

THE EVERLASTING COVENANT BETWEEN GOD AND EVERY LIVING CREATURE.

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Covenant is the title of the Christian Scriptures: Old Testament and New Testament is the more familiar translation. We should expect 'covenant' to be the central theme of the Bible. Covenant was the central theme of the Last Supper, and so passed into the central Christian liturgy.

The question I shall explore this evening is which covenant are we talking about? Not, I shall argue, the Moses covenant, with all the problems this brings of the new covenant superseding the older one; but rather the **everlasting covenant** that encompasses all the historic Old Testament covenants and forms the basis of the New Testament. This is the covenant that Jesus renewed at the Last Supper. He restored a covenant that had in his time been neglected, and in our current theological scene is almost completely unknown.

Matthew attributes to Jesus at the Last Supper more words than appear in Luke and Mark. Matthew's Jesus defines the covenant as 'for the putting away of sins, *aphesis*' (Matt.26.28). Blood poured out for the putting away of sins. Which Old Testament covenant was this? We usually assume that Matthew's gospel was written for a community with Hebrew roots, and so he needed to define which of the many possible covenants Jesus meant.

- The covenant with Abram was a promise of land and had nothing to do with sin (Gen.15.18-21).
- The covenant that Moses mediated at Sinai was an agreement to observe the ten commandments and did not deal with putting away sin (Exod.24.8).
- The covenant with David was a promise that his heirs would be the rulers in Jerusalem and did not deal with putting away sin (2 Sam.7.12).
- The covenant with Noah was a promise that God would never again destroy the earth. It was the **everlasting covenant** between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth (Gen.9.16).

Three of these - Abram's, Noah's and Moses' - involved a blood sacrifice, but the Hebrew text does not obviously link any of them to 'putting away sins'.¹

¹ Targums Pseudo-Jonathan and Onkelos expand Exod.24.8: 'Moses took half the blood and put it on the altar to make atonement for the people...', but neither the text nor the tradition can be dated. Both could be a reaction to the Christian claim to the covenant of peace and atonement, see L Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1914, vol.6, p.34, n.195.

Nor does any of these covenants explain what Dillistone, in a book published in 1968, called the 'comprehensive cosmic reconciliation'.

From the New Testament there come hints, suggestions, even daring affirmations of a comprehensive cosmic reconciliation.

He could find nothing of this in the Old Testament, and so concluded:

It was not until early Christian witnesses found themselves confronted by pagan systems in which a full theory of cosmic redemption played a prominent part, that the effect of the work of Christ upon the cosmos at large began to receive serious consideration.²

Two years later the environment movement was born. Although Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* had been published in 1962, the first Earth Day in April 1970 is often taken as a convenient 'date of birth' for the environment movement. Nurtured by the theological fashions of the time, Christians were not prepared for this new movement.

Bishop Hugh Montefiore, who was a pioneer of environment theology in the Anglican church, wrote in his 1969 book *The Question Mark*: 'It is small wonder that theology is regarded by so many as irrelevant if it does not concern itself with the real world in which we live.'³

When I was studying the Bible at university, I learned first and foremost that it was a tangle of literary problems about sources and redactors, and then that the Old Testament was about the history of the chosen people and the New Testament was about my personal salvation. Creation elements in the Old Testament were an unfortunate influence from Canaanites or worse. The wisdom literature was also suspect and much influenced by foreigners. Thus teachers of Christian theology were not prepared for the environmentalists, and Dillistone could find no basis in the Old Testament for the great cosmic reconciliation.

But it was there. The covenant underlying all the other covenants in the Old Testament was the **everlasting covenant**, which depicted heaven and earth bound together in one great system that encompassed the powers of heaven, the visible creation and human society. 'All things visible and invisible', as the Creed says, or, in the words of the Book of Revelation: 'the myriads of angels... every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all therein' (Rev.5.11, 13). The first book to draw attention to the everlasting

² F W Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement*, Welwyn: Nisbet and Co., 1968, p.47.

