



COVENANT

THE FRAMEWORK

OF GOD'S GRAND PLAN OF REDEMPTION

Daniel I. Block



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Introduction

Covenant and God's Grand Plan of Redemption in Scripture

Covenant as the Heart of Biblical Revelation

Theologians have identified many profoundly significant “big and unifying motifs” in the Scriptures. After five decades of marinating in the Scriptures, I have found, among those themes, that the notion of “covenant” represents the heart of all biblical revelation, and the “covenants” themselves provide the framework for that revelation. A covenant is a formally confirmed agreement between two or more parties that creates, formalizes, or governs a relationship that does not naturally exist or a natural relationship that may have been broken or disintegrated. The term “covenant” derives from an Old French verb *covenancier*, “to settle or contract.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “covenant” as “a mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts; a compact, contract, bargain; sometimes, the undertaking, pledge, or promise of one of the parties” (1:585). Normally parents need not formalize their relationship with biological children; the relationship is established by birth. However, it is conceivable that should parent and child be estranged, at some point they could reestablish the relationship through a “covenantal” procedure. In contrast to relationships established by birth, adults in many societies may establish a relationship with a person who is not their biological child through a formal ceremony of adoption. Through this “covenant” ritual, the parents claim the child as their own and commit to caring for that child. Covenants typically involve solemn commitments establishing the privileges and obligations that attend agreements.

The Scriptures know of two kinds of covenants: parity covenants, between parties of equal social status; and disparity covenants, between parties of

unequal status—usually identified as suzerain-vassal treaties. The Scriptures present marriage relationships as covenantal: two unrelated persons commit to each other and to the long-range goal of establishing a new family through a formal procedure (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). The patricentric world of the Bible considered the husband and father the head of the household (*bêt 'āb*, “a house of a father”). However, the Song of Songs suggests that within the context of marriage, the relationship between husband and wife could be quite egalitarian.

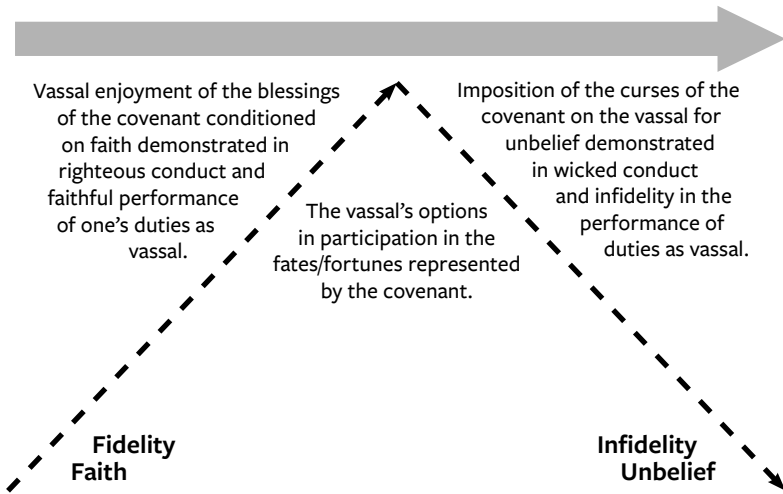
In the ancient world, covenants, also referred to as treaties, often established and governed relationships involving heads of clans or rulers of realms. These could involve “parity” or “disparity” relationships. Genesis 31:43–55 illustrates the former. By means of a covenant ritual, Laban formally acknowledged his son-in-law as his social and economic peer. Second Kings 16:7 illustrates the latter. King Ahaz of Judah expressly acknowledged that he was the “vassal” (*'ebed*) and “son” (*bēn*) of Tiglath-pileser III, the emperor of Assyria. This obviously involved disparity—that is, a suzerain-vassal relationship.

While the notion of “covenant” dominates the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, in the Bible the concept is profoundly theological rather than economic or political: it involves the infinite God and finite parties whom he invites to covenant relationship with himself, and these finite members are to treat each other as coequal beneficiaries of these covenants. In the Scriptures all covenants involving God are fundamentally monergistic suzerain-vassal pacts: God the divine Suzerain initiates the covenant; God chooses the covenant partner; God declares the terms; God determines the consequences for the subjects, depending on their responses to him and his revealed will (blessing for fidelity, curses for rebellion); and God identifies the sign of the covenant (rainbow, Gen. 9:12–17; circumcision, Gen. 17:9–14; the seventh-day Sabbath, Exod. 31:15–17). Accordingly, God always identifies these covenants as “my covenant,” while biblical authors or characters refer to them as “his covenant,” or “God’s covenant with X,” rather than “our covenant,” “Israel’s covenant,” or “X’s covenant with God.” YHWH’s covenant partners are never in a position to negotiate either the terms of the contract or the consequences for fidelity or infidelity; their only option is to accept or reject the relationship.

Categories of Covenants in the Bible

Biblical covenants have long been classified either as unconditional and irrevocable covenants of grant (Abrahamic, Davidic) or conditional and revocable covenants of obligation (Israelite). But this dichotomy is false: they all exhibit signs of both irrevocability and contingency. The repeated use of the word

Figure 0.1
God's Irrevocable Covenant Commitment



“eternal” (i.e., irrevocable; Hb. *‘ad ‘ōlām*) in association with the covenants guaranteed their perpetuity irrespective of the response of the vassal partner. God would never retract his commitments (cf. Judg. 2:1). Nevertheless, as in any relationship, the extent to which covenants achieved their goals was always contingent on the response of the vassal partners, who retained freedom at every stage to keep the covenants or to violate them (cf. Exod. 19:4–6). The consequences of these divergent courses were fundamental elements of the covenant, either implicitly or explicitly. Even in the precovenant world of Eden, the tree of life represented the divine ideal, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented the curse for rebellion by the vassal; these respectively symbolized the alternative effects of human responses. In the Israelite covenant, YHWH spelled out in detail the alternative effects in the form of blessings and curses (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The Davidic covenant predicted negative effects with God’s threat to discipline the descendant of David, but it did not spell out the reasons (2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Ps. 132:12).

However, the imposition of the curses would not signal the termination or cancellation of the covenant. Rather, as Daniel recognized (Dan. 9:1–19), because YHWH had built punishments for infidelity into the covenants, his people’s experience of the curses meant that the terms of the covenant were fulfilled to the letter. Objectively, the covenant remained in force in perpetuity, irrespective of human response; subjectively, the mission envisioned for the vassal and enjoyment of the benefactions promised by the covenant depended upon the vassal’s faithful fulfillment of the suzerain’s charge (fig. 0.1).

In summary, the oft-proposed categories of conditional and unconditional covenants should be abandoned for two reasons. On the one hand, God's covenants are all irrevocable; as the divine Suzerain, he is always faithful to his covenant commitments. On the other hand, the effectiveness of all covenants depends upon the fidelity of the human covenant partner(s). Therefore, I find it best to recognize two types of divine covenants according to function rather than duration: missional/communal covenants and administrative covenants. The first category involves covenants focused on the health of the group (communal) and God's mandate for them (hence missional). These include the cosmic and Israelite covenants, while the administrative covenants involve the Adamic and Davidic covenants. I classify them as administrative because within the communities involved in ecclesial/missional covenants, God appoints individuals and their descendants to promote the smooth operation of these broader covenants. Whereas these latter covenants offered benefits to vassals chosen for a particular suzerain-vassal covenant relationship, the primary concern of administrative covenants was not the vassal as vassal but the triangular complex of relationships involved in the ecclesial/missional covenants (figs. 1.1 and 1.5 below). Three covenants revealed in the First Testament fall under the rubric of administrative covenant: the Adamic, Davidic, and Levitical covenants. Of these three, the last is an outlier and will be treated separately in an excursus after the discussion of the Israelite covenant. In the exploration of all these relationships, we will observe that just as the Israelite covenant serves as a microcosm of the cosmic covenant, so the Davidic covenant functions as a microcosm of the Adamic covenant (fig. 1.5 below).

