

COVENANT: THE BEGINNING OF A BIBLICAL IDEA

Covenant is arguably one of the most significant concepts in biblical theology. As well as being part of the glue that unites the Christian canon (traditionally entitled ‘the Old and New Testaments’), covenant plays a prominent role at all the major points in salvation history. However, while its biblical and theological significance is generally acknowledged, there is little consensus over the point at which it is first introduced. While the word is not explicitly mentioned until the sixth chapter of Genesis (‘But I will establish my covenant with you’, Gen 6:18 TNIV), it is suggested by some that the concept has been introduced (implicitly) much earlier, namely in the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2. This article will attempt to disprove that by critiquing the exegetical arguments used to support the idea of an antediluvian ‘covenant’ in the opening chapters of Genesis.

Reformed (or federal) theologians in the seventeenth century developed a system in which the whole of God’s engagement with the world was understood within a covenant framework. This framework included some covenants whose biblical basis is at best unclear. Such covenants include a pre-creation ‘covenant of redemption/peace’ between Father and Son, a probationary ‘covenant of works’ with Adam prior to the Fall, and a postlapsarian, all-encompassing ‘covenant of grace’ (of which each of the explicit divine-human covenants from Noah to the new covenant is an expression or administration).¹ Accordingly, such scholars argue that there are two great covenantal epochs in history: the pre-Fall covenant of works and the post-Fall covenant of grace. These are bound together by an overarching covenant of redemption established between the Father and the Son in eternity.

As the latter obviously lies well outside the scope of Genesis, we can leave it to one side.² Moreover, since the ‘covenant of grace’ is clearly a trans-historical entity (which allegedly holds together all the divine-human covenants explicitly mentioned in Scripture) we can ignore it also. Our attention will focus rather on the covenant allegedly reflected in the opening chapters of Genesis. Debate rages over the nomenclature, but ‘covenant of works’ is certainly the most

¹ The covenant of grace is also seen to incorporate a postlapsarian covenant between God and Adam, alluded to in the *Protevangelium* of Gen 3:15.

² Interestingly, even some Reformed theologians dismiss the idea: For example, Robertson (*The Christ of the Covenants* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980], p. 54) states: ‘The intention of God from eternity to redeem a people to himself certainly must be affirmed. Before the foundation of the world God set his covenantal love on his people. But affirming the role of redemption in the eternal counsels of God is not the same as proposing the existence of a pre-creation covenant between Father and Son. A sense of artificiality flavours the effort to structure in covenantal terms the mysteries of God’s eternal counsels ... To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian “covenant” with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety’.

common epithet.³ Unfortunately such a description has resulted in considerable misunderstanding.⁴ For example, there is no suggestion of humans achieving a righteous status, or procuring it by their own efforts. But even its advocates recognise that the nomenclature is imprecise and potentially misleading. Thus Robertson (p. 56) observes:

To speak of a covenant of “works” in contrast with a covenant of “grace” appears to suggest that grace was not operative in the covenant of works. As a matter of fact, the totality of God’s relationship with man is a matter of grace. Although “grace” may not have been operative in the sense of a merciful relationship despite sin, the creational bond between God and man indeed was gracious.⁵

Despite some of its acknowledged limitations, this ‘covenant of works’ is understood to have great theological significance, explaining, for example, the fallenness of humankind, the universality of sin and guilt, and the federal headship of Christ.

However, the concept of a ‘covenant of works’ has attracted strong critique even from those within the Reformed camp. Not surprisingly, this has largely been on the grounds of insufficient warrant for such an idea in Scripture, but concerns have also been expressed over the imprecise terminology. Most tellingly, even advocates such as McComiskey are forced to concede that ‘the application of the term *covenant* is not wrong, provided we understand it to be used in its broadest relational sense’.⁶ But this of course begs the question whether or not this ‘broadest relational sense’ concurs with the use of ‘covenant’ in the rest of Scripture.

