BIBLICAL STUDIES

Meredith G. Kline on Covenant Community and Canon

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Abstract

Meredith G. Kline supported conservative views of canon by arguing that ancient Near Eastern treaties and Deuteronomy contained canonical clauses, meaning that their texts were authoritative for the vassal community when they were written, as were biblical books performing functions governing that community. Based on discontinuities between the Old and New Testament forms of the covenant community, Kline redefined *canon* as documents structuring and implementing the polity of the various phases of the vassal community. Thus, the Old Testament counts as Scripture, but not canon, for the church. Critical scholarship perceives Kline's views as conservative dogma rather than historical argument; conservatives approve his demonstration that all Scripture is covenantal, but dislike his distinctions between faith, individual-life, and community-life (polity) norms.

I. *Meredith G. Kline as Covenant Theologian*

Meredith G. Kline (1922–2007) was a covenant theologian.[1] Trained in Reformed theology at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1944–1947 under Van Til, Stonehouse, Young, and Murray, all influenced by Geerhardus Vos, Kline understood the concept of covenant to be a core component

[1] In this article Kline refers to Meredith G. Kline. Both his son (Meredith M. Kline) and grandson (Jonathan Kline) publish in biblical studies.

of the Reformed system of doctrine. As he completed his doctoral work in the mid-1950s, Old Testament scholars began to relate the Hittite suzerainty treaties that had been published in the decade before World War II to Old Testament covenantal texts. Perceiving the significance of these ancient Near Eastern second-millennium suzerain-vassal treaties for biblical and theological studies, while believing that proper interpretation of extrabiblical cultural materials should harmonize with conservative views of the Bible, he was among the first to correlate these Hittite documents with the organization and dating of the book of Deuteronomy. The elements of the typical second-millennium treaties (identification of the suzerain, historical prologue, stipulations, sanctions, and document disposition) could be correlated with the organization of the speeches of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy, while the book's thematic pattern corresponded more closely to the second-millennium Hittite treaties than to the seventh-century B.C. neo-Assyrian treaties, which critical scholars preferred to relate to Deuteronomy because they theorized it was composed in that time period.[2]

Subsequently, Kline related the ancient Near Eastern treaties to the debate between critical scholars and conservative theologians on the concept of the biblical canon, arguing in support of conservative views that biblical books were canonical when produced because treaty texts had document clauses making them canonical when they were written, and because biblical books performed functions that regulated the life of a vassal community. He also applied the idea that ancient Near Eastern treaties regulated vassal communities to discussions of the discontinuities between the old and new covenants.

In the process of correlating covenant community with canon, Kline redefined *canon* in a way narrower than previous discussions had defined it. A dictionary definition of canon makes the term synonymous with "Scripture": "the books of the Bible officially accepted as Holy Scripture."[3] Instead, Kline restricted canon to documents implementing official functions of the polity of a vassal covenant community.

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[2] Kline combined articles published in *The Westminster Theological Journal* in 1960 and a commentary on Deuteronomy published in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962) into *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); a reprint of the last, available from Wipf & Stock and hereafter referred to as TGK, brings into book form his ideas supporting Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. For a recent argument for that position, see Paul Lawrence, *The Books of Moses Revisited* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011) and the comprehensive documentation of ancient Near Eastern treaties in Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012).

[3] Definition 4 for canon[1] in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 272.

II. *Traditional Approaches to Biblical Canon*

When Kline related covenant to canon,[4] the dominant concept of canon considered it a list of texts or books that were authoritative for a faith community. Critical scholars dated the final form of the lists to a time after Jesus for the Old Testament and to the fourth century A.D. for the New Testament. Conservative theologians dated the conclusion of the production of Old Testament writings to during the postexilic period before Jesus and recognition of the corpus of New Testament documents to the second century A.D. Also, critical scholars considered books to be canonical only when the list was finalized, whereas conservatives believed that, because of their divine authorship, biblical books were canonical as soon as they were produced, not when a whole collection was recognized as authoritative. The major theological question in the discussion was whether canonical documents formed the covenant community or whether the covenant community created the canon. According to the critical dating Israel never had a canon, the Old Testament became the canon for Judaism, and the Old Testament plus the New Testament became the canon for Christianity.

