

THE COVENANT OF SALT

SIGNIFICANCE AND
SYMBOLISM OF SALT



H. C.
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The Covenant of Salt

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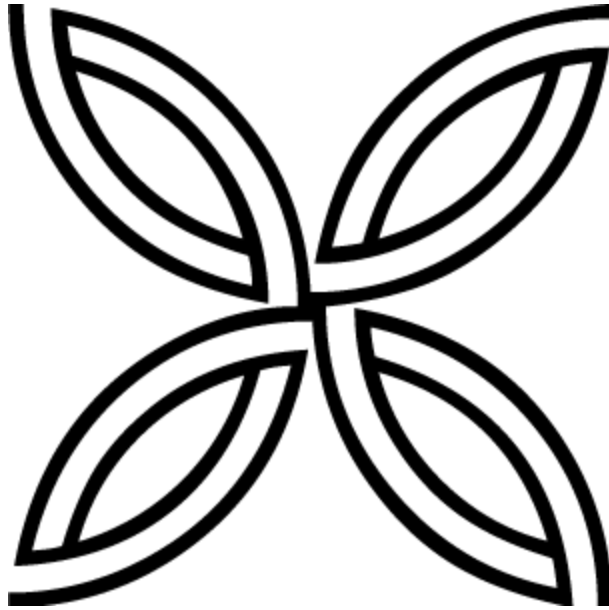
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The Covenant of Salt

H. Clay Trumbull



PREFACE

In 1884 I issued a volume on "The Blood Covenant: A Primitive Rite and its Bearings on Scripture." Later I was led to attempt, and to announce as in preparation, another volume in the field of primitive covenants, including a treatment of "The Name Covenant," "The Covenant of Salt," and "The Threshold Covenant." In 1896, I issued a separate volume on "The Threshold Covenant," that subject having grown into such prominence in my studies as to justify its treatment by itself. These two works, "The Blood Covenant" and "The Threshold Covenant," have been welcomed by scholars on both sides of the ocean to an extent beyond my expectations, and in view of this I venture to submit some further researches in the field of primitive thought and customs.

Before the issuing of my second volume, I had prepared the main portion of this present work on "The Covenant of Salt," but since then I have been led to revise it, and to conform it more fully to my latest conclusion as to the practical identity of all covenants. It is in this form that I present it, as a fresh contribution to the study of archeology and of anthropology.

As I have come to see it, as a result of my researches, the very idea of a "covenant" in primitive thought is a union of being, or of persons, in a common life, with the approval of God, or of the gods. This was primarily a sharing of blood, which is life, between two persons, through a rite which had the sanction of him who is the source of all life. In this sense "blood brotherhood" and the "threshold covenant" are but different forms of one and the same *covenant*. The blood of animals shared in a common sacrifice is counted as the blood which makes two one in a sacred covenant. Wine as "the blood of the grape" stands for the blood which is

the life of all flesh; hence the sharing of wine stands for the sharing of blood or life. So, again, salt represents blood, or life, and the covenant of salt is simply another form of the one blood covenant. This is the main point of this new monograph. So far as I know, this truth has not before been recognized or formulated.

Similarly the sharing of a common name, especially of the name of God, or of a god, is the claim of a divinely sanctioned covenant between those who bear it. It is another mode of claiming to be in the one vital covenant. A temporary agreement, or truce, between two who share a drink of water or a morsel of bread, is a lesser and very different thing from entering into a covenant, which by its very nature is permanent and unchangeable. This difference is pointed out and emphasized in the following pages.

In these new investigations, as in my former ones, I have been aided, step by step, by specialists, who have kindly given me suggestions and assistance by every means in their power. This furnishes a fresh illustration of the readiness of all scholars to aid any fresh worker in any line where their own labors render them an authority or a guide.

Besides my special acknowledgments in the text and footnotes of this volume, I desire to express my indebtedness and thanks to these scholars who have freely rendered me important assistance at various points in my studies: Professor Dr. Hermann V. Hilprecht, the Rev. Drs. Marcus Jastrow, K. Kohler, and Henry C. McCook, Professor Drs. Hermann Collitz, H. Carrington Bolton, William H. Roberts, Morris Jastrow, Jr., F. K. Sanders, William A. Lamberton, W. W. Keen, William Osler, J. W. Warren, and D. C. Munro, Drs. J. Solis Cohen, Thomas G. Morton, Charles W. Dulles, Henry C. Cattell, and Frederic H. Howard, Rev. Dean E. T. Bartlett, President Robert E. Thompson, Drs. Talcott Williams, Henry C. Lea, and T. H. Powers Sailer,

Messrs. Clarence H. Clark and Patterson Du Bois.