I. A Covenant with Adam?

Most mainstream OT scholars dismiss any idea of an Adamic covenant, typically on the grounds that ‘there is no explicit reference to a covenant with Adam or Eve’.⁷ With rare

³ Other epithets include ‘covenant of nature’, ‘covenant of life’, ‘Edenic covenant’, and more popular in recent discussion, ‘covenant of creation’. In a recent defence of federal theology, McGowan (A.T.B. McGowan, ‘In Defence of “Headship Theology”’, in J.A. Grant and A.I. Wilson [eds], *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives* [Leicester: Apollos, 2005], 178-99) interestingly suggests replacing the traditional covenant nomenclature altogether, preferring rather to speak of ‘the Adamic Administration’ and ‘the Messianic Administration’. Tellingly, he insists that ‘it is ... perfectly possible to maintain the relationship of headship [i.e. involving imputation of sin or righteousness] without positing covenants as the basis for the relationship’ (p. 190).

⁴ For a number of potential misconceptions, see Robertson p. 56.

⁵ Here Robertson accurately represents traditional Reformed usage, which reserves ‘grace’ for the activity of God with respect to *fallen* humanity.

⁶ T.E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 219.

⁷ S.L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), pp. 46-47. See also the dismissive comments by both J. Barr and J. Day in A.D.H. Mayes & R.B. Salters (eds), *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson* (Oxford: OUP), pp. 12-13; 99, 102.

exceptions,⁸ advocates usually belong to the Reformed camp; e.g. E.J. Young; T.E. McComiskey; O.P. Robertson.

The only explicit textual support for the existence of an ‘Adamic Covenant’ is Hosea 6:7,⁹ which the ESV—in line with most English versions—renders as follows: ‘But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me’. However, while this text may initially appear to settle all dispute, its interpretation is notoriously difficult:

- Most interpreters emend the key word, *kē’ādām*, (‘as/like Adam’) to read, *bē’ādām* (in/at Adam).¹⁰
- Arguably, a geographical interpretation may not necessitate textual emendation (cf. the similar syntax, *kammidbār* [‘as in the wilderness’ so NRSV] in Hos 2:3; MT v.5).
- A geographical understanding is supported by Gilead (Hos 6:8) and Shechem (Hos 6:9) in the immediate context, and especially by the deployment of the locative *šām* (‘there’) immediately after *bērît* in Hosea 6:7. Robertson (p. 22n.2) suggests that ‘the emphatic “there” could represent a dramatic gesture toward the place of Israel’s current idolatry rather than requiring a poetic parallel to the location at which Israel had sinned in the past’, but this is without parallel in Hosea (cf. Hos 6:10; 9:15; 10:9; 13:8) and the Book of the Twelve as a whole.
- Indeed, even with no adjustments to the MT, the text may be translated in several ways that clearly militate against using it as a proof text for a hypothetical Adamic covenant.¹¹

The significance of this must not be overlooked, for without Hosea 6:7 there is no explicit textual support for a covenant established between God and Adam. Thus, a major difficulty for those who wish to identify such a covenant is the fact that there is no unambiguous warrant for it elsewhere.

⁸ Most famously, Wellhausen believed that at least one of his putative sources attested to four distinct covenants in the Pentateuch (viz., the Adamic, the Noahic, the Abrahamic, and the Mosaic), as is reflected in his label for the ‘P’ material (i.e. ‘Q’, ‘The Book of the Four Covenants’; Latin: *Liber quatuor foederum*, hence ‘Q’). Wellhausen believed a covenant with Adam was implicit within Gen 1:28 – 2:4.

⁹ Some advocates (e.g. Robertson, pp. 19-21) point also to Jer 33:20-21, 25-26. However, these texts (and others in Jeremiah) seem to point more generally to a covenant with creation. For this reason the will be discussed below in the material dealing with covenant and creation.

¹⁰ E.g. RSV; JB; TEV; NRSV; NJB; TNIV; also H. Wolff, *Hosea* (Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), pp. 121-122; J.L. Mays, *Hosea* (OTL, London: SCM 1969), p. 100; F.I. Andersen and N. Freedman, *Hosea* (AB, New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 435-36; J. Day, ‘Pre-Deuteronomistic Allusions to the Covenant in Hosea and Psalm LXXVIII’, *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986), pp. 2-6; D.A. Hubbard, *Hosea* (TOTC, Leicester: IVP, 1989), p. 128. In Hebrew script the letters ‘k’ and ‘b’ are very similar and thus easily confused.

