PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT AND THE ENGLISH BIBLE

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ABSTRACT. The paper shows how the important theological and Anglo-biblical term ‘Covenant’ was formulated in the course of successive biblical translations, from the original Hebrew and Greek to the King James Bible. It suggests that the use of the term in English biblical versions reflected – and in turn propelled – the increasingly prominent Covenant theology. Once coined in the vernacular Scriptures, moreover, the term was applied to religious political alliances: from the Scottish Covenants of the 1590s to the English Solemn League and Covenant, 1644, studied in the paper.

On 5 February 1643/4, the English parliament assembled in Westminster and ordered a special oath to be ‘solemnly taken’.¹ The ‘Solemn League and Covenant’, ratified by the Scottish Convention of Estates, and partially enacted in England since the autumn of 1643, was now to be enforced throughout the realm. The entire mechanism of the English state was to be put into action to facilitate the making of the oath.² Within six days, ‘true Copies’ of the document were to reach the provinces. Local committees were to receive them in the counties and the boroughs, and to dispatch them to the parishes. Each minister, churchwarden and constable within each and every parish was to be delivered a copy in person; a certificate was devised to attest for the receipt, and a clerk appointed in London to collect the records flowing from the provinces. At the next stage, all clergymen were required to read the ‘said Covenant publikely’, in their local churches and chapels, and prepare their congregations for


² For the relation between the centre and localities, see esp. e.g. A. Fletcher, Reform in the Provinces: The Government of Stuart England (New Haven and 1986); M. Braddick, State Formation in Early Modern England (Cambridge, 2000); S. Hindle, The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640 (Basingstoke, 2000).
making the oath by the following Sunday. In the next days, the clergymen and local officers themselves were to travel to provincial centres and subscribe to the oath there, following which they were to return and complete the arrangements. On the designated Sunday, all men ‘above the age of eighteen’ were to assemble in the local church or chapel, including not only settled inhabitants but lodgers who happened to be in the place. A special sermon was to be delivered, and the full text of the Covenant was to be read ‘distinctly and audibly’ from the pulpit. During the entire time that the Covenant was read, the men were to stand on their feet, ‘uncovered’ (that is, their hats humbly removed), until the time came for them to pronounce the crucial words. Then, they were to lift their right hand – bare, with no glove to shield the flesh from God’s sight and from one’s neighbour’s gaze. Having declared the oath, they were to subscribe to it, whether by ‘writing their names’ on a roll or in a book, or by placing ‘their marks, to which their names were to be added’. Parishes were to deposit the written records for safekeeping, as they kept other important deeds and bonds. At the same time, they were to report in writing the names of those who refused to subscribe.

As Edward Vallance explained in 2001, this English ‘Solemn League and Covenant’ was much more than a marriage of convenience with the Scots during a time of trouble. While the ‘Covenant’ rolls, still kept in archives, attest to the extent to which the order was carried out, personal records suggest that it was extremely seriously undertaken. The contractual individual obligation was binding. Breaking the oath was perjury. The bond postulated a formal boundary around the community of faith, as well as the body politic, still couched at that stage firmly in terms of loyalty to the king. This was, moreover, a matter of confessional identity: a Protestant notion of Christendom was embedded in the very formulation of the oath, while copies were immediately dispatched to Protestant churches worldwide. The alignment with the Scots swung the war in favour of parliament and against the king. From the religious perspective, it propelled the confessional landslide that marked the Godly revolt. The political and religious dimensions of the Solemn League and Covenant are widely studied. What were the broader cultural and ideological resonances, however, that helped it to achieve such purchase? This article investigates the provenance of these important notions.

5 Ibid., 69.
One immediate context to mention is the preceding Scottish National Covenant (culminating in the Bishops’ Wars, 1639–40) in which several strands had come together: objection to the religious policies of Charles I, defence against the English intruder, millenarian notions, as well as a strong notion of a special pact between ‘God and his people in the Covenant of Grace’ in Scotland, then in England. Not less important was the notion of ‘covenant’ in the contemporary theology. Lexical evidence suggests its enhanced development from the first decades of the sixteenth century through the latter decades, and its propagation thereafter. The first explicit formulation of a pre-fall ‘covenant of works’ dates to 1585. The covenant theology then swiftly made its way in broadly disseminated tracts, such as catechisms, as Ian Green has shown. By the 1640s, it had achieved prominence to the point that it was incorporated into the official Westminster Confession. Yet another, and at that time closely related, idea concerns banding. The use of oaths to cement allegiances between peoples and leaders is both ancient and widespread; however, under the influence of the covenant theology it came to acquire a new revolutionary thrust. On the Scottish side, the ‘Covenant’ was perceived as a renewal


