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KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY  
FOR STUDENTS AT LINCROFT BIBLE CHURCH  
IN LINCROFT, NEW JERSEY

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A Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

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by  
Christopher Randolph Pascarella  
December 2021

**APPROVAL SHEET**

KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY  
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For the glory of God

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## PREFACE

I would like to thank my wife, Heather, for the support through this process. I was a little hesitant to pursue this degree and Heather told me to pursue it. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Peter Gentry, for his encouragement and guidance in this project. Also, I would like to thank The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for affording me of this opportunity. Of course, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the reason why I am doing any of this.

Chris Pascarella

Lincroft, New Jersey

December 2021

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Teenagers are anxious. In fact, rates of teenage anxiety have increased compared to previous generations.<sup>1</sup> Teens are not the only anxious ones, however; parents are too. Christian parents seem vulnerable to a particular kind of anxiety: fear of their teens leaving the faith. Parents can fear the student “dropout” rate, the rate at which students abandon the faith when they enter college.<sup>2</sup> Recent research, however, questions the ever-popular evangelical dropout rate.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the legitimacy of the dropout rate, most Christians would agree that teenagers must adequately learn God’s Word before leaving for college or the workplace.

The church, then, has the crucial opportunity of teaching middle and high school students the Word of God before they leave. Teaching students is part of a pastor’s work, for ministers must “[equip] the saints for the work of service” (Eph 3:12). Equipping teenagers is important work because they are *not* the future of the church; they *are* the church. When considering how to teach students, the question arises, “What is the best way to equip students in the Word of God?” This is where the field of biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Ellis Nutt, “Why Kids and Teens May Face Far More Anxiety These Days,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/05/10/why-kids-and-teens-may-face-far-more-anxiety-these-days/>.

<sup>2</sup> In evangelical circles, the infamous “drop out rate” statistic says that close to 80-90 percent of high school students raised in church leave the faith. See a representative use of dire statistics to promote a certain model of ministry in Steve Wright, *ReThink: Is Student Ministry Working?* (Wake Forest, NC: InQuest, 2008), 18-20.

<sup>3</sup> Brandon Shields effectively refutes the dropout rate statistic in his PhD dissertation. Most of the “data” which produced the drop-out rate came from “gut feelings.” See Brandon James Shields, “An Assessment of Dropout Rates of Former Youth Ministry Participants in Conservative Southern Baptist Megachurches” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).



theology enters the discussion. Although there are many different ways of putting the Bible's story together, biblical theology gives pastors one of the best tools to read and interpret the Bible properly, because a person's view of the whole story influences their understanding of the smaller episodes.

My aim in this project is to articulate the Bible's metanarrative through the biblical covenants. In this project, I will outline the covenants and show how they provide a hermeneutical grid for interpreting all of Scripture. Such a project is important for students so that they both understand the Bible's overarching story but also are given the framework to properly understand any particular passage of the Bible.

### **Definition and Purpose of Biblical Theology**

Biblical theology is both a *content* and a *method*. According to James Hamilton, the method of biblical theology is to embrace "the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors."<sup>4</sup> Christians should read the Bible like Jesus and the apostles did. How did they read the Bible? They read earlier Scripture as part of a much larger story that was leading to Christ.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Gospel of Matthew intends to show how Jesus fulfills the role of Israel.<sup>6</sup> Such fulfillment by Christ indicates that the Gospel writer viewed Christ in light of a larger story, Israel's.

Moreover, the biblical writers interpreted the Scriptures *covenantally*, meaning they saw the location and progression of the covenants in the Bible as key to interpreting

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15.

<sup>5</sup> See this main conviction and more assumptions of the biblical authors explained in G. K. Beale, "The Cognitive Peripheral Vision of Biblical Authors," *Westminster Theological Journal* 76 (2014): 285.

<sup>6</sup> Peter J. Leithart, "Jesus as Israel: The Typological Structure of Matthew's Gospel," Theopolis Institute, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://theopolisinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2015/09/jesus-as-israel-the-typological-structure-of-matthew-s-gospel.pdf>.

the Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> One of the clearest examples of covenantal reading is Paul’s arguments in Galatians 3:15-29. Paul argues that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses precisely because the old covenant was temporary. The inauguration of the new covenant renders the old covenant unnecessary.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Christians should follow the method of Jesus and the apostles whereby they understood Scripture telling a larger story and also interpreted Scripture in light of the biblical covenants.

Such a method for reading Scripture naturally leads to producing a particular content—an articulation of the larger story. When reading Scripture according to its own plot-structure, Scripture’s story advances along the lines of the covenants, which have their fulfillment in Christ. Therefore, as N.T. Wright presents, Christ is the “climax of the covenant.”<sup>9</sup> Everything in the Bible leads students to know and understand the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, there is great diversity of theory and practice within the field of biblical theology.<sup>10</sup> A large separation within biblical theology first occurs between evangelical and non-evangelical approaches. Even though there is debate about the exact definition of what an evangelical is, one hallmark of academic evangelicalism is to uphold the divine

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<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 123-25.

<sup>8</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking of Paul’s interpretive method concerning Christ and the Law, N. T. Wright says, “What [Paul] says about Jesus and the Law reflects his belief that the covenant purposes of Israel’s God had reached their climactic moment in the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection.” N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), ix. While Wright’s book specifically focuses on Pauline theology, his main contention—Christ as climax of the covenant—can be broadened out to speak of Christ as climax of the covenants, thereby providing a whole-Bible theology.

<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). Klink and Lockett categorize five main ways of conceiving of biblical theology: historical description, history of redemption, worldview-story, canonical approach, and theological construction.

inspiration of the Bible—the belief that all the words of the Bible are God’s words.<sup>11</sup> Building upon a belief in the inspiration of Scripture, evangelicals take things a step further and usually contend for the inerrancy of Scripture as well. Inerrancy means that everything the Bible teaches is true and trustworthy.<sup>12</sup>

Such doctrines influence evangelical biblical theology in a few ways. Since the doctrine of inspiration states that all the words of the Bible are God’s words, he is *the* author of Scripture, even though he also uses human beings to write his word.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a reader can expect a coherent and unified narrative to emerge in Scripture because one author stands behind all the diversity. Such unity of the biblical story makes biblical theology possible. Furthermore, a belief in inerrancy will cause evangelicals to wrestle with the text. They must include *all* the different parts and genres of Scripture into their retelling of the biblical story and cannot excise portions of Scripture they do not find palatable.

### **Non-Evangelical Views of Biblical Theology**

Evangelicals have not been the only ones doing biblical theology, however. Biblical theology actually began with a desire to separate study of the Bible from theological proof texting.<sup>14</sup> Biblical theology sprang out of non-evangelical impulses and

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 160-61.

<sup>12</sup> Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 176-81.

<sup>13</sup> David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, “Special Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 141-42. The idea that God works through the human authors is known as the “concurrent theory” of inspiration. Dockery and Nelson write, “This concurrent approach . . . gladly confesses that God’s purpose is accomplished through the writer. . . . This is accomplished by the Spirit’s leading the human authors in points of research, reflection, and subsequent writing or editing.” Dockery and Nelson, “Special Revelation,” 142.

<sup>14</sup> Brevard Childs writes, “The history of Biblical Theology throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century shows clearly the effect of the emancipation of the discipline from its dependency on ecclesiastical doctrine.” Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 5.

non-evangelical scholars have propounded many different models of biblical theology. James Barr, for example, was a prolific non-evangelical biblical scholar who contributed to the discussions of the definition of biblical theology. In his book *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, Barr sought to distinguish biblical theology from other forms of theology.<sup>15</sup>

One of Barr's concerns was the tendency, in his view, for theologians to impose their own ideas onto the text in order to provide contemporary relevance for the Bible. Barr writes, "The claims that [biblical theology] 'works' for the present day ... depend on the assumption that biblical theology has actually described the situation correctly: for otherwise the evaluations are mistaken."<sup>16</sup> According to Barr, the purpose of biblical theology is to discover what the text meant solely in its original context.<sup>17</sup>

Barr's warning about imposing foreign ideas upon the text of Scripture is important to heed when doing biblical theology. Unfortunately, Barr does not seem to follow his own admonition within his work, for he allows historical-critical methods to determine what should be included in the retelling of Scripture's story.<sup>18</sup> The question must be asked however: "Why should the historical-critical method be privileged in the reading of Scripture over against Scripture's own claims for itself?"

Instead of pursuing "objectivity," students of Scripture should admit that all interpreters come to the Bible with presuppositions. Responsible interpreters, however,

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<sup>15</sup> James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> When interacting with the concept of "story" in Scripture, Barr admits that story can be a helpful concept to include in one's interpretation of Scripture. Story, however, has limits. He writes, "Though reading as 'story' is different from historical reading, that does not mean that historical reading can be dispensed with. For in the modern world . . . the biblical text, taken 'just as it is', turns out to be read above all as a historical record. . . . It is only through the presence of historical reading and historical criticism . . . that, for most people, the reading as story becomes available." Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 352. Barr seems to be saying that historical critical methods need to be used to sheer the biblical texts of unhistorical elements so that the true, "historical" story can emerge.

acknowledge their presuppositions and allow them to be challenged by the Scripture's own claims and presentation. In fact, evangelical biblical theologies *do* attempt to heed Barr's admonition. They really do try to "describe the situation correctly," that is, accurately recount the Bible's own theology. Describing the situation correctly means taking seriously the Bible's own claims for itself and not using human reason to determine what is historically plausible and what is not.

Barr advocates for the "descriptive" role of biblical theology. Yet, does the biblical theology provide any *prescriptive* value for the church today? Non-evangelical scholar Brevard Childs attempts to bridge the gap between the descriptive and prescriptive role of biblical theology with his canonical approach. Childs argues that the "canon" influenced the formation of both the Old and New Testament.<sup>19</sup> According to Childs, the formation of the canon was a dynamic process whereby many different groups adapted and shaped texts over time to produce *the* text. These groups produced *the* text (i.e., the canonical text) for an explicitly theological purpose meant to speak to subsequent generations of believers.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Childs sees the canonical text setting the parameters for understanding of God's Word: "The canon provides the arena in which the struggle for understanding takes places."<sup>21</sup> Biblical theology, then, can be prescriptive for the church when it operates within the bounds of the canon.

While Childs' emphasis on the canon is certainly a welcome contribution to the discussion of biblical theology, conservative scholar John Oswalt points out that many evangelical scholars have latched onto one point of Childs' work (the canon as context) but missed his underlying beliefs about Scripture which make the canonical

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<sup>19</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 15.

approach less than ideal for evangelicals to follow.<sup>22</sup> For example, Childs holds that the words of the Bible are *not* God's very word but rather "the human form of the witness to divine revelation which God continues to bring alive for each new generation through his Spirit."<sup>23</sup> Because the Bible is only human words in Childs' view, he evaluates much of the Bible through the use of historical criticism.<sup>24</sup> While Childs' canonical approach widens the context of interpretation beyond Barr's emphasis on the immediate context of a passage, he still uses similar tools of a purely descriptive approach when building his biblical theology.

Evangelical biblical theologies will agree that the scriptural canon sets the parameters for interpretation. Kevin Vanhoozer emphasizes "thick" interpretation whereby the fullest meaning of a biblical text is discovered by placing it in the canonical context.<sup>25</sup> Most evangelical biblical theologies, however, will differ from Childs in their doctrine of Scripture, holding to the view that all the words of Scripture are God's words, not merely a witness to the revelation of God. Such a view of verbal plenary inspiration will cause evangelicals to be more well-rounded in their approach and more fully "canonical" than the adherents of the canonical approach because they will not use historical criticism to deem which Scriptures are authoritative.

Although Childs' work has definitely helped move the conversation about biblical theology in a better theological direction, Francis Watson defines biblical theology in unabashedly theological terms. He specifically aims to "re-theologize" biblical theology

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<sup>22</sup> John Oswalt, "Canonical Criticism: A Review from a Conservative Viewpoint," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 3 (1987): 319.

<sup>23</sup> Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him: Brevard Childs, his Critics, and the Future of Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, no. 1 (1997): 29-30.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 61.

in a distinctively Christian way.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, biblical theology will be anchored by Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament. Watson writes, “The Old Testament comes to us with Jesus and from Jesus, and can never be understood in abstraction from him.”<sup>27</sup> For Watson, the purpose of biblical theology is to articulate theology, which is centered on Christ for the benefit of the church.

Unfortunately, Watson uses a radical “gospel-centric” hermeneutic to claim that the text of Scripture is not immune from criticism.<sup>28</sup> In fact, some texts will be deemed “oppressive.” Yet who can deem them oppressive and by what criteria? Watson’s answer is that the interpretive community has the power to determine which texts are oppressive or not: “Whether a text is experienced as contrary to the gospel is determined not only by its objective contents but also by the way it is understood in the community to which one belongs.”<sup>29</sup> By making such an argument, Watson injects significant subjectivity into the task of biblical theology. Essentially, any text that a community does not want to include in the biblical story can be left out, leaving a truncated story behind.

Evangelical biblical theology, on the other hand, does not operate with a communal hermeneutic. Rather, it uses a “hermeneutic of love,” where texts are listened to on their own terms.<sup>30</sup> While an interpreter may initially find things in Scripture that he might consider unfashionable, it is not his place, nor the community’s place, to judge texts as oppressive or non-oppressive. The church must allow the Scriptures to have their say.

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<sup>26</sup> Watson argues that many modern biblical scholars have “devised a variety of strategies for concealing, evading or denying the simple fact that Christian faith has its own *distinctive* reasons for concerns with the Bible.” Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), viii.

<sup>27</sup> Watson, *Text and Truth*, 182.

<sup>28</sup> Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 231.

<sup>29</sup> Watson, *Text, Church, and World*, 235.

<sup>30</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 64.

The church must then conform its beliefs and practices to the teachings of Scripture because it is the very word of God, carrying his authority. Therefore, Christians can discern a coherent story in Scripture through evangelical convictions concerning biblical theology in contrast to non-evangelical biblical theologies.

### **Evangelical Views of Biblical Theology**

Although agreeing on foundational theological commitments, even evangelical scholars differ from one another in their approach to biblical theology. One popular method traces a theme, or cluster of themes, from Genesis to Revelation.<sup>31</sup> Advocates for this approach argue that it is not enough to study a text in its own context, but it must also be situated within redemptive history. D. A. Carson represents such an approach: “Ideally, biblical theology will not only work inductively in each of the biblical corpora, but will seek to make the connections among the corpora.”<sup>32</sup> Biblical theologians following such an approach will not be so concerned at finding *the* main theme, but will be more concerned with how the biblical authors develop a theme across the canon.

Other evangelical scholars search for the “center” of Scripture—the single most important idea of the Bible. James Hamilton’s *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment* is a clear example. Hamilton attempts to discover the “ultimate purpose” for why God does what he does.<sup>33</sup> Hamilton desires to find unity amidst the diversity of the Bible by finding the ultimate unity, the center of Scripture. He notes the suspicion many scholars have toward speaking about “orthodoxy” or “unity” with regards to theology.

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<sup>31</sup> G. K. Beale’s work on the temple is a classic example of this approach. See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> D. A. Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 31.

<sup>33</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 48.



Often, they prefer to speak in the plural referencing *orthodoxies* and *theologies*.<sup>34</sup> Hamilton warns, however, that overemphasis on pluralities can lead to relativism and incoherence.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to scholars that deny a center to Scripture, Hamilton argues that identifying the center of the Bible provides a coherent way of telling the Bible's story and a coherent theology from the Scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

The thematic approach and center approach are legitimate expressions of biblical theology. Nevertheless, there is another way of doing biblical theology: tying the plot of the Bible to the biblical covenants. The biblical covenants are important for constructing a biblical theology because they are the natural turning points in the biblical story.<sup>37</sup> The biblical story progresses most clearly through the covenants, which provide a framework for understanding the whole story. Furthermore, interpreters can reduce the subjectivity of their approach to biblical theology by wedding the narrative storyline to the biblical covenants.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, a thematic approach to biblical theology would be useful for certain purposes, but even a thematic approach would need to trace a particular theme, or themes, across the progression of the covenants to be fully "biblical."

The covenantal framework also provides a biblical grid for interpreting individual texts. For example, students will be less liable to misinterpret Old Testament laws if they are able to understand how the new covenant fulfills the previous covenants. They would avoid the trap of finding direct application of Israel's laws to themselves by recognizing the covenantal shift that has taken place with the coming of Christ (Gal 3:15-25; Rom 3:21-26; 4:9-12; Heb 8:7-13).

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<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Gentry, "The Significance of the Covenants for Biblical Theology," 20-22.

<sup>38</sup> Gentry, "The Significance of the Covenants for Biblical Theology," 24.

Biblical theology helps Christians in general, and students in particular, to read and interpret Scripture like Jesus and the apostles did because it is a method that attempts to understand how they handled Scripture. In their handling of Scripture, they saw the Bible telling a comprehensive and united story, which ultimately lead to Christ himself (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39; Acts 2:22-36). They also saw the covenants playing a crucial role in the Bible's metanarrative (Rom 4:9-12; Gal 3:23-29; Heb 8:7-13). Adopting such a view of biblical theology will help students today read and understand the Bible correctly. They will begin to understand the unity of the Bible and develop a covenantal framework for interpreting Scripture. Biblical theology not only helps students understand Scripture, but it also equips pastors of students to preach the word to teenagers.

### **Biblical Theology and Preaching**

Biblical theology helps preachers keep Jesus as the main point of each sermon. As Tim Keller points out, there are only two ways of reading the Bible: "Is it basically about me or basically about Jesus?"<sup>39</sup> Bible reading becomes myopic when Christians read the Scripture primarily with an eye toward what they must do in response to the text. Consequently, if readers do what the text says, they can receive the glory. On the other hand, if they fail (which is most likely due to humanity's sinful nature), they will be consumed with guilt.

However, if readers acknowledge Jesus as the main point of the text, then they will avoid both triumphalism and despair. They will not boast in themselves because they will know that they are not capable of fulfilling the demands of Scripture; only Jesus can. But they will also not slip into despair because they will rightly understand that Jesus *has* fulfilled the demands of Scripture and a righteous status is now available through Christ alone (2 Cor 5:21).

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 60.

Applying Keller’s insight to preaching means that there are only two kinds of sermons: sermons about the audience or sermons about Christ. If a preacher dares his audience to be Daniel or gives them tips as to how to slay the giants in their lives, then he is making the sermon about *them*.<sup>40</sup> If they live like Daniel or kill those pesky giants, then the audience could boast in their own performance. If they fail, they could despair of ever following Christ adequately.

Biblical theology challenges human-centric sermons by connecting every passage of the Bible to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Bryan Chapell speaks of how biblical theology informs preaching: “Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ.”<sup>41</sup> If Jesus is the main point of the passage, then he should be the main point of the sermon as well. Only *after* seeing how Christ fulfills the Scripture can Christians be truly transformed and walk in a new way (1 Cor 2:18-19).

Besides grounding each sermon in the gospel, biblical theology also provides preachers a coherent way of communicating to the current generation by making every sermon a narrative sermon. Unfortunately, narrative preaching has gotten a bad reputation in evangelical circles because of its origin in the Protestant mainline and the faulty theological assumptions that undergird it, notably the derision against propositional truth.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bryan Chapell points out the dangers of audience-centric or “moralizing” sermons: A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors. By ignoring the sinfulness of humanity, which makes even our best works tainted before God (Isa 64:6; Luke 17:10), and by neglecting the grace of God, which makes obedience possible and acceptable (1 Cor 15:10; Eph 2:8-9), such messages necessarily subvert the Christian message. (Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 274)

<sup>41</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 279.

<sup>42</sup> Such a criticism against propositional truth and expository sermons can be seen in Fred Craddock’s remarks: “The sermons of our time have, with few exceptions, kept the same form [sermons build on propositional truth]. Either preachers have access to a world that is neat, orderly, and unified, which gives their sermons their form, or they are out of date and out of touch with the way it is.” Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 13. Craddock is criticizing the way conservative preachers “propositionalize” their sermons to reflect the absolute truth of Scripture.

Narrative preaching can be redeemed, however; just like the discipline of biblical theology was by Geerhardus Vos.<sup>43</sup> Every sermon can be a narrative sermon by placing each smaller passage into the larger story of Scripture through the discipline of biblical theology.

For example, it is not enough to merely preach through a passage of Romans in its own context. To preach a passage solely in its immediate context is actually to misinterpret the text. To prevent misinterpretation, Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry argue that for a biblical text to be interpreted properly it must be set within *three contexts*: the textual, the epochal, and the canonical.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, a passage from Romans, even though it is didactic literature, must be set within a larger biblical-theological framework for its true meaning to emerge.

In practice, if a pastor places the sermon passage in its larger context, then the sermon will then show that Christ is the main point of that text. While the bulk of the sermon may focus upon explanation of the passage in its immediate context, the pastor should also locate it in the Bible's metanarrative. Although the actual presented outline of the sermon may differ from week-to-week, the macro-shape of the sermon should flow like a narrative with a problem, rising tension, climax, and resolution in Christ.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, every sermon can be truly expository *and* flow like a narrative, thus reaching a culture that thrives on stories.

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned in n14, biblical theology arose within a non-evangelical context. But as Klink and Lockett point out, Geerhardus Vos was a key conservative voice in reclaiming biblical theology to serve orthodox ends. Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology*, 15-16.

<sup>44</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 119-27. The textual context refers to the immediate context of the passage, the paragraphs before and after a particular passage. The epochal context refers the covenantal time periods which come before and after the passage. The canonical context refers to placing the passage in light of the whole canon of Scripture, the Bible's big story.

<sup>45</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 228-32.

## Review of Literature

Since this project concerns a biblical-theological understanding of the covenants, this review of literature concerns how the covenants have been understood in various biblical-theological proposals. Furthermore, biblical theology involves study of the original text so a few important biblical studies surrounding the covenants have been consulted.

### Covenants in Biblical-Theological Proposals

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum undertake a biblical-theological understanding of the covenants in *Kingdom through Covenant (KTC)*. In their view, the biblical covenants provide the narrative plot structure for the whole Bible.<sup>46</sup> The story of the Bible advances (progresses) through the covenants. The covenants, beginning with a covenant with creation, build upon one another, leading the climactic fulfillment in the new covenant.<sup>47</sup> They also question the strict categorization of biblical covenants as either conditional or unconditional, seeing elements of both in each covenant. Such an understanding leads the authors to coin their system “progressive covenantalism.” They situate their system as a *via media* between two major evangelical theological systems: dispensationalism and covenant theology.

Another way of understanding the covenants is dispensationalism. While many varieties of dispensationalism exist, progressive dispensationalism is the newest version and updates some of the arguments of older dispensationalism.<sup>48</sup> Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising wrote *Progressive Dispensationalism* to unpack how the Bible’s story unfolds. While Bock and Blaising mention the covenant with Noah, their articulation of the

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<sup>46</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 604.

<sup>48</sup> See the taxonomy of dispensationalism found in Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 9-56. There are three distinct phases of dispensationalism: classical, revised, and progressive. Interestingly, there has not been much modification of the dispensational system since the advent of progressive dispensationalism around thirty years ago.

Bible's story rests upon the Abrahamic covenant, which undergirds all of the other covenants.<sup>49</sup> The Abrahamic covenant is unconditional with the stipulations within the covenant designed to bring about the historical manifestation of its blessings. Such a dynamic is picked up by the Mosaic covenant, so that the underlying gracious nature of the promises remained unchanged even if the people fail to obey.<sup>50</sup> Their covenantal reading is Christ-focused as they see Jesus fulfilling all of the previous covenants.<sup>51</sup> Jesus fulfills the new covenant in an *already/not yet* way with the spiritual blessings of the covenant being inaugurated in the present time while the material blessings of the new covenant await the last day.<sup>52</sup>

Another common biblical-theological system within evangelicalism is covenant theology. Covenant theology has a long history with many nuances within it.<sup>53</sup> Covenant theologians typically subsume the biblical covenants under theologically constructed covenants like the covenant of works or the covenant of grace. For example, theologian Michael Horton assigns the biblical covenants to either the covenant of works (the Mosaic covenant) or grace (Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenant).<sup>54</sup> Horton further labels some biblical covenants as unconditional (like the Abrahamic) and others as conditional (like the Mosaic).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Bock and Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 137.

<sup>50</sup> Bock and Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 142-44.

<sup>51</sup> Bock and Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 175.

<sup>52</sup> Bock and Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 206-10.

<sup>53</sup> For a history of covenant theology and its varieties, especially interacting with recent modifications to the system, see Jeong Koo Joen, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 77-110.

<sup>55</sup> Horton, *God of Promise*, 23-76.

While some covenant theologians like Horton would insist on a distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant grace, O. Palmer Robertson argues for unified plan of God by insisting on *one* overarching covenant: “God’s multiple bonds with his people ultimately unite into a single relationship.”<sup>56</sup> In his view, the covenants successively build upon each yet without nullifying what came before them.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, Robertson sees an organic unity between the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants due to their historical circumstances and other unities such as the genealogical principle, the promise made to “you and your seed.”<sup>58</sup>

Besides classical covenant theology and its modern developments, N. T. Wright has also pioneered important work in the field of covenant and biblical theology. Although Wright does not set out to write a biblical theology of the covenants, his work makes important contributions to the discussion. Wright clarifies the connection between Genesis 1-11 and the introduction of Abraham in Genesis 12. He shows the thematic and linguistic links between the promises and commission given to the Abraham and the promises and commission to Adam.<sup>59</sup> Why are Adam and Abraham connected? For Wright, the Abrahamic covenant is the answer to the sin to Adam: “The reason the creator God called Abraham in the first place was to undo the sin of Adam.”<sup>60</sup> The Abrahamic covenant deals with the sin problem introduced through the fall of Adam. As a result, Jesus’ fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant is important because it provides forgiveness for sins, dealing with the problem of sin. Christ also restores his people back to the Adamic vocation

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<sup>56</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 28.

<sup>57</sup> Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 29-41.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 21-23.

<sup>60</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 784.

originally given in the Garden.<sup>61</sup> Wright’s work demonstrates the profound unity between the covenants, for Jesus’ fulfillment links back to Abraham who links back to Adam. His work also provides compelling evidence for an Adamic, or creation, covenant, although it is unclear as to his position on the matter.

Stepping outside of the realm of evangelicalism, Catholic scholar Scott Hahn has produced an important book of biblical theology called *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Purposes*. Hahn sees the New Testament reading and interpreting of Israel’s history through the grid of the covenants.<sup>62</sup> Such covenants reach their telos in Christ. Hahn’s work is unique because he emphasizes the familial context of covenants. Covenants do not just bond two parties together; they make them *family*.<sup>63</sup> His book draws out the covenantal nuances of Israel being God’s “son.” His work is relevant to this project because it solidifies the identification of Jesus as the true Israel—the faithful “son” who keeps the terms of the covenant.<sup>64</sup>

### **Biblical Studies of Covenant**

Covenants have not only played a crucial role in biblical-theological proposals but have also been subject to much controversy, especially in the field of biblical studies. While the issues surrounding the term and idea of covenant are complex, two issues take up a lot of space within scholarly literature: the definition of the biblical term “covenant” and the classification of covenants as conditional or unconditional.

Scholars have long debated the exact definition of covenant. Nevertheless, a strong starting point is the work of Gordon P. Hugenberger. He offers a quite detailed

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<sup>61</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 21-37.

<sup>62</sup> Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Purposes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 332.

<sup>63</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 37.

<sup>64</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 48.



lexical study of the term covenant throughout Scripture. He points out that while covenant cannot be reduced to a relationship, the majority of biblical examples show that a personal relationship is present in the covenant.<sup>65</sup> According to Hugenberg, three other elements are included in covenant: it is made with a non-relative, it involves obligations, and it is established with an oath.<sup>66</sup> Thus, he defines covenant as “an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction.”<sup>67</sup> The weakness of Hugenberg’s definition is his focus on the relationship being “elective,” that is, chosen. Some relationships are *not* chosen yet still covenantal such as the bond between parents and their children is covenantal, yet no one chooses to be born into their family.<sup>68</sup>

Scholars also debate how to classify the various covenants found in the Bible. Many biblical scholars classify covenants as either conditional or unconditional. David Freedman and David Miano essentially agree with the classic schema when they identify two categories of covenants: “human obligation” and “divine commitment.”<sup>69</sup> They attempt to show how unconditional and conditional covenants made to the same people (Israel) can co-exist together. Such a work is important for this study because it presents a majority view of seeing covenants within the unconditional/conditional framework.

Paul R. Williamson is another scholar who grapples with the conditional and unconditional classification of the covenants. Williamson makes a unique contribution to

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<sup>65</sup> Gordon Hugenberg, *Marriage as Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 176. It is actually easier to point out the texts in which a personal relationship is *not* present: Job 5:23; 31:1; 40:28; Isa 28:15-18; Jer 33:20, 25. But even in these texts, Hugenberg points out that they usually occur in highly poetic or hyperbolic contexts and the use of “covenant” is more metaphorical than literal. Hugenberg, *Marriage as Covenant*, 177.

<sup>66</sup> Hugenberg, *Marriage as Covenant*, 176.

<sup>67</sup> Hugenberg, *Marriage as Covenant*, 184.

<sup>68</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 164-65.

<sup>69</sup> David Freedman and David Miano, “The People of the New Covenant,” in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period*, ed. S. E. Porter and J. C. R. de Roo (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 7-26.

the classification of covenants in the Bible because he argues that Abrahamic covenant is really *two* covenants: one unconditional found in Genesis 15 and one conditional found in Genesis 17.<sup>70</sup> In addition to Williamson, both Bruce Waltke and William Dumbrell tackle the unconditional/conditional categorization of covenant, albeit from different angles. Waltke points out that there are conditions within seemingly unconditional covenants, like the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.<sup>71</sup> Dumbrell, on the other hand, demonstrates that there are unconditional elements within seemingly *conditional* covenants, specifically the Mosaic covenant.<sup>72</sup>

Because the concept of covenant is so varied and complex in the Scriptures, scholars will probably still be debating the definition and classification of covenants for years to come.<sup>73</sup> Still, a few strands of thought stand out in the literature. Although different scholars will add nuances to the definition of covenant, there seems to be a common understanding that covenants involve bonding two parties together with promises and obligations. Furthermore, the strict classification of covenants into the categories of unconditional or conditional seems to be eroding as more scholars admit that there are usually elements of both within the covenants, even if they still hold to the traditional classification.

### **Rationale of Project**

The church must equip the saints for the work of ministry through the teaching of God's Word (Eph 4:12-16). Even teenagers need to be taught Scripture, and the most

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<sup>70</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 89.

<sup>71</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. A. Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 123-40.

<sup>72</sup> William J. Dumbrell, "The Prospect of Unconditionality in the Siniatic Covenant," in Gileadi, *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, 141-55.

<sup>73</sup> Hahn, *Kingship by Covenant*, 9.

effective way is by teaching them biblical theology. Readers should attempt to understand God’s Word, the Bible, according to its own structures and unfolding plot, instead of importing their own meaning onto the text.<sup>74</sup> Since biblical theology helps all Christians rightly understand the Bible, teenagers need biblical theology.

Teaching biblical theology to teenage students is crucial because they need Scripture’s metanarrative to make sense of their lives. Cultural commentators have spoken about how postmodernism destroyed the concept of a “metanarrative,” a large story by which someone could live their life.<sup>75</sup> The death of the metanarrative seems to have led to the promulgation of “expressive individualism,” where each individual creates his own meaning for life.<sup>76</sup> But even those who deny metanarratives exist still live according a larger story, the postmodern one.<sup>77</sup> Everyone still must live according to some larger story. Therefore, pastors must fight story with story. Youth pastors should present the big story of Scripture to students so that it shapes their thoughts, actions, and lives. Since biblical theology seeks to articulate the larger story of the Bible, it is an important discipline to impart to students.

