

God's Alliance with Man

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The idea of covenant, or *brit*, has long been one of the main ways in which the biblical encounter between man and God is understood. This term has been especially popular among today's political theorists with an interest in Scripture, who have tried to marshal the biblical term for contemporary political applications. But these efforts have, more often than not, only clouded our understanding of the biblical concept of covenant. Invariably they employ anachronistic political theories or much-later understandings about what the word means to interpret the term, and then to read it back into the biblical text.

Daniel J. Elazar's *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel* offers a good example of the problem. Seeking to mine the term for its contemporary implications, Elazar depicts a covenant, following Max Weber,¹ as a bonding agent among members of the Israelite community. Yet the covenant in the Bible is between God and Israel, and any definition that is not built around this relationship must necessarily miss the point. Moreover, Elazar discovers "covenant" at every turn—even in the account of creation—and he attempts to show how the principle of covenant underlies every major story in the Bible. Yet by invoking the principle of "covenant" in so many different instances, Elazar makes a precise definition of the term difficult to

attain.² A more recent work, *The Jewish Political Tradition*, a major compendium of sources and commentaries edited by Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar, likewise eschews any attempt to engage covenant on its own terms within its biblical and ancient Near Eastern contexts.³ Instead, the relevant chapter assesses the covenant narratives in the Bible in light of modern political theories of consent.

Thus, despite the fact that covenant has been widely discussed in modern political thought, it has often been without really addressing the essential question: What is the original, biblical meaning of covenant? As some scholars first noted fifty years ago, the pact between God and Israel bears a strong resemblance to the ancient Near Eastern “suzerainty treaty” between a sovereign king and a subordinate king.⁴ In this essay I will show why this is the correct model for understanding covenant, and flesh out some of the theological implications of the employment of the international treaty metaphor as a paradigm for the relationship between Israel and God.

Whereas much scholarly discussion has focused on the idea of the people of Israel as a collective, and the covenant referring to an entire nation as such enjoined in a covenantal bond with God, I will argue in what follows that within the covenantal narratives human kingship is bestowed not only upon the entire Israelite polity, but upon *each individual member* of that polity as well. God is a king who enters into a treaty not only with the Jewish people as a lesser king, but with each individual Jew, subordinate yet possessing honor and standing in his own right.

The implications of this claim—that subordinate kingship devolves upon the individual no less than the people—may extend far beyond the scholarly debates. The idea of covenant may in fact be indicative of a profound revolution which biblical thinking represented in the ancient world, a revolution which is with us to this day.

II

In order to grasp this revolution, it is necessary to examine the relationship between ancient Near Eastern notions of kingship and the manner in which they are reworked within the biblical covenant between God and Israel. The first step toward this is to explore the royal ideology that surrounded these institutions elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

In his seminal work on the sociology of religion, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger describes religion as a self-interested, politically motivated distortion that masks the construction and exercise of power.⁵ A despot, he argues, could seek to legitimate his control of power by declaring that he was an agent of the gods, and was chosen by them to lead. Yet as Berger notes, ancient cultures took this a major step farther: The political institutions in the earthly realm, they maintained, paralleled heavenly institutions. The institutional order “here below” manifested the divine order of the cosmos “up above,” establishing what Paul Ricoeur called “the logic of correspondences.”⁶ In his account of the parallelism between the earthly political realm and the divine realm, Berger characterizes the activity of human royals as a “mimetic reiteration” that stands in place of a cosmic reality. Royal authority, in essence, mimes the authority of the gods.⁷

Two representative cultures from the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia and Ugarit, each displayed this mimetic dynamic of the logic of correspondences. With regard to the former, it was after the great conquests by Sargon, king of Akkad, in 2300 B.C.E. and by Hammurabi in 1800 B.C.E. that the political structure of the exalted sovereign emerged as the central model of Mesopotamian civilization and was mirrored in its conception of the heavenly realms. Within the earthly realm, the king presided over a vast hierarchy, a pyramid of lesser authorities. And so it was in the supernal realm. The realm of the gods had a king as well—Enlil, who presided over an elaborate pantheon of Mesopotamian gods corresponding to the range of lesser

authorities that served under earthly kings like Sargon and Hammurabi. Enlil, like his earthly counterparts, ruled by delegating responsibilities to lesser dignitaries and functionaries. He presided, like his earthly counterpart, over a large assembly. He, like the earthly king, lived in a palace with his wives, children, and extended “household.”⁸

The mimetic dynamic of the logic of correspondences was evident, too, in Ugarit, a much smaller society that flourished between 1450 and 1200 B.C.E. on the shores of the Mediterranean in what is modern-day Syria. In Ugarit the highest level of association was the family, the clan. Because of its relatively modest size, society in Ugarit consisted of nuclear families within a multi-tiered clan structure. Typically, the structure of the patriarchal household was headed by the oldest male relative, the patriarch, who presided over multiple nuclear families headed by his sons and other male relatives. It was the task of the patriarch to mediate interactions and conflict within the household and to negotiate relations between his household and other households in the society. His ultimate task was to ensure the welfare of the household and to guarantee its perpetuation, its holdings, and its good name.⁹

The structure of the patriarchal family also lay at the root of Ugarit political structures. The sovereign monarch was considered the ultimate father, and in Ugarit, kinship and kingship went hand in hand: To be king over all was also to be father over all. As in Mesopotamia, the power of the central metaphor to legitimate the earthly polity did not imply a reign of tyranny.¹⁰ Here, despotism and benevolence naturally coexisted. On the one hand, the patriarch king had the right to dominate all individuals, goods, and services. Yet in return for filial loyalty came the expectation that the patriarch or king would treat the members of his household with benevolence. The staying power of the construct of the patrimonial household rose from the intra-household loyalty that was at its core.¹¹

The model of the patriarchal household, and of the royal household in particular, was thus integral to the depiction of the divine sphere within Ugaritic texts. The social models for the leading gods manifestly reflected

the patriarchal experience in households, non-royal and royal alike.¹² To use Berger's phrasing, in Ugarit the earthy realm was a mimetic reiteration of the heavenly—a central element in legitimizing the exercise of power.

Other cultures went even further. Instead of articulating a series of correspondences between earthly and heavenly leaders, some cultures went as far as elevating the king to demigod status. Nowhere was this more evident than in Egypt. The metaphysical status of the king is the subject of the best known and the most highly developed of all the Egyptian myths, the myth of Osiris, which relates that the king in ancient Egypt is both the living son and the immediate divine reincarnation of his predecessor.¹³

There is much debate as to the precise nature of the king's divinity in Egypt, but at the very least it seems clear that the king is the visible image of a god and assumes a divine role on earth.¹⁴ Only the king has access to the world of the gods, and indeed he is a ubiquitous figure in scenes of worship inscribed upon temple walls. Like the cult image of the gods, the king was steadfastly hidden from the view of his subjects. When he would enter the public arena, however, he would be surrounded by signs of power and protection, and would represent for the public the presence of the gods. His decrees were considered "the utterances of god himself," his actions "not the work of men."¹⁵

The key player in each of these cosmic narratives is the king and, to a lesser degree, the human hierarchies that surround him. It is thus no surprise that in most cultures of the ancient Near East, power was concentrated in the hands of the king. This routinely included the administration of justice, the capacity to order the remission of debts, service as the high priest, and service as the military commander in chief.

