

CREATION AND COVENANT PART ONE

A survey of the dominion mandate in the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants

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I. Introduction and Orientation

This article proposes to examine in selected passages of Genesis the notion of human dominion over the creation. The revelation before the fall of humanity into sin gives the proper definition of what pertains to the dominion mandate (often called the "cultural mandate"). We will then survey how the essential elements of the dominion mandate are dealt with in two covenants subsequent to the fall into sin, namely the Noahic and the Abrahamic covenants. The survey will suggest that these two covenants in particular are redemptive of that which was lost in the fall into sin.

In the exegesis that is offered, we will suggest that the two main foci of the dominion mandate are people and objects of rule (i.e., the earth's occupants and the earth itself, "seed" and "soil"). This essay will assume and not argue the viewpoint that the biblical text should be dealt with as a canonical whole. This is the testimony of the Bible itself (2 Tim. 3:16), and therefore, this has historically provided the most fruitful basis for exegesis in the Christian tradition. It will also assume that Moses is the secondary author of the Pentateuch in terms of its basic form and content.¹ We hope to show how a motif which opens up already at the beginning of both the Scripture and history itself, is sustained and developed, at least in the earliest history of revelation.

¹In saying that Moses was the "secondary author," it is understood that God is the primary Author (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-21). See H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 5-9; E.J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 39, 48-51; R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 537-541; H.D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979), 58-61.

II. *The dominion mandate in the pre-fall situation*

Genesis 1 and 2 describes the sovereign God speaking the word of command, and all things come into being. It can be compared to a king speaking his will from his throne and watching his wishes fulfilled down to the last detail. In six days all is made that constitutes "heaven and earth" (Gen. 1:1). Exegetes have often noted that the six creation days show a pattern of eight acts divided in two three-day periods.² Each of the two parts contains a movement from heaven to earth, "which increasingly becomes an orderly habitation."³ In the first three days are creative acts of separation (e.g., waters above from waters below), while in the second three days are creative acts which fill the various territories with inhabitants (e.g., the heavens are occupied with birds). All of this is declared to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31), at which point God rests on the seventh day (Gen. 2:1-3).

The final creational act is, of course, the formation of אָדָם (mankind). He is made in God's image, according to His likeness (Gen. 1:26). This article will not explore all the possible explanations of what the "image of God" is or means, except to point out the following. The words "image" or "likeness" stress a visible representation of an original prototype. Therefore, the image of God in man "is not limited to any part of man. Man is like God in the way in which he is called into existence, in the totality of his being."⁴ Mankind is not unique by being אֱלֹהִים תְּהִיָּה (Gen. 2:7), since this is true also of water and land creatures.⁵ Thus to reduce the image of God in man to rationality or "spirituality" (some inner quality) is inadequate.

Whatever else can be said concerning the image of God (e.g., being created in righteousness, holiness and knowledge),⁶ the image of God should be closely connected with God's stated purpose in creating אָדָם (Gen. 1:26), as well as with the blessing which accompanies mankind's creation (Gen. 1:28). Davidson says that *image* and *likeness* are "defined by what follows, *to rule the fish in the sea*. . . (v. 26). The blessing given to

²William J. Dumbrell, "Creation, Covenant and Work," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13/2 (April, 1989), 140.

³Berhard W. Anderson, "Creation and Ecology (1983)," from *Creation in the Old Testament*, B.W. Anderson, ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1984), 158.

⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 3rd ed. (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1972), 59.

⁵Gen. 1:20,24; 2:7. Cf. D.T. Asselin, "The Notion of Dominion in Genesis 1-3," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16/3 (July, 1954), 278ff.; Anderson, "Creation," 162.

