

“The Creation Account: A Divine Introduction to the Covenant Drama”

By Michael Beck

The first chapter of Genesis is one of the most sublime theological portrayals in all of Scripture. It is deeply regrettable that this luminescent starting point is sometimes dulled-over by the minutia of ongoing creation-debates. While these debates certainly have their place, they should never obscure the important point that the creation account, first and foremost, is an introduction to the great covenant drama of Scripture. The following consideration¹ of Adam’s prelapsarian state is offered to reinforce this vital point.

1. Adam’s Image and the Covenant Drama

To begin, it should be noted that when the opening account of Genesis is considered in its historical context, or “original dress”, it is found to be “clothed in the metaphor” of the Ancient Near Eastern monarch and his political-covenantal affairs regarding matters of allegiance, protection and land rights.² In this regard, Gen 1:26 portrays Adam as the vice-regent king who is made in the image and likeness of God. The terms *צֶלֶם* (image) and *דְּמוּת* (likeness) are used to describe Adam’s status. When considered in their original “environs”,³ these terms would have communicated (a) the sonship of a king in relation to his deity, and (b) the rulership of a king in relation to his realm.⁴ Indeed, these conceptions correspond well to the way that they are used in Genesis 1:26. Seen in terms of a horizontal dimension, *צֶלֶם* would capture mankind’s relationship to God as reflected in the world. On the other hand, *דְּמוּת* would indicate the vertical dimension—Adam’s relationship to God as a son.⁵

As both of the above concepts refer to a rightly ordered “relationship and spiritual fellowship with God”, they can be seen to indicate important covenantal dimensions concerning the

¹ The following argument is adapted from *Covenant Lord and Cultic Boundary: A Dialectic Inquiry Concerning Meredith Kline and the Reformed Two-Kingdom Project*, by M D L Beck (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, forthcoming).

² Sailhamer 1990:12; cf. Wenham 1987: xlv. These are all issues of deep concern for the newly formed Israel.

³ Stendebach 2003:389–390; Gentry and Wellum 2012:194, 200.

⁴ Gentry and Wellum 2012:192; cf. Waltke and Fredricks 2001:66; Walton 2011:199; Stendebach 2003:389–390.

⁵ Gentry and Wellum 2012:195; cf. Luke 3:38.

image.⁶ Indeed, this idea is strengthened by the fact that these terms were also used to speak of the covenant relationships between Ancient Near Eastern suzerain and vassal kings⁷ as well as between rulers and their deities.⁸ In this regard, it is important to note that in the opening scene of Scripture, when Adam is presented as one who is created in the image of God, and one who is charged to have dominion over creation, he is being presented as a covenant protagonist in the forthcoming drama.

2. Adam's Mandate and the Covenant Drama

In thinking further about Adam's task itself, again, ancient context proves helpful. The fact that mankind was to have absolute dominion *וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ* (over all the earth) suggests that this task, from the beginning, involved a concept known as “cosmic expansion”.⁹ In line with the way in which ancient kings would represent their deity while expanding their rule, God's dominion “was to be extended throughout the whole earth by his image bearers, as they themselves represented and reflected his glorious presence”.¹⁰

Further, we know from Genesis 1:27, that an important part of this spread and dominion involved the fruitful multiplication of God's image through childbearing. This is “the means by which the commission and goal” of 1:28 is to be put into action.¹¹ The commands to *פְּרוּ* (be fruitful), *רבו* (multiply) and *מלאו* (fill) all flow directly from the creation of male and female, along with the benediction that arises from the first verb (*ברך*) in 1:28. This opening verb communicates God's endowment upon mankind's specific capacity to replicate the image.¹² This concept, in turn, yields the beginning moment of a major theme in Scripture.¹³ As Sailhamer comments, “already the fulfilment of the blessing is tied to man's ‘seed’ and the notion of ‘life’—two themes that will later dominate the narratives of the Book of Genesis”.¹⁴

3. Adam's Telos and the Covenant Drama

⁶ Gentry and Wellum 2012:202.

⁷ Ibid., 194–195.

⁸ Gentry and Wellum 2015:77.

⁹ Beale 2004:96, 104, 107.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹ Ibid., 95–96.

¹² Harris 2006.

¹³ cf. Waltke and Fredricks 2001:46–54.

¹⁴ Sailhamer 1990:38.

All the key elements of the ensuing drama, including the introduction to a serpentine antagonist, the moment of conflict (and apparent defeat), as well as the redemptive resolution of Genesis 3:15, are all only properly grasped in light of these covenantal dimensions in the Genesis prologue. Even so, a critically important element of any story concerns its ending and goal. The opening scene therefore appropriately moves toward a focus on the intended Sabbath-destiny of mankind.

With the completion of God's work, comes the final part of the initial pericope in Genesis 2:1–3.¹⁵ The world-stage is complete. The mandate is made clear. Next, is the culminative moment; the one who is imaged himself enters into rest. A moment which the original audience would, “without hesitation”, have perceived in terms of “a temple text” wherein the seventh day was regarded as the most important.¹⁶ In this regard, the term שָׁבַת is seen to present an important relationship with נֹחַ, which speaks of “entering a position of safety, security or stability”.¹⁷ Specifically, the verb שָׁבַת (rest) describes a transition into the “new state” of נֹחַ, which “results when a crisis has been resolved or when stability has been achieved”.¹⁸ This is relevant because the original audience would have known that when a deity is said to rest in his temple it meant that he was “mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role” of rulership.¹⁹

Viewed in light of the above, Genesis 2:1–3 reveals that, by entering the seventh day, God had not only completed the task of creation, but had also been enthroned in his completed

