LESSON 2:

THE CENTRALITY OF THE COVENANT

INTRODUCTION

The previous lesson introduced the concept of biblical theology as a way of reading Scripture and addressing how the different parts of Scripture relate to each other. We looked at different approaches to reading Scripture, highlighting how in Luke 24 our Lord Jesus Christ taught His disciples that all Scripture points to Himself. We concluded that lesson by positing that the most organic and best way to see Christ in all of Scripture is covenant theology. We will now in this lesson begin to draw out what that means, looking first at how a covenantal reading brings the Old and New Testaments together, and then examining what a covenant is and how that structures our understanding of Scripture.

CONFESSIONAL READINGS

Westminster Confession of Faith

CHAPTER VII—*Of God's Covenant with Man*

1. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant. (a)

   (a) Isa. 40:13–17; Job 9:32–33; 1 Sam. 2:25; Ps. 113:5–6; Job 22:2–3; Ps. 100:2–3; Job 35:7–8; Luke 17:10; Acts 17:24–25.

2. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, (b) wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, (c) upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (d)

   (b) Gal. 2:16-17; Gal. 3:12; Hos. 6:7
   (c) Gen. 3:22; Rom. 10:5; Rom. 5:12–20
   (d) Gen. 2:17; Gal. 3:10

3. Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, (e) commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him that they may be saved, (f) and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe. (g)

   (e) Gal. 3:21; Rom. 3:20–21; Rom. 8:3; Gen. 3:15; Isa. 42:6
   (f) Mark 16:15–16; John 3:16; Rom. 10:6, 9; Gal. 3:11; Rev. 22:17
   (g) Acts 13:48; Ezek. 36:26–27; John 6:37, 44–45; 1 Cor. 12:3

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4. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a Testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed. (h)

(h) Heb. 9:15–17; Heb. 7:22; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25

5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: (i) under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foresignifying Christ to come: (j) which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, (k) by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament. (l)

(i) 2 Cor. 3:6–9

(j) Heb. 8–10; Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11–12; 1 Cor. 5:7

(k) 1 Cor. 10:1–4; Heb. 11:13; John 8:56

(l) Gal. 3:7–9, 14; Ps. 32:1-2, 5

6. Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, (m) was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper: (n) which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory; yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, (o) to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; (p) and is called the New Testament. (q) There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations. (r)

(m) Col. 2:17

(n) 1 Cor. 1:21; Matt. 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25

(o) Heb. 12:22–28; 2 Cor. 3:9-11; Jer. 31:33–34

(p) Luke 2:32; Acts 10:34; Eph. 2:15–19; Matt. 28:19

(q) Luke 22:20

(r) Gal. 3:8-9, 14, 16; [Acts 15:11]; Rom. 3:21–23, 30; Rom. 4:3, 6-8, 16–17, 23–24; Gen. 15:6; Ps. 32:1; [Heb. 13:8]; Heb. 4:2; Rom. 10:6-10; 1 Cor. 10:3-4

DELVING DEEPER

I. Bringing the Covenant into Focus

The best place to see how God's covenants bring Scripture together is in our Lord's institution of the Last Supper. Luke records that on the night on which He was betrayed, Jesus took some of the unleavened bread set aside earlier that evening and spoke to His disciples the words of institution: "***And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake* it*, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.***"** And then, ***"This cup is the***

new testament [covenant] ***in my blood, which is shed for you***[1]" (Luke 22:19-20). The words would have been freighted with meaning for his disciples, but to see this we need to look at the broader context of what was going on.

Jesus's disciples almost certainly were emotionally exhausted in the week prior to the Last Supper, having gone from excitement to euphoria to bewilderment. Six days prior they were in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, at the home of their friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (John 12:1-8). Weeks earlier, the disciples were amazed to see Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. Unlike other instances when Jesus raised people from the dead, Lazarus had not been dead only briefly; he had been dead and in the burial tomb for four days. To raise him under such circumstances was a clear manifestation of divine power. When the disciples had dinner with the family, however, it was as if Lazarus had never died. He was a living miracle. So grateful was his sister Mary that she opened a jar of expensive perfume and anointed Jesus's feet with it, wiping them with her hair. Lazarus's resurrection confirmed what Peter confessed months earlier, that Jesus was the Messiah, that is, the Christ (Matt. 16:16).

