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Chester's Covenant Theology

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'Correcting' the Text

That the plaies Comonly Called the whitson plaies At Midsomer next Comynge shalbe sett furth and plaied in such orderly maner and sorte as the same haue ben Accostomed with such correction and amendment as shalbe thought Convenient by the said Maior.¹

The resolution of Chester's Common Council in 1575 makes it clear that the text performed in what proved to be the final performance of the civic plays would be 'amended'. In fact, the play-text had evidently been 'amended' on several occasions during the sixteenth century. The Puritan minister Christopher Goodman, writing from Chester to the Archbishop of York in 1572, comments that the plays contain theologically unacceptable material despite previous attempts at correction:

For albeit divers have gone about the correction of the same at sundry times & mended divers things, yet hath it not been done by such as are by authority allowed, nor the same their corrections view-ed & approved according to order, nor yet so played for the most part as they have been corrected.²

And evidence of such reworking is found also in the Post-Reformation Banns, both explicitly, in lines such as:

how Criste from deathe arose the thirde daye –
not altered in menye poyntes from the olde fashion³

and also in comparison to the Pre-Reformation Banns, whose play of the Assumption

of the Virgin Mary is absent from the later listing. Chester's text seems to have been frequently rescruinised at local level, possibly in response to changing doctrine and to vocal Puritan opposition from the city's pulpits.

It is not possible now to trace the layers of 'correction' in the extant cyclic manuscripts, all copies of a common exemplar which bore the marks of earlier alterations.⁴ The plays as we have them seem still in some respects to contain material which would substantiate the claim of the Proclamation of c.1531-32 to be 'for the Augmentacion & incres [of the holy & Catholick] faith of o[ur S]auyour iesu Crist'.⁵

Matters such as the Petrine succession (Play 18, Appendix 1D, 72-95), the role of the Virgin Mary (Play 24, 613-16), and the doctrine of Purgatory (Play 24, 69-72, 97-100, etc) can still be discerned in the text, and one can only assume that these were matters addressed at some stage in the 'correction' of the performance text.⁶ Certainly, in writing in defence of the Mayor of 1575, Sir John Savage, to the privy Council, his successor, the Puritan Henry Hardware, addresses his supporting document confidently 'To all true christen people'.⁷ But within the extant manuscripts it is possible to detect a recurrent strain of covenant theology which could only have gained ground during the sixteenth century.

Salvation History and Covenant Theology

Chester's plays differ from those of York, and indeed from the other large play-collections of Towneley and N-Town, which can usefully be considered a species of 'Salvation History'.⁸ 'Salvation History' became established through the influence of a German Protestant theologian, J.C. von Hofmann, in the nineteenth century and can be summed up as follows:

God has made a progressive revelation of Himself and His will in Scripture. The interpreter therefore must expect a organic growth in the deposit of Biblical faith.⁹

That revelation is reflected in episodes which seem to appear in any cyclic text or play-list – The Creation and Fall of Man, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the Law, and the birth, ministry and Passion of Christ. The resulting drama centres upon issues of understanding and obedience and the related concerns of spiritual and worldly power and authority. York and Towneley in particular develop

these themes in the direction of social satire and comment.

But history as written by the Jews is one of covenants between God and Man. A covenant is an agreement which is made between two parties and confirmed by a sign or significant happening. 'Covenant' in general usage refers to a legally binding contract, but in Jewish scriptures that contract also constitutes a way of representing the relationship between God and Man, a contract made by God with a named individual which places God's limitless, and potentially arbitrary, power on a rational and human basis.

God imposed rational and constitutional limitations on his unlimited caprice, offered himself as a ready constitutional partner to each believer, prescribed moral duties not directfully and violently but with each Christian's reasonable and willing consent.¹⁰

For some Rabbinical teachers, the covenant began in Eden, where God granted Adam power over all created things in return for obedience to Him.¹¹ Adam broke that covenant, but God continued to covenant with His creation, making new covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses, among others – the patriarchs whose dealings with God are dramatised in salvation history. But salvation history ignores the covenant-aspect of the narrative.

