Kingdom through Covenant and Dispensationalism: A Summary and Response

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I. Front Matter

A. Kingdom through Covenant\(^1\) is a whole-Bible theology. This is an inherently difficult task, which should cause readers to be charitable and, probably, corrigible.\(^2\)

B. Kingdom through Covenant is a proposal. It’s thorough (778 pp.) but admittedly provisional (e.g., in its theological syntheses; see 716).

C. Kingdom through Covenant is an in-house discussion. E.g., it’s . . .

   1. Thoroughly evangelical
   2. Baptist—The authors’ view of the covenants lead them to a Baptist ecclesiology.
   3. Hermeneutically sensitive—In fact, the authors note, along with many dispensationalists, that “[t]he New Testament’s interpretation of the Old Testament is definitive in interpreting the details of the Old Testament but not in such a way that contravenes the earlier texts” (116).\(^3\)

II. Summary of Kingdom through Covenant’s argument against Dispensationalism

A. Kingdom through Covenant’s Claim: Dispensationalism fails to see Israel and her land as types of (and, therefore, fulfilled in) Christ and new creation.

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

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

\(^2\) It is instructive that when Paul talks about God’s plan—about “whole-Bible theology”—he inevitably starts talking about God’s wisdom (and/or doxologizing; cf., e.g., Rom 11:33–36; 16:25–27; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:3–14; 3:2–12).

\(^3\) Many readers will appreciate, as well, e.g., the authors’ statement about creation (spec. about Adam and original sin, 593, n. 4; also 621, n. 52), their view on the role of the Mosaic Law for the Christian (i.e., approximates Moo’s “modified Lutheran” approach; 354–56 and 637) and their expectation of a future salvation of ethnic Jews (500–1; cf. also “Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton,” 2).
future, ‘literal’ fulfilment in the millennial age; the land itself is a type and pattern of Eden and thus the entire creation, which reaches its fulfilment 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 (122).  

What our Lord has inaugurated does not go back to the types and patterns of old; it transforms and fulfills them. This is especially crucial to note in regard to the land. When it comes to the future, dispensational theology, at least on the land issue, tends to go backward in redemptive-history instead of forward (714, n. 146).

1. Land: Dispensationalists fail to see that the land promised to Abraham is typological of the new creation. That is, they fail to see how the Abrahamic covenant relates to the Adamic covenant and, therefore, fail to see that the land promised to Abraham is another way of talking about the restoration of Eden, the new creation (Rev 21–22; cf. Isa 65). To suggest that it’s a promise simply to Israel and simply relating to a restored Palestine misses the way the OT itself develops the promise.

2. Israel: Dispensationalists fail to see how Israel is a type of Christ. They fail to see how Jesus fulfills Israel’s mediatorial role by securing and administering the Abrahamic blessing (and, thus, the Noahic and Adamic blessing) to the Jews and Gentiles who join themselves to him in the Church.

B. Evidence: intertextual, typological development

The Old Testament text does present the land and the nation as types and patterns of something greater. From the covenant of creation with Adam, Eden is presented as the archetype, which the ‘land’ later on looks back to and forward to in anticipation of the recovery of the new creation. Furthermore, Adam as a covenant head is typological of the ‘last Adam’ to come, and as we move across the covenants, Adam and the land is developed in terms of Noah, Abraham and his seed, the nation of Israel and her land, and ultimately in the Davidic King who will rule the entire creation . . . . [A]s the covenants unfold there is plenty of biblical evidence of intertextual development of all of these patterns, so that when the new covenant era is inaugurated by the last Adam and the true Israel—

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4 Shaded material = citations from Kingdom through Covenant.

5 As my response below will show, I think this is their fundamental argument against dispensationalism, even though the land-as-new-creation argument gets a bit more space. As I’ll note: preserve a mediatorial function for Israel and dispensationalism survives, the land issue, it seems to me, notwithstanding.