¹¹ E.g., the consonantal text could also be rendered, ‘like Edom they have transgressed a covenant’, although the locative (*šām*) clearly militates against this interpretation also. The Septuagint understands *kē’ādām* in a ‘generic’ sense: *hōs anthrōpos* (they are like a man transgressing ...). Such an interpretation (‘like mankind’) was strongly supported by Calvin. A radically different interpretation is adopted by Stuart (*Hosea-Jonah* [WBC; Waco: Word, 1987], pp. 98-99, 111), who renders the verse, ‘But look — they have walked on my covenant like it was dirt, see they have betrayed me!’ reading *’ādām* as a variant of *’ādāmā*, *’ābar* as ‘to walk on’, and *šām* as ‘see’.

Undaunted by this fact, several scholars have sought to find exegetical support for such a covenant in the Genesis creation texts themselves. Thus Niehaus resorts to Form Criticism in an attempt to validate the existence of such a covenant.¹² His case is undermined, however, by the rather forced and tenuous nature of some of his suggested analogies between Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 and a typical second millennium suzerain-vassal treaty pattern.

A better case is offered by Bartholomew,¹³ who clearly recognizes the deficiencies in the traditional defence of a covenant within the context of creation. He notes a number of allusions to Genesis 1 – 2 in subsequent covenant texts. However, while validating his claim that these covenants are ‘anchored in’ and ‘involve the fulfilling of God’s creative purposes,’ this does not necessarily indicate ‘a covenantal understanding of creation in Genesis 1 and 2’ (p. 29). Moreover, Bartholomew’s attempt to explain the absence of key covenantal elements (i.e. an oath or covenant rite) in Genesis 1 and 2 is unconvincing; he maintains that ‘the normal assurance and legalizing element of covenant’ is unnecessary prior to the Fall (p. 30). But this surely begs the question whether *covenant* itself is a necessary constitutive element at this stage either.¹⁴ As Goldingay (p. 23) comments:¹⁵

The fact that Genesis does not use the word ‘covenant’ until after the Flood is unlikely to mean nothing. I suspect it suggests that there is no need for the formalising or legalising of the relationship between God and the world when the relationship is in its unspoiled state. It is when humanity is discovered to be wrong-minded from youth (8:21) and God has acted so destructively towards the world that God comes to make the kind of irrational promise that Noah receives, and to seal it with a covenant commitment.

More recently Goldingay elaborates as follows:¹⁶

By not speaking of the relationship between God and the first human beings as a covenant, Genesis has perhaps implied that there was no need for formally binding commitments before the time of human disobedience and divine punishment. Those events have imperilled the relationship on both sides. God cannot trust human beings, and human beings cannot trust God. So now God makes a formal and solemn binding commitment to humanity.

¹² J.J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (SOTBT; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 143-59.

¹³ C.G. Bartholomew, ‘Covenant and Creation; Covenant Overload or Covenant Deconstruction,’ *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995), pp. 28-30.

¹⁴ Cf. J.H. Stek, ‘“Covenant” Overload in Reformed Theology,’ *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994), 12-41.

¹⁵ J. Goldingay, ‘A Response to Stephen Clark’, in M.J. Cartledge and D. Mills (eds), *Covenant Theology: Contemporary Approaches* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 21-32. While certainly not in agreement with all the sentiment expressed here, I consider Goldingay’s premise and conclusion essentially to be correct.

¹⁶ *Old Testament Theology: Volume 1. Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), p.181.

Tellingly, McComiskey (p. 217) can offer no better explanation to this issue (the absence of covenant vocabulary before Gen 6:18) than the following:

The intent may be that we are not to understand the relationship with Adam to be a *bĕrît* in the same sense that the word has in its other occurrences in the Book of Genesis. In the other instances where the word is used of a divine-human relationship, it connotes the assurance of a divine promise of blessing that the human participant did not previously possess.

Surely this concedes too much, given that the latter understanding of a divine-human covenant applies not only in the rest of Genesis, but throughout the rest of Scripture.

II. Preliminary Conclusions

It is difficult to get past the lack of unambiguous textual warrant for the existence of a covenant between God and Adam. While the absence of formal covenant terminology cannot be said to exclude the idea,¹⁷ the fact that it is not introduced until Genesis 6:18, where it unarguably relates to God's covenant with Noah, must carry considerable weight.¹⁸

Moreover, advocates of a prelapsarian covenant must define 'covenant' in a way which is broad enough to encompass the situation which prevailed in Eden, hence ignoring or excluding aspects that appear to be absolutely intrinsic to the covenant concept elsewhere in the OT (i.e. a commitment solemnly/formally sealed by an oath).

