CREATION AND COVENANT PART TWO

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Creation as object of human work and divine liberation

I. Introduction and orientation

Since the late 1960s there has been increased public awareness in western countries of the growing pollution of the environment. "Discussion of the relationship between mankind and the rest of creation has revived in intensity in recent times in response to the growth of the 'ecological' movement." Current discussions deal with the disappearance of many wildlife species as well as the so-called "greenhouse effect."

Who or what is to be blamed for this ecological problem? Richard Hiers says that "since at least the eighteenth century, the cultured among the despisers had been telling the world that religion was the great enemy of science and human progress." Hiers makes reference to the oft-quoted and widely debated article by Lynn White, Jr. (Science, 1967) who said that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the exploitation of the environment and the ecological disaster which seems to threaten the planet.

In this second article which deals with creation and covenant there will be no refutation of or confirmation for White's thesis. It will trace through selected biblical passages the notion of mutuality between the biblical covenant(s) and the creation itself. The Bible appears to reveal that the creation is the *object* of covenantal actions of either obedience or disobedience. But at the same time it is the *observer* of such actions. The key figure in this relationship of mutuality is, of course, mankind

¹J.A. Friend, "Nature, Man and God: A Temple Revisited," Reformed Theological Review 41/2 (May-August, 1982), 37.

²Richard Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology," *Zygon* 19/1 (March, 1984), 44.

who stands as the crowning work of God, but yet mankind remains as "crown" composed of the very dust of the earth itself.

II. Creation as covenant witness

We have observed in Part I that the Noahic covenant is redemptive as well as preservative. It includes and thus maintains the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:26,28. The creation, heaven and earth, are sustained by God's promise so that humanity can pursue its various callings, activities, and enterprises on its stage. Thus the heavens and earth continue to be the objects of human work.

But there is another side to the relationship of the covenantal activity and the creation. Creation is also called upon to witness the work of which it is both the platform as well as the object. At Mount Sinai YHWH imposes His covenant (one that is analogous to the so-called Hittite suzerain-vassal type) upon Israel. In spelling out the covenantal stipulations for one particular people, YHWH is incorporating the dominion mandates of Genesis 1:26,28 and 9:1ff. In other words, the Mosaic covenant includes the concerns of the Noahic covenant. The blessings bestowed and the tasks imposed upon mankind in its universality are now particularized for the elect people of Israel (without the universality being forgotten; cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Matt. 28:18-20). The creation is to witness in a comprehensive way the carrying out of the various laws and covenantal stipulations when Israel comes to the land which YHWH promised to the patriarchs. The land will monitor the holiness (or lack thereof) of God's people.

In Deuteronomy there are three passages in which heaven and earth are formally called as witnesses: Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; and 31:28. In the context of the first passage, Deuteronomy 4:26, Moses, having given Israel instruction in God's law, now warns Israel of what would happen in the event of apostasy. "I call heaven and earth to bear witness against you this day, that you shall soon completely perish from the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." In Deuteronomy 4 we have a prelude to the repetition of the laws of the Decalogue found in Deuteronomy 5. The events of Sinai are recalled as all idolatry and false worship are repudiated. Says Habel:

³William J. Dumbrell, "Creation, Covenant and Work," Evangelical Review of Theology, 133/2 (April, 1989), 139.

And again it is this jealous overlord whose sovereign choice of Israel as His precious possession and whose salvation of this people from the mighty Egypt are so unique that they presuppose the uniqueness of Yahweh (Deut. 4:20,32-39). With due solemnity the covenant witness of heaven and earth testify to the warning of this jealous King against any corruption comparable to the golden calf or the Beth-Peor incident (Deut. 4:25f.).⁴

