

COVENANT: Unpacking A Biblical Motif
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COVENANT IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

INTRODUCTION - "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."
(Gen 1:1) WHY???

1. The relationship between God and humanity is understood as the relationship between creator and creature. Genesis 1 explains that God created humanity by speaking. God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26), and God gave them "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (1:28)
 - Human beings are, first and foremost, creatures of God, created by Him. Human beings depend utterly upon God for having come into being, and continue to rely on God to be sustained in existence. Human beings occupy a peculiar place in the created order. They are made in the image of God and given a special role, that of dominion, with respect to other creatures.
 - Human beings are not God, are not of ultimate significance, but they are exalted creatures, worthy of being called "the image of God", and entrusted with the care of other living things. Psalm 8 expresses it this way:

"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands." (8:3-6a)

I. "Covenant" - its meaning and context in the Ancient Near East (ANE)

A. Major types of covenants/treaties in the ANE

1. **Royal Grant** (unconditional) – A king's grant to a loyal servant for faithful or exceptional service. The grant was normally perpetual and unconditional. (Gen 9:9-17; 1 Sam 27:6)
2. **Parity** – A covenant between equals, binding them to mutual friendship or at least to mutual respect for each other's interests. (Gen 21:27)
3. **Suzerain-vassal** – (conditional) – A covenant regulating the relationship between a great king and one of his subject kings. The great king claimed absolute right of sovereignty, demanded total loyalty and service, and pledged protection of the subject's realm and dynasty. The vassal pledged absolute loyalty to the suzerain, and exclusive reliance on the suzerain's protection. (Joshua 9:6ff)

B. Major Components of covenants/treaties in the ANE

1. **Preamble** – generally describes who composes the treaty. It may contain some or all the suzerain's titles, mighty attributes and genealogy.
2. **Historical Prologue** – recounts the events and/or relationships between the parties leading up to the moment of entering into the covenant. Emphasis on the suzerain's kind and beneficial acts toward the vassal.
3. **Stipulations** – simply specify the obligations imposed on the vassal, what the vassal must and must not do.
4. **Provisions for public deposit and witness of the gods** - the deposit of the treaty in a temple and provisions for public reading. Serves to familiarize the populace with the obligations to the great king and to show how their vassal king has powerful friendship with the mighty suzerain. The gods in the ANE were invoked as witnesses and, if need be, enforcers of the treaty.
5. **Curses and Blessings** - All treaties include blessings and curses. Usually the suzerain specifies what he will do to the vassal who disobeys the stipulations and what blessings he will bestow on him for obedience.

II. Covenant with Noah – Genesis 9:9-17

- A. **Royal Grant** - Made with “righteous” (6:9) Noah and his descendants and every living thing on earth – all life that is subject to man's jurisdiction.
- B. An unconditional divine promise never to destroy all earthly life with some natural catastrophe; the covenant “sign” being the rainbow in the storm cloud.
- C. **ACTIVITY** - Compare to typical ANE format

III. Covenants with Abram

- A. **Genesis 15:9-21** (see also **Gen 12:1-3**). This is a royal land grant covenant made with “righteous” (v.6) Abram and his descendants (v.16). An unconditional divine promise to fulfill the grant of the land, including a self-destructive oath upon God himself symbolically enacted – **BE-RIT** - “the cutting of the covenant” (v.17)
- B. **Genesis 17** – Suzerain-vassal treaty. Made with Abraham as the patriarchal head of his household. A conditional divine pledge to be Abraham's God and the God of his descendants. Abraham and his descendants are bound to total consecration to the Lord, to be people to Him). **TO BE NOTED:**
 - “as for me” v. 4 and “as for you” v. 9

- The everlasting sign of the **cutting** of the covenant is to be circumcision v. 11
- Names changed in v. 5 and 15

C. **ACTIVITY** - Compare to typical ANE format

WRAP-UP

Two theological themes held in balance characterize the relationship between God and humanity. The **first** is God called forth creatures from nothingness. Creatures exist, therefore, sheerly by the gracious will of God. This means that God's existence is fundamentally different from creaturely existence. God is essentially unknowable to humanity because God's nature is beyond our capacity to grasp.

The second theme is that of revelation; in spite of God's essential unknowability, God makes certain divine truths accessible to humanity. God is revealed to humanity through nature and through God's mighty acts in history, which are recorded in Holy Scripture. But God is revealed especially through the incarnation, through Jesus Christ. Human beings, then, are related to God as creator and redeemer, but also as the unknowable one who is made known in Christ.