⁶Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3.

man has the same peculiar content. . . (v. 28). Just as God is sovereign over all creation including man, so man reflects this sovereignty.⁷ Psalm 8:5-6 echoes this thought by saying that YHWH has "crowned him [i.e., mankind] with glory and majesty!" He is to rule (משל) over all YHWH's works since everything has been put under mankind's feet.⁸ Aalders adds that "Mankind receives the task to rule, in subjection to his God, over the works of God's hands (cf. Psalm 8:7-9)."⁹

Genesis 1:28 contains two indicative sentences, each introduced by imperfect consecutive verbs (ויברך . . . ויאמר), "God blessed them, and God said to them. . . ." The content of the second sentence of Genesis 1:28 is a series of five imperatives: פרו, רבו, מלאו, כבשׂה, and רבו. According to the Masoretic accenting, the verse "division" comes on the verb כבשׂה. But the meanings of the first three imperatives convey a similar thought ("Be fruitful and multiple, and fill the earth"), while the last two imperatives are similar to each other in meaning (" . . . subdue it; and rule over the fish. . .").

At the same time the verbs show some progression in their thought. For example, multiplying presupposes fruitfulness, and filling the earth presupposes the multiplication of human beings. This logically leads to the idea of the fourth verb (כבשׂה), since once humans have filled the earth (and also as they fill the earth), God intends that they subdue it and hold it in subjection. The objects on the verb כבשׂה refer to the nearest feminine noun in the previous sub-clause, with "the earth" understood "as mankind's realm for living, without territorial or geographical boundaries, his whole world."¹⁰ The final verb explicates the objects of the subjugation and rule, namely, the other "living beings" which move about within the various spheres of the creation. The imperatives of Genesis 1:28 draw our attention to two foci: an increase of *people* so that they may occupy and have dominion over *earth/land*.

Reflection upon the account of the creation of אדם leads to the conclusion that "the text speaks less of the nature of God's image than of its purpose. There is less said about the gift itself than about the task."¹¹

⁷R. Davidson, *Genesis* 1-11 (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 25.

⁸Cf. J. van Seters, "The Creation of Man and the Creation of the King," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 101/3 (1989), *passim*.

⁹G.Ch. Aalders, *Het Boek Genesis, Eerste Deel: Hoofdstuk 1:1-11:26* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1933), 96.

¹⁰S. Wagner, כבשׂה, *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Band IV, G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, ed. (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1984), 56.

¹¹von Rad, *Genesis*, 59f.

The task is one of population increase and dominion over the other *הַיְהוּדָה* (*dominion over the rest of creation being assumed*).¹²

Moreover, the tasks of this dominion mandate, although in the imperative form, are actually the content of a general blessing (*בְּרָכָה*; Gen. 1:28) from God. Oswalt says that "to bless" in the Old Testament means "to endue with power for success, prosperity, fecundity, longevity, etc."¹³ As a blessing, God's word would enable mankind to reach the intended goal of filling the earth with other humans, imagebearers of God.¹⁴ But Genesis 1:28 also says that the mandate is spoken "to them," indicating that the imperative force cannot be completely subsumed under the blessing which God bestows as His first action toward them, following their creation. Thus the imperatives address *אָדָם* with a responsibility, one which can be either accepted or rejected, obeyed with care or with abuse. Further specification of mankind's responsibility toward the creation comes in Genesis 2:15 where the verbs *עָבַד* (to work, serve, worship) and *שָׁמַר* (to guard, keep) are used.¹⁵

Of key interest are two verbs used in Genesis 1:26,28, namely *רָדָה* and *כָּבַשׁ*. The verb *רָדָה* means "to rule, govern, make subservient,"¹⁶ The verb can also refer to "tread," as in the winepress (Joel 4:13 [MT]). At times this verb seems to mean "rule" in the sense of administration (e.g., 1 Kings 5:30; 9:23; 2 Chron. 8:10). But in other examples it seems to connote the exercise of power or strength (e.g., Lev. 25:43,46,53; 26:17; Isa. 14:2,6; Ezek. 34:4; etc.). The verb itself does not appear to mean that such rule is always oppressive or cruel because it is used in at least three passages usually recognized as messianic (Num. 24:19; Psalm 72:8; 110:2) Vawter makes this observation:

"Have dominion" is a Hebrew verb (*רָדָה*) of some vehemence: it does not imply some kind of benign presidency over a docile and pacific nature. It occurs in sufficient rarity in the Hebrew Bible that its

¹²Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 52.

¹³J.O. Oswalt, *בְּרָכָה*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, ed. by R.L. Harris et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 132.

