

# *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*

## A Review Article

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Just as the Israelites feared to enter Canaan because there were giants in the land, so also the one who approaches *Kingdom through Covenant*<sup>1</sup> must consider the viability of digesting and interacting with a work of such magnitude. That being said, Gentry and Wellum have produced a book worthy both of digestion and interaction.

From the beginning of the first chapter, Gentry and Wellum are clear in their purposes, which are twofold. “First we want to show how central the concept of ‘covenant’ is to the narrative plot structure of the Bible, and secondly, how a number of crucial theological differences within Christian theology, and the resolution of those differences, are directly tied to one’s understanding of how the biblical covenants unfold and relate to each other” (21). This twofold purpose is then carried through three main sections in the book. The first section (chs. 1-3) deals with the place of covenant theology within biblical and systematic theology, summarizes and briefly interacts with classic covenant theology and dispensationalism, and lays down hermeneutical foundations, especially with regard to typology. The second, and largest, section (chs. 4-15) is comprised of an introduction to the concept of covenant in the Bible and the ancient Near East and subsequent detailed exegesis of “each biblical covenant in its own redemptive-historical context and...in its relationship to the dawning of the new covenant in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ” (26). The third and final section (chs. 16-17) is a systemization of the exegetical section as well as an application of that systemization to a variety of the discrepancies that they find in classical covenant theology and Dispensationalism.

Within these three sections, their twofold purpose is realized. In sum, their first purpose of integrating the role of covenant into the metanarrative of Scripture is seen in that the “backbone” of the narrative plot structure is God’s progressive building of his kingdom of salvation through the covenants of Scripture, all of which culminate in Jesus Christ—hence, “kingdom through covenant.” The second purpose of resolving “numerous theological differences” is the result of what naturally follows from this system.

## Summary

In chapter one, the authors argue that the progress of the covenants of Scripture is the key to understanding the metanarrative of the Bible. Indeed, “apart from properly understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and how they relate to each other, one will not correctly discern the message of the Bible” (22). The reason for calling this project a “*via media*” (23) is that Gentry and Wellum are not in agreement with the way

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012, 848pp.).

that classical covenant theology and dispensationalism have understood the relation of the biblical covenants one to another. Thus their intent is “to propose an alternative way of understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and their relation to the new covenant in Christ” (25). Here they label their approach as “progressive covenantalism” or “a species of ‘new covenant theology’” (24).<sup>2</sup>

In chapter two, Gentry and Wellum summarize the teachings of dispensationalism and covenant theology in order to give clarity to where they agree and disagree with these systems. Their main disagreement with dispensationalism is the core teaching of dispensationalism, namely the Israel-church distinction (56). The authors’ argument for the building of God’s kingdom through progressive covenants is a straight line without the parallelism of dispensationalism.

Their disagreements with classical covenant theology are various and significant. According to Gentry and Wellum, “covenant theology views the biblical covenants under two larger theological headings—the covenant of works and the covenant of grace—both of which are grounded in the eternal covenant of redemption” (59). While this chapter is dedicated to summarizing the views of classical covenant theology, Gentry and Wellum take issue with the standard conditional/unconditional classification of covenants, meaning that they take issue with the covenant of works and covenant of grace. A natural consequence of this is to reject the idea that the historical covenants of Scripture are simply administrations of the one covenant of grace and to seek to emphasize the unique character of each of those covenants, hence the extended exegesis of chs. 4-15.

In chapter three, the authors lay down hermeneutical foundations. They affirm the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture and argue that because it is a unified whole, ultimately the product of one author, God, we should read the Bible canonically. Revelation develops progressively and thus the New Testament holds priority over the Old Testament in terms of definitive interpretation and unpacking of the complete teaching of God’s word (85-86). Scripture is “word-act” revelation. It is God’s own commentary on what he has done and will do in history (87-89).

The majority of the third chapter deals with three horizons of biblical interpretation (92-102) and typology (102-21). Gentry and Wellum argue that in order to gain a full understanding of a given text you must first understand it in its textual horizon, that is, in its own place in Scripture. Then, one must understand this text in its epochal horizon, its place within redemptive history. Lastly, one must understand the text in its canonical horizon, that is, within the teaching of Scripture as a whole. Typology, they argue, is “symbolism rooted in historical and textual realities” (103). It is both “prophetic and predictive,” meaning that it is divinely ordained and intended. Gentry and Wellum do an excellent job of emphasizing the need to give due weight and consideration to the type in its own context, especially in relation to the escalation that is involved in the progression from type to antitype (106-07). Appreciating the type and antitype in their own contexts naturally yields a proper continuity and discontinuity between the two. They also rightly make the point that the vast majority of typology takes place within covenantal contexts. “[T]o reflect upon typological structures and their development is simultaneously to unpack the biblical covenants across redemptive history” (107).

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<sup>2</sup> The authors are unwilling to fully embrace the title of “new covenant theology” because on the one hand it is not a clearly defined system, and on the other hand they disagree with some of the teachings found within that broad label.

