

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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COVENANT: WHAT IS IT ANYWAY?

by Ray R. Sutton

A sixteenth century woodcarving tells the following story. While strolling one evening, a man met a recently married friend who was scratched and bruised, and he asked him if he had been attacked by cats.

The friend replied that his marks were the result of a brawl with his wife, who, unlike other women, had "nine lives or natures." Urged on, he elaborated.

Returning home from the pub last Monday, he greeted his wife but received not a word in reply; she was like a codfish. So he struck her a good blow, whereupon he encountered a raging bear, pawing at him. So he struck her again and this time he met a hissing goose. Then she was a dog, snarling and barking epithets at him: "Ass, fool, simpleton." Struck still again, she became a rabbit on the run, bounding about, and cursing him as she ran: "Scoundrel, whoremonger, adulterer, gambler, drunkard." He ran her down and beat her about the head, now to find himself astraddle a wild, kicking horse. Then she was a cat, pouncing on him in full cry, scratching and clawing him mercilessly. At this point he grabbed a club and beat her incessantly until she became a pig, squealing and bawling. Finally, she crumpled into human form at his feet, threw her arms around him, and begged for mercy.

I'm sure that the husband probably thought, "What kind of critter am I dealing with anyway?" Every time he got a grip on his wife, she became something else. In a lot of ways, this story reminds me of the frustration of trying to *define* the covenant.

I can't tell you how many times over the last several years I've picked up a book thinking, "This one will tell me what a covenant is," only to discover that the meaning had eluded the author, that is, if he even stopped to define his term. I've also found that the studies that do attempt to define have extremely vague explanations.

Like the man with his constantly changing wife, I've even picked up many a book that purported to do one thing, and by the time I had finished I realized that it had done another; it had become a different animal. I've ended up saying more times than I care to admit, "What is a covenant anyway?"

Okay, someone might want to say, "You can't define it; it is like God; you can only *describe* it." Great, I'll settle for a description. But where is it? Descriptions are as few and far between as definitions.

So we're left to treating the covenant like pornography, a kind of "you know it when you see it" understanding. But the problem is that most Christians can't even do this. They don't know it because they don't see it. And they don't see it because they don't know it. They are trapped in a ridiculous cycle.

All the while, these good-intentioned Christians continue to propose a disjointed kind of Christianity at a time when more than ever before they need to know what a covenant is

and how it works. They are headed into the slaughter of irrelevance with their Scofield Bible notes in hand.

So my primary purpose in this newsletter is to *define* the covenant. The Book of Deuteronomy is a model, a place where all of its parts can clearly be seen. Deuteronomy is to the covenant what Romans is to systematic theology. But how do we know Deuteronomy is a covenant? Moses says, "He declared to you His *covenant* which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments [*Words* in the original]" (Deut. 4:13). Deuteronomy is the *second* giving of the Ten Commandments, a "new" covenant so to speak. Moses says of the book as a whole, "Keep the words of *this covenant* to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do" (Deut. 29:9). Deuteronomy is definitely a covenant document.

Significantly, scholarship of the last few decades has uncovered the similarity between Deuteronomy and other ancient near-eastern covenant treaties, called *suzerainty treaties*: Hittite (sixteenth-thirteenth centuries B.C.) and Assyrian (eighth-seventh centuries B.C.). Suzerains were ancient kings who imposed their covenant treaties on lesser kings called vassals. The structure of these treaty documents is not identical to Deuteronomy, but close enough to help us better understand its structure. Suzerainty covenants had six parts.¹

Suzerainty Covenants

1. *The Preamble*: Like an introduction, it declared who the suzerain (king) was as well as his great power.

2. *The Historical Prologue*: A historical summary of the suzerain's rule. In short, the one who controls history is lord and demands complete *submission*.

3. *Stipulations*: These were the specific laws of conquest to be observed, the stipulations being the very means of dominion. Also, they distinguished the servants of the suzerain from the other people of the world.

4. *Blessing and Cursing*: This section outlined the ceremony where an *oath* was taken, receiving sanctions in the form of blessing and cursing. The character of this oath was "self-maledictory." The vassal swore his allegiance to the suzerain. It is called "self-maledictory" because the vassal condemned himself to death if he broke the covenant. In other words, if he was faithful, he was blessed. If unfaithful, he was cursed.