¹⁴Cf. Gen. 1:22, where the fish and the birds receive God's blessing to fill their respective areas of the creation.

¹⁵Cf. Dumbrell, "Creation," 146.

¹⁶William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 333; W. White, *רָדָה*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, ed. by R.L. Harris et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 832.

frequent usages in connection with kingship. . .convince us that it was part of the technical language of royal rule, it hardly need be pointed out, was an absolute in the world of Genesis.¹⁷

But with this we cannot agree. Dumbrell notes that this "exercise of authority by a superior over a positional inferior. . .is not necessarily arbitrary or despotic rule. . ."¹⁸ The exercise of rule and authority can be absolute while at the same time quite benign. Such is precisely the kind of rule which YHWH God exercises, and that is what is intended in the rule of His anointed Messiah (Psalm 72:8; 110:2; cf. Psalm 2). Therefore, when this verb is used to characterize the task of אָרַם, it cannot be used to justify any exploitation of the creation's resources.

The other verb used in Genesis 1:28 to describe mankind's mandate is the verb כָּבַשׁ. This verb means "to subject s.one; make subservient; subdue, hold in subjection."¹⁹ It seems to convey the idea of holding something down (with some force or effort) in order to make it or them perform some service (e.g., Jer. 34:11,16; Neh. 5:5; etc.). It can even include the idea of physical assault, perhaps rape (Esther 7:8). Oswalt elucidates כָּבַשׁ by saying that the verb assumes "the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place." Thus in Genesis 1:28 it "implies that creation will not do man's bidding gladly or easily and that man must now bring creation into submission by man's strength. It is not to rule man."²⁰

One can conclude from the use of these verbs that mankind from the beginning, even before the fall into sin, has the task of working with all the materials of the creation. This task can proceed because of God's explicit blessing. Our first human parents were not placed in a magic garden where the wave of the hand or some special incantation caused finished products to appear. Effort, application of wisdom's insights, the use of mind and hands, were all necessary for the creation to develop in a way that was consistent with God's structures for creation. By mentioning the fish, birds, and animals as being under mankind's dominion, the text is utilizing synecdoche to refer to all elements, animate and inanimate,

¹⁷Vawter, *On Genesis*, 57-58.

¹⁸Dumbrell, "Creation," 142

¹⁹Holladay, *Lexicon*, 151; J.O. Oswalt, כָּבַשׁ, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, ed. by R.L. Harris et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 430; Wagner, *Wörterbuch*, 54f.; von Rad, *Genesis*, 60; Leupold, *Genesis*, 95.

²⁰Oswalt, *Wordbook*, 1, 430

within the heavens and the earth. Tilling the earth "means subjugating and developing the earth and bringing it under the dominion of and into service to man. This has broad implications. It includes all manual labor, agriculture, and science."²¹ Robertson concludes that because humanity is created in God's image, "man has a unique responsibility to 'subdue' the earth and rule over every living creation (Gen. 1:27-28). This subduing involves the bringing out of all the potential within the creation which might offer glory to the Creator."²² Kaiser describes work as a "holy calling from God" and a "good gift" from God.²³ He adds that work, "in the biblical model of holiness, is a heavenly vocation, received as a gift, and is performed not with an eye primarily to pleasing men, but as unto the Lord."²⁴ In short, the dominion mandate puts mankind in a stewardship position with regard to the earth. The two foci (*people* and *land*) have a well-defined relationship to each other.

In performing this stewardship in obedience, mankind is imaging God Himself, and therefore "man cannot use the earth apart from God's law. He must be a wise steward, not a thief nor a murderer."²⁵ Human dominion should always be seen as a function of God's prior dominion over humanity. Mankind may administer, even must administer, but in a creative, obedient way.²⁶ Vawter summarizes this point in the following way:

Dominion is not a license to caprice and tyranny but, in its best sense, a challenge to responsibility and the duty to make right prevail. If Genesis is attended to carefully, we see that it gives every encouragement to the present-day ecologist who believes that the earth has been delivered into man's hands as a sacred trust that he can perpetuate in a nature—or God—given order which he has been given the capacity to learn and improve upon.²⁷

²¹Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Revolt Against Maturity: A Biblical Psychology of man* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1987), 17.

