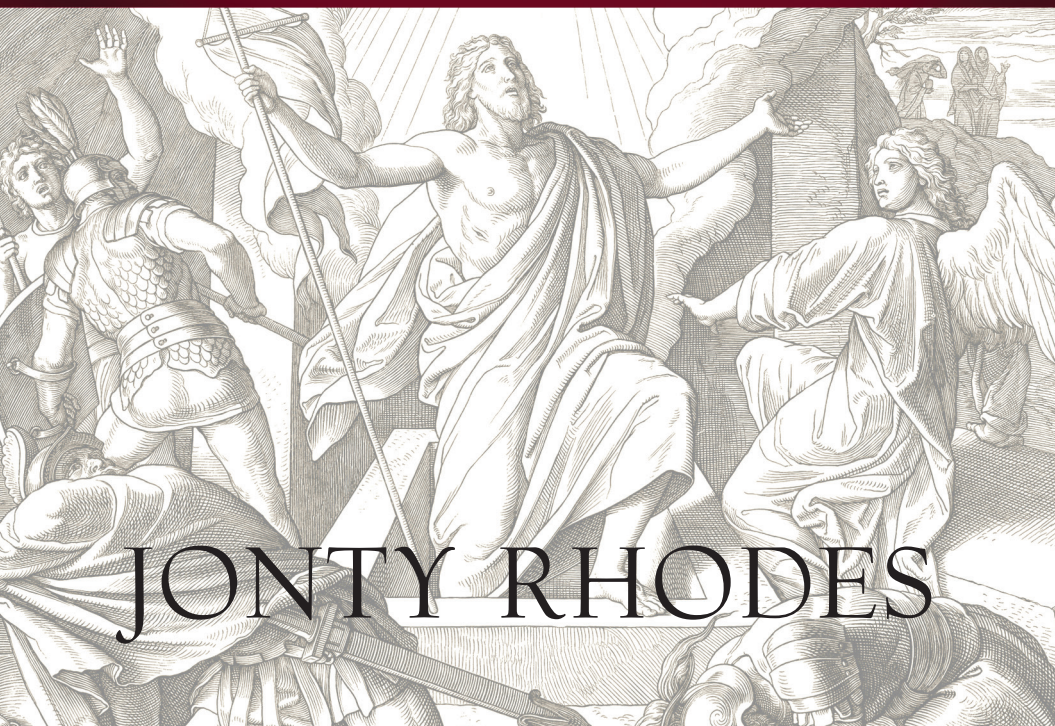




COVENANTS MADE SIMPLE



UNDERSTANDING GOD'S UNFOLDING
PROMISES TO HIS PEOPLE



JONTY RHODES

What Graeme Goldsworthy did for “kingdom,” Jonty Rhodes has done for “covenant”: an eye-opening, big-picture Bible overview which traces the profound influence of this theme from Genesis to Revelation. This excellent book explains what covenant is, why it matters, and how we cannot understand the Lord Jesus, his work, or his Word without it.

—**David Gibson**, Minister, Trinity Church, Aberdeen

A fascinating little introduction to a complex topic. Jonty’s quest to recapture the covenant sweeps us through the whole Bible’s story, into the very depths of eternity, alongside profound thinkers across the ages, and right up to present-day Christian living. Engaging, relevant, and often both humorous and thought-provoking, *Covenants Made Simple* sheds new (as well as old) light on some of the greatest mysteries concerning God’s wonderful plan of salvation. And while I’d beg to differ on the precise nature of the new covenant, and therefore *who* should be baptized, I’m delighted to commend this book on an often neglected but vital biblical theme. Let the journey commence, if you dare!

