

11-2012

Book Review: Kingdom Through Covenant

Christopher R. Bruno

Cedarville University, cbruno@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bruno, Christopher R., "Book Review: Kingdom Through Covenant" (2012). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications*. 314.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications/314

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

the various ways a command can be constructed in Koine Greek, and also as tool to help them perceive some of the sociological elements embedded in the grammatical and lexical elements in the text.

The third and fourth chapters are excellent examples of applying linguistic theories to biblical exegesis. As such, they are a good introduction for a biblical scholars interested in learning more about linguistic approaches to the biblical texts. A particular strength of the current volume are the five appendixes that provide a clear and concise introduction and evaluation of the contribution of modern linguistic approaches, linguistic issues concerning grammatical mood, and semantic-versus-pragmatic distinctions. The final two appendixes contain tables that lists parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels that contain imperatival constructions (e.g., where Mark may use the imperative mood and Luke the subjunctive), and a list of passages that contain the imperative, *καί*, and future indicative constructions.

One question I am left with is why the author chose Sydney Lamb's NCSL framework when a more extensive Cognitive Linguistic approach to linguistics is embodied in the works of Charles Fillmore, Ronald Langacker, John Taylor, Eve Sweetser, and Gilles Fauconnier, to name a few (see the *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*). Overall, Fantin's book makes a valuable contribution to the Studies in Biblical Greek series, advances our understanding of the Koine Greek imperative mood, and can be profitably employed in various teaching contexts.

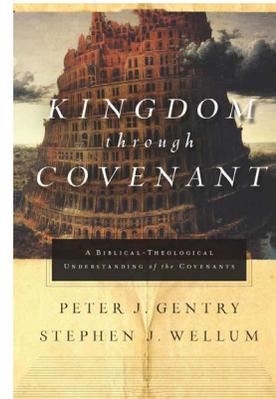
David Parris
Fuller Theological Seminary
Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA

Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum. *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012. 848 pp. £28.99/\$45.00.

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum have produced a remarkable work. It is a rare book that is able to move from systematic theology to biblical theology to exegesis and then back again to theological synthesis. But *Kingdom through Covenant* accomplishes just that. That feat alone puts this volume ahead of most others.

Since neither my space allowance nor your patience allows for a thorough summary of the book, we can only highlight a few key points by way of summary. The stated goal of the authors is to demonstrate the centrality of the covenant motif in both the plot of the Bible and the structure of Christian theology (p. 21). To accomplish this goal, they begin with a prolegomena covering the current theological conversation surrounding the biblical covenants. From here, they introduce the key questions that they intend to address in the rest of the book.

The main argument of the book throughout is to present a “progressive covenantalism,” to use the term the authors coined for their system (p. 24). Gentry and Wellum also claim that this way of reading the biblical story lines results in a “*via media*” between covenant theology and dispensationalism. In short, the authors see the biblical covenants as a means of fulfilling God's saving promises as outlined in previous covenants, with the goal of finally and fully establishing God's reign over his people. Each covenant is intended to advance God's saving program, which culminates in the new covenant's



fulfillment. In other words, the kingdom is established through the progressive fulfillment of God's covenants.

While we could single out many other positive aspects of this book, perhaps the most important is how the authors describe the nature of biblical covenants. Along with many others, I have long doubted the overly clinical distinction between covenants that fall into the unconditional/royal land grant and covenants of the conditional/suzerain-vassal type. I have yet to read a better explanation of the conditional and unconditional aspects of all the biblical covenants. As the authors demonstrate with careful attention to the exegetical details of every major covenant in the OT, all of the biblical covenants are in fact conditional. Both parties must meet the terms of the covenant. However, throughout the Bible, while God faithfully meets his covenant commitments, the human parties consistently fail to meet their obligations. Therefore, Gentry and Wellum conclude, "God himself, as the covenant maker and keeper, must unilaterally act to keep his own promise *through the provision of a faithful, obedient Son*" (p. 668). The kingdom is established as God himself keeps both sides of the covenant. Because of this and other similar insights, few exegetical studies will lead you to worship as often as this book does.