8 R. Letham, The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context (Pittsburgh, 2001), 112. Early reformed theologians such as Bucer, Musculus and Bullinger extensively considered Adam, yet not in terms of ‘covenant’ (perhaps owing to the absence of a literal mention of a covenant with Adam in Genesis). The theology of William Perkins (d. 1602) was influential in England in seeing Adam as bound by ‘covenant’ and representative of humankind, e.g.: ‘he was the Father of vs all: and was not a pri\|ate man as wee are now, but a publike person . . . what covenant God made with him, was made for him[sel|f & vs’: M. W. Perkins, A Faithfull and Plaine Exposition vpon the 2. Chapter of Zephaniah by that Reuerend and Judicious Divine, M.W. Perkins. Containing a Powerful Exhortation to Repentance: As Also the Manner howe Men in Repentance Are to Search Themselves (1609), p. 36; Green, The Christian’s ABC, esp. 403–11.


of earlier bonds made in 1572, 1581, 1590 and 1596; from 1590, the term ‘covenant’ was explicitly employed in describing the renewed religious and political allegiance. On the English side, the Solemn League and Covenant was heralded by the Protestation Oath, ordered in 1641, and the Vow and Covenant, taken by members of the two houses of parliament in June 1643.

Lastly, two additional highly resonant notions to mention here – and which concern me in particular – are to do with the Bible and the language of the law. Both – I suggest – are also tied to the English literate culture, already touched upon while describing the making of the oath. At the point that the Scots and the English were discussing their covenant, they had already before them, for example, the canonical King James Bible, in which the word ‘covenant’ appeared more than 270 times in the Old Testament alone, designating an array of agreements, including not least the crucial agreements between God and His chosen people. As well as that, they could find the term in the popular Geneva Bible, both in the text and copious notes; that Bible had appeared by then in at least 140 editions since its initial publication in 1557. Scottish households were required to purchase a copy; if they had the means; in England, Bible ownership had increased tenfold between 1570 and 1630, proportionally the highest rate in Europe. A brief glance at the Scottish and English documents reveals how resonant this biblical language of ‘covenant’ had become. Beyond the manifestation of the term in the very titles of the Scottish and English documents, the Scottish form was headed by four phrases...
from the Scriptures; the English by three, carefully edited, and from the Hebrew Bible alone. The first suggested that a ‘perpetual covenant’ was to be made (at this point the words ‘to the Lord’ had been subtly removed from the King James version of Jer. 50:5, which gave the impression that it was the present covenant that the text may have ordained). Another citation confirmed that ‘all Judah rejoiced at the oath’.

The aim of the oath was indeed to make a covenant so that ‘the Lord may be one, and His name one’ not in ‘all the land’, as originally prophesised in Zach. 14:9, but, as paraphrased in the oath: in the ‘three kingdoms’. The plea – again, paraphrasing Zach. 1 – was that the Lord ‘may turn away His wrath and heavy indignation’ and let the three kingdoms dwell in peace. One can hardly imagine a more integrated political manifestation of a scriptural notion of ‘covenant’, typical of the contemporary culture of the Bible, widely appreciated by scholars.

Yet, how did this language of ‘covenant’ become so dominant in the vernacular Bible? It is at this point that we reach the common law. The primary meaning of the term ‘covenant’, technically employed since the Norman Conquest, was indeed a legal contract, stemming from the Latin conventio. While the term could historically be applied to general agreements or conditions within them (often relating specifically to leases and rents), it designated especially written contracts made under sign and seal, a usage dating back to the 1330s and undoubtedly known to the parliamentarians of the 1600s, who were educated and dealt habitually with matters of the law.

When the Restoration regime enacted the Statute of Fraud, the demand for any covenant to be written had become

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18 Chron. 15:15, Several phrases were added at that point to the English version highlighting, among other things, that covenant is to obtain peace: ‘and the Lord gave them rest among them’. Note also the second phrase ‘Take away the wicked from before the King: and his Throne shall be established in righteousness’, Prov. 25:5. The fourth citation from Gal. 3:15, which appeared in the Scottish document, was taken not from KJV but from the Geneva Bible, which still included the word ‘testament’ at that point, and where the words ‘on the oath’, were added.