—**Dave Gobbett**, Lead Minister, Highfields Church, Cardiff

With all sorts of proposals about what the “big idea” of Scripture is floating about, Jonty Rhodes does us the favor of pointing us to the Bible’s own answer to that question. He carefully demonstrates that at the heart of God’s revelation of himself to humanity is a well-defined relationship which is given a name in Scripture: covenant relationship. The idea of the covenant shapes the whole of Scripture from the garden to the upper room; and it points us to the significance of the two main characters in the human story: Adam, the first, who was a covenant-breaker, and Adam, the last (Christ), who was the covenant-keeper. Born under the curse brought on us by the disobedience of the former, we are freed from the curse by the obedience of the latter. Jonty’s work is clear-headed and heart-warming, satisfyingly biblical and Christ-exalting. I warmly commend it.

—**Liam Goligher**, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

British evangelical theology has been impoverished over the years by a general failure to appropriate the riches of covenant theology. This is ironic, given that the Westminster Confession of Faith, perhaps the finest confessional statement of covenant theology, was originally a British document. It is thus a pleasure to commend Jonty Rhodes' fine introduction to the subject. I hope that this little book will help many to see the beauty of the biblical covenants and their relevance for God's people today.

—**Carl R. Trueman**, *Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania*

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P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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First published in the UK by Inter-Varsity Press in 2013 under the title *Raiding the Lost Ark: Recovering the Gospel of the Covenant King*

North American edition issued 2014 by P&R Publishing

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ISBN: 978-1-59638-975-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-976-2 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-980-9 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014943848

For Georgina and Charlotte

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY DISCOVERY OF the covenants is almost entirely down to two people: Dr. Garry Williams, now of the John Owen Centre, whose classes both there and previously at Oak Hill Theological College were hugely eye-opening, and Rev. Dr. Mark Pickles, for seven years past my boss and for many more to come, I hope, my friend. I am heavily indebted to both men. Anything useful in the pages to come is likely to have been stolen from them. Needless to say, the mistakes are entirely my own.

I'm grateful to a number of friends for reading through early drafts of the manuscript, especially Matthew Roberts, David Gibson, James Buchanan, and Ted Watts; their comments and critiques have made this a much better book. Likewise, my wife Georgina has patiently read and reread chapter after chapter, improving them each time. Much of the material in chapter 3 I've learned from Dr. Daniel Strange, and chapter 10 I'd particularly like to dedicate to Dan, Jeff, Reuben, and Dave: *tolle lege*, as they say. Thanks too to Kieran Harrod for making my terrible illustrations look professional and editor Eleanor Trotter for her endless encouragements along the way.

Finally, as I hope you'll pick up in the pages ahead, the covenants reveal the significance of the church in God's plan. Most of this material was first worked through with the members of Christ Church Derby, and it's worth you knowing that it is now being published with the permission and blessing of my fellow elders there, Tim Houghton and Matt Newbould.

INTRODUCTION

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS are known for their insistence that Christianity is centered on “a relationship with God.” Rightly so. But what is the nature of that relationship? I have one relationship with my wife, quite another with my neighbor. My relationship with my daughter could be fairly described as unconditional; that with my boss rather less so.

Covenant is the word God uses to describe his relationship with his people. At each stage of the Bible’s story, including our own, God relates to his people through a series of these interlinked covenants. That relationship is more complex than we sometimes imagine. God is a Father who loves his children unconditionally, yet in Corinth he strikes some of those same children dead when they disobey him. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will never lose a sheep, yet Judas, one of the original twelve, never makes

it home. Christ died for the sins of the world, yet not everyone is saved. We are saved by grace alone, yet John tells us we'll still be judged according to what we've done. These examples provoke all sorts of questions in thoughtful Christians. Can I know I'm saved? Does how I live have any effect on how God treats me? Can I lose my salvation? What does God expect from me?

Covenants hold the key to unlocking these kinds of puzzles. I hope we'll see that they bring a beautiful harmony to the different melodies God sings throughout Scripture. Covenant thinking has fallen somewhat out of fashion recently, much to our loss. This book is an attempt to rediscover a hugely important biblical theme.

