



God's Salvation in the Form of the Covenant

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Abstract: God's big plan for the world is revealed in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and the heart of God's mission is to bring salvation to humans in order to glorify his name in heaven and earth. The history recorded in Genesis is the history of God's salvation, and God chose to fulfill the salvation in the form of a covenant. Our God is God of the covenant. God made the covenants with Adam, Noah, and Abraham in Genesis, as well as with Moses and David. All these covenants imply the typology of Christ. God's promise and mission to the world in the beginning is finally accomplished in the covenant of Christ and will be completely fulfilled in his second coming.

Keywords: Salvation, Covenant, the Covenant with Abraham, Sacrifice, New Testament, History of Salvation

I. GOD'S MISSION FOR THE WORLD IN GENESIS

After God created Adam and Eve, he gave them a mission that applied to all humanity. "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth, and subdue it" (Gen 1:28 NIV). This is the mission of God for the whole world-fill the earth with God's image-bearers so that the universe will be filled with God's glory. God chose to make a covenant with Adam to achieve this mission. The covenant with Adam is



the covenant of works.¹ There are conditionalities and consequences in all the covenant of works, which manifests in the mutual relationship between God and men. If Adam obeys God and does not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they will enjoy the tree of life and have eternal life (Gen 3:22) so that God's mission in the world will eventually be fulfilled. If Adam does not obey God, then they will die and be separated from God. Unfortunately, Adam did not make the right choice, and God needed another covenant to bring salvation to complete his mission.

The promise in Genesis 3:15 is significant to the work of Christ, which implies that Jesus Christ will fulfill the covenant of works. This is "the first promise of Christ's incarnation in the imputation of redemption."² If Adam kept the covenant in the first place, humans would receive the blessing from the covenant, which is the eternal life. However, because of breaking the covenant, humanity received the punishment from the covenant. The seed of women is a typology of Christ, who will overcome all the curses in the covenant of works, including the broken

¹ This is still a debated classification. This term originated from Dudley Fenner and later in reformed theology. See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context*, The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub, 2009), 227–34. It's interesting that in this book, it is believed that the covenant of works is supported by Hosea 6:7, "As at/like Adam(אָדָם), they have broken the covenant." The problem is the preposition(אֶת or לְ like Adam or at Adam?) here can make mistakes in the process of transcription because of the similarity of these two prepositions. It can refer to the people Adam(like Adam) or the city Adam(at Adam). See T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 141–142. Therefore, the covenant in Hosea 6:7 does not necessarily have connection with Adam the man. However, we can still find lots of implications that God made a covenant with Adam in Genesis 2:16–17, 3:19, 22.

² This approach originated from Church Fathers (such as Augustine and Irenaeus) to reformers(such as John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger), later developed by John Owen, see the discussion by Ryan M McGraw, "'The Foundation of the Old Testament': John Owen on Genesis 3:15 as a Window into Reformed Orthodox Old Testament Exegesis," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10.1 (2016): 12.



relationship with humanity and God.¹

The covenant of works applies to all humanity because Adam is the head of humanity. Therefore, when Adam broke the covenant, all human beings violated it, and sin entered into the world by Adam (Rom 5:12-16). The last Adam, however, a life-giving spirit, has achieved the mission from heaven (1 Cor 15:45-48). Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of the covenant of works by his perfect deeds, so that Christ's righteousness can justify everyone in his covenant.² The goal of God's covenant is summarized in verses that declare, "I will be your God, and you will be my people" (Exo 19:5; Lev 26:12; Deut 29:13; 2 Sam 7:24; 1 Chr 17:22; Jer 30:22, 31:1, 33, 32:38; Eze 11:20, 36:28, 37:27; Hos 1:10; Zech 8:8, 13:9; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3). We can see the big picture of God's mission throughout the entire history of humankind. God created humanity in his image to glorify him all over the world. In the final chapter of history, all the people in Christ become God's people in the new heaven and the new earth, which will accomplish the mission of glorifying his name.

