

**HAVE THEY FOUND A BETTER WAY?
AN ANALYSIS OF GENTRY AND WELLUM’S,
*KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT***

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In their book, Kingdom through Covenant, authors Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum offer what they consider to be a better approach for understanding God’s purposes than either dispensationalism or covenant theology. The purpose of this article is to give a critical review of their book, pointing out various strengths and weaknesses. While there is good information in the book about the biblical covenants, misunderstandings about typology and the role of Israel in God’s plans hinder the book from offering a better alternative than dispensationalism.

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Introduction

Is there a better theological path than the ones given by dispensationalism and covenant theology? Two professors at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary believe there is. They offer an attempt at a *via media* or middle-road approach in their 2012 book, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*.¹ The authors are Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum. Gentry is professor of Old Testament. Wellum is professor of Christian theology. The purpose of this article is to offer a critical review of the book. Since I am writing from a dispensational perspective, much of the analysis will focus on how the book’s contents relate to dispensationalism. In sum, I will argue that the authors have offered some good insights on the biblical covenants, but their understanding of how these covenants relate to the Bible’s storyline is insufficient

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

in some important areas. My main areas of disagreement will be in regard to their understanding of typology and how they view Jesus' relationship with Israel. I also do not think that the authors understand the significance of nations in the *eschaton* as a result of Jesus' coming. Thus, their proposal is not more accurate than that offered by dispensationalism.

Summary of the Book

The authors state in their weighty 848-page book that their purpose is twofold. First they “want to show how central the concept of ‘covenant’ is to the narrative plot structure of the Bible.”² Second, they desire to demonstrate “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.”³ In doing so the authors are not claiming that the covenants are the center of biblical theology. But they do assert that “the covenants form the backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture.”⁴ Thus, putting the covenants together accurately is essential to understanding the whole counsel of God. They readily admit that “this is not a new insight” since “almost every variety of Christian theology admits that the biblical covenants establish a central framework that holds the story of the Bible together.”⁵

But where the authors want to make a significant contribution is in regard to *their* understanding of how to “put together” the biblical covenants.⁶ They assert that both covenant theologians and dispensationalists have presented understandings of the covenants that “are not quite right”⁷ and “go awry at a number of points.”⁸ The authors want to present *a via media*—an alternative approach to covenant theology and dispensationalism that is not entirely dismissive of either but offers a better way.⁹ This middle path approach they identify as “progressive covenantalism” which is a species of “new covenant theology.”¹⁰

What the authors claim is bold. Not only are they asserting that they have helpful insights in regard to the biblical covenants and the Bible’s storyline, they are claiming to offer a better approach than the two dominant evangelical systems. An ambitious task indeed! Gentry and Wellum are respectful of these rival positions. And they are not dismissing all aspects of either covenant theology or dispensationalism. In fact, the authors believe these traditions offer good insights at times. Gentry and Wellum believe that covenant theologians are in error for holding that the genealogical principle of “to you and your children” in the Abrahamic

² Ibid., 21.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

covenant is still in effect today for the church. For the authors, this wrongly leads to accepting infant baptism as entrance into the new covenant and the church. But according to the writers, who are Baptists, the genealogical principle has changed with Christ and there is no biblical basis for infant baptism.

On the other hand, the authors say that dispensationalism makes a significant error by holding that the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant are still in force for national Israel. They say that dispensationalists do not rightly grasp that the land is fulfilled in Christ and is typical of the coming new creation. Thus, there will be no literal fulfillment of land for national Israel.

The authors believe irony exists in that both covenant theologians and dispensational theologians adopt a similar hermeneutic at times by relying on too much continuity with the Abrahamic covenant and not taking into consideration the implications of typology as they relate to Christ and the new covenant. Thus, both sides, allegedly, are not seeing the proper typological connections, although they err in different areas—covenant theologians with the *genealogical principle* and dispensationalists with the *land*.

The book consists of seventeen chapters that are divided into three parts. Part One is “Prolegomena.” The three chapters in this section are written by Wellum and cover: (1) The Importance of Covenants in Biblical and Systematic Theology; (2) Covenants in Biblical-Theological Systems: Dispensational and Covenant Theology; and (3) Hermeneutical Issues in “Putting Together” the Covenants.

Part Two is “Exposition of the Biblical Covenants” and is written by Gentry. These twelve chapters, according to the authors, are the heart of the book and the framework for their main argument. Together they address the major covenants of the Bible, including the Adamic/Creation covenant along with the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants. The section ends with some discussion on speaking the truth in love based on Eph 4:15. Part Three is written by Wellum and consists of two chapters dealing with a biblical and theological summary, and theological implications in regard to the “Kingdom through Covenant” concept. There is also an appendix on *berit* (“covenant”).

The main argument of the book runs through the framework of the six covenants mentioned in Part Two. What follows is a brief attempt at summarizing some of their conclusions about the covenants.

Adamic Covenant

First, for the authors, the Bible’s storyline begins with Adam and the Adamic covenant. Adam functions as the archetypal covenant partner and mediator between God and creation.¹¹ Adam being the “image” of God pertains to Adam’s role as “servant-king” over God’s world. Being the “likeness” of God emphasizes Adam’s relationship to God as a son. In sum, the “likeness” concept emphasizes man’s relationship to God while “image” focuses on man’s relationship to creation. The

¹¹ For another summary of the key points of the book, see Jared Compton’s helpful analysis at Jared Compton, “Kingdom through Covenant and Dispensationalism: A Summary and Response,” <http://www.dbts.edu/pdf/macp/2012/Compton,%20Kingdom%20through%20Covenant.pdf>. (accessed January 18, 2013), 3.