There have been times when covenant has played a more central role in the church's life, notably during the era of the Puritans—those ministers who came after the first wave of the Reformation and built on its foundations. That's why although our primary focus will be the Bible itself, we will at times dip into the writings of these men and their spiritual successors, to benefit from some of their insight and wisdom.

So, if God's covenants are becoming buried under the sands of time, we ought to start digging. And like any good explorer, we need to first ask, "What are we looking for?" In other words, what is a covenant anyway?

THE COVENANT OF WORKS

Why “Covenant”?

Three years of patient, careful teaching and time was running out. Time and again, he had explained why he had to die, and time and again even his closest friends had failed to understand. Now, only hours before his arrest, the Son of God grasped his final opportunity. Taking a cup of wine in his hands, he thanked his Father and spoke to the Twelve: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

My blood of *the covenant*. Why “covenant”? Wouldn’t “This is my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” have been enough?

Most Christians have at least some understanding that Jesus shed his blood so that we might be forgiven. Far fewer, I suggest, would be able to explain what Jesus meant by calling his blood *covenant* blood. In fact, many of us could put our finger over the word “covenant” and read the verse just the

same. And yet, this is the word Jesus uses at the last supper, the final picture given to the men who would become the great preachers of the gospel after his resurrection. The death of Christ stands at the heart of the Christian gospel. And Jesus, for one, thought “covenant” best unlocked the meaning of that death.

Thirty or so years earlier, before Jesus was born, his uncle had sung a hymn of praise to God. As Zechariah looked forward to the birth of his son, John the Baptist, he praised the Lord who was about

to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.
(Luke 1:72–73)

Zechariah knew that God was about to do something enormous, something that would shake the world. He also knew that the origin of this plan had been the covenant God had made with Abraham right back in Genesis. Covenant is the theme that links the different books of the Bible to make them one united story, blazing through the Old Testament like a firework, before exploding into full color in the coming of Christ.

Even from just these two passages, we see hints that covenant is the concept that will allow the message of salvation God offers to grow naturally out of the story he tells. It is through understanding the covenants that we can move from story to salvation. To press the significance of covenants still further, let’s visit the temple, the center of Israel’s worship during the days of the Old Testament. If we were to be given a guided tour, we’d begin in an outer court, before moving

into a smaller central room known as the Holy Place. Pressing on still further, we'd come to the heart of the temple, the Holy of Holies. So far, so predictable, at least if we'd been on tours of other Ancient Near Eastern temples. They tended to follow the same threefold pattern, leading toward that central most holy place. The surprise with the Israelite temple was what was in this Holy of Holies—or rather, what wasn't. Unlike the nations around them, the Israelites built no statue of their God: in fact he had expressly forbidden it. Instead, we would have found an ornate box, or “ark,” containing the Ten Commandments. These commandments constituted the covenant documents of their day. The God of the Bible had chosen to reveal himself not through statues and images, but through covenant.

It's the kind of passages we've looked at so far that move J. I. Packer to go so far as to say that, first, “the gospel of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.” Second, “the Word of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.”

Third, “the reality of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.”¹

God, gospel, and Scripture: none properly understood until seen in the light of the covenant. Reason enough to begin to dig deeper!

Exactly What Is Covenant?

Clearly, “covenant” is not a word we use much nowadays. Yet, it occurs over 300 times in the Bible, and not just in the dusty corners normally reserved for the intrepid “keen” Christian. The Sunday school favorites of Noah and his ark, father Abraham and his many sons, Moses and the Ten Commandments, and King David of giant-felling fame all not only

mention, but are centered on, the unfolding story of the covenant. The great prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are stuffed full of references to this same covenant, and the psalmists regularly burst into song because of it. But the question still remains: what is a covenant?

