

## 1. THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

Scott J. Hafemann

At its most fundamental level, the subject matter of biblical theology is the *Bible's* understanding of *God's* character and purposes. This 'theology' is displayed in the developing relationship between God and his people (Israel and the church) and, through them, in God's relationship with the world (the nations and the created order). The primary matrix of God's self-revelation is therefore not private religious experience, but the events recounted and interpreted in the Scriptures that establish and maintain these relationships.<sup>1</sup>

1. As James D. Smart, *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), pointed out, the nature of the link between 'theology' as God's self-revelation and 'history' as the discernible nexus of cause and effect is the key question of Biblical Theology. Smart's own answer, advocated by many today, was to follow Barth's separation of theology from history by relocating revelation in the human experience of God reflected in the Scriptures (see pp. 90-92). In contrast, the position taken here is that Scripture is not a record of religious beliefs or experiences in response to a divine revelation outside itself, but is itself divine revelation. In this regard, see the helpful distinction established by John S. Sallhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology, A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 13-15, between God's self-revelation in the Bible and religion as a human act in accordance with that revelation. Sallhamer follows

History, not the heart, is the locus of divine revelation. Moreover, since biblical history focuses on God's rescue of humanity from its rebellion against its creator and sustainer, it can be called the 'history of redemption' or 'salvation history'. Thus God's relationship with his people within the salvation history recounted in Scripture is the subject matter of 'biblical theology'. To call it 'theology' is especially apropos in that the intention of biblical salvation history is unequivocally *theocentric*, being focused on God's self-revelation of his righteous character in and through his relationship with his people, the nations and the world. Biblically speaking, the purpose of theology is doxology.<sup>2</sup>

This means that God's relationship with the world and his people is not a theoretical abstraction, nor is it fundamentally a subjective experience. Rather, with salvation history as its framework, this relationship is expressed in and defined by the interrelated covenants that exist throughout the history of redemption. This leads to the apostle Paul being able to refer to the various covenants throughout Israel's history (cf. Rom. 9:4; Eph. 2:12), as well as to references to the 'old' or 'new' covenant as the two epochs of salvation history. Nevertheless, although all would agree that there are various individual covenants throughout the Scriptures, it is significant that the term for covenant in the Old Testament (*berit*) never occurs in the plural when describing God's covenants with Israel.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the biblical writers refer either to a specific covenant or to 'the' covenant between God and his people. This is because the covenants of the Bible all embody the same fundamental covenant relationship. For this reason, 'covenant' is the biblical-theological concept used<sup>4</sup> to

E. Hirsch in tracing the shift from a faith based on the Bible as revelation, to a faith based on the Bible as a religious response to revelation, to the work of Signmund Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century.

2. This conviction first came home to me through the teaching of John Piper as crystallized in *The Justification of God, An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), pp. 90-97, in which he establishes that God's righteousness 'consists most basically in God's unswerving commitment to preserve the honor of his name and display his glory' in everything he does (p. 97). See, e.g., Exod. 14:4, 18; 1 Kgs 8:41-45; Ps. 31:1-3; 79:9; 143:1-2, 11; Isa. 43:6-7, 21-25; 46:13; 48:11; Jer. 14:7-21; Ezek. 20:9-44; 36:20-32; Dan. 9:7-19; Rom. 11:32-36; Eph. 1:3-14.

3. As Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula, An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), pp. 8, 79, has pointed out, though James Barr emphasized this point in 1977, it has not been taken seriously enough in subsequent scholarship.

explain (1) the essential character of God as King or Sovereign Ruler, (2) the election of a people under his rule who, as his 'adopted' children, live in dependence upon him, and (3) the corresponding nature of God's bond with them as their 'Sovereign Father'. The content of this covenant relationship is thus summarized in what has come to be known as the 'covenant formula', i.e., that YHWH declares, 'I will be God for you [= your God] and you shall be a people for me [= my people],<sup>24</sup> a mutual belonging between God and Israel that eventually encompasses the nations and consummates history (Ezek. 37:26-28; Zech. 2:11; Rom. 15:10; Rev. 21:3).

