

3 *Covenant and Politics*

In the previous two chapters we engaged in exploration of the challenges facing persons of faith who seek to balance faithfulness to scriptural and confessional heritage with sensitivity to the religious and philosophical diversity that characterizes their particular nation-state. We described that balance as one charged with a lively tension, with the specific communitarian experiences of worship and eschatological hope serving as bookends in a hermeneutical movement that also demands sensitivity to speak specific truths and convictions in a language comprehensible to fellow-citizens whose religious beliefs and moral principles are rooted in other scriptures and traditions. We found the theological and social-ethical thought of H. Richard Niebuhr particularly helpful as an example of how a central tenet of biblical faith can enrich public understanding of moral imperatives that are essential foundation stones for a society dedicated to equality and justice. Key to Niebuhr's analysis was the notion of "covenant," in which the qualities of truth-telling, justice, loyalty, and indissoluble union provide the cohesion prerequisite for the good society, qualities, moreover, that become anemic if separated from an authorizing warrant that transcends human agents. "Under God" was accordingly seen to provide a vital connection between confessional beliefs and moral principles in a society that is able to maintain the lively balance between religion and politics.

In this chapter we shall look more deeply into the concept of "covenant," for any argument defending its importance in public discourse must deal with the fact that its meaning and significance remain quite foreign to the thought of most people today. Aside from biblical scholars, does anyone use the word anymore in everyday speech? Deeming the question worthy at least of cursory investigation, I scanned several newspapers and weekly periodicals and

listened to “The News Hour with Jim Lehrer.” Negative results confirmed my suspicion. This led to a second phase of my “research,” the file in my study marked “legal documents.” My search was rewarded in discovering this sentence in the warranty deed for the purchase of our family home: “I do covenant with the said Grantees, their heirs and assigns, that I am lawfully seized in fee of the premises.” The scope of my query thus was enlarged with this discovery of a second profession familiar with the language of covenant. But why is it that lawyers, alone alongside theologians, persist in using this rather archaic term? The answer seems patent: In drawing up quit claims and warranty deeds, lawyers cannot tolerate situations in which agreements are not upheld. Consequently, they use the strongest word available in the English language to urge truth-telling and the honoring of obligations—namely, *covenant*.

The rest of society in the meantime seems content to have discarded the term altogether. To “covenant with” someone would sound about as silly in colloquial discourse as for the young suitor to get down on one knee and announce to his loved one, “I plight thee mine troth.” The essential question that arises from this brief excursion into contemporary idiom is this: Can we remain content to leave the language of covenant-making to lawyers and the few medieval lords and ladies remaining in our society, or should we be concerned that something has been lost in the political realm as a result of the abandonment of this once-revered concept? It should be of some concern to us that, as we observed in the last chapter, no less a sage of modern culture than H. Richard Niebuhr argued that the idea of covenant is crucial for the preservation of a democratic republic.¹ From a historical perspective, according to Niebuhr, covenant stands out as categorically different from related contractual concepts used by political theorists. For example, the hierarchical model prevalent in medieval thought failed to capture the dynamic of reciprocity that is present in covenant, according to which binding promises are made by both parties rather than solely by the vassal to the suzerain. In later Calvinist thought, a mechanistic understanding placed emphasis on the self-regulating nature of agreements between parties, an emphasis that carried over into

1. Niebuhr, “Idea of Covenant and American Democracy.”

Deism in keeping with its diminution of the personal dimension in the divine/human relationship. Finally, the notion of contract that played a dominant role in much British political philosophy stressed the mutual benefits derived by the participating parties but added a hedging provision that compromised the binding nature of the commitments. One party could back out of the agreement, and to the degree that power arrangements between the contractual parties were unequal, the ease with which the more powerful could annul the contract was increased.

