

A Ratifying Sacrifice

Ratifying a covenant with a sacrifice involves offering a sacrifice as a ritualistic and symbolic gesture to solidify or validate the covenant being made. This practice was ubiquitous throughout the ANE, although customs may vary over time or within different regions. The following is a general outline of a ratifying sacrifice:

1. **Covenant Establishment:** Before a covenant can be ratified with a sacrifice, the terms and conditions of the covenant are agreed upon by the parties involved. This could be a mutual agreement between individuals, families, tribes, or nations. The covenant outlines each party's rights, obligations, and commitments.
2. **Selection of Sacrifice:** The choice of the sacrifice can vary depending on the culture and the nature of the covenant. Depending on the significance of the covenant, it could be a single animal, such as a lamb, goat, or even a group of animals. See the Blood Path below.
3. **Ritual Preparations:** Before the sacrifice, various preparations take place. These preparations may include purification rituals, fasting, prayer, or other ceremonial practices to ensure the sanctity and solemnity of the occasion.
4. **Sacrificial Act:** The sacrifice is then performed in a prescribed manner. This typically involves a ritualistic slaughter of the chosen animal or cutting the animal into two pieces in a blood path ceremony. The act may be carried out by the individuals involved in the covenant or a designated individual, such as a priest or community leader.
5. **Symbolism:** The sacrifice represents the life of the one who enters the covenant and the overall covenant itself. It signifies the seriousness, commitment, and dedication of the parties involved. It communicates to each party and the witnesses that the penalty for violating the covenant is as severe as death.
6. **Communal Participation and Witnesses:** In some cases, the ritual may involve the active participation of the covenanting parties or the wider community. The community witnesses the covenant, reinforcing the communal bond and underscoring the covenant agreement's significance.

7. **Acceptance and Ratification:** The sacrifice signifies that the terms of the covenant have been acknowledged and validated and that its terms bind the parties involved.

A historical example of the weightiness of a covenant violation and the symbolic representation of the sacrifice with the life of the one who enters the covenant comes from a treaty between Ashurnirair V, king of Assyria (755-745 BC), and Mati'ilu of Arpad. The text begins with a description of the sacrificial animal:

“This spring lamb has been brought from its fold not for sacrifice, not for a banquet...it has been brought to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mati'ilu. If Mati'ilu sins against (this) treaty made under oath by the gods, then, just as the spring lamb, brought from its fold, will not return to its fold...Mati'ilu, together with his sons, daughters, officials, and people from his country, will not return to his country...”¹

The treaty continues with the symbolism of the spring lamb as the life of Mati'ilu,

“This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off...the head of Mati'ilu be torn off, and of his sons...”

Needless to say, a violation of the covenant agreement carries a high price. This helps us understand what Paul says about sinning against the covenant with God, that “the wages of sin are death” (Rom. 6:23). In a similar vein, we can understand that the concluding words of most modern wedding vows - “till death do us part!” These words convey the strength of the marriage bond and that only the pain of death can end this covenant.

¹ Pritchard, James B., 2011. *The Ancient Near East : an Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press (210-211).

The Blood Path

An additional element that may be added to a ratification ceremony is called the blood path. The blood path ceremony typically refers to a ritual or symbolic act involving blood to establish or strengthen the bond between individuals or groups. While specific details and practices may vary across different cultures or belief systems, the following outlines the blood path ceremony practiced by the Israelites.

1. **Significance and Purpose:** The blood path ceremony holds deep symbolic meaning and is performed to solidify alliances, establish loyalty, or mark significant transitions or commitments.
2. **Participants:** The ceremony involves the individuals or groups who have chosen to enter the covenant.
3. **Blood Path:** The central element of the blood path ceremony involves the creation of a path of blood on the ground. One way of creating this path is to cut the animals into two pieces set across from one another as the blood from the animals drains to the middle.
4. **Walking Between the Pieces:** At this point, each participant in the covenant will “walk between the pieces” (Jer. 34:18-20) while reciting their oaths or vows. This dramatic act reinforces the significance of the ceremony and solidifies the covenant terms. Similar to the ratification sacrifice mentioned above, the symbolic message from the blood path is, “If I violate this covenant, you can do *this* to me.”
5. **Communal Bond:** The blood path ceremony aims to create a profound bond among the participants, emphasizing their shared purpose, unity, and mutual support. It symbolizes a commitment to honor the covenant they have established.

Cut a Covenant

So common was the blood path ceremony used by the Israelites that the idiomatic expression “to cut a covenant” arose for the practice of creating a covenant. The Hebrew term “to cut a covenant” is “*karat berit*.” In Hebrew, the word “*karat*” means “to cut,” and “*berit*” means “covenant” or “treaty.” So, the phrase “*karat berit*” refers to the act of cutting an animal and making a covenant or treaty with another party.

This phrase is used several times in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the context of God's covenants with his people, such as the covenant with Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham, promising him land and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:4). Responding to the promise of land, Abraham asks God for a more concrete sign of this covenant promise – in modern terms - Abraham wants God to “sign on the dotted line” (Gen. 15:8).

At this point, God commands Abraham to gather numerous animals (Gen. 15:9). Without further instruction, Abraham prepared the animals by cutting “them in two and arranging the halves opposite each other” (Gen. 15:10). Abraham is familiar with the ancient Near Eastern practice of creating a blood path for covenant making and understands precisely what he must do.

Abraham prepared the animals, cut them in half, and lay them in two rows. The stage is set, and now God and Abraham, as the two parties entering into the covenant, would then walk through the pieces as a symbolic act of their commitment to fulfill the covenant terms.

Genesis 15:17-18 tells us, “When the sun had set, and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day, **the Lord made a covenant** (*karat berit*) with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants, I give this land...’” Here, the phrase “*karat berit*” is used to describe the act of making the covenant between God and Abraham. Most, if not all, English bibles read “made a covenant” as the translators have included the interpretation of the Hebrew idiom to assist the reader with understanding the context.

A final illustration of the blood path ceremony is found in Jeremiah 34:8-22. In this example, a covenant was made at the Temple in Jerusalem to free all Hebrew slaves who currently belonged to Hebrew masters (vv. 8-9). Those who freely entered the covenant agreed to release their slaves (v. 10), but then, in an act of betrayal, some who had initially said yes, changed their minds and decided to take back their slaves (v.11).

The LORD then responds to this violation of the covenant through the prophet Jeremiah:

I will give the men who have transgressed my covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before me, when they **cut the calf in two** and **passed between its parts**; the officials of Judah, and the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land, who **passed between the parts of the calf**; I will even give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those who seek their life; and their dead bodies shall be for food to the birds of the sky, and to the animals of the earth.²

² Jeremiah 34:18-20, *New Heart English Bible*, <https://nheb.net/>.