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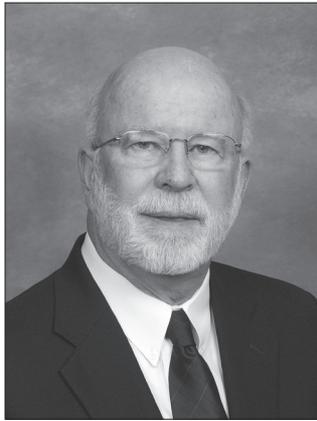
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Editor's Note: Dr. Skillen's essay is part of a book project, tentatively titled *God's Sabbath with Creation*, exploring (1) the meaning of our creaturely responsibilities in relation to the progressive development of the biblical covenants and (2) the relation of this age to the coming age—creation and eschatology.

A New Covenant God Will Make¹



by James W. Skillen

Israel and the Covenants

In Jeremiah we read, “The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31). How does that divine promise relate to the original covenant God made with Israel? And if Jesus is the embodiment of that new covenant, as Christians believe, how is it that he fulfills God’s promise to “the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”?

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In this essay I argue that God’s covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David build on one another in a progressive revelatory way that anticipates the new covenant promised in Jeremiah. This progression is different from imagining that each of those covenants displaced or replaced the one preceding it, and it is different from saying that the new covenant in Christ Jesus displaces all earlier covenants, putting them in the past tense from the moment of his resurrection. My thesis is that all of the earlier covenants, including God’s covenant with Israel, continue even now to bear witness to, and anticipate the fulfillment of, the new covenant God promised to make *with Israel and Judah*, the covenant that the apostles proclaim has been revealed in Jesus Christ. To understand this point, we need to recognize that from our present temporal point of view, God’s new covenant promises have not yet been entirely fulfilled. Messiah Jesus has come, but he has not yet returned. God’s kingdom has not yet been fully established. With the new covenant that God promised through Jeremiah, no one would any longer need to teach neighbors to know the Lord because “they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:34). That promise also has not yet been realized. Thus, we need to look again at how the new covenant is fulfilling the earlier covenants.

God’s covenants with Abraham on through to David had the character of God’s pledged troth, which entailed many promises that would be fulfilled in the future, along the way. Think, for example, of God’s covenant with Abraham that included the promise that through his seed all nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).

And that was before Abraham had even one heir. Moreover, the same promise was repeated to Isaac and Jacob. There is a great mystery here, yet the pattern of promise and anticipated fulfillment is clear. The covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob looked ahead to how and when God would fulfill promises to them. We also know from the prophets that many of God's promises, which entailed curses as well as blessings, have been fulfilled while many others have not yet come to pass. That is why the questions that tend to arise in almost every discussion of God's covenants, old and new, tend to focus on the timing and the meaning of their fulfillment. For example, God promised to establish David's throne forever and to restore Israel and Judah to right standing with God. Yet it does not appear today that a son of David sits on a throne of Israel or that Israel and Judah have been fully restored to righteousness before God.

If we are to believe what is written in the Old and New Testaments, therefore, we must still struggle with the question of when and how God fulfilled, is fulfilling, and will fulfill the covenant promises to Israel. And if Jesus is the promised Messiah, through whom God is establishing the new covenant, how does (how will) that new covenant reach fulfillment? Recall the final conversation that the risen Jesus had with his disciples before ascending into heaven (Acts 1:1-8). They asked him, "Is *now* the time, Lord, when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus did not reject their question as irrelevant to his mission. He told them that it was not for them to know the times and dates God sets but that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8). The disciples' question to Jesus is still awaiting a final answer. The dates of fulfillment are for God to decide. So again we ask, how are God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David related to Jesus?

