



CROSSWAYS®

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SECTION

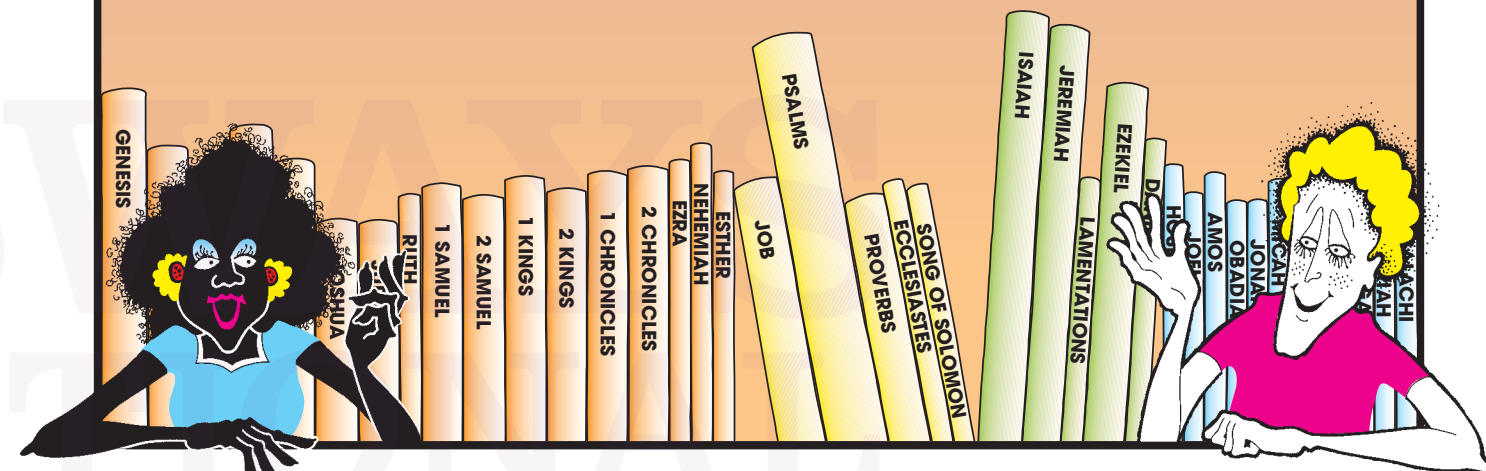
UNITS 1-10

**From Creation
to the Transjordan**

UNIT 8

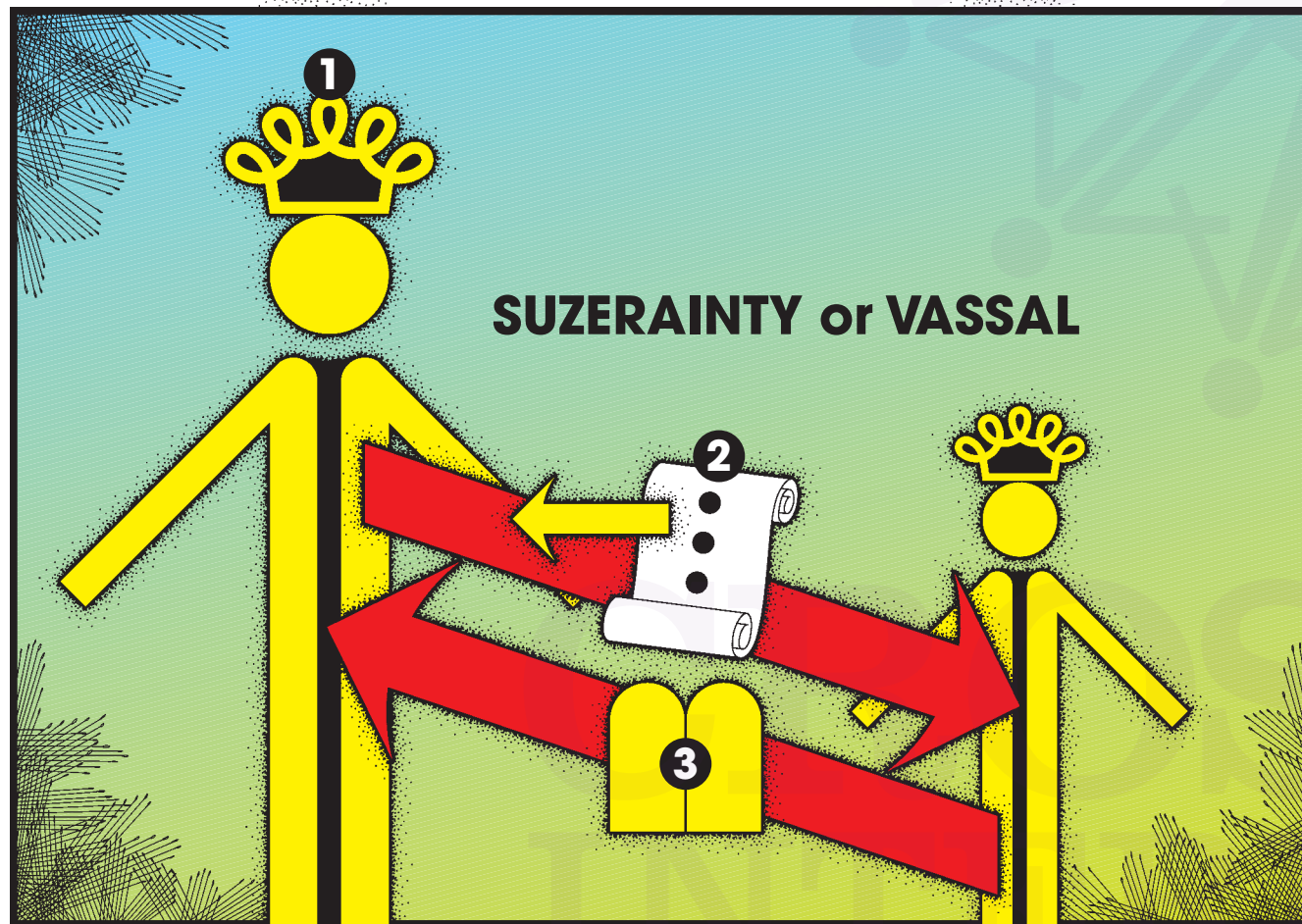
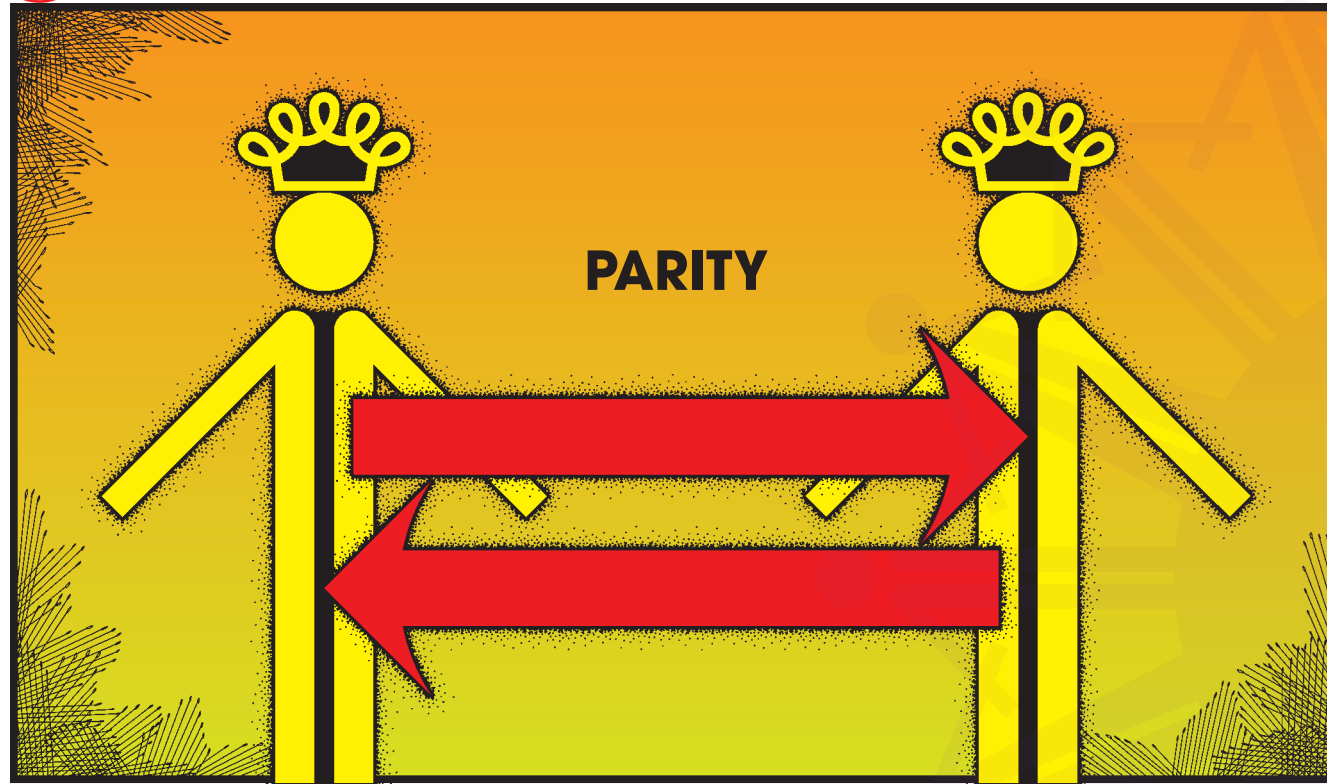
The Covenant at Sinai

Covenant: The Key to Understanding God's Relationship with Humanity



CROSSWAYS
INTERNATIONAL

HITTITE TREATY FORMS



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Help from Archaeology

Down through the millennia, nations, rulers, groups, and individuals have made agreements or covenants with each other—and still do. Archaeologists have unearthed examples of these ancient covenants.

ILLUSTRATION 8A depicts two kinds of covenant forms discovered by archaeologists in 1931. These covenant forms, inscribed on stone tablets, were used long ago by an ancient people called the Hittites who lived in the region now known as Turkey. (Genesis 23 refers to Abraham buying a field and burial cave from Ephron the Hittite.)

