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## Recent Covenant Studies and the Reformed Believer

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# RECENT COVENANT STUDIES AND THE REFORMED BELIEVER

by Wayne Kobes  
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At the very heart of Reformed thought stands the Biblical understanding of the covenant. As Meredith Kline observes:

Following the lead of the Scriptures themselves, Reformed theology has long prized the covenant as a structural concept for integrating all that God has so diversely spoken unto men of old time and in these last days.

A recent writer, comparing the relationship of law and gospel within the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, finds the genius of the Reformed position in this overarching status it accords to the covenant.<sup>1</sup>

In the Reformed community there is a promi-

nence given to the covenant, but what is the general understanding of covenant?

The covenant comes to mind when Reformed believers think of infant baptism, God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, or God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17. In addition most have a general knowledge of the theological constructs of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. But apart from these, how does the covenant relate to the prophets, to the Psalms, to wisdom literature, to the New Testament?

At the outset, it is helpful to distinguish between "covenant" used in a broad general sense, which is that full-orbed relationship between Creator and creature, and the numerous covenants found in Scripture which are

historical outworkings of this covenantal relationship. At creation and by virtue of creation, the covenant in this broad sense exists. Adam's fall into sin disrupts that covenantal relationship, but God reaffirms it in His Son, Jesus Christ. In no way is this distinction to be construed as a tension, for there is in essence one covenant between God and his creation which is articulated in different historical settings. Calvin emphasizes this when he writes concerning the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament:

Now we can clearly see from what has already been said that all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us. It is very important to make this point. . . . The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation. (*Institutes*, II, X, 1)<sup>2</sup>

A biblical understanding of the covenant, then, gives one a unified view of Scripture as God's covenant Word.

"Faced with a church which presented itself as the depository of grace--grace which was meted out in the sacraments--the Reformers rediscovered in Scripture that man and the whole of creation stand in a covenantal relationship to God."

It was not until the Protestant Reformation, however, that the Biblical understanding of the covenant came into prominence. Certainly there are scattered references to the covenant found in the writings of the early church, but they remained little more than

scattered references until God's Spirit and Word gripped men's hearts in the Reformation. Faced with a church which presented itself as the depository of grace--grace which was meted out in the sacraments--the Reformers rediscovered in Scripture that man and the whole of creation stand in a covenantal relationship to God. Further they came to see that the whole of Scripture was God's covenant Word to His people and must be read as such. It was particularly the Reformed branch of the Reformation which came to stress and develop a biblical understanding of the covenant. Luther and Melancthon did not reject the concept of the covenant, but neither did they come to the full understanding which Calvin, Zwingli, Bullinger and other Reformed leaders came to see. This seems quite understandable when one considers the effect of the law-gospel tension in Lutheran thought. Whereas a proper understanding of the covenant emphasizes the unity of Old and New Testaments, the law-gospel distinction tends to create a tension.

It is difficult if not impossible to point to only one man as responsible for a rediscovery of the biblical understanding of the covenant. Instead one finds that there was a gradual deepening of understanding in which many Reformed leaders played a part. Zwingli was the first to come to this fuller understanding of the covenant in the context of his debates with the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists had come to the position of rejecting the Old Testament, charging that it was a Jewish book no longer authoritative for Christians. In response to this, Zwingli stressed that there was one covenant and one people of God. This one covenant underlies the whole of Scripture.

But it is in the writings of Bullinger, Zwingli's successor, that one finds a more thoroughly worked-out understanding of covenant as the essential relationship between God and his people. In fact, Bullinger saw the covenant concept as so significant that he singled it out for special consideration.

Calvin never specifically focused his attention upon the subject of the covenant, but it soon becomes obvious to anyone who reads his Institutes of the Christian Religion that it played a foundational role in his thinking.

This is especially evident in Book IV which deals with the Church and the sacraments.

One could continue to list Reformed thinkers from Calvin to the present and to point out their stress on a biblical understanding of the covenant, but such a treatment hardly seems necessary. It will suffice to note that the Reformed understanding of the covenant is seen in Reformed theology, in the Reformed creeds, and in the life style of Reformed believers.