Thus, in reward for Noah's obedience, God agreed that He would never again destroy the Earth by water, and as a sign of that agreement he created the rainbow. He renewed the covenant with Abraham in recognition of Abraham's obedience in presenting a part of his spoils to Melchizedek, priest and king of Salem;¹² his gift was fertility and land, and the sign was circumcision.¹³ And He renewed His covenant with Moses, who had obeyed Him, providing protection in return for obedience to the Law; the sign there was the observance of the Sabbath with its ritual offerings.¹⁴ These covenants represent the Old Law of works, written variously – in the air (Noah); on the flesh (Abraham); on stone (Moses). But the Old Testament envisages a New Covenant of grace, written in the heart of Man which, in the New Testament, is sealed by the blood of Christ.

After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jeremiah 31 v. 33).¹⁵

It is this covenant within the heart that provides the New Testament and Christian extension of the Jewish covenant.

During the sixteenth century in England interest in covenant theology revived. It appealed to those of Puritan persuasion as a way of redefining the relationship of Man and God, since, at its most extreme, it removed the perceived obstacles of bishops and Church and brought the individual into a direct and personal contract with his Maker and Redeemer. It therefore became, by the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a dominant organising principle for Puritan thought; but during the period when Chester's plays were being 'corrected' and performed covenant theology remained merely one theological theme among several. Only from seventeenth-century theologians, such as William Ames, did it develop into a doctrine of pervasive force, structuring not only relationships between Man and God but also the contract between subject and monarch.¹⁶

Yet even in embryo the doctrine has a potential political dimension, epitomising the transition from the feudal monarchy of the Middle Ages to the constitutional monarchy of the later sixteenth century. It belongs with a greater delegation of power, which contrasts with the hierarchical structures that spring from the descent of power as commissioned by Christ to St Peter and thereafter recommissioned to each of St. Peter's successors in the papacy. The power to loose and to bind remained central to the theocratic view of authority in the Middle Ages; it placed the monarch's power as divinely committed through the Church, but left that power unassailable from below. The covenant, in contrast, set obligations upon both monarch and subject on analogy to the contracts of obligation which God had confirmed with Man.

Christopher Goodman, a learned theologian, would have appreciated the allusion to the covenant. Covenant theology permeates the thinking of his close friend and constant correspondent John Knox, emerging in response to Mary's accession and Knox's exile.¹⁷ In his *Admonition or Warning* of 1554,¹⁸ Knox asserts:

This is the league betwixt God and us, that he alone sall be oure God, and we salbe his pepill: He sall communicat with us of his graces and gudness: We sall serve him in bodie and spreit: He salbe oure saifgaard frome death and dampnacioun; We sall seik him and sall flie from all strange Godis.

The sense of God's people as chosen, the elect, carried with it the obligation to remain apart from the idolaters. A more moderate tradition in England had been worked out,

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typified in the words of John Hooper on the Ten Commandments:

The contract whereof binds God to aid and succour, keep and preserve, warrant and defend man from all ill, both of body and soul, and at the last to give him eternal bliss and everlasting felicity. Man is bound of the other part to obey, serve, and keep God's commandments, to love him, honour him, and fear him above all things . . . So that it was fully agreed upon, that God should be their God, and they his servants, with certain conditions, containing the office of them both.¹⁹

This view of the commandments as contract rather than imperative contrasts with the traditional teaching of obedience in cycles of salvation history.

Covenant Theology in Chester's Plays

Chester's cycle has been revised by one or more scholars of considerable learning who has underlined the covenant potential of the plays, incorporating material and details not found in other extant cycles. As Philip Zarrilli has pointed out in a revealing interpretation of Play 3, 'The Flood':

Of the Wakefield, Chester and N-town *Noah* plays, only the Chester version includes the 'covenant' motif as an integral part of the dramatic action.²⁰

At its conclusion God makes his peace with Man by sending the rainbow as a sign that the world will never again be destroyed by water (3/309-24). But Chester moderates that obvious closure through what is effectively a coda, a long address by God to Noah. Noah has proved his obedience to God both by building the Ark and also, significantly and dramatically, by sacrificing to God on his disembarkation (267-68) in recognitions of his elect state (305-07). God therefore gives Noah a dietary concession, and warning:

of cleane bestes nowe, lesse and more,
I give you leave to eate –
save blood and fleshe bothe in feare

of [wronge] dead carryen that is here. (287-90)

Then He confirms a 'forwarde' (301) both with Noah 'for thy sake' and hence with all his descendants, that He will never again destroy the Earth with water. God finally produces the rainbow,

by verey tokeninge that you may see
that such vengeance shall cease (311-12)

and explains it. Here God makes a formal agreement with one individual on behalf of all, and expressly as a reward for Noah's obedience. The dietary concession, which to the Chester audience must have seemed a quaint touch of ethnicity, is the ongoing sign of that agreement, technically appropriate.