Garden of Eden was the place where Adam and God dwelled together and it functioned as an archetypal sacred place or sanctuary. Adam's role was to rule and subdue the earth and thus expand the sacred space throughout God's creation. With his sin and fall, though, Adam (as representative of mankind) failed in the mission given to him by God.

Noahic Covenant

With man's failure of the Adamic covenant, God started afresh with a new Adam—Noah. To him the Noahic covenant was given. This Noahic covenant was not a brand new covenant but a continuation in some ways of the creation covenant made with Adam. As a second Adam, Noah was to succeed where Adam failed. But he did not succeed. With the account of Noah's drunkenness in Genesis 9, Noah, like Adam, "is also a disobedient *son* whose sin results in shameful nakedness."¹² Thus, "the family of Noah ends up in the same chaos and corruption as the family of the first Adam."¹³ So not only did the first Adam fail, the second Adam, Noah, failed as well. The search for a faithful covenant adherent continues.

Abrahamic Covenant

God then starts fresh again with Abraham who is then given the commission that was first mandated to Adam and then Noah. As Gentry puts it, "God intends to establish his rule over all creation through his relationship with Abram and his family: kingdom through covenant."¹⁴ Through Abram and his descendants "the broken relationship between God and all the nations of the world will be reconciled and healed" (245). The land promised to Abraham is to function as a new Eden.

Mosaic Covenant

Through Abraham, the nation Israel picks up the mantle of new Adam. Israel was to be the mediator between God and the world: "Israel is also a vehicle for bringing the nations to the divine presence and rule."¹⁵ Israel's tabernacle "is also a replica of the garden of Eden and a representation of the universe."¹⁶ This means that "just as Adam was to fulfill his mandate by devoting himself to worship as a priest in the garden sanctuary, so Israel as a new Adam is to fulfill her mandate by devoting herself to worship as a priest in the tabernacle and later the temple."¹⁷

¹² Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 170. Italics are in the original.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Davidic Covenant

The next new Adam was David via Abraham and Israel. Like Adam, David is God's son and like Adam, David was to mediate God's blessings on a universal scale. The Davidic covenant which was given to him had the purpose of being "the instruction for humanity" (2 Sam 7:19), indicating that the covenant's aim was universal blessing.¹⁸ Yet the record shows that both David and his descendants were sinful and failed.

New Covenant

With the new covenant, the baton of "new Adam" is then passed to the Davidic Messiah who we now know as Jesus. He is the one who restores Israel for the good of the world. While all of the other "Adams" failed—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David—Jesus the Davidic Messiah succeeds.

Thus, the authors see the kingdom being carried out through six biblical covenants. With each covenant there is a representative who functions as an "Adam" figure. Yet these covenants and Adam figures point ultimately to Jesus and the new covenant. And with the coming of Jesus some of the promises and expectations of the previous covenants are transcended. The authors believe that both covenant theology and dispensationalism miss some of the changes that have occurred because of the coming of Jesus and the new covenant. Covenant theologians err on the genealogical principle and view too much continuity between circumcision for Israel and infant baptism for the church. On the other hand, dispensationalists are wrong for seeing the land promises as still being in effect for national Israel. It is from this framework that Gentry and Wellum present their *via media* approach and contrast it with that of covenant theology and dispensationalism.

Areas of Appreciation

As will become evident, I have disagreements with some key points of the book. But before delving into those I want to highlight some commendable features. This is a serious work written by two fine scholars and is worthy of consideration. The authors have an unwavering commitment to God and the authority of Scripture. Gentry's chapters on the biblical covenants in the Old Testament are full of helpful information and reveal the result of years of fruitful study. Wellum's interactions with dispensationalism and covenant theology are mostly well done. The tone of the authors was respectful of both covenant theologians and dispensationalists. They are also correct that when it comes to "a basic understanding of the gospel" both covenant and dispensational theologians "agree more than they disagree."¹⁹ I also appreciated how the authors at times quoted representatives from the opposing camps favorably. Both Michael Horton (a

¹⁸ Ibid., 399.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39.

covenant theologian) and John Feinberg (a dispensational theologian) were noted as making good points. This shows the ability of the authors to interact with others on the merits of their arguments.

As a dispensationalist, I also was pleased to see the authors interact with John Feinberg's explanation of dispensationalism from Feinberg's chapter, "Systems of Discontinuity" in the book *Continuity and Discontinuity*.²⁰ This chapter appeared in 1988, but most books critical of dispensationalism after this date have ignored Feinberg's contributions, which offer a formidable defense of the dispensational perspective. The fact that the authors were willing to interact with Feinberg shows their desire to interact with real issues and not straw man presentations which often characterize books critical of dispensationalism.

Then in regard to content, I agree with the authors on a major point that "covenant" and the progression of the covenants form the framework of the Bible's storyline and that a proper understanding of the covenants is the way to understand God's kingdom purposes. My own view is that "kingdom" is the theme of Scripture, and I agree that the covenants are the vehicle through which the kingdom program is carried out. Thus, the "kingdom through covenant" concept has merit. This does not mean that I always agree with how they understand the covenants or the kingdom of God, but I do agree that biblical covenants are the framework for understanding God's kingdom program.

I also found myself in hearty agreement with the authors' affirmation of believer's baptism and their stance that covenant theology is in error for supporting infant baptism. Of all the issues discussed in the book, I think this is the one with the most importance since it influences how we view the church and who is in it. The new covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit applies only to those who have consciously placed their faith in Jesus, and baptism is the proper response for those who have made this commitment.

