

Kingdom through Covenant – A Review

Review of *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012, 848 pages.

A. This book is written by two professors from Southern Seminary; one a theologian, the other an Old Testament scholar. The work in question is a courageous effort to forge a *via media* between traditional covenant theology (CT) and dispensational theology (DT). If for no other reason than this, *Kingdom through Covenant* deserves attention, and Crossway are owed some plaudits for publishing it. Whether we agree with their conception of biblical theology or not it is good to see a presentation which aims to amend errors in other viewpoints while serving up a positive interpretation of its own. The authors both note a debt to New Covenant Theology (or NCT, 24), and it is a noteworthy step forward for this position.

As a person who seeks to build theology upon the Covenants of Scripture I was naturally interested in what the two authors had to say. In the short Preface we are told that “Care has been taken to let the text speak for itself” (11), which was heartening to read. But this claim is directly followed up with the words, “as the biblical covenants are progressively unfolded in God’s plan, reaching their culmination in the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I placed a question mark in the margin as soon as I read this, because I sensed that they were saying the covenants were fulfilled at Christ’s first coming, which, if right, would lead them inevitably into some form of supercessionism. That is to say, if, for example, the Davidic Covenant is fulfilled at the first coming then why look for any literal fulfillment of the specific geopolitical prophecies which make up such an important part of that covenant in the OT? But more on that as we proceed.

Stephen Wellum, the theologian, writes the first three chapters, which aims to define how covenant theology on one hand and dispensational theology on the other have understood the covenants. Then the hermeneutical issues are discussed. These chapters comprise Part One.

Chapters 4 all the through to 15 were written by Peter Gentry, an OT scholar. Gentry’s job is to explain the biblical covenants exegetically. Wellum then closes the chapters off in Part Three (chs.16-17) with a review and proposal. Gentry provides an Appendix on the word *berit* which lends support his contention for the existence of a Creation covenant.

There is much in this work which repays the reader’s time. Numerous insightful points and critiques are put forth, as well as helpful exegetical and cultural data. For example, I didn’t know that, “Although other nations besides Israel practised circumcision, the Israelites were the only nation to completely cut off and remove the foreskin.” (274). There are lots of these little notes dotted around the book (particularly Gentry’s section). For the most part, the position of the authors is well argued and thought-provoking. The book is dense, which makes any review of its content necessarily selective.

B. Nevertheless, at the end of the day I came away from the book benefited but finally disappointed.

On page 33 Wellum approves of Brian Rosner's definition of Biblical Theology, which involves "theological interpretation of Scripture," which I find a bit troublesome. Wellum writes:

Biblical theology is concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to literary, historical, and theological dimensions of various corpora, as well as to the interrelationships between earlier and later texts in Scripture. Furthermore, biblical theology is interested not merely in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes as it traces out the Bible's own story line, on the Bible's own terms, as the plot line reaches its culmination in Christ.

He then goes on to give his own definition; a definition that includes this statement:

Biblical theology as a hermeneutical discipline attempts to exegete texts in their context and then, in light of the entire Canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between before and after in that plan which culminates in Christ. (34).

In a footnote he recommends Graeme Goldsworthy's *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*; a book which makes no bones about reinterpreting the OT by the New.

The trouble I have with the definitions above is that it seems they are saying two opposing things. I have always felt this way about this approach. I wonder, how can one "trace out the Bible's own story line" while also taking into account "the interrelationships between earlier and later texts of Scripture"? How can one "exegete texts in their context" while presupposing an interpretive grid which "culminates in Christ" (i.e. the Cross)? What if the texts in context *don't* refer to the Cross but to the second advent? It seems that the driving assumption of fulfillment at the first advent endangers unfettered exegesis of "the texts in their context."

