

**A Religion of the Covenant:
The Centrality of Covenant Theology to the Islamic Faith**

ST540: Christian Encounter with Islam

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Introduction

Joseph Lumbard laments that the concept of covenant is one of the most “severely understudied” topics in Islamic theology.¹ As Bernard Weiss observes, “Covenant was not a subject on which Muslim authors deemed it necessary to write comprehensive and systematic treatises.”² The opposite situation obtains among Christian scholars. In contrast to the extensive and detailed treatments of the biblical concept of covenant in the fields of theology and Old and New Testament studies, Lumbard says, “A Muslim or Qur’anic covenant theology has not been articulated in the modern era.”³

One might conclude from this fact that Islam essentially has no covenant theology, or that the covenant idea is not very prominent in the Qur’an. Lumbard cautions against this conclusion. “Given the paucity of scholarship regarding the place of the covenant in the Qur’an,” he says, “one cannot even say whether or not this lacuna in scholarship arises from the fact that the concept of covenant is not as central to Islamic theology and self-understanding as it is to Judaism and Christianity, or that it is not as cohesive.”⁴ In other words, lack of scholarly treatment does not necessarily imply that covenant theology is less important in Islam; it may simply be less organized or less formulated. It may be that the lack of scholarship in this area says more about the state of Qur’anic studies than about the Qur’an itself.

1. Joseph E.B. Lumbard, “Covenant and Covenants in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 1.

2. Bernard G. Weiss, “Covenant and Law in Islam,” in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, and John W. Welch (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 50n2.

3. Lumbard, “Covenant and Covenants in the Qur’an,” 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 2.

Lumbard is one among several contemporary scholars who have devoted their efforts to ending the neglect of the covenant idea in Qur'anic studies. What these scholars are beginning to find is that historically, especially in the classical commentary tradition, the covenant is of supreme importance both to the Qur'an and to Islamic theology. The following discussion will attempt to integrate the findings of these recent studies and to present a cohesive articulation of Islamic covenant theology. It will be argued that, far from being of marginal importance, covenant theology is central to the teaching of the Qur'an and, therefore, is at the very heart of the Islamic faith.

Abundance of Covenantal Language and Commentary

An initial clue to the importance of the covenant to Islam is that the Qur'an is replete with discussions and allusions to covenantal ideas. The first and most substantial modern study of the concept of covenant in the Qur'an is a dissertation by Robert Darnell.⁵ In the abstract of his dissertation, Darnell states that "more than 700 verses of the Qur'an were found related to the covenant idea."⁶ With respect to specific terminology, Lumbard notes that "words pertaining to the covenant occur over 100 times."⁷ These statistics indicate an abundance of covenantal language.

There are two Arabic words that are of primary importance for understanding the covenants in the Qur'an.⁸ The first, *'ahd*, occurs 29 times, and the second, *mithaq*, occurs 25

5. Robert Carter Darnell, Jr. "The Idea of Divine Covenant in the Qur'an," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1970).

6. Ibid. Page numbers are not assigned to the abstract.

7. Lumbard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," 1.

8. Ibid., 2-4. See also Gerhard Böwering, "Covenant," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Damen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:464.

times.⁹ In the various corpora of the New Testament, biblical scholars rightly note the importance of words that recur with this level of frequency. Given that the Qur'an is a relatively short document in comparison with the New Testament, these figures surely suggest that the covenant idea is significant to the Qur'an. Indeed, it would be strange if the attention of hundreds of verses were dedicated to a topic of negligible importance.

In addition to the abundance of covenant language in the Qur'an, the commentary tradition (the *tafsir* literature) likewise devotes extensive coverage to the topic. Lumbard says, "The covenant is in fact quite prevalent in the Qur'an itself and even more prevalent in the commentary tradition, where many issues and concepts are linked by various commentators to the covenant between God and human beings. According to many exegetes, the covenant is central to the Qur'anic conception of humanity and of religious history."¹⁰ It is not surprising to discover extensive commentary on covenant data since there is ample material available for analysis. What may be unexpected, however, is Lumbard's statement that many exegetes concluded the centrality of covenant for the Qur'an's view of humanity and of sacred history.