Jesus's resurrection of Lazarus was the most recent—and perhaps most famous—episode that had garnered public attention. As the Apostle John records, once Jesus's presence in the town became known, many Jews wanted to come by the house, not only to glimpse Him but to see the resurrected Lazarus (John 12:9). Unsurprisingly, when Jesus entered Jerusalem on the first day of the week, the throngs of people that massed in the city for the upcoming Feast of Unleavened Bread treated Him as a conquering king. They praised Him as He rode in on a donkey like royalty prophesied of old (Matt. 21:5), and bowed before Him, spreading out their cloaks as a sign of homage (Matt. 21:8-11, Mark 11:8-10, Luke 19:36-38). To many, He would have seemed to be the promised Messiah, now come to assume His rightful position of authority.

This authority was reinforced on Tuesday of that week in His confrontation with the religious leaders in the Temple. Jesus showed Himself to be shrewd and spoke with an authority that astonished the ordinary people and infuriated the leaders (Matt. 22:33). It is no wonder, then, that the disciples had the sense they were fast approaching the moment when Jesus would finally fulfill the prophecies of old regarding the eschatological restoration of God's people.

This sense of expectation probably was behind the disciples' comment as they exited the Temple that Tuesday afternoon regarding the beauty of the Temple. This was not the casual comment of country rustics who were in the big city for the first time. As adult Jewish men, the disciples almost certainly had been in Jerusalem before for observance of the national festivals and no doubt saw Herod's Temple previously. No, now the disciples expected they were approaching the time in which the Lord would begin His march to power, expel the Roman occupiers, overthrow Herod, and restore justice and righteousness to

[1] The Authorized Version (i.e., King James Version) and the New King James Version (NKJV) reflect the historic and received textual tradition, but most modern versions omit "new" in this verse, since two manuscripts do not have it. There is notable manuscript support, however, for the word both here and in the parallel passages in Matt. 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-26, and 1 Cor. 11:23-25.

Israel. They expected that as Jesus came into power, they too would come into power with Him. Like the Maccabees nearly 200 years before, who had regained Israel's independence in a revolt against the Greek Seleucids, Jesus's disciples expected that when they came into power, they would restore true worship in the Temple. Herod was a half-breed and not a true Jew—but he did build an impressive Temple, if only in a failed effort to ingratiate himself with the Jews. In pointing out the beauty of the building to Jesus, the disciples indicated they expected to repeat the Maccabean pattern of restoring what they understood to be true Temple worship when they all came into power.

And then Jesus told them the building would be destroyed, and no stone would be left upon stone (Matt. 24:2, Mark 13:2, Luke 19:44).

The disciples had to have been shocked and confused. Instead of returning immediately to Bethany, where they had been staying, Jesus and His disciples went just outside Jerusalem and rested on the Mount of Olives. With the afternoon sun setting behind the Temple, Peter, Andrew, James and John privately approached Jesus and asked "***…When shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the age?***" (Matt. 24:3, cf. Mark 13:4). Their expectation and confusion was manifest. They clearly thought Jesus was going to establish His kingdom imminently and render Final Judgment on the peoples, but His words brought that idea into doubt. His answer, which we now call the Olivet Discourse, gives the sense that such a coming with power and glory was to be some time off. How far off was not clear. Despite Jesus's words, the disciples a couple of days later still clung to the expectation they would soon come into glory, as evidenced by the argument they got into during the Passover meal over which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24-30). It is this sense that things were moving to a climax, that long-held hopes were finally to be fulfilled, which made that particular celebration of the Passover pregnant with anticipation. And the covenant God had with His people was at the center of all these hopes.

The Last Supper was a Passover Seder,[2] which Jesus long desired to share with His disciples (Luke 22:15). Typically the head of household would serve as host during the dinner, and as host that evening Jesus led His disciples through the Paschal liturgy. At its heart, the Passover Seder was the occasion to remember the preeminent event in all of Israel's history: when the LORD delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt nearly a millennium and a half earlier. The LORD chose Abraham to be the patriarch of the people He was dedicating to Himself, and confirmed by way of covenant His promises of making Abraham into a great nation and bringing His people into a land of their own (Gen. 12:1-3). Those promises were the ground for the Exodus. After the Exodus, the LORD made a covenant with the entire nation, first at Sinai (Exod. chs. 20-24), then again on the plains of Moab (the entire Book of Deuteronomy), just before the nation entered

