Covenants in the Ancient Near East

Sheila E. McGinn, Ph.D.
What is a Covenant?

- A formal agreement between two parties
- Witnessed by both humans and Deities
- Proclaimed by public reading and “deposit” of treaty in public place
  - Esp., shrines of witnessing Deities
- Sealed by an oath and ritual sacrifice
  - “If I am not faithful to this covenant, may what is done to these animals be done to me.”
Three Kinds of ANE Covenants

- **Suzerainty (or Vassal) Treaty**
  - Agreement between two unequal parties, one of higher status and one of lower status

- **Parity Treaty**
  - Agreement between two parties of equal status

- **Land Grant**
  - Agreement between two unequal parties, one of higher status and one of lower status
Suzerainty (or Vassal) Treaty

- Six parts:
  - Preamble
  - Historical prologue
  - Stipulations
  - Provisions for treaty deposit & public reading
  - List of Divine witnesses to the treaty
  - Blessings & curses (for fidelity or infidelity to the treaty)
A Suzerainty Treaty

An alliance between a great monarch and a subject king

- The overlord is lauded for past favors, but has no explicit duties under the covenant
- The vassal pledges allegiance to the overlord
  - Pay taxes
  - Keep own borders secure
  - Provide military support against overlord’s enemies
  - Make no alliances with other great lords
A Suzerainty Treaty

Marriage was the most common “suzerainty treaty” in the ANE

- Husband has higher social status than wife
- Husband is wife’s “overlord” (*Ba’al*)
  - Wife is to obey husband
  - Wife becomes chattel of husband
  - Wife owns no property; it belongs to husband
  - Wife cannot divorce; only overlord can end treaty
Parity Treaty

- Two parties of equal power and social status
  - Two monarchs forming an alliance for mutual aid
  - Two merchants forming a trade agreement
  - Marriage contract (*ketubah*) between the father of the bride and the groom (NOTE: the bride herself is not of equal status with the groom)
Land Grant

- Free gift of land to faithful subject of a great monarch or servant of a wealthy landowner
- Greater party binds self to the treaty
- Lesser party benefits from the gift, but may not be bound to any specific stipulations, either before or after reception of the land grant
Genesis 2

- What kind of treaty is this?
- What leads you to think so, i.e., what formal characteristics of the passage suggest that it falls into this category?
- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?
Genesis 9:1–17

- What kind of treaty is this?
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Genesis 15

- What kind of treaty is this?
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- What source is behind this story?
- What does your identification of the kind of treaty illustrated here tell you about the source’s view of Israel’s God?
Genesis 17:1–14

- What kind of treaty is this?
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Exodus 24:1–8

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Exodus 34:1–27

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