While the “biblical theology” component is vital to this project, so is the “students,” or youth ministry, part as well. This project seeks to be one small contribution to a larger goal: changing the conversation surrounding youth ministry. Unfortunately, stereotypes abound concerning youth ministry positions. One such stereotype is that youth pastors will not stay long in a particular position if a better opportunity to “move up the ladder” comes along. Some younger pastors may see youth ministry positions as a

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<sup>74</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> According to philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, postmodernism has “incredulity toward any metanarrative.” Quoted in Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 63.

<sup>77</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 63.

way to build a resume on the way to becoming a senior pastor rather than a calling to shepherd the church of God. Another stereotype is that the demands of youth ministry demand young, high-energy Bible college graduates.

The statistics demonstrate, however, that youth pastors are growing older and staying longer in their respective positions.<sup>78</sup> Youth ministry is beginning to bear the fruit of experienced and well-equipped ministers. One of my intentions is to continue this trend by adding theological rigor to the kind of teaching given to students. Students are not the future of the church; they *are* the church. Thus, they are also capable of understanding biblical theology and applying it to their lives.

### **Overview of Passages**

One of the primary ways to influence teenagers in the church is through biblical preaching. Therefore, this project outlines the work necessary to preach a sermon series on the progression of the covenants to students of Lincroft Bible Church. The sermon series would cover the six major biblical covenants: covenant with creation, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David, and the new covenant. The messages on the new covenant should be split into two parts: the new covenant as predicted by the prophets, and the new covenant as inaugurated in Christ. The split attempts to do justice to both the Old Testament context of the new covenant and show how Christ fulfills all the promises of the new covenant.

### **Covenant with Creation (Gen 1:26-28)**

God's relationship with humanity is covenantal. While scholars debate the exact definition of covenant, the core of all biblical covenants is the idea that two parties

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<sup>78</sup> Ricky Harris, "The Aging Process and How That Affects Judgement and Choices in Youth Ministry" (DMin diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 26.

are bound together with promises and responsibilities.<sup>79</sup> Some covenants may be redemptive; some may not.<sup>80</sup> Some may have signs; some may not.<sup>81</sup> However, all covenants bind two parties together in relationship. Moreover, all covenants come with promises and responsibilities. Such is the case with humanity and God in Genesis 1-2.<sup>82</sup>

God creates humanity “in [his] image” and “according to [his] likeness” (Gen 1:26). Such descriptions mean that humanity *is* the image of God and humanity’s *purpose* is to rule.<sup>83</sup> God creates people like himself and gives them a job to do: “Be fruitful and multiply” and “rule over” creation (Gen 1:28). God gave Adam and Eve the responsibility to spread his glorious presence over the face of the earth.<sup>84</sup> They were to have children, raise them up in relationship with God, and send them out to spread God’s glory around the globe by stewarding God’s creation. They were not to do this in their own strength. The implied promise of the creation covenant was that God would strengthen them in their task since his presence was with them in the Garden (cf. Gen 3:8).

The close connection between God, humanity, and creation makes sense of later biblical texts that also support the notion of a creation covenant. God reaffirms his commitment to the Davidic dynasty cast in terms of creation: “If you can break my

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<sup>79</sup> See Michael Horton’s definition of covenant: “A covenant is a relationship of ‘oaths and bonds’ and involves mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments.” Horton, *God of Promise*, 10.

<sup>80</sup> For example, marriage is a covenant (Mal 2:14), but is not “redemptive” (i.e., about salvation).

<sup>81</sup> The sign of the Noahic covenant is the rainbow (Gen 9:12-17) and the sign of the Abrahamic covenant is circumcision (Gen 17:10-14). But it is not entirely clear what the “sign” of the marriage covenant is. In contemporary culture, most couples exchange rings as the sign of their covenant but the Bible does not explicitly demonstrate what the sign of the marriage covenant is.

<sup>82</sup> Scholars debate the existence of a “covenant with creation.” The argument that no creation covenant exists because the word “covenant” is not used in Gen 1–2 is not a strong argument for the biblical authors can talk about a concept without actually using the word. For example, Isa 66:1 talks about God’s kingship even though the word “king” is not used. See Gentry and Wellum *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 212.

<sup>83</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “Kingdom Through Covenant: Humanity as Divine Image,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008): 29.

<sup>84</sup> Beale, *Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 84-85.

covenant for the day and my covenant for the night . . . then my covenant may also be broken with David” (Jer 33:20-21, cf. Jer 31:35-36). The references to creation in these verses are probably intended to reach back to God’s original commitment, i.e., the covenant made at creation.<sup>85</sup>

Hosea 6:4 speaks of Israel who “like Adam they transgressed the covenant.” Debates rage as to whether Hosea has in mind a covenant made with Adam at creation due to the wide variety of translational possibilities for the verse.<sup>86</sup> It seems that the author intends to connect Israel’s sin to Adam’s sin due to the fact that 6:7 is set in the wider context of 6:4-6, which speaks rather generally of Israel’s sin. The author then uses 6:7 as a bridge to speak of specific manifestations of Israel’s sin in 6:8-11. The text suggests that Israel is acting just like their ancient ancestor, Adam. Therefore, such a connection may indicate that a covenant with Adam at creation is intended in Hosea 6:7, for both were supposed to be king-priests in the world.

When Israel sinned against the Lord, they were walking in the way of their ancestor, Adam. In fact, Adam rebelled against God, bringing sin and death into the world (Gen 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-21). The ultimate judgment was expulsion from God’s presence (Gen 2:24). Soon, the world descended into evil and death, exemplified when Cain kills Abel (Gen 4:1-12). Things get so bad that God regrets making people, and he decides to judge the world with a seemingly comprehensive judgment (Gen 6:6-8). Will anyone be saved?

### **Covenant with Noah (Gen 9:1-17)**

Despite humanity’s sin, God continues his plan because of his grace and mercy. He saves eight people through the flood: Noah and his family (Gen 7:6-7). After the flood waters recede, God makes a covenant with Noah and binds himself to all of humanity (Gen

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<sup>85</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 257.

<sup>86</sup> Brian Habig, “Hosea 6:7: Revisited,” *Presbyterion* 42, nos. 1-2 (2016): 4-20.

9:8). He makes his covenant “with every living creature” (9:10, 12, 15), “all flesh” (9:11, 17), and “the earth” (9:13). God promises to never destroy the world with a flood again (9:11). There is grace.

God also gives to Noah and his sons the same responsibility he gave to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 9:1). Humanity’s mandate persists because creation still exists. The world, however, is a very different place than it used to be due to sin. God helps humanity in its task as he makes animals fear people and protects human life (Gen 9:8-9).

Despite the fresh start, the curse upon the world ends up overtaking Noah as well. He is righteous, yet he is not totally obedient to God. Reminiscent of Adam’s fall in a garden, Noah winds up drunk in a vineyard where something unfortunate happens with his own son (Gen 9:20-23). Even with a fresh start, humanity fails. How will God save the world with such flawed partners?

### **Covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3)**

While the world groans under death, decay, and sin, God continues his plan to save the world by making a covenant with one man, Abraham. God provides the basic outline of his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 with its corresponding promises and responsibilities.<sup>87</sup> God gives to Abraham the same commission he gave to Adam and to Noah.<sup>88</sup> But now, Abraham must do two things: go from his country and family, and be a blessing.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, God desires for Abraham to extend his glory across the globe.

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<sup>87</sup> Although the covenant with Abraham is not formally made until Gen 15 and then ratified in Gen 17 with the sign of circumcision, the basic elements of the covenant are there in Gen 12. The later chapters merely build upon and formalize these things. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 265.

<sup>88</sup> The same language of “bless,” “be fruitful,” and “multiply,” which were originally given to Adam and reaffirmed to Noah, are also used of Abraham (Gen 12:2-3, 17:2, 6, 8, 22:16-18). See Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 21-23.

<sup>89</sup> There are two imperatives in the text: “go” and “be a blessing.” Most translations construe the command to “be a blessing” as a promise, “you will be a blessing.” Given the grammatical features of

Before that can happen, though, Abraham must obey and leave his father's country. God tests Abraham's faith throughout his life. Sometimes, Abraham obeys in compliance with God's covenant (Gen 22:16-18). Other times, Abraham fails (Gen 12:10-20; Gen 16:1-4). Nonetheless, God upholds his promises.

God gives Abraham two sets of promises: one for himself and one for the nations.<sup>90</sup> Abraham's personal promises include many descendants, which will form into a large nation. God will also bless Abraham and make his name great, a possible allusion to coming kings.<sup>91</sup> Abraham is not the only one to benefit from God's promise, because the second set of promises concern the nations. Those who bless Abraham will be blessed, while God's judgment will come against those who oppose him. God's blessings will come to all the families of the earth through one of Abraham's descendants.<sup>92</sup>

A problem arises, however. For one of Abraham's descendants to save the world, Abraham needs at least one son, which seems impossible since he and his wife struggle with infertility. Their infertility drives them to take matters into their own hands, but God did not intend anyone other than Sarah to have the chosen son (Gen 16:1-4; 17:19). Yet, Abraham and Sarah still had to wait on God for a long time. Will God ever make good on his promise?

### **Covenant with Israel (Exod 19:1-6)**

God makes good on his promise by first giving Abraham one son named Isaac. Isaac carries the covenant and passes it to his son, Jacob (Gen 28:4). God eventually renames Jacob, Israel. Israel has twelve sons, and the promise of a great nation is well on

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the Hebrew text, it should actually remain a command. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 269-71.

<sup>90</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 274.

<sup>91</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 272.

<sup>92</sup> James M. Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 2 (2007): 261-63.



its way to fulfillment. A famine interrupts the life of Israel, sending the people of God to Egypt. While in Egypt, the people multiply, showing that God's promise to Abraham is being fulfilled and anticipating that it is now through Israel that God's plan of salvation will roll forward (Exod 1:7).<sup>93</sup>

But not all is well. Egypt enslaves the people of Israel (Exod 1:8-11). At just the right time, God raises up Moses to deliver them (Exod 3:10). God liberates the people through a great act of salvation, the Exodus (Exod 12-15). God leads the people to Mount Sinai where he enters into a covenant with them (Exod 19:1-6).

God promises to make Israel his own possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6). Israel would be God's unique treasure, indicating a privileged relationship amongst all the nations of the world.<sup>94</sup> They would also become a royal priesthood, tasked with bringing God's blessing to the world.<sup>95</sup> They would also be a holy nation, devoted exclusively to God and his ways. In particular, God's holiness should influence how they treat the broken among them.<sup>96</sup>

Israel, however, must "keep" God's covenant. God summarizes Israel's responsibilities in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17). Although the people agree to obey God's covenant (Exod 19:8), an undertone of failure hangs over the narrative for the people do not want to approach God directly but have Moses be their intermediator. The people grow restless and fall into idolatry while waiting for Moses to receive the covenant (Exod 32:1-10). Only God's grace and mercy keep the people from being wiped out (Exod 32:14). He affirms his covenant with the people and they will try again to obey (Exod 34:10).

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<sup>93</sup> Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 93.

<sup>94</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 303.

<sup>95</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 304.

<sup>96</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 363-64.

Try as they might, the people continue to disobey the Lord. Moses even predicts that the people will transgress the covenant and God will exile them (Deut 30:1-3). Yet God will bring them back to the land because of his commitment to his covenant with Abraham.<sup>97</sup> God's promise would not be actualized without Israel fulfilling their responsibility to love the Lord with all of their heart. So how can Israel come to love the Lord with fully? Through the Lord circumcising their heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6). The fulfillment of Israel's responsibility ultimately rests on God's grace and initiative to transform her. In the meantime, the history of Israel testifies to their continued failure. If the nation cannot obey, maybe a special individual can. Maybe all the people need is a king. Can one special person keep the covenant and bring God's blessing to the nations?

### **Covenant with David (2 Sam 7:1-17)**

It is no surprise that the people of Israel desired a king because God included the concept of kingship in his covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:6). The problem was that the people did not want kingship God's way; they wanted it *their* way.<sup>98</sup> God gives them a king, Saul, who looks stately outwardly but inwardly is corrupted by sin (1 Sam 9:1-2; 15:20-21). God strips the kingdom from Saul due to his disobedience and instead gives it to David (1 Sam 28:16). Unlike Saul, David does not look impressive, but David has a heart for God (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). God then enters into a covenant with David (2 Sam 7:1-17).

God's promises in the covenant pertain to David's life and to the future.<sup>99</sup> God promises to make David's name "great," echoing the earlier promise to Abraham (2 Sam

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<sup>97</sup> Notice the emphasis that once Israel is back in the land, they will "multiply" once again.

<sup>98</sup> Notice how the elders of Israel request a king: "Appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam 8:5). David Tsumura writes about this request: "The people want to become like all the other nations, but God had called them uniquely to be his people, under his care. But they are exchanging their true glory for status in the eyes of the world." David Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 249.

<sup>99</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 447.

7:9, cf. Gen 12:2). God also promises to establish David's "house," that is, his dynasty.<sup>100</sup> David's dynasty will not merely be a long time, but eternal (2 Sam 7:12-13). Yet the promise of the future depends upon the obedience of the king (2 Sam 7:14).<sup>101</sup> The presence of responsibility in the Davidic covenant demonstrates that the kings of Israel could not presume upon God's grace, ruling as if their behavior did not matter. The king's character is especially important because God intends the king to set the example for the people as the model Israelite, being obedient to the torah (Deut 17:14-20). Unfortunately, after David, many of the kings of Israel were wicked, and so God exiled the nation due to their sin.

Israel's history and kingship reaffirm a central point of the Bible: all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Adam was tempted in the Garden and failed. Noah got drunk and failed. Although Abraham believed God, he did not receive the complete fulfillment of God's promise (Heb 11:8-9, 13). Israel was given the Law but gave into idolatry. Even the Davidic kings resorted to idolatry and failed. Would there ever be any hope for God to save the world?

### **New Covenant: Predicted by Prophets (Jer 31:31-34)**

While the people languished in exile, God gave them hope that a new covenant would be made with them. The new covenant would not be like the old covenant because God would actually give the people the ability to obey him unlike the previous generations of Israelites (Jer 31:33).<sup>102</sup> God's law would no longer be an external reality written on

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<sup>100</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 143.

<sup>101</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 449.

<sup>102</sup> James Hamilton argues that Jer 31:31-32 refers to God's promise to send the Spirit to indwell the new covenant community. It is not, according to Hamilton, a promise that God will regenerate the community because God's regenerative work was already operative under the Old Testament. James M. Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 47. However, I will argue that Jer 31:31-32 is talking about the Spirit's regenerating work. Of course, the Spirit regenerated believers under the old covenant. But the

stone but would be an inward reality written upon the heart (Ezek 36:26-27). No matter how seemingly insignificant from a human perspective, *all* of God's people will be able to do the most significant thing in the universe: know him (Jer 31:34). God will provide a forgiveness so thorough that it is as if the all-knowing God has forgotten their sins (Jer 31:34b). Hosea even indicates that with the establishment of the new covenant, there will also be a new creation (Hos 2:21-23).

But how will this new arrangement come about? The rest of the prophets only hint at how it will unfold: a promised (Davidic) king will arise. Strangely, this king will be humble, almost servant-like (Zech 9:9; Isa 42:1-2). Even more unthinkable, this king would even suffer and die (Isa 53:1-12). However, his death is not the final word as this king seems to come back to life.<sup>103</sup>

### **New Covenant: Inaugurated by Jesus (New Testament)**

The New Testament indicates that the promises of the new covenant are inaugurated through the promised faithful Davidic king, Jesus Christ. Jesus renews the bond between God and his people. The book of Luke establishes Christ's identity as the Davidic king in numerous places and specifically states that the birth of the Christ child will usher in David's kingdom (Luke 1:32-33). Jesus is the Davidic king who represents the new Israel. Jesus is also head of a new humanity (Rom 5:12-21; Eph 2:11-22). Believers have been brought near through Jesus' sacrificial death and are united to believing Jews (Eph 2:14). The result is that Christ has made one new man, or a new *Adam*. Gentry writes, "When Paul speak in Ephesians 2:15 of 'one new *man*,' he is obviously thinking of a new *Adam* and is saying that the *church*—by virtue of the new

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context of Jer 31 seems to contrast the *scope* of the Spirit's regenerating work in the new covenant versus the old covenant. God will regenerate *all* under the new covenant whereas only a few were regenerated under the old covenant. The Lord will write the Law on the hearts of *all*, not just a few. So, the indwelling work of the Spirit is not in view here. His regenerative work, cast in universal terms, is what Jeremiah is talking about.

<sup>103</sup> John Barry, *The Resurrected Servant in Isaiah* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2010), 1-2.

creation resulting from the resurrection of Jesus Christ and by virtue of the union of head (Christ) and body (church)—constitutes this new Adam.”<sup>104</sup>

Believers also experience the writing of the law on their hearts by the Spirit (Rom 2:25-29). They have been made new through the Spirit to truly obey God. The New Testament, especially the Gospel of John and 1 John, also indicates that the church of Jesus Christ *knows* God, just like Jeremiah 31:31-34 promised. Finally, believers experience the complete forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial death of Jesus as the book of Hebrews explains (chaps. 7–10). In all these things, the biblical story is leading all Christians to Christ and points to him as one the church must worship!

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<sup>104</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 544.

## CHAPTER 2

### COVENANT WITH CREATION

From the beginning of the Bible, God is in covenantal relationship with humanity.<sup>1</sup> The Bible begins with God creating the world and then filling the world he has made (Gen 1:2-25). While God makes many other things, the creation week leads up to the climactic creation of man and woman in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27).<sup>2</sup> After creating humanity, God gives five imperatives to people: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, rule, and subdue (Gen 1:26-28). He builds upon this commission as he commands the man to work and keep the Garden (Gen 2:15). Such instruction was not merely agricultural; instead, it was a call to tend to God's sacred space, that is, serve and worship God as a priest.<sup>3</sup> Later in Genesis 2, God warns Adam not to eat from the fruit in the middle of the Garden and promises that death will come upon him if he disobeys (Gen 2:16-17).

Genesis 1–2 contains the building blocks of a covenant.<sup>4</sup> There is a bond between God and humanity; it is made as his image and likeness. God promises to be

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Horton argues that any relationship that God has with his creatures *must be* covenantal. For Horton, there is no other way because God is God and human beings are not. He writes, “The relationship [between God and humans] could not be explained in terms of, say, a common spiritual essence shared by the Creator and a creature. . . . We are not related to God by virtue of a common aspect of our being, but by virtue of a pact that he himself makes with us to be our God.” Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “Kingdom Through Covenant: Humanity as Divine Image,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008): 22

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Theologians and biblical scholars have labeled the covenant found in Gen 1–2 in various ways. Many “classical” covenant theologians called the covenant “the covenant of works.” Meredith Kline preferred the designation “covenant of creation.” Others label it the “Adamic covenant.” See the

near his creatures in blessing. Responsibilities are also given to humanity. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that God's original relationship with humanity was covenantal. However, many scholars disagree with such an assessment. They argue that Genesis 1–2 do not constitute a covenant that God makes with humanity. They advance four lines of argument to discount the presence of covenant in Genesis 1-2.

First, some scholars doubt a creation covenant exists because of how they define the term “covenant.” For example, Paul R. Williamson believes that oaths are integral parts of a covenant. Lack of an oath in the text means there is no covenant.<sup>5</sup> John Stek argues further that God only made covenants when the future was in doubt.<sup>6</sup> In his view, since there is no doubt of the future in the Garden, there is no covenant. These additions to the definition of covenant are not persuasive. It is possible that both the Noahic covenant and the Davidic covenant do not include oaths.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Stek's point that covenants enter the biblical story at places where the future is in doubt is an interesting observation, but does not necessarily preclude a creation covenant. The circumstances in which a covenant is made do not seem integral to its definition. The Bible uses the term covenant flexibly, covering a wide variety of relationships and circumstances.

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explanation of various labels by Rowland S. Ward, *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantrina, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 43.

<sup>6</sup> John Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload in Reformed Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “Covenant: An Idea in the Mind of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (2009): 234. Williamson is not the only one who includes the idea of an oath as integral to the definition of covenant, Stek does as well. Stek also hedges at various points in his presentation. He claims that the oath is symbolized in the Noahic covenant through the bow pointing up at God's (28). Then he also says that there is no “oath” explicitly in the Davidic covenant text but that it is there implicitly in a text where the term “covenant” is not even used (36). Such is the almost the exact argument advanced in talking about a creation covenant. Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload,” 28-36. So, why does such an argument work for Stek with the Davidic covenant and not the creation covenant?

Second, other scholars argue all of God's covenants are redemptive, that is, they concern salvation and enter the storyline after sin enters the world.<sup>8</sup> Separating the concepts of creation and covenant from sin and salvation is a mistake, however. It is worth pointing out that the biblical story begins in Genesis 1–2, and not Genesis 3. In other words, the story does not begin with sin and salvation, but with creation and covenant. In fact, creation and covenant shape the later categories of sin and salvation. For example, sin is covenant violation and the resultant entrance of death is the curse of the covenant.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, salvation is often cast in “new creational” language (2 Cor 5:17; Titus 3:5-6).

Third, others argue that covenants only ratify an already existing relationship. Since God begins a relationship with humanity in Genesis 1–2, the nature of the relationship cannot be covenantal.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, covenants can create relationships. For example, the Israelites did not have a prior relationship with the Jebusites but made a covenant with them anyway (Josh 9).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the relationship between parents and children should be considered covenantal yet no parent has a preexisting relationship with their child. Covenants can create relationships.

Fourth, many scholars point out that the word “covenant” does not appear in Genesis until chapter 6. If God really instituted a covenant at creation, would not the word

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<sup>8</sup> John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” in *The Collected Works of John Murray* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:49. Murray nuances his position a bit and says that “Scripture always uses the term covenant, when applied to God’s administration to men, in reference to a provision that is redemptive or closely related to redemptive design.” Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” 49. In other words, a covenant may not be strictly “redemptive” but because it is closely related to a redemptive movement in the text, it is kind of redemptive and therefore rules out a “general” covenant with creation or Adam.

<sup>9</sup> Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse Is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2005), 63-76.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson writes that a covenant is “primarily a means of sealing or formalizing a relationship; it did not establish it.” Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Niehaus, “Covenant,” 237.



appear? Williamson writes, “The fact that such [covenant] terminology is not introduced until Genesis 6:18, where it unarguably relates to God’s covenant with Noah, must carry considerable significance.”<sup>12</sup> But the absence of the *word* does not mean the absence of the *concept*.<sup>13</sup> Paul Kalluveettil’s work is important in this regard because he demonstrates how various other phrases and concepts are connected to covenant. For example, he shows how “peace” (שלום) is a covenantal concept.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, covenant can exist in Genesis 1–2 without the term of being used.

Williamson actually acknowledges that concepts can exist where exact terms do not, and yet he still anchors much of his argument against a creation covenant upon it.<sup>15</sup> Still, the question must be asked, why does the term “covenant” not appear until Genesis 6:18? It is hard to know for sure. However, other key terminologies in the Bible, such as kingdom, do not appear until much later either.<sup>16</sup> Does this mean that the kingdom of God is not present in the early chapters of Genesis? Furthermore, marriage is a covenant made before the fall, even though the terminology is not present early in the Bible (Gen 2:22-24; cf. Mal 2:14). If those concepts are present in Genesis 1-2 without the specific terms being used, then it is reasonable to believe that the idea of a creation covenant is present as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> G. K. Beale writes, “Although the word ‘covenant’ is not used to describe the relationship between God and Adam, the concept of covenant is there.” G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), 37-42.

<sup>15</sup> Williamson admits, “The absence of formal covenant terminology cannot be said to exclude the idea (cf. the absence of the key Old Testament term in 2 Sam. 7 and 1 Chr. 17, which record the establishment of the Davidic covenant).” Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 24.

## Definition of Covenant

When attempting to define covenant, scholars often fall into one of two camps: maximalists and minimalists. Maximalist scholars add more elements to the definition of covenant, such as self-maledictory oaths.<sup>17</sup> Minimalists, on the other hand, focus on the essential features of a covenant. Thomas Schreiner represents a minimalist position in his definition of a covenant: “A covenant is a chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other.”<sup>18</sup>

Further complicating the issue is the ancient Near Eastern background of the biblical covenant.<sup>19</sup> While many scholars seek to use the ANE background to help define what a covenant is, no parallel between the ANE and biblical texts fits exactly. The Bible uses the word covenant flexibly to designate all kinds of relationships, making it difficult to align with ANE texts and practices. For example, Scripture uses covenant to refer to God’s relationship with his people (Exod 19:1-6), marriage (Mal 2:14), and even friendship (1 Sam 18:3).

While certain relationships are definitely *not* covenantal, a simpler definition is preferred to cover all of the flexibility of the term. I view a covenant as the bonding of two parties together as family with promises and responsibilities. Some covenants may have signs; some may not. Some covenants may be redemptive, concerning salvation; some may not, like marriage. Some may be unilateral, imposed by a superior party, while some may be bilateral, entered into by equal parties. Some may be unconditional,

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<sup>17</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 43; Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload,” 26.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 13.

<sup>19</sup> See the survey of research by Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Purposes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 1-2.

emphasizing promise, while others may be conditional, emphasizing the obligation.<sup>20</sup> Some may have oaths attached to them; some may not.

Despite the diversity of elements in a covenant, all covenants contain three important features: a bond as family, promises, and responsibilities. In the Bible, a covenant creates a bond as family, two parties (human or divine) bind themselves to one another as if living together in some kind of family structure. The most obvious example is the marriage covenant that bonds two unrelated people into the closest possible human relationship.<sup>21</sup> The fact that marriage is a covenant helps to explain divine-human covenants because familial language is covenantal language. In the Davidic covenant, God treats the Davidic king as his son (Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14). In his covenant with Israel, God dramatically demonstrates the bond through a marriage-like ceremony.<sup>22</sup> The “covenant formula” also demonstrates the bond as family.<sup>23</sup> Concerning the covenant formula, Walter Vogels writes, “We never read about ‘my nation,’ which is a more political designation associated with state and government, but always ‘my people,’ which implies a blood relation or family-tie, and insists on the human dimension.”<sup>24</sup> The focus

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<sup>20</sup> Many scholars see the biblical covenants containing *both* unconditional and conditional elements. Yet they often still assign labels to the covenant as either unconditional or conditional depending upon which element they see to be more prominent in the covenant. For example, Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock acknowledge that the Abrahamic covenant has conditional elements within it. Yet, they still see the Abrahamic covenant as essentially unconditional: “The fact that God gives commandments to Abraham does not make His covenant with him a bilateral contract, one in which God’s blessings are wholly dependent on Abraham’s (or his descendants’) obedience.” Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Bridgepoint Books, 1993), 133. Blaising and Bock see the conditions of the Abrahamic covenant as merely the conditions for the “historical experience” of God’s promise.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 388.

<sup>23</sup> The covenant formula is generally “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Many other variations or shortened forms exist too. See Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, Old Testament Studies, trans. M. Kohl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Walter Vogels, *God’s Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, CA: Ottawa University Press, 1986), 7.

on the bond as family would distinguish covenants from contracts, which are merely about the exchange of goods and services.

Covenants also contain promises and responsibilities. To use theological categories, all covenants have grace-gospel and law-demand components to them. Therefore, it is not helpful to label certain covenants as conditional or unconditional. All the biblical covenants have *both* elements within them: God makes promises (the unconditional aspect) but also gives the partner in the covenant responsibilities to uphold (the conditional aspect).<sup>25</sup> For example, while many scholars designate the Abrahamic covenant as unconditional, God gives Abraham responsibilities to uphold (Gen 12:1-3; 22:16-18).

The presence of both promise and responsibility in the covenant accurately reflect the tension in the Bible's storyline better than the traditional classifications. Repeatedly, the people of Israel must grapple with both God's promises and their responsibilities. They know that God had made great promises to Abraham and to David, yet they found themselves in exile due to their sin. Naturally, questions would come up in their minds: Would God make good on his promises? Would they be able to uphold the stipulations God had given them? The Old Testament is a story without a resolution. Yes, there is a seed of hope in the Messianic promise (Isa 6:11-13). However, such hope flickers in the wind due to the ongoing sin of the people. How would God make good on his promise and restore his people?

Understanding that biblical covenants have both promises and responsibilities attached to them also helps to cut through some difficult theological issues, such as relationship between faith and works. On the one hand, the human heart is prone to legalism, believing it can achieve salvation through its own performance or even

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<sup>25</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 663.

cooperation with God.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, some evangelicals adopt an “easy believism” where mental assent in the head substitutes for living faith in the heart.<sup>27</sup> Maintaining the tension of promise and responsibility in the biblical covenants helps to guard against both of these errors. God promises to save and makes good on his word; there is no basis for believing that someone’s works merits their standing before God. On the other hand, believers still have responsibilities in the covenant: “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” says the apostle James (Jas 2:17).<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, due to the way that Scripture uses the term covenant, a minimalistic definition of covenant is offered whereby a covenant is a bond as family that comes with promises and responsibilities. Moreover, when taken this way, there is ample evidence that God makes a covenant with humanity in Genesis 1–2, called the creation covenant.

### **Exposition of the Covenant**

If God made a covenant with creation in Genesis 1–2, then what does this covenant entail? The creation covenant bonds God to humanity: God is their father and humanity is his royal “son”—a servant-king who rules over creation (Gen 1:26-28).

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<sup>26</sup> Most evangelical Christians would view official Roman Catholic teaching on salvation to be out of bounds scripturally. Catholicism certainly views salvation as gracious in nature, with God coming toward the sinner. Yet, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, after God’s grace comes to a person, he must cooperate with God’s grace to stay in a state of grace: “The *preparation of man* for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith” (539, par. 2001). The Catholic Church argues, “Justification establishes *cooperation between God’s grace and man’s freedom*” (537, par. 1993). God’s grace brings salvation to people, but they are called to cooperate with that grace. If a person does not cooperate with God’s grace, either through unbelief or mortal sin, then they lose their justification. “Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man. We can lose this priceless gift. . . . To live, grow and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; it must be ‘working through charity’” (50, par. 162). *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from Editio Typica*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997), emphasis original.

<sup>27</sup> For a historical background to the “Lordship Salvation” debate, see Randall Gleason, “The Lordship Salvation Debate,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27, no. 1 (2003): 55-72.

<sup>28</sup> Carol Man Fen Chen, “A Historical, Biblical, and Theological Interpretation of Covenants: Unconditionality and Conditionality in Relation to Justification and Sanctification” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 9.

Ruling over creation involves expanding the borders of the Garden so that the glory of God covers the world like the waters cover the sea (Gen 2:15).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, there is a status and service for humanity in the creation covenant. Due to the responsibilities found in the covenant, God demands obedience from his creatures. Failure to obey constitutes breaking the covenant, bringing the curse of the covenant, death, upon all humanity (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12-21).

## **Bond**

God binds himself to humanity as in a father-son relationship by creating humanity in his image and his likeness (1:26-27). The word “image” (צֶלֶם) is often used of statues of kings that would be set up to represent a god or king.<sup>30</sup> The Bible probably has such a background in mind, yet with a twist. Instead of deaf, mute, and blind statues imaging God, people are living, breathing representations of Yahweh’s kingly rule over the earth. God also creates people in his “likeness,” which speaks to the relationship that humanity has with God. Literal sonship is not in view here; *covenantal* sonship is in view.<sup>31</sup> As a result of God’s covenant, two parties, God and humanity, are bound together as family.<sup>32</sup> God is their father; humanity is his royal son.