While there is little evidence of such a commitment prior to the Fall, Robertson and others have a more solid basis for an alleged covenant established between God and Adam after the Fall. Here, at least, there is a substantive divine promise which is in some sense foundational for the covenants which follow (i.e. Gen 3:15). However, the fact that this promise was made to the serpent rather than directly to the human pair does raise questions over calling it a 'covenant with Adam'.

It seems best to conclude, therefore, that while Adam and Eve were certainly involved in a divine-human relationship both before and after the Fall, neither the prelapsarian relationship nor the immediate postlapsarian relationship was understood in terms of a 'covenant'. This explains

¹⁷ As W. Eichrodt's oft-quoted statement underlines, 'The crucial point is not—as an all too naïve criticism sometimes seems to think—the occurrence or absence of the Hebrew word *bĕrît*' (*Theology of the Old Testament*, [OTL; London: SCM 1961], pp. 17-18).

¹⁸ This is acknowledged even by Robertson (p. 18), who concedes that 'The biblical exegete should be concerned to determine the reason for this omission.' However, he himself does not appear to furnish his readers with any such explanation.

not only the lack of scriptural warrant for any Adamic Covenant, but also the insurmountable fact that the biblical narrator chose not to employ the word ‘covenant’ before Genesis 6:18.

III. Covenant and Creation

While the postdiluvian covenant involving Noah has important links with creation, several scholars suggest that this is simply the renewal of an already-existing covenant—one which God had previously made in the context of creation itself. Thus several recent advocates of an antediluvian ‘covenant’ prefer to speak in terms of an all-embracing covenant established between God and his creation. Such a covenant was not established between God and humanity at some point subsequent to creation; rather, this covenant of/with creation was established in the very act of creation itself.

1. *The Exegetical Arguments for a Creation Covenant*

An exegetical case for such a prelapsarian ‘covenant with creation’ has been mounted, among others,¹⁹ by W.J. Dumbrell.²⁰ Dumbrell’s argument leans heavily on his exegesis of Genesis 6:18, from which he infers that the covenant announced there is simply the confirmation of the covenant God had previously ‘brought into existence by the act of creation itself’ (p. 43). This conclusion is based primarily on two observations: how the covenant concept is introduced and how its anticipated ‘establishment’ is described.

Genesis 6:18 (cf. Gen 9:8-17) introduces the Noahic covenant using a possessive pronoun, ‘my covenant’ (*bēṣītī*). For Dumbrell, ‘the most natural interpretation ... is that an existing arrangement to be preserved is referred to, to which no more specific appeal is required than the denomination of it as “my covenant”’ (p. 24).

The other major factor in Dumbrell’s argument is the precise connotation of the Hebrew verbs used in association with a ‘covenant’, especially the verb *hēqîm* (‘establish’). As in Genesis 17 (in which the covenant concept reappears in the Abraham narrative after its initial introduction in Gen 15:18), the verbs *nātan* (‘give’) and *hēqîm* are used with reference to the Noahic covenant rather than the more idiomatic *kārat* (‘cut’)—the verb most commonly associated with the initiation of a divine-human covenant in the Old Testament (cf. the Abramic covenant, Gen 15:18; the Sinaitic covenant, Exod 24:8; the Davidic covenant, Ps 89:3; the new covenant, Jer 31:31). Dumbrell maintains that the ratification of secular covenants reflected in the Old Testament is likewise described by this same verb and that none of the analogous verbs used in association with a *bēṣīt* is strictly synonymous with *kārat*. Such verbs, he avers, are not deployed

¹⁹ Cf. M.G. Kline’s self-published *Kingdom Prologue* (3 volumes), in which an exegetical case similar to Dumbrell’s is mounted for a covenant with creation.

²⁰ W.J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984), pp. 11-43.

with reference to a covenant's actual initiation (i.e. the point of entry), but are consistently used in relation to covenants that have been established formerly.²¹ From this Dumbrell concludes that it is 'more likely that in contexts where *hēqîm b'rit* stands (Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11, 17; 17:7, 19, 21; Ex 6:4; Lev 26:9; Deut 8:18; 2 Kings 23:3) the institution of a covenant is not being referred to but rather its perpetuation' (p. 26). If, as Dumbrell insists, this verb is used exclusively for perpetuating a pre-existing relationship, then one must inevitably concede that Genesis 6:18 refers to an already-existing covenant.

