

**A CRITIQUE OF GENTRY AND WELLMUM’S,
KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT:
AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE**

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I am honored to respond to the work of two scholars I respect, Peter Gentry and Steve Wellum. I offer this response in accordance with the best possible understanding of “iron sharpens iron.” Here are my key “structural” or “big picture” concerns. As you would expect from a dispensationalist, my concerns focus on various issues concerning Israel as a nation, land promise, and typology.

First Issue

As a result of their typological approach and belief that all covenants find primary fulfillment through the first coming of Christ, I believe that Gentry and Wellum overlook the fact that the *OT presentation* of the promise of a restored nation to the land of promise receives repeated emphasis *as a concrete reality* in numerous OT passages. The OT does not present the land of promise as a typological issue pointing to a less concrete reality.

Broadly speaking, the noun “land” occurs almost 200 times in the book of Deuteronomy that directly connects the terms of the covenant with life in the land of promise (cf. 4:1, 5, 14, 40; 5:16; 6:1, 18, 20–25; et al.). Two biblical prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, also spend a lot of time addressing the nation of Israel’s past, present, and future where the term “land” (אֶרֶץ) occurs well over 400 times in over 400 verses. Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel present the concept of land as a concrete reality that God promised His chosen nation, threatened to take away from them because of covenant treachery, and promised to restore them to as a nation after they experienced covenant curse, repent of their sin, and embrace a relationship with Yahweh by faith.

Beyond that, numerous passages that deal with the New Covenant age intermingle what the OT covenants promise relating to a future restoration of the *redeemed* nation to the land along with rule over this domain by a Davidic king. Deuteronomy 29:22–28 envisions a future time when God will bring covenant curse upon the nation because of their penchant for covenant treachery. However, God's scattering His covenant nation throughout pagan nations is *not the end* of God's intentions for His people. Deuteronomy 30:1–10 describes their experience of redemption—individual salvation—as well as national restoration to the land of promise. Right before His promise to circumcise their hearts, we read that “the LORD your God will bring you into the land your fathers possessed, and you will take possession of it. He will cause you to prosper and multiply you more than He did your fathers” (Deut 30:5). This passage (30:1–10) describes God's regenerating His chosen people *in conjunction with* restoring them to the Promised Land. Both realities do not typologically point to something different.

In Jer 16:10–15 and 29:4–28, the Lord connects His promise to bring covenant upon His chosen nation—eviction from the land of promise—with His promise to return this now spiritually vibrant nation to “their land that I gave to their ancestors” (Jer. 16:15; cf. Jer. 29:12–14). The prophet connects this Promised Land to the land that Yahweh had given Israel in history. Building on that argument, a few verses later, Yahweh declares: “I will restore them to the land I gave to their ancestors and they will possess it” (Jer 30:3).¹ Before and after Jeremiah's presentation of the New Covenant, the Lord connects His intention to remove Israel from the land of promise to His plan to build and plant them in that land in the future (Jer 31:27–28; 32:40–41). The clear prophetic connection of these two divine intentions clearly suggests that each one must be as concrete or as metaphorical as the other. How is it that one happened tangibly in human history in accordance with God's stated intentions while Gentry and Wellum affirm that the promised restoration finds typological fulfillment through Christ's death? The prophet Jeremiah repeatedly connects the promise of the New Covenant with God's promise to reinstall the nation into the land of promise as a redeemed people.

Ezekiel 11:16–21 describes Israel's transition from being scattered among the nations (because of covenant curse) to Yahweh reinstalling them in the land of promise. Those who wholehearted embrace Yahweh as their God will enjoy this, but those who reject this relationship will face divine judgment. Ezekiel 36:24–30 connects God restoring the nation of Israel to the land of promise (that will be abundantly fruitful) with their experience of salvation. Ezekiel 37:20–28 describes Israel's future restoration to the land of promise² as a redeemed people, with “David” ruling over them as their king. I would suggest the Gentry and Wellum undervalue or misinterpret the OT's presentation of land as a concrete reality by means of their typology scheme.

¹ Cf. Jer. 31:4–14, 16–17; 31:21–23; Ezek. 11:16–21; 20:39; 34:11–16, 23; 36:8–12; 36:24–30; 37:20–28;

² This emphasis on the fulfillment of the Abrahamic land promise to the nation of Israel is not primarily about land, but about God receiving great glory by bringing His plan to pass on earth, in time and space, in accordance to what He promised He would do.