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<sup>29</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 73.

<sup>30</sup> Holger Gzella, “צֶלֶם,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgen, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), ProQuest ebook.

<sup>31</sup> Since humanity does not share in God’s “essence” (God-ness), then humanity must be bonded to God another way, that is, through a covenant relationship. Therefore, Paul can say that even females are “sons” of God in Christ Jesus. Females in Christ receive the same inheritance as male Christians and are included in the new covenant on the same footing as males as well. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 256.

<sup>32</sup> Again, literal, biological generation is not in view here. Covenantal bonding is in view. This is why, in some sense, all people are God’s “offspring” (Acts 17:29). This does not mean that all people are in *saving* covenant relationship with God. It means that all people are under the covenant curse due to their sin. But what covenant? The Moasic covenant? It does not seem to make sense to view Gentiles under the Mosaic covenant. It seems that *all* people would be included in the Adamic covenant. Paul explicitly tells us all “in Adam” die, i.e., receive the ultimate covenantal curse (Rom 5:15-19; 1 Cor 15:22).

Maintaining a distinction between “image” and “likeness” is a minority view as many scholars believe the terms are roughly synonymous.<sup>33</sup> It is true that both terms overlap in significant ways. The idea of being a copy of something is definitely present in both terms, but often putting two terms together also does indicate some slight nuance of meaning. Nevertheless, based upon the contextual usage of the terms in Genesis, even if the terms *are* synonymous, they still indicate that humanity being made in God’s image means that people were supposed to be God’s “royal son.”

God, then, is the great suzerain in covenant with humanity, and subsequently the whole creation. This is why the Bible can speak of God’s covenant with things he has made, like the sun and moon (Jer 33:20). The Bible is consistent in its teaching that the actions of human beings affect the created order (Gen 3:17-19; Rom 8:18-22). This would be so because there is an inextricable link between man and the ground (i.e., created order).<sup>34</sup> God is in covenant with humanity who is called to represent his royal rule and stewardship to all creation. Therefore, the Bible can speak of God being in “covenant” with the created order. Paul’s use of Isaiah 24–27 is especially illustrative to this point. Paul draws on the background of Isaiah 24–27 and its description of an “everlasting covenant” to show that the “cosmic and personal” are interconnected.<sup>35</sup> The story of Adam and the story of Israel are brought to climax in the story of Christ who reserves the curse.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, all the covenants have “re-creational” edges to them, anticipating the renewal of creation.<sup>37</sup> Covenant and creation are categories of thought that belong together.

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1-11*, New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: B & H, 1996), s.v. “(6) Sixth Day of Creation 1:24-31,” ProQuest ebook.

<sup>34</sup> I owe this insight by fellow student Joey Nickerson.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 1 (2008): 88.

<sup>36</sup> Moo, “Romans 8.19-22,” 88.

<sup>37</sup> Niehaus, “Covenant,” 232.

From the very beginning of the biblical story God has been in a relationship with humanity. They are the pinnacle of his creative work, being made in his image and likeness. According to the biblical narrative, human beings did not evolve from animals but were designated with status and service from the one, true Creator God. Made in his image, humanity was to represent his royal rule. Made in his likeness, humanity was his son. God and humanity are bound together in covenant in Genesis 1–2.

### **Promises**

The promises of the covenant are more implied than explicit in Genesis 1–2 due to the fact that is just how life was at the time. God did not need to explicitly promise he would be near his people; he just was. The context for enjoying God’s presence was the Garden, which seemed to have functioned like a temple, a sacred space separated from the rest of the world where the man and woman could enjoy God’s presence.<sup>38</sup> From there, Adam and his children could go out and expand the borders of the Garden to spread God’s glory across the face of the earth. The worship of God nourishes the work of humanity.

Adam and Eve experienced God’s presence as he “walked back and forth” among them (Gen 3:8). Gordon J. Wenham notes the connection between God’s walking and his presence: “The description of Eden with its trees, rivers, gold, and so on emphasized God’s presence there. Therefore, it seems likely that it was not unusual for him to be heard walking in the Garden, ‘in the breeze of the day.’”<sup>39</sup> God walking in the Garden was probably not intended as a literal description as if God was incarnate in the Garden. Instead, it symbolized that his presence was near Adam and Eve. In other words, they were in a covenant together, experiencing the joy and intimacy of a well-functioning family.

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<sup>38</sup> Beale *Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 6-70.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 76.



Genesis 1-2 also seems to suggest that if Adam and Eve obeyed the Lord fully, they could experience the promise of “rest” (Gen 2:1-4). While the creation of humanity was certainly a high point in the narrative, the whole creation week seems to be leading to the goal of the people participating in God’s rest.<sup>40</sup> Of course, God was not tired after his work. Rather, his rest was “the rest of completion, not exhaustion.”<sup>41</sup> God’s rest is similar to the kind of satisfaction people have when completing a project and sit back to admire their work. He made the created order and he made humanity. God had completed his work, but humanity still had a job to do. They could experience the victorious rest of God when they finished the work God had tasked them to do.

## **Responsibilities**

God gave humanity various responsibilities in the creation covenant. God charged humanity to “be fruitful and multiply” and he provided humanity with the duality of gender, male and female, to fulfill this mandate (Gen 1:28).<sup>42</sup> Some theologians have taken the duality of gender to be part of the image of God.<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth argues that just as God is one yet plural in persons (in his “kind”), so humanity is one but plural, man and woman.<sup>44</sup> However, Barth’s interpretation runs into theological problems when considering that Jesus Christ was incarnated as only one gender, male, yet was truly “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). God does not define the image by the two genders, but instead provides them as the way for humanity to be fruitful and multiply. When God commissions

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<sup>40</sup> William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 35.

<sup>41</sup> William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013), s.v. “Genesis 2: The Unending Sabbath Day,” ProQuest ebook.

<sup>42</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 189.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, part 1, *The Works of Creation*, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 186.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 186.

humanity to be fruitful and multiply, the bearing of biological children would come to mind. The duality of genders comes together in a bilateral covenant of marriage for the bearing of children (Gen 2:23-25). Children are biologically the one flesh of a husband and wife's fruitful covenant marriage. From the beginning, the creation covenant between God and humanity was leading humanity into another covenant, marriage, where man and woman would be united together to bring forth new life.

Besides building marriages and families, humanity was also called to have dominion, or "subdue" creation (Gen 1:28). In later texts, the Old Testament authors use the word "subdue" to speak of military conquest (Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; 2 Sam 8:11; Zech 9:15; 1 Chron 22:10).<sup>45</sup> The usage of subdue in later Scriptures further confirms the royal status of humanity at creation: They are like God's representative rulers on the earth, bringing new territories under his control. Of course, God does not give humanity the license to exploit nature. While animals are in subjection to humanity, they are designated as companions (Gen 2:18-20).<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the inextricable connection between man/humanity (אָדָם) and the ground (הָאָרֶץ) suggests that in caring for the world humanity is caring for itself.

God also charged Adam to "work and keep" the Garden (Gen 2:15). While Adam actually lived in a garden, God's commission means more than just agricultural activities. The mandate means to protect and expand God's sacred space. Upon first reading it may not seem like the Garden was sacred space, but clues in the text give a good indication that it was.<sup>47</sup> As the sacred space of God's presence, Adam functioned in Garden like a priest, worshipping the Lord and tending to the "temple." He was always called to "keep," or guard, the Garden. Unfortunately, Adam's first failure may have been

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<sup>45</sup> The term can also be used in terms of subjugation of slaves (Jer 34:11, 16; Neh 5:5; 2 Chron 28:10), sexual assault (Esth 7:8), or the forgiveness of sins (Micah 7:19).

<sup>46</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 66-70.

his failure to guard the Garden and allow the unclean serpent into it (Gen 3:1).<sup>48</sup> Therefore, coupling the commission to be fruitful and multiply with the commission to work and keep the Garden gives the impression that humanity was to spread the sacred space of God across the globe.

Another responsibility that God gave Adam was to obey his word (2:16-17). God threatened Adam with the ultimate covenantal curse, death, if he disobeyed. Therefore, it was Adam's responsibility to heed the warning and obey. It is probably implied that Adam had the responsibility to teach Eve the warning as well.<sup>49</sup> In addition, they were probably tasked with passing along the instruction to their children since they were to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28).

In these responsibilities, humanity was to live out its identity as God's royal son. God had promised to be near them in covenant relationship as well as hold out hope of experiencing his rest if they followed through on their responsibilities. They were to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. They were also to expand and protect God's sacred space. Tragically, Adam did not uphold his responsibilities of the covenant.

### **The Breaking of the Covenant**

The text is unclear how long Adam and Eve lived in a state of covenantal faithfulness to God. The impression from the text is that Adam broke the covenant fairly quick. While Eve was deceived by the serpent and yielded to temptation, Adam deliberately sinned and bore the responsibility for sin (Gen 3:6). The exact nature of Adam's failure is open for some debate.<sup>50</sup> It is clear, however, that Adam's "one act of

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<sup>48</sup> Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 87.

<sup>49</sup> Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> Beale advocates that Adam's failure was to allow the serpent in the Garden. Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 85. Yet the Scriptures never actually attribute Adam's sin as failure to guard the Garden. Instead, Paul sees Adam's failure as "one act of transgression." In context, it seems most reasonable to believe that Paul is referring to Adam's breaking of God's commandment to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17).

transgression”—disobeying God’s clear word—brought sin and death into the world (Rom 5:12-21). Once Adam and Eve broke the covenant, the bond that united them to God was broken. Instead of living as his royal son, they were now rebels. As a consequence, God exiled them from his presence when he banished them from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:23).

Sin affects all the vital relationships in the narrative even down to personal identity. The woman’s identity as a nurturer is affected as Eve will bring forth children in pain, possibly causing her to shy away from bearing children (Gen 3:16). Adam’s identity as a worker is corrupted too. Having relinquished his role as royal son who rules over the created order by allowing a creature to “rule” over him, the whole created order does not function properly.<sup>51</sup> Instead of subduing the creation with joy, he now has to work the ground with toil and futility (Gen 3:17-18).

What the Old Testament narrates, the New Testament explains. In Romans 5:12, Paul explains that sin and death came into the world through “one man,” Adam. Adam was not the only one implicated in ruining the world. Death entered creation “because all sinned” (Rom 5:12b). The church has long wrestled with how Adam’s sin affects the rest of humanity.<sup>52</sup> By and large, the church has affirmed that Adam was the covenantal head of the human race. Adam’s sin affects all people because he represented them before the Lord. The consequence of Adam’s sin is that all people enter the world far from God (Eph 2:13).<sup>53</sup> Cut off from God, people are hopelessly enslaved to sin (John 8:34; Rom 6:17-19; Eph 2:1-3). Oliver Crisp uses the analogy of how someone who sells

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<sup>51</sup> Beale, *Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> For a helpful survey of the various Christian views on the transmission of Adam’s sin and the development of the doctrine see Gregg R. Allison’s chapter on sin, in *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 343-62.

<sup>53</sup> The designations “far” and “near” of God’s are not spatial terms for God is omnipresent, he is everywhere. Instead, those terms are covenantal. Being “near” God means that someone is in covenant with him. Being far from God means that someone is outside of God’s saving covenant.

themselves into slavery would affect their ancestors: any children born to such a person would also be born into slavery.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

God created a good world and humanity as his vice-regents to rule over it. God chose to display his glory by ruling over the world he made through people who are in a covenant with him. The first covenant God makes is with Adam and subsequently all creation. Humanity was to be God's image-bearers who reflected his rule. They were to expand the glory of God across the world as they took dominion over a good but untamed creation. Moreover, Adam was called to obey God's word, but Adam forsook the Lord and disobeyed. Consequently, death and sin entered into the world and the most important relationships humanity had been affected by sin. God expelled Adam and Eve from his presence in the Garden (Gen 3:24). The relationship between husband and wife was also broken.<sup>55</sup> Such marital discord was also an indication of the general dysfunction now to infect all human relationships as displayed in the very next incident of Cain killing Abel (Gen 4:1-16).

Even man's relationship with the ground (i.e., created order) was damaged. The ground would be cursed, and dominion would now be difficult (Gen 3:17-19). The most significant curse of the covenant was death (Gen 2:16). Life and death in the Bible are mostly *relational* concepts before they are biological concepts. To be separated from relationship (like expelled from the Garden) is death. The final outworking of death is physical death. The picture the Bible paints is almost of the curse creeping up from the

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<sup>54</sup> Oliver Crisp, "Sin," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 212.

<sup>55</sup> No matter how one interprets a woman's "desire" (Gen 3:16), there is ample to view that the relationship between them was frayed. For the view that the woman's "desire" is a more sexual, or overall, positive desire for her husband, see Janson C. Condren, "Toward a Purge of the Battle of the Sexes and 'Return' to the Original Meaning of Genesis 3:16B," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60, no. 2 (2017): 227-45.

ground and then swirling around man's legs as God promises to send people back to the ground in death because they came from death (Gen 3:19).

How would God now respond? Being the holy and righteous Creator, he could have justly condemned Adam and Even immediately, but he did not. In his grace and mercy, God made another covenant promise: a descendant (seed) of the woman (a new Adam?) would come and crush the skull of the serpent (Gen 3:15). God would not throw away his creation and start over. He would seek to *redeem* it, buy it back from the ravages of sin and reestablish his rule in the world through covenant relationships.

## CHAPTER 3

### COVENANT WITH NOAH

Scholars often quickly gloss over God’s covenant with Noah when studying the biblical covenants.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they usually focus on other major covenants in the Bible, especially the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>2</sup> They may not write as much on God’s covenant with Noah as compared to other covenants because they see the Noahic covenant merely as one of preservation. In their view, the covenant with Noah serves as the backdrop for the rest of the biblical story due to God’s preservation of the created order, but it does not really advance the storyline in a significant way.

Yet God’s covenant with Noah is much more important to the Bible’s storyline than many readers may initially believe. If Christians are able to understand better the significance of the Noahic covenant in the Bible’s storyline, then they will begin to appreciate more deeply the unity of the Bible, progression of the storyline through the covenants, and grace of God. God’s covenant with Noah stands in continuity and discontinuity with his original covenant with creation.

It is continuous with the creation covenant for it is concerned about humanity’s relationship to God as well as the preservation of the created order. The Noahic covenant re-uses earlier scriptural language, themes, and motifs from the creation covenant.

Moreover, a lexical study will demonstrate that the phrase *הִקְיִם בְּרִית* (“establish a

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<sup>1</sup> Katharine J. Dell, “Covenant and Creation in Relationship,” in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Dell, “Covenant and Creation in Relationship,” 111.

covenant”) means the Noahic covenant confirms a covenant previously made: the creation covenant.

On the other hand, the Noahic covenant actually advances the storyline forward because it adapts the creation covenant for the context of a post-fall world. There is also an increase in the tension of the storyline due to the interplay of God’s faithfulness and human failure. The Noahic covenant is crucial for developing a whole-Bible theology because later biblical authors use the language and ideas of the Noahic covenant to point forward to God’s institution of a new creation in the future.

### **Exposition of the Covenant with Noah**

The Noahic covenant is first found in Genesis 6:18 where God says, “I will establish my covenant with you [i.e., Noah].” The reference to the covenant in Genesis 6:18 is proleptic of the more detailed covenant text of Genesis 9:1-17.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the whole Noah story should be seen as a covenant text, not just in passages where the word covenant appears. By observing the wider scope of the story, readers will see connections back to God’s original covenant with creation as well as different ways the covenant with Noah advances the storyline.

### **Continuity with Creation Covenant**

The Noahic covenant stands in continuity with God’s covenant originally made with creation. The distinction between the phrases *הקים ברית* (“establish a covenant”) and *כרת ברית* (“cut a covenant”) supports the connection between both covenants. The biblical authors are remarkably consistent in their usage of *הקים ברית* and *כרת ברית*. The phrase *כרת ברית* refers to initiating a covenant, while the term *הקים ברית* refers to upholding a previous covenant which was already made. When God says he will “uphold” the covenant with Noah in Genesis 6:18, it means that he will uphold the covenant he originally made

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1-11*, New American Commentary Series, vol. 1A (Nashville: B & H, 1996), s.v. “(1) Announce of the Flood and Instructions for the Ark,” ProQuest ebook.



with creation. However, not all scholars are convinced by this argument. Paul R. Williamson critiques the argument two ways. First, he attempts to show that כְּרַת בְּרִית has a broader range of meaning than just about instituting a covenant.<sup>4</sup> Second, he points to some texts which seem to suggest that הִקִּים בְּרִית refers to instituting a covenant, and *not* upholding a previously made covenant.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Williamson’s criticisms do not hold up. Williamson’s argument that כְּרַת בְּרִית has a broader range of meaning than solely “instituting a covenant” is irrelevant. The argument is *not* that כְּרַת בְּרִית only means to institute a covenant. Instead, the argument is that the *distinction between* כְּרַת בְּרִית and הִקִּים בְּרִית is consistent.

Furthermore, Williamson cites Jeremiah 34:18 as an instance where הִקִּים בְּרִית means to make a covenant, but the context actually shows that it means “uphold a covenant previously made.” In fact, Jeremiah 34 is strong evidence for the distinction between כְּרַת בְּרִית and הִקִּים בְּרִית.<sup>6</sup> The author of Jeremiah uses כְּרַת בְּרִית in 34:8, 13, and 15 and clearly means the institution of a covenant. In 34:8, king Zedekiah makes a covenant with the people as they promise to release their slaves. The next use of “covenant” in 34:13 refers to the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. Moving on, 34:15 refers back to the covenant the people made to release their slaves. Unfortunately, the people did not keep their word and released their slaves. As a result, God chastises the people by claiming, “They did not establish the words of the covenant” (לֹא־הִקִּימוּ אֶת־דְּבָרֵי (הַבְּרִית) (Jer 34:15). In other words, the people did not uphold the commitments of the covenant they previously made in Jeremiah 34:8. Rather than upholding Williamson’s

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<sup>4</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 73.

<sup>5</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 190.

argument, the distinction of usage in Jeremiah 34 provides clear and compelling evidence that *הקים ברית* means to uphold a covenant previously made.

A more recent critique comes from Lee Irons.<sup>7</sup> Irons contends that words or phrases usually have multiple meanings. Therefore, it is illegitimate to restrict the phrase *הקים ברית* to one meaning of “uphold a previous covenant.” Although Irons may use new vocabulary, he essentially argues that usage in context determines meaning of a word or phrase. Few scholars would disagree. In fact, Peter Gentry and Jason Parry agree with Irons on this point yet they insist on the consistent distinction between the two phrases. They have responded to Irons precisely by doing exegesis of the relevant passages involving *הקים ברית*.<sup>8</sup> Even when taking into account how it is used in context, the result is clear: *הקים ברית* means to uphold a previously made covenant.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, when God says he will establish a covenant with Noah (Gen 6:18), he promises to uphold a previously instituted covenant, the covenant with creation.

Besides the lexical evidence, the author of Genesis reuses the vocabulary and concepts of the creation account in the Noah narratives. Both accounts reference birds, cattle, and living creatures (1; 26; 2:7; 9:10, 12, 13, 15, 16). Both accounts mention the land, earth, or ground (1:10; 2:5; 9:13, 17). Further continuity is amplified because both covenants concern creational realities.<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 1, God creates *ex nihilo* (1:1). He then establishes an order and structure to the world, climaxing in the creation of humanity

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Lee Irons, “*Hēqîm Bērît* in Gen 6:18: Make or Confirm a Covenant?” accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.academia.edu/35833018/H%C4%93q%C3%AEmB%C4%95r%C3%AEtinGen618MakeorConfirmaCovenant>.

<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Jason T. Parry, “*Hēqîm bērît* in Gen 6:18—Make or Confirm a Covenant? A Response to Charles Lee Irons,” accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.academia.edu/36844287/h%C4%93q%C3%AEm%C4%95r%C3%AEtinGen618MakeorConfirmaCovenantAResponsetoCharlesLeeIrons>.

<sup>9</sup> Gentry and Parry, “*Hēqîm bērît* in Gen 6:18.”

<sup>10</sup> The following parallels are drawn from Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 61.

(1:2-26).<sup>11</sup> Land is separated from the waters (1:1:9-10), living creatures populate the world (1:20-22, 24-25), days and seasons are established (1:14-18), and God provides food for humanity (1:29-30). In the Noah narratives, God reclaims the creation out of the waters of judgment, which is a reversal of creation.<sup>12</sup> God makes the world inhabitable again (8:1-3), brings out living creation (8:17-19), reaffirms days and seasons (8:22), and provides humanity with food (9:3). God instituted the creation covenant to have humanity be his stewards over the good, orderly creation he just made. Now, in the Noahic covenant, God reestablishes the created order after the cataclysmic judgment of the flood and reinstalls humanity to be his vice-regents who are stewarding the earth.

Furthermore, God renews the original bond he has with humanity and creation through the Noahic covenant. God first binds himself to Noah and his family (Gen 6:18). Later on, God expands the covenant to encompass all humanity and creation. In fact, the bond between God and his creation is described in six different ways in Genesis 9:8-17:<sup>13</sup>

1. 9:9-10: “With you, and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you.”
2. 9:12: “Between you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations.”
3. 9:13: “Between me and the earth.”
4. 9:15: “Between me and you and every living creature of all flesh.”
5. 9:16: “Between God and every living creature of all flesh.”
6. 9:17: “Between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The family-like bond is also highlighted in the Noahic covenant when God prohibits murder (9:6). Both horizontal (humanity’s relation to itself) and vertical

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<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “Kingdom Through Covenant: Humanity as Divine Image,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008): 22.

<sup>12</sup> David J. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 10 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 201.

(humanity's relationship to God) reasons are given in the text to abstain from murder. People should not kill each other because they are "brothers" (9:5-6a).<sup>14</sup> People should not murder because they are made in God's image (9:6b). Therefore, the bond between God and humanity makes them family in the Noahic covenant.

God also gives humanity the same responsibilities in the Noahic covenant as he does in the creation covenant. In both passages, God blesses humanity and commissions them: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28; 9:1; cf. 9:7). The implication is that Noah functions like a new Adam in a new creation with a new commission to fill the earth once again.<sup>15</sup> Noah also parallels Adam's status as a priest, offering sacrifices to the Lord (8:20).<sup>16</sup>

With the same bond, same responsibilities, and same concern with creational realities, there is continuity between the covenant with Noah and the covenant with creation. Both covenants see a bond of family forged between God and humanity. Both covenants envision humanity being God's royal son who stewards the world on his behalf. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to believe that the Noahic covenant upholds the creation covenant.

### **Progression of the Bible's Storyline**

The Noahic covenant advances the Bible's storyline by equipping humanity to live in a post-fall world. God provides some new provisions to humanity in this new creation now corrupted by sin. The Noahic covenant also emphasizes God's faithfulness but the utter failure of humanity. Humanity's failure opens the door for wondering if God would cataclysmically judge the world again. While the threat of future judgment looms

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, CA: Ottawa University Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 197-98.

<sup>16</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 66-70.

on the horizon, the Noahic covenant displays God's grace in a way not seen before in the Genesis narrative.

After the flood, humanity steps into a seemingly new world, even though the earth abides. While the post-flood world stands in continuity with the original creation, there is still a significant difference as Williamson explains: "There is one very significant difference between the recreated world of the post-flood era and the original creation. As noted in Genesis 8:22, the world had not been restored to its pristine, pre-fall condition. Rather, it was still marred by human sinfulness."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, God provided help to humanity in this new condition. For example, God promised that animals would now fear people, which would aid humanity in its task to subdue the earth now that labor would be hard due to the effects of sin (9:2; see Gen 3:17-19).<sup>18</sup> God also gives a new food source to humanity: animal meat (9:3). Such provisions give humanity the tools necessary to fulfill the creation mandate, albeit in a modified way due to a post-fall, post-flood world.

Moreover, God also institutes capital punishment against those who take human life (9:6). God seems to institute the new prohibitions to curtail the violence that plagued the earth before the flood (Gen 6:11). God's prohibition of murder contains both a horizontal and vertical dimension as mentioned before. People should not kill each other because there is an essential unity to the human race, a "brotherhood" (9:5).<sup>19</sup> Besides a common human bond, people should not kill one another because each person is made in the divine image (9:6b). Therefore, humanity has great value and worth. For those reasons, God prohibits murder. In addition, there would not be much of a story left if human violence had its way. Therefore, God provided some new measures for society to repopulate and reestablish human civilization in an even greater way than before. The

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<sup>17</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> O. Palmers Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, 29.

storyline progresses because the extreme violence that led to the judgment of the flood would no longer be a possibility. According to Genesis 9:1-6, humanity will now have a chance to grow and thrive on the earth.

While the Noahic covenant stabilizes the earth, significant tension is added to the story due to humanity's sin. While God was incredibly patient with humanity in that he allowed violence and evil to persist upon the earth while Noah was building the ark, judgment eventually did fall. However, under the Noahic covenant, God promises to "never again" bring judgment in the form of a flood upon the earth (9:11-12). Humanity, nevertheless, does not uphold their responsibilities in the covenant. The story of Noah's sin in the vineyard is cast in terms reminiscent of Adam's fall, suggesting Noah functions something like a new Adam who fails to uphold the covenant (9:21-22).<sup>20</sup> Later on in the narrative, humanity fails to "fill the earth" but instead cloisters itself at the Tower of Babel (11:1-9). Even though God makes a fresh start and gives humanity a second chance, people still fail. No obedient "Adam" is found yet.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, many scholars cut out the tension in the story by labeling covenants either as conditional or unconditional. For many theologians, the Noahic covenant is easy to label—it is clearly unconditional. Tom Schreiner reflects the sentiment of many when he says that the Noahic covenant is fundamentally unconditional: "It is difficult to see, however, how the word *conditional* plays any meaningful role when it comes to the Noahic covenant."<sup>22</sup> Even the Noahic covenant, which seems like a purely unconditional covenant, contains conditions as God calls humanity to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 9:1). When faithful readers reflect on the covenant with Noah, they

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<sup>20</sup> Carol M. Kaminski, *Was Noah Good? Finding Favor in the Flood Narratives*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 563 (New York: T & T Clark, 2014), 101-2.

<sup>21</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 208.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 37.

should be confronted with a host of questions: While God may not bring judgment in the form of a flood, might he bring judgment some other way? Since humanity regularly fails, why does God not just wipe them out again? God answers such questions with the sign of the covenant.

Not all covenants have signs, but many do. For example, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision (Gen 17:11), and the sign of the Mosaic covenant was the sabbath (Exod 31:12-17). In Genesis 9, the sign of the Noahic covenant is the rainbow (Gen 9:12). While the signs of the covenant in the Abrahamic covenant and Mosaic covenant were oriented toward humanity's responsibility, the sign of the Noahic covenant is oriented toward God's promise. When God sees the rainbow set in the cloud after a rainstorm, he will "remember" the covenant he made with the world (Gen 9:14-16). Some commentators have noted that God radically transforms a symbol of war, the bow, into a symbol peace, indicating the cessation of divine hostility.<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Matthews, on the other hand, argues that it is simply a reminder of God's promise not to flood the world again.<sup>24</sup> Every time God "sees" his war bow hung up he remembers his promise to not judge the world with flood again.

However, could there be more to the sign of the rainbow? Is it possible that the rainbow is a kind of self-maledictory oath? Horton points out that the self-maledictory character of the bow in that it is turned toward God himself.<sup>25</sup> It seems as if God's war bow is now pointing up to himself, communicating that he will patiently bear with sinful humanity precisely because he will take upon their sins himself. Robertson doubts the

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<sup>23</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), s.v. "10. God's Covenant with Noah," ProQuest ebook.

<sup>24</sup> Matthews, *Genesis 1-11*, s.v. "(1) Announce of the Flood and Instructions for the Ark."

<sup>25</sup> Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 42.

presence of self-malediction in the rainbow symbolism.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not the rainbow communicates self-malediction, God upholds his promise in the Noachic covenant despite the presence of human sin. So, there must be some sort of suspension of God's judgment, which is due to his grace.

Besides the rather slim textual evidence that the bow is turned toward God, is there any other warrant for viewing the rainbow as a self-maledictory symbol? Yes, if readers adopt a "thick" reading of the text.<sup>27</sup> A thick reading would involve interpreting the rainbow along the narrative storyline of Genesis. Read this way, the rainbow seems to anticipate the self-maledictory oath of Abrahamic covenant found in Genesis 15:9-19. In the passage, Abraham splits animals in half to make an aisle (Gen 15:10). Whereas in most covenants both parties would pass through the pieces to indicate their commitment to upholding the covenant, only *God* passes through the pieces in this episode (Gen 15:17). Peter Gentry explains the significance of passing through halved animals: "Walking between the animals cut in half is a way of saying, 'May I become like these dead animals if I do not keep my promise(s) and my oath.'"<sup>28</sup> In this episode, God makes promises in the covenant (Gen 15:13-16, 18-21), but the Lord also seems to take on the responsibility of upholding the covenant himself by passing through the pieces. God will uphold the covenant, even if Abraham fails in his responsibility.

God's act of self-malediction to Abraham seems to be previewed in the covenant he makes with Noah: even though humanity will fail, the Lord seems to make a self-maledictory oath against himself to uphold his promise to Noah and the whole world. Such an act of grace has not been seen before in the narrative. Certainly, individuals like Adam and Eve and Cain received grace, but never before in the story had the entire human

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<sup>26</sup> Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 178-79.

<sup>28</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 287.



race received such great grace and mercy. The covenant of Noah shines forth as a beacon of grace, for God had previously *judged* all of humanity through the flood.

The Noahic covenant advances the storyline of the Bible in various ways. First, the Noahic covenant equips humanity to live in a post-fall, post-flood world. God made new provisions for humanity in a new situation. Animals now “fear” humanity, which helps them accomplish the Adamic mandate. God also prohibits murder and institutes capital punishment to curtail the violence found before the flood so that humanity can flourish, and the story can continue. Second, the Noahic covenant heightens the tension in the story. Just as the first Adam failed, Noah as a second Adam fails to uphold the responsibilities of the covenant. Even with a second chance with most of the sinful people wiped off the face of the earth, people still fail to obey God perfectly from the heart. Third, the Noahic covenant magnifies God’s grace in a unique way. God had certainly shown his grace through Genesis 1–6, but God had largely done so to individuals. In the Noahic covenant, God sheds his grace upon all of humanity.

### **Noahic Covenant in Later Scripture**

Later biblical authors reuse concepts, vocabulary, and themes drawn from the Noahic covenant to describe the future work of salvation that God would accomplish through a *new* covenant. While only a few explicit references to the Noahic covenant exist later in the Old Testament, it provides the substructure of thought for the prophets who often describe the new covenant in terms of a new creation.

**Hosea 2:18.** Hosea 2:18 illustrates how the Noahic covenant provides the backdrop for the new covenant. God judges Israel through exile due to their infidelity to the covenant (2:1-13). In the future, God will remarry Israel, forging a family bond through a new covenant (2:14, 16-17). The new covenant will also involve the animal kingdom, and it will even involve abolishing the “bow,” a symbol of war (2:18). The animals mentioned (beasts of the field, birds of the sky, and creeping things) allude back

to Genesis 1:20-21.<sup>29</sup> These animals are likewise picked up in the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:10). Hosea envisions a complete renovation of the natural order.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the new covenant fulfills the intent of the Noahic covenant where God would provide an abiding platform for his presence to be with humanity.

