

Biblical Foundations of a Pre-Fall Covenant

By Zachary S. Maxcey

Do the Scriptures teach the existence of a covenant between God and Adam prior to the Great Fall? Many will answer this question negatively, arguing that *covenant* (בְּרִית, *bĕrîth*) appears nowhere in the creation account of Genesis 1-2. However, others argue that the Lord actually did forge a pre-Fall covenant with Adam in Eden. D.G. Barnhouse wrote, “We shall not understand Adam...if we do not comprehend that, before the fall, Adam was joined to God by a covenant which, when broken by sin, brought dread consequences upon all the race.”¹ However, many who do hold to a *pre-Fall covenant*² between God and Adam understand it to be a “covenant of works” in accordance with the covenantal system of Reformed Theology. For example, R.C. Sproul writes, “The original covenant between God and humankind was a covenant of works. In this covenant, God required perfect and total obedience to His rule. He promised eternal life as the blessing of obedience, but threatened mankind with death for disobeying God’s law.”³ In actuality, this “covenant of works” is a non-Scriptural theological deduction, which suffers from several systemic inaccuracies. Is there a way to acknowledge a covenant between the Lord and Adam prior to the Fall without conforming it to the theologically-deduced “covenant of works?” Indeed, there is. Although the Creation account admittedly does not employ the term “covenant” to describe Adam’s relationship with the Lord, there is strong Biblical evidence for a pre-Fall covenantal relationship without affirming Covenant Theology’s (CT) “covenant of works.”

It is readily conceded that the absence of the word *covenant* (בְּרִית, *bĕrîth*) in Genesis 1-2 constitutes a strong, but not insurmountable, objection to the existence of a pre-fall covenant. In actuality, it is not necessary that the word *bĕrîth* appear in the Genesis account in order for such a covenantal relationship to exist between God and Adam. Why? 2 Samuel 7:1-29 recounts the historical ratification of the Davidic Covenant, but the word *covenant* (בְּרִית, *bĕrîth*) appears nowhere in this particular biblical text. However, Psalm 89 clearly identifies God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 as a *covenant*! Just as the Davidic Covenant is identified as such by Biblical references external to 2 Samuel 7 (cf. Ps. 89:4ff), the pre-fall covenant is identified as a covenant by Hosea 6:7.

Although a great deal of controversy surrounds Hosea 6:7 due to its varied interpretations, the most natural sense of the verse *does* support the existence of a pre-fall covenant. At the center of this controversy lies the Hebrew word *kĕ’ādām*. This particular word is a composite of the word *ādām*, meaning *Adam*, *man*, or *mankind*, and the prefixed preposition *kĕ*, meaning *like*, *as*, or *according to*. Typically, *kĕ’ādām* is translated one of four ways: *at Adam*, *like men*, *like man / mankind*, or *like Adam*.

At Adam. The first way to translate Hosea 6:7 is “But they *at Adam* transgressed the covenant; *there* they dealt faithlessly with me.” This particular translation is based upon two specific pieces of information. First, the appearance of the adverb *there* (*šām*) leads many to believe that Adam refers to a place, not a person. Second, the Scriptures do make reference to a town by the name of Adam in Joshua 3:16. However, *at Adam* is in fact a fundamental mistranslation of *kĕ’ādām*. Why? First, although many attempt to translate *kĕ’ādām*⁴ locatively, the prefixed preposition *kĕ* is *not* translated *at*. Second, there is no recorded transgression of a covenant at this particular location.

¹Donald G. Barnhouse, *Exposition of Bible Doctrines: Taking the Epistle to the Romans as the Point of Departure*, Vol. 3, *God’s Grace, God’s Freedom, God’s Heirs: Romans 5:12-8:39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 53.

²As of a short time ago, I have preferred to refer to the covenantal relationship between God and Adam merely as the *pre-fall covenant*, instead of a Covenant of Creation (as this name and others are connected with Covenant Theology), and NCT proponents who do hold to a pre-fall covenant and use such a terms would immediately have to explain how their use of the term differs from that of a covenant theologian.

³Robert C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1992), 73.

⁴Some theologians even recommend that *kĕ’ādām* is a textual corruption and should be revised to *bĕ’ādām*, which can be translated locatively as *at Adam* with the prefixed preposition *bĕ*. However, this proposed textual emendation is largely based on viewing the adverb *there* (*šām*) as the interpretive fulcrum of the verse, which is ill-advised.