While in the Reformed community the covenant stood as central, in the larger Protestant community such was not the case. More and more rationalism began to shape a view of Scripture and of the covenant which was antagonistic to the Reformed position. J.G. Eichhorn (1752-1827) who is often granted the title, "the father of Old Testament criticism," reacted against the view of Scripture held by the early church and the Reformers by adopting a documentary analysis of the Pentateuch emphasizing the thoroughly human element of the Old Testament literature. From Eichhorn on, the higher critical approach gained impetus. It is the name of Julius Wellhausen, however, which occupies the place of prominence in higher criticism. Wellhausen gave classic form to a theory which was to dominate Old Testament scholarship for years to come. In the words of Emil Kraepling: "It marked the beginning of a completely secular and evolutionistic study of the Old Testament sources."<sup>3</sup> Basically, Wellhausen affirmed Graf's contention that the Old Testament legislation was post-prophetic. In his theory, which was shaped by an evolutionistic conception of Israel's "religious" history, the prophets played a very significant role. Wellhausen proposed that it was the prophetic teachings of monotheism which finally led to the establishment of a central cult center at Jerusalem, which in turn led to the development of the ritual and legal codes of the post-exilic period. On the basis of such a scheme, he maintained that the various literary works contained in the Old Testament were not so much literary unities as later compilations of various "codes," which represented different and even opposing stages of Israel's "religious" development.

Reformed believers rightly rejected Wellhausen's approach because of its rationalistic, evolutionistic basis. According to Wellhausen's scheme, covenant could no longer be that central unifying theme underlying the whole of Scripture but was merely a later development in Israel's "religious" life which had been written into the earlier documents. Scripture was not to be taken at face value; instead scholars were to be busy reconstructing what "really" happened. Such thinking has dominated the world of Old Testament scholarship to the present time. Even in the light of discoveries which conflict with Wellhausen's basic assumptions, many have continued to cling to his theories.

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In higher-critical circles, the most damaging blow to Wellhausen's scheme of Old Testament interpretation began with the work of Viktor Korosec. In 1931, Korosec published an analysis of Hittite treaties in which he designated two basic types, the suzerainty treaty and the parity treaty. Korosec went on to designate the elements normally found in the Hittite treaties, but he did not compare these with covenants found in the Old Testament.

It was not until 1954, when George Mendenhall published his work Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East, (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955) such a comparison was made. Especially significant was the dating arrived at by Mendenhall. Since the form of the Suzerainty treaty in the Hittite empire changed after 1200 B.C., and since Israel's covenants resembled these early forms, he concluded that they must have been

introduced into Israel quite early. Such a conclusion struck at the very heart of Wellhausen's contention that covenant was an outgrowth of the teaching of the prophets and was therefore a late development in Israel's history. Although Mendenhall's early dating of the covenant in Israel has been verified and accepted by many scholars, the influence of Wellhausen's view of covenant is still strongly felt. Some continue to work with Wellhausen's conclusions in face of the new information, although others have begun to work out Mendenhall's discoveries in relation to particular writings of the Old Testament. Yet a word of caution is in order. While Mendenhall's challenge to Wellhausen thought has been welcomed by Reformed theologians, it should be noted that Mendenhall does not return to the orthodox approach to Scripture. For him, there is still found a tension between various covenant traditions in Scripture. Mendenhall, too, holds to a higher-critical view of Scripture.

Nevertheless many of the insights which Mendenhall has brought to light have been of extreme importance to Reformed scholars. Meredith Kline in particular, in light of the close relationship between ancient Near Eastern covenants and those found in Scripture, has attempted to use these insights to come to a fuller understanding of the sacraments and of biblical authority. (cf. Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned, 1968 and The Structure of Biblical Authority, 1972, Wm. B. Eerdmans.)

