

Why Do Dispensationalists Have Such a Hard Time Agreeing on the New Covenant?

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Note: This edition of the paper is v. 1.1. It includes some corrections and minor additions or changes from the paper as presented at the council. The discussion following the paper was extensive and vigorous—to the point where it is likely that next year’s council (if it materializes) may focus entirely on the new covenant. Please treat this paper, not as a formally published paper, but as a “trial balloon” sort of paper. It was not designed to defend a particular position (though that is largely what the ensuing discussion became!), but to serve as an introduction/stimulus for a discussion as to *why* there are differences among traditionalists in regard to the new covenant. That is one reason why there is not formal “conclusion”—that was to emerge from the council discussion. (This year’s council was a private consultation by about 20 scholars, all “traditional” dispensational, from across the country. For more info, see the news article at <http://www.baptistbulletin.org/?p=1295#more-1295>.)

Introduction

It is no secret that there is more diversity among traditional dispensationalists regarding the church’s relationship to the new covenant than regarding any other comparable issue in our system. We have no problem agreeing on a distinction between Israel and the church, on a future for national Israel, or on the beginning of the church at Pentecost. We also have considerable consensus regarding other biblical covenants, whether that is the Abrahamic surety of land, seed, and blessing, of the Mosaic covenant’s role in Israel and lack of legal standing for the church, or the future fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.

Yet when we come to the new covenant it is challenging to establish consensus as to whether there is one new covenant or two, whether the church is a party to the covenant, related only through the covenant mediator, shares similar blessings, or has nothing at all to do with it.¹ Although I would like to expound my own view of the new covenant in detail,² my assignment for this session is to consider *why* we have the range

¹ For sake of time I will assume that these various positions are generally understood. I have treated them at length in “The New Covenant and the Church,” *BSac* 152 (1995): 290-305, 431-56, or in abridged form, “New Covenant, Theology of” and “New Covenant, Dispensational Views of,” in *The Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997).

² My own views on the matter will be obvious enough (and many of you will have already read my *BSac* articles, though even they are of a survey nature), but this essay does not present a fully argued defense of them. My view has not changed, though I have developed a broader framework for handling covenantal questions since those articles were published.

of positions.³ To launch our discussion in that direction, I will first address some methodological issues, then turn to the general category of covenant, and finally raise some questions regarding the actual content of the new covenant.

In the time allotted to me, I can only raise issues and perhaps suggest some directions in which our discussion might be profitable. Occasionally you may think that I cross the line of analysis and move into exposition—and you will be right! But I have tried to not to trespass too frequently. In none of these topics will I be able to offer a definitive treatment. You may vigorously disagree with some of my suggestions as to the answers, but I suspect if that is the case, then perhaps I have identified at least some reasons for disagreements among traditional dispensationalists. So if you manage to help stir the waters when I am finished, that may help validate my presentation! 😊

1. Methodological Issues

Let us first consider some methodological issues related to exegesis.

1.1. Priority of exegesis vs framework/theological system

Does the text determine our theology or does our theology determine our understanding of the text? How does our hermeneutical framework—our theological system—affect (and sometimes effect!) our exegetical conclusions? Which takes priority, text or theology?

We all know the “correct” answer to such questions: the text must determine our theology. But that is not, of course, the end of the discussion. There is and must be an interrelationship between those two categories. The text must always be our final authority and our sole authoritative source for our theology. We dare not, as seems so popular today, elevate other sources to the same level as the text.⁴ Yet there is a legitimate asymptotic spiral involved as our theology, derived from our previous exegesis, helps us evaluate and refine our exegetical conclusions, which in turn enables us to hone our theological system, but that is different from the system stepping in too

³ “Why” questions are always tricky. I make no pretense of offering an “intentional/psychological” reason. My comments relate strictly to biblical-theological issues. In essence my answer to the why question is that we have not done our exegetical-theological homework in some areas, and I may be as guilty as you on that score! Perhaps your comments will make that obvious!

⁴ This is very evident in the works of Grenz and Franke as they have attempted to employ a postmodern epistemology as the basis for their theological formulations. They have been followed in this by some sectors of the emerging church. On Grenz’s epistemology (which serves as the fountain for many in his train, including Franke), see my article “Revisioning the Nature of Biblical Revelation: A Critique of Stanley Grenz’s Proposals,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8 (Spring 2004): 5-36.

quickly.⁵ This is an even greater danger when the system is a *hermeneutical* system not an eschatological one⁶ for then it impacts our exegesis more directly and more extensively. Yet we still need to walk a fine line in delineating legitimate exegesis from the invalid imposition of premature, system-driven conclusions onto a text.

Although dispensationalism is at its heart a hermeneutical system, there is a yet more basic hermeneutic that must control our handling of the texts, a hermeneutic that ultimately generates dispensationalism. That hermeneutic is a historical-grammatical reading of the text of Scripture—a hermeneutic no different at the fundamental level than what we use to understand any written text or oral utterance. I dare not attempt to unpack that textual approach in the confines of this paper; I can only plead that we not confuse the more basic hermeneutic with a higher level, systemic dispensational model or framework for understanding how the Bible as a whole fits together. This framework arises from our theological reflection on a historical-grammatical exegesis of the entire text of Scripture.

As a biblical-theological model, dispensationalism provides a framework for making sense of what God is doing in his world. It explains (to the extent we are able to understand God's revelation of it) God's providential dealings with humanity. It assures us that he is in control of history and that he is working out all things according to the counsel of his will. Yet the Bible never spells it out in a chapter on "dispensationalism." The systemic framework is *our* construction,⁷ based, we would argue, on the text, and harmonious with and synthetic of the full panorama of Scriptural revelation, indeed, the most harmonious model of the various competing systems in this regard. As such,

⁵ As A. T. Robertson says, "When the grammarian has finished, the theologian steps in, and sometimes before the grammarian is through" (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3d ed. [New York: Doran, 1915], 389)!

⁶ It is still rather amazing to me how many people view dispensationalism primarily as an eschatological system. This is true not only of our opponents but of too many within the camp. Yes, dispensationalism has significant implications for eschatology, but that is the outgrowth of the system, not its core distinctive. I once had a long discussion with a new librarian at another dispensational institution who was very puzzled as to where to classify dispensational material in Dewey's 236 section. The issue is not primarily with Dewey—who did not likely have any idea of what dispensationalism was—but with the librarian (who had a seminary degree in addition to his MLS) who viewed dispensationalism as a variant of eschatology rather than hermeneutics.

⁷ Unless, of course, we want to argue that Paul was a dispensationalist in the same sense that we are! We may make such comments (i.e., that Paul was a dispensationalist), but I trust it is said with tongue firmly planted in cheek, for although Paul both understood and taught many of the truths on which we base our system, that is quite different from attributing our system to him as a conscious framework. There have been some dispensationalists who have seriously argue to the contrary; I was taught by one and have read others (e.g., Miles Stanford, *Pauline Dispensationalism* [Colorado Springs: By the author, 1993]).

the system can never dictate the exegesis of any individual part of Scripture.⁸ Rather it serves to integrate our grasp of the whole and to suggest appropriate questions to ask of the individual parts as we labor through the underlying exegesis.

