

A FURTHER NOTE ON THE COVENANTAL FORM IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

KENNETH A. STRAND
Andrews University

In an earlier issue of *AUSS* my colleague, William H. Shea, provided an illuminating discussion of the covenant form in the book of Revelation, particularly in the letters to the seven churches in chaps. 2-3.¹ All the basic elements of the ancient Hittite suzerainty-treaty formulary appear in each of those letters: (1) the *preamble* identifying the suzerain (here, Christ under appropriate symbolisms); (2) the *historical prologue* indicative of past relationships (presupposed in the "I know your works . . ." statements); (3) the *stipulations* (the prescribed course of action for each congregation in view of its circumstances); (4) the call upon *witnesses* (here the repeated imperative to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches"); and (5) the *blessing and curse* (the promises to the overcomer and the warnings for unfaithfulness).² I concur fully with Shea's analysis, and would simply call attention to some further perspectives that may merit consideration:

1. It is likely that the ancient suzerainty-covenant formulary, in addition to its occurrence in conjunction with each of the individual letters to the seven churches, appears also in a broader, constitutive pattern for the entire book. In this broader pattern, the *prologue in chap. 1* (especially vss. 5-6) furnishes the covenantal "preamble" and "historical prologue," the *epilogue in chap 22* (notably vss. 6, 7, 14, 16-20) furnishes the covenantal "call upon

¹William H. Shea, "The Covenantal Form of the Letters to the Seven Churches," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 71-84.

²The basic study of Hittite covenants was done by V. Korosec, *Hethitische Staatsverträge* (Leipzig, 1931), in which he distinguished *suzerainty* treaties and *parity* treaties. The former, with which we are interested here, provides the basic formulary that binds the vassal to the Hittite suzerain. (The parity treaty is simply two suzerainty treaties going in opposite directions, and is exemplified in the

witnesses" and "blessing-and-curse" formulation, and the *rest of the book* (including the messages to the seven churches) embraces the specifics of the covenantal "stipulations."³

2. This broader covenantal pattern highlights two aspects of the ancient suzerainty-covenant formulary that are apparent, though not so clearly delineated, in each of the seven letters: (a) the divine Suzerain's *prior goodness* which supplies the basis for, and which lies at the very heart of, the covenantal relationship itself; and (b) the divine Suzerain's *continuing goodness* as part and parcel of the stipulations segment of the formulary. In fact, the expression of

international covenants between the Hittite Empire and Egypt [cf. *ANET*, pp. 199-203]).

The foundational study that has explored the ancient Hittite formulary in terms of biblical relationships is by George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1955), a reprint of his articles in *BA* 17 (1954): 26-46, 50-76. A study of the book of Deuteronomy in the light of this formulary has been presented by Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1963). Brief excerpts from the treaty between Hittite king Mursilis and his vassal Duppi-Tessub, together with analysis, have been provided in K. A. Strand, *Brief Introduction to the Ancient Near East: A Panorama of the Old Testament World* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969), pp. 174-177. That treaty has been given much more fully in a translation by Albrecht Goetze in *ANET*, pp. 203-205. (In my presentation of excerpts, I have utilized the basic five subdivisions by Mendenhall adopted by Shea, whereas Goetze provides somewhat different categories. One additional element noted by Mendenhall, p. 34, but not relevant to Shea's and my own discussions is the "provision for deposit in the temple and periodic public reading.")

³When I here refer to "constitutive pattern," I do not, of course, exclude other *types* of pattern that may also be evident. I have elsewhere called attention to the *broad chiasmic structure* of the Apocalypse (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. [Naples, Florida, 1979], pp. 43-52).

That the covenantal "stipulations" in this broad covenantal pattern should cover virtually the entire book of Revelation may at first thought seem strange, for specific imperatives appear only intermittently throughout the book (i.e., aside from their rather regular appearance in the seven letters). However, what must be kept in mind is that the book of Revelation is a different kind of work from the legal documents embodying the covenant formulary among the Hittites and different also from the OT legal and/or legal-historical presentations where the formulary is evident. Within the *apocalyptic* framework of Revelation, the stipulations are not generally stated directly; rather, they surface through pictorializations of covenant loyalty within the conflict setting that is the constant backdrop to the book's portrayals.

that continuing goodness is the complement of, and counterpart to, the Lord's stipulations as he calls his followers to unswerving loyalty in the face of hostile opposing forces.

