Introduction

This book arose from biblical study, but it ends with concerns which today’s student of the Bible must share with many who start from other subjects, or simply from where they are as members of the human race. My starting-point lay in tracing ideas of covenant in ancient Israel and its world. It seemed that there was an important aspect which had been neglected by scholars and theologians. As I pursued the idea which had struck me, it led into concepts of order and disorder both in the cosmos, in nature and in human society, which are found not only in the Jewish and Christian scriptures but far more widely in the human race. I became convinced that the theology of creation, especially as it has developed among Christians, has improperly narrowed the scope and power of the Bible’s teaching about our place and responsibilities in the world, at a time when it is needed as never before.

The aspect of ancient covenant thought on which the present work focuses, under the title of ‘the cosmic covenant’, has been neglected (as I believe) because it has not been identified as a theme in its own right, revealing roots in near eastern religious culture distinct from the origins of the covenants associated with Moses, Abraham and the House of David. The constituents of this theme have not been seen to belong together because they occur in parts of the Hebrew Bible which modern scholarship has assigned to widely separated parts of the biblical tradition. It is my task to argue that these different passages variously reflect a coherent religious world-view which ancient Israel shared with other, often older, cultures. Theologically this implies (as will become clear especially in later chapters) a more open and inclusive concept of revelation, and therefore of the workings of God’s grace in the world, than some Christians have held.

Thus, though the present work is offered primarily as a contribution to biblical studies, its potential significance reaches beyond that field, and finally into reflections which concern every thinking person today. It is hoped that it will be regarded not merely as a specialist work for biblical scholars, but that it may reach a wider readership and be found to have a wider appeal.
This book, then, proposes that the Bible contains a complex of themes relating to creation and order, the coherence of which has not been observed. One reason has been suggested, but there are others. First, many ways of reading the Old Testament — both more traditional, devotional ways and more sophisticated, theological approaches — have tended to organize a synthesis round the Mosaic covenant viewed through the Deuteronomic perspective. The standpoint of piety, both Jewish and Christian (and influencing both private reading and liturgy) naturally encourages a synthetic and harmonized reading. This is verified not only in the history of interpretation and liturgy: it can be said to be the natural effect of the way in which the books of the Jewish Bible were edited together into a collection, copiously adorned with cross-references and clues to delight both piety and ingenuity. Such devout harmonizing could be called the 'natural' way to read the Old Testament, provided that it is truly traditional and is not governed by that ideology which we now call fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism, as we know it today, may seem to inherit the innocent literalism of our forbears, both Jewish and Christian, but in fact it is as heavily loaded with modern presuppositions as the critical scholarship which extreme fundamentalists attack. The basic error of fundamentalism is something from which neither rabbinic midrashists nor church fathers suffered: it is a refusal to recognize the variety of styles and genres of statement in the Bible, and therefore to realize that the divine Truth, which both Jewish and Christian faith ascribes to the Bible, comes to us in many modes, some of them essentially symbolic. In the case of Covenant, the Bible presents various forms of the idea, often expressed by the same word berit, in narrative and poetry, in prose preaching and in many distinct prophetic genres. Traditional piety can harmonize and synthesize these occurrences without forgetting their differences; it is modern fundamentalism which stands in gravest danger of forcing the text into an ideological Procrustean bed. But neither way is likely to help readers of the Bible to see the original distinctiveness, and the continuing distinct significance, of that strand in biblical covenantal thinking from which the argument of this book starts out.

The same has so far also proved true of the far more complex and sophisticated enterprise of attempting to construct a theology.
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of the Old Testament. Perhaps the basic problem of such an attempt is that of choosing and justifying a principle of organization. If an interpretative scheme is chosen depending on philosophical concepts which are not of purely biblical origin (as G. von Rad employs history), there will be the danger of imposing alien categories on the Bible. If an organizing principle is sought which arises naturally from the Hebrew Bible as it was finally arranged by its scribal redactors, it is less likely to impose on the text, but is all the more likely simply to mirror the Deuteronomic synthesis.\(^1\)

