

INTERTESTAMENT

THE END OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: Part 1

The Institution of Covenant

To understand the Intertestamental Period, one must begin with the back story. This back story revolves around three sacred covenants, one between Yahweh and Abraham, one between Yahweh and the Israelite nation, and one between Yahweh and David.

VOCABULARY OF COVENANT

Because covenants in the ancient Near East were so basic to the lives of its people, certain stereotypical language patterns and symbolic actions developed around the idea of covenant.

karat berit (= to “cut” a covenant)

shevu’ah (= oath)

nishba’ (= act of swearing)

mitswot (= stipulations)

berakah (= blessing)

‘ala (= curse)

A standard oath gesture was the lifting of the hand toward heaven (cf. Ge. 14:22). Those who broke covenant were considered to have a “deceitful right hand” (cf. Ps. 144:7-8).

The idea of *berit* (= covenant) was woven throughout the woof and warp of ancient Near Eastern life. A covenant was a solemn promise between individuals, clans, or states made binding by an oath (either a verbal formula or a symbolic action) which both parties recognized as sacred. Such an oath called upon the gods to punish any breach of covenant. The obligations accepted by someone in such a covenant relationship carried the force of law. Covenants regulated the social behavior of ancient peoples so that a certain level of predictability and trust could be counted on. Even before the time of Abraham, well-formed covenantal patterns for the regulation of international affairs had been

established in the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures. By the time Israel was coming out of Egypt, the Hittites, who built a vast empire in Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400-1200 BC), had left an indelible impression on their vassal cultures in what scholars call the Hittite suzerainty treaty, examples of which are well-known to archaeologists and scholars. Other than blood ties, the covenant was perhaps the single most important social relationship between ancient Near Eastern peoples, and it controlled both domestic and political life.

That God used the institution of ancient Near Eastern covenant by which to establish his own relationship with the people of Israel is everywhere attested in the Torah. The exodus from Egypt and the journey toward Canaan, which was the central redemptive event in Torah, was the direct result of Yahweh’s ancient covenantal oath to the patriarchs.

And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am Yahweh.

Ex. 6:6-8

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Yahweh's Covenant with Abraham

Early in the biblical story, God called Abraham from Ur in southeast Mesopotamia, directing him to a new land, the land of Canaan. With this man God established a covenant which was expressed in the form of a promissory oath (Ge. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:2-5; 17:3-22; 18:17-19; 22:15-18). The covenant was reaffirmed to Isaac, his son (Ge.26:2-5), and later to Jacob, his grandson (Ge. 28:13-15; 35:11-12). The patriarchal covenant consisted of a complex of interrelated promises. It guaranteed *zera* (= seed, posterity) to Abraham in very great numbers, personal blessing for him along with an enhanced *shem* (= name, reputation), blessing for those who favored him and disfavor for those who did not, land rights to Canaan for his clan, and ultimately, divine blessing for all nations on the earth. A most important factor for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt was that they were themselves the descendants of this same Abraham and that the land of Canaan was to be theirs by a divine grant. The land was to be theirs "forever" (Ge. 13:15; 17:8), though to be sure, the fulfillment of the land grant was to be some four centuries or so after the time of Abraham (Ge. 15:13-16). When Israel came out of Egypt to go into the land of Canaan, the assumption was that they would be established in their promised land so that they might live there perpetually (Ex. 6:2-8).

Yahweh's Covenant with Israel

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SUZERAINTY TREATIES

Suzerainty treaties were a form of covenant between a powerful king and his vassals in the absence of international law. In this widespread cultural institution, both parties were bound by sacred oath to obligations of covenant loyalty. Covenant violation was attended by formal curses in which the gods were invited to punish or even destroy whoever broke covenant. The texts of such suzerainty treaties most relevant for understanding the covenant between God and Israel are the Hittite treaty (15th century BC) and the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon II (7th century BC).