The second passage is in Deuteronomy 30:19. In the context of this passage Moses has been telling the people of Israel of the requirement that they must totally love God. Then he sets before the people life and death, good and evil, depending on the measure of obedience. By appealing to heaven and earth YHWH indicates that Israel faces a serious choice. In an analogy with the Hittite suzerainty treaties, the various gods of the contracting parties as well as the phenomena of the natural world would be summoned to observe the carrying out of the treaty's requirements. The "gods" and natural phenomena would be expected to punish any infractions of the treaty terms.⁵

However, Scripture offers no proof that the biblical writers adopted and then modified the polytheism of surrounding pagan religions. God alone is the supreme Judge. When "the heavens and the earth" are described as judges of man's sins, this judging is understood in a derived sense. The creation, even when being personified, never is raised to the level of a group of nature deities. The closest that the Old Testament comes to such an expression is in Psalm 82:1. But even there the text does not speak in a polytheistic manner. God is asking the covenant witnesses to judge both the people and His own righteousness. Heaven and earth also judge in that sense.⁶

Near the close of Deuteronomy 31 is the third passage of calling formal witnesses. In the context Joshua has been commissioned, the law has been read, and the elders and other officers have been assembled. Moses calls on heaven and earth to bear witness against them when they

⁴Norman C. Habel, Yahweh versus Baal: A Conflict of Religious Cultures (New York: Bookman Associates, 1964), 26.

⁵M. Delcor, "Les attaches litteraires, l'origine et la signification de l'expression biblique prendre a temoin le ciel et la terre," *Vetus Testamentum* 16/1 (Jan., 1966), 8-25; A. Philips, *Deuteronomy* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 36-37; Peter C. Craigie, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 139.

⁶Cf. Psalm 50:4-6, especially v.6, "And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge. Selah" (NASB).

will later apostasize and abandon true worship (Deut. 31:28). Then the people of Israel learn a song which functions as a covenant response of affirmation but also as covenant witness. "Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak: and let the earth hear the words of my mouth" (Deut. 32:1). "The address to heaven and earth must be understood as a summons to them to be witnesses of the covenant, since Moses has just stated that precisely that was the purpose of assembling Israel to hear the song (cf. 31:28).

This reality of covenant witness is not forgotten by the biblical writers, as it continues to function especially among the prophets. Narratives in the Old Testament which deal "with occasions of national covenant renewal contain significant elements of the standard covenant pattern (Exod. 34; 2 Kings 11; Ezra 9-10; Neh. 9-10). On such occasions Yahweh called on heaven and earth as witnesses of the original treaty oath, to testify against Israel."

The function of the latter prophets, prior to the Exile, is not only to teach Israel, but also to warn the people of their covenant violations. The analogy with the Hittite suzerainty treaties may be useful at this point. In these treaties there was a solemn warning given lest the vassal should violate the treaty terms. If there were violations, the suzerain would send a messenger who would bring the charges, call upon the witnesses to testify to the accuracy of the charges and then ask rhetorical questions of the violator(s), such as, "What have I done wrong to you?" It is precisely the lack of charges being brought against Job that gives Job such feelings of distress and agony.

As indicated earlier, the treaty motifs found in Deuteronomy are utilized in the prophets on a formal literary level. Explains Kline:

One of the standard divisions in the secular suzerainty treaties was that containing the invocation of the gods of the lord and vassal as the divine witnesses of the covenant oath. . . . the Deuteronomic treaty contains at least a rhetorical imitation of that fea-

⁷Meredith G. Kline, Treaty of the Great King: the Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy, Studies and Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 139. But cf. Craigie, Deuteronomy, 376.

⁸J.A. Thompson, *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 23.