Now at this point I will discuss some differences I have with the book. The first is a structural issue. Then this is followed by key theological differences.

Structural Issue: Where Is the New Testament?

My first criticism involves the structure of the book. The authors present their approach as a whole-Bible approach that is better than covenant theology and dispensationalism. But surprisingly there is very little discussion of key New Testament passages other than one chapter devoted to Ephesians 4, which seems somewhat arbitrary and does not seem to help their argument. While reading, I kept wondering, "When are they going to deal with NT texts?" But the New Testament discussion did not come, even in regard to significant New Testament passages dealing with the covenants. If one skims the Scripture Index at the back of the book one will see references to New Testament verses, but significant treatment of key passages is critically lacking. The issue is not just with a verse here or there, but

²⁰ John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988).

major sections that go with little or no comment. Key passages that are not adequately discussed include Matthew 24–25; Luke 1–2; and Acts 1–3, etc. There is very little discussion of Romans 9–11 and no treatment of the key millennial passage of Revelation 19–20. My perception is not alone. In his review of *Kingdom through Covenant*, New Testament scholar Douglas Moo expressed his bewilderment at the lack of NT discussion:

Yet, at the risk of exposing my own disciplinary prejudice, I'm puzzled at the lack of any sustained exegetical argument for the point from the New Testament (NT). To be sure, the authors appeal to NT texts in the course of their discussion of the OT covenants, but there is little if any exegesis and a distressing lack of recognition of alternative viewpoints and of bibliography. The one sustained NT chapter, on Ephesians 4–6, contributes little to the key argument, while critical NT texts about "covenant" or "law" are only briefly mentioned.²¹

Likewise Darrell Bock made a similar point about the book when he said, "it is amazing to see no detailed treatment of Romans 9–11 or how Israel is seen in several texts within Luke–Acts. These texts depict the role of Israel in the New Testament and in light of new creation realities."²²

This lack of New Testament treatment is a structural flaw and hinders the book's attempt to offer an approach that is better than that of covenant theology and dispensationalism. The book has an Old Testament scholar in Gentry who makes detailed points from the Old Testament, and a theologian in Wellum, who is making big-picture theological statements and comparisons with covenant theology and dispensationalism. But the presence of a comparable New Testament influence would have given the book a much-needed symmetry.

This lack of New Testament interaction is glaring when it comes to New Testament references to the biblical covenants. It would be helpful to see how the authors address New Testament passages that refer to the biblical covenants. In Luke 1:32–33 the angel Gabriel told Mary that Jesus' coming is linked with the Davidic covenant and a kingdom reign over national Israel. Under the influence of

²¹ Douglas Moo, "Kingdom through Covenant: A Review by Douglas Moo," <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/09/12/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-douglas-moo/> (accessed January 9, 2013). In response to Moo, the authors made a defense for the lack of New Testament discussion by offering three reasons: "(1) We wanted to deal thoroughly with the NT, but this would require another big book, as can be seen from the works of Beale and Hahn, which focus largely on the NT; (2) in circles of thought somewhat similar to our own, the OT is often neglected or people are relying upon exegesis that already assumes a specific theological system; (3) only when we correctly construct the OT scaffolding can we rightly understand what Paul is doing in Romans 9–11 and other NT texts." "'Kingdom through Covenant' Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton." These answers are not sufficient in our view. Offering a big-picture storyline of the Bible in a way that is better than other whole-Bible storylines requires New Testament interaction. It may appear to some that the authors believe they did such a good job with the Old Testament that there is no need to address the New Testament.

²² Darrell Bock, "Kingdom through Covenant: A Review by Darrell Bock," <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/09/11/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-darrell-bock/> (accessed January 8, 2013).

the Holy Spirit, Zacharias referred to both the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants as evidence that Israel would be saved and rescued from her enemies (see Luke 1:67–74). In Rom 9:4 Paul says that the “covenants” still belong to Israel even though Israel as a whole is in a current state of unbelief. In Acts 3:25 Peter tells the leaders of Israel that they are still “sons of the prophets and of the covenant” that God made with their fathers and Abraham. In addition, isn’t it significant that Paul appeals to Isa 59:21, a new covenant passage, as support for his claim that all Israel will be saved (Rom 11:26–27)? This seems to link the new covenant with national Israel’s salvation. But since the book does not address major sections of the New Testament, including those that refer to the biblical covenants, the book leaves many important issues uncovered and is vulnerable to those who appeal to New Testament passages for support of their view.²³

Theological Issues

Israel, the Land, and Typology

Now I want to focus on four key theological issues related to the book where I have important differences with the authors : (1) Israel, the land, and typology; (2) Jesus’ relationship to Israel; (3) Israel, Gentiles, and the people of God; and (4) the Old Testament expectation.

