

The Significance of Covenants in Biblical Theology

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this article is to address the significance and role of covenants in the doing of biblical theology. This topic entails describing the approach or method to biblical theology taken in the book written by myself and my colleague, Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*,¹ and comparing different systems of theology and as such, calls for a gracious and humble spirit.

The term biblical theology, whether used in academia or in the church, has a bewildering number of meanings today. For starters, I am not using the term in the popular sense of theology that we may derive from the Bible or speaking simply of theology that is true to the Bible. Instead, I am using the term in the technical and disciplinary sense which will be defined shortly.

Even when we are using the term biblical theology as a technical term, a number of scholars, whether conservative-evangelical or liberal, honestly think that there are a wide variety of acceptable ways to do biblical theology. As we consider the role of covenant in biblical theology, we will do so in four steps.

First, we will address the issue of method or methodology in biblical theology. Should we accept the wide variety of biblical theologies, or can one argue for a methodology that is superior and leads to a biblical theology that better approximates truth so that other biblical theologies fall short, even if they have some value? We will broach this complicated subject by thinking through the different approaches to biblical theology as described by Edward Klink and Darian Lockett in their helpful overview of biblical theology, *Understanding Biblical Theology*.² This book is a helpful place to begin our reflections on method and to provide some initial critical reflections.

Second, we will outline some basic assumptions and presuppositions essential to the task of doing biblical theology from the standpoint of historic, evangelical theology. Third, we will describe some fundamentals of methodology central to the doing of biblical theology. Fourth, we will conclude with a comparison of the methodological approach of *Kingdom through Covenant* with other biblical theological proposals, and describe why covenant is crucial in the task of doing of biblical theology in a way which remains true to what Scripture is and how Scripture has come to us as God's inspired, infallible Word written. Let us now follow each of these steps in turn.

THE DIVERSITY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: A SUMMARY AND INITIAL EVALUATION

As noted, two evangelical scholars, Edward Klink and Darian Lockett have recently co-authored a book which describes different approaches to biblical theology and evaluates them. This book is a helpful place to begin and the five different approaches they describe can be briefly summarized.

1. Biblical Theology as Historical Description.

In this understanding of the discipline, the central task is to affirm the descriptive or exegetical nature of biblical theology and deny the normative or theological nature of biblical theology.³ Exemplified by James Barr, biblical theology as historical description seeks a theology of the Bible in its own terms and based on its own context(s). Rather than being subject to contemporary commitments of faith that make normative judgments for the present day, this kind of biblical theology remains committed to an authority of the Bible that seeks first and foremost its own message. Note that this method is

committed to an approach to the bible based on historical criticism and is an approach arising from the exaltation of reason as king in the Enlightenment.

2. Biblical Theology as History of Redemption.

This view of biblical theology is an exegetically driven and historically sensitive reading of Scripture. On the continuum between history and theology, this type of biblical theology relies on redemptive history to discern the normative purposes of God as they unfold through the Scriptures. It views God's revelation as a fundamentally progressive disclosure deployed along a sequential and historical timeline. The central means to discern this redemptive history is through inductive analysis of key themes that develop through both discrete corpora and the whole of Scripture.⁴ There are three or four different schools within this approach, but D. A. Carson and Graeme Goldsworthy are leading lights propounding this view.

3. Biblical Theology as Worldview-Story.

This view of biblical theology is exemplified notably by N. T. Wright. This approach attempts to balance historical and theological concerns via the category of narrative. Instead of progressing from the little portions of the narrative to the larger whole, the methodology begins with the larger narrative portions of text through which individual units are read. Wright considers metanarrative or story as an essential element of one's worldview. Historical criticism is criticized because in focusing on fragmentary and technical minutiae, it loses sight of the larger narrative connections running through and connecting the overarching plotline of the Bible as a whole. And since the larger story-line running throughout the text is the key to interpretation,⁵ this approach relies on the plotline of the Bible's metanarrative to understand each individual passage. Wright is a NT scholar who uses the documents of the OT and of Second Temple Judaism to lay out the narrative framework fundamental to understanding the Gospels, Paul, and indeed the entire NT.

4. Biblical Theology as Canonical Approach.

This approach is exemplified by Brevard S. Childs as its chief originator and proponent. Although Childs accepts the historical-critical approach, he seeks a theology in canonical terms and based upon a canonical context. Rather than being confined to external criteria and hypothetical reconstructions,

this approach remains committed to an authority of the Bible that is located within the Bible by means of the exegetical form and function of the canon.⁶ Proponents of the canonical approach claim that only a canonical biblical theology can hold together both the descriptive (historical) and prescriptive (theological) nature of Scripture intended for the confessing church.

5. Biblical Theology as Theological Construction.

This last approach to biblical theology is more of a theological construction that seeks a theology of the Bible in which theological terms are overriding and based on a theological hermeneutic. This approach, exemplified by Francis Watson entails only a modest critique of historical criticism and seeks to incorporate all such criticisms beneath a theological criticism characterized by a governing interest in God and the church.⁷ They claim that only an explicitly *theological* biblical theology can make God the primary subject matter and address the issues innate to the church. Too long has the academy usurped the categories of the Bible and its theology, leaving the leftovers to the church.

An Initial Evaluation

A serious shortcoming of Klink and Lockett's introduction to biblical theology is that although the authors are evangelicals, they place together on the table, as approaches to be evaluated equally, biblical theologies that differ vastly in their assumptions, presuppositions, and epistemological foundations. And nowhere in the book do they assess or critique the epistemological foundations of the different views. They simply record the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches presented without making the basic assumptions explicit, but in so doing, they never get to the heart of the differences between the five approaches.

