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Treaty of the Great King



Part of the standard procedure followed in the ancient Near East when “the great king” gave his covenant to a vassal people was the preparation of a text of the ceremony as the treaty document and witness.¹² **The Near Eastern vassal treaty, used in the fifteenth to the thirteenth centuries BC, had the following parts:**

- 1. Preamble** (“These are the words . . .”). The preamble in the Hittite suzerainty treaties normally opened by identifying the words contained in the treaty as those of the Hittite king.
- 2. Historical Prologue** (events leading to and forming the basis of the treaty). History plays a particular role in the covenant. The covenant prologue recounts those events that came before the founding of the covenant, which were of fundamental importance.
- 3. General Stipulations** (statement of substance concerning the future of the relationship, and summarizes the purpose of the specific stipulations between the two parties). Here were the principles of the new relationship. It details what the king would do for the vassals, and what the vassals (the people) would do in return.
- 4. Specific Stipulations**, an enlargement of the covenant stipulations.
- 5. Blessings and Curses** relating respectively to the maintenance or breach of the covenant. The kings would threaten their subject about the consequences of disobeying the covenant.

6. Witnesses that the pagans would call various deities to witness the treaty.

The vassal treaty was employed in the Near East when a great power (the suzerain king) imposed certain conditions of vassalhood on a smaller state (the vassal), which would normally have been conquered by the more powerful state in battle. The treaty explained the reasons for imposition and the nature of the conditions imposed on the smaller state, and made certain provisions relating to the maintenance of the treaty. The suzerain king guaranteed the vassal benefits and protection. But in turn, the vassal was obligated to be loyal solely to the suzerain, with the warning that any disloyalty would bring punishments as specified in the covenant. How was the vassal to show loyalty? By keeping the specific stipulations of the covenant. As long as the vassal kept the specific stipulations, the suzerain knew the vassal was loyal. When the specific stipulations were violated, however, the suzerain was required by the covenant to take action to punish the vassal. The same basic type of treaty seems to have been employed throughout the Near East, and there is evidence of its use, in simpler form, in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium. In Egypt, there is some evidence to suggest that the treaty form was employed not only in relation to external vassal states, but also in relation to foreign (labor) groups within Egypt. Both the suzerain-vassal treaties and the covenant which was established at Mount Sinai follow a similar pattern.

The Israelites adapted the Near Eastern vassal treaty form for their own use in order to express the nature of their relationship to YHVH. For many years they were in effect vassals to Egypt, but that old bondage was brought to an end in the **Exodus** for Egypt. Being liberated from bondage to an earthly power, they then submitted themselves in the Sinai Covenant to become vassals of **God**, the one who had liberated them from Egypt. The nature of this new submission, expressed in the covenant, finds its dramatic expression in the form of a treaty. While other smaller states might serve Egypt, or the Hittite Empire as vassals, **the Israelites** owned **their** allegiance only to **their** suzerain **God**. This treaty, in which their covenant was set, finds striking expression in the book of **Deuteronomy** as a whole; in broad outline, the treaty of the book may be described as follows:

1. Preamble (1:1-5): Deuteronomy opens in a similar way to the Hittite suzerainty treaties, but in a distinctive manner: **These are the words that Moses spoke to all Isra'el (1:1).** The formal similarities are clear, but the difference in substance is noteworthy; the book does not open with the words of **the LORD**, the true **King of Isra'el**. The human words are those of **Moshe**. This difference does not mean that **Moshe** was in effect the king of **Isra'el**; however, it points to his role as the spokesman or prophet of **YHVH**. **He** was the first of a distinguished line of prophets in **Isra'el**. And, in the last verses

of the book, when **Moses** had died, it was said that there had not been a prophet like **him** since then; what distinguished **Moshe** was that **he** was a man **whom ADONAI knew face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10)**.

There is a further aspect to the prophetic role of **Moses** in **Deuteronomy**. In **Deuteronomy 18:15-22**, there is a description of the nature of prophecy, but the passage is in itself prophetic in foreshadowing another **Prophet** who was to come. As **Moses** was **the first prophet** in the covenant community founded at Sinai, so too **Yeshua** had a prophetic role in the inauguration of the B'rit Chadashah. During the early ministry of John the Immerser, he was asked if he was **the prophet** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click BI - John the Baptist Denies Being the Messiah**), and he answered negatively. John was only a forerunner. **Yeshua** was the coming **Prophet**, but **He** was more than a **prophet**. Therefore, in the TaNaKh, the opening words were those of **Moses**, representing **the true King of Isra'el**; in the B'rit Chadashah, the Kingdom was inaugurated by **the King Himself**.¹³

