

What about Covenants Made by Tyrants?

Ezekiel 17:11-21; Jeremiah 25:9

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Can a tyrant (that is, an unlawful civil magistrate) within a nation (bound by a lawful National Covenant) engage himself in any civil agreements to which he is yet morally bound to keep? Or does his tyranny and covenant-breaking render all civil agreements, covenants, and contracts that he should make thereafter null and void? Does that nation ruled by a tyrant civilly cease to exist as a moral person from the point that a tyrant begins to rule because nothing done civilly within that nation has been transacted by a lawful civil magistrate? You may be asking, "What do these questions have to do with national covenanting and the perpetual obligation of National Covenants?"

Certain critics of our position seem to argue by way of objection that if it can be proven from Scripture that all the civil agreements that an unlawful civil magistrate (or tyrant) makes are null and void, then the nation itself ceases to exist, and members cannot be added to or subtracted from that which does not civilly exist as a nation. And the inference drawn from this argument would seem to be that if such a covenanted nation cannot add new members to it (due to a covenant-breaking and unlawful civil magistrate), then it would follow that there can be no perpetual obligation of a lawful National Covenant to new members or to all posterity (whether that be one individual, a family, or a colony of people across the ocean).

Dear ones, the implications of this point that we are considering today cannot be over-emphasized. This point is so very significant.

I. Civil Covenants Made by Tyrants within a Covenanted Nation Are Not Null and Void (Ezekiel 17:11-21).

A. Within our text, I submit we have a biblical example of a tyrant within a covenanted nation who made a lawful civil and national covenant which the tyrant is yet obligated to keep.

B. Before looking more closely at our text, we need to establish from God's Word, what is a lawful civil magistrate and what is an unlawful civil magistrate (or tyrant)? Without those scriptural principles we cannot know whether Zedekiah was a tyrant or not.

1. What is a lawful civil magistrate?

a. According to the Apostle Paul in Romans 13: 4, lawful civil magistrate is "the minister of God to thee for good". Lawful civil government serves God (according to His Moral Law in nature and/or in Scripture), and serves the people for their good (according to that same Moral Law). The "good" which lawful civil government administers on behalf of its subjects must be measured according to God's Moral Law (Romans 7:12). Dear ones, if civil government does not serve this end, then according to Paul it is not the divine and lawful ordinance of civil government, "for the throne is established by righteousness" (Proverbs 16:12), and this is especially true within a covenanted nation, as was the kingdom of Judah.

b. As a "minister of God to thee for good", the Scripture gives two means by which one becomes a lawful civil magistrate.

(1) The first is by way of *institution*, for he must meet the qualifications for civil government as found in God's Moral Law (Exodus 18:21; Deuteronomy 17:14-19; Romans 13:3-4). He must keep covenant with God and the nation wherein there are lawful covenants established. That which qualifies one to be a lawful civil magistrate upon entry into his office likewise disqualifies him from being a

lawful civil magistrate if he flagrantly and habitually practices the contrary. This again is especially true of a covenanted nation (like Judah) wherein a lawful National Covenant (as was made at Mt. Sinai between God and the nation) perpetually binds that nation's rulers and people.

(2) The second means by which one becomes a lawful civil magistrate is by way of *constitution*, for he must secure the consent of the people by way of a lawful covenant between himself and the people. A lawful ruler cannot be imposed upon the people by violence or by force, but only by a lawful accession to power in order to rule on behalf of the people and for their good (Deuteronomy 17:14-15 [all kings in Israel or Judah]; Judges 8:22 [Gideon]; Judges 11:11 [Jephthah]; 1 Samuel 11:15 [Saul]; 1 Chronicles 12:38 [David]; 2 Chronicle 23:3 [Joash]; 2 Chronicles 36:1 [Jehoahaz]). Only such civil magistrates are the "ordinance of God" and the "minister of God to thee for good" to whom we must submit out of godly fear. Rutherford stated succinctly that it is the people that make the king and not the king that makes the people (*Lex Rex*, p. 113).

