



2009

The Way Beyond: Puritan Covenant Theology Burst Open by Levinas's Thought

Maren Haruko Miyasaki

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Miyasaki, Maren Haruko (2009) "The Way Beyond: Puritan Covenant Theology Burst Open by Levinas's Thought," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol2/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Way Beyond: Puritan Covenant Theology Burst Open by Levinas's Thought

Maren Haruko Miyasaki

During the late sixteenth century, Puritan theologians and theorists wanted to justify why what historian Perry Miller calls a Calvinist “absolute, incomprehensible, and transcendent . . . God” would create or care about humans (51). The rationale they developed or, as they say, reemphasized was covenant theology. Miller suggests that the rationale for this was that God “voluntarily, of His own sovereign will and choice, consented to be bound and delimited by a specific program” or covenant (63). As people tried to negotiate the balance between works and mercy in the gospel, tension was created as they attempted to interpret the covenant as a contract, a promise, or both, between man and God. The historical definition of promise involves assurances to others, while contracts involve mutual legal agreements. Christian marriage agreements and the feudal system also incorporated the idea of promise or endless obligation into their cultural structure. Contracts constituted the system of business among foreigners and strangers. As the covenant became the pattern for relationships in the Puritan community, the tension within it translated into those relationships. This becomes evident in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and Herbert’s poem “Redemption” as the tension of the unilateral contract given by God is negotiated, and is subsequently bypassed and burst open by Levinas’s replacement of God with the Other.

Before exploring how this tension reveals itself in the literature, a brief explanation of the tension inherent in Puritan covenant theology is necessary. While the word “covenant” for Puritans referred to any number of ordinances, such as baptism or sacrament, it ultimately symbolized the covenant between man and God. Richard Strier, among others, argues that during this time “the contract replaces the promise . . . as the central form of divine self-expression” because of the contractual economic language involved (87). Others emphasized that, like grace, the covenant was a “firm promise” or “gift” rather than a bargain (*The Marrow of Theology* 150). Finally John von Rohr notes this tension when he explains that Puritans did not place one over the other, but were “in favor of a both/and [model].... For the mainstream of Puritanism,... the bilateral and the unilateral were conjoined, human responsibility and divine sovereignty were unitedly maintained, and the covenant of grace was seen as both conditional and absolute” (32–3). Most interpreted their covenant with God as well as their interpersonal relationships as a contract, but a contract of endless obligation and promise.

The power of what John Caputo would call the “possibility of the impossible” or “the power of the powerless” to solve this tension of interpretation can be tapped into by utilizing Levinas’s concept of the Other (Caputo 62, 82). This tension gives a powerless person the possibility to fulfill the covenant by decentering God as the focus of interaction and replacing Him with the human. With God in view the covenant only became a contract or prescribed obligation or promise. With God out of the way, the covenant became a covenant of responsibility to the other because “God withdraws in order to create a space wherein ethics might be possible and so the creation reaches the fulfillment of its original purpose. God’s self distancing, then, is the possibility of an ethical humanity” (64). Sean Lawrence suggests that an intentionally absent, hidden, “radically alterior” God (*Deus absconditus*) is more than just a twentieth-century idea; it existed also in the work of Michel de Montaigne and Rene Descartes. Their “skeptical inquiries into our knowledge of the divine bordered on atheism but end in belief” (Lawrence 144). Levinas also emphasizes that the Other, even in his destitution, maintains importance. The unequal relationship calls for endless responsibility, promise, or mercy that ends in true transcendence and theism. The covenant can only be lived by living on the earth and reaching beyond in interactions with others. The covenant with God can serve as a pattern for these interactions, which become the truest outlet to live the covenant with God.

Early modern writers negotiate the tension within covenant as both contract, promise, or gift, as evidenced in George Herbert’s poem

“Redemption.” The impulse of contract plays out distinctly when a tenant to a rich lord decides to “be bold” end his old contract and, secure “a new small-rented lease” (Herbert 1597). Herbert sets up the relationship between master and tenant as contractual. If the relationship between the master and tenant is contractual, it can be ended or renegotiated by either side. Both parties possess equal agency to enter, renegotiate, or end the contract. As Gordis explains, interpreting the covenant as a contract, even a unilateral contract, implies “some level of equality between God and man” (386). Although the Other always takes priority, Levinas’s justice relationship creates equality because all others are equal in their superiority. Levinas explains that “the word ‘justice’ is in effect much more in its place, there, where equity is necessary and not my ‘subordination’ to the Other. If equity is necessary, we must have comparison and equality: equality between those that cannot be compared” (*Of God Who Comes to Mind* 82). In discussing the tension and paradox of the equality of others Levinas still maintains the inferiority of self. Christ’s example of sacrifice and mercy fulfills the covenant in a unique way by putting the Other before self, thereby obliterating justification for using people as a means to an end—even a celestial end. Instead, the interaction with the Other calls for instinctual, genuine response. The face of the Other calls out for endless promise and responsibility, thereby bypassing the artificial actions of many to fulfill the covenant to reap rewards. Becoming aware of how one interacts with others becomes an integral part of living in accordance with the covenant.