Not that either pursuit is wrong, but surely trying to do both things simultaneously is a bit schizophrenic? The first inquiry requires that as much as is possible we don't pursue the second. And this unease is given support when, as already noted, this reader was alerted to the writers working assumption that the first coming of Christ provides the hermeneutical cast into which all that came before is to be fitted. By the time I had finished Part 1 this feeling had been overwhelmingly confirmed by Wellum (34, 40, 54, 86, 89, 92, 94, 95, 99, 100-101, 103-105, 107, etc.). Assurances to the contrary notwithstanding (e.g. 435), as one continues through the book one seeks in vain for any awareness of their presupposition, and so no substantiation of this dominating premise is forthcoming. It is the big flaw in the book's argument and it is fatal, for it predetermines their whole approach, forcing them to major in typological interpretations, just as it does covenant theology. It is hardly surprising to have to report their adoption of many recent ideas presented by promoters of amillennial eschatology.

C. Another thing that was confirmed by the close of Wellum's prolegomena was that whatever *Kingdom through Covenant* is, it is certainly not a *via media*. Unsurprisingly, because they seek

fulfillments of the covenants at the Cross, Wellum and Gentry embrace the same basic interpretative procedures as covenant theologians (whom they often recommend). In large measure, their arguing is almost the same as contemporary CT's! The OT is to be interpreted by the NT (with some reservation, which I shall return to); the land-motif is symbolical, the story of redemption is front and center; typology is to both drive interpretations and help formulate doctrine. Of course, this also means that meanings of covenantal texts can and do change or "transform" (see 598, 608), and so be morphed almost out of recognition from how they were originally worded.

D. Typology, as everyone ought to know, is bound to theology; it seldom if ever precedes theology, as the authors appear to know (111 n.68, 115 n.79). It is therefore question-begging to try to employ typology to prove one's theology. At best it can illustrate it. Here is an example I have used before:

In the Genesis 24 story of the getting of a bride for Isaac there is a motif which is recapitulated in the church. Eleazar (if it is he) is a type of the Holy Spirit, and he goes to Rebekah (type of the Bride of Christ) and finally through the servant's efforts, she is asked "Will you go with this man?" She answers, "I will go" (Gen. 24:58). Then she is brought to Isaac (a type of Christ) to be his. And there it is! A typology of Semi-Pelagianism! The motif is there. It all fits. Semi-Pelagianism must be true! This illustrates the danger of deriving doctrine from types. We need to heed the following warning:

Second, we observe in Scripture itself that typological understanding never creates new revelatory data. It only underscores, illustrates, and amplifies what has already been stated clearly. In other words: typological understanding enriches but does not replace a previous understanding of revelation. It is checked by philological-grammatical understanding. – Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 87.

As I have said before: "A type must be identified as a type. For this to occur the antitype must be known, otherwise calling something a type would be like calling it a thing-a-mi-jig. But if the antitype must be known it must be shown to be indeed an antitype. Thus, where there is good reason to question the identification (read interpretation) of the said antitype, we must examine the reasons for arriving at the identification of it as an antitype. Are we told directly that Y is an antitype of X? If not, how "thick" (to use W. Brueggemann's word) is the connection? That is to say, with what amount of confidence may we invest an object with the status of a type?"

Letting types lead to a theological construct nearly always begs the question. The authors' views on the subject do nothing to alleviate this problem of circularity.

E. In many places (e.g. 512, 607) we read that the New Covenant replaces the other covenants. But this does not follow at all. The New covenant is much better seen as being the means by which the other covenant oaths to which God obligated Himself find their fulfillment. This is why New covenant truths are found mixed with the other covenants, especially in the Prophets (like Isa. 51:3, 6; 52:1-2, 9, 13; Jer. 23:5-8; 30:9-10; 32:37-41; 33:14-16; Ezek. 37:11-14, 21-26, etc.). But these envisage the physical reign of Christ on earth, which is not a first coming reality. Gentry and Wellum have to support their contention that the New Covenant supersedes

the others with the bracing mechanism of typological hermeneutics. This often involves throwing the spotlight on structures within the Bible, often at the expense of the wording of the text. The reason for this is because structural principles are apt to serve the ends of those who find them. The position of the authors requires them to read the fulfillment of the other covenants in light of their first advent understanding of the New Covenant. This leaves the other covenants shorn of many of their specifications.