Up to this point we have been speaking of covenants as real agreements, but we need to begin to think about the notion of "covenantance" in the abstract. In the United Kingdom this noun occasionally occurs in real estate documents in association with the governance of transactions. Even though the Scriptures never use the Hebrew *bērît* or Greek *diathēkē* in this sense, and "covenantance" never appears in English translations, the abstract concept is useful for understanding the divine passion that drives God's overtures to create and maintain relationships with his fallen creation. Accordingly, in this volume I shall often speak of "covenantance" in the abstract, in addition to considering "covenants" in concrete cases.

Organization

The title of this volume, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption in Scripture*, assumes several fundamental convictions that

underlie the discussion that follows. First, this project involves a biblical theology of covenant. The Christian Scriptures, made up of the First Testament (the Hebrew Bible treasured by our Jewish friends) and the New Testament, provide our source of information on the covenants. The primary subject of our study is not natural revelation, nor human traditions or mythologies, nor the writings of biblical theologians; as Protestants we adhere to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*: the Scriptures are our only sure and ultimate source of truth concerning God and the life of godliness. Other sources provide context for biblical revelation and voices that aid us in interpreting the Scriptures. Even so, ultimately, to know the mind of God on these matters, we need to consult the writings that God, in a particularly inspiring sense, “breathed out” (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Thus the Scriptures are our primary resource in this study.

Second, this project assumes that the divine project involving the cosmos generally and humankind particularly is a redemptive project. The language of “redemption” used in the Scriptures is both broad and varied. The Hebrew Bible, which provides the foundation for the New Testament understanding of the concept, uses two principal expressions for redemption, *gā'al* and *pādā*. While the nuances in their everyday usage differed slightly, when used theologically both involve rescue from a desperate state (e.g., disaster, death, bondage) and transfer into a state of well-being (*šālôm*).¹ Indeed, we may look upon the history of the cosmos after Genesis 3 as a single grand story of God's determination to rescue his creation from the desperate condition that has resulted from Adam and Eve's sin and to restore creation into the ideal state for which he had originally created all things.

Third, God's accomplishment of this goal over time will be not the consequence of haphazard decisions or accidental events but the result of a deliberate plan. Many have spoken of this plan as “the drama of redemption,” a notion that is quite fitting, not because this drama is played out on a stage for the entertainment of an audience but because it involves real characters in real time on a real plane. The numerous references to “before/from the foundation of the world” in the New Testament demonstrate that the plan God has implemented in time and space was in God's mind even before time and space existed.² The author of Hebrews recognized the place of “covenant” in this grand divine scheme in his concluding benediction: “Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from

1. For examples, see the following: *gā'al*, Gen. 48:16; Exod. 6:6 (both Gk. *ryomai*); 15:13 (Gk. *lytroō*); *pādā*, Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5 [6]; Ps. 25 [LXX 24]:22 (all these, Gk. *lytroō*).

2. Matt. 13:35; 25:34; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8.

the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20–21 NIV).

Even though I recognize communal/missional and administrative categories of covenants in the Scriptures, the divine drama of redemption transpires in four acts, which provide the broad structure for this volume:

- Act 1: Background to the drama of redemption (Gen. 1–2)
- Act 2: The cosmic need for redemption (Gen. 3:1–11:26)
- Act 3: The story of the chosen agents of redemption (Gen. 11:27–Mal. 4:6)
- Act 4: The appearance and mission of the Redeemer (Matthew–Revelation)

Part 1 of this volume will involve the first two acts, which deal with the state of the cosmos and humankind generally. Part 2 focuses on Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel, whom YHWH chose as his agents of blessing to a cursed world. Part 3 examines the Davidic covenant in the First Testament and its forward look. Part 4 investigates the fulfillment of the divine redemptive goal in Jesus, Messiah, the Son of God, and the Son of Man. All four parts will begin by exploring the communal/missional covenants involved in the drama and conclude with examinations of the role of the administrative covenants in the communal/missional agenda.

Method and Approach

Initially many readers will find my approach to the biblical notion of “covenant” to be idiosyncratic, but this is characteristic of many biblical theologians. We all make choices and then tend to interpret and present the evidence in the light of those choices. We recognize that the biblical accounts of the various covenants are sufficiently vague and ambiguous to invite more than one approach. I offer this presentation as a contribution to a lively ongoing discussion.

Readers interested in biblical theology will find many excellent books and journals in libraries and in the warehouses of publishers. These resources vary greatly in depth of discussion, approaches to the subject, their views of Scripture, their hermeneutics, and their authors’ theological predispositions. Most of us can cite resources that both reinforce and challenge the positions

we hold. My aim in this volume is not to rehash previous works nor to provide an exhaustive discussion of every subject I raise. I do not intend to examine or even mention alternative views on every matter. My lack of documentation of authorities who have held similar views or who reject both my method and my conclusions will probably frustrate some readers. Rather, I offer this work as a "Here I stand" sort of statement.

With this comment I do not mean to be presumptuous. I recognize openly that the import of those words in this context is not nearly as weighty and the words themselves are not nearly as consequential as they were for Martin Luther and the history of Christianity when he declared them at the Diet of Worms before Emperor Charles V on April 18, 1521. However, as we often find in the Scriptures, in later accounts speakers and authors find antecedent statements appropriate in new settings. The Reformer's words express my state of mind as I "pen" this manuscript. What lies ahead is the result of fifty years of listening to, studying, and wrestling with the Scriptures; seeking to demonstrate the transforming truth and grace of the Scriptures in my daily life and ethic; participating in small group Bible studies; ministering pastorally in local churches; and lecturing, teaching, and preaching on every continent except Antarctica.

I could have kept this project much simpler by limiting my discussion to the essential features of the covenants serially. Biblical scholars have produced many fine monographs that achieve this purpose. My concern has been deeper, to explore how biblical authors develop the notion of covenant. This involves investigating the historical and literary contexts out of which the covenants arose and that they address. To do this, we must read the texts closely, suspending our own presuppositions and earnestly listening for the inspired illocutionary messages that the authors of Scriptures were communicating, rather than merely finding support for our preconceived ideas. I grant that this is a modernist approach and that reading ancient texts without prejudice and without personal biases is ultimately impossible, but we must be diligent in letting biblical texts speak their own messages.

A high view of Scripture lets biblical authors say whatever they want to say. This means neither forcing them to say more or something different from their intended sense nor having them say less than they intend. Because the book of Deuteronomy never identifies its author, I resist the impulse to name the person or to fix a firm specific date to the composition as we have it. I accept that it comes with Mosaic authority, for this is fundamental to its message. With allowance for the engagement of an amanuensis or a secretary, I accept that Moses was the author of the texts that appear to be transcripts of his concluding pastoral addresses, and that from the beginning these documents had

full canonical authority, because this is what the text says (Deut. 4:2; 31:9–13, 24–26). However, because the text does not identify the author of the first five verses and the final chapter of the book, and because the book contains a series of other post-Mosaic (e.g., 2:12), I do not feel obligated to identify Moses as the author of the book as we have it. By virtue of the inspiration of its final author, whom I understand to be “a prophet like Moses” (18:15–22), it comes with Moses’ authority and Mosaic content, but the style of Hebrew and other features suggest that the present form derives from a later date.

This approach applies also to issues that are more theological. When we read biblical texts, we must let them speak with their own voice before we listen to the voices of later interpreters. This is difficult, because we are all products of our literary and hermeneutical past. But it is a goal for which we need to strive. For this reason, I have spent a considerable amount of time and space discussing both the fundamentals of covenant and the covenants and the ways biblical authors saw these notions working in their narratives, genealogies, hymns, prayers, prophecies, and epistles.

Biblical theologians follow different strategies in laying out their understanding of the theological message of the Scriptures, which for us mean the First and New Testaments. Some approach the task serially by declaring what they consider to be the common and distinctive theologies of the individual compositions that make up the Scriptures. Others present their interpretation of biblical theology thematically, tracing the progress of particular topics and perspectives (e.g., divine kingship, holiness, theological ethics), exploring the history and progress of revelation through time, beginning with the earliest compositions and ending with the book of Revelation. Because of the scope of the project, biblical theologians tend to divide with the Testaments. On the one hand, we have First (Old) Testament theologians, who begin with Genesis and end with Malachi or 1–2 Chronicles, the last of the writings in the Hebrew canon. On the other hand, New Testament theologians tend to begin with Paul, who composed his epistles somewhere between AD 48 and the mid-60s, and end with the Johannine writings, which were written between the AD mid-80s and the mid-90s.