²²O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 80.

²³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 149.

²⁴Kaiser, *Ethics*, 151.

²⁵Rushdoony, *Revolt*, p. 18; cf. Dumbrell, "Creation," 137.

²⁶Cf. J.A. Friend, "Nature, Man and God: A Temple Revisited," *Reformed Theological Review* 41/2 (May-August, 1982), 39.

²⁷Vawter, *Genesis*, 59.

It should be noted that the term "covenant" (בְּרִיתָה) is not used in the passage at this point. Thus the text is not pressing upon the reader the idea that the original condition of אָדָם is covenantal. We will, however, return to this point below.

III. *The Noahic Covenant*

By succumbing to the temptation to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:1ff.), Adam and Eve sought to add their own self-mastery to the mastery over the creation which God had granted to them from the beginning. The phrase "good and evil" is "not simply a merism for total knowledge. It is legal language denoting the authority to decide an issue," says Dumbrell. In Genesis 3 by "eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man claims for himself the moral autonomy and the right to decide for himself apart from God (to whom these decisions properly belong) what is good or non-good."²⁸

The אָדָם is cursed because of this rebellion, and here begins the "symphony of sighs" that characterizes the whole creation until this day (cf. Rom. 8:18ff.). Cursing indicates that the ground (the area upon which man walks and lives, the producer of his food²⁹) is now removed from blessing, the sphere where God's benign activity can be always assured. Mankind's work now becomes characterized as toil, sweating, and alienation. Mankind has now lost control over the realm he was to rule and subdue. "He has not lost the ability, however, to be sure that the decisions taken are right in themselves, nor the assurance that such decisions once taken will promote the desired consequences."³⁰ Sinfulness, under God's judgment, causes a lack of dominion which creates the ecological crisis. An offense "in the legal realm obviously has effects in the realm of nature (drought, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy). Law, nature, and politics are only aspects of one comprehensive order of creation," writes Schmid. "Created to rule, man has found that the crown has fallen from his brow."³¹ Dumbrell elaborates the consequences of the fall into sin:

²⁸Dumbrell, "Creation," 147.

²⁹Early mankind is restricted to vegetation (Gen. 1:29).

³⁰Dumbrell, "Creation," 149.

³¹H. H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," from *Creation in the Old Testament*, edited by B.W. Anderson, (London: SPCK, 1984), 105.

It has been man's failure to serve his environment, his failure to exercise dominion in this way by proper management, his failure as a worker to understand the nature of his relationship to creation, which has furnished our world with its present spate of problems. Man lives out of harmony with nature and himself.³²

The Bible records that in time the violence of mankind was such that God destroyed the world with a flood, while saving Noah and his family in the ark (Gen. 6-8). The flood story is not told "to illustrate natural evil; rather, the story is told to show the severity of God's judgment upon 'all flesh.'"³³

Our interest here is in the covenant which God establishes with Noah (Gen. 6:18: *וְהִקְמֹתִי אִתְּךָ בְרִית*). Although the establishment of a covenant is announced in Genesis 6, it is not until Genesis 8-9, after the flood, that there is the formal ceremony of covenant establishment with the accompanying words of promise on the part of YHWH. YHWH's first reaction consists of a promise toward the creation: creation's times and places will continue without the disruption of God's punishment. Only then is Noah addressed. In Genesis 8:20-22 God decrees that He will bind Himself "to preserve the earth in its present world-order until the time of the consummation."³⁴ Vawter observes that "Yahweh has already said that he will *never again doom the earth (adamah) because of man (adam)*, recognizing that the earth was a kind of innocent bystander in the deluge directed against man, though man and earth had been *inextricably bound together*"³⁵ from the very beginning of history. God's Word after the flood demonstrates that the creation is to be maintained, "redeemed" or liberated in its own right, even in light of the fact that "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). God thus does more than simply uphold His providence over creation; He restores the heaven and earth, but He does so inextricably with the humanity which He has redeemed and is redeeming.