The emphasis upon the king came, perforce, at the expense of the metaphysical role of the people. In Mesopotamia, portents of evil, such as an eclipse or an earthquake, would mandate human action to placate the gods. But the action mandated was solely that of the king. It was only he who would recite prayers, offer sacrifices, or shave his body in obeisance. Nothing was required of the people at large. It was not the people whom

the Mesopotamian gods held accountable, but rather their king. In Egypt this was expressed even in graphical terms: The symbolic representation of the community from the earliest dynasties is simply the figure of the king.¹⁶

III

The proposition of kingship in the Hebrew Bible looks rather different. At first glance, the same “hermeneutic of suspicion” employed by Berger with regard to ancient religion as a tool for the legitimization of power structures might be applied to the biblical description of monarchy, as well, at least in some passages. Yet even in those passages that grant the greatest legitimacy to Davidic rule, some fundamental differences are apparent. For example, in Psalm 2, perhaps the most pro-monarchal of the so-called royal psalms, the identification between God and king is not nearly as strong as was seen elsewhere in the ancient Near East. The claim here is a relatively modest one: The king is legitimate because he has been chosen by God. The concluding phrase of the psalm, in which God says, “You are my son, I have fathered you this day,”¹⁷ does not necessarily imply deification of the king; the phrase “you are my son” is a legal term found in the Code of Hammurabi, implying adoption.¹⁸ “I have fathered you *this day*,” perhaps, implies the adoption of the king by God at the king’s coronation. Certainly, the king as depicted throughout the Bible is not meant to be the “visible image of a god” as in Egypt. Nor does his rule mimetically resemble that of the King of Kings to nearly the extent that we saw in Ugarit and Mesopotamia.

While many biblical passages, such as in Isaiah 6, envision God as a king upon a throne, which implicitly strengthens the institution of kingship, by and large the logic of correspondences between the earthly and heavenly

polities is absent within biblical writing. The anointment of Saul, Israel's first king, in I Samuel 8—in which the prophet capitulates to the popular demand for a king, and God consoles him, saying, “It is not you that they have rejected; it is me they have rejected as their king”—is probably the only account within the annals of ancient Near Eastern historiography that depicts the historical beginnings of the institution of kingship in non-cosmic, even anti-cosmic, terms.¹⁹ In Deuteronomy, it is the people, not God, who are described as responsible in the first place for appointing a king over Israel.²⁰ In a great many biblical passages the king is not deemed necessary for the bond between God and the people. This marks a level of dissociation of a people from its leader in relation to the divine that is found nowhere else in the ancient Near East.²¹

In articulating the relationship between God and Israel through the political concept of covenant, however, the Bible did not merely sideline or even sidestep royal theology as found in the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East. Rather, through covenant, earthly kingship is entirely reworked.

As I suggested above, the pact between God and Israel hews to what is known by scholars as an ancient Near Eastern “suzerainty treaty.”²² The suzerain, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “a sovereign or a state having supremacy over another state which possesses its own ruler or government but cannot act as an independent power.”²³ It is important to stress that in certain circumstances, the vassal state of the ancient Near East retained its autonomy and territorial hegemony and, as we shall see, occupied a place that retained more independence, and perhaps dignity, than suggested by the term “vassal.” For the purposes of clarity, therefore, I shall refer to “the suzerain” simply as “the sovereign” and to “the vassal” as “the subordinate.”

The Bible articulates the relationship between God and Israel as one between a great king and a lesser king engaged in just such a treaty. To understand the extent to which this is really the case, and the theological import deriving from this fact, it is essential to understand the form such

international treaties took and the role they played within the political life of the ancient Near East. Letters of correspondence among kings attest to the fact that treaties between states abounded in all ages of the period. Yet we possess actual treaty texts in any significant number from only two eras: The Hittite kingdom of Anatolia from the Late Bronze Age (roughly the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries B.C.E.); and the Assyrian empire in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. There are significant differences in terms of form, tone, and content between these two collections. A vast scholarship has emerged over the last fifty years that seeks to compare these two bodies of literature and biblical covenant passages, and a vigorous debate has arisen as to whether various covenantal passages more closely resemble the Hittite material or the Neo-Assyrian ones. There is a consensus today that the fullest illumination of the biblical texts in question may be drawn by invoking both bodies of treaty literature.²⁴

For the purposes of elucidating the meaning of covenant in this essay, we will focus on the parallels that may be drawn from some eighteen Hittite treaties.²⁵ Although the Hittite kingdom of Anatolia was not contiguous with the Israelite kingdoms, the very nature of political treaties, however, is that they are cross-cultural, and thus it is reasonable to assume that they reflect underlying conceptions and phraseology that were shared by other cultures of the ancient Near East. The underlying axiom at play as we compare the Hittite treaties to the biblical covenant is not that the Hittite treaties *per se* served as a template for the composition of the Sinai and other covenant narratives. Rather, the *form* of the Hittite treaties is representative of a form of political discourse that was *de rigueur* throughout the Near East.

IV

Of all the Bible's accounts of Israel's covenantal relationship with God, the Sinai narratives of the book of Exodus, along with their repetition later on in Deuteronomy, are surely the most pivotal. It is here that the story of Israel's desert encounter with God on Mount Sinai is first spelled out, and the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, first enumerated, and it is therefore no surprise that the covenantal revelation at Mount Sinai (*ma'amad har sinai*) would later become the centerpiece of classical Jewish belief. Yet it is striking how closely the various biblical accounts of the Sinai covenant follow the typical formal elements of the Hittite suzerainty treaty. These formal elements of structure and of language are fraught with implications for understanding the nature of the relationship between God and Israel, and by extension have bearing on the political thought of the Bible. Five elements in particular stand out: (i) the historical prologue; (ii) the stipulations of the duties, privileges, and responsibilities conferred on each party to the treaty; (iii) the deposit of the treaty within the temple; (iv) the calling of witnesses to the treaty; and (v) the issuance of blessings for adherence to the treaty, and of curses upon its breach.

(i) *Historical Prologue*. Almost universally, the Late Bronze suzerainty treaty opened with a historical prologue in which the events that led up to the establishment of the treaty are delineated. This section, often of great length, is designed to show the basis upon which the subordinate king has submitted to the dominion of the sovereign. It is critical here to note the variety of circumstances that form the backdrop of the treaty that we encounter in these prologues. Of the Hittite suzerainty treaties known to us, only one documents a situation whereby the sovereign forcibly subjugated the subordinate king.²⁶ Instead, these treaties document the manner in which the lesser king entered into subordination to the sovereign through a consensual arrangement. These fall into two broad categories. In one, the

subordinate king is installed by the sovereign as the ruler of territories that have already come into his domain. The treaty outlines the terms of the subordinate's rule in deference to the Hittite king. In the second, autonomous rulers approach the Hittite king and request his patronage or deliverance in exchange for their fealty as subordinates, in what may be termed *self-subjugation treaties*.²⁷

There is a single underlying principle that girds the argument of these historical prologues: Moral and legal obligation on the part of the subordinate for the favor bestowed upon him by the sovereign.²⁸ Universally in these treaties we find that the Hittite king initiates an action on behalf of the subordinate, and is later repaid through the fealty that the subordinate demonstrates according to the terms of the suzerainty treaty. Even if the historicity of the accounts is suspect, the discourse itself is telling of the political ethos. Apparently, the Hittite kings of the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries B.C.E. felt that their claims to suzerainty could be deemed legitimate only if power was exercised upon a moral or legal base. Put differently, the moral and legal obligation of fealty on the part of the subordinate was the basis upon which a sovereign could lay claim to suzerainty, and only when the subordinate had submitted to the terms of the treaty of his own volition could it be considered binding.

