

Creation and Covenant

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1. Creation and Covenant in the Old Testament

What I mean by ‘creation and covenant’ will become clear if we consider a couple of Psalms where the two are joined together. What I intend by using that pair of evocative terms as an initial way in to Paul will then become clear if we consider three central passages in which the same themes play the same kind of roles. This will open the way to a more detailed consideration of what, I shall argue, must be regarded as part of the fundamental structure of his thought, and how it relates to the other themes which will occupy us in subsequent chapters.

The first Psalm is no. 19, a spectacular poem made more so by Joseph Haydn: ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God’. But Haydn’s setting, which never got beyond verse 1, can actually distract us from what the writer is doing. The psalm isn’t just a poem about the glory of creation. It divides into two more or less equal halves (vv. 1–6 and 7–14), and it is the juxtaposition of these which opens the door to the view of creation and covenant which, I shall suggest, remains at the heart of Judaism and, as I shall argue, was always central for Paul.

The first six verses are a paean of praise to God for his creation, celebrating the fact that creation itself praises God and declares his glory without speech or language but yet with great power and force. ‘Their sound has gone out into all the world, and their words to the ends of the earth.’ Within this, the psalmist celebrates the power and strength of the sun. ‘Nothing is hidden,’ he declares, ‘from its searching heat.’ Then, without warning, he switches to the second half of the poem, which is a similar paean of praise for Torah, the Law of YHWH. Torah does in human life what the sun does within creation: it brings the light, power and searching, probing heat of YHWH’s presence into the depths of the human heart. Torah is, of course, the covenant charter of Israel, the Law given to bind Israel to YHWH, to establish the nation as his people. With Torah as its guide, Israel is the unique, chosen people of

the one creator God. The same point is made graphically at the end of Psalm 147: YHWH, the creator, declares his statutes and ordinances to Israel, but he has not done so with any other nation, and they have no knowledge of his laws (147.19–20). The ‘Alleluia’ which concludes the psalm indicates well enough how creation and covenant sit together: Israel celebrates its unique vocation as the creator’s chosen people, the people who know the secrets of the universe and are called to live by its otherwise hidden rules, while the other nations blunder around in darkness.

The second psalm I cite for my main point has a very different mood, but the same underlying theology. Psalm 74 is a lament, a complaint against the powerful heathen nations who have ravaged Jerusalem. ‘O God, why have you cast us off forever; why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? . . . Your enemies have roared within your holy place, they have set up their banners there, and have hacked down all the carved work with axes and hammers. . . . How long, O Lord? Why don’t you do something?’

Then in verse 12 (those who relish the Anglican choral tradition will know that this moment invites a change of chant from a lament in a minor key to a strong statement in a major key) the Psalmist appeals over the head of the powerful pagan nations to the creator God, the God by whose power Israel came out of Egypt. ‘Yet God is my king of old; you divided the sea by your power, you broke the heads of Leviathan in the waters. . . . Yours is the day, yours also is the night, you have established the light and the sun; you have fixed the boundaries of the earth, you have made summer and winter.’ When everything is tottering and crashing all around, in other words, look back to Genesis 1, and to the evidences that the creator’s power has in the past been made known on Israel’s behalf. Then the Psalm can return to the lament in verse 18, and complaint: ‘Remember this, O YHWH, how the enemy scoffs, how a foolish people blaspheme your name.’

Two very different Psalms, each drawing on the same theology of creation and covenant. The one celebrates creation, and within that celebrates Torah as the covenant charter designed to enable each individual Israelite to become a whole, cleansed, integrated human

being; the other complains that the pagans are laying Israel waste, and invokes the covenant God as also the creator God who has the power, the right and the responsibility to deal with evil. There are many other examples, but I choose these both because they are so graphic and clear, and because they point to some of the themes which I shall propose as central for Paul.

A good deal of the Old Testament could of course be brought alongside at this point. I draw attention here simply to passages to which Paul himself appeals. I have argued elsewhere that the book of Genesis demands to be read in this way: the promises to Abraham echo the commands to Adam, and the whole argument of the book, the whole point of the narrative, is that God has called Abraham and his family to undo the sin of Adam, even though Abraham and his family are themselves part of the problem as well as the bearers of the solution.^[1]

That, indeed, is close to the heart of Paul's own fresh reading of Genesis, as we shall see. Deuteronomy, and particularly its long exposition of the covenant in chapters 27—30, brings together creation and covenant in terms of the Land: if Israel obeys the voice of YHWH, the created order within the promised land will be abundantly fruitful, but if Israel disobeys, the Land itself will turn against them, and ultimately drive them out into exile, whence they will only return if they turn back to YHWH with all their heart and soul. Isaiah 40—55 brings together creation and covenant from one angle after another, invoking YHWH in chapter 40 as the sovereign creator in whom Israel can have complete trust and confidence, celebrating in chapter 55 the way in which his Word has the same effect, in terms of restoring Israel, as the rain and the snow which make the earth fruitful. In between, not least in the steady build-up to the final Servant Song, the prophet does what Psalms 19 and 74 and many others do:

I, I am he that comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die?