II. GOD'S SALVATION IN THE FORM OF COVENANT

The Nature of Covenant

What is a covenant? Why does God choose to bring his salvation in the form of the covenant? Why not make it a more relaxed way by saying a word, just like in

¹ See the interesting discussion about broken relationship between people, especially in the covenant of marriage. John E. Hartley, *Genesis (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series)*, Kindle edition.(Baker Books, 2012), location 1678.

² We will discuss the covenant of grace later, but here we can see the relationship of the covenant of works with Adam and Jesus. Jesus Christ has succeeded where Adam failed, which made the covenant of grace a reality. See R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right*, Reprint edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 159.



the creation? It is the nature of the covenants to reveal the attributes of God. The redemption also includes the element of the legislation, which is also appropriate for the form of a covenant.

First, the form of the covenant appears in Moses' time, such as treaties, oracles, and alliances, especially between Suzerain and Vassal.¹ Kline believes the whole of Deuteronomy is written as a suzerain treaty.² The most similar covenant is discovered in the Persian period.³ Therefore, the readers of Pentateuch should be familiar with the concept of covenant. I agree with Provan that exegetes should not interpret the Bible from the perspective of the modern world.⁴ However, we must understand the backgrounds in the time of Moses. The Israelites should have a better understanding of salvation in the form of the covenant, which also shows how God makes concessions to humanity. Therefore, God humbles himself by making covenants with humanity, which are later revealed in the incarnation of Christ (Phi 2:7).

Second, the covenant indicates a special relationship.⁵ God uses covenants to

¹ There are lots of parallels in ancient Hittite(Brown Age) contracts with the covenant in the Bible. See more similarity comparisons by Gary M. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 2nd ed., Writings from the Ancient World ; v. 7 (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1999).

² Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary*(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

³ Bill Goodman, "Covenant in the Persian Period: From Genesis to Chronicles," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42.5 (2018): 171–72. The comparison with Oracles and Covenants, especially in the biblical text, such as Jeremiah and Zephaniah's oracle, see Michael DeRoche, "Contra Creation, Covenant and Conquest," *Vetus Testamentum* 30.3 (1980): 280–90; Arvid S Kapelrud, "The Interpretation of Jeremiah 34: 18ff," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 7.22 (1982): 138–41.

⁴ See the comments of Provan's work by Rachel Krohn, "Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32.2 (2016): 391–92.

⁵ Most mundane covenants of the ANE indicate a special relationship, so is in the Bible. Some special relationship may not be revealed through a covenant, such as the narrative of Joseph, however, some argue



build a relationship with humanity, and sometimes with all living things (Gen 9:12). Similarly as in marriage, it is a covenant that identities the intimate relationship between a man and a woman. Paul also uses marriage as a parallel that refers to Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32). The ultimate goal of marriage as a covenant is to reveal the special relationship between God and his people.

Third, the covenant includes terms, signs, witnesses, blessings, and curses. The covenant of Adam has apparent blessings and curses in terms of life and death, and the sign of this covenant is the tree of life.¹ The covenant with Noah is expressed more clearly than the covenant of Adam, especially the sign of the covenant, the bow.² The word “covenant” (בְּרִית) first appears here directly from God (Gen 6:18). I will return to Abraham below. The Mosaic covenant has some parallels with the covenant of Noah.³ The Ten Commandments become the legal governance document in the covenant of Moses. As for David’s covenant, God promises to establish his line forever (Psa 89: 3,4). The political power of David on earth(the earthly king) is a pre-messianic prophecy for Christ the King.⁴ All

that the Joseph traditions are “embedded within the wider patriarchal and exodus narrative.” Thus, we can still treat the story of Joseph in a covenant background. See the discussion by Alastair G Hunter, “Joseph, Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis 37-50,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31.5 (2007): 167.

