

*The Fulfilment of  
the Covenants: An  
Acovenantal  
Perspective on Paul*

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## ABSTRACT:

Many would say that “covenant” is a central category to describe a Christian’s relationship with God. According to the New Perspective on Paul, the “covenantal” nature of this relationship is derived from God’s covenant with geopolitical Israel, reinterpreted in the light of the Messiah’s appearance and work. However, the concept of “covenant” in Paul is still in need of serious semantic study. This study aims to investigate Paul’s nine usages of *διαθήκη* against their OT background in order to gain insight into Paul’s understanding of the “covenant” concept.

In the OT, a covenant is “an elected relationship of obligation under oath”. A two-fold structure is evident in all of the OT covenants after Noah: the constitution of the nation of Israel followed by international blessing. The intertestamental period shows both continuity and discontinuity with this idea. In particular, the Qumran sectarians develop a sociological grammar for God’s covenant with Israel which is akin to the New Perspective’s covenantal grammar (“getting in”, “staying in”, etc.). However, Paul’s concept relies more on the OT than the Qumran sectarians.

We discover that Paul’s view of the relationship between God and Christians is “acovenantal”. “Covenant” is an inappropriate category for describing the fundamental character of a Christian’s relationship with God. Rather, the covenants were *instruments* that God used historically to bring about such a relationship. The “new covenant” is not a “new relationship with God”, but Christ’s atoning death and the apostolic preaching of the gospel. The covenants *inform* our relationship with God, but the relationship itself is not a covenant. The relationship is best expressed as spiritual union with Christ by faith.

## What Saint Paul Rarely Said

Few would deny that a relationship with God is a fundamental aspect of being a Christian. But what is the *nature* of this relationship? Many would say that “covenant” is a useful, even central, category to describe a Christian’s relationship with God. The apostle Paul, in particular, has been cited as a champion of the “covenantal” cause. A more traditional view sees Paul expounding a “new covenant”, discontinuous with the old covenant in some respects but still retaining the basic covenantal structure of relationship. In this view, the new covenant is similar to the old covenant in that God and Christians are “covenant partners” with well-specified obligations to one another, yet the obedience and forgiveness of Christians is (or, at least, will be) perfect and complete under the new covenant by virtue of Christ’s perfect atoning sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, in recent decades the influential “New Perspective” on Paul has tended to emphasise the *continuity* between the old and new covenants.<sup>2</sup> According to this perspective, the “covenantal” nature of a Christian’s relationship with God is derived from God’s covenant with geopolitical Israel, reinterpreted in the light of the Messiah’s appearance and work. N. T. Wright, for example, in his popular book *What Saint Paul Really Said*, advocates “a covenantal reading of Paul”.<sup>3</sup> Wright subsumes biblical terms that describe the Christian’s relationship with God under the overarching theme of “covenant”, which (as in national Israel) implies a primacy of the corporate over the individual.<sup>4</sup> Our union with Christ by the Spirit, for example, is “irrevocably covenantal”, which is virtually synonymous with “ecclesiological”.<sup>5</sup> So too, justification is a “definition” of covenant membership,<sup>6</sup> “the covenant declaration, which will be issued on the last day, in which the true people of God will be vindicated”.<sup>7</sup> James Dunn also sees “covenant” as the unifying concept in Pauline theology, especially when it comes to justification.<sup>8</sup> This “‘covenant romanticism’ [. . .] has captured the current study of Paul, in which ‘the covenant with Israel’ has become the unexamined basis for resolving all questions about his soteriology”.<sup>9</sup>

There is, however, a serious problem, too often ignored by exponents of a covenantal theology in Paul. The word διαθήκη (“covenant”) occurs only nine times in the whole Pauline corpus (Gal 3:15, 3:17, 4:24; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6, 14; Rom 9:4, 11:27; Eph 2:12). By contrast, the δικ- (“righteous” / “justification”) word group occurs 152 times.<sup>10</sup> If, as Wright claims,

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Scott Hafemann, “The ‘Temple of the Spirit’ as the Inaugural Fulfillment of the New Covenant within the Corinthian Correspondence”, *Ex Auditu* 12 (1996): 29–42 (esp. 34–35).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley E. Porter, “The Concept of Covenant in Paul”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 269–85 (here 269–71).

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Oxford: Lion, 1997), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul*, 117–18, 151–53, 160.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul*, 119.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Saint Paul*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 43/1 (1992): 1–22 (esp. 15–18).

<sup>9</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “In What Sense Is ‘Justification’ a Declaration?”, *Churchman* 114 (2000): 123–36 (124).

<sup>10</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Paul’s Use of Righteousness Language Against its Hellenistic Background”, in *Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifrid; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 39–74 (39).

covenantal theology is “what Saint Paul *really* said”, then why is “covenant” a term that Saint Paul *rarely* said?

Of course, “covenantal” concepts may be present in a Pauline passage without the word *διαθήκη* appearing. Porter has called for a serious study of the “covenant” concept in Paul that goes beyond naïve word studies and takes account of the concept of “semantic domain”. A proper lexical study of “covenant” in Paul must take into account patterns of usage, synonyms, antonyms, syntactical patterns, literary types, situation and culture, etc.<sup>11</sup> Porter adopts a particular definition of covenant: “the salvific relationship between God and his people”.<sup>12</sup> On this basis, he suggests that we exclude instances where *διαθήκη* means “last will and testament” in the Hellenistic sense (Gal 3:15, poss. Gal 3:17; cf. Heb 9:15–17),<sup>13</sup> and then examine other words that may be related to the concept of covenant, such as “mediator” (*μεσίτης*, Gal 3:19, 20),<sup>14</sup> “promise” (*ἐπαγγελ-*, Gal 3, Rom 4:13, 16, 20, Rom 9:8, Eph 2:12),<sup>15</sup> and “ministry” or “service” (*διακον-*, 2 Cor 3).<sup>16</sup> Porter claims that the “righteousness” (*δικ-*) concept, too, overlaps significantly with the “covenant” concept by virtue of a shared concern with the relationship between God and people.<sup>17</sup>

Porter is correct in warning that theological concepts cannot be restricted to the use of an individual lexical item. However, there is some stability in the sense of words, especially technical words, and so any overlap between word and concept must be addressed on a case-by-case basis. In this case, as we shall see, there is a strong connection between the OT term *בְּרִית* (almost exclusively translated *διαθήκη* in the LXX)<sup>18</sup> and the biblical concept of the covenant, with which Paul would have been familiar.<sup>19</sup> We shall also see that *every* instance of *διαθήκη* in the NT (including Gal 3:15) corresponds very closely with the OT word *בְּרִית* / *διαθήκη* rather than the Hellenistic “will”. Hence an investigation of the uses of *διαθήκη* in Paul, although incomplete in itself, is the most logical starting point for a broader investigation of the covenant concept in his thought.

Furthermore, semantic domain analysis needs strict controls, because it can easily become too dependent upon the subjective judgments of those who perform the semantic mappings. Porter’s article itself is subject to this criticism. He adopts an *a priori* definition of “covenant” (“the salvific relationship between God and his people”)<sup>20</sup> but shows no inclination to modify his definition in the light of his discoveries. Porter relies upon the Louw-Nida semantic domain lexicon, which groups the “covenantal” uses of *διατίθεμαι* (34.43) and *διαθήκη* (34.44) together with “justify” (*δικαιόω* 34.46), righteous (*δίκαιος* 34.47) and other words under the general topic “establish or confirm a relation” (34.42–34.49).<sup>21</sup> Louw-Nida also explicitly denies a forensic element in the *δικαι-*\* word-

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<sup>11</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 273.

<sup>12</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 275.

<sup>13</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 275–79.

<sup>14</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 280–81; cf. J. Gurht, O. Becker, “Covenant, Guarantee, Mediator”, *NIDNTT* 1:365–76

<sup>15</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 283–84.

<sup>16</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 284.

<sup>17</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 281–83.

<sup>18</sup> In Gen 14:13 *בְּרִית* *בְּעַל* (“covenant-partner”) is translated with *συνωμότης* (“confederate”). This is the only exception not due to textual variations (cf. Deut 9:15; 1 Sam 4:3–5; 1 Kgs 11:11, 19:10; 2 Kgs 17:15; Job 5:23; Jer 11:8; Ezek 20:37; 2 Chr 23:1).

<sup>19</sup> Moisés Silva, “Old Testament in Paul”, *DPL* 630–42.

<sup>20</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 275.

<sup>21</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene P. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:451–53.

group, regarding relational (covenantal) and legal categories as mutually exclusive (34.46).<sup>22</sup> But there are many questionable assumptions in these classifications. There are many different types of relationship. Just because covenants are “relational”, and righteousness is “relational”, it does not necessarily follow that righteousness is covenantal. Neither are forensic categories necessarily inimical to relationships. In fact, Seifrid’s careful analysis of the terminology suggests that “righteousness” is much more connected to “creational” categories of relationship than “covenantal”; that is, “righteousness” refers to a relationship with God as *creator* and *judge*, which implies both *normative* and *forensic* categories.<sup>23</sup> While the semantic fields of “righteousness” and “covenant” may overlap at times in the OT, NT and intertestamental literature, “righteousness” is a concept fundamentally distinct from “covenant”.<sup>24</sup>

Dunn’s view of the covenant in Paul is even more subjective. He argues that *every* reference to the actual word διαθήκη in the Pauline corpus is incidental, even rhetorical. But because of Dunn’s prior convictions about the covenantal continuity between Christian believers and historical Israel, he insists that Paul’s whole discourse has an implicit underlying “covenant theology”.<sup>25</sup> He explains this discrepancy by positing that the covenantal relationship between God and his people was a basic uncontroversial assumption shared by Paul and his opponents, so Paul usually had no need to mention the word “covenant”.<sup>26</sup> This is not very helpful for those who do not share Dunn’s presuppositions.

This study aims to address some of Porter’s concerns and challenges. Noting first of all that the OT background is fundamental to all of Paul’s usages of διαθήκη, we will provide an inductive definition of “covenant” (בְּרִית) in the OT, identifying some of the common lexical, grammatical, syntactical, cultural and theological elements associated with the word (especially in the particular OT passages that Paul cites). We will next examine, by way of comparison and contrast, how this definition and “grammar” of covenant relates to usages of בְּרִית and διαθήκη in certain intertestamental and secular writings. We will then investigate how Paul makes use of the covenant concept in his explicit references to διαθήκη, and suggest avenues for further study of covenant-related concepts in Paul.

To anticipate our conclusion, we will discover that Paul’s view of the relationship between God and Christians is “acovenantal”. This is a neologism coined to express a view that regards “covenant” as an inappropriate category for describing the fundamental character of a Christian’s relationship with God. Rather, the covenants were relationships with particular historical people involving special obligations that God used to bring about salvation in Christ. As such, the covenants *inform* our relationship with God, but the relationship itself is not a covenant. The relationship is best expressed as spiritual union with Christ by faith.

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<sup>22</sup> Porter, “Covenant in Paul”, 281–84.

<sup>23</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism”, in *Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifrid; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2001), 415–42; Seifrid, “Paul’s Use of Righteousness Language”. Porter “Covenant in Paul”, 282, quotes Seifrid, but confesses ignorance of Seifrid’s understanding of the connection (or lack thereof) between righteousness and covenant.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 286–96.

<sup>25</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “Did Paul Have a Covenant Theology?: Reflections on Romans 9.4 and 11.27”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 287–307.

<sup>26</sup> See also E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of the Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977), 420–21.

## Preliminary Observations

We will begin by making some preliminary observations on Paul's usage of διαθήκη (Gal 3:15, 3:17, 4:24; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6, 14; Rom 9:4, 11:27; Eph 2:12) which will prompt avenues for further investigation.

Firstly, plurality is a significant feature in at least seven of the nine instances of διαθήκη in Paul. The plural form is used twice (Rom 9:4, Eph 2:12). In five of the instances, one covenant is compared or contrasted with another: a covenant ratified by God (Gal 3:15) has the same binding force as a human covenant (Gal 3:17); Sarah and Hagar are metaphorically two different covenants (Gal 4:24); Paul and Timothy are ministers of a new covenant (2 Cor 3:6), whereas there is a veil over the public reading of the old covenant (2 Cor 3:14). Furthermore, the word καινή ("new") in reference to the covenant in Jesus' blood (1 Cor 11:25) probably implies a previous covenant or covenants. Hence we should expect Paul's concept of "covenant" to have some pluriformity.

Secondly, every instance of διαθήκη occurs in a context in which the OT is unmistakably on view. The Abraham narrative (Genesis 12–22) features prominently in OT citations in Galatians 3–4 (Gal 3:6 // Gen 15:6; Gal 3:8 // Gen 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, cf. 26:4; Gal 3:16 // Gen 13:15, 17:8; Gal 4:22 // Gen 16:15, 21:2; Gal 4:30 // Gen 21:10). Other relevant OT background includes the "covenant" of law given at Sinai (cf. Gal 4:24 with Exod 19:5), the stipulations and curses of this law (Gal 3:10 // Deut 27:26; Gal 3:12 // Lev 18:5; Gal 3:13 // Deut 21:23), the role of Moses as glorious mediator of the law (2 Cor 3:6–7, 14 // Exod 34:29–35), the covenant of priestly ministry (cf. 2 Cor 3:6 with Isa 61:5–9, Jer 33:20–22, Mal 2:4–9, Neh 13:29), the covenants of peace and redemption with the eschatological Israel / Jerusalem (Gal 4:26–27 // Isa 54:1, 10; Rom 11:27 // Isa 27:9, 59:21; cf. Isa 65–66), and the "new covenant" through which the law is written on the heart (2 Cor 3:6 // Jer 31:31–33, cf. 2 Cor 3:2–3). Also on view may be passages which describe a "covenant" in terms of blood or suffering (cf. 1 Cor 11:25 with Isa 49:7–8, Zech 9:11). More generally, the covenants are associated strongly with national Israel. The covenants belong to Israel "according to the flesh" (Rom 9:4) and are connected with "the commonwealth of Israel" (Eph 2:12).

