

Changing Borders, Changing Relations

Commentary for January 1, 2015 — between Nations Past and Present

God is constantly changing borders of peoples and nations (Acts 17:26). He does so in our present day. Changing borders destabilize everything within a region. Such destabilization occurred in the 11th century BC when the power and influence of King David's Israel was expanding. Chaos reigned and kingdoms formed new alliances to resist Israel's growing dominance. This Commentary provides background for the article for January 2015, "Israel and Judah: 6. David's Foreign Wars," introduced by the "[January 2015 Newsletter](#)."

When borders change, power relationships also change among kingdoms, city-states, and peoples. When that happened, a well-developed system of diplomatic relations in ancient times in the Middle East came into play. Treaties were arrived at which recognized new political realities between kingdoms. Those treaties had a structure similar to God's covenant, which He made with His people Israel at Mount Sinai. That covenant not only required Israel worship only YHWH as their God, but also that they accept YHWH as their King. Walter Vogels discusses the features of God's covenant with Israel:

"If we wish to speak about God, it is necessary to use images of human experience. When biblical writers wanted to explain the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, they chose familiar images: the husband-wife relationship; the father-son relationship; and the more frequent image of covenant: *b^erit*. ... Some extra-biblical texts, known as treaties, have been of great help in understanding the biblical concept of covenant. It seems very likely that biblical writers were inspired by these extra-biblical contracts. One particular kind of treaty, known as the vassal treaty, regulated the relations between a Great King or Suzerain and his vassal."

• *Vogels, God's Universal Covenant, pp. 1–2*¹

I differ with Vogels in one regard. God put it into the minds of Moses and later biblical writers to present the covenant in a form Israel would be familiar with, because it was part of common cultural experience. The biblical writers did not do so on their own. God was the principal operator who led Moses and the other authors to write in forms they were familiar with.

The structure of the covenant was familiar to the people of Israel. This is one reason why Israel was without excuse when they violated their covenant with YHWH after Sinai, and in the future in David's day and beyond. They knew better. They were fully informed about what their ancestors agreed to in the covenant. They discovered that the covenant with YHWH was

¹ Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant: a Biblical Study* (Univ. of Ottawa Press, 1986), pp. 1–2. Two early works on this subject were Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: a Study in form of Ancient Original Documents and in the Old Testament* (Biblical Institute Press, 1978), and the online monograph by George E. Mendenhall, [Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East](#), reprinted from *The Biblical Archaeologist*. Vol. XVII No. 2 (May, 1954), pp. 26–44 and No. 3 (September, 1954), pp. 49–76.

a yoke (Acts 15:7–12) and a burden upon Israel (Acts 15:24–28). The covenant also served to keep them separate from the peoples of the other nations throughout history:

“For you are a people holy to Yahweh your Elohim; Yahweh your Elohim has chosen you to become His, a special people FROM all the peoples who are on the surface of the ground. Yahweh was attached to you and chose you, ... [1] because of the love of Yahweh for you and [2] because of His keeping the oath that He had sworn to your fathers that Yahweh brought you forth with a steadfast hand and ransomed you ..., from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Thus you will know that Yahweh your Elohim, He is the One, Elohim, the El, Who is faithful, keeping the covenant and the kindness to those loving Him and to those observing His instructions for a thousand generations, ...”

• *Deuteronomy 7:6–9, CLV*

YHWH's demands of the covenant on Israel were quite stringent. **“Hence you will observe [1] the instruction and [2] the statutes and [3] the ordinances which I am enjoining on you today, to keep them ...”** (Deuteronomy 7:11, CLV). As we proceed in our long series of the histories of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, issues of faithfulness, unfaithfulness, punishments, promises, renewal, and more failure come up repeatedly. We will also see Israel's relationship with YHWH mirrored by relationships other nations have with Israel.

Most all covenants between a superior power and a subservient power followed certain patterns of expression in their written form. (Between nations today such covenants are commonly called treaties.) Patterns to ancient treaties have been noticed in the covenant God gave to Moses, which the people of Israel ratified by voice acclamation at Sinai.

“And all the people answered together, and said, ‘All that YHWH has spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto YHWH.”

• *Exodus 19:8, KJV*

Rodger Dalman summarizes the historical research and debate on the similarities between ancient Near East treaties and the Old Covenant in [“Antiquity of the Treaty Motif: Treaty Concepts and Technical Treaty Vocabulary in the Book of Genesis”](#):

“Ancient treaties contained a number of common elements, although not all treaty elements were found in every treaty. The treaty elements have been a topic of substantial debate for over five decades. Common treaty features included a prologue, historical material, a list of stipulations, blessings and curses, a list of divine witnesses, provisions for preserving treaty documents, and provisions for passing on the treaty relationship to the next generation.”

Dalman, “Antiquity of the Treaty Motif”

There is close correspondence of elements within discovered treaties by several ancient kingdoms, including Hittite treaties with lesser kings, Assyrian treaties with lesser kings, and YHWH's earlier covenant as King over the lesser people of Israel. Again, not all treaties have all these elements, some have more.

The great upheaval caused by the rise of Israel under King David resulted in new arrangements of power between and among Near East kings. Former enemy kingdoms allied together to fight the growing power of Israel's armies. Then when Israel was victorious,

treaties were made with the defeated kingdoms who became vassals of David, often supplying tribute as a provision of the treaty. In return, the suzerain pledged to defend and protect the vassal from attackers.