First Testament and New Testament theologians have enough work to do in their separate areas; the complexity and sheer bulk of textual data require disciplined analysis of manageable material. Likely this partly explains why First and New Testament scholars hesitate to cross the gap between the Testaments, and when they do, they primarily seek enlightenment from the other Testament for a reference or issue in one’s chosen Testament. In this volume I will accept the charge of *chutzpah* for devoting almost 40 percent of my investigation to the New Testament. I freely admit that I am not a New

Testament scholar, and in giving this amount of space to reading “the other Testament” from the inside out, I am traveling where other First Testament scholars (and angels?) fear to tread. The absence of First Testament scholarly voices from published discussions on the new versus old perspectives on Paul illustrates the problem. I expect that some—perhaps many—will dismiss my interpretations of New Testament texts as superficial, uninformed, and naive, but they arise out of my deep reflection on First Testament perspectives. Then I seek to read the New Testament in light of antecedent texts, rather than the reverse, which often yields forced and unnatural readings of earlier texts.

The Value of a Biblical Theology Grounded in the First Testament

Within North American evangelicalism, we hear voices explicitly calling for Christians to detach the First Testament from Christian faith because the *Old Testament* poses too many problems for those who try to present the good news (gospel) of salvation in Jesus Christ. Christians since the heretic Marcion—who argued that the God of ancient Israel and the God of the New Testament were distinct and very different deities—have hesitated to be this explicit. Yet for many evangelicals, the First Testament is at worst the problem that the New Testament supposedly fixes and at best a dead book that we would do well to bury ceremoniously in a genizah.

Our creedal statements affirm the authority of the entire Bible, First and New Testaments, for Christian faith and life, but the former is largely missing in evangelical worship. My summary of the problem below is embarrassingly autobiographical, but in our time symptoms of the trivialization and demise of the only Bible that Jesus and the apostles had are everywhere: (1) avoidance of the First Testament; (2) walk-through-the-Bible approaches to the First Testament; (3) using the First Testament primarily as a source of illustrations for New Testament sermons; (4) using the First Testament primarily for prooftexts in apologetic debates; (5) restricting our use to a few favorite selected texts; (6) preaching biographical sermons that focus on the human characters and idealize them even when biblical authors intentionally characterize them negatively; (7) reading the First Testament with a “a homiletical hermeneutic,” which means that the message we preach depends upon what we want the people to get out of the text, rather than what the text intends to say; (8) Alexandrian spiritualizing of historical and cultural elements in the text because the “spiritual meaning” of the text supposedly edifies; (9) reading the First Testament through New Testament lenses, which means that the rhetorical use of texts or concepts in the later contexts drowns out the

message of the authors as established by normal grammatical-historical interpretation; (10) Christologizing the First Testament. That Jesus Christ is the heart and goal (*telos*) of all revelation (cf. Luke 24:25–35) is an important underlying assumption of Christian exegesis, but it is not the starting point of interpretation for any given text.

These are the symptoms of a deeply rooted and pervasive problem. Modern readers offer many excuses for their disinterest in and repudiation of the First Testament: (1) As an ancient text it is out of touch and irrelevant for modern Western Christians. (2) It presents a ritualistic approach to religious expression that has ended or been superseded by Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. (3) Its ethic of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is grossly inferior to Christ's ethic of love, which calls us to return good for evil. (4) Literarily, it is cast in genres that range from boringly detailed genealogies to incomprehensible metaphors and offensive rhetoric. (5) Theologically, it presents a view of a vengeful God that is utterly objectionable to modern sensitivities.

However, the greatest problem may be dogmatic. Many evangelicals subscribe to theological dogmas that highlight the contrasts between the two Testaments. Instead of treating the Scriptures as one continuous story of divine redemption, in which the incarnation and the New Testament as a document represent the climactic chapter in YHWH's grand redemptive project, they focus on and exaggerate discontinuities. Whether rooted in Martin Luther's "law-gospel" contrast, Anabaptist claims of a new and superior ethic, a neo-Reformed inability to experience the life-giving and life-transforming power of the word unless it speaks of the New Testament Christ, or a dispensationalist division of human history into discrete eras within which the divine economy operates according to divergent rules, the effects of these "discontinuities" have been deadly for the place of the First Testament in North American Christianity. Since the Reformation, we have invested too much time and effort into digging the ditch between the Testaments. The time has come to read the Scriptures as one story and to begin filling the ditch by highlighting the continuities over time in God's amazing grace toward a fallen and rebellious humanity, which has unfortunately dragged the cosmos down with it. This book offers twenty shovels of soil (chapters) between the introduction and the conclusion as my small contribution to closing the chasm between the First Testament and New Testament. To return to the metaphor of the drama of redemption, the Scriptures do not offer two distinct dramas. This is one grand story in which Act 4 represents the climax of an account that began in Act 1 and has taken us through Acts 2 and 3.

PART 1

The COSMIC
and ADAMIC
COVENANTS

The Cosmic Covenant

Introduction

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). With this grand announcement, Act 1 of the cosmic drama began. I have carefully chosen the expression “cosmic drama”; what we are about to describe concerns all creation. Christians often view the world and the Scriptures from an anthropocentric perspective—as if human beings are the center of the universe and everything exists for them. Genesis 1:1 reminds us that God has been engaged in a project that is vastly greater than the human population. The spectacular astronomical discoveries made possible by the Hubble Space Telescope and other machines that humans have sent into space reveal a creation infinitely greater than our species of primates. While human characters dominate accounts of earthly history, biblical writers never lost sight of the grander vision.

This grander vision is especially prominent in the writings of the psalmists, sages, and prophets. Psalmists celebrate the wonder of YHWH’s creation in its entirety.¹ They speak of the heavens and their expanse as spokespersons for the glory of God (19:1–6 [7]) and his righteousness (50:6; 97:6) and of the earth as belonging to YHWH.² They marvel at his care for his creatures and his control of cosmic forces to accomplish this (Ps. 104). And they call upon the cosmos and all the creatures of earth to praise YHWH (Ps. 147). Sages (Prov. 8:22–31; Job 38:4–11) and prophets join them in glorifying YHWH as

1. Pss. 8:1–3; 29:1–11; 33:6–11.

2. Pss. 24:1; 95:4–5; cf. Exod. 9:29.

creator and sustainer of all things,³ and they see heaven as YHWH's throne and the earth as his footstool (Isa. 66:1–2). Although the cosmos has been implicated in humanity's rebellion and suffers intensely under the judgment of YHWH,⁴ the prophet in Isaiah 65:17–25 promised that one day YHWH would create a new heavens and a new earth where all humanity and all creatures will enjoy perfect shalom. Indeed, on the analogy of YHWH's cosmic promise in Genesis 8:21–22, Jeremiah spoke of his irrevocable commitment to Israel (Jer. 31:35–37).

YHWH's passion for the cosmos also reverberates through the New Testament. In what is probably the best-known text, God's covenant commitment to the cosmos underlies the incarnation and saving work of the Son of God: "For God demonstrated his love for the world [Gk. *kosmos*] by giving his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world [*kosmos*] that he might judge the world [*kosmos*], but that the world [*kosmos*] might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17).

John often uses the word *kosmos* to refer to "the people who inhabit the world," but the apostle also often uses words ambiguously and ambivalently. Western anthropocentrism blinds us to God's greater goal in this passage: the redemption of the cosmos, a theme that Paul picks up in Romans 8:19–22. Building on Isaiah 65:17, Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3:10–14 speak of the destruction of the old world and the re-creation of a new one.

