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COVENANT

AND GOD'S PURPOSE FOR THE WORLD

THOMAS R. SCHREINER

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Covenant and God's Purpose for the World

Thomas R. Schreiner

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To my fellow elders at Clifton Baptist.

*“How good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!”*

—Psalm 133:1

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Introduction

Covenant is one of the most important words in the Bible since it introduces one of the central theological themes in Scripture. Some scholars have even argued that covenant is the center of Scripture, the theme that integrates the message of the entire Bible. I am not convinced that covenant is the center of Scripture. Indeed, the idea that the Scriptures have one center is probably mistaken. Still, we can rightly say that covenant is one of the most important notions in the Bible.

The Importance of Covenant

The many scholars who have made covenant their integrating motif or central theme demonstrate how crucial it is. Indeed, covenant has played a vital role in theology from the beginning. Early church fathers, such as Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine, assigned covenant a significant place in their writings. Covenant also came to prominence among the Reformers and their successors. Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531), Johannes Cocceius (1609–1669), and Herman Witsius (1636–1708) advanced the importance of covenant in interpreting the Scriptures.

In the modern period the importance of covenant was set forth by a number of scholars, perhaps most notably by the great Old

Testament scholar Walther Eichrodt (1890–1978). More recently, the landmark book by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, which uses covenant as a framework or a sub-structure to elucidate the storyline of the Bible, has been published.¹ At the same time, systematic theologians in the Reformed tradition, such as Michael Horton, have made the covenant an organizing motif in their dogmatic work.

Although such an approach is surely illuminating at a number of levels, it isn't necessary to insist that covenant is *the central* theme of biblical theology or *the key* for doing systematics. Even if one disagrees with those claims, we can say without exaggeration that we can't truly understand the Scriptures if we don't understand the covenants God made with his people. For even if covenant isn't the central theme of Scripture, it is still one of the central themes in biblical revelation. We can safely say, along with Gentry and Wellum, that the covenants are the backbone of the storyline of the Bible; they help us to unfold the biblical narrative. All careful readers of the Scriptures want to comprehend how the Bible fits together so that they can grasp the overarching narrative and theology of the Bible. We can't really apply the Scriptures wisely to our lives if we don't understand "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), and we can't grasp how the Scriptures fit together if we lack clarity about the covenants God made with his people.

If we have a nuanced understanding of covenants, we will gain clarity as to how the Old and New Testaments relate to each other. Such an endeavor is necessary since God didn't limit himself to one covenant, for we find in the Scriptures a covenant with Noah, a covenant with Abraham, a covenant with Israel, a covenant with David, and a new covenant. And many think God also made a covenant with Adam.

1. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

To understand the Scriptures well, we need to understand how these covenants are interrelated, and we need to see how they advance the story of God's kingdom in the Scriptures. The covenants help us, then, to see the harmony and unity of the biblical message. They also play a vital role in tracing out the progress of redemptive history, which centers on the promise that God will bring redemption to the human race (Gen. 3:15).² Understanding the covenants is also essential for understanding the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. Both of these signs are covenantal in nature and must be apprehended in that context.³

Definition of Covenant

Before launching into the study, we need to ask other vital questions. What is a covenant? What are we talking about when we use the word *covenant*, and how do we define it? Covenants can contain several elements, but here we want to look at what is required at minimum. *Covenant* can be defined as follows: a covenant is a chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other. Several things can be said about this definition.

First, a covenant is a relationship, and that sets it apart from a contract. Contracts also contain promises and obligations, but they are impersonal and nonrelational. Covenants stand apart from contracts because the promises are made in a relational context. We are not surprised to learn, then, that marriage in the Scriptures is described as a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). In marriage a husband and a wife choose to enter a covenant relationship, and they make binding promises to each other, pledging lifelong loyalty and faithfulness.