F. For there to be a true middle course one must know in advance where the two curbs are. Over and over again this writer had cause to question whether the authors really had but a smattering of knowledge about dispensationalism. While their understanding of (and oftentimes agreement with) covenant theology is everywhere clearly in evidence, the same cannot be said for their comprehension of dispensational theology. Indeed, simply looking at the General Index will show the meager use of traditional dispensationalist sources. We were pleased to see some interaction with John Feinberg's essay "Systems of Discontinuity", though much of this was descriptive, only showing dissent in the area of typology (though Wellum's treatment of Feinberg and DT typology was inadequate).

As both traditional dispensationalists and covenant theologians have pointed out, progressive dispensationalism has far more in common with G.E. Ladd's covenant premillennialism than with traditional dispensationalism. Even allowing for the insights from PD, no traditional dispensationalist will think himself fairly represented by that view. Yet Wellum is content to base a lot of his argumentation on PD Craig Blaising's account of dispensational taxonomy; a survey whose obvious apologetic purpose many believe unsatisfactory. As someone who has kept up with many books espousing covenant theology, this writer can say that compared to developments in CT dispensationalism (minus PD) has had a fairly steady ride. As noted, John Feinberg is used, but as Wellum counts him a PD (41) my comment about lack of discussion with DT's is not dislodged. To me it seemed that the authors familiarity with traditional dispensationalist writers was slight. Two quick examples will suffice. On the subject of ecclesiology Wellum says,

...dispensational theology affirms credobaptism, contra paedobaptism, since one cannot equate the sign of the old covenant with the sign of the new... (43)

Anyone with only a passing acquaintance with L. S. Chafer's *Systematic Theology* would know that he tries to stridently defend infant baptism. Who does not know that men like Scofield, Walvoord and others were paedo-baptists?

Again, try this:

How did classic dispensationalists correlate the biblical covenants? Similar to all forms of dispensational theology, they argued that the foundational covenant of Scripture is the Abrahamic and not the Adamic...since they did not recognize such a covenant. (45)

One has to wonder if the writer of that quote has ever opened a Scofield Reference Bible (note on Gen. 2:16)? Or read anything by Lewis Sperry Chafer or Arnold Fruchtenbaum, or even

Eugene Merrill? These men, and many more dispensationalists have affirmed their belief in an Adamic covenant!

G. There are some noteworthy discussions of passages in the book. Probably the most intriguing part of Gentry's contribution is his promotion of a pre-fall "Creation covenant." Gentry's exposition of this covenant is found in Chapters 5 and 6. While pursuing an exchange with Paul Williamson, Gentry traces out the difference between the phrase "to cut a covenant" (*karat berith*), and "to uphold an existing covenant" (*heqim berith*). And he makes a reasonable circumstantial case for tying in the Noahic covenant, which adopts the language of "upholding a covenant", with a previously existing "Creation covenant" (155-156, 217-221). On a personal note, a Creation covenant would support my own theological project considerably. Still, when all the pages about the *imago Dei* and ANE parallels are covered, the actual proof for a Creation covenant is, I think, unimpressive. Even if we grant its existence, the problem is one of definition. Supposing one can prove such a covenant. What, precisely, did it say? Where are its clearly drawn terms? If we cannot determine with any solid confidence the wording of the original covenant, how can we say anything about it which will be theologically productive? And as we have had cause to [point out](#), once our surmises are given entry to our theologies, they have a nasty habit of stealing the limelight from more clearly revealed truths.

I think it is dubious to think about Noah (let alone Abraham, Israel, David, etc.) as "new Adams," as these writers, in line with some contemporary CT scholars do. This kind of thinking comes quite naturally to those with a predisposition for types, but although one may grant some sort of representative function to these people, we are nowhere told they are "new Adams." We are told that Jesus Christ is "the second Man" (1 Cor. 15:47), and it is well to leave it at that. There is some pleading for a straight-forward reading of the text (e.g. 157) in this section, but one has cause to ponder its selectivity (see, e.g. 192 where the author wants to assume identity of meaning for "image of god" between 15th century B.C. ANE customs and Genesis. Surely here interpretation is being decided beforehand and foisted on the text from without?).