Like Men / Like Man / Like Mankind. None of these generic interpretations are viable for several reasons. Hosea 6:7 cannot be understood as comparing the people of Israel and her priests (who were bound to God through the Mosaic Covenant) to Gentiles (who are not in covenant with God); such a comparison makes *no* sense. The verse is best understood as comparing Israel and her priesthood to an individual or group of people who are bound to God by a covenant which they subsequently transgressed. Although *like men*, *like man*, and *like mankind* are not preferred translations of *kě'ādām*, each inevitably and logically leads one back to a pre-fall covenant with Adam, since all mankind in Adam broke God's covenant.

Like Adam. The best way to interpret Hosea 6:7 is: "But they *like Adam* transgressed the covenant; there they dealt treacherously with Me." This interpretation is the most natural rendering of Hosea 6:7, as the verse is comparing the Israelites and Levitical priests to Adam. The prophet Hosea is comparing Israel's transgression of the Mosaic Covenant to the willful, rebellious transgression of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Since all Israel would have been familiar with Adam's transgression, they would have readily recognized what the Lord was saying to them through the prophet Hosea who references the book of Genesis on numerous occasions (e.g. Hos 11:8, 12:1-14).

The first and strongest evidence for a pre-fall covenant is the type – antitype relationship between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15. Just as Christ is the Head of those represented under the New Covenant (i.e. the Elect of God), Adam was the head of those represented under a pre-fall covenant (i.e. all those who have ever lived, except for Christ). In other words, this representative or federal⁵ headship directly implies a covenantal relationship both in the case of Christ and in the case of Adam. The imputation of sin to all in Adam and the imputation of perfect righteousness to all in Christ are both strongly dependent upon a covenantal relationship. As a result, the denial of a pre-fall covenant between God and Adam strongly undermines the doctrine of imputation – a doctrine which is absolutely necessary for substitutionary atonement.

Secondly, when the Old Testament describes the ratification of the various biblical covenants it primarily uses one of two Hebrew constructions: to *make / cut* a covenant or to *establish* a covenant. The first construction, 'to *make* or *cut* a covenant', is used with regard to the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Gen 15:18), the Old Covenant (cf. Exod 34:10, 27; Deut 5:2-3, 29:14; Jer 31:32), the Davidic Covenant (cf. Ps 89:4), and the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31,33; 32:40; Ezek 34:25; 37:26). This particular construction appears when a covenant is being ratified for the *first* time. However, the second construction, 'to *establish* a covenant', is generally used when a previous covenant is amended, reconfirmed, or reestablished. For instance, when the Lord amends the *already-standing* Abrahamic Covenant by making physical circumcision its covenantal sign, He uses this particular Hebraic construction (Gen 17:7). This same phraseology also appears when God declares to Abraham that in the future He will reestablish this same covenant with Abraham's son, Isaac (Gen 17:21; Exod 6:4). This distinction is essential to understanding the nature of the Noahic Covenant, for when God ratifies His covenant with Noah, He repeatedly declares, "I *establish* My covenant with you" (cf. Gen 6:18, 9:9,11). ***The usage of this construction in Genesis 6-9 implies that God's covenant with Noah is an amendment, reconfirmation, or reestablishment of a previous covenant. In other words, the Noahic Covenant is a reestablishment of the pre-fall covenant which God forged with Adam.***⁶

Thirdly, the presence of many elements of a covenant in the Genesis 1-2 account also evinces that a pre-fall covenant existed between God and Adam. The structural elements of a covenant consist of the

⁵The word *federal* is actually derived from the Latin word *foedus*, which means *covenant*.

⁶This observation is further strengthened by the repeated parallels between Adam and Noah; Noah in essence is a *new* Adam. Just as Adam is the progenitor of the entire human race, Noah is the father of all those living after the flood. Both were given *similar* mandates to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28; 9:1-3). Just as Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden resulted in knowledge of his nakedness and the cursing of the entire human race, Noah's sin in his vineyard resulted in his nakedness and the cursing of his grandson, Canaan (Gen 3; 9:20-27). Many more parallels exist between Adam and Noah, but for the sake of brevity, they will not be addressed here.