6 For a visual display of the metanarrative that follows, see Fig. 14 on 620.

7 For a summary of the evidence supporting this conclusion, see 707–16.
our Lord Jesus Christ—these types, which point beyond themselves, now find their terminus and fulfilment in Christ and the new covenant age (124).

1. Adamic Covenant (ch. 6)
   a. Adam = archetypal covenant partner and mediator between Yhwh and world/creation

   Adam is created in Yhwh’s image and likeness. *Image* relates to Adam’s role as a servant king and, thus, his relationship with the world and creation. *Likeness* relates to his role as Yhwh’s son and, thus, his relationship with Yhwh (for proof, see the Egyptian, Akkadian and Syrian [i.e., the Tell Fakhariyeh Inscription] evidence adduced on 192–95).

   Given the normal meanings of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in the cultural and linguistic setting of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East, ‘likeness’ specifies a relationship between God and humans such that ’ādâm can be described as the son of God, and ‘image’ describes a relationship between God and humans such that ’ādâm can be described as a servant king. Although both terms specify the divine-human relationship, the first [i.e., likeness] focuses on the human in relation to God and the second [i.e., image] focuses on the human in relation to the world. These would be understood to be relationships characterised by faithfulness and loyal love, obedience and trust—exactly the character of relationships specified by covenants after the Fall. In this sense the divine image entails a covenant relationship between God and humans on the one hand, and between humans and the world on the other (194–95; cf. 217: In the ancient Near East, both the context of the family and the relationship of king and people is covenantal, requiring loyal love, obedience, and trust.).

   b. Eden = archetypal sacred place/sanctuary

   The garden was the place where Adam and Yhwh dwelt (thus, like a temple or sanctuary) and its borders were to be extended throughout the world (i.e., dominion mandate) (209–16). (Creation [thus, Adamic covenant] linked with new creation [thus, new covenant] by the fact that both creation and new creation’s goal is *rest*; cf. Day Seven of the creation week with Heb 3:7–4:13; 208–9; also 618).

2. Noahic Covenant (ch. 5)
   a. Noah = new Adam (fresh start)
Noah is given Adam’s commission (cf. Gen 9:1 with 1:28a; see 163; also 165ff. and esp. the charts on 168 and 176; cf. summary on 247–48; and see e.g. below). As Wellum and Gentry say, “The covenant with Noah ‘upholds’ the divine image” (174). Here’s an e.g., of the way Moses links this covenant with Adam’s.

Dumbrell draws attention to the fact that four of the eight occurrences of the word ‘covenant’ in this narrative heave the possessive pronoun “my” attached to it: “I will confirm/uphold my covenant with you” (Gen. 6:18; 9:9, 11, 15). We must pause for a moment and consider the force of the “my” which is involved in the expression ‘my covenant’ in these texts. We have already noted that covenant, on any understanding of the term, has the notion of commitment or obligation built into it. Is this a covenant by which humans are obligated, or does God bind himself and thus made mankind the beneficiary of the obligation so undertaken? Dumbrell rightly suggests that the “my” of “my covenant” indicates that the latter is the correct interpretation. This is a covenant in which God binds himself, God obligates himself, and he will maintain the covenant in spite of human failure.

In Genesis 9:18–29 we have the strange story of the drunkenness of Noah and his curse upon Canaan. Like the first Adam, the second Adam is also a gardener who plants a vineyard. Like the first Adam, the second Adam is also a disobedient son whose sin results in shameful nakedness. One of the points this episode is making is that once again the human partner has failed as a covenant keeper, and that the fulfilment of the promise will be due solely to the faithfulness and grace of God, who is always a faithful covenant partner. This is the parallel in the Noah story to the Fall in Genesis 3 (169–70).

b. Restored earth = new Eden/creation (see 163; also Table 5.2, 176).

