

KING JOSIAH'S RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT (2 KINGS 22-23)

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This article deals with the sequence of the events described in 2 Kings 22 and 23. I would like to use as the point of departure for my analysis two articles, written by N. Lohfink in 1963, which appeared in *Biblica* under the title, "Die Bundesurkunde des Königs Josias" ¹. These articles are very valuable and I made grateful use of them in my dissertation on Deuteronomy and the reformation of King Josiah ². At one point in these articles, however, Lohfink points to a problem which, in my opinion, can be better resolved by distinguishing between covenant restoration and covenant renewal.

A brief summary of the contents of 2 Kings 22-23 is as follows: After the high priest Hilkiah found a book of the law in the temple, he had it brought to king Josiah, who read it, tore his robes, and sent a delegation to the prophetess Huldah. The prophetess confirmed the content of the book which had been found, that the city of Jerusalem would come under judgment, although it would not happen until after the death of the king. Thereupon, the king read the book which had been found to the people in the temple, renewed the covenant, and celebrated the Passover ³.

Lohfink identifies the following five elements: a. repentance of the king (22,11); b. destruction oracle (22,16-17); c. salvation oracle (22,19-20); d. renewal of the covenant (23,1-3); e. feast (23,21-23). The sequence of these events has raised questions. Would not the destruction oracle be more appropriate before the repentance of the king rather than after? And why is there first a judgment oracle which is then immediately followed by a salvation oracle? Lohfink writes (translated): "The sequence repentance - destruction oracle in itself is [p. 270] surprising. Logic would prefer: distress – prophetic designation, through a destruction oracle, of the distress as the consequence of breaking the covenant – repentance – prophetic salvation oracle as promise of covenant renewal" ⁴. Using the schema above, this would mean a sequence of b-a-e-d-e.

¹ N. LOHFINK, *Die Bundesurkunde des Königs Josias (Eine Frage an die Deuteronomiumsforschung)*, in *Biblica* 44 (1963) 261-288, 461-498. Cf. *Die Gattung der "Historischen Kurzgeschichte" in den letzten Jahren von Juda und in der Zeit des babylonischen Exils*, in *ZAW* 90 (1978) 319-347 and *Zur neueren Diskussion über 2 Kön 22-23*, in Id. (ed.), *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft* (BETL, 68), Leuven, University Press, 1985, pp. 24-48.

² M.J. PAUL, *Het Archimedisch punt van de Pentateuchkritiek: Een historisch en exegetisch onderzoek naar de verhouding van Deuteronomium en de reformatie van koning Josia (2 Kon 22-23)* (Diss. University of Leiden), 's-Gravenhage, Boekencentrum, 1988, ²1988.

³ E. EYNIKEL, *De hervorming van Josia en de compositie van de deuteronomistische geschiedenis* (Diss. Cath. University of Leuven, 1989, manuscript) gives a survey of recent diachronic analyses of 2 King 22-23.

⁴ LOHFINK, *Bundesurkunde*, p. 274, n. 4. Cf. K. BALTZER, *Das Bundesformular* (WMANT, 4), Neukirchen, Neukirchener Verlag, 1960, ²1964, p. 61. In a more recent article Lohfink makes a distinction between Dtr I and Dtr II and writes: 'I do not have the courage to reconstruct Huldah's oracle as composed by Dtr I (which, moreover, would still not be its actual historical wording). Dtr II appears in general never to have altered texts but rather only to have expanded them. But there convincing grounds for a precise delimiting of the text are missing'. (*The Cult Reform of Josiah of Judah: 2 Kings 22-23 as a Source for the History of Israelite Religion*, in P.D. MILLER, P.D. HANSON, S.D. McBRIDE (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion. FS F.M. Cross*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, pp. 459-475, p. 471, n. 12).

He then suggests that it was a matter of style in those days to repeat the oracle of destruction (22,16-17), before pronouncing the oracle of salvation (22,19-20). In that case, the original sequence would have been b-a-b-c-d-e. Yet, at the same time, he points to the possibility that no destruction oracle was pronounced before the repentance of the king. Huldah could "have had an interest in again precisely formulating the destruction oracle presupposed in the salvation oracle" ⁵.

