COVENANT: AN IDEA IN THE MIND OF GOD

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Theologians, scholars, and other thoughtful readers have long understood that the Bible contains several covenants, both divine-human covenants and covenants between humans. The discovery and publication of the Hittite international suzerain-vassal treaties, and subsequent studies which compared them with the biblical covenants, have helped us understand better the nature of the biblical covenants against their ancient Near Eastern background.[1]

Nevertheless, scholarship on the topic of biblical covenants has shown a lack of consensus on the origin of the covenant idea. Some hold that the idea evolved out of the family; others hold that it evolved out of the institution of nation states. I propose that the covenant idea did not evolve out of any human institution at all; rather, it is rooted in the very nature of God, and might also be called an idea in the mind of God. I will examine the creation data and their implications for an understanding of covenant and its rootedness in God's nature. In addition to these questions regarding the origin of covenant, a question has arisen as to the nature of covenant. On this matter, too, scholarship lacks consensus: does a covenant establish a new relationship on the basis of some historical background, or does a covenant confirm or ratify an existing relationship? I hope in this article to explore these questions, and to propose answers to them which suit the biblical and ancient Near Eastern data, and also comport well with what the Bible tells us about God. The first half of the article will deal with the origin of the idea of covenant; the second half will deal with the nature of that idea.

I. THE ORIGIN OF COVENANT

1. *An evolutionary model.* Some have argued that the idea of covenant had its origins in the most fundamental of all social units, the family. The god of the family, or more particularly, the god of the father, had a tutelary relation to the family, with whom he also had mutual obligations. Albrecht Alt,

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[1] The groundbreaking study was by G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *BA* 17/3 (1954) 50–76, followed by the analytical work of M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) and K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1966) and, subsequently, D. J. McCarthy's *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1982).

in his seminal work *Der Gott der Väter*, argued for three distinct patriarchal deities: the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac, and the Mighty One of Jacob. He thought that these three eventually became fused into one figure, the "God of the Fathers."[2] The God of the Fathers then became identified with Yahweh in Exod 3:15, "Yahweh, the *God of your Fathers*, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Frank Moore Cross followed Alt's hypothesis and declared, "The gods of the Fathers were *paidagogoi* to the great god Yahweh who later took their place."[3] Cross thus speaks of "the Divine Kinsman, who adopted (or entered into covenant with) the patriarch, the lineage, or tribe, in other words the 'god of the father.' "[4]

Cross argues that as time passed and population increased such family covenant structures evolved into tribal covenants with the patriarchal deity. Eventually the tribes formed a league which extended covenant fellowship to all members, whether related genetically or legally ('in-laws'):

> In the Israelite league kinship ties were extended by the bonds of a covenant of which Yahweh was party and guarantor. The league covenant bound the tribes to the deity, and tribe with tribe, with stipulations as to the deity's cult and stipulations governing tribal behavior. These were the basis of solidarity and peace (*salom*), mutual responsibilities in time of war, and the duties of conducting a common cult.[5]

Moreover, Cross suggests an analogous evolution of tribal leagues or con-federations into nation states headed by kings, before and around Israel (e.g. Edom, Moab, Ammon, Midian, Ishmael, and Qedar); and he indicates that these were sacral leagues, like Israel, in covenant with their god (e.g. "the *'am Kemos*, 'sacral league' or 'kindred' of Chemosh, and Ammon, the *'am Milkom*").[6] The covenant idea carried over from tribal league to nation state, so that kings and nation states were in covenant with their national (originally, tribal, and even earlier, patriarchal/family) god. McCarthy, it should be noted, had put forward the same idea in his earlier study, when he stated that a covenant was "the means the ancient world took to extend relationships beyond the natural unity by blood."[7]

Because the idea of covenant originated in the family, ancient Near Eastern covenants contained family language. Again, to quote Cross:

> The language of kinship used in marriage, adoption, and covenants of indi-viduals and groups is put to use even in parity treaties and vassal treaties negotiated at the international level between independent states. That such language survives in societies evolved far beyond the tribal level is remark-

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[2] Albrecht Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (trans. R. A. Wilson; Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) 54–55.

[3] F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 128.

[4] F. M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon, History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998) 20.

[5] Ibid. 17.

[6] Ibid. 12.

[7] McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* 175.

able, and it points to the tenacity of the kinship ethos, especially in peoples of the West Semitic world.[8]

Cross notes in support of this thesis that such "kinship" terms as "love," "brotherhood," "fatherhood," and "sonship" were used in the second millennium BC international treaties to characterize covenant relations between the parties.[9]

It has been known for some time that family terms were used as a way of portraying international relations brought about by covenant.[10] But Cross has taken these data and used them to construct an anthropological/sociological way of accounting for the evolution of the covenant idea in the ancient Near East. As he notes, "Often it has been asserted that the language of 'brotherhood' and 'fatherhood,' 'love' and 'loyalty' is 'covenant terminology.' This is to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from the language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh."[11]

The interpretive tradition in which Cross stands is evolutionary and naturalistic: the idea of covenant evolved out of family structures and is analogous to the nexus of relations that one finds in a family. Some evangelical scholars have adopted his reconstruction, without necessarily embracing its evolutionary ethos. Paul R. Williamson says of the covenant idea, "The concept probably derives from formal kinship ties (so Cross, 1998), which have subsequently been employed (along with vassal treaties) as a metaphor for a similar bond between God and human beings."[12] Scott J. Hafemann likewise sees the origin of the covenant idea in family ties:

> YHWH's covenant with Israel and the church as divine King (Lord) and Father is an extension of the "natural relationship" that exists within the household-family and tribe (with marriage seen as a covenant) to a nation and people. . . . As a result, God is now his (adopted) people's "Divine Kinsman," who is no longer simply a family God (the 'God of the fathers'), but the ruler of all by virtue of an extended "kinship-in-law."[13]

Here again, the family and tribe are the basis for the covenant idea and account for the kinship terminology that one finds in covenants.

If the order of ideas described above is correct, there are two possible ways to understand its significance. One way is to view it naturalistically: the idea of covenant evolved among humans on the basis of family bonds as society became more complex, and then it was used to portray supposed (but

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[8] Ibid. 10.

[9] Ibid. 10–11.

[10] Cf. William L. Moran, "A Note on the Treaty Terminology of the Sefire Stelas," *JNES* 22 (1963) 173–76; cf. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25 (1963) 77–87.

[11] Ibid. 11.

[12] Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 39, n. 57. Williamson apparently distances himself from "the developmental views of mainstream OT scholarship" (ibid. 39, n. 57).