This 'covenant relationship', in which the basic categories of kingship (Sovereign Ruler) and kinship (Father) are mutually interpretive,<sup>5</sup> is not static. It is the dynamic, historical arena within which God reveals himself. As such, it provides the interpretive lens for understanding who God is, who his people are and how they relate to one another. Hence, as Rolf Rendtorff has observed, 'covenant' is 'the most comprehensive and the most theologically weighty term for God's attention to humans in the Hebrew Bible.'<sup>6</sup> John Walton concludes that it is the 'single most important theological structure in the Old Testament'; indeed, 'both the Old and New Testament weave their theology on the loom of history with the thread of the covenant.'<sup>7</sup> The covenant relationship con-

4. For an insightful treatment of this theme, see Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula*. See his p. 11 for this literal translation and pp. 50, 73, for his conclusion that the covenant formula is 'at once the unfolding and the endorsement of the... covenant', and as such 'the expression of the fundamental relationship between God and Israel'. Rendtorff's study is based on an analysis of the context and significance of the distribution of the three forms of the formula: (A) 'I will be God for you'; (B) 'You shall be a people for me'; and (A) and (B) combined. For a listing of the passages according to these categories, see his pp. 93-94.
5. For the programmatic insight that the concept of 'covenant' in the Bible is based in tribal and family 'kinship' relationships, which later become interpreted in terms of kingship, see F. M. Cross, 'Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel', in *From Epic to Canon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998), pp. 3-21.
6. Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible, A Theology of the Old Testament*, Tools for Biblical Study 7 (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005), p. 433.
7. John H. Walton, *Covenant, God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 10. In accord with my emphasis, Walton's thesis, p. 24, is that God's sovereign plan is to be in relationship with the people whom he has created, but that people must know God to be in relationship with him. Therefore God has instituted 'as a primary objective a program of self-revelation... the mechanism that drives this program is the

sequently provides not only the content but also the context for understanding the revelation-in-relationship and the history-of-redemption within which the biblical narrative and theology unfold.<sup>8</sup> Brevard Childs is right: a scripturally interpreted *Heilsgeschichte* and the notion of the covenant are the two key categories for constructing a biblical theology.<sup>9</sup>

This does not mean that the 'covenant relationship' is the one, central theme of the Bible. The attempt to isolate such a theme has proved to be too specific to gain a consensus or too general to be of explanatory power. More appropriately, the concept of the covenant relationship provides the *structure* that serves to integrate the interrelated themes developed throughout the history of redemption delineated in the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> Like the hub and rim of a wheel respectively, the old (establishment) and new (restoration and consummation) covenants define and hold together the different 'spokes' of divine revelation manifested in the words and deeds of redemptive history. In so doing, the covenant becomes the interpretive lens for seeing clearly the conceptual and historical unity of the Bible in the midst of its diversity.

### The covenant concept of the Bible

In 1933 Walther Eichrodt shocked the scholarly world of his day, which emphasized critical reconstructions and the disunity of the Old Testament, by arguing

---

covenant, and the instrument is Israel. The purpose of the covenant is to reveal God.' See his pp. 26, 29 and esp. 31-43 for his fourteen key texts in support of this thesis.

8. For the history of the debate surrounding this complex issue, see Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2004).
9. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 92; cf. p. 419.
10. James Barr's conclusion concerning scholarship's search for the centre of biblical theology is instructive in this regard: 'To sum up the question of the "centre," it seems to me that the discussion of it has not been a vain waste of breath, as some have thought, and that valuable results have emerged from it. It is not a matter of reaching a definitive answer, but rather of weighing possibilities for the expression of structure. Whether writers of Theologies define a "centre" or not, they will very likely have to work with some idea of one (or more?), as a simple necessity for the organization of their work' (*The Concept of Biblical Theology, An Old Testament Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999], p. 343).

that Old Testament religion is a 'self-contained entity' with 'a constant basic tendency and character'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this character was displayed in the Old Testament concept of the covenant, which Eichrodt saw to be an antidote to the 'bloodless abstraction of "ethical monotheism"' and to the 'bloodless abstractions of a rationalist individualism'.<sup>12</sup> After fielding twenty-four years of criticism, Eichrodt retained the 'covenant' as the central concept of the Old Testament, 'by which to illuminate the structural unity . . . of the message of the Old Testament', since in the concept of covenant 'Israel's fundamental conviction of its special relationship with God is concentrated'.<sup>13</sup> The criticisms have not abated, but Eichrodt was right. Yet, to make the case today, three important distinctions must be drawn in speaking of the covenant as the integrating concept of Scripture.