What I intend here is something similar to a point that Mike Stallard made in his response to Brent Sandy's 2007 ETS/DSG paper: "using the poetic understanding of a text is a second-order observation that comes after the first-order grammatical-historical reading."⁹ Our historical-grammatical understanding of a text is a "first order" endeavor, whereas our consideration as to how it fits into our dispensational framework is a higher order question.¹⁰ My point is not to identify dispensationalism as a second or third level method (or any other numbered step), only that it is not a first level exegetical enterprise.

I wonder if we have sometimes been guilty of too quickly bringing our higher level dispensational system to bear in our exegesis.¹¹ Since we already "know" what fits our system and what does not, I fear that we sometimes postulate exegetical conclusions that appear not to have the best support in the text.¹² I must confess that when we can

⁸ Perhaps I should say, "should not," since it *can* dictate conclusions when used inappropriately.

⁹ Mike Stallard, "Response to D. Brent Sandy's Paper: 'Plowshares and Pruning Hooks and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism' (paper presented at the Dispensational Study Group, Evangelical Theological Society, Nov. 2007, San Diego), 5.

¹⁰ I use "first order," etc. here methodologically, which is slightly differently than does, say, someone from the Yale school such as George Lindbeck who uses it epistemologically in regard to ontological truth claims, first order claims being statements of ontological reality, in contrast to second order claims (which include all religious and theological statements) that are rules relating to conduct. See his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 64–69. I have discussed both Lindbeck and Stanley Grenz's use of this epistemological model in "Revisioning the Nature of Biblical Revelation," 5–36.

¹¹ I have commented elsewhere (*BSac* 152 [1995]: 432) that both Chafer and Stanford may be guilty of just this error—and their own statements of it suggest their reasoning. Chafer says, "to suppose that these two covenants ... are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God's purpose for Israel and His purpose for the Church" (L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48], 7:98–99). And Stanford concludes that "it *seems* evident that there is another New Covenant for the Church—which is necessary to keep the Church totally apart from Israel" (Miles J. Stanford, "The Great Trespass," unpublished paper [Colorado Springs: By the author, 1991], 7, emphasis in the original). [Note: I do appreciate Chafer's ministry and his theology and do not intend my observation to be a personal slight on him. I am sure that I have my own foibles and oversights as well!]

¹² I was taught dispensationalism by a student of one of the early leaders in dispensationalism—one who not only learned the system from him, but also managed to adopt some of his minor idiosyncrasies—and expand some of them into dogmatic necessities. My impression (though it took many years to understand this) is that my prof was somewhat like an eager handyman whose only tool is a hammer and to whom everything appears to be a nail. To my prof, every text appeared to have dispensational distinctives; the system was read into everything, even if what was found reflected not valid exegetical conclusions, but only his dogmatic idiosyncrasies. He loved to find covenant theology blindness in everyone else's interpretations!

examine the Lord's Table texts, Heb 7-10, and even 2 Cor 3, and conclude either that there are two new covenants, or that the church is not related in some way to the new covenant, I wonder if the dispensational egg might not be arriving before the exegetical chicken!¹³

Excursus

At the danger of shifting into expository mode, let me illustrate from Heb 7-10.¹⁴ Having transitioned from Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant to Jesus as Melchizedekian high priest at the end of chapter 6, the author of Hebrews (AH) devotes the next four chapters to expounding the implications of Jesus as high priest. He points out the temporary nature of the old covenant (7:11ff) as one given on the basis of the Levitical priesthood (τῆς Λευιτικῆς ἱερωσύνης ... ὁ λαὸς γὰρ ἐπ' αὐτῆς νενομοθέτηται). His conclusion is that if the priesthood has changed (μετατίθημι), then the law must also have changed (ἐξ ἀνάγκης καὶ νόμου μετάθεσις γίνεται, v 12). AH then argues that the old covenant (the "former regulation," προαγούσης ἐντολῆς, v 18) has been set aside (ἀθέτησις, annulled) because it was, relatively speaking, weak and useless. In place of this former regulation (i.e., the law), a better hope is introduced (ἐπεισαγωγή κρείττονος ἐλπίδος, v 19). AH declares that it is on the basis of this better hope that we draw near to God (δι' ἧς ἐγγίζομεν τῷ θεῷ, v 19).

It is at this point that we encounter the danger of an exegetical misstep. It is easy for some of us to think, "since the new covenant is made with Israel, AH can't be talking about the new covenant here (or at least not Israel's new covenant), because the 'we' clearly refers to Christians—members of the church—not Israel." We may then develop our synthesis in terms of Jesus' high priesthood, etc. and omit all reference to the new covenant. But the preceding argument has just contrasted the old and new covenants, and Jesus' high priesthood is predicated on the change of law (i.e., from law/old covenant to new covenant). The following context likewise makes the same point. The better hope of v 19 is surely to be understood in this context as the better covenant (κρείττονος διαθήκης, v 22) upon which Jesus' high priesthood is based.

This is expounded in chapter 8 as AH explains Jesus' high priestly ministry as being superior to his priestly predecessors since "the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and is founded on better promises" (v 6).¹⁵ This second

¹³ My answer to the old conundrum of which came first is, based on Gen 1, the chicken!

¹⁴ The English phraseology below is that of NIV, though I have noted the Greek text as well to enable you to compare it with whatever English translation you may be using.

¹⁵ The syntax of this verse is not the simplest! It reads, διαφορωτέρας τέτυχεν λειτουργίας, ὅσω καὶ κρείττονός ἐστιν διαθήκης μεσίτης, ἥτις ἐπὶ κρείττοσιν ἐπαγγελίαις νενομοθέτηται. The NIV makes good English and communicates the meaning accurately, but it is not easy to coordinate the word order. NRSV offers one of the better formal equivalents (supplying the subject for clarity): "But Jesus has now

covenant was necessary because the first was not faultless (v 7).¹⁶ AH then cites at length from Jer 31:31–34 (= Heb 8:8–12), which can only be understood in this context to be a reference to that second covenant of which Jesus is the mediator, which replaced the earlier, faulty, first covenant—the new covenant replacing the old, Mosaic covenant, now said to be obsolete (πεπαλαίωκεν, v 13).