Even if there was agreement on biblical books becoming canonical as they were produced, critical (late daters) and conservative (early daters) scholars still would differ. Nonconservative views of the Bible devalued the divine component of Scripture by treating prophecy about the future, whether of Old Testament prophetical books or of Deuteronomy's sanctions and provisions for the monarchy, as descriptions after the fact rather than as predictions. They also assumed the theories of source criticism, which dated Deuteronomy to the time of Josiah in the first millennium rather than to Moses in the second millennium. In contrast, conservatives emphasized the divine authorship of Scripture so that predictive prophecy was possible for Spirit-directed prophets, and a book like Deuteronomy was dated in the second millennium in the days of Moses at the beginning of the Israelite theocracy long before the monarchy, as the book presented itself, rather than at the end of the monarchical period.

Although scholarship based on evaluation of the Dead Sea Scrolls has increased variations on the traditional critical understanding of canon, Steinberg and Stone's overview of current discussion of canonization

[4] Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), hereafter referred to as SBA, was followed in 1975 by a second, revised edition (reprint available from Wipf & Stock), which added a chapter on the gospels to the first edition that had included two chapters, previously published in the then-out-of-print TGK, and several chapters which had appeared in *The Westminster Theological Journal* in 1969–1970.

indicates that the basic positions have not changed since three decades ago, when opposite poles on the topic were represented by Roger T. Beckwith,[5] who championed the idea that the Old Testament canon was closed before the Christian era, and by John Barton,[6] who theorized that a lot of respected Hebrew texts floated around during intertestamental times without being collected into a canonized unit until well into the Christian era.[7]

III. *Covenant Community and Canon*

Kline stated in the preface to *Treaty of the Great King* (TGK) that the "significance of the treaties for subjects like the beginnings of the canon of Scripture and the authenticity of the Pentateuch as well as the historicity of various covenants recorded in the Bible can hardly be overestimated" (TGK 7). A decade later he had combined articles on canon and covenant with other studies in *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (SBA), redirecting biblical canon from a finalized collection of authoritative books for a faith community back to the traditional conservative definition of canon as a growing collection of texts with official functions in the administration of God's covenant community.

> The formation of the canon, rather than being a matter of conciliar decision or a series of such decisions with respect to a preexisting literature, was a divine work by which the authoritative words of God were through the mystery of inspiration inscripturated in document after document, the canon being formed by the very appearance of these God-breathed scriptures. (SBA 23)

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[5] Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

[6] John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986).

[7] "The Historical Formation of the Writings in Antiquity," in Julius Steinberg and Timothy Stone, eds., *The Shape of the Writings* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 1–58. Since Kline did not deal directly with the debate about the dating of the final listing of canonical books, he is rarely mentioned in scholarship on the topic. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), lists SBA in its bibliography but does not refer to Kline in the text. Beckwith mentions Kline's correlation of Deuteronomy with second-millennium treaties and the significance of its canonical sanctions but does not discuss Kline's canonical nature of the whole Old Testament and New Testament. For a concise presentation of a conservative position on various theories about canonical lists, see Eckhard Schnabel, "History, Theology, and Biblical Canon: An Introduction to Basic Issues," *Themelios* 20.2 (1995): 16–24. Current treatments of canon such as Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011); David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), do not even mention Kline.

Kline focused on the elements of the treaty pattern in order to apply them to the covenantal functions of the legal, historical, prophetic, and wisdom portions of the Old and New Testaments.

Kline wrote in the preface to SBA that republishing his article on the two tables of the Decalogue as referring to two copies of the covenant being deposited in the temple, one copy for the Lord and the other for the vassal community, "these ten years later is still timely, therefore, since it may (in effect) introduce a new consideration into the current discussion" (SBA 9). Similarly, almost half a century later it appears timely to reconsider his ideas on the relation of canon to covenant community, since his ideas on canon have not been elaborated.[8]

Kline's correlation of ancient Near Eastern treaties with biblical texts led him to focus on the kingdom-administering functions of biblical books for the Lord's vassal community. His concentration on the covenant community informed his answers to questions of when biblical books became canonical for the community and what books counted as polity directives for the community.