You have forgotten YHWH, your maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth.

You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor; but where is the oppressor's fury? The oppressed shall speedily be released;

For I am YHWH your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – YHWH of hosts is his name.

I have put my words in your mouth, and hidden you in the shadow of my hand,

Stretching out the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, ‘You are my people’.^[2]

There you have it: the creator God is the covenant God, and vice versa; and his word, particularly through his prophet and/or servant, will rescue and deliver his people from the enemy. This combination constituted the deep implicit narrative within which the multiple other narratives of second-Temple Judaism find their coherence and meaning. We could put it like this, in a double statement which might seem paradoxical but which carried deep meaning through ancient Judaism. First, the covenant is there to solve the problems within creation. God called Abraham to solve the problem of evil, the problem of Adam, the problem of the world. (That, incidentally, is why accounts of the problem of evil which fail to incorporate covenant theology are doomed before they start; but that is another story.) Israel’s calling is to hold fast by the covenant. Through Israel, God will address and solve the problems of the world, bringing justice and salvation to the ends of the earth – though quite how this will happen remains, even in Isaiah, more than a little mysterious.

But, second, creation is invoked to solve the problems within the covenant. When Israel is in trouble, and the covenant promises themselves seem to have come crashing to the ground, the people cry to the covenant God precisely as the creator. Israel goes back to Genesis 1, and to the story of the Exodus, in order to pray and trust that YHWH will do again what, as creator, he has the power and the right to do, and what as the covenant God he has the responsibility to do, namely, to establish justice in the world and, more especially, to vindicate his people when they cry to him for help. In both cases, we should note carefully, it is assumed that something has gone badly wrong. Something is deeply amiss with creation, and within that with humankind itself, something to which the covenant with Israel is the answer. Something is deeply amiss with the covenant, whether Israel’s sins on the one hand or Gentile oppression on the other, or perhaps both – and to this the

answer is a re-invoking of creation, or rather of God as creator. So far I have concentrated on the Old Testament itself, partly because these themes are so clear there and partly because Paul constantly goes back to the Old Testament, not least to Genesis, Deuteronomy, the Psalms and Isaiah, not to find proof-texts for abstract ideas but in order to reground the controlling narrative, the historical story, of God, the world, humankind, and Israel. But it is of course important that we also contextualize Paul in his own day by noticing these same themes in second-Temple literature. There is no space to expound this in detail. I merely note that in very different writings, such as *The Wisdom of Solomon*, the Qumran literature, and the apocalyptic writings such as 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, we find exactly these themes, albeit deployed in very different ways. We find, not least, these themes invoked as the reason why Israel's God, the creator, must eventually engage in a final show-down with the forces of evil, a dramatic event which will be like the Exodus in some respects and like a great court scene, a trial in which the powers of evil are judged, condemned and overthrown, on the other. We think, most obviously, of Daniel 7 and the re-use of that passage in various later texts. Though Paul appeals over the heads of the later texts to the Bible itself, his own re-use of the biblical themes possesses an easily recognisable family likeness to the other re-uses of his day.

One of the great slogans in which all this theology of creation and covenant is summed up, one with of course enormous significance at the heart of Paul's thought, is *tsedaqah elohim*, the 'righteousness' or 'justice' or 'covenant faithfulness' of God. The problem of how to translate this phrase is acute already in Isaiah and elsewhere, as it is in Paul. Somehow we need a word which will pull together this entire complex of thought, which will evoke for us what the Hebrew phrase, and then its Greek equivalent (*dikaiosyne theou*), evoked in Paul's day as it had done for a long time before: the fact that the creator and covenant god can be relied upon to act in accordance with his creating power and his covenant fidelity, to put the world to rights. How can all this be summed up in a word?