How does covenant differ from the above-mentioned constructs for formalizing an agreement between two parties? As we have seen, in a covenant the parties, as an exercise of free will, take upon themselves “the obligations of unlimited loyalty, under God, to principles of truth-telling, of justice, of loyalty to one another, of indissoluble union.”² Any civil society will regard as essential to its viability the principles of truth-telling, justice, mutual loyalty, and indissoluble union. And indeed, a secular construal of political theory will stress the importance of these principles and urge conformity to the conditions they describe. But the theo-politics of Niebuhr presses further by asking where a reliable basis can be found for these principles. The answer given by Niebuhr is found in the juxtaposition of the terms “unlimited loyalty” and “under God.” “Unlimited loyalty” is a quality of commitment that can be assumed no matter how circumstances change and independent of the immediate benefits or sacrifices that befall either side. Such loyalty derives its force from acknowledgment on the part of the human parties of a Guarantor transcending the arbitrariness and compromises of conventional power politics. What this contributes to a body politic is a moral grounding that derives its authority not merely from human promises but above all from an ultimate Reality upon whom all citizens are dependent. Since instances of “unlimited loyalty” are rare, one looks to something as extraordinary as the history of martyrs for illustration of its nature. For example, what was it that bound Dietrich Bonhoeffer to a moral obligation to remain steadfast in his opposition to the Nazis even when it mandated a course of action leading to execution? The last words of his poem

2. Ibid., 134.

“Who Am I?” give the answer: “Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!”³ Whatever other loyalties were woven into his existence—family, fiancée, nation, church—they were all subsumed under and integrated into his ultimate loyalty to God.

The notion of unconditional loyalty to God raises the question of fanaticism, especially during times when terrorist acts frequently are justified by religious zeal. The classic philosophical case against the justification of immoral acts by appeal to divine revelation was made by Immanuel Kant. His position that the categorical status of universal moral principles trumps appeal to the human *perception* of divine command represents one of the most urgent ethical challenges facing traditions that appeal to divine revelation for guidance in responding to contemporary issues.⁴ It cannot be denied that religious fanaticism has perpetrated horrendous deeds from the medieval Crusades to the attack on the World Trade Center towers in 2001. How can such perversion of religion in the service of reckless and (judged from the perspective of widely held standards of human decency) immoral political stratagems be refuted within a worldview that calibrates its moral compass on the basis of a Reality transcending all things human, including human reason?

Again, we are instructed by the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. From a Kierkegaardian point of view, his participation in the attempt to stem the rising tide of genocide under the Nazis by assassinating Adolf Hitler could be ascribed to the concept of the “teleological suspension of ethical.”⁵ God had given his command, and faith, whether in the case of Abraham or a member of the Confessing Church, called for unquestioning submission to divine will. But Bonhoeffer’s faith was categorically different from such “blind” faith. Indeed, no struggle commanded his attention more than that of reconciling faith and ethics, and that meant coming to grips with the temptation of being seduced into premature certainty by an over-facile reliance on faith understood as a construct rather than the response to a living relationship with the God known in the suffering Christ.

3. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 15.

4. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 644 [A 818f, B 846f].

5. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Book on Adler*, 45–58.

So committed was he to wrestling with the ambiguities entailed in ethical reflection that it is reported that following Hitler's successful occupation of Paris he raised the dreadful question at a church conference of whether that event would have to be understood in terms of divine purpose! Clearly Bonhoeffer's Lutheran faith did not exclude the rigorous exercise of human ethical discernment, an exercise that required diligence and prayer within the context of fellow believers. His decision to participate in the plan to assassinate Hitler accordingly was shaped not in the brilliant certitude of a personal revelation, but in the caldron of communal worship and study within an underground Church that chose discipleship over patriotism and loyalty to the *Führer*.⁶

The lesson we are given from the position taken by Bonhoeffer and his fellow confessors revolves around the ethical corollary of his belief that God was the author of the universal moral order binding on all humans. The case had to be demonstrated that an act that broke a universally held moral law (in this case the prohibition of murder) in fact was justified by a higher moral principle deriving from God's sovereignty. No individual held the license to make such a dread determination on his or her own authority. The implicit reasoning underlying this strategy can be formulated as follows for any religious community dedicated to the concept of universal justice and compassion: Any case for a human endeavor by appeal to religious warrants that contradicts moral norms held by the civilized communities of the world and centrally located in the religious and philosophical classics of those communities must be repudiated. But does this general principle allow for exceptions *in extremis*?

