

Searching the Presbyterian Soul:

The Formation, Changes, and Purposes of
Scotland's Covenants, 1557-1690

Craig Kelly

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Abstract

This thesis reconstructs Reformed—and later, Presbyterian—thought by analysing the influences on the formation, changes in conception, and purposes of Scotland’s covenants from the emergence of covenantalism at the initial Reformation in 1557 to the Glorious Revolution of 1689—90. To achieve this, it has relied primarily on covenant documents and sermons. It has challenged the idea that Presbyterians comprised a homogeneous and fixed group in opposition to the crown’s ostensibly Episcopalian policies. Rather, this thesis argues that Presbyterian thought was transitory and was influenced by particular historical contexts, biblical exemplars, and to a lesser extent cultural norms such as the promissory nature of Scots contract law. It is not possible to investigate Presbyterians in isolation, so this thesis has also considered the relationship between different societal actors such as the national claimant, local elites, and ordinary people. This analysis has brought into question many of the historiographical constructs that have been imposed on Scotland’s Presbyterian and covenantal history. The idea that it is possible to solely focus on one key event such as the signing of the National Covenant and conclude that this was a Second Reformation has obscured the broader narrative. Historians have approached the sources with preconceptions such as the idea that there was such a thing as separate religious and political spheres which has led them to disregard religious sentiment as mere political posturing. Covenantal ideas had both political and religious significance: often starting as religious expressions and developing political implications such as the democratic imagining of the City of God that went on to influence the desire for ordinary people’s participation in political and ecclesiastical governance. To compare Scotland’s covenants, this thesis has used the Cambridge School methodology and Mendenhall’s covenant formulation. This has been particularly helpful in demonstrating that changes in ideas were not progressive or linear. Instead, covenantal ideas often oscillated between different conceptions: the desire for limited monarchy was articulated in early covenants, later there was a recognition of the divine right of kings, and later still a return to the aspiration of limited monarchy. Whilst the covenants were effective vehicles for forwarding Presbyterian ideology, they were limited as a result of the fact they were Presbyterian documents. As such, the best they could hope to achieve was to unite the Presbyterian community around a common goal. Once Scotland had a Calvinist king on the throne, however, Presbyterians were able to pursue their desires through parliamentary legislation in the form of the Claim of Right. It was able to turn Presbyterian thought into

national orthodoxy: which is exactly what it did by securing limited monarchy, nascent democracy, and Presbyterianism as the creed of the Kirk. Therefore, contrary to the views of many historians, the Glorious Revolution—as embodied by the Claim of Right—was not a watershed for secularism and was instead part of Scotland’s Presbyterian history. It is, therefore, suggested that the events between 1557 and 1690—from the beginning to the end of covenantalism within mainstream Reformed and Presbyterian ideology—are reimagined as a *Long Reformation* process.

Keywords

Covenant, Scotland, Presbyterianism, Reformation, Cambridge School, 1557—1690.

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Chapter 1: Landscaping

In 1688 Mr Robert Bell—minister of Kilmarnock—walked towards the neighbouring village of Richardtown. In the distance he noticed a large darkly dressed group of people blocking the road. Suddenly, he was aware of a looming presence at either shoulder, hands began grabbing and snatching at his clothes, and the cold metal barrel of a musket was placed against his temple as he was escorted towards the rabble. Robert’s innocent walk was now a chaperoned march to a destination unknown.¹

He was brought to Kilmarnock market place—bare headed like a common criminal—and forced against the Christian cross that stands in the centre of the square. As he glanced at his assailants, certain faces looked familiar, yet rage and passion now contorted them into shapes that looked rather different from the serene expressions of piety typical of a Sunday morning. There were women and men, some he had married and baptised, others he had never set eyes on before. Two figures stepped forward, one clutching the gown that Robert wore with pride each day, the other tentatively held the Book of Common Prayer from her body as if merely touching it was dangerous. A knife appeared: and then a torch fire. The gown was shred into an unrecognizable mess; and there was nothing left of Robert’s Holy Book.²

Amidst his fear, anger, and sadness, Robert managed to force out one simple word; “why?”

“By the rule and Law of the Solemn League and Covenant, by which [we are] obliged to extirpate Prelacy, and bring all Malignants to condign punishment,” cried the self-styled leader of the rabble.³

Mr James Little, minister of Tindace and Trailflat, suffered a similar fate. The reply from his assailants was that “they could not obey Man’s laws, but their King of Heaven’s Laws.” And from the rabble that attacked Mr Archibald Ferguson, minister of Kirkpatrick, on Easter 1689, “[we] require [you] also to be gone from [our] Covenanted Lands, under pain of death.”⁴

Robert Bell and his fellow ministers were not attacked because of any political disagreement with their assailants: in fact both assailants and victims had recently welcomed William and Mary as the new monarchs of Scotland. These ministers were assaulted and driven out of their

¹ Case of the Present Afflicted Clergy 1690, A true account of those abuses and affronts, that were committed upon the person of Mr. Robert Bell Parson of Kilmarnock, by a party of the Presbyterians now in arms in the West of Scotland, Project Canterbury

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

parishes simply because they believed that the church should be governed by Bishops and answerable to the state. Their assailants disagreed. The members of the rabble were convinced by the *ius divinum*, the “intrinsic right”,⁵ of Presbyterianism. The wider battles fought throughout Scotland’s seventeenth century were often based on this same dispute, and only with the removal of the Stuart monarchs and the institution of Presbyterianism during the Glorious Revolution was a resolution finally found—to a large extent.