First, we must distinguish between covenant terminology and covenant reality. The relative scarcity of covenant terminology in the canon, together with its uneven distribution, has caused many to doubt its viability as an integrating motif within Scripture, not to mention as its integrating centre.<sup>14</sup> It is important, however, not to fall prey to the fallacy of assuming that a reality can only be referenced if a specific term is used. The explicit use of covenant terminology need not be present for the reality to be presupposed or even in view.<sup>15</sup> The realities associated with covenant, centred on kingship and kinship, often reference the covenant relationship between God and his people, but

11. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Volume 1, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 11.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 17.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

14. According to Accordance 6.4.1 (OakTree Software, November, 2004), *bērit* ('covenant') occurs in the Old Testament 287 times in 267 verses. These occurrences are concentrated in the Law (82 times, 27 times in both Genesis and Deuteronomy),

Joshua (22 times) and 1–2 Kings (26 times), Isaiah (12 times), Jeremiah (25 times), Ezekiel (18 times), Hosea (5 times) and Malachi (7 times), and the Psalms (21 times) and 1–2 Chronicles (30 times). In the New Testament, *diathēkē* ('covenant') occurs 33 times in 30 verses. Of these, it occurs only 6 times in the Synoptics and Acts (none in John), 9 times in Paul, once in Revelation 11:19 and 17 times in Hebrews.

15. A point well made by Gordon Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant, A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed from the Perspective of Malachi*, *VTSupp* 52 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 6 (pointing to the reference to the covenant with David in 2 Sam. 23:5 and Pss. 89, 132, even though no corresponding covenant terminology appeared originally in 2 Sam. 7).

occur without an explicit mention of a 'covenant' per se.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, the covenant relationship embodied in its various covenants may be described in the Scriptures from one or more of its interrelated elements, such as the sovereignty and fatherhood of God, divine election and 'adoption', the people of God as a divinely constituted 'family' or 'bride', the mutual belonging expressed in the covenant formula, the call to obedience to specific commands in response to divine provisions, and God's promises of blessing and judgment.

Indeed, Childs emphasizes that while the classic formulation of Israel as 'the people of YHWH' occurs in a standardized covenant formula (cf. Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Judg. 5:13; Jer. 11:4; Ps. 95:7),<sup>17</sup> even to speak of 'Israel' is to speak of both the covenant relationship and covenants of the Bible. Israel exists as God's people only because of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21). She continues on under the Sinai covenant only due to the promises made to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 2:24; 6:4–5; Deut. 4:31; 7:12; 29:12–13).<sup>18</sup> Eventually Israel incorporates the Gentiles and finds her own final redemption through the new covenant established by the Messiah, in fulfillment of these same promises to the patriarchs (Rom. 11:17–24, 26–29, quoting Isa. 59:20–21; Jer. 31:33; Isa. 27:9; cf. too Isa. 41:8–9; 51:1–3). Thus it is not overstrating the case to maintain that the entire Scripture 'is a record of God's activity in creating and defining Israel' in answer to the question of who will inherit the covenant promises made to 'Israel' as the true, elect people of God.<sup>19</sup>

Second, we must distinguish between the establishing of the formal 'covenants' and the continuing personal relationship they either initiate, presuppose or ratify, and thereafter embody.<sup>20</sup> The covenant itself is the formal

16. So Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 415, with my own expansion of some of these covenant realities.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 421.

18. Emphasized by Bruce C. Birch, Walther Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 151. So too Rendtorff, *Canonical*, pp. 438, 443.

19. So David E. Holwerda, *Jews and Israel, One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 30.

20. For the fact that a specific covenant need not create a relationship, but often presupposes and ratifies an existing relationship, see W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation, A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1984), pp. 13–14, 19, 26, 42–43, 47, 76 (on the Abrahamic covenant), 81, 89 (on the Sinai

and/or ceremonial act, both verbal and/or symbolic, that provides the recognized, 'legal' framework for living within the relationship to which it belongs. As a matter of definition, 'covenant' is not a synonym for 'relationship', although the existence and maintenance of a relationship is central to the covenant itself.<sup>21</sup> A covenant is the formal declaration, sealed with a ratifying oath (whether given in a verbal declaration and/or symbolized in a sign or ceremony), of the parties involved, the framework for the commitments of the relationship it defines. As such, a covenant represents 'an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath', i.e., it establishes or reflects 'a relationship under sanctions' based on 'a sanction-sealed commitment to maintain a particular relationship or follow a stipulated course of action'.<sup>22</sup> A covenant and the relationship it represents is therefore 'an *elected* vs. natural relationship of obligation — established under divine sanction'.<sup>23</sup>