⁹Cf. Job 10:2b, "Let me know why Thou dost contend with me" (NASB).

ture....Yahweh was of course the divine Witness as well as the Lord of the Covenant.¹⁰

It also seems that Israel was familiar with this lawsuit idiom. It appears

that the many references in the prophets to covenant lawsuit point to the influence of the treaty idea. . .According to H.B. Huffmon¹¹ the law-suit in the prophets follows a fairly standard literary form consisting of an introduction in which the scene of the judgment is described; an address by the plaintiff, who is also the judge, in the form of questions which actually list the accusations to which the accused has no adequate reply; a resumé of the past benevolent acts of the plaintiff and the ingratitude of the accused; and finally, the indictment of the accused. This latter feature is sometimes in the form of a warning concerning the evil results of a breach of covenant. In a number of cases witnesses are called to attest that the covenant has been broken. Heaven and earth are commonly called, no doubt in view of their permanence and reliability.¹²

The "permanence and reliability" of heaven and earth are obvious enough.¹³ It must be said that heaven and earth are the formal covenant witnesses so that the prophets' appeal to them is both proper and required. In a more fundamental sense heaven and earth are witnesses to humanity's obedience already from Genesis one. Heaven and earth are created as eternal witnesses, both for God and for man (Psalm 73:9,11; 89:34-37; Isa. 42:5f.). Even the new heavens and the new earth will be witnesses (Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

Ultimately God is both the "council" that hears the charges, and the judge who passes the sentence with the creation functioning as council and judge of the covenant in a secondary sense. Creation "keeps" its covenant perfectly with God. Mankind can find no neutral

¹⁰Kline, Treaty, 135. Cf. Meredith G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 49.

¹¹H.B. Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 78 (1959), 285-295.

¹²Thompson, Near Eastern Treaties, 30.

¹³E.T. Mullen, Jr., "The Divine Witness and the Davidic Royal Grant: Psalm 89:37-38," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 102/2 (1983), 214.

spot or safe ground from which to hide from God or the covenantal responsibilities to Him (Jer. 23:24).

The various prophets use very similar literary styles in pressing the legal case against Israel and Judah because of their sins. Heaven and earth are called upon to bear testimony (or to hear the case) against Israel as violators of the terms of the covenant. Israel, being justly condemned in the court of heaven, is promptly sentenced. It is then the role of the prophet to go to his people and make known Israel's guilt before the bar of God.

The book of Isaiah begins immediately with such a testimony. "Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth: for the LORD speaks, "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me" (Isa. 1:2). He later calls on the nations and the earth to hear of the Lord's wrath (Isa. 34).

Jeremiah speaks similar words. "Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people..." (Jer. 6:19; cf. 22:39). God through Jeremiah also points to the creation as a sign of His faithfulness (Jer. 33:19-26). First He says that if mankind could break the covenant with night and day (alluding to the Noahic covenant), then God would remove David's line (cf. 2 Sam. 7). But that is an impossibility. Then in stronger language He says, as it were, "If I have removed My covenant with day and night, with heaven and earth, then I will remove Israel. But see for yourselves, the creation continues. Israel will find compassion again!"

In Micah the peoples and creation are summoned to hear what the Lord is going to witness against both Israel and Judah (Micah 1:2). YHWH then invites the people to confess before the mountains (Micah 6:1). The mountains hear both the people and the Lord. "Listen, you mountains, to the indictment of the LORD. . . because the LORD has a case against His people. . ."(Micah 6:2; cf. Malachi 2 where the LORD speaks against unfaithful priests).

All these covenant lawsuits are fully justified. The Israelites had received plenty of warning in the Pentateuch. The covenant had to be kept; creation will witness to that! If the land is defiled, it would disgorge Israel (Lev. 18:25,27,28). The land would not be able to bear sin (cf. Job 20:27; Prov. 30:21-23). Not only would the land disgorge the guilty party later on in history, but it also swallows the rebellious in the wilderness (Num. 16:32-34).

Part of Israel's covenant objectives was also to give the land its rest, as part of the Sabbatical and Jubilee obligations (Lev. 25). But the land cannot observe its rest without the active obedience of its occupants.

