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Covenants

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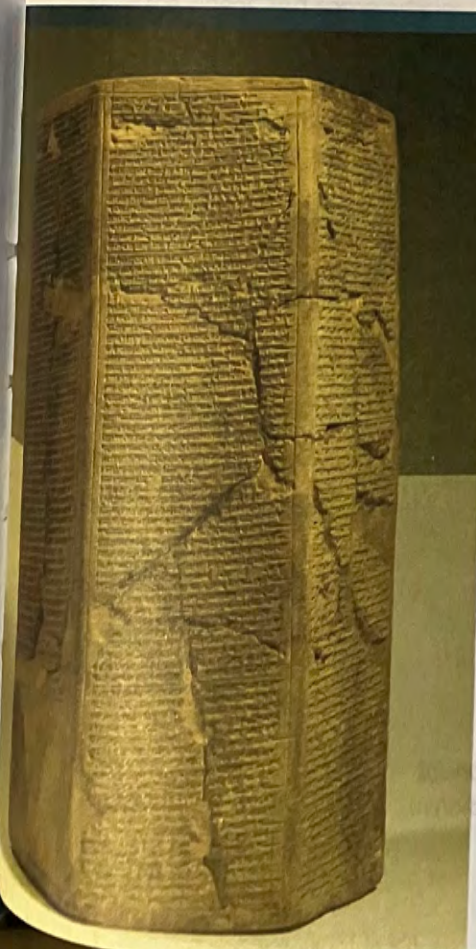
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ARCHAEOLOGY AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND STUDY BIBLE



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Special thanks to the scholars of the Institute of Archaeology from Andrews University for their support towards the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

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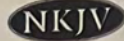
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EXODUS 18

17 So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do is not good.

18 Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself.

19 Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God.

20 And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.

21 Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating

covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

22 And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you.

23 If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."

24 So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.



Covenants—Exodus 19

After the Fall (Gen. 3), God initiated relationships with those people willing to follow Him and receive restoration. Then He established covenants with them to affirm, maintain, and guide those relationships. Such divine covenants are analogous to formal agreements between individuals or groups of people, including the kind between rulers attested in ancient Near Eastern treaty documents.

The biblical Hebrew word for "covenant" is *berit*. It can refer to various kinds of binding agreements involving mutual obligations, such as between human individuals, including spouses, or groups represented by their leaders; between rulers and their subjects; or between God and individuals and their descendants. Here we will focus on the divine-human covenants and their ancient Near Eastern parallels.

Some aspects of covenants appear in the way God set up His relationship with Adam and Eve before and after they fell into sin (Gen. 1-3). However, the term *berit* first appears in God's promise to make a covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18), which He fulfilled after the great Flood (Gen. 8; 9). Subsequently, the Lord established covenants with Abraham (Gen. 15, 17) and with the elect nation of Israel that descended from him (Exod. 19-31). Under the covenant with Israel, God made covenant promises to Phinehas (Num. 25:13) and David (2 Sam. 7) that their descendants would respectively fill their positions as high priest and king. Finally, He promised a "new covenant," a renewal of the covenant with Israel that they had broken (Jer. 31:31-34), which He then established through Christ's sacrifice (Heb. 9:14-15), and which came to be directly available to all people (Gal. 3:26-29).

God as the superior party has offered ongoing covenants with people who were already in relationships with Him and

thus benefitting from what He had done for them, on condition that they obey His instructions/laws, which function as covenant stipulations (e.g., Exod. 19:4-6). Thus, His covenant with Israel was somewhat like a marriage (Jer. 3:1-10) or the bond between a ruler and His subjects (Num. 23:21). Another analogy is with ancient Near Eastern international treaties between greater and lesser nations represented by their rulers, the superior "suzerain" and the inferior "vassal," the latter being within the suzerain's sphere of protection and control. In this sense, the Lord was Israel's suzerain and Israel was His vassal.

Archaeologists have found many ancient Near Eastern treaties dating from the third millennium to the first millennium BC. Most are from Anatolia in the Hittite language and from Mesopotamia in Akkadian (Babylonian and especially Assyrian), but some are in other languages, including Sumerian, Eblaite, Elamite, Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Aramaic.

A suzerainty treaty specified obligations the vassal had to the suzerain within the context of the ongoing relationship between the two parties. It primarily served the interests of the suzerain, and its formulation was designed to persuade the vassal to faithfully meet his responsibilities to the overlord.

A treaty text could include such components as a preamble identifying the speaker; a historical prologue recounting past interactions between the two parties, which could show how the vassal received benefits from his relationship to the suzerain; stipulations by the suzerain regarding the vassal's ongoing obligations to him; specifications for the public reading of the treaty document and where it should be kept; identification of gods who served as witnesses to the treaty

25 And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

26 So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves.

27 Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went his way to his own land.

Israel at Mount Sinai

19 In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.

2 For they had departed from Rephi-dim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness. So Israel camped there before the mountain.

3 And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel:

4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.

5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special

BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS

and could unfailingly hold the vassal accountable to fulfilling its terms; and curses and blessings to be given by the divine witnesses for respectively violating the stipulations or complying with them.

We find the full set of treaty components listed above uniquely attested in second millennium BC Hittite suzerainty treaties. These elements also appear in the formulations of the covenant between YHWH (the Lord) and the Israelites recorded in the biblical books of Exodus and Leviticus and the renewal of the covenant in Deuteronomy, along with collections of laws comprising the stipulations. However, the biblical covenant witnesses are "heaven and earth" (Deut. 30:19) rather than other gods. The close parallels with the Hittite texts indirectly supports the second millennium (Mosaic) origin of these biblical books, in accordance with their second millennium narrative frameworks.

Comparison between ancient suzerainty treaties and the divine covenant with Israel yields insights into the special nature of the latter. First, whereas the parties to the Near Eastern treaties were human rulers, YHWH's covenant with Israel was unique in that it was contracted between a deity and a nation.

Second, the Israelites had no king at the time, but all males were to appear before their divine covenant suzerain to show their loyalty with sacrificial gifts three times per year during the pilgrim festivals at His sanctuary (Exod. 23:14-17). Thus, it elevated male Israelites to the status of individual vassals, responsible for covenant faithfulness, within the corporate vassal nation that comprised a "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:6).

Third, the pentateuchal narratives recount acts of deliverance, provision, and protection by YHWH that far exceeded anything that other ancient peoples believed their deities had done for them (Deut. 4:34-39), let alone what a human suzerain could accomplish. Israel's continuing free existence depended on God, as demonstrated before He gave them commandments (Exod. 20:2). Therefore, His covenant stipulations functioned within a framework of grace to maintain the beneficial relationship between Himself and people whom He had already saved, just as He had formally established His covenant with Noah, his family, and the animals only after delivering them from the Flood (Gen. 8; 9). Therefore, the Lord could rightly expect His people to gratefully and loyally follow His instructions.

Fourth, whereas the stipulations of a human suzerain were self-serving, YHWH's instructions to the Israelites were inherently for their good (Deut. 10:13). He wanted to enhance the positive benefits of following His sensible instructions so that Israel would be a model nation, the channel to reveal His beneficence to the nations (e.g., Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 4:5-8; 28:1-14).

The biblical divine-human covenants, which provide the skeletal structure of salvation history, represent cumulative phases of the Lord's unified plan of redemption from lost Eden (Gen. 1-3) to the new earth (Rev. 21-22). His plan involves drawing people to Himself through covenants with them that are understandable, memorable, and persuasive, as highlighted by comparison with agreements that humans contract with each other.

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