Having concluded this foundational section, the authors then proceed to the main course and dedicate chapters to the various biblical covenants. Just prior to their exegesis, Gentry and Wellum devote a chapter to the notion of “covenant” in the Bible and the ancient Near East (129-45). Within this chapter they express their disagreement with the standard conditional/unconditional classification of covenants, particularly as those categories have been filtered through the royal-grant and suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient Near East. According to Gentry and Wellum, these two kinds of covenants are “different emphases on a continuum rather than polar opposites” (135). Thus, “it may be that a covenant in the Old Testament has features of both types and it would diminish the communication of Scripture to represent the covenant solely in terms of one model” (135). As they go on to explain, the metanarrative of Scripture is a progress of covenants where God always keeps his side of the covenant, but there is no perfect faithful covenant partner until Jesus Christ and the new covenant. Gentry and Wellum argue that after Adam failed, God made a “new start” with Noah which ended in the ruin of Babel, and then God made a “fresh start” with Abraham from which, eventually, came the Messiah, the final and faithful covenant partner (138-39)—hence, progressive covenantalism.

As the exegesis begins, one might be surprised to see that the first covenant that they address is the Noahic covenant. Their reason for doing so is that the word for covenant, *bērît*, does not appear in the text of Scripture until Genesis 6:18. In fact, they argue that until Genesis 6-9 is studied “only then, the issues raised by Genesis 1-3 can and will be considered” (147).

Central to this argument, and many others in the book, is the assertion that the Hebrew phrase “*hēqîm bērît*,” refers to “a covenant partner fulfilling an obligation or upholding a promise in a covenant initiated previously so that the other partner experiences in historical reality the fulfilling of this promise” (155). This is contrasted with *kārat bērît* which refers to “making, initiating, or cutting a covenant.” Thus, since the first instances of *bērît* in the Scriptures are accompanied by the verb *hēqîm*, it implies that God’s covenant with Noah is an upholding of a covenant already in existence.

Laying this aside for the moment, Gentry and Wellum accurately portray the Noahic covenant as a covenant that stabilizes the world for the development of redemptive history (169) and demonstrates the universal “unmerited favour and kindness of God in preserving his world” (175). They do a good job of showing the parallel between Adam and Noah (161-68) and portraying the valid continuity that exists between those two and their covenants.

In the next chapter, Gentry and Wellum argue for a covenant of creation. Rightly so, they state, “The absence of the word for ‘covenant’ (*bērît*) in Genesis 1-3, then, is no argument at all against the notion that a divine-human covenant is established at creation, if exegesis can demonstrate that the idea is there” (176). Exegetically, the authors argue for a covenant in Genesis 1-3 from the nature of the image of God in man. The authors summarize:

Man *is* the divine image. As servant king and son of God mankind will mediate God’s rule to the creation in the context of a covenantal relationship with God on the one hand and the earth on the other. Hence the concept of the kingdom of God is found on the first page of Scripture. Indeed, the theme is kingdom through covenant. (201)

Gentry and Wellum note briefly that the goal of the covenant was to rest as God had rested, but they do not go into detail regarding what that means (208). Brief treatment is also given to “The demand of the covenant and its breach” (216-17). They note, “When the fruit of the forbidden tree was eaten, we were all involved somehow, as Romans 5:12-21 makes plain” (216).

The Abrahamic covenant is covered in two chapters following the covenant of creation. The first chapter covers God’s call of Abram and his promises to him in Genesis 12. The authors argue that the blessings which God promised are a repealing of the curses found in the preceding chapters of Genesis. In sum, Abram is promised a kingdom in which God himself is the ruler as opposed to Adam’s rebelling and Babel’s self-aggrandizement (242-45).

In their exegesis of Genesis 15, the authors provide strong argumentation for understanding the covenant cutting ceremony as a self-maledictory oath taken by God himself (251-58). Genesis 17 is interpreted as an unpacking and confirming of the covenant cut in Genesis 15, and circumcision is understood to be a sign of inclusion in the covenant community as well as a demand for faithfulness paired with the threat of excision (272-75). The authors present Abraham and his seed as God’s agents of mediating blessing to the world, thus as a “fresh start” and a “last Adam” (247, 269, 275). In relating the Abrahamic covenant to the larger metanarrative, they demonstrate how there are tensions in the story of God’s dealings with man. While God promises to keep his part of the covenant, he demands obedience from the covenant partner, obedience which Abraham poorly reflects to the world around him. Still, they argue that the Abrahamic covenant “is the basis for all God’s dealings with the human race from this point on, and the basis of all his later plans and purposes in history” (295). The Mosaic covenant, they argue, is built on the Abrahamic, and the Davidic covenant is built on the Mosaic covenant. Christ comes in fulfillment of all of them, his mission being built originally on the Abrahamic covenant’s promise to mediate blessing to the nations.

The Mosaic covenant is also treated in two chapters, the first dedicated to Exodus, the second to Deuteronomy. The Mosaic covenant is summarized as a “relationship with God on the one hand and relationship with the world on the other hand. Israel will model to the world what it means to have a relationship with God, what it means to treat each other in a genuinely human way, and what it means to be good stewards of the earth’s resources” (326). Gentry and Wellum argue via comparison with other ancient Near East law-codes that the “Ten Words” are not a law-code. They are not a list of laws as in a contract, but rather directions for how the covenant partner is to operate under the covenant lord. This does not mean the stipulations do not carry the force of obligation, but that they must be understood as God’s covenantal directions to Israel, not universal laws. They also object to the tripartite division of the law on the grounds that those categories are arbitrary and one finds all three mixed together rather than naturally organized by the text itself. Their disagreements with classic Protestant theology on this point are summarized in this way:

The Book of the Covenant consists of the Ten Words and the Judgements, and this is the covenant that Jesus declares he has completely fulfilled and Hebrews declares is now made obsolete by the new covenant. What we can say to represent accurately the teaching of Scripture is that the righteousness of God codified, enshrined, and encapsulated in the

old covenant has not changed, and that this same righteousness is now codified and enshrined in the new. (355)

They go on to insist, “We should always remember that Torah...means personal instruction from God as Father and King of his people rather than just ‘law’” (356).