It may then be asked what the force of the word *בְּרִית* (covenant) is in Genesis 6:18 and 9:9. The typical phrase to indicate the initiation of a specific covenant relationship is "to cut a covenant" (*בָּרַח בְּרִית*), e.g., Gen. 15:18). Von Rad says that a "covenant is meant to clarify an intricate or

³²Dumbrell, "Creation," 149.

³³Anderson, "Creation," 162.

³⁴Robertson, *Covenants*, 114.

³⁵Vawter, *Genesis*, 132; cf. Anderson, "Creation," 163.

opaque legal situation between two groups or individuals, in that it puts the relationship of the partners on a new legal basis."³⁶ By using a different idiom (הִקְיָם בְּרִיתָהּ) in Genesis 6:18 and 9:9, YHWH seems to be showing the reader/audience that the relationship needing clarifying is already in existence; it now requires further establishment, or confirmation, by means of YHWH's explicit word of promise. Dumbrell provides an important explanation:

Here the precise language of 6:18 helps for the covenant is not "made" with Noah, but "established." In all other Old Testament contexts in which the phrase "establish a covenant," הִקְיָם בְּרִיתָהּ, occurs (Gen. 17:7,19,21; Exod. 6:4; Lev. 26:19; Deut. 8:18; 2 Kings 23:3; Jer. 34:18 as well as Gen. 9:9,11,17), the initial institution of a covenant is not referred to, but its perpetuation and we may thus surmise that the phrase "cause my covenant to stand," i.e., "establish my covenant" of Genesis 6:18 also refers to the perpetuation of some covenant and not to its initiation.³⁷

An important clue as to when the covenant being maintained was initiated comes in several hints throughout Genesis 8:20-9:17. Especially important is Genesis 9:1,7, where Noah is blessed and the commands, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill/populate the earth," are given. The allusion to the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:26,28 is unmistakable. What is interesting to note is that the two verbs of Genesis 1:28, רָדָה and כִּבְשׁ are missing in Genesis 9. The reasons are not quite clear. Perhaps the allusion to Genesis 1:26,28 is enough to remind the reader/audience that mankind is called upon to rule and subdue the earth. But it may also be possible that the text is subtly getting at something which is described in Hebrews 2:8c, "But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him" (cf. Psalm 8:4-6; Heb. 2:6-8). Mankind in a fallen, sinful state may yet attempt to rule and subdue all things as was his original task and calling, but the blessing of actually accomplishing such rule continues to elude him. Such rule is now given to the Christ as the firstfruits of the creation (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Cor. 15:25f; Heb. 2:9).

In any case Dumbrell is correct when he concludes that Genesis 9:9-13 "appears to presuppose the context of 6:17-18 but to widen it. Genesis 9:9-13 is not the covenant to which 6:17-18 looks forward but 9:9-13 refers

³⁶von Rad, *Genesis*, 133.

³⁷Dumbrell, "Creation," 139.

to the covenant of 6:17-18.³⁸ Moreover, by doing so, the biblical text is indicating that God not only saves the world through Noah in the ark, while establishing the covenant following the flood, He also saves the original purpose of humanity and the world in which humanity lives. Anderson correctly notes that the covenant concluded in Genesis 9 "was a universal covenant in that it embraced all peoples (the offspring of Noah's sons) and an ecological covenant in that it included the animals and a solemn divine pledge regarding the constancy of 'nature' (Gen. 8:21-22)."³⁹

To relate this to the two foci of the communion mandate—people and earth—we note that the earth is to be maintained despite the fact that the human race, which includes the "seed of the woman" (Gen. 3:15), is sinful and wicked. The ground is never again to be cursed. Yet man's heart is continually evil from his youth. "However, God understands that the sin-problem will never be cured by judgment and curse. If appropriate relief from sin's corruption is to appear, the heart must be preserved free of devastating judgments such as the flood for a time."⁴⁰ In this way the "seed of the woman" can be preserved until the time comes when the One should come who would crush the head of the serpent. Therefore, God goes on to pronounce the explicit terms of the covenant He is establishing with Noah and his sons.