The contrast between the first, obsolete covenant and the new covenant of which Jesus is the mediator continues into chapters 9 and 10. The regulated worship system of the first covenant (9:1–7) was comprised of “external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (δικαιώματα σαρκὸς μέχρι καιροῦ διορθώσεως ἐπικείμενα, v 10). These are contrasted with “the good things that are already here” (τῶν γενομένων ἀγαθῶν, v 11)¹⁷ of which Jesus is the high priest. After describing his high priestly work (11–14), AH concludes “for this reason Christ is the mediator of the new covenant” (διὰ τοῦτο διαθήκης καινῆς μεσίτης ἐστίν, v 15).¹⁸ The law, which was only “a shadow of the good things which were coming” (10:1—they are now here per 9:11), has now been set aside: “he sets aside the first [covenant] to establish the second [covenant]” (ἀναίρει τὸ πρῶτον ἵνα τὸ δεῦτερον στήσῃ, 10:9). The newly established covenant is then described again by another citation of Jer 31:33 in Heb 10:16.¹⁹

My point is that these four chapters present a unified argument which discusses the new covenant throughout. There is no distinction of multiple new covenants here. The AH discusses this new covenant strictly in relation to the church. He says nothing about a future covenant for Israel (though he certainly does not deny that). It is this new covenant that is the basis on which Christians draw near to God, on which their

obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.”

¹⁶ Note particularly the first/second contrast in v 7 (πρώτη ... δευτέρα), somewhat obscured by NIV’s use of “another” for δευτέρα.

¹⁷ This assumes that the NA text is correct in reading the aorist middle participle γενομένων (B⁴⁶, B, D, etc.) rather than the present active participle μελλόντων (as found in **8**, A, **9**, etc.).

¹⁸ I have deliberately revised the NIV text at this point, changing the English indefinite article to the definite “the.” Although this phrase *could* be translated “mediator of a new covenant” or even “a new covenant mediator,” in this context that seems highly unlikely. Not only has *the* new covenant been under discussion for several chapters, but διαθήκης καινῆς could be treated as a monadic noun (apart from any explicit, exegetical evidence for more than one) as could μεσίτης. Also Colwell’s rule suggests that definite predicate nominatives are generally anarthrous when they precede the linking verb, which is the case with μεσίτης here (E. C. Colwell, “A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 52 [1933]: 12–21). Since the noun (μεσίτης) is anarthrous, any modifiers (such as διαθήκης καινῆς) will, of course, likewise be anarthrous.

¹⁹ The preceding summary is only that—a summary. It does not attempt a fully argued exegetical treatment of the passage, though I think it is a fair summary that reflects such exegesis. Nor have I attempted to document the opposing positions that some traditional dispensationalists have taken in these chapters. I will assume that these alternate positions are commonly known in this setting.

mediatorial high priest presently ministers on their behalf. It is also this second covenant that has replaced the first covenant in administering the relationship of God's people to their Lord. The new order of things, the good things which have come, refer to the present relationship of believers to God. It is not, in my opinion, possible to postulate two new covenants without doing violence to this unified, four-chapter argument. Nor is it possible to divorce Christians from *some* relationship to the new covenant so described. It is not our relationship to the high priest that gains us this access, but it is the covenant itself by which we draw near to God. To conclude otherwise, if I may say so, is to intrude a predetermined system into the text *before* we allow the text to speak for itself—before we have completed a careful exegesis of the text.

1.2. Proper use of exegetical/grammatical method

Related to the above observation, but much more briefly, I would ask, are we careful to use valid exegetical methods? This is significant for broader dispensational matters, but it is one significant reason for differences in our midst in regard to the new covenant. If we expect our arguments in defense of a traditional dispensational hermeneutic to carry persuasive weight and if we hope to achieve a greater degree of unanimity among ourselves, we need to be careful about how we handle the text. It does not help our cause if we sometimes draw invalid or artificial exegetical conclusions. Some of the historic proponents of dispensationalism have either not been capable of working with the biblical languages or have not been careful methodologically in doing so (whether well qualified or only marginally so). As the movement has matured we have advantages of much better training and tools in the biblical languages, to say nothing of the advances of understanding in these areas over the past century—advances that have been vetted and stood the test of time.

This might involve such givens as avoiding those methods excoriated (and rightly so) in *Exegetical Fallacies*²⁰ or depending on outdated commentaries that still make pre-papyri assumptions and distinctions now known to be invalid for koine Greek.²¹

²⁰ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). This could (and should!) be extended with such works as Moises Silva's *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) or his *Biblical Words and Their Meanings*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). Also significant are recent discussion in Greek grammar, particularly verbal aspect—which writers today cannot ignore. The best introductory summary of this field is soon to be Constantine Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming [2008? I have read a pre-pub galley proof]).

²¹ The classic works of Westcott and Lightfoot, as well as somewhat more recent works like Lenski are all problematic at some level in this regard. For comment and illustrations along this line, see Richard Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 85–87; Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 12–30; as well as the volumes by Carson and Silva cited above.

Some dispensationalists, e.g., distinguish between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God on the basis of the terms used. Others place great weight on the fact that there are two words for “new” used in the NT to describe the new covenant, *καινός* and *νέος*.²² This is then seen as a basis for postulating two new covenants.

This may also be what I call exegesis by fiat: appealing to *possible* grammatical categories without validating our judgment from context or considering other alternatives. We might, e.g., base a claim on the particular use of a case or a tense or on the use (or lack of) the article. While traditional labels (e.g., genitive of source, inceptive imperfect, etc.) may have validity on a *contextual* basis, they never have validity at the word level—which is where they are all too frequently employed.²³ Indeed, most any area of grammar is subject to such misuse when we merely *claim* the categorization and do not justify it. As just one example, some of our new covenant discussions have turned on an anarthrous construction in 2 Cor 3—but the alternatives are rarely considered.²⁴ Perhaps we sometimes use grammatical categories to fend off objections.

This is also sometimes combined with the first issue I mentioned, allowing our system to step in too quickly in the exegetical process. In other words, our system dictates our choice of a grammatical category. Yet only first level methods may be invoked for such decisions; it is invalid to allow our system to call the shots here. Higher level matters may well raise questions that we must address at the exegetical level, but the higher levels cannot adjudicate them. When higher level methods are used to resolve various issues (and that is normal and necessary at times),²⁵ the conclusion should be clearly stated as such rather than couched in grammatical terms.

²² All NT uses are *καινός*; the only reference using *νέος* is Heb 12:24. If such a word change justifies two such covenants, I suspect that we would find several more if we examined the OT references!

²³ There is no such thing as a gnomic aorist. All aorists are just aorists—verb forms that express perfective aspect. There is nothing different about a gnomic aorist compared with, say, a constative aorist. But any given aorist in a particular context may well be part of a statement that is gnomic or constative. That is, such usage labels are pragmatic categories, not semantic ones.

²⁴ 2 Cor 3:6, ὃς καὶ ἰκάνωσεν ἡμᾶς διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης. Perhaps this should be treated as a monadic noun and thus definite, “*the* new covenant.” My point in part is that grammar cannot resolve this question; it only provides options.

²⁵ The context of the Robertson quote above (see n5) is titled “The Limits of Syntax.” Robertson acknowledges, as all grammarians and exegetes should, that grammar and syntax cannot resolve all the questions in the text. At that point the theologian must pick up the discussion—and hopefully exegete and theologian can be the same person! I.e., all grammarians should also be theologians, or at least theologically sensitive, and certainly all theologians must be grammarians, or at least capable of working competently in the biblical languages. The systematician who works only from a translation has been an embarrassment in all theological systems, no less in dispensationalism.

