

›Covenant‹ as Basis and Theme of Comparative Theology

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Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Abhandlung sucht das biblische Motiv des Bundes in seinem Facettenreichtum für die komparativ-theologische Arbeit urbar zu machen. Hierfür zeigt Christophe Chalamet zahlreiche Anschlusspunkte zwischen den Bundestraditionen der drei abrahamitischen Religionen auf. Zunächst betont er die notwendige Verbindung von Bundestradition und Erinnerungsnarrativ bzw. -praxis. Im Vordergrund steht dabei insbesondere die Fragilität des Bundesschlusses, der sowohl durch die ›Vergesslichkeit‹ Gottes als auch durch die Unbeständigkeit der menschlichen Bundespartnern stets bedroht ist und zuweilen gebrochen wird. In diesem Sinne betont Chalamet die Bedeutung der Erneuerungspraxis von Bündnissen in komparativ-theologischer Perspektive. Das Thema Bund wird damit als Schlüsselbegriff bestimmt, der das Gott-Mensch- bzw. Gott-Welt-Verhältnis besonders pointiert zu fassen und von daher ein hohes Potenzial komparativ-theologischen Weiterdenkens zu entfalten vermag.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Bund, Komparative Theologie, Erinnerung, Sakrament

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Abstract

This essay seeks to make the theme of biblical covenants accessible for comparative theological work. In order to do so, Christophe Chalamet identifies various interconnections among the covenant traditions of the three Abrahamic religions. He emphasizes the necessary connection between covenantal tradition and memory narratives or practices. In particular, he focuses on the fragility of the covenant, which is constantly threatened due to both, the ›forgetfulness‹ of God and the fickleness of the human covenant partners. For this reason, Chalamet emphasizes the importance of covenantal renewal practices from a comparative theological perspective. The topic of covenant is thus defined as a key concept that depicts the God-human or God-world relationship in a particularly concise way and can therefore be considered to be highly productive for comparative theological thinking.

Keywords

Covenant, Comparative Theology, memory, sacrament

Sumario

Este ensayo pretende hacer accesible el motivo bíblico de la alianza en sus múltiples facetas para el trabajo teológico comparativo. Para ello, Christophe Chalamet identifica numerosos puntos de conexión entre las tradiciones de alianza de las tres religiones abrahámicas. En primer lugar, subraya la conexión necesaria entre la tradición de la alianza y la narrativa y la práctica del recuerdo. En particular, hace hincapié en la fragilidad de la alianza, que se ve constantemente amenazada y a veces rota tanto por el «olvido» de Dios como por la inconstancia de los aliados humanos. En este sentido, Chalamet subraya la importancia de la

práctica de la renovación de la alianza desde una perspectiva teológica comparada. El tema de la alianza se define así como un concepto clave que es capaz de captar la relación Dios-seres humanos o Dios-mundo de una manera particularmente aguda y, por tanto, es capaz de desarrollar un alto potencial para el pensamiento teológico comparado.

Palabras clave

Alianza, teología comparada, memoria, sacramento.

The present paper's thesis is quite straightforward and might not be very hotly contested: »covenant« could prove a very rich and stimulating theme for comparative theology today. Of course, confirming the accuracy of this thesis will imply practicing, exercising a kind of comparative theology, in the present case as the work of a group of people.

The practice of comparative theology is a notoriously difficult task. It presupposes a deep familiarity not just with one tradition (which may be one's own), but with at least a second one – even as this kind of bilateral comparative theology could easily be broadened in the direction of a sort of multi-lateral form of comparative theology. Or, for those of us, like me, who are familiar mostly with one single religious tradition, comparative theology can become a sort of dialogue which centers on this or that theme in conversation with others.

1. Finding one's way

»Covenant« is a complex theme. If you linger a bit on it, it start resembling a maze. It is a euphemism to say that it is a multifaceted theme. How could it not be, since, to begin with, it concerns specific »relationships,« and whoever says »relationships« that involve human beings, let alone relationships that involve not just human beings but humans beings and their God, is bound to confront some fairly complex, at times messy, stories or narrated events.

A fair amount of preparatory work is needed when addressing the theme of »covenant.« A good place to start might be the etymology of the terms under consideration, in the various religious traditions being studied.¹ Another potentially helpful approach might be to select this or that particular text that appears to be promising for comparative work. Yet another possibility is to confront right from the start the variety of meanings »covenant« might have depending on the literary context in which it occurs.

To me, this last possibility is a particularly fruitful one, for several reasons. First, it avoids positing a monolithic understanding of »covenant,« even within one single religious tradition. When we acknowledge from the start the complexity and the richness of the ways in which a particular tradition, presents and articulates the theme of »covenant,« we are more likely to recognize certain *consonances* on this very theme that might be present in other traditions. I might also find it easier to acknowledge how both consonances *and* dissonances shed light on certain aspects of my own tradition – or the tradition I am studying – that I barely considered until now.

