

Covenant in the Book of Joshua

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So Joshua made a covenant (*berith*) with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the *torah* of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of Yahweh.¹ (Joshua 24:25-26)

Covenant, *berith*, is a central theme of the Hebrew Bible, but it is a difficult term to define and interpret. It is especially difficult to describe in the context of the Book of Joshua. The reasons are many, but two in particular are of interest to this reader of the biblical narrative.

First, the word *covenant* seems to elude a firm definition. *Covenant* is a somewhat old-fashioned word for our twentieth-century vocabularies. It conjures up images of tribal peoples taking oaths, performing sacrifices, and signing ominous treaties. The dictionary defines *covenant* as a solemn and binding agreement made by two or more individuals or parties to do or keep from doing a specified thing. Synonyms include *agreement, compact, contract, commitment, treaty,*

¹All biblical translations are my own, unless indicated.

alliance, obligation, bond, relationship, promise, and pact.² Perhaps the closest we ever come to having a covenant, a solemn and binding agreement, in our modern society is when we marry or buy a house. But what did it mean to have a binding and solemn agreement with Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

A model for covenant, for *berith*, in the Hebrew Bible can be found in the suzerain-vassal treaty of the ancient Near East. Suzerain-vassal treaties were made between superior powers, called suzerains, and inferior peoples, called vassals. The treaties are well-attested in Hittite documents from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E., but existed in Aramaean and Neo-Assyrian texts until the seventh century B.C.E.³

A suzerain-vassal treaty typically consists of six sections. Section one is a **preamble**, which names the suzerain who is formulating the treaty. Section two includes a **historical prologue** which lists the benevolent acts of the suzerain on behalf of the vassal(s). A **set of**

²Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 202, and John H. Hayes, Covenant, in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 177.

³Gottwald, 205, and William L. Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress

stipulations, the obligations to which the vassals bind themselves, makes up section three. Section four details instructions for **depositing** the treaty in a safe place and for **reading** the treaty at designated intervals. In section five, **witnesses** are called to confirm the treaty. And section six outlines **curse and blessings** upon the vassals for obedience or disobedience to the treaty.

William L. Holladay parallels the Sinai covenant between Yahweh and the ancient Israelites with the suzerain-vassal treaty of the ancient Near East. He suggests that the **preamble** by the suzerain is found in Exodus 20:2's, I am Yahweh your God. Exodus 20:2's who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery is the treaty's **historical prologue**. The **set of stipulations** obligating the vassals to the suzerain is the ten commandments in 20:3-17. Moses makes provisions for **depositing** the treaty in the ark of the covenant and **reading** it at stipulated intervals in Deuteronomy 31:9-13.

So Moses wrote this *torah* and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of Yahweh, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them saying, At the end of seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear

before Yahweh your God at the place which God will choose, you shall read this *torah* in front of all Israel in their hearing.

(vv. 9-11)

In Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Moses calls heaven and earth as **witnesses** to the treaty.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants . . . in the land which Yahweh swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.

And Deuteronomy 27 and 28 contain the **blessings and curses** upon the vassals for obedience or disobedience.⁴

Now, it shall be, if you will diligently listen to the voice of Yahweh your God, being careful to do all God's commandments which I command you today, Yahweh your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you.

(28:1-2)

But it shall come about, if you do not listen to the voice of Yahweh your God, to observe to do all the commandments and all the statutes with which I charge you today that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (28:15)

Norman Gottwald defines covenant in the Hebrew Bible, based on the form of the Sinai covenant, as an ordered relationship between God and people that is two-sided, though not necessarily even-hand in the

⁴Holladay, 27-28.

involvements and obligations of both parties.⁵

Chapter 24 of the Book of Joshua, in which Joshua assembles all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and makes a covenant with the people that day, also conforms to a suzerain-vassal treaty format. The **preamble** is Thus says Yahweh the God of Israel in 24:2. Verses 2-13 make up the **historical prologue**. The **stipulations** upon the vassals are found in verse 14-15 and 22-23. Joshua **deposits** the covenant in the book of the law of God in verse 26. While he makes no provision for **public reading** of the covenant, he does set up a large stone under the oak that was by the sanctuary of Yahweh at Shechem as a public reminder of the covenant (v. 26). And verses 19-20 contain the **blessings and curses** upon the vassals.

The occasion on which Joshua called for the assembly at Shechem may have been to fulfill the provision for the **public reading** of the Sinai covenant-treaty proclaimed by Moses in Deuteronomy 31:10-13. If so, Joshua 24 is the record of a covenant ceremony, what Norman Gottwald calls a narratized liturgy.⁶ And thus we may understand the concept of

⁵Gottwald, 202.

⁶Gottwald, 235.

covenant in the Book of Joshua as the Sinai Covenant, the suzerain-vassal treaty between Yahweh the children of Israel.

