

Covenant and the Bible Part 2

Last week we discussed the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) concept of “covenant”. We defined it as “a relationship with a non-relative which involves obligations and is established through an oath”. We noted that in contrast to a contract which is between two members (horizontal agreement or relationship), a covenant is triangular agreement (God or the gods is always witness). We talked about the 2 basic types of covenants in the ANE: brother-to-brother covenants & suzerain-vassal covenants. We emphasized that the ANE concept of covenant is crucial to the development/formation and structure of 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.]

This week, we are going to examine the concept of covenant in the Old Testament as it defined Israel as a people and chartered their relationship with God.

I. The “Ten Words” as a Short-hand Suzerain-Vassal Covenant

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. As we recall from last week, the components of Suzerain-Vassal Treaties of that time (1500-1200 BC) are:

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 covenant at Sinai encapsulates all of these occurrences, and we get a snapshot of this in Ex. 20. This is the account of the “Ten Commandments” or “Ten Words” which God writes on tables of stone with His own finger (Ex. 31:18).

Exodus 31:18 And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Exodus 20:2-17 [Preamble]"I am the LORD your God, [**Historical Prologue**] who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 [**Stipulations**] "You shall have no other gods before me. 4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, [**Cursings**] visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, [**Blessings**] 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. 8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. 12 "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. 13 "You shall not murder. 14 "You shall not commit adultery. 15 "You shall not steal. 16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." 18 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off 19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 20 Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." 21 The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. 22 And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: [**Witnesses**] 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. 23 You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. [**Ratification Ceremony**] 24 An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. 25 If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. 26 And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'

Consequently, the two tables are called "the tables of the covenant" (Deut. 9:9, 11, 15) and "the tables of the testimony" (Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29); the ark, as the depository

of the tables, "the ark of the covenant" or "of the testimony"; and the tabernacle, where the ark was located, "the tabernacle of the testimony". The 2 tablets, each containing the 10 Commandments generally were deposited in each nation's temple, but here, both were deposited in the Tabernacle of God and then later the Temple.

II. Deuteronomy as a Formal Suzerain-Vassal Covenant

As the second generation of Israel was ready to enter the land, God renewed the covenant with them through Moses in a more robust and complete format in the book of Deuteronomy ("second law"). It is this that becomes the litmus or standard by which Israel would operate. Deuteronomy would become the most important document of Israel's history. So much so, that the New Testament authors quote it more than any other book in the Old Testament by far. Most notably, Jesus quoted from only Deuteronomy in his testing in the wilderness with Satan.

The covenant nature of Deuteronomy as a Suzerain-Vassal Covenant is a massive key to understanding the whole Old Testament. God's relationship with Israel was not arbitrary or random but specific, purposeful, and covenantal. God was the great King and Father as Israel was the vassal and son. The treachery and disobedience of Israel would bring about severe consequence due to the magnitude of God. No other nation could or would claim to have a direct covenantal relationship with God.

The Structure of Deuteronomy

- I. **Preamble:** Covenant mediator. 1:1-5.
- II. **Historical prologue:** Covenant history. 1:6–4:49.
 - A. From Horeb to Hormah. 1:6–2:1.
 - B. Advance to the Arnon. 2:2-23.
 - C. Conquest of Trans-Jordania. 2:24–3:29.
 - D. Summary of the covenant. 4:1-49.
- III. **Stipulations:** Covenant life. 5:1–26:19.
 - A. The Great Commandment. 5:1–11:32.
 - 1. God’s covenant Lordship. 5:1-33.
 - 2. The principle of consecration. 6:1-25.
 - 3. The program of conquest. 7:1-26.
 - 4. The law of the manna. 8:1-20.
 - 5. The warning of the broken tablets. 9:1–10:11.
 - 6. A call to commitment. 10:12–11:32.
 - B. Ancillary commandments. 12:1–26:19.
 - 1. Cultic-ceremonial consecration. 12:1–16:17.
 - a. Allegiance to God’s altar. 12:1-32.
 - b. Resistance to apostasy. 13:1-18.
 - c. Filial obligations. 14:1–15:23.
 - d. Tributary pilgrimages. 16:1-17.
 - 2. Judicial-governmental righteousness. 16:18–21:23.
 - a. Judges and God’s altar. 16:18–17:13.
 - b. Kings and God’s covenant. 17:14-20.
 - c. Priests and prophets. 18:1-22.
 - d. Guarantees of justice. 19:1-21.
 - e. Judgment of the nations. 20:1-20.
 - f. Authority of sanctuary and home. 21:1-23.
 - 3. Sanctity of the divine order. 22:1–25:19.
 - a. The ordinances of labor and marriage. 22:1-30.
 - b. The congregation of the Lord. 23:1-18.
 - c. Protection for the weak. 23:19–24:22.
 - d. Sanctity of the individual. 25:1-19.
 - 4. Confession of God as Redeemer-King. 26:1-19.
- IV. **Sanctions:** Covenant ratification. 27:1–30:20.
 - A. **Ratification ceremony in Canaan.** 27:1-26.
 - B. Proclamation of the sanctions. 28:1-68.
 - 1. **Blessings.** 28:1-14.
 - 2. **Curses.** 28:15-68.
 - C. **Summons to the covenant oath.** 29:1-29.
 - D. Ultimate restoration. 30:1-10.
 - E. Radical decision. 30:11-20.
- V. **Dynastic disposition:** Covenant continuity. 31:1–34:12.
 - A. Final arrangements. 31:1-29.
 - B. **The song of Witness.** 31:30–32:47.
 - C. Moses’ testament. 32:48–33:29.
 - D. Dynastic succession. 34:1-12.