In Puritan covenant theology the relationship between man and God serves as the pattern for relationships between man and the Other. Thomas Hooker explains, “The Covenant which passeth between God and us, is like that which passeth between a King and his people; the King promiseth to rule and govern in mercy and righteousness; and they again promise to obey in loyalty and in faithfulness” (Hooker 10). James Johnson further emphasizes that the covenants within marriage, within the church, within nations, and between friends all resemble each other (Johnson 108). This pattern of covenantal relationships can be seen in the literature of the late seventeenth century, specifically in Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare does not discuss this covenant relationship with God but shows how the covenant plays out in earthly relationships.

The tension within the covenant with God might be resolved by using Levinas’s theory to remove God as the focus in order to fulfill the covenant. The covenant no longer is a promise or contract, but an impulsive obligation to the Other. Certain characters in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* exemplify interactions where “the face of one’s

fellow man [should be] the original locus in which transcendence calls an authority with a silent voice in which God comes to the mind,” calling for more than contractual interaction because of the interaction with people (*Alterity and Transcendence* 5). Instead of a false covenant serving as the pattern for relationships, relationships fulfill the covenant. In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare shows how changing the focus of the covenant or the contract leads to more merciful behavior. All that remains is the face of another calling and demanding response with no time to analyze that response. By fulfilling the demand the individual fulfills the covenant with God.

In the play the tension between contract and promise is negotiated much as it was in Herbert's poem. Bassanio and Portia's relationship shows the impulse of contract as Portia demands equal—perhaps greater—reciprocation from Bassanio. Within the marriage covenant, Portia gives Bassanio all her possessions and recognizes him as “her lord, her governor, her king” (III.ii.165). At the same time Portia retains a certain amount of control over her possessions and her marriage situation. Even though Portia has been the master of her house since her father died, she willingly gives up her possessions to her new husband Bassanio. Portia also gives Bassanio her ring saying “when you part from, lose, or give away, / Let it presage the ruin of your love, / And be my vantage to exclaim on you” (III.ii.172–174). Portia gives up her possession but reserves the right to reproach Bassanio if he loses his ring. Portia wants the obligation and respect she gives Bassanio in their covenant to be reciprocated. When Bassanio offers both wife and life to save Antonio from death, Portia, in her guise as a male lawyer, responds, “Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make that offer” (IV.i.283–84). Portia tests Bassanio to see if he will give up the ring, and he does. In response, she vows not to sleep with him or give it back until he again swears that he will not break his oath. Portia expects Bassanio's promise of endless obligation and respect to equal that which she offers him. Showing mercy when Bassanio fails to keep his promise and forgiving him all his grievances, she recognizes Bassanio's *promise* to reciprocate sufficient to the actual attempt. So while the impulse of the contract plays out in covenant between husband and wife, it also calls for more than equality.

In contrast, William Ames emphasizes that the covenant is not a true contract, but an undeserved “gift” (150). The covenant is undeserved and unilateral because in Puritan theology God has no reason to offer or keep a covenant with inferior beings. Like in the feudal or monarchical system this inequality means that “the vassal cannot break the treaty by

his actions. In fact, the treaty does not consider ‘the dissolution of the basic relationship which it establishes’ at all: ‘Failure of the vassal to obey the conditions of the treaty may lead to his destruction, no doubt, but not to his ceasing to belong to the sovereign’” (Coolidge 105). The covenant binds the human without binding God, who controls it. Ames also explains that “because this way of entering into covenant is not between those that are equal, but between Lord and servant. Therefore it pertains to government, whence also it is most properly called not the covenant of man, but of God, who is the author, and chief Executor of it” (111). The unequal covenant between God and man serves as the pattern for all relationships. While retaining all power, God gives men more than they deserve—the ultimate gift of Christ’s atonement and death. Christ offers humans endless promise, mercy, and charity, anticipating their inability for equal participation in the covenant. Christ does not ask for the comparable mercy and sacrifice that He gives, but at the same time His example calls His followers to go beyond contract.

