

# COVENANT AND INDWELLING

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**C**OVENANT IS ESSENTIALLY an inter-personal relationship. In the period before the Incarnation, the basis of the Covenant between God and Israel was that Yahweh was God for Israel and Israel a people for Yahweh. Rituals, which used blood as the symbol of life, celebrated the inauguration and renewal of the Covenant between Yahweh and his people, who were given a share in his life. The covenant formula, 'I shall be your God and you will be my people', gave concise expression to the relationship, which was embodied in the way of life laid down by the Law.

In four Old Testament texts the covenant formula is closely connected with God's inhabitation in the midst of his people. Exodus 29, 43-46 develops ideas already mentioned (25,8) by telling us more about the tabernacle: it will serve as a meeting place where God can speak to Moses and the people; it will be sanctified by the Lord's glory; the altar, together with Aaron and his sons, will be consecrated; God's dwelling among his people springs from his side of the covenant relationship:

And I will dwell among the people of Israel  
and I shall be their God;  
and they will know  
that I am the Lord their God  
who brought them forth from the land of Egypt  
that I might dwell among them;  
I am the Lord their God.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Father Edward Malatesta was unfortunately taken ill before he could complete this article. He kindly put his unpublished thesis at the disposal of the editors and allowed them to use it to construct the article which follows. Every effort has been made to remain faithful to Father Malatesta's intentions, thought and language. He was able to read the proofs and wishes to express his gratitude to the editors for their kindness and patience.

<sup>1</sup> Exod 29, 45-46.

Framed between two theophanies, the passage gives us the theological meaning of sanctuary: a place where Yahweh continually dwells among his people and occasionally reveals himself to them.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the Exodus is given as God's indwelling.

Leviticus 26 consists of a series of curses and blessings, which conclude the Law of Holiness (chapters 17 to 26). God's promise to dwell among his people by means of the sanctuary and to walk in their midst is the climax of these blessings, and represents the fulfilment of the covenant formula and the high point of Israel's relationship with God.<sup>3</sup>

During the Exile, Ezekiel was writing for people who felt themselves to be far away from God. In the language of the Covenant this could be expressed as 'I am not your God'; and the priestly tradition would have said: 'I am not your sanctuary'. But in his mercy God did not totally abandon his exiled people. He was not unfaithful to his side of the Covenant. In spite of the separation caused by Israel's sins, he can still say: 'I have been a sanctuary for them', which was an invitation to interpret the Temple in a less material sense.<sup>4</sup>

Ezekiel 37, 24-28 describes four everlasting blessings: the people will dwell in the promised land, have David as their prince, enjoy a covenant of peace with God, and have his sanctuary in their midst. It is precisely because of this indwelling that Israel's election will be known to the nations.<sup>5</sup>

The eleven major texts concerning the promise of the New Covenant contain several or all of the following themes: the covenant formula, interior renewal of the nation or individuals, the reunification of Israel and her return from exile, the announcement and blessings of the definitive covenant. Nine of these texts mention interior renewal, each with its own shades of vocabulary and metaphor.<sup>6</sup> Here we shall briefly refer to three passages.

Deuteronomy stresses that circumcision, the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, means nothing unless it is accompanied by interior fidelity. Just as the ears of the people must be circum-

<sup>2</sup> The first theophany is in Exod 24, 16: 'The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and covered it for six days'. The second is in Exod 40, 35: 'And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle'.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 33, 3-5; 34, 9; Lev 26, 11-12, see also 2 Sam 7, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ezek 11, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Ezek 40-48.

<sup>6</sup> Deut 30, 1-10; Jer 24, 5-7; 31, 31-4; 32, 37-41; Ezek 11, 14-21; 16, 53-63; 36, 22-35; 37, 21-28; Bar 2, 29-35.

cized so as to hear God's word,<sup>7</sup> so too their hearts must be circumcized in order to love and obey the Lord.<sup>8</sup> Only in this way can they have true life.