Unlike his higher critical counterparts, Kline stresses the unity of Scripture as the infallible, inspired Word of God. From this starting point and in the light of ancient Near Eastern treaty documents, he attempts to develop a biblical theology of the covenant. Most significant to us is his approach to the relationship between the covenant and the proper understanding of Scripture.

Kline begins by focusing his attention upon the Sinaitic covenant in which Yahweh formally declares His lordship over the people of Israel. He finds a striking similarity between the Sinaitic covenant and certain international treaties, known as suzerainty covenants, found in the ancient Near East. (The suzerainty covenant was formalized be-

tween the suzerain, a powerful conquering king, and the vassal kings whom he had conquered. This covenant determined the relationship which existed between the suzerain and his vassals.) At Sinai, Yahweh stood as suzerain, and the people of Israel were his vassals. The words of Yahweh written on the tables of stone and in "the book" were His authoritative covenant words to His people. They can be said to define that covenant relationship. The formal structure of that covenant and the ceremony involved, Kline maintains, accord closely with the suzerainty covenants in the ancient Near East. Even the retaining of the covenant words in written form finds its parallel in those international treaties. In this way Kline finds the structure of the classic treaty pattern in the Decalogue and in Deuteronomy. As Kline comments:

In this treaty form as it had developed in the history of diplomacy in the ancient Near East, a formal canonical structure was therefore available, needing only to be taken up and inspired by the breath of God to become altogether what the church had confessed as canon. And that is what happened when Yahweh adopted the legal-literary form of the suzerainty covenants for the administration of his Kingdom in Israel.<sup>4</sup>

The Decalogue and Deuteronomy then stand as the Sinaitic treaty documents. But what of the rest of Scripture? According to Kline, these are all extensions of some part of the foundational treaties. He states:

The functional extension may be by way of administrative or judicial application or by way of didactic or confessional elaboration. But in each case a special relationship can be traced between the function and a particular element of the treaty documents, and thus a literary dimension is added to the functional in our identification of the Old Testament in all its parts as a covenantal corpus. Our thesis is then that whatever the individual names of the several major literary genres of the Old Testa-

ment, as adopted in the Old Testament their common surname is Covenant.<sup>5</sup>

Kline clearly stands in the line of Reformed thought when he asserts that Scripture is covenantal. However, the way that Kline works out his understanding of Scripture as covenantal in terms of ancient Near Eastern treaties, has met with mixed response from within and without the Reformed community. This is due largely to the fact that the comparison of biblical covenants and ancient Near Eastern covenants is still in a beginning, formative stage. Further cautious study and analysis is needed.

Reformed believers agree that covenant does lie at the very heart of understanding Scripture. It is easy to see this when one turns to Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, or even the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. But how do the Psalms or the Prophets relate to covenant? Perhaps the question should be asked in particular of the Prophets, since historically many have denied that the prophets even knew of covenant. Wellhausen noted that the Prophetic writings rarely use the term "covenant" and concluded that the few references which are found are obviously later additions. This is one of the bases upon which he built his theory that a notion of covenant in Israel came after the Prophets and as a result of their high ethical teachings.

Does covenant really underlie the message of the Prophets? A brief examination of the prophecy of Micah is helpful in answering this question. When one reads the entire prophecy, he notices that there is not a single reference to the covenant between God and his people, an observation which has troubled many and has been used as support for Wellhausen's position. Yet the mere absence of the word "covenant" must not lead one to hasty conclusions that Micah had no knowledge of the covenant. Chapters six and seven in particular are helpful in understanding the prophecy of Micah. When one examines these chapters in the light of recent discoveries and analyses of ancient Near Eastern treaties, he finds that Micah employs many of the elements of the riv (covenant lawsuit). Briefly those

elements which normally constitute the riv are: a call to witnesses to hear and testify, an introductory statement of the case, a recital of the plaintiff's benevolent acts and indictment, a sentence and warning, and the recognition of the judgment. These elements were arrived at by the examination of recently discovered extrabiblical covenant lawsuits. Not every riv contained all these elements nor was the order always the same.