[13] Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., *Central Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 26–27.

unreal) relations between peoples and their gods. As a part of that scenario, Yahweh's covenants with humans are nothing more than religious fictions. The other way is to suppose that Yahweh did indeed make covenants with people, but when he did so he employed a legal genre which had evolved as human societies had grown in complexity. According to this view, the pagan claims of covenant relations with their gods would be false, but Israel's claims of Yahweh's covenant relations with humans would be true.[14]

There is, I believe, a better way to understand this matter of the covenant idea and its origin. I propose that both concepts, covenant and family, are to be found at the beginning, that is, at the creation. Moreover, since God existed before all that he made, it follows that both ideas are actually rooted in the mind of God. I would further affirm that they are rooted in the very nature of God. I will also argue that both realities continue to this day, so that all humans live under the benefits of the Adamic covenant (and its renewal in the Noahic covenant) and are all accountable to God as his children.[15]

2. *God and the family model.*   The Bible tells us that family relations are somehow rooted in God. Paul's statement to the Ephesians articulates the idea: "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom all family/ nation in heaven and on earth derives its name" (ἐξ οὗ πᾶσα πατριὰ ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς ὀνομάζεται, Eph 3:14–15). Paul tells us that families and nations exist in heaven and on earth. His statement seems to indicate the reality of relational ties between God and intellectual beings in both realms, and, moreover, those ties are of a family sort.[16] In addition, those families are named after God. I think it quite likely that the concept of "name" here carries a significance often found in the Bible and ancient Near East, that is, essential nature or character (cf. John 16:24, Matt 28:19). On that understanding, families are "named after," or derive their nature from, God. Another statement similar in spirit is Paul's declaration regarding all humans that "we are his [i.e. God's] family/race/kind" (γένος, Acts 17:28). Such data indicate that human beings already stand in a "family" relation to God, and they do so by creation, since humans are created beings. How can that be?

Luke tells us that Adam was the "son of God" (Luke 3:38). That is consistent with his being created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26), for Adam, too, had a son who was in his image and likeness (Gen 5:1–3). Sonship, image,

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[14] For a discussion of divine-human covenants in the Bible and ancient Near East see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, hereafter *ANETBT* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008) 56–62.

[15] These topics are huge and cannot be fully addressed in an article. I hope to present here the outline and main features of an argument which will appear in more detailed and developed form in a forthcoming biblical theology.

[16] The family nature of heavenly beings is also indicated by the Hebrew phrase "sons of God" (e.g. Job 1:6, 2:1. 38:7), which apparently shows that angels, as well as humans, are made in God's image. They are, then, his "sons" by creation, as was Adam (Luke 3:38).

and likeness go together in these foundational statements.[17] We also see sonship and image come together in the Son, of whom Paul says, "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). The author of Hebrews similarly says of the Son, "The Son is . . . the exact representation of his [i.e. God's] being" (Heb 1:3). Moreover, the image of God and family are inextricably bound together (as one would expect from Eph 4:16). Royce Gruenler has noted the same in his comment on the social nature of the Trinity and the importance of conversation and fellowship in that social nature:

> That is one of the images of God that is reflected in the first human family: Man and woman are invited by grace to share in conversation and fellowship and love with the divine Family. As subcreators in the image of God they are gifted to speak and sing variations on the fundamental theme of inexhaustible love, with the power to invite new beings (their children) to life and to draw them into the circle of the social family where language, conversation, and song abound. In being fruitful and multiplying (Gen 1:28), husband and wife imitate God's generosity in creating wider circles of family that are sustained and hallowed by fellowship with the Triune Family.[18]

Gruenler further notes regarding those under the New Covenant that "the Christian belongs to a higher realm where God the Achitect and Archetype of Family is sovereign."[19] So, the social nature of the human family images the social nature of the triune God, and that is part of being in God's image.[20] Moreover, since all humanity derives from Adam, all not only share his sinful condition and its consequence ("in Adam all die," 1 Cor 15:22; cf. Rom 5:12, 15, 17, 18), but also share his family or sonship relation to God, as Paul declares in Acts 17:28: "We are all his family/race/kind (τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν)" although only in a common grace way).[21]

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[17] Cf. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park: Two Age, 2000) 45–46, pursuant to his discussion of the Lucan genealogy: "Since the Spirit's act of creating man is thus presented as the fathering of a son and that man-son is identified as the image likeness of God, it is evident that image of God and son of God are mutually explanatory concepts. Clearly man's likeness to the Creator Spirit is to be understood as the likeness which a son bears to his father. And that understanding of the image concept, according to which the fundamental idea is one of representational similarity, not representative agency, is further and unmistakably corroborated by Genesis 5:1–3 as it brings together God's creation of Adam and Adam's begetting of Seth, expressing the relation of the human father and son in terms of the image-likeness that defines man's relation to the Creator. To be in the image of God is to be the son of God."

[18] Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 12–13. The rootedness of family in the nature of God may well account for the command to honor father and mother, and also shed light on Paul's stringent warning, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8).

[19] Ibid. 20.

[20] As Gruenler says even more broadly of the created order, "God's created order images his own social nature" (*Trinity* 15). Also, of the Christian family he notes that "husband, wife, and children have eternal value in this present age only because they are part of the larger family from which all lesser families are derived" (*Trinity* 19).

[21] See the discussion of human family solidarity in terms of covenantal household punishment in Niehaus, *ANETBT* 138–65, esp. 162–65.

II. PRIMORDIAL COVENANT

Humans stand in a family/image relation to God because they are created in his image and likeness and are named after him. As James 3:9 tells us, even fallen human beings are made in God's likeness. But the first humans to be made in God's image and likeness were without sin. I would now like to explore whether they were made in the context of a covenant. If family was an idea in the mind of God, and family relations between Adam and Eve were part of the created order, were covenant relations between Adam and Eve also an idea in the mind of God, and part of the created order? Gruenler understands the social nature of the Trinity as a covenantal reality: "God is the God who speaks, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Speaking and conversing in dynamic and inexhaustible fellowship is the essential hallmark of God's own reality. . . . God's own triune reality is covenanted and social, and human reality is intended by God to follow this pattern of covenanted language."[22] Similarly, Hugenberger has argued that the marital relationship between Adam and Eve was covenantal.

A related matter is the standing of human beings and creation in general in relation to God. Was God's relation to humans and to the creation covenantal at the beginning, or only after the Fall (Gen 9:12–13)? If we understand that covenant with all of its relations as an idea in the mind of God before the creation—an idea made manifest in and through creation—then we understand the root of the covenant idea. In order to appreciate this conclusion, some discussion of God's promordial relation to the created order, and to the man and the woman in particular, is necessary.

1. *Adamic covenant and theologically constructed covenants.* Some years ago I argued for the existence of an Adamic or Creation covenant.[23] The tradition of covenant theology since the eighteenth century has recognized such a covenant, usually in the broader context of a theologically constructed covenant system. In that broad construct, the Adamic covenant is a "covenant of works," and all subsequent divine-human covenants become part of a "covenant of grace."[24] I have attempted to demonstrate that such theologically constructed covenants are untrue to what a covenant actually was in the ancient world and in the Bible. Such artificially constructed covenants can only contribute confusion, or, at best, an illusion of a unifying covenantal structure where none exists.[25] If this long-standing theologically constructed covenant scheme is false, however, it does not follow that any one component of it, for example, the Noahic covenant, the Mosaic covenant,

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[22] Gruenler, *Trinity* 9.

[23] Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 143–59.

[24] Usually associated with the origins of such federal covenantal theology are Johannes Koch/Cocceius (1603–69) and his contemporaries. It appears clearly articulated in the Westminster Confession (1643–48), Chapter VII, esp. VII.I–III.

[25] Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "An Argument against Theologically Constructed Covenants," *JETS* 50 (2007) 259–73.

or even the disputed Adamic covenant, does not exist. The question is whether one particular body of material, Gen 1:1–2:3, actually embodies or implies a covenant in ancient Near Eastern terms, and should be understood as doing so. I think that the creation data do imply such a covenant, and submit that in recognizing an Adamic covenant, the Westminster divines were on the right track.

