

ON THE PALESTINIAN COVENANT

A Paper
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Dr. Louis A. Barbieri
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by
Neil C. Damgaard
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B -
You never come to a conclusion
about 1. Conditional or Unconditional
2. Literal or Spiritual
3. Past or Future
4. 1 or 2
etc.

Introduction

The fact that God is a covenant-making God is one worthy of our full attention. The Lord has been pleased to reveal many things to us in the Scriptures by means of the establishment and maintenance of covenants, or promise-agreements, with His people. This paper will briefly examine the significance of that covenant made by God with Israel known as the Palestinian Covenant, and found recorded in the 29th and 30th chapters of Deuteronomy (specifically 30:1-10).

The content of the last chapters of Deuteronomy finds the children of Israel on the verge of entering Canaan, and ready to end their forty-year wilderness wanderings. Chapters 28 and 29 contain solemn words of warning about the seriousness of obedience or disobedience in keeping the law of God. The section contains blessings and curses to come upon Israel, commensurate with their response to the law. The passage can be characterized by 29:18 (NIV) "Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison." The Lord's promised response to such practice is fearsome, with "fierce, burning anger" (29:24). Yet, Israel makes it her history to turn from her God, and to wander after foreign inducements, depraved in the midst of many evidences of God's grace to them (29:2-6).

In chapter 30:1-10, is given a clear re-affirmation of promise (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:4-10,20,21; 22:3-5, 16-18,24; 28:13-15; 35:10-12) about a physical land to be given

to the decedents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God says that when Israel "takes to heart" the blessings and curses of obedience and disobedience, being in the midst of a scattering, that then He will restore their fortunes, have compassion on them, and gather them back again to the land that belonged to their fathers, take possession of it and live in even greater prosperity (30:1-5). Restored to blessing and land ownership, the Lord says He will work ^{love} for Him in their hearts, and utterly curse their enemies. Finally, He says that He will delight in them, as He did in their fathers, this, however, (and perhaps there ^{fore} the whole passage) being conditional once again upon their obedience to the law, and whole-hearted devotion to their God (30:10).

It is important to view Scripture from two complimentary viewpoints, neither of which stands without the other. The first is the doctrinal or theological angle, which seeks to discover the truth and fact of the passage. The second, which stands on the first, is the homiletical or devotional angle, which seeks to apply that truth to the life of the reader. As the body cannot function without the heart and vice versa, so orthodoxy cannot function without piety and vice versa.

The Theological Angle

Debate has been engaged in among Christians for some 150 years now over matters of eschatology, in particular, the years preceding the eternal state. The questions raised by the Palestinian Covenant are somewhat reflective and representative of the overall discussion. "Pre", "A" and "Post" millennialists argue over the nature of the millenium and of Christ's reign, and over the

the covenant
conditional
→

Are these
disputed?

alleged future role of national Israel (or whether any future Israel will be grafted in as part of the church). Viewed simply, the Palestinian Covenant relates to these discussions in terms of whether national Israel has a future in God's plan or not, and hence whether the land will be restored to them or not. Chafer states that God's promise to return (KJV) and restore Israel is none other than the first Old Testament reference to the second coming of Messiah, since one cannot return if one hasn't first been there. This sets the emphasis of the passage for pre-millennialists. Pentecost further develops the interpretation by claiming Ezekiel 16:60-62 as a reaffirmation of this very covenant, and believes it to be unconditional, presuming upon the assumed unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant and other promises of God. Further, Schultz states that the Mosiac writings end here with a note of assurance, not a "hopeless warning of desolation and destruction that would come as a result of invoking God's curse through disobedience." There are other examples of pre-millennial argumentation.

In contrast stand those who view the overall role of national Israel as past, the future to be occupied by the Church (true Israel). Pechawer, representing this sentiment, proposes that the land promises are conditional. In responding to H. A. Ironside's The Lamp of Prophecy, he states that

The argument in Galatians 3 is that faith preceded law, and that the promise was based upon (i.e. conditioned upon) faith and not works of the Law. Since the land promises were part of the promise, this passage actually shows the conditionality of those promises. They were based on faith; there were strings attached . . . For all intents and purposes the possession of the land was accomplished in Joshua's day; and certainly there

is no looking ahead in the Bible to a modern-day fulfillment. As Joshua 21: 43-45 says,

So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it...etc.

In short, this position asserts that the patriarchal land promises, climaxed in the passage before us, have no bearing on events in Palestine today and need no further fulfillment. The conditional nature of the promises eliminates any Biblical necessity for the birth or anticipation of a new nation of Israel. The church of Christ is His new people, a "people of God's own possession" (I Pet. 2:9).

Having surveyed some of the kinds of thinking employed in analyzing this passage theologically, we must offer one simple conclusion. Biblical eschatology obviously cannot be definitively settled in a short paper such as this. But it seems from examination of the offered opinions (and from further consideration, from Rom. 9-11), that there will [?]probably still be some future role for national Israel. This, at least, seems hard to disprove. There can however, be no doubt but that the New Testament conclusion is that God's people will be redeemed from every nation:

~~Neither~~ slave nor free, neither Gentile nor Jew. → Does this relate to the nation of Israel?

The Devotional Angle

As previously illustrated, theology should never be divorced from its practical expressions in living the balanced Christian life. No writer of Scripture ever conceived of truth, only to then walk away, unaffected by its power and message. Much less should we ever be so bold as to tickle our minds with the systems of Scripture, and not concurrently seek after its Author, and long to have our "hearts circumcised." Yes, the Palestinian Covenant does offer

some interesting problematic questions, which should be studied in seeking to discover the whole counsel of God. But the passage (30: 1-10) speaks to the Christian's heart and will too. As well as data about God's economy, we have before us another example of God's grace. God certainly didn't HAVE to continue His lovingkindness towards Israel; particularly after (or since) they had responded to Him so often with irreverance and disobedience. But after His discipline, which is always just, comes words of redemption. When Israel has returned to Him, He will exercise compassion and gather them (30:3). Regardless of how hopeless their state may seem, He will perform it (vs.4). He will bring prosperity, victory, occupational success and fertility. But most of all, He will bring a circumcision upon their hearts. "Not only will He act in power for them, but He will do a mighty work of grace in them, of far more value than any outward prosperity, however desirable" (C.H. Mackintosh). The moral regulator of the entire life will be redeemed, with God's sign upon it. The covenant, concluded by the same condition for obedience and devotion, promises God's delight towards them. What could forge more hope and excitement, than to think that in spite of their history, God might actually delight in His people?

Finally, the simple command for devoted obedience (which displays trust) is "not too difficult"...or beyond their reach (30: 11-14). What God demands of His people is within their capability. And though those same people may find the ability lacking, they will never find resources for obedience lacking in the Lord. May the example in the Palestinian Covenant of God's longsuffering and gracious character motivate us to praise and thanksgiving for the many more blessings which we know in Christ!

Neil C. Damgaard

DAMENARD, NEIL C.
207 E. Gordon Street
Box 878 (1)

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