There is no such word in English. One might say 'faithfulness', but it hardly carries the sense of 'justice', of putting things to rights. One might

say ‘righteousness’, but people inevitably hear it today either in the sense of ‘ethical uprightness’ or in the (to my mind mistaken) familiar Reformed understandings of it as the status which God imputes to the faithful, about which I shall say more later on. The word ‘justice’ itself evokes that element of what Paul, and the texts on which he drew, were talking about which is all too often forgotten today, namely that because God is the creator he has the obligation to put the world to rights once and for all, but unless we constantly remind ourselves that in the Jewish context, and in Paul himself, this ‘justice’ springs not from some abstract ideal but from the creator’s obligation to the creation and from the covenant God’s obligation to be faithful to his promises, it will lose its flavour and force. This multiple obligation is what Psalm 74 appeals to, and it is what makes sense of the actual flow of Paul’s own thought in passage after passage. The word ‘justice’ has one advantage, though, namely that it is cognate with ‘justification’, the moment in the present time when one part of the creation is put to rights in advance of the final renewal. But, again, more of that anon. We are dealing in the present chapter with fundamental structures of thought, not with detailed outworking.

2. Paul: Three Central Passages

So much for the setting. I now turn to Paul to look briefly at three passages about which I have written extensively elsewhere but which I invoke at this point to demonstrate the way in which, in some of his most central arguments, the recognisable family likeness of a theology of creation and covenant reappears, albeit transposed into some different keys. I hope it is clear, by the way, that throughout what I have said so far I am using the word ‘covenant’, just as indeed I am using the word ‘creation’, not because that word occurs in all of the passages I have mentioned (in fact, it is quite rare), but because it is the most convenient shorthand I know to sum up the way in which Jews not least in Paul’s day thought about themselves as the one chosen people of the creator God. At this point at least I am fully on the side of E. P. Sanders when he argues that the covenant is the hidden presupposition of Jewish literature even when the word hardly occurs.^[3] Exegesis needs the concordance, but it cannot be ruled by it. It is no argument against calling Paul a covenantal theologian to point out the scarcity of *diatheke*

in his writings. We have to learn to recognise still more important things, such as implicit narratives and allusions to large biblical themes. Just because we cannot so easily look them up in a reference-book that does not make them irrelevant.

(i) Colossians 1.15–20

The first Pauline passage I invoke, controversially of course in terms of authorship, is Colossians 1.15–20. I think it, and the whole letter, were written by Paul; if someone other than Paul wrote it, quoting an earlier poem, it is of course possible that the poem was written by Paul and incorporated by the anonymous letter-writer. But this is a point where such arguments fall away, I believe, in the face of theological exegesis. The poem exhibits all the traces of Paul's own thought, even though summed up uniquely in this passage; and – my main point at the moment – it also exhibits exactly that combination of creation and covenant which we have noticed in the Old Testament.^[4]

Like Psalm 19, the poem falls into two halves, which are closely balanced. 'He', that is, the Messiah, 'is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth; all things were made through him and for him' (1.15–16). He is then 'the beginning, the first-born from the dead; for in him God's fulness was pleased to dwell, and through him God reconciled all things to himself' (1.18b–20; vv. 17–18b form a smaller sequence within this larger one). Whoever wrote this was making more or less exactly the same point, by means of the poetic structure itself, as Psalm 19: the creator God is also the redeeming, covenant God, and vice versa. The main difference, of course, is the breathtaking insertion into this theology of Jesus the Messiah as the one through whom both creation and redemption have come about. The echoes of Jewish wisdom-theology are part of the clue to how this has been rethought. But the crucial thing, as has often been noticed, is the way in which the poem exploits the meaning of 'in the beginning' from Genesis 1.1 itself, turning the Hebrew word for 'beginning' this way and that (beginning, head, sum total, and first fruits), and combining it with the assertion that Jesus is the true image of God, in other words, the true fulfilment of Genesis 1.26f. And of course if Jesus is the point at which creation and covenant come together, one of the most striking innovations, completely

consistent with all of Paul's thought, is that this coming together has taken the form of an actual event, an event which has already happened, an event which consisted, surprisingly and shockingly, of the shameful and cruel death by crucifixion of the one who has thus fulfilled the double divine purpose. The explosive force of Paul's theology lies just here, that in both the structure of his thought and its explicit sentences he writes simultaneously of fulfilment and of something radically new – something shocking, something until that point unthinkable.