5. *Successional Arrangements*: The covenant document

1. George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant," *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary* Vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 714-723. It should be noted that Mendenhall's overview of the covenant in this article actually lists *seven* parts of the suzerain treaty: Preamble, historical prologue, stipulations, deposit arrangements, witnesses, blessing and cursing, and oath. But it is generally agreed that the suzerain covenants had six parts. See also, George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

also specified successors to the suzerain so that the vassal could pledge his allegiance to them. Another feature is the enlisting of witnesses, often "heaven and earth," to the sealing of the covenant.

6. *Depository arrangements*: The covenant also stated how and where the covenant document would be stored and preserved. In the event there was a breach of covenant, this document could be produced to begin a process of prosecution against the offending vassal, usually called a *covenant lawsuit*.

The Biblical Covenant

The Biblical covenant in Deuteronomy has five parts.² It preceded the suzerainty treaties and was not a copy of them. It was the original covenant from which the suzerains copied the Biblical pattern to form geo-political covenants. Deuteronomy, for example, is the restatement and expansion of the *Ten Commandments*. Not only does Moses say as much (Deut. 4:13), but the parallel between the five-fold pattern in Deuteronomy and a *double* five-fold pattern in the Ten Commandments demonstrates the connection, as we shall see in a moment. Nevertheless, studies in suzerain treaties have been helpful in understanding the basic structure of the Biblical covenant. I have used them in this regard, especially the work by Meredith G. Kline.³ Therefore, let us briefly overview the five points of covenantalism.

The Five Points of Covenantalism

True Transcendence (Deut. 1:1-5). Kline and others point out that the covenant begins with a "preamble." But what does the Biblical preamble of Deuteronomy teach? Here we find that God declares His *transcendence*. True transcendence does not mean God is distant but that He is *distinct*. This makes the Biblical covenant totally unique from suzerain covenants.

Hierarchy (Deut. 1:6-4:49). The second section of the covenant is called the *hierarchy*. Suzerain treaty scholars point out that in this section of Deuteronomy, the author develops a brief history of God's Sovereign relationship to His people around a hierarchy of authority. Significantly, the Biblical covenant begins this section of Deuteronomy with a description of the hierarchical *court system* in Israel (Deut. 1:8ff.). What is it? What does it mean? Briefly, God established a *representative*, bottom-up system of government with captains over 50s, 100s, and 1000s. These representatives were to mediate judgment to the nation. And the nation was to mediate judgment to the world.

Ethics (Deut. 5-26). The next section of the covenant is usually the longest. It concerns the principle of *law*. *Stipulations* are set out. In Deuteronomy, this segment is a re-statement and expansion of the Ten Commandments, consisting of 21 chapters (Deut. 5-26). These stipulations are the way God's people defeat the enemy. By relating to God in terms of ethical obedience, the enemies fall before His children. The primary idea is that God wants His people to see an *ethical* relationship between cause and effect: be faithful and prosper.

Sanctions (Deut. 27-30). The fourth part of Deuteronomy lists blessings and curses (Deut. 27-28). It calls them *sanctions*. Just like the suzerain treaty, Kline observes that this is

the actual process of ratification. The covenant is received by a "self-maledictory" oath that applies both sanctions. A "self-maledictory" oath literally means "to speak evil unto oneself." It calls down God's wrath, if the covenant is broken, and God's blessing, if the covenant is kept.

Continuity (Deut. 31-34). Continuity determines the true heirs. It is established by means of a confirmation process. It appears when Moses lays hands on and commissions Joshua to lead the nation into conquest of the land. The covenant is handed down from generation to generation. But only the one empowered by the Spirit can obey and take dominion. He is the one who *inherits*. The final principle of the covenant tells "who is in the covenant," or "who has continuity with it," and what the basis of this continuity will be.

The covenant model is complete. Now we know what a covenant is. It has five basic parts. These are the five basic principles of Biblical reality: transcendence, hierarchy, ethics (law), sanctions, continuity. At a later date I will be developing these in greater detail, as I do in my book, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: Institutes for Christian Economics, 1987). But let's try to *check* my proposal. If I'm correct in my five-fold grid, the obvious place to cross-check is the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20). Let's see if the model fits without any slight of hand or mirrors.

First Five Commandments

The Church has always wrestled with the structure of the Ten Commandments, or "Ten Words" in the original Hebrew (Exod. 4:13). Some see a three/seven break down. Others have proposed a four/six division. Still others have considered even different structuring. But let's consider the obvious, a five/five division, by using our covenant model as a guide.