[2] The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) give the impression that it was, while the Gospel of John gives a seemingly contrary impression, that the meal took place on the day before the Passover. Alfred Edersheim, in his book, *The Temple, Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 311-318, argues from a close examination of all the Gospels that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover Seder and there is not a contradiction between the Synoptics and the Gospel of John. The description here follows Edersheim's reconstruction, 180-196.

the Promised Land. The covenant not only reconfirmed the promises to Abraham, but went into greater detail about what the LORD expected of His people who would reflect His image to the surrounding nations. Indeed, it was in this "Mosaic" covenant that the LORD commanded the Passover be observed annually so the people would remember what their God did for them. Israel was unique among the nations of the ancient Near East in that only she had a covenant with her God. At the same time, in celebrating the Passover, however, it would have been impossible not to reflect as well on the nation's long history of covenant-breaking. As the LORD warned in Deuteronomy, the ultimate penalty for such disloyalty was the most traumatic event in Israel's history: the division of the country into the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the eventual destruction of both, with the people deported first by the Assyrian Empire and then, over 130 years later, by the Babylonian Empire.

Toward the close of the supper, Jesus filled and raised the third and penultimate cup, called the "Cup of Blessing." To this point in the evening, everything had preceded as had for centuries with the Passover celebration. Then He did something unexpected: He took some of the unleavened bread set aside earlier that evening, and spoke to His disciples the words of institution noted earlier. The "New Covenant" that Jesus mentioned was originally prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah in Judah's last days before the country was carried off into exile by the Babylonians (Jer. 31:31-34). Since that time the promised New Covenant held out the hope that God would permanently restore His chosen people and be with them. It was to complement the covenantal promise God made to David the King (2 Sam. 7), that the day would come in which his heir would establish his throne forever. This New Covenant was to surpass the covenant renewal which had been done under Ezra and Nehemiah, when the nation reconstituted itself after returning from the Exile. With His institution of the sacrament of His Supper, Jesus in effect told His disciples that the long-expected prophecy was to be fulfilled in His Person and in His Passion. With this simple act, He instituted a symbol by which His disciples were to remember Him until His Second Advent at the end of time. In continually reenacting this, His disciples not only would remind themselves that Jesus is the Messiah, they also would remind themselves of the Old and New Covenants.

This reference to the covenant is recorded by all of the Synoptic Gospel writers, as well as by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians where he too describes the institution of the Lord's Supper. The unknown writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, describing to his Jewish readers the culmination of all things in Christ, also talks in chapters 8 and 9 of the epistle about the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. **The concept of the covenant, then, reaches back to the earliest parts of biblical revelation, encompasses the high points of Old Testament history, and embodies the hopes of God's people centered on Christ Jesus. For this reason, it is fair to say that the covenantal motif permeates all Scripture. It is the vehicle through which God's redemptive purposes unfolded from beginning to end, and it parallels the progressive development of God's relationship and presence with His people**.

II. What is a Covenant?

Reformed believers use the term "covenant" a lot, but often without a lot of precision. Contemporary Reformed theologians describe the covenant variously as a bond, a relationship, a promise, a mutual agreement, or a contract. While biblical covenants contain these aspects, the concept is not reducible to any one of them or even simply an agglomeration of all them.

The biblical terminology for "covenant" centers around the Hebrew term *berith* (בְּרִית) and the Greek word *diatheke* (διαθήκη). *Berith* means pact, compact, or treaty in the sense of a formal agreement. This includes agreements between men, such as treaties, alliances, leagues, ordinances, or pledges. It also includes agreements between God and man, which signify more of a divine constitution or constitutional arrangement.[3] The Hebrew term envisions a legally binding agreement between two parties. It is not a matter of the parties merely concurring on a matter, informally promising to do something or marking the existence of a relationship. It is much more formal.

Complicating the scholarly discussion on covenants is the fact that the Septuagint (LXX)—the third century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament—consistently uses the term *diatheke* to translate *berith*. Outside of the Septuagint, in the Greek-speaking world at the time of Christ, *diatheke* was commonly used as a legal term to describe a last will and testament. It is not immediately evident why the translators of the Septuagint used this, rather than the word *suntheke* (συνθήκη), which is more commonly used in Koine Greek for "treaty." Given this Septuagint use, some have tried to read into *berith* the notion of a last will and testament, but this seems ill-suited for the Old Testament contexts where *berith* appears. The LXX translators may have chosen *diatheke* because it has a root meaning of disposition or dispensation.[4] Such a disposition carries the connotation that it cannot be altered and that it is an imposed arrangement. Jewish rabbinic tradition stressed this legal, unalterable aspect of *berith*.[5] Geerhardus Vos, the father of Reformed Biblical Theology, contrasted this understanding of *diatheke* with *suntheke*, which has the sense of a bilateral contract between two relatively equal parties. In his view, this is probably what made *suntheke* inappropriate to the LXX translators for translating *berith*. Since there were only two terms, by process of elimination, *diatheke* came to be preferred, understood as a "disposition" rather than a "last will and testament."[6]

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[3] F. Brown, S. R Driver, & C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000).