3. Abrahamic (chs. 7–8)

a. Abraham = new Adam (last fresh start)

Abraham is given Adam’s commission (cf. Gen 12:2; 17:2, 6, 8; 22:16; 26:3, 24; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:3 with 1:28; 226–27; cf. also Gen 10–11⇒12, with Gen 6⇒8–9 [Noah], with 1–2⇒3 [Adam]; 225 and Table 8.1: Parallels between Genesis 9 and 17 [269]; see further the priestly connotations of circumcision on 272–75)

[A]lthough the context, expressions, idioms, and language are completely different from the creation narrative and the image of
God in Genesis 1:26–28, the *ideas* are identical. Abram (and the nation that comes from him) constitute an *Adamic* figure, indeed the last Adam, since there are no major new starts after this [i.e., as there was with Noah]. God intends to establish his rule over all creation through his relationship with Abram and his family: kingdom through covenant. Through blessing Abram and his descendants, the broken relationship between God and all the nations of the world will be reconciled and healed (245).

b. Abraham’s homeland = new Eden

Cf. descriptions of Canaan as a ‘mountain sanctuary’ in Exod 15:17; Ps 78:54 with Gen 2 and Ezek 28; see Isa 51:3; Ezek 36:33–36 (227–28)

4. Mosaic Covenant (chs. 9–10)

a. Israel = new Adam (via Abraham)

i. Israel, like Adam, is God’s son (Exod 4:22–23)

Israel will display to the rest of the world within its covenant community the kind of relationships first to God and then to one another and to the physical world, that God intended originally for all of humanity. In fact, through Israel, his last Adam, he will bring about a resolution of the sin and death caused by the first Adam. Since Israel is located geographically on the one and only communications link between the great superpowers of the ancient world (Egypt and Mesopotamia), in this position she will show the nations how to treat each other in a truly human way, and how to faithfully steward the earth’s resources. This is the meaning of Israel’s sonship (303; cf. similarly 321–22).

ii. Israel, like Adam, is (therefore) a mediator between Yhwh and the world/creation (Exod 19:5–6; 315–27; cf. 388)

“holy treasure” = devoted service as a son to Yhwh for the world

→ “kingdom of priests” = for the world
→ “holy nation” = devoted service as a son to Yhwh

Explanation of the terms “personal treasure,” “kingdom of priests,” and “holy nation,” then, shows the goal and
purpose of the Sinai covenant for Israel. Although the language is different from that of Genesis 1:26–28 and Genesis 12:1–3, we can clearly see that the covenant at Sinai achieves and administers in the Iron Age, through the nation as a whole, the purposes of the promises given to Abraham. God is establishing his kingdom through covenant. The covenant entails relationship with God on the one hand and relationship with the world on the other hand. Israel will model to the world what it means to have a relationship with God, what it means to treat each other in a genuinely human way, and what it means to be good stewards of the earth’s resources. As priests, they will mediate the blessings of God to the world and will be used to bring the rest of the world to know God (326).

b. Canaan, spec. Tabernacle = new Eden (321–22)

The tabernacle is also a replica of the garden of Eden and a representation of the universe, so just as Adam was to fulfill his mandate by devoting himself to worship as a priest in the garden sanctuary, so Israel as a new Adam is to fulfill her mandate by devoting herself to worship as a priest in the tabernacle and later the temple (322; see Davies, Royal Priesthood, 169, for this sanctuary ideology [i.e., sanctuary = ideal or restored cosmos]).

5. Davidic Covenant (ch. 11)

a. David = new Adam (via Abraham and Israel)

i. David, like Adam, is God’s son (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron 17:13; cf. Pss 2; 89:26–27; cf. Near Eastern parallels on 397 [= “king represents the character of the god in some way to the people”]).

ii. David, like Adam, will mediate God’s blessing to the world (2 Sam 7:19; 399–401).