Scotland’s initial Reformation, 1550—60, was peculiar in that it was inspired and carried out by a “popular tumult”⁶ of the ordinary people. It was not, as one might think from the subsequent obsession over ecclesiastical power dissemination, a Reformation that espoused Presbyterian church governance. In fact the nature of power dissemination within the Kirk was not settled during the initial Reformation. But it was the distinct hermeneutic introduced by John Knox—one that he had come into contact with in continental Europe—that captured the imagination of many Scottish people.⁷ This hermeneutic appropriated one of the central themes of Scripture, the covenant, and applied it equally to biblical analysis and to an understanding of contemporary events.

Knox used covenantal ideas to ally the local elites and ordinary people against a monarch who was opposed to any form of Protestant reform. Later, in the 1580s and ‘90s, the Scots’ Kirk instituted a covenant to address concerns over which direction James VI would take the church, and the Covenanters of the 1630s applied a covenant to counter King Charles I’s liturgical reforms. Again, a covenant was employed to pacify Charles II and to make way for the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. It was swiftly abandoned by Charles II and became a tool of the rebel covenanters during the bloody years of the 1670s and ‘80s that have come to be known as the Killing Times. And finally, covenantal ideas were present—even if a covenant was not—during the Glorious Revolution.

Covenantal ideas, then, were adapted and influenced by the historical context against which they were employed. Yet, to see the covenant solely in this political sense would be to lose the true nature of covenantalism. Robert Bell’s assailants did not carry out their violent assault for the sake of a convenient political tool. The covenant was—at a basic level—an expression of the relationship between the Scottish people and God: a relationship that, for many, placed Scotland at the centre of God’s universe. This was achieved through the simple yet powerful idea that by accepting the Reformed faith the Scots had entered into a covenant with God and had become, like the Israelites before them, “God’s chosen people”.

⁵ Raffe 2010, p. 317

⁶ James VI 1599 Basil. 23

⁷ Torrance 1996, p. xi

The covenant was incredibly important to early modern Scots; it provided the framework through which they viewed the world and understood their place in it. And yet, our secular generation of historians has generally ignored the religious aspect of covenantalism. There is, therefore, an opportunity to analyse the different ways people of Reformed and Presbyterian ideology conceived covenantal ideas, and as a result we are likely to gain a better understanding of the events that took place between 1557 and 1690. In this way, we can appreciate early modern Scotland on its own terms by dissecting the notion of Scotland's "peculiar" relationship to God.⁸

“Not Words but Meanings”

It is easy to get tied up in complex terminology when dealing with the analysis of ideas. In particular, theological ideas that were once commonly understood have become obscure in an increasingly secularised world. To address these issues, and for the avoidance of semantic arguments, it is helpful to define some of the terms that will be used throughout this thesis.

The term *covenant* has multiple usages. In a legalistic sense, covenant denotes any agreement between two or more parties in which signatories agree to do, or to not do, something specified.⁹ This definition can equally use the terms *bond*, *pact*, or *contract*. In an ecclesiastical sense, the term covenant can be the agreement of members of a church to “act together in harmony with the precepts of the gospel”,¹⁰ or to describe the relationship between humanity and God. This latter definition of covenant can be confused further since for the ancient Israelites their covenant with God was conditional and, as a result, contractual.¹¹ However, since the Reformation the term covenant can also denote the relationship between humanity and God that is exclusively based on God's grace and is, therefore, only conditional on the basis that an individual is willing to accept grace.¹² These various definitions are fundamentally the same thing: a declaration of a relationship. However, it is important to highlight that while a written or oral covenant is, on one level, merely the expression of a relationship between humanity and God, it is also a vehicle that carried forward various ideas such as conceptions of kingship and nascent democracy. It is at this deeper level that I will use the terms *covenant* and *covenantal ideas*.

⁸ 1 Peter 2:9 King James (KJ)

⁹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/covenant>

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ This is the Reformed notion of the covenant of works. See: Zaret 1985, p.133 It is contradicted by Jewish understandings of covenant in the Torah/Old Testament, but this is not a problem since my purpose is to understand Reformed/Presbyterian ideology. For information, see: LaSor, Hubbard, Bush 1996, p. 122

¹² Zaret 1985, p. 133

I will occasionally use the terms *Prelacy/prelatic* and *Episcopalianism*. In this context, these three terms will be taken to mean roughly the same thing: church governance through Bishops whose responsibility was divided along a diocesan structure. Prelacy will be used since it was the term of choice for most of the historical actors under consideration, and to facilitate a seamless transition between the language contained in the primary sources and the terminology applied for analysis. It does not carry any negative connotations in this context. Although, it is worth pointing out that like the term *Papists* to describe Catholics, in the early modern period *prelacy* was intended as a term of derision towards the Episcopalian system.

Presbyterianism is a form of church governance in which members participate in devolved legislative bodies starting with a presbytery, moving on to the more powerful synods, and finally the most powerful body, the General Assembly. This form of ecclesiastical power dissemination is based on Calvinist theology and was an express attempt to mimic the power structure of the early church.

These terms are fundamental to an understanding of the following discussions. *Covenant*, since it is the focus of this study. And *Episcopalianism* and *Presbyterianism* since they formed the two competing solutions to the problem of church governance after the Reformation, and between which a line can be drawn that divides the two rival camps throughout the historical period in question. This thesis is primarily concerned with the development of Reformed and subsequent Presbyterian thought; however, Episcopalianism will feature in the background since it is likely that Presbyterian thought evolved, in part, as a reaction against Episcopalianism.