Upper section

PARITY Treaty

The word parity indicates that **two rulers of equal rank** made this kind of treaty with one another. This treaty was an *agreement*, a *two-way affair*, because both parties discussed, and agreed to, its contents.

Lower section

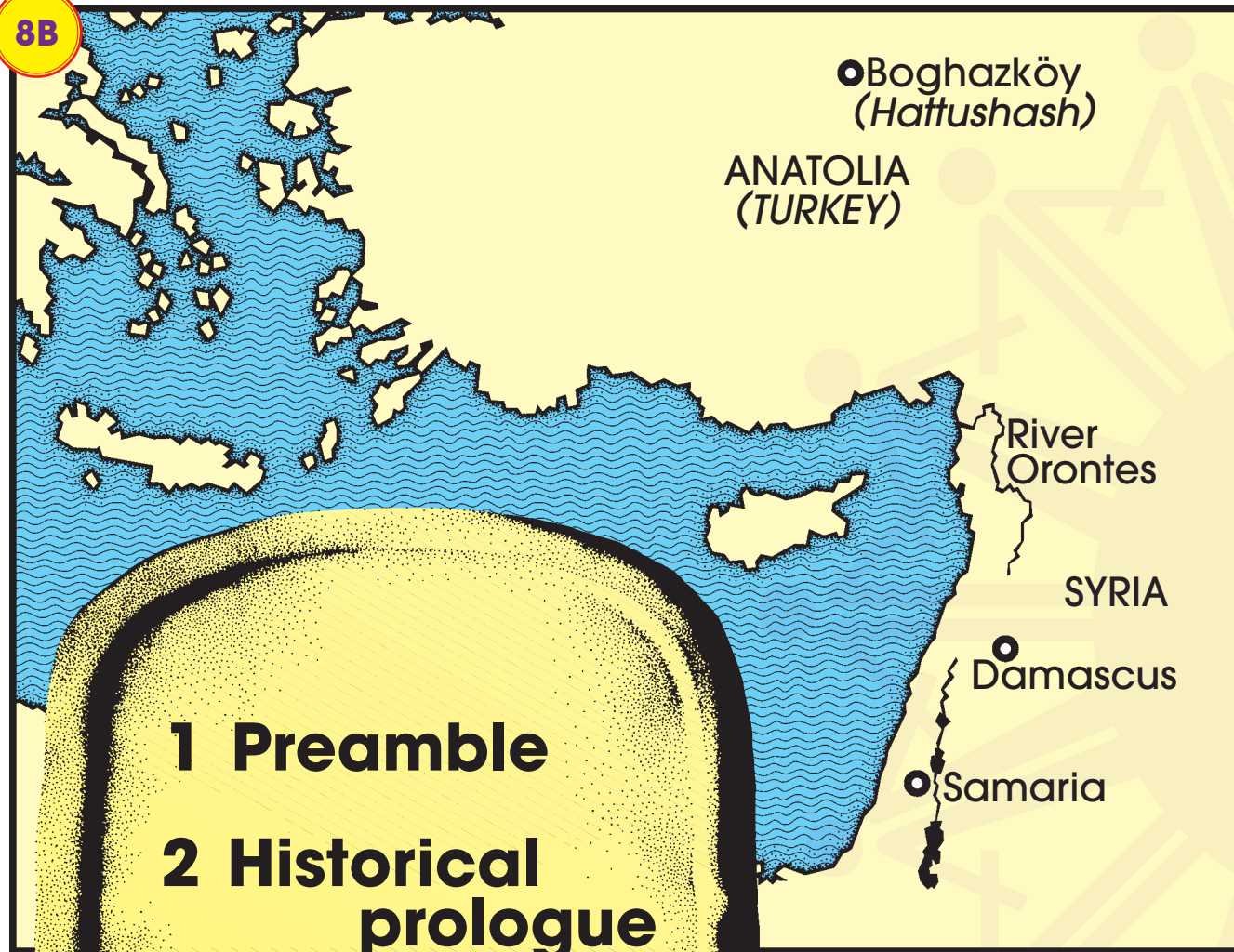
SUZERAINTY or VASSAL Treaty

This treaty was made by a powerful king or *suzerain* (**large crowned figure**) with a less important ruler or *vassal* (**small crowned figure**). It was not an agreement. The suzerain drew it up, and imposed it on the vassal. The sequence of thoughts underlying this treaty was as follows:

- ❶ The *suzerain* introduced and described himself to the *vassal*.
- ❷ The suzerain listed his past acts of generosity and kindness toward the vassal (**scroll, three dots, arrow pointing to the past**).
- ❸ The suzerain told the vassal in detail how he, the vassal, was to live and act (**law-codes**).

In the ancient non-biblical world, these treaties or covenants were always made between *people or nations*—never between *a god and a nation*, or between *a god and a person*.

The Bible, however, refers to *God* making a covenant with *Israel* at Sinai—a covenant whose structure resembles that of a Hittite suzerainty treaty.