Søren Kierkegaard's concept of the "teleological suspension of the ethical," if perhaps formulating the challenge of extreme exceptions too starkly, nevertheless presses its fundamental underlying question: Is it justifiable, ethically or theologically, under any circumstance, to obey a divine word if it entails what would widely

6. Bonhoeffer was one of the leading members of the "Confessing Church" (*bekennende Kirche*), the movement that courageously placed itself in opposition to the church officially recognized by the Nazis, the "German Church" (*Deutsche Kirche*). Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*, 870–71 (English translation: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*).

be regarded as an unethical act? It would seem that Bonhoeffer's course of action would imply an affirmative answer, but does that answer open the door to the kind of response that the Al-Qaida makes, viz, "The so-called civilized communities of the world have demonstrated that they are anti-Islam and morally bankrupt, so our own community bears the responsibility of fighting religious wars that strike at the centers of Evil like the World Trade Center Towers"? Viscerally, we answer no, but on what basis do we distinguish between Bonhoeffer's decision and the fanaticism and illusions of prophetic grandeur of Osama bin Laden? The answer is not one that can be facilely derived, for it lies at the heart of the covenantal bond intertwining the lives of people of faith with God's plan for the creation. Essential to that bond is the order upheld by moral principles. But the recital of the experiences of God's people in Scripture and subsequent history also testifies to horrendous events in which crazed individuals seized divine prerogatives and plotted to exterminate segments of God's family.

Bonhoeffer sought to understand the horrendous phenomenon of Hitler with appeal to a category ensconced in biblical tradition. In invoking the category of *Antichrist* to describe Hitler, Bonhoeffer was identifying the theological basis for his dread decision to seek the death of a fellow member of God's human family: Hitler had taken on the role of Satan in attacking and seeking to replace God's rule with his diabolical rule. If successful, he would undercut the moral foundation of the entire world, with a result of such cataclysmic dimensions as to be incalculable. Understood thus, Bonhoeffer's participation in the plot to assassinate Hitler can be seen as a profoundly moral act, albeit dreadful beyond imagining. It was an act neither arbitrarily chosen nor individually determined, but worked out, again to borrow a Kierkegaard's term, in "fear and trembling," but—and this is critically important—"fear and trembling" not in the heart of a lonely individual standing in solitude before a commanding God, but with fellow disciples within the covenantal context of "unlimited loyalty . . . under God."

Turning to earlier periods of American history, we find that the concept of covenant was frequently applied to politics. This was part of the more general tendency, from Puritan times on, for Americans

to look to the Bible for political models. Already in the thirteen colonies, the influence of the concept of covenant, though variously construed, was pervasive. The Puritan leaders of Massachusetts and Connecticut, for example, whether magistrates or clergy, thought in terms of a covenant, established and maintained by God, as the framework for public life. Even when, as soon was the case, compromises had to be made in the moral and religious standards required for civic participation, these standards were construed in terms of covenant (e.g., “halfway covenant”). God, as Guarantor of the policies and laws that governed the Commonwealth, was the undisputed transcendent authority before whom oaths of loyalty were sworn, thus providing an ultimate grounding for political cohesion. Vestiges of this ultimate point of reference are still visible in the oaths generally taken over the Bible by witnesses in judicial courts and by elected and appointed officials upon being inaugurated into office, though that phenomenon when viewed in historical rather than ideological perspective suggests a much softer relation of national ethos to biblical epic than the more rigid theocratic perspective insisted upon by the Religious Right.⁷

Granting that from Puritan times political thought in the United States has been *influenced* by the biblical notion of covenant does not imply that covenant *fidelity* has shaped the history of the nation. Indeed, Robert Bellah traces the development of American civil religion under the heading of *The Broken Covenant*.⁸ This provides an important reminder that lipservice to a covenantal understanding of public life does not in itself assure “unlimited loyalty” to truth-telling, justice, loyalty to one another, and indissoluble union. Intrinsic and essential to covenant as relationship is wholehearted

7. In an act reflective of increasing religious diversity, the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress, Keith Ellison, swore his oath of office over the Quran. Adding to the symbolic richness of the event was the fact that the copy of the Quran he used was from the library of Thomas Jefferson. Not surprisingly, the precedent set by Ellison drew sharp criticism from the representatives of the Religious Right such as *Townhall* columnist Dennis Prager, though it is interesting that little attention was paid when in 1997 Gordon Smith of Oregon chose the Book of Mormon for his swearing-in ceremony to the U.S. Senate.