When we look at the sweep and progress of God's redemptive plan revealed in Scripture, we recognize a glorious drama involving a series of easily identifiable acts:

- Act 1: The creation of the cosmos and its inhabitants, including humanity as the divine image and vice-regent
- Act 2: The rebellion and fall of the vice-regent, and with him all creation
- Act 3: The history of a people (Israel) commissioned as agents of grace in a fallen world
- Act 4: The appearance within time and space of the divine Son, through whose self-sacrifice God laid the foundations for the renewal of the cosmos
- Act 5: The re-creation of the new heaven and the new earth, fulfilling the original design

3. Isa. 37:16; 40:12–31; 45:5–13, 18; 48:1–19; Jer. 10:12–16 = 51:15–19; Amos 5:8–9.

4. Gen. 6–8; Isa. 24:1–23; cf. Hosea 4:3.

Like dramas played out on the stage, the Scriptures recount the story artfully. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, biblical authors and poets selected the details to include in the script, carefully arranged the scenes and acts, and skillfully crafted the details in keeping with intended rhetorical goals and desired portrayal of the primary characters. However, unlike dramas performed in our theaters, on this stage God is the primary character. Left to ourselves, the story would have ended with Act 2. But the good news is that God did not leave us to ourselves. By “ourselves” I mean not only humankind but also the world we occupy, which he charged us to govern on his behalf. Despite our rebellion and our betrayal of the divine mandate, God remained committed to the world he had created. This first chapter concerns Acts 1 and 2 of this drama. With his eye on the cosmos, the biblical dramatist sets the stage in Act 1 for all that follows (Gen. 1–2), and in Act 2 (Gen. 3:1–11:26) he presents God’s response to the crisis in the cosmos, taking action in the wake of his vice-regent’s horrific betrayal of both the Creator and the mandate/privilege granted him.

The Background to the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 1–2)

The Hebrew word for “covenant,” *bērit*, occurs for the first time in Genesis 6:18. The Hebrew construction is ambiguous. “I will establish my covenant with you” could mean that God will confirm a previously existing covenant with Noah as the covenant partner. Because the usual idiom for “making a covenant” translates literally as “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bērit*), and the present idiom involving *hēqim*, usually means “to establish” a (preexistent) covenant, many assume that the covenant must have been made with Adam. However, we should not rule out other options too quickly, for several reasons: (1) The preceding narrative has been silent on any antecedent covenant. (2) The boundaries between the two Hebrew idioms sometimes blur in the First Testament. For example, Deuteronomy 29:1 [MT 28:69] uses “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bērit*) for a covenant ritual that obviously involves the renewal of an antecedent covenant (on which see further below).⁵ (3) If a covenant involves a ritual that creates a relationship that does not exist naturally, then a covenant would have been unnecessary and superfluous in the scenes described in Genesis 1–2. It would be superfluous because the entire cosmos was functioning as God intended. Even though Genesis 1–2 casts *Adam* (the italicized form of the word signifies humanity) in the role of “vassal” vis-à-vis God, the divine “Suzerain,” this does not make the relationship covenantal.

5. For interchangeable uses within a single book, see Ezek. 16:60, 62; 34:25; 37:26.

However, we could also interpret “I will establish my covenant with you” as elliptical for “I will establish my covenant [with the cosmos] with you.” The context seems to support this interpretation. In addressing Noah and charging him to build an ark to preserve the created species in the forthcoming deluge, God obviously treated the man at the end of the genealogy that began with Adam (Gen. 5:32) as his vice-regent, with responsibility for the well-being of the rest of creation. A cosmic interest pervades the flood account.⁶ God’s promise to establish his covenant with his creation and do so “with you” assumes that the person who had served as the agent of creation’s survival of the deluge would also serve as the agent in the establishment of God’s covenant with creation (cf. 9:9–17). The role of Noah in the elliptical clause in 6:18 is like that of Moses in relation to YHWH’s covenant with Israel (Exod. 34:27). Just as Moses would function as the administrator who transcribed the covenant terms and through whom YHWH reconstituted his relationship with Israel, so Genesis 6:18 anticipated and 9:8–17 portrays Noah as fulfilling that role.

Although the notion of covenant is absent from Genesis 1–2, the accounts of creation are vital to the present project; they offer a glimpse into the reality that was lost in Act 2 and hint at the realities that God would seek to reconstruct through the covenants that will form the framework of the divine drama of cosmic judgment and redemption. The texts that describe the world as it came from the Creator’s hands provide necessary background for understanding the cosmic covenant instituted in Genesis 9.

Israel’s Cosmological Catechism (Gen. 1:1–2:4a)

The Boundaries of the Literary Unit

Biblical scholars widely recognize that Genesis 1 and 2 involve two contrasting images of creation, differing in their literary style, portrayal of God, description of *Adam*/Adam’s role, and placement of vegetation in creation. Scholars also agree that the division between Genesis 1 and 2 is misplaced. Although most treat 2:3 as the true conclusion to chapter 1, it is preferable to locate the boundary between 2:4a and 2:4b. The formula “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created” in 2:4a obviously signals a transition. Because elsewhere this “genealogical formula” always serves as a heading to what follows,⁷ most interpreters understand the formula here as introducing the remainder of chapter 2 and beyond. However,

6. E.g., Gen. 6:17–20; 7:14–16, 21–23; 8:1, 17–19.

7. Gen. 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2; Exod. 6:16, 19; Num. 3:1; Ruth 4:18.

because the structure of headings and conclusions (colophons) may be identical (cf. Lev. 26:46 and Deut. 12:1), the form alone is not determinative, especially when the common usage does not fit this context. Since Genesis 2:4–25 does not recount the generation (*tôlēdôt*) of the heavens and the earth but focuses on the first man and woman, we should be cautious about dismissing the evidence of a single exception.

Several additional considerations reinforce the treatment of 2:4a as a colophon (titular conclusion) rather than a heading. First, the merismic reference to the heavens and the earth (*haššāmayim wēhāʾāreš*, meaning “all things”) functions as a “bookend” matching the same phrase in 1:1. Significantly in 2:4b, where both words recur, they appear without the article and in the reverse order (*ʾereš wēšāmayim*). Second, the verb *bārāʾ*, “to create [specially],” is missing entirely in the literary subunit that is defined by the next occurrence of the genealogical formula (5:1), but this is the seventh occurrence in this context,⁸ where occurrences match the days of creation. Third, if we treat 2:4a as the conclusion to the preceding, verse 4b becomes the introduction to what follows, resulting in a remarkable syntactical parallel between the opening to chapter 1 and the opening to the newly defined chapter 2: both units begin with adverbial temporal clauses. Thus 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is paralleled by 2:4b, “On the day of YHWH Elohim’s making of earth and heavens.” However, the change of verb from “to create” (*bārāʾ*) cosmic time and space to “make” (*ʿāśá*) a home for humanity suggests that the second builds on the first (2:4b). Fourth, the narrative shifts in its designations for God. Chapter 1 consistently uses *ʾēlōhīm*, which is a generic expression for a (divine) being residing in the heavens, but in 2:4b the narrator identifies the Creator by personal name and divine title: “YHWH Elohim.” From the outset, the Israelite narrator of Genesis 2 equated the God who created humankind with the One who created a new (microcosmic) humanity when he rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt.

The Style and Structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Reflecting a “radical theocentricity,” Genesis 1 is composed in an elevated form of prose, exhibiting an exalted literary style for an exalted subject. Assuming a measure of poetic license, some interpret this chapter freely as a sheerly theological and literary composition disconnected from the actual process of creation. Although it exhibits few features that characterize Hebrew poetry generally (parallelism, metaphorical imagery, special syntactical features), chapter 1 looks like a creedal, perhaps even catechetical, kind of statement—formal, majestic, dignified, and easily committed to memory.

8. Cf. Gen. 1:1, 21, 27 [3×]; 2:3.

First, the characterization of creation as six days of divine work governed by a repetitious sequence of formulas gives it an artificial flavor. This flavor also comes across in the formulaic descriptions of each day, the loose chiasmic parallelism that signals the climaxes of segments of the account (vv. 10, 27), and the repetition of constructions that sound poetic in verse 16, as well as in verses 26 and 28. Several additional features reinforce the sense of artificiality in the structure and tone of the text, including the bookends in the frame of 1:1 and 2:4a; the sevenfold use of the relatively rare word for create, *bārā*²; and its profoundly theological agenda, signaled by the opening line and climaxing in the consecration of the seventh day as a day for God to “rest.” These features suggest an artfully crafted composition.