There would then have been a formal need to repeat the destruction oracle, which normally would have preceded the repentance of the king, but in this case was not necessary to move the king to repentance. In this way, the sequence in 2 Kings 22-23 is explicable.

Lohfink also considers the salvation oracle necessary for the renewal of the covenant in the following verses. From this point of view, one can understand why he thinks that the salvation oracle negates the oracle of destruction ⁶.

I have the following four questions with regard to this analysis: 1. Does the salvation oracle really negate the destruction oracle? 2. Is there a simpler explanation for the oracle of destruction? 3. Is the oracle of salvation necessary for the renewal of the covenant? 4. Are there extra-biblical examples which could shed light on the given analysis?

1. The content of the destruction oracle is that God will carry out the threats stated in the book which had been found, because of the sins of the people. The salvation oracle is directed exclusively to the king. He would die in peace and would not experience the destruction which would certainly overtake Judah. It seems to me that we have here a general proclamation with a specific restriction : the evil will certainly come (general message), but Josiah would not experience it (restriction).

[p. 271] There is no question here of a salvation oracle which nullifies the oracle of destruction. The two messages belong together. Thus, it is unlikely that the destruction oracle is pronounced only for formal reasons.

Lohfink anticipated this critique and stated, by way of explanation, that there is a tendency from within the deuteronomistic framework to think only in terms of a postponement of the destruction. In 23,26f. it says: "Still the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the LORD said, 'I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city which I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said: My name shall be there'". After releasing this deuteronomistic statement, Lohfink – following K. Baltzer – interprets the words of Huldah as stating that the wrath of God had already been kindled, and not, as many translations have, that it would be kindled in the future ⁷.

In reaction to this interpretation I would reply that this view of the wrath of God is possible, although it is strange that the assumed crisis is not specifically mentioned. We must add, however, that vs. 17 says that the wrath of God continues to burn, and that would also imply future disasters. The so-called "salvation oracle" addressed to the king also makes clear that evil would be brought upon that place in the future as well, even though the king would not see it. It is incorrect to interpret these

⁵ LOHFINK, *Bundesurkunde*, p. 275, n. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272, n. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 273, n. 1.

verses as saying that there would be no more disasters to come. The closing of verse 20 must be translated as a future: "Your eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place".

For the reasons just delineated, I consider it better to retain the view that the pronouncements of Huldah announced a general destruction which would, however, not be realized in the days of Josiah. We also need not, then, accept the proposal that the redactor was defending a contrary opinion.

This point of view does, however, entail that the last words addressed to the king can hardly be defined as a "salvation oracle". These words cannot be said to announce salvation in the limited sense. Perhaps we could better speak of an "oracle of comfort" than an "oracle of salvation". Or, if one would rather avoid the word "oracle": a "prophecy of comfort".

2. With this, we come closer to answering our second question, whether there is not a simpler explanation for the place of the destruction oracle. It follows from the analysis just given that the announced [p. 272] destruction would definitely come, but not in the days of Josiah. The message of Huldah can be characterized as an announcement of punishment with a limited comfort, but not a message of salvation. In light of the fact that Josiah inquired concerning the consequences of the trespasses for the people and for Judah, it is understandable that the answer of Huldah follows. And the limited comfort for Josiah himself is the result of his repentance. There is, therefore, a logical sequence in this account: after the repentance, there necessarily follows a prophetic clarification of the situation, with a limited comfort for the king himself.

It is incorrect to classify the initial words of Huldah as a destruction oracle which possibly preceded the repentance.

3. When we classify the words of Huldah as a prophetic clarification of the situation, with a limited comfort for the king, the salvation oracle, which, according to Lohfink, is necessary for the renewal of the covenant, of course, also lapses. Thus, we will now examine whether such a salvation oracle is indeed necessary for a renewal of the covenant.

According to Baltzer and Lohfink, the following chapters deal with covenant renewal: Exodus 34; Joshua 7-8; 1 Kings 8; 2 Kings 18-19; 22-23; 2 Chronicles 14-15; 29; Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9-10; Jeremiah 21; 34; Daniel 9 and 1QS I-II. If we examine these passages, it is not at all clear that there is always a salvation oracle before the covenant is renewed.