2. *A brief summary of evidences for an Adamic covenant.*   Scholars are far from agreed on the existence of an Adamic or Creation covenant.[26] However, there are several lines of evidence for it. One is the apparent conformity of narrative elements in Gen 1:1–2:3 to the pattern of a second millennium BC international treaty.[27] In such an analysis elements of Genesis 2 are also relevant.[28] Other OT covenant narratives also have narrative elements that conform to the same treaty pattern: the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:1–18), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:1–19), and the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:1–17).[29] Another suggestive datum is the parallelism between Gen 1:28 and Gen 9:1–3: command and blessing which take place in the Noahic covenant and may suggest that the command and blessing of a prior covenant are being renewed. Another relevant but typically overlooked fact is that by presenting God as the Creator, Gen 1:1 also implies that he is Suzerain over all, since creator gods in the ancient Near East were understood to be universal suzerains, from whom all other heavenly and earthly authority derived.[30] God's suzerainty, moreover, implies some covenant relationship

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[26] For some arguments against such a covenant see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 118–21; Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* 52–76.

[27] See Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 144–47. Cf. the comment by Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* 20: "The several standard sections of this treaty form provide serviceable categories for an analysis of the creation covenant." He goes on to apply the treaty sections to the first three chapters of Genesis. However, Kline subsequently agreed with my second millennium BC treaty form analysis of Gen 1:1–2:3 (private communication). According, then, to the narrative technique indicated above, the Gen 1:1–2:3 creation account is framed according to the pattern of a second millennium BC ancient Near Eastern treaty—or, if that seem too strong a statement, the narrative contains elements that would be at home in such a treaty/covenant, from the identification of the Great King to the statement of his provisions for, and empowerment and commission of, his vassals (that is, the blessings and stipulations which he bestows upon them). See below.

[28] See the appropriate comment by K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1973) 116–17: "It is often claimed that Genesis 1 and 2 contain two different creation narratives. In point of fact, however, the strictly *complementary* nature of the 'two' accounts is plain enough: Genesis 1 mentions the creation of man as the last of a series, and without any details, whereas in Genesis 2 man is the centre of interest and more specific details are given about him and his setting. There is no incompatible duplication here at all. Failure to recognize the complementary nature of the subject-distinction between a skeleton outline of creation on the one hand, and the concentration in detail on man and his immediate environment on the other, borders on obscurantism."

[29] I hope to demonstrate these facts in a future article and/or the forthcoming biblical theology.

[30] Consequently, the Bible recognizes Yahweh as the "Great King," a *terminus technicus* for suzerain (cf. Akk. "*sarru rabu*."), e.g. Ps 47:2 ("How awesome is the LORD Most High, the Great King over all the earth!"); 95:3 ("For the LORD is the great God, the Great King above all gods"); cf. Mal 1:14. Jesus calls Jerusalem the "city of the Great King" (Matt 5:35), which may refer to his

in which he is suzerain: one does not have a suzerain without one or more vassals. Another evidence may be the Sabbath ordinance and its root in the creation account (Exod 20:11) and the concomitant idea that Israel is a new creation by covenant (we note that the Sabbath ordinance is also rooted in Israel's deliverance from Egypt, parallel to the Exodus creation roots, in the renewal covenant, Deut 5:15).[31] Related to the Sabbath ordinance is the sevenfold repetition (echoing the sevenfold repetitions in Genesis 1:1–2:3) of the phrase, "Yahweh said to Moses" in the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 25–31), the last of which introduces the Sabbath command—all of which have been seen as an allusion to the creation data.[32] The covenantal terminology echoing Genesis 1 in Jer 33:20, 25, 31:35–36 also seems to indicate an Adamic covenant.[33] There seems to be a parallelism between the first Adam (as covenant mediator) and the Second Adam (as covenant mediator).[34] A related piece of evidence is the parallelism of the original heaven and earth (Gen 1:1) and the new heaven and earth (2 Pet 3:3, Rev 21:1), the latter being a work and a result of the new covenant mediated by the Second Adam. More broadly, Kline draws upon the re-creational aspects of God's several redemptive covenants, also noted by others, as implying a covenant at the original creation.[35] Finally, there is also Hos 6:7, which stands as evidence

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suzerainty over Israel, but seems also to allude to his suzerainty over heaven and earth ("Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King"). Cf. Gen 18:25. For the concept in the ancient Near East see Niehaus, *ANETBT* 35–50.

[31] Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* 19: "the setting of man's kingdom labors in a sabbatical framework immitative of the pattern of God's work of creation was an expression of man's identity as image of God and as such the sabbatical ordinance also served to identify man as a creature in covenant with God. By the Sabbath ordinance God made covenantal commitment that man with his God-like endowment would move on in the way of obedience to a consummation of rest, indeed, to the glory of God's own Sabbath."

[32] Cf. Peter Enns, "Exodus," in T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2000), 149. Enns adds, "In the midst of a fallen world, in exile from the Garden, the original 'heaven and earth,' God undertakes another act of creation, a building project signifying a return to pre-fall splendour."

[33] Ibid. 14–16. Kline also suggests a parallel between Nebuchadnezzar's yoke of a vassal treaty on the nations (and even the animals, Jer 27:2–6) and the Adamic situation: "Accordingly, the Creator's giving of the earth and its creatures into man's hands in Eden may be viewed as the placing of the covenantal yoke of man's lordship upon the earth" (p. 18).

[34] Ibid. 20: "Another such parallel is found in the Bible's use of the two-Adams scheme in its comprehensive analysis of God's government through history. If the role of Christ as the Second Adam is recognized as covenantal, this scheme provides further clear warrant for classifying the arrangement made with the first Adam as covenantal."

[35] Ibid. 20: "Further there is the familiar fact that the biblical accounts of redemptive covenants, the old and the new covenants, depict these covenant histories as divine works of re-creation . . . with our view extended now to include all the creation motifs that are used in the Scriptures to set forth the nature of God's covenantal action through Moses and Jesus Christ, the mediators of the old and new covenants. In interpreting these later covenants as creational, the biblical authors reflect their understanding of the creation as covenantal." Cf. p. 17 on the significance of nuptial imagery in relation to the Sinai Covenant. It should be noted that Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* 95, n. 3, recognizes this fact, with respect to the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants, but does not see them as implying an original Adamic covenant.

in spite of—and even because of—its ambiguity, and in spite of its many detractors.[36]

A complete argument in favor of an Adamic or Creation covenant could occupy a small monograph. I hope that what I have written above suggests the variety and perhaps even the weight of evidence in favor of such a concept. Not everyone will agree with it. But it should be clear that Gen 1:1–2:3 (and 2:17) and other data (e.g. Ps 47:2, Mal 1:14) display the following facts about God: he is the Creator and Great King over all in heaven and earth; he has provided good things in abundance for those he created; he made the man and woman royalty ("subdue," "rule over") and gave them commands; he blessed them; and he pronounced a curse on them should they disobey his commands. These facts are the essence of covenant: a Great King in authority over lesser rulers, with a historical background of doing good to them, with commands and with blessings, but also a curse in case of disobedience. These facts about the Genesis creation material are the stuff of covenant, and primordially so. Some may not want to say that they constitute a covenant, but the creation data do tell us just what, later in history, would form the constituent elements of a suzerain-vassal treaty in the ancient Near East, and of a divine-human covenant in the Bible. Such things are expressions of God's nature, as that nature comes through to us in the creation data. We know the workman by his work (cf. Rom 1:19–20). God, then, from the beginning showed a nature that could appropriately be called covenantal, and he entered into relationships that could appropriately be called the same.