Like almost every other Bible word, there's no one place you can look up where Jesus sits his people down and gives them a dictionary definition. "A. Angel: spiritual beings who act as messengers of my Father. B. Baptism: the ceremony where . . ." Well, actually, we'd better leave that one for now. (As we'll see, there's a fair bit of disagreement as to who should be baptized—itself a covenant debate!) The problem with giving definitions is that you could usually give four or five different answers that would all be right. According to Wikipedia, a cow is a large domesticated ungulate of the subfamily Bovinae. According to my friend's three-year-old son Oscar, it's a big black and white thing that moos and makes milk. Both definitions would lead you to a decent understanding of the word "cow."

Similarly, the word "covenant" has been defined in a dozen different ways by Christians down the centuries. This is not the place to get into lengthy disputes as to whose description was the best. For our purposes, I'm going to suggest the following as a simple introductory definition that we'll nuance as we go along: **A covenant is a conditional promise.**

Or, to put a bit more flesh on the bones, particularly in regards to the biblical covenants: **A covenant is an agreement between God and human beings, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken.**

Honestly, you could pick a thousand holes in that definition and add in a thousand other things you'd like to see included.

But by far the best thing to do is to dive in and start looking at the covenants we actually meet in the Bible.

In the Beginning

Perfect. That's how we usually describe the world that God made right back in Genesis 1 and 2. And so it was, in many respects. Leaving aside the endlessly debated question of how long he took to do it, in these opening chapters of the Bible we see God making a beautiful world teeming with life.

Imagine the universe like a play in the theater. On the first three days, God created the scenery that would provide the backdrop to the action. Day one gives us light and darkness, day two separates the sky from the world, and day three sees splotches of land burst out to create continents amid the watery mass that was Earth. Having set the scene, God then turns his attention to the "actors," the characters who will fill each of the three stages he has crafted. So, the sun, moon, and stars are hurled on stage to control the light and darkness created on day one. Day two's scenery of sky and waters is filled with birds and fish on day five. Then on day six come the animals: creepy-crawlies, excitable dogs, herds of wildebeest, all to fill the land that erupted on day three. God is clearly a God who enjoys both forming and then filling empty spaces.

And so to the climax of day six: the creation of humankind. God makes man and woman in his image. We learn elsewhere in the Bible that God is spirit, so it's unlikely that the image of God refers literally to our physical features. Closer to the truth is the idea that we humans are created to reflect some of the character and responsibilities of God. This becomes clear in God's first words to humanity: "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the

heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:28).

God had just formed and filled a whole universe. Now, in their own small way, Adam and Eve were to do likewise. They were to “be fruitful”: get making lots more human beings, to form even more images of God. And these children and grandchildren weren’t all to stay cramped up in the garden in Eden, but to spill out into the rest of the world, to “fill the earth.” Form and fill, just like their Father God.

It’s pretty obvious from this first chapter that God didn’t just make the world; he also rules it. In fact, it’s precisely because he made it that he’s in charge. And so, unsurprisingly, as his little images, men and women are to rule too: over the animals, fish, and birds. That’s what it means to “have dominion.” Under God, they were to be king and queen of the world, caring for and ruling over it.

Which brings me to my first little quibble with describing the scene as perfect. If, by perfect, all we mean is that there was no sin, no disease, no death, no danger, then all’s well; after all, God himself pronounces that everything he made was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). But the one thing it wasn’t, was finished. There were still people to “create.” And did you notice that, as Adam and Eve’s family spread out to fill the earth, they would also have to *subdue* it? Subdue is not a word that suggests everything’s finished. It sounds very much as if Adam is going to have to do some work. Just in case we were in any doubt, God makes this very point in Genesis 2:15: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”

To work and to keep. Adam and Eve were meant to change the world, to improve it we might even say. Not, again, that anything was wrong. It’s just that as of yet horses hadn’t been

trained to pull ploughs. Crops were growing all over the place, rather than more fruitfully in well-managed fields. Trees needed to be chopped down to build houses, boats, carts: it would be tough to explore the whole world on foot! Similarly, it wouldn't do Adam any harm to nip down river into the land of Havilah and craft some of the gold and precious stones found there into a nice necklace for Eve. While he's away, perhaps Eve could carve out some bamboo stalks and begin work on the first-ever flute concerto. So much to do, so many possibilities.

