

April 2024

Frank W. Nelte

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE OLD COVENANT?

Most people in God's Church have heard about "the Old Covenant" and "the New Covenant". A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties, where all concerned parties make certain commitments, usually conditional on the other parties also fulfilling their specific commitments. If either party fails to fulfill their commitment, then a covenant becomes null and void.

In the Old Covenant between God and the people of Israel, God committed to do something for Israel, provided that Israel would fulfill their commitment to God. In this covenant Israel's part was that they were to faithfully obey God. If Israel fulfilled their obligation to obey God faithfully, then God committed Himself to do something for Israel.

But exactly **what was God going to do for Israel?** Do you know?

The answer is presented in Exodus 19:5-6, at the very start of the section that presents the Old Covenant in detail.

Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be **a peculiar treasure** unto Me above all people: for all the earth *is* Mine: And you shall be unto Me **a kingdom of priests**, and **an holy nation**. These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:5-6)

These two verses spell out what the entire Old Covenant was all about. And a mistranslation in verse 5 obscures certain details.

The mistranslation involves the words "**a peculiar treasure**". They represent a translation of the Hebrew word "segullah". The correct and most basic meaning of "segullah" is "**personal property**". "Segullah" refers to ownership. So "a peculiar treasure" is not a good translation.

What do the words "a peculiar treasure" convey to us? It's a kind of vague term, isn't it? Are you personally aware of anything that you might refer to as "a peculiar treasure"? The expression has a lofty sound to it, but without actually conveying anything specific.

**But God was here being very specific!**

The problem is that the KJV translators didn't make an effort to actually translate the Hebrew word

“segullah”. No, they simply accepted a **Latin** word from the Latin Vulgate Translation and carried it over into the English language. In the Latin Vulgate verse 5 reads as follows:

si ergo audieritis vocem meam et custodieritis pactum meum eritis mihi **in peculium de cunctis populis** mea est enim omnis terra (Exodus 19:5 VULGATE)

(“De cunctis populis” means “of all people”.) The KJV translators simply took the Latin word “**peculium**” and turned it into the English word “**peculiar**”. But they made no effort to translate the Hebrew word “segullah”.

However, before we blame the Latin Vulgate for this mistranslation, we should note the following point.

The Latin noun “peculium” actually means “small savings, **private property**”. So the Latin noun “peculium” basically does mean the same as the Hebrew noun “segullah”; both words refer to private or personal property. So “peculium” is a correct translation into Latin for the Hebrew word “segullah”.

However, the problem is that the English word “**peculiar**”, derived from the Latin “peculium”, basically refers to “a distinctive or exclusive **characteristic**”. Our English word refers to characteristics or attributes. Today we wouldn’t think of “peculiar” expressing “**ownership of a people**”. Perhaps ownership of certain attributes or traits, yes, but ownership of people themselves? No, that’s not what comes to our minds when we see the expression “a peculiar people”.

The point is: this specific verse is what the Old Covenant was all about. While our English translation is somewhat vague, God in effect said to Israel:

**IF YOU WILL OBEY MY VOICE, THEN YOU SHALL BE MY PERSONAL PROPERTY ABOVE ALL OTHER NATIONS**, for all the earth is Mine.

(The expression “for all the earth is Mine” means that God can choose from amongst all nations, without any restrictions being imposed on God.)

That is the Old Covenant! It was very much a conditional covenant, introduced by the word “if”. God only accepts as His own “personal property” those people who obey God. God “owns” all people, those who obey God and also those who don’t obey God. But God does not view the people who do not obey God as His “own personal property”; they don’t qualify for that description.

Why not?

Those who don’t obey God are destined to be burned up in the lake of fire. And God does not view anything that is going to be burned up as “His own personal property”. The burning up in the lake of fire expresses a very emphatic rejection of all those people who will be in that lake of fire. God clearly

doesn't want any of those who will be destroyed by fire as His own personal property.