The only passage which explicitly mentions the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31) highlights these three features: an interiorization of the Law, given to Israel's inmost being and written on their hearts; a knowledge of God shared by all the people; forgiveness of sins. Similarly in Ezekiel, God promises another heart and a new spirit, to replace the heart of stone with a heart of flesh so that his commandments will be obeyed.<sup>9</sup> In the better known passage the same promise is repeated with the additional assurance that God will give his very own Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The interaction between God and man is described by the Old Testament in a number of ways. *The heart*, for instance, is the centre of the personality, the seat of memory, the source of thoughts and decisions. Biblical authors often speak of man's relationship with God in terms of the heart. Man cannot pretend before God, who sees the heart,<sup>11</sup> tests and scrutinizes it.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, to know man's heart is to know him in the depths of his being, for the heart is the very organ of interiority. Many passages refer to *the Spirit*, which dwells in man and modifies his inner self. This is God's own Spirit, conceived in personal terms, which he gives or promises. Just as man depends for his physical life upon the breath God breathed into him at his creation,<sup>13</sup> so, for the fulfilment of a mission given by the Lord and the ability to serve him faithfully, man needs the presence and activity of God's own Spirit within himself.<sup>14</sup> The Old Testament conceives of *wisdom* as dwelling within the most intimate part of a man. God gave Solomon wisdom into his heart to administer justice.<sup>15</sup> Personified wisdom was described as having an intimate relationship with God's faithful ones. Although she is present everywhere,<sup>16</sup> some people repel wisdom, while others love her, desire her and labour to find her.<sup>17</sup> Solomon determined to take wisdom to live with him.<sup>18</sup> He realized that wisdom was a gift and that he could not possess her until God gave her to him.<sup>19</sup> Ben Sirah compares wisdom with a mother or the wife of his youth; she will wel-

<sup>7</sup> Jer 6, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Deut 10, 16; Jer 4, 4; 9, 26; Lev 26, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ezek 11, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Ezek 36, 26-7.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Sam 16, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ps 17, 3; Jer 17, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Gen 2, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Wis 1, 7; 7, 7; Isai 42, 1; 44, 3; 59, 21; 61, 1; Ezek 11, 5; 37, 10 etc.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Kg 3, 28; 2 Chr 9, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Wis 7, 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> Wis 6, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Wis 8, 2-18.

<sup>19</sup> Wis 8, 21.

come him and he will lean on her. Chapter 24, 1-12 is the most extensive treatment of wisdom's presence in the midst of God's people, where she is to be found in the liturgical assembly, the universe, the nations, Israel and the holy city. Baruch asks the essential questions:<sup>20</sup> 'Who has found her and *entered into* her treasures? Who has gone up to heaven and *taken her* and brought her down from the clouds? Who has gone over the sea and *found her*?<sup>21</sup>

Baruch goes on to identify wisdom with *the Law*, which reminds us that in the Old Testament the Law, like the Temple, is an answer to the problem of the presence of God. While stressing the transcendence and sovereignty expressed in the revealed word, the Law shows how God intervenes in even the smallest details of human living. Observance of the commandments is fulfilment of covenant love: 'Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful one, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations'.<sup>22</sup> 'Keep silence and hear, O Israel, this day you have become the people of the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God'.<sup>23</sup> The commandments are to be observed 'with all the heart and with all the soul'.<sup>24</sup> The people are 'to walk in Yahweh's ways',<sup>25</sup> and 'listen to his voice'.<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah and Ezechiel are explicit: Yahweh will give his people one heart, a new spirit 'that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people and I will be their God'.<sup>27</sup> When the Lord has carried out his promise to establish his new covenant, Israel will recognize that Yahweh is the Lord.<sup>28</sup> Everyone will know God with that intimate knowledge,<sup>29</sup> which is made possible only because he himself gives the interior strength necessary to obey him. An essential feature of the knowledge of God proper to the New Covenant is communion with the Lord, which consists in loving obedience to his commandments.

An account of covenant and indwelling in the Old Testament must include a passing reference to God's relationship with his people expressed as the union between the lover and the beloved:

<sup>20</sup> Bar 3, 9-4, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Bar 3, 29-30; cf Deut 30, 12-13; Job 28, 13-22.

<sup>22</sup> Deut 7, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Deut 27, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Deut 4, 26; 6, 5; 10, 12; 11, 13; 13, 4 etc.