1 Preamble

2 Historical prologue

3 Stipulations

4 Preservation & re-reading

5 Witnesses

6 Blessings & curses



The Structure of a Hittite Treaty

A Hittite SUZERAINTY or VASSAL Treaty

The treaty patterns inscribed on tablets unearthed by archeologists in 1931 were found in the ruins of ancient *Boghazköy* near *Hattushash* in present-day *TURKEY* (whose ancient name was *ANATOLIA*). The treaty pattern usually contains six parts—although not every treaty discovered contains all six. What follows is a simplified version of a suzerainty treaty made by a Hittite king, Mursilis, with a vassal king named Duppi-Tesub, ruler of Amurru land (that is, the land of the Amorites—later, the Syrians).

1 Preamble

I am the great king Mursilis, the king of Hatti land, the valiant, the favorite of the storm-god, the great king, the king of Hatti land, the valiant.

2 Historical prologue

My forefathers and I have always treated you and your forefathers well. We have protected you, been loyal to you, treated you justly, and have done nothing to arouse your anger. When your father died, I did not desert you but put you on the throne in your father's place, and made sure that your next of kin would be obedient to you.

3 Stipulations

You have taken oaths toward me and my next of kin. Remain true to them. You shall pay me the same tribute your father paid. You are not to try to make private arrangements with other nations. My friends must also be your friends, and my enemies your enemies. When you hear of others plotting against me, you are to let me know. When my land is under attack, you must come to my aid. When fugitives from my land flee to your land, you must take them into custody and return them to me.

4 Preservation and Re-reading

A copy of this treaty has been deposited in the temple of Hatti land before the sun-goddess. Another copy has been placed in the temple of your land before Tesub. It is to be read to you at regular intervals.

5 Witnesses

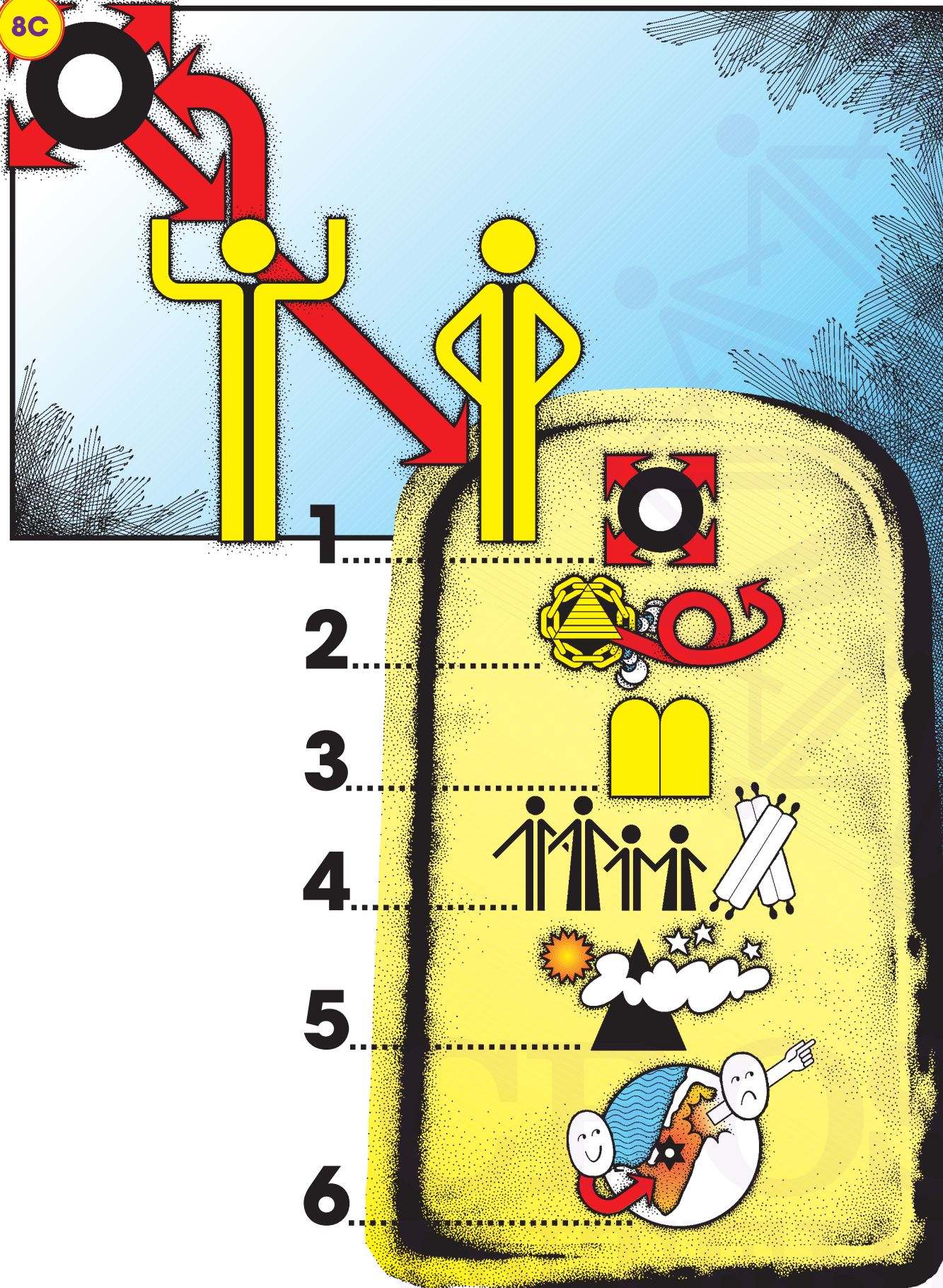
We call upon the gods to assemble in our presence and to witness what is written in this treaty. (Two lists of gods are then given: first those of the Hittites, and then those of Amurru land.)