There are important parallel elements found in the Sinai narratives. The historical prologues of the Hittite political treaties typically begin with the formula "The words of [name of the Hittite king]" followed by a delineation of the favor bestowed upon the subordinate that has resulted in his present expression of gratitude through subordination. The fact that the exodus narrative precedes the Sinai covenant in the book of Exodus accords with this pattern in general terms. It is more instructive, however, to observe how the opening lines of the Decalogue itself also reveal such an introduction. Before the delineation of the laws themselves, we find the following introduction: "And God spoke all these words, saying: I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage."²⁹ Notice the moral, or legal, basis upon which God enjoins the children of Israel: He

identifies himself not as the God who created heaven and earth, but as the God who bestowed a great favor upon the “kingdom” of Israel, and is thus deserving of its subordinate loyalty. Note that the phrase “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” is surely superfluous after nineteen chapters of exodus and delivery that clearly delineate that this is so. At this juncture, however, God is entering into a “treaty” with the Israelites, and hence the formal need within the written contract for the grace of the sovereign to be documented.³⁰

As we noted earlier, the self-subjugation treaties usually indicate that the relationship between the two kings would be initiated by the subordinate king’s appealing to the sovereign for assistance. Indeed, this pattern emerges from the narrative of the early chapters of the book of Exodus. The process of divine salvation begins only after the children of Israel cry out. Scripture then notes that God heard their cry, a detail which God repeatedly underscores as he tells Moses of his intention to deliver them from bondage.³¹

(ii) *Stipulations of the Treaty*. Following the historical prologue, the Hittite suzerainty treaties would typically enumerate the stipulations imposed upon the subordinate by the sovereign that were to be the expressions of his loyalty. These would typically revolve around security arrangements: Delineation of borders, repressing acts of sedition, capture and extradition of escaped fugitives, and the like. What is particularly important about these stipulations is the terminology that they employ, and how these terms are carried over into the Sinai narratives as paradigms for the relationship between God and Israel. Many of the treaties, for example, restrict the political activity of the subordinate king; he may enter into an alliance only with the sovereign. One Hittite treaty warns the subordinate of punishment, “if you [do not seek] the well-being [of Hatti and] the hand of [the Great King of Hatti], but rather you seek the well-being of another... thereby you will break the oath.”³²

Such clauses add new dimensions to familiar biblical passages. The demand of the Decalogue that “You shall have no other gods beside me” is understood by a contemporary reader from an epistemological perspective:

The Lord God who took the children of Israel out of Egypt is the only true God, and hence the need to underscore the falsehood of placing stock in any other god.³³ But the command takes on a different light when seen in the context of ancient treaty formulations. God is the sovereign, Israel the subordinate. To revere another god is not just to accept a falsehood; it means violating a relationship. It means implicitly expressing ingratitude in light of the favor and grace bestowed upon Israel the subordinate by God the sovereign, as laid down in the “historical prologue” of the Decalogue—indeed, as laid out in the entire narrative of the book of Exodus to that point.³⁴ For the subordinate king to establish treaties or other ties with another power would be tantamount to treason.³⁵ The demand for exclusive fealty underlies the striking phrase in the Ten Commandments that pronounces God to be a “jealous God.”³⁶

The terminology of the treaties and of the dynamics that governed the relationship between their partners is especially illuminative of several biblical passages. What does it mean to “love God” as the book of Deuteronomy demands?³⁷ Medieval thinkers understood that one was required to yearn for God even as a man yearns for an unattainable woman.³⁸ The term “love” (*ahav*), however, plays an important role in the language of ancient Near Eastern political treaties. To love, in the political terms of the ancient Near East, is to demonstrate loyalty. In the El Amarna letters of the fourteenth century B.C.E., the king of Byblos (in Phoenicia, present-day Lebanon) writes to Pharaoh about the rebellion in his own city: “Behold the city! Half of it loves the sons of ‘Abd-Asir-ta [who fostered the rebellion], half of it loves my lord.”³⁹ In another letter, a vassal king writes to Pharaoh, “My lord, just as I love the king my lord, so do the [other kings].”⁴⁰ The converse is seen as well: Ancient Near Eastern treaties speak of breach of covenant as an act of hate.⁴¹

Turning to the Bible, we encounter the same sense of the words “love” and “hate.” According to the book of I Kings, Hiram, the king of Tyre, sent representatives to the newly anointed Solomon, “for Hiram had always loved David,” that is, had always been loyal to him in covenant.⁴² To love

God, then, may be understood not as an emotional disposition, but simply as a noble command for steadfast loyalty. In the Sinai narratives, love and hate bear these precise meanings, as in the following references to the prohibition of following other gods:

You shall not bow down to them, or worship them; for I am the Lord your God, a jealous God, who visits the sins of the father upon the sons unto the third and fourth generations *for those who hate me*. And who gives kindness unto the thousandth generation *for those who love me*.⁴³

Those who are said to love God are not necessarily those who reach an ecstatic experience of God's presence, nor even in the contemporary sense of having a profound emotional attachment to God. To love God is simply to demonstrate fealty to him through steadfast performance of his commandments. To violate those commandments is to breach the terms of the treaty, or in other words, to display disloyalty, here called "hate."

Beyond the question of loyalty, the terminology of suzerainty relations in the Late Bronze period (fifteenth to thirteenth centuries B.C.E.) may also elucidate a preferred status enjoyed by the subordinate in the eyes of the sovereign—parallel to a charged theological concept in the Bible, the notion of Israel as a chosen people. The biblical term for "chosen" people is *segula*.⁴⁴ In a Ugaritic document, a favored vassal of the king of Ugarit is called the *sglt* of his sovereign, a term that implies both subordination and distinction.⁴⁵ Indeed, this tension between distinction and subordination seems to be implicit in the first biblical reference to "chosenness" in the opening verses of the covenant narrative of Exodus 19: "Now then, if you obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession (*segula*) among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine."⁴⁶ Entering into covenant renders Israel a subordinate. But the Israelites are promised favored status among God's subordinates, so long as they remain faithful to the terms of the subordination treaty.