But Genesis 1:1–2:4a also exhibits features that characterize prose more than poetry: (1) the logic of the argument involving a formal thesis statement that is developed and then formally concluded (1:1; 2:4a); (2) the insertion of three circumstantial/parenthetical clauses that are separate from the discourse skeleton but offer necessary background for understanding the full account (1:2); (3) the use of a series of *wayyiqtol* verb forms to track the sequence of past actions; (4) the use of other characteristic prose markers (*’et* as a marker of the direct object; the definite article *ha-*; the subordinating conjunction *’āšer*, and the deictic particle *hinnēh*, “Look!”); (5) the preponderance of dialogue (eleven direct divine speeches); and (6) the use of coordinate rather than parallel pairs of words (A *and* B versus A // B; vv. 24, 26). Accordingly, the author invites us to take his presentation at face value; this is not a freely imaginative mythological composition, but a reasoned presentation of a profoundly theological subject.

The structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4a is clear. The prologue (1:1–2) includes the thesis statement (1:1) followed by three circumstantial clauses (1:2) that stand off from the narrative flow but provide necessary information to interpret the six days. The function of the six days (1:3–31; intentionally cast in parallel structure) is to resolve the issues raised by these three clauses: impose structure on a disorganized (not chaotic) mass; fill empty space with life; bring light to darkness. The conclusion of the six days (1:31) affirms the goodness and completeness of the universe as it came from the hand of God. Before the colophonic conclusion (2:4a), the epilogue that follows the six days of creation celebrates the climax of the week (2:1–3).

The Theological Agenda of Genesis 1:1–2:4a

If there is such a thing as doxological narrative, this is it. From the opening “in the beginning God created . . .” to the closing “and God ceased [*šābat*]

from all his work that he had accomplished in [his] creative actions,” we hear a catechetical-style statement that makes a series of profound theological points, including the following:

1. The opening affirms the divine origin of the universe (v. 1); the universe had a beginning—it is not eternal.
2. The hovering presence of the “Spirit of God” (v. 2) guarantees the perfection of the product of divine creation.
3. The announcements of the six days highlight the creative power of the divine word.⁹
4. The universe that God created was permeated by structure and order, with the heavenly bodies functioning as servants of light and symbols of cosmic stability (vv. 14–18; cf. Jer. 31:36). God created animals and plants after their kinds, and so they reproduce.
5. The creation of *’ādām* as “the image of God” and the assignment of representative and deputy status to human beings represent the climax of the creation week.
6. The divine rest on the seventh day, when the universe was complete, became the paradigm for the activity of humans, whose seven-day rhythm celebrates the creative and providential power of God (Exod. 20:11).

Although Christians often appeal to this text in debates against evolutionary theories of cosmic origins, we understand it best if we recognize the cultural and religious context out of which it emerged and which it primarily addressed. Many have observed that rather than challenging modern perspectives (whose atheistic and secular foundations all ancient Near Easterners would have rejected), this document challenges ancient pagan views of cosmic origins in several significant respects. (1) The singularity of God contrasts with the polytheistic worldviews of Israel’s neighbors. (2) The *tēhôm* (great deep), which is assonantly reminiscent of the Babylonian mythological divine figure Tiamat, provides the context in which God works. (3) The seven-day structure reflects the intentionality and sacred nature of the process of divine creation, in contrast to the ad hoc character of extrabiblical accounts, like the Babylonian Enuma Elish. (4) The creative power of the (daily) divine word contrasts with the crassly physical nature of other ancient Near Eastern accounts in which the universe was created from the body of Tiamat after Marduk had defeated her. (5) The order

9. Cf. Pss. 33:6; 148:5; John 1:1; Heb. 11:3.

built into the universe, specifically the reproduction of plants and animals after their kind, contrasts with Babylonian omen texts that imagine creatures giving birth to all kinds of bizarre and mixed forms, with features seemingly derived from other species. (6) The text casts the heavenly lights as specifically created by God and appointed to their places in the heavens to govern cosmic affairs as servants of light, in contrast to pagan views in which sun, moon, and stars were all divinities in their own right. (7) The creation of humankind as a royal figure and the image of God contrasts with other accounts in which people were created to function as the slaves of the gods. (8) The final rest of God contrasts with the perpetual restlessness of the gods in pagan mythology.

The Relationship between Creator and Cosmos in Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Having explored the literary nature of this text and its general theological trajectories, we may now focus on the issue at hand: the relationship between God and his creation. Although the relationship appears binary—Creator and created reality—the biblical picture is more complicated than that. Elsewhere First Testament texts often distinguish between “the earth/world” (*hā’āreš/ tēbēl*) and its contents, referred to variously as “all that is in it” (*kol ’āšer bāh*, Deut. 10:14), “its fullness” (*mēlō’āh*),¹⁰ and “those who inhabit it” (*yōšēbē bāh*).¹¹ Our text draws similar distinctions, speaking about the heavens and the earth, which includes the dry land (which God called *’ereš*, “earth”), the gathered waters (which God called *mayim*, “seas” [v. 10]), and living creatures (*nepesḥayyā*).¹² These include swarming land animals (*šeres*), large monsters (*tannîm*) in the seas, birds that fly in the skies (vv. 20–21), creatures that scurry along the ground (*remes*), high-carriage land animals (*bēhēmā*), and wild beasts that live on dry land (*ḥayētō’ereš*, v. 24). Plants occupy a liminal place within creation (vv. 11–12); like animals, plants live, but unlike animals, they lack lungs and cannot walk.

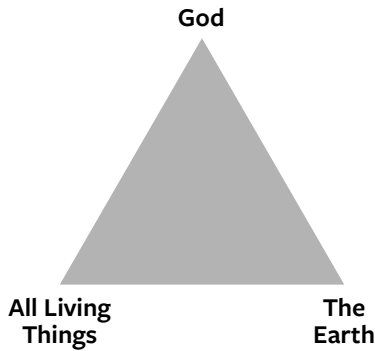
God’s relationship to inanimate creation differed from his relationship to animate creatures because the latter were animated by his breath (Job 12:7–10; Ps. 104:24–30). Therefore, we may speak not only of a binary relationship between the Creator and his created universe but also of a triangular relationship involving God, the physical environment, and all living things that occupy this space (fig. 1.1).

10. Deut. 33:16; Pss. 24:1; 50:12; 89:11 [12]; Isa. 34:1; Jer. 8:16; 47:2; Ezek. 12:19; 19:7; 30:12; 32:15; Mic. 1:2.

11. Pss. 24:1; 98:7; 107:34; Isa. 24:6; Nah. 1:5.

12. Gen. 1:20–21, 24, 30.

Figure 1.1
The Cosmic Triangle



God's Relationship to Inanimate Creation (the Earth)

Inanimate creation is represented in Genesis 1:1–2:4a by the merismic pair “the heavens and the earth” (*haššāmayim wəhā’āreš*) in 1:1 and 2:4a. Obviously God’s relationship with this creation was established by his personal creative act. Whereas Isaiah speaks of the universe as the work of God’s hand (Isa. 40:12), this text observes that God spoke new elements into existence with seven jussive declarations: “Let there be . . .” or “Let X happen.”¹³ In each case the comments that follow indicate the effectiveness of the divine word, and seven times we hear of God’s assessment of the respective stages in the process, “God saw that it was good.”¹⁴ The account of God’s creative work concludes with a climactic and comprehensive assessment: “God saw all that he had made, and look, it was exceedingly good” (v. 31). Chronological markers signal the boundaries between these stages: “Then evening came. And morning came, day X.”

The way God and inanimate matter relate is striking. God exercised supreme authority over the earth and its parts, assigning all the elements their places and functions. He never addressed inanimate creation directly, but the third-person jussives each day assume the segments addressed heard him: whatever God called for did happen. This observation applies whether he called something into existence (“Let there be . . . , and so it happened”) or virtually charged inanimate elements to participate in the creative activity: “Let the earth sprout vegetation” (v. 11), “Let the water swarm with living creatures” (v. 20), and “Let the earth produce living creatures of every kind”

13. Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24; cf. Ps. 33:6.

14. Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

(v. 24). However, rather than commanding (*šiwwâ*) the earth and the sea to do his bidding, he “spoke” (*wayyô’mer*), in effect inviting them to participate in his creative work.

