

## "COVENANT" AS A STRUCTURING CONCEPT IN GENESIS AND EXODUS

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Old Testament scholarship is on the move. This is, of course, a truism. But I feel it necessary to emphasize the experimental character of much of what we are doing at the moment. In German scholarship, which is my own background, the majority still hold to the traditional methods established since the end of the nineteenth century, such as *Literarkritik*, or since the beginning of this century, such as *Formgeschichte*, or developed in the forties and fifties, such as *Überlieferungsgeschichte*. In other parts of the world, OT scholarship meanwhile has undergone fundamental changes.<sup>1</sup> It is out of this complex context that I am attempting to break new ground.

As befits a student of Gerhard von Rad, my main interest is a theological one. What would be the most appropriate approach to a theological understanding of OT texts? This question has been the subject of deep reflection by several OT scholars during the last decade. In the limited framework of these introductory remarks, I want to quote only two of them.

In his book *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach*, Ronald Clements thoroughly analyzes the problems, in particular the "inescapable tension in the very goal of writing an Old Testament theology." He writes

The Old Testament is a literature, whereas a theology is concerned with the world of ideas and their systematic formulation. It is possible for us to extract the ideas, so far as is attainable, and to pay little attention to their literary setting. Conversely, we may concentrate our attention upon the literature and its complex history, giving only scant attention to the systematic ordering of the religious ideas which we find in it.<sup>2</sup>

I want to go beyond this alternative, not only by an "as well as" but also by assuming that the OT texts in their present form are theological by nature,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. Rendtorff, "Between Historical Criticism and Holistic Interpretation: New Trends in Old Testament Exegesis," in *Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986* (ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 40, Leiden: Brill, 1987) 298-303.

<sup>2</sup> R. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1978) 32.

and that, therefore, the texts themselves contain the—or at least a—theological message

My position is close to that of Brevard Childs in the introductory chapter of his *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. Childs puts the question differently by posing the problem of “the relationship between text and process”

The final canonical literature reflects a long history of development in which the received tradition was selected, transmitted and shaped by hundreds of decisions. That the final form of the biblical text has preserved much from the earlier stages of Israel's reflection is fully evident. However, the various elements have been so fused as to resist easy diachronic reconstructions which fracture the witness of the whole.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, “the witness of the whole,” that is, the text as we have it before us, in my view, should be the first and main subject of our theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. I want to demonstrate this by focusing on a central aspect of the first two books of the Pentateuch.

# I

Let me begin with the Primeval History in Genesis 1–11. It is obvious that in these chapters different aspects of the beginnings and foundations of the world's and humanity's history are closely interwoven. The narrative begins with creation, but there follows immediately the endangering of the original intention of the creator by human sin (Genesis 3–4). This development reaches its peak in Genesis 6, where God himself declares that he is going to destroy his own creation. The structure of the text makes the contrast between God's intention and the actual situation of the creation evident. In Gen 1:31, after the completion of God's work it is stated

וירא אלהים את-כל-אשר עשה והנה-טוב מאד

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good”

In contrast, Gen 6:12 reads

וירא אלהים את-הארץ והנה נשחחה

“And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt”

The parallelism in the Hebrew text of these two passages is evident and obviously intentional.

The world is no longer “very good,” and God decides to destroy it. But he makes one exception: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (6:8). God announces his decision to Noah by saying: “But I will establish my

<sup>3</sup> B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

11. In the framework of this paper, it is not my intention to discuss the structure of a “Theology of the OT,” but I consider Childs's “Theology” to be much more “systematic” than “canonical.”

covenant with you" (v 18) This is the first time that the word ברית appears in the OT It is spoken as a promise to Noah that God will spare Noah himself, together with all living beings that enter the ark together with him (v 19) This points to chap 9, where the term *bērît* is developed in detail