iii. David’s covenant, like Adam’s, required obedience for its fulfillment (Deut 17:16–20; also 2 Sam 7:14–15; cf. also Pss 89:30–33; 132:11b–12; 1 Kgs 2:3–4; 3:6 [//2 Chron 1:8]; 6:12; 8:25; 2 Chron 6:14, 16; 7:17–18; Jer 22:1–5, 24; and esp. Isa 55:3 and Ps 72:17; 392–406; 406–21 [exegesis of Isa 55:3] 424–47 [exegesis of Ps 72:17]) and his obedience will lead to blessings for the world (2 Sam 7:19; cf. 1 Chron 17:17; Ps 72:17 [cf. LXX: εὐλογηθόσονται ἐν αὐτῷ πᾶσαι φυλαι τῆς γῆς; et al.]).
Despite critical textual problems, 2 Samuel 7:19 is the key to the universalisation of the messianic vision in the psalms and prophets (401).

b. Canaan = Zion = new Eden
See Isa 2:1–4, where future Davidic king (Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–10) rules from Zion, which is described as a new Eden and, significantly, to which the nations stream (412).

6. New Covenant (chs. 12–15)⁸

a. new Adam (i.e., Davidic messiah) restores Israel for the good of the world

i. restored Israel blesses the world: see, e.g., Isa 40:1–42:17 (the First Servant Song)

The First Servant Song belongs to the introductory opening section, which is devoted to the theme of the consolation of Israel and of the nations (40:1–42:17). The Abrahamic covenant undergirds this introductory section. At the heart of the covenant with Abraham is the promise that blessing will come to the entire world through Abraham and his family, Israel. The arrangement in this section is important. The consolation of Israel comes first because at this time Israel is under a curse; she is part of the problem and not part of the solution. First God must console and restore Israel and only then can he use Israel to be an instrument of consolation and restoration for all the nations (438).

also Jer 4:2 (484–87; cf. 12:14–17 [487–88])

If Israel returns to an unadulterated devotion and loyalty to Yahweh in the covenant relationship, then her use of the name Yahweh will demonstrate faithfulness and justice. This in turn would impact the nations to turn to Israel’s God — this is the plot structure of the Old Testament from Genesis 12 onwards . . . . The idea expressed in Jeremiah 4:2, that when Israel is faithful in her relationship to Yahweh, blessing will flow to the nations, is based squarely

⁸ Here I should make two preliminary notes about Gentry’s chs. on the new covenant: (1) I’m not convinced his chapter on Daniel’s seventy weeks (ch. 14) or on Ephesians (ch. 15) moves our discussion forward in any significant ways. See, e.g., the limited (non-existent) role these chapters play in Wellum’s summary of the new covenant on 644–52. (For Gentry’s own appraisal on the value of ch. 14, see esp. 564 [also 472 and 501]; (2) There is some tension, as we shall see, in Wellum and Gentry’s argument in these chapters, particularly concerning the role of the S/servant in blessing the world. I will return to this in my conclusion.
on the Israelite covenant as an outworking of the promises to Abraham (487)

cf., however,

The Davidic covenant reveals that the blessing will come through the King of Israel (rather than through the nation as a whole) as he administers justice to Israel and to the nations . . . . Redemption is the achievement and victory of a Davidic king who then administers righteousness to a restored Israel, in which Jew and Gentile are created to be the new humanity” [511–12; see, similarly, 424–27 [disc. Ps 72:17]).

ii. new Adam (Davidic messiah) restores Israel: see, e.g., Isa 55:1–5

In Isaiah 55:3 God announces that he is initiating an everlasting covenant. This covenant is described as the acts of loyal love performed by David, i.e., the atoning death of the servant king in chapter 53 [for the supporting exegesis, see 406–21]. Here Isaiah is connecting the Davidic covenant and the new. The new covenant will accomplish what was promised in God’s covenant with David. Second Samuel 7:19 reveals that the covenant with David is God’s instruction for all mankind. Isaiah follows this up by speaking of the Gentiles being called by Israel, who then look to Israel’s king as their commander and leader who, as witness, brings the instruction (Torah) of the Lord to them. This is exactly what happened when Peter and Paul began proclaiming the good news to the nations in the book of Acts (445; for another disc. of the relationship between the Davidic and new covenant, see 525).