Briefly, then, let us make clear some of the assumptions, axioms, and epistemological foundations of each of these five approaches to biblical theology so that we can briefly evaluate them.

The approach of biblical theology as historical description (#1) is completely committed to historical criticism. Although the biblical theology approaches of canon (#4) and theological construction (#5) are more post-liberal in their method, they are also committed to historical criticism, with the caveat that the canon or the church's theology can trump it. So in

three out of the five methods described and evaluated, there is already a faulty view of Scripture which does not match the Bible's own proclaimed view of itself, which is a major problem indeed. It is hard to conceive of how these three approaches are biblical theologies in any orthodox, evangelical sense of the word. In other words, we have people putting the Bible together in a way that is completely contrary to the Bible's own categories and self-delineated structures. These are approaches in which human reason is set above the authority of Scripture itself and, as a result, must ultimately be rejected as unacceptable.

In truth, it is only the approaches of #2 and #3 which resemble an evangelical approach to biblical theology. With that said, what minimal assumptions and presuppositions ought to govern our doing of biblical theology? It is to this subject we now turn.

SOME BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS CENTRAL TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

One of the most prolific scholars in biblical theology, whose approach is not only evangelical, but also committed to covenant theology in the Reformed tradition, is Graeme Goldsworthy. After producing a number of works which "do" biblical theology, his most recent work, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, is focused on describing and determining the best method in biblical theology.⁸ Goldsworthy's work, then, offers a good interlocutor with which we can dialogue as we seek to articulate and develop the best methodology in biblical theology. In fact, unlike the book by Edward Klink and Darian Lockett, Goldsworthy is clear and forthright about his assumptions and presuppositions. Since Stephen Wellum and I share all these and more, it is appropriate to describe them briefly in order to be clear exactly what is undergirding our approach to biblical theology and how we differ from other approaches. What, then, are some of the epistemological foundations behind *Kingdom through Covenant*?

1. The Doctrine of God.

Graeme Goldsworthy states, "We would not be interested in the theology of the Bible if we did not have some previously formed notion that the Bible can deliver a theology."⁹ Those who are Christians, i.e., followers of Jesus as the

Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed King, have come to certain conclusions. We believe in one creator God who made the entire universe simply by speaking, by his Word. We believe that humanity is created or made as the image of this God. And above all, we believe that this God is triune: that is, within the one and only being that is supreme in and above the universe we can distinguish three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The comment of Goldsworthy is helpful here:

A trinitarian dogmatic will inform the way we do our theology and the way we formulate principles of interpretation. The doctrine of the Trinity and its related doctrine, the incarnation of Jesus, form the basis for understanding all relationships in terms of both their unity and their distinctions. This is vital for the proper handling of a progressive dynamic in revelation and for the avoidance of a view of Scripture as a flat and static body of timeless propositions. Different parts of Scripture bear different relationships to Christ and the Christian.¹⁰

2. The Doctrine of the Word of God.

We are also assuming in our approach to biblical theology a classic, evangelical, orthodox view of Scripture as God's Word written. We accept fully the claims of Scripture as divine revelation, guaranteed via divinely inspired spokesmen, the prophets of the OT and the apostles of the New. We would speak of Holy Scripture as our foundation, as first order truth, having first order authority, and that all of our interpretations, creeds, and confessions are second order as they seek to rightly interpret and understand God's objective, authoritative, infallible Word-revelation of himself.

In addition, the Bible is a Word-Act revelation. It is not merely a record of the acts of God in history. The authors of the Bible also provide us with the authoritative and correct interpretation of those events in a first order way.

As noted, what this entails is that we would relegate our own interpretation of the Bible to second order. We come to Scripture biased. No one is completely objective. We bring to the Bible a life-philosophy, a theology, a world-view, a *Weltanschauung* that does not necessarily match that of Scripture. So we constantly strive to bring our interpretation to match and correspond to the first order data of Scripture. Since the Bible is objective and first order truth, it can constantly correct our interpretation of it.

We reject the method of historical criticism because those who adopt this approach have already adopted a view of the Bible that does not equate with God's own view of the Bible as evidenced by its own claims and statements. We consider that the biblical authors are accurate and trustworthy in what they affirm, what they tell us, and what they teach. So we pursue and strive to see the unity of the Bible according to God's own way of putting the Bible together, to grasp and understand what categories and structures are provided by the Bible itself and how, in fact, they are put together by Scripture itself.

What is heartwarming here is to see the agreement here between ourselves and Goldsworthy. He says, "In the wider sense biblical theology is concerned with the structures of revelation and with the ways in which the unity of the biblical canon can be described."¹¹ Indeed, in more than one place in his work he expresses in similar words the need to discover and build a biblical theology based upon the Bible's own categories and structures.

As we distinguish between the Bible as first order truth and acknowledge our own interpretation as second order and confess our lack of objectivity, it is important to note that raw data and events are never self-interpreting. This can be illustrated by the different interpretations of the crucifixion of Jesus offered by those who were in fact eyewitnesses to the event. Let us consider those who were bystanders and who witnessed this event.

