

III. The Biblical Covenants

Though usually considered last in theological texts and courses, *eschatology* actually belongs first among the theological disciplines. If God is known through His self-interpreted actions in history (the climactic and greatest being the person of the incarnate Messiah) and those actions express and serve His predetermined purposes for His creation, then God's purposes are both fundamental and critical to knowing Him; that is, eschatology is the foundation of theology. The same logic applies to the other theological disciplines, whether anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, etc.

So also eschatology is fundamental to *Torah*: God's design for His creation – i.e., the predetermined outcome toward which He is directing all things – underlies and determines all of His disclosures, which take the form of both word and action. And if eschatology is fundamental to *Torah* (in every sense of the concept, including the entire scriptural corpus), *it is equally fundamental to the covenantal formulations – the biblical covenants – in which Torah is embodied*. Three critical implications follow from this:

- 1) First, *the biblical covenants look beyond themselves to God's larger work and ultimate goal for His creation*; they share a common *prophetic* nature. And because God's purposes have their focal point in Jesus, the covenants are all *christocentric*.
- 2) The second implication flows from the first one, which is that *all of the biblical covenants are related to one another in a progressive, prophetic and christocentric manner*. Each one presupposes its predecessors and anticipates those that follow, but as moving toward and then flowing out from Messiah and His work.
- 3) Third, *the biblical covenants – in their scriptural formulation, arrangement and relation – form the "backbone" of the scriptural text*. Specifically, the covenants form the primary structural framework for the elaborate, multi-dimensional scriptural storyline which advances from creation to new creation in the Messiah and finally to the consummation of the new creation as all things are summed up in Him.

All sorts of schemes have been proposed for understanding and relating the biblical covenants, but the above observations provide the *scriptural* framework for that task. Artificial categories such as *conditional* and *unconditional*, *law* and *grace*, etc. fall far short of the Scripture's perspective and actually work against a truly biblical understanding.

A. Covenant and Creation

If eschatology (the fact and nature of God's predetermined design for His creation) is the key to understanding the biblical covenants – *and it is*, it would seem the creation account is the place to begin in examining the covenants. The Reformed tradition, at least, agrees with this, but the agreement characteristically centers on the so-called "covenant of works" God allegedly made with Adam. But the contention here is that the creation *itself* is the starting point, not an inferred covenant in Eden coming after the creation was in place. In itself, God's creative work pointed toward His design for the creation, evident in the way the scriptural account presents it.

The Scripture provides a theological and eschatological account of creation, not a scientific one. That is, it discloses the meaning and purpose of God's creation, not the physical or biological mechanisms of His creative activity. And what that account reveals is that God created with the intent of administering His own presence and lordship through *man*, the divine image-bearer created to be royal image-son. Hence the creation account introduces the concept of *kingdom*, with the "days" of creation accomplishing God's work of "ordering and filling" by which He remedied the initial creational state of *tohu* (uninhabitable) and *bohu* (uninhabited) (Genesis 1:2).

- The first three days saw the creation of ordered *realms of dominion* which were then filled with corresponding *creaturely lords* appointed to preside over them (days 4-6).
- And to rule over all of those realms and rulers God created man – the "lord of the lords" in and through whom He, the Creator-God, would carry out His own wise and benevolent rule. Man was created to be God's "royal priest," mediating to the creation His presence and loving lordship while carrying back to God the creation's praise through his own worship and devotion. *The opening chapters of Genesis reveal that man, the image-son, was obligated to fulfill his uniquely glorious creational design and vocation, not comply with a moral works covenant.*

The creation narrative points to the design and destiny of the created order and the biblical covenants were enacted to serve that design and destiny. They did so, first by disclosing God's intent and then by advancing it (covenant as *torah* and *prophecy*). Each accomplished these functions in its own way as God situated each in its own place in the salvation history, but all shared this same singular purpose.

B. The Noahic Covenant

The first of those covenants was God's covenant with Noah, recorded in Genesis 6-9. Like all of the covenants, it had its basis in creation and God's design for it, but specifically as that design was interrupted and obstructed by the fall of man. That fall, recounted in the third chapter of Genesis, had cosmic implications, bringing the whole creation under the curse of death and alienation. The harmonious flourishing that characterized God's "very good" creation was supplanted by estrangement and enmity. Man remained image-lord, but as a perverse caricature of himself, now ruling in his own name as a being cut off from the divine life and mind (6:5). By seeking to define and order his existence independently of the God whose image and likeness he shares, man died to the truth of himself, no longer able to know himself or be who he truly is.

This was the human and creational circumstance that framed the Noahic Covenant and the flood episode surrounding it. Thus the premise of the Noahic Covenant was two-fold: God's *design* for His creation and its *cursed state* which precluded that design. So also this covenant – as all of the Old Testament covenants – had a two-fold purpose: It served to highlight the creation's tragic and intractable condition while reinforcing and advancing God's commitment to resolve it. The Noahic Covenant (and all those that followed) had its basis in creation and fall, but supremely in the *Protoevangelium*: God's pledge in Eden to overcome the serpent and his fruit and achieve His goal for His creation through Eve's offspring (3:15). *This is the fundamental sense in which all of the scriptural covenants are eschatological, prophetic and christocentric.*