But the ceremony at Shechem includes an element that stops the reader short of being able to accept that the meaning of covenant in the Book of Joshua is covenant as defined by the suzerain-vassal treaty and the Sinai covenant.

In verses 14 and 15, Joshua says to the people at Shechem:

. . . put away the gods which your parents served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve Yahweh, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.

And if we read Joshua's words in 24:14-15 through the lens of the story in the whole Book of Joshua, a new image of the assembly at Shechem emerges. Might we assert that the narrative in Joshua 24 is a record, not only of covenant renewal on the part of the ancient Israelite worshipers of Yahweh, but also the record of a new covenant between Yahweh and other peoples in the land of Israel? The narrative of the book certainly allows for such an understanding.

Joshua impresses the reader at first glance as a book of conquest. It is the story of a group of Israelite worshipers of Yahweh who invade the

land of Canaan, annihilate all with whom they come in contact, and settle in the land, just as Yahweh had promised their ancestors:

And I will fix your boundary from the Reed Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant (*berith*) with them or with their gods.⁷

A closer reading of the book, however, reveals that the surface claims of conquest are not as they first appear.

In the very first conquest story in the Book of Joshua, the destruction of the city of Jericho, a crack, a fissure, appears in the fulfillment of the command of Yahweh to drive out (Exodus 23:31), to utterly destroy (Deuteronomy 7:2), the inhabitants of the land. The Israelites spare the life of Rahab and her family because she helps the Israelite soldiers who scout out Jericho to escape capture (Joshua 6:22-25). David Gunn, in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, writes:

No matter that the agreement reached by the spies seems reasonable and reciprocal; it is an illegal covenant according to the rules governing the war of occupation, the law [the *torah*] of Yahweh.⁸

⁷Exodus 23:31-32. See also Exodus 34:11-12 and Deuteronomy 7:1-2.

⁸David M. Gunn, Joshua and Judges, in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank R. Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 108.

In chapter 9, the Gibeonites dupe the Israelites into making a covenant with them, and thus, they remain in the land that Yahweh promised to the ancestors. In 11:22, the reader learns that no Anakim were left in the land of the children of Israel, except that in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod some remained. In 13:13, the author notes, But the children of Israel did not dispossess the Geshurites or the Maacathites; for Geshur and Maacath live among Israel until this day. And according to 15:63, the children of Israel were unable to drive out the Jebusite inhabitants of Jerusalem, so the Jebusites live with the children of Judah at Jerusalem until this day. The first chapter of the Book of Judges lists, in verses 27-36, the territories which the ancient Israelites were not able to possess and had to leave in the hands of the inhabitants of the land.

The biblical narrative states clearly that ancient Israel did not fulfill the set of stipulations of the suzerain-vassal treaty into which they entered with Yahweh at Sinai. In the **blessings and curses** of Deuteronomy 27 and 28, Moses says to the people:

Be silent and listen, O Israel! This day you have become a people for Yahweh your God. You shall therefore obey Yahweh your God, and do all His commandments and His

statutes which I command you today.⁹

And so we must ask, if the Sinai treaty/covenant has been violated, why does Yahweh remain the God of Israel and give the Israelites possession of the land?

We may discover an answer to our question by exploring this reader's second reason for maintaining that covenant, *berith*, is a difficult term to define and interpret. The suzerain-vassal treaty is a good parallel for the covenant made between Yahweh and ancient Israel at Sinai. But the biblical text includes the record of other covenants that Yahweh made with other people in other times.

In the Book of Genesis, God makes a covenant, a solemn and binding agreement, with Noah after the waters of the flood have abated and God smells the soothing aroma of Noah's sacrifice of thanksgiving. God says to Noah and to Noah's children:

I myself do establish a covenant, a *berith*, with you and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you . . . And I establish My *berith* with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.
(Genesis 9:9-11)

God also makes a covenant with Abraham.

⁹Deuteronomy 27:9-10.

On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates. (15:18)

God agrees, in solemn and binding terms, to provide Abraham and Sarah with heirs who will become a great nation and occupy the land through which God is leading them. The covenant between God and Abraham is described in detail in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, and is referred to again and again throughout the ancestral, the Exodus, and the wilderness wandering narratives. After Israel occupies the land of Canaan, and the people ratify David as their king, God makes a covenant with David:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. . . and your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne will be established forever. (2 Samuel 7:12, 16)

In the covenant at Sinai, both parties in the covenant, God and ancient Israel, make solemn and binding agreements. God agrees to be the God of the ancient Israelites and the ancient Israelites agree be the obedient worshipers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 34:10-28). But in the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David, only God makes a solemn and binding agreement. God will not again destroy the earth by flood; God will give the land to Abraham s descendants; and

God will provide an heir for the throne of David. God requires nothing of his human covenant-partners.¹⁰

When we discuss the concept of covenant in the Book of Joshua, then, we must ask about which type of covenant we are speaking. Most commentators maintain that the covenant referred to in Joshua is the Sinaitic covenant, the covenant which requires solemn and binding agreement by both parties to the covenant. But is this truly the case? Recall the evidence in the Book of Joshua that Israel did not completely fulfill the stipulations of the Sinai treaty/covenant, including that in chapter 24 Joshua seems to be inviting other parties to participate in the Israelites covenant with their God. And yet God gave the Israelites possession of the land.