The rainbow is explained in some detail:

The stringe is torned towardes you
and towardes me is bente the bowe (321-22)

It is a war-bow, turned away from Man towards God, and thus, as Zarrilli points out, acknowledges the nature of the covenant made:

The obligation is not upon man, but upon God for the sustaining
of the new creation.²¹

The covenant is unconditional. Here the sign is written in air, by the rainbow, and marked by the ritual act of meat-eating, with its stress upon the nature of the beasts that might be eaten.

Play 4, the Barber-Surgeons' play of Abraham continues this covenant theme. Other plays on the corresponding episode could be called 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' and present it either for its typological import or as an exemplum of obedience. Typology is implicit in the York play, where Isaac is aged thirty, the age of Christ, and therefore willingly chooses to submit to sacrifice. The exemplum is represented by the Brome Play, generally agreed to be the forerunner of the corresponding section of Chester's play.²² It is not clear whether the play was taken verbatim from the cycle or has been adapted for production as a self-contained play. Brome presents the sacrifice as a test of Abraham's obedience set up by God and the Doctor finally uses it to urge patience upon bereaved and mourning mothers.

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Our cycle play, however, prefaces the sacrifice of Isaac by a series of episodes, unique among our extant plays, which show the establishment and reaffirmation of God's covenant with Abraham, another agreement with an individual for his faith which has implications for his descendants. Abraham, like Noah, offers to God. Having overcome four kings to rescue Lot:

the teathe I will give him of this
as skylle is that I doe (4/35-36)

the recipient being Melchizedek, priest and king of Salem. This obedience pleases God, who promises to be Abraham's 'helpe and thy succour' (146), and this emboldens Abraham to ask for an heir and the covenant is made:

and here a forwarde I make with thee (171)

promising fertility and lands. As its sign, Abraham will be circumcised, and all male children on the eighth day (178). Like Noah, Abraham acknowledges their elect state:

for therby knowe thou maye
thy folke from other men (187-88)

The sign is written on the flesh as circumcision. This covenant is interpreted by the Expositor as prefiguring baptism

As followeth nowe verament,
soe was this in the owld testamente.
But when Christe dyed away hit went,
and then beganne baptysme. (197-200)

The covenant therefore descends to us all today:

Alsoe God a promise behett us here (201)

Baptism was read by Puritans as a renewal of the covenant between the individual and God:

Baptism is a Sacrament by which such as are within the covenant

are washed with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, that being thus engrafted into Christ they may have perpetual fellowship with him. Within the covenant are all the seed of Abraham, or the seed of the faithful.²³

Isaac's sacrifice is separate from this covenant preface and is interpreted in typological and exemplary terms by the Expositor (4/460-83).

Play 5, the Cappers' Play of 'Moses and Balaam', begins with the presentation of the tables of the Law, the third covenant, written in stone. The recital of the Law is a feature of all the cycles, but in York and Towneley it is given to the infant Christ before the Doctors in the Temple and in N-town, God delivers the tables from the burning bush, and tells Moses to preach them to the people. In Chester God first addresses the individual with whom the covenant is made, and then the people on behalf of whom Moses makes it:

Moyses, my servant leeffe and dere,
and all my people that bine here (5/1-2)

again embracing the contemporary play-audience. He reminds them of the Israelites' obedience in following Moses into the desert in the Exodus:

yee wotten in Egipte when yee weare
out of thraldome I you brought. (5/3-4)

Moses is evidently holding the tables, since the Expositor says that he broke them in anger at the Israelites' subsequent disobedience (55-56). But we are told that Moses carved out other tables:

The which tables [shryned] were
after, as God can Moyses leare
and that [shryne] to hym was dear
therafter evermore (61-64)

and Moses mimes the inscribing of the second set of tables on stone. These lines are the only reference to the Ark of Covenant in our cycles, and perhaps suggest that the Ark is a stage property in which the tables were ceremonially deposited. Finally Moses emphasises to the people the ritual act to mark this covenant, the observance

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of the Sabbath with due formality. As he leaves and Balak enters, we learn of the consequences of that covenant in the victorious march of the Israelites towards the land of Moab.