Many of the Hittite subordination treaties, moreover, also delineated the responsibilities of the sovereign toward the subordinate: Protection against

invasion; a pledge to honor the heir of the subordinate king; cementing of the alliance through royal marriage; the grant of land; a pledge to support the subordinate king even if his own people request his deposal.⁴⁷ Typically the sovereign pledges to furnish the subordinate with sustenance. Mutual affective and supportive gestures were often an integral part of these political treaties.⁴⁸ In like fashion we find that the Sinai narratives are explicit concerning God's responsibilities as sovereign to protect Israel the subordinate.⁴⁹

This convention is not merely adopted, moreover, but indeed reworked in accordance with the theological agenda of the Sinai narratives. Within the Hittite treaties, the stipulations enjoined upon the subordinate all relate to actions that directly serve the interests of the sovereign king. In the Sinai narratives, as we have seen, we indeed find prohibitions against serving foreign gods, the requirement to rest on the Sabbath as a recognition of God's sovereignty in the world, and descriptions of ritual obligations, all of which could be said to reflect God's own "personal" interests.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, we see that the scope of the stipulations enjoined upon Israel is greatly expanded compared with those ordinarily incumbent upon subordinate kings. The second half of the Decalogue and the better part of Exodus 21-23 enjoin stipulations upon Israel in the realms of public welfare and justice.

(iii) *Deposit of the Treaty in the Temple.* The next typical element of the Hittite suzerainty treaty is a clause calling for a copy of the treaty to be deposited within the temple of the subordinate's deity to affirm that the local deity of the subordinate was interested in the fulfillment of its terms.⁵¹ It also sent an implicit message to the inhabitants of the subordinate state that the treaty was now to occupy a central place within their value system.

The same trope, transformed to accord with the new theological agenda, is witnessed in the Bible as well. The text of the treaty, or at least a symbolic representative part of it, was deposited within the Ark of the Covenant within the Holy of Holies.⁵² In this fashion, Israel the subordinate would publicly recognize the place of the treaty with the divine sovereign within its own value system.⁵³ Again, the motif is reworked to accord with the Bible's theology. Within the logic of the Hittite treaty, of course, the deposit of the

tablets in the temple of the subordinate king's own god was a public display that that local god attested to the binding nature of the treaty. Within the Sinai narratives, the "god" of the subordinate king is none other than the sovereign King himself.

(iv) *Witnesses to the Treaty*. Late Bronze Age treaties typically included a long list of divine witnesses who were called upon to enforce the treaty and to punish the subordinate in the event of violation. These were often gods of the natural world, and on occasion elements of the natural world itself were invoked such as the skies, the earth, mountains, or rivers. Thus we find one representative text that reads:

The mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great sea, heaven and earth, the winds and the clouds. They shall be witnesses to this treaty and this oath. All the words of the treaty and oath which are written on this tablet—if Tette does not observe these words of the treaty and oath, but transgresses the oath, then these oath gods shall destroy Tette....⁵⁴

The trope is again transformed within the biblical context. It would be incongruous, of course, for the Bible to call upon other gods to bear witness to the treaty between God and Israel. Instead, we find on one occasion that it is God himself who plays the role of both the sovereign king and the divine witness (*'ed*): "Take to heart all the words to which I attest (*me'id*) that I have enjoined upon you today."⁵⁵ More often, however, we find the vestige of the earlier ancient Near Eastern trope: It is not God who attests to Israel's commitment, but the natural elements of the heaven and the earth who are appointed by God to serve in this capacity.⁵⁶ In the Sinai narratives as well, the tablets are described as symbolic proof or public testimony of the covenant between man and God. The tablets are called simply "the testimony" (*ha'edut*) and the Ark is referred to as the "Ark of the Testimony" (*aron ha'edut*).⁵⁷

(v) *Blessings and Curses*. Finally, the Late Bronze treaties typically concluded with a list of blessings that would be conferred upon the subordinate by the gods in exchange for his loyalty, and conversely a list of curses that

would befall him, in the event he was in breach of the treaty. These were usually juxtaposed, and located at the end of the treaty, as in the following passage:

If you... do not observe the words of this treaty, the gods... shall destroy you.... They will draw you out like malt from its husk.... And these gods... shall allot you poverty and destitution.... Your name and your progeny... shall be eradicated from the earth.... The ground shall be ice, so that you will slip. The ground of your land shall be a marsh of [indecipherable]... so that you will certainly sink and be unable to cross.

If you... observe this treaty and oath, these gods shall protect you... together with your wife... her sons and grandsons.... And the land of Mitanni shall... prosper and expand. And you... the Hurrians shall accept you for kingship for eternity.⁵⁸

Whereas the Sinai narrative in Exodus does not have this feature, it is presented elsewhere in the books of Moses, notably in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. A series of blessings of prosperity and bounty open with the phrase “If you heed... then...,” followed by a longer, more elaborate series of curses, which likewise open with the phrase, “if you do not heed... then...” Indeed, as Edward Greenstein has suggested, the overall structure of the Pentateuch is that of a political treaty between God and Israel that is patterned after the Hittite political treaty. Broadly speaking, the first part of the Pentateuch outlines just what God had done for the children of Israel to earn their loyalty: He took the patriarchs under his wing, and later liberated Israel from the bondage of Egypt. As in Hittite political treaties, such favors leave the subordinate king—in this case, Israel—indebted to the sovereign, who demands unswerving fealty in the currency of fulfillment of the commandments, laws, which take up the bulk of the Tora.⁵⁹ The Tora then invokes a lengthy list of blessings for Israel in the event that they fulfill the terms of the covenant, and curses in the event that they do not, at the end of the book of Leviticus. The motif of blessings and curses at the conclusion

of a treaty is amplified at the close of Deuteronomy, with a very extended list of each.⁶⁰

Taken as a whole, the similarities between the Sinai covenant and the Hittite treaties are too striking to be dismissed as coincidence—though their significance remains to be addressed. It is worth noting, however, that much the same pattern emerges later in the biblical narratives, for example in Joshua 24, which tells of the covenant ceremony that Joshua enacted with the Israelites at the close of his career. It opens with a historical prologue detailing the acts of favor that God had bestowed upon Israel across the generations. The chapter continues by stating the commitments of loyalty and exclusive devotion that Israel is called upon to ratify. The treaty is written down for posterity, and witnesses are called to testify to the commitment. In the place of divine witnesses, the people themselves are called as witnesses as is a great stone monument erected in the shrine there. Joshua warns of a curse that will befall the people in the event of disobedience.⁶¹

The theological implications of all this are far-reaching. To begin with, the notion of a “historical prologue” suggests that the relationship between God and man in the Bible is founded on gratitude and moral obligation, and not merely on God’s power over man. By invoking the language of “love,” “hate,” and “jealousy,” the Bible educates toward seeing God not just as a power but as a personality. And like the Hittite self-subjugation treaties, the Pentateuchal narrative of the covenant underscores the subordinate Israel’s readiness to accede to the treaty—the most famous expression of this being Israel’s declaration, soon after the Ten Commandments are presented, that “All the things that the Lord has spoken, we will do and obey.”⁶²

But perhaps the greatest implication of casting the covenant between God and Israel in terms of the Late Bronze Age suzerainty treaty is the relative pedestal upon which it places the human agent here, Israel, in its role as the subordinate king. Saul Olyan has effectively dramatized this implication through his application of studies in the anthropology of honor to treaty-making in the ancient Near East. Consider the following relationships: A

child in relation to his parent, the young in relation to the elderly, a slave in relation to his master, a subject in relation to his sovereign. These pairings are all social contexts in which persons of inferior status interact with those of superior status. Moreover, they are all relationships where there is a bestowal of honor, and it is bestowed unilaterally by the inferior figure to the superior one.