2 Chronicles 29 is a good example. Hezekiah first confesses that the forefathers had not been faithful, with the result that the wrath of God now rests on Jerusalem and Judah. Consequently he says: "Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel, that his fierce anger may turn away from us" (vs. 10). Nowhere do we read here of a salvation oracle, yet Hezekiah wants to turn away the wrath of God precisely through a renewal of the covenant. A similar instance is that of Ezra 10,2-3; a covenant is made in order to act in accordance with the law of God. In most instances, the initiative for a renewal of the covenant derives from the human side!

Only in Exodus 34 is it otherwise. The covenant is broken through the sin of the golden calf, so that Moses, as a symbol of this break, throws down the stone tablets and breaks them to pieces⁸. God wants to kill the people and to make Moses into a great nation. In this [p. 273] situation, the people could only repent, but could not renew the covenant. A restoration of the original situation could only come from God.

The difference between these histories can be classified as follows: in Exodus 34, God restores the covenant, and in the other histories, the people bind themselves once again to the already existing covenant, and promise to be faithful to it once again. The difference could be expressed in the words "covenant restoration", and "covenant renewal". If the covenant is completely broken, only God can restore its validity. But if the Israelites have been temporarily disobedient to the covenant, they can promise again to maintain the conditions of the covenant which remains in effect. For such a promise, no salvation oracle is needed.

According to this analysis, Josiah needed no divine promise to renew the covenant. The old covenant, with its blessings and curses, was still in effect. In this situation of covenant wrath, which ensued from the trespass, Josiah did the only thing possible: he let the people pledge their fidelity once again. So, he renews the covenant. But this is something different than God's restoration of a broken covenant.

4. Are there extra-biblical examples which can shed light on the analysis given? Since the fifties, many studies have appeared in which a comparison is made between the extra-biblical vassal treaties (especially those of the Hittites and the Assyrians) and the biblical covenants. Especially Dennis J. McCarthy's book, *Treaty and Covenant*⁹, contains a treasure of information on this subject. In the biblical covenants, God takes the part of the sovereign and Israel the part of the vassal¹⁰.

Here we can examine whether, in agreement with our analysis, examples can be found in the extra-biblical treaties of a vassal who again takes upon himself the obligations of an existing treaty, and examples of a treaty that has been broken, but is restored by the sovereign.

Restoration of a treaty can be seen in the case of Hattusil III and Bentesina. By way of clarification it must be said that first Suppiluliuma, then Muwatalli, and then Hattusil ruled over the kingdom of Hatti. In Amurru, first Azira ruled, and later, after a number of other rulers, Bentesina. The grandfather of the Hittite king Hattusil, Suppiluliuma [p. 274], had made a treaty with Azira, the ruler of Amurru. Later, when Bentesina ruled over Amurru, he rebelled, and Muwatalli, who was reigning over the Hittite kingdom at that time, punished and deported him. Nevertheless, Hattusil took him into his protection. When Hattusil later ascended to power, he restored Bentesina as a vassal in Amurru: "I have now, for a second time, given Bentesina authority over the land of Amurru and assigned to him the house of his fathers and the kingly throne". Some time later, Bentesina asks whether he would receive the rights of successor. The Hittite king grants his request. "You, oh

⁸ M.G. KLINE, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975, 152 and D.J. MCCARTHY, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (AnBib, 21a), Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1978, p. 65, n. 56.

⁹ See note 8.

¹⁰ See further J. WIJNGAARDS, *Vazal van Jahweh*, Baarn, Bosch en Keuning, 1965 and K.A. KITCHEN, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today*, Exeter, Paternoster, 1977, pp. 79-85. In the article *The Fall and Rise of Covenant, Law and Treaty*, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989) 118-135, Kitchen attacks E.W. NICHOLSON, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*, Oxford, University Press, 1986.

Bentesina, desired it of me, and I, the Sun, did not deny it him ... to Bentesina, a tablet of the covenant corresponding to the tablet which Suppiluliuma, the great king, to Azira ... I, the great king, have written (it) to Bentesina, the king of the land of Amurru, according to the words of the tablet of the covenant of my grandfather, and have given (it) to him" ¹¹

Fortunately, the treaty between Suppiluliuma and Azira has been preserved so that we have material for comparison. The conditions in the treaty with Bentesina were indeed taken over word for word ¹². Previous successors of Azira had maintained the old treaty ¹³, but because Bentesina had been deposed, the treaty had to be restored. In this case, the vassal is dependent on the goodwill of the sovereign, and it is up to the sovereign whether the vassal is reestablished in his old rights.

