

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God. (Genesis 17:7-8)

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandment—the statutes, and the ordinances—that I am commanding you today. (Deuteronomy 7:9-11)

Yes, thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, 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. . . . I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 16:59-60, 62-63)

In this chapter we continue our examination of the central ideas that shaped the personal and religious identity of the followers of Yahweh in ancient Palestine. Where the previous chapter focused on the way the individual is defined in the Hebrew Bible (Who am I?), the present chapter will explore the theoretical framework that shaped the biblical authors' vision for their society (Who are we?), including their relations with people outside the group (Who are they?). Toward the end of the chapter we will examine how this theoretical outlook compares with what we know about real-world social conditions in ancient Palestine.

THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

As we have noted on several occasions, people in traditional societies derive much of their sense of identity from their membership in various social groups. The most basic identity group is the extended family. Here children are trained to accept the group's understanding of who they are as individuals, their role within the family, and the way they should relate to people within and outside the group.

Above the family in most traditional societies stands the clan, a grouping that includes several extended families and frequently the tribe, a unit consisting of several related (or sometimes unrelated) clans. Relationships among group members are less personal and immediate at this level, but the ideals and expectations associated

with these larger groups still play a vital role in defining the identity and obligations of the individuals and subgroups that make up the society.



Fig. 14.2. Both Hasidic Jews (top) and Sikhs (bottom) wear special clothing to mark their ethnic and religious identity.

The broadest identity group is the people (that is, the ethnic group), a nebulous entity whose influence on individual members can vary from symbolic identification to totalitarian control. Members are taught from an early age that loyalty to their own people is crucial to the survival of the group, especially in times of conflict with outsiders. In many societies this message is reinforced by a conviction that the people have a special relationship with the gods. This belief is then celebrated in public rituals that remind members of the importance and uniqueness of their group.

In addition to orienting the individual toward his or her rank and duties within the society, most such groups develop a set of identity markers that define who is and is not a member of the group. Almost any distinguishing feature can serve as a marker of group identity: physical features, records of family descent, modes of speech, styles of dress or behavior, social or religious customs, and so forth. The practical significance of this division of the world into “us” (the in-group) and “them” (the out-group) varies from culture to culture. In some cases the distinction is benign and inclusive: the in-group provides psychological and material resources for the individual while simultaneously encouraging a positive attitude toward people outside the group. In other cases the in-group becomes the breeding ground for **exclusivism**, intolerance, and even organized attacks against outsiders. Most groups fall somewhere between these extremes.

Because traditional societies view reality through a religious lens, they invariably develop religious explanations for the existence and expectations of the society and its subgroups. Often these explanations are passed on through stories about the group’s past. Some of these stories have historical foundations, while others do not. Their purpose is the same in either case: to instill in members an idealistic vision of how the group should operate by pointing to special times and people in the past where the vision was supposedly defined or realized. The same thing happens in our own day when politicians tell stories about the Founding Fathers in an effort to garner support for their ideas about what the country ought to be like. Of course, stories are not the only means of communicating these ideals; the same vision can be passed on through poems, songs, rituals, codes of conduct, and other modes of societal instruction.

To be effective, a religious interpretation of society must be able to capture the imaginations of the people who direct the social, political, and religious institutions of the society. A vision for society that fails to gain their approval will either die out or fragment the society into competing subgroups. Other factors that can interfere with the success of a particular vision for society include the presence of ideas or practices that differ significantly

from the accepted traditions; the absence of a reliable means of transmitting the vision; and the potentially divisive effects of social, ethnic, or religious rivalries within the leadership or the group as a whole.

THE IDEA OF COVENANT

When we ask whether the Hebrew Bible offers any kind of overarching religious vision for the society in which it was produced, one answer stands out clearly: the idea of covenant. A covenant is an agreement or contract that defines the relationship between two parties. In the ancient Near East, people and nations sometimes entered into covenants that spelled out how the two parties were supposed to act toward one another. An analogous situation arises today when nations ratify treaties or individuals sign a loan contract. Most covenants entailed an exchange of mutual promises, though the obligations could also be entirely one-sided. In cases where the two parties were social equals, the terms and conditions of the covenant were usually negotiated. In other cases (for example, alliances between stronger and weaker nations or individuals), the party with the greater power or social standing dictated the terms of the covenant.

