

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NOAHIC COVENANT TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Aaron Chalmers

## Summary

*This article seeks to draw attention to the importance of the Noahic covenant to biblical theology. This article suggests that rather than being of only marginal significance, the Noahic covenant is of decisive importance for understanding the broader metanarrative of Scripture. In particular, this covenant establishes the basis or foundation for the story (God's commitment to creation, and in particular, the preservation of life on earth), establishes the parameters of the story (God's activity reaches out to embrace not only humanity, but also the created animals and the earth), and provides an anticipation of the conclusion of the story of redemption (God's judgement on sin, salvation of the righteous, and renewal of creation).*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the concept of covenant as a key theme within biblical theology. Works by Williams, Williamson and Robertson have identified the various covenants as a possible way of approaching the metanarrative of Scripture, or at least the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, however, these works have tended to focus on the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants and

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<sup>1</sup> M. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R 2005); P. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (NSBT; Nottingham: Apollos/Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007); O. Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980). Recent texts that recognise the centrality of the covenants for the OT include W. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984) and C. Bartholomew and M. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

placed least emphasis on the so-called Noahic covenant found in Genesis 8–9.<sup>2</sup> For example, Robertson devotes only seventeen pages, or just over five percent of his book to this covenant.<sup>3</sup> Outside of these works, the Noahic covenant has fared little better. In fact, within critical circles the Noahic covenant is often maligned or virtually ignored altogether. Mendenhall and Herion's comment seem to be reasonably representative of the critical scholarly position.

The narrative of the covenant established with Noah, his descendents, and all the occupants of the ark (Gen. 9:8-17) perhaps illustrates the ultimate demise of the 'covenant' tradition. The historical development of the covenant from a constitutive act instrumental in creating a new society and a correspondingly new value system in the time of Moses has, in this late narrative, become little more than a theological motif or literary device by which to confer religious value upon that which already existed, namely, the orderly process of the natural world...In place of the rich complexity of the LB suzerainty treaty tradition and its function as a vain attempt to create orderly and peaceful relationships between political entities, the covenant has become a mere word-label giving religious value to an old folkloristic 'explanation' of the rainbow.<sup>4</sup>

There are many reasons for the neglect of this covenant within both evangelical and critical circles, perhaps the most significant being the focus on salvation history (beginning with Abraham in Gen. 12) at the expense of God's role in creation (Gen. 1–11).<sup>5</sup> In this paper I will seek

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the inadequacies of the title 'Noahic covenant' with reference to Gen. 8–9 see below.

<sup>3</sup> This neglect of the Noahic covenant within evangelical circles is found almost across the board. For example, Hafemann does not even have a separate section on the covenant with Noah but instead jumps straight from the 'covenant' at creation to Abraham (S. J. Hafemann, 'The Covenant Relationship' in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity*, ed. S. J. Hafemann and P. R. House (Nottingham, Apollos: 2007). There is a limited discussion of the Noahic covenant in Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama of Scripture*. In other works that focus on the various biblical covenants (see, e.g., Williams, Williamson, Dumbrell in fn. 1 and T. McComiskey, *The Covenants as Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* [Leicester: IVP, 1985]) the Noahic covenant usually receives the least amount of attention.

<sup>4</sup> G. Mendenhall and G. Herion, 'Covenant' in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. D. Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 1190. It is also informative to note the amount of space given over to a discussion of this covenant in Mendenhall and Herion's article. They devote approximately 1/3 of a column, which is less than 1% of their total discussion on the biblical covenants.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, it is good to see this tendency being redressed in recent years. See, e.g., T. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) and B. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). Another common reason for the

to redress this imbalance and, in particular, highlight three key ways in which the Noahic covenant is absolutely central to the broader metanarrative of Scripture.

## **2. The Noahic Covenant Establishes the *Basis / Foundation* for the Covenant Story of Redemption<sup>6</sup>**

The Noahic covenant, including the various divine promises which accompany it, guarantees God's commitment to creation, and in particular, the preservation of life on the earth.<sup>7</sup> It thus provides the necessary foundation for the story of redemption—life on earth is guaranteed to continue in spite of human sin.

God's commitment to creation and the preservation of life on earth is demonstrated in a number of different ways in chapters eight and nine. This commitment is found pre-eminently in a number of the promises that the Lord makes. For example, in 8:11 the Lord declares 'never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth'. This promise is recapitulated and expanded in vv. 21-22.

God's promises point to his commitment to creation, irrespective of human sin. They guarantee that life will continue to flourish, that the natural order shall continue. Hence the importance of the promise of seasons in 8:22—here God guarantees the stable conditions necessary for the production of crops and food, which are, in turn, essential for the growth and spread of both human and animal life on the earth.