¹⁵ While the literary sequence in the presentation of the seventh day sets it apart from the previous days, this is not a sufficient reason to see a break in the pericope (Wenham 1987:34). The passage builds on what went before. The waw conjunction at the beginning of 2:1 clearly links the account with the preceding verses. Genesis 2:3 also reinforces that the preceding verses, from chapter 2 onwards, should in fact be regarded as the final part of the preceding chapter. This is because the perfect conjugation of the verb form בָּרָא corresponds to its use in the opening verse of Genesis, thus forming an inclusio and bringing a proper end to the first account. This is even further cemented by the close of its greater chiastic structure. In the order of Genesis 1:1, the term בָּרָא (create) is used before the term אֱלֹהִים (God). This is then followed by הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ (the heavens and the earth). However, it can be observed that Genesis 2:1–3 reverses this the order. Genesis 2:1 begins with הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ (the heavens and the earth). This is followed by the use of אֱלֹהִים (God) in 2:2. Finally, in 2:3, the same verbal form of בָּרָא again appears. In this echo and balance, the literary device brings the greater passage to a definite close (Wenham 1987:7, 36; Brayford 2007:226). The state of being תֹּהוּ וָבֹהוּ (without form and void) has now been completely replaced with a form and fullness (Waltke and Fredricks 2001:57). Sabbath rest is thereby shown to lie at the culmination of this completed state.

¹⁶ Walton 2009:71.

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., 74.

cosmos-temple.²⁰ The Sabbath account is therefore no mere etiological explanation of the later human practice. Instead, it shows the Sabbath to be the very “goal of creation” itself.²¹ Forming an interplay with man’s imaging of God, this day is to be seen as a “summons” to image “the pattern of labor and rest of the King”.²² Imaging God, Adam would need to work in order to enter into the eschatological state (the Sabbath). Further, by God’s own entrance into a state of Sabbath enthronement, he shows that a glorious and restful *telos* awaits humanity upon the completion of their task. Here, the greater “the significance of the imago Dei” and the “covenantal commission with which Adam was entrusted” is most clearly revealed: “namely, to enter God’s everlasting Sabbath with the whole creation in his train.”²³ To this end, the tree of life stood as a sacramental reminder of this final eschatological goal.²⁴

4. Adam’s Union and the Covenant Drama

As the story moves forward, Eden does indeed show itself to be the “place of divine decrees”,²⁵ that is, the place where Adam received his commands from God and then himself issued them (Gen 2:15, 19–20). The previously developed concept of the image of God in man is here further confirmed and reflected. Adam is presented as a “king-priest” who is in liturgical and covenantal relationship with God.²⁶ Of course, the task was not given to Adam alone. God’s presentation of Eve to Adam serves as the focal point of Genesis 2.²⁷ There, the covenantal union of the first man and the first women is shown to be the proper means by which the mandate of the previous chapter should be carried out. However, this relationship is not only introduced as a practical idea. It is intended to offer yet another confirmation of the centrality the covenant in relation to the drama of Scripture.

²⁰ Walton 2009:162.

²¹ Walton 2011:203, 223.

²² Waltke and Fredricks 2001:67–68.

²³ Waltke and Fredricks 2011b:397.

²⁴ Considering the above, it is especially significant to note that, as the eternal God takes up his rest, the day does not end with the typical refrain וַיְהִי עֶרְבַּ וַיְהִי בֹקֶר (and there was evening, and there was morning). Not only does this further mark the uniqueness of the day, but it suggests that the substance of the state entered into is unending. God’s entrance into Sabbath rest should therefore be seen to inform the greater eschatological outlook of the Pentateuch itself (Sailhamer 1990:12,39; Waltke and Fredricks 2001:68).

²⁵ Gentry and Wellum 2012:212.

²⁶ Ibid., 215. The above also anticipates the later temple mount and city, as “the place from which God rules” by means of his own appointed theocratic king (Gentry and Wellum 2012:212).

²⁷ Gladd 2019:20–21.

The covenantal arrangement between Adam and Eve alluded to nothing less than their own consummated Sabbath-*telos*.²⁸ As seen in the previous section, Genesis 1 shows that God created (ברא) the heavens and the earth. As is borne out by the account in Genesis 1 itself, the term ברא suggests a “creation by division”.²⁹ The implication of this is that, just as surely, creation awaits a time when its aspects of division are entirely removed. Put another way, though the cosmos is created both good and perfect, it yet awaits an important moment of union and completion.³⁰

In light of the above, the presentation of Eve has significance in that it was the first creation act to be followed by union. As a microcosm of the created order, this anticipated the final eschatological consummation of the seventh day.³¹ As Gladd notes, “Genesis 1–2 looks forward to the very end of history, when heaven and earth will be joined together”.³² As part of the Genesis introduction, the concept of covenant is therefore again highlighted to remind of the final eschatological reality of life in the consummated creation.

Conclusion

The above has focused on Adam in his prelapsarian state. Of course, the failure of Adam would impact everything. All would be lost were it not for God’s unspeakable mercy first revealed in the protoevangelium (Gen 3:15). Even so, it is the Genesis prologue that provides the necessary context for understanding this mercy. In that regard, the above has sought to show that this prologue should be read as a carefully arranged “literary composition” that is uniquely designed to introduce the central concern of the Pentateuch³³—to instruct a covenant people concerning the salvation that God had provided for them.³⁴ Put more simply, the opening of Genesis should be read by the church as a divine prologue to a great covenant drama that finds its apex in Christ.

Works Cited:

²⁸ Gen 2:21–23; Mal 2:14, Prov 2:17; cf. Jeon 1999:204.

²⁹ Caughey and Van Pelt 2020.

³⁰ Gladd 2019:20.

³¹ Caughey and Van Pelt 2020.

³² Gladd 2019:20.

³³ Wenham 1987:9–10; cf. Sailhamer 1990:12.

³⁴ Waltke 2001:78.

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