Swathes of Historical Commentary

A new study of Scotland's covenants demands justification, as even a cursory glance through the swathes of historical commentary will leave you wondering if such a rigorously analysed aspect of Scottish history really needs further examination. It seems arrogant to claim to have anything new to say, since the focus of this thesis is on an idea so central to early modern Scottish history that it has leant its name to a revolution; that is, the Covenanter Revolution of 1637—44.

It seems, then, that scholars have put the covenant to rest. “The antecedents to the National Covenant [...] have often been discussed,” claimed I. B. Cowan, and now we have reached “general agreement that constitutional opposition to the king was as important as matters of religion.”¹³ For Alan MacInnes, this was a revolution “manufactured” by the local elites to limit

¹³ Cowan 1968, p. 38

the sovereignty of the crown.¹⁴ And, although he would likely admit to not being an expert on the topic, Wayne Te Brake characterised this moment in history as an excellent example of the local elites and ordinary people joining together in a shared political venture.¹⁵ You might be wondering why these events are called the *Covenanter Revolution* at all, since there seems so little attention afforded to the new, or at least reasserted, relationship between Scotland and God expressed in the National Covenant. But perhaps we are like Plato's men in a dark cave who have discovered that there is more than one way to the light of knowledge pouring through the entrance. These historians have seemingly tread that alternate path by adding political explanations to the events of the Covenanter Revolution.

So, a political focus is the new route to enlightening the National Covenant; and, therefore, by extrapolation a religious focus has not been forgotten, but the trail has been worn bare by the footsteps of so many previous historians. Or so we are to believe. In 1958 S. A. Burrell was one of these historians who discussed "the antecedents to the National Covenant". He concluded that the Covenanter Revolution was based upon apocalyptic belief heralded in during the initial Reformation. His point was that whilst the visions of the Covenanters may appear "unrealistic to a secular-minded generation", by viewing the Covenant primarily as a religious symbol that just so happened to have political ramifications, we gain a greater understanding of the events that unfolded.¹⁶ Yet despite this conclusion, Burrell did not set out with a religious focus. He was primarily interested in the political symbolism of the covenant and its earlier roots.

It seems that the revisionism of MacInnes and Cowan may be little more than the historiographical equivalent of the Emperor's new clothes. In fact, they share more than just a focus of enquiry with the historians that preceded them. Both generations of historians seem to accept that the Revolution of 1637—44 was the ultimate act in the story of Scotland's covenants. There are some, like John Young, who argue that certain groups active in the Glorious Revolution drew upon the heritage of the Covenanters.¹⁷ However, this is yet again a political argument that pays only a passing glance at the continuity of religious ideas.

These comments are not intended to discredit the excellent contribution of renowned historians such as MacInnes, Cowan, Burrell, or Young, but rather to indicate that the political aspect of the National Covenant has been thoroughly examined. Yet, the ecclesiastical aspect of the Covenanter Revolution remains a sparsely inhabited space in the landscape of Scottish historiography. And if we fast-forward to the Glorious Revolution, little scholarship has examined this event in Scotland from either a political or ecclesiastical standpoint. You might be

¹⁴ MacInnes 1987, p. iii

¹⁵ Te Brake 1998, p. 141

¹⁶ Burrell 1958, p. 349

¹⁷ Young 2000, p. 159

inclined to agree with Ann Shukman's cutting indictment of Scottish historiography, "If we lack political analysis for those events, even more do we lack ecclesiastical analysis."¹⁸

Shukman's attack, however, is unscrupulous. In one sharply worded sentence, she placed a large sticker that read, "not worth considering", on top of works that have made a significant contribution to our understanding: since, although there are gaps in our ecclesiastical and—to a lesser extent—political knowledge, it is unfair to depict early modern Scottish historiography as a barren wasteland. An example of a significant piece of scholarship is a 1994 article by John D. Ford. He focused on an ecclesiastical debate around ceremonies introduced by the Five Articles of Perth, 1618, and, for some, their perceived inconsistency with Scotland's covenants. The article was the first to examine specific sections in each covenant and categorise them as being either assertory (an expression of the current state of things) or promissory (a promise to do something in the future).¹⁹ As such, Ford argued that these documents were not so much covenants, but collections of bonds that "were only thought to be worthy of retention because they strengthened the bonds of divine law."²⁰ However, this conclusion would be more robust if Ford had compared Scotland's covenants to their biblical forerunners and identified differences. And once again, Ford's analysis was focused on the period around the National Covenant, adding further fuel to the notion that the zenith of the covenant idea was in the 1630s and 40s.

Shukman was perhaps overly zealous with her appraisal of the shortcomings of Scottish historiography. She did, however, come closer to the mark when she argued that, "Crucially too there has been no full study of the political ideas of the Presbyterians, or of the legacy of the covenant."²¹ This thesis, then, is an attempt to provide such a study into the development of covenantal ideas; and—in a reversal of Burrell's approach—at the same time shed light upon the political aspects of the period. This aim hints at one of my preconceptions—that politics and religion were inseparable spheres in the early modern period. Religious ideas were influenced by the historical context, and the events by the ideas.

