



Handout for week of 5/28/18 Mk. 14: 12-16, 22-26 & Ex 24: 3-8

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Ex. 24: 3 And Moses came and told 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 hath spoken will we do.' 4 And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 And he sent the young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt-offerings, and sacrificed peace-offerings of oxen unto the LORD. 6 And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. 7 And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people; and they said: 'All that the LORD hath spoken will we do, and obey.' 8 And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said: 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made

with you in agreement with all these words.'

COMMENTARY: (One view within the many of modern day Judaism)

[The Covenant: A Relationship with Consequences](#)

At Sinai, the Israelites pledged their allegiance to God and accepted the punishments that would result if they betrayed God.

By Richard L. Rubenstein

The author of this article is one of the most important post-Holocaust theologians. His interpretation of the Holocaust has led him to the conclusion that the God of traditional Judaism is dead. Reprinted with permission of The Gale Group from Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought, edited by Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, published by Charles Scribner's Sons.

The notion of the punitive, divinely inflicted character of evil is dependent upon the distinctive view of the relationship between God and man that pervades Scripture, according to which the divine-human relationship and, most especially, the relationship between God and Israel, was defined for all time by a structure known as the brit or covenant.

This institution resembled a treaty form used by the Hittite rulers in the ancient Near East in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E. to define the relationship between a royal suzerain and the vassals who ruled his client states. Both the biblical and the Hittite treaties were asymmetrical, in that the superior partner (the king in Hittite documents and God in Scripture) stipulated the terms of the relationship and spelled out the dire misfortunes entailed in any act of rebellion or disobedience. Typically, in both the biblical and Hittite covenants, the vassal responded by taking a solemn oath, that is, a conditional self-curse, calling upon his God or gods to visit terrible punishments upon him should he fail to abide by the terms of the covenant.

According to biblical tradition, Israel became a community by virtue of entering into a covenant with God at Sinai. As in the Hittite covenants, the superior party in the Sinai covenant is depicted as recounting his past benefits to the inferior party: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). The superior party then prohibits the inferior party from loyalty to any rival power (Exodus 20:3-5) and stipulates both the benefits that will accrue from fidelity to the covenant and the dire penalties that will follow from infidelity (Exodus 3:6). This is followed by the solemn acceptance of the covenant by the inferior party. "All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do" (Exodus 24:3, cf. Exodus 19:8). Of special importance to the covenant relationship is the conviction that God exercises his power in a manner that is both ethical and rational. Put differently, there was thought to be a predictable and dependable relationship between Israel's conduct and the manner in which God exercised his power over his people.

Scripture recounts that the covenant relationship between God and Israel was reaffirmed at Shechem when, under the leadership of Joshua, "all the tribes of Israel" pledged themselves to abide by the solemn pact (Joshua 24:1-28). The author of this biblical narrative stressed that the tribes of Israel freely chose to enter into the covenant with full knowledge of the dire consequences of infidelity. Thus, Joshua is depicted as warning the people:

"You will not be able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve alien gods, He will turn and deal harshly with you and make an end of you" (Joshua 24:19-20).

When we turn to the prophets, we note that they frequently depicted God as addressing Israel as if he were the plaintiff in a lawsuit against his people (Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 2:4; Micah 6:1). The image of the sovereign and majestic creator of heaven and earth taking upon himself the role of a plaintiff makes sense only if his complaint is that Israel has broken the terms of its sworn pact with God. The prophet served as God's mouthpiece to remind Israel of the broken covenant and to seek its restoration to wholeness.

It can thus be seen that any attempt to understand the problem of evil within Judaism must start with the absolute and enduring primacy of the covenant in defining the divine-human relationship. Even the relationship between God and Adam can be seen as a modified covenant in which God as the superior party stipulates both the conditions of his protection and the cost of disobedience (Genesis 2:17). Similarly, God is explicitly depicted as establishing a covenant with Noah and his descendants (Genesis 9:1-17). These covenants anticipate the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. In the light of that primacy, there can be in normative Judaism only one definition of the evil men do, namely, rebellion against or transgression of God's covenant.

There is no autonomous realm of the ethical in covenantal religion. All offenses are ultimately made against the Lord of the covenant, as is evident from the biblical account of the covenant at Sinai. The relationships between man and man, such as the honor due to parents and prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, are not portrayed as expressions of an independent ethical or legal realm. Instead, they are depicted as covenantal injunctions, as, indeed, are all of the Torah's norms. The covenant and it alone legitimates the corpus of behavioral norms in Scripture.

In the light of the definition of human evil in biblical and rabbinic Judaism as breach of the covenant, natural and social misfortunes--such as plague, famine, and war--are, as noted, interpreted as God's just and appropriate response. The justice of even the worst misfortunes meted out to those who break the covenant follows from the fact that the conditions of the relationship were spelled out explicitly in the original pact. The unremitting ethical rationalism of this system is also manifest in the fact that neither at Sinai nor at Shechem do we find even a hint of a suprahuman power, such as Satan, moving Israel to disobedience. Israel's disobedience is seen as freely chosen. The volitional element in both compliance and deviation and, hence, the offender's responsibility for the results of his conduct are stressed in Deuteronomy:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse: Choose life if you and your offspring would live" (Deuteronomy 30:19; cf. Jeremiah 21:8).

Obedience to the terms of the covenant is the path of life; rejection of the covenant is ipso facto the individual's election of misfortune, unhappiness, and death. The latter cannot be seen as evil insofar as they are the just response of the offended deity. Similarly, in the case of communal disasters, the community's sufferings were understood to be misfortunes Israel called down upon itself when, at Sinai and Shechem, it bound itself by an oath to the covenant, calling upon God to punish it were it ever to prove unfaithful. As can be seen from the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, no matter how bitter are the misfortunes visited by God upon the offender, they are regarded as no more than the offender's just deserts.

Richard L. Rubenstein is President Emeritus and Distinguished Professor of Religion at the University of Bridgeport.