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*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.*

## “In the Beginning”<sup>1</sup>

### Digest

Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).<sup>2</sup>

Scott Hahn, “Salvation History: One Holy Family,” at [zuserver2.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vgg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m2/slvhst1.html](http://zuserver2.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vgg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m2/slvhst1.html).

*Editorial Note:* The following passages are drawn from Bernard J. Lee’s treatise on *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* and from Scott Hahn’s electronic document on “Salvation History: One Holy Family.” The purpose of these passages is to establish the Hebrew understanding of the One-and-Only God’s creatorship and the nature of his inaugural covenant with mankind (male and female).

It also should be noted that the biblical account of Creation was never meant to be a *scientific* description — with literal time periods, Garden of Eden, etc. — although this distortion is common because of our Western mindset. Rather, Genesis is an Eastern document, and its account of Creation was designed to make a *theological* statement in the framework of a Hebraic worldview. Tragically, the profound meaning, purpose and value of the Genesis account are often lost because of our misunderstanding.

### God as Yahweh

“What Yahweh might have been like before creation, if there was a before, or in God’s Self without creation — these things we cannot know. The only God we know is the God who is with us in history. . . . There is only one God! There never was another! There never will be another!

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“You yourselves are my witnesses, declares Yahweh,  
and the servant whom I have chosen,  
so that you may know and believe me  
and understand that it is I.  
*No God was formed before me,*  
nor will be after me.  
I, I am Yahweh,  
there is no other Saviour but me.  
I have revealed, have saved, and have proclaimed,  
not some foreigner among you.  
You are my witness, declares Yahweh,  
*I am God, yes, from eternity I am.*  
No one can deliver from my hand,  
when I act, who can thwart me?  
Thus says Yahweh,  
your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel . . .  
(Is 43:10-14a)”<sup>3</sup>

## God as Creator

“ . . . [I]n the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and it . . . says, ‘Now the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.’ Now there are two words in the Hebrew that denote a kind of problem. The earth was ‘formless’ and void or ‘empty.’ In other words, God had to do two things. He had to create structure, and he had to fill [it] with inhabitants. It was unformed and unfilled. There was no habitation in the beginning, and there were no inhabitants.

“Then, in the six days of creation, he first creates by his own Word day and night. What does he create the second day? He creates the sky and the sea. On the third day he creates the land. What he just did in those three days was to respond to the first problem. If the heavens and the earth were formless and empty, what he just created in those three days was form. He created form to creation. He created day and night, that’s time. He created sky and sea, that’s space. And then he creates land so that the inhabitants can dwell and live.

“What does he do the second set of three days? You can see a correspondence. The fourth day corresponds to the first, the fifth to the second, and the sixth to the third. He creates the dwellers of the day and night. He creates the sun, moon and stars to rule over the day and the night on the fourth day. On the fifth day he creates those beings that will rule over the sky and the sea, namely the birds and the fish. Then on the sixth day he creates those that will inhabit the land that he created on the third day. In other words, the Hebrews understood this as a kind of home-building project. God creates the structure in three days, and then he fills that structure with living beings on the second three days. . . .”

## God as Covenant-Maker

“And on the seventh day he covenants himself to that creation so it becomes for him a kind of temple-palace, his own home. The creator enters into a family relation and becomes, as it were, a father to his creatures. . . .

“[Many questions have been raised as to why God created in six days and rested on the seventh.] There are various interpretations and explanations given. The one that

impresses me the most is built upon the recognition that the Hebrew word, the verb ‘to swear a covenant,’ is literally built upon the Hebrew term ‘to seven oneself.’ I remember back in Hebrew class in seminary, the Hebrew professor giving out a vocabulary list and I saw the word, ‘to swear a covenant,’ and then there was a comma or ‘to seven oneself.’ I raised my hand and said, ‘Professor Huggenberger, which is it? Is it to swear a covenant, or is it to seven oneself?’ And he said, ‘Well look, the verb to swear a covenant is built upon the number seven.’ . . . [T]hat explains why God’s creation is depicted in seven days, because what is God doing in the act of creating the cosmos? He’s swearing a covenant to his world. He’s not just master. We’re not just slaves. He’s not just creator and we’re creatures. That’s true, but it doesn’t go far enough. If he had stopped on the sixth day, we would be creatures, slaves and private property of God. But he went on and blessed the seventh day and took a rest and invited us into that rest because that represents the covenant relationship that he establishes with his creation.