[4] Geerhardus Vos, "Hebrews, The Epistle of Diatheke" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation; The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin, (Philipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 161-233. See also Vos's *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1956).

[5] G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, and G. Friedrich, eds. "Diatheke," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964). In light of these aspects, it is not difficult to see how the concept of a testament could be derived, since it is essentially a disposition of one's goods to take effect upon one's death.

[6] *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 33.

The key point in the more general definition is that a covenant is both legal AND relational and there are positive and negative sanctions associated with it. The more specific definition brings in the idea that covenants are the mechanism that God uses to exercise lordship over His people. The rest of the definition aims to get at the character of that lordship ("communion" and "renewal") and the purpose of it ("to inaugurate His kingdom"). We will flesh out these definitions as we proceed through the course.

This is not merely an academic exercise, but has definite devotional implications for how we read Scripture and how we relate to God. Very simply, there is the King, His rule and His realm. We can see this in two key passages of Scripture. The first is from Daniel 7:14:

> ***And there was given him*** [the One like a Son of Man] ***dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion*** **is** ***an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom*** **that** ***which shall not be destroyed***.

The second is from Matt. 6:13:

> ***For thine*** [God's] ***is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.***

The Daniel passage is a Messianic passage of the Ancient of Days (God the Father) giving to One Like a Son of Man (Christ Jesus) three things: dominion, glory, and a kingdom. "Dominion" should be understood sovereign rule or power. The Matthew passage is from the end of the Lord's Prayer in the Mount. "Power" in this verse is synonymous with "rule" or "dominion." Christ is not merely teaching His disciples to put a doxology at the end of their prayers, but is instilling in them an experiential sense that all things are to be directed back to God. It is the highest good (or *summum bonum*) of the Christian life.

The parallelism between these two sets of triads is striking and goes to the heart of how we are to read Scripture covenantally. There is the King and His Kingdom; His dominion and His glory. It first sets our understanding of who God is: He is the King, indeed, the Good King. As King, He has undeniable power to do things and ultimate authority. At the same time, He is a good King, just and avenging and yet merciful and loving. While we may come into His presence because of His goodness, we need to remember nevertheless that He is our Lord who has power and authority over us. Secondly, this paradigm sets our understanding of who we are: we are part of His kingdom. We are not just citizens or subjects, but are indeed covenantally bound or united to our King. Lastly, Scripture relates to us God's absolute dominion (i.e., the exercise of His rule) and the amazing results His dominion produces (i.e., His glory). These categories set the parameters within with we should read Scripture and the basis for cultivating devotion to the LORD.

III. How Does Scripture Fit Together Covenantally?

Of all the Reformation-era creeds, confessions, and catechisms, the Westminster Standards alone provide the most developed treatment of the covenant, and indeed, it is the particular inheritance of the Presbyterian tradition. The Westminster Confession of Faith presents what is commonly called a "two-covenant" view of Scripture, namely the **Covenant of Works** (or Life, per WLC 20) **in Adam** and a **Covenant of Grace in Christ Jesus**. It is important to realize that the dividing point between these two covenants is the Fall of Adam, which plunged mankind into a state of misery and death, rather than the Old and New Testaments. This means that the Old Testament after Genesis ch. 3 is part of the Covenant of Grace, and this provides the unity between the Old and New Testaments in the unfolding of God's redemptive work.

Most introductions to covenant theology cover the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, including God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the New Covenant in Christ, and we will do that as well in this course. That said, not only are there these specific covenants in Scripture to consider, but it can indeed be argued that **the very creation of all the books in the Bible were prompted by developments in God's covenantal relationship with His people**. Meredith G. Kline (1922-2007) argued that the impetus for writing the books of Scripture was occasioned by developments in God's covenantal relationship with His people.[7] The Bible is the record of God's covenantal relationship with His people. The unfolding of the covenants establish the historical narrative of the Bible, and it is this that provides the thread of continuity in Scripture.