8. Bellah, *Broken Covenant*.

consent committed to purging self of the ever-present weight of claims to personal and national special privilege. Accordingly, prophets—that is, watchers—who publicly decry instances of covenant violation, distortion, and perversion are an essential part of any society construing its essential identity in covenantal terms. Even in tracing the history of broken covenant, therefore, Bellah demonstrates the importance of that concept over the course of United States history, for the very fact that the jeremiads of Frederick Douglas and the sermons of Walter Rauschenbusch were intelligible to their reluctant, wayward listeners indicates that the benchmark for judging the faithfulness of the nation was associated in the minds of at least a broad cross-section of the populace with the notion of covenant fidelity.⁹

FROM COVENANTED COMMUNITY TO THE UNENCUMBERED SELF

In *Habits of the Heart*,¹⁰ Bellah and his collaborators described a major paradigm shift in the way Americans viewed public life, one in which earlier loyalties to neighbors and the nation had yielded to an anti-communitarian individualism that stultified the sense of civic obligations tied to covenant. Arising out of the social upheavals of the late sixties and seventies was an understanding of the relation of the individual to the larger society that differed categorically from “unlimited loyalty, under God, . . . to one another.” In the place of loyalty to others, commentators began to speak of the “unencumbered self.”¹¹

Like most cultural revolutions, the appearance of the autonomous individual did not burst upon the scene like a meteor in the night but was the outgrowth of seeds planted by the Renaissance and Reformation that reached fruition in the philosophical movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries referred to as the Enlightenment. Characteristic of earlier medieval societies was

9. Ibid., 55–60.

10. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*.

11. Sandel, “Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self.”

a traditionalism enforced by the twin authorities of ecclesiastical miter and royal crown. Once these authorities were successfully challenged by religious reformers and regional princes, the traditional foundation for an authoritative, hierarchical polity crumbled, and the search for a new basis began. Appeal to divine revelation to settle political disputes had been brought into disrepute by religious factiousness and the wars that ensued. Hope for social harmony, therefore, came to focus on a new instrument for discovering the common good that presumably could reestablish social accord, an instrument that, unlike the implements utilized by theologians and kings, was allegedly shared by every fair-minded human being: namely, *reason*.

The effect of this enthronement of reason was to situate the human in place of God as the center of the political universe and the agent responsible for discovering the good and the right. Though traditionalists would seek to defend truth claims based on the authority of the Church, an increasingly influential intellectual class turned to their philosophers as the ones best qualified to guide human thought toward universally recognized standards of truth, a situation recalling the world of Plato and Aristotle. But as was the case in ancient Athens, the new custodians of public values disagreed among themselves regarding the foundation stones necessary for social stability and prosperity. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the battles among the philosophers resembled on an intellectual level the religious wars between regional princes of the previous two centuries. In one sense, Immanuel Kant can be viewed as a staunch defender of the idea that objective knowledge is possible and that one of the primary responsibilities of philosophy is to describe the universal categories that guide reasoned inquiry. But in another sense, Kant prepared the way for the impending assault on the concept of universal knowledge with his epistemological insight that the only access we have to objects is through our senses.¹² With their claim that in the pursuit of truth there exists no universally acknowledged basis upon which the inquirer can claim disinterested objectivity, the historicists would take the next step. Inevitably, one is guided by presuppositions, and presupposi-

12. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 82–83 [A 42–43, B 59–60].

tions, being historically conditioned, cannot lay claim to universal validity.

What followed could be called “the unraveling of the Enlightenment project.” In his attack on the German Idealism associated with Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard repudiated attempts to establish a rational basis for a universal morality. In its place he advanced his existentialist position that, faced with the necessity of deciding between a purely self-centered aesthetic perception of life and an authentically moral way of living, the person of faith would give assent to the Christian way of life strictly as an act of *submission to God*.¹³ By its very nature, he argued, faith renounces all external assurances, including those provided by rational argumentation. In “fear and trembling,” the believer places trust in God alone, a unique Being separated from humans by an “infinite qualitative distinction” and thus utterly transcending rational categories.¹⁴

While Kierkegaard stands tall as a defender of the traditional values associated with classical Christianity, his move away from the rational defense of a universal morality to what has been designated *perspectivism* paved the way for a much more radical departure. While concurring with Kierkegaard’s dethronement of reason as the basis for a universal understanding of the right and the good, Friedrich Nietzsche pointed to the arbitrariness of according a privileged status to traditional (i.e., Judeo-Christian) morality. The anti-foundational, subjectivist framework that Kierkegaard had introduced provided no basis for defense against the move to relocate the source of morality away from tradition to the individual human will. A new world had dawned in which individuals did not find their identity through conformity to the beliefs and values of the community into which they had been born but through the assertion of selfhood dedicated to the fulfillment of personal needs and desires. The “transvaluation of all values” that became a possibility within the context of this new outlook is evident in Nietzsche’s scornful dismissal of traditional Judeo-Christian virtues as exemplifications

13. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 2:170–73.

14. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 139.

of weakness in contrast to the self-assertion of the Superman, whom he promoted as the paragon of the new elite humanity.¹⁵

Obviously, there are serious problems with the transmutations introduced by Nietzsche. The issue here, however, is the tenacity and historical influence of the conceptual world he helped to construct. In a sense, this world was the logical extension of the human-centeredness introduced by the Enlightenment. Values and their religious or philosophical warrants were no longer to be defined by tradition or by the community of which one was a part, but by the individual, as a utilitarian imperative of the exercise of his or her rights. Since place of privilege was categorically denied any specific ideology, a multiplicity of rivals made their debut, each contending for the approval of individual free agents: e.g., utilitarianism, Marxism, empiricism, and pragmatism. The free reign of the individual, however, soon became a scary dream rather than a comforting reality, as the actual rules of the new game accorded success to those wielding power, a cadre characteristically motivated more by their own self-aggrandizing schemes than by commitments to a better humanity. This set the stage for the tragic ironies of the first half of the twentieth century, in which theoretically unprecedented freedoms led to unprecedented assaults on human dignity in the form of ideologically driven world wars and genocides defended on the basis of subjectively discovered and solipsistically buttressed “absolute” truths defining humanity not in terms of inclusivity but racial purity and superiority.

The legacy of Nietzsche extended beyond the international chaos of the first half of the twentieth century to the “naked square” of the 1980s and 90s. The new economic and military hegemony that arose with the crumbling of the Soviet Union evoked triumphalistic rhetoric of a new world order. But what was the state of health of the communities loosely held together in the new aggre-

15. Nietzsche, “Genealogy of Morals.” Nietzsche traced the roots of cowardly morality to the glorification of submission and weakness within the Jewish and Christian religions (645). A central strategy in his version of Romanticism was a return to the primal ethics born of “the will-to-power,” a conception that set him on a collision course with the central beliefs of biblical covenantal thinking.

gate? At least in the Western nations that fell heir to the postmodern legacy, the source of values and morality of the masses got mired down in the solipsism of perspectivism, that is, in the murkiness of the individual will. Alastair MacIntyre has argued that this has led to a highly ambivalent situation in the ongoing search for the communal values that are still arguably necessary for the maintenance of a viable society.¹⁶ Within the modern pluralistic society, traditional terms such as *liberty*, *freedom*, and *rights* continue to provide the vocabulary of moral reflection and political deliberation, but they bear widely divergent meanings derived from the highly personalistic perspectives that they have come to reflect. The result is a situation in which the parties participating in public debate fail to experience the kind of genuine communication that can lead to the resolution of conflicts, the negotiation of compromises, and the identification of mutually acceptable strategies for improving the commonweal.

From the social sciences, highly regarded savants such as Robert Bellah, Michael Sandel, and Robert Putnam have sounded an alarm that all is not well with our democracy and the principles and procedures that guide it.¹⁷ Like Alasdair MacIntyre, they have turned to the past for the lessons that can be found in the classics.¹⁸ Two considerations commend an examination of the light that biblical tradition in particular can shed on the contemporary dilemma. First, the Bible is one of the classics of our civilization that continues to provoke lively discussion and command widespread respect. Second, the Bible contains profound insight into fundamental questions of governance that have not been adequately scrutinized. We turn, therefore, to explore further the contemporary significance of the Bible by examining in detail the concept of covenant in the message of the prophet Isaiah.

16. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

17. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

18. See also Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*.

THE BACKGROUND OF ISAIAH'S COVENANTAL WORLDVIEW

A topic of lively debate among biblical scholars revolves around the question of whether the concept of “covenant” (tyr b, *berith*) entered the religious thought-world of ancient Israel at an early or a later period. The long-standing view that covenant traditions trace back to the earliest stages of Israelite religion has been challenged in recent scholarship.¹⁹ However, it is very difficult to explain how covenant came to play such a central role in the thought of the prophets and historians of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE without antecedents in earlier tradition. Part of the problem stems from imposition of the unjustifiably narrow linguistic perspective of limiting evidence exclusively to texts containing the term *berith*. Common sense would suggest that it is preferable to construe the matter substantively, by taking into consideration all traditions in which the *notion* of a covenantal relation between God and people forms an indispensable part of the conceptual background.²⁰ When the biblical evidence is approached from this broader perspective, the antiquity of the idea of covenant becomes apparent. From the earliest stages of Israelite history, the identity of the people was de-

19. E.g., Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament*; Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People*; Thompson, *Bible in History*; Thompson, *Mythic Past*. Cf. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*; and Nicholson, *God and His People*.