In his study of honor and shame in ancient West Asian covenant relations, Olyan has shown that whereas the master owes no honor to his servant, material from Mari and the Amarna archives reveal that honor is a commodity bestowed in both directions between sovereign and subordinate in political treaty-making.⁶³ It is in this vein that we find within the El Amarna correspondence a letter to Pharaoh by one vassal complaining that he has received less honor from Pharaoh than has another vassal.⁶⁴ In one of the Hittite self-subjugation treaties, with a subordinate king named Sunashshura of Kizzuwatna, we find that the subordinate is mandated to appear at regular intervals in the court of the Hittite sovereign. The treaty reads,

Sunashshura must come before His Majesty and look upon the face of His Majesty. As soon as he comes before His Majesty, the noblemen of His Majesty [will rise] from their seats. No one will remain seated above him.⁶⁵

The visit of this Sunashshura to the Hittite court is hardly made in tar and feathers. He is received amicably and with distinction; the Hittite king's nobles must rise in his honor. There are indicators in the Hittite self-subjugation treaties, moreover, that even as the subordinate submitted to the sovereign, he still remained autonomous in relation to the kingdom of the sovereign. Nowhere in these treaties do we see that a sovereign could impose an heir upon the death or abdication of a subordinate king, nor is there any indication that he could ever rightfully annex the subordinate's territory, even in the event that the treaty were violated.⁶⁶

In the ancient Near East, a variety of metaphors was typically invoked to articulate the human-divine encounter: As a child to a parent, as a slave

to a master, and as a subject to a king. What is common to all of these is that they are relationships in which honor is bestowed unilaterally from inferior to superior. Indeed, each of these paradigms may be found to describe the disposition of man toward God in the Bible as well. Yet alongside these, the Bible sought complementary paradigms through which to articulate the human-divine encounter in a radically new way. It sought out the metaphor of Late Bronze Age treaty-making, for in it honor was a commodity reciprocally bestowed between sovereign and subordinate. The implications are that within the biblical notion of covenant, God honors man, even as man honors God.

V

But beyond the powerful implications regarding the honor that God bestows upon man, there is a further implication of the parallel between biblical covenant and Late Bronze Age political treaties, one that has drawn little attention. The vast majority of the Late Bronze Hittite subordination treaties are unambiguously constructed as agreements between two *individuals*—the sovereign king and the subordinate king.⁶⁷ In the Bible, it is clear that God plays the role of the sovereign. Yet who stands parallel to the subordinate king? Now, it is true that the Israelites have a leader: Moses. Yet Moses cannot be properly termed a king. He is never referred to by this term; his children are not discussed as possible heirs. Moreover, nothing in the language of the covenant narratives suggests that it is Moses who is the vassal king, and Israel his subjects. The covenant is never cast as a treaty between God and Moses. Rather, the implication of these passages is that God enters into a covenant with the people.

One is tempted to say that the role of the subordinate king is played here by the corporate body of the people of Israel as a whole. And perhaps

this is true to a certain extent. Yet, within the Sinai covenant itself we see that God in fact relates to individual Israelites. Each of the Ten Commandments is of a nature that it can be fulfilled, or transgressed, only by an individual. None of them requires a collective effort, such as would be necessary to build a sanctuary, anoint a king, or engage in military conquest. Moreover, we see that within the Decalogue, God distinguishes between those who adhere to his covenant and those who do not. He pledges to visit the guilt of fathers unto the third and fourth generations of “those who hate” him, while showing kindness unto the thousandth generation of “those who love” him.⁶⁸ When God, as the sovereign, bestows honor, he does so selectively, upon individuals, and not only collectively. In I Samuel God says “those who honor me, I will honor, and as for those who despise me, they will be diminished, or dishonored.”⁶⁹ This does not mean, of course, that God does not relate to Israel as a corporate body at all, but rather that individuals are not necessarily always subsumed within the collective in the terms of the covenant.

We may conclude, therefore, that to some degree the subordinate king with whom God forms a political treaty is, in fact, each individual within the Israelite polity; that every man in Israel is to view himself as accorded the status of a king—a servile, subordinate king under the protection of and in gratitude to a divine sovereign.

The proof of this may be seen in striking parallels between the stipulations and language used in the Hittite treaties regarding the subordinate king, and parallel biblical laws and commandments that bind each and every common man of Israel. We saw earlier the treaty with the subordinate king Sunashshura, in which he was obligated to “come before His Majesty and *look upon the face of His Majesty*.”⁷⁰ Again, the visit of Sunashshura is a state visit replete with honor, as the Hittite king’s nobles must rise in his presence. We also note that such a formal court appearance is referred to throughout the Bible as well as an act of “looking upon his face.”⁷¹

Yet precisely this language is used with regard to the common Israelite’s obligations with respect to God. We find it, for example, in the stipulations

of the covenant narrative of Exodus. “Three times a year,” we read, “all of your males shall be seen by the face of the Lord”—referring to the duty to make a pilgrimage to the central shrine of Israelite worship.⁷² Nearly ubiquitous throughout the Bible is the notion that God may not be seen by mortals. Were they actually to behold God, they would die, as God explains to Moses, when the latter requests to see the face of God. “And God responded, you may not see my face, for no man may see me and live.”⁷³ Thus it is highly unlikely that that which was forbidden even once to Moses, to see the face of God, is in fact mandated for every male of Israel for generations. Moreover, the particular term translated here as “the Lord” (*ha’adon*) is actually rare within biblical literature as a reference to God.

Yet when seen in the context of the Hittite treaties, the meaning is clarified. The command that each Israelite male make a pilgrimage is patterned after the requirement that a subordinate king visit the court of his sovereign, to “look upon the face of his majesty.” What is most instructive here is that this is enjoined upon all adult males—whereas in the Hittite political treaties, only the subordinate king is called upon to visit the sovereign. Indeed, it would be beneath the dignity of the sovereign to receive all of the commoners subject to the subordinate king.

A similar parallel with Hittite political treaties emerges with regard to the treaty stipulations that mandate the periodic reading of the treaty within the subordinate king’s court. One treaty, forged between one Kupanta-Kurunta of Mira-Kuwaliya and the Hittite king, states: “[This tablet which] I have made [for you, Kupanta-Kurunta,] shall be read out [before you three times yearly].”⁷⁴ In another treaty, this time with a subordinate by the name of Alaksandu of Wilusa, the Hittite king states:

Furthermore, this tablet which I have made for you, Alaksandu, shall be read out before you three times yearly, and you, Alaksandu, shall know it.⁷⁵

Once again, we see a parallel stipulation in the Bible, but one that is extended to include all the children of Israel. In the Late Bronze Age suzerainty

treaty it is the subordinate king who is responsible to execute and follow the terms of the treaty, and thus he personally must be read its provisions, to reinforce in his own mind the covenant he has made with the sovereign. But the covenant between God and Israel is consecrated with each and every member of the polity, and thus each and every member must hear it read aloud, because each and every member of the people is responsible for its faithful implementation. Indeed, the terms of the covenant between God and Israel are read out before the whole people on a number of occasions. The first of these is at Sinai:

Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the Lord and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice saying, "All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do!" Moses then wrote down all the commands of the Lord.... Then [Moses] took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will faithfully do!" Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord now makes with you concerning all these commands."⁷⁶

The covenant is similarly read out to the entire people by Joshua at Shechem and by King Josiah during his reform.⁷⁷

The public readings of the laws in these instances are reported as one-time events. Yet, there is also a requirement of the periodic reading of the covenant to the whole people, mandated in Deuteronomy:

Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Sukkot, when all Israel comes to be seen by the face of the Lord your God in the place that he will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people—men, women and children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this teaching. Their children too, who had not known, shall hear and learn to revere the Lord your God.⁷⁸

It emerges that the treaty imagery in the Bible bypasses the personage of the subordinate king and replaces him with the common Israelite. He is the one addressed by the covenant; he is the one upon whom God has bestowed favor; it is he who is enjoined to pay a fealty visit to the “court” of the divine sovereign; it is he who must hear the terms read aloud every seven years.