At the heart of Gentry and Wellum’s disagreement with dispensationalism is dispensationalism’s position on Israel and the land. Dispensationalists assert that both Israel and Israel’s land have future significance in God’s plans. This is because God’s plan to restore all things involves nations and the restoration of nations (Isa 2:2–4). The ultimate Israelite, Jesus the Messiah, uses the nation Israel as a platform to bless the other nations of the earth as God deals with nations as national entities. Israel failed her mission in the Old Testament, but under her Messiah, Israel is enabled to minister to the nations at His return. But according to Gentry and Wellum, dispensationalism errs in regard to Israel and her land by not understanding how these issues relate to Christ in the realm of typology. They state:

In the case of dispensational theology, if they viewed as typological both the land of Israel and the nation itself, then their view, at its core, would no longer be valid. Why? For the reason that the land promise would not require a

²³ I think Bock makes a legitimate point that a major passage such as Romans 9–11 needs treatment. Interestingly, in response to Bock’s point that Gentry and Wellum do not deal with Romans 9–11 and Luke–Acts, the authors responded, “The metanarrative we bring to these texts determines our exegetical outcomes, and we are questioning DT’s storyline.” See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, “‘Kingdom through Covenant’ Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/09/20/gentry-and-wellum-respond-to-kingdom-through-covenant-reviews/> (Accessed October 3, 2012). This is not a helpful response in my opinion. It seems that the authors are claiming that the metanarrative they have supposedly discovered makes Bock’s challenge irrelevant. Bock wants to challenge their metanarrative with a major portion of Scripture, but the authors seem to claim that this is not necessary, because Romans 9–11 must align with the metanarrative they have allegedly established so why even deal with Bock’s challenge. But what if a proper exegesis of Romans 9–11 contradicts the authors’ metanarrative?

future, “literal” fulfillment in the millennial age; the land itself is a type and pattern of Eden and thus the entire creation, which reaches its fulfillment in the dawning of a new creation. Christ, then, as the antitype of Israel, receives the land promise and fulfills it by his inauguration of a new covenant which is organically linked to the new creation.²⁴

The authors also say:

In other words, “land,” when placed within the biblical covenants and viewed diachronically, was intended by God to function as a “type” or “pattern” of something greater, i.e. creation, which is precisely how it is understood in light of the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant.²⁵

According to the authors, Jesus is the “antitype” of Israel who fulfills both Israel and Israel’s land. Since Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel and the land, dispensationalists err in expecting future significance for Israel and the land. *Typology, then, is at the heart of the difference between dispensationalism and the approach offered by Gentry and Wellum.* This argument from typology against dispensationalism is not new and has been used often by covenant theologians and others who disagree with dispensational theology.

But it is on this issue of typology in regard to Israel that I think dispensationalism has a significant edge. The theory that Israel and the land are no longer significant because of Jesus is refuted by explicit texts in the New Testament that show the future significance of Israel. *If Gentry and Wellum are correct, then the New Testament should not speak of a future for national Israel after Jesus comes on the scene. But it does.*

For instance, when Peter asked Jesus about future rewards Jesus responded by saying, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28). Here Jesus is referring to the relevance of Israel in the *eschaton*. When the renewal of the cosmos (“regeneration”) occurs and Jesus sits on His glorious throne (i.e. Davidic throne), the restored twelve tribes of Israel will be ruled by the twelve apostles. In this case the ultimate Israelite, Jesus, predicts a future existence for the tribes of Israel. But if Israel has been transcended into Jesus, this text would make no sense since it would be asserting that the twelve apostles would have positions of authority over Jesus.

Other such examples abound. With Luke 22:30 at the Last Supper, Jesus again tells the disciples that they will be “judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Also, on the day of Ascension, after forty days of instruction about the kingdom from Jesus (see Acts 1:3), the disciples asked, “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). This shows how the apostles understood the nature of the kingdom after forty days of kingdom instruction from Jesus. As apostles of the ultimate Israelite, Jesus, they believed there was a future for the nation Israel or

²⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 122.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 706.

they would not have asked the question. Jesus does not say they are wrong in their expectation, nor does He say, “Don’t you get it? I am the true Israel! Why are you talking about the nation Israel?” Jesus does not contradict their view but tells them that the timing of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel is not for them to know (Acts 1:7). This offers evidence that Israel is significant as an entity after the arrival of Jesus.

Even in a state of unbelief after the era of the church has begun, Paul explicitly affirms that the “covenants,” “temple service,” and “promises” still “belong(s)” (present tense) to Israel (Rom 9:4–5). Romans 11 affirms a future for Israel by declaring that after the time of the fullness of the Gentiles, “All Israel will be saved” (see Rom 11:25–26). Other passages like Acts 3:19–21 also speak of a future for Israel. So Jesus and the New Testament writers affirm a future for the nation. Also, the perpetuity of Israel specifically as a *nation* is affirmed in Jer 31:35–37, a key new covenant passage:

Thus says the LORD,
 Who gives the sun for light by day
 And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
 Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar;
 The LORD of hosts is His name:
 “If this fixed order departs
 From before Me,” declares the LORD,
 “Then the offspring of Israel also will cease
 From being a nation before Me forever.”
 Thus says the LORD,
 “If the heavens above can be measured
 And the foundations of the earth searched out below,
 Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel
 For all that they have done,” declares the LORD.

God explicitly links Israel’s existence as a *nation* with the functioning of the cosmic bodies as part of His new covenant promises. What stronger language could God use to convey His commitment to Israel as a nation?

Gentry and Wellum’s theory of Israel’s land being transcended into Jesus in a type/antitype relationship does not work. In His Olivet Discourse, Jesus gives prophetic significance to the land of Israel. Those who are in Judea are told to flee as a result of the Abomination of Desolation spoken by Daniel (see Matt 24:15ff.). The trampling of Jerusalem by Gentiles is said to be limited “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). The word “until” means that Jerusalem’s fortunes will be reversed. In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul predicts that a coming “man of lawlessness” would enter the temple of God which must be a temple located in Jerusalem (see Rev 11:1–2). In addition, since Israel and its land are so closely connected, if it can be proven that Israel has future significance, this means the land has significance since a nation must have a geographical location from which to operate.