In the second chapter on the Mosaic covenant, Gentry and Wellum argue that “The book of Deuteronomy is the centre of the entire Old Testament, in terms both of metanarrative and theology” (363). In fact, they argue that the place of Deuteronomy 6:5 in the literary structure of Deuteronomy makes it “the key text of the Old Testament” (366). Due to the use of *kārat bērit* in Deuteronomy 28:69 (29:1 ESV), Deuteronomy is viewed as its own covenant, yet as a “supplement” to the Mosaic covenant (378). In this section, the authors reinforce their arguments that Torah means “instruction rather than law” and that Deuteronomy 12-26 demonstrates this to be the case as God instructs Israel how to live in the land. The Mosaic covenant is summarized by the argument that “by means of the Israelite covenant, God intends for the nation to fulfill the Adamic role reassigned to Abraham. Through covenant, God will bring his blessing and establish his rule in the lives of his people and, through them, to the rest of the world” (388).

The Davidic covenant is developed from 2 Samuel 7 where, the authors rightly argue, the absence of the word *bērit* is no reason to reject the notion that a covenant was indeed made there. Psalm 89, they note, uses *bērit* to describe God’s dealing with David (as do other passages). The sum of this covenant is that the king must “embody Torah as a model citizen” (399). In relation to the Mosaic covenant, “This is a clear illustration of federal headship: the king *is* the nation *in himself*” (423). In relation to the Abrahamic covenant, the king brings Israel to rest and safety within the promised land and is the source of mediating blessing to the nations (423-26).

Following the exegesis of the Old Testament covenants, Gentry and Wellum discuss the new covenant as it is presented in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel’s seventy weeks as well as an extended treatment of Paul’s command to “speak the truth in love” as an example of the new covenant community demonstrating the kind of conduct that was envisioned in the old covenant.

Time and space do not permit a detailed review of all of the points made in these chapters, but a few summary statements will suffice. Drawing from Isaiah, the Servant of the Lord “must be the future king,” and will “represent the nation as a whole” in his death and resurrection (440-41). “The new covenant therefore brings to fruition God’s promises and purposes in all the others” (445). Drawing from Ezekiel, “The covenant relationship will be restored once they are cleansed from sin” (480). “A Davidic king will be established as ruler over the renewed Israel and, as a result, the people will carefully keep the instruction in the covenant.” This leads to the restoration of the temple as well, but all of this is understood in a national and spiritual return from exile (480). In Jeremiah, as one would expect, ample attention is dedicated to chapter 31, in which they argue that the new covenant will be its own covenant. It will not be a renewal or administration of another covenant. Rather, God will *kārat* a new *bērit*, cut a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah (512). Drawing from Matthew 26, the house of Israel and Judah are understood to be Jesus’ people, believers, those in whom the Spirit resides and upon whose hearts the law has been written (496-97). The new covenant is established on better promises through a better mediator (513). In Daniel, the same features are found but in different contexts. The message is that “the vicarious death of the coming king

brings about a confirming/strengthening/upholding of a covenant with ‘the many,’ almost certainly ‘the many’ referred to in Isaiah 53:10-12” (550). Lastly, Ephesians 4:25-5:5 is interpreted to show that Paul views the church as the new covenant community envisioned and promised in the prophets. Gentry and Wellum’s view of Torah as instruction as opposed to law is seen again in the claim that Paul “devotes more space to encouragement and motivation than to hammering people with commands” (568). This chapter concludes the exegetical portion of the book.

The final section of the book summarizes and synthesizes the work that has already been done. The argument is that God establishes his kingdom of salvation through the biblical covenants in two senses: in the sense of agency and in the sense of chronology (594). God’s covenant partners are to be his faithful servants, agents of his will. Thus God’s kingdom is established through covenant. However, the biblical metanarrative is built on the unfaithfulness of the covenant partners and thus the progressive establishment of God’s kingdom through covenants over time. Christ is the resolution of this metanarrative, but while he has inaugurated the kingdom of God it awaits consummation. D-Day has come, but V-Day awaits (600).

In reviewing the hermeneutical foundations, the authors conclude that the conditional/unconditional classification of covenant theology does not accurately reflect the blending of the two in the biblical covenants and thus misses the inherent tension of the metanarrative and the desire for a faithful covenant partner. Typology is applied to dispensationalism and covenant theology to show that both systems contain a similar error: the perpetuation of a national element of the Abrahamic covenant. For dispensationalism that is seen in the expectation of the promise land being restored to Israel. For covenant theology that is seen in granting the covenant sign to children. According to Gentry and Wellum, proper typology assigns the correct place to each of these elements and finds them fulfilled in their own time (121-26, 606-08).