<sup>25</sup> Deut 8, 6; 10, 12; 11, 22; 19, 9; 26, 17 etc.

<sup>26</sup> Deut 4, 30; 8, 20; 9, 23; 13, 5; 15, 5; 26, 14 etc.

<sup>27</sup> Ezek 11, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Jer 24, 7; Ezek 16, 62.

<sup>29</sup> Jer 31, 34.

That is why I am going to lure her  
 and lead her out into the wilderness  
 and speak to her heart . . .  
 I will betroth you to myself for ever,  
 betroth you with integrity and justice,  
 with tenderness and love . . .  
 I will say to No-People-of-Mine: You are my people;  
 and he will answer: You are my God.<sup>30</sup>

From the time of Hosea onwards, Israel is represented as the unfaithful wife and Yahweh as the ever-faithful husband, who will establish a new and lasting marriage-bond with his people.

The Old Testament writers catch glimpses of the sublimity and intimacy of the new covenant communion between God and his people. The decisive moment for inaugurating the New Covenant was the Incarnation of God's eternal Word. In the person of Jesus, in whom the fulness of the divine glory came to rest,<sup>31</sup> upon whom the Spirit descended and remained,<sup>32</sup> there came into being a perfect interchange between man and God. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father.<sup>33</sup> Jesus was perfectly receptive to the Father's words and teaching,<sup>34</sup> and to his commandments.<sup>35</sup> He knew the Father as no one else knew him,<sup>36</sup> and he was perfectly free from sin.<sup>37</sup> The New Covenant was sealed by the paschal mystery of Jesus through the shedding of his blood of the New Covenant,<sup>38</sup> and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the New Law.<sup>39</sup> The realization in us of the New Covenant is the result of God's initiative. In his everlasting love and mercy the Father has chosen to send his Son and his Spirit into our midst, so that through our relationship with them we may be drawn into communion with the Father as well.

The book in the New Testament which brings out most clearly the connection between covenant and indwelling is the First Letter of John. Nothing less than a word-by-word, verse-by-verse reading of the Letter can do justice to the theme. In an article it is possible only to notice some of the key ideas and to give a summary of the development of the book.

<sup>30</sup> Hos 2, 16-24; cf Isai 1, 21; Jer 2, 2ff; Ezek 16, 1ff.

<sup>31</sup> Jn 1, 14; 17, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Jn 1, 32-23; 3, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Jn 10, 30; 17, 11. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Jn 8, 26. 28-29.

<sup>35</sup> Jn 15, 10; 1 Jn 2, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Jn 10, 15; 17, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Jn 7, 18; 8, 45-46; 1 Jn 3, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Mk 14, 24; Heb 10, 19 etc.

<sup>39</sup> 2 Cor 3, 3-18.

'God' is the most frequent noun in John's First Letter.<sup>40</sup> The repeated theocentric thrust of the Letter keeps before our eyes the fact that God brings us to himself. The loving step he takes towards us corresponds to his choice of Israel.<sup>41</sup> He is faithful, which is what John means when he says that he is 'true'.<sup>42</sup> The people God draws to himself are a fellowship or brotherhood, an association with 'one another'. This fellowship is characterized by its faith, the confession of and purification from sin, knowledge of God, victory over the world and the evil one, and obedience to the word or the commandments. Believers live in a hostile environment and have to confront unbelievers, antichrists and the spirit of deceit. The demands of the Law put members of the community before choices between life and death, light and darkness, love and hatred, belief and unbelief.

So far there is nothing which is not taken straight from the old covenant, but John assimilates the old into the new. There is forgiveness of sins and expiation through Jesus. Revelation – God's word, truth, new commandment, anointing – are absorbed into, and become part of, man's inmost being. God's action and man's response take place inside a man. To express this mutual interchange John uses the words 'being in' and 'remaining in'.<sup>43</sup> The reality of the New Covenant goes further than the promises of Jeremiah and Ezechiel. Not only does God renew our hearts by sending his gifts; he himself comes to take possession of our hearts, to dwell in them, to make us live his own life. His presence within us enables us to be present in him, to live in communion with him, our Father, by giving ourselves to him as devoted children in adoration and praise, in all our acts of faith and love. To this experience of 'being-in', 'remaining-in', are added the qualities of familiar intimacy, loving attachment, faithful presence. The New Covenant, accomplished once and for all, is eternal. It remains for ever, and so the relationships it establishes remain. For Jeremiah, Israel's failure was precisely not to have remained in the old covenant. The New Covenant is such that not only will God's people remain *in it*, that is to say, be faithful to its stipulations. They will remain *in him*, because he himself will remain in them in such a