(ii) 1 Corinthians 15

This same blend of the fulfilment and the unthinkable characterises the second passage I here highlight, namely 1 Corinthians 15. It is easy to get lost in the multiple complexities of this, one of Paul's longest and most detailed arguments.^[5] But one of the key guiding principles to understanding the whole passage is that it is, at a fundamental level, an appeal to Genesis 1—3 in the light of the events concerning Jesus. I have spelled this out in more detail elsewhere, but we can summarize the point like this. As soon as the argument gets going in verse 20, Paul evokes Genesis 3: since death came through a human being, the resurrection has come by a human being; for as in Adam all die, so in the Messiah all shall be made alive. This is a statement of new creation through the Messiah, and it is developed by means of a detailed argument, in verses 23–28, drawing on various Old Testament texts not least Psalm 8, itself an evocation of Genesis 1. This leads Paul, after a short excursion (verses 29–34), to address the question about what sort of a thing the resurrection body will be; and, in answering this crucial question, he draws on several parts of Genesis, about the seed and the plant and the different types of created physicality, that of stars and fish and animals, objects in the sky and objects on earth. This leads him in verses 42–49 to a climactic statement of the new type of resurrected physicality that has come to birth with Jesus' resurrection, contrasted with what is said of Adam in Genesis 2.7. Adam was from the earth, and earthy, whereas the new body which Jesus now possesses is a fresh gift from heaven. The end result is the creation of a new type of human beings, once more in the image of God but now, more specifically, in the image of the risen Messiah: as we have born the image of the earthly human being, we shall also bear the image of the

heavenly one.

This is how the problem within the existing creation, namely sin and death,[6] has been dealt with through the Messiah, more specifically through the way in which the Messiah has been the means of fulfilling the promises of a great victory through which evil would be overthrown. This obviously looks on to the theme of the next chapter (Messiah and Apocalyptic), but it is no bad thing that we grasp already the connections between ideas that have often been played off against one another. For the moment my point is that, like the Psalms or Daniel, Paul is going back to creation itself, to Genesis, and is showing how God's fulfilment of the covenant promises has established creation's renewal. This in turn is of vital importance for understanding what 1 Corinthians 15 is all about: not the abandonment of creation, but its renewal.

(iii) Romans 1—11

The third passage is a longer one, and in taking the risk of expounding it in one go I am conscious that I am asking my readers to hold a large and complicated argument in mind all at once; but I think it is worth the effort. The passage in question is the letter to the Romans, especially the first three of its four main sections (chs. 1—11). Let me work through with a bird's eye view and propose a way of understanding Paul's masterpiece in which the twin themes of creation and covenant come to their spectacular fresh expression.[7]

In 1.18—4.25, the first major section of the letter, Paul launches in with an exposition of God's goodness and power in creation, as a way of calling the human race to account for not recognising God and giving him the praise and honour that were his due. As a result, imagebearing human beings have become corrupt; violence and hatred fills the world; and even those who think they are above such things are themselves in fact no better. To this scenario, in which Paul hardly differs from many of his Jewish contemporaries, the Jew would answer – Saul of Tarsus himself would have answered! – with a statement of the covenant: God has called Israel to be the light to the nations, the teacher of the foolish, the guide to the blind. That is what the covenant was there for. But when Paul sees this argument coming he turns it, too, on its head (2.17–29): the covenant people have become part of the problem, not the

agents of the solution. Israel is no better than the nations, as is proved by biblical texts which speak of exile. This creates a crisis for God himself, a crisis exactly parallel to the crisis which 4 Ezra saw so painfully: how is God to be both faithful to the covenant and just in his dealings with the whole creation?

This is precisely the question of the *dikaiosyne theou*, the faithful covenant justice of God, which Paul had announced as the letter's main theme in 1.17. And, beginning in 3.21, he provides a fresh answer to the question, an answer not available to writers like 4 Ezra: God has unveiled his *dikaiosyne* in the faithful Messiah, Jesus, the one in whom at last we find an Israelite faithful to God's purpose, the one through whose death sin has been dealt with, the one through whom God has now called into being a renewed people among whom Jews and Gentiles are welcome on equal terms. Creation and covenant then come together with great force in chapter 4, for which Genesis 15 as a whole is foundational: Paul is recalling Abraham, neither as a random proof-text for justification by faith, nor as an example of a Christian before Christ, but precisely as the one with whom God made the covenant in the first place, the covenant which has now been fulfilled in Jesus. It is with Romans 4, as much as with 3.21–31, that we see the unveiling of the *dikaiosyne theou*.