1. *When Was a Biblical Book Canonical for the Covenant Community?*

Kline was not simply repeating the conservative dogmatic position that the divine authorship of Scripture ensured biblical books were canonical as they were written. He was proposing that biblical books were canonical as written even when viewed from an understanding of the role the human authors performed in writing the books. The human authors were functionaries in the administration of God's covenant community. The documents they produced were not just literary texts that were recognized as authoritative for the faith community and added to a growing canon but were documents performing official functions in the life of the community. The books were not just part of an accumulating religious library housed at a cult center but were directives for the life of a human vassal kingdom existing as part of the divine lord's empire. The traditional definition of canon as a list of holy books, however, continues to dominate the discussion, even for evangelicals.

Perhaps Kline did not state his thesis forcefully enough, since an evaluation of his position by Brevard Childs did not fully represent Kline's argument:

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[8] Craig Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 251–78, chapter 8 on canon, does not refer, even though it would strengthen his argument, to Kline's views on covenant and canon.

> Kline's basically dogmatic formulation of the history of the canon in terms of divine inspiration which assured an inerrant transmission of the Word of God reflects completely the pre-Semler, seventeenth-century understanding which has not even seen the historical problem. These issues are far too complex simply to circumscribe by a strictly theological definition. Therefore, in spite of some excellent insights, the total impact of the book misses its intended goal.[9]

While the program of Childs focused on the meaning of the final form of a biblical book for a faith community, he did not jettison critical theories on the late dating of canonical lists or on the literary evolution of biblical texts, which dated them later than conservatives believed the books were produced. The charge of Childs that Kline was merely reformulating conservative dogmatic positions on the canon overlooked statements that a new argument was presented based on historical facts, the literary structure of ancient texts, and the roles those texts played in the administration of ancient empires. Kline stated that "the attempt will be made to arrive at a specifically and authentically *historical* conception of the matter" (SBA 25, emphasis added) and

> 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. (SBA 46, emphasis added)

Kline argued that the initial stage of the formation of the Old Testament canon began with Deuteronomy, a text of Mosaic speeches renewing the Sinai covenant at the transition of covenant mediatorship from Moses to Joshua. To it were prefixed the rest of the Pentateuch, functioning as external historical prologue in addition to Deuteronomy's internal historical prologue. The Pentateuch focused on the formation of the old covenant community and the rest of the Old Testament documented important stages in the administration of the Israelite community. The initial phase of Old Testament canon was associated with Moses.

2. *Deuteronomy as Canonical*

Ancient Near Eastern treaties and legal documents such as *kudurrus* (steles documenting royal grants of various benefits to recipients) contained document clauses, divine sanctions against violators, not only of the recorded legal

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[9] Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 56.

transactions, but also of the physical document, whether tablet, stele, or other form. "A feature of the covenant tablets of peculiar significance for their canonical character is the inscriptional curse, or what we may call the canonical sanction. The tablet was protected against alteration or destruction by making such violations of it the object of specific curses" (SBA 29). Since the contents of the ancient Near Eastern treaty documents regulated the administration of kingdoms, their document clauses functioned as canonical clauses, indicating the text was authoritative for the participants involved, when it was produced. "And the inviolable authority of these written tablets, vividly attested to by the document clause and, especially the documentary curse, sufficiently justifies our speaking of the canonicity of these treaties" (SBA 30). Kline argued that, likewise, the Moses-authorized copy of Deuteronomy with its divinely sanctioned, canon-forming, document clause (Deut 4:2), its placement under the tabernacle throne of the divine overlord of the covenant with the two copies of the Decalogue, one for the sovereign suzerain and one for the human vassals, and its stipulated septennial reading to the congregation, separated Deuteronomy from other cultural texts. The document clause meant that, analogously to the second-millennium international Hittite treaties, Deuteronomy was canonical as it was produced, an authoritative instrument for regulating the behavior of a geopolitical organization, the Israelite theocracy. In addition to the documentary sanction making the book canonical as it was produced, Kline argued, Israel's taking the oath at the cutting of the covenant meant that the covenant community was acknowledging the transaction's canonicity when the text recording the covenant-making was written. "For the Old Testament as covenantal canon was by nature community-attested canon from the time of its Mosaic beginnings" (SBA 91). Deuteronomy was canonical in light of its simultaneously being produced by a divine suzerain, having a canonical clause, and being acknowledged as binding by the people of Israel (Deut 26:17).