Second Issue

Gentry and Wellum seem to believe that the presence of “international” or “worldwide” elements points to the intended non-literal fulfillment of land or nation promises that occur in the near context.

First, Gentry and Wellum point to various “textual clues” that the “land” promise in the Abrahamic Covenant refers to something *greater than* a concrete section of land in the Middle East. They contend that the international dimensions of that covenant (Gen 12:3) represent the main reason for the covenant. They write: “The climax of God’s plan through Abraham is not merely the establishment of the nation of Israel but rather that, through Israel, the nations will be blessed, which ultimately is fulfilled in Christ (Gal 3:16).”³ Based on that understanding, they conclude that Abraham’s spiritual seed, whether Jew or Gentile, inherit the promises of this covenant.⁴ Drawing on the work of Paul Williamson⁵, they posit that God’s programmatic agenda to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham’s seed (cf. Gal 3:6–9; Rev 7:9) is clearly non-territorial (i.e., not restricted to any one geographical location). Again, this larger agenda requires a spiritual or typological fulfillment of the land promise to the entire people of God and not just to the nation of Israel.⁶

Second they also affirm that various passages that delineate the geographical boundaries of the Promised Land (Gen 15:18–21; Exod 23:31ff.; Deut 1:7; 11:24) are “not consistent and precise”⁷ Gentry and Wellum agree with Williamson that this imprecision indicates that the Promised Land boundaries was subject to “at least some degree of expansion and redefinition.”⁸ Gentry and Wellum conclude that “this textual ambiguity regarding the land provides clues that the land promise cannot be reduced merely to a particular piece of land but rather hints at a more ideal land which will be far greater, and that this promise will not be fulfilled until Abraham’s seed fills and occupies the world.”⁹ They believe that Paul’s statement in Rom 4:13a, “for the promise to Abraham and his offspring *that he would be heir of the world*” demonstrates that “Abraham did not understand the land promise as referring only to a specific geographic location; rather he viewed the promise as that which ultimately would encompass the entire created order.”¹⁰ They agree with Williamson that “Canaan was simply the preliminary stage in the ultimate unfolding of God’s programmatic agenda—an agenda which not only involves all peoples of the earth but also encompasses all regions of the earth.”¹¹

³ Gentry and Wellum, *KTC*, 707.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Paul R. Williamson, “Promise and Fulfillment: The Territorial Inheritance,” in *The Land of Promise: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Philip Johnston and Peter W. L. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 18.

⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *KTC*, 707–08.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 708.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 708; cf. Williamson, “Promise and Fulfillment,” 20–21.

⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *KTC*, 708 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Williamson, “Promise and Fulfillment,” 22.

Let me respond to this idea that Abraham did not intend to refer to a concrete section of land through the wording of this covenant with three lines of thought. First, God's intention to bless all peoples on earth through the descendants of Abraham as an important part of the Abrahamic Covenant does not legitimize a typological interpretation of the land promise made there. Genesis 1:26–28 make it clear that God created mankind to serve as His image-bearers to all creation. God intends to impact all humanity with His rule. Adam and Eve's fall into sin interrupted the accomplishment of that divine agenda. God's introduction of a "he" (Gen 3:15) who will provide resolution for mankind's sin serves as the first step of God's intentions to bring His will to pass—the establishment of His rule over creation. The Abrahamic Covenant, including the promise of land to Israel, is another part of those divine intentions. God's relationship with Abraham and His descendants, that results in the formation of Israel and placing them in the land of promise, provides a *microcosm* of His intentions for the entire world. God will bless all humanity through His chosen people. God's fulfillment of making use of Israel to demonstrate His glory to the world on the land of promise in the future will demonstrate to the world that God brings to pass what He promises in time and space. Israel as a nation in the land of promise is a significant part of the biblical metanarrative.