Israel's national history also began with a sacred covenant, a binding agreement patterned after an ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty (Ex. 24:3-8). The heart of the treaty was the list of stipulations or requirements which the vassal must perform out of deference to the suzerain, the core of which were the Ten Commandments. These stipulations included the demand for undivided allegiance. Yahweh, the Great King, promised to protect and bless the Israelite nation; the nation, in turn, was obliged to be faithful to the covenant as expressed in detail in the Book of Deuteronomy, climaxing with the curses for covenant violation (Dt. 28:15-68). The final curse after repeated covenant unfaithfulness would be exile (Dt. 28:64-68).

The covenant ratification at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24), like many other elements in the covenant, was carried

out in the form and spirit of ancient Near Eastern patterns. Moses acted as a mediator of the covenant between Yahweh and the people (Ex. 24:1-2). He read the stipulations of the covenant, after which the congregation of Israel, similar to a bride at a wedding, repeated the vow in unison, "Everything Yahweh has said we will do" (Ex. 24:3). The symbolic actions that formed the oath of the covenant were carried out by Moses, who set up an altar, representing Yahweh, along with twelve pillars, representing the clans of Israel. Holocausts (*'olah*) and fellowship sacrifices (*zebah selamim*) were offered, and the blood of the sacrificial animals was drained off in bowls for the blood ceremony (Ex. 24:4-5). Half of the collected blood was dashed against the altar representing

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Yahweh. After reading the Book of the Covenant to the congregation, and after the people had repeated the vow in unison, Moses dashed the remainder of the blood over the heads of the people (Ex. 24:8). The life's blood of the sacrificial victims now covered the two contracting parties. Yahweh and Israel were, so to speak, blood-brothers, bound together by oath-taking words and actions. The covenant was sealed with a sacred meal (Ex. 24:11).

From the time of the Sinai experience, the remainder of the Old Testament is governed by the idea that Yahweh and Israel are bound together in covenant by solemn oath. Virtually every aspect of Israel's future--the experience of the tribal confederacy, the rise of the monarchy, the Zion tradition of Judah, the anti-Zion tradition of Ephraim, the fortunes and misfortunes of the kings in the north and the south, the eventual exile of both nations, the prophetic interpretation of the exile, the returning remnant to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the second temple--all of these aspects of Israel's future flow out of the fundamental institution of covenant. Yahweh is a covenant God, and Israel is a covenant people. Yahweh is to be known in the context of the covenant, and Israel is to be defined in the context of the covenant.

Yahweh's Covenant with David

After Israel had established itself in the land of Canaan in the 13th century BC, and following a lengthy period of troubled relationships with the native Canaanites, a young warrior arose to become king. He was finally able to set the nation on solid footing for the first time, securing its borders and establishing a new capital in Jerusalem. The political and religious consolidation of the kingdom was part of a much grander and magnificent ideal. David determined to build a permanent temple for Yahweh and the ark of the covenant. The impetus for this project was the Deuteronomic Code, which envisioned a permanent shrine in the Israelite heartland to be established after the Canaanite nations had been subdued (Dt. 12). Although initially Nathan the prophet instructed David to go ahead with his intent, Yahweh subsequently spoke to Nathan and instructed him that David must forego his plans. Later, in recounting this story to his son Solomon, David revealed that he had been forbidden to build a house for Yahweh due to his violent career as a warrior (1 Chr. 22:6-10). However, even though Yahweh required that David leave this task to his son Solomon, he did establish with David a solemn covenant, mediated through the prophet Nathan.

In this covenant, God's promise to David was threefold. Its provisions were for a home, a house, and a son. Yahweh promised to secure for the nation a home in which it would not be disturbed or oppressed. This assurance of national peace stood in sharp contrast to the previous history of the nation, a history marked by bloody battles and almost constant war. Instead of David building Yahweh a house, Yahweh promised to build David a house. There is an obvious play on words here, for David's intention was to build a cedar structure, while Yahweh's promise almost certainly refers to David's posterity, and particularly, his dynasty. (The Hebrew word *bayit* or "house" may equally



Hittite Suzerainty Treaty, 15th Century BC (British Museum)

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This ivory pomegranate scepter head may be the only surviving relic from Solomon's temple.

