

**M**any Christians and readers of the Scriptures are aware that the Bible speaks about a matter called 'covenant'. There would be quite a number who would have a rough idea of its meaning. They would describe covenant by such terms as league, compact, pact, treaty and agreement, and these would be terms which are used in the text of Scripture. Because of such words some readers have the idea that God makes a contract with humanity to give them blessing but requires obedience as part of that contract. Should the contract not be observed then it means it has been broken, and God either punishes or forsakes the one who has disobeyed His contract.

This is a false view of covenant. Covenant is a love relationship which God has with the human race because He created all persons. His intentions are always those of love. It is true that Man broke the initial covenant relationship he had with God at creation, but God is the God of grace, and so all His covenants with us are those of grace. We may not merit them but His love insists on having a wonderful love relationship with us.

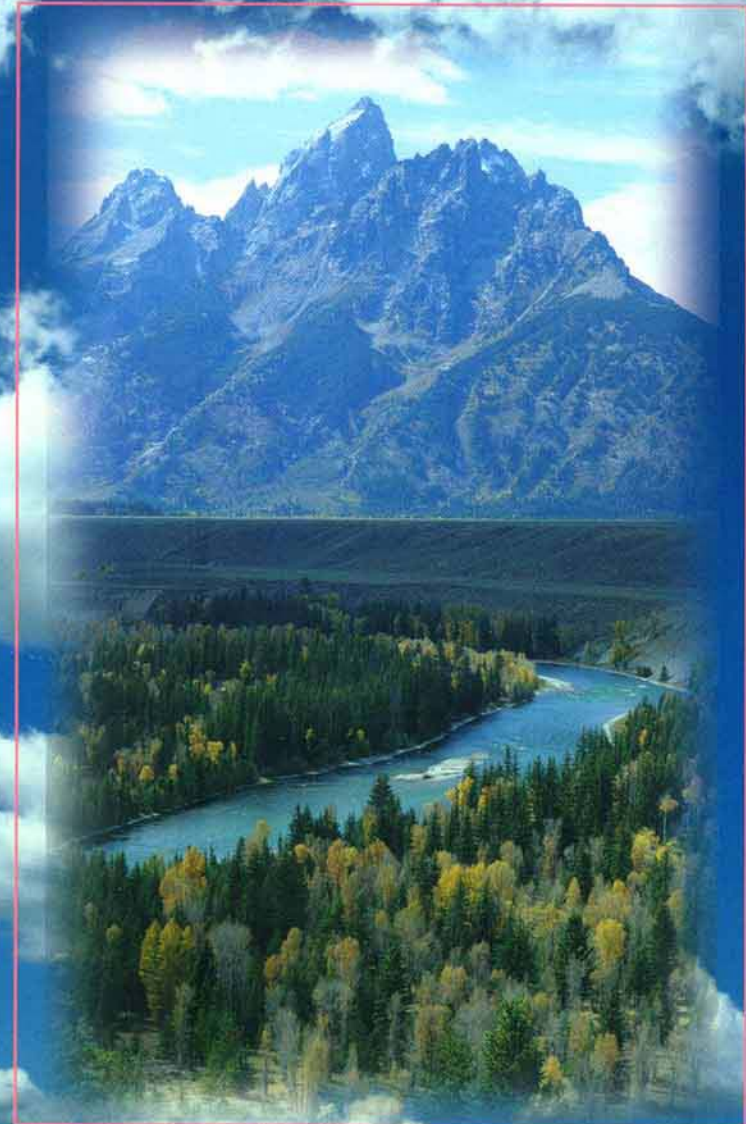
For this reason it would be good if we all came to know His universal covenant, begun at creation, and in Christ - 'the mediator of a better covenant' - now the New Covenant in which we can live at peace with God and all others. Let us seek to know God's covenant. This little book will help.



**New Creation Publications Inc**

# Comprehending

## the Covenant



**Geoffrey C Bingham**

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# Comprehending the Covenant

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## Foreword to the 'Comprehending Books'

For over twenty-five years New Creation Teaching Ministry (NCTM) has been developing Christian Resources, and by means of its Publishing Unit—New Creation Publications Incorporated (NCPI)—has brought these to the general public and is making them further available on the Internet. NCPI distributes books, booklets, other printed study materials, audio and video cassettes, some music CDs and is forming CD-ROMs. All of these are for use by pastors, theologians and other persons. NCPI also has an Imprint named Troubadour Press. By means of NCPI and Troubadour Press, we seek to cover Bible teaching, Bible commentaries, theology, history, personal counselling and certain devotional materials. It also publishes useful fiction and non-fiction volumes, including poetry and hymn books. In addition, it seeks out valuable out-of-print theological books and republishes them.

Many of our NCPI publications are quite substantial and deal with a wide variety of subjects. In some cases certain readers find they cannot take on board books designed to deal thoughtfully and in detail with their subjects or topics. These

readers would like smaller books or booklets which would give them the essence of the subjects they are seeking to understand. It is obvious that often a reader may find a substantial book too much to take in, and may even lose the essence of its subject. It is a pleasant fact that many of our booklets are in demand and are sufficient to inform their readers on a particular subject. One consideration, of course, is that our booklets are less expensive than those which deal in detail with their particular theme, though none of our books is really expensive.

Here, at NCTM–NCPI, we pondered the whole matter and came up with the idea that we would develop what we have called ‘The Comprehending Series’. These booklets would be in a format easy to handle, to read and to comprehend. By ‘comprehend’ we mean each title would deal with its subject so that it would be easy to understand. We decided that it should still have to have substance, and would not be designed for laziness in reading, or be superficial in its material. We had hoped the general public and those with minds for biblical truth would enjoy the Series and not find the books difficult to comprehend. We also hoped that thoughtful students and scholars would find them quite useful. We decided that the subjects should be those which constantly come up in conversation, confront us often in life, and would be helpful in gaining knowledge and wisdom.

We thought it would be good to have a regular format and a cover by which we could quickly recognise the Series. Of course, we send out these

slim volumes with a certain heart-trepidation. Doubtless some of them will be thought to be too simple, and others to be too difficult, but on the whole we feel they will fulfil a felt need and with a prayer and a tremor or two we send them out to the public. It could be that you might come to welcome and appreciate them. We hope so.

*Geoffrey Bingham*  
*General Editor*  
*NCPI, 1999*

# Foreword

This small book entitled *Comprehending the Covenant* is written mainly for those who have little idea about the meaning of the subject 'covenant' in the Bible. For this reason, I have tried not to present too much material, and to keep it as simple as possible. There are books on the subject which will fill out a reader's knowledge, for the idea of covenant is essential for really understanding the Bible. It is also essential for knowing the nature of God and His relationship with the human race which He has created.