The books of Scripture can be divided into the seven compositional periods as shown on the chart on the next page, based on conservative assumptions regarding their dating, with each compositional period ranging from 50 to 120 years, or roughly one to three generations. There is a correspondence between these periods and developments in the redemptive-historical covenants between God and His people, and this highlights how the biblical books organically were a response to the needs of God's people. It also shows that covenant theology is not limited to the standard covenants (i.e., with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David) but encompasses the entire Bible. For this reason, in this course we will study the covenantal motif in each of the compositional periods in addition to the standard covenants.

In mapping the narrative arc of Scripture, the first thing to observe is that between the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants is the Exodus from Egypt. **In viewing Scripture rightly, we need to understand that the great salvation event of the Old Testament is the Exodus**, and this foreshadows and parallels the great salvation events in the New Testament, namely, the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Beyond this, **we need to understand the pivotal role that the Deuteronomic covenant plays in the unfolding of Scripture**. The historical and prophetical books of the Old Testament

[7] Meredith G. Kline, ch. 2, "Covenantal Bible" in *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 45-75.

THE COVENANTAL ARC OF SCRIPTURE

Period	Biblical Books	Covenantal Theology
I. Covenantal Foundations (c. 1450-1365 BC)	Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and Joshua	**Covenant of Life/Works** • In Adam **Covenant of Grace** • With Noah • With Abraham ***Exodus from Egypt*** • Sinaitic Covenant • Covenant with Phineas • Deuteronomic Covenant • Covenant renewal under Joshua
II. The Kingship Established (c. 1050-930 BC)	Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, (possibly Job)	Establishment of the Davidic covenant
III. Decline and Fall of Israel (c. 770-690 BC)	Amos, Jonah, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah (dating of Joel, Obadiah is uncertain but likely early)	Covenantal judgment rendered on Israel and Judah
IV. Decline and Fall of Judah (c. 650-580 BC)	Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Lamentations, 1 & 2 Kings	Covenantal judgment rendered on Judah alone
V. Sustenance for the Exiles (c. 605-520 BC)	Daniel, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zechariah	Anticipation of the New Covenant
VI. Restoration from Exile (c. 490-415 BC)	1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Malachi	Restoration of the covenant community
VII. The Advent of the King (c. 45-95 AD)	All New Testament books	Inauguration of the New Covenant

frequently look back to Deuteronomy, and the New Testament books refer to Deuteronomy more than any single Old Testament book except the Psalms. This begs the question as to why Deuteronomy was so important.

Deuteronomy probably was intended to be a succession covenant. In the ancient Near East, kings would at times make covenants with their subjects or with vassal kings to ensure that upon their death their designated successor would secure the throne. In the case of Deuteronomy, the book was written as the people were poised to enter the Promised Land which God promised to Abraham more than 400 years earlier. Moses, however, would not be going in with them into the Land because he sinned against God at Meribah (Deut. 1:37 cf. Num. 20:1-13), so like the Israelites he led for forty years, he too would die in the Wilderness. Thus,

there was the need to secure the succession from Moses to Joshua as to who would lead the people and be a mediator or an intercessor for them with God.

While anyone following Moses's footsteps would have faced a significant challenge given the influence he wielded, the succession issue was exacerbated by the people's history of rebelliousness. Moses repeatedly witnessed the Israelites' propensity to question and wander from the very God who saved them. Although Joshua would lead the people into the Promised Land, the people needed to be reminded that their ultimate leader would not be him, but God Himself. This was Moses's parting legacy—in a sense, *his* last will and testament. The Deuteronomic covenant, then, would thus formally and concretely bind God's people to the LORD, and the Law's stipulations would regulate the nation's relationship with the LORD. The formality of a covenant not only underscored the obligatory and binding nature of the people's relationship to God, but also, by its very formality, provided them assurance that the LORD would fulfill His promises. Since the Exodus from Egypt, Israel had often questioned whether the LORD would care for them and bring them into the land of promise, and they needed assurance that the LORD would fulfill His promises. Joshua, too, also needed assurance that the LORD was with him in leading this people.

This puts into perspective why the rest of the Pentateuch was written. Just as Deuteronomy was written in the form of a covenant, the other four books of the Pentateuch compose a historical prelude to Deuteronomy, showing that Israel was not only the heir to God's covenant promises, stretching back to the beginning of creation, but was the special recipient of God's redemptive work, and in a relationship of special obligation to God. This privileged position should have been an inducement for Israel to obedience and covenantal faithfulness to her suzerain king, the LORD Himself.