Against this backdrop, YHWH's covenant with Israel and the church as divine King (Lord) and Father is an extension of the 'natural relationship' that exists within the household-family and tribe (with marriage seen as a covenant) to a nation and people. In other words, the covenant extends the otherwise inherent familial or tribal bonds to those not related by birth or blood ties, so that those within this covenant relationship now belong to God and to one another as 'family'. Election not blood, rebirth not birth, defines the people of God. By virtue of the covenant, God, the King, becomes the 'Father' of his elect 'children', and they become 'brothers and sisters' in the people of God.

- covenant), 127 (on the Davidic), etc., and Hugenberger, *Marriage*, following McCarthy, pp. 169, 175. McCarthy points to thirteen examples of formal covenants ratifying an existing relationship within secular covenants as well (see Hugenberger, *Marriage*, p. 169 n. 5). In fact, ratifying an existing relationship may be the typical use of covenant making. On the other hand, E. Katsch, Perltt and Nicholson go too far when they conclude that a covenant *never* establishes a relationship (rightly, Hugenberger, *Marriage*, pp. 169–170).
21. For this important point and its implications, see Hugenberger, *Marriage*, pp. 4, 169–171, 176–177.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 171 n. 5, quoting M. Kline. Thus Mendenhall could define a 'covenant' as a 'solemn promise made binding by an oath' (quoted by Hugenberger, p. 11 n. 76), while D. J. McCarthy called it 'a union based on an oath' (quoted by Hugenberger, p. 12). For the important addition that a covenant may secure a stipulated course of action as well as a relationship, as in Ezra 10:3; 2 Kgs 11:4; 2 Chr. 23:11; Jer. 34:8–10, see Hugenberger, p. 169.
23. Hugenberger, *Marriage*, p. 171.

As a result, God is now his (adopted) people's 'Divine Kinsman', who is no longer simply a family God (the 'God of the Fathers'), but the ruler of all by virtue of an extended 'kinship-in-law'.<sup>24</sup> In this extended covenant relationship,

The Divine Kinsman, it is assumed, fulfils the mutual obligations and receives the privileges of kinship. He leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his family, shares the land of his heritage (*nabhalid*), provides and protects. He blesses those who bless his kindred, curses those who curse his kindred. The family of the deity rallies to his call to holy war, 'the wars of Yahweh', keeps his cultus, obeys his patriarchal commands, maintains familial loyalty (*peted*), loves him with all their soul, calls on his name.<sup>25</sup>

Third, we must distinguish between the covenant *relationship* that exists between God as King and Father and his people *throughout* history and the covenant *epochs* that take place *within* history. The Bible divides all of history into two opposing epochs: this age and the age to come. From the biblical perspective, history moves from creation to new creation, from this fallen age to the restored age to come, from the evil kingdoms of this world under the rule of Satan to the kingdom of God. In accordance with this two-age conception, the Bible also divides the history of God's relationship with his people into two main periods of time, the 'old covenant' of this age and the 'new (or everlasting) covenant' of the age to come (Isa. 5:5; 3; 6:1; 8; Jer. 31:31–34; 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Matt. 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6, 14; Eph. 1:21; Heb. 8:6–10).

The transition from this age to the age to come will take place through the last 'great and awesome day of the LORD' (Mal. 4:5; cf. Isa. 13:6–9; Joel 1:15; 2:1–31; Zeph. 1:7, 14; 2:1–3; Amos 5:18–20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:1–2; 2 Pet. 3:10; etc.).<sup>26</sup> On this 'day', God will decisively judge this evil age and in so doing deliver his people once and for all from sin and its consequences. Through this coming day of judgment, God will establish his unrivalled rule and reign as King and, under his undisputed sovereignty, bring about the new creation and its covenant. This coming day of salvation

24. Cross, 'Kinship', pp. 6–7.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 7. Walton, *Covenant*, pp. 21–22, makes the same point by emphasizing that, unlike the earthly suzerain who employed the covenant language in the Ancient Near East as a means of maintaining subservience, YHWH was the sovereign who actually loved his people.
26. See Paul House's essay on the Day of the Lord in this volume.

is therefore often pictured in the Bible as a 'second-exodus' redemption of God's people. Like the first deliverance from slavery in Egypt, with its covenant at Sinai, God will once again rescue his people from captivity (to sin) in order to bring them into his presence as their sovereign ruler, albeit now in accordance with an everlasting 'new covenant' associated with a restored Zion (Jer. 32:36-41; Ezek. 34:25-31; Isa. 2:1-4; 55:3; 61:8; Zech. 8-9).

