

## Suzerain-Vassal Treaties and Deuteronomy

### Treaties – Common Elements of Covenants:

- **Preamble** – Identifies the suzerain (great king) and establishes authority over vassal (servant). The introduction of parties – “I am sovereign... you are my subjects.” “I’m great, you are not. You will submit.”
- **Historical Prologue** – Recounts the suzerain’s past acts of benevolence toward the vassal, establishing the basis for loyalty. “Why you need to follow me. . . you should be loyal.”
- **Stipulations** – Lists the obligations and laws the vassal must follow to maintain the covenant, i.e., the things you must do . . . rules, requirements.
- **Blessings/Curses** – Outlines rewards for obedience and consequences for disobedience. Promises “If you obey, things will go well: blessings . . . If you disobey: curses”
- **Witnesses** – Invokes deities or natural elements as witnesses to the treaty’s binding nature, such as the sea. . . rivers. . . , etc.”
- **Document Clause** – Provisions for preserving and publicly reading the treaty to ensure ongoing adherence. covenants were to be written down, read publicly once a year
- **Ratification Ceremony** – Describes rituals or oaths to formalize the covenant.

### Book of Deuteronomy Correspondence (follows a Suzerain-Vassal Treaty format)

- **Preamble** Deut. 1:1 – 5; Introduction of the parties – the Lord and His people, Israel. The Lord will address His people through His servant Moses.
- **Historical Prologue** Deut. 1:6 – 4:44. Reviews God’s history with Israel – delivered you from Egypt, gave you manna, water from a rock, gave you victories over your enemies
- **Stipulations** Deut. 4:44 – 26:19 Giving of the 10 Commandments . . . do not have any other gods before Me; general, specific – tabernacle; how to treat foreigners, widows, etc. clothes; food
- **Blessings/Curses** Deut. 27:1 – 28:68 Two groups: one on Mount Gerizim (blessings), one on Mount Ebal (curses)
- **Witnesses** Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31ff; 32:1 – 47 (the Song of Moses) “I call my servants, Heaven and Earth, to testify as My witnesses.” Also, Moses testifies that God has been true and faithful, so we ought to listen.
- **Document Clause** Deut. 31:9 – 13, etc. Put my covenant down on stone; store it in the Ark of the Covenant. Read it out loud every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles.

## Covenant of Works

When does God enter into a covenant with humanity for the first time? (Genesis 1 and 2)  
He makes it with Adam, even though the word “covenant” does not occur. Hosea 6:7 “Like Adam, they [Israel] transgressed the covenant.”

### Elements of the Covenant in Genesis 1 and 2

- **Preamble:** the Lord, Adam are the parties
  - Contrast the Babylonian version of Creation – battle between the gods
  - Contrast the Egyptian version god who “pleasured himself” and that gave birth to other gods
  - Contrast the Canaanite version storm god Baal, slay the behemoth dragon
  - In Genesis, no struggle between gods, He simply creates “Let there be light, etc.”
  - Pagan gods were lazy and created a race of slaves (people) to do their work
  - In Genesis, God created mankind “let us make mankind in our image.” Read Genesis 1: 24 – 26 & 27 (poetry v. 27 – God is singing!! Also, Genesis 2:23 – Adam is singing!)
- **Historical Prologue:** I gave you a garden, teaming with trees full of fruit, I gave you a helper, etc.
- **Stipulations:** Genesis 2:16 – 17. “. . . free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”
  - What does the tree of the knowledge of good and evil mean? (Refer to Genesis 3:22 “The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”) Knowledge does not mean cognitive awareness. Adam and Eve knew it was wrong. The Hebrew word “know” also means “to decide. God did not want them to take it upon themselves to decide what was good. Adam and Eve had become the “determiners.” They had taken it upon themselves to be “suzerain.” That’s the way they had become “like God.” God wanted them to trust Him; to walk in His ways.
- **Blessings/Curses:** Genesis 2:17
  - Blessing: Continue to trust Me, you will be fine.
  - Curse: “For when you eat from it you will certainly die.” On the day they disobeyed, they died from their holiness, purity, and innocence. . . dead in sin . . . later they would physically die. Death is a curse on a good creation.
- **Witnesses:**
- **Document Clause:**

A mediator is introduced – totally unique concept in Middle Eastern covenant in which the suzerain made a covenant with many, not one. (Mediator: a man who would stand on behalf of the whole.)

In Genesis 1 and 2, God enters into a covenant with one individual who represents everyone else. Therefore, because of what Adam did, the consequences fell upon us all. God knows if we had been in the garden, we would have done the same as Adam.

- Refer to Romans 5:12 Adam, our covenant, head sinned on our behalf. vv. 15 – 17. Two kinds of people in the world: those represented by Adam, those represented by Christ; those “in Adam,” those “in Christ.”

- Through the one act of disobedience, Adam brought death. Through Christ's righteous obedience, we receive life. He completely fulfilled the covenant of works. . . this leads to blessing. (Remember how Satan tempted Him in the wilderness? Jesus did not yield – He is the second Adam; He brings in the new covenant. He obeys God. When God looks at us, He sees His Son who conquers Satan. Jesus is our covenant Mediator.)

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Supplemental Information from Handout:

### **“Suzerain-Vassal Treaty and Deuteronomy Comparison Chart”**

**Context:** The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty format was common in the ancient Near East (e.g., Hittite treaties 14<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century BC). Deuteronomy mirrors this structure, presenting God as the sovereign King and Israel as His covenant people. Suzerain-vassal treaties were formal agreements between a dominant power (suzerain) and subordinate entity (vassal), such as a smaller kingdom, city-state, or tribal group. Unlike parity treaties between equals, these treaties were asymmetrical, with the suzerain imposing terms on the vassal. They were not contracts in the modern sense but acts of grace from the suzerain, defining an existing relationship and reinforcing loyalty through obligations, blessings, and curses.

The treaties served multiple purposes:

- **Political Control:** Endured the vassal's allegiance, preventing alliances with rival powers.
- **Economic Benefits:** Required tributes or resources from the vassal.
- **Military Support:** Obligated the vassal to provide troops or support in conflicts.
- **Cultural and Religious Integration:** Often invoked deities to enforce the treaty, blending political and religious obligations.