Okay, so God offered Israel the opportunity to become God's own personal property. But what does that mean in practical terms? What does being God's personal property look like? Is it just a symbolical term, without any specific application? Or does becoming God's personal property have concrete consequences?

These questions are answered in the next verse.

And you shall be unto Me **a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation**. These *are* the words which you shall speak unto the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:6)

The first thing we need to understand about this verse here is that becoming "a kingdom of priests" and "a holy nation" is **not a reference to anything in this present physical life!**

God was **not** offering the whole nation of Israel the opportunity to become "a kingdom of priests" in this present world. And neither would Israel be "a holy nation" in this present world, because "a holy nation" is a nation that can no longer sin. And God was not saying that He would take **the possibility** of sinning away from Israel.

So Israel was not going to be "a holy nation" in this present life. Rather, the condition "if you will obey My voice" makes clear that they were still very capable of disobeying God.

In Exodus 19:6 God was offering Israel a reward that applies to **a very specific status within the yet future Family of God**.

Now once God has decided to achieve a very specific result, then God is also going to achieve that result. So God has determined that within the Family of God there will be "a kingdom of priests" and "a holy nation". That result is going to be achieved.

If the human beings to whom God gives the opportunity to become that "kingdom of priests" within His Family don't meet God's conditions (i.e. they don't submit their lives to God; they don't obey God), then **God will use other human beings** to become that "kingdom of priests". The thing God has determined to achieve is going to be achieved, if not with one set of human beings, then with other people.

So what does "a kingdom of priests" refer to? Where does the Bible speak about something like this? That takes us to Revelation 5:10. The people who will be in the first resurrection are represented as singing (see verse 9):

And have made us unto our God **kings and priests**: and we shall reign on the earth. (Revelation 5:10)

The “kingdom of priests” reference in Exodus 19:6 is a very specific reference to the 144,000 who will make up the first resurrection. And those 144,000 in the first resurrection will be “a holy nation” within the Family of God. That “holy nation” will be structured into the 12 tribes of Israel, as identified in Revelation 7:4-8, and **together they will be “the Israel of God”** (see Galatians 6:16), meaning “those who as rulers have power with God”.

“The Israel of God” is **that part of God’s** (yet future) **Family** that is identified as “a holy nation” amongst all “the nations of them which are saved” (see Revelation 21:24), that will make up the whole Family of God.

**Why** will those in the first resurrection become “a **holy** nation”? What is it that confers the attribute of “holy” to someone or to something? It is **the presence** of God the Father and/or the presence of Jesus Christ, that makes something “holy”. If God is not in some way present, then someone or something cannot be holy.

Referring to all those who will be in the first resurrection as “a holy nation” tells us that they will dwell in the presence of God the Father and of Jesus Christ. They are the ones who in God’s yet future Kingdom will be living in the New Jerusalem with God. They will have the name “New Jerusalem” written on them (Revelation 3:12). God’s staggeringly huge Family will be structured into “nations”, with those in the first resurrection becoming “the nation of Israel”, and being citizens of the New Jerusalem; and all the others in God’s Family will be structured into “nations” that will live in all the other cities on the “New Earth”, and they will regularly come up to the New Jerusalem to appear before God the Father and before Jesus Christ (see again Revelation 21:24).

So the term “a holy nation” is one more reference to those who will be in the first resurrection and who will be citizens of the New Jerusalem.

Thus Exodus 19:5-6 spells out the real essence of the Old Covenant. Here is what we have:

- 1) After the flood God modified His original plan to now consist of **two distinct parts** for building the Family of God.
- 2) The first part (i.e. first **after** Jesus Christ has become the first of the firstfruits) consists of the 144,000 who will make up the entire first resurrection. All the individuals in this group will have been specifically “called”, or hand-picked to this opportunity by God the Father Himself. Amongst other things, they will also be known as “a kingdom of priests” and as “a holy nation”.
- 3) The second part consists of all the people from the millennium plus those from the second resurrection, who eventually attain unto salvation, and who will be identified within God’s Family as “the nations of them which are saved”. This second part will very likely consist of many billions of individuals.
- 4) The Old Covenant represents **God’s offer to Israel** to restrict God’s selection of the individuals

needed for **the first resurrection** to the people of Israel. At the time of Moses God did not intend to have any non-Israelites in the first resurrection, **provided** that sufficient numbers of Israelites would faithfully and willingly obey God.