**Isaiah 54:9-10.** The most explicit reference to the Noahic covenant in later Scripture is found in Isaiah 54:9-10. In the vision, God will work on behalf of Israel to make a previously barren people fruitful (54:1-3). God's future work should engender fearlessness among the people because God will redeem his people and remarry them, forging a new covenant (54:4-8). God's future work of instituting a new covenant is likened to his work of establishing the Noahic covenant: "For this is like the days of Noah to Me, when I swore that the waters of Noah would not flood the earth again" (54:9). The grace and mercy God showed to the world in the past is a concrete example of the kind of grace and mercy God will show his people in the future. Gentry explains the comparison well: "Just as [God] promised there that never again would he judge the entire world by a flood, so here he is promising never again to be angry with his people."<sup>31</sup>

It seems that Isaiah is making more than a mere comparison between these two covenants, however. Isaiah seems to imply that the new covenant will fulfill the Noahic covenant. The Noahic covenant anticipated a renewed creation in which the hostility between God and humanity would end. It was looking for *shalom*, or peace. Therefore, since the new covenant is called a covenant of peace in the passage (54:10), it seems as if the new covenant is bringing to pass the ideal version of the covenant with Noah: a world completely at peace with all hostility ended.

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<sup>29</sup> Duane Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, New American Commentary, vol. 19A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 199.

<sup>30</sup> Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 199.

<sup>31</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 498.

**Ezekiel 36:30-36.** The prophet Ezekiel also uses the Noahic covenant as the platform for speaking of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36:30-36. To see this, a few things need to be demonstrated. While Ezekiel 36 does not explicitly mention the new covenant, it is actually a new covenant text due to the presence of the covenant formula (Ezek 36:28).<sup>32</sup> Second, the influence of the Noahic covenant should be noted throughout the passage. God will bring back the people to their land and “multiply the fruit of the trees” (36:30). The land, which was once a “desolation” and “waste,” will become like the Garden of Eden (36:35). Such language of judgment recalls the judgement of the flood, which is depicted as a reversal of creation and part of a large cycle of creation, de-creation, and re-creation pattern found in the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> This cycle is picked up in the Noah narratives as Noah is cast as a new Adam stepping into a new creation. However, Ezekiel also sees the cycle continuing here as the de-creation of exile is overturned through the new creation found in the new covenant. Thus, Ezekiel’s prophecy points to a future when the institution of the new covenant will also bring about a new creation, thus fulfilling the Noahic covenant.

**Jeremiah 33:20-26.** God anchors his commitment to the Davidic covenant to his covenant “for the day” and “for the night” (33:20-21). He also ties his commitment to his people in a covenant “for the day and night . . . and the fixed patterns of heaven and earth” (33:25-26). Some scholars see the covenant with Noah referenced here.<sup>34</sup> Others see a reference to the creation covenant.<sup>35</sup> It seems plausible that both covenants are in view since the Noahic covenant upholds the previously established creation covenant.

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<sup>32</sup> The Bible regularly uses variations of this phrase, but the meaning is still the same: God and humanity will dwell together as family. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 170.

<sup>33</sup> Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 20-21.

What is more important, however, is how Jeremiah delineates the relationship between the covenants mentioned in this passage and the wider context of the book. God had mentioned earlier the establishment of the new covenant, providing full forgiveness of sins, restoration of the people, and renewal of the creation (31:27-40). In another vision, God speaks of the restoration of people and the land based upon the forgiveness of their sins (33:1-13). Although not explicitly mentioned, the language of 33:1-13 is clearly referencing the institution of the new covenant. After speaking of Israel's restoration in the language of the new covenant, Jeremiah speaks of the reestablishment of the Davidic kingdom (33:14-18). Jeremiah seems to be communicating that the institution of the new covenant will bring the Davidic covenant to fulfillment. Moreover, since the Davidic covenant is anchored to the creation/Noahic covenant, there would be good reason to think that the new covenant brings those to fulfillment as well through their connection to the Davidic covenant (33:19-26).

Besides these important texts that connect the Noahic covenant to the new covenant, scholars have located allusions to the Noahic covenant in other Old Testament texts, such as Isaiah 11:6-9, 24:3-5, and 33:8-9.<sup>36</sup> Katherine Dell even goes so far to say that the Noahic covenant influences the wisdom tradition as well, although these allusions are far more tenuous.<sup>37</sup> The study of the prophetic passages drawn from Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, however, should alert readers to the fact that the Noahic covenant serves as the backdrop for the new covenant. The institution of the new covenant also ushers in a new creation that serves as the fulfillment of the Noahic covenant.

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<sup>36</sup> The following lists are drawn from Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 65-67; and Dell, "Covenant and Creation in Relationship," 114-24.

<sup>37</sup> Dell, "Covenant as Context," 122-24.

## Conclusion

The Noahic is not a covenant that students of Scripture should bypass easily. It plays an absolutely crucial role in the biblical storyline. The covenant with Noah upholds the covenant God originally made in the creation narratives. God originally bonded himself to humanity in a father-son relationship when he created humanity in his image and likeness. Humanity was to be God's royal "son" who spread his glory across the globe as it was fruitful and multiplied. In the covenant with Noah, things are not much different. God bonds himself to humanity and even the whole created order again (Gen 9:10, 13, 15, etc.). The responsibility that people have is the same as well: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 9:1). The significant difference is that God promises to suspend his judgement upon the world again, rather than merely his presence being near like it was in the Garden (see Gen 3:7). Through the covenant with Noah, God preserves the world as the "theater" for his glory.<sup>38</sup>

The covenant with Noah does not merely keep the story of the Bible going, however. No, it plays a much larger role and actually advances the plot forward. It does so in three ways. The covenant with Noah equips humanity to live in a post-fall, post-flood world, making a further plotline possible. While the story continues, major questions arise about the possibility of more judgement because humanity still fails to uphold the responsibilities of the covenant. God demands a faithful covenant partner, for even though he makes promises in the Noahic covenant, humanity must still uphold the stipulations of the covenant. However, people fail, even "righteous" Noah gets drunks. Later in the narrative, people are to spread across but instead cluster at Babel. Why should God bear with humanity? Will anyone arise to obey the demands of God's covenants?

The answer to these questions comes through an awesome display of God's grace. In the Noahic covenant, God takes on the failures of the covenant partners upon

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<sup>38</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 2.6.1.

himself as he hangs up his war bow and points it at himself (Gen 9:16). God seems to be saying, “Even though you fail and deserve judgment, I will suspend my judgment upon you by bringing it upon myself.” Through the presence of the New Testament, such a tension is resolved in the death of Jesus whereby he upholds God’s righteous standard to judge sin yet also offers forgiveness (Rom 3:23-26).

The later writers of Scripture also see the Noahic covenant playing an influential role in the conception of the future new covenant. Many texts speaking of the new covenant have “new creational” elements within them. In other words, the new covenant not only promises full forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:31-34) but also a complete restoration of the created order that fulfills the intent of the Noahic covenant (Hosea 2:18; Ezek 36:30-36).

## CHAPTER 4

### COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Due to humanity's sin, God could have destroyed every single person, yet he chose to save one family, the family of "righteous" Noah (Gen 6:5-9). After Noah leaves the ark, God enters into covenant with him and all living things (Gen 9:8-11). God promised to preserve the world and abide with humanity due to his own grace and mercy. But just like Adam sinned in the Garden, so Noah fails to uphold the responsibilities of the covenant (Gen 9:20-24). The story of Noah reiterates the truth revealed in Adam's failure: a fully obedient "son" is hard to find.

Noah was not the only disobedient one after the flood. As the earth was repopulated, people continued in rebellion against God as they failed to "fill the earth" and instead consolidated at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-4). In view of humanity's sinfulness, what would God do? Would he judge the world again with another cataclysmic judgment? While he does judge the people by confusing their languages causing them to scatter across the earth, he does not devastate the world again (Gen 11:6-9). Instead, he continues his plan to re-establish his rule over the world. He does so by choosing and entering into covenant with one man, Abraham.<sup>1</sup> God's covenant with Abraham means that the establishment of his rule will begin in one family but eventually reach the whole world.

It is difficult to overstate how important the Abrahamic covenant is in the storyline of the Bible. Many theological systems build their foundation upon the

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<sup>1</sup> I will use "Abraham" throughout the chapter for ease of reading even though his name does not change until Gen 17:5.

Abrahamic covenant.<sup>2</sup> Yet, many of these systems fail to see the development within the Abrahamic covenant *itself* and the further transformation of the covenant across the storyline of the Bible. Many scholars also see the Abrahamic covenant as one of pure promise devoid of any responsibilities. Even from the beginning text of the Abrahamic covenant, however, the covenant is not solely promise as the programmatic statement of Genesis 12:1-3 reveals that God's covenant with Abraham involves a bond, promises, and responsibilities. The covenantal elements found in Genesis 12:1-3 are then developed in later texts in Genesis, specifically Genesis 15, 17, and 22. Therefore, it is important to understand that while the Abrahamic covenant is united by the foundational elements of Genesis 12:1-3, it also undergoes development across the narrative of Genesis.

### **Covenant, or Covenants, with Abraham?**

Due to the development of the elements of Genesis 12:1-3 in the Genesis narrative, some scholars believe that God makes multiple covenants with Abraham. Rather than seeing one covenant which undergoes development, these scholars believe that God makes at least two distinct covenants with Abraham. One prominent scholar who has advanced the two-covenant view of the Abrahamic covenant is Paul R. Williamson.<sup>3</sup> Williamson uses three arguments in favor of seeing two distinct covenants in the Genesis narratives. First, Williamson highlights the significant differences between

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<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the importance of the Abrahamic covenant to progressive dispensationalism, Craig Blaising writes, "To understand the Bible, one must read it in view of Abrahamic covenant, for that covenant with Abraham is the foundational framework for interpreting the Scripture and history of redemption which it reveals." Craig L. Blaising, "The Structure of Biblical Covenants: The Covenants Prior to Christ," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 134. Covenant theologians also see the Abrahamic covenant as being crucial to their theological system. Covenant theologians often see the Abrahamic covenant as being foundational to the theologically constructed "covenant of grace." As Michael Horton notes about the covenant of grace, "The Abrahamic covenant rather than the Mosaic covenant establishes the terms of this arrangement." Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel, and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 21.



the covenants God makes with Abraham in Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. If God made only one covenant with Abraham, then why are these two passages so different? For example, Williamson argues that the covenant made in Genesis 15 is unconditional, while the covenant in Genesis 17 is conditional. Second, he notes the time lapse between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. His argument essentially asks the question that if there is only one Abrahamic covenant, then why would God not just “frontload” the whole covenant at once? Third, Williamson points out that the promises of each covenant differ widely: the promises of Genesis 15 are national while the promises of Genesis 17 are international. Williamson concludes then that Genesis 15 is a separate covenant that amplifies the nationalistic promises given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 while Genesis 17 is another covenant that amplifies the universalistic promises given to Abraham.

Williamson’s argument fails to account for the natural development that takes place within Abraham’s relationship with God as well as the various connections each covenant passage has with each other. Furthermore, Williamson builds his argument on the notion that covenants can be categorized as either conditional or unconditional even though all biblical covenants have both elements within them. While Genesis 15 emphasizes the promissory nature of the covenant, conditions still exist for Abraham. He was still responsible to pass through the pieces of the covenant. The surprise of the passage is that only *God* passes through the pieces, meaning that God himself would fulfill the conditions of the covenant (Gen 15:17-18).

Besides incorrectly categorizing covenants using the conditional-unconditional rubric, Williamson’s view is not persuasive because the time lapse between Genesis 15 and 17 is immaterial. The covenantal relationship God had with Abraham was dynamic and developing so it is natural to assume that some time may elapse between God supplementing the covenant. Moreover, many scholars believe God made some kind of covenant with Abraham in Genesis 22. Why was there a time lapse between Genesis 22 and Genesis 17? Did God make *three* covenants with Abraham? Rather than arguing that

each covenantal text is a new and different covenant, it is more satisfactory to see that God builds on his covenant with Abraham over time.

Williamson's view also falls apart by not acknowledging the tight connection between the nationalistic promises and the universalistic ones. God certainly promises that Abraham would become a great nation and that this nation would have a particular land (Gen 12:2, 7; 15:18-21). Yet the nationalistic promises serve the universalistic ones because Abraham's family was supposed to be the means by which God's rule would extend to the world. It would be natural, then, for God to promise him and his family a base of operation, i.e., a land. Moreover, the author of Genesis sets the nationalistic and universalistic promises side-by-side in the same passages (Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8).

Therefore, the evidence that Genesis 15 and 17 are different covenants is slim. Contrary to Williamson, God only makes one covenant with Abraham although God's covenant relationship with Abraham is dynamic—it develops over time just like Abraham's faith does. The foundational elements of the Abrahamic covenant are laid forth in Genesis 12:1-3 and then later picked up on and developed by Genesis 15, 17, and 22.

### **Exposition of the Covenant with Abraham**

Although many scholars are reluctant to actually label Genesis 12:1-3 as a covenant, the text is foundational to all other Abrahamic covenant contexts that it makes sense to see it as the beginning of God's covenant relationship with Abraham. While the word *בְּרִית* may not be used in the passage, the concepts of a covenant are clearly present. Genesis 12:1-3 demonstrates the beginning of a growing bond between God and Abraham, provides the foundational promises the Lord gave to Abraham, and details Abraham's responsibilities.

#### **Bond**

When God calls Abraham to himself he is now binding himself to Abraham as family. Hahn points out that there was really no such thing as a covenant without a

kinship bond in the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> Familial bonds distinguished covenants from other legal devices such as contracts. Whereas contracts focused on goods and services, and treaties focused on land or military aid, covenants focused on creating family bonds.

### **Promises**

God gives Abraham six promises in the text. The first set of promises concern national issues and the second set concerns international ones.<sup>5</sup> The promises can be differentiated by their specific content and also by how they relate to the commands of the text.<sup>6</sup> In Genesis 12:1, God commands Abraham to “go.” The command to go focuses on Abraham’s current situation: he must leave his family and follow God. The corresponding promises are national, concerning Abraham and his family. The second command to be a blessing is intrinsically others-focused (Gen 12:2c). Being a blessing speaks to how Abraham should live in the world and relate to others. Therefore, it is not surprising that the promises attached to such a command are international, or how God will work through Abraham for the benefit of others.

In the first set of promises, God pledges to provide Abraham three things: a great nation, blessing, and great name. The promise of nationhood implies a seed, as Abraham will need at least one son to begin his family line. The desire for a seed and nation escalates the crisis of Sarah’s inability to conceive. The desire for a son is perhaps the greatest test of Abraham’s faith in Genesis. Moreover, the promise of nationhood implies the need for land, a place for the great nation to grow and expand. God is

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<sup>4</sup> See Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Purposes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 37-42.

<sup>5</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 82.

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars see God giving Abraham seven promises here, not six. The discrepancy of the number of promises is determined by how the literary structure of the text is unfolded and how they interpret the command forms in the text. See Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 1B (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 106-7.

promising to give Abraham's family a beach head of land from which his family would exemplify his holiness and spread his glory to the nations.

God also promises to bless Abraham. The concept of blessing is a central concern in the passage, as Williamson explains: "There can be little doubt that the central theme of this periscope is that of blessing. This is reflected, not only by the frequent occurrence of the root *brk* (used five times in Gen. 12:2-3), but also by its climactic position at the end of the speech."<sup>7</sup> Prior to Genesis 12:1-3, the root *brk* is used six times. Five out of those six times God is the speaker who is pronouncing his blessing over people or things.<sup>8</sup> Based upon its usage earlier in Genesis, the idea of being blessed means to be commissioned by God with favor to fulfill the responsibility of the original creation covenant (be fruitful and multiply). Therefore, Abraham will be blessed by God, meaning he will receive God's favor in order to fulfill the responsibilities God gives to him.

Besides nationhood and blessing, God promises Abraham a great name. Scott Hahn points out that the great name has a dual meaning: one literal and one metaphorical. On the one hand, Abraham's name literally becomes greater (i.e., longer) when God changes it from Abram to Abraham later in the narrative (Gen 17:5).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, having a "great name" means not only being a man of renown, but also has royal overtones in the ancient Near East and Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> God's promise of a great name for Abraham counters humanity's attempt to make a name for themselves at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:4). Whereas in rebellion to the Lord humanity consolidates at Babel and attempts to

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<sup>7</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 82.

<sup>8</sup> God blesses the animal world to be fruitful (Gen 1:22), humanity to be fruitful (Gen 1:28), the seventh day (2:3), humanity in general (5:2), Noah and his sons to be fruitful (9:1).

<sup>9</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 275-76.

make a name for themselves, God calls Abraham to go and in the process *God* will exalt *him* (Gen 11:4; 12:1-2).<sup>11</sup>

God's promises are not meant solely for Abraham's own personal blessing, but he also gives Abraham promises of international, or global, significance. God's promises of global blessings will strengthen Abraham as he seeks to "be a blessing" to the world. God promises to shower his favor and provision on those who favor Abraham: "I bless those who bless you" (12:3a). Since Abraham is God's royally designated ambassador, acceptance of Abraham means acceptance of God. An example from later Scripture shows that those who accept the apostles, accept Jesus (John 13:20). When the nations accept Abraham, God will bless them. Nevertheless, the text clearly anticipates the fact that not everyone will accept Abraham, for God promises to "curse the one who curses you" (12:3b).

The idea of blessing and curse are covenantal ideas. Curses, in particular, were often attached to covenants in the ancient Near East to punish those who broke the covenant.<sup>12</sup> It is no surprise, then, that God would curse the individuals and nations that rejected the opportunity to be blessed along with Abraham. According to the Bible, death is the curse of the covenant and physical death is now the destiny of all human beings (Gen 2:16-17; 3:17-19).

The concept of death in the Bible is more of a relational concept than a biological one, however. Life and death consist of someone's connection, or lack thereof, to God. Adam and Eve surely died on the day they ate of the fruit when God expelled them from the Garden, the place of his presence (Gen 3:22-24).<sup>13</sup> Israel's exile from the

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<sup>11</sup> Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 110.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 152-61.

<sup>13</sup> G. K. Beale has demonstrated that the Garden was like a temple, i.e., the place of God's presence, before temples were even constructed. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17 (Downers Grove, IL:

land is also cast as death because they were severed from the place of God's presence, the temple (Ezek 37:12). Being cursed by God, then, means being cut off from covenantal relationship with him; God is now far off rather than being near (see Eph 2:11-22). Therefore, the promise to curse Abraham's enemies means that God would afflict them with all kinds of death, whether physical destruction or expulsion from their land.

While God is certainly a God of judgment, his mercy abounds even more. The language shifts from the singular of God's curse to the plural when referring to those blessed by God: God will "bless those [plural]" who bless Abraham and "curse the one [singular]" who curses Abraham.<sup>14</sup> Such a shift demonstrates that majesty of God's grace and mercy for he desires to bless many more than the ones he curses. Through Abraham, God promises to bless the whole world: "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3c). Just as God cursed the ground and dispersed the clans of the earth abroad, so all people of the ground (הַאֲדָמָה) will be blessed through Abraham (see Gen 3:17-19).<sup>15</sup> God's blessing will truly be universal, covering every family over the face of the earth. Consequently, God will use Abraham to bless the world and restore his kingdom rule over the entire world, not just the land of Israel.

From Abraham's family, blessing will flow to the nations. Some scholars argue that "nations *will be* blessed," while others claim that the "nations *will* bless themselves." Understanding how the nations receive blessing depends upon whether one takes the verb "blessed" as passive ("will be blessed") or reflexive ("will bless

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IVP, 2004), 66-76. Since God promises that Adam would die "in the day you eat [the forbidden fruit]," it would seem like death would be immediate. However, Adam and Eve did not physically die for many years. Yet, they were cast out of the Garden promptly. Therefore, the "death" God promised was a holistic death, a spiritual exclusion leading to physical demise. See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 67-68, 74-75

<sup>14</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 274.

<sup>15</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 83.

themselves”).<sup>16</sup> While both translations are grammatical possibilities, only the context can determine the meaning. In the context of Genesis 12:1-3, the focus of the promise is not on what people will do to earn God’s blessing but upon the work God will do on Abraham’s behalf. As Chee-Chiew Lee points out, “Nowhere in the narrative do we see people actively seeking blessing for themselves by their association with Abraham.”<sup>17</sup> Instead, God’s blessing comes through Abraham to the nations. Therefore, the passive sense of the verb makes the best sense given the context of Genesis.

### **Responsibilities**

Many scholars understand the Abrahamic covenant to be unconditional, and consequently, unbreakable because it is founded solely upon God’s promises. The emphasis on promise is typically reflected in expositions of Genesis 12:1-3 as most scholars view the texts as solely a series of promises given to Abraham.<sup>18</sup> Yet the grammar of the text actually shows that there were promises and responsibilities given to Abraham from the very beginning of his relationship to God.

The sequences of volitives in the Genesis 12:2 could be rendered many different ways. Many scholars see God giving Abraham three promises (nationhood, blessing, name) leading up to the imperative form בָּרַךְ (usually translated as “so that you will be a blessing”). Yet, such a conclusion is not actually driven by grammar but by prior ideas about what its interpretation should be.<sup>19</sup> Joel Baden writes, “The translation of v. 2b, therefore, *could* be ‘so that you will be a blessing’ . . . but it does not *have* to

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<sup>16</sup> Chee-Chiew Lee, “Once Again: The Niphal and the Hithpael of BRK in the Abrahamic Blessings for the Nations,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 3 (2012): 279-96.

<sup>17</sup> Chee-Chiew Lee, “GOY in Genesis 35:11 and the Abrahamic Promise of Blessing for the Nations,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 3 (2009): 472.

<sup>18</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Joel S. Baden, “The Morpho-Syntax of Genesis 12:1-3: Translation and Interpretation,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010): 229.

be.”<sup>20</sup> The imperative most likely retains its force as a command: “Be a blessing!”<sup>21</sup> If the imperative is allowed to have its natural force of a command, then the passage could be outlined this way:

1. Go to the land I will show you (12:1)
  - a. I will make you into a great nation (12:2a)
  - b. I will bless you (12:2b)
  - c. I will make your name great (12:2c)
2. Be a blessing (12:2d)
  - a. I will bless those who bless you (12:3a)
  - b. I will curse those who curse you (12:3b)
  - c. I will bless all the families of the earth through you (12:3c)

Whether or not there are two commands in the texts, all scholars agree that Abraham’s first responsibility is to go, which is an invitation to exercise faith. Wenham writes, “Most commentators have regarded this divine imperative as a test of faith: Abram is to give up all he holds dearest for an unknown land promised by God.”<sup>22</sup> Within the presentation of the Bible there is no prior interaction between God and Abraham, for he had been living as a pagan in the land of Haran until God revealed himself (11:31-32). Therefore, Abraham had to believe certain things about this God who is just now revealing himself. Abraham’s faith exercised in Genesis 12:1 anticipates the more explicit trust Abraham exhibits in Genesis 15:6.

For Christian interpreters it is difficult not to see parallels between Abraham’s call from God and the Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples (Matt 28:18-20). While God tells Abraham to “go . . . and be a blessing,” Jesus tells his disciples to “go . . .

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<sup>20</sup> Baden, “Morpho-Syntax,” 229.

<sup>21</sup> Baden, “Morpho-Syntax,” 229.

<sup>22</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 274.



and make disciples.” Christopher Wright points out the numerous correspondences between the two passages.<sup>23</sup> The correspondence shows that the church now fulfills the Abrahamic role in the world by virtue of being united to *the* seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16). Therefore, the mission of the church is not solely about evangelism, but also about administering God’s blessing to the world. The church must be the agent of God’s kingdom in a world broken corrupted by sin. As Abraham goes out in obedience to God’s call, he is to “be a blessing” to the nations. While God has a sovereign plan to save, he always uses “means” to accomplish it. God uses people to bring his blessing to other people! So, God tasks Abraham with being the vehicle for his blessing to come to the nations. Abraham being a blessing to the nations is exemplified when he rescues his nephew Lot from marauding kings and intercedes for a wicked city that did not deserve it (Gen 14, 18).

In designating Abraham as the means by which the nations will be blessed, the Abrahamic covenant makes explicit that “dual humanities” exist in the world: the people of the God and the nations. Another way of speaking of these two humanities is to see them connected to the two “seeds” of Genesis 3:15: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. T. D. Alexander explains that these two seeds represent two different ways of relating to God, one righteous and one wicked.<sup>24</sup> Most likely, the blessing given to Abraham was meant to overturn the curses pronounced upon the woman in Genesis 3.<sup>25</sup> Abraham’s “seed” would come and bring salvation to the world. Through the seed of Abraham God will bless the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 213.

<sup>24</sup> T. D. Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible’s Portrait of the Messiah* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1998), 18.

<sup>25</sup> James M. Hamilton, “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 2 (2007): 253-73.

## Development of the Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 12:1-3 is a concise treatment of God's covenant relationship with Abraham. It contains seeds of all the covenantal concepts which will be expanded in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. Each passage contributes important developments in God's relationship to Abraham: Genesis 15 emphasizes the promises of God; Genesis 17 highlights Abraham's responsibilities; and Genesis 22 provides an important test of faith which confirms the covenant.

### Genesis 15

Most scholars label the covenant found in Genesis 15 as the covenant between the pieces, recognizing it as the official beginning of the covenant between God and Abraham.<sup>26</sup> While the making of the covenant does not occur until Genesis 15:17-21, the whole chapter is a covenant text where God builds on the promises of Genesis 12:1-3. God promises Abraham numerous descendants and land (15:5, 7, 18-20) as well as a people who conquer and rule over the land (15:7, 16, 18-20).

The emphasis Genesis 15 has on promise leads some scholars to argue that Genesis 15 presents the making of a different covenant from the one established in Genesis 17. Williamson, for example, points out that the covenant in Genesis 15 is unconditional and national, while the covenant in Genesis 17 is conditional and international. Seeing different covenants being made in Genesis 15 and 17 is not convincing, however, because it is not appropriate to separate the national aspects of the Abrahamic covenant from its international ones. God will work through Abraham's family (national) to bless the nations (international) (Gen 12:1-3). The national promises are the means by which the international promises will come to pass.

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<sup>26</sup> Schreiner points out that while the word *covenant* is absent from Gen 12:1-3, the promises of Gen 12:1-13 are so integral to the later covenant texts of Genesis that it is fitting to treat Gen 12 along with Gen 15 and 17. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, Shorts Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 43.

Furthermore, the covenant cut in Genesis 15 should *not* be labeled as unconditional as if no responsibilities were to be laid upon Abraham. In my view, all major biblical covenants contain responsibilities for the human party. The Abrahamic covenant is no different. Yet, the shocking element in Genesis 15 is that God takes Abraham’s responsibilities *upon himself*. The covenant cutting ceremony depicts something akin to a bloody wedding aisle. Animals are cut in half and their carcasses form the aisle (Gen 15:9-10). Typically, both parties would pass through the pieces, indicating their commitment to upholding the responsibilities of the covenant. Their commitment to uphold the responsibilities also indicated the taking on of a curse. Gentry writes, “May I become like these dead animals if I do not keep my promise(s) and my oath.”<sup>27</sup> What happens in Genesis 15, however, is unprecedented in the ancient Near East: only God passes through the pieces. Jeffrey Niehaus writes, “In the pagan ‘covenant of grant’ there may be a curse, but if there is, it is directed against one who would violate the vassal’s rights. In the Abrahamic covenant-cutting by contrast there is a curse but the Suzerain pledges to *take it upon himself*.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the covenant cut in Genesis 15 does indeed include responsibilities. These responsibilities should have been laid upon Abraham, but the twist in the text is that God puts Abram to sleep and takes on the responsibilities himself.

By taking on the responsibilities himself, God demonstrates his glory. The continuation of the Abrahamic covenant is not upheld by mere divine fiat; rather, it is upheld by God’s own grace and mercy. God taking on the responsibilities of the covenant himself and the potential to receive the curse of the covenant takes on actuality in the new covenant. In the new covenant, the true “seed” of Abraham, Jesus Christ, takes upon the responsibilities of the new covenant—complete obedience to the Lord. The glory of the

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<sup>27</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 287.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 2 (2013): 269, emphasis original.

gospel is the fact that Jesus has done all the work so that sinful, broken people do not have to. Jesus not only did all the work, but he bore the curse of the covenant upon himself to provide forgiveness for all of his people (Gal 3:10-14).

## Genesis 17

God makes the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:18 and then establishes his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1-14. By using the word *וְאֶמְצִי* (“and I will establish”), God is not initiating a new covenant in Genesis 17:1-14 but upholding the promises of a previously established covenant—the covenant of Genesis 15.<sup>29</sup> As the narrative of Genesis progresses, all aspects of the Abrahamic covenant (bond, promises, and responsibilities) develop and progress as well.

The bond between God and Abraham (and his descendants) develops through the first instance of the covenant formula (Gen 17:7-8). The covenant formula is a statement of a kinship bond that features two components that often go together: “I will be their God” and “they will be my people.”<sup>30</sup> The biblical authors often modify the formula, however, so that only parts of it are used. Such shorthand usage would still be indicative of the whole covenant relationship. For example, God promises Abraham to be “God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7). A bond of family has been established with Abraham and will continue to include his offspring. One verse later, God promises to Abraham’s descendants, “I will be their God” (Gen 17:8). God and Abraham, and Abraham’s descendants, are now family.

Genesis 17 also develops the promises of the covenant promises. Abraham is not only going to become a great nation (Gen 12:2), but he will now be the father of a

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<sup>29</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Jason Parry, “*Hēqîm bērit* in Gen 6:18—Make or Confirm a Covenant?” accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.academia.edu/36844287/h%C4%93q%C3%AEmb%C4%95r%C3%AEtinGen618MakeorConfirmaCovenantAResponsetoCharlesLeeIrons>.

<sup>30</sup> Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, Old Testament Studies, trans. M. Kohl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 30-31.

multitude of nations (Gen 17:5). His descendants will not only be a nation, but a conquering people ruled by kings (Gen 12:2; 15:18-21; 17:6). The land promised in Genesis 15:18 now will be an everlasting possession (Gen 17:8). In the Genesis narratives, God significantly expands the scope and depth of the promises.

In light of God's promises, Abraham must walk before God and be blameless (Gen 17:1). Walking before God means acting as his emissary, his appointed and commission representative.<sup>31</sup> Originally, humanity was created in God's image. Humanity was God's royal "son" (Gen 1:26). Their commission then was to take dominion and rule over the world on God's behalf (Gen 1:28). What they did (take dominion) flowed from who they were (image of God). So now, Abraham is called as a new Adam and is called to bear the image of God in the world. He is to live before the nations and "be blameless." Godly character is of utmost importance for accomplishing the mission of God.

One unique feature of the covenant in Genesis 17 is the sign of circumcision, the meaning of which is much debated.<sup>32</sup> At the very least it is the sign that someone belongs to the covenant family of Abraham: "An uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen 17:14). Even in the Genesis narratives it seems as if physical circumcision points to something more. The narratives make it abundantly clear that circumcision did not automatically make someone godly. Abraham still sinned greatly after his circumcision (Gen 20:1-19). Moreover, even if someone received circumcision, it did not necessarily mean he would be included in the covenantal blessings of Abraham.

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<sup>31</sup> John H. Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 73.

<sup>32</sup> John Meade writes, "[Scholars] view Abraham's circumcision as a reminder to God to keep his promise to Abraham to a multi-valent meaning including malediction and consecration." John D. Meade, "The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2016): 47. Meade adds his own view that circumcision meant consecration of a priest before God. In other words, the whole people of Israel were to be a "kingdom of priests."

Both Ishmael and Isaac received circumcision, but only Isaac was the real “seed” of Abraham (Gen 17:18-18). Jacob and Esau both received circumcision, yet only Jacob was chosen to bear the covenantal promises while Esau was excluded (Gen 19:23-26; Mal 1:3).