Thirdly, Paul is particularly interested in the *outcome* of the covenants, especially insofar as they fulfil a promise or promises. There are covenants "of [the] promise" (Eph 2:12). An annulled covenant would invalidate the promise of inheritance (Gal 3:17–18). Two covenants are metaphorically mothers who "bear" children, either "into slavery" (Gal 4:24) or "of promise" (Gal 4:28). The ministry of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6) results in life (verse 7) and righteousness (verse 9). Israel, who possesses the covenants (among other things) is the one from whom, according to the flesh, comes Christ who is God over all (Rom 9:4–5). The covenant with Israel results in salvation and the removal of sins (Rom 11:27). Negatively, being aliens with respect to the covenants of the promise means hopeless godlessness (Eph 2:12).

Fourthly, two of the instances associate covenants with Christ's blood (i.e. his crucifixion). Jesus says that the cup is the new covenant "in my blood" (1 Cor 11:25, cf. Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20). Those who were "aliens of the covenants of the promise" (Eph 2:12) are "brought near" by "Christ's blood" (Eph 2:13) and are subsequently no longer "aliens" (Eph 2:19). This points to a connection between covenant and sacrifice.

Furthermore, it seems that Paul never uses *διαθήκη* as a designation for the people of God.<sup>27</sup> He prefers terms such as “assembly” (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, Gal 1:2, Eph 1:22, 1 Thess 1:1, 2 Thess 1:1), “brothers” (Rom 1:13, 1 Cor 1:10, 2 Cor 1:8, Gal 1:11, Phil 1:12, Col 1:2, 1 Thess 1:4, 2 Thess 1:3, 1 Tim 4:6) and “saints” (Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, Eph 1:1, Phil 1:1, Col 1:2, 1 Tim 5:10).

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<sup>27</sup> Ellen J. Christiansen, *The Covenant in Judaism & Paul: A Study of Ritual Boundaries as Identity Markers* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 27; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 270.

## Covenant: Relationship, Obligation, Solemnity, Election

For more than a century, there has been a scholarly debate over the precise meaning of the Hebrew word בְּרִית (“covenant”). We can summarise the discussion according to four axes: “obligation”, “solemnity”, “relationship” and (more recently) “election”.<sup>28</sup> Each of these axes has been emphasised to a greater or lesser extent in the scholarship under review here.

Earlier understandings tended to play the first three axes off against each other. Wellhausen, Kittel and Gressman viewed a covenant as essentially a set of *obligations* (usually reciprocal).<sup>29</sup> For Kraetzschmar (1896), it was a means of *solemnising* such obligations.<sup>30</sup> Pedersen (1914) saw the covenant more as a *relationship*, with ensuing obligations.<sup>31</sup> This view became somewhat influential, but was seriously challenged by Kutsch’s *Verheißung und Gesetz* (1973). Kutsch argued that בְּרִית always means “obligation” or “duty”, and does not denote the making of a relationship as such.<sup>32</sup> While בְּרִית can mean “treaty” when used of covenants among humans (i.e. a bilateral acceptance of obligations),<sup>33</sup> when used of Yahweh, בְּרִית *never* means “agreement” but *only* unilateral obligation, either self-imposed by Yahweh (a covenant of grace), or imposed by Yahweh on the people (a covenant of law).<sup>34</sup> Kutsch’s view influenced Weinfeld,<sup>35</sup> although Weinfeld also highlights the significance of the common hendiadys between “covenant” and “oath” (i.e. solemnisation).<sup>36</sup>

Barr sought to bring some order to the discussion by calling for the application of functional semantics. For Barr, בְּרִית can be used for a wide range of concepts (expressed in English by various words such as “agreement”, “treaty”, “contract”, “promise”, “obligation”), with solemnity perhaps being the common factor.<sup>37</sup> However, בְּרִית is remarkably restricted in the *contexts* in which it may occur.<sup>38</sup> A בְּרִית may be made, kept, broken, left, remembered or forgotten; it has certain material or visible signs such as the ark, the book, the tablets and the blood; and it is usually “forever”. That is about all the Biblical writers do with the word.<sup>39</sup> Nobody ever counts or numbers covenants. Nobody ever loves, meditates upon or rejoices in a covenant (except in the later Qumran literature). Nobody ever recounts or retells a covenant, as they do God’s other mighty acts

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<sup>28</sup> Based on Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law & Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi* (Vetus Testamentum Supplements; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholson, *God and his People*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholson, *God and his People*, 18–20.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholson, *God and his People*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholson, *God and his People*, 91–92.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholson, *God and his People*, 106–8.

<sup>35</sup> M. Weinfeld, “בְּרִית”, *TDOT* 2:253–79 (esp. 255). See also H. Hegermann, “δαθήκη”, *EDNT* 1:299.

<sup>36</sup> Weinfeld, *TDOT* 2:256.

<sup>37</sup> James Barr, “Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant”, in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 23–38 (31).

<sup>38</sup> Barr, “Semantic Notes”, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Barr, “Semantic Notes”, 34.



and words. In the light of the New Perspective, we might add here that nobody in the Bible ever “gets in” or “stays in” a covenant either.<sup>40</sup>

Dumbrell, returning to an older view but modifying it somewhat, sees the *relational* factor in a covenant as foundational and pervasive. He argues that a covenant does not *initiate* a relationship. Rather “[w]hat the covenant does is formalize and give concrete expression to a set of existing arrangements [. . . T]he covenant will give firm quasi-legal backing to an arrangement which is already in existence”.<sup>41</sup> In other words, a covenant ceremony adds obligation and solemnity to a pre-existing “covenantal” relationship. He cites the various “human” covenants (Gen 21:22–32, 26:26–33; Josh 9; 1 Sam 11:1–3, 18:3; 2 Sam 3:12–21, 5:1–3; 1 Kgs 20:31–34; 2 Kgs 11:17) as examples. On this basis he posits a “covenant with creation” that exists prior to its formalisation with Noah.<sup>42</sup> This would seem to provide a licence for Dumbrell to conceive the whole of reality in covenantal terms.

It cannot, of course, be disputed that when a covenant is made between two parties, there is some prior “relationship” between these two parties (how or why would two complete strangers spontaneously make a covenant?). However, covenants achieve much more than merely “legalising” existing sets of relationships. For example, the covenant between Joshua and the Gibeonites (Josh 9:15–20) does not merely formalise a pre-existing relationship, it creates a new relationship of peace where previously there had been enmity, even if that enmity was hidden when the covenant was made. Hence “covenant” is not simply synonymous with “relationship”; a covenant is a specific *type* of relationship.

Hugenberger provides a comprehensive and integrated inductive definition of בְּרִית in his defence of the “covenantal” nature of OT marriage. Decrying “the now discredited notion that ‘covenant [בְּרִית]’ is essentially a synonym for ‘relationship’”,<sup>43</sup> Hugenberger maintains that there is now a “substantial scholarly consensus” about “the major elements which typically comprise a covenant”. His working definition of a בְּרִית in its normal sense is “an *elected*, as opposed to natural, *relationship of obligation* under *oath*”.<sup>44</sup> This definition of “covenant” is not *apriori*, but comes from a careful examination of the occurrences of the word in their OT context. We have good reason, therefore, to adopt it as our working definition.

A covenant is *elected* because it is always entered into by choice rather than necessity. Hence “בְּרִית is nowhere employed of naturally occurring relationships and the ordinary obligations which attend them, such as those which exist between parents and a child”.<sup>45</sup> A covenant is *relational* because it always involves two parties.<sup>46</sup> This explains the common use of familial terminology to describe a covenant, even though the parties previously had no kinship bond.<sup>47</sup> But a

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<sup>40</sup> This language comes from Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 16–20.

<sup>42</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 22–26. Dumbrell also employs a semantic argument, distinguishing the perpetuation (בְּרִית) of a covenant relationship from its establishment (בְּרִית). The appropriateness of this distinction had earlier been questioned by Barr, “Semantic Notes”, 33. Paul R. Williamson, “Covenant”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker; Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 139–55 (142–43) demonstrates the semantic weakness of Dumbrell’s case.

<sup>43</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 11, emphasis mine.

<sup>45</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 180; see also Nicholson, *God and his People*, 215–16.

<sup>46</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 177–79.

covenant is not just any type of relationship; it is specifically a relationship of *obligation*, because it always binds one or both of the parties to certain specified duties.<sup>48</sup> Finally, a covenant is always *solemnified* by an oath or oath-sign (e.g. a solemn rite).<sup>49</sup> In fact, בְּרִית may be used as a shorthand for אֹת בְּרִית, “covenantal sign” (e.g. circumcision, Gen 17:9–14).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 181. According to Hugenberger, there is some debate about whether a covenant can be entirely “unilateral”, such that only one of the two parties is under obligation; but Hugenberger’s own case is not affected by this debate because he is interested in marriage, which is always bilateral.

<sup>49</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 182–83.

<sup>50</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 173–74.

## The Abrahamic Covenants (Genesis 12–22)

We have, so far, outlined the basic features of Paul’s use of διαθήκη, and then described the general semantic range of בְּרִית in the OT. We are now in a position to look at the salient features of the covenants found in the specific OT passages that form the background for Paul’s use of διαθήκη. We will begin with Genesis 12–22, one of the foundational texts for Galatians 3. Weinfeld sees a single covenant with Abraham throughout Genesis 12–22, which was originally unilateral, without any human obligation (Gen 13:15).<sup>51</sup> According to Weinfeld, the exile forced Israel to reinterpret the promises, adding conditional elements that are reflected in later accretions to the story (e.g. Gen 22, 26:5).<sup>52</sup> However, since Paul was not a source critic, it is unlikely that he would have identified such “early” and “late” elements in the text. Rather, he would have read Genesis as an integrated narrative whole. Hence, for our purposes, the most helpful analyses of the Abraham story are those that take its final form seriously. We will largely follow Williamson’s detailed synchronic reading of the Abraham narrative.<sup>53</sup>

The Abraham story occurs in the context of universal human need. God’s creation of the world and his “blessing” of all humanity (Gen 1–2) has seemingly been negated by human disobedience which called forth a “curse” (Gen 3). As disobedience reaches its full measure, God regrets his creation of humanity (Gen 6:6) and sends a flood in a great act of “uncreation” followed by “recreation”.<sup>54</sup> God then makes a covenant (Gen 9:8–17) with the humans and animals who survive the flood. This covenant affirms God’s choice to maintain his original creational intent despite humanity’s continued sinfulness (Gen 8:21–22).<sup>55</sup> The Babel incident, where humanity attempts to build a tower that reaches to the heavens in order to make a “name” for itself (Gen 11:4) but is thwarted by God (Gen 11:6–7), shows decisively that this will not be achieved by independent human effort. Genesis 11 ends with humanity, composed of various “nations” (Gen 10), dispersed across the earth and confused (Gen 11:9). The story of Abraham is God’s answer to how he will fulfil his covenant in the face of human sin and the curse on creation.

Williamson describes a narrative arc in Genesis 12–22 that begins with a twofold set of promises from God to Abram (Gen 12:1–3), includes the details of two related but distinct covenants based on these promises (Gen 15, 17),<sup>56</sup> and concludes with a solemn oath of ratification (22:16–18).<sup>57</sup> The two distinct promises (Gen 12:1–3) are, firstly, nationhood (12:1–2c), and secondly, international blessing (12:2d–3). The first promise is a geopolitical promise *to* Abram: a promise of land and descendants (together constituting nationhood) that will give Abram a great “name”. The second promise is a universal promise *through* Abram: that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed. The second promise is clearly based upon the first, but even so it is quite distinct.

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<sup>51</sup> Weinfeld, *TDOT* 2:270.

<sup>52</sup> Weinfeld, *TDOT* 2:270–72.

<sup>53</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 315; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> Williamson, “Covenant”, 139.

<sup>55</sup> Williamson, “Covenant”, 140.

<sup>56</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 220–34. See pages 188–216 for a detailed defence of both continuity and discontinuity between the two covenants.

<sup>57</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 217–59.

“Even though there is a clear connection between the blessing promised *to* Abraham [12:1–2c] and the blessing promised *through* Abraham [12:2d–3], a failure to demarcate these two prospects unfortunately obscures the meaning of this programmatic text in the Abraham narrative.”<sup>58</sup>

Genesis 15 and 17 describe two distinct but related covenants (i.e. “elected relationships of obligation under oath”) based on the two sets of promises in Gen 12:1–3. The first covenant (Gen 15) is related to *nationhood* (heirs and inheritance) without any explicit mention of international blessing, while the second (Gen 17, which is dependent upon the fulfilment of the first) is related to the *international* significance of Abraham and his seed.<sup>59</sup> Apart from the obvious (but often overlooked) fact that the two covenants are separated both temporally (by at least 13 years, cf. Gen 15:2, 16:16, 17:1) and literarily (by chapter 16), there are numerous other significant differences between chapters 15 and 17.<sup>60</sup> The chapters have different structures,<sup>61</sup> and describe different rituals. Genesis 15 is a unilateral covenant,<sup>62</sup> while Genesis 17 describes bilateral commitments. Genesis 15 describes a temporal covenant, fulfilled once the nation had taken possession of the land, whilst Genesis 17 describes an enduring covenant (עוֹלָם, 17:7). There is a shift in focus from the single nation (Gen 15) to the multitude of nations (Gen 17). The “nation” (i.e. Abraham and his seed) is the *result* of the Genesis 15 covenant but the *partner* in the Genesis 17 covenant. This is paralleled by the name change from Abram to Abraham (Gen 17:5). There are two distinct covenantal oaths: the oath of the Genesis 15 covenant (see 24:7),<sup>63</sup> and the oath of the Genesis 17 covenant in Gen 22:16–18 (see below).<sup>64</sup>

The covenants do not stand alone, but are integrated into a story that focuses on Abraham’s faith and loyalty. There is a causal connection (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) between Abraham’s faith and loyalty, and the making of the covenants. In chapter 15, God makes a *promise* of abundant seed to Abram despite Abram’s childlessness (Gen 15:1–5). Abram *believes* God, and this is accounted as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Then God makes a unilateral *covenant* of land (inheritance) with Abram (Gen 15:7–21).<sup>65</sup> There is also an explicit connection between Abraham’s loyalty to God and the establishment of the Genesis 17 covenant:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly”. (Gen 17:1–2 ESV)

“Walking before” the LORD and “being blameless” means primarily loyalty and devotion to God. It is the moral prerequisite for the establishment of the eternal covenant between God and Abraham.<sup>66</sup> This covenant is that God will make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations (Gen 17:4–7). Whilst this covenant encompasses the first covenant of physical seed and inheritance (Gen 17:8), it goes far beyond it.