Tariq Jaffer says, "There is no doubt that the Qur'an contains the seeds of Covenant Theology."¹¹ Yet, he admits, "It appears as though the seed of the Qur'anic idea of covenant did not ever develop into a fully-fledged theory."¹² He goes on to conclude, "Although Muslim traditionists and Sunni theologians acknowledged the covenant as a fundamental premise of

9. According to another source, "The word '*ahd*' is mentioned forty-six times in thirty-six verses of seventeen chapters of the Qur'an. . . . Another term synonymous with '*ahd*' is *mithaq*, which is mentioned twenty-three times in nine chapters." The calculation for '*ahd*' includes various forms of the root that appear in the text rather than simply tallying the noun. See Ibrahim Sumer, "'*Ahd* / '*Ahada*,'" in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 14-16.

10. Lumbard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," 2.

11. Tariq Jaffer, "Is There Covenant Theology in Islam?," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, edited by Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 120.

the Qur'an and an idea that is foundational to the qur'anic worldview, and although they speculated about its meaning and implications, they did not deem the idea worthy of extensive elaboration."¹³

Jaffer's conclusion is nicely balanced. It is evident that classical Muslim exegetes and theologians did not address the Qur'an's doctrine of the covenant in an independent treatise. This factor should be given its due weight. One would think that a fundamentally important doctrine would receive in-depth, independent treatment by at least some of the classical scholars. Yet notice the high priority Jaffer assigns to the covenant. He says the covenant was "a fundamental premise" and "foundational to the qur'anic worldview" in the estimation of the commentary tradition—a striking conclusion, but the evidence seems to bear its weight.¹⁴

Jaffer's findings lend support to Lombard's caution (mentioned above) that lack of independent treatises and modern scholarly studies is not necessarily a reliable gauge of the importance of the covenant concept in Islamic theology. In fact, if these findings are accurate, the lack of systematic study is misleading. Indeed, Rosalind Gwynne argues that the lack of isolated treatment implies the *opposite* conclusion. She says, "So intrinsic is it to the message of the Qur'an, in fact, that the Covenant *as a discrete concept* does not have a clear profile in Islamic scholarship."¹⁵

Gwynne offers two explanations for the lack of isolated treatment in the commentary tradition. The first is a hermeneutical or methodological reason. When the commentators discuss

12. Jaffer, "Is There Islamic Covenant Theology?," 121.

13. Ibid.

14. Torsten Hylén, "The Hand of God is over their Hands (Q 48:10): On the Notion of Covenant in al-Tabari's Account of Karbala," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 61

15. Rosalind Ward Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an: God's Arguments* (London: Routledge, 2014), 15 (italics original).

covenantal passages, she says, they “are more concerned with the immediate context and with the occasions of revelation.”¹⁶ The exegetical method employed by the commentators tended to divert their attention away from systematic analysis of discrete doctrines. This reason alone, however, would be an insufficient explanation. The second explanation she posits is historical in nature and pertains to the controversies that existed in the formative period of Islamic theology. Gwynne says, “Later theological developments, especially the reaction against the Mu‘tazilites, turned discussion away from any limitation—voluntary or not—upon the power of God.”¹⁷

The majority of Islamic theologians and commentators in the formative period of Islamic thought were traditionist Sunnis. Their chief opponents were the Mu‘tazilites.¹⁸ Gwynne makes the point that the Mu‘tazilites utilized some of the covenant passages in the Qur’an in support of certain views the Sunnis found objectionable. These debates caused Sunni scholars to resist and distance themselves from Mu‘tazilite lines of thought, including some of their covenantal reasoning.¹⁹ These historical theological conflicts, together with Gwynne’s first observation on the classical exegetical method, provides a plausible explanation for why covenant is both central to the teaching of the Qur’an and conspicuously lacking in robust theological development as an independent topic among the other *loci* of Islamic theology. It seems, therefore, that the abundance of material in the Qur’an devoted to the covenant, with the added testimony of the commentary tradition, provides initial support that covenant theology is central to Islam.

16. Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur’an*, 15.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Jaffer, “Is There Islamic Covenant Theology?,” 113.

19. *Ibid.*, 113-115. See note 45 below for elaboration on this point.

