

Notes on the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *The Structure of Biblical Authority* by MG Kline

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Continued from Notes on the Preface

Introduction

Contemporary to Kline, who published this book in 1972, there was a modern dialectic between many heterodox and orthodox Old Testament scholars, centered on the assumption that we have already exhausted our analysis of material sourced directly from the OT that reinforces its own status as canon. The dialectic is therefore waged in the form of disputes about accuracy of interpretation of pre-Christian and early Christian supplementary materials, e.g. the contents of the Qumran library in the West Bank, which contains almost every book in the Protestant OT, save Esther, but which also includes 1 Enoch and the Book of Jubilees. However, all 19th and 20th century scholastic participants in this dialectic are mistaken to have assumed the premise that created it. They believe that the OT is not self evidently canonical, but is only so through intellectual evolution, consensus, and dogma (e.g. the argument by Fohrer that “formation of the canon didn’t take place until the time of Sirach and his grandson’ in the second century BC”). They cast aspersions on the objective authority of scripture in so doing. However as Kline argues, the entire dialectic, with Fohrer claiming canonization came in three separate and partial stages, which Kline calls the “long-current critical tradition”, is again falsely predicated on assumptions about the evolution of ancient Israelite religion, and ignores positive historical evidence highlighting properties about the canon that have in fact never changed. Such assumptions are at least deeply flawed in that without rationale they assign selected sentiments of contemporary Israelite actors as the authoritative process by which the canon itself was determined. Of course as orthodox critics note, this interpretation is not only unverifiable, but spiritually consequential, as it inherently undermines the claim made throughout the Old Testament that the words therein are God-breathed, and that therefore ontologically they were canon at the exact moment of being uttered, to the same extent that any of God’s decrees are infallible and everlasting. Accepting the orthodox view based on evidence that will continue to be unpacked in Chapter 1, the canon was then developed over a thousand years starting in the second millennium BC, a time long before any critics contemporary to Kline were willing to accept, instead regarding the same period as generic prehistory. It is therefore this period that Kline starts his analysis of the canon, with a focus on the suzerain-vassal treaty form of the ancient Near East (for context, see Notes on the Preface). According to Kline, this scholastic development is significant towards confirming the canonicity of the Old Testament, even more so than the Dead Sea Scrolls emerging out of the ancient library of Qumran. This innovation also carries apologetic value when properly understood.

Chapter 1

Sec. 1: Ancient Near Eastern Canonical Documents

The substance of Sec. 1 (pg. 27–35) was anticipated in Notes on the Preface.

Sec. 2: Adoption of the Canonical Treaty Form

As discussed the international suzerain-vassal treaty was formative to the realized structure of the Book of Deuteronomy, and within this, the Decalogue delivered at Sinai. Through Moses, God, analogous to the Hittite suzerain, addressed to the vassals, the nations, the law of his parent eternal kingdom. Moreover the duplicate tables of the covenant reflect the contemporary Hittite custom to produce one copy of the treaty for each party involved in the covenant. That it was meant to be preserved as canon, or at least that it was esteemed to such a level, is evidenced in the instructions in 1 Kings to preserve the Decalogue inside of the Ark of the Covenant as a permanent witness to the formation and eternal binding nature of the treaty. The direction by God to

“Not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of Yahweh your God which I command you” (Deut. 4:2)

and that by Moses to

“At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, [read] this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess (Deut. 31:10–13)”

constitute commandments about the deposition of the treaty, and also constitute an inscriptional curse that was the signal trait of canonical, legally binding Hittite treaties.

The inscriptional curse theme is also found in Jeremiah 36, towards King Jehoiakim and his house for transgressing and burning the original scroll containing Jeremiah’s prophecies:

Also tell Jehoiakim king of Judah, ‘This is what the Lord says: You burned that scroll and said, “Why did you write on it that the king of Babylon would certainly come and destroy this land and wipe from it both man and beast?” Therefore this is what the Lord says about Jehoiakim king of Judah: He will have no one to sit on the throne of David; his body will be thrown out and exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night. I will punish him and his children and his attendants for their wickedness; I will bring on them and those living in Jerusalem and the people of Judah every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened” (36:29–31).

Again an inscriptional curse is found in Rev. 22:18–19 against tampering or otherwise disgracing the original scroll:

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. 19 And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.”

These examples falling outside the Deuterocanon reinforce not only the intentional insertion of treaty structural elements in Deuteronomy but also the thesis that all of scripture was indeed intended as canon at the time of inscription, speaking to their unchanging authority, and adding to their reputation even in relationship to the human civilizational corpus which is in part secular, and the study thereof. On the overwhelming content that the Old Testament itself provides it then becomes significantly less important to look extrabiblically for support of the same conclusions.

Sec. 3: Anachronistic Modern Canon Theories

In this section Kline briefly redresses opposing theories, or definitions of canon, introduced in Sec. 1 and the Preface, and concludes by identifying commonalities about the entire set of objections he faces. In particular new, progressive models of canonicity (e.g., by von Rad) claim to depart from the original disproven model of the academic predecessor Julius Wellhausen of the University of Gottingen, while actually repeating the same fundamental mistakes. For context, the Wellhausenian theory (also called the JEDP theory) was to treat the Pentateuch as though it were assembled via the uninspired, mechanical pasting of four distinct written books J (Jahwist, originating in southern Judah), E (Elohist, originating from the northern Kingdom of Israel), D (Deuteronomist, linked to King Josiah himself), and P (Priestly, a collection of laws) by fifth century BC editor. In the work of von Rad he is correct to note this is an anachronistic approach, in that it projects modern practices about book production back into the ancient Near East. von Rad continues that JEDP as a theory is outright disproven, not simply creative or unlikely, because it would be incommensurate with evidences of the whole of Deuteronomy resembling in a coordinated manner the suzerain-vassal treaty form. But, as discussed in the Preface, von Rad stopped short of ascribing this similarity to direct contemporary imitation of the form (which would be to say that Deuteronomy was written in the second millennium BC, contemporary to the Hittites). Because of von Rad's hesitation to concede this, Kline warns that von Rad, though claiming and perhaps wishing to be more advanced than the Wellhausenian mold, yet falls to the same anachronistic tendency, but in his case on the order of a millennium.

Sec. 4: Conclusion

To end on a quote by Kline,

“Canon is inherent in covenant, . . . of the kind attested in ancient international relations. . . hence it is to this [structure] that theology should turn for its doctrine of canon in terms historically concrete and authentic” (pg 44).