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<sup>58</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 230, emphasis mine.

<sup>59</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 99–113.

<sup>60</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 99–113.

<sup>61</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 113–19.

<sup>62</sup> see further Williamson, *Abraham*, 135–40.

<sup>63</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 139–40.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 234–53.

<sup>65</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 124.

<sup>66</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 174–76.

[T]he central promise in Genesis 17 closely relates to Abraham's phenomenal expansion in a multinational sphere. Abraham will be a 'father' to this international company, not in the sense of being their progenitor, but rather through his special status and the particular responsibilities that he will discharge on their behalf.<sup>67</sup>

God will make a covenant to bless *all nations* through Abraham and his physical seed, provided Abraham is loyal to God.

In the "Aqedah" ("binding") incident (Gen 22:1–13), Abraham fulfilled the conditions of loyalty by not withholding his "only son". Abraham showed his willingness to sacrifice the very "seed" that was the basis for the promises. This was a display of supreme loyalty to God—an outworking of Abraham's faith in the One who could fulfil His promises despite overwhelming odds.<sup>68</sup> Once Abraham had displayed the necessary blameless walk before God, the covenant spoken of in the future tense in Genesis 17 is ratified by a solemn oath and becomes a reality (Gen 22:15–18, cf. 26:4b–5). Even though the seed is not, in the end, sacrificed, a sacrifice is still an important factor in the ratification of this covenant (Gen 22:13–14). The God who ratifies the covenant by oath is the same God who has just provided a sacrifice.

Abraham's children after him must also follow in the footsteps of Abraham's faith and loyalty in order for international blessing to be accomplished (18:18–19).<sup>69</sup> The constantly recurring question in the whole of Genesis-Kings is the question of the identity of the "seed" who will mediate international blessing, especially in the light of the recurring failure of the majority of Abraham's physical descendants (e.g. 2 Kgs 17:20, "And Yahweh rejected the whole seed of Israel").<sup>70</sup> The focus narrows down onto a "royal" seed, one from the line of David, for whom God will establish an "everlasting kingdom" (2 Sam 7).

It is worth pausing at this point to discuss the nature of circumcision (Gen 17:9–14). Circumcision itself is not a major feature in the OT; it is assumed as an obligation for Abraham's descendants and those in their household (Gen 21:1–4; 34:13–30; Exod 12:48; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:1–9, cf. Judg 14:3, 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6, 17:26, 17:36, 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chr 10:4; Isa 52:1; Ezek 28:10, 31:18, 32:19–32, 44:7–9), required to avoid curse and death (Exod 4:22–26), often internalized (Exod 6:12; Lev 26:40–43; Deut 10:16; Deut 30:5–6; Jer 4:4, 6:10, 9:25–26; Hab 2:16), but seldom explained. Yet Paul deals with circumcision with some frequency and at some length (Rom 2:25–29, 3:1, 3:30, 4:9–12, 15:8; 1 Cor 7:18–19; Gal 2, 5, 6; Eph 2:11; Phil 3:3–5; Col 2:11–13, 3:11, 4:11; Tit 1:10). How is the "covenant" of circumcision in Genesis 17 related to the covenant of international blessing described in the rest of the chapter? Some would see them as two entirely separate covenants.<sup>71</sup> However, it seems best to assume with Hugenberger that בְּרִית in 17:9, 13 is shorthand for a specific obligation (17:10) or sign (17:11) within the covenant of Genesis 17.<sup>72</sup>

But is circumcision simply an ethnic "boundary marker" or "badge",<sup>73</sup> or does it actually signify something? It is not, in fact, particularly useful as a "boundary marker", for many of Israel's

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<sup>67</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 157–66 (166).

<sup>68</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 234–58.

<sup>69</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 182.

<sup>70</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 253–58.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Nottingham: IVP, 1985), 146–50; see also Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15–20* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; trans. George V. Schick; LW 3; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1961), 162–63.

<sup>72</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 174; see Williamson, *Abraham*, 149.

<sup>73</sup> So N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (London: T & T Clark, 1991), 3.

ANE neighbours also practiced circumcision.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, circumcision is invisible under normal circumstances. But neither does circumcision seem to be a proof or symbol of God's activity, or a sign to remind God of his obligations (cf. Gen 9:16–17). It seems to be a sign for the sake of the one circumcised.<sup>75</sup> Williamson suggests that circumcision reminds the Israelites to “walk before God and be blameless (תָּמִים, whole)”.<sup>76</sup> Yet it is difficult to see how cutting off a part of one's body would remind one to “be whole”. Goldingay sees the significance of circumcision in “disciplining of (especially male) procreation” (an interpretation also found in Paul's contemporary Philo).<sup>77</sup>

The narrative context of Genesis 17 may shed light on this question. Given chapter 16 and 17:17–18, circumcision may be a symbolic means to perpetually restrain Abraham's desire to achieve God's purposes through his own effort (i.e. his “flesh”). God commands Abraham and his seed to “cut” the very instrument that Abraham had used to try to fulfil the Genesis 15 promise of seed by begetting Ishmael through Hagar (Chapter 16). Abraham had thought that Ishmael (the result of his own effort) was to be the seed (17:17–18). But God, while promising international blessing through Abraham's blameless walk (17:1) simultaneously restrains Abraham's natural inclination to achieve God's purposes by himself. Thus the purpose of the covenant of circumcision is to remind Abraham that God will make a name for him (Gen 12:2; 17:5); he is not to make a name for himself (cf. Gen 11:4). It also reminds Abraham's seed of the danger of being “cut off” (כָּרַת) if they should break this covenant (Gen 17:14). Hence circumcision is both a sign and warning of fleshly weakness and a stimulus to faith in the God who can achieve his purposes despite the odds (cf. Rom 4:11–12, 17–19).

To summarise the Abraham narrative: God gives Abraham a two-fold set of promises involving, firstly, nationhood (land and seed, inheritance and heir, Gen 12:1–2c) and, secondly, international blessing (Gen 12:2d–3). Abraham's faith in the promise of seed (Gen 15:6) is the basis for a covenantal commitment by God to give the land *to* Abraham (Gen 15:7–21). Abraham's loyalty (Gen 17:1), displayed in his willingness to trust God even to the point of sacrificing the seed of the promise, is the basis for a covenantal commitment by God to bless all nations *through* Abraham and his great, numerous seed (Gen 17, Gen 22:15–18). This covenant also involves an obligation on Abraham's part: circumcision, which restrains his “flesh” and reminds him, according to the suggestion made here, that he and his seed cannot achieve God's purposes in their own strength.

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<sup>74</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 176–81.

<sup>75</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 176–81.

<sup>76</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 180–81.

<sup>77</sup> John Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 88 (2000): 3–18.

## The Covenants of Law and Mediation

The rest of the Pentateuch describes the two-fold outworking of the covenants with Abraham in the life of Abraham's national "seed": Israel. The numerical growth of Israel (Exod 1:6–10), their deliverance from Egypt and the subsequent capture of Canaan fulfils the promise of "nationhood" held out in the unilateral covenant of Genesis 15 (esp. vv. 13–14, 18–21).<sup>78</sup> Through Moses, God brings his newborn nation to Sinai (Exod 19:4, cf. Gen 15:14) and makes a bilateral covenant with them (Exod 19:5–6, cf. Gen 17:1–2). As with Abraham, Israel is obliged to obey God's voice (Exod 19:5, cf. Gen 22:18) and keep his covenant (Exod 19:5, cf. Gen 17:9). If they do this, then they, like Abraham, will be a source of international blessing: they will be a special possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation, for the sake of the whole earth which is God's possession (Exod 19:5b–6a, cf. Gen 17:4–5, 16, 18:18–19). The subsequent chapters show that the content of the covenant is, in fact, various laws and rules whose primary intention appears to be to reveal the character of God to the surrounding nations (Exod 20–23).<sup>79</sup> The covenant is ratified with a solemn oath of allegiance and a blood-throwing rite (Exod 24:3–8), followed by a covenant meal (Exod 24:9–11).<sup>80</sup>

But even at her very foundation, Israel is tragically bereft of the requisite loyalty and obedience displayed by Abraham (cf. Gen 17:1, 22:15–18). This is seen graphically in the national apostasy during the golden calf episode (Exod 32–33), where "[e]ven as Moses is receiving the covenant stipulations, the Israelites are breaking them".<sup>81</sup> The people have broken God's covenant, so Moses breaks the written record of that covenant (Exod 32:19).<sup>82</sup> The "disastrous word" (Exod 33:4), therefore, is that although God will fulfil his unilateral covenant to give them the land (Exod 33:1–2, cf. Gen 15), God himself will not go with them to be their God, because the covenant of Genesis 17 has been broken (Exod 33:3, cf. Gen 17:7–8).

It is at this point that Moses steps in as the mediator of the covenant. Moses is one with whom God meets face to face, separate from Israel (Exod 33:7–11). In contrast to the rest of the nation, Moses is a "seed" of Abraham through whom God could re-establish his covenant—he has found favour in God's eyes and God knows him by name (Exod 33:12). But Moses pleads to God in favour of the nation (Exod 33:13). He reasons that God's purpose of international blessing will not come about unless God actually goes with this nation (Exod 33:16, cf. Exod 32:11–13). God agrees, because Moses has indeed found favour in his sight (Exod 33:17). So the covenant with Israel is renewed; new tablets are carved in stone and the law is reiterated (Exod 34:10–26).<sup>83</sup> However, the renewed covenant with Israel is an indirect, *mediated* relationship, contingent upon God's gracious relationship with Moses (Exod 34:10). God's covenant with Israel is now based upon his relationship with Moses: "I have made a covenant with you, *and* with Israel" (בְּרִית וְאֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל) (Exod 34:27). Moses has a direct experience of God's glory (Exod 34:29)—that is, his

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<sup>78</sup> Williamson, "Covenant", 150.

<sup>79</sup> Williamson, "Covenant", 150–51 (151).

<sup>80</sup> Williamson, "Covenant", 151.

<sup>81</sup> Williamson, "Covenant", 152.

<sup>82</sup> Weinfeld, *TDOT* 2:276.

<sup>83</sup> Weinfeld, *TDOT* 2:276.

compassionate and gracious nature (Exod 33:18–19)—but God’s glory is veiled to Israel (Exod 34:33–35).<sup>84</sup>

It appears that this implicit “covenant of mediation” with Moses was inherited by the Levitical priesthood. In the Sinai narrative, the Levites provided the bloody sacrifice of atonement that turned away God’s wrath from his people between the Golden Calf apostasy and Moses’ intercession with God, and so they were “ordained” for service and blessing (Exod 32:25–29, cf. Exod 32:30). Later, Phinehas received a “covenant of peace” for providing atonement in the same way (Num 25:11–13), which is probably a special case of the Levitical covenant.<sup>85</sup> Later prophets can refer to this covenant of mediation as “the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites” (Neh 13:28), “my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers” (Jer 33:21), and “my covenant with Levi” (Mal 2:4).<sup>86</sup> From the context of this last quotation, we may infer that the obligations of the “covenant with Levi” involved offering sacrifices (Mal 1) and teaching the law (e.g. Mal 2:7).

The Golden Calf incident highlights the dark underside of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. If the covenant with Israel was intended to bring blessing to all the families of the earth (אֲרֶבְרָה, Gen 12:3), we must not forget that what originally prompted the need for this covenant in the first place was the pre-covenantal curse (אָרָר) brought on by Adam’s sin (Gen 3:17). Under this curse, all humanity (אָדָם) must return to the earth (אֲרֶבְרָה) in death (Gen 3:19). Thus Israel’s failure to bring blessing through obedience naturally brought home to them in a special way the general curse on humanity for disobedience (Exod 32:33–35).<sup>87</sup> The atoning priestly ministry prevented total destruction of the nation. However, Deuteronomy warned of the day when the sin of the people with whom God had made the covenant would be reckoned. The nation itself was instructed to proclaim the covenant curses, climaxing with the great covenantal curse: “Cursed (אָרָר) be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Deut 27:26). A number of significant passages in Deuteronomy point to Israel’s inability to be a faithful covenant partner (1:26–46, chs. 9–10, 11:26–32, ch. 28). Deuteronomy finally predicts the curse of the exile, followed by a future restoration on the horizon (Deut 29–30).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Moore Theological College Lectures 1983; Homebush West, NSW, Australia: Lancer, 1985), 109.

<sup>85</sup> Williamson, “Covenant”, 152.

<sup>86</sup> Williamson, “Covenant”, 152.

<sup>87</sup> Williamson, “Covenant”, 152.

<sup>88</sup> J. Gordon McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 133–39.



## The Eschatological Covenants

Except for Isaiah 40–66, the eighth century prophets tend not to refer explicitly to Yahweh’s covenant with Israel, even though their message seems to be premised on its existence (e.g. Hos 6:7, 8:1).<sup>89</sup> However, with the exile of national Israel, the prophets begin to refocus on God’s international purposes and look beyond the exile to the “last days”. Here the two-fold covenantal structure of God’s relationship with Israel (nationhood followed by international blessing) re-emerges in a familiar yet also strikingly new form.

Isaiah chapter 40ff speaks about Israel’s restoration, but the ultimate grounds of the restoration is God’s sovereignty as creator and judge (40:27–28)—Israel’s restoration as God’s “people” is both for the sake of God’s special relationship with her (e.g. Isa 43:1–7) and for the sake of the whole world being set to rights, idolatry judged, and “justice” being established in the nations (chapter 41). Historical Israel had not lived up to its calling—it had sinned, and so Israel as a geopolitical entity was blotted out (43:22–28). However, the hope for the nation of Israel and for the other nations comes through an enigmatic “servant” figure. He is given by God as “a covenant [for the] people, a light [for the] nations” (לְבָרִית עִם לְאֹרֶן גּוֹיִם, Isa 42:6). The two-fold structure of the Abrahamic covenants is evident here: the covenant with the *one* people will mean blessing and light for *all* nations.