The Nature of Covenant in the Qur'an

Having established the extensive concentration of the Qur'an and the *tafsir* literature on the covenant idea, we must now consider the Qur'an's understanding of the nature of that idea. First, we will examine how the Qur'an defines a covenant. The primary pair of covenantal, Arabic terms were mentioned above. The definitions of these words will be of primary importance in understanding the qur'anic conception of covenant. The second item to examine along these lines is the nature of the relationship that a covenant creates between the parties included in its purview. According to the Qur'an, God and humanity share a covenant relationship (Q 7:172). The state of affairs actualized between God and man as covenant partners is essential for unlocking Islamic covenant theology.

Defining A Qur'anic Covenant

Recall that the two primary Arabic words for covenant in the Qur'an are *'ahd* and *mithaq*. The notions inherent in these and related words are neither new nor isolated to 7th century Arabia. The ideas they convey antedate Islam by centuries, stretching back into the ancient Near East and overlapping with Hebrew covenantal terminology in the Old Testament from the period of the Late Bronze Age.²⁰ There are places in the Qur'an and in the commentary tradition where *'ahd* and *mithaq* are used interchangeably (e.g., Q 2:27; 13:20, 25),²¹ but there are other places that display a conceptual divergence between them.

20. Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an*, 17-18; Hylén, "The Hand of God is over their Hands (Q 48:10): On the Notion of Covenant in al-Tabari's Account of Karbala," 62-64; Weiss, "Covenant and Law in Islam," 52.

21. Böwering, "Covenant," 464; Lombard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an," 3.

Gerhard Böwering defines *'ahd* as a “commitment, obligation, pledge, covenant.”²²

Citing several occurrences in the Qur'an, Lombard concludes from his own word studies that, “In and of itself *'ahd* thus implies a reciprocal agreement and obligation, but when used with the preposition *ila*, *'ahd* indicates a unilateral ‘agreement’ that has been ‘enjoined’ by one party upon the other.”²³ By contrast, “The term *mithaq* itself implies reciprocity between two parties.”²⁴ Böwering notes that *mithaq* carries the sense of an “agreement, covenant, contract.”²⁵ Rafik Berjak defines *mithaq* as “a confirmed contract, guaranteed by an oath.”²⁶

So then, a qur'anic covenant is a solemn, sworn, binding arrangement enacted between at least two parties.²⁷ This arrangement may take the form of a *unilateral* obligation imposed on another party, or the form of a *bilateral*, reciprocal agreement. The essence of the former type is mere obedience,²⁸ that of the latter includes an element of mutuality.²⁹ As a general conclusion from these word studies, Jaffer states that a covenant “cements bonds between contracting parties and prescribes obligations between them. . . . The obligations were either taken on by one of the parties in favor of the other, or imposed by one upon the other, or mutually accepted by both.”³⁰ This naturally raises the question: what type of covenant exists between God and humanity?

22. Böwering, “Covenant,” 464; cf. Sumer, “‘Ahd / ‘Ahada,” 14.

23. Lombard, “Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an,” 3.

24. *Ibid.*, 4.

25. Böwering, “Covenant,” 464.

26. Rafik Berjak, “*Mithaq*,” in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, 409.

27. Frederick Mathewson Denny, “Some Religio-Communal Terms and Concepts in the Qur'ān,” *Numen* 24, no. 1 (Apr. 1977): 48.

28. Weiss, “Covenant and Law in Islam,” 59.

29. Hylén, “The Hand of God is over their Hands,” 64.

30. Jaffer, “Is There Islamic Covenant Theology?,” 104; cf. Böwering, “Covenant,” 464, “

The Binding of God?

As Mark Anderson notes, the Qur'an maintains a maximal view of God's transcendence. Anderson says, "The Qur'an asserts [God's] untrammelled glory and utter inapproachability, making its creator-creature distinction as sharp as possible."³¹ The Qur'an proclaims, "He is the One who originates creation and will do it again—this is even easier for Him. He is above all comparison in the heavens and earth; He has the power to decide" (Q 30:27);³² "Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him'" (Q 112); God is "the Glorious Lord of the Throne, He does whatever He will" (Q 85:15-16).