3. *Old Testament as Canonical*

Old Testament books besides Deuteronomy, however, do not have canonical clauses protecting their written form by divine sanctions. Kline therefore argued that in addition to the traditional conservative theological idea that biblical books were authoritative for the covenant community because they had a divine author, the Old Testament books were canonical by his definition because as they were produced they performed official functions in the divine administration of the Israelite theocracy, whether it had the form of a tribal alliance, a (divided) monarchy, or an ethnic organization functioning as a dependent entity in a foreign empire.

The rest of the Old Testament books were not understood as a mere collection of culturally significant literary texts grouped late in the history of the covenant community to legitimate its subsequent existence, but were perceived as performing the function of administering the covenant kingdom throughout its existence. Because of their official functions in the kingdom, the texts were considered canonical as they were produced.

> The several major kinds of literature—history, law and wisdom, prophecy and praise—as they are employed in the Old Testament all function as extensions (free and creative to be sure) of some main section or feature of the foundational treaties. 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. (SBA 47)

These official kingdom-administering functions were determined by relating Old Testament books to the components of the suzerainty treaties. Thus, the Pentateuch consisted not only of Deuteronomy, which contained all the elements and structure of the treaty pattern internally, but also of materials that functioned as historical prologue to that covenant-renewal document. The historical prologue material in Deuteronomy 1–4 summarized the history of the covenant relation from the establishment of the covenant at Sinai, to the rebellion of the vassal people and the destruction of the renegade generation, to the gracious preservation of the following generation to bring it to the promised land, history that had been recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. It documented the forty-year history of the wayward vassals' relationship to their Lord, who had been identified in terms of the first component of the treaty pattern as both Creator of heaven and earth and sovereign of various covenant communities as recorded in Genesis, prologue to the establishment of the theocratic kingdom as recorded in Exodus, and as redeemer from oppressive bondage in Egypt. Genesis through Numbers functioned as identification of the suzerain and historical prologue to the covenant renewal on the plains of Moab.

In broad terms, the historical books functioned as documentary witnesses to Israel's adherence to the stipulations of the covenant, justifying the Lord's implementation of the covenant sanctions. During the time when the covenant community existed in the form of a tribal league, the book of Joshua was a witness to the Israelites' commitment to Yahweh at the time of the leadership of the covenant community transitioning from Joshua to charismatic saviors, and to the faithfulness of the covenant suzerain in

directing the commanded conquest of the land promised to the patriarchs by his wisdom and power. Judges documented the inability of tribal leaders to preserve the faithfulness of Israel to the covenant, thus demonstrating the need for a monarchy. The books of Samuel recorded the transition to the monarchical form of the community as legislated for in the stipulations of Deuteronomy, while Kings provided justification for the implementation of the covenant curses at the Exile as depicted in the sanctions of Deuteronomy. At the end of the Exile the book of Daniel indicated how Israelites might live as components in a province of the various empires Daniel predicted, Chronicles indicated how postexilic Jews had cultic continuity with the monarchical stage of the community, while Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther documented the Lord's formation and preservation of the postexilic form of a cult-centered, ethnic, political unit dependent on a foreign empire as they entered the dark ages before the arrival of their promised Messiah.

The prophets were seen as messengers of the Great King, imitating the practices of ancient Near Eastern international diplomacy, conveying covenant lawsuits to deviant vassals, warning them to avoid the ultimate curse sanctions of the covenant by repentant renewal of allegiance to the divine suzerain and graciously promising ultimate blessing beyond the infliction of the impending curses.

Wisdom literature elaborated the identification of the covenant suzerain as a Lord whom his vassals were to fear even when undergoing common (Job and Ecclesiastes) or theocratic (Lamentations) curses. Yahweh was a Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer to be praised in hymns for the blessings exemplified by those names. He was also to be called upon in laments as their Protecting Covenant Suzerain from antagonistic forces within and without the kingdom. And he was to be extolled as Wisdom for elaborating the cultural mandates of labor and marriage by the sagacious insights of Proverbs and Song of Songs. The wisdom books did not function officially in establishing or administering covenantal sanctions in the divine kingdom, but they did contribute to the cultic activity and religious perspective of the community.