It has an inscription reading "Belonging to the temple of Yahweh, holy to the priests."

(Israel Museum)

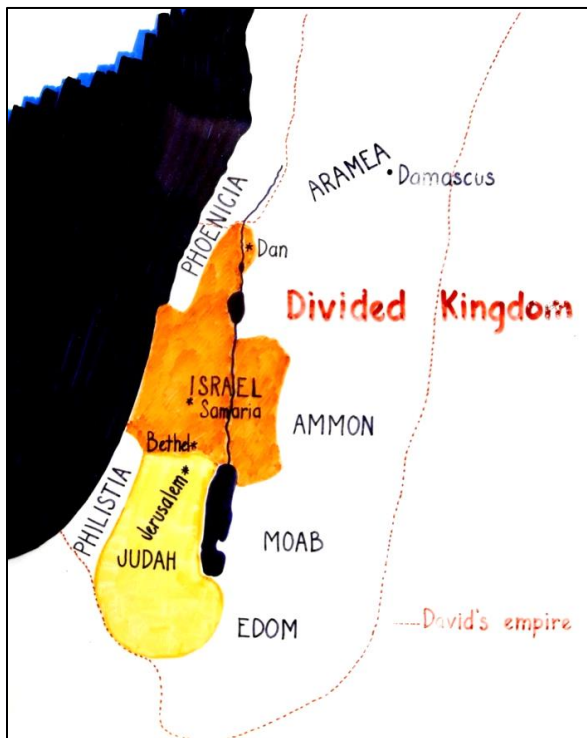
indicate a structure or a family.) From the posterity that Yahweh guaranteed to David would arise a son. For this son, Yahweh promised to establish a kingdom and an eternal throne. This son, rather than David, would be the one to build a house for Yahweh. Yahweh also guaranteed his loyal love to this son. If this son did wrong, he would not be rejected, but Yahweh would lovingly chastise him so that he would learn to follow the right way. The son would not only be considered the son of David, but he would also be reckoned as the son of Yahweh (cf. 1 Chr. 22:10). He would be established eternally over Yahweh's kingdom.

The Subsequent National History

Solomon did indeed build a permanent temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem. However, upon his death, due to heavy taxation and the unwise determination of Rehoboam, his son, to increase the fiscal burden (1 Kg. 12:10-11), the kingdom of the Twelve Tribes split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, usually called Israel or Ephraim, rejected outright the Davidic covenant, establishing their own shrines for worship apart from Solomon's temple. The southern kingdom, called Judah, remained faithful to David's family and the temple. Both kingdoms struggled for the next three centuries through the vicissitudes of international politics, and each, in turn, flirted first with Canaanite religion and then Mesopotamian religion. This trend was a fundamental covenant violation, the first principle being, "You shall have no other gods but me" (Ex. 20:3). This covenant unfaithfulness sets the background for the downfall of both kingdoms.

It was against this background that the prophets railed against Israel's covenant-breaking ways, first the non-writing prophets like Elijah and Elisha, and by the 8th century BC, the writing prophets, beginning with Amos and Hosea in the north and Isaiah and Micah in the south. Prophets like Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel continued to shout warnings through the 7th century and into the early 6th century BC. The people of Israel had a reckoning with God, and exile would prove to be the final disaster.

The life of the northern kingdom came to an end in 721 BC, and large portions of its population were deported to the outlying regions of Assyria (1 Kg. 17). The life of the southern kingdom came to an end in 586 BC, its citizens deported to Babylon (2



Kg. 25). The final curse for covenant violation had occurred, just as the prophets had warned.