1. First Commandment: Transcendence (Exod. 20:1-3)

The first commandment begins with the Exodus. It is an explicit reference to God's true transcendence. God said that the purpose of the Exodus was so that the "Egyptians would know that He is *Lord*" (Exod. 14:18). He essentially told them that His purpose was to demonstrate His transcendence and immanence: that He was distinct from all other Gods, the One and only God, and that He was present with His people in a way that He was not present with anyone else. He had made a special display of His transcendence and immanence in other words, and thus, Israel was especially responsible to depend on Him alone for their salvation.

2. Second Commandment: Hierarchy (Exod. 20:4-6)

The second commandment moves to the next principle of the covenant, a hierarchy of obedience ("worship and serve"). In the Deuteronomic covenant, the hierarchical section closes by associating rebellion to the sin of idolatry. Moses says, "So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make a graven image" (Deut. 4:15-16). Thus, the second commandment follows the same pattern, connecting worship and ~~service~~ mission, "service" (Exod. 20:5).

The history of Israel's redemption is also the backdrop. God forbids worship of any sort of idol. The specific outline is "from heaven above to the earth, to anything under the sea or earth." It is possible that the commandment is written this way to counter a "hierarchy" among the Egyptian false gods. They worshipped life above, below, and especially the Nile itself. Birds and animals of the Nile were worshipped because it was believed that the "Great River" was a serpent providing life to the world above, below, and all around. Clearly this refers to the imagery of the serpent in the garden, a pagan hierarchy. Even the way God condemns idolatry develops a certain "false" hierarchy.

2. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 131-153. Also, "Deuteronomy," Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Nashville: Southwestern Co., 1962), pp. 155-204.

3. Any student of Kline will immediately recognize the similarity between the five points of covenantalism and Kline's division of Deuteronomy. But any *real* student of Kline will also immediately note the differences between what I am doing and what Kline has done. The most obvious difference, for example, is my understanding of the first point of covenantalism: transcendence. Kline failed to make this connection, simply calling the first section of Deuteronomy the "preamble." In the next newsletter I shall discuss in what sense I've used Kline and in what way I've rejected him. The title of the essay is, "Kline vs. Kline."

God's hierarchy places all authority in Him. Anyone else only has delegated responsibility. Transcendence is not shifted from God to man, or to creation for that matter. Egyptian religion had a hierarchy of authority that placed the Pharaoh in the center of the world. He was half god and half man, a perfect "false" incarnation. He mediated life to the world. The animals were simply "emanations" from him, possessing a little "less" deity.

This created a pyramidal hierarchy with man at the top of the pyramid. The pyramid structure is not inherently bad, since it is the "mountain model" found throughout the Bible.⁴ The pyramid was simply a cheap (or shall I say, rather expensive) copy of God's mountain dwelling. But God's mountain-pyramid always has God on top of the mountain. His hierarchy begins with God, not man. To worship a "created" thing is to place creation at the top of the mountain. The result: tyranny like that of Egypt.⁵

3. Third Commandment: Ethics (Exod. 20:7)

The third section of the Deuteronomic covenant stipulates what is involved in obeying God. The pagan system, growing out of a "chain of being" approach, is inherently manipulative. This commandment has to do with not manipulating the "name of God." When would the name of God be taken in vain? In false oath-taking. To "swear" in the Bible is to take an oath. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for swearing by all sorts of things and taking so many false oaths (Matt. 5:33-37). They tried to manipulate God's name.

What is a name? A name in the Bible represents the person. The *power to name* is the *power to control*. God named Adam. Adam named the animals and Eve. This made man God's vice-regent in dominion. But the *power to name* is the *power to have authority over the thing that is named*. Therefore, any time the name of God was tampered with, it indicated an attempt to manipulate Him. Actually, to worship a false god re-names and re-constitutes the true God. God does not want to be re-named, and He certainly cannot be manipulated.

The Pharaoh renamed Joseph (Gen. 41:45). Nebuchadnezzar's official over the eunuchs renamed Daniel and the three Hebrew youths (Dan. 1:7). When a man came under a pagan king's authority in the Old Testament, at least to serve in a position of leadership under him, he was renamed by that king. God renamed Abram to Abraham and Jacob to Israel, a sign of His authority over them.