Depending on the nature of the relationship, the duties of the covenant partners could be spelled out in great detail, as in a loan agreement, or framed in more general terms, as in marriage vows. Most covenants included severe penalties for anyone who violated their conditions. Sometimes these penalties were judicial in nature, but more often they took the form of **curses** to be inflicted by the gods, who were regarded as witnesses and enforcers of the covenant. As a rule, the establishment of a covenant was accompanied by some kind of ritual or other symbolic act—a sacrifice, an oath, an exchange of gifts, a meal.

Since the biblical authors viewed Yahweh as a personal being, it was only natural that they should turn to the metaphor of a covenant when describing the way in which Yahweh relates to his people. The covenant idea was attractive because it combined the legal notions of promise and obligation with the more personal images of

faithfulness and loyalty to a covenant partner. Again and again the biblical authors insist that the covenant between Yahweh and his people must be viewed not as a set of legalistic duties but as a deeply personal relationship based on mutual love and commitment. Some of the prophets go so far as to depict Yahweh's covenant with Israel as a marriage and to condemn Israel's violations of the covenant as a form of adultery.

The importance of the covenant image to the biblical authors is apparent from the frequency with which it appears in the Hebrew Bible. The word *covenant* is used more than 250 times to describe agreements between Yahweh and humans, and the concept is often presupposed even when the term is absent. The idea is prominent in all three sections of the Hebrew Bible. The laws of Torah are presented as the terms of a special covenant relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people. The prophets condemn the people of Israel and Judah for not living up to their side of the divine covenant. The narrative books attribute the military defeats of Israel and Judah to their



Fig. 14.3. (top) A Canaanite stela of two men settling a contract; (bottom) an ancient contract engraved on a stone tablet.

unwillingness to abide by the terms of their covenant with Yahweh. The psalms honor Yahweh as the covenant deity of Israel and plead with him to assist his people as an expression of his loyalty to the covenant. Only the wisdom books make little use of the covenant image (see chapter 37). Virtually all scholars would agree that the idea of covenant lies at the heart of the social and religious vision of the Hebrew Bible.

While there are stories that speak of Yahweh having a covenantal relationship with an individual or family, the majority of the references to covenant in the Hebrew Bible concern Yahweh's relationship with the descendants of Abraham. This relationship sets the people of Israel apart from every other people group on earth. Nations that stand outside of this covenant are not condemned by Yahweh, but neither are they his people. This privilege is reserved for Israel alone.

From time to time Yahweh uses other nations to carry out his purposes for his covenant people. Many verses speak of Yahweh sending foreign armies to punish his people for violating his covenant (Deuteronomy 28:49-57; Joshua 7:10-13; Judges 2:10-23; 2 Kings 17:16-23; Isaiah 8:5-10; Jeremiah 4:5-18) or to conquer their oppressors and free them from bondage (Isaiah 45:1-8; Jeremiah 50:1-5; Zephaniah 2:13-15). Yet never does Yahweh enter into a covenant with any of these nations. Instead, once they have fulfilled their purpose, he pronounces judgment against them for the harm that they have done to his people (Isaiah 10:12-34; 47:1-15; Jeremiah 50:8—51:58; Nahum 1:12-13). At best these other nations have a temporary role in Yahweh's plan.

A few passages suggest that Yahweh's ultimate intention is to incorporate all of humanity into his covenant people (Genesis 12:3; Psalm 87:4; Isaiah 42:6-7; 49:6; 56:3-7; Micah 4:1-4), but this is not a central theme in the Hebrew Bible. Not until the rise of Christianity (and later Islam) did the idea of a universal people of God become an integral part of the Western tradition.

A STORY OF COVENANTS

The idea of covenant is central to the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible. The story is structured around a series of covenants that Yahweh is said to have made with humans. At the heart of this narrative lies the covenant that Yahweh established with the people whom he rescued from Egypt, the ancestors of the people known as Israel. As the narrative progresses, the people of Israel and Judah (especially their kings) are evaluated according to their faithfulness to the terms of the covenant. Eventually they are punished for their failure to live up to their side of the covenant. A brief overview of the way in which the concept of covenant is developed in the narrative books will demonstrate the centrality of this idea to the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible.

1. The idea of a covenant between Yahweh and humans is probably implied in the creation story in Genesis 2–3, where Yahweh commands the first human to tend the garden and to refrain from eating the fruit of a particular tree. No penalty for violation is stated, but the first man and woman are cursed by the deity when they fail to follow his commands (see chapter 16). Curiously, Yahweh's obligations are never identified; perhaps we are to assume that he has already fulfilled his side of the relationship by providing a perfect place for the man and woman to live.