And so my tendency would be to jump in the water and find out how I can swim in it, rather than embark on very long prolegomena. It could well be that some of the basic questions

¹ See the massive, recent book edited by Christian A. EBERHART / Wolfgang KRAUS in Zusammenarbeit mit Richard J. BAUTCH / Matthias HENZE / Martin RÖSEL, *Covenant – Concepts of Berit, Diatheke, and Testamentum*. Proceedings of the Conference at the Lanier Theological Library in Houston, Texas, November 2019, Tübingen, 2023. Etymological issues are of course also treated in this other monograph, which, along with the first one, attests to the ongoing interest for the theme of »covenant« among scholars: Hans BURGER / Gert KWAKKEL / Michael MULDER (Hg.), *Covenant. A Vital Element of Reformed Theology. Biblical, Historical and Systematic-Theological Perspectives*, Leiden-Boston, 2022.

become more clearly visible, and more readily answerable, as the work of comparative theology unfolds. Identifying promising questions may depend on having already done a certain amount of work together. We may have a series of questions which we bring to the table, but chances are that the questions will evolve and deepen in the course of comparative work.

2. Getting started

As I see it, Muslims and Christians should acknowledge the fact that in their traditions any mention of the »covenant« is directly and ineluctably indebted to the Hebrew Scriptures. Even if Muslims and Christians may be »tempted« to begin with their own central figures and texts – and I am not denying the legitimacy of such a decision – they do well to recognize that neither Muslims nor Christians »invented« the theme of »covenant.« Nor did the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures, for that matter! Biblical scholarship, especially since the second half of the 20th century, has shown how the theme of *berît* was deeply and decisively influenced by various practices and theories of pacts and covenants in a number of Ancient Near East cultures. This does not mean the Hebrew Scriptures did not bring their own »twist« to it. They certainly did! But human beings have made pacts and agreements for millenia, involving also their divinities and gods into them, often in the wake of conquests and domination.

That Christianity and Islam both derive from the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of Israel, also when it comes to the theme of »covenant,« should not be a provocative thesis. But at the same time these two religious traditions look at this theme through their own lenses, and so they do not merely see different things, they see things differently. A comparative theology of »covenant« should keep in mind these two distinct levels. Religious traditions see different things because they see things differently, just as they see things differently because in many instances they see (or look at) different things. One case in point, in relation to the theme of »covenant,« are of course the figures of Hagar and Ishmael, in the book of Genesis, and the reception of these narratives in the writings of the apostle Paul (see Gal. 4:21-31) as well as many other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim authors. Despite not being mentioned very often in the Qur'an (only 12 mentions, whereas Moses is mentioned 136 times, Abraham 69 times, Adam 25 times, Solomon 17 times, and David 16 times), Ishmael is revered as a righteous prophet and messenger within Islam (Qur'an 19:54 and 6:86), whereas Jewish (see esp. Gen. 16:12) and Christian (see Gal. 4 and its Patristic reception) traditions tend to interpret him as a negative, violent foil and rival to the »son of the promise,« namely Isaac.² The theme of »covenant,« in the Qur'an, appears to have mainly »transactional« connotations, in that the Abrahamic privileges of the community of believers can be lost if it behaves in a manner which is unworthy of God's benevolence.³ Even if the theme of »covenant« has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, it is far from an insignificant theme in the Qur'an. Looking at occurrences of the term, the two key, interchangeable arabic words for »covenant,« '*ahd* and *mīthāq*, appear 29 times and 25 times respectively, not counting their verbal forms.

What is true of a number of religious traditions is probably also true of the theme of »covenant,« namely: religious traditions interpret this theme, and their own entire traditions, from the most central or ultimate revelatory event(s) on which they base themselves. As a consequence, right

² See Mohsen GOUDARZI, The Ascent of Ishmael: Genealogy, Covenant, and Identity in Early Islam, in: *Arabica* 66/5 (2019) 415-484, esp. 450 as well as 438 (for the mentions of Ishmael in comparison to other Biblical figures). Perhaps on the basis of verses such as verses 40-41, 47, 63-64 and 100 (among others), Goudarzi sees covenant as »the major theme« of the sura al-Baraqa (430). I thank Klaus von Stosch for mentioning this article to me. See also Phyllis TRIBLE / Letty RUSSELL (Hg.), *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, Louisville 2006, as well as Joseph E. B. LUMBARD, Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an, in: *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17/2 (2015) 1-23.

³ See *ibid.*, 483.

from the start these traditions see »covenant« differently, even as they (may or may not) admit that, objectively speaking, it all began with narratives found within the Hebrew Scriptures, even as they recognize that their own narratives concerning »covenant« are intrinsically related to prior religious traditions.