The servant thus embodies the covenant and perpetuates it for the true “Israel”, who are to recognize that the covenant with whatever Israel may be on view in this context has its point of final reference in its wider application to the nations.<sup>90</sup>

In Isaiah 49:3, the servant is identified with Israel. Yet it is not the “Israel” that was originally called “Israel” (48:1), i.e. geopolitical Israel. The old geopolitical Israel has failed to obey God’s commands, forfeiting any claim to be heirs of the Abrahamic covenant (48:17–18). This new “Servant Israel” is one who will bring national Israel back to God. He will also fulfil the covenant of international blessing by being a “light to the nations”, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6). Although he will be despised and abhorred by the nation (49:7), God will make him “a covenant for the people”; one who will fulfil the Abrahamic covenant of land (Isa 49:8, cf. Gen 15). Here again we see the twofold structure of the Abrahamic covenants: the servant will fulfil the covenant of land (49:8) so that the promise of international blessing will come about (49:6).

However, there is no indication in Isaiah that the vast mass of saved and worshipping Gentiles are to be “included” in the covenant, or to “enter” the covenant.<sup>91</sup> They don’t need to be! The servant figure is depicted as the one who *fulfils* the covenants, who brings God’s purposes of nationhood and international blessing to completion. In Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the Servant becomes a vicarious sacrifice for the sins of the people. The outcome of the Servant’s sacrifice is that the covenantal promises associated with Noah, Abraham, Israel and David are fulfilled (Isa 54–55).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Nicholson, *God and his People*, 115.

<sup>90</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 193.

<sup>91</sup> There are, admittedly, proselytes and eunuchs (“outcasts of Israel”, Isa 56:8a) who will gain full access to the Sinai covenant in its historical form (Isa 56:1–8). Luke seems to see this fulfilled in the cleansed Samaritan lepers (Luke 17:11–19) and the temple-worshipping Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:27–40). But this inclusion of physical outcasts into the historical structures of national Israel, while significant, is only the historical precursor to a greater event: the blessing of the Gentiles *apart from* the historical structures of Israel (Acts 10–11, cf. Isa 56:8b).

<sup>92</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 194–96.

Nevertheless, the new “Israel” has a further covenantal role to play in bringing about international blessing. Every individual member of Israel without exception is unrighteous, and must repent and trust in the LORD’s redeemer (Isa 56–59, esp. 59:16–21, cf. Rom 3:10–18). Once Israel is redeemed from this universal depravity, God makes an “everlasting covenant” of *ministry* with them (Isa 59:20, Isa 61:8). Israel and her seed will be God’s Spirit-empowered mouthpiece (Isa 59:20–21). Nations and kings will come to their light (Isa 60:2, cf. Gen 17:6). They will be a nation of priests, receiving the wealth of the nations as their payment (Isa 60:3–22; 61:6, 8, cf. Exod 19:5). These covenantal promises are ratified by a solemn oath (Isa 62:8–9). Israel’s “priestly” role, however, is now entirely declaratory. The reconstituted Israel does not bring salvation by teaching the law or by providing atonement, but by evangelism (Isa 61:1). Hence “[t]heir seed will be known in the nations and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall recognise that they are seed that YHWH has blessed” (Isa 61:9). Israel has a glorious ministry to the nations that exceeds the glory of Moses’ mediatorial ministry: Israel is “clothed with the garments of salvation” (Isa 61:10–11); they are a “crown of beauty in the hand of [their] God” (Isa 62:2–3). This is in stark contrast to the mediatorial ministry of Moses, who was clothed with a veil to hide God’s glory from the sinful people (Exod 34:33–35).

The nations, then, are called, not to “get in” to the covenant as if they, too, could bring about international blessing, but rather to partake in the blessing that has already been won by the servant’s fulfilment of the covenants, proclaimed by the Spirit-enabled covenant ministers. The nations are to be ruled by Israel’s king (Isa 55:4) and drawn to Israel’s glory (60:1–4). This international blessing is spoken of in the grandest cosmic terms in Isaiah 65–66. There will be a “new heavens and a new earth” in which a new Jerusalem is the centre of a new creation (65:17–25). This new Jerusalem is a woman who brings forth children (66:8), the glory of the nations flows to her (66:12) and God’s glorious name is proclaimed among the nations (66:19). The result is that all flesh will come and worship before the LORD in the new Jerusalem (66:23).

Jeremiah, too, looks forward to an eschatological covenant with Israel with international implications. The book of Jeremiah as a whole is set in the context of international blessing and judgment (1:5, 3:14–18).<sup>93</sup> Jeremiah censures the people for breaking Yahweh’s sworn covenant with their fathers (Jer 11:2–10).<sup>94</sup> In chapters 1–20 Judah has lost her distinction from the nations, standing with the nations under God’s judgment (9:25–26, 18:5–12).<sup>95</sup> Israel is no longer a kingdom of priests or a holy nation (Exod 19:6). The question of how God will bring about international blessing through Abraham’s seed is answered, however, by the new covenant that God will make “after those days” (Jer 31:31–34). God promises here that he will once again write his law on Israel’s hearts (cf. Deut 30:11–14); that he will once again be their God and they his people (cf. Deut 29:13); that knowledge of God will be universal amongst his people; and that he will forgive their sins. International blessing is implicitly linked to the hope of the restored Israel (Jer 31:10).<sup>96</sup> The associated covenants of kingship and ministry also continue (Jer 33:20–22). Once again, however, it would be misleading to speak of the nations being “included” in the covenant.<sup>97</sup> What the Gentiles receive in Jeremiah is not “inclusion” in the covenant, but all the blessings of salvation and forgiveness (via repentance) that flow to them because God has fulfilled his covenant with Israel.

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<sup>93</sup> Andrew G. Shead, “The New Covenant and Pauline Hermeneutics”, in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission* (ed. Peter Bolt & Mark Thompson; Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 33–49 (34).

<sup>94</sup> Weinfeld, *TDOT* 2:277.

<sup>95</sup> Shead, “New Covenant”, 35.

<sup>96</sup> Shead, “New Covenant”, 43.

<sup>97</sup> Pace Shead, “New Covenant”, 42–43.

Ezekiel, too, looks forward to a time when God's covenant with Israel will be renewed, resulting in international blessing. The re-establishment of national unity (Ezek 37:15–22), obedience (Ezek 37:23) and kingship (Ezek 37:24) leads to a “covenant of peace” with Israel which (like Genesis 15) involves land, numerous descendants and Israel's designation as “God's people” (Ezek 37:25–27). This leads to knowledge of Yahweh in the nations (Ezek 37:28), first through judgment (Ezek 38–39) and then (more implicitly) in glorious blessing (Ezek 47:8–12, cf. Rev 22:1–2).

Hence the two-fold covenantal structure of God's relationship with Israel is affirmed, not collapsed, by the prophets. The new covenants that the prophets look forward to are new “elected relationships of obligation under oath” between God and a reconstituted Israel, in which Israel's obedience to specific obligations will result in blessing for all the nations. Isaiah, in particular, spells out Servant Israel's obligations in detail: suffering sacrifice (e.g. Isa 49:7–8) and gospel proclamation (e.g. Isa 59:21).

## “Covenant” from Hebrew to Greek

The translators of the LXX chose to translate תּוֹרָה with the Greek word διαθήκη. This is a little surprising given that by far the most common use of διαθήκη in the extant Greek literature is not a “covenant” in the OT sense (“elected relationship of obligation under oath”), but a written document drawn up to distribute property after a person’s death, a “disposition”, “testament” or “will”.<sup>98</sup> Prior to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, there are about 240 instances of διαθήκη.<sup>99</sup> It occurs most abundantly in orators arguing legal cases and in Plato’s *Laws* (e.g. 922.c, 923.c, 923.e, 924.a, 926.b). Often the plural is used to refer to a will, since the various “dispositions” (διαθήκαι) collectively form a will (Isocrates, *Aeginet.* 1, 12, 15, 34; Isaeus, *Cleonymus*, 3). By contrast, the plural of διαθήκη never occurs in the OT. The testator could make or leave a will (διατίθεμαι [Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 3, 11, 15, 20, 48], ποιέω [Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 10, 30–31], καταλείπω [Isocrates, *Aeginet.* 5, 15, 34]), confirm a will (βεβαιόω [Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 18–19]), alter a will by codicil (ἐπανορθόω [Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 26]), and revoke a will (ἀναιρέω [Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 14, 18, 21; *Philoctemon* 30], λύω [Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 3, 18, 50]). After the death of the testator, a court could declare his will invalid (ποιέω ἄκυρον [Isocrates, *Aeginet.* 3, 15; Isaeus, *Cleonymus* 21, *Philoctemon* 4], καθίστημι ἄκυρον [Isaeus, *Aristarchus* 22]). By contrast, OT covenants are “broken” (בָּרַח, διασκεδάζω) by negligence or wilful disobedience (e.g. Gen 17:14; Lev 26:15; Deut 31:16, 20; Isa 24:5, 33:8; Jer 11:10, 31:32; Ezek 16:59), never simply invalidated.

One feature common to OT covenants and some Greek wills is the creation of kinship bonds by “election”. A διαθήκη could be used to bestow legal rights upon people who naturally did not have these rights (e.g. Isaeus, *Philoctemon* 28). A διαθήκη was a possible means for adopting a son and thus allowing him to inherit property (Isaeus, *Aristarchus* 9; *Astyphilus* 5, cf. 10–11; *Ciron* 40). However, there is evidence that this process was fraught with complications. For example, “I was adopted by Meneclēs with the strictest possible legality, and [. . .] the form of adoption was not merely verbal or by will [διαθήκη] but by very act and deed” (Isaeus, *Meneclēs* 44 [Forster, LCL]; see also Isaeus, *Hagnias* 8–9). By contrast, an OT covenant is a much stronger means of creating kinship bonds.

The choice of διαθήκη is even more surprising when one considers that there was a Greek word for “pact”: συνθήκη.<sup>100</sup> Demosthenes (*1 Steph.* 41.9) mentions both συνθήκαι (articles of agreement) and διαθήκαι (articles of disposition) in parallel, showing that they are not synonyms. The translators of the LXX clearly knew the former word; they used it for political pacts between humans (1 Macc 10:26; 2 Macc 12:1, 13:25, 14:20, 14:26–27; Isa 30:1; Dan 11:6, 17) and metaphorical pacts between humans and “death” (Wis 1:16, Isa 28:15). Once, it is used of an agreement between God and humans (Wis 12:21). Nevertheless, διαθήκη translates תּוֹרָה 270 times.<sup>101</sup> Why did the LXX translators consider the word commonly used for “will” to be more appropriate than the word for “pact” for translating the OT word “covenant”?

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<sup>98</sup> W. Danker, “διαθήκη”, *BDAG* 228–29;

<sup>99</sup> This is based on an exhaustive search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. For details of the *TLG* see Luci Berkowitz and Karl A. Squitieri, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae Canon of Greek Authors and Works* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>100</sup> J. Behm and G. Quell, “διαθήκη”, *TDNT* 2:106–34 (126).

<sup>101</sup> John J. Hughes, “Hebrews IX 15ff. and Galatians III 15ff: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure”, *Novum Testamentum* 21 (1979): 27–96 (30).

The answer, quite literally, may be found in Cloudcuckooland. The ancient comic Aristophanes (c. 445–385 BC), although familiar with the meaning “will” for διαθήκη (*Wasps*, 584, 589), and also with the word συνθήκη (“pact”, *Peace*, 1065; *Lysistrata*, 1268–69), uses διαθήκη in one passage in a way that is identical with our inductive definition of the OT word תִּרְיָהּ: “an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath”.<sup>102</sup> In his fantastic play *Birds* the hero, Peisetaerus, wants to convince the bird community to establish a carefree hedonistic utopia called “Cloudcuckooland”. The birds gather and ask Peisetaerus to disclose his plan to them. But they are armed and look a little too dangerous, so Peisetaerus says (lines 438–42, my translation):

By Apollo! I will not / unless (and not otherwise) they make a covenant with me [διάθωνταί ... διαθήκην ἔμοι] / the very same one that the ape made [διέθετο] with the woman<sup>103</sup> / (the knifemaker): that they neither bite me / nor yank [my] testicles nor dig—

After some brief innuendo, the play continues (lines 444–47, my translation):

*Leader of the birds*: I make [a covenant] [διατίθεμαι ἄγω]

*Peisetaerus*: “Now swear these things to me”

*Leader of the birds*: I swear to prevail in [the opinion of] these: all the judges / and all the spectators [. . .] But if I should transgress, to prevail in [the opinion of] one judge only.

The result of this sworn oath is that Peisetaerus now has a claim over the birds, and is able to order them to dispose of their arms. While the details of the oath are obscure, the meaning of διαθήκη is clear. The birds choose to enter into a new relationship with a human by oath, whereby they are obliged not to hurt him. While the covenantal obligation is unilateral, the covenant established a “truce” (τὰς σπονδάς, line 461), a relationship which enables Peisetaerus to get on with his original task of explaining his idea about Cloudcuckooland to the birds.<sup>104</sup>

The significance of this reference is that it shows a popular usage of διαθήκη, quite distinct from the legal usage, which overlaps significantly with the semantic range of the Hebrew word תִּרְיָהּ as we have defined it. This both strengthens our inductive definition of תִּרְיָהּ (not merely “pact” but “an elected relationship of obligation under oath”) and also enables us to allow that the LXX translators (who undoubtedly influenced Pauline usage of the term more than anyone else) could have easily had this concept in mind when they used διαθήκη.<sup>105</sup>

Although it is only one instance among hundreds, it is a much more significant instance than the statistics would appear to suggest. Firstly, the statistics are already skewed in favour of the legal usage, since there are far more extant legal texts than comic texts.<sup>106</sup> Secondly, Aristophanes himself was being critically studied and copied by scholars at around the same place and time as the LXX was being translated (i.e. Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC).<sup>107</sup> Hence there are good reasons to suppose that the translators of the LXX would have been familiar with the sort of usage we find here in Aristophanes. In any case, our definition of διαθήκη in the LXX, “elected relationship

<sup>102</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage*, 11.

