

# CREATION

## *God's Covenant with the Earth*

by Peter Harris - **Genesis 6:1 – 9:17**

God's covenant with Noah was a commitment to maintain the inherent relationship between Creator and creation; his relationship with the natural order – implicit in the act of creation – whereby he promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood. This divine pledge, given unconditionally to Noah and to every living creature on earth, was accompanied by the sign of the rainbow.

The story of God's covenant with Noah has more relevance in our time than it has ever had before. In a world torn apart by injustice, oppression, wars and environmental degradation, perhaps we are the first generation to read this story with such a sober understanding of the destruction with which it begins (Genesis 6:5), and such a sharp awareness of the vital importance of the promise of God with which it ends (Genesis 9:8-17). The same can be said for some of the forebodings of the Old Testament prophets who understood that living selfishly and independently from God brought about not only human but also ecological catastrophe which was the direct consequence of human disobedience of God.<sup>i</sup>

We often read these Genesis passages from a merely human perspective, yet their relevance is more far-reaching. We read them at a time when, according to the best studies,<sup>ii</sup> up to a quarter of the species of animals and plants of which we are aware, and with whom we share this earth, face extinction in the next fifty years. The rates vary, but all are many times higher than the natural rate of extinction, and all are directly related to human activity and choices.

In this terrible present predicament, the Ark becomes a potent symbol of the human role in God's rescue effort, and the rainbow shines as a precious promise of hope for the creation itself. If we are looking for answers to the current state of the planet, and in particular the catastrophic loss of biodiversity in our world, we must understand the story of the Flood as more than a story about the human condition, although the person and family of Noah stand at its heart. In Genesis chapter 9, where God promises a future and a hope, the promise is for the whole creation. Further-

more, as commentator Bruce Waltke has pointed out: "the intentional repetition of the phrases 'every living creature' and 'all life' eight times in verses 8 – 17 alone affirms God's desire to preserve every species. The human annihilation of species is a matter of grave concern to the Creator."<sup>iii</sup>

While the place of people in the future promise of God's care and protection is central; it is intentionally extended directly to the rest of life on earth. This focus stands in direct contrast to the Near Eastern pagan and polytheistic creation stories of the ancient world. At the time Genesis was written, Genesis records this as a covenant between God and all life on earth (Genesis 9:17).

Biblical covenant language, and the force of stories such as the Flood, should call our attention to the way that we have allowed ourselves to interpret biblical texts and to take on a view of life that is not entirely in keeping with orthodox biblical Christian belief. In western thinking, over the last five hundred years at least, a re-ordering has taken place based on the idea of a distant, or even illusory Creator God, and an increasingly potent human presence taking centre stage in the drama of history. In societies that have accepted this view, it has become difficult for the Christian church not to read and interpret biblical history as simply human history, and to ignore God's commitment to all that he has made. In order to redress this shift in thinking and to do justice to the biblical account of the Flood, we need to reconsider the way we see things and align ourselves to the biblical understanding of humanity as created by God.

In outline, the Flood story shows us God distressed and finally outraged by human wickedness. He resolves to make a new start with the only family to obey and trust him, and to entrust to this family as care representatives of current biodiversity on earth. Following the destruction and symbolic baptism of the earth that the flood brings, God commits himself never again to take such drastic measures, and to persist in protecting and providing for Noah, his family, and all life on earth.

As we have read and believed, the story that has of course most interested us is our human well-being, but the irony is that in most times and places we have gone on to secure it at the cost of the rest of life on earth. Where Noah's faith and knowledge was put at the service of all creation, which was then physically taken into his survival story, our own experience follows the humanism of recent centuries in taking little account of the well-being of the wider creation. Even more scandalously, in view of the fact that--as Genesis would see it--we are literally "all in the same boat". Our human comfort has been secured by driving the poor into further poverty to the point where currently more than half the world lives on less than a dollar a day, where over a billion people have access to water of drinkable quality, and where the demands we make individually on the resources of creation can vary by up to forty times depending on where and how we live.

This human suffering cries out to the Creator as it did in the time of Noah. The church world wide is, for the most part, not indifferent to the need to work for change, even if not entirely convinced of its place in the priorities of mission. But we have to acknowledge that, despite the essential place in God's concerns that Genesis and other books in both Testaments give to the well-being of the wider Creation, we have remained stubbornly interested only in the human part of the story. If God insists on his covenant with creation, what might it mean for us to live out our own covenant? To find out, we must look again at what the covenant implied.