Second, Gentry and Wellum make use of God's "programmatic agenda" or the biblical metanarrative to conclude that the promise of land for Israel is not really what God intended, but rather blessing for all peoples in the future. As stated above, God's promise to install Israel in the land of promise as a believing nation is a clear part of His intentions for the world. Rather than an either-or choice, it is a both-and choice. The "international" dimensions of the Abrahamic Covenant do not preclude a future fulfillment of land promises to Israel or require that those land promises find spiritual fulfillment in a non-national Jew/Gentile people of God. Through the Abrahamic Covenant Yahweh reveals that He has intentions for Israel as a nation *and* for the nations of the world. God's establishing His chosen people in the land of promise (initially in Joshua's day and fully in the millennium) serves as a microcosm of what He intends to do for all Gentile nations—establish His concrete, tangible rule over all the earth.

Third, Gentry and Wellum overstate the "imprecision" of the boundaries of the land of promise as an indication that these land references were always meant to envision an ideal reality enjoyed by all of creation. All of the passages they cite as evidence for the "imprecision" (Gen 15:18–21; Exod 23:31–35; Deut 1:7; 11:24; cf. Gen 26:3–4; Exod 34:24; Num 24:17–18; Deut 19:8–9) refer to actual land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants in the Abrahamic Covenant. Also, the passages cited by Gentry and Wellum contain common boundary elements that include the brook of Egypt, Wilderness area, Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Euphrates River. Even though it is true that the boundaries are not given with the exactitude of a land surveyor (a relatively common way of describing land in the ANE world), the general picture of the land encompassed by these boundaries is relatively clear rather than being as imprecise and varied as to suggest an ideal or metaphorical reality.

Third Issue

The biblical metanarrative embraced by Gentry and Wellum excludes the nation of Israel from having a significant role in God's plan for the world. In their response to interaction with Bock, Moo, and Horton on the Gospel Coalition website, they write:

The metanarrative we bring to these texts *determines our exegetical outcomes*, and we are questioning DT's storyline. . . . The people of Israel, as God's chosen people, serve as the privileged means by which God brings about his redemptive purposes to the nations. Even now, God is not finished with them, as Romans 9–11 makes plain. At the same time, the meaning of Israel and Jerusalem is *being transformed* to speak of the people of God, which will include both ethnic Jews and Gentiles.¹²

In their volume, they refer to the fact that various OT themes have been transposed and transformed due to Christ's coming.¹³ They recognize that Israel plays a key role in OT revelation, but God's ultimate intentions for the world have nothing to do with the nation of Israel since all promises related to the nation find typological fulfillment in the Church as part of the New Creation.

According to Gentry and Wellum, NT statements provide the correct interpretation or understanding for OT concepts in a way that does not sound anything like what the OT presented. However, we are not talking about a set of concepts that is presented in metaphorical terms or ones only rarely presented in the OT. The consistent paradigm from the Pentateuch through the Prophets is that God's intention to establish His rule over the world includes His formation of Israel, judging them for their covenant treachery (as a nation that included only some believers), but also the intention to restore that nation to the land of promise after that nation "will look on me, the one they have pierced" (Zech 12:10) and "all Israel is saved" (Rom 11:26). Along with many others, Gentry and Wellum believe that NT statements about New Covenant realities *replace* the repeated tangible and objective statements about nation and land also being part of God's plan to bring Himself glory.

I contend that the glorious truths that become realities through the inauguration of the New Covenant are indeed the intangible aspects of God's covenant program. However, the Church's experience of these blessings does not replace or transform the tangible promises that relate to Christ ruling over the entire earth during the millennium. That millennial reign of Christ includes a redeemed nation of Israel being installed in the land of promise. On earth, in time and space, God brings to fulfillment His promise to His covenant people as part of bringing His rule to pass over the entire world.

¹² Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, "Kingdom through Covenant" Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton," <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/gentry-and-wellum-respond-to-kingdom-through-covenant-reviews/> (accessed 10/8/14) (emphasis mine).

¹³ Gentry and Wellum, *KTC*, 598.

Isaiah 2:2–4 and Micah 4:1–5 correctly depict nations as a huge part of that future kingdom. However, it also depicts them streaming to Zion, established in the land of promise, from which Christ will rule in justice and equity. These nations stream to Jerusalem to worship God, as Gentile nations, not as part of transformed Israel.¹⁴ The reference to the role Gentiles will play in that future kingdom does not rule out God bringing to fulfillment His promises to the nation of Israel as part of that future reign. Israel as a nation does play a role in the biblical metanarrative that also embraces the entire world and all peoples.