The degree to which the Bible envisions a direct relationship between the individual Israelite and the Almighty is unparalleled in the ancient Near East. Religious laws for the masses are sparse within Hittite legal codes, and are entirely absent from Mesopotamian ones. The common man in these cultures had only a small role to play in the public worship of the deity, which was relegated to the king and the priests. For all that we know about Mesopotamia, we possess no document that speaks of a role for the public in the official state liturgy or cultic ceremonies, even on the occasion of major festivals.⁷⁹ There is no cultic protocol that ever beckons any member of the public to enter the temple.⁸⁰

By contrast, God’s interest in each and every member of the Israelite polity is expressed in the Sinai narrative, which refers to the Israelites as a “kingdom of priests.”⁸¹ Every member of the polity is called upon to behave in a priest-like fashion; and indeed, we find in the Bible parallels between laws that are specifically enjoined upon the priestly class and analogous laws for the common man of Israel. Priestly proscriptions against cutting the hair at the corners of the head as signs of mourning are matched with similar injunctions for the common Israelite.⁸² The laws of holiness enjoined upon each member of Israel concerning the consumption of meat are similar to those elsewhere especially prescribed for the priests.⁸³ In Egypt, circumcision was a distinctive and obligatory mark of priesthood.⁸⁴ In Israel, the obligation is universal.

VI

We have mentioned Peter Berger's claim that ancient religions could be properly understood only by determining whose interests are served by the cosmic beliefs maintained by the culture; we mentioned a few of the ways in which the power structures that governed other ancient Near Eastern cultures were legitimized through their conceptualizations of the divine realm.

What may we say of the biblical covenant between man and God? Who benefited from it?⁸⁵ By a process of elimination, it is difficult to identify a clear beneficiary, an interested party that jumps out of the pages of the Bible as coming out overwhelmingly ahead. Covenant, it would seem, leaves very little to the Israelite king, since the covenant is fundamentally between God and the people of Israel. One can argue over whether it was with Israel collectively, or, as I have suggested, with each member of the polity. But at the very least, in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, it is untenable to claim that the king, rather than the people, was the subordinate party to the treaty.⁸⁶

Nor, would it seem, did the notion of covenant serve to bolster the interests of the merchants or the gentry. Virtually the only mention of these groups is in terms of their responsibilities to the poor in the Pentateuch and their abuses in the Prophets. In Leviticus, to be sure, one finds an emphasis upon the priestly class, but not at all in the covenant texts of, say, Exodus 19-24, or Joshua 24, or within the book of Deuteronomy, where priests are denied land ownership.⁸⁷

Perhaps it was the prophets who stood to gain? Yet, few are the references to groups or guilds of prophets. The itinerant "sons of prophets" mentioned in the books of Samuel and Kings are never again mentioned elsewhere, and it can hardly be said that they are the great beneficiaries of the covenant paradigm.

Nor, as some scholars have pointed out, can the paradigm of covenant be said to represent the best interests of the state.⁸⁸ The systems that we saw in Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Egypt may be said to represent state ideologies, as they put the well-being of the state at the center of the gods' interests. By contrast, in the political treaty paradigm, it is hardly the greater glory of Israel that is cardinal to God's concerns. When Israel is a faithful covenantal partner, God is only too pleased to ensure the welfare of Israel. But when the covenant has been breached, God has no problem showing his wrath against the state, even to the point of orchestrating its downfall. What *is* cardinal is the upholding of the relationship with which God engages Israel.

All of this should encourage us to consider anew the role of human kingship in biblical thought. Many passages in the Bible adopt a highly equivocal stance toward the notion of a human king. The reason for this, the conventional wisdom goes, is out of the fear that a strongly sanctioned monarchy would perforce marginalize the true and divine King of Kings.⁸⁹ Yet everything that we have seen thus far suggests otherwise. When we look at neighboring cultures, we see that exactly the opposite is true: In systems in which the earthly king parallels the divine king, or is himself in some way a member of the divine realm, both divine kingship and human kingship are strengthened. The divine analogue to the earthly power structure lends validity and metaphysical stature to that power. But the converse is no less true: The overpowering dominance of the earthly king in these cultures led to a conception of the gods as mighty and powerful. In spite of the presence of well-entrenched monarchies—perhaps precisely because of them—the gods were securely at the focus of each and every one of these societies.

If much of biblical writing reveals an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of monarchy, it is not because the biblical writers feared marginalizing the Almighty. Rather, they feared that the monarchy would result in the marginalizing and dishonoring of the common man, and the severance of the direct relationship between the latter and God. The prophet Samuel, in trying to convince the Israelites to refrain from anointing a king, cites the

ways in which such a king will violate the liberty and property of each and every Israelite:

This will be the practice of the king who will rule over you: He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen, and they will serve as outrunners for his chariots. He will appoint them as his chiefs of thousands and of fifties; or they will have to plow his fields, reap his harvest, and make his weapons and the equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will seize your choice fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his courtiers. He will take a tenth part of your grain and vintage and give it to his eunuchs and courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, your choice young men, and your asses, and put them to work for him. He will take a tenth part of your flocks, and you shall become his slaves. The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you on that day.⁹⁰

By recasting the encounter between man and God as a covenant modeled on the political treaties of the surrounding world, the Bible articulated a relationship in which honor could be reciprocally bestowed between God and the common man of Israel, enacting thereby a reformulation of social and political thought of great proportion. The common man was transformed, perhaps for the first time in human history, from a mere servant of kings to nothing less than a servant-king, who stood in honor before the Almighty Sovereign. This elevation of the individual in the eyes of God may well represent the most profound political teaching, and most lasting political legacy, of the Hebrew Bible.

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Notes

1. See the overview of covenant in the writings of Max Weber in Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 38-42.

2. Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1995). The book is a summary of the entire Bible from Genesis through the Babylonian exile. The subheadings that make up the three-page table of contents outlining this material contain no fewer than 46 occurrences of the word “covenant.”

3. Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar, eds., with the assistance of Yair Lorberbaum, *The Jewish Political Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 2000).

4. George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (September 1954), pp. 50-76; Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

5. Peter L. Berger, *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 31-38. See discussion with regard to ancient Near Eastern religions in J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), p. 92.

6. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Ausbur Fortress, 1995), p. 54.

7. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 38.

8. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1976), p. 4; Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), pp. 51, 91, 220; Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 153.

9. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford, 2001), p. 58.

10. Indeed, some theophoric names in Mesopotamia implied that Mesopotamians felt they could look to the gods for beneficence: Samas-hatin, “Samas is protector”; Samas-epiri, “Samas takes care of me”; Marduk-abi, “Marduk is my father” (Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, pp. 39-40).

11. Schloen, *House of the Father*, pp. 79, 94. Some of the patriarchal motifs that we see concerning kingship in Ugarit were present in Egypt as well. Jan Assmann has demonstrated that in Egypt Pharaoh was considered the father of the nation, as procreator, provider, and educator. He was the mediator between the divine and human realms, inasmuch as he was both the son of Amun, the sun god, and the father of the whole country. Jan Assmann, "The Picture of the Father in Ancient Egypt," in *The Father Picture in Myth and History*, ed. Hubert Tell-enbach (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1976) [German]; Jan Assmann, *Stone and Time: Man and Society in Ancient Egypt* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1991). [German]

12. Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, p. 60; Schloen, *House of the Father*, pp. 1, 350. For a contrasting theory of the Ugaritic pantheon see Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994) and a critique of the theory in Schloen, *The House of the Father*, pp. 356-357. Broadly speaking, the Ugaritic pantheon exhibited a four-level structure. The highest-ranking god, El, is depicted as an aging patriarch, and his divine wife, the goddess Athirat, was conceived as the *rbt*, the lady, or matriarch, of the divine household. As the king/patriarch, El presided over the whole pantheon, and indeed over humanity. The second level of the pantheon included the divine royal children, the seventy sons of Athirat. As in the earthly realm, these sons inhabited their own respective houses (Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, p. 56). The third level of the pantheon, of which we know relatively little, seems to consist of godly "craftsmen" who serve the deities of the upper two realms. The fourth and lowest level of the pantheon consists of what Baruch Levine calls "the divine workers [or servants]," the *ins ilm*, or "divine beings." This group includes maidservants, messengers, and gatekeepers, who parallel the servants of the earthly king in his palace. (On this meaning of *ins ilm*, see Baruch A. Levine, "Review of Jean-Michel de Tarragon's *The Cult at Ugarit*," *Revue Biblique* 88 (April 1981), pp. 246-247.)

13. It is only in the writings of Plutarch that we have our first continuous version of the myth, but from various sources we are able to reconstruct a composite of it. The most complete Egyptian version of the myth is provided by an Eighteenth Dynasty stele in the Louvre. See Jacobus Van Dijk, "Myth and Mythmaking in Ancient Egypt," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 1702. For summary and discussion, see Van Dijk, "Myth and Mythmaking," pp. 1702-1705.

14. For a discussion of the various views on the divinity of the Egyptian king see Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 140-142.

15. These statements with reference to Thutmose III are found in *Documents of the Egyptian Antiquity* (Leipzig 1903-1939, Berlin 1955-1961) IV,

1236, 2; 165, 13 [German], cited in Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, p. 139, n. 104. In Mesopotamia, too, there is evidence that the king was awarded a degree of divine status, and thus his rule legitimated. From the time of Sargon (c. 2300 B.C.E.) we find temples erected for the worship of kings, and sculptures were made of them that incorporated typical iconographic hallmarks of divinity. William W. Hallo, "Texts, Statues, and the Cult of the Divine King," in *Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986*, ed. John A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 54-66; Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), pp. 295-312.

16. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 7. This metaphysical divide between the realm of the king and the realm of the commoner was directly reflected in the social structure of ancient Near Eastern societies. Many junctures throughout the history of the ancient Near East witnessed the divide between the dominant tribute-imposing class and the dominated tribute-bearing class. The terminology used here is taken from Norman Gottwald, "Social Class as an Analytic and Hermeneutical Category in Biblical Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993), p. 6. See in a similar vein Ignace J. Gelb, "From Freedom to Slavery," in *Social Classes in Ancient Mesopotamia and in the Adjacent Area: XVIII, The International Assyriologic Meeting, Munich, June 29 to July 3, 1970*, ed. Dietz O. Edzard (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1972), p. 92 [German]; and Daniel C. Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East: 3100-332 B.C.E.* (New Haven: Yale, 1997), pp. 146-147. These two groups, the exploiters and the exploited, were in fact opposite sides of the same coin. The dominant tribute-imposing class consisted, in short, of the political elite. This class included not only the nobility, but all who benefited by association with it: Administrators, military and religious retainers, merchants, landowners who directly or indirectly benefited from state power. What all of these have in common is that they participated in the extraction of surplus from the dominated, tribute-bearing class: Agrarian and pastoral producers, slaves, unskilled workers, all who did not draw surplus from other workers, but whose station in the culture dictated that their own surplus was to be taken by members of the elite class and its subsections. While the terminology here is that of Gottwald, the phenomenon is considered endemic to pre-modern agrarian societies. See Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Stratification* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), p. 243. For the structure of Mesopotamian society along these lines, see Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 49.

17. Psalms 2:7.

18. Code of Hammurabi, sections 170-171.

19. I Samuel 8:4-22.

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20. Deuteronomy 17:14-15.
 21. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 341.
 22. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," pp. 50-76; Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary*.
 23. John A. Simpson and Edmund S.C. Weiner, eds., *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 17, second ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), "Suzerainty Treaty," p. 332.
 24. J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 5 [Apollos Old Testament Commentary] (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), p. 24; Moshe Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy, Book of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 169-170.
 25. Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).
 26. Amnon Altman, *The Historical Prologue of the Hittite Vassal Treaties* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan, 2004), pp. 43, 64. For text, see Treaty between Mursili II of Hatti and Manapa-Tarhunta of the Land of the Seha River in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, pp. 82-86. The standard of reference to these materials is to the catalog number assigned to each in Emmanuel Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971). The present treaty is entry 69 in that collection. Throughout the following discussion I shall cite the translation reference from Beckman's anthology with a citation of the entry number of the treaty in Laroche's collection.
 27. For discussion and delineation of these two categories, see Altman, *Historical Prologue*, pp. 132-138.
 28. Altman, *Historical Prologue*, p. 27; George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 1181.
 29. Exodus 20:1-2.
 30. Mendenhall and Herion, "Covenant," p. 1183.
 31. Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7, 9.
 32. Treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Aziru of Amurru, par. 15 (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 49), in Itamar Singer, "The Treaties Between Hatti and Amurru," in *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, vol. 2, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 95.
 33. Exodus 20:2.
 34. See also Exodus 34:12, 15.
 35. See Mendenhall and Herion, "Covenant," pp. 1179-1180.
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36. Exodus 20:4. See also Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 4:24; 5:8; 6:15; Joshua 24:19; Nahum 1:2.

37. Deuteronomy 6:5; 11:13.

38. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:3.

39. El Amarna letter 138:71-73, in William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (January 1963), pp. 79-80.

40. El Amarna letter 53:40-44, in Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background," p. 79.

41. See discussion in Saul Olyan, "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), p. 210.

42. I Kings 5:15.

43. Exodus 20:5-6. Emphasis added.

44. Exodus 19:5. See Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Psalms 135:4. The word may also be related to the Akkadian word *sikiltu*, meaning possession, as found in I Chronicles 29:3. See discussion in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 224; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 294 and p. 563, n. 115.