H. Turning to a few more examples, are we really to believe that utter destruction comes upon humanity because "they have violated the instructions and terms of the Noahic covenant" (172)? I rather thought God made the covenant with Noah and the rest of creation. God sent a flood. Noah built an Ark. God said He wouldn't do that again. What was to violate?

The authors both stress the inadequacy of viewing covenants as unilateral or bilateral, or unconditional or conditional (see Wellum's summary on 609f.), but this reviewer can think of no scholar who does not place exception clauses on these ways of thinking. As every dispensational scholar I know about is careful to explain, the "unconditional" covenants with Abraham, Israel, David, etc., do contain temporal conditions, which if not kept will cause God to act in judgment. But these can never finally frustrate the outcome of the oaths God bound Himself to keep, since those promises obligate Him to insure the conditions are eventually met (which is where the New covenant comes in).

It seems to me that trying to create a tension between the covenants by rejecting the unilateral/bilateral dichotomy opens up another opportunity for typology to enter and begin dictating the play. This pliancy assists supercessionism of all stripes greatly.

I. Although ranging for several pages, Gentry's explanation of Jeremiah 33:14-26 is rather a thin veneer, and disappoints. Gentry's preferred pattern of pursuing detailed digressions from the text and then bringing his conclusions to his interpretations of the text strike me as more impressive and substantial looking than they are. When all is said and done, his actual dealing with passages sometimes appears a little shallow and strained. This is certainly the case with his treatments of Jeremiah 30-33 (although chs. 34 & 35 illuminate those chapters much), and, as we shall see, Daniel 9.

The treatment of Jeremiah 33 is especially inattentive. Although noting the connection of the New covenant "with the covenant with David, the covenant with Levi, and the covenant with creation [which is more probably the Noahic covenant]" (522), Gentry fails to give attention to the direct quotation of or strong allusion to the terms of these covenants in this passage (see Jer. 33:15 refers to after the second advent; 33:17 quotes from the Davidic covenant; 33:18 alludes strongly to the Priestly covenant of Num. 25:12-13; then Jer. 33:20 ties in with the preamble to the Noahic covenant in Gen. 8:22; Jer. 33:22, 26 partly cites the Abrahamic covenant; and 33:25 probably refers to the creation ordinances). Here we have perhaps the strongest example of intertextuality in the OT, but he skips over much of it: for example, what he doesn't say about the throne of Israel, and in his remarks about the covenant with Levi, where Ezek. 44, Zech. 14, and Mal. 3 are ignored.

If there is a more strongly worded statement from God in all of Scripture than Jeremiah 33:14-26 I should like to see it. Moreover, as Gentry (253, quoting K. Mathews) seems to recognize, the passing through the parts of the animals in Jer. 34 recalls the self-imprecation of God in Gen. 15. It is passing strange that few scholars have connected Jeremiah 34 with God's oaths in the previous chapter (and 31:31-36).

J. We must move on and say something about the ingenious but unpersuasive exposition of Daniel 9:24ff. To put it in a nutshell, the authors believe that the six items listed in Daniel 9:24 were all fulfilled in Christ at the first advent (541, 553-554 – though they admit "anoint the *most holy person*" is abnormal, typology again steps in to help). "Messiah the Prince" or "Leader" of 9:25 is equated with "the prince [or leader] who shall come" of verse 26 even though it appears that he comes after "Messiah is cut off." From chapter 7:8, 23-25 the antichrist arises from the fourth kingdom (the Roman empire), seemingly just prior to the second coming (7:13-14 with 7:21-22). This prepares the reader for "the people of the prince who is to come" who "shall destroy the city and the sanctuary" (9:26).