2. Historical Prologue (1:6 to 4:49): The history in the biblical tradition does not, however, have the same meanings as do modern concepts of history. Biblical history isn't merely an unbroken record of the causes and effects of different nations, rather, biblical history reflects the will of **YHVH**. **The historical prologue provides the basis upon which the covenant between Ha'Shem and His people is remembered. But it embraces both the past and the future.** Because **[God] is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8)**, when we look at how **ADONAI** treated **Isra'el** (and us) in the past, we can be confident of how **the LORD** will treat **Isra'el** (and us) in the future. In other words, the past pictures the faithfulness of **God** within the relationship and holds the promise for the continuation of that relationship. Conversely, the past may remind **the people** of their lack of faithfulness, or the unfaithfulness of their ancestors, and it may therefore impress upon them more urgently the need to live godly lives to receive the blessings of the covenant relationship.¹⁴

3. General Stipulations (Chapters 5 to 11): The entire generation that left Egypt in the Exodus was now dead and **the covenant** needed to be renewed for a new generation. The renewing of **the covenant** thus consisted of a new commitment of **love** to **ADONAI**. The nation of **Isra'el** was not based on any human ruler, or no democratically elected government, but on the living **God**. In **Deuteronomy** the basic principle underlying the relationship between **YHVH** and **His people** is stated and then worked out in some detail in the address of **Moshe**. It was in **love** that the covenant was initiated by **YHVH** in the first place and it was by **love** that **the people** were to maintain **their** close relationship to **the**

LORD. The stipulation is first stated in the Ten Commandments (**5:6-21**), and secondly that **His people** must **love Him** with **their** whole being (**6:5**). In the remaining portions of the general stipulations, love is a recurring theme, both **God's love** for mankind and the **love** mankind must have for **God**.

The imagery used to picture the principle of **love** is that of a father's **love** for his **son**, which has two characteristics. This fatherly **love** may be expressed in **YHVH's** compassionate care for **His people** as in **1:31**, or it may be expressed in **His** disciplining **them** as in **8:5**. Both of these are aspects of fatherly **love**. The command to **love**, however, does not reduce the covenant to a legalistic relationship. **Love** must be a response toward **the LORD** from the heart, **the love of God** and **the love for God**.

Love, the basic principle of the covenant, finds its expression in the Ten Commandments, which is the constitution of the state of Isra'el whose king is YHVH. In other words, love was not simply a principle or abstract concept; it was given clear expression in the commandments, which showed the way in which man's love for ADONAI and for his fellow man must be given expression. The Ten Commandments, then, were vital to the continued welfare and existence of the Israelites. Therefore, to break the Ten Commandments was to disrupt the relationship of love. And if there was no love, there could be no covenant.¹⁵

4. Specific Stipulations (Chapters 12 to 26): The details contained in the specific stipulations are in many ways the most distant and foreign elements of **Deuteronomy** to the modern reader. The matters touched on in the exposition of the commandments are numerous and varied; some appear to be of the greatest importance, while others seem to be relatively insignificant. There appears to be a mixture of ceremonial, religious, civil and criminal law. No area of human living is immune with respect to the covenant.

In the modern world, a distinction may often be made between the religious and the secular, or the sacred and the sinful. To **Isra'el**, such a distinction would be merely artificial, not because there was no distinction in the spheres of life within which the commandments operated, but because all of life was under the dominion of **YHVH, the Master** of the covenant. Consequently, the broad scope of **the specific stipulations** is significant. They do not cover every possible thing that could arise in human living; however, they indicate by their diversity that no area of life is irrelevant or unimportant to the members of the covenant community. Individual responsibility was vital, not only for his or her own well-being, but also because each individual's actions were part of the whole community. The whole was endangered by the sins of its members. If a crime was committed and the criminal were not brought to justice, the whole community was responsible to deal with the

wickedness that had been done and to seek the forgiveness of **the LORD**. **Therefore, you will purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in ADONAI's sight (21:9).**

The significance of **the specific stipulations** (see [Cr](#) - **The Second Address: The Stipulations of the Covenant**) emerges in the relationship between **Ha'Shem** and **His people**. **The people** declared that **ADONAI** was **their God (26:18)**, and **God** promised that **He** would set **His people** above all nations, and that **they** would be a holy **people**, set apart for **His** purposes **(26:19)**. **The people's** declaration was not simply a statement of fact, but a submission to the obedience to the 613 commandments of **ADONAI**. It was in this section that **Moshe** warns against false teachers and false doctrines. **He** cautioned **them** against idolatry. Obedience was necessary, for **their** declaration would be null and void if **their** lives did not reflect the reality of the declaration. To declare that **ADONAI** was **their God** and then not walk-the-talk would be more than hypocrisy in the eyes of the world. It would drag the name of **YHVH** through the mud. **Therefore, the object of the specific stipulations is the maintenance of a true and living relationship with the LORD of the covenant.**¹⁶

