

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Covenant with Moses and the Kingdom of God: Thomas Hobbes and the Theology of the Old Covenant in Early Modern England*, by Andrew J. Martin**

Harrison Perkins

<https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.132301>

Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy

Andrew J. Martin. 2023. *The Covenant with Moses and the Kingdom of God: Thomas Hobbes and the Theology of the Old Covenant in Early Modern England*. Leiden: Brill.

Historians have increasingly recognized the important link between theology and politics in the early modern world, especially in England, Ireland, and Scotland. They have less often focused on how one theological topic intersected with the principles and execution of political theory. Andrew J. Martin's intriguing new work counterbalances that gap with a serious exploration into the intersection of covenant theology (one of the Reformed tradition's most distinctive doctrines, which was a structure for organizing principles of law and gospel as well as understanding the continuity of redemptive history) and the political system of Thomas Hobbes. Martin's study is rather sprawling in the timespan and views that he covers, outlining the vast variety of views on covenant theology in 1640s–1650s England and then investigating the significance of Hobbes's use of covenant theology within his political theory.

This book has both strengths and weaknesses; let us get the negative assessment out of the way first. It claims to be about how Thomas Hobbes's political theory relates to Reformed covenant theology. Although that idea emerges eventually, the very long lead-up through multiple chapters about a plethora of views on covenant theology precludes any clear sense of development and direction from the outset. Had Martin argued simply for stunning diversity in one theological locus that had ramifications for political theorizing, this work would have been a tour de force.

Further, Martin neglects paradigmatic works from the likes of Stephen Hampton, Jake Griesel, and Greg Salazar on issues of conformity and puritanism, a categorization which is rightly a major factor in understanding early modern religion in England. Even more, he defers to the roundly critiqued Jonathan Moore over Richard Snoddy concerning James Ussher when Snoddy has demonstrably interpreted Ussher more accurately. Martin seems to think that he is breaking new ground on the issue of conformity

and puritanism when in fact he has neglected the most significant literature about the nature of the Reformed conformist tradition in relation to other contemporary camps.

Finally, Martin's argument about Hobbes feels incomplete. Martin makes much of the relationship between nature and grace early in his book but leaves this further in the background in his treatment of Hobbes. When he does raise it, his analysis of Hobbes's rejection of the Reformed doctrine of God's covenant with Adam before the fall reveals a remarkable resemblance to the Roman Catholic doctrine of pure nature. Hobbes's view of works in anthropology and soteriology, also assessed by Martin, confirms Hobbes's similarity to Rome on these topics. Examining Hobbes against a cross section of non-Protestant thinkers would have added more perspective to this analysis of his political theory and further explicated how he modified Protestant ideas to build it.

Nevertheless, Martin's book also contains some impressive features. First, Martin offers several taxonomies for how accounts of God's covenant with Israel relate to the covenant theology and political theory of the Reformed tradition. These taxonomies are remarkable in scope and show the astonishing diversity of early modern thought concerning how the Mosaic covenant affects different views of the relationship between nature and grace.

Martin's survey addresses both historical and theological issues in contemporary literature. It especially undermines the argument that the Reformed tradition has only a singular explanation for the development of biblical history related to the Mosaic covenant. Martin admirably puts such a notion to lie. He shows instead that consensus did form to exclude some explanations of the Mosaic covenant, which means that a center formed around what to reject. Still, the confessional mainstream allowed a wide berth for various explanations for how to relate the various biblical covenants to one another. As point of confirmation, even theologians who disagreed with one another manifested genuine respect for each other and made efforts to appropriate one another's work—something that often has been lost in the modern theological debates about this topic.

Second, Martin implements a finely calibrated historical method, building his taxonomy by using primary source taxonomies from the early modern period. In dealing with the categorizations that theologians in mid-seventeenth century England were already using for their contemporary literature, this approach avoids imposing anachronistic categories. This approach again reveals the surprising diversity on these issues because these seventeenth-century taxonomies each recount many diverse views. Additionally, the taxonomies from these various theologians contain further diversity among themselves in how to explain and evaluate the various proposals for making sense and application of the Mosaic covenant.

Martin makes his strongest contribution when he diachronically investigates Hobbes's implementation of covenant theology for developing political theory. Martin shows how Hobbes was well attuned to theological discussions of his time and how Reformed theologians were using these conversations to bolster their own political ideas. The implication of Martin's investigation is that Hobbes sought to make his political theology more persuasive by enlisting burgeoning Reformed ideas in its service. In his case, it seemed that politics took precedence to theology, which is the opposite direction of the intellectual traffic of the mainstream Reformed writers that Martin examines. In this respect, Hobbes seemed to take a tool from the theologians' workbench to weaponize it against their own intentions. Accordingly, Martin's work on Hobbes suggests a provocative implication for historiography that can also serve as a lesson for those working in systematic theology—namely, when theologians enlist their theology to further their political hopes, as many of the Reformed writers examined in this book did, they should not be surprised that politicians may well turn around and use their own theology against them to develop contravening social agendas.

Harrison Perkins

Published: March 19, 2025 EDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-NC-ND-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode> for more information.