Some who know the biblical theme of covenant may feel the book does not supply much which has to do with covenant. I would agree with them; but this small volume does not attempt to do that. A few things which need to be understood but would complicate the text are supplied in the appendixes. It is hoped that readers will use these to fill out their knowledge of covenant. It is difficult to obtain a small book on the theme of covenant, and so I trust it may be of help to many, and that the beautiful knowledge of God's covenant with Man may become further known in the Church.

*Geoffrey Bingham*  
*November, 1998*

# Comprehending the Covenant

## THE WONDER OF COVENANT

Why should we talk about the wonder of covenant? What is so delightful and, perhaps, exciting? This is a point in time and writing where we can point to the riches of theology, when it is so often scorned by folk who say they are for ‘the real world’ and the ‘simple reality of the truth’. Theology—the studied word concerning God, the contemplation of Him and His mysteries—opens up to us riches of which we had not dreamed. The riches of covenant are that whoever is under, or in, the covenant is in relationship with God. He is the Eternal Head of the covenant, and He cares for all His covenantees, as we will call them. They belong to Him and He holds Himself responsible for them. Moreover, their children and families are under that covenant cover.

In our book we will speak of the overarching covenant which we can call eternal, or creational, since it is the expression of God Himself even before He began to create. For those who realise, at least, that they are in the New Covenant of Christ,

there is this assurance that they are under covenant cover, and can take rest in a world which is otherwise a difficult one in which to live. If we wish to speak about assurance in life, then such springs from being in God's covenant—the covenant of the Father. To have this assurance makes a great difference in our manner of living and our peace of heart. Of course, covenant is not just an idea but a firm promise of God, and helps to confirm hope for a proper future.

For those who see every covenant as contractual, then God is not a covenanting God but a contracting Deity. This is not the biblical idea of a covenant, although doubtless it is an idea of fallen human beings. Whilst it is not contractual it certainly has obligation in it, the obligation love and gratitude always feel without thinking of a contract. We will see more of this later. Meanwhile any reader may relax and enjoy a study of covenant, no matter how much he may have regarded the subject with distaste and even perhaps a little of fear. How different the Christian life could be for many who have not yet found its peace and joy.

## INTRODUCTION TO COVENANT

The word 'covenant' is rarely used today. We find it being used in law circles, but that is about all. Once it was a very well-known term. Just about all ancient cultures used it. There were

covenants of a kind with the king and his people; there were covenants between persons; covenants which related to the land and other such matters. In the Bible the word 'covenant' is used hundreds of times in many of these situations we have just mentioned. The first mention of covenant is in Genesis 6:18—a covenant of God with Noah—and the last reference is in Revelation 11:19 where the ark of the covenant is mentioned.

Today we use different words for covenant. These are: agreement, bond, pact, treaty, settlement, testament and promise. The word 'testament' is often used regarding a will, and in the New Testament these two are almost the same. We speak of 'a person's last will and testament'. The term 'agreement' comes close to the biblical idea, but not wholly. Most people understand the word 'covenant' as a contract, and this resembles the biblical idea in some ways, but we have to be careful how we use it. We can make a written covenant—agreement—or we can simply have a verbal one, in which case there must be trust on the part of the persons making the covenant.

When we mean to understand the biblical idea of covenant, we read the Bible through and we discover the first mention of covenant is when God speaks to Noah. In Genesis 6:18 the covenant is firstly with Noah, and by this covenant God promises Noah that he and his family will not be destroyed by the coming flood. After the Flood God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, forever.<sup>1</sup> This, then, enlarges into a

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to know whether there are two covenants in Genesis chapters 6 to 9, or just one.

covenant with all the world, 'the covenant between me and the earth'.

The next covenant that is made is between Abraham and God. This covenant promises many blessings, and all the nations of the world who recognise Abraham and bless themselves by him will also be blessed. Those who curse Abraham and/or his descendants will be cursed. Rejecting Abraham's son Ishmael as the inheritor of the covenant blessing, God nevertheless promises blessing for him. Isaac, Abraham's son by Sarah, is the inheritor of the blessing, and his son Jacob—rather than the first son Esau—is the inheritor. Jacob's twelve sons who make up the nation of Israel all inherit the covenant promises and blessings.

When Israel is later a slave people in Egypt, God remembers His covenant and delivers them from the oppressor Pharaoh, and leads them to the promised land of Canaan. By covenant, God had promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, especially the children of Israel. Even before they enter the land, God makes a special covenant with Israel, which has often been called a covenant of law. We will talk about that later. Israel in the new land is to live by this covenant.

Israel over the centuries often does not keep the covenant God has made with her as a nation, and so Israel is punished; often by invasions; sometimes by weather conditions and disasters; and in large measure by being exiled. The exile of the

Northern Kingdom means that the tribes virtually disappear. The Southern Kingdom which was composed mostly of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin was also exiled, but in some measure returned to Palestine.

When Israel is in reasonable condition, God makes a promise which really is another covenant; namely what has been called the Davidic Covenant. David has died, of course, but God will raise up another like David, and even greater than David. Israel will enlarge its kingdom and, through the covenant, peace will reign in the world. It seems fairly reasonable to claim that the new Davidic king will be the Messiah. As a Shepherd-King he will reign over God's flock, Israel, but then others will be brought into this flock.

We know that the prophets were raised up to be God's messengers to His people. They were to correct error, bring fresh views of God as the covenant God to His people, keep the law of God in their view and to predict things of the future. One of the great things of the future was, of course, the Davidic Covenant and the Davidic kingdom. What gradually came to the fore was a new covenant God would make with His people, and this would supersede the covenant which He made with Israel at Mount Sinai. There seems to be no indication that the New Covenant would supersede the covenant made with Abraham. In fact, it seems the New Covenant would be the fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

So, then, it would seem that the history of covenant begins with Noah, and is a covenant

which concerns the creation. Creation will be protected by this covenant. The covenant with Abraham is more directed towards God blessing the descendants of Abraham, and later we will see that these descendants are not just blood ones, but faith ones, to use two strange terms. The promises to Abraham flow through to Israel and, in the New Covenant, to the whole world. The promises can only be received by faith. This is the case of all covenants.

Whilst our summary of God's covenants seems substantially correct, yet we need to ask two special questions, 'Did covenant begin with Noah in the first place?' and 'Did God's grace begin with the covenant He made with Abraham?'