In addition to the above arguments, Dumbrell (pp. 33-39) also finds implicit evidence for a creation covenant (i.e. a commitment to achieve the purpose of creation) in the opening creation narrative itself (i.e. Gen. 1:1 – 2:4a). Thus the covenantal relationship is implicit in man's unique function as divine image; sharing in divine rest is the covenant's goal; and the covenant is conditioned on submitting to Yahweh's authority (i.e. living under Yahweh's kingship).

Other advocates of a creation covenant (e.g. Roberston, pp. 19-21, for whom it is made with man in particular, rather than with creation in general) have looked for scriptural support to Jeremiah 33:20-26. In these verses God expressly mentions his 'covenant with the day and with the night' and seems to link this with 'the fixed patterns of heaven and earth' which he has established. Thus Roberston asks (p. 19), 'When did God establish a "covenant" with "day and night"?' and notes that there are really only two possibilities: 'These phrases apparently refer either to God's ordinances of creation or to the ordinances of the covenant with Noah. In both instances, the regularity of day and night play a prominent role.'

However, while conceding that Jeremiah could be alluding to Genesis 8:22 ('As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease' TNIV), Robertson concludes in favour of an allusion to Genesis 1:14 ('And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years' TNIV). He does so mainly on the basis of a second Jeremianic text (Jer 31:35-36) where a similar argument is employed. Robertson acknowledges that this second text does not actually use the term 'covenant', but notes that the terminology it does employ—'statute' or 'fixed order' (Heb. *hōq*)—is used in parallel with covenant elsewhere (e.g. 1 Kings 11:11; 2 Kings 17:15; Pss 50:16; 105:10). Robertson further notes that the details given in Jeremiah 31:35 ('he [Yahweh] who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night ...') correspond with those of the creation narrative but not with the Noahic covenant:

²¹ Cf. W.J. Dumbrell, pp. 25-26; see too J.G. McConville, 'בְּרִית', *NIDOTTE IV* (1997), pp. 748-49.

Quite interestingly, the reference to the sun and moon specifically as light-bearers for day and night is found in the creation narrative but not in the narrative describing God's covenant with Noah. Furthermore, the narrative of the creation activity of the third day refers to the stars as well as to the moon (Gen. 1:16), as does Jeremiah 31:35. The record of God's covenant with Noah makes no mention of the stars.

For these reasons Roberston concludes that both Jeremiah 31:34-35 and Jeremiah 33:20-26 allude to God's creation ordinances, and thus a covenant made in the context of creation, rather than to the covenant with Noah in the aftermath of the Flood.

2. *The Exegetical Arguments Critiqued*

It is worth reiterating that explicit covenant terminology is conspicuously absent in the creation narrative. This must mean something. While the situation for Adam and Eve, and the created order may have been similar to that experienced under the terms of subsequent divine-human covenants, it was clearly not identical. As Dell suggests, Dumbrell 'understresses the part played by human sin in the inauguration of this [creation] covenant after the flood'.²² As noted previously, the fact that the biblical narrator chose not to employ explicit covenant terminology until after the Fall and in the context of a major threat to the fulfilment of God's purpose must surely be significant.

As well as the glaring absence of corroborative evidence for his postulated creation covenant, Dumbrell's exegesis of Genesis 6:18 may itself be challenged. Exodus 19:5 analogously heralds the formal inauguration of the Sinaitic covenant (cf. Exod 24:8), referring to the latter (as yet, unestablished) covenant as 'my covenant.' In keeping with his earlier suggestion, Dumbrell (pp. 80-81) again suggests that an element of continuity is reflected here by the pronominal suffix: 'The phrase 'my covenant' contains the same unilateral implications as are suggested by references such as Gen 6:18; 9:9ff, hinting thus that the Sinai revelation may in fact be further specification only of an already existing relationship'. This, however, is clearly a circular argument; Dumbrell is uncritically assuming that the Noahic covenant *must* be understood as an expansion of his postulated 'covenant with creation.' Without the latter premise, Dumbrell's conclusion with respect to the Sinaitic covenant is not immediately obvious. Indeed, it is seriously undermined by the fact that the Sinai covenant is presented as a new development in the Pentateuchal narrative. Moreover, given the use of the verb *kārat* ('cut') in Exodus 24:8 (according to Dumbrell, a verb deployed only in the context of the initiation of a new covenant; see below), this is something that even Dumbrell himself must surely concede.