Not only do early portions of the Old Testament predict a future significance for Israel and the land after a time of judgment and dispersion (see Deut 30:1–6), the prophets of the OT continue to give prophetic significance to Israel and the land. The land is affirmed in Jer 16:14–15:

“Therefore behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when it will no longer be said, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’¹⁵ but, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of the north and from all the countries where He had banished them.’ *For I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers.*”²⁶

Notice here that God still intends to fulfill the land promise to Israel based on His promise to Israel’s fathers. Even the “new covenant” sections of Jeremiah affirm the land promise to Israel. Jeremiah 30:3 states that “days are coming” when the Lord will “restores the fortunes” of “Israel and Judah” with the result that God will “bring them back to the land” that He “gave to their forefathers.” The “city [Jerusalem] shall be rebuilt” (Jer 31:38). God “will faithfully plant them in this land” (Jer 32:41). I find these references highly significant since *the new covenant itself on multiple occasions affirm Israel’s relationship to the land of promise*. The new covenant is not evidence against the land for Israel, it is evidence for it.

Very late in the Old Testament story, Zechariah 14 indicates that the Lord will return to the Mount of Olives to deliver Jerusalem and begin His kingdom reign over the nations from Jerusalem (Zech 14:1–9). So even with the later prophets the promise of the land to Israel is affirmed. If God intended for the earlier discussion of the land in Genesis to be typical, this is not evident from the prophets who keep emphasizing the importance of Israel’s land.²⁷

Nor can it be rightly argued that since the Abrahamic covenant has an “international purpose” to it that this means there are textual clues that one should not expect a future land fulfillment with Israel.²⁸ These are not mutually exclusive concepts. It is not the case that God promises land but then embeds language to indicate that it’s not really about land or that this land is just typical of something else. If one views Israel’s promised land as a “microcosm” of what God will do for all the nations, then why can’t there be a literal fulfillment of land for Israel? God can bless both Israel as a nation and the international community. This does not have to be an either/or proposition; it is both/and. What God will do for Israel is a microcosm of what He will eventually do for nations on an international scale. Since the beginning of the Abrahamic covenant, Israel was intended to be a vehicle for blessings to the Gentiles (see Gen 12:2–3). Israel failed that mission in the Old Testament, but Israel’s Head, Jesus the Messiah, is able to restore the nation and

²⁶ Emphases are mine.

²⁷ In a response article the authors made the statement, “especially in the prophets, the land is viewed as a type that looks back to Eden and forward to the new creation.” “Kingdom through Covenant” Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton.” But I don’t think this was proven. The land promises of Genesis are affirmed. They are not viewed typologically.

²⁸ The authors appear to make this point on pages 707–09.

use the nation to bring blessings to the other nations of the earth—blessings that are spiritual and physical. Thus, God's plans are *national* (Israel), but the nation is an instrument to bring *international* blessings.

This is a case where I think explicit Bible texts trump a theory of typology in regard to Israel. To clarify, this is not an issue of whether types exist or not. Dispensationalists affirm that types exist in the Bible. And as a dispensationalist, I affirm that events in Israel's history correspond to Jesus. So this is not about whether one believes in types or typological connections. It has more to do with what are legitimate types and what are the implications if a typological connection exists.

The dispensational view is that Jesus is coming again to rule and bless the nations of the earth (see Psalm 2; 110; Rev 2:26–27). The land of Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital, will function as the headquarters of Jesus' international reign (see Zech 14:9). Both the Old Testament (Isa 19:24–25; Zechariah 14) and the New Testament (Rev 2:26–27; 21:21, 24; 22:2) affirm the presence of plural nations in the *eschaton*. So as God takes back this planet for His purposes, Jesus will use a restored nation Israel, with its geographical boundaries, as a beachhead or platform to bless all the nations of the earth. This will occur in an intermediate kingdom as described in Rev 20:1–6, yet the interaction between God and the nations will continue on into the eternal state as well (see Rev 21:24, 26; 22:2).

That the nation Israel has influence both now and in the future is also affirmed in Romans 11. Here Paul is undeniably addressing the people of Israel as they currently stand in unbelief. Paul strongly declares that “God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be!” (Rom 11:1). Then in Rom 11:11–12 Paul addresses both the *current* and *future* influence of Israel on the world. The current influence is found in Rom 11:11b: “But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles to make them jealous.” So Israel presently has an impact on Gentile salvation.

But next Paul discusses Israel's future influence: “Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” (Rom 11:12). What Paul is saying is that Israel matters both now and in the future. His argument could be called the ‘lesser to the greater’ argument. In more informal terms I call this the “You ain't seen nothin' yet!” argument. If Israel's current unbelief has brought blessings to the world in the present, just wait until the “fulfillment” takes place in the future. That will really be something! This fulfillment is linked with the salvation of “all Israel” at the coming of Jesus in Rom 11:26. What this passage shows is that Israel has not faded in significance. Israel is relevant now and in the future.

The authors appear to be working off a model of typology in which the arrival of an antitype must always mean the non-significance of a type. Thus, if it can be shown that there is a typological connection between Israel and Jesus, then Jesus assumes the identity of Israel so much that national Israel is no longer relevant as an entity in God's plans. But while this ‘antitype negates type’ approach may apply in some cases, it does not work in regard to Israel and Jesus. This is not a case of an antitype swallowing up a type in significance but the Corporate Head (Jesus)

restoring the many (national Israel). This ties into the next point concerning the relationship of Jesus to Israel.