4. *New Testament as Canonical*

Kline also saw the New Testament documents as performing administrative functions for the new covenant community, now in the form of the church, which was not a geopolitical institution, as Israel had been. The Gospels were shaped as documents focusing on the ministry of the covenant mediator, culminating in his death, which ratified the new covenant, thus corresponding to the book of Exodus. The book of Acts recorded the history of

the development of the new covenant community as a group that added Gentiles to Israelites as members forming an institution with differently functioning earthly leaders and worship practices contrasting with those of the old covenant community. The epistles elaborated the stipulations of the new covenant and functioned as covenant lawsuits against established churches, while Revelation also brought covenant lawsuits from the glorified covenant Lord to city-congregations, along with promises of protection from historical antagonists and depictions of the execution of the ultimate covenant sanctions associated with the consummating glory of the new heavens and earth and the lake of fire.

Thus, the books of the Old Testament and New Testament functioned to direct the Lord's covenant community in its varying forms. The books were canonical for the covenant community when they were produced because of the official kingdom functions they performed.

Reformed folk tend to appreciate Kline's support of and new argumentation of traditional conservative understandings of canon,[10] although evangelicals have not developed Kline's ideas.[11]

Critics like Childs, however, were not convinced by Kline's arguments because debates still exist between critics and conservatives on the dating of the biblical books. Kline's arguments added to the conservative arsenal for engaging in canonical battles, but critics were skeptical that their defenses were any less effective. Kline's scholarly utilizing of extrabiblical documents to support the early dating of Old Testament texts and their canonicity by conservatives, combined with strongly worded descriptions of mainstream Old Testament documentary hypotheses as "scholarly phantasy" (SBA 8) and "a grotesque distortion of the historical facts, a Wellhausenian anachronism on a millennial order of magnitude" (SBA 43), was not appreciated by reviewers of the dominant school.

The problem for Childs was that Kline's historical argument, supposedly substantiating conservative dating of Old Testament books, assumed the legitimacy of using the face-value internal witness of biblical books to date them, rather than the results of source criticism that purportedly warranted later dates; according to them Kline had not dealt adequately with such details, even for Deuteronomy.

Perhaps Kline's ideas have been forgotten because they have not received the necessary elaboration he knew was needed: "The more precise

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[10] For example, Robert Reymond thinks Kline's argument successful. See Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 69–70.

[11] See the earlier reference to Beckwith or a typical brief discussion like Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 487–97.

delineation of biblical canonicity requires that it be perceived as fully as possible in its specific historical character, and much remains to be done along these lines" (SBA 25).

Questions not raised by Kline need to be investigated in the future. If prophetical oracles, covenant lawsuits, were authoritative when spoken, were the individual speeches canonical for the community at the time they were spoken, or were they canonical only when collected into a prophetic book? Were individual psalms canonical when composed, or only when the collection was finalized? The process of canonization of individual books can be analogous to the collections of the Old Testament and New Testament as wholes. Also, did the canonical function of books change over time, for example, from documentation warranting implementation of covenant sanctions to historical prologue for a subsequent phase of the covenant community?

5. *Is the Old Testament Canonical for the New Covenant Community?*

Kline's focus on the community-governing functions of biblical books was not only unacceptable to critical teaching on the canon but also resulted in an idea that did not fit the conservative mold. The most surprising statement of Kline for evangelicals was that the Old Testament is not the canon of the Christian church (SBA 99). This claim appears unusual if one assumes canon should be defined as a collection of documents that provide authoritative instruction for the church. Kline did not deny that the Old Testament texts authoritatively directed church members with wise counsel, as properly interpreted. He restricted, however, the definition of canon to its function for a particular form of the covenant community. Canon had to do with the *polity* of the covenant community, and as that community changed form, the polity changed, and therefore its canon changed. The Old Testament was documentation for the administering of a theocracy, a geopolitical kingdom, while the New Testament was documentation for the direction of a church, a spiritual institution without a bounded geographical location or a visible, politically recognizable organization, despite attempts throughout Christian history to make it so by analogy with the form of the Old Testament covenant community. Since Kline integrally associated canon with the administering of the covenant community and the form of that community changed radically from theocracy to church, the discontinuity in the form of the covenant community meant there was a discontinuity in canon; what was canon for the old covenant was not canon for the new covenant. By his definition there are two separate canons. In the traditional view, the

new covenant canonical material supplements the old covenant material so that they merge into one canon. The difference in perspective reflects the two different senses in which the word canon is being used.