But this covenant fulfilment, through which Jew and Gentile come together as the true children of Abraham (that is the main theme of Romans 4) is also, implicitly, the renewal of creation after the disaster outlined in chapter 1. As has often been shown, the faith of Abraham as spelled out in 4.18–21 constitutes the deliberate reversal of the unbelief of humankind in Romans 1. Abraham looked at his good-as-dead body, but did not grow weak in faith; he didn't waver in unbelief; he grew strong in faith, giving God the glory, believing completely that God, as creator, had the power to do what he had promised. That is why, as an advance sign of creation's restoration, and with it the restoration of the male-and-female nature of imagebearing humankind, Abraham and Sarah are enabled to bear a son. Abraham's faith thus points forwards appropriately to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and this faith becomes the covenant marker, the badge of God's multi-ethnic people, the sign of God's renewed humanity. Furthermore, one

of the tell-tale signs of what Paul is thinking in this chapter as he expounds Genesis 15 is his redefinition, his broadening, of the promise of God to Abraham. In Genesis, Abraham is promised the Holy Land. For Paul, as for some others in his day, this was to be interpreted as an advance sign of something else. The promise to Abraham and his family, declares Paul, was that he should inherit the *world* (4.13).

This is the promise which is then taken up in the next four chapters. Romans 1—4 expounds, from one point of view, the way in which the problem of creation has been addressed by the fulfilment of the covenant, while simultaneously the problem of the covenant (the failure of ethnic Israel) has been dealt with by God's action through Jesus the Messiah, in fulfilment of the promise of new creation. Chapters 5—8 develop the themes of creation and covenant in a closely related manner. Romans 5, densely but deftly, outlines like 1 Corinthians 15 the way in which the obedience of the one man Jesus the Messiah has more than reversed the effects of the one man Adam. He has done, it seems, what the covenant was put in place to do. But what has happened to the covenant itself?

This is the problem of the Jewish law, which comes to its head especially in Romans 7. (This context of creation and covenant, I might add, is the right way to approach the question of 'Paul and the Law', rather than the approaches common within a non-creational or non-covenantal reading.) In Romans 7, Paul expounds what happened when the Torah arrived in Israel, and what happens still as Israel lives under the Torah; and he does so in such a way as to make it clear that, through Torah, Israel actually recapitulates the sin of Adam and the sinful human life which follows from it. You might almost say that at this point he is deliberately deconstructing Psalm 19; or, perhaps, that he is probing its final verses and discovering that the more you embrace Torah the more it does indeed show up your secret faults. But Romans 7 is then answered, of course, by Romans 8, which is Paul's most spectacular piece of creation-theology, a bursting out of a fresh reading of Genesis 1—3, coupled with the Exodus narrative of liberation from slavery and the journey to the promised inheritance: creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, to share the freedom of the glory of God's children. And the fulcrum around which the argument turns is

Romans 8.3–4. God has done what the Torah, weakened by the flesh, could not do: that is, God has accomplished the goals for which the covenant was put in place, while dealing simultaneously with the fact that the covenant people themselves were part of the problem within creation. Through Jesus and the Messiah there is therefore covenant renewal, which results, as you would expect once you locate Paul within an overarching Jewish narrative of creation and covenant, in new creation. That is the underlying logic of Romans 7 and 8.

Romans 9 begins with a lament which reminds us, after a fashion, of Psalm 74. Israel is in dire straits, having failed to believe in its own Messiah when he came, and having continued that failure by the refusal to accept the gospel about him preached by Paul and the other apostles. Paul's wrestling with this problem takes the form, principally, of a retelling of the covenant narrative, a retelling which we can plot on the grid of other similar retellings in the second-Temple literature, though it goes beyond the parallels in various striking ways. As gradually becomes clear, this is of course an account precisely of the *dikaiosyne theou*, God's faithful covenant justice, which seems to be called into question both by what has now happened and indeed by the nature of the promises in the first place (Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau, and so on). Israel, declares Paul (10.3–4), was ignorant of God's covenant justice, and sought to establish its own status of covenant membership, of being-in-the-right, and so did not submit to God's covenant plan, the plan which came to its goal in the Messiah.