That understanding about the nature of the deity was passed on through the generations. Human beings made in God's image were constituted for such relationships themselves, and entered into them in both family and, later, national forms. The late second millennium BC international treaty form was produced by humans as a legal articulation of the sorts of commitments that a covenant relationship should involve. That legal form arose out of a human nature made for such relationships, and that human nature was made in the image of God who was and is also supremely relational (or more particularly, one might say, covenantal). In his good time, God employed that historical literary/legal form as he acted in history and as his Spirit breathed forth Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). Its elements appeared in narratives that reported divine-human covenants. But the original, archetypel covenant idea was part of God's very, relational nature, or, as we have said in the title of this article, an idea in the mind of God.

3. *Adamic covenant relationships and what they tell us.* The creation data have told us those things about God which are both part of his nature and fundamental to covenants and covenant relationships. God's creative acts produced both the context (the world) for those who would rule under him

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[36] Perhaps more work ought to be done on the obvious point that ambiguity, or even polyvalence, can be intentional and fruitful in Holy Writ. In this case, a reader of the original, unpointed Hos 6:7, might well have understood it to mean, "Like Adam," or "Like a man," or "Like humanity"—and any two or all three readings may have been correct and intended by the Spirit.

and those rulers-to-be themselves (the man and woman). Once they came into being, the man and woman began to be aware of the happy surroundings into which God had placed them. That is to say, they became aware of the good he had done for them in the past. They knew God, who spoke to them, as a benefactor. However, God would soon tell them other things that would further qualify their relationship to him. He would, explicitly, bless them. He would command them to rule and subdue. He would give them the fruit of the Garden to eat. He would command them not to eat the fruit of one tree in particular. So, their relationship moved from being a simple relationship between the Creator and the creature to a more nuanced relationship between a ruler and those whom he blessed and empowered for rule and to whom he gave provisions (further blessings), commands, and a warning (curse). Laconic as the passages are, the creation data of Genesis 1 and 2 thus give us information regarding a development of relations between God and the man and woman. The establishment, after the creation of the man and woman, of God's blessings, commands, and curse define that relationship in a way that it had not been defined before. That is so, whether or not there was a Creation covenant. However, since we have seen that the creation data give us the stuff of a covenant, we can also begin to see that the establishment of a new relationship (although with some historical background) is also part of the nature of a covenant.

Studies of treaties and covenants in the ancient Near East have confirmed the understanding of covenant stated above, namely, that a covenant establishes a new relationship, although on the basis of some historical background of relationship between the covenanting parties. A number of scholars have disagreed with this understanding, however. Up to this point, our discussion of covenant has considered the origin of the covenant idea, and we have submitted that it was and is an idea in the mind of God. Our discussion of the creation data has led us to a point at which we now consider a closely related and important question: What is the nature of that divine covenant idea?

III. THE IDEA OF COVENANT

The idea of covenant has been described by Hugenberger as follows: "A covenant, in its normal sense, is an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath."[37] His definition follows that of Mendenhall, who defines covenant more broadly as a "solemn promise made binding by an oath, which may be either a verbal formula or a symbolic oath."[38] These definitions apply well, *mutatis mutandis*, to the divine-human covenants reported in the Bible. The only exceptions are the Noahic and the Adamic covenants, because they contain no oath. Beyond this rather elegant definition, however, lies another matter of definition which has become unclear, and that is whether a covenant ratifies (or confirms) an *existing* relationship. I

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[37] Gordon Paul Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant* (New York: Brill, 1994) 11.
[38] G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant" 714; cited in Hugenberger, *Marriage* 11, n. 76.

believe that the ancient Near Eastern and the biblical data argue against such an understanding, so that, for example, it makes no sense to talk of a "covenant relationship" before a covenant has been made, any more than it makes sense to talk of a "marriage relationship" before two people have become married.[39]

A point that appeared for a long time to have been well understood, or at least taken for granted, among scholars who studied ancient Near Eastern covenants is this: a covenant assumes some past history of relationship (however minimal) between two parties, but a covenant, once agreed upon, changes the relationship between the two covenanting parties and takes it to a different level. Take, for example, a parity treaty between a Hittite emperor and an Egyptian pharaoh. We speak here of two parties who have no history of being in covenant before—neither they nor their fathers.[40] Before the parties entered into, or ratified, the treaty/covenant, neither of them had any obligation to support the other in case of a war with some third party.[41] Once the treaty has been ratified, however, that obligation becomes part of the relationship between the Hittite and the Egyptian. Obviously, they now stand in a relationship that is different, in this way and in a number of other ways (e.g. mutual non-aggression, repatriation of fugitives, etc.) from whatever relationship they had before the treaty was ratified. The same is true of, say, a suzerain-vassal treaty between a Hittite emperor and some lesser king. Once the covenant is in place, the lesser king becomes officially a vassal, with all the privileges (e.g. imperial protection) and responsibilities (e.g. provision of military aid, payment of tax and tribute, repatriation of fugitives, etc.) that pertain to that status. The lesser king, who had not been a vassal, is now a vassal, and stands in a very different relationship than any he had once had with the one who has only now become his suzerain. The same is true of marriage, which, as Hugenberger's study has shown, is a covenant (cf. Mal 2:14). A marriage covenant allows two parties legally to enter into a more intimate relationship than they had had when they were engaged, and that new relationship entails new privileges and responsibilities. The new relationship certainly builds upon the premarital, pre-covenantal relationship, but also far surpasses it, so that it is indeed a new and substantially different relationship. Married and unmarried people understand this.[42]

With regard to these facts, the historical prologues, found in second millennium BC treaties at least, provide a valuable service.[43] They document the

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[39] I speak here of covenants that are not renewal covenants—a critical distinction, discussed below.

[40] The treaty between Ramses II (c. 1279–1213 BC) and Hattusilis III (c. 1275–1250 BC), some sixteen years after the inconclusive Battle of the Orontes, would be a good example.

[41] Indeed, they might have been tempted to go to war against each other.

[42] See the discussion in Niehaus, "Argument" 270.

[43] For an overview of ancient Near Eastern treaty structures from the third millennium through the first millennium and a comparison which demonstrates the conformity of materials in the Pentateuch and Joshua to the late second millennium Hittite international treaty form, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?" *BAR* (March/April 1995) 48–95 (esp. 52–56).

relationship that had existed, or the events of mutual involvement or interest that had occurred, before the two parties agreed to enter into a covenant relationship. The historical prologue illustrates the fact that some sort of prior relationship, however minimal or even hostile, had obtained in the past. Now, however, the parties enter into a covenant which declares, sanctions, witnesses, and ratifies the stipulations that shall govern the new, covenant relationship (be it parity or suzerain-vassal) according to which both parties shall live going forward.[44]

It is necessary to state these matters so deliberately because of the scholarly trend, which appears to be on the increase, that seems not to understand, or at least not to acknowledge, these basic facts. The new tendency is to define a covenant as an agreement which ratifies an existing relationship.[45] Such a blanket definition of covenant is inappropriate because it does not actually characterize all covenants, but only covenant renewals (or, to reverse the terms, renewal covenants). Only in a renewal covenant have the suzerain and the vassal *already been* in a relationship *as suzerain and vassal* for some time past—a relationship that is now being renewed, or reaffirmed, for a new generation.[46] Dumbrell believes that the Noahic Covenant is a covenant of that sort (renewing the Adamic Covenant), and I think he is right. But he then takes the covenant renewal model as a paradigm for understanding all covenants, and that, I believe, is a serious mistake.[47]

Williamson and Hafemann share his understanding of covenant, and we turn now to consider what they have said. Paul Williamson says that two key elements or facts define a covenant: "A covenant ratifies an already forged or existing elective relationship" and "[t]he ratification involves the making of solemn promises by means of a verbal and/or enacted oath."[48] He

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[44] As Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985) 43, notes: "The historical prologue is only the prologue. It ceases to be at point when the covenant takes effect. From that moment on, what is critical is not the past, but *the observation of the stipulations in the present and the sort of life that such observance brings about*" (emphasis added). Cf. Niehaus, "Argument" 270.

