

Book Review

The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine

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It is probably not an exaggeration to say that 2020 marks a significant milestone for covenant theology in general, and particularly for the covenant of works,¹ including two monographs published in the Oxford Studies in Historical Theology series—one by Harrison Perkins, *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works*; the other by John Fesko, *The Covenant of Works*. The latter work, in my estimation, would become a major go-to resource on this particular doctrine in the years to come.

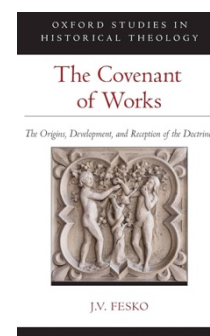
How so? Covenant of works, the idea that God instituted a covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden (see e.g., Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2), has long been understood not only as a parochial Reformed doctrine but also as something foreign to the Scriptures. Not only has this doctrine often been heavily criticized in the eyes of numerous contemporary biblical scholars due to the lack of explicit mention in the opening chapters of Genesis and the only clear yet not uncontroversial reference in Hosea 6:7, but even many Reformed theologians like Karl Barth, Herman Hoeksema, John Murray, James Torrance, Anthony Hoekema, among others, found it wanting though for variety of reasons. Against such narrative, Fesko sets out to prove otherwise: “Despite its negative reception in the twentieth century, early modern Reformed theologians of the Reformation (1517–65), Early Orthodoxy (1565–1640), and High Orthodoxy (1640–1700) constructed the doctrine in an exegetically careful manner by collating numerous biblical texts to conclude that God created Adam and entered into a covenantal relationship with him” (p. 2). Further, and more boldly, Fesko attempts to show that the covenant of works “was not a de novo creation of Reformed theology but has pedigree in ancient church, with broad exegetical

¹See the recent massive volume by Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reed, and John R. Muether (eds.), *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

Book Title

The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine

Front Cover



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footing, and serves as the nexus for a number of key theological loci, including anthropology, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology” (p. 2).

The first chapter contains the most significant contribution of Fesko’s overall project, as it demonstrates that the covenant of works originates in “the earliest days of the church, not in the sixteenth century as some historians suggest” (p. 11), and thus highlighting the catholicity of the doctrine. Working under a “cradle view of history,” Fesko shows that the seeds that would eventually grow into what we know as the covenant of works already exist in the patristic writings such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, Lactantius, Augustine, Jerome, and the medievals like Rupert of Deutz, Hugh of St. Victor, Nicholas of Lyra, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus. Moreover, Fesko provides the unacknowledged contributions of early modern Roman Catholic theologians like Diego Lañez and Ambrogio Catharinus during the Council of Trent, where both mentioned the twofold covenant with Adam and Christ. Fesko then examines indications of the covenant of works in the first-generation reformers like Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, and William Tyndale, and the second-generation reformers like John Calvin, Wolfgang Musculus, Zacharias Ursinus, and Caspar Olevianus. These explications give us reasons why the covenant of works is an indispensable doctrine to these theologians: not only because the covenant of works has sure exegetical footings in the Old and New Testament alike, but it also has a strong theological motivation underlying its development, especially in making sense of the imputation of Adam’s sin and guilt to his descendants.

In chapter 2, Fesko turns to an exposition of one important yet somewhat neglected Scottish Reformed theologian, Robert Rollock. Rollock is presented as a “transitional theologian” who develops a robust doctrine of the covenant of works, including one of the first who connects it to the federalist view of the

transmission of original sin. One historical contribution from Fesko here concerns the sources from whom Rollock developed the doctrine, where Rollock most probably did not just rely on Reformed sources but also quite heavily on Roman Catholic sources, especially Catharinus. Fesko further traces Rollock’s influence on many subsequent theologians after him, which then receives more extensive treatments in the following chapters—James Cameron and Edward Leigh (ch. 5) and many of the Westminster divines (ch. 6).

Chapter 3 is perhaps surprising to many contemporary Reformed people as it features the Remonstrant Dutch theologian, Jacob Arminius. Although not without some subtle nuances and differences (see pp. 52–57), Arminius certainly defended a version of the covenant of works, which is largely influenced by his colleagues at the University of Leiden: Franciscus Junius, Franciscus Gomarus, and Lucas Trelcatius. It is also worth noting that Leiden became one of the major breeding grounds for subsequent Reformed figures like Gisbert Voetius, Francis Turretin, and Herman Witsius in propelling the reception of the doctrine. Chapter 4 also features an unlikely ally, Archbishop James Ussher of the Church of England, who is an important figure behind the drafting of the 1615 Irish Articles, a document that stands behind the development of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). Ussher himself undergoes a significant change of view regarding the transmission of original sin, from a more Augustinian realist view to federalism which sounds very close to those Reformed views in his period like Rollock’s and many more.

