

# Covenant

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# God's Covenant with Noah and Creation

## Scripture

**Genesis 1:1—2:3** In this first creation account, God brings forth order and living diversity from the “formless void.”

**Genesis 8:20—9:17** In this first covenant account, God resolves to “never again” destroy creation.

## Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the beauty of the earth, for the goodness of your creation, for all things bright and beautiful, and even for things not so bright and beautiful in our eyes. How manifold are your works in creation! How diverse are your creatures! You have made them all in your great wisdom. We praise you for the gift of life. Help us to live according to your wisdom and goodness of your creation. In Christ's name we ask this. Amen.

## Introduction

The word “covenant” is not widely found in everyday discourse. It is occasionally invoked in wedding ceremonies, mortgage contracts, and homeowners associations. Where it continues to thrive is in faith communities.

The word itself comes from the Latin verb *convenire*, “to meet” or “come together.” “Covenant” is more than a business contract. It establishes community in some form. The richness of the term is indicated in the variety of ways the Bible uses the word. Nevertheless, one can detect a common thread when it comes to covenants made between God and Israel in the Old Testament. Call it the “covenant formula,” and it goes something like this: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). Or in Leviticus 26:12: “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”

In both examples, God is poised to enter into relationship with a people. God claims a people so a people can claim God as their

own. God desires to be in a relationship of intimacy and love. As we shall see, such a “covenant” between God and a people typically involves an expression of God’s commitment and an expectation of responsible human conduct.

There are four major covenants in the Old Testament, each associated with a particular personage: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. In common to them all is God’s initiative. God enacts each covenant. There are, to be sure, numerous other covenants in the Bible, including those made by individuals and political entities. (See, for example, Genesis 21:27; 31:43–54; 1 Samuel 18:3; 23:18; 2 Samuel 3:21; 5:3; 1 Kings 5:13; 15:21; Hosea 12:1; Jeremiah 34:8–20.) Our study, however, will focus on those covenants established by God.

## **Creation**

God’s covenant with Noah, described in Genesis 9:8–17, is the first covenant mentioned in the Bible. To understand it fully, one must go back to the very beginning of creation according to Genesis 1. There, God creates the cosmos, a universe replete with structure, order, and life. In a majestic series of commands, God calls creation into being, step by step, day by day, until creation is deemed complete on the seventh day.

Creation begins in a state of primordial soup, as it were (1:2), from which God separates light from darkness and the waters above from the waters below. Creation is deemed “good” throughout and “very good” at the end (1:31). Whereas the first three days establish creation’s domains (light, sky, seas, and land), days 4–6 populate those domains: lights (day 4) and various forms of life (days 5 and 6), all “according to their kinds.” No longer is creation a “formless void” (Hebrew *tohu wabohu*, v. 2). Far from it, creation now teems with life in all its wondrous diversity: aerial, marine, and terrestrial. Creation’s goodness (the term “good” in Genesis 1 is repeated seven times!) not only points to its beauty and structure but also to its sustaining power. Seeds and sex are deemed critical for the continuance of life. The plants of the earth bear seeds, making possible their succession. The command to “be fruitful and multiply” applies not only to humans (v. 28) but also to animals (v. 22). The procreation makes possible the replenishing of the earth, and that is a good thing—a blessing, in fact (vv. 22a, 28a).

Each step in creation, according to Genesis 1, is initiated by God’s command. God’s commands, however, do not simply bring forth

creation out of nothing. God commands the earth to bring forth vegetation (v. 11) and land animals (v. 24). Similarly, God commands the waters to produce “swarms of living creatures” (v. 20). God’s commands, in other words, enlist other agents of creativity, specifically the land and the waters, to produce life. The God of Genesis 1 proves to be a collaborative God.

Divine collaboration is most vividly depicted in the creation of humankind: “Let us make humankind in our image” (v. 26). Within the author’s own ancient context, such language refers to the divine council, populated by lesser divine beings—angels, for example, as depicted elsewhere in Scripture such as in Job 1–2 and 1 Kings 22:19–23. Christian tradition would interpret this passage in reference to the Trinity. In either case, God works in collaboration in Genesis 1. What makes the creation of humanity so special in Genesis is the language of divine “image.”

Humans, both male and female, are created in “God’s image.” As bearers of God’s image, human beings have the privilege and task of exercising “dominion” over all life (vv. 26, 28). Within an agrarian community, such a task involved the difficult work of cultivating the land and domesticating animals (compare Genesis 3:17–19). It involved care and wisdom, much in contrast to the kind of dominion that is harsh and cruel (see Ezekiel 34:4). The God who created the world to be sustained from generation to generation is the God who commissions humans to be responsible for creation’s “goodness,” for its sustainability. Noah, as we shall see, is the one who most fully exercises responsible dominion.

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## **Noah**

By the time the flood is unleashed in Genesis 7, creation has gone awry. By Genesis 6, violence has engulfed the world: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence” (v. 11). Genesis 1 held out hope that the world would flourish with life. But now creation is filled with wickedness. The state of the world, including that of the human heart, is in such bad shape that God regrets ever having created humankind (6:6). God

decides to destroy a world that itself is in the throes of self-destruction. (The word “corrupt” in v. 11 is in Hebrew the same word as “destroy” in v. 13.) God resolves to start over, to go back to the “beginning” to recreate the world from its watery, chaotic origins (see 1:2).