2. What then is an unlawful civil magistrate or a tyrant?

a. He is one that is not "a minister of God to thee for good" (Romans 13:4). He is not God's minister ruling according to God's Moral Law (in nature and/or in Scripture), but rather is one who flagrantly and habitually frames mischief by laws that he establishes (Psalm 94:20). He is one who tramples underfoot the true religion, destroys the people, and disregards lawful covenants made with God and the people. Samuel Rutherford states in *Lex Rex* that "a tyrant is he who habitually sinneth against the catholic good of the subjects and state, and subverteth law" and that such a one ceases to be "a lawful king" (p. 119). One is also an unlawful civil magistrate (or a tyrant) if he accedes to power by violence, force, or fraud. In Scripture, one may be a king *de facto* (i.e. a "king" who is called a "king" regardless of how he came to power or regardless of how he rules) and yet not be a "king" *de jure* (i.e. not a lawful king because he has not come into power lawfully or does not rule lawfully). He is a king in one sense (*de facto*) because he rules as a king, but he is not a king in another sense (*de jure*) because he has come to power or rules contrary to God's Moral Law (in nature and/or in Scripture).

b. Thus, a civil magistrate is not the "ordinance of God" or the "minister of God to thee for good" simply because he is in power and sits as a ruler within a kingdom in God's providence. God by His providential will sets even tyrants in places of rule (as in the case of Absalom instead of David for a time [2 Samuel 15:19,34-35] or in the case of Athaliah instead of Joash for a time [2 Kings 11]), but it is not God's providential will that determines whether a ruler is a lawful magistrate, but rather God's perceptive and revealed will as contained in His Moral Law. If any ruler that comes to power is a lawful ruler then Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Nero, and Satan himself (as the prince and power of the air) are all lawful rulers because they hold the power to rule. That is why it is absolutely essential that we understand that God establishes in His Word what institutes and constitutes a lawful ruler. And one who does not conform to that standard is indicted as a tyrant.

C. We now come to consider whether King Zedekiah meets the biblical and moral criteria of being a lawful civil magistrate.

1. First, as to *institution* was he qualified as one who feared God and kept covenant with the Lord, or was he rather one who habitually ruled as a covenant-breaker? Let us consider a few passages of Scripture that describe the rule of Zedekiah.

a. God inscribes upon Zedekiah's rule what was said of all the covenant-breaking kings of Judah: "and he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Kings 24:19), but God further qualifies these words implying the habitual nature of his covenant-breaking by saying, "according to all that Jehoiakim had done." Jehoiakim was the brother of Zedekiah (and like Zedekiah), the son of King Josiah. But Jehoiakim was notorious for his habitual evil and covenant-breaking (2 Kings 23:37); his habitual abominations

(2 Chronicles 36:8); his hatred for God's Word (Jeremiah 36:23,27); and his unique judgment (Jeremiah 22:18-19).

b. Furthermore, God is clear in referring to the habitual "abominations" and covenant-breaking that were committed not only by Zedekiah, but also protected and promoted among the chief priests and people as a whole (2 Chronicles 36:12-16). The word "abominations" is a code word for the most aggravated types of covenant-breaking (as we see in the use of the term for Manasseh's gross violations of Judah's National Covenant in 2 Kings 21:1-16 and 2 Chronicles 33:1-9).

c. Moreover, Zedekiah and the princes of Judah are compared to rotten figs that cannot be eaten and that must be destroyed because they have decayed to such a vile extent (Jeremiah 24:3,8-10).

d. Finally, God is clear that if He delivers Zedekiah and Judah into the hands of the Babylonians, it would be due to their gross and habitual covenant-breaking (Jeremiah 22:8-9).

e. Is it not abundantly clear that Zedekiah was disqualified from being a lawful magistrate by his gross and habitual covenant-breaking? Zedekiah was *de facto* the king of Judah because in God's providence he ruled as king, but clearly he was not a lawful king, for he flagrantly and habitually subverted God's National Covenant with Israel.