The world that God handed over to Adam and Eve was not a dusty museum that needed to be preserved exactly as it was for millennia to come. No, it was an art gallery full of beautiful white canvases waiting to be made even more beautiful by hundreds of mini-artists created in the Great Artist's image.

These commands are sometimes referred to as the "cultural mandate." They remind us that our work, our families, our marriages, our art, our science are good gifts. They aren't sub-spiritual things to be indulged in during a guilty moment, all the while wondering if we shouldn't really be praying or evangelizing. They are (or should be) ways of making the earth more pleasant to live in, of loving our neighbor with the various gifts and roles God has given us.

Of course, alongside all these positive commands, there was one negative: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Genesis 2:16–17). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was off-limits. And hence, there was a way for Adam and Eve to ruin the wonderful world they'd been given. If they were to steal the fruit from this tree, they would be betraying God,

abandoning him as their King and Father, destroying the peace of the garden, and killing themselves in the process. This is the second reason why “perfect” is perhaps not the most useful word to describe the situation in Eden. At this stage, things weren’t complete—there was still the possibility of everything going horribly wrong . . .

The Covenant of Works

So far we could summarize the situation in Eden with 3 *p*’s: God’s people, in paradise, with God present.² But the set-up isn’t static—something was going to change. And here at last we come to the idea of covenant.

Remember, a covenant is **an agreement between God and human beings, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if they are broken.** This is what we see in Eden. The agreement, or conditions, are:

1. Positively, humans must obey God, including fulfilling the “cultural mandate”
2. Negatively, they must not take the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

The curse, if the conditions are broken, is spelled out with crystal clarity by God in Genesis 2:17: “You shall surely die.” But if covenants also include blessings if they’re kept, where do we see these in Genesis 1–2?

Most writers on the covenant have taught that, although it is not made absolutely explicit, there is a blessing promised: that if Adam had obeyed and kept the covenant for a certain period of time, he would have been rewarded. In the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck’s great phrase: “Adam stood at the beginning of his ‘career,’ not the end.”³ Is this just speculation?

Let me pick two of the arguments used to prove that this covenant with Adam, usually referred to as “the covenant of works,” had a reward attached.

The first is an argument from the nature of other covenants in the Bible. Whether it’s the covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai, David as he took the throne of Israel, or Jesus and the church in the New Testament, each has a reward as well as a curse. The basic agreement always follows the same pattern: here are the conditions; keep them and I’ll bless and reward you; break them and I’ll punish you. In Genesis 2, we may only read of the conditions and the curse, but it’s of the very nature of a covenant that there be a blessing involved too: curse and blessing are two sides of the covenant coin. In fact there are clues to this blessing in the garden itself. Alongside the tree of the knowledge of good and evil stands the tree of life. When Adam sins, he is banished from Eden “lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live for ever” (Genesis 3:22). Somehow this second tree is connected to the promise of eternal life, a gift taken out of Adam’s reach because of the fall, but presumably genuinely on offer had he remained faithful.

Second, as Paul looks back on the story of Adam, he sees a parallel between Adam and Jesus. In fact, so similar are they, at least in the way they relate to the rest of us, that Paul can say that Adam was “a type of the one who was to come” (Romans 5:14) or even call Jesus “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45). (We’ll explore this much more in future chapters, but for now we just need to note that Jesus is called the last Adam because he fulfills the conditions of the covenant that the first Adam broke.)

The significance of this dawns on us when we think of what Jesus won for us. If he earns for us a better reward than simply

winding back the clock and returning us to Eden in the same state as Adam, we'll find proof that there was always something greater on offer to humanity.

This is exactly what we do discover. It might seem that things are as good as they can get for Adam. After all, he's just been appointed king, is living in paradise, and has God as his Father. What reward could improve the situation Adam already finds himself in? Isn't Adam already perfect?

