiada made a covenant [renewal] between the Lord and the king and the people, that they should be the Lord's people, also between the king and the people."²⁹ Later, King Hezekiah had it in his heart to make a covenant with God, realizing that a proper relationship with God had been strained by not adhering to the terms and behaviors that God desired.³⁰ Later still, King Josiah gathered the people of Israel together as they found the lost book of the covenant,

and they read the book out loud and made a commitment to obey God and keep the words of the covenant.³¹ After being exiled to Babylonia for many decades, ultimately due to breaking the covenant, the Israelites returned to their land in Jerusalem and renewed their covenant relationship with God, under the leadership of Ezra.³² Israel's history is focused on whether or not their people emphasized and lived by the covenant, a proper relationship with God.

SUPPORT FROM THE POETICAL BOOKS

The Poetical books support the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The Poetical books, which include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, build upon the covenant relationship that is defined and described in the Pentateuch, or Torah. Some scholars partition the Old Testament into three parts: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Thus, the Writings usually incorporate much of the Historical books and the Poetical books. Using the "Writings" terminology, which includes the Poetical books, Ronald Allen says, "The Prophets and the Writings are akin to the opening of the rose. They do not present so much new truth as they develop and clarify truth that has been already expressed in the books of the Torah."³³ Similarly, Wyckoff says:

The Writings provided further instruction as well as encouragement for one to live his/her life in proper responsiveness to the Torah. . . . The Writings are application, instruction, and encouragement for the people to respond in the way that God wants them to live in relationship to Him according to Torah.³⁴

While Proverbs generally gives wisdom by describing normally true situations and encouraging good moral behaviors that reflects a godly life-style that is pleasing to God, Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes provide wisdom for dealing with the exceptional circumstances of life. Song of Solomon offers an appropriate view of human love within courtship and marriage. All of the Poetical books apply the concepts of the Pentateuch and thus enable one to abide in a proper relationship with God.

SUPPORT FROM THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

The Prophetic books support the idea that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man. The Old Testament gives the mark of a true prophet as one who preaches conformity to Israel's covenants, as described in Deuteronomy 13.³⁵ Since the prophets preached and wrote with Israel's covenant in mind, the Prophetic books deal much with the covenant relationship between God and man. The prophetic books exemplify a focus of a proper relationship as seen by those passages that use the formula "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (cf. Jer. 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23; Zech. 8:8; etc.).³⁶ Jeremiah

31:31-34 gives the classic passage where God promises that a new covenant will be made with the people of Israel, emphasizing the desire of God to have a proper relationship with man:

"Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."³⁷

Wyckoff says, "The message of the prophets is seen to be a preaching of repentance, and a calling of Israel usually back to the covenant, back to the terms of the torah."³⁸ Often the people of Israel strayed from the terms of the covenant and the lifestyle that God had desired and required of them. Therefore, God called them back to these terms through the prophets so that they could repent and establish a right relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows that the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man, especially as it is reflected in the covenant concept. Covenant is a widely used notion to describe the nature of the

relationship between God and His people. Since most scholars believe that the Pentateuch contains all of the elements of Old Testament theology, this paper concentrates on showing support for the thesis primarily from the five books of the Pentateuch. Additionally, this paper briefly discusses support for the thesis in broad terms from each of the other main sections of the Old Testament: the Historical books, the Poetical books, and the Prophetic books.

In the Pentateuch, Genesis shows the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant, which was renewed by later patriarchs. Exodus shows God delivering his people and establishing covenant with them. Leviticus shows how the Israelites can have their sins atoned to reestablish a right relationship with God and how to properly behave to maintain a right relationship to God. Numbers shows the consequences of the Israelites not responding to God in faith and obedience, thereby damaging their relationship with God. Deuteronomy amplifies the main terms and obligations of the covenant and renews and confirms the covenant between God and the new generation of Israelites. In the Historical books, Israel repeatedly renewed their covenant relationship after repeatedly failing to consider and follow the covenant. In the Poetical books, the writings contain instruction and encouragement for how people should live in proper responsiveness to the terms of the covenant. In the

Prophetic books, the prophets carry a message of repentance that calls Israel back to the terms of the covenant to have a right relationship with God. From the Scriptures, God clearly blesses those who remain in a proper covenant relationship with Him. The Scriptures give warnings about veering away from a proper relationship with God, for people will experience consequences to breaking the terms of the covenant. Therefore, the central focus of the theology of the Old Testament is a proper relationship between God and man.

Notes

¹ Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 11.

² R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 96.

³ Gleason L. Archer, "Covenant," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 299.

⁴ Archer, 300.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Clements, 110.

⁷ John Wyckoff, "The Material for an OT Theology Part 2," (lecture, Southwestern Assemblies of God University, Waxahachie, TX, December 19, 2006), Tegrity video file, http://tegrity.sagu.edu/tegrity/jwyckoff/the5323jwyckoff/Material%20for%20an%20OT%20Theology%20Pt%20_191206150132/class/Sun.htm?Watchid=1214571298982 (accessed June 21, 2008).

⁸ Genesis 2:4-25.

⁹ Genesis 3:1-24.

¹⁰ Genesis 3:15.

¹¹ Genesis 12:1-3.

¹² Genesis 26:2-4

¹³ Genesis 28:13-15; 35:11-12.

¹⁴ Genesis 48:1-6.

¹⁵ Archer, 300.

¹⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, "Exodus," in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 292.

¹⁷ Exodus 19:5-6

¹⁸ Exodus 24:3.

¹⁹ Leviticus 17:11.

²⁰ R. Laird Harris, "Leviticus," in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 523.

²¹ Leviticus 20:7-8.

²² Numbers 14:22-24; 20:12.

²³ Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 676.

²⁴ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, vol. of *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 9.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 29:1, 9, 12-13.

²⁷ Deuteronomy 31:10-12.

²⁸ Joshua 24:24.

²⁹ 2 Kings 11:17.

³⁰ 2 Chronicles 29:10.

³¹ 2 Kings 23:1-3.

³² Nehemiah 8-10.

³³ Allen, 660-61.

³⁴ Wyckoff.

³⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 829.

³⁶ Archer 300.

³⁷ Jeremiah 31:31-34.

³⁸ Wyckoff.

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