Levinas’s theory answers that call with the interaction with the Other: “proximity signifies, from the face of the other man, the responsibility already assumed for him. We have attempted to show how, by this non-transferable and inescapable responsibility—going to the point of substitution for the other man, potentially, all the way to the condition of hostage” (*Of God Who Comes to Mind* 120). For Levinas, the covenant between God and man plays out in the face of the Other as it makes one hostage to inescapable responsibility by provoking sympathy. Levinas’s thought fulfills the covenant by having people subvert and submit themselves to a higher party, but Levinas replaces God with the other person as the way to God. Instead of creating usury—a kingdom of means and ends—or equality, the covenant creates God-like behavior by removing God as the focus. This concept pushes toward the impossible goal of kenosis (the complete submission of self for another person), which only Christ attained. While the powerless do not strive to actively stop or change the behavior of others, they exemplify mercy and endless promise that can influence similar behavior in others. Both *The Merchant of Venice* and “Redemption” show contractual interaction, but also promissory or merciful interaction provoked by the Other.

In “Redemption” there is an example of this provocation after the tenant sees his master to form a new contract. The new contract, like the New Testament, will exact less and expect more from the tenant. Herbert complicates the imagery of the contract by proclaiming that he searched for his lord “in heaven at his manor,” and at the end of the poem when looking on earth at the land his lord “dearly bought,” the tenant finds his lord among “thieves and murderers.” Upon seeing the tenant, his master

proclaims, “your suit is granted” and dies (14). Herbert implies that the lord in the poem is not just an earthly lord with reference to “theeves and murderers” and “heaven,” but Jesus Christ who is the symbol of Christian atonement and charity (5,13). The contract not only binds a master and tenant, but also Christ and man. The poem shows the imagery of the Christ figure suffering on the cross. The life of Christ did not just fulfill contracts, but surpassed contracts and promised more. The reader is faced with the inconsistent nature of the contract, where the new tenant does not ask for it, but finds it just the same as his dying Lord offers him mercy. This inconsistency would call for more examination. Upon seeing the persona just, the Lord proclaims, “Your suit is granted” (1597). At this point, the reader is never sure if Christ has ended the old contract and created a new one, or if he simply forgives the debt. This ambiguous situation preserves the tension and negotiation between contract and gift. Herbert resolves the tension by temporarily removing God from the covenant and dealing with the face of the Other, which calls out for endless responsibility. This is not a contract or prescribed obligation, but an honest response to that Other.

Like Herbert’s Lord, Portia asks for contractual reciprocation while also demanding endless obligation. Portia gives her property and obligation to Bassanio when she hears about Antonio, but also asks for its return. Gregory Chaplin observes that “works by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other classical authors taught that a friendship between two men, if practiced properly, was the perfect human relationship” (267). For most men, fraternal relationships took priority over marriage. Portia, though, demands more than equality of Bassanio with the ring; she demands reciprocation of the endless obligation and responsibility she has promised him. When a disguised Portia demands the ring as payment, Bassanio initially holds onto it. Antonio persuades Bassanio to relinquish it by pleading that “his deserving and my love withal / Be valued ‘gainst your wife’s commandment” (IV.i.446–7). Antonio thinks the bond to Bassanio’s savior (the disguised Portia) and his friendship should take priority over the promise made to his wife. Portia does not give Bassanio the ring back until he has sworn in front of his friends that he “never more will break an oath with thee” (V.i.247). Portia demands that their relationship take precedence over Bassanio’s other friendships or obligations to men. Unlike other women, Portia will not settle for inferiority or even equality, but demands that the marriage supersede all other relationships. Although Portia demands the promise, she also offers grace as she forgives Bassanio his trespass. She knows that because she cannot fully return the very promise she demands, she cannot hold his trespass against him.

In addition to marital contracts, *The Merchant of Venice* also addresses the negotiation of contractual and promissory relationships in business deals, specifically between Christians and Jews. In order to help Bassanio woo Portia, Antonio creates a contract with Shylock. Shylock initially expresses reserve to enter into a contract with Antonio because Antonio had previously treated him poorly. To Shylock's surprise, Antonio asks to be treated as an enemy, agreeing to pay in flesh rather than money if the contract is violated. When the contract is not met, Shylock calls in the bond: a pound of flesh. Shylock has cause to resent the Christians for their unchristian behavior, at one point noting that, like the Christians, he is human. He queries, "If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that [revenge]. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go heard but I will better the instruction" (III.i.56–62). Although Shylock goes too far in demanding justice, he follows the pattern of Christian revenge. He may stay within his legal right, knowing that the Duke will not overthrow justice, but all the Christians believe that the situation calls for more mercy. The contract calls for justice, but Antonio's face and situation calls for sympathy and mercy.