20 70 per cent of MPs in 1640–2 had attended either the Inns of Court or one of the universities, 55 per cent the Inns of Courts, and many who attended the universities also proceeded for a period at the Inns of Court, as the legal profession was expanding and the law was generally considered an important accomplishment for a gentleman. Both the universities and the Inns of Court had by that time expanded to attract unprecedented numbers from among the gentry and middling ranks; see esp. L. Stone, ‘The Educational Revolution in England’, Past and Present, 28 (1964), 41–80, esp. table 8, 63; W. Prest, ‘Legal Education of the Gentry at the Inns of Court, Past and Present, 38 (1976), 20–39; and see e.g. L. Stone, ‘The Size and Composition of the Oxford Student Body 1580–1909’, in The University in Society, ed. Lawrence Stone (2 vols., Princeton, 1974), e.g. 1, 24–8, table 4.1, 93; F. Heal and C. Holmes, The gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700 (Stanford, 1994), esp. e.g. 133–4; R. O’Day, The professions in early modern England, 1450–1800 (Harlow, 2000).
a legal requirement, still valid today. In 1643/4, this was already a widely accepted practice.\footnote{21}

It was this legal concept, I suggest, that was increasingly applied over time not only in religious and political discourses, but in the very language of biblical translation. If the language of ‘covenant’ had become progressively more dominant in the theological and political vocabulary of our period, a similar process – I suggest – can be discerned in the English Scriptures themselves. One reason why the English Bible had become so popular – as I argued elsewhere – was because it was not simply translated, but also (to use a contemporary verb) ‘Englished’. The term ‘covenant’ provides us with an interesting case of ‘Englishing’, which both preceded the widespread currency of the theological and political language of covenanting, and in time reflected it, if not propelled it. Indeed, one could even go as far as suggesting that the very notion of ‘covenant’, as it was coined in the British political and religious culture by the 1640s, was rooted not necessarily in the Bible itself, but in a unique interface that emerged through the processes of translation. An appropriate place to start, then, would be the translation history of the term ‘covenant’. It is to this particular case study of translation and polemics that we now turn.

The word *berit* (or *berith, b’rit, bḕrit,*\footnote{22} plural *beritot*) appears in the Hebrew Bible to designate a range of treaties and pacts, whether between two equal parties who agree to support one another, or, most often, between unequal parties, as the weak agrees to serve the strong and the strong to protect the weak.\footnote{23} The biblical *beritot* include an alliance of friendship between individuals (e.g. the *berit* between David and Jonathan, 1 Sam. 18:3); symbolic treaties between larger parties (such as the *berit* between Abraham and Abimilech, Gen. 21:32; Isaac and Abimelech, Gen. 26:28; or Jacob and Laban, Gen. 31:44);\footnote{24} as well as treaties between heads of nations (e.g. Josh. 9:6,11), and even a treaty between the nation and its elected monarch (2 Sam. 3:21, 5:3; 2 Chron. 23:3). A range of biblical treaties are similarly contracted between God and humankind, and between God and his chosen people and select leaders amongst them. God’s *berit* with Noah thus extended to a treaty with humankind following the Deluge (Gen. 6:18, 9:8–17), while several *beritot* enshrine the reciprocal commitment between God and the people of Israel, starting from the *berit* with Abraham and his seed, the *berit* for the possession of the land and

\footnote{21} Ch. II c. 3, see the law with current amendments: www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Chaz2/29/3 accessed December 2011. See also e.g. A. P. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), esp. ch. 5.

\footnote{22} Tyrb: my transliteration here as elsewhere follows the modern Hebrew pronunciation.


\footnote{24} Ibid., 348.
the treaty surrounding the deliverance from the Egyptian slavery and the giving of the Law. God’s commitment to the house of David is mentioned likewise as a berit (Pss. 89: 3–4, 26–37; 132: 11–18). Prophetic notions of deliverance are also coined in the language of berit (e.g. in Jer. 31), while the berit between God and Israel is seen as subject to renewal – such ideas became in time important in Christian readings.

At the heart of the various beritot is a solemn oath, which is uttered verbally. Another important feature concerns the manner of transaction. The biblical treaty, in its most usual form, is neither signed nor sealed (in the manner of the English covenant); nor is it imagined as a tied ‘bond’, let alone a bilateral written one. Rather, the biblical treaty is ‘cut’ (indicated with derivations from the root k-r-t). The sacrifice of animals is often implied or presented.²⁵ As well as that, the berit is signalled by tokens, some of which themselves invoke the notion of ‘cutting’: the dissection of animals, sprinkling blood and even cutting the flesh as in the act of circumcision (Gen. 15:9–11, 17; Gen. 17; Exod. 24:8; Ps. 50:5).²⁶ A curse or a sanction against the breaking of the treaty is manifested at times in the synonym ‘alah, which signified both a berit and the curse levied against its breach (Gen. 26:28; Ezek. 16:59, 17:18; Deut. 29:11, 13). The punishment for breaching the berit is conveyed with the use of the same root ‘to cut’ (k-r-t), indicating the removal of the transgressor from amongst the living.²⁷ The ritual of cutting and the sprinkling of the blood convey a threat – what might happen to the person who breaks the oath. Written documents mentioned in the context of berit contain principal testimonials and instructions (e.g. sefer ha-berit, ‘the book of the covenant’, in Ex. 24:7, divrei ha-berit, ‘the words of the covenant’ in 34:28; or luhot ha-berit, ‘the tables of the covenant’, Deut. 9:9). Yet, the berit itself is rooted essentially in the rites and ritual of an oral culture, characterised by verbal oaths and agreements attested by symbolic deeds.²⁸