<sup>103</sup> “The various guesses in the scholia show that not even ancient scholars could explain this allusion” (Jeffrey Henderson, “Birds”, in *Aristophanes* [4 vols.; Loeb Classical Library 178, 488, 179, 180; Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1998–2002], 3:1–251 [3:77 fn 30]).

<sup>104</sup> William L. Lane, “Covenant: The Key to Paul’s Conflict with Corinth”, *Tyndale Bulletin* 33 (1982): 3–29 (22).

<sup>105</sup> See also the definition in Behm and Quell, *TDNT* 2:112: “a legal fellowship under sacral guarantees”.

<sup>106</sup> Henderson, “Introduction”, 1:33.

<sup>107</sup> Henderson, “Introduction”, 1:33.

of obligation under oath”, has arisen from the inductive semantic study of Hugenberger and others and does not rely on Aristophanes’ usage. This instance in Aristophanes merely helps to confirm a definition arrived at independently.

## “Covenant” in the Intertestamental Period

While Paul is explicitly dependent upon the OT and the Christian gospel for his theological argument, he is clearly writing about questions and issues that arose in his time. While we may wish to postpone judgment on the nature of the connection between Paul’s theology and that of his contemporaries, a consideration of the concerns and questions of various intertestamental writings may shed light on the issues Paul faced. We will look at a number of the intertestamental writings to see what they have to say about the covenants.

Many of the writings use διαθήκη in more or less the same way we find in the OT, albeit with differing emphases. The close association between covenant and oath continues (e.g. Wis 18:22). The Psalms of Solomon refer to the covenant as a firm, binding promise made by God to the nation (*Pss. Sol.* 9:8–11, 10:4, 17:15). The books of the Maccabees concentrate on “the covenant of the fathers” (1 Macc 2:20, 2 Macc 8:15), which is associated particularly with circumcision (1 Macc 1:15) and the law (1 Macc 1:57, 63; 2:27, 50). Human loyalty to the covenant will be rewarded by divine loyalty in crushing Israel’s enemies (1 Macc 4:10). The “covenant of everlasting priesthood” with Phinehas is also mentioned (1 Macc 2:54). There are also references to non-divine covenants (e.g. Sir 11:20; Sir 14:12, 17; 1 Macc 1:11, 11:9).

Sirach contains an extended treatise on the various covenants between God and glorious national heroes. Earlier in Sirach, διαθήκη refers mainly to the Mosaic law or commandments (Sir 24:23, 28:7, 39:8, 41:19, 42:2). But in chapters 44–45 there is a list of various “famous men” that are praised because “The Lord apportioned to them great glory” (Sir 44:1). The covenants with Noah (Sir 44:18), Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Sir 44:19–23), Aaron (Sir 45:6–22), Phinehas (Sir 45:23–24) and David (Sir 45:25–26) all get a notable mention. The covenantal ministries of Moses and Aaron, in particular, are depicted as ministries of fabulous God-given *glory* (Sir 45:2, 3, 7, 20) as they teach the law and offer sacrifices.

*Jubilees* (late 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC) sees the covenant in similar terms to Genesis—a commitment or obligations by or between God and men under oath.<sup>108</sup> However, *Jubilees* stresses the human commitments more than does Genesis.<sup>109</sup> *Jubilees* 6:1–38 transforms the unilateral covenant that God makes with Noah into a bilateral covenant where human obligations are given prominence, explicitly linking it to the Mosaic covenant.<sup>110</sup> The same trend can be seen with *Jubilees*’ interpretation of the patriarchal covenants. “The ultimate goal of *Jubilees* is to show that there is only a single covenant” in which human obligation is emphasised—in effect, *Jubilees* universalises the Sinai covenant.<sup>111</sup>

Philo uses covenantal concepts sparingly. “He has no choice but to deal with it because it is a part of the Septuagint text”.<sup>112</sup> He generally interprets the word according to its legal usage,

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<sup>108</sup> Jacques Van Ruiten, “The Covenant of Noah in Jubilees 6.1–38”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 167–90.

<sup>109</sup> Van Ruiten, “Covenant of Noah”, 170.

<sup>110</sup> Van Ruiten, “Covenant of Noah”.

<sup>111</sup> Van Ruiten, “Covenant of Noah”, 190.

<sup>112</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Did All Jews Think Alike? ‘Covenant’ in Philo and Josephus in the Context of Second Temple Judaic Religion”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 251–66 (256).

“will”, using it as an allegorical symbol to describe the gracious bequest by God of certain graces: wisdom, law, word, justice, even himself (*Sacrifices* 57; *Worse* 67–68; *Names* 51–53, 58; *Dreams* 2.223–24, 2.237).<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, Philo does share some of the concerns of the OT that we noted above. He discusses the question of the identity of the seed of Abraham, concluding that it is the wise man (*Heir* 313). He understands that the covenant with Abraham brings blessing to the nations, not by the nations joining the covenant, but by the nations learning from Israel’s wisdom (*Names* 263, cf. Deut 4:4–8).

Every reference to διαθήκη in Josephus is to a human will (*Ant.* 17.p, 17.53, 17.78, 17.146, 17.188, 17.195, 17.202, 17.224, 17.226, 17.228, 17.238, 17.244, 17.246, 17.249, 17.321, 17.322, 18.156; *J.W.* 1.451, 1.573, 1.588, 1.600, 1.625, 1.646, 1.664, 1.668, 1.669, 2.3, 2.20, 2.21, 2.31, 2.35, 2.38, 2.98, 2.99.). Mason observes that Josephus “systematically removed the stronger covenantal statements from his paraphrase of the Bible (*Ant.* 1.183–185, 191–193) in his attempt to avoid angering his Roman opponents (who, in fact, possessed the land along with their ‘gods’)”.<sup>114</sup> Hence “[t]he only advantage the Jews have is their association with Moses, who in his extreme sagacity discovered the truth about God and formulated laws in keeping with God’s will”.<sup>115</sup>

Of all the documents we have surveyed, the writings of the Qumran community are the most strikingly radical in their interpretations of the OT “covenant” concept. At Qumran, covenantal vocabulary became inseparably bound up with sociological, sectarian concepts such as “community”, “entry” and boundary markers.<sup>116</sup> The history of the community helps us to explain this transformation: it seems that after being expelled by the Jerusalem priesthood, this community was established outside Jerusalem by its leader, the “Teacher of Righteousness”. They believed that the rest of Israel had committed apostasy. Their own community was the only true remnant of Israel, and therefore the unique locus of God’s covenant with Israel. The particular rules of the community (involving worship, calendar observance, etc.) were coterminous with the boundaries of the new (or renewed) covenant thus established: all other Jews were outside the covenant.<sup>117</sup>

The Qumran community describes itself as “The Community of Those Entering the new covenant” (יחד באי הברית החדשה).<sup>118</sup> A person’s commitment is described in terms of “entry” (בוא) into the Covenant (1QS 2.12, 18; 5.8, 20; 6.15; CD 2.2; 3.10; 6.11, 19; 8.1; 9.3; 13.14; 15.5; 19.14; 20.25; 1QH<sup>a</sup> 13.23; 21.9); “crossing over” (עבר) to the Covenant (1QS 1.16, 18, 20, 24; 2.10; CD 1.20; 16.12); and “holding fast to” (חזק) the Covenant (1QS 5.3; 1QSb 1.2; CD 20.27; 1QH<sup>a</sup> 10.28; 12.39; 23.9).<sup>119</sup> It seems that the Qumran community had taken concepts that initially applied to the *initiation* of the covenant relationship between God and Israel, and has transformed them by speaking of an individual *entering* into an already established covenant. The verb עבר, which in Deut 29:11 refers to the whole community “crossing over” (the Jordan) into a covenant, is

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<sup>113</sup> Grabbe, “Philo and Josephus”, 257.

<sup>114</sup> Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 70.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Spilsbury, “Josephus”, in *Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifrid; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2001), 241–60 (258).

<sup>116</sup> Craig A. Evans, “Covenant in the Qumran Literature”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 55–80.

<sup>117</sup> Evans, “Qumran Literature”, 79–80.

<sup>118</sup> David N. Freedman and David Miano, “People of the New Covenant”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 7–26 (22–23).

<sup>119</sup> Evans, “Qumran Literature”, 63.



used in the initiation ceremony for an individual who is “inducted into” the covenant.<sup>120</sup> Food laws, in particular, served as important marks distinguishing between the Qumran covenant community and the Gentiles and other Jewish groups who were “outside” the covenant.<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, while this sociological “grammar” of covenant appears to be unique to the Qumran sectarians in the Second Temple period, it finds many parallels in the covenantal grammar of the New Perspective.<sup>122</sup>

These diverse trends can be helpful in sharpening our approach to Paul’s letters. Which, if any, of these trends does Paul adopt and / or develop? Which, if any, does he reject and / or explicitly criticise? Is there anything genuinely new in Paul when it comes to the covenants? We will now turn to Paul himself and look at his usage of διαθήκη.

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<sup>120</sup> Martin G. Abegg, “The Covenant of the Qumran Sectarians”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 81–97 (esp. 85–86); Evans, “Qumran Literature”, 63.

<sup>121</sup> Stephen A. Reed, “The Role of Food as Related to Covenant in Qumran Literature”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 129–64.

<sup>122</sup> See the quotations in Stephen Westerholm, “The ‘New Perspective’ at Twenty-Five”, in *Justification and Variegated Nomism Volume 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifrid; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 1–38.

## Galatians 3

The argument of Galatians 3:15–22 is “generally reckoned among the most difficult in Paul”.<sup>123</sup> In Galatians, Paul is strenuously arguing against opponents who want the Gentile Christians to adopt circumcision and the law (i.e. become ethnic Jews) as a prerequisite for salvation in Christ (e.g. 2:14, 4:21, 5:3, 11, 6:13). Wright, in the light of his assumption of a “covenantal” background to Galatians 3–4, concludes that these chapters are about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Abrahamic covenant without the need for them to become ethnic Jews. According to Wright, Christ’s death and resurrection has reordered Israel’s covenant in favour of the Gentiles. Now that the “demarcating mark” of the “new covenant family” is faith rather than Torah, Gentiles may “get in” to the covenant.<sup>124</sup> However, a close reading of Paul’s argument in the light of our inductive definition of the OT term “covenant” (“elected relationship of obligation under oath”, see above) and the two-fold nature of the Abrahamic covenants (nationhood followed by international blessing) points to a very different, even opposite, conclusion. As we will see, Paul’s sustained argument is that the extension of blessing to the Gentiles is *not* brought about by their inclusion in the covenant. Rather, the extension of sonship to the Gentiles happens by the coming of Christ, the one seed of Abraham, who *fulfils* the covenants, pours out the Spirit, and enables all nations to be blessed in him through faith.

Some interpreters understand διαθήκη in verse 15 to mean “last will and testament”.<sup>125</sup> In this understanding, when Paul speaks in “human terms” (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον) about a “human” covenant (ἄνθρωπον [. . .] διαθήκην) he refers to the secular Graeco-Roman practice of will-making. He then proceeds, by way of comparison, to show that just as a human will cannot be rejected (cf. ἀθετεῖ) or reordered (cf. ἐπιδιατάσσεται), so it is with God’s covenant. Hughes, however, marshalling an impressive array of internal and external evidence, shows that διαθήκη in Gal 3:15 cannot possibly be used in the Hellenistic sense of “will”.<sup>126</sup> Throughout the ancient world, a will could, and frequently was, nullified and changed by the testator (see above).<sup>127</sup> If Paul was using a will as his “human” example, the basic premise of his comparison would have been nonsense to his original readers. On the other hand, if Paul meant “covenant” according to our inductive definition (“elected relationship of obligation under oath”), the argument makes perfect sense. Sworn covenants between human beings in the OT were inviolable (e.g. Josh 9:19–20, cf. 2 Sam 21:1–14).<sup>128</sup> So, it seems, was the birds’ covenant with Peisetaerus (see above). Hence Paul is arguing from the general inviolability of covenants (3:15) to the inviolability of the particular covenant with Abraham (3:17).<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 157.

<sup>124</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 155–56.

<sup>125</sup> E.g. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word Biblical Commentary 41; Dallas: Word, 1990); Wright, *Climax*, 166; see also NJB, RSV, NRSV.

<sup>126</sup> Hughes, “Covenant Practice and Procedure”, 66–96.

<sup>127</sup> Of course, a “last will and testament” couldn’t be changed by anyone *other than* the testator, nor for this reason could it be changed after the testator’s death; but this is irrelevant, for Paul is claiming that *God himself* would not change his own previously ratified διαθήκη.

<sup>128</sup> Scott W. Hahn, “Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah: Διαθήκη in Galatians 3:15–18”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 79–100 (esp. 83–86).

<sup>129</sup> Hahn, “Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah”, 95.

In verse 16, Paul exegetes a phrase from the Abrahamic narrative: “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, ‘And to seeds’, as though to a multitude (ὡς ἐπὶ πολλῶν), but as though to one, ‘And to your seed’ (καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου), who is Christ.” The phrase in question, καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, occurs 3 times in the Abraham narrative (Gen 13:15, 17:8 and 24:7). Given that the other key terms “of many” (πολλῶν, Gal 3:16) and “covenant” (διαθήκη, Gal 3:15, 17) also occur in Genesis 17 (17:2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 19, 21) it seems that the text under discussion is Genesis 17:8, in which God confirms that he will give Canaan to Abraham. This confirmation is part of the larger covenant of international blessing, which is contingent on Abraham’s loyalty (17:1) and includes the sign of circumcision (17:9–14). What, then, does Paul mean by his insistence that the promises were not given to a multitude, but to the one seed?