However, the descriptions of the production of plants and animals are asymmetrical. In the second and third cases, the narrator follows up the charges with statements crediting God with creating (*bārā’*) marine creatures (v. 21) and making (*‘āśā*) land animals (v. 25). Nevertheless, with respect to the first, the earth appears as the actant/subject (v. 12). Furthermore, verses 29–30 subordinate plants to animals; YHWH took what the earth produced and gave it to the animals as food. Psalm 104:10–15 extends the earth’s investment in creaturely life by having YHWH commission (*šillah*) springs in the valleys to satisfy the creatures’ thirst. YHWH also provides (water) for trees so they may serve as homes for birds (vv. 16–17) and assigns mountains and cliffs as homes for mountain goats and hyraxes (v. 18), presumably as representatives of all creatures. Even the sun and the moon “know” (*yāda’*) their places within the divine economy (vv. 19–20) and in regulating the seasonal and daily activities of the creatures—including human beings (vv. 19–23). In short, the resources of earth are gifts from YHWH’s hand to secure the well-being of creatures. Although many interpret Psalm 104 as a nature psalm, it is in fact an ode to YHWH, framed as a celebration of transcendent glory (vv. 1–4, 31–35) but explaining with vivid poetic imagination how the entire cosmos sustains the lives of those who are animated by the divine breath (vv. 29–30).

God’s Relationship to Animate Creation

The discussion above has hinted at the special role that living creatures play within the triangular cosmic economy, but this subject deserves further treatment. Several features of Genesis 1:1–2:4a reflect the special status of animal life in God’s world. First, this subject receives extraordinary attention in the text. Although the creation of the cosmos transpires over six literary days, by word count, the last two days, involving the creation of animals, take up the same amount of space as the first four days (vv. 3–19, 207 words; vv. 20–31, 206 words). Second, the special verb for “create,” *bārā’*, which occurs in the frame (1:1; 2:3–4), occurs three times in the report of the fifth and sixth days (vv. 21, 27a, 27b) but is missing in the first four days. Third, the account specifies six branches of Israel’s zoological taxonomy: marine and sky creatures (vv. 20–21), high-carriage land animals (*bēhēmā*), low-carriage creatures that scurry along the ground (*remēš*), wild animals (*ḥayyat hā’āreš*, vv. 24–25), and human beings (*’ādām*, vv. 26–28).

Fourth, God blessed (*bērēk*) the creatures, charging them to multiply and fill the spheres of existence they occupy (vv. 22, 28). This is not explicitly mentioned for land animals (vv. 24–25), but it is undoubtedly assumed. The imperative verbs assume an “I-you” relationship between God and the creatures that was absent from his relationship with inanimate creation. The Hebrew word for “to bless” always bears a positive sense, meaning either to confer upon a person good gifts or to empower a person to achieve that which is good, in this case fulfilling the divine calling of being fruitful and filling the earth. Verses 29–30 clarify what that requires: God provided (*nātan*) sustenance for both humankind and the animals in the form of the seed of ground vegetation and the fruit of trees.

Fifth, although the survey of divine creative activity was punctuated six times with the general assessment “And God saw that it was good” (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), the sixth day ended with a comprehensive statement: “God observed everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good!” (*tôb mē’ōd*, v. 31). With the appearance of the animals and human beings, the cosmos was in excellent shape and set for a durative relationship involving God the producer, the physical environment as the stage, and the animals as players in this divine drama. The creatures collectively represented a third party within this cosmic economy, alongside God and the physical environment. For the moment we will note that human beings were part of this third angle of the triangle and that the primary cosmic relationships involved God, the world, and all life on the earth (fig. 1.1).

From the beginning, God intended this tripartite relationship to function symbiotically, with each member responding to the other two in a dynamic dialogue. However, the relationship did not involve parties of equal status but consisted of a divine Suzerain and his vassals, language taken from ancient Near Eastern diplomatic texts (cf. 2 Kings 16:7–9). God’s sovereignty over the other parties was grounded on three pillars: (1) He is the Creator of the earth and its inhabitants. (2) He owns the earth and its fullness—that is, all living things. (3) He determines the role the other two parties play within this relationship. With respect to the bottom right angle, he waters the earth so that plants may grow and nourish the animals,¹⁵ or he curses the ground (Gen. 3:17–19; 5:29) and turns off the rains.¹⁶ With respect to the bottom left angle, the Creator feeds the creatures or withholds food and withdraws his animating breath.¹⁷ God’s performative word energized the earth to produce

15. Lev. 26:4; Deut. 11:14; 28:12; Job 37:1–13; Ps. 65:9–13 [10–14]; Ezek. 34:26–27; Heb. 6:7.

16. Lev. 26:19–20; Deut. 11:17; 28:23–24; Heb. 6:8.

17. Job 12:10; 34:14–15; Ps. 104:29.

all kinds of vegetation (Gen. 1:11–12), but he also energized the waters to swarm with living creatures, the sky to come alive with birds (1:20–21), and the earth to produce all kinds of land creatures (1:24–25). In the end, he blessed the creatures themselves with the charge to multiply and fill the earth (1:22).

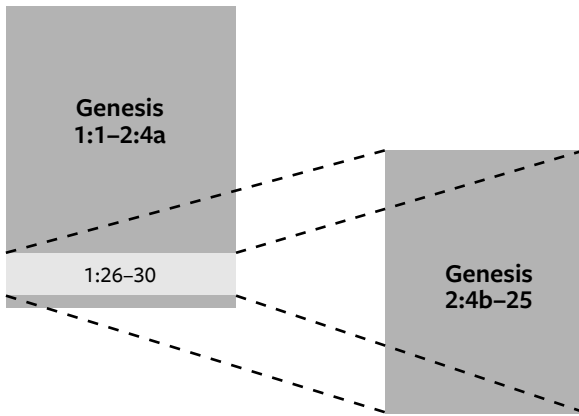
Because these relationships were natural rather than artificially created, we do not expect the term “covenant” (*bērît*) to appear in Genesis 1. That blessings and stipulations, which were standard elements in ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, are evident here does not make this relationship covenantal. Rather the blessings (vv. 22, 24, 28) served as appeals for fidelity to the Suzerain and invitations to enter into the well-being (*šālôm*) and enjoy the benefactions (*tôb*) that God offered. The commands to the earth to produce vegetation (vv. 11–12); to the marine and sky animals to multiply and fill the seas and sky, respectively (v. 22); and to humankind to fill the earth and govern the world—these commands represent divinely defined stipulations to be fulfilled by the vassals. Genesis 1 announces no curses as consequences for the vassals’ failure to fulfill their obligations, though the charge to humankind to “dominate and govern” (*kābaš wērādâ*, v. 28) the earth may hint at signs of revolt against the Creator and suggest that humankind was created expressly to take care of an internal administrative problem (see further below).

Israel’s Cosmological Story (Gen. 2:4a–25)

Unlike Genesis 1:1–2:4a, the text of 2:4b–25 is neither self-contained nor independent but part of a larger complex sandwiched between two *tôlēdôt* formulas, the first ending the preceding literary unit (2:4a) and the second signaling the beginning of the following unit (5:1–6:8). Although chapter 2 is part of Act 1 of the divine drama of redemption, it sets the stage for Act 2 (3:1–11:26). In so doing, 2:4b–25 is concerned less with presenting an account of cosmic origins (cosmogony) than with introducing the primary (human) character and setting the context for the description of humankind’s response to the divine mandate (3:1–4:26). The first chapter of Act 2 (Gen. 3) demonstrates a massive failure, involving what theologians have called “the fall” of humankind and with it the demise of the cosmos. That motif is developed in three parts: (1) the context of the fall (2:4b–25), (2) the events involved in the fall (3:1–7), and (3) early consequences of the fall (3:8–4:26). The last section subdivides further into the effects of the fall on Adam and Eve (3:8–24) and the effects of the fall on their descendants (4:1–26).