Because of God's utter transcendence, Anderson also asserts that the Qur'an maintains "an absolute master-servant distinction."³³ He says the "master-servant distinction excludes the very possibility of God's being humble," and hence the relationship between God and humanity "involves attitudes of reverent fear of God, humility, subservience, and grateful dependence."³⁴ Therefore, "Lacking the voluntary condescension of divine approach so intrinsic to biblical theology, God's inaccessibility in the Qur'an leads us not actually to love but only to fear him."³⁵

As pronounced as the Qur'an's creator-creature and master-servant distinctions are, it seems obvious that the nature of the divine-human covenant relationship could only be characterized as a unilateral imposition of the divine will—an entirely one-sided arrangement from the Creator/Master demanding sheer obedience from the creature/servant. But it is not so

31. Mark Robert Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context: A Christian Exploration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 63.

32. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Qur'an are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

33. Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context*, 65.

34. *Ibid.*, 80, 84.

35. *Ibid.*, 64.

simple. The Qur'an states that God is in a *mithaq* with human beings (Q 5:13, 70; 13:20). This type of covenant is inherently reciprocal in nature.

Despite the infinite gulf between Creator/Master and creature/servant, Anderson makes the point that, although the "intimacy involved in the Qur'anic covenant is decidedly one-sided," nevertheless, the covenant relationship is "marked by *mutual* commitment."³⁶ God alone is the one with intimate knowledge of his covenant partner, but the terms of the covenant are reciprocal and conditional, placing obligations on *both* partners. This claim seems inconsistent with God's unlimited transcendence and freedom, yet the Qur'an itself explicitly mentions this conditional reciprocity. God says, "Children of Israel, remember My blessing wherewith I blessed you, and fulfil My covenant and I shall fulfil your covenant; and have awe of Me" (Q 2:40).³⁷

On the basis of such passages, Frederick Denny argues that, "It would be easy to multiply examples of how the Qur'anic covenant concept entails mutual conditions and responsibility."³⁸ Citing Q 33:72 and 2:30, Denny says, "These two passages are exceedingly important for a proper understanding of the covenant idea in the Qur'an, for they reveal a dimension of human responsibility and potential initiative which is easily lost sight of when the 'servant-slave' aspect of man under God is emphasized, as it often is."³⁹ Denny's conclusion strikes the precise balance between reciprocity and transcendence. He states that there is enough data in the Qur'an "to

36. Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context*, 67-68 (italics original).

37. A.J. Arberry, trans., *The Koran Interpreted* (1955; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1996). Denny says this covenant with Israel is meant to have application to Muhammed's situation as well. See Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms and Concepts in the Qur'an," 51.

38. Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms and Concepts in the Qur'an," 53. See also Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 88, "But every covenant, inasmuch as it is a covenant, puts both parties under obligations."

39. Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms," 58.

show a clear mutuality of rights and duties, however unequal, on *both* sides, without suggesting that the basic relationship is anything resembling even approximate parity.”⁴⁰

God remains absolutely sovereign, transcendent, and free, and the covenant with humanity is imposed by unilateral divine enactment. There is no bargaining of stipulations or negotiating of terms. Humanity simply and exclusively receives the covenant from God. As Weiss highlights, the covenant does not even await man’s acceptance before it goes into effect.⁴¹ Thus Anderson defines the Qur’an’s view of the divine-human covenant as “a formal expression of the sovereignly imposed religious bond between God and humankind, with the idea of mutual obligation at its heart.”⁴² The covenant establishes the entire framework of God’s relationship to every individual human being. Moreover, the covenant institutes the full complement of the parameters that determine God’s dealings with each person. The terms, conditions, stipulations, and sanctions of the covenant are inviolable, obligating both God and humanity.⁴³

Where, then, do God’s obligations in the covenant come from? The answer can only be that they are exclusively *self-imposed*. The obligations placed upon God do not come from his creatures but from his own commitments. His covenant requires *islam* (exclusive loyalty and submission) from human beings, and in response he has pledged “to reciprocate loyalty for loyalty, rejection for rejection.”⁴⁴ God has made promises to his covenant partner, humanity, and

40. Ibid., 53n68 (*italics original*).

41. Weiss, “Covenant and Law in Islam,” 72.

42. Anderson, *The Qur’an in Context*, 87.

43. Humanity’s moral responsibility to believe and obey God’s law, as well as the accountability for unbelief and sin before God’s judgment, are nested in the divine-human covenant; equally, humanity’s expectation of divine favor, blessing, and reward are based on God’s covenant commitments. See Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur’an*, 14-16.

