



The Sinaitic Light

Covenantal Nomism
God's Relational Bond with Man

Study Article No. XVIII

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This article uses the English terms for Elohim (God), Yah (Father) Yahoshua (Christ).

Objective and Learning Outcome

Objective:

The objective of this article is to understand what constitutes a relationship with God as He defines it. It is to better understand our role in this relationship as Yah expresses it so that we may fulfill His will. Our relationship with Yah is defined by His terms. Therefore, it is important that we understand what He expects of us in this relationship. Identifying His expectations and meeting them determines our fitness to immortality through His wonderful grace.

Learning Outcome:

Upon completion of this study, the reader will:

1. Understand the meaning of covenantal nomism,
2. Understand the reason for man's creation,
3. Understand what a covenant is and what establishes a covenant,
4. Understand what role man plays in his covenant with God,
5. Understand what prevenient grace is,
6. Understand what monergism is and synergism is
7. Increase your theological vocabulary

Introduction

The primary theme of the Bible centers on God’s relationship with man, the bond He has with humanity, which is important to Him. This coveted bond has drawn millions to the Bible throughout the centuries and continues to do so. Myriads of churches, tabernacles, and synagogues are filled every Sunday—and even Saturday—with those hoping the pastor, minister, or rabbi can deliver on the promise to provide the means to develop a bond with the Creator. However, more times than not, believers are simply told that they must *believe in Christ* to “develop a personal relationship with God.” Alternatively, and certainly less often, others are told the only thing they need to do to have a relationship with God is to *keep His law*, what is referred to in Hebrew as the Torah or in Greek, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). Intuitively, one responds by asking, “Is that all?” So, depending on who you are talking with you might be told to just believe in Christ or keep the Torah to procure a relationship with God. This study will demonstrate unequivocally that one must *do both* to have an intimate relationship with God, and that this relationship is the determining factor for one’s salvation. In other words, one must believe in Christ and observe the law, (the tenets of the Torah).¹

Before the beginning of the universe, God planned to create man in His likeness, viz., to emulate or image Him. In other words, to reflect His holiness, wisdom, righteousness, compassion, mercy, love, and justice. This was Yah’s goal for man, to create a human being that resembled Him intellectually and morally. Genesis 1:26 says,

Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, *to be like us*. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.’ So, God created human beings *in his own image*. In the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them”. Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground (Gen. 1:26-28, NLT) [emphasis added].

Humanity was created in the image and likeness of God and was commanded to fill the earth. They were to represent the kind of people with whom God desired to establish a bond. They share God’s image by embracing His likes and dislikes, and by doing so, they reflect His characteristics, thereby pleasing Him. However, it is impossible to reflect God’s ways if there is no description of what His ways are, in other words, what pleases Him, so they may be emulated. How can anyone possibly develop a reflection of God’s nature without instructions that reveal what His character is like? Many will assert, “This is why Yahoshua was revealed to humanity”, so they could see what God is like, and emulate Him by emulating Christ’s behavior (John 1:18;

¹ God’s law is referred to as the _____ or _____.

14:9; 1 John 2:6). One would have to agree with this assertion. However, there is a process of obtaining this imagery that Christ directed us to, to achieve the state of being He achieved that allowed Him to properly image God. ^{2 3 4}

Monergism

God *has* revealed His character (His likes and dislikes) to humanity through a set of divine laws that represent His personality and code of ethics. However, to introduce the concept of law into most conversations is to invite tension, as *law implies instructions and directives*. The law, as a body of instructions is referred to as the Torah, which means to “shoot, to cast, to direct, to instruct, and to teach,” from the Hebrew root word, *yarah* (Ex. 4:12-15; 24:12; Lev. 10:11, *see* H3384). In Greek it is called the Pentateuch, which means, “five books.” So, the natural reaction within most of neo-Christendom is to counter any discussions of the law with the theory of monergism, meaning “*one who works alone*, i.e., God works without man’s contribution to bring him salvation”. Classical monergism refers to the theory that justification (*being declared righteous by God*) comes solely through God’s grace without the requirement of man’s participation through the practice of God’s law. This classical form of monergism is the cornerstone of the neo-Christian faith because it is by its very definition, an abandonment of the law for grace—the grace found in Christ. Any attempt to practice the law (Torah) is seen as a complete rejection of the grace found in Christ as well as an attempt to self-justify (make oneself righteous). ^{5 6 7 8}