Importantly, these promises (and, for that matter the Noahic covenant as a whole) are unconditional. Although God places certain expectations on humanity (see below) there is no sense in which humanity must keep these obligations in order for the promises / cov-

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neglect of the Noahic covenant is the connection between the covenant and P, whereby the Noahic covenant is interpreted as a late retrojection. Yet as P. Harland, *The Value of Human Life: A Study of the Story of the Flood (Genesis 6-9)* (SVT 64; Leiden: Brill, 1996): 130, has pointed out 'Even if it was written relatively late in Israel's history and was a reflection of her covenantal beliefs, it is still given a literary position of some importance...if one reads at the level of the canonical form of the Old Testament, as opposed to attempting to reconstruct a history of Israel's religious thought, the covenant of Gen. 9 is of vast importance, since it is the first in the Old Testament, and it forms the framework for all others.'

<sup>6</sup> I have borrowed the phrase 'covenant story of redemption' from the subtitle of M. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found*.

<sup>7</sup> Hence Robertson refers to it as 'the Covenant of Preservation'.

enant to remain intact. In other words, even if humanity fails to fulfil these expectations (a reality which the text clearly envisages, cf. 8:21b), God will not renege on his guarantees. At the end of the day, the permanence of the covenant, and its accompanying promises, is based on the unconditional commitment of God to the human and non-human creation. In this regard, Wenham's paraphrase of Westermann's comment is insightful:

Underlying the history of nature and the history of mankind is an unconditional divine Yes, a divine Yes to all life, that cannot be shattered by any catastrophe in the course of history—and what is most important for P—by the mistakes, corruption or rebellion of man. God's promise remains rock certain as long as the earth exists.<sup>8</sup>

God's commitment to creation is also demonstrated in the sign associated with the Noahic covenant—the rainbow (9:12-16). Signs are found in relation to a number of biblical covenants with their purpose usually being to remind the participants in the covenant of their commitment to the relationship and respective obligations.<sup>9</sup> For example, circumcision is given as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17), and the sabbath is the sign of the covenant at Sinai (Exod. 31). There is one key difference, however, between these signs and the sign associated with the Noahic covenant—the intended recipient. While in all other covenants the signs are given for the *human* participants to the covenant, in the case of Noah the sign is given as a reminder to *God* of his covenantal commitments.

While it is undeniable that this visible sign in the heavens would act as a source of reassurance for humanity,<sup>10</sup> according to Genesis 9 its express purpose was to remind God himself to keep his covenantal promises and obligations. It is established for *God's* benefit—it will

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<sup>8</sup> G. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987): 195-96. Or as Anderson puts it 'Although legal obligations are given in the Noahic covenant, the permanence of the covenant is based on the unconditional commitment of God to the human and nonhuman creation, for better or for worse. In this view, hope for the future does not rest on human perfection or improvement...Rather, hope is based on God's absolute commitment to the creation.' (B. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994): 157-58).

<sup>9</sup> In his seminal work on biblical 'signs' (אִרְהוּרָה), Fox has identified three basic categories. The sign associated with the Noahic covenant belongs to the third category: a mnemonic or cognition sign which arouses consciousnesses of something already known (M. Fox, 'The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'ot Etiologies', *Revue Biblique* 81, [1974]: 557-96, esp. 563ff.).

<sup>10</sup> Harland, *Value of Human Life*, 139, proposes 'the impersonal statement "the bow is seen" (9:14) suggests that the bow also serves to remind the world.'

prompt God ‘to remember’. In this context, God’s ‘remembrance’ (זָכַר) of his covenant implies God’s faithfulness and willingness to act on his covenant obligations. As Harland points out ‘In Hebrew, memory was not just recollection but the putting into effect of an action. When God remembers he intervenes.’<sup>11</sup> This term is used with a similar nuance in Exodus 2:22-24 where it effectively functions as a major reason for the Exodus from Egypt: God remembers his covenant obligations to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (including the promise of land, cf. Exod. 3:8) and decides to act on these. The sign of the covenant, which effectively guarantees God’s faithfulness and willingness to act on his covenantal promises, is another feature that points to God’s ongoing commitment to the world he has created.

The final way in which God’s commitment to his creation and, in particular, the preservation of life on earth is demonstrated is through the series of commands that God gives Noah, and thus, by extension, all of humanity. Essentially, these commands are given to encourage and preserve life. For example in 9:1 and 7 the Lord reissues the command originally given to Adam ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’. At first glance, God’s command to Noah simply encourages the proliferation of human life. But, as Wright has recognised, there is more going on here.<sup>12</sup> The significance of the command to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ can only be fully appreciated when understood in the context of Genesis 1. There it is linked with the instruction for humanity to have dominion (רָדָה) over the animals. This dominion does not equate to self-serving exploitation of one’s subjects but instead the promotion of their wellbeing (cf. the portrayal of the Israelite king—the human being to whom the verb רָדָה is especially appropriate—in Ps. 72).<sup>13</sup> The proliferation of human life is thus not just for the benefit of humanity but for creation as a whole.

