

The Use of the Treaty Format in the Mosaic Covenant

Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*

| | Exodus-Leviticus | Deuteronomy | Joshua 24 |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| <i>Preamble</i> | Ex. 20:1-2a | Deut. 1:1-5 | v. 2a |
| <i>Historical prologue</i> | Ex. 20:2b | chs. 1-3 | vv. 2b-13, 17-18 |
| <i>Stipulations</i> | Ex. 20-23, 25-31 Lev. 1-25 | chs. 4-11 (basic) chs. 12-26 (detailed) | vv. 14-16, 23 |
| <i>Documentary clause</i> | Ex. 25:16; 40:20 Deut. 10:1-5 | 31:9-13, 24-26 | v. 26 |
| <i>Witnesses</i> | Ex. 24:4 (stones) | 30:19 (heaven & earth) 31:19-22 (song of Moses) 31:24ff (book of the law) | v. 22 (people) v. 27 (stones) |
| <i>Sanctions</i> | Lev. 26 | 27:11—28:68 | vv. 19-20 |
| <i>Ratification ceremony</i> | Ex. 24 | 29:1, 10-15 Josh. 8:30-35 | vv. 21-25 |

Objection: Does comparing the biblical covenants with the ancient near eastern suzerain-vassal treaty form imply that the Bible borrowed from pagan ideas? In response to this objection, Kline appeals to the Reformed doctrine of God's providential control of history, particularly the political history of the ancient near eastern peoples. God sovereignly arranged the situation so that the peoples around Israel would be using this format for their political treaties at that time, in order to provide the necessary conceptual framework for Israel to understand her vassal relationship with Yahweh, the Great King. Obviously, the pagan conception is mixed with erroneous theology. But God took the basic format, cleansed it of the pagan errors, and used it to teach Israel about her relationship with God. In *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Kline argues that God's covenant with Israel "providentially" "coincided" with the political treaties of the ancient near east (p. 43), thus making the treaty form "available, needing only to be taken up and inspired by the breath of God" (p. 37).

In addition to the concept of providence, there is also the important theological consideration that fallen man retains the image of God by common grace. The very institution of human kingship in the ancient world was a pale reflection of the glory of God the King. The unquestioned authority of ancient near eastern kings, the ability of their law-word to define reality by decree, their absolute power over all their subjects, etc. – these were all mixed with sin, abuse of authority, tyranny, and so on, but they nevertheless reflected something true about God's own authority. That reflection was distorted by sin, but it was not a totally false reflection, since God restrains man's sin by common grace and preserves some sparks of truth and some conception of deity. Thus, it is not surprising that these pagan kings would employ a covenantal treaty form as the means of exercising their authority. The treaty was not negotiated with the vassal but sovereignly imposed. The sanctions were enforced by the gods in whose name the treaty was sworn. The obedience of the vassal was expected unconditionally. The treaty form highlights the sovereignty of the king over his subjects, thus reflecting the vestiges of some awareness of the covenantal sovereignty of God over his creatures, a faint echo or memory of the Adamic covenant of works, the basic demands of which are written upon the conscience of all men.