## **WHEN DID COVENANT BEGIN AND WHEN WILL IT BE COMPLETED?**

### **The Nature of Human Covenants**

Before we can answer this question we need to understand the nature of God's covenants. Above we used various words as synonyms—equivalents—and they were: agreement, bond, pact, treaty, settlement and promise and to these could be added: compact, transaction, arrangement, and perhaps many more. Such agreements are made between persons, groups and nations. For the most part they are what we call bilateral, that is, contracts made by two persons or parties. If one person or partner makes an agreement and sets out the

conditions, then that is called a unilateral covenant. We all understand these kinds of agreements. A dictator can make a unilateral covenant with his people, but they must recognise and obey his dictatorship to get the benefits of the covenant. In a bilateral covenant both persons or parties benefit by the agreement in which each binds the others.

It has been thought by some scholars that Israel got the idea of covenant from its neighbouring nations. Certainly the ideas of covenant were there. It seems that, by nature of the case, the human races cannot live together without agreements or treaties. They also need to have binding clauses and even punishments or the giving of reparations if they break the treaties. Political systems, too, work by covenants or agreements. So we have democratic, socialistic and dictatorship systems by which various nations are ruled. In the everyday of human living, we need things such as agreements and contracts, and penalties for breaking them.

The reason we have to have contracts and treaties and agreements is that we cannot trust persons or groups or nations. It is a sensible way of trying to live in a world where human beings are generally not trustworthy.

### **The Nature of God's Covenant or Covenants**

With God, the matter of covenant is different. Almost everything we have said above does not apply to God's covenant or covenants. At the most,

God's covenants are always unilateral and not bilateral. Many Bible readers think God has contracts with humanity. We admit it often *seems* like that, but it is *not* that. Because our fallen, human mind-set is contractual, we look at God's covenants through that lens. It is almost impossible to convince a human being that God's agreements are not contractual. Some naturally point to the covenant of law—as it has been called—which was made with Israel at Sinai. They point out that God said to them that if they kept His law, then He would save them. This is certainly not the case, but it would take a lot of time and print to convince people who have that mind of thinking. The law was given in grace, and obeying the law was to be by love: otherwise it was not obedience. The law itself was to be a wonderful way of living. The most we can say about human beings 'keeping the covenant' is that they ought to do so out of the obligation of love.

What, then, is God's mind on covenant? I have included an appendix at the end of this booklet by a theologian Hermann Hoeksema entitled 'God and Covenant'. It will give an extended view of what I am trying to say here. The thrust of it is that God is love and that when He created there was already innate in creation the whole principle of covenant. This did not have to be stated, and that is why it is not explicitly written into the text of the early chapters of Genesis.

My statement, then, and that of many other theologians is that God is covenantal by nature. That is because in the Three Persons there is the

unity of love which flows from the Father to the Son and the Spirit, and they respond in that love to the Father. The Triune Godhead is relational. Each Person coinheres in the other Two Persons. They live in each other; that is, they live in love-communion—all Three.

When God creates Man in His own image, then Man lives in relational communion with God. This relational communion we should understand as covenant from the very first, but never as contractual living. God never says, 'If you do this I will do that', or 'I give you this but you must obey me, or you will be punished'.

It is not easy for some to accept what I have just written. Some have been brought up with the idea that in Eden God was telling Man to be good, otherwise he—the man and the woman—would die. If he obeyed God, that is, if he kept God's law, he would be saved. There are others who reason that God made a covenant with His Son before the world began, and the agreement was that the Son would come to earth to die for sinful Man to save him. This they call 'the covenant of redemption'.

It is better to say that the Trinity was One in being, and as One planned Man's salvation before time. When Man was created, he was one in communion with God, and this is the relationship we call covenant. It was with all humanity, in Adam. When Adam broke relationship with God, he broke the covenant; but God, for His part, did not break the covenant. He had determined to redeem Man through His Son, and that act was what we call the New Covenant. There is no one in the

world who has been forsaken by God, but many have forsaken God, and thus consider themselves to be forsaken.<sup>2</sup> Christ died for the whole world, but the whole world does not respond and come into the New Covenant, and so into the covenant of creation—the covenant which was in being by God making Man in His image. We repeat here that God did not make a contract with Man, but out of His love He had a love relationship with Man, and this we call covenant.

If we go through all the covenants mentioned in the Bible—that with Noah, Abraham, Israel, David and the New Covenant of which Christ is Mediator—then we will see they all issue from grace. Grace is God's love in action for undeserving Man. In no way are they contracts. Certainly God has an expectancy that where He makes a covenant those with Him in the covenant will live in that covenant relationship, and will keep the obligation of love. That is, they will not despise or go against the covenant He has made because they have a *personal*

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<sup>2</sup> The principle by which God kept covenant with Israel is stated in Ezekiel 18:30–32, 'Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.'

It would seem to Israel that God had forsaken her, and it seems in the covenant with creation that God forsook Adam in Eden through the Fall, but Genesis 3:15 is a soteriological promise to Man as well as the forecast of judgment for the Serpent.

relationship with Him, and so they will be one with Him, and love and keep His law.

### Examples of Covenant Love

In the Bible, marriage is a covenant and not a contract. It is a relationship of love whereby two live together. Malachi 2:13–16 speaks of marriage as covenant:

You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour at your hand. You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the LORD was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. 'For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.'

This passage shows that marriage is a covenant, and a covenant which is a relationship of love to which the couple are to be faithful. Today many look on marriage as a contract. That is part of the reason marriages often do not last. The couple live not by covenant obligation but by contract. They watch each other to see whether the contract is being kept. What a dreadful situation! If we could only see that God did not create us to be contractors with a God who is a Contractor, then we would view Him differently. It is a fact of life that

many people view God as a Contractor. They feel heavy guilt if they do not keep the imagined contract, and they are angry with God for having put them under this arrangement. They look at God as the God of law, and they do not know the real meaning of law, which is certainly not a contractual one.

In passing, I would observe that if we see God as a Contractor, then we will see human beings in the same way, and so the husband–wife covenant is viewed as contract. We will see that the Fatherhood and the sonship of Man are of the essence of covenant. In a family, a true father will not have a contract with his family but a love relationship, however inadequate he may be to express it. This would be the same for the mother and the children. All—father, mother and children—live in a relationship which is covenantal, but not contractual. Certainly there will be a law of family-living and an obligation of love to obey that law. We are by no means claiming that this is the way all families live, but it is the true way of family-living.