The only, but crucial, modification to this linear development of history is the fact that the first coming of the Messiah was intended to inaugurate the kingdom of God without consummating it.<sup>27</sup> The great second-exodus redemption of God's people from their slavery under the presence, penalty and power of sin takes place first not through the judgment of the world, but through the death and resurrection of the Messiah himself as the suffering Servant of the Lord.<sup>28</sup> Only the substitutionary death and vindicating resurrection of the Christ himself can make the new covenant possible in order that, under its provisions, God's people might be prepared for their final deliverance at the judgment to come. Thus the kingdom of God is here (Matt. 12:28; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 10:9; 13:18-21; Rom. 14:17; Gal. 3:14; Col. 1:13; Heb. 6:5), but not yet here in all its fullness (Matt. 24:30; 25:34; Luke 20:34-35; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 2 Pet. 1:11; 3:1-13). The new age of the new creation under the new covenant is dawning in the midst of this evil age *without* bringing it to an end (2 Cor. 3:6; 5:17; Gal. 6:15)! This 'overlapping of the ages' is the 'mystery of the kingdom' (Mark 4:1-34).

In this way, the linear development of history presented in the Bible, from creation to new creation, overlaps with and is inextricably tied to the sequential development of the biblical history of redemption, from the old covenant to the new. The covenants and story of the Scriptures match one another. This age and the age to come correspond to the two redemptive epochs within

27. For the paradigmatic presentation of this 'inaugurated eschatology', see Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964). This perspective was established in the English-speaking world largely through the work of G. E. Ladd; of his many works, for a concise presentation, see *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (1959; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). For the biblical-theological implications of this basic two-age structure and its modification with the first coming of the Christ, see Roy Ciampa's essay on the history of redemption in this volume.

28. See Frank Thielman's essay on substitutionary atonement and Stephen Dempster's on the Servant, in this volume.

history, that of the old and new covenants, with their respective bodies of literature. The history of 'this age' is first established, and then re-established, by what may be called the two 'covenants of creation', the first with Adam (and Eve) before the fall and the second with Noah after the flood (cf. Gen. 1:28-30 with 9:1-3, and 1:27 with 9:6). These two covenants with humanity ensure God's *providential* provisions necessary for history itself, in order that God may also establish a *redemptive* covenant relationship with his chosen people. These covenants also prefigure the final judgment to come upon rebellious humanity through the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden and the destruction of humanity from the earth, even as the exile of Israel from the Promised Land makes the same point regarding the judgment of those who break his salvific covenants.

The history of redemption, made possible by the re-established 'creation' after the flood, thus stretches from the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 22:15-18), to the consummation of the new covenant of peace between God and his people (Isa. 54:10; 66:22), to the new creation after final judgment (Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Pet. 3:1-13; Rev. 21:1-8). This 'salvation history' unfolds based on a series of specific covenants, which build on one another and mark out its turning points: from the covenant established between God and Abraham, through the covenant established with Israel at Sinai (Exod. 19-24), which together make up the epoch of the 'old covenant', to the 'new covenant' established with the church by the Messiah (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:6-13; 9:15).<sup>29</sup>

The unity of the Bible is therefore built upon a two-age, two-covenant conception, within which the individual covenants play their respective roles in the unfolding drama of a continuous history of salvation. The various covenants and stages of redemptive history are distinguished by the increasing knowledge of God's unified purposes and the manner of their accomplishment, climaxing in the coming and return of the messianic Son of God (cf. Dan. 9:24-27; 1 Pet. 1:10-12; Heb. 1:1-4; John 1:1-5, 14; 1 John 3:2; 1 Cor. 13:8-13). This is reflected in the fact that the same covenant formula remains the purpose of God from