At the other end of the spectrum is a *variation of classical monergism* found within most *modern* forms of Judaism. Within this model, practitioners believe that they can self-justify by keeping the law without the need to be justified through God’s grace of propitiation (atonement). Proponents of this model emphasize the need to practice the Torah as the embodiment of God’s character while dismissing the efficacy of the grace found in *vicarious sacrifices* (a substitute dies for another’s sin) for *expiation* (making reparations for sin) and *propitiation* (conciliation or regaining God’s favor through appeasement). In this model of monergism man can declare himself righteous by merely practicing the law. Hence, he can bring salvation to himself apart from Yah’s involvement. ^{9 10 11 12}

² What passage says that man was created to be like God?

³ What was God’s ultimate purpose for creating man?

⁴ What does it mean to be created in the image of Yah?

⁵ What is monergism (classical)?

⁶ What does justification mean?

⁷ What does Torah and Pentateuch mean?

⁸ What does self-justify mean?

⁹ What is another word for propitiation?

¹⁰ What is a vicarious sacrifice?

¹¹ What does propitiation mean?

¹² What does expiate mean?

Prevenient Grace

In the Old and New Testaments, the Bible promotes a melding of both grace and law to produce a complete model of righteousness, designed to help the worshiper meet Yah's standard of holiness. God has illustrated the tenets of this model throughout the testaments to ensure that the bond of the covenant He has made with those who come to Him is efficacious and beneficial for both parties (God and man). In this covenantal relationship, grace is arguably the most central aspect of this covenant. Without God's grace, His covenant will lack relational and salvific vitality. In other words, man has never been able to perfect God's standards as His covenant requires (Deut. 5:29; Rom. 8:3), therefore, Yah extends a measure of grace to believers within the confines of His covenant to help us become presentable and acceptable to Him.

Grace *is* the cornerstone of every covenant God has made with man. However, there are different forms of grace (grace of time, mercy, salvation, etc.). The grace in this treatise is *God's prevenient grace*—which is often relegated to a secondary role in neo-Christianity behind the salvific grace offered through Christ. God's prevenient grace is the overarching grace that makes it possible for man to establish a relationship with Him, and it is the grace that sustains man throughout this relationship. Often described as the grace that “goes before,” prevenient grace refers to the free unmerited grace God shows in initiating a relationship with man, *despite his moral failings*. Yah does this to demonstrate His love for His creation, and to give man the *opportunity* to enter the covenant that leads to eternal life. Prevenient grace also sustains man throughout the relationship because it is through this grace that salvific grace becomes possible. An example of this precursory action can be seen in God's call to Abraham while he was dwelling in Haran,

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

In this passage, it is God who made the first step toward Abraham as He does with all who choose to enter a covenant with Him (Prov. 1:20-33; Is. 65:2).^{13 14}

Prevenient grace precedes all covenants from the Adamic covenant to the New Covenant; it is the essential component that comes before the relationship is established. Prevenient grace is the forerunner of all aspects of grace because it has salvation in view. It is unmerited grace, what many would refer to as favor that allows one to “come as you are” when entering the covenant. However, its caveat and expectation are that you do not “remain as you are.” Thus, like all good relationships, *work* is required to make them last.

¹³ What is prevenient grace?

¹⁴ What grace makes salvific grace possible?

Covenantal Nomism

As Yah *works* to make the first step towards man in initiating the relationship (prevenient grace), man must also *work* to demonstrate good faith in the relationship by sincerely honoring the conditions therein, in a process called *covenantal nomism*. Covenantal nomism is the understanding that God invited man into a relationship or covenant with Him through prevenient grace, that is, while man was in a sinful state and had not merited such a gift, God called him to be in relationship with Him. As a requirement to continue in this relationship, man must morph into God's image *by actively practicing and obeying the laws and statutes of the covenant* (Torah) to show his commitment, fealty, benevolence, and spiritual fidelity to Yah (Matt. 19:17; 22:34-37; 1 John 5:3). Again, the Abrahamic covenant serves as an excellent example of this process,

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life. I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to give you countless descendants." At this, Abram fell face down on the ground. Then God said to him, "This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them! "I will confirm my covenant with you and your descendants after you, from generation to generation. This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And I will give the entire land of Canaan, where you now live as a foreigner, to you and your descendants. It will be their possession forever, and I will be their God." Then God said to Abraham, "*Your responsibility is to obey the terms of the covenant. You and all your descendants have this continual responsibility*" (Gen. 17:1-9, NLT) [emphasis added].