¹ This is debated as I mentioned before, see John Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, Old Testament Theology ; v. 1 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

² Rainbow is the sign of the covenant that God will not destroy earth again with water. See Laurence A Turner, “The Rainbow as the Sign of the Covenant in Genesis ix 11-13,” *Vetus Testamentum* 43.1 (1993): 119-24. However, some argue that the rainbow should regard as God's War Bow, See E J van Wolde, “One Bow or Another?: A Study of the Bow in Genesis 9:8-17,” *Vetus Testamentum* 63.1 (2013): 124-49.

³ See the specific comparison by Rolf Rendtorff, “‘Covenant’ as a Structuring Concept in Genesis and Exodus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108.3 (1989): 393.

⁴ See the discussion of the relationship between David's covenant and the work of the Messiah by Heinz Kruse, “David's Covenant,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35.2 (1985): 164.



these covenants point to God's salvation, which means the elements of these covenants have connections with the work of Christ.

The Relationship with Sacrifice and Covenant

Paul, reflecting on Jesus's ministry, indicates that Jesus condemned sin in flesh (Rom 8:3), which means humans can only be saved when they still have flesh. Therefore, God only makes a covenant with living things. This is the reason why the incarnation is a necessity to make the new covenant. "A covenant molds and maintains the identity of those who live within it—both the original mediators of the covenant and their descendants."¹ Christ has to become flesh so that he can sacrifice himself on the cross. In this way, Christ identifies himself as the mediators between humanity and God. All the covenants in the Bible accompany the act of sacrifice.²

Noah built an altar to offer up a sacrifice unto God just after God made a covenant with him (Gen 8:20). Peter connected Noah's covenant with the new covenant of Jesus by the sign of the covenant, baptism (1 Pet 3: 20,21). God also asked Abraham to offer sacrifices in order to make the covenant in Genesis 15:7-21.

Furthermore, God even ordered Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, and then God reaffirms the covenant with Abraham immediately (Gen 21:16-18). In

¹ Aaron T Hollander, "Covenant of All Flesh: Earth Community as Grounds for Biblical and Biological Identity," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 39.2 (2012): 124.

² Generally, in the ANE (as in Middle Eastern cultures today) sharing table with someone indicates being welcomed in the covenant as "family". The image of sharing table can also be discovered in the sacrificial system, which the hosting makes the connection between God and his people. The people become the family of God. Eucharist is the sacrificial meal, which means Christ brings us into the new covenant by offering himself as a sacrifice.



the covenant of Moses, the whole sacrifice system becomes perfect. After Moses, only the priest can offer a sacrifice to God, and this is tricky for the covenant of David.

David is the only king that is eligible to come to sacrifice to God (2 Sam 6:13,14). However, according to Mosaic law, one cannot be a king and a priest at the same time, clearly one cannot be in two tribes at the same time. Why does David then play the role of king and priest at the same time? The key is a critical prophecy in Zechariah 6:13, "It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two." There will be harmony between the king and the priest. Besides, David is also a prophet who prophesied a lot in the Bible. Therefore, David's covenant is crucial not only because of God's salvation plan, but also the first typology of Christ in terms of these three offices, the king, the prophet, and the priest.¹

III. Reading Covenant as Typology of Christ

The Covenant with Abraham

We have mentioned that all covenants point to Christ, and the covenant of Abraham is a great illustration. The Abrahamic covenant is also the covenant of circumcision, which will be the sign of the covenant between YHWH and Abraham (Genesis 17:11). It is also essential to recognize that God's oath in chapter 22

¹ Moses and Samuel also serve all three roles to some extent, however, they do not hold the official office of the king. Saul is the first king of Israel. See the discussion of threefold offices by Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Pbk. ed. of 1536 ed., Bibliotheca Calviniana (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HHMeeter Center for Calvin Studies, 1995).



belongs to Abraham's covenant in chapter 15 and chapter 17.¹ Therefore, understanding the sacrifice in chapter 15 and chapter 22 will help us to interpret the nature of the Abrahamic covenant.