The commandment here forbids a manipulative approach to God. It does not forbid oath-taking per se (i.e. in the courtroom). It condemns swearing to "emptiness" or "vanity." When someone makes a false oath, he is attempting to manipulate God's name for his own end. Even though man tries, he cannot control God. It is the other way around. Nevertheless, false oath-taking is ultimately a reflection on Him, making Him seem to be empty. How? When someone who is actually lying says, "May God strike me dead, if I am telling a lie," and, if he does not fall down dead, but is later found out to be a liar, God does not "seem" to have stood behind His name. If man obeys God's stipulations, however, he will not need to try to manipulate God's name. Blessing and whatever man needs will come through a proper ethical relationship to Him.

4. Fourth Commandment: Sanctions (Exod. 20:8-11)

The fourth commandment regulates the Sabbath. What was the Sabbath? Originally, it was the day when God "blessed" the world in a special way (Gen. 2:1ff.). The word "blessing" ties the day to one of the two judicial *sanctions* of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28). This makes the original

Sabbath a day when man was to receive God's benediction. Instead, man disobeyed and the Sabbath Day became a day of judgment. The curses of Genesis three were issued. So, throughout history, the Lord's Day (Sabbath Day) is a time of judgment. It is like that final day, "the Day of the Lord."

This commandment has to do with honoring a time of special judgment. One day in seven should be devoted to it. Double sacrifices were offered because Israel made special reflection on her sins. The comments about working on the other days orient even man's work toward a time of judgment. Indeed, this is the direction of history.

5. Fifth Commandment: Continuity (Exod. 20:12)

We see that the fifth commandment is positive. The emphasis is on tangible continuity, *inheritance*, since to "live long on the earth" was the legacy given to Israel. Why longevity? The curse of death broke down generational continuity, requiring that covenantal faithfulness be sustained over many generations.

Historical extension of the faith was broken down. Think how easy it would be to sustain a system of belief if the founders lived for 500 years. This would be like still having Martin Luther alive. All those years that liberal German, Lutheran theologians were corrupting orthodoxy, Luther could and would have confronted them and probably turned them over his knee. (They would have needed a lot more than that.) But the point is that longevity was critical to sustaining the family inheritance. Because death entered the world, a system was needed to *transfer* the inheritance. It is in the *transferral* that the many problems of inheritance can be seen.

Although, it seems that death is also *pro-covenantal*. After the flood, lifespans shortened. The common grace to pagans lasts three to four generations, then they fall or revolt. The blessings to the faithful go on for a thousand generations. Thus, covenant keeping compounds far longer than covenant-breaking. If the evil ones lived five hundred years per generation, their hand would be strengthened: two thousand years of compounding. So this commandment has to do with inheritance, an issue of *legitimacy*. Obedient sons and daughters receive the inheritance, the blessing of the previous commandment.

The first series of commandments follows the structure of the covenant. Without having to force the commandments, I believe the reader can easily see how God ordered them around the five parts of the covenant. The second half of the commandments does the same.

The Second Five Commandments

6. The Sixth Commandment: True Transcendence (20:13)

God returns to the transcendence theme. How? Unlawful killing of another human being was expressly forbidden because "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, For in the *image* of God He made man" (Gen. 9:6). In fact, the "ethical" section of the Noahic covenant is summarized under this one commandment, summing up all of God's demands.

The key is in the word *image*. Man is the image of God. Unique to God's creation and unlike any other aspect of His handiwork, man is a picture of God. Man shows God's transcendence and immanence. To kill man is analogous to killing God. All rebellion is an attempt to kill God. Satan tempted man to become like "God." Between the lines of Satan's offer was the idea that the true God would be *displaced* (Gen. 3:1ff.). So the second table begins with a commandment against eradicating God's transcendent/immanent representation in man.

7. Seventh Commandment: Hierarchy (20:14)

The Deuteronomic covenant made a specific connection between idolatry and adultery. The end of the second sec-

4. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain In Canaan and The Old Testament* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 25-28.

5. R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many*, pp. 36-37.

tion calls attention to the second commandment, reminding Israel of the prohibition against "idolatry" (Deut. 4:15-19). Moses gives as a reason, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a *jealous* God" (Deut. 4:24). "Jealousy" is a response to any kind of marital unfaithfulness. Indeed, there was a special "ordeal of jealousy" (Nu. 5). Since the people of God are His "bride," worshipping other gods would be analogous to sexual unfaithfulness in marriage. God's proper response would be "jealousy."