First there were the Jewish leaders, who stated that Jesus was a blasphemer and was receiving the just penalty due him for claiming to be God. Second we see the disciples. Judas was utterly disappointed to have followed a failed Messiah, one who in no way brought down the might of Rome and put Israel in first position of political power. Some of the other followers of Jesus were also very confused and some were fleeing as fast as possible. The women who had consistently followed Jesus in order to meet his needs would have thought, "Well, now, here is a gentle, meek person who always brought good and never harmed anyone. And now he has been done in by the system." Two bandits were crucified with Jesus. One considered Jesus just another bandit like himself. The other saw Jesus as a real king who ruled a real kingdom and who could rescue him and so cast his vote for Jesus' kingdom as opposed to that of Rome. The Roman soldiers had witnessed scenes like this hundreds of times in the first century and Jesus was not the only person in the first century who claimed to be the Messiah. The centurion in charge, however, concluded from the events, "Truly this man was the son of God" (Mark 15:39).

We see then, how many and varied were the interpretations of the eye-witnesses. In Romans, however, Paul gives us the *true* interpretation: “He was handed over because of our offenses, and he was raised because of our justification” (4:25). Scripture provides first order truth in both the description of events *and* the interpretation that goes with them.

3. *The Canon as the Limit of Inspired Scripture.*

Canon is a corollary of inspiration and revelation. If we believe that God has spoken and his words have been written down, then the Word of God must be located in some texts, while other texts must be distinguished as not containing or constituting the Word of God.

Here the evangelical and Protestant view stands in opposition to the claims of the Roman Catholic Church that the church gave us the Bible and has the authority to determine its limits and interpret it according to its teachings. The Protestant view holds that God gave us his Word and the church recognizes its claims. In 1 Corinthians 14:37 we read: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord” (ESV).

Two principles are laid out by Paul in this verse: (1) The Bible attests to and makes claims for itself, and (2) God’s people acknowledge its claims. Both parts of the principle are clearly seen in 1 Corinthians 14:37. The first part is clearly primary. For the OT, the Protestant view is based upon the fact that Jesus accepted the Jewish Tradition of only twenty-four books which we number as thirty-nine in our tradition. As followers of Jesus Christ, this is also normative for us.

In this way the Protestant view avoids the ambiguities of the grey areas of the Roman Catholic basis of authority in canonical scripture: deuterocanonical texts and church tradition. It is interesting that 1 Maccabees, one of the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical texts, not only does not claim anywhere to be Scripture or authoritative, but actually expressly states at least three times that no one at that time was speaking for God as a prophet or as an inspired spokesman (4:46, 9:27, 9:54, 14:41).

4. *The Arrangement of the Canon.*

We also argue in *Kingdom through Covenant* that the arrangement of the books in the Jewish canon of the OT is significant for the way we read the text. In the Jewish tradition, which is spelled out by Jesus in Luke 24:44,

there are three divisions: the Law or Torah, the Prophets (which contain the historical books called the Former Prophets and the prophetic works known as the Latter Prophets) and the Writings, headed by the book of Psalms. The different arrangement in our English Bibles is derived from the Septuagint, where the original order in Jewish tradition was rearranged according to chronology and to four genres: Law, History, Prophets, and Poetry.

An example of how the arrangement affects our interpretation can be seen by considering the books of Kings and Chronicles. In our English Bibles, Chronicles follows Kings and is considered by many Christians to be a redundant rehash of Kings. Yet the historical moment in which each was written and the motive for writing each book differs greatly between Kings and Chronicles. Kings was written during the exile to answer the question: Has God failed in his promises? Chronicles was written after the exile to deal with the question: Do We as Returned Exiles Have any Future Hope? Placed at the end of the canon in the Hebrew Tradition, Chronicles provides a bird's eye view of the entire Old Testament and ends by pointing to the promise of the Messiah. Thus the exegesis and interpretation of individual books is sometimes dependent on the arrangement in the canon. Goldsworthy does not adopt a position on the arrangement in the canon.

5. The Unity of the Canon of Scripture.

Also crucial for our approach in biblical theology is the unity of the canon of Scripture. Although the books reckoned as Holy Scripture were written by many human authors over a 1,500 year period, there is a single divine author and we must view the book as a single text, not as an anthology of stories or texts. As a single text or literary work, we can treat it the way we do other unified literary works and ask about the themes or specific topics it treats as well as the narrative plot structure that unifies the whole. This has huge implications for how we do biblical theology which will be unfolded in a moment.

6. The Human Problem and God's Response.

Theologians in the Reformed tradition speak of total depravity. This is not to say that all humans are completely evil, but that all humans are guilty of moral rebellion against the creator God and that this affects every area of our humanity, including our mind. Systematic theologians speak of the noetic effects of sin. Not only our desires and will, but even our reason and thinking

are corrupted and we cannot rely on logic or reason, pure and simple, to attain to a knowledge of God. According to 1 Corinthians 2, in our natural state we do not accept or receive revealed truth. We must possess the Spirit of God to investigate and understand properly divine revelation.

7. *The Role of Story in Worldview.*

Here we combine a central element in the method of N. T. Wright with those who approach biblical theology as redemptive history.

Every person who has ever lived, from untutored to intellect of great sophistication, has an approach to life, a worldview. Now a metanarrative or overarching story is a basic element of every worldview. This metanarrative or overarching story deals with basic questions like “Who am I?”, “Where did I come from?”, “Where am I going?”, “What am I doing here?”, “What is my purpose in day to day life?” Answers to questions provide us with guides for daily praxis in life and symbols that hold things together in our minds. This is discussed by N. T. Wright in the first part of his foundational work, *The New Testament and the People of God*.¹² In the modern period in which I was born, there was a rule that we should reduce all truth to propositions. While I am not denying the importance of propositional truth, N. T. Wright has argued that a proposition, in fact, is an abbreviation of an overarching story and that story is not always reducible to propositions.