When we turn to a critical evaluation of the book, I have two central questions. The first is theological and logical, and the second is exegetical and structural. It is best to begin with the theological point, for the authors have clearly indicated that this was their goal in writing the book. They have staked out their position as a middle way between covenant theology and dispensationalism. The foundation to this claim is that each of the two systems has a central tenet that is fundamentally flawed. For covenant theologians, this tenet is the genealogical principle, which requires that since children of covenant members are themselves part of the covenant, they ought to receive the covenant sign. In the OT, this sign was circumcision, and in the NT, it is baptism. This of course leads to the necessity of infant baptism. The fundamental flaw of dispensationalism that Gentry and Wellum emphasize is insisting on the literal fulfillment of the land promises to the physical descendants of Abraham. This error leads to an unbiblical view of Israel and an expectation that the promised land of Palestine will be given to the geo-political nation of Israel during the millennial kingdom.

While these two errors are very different at a superficial level, Gentry and Wellum argue that they actually share a common problem: failing to understand the nature and symbolism of typology. Covenant theologians have failed to see how circumcision is a type of Christ's work of spiritual circumcision in the new covenant. Dispensationalists have failed to see how the land promises were types of Christ as the king—not only of a small parcel of land in Palestine, but also of the whole earth.

While some will disagree with me, I happen to think their critique of dispensationalism is, on the whole, rather solid. However, while I find myself persuaded by the many of their arguments against *infant baptism*, I am not yet convinced that these constitute a complete argument against *covenant theology*. The problem seems to be that many self-professed covenant theologians are also advocates of *credo-baptism*. Whether they agree with them or not, Gentry and Wellum have not sufficiently interacted with the long history of covenant theologians in the Baptist tradition (one thinks of the 1689 London Baptist Confession, for example).

Given the long history of credo-baptist covenant theology, it seems that Gentry and Wellum are critiquing infant baptism more than covenant theology *per se*. While one could argue that these phenomena must go hand-in-glove, I am not convinced the authors have done this. It is therefore perhaps more accurate to say that while dispensationalism has an insufficient view of typology, paedobaptist covenant theology has an under-realized view of typological fulfillment, for in the new covenant

there is no gap between the sign (baptism) and the thing signified (circumcision of the heart). That is to say, paedo-baptist covenant theology does not recognize the extent to which the new covenant is presently fulfilled. While we could certainly discuss other critiques of classical covenant theology that I happen to agree with, the authors give most attention to infant baptism. However, I am not persuaded that the mostly solid arguments against infant baptism constitute in and of themselves an argument against covenant theology.

My second critique takes considerably less space to explain because the authors have given us far less material to consider. In fact, it is somewhat ironic that this review falls under the heading of “New Testament,” at least in this journal, because the most glaring omission (at least to my NT eyes) is the lack of serious and sustained interaction with the key covenant texts in the NT. While the authors do give space to the NT fulfillment of certain OT texts and themes, I was very surprised to find Eph 4:15 as the only NT passage given its own chapter in a book that aims to present a biblical-theological understanding of the covenants. While I have no complaints with their treatment of this text, closer attention to any number of NT texts likely would have served their purposes better. One thinks of Rom 11, 2 Cor 3, Gal 3, Heb 8, or even Eph 2 as better candidates for careful examination in a book on the biblical covenants. My suspicion is that such a treatment would have only strengthened the argument of this already outstanding exegetical study.

Kingdom through Covenant is an important book. Because of this, I am concerned that many believers and even some pastors will be intimidated by the lengthy word studies, frequent scholarly citations, and references to German and French literature. If any editors from Crossway happen upon this review, I would like to make a suggestion: perhaps the most effective way to get this book into the hands of pastors in a readable and accessible way would be through publishing a condensation along the lines of the summary of Thomas Schreiner’s *Magnifying God in Christ: A Summary of New Testament Theology*. We are all in the debt of Gentry and Wellum for this excellent study, and it is my hope that it is disseminated and discussed for years to come.

Christopher R. Bruno
Antioch School Hawai’i
Honolulu, Hawaii, USA

James M. Hamilton Jr. *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012. 464 pp. \$34.99.

Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches is Hamilton’s first book-length publication since his 600-page *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010). In *God’s Glory* Hamilton devoted ten pages (pp. 541–51) to an examination of the biblical theology of Revelation, focusing on Revelation’s chiastic structure (p. 544) and demonstrating how John’s consummate prophecy rearticulates biblical patterns such as the exodus, the conquest, and the return from exile (pp. 546–48). There he also anticipates this forthcoming work on Revelation (p. 542). Not surprisingly then, Hamilton’s full-length commentary on Revelation consistently highlights his understanding