following: a preamble, historical prologue, stipulations, depositing /regular reading of the treaty, witnesses, and blessings / curses.⁷ For example, Genesis 1:1 serves as the covenantal preamble, while the entire first chapter of Genesis functions as the historical prologue. The stipulations of the pre-fall covenant would consist of the following: 1) God's command for Adam to fill and rule over the earth (Gen 1:28), 2) God's command for Adam to cultivate and keep the garden of Eden (Gen 2:15), and finally 3) God's command for Adam to eat from every tree in the garden except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 2:16-17). God stands as not only the Lord but also *witness* of the pre-fall covenant. Niehaus even writes that even "the finished heavens and earth, subsequently [are] called to witness in prophetic literature (Dt. 4:26; 31:28; Isa 1:2; Ps 50:4)."⁸ Lastly, there are both blessings and curses associated with the Genesis 1-2 account. For example, Genesis 1:28 declares, "And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" However, Genesis 2:17 constitutes the curse of the pre-fall covenant: "but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, *for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.*"

There are additional proofs that a pre-fall covenant relationship existed between God and Adam. First, all temples in the Bible are connected to biblical covenants.⁹ The similarities between the Tabernacle, Temple, and the Garden of Eden indicate that the garden was "a non-architectural temple" where God uniquely manifested His presence.¹⁰ As a temple of God, the Garden of Eden must also be connected to a biblical covenant. Therefore, it logically follows that the Lord did make a pre-fall covenant with Adam. Secondly, all priests of the one true God, with the sole exception of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20), are connected to biblical covenants. The two verbs in Genesis 2:15 which describe Adam's responsibility in paradise (NASB: "to cultivate *it* and to keep *it*") are respectively used to describe "the duties of the Levites (see Num. 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26)" to serve God and "to guard the tabernacle."¹¹ In other words, Adam fulfilled a *priestly* role in Eden, and this fact further evinces that God forged a pre-fall covenant with him. Thirdly, as Niehaus states: "All Yahweh theophanies do in fact take place in covenantal contexts."¹² He continues: "Four pre-Sinai theophanies have clearly Sinaitic characteristics—that is, characteristics of storm theophany. Each of these takes place in a covenantal context. The first is the avian appearance of the Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2; the second is Yahweh God's storm theophany in Genesis 3:8; the third is Yahweh's presence at the Flood (especially as reflected in Ps 29); and the fourth is Abram's theophanic visions of Yahweh in Genesis 15."¹³

Those proponents of New Covenant Theology (NCT) who hold to a pre-fall covenant refuse to define such an arrangement as do Covenant Theologians. First, they readily assert that Adam could not have earned eternal life by obedience to the stipulations of the pre-fall covenant as taught by CT's "covenant of works." Adam would have simply had a perpetual existence in the Garden in the manner and

⁷Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant & Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1995), 144-5.

⁸Ibid., 146.

⁹All biblical temples are connected to biblical covenants. For instance, the Tabernacle is connected to the Old Covenant. The Temple in Jerusalem is connected to both the Old and Davidic Covenants. The Lord Jesus Christ (John 2:20-21; Col 2:9), who is the Ultimate Temple of God, His Church (cf. Eph 2:19-22), and the individual believer (1 Cor 6:19) are all temples which are connected to the New Covenant.

¹⁰G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical theology of the dwelling place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 383. For other works which describe the Garden of Eden as a temple of God, see also the following works: Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1980; reprint 1999; Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations For A Covenantal Worldview*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006; Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006.

¹¹Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 105.

¹²Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant & Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1995), 142.

¹³Ibid.

form that he was already experiencing. Secondly, there is *no* probationary period stated in Scripture in which Adam was required to successfully negotiate in order to be confirmed in his holiness, be glorified and gain eternal life.¹⁴ Finally, the oftentimes visceral reaction with which some NCT adherents respond against a pre-fall covenant appears largely to be a premature reaction against what appears to them to be a resurrection of a tenet of CT. Those in NCT who do hold to a pre-fall covenant believe such a reaction to be unfounded and unnecessary.

[<http://ptsco.org/showcase.htm>]

¹⁴As far as Adam was concerned, he had to maintain a perfect perpetual obedience to God's command in the pre-fall covenant. CT bases their so-called probationary period with Adam on how God dealt with the elect angels, namely, that after a certain probationary period, God confirmed the elect angels in their holiness, so that they would never sin. However, it must be noted that God does not deal with us as He does the angels. The fallen angels fell individually and cannot be redeemed. All mankind fell corporately in Adam, and the elect of humankind are corporately redeemed in Christ.