²⁶ Other tokens included commemorative stones (Gen. 31:44–54), extending the hand (Ezek. 17:18) or eating shared food (Josh. 9:14), which itself can form a part of the solemn ritual of contraction.

²⁷ E.g. ve-nikhretah ha-nefesh, Gen. 17:14.

²⁸ Tadmor, ‘Treaty and oath’.
English translators struggled with this complex notion from the very outset. The range of terms employed by them to designate the biblical *beritot* include, among others, ‘bond’ or ‘boond’, ‘bond of peace’, ‘token of a bond of pees’, ‘sign of a bond of peace’, ‘appointment’ or ‘pointment’, ‘testament’, ‘league’, ‘covenant’ or ‘covenantant of peace’, and various others. The Anglo-biblical term ‘covenant’, as seen above to have been employed around the middle decades of the seventeenth century, was the outcome of decades if not centuries of translation and revision. An important source of complexity, moreover (in addition to the broad remit of the Hebrew *berit* and its cultural features) was the influence of the ancient Greek and Latin biblical versions, which continued to serve both as mediating texts and as sources for translation in their own right.

The first medieval English vernacular Bible, the Wyclifite Bible, closely followed the Vulgate, where *pactum* and *foedus* appeared interchangeably corresponding with the Hebrew *berit*: while the one could be rendered as ‘bond’ or ‘bond of peace’, the other was coined as ‘covenant’ or ‘covenant of peace’, and the two also appeared interchangeably. Beyond that, the term ‘testament’ was employed, corresponding with the Latin *testamentum*, which preceded and complemented the Vulgate’s *pactum* and *foedus* (in line with the Greek *diathēkē*, first employed in the Septuagint to correspond with *berit* and subsequently in the Christian Scriptures, echoing *berit*); this usage remained habituated in Old Testament English contexts particularly in the language of the Psalms. *Zot beriti* (this is my treaty, Gen. 17:10) in the early and Latinate Wyclifite version (*c.* 1384), for example, was thus conveyed with the phrase ‘covenant of pees’, corresponding with *hoc est pactum meum*, while *le’ot berit* (as a sign of the treaty) in the next verse became ‘token of a bond of pees’ agreeing with *signum foederis*. 29 In Ps. 43:18 (Masoretic Text 44:17) *berit* was rendered as ‘testament’. Similar usages remained in the later Wyclifite version (*c.* 1395) with some variations, and at times greater unity. The important allegiance between God and Abraham in Gen. 17, for example, remained ‘bond of pees’, otherwise unified as ‘covenant’. God’s contract with man following the Deluge was also named ‘boond of pees’, 30 as was the contract made by Abraham with Abimelech, or the crucial ‘bond’ between God and his chosen people in Deut. 5. 31 Elsewhere, the same

30 Wyc. LV, Gen. 9:12–17.
31 Wyc. LV, Gen. 21:32; Deut. 5:2–3, 9:11, 15.
relation was described as ‘covenant’, yet on the whole the mentions of ‘covenant’ in the revised Wyclifite text had declined.

When William Tyndale came to translate the Pentateuch around the late 1520s (in the spirit of the Reformation, not from the Latin Vulgate but from the original Hebrew), he thus faced a complex vernacular tradition. Although early notions of a covenant theology, which had developed in Zurich in particular, may have reached England through Tyndale, he evidently did not readily endorse the biblical ‘covenant’ terminology in his translation work. One can only wonder what the reason might have been: perhaps the legalistic resonance of the term did not always strike the right note; perhaps the literary cadence interfered; perhaps he wished to distance himself from the Wyclifite Bible; perhaps he was disturbed by a possible association with a Latinate rendition; and perhaps he was concerned that ‘covenant’ was too removed from the crucial Greek term, διαθήκη, employed since the dawn of Christianity, yet most simply meaning not treaty or pact but last will and testament.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that ‘the 16th c. English versions at length used covenant entirely in OT’. Examining Tyndale’s rendition, the rule hardly applies. Tyndale employed the term ‘covenant’ sparingly, more in explanatory comments and notes than in the text itself. Within it, he preferred the terms ‘pointment’, ‘appointment’ and ‘testament’, as well as ‘bond’, which he employed alongside ‘covenant’. His glossary, which he appended to his first rendition of Genesis, explained: ‘Testame[n]t here is an appoynteme[n]t made betwene god and ma[n], and goddes promyse. And sacrame[n]t is a signe representinge soch an appoynt[ment] and promeses’. In describing the berît between Abraham and God in Gen. 15, 17, for example, he thus used ‘bond’, ‘covenant’ and ‘testament’ alternately. Interchangeability can be seen in the following passage.