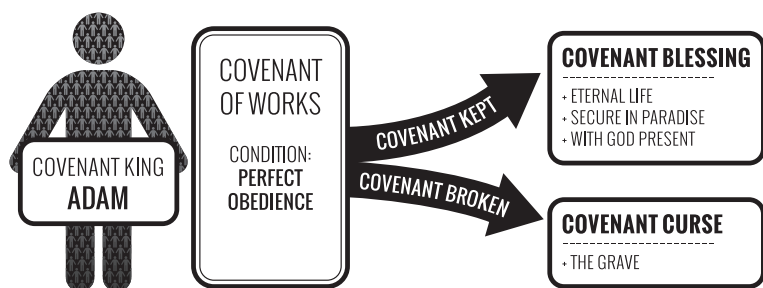
But wait a minute—we've already seen that "perfect" is a rather slippery term. Yes, Adam is sinless, without fault. In this regard, he is the same as every other part of creation: and that's exactly the point. Just as the world is spotless but capable of being further glorified, so too is Adam. And just as the world is capable of being corrupted and ruined, so too is Adam. In Eden, Adam is able not to sin. What could be better? It would be better for Adam to be unable to sin! Likewise, in Eden, Adam is able not to die. What could be better? It would be better to be unable to die!

In case that sounds like grammatical hair-splitting, think of yourself standing ready to take a penalty that would win England the next World Cup Final. The crowds are silent; your teammates and banks of photographers look on. Would you rather you were able to score or would you rather you were unable to miss? Surely, the latter every time! Or imagine yourself about to leap out of a plane for your debut parachute jump. Which would you rather hear from your instructor: "It's possible for you not to die here," or "It's impossible for you to die"? Again, a no-brainer. At the beginning of Genesis, Adam was able to score a spiritual goal, but also able to miss; able to live for ever, but also able to die.

Now, let's make the comparison with Jesus. According to 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus makes us alive in a way that Adam failed

to do. We know that when Jesus has finished saving us, we will be welcomed back into paradise. The difference is that this time there will be no possibility of things going wrong again. Jesus wins us the reward of eternal, un-spoilable righteousness, holiness, and life. We'll never miss a spiritual penalty, and never face eternal death. We will join him in glorious resurrection life. That is what was on offer to Adam too: if he had remained faithful, then one day the trumpets would have sounded and he would have been confirmed as eternally righteous, the test period over. He would be rewarded with a world and descendants without sin, suffering, tears, or temptation. A glorified world, in fact, that we won't meet again until Revelation 21. And in a glorified world, humanity is transformed to live in glorified bodies (1 Corinthians 15:42–49). As in all the best stories, the end will be better than the beginning.

But we've got ahead of ourselves. It's hard not to, given that Jesus himself said the Scriptures "speak about me" (John 5:39 GNT). But let's recap and summarize this first covenant: "the covenant of works." (Incidentally some people prefer to call it the "covenant of life," or the "covenant of creation." Take your pick—I'm using covenant of works because it seems to be the most common.)



The covenant was between God and Adam, with Adam also representing every other human.

The condition was perfect obedience: positively, to obey the cultural mandate, and negatively, not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This means Adam could break the covenant either by pinching the fruit or by sitting on his backside and doing nothing to obey God. Both would scar the image of the God role that he'd been given. An Adam who lied to his wife, refused to do any work, murdered his children, and ignored the worship of God, but who didn't eat the forbidden fruit, could hardly have protested that he hadn't broken the covenant.

The curse was clear: death.

And the blessing? Eternal, incorruptible life on a paradise earth, with God as Father and King, and with the potential to sin and die removed for ever.

But wait a minute, the word "covenant" isn't actually in Genesis 1–3. There are several reasons, however, why this isn't a huge problem.