This is not an exhaustive study of Scotland's early modern history, or even Scotland's ecclesiastical history. This is merely a perspective, a different angle, into Reformed and Presbyterian thought, and into the events that transpired between 1557 and 1690. A similar study was carried out by Delbert R. Hillers who justified his work by arguing "that 'covenant' is just the sort of idea which is apt to become 'dark and doubtful' with the passage of time."²² He was talking about Ancient Israel's biblical covenants and one by one he examined them for their

¹⁸ Shukman 2012, p. 3

¹⁹ Ford 1994, p. 50

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 64

²¹ Shukman 2012, p. 3

²² Hillers 1969, p. 1

textual content, format, influences, and ultimately impact upon history. In the words of Hillers', "We may, for the sake of convenience, call this the history of [...] an idea, but quite obviously it was much more than an idea to Israel."²³ And to early modern Scotland.

Research Questions

Three central questions will be applied to five key stages in order to dissect different conceptions of covenantal ideas. They have been chosen to allow a deep and prolonged analysis of these ideas; where they came from, what they were used for, and how they changed. The central questions are:

- 1) What influenced the formation of covenantal ideas?

This question should help us to understand what ideas early Reformed Protestants—and later, Presbyterians—were drawing on to put together covenant documents. For example, if the Godly Band of 1557 closely resembles the format, language, and particularly the content of the Covenant of Sinai, we can conclude that the authors of the Godly Band were drawing heavily on the Old Testament and particularly the Book of Deuteronomy.

I will also be analysing sermons delivered around the time covenants were signed. These sermons were partly designed to explain covenantal ideas in more detail and, as a result, they provide a window into popular Reformed and Presbyterian narratives. By considering what influenced the formation of any given conception of covenantal ideas, we can gain a greater understanding of Presbyterian thought. For instance, Richard Kyle has highlighted John Knox as the herald of apocalyptic thought in Scotland,²⁴ whereas Episcopalians described Presbyterians as "rabbis" because of their perceived over reliance on the Old Testament.²⁵ Both cannot be correct. Either the initial Reformation was typified by a focus on the New Testament and particularly the Book of Revelation, or the Reformers were more concerned with Old Testament precedents. Considering what influenced covenant ideas will allow me to explore which of these options is more likely in light of primary source evidence.

That is, however, merely one small example as to why this question is important. The main purpose of this question is to try to provide a wider context for the ideas professed in covenants and within popular narratives. I want to know what motivated Presbyterians and why they

²³ *op. cit.*, p. 5

²⁴ Kyle 1984, p. 449

²⁵ Maxwell 1644, p. 16; Coffey 1997, p. 157; Shukman 2012, p. 68

developed their thought in certain directions. Knowing what influenced the formation of covenant ideas will provide us with an appreciation for the depth of Presbyterian thought.

2) What purposes did the covenants serve?

The second question is designed to act as a bridge between specific conceptions of covenantal ideas and their historical context. It is one thing to discuss the lineage of ideas in an academic vacuum, but such a thesis would be rather shallow and tell us very little. Instead, by considering the purpose of a covenant and the reason why a covenantal idea was conceived in a specific way at a particular time, we will be able to say something about the historical context. For example, if we find that a certain covenant contains the notion of a divinely ordained monarchy and a rejection of nascent democracy, then we can only conclude that this was a period in which the national claimant enjoyed a strong position that the people were unwilling to challenge. And the converse would be true if emphasis was placed on limited monarchy and the desirability of nascent democracy.

3) How did the notion of covenant change over time?

The third and final question really drives to the heart of what it means to carry out an historical enquiry. Historians can study specific points in time or particular practices, but an overarching aim in most historiography is to discern how a practice, a cultural norm, or an idea changed over time. Changes allow us to consider what is constant: they allow us to comment on what is fixed about the human condition, and, conversely, what is transitory.

In the context of my thesis, mapping the changes in conceptions of covenantal ideas will allow me to explore the transitory nature of Presbyterian thought and challenge a common tendency to understand religious groups as homogenous and fixed in their beliefs. It will also help to shed light on the changing historical context and how religious beliefs reacted to, or influenced, that context.

There is a problem in trying to discern changes in an idea over time and that is the desire to see ideas as inherently progressive: from a basic conception, to something more advanced, and then into the fully mature and complex embodiment of an idea. Whilst this may be a correct understanding of the development of ideas, it is as likely that the development of covenantal ideas moved from one understanding, to something else, and back again. In short, the old adage that there is “no such thing as a new idea”—or in this case a new conception—may hold true.

Moving on from the research questions, the key stages that will be placed under the microscope are the:

- Initial Reformation, 1557—60
- Reign of James VI, 1567—1625
- Covenanter Revolution, 1637—43
- Charles II's submission to the Solemn League and the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, 1650—81
- Glorious Revolution, 1689—90

The question concerning the formation of the covenant idea will be most relevant to dissecting the Reformation and the reign of James VI; and the question that explores the changes in the covenant idea over time will be most applicable to the Covenanter Revolution, the Restoration, and Glorious Revolution. Finally, the question of what purpose the Covenant served at any given time is relevant to every stage under consideration and will act as a binding agent that holds the analysis together. You will hopefully understand how the research questions will illuminate covenantal ideas in Scotland, but you might be wondering why the key stages—rather than any other time periods or categorisations—have been chosen. The answer is simply that a covenant was formed during each of these time periods (and their durations have been fixed according to the sources under consideration).