Second, a covenant is a chosen or elected relationship. Once

2. Genesis 3:15 isn't part of the covenant itself, but it does play a significant role in the unfolding narrative.

3. In this book, however, I will not explain how baptism and the Lord's Supper relate to the new covenant.

again, marriage serves as a good illustration. A husband and a wife choose to enter into the marriage covenant. By way of contrast, children and parents don't enter into a covenant with one another, for they are already bound together by their natural relationship, by their family bond. A covenant is a chosen relationship with defined responsibilities made with those who aren't already in a kinship relationship.

Third, a covenant relationship includes binding promises and obligations. We see this again in marriage, where spouses pledge themselves to each other. They promise to be faithful until death, living out the specific conditions and responsibilities in a covenant relationship. Each party in the relationship pledges to carry out the stipulations or the requirements of the covenant. Covenants, in other words, are mutual.

Still, not all covenants were alike in the ancient world. In some covenants a person with more authority made a covenant with those having less authority and power. Such was the case when a king made a relationship with his subjects. Readers of the Bible immediately think of God entering into covenant with human beings, for in this case we have a superior entering into covenant with an inferior. All covenants, then, aren't precisely the same, and we need to keep this in mind while studying the covenants in the Bible.

Examples of Covenants

We see a number of covenants between human beings in Scripture, and it should prove helpful to survey them briefly so that we can see how covenants operated in the biblical world. Both Abraham and Isaac had disputes with residents in Canaan over wells since water for flocks was in short supply. In one case, Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech over a well so that he could use the well without conflict (Gen. 21:24–32). Abraham and Abimelech made promises to

one another and sealed their promises with an oath (v. 31). Abraham also gave seven lambs to Abimelech to serve as a witness of the covenant enacted. Isaac also disputed with the residents of Canaan over wells for his flocks (Gen. 26:14–33), so a covenant was made between Isaac and Abimelech,⁴ which was sealed with an oath. They pledged not to harm each other and ratified the covenant with a meal. In both cases, we see that two parties entered into a formal relationship in enacting a covenant. They also made binding promises to each other, which were ratified with oaths. The covenant, then, was conditional, and each party promised to abide by its stipulations.

When Jacob fled from Laban accompanied by flocks, servants, and his wives (who were also Laban's daughters), Laban pursued Jacob in order to harm him (Gen. 31:17–55), but God appeared to Laban in a dream, warning him not to hurt Jacob in any way (v. 24). The meeting between Jacob and Laban was by no means friendly, as old family hurts and wrongs were voiced. Finally, they decided to conclude their complaints with a covenant (v. 44). They set up a heap of stones and a pillar, which served as a witness to the stipulations (vv. 45–48, 51–52). In the covenant, Jacob pledged to faithfully take care of Laban's daughters, and both Jacob and Laban promised to respect the boundary markers established by the stones and pillar (vv. 50–52). Neither would transgress the boundary and plunder the other. Jacob took an oath, and presumably Laban did as well, to observe the covenant stipulations (v. 53). The covenant was then sealed with a meal (v. 54). A formal relationship was thereby established between Jacob and Laban.

In the book of Joshua the Gibeonites deceived Israel and made a covenant with them to avoid being destroyed like the other inhabitants of Canaan (Josh. 9:3–27). Israel entered into the covenant

4. Abimelech is a dynastic name, so this person is not necessarily the same person Abraham dealt with.

relationship with the Gibeonites, pledging to let them live and promising peaceful relations. The covenant was ratified with an oath (v. 16). When Israel discovered that the Gibeonites had deceived them, some in Israel wanted to destroy them, but the Israelite leaders protested that they could not break the covenant since they had sworn oaths to the Gibeonites. If they transgressed the covenant stipulations, they would face the Lord's wrath (vv. 18–20).

The seriousness of the covenant is evidenced much later in Israel's history, when Saul violated its provisions by slaying the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21:1). The Lord's anger was satisfied only after seven of Saul's descendants were put to death in exchange for the evil inflicted on the Gibeonites (vv. 2–9). Here we see all the elements of a covenant—a chosen relationship with promises ratified by an oath. We also see here that transgressing the covenant requirements led to judgment, which anticipates a theme we shall see later. Those who failed to keep covenant requirements were cursed.