But not entirely. One individual stands out as righteous, the son of Lamech whose birth name holds out hope for “relief” from the hard toil of working the cursed land (5:29). His name is Noah, the one who has “found favor in the sight of the LORD” (6:8), righteous and blameless (v. 9). Noah is deemed the new Adam (5:28; see 2:7); he holds the promise of creation’s restoration.

Accompanying God’s resolve to “destroy *all* flesh,” life that is well on its way to destroying itself, is God’s decision to save Noah and his family in order to save life in *all* its variety. Enter the ark, which will preserve creation’s biodiversity as the floodwaters rise to engulf a world already engulfed by violence. The flood is described in Genesis as creation’s reversion to its watery origins: the separation between the waters above and the waters below collapses (compare 7:11 with 1:2, 6–8). Amid the surge of chaos, Noah, his family, and the animals housed in the ark ride out the storm until the earth is purged, cleansed for a new creation.

Of all the human characters in the book of Genesis, Noah fulfills most fully the divine command to have “dominion” over creation, and he does so by implementing the first endangered species act! In Noah, creation begins again.

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## **The Cosmic Covenant**

The covenant of Genesis 9:8–17 formalizes God’s cosmic restoration. Preceding the covenant formulation in this text is God’s change of heart toward creation, particularly toward humanity. On Noah’s burnt offerings, God solemnly promises to “never again curse the ground because of humankind” (8:21a; cf. 3:17; 4:10–12), despite the fact that the human heart remains “evil” (8:21b). For all its totalizing reach in purging the world of violence, the flood in God’s eyes has not changed this intractable feature of the human condition. Humans remain inescapably caught in their tendency toward evil, God realizes.

Indeed, it is this very realization that prompted the flood in the first place (6:5). In short, the human heart has not changed. What has changed is God's own heart! Noah's pleasing sacrifice prompts a change of heart, a heart bent toward mercy and forbearance. Following God's declaration in 8:21 is a poetic testimony of the movement of the seasons, the alternation of day and night, of planting and harvest, cold and heat. These natural regularities can be counted on to ensure the earth's sustainability. They have become testimony to God's resolve to "never again" destroy creation.

God's promise sets the stage for the covenant that follows in the next chapter, which opens with God's primordial blessing given to Noah and his family to replenish the earth (9:1; see 1:28). But something new is introduced: whereas the world of Genesis 1 assumed a vegetarian diet (see 1:29–30), God now allows for the eating of meat (9:2–3). It is God's concession to humankind's violent nature, its "evil heart." But such an allowance is not without a restriction: meat must be eaten without its blood, for blood indicates life (v. 4). And while animal killing is restrictively allowed, the shedding of human blood is expressly forbidden (v. 6a). The reason behind the prohibition of human-on-human violence is lodged in humanity's primordial genesis: every human being is created in God's image (v. 6b; cf. 1:26–28).

God's concession and accompanying restrictions regarding human life and conduct in this post-flood world leads to God's greatest restriction, a self-restriction. In Genesis 9:8–17, God promises to "never again" destroy "all flesh," indeed the earth itself, by the flood. Different from typical covenants or contractual agreements in the ancient world, the covenant stipulation is an unconditional promise, a unilateral divine decree that serves to limit God's options toward the world. Destruction is now ruled out. God's covenant with Noah amounts to a self-restraining order.

Moreover, this covenant is not limited to Noah and his family but includes all the former occupants of the ark, that is, "all flesh." God's covenant with Noah, the first covenant of the Bible, is a truly cosmic covenant, and the guarantee of its enforcement is signaled by the rainbow, the public—indeed cosmic—"sign" of God's own disarmament for future generations. The "rainbow" is in the eyes of the biblical author associated with the bow, a weapon of war. Now the bow is hung in the clouds, and when God sees it, God will "remember" the covenant made on that primordial day (9:15). For

God, remembrance is not a matter of recollection, as if God could ever forget or grow senile. Here, the Hebrew word for “remember” comes closer to the meaning of “enact” or “fulfill” in this context. The sign of the bow is a testimony that God has forever set aside the option of destruction as a way of dealing with creation. By hanging up the bow, God becomes freely bound and committed to the welfare of creation. And so should we.

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### **Spiritual Practice**

Find a place, perhaps a nearby park or simply a grove of trees, in which you can hear the sounds of birds. Early morning is the best time. Note the different sounds you hear. Silently thank God that nature continues to thrive, even right outside your home.

### **Questions for Reflection**

Has the story of Noah’s flood and its aftermath changed your view of God? What kind of God would have a “change of heart”?

Does God’s covenant with Noah mean that God would never let our planet be destroyed by human hands or that God would not have a hand in our planet’s destruction if it came to that?

What implications does God’s covenant with Noah have in the face of our mounting degradation of the earth? Is there a new “flood” that threatens to damage the earth?