cf., however,

[T]he ongoing debate regarding the identification of Israel as the servant of the Lord and an individual as the servant who delivers the nation is resolved if we realize that the Davidic king is a representative figure for the entire nation. All of this is to say that Isaiah presents us with a unified vision of a coming Davidic king who is identified as the “servant of the Lord,” who as a result of his victorious work will restore Zion (Isa. 2:1–5), who will delight in the fear of the Lord (11:1–10), who will perfectly represent the Lord by implementing social justice (11:3–5), who will
become a banner to the nations (11:10) and through his instruction will teach and rule the nations (42:1, 3–4; 49:1, 6). Then in Isaiah 55, we have a link made between the Davidic covenant and the new covenant, where it is announced that, on the basis of the work accomplished by the servant of the Lord, God will make an “everlasting covenant” on the basis of the “faithfulness performed by David” (55:3). In this way, the Lord performs his covenant obligation, but David performs his too, and thus the new covenant is inaugurated and the promise is fulfilled (643–44).

b. new Jerusalem = new creation/Eden

Isaiah 65:18b describes creating Jerusalem a delight and God’s people a joy. It seems that Jerusalem is the new creation. As T. Desmond Alexander notes, ‘Significantly, in verses 17–18 the creation of the ‘new heavens and a new earth’ parallels the creation of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 24:23). The repeated use of the Hebrew verb bārā’, ‘to create’, suggests that Jerusalem is deliberately equated here with the new heavens and the new earth. They are one and the same.” Possibly this is not the only way to understand the text, but in Revelation 21 we see that it is the correct interpretation. Jerusalem is not only at the centre of the new world, but in fact is coextensive with it. The new creation is the new Jerusalem and vice versa. This conclusion is clear from Isaiah 65:25, where the new creation is described as God’s holy mountain—Mount Zion has become the new Eden! (467; see, similarly, 481; cf. also Rom 4:13, which notes that Abraham will inherit “the world,” 468; see also 266, 708).

Jeremiah 31:38–40 describes the dimensions of the renovated and restored Jerusalem and claims that even the areas formerly used for refuse will be devoted to the Lord. Not all of the locations mentioned in the text are known, but Jeremiah appears to move from the northeast to northwest, then to southwest and around to southeast. It seems that the geography of the new Jerusalem will be different, and that the Valley of Hinnom defiled by corpses and garbage will become holy to the Lord. The new Jerusalem will be both different and expanded from the old” (516; i.e., Jerusalem expanded = one step toward Jerusalem = new creation).

III. Response: Jesus represents but does not replace Israel

A. Jesus and Israel
Jesus, as the true David (and, in this sense, the true Israel), brings about the conditions necessary for the fulfillment of the new covenant (Isa 55:3), which is to say, the conditions necessary for restoring Israel (Abraham’s physical + spiritual seed) to her mediatorial role, thus allowing the Abrahamic blessings to flow from Abraham to the nations (Abraham’s spiritual seed). In Jesus’ first advent, he inaugurated the new covenant with his death (Heb 9:15–28; cf. Matt 26:26–29; Luke 22:20) and Israel was restored, though only partially (Rom 11:1–6, esp. v. 5; cf. also the twelve [with Matthias], and Jesus [see, e.g., Mark 7:24–30 (Syrophoenician woman)] and Paul’s [Rom 1:16] emphasis on Jewish priority), and this led to (partial) blessing for the world (cf. Rom 15:7–13; also vv. 14–33; Acts 15:15–18). At Jesus’ second advent, Israel will be fully restored (Rom 11:25–26a [“all Israel”]), which will result in more blessing for the world (Rom 11:15; also v. 12) and, indeed, for creation itself.