44. Anderson, *The Qur’an in Context*, 88.

the Qur'an explicitly asserts that God has committed himself to keeping his word and that he is, therefore, incapable of violating the covenant by breaking his promises: "This is God's promise: God *never breaks* his promise, but most people do not know" (Q 30:6); "We make it *Our duty* to help the believers" (Q 30:47); "They have sworn . . . that He will not raise the dead to life. But He will—it is his *binding* promise (Q 16:38); "Say to them, 'Have you received a promise from God—for God *never breaks* His promise?'" (Q 2:80).⁴⁵ This two-sided covenant relationship is definitional to Islam: God issues conditional promises, and man is obliged to respond (Q 2:40).⁴⁶

The Qur'anic Covenant of Grace

Thus far it has been shown that covenantal language is abundant in the Qur'an and that the commentary tradition has placed tremendous emphasis on the covenant as central to Islam. We have also seen that the covenant forms the nature of the divine-human relationship and determines both humanity's (divinely imposed) obligations to God and God's (freely self-imposed) obligations to humanity. The final question to consider, for our purposes, is the content

45. Weiss discusses the controversy between orthodox (Ash'arite) theologians and their Mu'tazilite opponents over the issue of divine obligations. He notes that the renowned classical commentator, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1150-1210 CE), "takes pains to show that the divine promise in no sense places an obligation on God. In this he reflects mainline Sunni thinking, which affirms that God cannot be under any obligation, that status being limited entirely to the creature." See Weiss, "Covenant and Law in Islam," 72. Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, insisted, as one of their "five principles," that "where God in the Qur'an had promised reward or threatened punishment, he was bound to carry this out." See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 229; cf. 212.

According to Weiss, al-Razi's explanation of the promise-keeping passages turned God's promises into prophecies. In other words, God's promises are merely pronouncements of what he freely intends to do. The assurance that God will "keep his promise" is rooted in the fact that God does not lie about what he intends to do (Weiss, "Covenant and Law in Islam," 71). Interestingly, al-Razi ultimately appeals to the same thing as the Mu'tazilites to anchor the security of God's promises/prophecies, viz., God's character—God would never violate his word because of his truthfulness (Q 10:63-64). The Ash'arites dogmatically maintained that God is bound by nothing except the divine will, to which he is always freely truthful. The Mu'tazilites cast the divine truthfulness in terms of covenant obligations, but the covenant *just is* the divine will freely expressed as a promise. Ultimately, then, the two groups seem to be insisting on saying the same thing in opposing ways. In either case, the end result is the same (God keeps his word) and for the same reason (God is truthful).

46. Citing al-Razi's commentary on Q 16:95, Weiss says, "Thus a Muslim is by definition one who fulfills the covenant, and Islam is by definition the act of abiding by the covenant" ("Covenant and Law in Islam," 65n22).

of the covenant. Three points deserve attention. What is God's covenant promise to humanity, and for what purpose did God institute the covenant? On what terms is the covenant established? And how does God's general covenant with humanity relate to the plurality of his historical covenants with specific people and communities? Let us briefly address each of these questions.

The Purpose, the Promise, and the Condition

God made an initial covenant with Adam alone in the Garden of Eden, but, at the instigation of Satan, Adam and his wife sinned by disobeying God and were cast out of the Garden (Q 2:36; 7:20-22; 20:115-121). Although Islam has no comparable doctrine of original sin in the Christian sense,⁴⁷ there were still negative consequences from the Fall that have an adverse effect upon all people.⁴⁸ In response to the Fall of Adam, God displayed his mercy rather than strict justice: "Then Adam received some words from His Lord and He accepted his repentance: He is the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful" (Q 2:37).⁴⁹ Adam and his wife were still expelled from the Garden, but not only did God save Adam through his guidance by turning him from his sin, he further declared his intention to send his light and guidance to restore all humanity: "We said, 'Get out, all of you! But when guidance comes from Me, *as it certainly will*, there will be no fear for those who follow My guidance nor will they grieve—those who

47. See Mlada Mikulicová, "Adam's Story in the Qur'an," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 4, no. 2 (2014): 277-296; Oliver Leaman, "Punishment and Original Sin," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, 512; Jaffer, "Is There Islamic Covenant Theology?," 111.

48. Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context*, 105-107, outlines three negative effects of the Fall upon humanity, and he casts each of them in terms of the curse of *alienation*: Adam's sin resulted in (1) spiritual alienation from God, (2) social alienation from Satan, and (3) spatial alienation from the Garden. In this limited sense, Anderson argues, Adam acted as a kind of head and representative of humanity because all his descendants must bear the consequences of his own breach of the covenant.

49. Cf. Q 20:121-122, "Adam disobeyed his Lord and was led astray—later his Lord brought him close, accepted his repentance, and guided him."

disbelieve and deny Our messages shall be the inhabitants of the Fire, and there they will remain” (Q 2:38-39, italics added).

In accordance with his purpose to guide humanity back to himself, God discarded the individual covenant with Adam and established in its place a universal covenant with all of humanity (Q 7:172-173). Though enacted second, this universal covenant is now considered the first covenant since the former one is nullified. The Qur’an says God brought forth all of pre-existent humanity, every individual soul who will ever live, from the loins of Adam and made them swear their faith in the oneness of God (*tawhid*) and pledge their exclusive submission to his lordship (*islam*). This covenant is referred to as the Primordial Covenant, and there are two passages in the Qur’an where it is enacted, viz., the Verse of the Covenant (Q 7:172) and the Verse of the Trust (Q 33:72).⁵⁰ According to Hylén, the Primordial Covenant is defined as “God’s promise of salvation in return for the human obligation to obey and worship Him only.”⁵¹

All people are born in this covenant relationship with God, and the mark of the covenant is stamped onto human nature as a “primordial disposition” towards the true religion.⁵² All people are thus guided internally towards God, and each will be held accountable to their primordial oath.⁵³ Bradley Cook says, “There is almost universal agreement in Islam that humanity will be held accountable at the Day of Judgment for this self-conscious but premortal

50. Nora S. Eggen, “Conceptions of Trust in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 64; Wadad al-Qadi, “The Primordial Covenant and Human Nature in the Qur’an,” in *Occasional Papers of the Margaret Weyerhaeuser Jewett Chair of Arabic* 1, edited by Ramzi Baalbaki (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2006), 7-8, 46-48.

51. Hylén, “The Hand of God is over their Hands,” 59.

52. The primordial nature is known as the *fitra* (Q 30:30). See Camilla Adang, “Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind: The Concept of *Fitra* in the Works of Ibn Hazam,” *Al-Qantara* 21 (2000): 391-409; Nevad Kahteran, “Fitra,” in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, 210-213; Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur’an*, 2nd ed. (1989; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23-25; al-Qadi, “The Primordial Covenant,” 35-37.

53. Weiss, “Covenant and Law in Islam,” 59-61; Jaffer, “Is There Islamic Covenant Theology?,” 109-110.

admission of God's ultimate lordship."⁵⁴ Breaking the covenant will result in damnation, but Paradise is the reward of fulfilling the covenant.⁵⁵ As Nora Eggen puts it, "It is in man's own interest to keep the trust relationship, as human salvation lies in fulfilling the covenant with God. It is the hallmark of man's humanity and breaking it will lead to God's curse and destruction (Q. 13:20-5)."⁵⁶

We see then that God's purpose in the Primordial Covenant is the guidance of humanity into salvation. His promise is Paradise, and the condition for receiving this reward is faithfulness to the pretemporal oath of allegiance that each person swore in pre-existence to faith in God's sole deity (*tawhid*, monotheism) and obedience to his absolute lordship (*islam*, submission). Thus salvation (by faith and good works: Q 2:277; 3:192-195; 5:65, 92-93; 7:8-9) is determined on the basis of the Primordial Covenant, and the punishment threatened for violating the covenant is the eternal Fire of God's judgment (Q 2:27; 3:77; 7:44-45; 14:22-23).