This brings us to a very important point: it is not because religious traditions identify a »final« event in the past that they should minimize the importance or the meaning of what came before that »final« event, as well as the importance of what occurred since this event. »Fulfillment« should not necessarily lead to any disparagement or cancellation of what came before. Unfortunately, theories of »fulfillment« frequently lead there.

Paradoxically, today, in a culture that is obsessed with »newness« and where what is ancient or old is often perceived negatively, we have become more aware of the dangers of obliterating the »old« with the »new.« It is the history of Christian anti-judaism and antisemitism, and its cataclysmic consequences in the middle of the 20th century during the Second World War, that has taught us the dangers of wishing to »replace« the old with the new. Christians have begun to learn the dangers of what is commonly called »supersessionism,« i.e. various theories of the »substitution« of Israel by the church.

3. Covenant and memory⁴

One of the main points of several major religious traditions of humanity is to *remember* the covenant. That is certainly true, it seems to me, of Judaism, whose most important feasts are to a large extent in service of remembrance. This is no less true, of Christianity. And my sense is that Islam too can be interpreted similarly. Within the burgeoning field of »memory studies,« the theme of »covenant« deserves a hearing.

Covenants simply vanish and die out when no one remembers them. Their very existence depends on the act of remembering them. No wonder then that the injunction to »remember« is so forcefully and centrally expressed in many religious texts, claiming the highest possible level of authority and normativity, namely that of a divine command.

Typically, there are at least two parties in covenant-making. This means that one of the party may need to remind the other of the covenant both sides have agreed upon or consented to.

Religion without memory becomes lifeless, it becomes a »thing« of the past, a dead thing. This is one of the reasons the deep and widespread break in the transmission of the Christian faith in Western Europe is so dire and does not bode well for the future of Christianity in this region of the world. It is as if the »(new) covenant« Christianity had sought to proclaim (and, in good and bad ways, to *enforce*) in Western Europe was becoming a distant, lifeless object.

A number of significant passages in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim Scriptures seek, in various ways, to guard against and to overcome forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is a sad, but real – and certainly also life-giving – attribute of human existence, both at the collective and the individual levels.

If forgetfulness, perhaps even more than disobedience, is among the most serious threats to any »covenant,« including religious ones, then strategies for remembrance become crucial. The Hebrew Scriptures propose a host of such strategies. And since in these writings covenants concern not just a people, Israel, or key figures, such as Noah, Abraham, or Moses, but also God, one should not be totally surprised to discover that these strategies do not only concern the human partner(s), but also the initiator of the covenant, i.e. God! This may come as a surprise, given that God's own memory should perhaps not be a cause of concern from our part.

⁴ For this section I have greatly profited from a marvelous dissertation written by Barat ELLMAN, *Memory and Covenant: The Role of Israel's and God's Memory in Sustaining the Deuteronomic and Priestly Covenants*, Minneapolis 2013.

Some will say that we should be more worried with *our own*, human difficulty to remember than with God's! But the Hebrew Scriptures beg to differ.

These texts are not overly worried with anthropomorphic depictions of God, even as they remind us of God's sovereignty and transcendence. Let us admit it clearly: the very theme of »covenant« is strongly anthropomorphic! That humans make agreements and pacts is obvious. But that God would take the initiative of making a covenant is something else! But, if God does take such initiative, can God forget the decision to commit to something like a covenant? Posing this question in such a way betrays a representation more akin to the Greek philosophers' immutable deity than to God as witnessed by the Hebrew Scriptures. In these Scriptures, from the earliest chapters of Genesis, God talks, works, molds things into being and then stops working (Gen. 2:1). God takes a stroll in the garden »at the time of the evening breeze« (Gen. 3:8). And so why wouldn't God also initiate a pact, and then perhaps also think of breaking it or, worse perhaps, forget about this commitment?

The very first Biblical narrative concerning a »covenant,« in the Biblical canon as we know it, is the covenant with Noah right after the flood (Gen. 9). This is a singular covenant narrative, for here the commitment as well as the remembering entirely falls on God's own shoulders (I am adopting the Hebrew Scriptures' anthropomorphic language!). Yes, there is a creaturely covenant partner, but this partner, strikingly, is not asked to fulfill any task of his own in the partnership. The task is God's. It is up to God to remember this covenant. And since God's memory somehow seems a bit shaky, God sets up a tangible sign that will help God to remember. The bow in the sky has this single purpose.