But before that, after the flood, God declares "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (8 22) The introduction to that promise is given by an almost word-for-word repetition of the statement God made as a reason for his decision to destroy the earth "for the imagination of humanity's heart is evil from its youth" (8 21, cf 6 5 "that every imagination of the thoughts of its heart was only evil continually") This repetition is a well-known crux for the interpreter because the same assessment of human nature seems to serve two contradictory functions the first time, as a reason for the coming of the flood, the second time, however, as a reason for the opposite Yet the intention is clear human beings have not changed after the flood Their יצר הרע, their evil inclination, still exists Nevertheless, God promises not to do again what he has done and guarantees the continuation of the basic preconditions for life upon the earth

Chapter 9, in particular vv 8–11, serves as a solemn confirmation of that promise What God has just declared will be the content of his *bērît* not to bring a flood over the earth again and not to destroy living beings again But before that confirmation, God makes it clear that this world is no longer "very good" God reconfirms his blessing of fertility (v 1), but immediately he adds that peace no longer prevails between human beings and animals (v 2), or among human beings themselves, so that a strict commandment is needed to prevent murder (vv 5–6) This commandment is related to Genesis 1 Every human being is created in God's own image (9 6, cf 1 26–27), therefore, according to rabbinic tradition, to kill one human being means to kill all humanity Within the composition of the Primeval History, this commandment is also related to chap 4, Cain's murder of his brother Abel This murder was the first deed committed after human beings were released into autonomy It demonstrates what human beings are able to do Therefore, the first commandment given to them after the flood with regard to interhuman relations is the prohibition of murder

The importance of Genesis 9, in addition to its fundamental function in the structure of the Primeval History (to which I shall return below), lies in the different elements related to the idea of *bērît* I want to mention two of them First, the term וָכַר, "to remember" God will "remember" his covenant (vv 15–16), with the consequence that he will do (in this case not do) what he has promised The reader of chap 9 recalls having met the word וָכַר before, namely, at the turning point of the flood story "And God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark" (8 1), after which the flood subsided Now the reader understands the relation between the *bērît* promised to Noah in 6 18 and God's remembering

The second element is the "sign of the covenant" (אות-הברית, vv 12–17). In addition to God's remembrance, the covenant is confirmed by a visible sign. It is the rainbow, which God himself will look at and then remember his covenant. But also human beings will be able to see it and then will be assured that, however terrible the thunderstorms might be, God will be faithful to his promise and will not bring the flood back upon the earth. (At this point, I couldn't help thinking what would happen if on "the day after" the rainbow were to become invisible in the "nuclear night," as the experts nicely call it. Will God's covenant be valid even after humanity has committed the final sin of self-destruction? But this question goes beyond the interpretation of Hebrew Scripture.)

Now let me come back to the composition of the Primeval History. If my reading of these chapters is correct—or at least possible—the first result would be that Genesis 9 is an integral part of the Primeval History, perhaps one could even say, the key to understanding the Primeval History as a whole. Here all the lines meet, and only from here can the whole story be interpreted.

The message is, first of all, that humanity does not live in a creation that God has called "very good." This creation does not exist any longer. It has nearly been destroyed because of human sin, in spite of which it still exists because of the grace of God. The guarantee for its continued existence is the covenant God has established with humanity and with the whole creation. The addressees of this message are those who live in the real world as it is, that is, from the biblical point of view, after the flood. Therefore, we should not read Genesis 1 apart from its continuation, the story of the fall as well as that of the flood, and finally that of the covenant after the flood.

From a diachronic point of view, Genesis 1 and 9 form a frame surrounding the first main part of the Primeval History. At the same time, these chapters, in particular chap. 9, are not comprehensible without the material enclosed by this frame. It seems highly unlikely, therefore, that these "Priestly" chapters ever existed apart from the present context, rather, they were formulated in order to be put where they are now.<sup>4</sup> Whether the rest of the material could be interpreted without the frame formed by chaps. 1 and 9 is another question. It may be possible and to a certain degree meaningful to interpret the individual stories independently, but in my view it would not make sense to try to "reconstruct" a "non-Priestly" Primeval History.