Wright rightly rejects interpretations that conclude that Paul is simply employing a “semantic trick”.<sup>130</sup> According to these interpretations, “Paul appears to be arguing, on the basis of the singular form of σπέρμα, that the promises made to Abraham and his seed point exclusively to Christ, not to the patriarch’s many other physical descendants”. The problem is that “in the LXX σπέρμα in the singular, when referring to human offspring, is in fact almost always collective rather than singular”.<sup>131</sup> Wright proposes an alternative view: that the singular form of σπέρμα is

not the singularity of an individual person contrasted with the plurality of many human beings, but the singularity of one *family* contrasted with the plurality of families which would result if the Torah were to be regarded the way Paul’s opponents apparently regard it. The argument of vv. 15–18 would then run: it is impossible to annul a covenant; the covenant with Abraham always envisaged a single family, not a plurality of families; therefore the Torah, which creates a plurality by dividing Gentiles from Jews, stands in the way of the fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham; and this cannot be allowed.<sup>132</sup>

Wright’s thesis relies on three questionable premises. The first premise is that Paul’s main problem with the Torah was its tendency to create ethnic “boundary markers” for the “people of God” which were inappropriate because the true “demarcation line” of the covenant family is faith in Christ.<sup>133</sup> But this sort of terminology is not the way either the OT or Paul uses “covenant” concepts; it is more akin to the covenantal grammar of the Qumran sectarians who were preoccupied with defining how to “enter” their community (see above). Secondly, Wright takes the word “Christ” as a “corporate personality”, shorthand for the “family of God” who are incorporated into Christ.<sup>134</sup> While this might be conceivable later in the chapter (3:26–28, and even there it is possible to distinguish Christ from his people), at this point in the argument Christ is quite distinct from his people (cf. Gal 3:13). Wright seems to have read the text from the perspective of now somewhat discredited sociological theories of “corporate personality”.<sup>135</sup> Thirdly, if the Gentiles are blessed by “joining” the covenant family, then the obligations of the Abrahamic covenant (i.e. explicitly physical circumcision, Gen 17:9–14) have been reordered or nullified (Gal 5:2–3, 6, 11). Yet this is precisely what Paul states *never happens*. Man does not reject or reorder a ratified covenant (Gal 3:15); neither does God (Gal 3:17).

<sup>130</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 158–59.

<sup>131</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 158.

<sup>132</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 163–64.

<sup>133</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 165, 67, see 155–56 for Wright’s use of the term “covenant family”.

<sup>134</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 165.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. John W. Rogerson, “The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination”, *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1970): 1–16; Gary W. Burnett, *Paul and the Salvation of the Individual* (Biblical Interpretation Series 57; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1–29.

Furthermore, Wright’s assertion that “the covenant with Abraham always envisaged a single family, not a plurality of families” is false unless it is strictly qualified. The promises in Genesis 12:1–3 envisage that all the *families* (plural, מִשְׁפָּחֹת) of the earth will be blessed in Abraham (Gen 12:3).<sup>136</sup> Abram has his name changed to Abraham precisely because God has made him “the father of a multitude of nations (πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν)” (Gen 17:5). In one sense, this multitude is one “family” because Abraham is their father. Nevertheless, they remain a multitude of nations. There is no indication in Genesis that the nations will “join” the covenant of circumcision that God makes with Abraham and his seed. There remains a twofold process: nationhood (seed and land) *for* Abraham will mean international blessing for the multitude of nations *in* Abraham (Gen 17:6–8). Even Ishmael, although he receives the sign of circumcision as a member of Abraham’s household and is greatly blessed (17:20), is not a party to the covenant (Gen 17:21). Given this context, it seems that Galatians 3:16 intends to make a precise exegetical point about the covenant of Genesis 17. The promises, while they were “for the *sake of* the nations” (Gal 3:14), are not, in fact, spoken directly *to* the multitude of nations (Gen 17:5). Rather, they are spoken to Abraham and his seed. Hence it is only Abraham and his seed who stand under this particular covenantal relationship of obligation, *for the sake of* the nations. The blessed multitude of nations is *not* required to be included in the covenant; hence they are not required to be circumcised. It is not that the covenant with Abraham has been reordered by Christ in favour of the Gentiles (Gal 3:15 rules this out),<sup>137</sup> but that the nations are not required to enter the covenant at all.

When was this covenant to Abraham and his seed “ratified by God” and thus made inviolable (3:17)? As we have seen in our survey of the Old Testament, a solemn oath or ceremonial act is needed to make a covenantal relationship of obligation legally binding. The covenant of land in Genesis 15 was ratified by the events recorded in the chapter—the passing of the flaming torch through the pieces, followed by solemn promises. But it is only after the Aqedah (binding) of Isaac that God finally makes a solemn oath that “in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen 22:16–18). Almost paradoxically, the primary act of loyal devotion that made Abraham and his seed a fitting covenant partner with God—a fitting agent for blessing to the whole world—was the willingness of Abraham to *sacrifice the seed himself*. It is only when the seed is placed on the wood and a sacrifice is made that God ratifies his covenant, emphatically vowing to make Abraham’s seed numerous and victorious (22:17) and thereby to bless the world through Abraham’s seed (22:18).<sup>138</sup> Hahn presents a strong case that this is the “ratification” Paul has in mind, and that the Aqedah is the type for his exposition of Jesus’ crucifixion and the subsequent blessing to the nations in 3:13–14.<sup>139</sup> In Genesis, the covenant of international blessing is ratified after Abraham’s supreme act of loyalty in being willing to sacrifice the “seed” of the promise by binding him “upon wood”:

Thus, the sense of [Gal 3:]13–14 is that the death of Christ ἐπὶ ξύλου allows the blessing of Abraham after the Aqedah (Gen 22:18) to flow to the ἔθνη through Jesus Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ).<sup>140</sup>

Hence it is “Christ” who is supremely the seed, the one in whom all nations are blessed (Gal 3:16).<sup>141</sup> This accords with the flow of biblical thought. Psalm 72 focusses the international scope of the promise to Abraham and his “seed” directly onto an ideal Davidic ruler (cf. 2 Sam 7). It is this

<sup>136</sup> Pace Wright, *Climax*, 166.

<sup>137</sup> Pace Wright, *Climax*, 155–56.

<sup>138</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 246–48.

<sup>139</sup> Hahn, “Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah”, 90–94.

<sup>140</sup> Hahn, “Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah”, 93.

<sup>141</sup> Hahn, “Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah”, 96–97.

Messiah-king “in whom all the nations will be blessed / bless themselves” (Psa 72:17, cf. Gen 12:3, 22:18).<sup>142</sup> Christ is the seed who fulfils the covenantal oath that God swore to Abraham by his obedience to death on the cross.

The larger import of this for Paul’s argument with his opponents is that the covenantal obligations laid upon Abraham (circumcision) and his national seed (the law) as a prerequisite for international blessing are not laid upon the nations as a prerequisite for their own blessing.<sup>143</sup> Abraham’s seed has *fulfilled* the covenantal obligations. The multitude of nations, therefore, are not called to enter this covenant, but to find blessing in the “seed”, to be “immersed” into Christ, to be “clothed” with Christ (3:27). This comes about by the Spirit and by faith in Christ (3:14). The blessings include justification (3:24), sonship (3:27) and unity with God and others in Christ (3:28). Hence it is faith in Christ, not covenant membership, that makes the Gentiles “seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise” (3:29). Being the “seed of Abraham” does not mean that the Gentiles are subject to the covenantal obligations, for these obligations have been fulfilled by Christ’s sacrifice. Rather, being the “seed of Abraham” means that the Gentiles are now sons of God in the fullest sense, heirs of the inheritance that has now come in Christ (4:1–7). Even the Jews who were members of the covenant must *also* be in the “seed” by faith (Gal 2:16, 3:11). Hence Abraham’s international fatherhood is not by means of common covenantal membership, but by means of a common faith in the God who achieves his astounding promises (Gal 3:7, 9), and a common blessing of righteousness; the characteristics that Abraham had before any of the covenants was made (Gal 3:6, Gen 15:6).

The more immediate question in verse 17 is that of the status of the Sinai covenant. Paul’s opponents seem to have been arguing that the Gentiles could only be blessed if they joined the covenant people and submitted to the covenantal obligations.<sup>144</sup> After all, this seemed to be the path to blessing for Ishmael, the slave-child (Gen 17:20–27). They seem to be reasoning that if God chose to enter into a covenant with his people at Sinai, then the obligations that constituted that covenant had to be kept by anyone who wished to receive the blessing. Paul, however, argues that insisting upon such covenantal obligations would, in fact, invalidate the earlier covenant with Abraham (which has been fulfilled by Christ’s sacrifice) and so make the promise to Abraham void (Gal 3:17–18). Once the “seed” has displayed supreme loyalty and is sacrificed, God keeps his promise and the blessings flow to the nations. What, then, was the purpose of the legal obligations laid upon Israel at Sinai? The answer, “because of transgressions”, is, as we shall see, part of Paul’s integration of the law into the wider scheme of God’s salvation-historical plans (Gal 3:19–25).

Verse 20 (literally, “A mediator is not of one, but God is one”) has spawned a multitude of interpretations. A common thread in most interpretations is the juxtaposition of plurality and singularity.<sup>145</sup> Wright, for example, understands the verse to mean that God, being one, desires one worldwide covenantal family “demarcated” by faith rather than a plurality of families.<sup>146</sup> However, in normal Greek usage, the existence of a mediator (μεσίτης) usually implied a conflict or underlying disunity between two parties.<sup>147</sup> Hence it seems that Paul’s argument is not about

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<sup>142</sup> Williamson, *Abraham*, 167–70.

<sup>143</sup> If this were so, then Carol K. Stockhausen, “2 Corinthians 3 and the Principles of Pauline Exegesis”, in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders; Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 83; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 143–64 (esp. 158–61) would be correct in concluding that Paul saw a real contradiction between the unilateral covenant of Genesis 15 and the bilateral covenant of Genesis 17.

<sup>144</sup> Perhaps the attitude that we saw in *Jubilees* (see above), was present among Paul’s opponents.

<sup>145</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 159.

<sup>146</sup> Wright, *Climax*, 168–72.

<sup>147</sup> Becker, *NIDNTT* 1:372–76; see also Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 378–79.

*plurality* but *disunity* between Israel and God. One of the foundational statements of the law was the *Shema*, with its tight indicative-imperative logic: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, The LORD is One (κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν). And you shall love the LORD your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole strength” (Deut 6:4–5 LXX). The law required singular undivided devotion to the one God of Israel. But this is precisely what had not happened at the time of the giving of the law (Exod 32–34, see above). God was about to destroy Israel for her outright apostasy with the Golden Calf, so a mediator (Moses) was introduced to the covenant, and God’s glory was veiled to Israel. The existence of a mediator proved that Israel was never going to be able to fulfil the promise of international blessing. From her very inception, Israel failed to display the blameless walk required of the seed as a prerequisite for this covenant (Gen 17:1). So Paul argues that Christ, not Israel, is the true obedient seed of Abraham, not by means of a semantic trick (cf. 3:16) but from the Torah itself.

Nevertheless, the Sinai covenant was not useless. It “was added on account of the transgressions until such time as the seed to whom it was promised should come” (Gal 3:19). In the purposes of God, this disunity between the people and God had an ultimately positive effect—to imprison everything under sin so that it would be clear that justification would be by faith, not by works (Gal 3:22–25). The law’s purpose was not opposed to the promise (Gal 3:21). It formalised and focused the curse on humanity (3:10), it highlighted sin, it made the distance between God and his people obvious, and it pointed to the inevitability of faith (3:19–24). But that purpose was limited to Israel’s national life, and it has been achieved. Now that Christ, the seed, has come and has fulfilled the covenant (and taken the curse), the “many nations” are not required to be a party to these (temporary) covenantal obligations. They are simply required to be immersed into the “one” seed, Christ, to be found “in Christ” by faith (3:26–27). However, by becoming “in Christ” by faith, they actually become the one “seed”, and so heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:28–29). This is “the blessing of Abraham coming about in Christ Jesus for the sake of the nations.” (Gal 3:14). In fact, if the Galatians do place themselves under the law, they are in grave danger because they are identifying themselves with the one part of salvation history that was associated unequivocally with the curse (Gal 3:10).

The covenants with Abraham and Israel, then, were *instruments* of international blessing. Abraham’s covenantal obedience foreshadows Christ’s sacrifice, and the covenant of law with Israel foreshadows the need for faith. The nations are blessed, not by *entering* Israel’s covenant with its obligations, but by trusting the seed who has fulfilled the covenant, and so becoming sons and heirs of God.

## Galatians 4:21–31

In Galatians 4:21–31, we find Paul comparing and contrasting an initially bewildering array of OT concepts. Beginning with the Abraham narrative, Paul speaks of two sons who come from two mothers: Isaac from Sarah, and Ishmael from Hagar (4:22). Hagar was a slave (4:22); Abraham fathered her son according to the flesh (4:23). Sarah, on the other hand, was free (4:22) and Abraham fathered her son through promise (4:23). This is the controlling framework for his “allegorical” or “analogical” (cf. ἀλληγορούμενα) interpretation of two “covenants” (4:24). Hagar represents the covenant which proceeds from Sinai, corresponding to the “present” Jerusalem and bearing children into slavery (4:24–25). Sarah represents the covenant of the “above Jerusalem” (4:26) who was once desolate but now bears many children (4:27, cf. Isa 54:1). The Galatians, says Paul, are children of the covenant of the “above Jerusalem”—children of promise, in the pattern of Isaac (4:28, 31). There are, however, children of the covenant of Sinai, who persecute the children born according to the spirit (4:29) but who will be cast out and left without inheritance (4:30).

There is not space to resolve all of the interpretive issues here. Paul may well have been employing a specific *ad hominem* argument against the false claims of his opponents.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, our study of the OT covenants (see above) does prove fruitful in clarifying the nature of the covenants that Paul has in mind. Campbell suggests that Paul is putting forward two “covenant options” that allegorically refer to two concurrent missions to Gentiles (that of Paul and that of his law-observant opponents).<sup>149</sup> We shall go further and suggest that the covenants themselves are not two proposed options for enjoying a salvific relationship with God (which, as we have already seen, is not the OT meaning of “covenant”), but rather two types of *ministry*—a covenant of legal ministry (cf. Exod 34:27, Num 25:11–13, Neh 13:28, Jer 33:21, Mal 2:4) versus a covenant of eschatological gospel ministry (cf. Isa 59:20–21). There are a number of strong indications that this is the case.