2. Covenant issues

Since our discussion is to focus on the new covenant, we need to think about several matters related to the category of covenant.²⁶ I would suggest two general matters related to the category itself and one more specific issue regarding the content of the new covenant.

2.1. Terminology related to covenants

First, how do we define our terms when discussing covenants in general? (*Do we define our terms?!*) It is possible that this may be one of the most crucial reasons for our disagreements.²⁷

Most of the terms that we use are extra-biblical.²⁸ We talk, e.g., of the *ratification*²⁹ of a covenant, or should it be *inauguration*? Or do both of those terms describe separate aspects of a covenant? Does it make any difference? And what do we mean by either? Can a covenant be *ratified* but not *inaugurated* (or the reverse)? Can a covenant be *established* (or *secured* or *enacted*) but not *ratified*, *inaugurated*, or *fulfilled*? Is a covenant *fulfilled* by being *ratified*? Must all aspects of a covenant be *realized* before it can be said to be *ratified*, *inaugurated*, or *fulfilled*? (And if a provision of the covenant is *in perpetuity*, will it ever be *fulfilled* temporally?! Does the *beginning* of an eternal promise count as

²⁶ There are some other questions related to covenant that I have not attempted to address here for lack of time and space. E.g., how is a covenant placed in force? What are the essential elements which place a covenant in force: blood sacrifice, formal ceremony, oath, bi-/unilateral agreement, ceremonial meal? Etc.

²⁷ My friend Bruce Compton and I have “gone around” on this subject (see the references to Bruce’s work in n41 and my articles in *BSac*) and some perceive us to disagree. They might be surprised to know that I agree with Bruce on this matter. I recommend his *DBSJ* article as one of the best short treatments of the covenant. Our only difference is terminology, and that at only one point: what does *fulfill* mean in this context? We both agree that there is one new covenant, that it was ratified at the cross, and that the church is related to that one new covenant. Bruce prefers to say that Israel *fulfills* the covenant and the church *participates* in it. I am willing to use other terms to describe it, but I do not think that my meaning is significantly different. We have both modified our terminology over the years; Bruce used *inaugurated* in his dissertation, but now prefers not to use that term and speaks of *ratified*, *established*, and/or *enacted* (see his *DBSJ* article, p. 33n100); I once used “complementary hermeneutic” to describe one aspect of the discussion, but I have dropped that term (see later in this paper)—but neither of us have changed our actual position.

²⁸ The italicized terms are all used in one discussion or another of the new covenant—and all by dispensationalists!

²⁹ I have defined the way I use *ratification* as follows: “*Ratification* is used to mean the official implementation of the covenant—the time when its provisions and stipulations become legally binding. The programmatic, theocratic covenants are most commonly enacted with a formal, blood ceremony, indicating that the relationship is a ‘bond in blood’ (O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 4). The technical term for this ratification in the Old Testament is כְּרַת, ‘to cut’ (a covenant)” (“The New Covenant and the Church,” *BSac* 152 [1995]: 300n32).

fulfillment?³⁰) Can someone be a *participant* in (or *beneficiary* of) a covenant or be *under* a covenant or have its benefits *applied* without being a covenant *partner* or without the covenant being *fulfilled*?

As it relates to the new covenant, how do we describe the relationship between that covenant and Jesus' death? It is clear that there is *some* relationship since the text describes “the new covenant in my blood” (ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐν τῷ αἵματί μου, Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25) and also Jesus' reference to “my blood of the covenant”³¹ (τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης, Matt 26:28 and Mark 14:24). Just what sort of relationship is referenced by the innocuous ἐν + dative or by the genitive? I am not sure this expression has received sufficient careful attention by dispensationalists. There are other questions raised by these same texts, but how we describe and define the terms is my concern here.

There are other similar expressions that we use, including *provision* (i.e., covenant provisions or terms); covenant *partner* and/or *party* and/or *beneficiary*; *mediator* (of the covenant), etc. Of these, the question raised most acutely by the new covenant is how Israel and the church are related to the same covenant. I have alluded to some of these issues above; I raise them here as a reminder that we need to define more clearly our terms in this regard—and not be too quick to criticize someone else if they use different terms than we might prefer.

Most of this terminology is extra-biblical, though there are Bible terms that need to be defined contextually. For example, Heb 9:15 says that Jesus “is the *mediator* of a new covenant” (διαθήκης καινῆς μεσίτης ἐστίν) and further describes him as the *Testator* (HCSB; τοῦ διαθεμένου, v 16). NET Bible does what we should do to all such Bible terms that are technical or semi-technical in a given context:

The Greek word μεσίτης (*mesitēs*, “mediator”) in this context does not imply that Jesus was a mediator in the contemporary sense of the word, i.e., he worked for compromise between opposing parties. Here the term describes his function as the one who was used by God to enact a new covenant which established a new relationship between God and his people, but entirely on God's terms.

³⁰ If the *beginning* of an eternal promise counts as fulfillment, then can other partial realizations also count as fulfillment? The implications of defining “fulfill” too tightly are obvious. An eternal covenant (as the new covenant is said to be) would require eternity to be fulfilled in one sense, so the beginning of the covenant is only partial. But if a partial fulfillment is allowed on the temporal level, could other provisions be fulfilled partially, either in terms of the extent of the provisions actually in force at a given time or the recipients? I am not arguing for *any* of these explanations! Only pointing out that terminology—and consistent definitions of these terms—is crucial.

³¹ Some Greek texts read τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης at this point, but that appears to be a secondary reading assimilated to Luke's wording. The reference to the new covenant is clear even without and explicit “new.”

Even the term *covenant* itself is worth defining more carefully, both בְּרִית and especially the NT use of διαθήκη rather than the more usual word for covenant, συνθήκη.³² Consideration of the words which comprise a covenant vocabulary leads us to the next issue, the classification of covenants.

2.2. Classification of covenants

The larger discussion of the biblical covenants in general has been treated relatively uniformly in dispensationalism. I do, however, have some concerns about what we have done in that regard. (Here I may tread on sacred ground, also spelled “to-e-s,” but to mix my metaphors, sacred cows often make good hamburger!) It is *de rigueur* that we classify the covenants as either conditional or unconditional.³³ Thus the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are said to be unconditional and the Mosaic conditional. But I wonder if our traditional “conditional versus unconditional” classification is the best way to conceptualize the biblical covenants? I am not familiar with other discussions of covenants outside dispensationalism (and perhaps covenant theology at the interface with dispensationalism on this issue) that use such a classification.

