

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

2A. Biblical basis for covenant (i.e. 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 (by good and necessary consequence)

We can now consider some places in Scripture where this theme is implicit. This especially concerns the early stages of OT redemptive history where the term covenant does not itself appear but the doctrine is nonetheless still present.

1C. Before the Fall

In the garden of Eden, the relation between God, the Creator, and the first parents of the human family was covenantal. God gave the promise of life in the 6-1 paradigm of history (Gen 1.1-2.3) and in His command of obedience regarding the tree of knowledge (Gen 2.17). The disobedience of the first Adam necessitated the coming of a second Adam in order to fulfill the promise of life. Since the fall, history is redemptive.

2C. Following the Fall

Following the Fall, the covenant structure is evident in what has been called the “first gospel promise” in Genesis 3:15. The sovereign administration of the covenant is evident for God says: **“I will put enmity between you (the serpent) and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”** God promises to establish a posterity through Eve within the human family that opposes the way of sinful departure from the living God. The word covenant is not here in the text, but the principle is here as a one-sided guarantee! God commits himself to save a people out of the fallen human race.

2B. Explicitly

Note: by the using the NT to understand the OT, we are reading the books as one book with the single author of the Holy Spirit, and we are reading it in light of the coming of Christ. We must do justice to the OT in its context to pick up the nuances as they unfold progressively, but we must do this in NT light as Christians under the authoritative word of Christ.

1C. Hebrews 13:20

Hebrews 13:20 speaks of the eternal covenant relation that reaches back before the coming of Christ because this covenant bestowal was promised to Christ before he came into the world. The covenant family that was purchased by the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb. 13:20) consists of those given to Christ as his people before he partook of flesh and blood (Heb. 2:11-14; cf. Jn 17). From these NT texts we can draw an important implication.

First, the certainty of God’s covenant intention is clearly evident in the efficacy of the sacrificial work of Christ. He does for his people what they cannot do for themselves. Even the faith of the Christian is purchased by the power of the blood of Christ (cf. John 6:45; 12:32; John 1:12, 13; Rom. 5:10). Therefore, this is a graciously redemptive promise. Hence, it is called the eternal covenant of grace (“covenant of grace” as in the WCF refers to the outworking of the eternal covenant of grace that began with the promise of Gen. 3.15).

God’s purpose is covenantal within history, encompassing it comprehensively.

God’s purpose is covenantal before history, planning it comprehensively.

Second, because it is Jesus who crushed the serpent’s head at the cross, then His anticipated covenantal mediation must lie behind all the redemptive acts in history by which the seed of Eve is called forth.

2C. Hebrews 4:1-4

Verse one mentions the promise of entering God’s rest that still stands. This promise has its roots in creation (vs. 3, 4). The seventh day rest (that God entered) promised the end of history. The six-one creation week is a paradigm of history. Thus, Sabbath keeping is a sign that points ahead to the goal of history: God’s rest, and our rest with Him in His rest.

For our purposes, note that God initiated the history of the universe with a promise (of future rest). God promises rest with Him as the goal of history. Therefore, the Bible records

how God fulfills this promise and in this sense the OT is a covenant document. For clarity, this is not to say that the OT is a covenant document as a literary genre. The literature is very diverse.

3C. Luke 22:20

In Luke's account of the last supper, Jesus refers to new covenant secured by his blood: **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you"** (22:20). What contrast is asserted here? Do we not have the fundamental shift from the OT to the NT? When Jesus brings in the new covenant fulfillment, does he not realize old covenant promise? If this is the case then the entire promise structure of the OT is covenantal, the basic divisions of the Bible being promise and fulfillment (cf. Mat 5:17; 11:11-12).

Thus, the NT is in broad summary, a covenant record from the side of fulfillment. The promises that reach back to Genesis 3:15 and which unfold throughout the OT find their fulfillment in the new covenant. The old order of things is therefore the old covenant and the new order of things is the new covenant. The OT and NT explain God's eternal covenant that came to expression in the time of promise that gave way to the time of fulfillment. God brought His eternal covenant to realization in the covenant-promise documented in the OT and in the covenant fulfillment documented in the NT.

4C. Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-22

God promised Abraham a land, a nation, and a blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). This promise is called the covenant of circumcision (Gen. 17:2, 10). Like the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant extends in time to all the remaining years of human history. Thus, NT Christians are Abraham's seed according to this circumcision covenant: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29).

This covenant also looks back to the covenant with Eve and confirms the implication we saw there of covenantal structure. Again, whether we look forward or backward from Abraham, we have indication that is sufficient to ground the structure of the entire Bible as well as the entire OT. The history of redemption gradually unfolds the progressive fulfillment of God's covenant purposes. The OT written revelation records the early stages of this fulfillment and thus has the same central theme.

The promise to Eve and the promise to Abraham converge in anticipation of Christ (Gal. 3:16). Furthermore, Paul tells us in Galatians that the Mosaic covenant was in effect an overlay that did not annul the Abrahamic covenant but served to carry the promise to Abraham (and to Eve) forward to its goal in Christ (Gal. 3:17, 29).

We have confirmation here that the structure of covenant that overarches the OT is a sovereign commitment made by God that unfolds his purpose to save. Genesis 1.1-2.3 gives us a summary introduction to not only the Book of Genesis, but to the entire Bible. Thus, the theme of the Bible is the theme of redemptive history that it interprets (giving God's interpretation); history is redemptive because of the fall. Therefore, the theme of Scripture is God's determined, one-sided, sovereign, and Christ-centered purpose to bring His image bearer to eternal Sabbath rest at the end of history.