In addition, it should be noted that the book's prologue reveals an interesting relationship between the covenantal "preamble" and covenantal "historical prologue." The "preamble" is given as a trilogy describing what *Christ is*, and the "historical prologue" takes the form of a further trilogy expressing *what Christ has done* (and what he continues to do). The basic elements of these trilogies, moreover, are inter-related. We will give brief consideration to these trilogies after first taking note of the two perspectives mentioned in the preceding paragraphs.

1. *The Broader Covenantal Pattern in Revelation*

In brief, the broader covenantal pattern in the book of Revelation (which supplements the outlines given by Shea for each of the seven letters of chaps. 2-3) may be set forth as follows:

Preamble

"... and from Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness, the First-born of the dead, and the Ruler of earth's kings" (1:5a).

Historical Prologue

"To him who loves us, and has loosed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (1:5b-6a).

Stipulations

In addition to the imperatives of the seven letters, the book of Revelation is replete with calls to loyalty and faithfulness—against deception, against persecution, etc. (note, e.g., Rev 6:9-11; 7:13-14; 12:11, 17; 14:12-13; 16:15; 18:4; 20:4). Intermingled with such "stipulations" are declarations of the suzerain Lord's own loyalty and faithfulness to his followers (note, e.g., Rev 5:9-10; 7:15-17; 11:18; 14:1-4; 16:4-7; 18:20; chaps. 19-22; and also the promises and assurances in the seven letters of chaps. 2-3).⁴

Witnesses

"I Jesus have sent my angel with this testimony for the churches..." (22:16a).

⁴Cf. the second paragraph in n. 3, above.

"The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'; and let him who hears say, 'Come'" (22:17a).

"He who testifies to these things" (22:20a).

Blessing-and-Curse Formulation

"Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book" (22:7b).

"Blessed are those who wash their robes [KJV and New KJV, "do his commandments"⁵] (22:14a).

"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book that if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book; and if any one subtracts from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the Holy City which are described in this book" (22:18-19).

2. The Suzerain's Prior and Continuing Goodness

A basic aspect of the ancient covenant formulary, whether in the biblical literature or in the Hittite suzerainty treaty, was to reveal the suzerain's prior goodness and unmerited favor toward the vassal. Indeed, the expression of this goodness and favor on the part of the suzerain lay at the very heart of the covenant relationship. In Exod 20:2, after the "preamble" identifying the lawgiver as "the Lord [Yahweh] your God" comes the brief but poignant historical prologue: "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This reveals Yahweh's prior goodness to Israel in his great redemptive act in delivering them in the Exodus from Egypt.

The Hittite formularies, too, emphasized the unmerited favor of the Hittite suzerain. For instance, in the treaty with Duppi-Tessub, Mursilis says, "When your father died, in accordance with your father's word I did not drop you. . . . I sought after you. To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father. . . ."⁶ Mursilis had made

⁵The best ancient MS evidence favors, of course, the wording "wash their robes." It should be noted, however, that in the context of the book of Revelation, this term and "do his commandments" are virtually synonymous. Cf., e.g., Rev 12:11 with 12:17.

⁶ANET, pp. 203-204, sect. 7.

Duppi-Tessub a king, even though the latter was "sick and ailing," and apparently not fit to be a king. The graciousness of the Hittite suzerain is thus revealed.

Regarding the letters to the seven churches, Shea has aptly pointed out that the "I-know-your-works" refrain "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."⁷ As such, therefore, this element in the seven letters is properly identified as the "historical prologue" of those letters. The specific acts of "prior goodness" on the part of the Christian community's Lord, however, are not set forth in the letters themselves. Rather, these specific acts are called to attention in the book's prologue.

What is Christ's relationship of *prior* (and continuing) goodness to his covenant community? The gracious acts are stated in a trilogy. The divine Suzerain (1) "loves us"; (2) "has loosed us from our sins by his blood"; and (3) "has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Rev 1:5-6).⁸

This trilogy expresses in succinct and paradigmatic form the essentials of Christ's gracious activity and provides the basis for the covenant relationship between him and his people. More will be said concerning this important trilogy in the next section of this article.

The goodness of Christ to his people is not only a *prior goodness*, however; it is also a *continuing goodness*. The present tense of the first element in the trilogy indicates this directly. But the *continuing-goodness* emphasis is one that is basic too, of

⁷Shea, p. 74.

⁸In this trilogy, there is a sudden switch from a present participle (first element) to an aorist participle (second element). As for the present tense of the first element, it would seem that although a past event, Christ's death, is the ultimate expression of his love, a stress is here being placed on the continuing and ever-present nature of that love. (More will be said in this regard later.)