Each covenant is then reviewed. In summary, “the progressive revelation of the covenants tell us a story...They anticipate in many ways that in the coming and work of this Son...God’s saving rule and reign will come to this world” (644).

The final chapter makes certain applications in light of Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. For example, if Christ represents his people as the one who makes atonement for their sins, and if we believe in a definite number of individuals for whom Christ performed this mission, how can there be any in his covenant who fail to enjoy the benefits thereof? And how can they be under his federal headship in any sense (670-83)? The obvious ramifications are an understanding of the church as the new covenant community, a community regenerated by the Spirit, whose sins are forgiven by the blood of the new covenant (690-92). We must evaluate people based on profession and accept the limitations of our judgment (693). There is a great difference between finding goats among the sheep and admitting goats among the sheep. Lastly, we are waiting for a new creation, a consummated kingdom, not a return to Israel. Christ is building his kingdom and through his covenant all will be brought to its rightful end to the glory of God.

### **Critique**

It goes without saying that Gentry and Wellum are to be commended for their detailed, careful, and extensive work. They are also to be commended for a desire to say what God

has said in such a way that reflects the way that he has said it. But we must now turn to iron-sharpening and face the giants in the land.

The fundamental argument of *Kingdom through Covenant* is sound. God does indeed govern his world through dominion delegated by covenant. The overall metanarrative is also sound. There is a great tension/need in the progress of the historical covenants for one who will do perfectly all that God commands. But the authors are operating under a few false dilemmas.

They propose their system as a *via media* between covenant theology and dispensationalism. From all appearances, covenant theology equals paedobaptism. The only hint to the contrary is the brief mention of Greg Nichols' book in the preface (12-13). Forasmuch as the authors are weary of the rehearsal of the same arguments from covenant theologians, they would find many an ally among the federal theologians of the seventeenth-century Particular Baptists. A rejection of the idea that the historical covenants are simply "administrations" of the covenant of grace, an appreciation for the progressive nature of God's covenantal dealings with man, and an insistence that the new covenant is the covenant of grace are arguments that have been brought forward in the past. But these arguments did not entail the same rejection of the covenant of works and covenant of grace as is seen in this book. Thus, it is a false dilemma to see no party besides paedobaptist federal theologians and dispensationalists.

This leads me to a second false dilemma. Gentry and Wellum are critical of the conditional/unconditional framework of standard covenant theology. I cannot help but agree with them, to a degree. When it comes to the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants there is indeed a blend in which God vows to make good on a promise while demanding that the covenant partner perform certain actions as well. They ought not to be reduced too hastily to one or the other without careful consideration. But when it comes to the covenant of works and covenant of grace, we have explicit scriptural warrant for doing so. In passages like Romans 4:4-6; 5:12-21; 11:6 and Galatians 3:18, there is an explicit contrast between wages and gifts, obedience and gifts, grace and works, and law and promise. All of this revolves around justification, a perfect record of righteousness. In such a case, these two are not two ends of a continuum, but two truly mutually exclusive polar opposites. The false dilemma is that if we isolate the covenant of works and covenant of grace from the covenants previously mentioned, and consider them on their own, then they truly are conditional and unconditional in the fullest sense. Nevertheless, that does not change the fact that when dealing with covenants in which perfect eschatological righteousness is not in view there are blends of conditionality.

This in turn leads to a third false dilemma. The covenant of works and covenant of grace metanarrative is pitted against the metanarrative of progressive covenantalism. That is almost like pitting the chapters of a book against the beginning and end of a book. While classic covenant theology may say that the metanarrative hinges on two covenants, as long as we understand that between the two lies a progression of covenants (as the seventeenth-century Particular Baptists argued), such a dilemma is dissolved. The new covenant is progressively revealed in and through the covenants of the Old Testament, but remains distinct from them.

In the biblical-theological summary of the covenants (611-52), reasons are given for the departure from the classic formulation of the covenant of works. While admitting that the classic covenant of works is "on the right track" (610), their disagreements are

unhelpfully woven into a defense of the validity of *a* covenant in Genesis 1-3. There is, they argue, *a* covenant, but it is *not* the covenant of works. Yet they agree that Adam played a representative role on behalf of the human race, that there were conditions of obedience, and that there were sanctions for obedience. They even agree that the tree of life symbolized a reward of life and that it served as a probationary test (667). Their reasons for preferring the title “covenant of creation” are unclear.

Regarding the new covenant, the authors view it as being “completely effective...in terms of both provision and application” (681). You cannot break the new covenant. As they proceed, they argue, “Theologically, the entire story line of Scripture is centered on two-foundational individuals—Adam and Christ” (616) and later that “Biblically and theologically, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Adam-Christ typological relationship for understanding the story line of Scripture” (616). They continue to argue that “Scripture is clear that all human beings fall under the representative headship of two people: Adam and Christ.” They even assert that the promise of Genesis 3:15 unfolds in “the entire story line of Scripture ...through the biblical covenants” (628). If this is not the basic structure of the classic covenant of works and covenant of grace biblical metanarrative, then I don’t know what is.