[45] Dumbrell, Hafemann, and Williamson have taken this view. I have discussed the work of Dumbrell and Hafemann in "Argument." I will give attention to the views of Williamson and address Hafemann's new work on the topic, below.

[46] E.g. the vassal dies, his son ascends the throne, and the covenant the suzerain had had with the vassal's father is renewed with the vassal's son. For some Hittite covenant renewals see Ernst F. Weidner, *Politische Dokumente aus Kleinasien: Die Staatsverträge in akkadischer Sprache aus dem Archiv von Boghazköi* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1923) 58ff ("Vertrag zwischen Subbiluliuma, König von Hatti, und Tette, König von Nuhassi"), and 76ff. ("Vertrag zwischen Mursili II, König von Hatti, und Dubbi-Tesub, Köning von Amurru"). Deuteronomy is a similar covenant renewal with a new generation, those who will enter the Promised Land under Yahweh's suzerainty (cf. Deut 29:1).

[47] See the fuller discussion in "Argument" 264–70.

[48] Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* 43. Although I believe that his concept of covenant in general, as ratifying an existing relationship, is mistaken, and although I do not think his arguments against a creation covenant do justice to some of the evidences that have been advanced for such a covenant, I think that Williamson's book has a good deal to offer. Readers familiar with the biblical material will probably conclude that he has expressed well important features of the various covenants, perhaps especially their interrelationships, and I think that his analysis of the Abrahamic covenant in particular has much to offer.

goes on to say, "This suggests, therefore, that a divine-human *bĕrît* may be defined as the solemn ratification of an existing elective relationship involving promises or obligations that are sealed with an oath."[49] Some of this definition follows Mendenhall and Hugenberger and is unobjectionable. However, the problem arises with the phrase "an already forged or existing elective relationship." As we have argued, covenant renewals (or renewal covenants) do indeed ratify existing relationships. Covenants which are not renewals do not. A case which most glaringly proves the point is the covenant between Joshua and Israel, on the one hand, and the Gibeonites on the other (Joshua 9). Before the covenant was agreed upon, or ratified, no relationship whatsoever had been "forged" between Israel and the Gibeonites. No relationship "existed" between them, except for their minimal verbal communications, which were deceptions from the Gibeonite side and credulity on the Israelite side. The covenant they made in no way ratified "an already forged or existing relationship." Yet Williamson lists it as an example of covenant conducive to that definition.[50]

Williamson further uses the understanding that a covenant ratifies or seals an existing relationship as an argument against a creation covenant, and in doing so he notes the background of relationship in the divine-human covenants:

> Leaving aside creation for a moment, just consider the ensuing biblical examples of divine-human relationships that are subsequently sealed by means of 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 formally 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 or not a relationship existed between God and creation or between God and humanity prior to the fall. Undoubtedly, such a relationship existed. However, to insist on calling this relationship a "covenant relationship" is another matter entirely. There is no indisputable evidence in the text for doing so. This is hardly surprising if, as suggested above, a covenant was primarily a means of sealing or formalizing such a relationship; it did not establish it.[51]

The question is not, however, whether a relationship existed between God and Abraham, God and Israel, God and David, and God and Noah, before God entered into covenants with them. The question is what sort of relationship existed in each case. The answer is: a pre-covenantal (and not a covenantal) relationship. That relationship, which existed before the covenant was actually "cut" or made, would become the stuff of the historical prologue of the future covenant. So, Yahweh commanded Abram to leave his homeland (Gen 12:1), and later, when the covenant was made (Genesis 15), identified

[49] Ibid. 43.
[50] Ibid. 38; cf the discussion on pp. 38–43.
[51] Ibid. 75.

himself as Yahweh who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 15:7). Likewise, Yahweh delivered Israel out of Egypt, and then, when he began to give them the laws of the covenant he was now making with them, identified himself as "Yahweh, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod 20:2).[52] The pattern is exactly what we typically see in the late second millennium BC international treaties. A king does some good to his prospective vassal. Then, when he finally makes the covenant with the vassal, he recalls that past good which he has done, in the historical prologue of the treaty. But the relationship between the covenanting parties now becomes, by virtue of the covenant making, a suzerain-vassal relationship, which is a different relationship from what it was before. To use the marital idea employed above, the relationship which existed prior to the covenant making was a sort of "engagement." Once the parties have ratified the covenant, however, they move forward in a new relationship which the covenant has established, with new expectations and new requirements.[53]

Scott Hafemann, in a new work, reaffirms his understanding that a covenant ratifies an existing relationship. He claims that D. J. McCarthy has given us examples of covenants that operate this way: "McCarthy points to thirteen examples of covenants ratifying an existing relationship as well (see Hugenberger, *Marriage*, p. 169 n. 5). In fact, ratifying an existing relationship may be the typical use of covenant making"[54] This may sound like formidable evidence. But if we turn to Hugenberger, and see what he and McCarthy actually wrote, we come away with a very different impression. Hugenberger says:

> D. J. McCarthy summarizes the pattern of some 13 older accounts of 'secular' covenant making within the Bible: Gen. 21:22–34 (J and E); 26:23–33; 31:25–32:5 (at least 2 narratives); Josh. 9:1–10:1; 1 Sam. 11:1–3; 18:1–4 + 20:5–8; 20:11–17 + 23:16–18; 2 Sam. 3:17–21 + 5:1–3; 3:12–21; 1 Kgs. 15:19, 20:31–34; 2 Kings 11 (// 2 Chronicles 23) (*Treaty and Covenant*, [1981] 19f.) McCarthy

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[52] In the case of the Noahic covenant, the narrative of Genesis 6–8, telling how the Lord delivered Noah and his family out of the former world and its judgment, provides the historical background for the covenant which the Lord makes with Noah in Gen 9:1–17. As noted below (n. 57), that covenant introduces new elements (of blessing, stipulation, and curse) which will henceforth condition the lives of Noah and his offspring in relation to the Lord. In the Davidic covenant, the historical prologue function is served by Yahweh's reported statement, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you'" (2 Sam 7:8–9). The covenant which the Lord now makes with David, however, introduces changes in David's life and outlook, which will include making David's name great (v. 9), giving him a more permanent rest from his foes (v. 11), establishing his dynasty (vv. 11–12), etc.— all things which the Lord will do for David in the new relationship (that is, a relationship altered for the better with superior blessings and promises) which the covenant establishes. In the case of the Davidic covenant, the Lord was already David's Suzerain, both in the realm of Common Grace (the Adamic and Noahic covenants), and under the Mosaic covenant (special grace). Now, however, he cuts a special covenant with David, with the new blessings and promises noted, and with a focus on the royal line, which eventuates in great David's greater Son.

[53] It follows that such a mistaken understanding of covenant on Williamson's part can have no value as evidence against a creation covenant, whether or not one agrees that such a covenant exists.