If Covenant is taken as the key, as in W. Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*, the Mosaic covenant will inevitably be central; other ideas of covenant are likely to be viewed in the Deuteronomic perspective, and if in fact they are of a different character, their individuality (or indeed even their existence) may be missed.\(^2\)

The neglect of which I speak may be due to other causes, to be sought in the fixed positions of critical scholarship. For example, assumptions regarding the date and significance of the Priestly strand in the Pentateuch made it unlikely that professional scholars would discern the connections for which I shall argue. Above all, for the past thirty years, interest has been concentrated on the relationship of the Mosaic and the Davidic covenant traditions to models in ancient Near Eastern political treaties. The history of modern covenant studies has recently been authoritatively and most illuminatingly surveyed by E. W. Nicholson in *God and his People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (1986). While he does not envisage the viewpoint of my thesis, I see his work as helping to prepare the ground for it, both by his questioning how far political treaty models are fundamentally significant for biblical covenant study, and by drawing attention to the work of H. H. Schmid.\(^3\) It is no part of my present purpose to deny the relevance of treaty models, for example to the structure of Deuteronomy;\(^4\) but this recent fashion has dominated covenant studies too exclusively. With regard to the scope of the present thesis, the assumption that the phrases *Berit olam* (eternal covenant) and *Berit šalom* (covenant of peace) have a primarily political background has kept attention from a wider area of ideas which I believe was the right field to investigate, namely that of order, in cosmos, nature and society. Schmid has shown how the Bible
The Cosmic Covenant reflects these widespread ancient concepts, and has identified the corresponding Hebrew vocabulary (especially the *sedeq* words with their complex range of meaning); he connects creation with order, but hardly sees covenant as integral to the field. More recently, this has been emphasized by B. F. Batto in his article 'The Covenant of Peace: A Neglected Ancient Near Eastern Motif' (1987); our respective treatments of several key texts show that independently we have made similar observations, though the present work has a broader scope.

My title, *The Cosmic Covenant*, focuses on the biblical evidence for a belief which ancient Israel shared with neighbouring cultures, one well documented especially from Egypt and Mesopotamia; the belief in a divinely willed order harmoniously linking heaven and earth. In Israelite tradition this was established at creation, when the cosmic elements were fixed and bound to maintain the order; but the harmony was broken and permanently threatened by disorderly supernatural beings and forces, hostile to God and to humankind. The myth of the Flood and subsequent re-creation, at which in some texts (Gen 9, Isai 54:9–10) God promised his 'eternal covenant' with all creatures, expressed the belief that the cosmic harmony was the will of YHWH; but, for Israel as for her neighbours, it had to be preserved in face of hostile forces. Human collaboration in this task was effected by maintaining justice with mercy and by ritual actions, in which kings played the leading part. In this context some writers have supposed that, when Canaanite influence was strong in Israel, there were royal 'sacred marriage' rituals symbolizing the union of heaven and earth. The only clear evidence for such rituals is Sumerian, from centuries earlier, and it is a far leap from those texts to postulate theory and practice in later Canaan and Israel. Yet Hosea's polemic implies, at least, that erotic and nuptial symbolism with reference to harmony of earth and heaven was familiar; it is plausible that he aims to counter the Baal cult by assimilating and transposing its magic, making a bid to take over what he cannot destroy. The 'marriage of heaven and earth' becomes a metaphor for God's covenant with his people. But the associated theme of peace, relating humans to animals and birds, links the concept of covenant in Hosea 2 more with that presented at the end of the Flood story than with other covenant models – a link which is found again in Isaiah 54.
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It is true that the king is not mentioned in the passages just referred to; but when we turn to the evidence for the king's role in the Jerusalem cult, Psalm 89 makes the promised stability of the house of David parallel God's establishment of cosmic order, while Psalm 72 prays for the king that he will reflect the divine justice and so win peace and fruitfulness for the kingdom. In Isaiah 1–35 (in which neither Moses nor the Sinai covenant are ever mentioned) the breach of the 'cosmic covenant' is pictured in ch. 24, in terms close to those in Hosea 4:1-4. In particular it is said that dwellers on earth have 'broken the eternal covenant' (Isai 24:5); those who are to be punished are the 'host of heaven' and unruly human kings (ibid., 21–22). As for the Davidic king (God's covenant-vassal, though Isaiah does not say so), in Isaiah 11 he is promised the divine endowments (11:2) to enable him to maintain a just social order (11:3–5), and this will bring about a state of peace (11:6–9) which, here too, is pictured as embracing the animal creation. Only lacking here is an explicit term for covenant, but the idea of cosmic harmony reflected by social order on earth is clearly expressed.¹⁰

