

Covenants in the Ancient Near East and The Bible

Royal Grant Covenant (promissory)	Suzerain-vassal Treaty (obligatory)
DESCRIPTION A king's grant (of land or some other benefit) to a loyal servant for faithful or exceptional service. The grant was normally perpetual and unconditional, but the servant's heirs benefited from it only as they continued their father's loyalty and service.	DESCRIPTION A covenant regulating the relationship between a great king and one of his subject (servant) kings. The great king claimed absolute right of sovereignty, demanded total loyalty and service (the servant must 'love' his king) and pledged protection of the subject's realm and dynasty, conditional on the servant's faithfulness and loyalty to him. The servant pledged absolute loyalty to his king—whatever service his king demanded—and exclusive reliance on the king's protection. Participants called each other "lord/servant" or "father/son."
FORM PROMISES from King to servant Includes only Blessings for servant Includes no conditions on servant NO CURSES for disobedience COMPLETE FULFILLMENT will be given to descendants as a whole, but individual participation is conditioned on faithfulness	FORM TITLE—Identifies chief partner (king) HISTORICAL PROLOGUE—Record of past benefits obtained from the king STIPULATIONS/LAWS DEPOSITION—Preservation of the text READING WITNESSES—the gods of both parties BLESSINGS AND CURSES—based on obedience, disobedience OATH, CEREMONY, SANCTIONS—Public ceremony establishing the seriousness of the treaty
PURPOSE A formal recognition of a faithful servant's acts resulting in unconditional blessing which served to protect the rights of the servant and his family.	PURPOSE A formal declaration given to a people (usually acquired through warfare) in order to protect the rights of the king and his kingdom.
EXAMPLES— THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT (THE LAND COVENANT) THE DAVIDIC COVENANT THE NEW COVENANT	EXAMPLES— THE MOSAIC/SINAI COVENANT

Covenants in the Ancient Near East and Their Relationship to the Covenants of the Bible

The ideas of covenants and treaties are found throughout the texts of the Ancient Near East. Political, religious, and social life was often regulated by the use of covenants. In the Old and New Testaments the covenant is viewed as a legally binding obligation.

Covenants or treaties were based on two types of relationship in the Ancient Near East. Parity covenants were made between two equals in terms of dignity, wealth, and status. Suzerain-Vassal covenants were established between a greater party (a great king) and a lesser party (a conquered king) See Chart.

Distinction between Covenant and Promise

In older research, it was assumed that a covenant was enacted to establish a relationship where none existed naturally between two parties. In light of recent evidence and research, it seems that most ANE covenants were established to give external form to an already existing relationship. This relationship was usually founded on obligations or promises that had been made in the past. The covenant gives binding formality to the promise. The distinction between covenants and promises may be summarized by four ideas:

- Covenant includes promise, but promise does not necessarily amount to covenant.
- Promises may be conditional, as may covenants.
- Promise may anticipate a covenant and the covenant may look back to a promise.
- Promises, as such, are informal; covenants are formal, established on proper ritual.

A promise is like an engagement – It is a genuine promise to carry out the act of marriage, but it is likely to be conditioned upon the continued obligation of both parties to the promise. A Covenant is like a wedding – It contains promises (already foreseen in the engagement), but it is based upon vows, and it demands special rituals to be recognized as valid.

In Genesis 12 Abraham is given promises by God, yet there is no covenant ceremony enacted. In Genesis 15 God actually ‘cuts’ the covenant with Abraham. The promises are expanded and a ritual (sacrifice) is enacted to ratify the covenant. In Genesis 17 another ritual is added – circumcision – which becomes the sign to identify Abraham’s descendants as inheritors of the covenant promises.

The Covenant Ritual

There is little evidence available to give a fully accurate and exhaustive description of rituals involved in covenant making ceremonies. Two basic rituals do appear both in the OT and ANE that seem to be common to covenants—a sacrifice and a covenant meal.

The sacrifice of animals is probably the background of the idiom used by the OT “to cut a covenant.” The cutting of animals is an enacted curse. Those who walk between the pieces take the curse upon themselves if they break the covenant. In essence the party making the oath is saying, “If I do not keep the terms of this covenant, let happen to me and my family what has happened to this animal.” When God walks between the pieces of the animals in Genesis 15, he is making the same type of oath thus assuring the fulfillment of his promises since He cannot die.

In many instances the sacrifice is also followed by a covenantal meal. This is described in Exodus 24 where God establishes the Mosaic Covenant with Israel. The sacrifices are offered in vv. 3-8 then the elders eat and drink in the presence of God in vv. 9-11. To share a meal with someone in ANE culture would indicate a close fellowship with those who partake in the meal. This is the background of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus redefines the Passover not as the sparing of life under the Mosaic Code, but the granting of forgiveness under the New Covenant.