

CHAPTER VIII

GOD'S COVENANT

1. Judaism has one specific term for religion, representing the moral relation between God and man, namely, *Berith*, covenant. The covenant was concluded by God with the patriarchs and with Israel by means of sacrificial blood, according to the primitive custom by which tribes or individuals became "blood brothers," when they were both sprinkled with the sacrificial blood or both drank of it.¹ The first covenant of God was made after the flood, with Noah as the representative of mankind; it was intended to assure him and all coming generations of the perpetual maintenance of the natural order without interruption by flood, and at the same time to demand of all mankind the observance of certain laws, such as not to shed, or eat, blood. Here at the very beginning of history religion is taken as the universal basis of human morality, so developing at the outset the fundamental principle of Judaism that it rests upon a religion of humanity, which it desires to establish in all purity. As the universal idea of man forms thus its beginning, so Judaism will attain its final goal only in a divine covenant comprising all humanity. Both the rabbis and the Hellenistic writers consider the covenant of Noah with its so-called Noahitic commandments as unwritten laws of humanity. In fact, they are referred to Adam also, so that religion appears in its

¹ See Herodotus, III, 8; IV, 70; Jer. XXIV, 18; H. Clay Trumbull: *The Blood Covenant*, New York, 1885; Kraetschmar: *D. Bundervorstellung i. A. Test.*, 1896; J. E. and Encycl. of Rel. and Ethics, art. Covenant.

essence as nothing else than a covenant of God with all mankind.¹

2. Accordingly, Judaism is a special basis of relationship between God and Israel. Far from superseding the universal covenant with Noah, or confining it to the Jewish people, this covenant aims to reclaim all members of the human family for the wider covenant from which they have relapsed. God chose for this purpose Abraham as the one who was faithful to His moral law, and made a special covenant with him for all his descendants, that they might foster justice and righteousness, at first within the narrow sphere of the nation, and then in ever-widening circles of humanity.² Yet the covenant with Abraham was only the precursor of the covenant concluded with Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai, by which the Jewish people were consecrated to be the eternal guardians of the divine covenant with mankind, until the time when it shall encompass all the nations.³

3. In this covenant of Sinai, referred to by the prophet Elijah, and afterward by many others, the free moral relationship of man to God is brought out; this forms the characteristic feature of a revealed religion in contradistinction to natural religion. In paganism the Deity formed an inseparable part of the nation itself; but through the covenant God became a free moral power, appealing for allegiance to the spiritual nature of man. This idea of the covenant suggested to the prophet Hosea the analogy with the conjugal relation,⁴ a conception of love and loyalty which became typical of the tender relation of God to Israel through the centuries. In days of direst woe Jeremiah and the book of

¹ See Gen. IX, 1-17; Tos. Ab. Zar. VIII, 4; San. 56a; Gen. R. XVI, XXIV; Jubilees VI, 10 f.; Bernays: *Ges. Abh.* I, 252 f., 272 f.; II, 71-80.

² Gen. XV, 18; XVII, 2 f.; XVIII, 19; Lev. XXVI, 42; Jubilees I, 51.

³ Ex. XIX, 5; XXIV, 6-8; XXXIV, 28; Deut. IV-V, XXVIII, XXIX; Comp. I Kings XIX, 10, 14; Jer. XI; XXXI; XXXIV, 13; Ezek. XVI-XVII.

⁴ Hos. II, 18-20.

Deuteronomy invested this covenant with the character of indestructibility and inviolability.¹ God's covenant with Israel is everlasting like that with the heaven and the earth; it is ever to be renewed in the hearts of the people, but never to be replaced by a new covenant. Upon this eternal renewal of the covenant with God rests the unique history of Judaism, its wondrous preservation and regeneration throughout the ages. Paul's doctrine of a new covenant to replace the old² conflicts with the very idea of the covenant, and even with the words of Jeremiah.

4. The Israelitish nation inherited from Abraham, according to the priestly Code, the rite of *circumcision* as a "sign of the covenant,"³ but under the prophetic influence, with its loathing of all sacrificial blood, the *Sabbath* was placed in the foreground as "the sign between God and Israel."⁴ In ancient Israel and in the Judean commonwealth the Abrahamitic rite formed the initiation into the nationality for aliens and slaves, by which they were made full-fledged Jews. With the dispersion of the Jewish people over the globe, and the influence of Hellenism, Judaism created a propaganda in favor of a world-wide religion of "God-fearing" men pledged to the observance of the Noahitic or humanitarian laws. Rabbinism in Palestine called such a one *Ger Toshab* — sojourner, or semi-proselyte; while the full proselyte who accepted the Abrahamitic rite was called *Ger Zedek*, or proselyte of righteousness.⁵ Not only the Hellenistic writings, but also the Psalms, the liturgy, and the older Rabbinical literature

¹ Jer. XXXI, 30-32, 34-35; XXXIII, 25; Deut. XXIX, 14.

² See Ep. Hebrews VIII, 8 f.; Gal. III, 15; I Cor. XI, 25; Matt. XXIV, 21, and parallels.

³ Gen. XVII, 11.

⁴ Ex. XXXI, 13-17; comp. Deut. X, 16; Josh. V, 9; Isa. LVI, 4-6. See Mek. to Ex. XIX, 5, the controversy between R. Eliezer and R. Akiba, whether the Sabbath or circumcision was the essential sign of the covenant.

⁵ Ker. 9 a; Yeb. 45-48 and see Chapter LVI below.

give evidence of such a propaganda,¹ but it may be traced back as far as Deutero-Isaiah, during the reign of Cyrus. His outlook toward a Jewish religion which should be at the same time a religion of all the world, is evident when he calls Israel "a mediator of the covenant between God and the nations," a "light to the peoples," — a regenerator of humanity.²

5. This hope of a universal religion, which rings through the Psalms, the Wisdom books and the Hellenistic literature, was soon destined to grow faint. The perils of Judaism in its great struggles with the Syrian and Roman empires made for intense nationalism, and the Jewish covenant shared this tendency. The early Christian Church, the successor of the missionary activity of Hellenistic Judaism, labored also at first for the Noahitic covenant.³ Pauline Christianity, however, with a view to tearing down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, proclaimed a new covenant, whose central idea is belief in the atoning power of the crucified son of God.⁴ Indeed, one medieval Rabbinical authority holds that we are to regard Christians as semi-proselytes, as they practically observe the Noahitic laws of humanity.⁵

6. Progressive Judaism of our own time has the great task of re-emphasizing Israel's world-mission and of reclaiming for Judaism its place as the priesthood of humanity. It is to proclaim anew the prophetic idea of God's covenant with humanity, whose force had been lost, owing to inner and outer obstacles. Israel, as the people of the covenant, aims to unite all nations and classes of men in the divine covenant. It must outlast all other religions in its certainty that ultimately there can be but the one religion, uniting God and man by a single bond.⁶

¹ Ps. XXII, 28 f.; CXV, 11; CXVIII, 4; Is. LVI, 6.

² Isaiah XLIX, 6-8.

³ Acts XV, 20, 29.

⁴ See J. E., art. Saul of Tarsus; Enc. Rel. Eth. art. Paul.

⁵ Isaac ben Shesheth: Responsa, 119. Comp. J. E., art. Christianity.

⁶ See further, Chapter XLIX.