6 Blessings and Curses

If Duppi-Tesub does not honor the treaty and oath written in this treaty, may the gods destroy Duppi-Tesub together with his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land, and everything he owns. But if Duppi-Tesub honors the words of this treaty and the oaths that are inscribed on this tablet, may the gods of the oath protect him and his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, and his country.

Lower right

This image is based on a carved relief showing a Hittite king (*right*) pouring a libation before a storm-god (*left*).

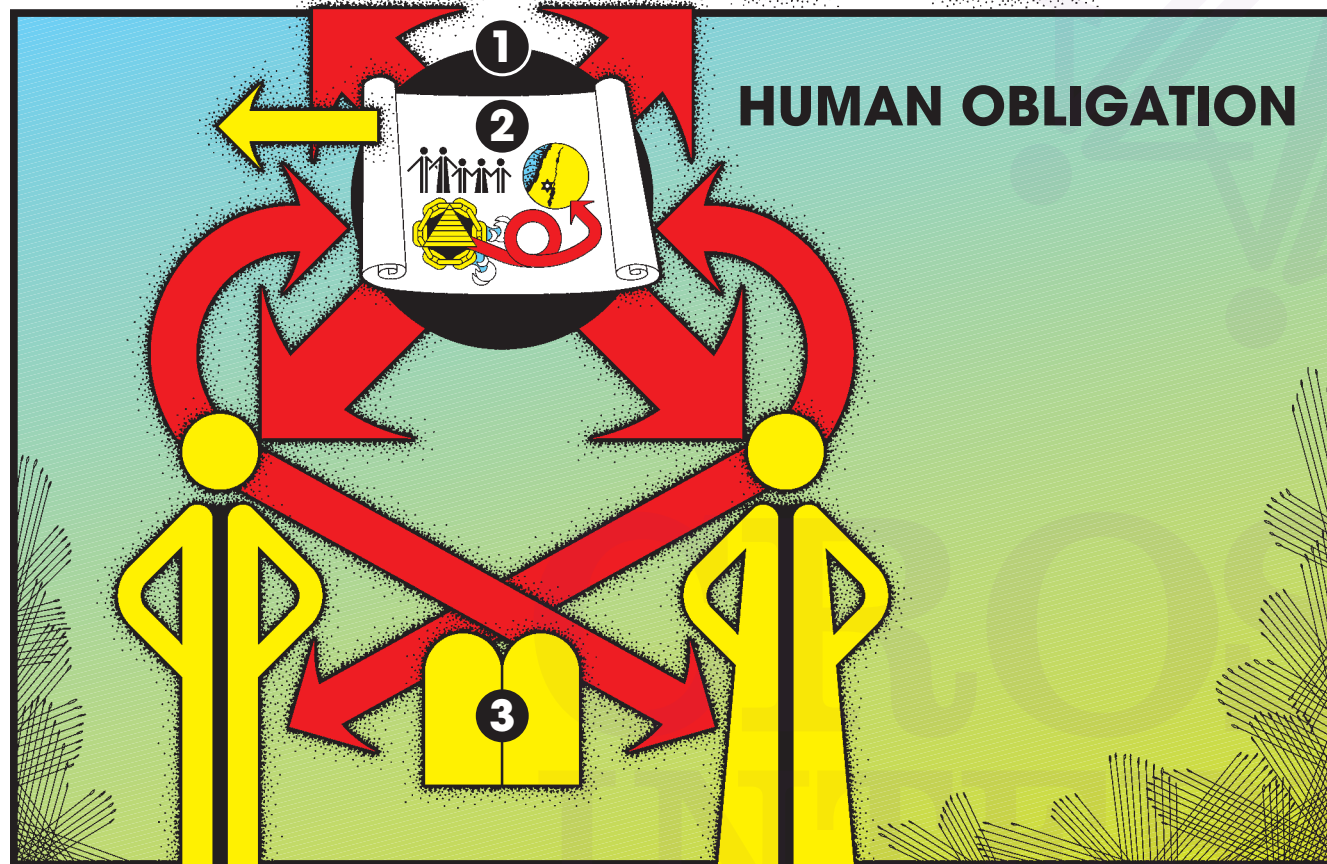
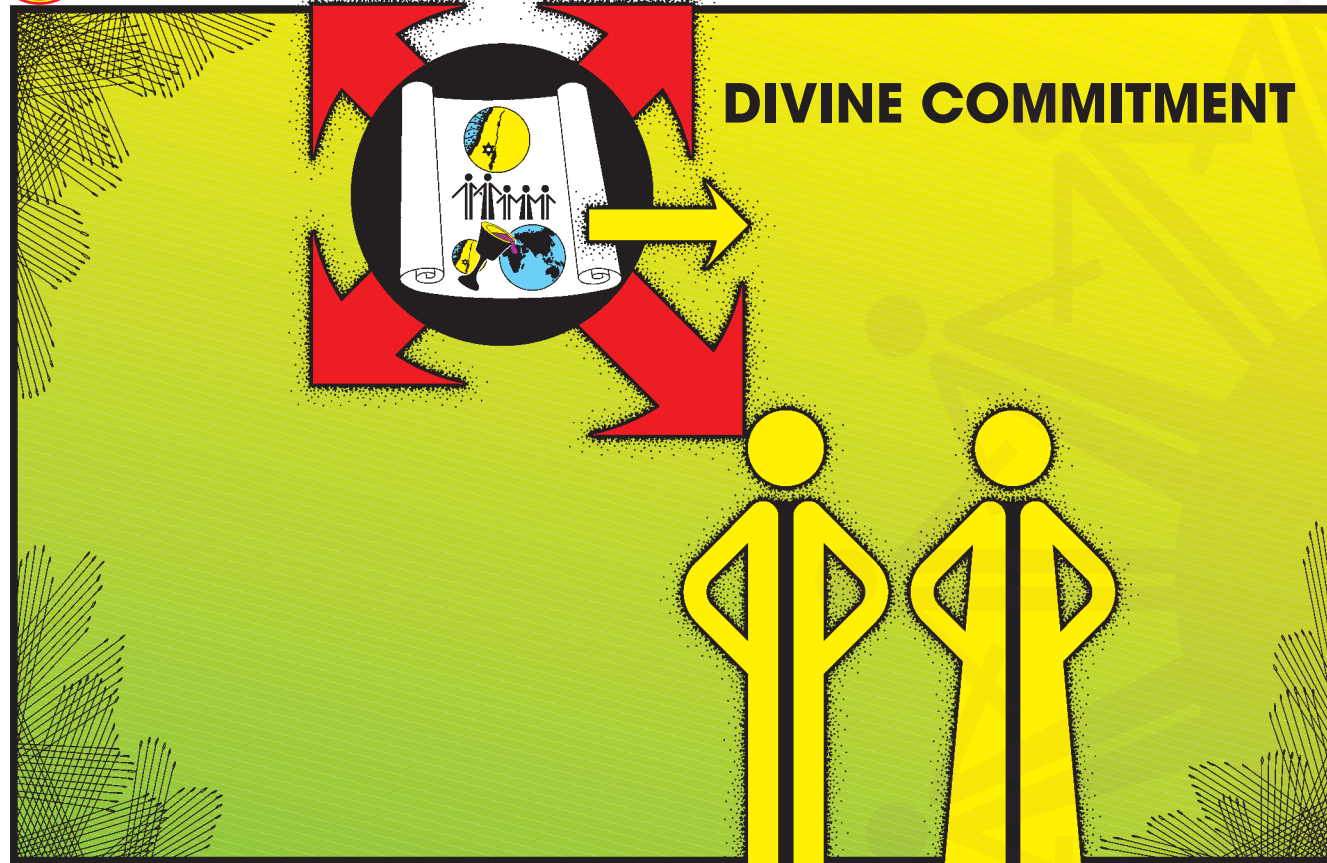


