

THE COVENANTAL FORM OF THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

WILLIAM H. SHEA
Andrews University

George E. Mendenhall's landmark studies on law and covenant that were published in 1954 have virtually given birth to a sub-specialty area within the larger realm of biblical studies.¹ In this burgeoning literature on the covenant in biblical thought, its significance has been examined and evaluated in any number of areas of the biblical text.²

In the present brief study, I would like to suggest that this covenant theme and covenant form may be found in one further area where it has not previously been studied, as far as I am aware. As an echo of Mendenhall's work on the covenant in one of the first books of the OT, Exodus, I would like to examine the evidence for its presence in a specific section of the last book of the NT, Revelation. This present study of the covenant formulary deals in particular with the evidence for its presence in the letters to the Seven Churches that are found in chaps. 2 and 3; but in order to provide a general introduction to this more specific area of study, the indications for the presence of the covenant in the thought of Revelation outside of these two chapters will be noted first.

As a basic preliminary to this entire discussion, however, we must make mention of certain integral parts of the ancient Israelite covenant formulary—a formulary which parallels closely that of the Hittite suzerainty treaty.³ These significant parts of the formu-

¹G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1955), a reprint from two articles in *BA* 17 (1954):26-46, 49-76.

²As one example, Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King; The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1963).

³An excellent example of a suzerainty treaty is that between the Hittite suzerain Mursilis and his vassal Duppi-Tessub of Amurru, the text of which is given in *ANET*, pp. 203-205.

lary will here be reviewed through the well-known labels that Mendenhall has applied to them:⁴

(1) The *preamble* to the Hittite suzerainty treaty identified the king who was the author of the covenant by giving his name, titles, attributes, and genealogy; (2) the *historical prologue* described the past relations between the two contracting parties; (3) the *stipulations* detailed the obligations imposed upon the vassal; (4) the *witnesses* to the extra-biblical treaties were the gods of the participants, but monotheistic Yahwism found other elements to substitute for them; and (5) the treaties then concluded with their religious sanctions, the *blessings and curses* that would occur in the case of loyalty to, or breach of, the covenant.

1. *The Covenant Concept Throughout Revelation*

Inasmuch as the Apocalypse is a book rich in OT imagery and phraseology, the presence of the covenant concept is reasonably to be expected in it. The evidence for this presence may be categorized along the lines of the subsections of the covenant formulary noted above. It is also of interest to observe that the Greek word for covenant itself occurs only once in the book, but that this one occurrence is at the very center of the book (11:19) and is connected with the Ark of the Covenant, just as the ten stipulations of the Mosaic covenant were connected with the Ark at the center of the Israelite tabernacle.

Preamble

Numerous titles for Jesus occur both in the letters to the Seven Churches (see below) and elsewhere in Revelation, and these can be compared with the identification of the Suzerain in the preamble of the covenant formulary. Since the book begins with John's description of Jesus Christ (1:12-20), this description might be thought of as the personal identification of the Suzerain. Certainly, the later

⁴Mendenhall, pp. 32-34. Mendenhall has one additional label beyond the five we enumerate below; namely, "Provision for deposit in the temple and periodic public reading" (his no. 4, on p. 34). Although I do not include this with the five more basic and specific items, it bears notice that even this element finds somewhat of a parallel in Revelation—in the blessing indicated for public congregational reading and hearing of the book (1:3).

description of him as the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (19:16) qualifies him as equivalent to the Great King of the covenant.

Historical Prologue

In the covenant of Exod 20, the brief historical prologue highlights God’s mighty act of redemption in delivering the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage (vs. 2). The prominence of the redemption motif in the book of Revelation, with its repeated emphasis on Christ’s salvific work (cf. 1:17-18; 5:9-10; 7:14-17; 12:7-11; etc.), functions as a parallel (implicitly, if not explicitly) to the historical prologue of the covenant formulary.