<sup>40</sup> 'God' occurs 63 times. 'World', which is the next most frequent noun, occurs only 23 times.

<sup>41</sup> Compare Deut 4, 37; 7, 6–7; 10, 15; 14, 2 with 1 Jn 3, 1. 5. 8. 16.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Jn 1, 9; 5, 20.

<sup>43</sup> The Jerusalem Bible translates *menein en* as 'living in'.

close, personal relationship that they will be made and kept holy by his indwelling, sanctifying presence. The communion of the New Covenant thus surpassed the hope or imagination of Israel. Christians share in the universality and eternity of God's love.

These ideas are developed in a magnificent progression throughout the Letter. In the first part God is light – symbol of his majesty, knowledge, salvation, favour, presence, law and wisdom – in whom there is no darkness, which means that he is perfect truth, goodness and holiness.<sup>44</sup> Light describes God's own nature and the conditions necessary for all who seek communion with him. He cannot be in them unless they share in light, nor can they be in him unless they are free from darkness. Man's condition is an ambiguous one; he has to choose between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, hatred and love. God attracts men to do his will so that, filled with love, he may have consistency and permanency. The world lures man to love what is within itself, so that man is left empty and passes away as the world passes away. Communion with God cannot be achieved by a man's own efforts; it is a gift freely given and freely received. Forgiveness of sins comes through Jesus. Likewise, living according to the commandments and abiding in God results from our relationship with Jesus. To remain in God it is necessary to walk as Jesus walked, for his life was governed by the commandment of love. From the risen Jesus we receive the power to cleave to the word in faith. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit the word becomes an anointing, which teaches us the truth about Jesus and the Father. The gift is given to remain in us, to accompany us on our pilgrimage, teaching us all we need to know: that we remain in Jesus. It is the role of the preachers to assure us of the presence of the anointing and of our presence in Jesus. Conversely, we have a two-fold response to make: to let the anointing remain within us by fidelity to the preaching we have heard from the beginning; and to remain in Jesus by recognizing him for who he is: Revealer, Expiation for our sins, Giver of the anointing, Model and source of brotherly love, Messiah and Son through whom we have communion with the Father.

In the second part of the Letter we learn that the community is a community of sons of God, of brothers bound by a bond of mutual love and common faith.<sup>45</sup> Besides this relationship with one another, the members are called to a personal relationship with the Spirit,

<sup>44</sup> 1 Jn 1, 5–2, 28.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Jn 2, 29–4, 6.

with Jesus and with the Father. Communion is therefore described in a more personal and inward way. As we acquire a more refined awareness of life as God's children, it is necessary to reflect Christ's compassion by sharing our goods with needy brothers. The section ends with discernment: the battlefield is in the heart, where the Spirit must help us to discriminate between truth and falsehood.

The third and final exposition gives us the author's most profound treatment of new covenant communion.<sup>46</sup> In this part of the Letter he stresses even more strongly the personal relationship between the believers and the Spirit, Jesus and the Father. The repetition of the name 'God' forty times in only a few lines centres attention on the God of the New Covenant and his communion with his children. In this section we meet the three most developed formulations of the mutual 'remaining-in' of God and the christian community.<sup>47</sup> Our relationship with the Holy Spirit, explicitly mentioned in 4,13 and 5,6-7, is implied throughout. Jesus, who came to us by water and blood, as the supreme sign of the Father's love, is our very life. The Father's own witness, which reaches our hearts through the witness of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments and the apostolic preaching, has only one purpose: to bring us to believe in Jesus and to love as he loved, so as to know the Father who is love. These inter-personal relationships between the community and the Spirit, Jesus and the Father, ground and determine the inter-personal relationships between members of the community, which will be a family of brothers and sisters living in mutual love in so far as they are children of the same Father, have Jesus as their brother and are guided by the Holy Spirit. John teaches us that christian inner life and christian community are complementary and inseparable dimensions of the New Covenant.