The biblical covenants must be understood within their Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context. The covenants were (and are) revelatory though they are expressed in terms comprehensible in their ANE setting. As we expound these covenants we must do so synchronically, not diachronically/canonically. Such an approach would address two types of covenants, impositional (suzerainty treaties, fealty oaths) and approbational (royal grant). Impositional covenants establish terms for loyalty, as, e.g., specified by a suzerain for his vassals (conqueror and conquered): this is what you must do if you are to be loyal to me, your suzerain (overlord). Stipulations are mandated that relate to

³² On the probable reason for this and the role of the LXX, see both BDAG, 228 and *LSD*, §34.44 (both s.v. διαθήκη). The bibliography on the biblical words for covenant is enormous; a recent discussion, which summarizes much of the older work, is Petrus J. Gräbe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Contemporary Understanding* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006).

³³ This may be so obvious as not to need documentation, but to make the point that this is both widespread and not limited to DTS-related treatments, note the following: Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 65–69; Charles Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), 52–61; Clarence Mason, *Prophetic Problems with Alternate Solutions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), 27–42; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 155–60; John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 149–52; John Master, “The New Covenant,” ch. 5 of *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. W. Willis and J. Master, 93–110 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 94–98; and Renald Showers, *There Really Is a Difference* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1990), 60–68, 96–97, 101–02. Even Bob Chisholm’s discussion of the Abrahamic covenant, which overall is a substantial improvement in handling the texts related to that covenant, still works with conditional terminology (“Evidence from Genesis,” ch. 2 of *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. D. Campbell and J. Townsend, 35–54 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992). It would be an interesting historical study to determine the origin of this terminology and if it has been used outside dispensationalism. I do have such data available at this time.

daily life and specify various parameters of loyalty which, if followed, will maintain good relations with the suzerain. By contrast, approbational covenants bestow gifts upon someone who has already been loyal. Though there are stipulations in both covenant forms, they are primary in impositional covenants and secondary in approbational covenants. The stipulation in approbational covenants is usually singular and general: remain loyal. Likewise both types of covenants include blessings, though they are secondary in impositional covenants (if you are loyal in obeying my stipulations, I will bless you in these ways), and primary in approbational covenants. Both types of covenants are perpetual and unconditional; they are not valid for a limited time period and violation of the terms does not void the covenant. Violation may incur penalty (curses) for an individual or group, but the covenant remains in force. Both covenant forms are unilateral in the sense that the suzerain dictates the terms of the covenant; neither are negotiated between two parties.³⁴ Though it is common for an impositional covenant to be sworn by both parties, the terms are solely at the discretion of the suzerain.³⁵

If instead of an ANE-sensitive classification, we view the biblical covenants in terms of being conditional versus unconditional, we end up asking the wrong questions. Every covenant includes conditions; every covenant includes blessings. Violation of the terms of any covenant has no affect on the legitimacy or continuation of the covenant; it will result in judgment, but failure to obey does not abrogate the covenant or cause it to fail.

Though the ANE perspective is an essential starting point, I doubt that it is helpful or particularly transparent to use the terms impositional and approbational. There are some differences in the biblical covenants, particularly since they serve a rather different purpose than those of the ANE. As a result I have proposed (though not previously published) an approach to the biblical covenants which attempts to be ANE-sensitive and to use terms relevant to the concerns of dispensationalism. I would like to suggest that this, or something similar, could advance the discussion, especially in terms of the new covenant and its role in God's plan.

³⁴ There were also "parity covenants" in the ANE in which two equal parties jointly negotiated terms. These are not, however, parallel with the four major covenants with which we are concerned here. There are other covenants mentioned in the OT which are of this type, e.g., Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21) or Laban and Jacob (Gen 31).

³⁵ The preceding paragraph builds on the work of Roy Beacham, which unfortunately remains unpublished. I have summarized the essence of his conclusions based on his doctoral seminar, "ANE and OT Covenants," in 1994 at Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis. Undoubtedly some of this summary has been influenced by the passing of nearly 15 years and my own perspective, but I think it is a fair representation of his approach. Dr. Beacham's work deserves wider circulation—and whenever I have opportunity, I encourage him to write in this area.

In highly abbreviated form, I propose that we think in terms of programmatic covenants on the one hand and administrative covenants on the other. The programmatic covenants are those in which God sets out his providential plan for the world (particularly for his people), they are the “big picture” covenants. In this category we would have the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. This category is parallel to the approbational/royal grant covenants of the ANE in which the actions of the suzerain are primary in performing various works for his subjects. There are not numerous stipulations here. What are the specifics as to what anyone would “do” to obey the Davidic covenant? Nothing. There is nothing to do. Yes, there are very general assumptions regarding obedience and loyalty—but what that actually looks like is not spelled out in the programmatic covenants; it is only implied.³⁶

By contrast the administrative covenants (parallel with the impositional/suzerainty ANE category) do not focus primarily on the big, programmatic picture, but specify how God’s subjects are to live. In this category we would have the Mosaic/old covenant and the new covenant. A major purpose of the Mosaic covenant is to regulate the life of those already related to God on the basis of the earlier Abrahamic covenant. Here God spells out how his subjects are to live so as to please him. As an administrative covenant the new covenant³⁷ then “bumps out” the Mosaic since it is not possible to have two

³⁶ In the Davidic covenant, nowhere in 2 Sam 7 or in Psalm 89 (the commentary on the Davidic covenant) is anything said about David’s obligations or responsibilities. The entire content is on what *God* will do, not on what David does. There is an explanation that if David’s offspring disobeys, he will be chastened—implying the obligation of obedience, but of what that obedience consists is not specified.

³⁷ One of the questions/objections raised when this paper was presented at the conference was why I class the new covenant as an administrative covenant rather than a programmatic one. That was not addressed in the original paper and I cannot do so now without writing another paper or extending this one beyond the limits of the time I have in making corrections and minor revisions before releasing the paper for somewhat broader circulation. But a brief answer is needed to suggest how I would attempt to answer that. First, if the Mosaic/old covenant is replaced by the new covenant (and that is clearly stated in both OT and NT), then I would expect an administrative covenant to be replaced by another of the same kind. Second, when we come to the NT this tentative conclusion is reinforced by what is specifically said about the new covenant and the Christian’s relationship to it. This I have already touched on in my excursus on Heb 7–10 in section 1.1. The key may be Heb 7:19 (& context) which appears to say that it is on the basis of the new covenant that the Christian draws near to God. That would seem to be an appropriate description of an administrative rather than a programmatic one. Indeed all the descriptions of the new covenant in the NT seem to be couched in administrative terms, not programmatic. Yes, the Jer 31 promise of the covenant spoke primarily (but not exclusively) in programmatic terms—what God will do for Israel in terms, e.g., of national restoration and the land. But remember from my description above that both types of covenants have both blessings and responsibilities, but programmatic covenants have almost exclusively the blessings emphasis with only very general comments regarding loyalty. The extent of the responsibilities that appear to be part of the new covenant as it actually begins to unfold in the NT justify, I think, the classification of administrative covenant. This is the covenant that is the basis for our relationship with God and which spells out our obligations in that regard.

different life-governing covenants in force at the same time.³⁸ This still leaves open the question, of course, as to *when* the new covenant replaces the old,³⁹ but at least we have (IMHO!) a more principled basis on which to discuss that question.