Stipulations

For stipulations there are various instructions given to the church through the initial letters and elsewhere in the book of Revelation, and the commandments of God are specifically mentioned at least two and possibly three times in it (12:17 and 14:12; significant textual variants occur for the possible reference in 22:14, but textual evidence for the covenant elsewhere could be used to argue for the originality of “commandments” in this passage).

Witnesses

Revelation is particularly rich in the vocabulary of witnesses, and such were connected with ancient covenants in a special way. The noun for “testimony” or “witness” occurs more frequently in the book of Revelation—eight times—than in any other NT book (Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:1, 17; 15:5; and 19:10). Occurrences of verbal forms from this root occur three times (22:16, 18, 20). Elsewhere in the NT, this verb is especially prominent in the Gospel of John.

From the old covenantal witness-pair of “heaven” and “earth,” references to “heaven” occur more commonly in Revelation than in any other book of the NT except Matthew. It is linked with the other member of this witness-pair, “earth,” in at least half a dozen of these passages. The vocative address to heaven and earth as witnesses to the fall of the devil in Rev 12:12 is especially noteworthy in this connection.

Blessing and Curse

The covenantal themes of blessing and curse are also present in Revelation. The sevenfold blessings of the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14) are exceeded in frequency of reference to blessing in the NT only by the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke. These seven macarisms in Revelation are balanced by the sevenfold occurrences of "woe" and "alas" (8:13; 9:12; 11:14; 12:2; 18:10, 16, 18). The last reference to curse in Revelation refers to God's final abolition of man's maledictions (22:3). The blessings and curses at the end of the book (22:11-19) are especially significant in view of the use made of the texts of ancient covenants.

2. Covenant Form in the Seven Letters: General Structure

All in all, then, a number of aspects of covenant language appear to be featured prominently throughout the Apocalypse. We shall now notice more specifically how these features relate to the overall structure of the letters to the Seven Churches in chaps. 2 and 3, after which we will turn our attention to the letters individually.

Preamble

Each of these seven letters begins with a different title for Jesus, "These are the words of X" (in which "X" in each case is filled by a new and different title for Jesus). The preamble to the covenant identified the suzerain in the same position in the text.

Historical Prologue

A refrain that occurs in each of these letters immediately following the title given to Jesus is, "I know your works. . . ." This sort of knowledge implies an association between two parties that have been working together closely enough for one to be able to evaluate the past works of the other. In other words, by virtue of its very nature, this expression refers to past relations between the suzerain Jesus, who has been identified by the preceding title, and the church, which is his vassal. The same point about past historical relations is made by the prologue of the ancient suzerainty covenant.

Stipulations

Following the evaluation of the nature of the past work of each of the churches, there follows a statement of counsel. Instructions are given for a course of action to rectify deficiencies described in the preceding sections of the letters (or in two cases, Smyrna and Philadelphia, an appeal to continued faithfulness). These come in the form of a series of imperatives. Four imperatives appear in the letters to two of the churches, Ephesus and Sardis. Three occur in the letters to Laodicea, two in the letter to Smyrna, and one each in the letters to the three other churches.

The most common of these imperatives is "repent," which occurs five times. Other imperatives present in these letters include "remember," "do not fear," "be faithful," "awaken," "hold fast," and "strengthen." Since these exhortations express the obligations of the churches to their Lord, they may be taken in a sense similar to those of the stipulations of the covenant.

The Witness and Blessing-and-Curse Elements

The final two elements in the covenant formulary, the witness and the blessing-and-curse statements, are also present in the letters to the Seven Churches, but they show an alternation of order. The obvious witness present at the end of these letters is the Spirit, mentioned in the constantly present formulaic statement, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This statement about the Spirit's witness appears as the next to the last element in the first three letters, following the more customary order of the suzerainty treaties; and in the last four letters, it appears as the final element. The reference to the Spirit as the witness alternates in these two concluding positions with the blessing pronounced upon the overcomer. Thus, the letters to the first three churches end with a blessing, while for the last four churches that final blessing appears before the mention of the witness of the Spirit.