“Now, what is a covenant? A family bond, a sacred family bond. That is why I suspect, if you turn to Job 38, Psalm 104 and other passages in the Old Testament where the whole world is described, you don’t read about quasars and galaxies and black holes and solar systems. You don’t have a scientific description. Every time I find creation being described, it’s described in one of three terms. Either it’s described as a house, a palace, or a temple. It’s got foundations. It’s got a cornerstone. It’s got pillars. It’s got a door. It has windows. It’s got a roof, and it’s got gardens, and it’s got all kinds of other things that you have when you decorate a house, a palace, or a temple.

“When God creates in seven days, he creates a house. He builds himself a home that he can move into so that he can dwell in our midst as a father, not just a creator. So we are not just creatures; we are his children. Now, I would suggest that that gets closer to the heart of how the religious history of Genesis 1 is intended to be understood — using symbols, getting at literal historical truth, but using literary figures to do so. . . . [T]his gets a little closer to the Hebrew understanding of what it means for God to create in six days and rest the seventh and invite his creatures into that Sabbath rest.

“[It is in this context that we should understand the biblical concept of covenant and distinguish covenant from contract.] Some people might use the word [*covenant*] interchangeably with *contract* . . . [but] that is a misleading usage. The difference between covenant and contract in the Old Testament and throughout scripture is so profound that the difference could almost be highlighted by saying it’s the difference between prostitution, contract; and marriage, covenant. Or between slavery, having a slave; and having a son.

“Contractual relations usually exchange property, exchange goods and services, whereas covenants exchange persons. So when people enter into a covenant, they say, ‘I am yours, and you are mine.’ So God uses the covenant to enter into a relationship with those whom he created in his own image: humanity and all human persons. . . .

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“[In this light] Adam’s name is not only the name of an individual, the founding father of the human race, but it’s also the Hebrew word for humanity, much like we use the word *Washington* to denote the founding father of our country and the capitol of our country, as well. So *Adam* is that name of the father and of the entire human family

...

“... [Therefore] covenant can be properly understood . . . to be a sacred family bond. In ancient Israel there was no word for family. Somebody could conclude, ‘Well, maybe for the ancient Hebrews family is not important.’ But you can’t read very far in the Old Testament before you realize that for them tribal bonds, kinship obligations, marriage and parenthood and brotherhood — all of these family relations are unbreakable bonds that God himself has instituted. So, obviously for the ancient Hebrews, family was very important. But then why no word for it?

“... [C]ovenant’ was that word — that when you establish a covenant, you establish a family bond; and that when God covenants with humanity . . . what he is doing is, he is fathering his people. He’s fathering his family. . . .

“So that when God the Creator creates man in his image and likeness, what does that suggest? It suggests that our Creator, in the act of making us, is fathering us. He is creating us to enter into a father-son relationship so that we are the children of God. We are given the grace of God from the moment of our historical existence.

“Now this is a key point that theologians often debate about, but I think that it can be made very simple; and that is this: By nature we would only be creatures and servants of God. That is, if all we had were human nature to go with, we’d be God’s servants, God’s slaves, God’s possessions, his property. But from the moment of our historical existence, when he first created us, he gave to us his grace; so that Elohim, God the Creator, becomes Yahweh, the covenant Lord, the family God who calls us into his own home, into his own family life.

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“... [T]he structure of the covenant is [therefore] always familistic, domestic. God administers kinship relations and obligations through the covenant. It’s a blood bond.”<sup>4</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. Genesis 1:1.
2. Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament*, is available from several independent booksellers. See [www.bookfinder.com/book/9780809134298/](http://www.bookfinder.com/book/9780809134298/).
3. Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), pp. 33, 34.
4. Scott Hahn, “Salvation History: One Holy Family,” at [zuserver2.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vgg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m2/slvhst1.html](http://zuserver2.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vgg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m2/slvhst1.html).