### **RECOVERING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE COVENANT**

The first vital component, and the starting point, of a covenant is the idea that a covenant must be based on an agreement with a worthy partner. We find it both before the fall, in the ringing affirmations of the first chapters of Genesis that the creation is good, and afterwards in the idea that the world's redemption was worth the life of God's own Son. God was pleased with what he made, and Jesus died to reconcile all things to himself.<sup>iv</sup>

In contrast to this, Christian history has a checkered

record with the idea of the goodness and worth of creation, and through the centuries has ranged through a variety of possibilities. Leaving aside questions of biodiversity for a moment, we can understand how the church has engaged with the question of the physical and material world in another area altogether. These varying attitudes can be seen most sharply in the Christian treatment of the question of sex in different communities through the centuries. William May's four categories of sex, seen at different times by the church as demonic, divine, casual or as simply a nuisance, might well stand as a convenient shorthand for some deformations of the church's general understanding of creation itself.<sup>v</sup>

However we understand the physical world, we need to recognise that often we have not been able to give creation the free-standing place that the Noah covenant in Genesis describes. Too frequently we have attempted to establish a value for creation and life on earth only in so far as it meets our own needs, and so placed ourselves too prominently in the agreement between God and life on earth. But God made his agreement because what he created was good, and was brought into being in love, firstly for his glory and then for our good. Only in that framework was it entrusted to human care.

The second vital component in the covenant is harder to understand and reflects the conditions that must remain on both sides for the covenant to be valid. Here again though, people are firmly put in their place, and this stands as a necessary counter to our current sense of our central place in the scheme of things. Because although human folly and wickedness led to the ecological devastation of God's judgement in the flood, and later through the fulfillment of the prophets' words<sup>vi</sup>, God does not tie the destiny of all life on earth to human folly. Rather, he assures Creation that his care will continue whatever. Thus, the covenant gives us a very practical form of hope, even now, in the face of some of the more disastrous consequences of our abuse of the earth and its species.

As we look at the covenant as an expression of God's relationship to the earth, we are given an intensely practical way of living faithfully and in a proper relationship to the wider world. The true value for other

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life on earth is that it is created and cared for by a personal Creator. It is not merely raw material for economic growth, or semi-divine emanations of some impersonal creative force, or even worse, our enemy in the struggle for species dominance, to be subdued in our fight to survive.

It is precisely the confusion over what status to give to the rest of Creation that has led to the incoherence of our relationships with our environment. We can also find in the covenant our proper place as earth-keepers for the living God who holds all creation together. The covenant is given expression by Noah and his family, and the church, which is the body of Christ, the Creator stands in their line to live out God's care and love for all he has made.

In Exodus, God shows his continuing love and concern for his people as he promises to lead them out of slavery in Egypt into the land that he has prepared for them to live. The theme of the Sinai covenant between God and his people helps us to understand God's promise of salvation and redemption. The covenant required obedience to the law and is linked with the Ten Commandments, and with the law in general. The promised land, promised to Abraham in Genesis 17, is an integral part of the Sinai covenant as Moses leads the people of Israel through the wilderness to the land of Canaan, which was to be their inheritance. Disobedience to God and his law and breaking the covenant would lead to exile from the land (Deuteronomy 28:36), disease, drought and crop failure (Leviticus 26:15-20). Here we see that Creation is drawn into the rebellions of God's people. We also see the promised redemption brought about through the people's repentance as they hear the message of God's forgiveness and renewed love in the words of Ezekiel and Isaiah. Despite the rebellious nature of God's people, God never abandoned his love for all he had made even when it was spoilt and scarred by human disobedience.

Today we live under a new covenant which is the fulfillment of God's purposes of salvation that was

expressed in the Old Testament covenants. It is a covenant of grace mediated by Jesus Christ through his sacrificial death and resurrection. The new covenant promises the redemption of the whole of creation, forgiveness and a renewed relationship with God through the Holy Spirit.

We need to rediscover, in the practice of living in the times and places God gives us, what the hope of this new covenant means. By thinking in terms of the covenant we see what folly it is to attempt to graft on environmental issues as just one issue for the church's social agenda. Rather, the task that faces us is to restore the biblical place of all life on earth in our thinking, and to translate God's concerns into our own discipleship as we follow Jesus the Lord, the Creator, who New Testament scholar Rikk Watts has called "the first earth-keeper".<sup>vii</sup> In the terms of secular society, the church is the biggest non-government organization on earth,<sup>viii</sup> and so we can glimpse what could be some wonderful consequences for all life on earth if we return to our true calling to be the body of Christ, and a biblical grasp of the scope of the gospel.

- i. See Isaiah, Ezekiel and Hosea
- ii. 2000 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species compiled by Craig Hilton Taylor, IUCN 2000 [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)
- iii. Genesis, Bruce K Waltke, Zondervan 2001
- iv. Colossians 1: 20
- v. William F May "Four Mischievous Theories of Sex" in *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar* ed A. Kass and L. Kass University of Notre Dame Press, 2000
- vi. See Hosea's predictions of marine devastation in chapter 4: 1-3 which have only come about in recent decades.
- vii. Gospel and Creation tapes and CD's available from A Rocha [www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)
- viii. Even in a national context it can be striking to see how significant a part the church can play, as for in UK for example where the Church of England is among the major landowners.