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32 E.g. Wyc. LV, Deut. 7: 9, 12, 8:18, 9:9, cf. 5:2–3; see also ‘to couenaunt’, Wyc. EV, Isa. 42:6.
33 The Pentateuch of the LV shows a decline of about one third, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings show a decline of nearly a half.
34 First printed 1530, New Testament fully printed 1526.
35 See e.g. Green, *The Christian’s ABC*, p. 404.
37 The term ‘bond’ was increasingly relegated to represent negative ties such as slavery and bondage, see Tadmor, *The Social Universe of the English Bible*, ch. 3.
39 William Tyndale (Pentateuch, Jonah and New Testament), 1530–4: machine-readable transcript, reproducing *Tyndale’s Pentateuch* (1530) (Tyn.), Gen. 15:18, 17:2, 4, 7, 9–11, 13–14. See e.g. Tyn. Deut. 7:9, 12; and ‘appoyntment’ and ‘tables of appointment’, e.g., Deut. 5:3,
from Lev. 26:42–5, where four terms are employed corresponding with the Hebrew berit (my accentuation):

And I will remembre my bonde with Iacob and my testamet with Isaac, and my testament with Abraham, and will thincle on the londe . . . I will not so cast them awaye . . . that I will vttelie destroye the[m] a[n]d breake myne appointment with them . . . I will therfore remebre vnto the[m] the first couenaunt made when I broughte them out of the lond of Egipte.

Tyndale’s rendition of important ecclesiastical words such as ‘elder’ rather than ‘priest’, or ‘congregation’ instead of ‘church’, was the subject of a great deal of public disputation. His creative rendition of berit sailed with little notice, and was changed more by friends than by foes. However, while Tyndale’s seminal rendition was absorbed into subsequent English versions to the point that 76 per cent of the King James Old Testament is still estimated to be based on Tyndale, his translation of berit was by and large revised. By the time that the covenanters were lifting their right hand to the Lord, their heads bowed in reverence, it was the legal term ‘covenant’ that won the day.

In the first instance, however, the Tyndalian understanding of berit was in fact absorbed into the first vernacular Bible to be issued in England with the approval of Henry VIII, ironically less than a year after Tyndale’s martyrdom: the ‘Thomas Matthew’ version, prepared by Tyndale’s disciple, John Rogers. There, the term ‘covenant’ was employed more than 130 times in the text and the notes of the Old Testament. Clearly,
the faithful pupil, Rogers, allowed himself to review the translation of *berit*, whether to gloss Tyndale’s ‘boke of the appointment’ and ‘blood of the apoyntment’ in Exod. 24, to clarify the ‘tabernacle of the witness’ in Exod. 27, or to add three headings in the Book of Genesis, bearing the word ‘covenant’, that did not appear in Tyndale’s early edition. The key prophecy in Jer. 31 was introduced by him using the two significant terms together ‘The newe Testament and couenaunt’. This terminology was incorporated in the next decade into the first English authorised version, the Great Bible, published in 1539, which therefore retained terminological diversity. If the Tyndalian rendition of *berit* was revised, it was not for want of dissemination and recognition. However, by that time another disciple, Miles Coverdale, though strongly leaning on Tyndale, had raked over the semantic field of *berit* to produce a greater unity of the language of ‘covenant’.

Scholars wonder to what extent the Yorkshire born clergyman, Miles Coverdale, had before him the Wyclifite text as he was preparing his version of the English Bible. If so, his extensive use of ‘covenant’ may have been a discreet bow to the native Lollard tradition. Equally important may have been the influence of the reformer Heinrich Bullinger, one of the forefathers of covenant theology, with whom Coverdale corresponded, and whose work he translated and popularised in England. Most important, however, was possibly the influence of the several English editions (which contain adaptations) bear different titles, and vary in length: H. Bullinger, *The Christian State Of Matrimonye . . .*, trans. M. Coverdale (Antwerp, 1541); Bullinger, *The Golde[n] Boke of Christen Matrimonye . . . Set Forthe in English by Theodore Basille*, trans. M. Coverdale (1543; 1st edn 1541). The treatise was reissued in 1548, entitled ‘The Christian state of matrimony: and how man and wife should kepe house together with love’, within a three-part volume entitled *The Christen Rule or State of All the Worlde from the Hyghest to the Lowest and how Every Man Shulde Lyue to Please God in Hys Callynge*, containing