Ben Witherington draws together, in the following way, several of the questions we've been rais-

ing. When Paul says in Romans 9:6 that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel," he

does not speak of a 'new Israel,' nor does he speak of the *replacement* of one Israel by another here. His argument is about the way the one true people of God have developed through history. He does, however, redefine who the people of God are, countering both popular Jewish notions about the claim Jews had on God because of their physical descent..., but at the same time countering attitudes that some Gentile Roman Christians seem to have had that suggested that Gentiles had replaced Jews as God's chosen people (11:19).²

If we follow Witherington's reading of Paul, where will it lead us? How does Paul understand the relation of Israel to Christ and his

disciples? How can God remain faithful to Israel and at the same time do something so new, so final and climactic, that it redefines the people of God?

Creation, Election, and Covenant Promises

To get our bearings, look with me at the Bible's opening chapters together with the openings of John's Gospel, Hebrews, and Colossians. For we cannot grasp the meaning of God's covenant with Israel and its relation to the revelation of Christ Jesus apart from God's creation purposes. According to the biblical witness, all things have been created by God through and for the Son of God, who became flesh in Jesus Christ. All things hold together in him (John 1:1-4; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3). God's creation order and purposes stand at the foundation of all the judgment-redemption covenants of the Old Testament and the New. "Part of the point of covenant renewal," writes N.T. Wright in reference to Paul's letters, "is that this was God's intended way of renewing creation itself; this is the larger framework of thought within which Paul is operating."³

In the Genesis account of creation we can recognize an originating covenant⁴ in the sense that it is God's bond with the creation, including the

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terms of God's commission of the human generations to serve as the stewards, rulers, prophets, and priests of creation. In it, humans are appointed to love and walk with God throughout their generations, exercising the responsibilities God has given them. The orientation of their lives and the whole creation is toward the praise of God, whose sabbath blessing will be their inheritance when all has been fulfilled in righteousness (see Heb. 4:1-12). That order of creation still stands and bears witness to the creator God. This is true even though human disobedience has alienated the human generations from God and subjected them to the curse of death. Yet God did not immediately carry out the full penalty of death (Gen. 3) that would cut off the continuation of the generations of humankind. Instead, God mercifully upholds the human generations in order to fulfill the creation purposes (Gen. 3:21-24), and the forthcoming judgment-and-redemption covenants have everything to do with that fulfillment.

The great flood-judgment (Gen. 6-8) nearly accomplished God's curse of death on unrighteous humanity, but in the act of saving the righteous man Noah (a second Adam), God establishes a creation-renewal covenant with blessings and promises for the continuation of humankind's earthly stewardship and the creation's continued fruitfulness (Gen. 9:8-17). God's election of Noah and his family makes possible a fresh start in the exercise of human responsibility in accord with the original creation covenant (Gen. 9:1-7). This covenant again opens the way for the human generation to anticipate fulfillment in God's consummation of creation. The Noachian covenant did not displace or replace the creation order but builds on it and takes place within it. We also see that the disobedience of Adam has not yet been eradicated from humankind, and the generations of Noah soon show themselves to be as unfaithful to God as the earlier generations were.

In God's covenants with Abram/Abraham, we see the next historical "calling out" (election) of a representative from among the nations, but this time it does not go hand in hand with the destruction of all others, as when God saved only Noah. God's purpose in electing Abram is again to restore a righteous humanity—a great nation—that will

hear and trust and follow God and be the channel of God's blessing to all nations on earth (Gen. 12:1-3; Ps. 47).⁵ God's election of Abraham forces the next question: what now comes of God's earlier promises to Noah for all of humanity, including those not in the line of Abraham? Clearly, Abraham is a son of Noah, not a replacement for Noah in the sense that the Abrahamic covenant abrogates the Noachian covenant. To the contrary, God's covenant with Abraham builds on the Noachian covenant and will unfold within the same creation order (see Is. 54:9-10). And part of what this means is that through Abraham's seed, all nations will be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