The above sketch has brought together some of the main passages on which my proposed synthesis is based, though there are still others, biblical and extra-biblical, which contribute important details. But some readers, brought up on the received traditions of critical biblical study, may be wondering about my method. How can a scholar be justified in bringing together a 'P' passage and parts of Isaiah which are generally held to be late, to reconstruct an ancient theme? My reason is that, whatever the date of composition of these passages, I believe that they enshrine old mythical material and provide valuable clues to the thematic connections involved in the total picture of the cosmic covenant.¹¹ On the subject of the binding of the elements by oath, much of the evidence is post-biblical; but it fits, in the manner of an organic continuation, with the myths of creation reflected in Job 38 and in other comparable biblical traditions which the author of Genesis 1 found unacceptable for his purpose.

The nature of the evidence makes it difficult to decide how to set out a reconstruction of the world-view and rituals which, I believe, were long in force, and thereafter were influential by memory or transposition. Scholarly 'orthodoxy' has long given supremacy to

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the category of history, and taught students to mistrust hypotheses which are not plausibly supported by chains of historical evidence. Without doubt it is difficult to justify connections and continuity between pieces of evidence spread over a long period, and the evidence to which I appeal is itself very complex. The picture of cosmic order and its covenant is connected in some passages with the original creation, in others with the situation after the Flood. Further, when the theme occurs it is often not just about creation and cosmic order: it may also be about breach of the cosmic covenant or of the oaths by which it was sealed. We must remember, throughout this discussion, that 'alah (oath or curse) is not only integral to the semantic field of covenant, but is sometimes found as an equivalent of bērit.¹²

The theme of breach of the 'cosmic covenant', of disorder in nature and society, appears in various forms. It may involve the myth of a rebellion among supernatural beings, or it may picture the land suffering under the curse of drought, or society as the world turned upside down, with no mention of the myth – though we may find traces of these elements still linked, as in Isaiah 24. The rebellion myth appears in its fullest form in 1 Enoch, where several traditions are interwoven: in the third Parable (1 Enoch 69) a form of it is combined with a full account of the cosmic oath. Most Old Testament scholars regard the rebellion myth in Enoch as a development from the story in Gen 6:1–5 which precedes the flood story. In contrast, I believe that the myth is older, forms of it being reflected in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, and that only a truncated version of it was left in Gen 6, to serve as a prelude to the Flood. Though 1 Enoch is later than Genesis and its authors must have been aware of the latter's data, too many details in the Enochian cosmology and rebellion myths point too clearly to other and older sources than Gen 6 for it to be likely that the account in 1 Enoch is merely a late invention based on that in Genesis.¹³ (Indeed, the interval between their dates of composition may well be shorter than has often been assumed.) My argument that there once existed rituals for the control of hostile forces also appeals to post-biblical and magical texts, in the belief that these preserve and explain the attitudes and intentions underlying obscure and fragmentary allusions scattered (and often obscured) in the Old Testament books.¹⁴ I believe that God's
ordering and control of the cosmic elements were declared and ‘enacted’ by means of rituals which may be reflected in some psalms, and in some passages in the prophets, which scholarly orthodoxy labels ‘eschatological’.\textsuperscript{15} Some of the language belonging to the themes of order and disorder remains traceable in the covenant curses in Deut 28 and Lev 26, though the themes have been partially transposed to suit the radically revised perspectives which developed during and after the Exile.