2. The earliest explicit use of the term *covenant* appears in the flood story in Genesis 6–9 (see chapter 16). In Genesis 6:18, God says that he intends to establish a covenant with Noah, the only person out of the entire human race who has remained faithful to God. In Genesis 9, this covenant is extended to include every living thing on earth, for all time. The covenant appears to be one-sided: God promises never again to flood the earth (Genesis 9:8-17) while laying no obligations upon Noah. The fact that Noah is described as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” who “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9) seems to suggest that no conditions were required because Noah was already living the kind of life that God desires.

3. The story of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12–23) marks the first instance of a covenant that involves only a limited portion of the human race (see chapter 17). The

covenant is instituted in three stages over a fourteen-year period of Abraham's life: its content is foreshadowed in Genesis 12:2-3, formalized in Genesis 15:7-21, and confirmed in Genesis 17:1-14. As with Noah, the covenant is heavily one-sided. Yahweh promises to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation and to give them the land in which Abraham is currently dwelling, and he assures them that he will be their God and they will be his people forever. All other nations will be judged according to the way they treat Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham's side of the covenant is framed in very general terms: "Walk before me [Yahweh], and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). These words recall the language that was used in Genesis 6:9 to describe Noah's character. Elsewhere the author states that Abraham's "trust" in Yahweh's promises was the basis for Yahweh regarding him as "righteous" (Genesis 15:6). The passage seems to suggest that Yahweh did not need to spell out the terms of the covenant because he knew that Abraham would uphold his end of the relationship. Abraham does receive one instruction from Yahweh: he and his descendants are to circumcise all of their male children as a sign of the covenant (Genesis 17:10-14). But this act only marks Abraham's descendants as members of the covenant people; it does not say what Yahweh expects from them under the covenant. A similar lack of specificity concerning the human side of the covenant can be seen in the passages where Yahweh confirms his promises to Abraham's son Isaac (Genesis 26:1-5) and his grandson Jacob (Genesis 28:13-15; 35:9-13).

4. The most important covenant in the Hebrew Bible—if we judge by the amount of attention that it receives in the biblical narrative—is the one that Yahweh makes at Mount Sinai with the people whom he had recently rescued from Egypt (Exodus 19–24). This covenant differs from the earlier ones in several ways: (a) it involves a group of people from the start, not an individual and his family (Exodus 19:3-5; 24:1-7; Deuteronomy 4:9-14; 5:1-31; 29:1-15); (b) it includes a long list of rules that the human participants are expected to follow in order to express their devotion to Yahweh and his covenant (as spelled out in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy); (c) it makes human obedience a condition for receiving the blessings of the covenant (Exodus 19:5; 23:22; Leviticus 26:3; Deuteronomy 4:40; 6:1-3; 7:12-16; 28:1-14); and (d) it includes an explicit list of penalties for violation (Leviticus 26:14-45; Deuteronomy 28:15-68).



Fig. 14.4. Raphael, *The Presentation of the Tablets of Law to the Hebrews*

When these differences are taken into account, we find an understanding of covenant that places substantially more responsibility on the human participants than the others that we have encountered. Despite the fact that the covenant is framed as an agreement between Yahweh and his people as a whole, the majority of its regulations are directed toward individuals. Obedience to these guidelines is necessary for Yahweh's people to be assured of the deity's blessings and to avoid his curses. Implicit in this interpretation of covenant is the conviction that Yahweh cares as much about the mundane activities of ordinary individuals—what they eat, who they marry, how they treat their animals, and so forth—as he does about the specialized deeds of priests and rulers. Everyone's actions matter; everyone is responsible for upholding the covenant.

Today, of course, many people would resist such a notion of a deity who seeks to control every aspect of life, since it runs counter to modern ideas of personal freedom and autonomy. Yet for the predominately peasant population to whom these commands were addressed, such a vision of Yahweh's relationship with his people could have served to enhance their sense of personal identity and self-worth, since it elevated their daily activities to the level of divine service. They, like the priests, could do things that would bring divine blessing upon the nation. This belief that the deity cares as much about the actions of ordinary peasants as about the deeds of the religious and political elites distinguished the biblical system of laws from many other religious systems of its day. It would be wrong, however, to regard this as a democratization of religion, since the laws still came to the peasants through the hands of the religious elites who maintained control over their content (see chapter 22).

