3. Covenant

Not uncommon in traditional theology is the leap from the doctrines of creation and fall to the doctrine of Christ. While the biblical canon does not do this, the ancient creeds do. This move leaves out a chapter of the Story, underscoring the point made in the Introduction: even the best traditions are ministerial, not magisterial. They are a "resource" to faith, not its final "source," and therefore are subject to correction by a deeper reading of the Word. Thus the covenant with Israel is a not-to-be-forgotten chapter of the Christian Story.

"Covenant" includes more than the tale of God's bonding with a chosen people, Israel. God's Story is, throughout, covenantal: a covenant with creation itself, a covenant with Adam and Eve, the "new covenant in Christ." In this chapter the focus is on the election of Israel. But it also includes a prior bonding, a universal covenant that precedes this particular one with the Jewish people: the "covenant with Noah."

A covenant, berith, is a solemn promise to fulfill a declared purpose. Covenant is God's stubborn, unswerving commitment to the Shalom willed for the world. It is demand as well as gift. To whom much is given, much will be required. While no human act of obedience or disobedience can make or break covenants, consequences follow from our faithlessness — the judgment of God. Neither the rebellion of the world nor the disloyalty of a particular people can turn God aside from promises made. Yet imperatives come with the indicatives. Accountability to them takes place in the penultimate judgments of history and the ultimate reckonings of eternity.
The Covenant with Noah

We left the Story with the catastrophic word of judgment on the world’s No to the divine overture. Alienation is the result of a refused invitation. In the generations succeeding Adam and Eve

[The wickedness of humankind was great on the earth. (Gen. 6:5 NRSV)]

Why not terminate this failed experiment in life together?

The story of the flood is testimony to the rigor of God’s righteousness. But it is remembered as well, and more, as the first signal of the patience of God. The ark, as later New Testament writers viewed it, is a symbol of a grace that rescues, and thus a portent of a yet-to-be-baptized family of believers “saved through water” (1 Pet. 3:20). But the sign for which Noah is finally known is the “bow in the clouds” (Gen. 9:13). This “sign of the covenant” (Gen. 9:12) is a promise made that the Maker of heaven and earth will not abandon creation to its willful ways. God will not be put off the track toward the divine purpose by our waywardness. The Story will go forward.

In both Jewish and Christian theology, the “Noachic covenant” (“Noachite,” “Noahic”) has to do with the long-suffering God who will sustain creation even in its disobedience. Entailed in this gracious persistence is, as the sign of the rainbow suggests, the giving of just enough leading light for human beings to see their way into the future. Thus the covenant expectations regarding human behavior:

“Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.” (Gen. 9:6 NRSV)

To the human race comes the knowledge, after the fall, of life made sacrosanct by the relationship in which we are established by the divine image. Humans have everywhere intimations in “conscience” of this law of life together. The Noachic covenant, therefore, is God’s promise to protect the remnant of the image of God as capacity after the fall. We have the ability to discern and to follow haltingly the elemental rules of life together. Without that universal glimpse of the good, the human race would destroy itself.

Does the rainbow sign illumine something of the source of these moral mandates? Exponents of “natural theology” do not hesitate to say—Yes; our minds can know by rational argument the existence of God. They hold that the fall is not so shattering that reason cannot discern its Maker. More recently, other human capacities—moral, affective—are declared to be capable of discerning something of the reality of God, or ultimate reality.

Evidence for the extension of the Noachic covenant to include this (albeit limited) knowledge of God is ambiguous at best. The chapters in Genesis that follow the rainbow sign, and precede the next covenant act with Abraham, do suggest the human race’s awareness of its existence before God (Gen. 9:18–11:32). At the same time, the tower of Babel thrusts skyward, revealing humanity’s pretensions to divinity, “a tower with its top in the heavens…” (Gen. 11:4). And the sequel in which “the LORD confused the language of all the earth” (Gen. 11:9 NRSV) suggests the untrustworthiness of our claims to the natural knowledge of things divine or matters ultimate.

The Noachic covenant does carry with it promises of sustenance, with their corresponding modest sensibility of what we are made for, a “general (universal) revelation” of the elemental moral, intellectual, and spiritual conditions for human life. A grace of preservation enables the world to go forward toward its proper end, one that is destined to include the defining disclosures of “special revelation.” In the time and space outside of God’s particular deeds, a “common grace” is at work in both personal awarenesses and institutional regularities. In the latter instance, the structures of human life now, after the fall, become “orders of preservation” — the family, the state, the economic order that are necessary for sustaining human life. The rainbow sign of this preserving grace both illumines and embodies the beauty and order of the natural as well as the human world.