This third work is to be considered in connection with the two which have preceded it in the same field. It is hoped that it will be recognized as adding an important thought to the truths brought out in those works severally.

A previously published monograph on "The Ten Commandments as a Covenant of Love" is added to "The Covenant of Salt" as a Supplement, in order that it may be available to readers of this series of volumes on covenants, as a historical illustration of the subject under discussion.

I CHARACTERISTICS OF A COVENANT

Our English word "covenant," like many another word in our language and in other languages, fails to convey, or even to contain, its fullest and most important meaning in comparison with the idea back of it. As a matter of fact, this must be true of nearly all words. Ideas precede words. Ideas have spirit and life before they are shaped or clothed in words. Words have necessarily human limitations and imperfectness, because of their purely human origin. When an idea first seeks expression in words, it is inevitable that it be cramped by the means employed for its conveyance. At the best the word can only *suggest* the idea back of it, rather than accurately *define* and explain that idea. In practice, or in continued and varied use, in the development of thought and of language, changes necessarily occur in the word or words selected to convey a primal idea, in order to indicate other phases of the idea than that brought out or pointed to by the first chosen word. While these changes and additions aid some persons to an understanding of the root idea, they tend to confuse others, especially those who are looking for exactness of definition.

As a rule, the earlier words chosen for the expression of an idea are more likely than later ones to suggest the main thought seeking expression. Hence there is often a gain in looking back among the Greek and Sanskrit and Hebrew and Assyrian roots carried forward by religion or commerce into our English words and idioms, when we are searching for the true meaning of an important custom or rite or thought. Yet this will ordinarily be confusing rather than clarifying to an exact scholar. Only as a person is

intent on the primal thought back of the chosen word is he likely to perceive the true meaning and value of the suggestions of the earlier word or words found in his searching.

Archeology is sometimes more valuable than philology in throwing light on the meaning of ancient words. It is often easier to explain the use of an archaic word by a disclosed primitive custom or rite, than to discern a hidden primitive rite or custom by a study of the words used in referring to it. An archeologist may suggest a solution of a problem which hopelessly puzzles the lexicographer or grammarian. Sentiment and the poetic instinct are often more helpful, in such research, than prescribed etymological methods. He who looks for an exact definition can never reach a conclusion. If he seeks a suggestion, he may find one.

"Covenant," as an English word, simply means, according to its etymological signification, "a coming together." At times the word is used interchangeably with such words as "an agreement," "a league," "a treaty," "a compact," "an arrangement," "an obligation," or "a promise." Only by its context and connections are we shown in special cases that a covenant bond has peculiar or pre-eminent sacredness and perpetuity. This truth is, however, shown in many an instance, especially in translations from earlier languages. Even in our use of the English word "covenant" we have to recognize, at times, its meaning as a sacred and indissoluble joining together of the two parties covenanting, as distinct from any ordinary agreement or compact. And when we go back, as in our English Bible, to the Greek and Hebrew words rendered "covenant," or "testament," or "oath," in a sworn bond, we find this distinction more strongly emphasized. It is therefore essential to a correct view of any form of primitive covenanting that we understand the root idea in this primal sort of coming together.

Primitive covenanting was by two persons cutting into each

other's flesh, and sharing by contact, or by drinking, the blood thus brought out. Earliest it was the personal blood of the two parties that was the nexus of their covenant. Later it was the blood of a shared and eaten sacrifice that formed the covenant nexus. In such a case the food of the feast became a part of the life of each and both, and fixed their union. In any case it was the common life into which each party was brought by the covenant that bound them irrevocably. This fixed the binding of the two as permanent and established. ^[1]

Lexicographers and critics puzzle over the supposed Hebrew or Assyrian origin of the words translated "covenant" in our English Bible, and they fail to agree even reasonably well on the root or roots involved. Yet all the various words or roots suggested by them have obvious reference to the primal idea of covenanting as a means of life-sharing; therefore their verbal differences are, after all, of minor importance, and may simply point to different stages in the progressive development of the languages. Whether, therefore, the root of the Hebrew *běreeth* means, as is variously claimed, "to cut," "to fetter," "to bind together," "to fix," "to establish," "to pour out," or "to eat," it is easy to see how these words may have been taken as referring to the one primitive idea of a compassed and established union. ^[2] So in the Greek words *diathēkē* and *horkion* it can readily be seen that the references to the new placing or disposing of the parties, to their solemn appeal to God or the gods in the covenanting, and to the testament to take effect after the death of the testator, or to the means employed in this transaction, are alike consistent with the primitive idea of a covenant in God's sight by which one gives over one's very self, or one's entire possessions, to another. The pledged or merged personality of the two covenantors fully accounts for the different suggested references of the variously employed

words.