God said, »This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.« (Gen. 9:12-16)

In this text, as well as, more generally, in texts that come from the priestly tradition, *divine* memory is a significant part of what is at stake. Tangible, sensory elements are necessary in order to maintain God's memory. Suddenly, when one understands this, a whole range of practices begin to make more sense: burnt offerings of animals matter since the odor of the sacrifice reaches God, who smells it and may be pleased by it (as in Gen. 8:21, right before the covenant with Noah and with all living things). Or certain sounds, such as the sound of trumpets, may reach God's ears, who might intervene with God's mighty »arm« (Num. 10:10). The richness of certain vestments, such as the High Priest's garments, can be seen in connection with the »sensory« element that is needed to remind God of God's commitment. A commitment to what? A commitment never again to destroy the Earth and its creatures (Gen. 8:21; 9:11.15). Placed within the context of the life-or-death question of the future of the covenant, a future that depends mainly on God's remembering God's commitment, a range of cultic practices, from sacrifices to ordinances concerning the building of the tabernacle or the priests' vestments, become more intelligible. All of these practices, all of this great flourish of details is part of a strategy to maintain God's memory alive, for the benefit of God's entire creation.

But, of course, it is not just God who needs to »remember.« The same applies to the human partner. The urgency of the people's remembering may not have been what the Priestly tradition was concerned with, but this concern was front and center for the Deuteronomistic tradition. Here, the command to remember is omnipresent and must be embodied in daily existence, and in fact more than that: *throughout* one's daily existence, whether one sits, lies down or is on the

go, day *and* night. This is expressed as clearly as possible right after the *Shema*, in Deut. 6:6-9, as well as in many other passages. Conversely, »forgetfulness« is among the most dangerous threats to the people, and the risk will become greater as the life of the people becomes more comfortable on a material level (Deut. 6:10-16).

Perhaps this helps explain why circumcision came to be closely associated with the covenant, following Gen. 17:9-14. We have seen how covenants need »tangible« support, even as far as God is concerned. They are ideas and projects that need *embodiment* in order to last, especially since human ideas tend to fluctuate and dissipate. Circumcision was – and is – a powerful way to *inscribe* the covenant in the flesh of human beings – not just for a time, but for their entire life. It is a way of »sealing« the covenant, in one's flesh. Covenants may look like fairly theoretical realities, at first sight, but when one studies them one realizes that, from the get-go and enduringly, they are »bloody« affairs in which human beings are summoned to fully commit themselves, body and soul.

If we look at the New Testament, we see a collection of writings that uses the Greek term for »covenant« (διαθήκη) for its title, but the term »covenant« does not occur frequently at all in these books. The key text in the gospels where »covenant« is explicitly mentioned associates it as closely as possible with »remembering.«

A few decades before the gospel writers, the apostle Paul detailed the way in which the eucharist should be celebrated in the communities of Jesus Christ's disciples:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, »This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.«²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, »This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.«²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

The disciples are summoned to remember Jesus, the meaning of his life given for others. In the event of his crucifixion, God has established a new »covenant.« All generations of Christians are summoned to this particular act of remembrance, of *anamnesis*. Jesus Christ, for Christians, is the living Lord as the one who is remembered by the community in its celebration of the gift of salvation.⁵ Christians are people who seek to remember this particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, who see in him their Lord and savior, who proclaim »the Lord's death until he comes.« As he celebrated *Pessa'h* one last time with his disciples, Jesus placed himself, his own life which he was about to give, right in the center of the covenant story. He inserted himself in this story, becoming the »hinge« and »guarantor« of the covenant. In the Bible, this is well known, the »blood« designates the *life* of a living being. Here Jesus declares (according to the apostle Paul's rendering) that the »new covenant« is becoming actual or effective in the event of his death, i.e. of his life which not just taken away from him, but which he gave for the sake of others, including those who tormented him.

The association between »covenant« and »death« is not surprising at all. The term διαθήκη has several connotations, including »testament« (as in »last testament«). The apostle Paul used the term with this connotation in mind in one of his letters (Gal. 3:15; see also Heb. 9:16). For Christians, the event of Jesus' death on the cross is identified as the renewal and fulfillment of the »old« covenant. Jesus, confessed as the anointed one (the Christ), becomes the »lens« through which any theologizing about the covenant occurs. He has something to do even with (historically) anterior or preexisting covenants, such as the covenant with Abraham (see John 8:56-58). In the words of the epistle to the Hebrews, the text within the New Testament that

⁵ See the second volume of Heinrich ASSEL's recently published *Elementare Christologie. Der gegenwärtig erinnerte Jesus*, Gütersloh 2020.

shows the most obvious interest in thinking about »covenant,« Jesus Christ is both the »mediator« (μεσίτης; Heb. 9:15) and the »guarantee« (NRSV) or »surety« (KJV) (ἔγγυος; Heb. 7:22) of the covenant.⁶ One could also say that for Christians Jesus imprinted the covenant in an ultimate manner, sealing it »once and for all« (ἐφάπαξ; another prized expression in the epistle to the Hebrews; see Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; see already Rom. 6:10; a notion which also plays, perhaps differently, a significant role in Islamic thought as well).