In examining the prophecy of Micah, one finds that chapter six corresponds to the first element of the riv pattern in that it begins with a call to witnesses to hear and testify.

Hear what the Lord says:

Arise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth;

for the Lord has a controversy with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.

(Micah 6:1,2)

In heraldic style the mountains, hills and foundations of the earth are summoned as witnesses. Such a reference reminds one of Deuteronomy 32:1, which was spoken in the context of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;  
and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

(Deut. 32:1; cf. also Is. 1:2)

But even more significant is the fact that such expressions were common in extra-biblical covenants and more particularly in the riv. Here, too, are found references to the mountains, hills and foundations of the earth being called as witnesses in a covenant lawsuit.

In examining Micah 6 and 7 for the second element of the riv, one encounters more difficulty in that verse 3 does not seem to state God's case against Israel. However, Micah 6:3 can be seen as an introductory statement of the case of Yahweh against His people in the sense that in this verse there is the implication

that Israel's present life style is an outward expression of her attitude that Yahweh had not been faithful to His covenant. In other words, by her covenant breaking, Israel is denying Yahweh's faithfulness to His covenant.

O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

(Micah 6:3)

Verses 4 and 5 of Micah 6 are clearly a recital of Yahweh's benevolent acts toward His people Israel in keeping with the riiv form.

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of bondage;  
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron,  
and Miriam.

O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,  
and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him;  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.

(Micah 6:4,5)

The prophet records these events which were well known to Israel so that she might know the righteous acts of Yahweh. What has Yahweh done unto Israel? He has been the faithful, gracious and righteous suzerain. Instead of testifying against Yahweh, His acts proclaim Him as righteous and point to Israel as the covenant breaker.

The indictment of Israel is found in Micah 6:6-12. Israel is charged with keeping the formal aspects of the cult but not living the covenant lifestyle.

"With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body

for the sin of my soul?"

He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

The voice of the Lord cries to the city--and it is sound wisdom to fear thy name:

"Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!

Can I forget the treasures of wickedness  
in the house of the wicked,  
and the scant measure that is accursed?

Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales  
and with a bag of deceitful weights?

Your rich men are full of violence;  
your inhabitants speak lies,  
and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.

(Micah 6:6-12)

Israel's deeds speak for themselves of her unfaithfulness to the covenant demands.

Yahweh pronounces His sentence upon the people of Israel in verses 13-16 of chapter 6. Having clearly laid out the indictment, Yahweh speaks in verse 13 beginning with a noteworthy "Therefore!"

Therefore I have begun to smite you,  
making you desolate because of your sins.

You shall eat, but not be satisfied,  
and there shall be hunger in your inward parts;

you shall put away, but not save,  
and what you save I will give to the sword.

You shall sow, but not reap;  
you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil;  
you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.

For you have kept the statutes of Omri,  
and all the works of the house of Ahab;  
and you have walked in their counsels;

that I may make you a desolation,  
and your inhabitants a hissing,  
so you shall bear the scorn of the  
peoples.

(Micah 6:13-16)

"Reformed believers, as already indicated, have always maintained that the prophets spoke in terms of the covenant, and recent scholarship has merely served to re-emphasize that position and to lead to deeper insights.... In order to understand the prophetic literature, one must understand God's covenant with His people, for the prophets came to Israel as messengers of God on the basis of the covenant."

Already as the prophet speaks, people of Israel are experiencing the curse of a covenant-breaking way of life. The judgment is not simply a future one but was felt even then in Israel. Note the similarity between verses 14-15 above and the covenant curses listed in Deuteronomy 28:38-40.

You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather little in; for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worm shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with oil; for your olives shall drop off.

(Deut. 28:38-40)

These were sure to come upon Israel if she broke covenant with Yahweh. Not only is there a striking connection between the Micah passage and that of Deuteronomy, but these curses or judgments are also similar to those found in certain extra-biblical sources.

The final element of the riy pattern is that

of recognition of the judgment on the part of the defendant. Micah 7 constitutes such a recognition, beginning with a lament but also looking to Yahweh as the God of salvation.