Providence

“Providence” is often the way Christians talk about the graces of the Noachic covenant. Providence, in this respect, is God’s universal care of a fallen world. The Maker of heaven and earth is also its Sustainer.

Sustenance in a fallen world means/support for the things that make for the continuation of the Story. In the most elementary terms, it is the conviction that “God takes care of God’s own.” God’s own is first and
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foremost the divine Purpose. God takes care of Shalom, protecting it from its enemies and encouraging it in its friends. Thus Providence is the power of the Purpose that runs through the world, the Spirit that “in everything... works for good” (Rom. 8:28 RSV).

As history is the workshop for “perfectly wise and loving ends” (General Assembly, Church of Scotland), the belief in Providence is a way of viewing the entirety of the Christian narrative. Time is in holy keeping.

Neither fate nor chance, neither the stars nor the cycles of nature and history, determine what shall be, but the implacable love of God moving toward its goal. Providence is not puppetry; we are free to be for that goal. But we are not free from its call and claim. As with creation and fall, so Providence rises out of the defining deeds of God, from the deliverance of Israel to the resurrection of Christ. Our understanding of divine governance comes out of Israel’s history with God, our covenant chapter, and its fulfillment in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. While we leap ahead of our Story for this direction, Providence at this point after the fall is witness to the power of God in the face of the most malignant of opposition. For the way in which a patient Providence establishes final dominion, we wait upon the climactic events of Easter and eschaton.

Providence can be seen in the processes of self and society, history and nature. It works to heal the scars of the destructive bolt of lightning that slashes a tree, it effects the same Shalom in the wounded body whose cells repair at the tender urging of this common grace, and its power is manifest in the mind cloven by hate that makes its way to health again. Providence can show a stern face when a nature ravished by pollutants strikes back through the inversion layer over the city, the chemically eroded food and water sources, the infertile fields, and the desolated timber ranges. The work of judgment comes to the self that has failed to learn the lesson “love or perish,” and to the society that has not listened to the prophetic call to let justice and righteousness reign and that therefore suffers from the “rod of my anger” (Isa. 10:5 RSV). In the history of nature and humanity there is a law of righteousness at work; when it is violated, the consequences are dire. We are met in judgment or buoyed up in grace by the Providence that “has brought down the monarchs from their thrones, but the humble have been lifted high” (Luke 1:52).

It is not only in the macrocosm of nature and history and in the boundaries set to the rebellion of the world that Providence does its work. There is also a tender and individuating care that numbers the hairs of our heads and marks the sparrow’s fall (Matt. 10:29-31). The eye of faith sees the hand of God laboring to shape our personal lives toward “wise and loving ends.” Indeed, the meanings to be found in this microcosm do not come easily. Providence struggles with “thrones and authorities” only too eager to fell the sparrow and bruise the head. Yet the light that comes from the central chapter of this Story, the knowledge that the powers of this fallen world do not have final charge of our destinies, illumines even those events whose darkness seems most impenetrable.

Toward the decisive act in this drama that gives us perspective on prologue, creation, and fall, we continue to move.

The Covenant with Israel

Covenant in biblical perspective is the stubborn, unswerving commitment to the Shalom God wills for the world. More than a general faithfulness to that purpose, it is a pledge to execute this intention through a particular people. We shall explore the living out of this compact in the deeds done, the word shared, and the vision disclosed in the life of a people and then in its chief prophet, priest, and king.

Why this people in this time and this place? We confront an enigma, the mystery of divine election, the sternest testing of the stoutest. The fertile crescent is such a place to carry on an experiment in faithfulness, located in a Mediterranean land bridge for marching armies, a prey of imperialisms and the pawn of political machinations. If an act of loyal seeing and serving is to be authentic, it must weather the worst of the world’s turmoil. And more than that, it must face the hatred evoked by that people’s seeing and saying what the world is made for.

Why Israel as the chosen people? Finally our speculations fade into silence, replaced by our thanksgiving that God also is a stubborn God who will not give up on us, and therefore enters this covenant to keep the vision before us.

Exodus and Law
The chosen people are freed from slavery. God leads Israel out of Egypt and into a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod. 12:37-14:31). The people of God taste the fruit of the promised land of freedom. Exodus becomes the pivot on which their history turns, and the event that makes them a visionary people.