Genesis 9:1-7 is bounded by an *inclusio* ("...Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. . . . And as for you be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it."). Genesis 9:1 itself is virtually an echo of God's original mandate words in Genesis 1:28. In both passages there is a blessing upon the human beings involved so that the commands given to them can proceed with God supplying the necessary power and grace. Even though these people are sinful, they are to increase in number so that such image-bearers of God can occupy all the reaches of the planet. Furthermore, we note that God, in making a covenant with Noah and his descendants, is also including the other *בְּרִית* of the creation (Gen. 9:10-11). Thus the objects of mankind's subjugation and rule (Gen. 1:26,28) continue to be preserved, supposedly so that mankind may yet act as responsible steward in relationship to these things.

³⁸Dumbrell, "Creation," 139; cf. William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation and Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Devon, England: Paternoster Press, 1984), 32,42.

³⁹Anderson, "Creation," 157.

⁴⁰Robertson, *Covenant*, 114.

Nevertheless, there is a very noteworthy change in the elements of creation. Whereas before the fall into sin, the creation posed no violent threat to mankind, but rather a challenge for work and development, now fear and terror have come upon the birds and the beasts of the earth. Just as the soil produces thistles and thorns that frustrate man's toiling effort to acquire bread (Gen. 3:17), now the animate parts of creation pose a threat to mankind. He is permitted to eat their flesh (without their blood), but they too many turn on him and claim his life (Gen. 9:5).

However, the history of redemption must go on, and that history must continue to sustain the two foci of the dominion mandate—*people* and *earth/land*. Therefore, the Noahic covenant enjoins upon the human race the requirement to increase in population, but it is also cognizant of the fact that threats to human life come now from both other human beings and the beasts. Robertson says that all created life "is sacred. Yet the highest value must be attached to the life of man. To sustain life, man may eat of all the beasts of God's creation (v. 3). Yet reverence must be shown for the life-principle of the creature, symbolized by his blood (v. 4)."⁴¹

In the Noahic covenant the dominion mandate is not discarded. It is continued in its basic contours and with the two main foci, although proper adjustment is made for the redemptive-historical situation in the post-flood period. One can deduce from this the fact that redemption is not a negation of creation, but a restoration of it, including humanity's calling (i.e., mandate) within it. As Robertson puts it:

The explicit repetition of these creation mandates in the context of the covenant of redemption expands the vistas of redemption's horizons. . . . redemption involves his total life-style as a social, cultural creature. Rather than withdrawing narrowly into a restricted form of "spiritual" existence, redeemed man must move out with a total world-and-life perspective.⁴²

In other words, the communion mandate does not only "survive" the flood, it is given renewed impetus within the covenant.

IV. *The Abrahamic covenant*

Genesis 10 records the הולדוה of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons are born to them, and from them comes a great variety of nations. Genesis

⁴¹Robertson, *Covenants*, 115.

⁴²Robertson, *Covenants*, 110.

11:1-9 relates the tower of Babel incident in which mankind, manifesting its sinful inclination of heart (Gen. 8:21), seeks for itself a name as it builds a tower to reach to heaven (Gen. 11:4). Apparently the blessing of fruitfulness given by God in Genesis 9:1-7 has resulted in population increase, but mankind fears its own spread across the whole earth, as was the task of the dominion mandate ("fill the whole earth"). Lest humanity build its own kingdom, God in mercy prevents this by the confusion of languages (Gen. 11:7-9).

The biblical text narrows the reader's attention to the הולדת of Shem (Gen. 11:10-26) since through him shall be continued the "seed of the woman" (Gen. 3:15). From this issues with even more narrow focus the הולדת of Terah (Gen. 11:27ff.), from which comes the patriarch Abram. Hummel calls this narrowing down to one individual the "scandal of particularity,"⁴³ since God's covenantal attention moves away (apparently) from the peoples covering earth.

Genesis 12:1-3 records the call of this one individual Abram. The sentence is a normal Hebrew indicative sentence in which YHWH addresses Abram. In the direct address there are two imperative verbs (לך לך, v.1b; הנה, v.2d), each of which is followed by three imperfects (for a total of six imperfect verbs). Five of the six imperfects have a first person singular subject (YHWH is the speaker), while the last imperfect has a third person plural subject ("families of the earth" [lit. "ground"]).

