

## 1.1 The Theme of the OT, the NT, and Scripture as a Whole

### Introduction

To get to the heart and core of the OT, NT, and Scripture as a whole, we can ask these Qs. Can we find a string that ties all the historical facts, all the books, and all the diversity together? In word, is there a single theme to the OT, the NT, and to Scripture as a whole? Finding this string and theme is the first step in our study as we shift from the OT to the NT. Many OT scholars do not think we can find a single unifying theme (Hasel, *Theology of the OT*; Dillard, *IOT*, 35-36). They think that the diversity of the OT and thus all of Scripture is simply too great.

We should still try to answer the fundamental question of a unifying theme and ground our answer in Scripture. Respectfully, we begin with the claim that there is a single theme, a string that connects all the beads of diversity in Scripture. That theme is the God's covenant or promise. This means that Scripture as God's revelation of His purpose in history is covenantal because His purpose in history is covenantal. Furthermore, it means that His purpose in history that Scripture records realizes His purpose from before the foundation of the world, which is also covenantal.

Once we ground this conclusion in Scripture, we should then formulate and focus a theme statement. The steps of our outline of this study includes explanation, support, and then focus.

### 1A. Explanation of covenant (or promise) as the unifying theme of Scripture

In a very basic sense, our theme is the focal point of covenant theology, a theological point of view that sees the purposes of God as covenantal as they unfold in the OT and in the history the OT and NT records. Look at the thirty-nine books from Genesis to Malachi. What is most characteristic? What is the broadest principle that can be applied that brings it all into focus? What is the skeletal frame on which all the muscle tissue of the OT hangs? What, in other words, is a one word summary of the OT that contrasts with the NT overarching notion of fulfillment?

"Promise" is the most acute, accurate, and concise summary of Genesis to Malachi in relation to Matthew through Revelation. In the idea of covenant-promise, the diverse OT elements of covenants, sacrifice, the anticipation of Messiah, hope, the coming of the kingdom, the coming of a new day all come together. Recognition of this fact is a strength of covenant theology, it would seem, even though many covenant theologians prefer a multiperspective approach to the OT (Dillard) and many covenant theologians balk at the idea of tracing covenant back to pretemporal intertrinitarian relations (Waters).

### 1B. Definitions

#### 1) Dispensational versus Covenant Theology

For perspective and clarity, we should define covenant theology over against its rival, dispensational theology. These systems overlap in many ways, but they are distinct in key aspects. They are different in the following summary ways that help us define both systems. The following graph should help clarify the differences:

<u>Aspects of Concern</u>	<u>Dispensational Theology</u>	<u>Covenantal Theology</u>
Redemptive History	Emphasizes Discontinuity	Emphasizes Continuity
OT to NT	Emphasizes Discontinuity	Emphasizes Continuity
Israel to Church (OT/NT)	Emphasizes Discontinuity	Emphasizes Continuity
Israel to Church (future)	Emphasizes Discontinuity	Emphasizes Continuity

Thus, dispensational theology is that system of biblical study (of biblical theology) that emphasizes discontinuity (while granting trends of continuity) in the unfolding of redemptive history that is on record in the Bible. Covenantal theology is that system of biblical study (of

biblical theology) that emphasizes continuity (while granting trends of discontinuity) in the unfolding of redemptive history that is on record in the Bible.

Thus, in sum, dispensational theology denies what covenantal theology affirms, namely, that redemptive history is an organic unity (like a seed to full plant), that in the shift from old to new this organic unity applies, that the church is now the new Israel made up of Jews and Gentiles, and that the church constitutes the new Israel of the future consummation of the kingdom.

As a side note, Scofield dispensationalism has a very meaningful treatment of covenants in Scripture. The problem is that the descriptions of the covenants stand in isolation from a strong emphasis on the discontinuities (and thus on the the dispensational) unfoldings of redemptive history. Hence, the emphasis on dispensations, which is not bad in itself, is cut away from the unity that results from viewing things from a covenantal perspective. This results in an undue emphasis on discontinuity as a broad methodological working principle when doing biblical theology (doing BT means studying the history of redemption).

## 2) Covenant

Covenant is often spoken of as an agreement between two or more persons in a reciprocal relation. But this is neither the only nor the best way to understand the term. It is often used of a one party grant with a guarantee that a more favored person gives to a less favored one (cf. Ridderbos, Galatians 130). An intriguing example of this usage is found in the action of the Hivites in Joshua's day (Josh. 9). These people who knew they were doomed before the invading Israelite army came to Joshua pretending to have come from a far country. Their bread was in crumbles, their wineskins were empty and their shoes were worn. To Joshua, they claimed to have heard of the Lord God and have come to receive a covenant from the people of God to be their servants. The response was that Joshua and the elders gave them a covenant and let them live. This was an absolutely one sided agreement!

God's covenant is one sided; it is sovereignly administered; it is a guarantee, promise and commitment. God's covenant word is His voiced commitment to His image bearers promising eternal Sabbath rest to save a people out of the fallen human family (more precisely, it is His covenant word).

Thus, whether explicitly stated in the covenants of the Bible or implicitly given in principle, the idea of covenant overarches the entire Bible. Scripture records the unfolding of the saving purpose in which God makes covenant one-sidedly to save. Where reciprocal conditions enter the picture (God chose Abraham so that he would obey Him, Gen 18.18; God redeems Israel for obedience not by it, Ex 19-20; believers pledge obedience in baptism, but the obedience of baptism flows from efficacious grace, 1 Pet 3.21; Rom 6.1-4), they are subordinate to this central idea of God's sovereign and gracious purpose. This simply corresponds with the point that biblical history is redemptive history. Scripture records and interprets that history. Thus, God records and interprets His redemptive actions saving helpless sinners in history.

The old contrasts with the new in the notion of fulfillment. What is it that comes to fulfillment in the NT? The new obviously fulfills the promise of the old. Thus, the OT records promise anticipated and the NT records the same promise fulfilled.

## 2A. Biblical basis for covenant (or promise) as the unifying theme of Scripture

The biblical basis for the covenantal nature of Scripture is implicit on one hand and explicit on the other.

### 1B. Implicitly

To work with implication is to simply agree with the Westminster Confession of Faith that we are under obligation to "necessary consequence" as well as direct reference in Scripture. For example, the summary doctrine of God as a trinity is a classic necessary consequence that is opposed by every cult.