Considering the themes of »covenant« and »memory« in close association is very enlightening and helpful. A number of lessons may be learned from it. From the realization that »memory« is used both objectively, in the sense of God's own memory, and subjectively and collectively, when stressing the people's memory, we might draw the conclusion that the old fights, in 20th century Protestant theology, on the supposed »anthropocentrism« of modern liberal Protestant theology, and the need either for a renewed »theocentrism« (see Erich Schaeder's works around the time of the First World War) or for a »Christocentrism,« are perhaps not the most necessary or urgent »fights« among scholars... Objective and subjective interpretations of »memory« in relation to the covenant are simply juxtaposed and, in a way, equally »normative,« and indeed thought-provoking, in the Pentateuch!

4. Breaches and renewal(s)

To think and speak about covenant(s) –any covenant – implies telling a story. Covenants have a duration in time. They have their »ups and downs.« As it turns out, the stories of the covenants in the Hebrew Scriptures have a lot of »downs,« which do not need to be rehearsed here. The deep worry of the Deuteronomist school about memory and obedience was not absurd! Many of the prophetic figures in the Hebrew Bible deal with the consequences of two kinds of betrayals of the very substance of the covenant as expressed in the »ten words« (or Ten Commandments) and in the Law. These two forms of betrayal are idolatry and injustice. The permanence of the covenant is in danger, not so much, as it turns out (but this is a story narrated by people who were influenced or whose writings were edited by the Deuteronomistic tradition), by a faulty divine memory, but by certain acts committed by the people God elected as God's people. That members of this people preserved, cherished and »canonized« texts that denounce so vehemently (see for instance the first chapters of the book of Hosea, or the book of Amos) the recurring breaches of the covenant by the people whose very existence was constituted by God's covenantal initiative, is quite amazing, and was potentially dangerous. These texts could indeed easily be (and indeed were) seized and abused by factions who were hostile to this people.

Human beings are not creatures characterized by »constancy.« Even God – if one follows the Priestly tradition – needs various forms of (sensory) assistance to help maintaining God's decision. And so preserving a covenant relationship is never a »given.« Talk of »covenant« almost necessarily implies talk of »breaches« and »renewal(s).« In the book of Exodus, the breach occurs immediately as the Law is being given to Moses. The Law, which is meant to ensure the »durability« of the covenant and thus also of the freedom which has been given, is

⁶ Johannes COCCEJUS pondered at length the meaning of these terms in what remains one of the most influential and detailed attempt at a systematic presentation of a Christian »covenant theology,« namely his *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei*, Amsterdam-Franeker, 1648; 3rd ed. 1660; see esp. §91. Thanks to Casey CARMICHAEL, this text, which had remained untranslated for centuries, is now available in English: *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, Grand Rapids, 2016. Coccejus unfolds his entire doctrine on the basis of a stark distinction (even »opposition«; see §11) between the »covenant of works« (*foedus operum*) and the »covenant of grace« (*foedus gratiae*). Zwingli, Bullinger or Calvin are nowhere mentioned. Olevianus, on the other hand, who is among the thinkers who introduced this dual interpretation of the covenant, is an important forerunner. He is mentioned right from the start of Coccejus' treatise.

broken right from the start. As it turns out, the covenant is like a boat that is leaking from all sides as soon as it first touches water. No wonder, in the face of this situation, that some remediations were searched for. No wonder, moreover, that an emphasis was placed on the contemporaneity of the covenant and thus also on the ongoing, present responsibility of the covenanted people:

Moses convened all Israel and said to them: »Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently.² The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.³ Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant but with us, who are all of us here alive today.« (Deut. 5:1-3).

Was the breach only enacted by the people, without severing the bond that exists between God and God's people? Or did the people's failure lead to a break of the covenant itself? On this very point the announcement, by the prophet Jeremiah, of a »new covenant« needs to be studied closely, in its two versions: in Greek, i.e. in the version of the Septuagint, and in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT). Scholars have shown how the Greek text, which is likely the oldest version, goes further than the Hebrew version, even suggesting that God has relinquished God's covenant (»they abode not in my covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord,« one reads in Jer. 38:32 LXX; ὅτι αὐτοὶ οὐκ ἐνέμειναν ἐν τῇ διαθήκῃ μου καὶ ἐγὼ ἡμέλησα αὐτῶν; in the MT version, one reads, instead: »a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord«).⁷ It looks like the Masoretic version sought to attenuate the radicality of the (older) Greek version. Much is at stake theologically here, for if the people's failure led to a cancellation of the covenant by God, then things are really dire. But at the same time this backdrop makes the promise of a »new covenant,« in Jer. 31:31-34, all the most startling and vital.

