

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

An agreement between two parties

(1) Parity Covenant

(2) Suzerainty Covenant – imposing conditions

About establishing the conditions for a relationship.

The idea of G*d establishing a COVENANT with people is a distinctive feature of Biblical Tradition.

G*d makes PROMISES and establishes CONDITIONS.

In principle, the COVENANT establishes a rule of LAW, defining how people should worship

& how they should behave toward one another

According to 3 of the 4 traditions we looked at last time, G*d establishes a covenant with ABRAHAM.

(According to the fourth, Deuteronomic tradition, G*d made a PROMISE. Conditions were later made explicit, in the Mosaic Covenant, esp. the Ten Commandments.)

According to the Yahwist tradition (J),
“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Yahweh G*d CHOOSES Abram, calling him out from his father's country, and promises him posterity. The implied condition is that Abram CHOOSES to go.

Some years later, after Abram has wandered into Egypt and returned to the land that was later called Canaan, Yahweh promises “all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth” (13:15). Again, no conditions are imposed on Abram except his willingness to trust that Yahweh will keep his promise. The crux of this trust is that **Abram still has no son.**

Later still, after Abram has rescued his nephew Lot, Yahweh comes to him in a vision, telling him not to fear: “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (15:1).

Abram has become anxious: “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless?” (2)

In response, G*d makes a COVENANT with Abram.

In an ancient ceremony, according to which covenants were “cut,” and in the midst of “a deep and terrifying darkness” (12), Abram slaughters a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon and divides the carcasses into pieces (probably in two rows).

“When the sun had gone down, . . . a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’” (17-18).

(Note that the Deuteronimic tradition seems to follow the Jahwist story in supposing that this original agreement was UNCONDITIONAL. G*d makes a promise. Period.)

A somewhat later, Elohist tradition (perhaps based on an even older story), establishes a terrifying condition: it seems that El[ohim] requires the life of every firstborn male child as his due. (Strictly speaking, Abraham's *firstborn* son was Ishmael, whom he begot with Hagar, Sarah's servant. The Elohist narrative, however, refers to Isaac as Abraham's *only son*.)

As the story is told in Genesis 22, Elohim (not Yahweh) "tests" Abraham, saying "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (1).

Without so much as a word of question or protest, Abraham sets out early the next morning, with two servants, Isaac, and a supply of wood (3). On the third day, in the Land of Moriah (Vision), Abraham, carrying the fire and the knife, and Isaac, carrying the wood, climb to a high place (4-5).

Isaac notices that something is missing: "The fire and the wood are here, . . . but where is the lamb for the **burnt offering**?" Abraham answer[s], "God will himself provide the lamb for the **burnt offering**, my son" (7-8).

Abraham builds an altar, binds Isaac, and lays him on top of the wood (9). “Then he reach[es] out his hand and t[akes] the knife to slay his son” (10). But an angel of YHVH calls out to him from heaven: “Do not lay a hand on the boy. . . . Now I know that you fear ELoHiM, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (12).

Abraham finds a ram caught in a thicket and “sacrifice[s] it as a **burnt offering** instead of his son” (13) and calls the place “YHVH Will Provide” (14). The angel of YHVH calls a second time: “I swear by myself, declares YHVH, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely **bless you** and make your **descendants** as **numerous** as the stars in the sky [cf. 15:5] and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take **possession** of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring **all nations on earth will be blessed** [cf. 12:3], because you have obeyed me” (16-18).

The third, **Priestly** version of G*d's covenant with Abram/Abraham is more succinct, but also more completely formulated: G*d makes PROMISES and also establishes an explicit **CONDITION, CIRCUMCISION**.

In **Chapter 17**, after the birth of Ishmael (son of Hagar, Sarai's maid), YHVH (!) appears to Abram when he is ninety-nine years old, identifying himself as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*] and saying: walk before me and be blameless. I will make [NRSV; NIV translates *nathan* as "confirm"] my **covenant** between me and you and will **greatly increase your numbers**" (1-2).

Elohim renames Abram: "your name will be Abraham . . . **father of many nations**" (5) and establishes "an **everlasting covenant** between me and you and your descendants (7). Elohim promises Abraham "the whole land of Canaan . . . as **an everlasting possession** (8), but he also requires him to keep the covenant by **circumcising** "every male among you" (10) saying: "My **covenant** in your flesh is to be an **everlasting covenant**. Any **uncircumcised** male . . . will be cut off [!] from his people; he has broken my **covenant**" (13-14).

Renaming Sarai as Sarah, Elohim promises that she will bear Abraham a son, insisting that Isaac (yet to be born), rather than Ishmael, will be Abraham's heir.

All three covenants make the same PROMISES:
LAND & DESCENDANTS
Summed up as a BLESSING
To Abra[ha]m, his descendants, and ultimately
ALL PEOPLES.

All three covenants are rooted in an idea of CHOICE:

G*d chooses Abraham;

Abraham chooses to accept the terms.

All three covenants involve the idea of SACRIFICE,
the first two (J & E) explicitly, the third (P) implicitly,
inasmuch as CIRCUMCISION is conceived as a
sacrificial substitute for the firstborn,
whether animal (J) or human (E).

(In the Elohist story, a ram is substituted for Isaac. In Jewish tradition, the story called “The Binding of Isaac” is always read in connection with the circumcision of a male child on the eighth day of his life.)

The three traditions are **distinguished** by the nature of the conditions they impose (or do not impose).

In the Jahwist story, the Covenant is UNCONDITIONAL:

Abraham has already, met the implied conditions.

In the Elohist story, the Covenant is CONSEQUENTIAL:

“because you have done this” (22:16).

In the Priestly story, the Covenant is CONDITIONAL:

in order to enjoy the blessings, you must be circumcised.