The ideas of worship and marriage are expressed in the old Anglican form of the marriage ceremony where the bride pledges, "I worship thee with my body."⁶ Sexual faithfulness is a form of service, like the faithfulness of service in worship.⁷

Adultery is a violation of God's hierarchy. Marital faithfulness is a mutual *submission* (familial hierarchy) to one another. Paul says,

But because of *immoralities* [adultery], let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. . . . The wife does not have *authority* over her own body, but the husband does (I Cor. 7:2-4).

Adultery is due to rebellion against the authoritative *hierarchy* within marriage. A man and woman are to submit their bodies to one another, the best defense against adultery and "immoralities." To "cut off" one's spouse is nothing more than an attempt to be *autonomous*.

8. Eighth Commandment: Ethics (20:15)

The third section of the Deuteronomic covenant "stipulated" how to be consecrated through "ethics." In other words, God's *boundaries* are ethical, separating the clean from the unclean. As long as God's people lived by these ethical boundary-lines, they would be victorious.

Ethics is contrary to a "manipulative" world-and-life view. In the third commandment we saw that man is forbidden to "manipulate" the Name of God.⁸ The eighth commandment, which parallels both the third section of the covenant and the third commandment, speaks to another form of "boundary violation." Stealing is manipulative. Taking something that is not yours is a failure to relate to people on *ethical* terms, and honor the propriety of others.⁹

Paul says, "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need" (Eph. 5:28). There are two problems with a thief. He will not *work* and will not *give*. Both require *ethical* dealings with people. To *work* means one submits himself to the laws of work: perseverance, showing up on time, willingness to learn, diligence, etc. To *give* means taking what has been earned and helping someone in need.

6. *The Book of Common Prayer*.

7. James Jordan, *Law of the Covenant* (Tyler: Institute For Christian Economics, 1984), pp. 18-19.

8. *Law of the Covenant*, pp. 132-133.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.

A thief, on the other hand, takes a manipulative approach. Instead of working, he seeks to manipulate through conning, deception, and various other forms of theft. He certainly doesn't give to others, and if he happens to, he does so to further *his* need, not the other person's. Ultimately, a thief believes money is magical: not the means to an end, but the end in itself. This is why all tyrannies are based on theft. The "Robin Hood" approach is a form of manipulating what belongs to one group to re-distribute it to another.

9. Ninth Commandment: Sanctions (20:16)

The Deuteronomic covenant is ratified by sanctions in the fourth section, to be received in an "official" context, probably at worship. Furthermore, this judgment was received at a Sabbath time, Pentecost.¹⁰ Thus, in this commandment, "bearing false witness" also conjures up the picture of an official scene, a courtroom. Where would one be likely to bear false witness? It would probably be brought in the same legal environment of passing judgment, a formal trial or hearing. This could also be done informally, telling lies about someone in the congregation or who lives down the street.¹¹ But even this setting is judicial because a judgment is passed. "Bearing false witness" interferes with and perverts judgment. How? False witness causes blessings to fall on those who deserve a curse, and vice versa.

10. Tenth Commandment: Continuity (20:17)

Notice all the items that are forbidden to covet. They all have to do with a man's inheritance. In Old Testament times, the wife was made an heir of the covenant through an adoption procedure. She actually became the "sister" of her husband. Abraham was not lying to Pharaoh after all (Gen. 20:2) when he called Sarah his "sister." This practice was done to assure the woman's receiving part of the inheritance, contrary to the pagan practices of considering a woman's value as being less than a man's. So, when an Old Testament man coveted the wife of another, he was cutting into his neighbor's inheritance. In Israel, this disrupted everything because each family received a particular piece of land and inheritance when Canaan was conquered under Joshua. To covet one's covenant brother's family and possessions was to rob the inheritance granted by the covenant itself. Here the last commandment ends on a note of finality.

The second five commandments follow, without much explanation, the basic pattern of the covenant, completing a perfect double witness. They also confirm our basic five-fold definition. Now, when someone asks, "Covenant: What is it anyway?", you'll have an answer, an answer that is so *handy* you can count it on your *five* fingers. Who knows, maybe this is why God gave man two hands with five fingers on each one!

10. *Law of the Covenant*, p. 58. Also, See Jordan's, *Sabbath and the Death Penalty* (Tyler: Geneva Ministries, 1986). He connects the 4th and ninth commandments in terms of the "sanctions" idea.

11. *Institutes of Biblical Law*, pp. 598-600. Rushdoony has an interesting section on the relation between "slander" and the 9th commandment.