In the Bible we are all expected to love our neighbours. Marital, familial and neighbourly relationships are all within God’s covenant with Man. Therefore we must not look at our neighbours—all other human beings—as though we and they have a contract for relational living. Neighbourly living which is contractual is a horrible matter and can never be called relational, for you cannot contract a relationship. Covenant relationship is warm and rich when properly practised. In

a way of thinking, it is impossible for people to live together with the legal idea of contract. A more workable principle has to reign, and that is covenant without contract.<sup>3</sup>

## A LOOK AT THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS

### The First Covenant: The Creational and Universal One

I, amongst many others, have claimed that the first covenant is what was present in creation. Being in the nature of the Trinity it was innate in Man when created. As the Persons were in communion with one another, so Man was in relationship with God when created in His image. We do not have this stated explicitly in the first chapters of Genesis, and there would be no call for that to be stated, by nature of the case. The closest we ever get textually to saying God had a covenant with Adam is Hosea 6:7 which the Reformers used to speak of God making a covenant with the first man, ‘But at Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me’. The AV had ‘But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant’. Most commentators take Adam to be a place. The Hebrew says ‘*like* Adam they transgressed the covenant’, and this, if it is the correct

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<sup>3</sup> We have taken a few examples to indicate the nature of covenant, but many more could be given. God’s persistent love for Israel as His Bride, His special people and His kingdom of priests among all the nations is seen throughout the Old Testament.

translation, would refer to Adam having had a covenant with God. Whatever the case, we cannot rest a whole doctrine of God having a covenant with Adam on one verse whose meaning is doubtful. One commentator translates it, 'But look—they have walked on my covenant like it was dirt'.<sup>4</sup>

To think of a covenant being with Adam, it is best, we shall see, to look at the covenant with Noah, and in particular at Genesis 6:18 and 9:8–17 where the statement 'I will establish my covenant with you' is found. It has been argued by recent commentators that the use of the word 'establish' in these passages does not indicate that God makes (cuts) a new covenant with Noah, but rather He establishes a covenant already made. Perhaps we can use the word 'reiterates'. It is clear that the creational mandate of Genesis 1:28 is given afresh in Genesis 9:1f., so that Noah is a kind of second Adam. The term *heqim berith* is taken by many to mean 'establish that which is already in existence', and *karat berith* to mean 'cut a covenant'.

There is another way we can go about understanding the creation of Man to be covenantal in its outworking. The first point is to take the matter of vocation. Vocation is given in Genesis 1:28. Man is to be fruitful, multiply, to replenish the earth, subdue it and have dominion over it. In this, Man would be the *covenant partner* of God. A covenant is a bond, and the bond or relationship is not there for its own sake, but for the sake of purpose and

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 31, Word, Waco, 1987, p. 98.

function: Man works with God in His plan. The second point relates to marriage. If we take the marriage of the first couple which Paul understands to be a 'profound mystery', and the primal marriage refers to the later New Covenant marriage of Christ and his Bride the Church, then what is in the first two chapters of Genesis on marriage seems to be covenantal (cf. Mal. 2:13–16), especially when we remember that Israel is the Bride of Yahweh as shown in Hosea chapters 1–3 and Ezekiel chapter 16. God's faithful covenant people would always have this marital relationship with God. The third point of the creational covenant is the sabbath rest of God. It is a sign of the covenant with Israel (Gen. 2:2–3; Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15), and this is pointed out in Exodus 31:12–17 where verse 16 says, 'Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant'. If covenant with Israel has to do with vocation (Exod. 19:5–6), marriage and the sabbath rest, then it is reasonable to say they also had to do with what we have called the creational covenant. In our footnote we see there are references to creational elements of covenant in Genesis 1 according to Jeremiah 33:20–26,<sup>5</sup> and these have reference

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<sup>5</sup> There is what might be called an oblique reference in Jeremiah 33:20–22: 'Thus says the LORD: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David my servant, and the Levitical

to the unbreakable nature of God's covenant. I believe we cannot possibly think that the God who by nature is covenantal does not begin covenantal activity until the time of Noah, and as the God of covenantal grace until the time of Abraham.

### The Covenant with Noah

We are in a position to see that if God's covenant with Noah is the establishing or confirming of the previously operative covenant of creation, then the renewing of the creational mandate—such as given in Genesis 1:28–30 by the words of Genesis 9:1–7—is most natural to this covenant, and, for that matter, all future expressions of the initial and eternal covenant. The judgment of the Flood was brought on Man for his violence and corruption, for these had spread across the

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priests who minister to me.'

Again, in Jeremiah 33:25–26: 'Thus says the LORD: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his descendants to rule over the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them.'

J. A. Thompson (*The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 603) comments: 'The regular succession of day and night was established at creation (Gen. 1:5; 8:22). It was part of the nature of things. It is here described as Yahweh's *covenant (berit)* with day and night which could never be *broken*.'

face of the earth. The grace of the Noahic Covenant was that God would not judge in this way again, not even if violence and corruption again spread across the earth. That, of course, did not mean God would not judge in the way He would see fit (cf. Rom. 1:18ff.).

Although Noah was given a good start, the drive to sin was present in his own family and it was not long before we hear of idolatry (cf. Rom. 1:19–25).

### The Covenant with Abraham

In Acts 7:2 Stephen said, 'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia'. Abraham was deeply affected by the God of glory, and when God promised certain things to Abraham, then he believed they would happen and he was accounted righteous for that belief in the living, active God, and, as such, Abraham is known as 'the father of the faithful'. It is good for us all to study the dealings God had with Abraham, and the life that patriarch led.

We hear concerning the promises of God in Genesis 12:1–3 where Abraham was told his name would be great and he would be a blessing, adding, 'by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves'. It is not until chapter 15 that the mention of the covenant came. After the ritual of cutting up slain animals and birds and the resultant darkness and a torch passing between the pieces of the slain creatures, it was written, 'On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram', in which He spoke of making the land of Canaan to belong to Abraham. In the following chapters there are statements regarding the covenant which is to be

‘an everlasting covenant’. It is this covenant which is continued with Isaac and Jacob and becomes the basis of the liberation of Israel from Egypt to Canaan of which the New Testament often speaks.

### *God and the Promises to Abraham*

One thing about the Abrahamic Covenant that we must not miss is the fact of the promises that God gave to Abraham and his descendants. This is a good point to introduce the fact that all covenant is based on promise. At least that is how it comes to Abraham, and, in other covenants, to the people of those covenants. It also indicates the faithfulness of God in that He keeps to His promises, covenantal disobedience notwithstanding. We note the personal and intimate promises which God made vocally to Abraham, that is, in the very intimacy of covenant itself. Whilst the term ‘promise’ is not used a lot in the Old Testament, it is certainly expanded in the New Testament. So much so that some scholars think of promises as even more significant than covenant since so often covenant seems to be all promise. In regard to Abraham and the promises Paul is vocal in both the Roman and the Galatian Epistles. He takes it that the children of faith—that is, not only Abraham’s blood descendants, but primarily his ‘faith’ descendants — will receive the promises. The writer of Hebrews in the 11th chapter develops the covenantal matter of God’s promises. Whilst it would not seem that explicit promises are given to Adam in the creational covenant, yet the mandate is telling him how much he is a partner with God and what

heights he can reach as covenant partner as set out in Genesis 1:28f. All covenants find it vital that the promises always be held in view. Promises always spring from grace.