8. *Can the Overarching Story Scripture Function as Worldview?*

Since a storyline is at the heart of every worldview and everyone has a worldview, we may ask the question: how can we construct a Christian worldview? Another way to pose the same question is this: can the overarching storyline of Scripture function as a worldview? The answer is yes and every Christian attempts in some way to build a worldview in which something of the story-line of Scripture forms a part of the story of their worldview. The main problem we all face is that we all are children of our times. We all inherit a worldview from the culture and society and time in which we live. Our worldview is very much like a window through which we view the world. When parents teach their children, they do not spend time talking about the window; they simply view the world through it. What happens in education is that the children adopt the window and look at the world the same way without the parents necessarily describing the window.

Similarly, all systematic theologies in some way marry the truth of Scripture with the worldview of their own times. We would argue that the closer the overarching story of our worldview is to the overarching story of Scripture, the more biblical or Christian our worldview will be. In the lives of many people who claim to follow Jesus Christ, there are only some elements of biblical truth married to the metanarrative common in the culture at the time that forms the basis of their worldview. We want the basic story-line or metanarrative of our worldview to match that of Scripture as closely as possible.

BASIC FUNDAMENTALS OF OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

With our assumptions and presuppositions laid out we can now discuss our actual exegetical and hermeneutical task. In the book, *Kingdom through Covenant*, both authors address this topic.

The design for *Kingdom through Covenant* is based on the conviction that biblical theology and systematic theology go hand in hand. To be specific, systematic theology must be based upon biblical theology, and biblical theology in turn must be founded upon exegesis that attends meticulously to the cultural/historical setting, linguistic data, literary devices/ techniques, and especially to the narrative plot structure, i.e., the larger story which the text as a unitary whole entails and by which it is informed.

First we must interpret the text according to the cultural and historical horizons in which it was written. This means, for example, that when we analyse the term “image of God” in Genesis 1:26-28, we must ask the question: what background from culture and history would the first hearers or readers bring to this text? Communication always begins with “where the hearer or reader is at” in order to bring them to the place of understanding the communicator wishes them to reach.

Second, the meaning of the words must be determined according to the languages in which they were originally written. It is the grammar and lexicon of the fourteenth century BC which is the fundamental place to start in interpretation of Genesis 1. What did “image of God” mean in Hebrew in its ancient Near Eastern setting? Here we must exclude the baggage we might bring to the text from Aristotelian or Platonic philosophy as it informs the Graeco-Roman heritage of our western civilization.

Third, we must allow the author to communicate not only by clauses and sentences, but by the literary devices and literary shape and structure he gives to the text in its parts and in the whole. Just as music combines lyrics with melody and rhythm, which shape the meaning of the words, just so the literary structures shape the meaning of the individual clauses and words. In fact, the literary structures as a whole frequently communicate big ideas not particularly specified or stated in any one particular clause. We have demonstrated this over and over throughout the exegesis in Part 2 of *Kingdom through Covenant*.

Fourth, the details in the text must be construed according to the narrative plot structure, i.e., the larger story which the text as a unitary whole entails and by which it is informed. Here I wish to affirm how our minds operate in attempting to grasp and understand things. When we investigate an object, we move back and forth from a view of the whole to an analysis of the parts. Let me illustrate. Suppose we look out a window and I ask you what you see. You look out and you respond: "I see a tree." You have just observed an object and you quickly form a judgement about the whole. This in turn may lead to a detailed study of the parts. You could dig in the ground to see whether there is a single root going straight down deep or a multitude of little roots which are shallow and extend immediately outward. You could examine the size and shape of the trunk. Does it branch right away or does it grow tall before branching? You could look at the colour and texture of the bark. You could consider the pattern of the branches and the overall shape of the tree. You could look at the shape of the leaves and the patterns of the vein structures on the underside. Indeed, if you observed long enough throughout the seasons, you might observe flowers or fruit/nuts and describe them. After all this further analysis of the parts you might refine your initial judgement of the whole by deciding that it is, in fact, a beech tree. As humans we continue to develop understanding by interpreting the parts in the light of the whole and using our understanding of the parts to refine our grasp of the whole. We move back and forth from deduction to induction and vice versa. This is not a vicious circle, but rather a hermeneutical spiral, as we continue to refine our understanding.

This must be part of our exegesis of Scripture. We must use our view of the whole, i.e., the plot-structure or storyline of the literary work to understand the parts and we must use our knowledge of individual details to refine and reshape our grasp of the whole.

An illustration of the interrelation of the plot-structure of the whole and the details of the parts comes from the Exodus.

The event of the Exodus must be interpreted the way Scripture interprets it, not only in the textual horizon, but also in how it is worked out inter-textually across the covenants in the narrative plot-structure, and reaches its fulfilment in Christ.

When we do this, we discover that the Exodus becomes a typological pattern that ultimately points forward to God's greater act of deliverance in Christ and his cross. How do we know this? In its immediate context the Exodus as an event is also presented as a model of future salvation. In light of the prophetic anticipation, the Exodus is spoken of in terms of a new exodus, and that new exodus post-Davidic covenant is anticipated in the dawning of the new covenant age, along with the coming of the Messiah, as seen specifically in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Note how Isaiah speaks of the new exodus in many places, (e.g., Isa 4, 11, *passim*) and especially in the servant passages, it is contrasted with the return from exile under Cyrus.