[54] Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship" 26, n. 20.

concludes, "the negotiations . . . begin regularly with an affirmation that a real though general relationship already exists between the parties."[55]

Here is Hugenberger's remark (to which his footnote, just quoted, is attached): "In other texts, far from creating a relationship *de novo*, the making of a covenant seems to presuppose an existing relationship, to which explicit appeal is made during the negotiations to make the covenant. This seems to be the case, for example, in the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech in Gen. 21:22ff."[56]

It appears to me that Hafemann has misstated Hugenberger's remarks.[57] Hugenberger notes that "the making of a covenant seems to presuppose an existing relationship, to which explicit appeal is made during the negotiations to make the covenant." That is indeed the case. The same is true in ancient Near Eastern treaties, as noted. Some sort of relationship, however minimal, exists between the parties before they enter into covenant.[58] That prior relationship is normally reviewed in the historical prologue of a treaty, the purpose of which is to document the historical basis for the covenant. That is the prior relationship "to which explicit appeal is made during the negotiations to make a covenant" (to use Hugenberger's words). So McCarthy rightly notes that the covenant "negotiations . . . begin regularly with an affirmation that a real though general relationship already exists between the parties."

However, to say that a real *though general* relationship already exists between the parties is one thing. To say that a covenant "*ratif*[*ies*] *an existing relationship*" (Hafemann, 26, n. 20) is quite another. It is important to understand the difference. To affirm that a relationship forms the background of the covenant means simply to recognize the existence of a relationship prior to the covenant, a relationship which forms a historical basis for the treaty or covenant. On the other hand, *to ratify that prior relationship by a covenant* means to confirm that existing relationship and make it a legal and binding reality so that the same, prior relationship now continues with the legal protection of a treaty or covenant. Covenant renewals do confirm or ratify existing relationships. Covenants do not. Again, marriage is a good example. The marriage covenant does not simply ratify the relationship of persons who have been engaged. If it did, it would simply declare them legally and permanently engaged.

The fundamental distinctions in this discussion are important. Unicovenantalists argue that covenants usually confirm existing relationships.[59] Why do they take this view? Perhaps the reason is that it comports with the

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[55] Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant* 169, n. 5.

[56] Ibid. 169.

[57] Hugenberger has confirmed to me in a private communication that this is indeed the case, and he agrees with the position on covenants, as distinguished from covenant renewals, set forth in this article: namely, that covenants do not ratify existing relationships.

[58] Thus, to use Hugenberger's phrase, the treaty does not create a relationship "*de novo*."

[59] It is important to note that one need not be a unicovenantalist to think that a covenant confirms or ratifies an existing relationship. Thus Williamson endorses that definition but is not a unicovenantalist.

argument that all of the divine-human covenants are one.[60] If all divine-human covenants are one, or constitute "one covenant relationship," then any one of them confirms that "existing relationship." Such, however, is not the case with the biblical covenants, except in cases of covenant renewal (e.g. the Noahic/Recreation covenant, which renews the Adamic/Creation covenant, and Deuteronomy, which enshrines the renewal of the Mosaic covenant, Deut 29:1).[61]

IV. ONE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP?

Whether or not covenant is an idea in the mind of God, it behooves us to understand just how many covenants God has in mind. Hafemann has been the most forward advocate of the uni-covenantal idea, according to which there is one human-divine covenant relationship in the Bible. He has reaffirmed this view in his latest work:

> Nevertheless, though all would agree that there are various individual covenants throughout the Scriptures, it is significant that the term for covenant in the Old Testament (*bĕrît*) never occurs in the plural when describing God's covenants with Israel. Rather, the biblical writers refer either to a specific covenant or to 'the' covenant between God and his people. This is because the covenants of the Bible all embody the same fundamental covenant relationship.[62]

With regard to the occurrence of *b^{e}rit* only in the singular in the OT, Hafemann follows Rendtorff, who remarks, "Where the covenant is concerned,

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[60] The view that all divine-human covenants are one produces in effect a theologically constructed covenant that aims to affirm the unity of a body of material (the Bible) which is indeed univocal by virtue of the Holy Spirit's role in producing it, but is not simply one covenant. Such a unicovenantal approach is idealistic, forcing different biblical covenants into a falsely unifying and abstracted idea of covenant which is not true to what covenants were in the Bible or in the ancient Near East (cf. Niehaus, "Argument"). A similar enterprise has been underway with regard to the Minor Prophets, arguing that what are actually twelve separate though univocal books in fact constitute a unity which must be read in its entirety in order to appreciate the fact that it is not simply an anthology, but rather a work intentionally composed as one book. As Douglas Stuart, "The Unity of the 'Book of the Twelve,'" in a forthcoming new edition of his *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Nashville: Nelson, 1987) argues, any attempt at such a holistic reading is likewise idealistic and does not fit the historical and form-critical facts, whether it is undertaken diachronically and from a higher critical perspective, as in the case of Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiderdorp: Deo, 2005) 264–314, or synchronically and from an evangelical perspective, as in the case of Paul House, *The Unity of the Twelve* (JSOTSup 235; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

[61] In both cases, and as in ancient Near Eastern covenant renewals, the terms of the original covenant can be modified to suit circumstances which have changed since the original treaty/covenant was made: e.g. the Noahic covenant, after renewing the cultural mandate of Gen 1:28, modifies the food provisions of Gen 1:29 ("Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything," Gen 9:3), and adds a curse on anyone or any animal that sheds human blood (Gen 9:5–6), an issue that was not a concern before the Fall. Similarly, as Williamson (*Sealed with an Oath* 111) notes regarding Deuteronomy, "Although in one sense Deuteronomy records a remaking or renewal of the Mosaic covenant with a new generation, there are some significant differences in emphasis, which may suggest that this covenant further qualifies the conditional nature of Israel's unique relationship with Yahweh."

[62] Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship" 21.

the fact that the word b^erit occurs only in the singular puts an obstacle in the way of talk about different 'covenants.' "[63] It is remarkable that two scholars who aim to do biblical theology fail to consult the NT on this matter. In the NT, the term for covenant ($diath\bar{e}k\bar{e}$, used in the LXX to translate Hebrew b^erit) does occur in the plural when describing God's covenants with Israel. Paul tells us about "the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the *covenants*, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises" (Rom 9:4; emphasis added). Moreover, in Ephesians Paul admonishes (pagan) converts to Christ, "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the *covenants of the promise*, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12).

The phrase "the covenants of the promise" actually makes it clear that it is the promise made to Abraham that is the overriding category in the redemptive covenants, as Paul explains with regard to the Mosaic covenant in Galatians: "What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the *covenant* previously established by God and thus do away with the *promise*" (Gal 3:17; emphasis added).

