

A Dialogue with N. T. Wright
Jesus: A Public Figure Making a Public Announcement:
Mission, Worldview, and the People of God

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*Covenant, Kingdom and the Family of God:
Exploring N. T. Wright's Biblical Theology of Covenant*

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The theme for our session comes from a comment that Tom makes in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, where he describes how years of gospel study led him “to reflect that the real-history Jesus was a *public* figure making a *public* announcement.”¹ So he concludes: “Christian faith is *public truth*,” which is all about creation and history. He then observes how “Biblical scholarship in the Western world has had a particular slant. It has not favored big-picture thinking...” even though “big-picture hypotheses are what we need just now.”² The organizers of today’s session believe that both *covenant* and *mission* are essential parts of that big picture so central to Tom’s biblical interpretation. I will address covenant, and then Mike Goheen will address mission.

Tom’s work is rightly celebrated for its creativity, depth and insistence on attending to both detailed exegesis and *big picture* issues when it comes to the New Testament. Big picture issues generally go under the rubric *biblical theology* in the academy and Tom has made a major contribution in this area. Too often, especially in Evangelical circles, as I’ve noticed, reception of Tom’s work has focused (fixated?) on certain interesting but peripheral areas (e.g., exile, justification), without adequate attention to the big picture aspects (e.g., covenant, mission). And the neglect of these larger issues has been to the detriment of the church as well as biblical scholarship.

I am responding to Tom’s work as a Catholic scholar doing biblical theology. I too have worked hard to show the importance of covenant for understanding and applying scripture. My major work in this area is entitled *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (AYBRL, 2009), and it is from this perspective of a biblical theology of the covenant that I wish to pursue my dialogue with Tom today.

Covenant in Biblical Studies

The title of this dialogue emphasizes the *public* implications of Jesus’ proclamation and the inherent link between this public message and the people of God. Covenant would appear to be a central biblical category for such an emphasis. In recent decades, however, it has been a challenge to open up this perspective via biblical theology in the academy.³ It has been argued, for example, that covenant was a late (prophetic or deuteronomic) development in ancient Israel, and that covenant is marginal in the NT.

¹ *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God*, 127.

² *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God*, 149-150.

³ See Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 1-33. The proper definition of “covenant” (Heb *berith*; Gk *diatheke*) is debated by biblical scholars. Since the 19th century, several German scholars have defined “covenant” in strictly legal terms (Wellhausen, Peritt, Kutsch), reducing it to a synonym for “law” or “obligation.” However, these legal obligations reflect and reinforce covenant relationships, which are solemnized in ritual acts. By the end of the 20th century, a majority of biblical scholars—Protestant (F.M. Cross, G.P. Hugenberger), Catholic (D.J. McCarthy, P. Kalluveetil) and Jewish (M. Weinfeld, A.F. Segal)—agree that covenants in antiquity served to extend (or renew) sacred kinship bonds between parties through legal sanctions and liturgical rites. Intrinsic to covenants, then, are these three distinct but interrelated elements: familial relations (life), legal obligations (law), cultic celebrations (liturgy). These are reflected in the covenant ceremony at Sinai (Ex 24:3-11): the *familial bond* in

While reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion is notoriously speculative, a *canonical* examination of covenant, such as I attempt in *Kinship by Covenant*, does indeed foreground the sort of theology that undergirds a covenantal perspective with creation-wide implications. Bill Dumbrell has argued persuasively for the connection between covenant and creation,⁴ which is also confirmed in my work. As I conclude in my study of the Noahic covenant of grant: “the grant-type covenant with Noah represents God’s unconditional promise to one righteous man that He would establish a gracious order for all people to live as the worldwide family of God.”⁵ A similar conclusion is reached on the Abrahamic covenant: “the Abraham narrative and covenants are closely connected to the preceding narrative of the so-called Primeval history, which accounts for its *universal* outlook (the blessing of all nations).”⁶ Canonically there is every reason to identify covenant as a central theme in the Old Testament, with its dual emphasis on a chosen people and their connection with God’s purpose to redeem creation and establish his kingdom.