If, therefore, the NT preserves a mediatorial role for ethnic Jews/Israel, then the covenants find their fulfillment in Christ in a slightly different way than Wellum and Gentry argue. Israel’s role is fulfilled not (only) in Christ but (rather) through Christ: Christ is Yhwh’s servant for restoring Israel, who as Yhwh’s servant will, on the basis of messiah’s work, restore the world (cf., esp., Isa 49:1–9: “a light for the Gentiles”). Christ, therefore, is the antitype of David and of Israel in slightly different ways. He replaces David but represents Israel. To put it another way, he is the “true David” in a slightly different way than he is the “true Israel.”

B. Jesus and the Land

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9 Wellum and Gentry seem to imply this priority. See, e.g., 497: “[T]he new covenant is not made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah interpreted as all of Judaism indiscriminately in the first century, but rather it is interpreted specifically as those who are followers of Jesus, regardless of ethnicity, Jew first and, later on, also non-Jew.”

10 E.g., the already-not-yet of NT soteriology (i.e., God’s law written on hearts [Jer 31:33] alongside indwelling sin).

11 What specifically this restoration entails is a subject for another day. Wellum and Gentry, e.g., argue that Rom 11 promises a future for ethnic Israel (“a massive end-time salvation of ethnic Jews brought to faith in their Messiah [Rom. 9–11] and then incorporated into the one new man, the church [Eph. 2:11–22].” “Authors Respond to Bock, Moo, Horton,” 2) but deny that this future restoration extends beyond salvation (see [Kingdom through Covenant] 500–1). (I do wonder how Wellum and Gentry would explain why Paul holds out this hope for ethnic Israel [see also n. 17 below].)

12 Cf. Rom 8:18–25, where Paul links resurrection with new creation.

13 Cf. 707: “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)”; also, 640: “[K]ingship becomes the means of accomplishing Exodus 19:3b–6 [i.e., Israel’s role]”; and, as already noted above, 122, 124; 424–27; 511–12; and 643–44.

14 This is why, e.g., Christ can fulfill the role of Adam (Rom 5:12–21) without replacing Israel’s mediatorial—Adamic—function.

15 **Puzzle:** Gentry’s exegesis of the new covenant texts seems to allow for this (see II, 6, a, i–ii above).
If Israel/ethnic Jews still have a mediatorial role to play (Rom 11:15; also v. 12), is it implausible to suggest that this role will be played from a particular place in the new creation (which Rev 20[16] and 21–22 imply, comes, along with divine judgment, in two stages)? Moreover, just because Gentiles join themselves to (with) Israel/ethnic Jews (i.e., part of the same tree, Rom 11:17–21; cf. Eph 2:11–22) in the new covenant era, as was promised (cf. Jer 12:14–17 [488]; Ps 87:4–6 [450–54]; Isa 56:3–8 [447–49]; et al.), this does not suggest one can no longer talk about Jews and Gentiles or, for that matter, about a future, specific role or place for either. After all, while all are indeed part of the same people of God (Rom 11:17–18), only some are natural branches (vv. 17, 21).18

IV. Other Reviews

Darrell Bock, Michael Horton and Douglas Moo have each published reviews of Kingdom through Covenant. Their reviews, along with a response from Wellum and Gentry, can be found on The Gospel Coalition’s blog (thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/).

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16 I do wish Wellum and Gentry has discussed Rev 20. The only reference to the text, as far as I could tell, is on the chart on 620, which says “the millennium (= inter-advent period).

17 Puzzle: I’m not quite sure how Gentry’s attention here to the expectation of Gentile participation with Israel in the new covenant squares with Wellum’s implication that the new covenant was made with (ethnic) Israel (and, therefore and ultimately, Christ) only and, therefore, that it applies (extends?) to the church solely on the basis of the church’s connection with the true Israel, Christ (“the antitype of Israel,” 690). Moreover, to say in this context that “[i]n Christ, the antitype of Israel, all of God’s promises are yes and amen” (690) could imply that God would have been covenantally faithful had Jesus been the only Jew to receive the promises of the new covenant. This would seem to run contrary to Paul’s argument in Rom 9–11 [cf. n. 10 above]).

18 See also, e.g., the persistence of “nations” in the new creation (Rev 21:24, 26).