Some scholars have said that covenants always presuppose an already existing relationship. The Gibeonite story shows that this is not the case, for Israel didn't have any relations with the Gibeonites before entering into a covenant with them. We can say the same thing about marriage in the ancient world. Typically, those who were married in Israel didn't "date" before getting married, and thus there wasn't a preexisting relationship. In other situations, of course, a relationship did preexist. We think of the covenants between Jacob and Laban, Abraham and Abimelech, and Jonathan and David. What we see, then, is that there was no distinctive pattern regarding the relationships between covenant parties, and thus it would be a mistake to conclude that a preexisting relationship was essential for establishing a covenant.

Jonathan and David made a covenant (1 Sam. 18:3–4; 20:8, 16–17; 22:8; 23:18). We don't expect Jonathan to support David, for

David was the greatest threat to Jonathan's succeeding his father as king. Nevertheless, we see Jonathan's love in his relationship with David. Jonathan gave to David his robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt as signs of his covenant with David. It is evident that Jonathan pledged to protect David's life, even from the hand of Jonathan's own father, Saul. Jonathan formalized the covenant by swearing his loyalty to David (20:17).⁵

Political alliances or covenants were apparently common. We read that the general Abner, who had aligned himself with Ish-bosheth, defected from Ish-bosheth and proposed to make a covenant with David so the latter could reign as king over all Israel (2 Sam. 3:12, 13, 21). So, too, the people of Hebron entered into a covenant with David and crowned him as their king (2 Sam. 5:3). King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre also made a covenant with each other (1 Kings 5:12). King Asa of Judah made a covenant with Ben-hadad so that Ben-hadad would break his covenant with Baasha, king of Israel, and enter into a covenant with Asa instead (1 Kings 15:18–20; see also 1 Kings 20:34).⁶ In every instance, those making a covenant entered a formal relationship in which promises were made.

The story of the covenant enacted in Jeremiah 34 is most interesting. The people of Jerusalem had made a covenant to set free all their Hebrew slaves (34:9–10). Unfortunately, the people changed their mind and took back their slaves (vv. 11–12), and thus they violated the covenant requirements they had promised to uphold. The covenant they transgressed was not merely a private one, for they had pledged before God, when he made his covenant with Israel, to free any Hebrew after six years of slavery (vv. 12–14; cf. Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:12). The covenant to free Hebrew slaves was made

5. By way of contrast, see Psalm 55:20.

6. Sometimes it seems that the word *covenant* simply means a solemn agreement or vow. Job "made a covenant with my eyes" (Job 31:1), so that he would not see a virgin. Similarly, the Lord mocks the idea that human beings could make a covenant with Leviathan (Job 41:4).

in Yahweh's temple, and yet they repudiated what they had pledged to do (vv. 15–17).

Jeremiah then tells us something fascinating, for we learn more about the ritual that inaugurated the covenant (vv. 18–20). Israel ratified the covenant by cutting a calf in two and walking between the parts of the dead animal. This signified the curse that would come upon them if they broke the covenant—they would be sacrificed and slain for violating its provisions. This is often called a “self-maledictory oath,” which means that one calls evil upon oneself for violating the provisions of the covenant.

Conclusion

We have seen that covenant is a major theme in the Scriptures, warranting an examination of its role in the biblical narrative. If we understand God's covenants, we will have a solid grasp of the storyline and theology of the Scriptures. We defined *covenant* as a chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other. Those binding promises are often accompanied by oaths, and there are often signs (the pillar and stones in the case of Jacob and Laban) and ceremonies (covenant meals) as well. We have also seen that not all covenants are accompanied by sacrifices, and thus sacrifices and the spilling of blood are not required to enter into a covenant. A pre-existing relationship is not a prerequisite for establishing a covenant, as is evident in the case of Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites. Some covenants in Scripture are personal (Jacob and Laban, David and Jonathan); there are also political covenants (Asa and Ben-hadad, David and Judah), marriage covenants, and legal agreements within a nation (freeing of Hebrew slaves). In every instance, two parties enter a formal relationship in which they make promises to the other.

