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# The Concept of Covenant in the Ancient Near East and in Biblical Theology

## ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

A szövetség fogalma elengedhetetlen az ókori Izráel teológiájának és identitásának megértéséhez. Jelen tanulmány a hettita és asszír vazallus-szerződéseket és a Héber Biblia szövetségi szövegeit vizsgálja. Az összehasonlítás eredményeképp a szerző a következő megállapításokat teszi: a Héber Biblia szövetségfogalma hosszú fejlődéstörténettel rendelkezik, amely számtalan ókori ember, kultúra és társadalom közös tapasztalatában gyökerezik, ehhez kötődik és innen is bontakozik ki. A bibliai szövetség fogalma így inkább a hétköznapi ember élethelyzetére épülő teológiai reflexió, mintsem egy olyan új koncepció, amely kifejezetten az ókori Izráel különleges helyzetéből és tapasztalatából származik.

## The nature of the problem

The covenant situation in the Ancient World belonged to the political sphere. After military campaigns, conquerors either left the former enemy kings on their thrones as vassals or replaced the rulers with hopefully more loyal ones. In these cases, the vassal kings' positions were defined by *vassal treaties*. Those who were, became, or proved to be equal regulated their relationships by *parity treaties*. The relationship of the parties was built upon political trust, but, as we may experience even today, this phrase has a special meaning, since in the political arena trust is an extremely fragile phenomenon. So just for being sure they called on human and divine witnesses to testify whenever a treaty was broken, and the deities also punished the guilty. Probably even in the oral stage this methodology was applied, and later the written documents were used as witnesses in controversial cases.<sup>1</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, the term covenant describes the relationship between a particular divine being (YHWH) and a people (Israel). Before entering into covenant with the entire people through Moses at Sinai, we learn about certain individuals, Noah and the ancestor Abraham, with whom God established this specific relationship. The covenant should be two-sided, and can be understood as an arrangement between two individuals, between groups, or between a person and a group.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MATTHEWS: *Treaties and Covenants*, 300. See also: WALTON: *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 69. General bibliography: FLANDERS—CRAPPS—SMITH: *People of the Covenant*, 526.

<sup>2</sup> GOTTWALD: *The Hebrew Bible*, 115.

The scholarly consensus rests on the theory that Israel adopted the concept of covenant, especially its developed form (Deuteronomy, Sinai Covenant) from the Ancient Near Eastern treaty theory, and expressed her relationship with YHWH through its terminology.<sup>3</sup> These vassal texts demonstrate a full dependence of the subject vassal upon the will of the imperial overlord. This idea fits perfectly with a theology that wanted to focus on the required obedience of the people towards God. The majority of the ancient treaty documents are dated to the Late Bronze Age, these are the Hittite vassal treaties, but we find similar texts from the 7<sup>th</sup> century as well, when the Neo-Assyrian Empire recorded some of the relationships with subject kings that way. Treaties were integral parts of ancient diplomacy, and although the Israelite concept of God making covenant with people is without direct parallel, the way it was utilized is worth noting.

## Texts

### a) Mari letter (Middle Bronze Age)

There are frequent references to different kinds of covenants in the Mari letters. Especially interesting is one of the letters (ARM II, No 37, 6–14) where two strange covenant-making ceremonies are mentioned. In the first case, a puppy and a plant (*lettuce*) are used; and, in the second case, the text mentions an ass. The covenant ceremony took place between two parties (presumably former enemies or at least rivals), Hanu and Idamaras, and in the presence of Ibal-Il, the representative of the king of Mari. The presence of this representative probably signs the fact that the king himself guarantees a longer term peace between the groups, but he is independent from both parties. Strangely enough the ceremony itself was rejected by the representative because they wanted to use the puppy and the plant. Instead of using the puppy and the plant, Ibal-Il forced them to kill a she-ass. The text:

*“To my Lord say: thus Ibal-Il, thy servant. The tablet of Ibal-Adad from Aslakka reached me and I went to Aslakka ‘to kill an ass’ between the Hanu and Idamaras. A ‘puppy and lettuce’ they brought, but I obeyed my lord and did not give the ‘puppy and lettuce’. I caused the foal of an ass to be slaughtered. I established peace between the Hanu and Idamaras...”<sup>4</sup>*