At times, both parties seem willing to exchange the justice of the contract for mercy as they react to the face of the Other. Shylock expresses that even after all the abuse he has suffered from Antonio he "would be friends with you, and have your love. Forget the shames that you have stained me with, / Supply your present wants, and take no doit / Of usance for my moneys; and you'll not hear me. / This is kind I offer" (I.iii.133–137). Shylock's willingness to contract with Antonio, even after receiving poor treatment from his hands, indicates that "there is much kindness in the Jew" (I.iii.149). In Levinas's terms, Shylock reacts to Antonio's situation instead of thinking of his own mistreatment, which portrays the impulsive obligation previously mentioned. Despite their move toward more merciful behavior, they do not forego their contractual behavior. Ultimately, the Christians maintain contractual behavior even as they require Shylock to abandon it.

Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity also calls for more Christian behavior and less contractual behavior from the Christians. Portia extracts "Christian" behavior from Shylock through extreme contractual logic. The Christians want to eliminate the alien or alterior threat to their system. Levinas worries about systems, like Christianity, which ask for responsibility and compliance under their own terms without allowing for the terms of other systems. Levinas explains that

the need for equality and one-sided responsibility creates violence and destruction as it tries to satisfy itself at expense of the Other or “harvests alterity to make up for its own defects” (Purcell 96). Because the Christians disagree with what Shylock believes and are frightened by his alterity, they swallow Shylock up into their system so he will be forced to live by their rules of mercy. Levinas would use the power of the tension and paradox in the covenant to call the Christians to move away from totality, and toward responsibility for Shylock and true transcendence (Purcell 104). Shakespeare shows the need to react to the person, which will fulfill the covenant.

Another example of this is the incident with the Duke. He also tries to prod Shylock into promising mercy instead of justice or the contract’s fulfillment, but Shylock wants justice. Portia, in the guise of a lawyer, begs Shylock for mercy because it becomes

The throned monarch better than his crown. His sceptre
shows the force of temporal power...
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is entroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice.” (IV.i.183–92)

Portia suggests that equality and justice shadow the divine when seasoned with mercy, but she uses contractual logic to free Antonio. The Christians expect mercy and promise from others, but they only offer it on their own terms. Levinas would suggest that in the covenant “the other ... always comes first.... If there is not this dissymmetry, then no line of what I have written can hold” (*Of God Who Comes to Mind* 91). The Other calls for more than justice; he also calls for mercy and complete responsibility. Shylock’s treatment of Antonio and the Christians’ treatment of Shylock call for mercy and honest reaction to one another. Although the Christians ask for mercy from Shylock, they treat him with little mercy and take the contract to the extreme. The Christian God never makes an appearance, and the tension never resolves. This contractual behavior and the characters’ focus on Christianity makes it impossible for them to fulfill the covenant.

In both “Redemption” and *The Merchant of Venice*, the characters interpret and try to fulfill the covenant in a contractual manner only without incorporating mercy or promise. For example, the persona in “Redemption” wants to end a contract, but does not consider the mercy his Lord extends him even though the Christ imagery suggests

the need for it. In the play, Bassanio violates his contract with Portia even though Portia wanted equal or greater reciprocation. When the Christians and the Duke try to inflict mercy or promise on Shylock they act contractually. These moments illustrate the need for more mercy. It is when the characters, like Levinas suggests, honestly and instinctually respond to another that they don't just act contractually, but mercifully. When they remove God as the focus and just respond, they fulfill both parts of the covenant.

Work Cited

- Ames, William. *The Marrow of Theology* (1623). Trans. and ed. John D. Eusden from the 1629 Latin edition (1968; reprint). Boston: Pilgrim Press; Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1983.
- Ames, William. *The marrow of sacred divinity drawne out of the Holy Scriptures, and the interpreters thereof, and brought into method*. London: Edward Griffin, 1642.
- Caputo John. D. *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Chaplin, Gregory. "One Flesh, One Heart, One Soul': Renaissance Friendship and Miltonic Marriage." *Modern Philology* 99.2 (2001): 266–92.
- Coolidge, John S. *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1970.
- Gordis, Lisa M. "The Experience of Covenant Theology in George Herbert's 'The Temple.'" *The Journal of Religion* 76.3. (1996): 383–401.
- Herbert, George. "Redemption." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. 7th ed. Vol. 1 New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. 1597.
- Hooker, Thomas. *The Christians Two Chiefe Lessons*. London, 1640.
- Johnson, James T. "The Covenant Idea and the Puritan View of Marriage." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32.1. (1971): 107–18.
- Lawrence, Sean. "Failing to Succeed: Toward A Postmodern Ethic of 'Gods that we Adore': the Divine in King Lear." *Renascence* 56.3(2004): 142–60.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity." *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge, UK: Belknap, 1956. 48–98.
- "Promise." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd Ed. 1987.
- Purcell, Michael. *Levinas and Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Merchant of Venice." *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. 1081–145.
- von Rohr, John. "The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought." *American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion* 45. Atlanta: Scholars, 1986.