The Structure of the Sinai Covenant

There are obvious similarities between the structure of Hittite Suzerainty or Vassal Treaties, and that of the Sinai Covenant. Admittedly, a complete example of a Covenant of Human Obligation cannot be found within the compass of a few verses in a single chapter in the Bible. However, portions of it occur so frequently in the Old Testament writings that one can only conclude that the Sinai Covenant parallels the Hittite form in spirit. To illustrate:

- 1 Preamble**
God tells the people who God is: "I am the Lord your God," Exodus 20:2a (*symbol for God*).
- 2 Historical prologue**
God tells the people what He has done for them: "...who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," Exodus 20:2b (*Egyptian pyramid, arrow through chains and water, circular arrow denoting journey through wilderness and entry into the Promised Land*).
- 3 Commandments (or Stipulations)**
God tells the people what God expects them to do in response, Exodus 20:3–17. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy contain several collections of these commandments, or *law-codes*. The people's obedience is not to be an attempt to *affect* (or, *bring about*) a relationship with God; the people's obedience is rather to *reflect* the relationship God has established with them. **The people are to serve one another as God has served them**, Deuteronomy 16:12 (top left).
- 4 Preservation and Re-reading**
The covenant is to be written and stored (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 4:13; 31:9, 24–26), read and taught to present and future generations of Israelites (Deuteronomy 6:6–9; 31:10–13), and obeyed (*parents with children, scrolls*).
- 5 Witnesses**
Witnesses watch over the covenant to ensure that it is kept, Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; Joshua 24:22, 27. In non-Israelite covenant forms, the gods are called on to serve as witnesses to the covenants which earthly kings made with each other. In Israel, the forces of nature (*sun, stars, mountain, cloud*) and the people themselves serve as witnesses to the covenant God made with His people.
- 6 Blessings and Curses**
God tells the people that if they take God's covenant with them seriously, all will go well with them (*smiling face*) in Canaan (*arrow pointing to the Promised Land*), Deuteronomy 28:1–14. God also tells them that if they do not take the covenant seriously, things will go badly for them (*sad face*), Deuteronomy 27:15–26; Joshua 8:34. Not only that, but they will lose the land to a foreign power and be taken into exile (*hand pointing to a distant land*), Deuteronomy 28:15–68. See also Exodus 23:20–33; Leviticus 26.