The Covenant of Creation

This chapter is perhaps the most controversial in the book, for the chapter title says there is a covenant at creation, but we don't find the word *covenant* anywhere in Genesis 1–3. Am I guilty of imposing something on the biblical text that isn't there? The great Presbyterian theologian John Murray said it would be better to speak of an Adamic administration rather than a covenant with Adam. According to Murray, covenants are always redemptive and given to human beings who have sinned. Therefore, it doesn't fit to speak of a covenant with Adam and Eve, in Murray's view, since they were without sin when God created them.

It is understandable why doubts arise about a creation covenant since the term *covenant* is lacking. When we add to this the unique circumstances of Adam and Eve in the garden, further ammunition is added to the argument that *covenant* is not quite the right term. A word should be said about terminology before going further. Those who believe that there was a covenant with Adam use different terms to label it, such as "covenant of life," "covenant of nature," or "covenant of works." The same general idea is involved, whatever the

terminology. I prefer “covenant of creation” because it fits with an overarching view of redemptive history, enabling us to see how this covenant integrates with other covenants. In other words, God inaugurated history with creation and will consummate it with the new creation, and thus the old creation anticipates and points forward to the new creation. Still, there is no need to linger on the matter of terminology since the vital issue is the nature of the covenant.

Evidence for a Creation Covenant

I argue that we indeed can identify God’s relationship with Adam and Eve as a covenant, for the following reasons. First, the word *covenant* doesn’t have to be present for a covenant to exist, contrary to an older word-study approach that today is rejected by virtually all scholars. Today most scholars recognize that the concept of covenant can be present without the actual word. We find a remarkable example of this in the Scriptures. God enters into a covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 (see also 1 Chronicles 17), but the word *covenant* isn’t used there to describe the promise the Lord made to David. Is it legitimate to identify God’s promise to David’s dynasty in 2 Samuel 7 as a covenant? Certainly, for subsequent biblical writers, in reflecting on God’s promise to David, specifically call it a covenant (Ps. 89:3, 28, 34, 39; 132:12; Jer. 33:21). It is apparent, then, that the concept of covenant may be present when the word is entirely lacking.

Second, we have textual evidence for a covenant at creation, so the analogy to the covenant with David stands on even firmer footing. We read in Hosea 6:7, “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; / there they dealt faithlessly with me.” The interpretation is disputed, but a reference to a covenant with Adam is the most likely reading. Some say that the word “there” in the verse is a place rather than a person. Is *Adam* ever referred to as a place in the Old Testament? The answer is yes, for we read in Joshua 3:16 that the

waters stood up in a heap at Adam, when Israel crossed the Jordan into the Land of Promise. Still, it is highly unlikely that Hosea has in mind the place called Adam. How do we decide whether Adam the place or Adam the person is intended? The answer rests on which of the two is more likely in Hosea's context. Remember that Hosea was talking about Israel's sin and transgression in referring to Adam, and a reference to the place Adam in Joshua 3:16 (the only time the place is mentioned in the Bible) has nothing to do with Israel's sin and transgression. Actually, the story in Joshua 3 is one of the great triumphs in Israel's history, where they crossed the Jordan and stood on the verge of conquering the Promised Land. Seeing a reference to the person Adam, on the other hand, makes perfect sense. Israel, like Adam, transgressed the covenant God made with them. What is striking here is that God describes the relationship with Adam as a covenant! As we shall see, Israel in a sense was a new Adam, and like the first Adam they violated God's covenant. In using the word "there," it may be that Hosea was referring to the garden where Adam spurned God's command, or alternatively perhaps he had Gilead in mind (v. 8). In either case, a reference to Adam is still intended.¹