20. In innumerable texts containing reference to legal terms, such as hrwt (*torah*), Myqx (*hūqim*), My+p#m (*mišpatīm*), and twd (‘*eduth*), a covenantal conceptual framework is assumed. In Hosea 8:10 and Psalm 78:10, the connection is made explicit through the parallel covenant/Torah. For an account of the development of covenantal thought in ancient Israel, see Hanson, *People Called*. The problem moves to another level, to be sure, if one accepts the radical revisionism of Thomas L. Thompson (see n. 19 above), who places the origin of the bulk of Israel’s religious and historiographic traditions in Persian and Hellenistic times. This position is contradicted both by inner-biblical evidence and the witness of archaeological and extra-biblical epigraphic sources. McBride has formulated succinctly the position: “The covenant idea is ancient in Israel, underlying the centuries-long development of tradition that culminated in the reflective, comprehensive promulgation of a constitutional Torah during the later Judean monarchy” (“Polity of the Covenant People, The Book of Deuteronomy,” 237 n. 19).

rived from the notion that Israel's God, through actions on their behalf in history, had drawn them into a relationship based on commitments on both sides—that is to say, into *covenant*. This covenant provided the only dependable basis within the realms of commerce, government, the judiciary, and family life for truth-telling, justice, human loyalties, and indissoluble union.²¹

Visible throughout the history of biblical Israel are two aspects of covenant: covenant promises and covenant obligations.²² The promises of prosperity, peace, and posterity rested solidly on the idea that the ultimate source of life was not the human agent, even as the tenacity of Israel's hope for restoration after calamity transcended human constraints and was based on belief in the dependability of a moral universe created and maintained by a faithful and purposeful God. But covenant promises were divorced from covenant obligations only at Israel's peril, for divine blessing was understood not mechanically but relationally. Blessing was conditional upon obedience; or better, the two were intrinsically connected, and if they were divided, the goal of covenant, namely, universal harmony (MwI #, *šalôm*), disintegrated into chaos.²³ The vast architecture of Torah in the Hebrew Bible attests to the indispensable importance of covenant obligations. They were inextricably bound up with the

21. The location of the concept of covenant within ancient Israel's Near Eastern political/cultural setting has been elucidated by several groundbreaking works that retain their relevancy: Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*; Baltzer, *Covenant Formulary*; and Hillers, *Covenant*.

22. The mutuality involved in Israel's notion of covenant is expressed most succinctly in the formula "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" (see, for example, Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23; Ezekiel 36:28). The promise/obligation duality finds its clearest formulation in Deuteronomy 26:17–18: "Today you have obtained the LORD's agreement: to be your God ... Today the LORD has obtained your agreement: ... to keep his commandments" (all translations are from the NRSV).

23. Jeremiah 4 dramatically illustrates this covenantal pattern: The chapter begins with the plea of the Lord to the covenant partner, "If you return to me ...," but the condition of obedience upon which the covenant is based is repudiated by Israel (vv. 18–23), resulting in universal calamity: "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light" (v. 23).

stability of the universe.²⁴ Maintenance of order accordingly entailed more than the pious individual conducting life on the basis of Torah. On a deeper level, those participating in God's covenant were partners maintaining a cosmic order. Awareness of this depth-structure of biblical ethics alone enables adequate understanding of the exception to general morality invoked by Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church. The final location of the categorical imperatives defining universal morality is the universal rule of the Sovereign of the universe. Conventional day-to-day ethics must retain its normativity in the day-to-day, but norms regulating normalcy must not exclude exceptional measures when mandated by an assault on the entire world-order by Antichrist.