From the seed of Abraham, only Isaac is elected for God's covenantal line, but that does not mean God's covenant with Abraham is abrogated when Isaac is born or that all who are not of Isaac are damned for all eternity. Ishmael, too, is protected and blessed by God (Gen. 21:8-21). Then, from the seed of Isaac only Jacob (Israel) is chosen. Yet that does not mean the elimination of Esau from God's purposes for Israel and the nations. Nor does it mean that God's covenant with Isaac is superseded when Jacob is elected. God's blessing of Jacob confirms as valid God's faithfulness to Isaac and Abraham. All too soon the children of Israel find themselves enslaved in Egypt, and when God liberates them from captivity, he sets them up as a nation whose covenant elaborates the true way of life for the redeemed. The children of Israel are to shine like a light for all nations; they are to show what righteous humanity ought to be. God's covenant with Israel is a further expansion and elaboration of the meaning of God's creation purposes, God's covenant with Noah, and God's promises to Abraham and Isaac. As Wright puts it,

Israel is to be God's royal nation of holy priests, chosen out of the world but also chosen for the sake of the world. Israel is to be the light of the world: the nations will see in Israel what it means to be truly human and, hence, who the true God is. For this purpose, Israel is given Torah.⁶

God does this not as a reward for the superior character and worthy deeds of Israel but to reveal God's faithfulness, righteousness, redeeming love, and glory (see Gen. 14:4; 15:1-21; 19:3-6; Deut.

9:1-6; Jer. 16:14-21; Ps. 106:6-12; 115:1).

These historically revelatory covenants do not answer all the questions we might ask about God's final, eschatological disposition of every individual person. The election of Jacob and not Esau does not imply that every child of Esau is bound for hell for all eternity and that every child of Jacob is saved for eternity. That is not what this covenantal history is all about. God's election of Abraham does not imply that every person outside Abraham's bloodline is condemned to inherit God's disfavor for all eternity. Stanley Stowers offers a helpful comment in this regard:

Paul's point [in Romans 9] is not that Ishmael and Esau were damned. They were not. Rather, Isaac and Jacob were made instruments 'so that God's purpose of election might continue' (9:11).... Thus chapter 9 tells us that one cannot find membership in a lineage by works. Rather, God decides on the lines of descent, and membership in the lineage comes by birth.⁷

There is much about God's election of covenant partners that remains a mystery to us. Yet the Scriptures are clear that God's election of Israel had in view other nations, the whole creation, and God's glory above all (see, for example, Is. 34-35 and Jer. 46-51).

In the wilderness after the Exodus and in the promised land, Israel showed that despite God's special covenant with them, they too continued in the line of sinful Adam and Noah. Part of the Sinai covenant is God's promised blessings and curses of the chosen people, depending on how they responded to God's will for them (Ex. Lev. 26:1-46; Josh. 23:14-16; Ps. 50; 78; Is. 1:27-28; Jer. 16:10-15; 17:5-8). After God's judgment of Israel by the Assyrians, only Judah and Benjamin were spared for a time. In other words, even before the exile of Judah, not all of Israel continued as "Israel"; God kept only Judah and Benjamin in the land. Judah was not all of Israel, nor was Israel all of humanity, but each was chosen for the sake of God's judging,

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saving, and consummation of creation to reveal the glory of God. Jews as a people of common descent from Israel continue to bear witness to God's special covenant with Israel (as Paul emphasizes in Romans 9:4-5). God's covenant with Israel has not been set aside, even with the curses carried out on them; God's judgments of disobedience are inherent in the terms of the covenant.

The New Covenant is the Eschatological Covenant

Again and again, God's faithfulness to the covenants with Abraham on through Israel at Sinai is on display in the cutting off of some and the saving of a remnant in fulfillment of God's promises. Covenant history unfolds historically

under God's protection and judgment, under God's blessings and curses, under the Lord of heaven and earth who is enthroned above. That is why God's covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob point in promise and hope to a consummation of creation beyond this age and not limited to certain future events in this age (see for example Is. 54-58). God's covenant with Israel continues to stand in testimony to that which God has been doing and will do in fulfillment of it. That covenant stands as an anticipatory witness to the new covenant that God will make with the houses of Israel and Judah.