Scott Hahn helpfully summarizes the inadequacy of physical circumcision in Genesis: “Circumcision may have been necessary at one time, but even then, it was not sufficient for what matters most. Indeed, even Abrahamic sonship is no guarantee of inheritance, because not all sons are heirs!”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, as the sign of the covenant, circumcision pointed to membership in the covenant. Though, as even the narratives of Genesis show, physical circumcision anticipated the need for circumcision of the heart (see Deut 10:10-12, 30:6; Jer 4:1-4; Col 2:11).

## **Genesis 22**

The Abrahamic covenant should be read as a unified covenant, especially in light of the fact that Genesis 22 references back to each of the covenant passages in Genesis 12, 15, 17. Relating to Genesis 12:1-3, God promises to bless Abraham and to bless the whole world through his family: “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 22:17-18). It also connects passage back to Genesis 15:5 when God speaks of multiplying Abraham’s seed and making them numerous like the sand and the stars (Gen 22:17). In addition, Genesis 22 also picks up the royal theme of Genesis 17:6 when God promises that Abraham’s seed “will possess the gates of their enemies” (Gen 22:17). In all these ways, Genesis 22 is not a separate covenant but the climactic confirmation and development of the one Abrahamic covenant.

It also functions as an *inclusio* with Genesis 12, bringing the formation of the Abrahamic covenant to a climactic close.<sup>34</sup> The narrative involves God calling Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac (Gen 22:1-2). Despite the difficulty of such a command

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<sup>33</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 273.

<sup>34</sup> Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” 256.

from the Lord, hints in the text indicate that Abraham trusts God to provide, whether through a substitute or resurrection (Gen 22:7-8; Heb 11:17-19). Due to Abraham's obedience, God swears on oath to bless Abraham and fulfill the covenant through him (Gen 22:16-18). Does the fact that God swears an oath to Abraham because of his obedience demand that the Abrahamic covenant is now based upon Abraham's obedience and not God's promises?

Some of the confusion surrounding the Abrahamic covenant is due to the fact of inadequate labels.<sup>35</sup> Scholars are quick to designate covenants as either unconditional (based on promise and unable to be nullified) or conditional (based on obedience and therefore nullifiable). But such designations do not hold because all the biblical covenants have elements of both within them. Instead of attempting to figure out whether the covenant in Genesis 22 is conditional or unconditional, it is better to read Genesis 22 in light of what has become before it. God had already taken on the "conditions" of the covenant himself in Genesis 15. God then reaffirms and expands the promises of the covenant in Genesis 17. Therefore, the test of Abraham's faith could *not* be the foundational premise of the covenant. Dean writes, "While God does test Abraham, passing the test is not a condition for cutting the Abrahamic covenant."<sup>36</sup> Yet, Abraham was still called to be responsible and live before God in obedience. Abraham's obedience mattered to such an extent that God reaffirmed his covenant with him precisely "because you [Abraham] have done this thing" (Gen 22:16). God desires a fully obedient "son": a completely faithful covenant partner. However, mere human beings would inevitably fail so God upholds the faltering steps of his "son" by his mighty oath and powerful promises.

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<sup>35</sup> David Andrew Dean, "Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence: New Terminology and a Case Study in the Abrahamic Covenant," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 2 (2014): 282. Unfortunately, Dean himself introduces new terminology and labels, which adds to the complexity of the discussion surrounding covenants rather than clarifying it.

<sup>36</sup> Dean, "Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequences," 304.

Only when the true “seed” of Abraham appeared would God find the one who was fully human “yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

### **Conclusion**

The Abrahamic covenant is crucial for the storyline of Scripture, but the Abrahamic covenant does not exist in a vacuum; other covenants have come before it. In the creation covenant, God promises to be near his image-bearers and tasks them with the responsibility to extend his royal rule in the earth (Gen 1:26-28). Yet, humanity fails so God makes a fresh start with Noah (Gen 6:18). After the flood, God blesses Noah and makes a covenant with him and the whole earth (Gen 9:1-17). God gives Noah the Adamic mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:1). Though even with a fresh start, humanity still fails to completely obey the Lord.

God moves his plan forward by selecting another new Adam, Abraham. God promises to bless Abraham both personally and internationally, but Abraham must still obey. As Abraham goes out in obedience to God, God will bless the nations through him (Gen 12:1-3). But the covenant relationship God has with Abraham develops. God makes the covenant upon his self-maledictory oath by walking through the pieces (Gen 15). God develops the promises of Abraham being a great nation by promising numerous descendants like the stars, as well as a land for them to inhabit (Gen 15:5, 18).

Genesis 17 finds God establishing, or upholding, his previously made covenant. Abraham must walk before God as his emissary and be diligent to circumcise those who belong to the covenant community (17:2, 9-14). God, in turn, promises to multiply Abraham and even bring kings from his lineage (17:4-6). All of these things lead to the climactic episode of Genesis 22 where God tests Abraham’s faith. Abraham passes the test, and due to his obedience God swears a mighty oath that he will bless Abraham, bring about royal progeny, and save the whole world (Gen 22:16-18).



## CHAPTER 5

### COVENANT WITH ISRAEL

God promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation, a people as numerous as the stars (Gen 12:2; 15:5). Yet Abraham would need at least one son for the promise to be fulfilled. Threatening the promise was the fact that he and his wife struggled with infertility. Lack of children was now not just a biological problem for Abraham, it was a theological one: would God keep his promise? The delay in fulfillment provided an opportunity for Abraham to exercise faith in the Lord. Sometimes he trusted God (Gen 15:6), while other times he doubted, attempting to accomplish God's plan through his own means (Gen 12:10-20; 16:1-6; 20:1-7).

Every time Abraham sought to fulfill God's purpose on his own, he failed. Despite his failures, God kept reiterating his promises, and at the right time, God miraculously provided a child for Abraham and his wife (Gen 21:1-8). The promise of a great nation was being fulfilled as Abraham's lineage extended through Isaac and his sons (Gen 25:19-26; 30:1-24). However, not all was well, for a famine in the land drove the people out of the Promised Land into Egypt. Once there, the Jewish people were enslaved by the Egyptians for four hundred years (Gen 15:13; see Gal 3:17). At just the right time, God raised up Moses as a deliverer for the people (Exod 3:10-12). Through Moses, God liberated the people through the exodus, and they began their journey back to the land of promise (Exod 4-15). While on the way, the people of Israel stood beneath Mount Sinai where God entered into covenant with them (Exod 19-34).

For the rest of the Old Testament, the covenant with Israel looms large over the narrative. For example, the author of 1 and 2 Kings often evaluates the Israelite kings according to the guidelines found in Deuteronomy 17. However, as important as the

covenant with Israel was, it was never intended to be a permanent or everlasting covenant.<sup>1</sup> It carried forth the Abrahamic promises into a new era for the family of Abraham, but God never intended the covenant with Israel to be last forever—it was pointing beyond itself to an even greater covenant that would come in the future.

### **Exposition of the Covenant with Israel**

The covenant with Israel advances the storyline of Scripture by heightening the covenant relationship God has with his people. Israel is designated as God’s “son” (Exod 4:22). Moreover, the covenant with Israel carries forward the promises of the Abrahamic covenant for a people and land. They are the “great nation” of Genesis 12 and eventually conquer the promised land of Genesis 15. Yet, Israel has the responsibility to keep the covenant, usually designated as “the Law.” Unfortunately, a note of foreboding hangs over the entire Israelite covenant indicating that it was never meant to be an everlasting covenant in the first place (see Deut 4:26-28; 31:15-16).

### **Bond**

God binds himself to the people of Israel in covenant. Yet, even before the covenant is officially made later in Exodus, God was already, in a sense, in a covenantal relationship with Israel by virtue of his covenant with Abraham.<sup>2</sup> There is direct fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises in the formation of the nation of Israel since God promised that Abraham would become a great nation (Gen 12:2; Exod 19:5-6). In addition, God promised Abraham that his descendants would receive a land, which is exactly what was given to Israel through the conquest of Canaan (Gen 15:18-21; Josh 21:43-45). Not only were promises of the Abrahamic covenant directly fulfilled through the formation of

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, each biblical covenant except the covenant with Israel is described as an “everlasting covenant”: creation covenant (Isa 24:5), Noahic covenant (Gen 9:16), Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:7, 13, 19), Davidic covenant (2 Sam 23:5), and the new covenant (Isa 55:3, 61:8).

<sup>2</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 170.

the people of Israel, but also some events, such as the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, served as a direct fulfillment of the prophecy given in the episode of God cutting the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:3-4).<sup>3</sup>

Besides the connection God had to Israel by virtue of the Abrahamic covenant, God also declared Israel his firstborn son (Exod 4:22-23). Sonship in the ancient Near East was not really about biological paternity, but it could signify other kinds of relationships. In the ancient Near East, the king was often considered the son of the gods, indicating his special relationship with the deity and his authority to rule on the god's behalf.<sup>4</sup> When God declares Israel to be his son, he is claiming to be family with Israel whereby Israel enjoys "God's devoted care and protection."<sup>5</sup> He is their father; they are his son.

The firstborn son would also be lead in the family, especially concerning the inheritance of the father where the firstborn would receive a double portion (Deut 21:17).<sup>6</sup> Even before being enshrined in Israel's law, the privileged position of the firstborn seems to be hinted at the Jacob and Esau story (Gen 25:19-34). The fact that the "older will serve the younger" seems to defy cultural conventions of those days (Gen 25:23).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as a firstborn son, Israel had a privileged position and relationship with God. Being God's son is not only about status and relationship but also about

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<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Bergman, Helmer Ringgren, and H. Haag, "בן," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 146-47.

<sup>5</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Matitياهو Tsvet, "בכור," in Botterweck and Ringgren, *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 177.

service. God desired Israel to be freed from slavery so that they might serve him (Exod 4:23). When God calls Israel to serve, it is a commission to worship him and serve the nations.<sup>8</sup> The dual function of Israel, worship and service, may also correspond to their dual identity as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests.

The designation that Israel is God's son also picks up concepts from the creation covenant where Adam is God's son.<sup>9</sup> God made Adam in his image and likeness, which designated a two-fold relationship: a relationship of royal sonship on one hand and a relationship to the world as a servant king on the other.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the combination of the terms indicates that Adam was to be God's royal "son" who spread his glory across the world. The "son" of God, Adam, was to bear God's image in the world. It is not a coincidence, then, just as Adam was to relate to God in worship and the world through service so also Israel is to relate to God through worship and serve the nations.

Unfortunately, Adam failed in his role by disobeying the covenant (Gen 2:16-17; 3:1-7). Yet, God did not abandon his creation but chose another "Adam," named Noah, to begin a new creation.<sup>11</sup> Noah, too, failed to uphold the responsibilities of the covenant, but God's grace preserved the world and God once again chose one man, Abraham, to be like a new Adam, a son.<sup>12</sup> Abraham bore God's image in the world and, by extension, Israel would be God's son. Israel is a *corporate* Adam. Being a nation, they are to mediate God's blessing to the surrounding nations.

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, "עָבַד," in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 712. The semantic range for עָבַד is "to work, serve, worship." It seems to me that a double meaning might be intended when Israel is called to serve God. They are to worship him. Out of the overflow of their worship, they are to go out and serve the nations.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Gentry, *Biblical Studies* (Peterborough, Canada: H & E Academic, 2020), 1:22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Gentry, *Biblical Studies*, 1:22-23.

<sup>11</sup> See previous chapter for evidence that Noah was a new Adam in a new creation.

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 21-23.

While God had a relationship with Israel before the making of the covenant, the making of the Mosaic covenant deepens the relationship he has with Israel; they are now in covenant together. The intimate bond God has with the people of Israel is highlighted in Exodus 24:1-11. While God calls Moses, the priests, and the elders to himself on the mountain to ratify the covenant, Moses alone approaches God (Exod 24:1-2). God then gives all the words to Moses who recounts them to the people, who accept them and take on the responsibilities of the covenant (Exod 24:3). Moses writes down all the words of the covenant and builds an altar (Exod 24:4).

After Moses writes down the words of the covenant, sacrifices are made and blood from the sacrifices is sprinkled on the altar and on the people (Exod 24:5-8). The sprinkling of the altar and people with the same blood seems to suggest that the “one blood” makes the two parties to be family.<sup>13</sup> William H. Propp writes, “Because the blood comes from a common source, it symbolizes the horizontal, literal kinship of all Israelites and also their vertical, fictive kinship with their Heavenly Father.”<sup>14</sup> The nature of the ceremony may even indicate that God is now “married” to Israel.<sup>15</sup>

God’s relationship with Israel is conceptualized in different ways throughout the Old Testament. In some contexts, God is likened to a husband and Israel to his wife (Jer 3:6-8; Ezek 16:8-21; Hosea 2:2-7). In other texts, God is Israel’s father (Exod 4:22-23; Isa 63:13-15). At root of both metaphors is the more foundational metaphor: they bonded together as “family.” Therefore, it makes sense that the Scriptures would depict God as a father who would long for his “son” to be released from bondage (Exod 4:22-23) and as a husband who is being joined to his wife through covenant (Exod 24:3-8).

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<sup>13</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 388.

<sup>14</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 308.

<sup>15</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 393.

## Promises

Israel has the status of being God’s “son” by virtue of their connection to Abraham, but God also makes mighty promises to Israel signifying their status and role in his plan. In Exodus 19:5-6, God promises to make Israel a people for his own possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

The first promise is that God would make Israel his own possession even though he owns the whole earth (19:5). The Hebrew word *הֵקֵלֶךָ* has a literal usage and metaphorical usage. In some texts, it refers to a king’s literal treasure of silver or gold (Eccl 2:8; 1 Chron 29:3), but it is mostly used to contrast the preciousness of Israel among the nations (Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4; Mal 3:17). In Exodus 19:5 it probably means a possession of immense value.<sup>16</sup> While God is the sovereign Lord of all nations, he particularly loves Israel. Zechariah speaks of the preciousness of Israel to God when he declares, “Whoever touches you [i.e., Israel], touches the apple of His eye” (2:8).

God also promises to make the nation a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6). A lot of images are blurred together here to make a powerful point. Just like Adam was a king/priest in the garden, so also the people *as a whole* were to act like kings and priests.<sup>17</sup> God’s rule was to be mediated through worship. A kingdom implies a border and a charter of rule. Israel was to spread God’s glory across the face of the world by showing the nations what God is like. In the Bible, priests were intermediaries between the people and God, being responsible for teaching the Scriptures to the people.<sup>18</sup> Even in the Old Testament, there is something like the concept of the “priesthood of all believers.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 101.

<sup>17</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 115-16.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H, 2018), 87.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy George explains that the priesthood of all believers is the doctrine that “every Christian is someone else’s priest, and we are all priests to one another.” Timothy George, *Theology of the*

Although God did install a formal priesthood for the people, such an office would not necessarily discount the whole nation functioning like a priest. At the very least, the nation *on a corporate* level could mediate the knowledge of God to the nations. On the individual level, Israelites, especially parents, could pass on the teaching of the Scriptures to their children (Deut 6:4-7).

In addition, Israel was to be a “holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Holiness is often misunderstood in the church due to faulty word studies. Many scholars attempt to build a meaning of holiness off of a perceived root word, which they often believe means “to cut something in half.” Building off such an etymology, they then believe the word for *holiness* means “to be separate.”<sup>20</sup> When applied to God, they then make claims that it refers to God’s “otherness,” or “separateness” from his creation. The concept of otherness then gets pushed into the realms of moral purity. Extending the idea to the people of God, holiness then becomes about being morally pure *by avoiding certain things*.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, such assertions, while not necessarily wrong, are really built upon faulty study of the Scriptures.

Words do not derive their meaning from their etymology but from their use in context. A thorough examination of the word “holy” indicates that it means “devoted” or “consecrated.”<sup>22</sup> When applied to God it means he is devoted to certain things, for example, the justice demanded in his covenant (Isa 5). When applied to the people of God,

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*Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 95. In other words, Christians have the responsibility to one another and teach each other the Word of God. While the church may have special “officers” who teach the Word to the whole congregation, *every* Christian should see themselves in a priestly role in contrast to the strict clergy-laity divide in the Roman Catholic Church. See Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 95-98.

<sup>20</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 2nd ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1998), 46. Although Sproul makes the classic mistake of relying on etymology for meaning, he does redeem himself later in the book by primarily focusing on the concept of holiness as consecration or devotion (48).

<sup>21</sup> Often these things can be arbitrary. I sat in a chapel service in college one time where the speaker handed out a list of sins. On the list was “rock music.”

<sup>22</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “Sizemore Lecture II: ‘No One *Holy* Like the Lord,’” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2013): 17-38.

it means they should be devoted to God and his ways. The distinction between the two views is subtle but significant. Certainly, Israel was to avoid certain things like idolatry and injustice, but they were first to be devoted to certain things: worship and justice. Israel could not separate itself from the world, for they were surrounded by pagan neighbors. In the midst of the nations, however, Israel was to be a “holy nation.”

### **Responsibilities**

Many biblical scholars and theologians draw a sharp distinction between the kind of covenant God makes with Abraham and the kind of covenant he makes with Israel. For example, Reformed theologian Michael Horton sees “two very different types of covenantal arrangements” existing in the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> According to Horton, there are “law” covenants (Adam, Moses) and “promise” covenants (Abraham, David, new).<sup>24</sup> Horton also uses ancient Near Eastern parallels to designate the biblical covenants as suzerain-vassal covenants or royal-grant covenants.<sup>25</sup> In Horton’s view, the kind of covenant determines whether it is based on promise, and thus permanent, or based on law, and thus breakable.

Does classifying covenants such ways actually hold up in light of the biblical evidence? I do not believe it does. In a sense, all biblical covenants are a suzerain-vassal covenant since God acts as a great suzerain to all of his “vassals” (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David). Furthermore, all biblical covenants see God promising various things to the covenant partners. Moreover, while the biblical covenants may share some similar characteristics of covenants, or treaties, with the surrounding cultures, none of the parallels

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Horton, *God of Promise*, 35-36.

<sup>25</sup> Horton, *God of Promise*, 41.



fit exactly.<sup>26</sup> So, if the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenant are not different in the *kinds* of covenants they are, how are they different? The biggest difference lies in *who* is taking on the responsibilities to uphold the covenant.<sup>27</sup> When the Abrahamic covenant is officially cut, *God* passes through the pieces alone while Abraham sleeps (Gen 15:17-18). All covenants are essentially two-sided, but in the case of Abraham, God upholds *both* sides. The same thing cannot be said for the Mosaic covenant. When the covenant is cut with Israel, Israel takes on all the responsibilities of the covenant (24:3, 7). God will surely uphold his covenantal promises to Abraham, but the functioning of the Mosaic covenant falls on Israel's shoulders.

Another difference between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants lies in their purposes and time frames. Williamson points out that the cutting of the Mosaic covenant does not result in a "temporary suspension, still less an annulment, of the programmatic agenda announced to Abraham."<sup>28</sup> Instead of being a way to earn salvation before God, the Mosaic covenant is "the means by which the promise would be advanced in and through Abraham's national descendants."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the "Law" is not set in opposition to the promise, but the Mosaic covenant provides a "fulfillment" of the Abrahamic covenant and the vehicle by which the international promises of the Abrahamic covenant comes to pass. In addition, clues in the text seem to indicate that the Mosaic covenant was always intended from the beginning to be temporary. The evidence for this will be taken up in a later section.

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "God's Covenant with Abraham," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 2 (2013): 267-68. Niehaus challenges the prevailing view that the Abrahamic covenant cut in Gen 15 is a "royal grant." Niehaus points out that in ancient Near Eastern cultures the examples of "royal grant" covenant speaks of people who were gifted land by a sovereign but do not need to conquer it. Israel, on the other hand, was gifted the land by God but still had to go in and take possession of the land.

<sup>27</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 334.

<sup>28</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 94.

In Exodus 19:5, God places responsibilities on Israel’s shoulders and commands Israel to “obey My voice and keep My covenant.” These phrases are mutually interpretive. Israel obeys God’s voice *by* keeping the covenant, and they hear God’s voice when the covenant stipulations are given (Exod 20:1). To “keep the covenant” means to obey all the regulations God will lay down within the covenant. These regulations are first explicated in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:3-17). Yet, the connection between listening and obedience to the covenant is further emphasized by the fact that God technically does not speak commandments, but ten “words” (Exod 20:1). Israel must listen to the voice of God, much like a son listens to his father (cf. Deut 6:4). Therefore, even in the context of giving the responsibilities of the covenant, the bond between God and Israel comes through.

The responsibilities Israel must uphold are famously enshrined in the Ten Commandments. While the exact numbering of the Ten Commandments has been debated for centuries, it is clear that two sets of responsibilities exist: those Israel has toward God and those Israel has toward itself.<sup>30</sup> The first set speaks of Israel’s fidelity to the Lord, speaking of their exclusive worship and devotion to God (Exod 20:3-4). For example, they must bear God’s name in the world with integrity.<sup>31</sup> The Ten Commandments then set the platform for further explication. In later sections in Exodus, Moses expounds upon and applies these commandments to real life situations in the “ordinances” or “judgements” (Exod 21:1-24:3). Therefore, Israel must obey everything God revealed to them, including

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<sup>30</sup> For a history of interpretation in how to number the Ten Commandments, see Jason DeRouchie, “Counting the Ten: An Investigation into the Numbering of the Decalogue,” in *For Our Good Always: Studies on the Message and Influence of Deuteronomy in Honor of Daniel I. Block*, ed. Jason S. DeRouchie (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 95-101.

<sup>31</sup> Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God’s Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 181. In contrast to the typical way of conceiving “taking the Lord’s name in vain,” Imes shows that there is more emphasis on Israel being “owned” by God and “bearing” his name like one might bear a tattoo or stamp upon themselves. The command is not so much about using the Lord’s name as a profanity, although doing so is not advisable. Rather, the command is about living in line with God’s purpose and character in the world.

the ten words (Exod 20:3-17) *and* the ordinances (Exod 21:1-24:3). Both the Ten Commandments and the ordinances comprise the “book of the covenant” (Exod 24:7).

The ordinances are specific, real-world applications of the Ten Commandments found throughout the Pentateuch. Leviticus gives expanded instruction on the sacrificial system and Deuteronomy gives expanded instruction for the generation about to enter the Promised Land.<sup>32</sup> The unity between the Ten Commandments and the ordinances challenges the prevailing Reformed Presbyterian view that God’s Law can be separated into three different categories: moral, civil, and ceremonial.<sup>33</sup> In reality, every law God revealed to Israel was moral. Disobeying even a civil or ceremonial law would have been sin for Israel. Therefore, God’s covenant with Israel should be viewed as a holistic covenant with the Ten Commandments and ordinances wedded together. The genius of the covenant that God makes with Israel is that its responsibilities are able to be summarized quickly and applied broadly. Jesus even condensed the Ten Commandments into two: to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:26-40).

The responsibilities of the covenant were not supposed to be a purely legal reality. God gave the law to Israel in the context of a familial relationship, like one between a father and son. Therefore, the law was never intended to be a means of salvation for Israel. They were always to find salvation by grace through faith. Unfortunately, many within Israel twisted the law and sought to use it as a means of attaining righteousness before God (Rom 10:1-3).

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<sup>32</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 437.

<sup>33</sup> The division of the Old Covenant into three aspects—moral, civil, and ceremonial—seems to be an attempt to make the Old Testament Law relevant for contemporary Christians. While Reformed Presbyterians believe that the civil and ceremonial laws regulating Israel’s government and worship have been fulfilled in Christ, they argue that the moral law of the Old Testament specifically found in the Ten Commandments still binds believers. See Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2010).

## The Relationship Between the Sinai Covenant and the Deuteronomic Covenant

The Mosaic covenant plays a prominent role in the Old Testament. In fact, as Williamson astutely observes, it could be considered “*the* Old Testament covenant.”<sup>34</sup> Complicating matters is that the covenant God makes with Israel at Sinai seems markedly different than the covenant he makes with the people at Moab in Deuteronomy. Reflecting on the differences of these accounts, Scott Hahn believes two different covenants are made with Israel.<sup>35</sup> Closer examination of the two passages demonstrates that the Deuteronomic covenant expands and reconfigures the original covenant with Israel at Sinai for a new situation: life in the promised land. Just like God made one covenant with Abraham and amplified certain aspects of it over time, so also God made one covenant with Israel, expanding the original covenant to fit a new context.

Unity between the covenant made at Sinai and the covenant made at Moab (Deuteronomic covenant) is expressed in a few ways in the Scriptures. The baseline responsibilities—the Ten Commandments—are exactly the same in both covenants (Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, while Deuteronomy regularly speaks of *torah* and obedience, God does not make a legalistic covenant with Israel at Moab. The idea of *torah* speaks of instruction and teaching.<sup>37</sup> In fact, *torah* is used of parental instruction to their children (Prov 3:1; 4:1). The kind of instruction God envisions for Israel to follow is like the instruction of a Father (God) to his son (Israel). Therefore, the kind of obedience Moses calls for in Deuteronomy is not a cold, detached “legalistic” obedience, but obedience from the heart flowing from a covenantal relationship. While some scholars try to drive a

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<sup>34</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 94, emphasis original

<sup>35</sup> Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 65.

<sup>36</sup> The wording of each record of the Ten Commandments is slightly different, but fundamentally they are the same in concept, and largely, in wording.

<sup>37</sup> Garcia Lopez, “תּוֹרָה,” in Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 611.

wedge between the sonship focus of Exodus 19-24 and the servant focus of Deuteronomy, no such division exists. Both covenantal texts speak of both realities: sonship and service. Even within Deuteronomy, there seems to be an indication that God's plan is to transform Israel from a rebellious vassal into an obedient son.<sup>38</sup> Sonship and service are present in both Exodus and Deuteronomy signaling the unity between the two covenant episodes.

Even though correspondences exist between Exodus 19-24 and Deuteronomy, some scholars object and point to the fact that God makes a new covenant with Israel at Moab. Therefore, the covenants at Sinai and Moab should be distinguished (Deut 29:1).<sup>39</sup> Contrary to those who posit two different covenants, the storyline of the Torah indicates that God is renewing at Moab the covenant he made with Israel at Sinai. A significant reason for God to make a covenant with Israel at Moab is that their identity is shifting from a nomadic people to a people living in the land. What God is doing at Moab is configuring the Sinai covenant for life in the land. On a practical level, Israel must be taught a new way to live because they are transitioning from being a people of bricklayers and nomads to farmers.<sup>40</sup> They must be taught in fatherly *torah* about how to live as a new kind of people—a people with a land.<sup>41</sup>

Another reason God makes a covenant at Moab is that God desires the covenant to extend to all generations of Israelites: “Not with you alone am I making (cutting) this covenant and this oath, but both with those who stand here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here today” (Deut 29:14-15). He

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<sup>38</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace Through Faith*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 101.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Bruegemann emphasizes the importance of Israel's land by explaining the significance of the Jordan crossing as Israel moves into their land: “The Jordan crossing represents the most radical transformation of any historical person or group, the moment of empowerment and enlandment, the decisive event of being turfed and at home for the first time.” Walter Bruegemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 43.

does not want any generations to make an excuse that the covenant only applies to previous generations.

The fact that God makes a covenant with Israel in Moab shows that he is renewing the covenant at Sinai and not creating a brand-new covenant.<sup>42</sup> While the phrase כָּרַת בְּרִית is often used to cut brand new covenants, it can also be used in covenant renewal ceremonies (Josh 23-24). Moreover, using the same phraseology for beginning a covenant and renewing a covenant is appropriate because covenant renewals are recommitments to keep a covenant previously made.<sup>43</sup> Marriage is the most vivid illustration of the relationship between covenant initiation and covenant renewal. When couples decide to renew their vows after many years of marriage, they are not creating a brand-new covenant. In a sense, they are reconfiguring their vows for a new situation, being married for a long time. Renewing one's vows is a reminder of the original promises made and responsibilities assumed on the wedding day, but the renewal is also a pledge of commitment to keep these things in the future. Therefore, the covenant God "cuts" with Israel on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy) is not an entirely different from the earlier covenant he made with them at Sinai. The Deuteronomic covenant is a reaffirmation and expansion of the Sinai covenant, reconfiguring it for the new context of entry into the promised land.

### **Breaking of the Covenant**

While God gave Israel distinct privileges and prerogatives, they still walked in the way of their ancestor, Adam (Hos 6:7). They repeatedly broke the covenant God made with them. Such breaking of the covenant indicates that from the beginning, the covenant with Israel was intended to be temporary. Moreover, several features of the covenant indicate that God intended the covenant to pass away and give way to a new covenant.

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<sup>42</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 439.

<sup>43</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 419.

The first indication of the temporary nature of the covenant with Israel is the distance God put between himself and the people. From the very beginning of the covenant, God uses Moses as an intermediary between himself and the people (Exod 19:3, 10, 20; 20:21; 24:2, 12).<sup>44</sup> Moses' intercession is significant because in each of the previous biblical covenants (creation, Noah, Abraham) God came to the primary partner in the covenant directly. With the Sinai covenant, however, God is separating himself from the people. There is a boundary that cannot be crossed, otherwise the people will die.<sup>45</sup> If God was too near to the people, he might destroy them in their sins, seemingly to indicate that they will fail to uphold the covenant.

While Sinai is a high point for Israel from one perspective, from another it is not. Commenting on Israel's repeated transgressions, Stephen Dempster points out that "Sinai does something profoundly negative to Israel."<sup>46</sup> Even though they are now in covenant with God, they go about breaking the covenant early on in the narrative. No sooner is Moses delayed on the mountain to receive the word from God, do the people become restless and make an idol for themselves to worship (Exod 32:1-6). Dempster writes, "This is Israel's original sin, and it happens even before Israel receives the law in writing!"<sup>47</sup> The sin makes God threaten to destroy the people precisely in line with the covenant agreement.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Moses pleads with God to spare the people because of the *Abrahamic* covenant: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you swore by yourself" (Exod 32:13). From Israel's early history, it is the Abrahamic covenant, not the Mosaic covenant, which is foundational for God's plan.

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<sup>44</sup> Duane Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 458.

<sup>45</sup> Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, 464.

<sup>46</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 104.

<sup>48</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 104.

The Golden Calf incident not only indicts the people but also the priesthood as Aaron acquiesces to the demands of the people and then makes excuses for his actions (Exod 32:2, 24). The failure of the priesthood would also happen repeatedly in Israel's history ranging from the "strange fire" of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2) to the sons of Eli being "sons of Belial" (1 Sam 2:12). The repeated failure of the priesthood indicates the necessity that the covenant with Israel would come to an end because there is an inextricable connection between covenant and priesthood.<sup>49</sup> Not only are Israel's priests corrupt, but God promises to raise up a faithful priest, indicating that some kind of change in priesthood would be necessary (1 Sam 2:35). Moreover, David prophesied that the coming deliverer would be a priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" and not a Levitical or Aaronic priest (Ps 110:4). Therefore, the failure of the priesthood, which is so intimately tied to the covenant worship of Israel, indicates that the new priesthood and a new covenant would be needed, which is exactly the point made in Hebrews Heb 7:11-22.

Moses also prophesied that the covenant with Israel would fail and a new covenant would be established. In Leviticus 26, God holds forth the blessing of obeying the covenant but also the curse of disobeying the covenant. Although couched largely in hypotheticals, it certainly seems that God is narrating what would happen to Israel: they would live in the land for a little while and then be exiled (26:2-39). God then promises to bring them back to the land after exile because of his commitment to the Abrahamic covenant (26:38-45). God will remember his covenant with Abraham and then cut a new covenant with the people that fulfills the Abrahamic covenant.

