Covenants in the Ancient Near East

What is a Covenant?

A formal agreement between two parties

1. Witnessed by both humans and Deities
2. Proclaimed by public reading and “deposit” of treaty in public place
3. Esp., shrines of witnessing Deities (pagans used god's as witnesses)
4. Sealed by an oath and ritual sacrifice
5. “If I am not faithful to this covenant, may what is done to these animals be done to me.”

Three Kinds of ANE Covenants

1. Suzerainty (or Vassal) Treaty
   a. Agreement between two unequal parties, one of higher status and one of lower status
2. Parity Treaty
   b. Agreement between two parties of equal status
3. Land Grant
   c. Agreement between two unequal parties, one of higher status and one of lower status

Suzerainty (or Vassal) Treaty

Six parts:
- Preamble
- Historical prologue
- Stipulations
- Provisions for treaty deposit & public reading
- List of Divine witnesses to the treaty
- Blessings & curses (for fidelity or infidelity to the treaty)

Methods to Ratify a Covenant in the Ancient Near East and in Israel

- Blood Covenant
- Threshold Covenant
- Salt Covenant
- Exchanging a Daughter or Son to make the covenant stronger
- Planting a Tree or a Pillar as a witness
A Suzerainty Treaty

An alliance between a great monarch and a subject king

- The overlord is lauded for past favors, but has no explicit duties under the covenant
- The vassal pledges allegiance to the overlord
- Pay taxes
- Keep own borders secure
- Provide military support against overlord’s enemies
- Make no alliances with other great lords

A Suzerainty Treaty

Marriage was a type the most common “suzerainty treaty” in the ANE

- Husband has higher social status than wife
- Husband is wife’s “overlord” (Ba’al)
- Wife is to obey husband
- Wife becomes chattel of husband
- Wife owns no property; it belongs to husband
- Wife cannot divorce; only overlord can end treaty

Parity Treaty

- Two parties of equal power and social status
- Two monarchs forming an alliance for mutual aid
- Two merchants forming a trade agreement
- Marriage contract (ketubah) between the father of the bride and the groom (NOTE: the bride herself is not of equal status with the groom)

Land Grant

- Free gift of land to faithful subject of a great monarch or servant of a wealthy landowner
- Greater party binds self to the treaty
- Lesser party benefits from the gift, but may not be bound to any specific stipulations, either before or after reception of the land grant
Can you tell which Types of Covenants are found in these chapters?

Genesis 2

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- What formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Genesis 9:1–17

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- What formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Genesis 12:1–4

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- What formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Genesis 15

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- What formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?
Genesis 17:1–14

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Exodus 24:1–8

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Exodus 34:1–27

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Deuteronomy 1-33

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?

Jeremiah 34:14-21

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?
Jeremiah 31:31-33

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e.,
- what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?