³ *The Question Mark*, London: Collins, 1969, p.44.

covenant was Robert Murray's *The Cosmic Covenant*, published in 1992.⁴ Fr Murray showed how the psalms and the prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel - all knew about the everlasting covenant. They presented it in forms that suggested temple liturgy, and central to the cosmic covenant was the sacral king who held all things together.

The everlasting covenant protected all within it and kept away the chaos and disaster that would otherwise engulf everything. This was the divine wrath. The business of maintaining the covenant was entrusted to the sacral kings, the Melchi-Zedeks, who had rituals of atonement.

Mary Douglas, the great anthropologist, made a special study of atonement and concluded that ideas of cleansing and purging, so often linked to the word atonement, have been imported into the texts by biblical scholars. According to Leviticus, she said, 'to atone means to cover, or recover... repair a hole... mend a rift, .make good a torn or broken covering... It means making good an outer layer which has rotted or been pierced.'⁵

When a bond of the covenant was broken, the priests, and especially the MelchiZedeks, had to mend the breach and thus restore the broken bond before the wrath could break in and destroy. To illustrate this, I have to use a far from edifying story, found in Numbers 25, but it does show how the words were used. During their time in the desert, an Israelite man married a Midianite woman, which was strictly against the covenant rules of the time. This disobedience broke the covenant open, and there was an outbreak of plague. Phineas the high priest killed the erring couple and thus he stopped the plague. His action repaired the hole in the protecting covenant. As a result, the Lord entrusted to him the **covenant of peace** because he had made atonement for the people of Israel and restored the covenant that kept them safe.

There is a similar story in Numbers 16. This time it concerned people who complained to Moses that they too should be priests and burn incense, but they were swallowed up by the earth. Their supporters also complained, and so the Lord sent plague to punish them. Aaron stood with his high priestly incense at the place where the plague had broken out, and it stopped. He and his incense 'made atonement for the people. He stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stopped.' (Num.16.47-48).

⁴ R Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1992.

⁵ M Douglas, 'Atonement in Leviticus', *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 1993-94, pp.109-130, p.117-187. .

This is also the imagery used by Isaiah to describe the mysterious Servant of the Lord. He was the protection set in the breach of the covenant, to protect the sinner from the consequences of breaking the covenant. Isaiah used one Hebrew verb, *pāga* ‘, which means ‘meet’, to describe how the Lord caused the Servant to meet the iniquities of all, and put himself in the way of their sins. The familiar translations are: ‘The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ and ‘He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors’ (isa.53.6, 12). The underlying image is of someone who intercepts.

In the story of the erring couple, the everlasting covenant is called the covenant of peace, *shalom*, the Hebrew word that means wholeness, integrity, completion; and Isaiah shows that the covenant of peace was another name for the everlasting covenant. During the exile, when the Lord promised Jerusalem that she was not forgotten, Isaiah had the Lord compare the situation to the time of Noah and the everlasting covenant:

For this is like the days of Noah to me:
As I swore that the waters of Noah
Should no more go over the earth,
So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
And will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart
And the hills be removed,
But my **steadfast love** shall not depart from you,
And my **covenant of peace** shall not be removed,
Says the Lord who has compassion on you. (Isa.54.9-10).

The city would be restored in splendour, and all her children would be taught by the Lord (Isa.54.13). The everlasting covenant, the covenant of peace, was linked to steadfast love, *hesedh*, and to teaching from the Lord himself.

Hosea lived in the mid eighth century BCE, a contemporary of Isaiah of Jerusalem. He mentions the covenant of steadfast love and knowledge of God and links it to Adam. This is the only reference in the Bible that links a covenant to Adam, who was remembered in later tradition as the first sacral king entrusted with the care of creation. Hosea has the Lord speaking to Israel:

For I desire steadfast love, *hesedh*, and not sacrifice,
The knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.
But like Adam they transgressed the covenant,
There they dealt faithlessly with me (Hosea 6.6-7).