Covenant in the NT: Covenant and Kinship

What of covenant in the New Testament? Part Two of *Kinship by Covenant* explores this topic in detail. Suffice it here to note that, early on, in *Climax of the Covenant* Tom rightly and courageously rowed against the stream by insisting that covenant is not marginal to the New Testament but central in all sorts of ways, just as it was in all of Second Temple Judaism: “Covenant theology was the air breathed by the Judaism of this period.”⁷

Tom is also spot on in connecting God’s covenant with God’s family, especially when it comes to Paul’s teaching about faith and how it unites the justified members of God’s Abrahamic family: “When God fulfils the covenant through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, thereby revealing his faithful covenant justice and his ultimate purpose of new creation, this has the effect *both* of fulfilling the original covenant purpose... *and* of enabling Abraham’s family to be the worldwide Jew-plus-Gentile people it was always intended to be”⁸

At the same time, it is worth reflecting on why many biblical scholars still think that covenant is marginal to the New Testament; for it is indeed the case that “covenant” is used much less in the New Testament than it appears proportionately in the Old. Why is it, then, that by the time we get to the NT, the use of covenant clearly recedes? My short answer is this: It is certainly not because the covenant was forgotten, but because of how it was fulfilled.

the shared meal (vv. 9–11); the *legal sanctions* in Israel’s sworn oath (vv. 7–8); the *liturgical ritual* in the sacrifice (vv. 4–5). A biblical theology of covenant should integrate these elements: familial relations, legal obligations, and ritual consecrations.

⁴ *Covenant and Creation*.

⁵ *Kinship*, 100.

⁶ *Kinship*, 135, emphasis added. Time does not permit us to address, much less resolve, the crucial but controverted question of the connection between covenant and creation. Last century K. Barth famously defended a close and profound connection: “creation as the external basis of the covenant,” and “the covenant as the internal meaning of creation” (*CD III/1*). I drew a similar conclusion at the end of my doctoral thesis: “The covenant serves as the transcendent principle that reveals the moral and theological frame of reference for the family. It thus discloses the real meaning of kinship relations and obligations, and why the family is not reducible to mere biology, or socio-political convention. The family represents the immanent principle of the covenant, which provides the covenant with its concrete historical and social forms in salvation history. The practical reality of the family prevents the covenant from becoming a mere theological abstraction or utopian ideal. Moreover, the family has a certain trans-cultural continuity and permanence, even allowing for a wide diversity of family types and values” (*KBC*, 657).

⁷ NTPG, 262. He notes: “The idea of covenant was central to Judaism in this period. This has sometimes been questioned on the basis of the relative infrequency of the regular Hebrew word for ‘covenant’ (*berith*) in many of the key texts. But, as Sanders has shown quite conclusively – so conclusively that one wonders how any other view could ever have been taken – covenantal ideas were totally common and regular at this time” (*Ibid*, 259).

⁸ PIFP, 21-39.

My research indicates that the core meaning of covenant in ancient Israel was *familial*, that is, it denoted sacred kinship bonds.⁹ Hence the title of my book: *Kinship by Covenant*. So the promissory aspects of God's covenant with Israel elicited high hopes and great expectations for a future fulfillment. With the exile, however, the Old Covenant becomes, as it were, a story in search of an ending.

The incarnation of God's Son is what effected the fulfillment of the covenant, and then some. Christ's coming, in effect, brought about such an explosion of good news that the divine fulfillment exceeded all human expectations. For instance, from the start of his public ministry, when proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, Jesus employs divine kinship terminology with unprecedented frequency and force. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, Jesus refers to God as Father some seventeen times, which is more than the entire Hebrew Bible. After his death and resurrection, Jesus sends the Spirit to empower believers to share in his own divine sonship, and to be taken up into the worldwide family of God. In sum, the New Covenant fulfills the Old with a hitherto unexpected escalation of sacred kinship and divine communion.

