

OVERVIEW OF THE ABRAHAMIC AND MOSAIC COVENANTS AND THEIR
RELATIONSHIP TO ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TREATIES

A Paper

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. I will evaluate the nature of each; specifically how each can be likened to the ancient near eastern (ANE) Royal Grant and Suzerain Vassal treaties. I will provide stipulations of each covenant, the time aspect, and the promised rewards and/or consequences of disobedience of each. Before beginning though it will be helpful to define what a covenant is and then more specifically what a Royal Grant and Suzerain Vassal treaty is; and then compare and contrast this with the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. I will conclude with the importance of each and how each of the covenants relates to the modern believer.

Covenants: Royal Grant and Suzerainty

A covenant at its core is, “a binding agreement between two parties.”¹ It involves an oath or commitment between the two; this as opposed to a mutual agreement or contract, both of which share characteristics of a covenant. The term for covenant in Hebrew, transliterated, is *berit* and comes from the root word *bara*, which means “to bind.”² Thus a covenant is a binding pledge.

In Israel and in the ancient Near East³ there existed two basic types⁴ of covenants, often referred together as Suzerain (Master) Vassal (Servant) treaties. While each type of suzerain-vassal overlapped in some respects, they were distinct by nature. In some cases the covenant was predicated upon “meeting certain conditions by the party to whom the promise was

¹ Rene Lopez, *Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants*. (CTS Journal, Spring 2004), 72.

² Holman Bible Publishers, e d. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 355.

³ This included the Babylonians, Syro-Palestinian, Neo-Assyrians, Hittites, etc...

⁴ E.g. parity treaties which are covenants between two parties of equal status.

made;”⁵ this is what is referred to as an obligatory covenant or a Suzerainty treaty. While at other times “the promise is made unilaterally and unconditionally,”⁶ this is a promissory or Royal Grant covenant.

More simply put, in each case, the parties involved are of unequal social status and the treaty is initiated by the Suzerain. The obligatory covenant (which I will refer to as Suzerainty) binds the servant to the master; the servant is responsible to meet any obligations placed upon him in order to receive blessing or, if they fail to do so, receive cursing. On the other hand, the promissory (which I will refer to as a Grant) binds the master to the servant; while the promissory may have stipulations that the vassal would have to meet, there is no time component associated with it. The question then is not one of “if this will be fulfilled”, but “when.” Point being, the promise made by the master will be fulfilled regardless of the actions to whom the promise was made and in the Suzerain’s own timing.

In the ANE, covenants exhibited similar characteristics. Lopez notes six basic attributes, or characteristics of a covenant that the Hittites⁷ used; they are a preamble, historical prologue, stipulations, the document, the witness of the gods, and curses and blessings. This would be similar to various companies putting together a statement of work which would have a background, objectives, requirements, deliverables, and a timeline. Each of the companies might have similarities in form but are not identical; this brings up an important point.

Often times, theologians and layman press into the scriptures the secular forms and attempt to interpret the scriptures with that presupposition in mind. While it is true the Israelites may have patterned their treaties after the ANE covenants, they are not identical in form or even

⁵ Holman Bible Dictionary, 355.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Hittites weren’t the only ones to have these characteristics.

substance in some cases. Lopez agrees stating “when speaking of historical treaties, it is best to refer to them as having similar elements, not identical forms.”⁸ J.C. Hutchinson in his ThD dissertation notes that;

“In identifying biblical covenants according to form, one must always recognize: (1) biblical writers were selective in recording narrative descriptions of biblical covenants; and (2) the contexts which show renewal and reaffirmation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants do not always reflect a complete duplication of content, form or ceremony.”⁹

That said, parallels between scripture and documents of the day provide us deeper insight into the culture and help us relate further to the people being written to; thereby deepening our understanding of God’s word. Having given a description of each of the treaties and cautions regarding the usage of such, we can move onto the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as outlined in scripture.

Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic covenant can be found in Genesis 12:1-3 and further detail is provided in Genesis 15:18-21. Genesis 12:1-3 states:

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ² And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³ And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

This covenant between God, the Suzerain, and Abraham, the Vassal was wholly a Royal Grant covenant and was promissory in nature. This is seen based on the events that occurred during the covenant ceremony described in Gen. 15:17; God made the covenant with

⁸ Lopez, 92.

⁹ John Charles Hutchinson, “*The Relationship of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Palestinian Covenants in Deuteronomy 29-30.*” (Doctoral Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 132-133.

Himself; Abraham had no part, he was asleep! Some aspects of the covenant were temporal (e.g. promise of Isaac) while others were eternal (e.g. land, Jesus).

The covenant encompassed three things. The first was land, as described in verses 1 and 7. The beneficiary is Israel, although has not yet been fulfilled due to the fact that only part of the land has been given. The second promise was descendants, or seed. Verse 2 says that God will make a great nation from Abraham, this has been fulfilled. Likewise, the beneficiary is Israel. The third promise differs from the other two, in that the beneficiary is both Israel and the Gentiles. This has been fulfilled in Christ.¹⁰

All three promises by God required no stipulations on Abraham's part sans the obvious fact that Abraham had to leave his country. Pentecost notes this one conditional aspect as well, and states the following:

It is important, therefore, to observe the relationship of obedience to this covenant program. Whether or not God would institute a covenant program with Abram depended on Abram's act of obedience in leaving the land. Once this act was accomplished, however, and Abram did obey God, God instituted an irrevocable, *unconditional* program."¹¹

As stated earlier, the irony regarding this covenant was that Abraham wasn't faithful to do any of the things God required; at least not initially. This is yet another indication of the promissory nature of the covenant. It wasn't until after Abraham left his father in Haran that God reiterated the land covenant "to your descendants I will give this land."

For further clarification I have broken the single conditional aspect into subsets and listed God's promises to Abraham, and noted whether or not the promises have been fulfilled and

¹⁰ Luke 22:17-20

¹¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, Pentecost, *Prophecy for Today*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961.), 60.

who the beneficiary was. God required four things of Abraham to be faithful to do in order to inherit the blessings, He required Abraham to...

- 1) ...Leave his country, which he eventually did.
- 2) ...Leave his relatives, which again he eventually did. His nephew Lot travelled with him for some time. Leave your father (didn't until he died)
- 3) ...Go to Land I promised, which Abraham did but then passed through it.

Verses 2-3 have seven promises that God will...

- 1) ...make a great nation from Abraham. This has partially been fulfilled as they have been great and will be again (Jews).
- 2) ...bless Abraham. This has been fulfilled as God provided him with a beautiful wife, land, sheep, and a son (Abraham).
- 3) ...make Abraham's name great. This too has been fulfilled as Abraham's name is revered by people the world over (God/Abraham).
- 4) ...make Abraham a blessing. This was fulfilled (Jews).
- 5) ... bless those who bless Abraham's descendants. This is perpetually fulfilled and is seen throughout history (Jews/Gentiles).
- 6) ...curse those who curse his descendants. This is perpetually fulfilled and first seen with the curse upon Pharaoh during the time of the exodus (Jews/Gentiles).
- 7)make all the families of the earth blessed through Abraham. This was fulfilled in Christ (Jews/Gentiles).