It’s not hard to conclude why there is fuzziness here. The treatment of the covenant of creation has giant holes in its coverage. There is an inexplicable lack of exegetical attention to Genesis 3. A passing comment states that Paul makes it plain that we are somehow involved in Adam’s fall (216). If it is made “plain” by Paul, then we were all involved more than “somehow.” Yet Genesis 3:14-19, the curses of the covenant (and the *protevangelium*), *is not treated at all in the chapter on the covenant of creation*. To a defender of the classic covenant of works, it appears quite odd to give *no exegetical attention* to this part of Genesis 1-3. And if, as stated before, the authors really do believe that Genesis 3:15 is unfolded in the rest of the plot of Scripture through the various covenants, then why does it (and the surrounding curses) receive not even one blot of ink in this chapter? Does not the fallen condition of mankind and the promise of restoration constitute *the entire biblical narrative* from this point on? It would be one thing to exegete the text and argue against the classic covenant of works, but it is inexcusable to bypass this data completely. It is precisely in these verses that the covenant of works and covenant of grace metanarrative of classic covenant theology is established, and yet it is here that the powerhouse exegetical machines of this book quietly excuse themselves. For those who insist that systematic conclusions be firmly established on exegetical foundations, chapters 16 and 17 assume a great deal of non-existent exegesis in Genesis 3. In fact, given that the conclusions about Genesis 3 in chapter 16 appear so in line with the classic covenant of works, one wonders what that assumed exegesis would look like and how it would change the presentation of the “covenant of creation.”

I understand the authors’ reservations. To embrace the covenant of works, in their minds, is to embrace all of the errors of classic covenant theology. But they are operating under a false dilemma. Along the same lines it would seem their opinion is that covenant theology is equal to the classic formulation of the covenant of grace being one in substance, varying only in administration. They state, “It is more accurate to think in terms of a *plurality* of covenants, which are part of the progressive revelation of the *one* plan of God that is fulfilled in the new covenant” (602). Though the model of substance and multiple administrations may be the dominant paedobaptist portrayal, it is not the



dominant portrayal of the history of Baptist federal theology. A good dose of Baptist historical theology might be of great benefit.<sup>3</sup>

Underlying some of these rejections is an inconsistent use of typology. Primarily, their use of typology is prospective. Patterns are established in the Old Testament that find fulfillment in the New Testament. That is true. But the authors also stated that the New Testament holds priority over the Old Testament in terms of definitive interpretation and unpacking of the complete teaching of God's word (85-86, 607). That means that we must also look at typology retrospectively. In fact, retrospective typology is that which holds priority in interpretation. Why are Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 legitimate material for informing our perspective of the divine image, but Romans 5 only makes it clear that "somehow" we were involved in Adam's actions? If we allowed for more retrospection, would that not put more meat on the bones of the covenant of creation and other theological issues?<sup>4</sup>

A related and larger problem is the lack of attention to the New Testament. The authors' scope was specific to the covenants of the Old Testament for a variety of reasons. That is not a problem. But as they themselves have stated, the true test of theological accuracy is to ask, "Does it do justice to *all* of the biblical data" (694)? Thus, to propose a metanarrative that spans the entire Bible, and then to fail to address not only a large portion of data, but *the most important set of data in terms of interpretational priority* is a fatal flaw. It does not mean that all conclusions are wrong. It simply means that they are incomplete. I have no doubts that the authors would argue that the New Testament supports their initial conclusions, but the reader has the right to remain unconvinced.

The New Testament is certainly not absent from their argumentation, but its authoritative and indispensable voice is sadly lacking. In ways, this is a failure to follow that third step of interpretation advocated by the men themselves, the canonical horizon. The authors are correct in reminding us to appreciate a text in its original and immediate context. In other words, we ought to read the Bible from the beginning forward. However, once we have arrived at Revelation, we realize that it's time to read the Bible backwards, or at least to start over in light of the New Testament. Thus, while the authors provide excellent exegesis of many texts in their original contexts, and indeed relate them to their epochal horizons and all that preceded them, they lack the voice of the New Testament.

Put another way, we must assert not only that the Old Testament looked forward to Christ, but that Christ was present in the Old Testament. We can assert the former based on the Old Testament itself, but we can assert the latter based only on the New Testament. Because this treatment focuses on the Old Testament, it is unwilling, in ways,

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<sup>3</sup> A good place to start would be Nehemiah Coxe's "A Discourse of the Covenants," in *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ* (eds., Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco; Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005). Cf. also, Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground, 2012). There are many other works that would be worth reading, but few are available in published format.

<sup>4</sup> While not treated in this review article, there are *ordo salutis* concerns that stem from this inconsistency. Gentry and Wellum affirm that "old covenant believers were regenerated and that they were saved by grace through faith in the promises of God," (684, n. 70) but they deny the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as well as union with Christ in the Old Testament (113, n. 74). See Jonathan Brack's review at <http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/kingdom-through-covenant.php>.

to see New Testament realities in the Old Testament. Yet, when the New Testament employs typology, it is to show the Jews what they should have seen from the beginning, whether that was in the wilderness manna, the water-gushing rock, the desert-serpent, the sacrifices, or so much more. Typology is both prospective and retrospective. Prospectively it casts a shadow. Retrospectively, the person casting the shadow steps into the light. Christ was not just portrayed in the Old Testament. He was present in the Old Testament. Thus through typology the new covenant, the covenant of grace, was present in the covenants of the Old Testament while remaining distinct from them.