5. Blessings and Curses (Chapters 27-28): These chapters provide a somber tone to the book of **Deuteronomy**. The emphasis is placed on the **curses** rather than on the **blessings**, which function as a solemn warning to those who renewed their allegiance to the **God** of the covenant. **It was no light matter to enter into a relationship with Ha'Shem.** The perspective within which the **blessings** and **curses** are set is that of the whole community as a whole; obedience to the **God** of the covenant would result in **blessing**, long life, and the possession of the Promised Land, while disobedience would lead to disaster. As a result, when **Isra'el** renewed its covenant with **the LORD**, the bright prospect of a future with **ADONAI** was contrasted with the bleak despair of a future without **Him**. By emphasizing the **curses**, **Moses** brought home to **his people** the awesome responsibility of the commitment **they** were making.

The darkness of the picture given by the emphasis on the curses in **Deuteronomy** is clarified by the words Paul wrote to the **Galatians**. He quotes **Deuteronomy 27:26**, everyone who does not live out all 613 commandments of the five books of **Moshe** comes under a curse. The paradigm of ancient **Isra'el** finds **herself** in the emphatic expression, **for all who rely on the deeds of the Torah are under a curse - for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not keep doing everything written in the scroll of the Torah" (Galatians 3:10).**

Where, then, is hope to be found? How can mankind be redeemed from **the curse of the Torah**? Paul provides that answer by quoting **Deuteronomy** once again and applying the passage to **Yeshua. Messiah liberated us from Torah's curse, having become a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13).** Through the death and resurrection of **Yeshua Messiah**, the **blessing** of **ADONAI** may be set before mankind again.¹⁷ The Jewish people are still living out these **blessings** and **curses**, and that will not stop until the Great Tribulation and the Second Coming of **Yeshua Messiah**.

6. Witnesses (see **30:19** and **31:28**): provisions for the continuity of the covenant and a successor for **Moses**. The calling of **witnesses** was a regular feature of the suzerain-vassal treaty. The gods of the two parties to the treaty were normally invoked as witnesses. In **Deuteronomy**, it is **YHVH Himself** who speaks, and because there are no other gods to call upon as **witnesses**, **the LORD** called upon **heaven and earth** to **witness (4:26)**. **In the presence of witnesses the choice before Isra'el is declared, life or death, blessing or cursing.** The final decision was **Isra'el's** to make. It was a free choice of a free people. **Moshe** made sure that **the words** of this scroll were written down so that future generations would not lose sight of it, and would continue to have access to it. **He** commanded **Joshua**, and those leaders who would come after **him**, to put **the scroll** into the Ark of the Covenant. **Moses** knew that **their** apostasy would certainly come and their exile into the diaspora would be a reality for them. So, he did not want **the Word of God** to slip away from **the Jewish people**. But the inevitable falling away was inevitable, but especially the time **Messiah** made **His** appearance on earth. So far away were **they** from **the Word of God** that **they** didn't recognize **the Word** made flesh.

In addition to **the heavens and the earth**, and **scroll of the Torah (31:26)**, **YHVH** gave **the Song of Moshe (31:1-43)** as a **witness** to all **the children of Isra'el**. All the witnesses were given to remind **Ha'Shem** and **Isra'el** of **their** mutual commitments. This song recites **the LORD's** many gracious acts on **their** behalf, as well as **His** demand for absolute loyalty. Any long-term departure from genuine obedience would invite the wrath of covenantal cursing.¹⁸

While the structure of this covenant was similar to the suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient Near East, it was much longer and much more personal since it comes from a loving **God**. And as opposed to the other books of **the Torah**, here we see a **Moshe** that is very active and fervent. It is in this book we see **him** as **the good shepherd**. **A man** who is so concerned with **his** flock that **he** gives a series of emotional and compassionate farewell messages. This is contrasted with the book of **Leviticus**, where **Moses** took the back seat

and merely reported the words of **God**. But here in **Deuteronomy**, **he** acts as a rabbi.

The book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Moshe, is therefore a literary account of the renewal of the covenant which ADONAI gave to Isra'el on the plains of Mo'ab.