First, the promise of the Abrahamic covenant is confined to his relationship with God.² The covenant of Adam and Noah are made with all living things, but the covenant of Abraham is only associated with his descendants. However, the covenant is still everlasting (Gen 17:7), just like the Noahic covenant, even though Abraham does not immediately inherit the promised land.³ The confined covenant indicates the line of Messiah, who will be the descendant of Abraham. "The Lord offered to identify himself with Abra[ha]m's progeny as well as to become the source of Abra[ha]m's identity."⁴ The circumcision, as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, also identifies who is and who is not in the covenant. "This covenant [the covenant of circumcision] supplies the basis for the distinction between Jew and Greek in the antithetical pair in Gal 3:28a."⁵ Paul also emphasizes the meaning of circumcision, not in the flesh, but the heart (Rom 2:29).

¹ See the exhaustive interpretation by T Desmond Alexander, "Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 8.25 (1983): 18. Alexander also argues that a sacrifice is an obligation to fulfill the covenant. As I mentioned above, every covenant in the Bible follows a sacrifice. Therefore, what should be focused on both the content and the action in Abrahamic covenant.

² At this point, the covenant is confined to Abraham and his descendants. But note how Paul define the descendant of Abraham later in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. The revelation of God is in a progress, just as the salvation was given to Israelites at the first place does not mean the salvation will not come to the Gentiles.

³ Moshé Anbar, "Genesis 15: A Conflation of Two Deuteronomic Narratives," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101.1 (1982): 48.

⁴ Martha L Rogers, "The Call of Abram: A Systems Theory Analysis," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 9.2 (1981): 121.

⁵ Jesus Christ completely "erases all distinctions and inequalities" in Gal 3:28. See Troy W Martin, "The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14) and the Situational Antithesis in Galatians 3:28," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122.1 (2003): 117.



“The physical ‘cutting’ was an indication of submission and commitment to the God of Abraham.”¹

Second, the sacrifice indicates the nature of the Abrahamic covenant. Why does God ask for a sacrifice for the covenant? Does Abraham become a qualified party of the covenant because he offers a sacrifice to God? It should be known that “[all] the sequence of events is done for God’s benefit.”² Throughout the narrative of Abraham, Moses also highlights that Abraham fails to express his faith (Gen 12:10, 17:17), even “put the promised seed in jeopardy.”³ God takes the initiative to make the covenant and the sacrifice in chapter 15 and chapter 22, so that we may understand that “salvation comes from the Lord” (Jon 2:9). “The animal cutting in Gen 15:9-10, 17 is designated a covenant ratification sacrifice.”⁴ The sacrifice also refers to salvation because “the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). Therefore, the sacrifice is a necessity of salvation, and salvation will be delivered in the form of the covenant.

Third, the Abrahamic covenant is also a typology of the covenant of Christ. The center of Genesis 22 is about the sacrifice, and the sacrifice of Isaac is a typology of Christ. Abraham is the first one in the Bible who has the concept of resurrection.

¹ Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch*, Kindle edition. (Moody Publishers, 2007), location 2464.

² John H. Walton, *Genesis from Biblical Text--to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary. From Biblical Text--to Contemporary Life, Kindle edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), location 10775.

³ The faith and doubt of Abraham should not explain as contradictory of his character, but to show that God does not make a covenant based on human’s merit. See T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 12.

⁴ Gerhard F Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 6.19 (1981): 70.



God has promised Abraham that his seed will be like the stars in heaven, but now God orders him to kill his only son, which will break God's promise. Abraham believes God cannot deny himself so that God must bring Isaac back to life after the sacrifice. Thus, Abraham said to his servants at the beginning that they (he and Isaac, plural, וְיִשְׁכָּחָה) will come back¹ (Gen 22:5).

God addresses multiple times about Abraham's "only son" (cf. 22:2,12), while Isaac is not the only biological son of Abraham. Besides, at the end of this story, Isaac has not died in the sacrifice, but a lamb takes his place. Abraham believes from the beginning that "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering" (cf. 22:8).