Gen. 9, 21 and 31. Daniell notes that Tyndale edited such usages in his 1534 version to reinforce the term ‘covenant’, having ‘thought himself through into a more full-blooded Protestant covenant theology’. Yet, revisions remained inconsistent in Genesis and were not extended through the 1534 Pentateuch, where considerable variation was retained: Tyndale’s Old Testament: Being the Pentateuch of 1530, Johan to 2 Chronicles of 1537, and Jonah, ed. D. Daniell (New Haven, 1992), xxii–xxiii, and references there; The Firste Boke of Moses Called Genesis Newly Correctyd and Amendyd by W[illiam].T[yndale]. (Antwerp, 1534).

*Berit* was rendered alternately in the Great Bible at Gen. 17, for example, as ‘bond’, ‘testament’ and ‘everlasting testament’, and the TM prelude to Jer. 31 was reproduced, see the Great Bible, 1540: a machine-readable transcript, reproducing *The Byble in Englyshe, that is to Saye the Contet of Al the Holy Scrypture both of Ye Olde, and Newe T estamet, with a Prologe Therinto, Made by the Reuerende Father in God, Thomas Archbysshop of Cantorbury, This Is the Byble Apoynted to the Vse of the Churches* (1540) (GB).


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Luther’s Bible, which Coverdale employed as he was doing his translation work. Be that as it may, Coverdale’s Bible, issued in 1535, contained a large number of usages of ‘covenant’ in the Old Testament, with over seventy in the Pentateuch alone, more than sixfold their number in Tyndale. These largely corresponded with Luther’s use of ‘Bund’ in the Old Testament (and ‘Testament’ in the New).

When the Geneva Bible was issued by pious exiles (prepared, among others, by the same Miles Coverdale, by that time in his sixties), awareness of the Hebrew had considerably expanded and with it the theology of ‘covenant’. The total mentions of ‘covenant’ in the Old Testament rose by that time overall, including nearly eighty mentions in the Pentateuch text itself, as well as numerous notes reinforcing the idea not only of covenant, but of covenant and grace. A related transition, which took place at the same time, was the division of the semantic field of the Hebrew berit into ‘covenant’ and ‘league’. Perhaps because of the increasing significance of ‘covenant’ in the religious discourse, as well as its solemn contractual resonance, translators felt that it was inappropriate for designating certain man-made beritot. The part-synonym ‘league’, first employed in two instances in the Great Bible (at Isa. 33), was applied in the Geneva Bible most notably in reference to problematic beritot, such as the berit between Joshua and the deceitful Gibeonites, which promised them protection under false pretences (Geneva Josh. 9: 6, 7 11, 14–16), or the

also chapters from Tyndale’s 1528 tract. Bullinger’s name does not appear on any of the English editions of his treatise. The name on the title pages of the first English editions is ‘Translated by Myles Coverdale’. Some editions contain a second preface by the popular polemicist Thomas Becon. Two bear the name ‘T. Basille’, Becon’s pseudonym. Becon, one of the most widely read English polemicists of the period, is claimed to have boasted that the publisher affixed his name to the Bullinger–Coverdale treatise so as to increase sales. See also references to Coverdale’s adaptation of Bullinger’s treatise in D. Cressy, Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion and Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England (Oxford, 1997), 271, 277, 294, 297, 350–2.


Biola Unbound Bible, http://unbound.biola.edu/ containing, among others, Luther’s Bible (1545); online-bibeln, wwwbibelwissenschaft.de/online-bibeln including, among others, Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, Septuaginta, Biblia Sacra Vulgata, KJV; accessed May 2011.