The NT makes it clear that the promise made to Abraham in God's covenant with him continues and is fulfilled in the new covenant. This is Paul's main point in Gal 3:15–25. Nevertheless, as I have argued, and as many have long understood, the Mosaic and Davidic covenants also play a role in God's program of salvation, a program which leads up to and culminates in the new covenant.[64] That is why Paul refers to God's covenants (plural) with Israel as "the covenants of the promise": they are individual (although interconnected) covenants that contribute to the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise by the new covenant.[65]

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[63] Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 79. Rendtorff, in turn, echoes J. Barr, "Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant," *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift W. Zimmerli* (Göttingen: 1977) 29: "b^erit forms no plural; it is strange that this fact is not more frequently commented upon." I suspect one reason the OT occurrences are in the singular is that, in each case, one particular covenant is in view, often the Mosaic, as a word study will, I expect, demonstrate. As a foretaste of the results of such a study, I note that whenever the phrase "my covenant" occurs, it relates to a specific covenant and does not indicate that all of the covenants are one: Adamic (creation): Jer 33:20; 33:25; Noahic (recreation): Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11, 15; Abrahamic: Gen 17:2, 4, 7, 9–10, 13–14, 19, 21; Exod 6:4–5; Lev 26:42; Mosaic: Exod 19:5; Lev 26:9, 15, 44; Deut 31:20; Josh 7:11; Judg 2:1; 1 Kgs 11:11; Ps 50:16; Isa 56:4, 6; Jer 34:18; Ezek 16:61; 17:19; 44:7; Hos 8:1; Zech 9:11; Heb 8:9; Levitical: Num 25:12; Jer 33:21; Mal 2:4–5; Davidic: Ps 89:28, 34; 132:12; Jer 33:21; new covenant: Isa 54:10; 59:21; Jer 31:32; Ezek 16:62; Rom 11:27. Evangelical scholars tend to agree that the covenant to which "my covenant" in Ezek 16:62 refers is the new covenant; e.g. John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (TOTC; London: Tyndale, 1969) 142; William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1986) 251–52; Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* (Communicator's Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1989) 143–44.

[64] Cf. Niehaus, "Argument" 272–73.

[65] This may give a more fundamental reason why the term "covenant" is not used in the plural in the OT, but, as we have seen, is so used in the NT. Only with the NT can we fully understand how God's prior covenants had as their goal what only the new covenant truly achieves—a goal to which those OT covenants contributed as "covenants of the promise"—namely, that a true Israel (cf. Gal 6:16) would be God's people and he would dwell among them and be their God (Rev 21:3; cf. on Rendtorff and the "covenant formula" below).

The OT writers refer to "covenant" only in the singular, but any attempt to draw conclusions from that fact ought to be controlled by Paul's references to covenant in the plural, and as a subcategory of "the promise." So, given this NT data, it cannot be proof that "the covenants of the Bible all embody the same fundamental covenant relationship," as Hafemann contends, and it certainly does not put "an obstacle in the way of talk about different 'covenants'" (Rendtorff). It put no obstacle in Paul's way, and it should put no obstacle in ours.

V. "COVENANT RELATIONSHIP" AND STRUCTURE

I will address one major point in the unicovenantalist approach, and that is the apparent equation of "covenant relationship" with structure. But there are some other matters that require clarification. One is God's overall covenantal program as Hafemann sees it. The other is the matter of the new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), which, however, we can address only briefly.

Hafemann gave the impression in *The God of Promise* that he considered "one covenant relationship" to exist throughout the Bible.[66] He repeats that idea in his new book.[67] Taken at face value, it seems to put all of the biblical covenants together into one. But he now also says that "one covenant relationship" actually exists in the redemptive covenants.[68] The latter statement has a desirable advantage: it suggests a generic difference between the common grace covenants (Adamic and Noahic) and the special grace covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New). Hafemann recognizes the distinction, and, like myself, understands that the common grace covenants provide a context or platform in or upon which God's special grace redemptive covenantal program can move forward.[69] I consider, however, the statement that the redemptive covenants all embody "one covenant relationship" to be untenable. A major question that must be answered, then, is this: what does Hafemann mean by "one covenant relationship"?

Hafemann's new work makes it clear that what he means by "one covenant relationship" is the fact that the biblical covenants share the same structural

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[66] Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001) 59: "there is *one uniform* covenant relationship that runs throughout the various covenants of the Bible."

[67] Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship" 21: "the covenants of the Bible all embody the same fundamental covenant relationship."

[68] Ibid. 30: "The specific content of the covenant provisions, stipulations and promises develops as time goes on, but there remains *one* covenant people, in two epochs, with *one* kind of covenant relationship that spans the individual covenants of redemptive history."

[69] Ibid. 29: "These two covenants [i.e. the Adamic and the Noahic] with humanity ensure God's *providential* provisions necessary for history itself, in order that God may also establish a *redemptive* covenant relatiionship with his chosen people." Cf. Niehaus, "Argument" 271: "Those two common grace covenants [i.e. the Adamic and the Noahic], by establishing and maintaining humanity on earth, are more than a maintainance program, however. Together they form the platform, as it were, upon which God constructs a program of special grace covenants that will lead to the new heavens and earth, and the new humanity, accomplished through the final biblical covenant, the new covenant."

elements. He calls these elements "[t]he threefold covenant structure."[70] He outlines that structure as follows: "[t]he Provisions and Promises of the Covenant, given by grace in the *past*," "[t]he Commands of the Covenant, kept by grace in the *present*," and "[t]he Consummation of the Covenant Promises or Curses, to be fulfilled by grace in the *future*."[71] Hafemann prefaces his outline with an explanatory comment:

> Moreover, God's provisions in the past provide the foundation for trusting his promises for the future. This active reliance on God's promises takes the form of obedience to the "King's" commands as the organic expression of trust in his sovereignty and love. When one trusts God's word, one obeys his commands. The track record of God's ongoing provisions in the past and present and the corresponding surety of his promises for the future therefore establish and maintain a relationship of mutual faithfulness between the King/Father and his people/children.[72]

Hafemann's discussion makes it clear that he believes the structure that he has identified defines the idea of a covenant relationship. And, since all the biblical covenants share it, "one covenant relationship" runs throughout the Bible (or, throughout the redemptive covenants, as he also says). Now it seems to me that Hafemann has made an unfortunate choice of phrase when he talks about "one covenant relationship," since structure and relationship are not the same thing. The fact that all the biblical covenants have structural elements in common does not mean that the relationships in those covenants (or in the redemptive covenants) are the same. Even if the structure is the same in each case, the details of the covenants (e.g. the stipulations, blessings and curses, which define what the covenant relationship will actually become under a given covenant) are different. Structure *qua* structure and relationship are two different matters.

Moreover, as I have noted elsewhere, Hafemann's analysis simply culls three salient elements of the second millennium treaty form and then finds them in the biblical covenants.[73] Scholars for some time have recognized the

[70] Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship" 34.

[71] Ibid. 35. Cf. Hafemann, *God of Promise* 59, where he analyses the covenant relationship by the same structure: "1) God's provision; 2) its corresponding covenant stipulations; 3) its consequent covenant blessings or curses."

[72] Ibid. 35. Although this structure is an oversimplification of the treaty/covenant structure that we do find in the biblical divine-human covenants (see below), it is also true that by isolating these structural elements Hafemann has drawn our attention to three things in which God is fundamentally constant when it comes to his covenant relationships. That does not mean that the divine-human relationship is the same in each covenant, since, after all, each covenant contains different types of blessings and stipulations which actually define what the relationship will become under that covenant. But by drawing our attention to these three items, Hafemann has reminded us of the constancy of God throughout history, as a God who can always be counted on to provide, to give wholesome instruction (commands), and to fulfill his promises (or even curses)—however the details of God's provision, command, and blessing (or curse) may differ from one divine-human covenant to another.