## II

Let me turn to another key text of the Pentateuch: the Sinai story. Usually Exodus 19–24 is treated as an independent unit. Taking this as a starting point, we may observe that this unit is framed by passages using the word *bērit*. In the first divine speech in 19:4–6, the word has a central

<sup>4</sup> This is also true for the chronological framework, including the *tôledôt*-formulas. The still-unsolved question of the composition of the flood story I must leave aside in this context.

function "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant" (v 5) Here the vocabulary related to ברית is enlarged by the word שמר, "to keep" Whereas in the Primeval History the covenant was given by God without mentioning any human reaction or activity, here the human side is particularly emphasized Accordingly, the word שמר refers to the commandments that will be given only in the following chapters The introductory speech, therefore, is to be understood as the first part of a framework whose counterpart is to be found in the final ceremony in 24 3-8, where the word ברית plays a major role

There can be no doubt that the first part of the Sinai story is aimed at the covenant ceremony in chap 24 There is also a specific relation between chap 19 and chap 24 According to 19 6 the whole people of Israel shall be a "kingdom of priests," and it looks like a demonstration of that notion when in 24 5 precisely the "young men of the Israelites" (נערי בני ישראל) are sent to serve as priests offering the sacrifices Afterward, a number of "the elders of Israel" (זקני ישראל) accompany Moses in the ascent to the mountain The whole story comes to an end with the blood ceremony and the solemn establishing of the covenant

But actually the story continues While Moses is on top of the mountain in order to receive the blueprints of the sanctuary that should be erected, and finally also the tablets with the divine commandments (24 12-31 18), the people commit the sin with the golden calf (32 1-6) Everything seems to be finished The covenant is broken, which Moses demonstrates by breaking the tablets (v 19) Even the existence of the people is at stake when God declares that he has determined to annihilate them (v 10) Only after Moses' intercession, God finally changes his mind and agrees to reestablish the covenant This is reported in chap 34 where, again, the word *bērīt* has a central function First, in v 10 God declares that he will establish a(nother) covenant הנה אנכי כרת ברית, "Behold, I make a covenant" And after the renewed declaration of the divine commandments, God (re)establishes the covenant (v 27) on the basis of the "words of the covenant" (דברי הברית, v 28)

Of course, a number of diachronic problems remain Nevertheless, the meaning of the composition we have before us is clear The first covenant is broken on Israel's part, God determines to destroy the people, Moses intervenes, and finally the covenant is established again In this sequence of events, there is a striking parallelism with the Primeval History In both cases the original gift of God (creation/covenant) is counteracted by human sin, in both cases God determines to destroy the responsible human community (humanity/Israel), in both cases the future depends on one man (Noah/Moses),<sup>5</sup> and in both cases the covenant is finally (re)established

<sup>5</sup> The differences in the respective roles of Noah and Moses are obvious, according to the different contexts, but with regard to the structure of both texts, in my view the parallelism is clearly visible

One particular detail makes the parallelism even more obvious. Above I discussed the explicit repetition of God's assessment of sinful human nature before the establishment of the covenant (Gen 8 21). We find the same kind of repetition in the Sinai story. As a reason for his determination to destroy the people, God calls them a "stiff-necked people" (Exod 32 9). The same expression is used, this time in Moses' words, immediately before God's announcement of the reestablishing of the covenant: "If I have gained your favor, O Lord, then may the Lord go in our midst, although it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as your own possession" (34 9, cf. also 33 4, 5). And God answers: "Behold, I make a covenant" (v 10). Like human nature in the Primeval History, Israel's nature has not changed. But in spite of that, God decides to reestablish the covenant.

Just as humanity no longer lives within the original creation, but in a restored one whose existence is guaranteed by God's grace, so also Israel no longer lives within the first covenant, but in a reestablished one guaranteed by God's grace. Both humanity and Israel are sinful, and remain sinful. Humanity's sin severely endangered the existence of the creation, Israel's sin endangered God's covenant with Israel. But both times God decides not to annihilate humanity or Israel but to grant them a continued existence guaranteed by his covenant. In this (second) covenant the sinfulness of humanity or Israel is, so to speak, taken for granted. In other words, humanity's or Israel's sin no longer can endanger the very existence of the creation or the covenant because God himself guarantees its continuation, despite human sin, because of his grace.