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity

and passing over transgression

for the remnant of his inheritance?

He does not retain his anger for ever

because he delights in steadfast love.

He will again have compassion upon us,

he will tread our iniquities under foot.

Thou wilt cast all our sins

into the depths of the sea.

Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob

and steadfast love to Abraham,

as thou hast sworn to our fathers

from the days of old.

(Micah 7:18-20)

Although it is unwarranted to maintain that the prophecy of Micah takes the full legal form of a riy on the basis of such a brief analysis as that above, at the very least one must say that the correspondence is striking. Reformed believers, as already indicated, have always maintained that the prophets spoke in terms of the covenant, and recent scholarship has merely served to re-emphasize that position and to lead to deeper insights. To maintain that Micah knew nothing of the covenant or covenant lawsuit is to hold to an untenable position in the light of recent scholarship regarding ancient Near Eastern treaties. In order to understand the prophetic literature, one must understand God's covenant with His people, for the prophets came to Israel as messengers of God on the basis of the covenant.

It is interesting to consult Calvin's Commentary on the above chapters of Micah. Although Calvin does not mention the covenant specifically, it is clear that he is working in this general context. For Calvin, the prophets do not merely come to Israel with exceptionally high moral standards, calling God's people to a higher level of "religious" life, but they point the people back to the foundations of their very existence in that special relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Israel failed to live as the people of God, so the prophets came



indicting and sentencing in the name of Yahweh on the basis of that covenant.

An understanding of the ancient Near Eastern riv form will not result in a radically new interpretation of the Prophets, for Calvin and those following him in the Reformed line already understood that prophecy could not be divorced from an understanding of the covenant. But certainly the Reformed believer, working with recent insights concerning covenant, will have an enriched understanding of the Prophets.

Such is true as well when one turns to other literary genre of Scripture. The Reformed believer today must not accept the higher-critical approach to Scripture and all that follows from it, but, holding firmly to his confession that Scripture is the infallible, inspired Word of God, he can and must make use of recent research which serves to deepen his understanding of that covenant Word.

To attempt to understand Scripture apart from the covenant will result in misunderstanding Scripture. The whole of Scripture is covenantal. Kline writes:

The aptness of the broad identification of the pre-Messianic Scriptures as "the covenant" or "the old covenant" will be perceived if the Old Testament's comprehensive witness to itself is accepted at face value. The human dimensions of the Old Testament are to be duly appreciated, but it is supremely important that we apprehend in faith the Old Testament's claim that God is its primary author. If we do, we will see the Old Testament as more than an anthology of various types of literature produced by a series of authors across a span of centuries. We will understand that it all issued ultimately from the throne room of Israel's heavenly King and that all its literary forms possess a functional unity as instruments of Yahweh's ongoing covenantal oversight of the conduct and faith of his vassal people.

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. For all Israel's life, cult and culture, the latter in both the private-family and public-kingdom spheres, stood under the covenant rule of Yahweh. A peculiar significance was imparted to the whole by Yahweh's presence in the midst as God-King. His covenantal dominion, exercised from the nation's cultic center, the royal site of the theophanic presence, claimed Israel's life to its full circumference. And because the cultic and cultural structures of Israel which were the immediate Sitz im Leben of the various parts of the Old Testament were thus so thoroughly covenantalized, it follows that all the inspired literature deriving from and related to that cult (like ritual legislation and hymns) and associated with that culture (like civil law, national history, diplomatic messages of prophets, and instruction of sages) served the covenant and inevitably bore its stamp.<sup>6</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned (Grand Rapids, Mich., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 13.
2. John Calvin, The Institutes of the Christian Religion (Ford Lewis Battles translation, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 428-9.
3. Emil Kraeling, The Old Testament Since the Reformation (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), p. 94.
4. Meredith G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids, Mich., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 37.
5. Kline, Biblical Authority, p. 47.
6. Kline, Biblical Authority, pp. 46-47.

All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.