### *The Universal Nature of the Abrahamic Covenant*

The Abrahamic Covenant we would see to be as the particular establishing of the universal creational covenant. It is the covenant which includes the other covenants with Israel and David, and the New Covenant is its grand fulfilment. In the New Testament the Abrahamic Covenant is understood to be fulfilled in the New Covenant. All persons of faith are said to be the children of Abraham. Some scholars speak of Genesis chapters 1 to 11 as being ‘pre-history’ and so date history as beginning from Abraham in Genesis chapter 11.

### *The Covenant with Israel*

God promised that He would establish His covenant with Isaac (Gen. 17:21; cf. 21:12; 26:1–5), and Jacob was marked out to continue the line of the covenant (Gen. 25:23; 27:29; 28:12–15; Mal. 1:2–3). Jacob, later called ‘Israel’, was blessed within the Abrahamic Covenant, but when Israel was in trouble in Egypt, then God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and came to Israel’s rescue. Before they reached Sinai, they had lived in the protection of this covenant; they were His covenant people. Even so, God made a special covenant with Israel. This is described in Exodus chapters 19 to 24. In chapter 19, Israel is called to come to Sinai where God will make a covenant

with the people. From 20:18 to 23:33 we have what is called ‘the book of the covenant’. In chapter 24 the ritual of the covenant takes place. This is virtually *karat berith*—‘cutting a covenant’. Moses first read the book of the covenant, the people promised to obey all the words and the people said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’.<sup>6</sup>

The vocation of Israel is in Exodus 19:5–6, ‘Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’. The being of Israel as God’s Bride, we have seen in the first three chapters of Hosea and Ezekiel chapter 16. The sign of God’s covenant with Israel is their sabbath keeping (Exod. 31:12–17). The elements of the creational covenant we saw to be vocation, marriage and sabbath rest.

This covenant was within the Abrahamic Covenant and did not displace it. The temporary nature of the Sinaitic Covenant is spoken about by the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians chapter 3, and by the writer of Hebrews in many places. The place of Israel in God’s history is well described by Paul in Romans chapters 9 – 11.

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that God would not have a sanctuary—the tabernacle—until the covenant of Exodus 24 was made. It is immediately upon its completion that God gives Moses directions for the building of the tabernacle. Likewise the making of the ark waited upon the covenant, and so it was ‘the ark of the covenant’ with the law inside the ark, and the lid of the ark the place of the mercy seat.

We need to keep in mind that we cannot understand any of the Old Testament writings unless we recognise that they were written in Israel by Israelites—people who had a covenant mind-set. Unless we identify with this mind-set we will not properly understand Israel or its covenant, let alone its understanding of the covenant with Abraham.

### The Davidic Covenant

In speaking of this covenant it is best to see its origin in the text of II Samuel 7:8–17:

‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be

made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.’ In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.<sup>7</sup>

This passage is clear enough. Also there is the parallel passage of I Chronicles 17:3–15 which contains some simple differences. At first sight, in both these passages, we might not think of God’s promise to David—of establishing for him an everlasting dynasty—as a covenant, but many scriptures indicate it was a covenant. Isaiah 55:3 speaks of ‘an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David’, a statement confirmed in Acts 13:34—speaking of Jesus as ‘great David’s greater son’—‘And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he spoke in this way, “I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.”’ When we come to Psalm 89, the whole of which is an exposition of the Davidic Covenant, verses 3 and 4 speak of II Chronicles 7:16, ‘Thou hast said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: ‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations”’. Psalm 132:11–12 repeats the thought and word of ‘covenant’. In II Samuel 23:5 David says, ‘he has made

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<sup>7</sup> The history of all Israel can be said to pivot around the Davidic Covenant; that is, it leads up to this promise of God and then on to the coming of the Davidic King—Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God—and so to the proclamation and establishment of his universal kingdom, he, at the same time, being ‘the mediator of a better covenant’, for in him kingdom and covenant meet.

with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure’. Jeremiah 33:19–26 places the covenant with David amongst the unbreakable covenants, those God has made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and with the Levites. There are many more references and they all point to the importance of this covenant.

### Special Note on II Samuel 7:19: The Davidic Charter

Walter Kaiser has a special point to make from II Samuel 7:19 which is often translated misleadingly, the *RSV* saying ‘thou hast shown me the future’, though adding, in a footnote, ‘Heb. this is the law for man’, whilst the *NRSV* has ‘May this be instruction for the people’. Kaiser discusses the Hebrew which he translates in its literal form ‘this is the law of man’ and concludes that:

Since the ‘this’ of II Samuel 7:19 refers to the content of the promise, more specifically, the ‘seed’ of Abraham, Israel, and David, which is to live and reign forever and be the Lord’s channel of blessing to all the nations of the earth, the law in this context is a principle by which all mankind is to be blessed. The genitive, then, is an objective genitive and David’s response is one of pleasant astonishment as he grasps the fact that the promise just given to him is to be ‘The Charter for Humanity’. We call this *torah* a ‘charter’ because it is the plan and prescription for God’s kingdom whereby the whole world shall be blessed with the total content of the promise doctrine. It is a grant conferring powers, rights, and privileges to David and his seed for the benefit of all mankind . . . So the ancient promise of blessing to all mankind would

continue; only now it would involve David's dynasty, throne, and kingdom. Indeed it was a veritable 'charter' granted as God's gift for the future of all mankind.<sup>8</sup>

What we have seen in this note (above) is that the covenant with David has its law—a 'charter for humanity'. Whilst Davidic kingdom and covenant are linked, yet both have at their core the 'charter' or law of God. The law of God is innate in all covenants, but is denoted specially in the Mosaic, Davidic and New Covenants. Jeremiah 31:34 states that God's law will be written in the hearts of His people in the New Covenant.

We are not trying to deal exhaustively with the various covenants, so we will leave this Davidic Covenant, noting that just as Israel's covenant was connected with the idea of their being God's kingdom (Exod. 10:5–6), so the Davidic Covenant is connected with the Davidic kingdom. In the New Testament, Christ is the Davidic King and he is King of the Kingdom of God.