Chronologically, the first things probably to have been written down by Moses would have been the core of the Law which he received from God on Sinai (Exodus chs. 20-31). Indeed, the first record of Moses writing anything down comes in this section (Exod. 24:5, 34:28). God's revelation to Moses provided not only the moral basis for the community—the Ten Commandments (i.e., the Moral Law)—but also the civil and ceremonial laws that would regulate the nation and how they were to honor and reflect the LORD.

The next thing probably to have been written down would have been the Levitical codes, since Israel's sin with the Golden Calf (Exod. chs. 32-33) and the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. ch. 10) underscored the seriousness of following God's command for how He was to be worshipped. The complexity of the code and the rituals Israel was commanded to follow would have necessitated having it in writing. Ironically, therefore, the portions of the Pentateuch that people typically find most boring—namely, Exodus chapter 20 through the end of the book and most all of Leviticus—probably were the first parts of Scripture to have been written down.

The narratives in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers were probably written closer to the time Deuteronomy was written, late in the Wilderness period, as these books provide the connective tissue which situates the earlier legal

and ceremonial codes in their proper historical context. It is as if someone were to write a history of the United States and inserted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution into the text directly when they chronologically occur. It is this connective tissue oriented toward the Deuteronomic covenant that provides thematic unity throughout the entire Pentateuch. **Deuteronomy thus came to function as the constitution of God's people**.

As the last book in this covenantal dispensation, **the Book of Joshua was written probably within a generation after that of Deuteronomy and serves as a kind of coda to God's covenantal promises**, showing that God did indeed fulfill the promises He had made to His people by bringing them into the Promised Land, as He said he would. The covenant renewal ceremony as the end of Joshua (Joshua ch. 24) reflects the people's rededication to hold fast to their covenant with the LORD who had saved them.

CONCLUSION

Wrapping up, we began in this lesson to think about how to read Scripture covenantally. We saw in the institution of the Lord's Supper how the covenantal motif brings all of Scripture together. We put forth a working definition of "covenant" and of the biblical divine-human covenants that we will build on in subsequent lessons. And, lastly, we considered how developments in God's covenantal relationship with His people were a driver of the writing of the books of the Bible and how the covenant structures how we see the Bible fitting together. With this macro picture in mind, in the next lesson we will start delving into our journey through Scripture proper.

For Review

1. How does this lesson define "covenant"? How is this similar to or different from how theologians often define the term?
2. From the discussion given here, how is a "covenant" more than simply a bond, a relationship, a promise, a mutual agreement, or a contract?
3. How does the understanding of the covenant presented here help us understand the organization of the Pentateuch?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does the account of the institution of the Last Supper change your appreciation both of the sacrament and of the covenant?
2. In what ways is the idea of a "covenant" a "voluntary condescension," as the Westminster Confession of Faith terms it?
3. What does the correlation between God's covenantal activities and when the biblical books were written tell us about the nature of Scripture?

AFTERWORD

Books on covenant theology abound and are growing more numerous year by year. My recommended overviews are *God to Us* by Stephen G. Myers and *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God; An Explanation of Covenant Theology* by Richard P. Belcher, Jr. Myers' book has depth, breadth, and clarity and is the best all-around introduction. Belcher (a former professor of mine) is succinct in his presentation and is self-consciously trying to be within the bounds of the Westminster Standards (something that not all covenant theologians do or try to do). Belcher also provides the best survey of competing conceptions of covenant theology in chapters 9-13, evaluating them on the basis of how they affect the doctrine of justification by faith, which gets into how theologians assess the law-grace dynamics associated with covenant theology. This is an extremely useful survey and brings clarity to a lot of debates currently going on within the field of covenant theology. Also useful is the book, *Covenant Theology; Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether. This book is a compendium of nearly 30 essays by several prominent modern Reformed theologians surveying all aspects of covenant theology. My view is that these three books are essential to anyone seeking to understanding Reformed covenantal theology today. They can be well supplemented with the books *Christ + Covenant Theology* by Cornelius Venema and *The Covenant; God's Voluntary Condescension*, edited by Joseph A. Pipa and C. N. Willborn. Both books address specialized topics in covenant theology, with the latter being the publication of conference papers presented at the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary annual theology conference in 2004.