In the next two chapters, which cover the High Orthodoxy period, Fesko first discusses the Westminster Standards (ch. 6) by highlighting both the background influences of the formation of covenant theology in the confession and catechisms (e.g., Cameron and Ussher and the Irish Articles), and the significant role of the divines present during the assembly like Samuel Rutherford, Anthony Burgess, Tho-

mas Goodwin, and George Walker. Fesko further shows that while the divines do not present a uniform doctrine of the covenant of works, they nevertheless successfully codified the basic and necessary elements of the doctrine in the confessional documents, thus leaving some theological flexibilities for various interpretations of the documents (e.g., whether Adam's reward was temporal or eternal; the exact relationship between the Adamic and Mosaic covenants; or whether the imputation of Adam's guilt is immediate or mediate). Chapter 7 further demonstrates that those issues by and large received a more precise treatment in the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) by Francis Turretin and Johannes Heidegger in response to various issues brought up by theologians of the French Academy at Saumur. Articles VII to XVI of the *Formula* specifically argue for the validity of the covenant of works, eternal life as Adam's reward, immediate imputation, and how the covenant of works is essential to the covenant of grace.

The eighteenth century, however, marks “a period of deconfessionalization, denominational disintegration, and theological stagnation” (p. 137), which caused significant weakening of the reception of the covenant of works (ch. 8). Nevertheless, Fesko underscores the contribution of Thomas Boston in promoting the doctrine among his contemporaries, including the traces of the influence of Rollock, the Westminster Standards, and Witsius in Boston's formulation and his role in the Marrow controversy. Eventually, when doctrinal indifference to (Reformed) orthodoxy culminated in the nineteenth century (ch. 9), critics of the covenant of works “no longer deemed the doctrine superfluous but exegetically and theologically erroneous” (p. 155). Fesko perceptively notes three major impetuses for why it was so: (1) rejection of the Reformed theological and interpretive principles—especially the good and necessary consequence in extrapolating various doctrines from Scripture, replacing it with naïve bib-

licist tendencies; (2) rejection of scholasticism, thus charging the Reformed proponents of the covenant of works as relying more on reason and argumentation than exegesis; and (3) rejection of the basic understanding of covenant as an *agreement*, redefining it with the covenant as “disposition, appointment, and promise” (p. 155). Despite that, Fesko brings to the fore John Colquhoun, whose detailed treatment of the covenant of works was impressive in a strongly intimidating context for his positive defense of the doctrine.

Lastly, Fesko moves on to the twentieth century (ch. 10) to show some similar (and additional) patterns of rejections of the covenant of works primarily though not equally in the works of Karl Barth, Herman Hoeksema, and John Murray, while singling out Geerhardus Vos as the premier covenant theologian and his interactions with notable figures like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof. Vos's treatment of the covenant of works under anthropology, original sin, and redemption stresses the interconnectedness of the doctrine to other doctrinal loci. Another notable contribution of Fesko's work includes his detailed analysis of how one's methodology (e.g., exegesis, historical knowledge, theological and philosophical commitments) determines one's reception of the covenant of works (pp. 200–211, 213–215).

Fesko has written a first-rate historical work promoting the covenant of works for the twenty-first century. Several minor comments and suggestions regarding Fesko's overall project can be given. First, some of the chapter titles appear too narrowly put. For example, chapter 1 covers more than just “The Reformation,” and chapters 8 and 9 feature more than “Thomas Boston” and “John Colquhoun” respectively. Perhaps putting it in broader terms would be slightly more accurate (e.g., ch. 10 is not just entitled “Geerhardus Vos”). Second, Fesko's treatment of some of the patristic figures could have been expanded to dispel any impression of hasty inferen-

cing and anachronism (e.g., treatments of Clement, Eusebius, and Lactantius on p. 13). This omission should have been avoided in the section where Fesko is arguing for something quite controversial—that the seeds of the covenant of works are present in these early figures. Third, Fesko should have incorporated more from Herman Bavinck to press further his thesis that the covenant of works “serves as the nexus for a number of key theological loci, including anthropology, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology”—for Bavinck would serve as an excellent example for it.²

I conclude with two further notes for future improvements for those interested in retrieving and developing the doctrine of the covenant of works: (1) one should focus on demonstrating how the covenant of works can be seen as irreducibly biblical (as exemplified nicely in Daniel Block’s recent meticulous work³); (2) one should put the patristic seeds of the doctrine into dialogue with authoritative scholarship on the specific area of studies—e.g., whether Augustine scholars would accept Fesko’s judgment that statements in his *City of God* 16.27 can be deemed as the covenant of works *in nuce*).

²See e.g., Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Nathaniel Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 18, no. 2 (April 2016): 174–90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12138>.

³Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God’s Grand Plan of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021). Fesko did write another volume on the same topic, nevertheless without the kind of exegetical acumen which Block exemplified. Cf. J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2021).