The deliverance from Egypt is followed by a rhythm of promise and fulfillment in the history of Israel. The God of the exodus displays a “mighty arm” preserving this people — goading them into loyalty, protecting them from the assaults of enemies, giving portents and signs of Shalom. In these events, Israel perceives and records the divine initiative and steadfastness of God.

This covenant cannot be understood without real hope for its embodiment in time and space, and belief in the God whose presence in history makes these promises possible. But this action of God comes in judgment as well as promise, for the One who liberates also rebukes (Exod. 32:30-35). Time after time God calls the people to account for breach of the covenant. Yet, especially in the early layers of covenant tradition, there is the assurance that the deliverance from Egypt represents a kind of relationship that the people of God can always expect from the One who has chosen them. Moreover, the covenant sealed by the exodus action of God points not only forward to fulfillment but also back to the covenant of creation. God does not will to be God without this world, and confirms the originating bond in the covenants with Noah and Abraham. Exodus and its antecedents and derivations, therefore, announce the action of God to pursue determinately the divine Purpose on the very terrain of its resistance, by way of enactment, disclosure, and support of a people.

As part of this covenanting action God sets forth the laws of the new land, the precepts of Shalom: a decalogue of imperatives of the love of God and the love of the neighbor (Exod. 20:1-12). Its reciter is given the eye to see clearly what our failed human vision only dimly perceives. This law is realistic, one that presupposes the already present falleness of the world, couched as it is in its “thou shalt not’s.” Law is kept alive by priests who celebrate it and make atonement for those who break it and by sages who meditate on and expound it. Hence the ritual life of the temple that environs the Law, and the wisdom traditions of the people of God.

The Prophets

Most of all, the intended future, of which the promised land, its laws, rituals, and lore are at best foretastes, is given to certain seers of the ultimate Light. These prophets are forerunners of the claims of God on the people. But they tell what they see, and are therefore forerunners as well. They perceive the future of God with their inner eye, and declare its meaning to the chosen people in both word and deed. The prophet portrays in the most vivid colors and sharpest outline the goal of God — a world in which nature, humanity, and God dwell in peace and freedom.

The life together to which the seer points reaches into the animal world... "The wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall grow up together... and the cow and the bear shall be friends, and their young shall lie down together" (Isa. 11:6, 7). From there it spreads throughout the realm of nature. “The wilderness will become grassland, and grassland will be cheap as scrub. Then justice shall make its home in the wilderness, and righteousness dwell in the grassland; when righteousness shall yield peace and its fruit be quietness and confidence forever” (Isa. 32:15-17). And this healed nature itself shall reunite with its Maker. "Mountains and hills shall break into cries of joy, and all the trees of the wild shall clap their hands, pine-trees shall shoot up in place of camel-thorn, myrtles instead of briars, all this shall win the Lord a great name, imperishable, a sign for all time” (Isa. 55:12-13). The restoration of nature from its tyrannies and alienations means that God shall “create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17).

The new harmony reaches up to encompass humanity, reknitting the torn fabric of relationship between humanity and nature. “The infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the young child dance over the viper’s nest” (Isa. 11:8). “Then my people shall live in a tranquil country... [It] will be cool on the slopes of the forest then, and cities shall lie peaceful on the plain. Happy shall you be, sowing every man by the waterside and letting ox and ass run free” (Isa. 32:18-20). “I will rid the land of wild beasts, and men shall live in peace of mind on the open pastures and sleep in the woods. I will settle them in the neighborhood of my hill and send them rain in due season, blessed rain. Trees in the countryside shall bear their fruit, and the land shall yield its produce, and men shall live in peace of mind on their own soil” (Ezek. 34:24-27).

To the healing of nature and the relationships between nature and
humanity is added the healing of the nations. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift sword against nation nor ever again be trained for war" (Isa. 2:4). And enjoined to this harmony will be freedom for the oppressed and justice for the downtrodden. "Listen to this, you cows of Bashan ... you who oppress the poor, and crush the destitute" (Amos 4:1). "Shame on those who lie in bed planning evil and wicked deeds and then at daybreak they do them .... [T]hey cover the land and take it by force; if they want a house they seize it; they rob a man of his home and steal every man's inheritance" (Mic. 2:1-2).