Third, we have good reasons to see a covenant at creation because the constituent elements of a covenant were present at creation. There were two partners: God and Adam/Eve. God as the covenant Lord gave stipulations or requirements, demanding that Adam and Eve refuse to eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17; 3:3, 11). Furthermore, there were cursings and blessings for disobedience and obedience, which, as we shall see, were present in later covenants. The covenant was conditional: if Adam and Eve disobeyed, they would die (Gen. 2:17; 3:3), but if they obeyed they

1. Jeremiah 33:20, 25 refers to God's covenant with day and night, which could also be called a covenant with creation. Still, it isn't clear from this text that the covenant described here was also made with Adam and Eve. It seems that Jeremiah is playing with the word *covenant* and applying it to fixed regularity of the natural world.

would enjoy life with God. Speculation has arisen as to how long the covenant was meant to endure. Some speculate that it was intended to end, and it seems fair to infer that eventually God would withdraw the test and confirm that Adam and Eve had shown covenant loyalty. The other view, that the covenant was unending, is equally speculative, for is it really likely that the test would last forever?

Fourth, John Murray and some others say that covenants exist only in redemptive relationships, and since Adam and Eve hadn't sinned, they didn't need redemption, nor was a covenant necessary. Once again, the objection doesn't stand, for the notion that covenants exist only where there are redemptive relationships isn't borne out by the evidence. Indeed, we have already seen that all kinds of covenants are made when redemption isn't in view. Marriage is covenantal even though the marriage covenant isn't redemptive in nature (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). Many other covenants in Scripture weren't made in a redemptive context, such as the covenants between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:44–54), David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:3–4; 20:8, 16–17; 22:8; 23:18), Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:3–27), and Solomon and Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 5:12). To sum up, covenants can exist apart from redemption, so the argument against a creation covenant on that basis isn't decisive.

Fifth, the parallel between Adam and Christ enunciated in Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 supports a covenant of creation. Both Adam and Christ functioned as representatives of those who belong to them. They are covenant heads! Therefore, sin, death, and condemnation belong to all human beings by virtue of their covenant connection to Adam, and grace, righteousness, and life belong to all those united to Jesus Christ. The covenantal and representational role of Adam is clear in the biblical storyline.

Sixth, God's covenant with Noah was said to be "established" rather than "cut," which might well indicate that the Noahic covenant

was a renewal of the covenant with Adam rather than something completely new (see Gen. 6:18; 9:9, 11, 17). The argument is that the phrase “establish a covenant” refers to the renewal of a covenant that has already been instituted, while “cut a covenant” indicates that a new covenant is being inaugurated. There are some exceptions to this lexical argument (e.g., Deut. 29:1; Ezek. 16:60, 62), but in most cases “establish a covenant” means a previous covenant is renewed. We should not rely on this lexical argument to defend the idea that the Noahic covenant was a renewal of the covenant with Adam, for there are other good reasons to think so, as we will see in chapter 2.

The Significance of Being Created in God’s Image

God created Adam and Eve, placing them in the beautiful garden he had made, the garden where he walked among them so that they enjoyed fellowship with him. God made Adam and Eve in his image (Gen. 1:26), and scholars have long discussed what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. Space is lacking here to explore the matter adequately, so I will restrict myself to a few observations. It is probable that the words *image* and *likeness* are synonyms, and thus the difference between the two words should not be pressed. In the ancient world an image (i.e., a statue) was set up to denote the rule of a king over a region. It doesn’t follow; however, that *image* is equated with or limited to ruling.

Still, the emphasis in Genesis is on the call for Adam and Eve to rule the world as those made in the image of God. We read in Genesis 1:26 that they were created in God’s image and after his likeness so that they would “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” The focus on rule is evident as well from Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish

of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” We see the same notion in Genesis 2:15, where Adam and Eve are placed in the garden “to work it and keep it.” In other words, God made Adam and Eve in his image so that they would govern the world on his behalf. They would serve as his vice-regents, managing and stewarding and caring for the world under God’s lordship.