What we learn from the Bible about covenant and indwelling is a message about what we are and hope to be. The Covenant will finally flower into that fullest possible communion between believers and God and believers with one another, which God has prepared for us as the perfection of eternal life. John's First Letter is strikingly complemented in the Apocalypse (21,3), which brings covenant and indwelling together in richly allusive Old Testament language:

Then I heard a loud voice  
call from the throne,

<sup>46</sup> 1 Jn 4, 7-5, 13; and summary in 1 Jn 5, 18-21.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Jn 4, 13. 15. 16.



'You see this city?'

Here God lives among men.

He will make his home among them:

They shall be his people

and he will be their God.

His name is God-is-with-them.

This verse occurs in the section which describes eschatological salvation in all its fulness: descent from God of the New Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb, in the time of the new heaven and new earth.<sup>48</sup> The first verses of the section provide the theological significance of the vision of the New Jerusalem; the city is the witness to the New Covenant just as the ancient city of Jerusalem was a witness to the Old Covenant.

John wanted to show that final salvation flowed continuously out of Israel's experience and that at the same time it was something utterly new. The continuity is emphasised by the use of evocative Old Testament passages, which describe the divine presence enjoyed by Israel in her covenant relationship with Yahweh.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless the vision is one of a radically new future, which will greatly surpass, in its universality, immediacy and the interchange of mutual presence, anything experienced or imagined in the Old Testament.

The universality of the New Covenant can be seen in John's faithful but free use of texts. The Apocalypse subtly changes Ezekiel,<sup>50</sup> for whom the divine presence is restricted to the people of Israel, so as to include an immense crowd out of every nation, tribe, people and tongue.<sup>51</sup> John uses the plural *laoi* in place of the singular in the covenant formula. In Apocalypse 21, 24-26 he describes the pilgrimage of the nations, which will never end until all have entered the city, whose gates will never close.<sup>52</sup>

The immediacy of the presence of God and his people in the New Jerusalem, which exceeds all expectations, is brought out by the use of Old Testament imagery. Three symbols are interwoven: Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Tabernacle or Tent. The city is presented as the Bride of the Lamb,<sup>53</sup> in fulfilment of the prophecy made in Hosea that Yahweh would betroth them again and forever. The city, identified with the people, 'has' the glory of God,<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Apoc 21, 1-22, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Lev 26, 11; Isai 25, 8; 60, 35; 61, 10; 65, 17-19; Ezek 37, 26-27; 43, 1ff; Zech 2, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ezek 37, 26-8; 44, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Apoc 7, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Cf Isai 60, 3. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Apoc 21, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Apoc 21, 11.

no longer as something coming from outside to dwell within, but as its essential possession.<sup>55</sup> The presence of the Lord is no longer in the Temple, for the Temple – sign of the divine presence – is no more. Now God and the Lamb *are* the Temple, dwelling in the city which is the people.

The overlapping of images goes even further to suggest the extraordinary intimacy in the mutual relations between God and his people in the New Covenant. The city, wholly structured in measurements of twelve to show that it stands for the faithful, is a new Holy of Holies. The people are thus identified with the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, which is God and the Lamb, where God and people are mutually present not just once a year, but all the days of eternity.

The use of symbols to describe the immediacy and intimacy of mutual indwelling reaches a peak in Apocalypse 21,3. The Tabernacle, which is with men, suddenly becomes 'He' who tabernacles with men. God-is-with-them is now God of all peoples. This dwelling, which is God himself, totally revealed and no longer veiled in a Holy of Holies, is immediately present to his Bride. She has come down from heaven to signify the permanent abolition of the division between heaven and earth, and the realization of the New Covenant communion, promised in the Old Testament, inaugurated in the Incarnation, actuated in the Church, and fulfilled at the end of time.

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<sup>55</sup> Compare Ezek 43, 1ff.