Such is the power of God that Balaam is unable to curse them but is compelled by God to declare their elect status ('that people that God blessed hasse', 281) and to prophesy that a star will rise on Judah – symbolically the Magi's star, allegorically Christ – which points on to the Nativity and the 'light to lighten the Gentiles' (320-27).

Once Balaam has uttered his Messianic prophecy, Balak announces that he is resigned to the fact that he cannot defeat God and prepares to leave. But Balaam suggests that God's wrath could be visited upon the Israelites by getting the most attractive Moabite women to seduce their young men and persuade them to abandon their faith in exchange for their favours. The sequel is abridged by a long speech from the Expositor (388-455) which explains that Balaam's plan succeeded and Moses proved powerless to prevent the young men. But:

Anon Phinees, a yonge men devowte,
captayne hee was of that whole rowte,
and of these wretches, without dowbt
xxiiii thowsand the slewe.
And then God was well content
with Phinees for his good intent (428-33)

This reference conceals another covenant allusion. Phinehas' intervention is described in Numbers 25 vv. 7-13. Phinehas was the son of Eleazar who in turn was the son of the high priest Aaron. When the Israelites succumbed to the Moabite temptation, he killed an Israelite prince called Zimri and his Moabite wife, stabbing her through the abdomen with his javelin, and so deflected God's wrath from Israel. In return for his obedience God covenanted with him:

Wherefore I say, behold, I give to him my covenant of peace; and he shall have it, and his people after him, even the covenant of the everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God and made an atonement for the children of Israel.

His virtue was his zeal.²⁴ This covenant was distinct from those discussed above, the priestly covenant given to the tribe of Levi and specifically to the house of Aaron

(Numbers 18 and 19).

The Phinehas coda seems the more significant because an alternative version of Play 5 exists which has a different ending. The version copied by James Miller and his fellow scribes in 1607, and the one usually anthologised, follows Balaam's Messianic prophecy with a sequence of seven Jewish prophets whose words were traditionally explained as references to various moments of Christ's life, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension. In all this, Balak is silent, but at the end he utters his parting quatrain of resignation and the play concludes. The version which I have quoted, from the other manuscripts, concludes with an indication that Play 5 ended the day's performance. Possibly the difference between the two versions arises from a new division of the performance. The 'Group' version stresses the triumph of the Israelites, whereas Miller's version bridges the time between the last Old Testament play and an immediately following 'Nativity' Play. Even so, the Phinehas episode suggests consciousness of the recurring covenant theme and, if the division relates to the four-day performance of 1575, may suggest that the covenant theme was part of that late revision.

The manifestations of that theme in the Old Testament plays represent the covenant of works. A new covenant replaced it, not written materially but within the heart of Man. That idea of internalising the covenant within each individual is alien to a cycle of salvation history which focuses upon the externals of revelation. But in Chester we see it in Jesus' words at the start of Play 13, 'The Healing of the Blind Man and the Raising of Lazarus':

But or we goe hence, printe these sayinges in your mynd and harte;
recorde them and keepe them in memorye.
Contynue in my worde; from yt doe not departe.
Therby shall all men knowe most perfectlye
that you are my disciples and of my familie. (13/29-33)

This internal covenant is a contract made with each individual believer, of redemption in exchange for faith, written in the blood of Christ.

Jesus' speech at the Last Supper (15/65-104) instituting the Eucharist, makes that transition clear:

For knowe you nowe, the tyme is come
that sygnes and shadowes be all donne . . .
For nowe a newe lawe I will beginne

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to helpe mankynd owt of his sinne. (69-70, 73-74)

Or, in the words of the influential theologian William Perkins in chapter 31 of *A Golden Chain* in 1591:²⁵

The old testament or covenant, is that which in types and shadows prefigured Christ to come and to be exhibited. The new testament declareth Christ already come in the flesh and is apparently showed in the gospel.

These covenant passages can all be reasonably seen as modifications to a pre-existent text. Since the primary opposition to Chester's plays came from among theologians of Puritan persuasion, I would postulate that covenant theology was introduced into the cycle to assuage their opposition.

Phinehas and Reformation

Moreover, there may be a further significance to the Phinehas allusion. Authenticating God's favour towards him, the text continues:

as the prophett wryteth verament,
and here wee shall yt shewe:

' Stetit Phinees, et placavit, et cessavit quassatio, et reputatum est
ei ad justitiam in generatione sua, etc.' (5/434-35+Latin)

The text cited does not come from the book of Numbers but from Psalm 105 (AV 106), vv. 30-31

Then stood up Phinehas and executed judgement, and so the plague was stayed. And that was counted unto him for righteousness unto all generations for evermore.