Although the flavors and tones of chapters 1 and 2 differ significantly, by juxtaposing them the author of Genesis invites us to interpret chapter 2 in

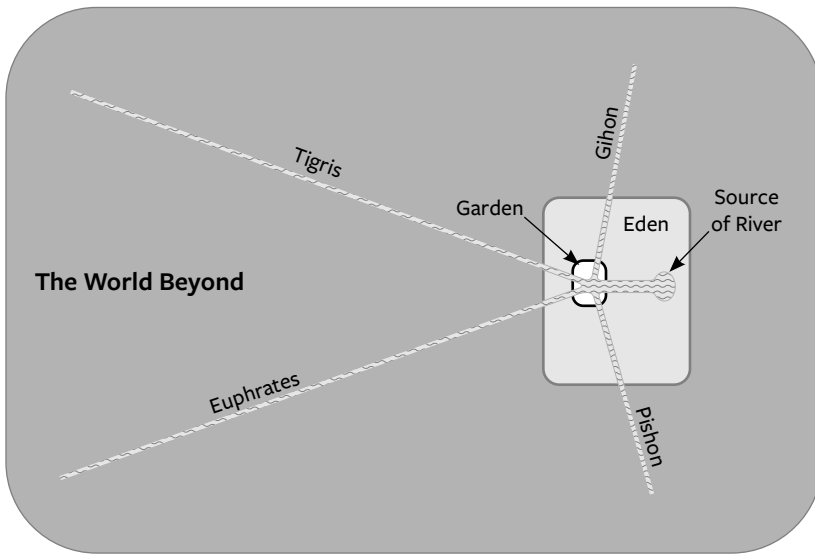
Figure 1.2
The Relationship between Genesis 1:26–30 and 2:4b–25



the light of chapter 1. Specifically, this chapter seems to build on 1:26–30 and develop the creation of humankind in greater detail (fig. 1.2). In the process this chapter enhances our understanding of the earth and its geographical design. The picture is admittedly sketchy, and the text focuses on a small corner of the globe, but the chapter suggests the following terrestrial features:

1. In the east, YHWH Elohim planted a garden, where he placed the Man newly created (2:8).
2. The garden was located in a larger region called Eden and was watered by a river originating in Eden, yielding a garden extraordinarily lush with vegetation, satisfying the vice-regent’s physical appetite for food and the aesthetic appetite for beauty (vv. 9–10a).
3. In the garden the river divided into four branches that flowed outward and watered the entire landscape around Eden (vv. 10b–14).
4. The fact that YHWH commissioned the Man to protect (*šāmar*) and serve (*‘ābad*) the garden suggests that nefarious external forces threatened the well-being and security of the garden (v. 15). This detail provides a link with 1:28, reinforcing *Adam*’s charge to subdue and govern the earth. By the time God created the first human beings, elements within creation had apparently become “unruly.” If this is a correct assessment, the freedom of creatures to act “unruly” did not jeopardize the divine assessment of the created world as “very good” in 1:31.
5. The image of a garden at the center of creation is tightly linked to ancient accounts of royal gardens associated with the palaces of kings.

Figure 1.3
A Schematic of Eden in Context



These gardens represented visual ideals of a world in which the physical environment, human and animal inhabitants, and the divine sovereign/ Sovereign functioned harmoniously, and from which the blessing of god/ God and the kind rule of the king would emanate throughout the realm.

Genesis 2 paints a picture of a perfect world, where all needs are met, especially for *Adam*.¹⁸ The tripartite relationship observed in chapter 1 is fully operative as the physical environment, living creatures, and Deity relate to one another in a symbiotic economy. Because 1:24 presents the earth (*hā'āreš*) as producing the land animals, YHWH's forming (*yāšar*) of the Man from the dust of the ground (*'āpār min hā'ādāmā*, 2:7) affirms his earthly origins. Even so, the divine invitation to examine and name all the creatures (2:19–20) reinforces the functional superiority of the Man over the rest of the animals, though this exercise also demonstrated that no female counterpart to himself existed among the creatures. Nevertheless, unlike the universal scope

18. In this volume, italicized *Adam* (*'ādām*) is a collective designation for humankind consisting of both males and females. "The Man" (*hā'ādām*) refers to the royal male member of the original pair, in contrast to "the Woman" (*hā'īššā*), his royal female counterpart. "Adam" functions as the personal name of "the Man," in contrast to "Eve," the personal name of "the Woman."

of humankind’s mandate in chapter 1, here the Man’s administrative role is focused on the garden. Specifically, the charge “to serve” (*‘ābad*) and “to guard” (*šāmar*) in 2:15 assumes that the primary concern is the well-being of the garden, rather than the Man’s own *šālôm*.

EXCURSUS

Eden as a Temple?

In recent years it has become fashionable to interpret the creation of the cosmos in general and Eden in particular as an exercise in divine temple building. While Israel’s sanctuaries were designed by YHWH¹⁹ and envisioned as replicas of the heavenly temple,²⁰ complete with a throne room (represented by the holy of holies) and a throne (represented by the ark of the covenant), they were also constructed as a miniature Eden. Decorated with images of cherubs²¹ and palm trees, lit by the menorah—a symbol of the tree of life—and served by a priest decked out in royal colors and precious stones, the temple employed motifs harking back to the garden where God first put human beings. But does this mean that the author of Genesis 1–3 perceived either the cosmos or Eden as a temple? I used to think so, but on the basis of a closer reading of Act 1 in Genesis and a reconsideration of the conceptual world represented by temples, I now find the case less convincing than I once thought.

Genesis 1–3 introduces readers to a world that we may consider sacred space by virtue of its divine origin but which the narrator does not explicitly categorize as a temple, either by means of a conceptual framework or by the use of distinctly priestly vocabulary. The only priestly expression in Genesis 1–2 involves the Sabbath, which God “sanctified” (*wayēqaddēš ’ōtô*, Gen. 2:3). However, the object of the action is time (the seventh day) rather than created space. As I intimated earlier, Genesis 1 portrays the cosmos as a royal world, in which the

19. Exod. 25:9, 40; 1 Chron. 28:9–19.

20. 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Pss. 80:1 [2]; 99:1; Isa. 37:16.

21. In ancient iconography cherubs were usually portrayed as composite creatures, often involving mammalian bodies and human and avian heads and wings, and were stationed as guardians at entrances to palaces and temples.

Creator deputizes *Adam* as his administrative vassal to secure the smooth operation of that world. In this environment, the sun, moon, and stars served royal rather than priestly functions (note the verb *mašal*, “to rule, govern,” in 1:16), but more significantly, the narrator casts *Adam* as a king, whom God invested with the status of his “image/likeness” (*šelem/dēmût*, Gen. 1:26–27) and charged to subdue (*kābaš*) and exercise dominion (*rādā*) over the earth (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8; cf. further below, chap. 2).

Although critical scholars attribute Genesis 2–3 to the Yahwist (J) rather than the Priestly source (P), recently many have ironically recognized more links to Israel's sanctuary traditions here than in chapter 1 (which critical scholars attribute to P): (1) the verb “to walk about” (*hithallēk*) in the garden;²² (2) the cherubs (*kērûbîm*) guarding the entrance to the garden;²³ (3) the tree of life;²⁴ (4) the charge to Adam “to serve and to guard” the garden;²⁵ (5) the garments (*kuttōnet*) of skin provided for Adam and Eve;²⁶ (6) the river flowing from Eden to water the garden;²⁷ (7) the reference to gold;²⁸ (8) the precious stones (*bēdōlah* and *šōham*);²⁹ (9) the lush arboreal imagery;³⁰ (10) the garden as a mountain, suggested by the rivers flowing downward in four directions;³¹ (11) the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was “good for food . . . a delight to the eyes . . . to be desired to make one wise,”³² and the illicit eating of which brought death;³³ (12) the eastern entrance to the garden (Gen. 3:24; cf. Ezek. 40:6); (13) the tripartite structure of the garden (Gen. 2:10) in which Eden = the holy of holies, the garden = the holy place, and the region outside the garden = the outer court.