BIBLICAL COVENANT FORMS



Abraham and Sinai Covenants Compared

God took the initiative in making both covenants, and both flow from God's grace. However, it is important to understand how these two covenants differ from each other. **ILLUSTRATION 8D** depicts the differences.

Upper section

The Covenant with Abraham: DIVINE COMMITMENT

This was a *one-way* affair, from God to Abraham. Abraham contributed nothing; he merely received. In the covenant with Abraham, God formed a *people*.

It contained future promises (*yellow arrow pointing forward; scroll depicting God's promises of land, offspring, and blessings to the nations*).

From God's perspective, it was meant to be *permanent*. God remains faithful to His promises.

God made a similar covenant with David, 2 Samuel 7:1–17. In the covenant with David, God promised a *dynasty* (a line of kings) to rule over Abraham's descendants, the Israelites. Although the word "forever" is used a number of times in 2 Samuel 7, the Davidic line of kings came to an apparent end when King Jehoiachin and King Zedekiah were taken into exile in Babylon in 597 and 587 B.C., and eventually died there. The dynasty was restored in a radical manner when Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David, was born in Bethlehem, Matthew 1:1.

A very important word shows up frequently with regard to the covenants with Abraham and David. That word is "*if*"; see 1 Kings 2:4; 9:4,6. God will remain true to His promises; however, *if the people worship other gods*, they will sever their relationship with the God of the patriarchs and the Exodus. They will lose the Promised Land, Jerusalem, the Temple, the Davidic dynasty, and their status as God's people, 1 Kings 9:1–9.

Lower section

The Covenant of Sinai: HUMAN OBLIGATION

- ❶ This covenant was a *two-way* affair. God *made* it; Israel was to *respond* to it.
- ❷ In this covenant, God made no future promises. God merely listed what He had done for the Israelites in the past (*yellow arrow pointing backward; scroll depicting the Exodus from Egypt, and God's promises of offspring and land*).
- ❸ It contained commandments (*law-codes*). The people were to respond to God's goodness by serving God and one another within the community (*arrows from each person to God and neighbor*).

Israel could always break the covenant God made with them at Sinai by *persistent disobedience*—by breaking the law-codes that were part and parcel of that covenant, Deuteronomy 8:11–20, 28:15–68.

A Closer Comparison

8E

An understanding of the similarities between the Hittite suzerainty treaty and the Sinai covenant form can prove helpful. In what follows, reference is made first to the Hittite form, and then to the biblical form.

1 Preamble

The treaty is between a major power, the Hittites, and a subordinate kingdom, Amurru. Only the Hittite king is called “great.” It is his treaty, not in the sense that he is expected to obey it, but in the sense that he granted it.

Biblical form:

The great Lord God of the universe says to little Israel, “This is who *I am*,” Exodus 20:2.

2 Historical prologue

The relationship between the Hittites and Amurru is outlined, going back a generation or two. Emphasis is placed on the kindness of the Hittite king, a factor designed to base the relationship between the two parties on something other than force.

Biblical form:

After rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, God says, “This is what *I have done for you*,” Exodus 20:2.

3 Commandments (or Stipulations)

The Hittite king does not suggest that he is in any way under obligation to the vassal. He merely outlines his *past* actions on the vassal’s behalf and assures him that his patronage will continue. The stipulations place the obligation to be loyal and obedient *on the vassal*.

Biblical form:

In giving the commandments, God says, “This is what *I expect of you* in response,” Exodus 20:3–17.

4 Preservation and Re-reading

The treaty is placed in the chief shrine of each land so that the gods, aware of the oath sworn in their presence, can remind the parties involved to remember its contents. From time to time, it is to be read to the vassal king.

Biblical form:

God’s will is: “Write, store, read, and heed the covenant.” (See Deuteronomy 6:1–9.)

5 Witnesses

The overlord’s gods are mentioned first; they are the most numerous and powerful. The gods of the vassal are mentioned second; they are fewer in number and less powerful. In some treaties, things of nature also served as witnesses.

Biblical form:

God says, “I see and know all that you do in relation to My covenant. Take it seriously.”

6 Blessings and curses

If the vassal takes the covenant seriously, things will go well with him. If he proves disobedient, he and all that is his will be destroyed.

Biblical form:

God says, “Your well-being depends on what you do with the covenant I made with you at Mt. Sinai. If you take it seriously, you will be blessed,” Deuteronomy 28:1–14. “If you persist in breaking it, you will be cursed,” Deuteronomy 28:15–68, Leviticus 26.

The Covenant with Abraham

8F

A ROYAL GRANT Treaty

The covenant with Abraham also has a prototype in the Ancient Near Eastern world—a prototype known as a *Royal Grant Treaty*. In this kind of treaty, someone with power and influence gives property or authority to a lesser person. The elements of the Royal Grant Treaty are similar to those found in the Sinai covenant. It usually contains an additional section, as defined in part seven below.

1 Preamble

The donor introduces himself by name and title; see Genesis 15:7, 17:1.

2 Historical prologue

The past relations of the donor and the recipient are described. The reasons for the grant being made are stated. Either the donor is rewarding the recipient for services rendered, or the donor wishes to further his own political agenda; see Genesis 15:6; 26:5.