So if enough Israelites had faithfully submitted themselves to God, then it would never in this age have come to the point where the gospel is preached in all the world, as a witness to all nations (see Matthew 24:14). If Israel had been faithful to God, then the preaching of God's truth, and the knowledge of God's plan of salvation for mankind, would have been restricted to the people of Israel, **exactly as it was during Old Testament times**. In that way all those who would be called by God to an opportunity to be in the first resurrection would have been physical Israelites.

### **That is what the Old Covenant was all about!**

God would not choose all Israelites for the first resurrection, certainly not. But God required that there would be a certain minimum number (unknown to us) of Israelites, who would faithfully obey God. That was essential for providing the manpower pool required, from which God would then call specific individuals.

It was because sufficient numbers of Israelites did not obey God, that God then "divorced" Israel, and then extended the opportunity to be called for a part in the first resurrection to all other nations as well. It is because sufficient numbers of Israelites were not prepared to obey God, that therefore the gospel of God's Kingdom is to be preached in all the world.

Exodus 19:5-6 are the key verses that identify the purpose of the Old Covenant. The subsequent section (i.e. Exodus 19:7 - Exodus 24:3) simply spells out and expands on some of the details regarding the Old Covenant.

As far as the mistranslation of "segullah" in verse 5 is concerned, a number of other translations have corrected this. A number of versions translate "segullah" as "My own possession" (e.g. ASV, Darby, New Heart English Bible, World English Bible, etc). The NRSV translates it as "My treasured possession". These translations all recognize that "segullah" refers to ownership.

So what was the Old Covenant all about?

The Old Covenant was **God's offer to Israel**, to restrict all the remaining people that God still had to call to make up the number of 144,000 for the first resurrection, to the physical descendants of the nations of Israel. God's condition was that sufficient numbers of Israelites would willingly obey God and His laws.

From the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God restricted His working with human beings to the

descendants of Jacob. This restriction continued all the way up to Jesus Christ's first coming. If sufficient numbers of Israelites had willingly obeyed God throughout that entire period, then this restriction would also have continued all the way to Jesus Christ's second coming. And then all the individuals in the first resurrection would also have been physical Israelites, in addition to being spiritual Israelites.

The Apostle Paul discusses this topic in general terms in Romans chapters 9-11. In chapter 11 Paul wrote:

And if **some of the branches be broken off**, and **you**, being a wild olive tree, **were grafted in among them**, and with them partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree; (Romans 11:17)

The point is that it wasn't possible for any non-Israelite branches to be grafted into the Israelite tree **until** some of the natural branches were broken off. The "breaking off" made space available for other branches to be grafted in. But if the natural branches had not been broken off, then there would not have been any space available for grafting any other branches into the Israelite tree.

Paul continued to reason:

You will say then, **The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in**. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear: (Romans 11:19-20)

There are only a limited number of spaces available for any other branches to be grafted into the Israelite tree. And if some natural branches had not been broken off, then no spaces whatsoever would have been available for any non-Israelite branches to be grafted in.

This system was established in Exodus 19:5-6. This system represents the Old Covenant. **It restricted access to salvation to only physical Israelites**. All non-Israelites were excluded from access to salvation in the first resurrection.

And that Old Covenant began to be terminated when God divorced both, the House of Israel and also the House of Judah. That termination was then finalized when Jesus Christ died for all human sins, and the veil in the temple was torn from the top to the bottom (see Matthew 27:51), representing access to God for all people of all nations. With that tearing of the veil the Old Covenant ceased to exist.

And that's the story of the Old Covenant.

Frank W Nelte