We do not know if this text is an explanatory gloss or was declaimed by the Expositor; but a biblically versed Puritan would recognise it and recall the full context – God's mercy to his undeserving people, who had turned from His ways:

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Many times did he deliver them, but they provoked him with their counsel and were brought low for their iniquity . . . And he remembered them for his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.

This implicit reference to a wayward nation brought back to its true faith from apostasy by the heroism of one who kept the covenant has obvious resonance for the Puritan in the world of the Elizabethan settlement.

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NOTES

¹ *Records of Early English Drama: Chester*, ed. by Lawrence M. Clopper (Toronto 1979), p. 104.

² Ruthin, Clwyd County Record Office, Plas Power MSS, DD/PP/839, p. 121.

³ R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (Chapel Hill 1983), p. 292, ll. 155-56.

⁴ See R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *Essays*, 'The Texts of the Chester Cycle'.

⁵ Clopper, *Chester*, p. 27. Clopper prints the version from the Chester Assembly Files, which is damaged. Lost readings are added here in square brackets from the copy in BL Harley 2013, f. 1, supplied in Clopper's footnotes.

⁶ References and quotations from *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Vol 1, Text*, ed. by R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS SS 3 (London 1974). On the objections to such references, see Goodman's list:

'20 Peter onely is said to create Matthias an Apostle . . .

23 Purgatory affirmed, preaching of merits of man.'

⁷ Clopper, *Chester*, p. 114.

⁸ On Salvation History, see entry in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 12, 998-1001.

⁹ *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 12, 999b.

¹⁰ *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 'Covenant Theology', vol. 4, 405a-b.

¹¹ cf Ecclesiasticus 17 vv. 1, 12: 'The Lord created man from earth and sent him back to it again . . . He established a perpetual covenant with them and revealed to them his decrees.' (*New English Bible* translation). Could something of this idea be implicit Adam's dream, Chester's Play 2, 441-72?

¹² On Melchizedek, see William Smith, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (London 1983), vol. 2, 314a-15a; James Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh 1899), vol. 2. 331-32; *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York and London 1904) vol.8, 450a-b. Melchizedek is invoked in the Epistle to the Hebrews cap 5, v. 6: 'Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech', quoting Psalm 110 v. 4; he is 'an image of priesthood in contrast to Aaron's'.

¹³ cf Genesis 17, vv. 9-14.

¹⁴ cf Genesis 2, vv. 2-3, Exodus 20, vv. 8-11.

¹⁵ cf. Matthew 26/28, Mark 14/24, Luke 22/20; and Hebrews 13/20: 'Now the God of Peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the Sheep. through the blood of the everlasting covenant'. Also James D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of*

Christianity (Philadelphia 1991)

¹⁶ cf. Selden, Table Talk: 'A king is a thing men have made for their own sake for a quietness sake' (quoted by Baker, p. 274).

¹⁷ This account relies entirely upon Richard L. Greaves, 'John Knox and the Covenant Tradition', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24:1 (1973), 23-32.

¹⁸ John Knox, *Admonition or Warning* (1554)

¹⁹ *Early Writings of John Hooper D.D., Lord Bishop of Gloucester and Worcester, Martyr 1555* (Parker Society, Cambridge 1843), pp. 255-56. The reference is cited by Greaves.

²⁰ Philip Zarrilli, 'From Destruction to Consecration: Covenant in the Chester *Noah* Play', *Theatre Journal* 31:2 (1979), 199.

²¹ Zarrilli, 209. See also Kathryn Wells, 'The Rainbow as Archer's Bow in the Chester Cycle's Noah's Flood', *N&Q* 42 (1995), 27-29, who draws attention to a similar allusion to the rainbow as bow in Deguileville; the reference, however, lacks the precision of that in Chester.

²² Text in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. by Norman Davis, EETS SS 1 (London 1970), pp. 43-57.

²³ William Perkins, 'A Golden Chain, or The Description of Theology', chapter 33, in *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. by Ian Breward, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics (Appleford, Abingdon, Berks 1970), p. 219.

²⁴ 1 Maccabees 2 v. 54: 'Phinehas, our father, never flagged in his zeal, and his was the covenant of an everlasting priesthood.'

²⁵ *Perkins*, cap. 31, p. 213.