As for the second element in the trilogy, I have adopted the now generally accepted reading λύσαντι (rather than the *Textus Receptus* reading λούσαντι). The translation of the clause is frequently given as "freed us from our sins" (e.g., RSV, NIV, *Good News Bible*), contrasting with "washed us from our sins" (KJV). For arguments favoring the reading λύσαντι, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York, 1971), p. 731.

course, to the seven letters and to the entire book of Revelation. In those seven letters, Christ's continuing love, care, and activity on behalf of his faithful followers is set forth in one way or another, but usually in conjunction with the "blessings" statements, rather than as a part of the "stipulations" segment of the messages (among possible exceptions is the short, pithy "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" [2:10]⁹).

In the broader context of Revelation, however, we find assurances of Christ's love and care in conjunction with the various visions in which God's people encounter oppressive forces, and wherein the divine call to loyalty (the "stipulations" element) is constantly in view either implicitly or explicitly.¹⁰ For example, Christ gives assurance that he holds the keys of the grave and death (1:18), a particularly pertinent message for Christians facing martyrdom; the prayers of the saints are depicted as being mingled with incense from the altar and ascending to God's throne (8:3-4); and the earth helps the woman by swallowing the flood with which the dragon seeks to entrap her (12:16).

Such assurances of the Suzerain's care in the present age are complemented by his promises of reward in the future. Each of the seven letters contains such promises, of course; and their fulfillment is depicted in chaps. 21-22. But other examples occur throughout the book, such as the saints' reign on earth envisioned in 5:9-10; the multitude in Rev 7 whom Christ will lead to living waters and from whose eyes he will wipe away all tears; the acclamation in 19:2 of vindication over the judged and doomed harlot Babylon, who had oppressed God's people; and in 20:4 the enthronement of the saints resurrected in the first resurrection.

The intermingling, throughout the book of Revelation, of Christ's call for loyalty on the part of his followers and his assurance of his own care for them is paralleled in what has been characterized as the "stipulations" section of the ancient Hittite suzerainty-treaty formulary. That ancient formulary has rightly been called a "suzer-

⁹The only other two possible exceptions that I have noted within Shea's outlines of the messages to the seven churches (see Shea, pp. 76-81) are in the stipulations to Laodicea ("I will come in to him and eat with him . . .") and in the prologue to Philadelphia ("I have set before you an open door").

¹⁰Cf. the second paragraph in n. 3, above.

ainty treaty," for it is *unilateral*. It binds a vassal king to his overlord, with only the vassal being told what to do.¹¹ The very fact, however, that that vassal has been given this vassal kingship implies an obligation (mainly protection) on the part of the supreme monarch. Such recognition of self-imposed obligation toward the vassal is at times explicitly expressed. For example, an introduction to one of the military clauses in the Hittite treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tesub states that "I, the Sun, am loyal to you" (this prefaces the requirement that Duppi-Tesub extend military help to his overlord).¹² Later, there is indication that if Duppi-Tesub is attacked or faces a revolt and writes to Mursilis, the latter will dispatch "foot soldiers and charioteers" to aid Duppi-Tesub (who, in turn, must not treat these forces "in an unfair manner").¹³

The ancient formulary thus highlights both the overlord's *prior goodness* (in the "historical prologue") and *continuing care* (in conjunction with the "stipulations"). That past and present goodness finds its highest expression in the very vassal kingship itself, wherein the unworthy recipient has so graciously received and continues to enjoy the suzerain's blessings. The vassal has first of all *been made a king*, and then is *continuously accorded the privileged treatment of a king*. In the account of the Exodus covenant, Israel's honored status is expressed in the statement that God has made Israel "a kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6). In the passage under discussion in the book of Revelation, similar imagery is used to express the relationship of the Christian church to her suzerain Lord, who has made her "a kingdom, priests to his God and Father." This expression is further paralleled in 1 Pet 2:9 by the description of the church as a "royal priesthood."

3. *The "Preamble" and "Historical-Prologue" Trilogies*

The two trilogies of Rev 1:5-6 that I have identified as representing the covenantal "preamble" and covenantal "historical prologue" bring to attention theological motifs that are the postulates or "givens" for the message of the entire Apocalypse. In elucidating

¹¹See Mendenhall, p. 29; Strand, *Ancient Near East*, p. 175.

¹²ANET, p. 204, sect. 10.