²² K. Dell, 'Covenant and Creation in Relationship', in Mayes and Salters (eds), *Covenant as Context*, p. 129.

Moreover, a careful reading of the relevant texts amply demonstrates the fallacy of Dumbrell's underlying premise. Weinfeld offers a more comprehensive list of such texts and therefore provides a better basis on which to evaluate Dumbrell's assertion.²³ In several of the texts cited by Weinfeld the key verbs do indeed refer back to established covenants rather than to the initiation of new covenants (e.g. 2 Sam 23:5). Nevertheless, such is not uniformly so, and is clearly difficult to maintain for several texts (e.g. Num 25:12; Deut 29:11[12]; Ezek 16:8; 17:13; 2 Chron 15:12), arguably including the relevant covenantal texts in Genesis also (i.e. Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11; 17:2, 7, 19). Moreover, while the causative verb *hēqîm* may be understood as 'to confirm' or 'to maintain' (e.g. Lev 26:9; Deut 8:18), it has a wide range of nuances in the Old Testament.²⁴ Thus a close examination of the relevant texts demonstrates that Dumbrell's conclusion is seriously flawed. For example, as Beckwith observes,²⁵ the deployment of *hēqîm* in Exodus 6:4 illustrates that this verb does not necessarily suggest the confirmation or perpetuation of a previously existing covenant. Similarly, in Jeremiah 34:18 a strong case can be made in support of a covenant being instituted and not just renewed (cf. Jer 34:10). Clearly the context alone must determine the meaning attached to *hēqîm* in any given text, hence Dumbrell is mistaken simply to infer from the use of this verb that an already existing covenant is being maintained.²⁶ Rather, as Weinfeld (p. 260) acknowledges, several verbs may be used to reflect the institution or ratification of a *bērît*, one of which is *hēqîm*. This being so, there is no compelling argument for interpreting Genesis 6:18 as alluding to the reiteration of a previously existing covenant. Rather, as a straightforward reading suggests, here the concept of a divine-human covenant is being introduced for the first time.

But how then is its initial description as 'my covenant' to be explained? Well, rather than indicating that this is an already existing covenant, the initial description of the Noahic covenant (like the subsequent Mosaic covenant; Exod 19:5) as 'my covenant' simply underlines its *unilateral* character. God describes the covenant as 'my covenant' because he initiated it and he alone determined its constituent elements. Even Dumbrell recognises such a connotation for the pronominal suffix in both texts (i.e. Gen 6:18; Exod 19:5), and it is quite unnecessary to extrapolate further. Thus the use of *bērîtî* ('my covenant') in Genesis 6 cannot be said to

²³ M. Weinfeld, *ברית* in *TDOT* II (1977), p. 260.

²⁴ See P.R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (Sheffield: SAP, 2000), pp. 197-98.

²⁵ R.T. Beckwith, 'The Unity and Diversity of God's Covenants', *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987), p. 99n.23.

²⁶ Dumbrell himself (p. 25n.17) notes the exception of Ezek 16:8 ('I spread the corner of my garment over you, and covered your nakedness: I gave you my solemn oath and entered [*bô*'] into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine' TNIV), suggesting that the legal formula might have been considered inappropriate in this context of a 'marriage' between Yahweh and Israel. However, it must be acknowledged that the prophets—including Ezekiel—reflect no such reluctance to use legal metaphor in relation to God's relationship with his people elsewhere. Moreover, the metaphor is surely no less 'inappropriate' in the absence of the exact legal formula.

indicate, still less prove, that the covenant spoken of in this chapter is simply a reiteration or an expansion of a covenant already recounted (implicitly) in the opening chapters of Genesis. Rather, the possessive pronoun simply emphasises the divine prerogative in every aspect of the covenant in view. Thus understood, Genesis 6:18 heralds the formal inauguration of the Noahic covenant which is subsequently set out in Genesis 8:20 – 9:17.