Geneva Bible, machine-readable transcript, reproducing The Bible: That is the Holy Scriptures Contained in the Olde and Newe Testament. Translated According to the Ebreev and Greke, and Conferred with the Best Translations in Divers Languages. With Most Profitable Annotations upon All The Hard Places ... (1587) (Geneva).
‘league’ of enemies ‘with craftie counsel’ against God’s people (Geneva Ps. 83:3, 5; Masoretic Text 83:4, 6).\(^{50}\) In a note appended to Mat. 26, the phrase ‘league and covenant’ appeared for the first time. A similar logic was accepted, albeit restrictedly, in the next authorised version to be printed in England, the Elizabethan Bishops’ Bible (BB), which set apart the ‘temporall league’ to designate, for example, the berit between Abraham and his confederates, Isaac and Abimelech, and Jacob and the crafty Laban.\(^{51}\) In describing the berit between Joshua and the deceitful Gibeonites, ‘agreement’, ‘covenant of peace’, ‘covenant’ and ‘league’ were employed alternately (BB Josh. 9:6, 11, 15–16).\(^{52}\) The division of the semantic field of berit was endorsed by the translators of the English Catholic version, the Rheims-Douai (RD) version, fully published by 1610 (ostensibly following the Vulgate yet with strong awareness of the Hebrew original), which considerably augmented the use of both ‘covenant’ and ‘league’. Old Testament textual mentions of ‘league’ now increased to over fifty,\(^{53}\) more than double their number in either the Geneva or the Bishops’ Bibles to include a wide array of temporal beritot, such as the ‘league of friendship’ between David and Jonathan (RD 1 Sam. 18:3 and notes) and various international treaties (e.g. RD 2 Kings 3:5 and notes; 2 Chron. 16:3, 20:37). At Neh. 10:30, the key phrase ‘leagues & covenantes’ appeared where the renewal of the people’s berit with God was described.\(^{54}\) Indeed, at the same time, the number of textual mentions of ‘covenant’ rose more than in any of the contemporary cardinal Protestant versions to designate not only an array of binding ‘covenants’ before the Lord, but phrases otherwise translated in the Protestant Bible with the use of the thorny word ‘congregation’.\(^{55}\) The overall mentions of ‘covenant’ in the Old Testament text and notes thus shot up to about 350, including over 120 textual references in the Pentateuch alone, more than eleven times

\(^{50}\) At 2 Chron. 16:3, the terms ‘covenant’ and ‘league’ were employed, subtly reflecting the speaker’s emphasis on the ‘covenant’ with himself, as opposed to a mere ‘league’ with an opponent, in Hebrew both read: berit.

\(^{51}\) Bishops’ Bible, 1568: a machine-readable transcript, reproducing The Holie Bible Conteynyng the Olde Testament and the Newe (1568) (BB), Gen. 14:13 note, 26:28 and notes, 31:44 and notes.

\(^{52}\) Rheims-Douai, 1582–1610: a machine-readable transcript, reproducing Holie Bible Faithfully Translated into English out of the Authentical Latin. Diligently Conferred with the Hebrew, Greeke, and Other Editions in Diuers Languages (Douai 1609–10) (RD).

\(^{53}\) Based on word search of ‘league’, and excluding eleven mentions in 1–2 Maccabees.

\(^{54}\) Albeit to gloss ‘alah and shevucah, and with reference to ‘amanah, see: RD Neh. 9:32, 38, 10:29, Masoretic Text Neh. 9:32; 101, 30.

their number in the Thomas Matthew Pentateuch and about five times their number in the Great Bible’s Pentateuch, based on Tyndale.\textsuperscript{56}

When the King James translators combed the text with an eye to both fidelity and uniformity, the overall mentions of ‘covenant’ in the Pentateuch declined to a total of eighty-one. The number of textual references to ‘league’ was reduced to a total of twenty-two, endorsing both Geneva amendments and several Douai revisions.\textsuperscript{57} As the semantic field of *berit* was adjusted and confirmed, the last remaining usages of ‘testament’ were weeded out of the Hebraic Scriptures, leaving this Latinate term in the title of the ‘Old Testament’, in the New Testament and in the liturgy.\textsuperscript{58}

However, by that time, the broader understanding of ‘covenant’ had manifestly changed. The legal term, removed in part from the revised Wyclifite version, sparingly employed by Tyndale, and corrected by Coverdale not necessarily in agreement with the Hebrew but with the German, had been incrementally naturalised in the vernacular language of the Bible, as well as in the broader religious discourse of the time. By the 1590s, as scholars note, this notion was enshrined in learned treatises and lexicons and was making its way in more widely disseminated catechisms and tracts. While debates about salvation increasingly divided believers, the notion of ‘covenant’ moreover emerged as a relatively neutral scriptural terrain, which could be shared – at least to an extent – by Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike. Not only ardent puritans but non-predestinarians, such as one of the translators of the King James Bible, Lancelot Andrewes, were able to incorporate the notion of ‘covenant’ in their work.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, even the translators of the Catholic Rheims-Douai version, as seen here, had no difficulty in employing the term – profusely, with more textual mentions than any of the cardinal Tudor and Stuart Protestant versions, while confirming both its sanctity and its contractual force by splitting the semantic field of *berit* between ‘covenant’

\textsuperscript{56} Or about 330 excluding Tobit, Ecclesiasticus and 1–2 Maccabees, based on an electronic searches and additional comparisons in RD, TM and GB.