Moses also explicitly prophesies in Deuteronomy that Israel would break their covenant with God (Deut 4:26-28; 31:15-16). Beyond explicit prophesies of their failure, Moses warns Israel about the consequences of breaking the covenant and forsaking the

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<sup>49</sup> James M. Hamilton, "The Old Testament Use of the Old Testament" (class lecture, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 7, 2020).



Lord. Moses exhorts the people to live by God’s Word rather than being self-satisfied with the blessings of the Promised Land (Deut 8:1-10). Moses then warns the people of forsaking the Lord and the consequences if they do (8:11-20). If the people forget the covenant with God, then they, like Adam, will “surely die” (8:19, cf. Gen 2:16).<sup>50</sup> Moses likens Israel to a new Adam, making their way to a new kind of Eden. Once the people reach Eden, however, they will break the covenant and suffer the curse of the covenant, death, just like Adam.

It could be easy to conclude that Moses is merely speaking hypothetically in Deuteronomy 8; that he is merely warning that “if” the people forget the Lord then they will be cursed. The hypothetical reading, however, goes against the overall context of Israel’s history in general, and the book of Deuteronomy in particular. While Moses couches his warning as hypothetical (“if”) in Deuteronomy 8, the context of Deuteronomy and the repeated failure of Israel in the past implies a proposition that they *will* fail. Moses seems to be saying throughout Deuteronomy, “If you break the covenant . . . *and you will* . . . then you will be cursed.”

Furthermore, the listing of the blessings and the curses indicates that the people would not keep the covenant God had cut with them. While the list of curses in Deuteronomy 28 is again couched in hypotheticals (“if”), the specificity of the curses and the fact that the passage reads like a retelling of history indicates that Moses is largely prophesying of what *will* happen to Israel: they will break the covenant and be exiled (28:15-68). The problem, however, is not with God’s covenant—the problem is with Israel. They do not have the “heart” to obey the covenant (Deut 10:12-16; 29:14-21). The good news in Deuteronomy, though, is that God will work on Israel’s behalf in the future (Deut 30:1-14). He will bring them back from exile due to his own grace and mercy

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<sup>50</sup> There are good reasons to think that Moses is alluding to Adam in the Garden in Deut 8. While the vocabulary is different in Gen 2:16 and Deut 8:19, the grammatical construction is the same: infinitive + verb. Plus, conceptually, both passages are teaching the same thing: breaking the covenant results in death.

(30:1-5). He will also circumcise their hearts, which seems to indicate an inward work of God to bring new spiritual life to the people so that they would have a genuine love for God and ability to keep the commandments (Deut 30:6).<sup>51</sup> While a sense of foreboding hangs over the whole history of Israel, there is a deeper hope anchored to God's covenant love for Abraham and his seed.

### **Conclusion**

The covenant with Israel relates the previous covenants this way. God made a creation covenant with Adam, whereby he was to live as God's royal son and administer his rule upon the earth. Adam forsook his responsibilities and brought sin and death into the world. God raises up Noah and then Abraham as new "Adams" to carry forth the responsibilities to be fruitful, multiply, and bless the world. Through Abraham, God would bring forth another "Adam," a corporate people, Israel, to work through as a vehicle to bless the world. The Sinai takes the promises of the worldwide blessing through Abraham and builds upon it by now promising that it will come through Abraham's "great nation," Israel.

Unfortunately, Israel repeatedly failed in their vocation. Yet, God is not through with Israel because he promised to use them to bless the world. The next covenant relationship involves narrowing the covenant relationship down to the king so that the covenant made at Sinai can be administered through one chosen individual, the king of Israel. The covenant with Israel launches the story forward because it exposes the utter failure of the nation and need for a righteous "Adam," an obedient son to arise, keep the covenant, and win the blessing of the nations.

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<sup>51</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 130-31.

## CHAPTER 6

### COVENANT WITH DAVID

After entering into covenant with God at Sinai, Israel marches their way to the Promised Land and settles there (Josh 21:43-45). Even though Israel now inhabits the land, things are not going well for the people. Judges recounts an intensifying pattern of Israel's disobedience and God's discipline.<sup>1</sup> The moral deterioration within Israel becomes so great that civil war erupts, leading to the destruction of the tribe of Benjamin (Judg 21:6). The author of Judges provides a reason for the decline in the final verse of the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25). In other words, the spiritual and moral character of the people declined due to lack of kingship.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, if a king ruled over Israel, they would be in a much better position, morally and spiritually.

The author of Judges' positive evaluation of kingship may seem at odds with how Israel's request for a king is portrayed in 1 Samuel, but both passages can be reconciled with one another. When Israel requests a king, the problem in their request is not that they ask for a king, but that they ask for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam 8:5). Kingship in itself was not a bad thing for Israel, especially considering the fact that Deuteronomy 17:14-20 speaks of a future king for Israel.<sup>3</sup> The intention for Israel to have a king goes even further back than Deuteronomy to when God promised to Abraham that

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 145-49.

<sup>2</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 426.

<sup>3</sup> V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 8 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 101.

kings would come from him (Gen 17:6; see 35:11). Kingship was also prophesied for Israel (Gen 49:10; Num 24:17). Through promises and prophecies, God made it clear he intended a king to rule over his people.

When Israel requests a king, it appears the time for kingship has come. Israel's first king, Saul, was not obedient to the Lord and eventually had the kingdom stripped from him (1 Sam 15:22-29). God chooses David to be king and enters into covenant with him. God's covenant with David then becomes the focus of the storyline of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The importance of the Davidic covenant is seen in the establishment of an everlasting kingdom for Israel as well as the development of the "mediatorial role" for the Davidic king on behalf of the nation. In God's covenant with Israel, the nation was supposed to be a kingdom of priests who mediated God's blessing to the nation (Exod 19:5-6). In the Davidic covenant, the mediatorial function of the nation gets placed primarily upon the king. If the Davidic king is faithful, then the nation would also be faithful. The reign of the Davidic king means redemption, not only for Israel but for the entire world. It is now through the Davidic king that the nations will be blessed.

### **Exposition of the Covenant with David**

The covenant with David advances the biblical storyline by narrowing the covenantal bond between God and his people to God and the king. The king would now represent the people in their covenant relationship with the Lord. If the king was faithful, then the entire nation would often follow in his footsteps. If the king was disobedient, however, then the entire nation would also slide into moral decline. The Davidic covenant also gives perpetual relevance to Israel to Scripture's storyline. Israel will be a factor in God's purpose because David's dynasty is to be perpetual, and his kingdom will

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Dempster makes the point that the mid-point of the Hebrew Bible, even when speaking of the exile, "recalls the covenant to David." Moreover, he shows how the second half of the Hebrew Bible is concerned with the tiny shoot (the kingship of a new David) and begins to sprout from the stump. Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 156.

be “forever” (2 Sam 7:16). Moreover, the Davidic covenant demonstrates the importance of obedience to God’s Torah, his fatherly instruction. It is only through a faithful king/son that the promises of an eternal kingdom would come to pass.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the Davidic covenant would be the means by which God extends his rule over the whole earth.

## **Bond**

Just as God binds himself to Israel, so he does to David and his descendants.<sup>6</sup> God speaks of being family with the Davidic king: “I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me” (2 Sam 7:14). God is obviously not speaking of biological or ontological sonship. Unlike the pagan gods of the surrounding cultures, the Old Testament authors never depict the God of Israel as having sexual intercourse either with human beings or other spiritual beings.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, biological sonship is not in view. Instead, God bestows a particular status upon the Davidic king: sonship. Sonship in the Bible is an Adamic status. To be made in God’s “image” and “likeness” meant that Adam was in a relationship of obedient sonship with God and servant kingship with the world (Gen 1:26-28).<sup>8</sup> The New Testament also clarifies that Adam, being made in God’s image, is God’s son (Luke 3:38). Sonship is tied to image. Therefore, when God calls the Davidic king his son, the king is being likened to a new Adam.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, Shorts Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Even though the word “covenant” is not used in 2 Sam 7:1-14, the concept of covenant is clearly there. God bonds himself to David in a father-son relationship. They are now “family.” God also gives promises to David and demands for him to uphold responsibilities in the relationship. Furthermore, other texts designate the arrangement as a covenant (2 Sam 23:2; Ps 89:3-4). Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 120.

<sup>7</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 70-71.

<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Gentry, *Biblical Studies* (Peterborough, Canada: H & E Academic, 2020), 1:22.

The concept of sonship for the Davidic king next develops in the storyline by being tied to the seed of Abraham. God originally promised Abraham that his descendants (seed) would become a great nation (Gen 12:2). For his line to become a great nation, however, Abraham would need at least one son to begin the process. After years of waiting, God eventually promises a son to Abraham (Gen 15:4). Through the birth of one son Abraham's seed would now become numerous (Gen 15:5). After being willing to sacrifice Isaac, God promises that through Abraham's seed blessing will flow to the nations (Gen 22:18). After Abraham has his son, Isaac, the seed of Abraham is on its way to developing into the great nation of Israel.

Israel, as Abraham's seed, is then designated as God's son (Exod 4:22-23). As the son of God, Israel is to worship him and serve the nations. When God cuts his covenant with them, Israel is to be like a new Adam, mediating God's blessing to the nations by being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6). What is surprising in the Old Testament storyline is that although it may first look like Israel is the seed and son through whom God's rule over the world will come, God's cutting of the Davidic covenant indicates that he is now giving those statuses to the king on behalf of Israel. Therefore, the king is a corporate representative of the nation.<sup>9</sup>

Psalm 72 confirms that the Davidic king would play a representative role for Israel as the mediator of the Abrahamic blessings. In Psalm 72, the Davidic king rules with justice and righteousness (72:1-7). His rule would then extend over all nations (72:8-15). In language reminiscent of the Abrahamic covenant, Solomon prays, "May his name endure forever; May his name increase as long as the sun shines; And let men bless

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<sup>9</sup> Commenting on the Servant Songs of Isaiah, Gentry writes, "How can the servant be both the nation and the deliverer of the nation? There is only one possible solution that resolve this conundrum fairly, and Isaiah has prepared us for this in the first part of his work: the servant must be the future king described earlier (e.g., 11:1-10). As an individual, the king can say, 'I am Israel.' The king can represent the nation as a whole, yet he can be distinguished from Israel." Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2018), 495. I would argue further that the future king in Isaiah is a future *Davidic* king and perfectly fulfills the representative role the king was supposed to play all along.

themselves by him; Let all nations call him blessed” (Ps 72:17). Solomon seems to think that the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant will come be mediated *from* Israel *through* the king of Israel *to* the nations. Gentry writes, “It is hard to avoid the thought that here in Psalm 72 Solomon sees, as David did, that the Davidic covenant narrows the mediator of blessing to the nation from the nation of Israel as a whole to the king, who represents and stands for the nation.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the king being God’s son means he also has a representative and mediatorial role.

The Davidic king is not only God’s son but also begotten by God himself: “You are my son, today I have begotten you” (Ps 2:7).<sup>11</sup> Even though the most common usage of the verb לָלַד means “to give birth,” a biological relationship is not in view here as if Yahweh had actually given birth to the king.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Othmar Keel points out the fact that Yahweh had begotten the king “today”—on the day of his enthronement—rules out literal, biological generation.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned before, the wider context of the Old Testament mitigates against the biological view because Yahweh does not have a physical body and does not engage in sexual relationships. Some texts use the verb in a metaphorical sense, meaning “to bring something into existence.” Moses speaks of Israel

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<sup>10</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 484.

<sup>11</sup> Many things indicate that Psalm 2 is a Davidic Psalm. First, God is clearly speaking about the king of Israel as reference is made to the Lord’s “anointed” (Ps 2:2). Scripture overwhelmingly uses the description of “anointed” to refer to the king, although it can also be used of the high priest. See J. A. Soggin, “אָלֵיִם,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2., ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westerman, translated by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997). Second, God explicitly says he is talking about the “king” of Israel, presumably the Davidic king now installed in Zion (Ps 2:6). Third, the only king described as God’s “son” is the Davidic king (2 Sam 7:14). The New Testament ascribes the author of Psalm 2 to be David (Acts 4:25). With these things in mind, it makes sense to see the Psalm as a “royal Psalm” highlighting the close relationship the Davidic king has with the Lord. See Derek Kidner, *Psalm 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 15 (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity, 2008), 66.

<sup>12</sup> Othmar Keel demonstrates that the ANE background to Psalm 2 is probably the relationship of the Pharaoh to the Egyptian gods. In ancient Egypt, the relationship between the god and the king was described as a birthing process. Yet even the Egyptians probably did not take such declarations “literally.” Othmar Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallet (New York: Seabury, 1978), 247-56.

<sup>13</sup> Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 248.

forgetting the “Rock who begot you” (Deut 32:18). In context, Moses is speaking of Israel worshipping other gods instead of the one true God who cut a covenant with them and “begot” them or became their originator. Elsewhere, the term is used in the same metaphorical way, sometimes of the evil people who bring forth wickedness or of nations beginning to exist for the first time (Job 15:35, 38:28-29, 39:1; Ps 7:14; Isa 66:8). The semantic range of אָבִי opens up the possibility that a covenantal relationship between God and the king is in view.

When God says he is the father of the Davidic king and the king is his son, he means that he is now bound in covenant relationship to the king. They are like family. As God’s son, the Davidic king represents God’s character and ways to the people. As God’s son, the king is like a new Adam who is meant to worship the Lord on one hand and to be servant king to the world on the other. As God’s son, the king is also the “seed” of Abraham, the one through whom blessings are to flow to the nations.

### **Promises**

Some of the promises in the Davidic covenant pertain to David’s lifetime while others refer to after David dies (2 Sam 7:9-11; 12-16). While the promises given to David for his lifetime matter, the promises God makes for the future of David’s line have more relevance to the storyline of the Bible because they provide the backbone for unfolding the rest of the story of the Old Testament. The future-oriented promises God makes speak of a perpetual royal dynasty and an everlasting kingdom for David (2 Sam 7:12-16).

God promises David that he will raise up David’s seed to rule over an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam 7:12). The mention of seed connects back to the Abrahamic covenant, which in turn connects back to the seed of the woman who will crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the future Davidic kings will be the ones through

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<sup>14</sup> James M. Hamilton, “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 2 (2007): 253-73.



whom the curse is rolled back, and the nations are blessed. The natural expectation of the time would have been a for line of kings who pass the throne on to their sons. It would be reasonable to believe that God is merely promising a dynastic rule to David.

The term seed, however, can have both corporate and individual dimensions, designating an individual or a group. The author probably intends *both* meanings in this text, indicating a singular faithful king will arise from a group of kings, that is, David's dynastic lineage. The focus on an individual may be noticed by the use of the third person singular pronoun—"He will build a house for my name" (2 Sam 7:13)—as well as other third person singulars throughout the text (2 Sam 7:14-16). The dual meaning of the term "seed" as well as the third person pronouns in the passage open the possibility for the fulfillment of the promise through one individual king who would live and rule forever.

Complementing the promise of a royal dynasty is the promise of an eternal kingdom (2 Sam 7:14). The term forever is used three times within four verses to speak of the seed of David's kingdom (2 Sam 7:13), the kingdom of David itself (2 Sam 7:16), and David's throne, a symbol of David's rule (2 Sam 7:16). Furthermore, God promises that his "lovingkindness" (חסד) would not depart from the Davidic king even if he sins (2 Sam 7:14-15). The eternal nature of David's kingdom is confirmed by other passages in the Old Testament as well. Psalm 89:20-29 recounts God promises to "David."<sup>15</sup> God promises that he will keep his חסד to David forever, and David's seed will be established forever (Ps 89:28-29). The author also states that David's throne will be as the days of heaven, that is, forever (Ps 89:29). Using similar imagery as 89:28-29, the author articulates God's promise that David's seed will endure forever and "his throne as the sun

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher Seitz makes the point that "David" mentioned after Psalm 72 is not the historical David but the paradigmatic ruler. The "David" mentioned after Psalm 72 is the embodiment of the kind of king David was in his lifetime. The Psalms seem to be looking to the future where a new Davidic king would come and usher in the fulfillment of God's promises. Christopher Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 159.

before me” (Ps 89:36). The rule of David will abide like the moon and the “witness in the sky” (Ps 89:37).<sup>16</sup> Thus, Psalm 89 envisions an abiding reign of a Davidic king.

Another intriguing passage concerning the eternal nature of David’s kingdom is Psalm 45. Psalm 45 is a love song for the king of Israel concerning his wedding. The sons of Korah begin by addressing their song to the king, who is most likely the Davidic king (45:1).<sup>17</sup> They praise him for his beauty, military might, and righteousness (45:2-5). They exclaim, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (Ps 45:6). Ascriptions of divinity to a human king is well-attested in ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>18</sup> Such ascriptions do not mean that the king is actually divine, but that he rules on behalf of the god. Herb Bateman argues that the exclamation “O God” merely means that “this Davidic monarch receives his authority from God.”<sup>19</sup> Having received authority from God, the sons of Korah pray that Davidic king rules “forever and ever,” indicating their hope that the king would rule for the duration of his life.<sup>20</sup> The natural expectation of the people of the time would be a hope for the Davidic line to continue forever.<sup>21</sup> The language, however, is ambiguous enough to open the door to be interpreted in an individual manner, where one king would *actually* be divine and rule forever. The book of Hebrews validates the individual interpretation by ascribing Psalm 45:6-7 directly to Jesus (Heb 1:8-9).

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<sup>16</sup> The “witness in the sky” is debated. Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Dallas: Word, 1980), 424-25. The options include the sky and clouds themselves, David’s own throne, God’s divine presence, or an unidentified heavenly witness (424-27). Whatever the witness is, it is testifying to the enduring nature of David’s kingdom.

<sup>17</sup> It seems unlikely that any other kingly line of Israel would be addressed with such exalted prose.

<sup>18</sup> Herb Bateman, “Psalm 45:6-7 and Its Christological Contributions to Hebrews,” *Trinity Journal* 22 (2001): 10.

<sup>19</sup> Bateman, “Psalm 45:6-7,” 10.

<sup>20</sup> Bateman, “Psalm 45:6-7,” 6.

<sup>21</sup> Bateman, “Psalm 45:6-7,” 6.

As great as the promises God made to David were, God's faithfulness could have been questioned by the people because of the exile. How could God promise an eternal kingdom to David when the kingdom was destroyed? The promises God made to David were not the only part of the covenant, however. God also demanded obedience within the covenant relationship on behalf of the king. God even explicitly warned that discipline would come upon the king and the people if the king sinned (2 Sam 7:14). Therefore, the covenant with David is not pure promise but also contained responsibilities for the king to uphold.

### **Responsibilities**

The presence of both promises and responsibilities within the covenant has led to debate over whether the Davidic covenant is "conditional" or "unconditional."<sup>22</sup> Rather than attempting to force the Davidic covenant into a preconceived mold about its nature, it seems best to allow both components to stand side-by-side with one another. God upholds the covenant with his promises, yet the Davidic king cannot sin with impunity; he must be faithful to the Lord. If he is not faithful, then he will be disciplined (2 Sam 7:14). What, then, does faithfulness to the Lord look like for the Davidic king? The Old Testament clearly defines faithfulness: obedience to the Torah.

The emphasis on the king's obedience to the Torah predates God's covenant with David. Just before Israel enters the land, God provides guidelines for how kingship should exist within Israel (Deut 17:14-20). The people should not be ruled by a foreigner, but someone from among themselves (Deut 17:15). Once installed, the king should not seek to increase his military might or depend on foreign powers (17:16). He must also not

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<sup>22</sup> The majority view is that the Davidic covenant is "unconditional." David Freedman and David Miano take a different view, however. They characterize covenants using ideas of "divine commitment" and "human obligation." They argue that the Davidic covenant is one of human obligation, very close to the idea of the Davidic covenant being conditional. David Freedman and David Miano, "The People of the New Covenant," in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period*, ed. S. E. Porter and J. C. R. de Roo (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 9-24.

marry foreign women or accumulate wealth for himself (17:17). Most importantly, the king must write out a personal copy of the Torah: “He shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests” (17:18). The king should not merely write it out but also *read* it, so that it motivates him to obey it (17:19). The result of obedience would be a long reign for himself and his sons (17:20). Deuteronomy 17:14-20 anticipates the Davidic covenant where God promises an eternal kingdom *and* demands an obedient king. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 is not the only other Old Testament text that speaks of the importance of the king’s obedience, for it is also reiterated in Psalm 89. If the Davidic kings forsake God’s “law” and “judgments,” then God would punish “their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes” (Ps 89:30-31; cf. 2 Sam 7:14). The threat of judgment for failure to observe the law presupposes the demand of faithfulness on behalf of the king.

The history of Judah’s kings also demonstrates that the king must obey the Torah. The author of 1 Kings evaluates the kings according to the principles of the Torah. He recounts that Solomon “loved many foreign women,” violating the admonition of Deuteronomy 17:17 (1 Kgs 11:1). Moreover, Solomon’s love of foreign women turned his heart away from the Lord just like Deuteronomy 17:17 predicted it would (1 Kgs 11:4). On the positive side, kings like Hezekiah and Josiah demonstrate that obedience to God’s Torah brings blessing. Hezekiah is described as doing right in God’s sight “according to all that his father David had done” (2 Kgs 18:3). Hezekiah received high accolades as being a king like whom “after him there was none him like” (2 Kgs 18:5). His prestigious description was precisely because “he kept his commandments, which the Lord had commanded Moses” (2 Kgs 18:6). Besides Hezekiah, Josiah also embodied obedience to the Torah by a Davidic king. After finding the “book of the law,” Josiah makes a covenant to keep the (Sinai) covenant (2 Kgs 22:3). Josiah, then, is described like Hezekiah. No king that came after him was in the same league (2 Kgs 23:25b). Such a description was given because Josiah obeyed the Lord “with all his heart and with all his soul and with all

his might, according to all the law of Moses” (2 Kgs 23:25a; see Deut 6:5). Whether through the negative evaluation of Solomon or the positive acclamation for Hezekiah and Josiah, the books of 1-2 Kings certainly expected the Davidic kings to be loyal to the Lord and obey his law.

Therefore, in line with Deuteronomy 17:14-20, the Davidic king was to be an obedient Israelite *par excellence*. He was supposed to be the paradigm for the people of what faithfulness to Yahweh would look like. More significantly, a fully obedient Davidic king was supposed to be the *means* of God keeping his promise to David that he would have a royal dynasty and an eternal kingdom. Noting the tension between God’s promise to David and God’s demand upon the king for obedience, Schreiner points out that “God will certainly fulfill his covenant, but the fulfillment will be realized only with an obedient king.”<sup>23</sup> Not only does God work through the king to bless Israel, but the reign of the Davidic king also has global implications.

### **David, Israel, and the Nations**

God’s covenant with David has implications for both Israel and the nations. In relation to Israel, the Davidic covenant fulfills both the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant. In actuality, the covenants are *progressive*; that is, they build upon one another. The Davidic covenant fulfills the Sinai covenant, which in turn fulfills the Abrahamic covenant. In the Abrahamic covenant, God promised land (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:18), seed (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10; 17:7-10; 22:17-18), familial relationship (Gen 17:7-8; 28:21) and global blessing (Gen 12:3; 22:18).<sup>24</sup> When God makes his covenant with Israel, he initially fulfills the Abrahamic promises. He provides land for them (Deut 11:24-25; Josh 1:4-5). They become a great nation with numerous seed (Exod 1:7; Deut 4:6-8). God

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<sup>23</sup> Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Michael A. Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 246.

also has a familial relationship with the nation as Israel is his son and he is their father (Exod 4:22-23). While God worked to fulfill these promises to Abraham through Israel, God also demanded that Israel be faithful to his covenant. The covenant with Israel was to the *means* by which the Abrahamic promise of global blessing reaches the nations.

When God makes his covenant with David, he narrows the scope of the covenant to one person: the king. If the Israelite covenant was to the means of fulfillment for the Abrahamic covenant, then the Davidic covenant was to be the means of fulfillment of the Israelite covenant, the fulfillment of which now hinges on one person. Walter Kaiser writes, “What all Israel was to receive now will come through the man David and his dynasty.”<sup>25</sup> In the Davidic covenant, God will also appoint a place for his people (7:10a), and they will reside in an eternal kingdom, which implies a land. Moreover, the king is now God’s son, enjoying a familial relationship with the Lord (2 Sam 7:14a). The king is also the seed through whom God’s promises will be fulfilled (7:12b). The blessing of God, however, was not only restricted to Israel; rather, it was meant to flow outward from Israel to the nations.

The first indication of the international reach of the Davidic covenant is found in David’s prayer of response to the covenant (2 Sam 7:18-29). David humbly reflects on his situation, that he is totally undeserving of God’s gracious initiative in cutting a covenant with him (7:18). The magnitude of God’s promises overwhelms David as they extend beyond his life into the future (7:19a). At this point in the prayer David’s attention turns to the international dimensions of the covenant: “And this is the charter for humanity, O Lord God” (7:19b).

What does David mean when he describes the covenant as “the charter for humanity?” Many translations understand the phrase as a question and translate it as, “Is

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Kaiser, “The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity,” in *The Law and the Prophets: Oswald T. Allis Festschrift*, ed. John Skilton (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 302.

this the manner of man?” (NKJV, see also AV, NLT, NET). Such a translation means something like, “Is this the usual way you deal with human beings?”<sup>26</sup> In such an interpretation, David is awestruck that God would come to make a covenant with him. Understanding the phrase as a question is not grammatically tenable because the verse lacks an interrogative ׀, which would indicate a question. Although Hebrew literature can ask questions without an interrogative ׀, Kaiser points out that a question without the interrogative ׀ would be a rhetorical question, which is, in essence, a statement.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, David is making a statement which most likely means, “This [Davidic covenant] is the charter for humanity.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the eternal dominion that the Davidic king would have is the “blueprint” for God’s blessing to reach the nations.

The global scope of the Davidic king’s rule does not rest merely upon the interpretation of an ambiguous phrase in David’s prayer of response. The international dimension of the Davidic king’s dominion is prominent throughout the Old Testament, especially in the book of Psalms. In Psalm 2, the Davidic king is God’s anointed who has been installed in Zion to rule over Israel (Ps 2:2-6). The king’s rule, however, is meant to extend to the “ends of the earth” (Ps 2:8b). God also explicitly tells the king that the nations will be his inheritance (Ps 2:8a). Therefore, the expectation of Psalm 2 is that the Davidic king will rule over the nations.

Psalm 72 also reiterates the global scope of the Davidic king’s rule. After praying for wisdom, justice, and righteousness for the king, Solomon prays for the rule of the king to extend “from sea to sea . . . from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps 72:8). Not only will his reign be global, but the request is to have “all nations serve him” (Ps 72:11). Psalm 72 is also quite clear that the Davidic king will be the one to mediate the

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<sup>26</sup> David Toshio Tsumura, *The Second Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 142.

<sup>27</sup> Kaiser, “The Blessing of David,” 311.

<sup>28</sup> Kaiser, “The Blessing of David,” 311-12.

blessing of Abraham to the nations: “Let men bless themselves by him; let all nations call him blessed” (72:17). Davidic rule and Abrahamic blessing are not antithetical concepts but complementary ones. David’s rule will be good and bring the blessing of Abraham to the nations. Besides Psalm 72, Psalm 89 also hints at the global rule of the Davidic king. Speaking of how God will exalt the king, the author writes that God “will set his hand on the sea, and his right hand of the rivers” (89:25).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the Davidic king will be “the highest of the kings of the earth” (89:27). Combining those verses together gives the impression that the king’s rule will be global in scope.

The global reign of the Davidic king also makes sense when set in the larger storyline of the Bible. God’s intention from the beginning of Scripture was for humanity to be fruitful and multiply, spreading his glory over the face of the earth (Gen 1:26-28).<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, such intentions were not immediately realized due to humanity’s sin and rebellion (Gen 3:1-24). God did not give up on having his rule cover the whole earth, however. He chose Abraham to be the one through whom his rule would be reestablished on the earth. Through Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen 12:1-2; 22:18). The next realization of God’s rule coming “through Abraham” was the development of his descendants into a great nation, Israel.

Israel was to be a “holy nation” before the Lord. They were to be like a little glimpse of God’s kingdom for the world. They were also to be a “kingdom of priests” who would mediate the blessing of Abraham to the nations (Exod 19:5-6). While God certainly would work through the nation, he also intended that the nation would have a leader, a king. The king of Israel, specifically David’s seed, would then become the focal point of the covenant relationship. Through the king’s obedience, blessing would come to

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<sup>29</sup> Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 423. Tate argues that the Psalmist mentioning the sea and river is probably personifying the chaotic forces against the Davidic king (423). He also acknowledges, “Historically the terms denote the boundaries of David’s empire” (423). Therefore, the Psalmist seems to be considering that the borders of David’s kingdom will once again be like they were and possibly even bigger.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 73.



Israel. Though the blessing would not be restricted to Israel, as the Davidic king's rule would then begin to stretch across the world.

Sadly, the history of Israel demonstrates that the kings who came from David's line were not always godly. While God promised his love never to be taken away from the line of David, individual kings could forfeit their participation in the blessing (2 Sam 7:14-16).<sup>31</sup> After David's good reign, the kings continued to be so morally corrupt that God exiled the people from the land and subjugated the king to foreign powers (2 Kgs 24:15-16). With the destruction of the Davidic line, God's faithfulness could be called into question. Eventually God allowed the people to return from exile, seemingly restoring hope for David's kingdom. Even when the people come back from exile, however, a Davidic king does not sit on the throne, being noticeably absent from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as the post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In the midst of the despair of the exile and subsequent disillusionment of the physical return where no David rules, the prophets provide the people hope by envisioning a time when a new David will arise.

### **David and the Future**

The promises of God in the Davidic covenant would not be fulfilled apart from the king's faithfulness (2 Sam 7:14). Yet David's descendants, for the most part, are not faithful to the covenant. Despite bearing with the sin of the kings for a long time, God's patience wears thin. He eventually sends the people and the king of Judah (David's line) away into exile (2 Kgs 24:15-25:7). While 2 Kings may end on a note of hope for David's line with Jehoiachin being released from prison and favored by the Babylonian king (2 Kgs 25:27-30), the post-exilic books like Ezra and Nehemiah do not mention a Davidic king on the throne so the problem of exile for the Davidic king still is not solved. Without a Davidic king on the throne, the people could have asked questions like, "Is David's

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<sup>31</sup> Kaiser, "The Blessing of David," 308.

kingdom really eternal,” “Would God keep his promises to David?” and “Has our infidelity voided the covenant?” The answer to those questions is found in the prophetic writings.

While the prophets rightly condemn the people and the kings for their infidelity to the Lord, they also present messages of hope, especially concerning the line of David. The prophets conceive of a day when the Davidic kingdom would be restored with a new David who would sit upon the throne of Israel. Ezekiel prophesies of David who will be a servant of the Lord (Ezek 34:23, 24; 37:24, 25). The new David will be like a good shepherd who takes care of God’s people. He will rule over them in a restored land, reuniting Israel and Judah into one kingdom (Ezek 34:11-31; 37:15-28). The prophet Jeremiah also envisions a day when a branch of David would come and restore the kingdom of David, perpetually sitting on his throne (Jer 33:14-26). The people can trust the promise of the future restoration of the Davidic kingdom because it rests upon God’s commitment to his creation covenant (Jer 33:20-21; 25-26). Therefore, both Ezekiel and Jeremiah foresee a day when a new David will arise and rule over the people forever.