Kline related the concept of canon to ideas about continuities and discontinuities between the old and new covenants. He distanced himself from dispensational approaches that minimized continuities and from critical positions that perceived the Old Testament as sub-Christian (SBA 96). He distinguished between faith-norms and individual life-norms, which exhibit continuity at the individual level, and community life-norms or polity-norms, which evidenced discontinuities.

Continuity of faith-norms was evident in that both old and new covenants

> unfold the same principle of redemptive grace, moving forward to a common eternal goal in the city of God. The blessings of old and new orders derive from the very same works of satisfaction accomplished by the Christ of God, and where spiritual life is found in either order it is attributable to the creative action of the one and selfsame Spirit of Christ. According to the divine design the old is provisional and preparatory for the new, and by divine predisclosure the new is prophetically anticipated in the old. External event and institution in the old order were divinely fashioned to afford a systematic representation of the realities of the coming new order, so producing a type-antitype correlativity between the two covenants in which their unity is instructively articulated. (SBA 98)

Continuous individual life-norms existed, such as

> the creation ordinances of marriage and labor, instituted in Eden, reinstituted after the Fall, and covenantally formalized in the postdiluvian covenant which God made with all the earth, explicitly for as long as the earth should endure. Such, too, are the universally applicable life-norms included in the stipulations of the Mosaic covenants, regulative of a man's life in relation to his neighbor. The New Testament, though not legislatively codifying these life-norms, does presuppose them and didactically confirm them. (SBA 102)

In contrast,

> the Old Testament's community life-norms for Israel are replaced in the New Testament by a new polity for the church. The Old Testament laws dealing with the institutional mode of the kingdom of God in relation to the cultural mandate and with the community cultus of Israel, those norms which are the peculiarly canonical norms, were binding only on the community of the old covenant. In these terms, the Old Testament, though possessing the general authority of all the Scriptures, does not possess for the church the more specific authority of canonicity. Under the new covenant the Old Testament is not the current canon. (SBA 102)

Thus, for Kline the old canon still provides direction for the lives of new covenant community members. Exodus 21:22–25 could be used to argue against abortion by members of either the theocracy or the church; violations of the Decalogue are as reprehensible in the new covenant as in the old. There is continuity for the covenant communities in these individual behavioral norms. But there is discontinuity at the community level: the theocratic community is commanded to annihilate Canaanite inhabitants or Philistine invaders of the promised-land protectorate, while the church community is commanded not to engage in the destruction of contemporary Jews or Palestinians in the former holy land territory or of non-Christians anywhere on the planet. Both communities are theocratic monarchies (SBA 98), but along with priests, the earthly form of the theocracy was led by charismatic leaders and later kings, whereas the visible church is led by elders and deacons. Old Testament prophets, functioning as members of the divine, heavenly council, continually brought covenantal lawsuits implementing Deuteronomic sanctions, initially against Israelite kings and subsequently against all members of the nation. The canon grew through prophetic productions. The canon, however, is closed for the current covenant community, which will not undergo a church-destroying curse of exile because of the faithful, covenant-obedience of its Federal Head; rather, it is subject only to the lawsuits of Revelation 3–4 against particular congregations. Old Testament ritual legislation is not New Testament worship. The Old Testament conquest to cleanse a divinely defined holy territory for a geopolitical community is not New Testament evangelism to produce a nonnational, nonpolitical body. Although the biblical redemptive paradigm of the divine suzerain saving his vassals by defeating his and their enemies and afterwards building himself a palace is applicable to the realities of the old and new covenant communities, the form of the two communities is different, so their canons are different.