Indeed, the Sabbath is not only a good gift for humans, but the animals as well can rest on it. The Sabbath was made for man—and the rest of creation! If the covenant is not observed, the heavens will be as iron and the earth as brass (Lev. 26:19; cf. Deut. 28:23, where the analogies are reversed). So important is this obligation to give the creation its rest that the Scripture records that the people of God are sent into exile to give the land its rest, a rest which Israel had neglected (2 Chron. 36:21; cf. Jer. 29:10).

When repentance comes in the lives of Israel, then the Lord remembers His covenant (Lev. 26:42; 2 Chron. 6:23,25-26). The creation breaks into singing when the Lord has compassion (Isa. 49:13). The Lord Himself has always been present as a witness though the creation (Job 16:19; Jer. 32:19). Previously the creation trembled in fear when God took action against His people (Judges 5:4; Micah 1:4), but the creation rejoices when He crushes the enemy Babylon (Jer. 51:48; cf. Ezek. 35:14).

Finally, we only take note of the remarkable passage in Hosea 2:20-25 (MT) where YHWH points ahead to an eschatological point in time when He will act as the interested "third party" in initiating a covenant between the מַשְּלִים and His people Israel. Israel's pursuit of the אַלְלִים had caused the covenantal punishment to be felt in the various parts of creation (e.g., Hosea 2:14-15, MT). Creation experiences the covenantal wrath of God, but His redemption will not exclude the animate and inanimate elements of the creation. The new covenant will renew life and fruitfulness, beginning in heaven but bearing fruit on earth.

III. Creation awaiting consummation (Rom. 8:18-25)

In the previous section we have seen how mankind is called upon within the covenant to work with the resources that the creation provides. We also noted that within that covenantal framework the creation itself ("heaven and earth") serves as witness to how mankind carries out the stipulations of the covenant. In Romans 8:18-25 we see how both regenerate mankind and the creation await the full redemption that is provided by Jesus Christ.

Briefly, some comments about context are in order. The letter to the Romans spells out in outline some of the basic contours of the new covenantal situation which now exists because of the work of Jesus Christ. In Romans 1:1-3,20 there is first set forth how all humanity is in rebellion against God's revelation, a revelation which clearly reveals God Himself and His will (Rom. 1:20; 2:14-15). But through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, all those of the human race who are united with Him can and will

experience redemption (Rom. 3:21-11:36). The passage under consideration occurs in this section which describes the salvation that has been accomplished by Christ. But it should be noted that it follows Romans 7 in which Paul cries out to express his wretchedness in that he experiences his own personal struggle with knowing God's will and wanting to do it, while at the same time seeing a different law, one of sin and death, at work in his members (7:15,19,21,23). In other words, Paul gives voice to a groaning that believers have because they still live in unresurrected bodies. The revelation of Romans 7 is a fitting prelude to what is said in Romans 8:18-25, the passage under consideration.

A very remarkable verse in Romans 8:18-25 is 8:21, "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." By means of the literary device of personification (frequently used in biblical literature) the apostle Paul declares that the creation will be liberated into freedom, which is glory. This is precisely the same eschatological goal for those who have been predestined by God, since in Romans 8:30 Paul tells us that the end point of the "golden chain" of salvation is glorification. The eschatological goal for a non-corrupted creation is also glorification.

That the biblical text here should so bring together the liberation of the creation as well as that of the children of God, should not surprise the reader/audience. The mutuality between the members of the covenant and the creation has been evident from the earliest moments of the history of redemption and the history of revelation. Mankind is made from the dust, he is called to work the soil until he returns to the dust (because of his sin), and the heavens and the earth "observe" his (dis)obedience in that working. Nevertheless, the creation itself is not the guilty party. Therefore, redemption includes the purging of the creation of all that which sin has spoiled. But until that moment of liberation through purgation arrives, the creation groans as it waits.

The creation referred to in Romans 8:19 refers to the product of God's creative activity and not the act of creating (cf. Rom. 1:20). Verses 20-23 carefully delimit the reference so that creation here does not include the angels, Satan and the demons, unbelievers, or believers. "We are restricted, therefore, to non-rational creation, animate and inanimate."