Firstly, the context suggests that “motherhood” is a metaphor for ministry and “sonship” is the result of such ministry. Galatians 4:1–10 contrasts slavery and sonship. Slavery to law (4:5) and to the “elements of the world” (Gal 4:3) is the state of those before Christ. Christ, however, through his redemption, secures the outpouring of the Spirit of Sonship. This brings about a relationship of sonship, described as warm personal intimacy with God (4:6) with the prospect of inheritance (4:7). The Gentile Galatians were once enslaved to false gods and the worthless “elements” of the world but now have a relationship with God in which there is true mutual knowledge (4:8–9). But Paul is concerned that they might lapse back into slavery (4:9–10, cf. 4:20). This leads on directly to Galatians 4:11–20, which contains a contrast between the two types of ministry that will result in slavery or sonship, respectively. On the one hand, Paul’s ministry is one of pain, struggle and suffering. Yet Paul is not embarrassed by this ministry: rather Paul’s personal appeal in Gal 4:12–20 ties his suffering and his message together. Paul, in his suffering, was accepted *as Christ Jesus* and so should continue to be accepted (Gal 4:14ff).<sup>150</sup> Hence his “pain” has a purpose: it is that of a mother giving birth to children (4:11–15, 19). Paul’s opponents, on the other hand, exercise a ministry of exclusion: they “exclude” the Galatians in order to foster a desire among the Galatians

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<sup>148</sup> See Longenecker, *Galatians*, 199–206; William S. Campbell, “Covenant and New Covenant”, *DPL* 179–83 (180); Dunn, “Covenant Theology”, 294–95.

<sup>149</sup> Campbell, “Covenant”, 180.

<sup>150</sup> Scott Hafemann, “The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul”, in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (ed. Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein; Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 127; Tübingen: Mohr, 2000), 165–84 (esp. 174).

to be included in their exclusive law-keeping group (4:17, 21). Since Paul explicitly identifies the two covenants with the two mothers (ἀδται γάρ εἰσιν δύο διαθήκαι, 4:24), it seems reasonable to conclude that the two covenants are the two forms of ministry just mentioned.

Secondly, Paul's reference to the "above Jerusalem" is backed up by a quotation from Isaiah 54:1. This brings to mind the whole context of the eschatological covenants in Isaiah 40–66. To summarise our earlier discussion (see above): the Servant's sacrifice (Isa 52:13–53:12), leads to the prospect of the fulfilment of the covenants, in particular the Abrahamic covenant of nationhood, beginning with seed to the barren woman (Isa 54–55). A little later, God makes an "everlasting covenant" of ministry with Israel which will bring about international blessing (Isa 59:20, Isa 61:8). By means of his Spirit, Israel and her seed will be God's mouthpiece (Isa 59:20–21). Nations and kings will come to their light (Isa 60:2, cf. Gen 17:6). Eventually, there will be a "new heavens and a new earth" in which a new Jerusalem is the centre of a new creation (65:17–25). This new Jerusalem is a woman who brings forth children (66:8), the glory of the nations flows to her (66:12) and God's glorious name is proclaimed among the nations (66:19). Paul seems to be identifying his own ministry with this "covenant" of the new Jerusalem.

Thirdly, Paul's use of Hagar and Ishmael may be intended to point to the futility of a ministry that posits circumcision and law as a means of blessing. We suggested above that the "covenant" of circumcision given to Abraham in his "flesh" (cf. Gal 4:24) was a warning against attempts to achieve God's purposes by human means in the light of Abraham's conception of Ishmael, who was born according to Abraham's human strength and decision (Gen 16, 17:9–14, 17–18). Paul has already argued that the Sinai covenant had a similar purpose (Gal 3:19–23). But since the law was a temporary measure, enslaving the Jews until the coming of the seed of the promise (Gal 3:22–25, 4:3–5), circumcision must be regarded in the same way. Hence a ministry of circumcision and law can only produce slave-children, children begotten "according to the flesh" (Gal 4:29), who have no share in the inheritance (Gal 4:30).



## The Corinthians and the New Covenants

We have seen that, on the evidence so far, the Gentiles are not called to join either the Abrahamic covenant or the Mosaic covenant. They will receive blessing through the fulfilment of these covenants, not through their inclusion in the covenants. But what of the “new covenant” of the Corinthian correspondence (1 Cor 11:25, 2 Cor 3:6)? Noting the presence of the phrase “new covenant” in Jeremiah 31:31 (Jer 38:31 LXX), many scholars cite Jeremiah 31:31–34 as the key OT background to this concept, often in combination with the “new spirit” passage in Ezekiel 11:19 / 36:36–37.<sup>151</sup> Assuming that Paul identifies the gentile Corinthians with the houses of Israel and Judah (even though neither Paul nor Jesus explicitly make this identification, cf. e.g. Matt 8:10–12, 15:22–28; Luke 4:25–27, 7:9; Acts 9:15; 1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor 3:7, 13; Phil 3:5), such scholars describe the Corinthians’ relationship with God as “covenantal” in one way or another—generally with an understanding of “covenant” that approximates to “salvific relationship with God”.<sup>152</sup>

Isaiah’s “new” covenants, however, are often overlooked. Isaiah may not use the exact phrase *καλὴ διαθήκη*, but the eschatological covenants of Isaiah 40–66 are part of the “new” (*שְׁרָרָה* / *καλὸς*) acts of God (cf. Isa 42:6, 49:8 with 42:9–10; 43:19, 48:6; cf. Isa 59:21, 61:8 with 62:2, 65:15, 65:17, 66:22). Paul is clearly dependent on Isaiah 40–66 in other parts of the Corinthian correspondence (e.g. 1 Cor 2:9 // Isa 64:4 + 65:16?, 1 Cor 2:16 // Isa 40:13, 2 Cor 6:2 // Isa 49:8, 2 Cor 6:17 // Isa 52:11, 2 Cor 9:10 // Isa 55:10),<sup>153</sup> so it makes sense to interpret the new covenant concept not only against the background of Jeremiah and Ezekiel but also against that of Isaiah. When this is done, a very different understanding of the new covenant emerges.

In 1 Corinthians 11:25, Paul quotes from the tradition of Jesus’ Last Supper (cf. Matt 26:26–29, Mark 14:22–25, Luke 22:15–20) in order to critique the Corinthians’ practice of the “Lord’s Supper”. There is a close association between the new covenant and Jesus’ blood / “the Lord’s death” (1 Cor 11:25–26). What is the nature of this association? Those who assume that the new covenant is synonymous with “new relationship with God” suggest that Christ’s death *ratifies* or *inaugurates* a new “covenantal” relationship between God and Christians.<sup>154</sup> However, in view of the form of words (“this cup *is* the new covenant”), the wider Scriptural context (OT and Gospels), and our inductive definition of *διαθήκη* (“an elected relationship of obligation under oath”), it is more likely that Christ’s death *is* the new covenant, not just its “inauguration”.<sup>155</sup>

In Isaiah, the servant himself is the “covenant for the people” (Isa 42:6, 49:8), whose specific covenantal obligation is to suffer for the sins of the people (Isa 52:13–53:12). Jesus identifies the new covenant with the “cup” (1 Cor 11:25). In the immediate context of the Synoptic

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<sup>151</sup> E.g. Hegermann, *EDNT* 1:300–1; Hafemann, “Temple of the Spirit”, 37; Shead, “New Covenant”, 43–45; Lane, “Covenant”, 7; Stockhausen, “Pauline Exegesis”, 157.

<sup>152</sup> E.g. Paul is “the messenger of the covenant lawsuit God has brought against his rebellious vassals at Corinth” (Lane, “Covenant”, 18).

<sup>153</sup> Silva, “Old Testament”, 631.

<sup>154</sup> E.g. Hegermann, *EDNT* 1:300; Dunn, “Covenant Theology”, 296; Lane, “Covenant”, 8; Dumbrell, *End of the Beginning*, 104; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 175–76; Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Revised ed.; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 159; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (2nd ed.; Black’s New Testament Commentaries; London: A&C Black, 1971), 268–69.

<sup>155</sup> See also Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 887.

Last Supper narratives, the “cup” means the pouring out of God’s wrath upon Jesus (cf. Matt 26:27–28 with 26:39; Mark 14:23–24 with 14:36; Luke 22:20 with 22:42; cf. Psalms 11:6, 75:8; Habakkuk 2:16; Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15–17; Ezekiel 23:31–33). Hence the “new covenant” is not referring to a salvific relationship between God and the Corinthians. Rather it is Christ’s death itself—a freely chosen and (at the Last Supper) solemnly ratified salvific act undertaken by Christ in obedience to his Father.<sup>156</sup> When the Corinthians drink the cup at the Lord’s Supper, they do not “join” this covenant. Rather, they participate in and proclaim the blood of Christ which has been poured out for them, exhausting God’s wrath against their sin and so fulfilling the covenant (1 Cor 10:16, 11:26–29). This, of course, has implications for their thinking and behaviour (1 Cor 11:27–29)—but it does not imply covenant membership.

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul describes himself and his apostolic team as “ministers (διακόνους) of a new covenant”, in apparent contradistinction to the old covenant associated with Moses (3:14). This is interpreted by some to mean that Paul is the facilitator or mediator of a covenantal relationship between God and Christians that is modelled on Jeremiah 31:31–33 and Ezekiel 36–26–27.<sup>157</sup> This kind of interpretation, as we shall see, does not do justice to Paul’s actual use of the OT.

In Ezekiel’s eschatological vision, God predicts that he will put a new spirit on the house of Israel, removing from them a heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26, cf. v. 22). This is further explained in the next verse: the new spirit is God’s Spirit, and the heart of flesh is one that keeps God’s decrees and laws (Ezek 36:27). Jeremiah also speaks of a new eschatological covenant involving the law being “written” on the hearts of Israel and Judah (Jer 31:33). Paul, by picking up this language, describes his own ministry using powerfully eschatological language (2 Cor 3:1–3).<sup>158</sup> However, we should not be too quick to infer that Paul is equating the *Corinthians* with the house of Israel, on whose heart the Spirit has written a new spiritual “law”.<sup>159</sup> The issue of the Corinthians’ spiritual obedience to the law is not a major issue in 2 Corinthians. While not denying the presence of the Spirit in the hearts of the Corinthians (e.g. 3:18, 11:4, 13:14), most of Paul’s references to God’s Spirit in 2 Corinthians are directly connected to his own apostolic ministry (2 Cor 1:22; 3:6, 8; 4:13; possibly 5:5; 6:6).

In fact, Paul does not say here that the Spirit has written anything on the hearts of the Corinthians.<sup>160</sup> Rather, the Spirit has written the *Corinthians* on the hearts of *Paul* and his band (2 Cor 3:2–3), as a letter commending Paul’s ministry to the world (cf. Ezek 36:28). Paul’s use of the new covenant passages from Ezekiel and Jeremiah is primarily to defend his own *ministry* (cf. Gal

<sup>156</sup> This is not to imply that there is a “contract” within the Godhead, as in the earlier Reformed “covenant of redemption” (e.g. John Owen, “Vindiciæ Evangelicæ: Or, the Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined”, in *The Works of John Owen* [ed. William H. Goold; 16 vols.; London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968], 12:1–590, esp. 12:497–508). Despite his protests to the contrary (499–500), Owen was working with a Roman legal definition of covenant in which two distinct persons make voluntary commitments to one another so that each will receive particular benefits (497). But the biblical focus is on the *unity* of the Father and the Son in the act of redemption (Matt 26:39, Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42), rather than on legal exchanges between two persons.

<sup>157</sup> E.g. Dumbrell, *End of the Beginning*, 107–13; Lane, “Covenant”, 8; Hafemann, “Temple of the Spirit”, 36–39.

<sup>158</sup> Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 168–70; Hegermann, *EDNT* 1:301; Shead, “New Covenant”, 43–45.

<sup>159</sup> *Pace* e.g. Shead, “New Covenant”, 43.

<sup>160</sup> A few manuscripts (Σ, 33, 88, 436) read ὑμῶν in 3:2 (thus: “written on your hearts”), but the overwhelming external support as well as the context is in favour of ἡμῶν (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament [Third Edition]* [London: United Bible Societies, 1971], 577). It seems that a few scribes changed Paul’s words to conform with an early covenantal theology that saw a direct continuity between Israel and the early Church (cf. *Barn.* 4.6.4, 4.7b3, 4.8c.2, 6.19.2, 9.6.3, 13.1.2, 13.6.2, 14). *Pace* Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Word Biblical Commentary 40; Waco: Word, 1986), 44.

4:24).<sup>161</sup> Israel represents Paul’s apostolic band, the law represents Paul’s apostolic ministry to the Gentiles, and the Spirit’s task is to equip Paul for this ministry. The new covenant is, then, not a “salvific relationship” between God and the Corinthians, but a particular relationship of obligation that God has graciously and solemnly laid upon his apostle: Gentile evangelism (cf. 1 Cor 1:17, Gal 4:24, Rom 15:15–16). This covenant is certainly *instrumental* in bringing about a relationship between God and the Gentiles, but the relationship itself is one of Spirit, life (2 Cor 3:6) and righteousness (2 Cor 3:9); it is not itself a “covenant”.