Paul then articulates, in a spectacular and commonly misunderstood passage, the covenant renewal which has taken place.^[8] In 10.6–10 he expounds Deuteronomy 30, the passage which spoke of return from exile, of restoration after covenant judgment, a passage already expounded in parallel ways by the very different books of Baruch on the one hand and 4QMMT on the other. 'Do not say in your heart, who shall ascend into heaven, or go down to the depths, to bring the Torah near to you; the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.' Paul expounds this statement of covenant renewal in relation to what God has done in Christ and by the Spirit (not mentioned explicitly but certainly presupposed in this passage). And the result is that now, instead of the return of ethnic Israel to the Holy Land, as envisaged in

Deuteronomy, the message goes out to all people. As in Romans 8, the whole world has become the Holy Land, claimed through the gospel of Jesus the Messiah on behalf of the creator God. This is the point where Paul triumphantly quotes Psalm 19: their sound has gone out into all the world, and their words to the ends of the earth. The apostolic mission simply follows the line of the original gospel, the good news of the first creation itself. Covenant renewal has resulted in the reclaiming of the created order. As he says in Colossians 1.23 (referring, I think, to the unspoken shock wave that ran through the whole cosmos at Easter), the gospel has already been proclaimed to all the world, and he, Paul, has the job of being its servant. When human beings come to believe this gospel they are precisely the first-fruits of redeemed creation; the phrase is that of James (1.18), but on this occasion at least the sentiment tallies exactly with that of Paul. Abraham and his seed are indeed to inherit the world, but Abraham's family has been redefined around Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

This hint of creation renewed through covenant renewal bursts out at the end of Romans 11, where Paul echoes some of the Old Testament's grandest celebrations of God as the wise, inscrutable creator:

O, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgments, how inscrutable are his ways.

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory for ever, Amen.

By coming to a fresh understanding of God's faithful covenant justice, displayed in the story of Israel reshaped around Jesus the Messiah, Paul has arrived back at a primal, characteristically Jewish, praise of God the creator.

These three passages, from Colossians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans offer strong *prima facie* evidence that we are indeed right to read Paul in terms of that theology of creation and covenant we find in the Old Testament. But, as we have seen, for him it is always a matter of going from creation to new creation, and going from covenant to renewed covenant. Fulfilment and surprising renewal are the constant thematic notes.

Further examples abound. It would be interesting to explore the way in which, in 2 Corinthians 3—5, the theology of new covenant in chapter 3

works its way through to new creation in 5.17 ('if anyone is in the Messiah – new creation!'), and to the claim in 5.19 that God was in the Messiah reconciling the *world* to himself. Similarly, Galatians 3 and 4, in which as in Romans the promises to Abraham are explored in relation to their fulfilment through Jesus the Messiah, leads Paul to declare in 6.14–16 that because of the cross of Jesus the world has been crucified to him, and he to the world, since now neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, but only new creation. This is the rule, the *kanon*, by which God's renewed people must walk, claiming as they do the title of 'Israel of God'. And when we start drawing out these themes, the entire argument of Ephesians 1—3 begins to clamour to be included, whoever we think wrote it.

I have now made the case for saying that the themes of creation and covenant, rooted in the Old Testament and developed within second-Temple Judaism, remained basic within the very Jewish thought of Paul. We can see him developing them in various ways, but he has not abandoned them in favour of some different overarching scheme. In particular, as we have seen, he believes that Israel's God, the creator, has acted decisively to fulfil the covenant promises and thereby to renew both covenant and creation. Paul thereby understands himself to be living at a different moment in the story, though there are partial parallels within the inaugurated eschatology we find at Qumran. The new age has already begun, though the old age continues alongside it. That in turn generates both Paul's vision of the church and the problems he addresses within it, but of that we must speak elsewhere.

What I want to do now, in drawing together the threads of this chapter, is to show how the twin themes of creation and covenant offer a context, an implicit narrative, within which we can grasp Paul's understanding of what has gone wrong in the world and in Israel and how it is put right – of, if you like, evil on the one hand and grace on the other. This will enable us to see how the questions of justification and soteriology are better approached from this angle than the normal ones, a question we shall continue to pursue in subsequent chapters. We will then be able to suggest, in conclusion, that his central picture of Jesus, more especially his death and resurrection, answers closely to the biblical images of creation and covenant with which we began.

3. Evil and Grace, Plight and Solution

As we saw earlier, the implicit narrative of covenant always presupposed that something had gone drastically wrong within creation. But it isn't just that if God is proposing a solution there must have been something wrong. The particular solution God proposes – that of beginning a family and promising them a land – shows that what is wrong concerns, in a central way, the fracturing of human relationships and the fracturing of the relationship between humans and the non-human creation. And the particular faith for which God calls indicates, as Romans 4 draws out, that at the core of the problem is the failure of humans to trust God, to give him praise and honour as the all-powerful creator. All of this is powerfully re-emphasized in the gift of Torah, which holds out an extraordinary blueprint of what a genuinely human life is like, a blueprint which called forth the delighted acclaim we noted in Psalm 19, and of course plenty of other places.