The second divine command is given in 9:2-4. Here, for the first time, God allows human beings to kill animals. At first glance, this text may appear to cut against the argument suggested above, for the command seems to be authorizing the taking of (animal) life, rather than encouraging and preserving this. Nevertheless, it needs to be kept

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<sup>11</sup> Harland, *Value of Human Life*, 123, goes on to state ‘The essence of God’s memory is his action towards people.’

<sup>12</sup> C. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006): 327.

<sup>13</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 33.

in mind that very strict rules are set on this practice. For example, animals shall only be killed for food (v. 3) or if they kill another human being (v. 5). In other words, such killing is only to take place in order to ensure the continuance of the human species.

Furthermore, humans are ordered not to consume the animal's blood (v. 4). This command points to the fact that although human life, in particular, is sacred (cf. v. 6), animal life in general must also be treated with dignity. As Waltke argues 'By forbidding the eating of blood, this regulation instills a respect for the sacredness of life and protects against wanton abuse.'<sup>14</sup> As a token of such respect, the consumption of blood is strictly prohibited, for this is representative of the animal's life-force (Lev. 17:11).<sup>15</sup> Thus even the commands given to humanity focus on respect for and the preservation of life, both human and animal.

The testimony of the Noahic covenant to God's commitment to creation and the preservation of life on earth forms the foundation or basis for the covenant story of redemption. In short, without the Noahic covenant there could be no *history*, and hence no *salvation* history. Thus the Noahic covenant is absolutely essential to the metanarrative of Scripture.

### **3. The Noahic Covenant Establishes the *Parameters* of the Story**

The Noahic covenant shows that the parameters of the covenant story of redemption are as wide as creation itself. In the Noahic covenant God reaches out to embrace his creation as a whole, it is unambiguously creation-wide in scope. Hence, the title 'Noahic' covenant is somewhat inadequate, for the recipients of the covenant are broader than simply Noah and his descendants.

'God's covenant with creation' would perhaps be a better label for what is happening here.

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<sup>14</sup> B. Waltke with C. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001): 144. For a fuller discussion of the reasons behind this command see Harland, *Value of Human Life*, 155-58. He also suggests (*ibid.*, p. 156) that one aspect of the prohibition of blood is that 'it prevents cruelty and downgrading of life in man's desire for master over the created order. Life is not to be tampered with indiscriminately...The prohibition then becomes a preventative measure against brutality.'

<sup>15</sup> This is the argument of Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 64.

The creation-wide scope of this covenant is shown by the three distinct partners to the covenant given in chapter nine.

Initially, God covenants with all of humanity (v. 8). Although Noah and his descendants are identified as the specific recipients of the covenant, it must be kept in mind that according to the biblical narrative Noah and his family constitute the only human survivors of the flood. Hence, by entering into a covenant with Noah God is entering into a covenant with the whole of humanity.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore the whole of humanity, and not just Israel, who are the recipients of Yahweh's gracious, life-sustaining promises and blessings.

God also covenants with every living creature (vv. 9-11). God's covenantal concern reaches out beyond human beings to embrace all the creatures he has made. (It is interesting to note that 8:1, which Wenham has shown to be the turning point of the flood narrative, mentions God's remembering not only Noah but also all the wild and domestic animals that were with him in the ark.<sup>17</sup> The shift from judgement to salvation is prompted not only by God's concern for humanity, as represented by Noah, but also for the animals.) Recognition of the fact that animals are also recipients of the creation covenant provides an important corrective to the tendency of some elements within the communities of faith to anthropocentrize God's concern and activity. Although God *is* concerned with the fate of human beings, this is not an *exclusive* concern. Here God reaches out to embrace and involve all the animals in the covenant story of redemption.

The inclusion of animals within God's redemptive story is also reinforced by a number of prophetic passages. For example, in Hosea 2:18 the prophet looks forward to a time of peace and security, a day when God will make a covenant 'with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground'. Similarly, two passages from the book of Isaiah (11:6-8 and 65:25) include animals within their depiction of the eschaton / renewed creation. The eschatological transformation of creation will also embrace and encompass the animal kingdom.

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<sup>16</sup> The picture is reinforced by the so-called table of nations found in Gen. 10 where all humanity traces its descent from the sons of Noah.

<sup>17</sup> G. Wenham, 'The Coherence of the Flood Narrative', *VT* 28 (1978): 338.

Finally, God covenants with the earth (v. 13). The very earth itself, rock, soil and sand, is embraced within the Noahic covenant.<sup>18</sup> God's covenantal concern reaches out beyond his animate creatures to embrace all that he has made and once declared to be 'very good' (1:31).