[73] Niehaus. "Argument" 269: "What Hafemann has done is to identify three elements that are common to all second-millennium BC ancient Near Eastern covenants, both pagan and biblical (i.e., historical prologue, stipulations, and blessings/curses), and to conclude, that, since the biblical covenants all have them, they must all constitute one covenant relationship."

presence of these elements in those covenants. The fact that two covenants have the same structural elements (e.g. title, historical prologue, stipulations, witnesses, blessings, curses) does not at all mean that the parties to one of those covenants have the same "covenant relationship" as do the parties to the other covenant. This is true even if we consider two biblical covenants and only employ Hafemann's three-part structure as a key for our understanding. For example, although the Lord has provided, commanded, and blessed his people under both the Mosaic and the new covenants, our relationship to the Lord under the new covenant is not the same as the relationship that people under the Mosaic covenant had with the Lord. Paul writes extensively about this in Romans 6–8 and Galatians 3 (cf. 2 Corinthians 3). We have an access to God that they did not. We have a freedom that they did not. We are temples of the Spirit and serve in "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom 6:7). And who among us now has to sacrifice bulls and goats? I am very grateful that the "covenant relationship" which the Lord and I (and all believers since Pentecost) have is very different from that of an ancient Israelite (good as that was by comparison with, say, a Babylonian, whose only "covenant relationship" to the Lord was under the Adamic and Noahic covenants).[74] So, in sum, a "covenant relationship" is not the same as a "covenant structure," and I think the failure to understand and clearly state the difference has produced, and continues to produce, unnecessary confusion.

Hafemann does use the idea of a covenant relationship in a different way when he discusses the "new covenant" prophesied by Jeremiah. He astutely says that, given Israel's failure under the Mosaic covenant, "What was needed was nothing less than a new beginning, a 'new covenant,' under which Israel would be decisively changed in her relationship to God."[75] However, his commitment to unicovenantalism has led him to understand this new covenant as a renewal of the Sinai covenant:

> Hence the essential difference between the new covenant and the Sinai covenant is the fact that the new covenant will not be broken like the previous one. God, like a "father," remained faithful to his covenant commitments to the old covenant; the people did not. In short, the new covenant, as an "everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten" (Jer. 50:5; cf. 32:40), is a "renewed" covenantal relationship.[76]

Hafemann follows Dumbrell, who has argued the same.[77] He is also in agreement with Rendtorff, who concludes, for example, "So this is really not a new

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[74] As Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 103–4, who understands that the new covenant replaces the old (even as it fulfills it) remarks, "Jesus has not simply replaced like with like, however—he offers something better than the Mosaic law. Those who have faith in Jesus receive spiritual satisfaction that surpasses the experience of Israel in the same way that vessels filled with abundant wine surpass empty vessels that once held water. Those who believe in Jesus worship in Spirit and in truth, and their feast never ends, for they never again hunger, thirst, or walk in darkness."

[75] Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship" 50–51.

[76] Ibid. 51.

[77] Cf. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 180–81, and my discussion of the same in "Argument" 267–69.

covenant at all; it is the same, unaltered covenant which the forefathers broke (v. 32). What is new are the presuppositions for its acceptance and realisation."[78]

I raise this matter near the conclusion of this article because it is, I believe, a major misunderstanding of what Jeremiah wrote. The author of Hebrews does not agree that the new covenant is a renewal of the Sinai covenant. Of the Sinai covenant he says, "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (Heb 8:7). And of the new covenant he says, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete" (Heb 8:13a). Such statements hardly support the claim that the new covenant is "the same, unaltered covenant which the forefathers broke" (Rendtorff).

The issue is large, not least because the scholars quoted have invested a good deal of material into its composition. To deal with it fairly and precisely would take another article, perhaps even a book.[79] I submit for now the import of passages such as Heb 8:7.13a and Paul's arguments in Romans and Galatians. I would add that, in my opinion, Rendtorff's whole approach, despite many good comments and insights, is deeply flawed. The fact that God's ultimate goal for his relation to humanity is expressed throughout the Bible by some variation of a formula ("I will be God for you" and "You shall be a people for me") does not even begin to prove that, for example, the Sinai covenant and the new covenant are the same.[80] Rather, they are distinct covenants, each of which plays a part in God's *program* of redemption, which does indeed have as *its* goal the day when "the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3).

VI. COVENANT: AN IDEA IN THE MIND OF GOD

God knows all things beforehand, and this is no new idea. But among the things he has known are those things that he would create. This is implicit in the statement: "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him *who works everything in conformity with the purpose/plan of his will*" (τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐνεργοῦντος κατὰ τὴν βουλὴν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ, Eph 1:11). God had an idea (a "plan") of the cosmos before he chose

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[78] Rendtorff, *Covenant Formula* 73. Hafemann's discussion of the new covenant ("Covenant Relationship" 49–56) relies a good deal on Rendtorff's analysis of the covenant formula and its role in understanding the new covenant as a reiteration of the Sinai covenant (Rendtorff, *Covenant Formula* 69–78).

[79] For a good discussion of the relationship between the old and the new covenants, which is consonant with what I have written here, but which predates the work of Hafemann or Rendtorff, see Thielman, *Law and the New Testament.*

[80] The fact that both contribute to that goal and use that formula does not make them the same covenant. For an outline of the formula see Rendtorff, *Covenant Formula* 13; for its use and (according to his synthesis) significance in Jer 31:33, see 69–78. I would submit that an article on Rendtorff's book could dissect and display the various flaws, from its higher critical foundations onward, that characterize his book, and someone ought to write it. Such a project is obviously outside the scope of the present article.

or willed to create the cosmos, and God had an idea of man before he created man. Before he created a plant, God had the idea of that plant. Before he created an animal, God had the idea of that animal. Put in terms of Eph 1:11, if God *purposed* to create a thing, he had an idea of that thing. In that sense, each created thing had its archetypal idea in the mind of God.[81] These statements are not a form of unbiblical idealism but are the implications of what Paul has written: God works everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. One might add that Rom 4:17 implies the same. There we read that God "calls things that are not as though they were." God could not call things that are not as though they were, unless he had an idea of them before he called them.

I submit that the idea of covenant is one of those archetypal ideas in the mind of God. An argument which derives covenant in some evolutionary manner from family structures or commitments has taken things the wrong way around. The structures and relationships found in families actually derive from the social nature of God. The relational commitments found in covenants also derive from God's nature—as one who is in fact Suzerain over all that he has made (Title); who has provided for those he has made (Historical Prologue); who commands those he has made (Stipulations); who promises to bless those he has made (Blessing); but who will also judge those he has made (Curse) if they are rebellious against his wise and loving intentions for his creatures, who are indeed his vassals. He himself was the Witness to all of this. Such was the state of affairs at the beginning. God's relationship with his creation, including the man and the woman he made in his image, was implicitly—to use a term we now know—covenantal.

That idea was not lost to humanity after the Fall. It did become distorted among human beings, just as the concept of God himself became distorted and his various attributes were portioned out to polytheistic pantheons in a dim reflection of his originally revealed nature. Paul's argument in Romans 1 is a simple and illuminating one. Humans distorted the knowledge of God and produced false religions. In the same way, I suggest, they carried into their darkness the true idea that deity related to people in a certain way—a way that we would call covenantal—and that people/kingdoms should also relate to one another in that way. God revealed himself in such a covenantal relation—or rather, a nexus of covenantal relationships—at the beginning. He renewed that revelation of his relational nature in the Noahic covenant. He continued to do so subsequently in a series of interrelated redemptive covenants. We who now know him and who have the privilege of writing theology also share the privilege, along with God's household everywhere, of being his children and knowing him in a nexus of relationships which are covenantal and which, by the power and presence of his Spirit, endure forever.

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[81] This biblical truth resonates with Plato's concept of a realm of ideal forms, and, under common grace, he glimpsed something of the truth. For the idea in the ancient Near East see *ANETBT* 83–115.