Liberation theology does not think about how the Exodus is worked out across the canon and how as a type it points forward to the greater need of redemption from sin. Instead, they view it merely as the liberation of a poor and oppressed people which now applies to God being on the side of the poor and that revolutions can take place similar to Marxist ideology. The problem with this view, is that it is possible to read the Exodus this way only if you limit it to its textual horizon, but even when you do that, it does not do justice to the Exodus in the covenants, and it certainly does not do justice to how the Exodus is picked up inter-textually and then canonically in Christ.

This illustration also clarifies the way Stephen Wellum addresses the method of interpreting the text of Scripture in *Kingdom through Covenant*. He argues that we must consider not only the *textual* horizon, but also the *epochal* horizon and finally the *canonical* horizon. The first horizon, the textual horizon, is the immediate context of a passage.¹³

The *epochal horizon* is the second context by which we interpret texts. Here we seek to read texts in light of where they are in the history of the progress of redemption, or where they are in terms of the unfolding plan of God. Since Scripture is a progressive revelation, the texts do not come to us in a vacuum; rather they are embedded in a larger context of what has come *before* them. As God communicates through biblical authors, these same authors write in light of what has preceded them.

Finally there is the *canonical horizon*. Given the fact that Scripture is God's Word and thus a *unified* revelation, in the final analysis texts must be understood in relation to the entire canon. We cannot adequately interpret and apply Scripture if we ignore the canonical level.

These three horizons bring us back to the notion of the plot-structure or storyline of the text as a whole. We will see how crucial this is as we evaluate the method of others and seek to demonstrate the centrality of the covenants in the narrative storyline of Scripture.

A COMPARISON OF OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO OTHERS IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

In *Kingdom through Covenant* we have argued that the covenants (plural) form the backbone of the narrative plot-structure of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. To describe the main storyline we do two things: (1) first we exegete the central passages or texts that detail the major covenants initiated by God between himself and various human partners. As already indicated, we attempt to do exegesis that attends meticulously to the cultural/historical setting, linguistic data, literary devices/techniques, and especially the narrative plot structure, i.e., the larger story which the text as a unitary whole entails and by which it is informed. (2) Second, we exegete the many passages in the OT which discuss and describe the relationships of each covenant to the other covenants. This second step has been neglected by other scholars. It is not sufficient to accurately understand the different covenants. We must put them together into an overall structure or storyline that is derived from Scripture itself and not from our imagination. We want the overarching story to be as close to Scripture itself so that as much as possible, we eliminate from our minds the bias and pagan worldview we bring to the text. The problem in so many biblical and systematic theologies is that the data and different parts of Scripture are put together in a way which is contrary to the way that they are put together by Scripture itself.

Biblical Theology which Emphasizes Themes over the Bible's Plot-Structure

Our colleague James M. Hamilton has written an excellent and helpful biblical theology entitled *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*.¹⁴ Hamilton correctly emphasizes the unity of the biblical texts and

claims a center for biblical theology, i.e., that the idea or theme of “the glory of God displayed in salvation through judgment” is *the* theme which unites the entirety of Scripture and that the parts or individual texts of Scripture cannot be understood without reference to it. We agree with the former, but we do not argue for the latter. We do not deny that “salvation through judgment” is *a* theme of Scripture, even a major one, but we will not defend the assertion that it is *the* theme to the neglect of other themes. In addition, Hamilton does not give much attention to the biblical covenants, their unfolding, progressive nature, and how the biblical covenants provide the entire substructure to the plot-line of Scripture. Yet it is our contention that apart from thinking through the relationships between the biblical covenants, one does not fully grasp the Bible’s own intra-systematic categories and thus how the parts are related to the whole in the overall plan of God.¹⁵ Before one argues for *the* overarching *theme* of Scripture, one must first wrestle with the unfolding nature of the biblical covenants and their fulfilment and consummation in Christ.

A similar evaluation could be given of the biblical theology of our colleague entitled *The King in His Beauty* by Tom Schreiner.¹⁶ He proceeds book by book through the canon of Scripture, discussing the central themes in each book and in the canon as a whole. Again, the important question, is, “How can we be sure his presentation is accurate apart from our relying on the skill of Prof. Schreiner to describe and discuss the themes? In other words, how we put the themes of Scripture together and also how we emphasize some themes and de-emphasize others depends on the biblical theologian’s own skill. There is no independent way to adjudicate whether the result is, in fact, the storyline of Scripture or an appropriate approximation to the biblical metanarrative.

A third example is the work of T. Desmond Alexander. His approach is to deal with biblical theology in terms of themes. In a recent book *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* he treats the following as central themes: the presence of God traced through the Sanctuary of Eden, the Tabernacle, and the Temple and the sovereign rule of Yahweh as King, the removal of evil, the slaughter of the Lamb to redeem creation and the new Jerusalem.¹⁷ We would agree that these are important themes. Much of his discussion is helpful, insightful, and stimulating. Nonetheless, how are these themes related? If, however, we follow the covenants as the key to the plot structure, the problem is easily

solved: God is establishing his rule and bringing salvation in the world through a progression and sequence of covenant relationships. Thus the themes he presents of divine presence, divine rule, and divine salvation are properly correlated. The sequence of covenants puts the different themes together into the proper story-line.

It is interesting to note that G. K. Beale is in complete agreement with our assessment of biblical theologies based on either centers or thematic approaches. Beale insightfully writes: “The challenge for these thematic approaches is validating the probability of whether the major themes chosen are in fact the major themes of the NT.”¹⁸ Later Beale also notes: “A focus on a single theme can lead to overlooking other important notions, which sometimes can happen when systematic theological categories are appealed to.”¹⁹ In our view, Beale correctly understands that themes can be distilled from the metanarrative and that a correct grasp of the metanarrative is superior to identifying a center.²⁰ Beale’s own proposal concerning the metanarrative of scripture will be critiqued momentarily.