True marriage is thus a covenant, instead of an arrangement. The twain become no longer two, but one; each is given to the other; their separate identity is lost in their common life. A ring, a bracelet, a band, has been from time immemorial the symbol and pledge of such an indissoluble union. ^[3]

Men have thus, many times and in many ways, signified their covenanting, and their consequent interchange of personality and of being, by the exchange of certain various tokens and symbols; but these exchanges have not in any sense been the covenant itself, they have simply borne witness to a covenant. Thus men have exchanged pledges of their covenant to be worn as phylacteries, or caskets, or amulets, or belts, on neck, or forehead, or arm, or body; ^[4]they have exchanged weapons of warfare or of the chase; they have exchanged articles of ordinary dress, or of ornament, or of special utility; ^[5]they have exchanged with each other their personal names. ^[6]All these have been in token of an accomplished covenant, but they have not been forms or rites of the covenant itself.

Circumcision is spoken of in the Old Testament as the token of a covenant between the individual and God. It is so counted by the Jew and the Muhammadan. In Madagascar, as illustrative of outside nations, it is counted as the token of a covenant between the individual and his earthly sovereign. The ceremonies accompanying it all go to prove this. ^[7]Again, men have covenanted with one another to merge their common interests, and to obliterate or ignore their racial, tribal, or social distinctions, as no mere treaty or league could do.

In tradition and in history men have covenanted with God, or with their gods, so that they could claim and bear the divine name as their own, thus sharing and representing the divine personality and power. ^[8]Thus also in tradition

different gods of primitive peoples and times have covenanted with one another, so that each was the other, and the two were the same. [9]

There are seeming traces of this root idea of covenanting, through making two one by merging the life of each in a common life, in words that make "union" out of "one." In the Welsh *un* is "one;" *uno* is "to unite." In the English, from the Latin, a unit unites with another unit, and the two are unified in the union. The two by this merging become not a *double* , but a larger *one* . Thus it is always in a true covenant.

We have to study the meaning and growth of words in the light of ascertained primitive customs and rites and ideas, instead of expecting to learn from ascertained root-words what were the prevailing primal ideas and rites and customs in the world. In the line of such studying, covenants and the covenant relation have been found to be an important factor, and to have had a unique significance in the development of human language and in the progress of the human race from its origin and earliest history. The study and disclosures of the primitive covenant idea in its various forms and aspects have already brought to light important truths and principles, and the end is not yet.

II A COVENANT OF SALT

Among the varied forms of primitive covenanting, perhaps none is more widely known and honored, or less understood, the world over, than a covenant of salt, or a salt covenant. Religion and superstition, civilization and barbarism, alike deal with it as a bond or rite, yet without making clear the reasons for its use. The precise significance and symbolism of salt as the nexus of a lasting covenant is by no means generally understood or clearly defined by even scholars and scientists. The subject is certainly one worthy of careful consideration and study. A covenant of salt has mention, in peculiar relations, in the Bible. It is prominent in the literature and traditions of the East. Here in our Western world there are various folk-lore customs and sayings that show familiarity with it as a vestige of primitive thought. Among the islands of the sea, and in out-of-the-way corners of the earth, it shows itself as clearly as in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. In some regions salt is spoken of as if it were merely an accompaniment of bread, and thus a common and indispensable article of food; but, again, its sharing stands out as signifying far more than is meant by an ordinary meal or feast. An explanation of its meaning, frequently offered or accepted by students and specialists, is that in its nature it is a preservative and essential, and therefore its presence adds value to an offering or to a sacramental rite. ^[10]But the mind cannot be satisfied with so superficial an interpretation as this, in view of many things in text and tradition that go to show a unique sacredness of salt as salt, rather than as a preserver and enlivener of something that is of more value. It is evident that the true symbolism and sanctity of salt as the nexus of a covenant lie deeper than is yet admitted, or than has been formally stated by