Although it was Adam who was responsible for the act of sinful rebellion which led to God's judgment, yet Romans 8:20 reveals that God's judgment included the element of hope when the world was placed under

¹⁴John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 302.

futility. God continued to keep the heavens and the earth under mankind for tilling and development, but sinfulness causes mankind's work always to fall short of God's intentions and His purpose of glory. Sin continues to foster corruption in all relationships of existence. Forde puts the matter thus:

Creation wants nothing more than to be set free. The problem is in us....We are always on the way somewhere else....We seek the immortal, the eternal, the perfect paradise, the classless society, a world "safe for democracy," and what not. Creation is not able to support us in our impetuous quests.¹⁵

Thus we suspect the creation to be perverse, an enemy. Then some human beings are tempted to exploit it or abuse it. This is a futility which adds to creation's groaning.

But creation now "knows" that its futility (witnessing sinfulness but being unable itself to correct it) is not a permanent situation. Creation in its groaning and suffering has hope, which allows all the cosmos to have this earnest expectation (Rom. 8:19, "anxious longing...waits eagerly"). Paul characterizes this expectation as the "pains of childbirth" (Rom. 8:22). Such is clearly not a death throttle, but rather it is a longing that issues forth or results in life itself. Creation's hope is thus not quenched by the sufferings of the present time.

The fruition of creation's hope is never apart from the redemption of the sons of God (Rom. 8:23). They too groan within themselves as they await the redemption of their bodies (i.e., the resurrection at the end of this age). Murray notes that the "groaning of the children of God is introduced as something surprising" because they have the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23). C.C. Oke suggests that the word usually translated "firstfruits" ($\alpha\pi\alpha\rho\chi\dot{\eta}$) can be used as a technical term for the birth-certificate of a free person. If his suggestion is correct, this would not be in contrast with the Spirit's presence in the lives of believers as $\alpha\rho\alpha\beta\delta v$ (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). Oke argues that the context is dealing with the status or condition of believers (e.g., 8:16-17,19,21,23,29) where they are, among other things, designated children of God, joint-

¹⁵G.O. Forde, "Expository Articles: Romans 8:18-27," Interpretation, 38/3 (July, 1984), 285.

¹⁶Murray, *Romans*, 306.

¹⁷C.C. Oke, "A Suggestion with Regard to Romans 8:23," *Interpretation*, 11/4 (October, 1957), 455f.

heirs with Christ, destined for freedom and full adoption as well as conformity to Christ's image. The Spirit witnesses to our spirit that we have spiritual freedom. Thus through the Spirit we have "the certificate that entitles us to be registered as the Sons of God," although "we are still awaiting our formal release from the bondage of the flesh and the law." Murray adds that the "consummation of the redemptive process is waiting for the transformation by which the body of our humiliation will be conformed to the likeness of the body of Christ's glory (cf. Phil. 33:21) and it is for that consummation that the sons of God wait." Here once again the interrelatedness between redeemed humanity and the creation (the "seed" and the "soil"; cf. Gen. 1:26,28) is evident since both are waiting with eagerness and that waiting is in hope for something that is sure but, at present, unseen (cf. Rom. 8:24-25).

We would be amiss in this article if we were not to note that the expectation of both God's children and God's creation is the redemptive result of the mediating work of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Romans 8:29 describes Him as the first-born among many brethren. As the second man and last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45f.) Christ has all things subject to Himself, thus fulfilling the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28. For this reason Hebrews 2 can now read Psalm 8, at this stage in redemptive history, as receiving eschatological consummation in Christ. All is subject to Him with death being the last enemy to submit (1 Cor. 15:25-28). Since Christ is God Incarnate, the flesh He assumes from the Blessed Virgin Mary is also "dusty" in its origin. But in redemption such flesh is glorified, representative of the new creation (new heavens and new earth; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1ff.).