First, have you ever heard anyone argue that Eve wasn't sinning in taking the fruit? I'd imagine not. But the word "sin" doesn't appear in Genesis 2–3. Nor for that matter do we meet any of the Bible's other words for sin, such as "transgression" or "iniquity." But the absence of a particular word is no argument for the absence of the idea, the reality for which the word is a convenient shorthand. So too covenant: word absent, reality present.

That brings me to the second reason: there are occasions later in the Bible where covenants are definitely being established but where the word is not used directly. Most famous is the covenant with David: the account of its formation is found in two places: 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, with neither passage containing the word "covenant." Yet later writers (such as the author of Psalm 89) are happy to reflect back on them

and refer to them as containing a covenant. This is a significant point: we need to let the Bible teach us how to interpret the Bible. We shouldn't be thrown off scent by the absence of a particular word, but instead learn to spot the Bible's own patterns. After all, the other relationship established in Eden, marriage, is later explicitly called a covenant in Malachi 2:14, yet likewise lacks the specific term in Genesis.⁴

Third, Hosea 6:7 seems to call the arrangement between God and Adam a covenant. Speaking about the later rebellion of the Israelites, God says,

But like Adam they transgressed the covenant;
there they dealt faithlessly with me.

Then, there's the parallel with Jesus, explained above. We know for sure that Jesus saves us and relates to us through a covenant: he says as much. It therefore makes sense that Adam's relationship to us is also covenantal. Finally, it's at the very least interesting that, when we do come across the word "covenant" for the first time with the story of Noah, the particular word used suggests that God is continuing rather than beginning to use covenants as his way of relating to humanity. Normally when a covenant is being initiated for the first time it is described as being "cut." But in Genesis 6:18 God "establishes" his covenant with Noah, the "continuity" word strongly suggesting that a covenant is already in place.⁵

All pretty clear, you'd have thought. But some people still seem to get jumpy about calling the arrangement between God and Adam a covenant. John Murray, otherwise a staunch defender of covenant theology, preferred to call it an "administration." Well, OK. I tend to think this is a bit like calling a cow a domesticated ungulate of the subfamily Bovinae. If it's

black, white, and moos, it's a cow. If you've got God, human beings, and conditions with an accompanying threat and an implied blessing, you've got a covenant.

So, imagine Adam and Eve as soft-clay figures, slowly hardening. One day, their final form would be set. The question was: would they harden with hands held aloft in worship of God, or become stony figures with fists raised in rebellion? The answer will have consequences not just for them, but for the history of humanity for centuries to come.

WHAT DO THE VARIOUS COVENANTS given throughout the Bible mean to us? Are they relevant to our lives? A rainbow now and then may remind us of God's promise to Noah, and we've memorized the part about the new covenant in Jesus' blood at Communion—but do we dig any deeper? Do we need to?

Jonty Rhodes guides us in an engaging study of covenant theology and why it matters. With clarity and wit, he shows us how *covenants carry the Bible's story from start to finish* and ultimately give root to the gospel of salvation by grace. Beginning with Adam in the garden of Eden, and ending with Jesus, our risen Covenant King, Rhodes illuminates the good news of a promise-making, promise-keeping God.

Key topics include law and grace, union with Christ, baptism in the Spirit, predestination, and water baptism. Rediscover the Bible's unified covenantal story and its unfolding message throughout Scripture.

"I hope that this little book will help many to see the beauty of the biblical covenants and their relevance for God's people today."

—**CARL R. TRUEMAN**, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History,
Westminster Theological Seminary

"With all sorts of proposals about the 'big idea' of Scripture floating about, Jonty Rhodes does us the favour of pointing to the Bible's own answer to that question. . . . Jonty's work is clear-headed and heart-warming, satisfyingly biblical and Christ-exalting. I warmly commend it."

—**LIAM GOLIGHER**, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church,
Philadelphia

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Cover images: top: "Expulsion of Adam and Eve," bottom: "The Resurrection of Jesus" from *Die Bibel in Bildern* (Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Julius, 1794–1872). Courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

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