Related to that conclusion, let me affirm an important point. The restoration of the nation of Israel to the land of promise is only part of God bringing to pass His intention to establish His rule over all creation. His plan involves Gentiles throughout the world as well. During the millennium, believing Gentiles will rule and reign under Christ's authority throughout the world. God's plan to establish His rule on earth (millennium) does involve individual redemption, i.e., His rule over the hearts of mankind, in addition to a concrete, tangible rule over the world that involves a concrete presence of Israel in the land of promise and Jerusalem reestablished as the place from which He will rule.

Fourth Issue

According to Gentry and Wellum, the OT Land promises must be understood typologically. They write that “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.”¹⁵ They also affirm that “‘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.”¹⁶ According to them, Jesus is the antitype of Israel who fulfills what the OT promised about land and the nation of Israel. I raise this issue because its foundation is in the OT. However, I will leave it to my NT counterpart, Darrell Bock, to address NT texts that refer to land issues and my theology counterpart, Craig, to address the hermeneutical question of typology.

First, the connection between the OT land promise and Eden is often mentioned, but is not connected with the actual occurrence of “Eden” in the OT. This term occurs fourteen times in the OT, six times in Genesis 1–4 as a location name (2:8, 10, 15; 3:23, 24; 4:16). “Eden” occurs as part of God's metaphorical description of the King of Tyre (Ezek 28:13) and is part of the description of Assyrian (like a beautiful tree = the trees of Eden—Ezek 31:9). As part of his pronouncement of judgment on Assyria, Ezekiel refers to the trees of Eden in the underworld/Sheol, chopped down by some previous arrogant rulers (Ezek 31:16, 18 [2x]). The prophet, Joel, compares the

¹⁴ Michael J. Vlach, “Have They Found a Better Way? An Analysis of Gentry and Wellum's, Kingdom through Covenant,” *MSJ* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 18.

¹⁵ Gentry and Wellum, *KTC*, 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 706.

coming Day of the Lord to a vast consuming fire. Before the raging fire hits, the land is compared to the Garden of Eden and behind the fire the land is a desert wilderness (Joel 2:3). Two passages describe God changing the land of Israel from a desert wilderness to a beautiful garden, like the Garden of Eden (Isa 51:3; Ezek 36:35). In Ezekiel 36, the prophet uses this term, Garden of Eden, to describe His restoration of Israel to the actual land of promise (from which He had evicted them through covenant curse). All of the occurrences of “Eden” either signify the actual Garden of Eden or serve as a metaphorical descriptive term. None of them provide the textual foundation for understanding the land promised in the Abrahamic Covenant as a typological reference to Eden, the epitome of bliss and beauty (but not actual land).

On the one hand, to say that God intends to bring all of creation to an Edenic condition is appropriate based on a large number of passages. Another way of saying that is God will one day establish His perfect rule over all creation where there is no sin—the Eternal State. However, there is no textual evidence that supports the idea that the OT clearly or implicitly presents the land of promise as a non-literal, typological reference to Eden, describing a condition rather than an actual land.

Fifth Issue

Gentry and Wellum argue that OT and NT passages demonstrate that the “meaning of Israel and Jerusalem is being transformed to speak of the people of God, which will include both ethnic Jews and Gentiles.”¹⁷ They also point to various OT passages that describe Gentiles coming to Jerusalem, enjoying salvation, and called “my people” as indications that in the OT God Himself is redefining the nation of Israel in totally non-ethnic terms (Isaiah 19, 56; Jeremiah 12, 16).

The term “people” often occurs in the OT to describe God’s covenant nation (Exod 3:7, 10; 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 2:11, 13, 31–32; Micah 6:2, 3, 5) and does more rarely occur to describe Gentiles (e.g., Isa 19:25; Zech 2:11). Regardless, the reality of Gentiles being part of “God’s people” is evident in the lives of Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman (among others). Numerous NT texts give fuller attention to the ethnic breadth of the “people of God.”