In this passage, God approached Abraham with the opportunity to covenant with Him, however, the covenant was contingent upon Abraham's promise to serve and obey God faithfully and blamelessly in all that God asked him to do. These are the terms of the covenant for which Abraham and his descendant must *forever* be responsible. Covenantal nomism provides the first hints of the synergistic justification model created by God in the Sinaitic Covenant (Torah or laws given at Mt. Sinai, *see* Ex. 20:1-17; 24:1-18) and later in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 26:27-28; Heb. 8:6;9:15). It is through an expansion of covenantal nomism that God's grace begins to work together with man's deeds as defined by the law to engender his *justification* or righteousness.^{15 16 17}

¹⁵ Nomism comes from the Greek word *nomos* which means law.

¹⁶ What is covenantal nomism?

¹⁷ What passage(s) states that we show how much we love Yah by how we observe His commandments?

Synergism

Covenantal nomism reaches its full expression in both the Sinaitic and New Covenants. It is within these two covenants that God fully reveals His justification model. Just as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and the patriarchs were invited into a covenant with God through His prevenient grace, so too was the mixed multitude of people that would constitute the fledgling nation of Israel. And just as Yah did with the patriarchs, God would give this fledgling nation terms to obey as defined by His covenant. These terms represented each citizen's responsibilities to remain in Yah's covenant and to maintain its integrity. If one could or would not maintain the integrity of the covenant by practicing the tenets of righteousness which is the framework of the covenant, then Yah would rescind His offer to grant them salvation through it. In other words, Yah accepted all humanity into the bowels of His covenant, regardless of their moral decrepitness but expects them to be reformed by the tenets of the covenant to stay in relationship with Him.

The Sinaitic Covenant is special and dissimilar to all preceding covenants that were made with Adam, Noah, and Abraham. It was different from its predecessors because Yah, through His prevenient grace, chose to look ahead and provide a means by which Israel could reconstitute their relationship with God should they have violated the terms of the covenant through disobedience. What makes the Sinaitic Covenant special is the fact that God appended the terms of the Sinaitic Covenant with additional laws that would provide atonement for such violations. These appendments made it possible for man to propitiate or appease God despite their frailties. This, in turn, made it possible for God to overlook forgivable violations, and to declare the violators righteous once more. This is the full expression of covenantal nomism embraced by ancient Judaism called synergism.

Synergism is the cooperative action between God and man *within the covenant* in which man's self-justification through his earnest attempt to observe all of God's laws (terms of the covenant) works together with God's grace and mercy to bring him back into right standing (i.e. declared righteous again by God) through vicarious atonement—animal sacrifices under the Mosaic propitiation system. Under the auspice of the New Covenant propitiation system, redemption occurs through Christ's sacrifice there be any violations of the terms of the covenant. It is this complete expression of synergism within covenantal nomism that makes it possible for fallible man to remain in covenant with God. This was the understanding that ancient Israelites held from the fifteenth century BC to the first century.¹⁸

Dr. E.P. Sanders, former New Testament scholar and Arts and Sciences Professor of Religion at Duke University coined the phrase covenantal nomism and said that it "is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant, and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression" (E.P. Sanders, 1977:75). God, Himself, expresses the

¹⁸ What is synergism?

synergistic nature within covenantal nomism through Moses as he gives the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) to Israel.¹⁹ God said through Moses,

I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make unto yourself any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: You shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; *And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments* (Ex. 20:2-6, KJV 2000) [emphasis added].