Who were the individuals to whom this understanding of covenant was addressed? On the narrative level, the Exodus covenant pertains most immediately to the generation that ratified it in the desert (Exodus 24:1-8). Only in the book of Deuteronomy do we see clear references to the covenant being binding on their descendants (Deuteronomy 4:37-40; 6:1-2; 10:14-15; 12:28; 29:29; 30:6, 19; 32:46). When we turn to the books of the prophets and the psalms, on the other hand, we find dozens of verses that presuppose that the Exodus covenant is relevant to the entire people of Israel and Judah. Many

of these verses contain fierce condemnations of people whom the authors believe are not living up to the terms of the covenant (Psalm 50:16-23; Isaiah 24:4-13; Jeremiah 11:1-11; Ezekiel 44:5-9). Passages such as these show clearly that there were people in ancient Palestine who believed that the story of the Exodus covenant presented an attractive social and religious vision that could serve as a framework for reforming their society (including the behavior of individual members) in troubled times. The identity and social location of these people cannot be determined from the narrative itself, but other verses in the Hebrew Bible might help us to identify them more closely (see below).

5. The other major covenant in the Hebrew Bible is the one that Yahweh is said to have made with David, the great king of Judah, and his descendants (2 Samuel 7). This covenant is important not because it is mentioned often by the biblical authors (it is not), but because it provided religious justification for the ongoing rule of the Davidic dynasty and later became the basis for speculation about the coming of an ideal king from the line of David, sometimes called the Messiah. Like the other covenants that Yahweh made with individuals, this one consists primarily of divine promises with no clear list of obligations on the part of the human partner.

According to 2 Samuel 7, Yahweh promised to bring honor to David's name and to maintain his family on the throne of Judah forever. Yahweh would treat the kings of Judah as his sons, loving and protecting them but also correcting them when they do wrong. This prophetic oracle served two purposes at once in the biblical narrative: it legitimized David's shaky claim to the throne (a claim resisted by the sons of Saul, his predecessor) and protected his heirs against subsequent challenges. The passage also sets up a close link between the family of David and the Jerusalem temple by showing Yahweh authorizing the construction of the sanctuary by David's son and successor, Solomon. This link was then used to justify royal control over the temple and to elicit priestly support for the kings. It is no accident that a number of the psalms that were recited in the Jerusalem temple celebrate the king's special covenant with Yahweh (Psalms 2:1-9; 18:46-50; 21:1-7; 45:1-9; 72:1-17; 78:70-72; 89:19-37; 132:10-18).



Fig. 14.5. King David converses with God about the covenant God promised to establish with his family in this image from a sixteenth-century monastic prayer book.

6. The Hebrew Bible also refers to several other covenants that humans are said to have made with Yahweh. Most are mentioned only once, and few offer any details about what the author had in mind in crafting the passage. According to Joshua 24:25, Joshua “made a covenant with the people” on Yahweh’s behalf and “made

statutes and ordinances for them.” The passage says nothing about what this covenant might have entailed, though it suggests that the materials that Joshua gave to the people were incorporated into the laws of Torah. On the other hand, it might simply be referring to a covenant renewal ceremony of the type that we find in several other texts that speak of people making a covenant with Yahweh (2 Kings 11:17-18; 23:1-3; 2 Chronicles 15:10-15; 29:8-10). A similar idea can be seen in a handful of verses that speak rather loosely of people making a covenant when they promise to do something that they believe Yahweh wants from them in a particular situation (Ezra 10:1-4; Jeremiah 34:8-18). Finally, we should note a few passages that allude to a belief that Yahweh has a special covenant with the families whose members were chosen to serve as priests and **Levites** (priestly assistants) at the Jerusalem temple (Numbers 25:10-13; Nehemiah 13:29; Jeremiah 33:20-22; Malachi 2:4-8). The Torah contains several texts that describe the selection of the priestly families (Exodus 28-29; Leviticus 8-9;

Numbers 18), but the term *covenant* is used in none of them, so it is hard to be sure precisely what the people who referred to such a covenant had in mind.