The preview of that consummation is seen throughout the Scripture. In a dream, Jacob caught a glimpse of the divine throne room (Gen. 28:10-22). When God met with Moses, the glory of the Lord was so great that Moses was not allowed to see God's face (Ex. 33:12-23), and thereafter Moses had to wear a veil in the presence of the people because his own face was so radiant (Ex. 34:29-35). Even though God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land, God did not allow Moses to enter the land. Moses saw it only from a distance (Deut. 32:48-52). But what he saw and had come to expect of God was more than what the earthly promised land could ever offer (Heb. 3:1-6).⁸ Even in building the temple, which David was not allowed to build, Solomon was aware that

it could not truly contain God: “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you [Lord]. How much less this temple I have built” (I Kgs. 8:27). When the Lord blessed Solomon and promised to “establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, ‘you shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel’” (I Kgs. 9:5), we again hear the promise of an eternity. But within several generations the kings of both Israel and Judah are destroyed, and Israel and then Judah are driven into exile. The reason for God’s judgment against Israel was offered in God’s very pledge to Solomon: “But if you or your sons turn away from me and do not observe the commandments and decrees I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name” (I Kgs. 9:6-7).

Nonetheless, God’s promise to restore a remnant and to establish David’s kingdom forever still rings out from the Psalms and the Prophets. God’s ways are not our ways, and they reach beyond the confines of our earthly generations and sense of timing. It is not for us to know “the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). The future king that Solomon is to anticipate will rule forever and will be more than any human king could ever be: “He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.... He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him” (Ps. 72:5, 8, 11). Isaiah, called by God to announce judgment on Israel, also holds out the vision and hope of an heir of David who will save his people: “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (Is. 9:7). In the midst of Jeremiah’s prophecies of judgment on the nations, including Judah and Jerusalem, the Lord swears on his “covenant with creation” (Jer. 33:20), “I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. ‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s

line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: the Lord Our Righteousness” (Jer. 33:14-16). Just as God assured Abraham and Sarah, who were well past the childbearing age, that they would have a son (Gen. 18:10-14), so God can see through and beyond the desolation of Israel and the destruction of throne and temple all the way to the fulfillment of covenant promises made long ago to those chosen from among the nations.

It is abundantly clear from the New Testament witness that God’s *covenant* in Christ is the *new covenant* prophesied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Yet it is equally clear that the new covenant builds on and fulfills the earlier ones; it does not discard them at historical points in this age and leave them in the past as no longer valid. Even after the coming of Jesus and his death and resurrection, the end has not yet come. Paul and the other apostles of Christ Jesus—just like Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—saw with eyes of faith something that is still not yet, something that in its fullness transcends the time and scope of both genealogical and historical possibilities and expectations (see Heb. 11).

The revelation of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, the seed of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed, began with his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. But the culminating fullness of God’s new covenant has not yet been disclosed. Jesus has not yet returned. The eschatological fulfillment of the revelation of God’s glory is still something we anticipate by faith. And all the while, the testimony of God’s creation order, of the rainbow sign to Noah, of God’s covenant promises to Abraham, of God’s chosen people Israel, and of the promise that David’s throne will endure forever—the testimony of all of these—continues to bear testimony to God’s covenant faithfulness that is now reaching eschatological fulfillment in Christ Jesus, until all is fulfilled.

Endnotes

1. As this essay is part of a larger project of biblical interpretation still in progress. I welcome reader feedback—jwskillen@gmail.com.
2. Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the*

World (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 116.

3. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 303. See also Wright's "Adam, Israel and the Messiah," in N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 18-40.
4. See particularly Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 95; N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 21-39; William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984); and O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ and the Covenants* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1980).
5. To understand the meaning of God's covenants, it is necessary to grasp the generational and kinship character of the relation God establishes with figures such as Noah and Abraham. Hahn explains this kinship in systematic detail in his *Kinship by Covenant*.
6. N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 109.
7. Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 301.
8. Paul's contrast (in II Cor. 3:7-18) of the glory of the Sinai covenant reflected in Moses' face with the greater glory of the new covenant in Christ adds weight to our judgment here. See the interpretations of this passage by N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 175-92, and Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, 109-11.