A close relationship exists between image and sonship. Genesis 5:3 says, “When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.” Seth was in the image and likeness of Adam because he was the son of Adam. So also in Egypt the king was said to be in the image of god because he was considered to be the son of god. Adam is also “the son of God” (Luke 3:38), and sonship designates a special and unique relationship to God. Adam and Eve were to exercise their rule as God’s children, as those in fellowship with God. Their rule wasn’t independent of God but was to be carried out in his presence and for his glory since he is the sovereign Creator (cf. 1 Cor. 11:7). Adam and Eve in their rule, then, were to represent God and reflect his likeness. By displaying his character and holiness, they would bring glory to God. Sons bring glory to their parents by living righteous and beautiful lives, and Adam and Eve would bring glory to God by living in accord with his character. Adam and Eve would show they were God’s children by their righteousness.

Incidentally, the image of God was not lost after Adam and Eve fell into sin, even though it was marred. A number of texts clarify that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, even though sin has entered the world (Gen. 5:3; 9:6; James 3:9). Part of what it means to be a son is to be like one’s father, so we aren’t surprised to discover that full restoration of the image means that human beings come to know God (Col. 3:10), and all those who

know God become righteous and holy (Eph. 4:24). Adam and Eve's being created in God's image and likeness was not just a functional matter, for they were created as God's sons and children to be like their Father so that they reflected God's love and character as they ruled the world on his behalf.

If we look forward in redemptive history, we see that human beings are restored to the purpose for which they were made when they are "conformed to the image" of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). Only those who belong to the last Adam, Jesus Christ, are restored to the purpose for which God created human beings as sons and daughters of God. Believers in Jesus Christ are being slowly transformed into the image of God (2 Cor. 3:18). They are being changed "from glory to glory" and will fully bear the image of Christ on the day of resurrection (1 Cor. 15:49). Then they will be like their firstborn brother, Jesus, and will no longer be stained or defiled by evil (Rom. 8:29).

Ruling as Priest-Kings

Adam and Eve were made in God's image to rule the world as God's servants and his sons. There is also evidence they were to function as priest-kings. They were to mediate God's blessing to the world as the king and queen of God's creation. The garden anticipates the tabernacle (Exodus 25–31) since God specially resided in the garden, as he later dwelt in the tabernacle. What made the garden so lovely was God's presence with Adam and Eve; it was a place where Adam and Eve enjoyed God's fellowship and love.

We see a number of connections between the garden and the tabernacle and subsequently the temple. (1) God was specially present in the garden and specially present in the tabernacle. (2) The cherubim guarded the garden (Gen. 3:24), and the cherubim hovered over the ark in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:18–22) and were also stitched into the curtains and veil of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:1, 31). (3) Both

the garden and the tabernacle were entered from the east (Gen. 3:24; Num. 3:38). (4) The many-branched lampstand may symbolize the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; 3:22; Ex. 25:31–35), for light was often associated with life. (5) The verbs used in Genesis 2:15 are also used of the work of the Levites in the sanctuary (Num. 3:7–8; 18:5–6). Adam was to “work” and “keep” the garden, and the Levites were to “work” and “keep” the tabernacle. (6) A river flowed from Eden and watered and fructified the garden, and so too a river flowed from Ezekiel’s temple and made salt water fresh so that trees bore fruit (Gen. 2:10; Ezek. 47:1–12). (7) Stones found in Eden, both gold and onyx, were also in the tabernacle (Gen. 2:11–12; Ex. 25:7, 11, 17, 31). (8) It is likely that both the garden and the tabernacle were on a mountain, which was sacred land in the ancient Near East. The Old Testament describes the temple as being on Mount Zion, and the garden was probably elevated, for the river divided and became four rivers and thereby watered the land. All this evidence supports the notion that Adam and Eve were to be priest-kings in the garden, exercising God’s rule over the garden and mediating his blessing to the world while they depended upon him for everything.

