Hahn concludes that the author of Hebrews is post-Levitical, meaning the salvation available in Christ is grounded in the pre-Levitical form of the royal priesthood which existed in the patriarchal period. Hahn concludes his study with a sundry array of theological reflections (chapter 11).

This volume is a thoughtful example of canonical biblical theology. Setting this volume apart from many other published doctoral dissertations is the fact that it has been rewritten twice since its days as a dissertation. This has led to a well-tuned final product.

Hahn’s introduction presents a thorough, yet concise, overview of covenants in recent scholarship, which will be of great benefit particularly for those approaching the issues for the first time. Additionally, Hahn is to be commended for seeking to extend covenantal discussions even to the Gospels.

Hahn’s articulation of the interplay between the correspondences and differences among covenants is at times complex, though carefully considered. However, in some instances this complexity appears to make too sharp a distinction between covenants. For example, I wonder if he has not pressed the discontinuity between the Sinaitic and Deuteronomic covenants too far. I am not convinced that the sonship of Deuteronomy is less intimate than that articulated in the Sinaitic covenant, especially when viewed in the whole context of Deuteronomy where the sonship of Israel is quite prominent (1:31; 8:5; 14:1-2; 32:4-6, 18-20, probably 43), in association with the intimate concepts of love and election (e.g., 7:6-8).

Hahn’s research into covenants, especially from an OT perspective, is quite extensive, but this thoroughness causes those passages or issues not covered to stand out in relief. It would be helpful to see, for example, how the author’s understanding of covenants informs a reading of the entire book of Galatians or the concluding chapters of Hebrews. Similarly, an important question for Hahn’s kinship paradigm is how Adam’s apparent familial relationship to God (cf. Gen 5:1, 3; Luke 3:38) might relate to the oft-invoked concept of an Adamic or creation covenant. This is a particularly interesting question given the purported influence of Meredith Kline on the author’s covenantal thought. Alas, the issue of the existence or non-existence of an Adamic covenant is mentioned only in passing, and the suggestive Hos 6:7 is nowhere discussed.

In sum, Kinship by Covenant is thoroughly researched and lucidly argued. Those with a serious interest in a biblical theology of covenants will not want to miss Hahn’s contribution, even if they may disagree with some of his construals.

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Imagine a North American traveling abroad and attending a local church where he observes worshipers clad in denim and Nikes while joining in song, assisted by Power Point and led by a praise band. He might come away from the encounter confirmed in the opinion that in church matters, much of the globe is taking its cues from us. Why this should be so and the alleged baneful effects of all such westernizing trends are often being
debated just now. Our natural inclination is to suppose that the Americanization that we can so easily find in a church elsewhere is part of the larger fabric of global westernization in general, and American influence in particular. U.S.-based firms, such as Walmart, MacDonalds, and Starbucks, are global economic forces; are they not an economic expression of a burgeoning American hegemony in the world that manifested itself first in the Spanish-American War and Panama, then an entry into World Wars in 1917 and 1941, in the Cold War era, and beyond? We easily suppose that this vast American geopolitical “reach” has had as its religious counterpart the vast crusade and broadcast reach of Billy Graham, the multi-lingual screenings of Campus Crusade’s “Jesus film,” and (most recently) the Rick Warren-led initiatives in aid of Rwanda.

Historian Mark Noll is quite aware of America’s global economic and military reach, so visible across the century now passed. Nevertheless, he insists that distinct from it—especially since the mid-eighteenth century—a global influence has been exercised independent of this geopolitical role by a North American Christianity functioning as a kind of experimental laboratory. In this “lab” has been pursued the quest to determine how a Christianity mediated from a Europe that had been served by specific churches, and characterized by clerical dominance and restraints on personal religious liberty, would adapt once these constraints were removed. What has emerged from this “lab experiment” (now 250 years in duration) is an expression of Christianity severed from the influence of the state, characterized by intense individualism, directed by the middle classes, and given to growth led by entrepreneurial and charismatic leaders. This eclectic, growth-driven Christianity, Noll maintains, is an expression of Christianity that proved highly suited for adaptation to missionary contexts beyond America. And so, it is for these reasons that North Americans so easily find features of their own Christianity awaiting them when they go globe-trotting.

