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Review: The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation by Rolf Rendtorff

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* by Rolf Rendtorff

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Book Reviews

RENTORFF, ROLF. *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*. Old Testament Studies. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998. xiv+105 pp. \$35.95 (cloth).

In this slender but important monograph Rolf Rendtorff closely examines a common biblical refrain “almost formula-like in character, . . . ‘I will be God for you and you shall be a people to me’” (p. 11). While Rendtorff notes that the term “covenant formula” may be inaccurate because this refrain is not always linked directly to the word “covenant,” he argues that this term should be retained both on grounds that changing terminology creates unnecessary confusion and that scholars have erred in creating the “impression that ‘covenant,’ ‘election’ and ‘covenant formula’ are three completely different themes” (p. 9).

Rendtorff begins his analysis of this formula by noting that it occurs in three different forms: “(1) ‘I will be God for you’; (2) ‘You shall be a people for me’; (3) where the two statements are combined in a *single* formula, though here the sequence of the two elements changes” (p. 13). What is theologically significant is Rendtorff’s discovery that the Priestly stratum of the first four books of the Pentateuch frequently makes use of the first element of the formula, twice makes use of the third element, but never utilizes the second one. In the book of Deuteronomy things are reversed, with the second element occurring frequently, the third twice, yet the first element is conspicuously absent. The covenant formula also recurs with some frequency in certain parts of the prophetic corpus, particularly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but almost always in its third, bilateral form. What these observations indicate is that various biblical writers make distinct theological points about how God and Israel relate to each other, even though they are drawing on a common storehouse of covenantal language.

Rendtorff takes matters further by attributing theological significance to the slight variations in word choice and word order that occur in each of the three forms of the covenant formula. While some of his arguments are quite convincing, occasionally one wonders whether he is over-reading the text. One example is his attempt to explain the discrepancy in the word order between Jer. 7:23 and 11:4. While both texts contain the full bilateral formula, 7:23 begins the formula “so, I will be your God” but 11:4 begins the formula “so you shall be my people.” He argues that the word order is controlled by an effort to have the element “so you shall be my people” in direct proximity to God’s demand “that the people act or conduct themselves in accordance with what God has commanded” (p. 32). However, at the beginning of 7:23 one also finds God commanding the people to engage in conduct, specifically to “listen to my voice,” and this demand is next to “so, I will be your God.” While Rendtorff’s suggestion is possible, it seems more likely that he is engaging in a midrashic reading that finds theological nuance in every detail rather than allowing that sometimes a biblical author may have diversified his vocabulary and/or altered his word order for aesthetic reasons, or simply because he was drawing on a common stock of related words and images that he used interchangeably. This may be an instance where the modern proclivity to

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call things formulas creates the need to explain all deviations from a supposedly set form.

My criticism here is closely akin to some of Rendtorff's own arguments. One of his most profound insights in this volume is that previous biblical scholarship has often fragmented the biblical text, setting some parts over against others by fixating on isolated terms, rather than realizing "that theological ideas did not by any means crystallise into particular terms, as it were, but that the terms often only cover a partial aspect of what is meant and said" (p. 3). Rendtorff notes that this fragmentation drives a wedge between the various ways biblical writers expressed God's relationship to Israel, instead of seeing that all these formulations were "merely different ways of expressing a great theme whose inner cohesion was never in doubt" (p. 10). The trick is to give proper weight to the nuances of language found in different texts from different historical periods in a way that avoids fragmenting the Bible completely, while drawing out the common threads that hold these various texts together without engaging in a harmonizing mid-rashic reading. Inasmuch as Rendtorff has generally succeeded in this difficult task within the limited scope of this study, the field awaits his forthcoming biblical theology to see the fruits of his approach over a larger portion of the biblical corpus.

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SCHNIEDEWIND, WILLIAM M. *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Samuel 7:1-17*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. x+229 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

This monograph sets out to study the history of a passage, the promise to David in 2 Sam. 7:1-17. The declared method is reception theory, as articulated by H. R. Jaus. It has much in common with redaction criticism, which has long been a part of the arsenal of the literary critic. Following the work of Michael Fishbane on inner-biblical exegesis, Schniedewind faults traditional redaction critics for arbitrarily distinguishing stages in texts on thematic grounds and insists on the importance of literary indicators. He also insists on the importance of the social and historical context in which the text is received and reinterpreted.

The methodological introduction is followed by six chapters. The first is devoted to the origin of the promise. Contrary to the recent fashion for dating biblical texts to the postexilic or even Hellenistic periods, Schniedewind dates the original promise to the time of David and regards it as foundational to the ideology of the united monarchy. He distinguishes two sources. The first, in 2 Sam. 7:4-7, rejects the proposal to build a temple. The second, in verses 8-16, is the promise of a dynasty. 2 Sam. 7:13, which promises that David's son will build a temple, is recognized as an insertion by a Deuteronomistic historian. The ambivalence of the original oracle toward the temple is best understood in the beginnings of the monarchy, before the temple was built. Schniedewind also defends early dates for Ps. 89:1-18 and, more tentatively, for Ps. 132:1-18. In the latter case, he notes the lack of Deuteronomistic language in Psalm 132 and argues that the theme of the psalm (the movement of the ark to the temple) can hardly have come whole cloth from a postexilic redactor. He does not, however, discuss the intriguing fact that Ps. 132:12 seems to make the promise conditional and thereby to revise 2 Samuel 7 significantly.

The third chapter deals with the late eighth century B.C.E., after the fall of the