The Test

The man and the woman, however, were not to exercise their priestly rule autonomously. They were ever subject to the will of God, and thus they were to rule under his lordship. The Lord showered his goodness upon them by placing them in an idyllic garden with verdant trees from which they were nourished, and the man and the woman were to reveal their submission to God’s lordship by refusing to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:17). If they consumed the fruit, they would experience death. We have here both the condition of the covenant, and the curse that would come if the covenant was transgressed. It is clear from this account that Adam

and Eve were called to perfect obedience. Partial obedience would not suffice; one transgression would lead to death. The covenantal requirement was clearly set forth, and the penalty for infringement was not hidden.

There was not only covenant cursing but also covenant blessing. If Adam and Eve obeyed, they would enjoy life. The “tree of life” (2:9; 3:22, 24) anticipated the final joy of human beings who know the Lord (cf. Rev. 22:2, 14, 19). It seems fair to conclude that if Adam and Eve had passed the test, God would have, at some point, confirmed them in righteousness. Such a matter is speculative since the narrative doesn’t answer that question. Still, it seems sensible to think that if Adam and Eve had continued to obey, they would eventually have been confirmed in righteousness.

Since Adam and Eve disobeyed, the curses of the covenant came upon them. More specifically, they experienced the death that had been threatened—they were separated from fellowship with God. When we consider all of Scripture, it is clear that the implications of Adam’s disobedience weren’t limited to him and Eve. We see in Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 that sin, death, and condemnation spread to all people because of Adam’s sin. The curses of the covenant weren’t limited to Adam and Eve alone; they had a universal impact.

After the fall we see immediately the monumental consequences of Adam’s sin. Murder plagues the first family as Cain slays Abel (Gen. 4:8). Genesis 5 records the roll call of death in generation after generation, documenting the impact of Adam’s sin on all those who succeeded him. When we come to the time of Noah, sin’s triumph over humanity is indisputable. Adam had unleashed a monster into the world. Hence, the early chapters testify to Adam’s representational and covenantal role, even if they don’t articulate it in the same terms we find in Romans 5:12–19.

The Promise

In Genesis 3:15 we read:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.

Genesis 3:15 isn't directly related to the covenant with Adam. Certainly Adam and Eve didn't deserve mercy after breaking the provisions of the covenant. Still, God promised that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the Serpent, even though the Serpent would bruise the heel of the woman's offspring. This promise was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Rom. 16:20), and thus the disobedience of Adam and Eve was not the end of the story. God didn't destroy humanity; he promised ultimate victory over the Serpent through the offspring of the woman. How that story plays out is the subject of subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

We have good reasons for seeing a covenant at creation. Even though the word *covenant* is lacking, the elements of a covenant relationship are present, and Hosea 6:7 supports the idea that the relationship with Adam and Eve was covenantal. The claim that all covenants are redemptive isn't borne out by the use of the term in the Scriptures, for the term is lacking in the inauguration of the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7). The elements of a covenant were also present at creation, for blessing was promised for obedience and cursing for disobedience.

Adam and Eve were made in God's image to rule the world on his behalf. They were to be priest-kings in God's creation as sons of God.

They were to represent God on earth and display his righteousness and holiness and goodness in the way they lived and exercised lordship over the garden. Their fall into sin plunged the human race into the abyss where death and sin reign. When we look at the biblical narrative as a whole, we see that Jesus Christ is the last Adam who grants righteousness and life to his people (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). Adam as a covenant head brought misery and death to the world, but believers will reign in life (Rom. 5:17) through the last Adam, Jesus Christ.

"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations."

GENESIS 17:4

Throughout the Bible, God has related to his people through covenants. It is through these covenant relationships, which collectively serve as the foundation for God's promise to bring redemption to his people, that we can understand the advancement of his kingdom. This book walks through six covenants from Genesis to Revelation, helping us grasp the overarching narrative of Scripture and see the salvation God has planned for us since the beginning of time—bolstering our faith in God and giving us hope for the future.

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