What, then, is the main problem with biblical theologies that seek to treat the themes of the Bible alone? It is simply this: there is no way to arbitrate satisfactorily which themes should be considered more prominent or how they should be put together into a framework or larger story—something that will happen in any person’s particular worldview whether consciously thought out or not. Such a biblical theology, then, owes too much to sanctified imagination and does not permit Scripture itself to determine and inform the way the pieces of the metanarrative are put together into a larger whole.

Biblical Theology which Emphasizes Historical Epochs over the Bible’s Plot-Structure

Our claim in *Kingdom through Covenant* is that the progression of the biblical covenants is the key to the plot-structure of Scripture. In one sense, this is not new at all. The covenants (plural) or covenant (singular) are considered as the key to the main storyline by covenant theologians and dispensationalists. After all, the name of one major biblical-theological view is *Covenant* theology. On the other hand, dispensationalists have normally used the covenants as a way of dividing history into the various dispensations. The covenant or covenants are important to both positions. So we must assess how our work differs from other approaches.

In his recent work, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, we find helpful the critique and evaluation of evangelical biblical theologies by Goldsworthy.²¹ Goldsworthy rightly contends that biblical theology consists in more than simply narrating the events of the biblical story in order. Instead, biblical theology must first grasp the Bible's own internal structure and then draw conclusions based on how the Bible unfolds *on its own terms*. Given the lack of consensus among evangelicals on how the Bible is "put together," Goldsworthy proposes that the "Robinson-Hebert" scheme best reflects the Bible's structure and it is the defense of this scheme that the rest of the book discusses. (Donald Robinson and Gabriel Hebert were both influential mentors in the formation of his thinking.) In setting the context to his discussion, in chapters 4-5, Goldsworthy summarizes the various methodological proposals of leading evangelical biblical theologians (e.g., Geerhardus Vos, Edmund Clowney, Dennis Johnson, Willem VanGemeren, William Dumbrell, Sidney Greidanus, Charles Scobie, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, as well as proponents of a multiplex approach, Gerhard Hasel and Elmer Martens). He devotes most of his effort to evaluating the influential and dominant Vos-Clowney approach which divides redemptive history into various epochs. Goldsworthy's main critique is that their epochal divisions are not consistent to the way the Bible structures itself (111-132). Thus, for example, the last great epoch of the OT in addition to creation, the fall, the flood, the call of Abraham, is the period from Moses to the coming of Christ. But Goldsworthy rightly questions whether this is how the OT divides redemptive history and whether this does justice to the watershed revelation associated with David and Solomon, let alone the later prophetic eschatology which focuses on the return from exile, the restoration of the people, and the anticipation of the renewal of all things.

We are excited about the emphasis in Goldsworthy's work: he is concerned to build a biblical theology that follows the categories and internal structure established and provided by Scripture itself. We could not agree more about the agenda. I note two central issues as Goldsworthy seeks to derive and implement this method.

First, as he attempts to discover the unity of the canon of Scripture, he lists three possible avenues of approach:

The Bible, as a book, can exhibit unity in different ways. The three major dimensions of the Bible are literary, historical and theological. The literary unity cannot

be usefully reduced to the fact that all sixty-six books have come to be collected under one cover. In fact there is very little by way of unity at the level of the literary genres. A collection of documents written over more than a thousand years in three different languages and containing a long list of different genres and forms does not make for much that we can call unity. There are many extra-biblical texts that closely resemble the biblical texts in terms of language and genre, and even of subject matter, but that have not been recognised as Scripture. Beyond the narrative continuity, literary unity is clearly not very meaningful. The diversity of the canon is found principally in its literary dimension.²²

Since Goldsworthy does not find the literary dimension useful for biblical theology, he turns to the historical dimension for his method. In our view, this is not enough. Goldsworthy comes within a hair of finding a better method than the one he chooses. For it is in the narrative plot-structure, which runs across all books and all genres, that there is a unity—and the covenants are the key to this unity.

Second, Goldsworthy spends four chapters, literally one-third of the entire work, evaluating evangelical scholars who have divided the narrative into historical epochs as a basis for biblical theology on the one hand, and on the other hand, sifting through the evidence of the OT afresh as he seeks a better way to divide the narrative into epochs:

What, then, can be said to constitute the significant events that characterize the epochs or stages of revelation, and what criteria are applicable to discern them? The object of our enquiry is to discover what, if any, matrix of revelation exists in the Old Testament. Are there inherent structures or epochs that can be discerned from some overarching emphasis in the various texts.²³

Later on as he works with the divisions established by other scholars and the evidence of the text itself he acknowledges the difficulty of this approach: “These disagreements serve only to show that establishing epochs, whether theological or narrative-historical, is difficult.”²⁴

We would agree and note that the different divisions into historical eras or epochs show the approach to be flawed in its method. In chapters 6-8, he argues for the threefold structure of Robinson-Hebert as reflecting best how the Bible itself moves from creation to new creation. He proposes that

God's plan unfolds in three main stages: (1) the basic biblical history from creation to Abraham, and then to David and Solomon; (2) the eschatology of the later writing prophets; and (3) the fulfillment of all things in Christ.