Jesus' Relationship to Israel

I believe the book is off-key on the significance of Jesus' relationship to Israel. I affirm with the authors that Jesus is identified with Israel, but I do not agree with the significance they give to this relationship. The authors appear to view the relationship in the sense of the type, Israel, being transcended by the greater antitype, Jesus. Since Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel, it is argued that there is no future significance for Israel as a nation. A better understanding, though, is to see the relationship between Jesus and Israel as that of *corporate solidarity* in which the One (Jesus the true Israelite) represents and restores the many (the nation Israel).²⁹ This corporate solidarity relationship between Jesus and Israel is revealed by typological connections such as those found in Hos 11:1/Matt 2:15 and Jer 31:15/Matt 2:17–18. In these cases events in Israel's history correspond to events in Jesus' life to show that Jesus is the true Servant of Israel. But these typological connections do not mean the non-significance of the nation Israel. Instead they show corporate solidarity between Jesus and Israel. For instance, Isa 49:3–6 highlights this understanding since it teaches the true Servant of Israel (Jesus) will “restore” the nation Israel with consequent blessings for the nations:

He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The concept of “servant,” which is sometimes used by Isaiah of Israel, is here used of the ultimate Servant, Jesus. But note that this “Servant,” who represents Israel, restores Israel and blesses the Gentiles. He does not make the people of Israel pass away in significance. Jesus does not absorb Israel; He restores Israel. Compare:

It is not:

Jesus' identification with Israel means the non-significance of the nation Israel.

Instead:

Jesus' identification with Israel means the restoration of the nation Israel.

²⁹ Thus, typological connections such as those found in Hos 11:1/Matt 2:15 and Jer 31:15/Matt 2:17–18 show the relationship between Jesus and Israel.

Israel, Gentiles, and the People of God

Another disagreement I have is in regard to how Israel and the Gentiles relate as the people of God. Gentry and Wellum assert that the Old Testament prophets foretold that nations would be integrated into a transformed Israel. Thus, Israel is expanded to include believing Gentiles. They claim that passages like Isaiah 2, 19, 56 and Jeremiah 16 teach such a transformation of Israel.³⁰ But these passages do not teach a transformed Israel. These passages teach that the *people of God* will be expanded to include believing Gentiles alongside Israel, but they do not teach that *Israel* has been expanded to include Gentiles. The ‘people of God’ is a broad concept that can encompass both believing Jews and Gentiles. Note Isa 19:24–25:

In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.”

Here terminology once used of Israel is now applied to Gentile nations. Egypt is called “My people.” Assyria is the “work” of God’s hands. Thus, the people of God concept is expanded to include Gentiles, so much so that language once used of Israel is now used of Gentile groups. Yet Israel still retains its identity as Israel—“Israel my inheritance.” Egypt and Assyria are not called “Israel.” Instead, they become the people of God *alongside* Israel who still retains her identity as Israel. Thus, there is unity in that the people of God includes believing Gentiles alongside Israel, yet there is still diversity in that Egypt is still Egypt, Assyria is still Assyria, and Israel is still Israel. Compare:

It is not:

Egypt and Assyria are morphed into a redefined Israel.

Instead:

Egypt and Assyria are incorporated into the people of God alongside Israel.

In Isa 2:2–4 the nations stream to Jerusalem to worship God but they do so as Gentile nations, not as part of a transformed Israel. A similar truth is found in Isaiah 56. Isaiah 56:3–8 indicates that foreigners will become God’s servants and will be brought to God’s mountain as the people of God, but this passage does not indicate that Gentiles become Israel. They participate with Israel in the people of God. Jeremiah 16:19 says that nations will come from the ends of the earth, but this in no way means Gentiles become Israel.

In sum, it seems that Gentry and Wellum interpret passages in which Gentiles are included in the people of God and participate in Israel’s land and temple as evidence that the concept of Israel has been transformed and that believing Gentiles

³⁰ Gentry and Wellum, “‘Kingdom through Covenant’ Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton.”

are integrated into Israel. But this is going beyond what the texts are saying. The biblical evidence indicates that the prophets predicted that believing Gentiles would become the people of God as Gentiles alongside believing Israel (see Amos 9:11–15). This truth is affirmed in Eph 3:6 in which believing Jews and believing Gentiles are “fellow heirs,” “fellow members of the body,” and “fellow partakers of the promise.” Believing Gentiles participate with believing Jews as the people of God but are not incorporated into Israel. Note the following:

It is not:

Israel expands to include Gentiles.

Instead:

The people of God expands to include Gentiles alongside Israel.

The Old Testament Expectation

I also disagree with how the authors view the connection between the Old Testament expectation and New Testament fulfillment. They claim that “precisely because Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament, there is also massive change or discontinuity from what has preceded, which entails that in Christ an incredible epochal shift in redemptive-history has occurred.”³¹ They also go on to say that because of the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the entire new covenant age, “many of the themes that were basic to the Old Testament have now been transposed and transformed.”³² Note the terminology in regard to how they view the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament:

- “massive change”
- “discontinuity”
- “transposed”
- “transformed”

They then quote another author favorably who says, “Eschatology is thereby transformed.”³³

But I do not find such massive changes as the authors do. The New Testament on many occasions relies upon the eschatological expectations of the Old Testament. In addition to the reaffirmations of the significance of the nation Israel mentioned earlier, the concepts of temple and an antichrist figure found in passages such as Dan 9:24–27 still have eschatological significance in the New Testament. Paul tells of a coming “temple of God” that a “man of lawlessness” will occupy during the Day of the Lord (see 2 Thess 2:4). This evil person will attempt to display himself as God, yet his evil activity in the temple is met by the wrath of

³¹ Ibid., 598.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Jesus the Messiah who slays him (2:8). In addition, both the temple and city of Jerusalem are given future significance by John in Rev 11:1–2. Writing in the 90s, John spoke of a coming “temple of God” in the “holy city” of Jerusalem. The holy city is said to be tread under foot by the nations for “forty-two months” with the implication that after the forty-two months the city’s fortunes would be reversed in a positive manner. Even the time period of 42 months is consistent with the time period of Dan 9:27.