This suggests that Adam broke a covenant based on *hesedh* and knowledge of God.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls shows that in the time of Jesus there were still people living by this covenant of *hesedh*. The *Community Rule* found at Qumran described people who entered this covenant: ‘To do the statutes of God of the covenant of *hesedh*, to unite with the wise counsel of God and to walk before him in integrity...’⁶ They would discern the knowledge of the Most High and the wisdom of the sons of heaven. ‘God has chosen them for the everlasting covenant, and all the glory of Adam shall be theirs.’⁷ The **everlasting covenant**, in the time of Hosea and in the time of Jesus some 800 years later, was the covenant of *hesedh* and knowledge of God, the covenant given to Adam which was broken when he ate from the wrong tree and lost his glory. In the New Testament, Jesus is the new Adam the second Adam. The end of the Adam story in Genesis was that the human couple lost the garden of Eden and had instead a place of thorns and thistles, dust and death. This was what happened when the everlasting covenant was broken.

Isaiah left a vivid picture of the state of the earth when everlasting covenant was broken. The whole creation withered away.

The earth mourns and withers,
The world languishes and withers,
The heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted⁸ under its inhabitants;
For they have transgressed the laws,
Violated the statutes,
Broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
And its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched
And few men are left. (Isa.24.4-6).

Jeremiah had a similar picture, but he does not use the word ‘covenant’. He spoke rather of losing the gifts of wisdom and discernment.

For my people are foolish, they know me not;
They are stupid children, they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil, but how to do good they know not.
I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
And to the heavens and they had no light.

⁶ *Community Rule*, 1QS I.7-8.

⁷ *Community Rule*, 1QS IV.21-22.

⁸ *ḥānaph*, as in Jer.23.11, where it means godless.

I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
And all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked, and lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled. (Jer.4.22-25).

‘Waste and void’ are the words used at the beginning of Genesis to describe the state before creation: ‘the earth was waste and void’ (Gen.1.2). Jeremiah saw the whole creation undone by people who lacked knowledge of the Lord and understanding.

Breaking the laws and the statutes and choosing evil rather than good, caused the everlasting covenant to collapse. The priests not only restored the covenant through their atonement rituals; they had also to protect it by their teaching. They had to bring knowledge of the Lord. Malachi condemned the priests of his time - perhaps early in the second temple period - for their wrong teaching. The familiar covenant words are here, and we also learn that the priests were the angels of the Lord of Hosts.

My covenant [with Levi] was a covenant of life and peace...

True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is a messenger /angel of the Lord of Hosts. But you have turned aside from the way, you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, say the Lord of Hosts... (Mal.2.5-8).

The priests of the second temple were fallen angels.

The fallen angels appear only briefly in the Old Testament, as the cause of Noah’s flood. They were called the Nephilim, the fallen ones, and people did evil in their time (Gen.6.4-5). But the fallen angels were a sensitive matter, and so the final editors of Genesis did not explicitly link the fallen angels and human evil. The *Book of Enoch* does.

The *Book of Enoch*, also known as *I Enoch*, was much used at Qumran and also by the first Christians. The letter of Jude quotes from it, and scenes in the Book of Revelation resemble the visions of Enoch. The central story of *I Enoch* is that rebel angels, known as the sons of God, made a counter covenant. They brought their knowledge from heaven to earth but used it in rebellion against the Great Holy One. They were led by Azazel and they passed this heavenly knowledge on to human beings as part of their rebellion. Human beings, liberated from the laws of the Great Holy One, then used this knowledge to corrupt the earth. The knowledge was practical as well as esoteric: metal working to make weapons and jewellery which led to war and fornication; magic and drugs; astronomy and astrology; writing [which

would have made public the sacred texts and so opened them to misuse]; and the abuse of women.

1 Enoch survives in its fullest form only in Ethiopic, but this was probably translated from a Greek that was translated from Aramaic. In other words, some details such as names have suffered in transmission. *1 Enoch* is an anthology of texts rather than a continuous work, and there are two lists of what the fallen angels taught (1 En.8, 69). After the first list, Enoch tells how the Holy and Great One sent the four archangels to rescue the earth: Azazel the leader of the rebels was bound and put into a pit. This appears in the Book of Revelation as the angel binding the ancient serpent and throwing him into a pit (Rev.20.1-3). The Holy and Great One told the archangels: ‘Heal the earth which the angels have corrupted and proclaim the healing of the earth, that they may heal the plague... And then the whole earth shall be tilled in righteousness, and shall all be planted with trees and be full of blessing’ (En.9.7, 18). This is new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21. The role of Enoch’s archangels was to heal and restore the earth, and to remove whatever destroyed it. This appears in the Book of Revelation as the song in heaven when the Kingdom is established on earth.