¹³ANET, p. 204, sect. 11.

the basis upon which the covenant relationship between Christ and his church is built, each of these trilogies provides its own *sequence* of the essential experiences that make this saving relationship possible. I would suggest, further, that the sequential items of the "preamble" trilogy also bear a direct interconnecting relationship to the corresponding sequential items of the "historical-prologue" trilogy. As an aid to our further discussion of these aspects of the trilogies, the two trilogies may be placed in parallel columns, as follows:

<i>What Christ Is</i>	<i>What Christ Has Done</i> ¹⁴
1. Faithful Witness	1. Loves Us
2. First-born of the Dead	2. Has Loosed Us from Our Sins. . . .
3. Ruler of Earth's Kings	3. Has Made Us a Kingdom, Priests. . . .

The Sequential Aspects

In the "preamble" trilogy, Christ is first identified as the "Faithful Witness." This is a designation he carries elsewhere in the book of Revelation, and especially so in conjunction with the word "true" (in 3:14, the "Faithful and True Witness"; in 19:11, the victorious rider called "Faithful and True").

In the initial identifying statement of 1:5, however, the action *par excellence* which has revealed Christ to be this "faithful," "loyal" witness is presupposed. That action was his death in behalf of mankind, the death which inaugurates the identifying marks that make him Lord and Savior for the Christian community. This is clear from the very fact that the next two identifications follow in an obviously chronological sequence: He is the "First-born of the dead" (a clear allusion to his resurrection), and the "Ruler of earth's kings" (the exaltation which follows upon, and results from, the victories accomplished in his death and resurrection).

It should be added that this motif of Christ's death as the ultimate act that identifies him as the "Faithful Witness" finds a counterpart in Revelation in the similar role that is depicted for his

¹⁴Concerning the present tense of the first element, see the first paragraph of n. 8, above. Further discussion will also follow shortly.

followers. They become faithful witnesses, too, in their loyalty even to death. For example, Antipas in Pergamum is described as “my [Christ’s] faithful witness who was killed . . .” (2:13); and the conquerors in the struggle against the great dragon are so designated because they “conquered him [the dragon] through the blood of the Lamb, and through the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto death” (12:11). Explicit statements, as well as implicit characterizations, could be multiplied; and the very tone of the book fortifies the conclusion that the ultimate in faithful witness is the martyr’s death in loyalty to God and Jesus Christ (cf. 6:9-11, 14:13, and 20:4).¹⁵

In determining the meaning of the term “Faithful Witness” in 1:5, it is useful also to go to other NT data (cf., e.g., 1 Tim 6:13, where Christ is described as giving the “good confession” before Pontius Pilate). Especially important in this connection are the accounts in the four gospels, particularly in the Gospel of John. That Gospel breathes, as it were, a “courtroom atmosphere” throughout, as Christ’s consistently true testimony is placed in striking contrast to the false testimony of his enemies (cf. John 8:43-47). Christ stands forth as the genuine Faithful Witness in every way. He is unswervingly loyal to God his Father, to God’s word, to his own disciples, and to the mission of salvation before him. This loyalty culminates in his passion and death; and, indeed, that ultimate outcome—his death on the cross—is the high point in his faithful witness, to which all his other faithful witness was a prelude and prefiguration.

Thus, the sequence in Rev 1:5 from “Faithful Witness” to “First-born of the dead” to “Ruler of earth’s kings” is both a logical one and a chronologically sequential one. As we turn to the “historical-prologue” trilogy, we find a similar sequential arrangement.

¹⁵A perceptive comment has been made by Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), p. 70: “This designation [“the faithful witness”] should not be limited to his [Christ’s] role in mediating the revelation which comprises the book itself. . . . It refers to the larger purpose of his life as the one who bore witness to the truth from God (Jn 3:32f; 18:37) with special emphasis on his death that followed as a result.”

Christ is, first of all, the one who "loves us" (the one "loving us," according to a more literal rendering of the present participle), and from that basic fact and its supreme demonstration at Calvary flow the next two elements in the description of what Christ has done for his people—"loosed us from our sins by his blood" and "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father."

The centrality of Christ's vicarious death as the supreme evidence of divine love is highlighted in the Fourth Gospel in a number of significant statements: for instance, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up. . . . For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son . . ." (3:14-16); "Jesus, knowing that his hour was come . . . having loved his own . . . he loved them to the end" (13:1, especially significant in being the introduction to the Last Supper with its implications for Christ's impending death¹⁶); "No one has greater love than this, than to lay down his life for his friends" (15:13).