In the Old Testament, God's covenant is prominent and explicit, whereas divine kinship, though present, is muted and implicit; or as Janet Soskice notes: "The kinship of God and humankind is both compelled and resisted by the Hebrew scriptures – compelled for reasons of intimacy and resisted for fear of idolatry."¹⁰ The New Covenant is precisely what reverses these proportionate emphases.

In the New Covenant, Jesus effects a fulfillment of the Old that exceeds Israel's hopes, the terminological result of which is noted by biblical scholars; i.e., the language of divine kinship must increase, while the explicit use of covenant terminology now predictably decreases. So the NT covenant minimalists may be right after all, but for all the wrong reasons; while Tom's bold resistance to the minimalists may be slightly wrong, but for all the right reasons. As explanatory hypotheses go, I find this one to be useful in addressing the relative scarcity of covenant in the New Testament (except for Hebrews), along with the emergence and predominance of family terminology.

Unfortunately, I do not have the time to show the many ways that these considerations actually fit and reinforce Tom's big picture approach to the New Covenant. Instead, I wish to trace one aspect of his retrieval of covenant and kingdom and the (public) practices that follow, by attending closely to some particularities of covenant liturgy and kingdom ecclesiology.

To anticipate, the church is the apostolic community to which Jesus commits the message and practices of the kingdom. For example, one aspect of the covenant that is sometimes neglected is the importance of the liturgy for sealing and renewing the covenant. This is evident throughout the Old Testament but often neglected in the New, even though the institution of the Eucharistic liturgy is precisely the only time Jesus employs the term "covenant" in the gospels, particularly when he refers to it as the "new covenant/testament" (Lk 22:20). Moreover, not only

⁹ F. M. Cross notes: "Often it has been asserted that the language of 'brotherhood' and 'fatherhood,' love,' and 'loyalty is 'covenant terminology.' This is to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from the language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh" (FETC, 11).

¹⁰ KOG, 2. She adds: "The text both gives and takes away, for it is on the face of it preposterous that we, creatures, should be the kin of God.... To claim that God is our Father, or Christ our brother, is thus to make a strong claim not only about God but about us. Given this strength of implication, we should be more startled than we are by the kinship titles in the Bible. Yet for many centuries and until relatively recently, kinship titles and related imagery (father, brother, being 'born again') was little remarked background noise of Christianity..." (2-3). Drawing on the research of Paul Ricoeur and Robert Hamerton-Kelly, Soskice also observes "that whereas God is described as 'father' more than 170 times by Jesus in the New Testament, and is never invoked in prayer by any other title, God is designated 'father' only eleven times in the entire Old Testament, and is never invoked as such in prayer.... The main name relation of God to the people in Exodus is covenant, not kinship.... Movement may then take place to the designation of God as father... in the Prophets" (KOG, 75-6). "Already, then, we see the turning of the symbol, the God who is 'not Father' in Exodus, becomes father and spouse in the Prophetic literature and is revealed in the intimacy of the address of 'Abba' in the books of the New Testament" (77).

does Jesus explicitly identify the Eucharist as the new covenant, he also ties the sacrificial communion of this new Passover meal explicitly to the conferral (or covenanting) of the kingdom with the twelve apostles (Lk 22:29).

Rightly understood and practiced, liturgy - with both word and sacrament - powerfully embodies and enacts the drama of Scripture as evoked by covenant and kingdom. As Gordon Lathrop notes, “The Word and Sacrament of Jesus Christ are surprisingly resilient. Allowed some presence in our assemblies, they will call us to the surprise of a reoriented cosmos. If we lay down our heads on them, even a little, they will be Bethel-stones for us, full of the presence of the triune God and enabling new views of the world.”¹¹

The Kingdom of God as Liturgical Empire in 1-2 Chronicles

My recent study of 1-2 Chronicles reinforces this linkage between covenant, kingdom and liturgy. In a new book, *The Kingdom of God as Liturgical Empire: A Theological Commentary on 1-2 Chronicles* (Baker 2011), I show how Chronicles should be read as a work of prophetic historiography that reflects a profound covenantal and liturgical worldview. The Chronicler wants his readers to understand that the history he is retelling is not finished; it is ongoing. Indeed, the Chronicler’s history of Israel in exile reads like a story in search of an ending.