YHWH is commanding Abram to leave one land (ארצו) in order to journey to another land (ארץ אחרת) which YHWH will show him, namely, the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:5). Here the history of redemption takes something of a turn in its direction. The word ארץ "designates either (a) 'the earth' in a cosmological sense, or (b) 'the land' in the sense of a specific territorial designation, primarily the land of Israel."⁴⁴ This second sense now becomes the focus of God's promise to Abram at a number of points in his life and sojournings (Gen. 12:1,7; 13:15,17; 15:7,18; 17:8; 24:7; cf. 26:3-4 [to Isaac]; 28:13-14 [to Jacob]). To Abram and to his descendants YHWH promises the land of Canaan. It is not Abram's at the time of his call; another "seed" is there possessing it (cf. Gen. 12:6). We take note that one focus of the dominion mandate, *land*, comes again into view in YHWH's dealings with Abram.

But the other focus, *people/seed* (זרע), also comes into play. On

⁴³Hummel, *Word Becoming Flesh*, 56,67.

⁴⁴Victor P. Hamilton, ארץ, from *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, edited by R.L. Harris, et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 74.

several occasions YHWH promises innumerable seed to Abram. In fact, both foci of *people* and *land*, are mentioned together to Abram and succeeding patriarchs (e.g., Gen. 12:7; 13:15-16; 15:13,18; 17:7-10,12,19; 22:17-18; 24:7,60; 26:3-4; 28:4,13-14; 32:13; 35:12; 48:4).

Perhaps it could be argued that the slight turn in direction (or perhaps better put, a change in emphasis) of redemptive history means that in Genesis 12:1-3 (and Gen. 15 and 17 for that matter) the dominion mandate has been neglected (or perhaps dropped?). Furthermore, when these various passages mentioned above speak of *people/seed* and *land*, they have decidedly different content from the terms as viewed in Genesis 1:28 or in the Noahic covenant.

But a closer examination of Genesis 12:1-3 in the light of previous redemptive history and redemptive revelation yields the following understanding, it seems to me. Just as God had blessed אָרָם (Gen. 1:28) and Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1), so too blessing is prominent in Genesis 12:1-3. The words בָּרַךְ or בְּרָכָה occur five times (N.B. the fivefold occurrence of עָרַר in Gen. 3-11).⁴⁵ Blessing is even more necessary in the case of Abram and his wife Sarai because Sarai is barren (thus no *seed/people*; Gen. 11:30; 15:3), and Canaanites occupy the land promised to Abram (thus no *land* available for immediate possession; Gen. 12:6). Dumbrell points out a parallel with the situation of Genesis 1:

As St. Paul had pointed out (Rom. 4:17), the election of Abram involved the calling into existence of the non-existent. It is therefore appropriate that this redemptive call of Abram should be expressed in language which is tantamount to the language of a new creation. Thus the similarities between Gen. 12:1 and 1:3 (where the actual work of creation was set in train) are not to be overlooked.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the very last line of YHWH's call to Abram (Gen. 12:3c) shows that there is something of a "universal" purpose in Abram's election. The blessing given to Abram at this point in redemptive history has in view at some other point in time the rest of humanity ("all the families of the earth"). While it is true that Abram is the patriarchal head of Israel (one particular family/nation; cf. Gen. 15:13; Exod. 2:24; 3:6; etc.), and while it is true that the land Abram is promised is Canaan (again one particular part of the earth), this attention should never focus on "the

⁴⁵Cf. Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 71.

⁴⁶Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 58.

Jews in Palestine" question to the exclusion of the broad divine intentions: God's salvation is a restoration of His elect humanity along with the creation which is the home of this humanity.

In Genesis 15 there is the formal "cutting" of the covenant with Abram (Gen. 15:18). It is not the case that YHWH was not dealing with Abram in a covenantal or redemptive way before this point. Genesis 12:1-3 indicates that YHWH is treating Abram as a "friend" (cf. 2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23) and a covenantal partner in His divine sovereign program of redemption. The covalent "cutting" apparently is done to help confirm Abram's own faith (Gen. 15:6). Abram wants to know that indeed he will have *seed* (Gen. 15:2) and that he will possess the *land* (Gen. 15:8). Abram believes after being shown the innumerable stars, and the covenant is cut to indicate YHWH's determined promise to give Canaan to Abram's descendants some 400 years after their sojourn in an alien land (Gen. 15:13).