\textsuperscript{57} E.g. KJV Josh. 9; 2 Sam. 3:12–13, 21 and 5:3, confirming that the deposition of Saul and the anointment of David by his people was a ‘league’, rather than a ‘covenant’, as in RD.

\textsuperscript{58} BB Deut 31:9; Josh. 3:3, 3:6, 4:9; Jer. 3:16. See also Green, *The Christian’s ABC*, 404, and the disappearance of ‘testament’ from theological tracts by the 1590s, Weir, *The Origins*, 58. Note the increased use of ‘covenant’ in KJV NT.

\textsuperscript{59} For Andrewes, see Green, *The Christian’s ABC*, 406. The avowed anti-Calvinist Thomas Jackson, for example, embraced the notion of ‘covenant’ while highlighting the mystery and prophecy embedded in the Greek *diathēke*, and criticising those who argue otherwise: T. Jackson, *An Exact Collection of the Works of Doctor Jackson... Christ Exercising his Everlasting Priesthood...* (1654), 3259. Compare, e.g., the learned exposition reconciling *berit* and *diathēke* in A. Willett, *Hexapla*, that is, *A six-fold commentarie upon the most divine Epistle of the holy apostle S. Paul to the Romanes* (1611), 2–3, passim.
and man-made ‘leagues’, and moreover expanding the use of the term to include disputed expressions. This, which stretched the use and meaning of ‘covenant’ well beyond the contractual discourse, differed from the policy of the King James version, which largely unified the contractual terminology.

Scholars highlight the ways in which conceptions of the law had become central in the theology of ‘covenant’, since the ‘Covenant of Works’ (itself formulated around the same time, as mentioned above) emphasised notions of Law, associated with berit. The biblical term ‘covenant’, grafted from a long-standing legal tradition, was evidently well positioned for conveying the idea, albeit while accentuating a formal and literate dimension rather than the oral and ritualised one, and often the individual conscience rather than the collectivity. As happened in many cases of ‘Englishing’, this was a reciprocal exchange: while the legal term became habituated in the vernacular Scriptures, contemporary legal concepts acquired an air of sanctity. The collocation ‘league and covenant’, borrowed from the Geneva Bible and reinforced in the Catholic Douai Bible, was also naturalised by association as both a temporal and divinely sanctioned pact, with legal and literate overtones, as seen in the Solemn League and Covenant, with which we started, and its biblical thrust and legal and administrative enforcement.

And so we return to the English Solemn League and Covenant. Contrary to its professed aim, peace was not restored to the land. Nor was the ‘the King’s Majesty’s, person, and authority’ augmented as a result. No sooner was Charles I’s son restored to his English throne than an order was issued by his loyal parliament ‘That the Instrument or Writing, called The Solemn League and Covenant, a copy whereof is hereunto annexed, be burned by the Hand of the Common Hangman.’ The administrative mechanism of the state was put into action once more, this time to ensure that ‘all other Copies’ of the said covenant should be taken out of all the public places where they had once been stored. In the course of the forthcoming decades, scholars and theologians increasingly moved to question the ‘covenant’ theology itself, by that time tainted in England in the eyes of many owing to its association with the revolt, and fostered primarily in Scotland and in the colonies across the Atlantic. Once again,

60 Above, n. 54.
61 See in particular, for example, how words such as ‘precepts’, ‘law’ and ‘conditions’ have crept into contemporary lexicons to explain biblical passages such as Jer. 31:33–4: Weir, The Origins, e.g. 55–8; Letham, The Westminster Assembly.
the boundaries of the community of faith were re-drawn, and, alongside them, political identities. Before long, the entire debate shifted once more owing to new critiques and enlightenment thought. The biblical language of ‘covenant’, once enshrined in the King James version, however, was there to stay. The Tyndalian ‘appointment’ or ‘pointment’ disappeared, and ‘bond’ was largely relegated to a different semantic field. Select usages of ‘league’ remained and were replaced in revised versions. As for ‘testament’, as modern reference books indicate, see ‘covenant’.  

65 Usages of ‘league’ corresponding with berit, e.g. Josh. 9:6, 11; 15, 16; Judge 2:2; and 2 Sam 5:3, mentioned above, were frequently changed in revised versions to ‘covenant’, as indicated, for example, in the standard A. Cruden, *Cruden Complete Concordance of the Old and New Testaments* (Peabody MA, n.d.; 1st edn 1869), s.v. ‘league’.

66 See e.g. *The New Bible Dictionary* (1962), e.g. s.v. ‘Testament’, 1253; In *ABD*, for example, there is no entry for ‘Testament’.