To be sure, God’s divine purposes are still unfolding in the lives of his people—despite the catastrophe of the exile and the hesitant and anticlimactic beginnings of the people’s return to and rebuilding of Jerusalem. The author’s intent is to recall to the people of Judah God’s original intentions—not only for Israel, but for creation.

Many scholars recognize the pivotal feature of the Chronicler’s prophetic historiography as God’s covenant. Not surprisingly, the covenant is established to extend sacred kinship bonds – setting God, Israel, and humanity in a familial relationship. These family ties are more than a metaphor, or a sort of legal fiction. The divine covenant points to a sacramental consanguinity, a blood bond, in which Israel is called to be “one flesh and bone” with the Lord, a covenantal image the Chronicler actually uses to narrate the origins of the Davidic covenant (1 Chr 11:1).

The Chronicler focuses on God’s covenant with David because it establishes the Kingdom and the liturgy of the Jerusalem Temple. Indeed, the making of the Davidic covenant is the climax of history, since it is presented as the fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation. For the Chronicler, the Davidic covenant advances the fulfillment of God’s purposes in all the covenants that came before, especially the Mosaic covenant with Israel at Sinai and the foundational covenant between God and Abraham.

Beginning with David’s first convocation in Jerusalem, the Chronicler repeatedly refers to the liturgical assembly of Israel in the Jerusalem temple as the *qāhāl* (LXX *ekklesia*). While the term occurs 48 times in the Pentateuch, mostly to describe the liturgical assembly of Israel at Sinai; the Chronicler uses the term 37 times, more here than any other book in the Hebrew canon. For the Chronicler, Israel is fundamentally a *qāhāl* when the twelve tribes are assembled for worship, where they form a liturgical empire. Israel is not primarily a national entity organized for military, political, or economic purposes; all those ordinary rationales for governments are re-ordered in Israel to one single overarching purpose, which is giving thanks and praise to the God of Israel, the God of creation.

This is the heart of the Chronicler’s theocratic vision—that the Kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon is the Kingdom of God on earth, a kingdom that is essentially a *qāhāl*, a liturgical assembly. Indeed, Chronicles is the only book in the Hebrew canon where the actual expression “Kingdom of God” (*Melek Yhwh*) appears.¹²

¹¹ Lathrop, *Holy Ground*, 49.

¹² “Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt? ... And now you think to withstand the Kingdom of the Lord [Melek Yhwh] in the hand of the sons of David?” (2 Chron. 13:5, 8).

Indeed, with the exception of Chronicles, the Book of Daniel, and select psalms, the notion of the Kingdom of God is rare in the Hebrew canon. While God is sometimes described elsewhere as king, his kingdom or rule is assumed but rarely referred to. In contrast, the Chronicler refers to God's kingdom or reign 16 times—always in relation to the Davidic kingdom. In fact, no other kingdom is divinely established by a covenant in the Old Testament, just as no other kingdom is identified as divine, except for David's. In Chronicles, the Davidic covenant is what establishes and makes manifest the kingdom of God on earth.

At the same time, the Chronicler's prophetic viewpoint reveals how it is, that when the Kingdom looks small in the eyes of Israel – because they face the military might and opposition from superior powers – it is precisely then that the true nature of the Kingdom is manifested—in and through Israel's covenant worship in the Temple liturgy.

The climax of Chronicles is reached during the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah, in their respective celebrations of the Passover. In these dramatic scenes, the Davidic king wields divine power in and through the convocation of 'all Israel' to celebrate the paschal liturgy in the Jerusalem Temple. Thus we see revealed the deepest meaning of the kingdom, as the king harnesses all the wealth and power at his disposal for the purpose of assembling God's people to renew their covenant by celebrating the Passover feast. The Chronicler's prophetic "word" is twofold: First, the kingdom is not primarily human, but divine; nor is it essentially political or military, but rather priestly and liturgical. The second and related point is this: the Kingdom is one and the Kingdom is God's, human faults and earthly appearances notwithstanding.