We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast,
That thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign.
The nations raged but thy wrath came,
And the time for the dead to be judged,
For rewarding thy servants the prophet and saints,
And those who fear thy name both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth (Rev.11.17-18).

After the second list of angel knowledge that was brought to earth, there is a poem about the oath that binds and upholds all creation: the heavens were suspended, the earth was founded, the sea was created and kept within its bounds, the sun, moon and stars were set in their courses through this oath. We recognise Enoch’s ‘oath’ as the **everlasting covenant**. Ezekiel used the same language: ‘You have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant (Ezek.17.59-60).

Enoch knew that the order established by the great oath was sealed by a name which the rebel angels tried to discover because this name gave power over creation. They did not succeed, because Michael guarded the Name. In the Ethiopic text, the Name is Akae, but this looks like a corruption of the secret Name of the Lord, the *'ehyeh* that was revealed to Moses at the

burning bush.⁹ It means ‘I who cause to be’ and it is the powerful Name in the hymn to the Creator in Revelation 4:

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come! [This is an expansion of the Name] .
Worthy art thou our Lord and God,
To receive glory and honour and power,
For thou didst create all things
And by thy will they existed and were created (Rev.4.8, 11).

The Name of the Lord appears in other texts as the seal of the eternal covenant. This is an extract from the Prayer of Manasseh, a short text found in some ancient copies of the Lxx and in the English Apocrypha:

O Lord Almighty...
Thou who hast made heaven and earth with all their order;
Who hast shackled the sea by thy word of command,
Who hast confined the deep
And sealed it with thy terrible and glorious name... (Prayer 3)

This seal of the Name was a diagonal X, and it was used in the first temple. Ezekiel described it as the letter *tau*, which in the palaeo Hebrew alphabet was written as X, but after the alphabet had been changed, later writers had to describe it as Greek *chi*. Ezekiel also knew that the seal of the Name protected the faithful against the imminent judgement. He heard the Lord say to the angels of judgement: ‘Pass through the city... and smite... but touch no one on whom is the mark’ (Ezek.9.5, 6). This means that the faithful were sealed by the Name within the protecting bond of the everlasting covenant, and so they were safe from the imminent wrath. Revelation 7 is the same scene: the angel of the dawn marks 12 000 from each tribe of Israel with the seal of the living God, to protect them from the imminent wrath.

The sign of the Name was marked on the forehead of a sacral king or high priest when he was anointed¹⁰, and Isaiah recorded what this meant. He was given the manifold spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His perceptions were transformed by the holy oil, and as his vision of the creation was changed, so too the creation was changed.

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb...

⁹ CTR Hayward, *Divine Name and Presence: The Memra*, Totowa: NJ: Allenheld, Osmun, 1981, pp. 126-128.

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud *Horayoth* 12a.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord,
As the waters cover the sea. (Isa.11.6, 9).

Bearing in mind that Jesus' words would have had a Hebrew original, this is what he prayed for his disciples after the Last Supper: he had manifested the Name, given them the teachings from heaven, taught them about unity and the bond of *hesedh*, and prayed that the Name would protect them.

Holy Father, keep them by thy Name, which thou hast given to me... While I was with them, I kept them by thy Name, which thou hast given me, and none of them is lost... (John 17.11-12).

Paul too, used the language of the **everlasting covenant** in Romans 8 to describe the role of the Christians, those led by the Spirit of God. 'The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God', he said. These were the new sons of God, to replace the fallen angels. 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay' – this was the counter covenant imposed on creation by the fallen sons of God. The role of Christians was to restore the everlasting covenant that upholds the creation. And Paul was certain that nothing in heaven or earth would be able to 'separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. In other words, nothing would be able to put them outside the *hesedh* that was the restored and protecting covenant.