The irony of this critique is that for all the prospection of progressive covenantalism, the covenant of creation goes second in the exegetical portion of this book. Because Genesis 6:18 indicates the existence of a prior covenant we are justified in returning to Genesis 1-3 to find it. Why stop at Genesis 6:18, or Genesis, or the Pentateuch, or Hosea, etc.? I do not deny those exegetical relations and realities. But a consistent application of such a method would add more of a canonical voice to some of the interpretations of these texts.

Moving on, a slight concern is the language of “fresh start” and “clean slate” (174) attributed to Noah, and later to Abraham (224). In light of the continued emphasis of “progressive covenantalism,” language like “progressive steps” might be a better choice, and might avoid unnecessary and unsound associations with the fragmented metanarrative of dispensationalism. Moreover, this would be more in line with the authors’ statement that the promise of Genesis 3:15 unfolds in “the entire story line of Scripture ...through the biblical covenants” (628). From such language, one is left with the impression of God crumpling up paper and starting his plans anew. Surely, that is not accurate of the one whose “plan for the fullness of time” is “to unite all things” in Christ (Eph. 1:10).

I also see reason to reconsider the argument about *hēqîm bĕrît*. The authors present detailed argumentation of this distinction, yet not all is clear. The definition given would indicate that *hēqîm bĕrît* never means “to initiate a covenant,” yet they clarify that there is “a clear demarcation between covenants made for the first time and renewal covenants which confirm or ratify covenants initiated previously” (160). Thus, “To view the covenant with Noah as a kind of reinstatement and upholding of a covenant or commitment initiated at creation is not equivalent to saying that this is a covenant renewal” (160). This is like making a covenant to keep a covenant (390). It would appear then, that the Noahic covenant is not merely Adam’s covenant redux but rather its own covenant and that *hēqîm bĕrît* can indeed mean *kārat bĕrît* but within the context of a previous covenant.

The examples of *hēqîm bĕrît* which Gentry and Wellum kindly provide in an appendix (733-36) demonstrate more nuance and diversity than consistent usage. The first four uses of this construction occur in Genesis 6 and 9. These instances represent the actual making and initiating of a distinct covenant, though most certainly in light of a previous covenant. In Genesis 6:18 God clearly says that he “will establish” his covenant with Noah, and in Genesis 9:9-10 God makes good on that promise and says “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth.” God has just initiated a covenant with distinct parties from those at creation. Surely, this covenant is made in

light of the covenant made in creation and Gentry and Wellum are right to note that Noah receives “Adam’s mandate, modified somewhat to suit the circumstances of a fallen world,” (165) yet that does not remove this from being the initiation of a distinct covenant. An interesting addition of evidence is that the Septuagint, which consistently translates *hēqîm bĕrît* with *isthmi* or *anisthmi diaqhkh*, translates “*hēqîm bĕrît*” in Genesis 9:17 with “*diatiqhmi diaqhkh*” which is the ubiquitous way of translating *kārat bĕrît*.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when God says that the rainbow is the sign of the covenant which he “established” with all flesh, the Septuagint treats it as having been “covenanted” and not just “upheld.” Thus, *hēqîm bĕrît* can refer to initiation of a covenant, but in light of another covenant.

Gentry and Wellum are right, nonetheless that there are cases where *hēqîm bĕrît* does not refer to the initiation of a distinct covenant. The use of *hēqîm bĕrît* in Genesis 17 in comparison to *kārat bĕrît* in Genesis 15 bears this out. So also, when God says in Exodus 6:4 that he “established” his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we are not led to believe that individual covenants were made with the patriarchs but rather that the same covenant cut in Genesis 15 was renewed or upheld with them. Furthermore, Leviticus 26:9 and Deuteronomy 8:18 are instances where God promises to fulfill “an obligation or uphold a promise in a covenant initiated previously so that the other partner experiences in historical reality the fulfilling of this promise.” 2 Kings 23:3 and Jeremiah 34:18 also show this meaning of *hēqîm bĕrît*. But it should be noted that these are cases where the covenant partner is the subject of the verb, meaning that it is one thing for the covenant imposer, God, to establish/uphold his covenant, and it is another thing for the people to promise to establish/uphold the covenant. That being said, these two verses are instances of upholding the terms of the covenant rather than making a covenant.

The last instances of *hēqîm bĕrît*, Ezekiel 16:60, 62, return to our previous conclusion, namely that *hēqîm bĕrît* can refer to the initiation of a covenant, but in light of another covenant. Upon publication, the authors concluded that here *hēqîm bĕrît* does refer to institution/initiation, but they have since changed their position.<sup>6</sup> Depending on how one interprets “everlasting covenant” in verse 60, the argument can go either way. In publication, the authors interpreted this to be the new covenant, meaning that God is promising to establish an everlasting covenant in spite of Israel’s spiritual whoredom. This would make *hēqîm* equivalent to *kārat* in this case. In the revision of their interpretation, by taking “everlasting covenant” to refer to the Abrahamic covenant, God is promising to bring to reality something that he had promised previously. In light of the fact that the Mosaic covenant governs enjoyment of the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant,<sup>7</sup> this is less likely. When the people fail, Canaan is lost. And when one points out that God had greater promises to Israel than the land of Canaan, we are confronted by promises of the new covenant contained within the Abrahamic covenant. Comparing the language of a future covenant and the atonement of sin in Ezekiel 16:59-63 with the