29. Within these covenants between God and his chosen people there are two important subsidiary covenants, that of kingship with David (2 Sam. 7:12-14; 2 Sam. 23:5; Jer. 33:21; Pss. 89, 132) and of priesthood with Levi (Num. 25:12-13; Deut. 33:10; Jer. 33:21; Mal. 2:4-7; Neh. 13:29). These covenants establish the instruments needed for maintaining and consummating the covenant relationship with Israel under the so-called 'Sinai' or 'Mosaic covenant', both of which are fulfilled under the new covenant by the Messiah, who is 'priest' and 'king'.

the covenant with Abraham, through the Sinai covenant, to its consummation in the new covenant, since this relationship is the means by which God reveals his glory.<sup>30</sup> The specific content of the covenant provisions, stipulations and promises develops as time goes on, but there remains *one* covenant people, in two epochs, with *one* kind of covenant relationship that spans the individual covenants of redemptive history. This 'unity' reading of the Bible, though highly contested,<sup>31</sup> stands at the heart of the proposal before us.

### The covenant relationship

Scripture testifies to one, constant relationship<sup>32</sup> between God and his people throughout redemptive history that is formalized and embodied in its successive covenants. Although disagreement remains over various historical, liter-

30. For this point, see Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula*, pp. 3, 20, 22, 26, 43, 47–49, 69, 80, 88–92, who points to the interrelationship at the key turning points in the biblical canon between the 'covenant', covenant formula, self-identification formula ('I am Yahweh') and recognition formula ('You will know that I am the Yahweh, the Lord').
31. One need think only of the conflict theories of biblical theology embedded in the majority of the paradigms employed for understanding the flow of biblical history; whether in the traditional Lutheran law-gospel perspective, the Reformed understanding of the covenant of works and covenant of grace, or the Dispensational understanding of the dispensations of law and grace. For an overview of the various positions within evangelicalism, see John S. Feinberg (ed.), *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988); for a survey of the issue within scholarship at large, see David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible, A Study of the Theological Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, rev. ed. (Leicester: Apolllos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), pp. 19–176.
32. This seems more appropriate than talking about one 'covenant' in the Bible; there are various covenants, but one covenant relationship based on one covenant structure. In contrast, Walton, *Covenant*, pp. 44–45, 49, 60, 106–107, 148–149, argues for a single 'covenant' in the Bible made up of 'constituent phases of development' based on the fact that all the covenants have the common purpose of revealing God in order to establish a relationship with Israel and the nations (p. 44). The continuity between covenants exists in that 'each is a part of a single, unified program of revelation' (p. 49).

ary and theological issues surrounding the origin and significance of the biblical covenants, a 'substantial scholarly consensus' exists today concerning 'the major elements that typically comprise an ancient covenant'.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, Hugenberger points out that within Israel's history a covenant always entails (1) a relationship (2) with a non-relative (3) that involves obligations and (4) is established through an oath.<sup>34</sup> Thus the covenant relationship between God and his people is determined by divine election on the one hand (as their 'Father', God 'adopts' his dependent 'children' through acts of deliverance) and by the commitments and stipulations of the relationship on the other. This relationship is then guaranteed by a covenant ratification ceremony, which is centred on the taking of an oath of allegiance to the promises and obligations of this relationship. The specific components of actual covenants and their corresponding ceremonies, although seldom preserved in full, embody these elements.

The biblical covenants did not arise in a vacuum. There were a variety of such treaties or covenants in the Ancient Near East, most likely based on intrinsic, tribal, kinship allegiances.<sup>35</sup> Largely due to the programmatic work of G. E. Mendenhall,<sup>36</sup> scholars have widely recognized that the structure of the covenant relationship as we now have it in the biblical text finds its historical location in affinity with, but not necessarily direct dependence on, the well-known Near Eastern suzerain treaties, starting with the treaties between the Hittite kings and their vassals (c. 1400–1200 BC).<sup>37</sup> In accord with the ele-

33. Pointed out by Hugenberger, *Marriage*, p. 11.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 215. An 'oath' can be any sign (verbal or non-verbal) 'which invokes the deity to act against the one who will be false to an attendant commitment or affirmation' (p. 215). Moreover, these oaths need not be explicitly self-maledictory, but can be 'a solemn positive declaration or depiction of the commitment being undertaken' (p. 215).
35. So Cross, 'Kinship', pp. 7–11, 19. 'Often it has been asserted that the language of "brotherhood" and "fatherhood", "love", and "loyalty" is "covenant terminology." This is to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from the language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh' (p. 11).
36. 'Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition', *BA* 17 (1954), pp. 50–76.
37. For a convenient listing of the fifty-seven examples of such treaties, see J. H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 93–107. The modern history of the study of the covenant structure is a complex one in which no consensus exists concerning the origin or development of the various kinds of treaty formulas found in the Ancient Near East and the