3 Stipulations

If the recipient is a privileged vassal, the stipulations are formulated in the vassal’s interest, e.g., the gift is made to the vassal in perpetuity. If the recipient is a less important person, the stipulations are written to the advantage of the donor, e.g., the recipient will lose the gift if he betrays the donor; see Genesis 15:4,5; 17:8.

4 Preservation and Re-reading

The details are similar to those in section four of a Hittite Suzerainty Treaty.

5 Witnesses

The details are again similar to those in section five of a Hittite Suzerainty Treaty.

6 Blessings and curses

The interests of the recipient are protected. Any party who interferes with the recipient is declared cursed. The donor may even include a self-directed curse, to take effect if the donor violates the terms of the grant.

7 Specifications of the Granted Territory

The donor defines the boundaries of the grant; see Genesis 15:18–21; 17:8.



1 Covenant, a Key Concept

The word “covenant” occurs frequently in the Bible. In addition to the covenants with Abraham and Israel, God made covenants with *Noah* (Genesis 9), *Phinehas* (Numbers 25:10–13), and *David*, 2 Samuel 7. Furthermore, the Genesis narrative speaks of both Abraham (21:27,32) and Isaac making covenants with *Abimelech*, 26:28.

2 The Covenant with Noah

The Covenant with Noah follows the creation and flood narratives, Genesis 9. God promises that never again will the “windows of the heavens” and the “fountains of the great deep” (Genesis 7:11) open to allow the cosmic waters to flood the habitable regions of the earth. The stage on which the ensuing divine drama is to be played out is secure.

3 Covenant Sealing Ceremonies

- The Hebrew term for making a covenant means literally “to cut a covenant”; see Jeremiah 34:18. Genesis 15:7–21 describes God—after making a solemn covenant promise to Abraham—passing between the halves of animals cut in two. (See 5C.)
- Isaac and Abimelech concluded a covenant agreement by sharing a meal together, Genesis 26:30.
- Other ceremonies were used in making and sealing a covenant. Both parties drank from a common cup, or made use of oil or water in rituals in which they either drank the water or smeared the oil on their skin. Possibly these rituals were enacted statements which declared: “If I break the covenant, may the curses enter my body as does this water (or oil).” See Psalm 109:18; Hosea 12:1; Jeremiah 2:18.

4 Covenant Ratification Ceremonies

The ceremony outlined in Exodus 24:1–8 appears to be a covenant ratification ceremony. An altar is built. Animals are sacrificed and some of their blood is sprinkled on the altar. Moses reads the book of the covenant to the people—who respond with a pledge of obedience. Moses then flings the remainder of the blood over the people. Apparently the ritual signified the uniting of the two parties involved in the covenant: God and the people. The use of blood reflected the view that blood (which is believed to contain life) is efficacious in establishing a relationship between God and humanity, Deuteronomy 27:5–8; Joshua 8:31–35; Mark 14:24; 1 Corinthians 11:25.

After the covenant ratification ceremony referred to in Exodus 24:1–8, Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s two sons, and seventy elders go up the slopes of Sinai, see the God of Israel, and share a meal with Him, Exodus 24:9–11. Later, Moses experiences a *theophany* (symbols of God’s heavenly presence), Exodus 24:15–18; see Luke 9:28–36.

5 Covenant Renewal Ceremonies

These played an important role in the life of the Israelites. Their purpose was to keep the faith alive and vital within the community, and to give each Israelite an opportunity to give personal assent to the covenant, Joshua 8:30–35; 24:1–28.

6 Covenant Reparation Ceremonies

The people held these when they became aware that they were guilty of some serious breach of the covenant, 2 Kings 23:1–3. Their purpose was to avert, if possible, the threatened and impending doom.



7 Covenant Confirmation Ceremonies

These were held in times of national crisis—for example, after the death of an important leader when power was transferred to a successor, 1 Samuel 12; 2 Kings 11:17–20; 2 Chronicles 23:16–21. Nehemiah 9 speaks of covenant observances in connection with a reform movement undertaken by exiles who returned from Babylon.

8 To Last—or Not to Last?

When God made a covenant with *Abraham*, He committed Himself to future actions on His people’s behalf without imposing expectations and obligations on them. The covenant with Abraham gave the Israelites hope and confidence. No matter what Israel’s condition, there was always reason for hope. Although the people had been unfaithful to God and had run after other gods, the hope remained that He would remember His initial promises and receive them back into fellowship with Himself.

9 Revocable

The covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai was different in implication. It placed obligations on Israel. Failure to live up to it could have dire consequences. God would revoke the covenant, and the curses spelled out in the covenant structure would overwhelm the nation. *This conviction lay at the very core of the proclamations of the prophets.*

10 The Land

The book of Deuteronomy insists that the Promised Land was and remained the Lord’s property. Behind this attitude lay a deep understanding of the significance of property and of the obligations associated with its use. Israel’s sojourn in Canaan was not necessarily permanent. The Israelites were a tenant people and could lose the land if they persisted in breaking the Sinai covenant, Deuteronomy 4:25–28; 5:32,33; 11:13–17; 28:1–68. See also Leviticus 25:23,24; Jeremiah 2:7; Hosea 9:3.