Isaiah also speaks of a time when “a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isa 11:1). E. J. Young emphasizes the humiliating position Israel was in prior to the exile by pointing out that Isaiah was “not even referring to it as the house of David, but merely as the rootstock of Jesse.”<sup>32</sup> Isaiah bypasses mentioning David to demonstrate the abysmal state of Israel. Moreover, Isaiah may be hinting that what Israel needs is not just *another* David but an entirely *new* David.<sup>33</sup> The new David will be endowed with God’s Spirit and will delight in God and also perform justice and righteousness (11:2-5). His coming will produce a new creation (11:6-9), a new people (11:10), and a new exodus (11:11-16). Complementing Isaiah’s

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<sup>32</sup> E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 378.

<sup>33</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “The Old Testament Use of the Old Testament” (class lecture, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 8, 2020).

picture of the new David and his reign is the prophet Amos. Amos, while not directly commenting on a coming new David, prophesies of the restoration of the Davidic “booth,” a reference to David’s line and kingdom (Amos 9:11).<sup>34</sup> The restoration of the Davidic line coincides with the salvation of the Gentiles (Amos 9:12; see Acts 15:13-21). The coming restored Davidic kingdom also brings in a new creation and a new exodus (Amos 9:13-15). Just like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, both Isaiah and Amos envision a future time when a new David would usher in the blessings of the covenant and rule over God’s people.

Therefore, while the situation for the Israelites sitting in exile seemed bleak, the prophets looked to a day when a new David would arise and reunite the divided kingdom as one people. He would also rule over them and the nations with justice and righteousness. While those who returned from the exile after seventy years may have been tempted to despair of the situation, as their return did not live up to the glorious picture of return found in the prophets, the prophets looked beyond the time of a physical return to a time of spiritual return from exile ushered in by the new David. Not only would the people return to the land, but under the guidance of their good shepherd, the people would be returning to a new creation, free from the curse of sin.

### **Conclusion**

God created the world so that his rule would extend over the world through a covenant relationship with those who bore his image (Gen 1:26-28). When humanity sinned, however, all relationships were disrupted and opposition to God’s rule reigned. Nevertheless, God continued his plan by preserving the world through his covenant with Noah and all the earth (Gen 9:1-17). With the promise of a platform for his plan, God selected Abraham to be the vehicle to bring his rule to the world. Through Abraham’s

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<sup>34</sup> Billy K. Smith, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, New American Commentary, vol. 19 (Nashville: B & H, 1995), 148-49.

seed, blessing would come again to the whole world. Eventually, Abraham's seed, his descendants, formed into a great nation, Israel. Israel was to be the vehicle through which God blessed the world. Though, God had always intended for his people to be ruled by a king (Gen 17:6; Deut 17:14-20). Although Israel's first king, Saul, was a disaster, God did not give up on kingship for Israel and chose David as their king.

After selecting David to be king, God entered into covenant with David (2 Sam 7:8-16). God made promises to David of a royal dynasty and an eternal kingdom (2 Sam 7:12-16). God's promise did not nullify the need for obedience, however (2 Sam 7:14). God's plan would only be fulfilled through a faithful "son"—a king fully devoted to him. Unfortunately, David's descendants proved to be unfaithful. God eventually exiled the people and enslaved the king under the rule of Babylon because of their continued sin (2 Kgs 24:15-16). While the exile would be an existential crisis for Israel because a Davidic king no longer sat upon the throne, God would still be faithful through the messages of his prophets. The prophets looked forward to the day when a new David would arise to rule over a restored kingdom.

Reflecting on Israel's history demonstrates that no one is beyond the corruption of sin, not even the king. Moreover, the covenant God cut with Israel was powerless to change the heart of the people and give them the ability to obey him. Even the Davidic covenant, with its great promises of dynasty and kingship, could not affect the change of heart needed for the king to be truly obedient to the Lord. Therefore, a new covenant would be needed: a covenant that would produce a new David and a new heart for a new people who would love God.

## CHAPTER 7

### NEW COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God's covenant with David contained magnificent promises: David would be given a perpetual dynasty and an eternal kingdom (2 Sam 7:8-14). God's promises, however, did not obliterate the king's need to obey. If the king disobeyed the Lord, then the Lord would discipline him (2 Sam 7:14). While God was patient with the ungodly Davidic line for a long time, eventually his patience wore thin and he brought his judgment upon them. The cost of rejecting the Lord was exile for the people and enslavement for the Davidic king (2 Kgs 24:15-16). The exile testified to the fact that no completely obedient king had arisen yet.

During the exile, the Davidic dynasty was all but snuffed out. Even after the exile the Davidic line is nowhere to be found as the presence of a Davidic king in Israel is notably absent from the "post-exilic" books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The lack of a king would have thrown doubt upon God's promises to David since they concerned a perpetual dynasty and eternal kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The doubts of the people would have been quelled, however, if they listened to the voice of the prophets. God raised up the prophets to give messages of hope to the people. Their messages of hope included the pronouncement that in the future God would act decisively on behalf of Israel to cut a new covenant with them. When the new covenant would be cut, all of God's promises made

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<sup>1</sup> While Zerubbabel led the exiles back to the land (Ezra 2:2; Neh 7:7) and was also from the line of David being the grandson of Jeconiah, he did not fulfill the role of Davidic king. First, Zerubbabel is never called the king of Israel. Second, the picture the prophets present with the new David is that Israel will be existing in its all glory, freed from the dominion of foreign powers. Zerubbabel, however, was appointed governor of Israel by Cyrus while Israel was still under Persian power (Ezra 1:8, 11; 5:14). See J. D. Douglas and Merrill C Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), s.v. "Zerubbabel."

in the previous covenants would come to pass, even the promises of a perpetual dynasty and eternal kingdom made to David. Therefore, no matter the situation the people found themselves in, they were to trust in God to make a new covenant and make good on all his promises.

### **Exposition of the New Covenant**

The new covenant is prevalent throughout the prophets, even though the precise phrase “new covenant” is used only in Jeremiah 31:31. Other passages reference the new covenant using different labels.<sup>2</sup> The prophets often reference the new covenant by using “newness” terminology, not necessarily the exact word “covenant.”<sup>3</sup> When the prophets speak of God doing “new” things, they are referring to the conditions that will be brought about in the new covenant. The picture the prophets paint is that when God makes the new covenant with Israel, it triggers the restoration of all things.

A complete study of the new covenant is not possible in a chapter like this; nevertheless, this study will focus primarily on Jeremiah 31:31-34 because it contains the only use of the phrase “new covenant” in the Old Testament. While Jeremiah 31:31-34 does not say everything about the new covenant, it does contain the core components of what makes up a covenant: bond, promises, and responsibilities. Through the new covenant, God will repair the broken relationship with his people. He also promises to spiritually revitalize and forgive the people. While the covenant relationship God has with the people is ultimately upheld by his promises, the mere fact of promises in the

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<sup>2</sup> In the Prophets, the new covenant is also referred to as the “everlasting covenant” (Isa 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26), and the “covenant of peace” (Isa 54:10; Ezek 34:25-26).

<sup>3</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy helpfully summarizes the prophets teaching on “newness” in the eschatological age. When God works on Israel’s behalf, there will be a new exodus (Jer 16:14-15; 23:7-8; Isa 40:34; 41:17-20; 42:7; 43:1-2, 16-20; 48: 20-21; 49:24-26; 51:9-11; 52:3-4, 11-12; 61:1), a new Israel (Isa 10:20-22; 46:3-4; 51:11; Jer 23:3; 31:7; Ezek 36:25-28), a new Zion/Jerusalem (Isa 44:24-28; 46:13; 49:14-51:3; 50:3-14), a new temple (Ezek 40-48), a new David (Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5-8; 33:14-26; Ezek 34:11-13, 25-23; 37:24-28), and a new creation (Isa 65:17-21). Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (1981; repr., Crownhill, UK: Paternoster, 2012), 100-01.

covenant does not obliterate any need for the people to obey God. They are still called to be responsible covenant partners with the Lord.

## **Bond**

Jeremiah clearly displays the strained relationship God has with the people of Israel. God condemns the people for forsaking his glory for worthless idols (2:11-13). He criticizes the people for committing spiritual adultery, labeling them a “prostitute” (3:6-10). He calls the people “foolish” and “stupid children” (4:22). He rebukes the people for having a “stubborn and rebellious” heart (5:23). Jeremiah then makes the point that the spiritual separation between God and people will result in physical separation from the land and the temple: the people will be exiled (1:11-19; 2:1-37; 3:6-10; 4:1-18; 5:14-31; 6:30).

Even though the situation is bleak for Israel in the days of Jeremiah, the prophet also looks beyond the exile to a time when God would work on behalf of Israel to restore them back into a loving relationship with himself in a section called, “The Book of Consolation” (chaps 30-33).<sup>4</sup> The Book of Consolation includes many oracles of restoration, notably one concerning the making of a new covenant (31:31-34). According to Jeremiah, the cutting of a new covenant brings about the restoration of relationship between God and the people: “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (31:33). The use of the covenant formula within the new covenant oracle signifies the overturning of the strained relationship God had with Israel. The covenant formula indicates that God and the people will once again be *family*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The book of Jeremiah does not unfold in a linear fashion where he first speaks of judgment (chaps 1-29) and then salvation (chaps. 30-33). Like most prophets, Jeremiah intermingles his oracles of judgment and restoration together. For example, he speaks of God bringing about a new exodus for the nations (12:14-17) and Israel (16:14-18) before ever getting to the Book of Consolation.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 40-41. Hahn argues that the idea of Israel being a “people” is built upon the underlying principle of family solidarity (40). In other words, Israel is God’s “people” because they are, in some sense, family with him.

The new covenant will not only repair the bond between God and the people, but also the bond between the people themselves. When God promises to make the new covenant with the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah,” he is confronting the division within the kingdom and providing hope for the reunification of his people.<sup>6</sup> The people who were divided into a Northern and Southern kingdom would one day be reunited together under the rule of one king. In another oracle, God promises to reunite the people through the new covenant (Jer 32:36-44). God will bring all the people back from exile and be joined to them as their God (32:37-38). As a result, he will give the people “one heart and one way” (32:39). In other words, the people will be united to one another in complete unity to fully serve the Lord together (32:39b).<sup>7</sup> Their unity will happen because God “will make an everlasting covenant with them” (32:40). The new covenant will restore the people to oneness.

### **Promises**

In the covenant God made with Israel, the people themselves pledged to keep the covenant stipulations (Exod 24:3). The history of Israel, however, demonstrates that they could not adequately stay faithful in the covenant relationship due to their sinfulness. Therefore, the curses of the covenant came upon them, culminating in exile. While the covenant with Israel stressed the people’s obedience, the new covenant would be different. The emphasis in the new covenant is clearly upon God’s initiative to uphold the covenant: “I will make . . . I will put . . . I will write . . . I will be . . . I will forgive . . . I will

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<sup>6</sup> William Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 145.

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars see the idea of “one heart” and “singleness of heart” meaning complete devotion to Yahweh, for example, see Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 13 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013) 239. Certainly, singleness of heart meaning complete devotion to Yahweh is intended, especially in parable with Ezek 11:19. However, the corporate unity factor cannot be eliminated either. The *whole people* will have *one heart*. Second Chron 30:12 is an interesting text because it speaks of “Judah” having “one heart” to do the king’s bidding. So, singleness of intention *and* unity among of the people is stressed.



remember.”<sup>8</sup> God promises to work on behalf of the people in the future by doing three things: giving them the ability to obey the Law, creating a community of people who love him, and providing full forgiveness of sins.

First, God promises to give the people the ability to obey the Law: “I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it” (31:33). While it could seem like the new covenant’s difference from the old covenant lies in its focus on the heart, William Dumbrell seeks to dispel a sharp division between the two covenants: “It would thus go beyond the evidence to suggest that the newness of the new covenant consists solely in the emphasis on the inwardness of the law.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, sharp contrasts between the old and new covenant should not be made because the old covenant itself concerned the heart. He explains, “The salvation of the individual in the OT always presupposed the ‘law in the heart.’”<sup>10</sup> Dumbrell is right that salvation always come through inward spiritual renewal. He goes askew, however, by not adequately reckoning with the new situation in which the people of God would find themselves.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God speaks of *corporate realities*. He promises to renew the whole people, not just a remnant of individuals. While individuals were spiritually regenerated under the old covenant, the people as a whole were not, thus the necessity of the exile as punishment for their sins.<sup>11</sup> What is new about the new covenant, then, is the scope of God’s work: God will write his law on the hearts of *all* the people. Therefore, continuity exists between the old and new covenant in that both concern the heart. Major *discontinuity* exists between them given the scope of God’s work among the people.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 45-46.

Dumbrell is right to point out that the Israelite covenant, especially in Deuteronomy, concerned the heart. The most famous command, the *shema*, explicitly calls the people to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deut 6:5). Even though the Israelite covenant called the people to obedience from the heart, there is a difference between intent and ability. While the intent of the law was to call people to wholehearted obedience to the Lord, the people lacked the ability to genuinely obey him, evidenced by their apostasy and the subsequent judgment of exile. Even before the exile, Moses recognized the people’s lack of ability to love the Lord. Thus, he called them to circumcise their heart (Deut 10:16). He knew they needed to remove their stubborn rebellion against the Lord from their inward person, their heart. Moses also knew the people could not do it themselves and would end up in exile (Deut 4:26-28; 31:15-16). Yet, Moses also looked past the days of their disobedience to a time when God would initiate a new work among the people and circumcise their hearts, giving them ability to love the Lord like the *shema* called them to (Deut 30:6). Therefore, the primary focus of the old covenant was, in fact, upon the heart. The problem of the old covenant was that it did not renovate the heart. It called the people to do something for which it did not provide the power.

The new covenant would be different from the old covenant because the people will not be able to break the new covenant like they broke the old (31:32). They would not be able to break the new covenant precisely because God would put his law in them and write it on their heart (31:33). God would fulfill his promise made earlier in Deuteronomy to circumcise their heart (Deut 30:6). In other words, God would act decisively to give them the ability to actually obey his commandments with their whole being.<sup>12</sup> The major work found within the new covenant is something akin to divine “heart surgery”: replacing the people’s rebellious desires with steadfast love for the Lord.

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<sup>12</sup> Hamilton, *God’s Indwelling Presence*, 45-47.

The inward writing of the law connects directly with the second promise of God in this text, the regeneration of the community: “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (31:34). Just as the covenant formula speaks of reversing the condition of alienation between God and the people, so God will reverse another problem: the people lacking knowledge (2:8; 4:22; 5:4; 8:7; 9:3-6). John Bracke writes, “Throughout Jeremiah 1-29, the prophet has leveled the accusation that Israel and Judah did not or even refused to know God.”<sup>13</sup> Knowing God is not merely intellectually assenting to propositions about God, but a relational knowledge of God which encompasses the whole person.<sup>14</sup> God, then, will replace the sinful ignorance of the people with true faith and belief: knowledge of himself.

The idea that the whole community will be made up of believers is strengthened by the admonition that covenant members will no longer teach one another to know the Lord (31:34). The text is not ruling out *any kind* of teaching, but rather a *certain kind* of teaching: urging fellow covenant members to know the Lord. In other words, there will be no evangelizing within the new covenant community. Evangelism will be unnecessary within the community because the text is implying that “all *members* are *believers*, and *only* believers are members.”<sup>15</sup> The whole community will be spiritually regenerated and know God.

The third major promise of the text is the comprehensive forgiveness of sins: “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (31:34). The promise of forgiveness is needed because the problem of human sin runs throughout the whole Bible.

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<sup>13</sup> John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas E. McComisky, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 555, emphasis original.

When Adam rebelled against God, his sin affected everything (Gen 3:14-24; see also Rom 5:12-21). Sin became like a virus, passing onto all people and infecting everyone so that the “wickedness of man was great upon the earth” (Gen 6:5). Due to humanity’s great wickedness, God was sorry he had even made people and was determined to destroy them from the face of the earth (Gen 6:6-8). Instead of destroying everyone with a flood, God spares Noah and begins anew with him and his family. He promises Noah, and subsequently the whole creation, to never destroy the world again with a flood (Gen 9:1-17). Despite being in covenant with God, even righteous Noah succumbs to sin (Gen 6:8; 9:20-25). God’s promise of the stability of the world prevails and he continues his plan to save the world from sin by choosing Abraham (Gen 12:1-2).

Much like those who have come before him, the great patriarch Abraham struggles with doubt and sin (Gen 12:10-19; 16:1-16; 20:1-18). Nevertheless, God’s grace and mercy abide with Abraham as his descendants form into a great nation, Israel. The history of Israel also demonstrates humanity’s need for forgiveness, because even though they were given every privilege and advantage to know God, they still eventually abandon him. Even right after being delivered from slavery in Egypt, the people grumble and complain (Exod 15:22-25). Even worse, soon after God cuts a covenant with them, the people make and worship an idol (Exod 32:1-10). Despite their sin, God is gracious with the people and even instituted the sacrificial system to atone for their sins. The sacrificial system, while God’s intention for a time, was still inadequate to provide comprehensive forgiveness. The sacrifices had to be repeated year-annually, pointing to their limited efficacy (Lev 16:34; see also Heb 9:6-12). Even though Israel had the Sinai covenant which provided a certain kind of forgiveness, they still ended up in exile, testifying that they needed a more complete kind of forgiveness based upon a better sacrifice. This kind of better forgiveness is implied by Jeremiah 31:34.

The comprehensive nature of the forgiveness in the new covenant is signified by the fact that God would not “remember” Israel’s sin any longer. God’s “remembering”

is not merely recalling information but “taking action to effect a new condition whose rationale stems from a past event.”<sup>16</sup> For example, God remembers Noah and Hannah in their plight and works on their behalf (Gen 8:1; 1 Sam 1:19). Applying the concept of not remembering to forgiveness, Dumbrell writes, “For God not to remember means that no action in the new age will need to be taken against sin. The forgiveness of which this verse speaks is so comprehensive that sin has finally been dealt with in the experience of the nation and individual believer.”<sup>17</sup> The kind of forgiveness God is offering in the new covenant would then be of a different quality than the kind of forgiveness provided for in the old covenant. As amazing as the promise of comprehensive forgiveness is, the text does not actually provide the basis for how such forgiveness would be attained.<sup>18</sup> Thankfully, other prophets provide hints at how it would take place: through the sacrifice of a representative king who bears the sins of the people (Isa 53:1-12; Zech 12:10; 13:1, 7).

The promises God makes in the new covenant demonstrate its superiority over the old covenant. While the old covenant was broken, the new covenant will not be (Jer 31:32). While the old covenant primarily concerned commands written on stone and concerning outward behavior, the new covenant would grant the people of God the ability to obey from the heart (31:33). While the old covenant community was a “mixed” community of believers and unbelievers, the new covenant would be a community of all believers who know the Lord (31:34a). While old covenant community provided some temporary covering for sin, the new covenant will provide comprehensive forgiveness for the people (Jer 31:34). In all these promises, God takes the initiative to work on behalf of the people.

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<sup>16</sup> Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, 146.

<sup>17</sup> Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 156.

## Responsibilities

The clear emphasis of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is upon God's initiative and God's promises. Do the new covenant people, then, have no responsibilities within the covenant relationship? Paul Williamson observes that the emphasis on the promise "is not to say that the people of God have absolutely no obligations under this new covenant; it is surely implicit here that they do; otherwise, why put the law in their minds and write it on their hearts?"<sup>19</sup> The implied responsibilities in Jeremiah 31:31-34 raise the age-old debate between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, between God's promise and the need for human obedience. If God makes promises and upholds them, do his people need to obey? The implication of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is that *God* is the one who will empower the people to live out the responsibilities of the covenant. The text seems to be saying that God will write the law on the hearts of his people and empower them to follow that law.

What is implied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 is made clear in Ezekiel 36:27. Using similar terminology and concepts to Jeremiah 31:31-34, the prophet Ezekiel foresees a time when God will give the people a "new heart" (Ezek 36:26). Along with a new heart, God promises the people to "put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezek 36:27). Obedience to the Lord's statutes and ordinances is due to the Lord's direct intervention to empower the people himself through his Spirit. Moshe Greenburg captures the sentiment of the verse well: "God will no longer gamble with Israel as he had in old times . . . in the future—no more experiments! God will put his spirit into them, he will alter their hearts (their minds) and make it impossible for them to be anything but obedient to his rules and his commandments."<sup>20</sup> The new covenant people do have responsibilities—they must walk

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<sup>19</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 153.

<sup>20</sup> Moshe Greenburg, quoted in Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 356.

in God's ways. The good news of the new covenant, however, is that God will cause the people to be obedient so that the covenant will never be broken.

### **(Davidic) Kingdom Through (New) Covenant**

The biblical covenants in the Old Testament are progressive; that is, they build upon one another to move the plot of the Bible forward.<sup>21</sup> The new covenant, then, is the climactic fulfillment of previous covenants. The new covenant is the last covenant in the series of major biblical covenants. Due to its location in the storyline and its association with the new era of salvation (new exile, new David, new temple, etc.), the new covenant is the climactic fulfillment of the covenants. The new covenant also connects back to each of the previous covenants since it fulfills them.

While the new covenant certainly connects back to each of the previous biblical covenants, it is most closely related to the Davidic covenant since it is closest to the timing of the cutting of the Davidic covenant. Moreover, the Davidic covenant is the fulfillment of the previous covenants at that stage in the story. The Davidic covenant is the mechanism of fulfilling the Sinai covenant, which in turn is the means of fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant. Therefore, the Davidic covenant is the lead covenant when it is made. In other words, the Davidic covenant takes precedence in how God relates to his people. While he certainly judges the people for their own sin, he now primarily relates to the people through the Davidic king. Consequently, if the new covenant fulfills the previous biblical covenants, then it would be natural to see how the new covenant fulfills the Davidic covenant, specifically the promise of a Davidic kingdom. The prophets indicate that when the new covenant is cut, the Davidic covenant would be fulfilled, that is, the Davidic kingdom would be restored. Two major prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, provide the picture for how the new covenant ushers in the Davidic kingdom.

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<sup>21</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 34-35.

## **Kingdom Through Covenant in Jeremiah**

Jeremiah envisions a day when God cuts a new covenant with the people, and it is by means a covenant relationship that the Davidic kingdom will be established. When speaking of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, Jeremiah draws numerous parallels back to the new covenant text of 31:31-34 (33:14-26). For example, Jeremiah locates the reestablishment of the Davidic kingdom in the future with the phrase, “days are coming” (31:31; 33:14). Moreover, the renewal of the Davidic kingdom will reunite both the “house of Israel and house of Judah” (31:31; 33:14). In other words, the restoration of the people leads to the unity of the kingdom. When the new covenant is made, the Davidic kingdom will be restored.

The renewal of the Davidic kingdom is also tied to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant which comes through the new covenant. The major promises of the Abrahamic covenant are land, seed, and blessing. God promised Abraham to plant him and his descendant in the land of Israel (Gen 12:7; 15:18-21). God also told Abraham that he would become a great nation and his seed would multiply (Gen 12:2; 15:5-6; 17:2, 7-8; 22:17). God would also use Abraham and his family to bless the world (Gen 12:3; 22:18). When Jeremiah demonstrates that the Davidic kingdom is tied to terminology typically used of the Abrahamic covenant, he is also having his readers think of the new covenant since it fulfills the Abrahamic covenant.

The new covenant fulfills the Abrahamic land promise by ushering in a new creation. In the Old Testament, the land promise undergoes development where the Promised Land begins to be likened to a new temple and a new creation.<sup>22</sup> The Old Testament itself demonstrates that the new temple will coincide with the new Jerusalem which will, in turn, coincide with the new creation (Isa 65; Zech 2, 14; Ezek 40-48). All of these new realities are ushered in by the new covenant. The new covenant also fulfills

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<sup>22</sup> Oren Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 34 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 101-12.



the promise of seed. When God makes the new covenant, the people will no longer be barren but will once again be multiplied (Isa 54:1-2; Jer 33:26). The people will be renewed and restored. Finally, the blessing of Abraham will be dispensed to the nations as they become full covenant members (Isa 42:6; 49:5-7). The Abrahamic covenant, then, finds its fulfillment in the new covenant.

God speaks of the establishment of the Davidic kingdom in the terms of multiplying Israel's seed so numerous that they are like sand (33:22). Use of the words multiply, seed, and sand refers back to the Abrahamic covenant for God regularly promised to multiply Abraham's seed (Gen 17:2, 6, 8; 22:16-18; 26:3-4; 28:3; 35:11-12; 47:27).<sup>23</sup> God also specifically promises Abraham that his seed would be like the "sand which is on the seashore" (Gen 22:17). Therefore, the coming Davidic kingdom is tied to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. And, as seen, the new covenant fulfills the Abrahamic covenant. Therefore, the new covenant will establish the restored Davidic kingdom.

The Davidic kingdom is also established upon the promises of the creation covenant, which it too is fulfilled by the new covenant. To understand the new covenant's fulfillment of the creation, one must understand that throughout the Old Testament, ideas, images, metaphors, and themes found in the creation account of Genesis 1-2 can trigger reflections back to the creation covenant. In the new covenant, God's work to establish his people forever is directly linked to the creation covenant by mentioning the celestial bodies, the sea, and the foundations of the earth (Jer 31:35-37). God's abiding commitment to his creation covenant undergirds his commitment to his new covenant people. Furthermore, other prophets speak of the new covenant bringing in a new creation. For example, Hosea speaks of the new covenant when God will betroth himself to his people again "in that day" (Hos 1:18-20). On the same day, the earth will be fruitful and flow

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<sup>23</sup> N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 21-23.

with grain and new wine (1:21-22). When the new covenant is cut, a new creation will spring forth as well (cf. Amos 9:11-15).

Just as the new covenant fulfills God's commitment to his creation covenant, so the abiding nature of the Davidic kingdom rests upon the creation covenant. God is committed to the establishment of the Davidic monarchy precisely because he is committed to his creation covenant (31:20, 25). God's intention to create the world as a theater for his glory will stand and thus provides the solid foundation for which he will bring about the establishment of the Davidic monarchy. These parallels between Jeremiah 31:31-34 and 33:14-26 demonstrate that the new covenant and the Davidic kingdom are connected. One will not really come about without the other. The Davidic kingdom is established by means of a covenant relationship. The covenant brings about the renewal of God's people, and the Davidic kingdom is the context in which this renewed people live under God's good rule.

### **Kingdom Through Covenant in Ezekiel**

Ezekiel also connects the making of the new covenant and the establishment of the Davidic kingdom. In fact, Ezekiel is very similar to Jeremiah in his message of God's judgment against the people for their sin but also for the future hope that will come to them through God's intervention. While most of Ezekiel speaks of judgment upon the people in Ezekiel's generation, the book begins to look to the future in Ezekiel 34. In three key passages, Ezekiel sets forth the connection between the new covenant and the Davidic Kingdom.

Ezekiel 34 begins with a prophecy against the shepherds (leaders) of Israel (34:1-10). While the shepherds will eventually be judged and removed from leadership of the people, God will care for his flock and restore them (34:11-22). The culmination of God's work is that he will set over them "one shepherd, My servant David" (34:23). The Davidic monarchy will eventually be restored. The new Davidic king is also called a prince among the people (34:24). In the future, God will restore the Davidic kingdom and

establish a new David who will rule the people with justice and righteousness. Immediately after speaking of the restored Davidic monarchy, God promises that he will cut a covenant of peace with the people (34:35). When God speaks of a “covenant of peace, the new covenant is in view.<sup>24</sup> When God makes the new covenant with the people, he will restore the land and it will be a garden-like paradise (34:25-27). God will also vindicate the people before the nations so that they will never be destroyed again (34:28-29). The prophecy ends with a reaffirmation of the covenant formula: Israel will be God’s people, and God will be their God (34:30-31). Therefore, Ezekiel affirms a connection between the Davidic kingdom and the new covenant.

Not only does the new covenant and Davidic kingdom come up in Ezekiel 34, but connections are made between the two in Ezekiel 36 as well.<sup>25</sup> Many of the same themes found in Ezekiel 34 reappear in Ezekiel 36 when speaking of the new covenant. God promises to act on Israel’s behalf to vindicate his name and the people before the nations (36:22-23). God promises to forgive their sins and give them the Holy Spirit (36:25-27). Then God will bring them back to the land and they will live a garden-like paradise where God will “multiply” their crops and fruit (34:28-30, 34-35). God then promises to increase the people like a “flock,” presumably under the guidance of the one shepherd, David, mentioned previously (36:37-38). God’s work in the new covenant seems to anticipate the people flourishing under the rule of the Davidic king.

A final passage speaking of the Davidic kingdom and new covenant is Ezekiel 37:15-28. The chapter begins with the vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1-14). While

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<sup>24</sup> Block describes the ramifications of the covenant of peace: “It speaks of wholeness, harmony, fulfillment, humans at peace with their environment and with God. . . . He [Yahweh] would initiate and effect this new chapter in the history of his relationship with the people. The complete destruction of the old order had freed him from the burdens of the nation’s past infidelity and allowed him to start anew.” Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, 303.

<sup>25</sup> Although Ezek 36 does not specifically mention a “new covenant,” the language is so similar that Ezek 36:28 may have been influenced by Jer 31:33. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, 356. It is construed this way because the blessings God promises to pour out on the people are similar to other new covenant passages, and it is also used to describe the relationship God will establish with the people

the vision could be speaking of the people returning from the exile in Babylon, the language of the text seems to speaking of a much greater return from exile—a spiritual one, where the people will be forgiven and given the Holy Spirit (37:34-35). In other words, the return in the vision of the dry bones entails the forgiveness of sins, which is precisely the same promise of the new covenant found in Ezekiel 36:26-27.

After a cursory explanation of the vision, the Lord provides further clarity of the vision in 37:15-28. Specifically, the making of the new covenant brings about the establishment of the Davidic kingdom. God will reunite the people in one kingdom under one king (37:21-22). The establishment in the kingdom coincides with the covenant formula and repairing of the relationship between God and the people (37:23). The kingdom God establishes for the people is not a generic kingdom but a Davidic one: he promises to set his servant David over the people (37:24). This new David will once again be prince over the people (37:25). God will also make a new covenant—a covenant of peace—with the people (37:26). The passage ends with the covenant formula and the vindication of the people before the nations (37:27-28).

In Ezekiel, there is a tight connection between the Davidic kingdom and the new covenant. Although the people are currently suffering in exile during Ezekiel's day, he prophesies of a day when God will cut a new covenant, or covenant of peace, with the people, sprinkling them with clean water (i.e., forgiving their sins), and providing them the Spirit so that they would obey his commandments (34:35; 36:25-27). Such work of God for the people also leads him to reestablish the Davidic monarchy so that the people are now living in the Davidic kingdom under the rule of the new David (Ezek 37:15-28). Therefore, the establishment of the kingdom rests on God's new covenant work: there is Davidic kingdom through new covenant.

### **Conclusion**

The new covenant is the climatic fulfillment of all the previous biblical covenants. While the people languish in exile, the prophets provided messages of hope

for a day when a new covenant would be cut with them. In particular, the prophet Jeremiah foresaw a day when an unbreakable covenant would be established (31:31-40). God would initiate the work. He would give the people ability to walk in his ways. He would give spiritual life to the whole community and also would forgive their sin. Other Old Testament texts speak of the glorious time of the new covenant involving a new exodus, bringing a new Israel back a new land under the rule of a new David who sits in a new Jerusalem that has a new temple, which exists in an entirely new creation. The people may have thought that such a grand vision of the future was underway as they made their way back from the Babylonian captivity, but their return was probably a significant letdown as no Davidic king sat on the throne and they continued to struggle with the very same sins which led them away into exile in the first place.

