

Ancient Near East Covenant:

The concept of covenant was an essential feature of social and religious life in the ancient Near East. According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, a covenant is defined as

“an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.”¹

In the political context, covenants, called parity treaties, were often established between two rulers or nations of equal status. The terms of the covenant would establish the boundaries of their territories, define their relationship of mutual support, and set the terms of trade and commerce between them. An unfortunate example of a parity treaty gone wrong can be found in Joshua 9, where the Israelites were tricked into creating a treaty with the Gideonites. The Israelites “did not inquire of the LORD” (Josh 9:14).

Modern scholars refer to a second covenant found throughout the ancient Near East as a suzerain/vassal treaty. The suzerain, a superior and possibly conquering king, offered a subject nation (the vassal state) a covenant agreement for their loyalty. The king promised to provide protection and blessings to the subject country so long as they maintained their commitment and abided by their obligations, such as providing soldiers for the king's army, natural resources, and paying tribute money.

Once a covenant relationship was established, the subject people were expected to remain loyal to their king. Subject nations were forbidden from creating additional covenant relationships with other kings. Such actions were considered a betrayal and would invoke the covenant curses upon the heads of the people.

When God establishes his relationship with the Israelites, he chooses the concept of a Suzerain/Vassal covenant to communicate the nature of their relationship. After both parties agree to the stated terms of the covenant, God promises to protect and bless the nation of Israel as their king as long as they maintain their obligations, obey his commandments, and direct their worship at him alone.

¹ Mendenhall, George E. and Heroin, Gary A. 1992. “Covenant” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. First edition. New York: Doubleday (pp. 1179-1202).

Components of a Covenant:

Most are familiar with a wedding ceremony that brings two people into a “marriage covenant.” We expect to see certain rituals and hear particular phrases when we attend a wedding ceremony. How many people would be satisfied with a wedding ceremony that didn’t end with the words “You may now kiss the bride?”

The wedding ceremony provides a concrete demarcation line for the relationship between the couple and is vital when establishing a solid bond for this newly formed relationship. Before the ceremony, they were separated, but once the marriage covenant is agreed upon, in the eyes of the community of witnesses – including the state – the relationship has been radically altered. Two now become one.

Since God uses an ancient Near Eastern covenant as the model to establish and define his relationship with Israel – and, by default, all of humanity – it should not be surprising to see the components of these covenants in our Bible. Since the Israelites were familiar with covenants, they would expect to see as many or all of the elements of covenant-making when establishing their relationship with God. Leaving any components out may cause them to lose confidence in the God who will lead them through the wilderness of life.

For us modern readers of the Bible, it becomes essential that we understand the components of a covenant, how they function within society, and what they communicate about the relationship being established between God and His people. Doing so adds depth to the structure of scripture and enriches our understanding of what it means for us to be in a covenant relationship with God through the New Covenant.

The components of an Ancient Near Eastern covenant typically include:

1. **Preamble/Covenant Giver:** This introduction identifies the covenant giver. We have from archaeology many examples of actual Near Eastern covenants. The preamble to a covenant between a king and a vassal nation can be lengthy in the ancient world. A human king wants to ensure the vassal people understand how great, powerful, and glorious he is! In Exodus 20, God is not compelled to make these braggadocious statements, and he states simply, "I am the LORD your God" (Ex. 20:1).
2. **Historical Prologue:** The historical prologue establishes the context for the agreement. "Why should you give your allegiance to this new king" you might ask. "Because he spared your life when he could have sold you into slavery, and that's why!" For God, the historical prologue is simple: "It was I who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2b). God providing our salvation is the historical context for why we should enter into a covenant relationship with him.
3. **Stipulations/Obligations:** These are the terms and conditions of the covenant, including the obligations and responsibilities of each party. This section may include specific required actions, such as paying tribute or providing military support, as well as prohibitions against particular activities. (see Ex. 20:3-17).
4. **Deposit and Periodic Reading:** The covenant was recorded in writing, and a copy was provided to both parties. Each party would deposit their copy in a sacred place, such as the temple of the main deity of each nation. That deity would protect the covenant so long as the relationship remained in force. (i.e., two tablets, one for each party, are stored in the Ark of the Covenant under the presence of God). Additionally, the document would contain a provision for periodic reading to remind both parties of the covenant and its obligations. (see Exodus 24:7, 25:21, 40:20; Deuteronomy 10:5, 31:10; and Joshua 8:30-35).

5. **List of Witnesses:** The covenant may be witnessed by other individuals or entities, such as a deity or a group of elders, to provide additional validation and authority to the agreement. In the ancient Near East, it was common to have a lengthy list of deities that would be called upon if the king or the vassal nation violated the covenant. How many other deities can be included as witnesses when the God of all creation is the covenant giver? None. So God calls "heaven and earth" as his witnesses (Deut. 4:26). Should either party violate the covenant, the witnesses are called upon as a reminder that they saw you enter into this agreement. (see Isaiah 1:2. When Israel violates the covenant, Isaiah, as the prophet, calls upon the witnesses "heaven" and "earth").
6. **Curses and Blessings:** Curses and blessings were included to enforce the covenant and emphasize the seriousness of its obligations. These curses and blessings may involve invoking divine blessing or wrath depending on whether or not the subject people broke the covenant. (see Deuteronomy 28 for the complete list of divine blessings and curses).
7. **Covenant Ratification Ceremony:** The covenant must be ratified with a symbolic act that generally involves the sacrifice of an animal followed by a sacred meal. The blood of the sacrificed animal then represented what would happen to either of the parties should they violate the covenant! Violating the covenant equals death, and this dramatic ritual provided the necessary reminder of the seriousness of any covenant violation. Another way to put this concept is with the phrase, "The wages of sin (that is, violating the covenant) is death" (Romans 6:23) or in our modern wedding ceremony, "Till death do us part." (see Genesis 15:17-21; Exodus 24:3-8; and Jeremiah 34:17-20).
8. **A Shared Meal:** Sharing a meal is a significant relational act. (see Exodus 24:11; and Matthew 26:28).

These components were typically flexible and could vary depending on the context and specific details of the covenant. However, they provide a general framework for understanding the structure and function of Ancient Near Eastern covenants.