There several introductions to covenant theology beyond those mentioned above. O. Palmer Robertson's *The Christ of the Covenants* is still a classic and accessible introduction, although it is somewhat dated. Other introductions include an *Introduction to Covenant Theology* by J. I. Packer (which is really more of an introductory essay); *Covenants Made Simple; Understanding God's Unfolding Promises to His People*, by Jonty Rhodes; and, more substantive but equally brief, *Sacred Bond; Covenant Theology Explored*, by Michael G. Brown and Zach Keele. T. M. Moore provides an overview of the significance of covenant theology rather than a examination of specific covenants in his book, *I Will Be Your God; How God's Covenant Enriches Our Lives*. More advanced and taking more of a systematic theological approach than a biblical theological one is *Reformed Covenant Theology* by Harrison Perkins. All of these books are more recent and preferrable to Michael Horton's *God of Promise; Introducing Covenant Theology*. Horton's work I have found to be confusing, and for that reason I cannot really recommend it.

For those who are interested in delving more deeply into the historical development of covenant theology, the Waters-Reid-Muether book has several essays that trace covenant theology through history as far back as to the Patristic period. The most thorough history of the concept is in Andrew A. Woolsey's book, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought*. Recommended is *Fountainhead of Federalism; Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition*, which contains a translation of Bullinger's "A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or

Covenant of God." Bullinger was a contemporary of John Calvin and his work was one of the earliest in the Reformation period on covenant theology. Complementing this are classic works which include Herman Witsius's *The Economy of the Covenants*, sections on the Covenant of Nature and the Covenant of Grace in Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* and Petrus van Mastrict's *Theoretical-Practical Theology*. Witsius, Turretin, and van Mastrict were all writing during the period of orthodox Reformed scholasticism in the late 1600s. Among more modern theologians, there is *The Federal Theology: Its Import and Its Regulative Influence*, by nineteenth century Southern theologian John Girardeau, and John Murray's booklet, *The Covenant of Grace*.

The connection between ancient Near Eastern treaties and the biblical covenants is central to understanding how the biblical covenants function. Academic interest was strong in this topic from the 1950s until the 1980s, but subsequently dropped off. George Mendenhall's 1955 monograph, "Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East," first drew the connection between the covenant renewal ceremony under Joshua and other ancient Near Eastern treaties. Meredith G. Kline advanced this further in his 1963 commentary on Deuteronomy, *Treaty of the Great King*, which showed that the entire Book of Deuteronomy was similar to ancient Hittite treaties. Dennis J. McCarthy, S. J., followed this up in 1978 in his book, *Treaty and Covenant; A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*. Noel Weeks, in his 2004 book, *Admonition and Curse; The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships*, offered some useful correctives to some of the earlier expectations regarding the connections between ancient Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants. Also noteworthy is Jeffrey J. Niehaus's book, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*. Nevertheless, scholarly theological interest in the matter has significantly tapered off in recent decades. J. Nicholas Reid in *Covenant Theology*, and Richard P. Belcher, Jr. in *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God* both give good, albeit disappointing surveys about the contemporary state of research on the ancient Near Eastern context for covenants.

This downturn in theological interest into the connections between ancient Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants ironically occurs at the same time that there has been an upturn in secular scholarly understanding of ancient Near Eastern diplomacy and law. An early major secular work was Delbert R. Hillers's 1969 book, Covenant; *The History of a Biblical Idea*. Translations of extant ancient Near Eastern archives have been published since the 1990s. William R. Moran first published *The Amarna Letters* in 1992, which were from the archives of the Egyptian 19th Dynasty heretic king, Akhenaten, who reigned during in the century after Israel came out of Egypt in the Exodus. Gary Beckman published *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* first in 1995 and then a 2nd edition in 1999. The translation of these texts has spurred scholarly discussions on how the texts illuminate the ancient Near Eastern world. Raymond Cohen and Raymod Westbrook convened a interdisciplinary conference in 1996 and published the research papers in the 2000 book, *Amarna Diplomacy; The Beginning of International Relations*. Mario Liverani, a contributor to the Cohen-Westbrook conference, separately published *International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 1600-1100 BC*. Amanda Podany added to this in

2012 with her book, *Brotherhood of Kings; How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East*. Also worth noting is *Everyday Law in Biblical Israel* by Raymond Westbrook and Bruce Wells.