1. General Observations

- a. This covenant is first mentioned in Genesis 6:18. God referred to it as *His* covenant with Noah by which He would save Noah and his family from the destruction He was bringing on the whole world. This characterization might make it seem that this was a one-sided covenant, but Noah had his own critical role in it. God “covenanted” deliverance for him, his family and other living things, but the covenant arrangement obligated Noah to facilitate that deliverance; he had to build the vessel of deliverance and then gather his family and pairs of creatures into it when the day of destruction came upon the earth (6:18-22).
- b. The fact that God spoke of *establishing* (upholding) His covenant with Noah (6:18) rather than *initiating* it (cf. Genesis 15:18 with 17:7, 19, 21) has spawned much debate. Some have argued that God previously entered into a covenant relationship with Noah (or the creation), so that the covenant mentioned here was the continuance of that earlier one. But in context, God spoke of “establishing” His covenant in order to encourage Noah that he needn’t fear the destruction that was coming upon the earth; he and his family could enter the ark secure that their God would carry them through the deluge because He was committed to His covenant. He would uphold (establish) it, even while destruction raged all around (6:13-18, cf. also 9:8-17 with Isaiah 24:1-5 and 54:1-14).
- c. The circumstances of the covenant show that it presupposed the creational curse and its effects (ref. 5:28-29), while also highlighting God’s unwillingness to abide it. The world now existed in contradiction of its created nature and intended function and it had man, the image-lord, driving its escalating perversion and pollution. God’s initial delight in His “exceedingly good” creation was replaced by sorrow and regret and He determined to completely destroy it (6:5-7).

The world’s woeful condition demanded its destruction, but God’s purpose for it and His promise concerning it required that it continue on. Thus His destroying hand could not be absolute; the covenant pertained to a *purging* that would yield *renewal*. What God had demonstrated in His creative work, He would later affirm through His prophet: He hadn’t created the earth to be a waste place (disordered and empty – Genesis 1:2), but to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18). Whatever man might do with the Creator’s world, His design for both would not be thwarted.

- d. And so the covenant with Noah was ultimately a *creation* covenant – not just between God and a man and his family, but the earth and its fullness (cf. Genesis 6:18 with 9:8-17). God’s intent for His creation and His delight in it would yet prevail; shalom and shabbat would again fill the earth. (As a sidenote, this perspective precludes the notion of a “local flood.” While perhaps addressing certain scientific concerns, a localized event misses the point of the flood as God’s condemnation and purging of the *world* cursed by human estrangement. Man’s fall as lord over the earth (Psalm 8) impacted his entire domain; a global curse necessitated global action (cf. Genesis 3:17-19, 6:17, 7:19-22)).

2. Significance and Implications

- a. The Noahic Covenant presupposed the Protoevangelium and built upon it. Itself an expression of *Torah*, the covenant revealed that the triumph depicted in God's oath to Eve had vast implications: The promised seed would strike the serpent's head, resulting in life out of death (Genesis 3:15, 20), but this life would encompass all creation. The seed's victory would mean the undoing of the creational curse; it would mean life for the world (ref. John 6:32-33).
- b. Thus the Noahic Covenant developed God's *torah* in Eden by showing that He was promising a *renewed creation* – both the human and non-human creation. In turn, this theme, introduced here, becomes a focal point of all future revelation, whether in word, deed, or covenant (cf. Genesis 12:1-3 with Romans 4:13 and Hebrews 11:8-10; cf. also Exodus 12:14-20; Leviticus 16:1-30; Numbers 15:1-16; so cf. 2 Samuel 7:1-16 with Isaiah 55:1-4; Jeremiah 33:14-26; Ezekiel 34:1-31 and Amos 9:11-15; finally, note Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12, 19:18-25, 24:1-5, 54:1-17, 65:17-25, 66:5-24; Hosea 2:1-23; Zechariah 2:1-13, 14:1-11).
- c. So also this covenant and its circumstances highlight Noah as a *new Adam* – the source of a new humanity, yet one still charged with the human mandate as divine image-son (cf. 1:27-28, 9:1-7). The Noahic Covenant thus introduced a *corporate* dimension to the Edenic promise of a seed; it suggested that Eve's triumphal offspring was somehow going to be the source of a new human race. Though the specifics remained in the shadows, this first biblical covenant indicated that the promised son of Adam was going to take his father's place (cf. Luke 3:23-38; 1 Corinthians 15:20-49; cf. also Romans 5:12-21).
- d. By embellishing the Protoevangelium in this way, the Noahic Covenant enlarged God's *Torah* as *messianic prophecy*: The promise of a human seed was the promise of a chosen, covenanted deliverer through whom God would purge the world's corruption and usher in a renewed creation – a new world that would endure before Him (cf. Genesis 5:28-29, 8:20-22, 9:11-16; cf. also Isaiah 54). This is the key to interpreting Noah's singular "righteousness" (Genesis 5:9). He wasn't "blameless" as untouched by the fall (ref. 8:21, cf. 9:20-23), but he prefigured the coming Deliverer as one who "walked with God," communing with Him in a way that distinguished him among his fellow men. Noah was a man in whom men uniquely experienced the Creator-God and His faithfulness and zeal on behalf of His creation (2 Peter 2:4-5; cf. John 1:14-18, 14:8ff).

Thus the Noahic Covenant looked forward as well as backward. Indeed, as a form of *Torah*, it couldn't be otherwise, for *Torah* always concerns the disclosure of truth – the truth of what *is* in relation to what *has been* and what *is to come* (hence *Torah*'s revelatory, instructive, prescriptive and prophetic dimensions.) The covenant saw the fulfillment of God's oath to Eve, but in a *prototypical* way (8:20-21). And so it, too, pointed forward in promise, taking hold of past disclosure in order to enlarge it and further build the case for what was yet to come. It amplified Eden's *Torah* with a view to the incarnate *Torah* (John 1:1-18; Revelation 1:1-19, 19:11-16).