The failure of human beings to be the truly imagebearing creatures God intended results, therefore, in corruption and death. When we begin with creation, and with God as creator, we can see clearly that the frequently repeated warnings about sin and death, referred to as axiomatic by Paul, are not arbitrary, as though God were simply a tyrant inventing odd laws and losing his temper with those who flouted them, but structural: humans were made to function in particular ways, with worship of the creator as the central feature, and those who turn away from that worship – i.e. the whole human race, with a single exception – are thereby opting to seek life where it is not to be found, which is another way of saying that they are courting their own decay and death. This is to say, with the entire Jewish tradition, that the basic sin is idolatry, the worship of that which is not in fact the living creator God. All this contextualizes one of Paul's key technical terms, *sarx*, normally translated 'flesh'. As is well known, Paul does *not* mean by 'flesh' simply physical substance. For that he normally uses *soma*, usually translated 'body'. For him, the word 'flesh' is a way of denoting material within the corruptible world and drawing attention to the fact that it is precisely corruptible, that it will decay and die. From that point Paul's usage expands one more level, to include the moral behaviour which, consequent upon idolatry, is already a sign of, and an invitation

to, that progressive corruption: hence ‘the works of the flesh’. This analysis, seen from within an overall theology of the goodness of creation and the deconstruction of it through idolatry, is preferable to those accounts which approach the problem from other angles, for instance the earlier history of the word on the one hand or the assumptions of a dualist worldview on the other. The controlling narratives, in this case that of creation, are all-important.

The same is true, and this brings us to another usage of the same word *sarx*, for Paul’s account of what is wrong within the covenant. Put simply, his point, repeated from several angles and in varying degrees of intensity, is that Israel too is in Adam: the people who bear the solution are themselves part of the problem, and the good and holy Torah (to its own surprise, one might almost say) simply intensifies this problem, partly by pointing at sin within Israel, and partly, at a second level, by apparently encouraging Israel to make it an idol, to use it as a way of establishing an inalienable status of national privilege. This is what Paul can refer to as Israel *according to the flesh*. This point needs spelling out more fully, but not here.

This move shows, I believe, the folly of dividing up readings of Paul into the false either/or of those on the one hand which highlight the problem of sin and the question of forgiveness and those on the other which highlight the problem of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles within God’s people. This is where the so-called ‘new perspective’ has made one of its necessary points – that every time Paul discusses justification he seems simultaneously to be talking about gentile inclusion – but has not, usually, shown how this integrates with the traditional view that he is talking about how sinners are put right with God.^[9] Once we frame the question within the overall narratives of creation and covenant, the way is clear and open to a fresh statement of Paul which will do far more exegetical justice to the passages concerned and which will show how these two emphases are in fact part of the same thing, both to be equally stressed.

Let me put the point in a sequence of three propositions which Paul everywhere presupposes and frequently makes explicit in whole or in part.

(1) God made the covenant with Abraham as the means of dealing with

evil within the good creation, which meant dealing in particular with evil within human beings, God's image-bearers. This I have already explained.

(2) The family of Abraham, who themselves share in the evil, as well as in the imagebearing vocation, of the rest of humanity, treated their vocation to be the light of the world as indicating exclusive privilege. This was their own meta-sin, their own second-order form of idolatry, compounding the basic forms they already shared with the Gentiles. This further point is basic to Paul's critique of Israel in such passages as Romans 2, 7 and 10 and Galatians 2, 3 and 4.

(3) When God fulfils the covenant through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, thereby revealing his faithful covenant justice and his ultimate purpose of new creation, this has the effect *both* of fulfilling the original covenant purpose (thus dealing with sin and procuring forgiveness) *and* of enabling Abraham's family to be the worldwide Jew-plus-Gentile people it was always intended to be. Indeed, when we rightly understand the matter, we shall see that from Paul's perspective at least these two effects were so closely aligned with one another that they not only could be spoken of in the same breath but demanded to be thought of as the same thought.

If there is one major result of this chapter in terms of current debates, it is that the 'new perspective' on the one hand, and its critics on the other, both need to come to terms with the integrated vision of human sin and redemption and Israel's fall and restoration which characterises Paul through and through, precisely because his controlling categories are creation and covenant. He is not simply assuming an implicit narrative about how individual sinners find a right relationship with a holy God (any more than he is simply assuming an implicit narrative about how Gentiles can have easy access to God's people). Insofar as he would be happy with the former way of stating matters at all, he would insist on framing it within the much larger question of how the creator God can be true to creation, how the covenant God can be true to the covenant, and how those things are not two but one. And that is what the phrase *dikaiosyne theou* is all about.