An Alternative Biblical Theology of Empire

The Chronicler presents us with a prototypical kingdom ecclesiology, where the kingdom on earth is a sacrament of the Kingdom of God. And this message is intended to speak to his audience precisely in their exilic context. Although there is no Davidic king seated on an earthly throne, the kingdom is nonetheless real. In the restored liturgy of the Jerusalem Temple, the people have the divine Kingdom made manifest on earth in its covenantal and sacramental expression. Whether there is a Davidic king, or a Persian ruler such as Cyrus, in the rebuilt and re-dedicated Jerusalem Temple, the people of God will behold on earth their true King who reigns in heaven. In all of this, I would suggest, we find the seeds of an alternative biblical theology of God's kingdom as a liturgical empire, one that intends to instruct Israel on how to live in the new post-exilic environment, how to worship the true God while still living under the domination of a foreign power. At the same time, Chronicles also points to a future fulfillment; for the story is not yet complete.

It is precisely the Chronicler's prophetic sense of salvation history as awaiting fulfillment that makes Chronicles such fertile ground for New Testament studies. To date, I believe, the work has not received the kind of attention from New Testament scholars that it deserves.

In many ways, the New Testament authors lived under conditions similar to those in the Chroniclers' audience—trying to keep the faith while living under the domination of foreign powers and gods, precisely as believers in the Christ, the only true and divine king. Likewise, it may be more than mere coincidence that the Christian canon begins with the Davidic genealogy of Matthew, just as the last book of the Hebrew canon, Chronicles, began with the same; what better way for the first editors of the Christian canon to underscore the continuity between the Old and New Testaments and the fulfillment of God's plan for the covenant family of Israel and humanity.

It is also significant that the renewal of the Davidic covenant in Chronicles is enacted by the reconstitution of the *qāhāl* under Kings Hezekiah and Josiah at the celebration of the Passover, not unlike Jesus, who instituted the Eucharist as the liturgy of the New Covenant Passover, while serving at the table as king (superior to Gentile rulers), where he also conferred the (Davidic) kingdom of his Father upon the twelve, as representatives of the

New Israel, who are to reign with him, not only by eating and drinking at his table, but by imitating his royal table service in their own Eucharistic ministry.¹³

Perhaps by now you can see more clearly why I am so fond of Tom's "big picture" approach to the public truth of God's covenant and kingdom. Time does not permit any more than this, although I am sure that additional study of Tom Wright and the Chronicler would shed additional light on Jesus' stated purpose in Matthew to build his Church (*ekklesia*), as the New Temple, upon the Rock to whom he entrusted the keys of the kingdom. Likewise, somebody here might want to examine these strands of covenant and kingdom and how they are interwoven in the literary fabric of the Apocalypse, where the faithful on earth join with the saints and angels in the Paschal liturgy of the Lamb, who now stands in the New Jerusalem, as the son of David, the king of kings, and the high priest at the altar of the New Temple of God. The pilgrim church is thus delivered by the risen Lord through a succession of persecuting empires to the victory of the new creation.

¹³ More work is needed to connect what Jesus prescribes as the apostles' liturgical action ("do this in remembrance of me") with the mystery of his superior kingship that he also confers on the apostles, which they exercise in their Eucharistic ministry and table service: "I covenant to you, as my Father covenanted to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Lk 22:29-30). See Wright (NTPOG, 447-8): "Paul's appeal to the Corinthians, taken in conjunction with the synoptic institution narratives and the references to the eucharist in the *Didache* and Ignatius, make it clear that this sacramental act was, like baptism, associated directly with the Jewish background of Passover, exodus and (Davidic) kingdom. It occupied a place similar to that of Passover in the Jewish community, except that it was celebrated not just once a year, but at least every week, reflecting the regular celebration of Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week. It thus tied the life of early Christianity very firmly to the historical life of Israel.... Equally, we know of no early eucharist that did not recite the events of Jesus' death, much as the Passover liturgy recited the events of the exodus."