The potential curse is also present, but only irregularly. When it is present, it is always mentioned before both the blessing and the witness of the Spirit. As it turns out, this element appears in the letters to the 1st, 3d, 4th, 5th, and 7th churches (Ephesus,

Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea), while it is absent from the letters to the 2d and 6th churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia).

3. *Covenant Form in the Seven Letters: Contents of the Letters*

With these five elements from the structure of the covenant identified in the letters to the Seven Churches, the contents of the individual letters may be examined more closely. Outlines and charts of these contents may be found in many commentaries. What is suggested here is not that new outlines for these elements are necessary, but that more meaningful labels may be proposed than those that have been previously employed. My suggestion is that these more meaningful labels can be drawn very appropriately from the designations given to the sections of the suzerainty covenant.

Indeed, the principal propositions present in the letters to the Seven Churches are essentially five in number—no more, no less—and the principal sections present in the formulary of the suzerainty treaties are also five in number. The nature of the contents corresponds as well; and given this sort of correspondence both in the number of basic elements and the nature of the contents, it may be suggested that the pattern for the letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation is modeled after that of the older covenant formulary.

With this working hypothesis in mind, we proceed now to examine the text of each of the seven letters with respect to how its divisions correspond to the five basic elements in the covenant formulary (for the biblical text, the RSV is used). Some of the longer sections of the letters have been abridged, but in general their essential content has been retained.

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus, 2:1-7

Preamble (vs. 1):

The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Prologue (vss. 2-4):

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. . . . I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have

not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned your first love.

Stipulation (vs. 5a):

Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.

Curse (vs. 5b):

If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Prologue Continued (vs. 6):

Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Witness (vs. 7a):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Blessing (vs. 7b):

To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The Letter to the Church at Smyrna, 2:8-11

Preamble (vs. 8):

The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

Prologue (vs. 9):

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Stipulations (vs. 10):

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Witness (vs. 11a):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Blessing (vs. 11b):

He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.

*The Letter to the Church at Pergamum, 2:12-17:**Preamble (vs. 12):*

The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

Prologue (vss. 13-15):

I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith. . . . But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, . . . So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Stipulations (vs. 16a):

Repent then.

Curse (vs. 16b):

If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Witness (vs. 17a):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Blessing (vs. 17b):

To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.

*The Letter to the Church at Thyatira, 2:18-29**Preamble (vs. 18):*

The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Prologue (vss. 19-21):

I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. . . .

Curse (vss. 22-23):

I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings. . . . I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

Stipulations (vss. 24-25):

To the rest of you in Thyatira . . . hold fast what you have, until I come.

Blessing (vss. 26-28):

He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron . . . and I will give him the morning star.

Witness (vs. 29):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

*The Letter to the Church at Sardis, 3:1-6**Preamble (vs. 1a):*

The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

Prologue (vs. 1b):

I know your work; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.

Stipulations (vss. 2-3a):

Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent.

Curse (vs. 3b):

If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.

Prologue Continued (vs. 4):

Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; . . .

Blessing (vs. 5):

He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

Witness (vs. 6):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

*The Letter to the Church at Philadelphia, 3:7-13**Preamble (vs. 7):*

The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens.

Prologue (vss. 8-10):

I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. . . .

Stipulations (vs. 11):

I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

Blessing (vs. 12):

He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

Witness (vs. 13):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

*The Letter to the Church in Laodicea, 3:14-22**Preamble (vs. 14):*

The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

Prologue (vs. 15):

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!

Curse (vs. 16):

So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

Prologue Continued (vs. 17):

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Stipulations (vss. 18-20):

Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Blessing (vs. 21):

He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Witness (vs. 22):

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

4. *Covenant Form in the Seven Letters: Some Concluding Observations*

The foregoing analysis of the contents of the seven letters leads to several further observations, relating to the formulaic introductions, to variations in the manner of statement, and to other considerations.