For the covenant to be enacted it only required Abraham to have faith in God's promise. Paul in Romans 4 equates the gift of eternal salvation with Abraham believing God and God crediting to his account righteousness; thus justification comes simply by faith. Abraham didn't have to work to get the covenant; he just had to believe God to enact the covenant. After that, in order to get the blessing described he and/or his seed would have to be faithful to God in order to inherit the blessings described. Dr. Anderson rightly notes:

“This principle of a “faithful generation” required for the fulfillment of the future aspects of the royal grants is a crucial link in connecting Jesus with the fulfillment of

both the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants. The rewards of the grants would not be realized by an unfaithful generation, or by an unfaithful ruler.”¹²

Soteriologically speaking this discussion is important as it sheds further light on the nature of our salvation. Dr. Anderson summarized this relationship well noting

“Thus it can be said that for the nation and the individuals within the nation of Israel, relationship preceded fellowship, and faith preceded repentance. ...faith is for relationship, while repentance is for fellowship”

It should be understood then that the inheritance of the blessing that God promised is different than initiation of the covenant. In order to be blessed one must first have a covenant in place, this is a key aspect to a Royal Grant; it requires faithfulness to the Suzerain in order for the blessing to be appropriated. This in no way affects the covenant itself because it is the Suzerain who initiated the covenant. Likewise, we are guaranteed to go to heaven simply by faith in Christ (justification), but we are also guaranteed blessing temporally and eternally by being faithful to God (sanctification/rewards).

Mosaic Covenant

As noted earlier, a Suzerainty treaty was obligatory in nature, and required the servant to be obedient to the master in order for the master’s promises to be effectuated. Likewise, if the servant was disobedient the vassal would receive cursing or punishment. The Mosaic covenant is an excellent example of this type of covenant. Dr. Pentecost refers to the Mosaic covenant as a conditional covenant, and defines it as such:

A proposal of God, wherein he promises, in a conditional or mutual compact with man, by the contingent formula “IF YE WILL,” to grant special blessings to man

¹² David R. Anderson, *The National Repentance of Israel*, (Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society, Volume 11:21, Autumn 1998).

provided he fulfills perfectly certain conditions, and to execute definite punishment in case of his failure.¹³

The Mosaic covenant can be seen in Exodus 19-24 and it is reiterated in Deuteronomy and Joshua 24. At the outset God, the Suzerain, in Exodus 19:5-6 makes clear what this covenant will involve;

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” [emphasis mine]

Two things to note from this are that 1) The covenant was between the Israelites and God and 2) it involved Israel’s obedience in order for the promises to be fulfilled. Many people today believe the 10 commandments are perpetual; that is to say that they are still in effect today. I will discuss this later and show how it was a temporal covenant that was fulfilled in Christ.

The Laws were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai shortly after the Israelites were freed by God from slavery under the Egyptians. Ten of the Laws were written by the finger of God (Ex. 32:16) and the other 603 dictated by Moses on Mt. Sinai.¹⁴ The Law had three aspects to it; There was the moral law, which were the commandments. Then the ceremonial law which covered the tabernacle, feasts, priesthood, etc. and then the civil law which was about crops, sanitation etc.. The point I want to make here is that they were not given to the gentiles but to the Israelites; an important fact that is often overlooked today.

¹³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958). 98.

¹⁴ As a side note, whenever scripture refers to the Mosaic Law, it always refers to it as a single unit. The word “Torah” itself means “Law” and when used in reference to the Law of Moses is always singular. Point being, there’s no scriptural justification to separate the 10 commandments from the other 603. We may separate them into parts for personal study to understand the types of commandments but scripture never does this. So when I refer to “The Law” I’m talking about all 613 commands.

The Bible gives us several reasons for the purpose of the Law, but I only want to briefly touch on one of the following three aspects in order to show its temporal nature. The purpose of the Law was three fold:

- 1) It was to provide a means of rule for the Israelites and to keep them distinct.
- 2) It was to show us God's Holiness and reveal sin.
- 3) It was to lead us to faith in Christ.