It would be interesting for comparative work on the theme of »covenant« to explore both the »breaches« and the »renewals« of the relation between God and God's people. How do breaches occur (if at all)? How is the relation renewed? What are the modalities of such renewal? How does »atonement« occur, which metaphors and images are used to depict it, and which part does God play in it, especially in relation to the suffering that may be at play in the atoning event? Does the renewal entail an entirely »new« covenant, or is a renewal of the (older) covenant envisioned? Christian theology, this past half-century, has pondered these questions and has expressed a certain unease with the way in which certain New Testament texts (Hebrews 8, for starters; see especially the final verse in that chapter) pit the »new« against the »old« [...] It is remarkable that this unease is already found among theologians who, half a millenium ago, have stressed the unity and the unicity of the one, eternal covenant made by God with God's people.⁸

Fear of supersessionism is so strong among Christian theologians nowadays that they may wish to avoid speaking of »covenants« in the plural. But we should in fact accept the plurality of covenants, first of all within the Hebrew Scriptures. The apostle Paul was well aware of this plurality (Rom. 9:4: αἱ διαθήκαι! For another occurrence of the plural, in a deutero-Pauline text, see Eph. 2:12). It does not take too much searching to see that by default we should probably

⁷ On this, see Adrian SCHENKER's marvelous book *Das Neue am neuen Bund und das Alte am alten: Jer 31 in der hebräischen und griechischen Bibel*, Göttingen, 2006. Schenker renders Jer. 31:32 (MT) as follows: »but I remain the master among them« (NRSV: »though I was their husband«).

⁸ Here am I thinking of John Calvin who, like Zwingli and Bullinger before him, emphasized that there is one single and eternal covenant. See Calvin's commentary on Hebrews 8, in Jean Calvin, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (1549), Victor Bridel in collab. with Roger Barilier ed. (Aix-en-Provence/Marne-la-Vallée: Éditions Kerygma/Éditions Farel, 1990); for the original, Latin version, see Jean Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Hebraeos* (Ioannis Calvinii opera exegetica, vol. 19), T.H.L. Parker ed. (Geneva: Droz, 1996). I have briefly commented on Calvin's interpretation of Hebrews 8 in Thérèse M. ANDREVON / William KRISSEL (ed.), *Réflexions juives sur le christianisme*, Geneva 2021, 145-164.

speak of »covenants« in the plural (with Abraham, with Moses and the people on the way to the promised land, with Noah and all living creatures, with David, the covenant renewed by Joshua in Jos. 24, and so forth) when speaking on this topic in the Hebrew Bible.

5. The »message« of the covenant – how it is encapsulated or formulated

This is something many scholars experience: as they search certain corpuses of texts (»sacred« or not) with a particular set of questions or with a specific topic in mind, they realize that they find answers to these questions or to this topic in many more places than they had imagined. This applies also to the theme of the »covenant.« This theme is ubiquitous. It makes sense, in order not to become lost, to circumscribe what one is looking for. One way of doing this is to look at the way(s) in which the covenant is expressed or, better, formulated in different writings. On this point too, comparative work may be useful.

In the Hebrew Bible, a covenant »formula« appears, again and again, in different shapes: »I will be your God, and you will be my people« (see e.g. Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23). The formula makes it clear that to speak of a covenant is to speak of a specific »relation« between two parties. In a time when talk of »relationality« is abundant among theologians (especially among Christian theologians), it is good not to stop at a general talk on this aspect, but to specify the *kinds* of relationality that are at stake. Clearly, the relation God envisions according to the formula just quoted is a *reciprocal* relation, even as it also is an *ordered* and *asymmetrical* relation, with an initiator as well as a second partner who is called or urged to respond to what has been initiated. Both the reciprocity and the asymmetry need to be taken into consideration. Another question arises: does the formula need to comprise both partners, divine and human, in order to be complete? Rolf Rendtorff has helpfully suggested a looser approach, in which different, shorter versions of the formula, rather than be seen as truncated versions of the »full« formula, are interpreted as full expressions of the covenant in this or that tradition (e.g. in the Priestly tradition, as found in Gen. 9, the covenant is expressed in the form of God's own commitment; a corresponding human commitment is absent).⁹

But it would be problematic, it seems to me, to restrict a study of the theme of »covenant« in holy Scriptures (Jewish, Christian, or Muslim) to this or that »formula,« even as such studies are necessary. The formula conveys a message that can be found throughout these writings, even were the formula does not appear at all. Certainly, there is then a risk of losing one's way. But it is better to use a filter that is not too narrow, sometimes, in order to wrestle with texts and narratives which, at first, may not appear to touch upon covenantal themes, but which in fact do shed light on these themes. A sort of modulating methodology may be useful here, using different lenses, some sharper and narrower, but also some broader, in order to account for a larger number of texts as well as questions.