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, in Deuteronomy 28:69, *isthmi* is used in the reverse, to render *kārat*.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/09/20/gentry-and-wellum-respond-to-kingdom-through-covenant-reviews/> and <http://www.credomag.com/2012/11/26/a-response-to-zaspels-review-peter-gentry-and-stephen-wellum/>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. “[T]he Mosaic covenant is given...to administer the fulfillment of the divine promises to Abraham and to the nation as a whole.” (304). Cf. also, “In fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, Israel, by virtue of the Mosaic covenant, will provide under the direct rule of God a model of God’s rule over human life” (324).

language of other prophetic passages indicates that we are textually, epochally, and canonically safe in the original conclusion that Ezekiel is announcing the new covenant to Israel. Yet again, this is indeed a development of promises made earlier in the Abrahamic covenant (and well before that in Genesis 3:15), meaning that *hēqîm bēřît* can refer to the initiation of a covenant, but in light of another covenant.

Gentry and Wellum summarize the argument:

In summary, based on the expression *hēqîm bēřît*, linguistic usage alone demonstrates that when God says that he is confirming or establishing his covenant with Noah, he is saying that his commitment initiated previously at creation...including the blessings and ordinances that he gave to Adam and Eve and their family, are now to be with Noah and his descendants. (161)

Linguistic usage alone is insufficient. We must consider the context of each use of this phrase. If this covenant is its own covenant, as the text indicates by its distinct parties and promises, then *hēqîm bēřît* can refer to the initiation of a covenant. Even if every instance after Genesis 6-9 used *hēqîm bēřît* in a consistent fashion (as it does not), that linguistic usage would not be a final determination of its use here. Within its natural meanings, *hēqîm* can refer to setting something up and holding something up. Gentry and Wellum argue that setting up is restricted to structural objects while holding something up is restricted to oaths, promises, words, covenants, etc. (159). However, given that *hēqîm* can mean to set up, and given the contextual factors of Genesis 6-9 (and Ezekiel 16), those lines should not be drawn quite so rigidly. God may set up a covenant, and later the parties will speak of holding it up according to their peculiar commitments.

The main reason for emphasizing this disagreement, albeit small, is to preserve the distinct identity and nature of the covenant of works and the Noachic covenant. There is no dispute that the two are closely related. But Gentry and Wellum's narrowing of *hēqîm bēřît* seems to preemptively delimit the nature of the covenant with Adam before arriving at its exegesis. If Noah's covenant is a covenant of refracted world government, then Adam's covenant was a pre-fall covenant of world government. Surely there is truth there. But if Adam's covenant was a covenant of works for eternal life, then a covenant of providentially sustained government is a somewhat different creature. For all the argumentation, the disagreement is small.

Briefly, the arguments concerning the law need to be addressed. A repeated emphasis of this book is that Torah refers to instruction rather than law. This is partly argued by contrast to ancient Near Eastern law-codes. But just because the law of Moses is unlike the law-codes of pagan nations, it does not mean that it does not bear a legal character. The nature of the law is different because it comes from a perfectly holy and just Lawgiver whose magnificent law reveals his magnificent character. And it is hard to accept the name of "instruction" attached to the Mosaic law when the violation of this "instruction" comes in a very penal and maledictory fashion (Deut. 27-28).

One of the reasons for viewing the law as "the law" bearing a very "legal" character comes from Paul's description of it in Galatians 3-4, yet Galatians 3-4 receives *no treatment in the chapter on the Mosaic covenant*. Galatians 3:24-25 is briefly mentioned to describe the contrast between God's people in their youth and maturity, but that is all (340). When Paul describes the law as that which curses the one who does not perform its dictates (Gal. 3:10), "instruction" sounds a bit tame.

Furthermore, the rejection of the tripartite division of the law is unnecessary. While this article cannot address the issue in full, the authors must admit the difference between moral and positive law. There is that which is right because of who God is and how he has made the world, and there is that which is right because it has been commanded. Once that is accepted, one must admit that within all of the laws found within the Mosaic covenant, some laws represent true universals while others are peculiar commands for Israel. There is a unique and special character in the laws inscribed by God himself, i.e., the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17; 31:18) that marks them out from the laws written down by Moses (Exod. 24:4). Confessional Reformed theology has recognized the special character of the Ten Commandments not only through the way that they are treated in Exodus, but also in the rest of the Scriptures, and thus assigned a moral designation to them. This is not arbitrary; it is a reflection of God's own special treatment of these commands. The second and third divisions of the law into ceremonial and judicial laws are simply subdivisions of positive law.

If the authors reject the identification of the moral law with the Ten Commandments, then to what inspired revelation should we look to identify the moral law? When Paul speaks of the law which the Gentiles keep by nature and connects it to the law which Israel had written for them (Rom. 2:12-27), where is the point of contact between the two?<sup>8</sup> The authors themselves admit that the same righteousness of the old covenant is enshrined in the new covenant. What righteousness is that? When we are told to love God and our neighbor, what do those commands summarize?<sup>9</sup>

If the authors' concern is in the function of the law as it was given to Israel, then we grant that there are indeed nuances to be recognized and maintained. Two qualifications stand out. First, positive laws from the Mosaic covenant are not binding on the new covenant people.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the morality behind many positive commands, they do not function as the laws of our societies.<sup>11</sup> Second, the way that the law functioned for Israel is surely not the same as the way that the law functions for the church. The law comes to us through Christ, but not as a covenant like it did for Israel. Still, this does not change the moral obligations reflected and codified in the law. The law may not be delivered to us at the hand of Moses, and thus it is not a covenant of works, but that in no way

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<sup>8</sup> See also Richard Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2001), 77-83.