How could these things be fulfilled? How could the new covenant be cut? The expectation of the Old Testament would be that a seed of Abraham coming from the nation of Israel who was the new Davidic king would usher in the new covenant. However, before the grand promises of the new covenant could be fulfilled, the problem of human sin must be solved. A sacrifice must be made. It is for this reason why Jesus of Nazareth came: to be the perfect sacrifice for sin and establish the new covenant.

## CHAPTER 8

### NEW COVENANT IN CHRIST

While Israel was languishing in exile due to their breaking of the Sinai covenant, God sent them prophets to share messages of hope. God promised that he would make a new covenant with the people at some point in the future (Jer 31:31-34). The people would not be able to break the new covenant because God would ensure that they would uphold it. Specifically, God would write the law on the people's hearts, giving them the ability to love and obey him (31:33). Inward renewal would also lead to knowledge of God. All members of the new covenant community would know the Lord (31:33). God also promised to forgive the sins of the people. The forgiveness provided by the new covenant would be so thorough that God would not remember the people's sins anymore (Jer 31:34). The new covenant would bring about a new covenant community. Besides affecting the makeup of the covenant community, the new covenant would also provide new leadership for the people. The prophets also envisioned that when the new covenant was to be cut, a new Davidic king would arise and restore the Davidic kingdom (Jer 33:14-26; Ezek 34:11-31; 37:15-28). Therefore, the prophets presented a glorious vision of restoration for the people.

Because of the hopeful messages of the prophets, the people had a lot to look forward to. Yet the return from exile was probably a letdown for the glorious era of the new covenant seemingly did not arrive. The land was desolate and it was a struggle to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple. Moreover, the people struggled with the very same sins that sent away into exile in the first place (Zech 1:1-6; Ezra 9:1-4; Neh 5:1-19, 13:1-31; Mal 1:2-5, 1:6-2:9; 2:10-16, 3:8-12, 13-18). The continued sin of the people proved that they were not the obedient, regenerated people that the prophets

promised would make up the new covenant community. So, they kept looking for the coming new covenant and new king. And then God went silent for four hundred years.

The very next words from God came in the form of John the Baptist, the messenger preparing the way for God to return to his people (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-17; John 1:19-23). He was preparing the way for the king and the new covenant. What the New Testament makes abundantly clear is that Jesus is the Davidic king meant to save his people and the one who cuts the new covenant through his sacrificial death on the cross. In Christ, the covenantal bond between God and his people is restored. In Christ, believers have access to the new covenant promises. In Christ, God's people, the church, can now fulfill the responsibilities of the new covenant through the power of the Spirit.

### **New Covenant in the New Testament**

It is important to remember that the biblical covenants provide the supporting structure for the various teachings and doctrines of Scripture. Therefore, the New Testament can be speaking of covenantal concepts even without explicitly using the word covenant.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the whole tenor of the New Testament is that Jesus makes the new covenant with those who would believe in him. Jesus restores the covenantal bond between God and his people. Jesus also gives believers access to the great promises of the new covenant and empowers his people to fulfill the responsibilities of the covenant.

### **Bond**

Jesus restores the bond between God and his people: God will be their God and they will be his people. The restoration of the bond occurs in Christ for Jesus is the covenantal representative of his people. Believers in Christ share in the bond that Christ himself has with the Father. Jesus' role as covenant representative is seen in his fulfillment of Davidic kingship. In the Old Testament, the Davidic king was the covenantal

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moo, "Every Spiritual Blessing," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 177, no. 706 (April-June 2020): 137.

representative for Israel.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament demonstrates that Jesus is the promised Davidic king who represents his people.

Jesus' identity as Davidic king comes through very clearly in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's emphasis on Jesus as the Davidic king begins with the announcement of his birth to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). When the angel Gabriel visited Mary and spoke to her of her coming son, he announced, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David . . . and his kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32-33). Darrell Bock notes that much of the background of Gabriel's announcement is drawn from the language of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7.<sup>3</sup> In Gabriel's prophesy, Jesus is explicitly said to be the one who will inherit the Davidic throne, thus being the promised Davidic king. Luke not only emphasizes Jesus' Davidic kingship in his birth announcements, but also in the birth narrative itself (2:1-11). Luke notes that Joseph's family of origin is the family of David, making the point that Jesus will come from David's lineage (2:4). As the holy family returns to Bethlehem for the census, they are traveling to the "city of David" (2:4, 11). Therefore, Jesus not only comes from David's biological lineage but will arise from the very hometown of David as well.

When Jesus is born, the angels announce to the shepherds that Jesus is "Christ the Lord" (2:11). Bock notes that while the term "Christ" was not necessarily equivalent to "Davidic king" in Judaism, it certainly *could* refer to the Davidic king in intertestamental literature and the context of Luke makes it clear that "Christ" is often another term for a Davidic figure.<sup>4</sup> The birth of Jesus fulfills the expectation of a coming Davidic king. Further explicit connections to the Davidic dynasty are found in the genealogy of Jesus as

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<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 480-85.

<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 113.

<sup>4</sup> Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 217-18.



Luke goes through painstaking details to show that Jesus is in fact coming from the Davidic line (Luke 3:23-28). Therefore, the early chapters of Luke show that Jesus fulfills the promises of a coming Davidic king.

Luke also develops the Davidic theme later in the gospel. When Jesus is approaching Jericho, blind Bartimaeus cries out that Jesus is the “Son of David” (18:38-39). The phrase “son of David” had significant implications for Davidic kingship in Jewish literature.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the language echoes 2 Samuel 7:12-14, where David’s son is said to inherit and rule over Israel’s eternal kingdom.<sup>6</sup> Bartimaeus certainly thought Jesus could be the Davidic king and Savior for Israel. Luke’s inclusion of the story in the narrative reinforces his contention that Jesus is the promised Davidic king of the Old Testament. Furthermore, Jesus’ questioning of the Sadducees and scribes concerning David’s son provokes the readers to ponder Jesus’ identity (Luke 20:41-44). In the confrontation, Jesus asks, “How is that they say the Christ is David’s son?” (Luke 20:41). Then Jesus quotes from Psalm 110:1 where David’s admits God is speaking to his Lord (Luke 20:42). Jesus’ point is that even David recognized that this coming son would be greater than he was. Upon reflection, readers should acknowledge that it is Jesus who is the greater son, the fulfillment of the promise of a new Davidic king.

In addition to the Gospel of Luke, early Christian preaching demonstrates that Jesus is the Davidic king. After the apostles are filled with the Holy Spirit, they go out and preach, calling the people of Israel to repentance (Acts 2:1-13). Specifically, the apostle Peter desires for Israel to call upon the name of the Lord for salvation (2:14-21). Peter then goes to show that salvation is found in Jesus Christ because he is the resurrected Messiah, the Davidic king who would restore the people and sit on David’s throne (2:22-36).

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<sup>5</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1508.

<sup>6</sup> See chap. 6 on the Davidic covenant for an exposition of promises that God makes to David.

Peter wants his audience to know that they put Jesus to death, yet it was all part of God's plan (2:22-23). God's plan did not end with the death of Jesus, for God raised him from the dead (2:24). Peter then explains Jesus' resurrection in explicitly Davidic terms as he shows that the resurrection of Jesus fulfills David's expectation for future vindication in Psalm 16:8-10 (2:25-28). Peter argues that when David wrote Psalm 16:8-10 he could not have really been speaking of his own future restoration because the historical David in fact died and was still dead (2:29). Instead, David was prophesying of a future king because God had promised him a descendent who would rule forever (2:30-31). Jesus' resurrection, then, fulfills God's promise that one of David's descendants would rule forever. Peter further explains the Davidic nature of Jesus' resurrection (2:32-36). Jesus was in fact raised by God (2:32). Consequently, Jesus had just poured out the Holy Spirit on the church because he had ascended to the Father's right hand and received the promised Holy Spirit (2:33). Jesus is the true Davidic king who has been exalted to God's right hand as predicted in Psalm 110:1 (2:34-35). Therefore, the people of Israel should acknowledge that Jesus is "Lord and Christ," the rightful Davidic king (2:36).

Later in Acts, the apostle Paul agrees with Peter that Jesus is the Messiah and Davidic king, fulfilling the promises God made to David (Acts 13:32-33).<sup>7</sup> In the Old Testament, God promised David a son who would rule forever (2 Sam 7:12-16). Paul's point is that the resurrection of Jesus is how David's eternal son would be raised up.<sup>8</sup> Paul verifies his claim by quoting from three important Davidic texts: Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Psalm 16:10. By using these texts with reference to Jesus, Paul wants to make it clear that Jesus is the Davidic king, the Messiah, the people have been looking for.

According to the New Testament, not only is Jesus the Davidic king who represents a new Israel, but Jesus is the representative of a new humanity. The idea of Jesus

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<sup>7</sup> John Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 303.

<sup>8</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 303.

as head of a new humanity is most clearly articulated by the apostle Paul. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul draws out the parallels between Adam and Christ. Paul's point is that Adam and Christ represent two different humanities and their actions effect these groups. Through Adam's sin, sin and death entered the world (Rom 5:12a). Death consequently spread to all men "because all sinned" (Rom 5:12b). All sinned in Adam because he was the covenantal head of humanity.<sup>9</sup> Even though Adam's actions affected all people, Christ's actions bring salvation to all united to him (5:15-18). Through Christ's obedience, "many will be made righteous" (5:19). Therefore, the work of Christ would be credited to those "in him." Just as Adam was the federal head of humanity in the beginning, so now Christ is the covenantal head of a new humanity and his work is credited to them.

Paul also speaks of these dueling humanities in 1 Corinthians 15. He shows the covenantal connection between Adam and humanity by claiming that "in Adam all die" (1 Cor 15:22a). Adam as covenantal head has brought death to all people in union with him.<sup>10</sup> The good news of the gospel that Paul writes of is that spiritually dead sinners can be made alive, "In Christ all will be made alive" (15:22b). Reflecting on the covenantal bond Paul is getting at here, Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner explain, "To be *in Christ* is to be part of the group which finds in Christ its representative and leader, which finds its identity and destiny in Christ."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Christ is head of a new humanity.

The new humanity concept also comes out in Ephesians 2:11-22. Paul calls on Gentiles to remember their former status, separated from Christ (2:11-12). But now, "in Christ," the Gentiles are brought near to God (2:13). They have been brought near through Jesus' sacrificial death and are united to believing Jews (2:14). The result is that Christ

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 318-28.

<sup>10</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 763.

<sup>11</sup> Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 763.

has made one new man, or a new *Adam*. Peter Gentry writes, “When Paul speak in Ephesians 2:15 of ‘one new *man*,’ he is obviously thinking of a new *Adam* and is saying that the *church*—by virtue of the new creation resulting from the resurrection of Jesus Christ and by virtue of the union of head (Christ) and body (church)—constitutes this new Adam.”<sup>12</sup> Christ is the new head of the new humanity.

As the covenantal representative, Jesus shares his covenantal status with his people. The apostle Paul writes of the church’s covenantal participation with Christ through Galatians. Paul claims that believers now share the status as God’s son through their faith in Christ: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26). Believers in Jesus Christ are God’s sons because they are united to God’s Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> Not only are Christians sons, but they are also the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:29). Earlier in Galatians, Paul argued that God’s promises in the Old Testament were not made to the seeds of Abraham, but to one seed, Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16). Paul interprets the Old Testament seed texts in terms of corporate representation.<sup>14</sup> In other words, all the promises of God flow from the one seed outward to the rest of the seed which are united to Christ by faith. In Galatians, Christ is *the* seed of Abraham, but believers are now the seed of Abraham through faith which unites them to Christ in covenantal bond. The blessing of sonship and “seedship” come through the bond believers have with Christ.

In addition to Paul’s writings, the apostle John shows that the covenantal bond between God and his people is restored in Christ. Specifically, John uses the covenantal formula to indicate that the ultimate fulfillment of the new covenant comes through Christ on the last day (Rev 21:3, 7). In the final vision of the book, John provides a picture of when God’s presence returns to the earth (21:1-2) When God dwells among people on the

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<sup>12</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 544, emphasis original.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 256.

<sup>14</sup> Schreiner, *Galatians*, 230.

earth, “they shall be his people, and God Himself will be among them” (21:3). John alludes to the many different Old Testament uses of the covenant formula that speak of the restoration of the bond between God and Israel.<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, John now speaks of the covenant formula describing God’s relationship to the church, indicating that the church is like a new Israel. The covenantal bond not only includes the collective people but also gives encouragement to individuals in Revelation 21:7: “I will be his God and he will be my son.” The implication is that “Christ is still God’s unique, divine son, but those whom he represents receive the privileges of his sonship.”<sup>16</sup> The use of the covenant formula in Revelation then speaks that the bond between God and his people comes in Christ and will come to consummation on the last day.

Therefore, Christ restores the bond between God and his people. The good news of the gospel is that God’s people can receive a share in this bond through faith in Jesus. When someone places their faith in Christ, they are united to him and become part of God’s people, the church, the new Israel, the new humanity.

### **Promise**

Jesus not only restores the covenantal bond between God and his people, but he also gives believers access to the promises of the new covenant. Jeremiah 31:34 presents three promises of the new covenant: God would write his law on the hearts of the people, all people in the covenant community would know God, and God would provide a comprehensive forgiveness for the people. In the new covenant, God promised he would write the law on the hearts of the people. The law written on the heart means that believers would have an ability to obey and love God through the Holy Spirit (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-

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<sup>15</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1046-47.

<sup>16</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1058.

27). The apostle Paul shows that the fulfillment of the promise comes through the Holy Spirit writing the law on the hearts of those who believe in Jesus.

Paul alludes to the law being written on the heart of believers through contrasting an “outward” Jew and an “inward” Jew in Romans 2:25-29. He argues that people can be Jewish, and even circumcised, but if they fail to keep the Law, then those things do not matter before God (2:25). The real Jew, on the other hand, is someone who keeps the Law (Rom 2:26-27). According to Paul, the person who keeps the Law is the one who is circumcised of heart by the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:28-29). The background to Paul’s argument concerning heart circumcision is the Old Testament (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25). The concepts of heart circumcision and the law being written on the heart begin to be brought together in the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 4:4; 9:25; 31:33).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, when Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit circumcising the heart of believers and enabling them to obey the law, he is alluding to the law being written on the heart.<sup>18</sup> Through the Holy Spirit, believers can love and obey God.

Another passage showing that believers have the law written on their heart is Romans 7:1-6. Paul’s point is to show that the “newness of the Spirit” fulfills God’s new covenant promise that believers could fulfill the commandments of the Law.<sup>19</sup> Before showing the effective work of the Spirit, Paul demonstrates that the Law (the Sinai

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<sup>17</sup> Dempster calls heart circumcision and the law being written on the heart as “conceptually similar.” Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 166.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Gabriel’s work focuses exclusively on the Old Testament, though he demonstrates that the ideas of “heart circumcision” and the law written on the heart belong to the same field of meaning. While both concepts are different, they are also related to one another and describe the era of God’s new covenant salvation. For a helpful table showing the relationship between the terms and OT texts see p. 85. It is presumable, then, that Paul works with such an OT background when he describes heart circumcision in Romans 2:25-29. Kevin Samy Gabriel, “Regeneration and the Heart Under the Old Covenant: A Study in Deuteronomy and the Major Prophets” (ThM thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 85.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 353.

covenant) cannot produce a life which pleases God (7:4). In fact, the Law can only exacerbate sin because sin coopts the Law to bear fruit for death in people (7:5). Therefore, the Law does not—indeed cannot—give believers the ability to obey God. The ability to obey must come from somewhere else, then. According to Paul, the ability to obey comes from “the newness of the Spirit” (Rom 7:6). The life of the new covenant is produced in believers by the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, when Christians serve through the newness of the Spirit, they are demonstrating that the law has been written on their heart.

While Paul explicitly tells believers that they have been released from the Law’s jurisdiction in Romans 7, he also envisions believers being able to keep the law through the power of the Spirit in Romans 8:1-11. The basis for believers keeping the law is the work of Christ on the cross (Rom 8:1-3).<sup>21</sup> As forgiven sinners, believers can now fulfill the Law through the Spirit (8:4). Paul expands his explanation of Spirit-empowered obedience by detailing the only two ways of living: according to the flesh or according to the Spirit (8:5-8). The good news for Christians is that they are not in the flesh but in the Spirit (8:9). Being united to Christ through the Spirit enables believers to stop living for the flesh and live for God (8:12-13). Believers can obey the law and put sin to death through the Holy Spirit, indicating that the Holy Spirit has written God’s law on their heart.

The second promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is that all members of the covenant will know the Lord. The New Testament shows that it is the church of Jesus Christ that knows the Lord. When the church was “born” on Pentecost, controversy arose between the church and the Jews over the questions of, “Who are the real people of God? Who truly *knows* God?”<sup>22</sup> Throughout Acts, there is a consistent distinction between the church who knows God in Christ and ethnic Israel who does not, due to their persecution of the church

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<sup>20</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 353.

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 397-409.

<sup>22</sup> Alan J. Thompson, *Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 27 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 20.

(4:1-31; 5:1-32; 6:8-15; 7:54-60; 8:1-3; 9:23-25; 12:1-3; 13:44-47; 14:1-3, 19; 16:22-24; 17:1-9, 10-15). Such a distinction does not just arise in Acts, but also goes back to the Gospels themselves. For example, Jesus equates eternal life with knowing God in the Gospel of John and it is his *disciples* who know God, not just any member of the nation of Israel (John 17:3, 6-12).

The Gospel of John contrasts those who believe in Christ and those from Israel who reject him. In John's prologue, he describes the rejection of Christ by the world and the Jews (John 1:10-11). By contrast, those who receive him—believe in him—are part of God's family and know the Lord (1:12-13). Later in the Gospel, the division between the Jews and Jesus' disciples is made evident again (6:26-69). When Jesus begins telling people to eat his flesh and drink his blood (i.e., believe in him [see John 6:29]), the crowds disperse (John 6:29-66). Jesus questions whether his disciples will leave, but Peter claims that they have come *know* he is the Holy One of God (John 6:69). Knowing God keeps the disciples in the fold of Jesus. In another passage, Jesus draws the distinction between those of his flock and those outside of it (John 10:11-18). Using the imagery of shepherding, Jesus likens himself to a good shepherd. As the good shepherd, Jesus knows his flock and his flock *knows* him (John 10:14). Knowing Jesus is also equivalent to hearing his voice (10:16). Later in the passage, Jesus says that people who do not believe in him are his sheep because his real sheep hear his voice and follow him (10:26-27). Therefore, it is Jesus' flock—his disciples, his church—who hears his voice and knows him.

Furthermore, the idea of knowing God takes prominence in 1 John—the word “know” occurs 32 times in a book of only five chapters. For example, the apostle John tells his readers, “By this we know him that we have come to know him, if we keep his commands” (2:3). John is probably alluding to Jeremiah 31:31-34 for many of the same themes are present. Just like in Jeremiah 31:33-34, John connects the idea of knowing God and keeping his commands (i.e., having the law written on the heart). John goes on



to explain that it is the those who have put their faith in Jesus who know God (2:13-14). Knowing God is also connecting to loving God and others because the person who has been given new life loves others and knows God (4:7b). The opposite is true too: the person who does not love, does not know God (4:8). First John ends with an emphasis on knowing God. John explains that Jesus came to enable believers to “know Him who is true” (5:20). First John provides ample evidence that believers in Jesus know the Lord and share in the fulfillment of the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34.

The third promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the comprehensive forgiveness of sin. The comprehensive nature of God’s forgiveness is illustrated by God not remembering Israel’s sins. The creator God of the universe, who knows all things, would “forget” their sins. The New Testament testifies that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is the basis for the comprehensive forgiveness Jeremiah looked forward to. Probably no other book in the New Testament explains the implications of Jesus’ death on the cross like Hebrews. Over the course of about three chapters, the author of Hebrews explains how Jesus provides the full payment for sin that Jeremiah promised (7:26-10:18).

Jesus provides comprehensive forgiveness because he is the perfect high priest and once for all sacrifice (7:26-28). The old covenant priests could not mediate actual forgiveness because they themselves were flawed sinners, signified by having to first purify themselves (7:27). Furthermore, they offered sacrifices repeatedly, demonstrating that they did not provide the comprehensive forgiveness the people needed. Jesus, on the other hand, had no sin and thus was the perfect high priest who could offer the perfect sacrifice (7:29).

Jesus provides comprehensive forgiveness because he inaugurated a better covenant, the new covenant (8:1-13). Jesus entered heaven as a divine priest who mediates a better covenant than any earthly priest could ever do (8:1-6). A better covenant was needed because if the first, or old, covenant had really provided true forgiveness, then a new covenant would not have been needed (8:7). But it could not, so a new covenant was promised to come. The author of Hebrews then quotes from Jeremiah 31:27-34 to show

that Jesus has inaugurated the new covenant that provides the comprehensive forgiveness the people need (8:8-12). Consequently, the very fact that God promised a “second” or “new” covenant was coming would render the Sinai covenant obsolete (8:13).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, people would not be able to find forgiveness under the old covenant, but only in the new covenant inaugurated by Christ.

Jesus provides comprehensive forgiveness because his sacrifice is better than all the other old covenant sacrifices (9:1–10:18). The old covenant sacrifices were insufficient because they only dealt with outward cleansing—they could not provide real forgiveness and repair the broken relationship with God (9:1-10). Jesus, on the other hand, entered the very presence of God to make reconciliation between God and man. His sacrifice cleanses people of all sin and restores them to fellowship with God (9:11-14). The author goes to argue that if even animal blood could affect some kind of forgiveness (the temporary suspension of God’s wrath), then Christ’s perfect blood will provide the perfect forgiveness people need (9:15-22). Jesus’ sacrifice is also better than the old covenant sacrifices because it was once-for- all-time (9:23-28). Unlike the old covenant sacrifices that had to be repeated year-after-year, Jesus offered himself one time, which was sufficient to pay for sins for all time (Heb 9:25). The author goes on further to say that Jesus “put away” sin through his sacrifice (Heb 9:26). Jesus bore the sins of his people to bring them salvation (Heb 9:28). The comprehensive forgiveness that God’s people needed is found in the sacrifice of Christ.

The author closes his section on the superiority of Christ’s sacrifice by repeating themes he previously mentioned. He argues that the repetitive sacrifices of the old covenant are now cancelled due to Jesus’ sacrifice (10:1-10). Moreover, the old covenant could not provide real forgiveness, for “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4). Jesus’ sacrifice, however, takes away the “first” (covenant), which was

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<sup>23</sup> Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), “A Better Covenant (8:7-13),” e-book.

ineffectual to provide forgiveness, to establish a second (new) covenant, which provides real forgiveness.<sup>24</sup> To sum up, the author of Hebrews, quoting again from Jeremiah 31:34, shows that Jesus' sacrifice fulfills the promise of the new covenant, perfecting those who had been sanctified (10:11-18).<sup>25</sup>

Christ's sacrifice, then, provides the cleansing and forgiveness people need. Such forgiveness was never possible under the first, or old, covenant. The old covenant merely dealt with outward ritualistic cleansing, although it did provide a temporary suspension of God's wrath against the nation due to the Day of Atonement.

The New Testament declares that Jesus enables believers to partake in the promises of the new covenant. God promised in the new covenant to write the law on the hearts of the people (Jer 31:33). According to the apostle Paul, the Holy Spirit writes the law on the hearts of believers in Jesus when he circumcises their hearts and produces the life of the new covenant in them. God also promised that all members of the covenant community would know him. The New Testament authors regularly draw a distinction between those who know God and those who do not. Those who know God are believers in Jesus, whereas those from ethnic Israel who do not believe do not know God. In addition to the promises of inward law writing and all members knowing him, God promised a comprehensive forgiveness of sin in the New Testament. The book of Hebrews declares that the forgiveness promised in the new covenant comes through Jesus. He is the perfect priest who is also the perfect sacrifice.

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<sup>24</sup> Cockerill writes, Christ's repudiation of those sacrifices was an annulment of that whole "first" system as a means of access to God. He ratified that annulment by his complete incarnate submission to God's will, climaxing in his self-offering on the cross. That same obedience established the 'second' or new way of approaching God. The natural antecedent of "the second" is the "will" of God accomplished by Christ in his earthly obedience. Still, the whole New Covenant arrangement for cleansing and entrance into God's presence through Christ's obedience is the "will" of God established through his perfect submission. (Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, "Sacrifice—'To Do Your Will, O God' 10:5-10)."

<sup>25</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, "Covenant—Where There Is Release (10:15-18)."

## Responsibility

The fact that believers are saved solely by God's grace does not mean they do not have responsibilities to uphold in the covenant relationship. All the biblical covenants contain responsibilities for the human partner.<sup>26</sup> Within the new covenant, however, Jesus provides believers with the power to uphold the responsibilities of the covenant by first perfectly upholding those responsibilities himself and then providing the Holy Spirit to empower believers to walk in his ways.

In one sense, the new covenant is unconditional, for the text of Jeremiah 31:27-34 demonstrates that God takes the initiative in the new covenant.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the new covenant is *unbreakable* in contrast to the Sinai covenant (Jer 31:27). God makes certain that the covenant would be fulfilled. Covenants are fulfilled, however, through the faithful obedience of the covenant partner. Within the new covenant, believers do not approach God on their own; instead, they have a covenantal mediator, Jesus Christ. Christ perfectly fulfilled the responsibilities of the new covenant: perfect submission and obedience to the will of God. Christ's obedience to the will of God has historically been called by theologians as Christ's *active obedience*.<sup>28</sup> The glory of the gospel message, especially found in the doctrine of justification, is that Christ's active obedience is then imputed, or credited, to believers (Rom 4:1-7, 5:19; 2 Cor 5:21).<sup>29</sup> Christ upheld the responsibilities of the covenant on behalf of believers so that his work is credited to them as their work.

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<sup>26</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 153.

<sup>28</sup> The active obedience of Christ is that "he had to obey the law for whole life on our behalf so that the positive merits of his perfect obedience would be counted for us." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 570. In addition, Stephen Wellum defends the concept of active obedience using explicitly *covenantal* categories. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 775-82. Wellum makes the argument that Christ is the faithful covenant partner who obeys all the stipulations of the covenant perfectly. His obedience is then credited to the account of believers through imputation of his righteousness which comes through the covenantal bond believers have with Christ.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton,

God, however, not only wants to forgive humanity and declare them righteous in Christ, but also desires to have his people transformed into the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). This process of transformation begins in this lifetime and will be completed in the new creation (Phil 1:6). While Christ has obeyed on their behalf, the call of the new covenant is that believers must still live for God. Believers obey, then, out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21).

If believers are called to new covenant responsibilities, then what are the responsibilities they must fulfill? Some Christian traditions argue that believers must still obey the Ten Commandments.<sup>30</sup> There are good reasons, though, for rejecting the view that believers must uphold the Ten Commandments directly. Most importantly, the New Testament declares that the old covenant has been fulfilled in Christ and thus has passed away for the new covenant people of God, the church (Matt 5:17-21). Instead of obeying the Sinai covenant or the Ten Commandments, believers are under the “law of Christ” in the new covenant (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2). Therefore, believers must still live righteous lives in complete submission and obedience to the Lord (1 Thess 4:1-12).<sup>31</sup> Believers must primarily obey the words and teachings of Christ and by extension his authorized representatives, the apostles.

While Christians primarily focus on obeying the commands found in the New Testament, the Old Testament is still relevant for them because it is God’s Word. The larger question at hand, however, is whether believers are directly bound to the stipulations

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IL: Crossway, 2006), 191-232.

<sup>30</sup> See chap. 5 on the covenant with Israel for a discussion on the role of the Mosaic law.

<sup>31</sup> Peter J. Gentry, *Biblical Studies* (Peterborough, Canada: H & E Academic, 2020), 1:47-71. Gentry makes the point that the requirement for righteousness under the new covenant is the same requirement for righteousness under the old covenant. Yet the means of living righteously under each covenant is different. He writes, “The central command in Deuteronomy 6:4 entailed the members of the covenant community to write out instructions of the covenant. . . . Under the New Covenant, there is no instruction to write out the instructions of the New Covenant. Why? Because it is the Holy Spirit who writes the instructions on our hearts moment by moment.” Gentry, *Biblical Studies*, 1:71.

found in the Old Testament. The New Testament seems to indicate that the Old Testament must be interpreted in a Christocentric manner. The commandments of the Old Testament must be received by believers *from the hands of Christ*.<sup>32</sup> In other words, they are not bound to the exact specifics of Israel's law because Israel's law was always meant to point to Christ (Rom 10:1-4). Of course, Christians must interpret Israel's law first in its own immediate context, but then Christians must see how the law points them to Christ. They do not obey the exact specifics, but they obey the laws as transformed by Christ.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible tells the story of God seeking to establish his rule upon the earth through covenant relationships. He made humanity in his image, indicating an original creation covenant. He intended for people to be fruitful and multiply over the face of the earth (Gen 1:26-28). Instead of following him, Adam and Eve rebelled against him, bringing sin, death, and destruction upon the earth (Gen 3:1-7). God did not utterly destroy them despite things getting so bad that he wanted to (Gen 6:5-7). Instead, God saved Noah and his family and made a fresh start by entering into covenant with him and by extension, the whole world (Gen 9:1-17). Despite entering a world cleansed of people by the flood, Noah eventually sinned and failed to obey God. God, however, did not give up on his rescue plan by choosing one man, Abraham, and entering into covenant with him.

God promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and that one of his descendants would save the world (Gen 22:18). God made good on his promise of a great nation when he entered into covenant with Israel (Exod 19:5-6), yet Israel walked in the ways of their great ancestor Adam and rebelled against God. The book of Judges demonstrates the spiritual decline of the people because no king ruled over them. Therefore, God installed a king over Israel and eventually God chose David to be king over

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), 157.

his people (1 Sam 16:1-23). God entered into covenant with David with promises that David would have a perpetual dynasty and everlasting kingdom (2 Sam 7:8-14). In addition to the mighty promises of God, the Davidic king would still have to obey the Lord: God's plan would be fulfilled but through a perfect son, that is, an obedient king. Unfortunately, no king of Israel was completely faithful in the Old Testament times. Due to the people and king's sin, God exiled his people.

Before, during, and after the exile, God promised that a new covenant would be cut with the people (Jer 31:31-34). In the new covenant, God would write his law on the hearts of the people, all the covenant members would know him, and God would provide the full forgiveness of sin that the people needed. What the Old Testament anticipated, the New Testament proclaims has been fulfilled in Jesus. He is the mediator of the better covenant, the new covenant. He restores the bond between God and his people. He also gives people access to the promises of the new covenant through faith. Finally, he enables believers to uphold the responsibilities of the covenant.

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## ABSTRACT

### KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR STUDENTS AT LINCROFT BIBLE CHURCH IN LINCROFT, NEW JERSEY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022  
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This work provides the framework to articulate the storyline of the Bible to middle and high school students, using the covenants as the organizing principle. Chapter 1 defines biblical theology and demonstrates why the covenants are crucial for constructing an accurate metanarrative of the Bible. Chapter 2 establishes the presence of a covenant in creation and shows the implications of the creation covenant for the rest of the story. Chapter 3 shows how the Noahic covenant stands in continuity with the creation covenant as well as advances the storyline forward. Chapter 4 focuses upon God's covenant with Abraham and shows how it builds upon previous covenants and is also programmatic for the rest of Scripture. Chapter 5 explains the significance of God's covenant with Israel and how it relates to previous covenants but was never intended to be permanent. Chapter 6 expounds the significance of the Davidic covenant and how the king would bring God's promises to fulfillment. Chapter 7 highlights the prophetic anticipation for the new covenant due to the sin of Israel and their king. Chapter 8 concludes the project by showing how Jesus inaugurates the new covenant and gives his people access to its promises.

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