With these preliminaries, I shall attempt to set forth the main headings for a reconstruction of the world-view and rituals connected with the ‘cosmic covenant’, arranging the data in an order based not on putative dating of texts, but rather on a pattern which suggested itself on the hypothesis that thematically coherent material, even though coming from different periods, could belong to one complex of religious ideas which remained influential throughout those periods. This reconstruction will be outlined and discussed in successive chapters with the following themes, in the order which my hypothesis has suggested:

1. the binding of the cosmic elements by a covenantal oath;
2. the breach of this covenant by rebellious divine beings;
3. its re-establishment by God in the ‘eternal covenant’;
4. the earthly effects of breach of the cosmic covenant;
5. the ritual preservation of cosmic and earthly order;
6. the ideal picture of cosmic harmony: humans and animals.

Such is the complex of ideas which I believe to have existed (if not formally expressed) in Israelite religion under the pre-exilic kings, and to have been subsequently transposed, first by the Deuteronomistic revision of previous covenantal themes, and then by the messianic reinterpretation of royal texts which projected their application to a hoped-for future. Chapter 7 looks at some of the ways in which our themes were transposed in both Judaism and Christianity. I have tried to write of both in accordance with my conviction that they are cousins and fellow-heirs of biblical tradition, tragically alienated from each other yet still showing features which illuminate each other. I only wish I could have brought Islam into my study; but my competence, which is not great with regard to Judaism, does not stretch so far. Finally in the Epilogue I try to indicate how the ideas explored in this work can, with the help of imaginative transposition, be seen as relevant to
reflection on the state to which the human race has brought the world today. Here my viewpoint comes near to that of some recent theological essays reflecting on the ecological crisis in the light of a biblical theology of creation, though none of these have anticipated the thesis of the present work. The theology of creation, at least as expounded by Christians at many times up to now, has suffered from grave defects which, I submit, can find a necessary corrective in a better-based reading of some biblical texts in relation to other ancient literatures.

This, then, is the order in which I intend to proceed, though the nature and relationship of the texts will make it difficult, especially in the first six chapters, to keep the stages of the exposition distinct.

The thesis that there is a distinct and important concept of covenant which has been missed or neglected, and that themes of order which ancient Israel shared with a wider religious world belonged to the same complex of ideas, may strike some readers as surprising or provocative. It should be understood that I do not claim more than to show that this complex once existed as a working system and then continued, albeit modified, as a pattern of thought and imagery. I am not claiming to have discovered the key to covenant thought in ancient Israel, let alone to offer a new 'Old Testament theology'. Though cosmic and earthly order was the business of kings, the related notion of covenant is not the same as that making the king the 'son' and vassal of YHWH; and both are distinct from the idea that the Law given by Moses bound Israel to YHWH by a covenant. How early this latter way of thinking developed is perhaps an insoluble problem; it is rare in the older prophets, and in its full development it seems to belong to the sixth century, to be expressed in terms borrowed from treaty style, and to have absorbed and transmuted the older forms of covenantal thinking. It is in such an order that I suppose religious covenant thought to have developed in Israel. But I have no intention (and it would be a waste of time) to suggest that what came later was in any way inferior, or to deplore the eventual triumph of a synthesis in which kingship was a splendour (and a problem) of the past and a hope of glory to come, but was replaced for the present and the foreseeable future by the holy people. The final pattern of the tapestry which makes up the actual Hebrew
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Bible cannot be criticized away in favour of reconstructions, however convincing or attractive, of earlier stages of religious tradition.

The theme of this book, then, is that this complex of ideas existed and had its own importance; it arose from human intuitions about nature and our place in it which are found in many cultures; it flourished in ancient Israel and lived on, modified, in both Judaism and Christianity; and – despite its limitations due to its original cultural contexts – once it is recognized and understood, it can still speak today, and perhaps to a wider public than merely those who look to the Bible as the Word of God. There are Christians who cannot allow that the light of saving grace is available before the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached. This is not the Catholic tradition, which sees the Holy Spirit at work everywhere in the human race. Today there are many who feel repelled by both church and synagogue, but whose moral sense is at least as keen as, and often keener than, that of traditional religious believers. I join with all, believers or not, who see the abuse of the earth that has been entrusted to the human race, together with the unjust distribution of its products and the exploitation of the poor nations by the rich, as the supreme evils and dangers threatening our very existence. I hope that this presentation of biblical themes in relation with other expressions of human thought may commend it to more readers.