In the particular case of God's covenant with Israel, Israel can break the covenant, and will break it many times, as the Hebrew Bible tells us. Nevertheless, the covenant itself will never be broken because God has promised to keep it.<sup>6</sup> Here the biblical terminology is of major significance. We have already noted the importance of the word *שמר*, "to keep." Israel is admonished again and again to keep the covenant, but for his part, God will keep it. In the Hebrew Bible several times he is called *שומר-הברית*, "the one who keeps the covenant."<sup>7</sup> This is a sort of epithet that characterizes God's nature and behavior toward his people.

### III

The result of our observations is twofold. First, we have seen the parallel structure of the Primeval History and the Sinai story. Second, we have recognized the importance of the notion of *bērît* in both contexts. Now the question arises whether and how the use of the term *bērît* in the rest of the

<sup>6</sup> This is true for the Hebrew Bible in general, where it is never said that God has broken or ever will break his covenant, no matter how often Israel might break it.

<sup>7</sup> This expression always appears within the formula *שומר הברית יהוה* (Deut 7 9; 1 Kgs 8 23 [= 2 Chr 6 14], Dan 7 9, Neh 1 5, 9 32, cf. Deut 7 12).

books of Genesis and Exodus can be related to these two key texts. In other words, is there a consistent use of the word *bērīt*?

In the patriarchal story the word *bērīt* appears for the first time in Gen 15:18–21. The chapter contains a narrative explication of God's promise to Abraham to give him offspring and the land. This is summarized in the solemn establishing of a *bērīt* whose content is explicitly formulated: "To your descendants I give the land," followed by a detailed description of the extent of the land and an enumeration of its present inhabitants. Here again God gives the covenant. There is no mention of anything Abraham has to do on his part.

The same promise is repeated in Genesis 17, where the word *bērīt* appears no fewer than thirteen times.<sup>8</sup> First, in vv 1–8 the same twofold content of *bērīt* is explicated that we saw in chap 15. God will make Abraham "the father of a multitude of nations" (vv 4–6)—and in addition to that will be the God of Abraham and his descendants (vv 7, 8b), and he will give them the land (v 8a). (To the second part I will return below.)

In the book of Exodus there are several references to this *bērīt*. In 2:24 it is said that "God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" ( . . . וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כְּרִיתוֹ ). This is the point at which God is going to send Moses to liberate Israel from Egyptian slavery. In 6:2–8 the reference to God's covenant with the fathers is repeated in the framework of God's solemn self-revelation to Moses. In an elaborate sentence (vv 4–5) God recalls that he has established his covenant with the fathers (הַקְּמָתִי הָאֵתִם) "to give them the land of Canaan," and continues by saying that he has heard the groaning of the people of Israel, and has "remembered" his covenant (וַיִּזְכֹּר אֶת־כְּרִיתוֹ).

In the Sinai story we find two explicit references to God's promise to the fathers to give them the land, the first in Moses' words reminding God of his promise (Exod 32:13), the second in God's own words sending Moses to lead the people into the promised land (33:1–3). In neither case does the word *bērīt* appear, instead the verb נִשְׁבַּע, "to swear," is used.<sup>9</sup> But then, in chap 34, the announcement of the reestablishing of the *bērīt* (v 10) is followed by a list of peoples God will expel before Israel (v 11) like the lists mentioned in both Gen 15:19–20 and Exod 33:2.<sup>10</sup> Here we have before us a distinct semantic field that is connected with, but not limited to, the use of the word *bērīt*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> According to B. Jacob (*Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* [Berlin: Schocken, 1934, reprint New York: Ktav, n.d.] 431), this is already mentioned by R. Ismael in *m. Ned.* 3:11, where all thirteen occurrences of *bērīt* are related to circumcision (ברית מילה).

<sup>9</sup> As for the diachronic aspects, see n. 11 below.

<sup>10</sup> According to Exod 33:2, God's messenger (or angel) shall expel these peoples, cf. also 23:20–33. In the latter case the Israelites are warned not to make a *bērīt* with these peoples (v 32), the same is said in 34:12, 15, cf. also Deut 7:1–2. The interrelation between God's covenant with Israel and the warning not to make a covenant with foreign nations deserves further attention.