Paul’s burden throughout 2 Corinthians is to assert the legitimacy of his own apostolic ministry over against the claims of certain opponents (e.g. 11:5, 13). He does this by claiming a superior covenantal status for himself. Paul needs to assert that he, too, is an “Israelite” (11:22, cf. Exod 19:5–6), “seed of Abraham” (11:22, cf. Gen 22:18) and “servant of Christ” (11:23, cf. Isa 49:1–6); all terms that refer to those with whom God had made a covenant to bring blessing to the nations. It appears that Paul’s opponents were involved in a “Moses-type ministry” (3:7–15).<sup>162</sup> They may have validated their ministry by demonstrating their connection with the covenant of priesthood, using written documents to prove their case (2 Cor 3:1).<sup>163</sup> Perhaps they argued along the lines of Sirach 45, which associated the covenants of priestly ministry with fabulous glory (emphasis mine):

“[. . .] the Lord brought forth [. . .] Moses [. . .] He made him equal in *glory* to the holy ones [. . .] the Lord *glorified* him [. . .] and gave him the commandments face to face, the law of life and knowledge, to teach Jacob the *covenant*, and Israel his judgments.” (Sir 45:1–5 RSV)

“He made an everlasting *covenant* with Aaron [. . .] and put a *glorious* robe upon him [. . .] Moses ordained him, and anointed him with holy oil; it was an everlasting *covenant* for him [. . .] to minister to the Lord and serve and priest and bless his people” (Sir 45:6, 15 RSV)

“Phinehas the son of Eleazar is the third in *glory* [. . .] a *covenant* of peace was established with him, that he should be leader of the sanctuary and of his people.” (Sir 45:23–24 RSV)

The glory of the covenant of priesthood is also celebrated in Qumran (1QSb 3:22–26).<sup>164</sup> Qumran’s Teacher of Righteousness claims to be a glorious new Moses receiving a new covenant:

“I praise you, O Lord, for you lit my face with your *glory* as I received your *covenant*” (1QH<sup>a</sup> 12.7–8).<sup>165</sup>

Paul, however, has a very different view of the glory of the old covenants of ministry. While Moses’ ministry did have a certain glory, this glory was veiled to Israel because of their disobedience (Exod 34:33–35, see above). Yet Paul’s own apostolic calling is a glorious Spirit-empowered ministry without mediation (2 Cor 3:8, 18), that far exceeds Moses’ inferior ministry by which he mediated the old covenant with veiled glory (2 Cor 3:9–14, cf. Gal 4:24). In 1:21–22 and 3:17–18, Paul seems to be identifying his ministry with the “everlasting covenant” predicted by Isaiah (Isa 59:21, 61:8), where, enabled by “the Spirit of the Lord” (Isa 61:1, 63:14, cf. 1:21–22), the redeemed Israel would preach a gospel of freedom (Isa 61:1–3) as glorious priests of God (Isa 61:6–11, 62:2–3, see above. Cf. Rom 15:15–16).

<sup>161</sup> Campbell, “Covenant”, 181; Dunn, “Covenant Theology” 298.

<sup>162</sup> Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 171.

<sup>163</sup> Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 160–61.

<sup>164</sup> Evans, “Qumran Literature”, 66.

<sup>165</sup> Translation from Michael O. Wise, “The Concept of a New Covenant in the Teacher Hymns (1QH<sup>a</sup> x–xvii)”, in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 99–128 (113).

Hence, while Lane is correct to assert that Paul understands his ministry throughout the Corinthian correspondence as “covenantal”,<sup>166</sup> the actual covenants Paul has in mind are Christ’s death (1 Cor 11:25) and the (ongoing) apostolic preaching of the gospel (2 Cor 3:6, cf. Gal 4:21–31). Paul is not the mediator of a new covenantal relationship between God and the Gentiles.<sup>167</sup> He is a servant (2 Cor 4:5), a light to the nations (2 Cor 4:6, cf. Isa 60:1–3), obligated to proclaim to them God’s grace, love and fellowship through Christ and the Spirit (1 Cor 1:9, 2 Cor 13:14).

Nevertheless, while there is no solemn covenant of obligation between God and his Corinthian children, the old and new covenants certainly *inform* the attitudes and actions of the Corinthians in their spiritual relationship with God. Because Christ has fulfilled the covenants, the Corinthians have received the promises that the covenants were designed to bring about (e.g. 2 Cor 1:20, 7:1).<sup>168</sup> The covenants inform the behaviour of those who are “in Christ”, giving shape to their new spiritual relationship with God (e.g. 1 Cor 7:19, 2 Cor 7:1). The Sinai covenant informs their understanding of God’s moral will (e.g. 1 Cor 5:13, 10:11), Christ’s death informs their life of sacrificial love and service (e.g. 1 Cor 8:10–13, 11:21–34; cf. Phil 2:5–11), and Paul’s sacrificial evangelistic ministry is a model for the behaviour of his Gentile converts (e.g. 1 Cor 4:16–17, 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:4–8; 2 Thess 3:7–9; Phil 3:17).

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<sup>166</sup> Lane, “Covenant”, 8–29 (9).

<sup>167</sup> *Pace* Lane, “Covenant”.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Lane, “Covenant”, 23–25.

## Romans 9–11

The two references to covenants in Romans (9:4, 11:27) occur in a section concerned with the status of national Israel (Romans 9–11). Although there are numerous exegetical issues in these chapters, the foregoing discussion has already shed enough light to elucidate the main features of Paul's use of διαθήκη. Paul first lists the covenants among the features of national Israel that ultimately led to the coming of God himself (Rom 9:4–5). If we follow our previous line of argument, that the covenants with Israel (i.e. the particular solemnised relationships involving specific obligations) were the *instruments* that God used to bring salvation to the world, rather than the salvific relationship itself,<sup>169</sup> we can begin to see the questions that shape Paul's discussion here. Surely, one may ask, God did not view national Israel *merely* as an instrument of international blessing? Surely, Israel's covenantal relationship with God (whose intention was to bring salvation to the nations) should *also* lead the Israelites themselves to a salvific relationship with God?

The answer, however, is more complex than it might seem. Firstly, the seed of Abraham is not necessarily coterminous with geopolitical Israel, for it always depends on God's sovereign choice (9:6–29). Furthermore, part of the purpose of the Sinai covenant was to show that the law could not be kept—Israel's *failure* to achieve salvation through law was always part of God's plan, even though the gospel of justification by faith was always available to the elect within Israel (9:30–11:10, cf. 3:1–8). In fact, Israel's failure means blessing for the nations (11:11, 25, 30). But Paul looks beyond Israel's failure and envisages her salvation (11:12–26a). Paul backs up his vision of the salvation of God's covenant partner using a combination of quotations from Isaiah (11:26b–27), which show that the book of Isaiah itself perceives forgiveness of sins for Israel (Isa 27:9, 59:20) as a prerequisite for Israel's covenant of eschatological ministry to the nations (Isa 59:21). Perhaps this is also the purpose of Paul's rewording of the LXX in 11:26:<sup>170</sup> Redemption *for* Zion (Isa 59:20) is the foundation for redemption coming *from* Zion to the Gentiles (Rom 11:26).

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<sup>169</sup> Pace Dunn, "Covenant Theology", 305.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (2 vols.; Word Biblical Commentary 38A–B; Dallas: Word, 1988), 2:682.

## Ephesians 2:12

Ephesians as a whole is concerned with the establishment of God's cosmic purposes in Christ (e.g. 1:10, 1:20–23, cf. Isa 66:22–23). Paul uses “new creation” language to speak of the redemption of the nations and their spiritual union with God through faith in Christ (e.g. 2:8–10, 3:8–12, 3:14–17, 4:4–6, 4:13). In 2:12, Paul describes a barrier that had once existed to such cosmic reconciliation. Being uncircumcised (Eph 2:11), the nations were “outside of Christ, estranged from the Commonwealth of Israel and *aliens in regard to the covenants of the promise*, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12).<sup>171</sup> But Christ's crucifixion has changed this situation forever: the nations have now been “brought near” (Eph 2:13). In his own flesh Christ abolished the law and created a new humanity, reconciling Israel and the nations (Eph 2:14–15).

Does this mean that the nations are now also included in the “Commonwealth of Israel” and the “covenants of the promise” (Eph 2:12)? Paul does not explicitly answer this question, for he is primarily interested in their citizenship in God's spiritual, Christological household, not their membership in the house of Israel or the covenants (Eph 2:19–22).<sup>172</sup> But perhaps we may infer that these two entities are now identical? Not necessarily. In fact, given our conclusions so far, it is more likely that the “Commonwealth of Israel” was the historical locus of God's activity that led to the coming of Christ (cf. Rom 9:4–5) and that the “covenants of the promise” were the particular sets of solemn obligations that God used historically to achieve the promise through Israel. Although the ultimate intention of the covenants was to bring about the “promise” of inheritance and international blessing, the intrinsic obligations of the covenants (circumcision and law, in particular) threw up barriers to the Gentiles (Eph 2:12). But now that the promise has been fulfilled by Christ's death, the intended purpose of Israel's covenants has been achieved. Hence our attention may shift away from the historical covenants to the new creation that even now is being embodied in churches of mixed Jewish and Gentile ethnicity.<sup>173</sup> This would explain why Paul refers to the Gentiles as partakers in the promise, in the inheritance, in the kingdom of God, and in Christ's eschatological body (Eph 1:18, 3:6, 4:4, 5:5; cf. Gal 4:7; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Col 1:12, 1:18, 3:24; Tit 3:7), but never as members of Israel or of her covenants.

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<sup>171</sup> Translation based on Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Word Biblical Commentary 42; Dallas: Word, 1990), 137.

<sup>172</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 159, 163–64; Donald W. B. Robinson, *Faith's Framework: The Structure of New Testament Theology* (2nd ed.; Blackwood, SA: New Creation, 1996), 110–15.

<sup>173</sup> Robinson, *Faith's Framework*, 114.

## Covenant-related Concepts in the Rest of Paul

It is beyond the scope of this study to engage in a detailed survey of the more general semantic domain of “covenant” in Paul. Such a survey would explore such words as “inherit[ance]” (κληρο-\*: e.g. Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6:9–10, 15:50; Eph 1:11–18, 5:5; Col 1:12, 3:24); “[un]circumcision” (περιτομή, περιτέμνω, ακροβυστία: e.g. Gal 2, 5, 6; 1 Cor 7:18–19; Phil 3:3–5; Rom 2:25–29, 3:1, 3:30, 4:9–12, 15:8; Col 2:11–13, 3:11, 4:11; Tit 1:10); “promise” (ἐπαγγελ-\*: e.g. Rom 4:13–21, 9:8–9, 15:8; Eph 1:13, 3:6; Tit 1:1–3); election and will (θελ-\*, ἐκλέγομαι: e.g. Gal 1:4; 1 Cor 1:27–29; Rom 9:18–22; Eph 1:3–12; 2 Tim 2:10); ministry and priesthood (διακον-\*, λειτουργ-\*: e.g. 2 Cor 5:18, 8:19, 9:1, 9:12; Rom 11:13; Eph 3:7, 4:12; Col 1:23–25). Further study is needed into the connection between the historical “seed of Abraham” with whom the covenant was made (Rom 1:3, 9:7–8, 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22; 2 Tim 2:8) and the “seed of Abraham” that exists by faith after Christ’s death has fulfilled the covenants (Gal 3:29).

We can, however, offer one example of how our understanding of the covenants could aid in Pauline interpretation: Romans 4. The chapter begins with a τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν question (cf. e.g. 6:1, 7:7, also 3:9) that poses a possible objection to the doctrine of justification by faith (cf. 3:21–31): “So what shall we say? That we have found Abraham to be our forefather *according to the flesh?*” (4:1).<sup>174</sup> The hypothetical questioner is recalling the promise that Abraham would be the father of a multitude of nations (cf. Rom 4:16–17, Gen 17:4), and seems to suggest that Abraham’s international fatherhood is by means of “the flesh”—that is, that we are saved by getting into (or staying in) the covenant of circumcision and keeping its obligations (Gen 17:13)—which would undermine justification by faith (Rom 4:2–8). Paul counters this by going back to Genesis 15 and showing that Abraham was already justified by faith *before* the covenant of circumcision (Rom 4:3, 9–10, 18; Gen 15:6). The covenant, he argues, was merely an instrument to enable Abraham and his seed to bring about international blessing, restraining his flesh (Gen 17:11–14) and reminding him of his need for faith (4:11). The covenant justified no-one! Rather, Abraham was the “father of [the covenant of] circumcision” *in order to bring about* justification by faith for all believers, not only for circumcised believers (with whom God has made a covenant) but also for uncircumcised believers (4:12).<sup>175</sup> Hence Abraham is our forefather by virtue of common faith, not by virtue of common covenant membership, i.e. not according to the flesh (Rom 4:16, 23–25). Thus Wright’s gloss, “God counted Abraham’s faith as constituting covenant membership” (Gen 15:6, Rom 4:3) misses the point entirely.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> See N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections”, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary In Twelve Volumes* (ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:393–770 (10:489), for a strong grammatical defense of this translation—but not for his interpretation of its significance.

<sup>175</sup> This interpretation accounts for the complex grammar of verse 12 without having to attribute a “mistake” or an “unusual word order” to Paul or Tertius, *pace* C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:237; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 270 fn 25.

<sup>176</sup> Wright, “Romans”, 493.

## The Acovenantal Perspective

There is a pervasive tendency amongst proponents of the New Perspective to emphasise “the covenant” as the controlling category for other concepts such as righteousness and baptism, and then to speak about this covenant in sociological terms like “membership” and “badges” and “boundary markers”.<sup>177</sup> But this is more akin to the covenantal grammar of the Qumran Sectarians than that of the OT and Paul. Faith in Christ is not a covenantal boundary marker. It is a trans-covenantal concept—existing in prototype in Abraham *before* the covenant was made (Gen 15:6) and becoming the essence of sonship and salvation once the covenant is fulfilled in Christ (Gal 3).

Instead, an “acovenantal” perspective is more appropriate. The covenants were special well-defined relationships of obligation under oath between God and particular figures in salvation history (supremely Christ) that functioned as *instruments* of our salvation, but do not form the goal or *essence* of our salvation.<sup>178</sup> Our relationship with God, both individually and corporately, is not a covenant. Granted, the relationship is *established* by means of the “new covenant” of Christ’s death and the apostolic preaching of the gospel (given written form in what we call the “New Testament”). Furthermore, our theology, ethics and ministry are *informed* by the covenants: Abraham’s obedience, the law given to Israel, Christ’s atoning death and the apostolic preaching of the gospel all inform our relationship with God in manifold ways. But our actual relationship with God through Christ is far more profound than a covenant. In Christ, we come to know God, not merely as covenant partners, but as children who, by grace, are truly united with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit as sons of our loving heavenly Father.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> See, e.g. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 240–57, 550–52; Dunn, *Romans*, 1:40–42; Wright, *Climax*, 39–40, 48, 148–51 and cf. Freedman and Miano, “People of the New Covenant”, 24.

<sup>178</sup> According to Koester, *Hebrews*, 110, this is also the view of the covenants in Hebrews (although Hebrews is not directly interested in the question of Gentile blessing).

<sup>179</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 14, 70, 143; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 276.



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