The New English Translation Bible provides a clearer definition on what God demonstrates to those who love him in Exodus 20:6. It says, “and showing *covenant faithfulness* [emphasis added] to a thousand generations *of those who love me and keep my commandments.*” God told Israel that He would provide an abundance of mercy, compassion, loving-kindness, and grace to them when they sinned. The purpose of this grace was to demonstrate His understanding of their frailties, if they would continue to pursue excellence through His covenant to honor the image, He bestowed upon them. Another prime example of this process can be seen in Leviticus 26:40-46,

But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies—if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they *make amends for their iniquity*, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. But the land shall be abandoned by them and enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them, and they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules and their soul abhorred my statutes. Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God. But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.” *These are the statutes and rules and laws that the LORD made between himself and the people of Israel* through Moses on Mount Sinai [emphasis added].

Leviticus 26:40-46 is detailing the synergistic justification process. Israel swore to walk in all of God’s laws. This was a requirement for staying in the covenant after God invited them in through His prevenient grace. If they violated the covenant by refraining from the sincere observance of all His laws and abandoning their part of the justification process, God would bring maledictions (curses) on them with the hope that Israel would have a change of mind. If

¹⁹ What is another name for the Ten Commandments?

Israel would in fact confess and atone for their sins and turn from their wicked ways by embracing their part in the justification process, then God would forgive them of their sins and again act on their behalf instead of against them. Thus, we see Yah's prevenient grace working in tandem with man's efforts to image the Yah by obeying the terms of the covenant.

In the New Covenant, covenantal nomism, with its synergistic expression reaches its apex in Christ. God's prevenient grace and mercy offered within the Sinaitic Covenant is improved upon to cover blatant violations of His covenant if certain conditions are met. Yet, there is still a wealth of similarities between the Sinaitic Covenant and the New Covenant. God still initiates the covenantal relationship with New Covenant believers as Luke said in Acts 2:47b, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The conversion of Cornelius (the Gentile), who was an uncircumcised Roman centurion that practiced Judaism (i.e., obeyed the terms of the covenant) and thus a gate proselyte, along with his household provides a clearer picture of God's prevenient grace at work within the New Covenant. Cornelius was deemed a devout and righteous man according to the terms of the covenant, but he was still flawed and needed God's help to be declared righteous.²⁰

So, God, through His prevenient grace, provided Cornelius and his household the opportunity to enter the New Covenant with the understanding that they must continue to obey the terms (laws) set within the Sinaitic Covenant carried forward within the New Covenant, which they were doing as gate proselytes. In summation, contrary to the doctrine of modern Christianity man is still required to obey the terms of the covenant to show himself faithful to God. James says, "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18). He also says, "You see that a person is *justified by works and not by faith alone*" (James 2:24) [emphasis added]. Cornelius was expected to continue to observe the terms of the covenant, and all New Testament believers, whether Jew or Gentile, face the same expectation as well. Dr. James Dunn says when discussing covenantal nomism,

In terms introduced by Sanders, 'works of the Law' is, then, another way of saying 'covenantal nomism'—*that which characterizes 'being in' the covenant and not simply 'getting into' the covenant* (as Sanders himself put it). And in terms of the preceding analysis, 'works of the Law' are Paul's way of describing in particular the identity and boundary markers which Paul's Jewish (-Christian) opponents thought, and rightly thought, were put under threat by Paul's understanding of the gospel (Dunn 1990:220) [emphasis added].

The only difference between the covenantal nomism of the Sinaitic Covenant and the covenantal nomism of the New Covenant are its provisions for atonement (making oneself right and acceptable to God). The Sinaitic Covenant provided prevenient grace and atonement through animals, the New Covenant provides prevenient grace and atonement through Christ who was

²⁰ What is a gate proselyte?

prepared as the Lamb of God before the world was formed (Isaiah 53:1-8; John 1:29, 36; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:6, 12).

Conclusion

From the beginning, God's intention was to create a single nation of people of all nationalities that reflected His character and righteousness so that He could dwell amongst them in unity within a covenantal relationship. This nation, which is biblically called the Israel of God, refers to those who actively practice God's organic law (i.e., obey the terms of God's covenant) as it was designed to be practiced and obeyed, with sincerity and love under the auspices of Christ. This form of practice changes the person as it works on one's mind at an emotional level which creates a change in character. This change in character brings one closer to achieving the goal of the law—accomplished only by Christ—which is to image God perfectly. This is man's responsibility within the covenant which works synergistically with God's all-encompassing prevenient grace. This synergistic relationship within covenantal nomism is how man develops a bond with the Creator.

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