Abraham's faith is faith in Christ,² and he recognizes the work of Christ by experiencing the sacrifice of Isaac. The concept of resurrection, only son, redemptive offerings, and the substitution of the lamb, are all elements in one story indicative of the work of Christ. It is God's only son who offered up himself as a substitutional redemptive sacrifice to give us the hope of resurrection. "For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb 10:14). Jesus also confirms Abraham's understanding of the Messiah's work by saying, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (Joh 8:56).

The New Covenant

¹ Abraham believes "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (Rom 4:17). "Gives life to the dead" can refer to the sacrifice of Isaac because he believes God will bring Isaac back to life. "Calls into being things that were not" maybe point to the barren Sarah who can be pregnant under the promise of God.

² See Jesus's own reaffirmation in John 8:56.



The new covenant of Christ includes all the elements of the old covenant. The parties of the covenant consist of Christ and the people in Christ. Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice to fulfill the obligation of the covenant by his blood, which means this new covenant is for salvation. The sign of the new covenant is the sacrament. The baptism implies the circumcision of the heart, and the holy communion points to the fulfillment of the covenant—the great supper of God (Rev 19:17). Because of the perfect works of Christ, the blessings of the new covenant (eternal life) are given to us by God's grace. Jesus also takes the curse of the covenant that humans were supposed to take, which is the death and separation from God. (Matt 27:46) The obligation of the covenant requires faith and submission to Christ so that we can receive the new covenant. Those who break God's covenant will be cut off from his people, and those who keep the new covenant will have eternal life¹ (Jud 1:21).

The Fulfillment of the Covenant

God's covenant will be fulfilled when Jesus returns, which brings the new heaven and the new earth. The covenant of God is not only for humanity, but also for all life on earth.² The Adamic and Noahic covenants include every living thing,

¹ See the parallel in Abrahamic covenant, "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen 17:14). Do we lose our salvation? If the obligation of the new covenant is faith in Christ, then Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, assures us the eternal life. In this way, the Father and the Son both will keep us in the new covenant to the end. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (Joh 10:28-29).

² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 58. It seems that God's covenant aims not only all living things, but also the whole universe (Rev 21:1; Rom 8:2). God will make all things new. However, there is still a debate on a renewal world with dissolved world (2 Pet 3:12). Maybe the method of God's renewal is



and this reveals the scope of God's mission in terms of his glory. The covenants of Abraham, Moses, and David confine to a specific group of people, which indicates the depth of God's mission in terms of salvation. The new covenant of Christ, which "is established on better promises (Heb 8:6) ," fulfills the Old Covenant by his sacrifice once and for all in his first coming. The fulfillment of the New Covenant will ultimately be achieved in the second coming of Jesus. The fulfillment of God's mission for the world is manifested in the worship from "every nation, tribe, people and language" in the new heaven and new earth (Rev 7:9-12). The universe will also benefit from the fulfillment of the covenant, "for the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" (Rom 8:19-21). "The redemption of the cosmos will come with the redemption of humanity, and that by means of the Christ."¹

IV. CONCLUSION

The covenants of God are an organic process, which means these covenants in the Bible are encompassing. It seems that these covenants are different from each other, but the nature of these covenants is the same. The metaphor of mustard seed provides a better understanding of the covenant's nature (Luke 13:19). The mustard seed grew and became a tree, which indicates the tremendous changes in the kingdom of God. The seed and the tree do look different from each other, but the nature of the seed and the tree are the same. The covenant of God is like a

through fire. However, the new heaven and new earth is the fulfillment of God's ultimate mission.

¹ Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), 114.



seed, growing up organically from the beginning, and will have its fulfillment entirely at the end of human history. God's covenant with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David shows the progression of salvation history. Jesus fulfills all the covenants by establishing his new covenant with God's people, and all the world will be renewed by the covenant of Christ when he returns.

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