Along with the central questions and key historical stages, the research will also be guided by certain fixed covenantal ideas that I have found throughout the sources. These are like benchmarks, or signposts, to keep the analysis on track. The ideas include, but are not limited to; God's chosen people, nascent democracy, kingship, and Reformation (as a process rather than an event). It will be possible to examine how opinions about each of these ideas changed over time, when they perhaps first appeared in rhetoric surrounding the covenant, and to consider if certain ideas are particularly prominent at specific times, and what that tells us about a specific covenant or historical context. These covenantal ideas were fixed in as far as they were present in every covenant. But they were also malleable in the way they were conceived in each covenant and in the way different actors understood them.

By outlining the central questions, key stages, and covenantal ideas, I hope to have provided you with a handy map that will allow you to follow the argumentation throughout my thesis.

Theory and Design

“Government is twofold”, observed John Calvin, it is divided between “spiritual and temporal jurisdiction.”²⁶ “There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland”, echoed Andrew Melville.²⁷ For Saint Augustine there was a “City of God” and “City of Man”.²⁸ And Mathew, Mark, and Luke all recalled Jesus’ haunting order; “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”²⁹ This fissure runs deeply through Christian thought.

Turn your attention to Western thought more generally and you will notice this schism everywhere you look. For a moment, imagine Isaac Newton. The historian interested in work and survival strategies may put Newton’s life under the microscope and consider how scientists financially supported themselves in the 1690s—an investigation into Newton’s temporal life. The historian of material culture may examine the kind of luxury items consumed by Newton and how they impacted upon his status in English society—another example of history with a temporal focus. Or the intellectual historian may delve into the inner workings of Newton’s mind, considering what ideas he may have been familiar with in an attempt to reconstruct the process that resulted in his greatest theories—a history of the spiritual realm. Perhaps you remain unconvinced.

If you instead turn to philosophy, Jean Paul Sartre’s phenomenological project was simply an attempt to turn philosophers away from introspection—the City of God—and towards temporal considerations. His was a philosophy of everyday life.³⁰ And on the other side, we have Descartes’ hyperbolically sceptical approach to understanding existence and the nature of God.³¹

Perhaps a return to Jesus’ words will provide a little clarity; “The Kingdom of God is within you.”³² Here we have a hint to the division of knowledge within Western thought. By secularising the phraseology— replacing the terms “spiritual” and “Kingdom of God” with “the realm of intellect and ideas”—the division within academia becomes clear: some scholars study the observable temporal sphere, and others the more abstract—but nevertheless real—realm of ideas.

A study into the tangled web of ideas is a little daunting. Thankfully, there are theories and pre-made methods to draw upon, such as Daniel C. Dennett’s catchy-titled *heterophenomenology*— he is a philosopher after all. Dennett argues that phenomena are ingested as follows: a) conscious

²⁶ Calvin 1536, Book 3; Chapter 19; Section 15

²⁷ Calderwood 1844, p. 440; Mason 1994, p. 123

²⁸ Augustine 2003, p. 596

²⁹ Luke 20:25; Mark 12:17; Matthew 22:21 KJ

³⁰ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

³¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/>

³² Luke 17:21 KJ

experiences themselves, b) beliefs about these experiences, c) verbal judgements expressing those beliefs, and d) utterances of one sort or another.³³ For my purposes, I will be focusing upon section ‘c’ since the covenants of Scotland are a collective expression of beliefs about the relationship between the Scottish people and God, and the dissemination of power within society. Dennett expands with an important point worth keeping in mind when considering the sources, “I am not assuming that you are right in what you tell me, but just that that is what you believe.”³⁴ So, while the views expressed about Scotland’s covenants may appear peculiar, we have no reason to suppose that these expressions are anything other than an accurate depiction of people’s beliefs.

We have, then, established the basic framework for this study: it is an exploration into the realm of ideas. And, hopefully you have already realised, I will focus on covenantal ideas. Whilst Dennett’s theory of consciousness is helpful in marking the boundaries for this study, it does not give us any indication of exactly how we can unearth the meaning of Scotland’s covenant; how it was used and understood; and how it may have changed over time. For this kind of practical help, we have to turn to historical theory and methodology: namely, the Cambridge School espoused principally by Quentin Skinner.

Skinner instructs would be intellectual historians to identify four elements in the sources: i) the occurrence of a particular word or phrase which represents the idea, ii) the use of the relevant sentence by a particular agent on a particular occasion, iii) the intention of the phrase, and iv) the statement considered in its totality and context.³⁵ I have adopted this approach when analysing my chosen sources. However, Skinner’s instructions leave a gap that could easily be filled by misunderstanding. To provide clarity: when sitting in a darkly lit room scouring over the sources, I have not looked for key terms that denote specific ideas. Instead, I have decided to focus on certain recurring themes in the sources. The expressions, *God’s chosen people*, *nascent democracy*, *kingship*, and *Reformation* are not necessarily important in themselves. Instead, my primary focus is on the sentences that describe these ideas. I am interested in meaning, not words: concepts, not terms. For instance, the Old Testament regularly refers to the covenant between God and Israel as a marriage: God is the groom, and Israel his bride.³⁶ Yet, in other places Israel is described as “the firstfruits of his increase.”³⁷ The important aspect is the idea that Israel had a unique relationship with God, and as a secondary aside we may ask why the

³³ Dennett 2003, p. 3

³⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 4

³⁵ Skinner 1969, p. 39

³⁶ Hosea 2:19—20; Jeremiah 3:14; Jeremiah 21:31—32 KJ

³⁷ Jeremiah 2:3 KJ

Bible uses different metaphors to describe the same idea. And whether this actually tells us anything. As Geerhardus Vos rightly observed,

In tracing back the development of a doctrine, one should simply take care not to attach too much importance to the name, and because of the lack of later current formulae, to conclude prematurely that it was absent. Stock phrases usually do not appear at the beginning, but only at the end of a development.³⁸

It is the persistence of notions—such as the desire for limited monarchy—that will shed light upon how the covenant was conceived. And the regularity of certain ideas can indicate what questions, or problems, covenantal ideas were expected to solve at any given time. For instance, if the notion of limited monarchy is particularly present during the Covenanter Revolution, but absent during the Reformation, it would be fair to conclude that the constitutional role of the national claimant was a matter of dispute during the Covenanter Revolution, and less so during the Reformation.