2.3. Expansion and/or division of covenant provisions

Still at the more general level of covenant (i.e., not addressing the new covenant specifically), there are two other issues worth considering. First, can covenant provisions be expanded following an initial announcement but prior to ratification? Second, can covenant provisions be divided or administered differently for multiple groups of people? We will examine each question in turn.

If a covenant has not yet been ratified, can additional provisions be added to older promises of the covenant? If so, could the church's involvement in the new covenant be an added provision after the OT announcement but prior to the ratification of the new covenant? This can best be approached by examining the Abrahamic covenant.

Gen 12 contains the promise that God will establish a covenant with Abraham. At this point, they are only promises of what God will do in the future. They are not yet formal covenant obligations. Although not stated explicitly as conditions, it is obvious that there was a condition: Abraham had to leave Ur as instructed if he was ever to receive these promises.

An additional promise is given when Abram eventually reaches Shechem: "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). This promise is probably given at least five years after the initial promises in Ur. At this point Abram has separated from his father. (Not until Gen 13 does he finally separate from Lot.) Having finally met the condition specified in Gen 12:1, Abram is finally ready for the first formal covenant ratification. That ceremony is described in chapter 15. Prior to the ratification of the covenant God gives additional promises: Abram's offspring will be as numerous as the stars. God then proceeds to ratify the covenant with Abram,⁴⁰ including both a blood ceremony (15:10) and an oath (15:13ff; cf. also Heb 6:13ff). Note that the only promise included in the actual ratification is the promise of the land. The other promises are not included at this point.

Additional promises are made to Abraham in Genesis 17. Some promises are repeated, others are new or expanded: in v 2, "I will greatly increase your numbers"; in v 4, "you will be the father of many nations"; in v 7, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant"; and in v 8, "the whole land of Canaan...I will give as an

³⁸ One can have multiple big picture, programmatic covenants in force since they do not—at least in the case of the Abrahamic and Davidic—specify alternate provisions, only supplemental ones.

³⁹ I have my answer for that of course, but my dean has reminded me frequently over the past weeks that defending my position is not my assignment!

⁴⁰Note that Gen 15:18 uses the technical term *בְּרִית*.

everlasting possession.” These *promises* also impose conditions on Abraham (v 1, “walk before me and be blameless”; v 9, “as for you, you must keep my covenant”).

The second ratification of the covenant is found in Gen 22—one of the most dramatic moments in the Old Testament: the sacrifice of Isaac. It is this event that serves as a test of Abraham’s faith. He had been commanded in Gen 17:1 to walk before God and be blameless. The question now is, will he obey God in this awesome command? The conclusion is familiar: “I know that you fear God” (17:12). Following this verdict, God ratifies the remaining promises he had previously made to Abraham (recorded in chapters 12, 13, 15, and 17). Accompanied by a blood ceremony (the sacrifice in 17:13) and a formal oath (“I swear by myself,” 17:15), the promises of blessings, seed, and land are reiterated and formally sealed. The specifics listed are: I will surely bless you, [I will surely] make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore, your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.

If this understanding of the Abrahamic covenant is correct, it would appear that covenant provisions may be expanded or enlarged progressively over a lengthy period of time. The Abrahamic provisions build through chapters 12, 13, and 15 before an initial ratification in chapter 15. Additional provisions are added in chapter 17 prior to the final ratification in chapter 22. This parallels the new covenant historically in the OT corpus. There are numerous passages that relate to this covenant—passages found in at least four different prophets⁴¹ spanning more than 150 years.⁴² None of the passages, not even the *locus classicus*, Jer 31, mentions all the elements of the covenant. This would suggest that there is nothing in principle that would fix the provisions of the covenant as of any one passage. Although any deletion or lessening of the promised

⁴¹ About a dozen and a half OT texts have been proposed as relevant to the new covenant: Isa 24:5 (historical?); 42:6–7; 49:8–12; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer 31:27–40; 32:37–44; 50:5; Ezek 11:17–19; 16:60–63; 18:31(?); 34:25–31 (could be Davidic covenant?); 36:24–38; 37:19–28; and Hos 2:16–23. Some of these are disputed, but many appear to be valid. Only Jer 31 uses the actual term “new covenant.” See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31–34,” in *The Bible in its Literary Milieu*, ed. John Maier and Vincent Tollers, 106–20 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 109, 117; R. Bruce Compton, “An Examination of the New Covenant in the Old and New Testaments,” ThD diss (Grace Theological Seminary, 1986), summarized and updated: idem, “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” *DBSJ* 8 (2003):10–23; Homer A. Kent, Jr., “The New Covenant and the Church,” *GTJ* 6 (1985): 290–92; and Bruce Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, 68–97 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 69n1 (Ware also references several other scholars who suggest additional texts (ibid., 69n2). Of particular note is the recent dissertation by Dave Fredrickson who has addressed specifically the question of how to identify references to the new covenant, focusing on the Isaianic material: “Is Isaiah’s ‘Servant-Covenant’ the New Covenant?” PhD diss., Baptist Bible Seminary, 2008.

⁴²Hosea (750+ BC), Isaiah (740+ BC); Jeremiah (646+ BC); and Ezekiel (581 BC, the probable date of the last explicit mention of the new covenant in chapters 34–37); 740 BC to 581 BC spans 169 years.

provisions would challenge the veracity of God, the addition of other elements is theoretically possible until the ratification of the covenant.⁴³

Second, can covenant provisions be divided or administered differently for multiple groups of people? Without at this point attempting to resolve the question of the church's relationship to the new covenant, the principle of division of blessings may still be addressed by once again examining the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic provisions may be summarized using the categories of land, seed, and blessing. Abraham was blessed historically (Gen 24:1), but the blessing on other people had only barely begun to be seen in his lifetime. The ultimate fulfillment of that blessing through The Seed (Jesus) was yet many centuries removed. Abraham's seed was not at all numerous in his own lifetime, though they had become very numerous by the end of the historical period covered by the OT (Neh 9:23). Neither had the land promises been fulfilled. From the perspective of the NT it can be noted that the church is never related to any Abrahamic covenant provisions except for that of universal blessing. Even the reference to believers as the seed of Abraham is linked, not to the promise of a great nation, but to the promise of blessing (Gal 3:7–9). A partial fulfillment has now been seen for millennia in that many people (including the church) have been blessed through Abraham and his descendants, yet other portions of the Abrahamic Covenant provisions remain yet unfulfilled (e.g., the land promises). Some of these provisions are for one people group—the Jews, others are for Gentiles, yet they are all part of one covenant.⁴⁴

3. Content issues

In this final section I turn to some more specific, content-oriented issues that relate more closely to NT issues of church and new covenant.