The prophets were steeped in the language of the **everlasting covenant**. They contrasted the order of creation and the disorder of human society. Such texts are usually identified as Wisdom language, whose roots are sought among the wise men of Egypt and Babylon. In fact the prophets and wise men of Israel used the language of the everlasting covenant, whose roots were in the belief that all creation was bound into one great covenant, and so a perception drawn from one example was relevant elsewhere. This is how Jeremiah spoke of the order of creation:

I placed the sand as a bound for the sea,
A perpetual barrier which it cannot pass;
Though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
Though they roar, they cannot pass over it.
But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;
They have turned aside and gone away. (Jer.5.22-23)

Rebellion, he was saying, is not natural.

Even the stork in the heavens knows her times;

And the turtle dove, swallow and crane keep the time of their coming;

But my people know not the ordinance of the Lord. (Jer.8.7).

Going against the divine order for creation bodes ill.

It is a curious fact that the prophets used the speech forms of the **everlasting covenant**, but in many cases show no sign that they knew the Moses covenant. The oldest strata of Isaiah, for example, attributed to the greatest of the Jerusalem prophets, have no trace of the Moses covenant. The change from the eternal covenant to the Moses covenant can be seen clearly in the two forms of the ten commandments. The older version exhorts people to observe the Sabbath 'for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day' (Exod 24.11). They were to keep the Sabbath to be in harmony with the pattern of creation. But when emphasis was shifted to the Moses covenant, at the end of the first temple period and throughout the second, the commandment changed:

Observe the Sabbath day... You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day' (Deut.5. 12, 15).

They were to keep the Sabbath because of their own history, led by Moses from slavery in Egypt.

Isaiah described how the everlasting covenant was broken: by transgressing the laws and violating the statutes. He described the result: the withering of heaven and earth (Isa.24.4-6). He also described the restoration of the covenant in his great poem about the suffering Servant, but his language is almost opaque until the ritual for renewal is considered, and so we must look briefly at the Day of Atonement.

Atonement, you will recall, was the name given to the action of Phineas the high priest when he acted to repair the breach in the everlasting covenant. It was a ritual not of cleansing or of appeasing an angry God but a rite of restoration and healing. In the temple, it was performed on the Day of Atonement by the high priest, when he sprinkled blood in the temple.

- First the high priest himself, who wore on his forehead the sacred seal of the Lord, *represented the Lord*. The temple priests were angels, as Malachi knew, and the chief of the priests was the Lord of Hosts.
- Second the blood, which in temple ritual represented life (Lev.17.11).
- Third the temple, which in the temple world view represented the whole creation: the holy of holies was heaven and the hall of the temple was earth.

The Day of Atonement was part of the ancient new year festival, when blood sprinkled around the temple represented life sprinkled onto the earth to cleanse and renew. It restored the everlasting covenant that bound the whole creation. The renewal of the earth preceded the enthronement of the sacral king, and so establishing the kingdom and restoring the everlasting covenant were linked.

The oldest description of the Day of Atonement ritual is found in Leviticus 16, but that text has been supplemented many times and is not always easy to understand. The *Mishnah*, a collection of Jewish law and custom as it was in the time of Jesus, has more detail about the rite, and there are several other texts which have the Day of Atonement as their setting.¹¹ From these we can begin to reconstruct what was done and what it meant.

Two identical goats were chosen and lots were drawn over them: one lot was the goat for Azazel, the leader of the fallen angels; and the other lot was for the Lord. That is the usual translation, but it raises the question: why was a goat offered to Azazel, the leader of the fallen angels? The answer lies with Origen, the early Christian biblical scholar who had contacts with Jewish scholars in Caesarea. He understood that the goat 'for' Azazel was in fact the goat that *represented* Azazel. The Hebrew can mean either 'for Azazel' or 'as Azazel'. Now if one goat represented Azazel, the other goat must have represented the Lord. This was the goat whose blood/life was sprinkled to renew the creation. Further, the goat as the Lord was a substitute for the high priest, who was also the Lord.