It is incredibly important to emphasise at this stage that I am not using Skinner's methodology as a writing technique or a framework around which to format a presentation of primary sources. Instead, I have applied the Cambridge School methodology to the sources during the initial research. Do not be surprised when you reach the analysis section and find that my thesis is not structured around the four elements identified by Skinner. The critical reader may object that a thesis should be arranged in line with the methodology used by the historian. However, since my thesis focuses on five separate time periods, to present Skinner's methodology would become insipidly repetitive and unbearably longwinded. Nevertheless, I will present one small section using Skinner's approach to give you a glance at his methodology in action and I will occasionally refer back to the Cambridge School to help ground the analysis.

While we are on the topic of how I will present my analysis, it will be helpful to provide you with a little more clarity. My analysis is concerned with comparing the covenant documents. This will allow us to see the changes in the conception of covenantal ideas over time. I will also present the biblical Sinai Covenant as a benchmark against which to compare the Scottish covenants in order to highlight the influence of biblical ideas on the formation of Scottish conceptions of covenant. One of the immediate problems is the varying length of the covenants. If we were to merely take the Godly Band of 1557, for example, and try to compare it to the National Covenant of 1638, we would be trying to contrast a half-page document against one that covers ten full pages. In short, we would not be able to fully appreciate the similarities between these two documents because we would be blinded by their obvious differences.

³⁸ Vos 2011, p. 11

Theologian George Mendenhall proposed a way of segmenting covenants to ease comparisons between them and ancient treaties. He was particularly concerned with showing how Hittite treaties heavily influenced the formation of biblical covenants. As such, Mendenhall suggested that there are six distinct sections in a covenant that can be identified to then compare against other covenants or treaties.³⁹ I am only using this method as an analytical tool at a simplistic level and I am certainly not concerned with influences on the formation of biblical covenants: if I were, we would end up with a never-ending analysis that went to ever-greater extractions. Instead, I will use Mendenhall's formulation merely to present my analysis section and—at most—as a method of categorisation. To put it simply, I have identified specific sections in each covenant that will be presented as quotes. I have then used Skinner's methodology to consider what these quotes really mean and to help us understand what was influencing covenant ideas; the purpose of these ideas in a given historical context; and how the ideas were changing over time.

There is an element of personal choice in deciding upon both the wider framework and methodology. Yet, the potential for the research to be biased as a result of those choices is fractional when compared to the impact of source selection. With that in mind, I have attempted to be cautious by allowing the thesis to be driven by the covenant documents. However, if I were to end there, we would have a very one-dimensional analysis. Therefore, sermons will also be considered to provide depth, to flesh out the historical context, and to particularly give us an insight into popular narratives. Whilst the sermons are without doubt subjective sources, I have minimised the risk of unbearable bias by deliberately selecting sermons by well-known preachers whose ideas could be considered as indicative of Reformed—and later, Presbyterian—popular narratives.

There is one exception to my self-imposed rules around sources and that is when we reach the Glorious Revolution, 1689—90. No covenant was signed during this key event and that means that I will consider a parliamentary act instead of a covenant. Due to the covenant's absence, some historians—such as Andrew Drummond, James Bulloch, and Colin Kidd—have argued that the Glorious Revolution was a watershed for secularism.⁴⁰ They have pointed out that Scotland's covenantal history came to a close with the Solemn League (signed by Charles II in 1651) and have portrayed the Glorious Revolution as something completely distinct from the earlier key events in this thesis.⁴¹ So, the obvious question is why I have included the Glorious Revolution at all?

³⁹ Mendenhall 1954, pp. 58—59

⁴⁰ Drummond and Bulloch 1973, pp. 1—24; Kidd 2003, pp. 62—63; Raffe 2010, p. 321

⁴¹ Kidd 2003, p. 52

I believe that the Claim of Right—a parliamentary act that ratified the transfer of the crown from James VII to William of Orange—was the logical progression of covenantal ideas. It enshrined Presbyterianism, limited monarchy, and nascent democracy. My thesis, then, is partly motivated by re-imagining Scotland’s early modern Presbyterian history by including the Glorious Revolution—as codified in the Claim of Right—as the final act in Scotland’s *Long Reformation*. By including the Glorious Revolution into a narrative that is concerned with Presbyterian thought, my thesis, then, hopes to sew together Scotland’s early modern historiography into an extended tapestry, and covenantal ideas will be my thread.

Skinner’s methodology instructs us to be sensitive of both the author(s) and the audience(s) of a given source. And, since the covenants are often concerned with power distribution within the church and state, this thesis, then, is also concerned with societal actors. Wayne Te Brake’s model of dividing actors within a community into ordinary people, local elites, and national claimants will be adopted to aid the analysis.⁴² Some readers might protest at the arbitrary categorisation of society in this manner, since it may seem misguided to talk of these as homogenous groupings. But as an approach, it is helpful as it makes the source material more manageable and provides a perspective into the way different sections of the community interacted with, and conceived, covenantal ideas.