We have Noll’s proposal. How does it “wear”? So as to provide a kind of validation that the American experience of Christianity has produced a “varietal” highly suited to implantation elsewhere, Noll explores a number of case studies. He selects such cases as the Christianity of Korea (ch. 9) and East Africa (ch. 10) for review; the result is mixed. Korean Christianity is found to demonstrate many affinities with the approach to Christianity known on this continent. By contrast, East Africa, especially in the early to mid-twentieth century (a period characterized by the fervor of revival) he finds not to have followed patterns so readily recognizable to the North American. There, British missionary and indigenous tribal culture have left a deep imprint on Christian practice. This only-qualified success in supporting Noll’s fascinating thesis should give us pause, for this implies that there is more to be said, both pro and con, regarding the Americanization thesis.

On the one hand, there will be readers (some conservative Presbyterians among them) who, while not disputing Noll’s interpretation of the “drift” of American Christianity since 1750, will maintain that the American adaptation of the Christian faith has included a number of “wrong turns.” The individualism, the exaltation of the “amateur” over the trained Christian leader, the tendency to hyper-evangelism—these (it will be said) are some of the excesses that the American experiment has yielded. If such exaggerated traits have been visited on the Christian movements of other countries by Americans, it ought to be regretted.
There will be others who conclude (via Noll’s East African example) that the American pattern, while indeed real, has not been of nearly as wide application as Noll suggests. Indeed, the inapplicability of the American pattern to many regions and cultures which have embraced missionary Christianity suggests not that the Noll hypothesis is without foundation, but that similar hypotheses might be framed regarding the formative periods of the Christian faith in other cultures and the transferability of those concepts abroad. One thinks of how the experience of the Chinese church in the post-1950 period (both Three-Self and unregistered) has itself provided a “laboratory” out of which lessons have emerged applicable to churches in many cultures dominated by authoritarian regimes.

Again, the question of the existence of what is known as American “exceptionalism” is raised by this book. Has the American experience, after all, been so distinctive, so formative? When one considers that the United States was not the solitary non-European (yet Anglo-Saxon) “sending” region in world mission in the formative period to the mid-twentieth century, one must ask whether the Australian, New Zealand, or white South African “laboratories” of Christian adaptation have not themselves exerted a considerable cross-cultural influence in missionary situations.

Moreover, this reviewer has been driven, incrementally, to the conclusion that Noll has artificially compartmentalized the exercise of America’s foreign Christian ascendancy from the exercise of America’s geopolitical ascendancy. We can grant that the American “laboratory experiment” with European Christianity unfolded in the ways Noll describes. The question is, did this experiment unfold in a vacuum? If it is suggested that America’s distinctive Christian influence was being felt abroad earlier than the Teddy Roosevelt era, with which we so readily associate the exerting of this nation’s geopolitical might beyond its borders, it is necessary to remember that this nation made war in the Mediterranean against the Barbary pirates in 1801—earlier than Adoniram Judson left these shores for Burma. By 1823, through the articulation of the Monroe doctrine, our government had cautioned European powers to think better of further Caribbean colonial intrigues. Thus, in truth, the question of America’s Christian missionary influence beyond our borders was early intertwined with the factors of military and economic action abroad as in the case of Britain, France, and the Netherlands in the heyday of their colonial empires. The discerning of American Christian patterns abroad cannot, so very easily, be distinguished from the larger question of America’s growing international cultural, economic, and military influence.

In this work, therefore, Mark Noll has launched a needed discussion about the Christian influence of this nation abroad. He has indeed shown affinities between the adaptations that the Christian message and movement underwent in North America since the mid-eighteenth century and the embrace and adaptation of the Christian message in lands to which American missionaries were commissioned. Yet he himself has acknowledged that there are limits to the application of this proposal. And he has not either proposed that America stands alone in this role of mediating a necessarily adapted Christian message to new receptor cultures. For such reasons, we can look forward with anticipation to the rousing discussion that the release of this fine volume will stimulate.

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