While impressive collectively, each of these observations is capable of another and in many instances more natural interpretation that removes it from the priestly conceptual realm and transfers it to the realm of an ancient royal garden. In the end the temple interpretation is illusory and can be maintained only by reading later realities into the earlier text. The links with later sanctuaries are clear, but these arise from the dual functions of Israel's sanctuary. As the residence of YHWH, it was a microcosm of his heavenly palace/temple (cf. Exod. 25:1–9, 40),

22. Gen. 3:8; cf. Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14 [15]; 2 Sam. 7:6–7.

23. Gen. 3:24; cf. Exod. 25:18–22; 26:31; 1 Kings 6:23–28.

24. Gen. 2:9; cf. the menorah, a stylized tree of life, Exod. 25:31–36.

25. Gen. 2:15; cf. Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6.

26. Gen. 3:21; cf. Exod. 28:40; 29:8; 40:14; Lev. 8:13.

27. Gen. 2:10–14; cf. Ps. 46:5 [6]; Ezek. 47.

28. Gen. 2:12; cf. Exod. 25:11, 17, 24, 29, 36; etc.

29. Gen. 2:12; cf. Exod. 25:7; 28:9–12, 20; 1 Chron. 29:2.

30. Gen. 2:9, 16–17; cf. 1 Kings 6:18, 29, 32; 7:18–26, 42, 49.

31. Cf. Ezek. 28:14, 16; also, Exod. 15:17; Ezek. 40:2; and many references to Mount Zion.

32. Gen. 2:9; 3:6; cf. Ps. 19:7–8 [8–9]; see also Exod. 25:16; Deut. 31:26 (referring to the written law kept inside the holy of holies).

33. Gen. 2:16–17; 3:3; cf. Num. 4:20; 2 Sam. 6:7 (touching the ark).

but as a miniature Eden it expressed the eschatological hope of God's favor and eventual restoration of the cosmos. The Eden narrative has provided the lexical and conceptual vocabulary for the sanctuary construction, but this does not mean that we should make Eden into a temple. Genesis 2 does not portray Eden as the holy of holies of the cosmic temple or a residence for YHWH in which Adam engages in cultic rituals.

Recognizing the function of temples in the ancient world reinforces this conclusion. Whereas Christians perceive places of worship as physical space where the faithful gather, in ancient times temples were perceived primarily as earthly palaces where the gods resided. However, the opening chapters of Genesis lack any hints of the notion that God created the world because he was homeless or needed a place for his throne. His real residence is in heaven, as the Torah (Deut. 26:15), the Psalter (Ps. 80:14 [15]), and the Prophets (Isa. 63:15) declare.

At the dedication of the temple, and after asking, "Will God actually reside with humankind on earth?" (2 Chron. 6:18; cf. 1 Kings 8:27), Solomon recognized the location of YHWH's true dwelling: "When they pray to this place, listen from your residence, from heaven" (2 Chron. 6:21; cf. 1 Kings 8:30, 32–49). References to YHWH's heavenly throne reinforce this notion.³⁴

Whatever God's reason for creating the world, it was not to provide a home for himself. That YHWH should have "walked about" (*hithallēk*) in the garden (Gen. 3:8) does not contradict this conclusion. Unlike "to dwell" (*yāšab*), this verb does not speak of residence but suggests occasional presence. Since YHWH was the creator of the garden, it was YHWH's domain. But the verb also conveys an extraordinary domestic image. In ancient times, people would relax and go for a walk in "the cool of the day" (*rūḥ hayyôm*), when the evening breezes blow. YHWH's appearance in the garden reflects the openness of his relationship with its inhabitants. Instead of welcoming their "extraterrestrial" Suzerain, the Man and the Woman tragically hid from him in Genesis 3. Sin had transformed an evening visit into a call to account and resulted in a tragic disturbance of all relationships. In Israelite thought, the temple served both as a symbol of the fallen world and as a symbol of the divine desire to continue to relate to that world. A pre-fall world needed no temple; relationship with God was free and open.

However, as noted, Israel's tabernacle and temple also represented microcosms of Eden, and herein lies the key to the relationship between Genesis 1–3 and Israel's sanctuaries. Although I reject reading Genesis 1–3 as a reflection of temple theology, I accept the notion that temple-building accounts reflect creation theology. Because the Eden narrative provides much of the conceptual vocabulary for Israel's sanctuary tradition, the narrative contains important

34. Pss. 11:4; 103:19; Isa. 66:1.

clues to the function of the temple in Israelite thinking. The sanctuary did indeed provide YHWH with an earthly dwelling amid a fallen people, and its rituals provided a means whereby covenant relationship with him could be maintained in a fallen world. As a miniature Eden, the Israelite temple addressed both humankind's alienation from the divine Suzerain and the alienation of creation in general. From Zion, Eden-like prosperity would flow out to the land that YHWH gave Israel as their grant.³⁵ While the rabbis went too far in suggesting that the heavens and the earth were created from Zion (b. Yoma 54b; Tanh. Qidd. 10), the temple represented the source of Israel's and ultimately the world's re-creation. The temple symbolized the gracious divine determination to lift the effects of the curse from the land and the people, and the place from which YHWH's blessing and rule (the delights of Eden) could radiate (Ps. 50:2–4) to the land and nation, and ultimately to the ends of the earth. Solomon acknowledged that the temple was built with the world in view (1 Kings 8:41–43, 59–60). Indeed, in the eighth century BC, reversing the direction of the flow of the rivers in Eden and applying the word metaphorically to people, Isaiah and Micah looked forward to the day when peoples from all over the world would “stream” (*nāhar*) to Zion to learn the way of YHWH, and his peace would flow out and envelop the world (Isa. 2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–4).

The Institution of the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 3–9)

Introduction

By painting such hopeful pictures of the triangular relationship involving God, material creation, and the living creatures, both the catechetical and the narrative accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 provide the background to Act 2 of the divine program of redemption and establish the need for the cosmic covenant as it is revealed in Genesis 3–9. The catechetical account (1:1–2:4a) had ended with God celebrating the completion of his creative labors by blessing and sanctifying the seventh day. Meanwhile this entire “very good” creation was poised to perform its divinely assigned functions, and the individual parts were ready to fulfill their charges. God had installed the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens to govern the world by ensuring daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly rhythms (1:14–18), and, according to Psalm 104:19–20, they “knew” their places. The ground was producing vegetation (Gen. 1:11–12), which would feed the animals who appeared on days 5 and 6 (vv. 29–30). And having been blessed and charged by God, the animals were set to multiply and fill the seas, the skies, and the dry land with life. Thus

35. Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14; Ezek. 34:25–31.

the account of the “generation” (*tólēdôt*) of the heavens and the earth had ended.

Genesis 2:4b–25 reinforces this hopeful picture, particularly with reference to humankind, the primary earthly actors. Indeed, the garden east in Eden represented the superlative state of blessedness. Although this chapter expounds on 1:26–30, it opens the window on a small slice of the larger picture. According to the opening note, the ground producing vegetation without the assistance of human laborers (2:4b–6) functioned as the backdrop for the “fabrication” (*yāšar*) of the first Man (*’ādām*) and the “planting” (*nāta’*) of an eastern garden in Eden to be his home (vv. 7–9). In this “paradise” (Gk. *paradeisos*) the trees were magnificent and yielded their fruit in abundance, for the place was watered by a river that divided into four branches that brought this life-giving resource to all the lands surrounding the garden (vv. 10–14). The lands around were flush with gold and precious stones and populated with all the species of land and sky creatures that YHWH had created. YHWH brought representatives of each species to the garden for the Man to enjoy and for him to begin to govern.

However, this picture lacked one small detail, a lack the narrator characterizes as “not good”: the Man was alone—that is, without a female counterpart (2:18). The divine plan to have all the animals parade before the Man served several purposes: (1) in naming them he employed his intellectual gifts of analysis and description; (2) in naming them he demonstrated his superiority over the animals—the greater names the lesser; (3) in examining them he tried to apply his social and communicative skills, but the absence of a counterpart exposed the problem—without “the Woman,” “the Man” would be unable to populate the whole earth as mandated by the Creator. That must have been a frustrating day for the Man, because none of the creatures matched him (vv. 19–20). However, the account reaches its climax with YHWH quickly resolving the issue. By means of a special operation, he prepared the Woman, who was perfect for the Man (vv. 21–25). The Man could relate to her as his equal and counterpart, and together the two could begin to populate the earth. The account ends by noting the perfect confidence and transparency of the pair.

This was indeed a perfect world. As the originator and head of the economic triangle, YHWH delighted in what he had created: the physical environment produced vegetation in abundance, the animals were poised to go out and fill the earth, and their relationship with humankind was established. Not only had they freely come to the Man, but they apparently also accepted his lordship over them. And when the Woman appeared, in the first quoted words from the Man’s mouth, we hear a song: “Eureka! She is here!” (2:23).