6. Covenant, from creation to redemption – and back

The theme of covenant is all-embracing. It is the kind of »meta-narrative« a certain postmodern philosophy (at least Jean-François Lyotard's) might deem untenable or out-of-date. Does this mean theologians who are attuned to current philosophy should give up on this theme? Far from it! Indeed, this theme invites a very long view of human history, a view that in fact goes even beyond human history. But that does not mean we ourselves leave or forget at any moment the

⁹ Rolf RENDTORFF, *Die »Bundesformel«: Eine exegetische-theologische Untersuchung*, Stuttgart 1995; *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, translated by Margaret Kohl, Edinburgh 1998.

very precise historical point or context from which and in which we live and act. Thinking theologically about the covenant(s) does not necessarily entail the pretense of a bird's eye view over history as a whole!¹⁰ What it reminds us of, on the other hand, is that speaking of »covenant« means speaking of »stories,« much more than of »history« understood in a positivist way, i.e. as a verifiable set of objectively-confirmed, datable factual events. Our interest in »covenant« and our faith in God who initiates covenants does not rely on the historicity of a past event in which God would have spoken to a man named Abraham somewhere in Chaldea. That being said, these stories, certainly, have shaped and continue to shape our human history in all of its aspects: culturally and socially, politically and economically, as well as ecclesially of course. Take for example the way in which the notion of »covenant« has played a role in the history of South Africa, or take the full, official Latin name of the country of Switzerland since the mid-19th century: »Confœderatio helvetica.«¹¹ In large segments of the Latin West as well as in other parts of the world, religious discourses about »covenant« have helped shape political discourses on what it means to be or to become a »people.« Much work remains to be done on this interplay between theology and politics in relation to our theme.¹²

It would be very interesting to see how the three Abrahamic faiths envision the link between God's »covenant« initiative in relation to the »big picture« of God's action toward and in the world, from creation to consummation or fulfillment. In recent Christian theology, the theme of covenant has served as a central key to understand who God is in God's very essence, as well as to articulate the very heart of what God intends in creating, reconciling and redeeming the world.¹³ I am convinced that keeping this theme before us as we practice theology can help us remember what lies at the heart of our respective religious traditions, rather than veer off in certain tangential, speculative directions which tend to forget the kerygmatic and deeply existential as well as the intrinsic political dimensions of our faith traditions.

If »covenant« is allowed to shape our thinking about God's action in its breadth, it might well be the case that the *telos* of this action ought to become a guiding interpretive lens as we ponder the different aspects of this action. For what God intends becomes clear to us as we consider the end (i.e. the aim) of God's action. From there we better understand what has been and what is God's intention all along. This is the element of truth in the recent proposals, especially within Christian theology, which posit the priority of »the end« over »the beginning.«¹⁴

¹⁰ Some theologians seem utterly unafraid of Lyotard's views on meta-narrative. See the subtitle of this recent publication: Miroslav VOLF / Ryan MCANNALLY-LINZ, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything*, Grand Rapids 2022.

¹¹ See John W. DE GRUCHY, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, London 2002, chap. 6 (Covenanting Together to Restore Justice; 181-213).

¹² See e.g. David P. HENRECKSON, *The Immortal Commonwealth. Covenant, Community, and Political Resistance in Early Reformed Thought*, Cambridge 2019, or the works of David NOVAK, especially his book *Covenantal Rights. A Study in Jewish Political Theory*, Princeton 2000, or the slightly older, numerous works of Daniel J. Elazar.

¹³ Karl Barth's theology of covenant, throughout his *Church Dogmatics* (especially in parts III and IV, on creation and reconciliation respectively) is a good illustration of this. Surprisingly and regrettably, this has remained an under-studied aspect of his theology. See however, among others, Raphaela J. MEYER ZU HÖRSTE-BÜHRER, *Gott und Menschen in Beziehungen. Impulse Karl Barths für relationale Ansätze zum Verständnis christlichen Glaubens*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2016.

¹⁴ We see this in Jürgen Moltmann's writings (starting with his *Theology of Hope*, but also in Wolfhart Pannenberg (for instance in his brilliant book on *Theology and the Kingdom of God*), Robert W. Jenson (*Systematic Theology*), and John ZIZIOULAS (»The End Is Where we Start From«: Reflections on Eschatological Ontology, in: Christophe CHALAMET u. a. (Hg.), *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, [Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, 180] Berlin/Boston 2017, 259-278) to name some significant voices. Among Jewish scholars, Alon Goshen Gottstein has sought to emphasize the future-oriented dimension, against an overly one-dimensional orientation to the past and to memory, of the Jewish faith. And so we see an interesting convergence on this point, from various faith »locations.«

7. God *with* and *in* creation

But if we follow this reversal and start with the end, does it not modify our understanding of »covenant«? For »covenant« implies a seemingly external relation between two partners who embark on a mutual pact or agreement. This relation can be quite intimate, as the metaphor of »marriage« suggests (for instance, as is well known, in the book of Hosea). But the vision of the end in the Bible (and not just in the New Testament) points in the direction not just of a coexistence, a living »with« God, but rather of a remaining »in« God and of a presence of God not merely among, but within and throughout God's creation as a whole. This seems to be taking the theme of »covenant« to an entirely new level of community and indeed communion between Creator and creature. What shall we make of this?