### The New Covenant

We have remarked that the writings of the Old Testament cannot be understood unless we understand the covenant of God, the covenant inherent

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<sup>8</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, 'The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity', in *The Law and the Prophets*, J. H. Skilton (ed.), Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1974, pp. 314–15. Kaiser then examines the parallel passage in I Chronicles 17:17, and translates it 'and thou are regarding me according to the upbringing *torah* of mankind, O Lord God!'

W. J. Dumbrell (*Covenant and Creation*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984, pp. 151–2) has a clear exposition of this verse (II Sam. 7:19).

in creation, then with Noah, with Abraham and with Israel. So, too, the writings of the New Testament cannot be fully understood unless they are seen in the light of covenant, especially the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenants. Of course the whole of the New Testament constitutes the New Covenant.

In a small book such as this one, readers will have tried to gather up covenant principles in the Old Testament in order that they might better understand covenant as a whole, but especially as it is significant in the New Testament. We certainly lack no materials in working out the latter, but we certainly cannot cover all the materials which pertain to it.

### *Three Elements of the Covenant of Creation and the New Covenant*

We can go back and see the three elements of the creational covenant, namely, vocation, the marriage and the sabbath. They were present in the Sinaitic Covenant. These, too, we find in the New Covenant. The vocation is the same as in Genesis 1:28, but further to it in the New Covenant is the mandate to proclaim the gospel throughout the world. The marriage principle is present in Christ being the Bridegroom and the Church being his Bride—the matter of 'the profound mystery' now in action. The sabbath principle is also present; ably set out in the third and fourth chapters of Hebrews, but generally seen in the coming Sabbath rest, the *telos* or goal of history when the Holy City, Holy Marriage, Holy Temple and the

Holy Paradise bring that Seventh-Day Rest to all the redeemed.

If we press the point of the creational covenant, then Adam was the mediator of that one, Abraham of his universal covenant, Moses of Israel's covenant, and Christ—the second and final Adam—of the New Covenant, as he was and is universal High Priest, the Mediator of the New Covenant.

### *The New Covenant Teaching in the New Testament*

The song or prophecy of the priest Zechariah we would interpret as being that of the New Covenant, though it is couched in terms of the Abrahamic Covenant, and does not speak explicitly of the New Covenant:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has visited and redeemed his people,  
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets  
from of old,  
that we should be saved from our enemies,  
and from the hand of all who hate us;  
to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,  
to grant us  
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before him all the days  
of our life.

Other prophecies and narratives surrounding Christ's birth carry through expectation

of Messiah's coming along covenant lines. Whilst there is little explicit talk of covenant in the New Testament, all talk and actions should be seen as following on from the Old Testament. It would be impossible for it to be otherwise. When Jesus at the Last Supper lifted the cup, he said, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:27–28). Luke 22:20 has, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood', and I Corinthians 11:25 has, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood'. We can gather from this that there has been a *karat berith*, a making of a covenant through the death of the Cross.

The New Covenant, in relation to the Davidic Covenant, comes out in Paul's quoting of Isaiah 55:3, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David' (Acts 13:34), which in the *RSV* of that text is, 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David'. In this way the Davidic and New Covenants are linked, but primarily through the fact that Jesus Christ is the Messiah—the Davidic King—as also he is the Mediator of the New Covenant, as the writer of Hebrews so ably shows.

### *Hebrews and the New Covenant*

In the first ten chapters of Hebrews, the writer deals with Christ's mediatorial ministry as the High Priest.<sup>9</sup> He has in mind the High-Priestly ministry of Jesus as 'after the order of Melchizedek',

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<sup>9</sup> See Hebrews 7:22; 8:6–7; 9:15; 12:24; 13:20.

in contrast to the Levitical-priestly ministry of Aaron in the Mosaic Covenant. The New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31–34 is central to the author of Hebrews, for he twice quotes this passage. In 10:29 and 13:20 he also speaks of ‘the blood of the covenant’. In the latter text he refers to Christ as ‘the great shepherd of the sheep’, a term used in Ezekiel 34 for the Davidic shepherd or king of Israel.

There are only a few passages which mention the old and new covenants. As a matter of fact the term ‘old’ is rarely explicitly used of any covenant before the new one (see II Cor. 3:14 and Heb. 8:6). In Hebrews 8:13 we read, ‘In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete’, and in Romans 7:6, Paul says, ‘But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit’.

In the passage of Jeremiah 31:31–34—the passage twice quoted in Hebrews (8:8–12; 10:16–17)—the following principles are seen:

- (a) The New Covenant will primarily be with Israel.<sup>10</sup>
- (b) Even so, it will not be like the old covenant made with Israel when God delivered them from Egypt.
- (c) It will be a covenant which will make innate to all believing hearts the holy law of God.

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<sup>10</sup> The general tenor of Hebrews does not allow forgiveness to be limited to Israel, but certainly we should note that it is for Israel.

- (d) Knowledge of God will not have to be taught to anyone or by anyone, because all shall know the Lord ‘from the least of them to the greatest’.
- (e) The rich outcome of the covenant will be God’s forgiveness of sins. It is by the forgiveness of sins they will truly know God.<sup>11</sup> Israel had a vast body of sins to be forgiven and no longer to be remembered. Its history of idolatry, uncleannesses and lawlessness was so vast as to be indescribable, so that the promise of forgiveness is remarkable in view of the dimensions of guilt and evil that it must cover.

### *Conclusion on the New Covenant*

We can see that the New Covenant is a vast subject, and so we refer to the helpful books set out in the short bibliography at the back of this book. What we need to see is that the New Covenant is recognised to have strong links with the Abrahamic Covenant, and that it is really that covenant in new form. It is a new dispensation or economy to that of the former dispensation—the Mosaic one with its law. The law is present in the New Covenant but not just as Jewish law.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A great theme of the New Testament is that God is known as love by forgiveness.

<sup>12</sup> We saw from Exodus 19:1 – 23:33 that the book of the law was the Law of the Mosaic Covenant. All the precepts and injunctions of that law followed the giving of ‘the ten words’, that is, ‘the ten commandments’. Whilst the ten words remain *at* the heart of all moral law and *as* the heart of all moral law, yet the other precepts and injunctions do not. They are especially for Israel, no matter how valuable they may be as a commentary on the ten words, and, in some sense, a social outworking of those

The powerful fact of the New Covenant is the forgiveness that can come to the whole human race because of Christ's blood-shedding. When we use the passages in Jeremiah (31:31–34; 32:36–41) with passages in Ezekiel (36:24–28; 37:1–14) and Joel (2:28f.), then we see, as Paul and the writer of Hebrews teach, that the covenant of the End-time has come. It is the living dispensation of grace. Christ is the Mediator of this covenant, as also the perpetual Intercessor for all covenant members, and the Holy Spirit is present in their hearts to bring them the liberty of the gospel and the freedom of the law of Christ. This covenant is—as are all God's covenants—societal. There is the covenant community under its Mediator and High Priest, Christ, who is also the Bridegroom of the Church, the Bride. This is borne out not only by studying the former covenants, but also by the words addressed to the thousands of repentant hearers at Pentecost: 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:38–39).