IV. Concluding observations

What we have seen to this point in this look at covenant-creation themes in the Old Testament is that the mutual responsibilities of the covenant-creation may not be shifted or overlooked in any way. It is quite proper to speak of Old Testament covenant and witnesses in a formal sense with particular people. But we can explore this idea further, it seems to me. All "covenant activity is at the same time creation, and thus materially it falls among God's works of creation." Thus there is a sense in which covenant does not begin with Moses, Abraham, Noah, or

¹⁸Oke, "Romans 8:23," 455.

¹⁹Murray, Romans, 308.

²⁰Piet Schoonenberg, Covenant and Creation (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 143.

The Word of God also calls upon humanity to keep the covenant. This is the purpose of our creation. Schoonenberg says that creation "proceeds entirely from him: His intention is also expressed without hindrance. He makes the creature in the whole of its purposiveness and utility. Orientation towards the covenant and exaltation is therefore intrinsic to the creature." In this way it can also be said that the created world is a revelation of God. Humanity thus finds itself surrounded by the Word revelation of God in this world, and humanity is a part of that revelation. To this revelation mankind is called upon to respond.

The relationship between creation and the covenant, we may now say, is a very close one. The connection between creation and covenant is also one of destination, of eschatological purpose. God creates for the covenant so that the image-bearers He shapes might have a personal relationship with Him.²³ Within that covenant we are to love God with our total self. This is no new commandment for man, nor is this something which is alien to man's originally created nature. Such a commandment is firmly rooted in creation, and the heavens and earth provide not only the arena for that love, they also witness as to how mankind (dis)obeys it. Schoonenberg says that the "covenant supposes the creation as foundation, as basis, as point of departure. . .but creation supposes the covenant as purpose." Friend suggests that the world is symbolic in that it expresses God's own mind and that the world is also instrumental, the means by which He effects His purposes.²⁵

It is clear that because of the mutual relationship between God's creation and His covenant with mankind in Christ, the world cannot be seen as "nature," a morally-neutral object of human exploitation, nor yet as a living organism (e.g., "Mother Nature") that is the object of semi-

²¹Schoonenberg, Covenant and Creation, 141.

²²Schoonenberg, Covenant and Creation, 147.

²³Cf. Schoonenberg, Covenant and Creation, 141.

²⁴Schoonenberg, Covenant and Creation, 147.

²⁵Friend, "Nature," 40.

worship (cf. Hindu worldviews). Natura is actually creatura of God. "There is an integral relationship between the natural order and the moral order. The moral jealousy of Yahweh may express itself by reversing or restoring this cycle of nature. For the sympathy of nature often coincides with the moral and religious activities of the people of God."26 Therefore, within God's covenant with His people throughout redemptive history, just as the "heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1), so too the locusts can proclaim His judgment of wrath (Deut. 28:38; Joel 1:4ff). Precisely because of man's created nature as God's image-bearer and because of the nature of creation itself, this world in all of its ecological settings may not be the object of exploitation, but it is to be the setting of obedience done unto God Himself.²⁷ "Though in various ways, every expression of human thinking has to do with the question of the proper understanding of the world and its orders, and thus with the question of justice and righteousness in the comprehensive sense of the word. "28

²⁶Habel, Yahweh versus Baal, 101. Cf. Dennis J. McCarthy, "Creation" Motifs in Ancient Hebrew Poetry (1967)," from Creation in the Old Testament, B.W. Anderson, ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1984), 77; G.M. Landes, "Creation and Liberation" (1978), from Creation in the Old Testament, B.W. Anderson, ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1984), 141.

²⁷Bernard W. Anderson, "Introduction: Mythopoetic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith," from *Creation in the Old Testament*, B.W. Anderson, ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1984), 16.

²⁸H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," from *Creation in the Old Testament*, B.W. Anderson, ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1984), 114.