An original reviewer of SBA, Pieter Verhoef, did not like the idea that the Old Testament was not part of the canon of the new covenant community. Verhoef also did not find agreeable Kline's distinctions between faith, community-life, and individual-life norms.[12]

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[12] Pieter A. Verhoef, review of *Structure of Biblical Authority*, by Meredith G. Kline, *Westminster Theological Journal* 36.3 (Spring 1974): 413–15. More recently, Frame has voiced similar reservations. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 219. "I find these distinctions unpersuasive. I grant that we should define the canon as those documents that God has given to govern the lives of the covenant people of God. But I don't see any biblical basis for the distinctions between life and faith, or individual and community, that Kline sets forth. Faith is part of life, and both individual and community life are under God's covenant." For an elaboration of Frame's methodological and some conceptual differences with Kline, see his chapter, "Meredith G. Kline's *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis*

Might Kline have avoided the criticism of the Old Testament not being canon for the church by treating the Old Covenant as historical prologue to the New Covenant just as he considered Genesis, with its referencing of various covenants, as historical prologue to the Sinai covenant, as indicated by his titling his covenant-theological development of Genesis as *Kingdom Prologue*? He had stated in SBA (53),

> If the Pentateuch is viewed as a unified corpus with God's covenant with the exodus generation of Israel as its nucleus, the narratives of Genesis and the first part of Exodus assume the character of an historical prologue tracing the covenantal relationship to its historical roots in Yahweh's past dealings with the chosen people and the patriarchal ancestors.

Perhaps Kline might have focused his argument better by naming "community-life norms" as "covenantal polity norms," thus making it easier to concentrate on the discontinuity between the old and new covenants. The discontinuity he recognized subsequently informed his controversial positions on topics like theonomy, the relation of church and state, and the Sabbath.[13]

Thus, interacting with Kline on covenant-community and canon is not simple because the topic involves our understanding of covenant theology, the contrast between common and redemptive grace, and the distinction between earthly and heavenly kingdoms, theological themes that currently have volumes being written about them from myriad perspectives. For example, compare contrasting approaches to covenant theology just by former students of Kline—Niehaus, Hahn, and Horton.[14]

Summary

Previous to SBA, critical scholarship defined canon as a list of books authoritative for a faith community that attained canonical status only when the list was finalized by the community. Conservatives argued that biblical books had canonical status when written and that the canonical corpus accumulated over time. Kline sought to support the latter approach by

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Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview," in John Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdom Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2011), 151–98.

[13] On the latter, see Meredith G. Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon: A Covenantal Tale of Cosmos and Telos* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 189–97.

[14] Jeffrey Niehaus, *Biblical Theology, Volume 1: The Common Grace Covenants* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2014); Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

applying insights gained from ancient Near Eastern international treaties to the concept of biblical canon. The ancient Near Eastern treaties were texts with clauses protecting, by divine sanctions, the written document from alteration. Kline saw such clauses as creating canonical texts, authoritative for the vassal community, which simultaneously recognized the text and the empire-administering function that it performed as binding for the life of the community. In the process he made canon a technical term, changing its meaning from a list of texts recognized as authoritative by a religious community to a document performing an administrative function over a vassal community.

By trying to demonstrate that all the biblical books were covenantal developments of various parts of the treaty structure, Kline strengthened conservative convictions on the covenantal nature of the whole Bible. He did not change, however, the opinions of critical scholars on the dating of biblical books, even Deuteronomy; so they viewed his ideas as conservative dogma, his argument as theological rather than historical.

By defining a canonical document as one performing official functions in the administration of the life of a vassal community, Kline associated canon with community polity. Thus, he posited that as the polity of the community changed, its canon changed; the Old Testament was authoritative Scripture for the church, but not part of its canon; the concept of biblical canon needs to reflect the discontinuities between the old and new covenants.

Kline's contribution to canon studies provided new directions that could still be profitably pursued, but to change opinions on the dating of biblical books would require historical evidence, archaeologically uncovered copies of biblical texts from before the time of Malachi, while the reaching of consensus on the significance of discontinuities between the old and new covenants for canon would depend on the unlikely prospect of the resolution of differences among the proliferating solutions to a multitude of debated issues within Reformed and evangelical theology.