A similar restructuring is occurring in our present day in the Near East, but with no defined "new power" yet arising on the scene. Governments are weakening. Old borders are crumbling or dissolving. New powers are emerging. New alliances are forming. Refugee populations are moving to safety. The current crumbling structure of nations in the Near East, begun in a recognizable way with the Arab Spring, is the result of national boundaries formulated almost 100 years ago.

The Middle East Today

In a recent Stratfor December 30, 2014 article, "[The Top Five Events in 2014](#)," Dr. George Friedman wrote this about the current borders of the Middle East.²

"4: The Disintegration of the Sykes-Picot World. Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot were British and French diplomats who redrew the map of the region between the Mediterranean Sea and Persia after World War I. They invented countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq.³ Some of these nation-states are in turmoil. The events in Syria and Iraq resemble the events in Lebanon a generation ago: The central government collapses, and warlords representing various groups take control of fragments of the countries, with conflicts flowing across international boundaries. Thus the Iraqi crisis and the Syrian crisis have become hard to distinguish, and all of this is affecting internal Lebanese factions.

... The question is how far the collapse of the post-World War I system will go. Will the national governments reassert themselves in a decisive way, or will the fragmentation continue? Will this process of disintegration spread to other heirs of Sykes and Picot? This question is more important than the emergence of the Islamic State. Radical Islamism is a factor in the region, and it will assert itself in various organizational forms. What is significant is that while a force, the Islamic State is in no position to overwhelm other factions, just as they cannot overwhelm it. Thus it is not the Islamic State, but the fragmentation and the crippling of national governments, that matters. Syrian President Bashar al Assad is just a warlord now, and the government in Baghdad is struggling to be more than just another faction.

Were the dynamics of the oil markets today the same as they were in 1973,

² "[The Top Five Events in 2014](#)" is quoted with permission of Stratfor. The top three events were (1) Europe's Persistent Decline, (2) Ukrainian and Russian Crises, and (3) The Desynchronization of the Global Economy. The 5th top event was personal, the birth of Friedman's grandchildren.

³ The purpose of the British and French agreements was to "create" nations that

- had minimal or no traditional centers of power,
- had borders with little natural geographic logic and boundaries that make for good neighbors (think in terms of "good fences, good neighbors"),
- benefited economic exploitation, and
- had governments and political groups compliant to British and French advice and influence.

By such creations, these two European governments were better able to advance their political and military interests, beside their economic interests. See Friedman's article, "[The Geopolitics of Israel, Ancient and Modern](#)."

this [importance of the fragmentation] would rank higher. But the decline in consumption by China and the rise of massive new sources of oil reduce the importance of what happens in this region. It still matters, but not nearly as much as it did. What is perhaps the most important question is whether this presages the rise of Turkey, which is the only force historically capable of stabilizing the region. I expect that to happen in due course. But it is not clear that Turkey can take this role yet, even if it wished to."

The Biblical Connection

The united kingdom of Israel and (after Solomon's death) the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah had relationships with other nations. Those relationships were criticized, praised, or allowed by God (and preached about by His prophets to the people) on this basis:

"The principles of international treaties seem to supply the answer for Yahweh's and Israel's attitude towards the nations. It could be summarized as follows: the nations are treated according to their own attitude towards the two partners of the covenant: Yahweh (suzerain) and Israel (vassal)."

• *Vogels, God's Universal Covenant, p. 64*

YHWH used nations as instruments to punish and to bless Israel and Judah to return and be faithful to their covenant obligations, being required to obey God and the covenant, as were their ancestors when they made their pledge at Sinai. They had no choice. Today, Israel is rising in economic power within a fragmenting Near East. It relies on its own power, and believes the United States is its savior of last resort. This strategy will fail. The United States and other nations will fail to support Israel today just as Egypt failed to support the kingdom of Judah during the time of Jeremiah the prophet and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

While the Near East is restructuring itself according to God's desires (Acts 17:26), Israel will become an increasing economic power fueled by oil and gas finds and technological growth to its infrastructure.⁴ God's covenant will again intrude to become the focus of the thoughts in Israel. God will once again be recognized as Israel's sovereign. God is moving in the hearts and minds of the people of Israel as they slowly take their covenant with God seriously. It will begin at Jerusalem (Zechariah chapters 12–14). This movement toward belief in God is not noticeable yet. When it happens, the nations will once again witness God's (temporary) blessing of His covenant people Israel (Deuteronomy 4:6–8).

Enjoy this month's article "Israel and Judah: 6. David's Foreign Wars." With the background presented here, you will better understand in future articles when kings become "servants" or vassals of David, when they give tribute, or when they become "friends" with David and are treated as equals.⁵ Later, Israel and Judah each become vassals of greater powers.

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⁴ At present these oil and gas finds are predominately off shore, but will eventually be located within the land of Israel itself. See the article "[Oil Soon to be Discovered in Israel](#)" (1981). It has taken considerably longer than Dr. Martin thought 33 years ago when he published his article.

⁵ Perhaps one day treaties made by David or other kings will be discovered. All will have a recognizable written structure now well understood as a treaty formula.