In the Old Testament, one main purpose was to provide a means of rule for the Israelites and to keep them distinct. The Jews were to be set apart from the rest of the world (Deut. 5:1,32-33). This in a sense, is similar to how Christians today are to set ourselves apart and not be conformed to the things of this world (Rom. 12:2). The laws were very unique, some were benign and others not so. For example, pork was not to be eaten (Lev. 11:7), but bugs like locusts, crickets and grasshoppers you could eat (Lev. 11:22). There were other commands like "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), which is reiterated in the New Testament. In Lev. 18:3 it says "You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt.", there was many a good reason for that as Egyptians used to mix fly dung with milk to "help" colicky babies, and they used to spread donkey dung on splinter wounds. Canaanites used to sacrifice babies to their god Molech. This detestable practice was not to be done (Lev. 18:21).

So the law was a means of rule for the Israelites not a means of salvation. God never intended the Law as a means of salvation; that would be works based salvation. Quite the contrary, salvation couldn't have been by the Law because of the fact that Abraham was saved by faith (Gen. 15:16), and lived about 500 years before Moses and the Law.¹⁵

¹⁵ Eternal Life Salvation has always been by faith in Christ and will always be by faith in Christ. For Old Testament believers (all the way back to Adam and Eve Gen. 3:15), eternal life was by faith that God would send a messiah. For New Testament believers, eternal life comes by placing our Faith in the one whom God has sent. In both cases

The point being is that the Law was for the Jews and was temporal. It has been rendered inoperative by Christ when he died on the cross. Galatians 3:19 says “Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.” Paul is saying that The Law was in effect until the seed, Christ, would come. It was in effect until he came as a mediator of a new covenant. In other words, the law was temporary.

Paul also says in Romans 10:4 “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Dr. Constable notes:

The Greek word *telos* and its English equivalent "end" can refer either to termination (as in "the end of the matter") or to purpose (as in "to the end that"). Paul believed that Jesus Christ was the end of the Mosaic Law in both respects. He spoke of the Law as having a function to fulfill in history after which Jesus Christ terminated it (7:6; Gal. 3:19, 23; cf. Mark 7:18-19; Luke 16:16; John 1:17; Acts 10:12; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 4:9-11; 5:1; Col. 2:17; Heb. 7:12; 9:10). Furthermore he described the purpose of the Law as bringing people to Christ (7:7-13; Gal. 3:24; cf. Matt. 5:17). ... God has terminated the whole Mosaic Law. It is one unified code (cf. 7:6). God wants Christians to observe nine of the Ten Commandments because they are part of the Law of Christ. This is the regulatory code that God has given the church, namely, the teachings of Christ and the apostles (Gal. 6:2).¹⁶

It becomes clear then that the Mosaic Covenant was obligatory because it typifies the idea of blessing and cursing based on the actions of the vassal. Scripture says over and over “you shall do this” or “you shall not do this,” with the appropriate blessing and cursing. One promise that stands out is in Exodus 19:6 – Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This was true so long as Israel obeyed God, when they failed to obey, this promise became ineffectual, and as history and the Bible shows, this became the case when the kingdom was divided by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

it's the object of our faith (Christ) that saves. "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

¹⁶ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Romans* (Dallas, Texas: Sonic Light, 2004), 111-112.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants show many attributes of the suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient Near East. The Abrahamic covenant represents a Royal Grant that is promissory in nature and contains both temporal and eternal aspects; while the Mosaic Covenant is a Suzerainty Treaty which is obligatory in nature and was temporal.

The application to the modern day believer of both of the covenants becomes easily seen. The Abrahamic Covenant represents our initial justification by faith in Christ which initiates God's eternal promises of forgiveness of sin (Matt. 26:28, Col. 1:14), eternal life (John 6:47, 3:16), and eternal security (John 10:28, Rom. 8:30). The Mosaic Law represents the discipleship process for the believer;¹⁷ the relationship has been established through faith, but now faith and reliance upon Christ enable the promises of blessing (1 Cor. 3:14) and cursing (Heb. 12:6).

¹⁷ I should note that it is a guide today for the unbeliever, one that points them towards Christ. In Galatians 3:8-9 Paul says "But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers." And in Galatians 3:24 he says "For all Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith."

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