A final note of caution: whilst analysing covenantal ideas through time, they are as likely to reveal conceptual disorder as much as coherent doctrine. Incoherence and contradiction are also probable in the way ideas around the covenant were conceived even by the same person. This is in part the unavoidable reality of the human mind. Each one of us holds contradictory opinions. But it is equally a problem of trying to map a transitory idea. Irrespective of what we might be inclined to believe, ideas rarely follow a linear progression. The historical actors will likely oscillate between different ways of thinking about specific notions such as kingship. Whilst this undoubtedly makes intellectual historiography a hard task, it would be disingenuous to attempt to simplify that which is complex. Instead, we must accept that trying to understand ideas is a complicated endeavour, but this only makes our adventure through Scotland’s covenants all the more exciting.

⁴² Te Brake 1998, pp. 15—16

Hypothesis

Marc Bloch instructed historians to present their work as an investigation unfolding: advice that was echoed by Helen Sword in her excellent handbook, *Stylish Academic Writing*.⁴³ No one wants to be told the identity of the killer on the first page of a crime novel, or to find out immediately that everything will work out at the end of a romance tearjerker. Admittedly, a thesis is a somewhat different beast. It should be the construction of an argument supported by source analysis. The “who done it” or “how does it end?” should appear earlier in academic work, but that does not mean that academics should give the game away from the very beginning.

With this advice in mind, I will present to you my initial thoughts on what we can expect to conclude at the end of this thesis. I may be right or wrong—both are acceptable since being wrong in our early assumptions tells us as much as being confirmed right. I believe we will find that covenantal ideas were fixed, but the way to conceive these ideas was malleable and influenced by factors such as a specific historical context or by biblical ideas (and I have a sneaking suspicion that the Old Testament was far more prominent in the formation of covenantal ideas than the New Testament). From my early research, I am of the opinion that there was no such interminable absolute covenant. It was not an unchanging *thing* to merely be invoked in later times; instead, written and oral covenants were vehicles used to forward ideas about kingship, nascent democracy, church governance, and Scotland’s peculiar relationship to God. Mapping how these ideas changed over time will allow us to observe how Presbyterian thought developed and will likely demonstrate that it was transitory. In short, Presbyterianism was not a fixed and homogeneous creed.

I am also of the opinion that ideas are not necessarily progressive or linear. Instead, I expect this thesis to illustrate that covenantal ideas oscillated between different conceptions dependent upon factors such as the specifics of a historical context, biblical ideas that were being drawn on, or even an individual’s personal attributes (a factor that is outwith the remit of my thesis).

Scotland’s covenants encapsulate early Reformed—and later, Presbyterian—thought. For this reason, they are particularly helpful to any study that seeks to examine Presbyterian ideology. But for that same reason, their usefulness as vehicles for societal change—for forwarding ideas—was limited. In short, you would not sign a covenant if you were Episcopalian or Catholic. As such, the covenants’ inherent weakness was that they could, at best, only unify the Presbyterian community around a particular goal such as limited monarchy. I believe that covenants fell from their central place in Scotland’s popular narrative when covenantal ideas could be forwarded in a

⁴³ Bloch 1992, p. 59; Sword 2012, pp. 79—83

wider sense, to the whole Scottish community, by parliamentary legislation (the Claim of Right) after the Glorious Revolution when Scotland had a Calvinist king on the throne.

By considering the covenants for the religious documents they were, I hope to demonstrate that the Claim of Right was merely a new vehicle for covenant ideas, the logical successor of covenant. In this way, I believe I will find that the Glorious Revolution is not a political event detached from Scotland's Presbyterian history (contrary to the impression one gets from Scottish historiography that has tended to focus on the political aspect of the Revolution Settlement).⁴⁴ The Glorious Revolution is in fact the conclusion of Scotland's *Long Reformation* that turned Presbyterian thought into the official doctrine of Scotland. As a result, by portraying the Glorious Revolution as part and parcel of Scotland's covenantal history, it is likely that my thesis will indicate that hitherto historians have imposed a religious/political divide onto a society that would not have understood such a separation of ideas.

⁴⁴ Patrick 2002, pp. 4—6

Chapter 2: Foundations

Plugging the Gaps

The covenant was, at a basic level, an expression of the relationship between the Scottish people and God. But why was there any need to express it in written form? When you go to the shop and buy a shirt you form an association with the retailer, but there is no need to officially convey the relationship. When you go to support your local football team you affiliate with your fellow supporters. And again, you feel no need to make an official declaration. Or do you? The truth is you do express these relationships through a receipt in the first instance; and, in the second example, by identifying yourself by the collective name held by the football fans: in my case I am an “Arab” because I support Dundee United. It is merely that due to their familiarity, these declarations of relationships are implicit and intuitive: just as declarations such as oaths, pledges, bonds, and covenants would have been for the people of early modern Scotland.

The story of Scots Law before 1707 is like a James Joyce novel: the overall narrative is there, but it appears to be pulling in different directions: clarity, it seems, remains allusive. Despite Scotland having three medieval universities—St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Aberdeen—Scots who wanted to study law in the late medieval and early modern eras generally went to universities in continental Europe.⁴⁵ These often competing influences resulted in a legal system with gaps.⁴⁶ Use of oaths, pledges, and bonds, then, made sense: they filled important holes in the network of the law.