A different situation present itself with Mursilis. After many people had died several years in a row, Mursilis prayed in order to find the cause. "The reason for which people are dying in the Hatti land, – either let it be established by an omen, or let me see it in a dream, or let a prophet declare it!" As a result of an oracle, he discovers the existence of two old tablets. The first tablet deals with the offerings for the river Mala. The previous kings had regularly made offerings to this river. "But now a plague had been rampant in the Hatti land since the days of my father, and we have never performed the offering to the river Mala". From the second tablet it appeared that his father had broken a treaty with the Egyptians.

For both cases he requested an oracle and it appeared that this was the cause of the wrath of the god. "See now! I have admitted my guilt before the Storm-god (and said): 'It is so. We have done it'. I know for certain that the offence was not committed in my days, that it was [p. 275] committed in the days of my father... . But, since the Hattian Storm-god is angry for that reason and people are dying in the Hatti land, I am (nevertheless) making the offerings to the Hattian Storm-god, my lord, on that account. Because I humble myself and cry for mercy, harken to me, Hattian Storm-god, my lord! Let the plague stop in the Hatti land!" Thus he requests an end to the plague. "If, on the other hand, people are dying for some other reason, either let me see it in a dream, or let it be found out by an oracle, or let a prophet declare it, or let all the priests find out by incubation whatever I suggest to them" ¹⁴.

In this instance, Mursilis does everything possible to find out which obligations he must fulfill. As far as he is concerned, he is ready to comply with all the promises made earlier. Here the vassal renews the relationship in order to avert punishment ¹⁵.

Conclusion

¹¹ E.F. WEIDNER, *Politische Dokumente aus Kleinasien: Die Staatsverträge in akkadischer Sprache aus dem Archiv van Boghazkoi*, Leipzig, 1923, repr. New York, Olms, 1970, pp. 124-135.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 70-75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-79 (when this Dubbi-Tesup is the father of Bentesina).

¹⁴ J.B. PRITCHARD, *ANET*, pp. 394-396.

¹⁵ We do not know whether or not there was a covenant relationship between the king and his god, but there are many similarities with the relation between Israel and his God. The king described himself as the servant of the god and named the Hattian Storm-god 'my lord'. The king confessed the sin of his father and took the responsibility for it: 'My father's sin has fallen upon me'. This god is the father and mother of the oppressed (*ANET*, pp. 394-397). Another example: Azira rebelled and submitted again to Suppiluliuma (*ANET*, p. 203).

In the extra-biblical material the possibility exists both for a sovereign to restore a treaty with a vassal, and for a vassal to make every effort to fulfill the old conditions once again¹⁶. In one instance in the O.T., God restores the covenant after it was completely broken, that is, in Exodus 34. In the other instances, Israel takes it upon itself to comply with the existing obligations of the covenant. With the distinction between "covenant restoration" and "covenant renewal", the sequence of events in 2 Kings 22-23 can be explained¹⁷. There is no salvation oracle which assumes a previous destruction oracle, but a prophetic clarification of the covenant wrath announced in the book which had been found. The king is the recipient of the limited comfort, [p. 276] that the disasters would not occur in his days. Under these circumstances, the king calls the people to loyalty to the old covenant and renews the covenant.

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¹⁶ 'In their pleas for fidelity the Great Kings of Hatti emphasize their reiterated mercy, their renewal of favor to a perjured vassal. Even the terrible Assyrian was usually readier to renew a relationship – after a condign penalty, of course – than wipe out a perjured land. He did this with Samaria and Ashdod, to mention merely examples close to the Hebrew orbit from among the plenteous mercies of which the annals continually boast (...). How much more might be expected from the savior sovereign who was the God of Israel' (McCARTY, *op. cit.*, pp. 297-298).

¹⁷ There are many other common features. See my *Het Archimedisches punt*, pp. 301-308.