'For the promise is to you and to your children' means that just as under the Abrahamic and

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commands. They can have value for us, but they are not the New Covenant law written in the heart.

Mosaic Covenants God's covenant promises were to all the people—adults and children together—so under the New Covenant all in the Church—the Family of God—have the covenantal promises given to them. The families within the Family of God have the promise of God's covenant care and love to adults and children together. Whether they avail themselves of that covenantal blessing and Godly care is a matter for personal decision on the part of every person, young or old. Some Christian parents think their children are outside the covenant until they accept Christ as their Saviour and Lord. He is their Saviour and Lord because they are in the covenant, but they must exercise repentance and faith to receive the gift of salvation personally. Likewise, if they reject the covenant relationship they must meet the consequences of that.

The effect of believing that the whole family is in the covenant makes sense when Paul says, 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord'. In some sense they are 'in the Lord'. In Israel all were in the covenant, but not all lived according to the covenant. Covenant-keeping was promised blessings and covenant-breaking was promised cursings: this must be kept in mind. This is the same in the New Covenant, and promises are not bribes, and the fact of cursings is not in the nature of threats. None of these blessings and cursings are to be thought of in terms of either 'keeping a contract' or 'breaking a contract'.

We have also seen that with the gift of the forgiveness of sins is the gift of the Holy Spirit. This

Spirit is our Helper, Guide and Empoweror. He brings the love of God to our hearts. At the same time he brings the law of God to our hearts. He internalises it, so to speak, and brings blessings by its being kept. Thus we know God and His ways and live in them because we have been justified.

### CONCLUSION ON 'COMPREHENDING THE COVENANT'

This small book has only touched a little on the whole matter of covenant, but I trust enough has been written to give some basic ideas concerning it. If we can understand that God had planned His covenant with the human race before time, and if it commenced with time—the primal pair in the Garden—then we can see all peoples and persons on the earth as those who are in that covenant of creation, that eternal covenant, since the whole human race was in Adam.<sup>13</sup> Some people may think this is universalism, but that is far from the case. Many peoples, tribes and cultures have set up their own cultures and covenants that have nothing to do with God. In that sense they are not aware of God's covenant, and in that sense are not in it. In Adam they have broken the covenant and formed their own gods and idols and developed their cultures around them. Even so, God does not abandon them. He has not broken His covenant. He has worked in history through all the covenants we

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<sup>13</sup> Here Romans 5:12–21 should be read, as also Acts 17:26–27.

have discussed. Finally His New Covenant is there to bring the forgiveness of sins to all who repent and believe the gospel. Of course it is far more than even forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. It is being wholly reconciled to God, being brought to a place of communion with Him. It is to inherit all the covenantal blessings and to be freed from all cursings.

Because there are some things we needed to speak about but did not want to include because they would make the running description too involved and seemingly complicated, I have put these things in as Appendixes. I hope you will look at them and try to see their meaning and where they fit into the whole matter of covenant.

At the last, let me remind you that a covenant of God is *not* a contract. You may think it is, but if you take this view you will see God as Contractor, and you as trying to fulfil the contract, or as disliking it. Don't do that. Try to understand that God's covenants are of grace. He gives: we receive.

If you do not comprehend the non-contractual principle you will probably say, 'Where God has His law, then it must be a contract'. The answer is No: God's law is His own law, the way He goes about His own being and doing. By creation He has instilled this law into our hearts. We have the privilege of being and doing as God does. When we are in communion with Him, we do not see law as a burden but as a delight. We know how to go about life.

Being in covenant is a very wonderful thing!

## Appendix One: God and Covenant

**Note:** the following long quote is from Hermann Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics*<sup>14</sup> and in particular his discussion on 'The *Pactum Salutis*', that is, 'The Covenant of Redemption':

However, as soon as we present the matter of the covenant in this wise, if the life of the covenant in God is such a life of most perfect friendship, of the most intimate communion, of the deepest knowledge and the most affectionate love, it follows, in the first place, that the idea of the covenant cannot be found in an agreement or pact. In perfect harmony and communion of life, in the perfect, eternal knowing of one another, and in the most perfect love and unity, the idea of an agreement, of the conclusion of a pact, does not fit. In such a relation everything is spirit and life. The covenant idea is given with the life of the Triune God in Himself. It rises in eternal spontaneity from the divine Essence and realizes itself with perfect divine consciousness in the Three Persons. God knows and wills Himself, loves and seeks Himself eternally as the covenant God. The covenant is the bond of God with Himself. It is the eternal life of perfect light.

But if this is so in God Himself, this must also be applicable to the covenant idea as a relation between God

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<sup>14</sup> Hermann Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grand Rapids, 1966, pp. 321–2.

and man. For all things are only out of God, through Him, and unto Him. Also the covenant relation can never be anything else than an ectypal reflection of the covenant life in God Himself. If the essence of the covenant in God is the communion of friendship, this must also be the essence of the covenant between God and man. If this communion of friendship in God rests upon the perfect essential unity by personal distinction, then this must also be the case with the covenant between God and man: it also must be based upon a creaturely likeness of man to God by personal distinction. If this communion of friendship in the Trinity implies a perfect knowledge of one another, then also the covenant life of man must consist in this, that God reveals Himself to him, causes man to know Him, reveals His secrets to him, speaks to him as a Friend with His friend, walks with him, eats and drinks with him, lives with him under one roof. If the covenant life in God consists in this, that the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are united in the bond of perfect love, then also the covenant relation between God and man must originate in this, that God opens His heart for man. Then the life of the covenant is eternal life itself. For this is life eternal, that they know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent. Thou in Me, and I in them, that they may be perfect in One . . . Then the covenant is the very essence of religion, the highest good, the very best that can ever be imparted to man through grace, the highest bliss. The idea of the covenant is certainly not a pact or agreement, whether you conceive of such an agreement in the unilateral or bilateral sense. It is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship in which God reflects His own covenant life in His relation to the creature, gives to that creature life, and causes him to taste and acknowledge the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all good.