Leviticus describes the ritual in the desert tabernacle, but the temple practice was the same. The high priest took the blood first into the holy of holies, which represented heaven, and there he sprinkled it on the ark which was the heavenly throne. Then he brought the blood out and sprinkled and smeared it on representative parts of the hall of the temple. This was, in the words of Leviticus, to cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleanness of the people of Israel' (Lev.16.19). The blood cleansed and healed. The life taken up and offered in heaven repaired the bonds of the everlasting covenant and renewed the creation. When the high priest had offered his own life to heal the creation, the remaining blood was poured out under the great altar, and he called out the Name of the Lord. His cry was the verbal seal of the restored creation.

¹¹ See my article 'Atonement. The Rite of Healing' in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 49.1 (1996), pp.1-20.

Returning now to Isaiah's poem about the suffering Servant, we have already seen that his role was to put himself in breach of the covenant caused by human sin. The Lord caused the Servant to meet the iniquities of all, and put himself in the way of the sins: 'The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' and 'He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors' (Isa.53.6, 12). There are other covenant terms too: he made himself the sin offering (Isa.53.10) - the word is *'āšām*, which means a sacrifice to repair the covenant – and he poured out his soul/life to death (Isa.53.12), alluding to the final outpouring of the atonement blood under the great altar. Jesus referred to this passage when he explained the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus: 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' (Luke 24.24.26). In other words, the Christians remembered that Jesus had seen himself as the Servant who restored the everlasting covenant.

The Book of Hebrews says this was the meaning of the death of Jesus.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest... he entered once for all into the holy place, taking not the blood of goats and calves, but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption (Heb.9.11, 12). t

When Peter spoke in the temple, in Solomon's porch, he used Day of Atonement images. It may even have been the season of the autumn Day of Atonement, since it happened just after Pentecost. This is what Peter said:

You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead...

Repent therefore and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3.15, 19).

Jesus was himself the Day of Atonement sacrifice, the Lord offering his own life to renew the everlasting covenant. The bonds of the covenant were healed by self sacrifice and a different type of knowledge. . Thus Paul said: 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice... Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...' (Rom.1.1-2).

The covenant first mentioned in the story of Noah - the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature' – is the covenant that also binds together the biblical narrative.

The tree that Adam and Eve rejected when they broke the everlasting covenant of *ḥesedh* and knowledge of the Lord, was the tree of life. The risen Lord in the Book of Revelation offered this again to the faithful Christian: 'To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life...' (Rev.2.7). Matthew made clear that Jesus renewed the everlasting covenant at

the Last Supper: ‘This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many *for the putting away of sins* (Matt.26.28, my literal translation). John did not describe the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, but he did record Jesus’ teaching about the everlasting covenant: unity, love, the power of the Name to unite and protect. And he distinguished his disciples from the disciples of Moses: ‘By this all men will know that you are *my* disciples, if you have love one for another’ (John 13.35).

The everlasting covenant had been neglected – almost forgotten - by those who emphasised the law of Moses and the Sinai covenant. This is true of the Jewish teachers in the second temple period, and it is also true of much Old Testament scholarship.

There could be no better illustration of this than a report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England: *The Mystery of Salvation*, published in 1995. In the section ‘Images of the Atonement’,¹² the report reaches this conclusion:

This image [of atonement] which lies at the heart of the gospel, raises numerous consequential questions. *The most obvious of these is why the death of Christ should have this astonishing effect.*

The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England admitted that it did not understand the most fundamental of Christian teachings. The report continued:

In the New Testament writings a great variety of images is called upon to illuminate some facet or other of the central mystery of the faith. They are pressed only so far as they are helpful, and then the believing imagination moves on to feed elsewhere, with no sense of obligation to restrict the interpretation to one standard form.

To try to reduce this variety [of imagery] to a single agreed statement about the doctrine of the atonement would be untrue both to the New Testament and to our Anglican heritage.

I will not comment.

The Doctrine Commission had lost sight of, or perhaps had never even heard of, the everlasting covenant, which, I suggest, is the only possible basis for a characteristically Christian theology for the environment. It will not do to deck out secular positions with a few texts of Scripture, and these not always relevant to the issue. The biblical vision for creation, based on the **everlasting covenant**, is rich, consistent and sophisticated. And largely forgotten..

¹² Pp. 96-101,