Christ's love is indeed a continuing love (as the present participle indicates in Rev 1:5), but it looks to the past event of the crucifixion as the foundational basis for, and supreme evidence of, that continuing love. A similar thought is conveyed in Rom 5:8: "God commends [present tense] his own love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

From the foundational fact of Christ's love for us as evidenced in his vicarious death, the subsequent two elements of the "historical-prologue" trilogy emerge in a logical sequence, as we have already noted.

Interconnection of the Trilogies

Not only do both trilogies reveal a sequential arrangement as indicated above, but the individual elements in the first sequence also appear to bear direct relationship to the corresponding elements in the second sequence, thus interconnecting the two trilogies in a

¹⁶Cf. 1 Cor 11:26: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes." In John 13, the focus (in vss. 2-17) is, of course, on the accompanying *footwashing*. For the Johannine community, this too, together with the cleansing involved, represented a martyrological/eschatological rather than (or at least in addition to) a missionary or liturgical concern. Cf. Herold Weiss, "Foot Washing in the Johannine Community," *NovT* 21 (1979): 298-325.

striking way. For instance, as we have already observed, Christ as the "Faithful Witness" and Christ as the one who "loves us" point directly to his death at Calvary. Thus, the first elements in the two trilogies are closely linked to each other.

The second elements in the trilogies appear similarly to be closely linked. In the "preamble" trilogy, the allusion is obviously to Christ's resurrection, for he is there described as the "First-born of the dead." As for the "historical-prologue" trilogy, that same resurrection of Christ is the vital element (even though not specifically stated as such right here), for it is his resurrection that gives him the power to loose us "from our sins by his blood." The efficacy and importance of Christ's death and shed blood constitute, of course, a central postulate for the theology of the book of Revelation, but that death and shed blood become effective only by virtue of Christ's resurrection—by virtue of his powerful presence as the *Resurrected One*. In the book of Revelation, the "Lamb slain" is again alive and is the powerful *living* Lamb, who alone in the universe can break the seven seals and open the scroll of destiny (chaps. 5:1-8:1). In fact, in the very first vision of the book, Christ had already introduced himself as the one "who was dead" but now is "alive forever" (1:18).

The loosing from sin of Rev 1:5 would seem to entail more than forgiveness (though that would undoubtedly be included). As Paul Minear has aptly pointed out, the basic thought is that of a transfer away from the power or dominion of sin.¹⁷ In this sense, this expression closely parallels the presentation in Rom 6, two verses of which may be noted here (though the whole line of argument is pertinent to our discussion):

We have therefore been buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death, that as Christ was resurrected from the dead by the glory of the Father, so also we should walk in newness of life (vs. 4).

Having been emancipated from sin, you have become servants of righteousness (vs. 18; cf. vs. 22).

¹⁷Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* (Washington, D.C., 1968), p. 16. Minear's own translation reads, "He has freed us from Sin's bondage by his death."

Christ's resurrection is of vital significance in bringing about for the Christian the possibility and the reality of this change of allegiance—the transfer from the domain of sin to the domain of righteousness. And thus, there is also a close link between the second elements of the two trilogies.

The very language of the final elements reveals a close connection by their referring to rulership or kingship. It is by virtue of his death and resurrection that Christ has been exalted to rulership over earth's kings. In this royal status, he is empowered to grant vassal kingship to his followers, making them "a kingdom, priests" In the ancient Hittite suzerainty treaty, the great Hittite king by reason of his supreme kingship could, and did, grant to other persons a royal power that enabled them to rule over the various districts within the far-flung boundaries of the Hittite Empire. It is precisely this sort of imagery that also comes into play here, as Christ through his supreme royal authority can, and does, give subordinate royal authority to his followers.

The precise meaning of the term "earth's kings" in Rev 1:5 has engendered a certain amount of debate. Several options appear reasonable. Are these "kings" to be understood as (1) rulers on earth in a broad generic sense (the book does at times seem to use the term in this way)? Or are they (2) the particular leaders of evil forces that are depicted in the book of Revelation as opposing God's people (such as Babylon and her supporting kings in chaps. 17-18)? Or are they (3) God's own covenant people, who by virtue of the covenant relationship have been raised to kingship with their Suzerain?