The eighth-century prophet Isaiah both inherited and enriched the Yahwistic worldview based on covenant. As was the case with Amos and Hosea, his indictments of the people are based on the obligations binding on the people as their side of the covenant traced to Moses.²⁵ Moreover, his view of a moral universe governed by divine retribution reflects traditional covenantal thought.²⁶ The theme of divine promise, which Isaiah upheld even in times of national peril, preserves the other dimension of the covenant formulary, now enriched by the covenant tradition associated with Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy.²⁷

COVENANT AS THE FOUNDATION FOR ISAIAH'S UNDERSTANDING OF REALITY

Above we suggested that it is necessary to go beyond a narrow study of the lexeme *tyr b* (*berith*, "covenant") to a broader philological analysis of biblical traditions to understand the full significance of this notion in biblical thought. Specifically in the case of the eighth-century prophet Isaiah this broader approach is essential. In materi-

24. Hosea 4:1–3 illustrates this vividly, as does Isaiah 24:4–6.

25. Isaiah 3:13–15; 5:18–25; 10:1–4. Admonitions, such as Isaiah 1:16–17, also reflect Mosaic covenantal tradition.

26. Isaiah 29:20–21; 30:12–14.

27. Isaiah 1:19–20, 26; 30:18; 31:5.

als that confidently can be attributed to Isaiah, *tyr b* occurs only in Isaiah 28:15, 18; and 33:8. It is found with considerably higher frequency in the exilic and postexilic portions of the Isaianic corpus (Isaiah 24:5; 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 56:4, 6; 59:21; 61:8). These portions reflect the thought of writers working within the conceptual world of Isaiah of Jerusalem and thus could be elicited as indirect evidence of the importance of covenantal thought in the “master teacher.” However, I take the more conservative approach of confining our analysis to the portions of the book ascribable to the eighth-century prophet himself.²⁸ Focus on that message will reveal a thought-world founded solidly on the central tenets of covenant.

If Richard Niebuhr’s pithy expression “unlimited loyalty . . . under God” captures the essence of a political understanding of covenant, the prophet Isaiah can be regarded as a staunch defender of a covenantal understanding of the life of his own nation. No prophet makes a clearer case for the twin biblical truths that there is no reality in the entire universe comparable with God and that the viability of a nation depends utterly upon conformity to the moral principles authored by this unique Being. We shall portray Isaiah’s covenantal understanding of politics by sequentially examining his understanding of God and then his development of the relational concept of unlimited loyalty, for which he uses the term *x + b* (*bṯi*) “trust”).

There is no epithet that better captures Isaiah’s understanding of ultimate Reality than “Holy One of Israel” (*l) r #y #wdq, qadoš yiśra’el*). One of the cardinal teachings of biblical faith is the ineffable glory and uniqueness of the One who transcends all else. This teaching has found expression in formulations as diverse as Kierkegaard’s

28. Such delimitation is not intended as a denial of the importance of studies that trace a concept throughout the book of Isaiah, for these studies have identified the threads of thought that tie together the canonical book of Isaiah as a unity. See, for example, Seitz, ed., *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*. Most recently, Fr. Leclerc has demonstrated how the concept of justice (*+p#m, mišpat*) was reapplied by each of the communities coming to articulation in the book of Isaiah to its particular situation, thereby illustrating the complementarity of continuity and change that is a mark of every dynamic religious tradition: Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice*.

“infinite qualitative distinction” between God and humanity²⁹ and Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.³⁰ The 2500-year liturgical history of the Trisagion (based on Isaiah 6:3) suggests that Isaiah can be credited with giving classical formulation to the idea of God’s holiness. The Trisagion reverberates from the scene depicting the prophet’s encounter with God in an awesome, career-shaping experience that stamped his entire being with the only Reality that carried ultimate significance and that relativized all other loyalties at best to penultimacy. That experience enabled Isaiah to capture with unprecedented clarity an insight with roots reaching back to Israel’s earliest confessions: there is only one political regime in the universe that is absolute and enduring, over against which the self-aggrandizing empires of the world are consigned to futility. Only through submission to the Holy One in trust, humility, and obedience is deliverance from this futility possible.³¹

We shall turn shortly to Isaiah’s description of the nature of that submission, for it forms the basis of his construal of unlimited loyalty. But first we take note of one more detail in Isaiah’s vision of the Holy One: the daunting, purging sense of awe before which the only fitting mortal response is the dread of “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”³² That experience carries Isaiah beyond a universal phenomenology of holiness to an awareness of the connection between the high and lofty Sovereign of the universe and his own nation. God is revealed as the Holy One of *Israel*.³³ Out of his experience of dread before the Holy One, Isaiah confesses his solidarity with a specific *people* (Isaiah 6:5), and once he has been absolved of his sin he hears the LORD directing him back to that same people (v. 9). The message he is given in vv. 9–13 seems to consign the nation to doom and can be understood aright only with reference to the profound influence Isaiah’s concept of divine holiness has on

29. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 139.