<sup>9</sup> Behind rejecting the identification of the moral law with the Ten Commandments is a particular understanding of the idea of "fulfillment" in passages like Matt. 5:17-48. The authors align themselves with D. A. Carson's interpretation of this passage (604, n. 22) in which Carson argues that just as Christ fulfilled prophecies by living out what they foretold, so also Christ's ethical teaching fulfills the OT law. This leads to a supersession of the types and shadows as well as the laws of the OT. Thus, the Ten Commandments are "fulfilled" and abrogated by Christ's teaching. Dr. Greg Welty has provided an excellent response to this understanding of "fulfillment" at <http://www.proginosko.com/welty/carson.htm>. Welty demonstrates that ethical teaching does not fulfill law. Laws do not foreshadow laws, nor do they fulfill laws. Rather, we should understand Christ's fulfillment of the law in the same way that we understand Christ's fulfillment of prophecies, namely, that he embodies and brings to full realization that which had been portrayed or manifested imperfectly in the OT. Thus Christ does not abrogate the law; he embodies it. Fulfillment is indeed eschatological, but Christ is the terminus of fulfillment for both the prophecies and the laws of the OT.

<sup>10</sup> This includes the seventh day observation of the fourth commandment. The apostolic example of the NT positively establishes the observance of the Sabbath on the first day of the week.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Paul grounds the moral duty of churches to give due honor and compensation to pastors in the duty of Israelites to feed their beasts of burden (1 Cor. 9:9; 1 Tim. 5:18).

removes the responsibility that we have to be holy as God is holy, to practice righteousness as God is righteous.

As long as the distinction between moral and positive law is maintained,<sup>12</sup> the tripartite division is just a particular application of that distinction. Indeed we would do well to recognize that the major difference between the law of Moses and the law of Christ has more to do with Moses and Christ than the law.

A final concern is the conflation of the kingdom promised to Abraham with the kingdom of Christ. Typology is two-leveled. There is an initial fulfillment and a final fulfillment. The two are distinct. Thus, the kingdom of Abraham's national seed was one fulfillment, and the kingdom of Abraham's (Christ's) spiritual seed is another. Thus it is not right to describe Abraham and Israel as "a last Adam." Israel is indeed a new son in a new paradise, and thus continues Adamic typology, but not as "a last Adam." Nor is it right to say, "There are no major new beginnings after this in the narrative of Scripture (until we come to the new creation at the end of the story)" (228). If the salvation-kingdom of God already exists, what does Christ inaugurate? Did the kingdom he inaugurated already exist on earth? The church, the kingdom of God, is an institution of the new creation. It is not an extension of Israel, though it came forth from her womb.

Later the authors argue that God constitutes Abraham and his seed a kingdom through which "God's saving rule will break into this world and the resolution of sin and death will take place" (632). "Ultimately this is fulfilled in the arrival of the new covenant and the new creation as presented in Revelation 21-22" (632). This is a conflation of the kingdom of Christ with the kingdom of Israel, as is the statement that "God's saving kingdom is revealed and comes to this world, at least in anticipatory form, through the biblical covenants" (659). It is a conflation because those anticipatory forms *reveal* the saving kingdom, but *they are not the salvation kingdom in and of themselves*. A type is not the antitype. A shadow is not the thing that casts it. A footprint is not a foot, etc. For this reason, it is *right* to say that "one cannot think of the inauguration of the kingdom apart from the arrival of the new covenant" (659). If paedobaptist theology is guilty of conflating the covenants of the Old and New Testaments, here progressive covenantalism has conflated the kingdoms of the Old and New Testaments. Yet, progressive covenantalism has established the perfect foundation for reaching the right conclusion: God establishes and governs distinct kingdoms through distinct covenants. The metanarrative of Scripture is God's progressive revealing of his salvation kingdom through the kingdoms and covenants of Scripture. From the ashes of Adam's cursed kingdom, on the platform of Noah's stabilized kingdom, and out of the womb of Abraham's kingdom comes the seed of the woman, the Messiah, the kingdom of God incarnate, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, mediator of the new covenant, our great high Priest, our consummate Prophet, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Heir and King of the new creation.

Gentry and Wellum have produced a volume that demands attention, consideration, and interaction. At the very least, it provides a wealth of exegetical work and research for those who would want to study these issues. But more than that, it is a book that will add

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<sup>12</sup> It would be absurd to deny this distinction. If all law is moral, no law could ever be changed. If all law is positive, God's character is mutable, capricious, and untrustworthy. Paul's designation of circumcision as counting for nothing in Gal. 5 and 6 demonstrates the nature of a positive command. Paul does not deal the same way with the moral law, the Ten Commandments (cf. Rom 3:31; 7:7, 22).

contour and detail to the reader's understanding of the divine drama and all that God has done and will do for his people throughout the ages.