Inasmuch as Christ's authority over all earthly rulership and his defeat of the antidivine powers are thematic elements throughout the book of Revelation, it may be tempting to opt for one or the other of the first two alternatives mentioned above. Without excluding those alternatives entirely from view, however, I would suggest that the setting of this particular reference to rulership over "earth's kings" makes it more appropriately a designation of Christ's relationship to his own covenant community. The paralleling third element in the "historical-prologue" trilogy—"made us a kingdom . . ."—suggests as much. Perhaps even more basic than this is the fact that the terminology occurs within the "preamble" of the covenantal formulary. The ancient suzerainty treaties or

covenants pertained specifically to the suzerain and his vassals, not to the suzerain and other persons or groups. Would not the same obtain here in expressing Christ's relationship to *his* people? Also, it is, after all, to his people that the entire book of Revelation as a covenant document is addressed. This is a fact made clear in the messages to the seven churches, in the introductory and concluding settings of prologue and epilogue (see 1:1, 11; and 22:6, 16), and in various allusions throughout the book.¹⁸

In whatever way we may wish to interpret that third element in the "preamble" trilogy, the corresponding third element in the "historical-prologue" trilogy is clear and undebatable. It bespeaks that highest of honors that can be bestowed upon those who are in covenant relationship with the all-powerful Risen One. The OT background symbolism in Exod 19:6 has already been mentioned, as has the NT paralleling description in 1 Pet 2:9 of the Christian church as a "royal priesthood."

The biblical references add a significant dimension to the royalty aspect already within the Hittite formulary. Ancient Israel and the Christian church actually enjoy a relationship with their Suzerain that goes even beyond the exalted role of vassal kingship. They also have a *priesthood*. As set forth in the text from 1 Pet 2:9 referred to above, Christ's people are a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation" that they may "declare the praises" of him who has called them "out of darkness into his marvelous light." Thus, as in the case of Christ himself, so with his covenant people: both royal and priestly functions are combined.

¹⁸Because of the reference in Ps 89:27 to "firstborn" and "most exalted of kings of earth," some commentators would opt for the first of the three alternatives I have mentioned above. However, the context in Revelation itself is the truly determinative factor as to how the language is intended there. Minear, p. 14, has called attention to a somewhat different threefold choice: (1) "emperors like Domitian, and their provincial delegates, like Pilate, Herod, and their successors . . ."; (2) "such invisible heavenly rulers as Satan, the Dragon, Sin, and Death"; and (3) "those faithful servants of Christ who have received from him that sovereignty over the earth which Adam had lost. . . ." Without being aware of the added arguments from the covenant formulary that I have indicated, Minear nevertheless opts for the "faithful-servants" alternative—on the basis of the "immediate sequel in vs. 6 . . . , and in vs. 9 where John and the Christians are described as partners in Jesus' royal power." He notes, as well, that the picture of Christians as "being rulers of the earth" is "undeniably present" in the book of Revelation, and cites Rev 5:10; 20:4, 6; and 22:5.

4. Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this essay, William H. Shea has presented an illuminating discussion of the ancient covenant form as it appears in the letters to the seven churches in Rev 2-3. His analysis is one with which I fully concur, and the purpose of this study has been simply to take a look at a broader expression in the Apocalypse of the same pattern—an expression of it that I consider to be, in a sense, constitutive.¹⁹ I have also taken a brief closer look at the nature of some of the subdivisions of the formulary as represented in the book of Revelation, with special attention to the “preamble” and “historical-prologue” trilogies.

In conclusion, two further points should now be made: First, the book of Revelation graphically portrays through its various visions and hortatory expressions the inestimable honor and worth of the church’s covenant relationship with her Suzerain, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a relationship that must not lightly be cast aside. Indeed, the Suzerain’s own infinite sacrifice was made in order to establish the covenant relationship and is the fundamental standard by which to measure the crucial significance of that relationship. It is a relationship so vitally important that it must also be safeguarded by the vassal’s own death, if need be (Rev 2:13; 12:11; 14:12-13; etc.).

Second, it should never be lost sight of that the whole concept of vassal obligation within the covenant relationship is built upon the prior goodness of the suzerain. In the NT setting, it is Christ’s prior goodness that has brought about the existence of the Christian community, and the obligation of loyal obedience on the part of this community rests squarely upon this fact. Obedience to the covenant stipulations—summarized in the book of Revelation as “the commandments of God” and “the testimony of Jesus” (12:17; cf. 14:12)—represents the Christian’s obligation of love that stems from Christ’s own prior love. Indeed, such obedience emerges as a response to that unspeakable and immeasurable *prior goodness* manifested in our Lord’s great redemptive activity. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19; cf. vs. 10).

¹⁹Constitutive, i.e., for the entire book according to *this particular pattern*, but *not to the exclusion of other patterns*, such as the overall chiastic framework of the book. See the first paragraph in n. 3, above.