The Covenant and the Covenants

In her magisterial work on the Primordial Covenant, Wadad al-Qadi has shown that the Primordial Covenant is indeed a "covenant of grace"—the "new covenant" enacted for the salvation of fallen, frail, wayward humanity.⁵⁷ Because of the *fitra*, humans are inherently good, but human nature is also flawed by inherent weakness, limitations, forgetfulness, and lethargy (Q. 70:19-21; 95:4-5). It is this human proneness to forget God's covenant and become lethargic

54. Bradley J. Cook, "Pre-Mortality in Mystical Islam and the Cosmic Journey of the Soul," *Dialogue* 50, no. 1 (2017): 43.

55. Michael Ebstein, "Covenant (Religious) Pre-Eternal," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2007-), 1:75.

56. Eggen, "Conceptions of Trust in the Qur'an," 65.

57. al-Qadi, "The Primordial Covenant," 50.

in God's service that are lethal, because forgetting God's covenant and growing slack in obedience are sins leading to damnation.⁵⁸ The covenant was graciously instituted to make salvation possible,⁵⁹ but the *fitra* alone is insufficient to guide sinners to salvation (Q 12:53).

In addition to the "common grace" of the *fitra* and the signs of the created order, God also pledged the "special grace" of guidance through revelation (Q 7:35-36). Therefore, God instituted a second covenant in order to restore sinners to the first covenant so that they might be saved.⁶⁰ Ibn 'Abbas, a Companion of Muhammed, is reported to have said, "The Hour (of the Day of Judgment) will not come until all humans are born who were given the covenant on that (first primal) day. Whoever encounters the second covenant and fulfils it will profit from the first covenant. Whoever encounters the second covenant but does not fulfil it will not be benefited by the first."⁶¹

This second covenant is made with the Prophets (Q 3:81), assigning them the task of delivering God's messages—"the Book and the Balance" (Q 42:17)—to each people group for their salvation (Q 57:26-29). The prophetic message contained both good tidings and warnings, and these were nothing other than a "reminder" of the Primordial Covenant (Q 2:213).⁶² Through the Prophets, God entered specific historical covenants with those who embraced the message (Q 48:10), yet the message and the covenant sent to each community were identical in substance (Q 2:136; 4:163-165; 42:13). Thus, there are only two covenants in Islam: the Primordial Covenant

58. al-Qadi, "The Primordial Covenant," 32-35.

59. Ibid., 36-37; Darnell, "The Idea of Divine Covenant in the Qur'an," 48, 51, 53-54.

60. al-Qadi, "The Primordial Covenant," 38-42; Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context*, 72-75.

61. Umar F. Abd-Allah, "Theological Dimensions of Islamic Law," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 251.

62. Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an*, 17; Lombard, "Covenant and Covenants," 8-10, 15; al-Qadi, "The Primordial Covenant," 39-41.

(enacted in eternity with all people) and the Prophetic Covenant (enacted in history with believers).⁶³ The Prophetic Covenant is one in substance throughout history but differs in its various administrations according to the circumstances of time, place, and people group. The Prophetic Covenant culminates in Islam with the sending of Muhammad as the final prophet.⁶⁴

Conclusion

On the surface, it seems that covenant theology is of minimal importance to Islam. As we have seen, however, covenant theology is at the heart of Islam. The Qur'an is replete with covenantal material. The commentary tradition also bears witness that the covenant is fundamental to the Islamic worldview. As al-Razi aptly puts it, the covenant "refers to the totality of what is required in religion. . . . [It] embraces everything which is included in theology [*kalam*] and jurisprudence [*fiqh*], since there is no true worship apart from these two things."⁶⁵

The Qur'an teaches that every human being is born in a Primordial Covenant with God, and thus the entire divine-human relationship is covenantal in form. God has also made a second covenant, sending guidance through the Prophets to restore wayward sinners to the path of *tawhid* and *islam*. Thus, people are saved on the basis of the first covenant, but only with the divine grace, forgiveness, and assistance offered in the second covenant. This covenantal vision determines the nature of every essential element of the Islamic faith. We ought to conclude, therefore, as Annemarie Schimmel says, that Islam is indeed a "religion of the covenant."⁶⁶

63. Sumer, "Ahd / Ahada," 14-15; Weiss, "Covenant and Law in Islam," 68.

64. Darnell, "The Idea of Divine Covenant in the Qur'an," 343-344.

65. Weiss, "Covenant and Law in Islam," 69n30.

66. Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 252-253.

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