ments of the covenant outlined above, these treaties were generally comprised of (1) a *proamble*, in which the sovereign identified himself and sometimes summarized the covenant itself; (2) a *historical prologue*, which gave the historical basis of the covenant, often centred in a great act of deliverance or provision on behalf of the vassal; (3) the *covenant stipulations*, which mapped out the requirements that constitute loyalty to the relationship, by which the covenant is maintained; (4) the *covenant blessings or curses* contingent on keeping or breaking the covenant; and (5) the (often divine) *witnesses* to the covenant.<sup>38</sup>

In the biblical text God takes this treaty form, typically used between a sovereign emperor and his dependent vice-regents, and applies it to his relationship with his people. God's self-revelation thus employs the concept of kingship as the fundamental framework for explaining his divine character and purposes, albeit a kingship modelled on kinship, in which the King was also the committed 'Father' of his people. Biblically speaking, divine kingship ('God') and kinship ('Father') become mutually interpretive (Isa. 9:6–7; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 4:6; Phil. 4:20; 1 Thess. 1:3; 3:11, 13; Rev. 1:6; etc.). As Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Matthew 6:9–10,

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Old Testament. For a helpful survey, in spite of his own historical scepticism concerning the early nature of the covenant concept in the Old Testament itself, see Ernest W. Nicholson, 'Covenant in a Century of Study Since Wellhausen', in his *God and His People, Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 3–117.

38. For the historical span of this treaty-form, see the Hittite treaties presented in William W. Hallo (ed.), *The Context of Scribings, Vol. II: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 93–106, and the two later treaty inscriptions in Aramaic from Sefire (prior to 740 BC), pp. 213–216. Such evidence, together with the parallels between covenant language and early tribal kinship terminology and concepts, has led Cross, 'Kinship', pp. 17–18, to declare that 'the antiquity of covenant forms, of the language of kinship-in-law, and of religio-military federations of tribes is not in doubt. This has been clear since the discovery of the texts of international treaties of the second millennium.'

For as we have seen in the covenant formula, mutual belonging and 'love', like that between members of a family, becomes the 'glue' holding the covenant relationship between God and his people together (on God's love: Deut. 7:8; 10:18; 1 Kgs 10:9; Pss. 33:5; 146:8; Jer. 31:3; John 3:16; Eph. 2:4; 5:2; 1 John 4:19, 19; etc.; on our love for God: Deut. 6:4; Lev 19:18; Mark 12:29–31; etc.).

In the ancient world, the ideal king, like the tribal 'father' or kinsman, expressed his love, manifested his power and magnified his rule by providing for and protecting his people (Pss. 68:5; 103:13). So, too, God's acts of deliverance and provision in the past, as well as his promises of blessing for the future, serve to reveal God's glory as the supreme, sovereign, self-sufficient supplier of all things for the sake of his people. God's self-revelation as 'King' is therefore the driving force of redemptive history, from the reign of God over his creation as reflected in humanity's exercise of dominion as his 'image' (Gen. 1:26–27) to the demonstration of his rule over the nations at the exodus (Exod. 15:18), and from the promise of his rule after the exile (Isa. 52:7; Dan. 7:13–18) to the dawning and consummation of the kingdom of God in the first and second comings of the Messiah (Mark 1:14–15; 1 Cor. 11:26; 15:24; 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18; 1 Pet. 1:3–9). From the old covenant 'song of Moses' to the new covenant 'song of the Lamb', redemptive history is moving towards the full revelation of God's glory as the 'King of the nations' (Rev. 15:3). Hence, although well known for his emphasis on the covenant as the integrating centre of the Scriptures, Walther Eichrodt rightly points out that 'that which binds together indivisibly the two realms of the Old and New Testaments – different in externals though they may be – is the irruption of the kingship of God into this world and its establishment here'; this is 'the unitive fact' of the Scriptures.<sup>39</sup> The thematic lines of Scripture can therefore be summarized under the following fourfold rubric:

Divine Kingship as Father  
via  
Creation-Provision-Redemption  
for  
Humanity  
in  
Covenant

With great theological import, therefore, the relationship between the

39. Eichrodt, *Theology*, p. 26.

