

## Covenant and the Bible Part 1

As we have discussed in previous weeks, the Ancient Near East (ANE) provides the historical and cultural context for the formation of the Old Testament. One element of this culture that is critical to the study of the structure and formation of the whole Bible is the ANE concept of “covenant”.

### **I. Definition of Covenant**

A **covenant** is “a relationship with a non-relative which involves obligations and is established through an oath”. In many cases **treaty** is synonymous with covenant.

A covenant is a legal kind of arrangement, a formal disposition of a binding nature. At the heart of a covenant is an act of commitment, and the customary oath-form of this commitment reveals the religious nature of the transaction. The arrangement is no mere secular contract but rather belongs to the sacred sphere of divine witness and enforcement. This kind of legal disposition consists then in a divinely sanctioned commitment. In the case of divine-human covenants the divine sanctioning is entailed in God’s participation either as the one whom makes the commitment himself or as the divine witness of the human commitment made in his name and presence

The idea of making a treaty or covenant pervades almost the whole history of the Ancient Near East. It is only by chance that we are well informed on certain Near Eastern treaties, e.g. the Hittite treaties, the treaties of Esarhaddon and the Aramaean treaty of Sefire. A close study of these documents shows that a treaty background existed between various of the nations and groups mentioned.

**In contrast to a contract** which is between two members (an horizontal agreement or relationship), a covenant is triangular agreement (God or the gods is always witness).

There are two basic categories of covenants in the Ancient world: those between equals (brothers), and those between non-equals (suzerain-vassal).

### **II. Brother-to-Brother Covenants**

There were many types of “brother-to-brother” covenants in the ancient world. They were established for friendship, for marriage, for land agreements, and international treaties. There were various occasions for these covenants and various ways in which these equals took oaths of agreement. Along with verbal oaths there were many symbolic oaths that people took. Some included the halving (cutting in two) of an animal, having a feast or grand meal, an elaborate exchange of hands (handshake), the exchange of gifts (rings or garments in the case of marriage), exchange of shoes/sandals, and exchanging of daughters for wives.

**Genesis 31:41-54** These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock,

and you have changed my wages ten times. 42 If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night." 43 Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? 44 Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me." 45 So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. 46 And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. 47 Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. 48 Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he named it Galeed, 49 and Mizpah, for he said, "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. 50 If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me." 51 Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. 52 This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. 53 The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, 54 and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.

**Ruth 4:1-13** Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. 2 And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. 3 Then he said to the redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. 4 So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." And he said, "I will redeem it." 5 Then Boaz said, "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." 6 Then the redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it." 7 Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. 8 So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal. 9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of

Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. 10 Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day." 11 Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, 12 and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman." 13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife.

### III. Suzerain-Vassal Covenants

Essentially, a Suzerain-Vassal covenant is a binding oath between a larger ruler (suzerain) and protected nation (vassal) sometimes issued when the larger ruler/nation steps in to help the other in a military campaign (see 2 Kings 16:1-8). Upon the victory of that campaign, the vassal is bound to the stipulations of the treaty in order to maintain the continued support and protection promised by the suzerain. This was ratified by the sacrificing of an animal, as it was normally cut into halves and each party would walk between the halves, symbolically invoking death upon the disobedient party. There would be two copies of the official document drafted, one to be placed in the respective temple of each nation. The covenant at Sinai encapsulates all of these occurrences, and we get a snapshot of this in Ex. 19-24.

These treaties were built up more or less around the following scheme: **preamble** or introduction, in which the great king is introduced with all his titles and attributes; the **historical prologue**, in which the history of the relationship between the great king and the vassal's forefathers and the vassal himself is sketched. It is not a stereotyped history, but actual historical occurrences which are described with strong emphasis on the benevolent deeds of the great king to the vassal and his country. Then the **stipulations** of the treaty are given. These may consist of the following:

- prohibition of any relationship with a country outside the suzerain's sphere;
- prohibition of hostility to the suzerain's other vassals;
- immediate help to the great king in times of war;
- the vassal must not listen to any slandering of the great king but immediately report it to the king;
- the vassal must not hide deserting slaves or refugees;
- the vassal must appear once a year before the king to pay his taxes and to renew the treaty.

The stipulations are followed by the compulsion on the vassal to **deposit the written treaty** in the temple and to read it occasionally. This is followed by a **list of gods as witnesses**, in which the gods of the great king are prominently placed. Even certain

natural phenomena such as heaven and earth, mountains, sea, rivers, *etc.*, are called in as witnesses. The vassal treaty is concluded by **curses and blessings**. Certain curses will come into effect when the treaty is broken. These curses are of a wide variety and it is clear that certain of them are reserved for the divine sphere and others could be executed by the army of the great king. When the treaty is kept, certain blessings will accrue to the vassal, *e.g.* the eternal reign of his descendants. The treaty was then ratified with the recitation of an **oath** or the performing of an oath-sign.

1. Preamble (Identification of the Covenant Giver)
2. An Historical Prologue
3. Stipulations,
4. Provision for Deposit and Public Reading
5. A Listing of Treaty Witnesses
6. Blessings and Curses
7. A Ratification Ceremony
8. Imposition of the Curses

The usage of, for example, father-son, or lord-servant shows that in a friendly relationship the great king is usually called 'father' and the vassal king 'son', and in a more stern relationship the great king is called 'lord' and his vassal 'servant'.

#### IV. Frequency of Covenant in the Bible

The word covenant is used 957 times in 295 verses in the ESV translation of the bible. The two key words used to translate "covenant" in the Bible are **berit** (בְּרִית - OT Hebrew) and **diatheke** (διαθήκη - NT Greek). **Berit** is used 858 times in 266 verses and **diatheke** is used 99 times in 30 verses. Therefore, it is easy to make the case that covenant is a supreme concept of the whole Bible.