These specific books on ancient Near Eastern diplomacy are usefully supplemented by several good general histories. Though dated, I still prefer *The Cambridge Ancient History, vol. 2, part 1, The Middle East and the Aegean Region, c. 1800-1380 BC*. More modern baseline histories include A History of Ancient Egypt and *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC, both by Marc Van De Mieroop*, *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000-330 BC*, 2 volumes, by Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, A History, by William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, and *The Ancient Orient; An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East* by Wolfram von Soden. In terms of anthologies of ancient texts, *The Ancient Near East, An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, volumes I and II, edited by James B. Pritchard is still the standard and these do contain some treaty texts. To this one can add *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context; A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, by John H. Walton.

Most scholarly theological discussions about the ancient Near Eastern context tend to acknowledge simply that it has a role in shaping our understanding of covenants, but often do not go much beyond that. Those works that do go beyond such acknowledgements tend to focus on more on the textual categorizations regarding the forms of covenants (e.g., "law covenants," "grant covenants," etc.) than on the social, cultural, and political factors that governed the ancient use of covenants. At best, this is an oversimplification. Correcting such impressions deepens our appreciation for why God used the mechanism of covenants as the means through which He related to His people.

In addition, scholarly theological discussions of biblical covenants consistently avoid examining the biblical non-divine covenants. It is not clear why this is, but it may be out of an assumption that the divine-human covenants provide the archetype for any kind of covenant, and the human-to-human covenants are simply an ectype. In practice, the human-to-human covenants do not neatly fit the pattern set by the divine-human covenants, and as a result, one is forced continually to redefine what a covenant is when it is between humans. In logical terms, this inverts the species and the genus. But if God is using the covenant as a construct for revealing Himself to His people, then logically it would make more sense to define covenants based on the human-to-human relationship and then treat the divine-human covenants as specialized variants of this general concept. The biblical non-divine covenants fit neatly into the patterns evident from the ancient Near Eastern context and examining them is a necessary contribution in helping us to define a covenant. Achieving a consistent, comprehensive, nuanced definition of covenant is necessary if we are to rightly to unpack the significance of God's covenants with us.

Within the lesson proper, discussion of all this has necessarily been truncated for the sake of brevity. The following Excursus, "Defining the Covenant," provides the foundation for the conclusions in the lesson about how we should define a covenant. This Excursus reacts to three problems repeated in

many presentations of covenant theology, namely: (1) a superficial treatment of the ancient Near Eastern context shaping how covenants actually worked; (2) omission of any examination of what non-divine biblical covenants contribute to our understanding of covenants; and, as a result (3) ambiguity in the definition of what a covenant actually is. One is strongly encouraged to read that discussion for a more thorough response to these issues.

The summary of the compositional periods is my own assessment, which I note is based on conservative dating assumptions. There are a number of good books on Old Testament introduction that address these assumptions. I would recommend *Old Testament Introduction; Back to Basics*, by Michael P. V. Barrett (who also was the Old Testament editor for the Reformation Heritage Study Bible); *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, by Edward J. ("E. J.") Young; the similarly named *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, by Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III; *Encountering the Old Testament* by Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer; and *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. By Miles Van Pelt, but is a compendium of articles by professors from the Reformed Theological Seminary system. All are from a generally conservative evangelical perspective. These are helpfully supplemented by two biblical histories, the first is Eugene H. Merrill's *Kingdom of Priests*, 2nd ed., and *A Biblical History of Israel* by Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III. Merrill's book is better on piecing together the chronology of the Bible and on narrative history. The Provan-Long-Longman book is better on engaging and challenging the assumptions of critical theologians regarding biblical historiography.

In this lesson there was also recognition that the entirety of Scripture is covenantally derived. I am modifying Kline's observation here somewhat. In the article cited in the footnotes, Kline was focused primarily on how the covenantal form shaped the function of various biblical books. In my appropriation, I am less interested in the application of the covenantal form and more interested in how the books of the Bible came to be justified on the basis of how they advanced the covenantal narrative, as I think that is probably a more demonstrable endeavor and more pertinent for readers of Scripture.

Finally, a word needs to be said about Meredith G. Kline's seminal work, *Kingdom Prologue; Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*. Behind Geerhardus Vos, Kline is easily one of the most insightful scholars of the Old Testament in the last 150 years. He excels in helping one discern the architectonic structures of Scripture and the eschatological typologies that are laced throughout the Bible. That said, he is not easy to understand and, as often happens with those who are brilliant in seeing things more deeply than most, his formulations sometimes deviate from accepted orthodoxy. In my view, he is certainly worth reading but his material really should be understood as advanced and requiring careful engagement, and therefore is not necessarily for the beginner.