And once more, if we may thus conceive of the very essence of the covenant, the covenant also is not a way to a certain end, is no means to the attainment of a certain

purpose, is not the manner wherein we are saved. It is itself the highest purpose, the end, the eternal bliss, unto which all things tend and must tend. Then the purpose of all things is always the covenant of God. Then the covenant determines and dominates the whole of God's counsel, and the whole of history concentrates around the highest realization of the covenant of God. That is the sole purpose in creation and recreation. That is the purpose of the Word, of the cross and resurrection, of the uniting of all things in heaven and on earth in Immanuel, God with us. In the covenant of God is found the motive of the struggle of all ages in the world. And in that covenant is found the reason for the consummation of all things. And the idea of the covenant dominates all existence and all life and all relations of the creatures to God and of the creatures mutually. So all-dominating is the idea of the covenant that it would not be impossible to write a complete dogmatics from the viewpoint of the covenant. Not a way, and not a means, but the final destination and the all-dominating purpose is the covenant of God.

## Appendix Two: Some Meanings of 'Covenant'

There are variations in the meaning of covenant as has been indicated in the text of our book. Covenant is so broad in its elements that it needs to be opened up and this W. J. Dumbrell does in his book *Covenant and Creation* on pages 15–20.

The following are some descriptions given of 'covenant':

O. Palmer Robertson defines a covenant:

*A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered. When God enters into a covenantal relationship with men, he sovereignly institutes a life-and-death bond. A covenant is a bond in blood, or a bond of life and death, sovereignly administered.*<sup>15</sup>

P. A. Lillback does not give us a clear definition of covenant, but describes the one way it comes to be known by institution. For him, promise figures largely in covenant, and this is correct:

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<sup>15</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1980, pp. 4ff.

The covenants are started with God's declaration, 'I will establish my covenant' (e.g. Gn. 6:18; Ex. 6:4–5). In this sense, the covenant is one-sided and reflects the unconditional character of election. God promises to be ever faithful to his covenant (e.g. Lv. 26:44–15; Dt. 4:31). The essence of God's covenant is captured in the summary promise, 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (e.g. Gn. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; 2 Cor. 6:16–18; Rev. 21:2–3).<sup>16</sup>

M. Weinfield in his article on *berith*<sup>17</sup> seems to provide a reliable understanding of covenant, technical as it may seem to some readers. In it he has the following valuable note:

The most plausible solution seems to be the one that associates *berith* with Akk. *biritu*, 'clasp,' 'fetter' (cf. the Talmudic *byryt*). This is supported by the Akkadian and Hittite forms for treaty: Akk. *riksu*, Hitt. *ishiul*, both meaning 'bond.' The concept of a *binding* settlement also stands behind Arab. 'aqd, Lat. *vinculum fidei*, 'bond of faith,' *contractus*, 'contract,' and is likewise in German *Bund*. This etymology might support the reading *ma'asoreth habberith* in Ezk. 20:37 ('I will make you enter into the *bond* of the covenant'), suggested long ago. The Greek terms for covenant, *syntheke*, *harmonia* (*Iliad* xxii.255), *synthesia* (ii.339), and *synemosyne* (xxii.261), also express the idea of binding/putting together. The 'bond' metaphor explains the use of 'strengthening' or 'fastening' to convey the idea of the 'validity' or 'reliability' of the treaty. Thus we find in Akk. *dunnunu rikstate*, 'to fasten the bonds' (=to vali-date the treaty), or *riksu dannu*, 'strong persistent bond'

<sup>16</sup> P. A. Lillback, 'Covenant', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (eds), IVP, Leicester, 1988, pp. 173–6.

<sup>17</sup> M. Weinfield, 'berith', in *Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, G. J. Botterweck and Helmer Riggren (eds), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975, p. 255.

(=a valid and reliable treaty), and similarly in Aram. *lethaqqaphah 'esar*, 'strengthen the bond' (Dnl. 6:8). The Greek term for annulling the pact is *lyein*, 'to loosen,' which also points to the understanding of the treaty as a bond.

This technical and reliable description of covenant from various languages—some associated—leads us to see covenant as having a bond, or making or sustaining a bond. We have our ideas today as regarding bonds and bonding, and some of them are contractual, so we will need to see that there is a bonding which is not forced and is non-contractual.

We need to consider the fact of bonding as the heart of covenant. We need to see that in the creational covenant God does not make a move to create the bond. It is already there, by creation. It is one of the inherent elements of creation. Man is in the image of God and so is one with God in communion. He is naturally bonded. Pets, taken at the right time and handled in the right way, can be bonded with their owners; yet the owner is but a substitution of the parent of the pet. A budgerigar can be wonderfully bonded to a human being, and it can be said that a covenantal relationship exists between the two. There is much talk of mothers being bonded with their children, as though this is a postnatal happening. The mother's bonding with the child begins at conception and develops over the period of pregnancy. Providing ideal conditions at birth may strengthen the bond, but it does not make it. Note that children, normally, are bonded in the covenantal relationship of love.

G. Pidoux in the article ‘Covenant, O.T.’ has this to say:

In Israel life is only possible within the community, the isolated individual being an exception who arouses horror. Now, that life which blossoms within the community is incomprehensible without the concept of *covenant*, by which the bonds uniting the members of the community are expressed. Still further, the relations between the God of Israel and His people are thought of under the form of a covenant. This conception alone affords an understanding of the religious life of the people of God. Many conceptions depend on it, such as righteousness or sin. Thus, in the O.T. covenant has a significance the importance of which cannot be exaggerated.<sup>18</sup>

#### CONCLUSION TO ‘MEANINGS OF COVENANT’

The books and articles on covenant are all slow to give hard and fast definitions because the subject is so wide in its dimensions. In the Old Testament we see the nature of the various covenants, and commentators are caught in the idea of contemporary ideas of covenant amongst tribes and nations which are neighbours to Israel, or powerful nations which fight with her and subdue her. We can choose to believe that Israel drew her ideas of covenant from these nations, or that it was an understanding which she received in creation and from God’s various covenantal acts with her.

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<sup>18</sup> G. Pidoux, ‘Covenant, O.T.’, in *Vocabulary of the Bible*, J.-J. von Allmen (ed.), Lutterworth Press, London, 1958, p. 65.

Whatever the case, Israel had a highly developed understanding of covenant. In the New Testament the Hebrew word for ‘covenant’ (*berith*) which comes through the Septuagint is *diatheke* and means ‘will’ or ‘testament’.

What we do know of covenant life in Israel and the New Covenant people, the Church, is that covenant means: (i) the community of God’s people living in love; (ii) the grace of redemption and so a people living in liberty; (iii) the Presence of God with His people as in the Old Testament, ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’. This Presence is shown in the first few verses of Revelation chapter 1; and (iv) all the covenant people will inherit all the promises of God—covenant is a matter of inheritance.

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