Nevertheless, I would argue that the passages cited by Gentry and Wellum are *not redefining* Israel into a Jew-Gentile entity, but looking forward to the broad inclusion of Gentiles as part of the people of God (a broader term than Israel). God’s purposes have always been to include people from every tongue and nation in the redeemed family (Gen 12:3; Isa 2:2–4; 45:20–25; Micah 4:1–5; Zech 14:16). Isaiah 19 describes how Egypt and Assyria, devoted enemies of Israel embrace salvation and are referred to by God as His handiwork and calls Egypt “my people.” It is interesting to note that Isaiah still refers to Egypt, Assyria, and Israel as distinct peoples (Isa 19:25), but not merged into one people called “Israel.” The prophet Jeremiah describes the fate of those nations in which God had scattered Israelites because of covenant curse. He will destroy those who keep worshipping their false gods and show compassion on those who “diligently learn the ways of My people” (Jer

¹⁷ See Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, “Kingdom through Covenant’ Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton,” <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/gentry-and-wellum-respond-to-kingdom-through-covenant-reviews/> (accessed 10/8/14).

12:16a). These ones “will be built up among My people” (Jer 12:16c). In this passage “my people” refers to Israel but is not equated with Gentile nations. Its main point is that rather than being inveterate enemies, believing Gentiles will enjoy fellowship with Israelites because they share the same salvation. Finally, Jer 16:31 demonstrates that God’s plan to extend His rule over all creation includes the salvation of Gentiles. None of these passages clearly teach a redefinition of Israel into a believing people made up of Jews and Gentiles. Praise God! That is exactly what the people of God as an umbrella term signifies, but there is *no OT evidence* for the kind of redefinition and transformation of concept suggested by Gentry and Wellum. The alleged evidence for a transformation of the designation Israel to encompass Jews and Gentiles is absent from the OT. “Israel” always means God’s servant nation (ethnic Israel) throughout the OT.¹⁸

They also turn to Amos 9:11–15 and James’ use of that passage as part of his argument to the leaders of the early church in Acts 15. They contend that “Acts 15 is central in showing that the rebuilt house of David, in both OT senses—royal dynasty and temple—includes the nations.”¹⁹ The prophet Amos does refer to the restoration of David’s fallen tent (Amos 9:11). He also refers to bringing back the nation of Israel to the land of promise, from which land they will never be uprooted (Amos 9:14–15). Amos also describes that future day when Gentiles will be included in that salvation Israel would enjoy (Amos 9:12). It seems that James’ primary point in quoting this passage is to affirm that God Himself authorized this humanity-wide enjoyment of salvation. The widespread salvation of Gentiles accompanies God’s restoration of “David’s fallen tent” but does not redefine the nation of Israel. As Vlach helpfully points out, “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.”²⁰

Summary/Conclusion

I am grateful for the hard work Gentry and Wellum have invested in producing this major work on biblical theology. My key disagreements with their views in the OT does not diminish my respect for them as colleagues and conversation partners. Here are the fundamental concerns I have sought to raise:

¹⁸ That nation will not cease to exist. According to Jer 31:35–37, the prophet anchors Israel’s continuation as a nation in the order of the universe: “³⁵ This is what the LORD says: The One who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed order of moon and stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea and makes its waves roar—Yahweh of Hosts is His name: ³⁶ If this fixed order departs from My presence—this is the LORD’s declaration—then also Israel’s descendants will cease to be a nation before Me forever. ³⁷ This is what the LORD says: If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below explored, I will reject all of Israel’s descendants because of all they have done—this is the LORD’s declaration.” As Vlach points out: “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?” Vlach, “Have They Found a Better Way?,” 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Vlach, “Have They Found a Better Way?,” 19.

1. The OT consistently presents the land of promise as a concrete reality in several settings: where it appears as a covenant promise, when Israel enjoys the initial fulfillment of that promise, when the Lord evicts them from that land through covenant curse, and in the statement of his intention to reinstall the nation of Israel as a redeemed nation in that land in the future millennium ruled by “David.”
2. God’s intentions for Israel and for the nations are not exclusive of one another but a both/and set of promised realities. God will bring glory to Himself by restoring the redeemed nation of Israel to the land of promise *as well as* ruling and reigning with Gentile believers throughout the world in the millennium.
3. Throughout the OT, Israel is the nation of Israel and is *not expanded* to include Gentiles. The people of God is a broader identity that does include believing Jews and Gentiles.
4. The OT does not present the land promised in the Abrahamic Covenant in imprecise terms. It does not present the Promised Land as part of an “Eden trajectory.”
5. My main point is that the OT presents a clear picture: Israel is Israel and the Promised Land is a concrete land rather than something presented with a typological trajectory. Whether the NT authorizes a reinterpretation of those realities is an issue my friend Darrell Bock will pursue.