Formulaic Statements

From the foregoing detailed examination of the contents of the seven letters, it can be seen that the five main sections of those letters that have been identified with covenant terminology are also introduced by formulaic statements. These statements, which recur as a sort of quasi-refrain through the letters, can be identified as follows:

Preamble: "The word of him who . . ." (titles follow).

Prologue: "I know your works . . ." (details follow).

Stipulations: "Repent, [etc.] . . ." (other imperatives follow).

Witness: "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Blessing: "To him who overcomes I will grant . . ." (details follow).

The formulaic nature of these introductory statements at the beginning of each of the five sections of the letters emphasizes two things: (1) the distinctions between those sections, and (2) the intentional repetition of each of the sections through all of the letters. Inasmuch as the contents of the various sections that are distinguished by the formulaic introductions parallel exactly the contents identified above under the labels of the covenant formulary, we have here additional support for the hypothesis advanced, namely, that the letters to the Seven Churches have been modeled after the covenant formulary.

Variations in Covenant-Form Statements

As is the case with earlier examples of statements of the covenant, there are in the seven letters some variations from the more "standard" form of that covenant structure as outlined earlier in this article. As one example, the alternation in position between the witness and the blessing has been noted above. As already mentioned, the first three of the seven letters have the more standard order of witness followed by blessing. It is interesting to note that the reversal in order occurs in the central letter of the seven and that the subsequent letters maintain this new order. Thus, from the standpoint of literary structure, the variation looks intentional, rather than accidental.

The threatenings of the curse occur only irregularly in these letters, as also called to attention above. Their occurrence may be seen as historically conditioned; that is to say, they stem from the experience of the individual churches to which they were addressed. They occur, in fact, in the letters to the churches that appear to have been the weaker ones in the faith, and which hence warranted this severe form of chastisement. However, it should be noted that the presence of the curse even in these instances is more than compensated for by the general emphasis upon the blessings promised to the churches. The messages close with, and place stress upon: this very positive note of blessing, revealing thereby the graciousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Suzerain of the covenant.

Another minor irregularity involved in these letters is that in three instances (Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea) a second statement on past historical relations has been added after the stipulations. This is in reality quite natural, for ancient covenant statements did

not slavishly follow exactly the same order in every instance. The surprising thing with regard to the seven letters is not that some variations can be seen, but rather that the order and main features of the well-known covenant structure generally appear to be so readily recognizable. The variations present have not obscured that structure to any great extent.

Nature of the Seven Letters

The fact that these letters appear to follow the form of more ancient statements of the covenant may say something about the nature of the letters themselves. Since they appear to provide restatements of the covenant to each of seven successive churches, in the order in which they were given, one way of looking at them from the standpoint of the covenant is to view them as providing for a renewal of the more original covenant of the suzerain in each of these seven instances.

When taken as covenant renewal messages, these letters can also say something about the interpretation of the seven churches. There are two main schools of thought on this point. The first interpretation of these seven letters is that their messages apply only to the seven literal and historical churches that were known in these particular cities of Asia Minor in the time of the writer. The other view of these letters is that while they should indeed be applied in this way, they can also be seen as standing symbolically for the experience of the church through succeeding eras of history. Viewing these letters as statements concerned with renewal of the covenant might lend some minor support to the latter point of view, since in OT times the covenant was renewed serially (Joshua, Hezekiah, Josiah), and not so much contemporaneously at different sites in Israel.

Finally, we may note that these letters give evidence of the persistence of the theme and the form of the covenant throughout the historical experiences of the people described in the OT and NT. Mendenhall elaborated its basic structure and function in the formative period of Israel's history described in the book of Exodus. When we come to the NT, we find that the "New Israel" has a New Covenant given by Jesus to his followers. In this study we have seen how a reflection of the continuing nature of the structure and function of the ancient suzerainty covenant has been carried out on

a rather sweeping scale in a major block of material from the last book of the NT—a section in which the Suzerain directly addresses his people, as the ancient suzerain did his vassals.