7. The idealistic quality of the covenant idea comes through clearly in several passages from the books of the prophets that speak of a future era when Yahweh will establish a new covenant or a covenant of peace with his people. These verses add a note of hope to the often critical words of the Hebrew prophets. This hope for a new



Fig. 14.6. Robert Walker Weir, *The Embarkation of the Pilgrims from Delfthaven in Holland*. The Pilgrims were one of many Christian groups who believed they had a special covenant with the God of the Bible.

covenant proved useful during the Exile, when the people of Judah were questioning whether Yahweh still cared for them in light of their devastating defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. In this context, the words of the prophets offered a comforting vision of the social, psychological, and spiritual renewal of the people of Judah. They spoke of a future time when Yahweh would rescue Judah (and Israel?) from foreign domination and restore the people's independence, possibly under the leadership of an ideal Davidic king (Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-16; 16:5; Jeremiah 23:5-8; 30:8-11; 33:12-26; 50:4-5; Ezekiel 34:20-31; 37:15-28; Hosea 3:4-5). At this time Yahweh would enter into a new covenant with his people. The content of this covenant is described in relational terms: Yahweh will forgive his people, watch over them, and bless them with peace and prosperity, and they will love, honor, and obey him with wholehearted devotion (Isaiah 55:3-5; 59:21; 61:7-9; Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:36-41; Ezekiel 16:59-63;

34:25-31; 37:26-28; Hosea 2:16-23). Never again will Yahweh have cause to hand his people over to judgment; this new covenant will truly last forever.

The value of such a vision for a group of people laboring under the physical and psychological burdens of military defeat and foreign rule is obvious. The dissolution of their national identity posed tremendous threats to the personal identities of the people of Judah. If they were to avoid losing their collective identity, a new social vision was needed. To gain acceptance, however, this vision had to be consistent with the beliefs that they already held. The idea of a new covenant was well suited for this purpose, since it drew upon a theme that was familiar in at least some Yahwistic circles. In the hands of the prophets, it took on a nearly irresistible appeal, since it promised the exiles that their world would one day be as it had been, only better. This message was perfectly suited for encouraging a disheartened people to hold on

to their national and ethnic identity at a time when the future of their nation and people appeared bleak.

Buried within this expectation of a new covenant was an implicit call for religious reform and renewal: those who hoped to enjoy the benefits of the new era must be prepared to serve Yahweh without reservation when the time arrived. This included setting aside the worship of other gods. For those who had not previously served Yahweh in this manner, the prophets' vision of a new covenant included a demand for a profound change of identity. If they persisted in honoring other deities alongside or instead of Yahweh, they would be relegated to the status of outsiders and excluded from the community. Some of the laws of Torah even called for their religion to be suppressed and their families killed (Exodus 23:23-24; Leviticus 20:1-8; Numbers 25:1-5; Deuteronomy 4:15-28; 7:1-6; 12:1-4). Clearly this vision of a new covenant would not have been welcomed by everyone in ancient Palestine.

EXERCISE 27

Read the following passages and notice what each one says or implies about the nature and meaning of covenant in the Hebrew Bible. Then summarize any common themes that you see recurring across the various passages.

- Genesis 9:8-17
- Genesis 17:1-14
- Deuteronomy 5:1-22
- Psalm 89:19-37
- Jeremiah 31:31-37

PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT

Once we see how well this vision of a new covenant works to encourage a dispirited group of exiles to maintain their faith in Yahweh, we begin to notice a similar pattern in other passages that employ the covenant metaphor. In the story of Noah, the audience is told that God expects them to live righteous and obedient lives even when everyone

around them follows a different standard. In the story of Abraham, they are reminded that they are a special people, chosen by Yahweh out of all the nations of the earth to follow his ways. Both stories implicitly challenged the people of Judah to hold on to their traditions and resist the temptation to adopt the culture and values of their Babylonian and Persian overlords. The story of the Exodus covenant told them how to do this. This story claimed that Yahweh had given their ancestors a series of rules and regulations that showed them how Yahweh wanted them to live. Following these rules would help them to remain separate from the people and cultures around them and so preserve their identity. It would also ensure that they stayed in Yahweh's good graces and avoided displeasing him. In time, their faithful behavior would motivate Yahweh to rescue them from their foreign oppressors. The story of the Davidic covenant would have added further fuel to their hopes for the future restoration of their nation.

The fact that the covenant ideal speaks so eloquently to the needs of the people of Judah under Babylonian and Persian rule has led some scholars (the group known as minimalists; see chapter 9) to suggest that the idea of covenant was created precisely for this purpose. Scholars who follow this view dismiss the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Moses as pious fictions created to communicate a religious vision to the people of Judah in a time of trouble. As they see it, nothing in these stories has any historical value, including the idea of a **preexilic** covenant between Yahweh and the ancestors of the people of Israel and Judah. References to the covenant in the Psalms and Prophets are editorial additions or generic references that say nothing about any earlier belief in a covenant between Yahweh and Israel or Judah.