While some scholars have pointed to Jeremiah 33:20-26 for further support,²⁷ the references here to a covenant with inanimate created things seem to allude more to dimensions of the Noahic covenant reflected in Genesis 8:22 – 9:13 (esp. Gen 8:22) than to an implicit ‘covenant with creation’ in Genesis 1 – 2. Admittedly, the somewhat similar analogy drawn in Jeremiah 31:35-37 may indeed allude to the fixed order established at creation, but nothing is said in this context (Jer 31:35-37) of a divine covenant with creation, and caution needs to be exercised before adjudging terminology to be ‘synonymous’ on the basis of Hebrew parallelism. Neither here nor elsewhere is it suggested that the cycle of day and night and the other cosmic ordinances established at creation were ratified by divine covenant *prior to that established with Noah*.

Nevertheless, while the conclusion that Genesis 1 – 3 must portray an antediluvian covenantal relationship is a *non sequitur*, Dumbrell and others are obviously correct to recognise several clear echoes of the creation narrative in the Noahic covenant. But these echoes suggest merely that God intended, through Noah, to fulfil his original creational intent; they do not necessarily presuppose the existence of a covenant between God and inanimate creation or indicate that the material in Genesis 1 – 3 must be understood covenantally. Rather, ‘Creation can only be called a *bērit* from the point of view of its restoration after the flood’.²⁸

IV. The Significance of the Debate

While the preceding discussion may seem somewhat pedantic, it does have a direct bearing on our understanding of covenant. For most Reformed theologians, any relationship involving God must be covenantal in nature—whether it’s his relationship with creation in general or his relation with human beings in particular. Covenant is seen as framing or establishing such a relationship. This, however, is not in fact what the biblical text suggests. Rather than establishing

²⁷ Significantly, McComiskey (p. 216) is reluctant to use Jer 33 to support the extension of the covenant concept to the pre-Noahic period, and Dumbrell completely ignores its possible significance for his postulated covenant with creation—possibly because it does not use the verb *kārat* with reference to the establishment of this particular covenant (I am indebted to Michael Stead for the latter observation).

²⁸ R. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. 134.

or framing such a divine-human relationship, a covenant seals or formalizes it. The biblical order is relationship, then covenant, rather than covenant, hence relationship.²⁹

Leaving aside creation for a moment, just consider the subsequent examples of divine-human relationships that are subsequently sealed by a covenant: God was clearly in relationship with Abraham from Genesis 12, yet it is not until Genesis 15 that God formalizes that relationship by means of a covenant. Similarly, God was in relationship with Israel before the covenant he established with them on Mount Sinai. Likewise, God was in relationship with David long before he sealed that relationship by covenant in 2 Samuel 7. And a straightforward reading of Genesis 6 suggests that God was in relationship with Noah before sealing that relationship by covenant immediately after the Flood. Thus the question is not whether a relationship existed between God and creation or between God and humanity prior to the Fall. Of course such a relationship existed. But was it a covenant relationship? The biblical text suggests otherwise. A covenant was a means of sealing or formalizing such a relationship; it did not establish it. As Waltke puts it, ‘A covenant solemnizes and confirms a social relationship already in existence.’³⁰

Hence our discussion throws important light on the precise relationship between creation and covenant. Rather than allowing creation to be subsumed under covenant,³¹ covenant must be understood in the context of creation. The priority of creation over covenant has important ramifications for redemptive or salvation history. The latter is concerned not merely with the restoration of the divine-human relationship established at creation, but ultimately with the renewal of all things, including creation itself which, as Paul reminds us, ‘will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God’ (Rom 8:21). It is towards this objective that each of the divine-human covenants in Scripture advance. The glue which binds all the biblical covenants together is God’s creative purpose of universal blessing. Each covenant takes us one step closer towards the realization of that divine goal.

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²⁹ Ironically, on this point Dumbrell and I are agreed. However, he appears to fudge the issue by collapsing relationship into covenant (see his ‘Creation, Covenant and Work’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13:2 [1989], p. 138).

³⁰ B.K. Waltke and C. J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 136. Waltke understands the verb (*qûm*) in Gen 6:18 to signify the confirmation of a previously existing relationship (between God and Noah), rather than a new development in an existing covenant (cf. Dumbrell).

³¹ In fairness to Dumbrell, it must be noted that he also is opposed to subordinating creation to covenant.