Here we come to the heart of my second point: as Goldsworthy assesses the evidence of the Old Testament afresh, looking for some way to divide it into epochs or historical periods, the key to doing this seems for him to be the covenants. He discusses the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and with David. Like most traditional covenant theologians, the covenant with Noah does not play a large part in his thinking. (He argues—mistakenly I believe—that it is given little attention in the OT). Next he subsumes the Mosaic Covenant under the Abrahamic Covenant which he calls the Covenant of Grace. Nonetheless, he re-arranges the epochs in the Clowney-Vos system because he demonstrates, successfully we believe, that earlier theologians have not paid sufficient attention to the Covenant with David.

The upshot of all this is that even though Goldsworthy belongs to the camp of biblical theology as redemptive history, as he considers the evidence of the OT in a fresh manner, the covenants play the key role in his discussion in determining the different epochs in biblical history. Thus, in the end, he is arguing for what is the main thesis of our work: the covenants are the key to the biblical metanarrative.

The problem with Goldsworthy's proposal is twofold: (1) First, he does not really understand Genesis 1:26-28 as we do, which we have argued describes and proclaims a covenant at creation between God and humanity and between humanity and all creation. Thus, his biblical metanarrative or story-line is too short. No wonder the covenant with Noah plays so little significance in his thinking because there God is renewing his covenant with creation. This is damaging when we come to the NT, where Paul draws parallels between Adam as the head of creation and Christ as the head of the new creation. Note that this headship is covenantal.

(2) Second, although he argues for the importance of the Davidic Covenant, in reality, he follows traditional covenant theology in which the Abrahamic Covenant flattens out and overshadows the entire narrative plot-structure. He sees the New Covenant as fulfilling the Mosaic Covenant but not really surpassing and superseding the Abrahamic Covenant.

As Goldsworthy develops these three stages, he argues that the first stage of biblical history not only provides the rationale and backdrop to the calling

of Abraham and the covenant with Israel, it also establishes the typological patterns which are later developed in the prophets and fulfilled in Christ. In addition, he argues that the high point of the first stage is found in David and Solomon and in the building of the temple which represents God's presence among his people, an echo back to Eden of old. The second stage begins with Solomon's apostasy. Biblical history from this time on is primarily one of judgement that is overlaid with the prophetic promises that the Day of the Lord will come and bring ultimate blessing and judgement. In this stage of revelation, the typological patterns laid down in the earlier history are now recapitulated as they project a greater future fulfillment. In the last and final stage, the fulfillment of the previous stages now takes place in Christ who fulfills all the previous patterns in himself in an "already-not yet" fashion (170-174).

Viewing the structure of the Bible this way not only leads us to read the entire Bible Christologically, it also allows for what Goldsworthy labels "macro-typology." Instead of restricting typology to certain persons, events, and institutions, Goldsworthy proposes that whole stages of revelation are typological and as such, "there is no limit to types in Scripture other than Scripture itself, which embraces the whole of reality" (185). Yet, Goldsworthy in making such a sweeping statement does not want to open the door to allegory. He writes: the "removal of limits to typology does not mean that anything goes, or that we take a cavalier attitude to finding types of Christ in every little detail on the basis of some association of ideas" (186). For example, he rejects the redness of Rahab's cord as a type of Jesus' blood since this represents a "fanciful, non-contextual associations that avoid the real theology behind these things" (187). Rather the entire stage of revelation is the context of typology and the "typological value of a person, event or institution is governed by the role that each plays in the theology of the redemptive revelation within the stage of revelation in which it occurs" (187).

Stephen Wellum devotes Chapter 3 of *Kingdom through Covenant* to a discussion of typology. In brief, we both believe that typology is governed by four factors.

(1) Correspondence between events, people, places, etc. of one time and events, people, places, etc. of a later time. This correspondence is due to the fact that God in his providence sovereignly controls history and is consistent in his character so that there are repetitive patterns to his works in history.

(2) Escalation from type to antitype so that the later event, person, or thing which can be said to be the fulfillment of the type is much better and greater than that which foreshadows it.

(3) Biblical warrant. Here we claim that for something to be considered a type, there must be exegetical evidence in the original text that indicates that what the text is dealing with is intended to be a model or pattern for something to follow in history. An excellent example is the exposition of Exodus 15, the Song of the Sea, by Norbert Lohfink in an essay published in his book, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament*.²⁵ He shows exegetically from Exodus 15 that the deliverance through the Red Sea was intended from the start to be a model for future salvation. Thus, when the major prophets predict a future salvation through the work of a coming king, they are right to speak of it as a New Exodus and describe the future salvation in the language of God's great deliverance in the past.

(4) The progression of the covenants throughout the narrative plot-structure of the Bible both creates, controls and develops the typological structures across the canon of Scripture. For example, in the covenant with Creation, Adam is portrayed as a king-priest who must be an obedient son in relation to God and a servant king in relation to creation. This role is taken up by Noah in the covenant with God which reaffirms the covenant with creation. Next, in the covenant with Abraham I demonstrate how the king-priest role devolves upon him. In my exposition of Exodus 19, I show, next, how Israel as a nation is called to be an obedient son and servant king, functioning in a priestly role vis à vis the nations of the world. In the Davidic covenant, this role is narrowed from the nation as a whole to the king in particular. Finally, in the New Covenant, Jesus the Messiah finally fulfills these roles adequately and fully.

The problem with Goldsworthy's exposition is that while he sees the importance of typology, he has no criteria to adequately distinguish what is typological from what is not. We are essentially back to the allegories of the church fathers who had no controls over typology.