30. Otto, *Idea of the Holy*.

31. Cf. Exodus 15:11; Judges 5:3–5, 31; 8:22–23.

32. This vivid phrase is borrowed from the title of a sermon delivered by Jonathan Edwards in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741.

33. Cf. Roberts, “Isaiah in Old Testament Theology,” esp. 68–71.

his political understanding. For the one enveloped by the numinous terror of the Holy One, the very possibility of anything human surviving the purging effects of God's holiness is called into question. This primal sense of awe that infuses Isaiah's entire message must be held in mind as we turn to the second pillar of Isaiah's political understanding. The only viable framework for the possibility of nationhood is a relationship solely based on divine grace and strictly conditional on the human response of unlimited loyalty expressed in obedience to the will of God.³⁴ No single word expresses this relationship more precisely than "covenant." We turn now to describe the response called for from the human partner in the covenant.

The word Isaiah uses to express the fitting human response is "trust" ($x+b$, *bth*), a word that carries all of the connotations of Niebuhr's phrase "unlimited loyalty." In a covenantal understanding of nationhood, citizens express their loyalty to their government in the first instance through acknowledgment of its utter dependence on the Ruler of all peoples and the Creator of the universe. The authentic patriot reserves ultimate loyalty for God alone and is thus freed from the slavery of nationalistic idolatry and purified to contribute to the health of the body politic.

In describing the fitting response of humans to the Holy One, Isaiah once again draws upon the tradition of his people. He describes the notion of covenant, not abstractly, but in terms of the relationship between God and a particular people. Just so, the terms of trust and unlimited loyalty are not left as theoretical constructs but expositied in the form of explicit commandments arising out of Israel's history with their God and applying to the concrete realities of day-to-day existence.³⁵ For Isaiah, as for his fellow prophets,

34. Eichrodt expressed Israel's relationship to God thus: "The nation thus chosen is protected by a power above all other powers in the world, but is constantly answerable to its demands in the world and must follow them unconditionally"; Eichrodt, "Prophet and Covenant," 170.

35. Isaiah relates to the Torah tradition of his community in the same manner as his contemporary Micah: "[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). For anyone with an open mind and heart, the conditions of the covenant are self-evident. Isaiah is baffled that a people that has received such clear testimony of both God's

the community living in trust of God expresses its loyalty in two ways: in worship, through which it renews its communion with its Source; and in obedience to the commandments, in which it aligns itself with the universal moral order established by God. Worship and obedience constitute an indivisible unity, as Isaiah's condemnation of "solemn assemblies with iniquity" makes clear (Isaiah 1:14). Together, worship and obedience safeguard the life and foster the blessings that constitute *shalom*: that is, the harmony intended by God for all creation. In sum, Isaiah's covenantal view of reality is an interactive, relational view, in which all players have assigned responsibilities that if discharged properly uphold the human side of the covenant and provide the foundation for national well-being.

Israel's rebellion against God contradicts even the natural law that Isaiah sees manifested in the world of beasts (Isaiah 1:3). Still, the persistent resistance to Isaiah's message from Israel's religious and political leaders forces him to face head-on the sobering sub-theme that accompanies the religious traditions to which he fell heir: since humans possess the freedom either to accept or to reject their Creator and Redeemer, life in covenant entails a perennial struggle. The tragedy that enshrouds human history arises from the common pattern of mortals claiming autonomy and self-rule, resulting in the chaos of each living for personal gain and treating others not as kinsfolk but as competitors in a zero-sum game. It is this subtheme that contributes a distinctly somber note to Isaiah's politics. It accounts for the earnestness with which he approaches the subject of governance. We turn now to his own words and actions to see how his covenantal understanding of national life, while deeply indebted to the religious traditions of his people, was given a new focus and a sense of urgency through his personal experiences.

mercy on its behalf and God's requirements could persist in rebellion. He reaches to the realm commonly associated with wisdom literature, the realm of nature, to document the absurdity of Israel's position: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:3).