This picture is reinforced by those passages which envisage the renewal of the heavens and earth, and which point to some form of 'worldly' existence as the culmination of God's story (e.g. Rev. 21 and 22). God is concerned about his creation as a whole, the earth included, and will one day act to renew this. This seems to be what Paul is alluding to in Romans 8:21-23 where he speaks of creation as a whole groaning in labour pains and longing for the revelation of God's long awaited, supreme act of restoration. Creation as a whole, the very earth itself, is caught up in God's plan of redemption.

The covenant established in Genesis 8-9 thus reveals God's care and concern for the entire created order. The object of God's redemptive activity cannot be limited to one people or nation. In fact, it is not even restricted to humanity, rather God reaches out to embrace the entire created order that he has made, including the animals and the earth. This is particularly significant because the canonical location of the Noahic covenant means that it provides the essential framework for the rest of redemptive history, including all other biblical covenants.<sup>19</sup> While the other covenants focus on the fate and fortune of the elect people, the Noahic covenant sets this more precisely defined concern within the broader context of God's engagement with humanity and creation as a whole. According to the Noahic covenant the boundaries of God's plan of redemption reach out to embrace all creation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Contra* V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990): 318, who suggests that in this context the earth 'should be understood as metonymy for all creatures of the earth—man and all animals'. The author clearly has another way of saying this very thing—*כל בשר על מארץ* 'all flesh upon the earth', cf. vv. 16 and 17—and thus the reference to the 'earth' (*ארץ*) in v. 13 should be taken at face value.

<sup>19</sup> This is an observation that Harland also makes but I arrived at it independently of his work.

<sup>20</sup> This is an especially important point given the current debate regarding the existence of a covenant with / at creation. For arguments in favour of such a covenant see the works of Williams and Robertson. For arguments against see Williamson. Such a covenant need not be posited in order to point to God's covenantal concern for the non-human creation. God's creation-wide concern is clearly found within Gen. 8-9.

#### **4. The Noahic Covenant Provides an *Anticipation of the Conclusion of the Story***

The covenant and preceding flood narrative shows us where the story of redemption is going. One could well argue that the flood is a proleptic event, an anticipation of the future.<sup>21</sup> For example, the deliverance of Noah ('the righteous man, blameless in his generation', 6:9) from the waters of the flood anticipates the eschatological deliverance of the righteous from the judgement of God. Conversely, the destruction of the wicked (the violent and corrupt, 6:11) provides a picture of God's eschatological judgement on sinful humanity.

The use of the story of Noah to describe the coming deliverance of the righteous and the judgement of the wicked is found, for example, in 2 Peter 2:4-10.<sup>22</sup> Here the author employs the story of Noah, along with a number of other OT examples, as evidence that God will condemn those who engage in false teaching (equated with the ungodly people of Noah's day) while he will save those who do not adopt their teachings (who are equated with Noah, the 'herald of righteousness' and 'seven others'). The story has thus become paradigmatic—it functions as a model for how God will act in judgement.

More broadly, the flood narrative provides an anticipation of the eschatological 'destruction' and renewal of creation. This is the main thrust of 2 Peter 3:1-10, which seem to be suggesting that on the day of judgement the earth will be 'destroyed' by fire just as it had been 'destroyed' by water during the time of Noah. As Bauckham, Williams and Wright have pointed out, however, this does not imply that the earth will be completely done away with—after all the earth was not done away with by the flood.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it does point to the fact that the renewal of creation will involve a cataclysmic change or transition, the closest 'historical' parallel to which is the flood.

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<sup>21</sup> According to 1 Pet. 3:18-21, the deliverance of Noah through the waters of the flood also functions as an anticipation of Christian baptism.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in Matt. 24:36-39 Jesus picks up on the flood story in order to describe what life will be like at the coming of the Son of Man.

<sup>23</sup> R. Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude* (WBC 50; Waco: Word, 1983): 316-22. Williams, *Far as the Curse*, 278-80; Wright, *Mission of God*, 408-409.

## 5. Conclusion

In spite of the relative lack of attention it has received, the covenant that God establishes with Noah and creation in Genesis 8–9 is of decisive importance for understanding the story of redemption. The covenant provides the *basis / foundation* for the entire story—in fact, the only reason there can be an ongoing story is the fact that God remains graciously committed to the other participants in the story in spite of their sin. The covenant also establishes the *parameters* of the story, showing God’s redemptive concern not only for humanity but creation as a whole, animals and earth. Finally the covenant provides a proleptic *anticipation of the end* of the story. In it we see a picture of the eschatological salvation, judgement and ‘destruction’ / renewal that dominates the final chapter of God’s great work of redemption. Far from being of only marginal importance, the Noahic covenant is a fundamental element of the metanarrative of Scripture.