Jesus Himself gave prophetic significance to Jerusalem when He declared that “Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24b). The key word “until” indicates that Jerusalem’s trampling by Gentiles will be reversed. Not only these, but Old Testament predictions of the Day of the Lord and its cosmic signs are reaffirmed in the New Testament (see Matt 24:29; 1 Thess 5:1–4; 2 Thess 2; 2 Pet 3:10–12). The judgment of Gentile nations that was predicted in Joel 3, is reaffirmed by Jesus in Matt 25:31–46. The following are other examples where Old Testament eschatology is reaffirmed in the New Testament:

OT	NT
Salvation of Israel	Luke 1:68–69/Rom 11:26
Consolation of Israel	Luke 1:25
Descendant of David will rule over Israel	Luke 1:32–33
Fulfillment of Abrahamic covenant with Israel	Luke 1:54–55
Physical deliverance from Israel’s enemies	Luke 1:70–74
Salvation for both Gentiles and Israel	Luke 2:32
Salvation for people of Jerusalem	Matt 23:37–39
Significance of land of Israel	Matt 24:16 / Luke 21:20–24
Abomination of Desolation	Matt 24:15
Tribulation for Israel	Matt 24:9–21
Worldwide Tribulation/Judgment/Wrath	Rev 3:10
Restoration of the creation	Matt 19:28/ Rom 8:19–22
New covenant fulfilled with Israel	Rom 11:27
Kingdom of God after worldwide Tribulation	Luke 21:31
OT covenants, promises, temple service for Israel	Rom 9:4

As these examples show, far from offering “massive” changes and transformation of the Old Testament expectations, the opposite is the case. The New Testament affirms the Old Testament themes and promises. The better understanding is that God is “building upon” the contextual understanding of what He promised in the Old Testament. Of course, in the progress of revelation God can and does offer more than what He promised in the Old Testament (i.e., two comings of Messiah), but such additions are consistent with what was revealed earlier. Not only is this a better and simpler understanding, but it does justice to what the original writers meant and what the readers of the Old Testament revelation would have understood. If there are “massive change(s)” from the expectation of the Old Testament to the New Testament, in what sense was the Old Testament a revelation to the Old Testament authors and readers? Or why would God lead the Old Testament people to believe one thing only to have it be fulfilled in a totally different way in the New Testament?

I also find the claim that the New Testament is making massive changes to the Old Testament to be ironic since the authors have no significant sections devoted to the New Testament. The reader is asked to believe that the New Testament introduces massive changes to the Old Testament expectation, but no significant proof is offered from the New Testament that such a change has occurred.

Other Issues

The points above are the major theological issues where I have differences with *Kingdom through Covenant*. But there are some other areas that I would like to mention as well.

Presentation of Dispensationalism

The last few decades have witnessed several misrepresentations of dispensationalism. That is why I appreciate the authors' attempt to represent dispensationalism accurately. I also like how they interact with some of dispensationalism's most able explainers and defenders. Their interactions with those like John Feinberg and Craig Blaising allowed for a true discussion of the issues. The authors are correct that dispensationalism holds a distinction between Israel and the church, and that Israel's land is important in God's future purposes. It is the latter point the authors really emphasize. I do think, however, that the emphasis they give to the land in dispensationalism is out of balance. So on this issue I have a minor quibble. At least to me, their argument appears like this:

- Dispensationalism is about land for Israel
- Dispensationalism is wrong about the land because the land is typical of Christ and points to the new creation.
- Therefore dispensationalism is wrong.

But dispensationalism's approach to the land is more like:

- Dispensationalism holds that God's plan to restore all things includes a restoration of all nations.
- God uses Israel as a nation, under Israel's Messiah, as a vehicle and microcosm to bless the nations of the earth.
- Thus, Israel's land functions as the platform for the nation Israel, under her Messiah, to perform a ministry of blessing to the nations.

With this scenario, Israel's land is not *the* primary aspect of dispensationalism. The primary issue is how God uses a nation to bless other nations and the geographical platform that nation is granted by the Messiah. So more than "land," a deeper structural issue is dispensationalism's views on nations in the *eschaton*. Israel and the land are microcosms of what God will do for all the nations of the earth. These points help put the land issue into perspective. For me, the primary issue is about nations in the plan of God and Israel's role to those nations under the Messiah, not just "land" as its own entity. If God has a plan for nations as national entities, and

Israel has a role to play to those nations, the land issue naturally follows. It would be odd to think God would use a nation for His purposes but do so in a way without a geographical platform. So, yes, the land is an important part of dispensationalism, but the land promises come within a broader context. In the attempt to refute dispensationalism, I believe it would be more effective for critics to tackle dispensationalism's views on nations in the *eschaton*.

