

Notes on Chapter 2 of *The Structure of Biblical Authority* by MG Kline

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Continued from Notes on the Preface, Notes on Chapter 1

Chapter 2

If the Mosaic documents are known to have been modeled after the covenantal suzerain-vassal treaty form, how can we classify the rest of scripture? We can first notice already that Christian traditional practice is to refer to the two main sections of the Bible as “Testaments” (old and new), and that Paul refers to the Pentateuch in the NT as “the old covenant” (2 Cor. 3:14). Outside of these kinds of semantic clues, it also just naturally intuitively to assume all of scripture has covenantal status, since it assumes itself to have Godly authorship. If someone is approaching this topic already holding a Christian faith then the same conclusion is basically foregone. Nevertheless the original question deserves to be asked both to reinforce those with preexisting faith but also to appeal to skeptics who can access arguments on the basis of historicity, which is a plausible entry point into a subsequent personal faith. In the words of Kline “We may come to the same understanding of the Old Testament by viewing it not directly in its ultimate issuance from its invisible heavenly source but in its immediate earthly derivation from the Israelite community.”

Starting from history it can be easily seen that independent of the timing or nature of the covenantal inscription, the lived culture of Israel across its entire lifetime was governed by its collective self conception *as* a covenantal vassal state. Extensive ancient Israelite legislation was written in a manner not only directly inspired by the Torah but in a manner that assumes the absolute binding nature of the original divine law. As quick examples, the priest Ezra instituted public Torah recitation requirements to spread knowledge of the law; also the governor Nehemiah enforced taxation laws for the upkeep of the Second Temple, and banned the exchange of goods on the Sabbath. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to examining several of these kinds of examples. The study is divided into examinations of different OT genres. In order: law, history, prophecy, praise, and wisdom literature. Each of the case studies set out not only to demonstrate that the citations of interest reinforce the Mosaic writings as canon, but also to show that they, while living inside of the rest of scripture, also themselves contain similarities to the treaty form. This then not only identifies the source of inspiration for the names “Old Testament” and “Old Covenant” but more importantly argues their total aptness across biblical genres and their eternal relevancy into the modern day. After the OT review in Sec. 1, the NT is likewise studied in Sec. 2.

Sec. 1: Covenantal Old Testament

Secs. 1.1-2: Law & History

The origin of the structure of Sinaitic law to this point has been well identified in the Preface and in Chapter 1. But in regards to the OT as a whole, it is worth backing up to consider the question

notably asked by Martin Noth, a German colleague to Kline and also to von Rad: why a law at all? Trivially the answer is that suzerains issue laws to run their states. But notice Noth's observation in his 1940 work *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Essays*:

“Israel besaß ein Gesetz, das nicht vom Staate ausging und nicht für einen Staat bestimmt war; es war ein Gesetz, das absolute Geltung beanspruchte für eine Gemeinschaft, die durch ihr Verhältnis zu Gott definiert war.”

“Israel possessed a law which did not emanate from a state and was not intended for a state; it was a law which laid claim to absolute validity for a community defined by its relationship to God.”

What Noth is saying here in the first part is that Israel, consisting not in some overarching kingship as with the Hittite empire but as a stateless people spread across twelve tribes without a capital city or a king, seem altogether unprepared for a governing judicial corpus. And yet Kline brilliantly observes that the answer to this fundamental question is hidden in the second part of Noth's same observation. While ancient vassals were defined in their political subordination to lords and their economic interdependence with other sibling vassals, they typically had autonomy in moral and social terms. The reason why the sibling tribes of Israel are issued a treaty of analogous structure, however, is to be defined in their *moral* subordination to God and their *social* interdependence as descendants of Jacob.

And the reason Kline reflects on this distinction is because it not only motivates the structure of the Sinaitic writings but also the structure of everything after it. Oftentimes modern readers ask, why is it that massive sections of Joshua through 1-2 Kings are consumed by granular logs of Israel's relative obedience or disobedience? But the construction of the post Sinaitic OT as a rigorous moral documentary makes perfect sense *as* the exact evidentiary ledger demanded by a treaty framework that binds the nation to explicit terms of blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. Then in the words of Kline,

“The uniquely religious nature of the Yahweh-Israel covenant naturally and necessarily transformed the political into the cultic.”

The rest of these sections then recount the OT's composition of cultic obligations that reinforce Israel's unified genealogical and spiritual identity. Among them mandated recitation of the law every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 31:9), rendering military assistance to God and engaging in conquest at his word (Exodus 23:23, 32, 34:11), participation in ceremonies and the failure to doing so leading to punishment (Lev 17:4), showing partiality to and kindness to Israelite servants on the basis of a shared story of deliverance from Egyptian bondage (Deut 5:15. 15:15, 24:18), reaffirmation of their covenantal mandates after lapse (Joshua 8:30, 23, 24; 1 Sam 12; 2 Sam 7; 2 Kings 11:17; etc). The entire books of 1&2 Chronicles are themselves of course the product of a chronicler, motivated in his selection of data by the desire to anchor the society to its formal covenantal identity.

Secs. 1.3-5: Prophecy, Praise, & Wisdom Literature

The work of the prophet is commonly thought of as the divine forecasting of events, but historically this term was also used to describe a limited diplomatic office mandated by the treaty. And just as *succession* was usually the concluding remark of the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form, Moses uses Deut 18:15 to legislate the election of future prophets such as himself. What prophets in this context were assigned to do is to clarify the correct application of ancient covenant sanctions in contemporary life. And it is with this authority that one also become responsible for the inverse operation of defining what constitutes an infraction, then litigating those infractions wherever they manifest. Kline then finds this persistent theme of the covenant *lawsuit* across both the prophetic and the wisdom OT literature. Specifically he notes

“The peculiar structure of the summons, consisting of admonition-promise-accusation-threat, is traced to a double set of covenantal protasis and apodosis conditions,”

by which he means a pair of if-thens. The first has a positive valence: admonition (“If you turn back, amend your ways, and seek Yahweh”) to promise (“then He will relent from disaster and grant you mercy”). Then the second is the inverse: accusation (“If you continue you ignore His voice and chase idols”) to threat (“then the covenant curses will swallow you in exile”). Notice the direct map onto a famous ancient treaty issued by the Hittite King Mursili II to Duppi-Tessub of the vassal state Amurru:

“So honour the oath (of loyalty) to the king and the king’s king And I, the king, will be loyal toward you, Duppi- Tessub. When you take a wife, and when you beget an heir, he shall be king in the Amurru land likewise. . . [but if] you, Duppi-Tessub, do not remain loyal together with your foot soldiers and your charioteers and if you do not fight wholeheartedly; . . . should Duppi-Tessub not honour these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns.”

Likewise to the prophet, the Psalter also echoes the treaty blessings and curses. While the prophet’s domain is law, the Psalter’s is culture. His recitations and proclamations are aimed at maintaining the uniquely cultic and personal conviction of the Yahweh-Israel treaty.

Sec. 2: Covenantal New Testament

The map of the New Testament onto the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form is less resolute because the authors weren’t contemporary to that second millennium BC literary standard and therefore they were probably unaware of it. However of course, they were very familiar with the imitative structure found in the Old Testament. And of course, they knew that the purpose of their documentation of the New Testament was to renew and fulfill the Old. Therefore transitively, even if not on purpose, the New Testament shares patterns with the ancient treaty forms. Kline argues this transport of that form over time is providential, since it is the most accurate representation of the covenantal relationship between God and man. And, as with the Old Testament, the New Testament ascribes godly authorship onto itself, which casts it as inherently covenantal, even independent of its internal structure, insofar as God’s promises to man are without expiration.