The freedom and peace among people and nations becomes freedom and peace within persons as well. "Each man shall dwell under his own vine, under his own fig-tree, undisturbed" (Mic. 4:4). The prophets gather the images of the future together under a common theme: "I will make with them a covenant of shalom ... and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslave them. They shall no more be prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them; they shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide them plantations of shalom .... " (Ezek. 34:25, 27-29). "Then justice and righteousness will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be shalom, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever" (Isa. 32:16-17 RSV). The chosen people have been stewards of Shalom since. They have seen the light and felt the heat of the rays of the Not Yet, and in turn share that pressure and pain with humanity. Through them we see what we were made for.

Being what we are, the response to that presence in our midst has been one of hostility. We do not like to be reminded of our Purpose. Its disclosure shames us. So the message is identified with a messenger. This people of the vision have had humanity's hate heaped upon them. The roots of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism go deep into the soil of human sin. The resistance to the original Light finds yet another target in the holocaust history of the chosen people.

Where Does the Covenant Lead?

The clarity of Israel's vision of the purposes of God early posed certain enigmas to its people. If the Lord of history wills Shalom, then why do those who pursue it suffer and those who scorn it appear to prosper? The entreaties of the psalmist and the protests of Job, combined with assurances and hopes of the same that this will not finally be so. Interlaced with the struggle over the disparity between the claims of Deity and deeds of the wicked, there was a sense that for those who breached the covenant there were ways of making amends. The priestly tradition's rituals of atonement were at first conceived in ceremonial, and later in moral, terms. Joined by penitence to the offering, the sinner made a sacrifice to God. Repentance so executed reestablished the broken bond.

As the prophet lived with the vision and read the calamities of Israel in the light of it, the earlier questions of the suffering of innocents and the sins of the wicked were seen in a deeper dimension. Now it was perceived that "the heart is the most deceitful of all things, desperately sick; who can fathom it?" (Jer. 17:9). The division between the righteous and the wicked is transcended by the division between God and humanity as such. Why are the good in fact sinful? And how can the Shalom of God exist when the chosen are faithless and the day of the Lord promises to be "darkness, not light" (Amos 5:20)? How will the steadfast God, who calls all wickedness to accountability, fulfill the promise to bring the kingdom, when all its hoped-for citizenry set their faces so resolutely against that purpose and deserve a rebuke commensurate with their rebellion?

Answers to those questions are advanced in various late traditions of the Old Testament. Their common features are:

1. God can be counted on to keep the divine promise. Wickedness will be punished, righteousness will prevail.
2. The future will be the time of fulfillment.
3. Consummation will be universal in scope, covering all history and nature.

Within the agreement that God shall vindicate the divine purposes exists a diversity of expectation. The late prophetic tradition suggests an intrahistorical consummation, in which the poor and oppressed will be
vindicated and justice and peace will prevail. Yet the character of this fulfillment is so different from the way things now are, as for example in the transformation of nature ("the leopard shall lie down with the kid"), that it entails a qualitative rather than a quantitative leap, and thus a radical alternation of our world rather than a simple extension and perfection of what now is. Another strand of belief is much more stark in its declaration of discontinuity. For the apocalyptic tradition the world culminates in a catastrophe: a cleansed kingdom of righteousness replaces the old world.

In both the historical-transhistorical and the transcendent completions anticipated in the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions, there are the outlines for a figure who in some way facilitates the transformation. In the former case, a great prophet like Moses will lead the people out of slavery. In the latter, the hoped-for vindicator appears as the Son of Man, who will descend from heaven to settle accounts. A Messiah of mundane or supramundane qualities will fulfill God's purposes.

Another thread of Old Testament expectation appears: universal redemption must deal with the deeper problem of rebellion posed by the thwarting of God's intention by the "righteous" as well as the wicked. Universal fulfillment must take into account universal rebellion. A fundamental act of atonement will be part of consummation. Thus the messianic figure emerges as a "suffering servant." A rebellion so deep-going that the righteous and chosen also fall under judgment means that fulfillment must bear away radical sin. "On himself, he bore our suffering, our torments he carried, while we counted him smitten by God, struck down by disease and misery; but he was pierced for our transgressions, tortured for our iniquities; the chastisement he bore is health for us, and by his scourging we are healed. We are all strayed like sheep, each of us had his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6).

The dynamics within this chapter in the history of God's hope drive beyond themselves. The stage is set for the central act of the drama.¹

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