2. Secondly, Zedekiah was not a lawful ruler by way of *constitution*, for he was not constituted king by the people's consent, but rather was constituted king by the raw power and bloody sword of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

a. Very clearly, it is said of Zedekiah that it was not the people that made him king, but rather Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, that made Zedekiah king (2 Kings 24:17; 2 Chronicles 36:10; Jeremiah 37:1). He did not have the consent of the people to rule over them. He ruled by the usurped authority of a heathen king, not by a lawful covenant with the people as authorized by God. Nebuchadnezzar had no lawful authority to make Zedekiah king. This is especially brought into contrast when we read that "the people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Josiah, and anointed him king in his father's stead" (2 Kings 23:30; 2 Chronicles 36:1). Jehoahaz was made king by the people, whereas Zedekiah was made king by Nebuchadnezzar.

b. Thus, not only was Zedekiah disqualified from being a lawful king because of his gross and serious covenant-breaking, but also because he did not have a lawful entry into office (but rather was made a king by a violent heathen tyrant).

c. But is not Zedekiah called "the king of Judah"? Yes, he is, but that does not mean that he holds the office lawfully. The false prophets of Israel are called "prophets" (Isaiah 29:10; Jeremiah 14:15) and the wicked priests of Israel are called "priests" (1 Kings 12:31-33) and Satan is called "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), but these titles are not used for their holding these offices lawfully (*de jure*), but simply for their holding these offices providentially (*de facto*).

d. But is not Nebuchadnezzar called "the servant" of the Lord (Jeremiah 25:9; Jeremiah 27:6)? Yes, he was the servant of the Lord in that he was appointed in God's providence to be God's scourge and servant to judge Israel for her gross and habitual covenant-breaking. He was "the servant" of the Lord like a plague serves the purposes of the Lord in God's providence. The sword, pestilence, and famine were all God's servants in judging His people, Judah and Israel (Leviticus 26:25). But also note that God held Nebuchadnezzar responsible for his tyranny and cruel treatment of Judah (Jeremiah 50:17-18,33-34; Jeremiah 51:24,34-35).

D. Now that we can see from Scripture itself that Zedekiah was not a lawful civil magistrate, but rather a tyrant who ruled contrary to the National Covenant established by God with Israel at Mt. Sinai, we seek to know whether he could in that unlawful state transact lawful covenants or agreements to which God held him bound? Let us briefly consider Ezekiel 17:16-19. Note that God holds Zedekiah who was appointed to

be king by the king of Babylon (Ezekiel 17:16) to be a covenant-breaker because he did not own the covenant he had made with the king of Babylon and had sworn in the name of God, but rather than submitting to Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah broke the covenant and sought help from Egypt. This truth will speak directly to an objection that is raised against the royal charters established by unlawful kings of Britain with the colonies when we consider this more fully in the near future as we focus our attention upon the *Solemn League and Covenant*. For as Covenanters, we can declare Charles II, James II, and all subsequent kings and queens of Britain to be unlawful according to God's Moral Law and God's Covenant (the *Solemn League and Covenant*), but also recognize they sit as rulers (*de facto*) upon the throne of Britain by God's providence. And we can also recognize that those colonial charters and agreements that were made with the colonies in North America (and elsewhere) are binding upon the moral person of the British crown and British colonies. For the British crown exists *de facto* by God's providence even if it does not exist de jure by God's Moral Law and by right of the fundamental law of the nation (per the *Solemn League and Covenant*).

1. A covenant-breaking tyrant may not be one to whom we can submit (for conscience sake) "as God's minister to us for good", but we as Covenanters do not maintain that all civil government ceases to exist or that there are no moral actions or civil agreements for which tyrants are not responsible if those original civil agreements are agreeable to God's Word.

2. Dear ones, such a view would lead us to the conclusion that what a tyrant does while he is in power has no moral or civil bearing upon a nation because he does not exist as a lawful civil magistrate. In other words, such a perverted view would lead us to conclude that if we want to avoid responsibility for our actions and to make null and void all agreements, covenants, and contracts that we do not like, then all we have to do is to become a covenant-breaking tyrant in our family, business, church, or nation. However, even covenant-breaking nations (and their civil governments) continue to exist as a moral person (a covenant-breaking moral person)—that is why they receive the righteous judgment of God upon them. If a nation simply ceased to exist when it became a covenant-breaking nation, no further punishment upon it could be brought for you cannot punish something that does not exist. As Covenanters, we abhor even the thought of such a view and our convictions about the unlawful rule of tyrants who habitually break covenant with God and with the people does not drive us to embrace such an absurd and wicked view. Such a wicked view would lead us to sin and to break covenant with God so that we might simply cease to be a moral person responsible for our moral actions before the Lord. Thus, Covenanters are not upon any horns of a dilemma in maintaining that a king is a tyrant and yet his charters (that are lawful) are binding agreements between the king and those dominions over which he rules (*de facto*).

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