If this is Paul's account of evil, and of the plight of humankind and Israel and the way God has addressed it, what can we say in summary about

his account of grace? This points towards the topic of the next chapter, but we can for the moment just say this: that Paul's vision of God's action in Jesus the Messiah and by the Spirit leads him from several angles to insist that the ultimate result is new creation, in which the old is set free from corruption and decay. This is accomplished, more specifically, not just through the covenant but through the *renewal of the covenant*: Paul draws explicitly on prophetic texts of covenant renewal, not least Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, and ultimately from Deuteronomy 30 itself, arguably the basis of the whole idea. In both creation and covenant, grace perfects or completes nature not simply by topping it up but by judging it, condemning the evil which has infected it, and then renewing it. This, of course, is precisely the model offered by the representative death of Jesus the Messiah, who from Paul's perspective offered to God the perfect obedience Israel should have offered, and thereby fulfilled on behalf of Israel as well as the world the rescue operation the covenant had always envisaged. Once more, if we approach Paul as a theologian of creation and covenant, we will not fall into the trap of so much exegesis, which has marginalized his theme of new creation and has forgotten altogether that the point of justification, and of Abraham and his family, always was that the way God intended to deal with evil was through keeping the promises made in the covenant.

Conclusion: Jesus within Creation and Covenant

Throughout this chapter I have spoken exclusively of Paul within his Jewish context. What has happened to his other two worlds? Part of the answer is that by sketching Paul as a theologian of creation and covenant we are insisting that it was this essentially Jewish message which he announced in the pagan world, and which was, for him (as for, say, the *Wisdom of Solomon*), the clue to the divine wisdom which upstaged the wisdom of the world. It would indeed be possible, from the point we have now reached, to glance across at the Areopagus address in Acts 17.22–31 and to show that its deconstruction of Stoic, Epicurean and Academician theologies is fully in line with what we have found in Paul himself. (Indeed, I suspect that it is the failure of previous generations to come to terms with Paul's theology of creation and covenant that has made them wonder whether the Paul of Acts 17 is

compatible with the Paul of the letters.) And from there we could show that it is precisely through his theology of a renewed covenant, in which all the nations can share on equal terms, and of a new creation, in which the whole world is already claimed by the creator as the new, extended and soon-to-be-redeemed Holy Land, that Paul is able to launch his opposition to the worldwide claims of Caesar's empire with those of Jesus the Messiah, the world's true Lord. But these are themes for later on. I conclude the present chapter by going back to Psalms 19 and 74 and suggesting that, for Paul, the questions they raise have now been dealt with through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The celebration of creation and of Torah in Psalm 19 leads the psalmist, as we saw, to the slightly anxious prayer that he may be kept from presumptuous sin. Creation summons him to worship, Torah to obedience, but in both he may fall short. Paul sees that humans have indeed fallen short, and that Torah has simply exacerbated that problem within Israel. But in Colossians 1, and Romans 7 and 8, we see Paul's answer. God has done what Torah could not. The one through whom all things were made is the one through whom all things are redeemed. More tellingly still, we can line up the agony and the faith of Psalm 74 with that of Paul as he faces in Romans 9—11 the plight of his fellow Jews. But we can look wider as well, to the whole story of the gospel which underlies everything Paul says and does. In the psalmist's agony at the destroyed Temple, and his strong affirmation of God as creator, we glimpse exactly the same theological structure as we find in the crucifixion of Jesus by the pagans and God's answer by raising him from the dead as the beginning of the renewal of all creation. Once we hold creation and covenant in our minds as the framework of the picture, we find that not only sin and redemption but also Christology itself come into fresh focus, a focus we shall explore further as this book goes on.

But we have already said enough to indicate that for Paul the theology of creation and covenant constantly drew him forward to the events concerning Jesus, events shocking both in being unexpected and in their very nature. It is as the fulfilment of creation and covenant, not in their abolition, that we find ourselves compelled to turn our full attention, in the next chapter in this series, to the second pair of themes around

which Paul's thought was organized: Messiah and Apocalyptic.

[1] *NTPG* 260–68.

[2] Isaiah 51.12–16.

[3] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), 81–107, 236–8, and esp. 420f.

[4] See *Climax* ch. 5 for full details.

[5] For details, see *RSG* ch. 7.

[6] Note the summing up in v. 56: the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

[7] For full details see *Romans*.

[8] On this see esp. *Romans* 658–66.

[9] S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004) is the most recent example of this false either/or, repeated over and over throughout the book, e.g. 257f.