In a similar vein, but with a wider focus, consider treaties between Scotland and other countries. This was a time when notions of international law were at an embryonic stage. Instead, Scotland’s international relations were governed by treaties that were both assertory and promissory in nature. For instance, Scotland’s *Auld Alliance* with France was a declaration of mutual friendship and promises of military aid in the case of attack. Again, we see pledges acting as an understudy for the role that would be later played by an all-encompassing legal system.

Today, we can catch a glimpse of the culture of oaths, pledges, and bonds every time we attend a wedding. As the bride and groom stand at the alter they are asked to repeat a

⁴⁵ MacQueen 2003, In: MacQueen; Aloy; Vaquer; Espiau 2003, pp. 102—103

⁴⁶ Attwool 1997, p. 64; op. cit, pp. 71—72; Reid and Zimmerman 2000, p. 230; For a hyperbolic account of the confusions within Scots law, see: Kidd 2003, pp. 147—148

promissory oath; “[I] take thee ... to hold from this day forward ... till death do us part.” The wedding ceremony is an anachronistic remnant of an oath-based society.

To early modern Scots, expressing a relationship through a written covenant would not have been peculiar. It is not as if John Knox and his friends conjured some novel way of expressing the relationship between Scotland and God, as they saw it. Rather, covenants emerged within the framework, or culture, of the time. In other words, relationships in early modern Scotland were often expressed through bonds, it should therefore be expected that Reformers and Presbyterians would express their desired arrangement of relationships—such as limited monarchy—in the same manner.

The Re-Discovery of the Bible’s Central Idea

Historians are a little like builders: mainly their job is to construct arguments that are robust enough to remain in tact against the wrecking-balls of counter-scholarship. And sometimes they engage in a little deconstruction themselves in order to build a shiny new house on the site of a dilapidated shack. So far in this thesis, I have dug the first foundation trench for my humble apartment block and added a central pillar. I will now add an adjoining column. The problem is that it is one thing to convince you that expressing a relationship through a covenant was common practice in early modern Scotland. But it is an entirely different task to explain why people believed Scotland had a unique relationship with God (which is, after all, the foundation idea of covenantalism).

Three years ago, I sat in a dimly lit lecture hall and listened with interest as the lecturer described the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. I remember picturing Martin Luther nailing his “95 Theses” to a church door. The thing that really captured me was not so much Luther’s bravery—undoubtedly he was a bold man—but it was the fact that he had introduced a brand new idea into Christendom, one that seemed so obvious: God’s authority is exclusively revealed through Scripture. The schism in the church, I thought, was obviously a divide between revelation through tradition against revelation through Scripture: the Church over the Bible, or the Bible over the Church. What a simple and yet incredibly profound dispute. The problem is my lecturer, like so many historians, had peddled a common misconception.

Throughout the middle ages, most theologians accepted that Scripture was the sole source of divine revelation—with the proviso that the Church had the authority to interpret Scripture

according to the apostolic *regula fidei* (rule of faith).⁴⁷ This is known as “Tradition I”.⁴⁸ In the early fourteenth century the theologian William Ockham introduced a two-source theory of revelation. According to Ockham, extra-scriptural sources of revelation are as authoritative as Scripture itself. Theologians describe this as “Tradition II”.⁴⁹ For the following two hundred years, these two theological positions sat side-by-side in relative harmony.

It was merely as a reaction against Luther and Calvin’s strict adherence to Tradition I that the Roman Church approved Tradition II as orthodoxy.⁵⁰ As such, since the Roman Church had accepted Tradition I for a large part of its history, Jaroslav Pelikan was right when he observed, “The Church did not need a Luther to tell it that the Bible was true.”⁵¹ The issue was not so much the status of Scripture, but rather its interpretation.

If we return to the issue in hand, the obvious question is why, from the beginning, was the concept of covenant so much in the foreground of Reformed theology? We could, as Geerhardus Vos points out, accept that “the doctrine of the covenant is taken from the Scriptures”⁵² and therefore a renewed vigour for scriptural analysis was surely going to rejuvenate the covenant idea. This explanation, however, provokes more questions than it answers. The Roman Church had accepted Tradition I for centuries and yet did not focus on the notion of covenant. And more pressingly, the Lutherans as well as the Calvinists triumphed the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). Yet, the notion of covenant was, for the most part, curiously absent from Lutheran theology.⁵³

When Reformed theology championed the covenant, it was casting itself upon the Bible’s “deepest root idea”.⁵⁴ It is tempting—and a little amusing—to agree with Vos when he argues that Calvinists were simply better at biblical exegesis.⁵⁵ We can, however, argue with a little more certainty—and a lot less bias—that for some Calvinists the covenant was a vehicle for advancing an alternate interpretation of Scripture: beginning with humanity’s relationship with God and moving on to explore other scriptural ideas. It was, in other words, a hermeneutic. Reformed theology’s focus on the covenant was therefore not simply a result of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

This section began with the ambitious aim of providing an explanation for the belief that Scotland had a unique relationship with God. For that, you will have to wait a little longer. But

⁴⁷ Romans 12:6 KJ; Mathison 2001, pp. 161—162

⁴⁸ Oberman 2002, p. 58

⁴⁹ Mathison 2001, p. 81

⁵⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 86

⁵¹ Pelikan 1964, p. 21

⁵² Vos 2011, pp. 5—6

⁵³ *ibid.*; McGrath 2005, p. 268

⁵⁴ Vos 2011, pp. 5—6

⁵⁵ *ibid.*