The Kingdom

The title of the book, *Kingdom through Covenant* mentions “kingdom” in the title, but I found discussion of what this kingdom actually is to be lacking. The authors offer “five points” that “capture” what they affirm about the kingdom.³⁴ Most of what is said is good and accurate, yet not specific enough to be of much help. I could see representatives from all three major millennial views agreeing with most of what was said here. I understand that the concept of “covenant” as the framework for the Bible’s storyline is their emphasis and not millennial issues. Yet if it is true that kingdom comes through covenant it would have been helpful to know more specifics of how they viewed the kingdom and which view of the millennium they hold. Are they amillennial or premillennial? Do they see this issue as significant in any way? If the premillennial view is correct, would not this be an ideal place for the physical and land promises to Israel to be fulfilled? For argument’s sake, even if we granted that Israel’s land is typical of the new creation, there could still be a millennial phase in which the land promises are literally fulfilled *en route* to conditions in the eternal state. Thus, one could hold that the land promises are typical and temporary but still see a need for a future era in which the land promises are literally fulfilled before the new earth conditions.

Messiah and the Prince of Daniel 9:24–27

This point is not as major as some of the others discussed, but in one of the chapters, Gentry makes a case for the view that “Messiah the Prince” and the “prince to come” mentioned in the Dan 9:24–27 section are “the same individual.”³⁵ This is in contrast to the more popular view that there are two individuals—“Messiah the Prince” being a reference to the Messiah, and the “prince to come” being a negative person, an “Antichrist” figure. Gentry sees no reason, though, to posit two different individuals. For him, the Messiah is in view in both references. Also, Gentry sees the “firm covenant” of verse 27 as a reference to the new covenant that the Messiah establishes vicariously for His people. This contrasts with the more popular view which sees the “covenant” as a deceptive covenant that the Antichrist makes with the people of Israel.

I believe Gentry’s case is well argued. But the context of Daniel and canonical considerations contribute to the view that Dan 9:24–27 tells of a negative Antichrist figure who makes a covenant with the people of Israel. First, Daniel 7 presents both

³⁴ See pages 592–97.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 562.

the Messiah and a negative person in the same context. Daniel 7:13–14 speaks of the Son of Man who was given a kingdom but then it tells of a coming “horn” (Dan 7:8, 21) who will oppose the Son of Man and wage war with the saints. Daniel 7, therefore, places the Messiah and an anti-Messiah figure in the same context. This does not mandate that Daniel 9 does this as well, but it has already occurred in Daniel. So to see this again in Dan 9:24–27 is not surprising. Plus, as other Scripture indicates, the coming evil one is an “antichrist” (see 1 John 2:18) He is a false Christ and satanic counterfeit to the real Christ, Jesus. It is reasonable, then, that the term “prince” could be used of both the real Messiah (Jesus) and the false messiah (the antichrist). This also seems natural in the context of Daniel 9 where the “prince to come” is mentioned after the reference to the Messiah being cut off.

Also, that a negative figure is in view in Daniel 9 is supported by canonical factors from the New Testament. Revelation 13 uses time indicators from Dan 9:24–27 when discussing the negative ministry of the coming beast. According to Rev 13:5 the beast speaks “arrogant words and blasphemies” along with “authority to act” for the time period of “forty-two months.” The “forty-two” months fits with the statement that the prince will stop sacrifice and grain offering at the middle of the seventieth week which is the 42-month point. Thus both the “prince” of Dan 9:27 and the “beast” of Rev 13:5 are linked with the same time period.

In addition, in Paul’s discussion of a future day of the Lord, he speaks of a “man of lawlessness,” a “son of destruction” who “takes his seat in the temple of God displaying himself as being God” (2:3–4). Paul appears to be relying on Dan 9:27 and 11:36 for his statements about this evil figure. According to Dan 9:27 the prince puts a stop to sacrifice and grain offerings in the Jerusalem temple. So in both Dan 9:27 and 2 Thess 2:3–4 negative things happen to the temple in Jerusalem because of an evil person. Also, in Matt 24:15 Jesus refers to the “ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION” that was spoken of by Daniel. This event causes terrible consequences for the people of Israel. This is a great persecution that comes upon Israel; it is not caused by Israel. This highly negative event that happens to Israel that Jesus refers to fits well with a negative event described in Dan 9:27. This is a case where a proper canonical approach informs us that Daniel had a negative person in mind in Dan 9:27.

Concluding Thoughts

As this review indicates, I do not think that *Kingdom through Covenant* establishes a storyline or metanarrative that is more accurate or more biblical than that offered by dispensationalism. Major sections of Scripture that should be examined to offer a whole-Bible theology are not considered. Plus, the authors draw conclusions from biblical data that are not accurate, especially when alleged typological implications are given more weight than explicit Bible texts in both testaments. While I do not claim that the storyline they are offering is entirely wrong, I do find it to be incomplete and insufficient. The understanding of typology is off-key. Also, I think they miss the significance of the relationship between Jesus and Israel and see too much discontinuity between the Old Testament expectation and the New Testament fulfillment.

There is much good information in the book, especially on the meaning of the image of God, details about the covenants, and the close relationship between persons like Adam and Noah, but the theological dots are not connected in such a way that leads to a more accurate understanding of the Bible from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. Even when discussing the covenants of the Bible, there is not enough consideration of how the covenants of promise still relate to Israel according to the New Testament. I find the dispensational understanding of the Bible's metanarrative to be better since I think it has a more complete and holistic understanding of what the "restoration of all things" includes (Acts 3:21).³⁶ Plus, it has a better understanding of typology and properly takes into account the role of nations and Israel in God's plans through Jesus the Messiah.

In spite of my criticisms, though, *Kingdom through Covenant* offers the Christian community a serious work that challenges us to think through important "big-picture" issues in the Bible. As we wrestle with these issues hopefully our understanding of God's glorious plans for the ages will become even more clear and serve as a motivation for godliness in the here and now.

³⁶ This includes matters both spiritual and physical and matters that are individual, national (Israel), and international.