Two questions loom before us if we follow Gentry's and Wellum's interpretation. The first concerns the fact that the "he" of verse 26b causes the sacrifice and offering to cease "in the middle of the [seventieth] week." If this refers to Jesus then it also refers to His crucifixion. That would leave three and a half years of the seventieth week left to fulfill. This is generally where those who don't like a second coming context will jump thirty-five or so years into the future and see fulfillment in Titus's armies in A.D. 70. This expedient appears to be adopted by Gentry (561), although he seems to hedge his bets. On page 560-561 he writes,

Jesus came and was cut off, and his people ruined the city and the sanctuary. It was Caiaphas' rejection of Jesus' testimony at the trial that meant that that temple had to fall...the Jews cut off

their Messiah and ruined the city as the culmination of their continued transgression, and the Romans destroyed the city “in a flood”...

Gentry admits the “people” who destroy city and sanctuary do “appear to be enemy armies” (560), so he has to read two peoples into the context: the Jews who “destroyed” the city metaphorically circa A.D. 30, and the Romans who adopted a more literal method in A.D. 70! (Readers who want a more straightforward exegesis of these verses could do worse than read Paul D. Feinberg’s essay in John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, *Tradition and Testament*, 189-220).

K. Do they believe the OT is not to be interpreted by the NT? Their interaction with the NT is very deficient, but it is clear that their appreciative use and agreement with CT’s like Beale, Goldsworthy, Dumbrell, Waltke and others to prop up major planks in their argument; from their supercessionism (e.g. 228, 243, 247, etc.); from their use of the Cosmos-Eden-Land-Temple typology as a hermeneutical principle (e.g. 322, 706); their “New Israel” as the one people of God (104, 598, 688-689, 716, and charts on 619-620), and their insistence that salvation is what it’s all about (614), they are in most places fully in step with covenant theologians. Most of the disagreements would be ecclesiological. The eschatology is the same, and so, to a large degree, is their reinterpreting the OT with their take on the New (Cf. 714 n.146).

L. For some reason, Limited atonement is brought into the fray, but I for one do not see much of a case for its inclusion in the book or the validity of the argument. I am not going to engage the question here; the basis of which is that the New covenant is made only with God’s true people, therefore, Christ’s blood was shed only for them. This is where they seem to forget their rejection of the unconditional versus conditional view for a both/and model in speaking about the covenants.

M. I have said that in writing about their applied method the authors seem to erect two contrary goals: they say they want to let the text speak in its context (see also e.g., 558), but they also want to bring in a front-loaded version of intertextuality into their exegesis. In similar fashion, they say they don’t want to read the OT in light of the NT, but their operating assumption is that the “kingdom through covenant” motif must be understood through the lens of Calvary and Pentecost. They say they want to steer a middle course between CT and DT, but their apparent minimal interaction with DT works causes them to make unsure generalizations (like all DT’s held to believer’s baptism), while NCT’s close affinities with CT and its typology, and their basic agreement with and endorsement of the typological position of G.K. Beale, Stephen Dempster, etc., shows that they are far from sticking to the middle of the road.

On pages 605-606 Wellum states,

In contrast to other theological views, our proposal of “kingdom through covenant” wants consistently to view and apply the previous covenants through the lens of Jesus’ person and work and the arrival of the new covenant age. It is only when we do so that our theological proposals and conclusions will be biblical in the full sense of that word-according to God’s intention of letting Scripture interpret Scripture at the canonical level.

Kingdom through Covenant does educate the reader and good points are made. But, in reality, differences with paedobaptist covenant theology notwithstanding, this is biblical theology in contemporary supercessionist tones. There is not a covenant oath God made which cannot be wrestled to the ground by typology. Despite their assurances otherwise (435), both writers assume that covenant fulfillment happened largely at the first advent. This allows them to reshape covenant promises to fit first coming/ecclesial revelation and keeps the doors open for any of the eschatological options of CT while banging shut the door to dispensational premillennialism.

Afterword

Lately evangelical scholars have lent a great amount of weight and authority to supposed motifs and types which they believe they see in the Bible. Oftentimes they do this at the expense of the actual wording of the biblical text in context. This turns the Bible into a Book for scholars. This recent work proposes to take the biblical covenants seriously. But as a matter of fact, even the covenants are not allowed to speak with their own voice and therefore set the agenda. When will someone just let these covenants say what they really say?