3.1. Does the OT content of the new covenant seem to be too dramatically different from NT references to the new covenant?

Do the differences in the OT and NT descriptions of the new covenant in terms of both emphasis and content seem so far apart as to force us to a heavily discontinuous conclusion? There are definite differences in the descriptions in terms of both emphasis and content. For example, the OT includes land promises with the new covenant (e.g., Jer 31:38–40), but the NT never mentions any such aspect of anything described as a new covenant. In the OT there is an emphasis on national restoration and the ministry of the Spirit to Israel (Jer 31:33–37), but the NT speaks only of spiritual features as related to the church, Israel is never said to be related to what is called the

⁴³ The preceding paragraphs in this section are from my *BSac* article, 152 (1995):303–05 with only minor reformatting and revisions.

⁴⁴ This paragraph is largely a revision of material in my *BSac* article, 152 (1995): 299.

new covenant in the NT.⁴⁵ These two descriptions seem, at least on the surface, so far apart as to justify a two-new-covenants view—if it were not for the semantic and hermeneutic issues that conversely seem to demand they be kept together!⁴⁶

It is at this point that some of the questions raised in the previous section become relevant. If all aspects of the new covenant were not revealed in the OT, then it is entirely possible that we should not view the NT comments as contrary to the OT description, but rather as supplementary to them. This sort of conclusion would be based initially and primarily on Jesus' own explanations in the Upper Room regarding the new covenant and his death (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; and Luke 22:20). They are then filled out and explained by other NT writers in later passages.⁴⁷

3.2. Can the church have anything to do with an OT entity?

If we asked, “can the church have anything to do with an OT entity?” the answer would have to be “yes,” if only because the question is phrased very generally. But what if we asked, “can the church have anything to do with an OT covenant?” the answer would depend on what level of association we envision. Could the church be related to the new covenant on the basis of OT revelation? Since the church is never mentioned in the OT, we would have to say no, unless we broadened the question to Gentiles. How we answer that question may be helpful in our considerations of the new covenant in the NT.

First, do the covenants recorded in the OT relate to any but Israel? Lincoln argues on the basis of Rom 9:4 that the covenants pertain strictly to “the nation Israel composed of the natural descendants of Abraham.”⁴⁸ It would appear thus that neither

⁴⁵ Israel is mentioned when the OT text is cited (e.g., Heb 8:8), but never in NT comments on such passages or on the new covenant in general. Instead the discussion there is in terms of “we” (Heb 7:19)—i.e., we Christians.

⁴⁶ That is, a normal reading of the NT, assuming normal semantic principles, would almost certainly conclude that the new covenant to which reference is made is the same new covenant as that described by Jeremiah. This is also surely how any first century Jew would have understood such references. (This argument is also advanced by several others; see Kent, *GTJ* 6 [1985]: 292–93 and Showers, *There Really Is a Difference*, 103–04.

⁴⁷ Were there not pre-cross justification for such an expansion of provisions it would be methodologically invalid to append them afterwards—assuming that the new covenant was ratified at the cross. If this assumption is rejected, and the covenant is yet future, then the potential for further development post-cross is expanded methodologically (though most who would argue for a future ratification, usually at the beginning of the Millennial reign, would almost certainly not favor such expansion! ☺)

⁴⁸ Charles F. Lincoln, “The Covenants” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1942), 4. Miles Stanford uses the same argument in “The Great Trespass” (Colorado Springs: By the author, 1991), 7.

Gentiles nor the church can have any direct relationship to the OT covenants.⁴⁹ There are two problems with this view. Although Gentile Christians were at one time “foreigners to the covenants of the promise” (Eph 2:12), Paul argues that on the basis of the crosswork of Jesus they have been brought near (2:13). In addition, the conclusion often drawn from Rom 9:4 is a *non sequitur*. All that the text says is that the (OT) covenants pertain to Israel. That does not mandate that they cannot relate to anyone else. Such a conclusion could be drawn only if the statement specified that the covenants were *exclusively* Israelite.⁵⁰

Second, does the OT picture of the new covenant include Gentiles? There are OT references to the new covenant that do anticipate the involvement of Gentiles. Isa 55 speaks of Israel “summoning nations” and those Gentiles “hastening to you [Israel] because of the Lord your God” (v 5). This is in the context of the everlasting (= “new”) covenant being made with Israel (v 3). Ezekiel also describes the response of the nations (37:28) when a covenant of peace is made with “my people” (v 26). The major new covenant passage in Ezekiel (chapter 36) likewise mentions the response of the Gentiles when the covenant is implemented (v 36).

These references are not numerous and the promises contained in them are not extensive. They are peripheral notes that speak of the Gentiles more as onlookers than as participants in the covenant. It might be possible to describe them as beneficiaries of the covenant made with Israel, though evidence for specific benefits is rather indirect. Although from an OT perspective it is clear that the Gentiles are not pictured as parties of the covenant, it is probably acceptable to conclude that the new covenant “includes a host of Gentile participants”⁵¹ if this is understood as “spillage” or as the results of Israel’s benefits and blessings. This would not be a great deal different from speaking of the participation of the Gentiles in the Abrahamic covenant. The nations are not partners of that covenant, yet they are blessed through Abraham—the covenant partner (Gen 12:3).

Third, if the theocratic covenants are viewed as closely related one-to-the-other rather than divided into separate compartments, it would seem to be quite consistent to see Gentiles included under the new covenant. The Abrahamic covenant explicitly includes Gentile blessings. If, as I have suggested above, the new covenant is essentially

⁴⁹Lincoln does, however, allow for the church to partake of the benefits of the new covenant (“The Covenants,” 4, 203). Stanford (emphatically!) does not (“The Great Trespass,” 7–10).

⁵⁰Even granted that the point of Paul’s contextual argument is that Israel possesses unique blessings, there is no contextual evidence that demands that there is no relationship whatsoever with other parties. True, most of the Old Testament covenants were made with Israel alone (the Noahic is an exception). That does not preclude, however, that they are the only people related to the covenants. The Abrahamic covenant, e.g., specifically included Gentiles in its scope (though not as legal parties to the covenant).

⁵¹Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” 73.

an administrative implementation of the Abrahamic⁵² (replacing the Mosaic covenant in the progressive outworking of God's kingdom purposes⁵³), then it is legitimate to see the new covenant as the vehicle through which the promised blessings on the Gentiles are administered in a post-Mosaic covenant era. If the NT evidence is adequate to suggest that the church participates in new covenant blessings in some way, this would seem to be compatible with OT evidence even though the church is not explicitly included in the older testament. It would be no more inconsistent to allow for the church to receive benefits this way than it is to allow the church to benefit from the Abrahamic covenant through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham through whom all nations have been and are being blessed (Gal 3:14).