45. See Claude F.A. Schaeffer, *The Royal Palace of Ugarit*, vol. 5 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1965), no. 60, lines 7, 12 [French] and discussion in Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 226, n. 2.

46. Exodus 19:5.

47. References to the commitments made by the sovereign Hittite king to his vassals are summarized in tabular form in Altman, *Historical Prologue*, p. 151.

48. Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), p. 128.

49. E.g., Exodus 20:7, 12; 23:20-33; Deuteronomy 6:10-11.

50. Exodus 20:3-4, 8-10, 20-22; 23:18-19.

51. See Treaty between Shattiwaza of Mittanni and Suppiluliuma I of Hatti (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 52, par. 8; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 51); Treaty between Hattusili III of Hatti and Ulmi-Teshshup of

Tarhuntassa (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 106, par. 5; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 111); and the Treaty between Tudhaliya IV of Hatti and Kurunta of Tarhuntassa (Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 123).

52. Exodus 25:21; 40:20. See also Deuteronomy 31:26.

53. See discussion in Mendenhall and Herion, "Covenant," p. 1184; Altman, *Historical Prologue*, p. 184; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, p. 63.

54. Treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Tette of Nuhashshi (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 53, par. 17; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 58).

55. Deuteronomy 32:46.

56. Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 32:1; Isaiah 1:2; see also Micah 6:1-2 with regard to mountains.

57. E.g., Exodus 25:16, 21; 26:33-34.

58. Treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Shattiwaza of Mittanni (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 51, pars. 15-16; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 48).

59. Edward L. Greenstein, "On the Genesis of Biblical Prose Narrative," *Proof-texts* 8 (1988), p. 350.

60. Deuteronomy 28:1-68. See also Mendenhall and Herion, "Covenant," p. 1181; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, pp. 116-146. As indicated earlier, the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties and loyalty oaths also provide illumination of certain covenant passages, particularly those in Deuteronomy, chs. 27-29. Nonetheless, it will be clear that the Neo-Assyrian material alone does not provide the complete provenance, or even, I would claim, the primary one for understanding the context for covenant in Exodus, Leviticus, Joshua, and perhaps the rest of Deuteronomy as well. The historical prologue is a feature exclusively of the Hittite treaties, and not the Neo-Assyrian ones. Blessings are matched with curses only in the Hittite treaties, but never in the Neo-Assyrian ones. Instructions for deposition of the treaty and its periodic reading are likewise features found only in the Hittite material and not in the Neo-Assyrian treaty or loyalty oath texts. Moreover, promises made by the sovereign king to the vassal, and expressions of affection toward him—elements so cardinal in the Pentateuch's portrayal of God's disposition to Israel—are found only in the Hittite treaties, never in the Neo-Assyrian ones. The most up-to-date summary of this argument is in Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, pp. 283-294. See also discussions in Hayim Tadmor, "Treaty and Oath in the Ancient Near East: A Historian's Approach," in *Humanizing America's Iconic Book: Society of Biblical Literature Centennial Addresses 1980*, eds. Gene M.

Tucker and Douglas A. Knight (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980), pp. 142-152; Mendenhall and Herion, "Covenant," pp. 1179-1202; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, pp. 59-157.

61. Joshua 24:1-14, 19-20, 22-23, 26.

62. Exodus 24:7. See also Exodus 19:8; 24:3; Deuteronomy 5:24; Joshua 24:16-18.

63. Olyan, "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations," p. 204.

64. El-Amarna letter 88:47, in *The Amarna Tablets*, vol. 2, ed. J.A. Knudtzon (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915), p. 1177. [German]

65. Treaty between Tudhaliya II of Hatti and Sunashshura of Kizzuwatna, par. 9. Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 41: Hittite; entry 131: Akkadian; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 19.

66. Altman, *The Historical Prologue*, pp. 138, 484.

67. See Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, treaties 2, 3, 7-14, 15 (a parity treaty), 16-18. For the corresponding numbers in the *Catalogue des Textes Hittites* see the synoptic table of Hittite treaties in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, pp. 6-8. Of the eighteen suzerainty treaties whose texts are in our possession, only a single one is between a Hittite king as sovereign and a subordinate *people*, with no mention of a king. The form of this treaty differs in significant ways from the treaties made with subordinate kings. This treaty bears no historical prologue and also bears no section delineating the blessings that will accrue to the subordinate for compliance with the stipulations of the treaty. As we have already seen, the Sinai narratives of Exodus and Deuteronomy include the historical backdrop of the Sinai covenant as well as a list of blessings promised to the children of Israel for compliance with the commandments. Put differently, the Sinai narratives resemble the form of the Late Bronze Hittite subordinate treaty made with a subordinate *king*, and not a subordinate *people* in the absence of a king.

68. Exodus 20:4-5.

69. I Samuel 2:30. God likewise bestows honor upon non-royals in Psalms 91:15 and especially Isaiah 43:4. See Olyan, "Honor, Shame and Covenant Relations," p. 205.

70. See treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Tette of Nuhashshi, par. 3: "Tette shall come yearly to My Majesty, his lord, in Hatti" (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 53; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 55). See also Treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Aziru of Amurru: "[You] Aziru [must come] yearly to My Majesty [your lord] in Hatti." Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 49, par. 1; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 37.

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71. E.g., Genesis 43:3, 5; Exodus 10:28-29; II Samuel 3:13; 14:32.
72. Exodus 23:17. See also Exodus 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16.
73. Exodus 33:20.
74. Treaty between Mursili II of Hatti and Kupanta-Kurunta of Mira-Kuwaliya, par. 28 (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 68; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 81).
75. Treaty between Muwattalli II of Hatti and Alaksandu of Wilusa, par. 16 (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 76; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 91). Another treaty, between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Shattiwaza of Mittanni, states in par. 13 that a duplicate tablet of the treaty “shall be read repeatedly, for ever and ever, before the king of the land of Mittanni and before the Hurrians” (Laroche, *Catalogue des Textes Hittites*, entry 51; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p. 46).
76. Exodus 24:3-4, 7-8.
77. Joshua 8:30-35; II Kings 23:2-3.
78. Deuteronomy 31:10-13.
79. Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 165.
80. Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 118. Yet, at the end of “Lud-lul bel Nemeqi,” the “Mesopotamian Job,” the author does enter a temple and walk around.
81. Exodus 19:6.
82. Leviticus 21:4-5; 19:27-28; Moshe Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), p. 133.
83. Exodus 22:30; Deuteronomy 14:21; Leviticus 22:8; Ezekiel 44:31. Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought*, p. 377.
84. Herman Te Velde, “Theology, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Egypt,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3, p. 1733.
85. On this general issue see Stephen A. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 174-177.
86. See, however, II Kings 23:1-4, where Josiah does seem to play an intermediate role.
87. Deuteronomy 18:1-2. On the equality of rights between priests and Levites in Deuteronomy, see Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 226-232.
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88. Nicholson, *God and His People*, pp. 200-201.

89. John L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), pp. 267-317; Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J.A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 441.

90. I Samuel 8:11-18.