It is true that Genesis 15 impresses no particular mandate on Abram. But this only underscores the sovereignty of God's grace as that which is the necessary foundation to any obedience which God's people must demonstrate. Before there can be any obedience a people (*seed*) must first be secured. A people/seed receives primary focus; even outside of the promised land, they are and will be called upon to obey the terms of God's covenant. But ideally, God is to bring them to Canaan in time. The two foci of the dominion mandate continue to be given attention, even though they have a content which is appropriate to this point in saving history.

In Genesis 17 there is provision made for continuity of the covenantal relationship. Again YHWH takes sovereign initiative by approaching Abram, identifying Himself, and speaking words of command. Says Dumbrell, "The new item in vv. 7-8 in which the familiar Abrahamic components of progeny and land appear, is the extension of the covenant to succeeding generations, and its depiction in terms familiar to us from Genesis 9, as an 'everlasting covenant.'"⁴⁷ Abram is the recipient of promises of fruitfulness in terms of *seed* (Gen. 17:2,4-6; cf. v.20) and promises in terms of *land* (17:8). The requirement imposed upon Abraham and his descendants is the sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14). In short, "Genesis 17 has operated as a consolidation of the Abrahamic covenant and as an extension of its detail. In this connection, material contained in chapters 12 and 15 is represented and summated."⁴⁸

⁴⁷Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 73.

⁴⁸Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 74.

Although the promises of YHWH are not announced here to Abram/Abraham (his name changes in 17:5) specifically as a blessing, the verbal form of בָּרַךְ is used with both Sarah (17:16) and Ishmael (17:20). Barren Sarah is miraculously made the mother of nations and kings, and Ishmael will be made the father of twelve princes, a great nation. In saying this the idea of land cannot be completely excluded because blessing is more than "power for life, accumulation of life. . . the promise of descendants alone. Blessing here primarily has nationhood in view, a concept which in any case carries with it the notion of territory as well as descendants."⁴⁹ Oswalt notes that it is "clear that for the Old Testament the abundant life rests directly upon the loving and faithful nature of God." He continues, "From Adam mankind has been under the curse of death, in all his works, in all his relationships. . . . God demonstrates from Genesis 12 onward that He alone has power to bestow blessing."⁵⁰

IV. *Concluding observations*

This survey has traced the two foci of the dominion mandate, namely *people/seed* and *earth/land*, in several stages of redemptive history. Before the fall into sin mankind receives the blessing as well as the calling of fruitfulness and ruling over the creation of God. There was a harmony between mankind and the occupants of the creation. This harmony enabled a relationship of work without permitting exploitation of the creation's elements.

With the fall into sin, an alienation set in, which causes children to be born with pain (Gen. 3:16), and the work with and rule over creation now becomes a sweating and a toiling that ends in a return to the dust (Gen. 3:17-19).

Nevertheless, the two foci of the dominion mandate are not lost in subsequent redemptive history. Following the purging of creation through the flood, Noah is blessed in order to fill once again the creation. "God's commitment to maintain faithfully the orderings of creation displays his longsuffering toward the whole of humanity. He desires to make known the testimony of His goodness throughout the universe."⁵¹ In the Noachic covenant both foci retain something of their "universal" character, as was noted in Genesis 1:28.

⁴⁹Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 68.

⁵⁰J.O. Oswalt, בָּרַךְ, from *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, edited by R.L. Harris et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 132.

⁵¹Robertson, *Covenants*, 122.

Finally, in the Abrahamic covenant both foci again appear, but now in a narrowed way: from Abram will come Israel who will receive the promised land of Canaan. However, this narrowing of *seed* and *land* is for the purpose of a later broadening that will once again be concerned with all nations. In terms of the covenant, Genesis 12:1-3 is the divine response to Genesis 3:11. "The Kingdom of God established in global terms is the goal of the Abrahamic covenant."⁵²

⁵²Dumbrell, *Covenant*, 78. Cf. Matt. 28:18-20.