Fourth, that only Israel is addressed in the Old Testament contexts of the new covenant does not mean that others are excluded. That conclusion could only be drawn logically if the text specifies that Israel's status under the new covenant is exclusive.⁵⁴ All that can be said is that the Old Testament speaks only of Israel's inclusion.⁵⁵

These considerations do not point to one specific solution to the overall question, but they do eliminate or at least challenge some positions (particularly those that refuse any relationship between the church and the new covenant).

3.3. Have we overused or misused the Pauline *μυστήριον*?

Have we misused *μυστήριον* in some instances? In some ways this is another facet of the question considered just above. I do not have a major innovation here, but I wonder if some traditional dispensationalists have implied, on the basis of *μυστήριον*, that nothing in the OT can have any relationship with something church-related in the NT. But we should be more careful and use *μυστήριον* as Paul does: what is unrevealed in the OT (the church) is now made known (Eph 4:3–6). That there may be relationships between OT entities (such as a covenant) is *not* precluded by such a definition. All that Paul's *μυστήριον* requires is that something is unknown in the OT. My focus at multiple points in this paper is that even though the church's participation in the new covenant (in some way) is not specified in the OT (it could be called a *μυστήριον*! though Paul never connects the church's relationship to the new covenant with that term),

⁵²“The New Covenant expands the promise to Abraham of blessing ‘to all the families of the earth.’ Here is revealed the means by which man can have his sins forgiven in order to enjoy eternal fellowship with the holy God.” C. E. Piepgrass, “A Study of the New Testament References to the Old Testament Covenants” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968), 174.

⁵³“The New Covenant is contrasted with the Mosaic as a basis of approach to God” (ibid., abstract, 3).

⁵⁴ This is sometimes assumed, but it goes beyond what the text actually says. See. E.g., Ronal Glass, “The New Covenant: A Response to Progressive Dispensationalism,” paper presented at ETS annual meeting (Nov. 1995, Philadelphia), 16.

⁵⁵ The preceding paragraphs in this section have been adapted from my article in *BSac* 152 [1995]: 294–97.

nevertheless in the progress of revelation we do discover clear evidence of that in the NT.⁵⁶

3.4. Do we reject some ideas simply because they have become so closely associated with a particular position?

[Note: Please read carefully what I do and do not say in this section as well as what I explicitly say that I am not saying! Some have heard me discuss this and branded me as “PD”—which I am not. Perhaps my explanation is clumsy—or perhaps I have not been read carefully. ☺]

Do we reject some ideas simply because they have become so closely associated with a particular position? Let me first illustrate, and then apply my illustration to my question.

If someone promises to take his son to a baseball game, but when he goes, takes both his son and his daughter to the game, he has not violated his promise. He has done *more* than he promised, not less. There is only a problem if he promises his son that *just* the two of them would go to the game and spend the day together. If he then takes his daughter along, he *has* broken his promise. The same would be true if he takes his daughter *instead of* his son.

If God does not fulfill the promises of the new covenant with Israel exactly as he promised and as the prophet understood God’s promise, then God has failed. But God could add to the promise at a later time. If God has seen fit to apply some aspects of the covenant (unrevealed in the OT) to the church, it does *not* change the covenant promises to Israel—they will still be fulfilled exactly as the OT text says. This does not change the meaning of the OT texts in any way. It simply says that God is doing more than he told the OT prophets that he would do.⁵⁷

An example of an *invalid* use of a similar principle may be helpful by contrast. Waltke attempts to avoid the necessity of Old Testament land promise fulfillment. His argument is that these physical promises have been “Christified”—“the images of the old dispensation were resignified to represent the heavenly reality of which they always spoke.” He argues that “for old Israel the land was a gift, accepted by faith, where one met God, and in which one remained through persevering faith; for new Israel it is a type of Jesus Christ.” His concluding query in his response is that “if God promised the fathers \$5 and he rewards them with \$5,000, is he unfaithful?”⁵⁸ The answer is no, but he *is* unfaithful if he gives them 5,000 lollipops instead (or if he gave

⁵⁶ Showers agrees with this basic contention (*There Really Is a Difference*, 103).

⁵⁷ My comments above should not be construed as in any way saying what, e.g., Bock says in describing a complementary relationship between the testaments. See further below.

⁵⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, “A Response,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, 347–59 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 358–59.

that \$5 to someone else)! The original prophecy must be fulfilled unchanged. In some instances it may be legitimate to suggest that God can add to his promise, but the analogy then would have to be that he gives *both* \$5 *and* 5,000 lollipops. As it relates to the land promises, God could (at least theoretically) give more, but he would still have to give Israel the land as promised lest he be judged unfaithful.

What I am describing is *not* what Bock describes as a complementary relationship between the OT and NT⁵⁹ and is probably best not described as a complementary hermeneutic.⁶⁰ It may sound similar at points, but what I have described above never changes the meaning of an OT text in any way. I certainly *do not mean* that the OT provisions of the new covenant promised to Israel are in any way fulfilled in the church, and definitely not in place of Israel. If, however, some aspects of the new covenant are experienced by the church, then in some sense there must be some level of relationship to *the* new covenant since it is the same new covenant, even though those provisions being experienced by the church and the church's involvement are not indicated in the OT (or do forgiveness and the work of the Spirit count as the *same* provisions?!). The additions—what God does in addition to what the OT text specifies—come *in the NT* as supplements to the larger categorical concept of new covenant, *not* to any OT new covenant texts. The NT does not complete or complement or change the meaning of the OT text. That is a significant difference. But we may shy away from such explanations due to what we have read in the progressive dispensational literature that may sound similar. This is not easy to state so as not to be misunderstood by others who use different terms or who use the same terms with different definitions or assumptions.

⁵⁹ For a critique of Bock's argument for a complementary relationship between the testaments, see Bruce A. Baker, "Complementary Hermeneutics and The Early Church," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (2003): 31-40 and idem, "Is Progressive Dispensationalism Really Dispensational? An Examination Of PD with Respect to Covenant Premillennialism," PhD paper presented to Dr. Robert Lightner, Th4, Advanced Issues In Eschatology, BBS, Oct 2004. See also Bruce Compton's critique of Bock at this point ("Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant," 40-46) and Robert Thomas's brief comments in *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 358. I might not be as negative toward using "partial fulfillment" terminology in this regard—that all depends on how "fulfill" is defined.

Bock seldom uses in print the exact term "complementary hermeneutic"—though he does frequently use the term "complementary." He more commonly talks about a complementary relationship between the testaments and a complementary reading of the text. One place where he does use the actual term "complementary hermeneutics" is in a *JETS* article: "the comparison between Ladd's method and his covenant premillennialism with complementary hermeneutics and progressive dispensationalism was more than descriptive: It was an attempt to suggest prescriptive concerns" ("Why I Am a dispensationalist with a Small 'd'," *JETS* 41 [1998]: 387.

⁶⁰ I have called it this in the past, including my *BSac* article (p. 297), but I have decided that using such a term muddies the water and is too easily confused with Bock's complementary relationship between the testaments. So consider this a "terminological retraction." ☺