First, this dimension of communion and of a participation in God's own life is part and parcel of the Christian interpretation of the gospel – it is a »constant« within Christianity, with very clear grounding especially in the fourth gospel and the Johannine literature. Even Christian traditions which have looked (and often still look) at the theme of »divinization« with a good dose of hesitation (I am thinking here of the main historical Protestant traditions of course) usually do not shy away from acknowledging this dimension of »communion« and »participation.« Coccejus included it in his comprehensive treatise of »covenant.«¹⁵

Second, this aspect of an intimate sharing in God's own life marks a decisive new step in the relationship between God and God's creation. But it is crucial to acknowledge that this new step is still *to come*. It is not yet a fully manifested reality. Anticipations exist, notably in the figure of Jesus Christ himself and in the celebration of the two main Christian sacraments (baptism and eucharist), but they are precisely that: anticipations, gestures that both make present and orient us towards what is to come. In other words, remembering the kind of presence that is promised in the fulfillment of God's ways helps us differentiate the various dimensions of God's action, rather than fuse them into one. The »economy« (*oikonomia*) is rich and complex, it is an articulated whole. It should not be reduced too quickly into something simple. Creation, reconciliation and redemption are like three threads that belong together, without being identical.¹⁶

8. What kind of God makes a covenant?

To speak of »covenant« therefore means speaking of a divine initiative, or at least of a divine action, in the context of a narration. It also entails a number of characteristic features of God, in relation to or on the basis of this action. And so theologies of covenant are bound to raise questions concerning the *identity* of God as covenant-maker. Who is this God who makes covenant(s)? What are the »traits« of this God?¹⁷ One does not wish to embark on a pact with someone who may turn out to be untrustworthy, and so certain guarantees or signs of the trustworthiness of the covenant partner may be important, even as faith remains characterized

¹⁵ »[...] the *covenant of God* is nothing other than the divine declaration of the way of receiving the love of God as well as the union and communion of becoming a partaker in Him.« Johannes COCCEJUS, *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, §5, translated by Casey Carmichael, Grand Rapids 2016; translation of the third edition (published in 1660), 22. »Est enim *Dei foedus* nihil aliud, quam divina declaratio de ratione percipiendi amoris Dei et unione ac communione ipsius potiendi.« From the 2nd ed. (1654), 6.

¹⁶ This is one of the many things one may learn from David H. KELSEY's *theological anthropology: Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vol., Louisville, 2009.

¹⁷ See Robert W. JENSON's Essay: *What Kind of God Can Make a Covenant?* in: Eugene B. KORN / Robert W. JENSON (Hg.), *Covenant and Hope: Christian and Jewish Reflections*, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2012, 3-18.

by audacity. Trustworthiness may be closely related to the question of »faithfulness.« Is the covenant-partner going to remain »faithful« to his/her commitment? Is the partner's »faithfulness« conditional or unconditional? How does it relate to the partner's »mercy« or »justice« (for instance)? Covenant theologies invite serious reflection on the identities of those who embark on these types of relationships. Needless to say, comparative studies could be very fruitful also in this regard.

9. Final considerations

The theme of »covenant« is ripe for comparative study across the main three monotheistic religions (and beyond them too). It may serve as a good way to deepen our understanding of what these traditions have in common and of the ways in which they diverge. It may help us see how what they have in common is in fact already characterized by specific interpretations that differentiate one tradition from the others. We tell the stories of the covenant(s) in distinct ways, on the basis of distinct narratives. Within these narratives, we can decide either to stress elements that pit our own tradition against other traditions, or we can emphasize elements that sustain dimensions of inclusivity and universality, that invite dialogue and interest in the other. How we help others within our own tradition(s) navigate these various facets of our respective traditions is a key question for our theologies and our religious practices.

Christian theologians have become sensitive to the suppression or cancellation of past traditions in the name of »newness.« We see this same tendency at work already in the canonical Scriptures of Christianity – not to mention two millenia of Christian tradition. How can religious traditions acknowledge and respect what has come before them, even as they consider this or that particular prophetic figure as »sealing« or »fulfilling« previous figures and events in an ultimate manner? Can the logic of »fulfillment« be used without falling into the trap of downplaying (or worse) what came before? If that is not possible, we may need to stop speaking of »fulfillment.« But there probably are ways to avoid this kind of trap. On this point as well as on many others, much work remains to be done. May it be done, at least in part, in close collaboration and dialogue across religious traditions!