Is God's covenant with Abraham, rather than God's covenant with the Israelites at Sinai, the dominating covenant concept in the Book of Joshua?¹¹ God's covenant with Abraham is all about descendants and

¹⁰Some maintain that God's requirement that Abraham and every male with him should be circumcised (Gen. 17:10-13) amounts to a covenant obligation. But we may also view circumcision as a mark of the covenant, rather than as an obligation of the covenant.

¹¹Scholars who have extensively studied the concept of covenant in the Hebrew Bible maintain that the Sinaitic covenant is the oldest covenant in ancient Israel and that the Abrahamic covenant, along with the Davidic

land, and the Book of Joshua is all about people and land. I suggest that the question is worth exploration. Land is crucial to the future of Israel.

Without land, without a place to grow into a nation, the plans which Yahweh has for ancient Israel cannot be realized. All periods of ancient Israel's life before the settlement in the land are portrayed in the biblical narrative as anticipatory to that settlement--the ancestral narratives, the time in Egypt, the Exodus, and the wilderness wandering. William L.

Holladay writes:

It is hard to imagine how the Israelites might have maintained themselves in the thirteenth, and twelfth, and eleventh centuries without a sense that they were identified with the land. . . . The Israelites were united by their oral tradition of God's great act of deliverance, but they could hardly have survived without a location in which to belong.¹²

Yahweh made a suzerain-vassal covenant/treaty with ancient Israel at Sinai. And the Israelites made a solemn and binding agreement to

covenant, was shaped during the monarchic period. (See George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, *Covenant*, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1189. While this order of events may very well be the case, in the current study, I am examining the biblical text as it is presented to us. I will, therefore, read the story as it stands, and accept that, for the writer and for the story-line of the Book of Joshua, the Abrahamic covenant was in effect before the Sinaitic covenant.

¹²Holladay, 127.

fulfill the stipulations of that treaty. But despite their violation of the agreement, their inability to drive all the inhabitants out of the land of Canaan, God gave this people possession of the land which I swore to their ancestors to give them (Joshua 1:5). In the story of the Book of Joshua, God remembered the covenant with Abraham. And that covenant remained effective even after the covenant at Sinai. Too much was at stake. Without the land, God's plan for the future of Israel would not be realized.

The reader of the Book of Joshua, then, is confronted with the concepts of conditional covenant and unconditional covenant, two views of the nature of the God of Israel, melded together. Yahweh is a God of both unconditional and conditional covenant, of unconditional and conditional promise. The story of the Hebrew Bible is stamped by the tension between the two. Must Yahweh sustain Israel no matter what, or can Yahweh break the covenant? Who is obligated to whom?

God remembered and honored the unconditional covenant by giving the Israelites control of the land and providing an heir of David to occupy the throne for some five hundred years. But God also remembered the conditional nature of the covenant with Israel. In the Book of Judges, we

read,

Then the children of Israel did evil in the eyes of Yahweh, and served the Baals, and they forsook Yahweh, the God of their ancestors. . . . And the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel and God gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them. (2:11-14)

The Deuteronomic Historian's assessment of all of the kings of Israel and of most of the kings of Judah was, And he did evil in the sight of Yahweh, and walked in the ways of his father [or, of Jeroboam] and in his sin which he made Israel sin (1 Kings 1:26,34,etc.). And the reason given in 2 Kings 17 for the destruction of the kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE is:

Now this came about, because the children of Israel had sinned against Yahweh their God. . . . They rejected the statutes and the covenant which God made with their ancestors, and the warnings with which God warned them. (2 Kings 17:7,15)

In Exodus 34, Moses receives from God a self-description that, I think, sums up the two aspects of God's relationship with ancient Israel.







The words:

Yahweh, Yahweh God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin (34:6-7)

summarize the unconditional aspect. The remainder of verse seven summarizes the conditional aspect.

Yet God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of the parents on the children and on the grandchildren to the fourth generation.

And so how do we understand the nature of covenant in the Book of Joshua? God forgives and yet is unforgiving; God blesses and yet curses.

Unconditional covenant and conditional covenant, total conquest and incomplete conquest. Two aspects of the God of the Israelites. The Book of Joshua includes both. God commanded the Israelites to drive out all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, but the Israelites were unable to accomplish the task. God demanded absolute obedience, but God recognized human inadequacy. The God of absolute obedience and the God of grace--of conditional and unconditional covenant--is present and working in the Book of Joshua and, thankfully, is present and working in the remainder of the biblical text and in the world today.      

(Hallelujah)!!