The chief problem with this interpretation is that it fails to explain why such a novel concept would have been embraced by the people for whom it was supposedly created. While it is true that crises can give rise to radical new ideas, most groups and individuals turn to the security of established traditions to carry them through difficult times. As a new idea, the claim that Yahweh had established a covenant with Judah's ancestors would have raised more questions than it answered, since anyone

could see that Yahweh had not protected Judah from foreign conquest. Why then should they believe that Yahweh would assist them in the future? The frequent use of covenant language in the Psalms and Prophets is also an embarrassment to this position. The effort to dismiss all of these verses as later additions falls apart under scrutiny.

The best way to make sense of the popularity of the covenant idea in the Hebrew Bible is to presume that the idea had a significant history in Yahwistic circles prior to the Babylonian conquest. This belief would have been shaken by events surrounding and following the Exile. Those who adhered to the idea would have felt compelled to defend Yahweh against charges of unfaithfulness or impotence. To do this, they had to show how the past, present, and future made sense when interpreted through the lens of covenant. To explain why these tragic events had come upon the people of Judah, they constructed a narrative that charged their ancestors with being unfaithful to the covenant and thus incurring Yahweh's judgment. To show what their compatriots should do now, they compiled a collection of laws that spelled out how the people of Yahweh should live in order to fulfill their side of the covenant. To assuage people's doubts about the future, they pointed to sayings of the prophets that anticipated the coming of a future era, including a new covenant, when all of their current troubles would come to a resounding end. In short, they took the materials and traditions that they had inherited from the past and reshaped them into a collection of texts that would address the needs of their own day. These texts became the heart of the collection that we now call the Hebrew Bible.

Apparently their efforts were successful, since the idea of a covenant between Yahweh and his people, embodied in the laws of Torah, was one of the central concepts that defined the identity of the people of Judah in the postexilic period. Not everyone accepted the idea; the Hebrew Bible indicates that there were people who continued to worship other gods alongside or instead of Yahweh through the end of the biblical era (see chapters 21 and 35). But the very popularity of the notion shows that there were many people who found the idea of covenant

useful for making sense of the world and their place in it. In this concept they found a vision for social and individual life that gave them answers to the classic questions asked by people everywhere: Who am I? Who are we? Who are they?

The impact of this concept on the history of Western civilization has been vast. The idea that God has entered into a special covenant with a group of humans became a dominant theme in the history of Judaism and Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam. Through their influence it shaped the thinking of other groups who believed that they were the recipients of such a covenant, such as the American Puritans. In a similar way, the vision of a future era of peace and plenty has been appropriated by countless apocalyptic groups over the centuries who expected this hope to be realized during their lifetime. Finally, the belief that the king has a special covenant with God became the basis for the medieval idea of the divine right of kings that was used to justify the rule of monarchs until fairly recent times. The scribes and scholars who framed this idea in ancient Palestine had no idea how powerful their vision would prove to be.

CONCLUSION

The biblical authors and editors were neither philosophers nor social theorists, but their writings contain serious reflections about the nature of human society. Since they were writing from a Yahwistic perspective, it was inevitable that their vision for the ideal society would be framed in religious terms.

At the heart of their thinking was the belief that Yahweh periodically entered into special covenants with individuals and groups whom he chose to favor with his affection. The terms of these covenants were dictated by Yahweh, but it was presumed that both parties would abide by their conditions. Faithfulness to the covenant led to material success for Yahweh's human partners, while repeated violations could bring divine judgment. People who accepted the covenant idea tended to interpret significant events as the acts of a deity who was seeking to further the purposes of the covenant.

The most important covenant in the Hebrew Bible is the Exodus covenant that called for obedience to the laws of Torah. The early history of this particular model of covenant can no longer be traced, but it seems to have been known in some form during the era of the prophets. Its popularity increased after the Babylonian conquest, when it helped many people to make sense of the troubling events that had befallen them and restored their hope for the future. Its chief value lay in the way it linked the ordinary activities of individuals with the identity and survival of the group.

EXERCISE 28

Read the following passages that speak of Yahweh's covenant with Israel and think about how each passage might have spoken to the needs and concerns of people affected by the physical, psychological, and religious trauma of the exilic and postexilic periods.

- Genesis 15:1-21
- Deuteronomy 30:1-10
- Psalm 111:1-10
- Jeremiah 11:1-8
- Ezekiel 37:15-28
- Hosea 2:16-23



Fig. 15.1. Storytellers play a vital role in virtually all traditional societies, as represented here by a Native American storyteller.