<sup>11</sup> As for the diachronic aspects, it is obvious that some of the texts quoted are related to the

I now return to the second part of Genesis 17, the covenant of circumcision, the ברית מילה. The structure of chap 17 is significant. God begins to speak, and twice the sentence is opened by אנִי, the divine "I" (vv 1, 4). The next divine speech turns to Abraham and begins ואתה, "and you" (or "as for you"), and continues את-בריתי השמר, "my covenant you shall keep" (v 9). It is, of course, the same covenant. But there is an element of human response which belongs indispensably to that covenant. This response shall be "a sign of the covenant" (אות ברית, v 11) that indicates that this particular human being belongs to the people which has received God's covenant. In this case, in contrast to Genesis 9, the sign has to be performed by the human beings who thereby acknowledge themselves to be God's partners in his covenant.

There is still one more text to be included. In Exod 31:12-17, again, a "sign of the covenant" is mentioned, namely, the sabbath. This day, as the seventh day of the week, is related to the seventh day of the week of creation, when God rested from his creative work. Therefore, the Israelites shall rest on this day. But why is this called a *bērīt*? First it is called a sign (אות, v 13). The terminology clearly corresponds to that of Genesis 9: "between me and you throughout your generations" (ביני וביניכם לדוריכם, cf Gen 9:12). But in the case of the sabbath, the sign has to be performed by human beings, as has the sign of circumcision (Genesis 17). Thus, there is a double relationship, to chap 9 as well as to chap 17. In the latter, we find the expression ברית עולם, "an everlasting covenant," twice—first used for the covenant given by God (v 7), and second for the covenant to be performed by Abraham and his descendants as a human response (v 13). The same expression, ברית עולם, is used for the sabbath in Exod 31:16, that is, for the covenant to be performed by the Israelites. Is it also to be understood as a human response? If so, where is the first part to be found, the divine covenant to which the sabbath corresponds? In my view the answer is clear. The covenant of the sabbath responds to the covenant given to Noah (Genesis 9). There also we find the expression ברית עולם (v 16, cf v 12 לדור עולם). Thus, God's everlasting covenant given to the world and humanity finds its human response in the sabbath, which is called "an everlasting covenant" as well. The explicit reference in Exodus 31 is to Genesis 1, to creation itself. But there the expression *bērīt* is not used. Creation can only be called a *bērīt* from the point of view of its restoration after the flood.

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"deuteronomistic" tradition (Genesis 15 and Exodus 32-34), whereas others belong to the "Priestly" texts (Genesis 17, Exodus 2 and 6). Yet it is interesting to see how in the final composition these two groups are related to each other, or even intertwined. From a compositional point of view, in Genesis 15 one might see a "deuteronomistic" point of reference for the mentioning of God's promise to the fathers in Exodus 32-34. In this case, unlike in Exodus 32-34, the word *bērīt* is explicitly used for God's promise to give the land to Abraham's descendants.



## IV

To summarize The Primeval History in Genesis 1–11 and the Sinai story in Exodus 19–34 show a parallel structure. In both cases the first gift of God (creation/covenant) is endangered by human sin and threatened to be destroyed because of God's wrath. In both cases God changes his mind because of (the intervention of) one man (Noah/Moses). In both cases God promises not to bring destruction again (on humanity/on Israel), and in order to confirm that he (re)establishes his covenant (*bērît*). Now neither humanity nor Israel lives in the original situation of creation or covenant, but in a restored one, which is spoiled by human sin but whose continuous existence, nevertheless, is guaranteed by the *bērît* God himself has established.

The use of the word *bērît* in other texts between these two key stories shows a network of references and interrelations whereby human involvement in the covenant as a response to God's gift is emphasized in different ways: circumcision is the first "sign of covenant" as a response to God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 17). Obedience to the commandments is Israel's response to God's guidance and gift of the covenant (Exod 19 4–6, 24 3–8), and the sabbath as a "sign" of the "everlasting covenant" (31 12–17) links Israel's religious life to the first covenant by which God restored the creation once and for all (Genesis 9).