Overall this is a helpful work on biblical theology and a careful study of its content will pay rich dividends. Goldsworthy is on target in seeking to argue for the Bible's own internal structure and thus how the Bible fits together *on its own terms*. In this regard his discussion of the three stages of revelation is helpful in thinking through how redemptive history is structured. Unfortunately this discussion is often neglected in biblical theology and too often the practice of biblical theology leads people merely to work out

broad themes across the canon without ever asking whether those themes are structured the way Scripture structures them.

However, even though we are sympathetic with Goldsworthy's proposal, we think a better case can be made for thinking that the *progression of the biblical covenants* is the backbone to the biblical storyline and that a proper unpacking of the covenants will make better sense of his three stages of revelation that Goldsworthy rightly notes. So, beginning in Genesis 1-11, what frames these chapters is God's covenant with creation first made in Adam and then in Noah. As God's promise of redemption from Genesis 3:15 is given greater clarity and definition through the respective covenants tied to Abraham, Israel, and David, we can make better sense of how God's grand plan of redemption progressively unfolds in promise, prophecy, and type. As the covenants develop and unpack the various typological structures, and especially as the prophets recapitulate and project forward the typological patterns developed in those covenants and look forward to the arrival of a new and better covenant, what Goldsworthy rightly notes is better structured along the plotline of Scripture in terms of the *progression of the covenants*. In this light, we do not find persuasive his discussion of macro-typology and the unlimited number of types despite the restraint he places upon this discussion. If types are unlimited in number then it seems difficult to argue that something is or is not a type. A better way to proceed is to argue that typology is indeed limited and that it is through the biblical covenants that the typological structures are developed, clarified, and projected towards their eschatological fulfillment in Christ.

The Biblical Theology of G. K. Beale

Finally, in November of 2011 a magisterial volume entitled *A New Testament Biblical Theology* by G. K. Beale appeared.²⁶ Comparison of Beale's work and ours would require more than I can do in this article, but one difference between his approach and ours centers on how he unpacks the storyline of Scripture. Beale argues that the "thought" and "themes" of Genesis 1-3 and the later patterns based on it form the storyline of Scripture. His meta-narrative turns out to be essentially creation, judgment, and new creation. He summarizes as follows:

The Old Testament is the story of God, who progressively re-establishes his new-creational kingdom out of chaos over a sinful people by his word and Spirit

through promise, covenant, and redemption, resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this kingdom and judgment (defeat or exile) for the unfaithful, unto his glory.²⁷

We are the first to acknowledge that there is much that is good and right in Beale's work. It is filled with rich insights and is worth careful reflection. Beale correctly sees a covenant in Genesis 1–3, and he speaks of the commission of Adam inherited by Noah, Abraham, and Israel. Nonetheless, he does not provide a detailed unpacking of the biblical covenants. Instead he treats creation and new creation as the main themes of Scripture, but in our view, creation and new creation only serve as the bookends of the plot structure and not the structure itself. Beale fails to use the covenants to develop adequately and properly the plot structure *between* creation and new creation, although we fully agree with his description of inaugurated eschatology. It is not the case that the canon merely provides a repetition of the patterns and themes in Genesis 1–3 as we progress across redemptive-history. Instead, the covenants provide the structure and unfold the developing plot line of Scripture, and a detailed investigation of those covenants is necessary to understand God's eternal plan of salvation centred in Christ. Each covenant must be first placed in its own historical/textual context and then viewed inter-textually and canonically if we are truly going to grasp something of the whole counsel of God, especially the glory of the new covenant our Lord has inaugurated. It is for this reason that we are convinced that Beale's otherwise full treatment of subjects is not sufficient when he comes to the end of his work. Since he does not provide a detailed treatment of the covenantal unfolding which reaches its climax in Christ and the new covenant, he, in our view, wrongly identifies Sunday as a Christian Sabbath when the former is a sign of the new creation and the latter is a sign of the first creation and (now fulfilled) old covenant. He also argues for infant baptism, thus confusing the sign of the new covenant with circumcision as the sign for the Abrahamic covenant. These are distinct and separate as covenants and covenant signs. Thus Sabbath and baptism are not sufficiently discussed in their covenantal contexts and fulfillment in Christ. In the end, Beale leaves us with a sophisticated treatment of covenant theology which we are convinced needs to be modified in light of the Bible's own unfolding of the biblical covenants.

CONCLUSION

The book *Kingdom through Covenant* was never intended to be the final word on biblical theology. It was intended to be programmatic and suggestive of a way forward. Let us think for a moment on the preposition “through” in the title, *Kingdom through Covenant*. The authors understand the “through” in two ways. First, God is establishing his rule within his creation *through* covenant relationships, relationships of faithful loyal love, not by force. Second, the Kingdom of God comes historical *through* a progression and series of covenants unfolded in the complete canon of Scripture. Understanding each of these covenants as well as putting them together the way Scripture does, is the beginning of a biblical theology that will lead to a better systematic theology.

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

² Edward W. Klink and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

³ See *ibid.*, 31, 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁸ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40, cf. 36.

¹² N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

¹³ On this point, see Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 290-311.

¹⁴ James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

¹⁵ For the use of the term, intra-systematic categories, see Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

¹⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

¹⁷ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

¹⁸ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15, 165.

²¹ See footnote 8 for bibliography.

²² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁴ Ibid., 122.

²⁵ Norbert Lohfink, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament*. Trans. of *Siegeslied am Schilfmeer* by R. A. Wilson (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1968).

²⁶ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

²⁷ Ibid., 87.