It is not clear why the *‘puppy and lettuce’* was so intolerable that the king had to command one of his officers to forbid the planned ceremony,<sup>5</sup> but obviously in the West-Semitic world the use of animals and herbs during covenant-making ceremo-

<sup>3</sup> For the debate over this statement see the still widely used textbook ANDERSON: *Understanding the Old Testament*, 98–101., MENDENHALL: *Ancient Israel’s Faith and History*, 57., GOLDINGAY: *Covenant, OT and NT*, 773., MENDENHALL–HERION: *Covenant*, 1183. The most recent evaluation of the available data: KITCHEN: *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 283–299., the present author’s opinion differs significantly from some of the conclusions of Kitchen, eg. the placing of materials of Deuteronomy to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium (299).

<sup>4</sup> ANET, 482, ANE I, 261 – date of the text: ca. 1730–1700 BC

<sup>5</sup> Probably the *‘puppy and lettuce’* ceremony the would have *“imposed obligations upon Mari”*. MENDENHALL: *Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest-Semitic Covenant Making*, 30.

nies was a common practice. A similar custom existed in the Roman Empire,<sup>6</sup> and the practice can also be compared to the Biblical Passover festival.<sup>7</sup> G. Mendenhall states: “It is very tempting to regard the Passover as a continuation of the age-old custom connected with the establishment of a covenant relationship.”<sup>8</sup>

#### b) Hittite vassal treaties

The most ancient covenant documents already contain the central message: “my friends will be your friends, my enemies will be your enemies”.<sup>9</sup> The largest treaty collection came from the Late Bronze Age Hittite archives; over three dozen texts have been discovered. These texts share a common and clear pattern. The most important elements are:

- (1) title;
- (2) historical prologue [can be a rather lengthy account about the events preceded the new relationship];
- (3) stipulations;
- (4) instructions for storing the text of treaty, in a shrine or other safe place;
- (5) reading instructions: periodically, publicly;
- (6) list of witnesses;
- (7) blessings and curses upon those who keep or break the terms;
- (8) oath-taking ceremony and affirmation of the sanctions.

There are minor changes and omissions in some cases.<sup>10</sup> The treaty form was not an innovation of the Hittites themselves, since the previous example and some Early Bronze Age plates already show most elements of the Hittite treaty texts, but the above structure is most fully attested in this corpus of documents. We can look at the order in the following example.

#### The Hittite Emperor’s Treaty with the King of Amurru<sup>11</sup> (abbreviated)

##### TITLE/PREAMBLE

“these are the words of the Sun Musilis, the great king, the king of the Hatti Land, the valiant, the favorite of the storm-god...”

##### HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

“Aziras was the grandfather of you, Duppi-Teshub. Aziras remained loyal to my father [as his overlord] ... my father was loyal toward Aziras and his country ... when my father became a god and I seated myself on the throne of my father, Aziras behaved toward me just as he had behaved toward my father ... Aziras, your grandfather and DU-Teshub, your father ... they remained loyal to me as their lord ... when your father died, in accordance with your father’s world I did not drop you

6 MENDENHALL: Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest-Semitic Covenant Making, 26.

7 See also some similar rites: Ex 12:21–23 (J, the oldest source); Lev 14:2–9, 48–53; Num 19:1–10.

8 MENDENHALL: Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest-Semitic Covenant Making, 29.

9 Treaty found at Susa, Iran, c. 2250 BC. MATTHEWS: Treaties and Covenants, 300.

10 MATTHEWS: Treaties and Covenants, 301.

11 ANET, 203–205; MENDENHALL: Ancient Israel’s Faith and History, 59.

... *I sought after you. To be sure you were sick and ailing, I the Sun, put you in the place of your father...*"

## OBLIGATIONS

*"but you, Duppi-Teshub, remain loyal toward the king of the Hatti land ... the tribute which was imposed upon your grandfather and your father ... you shall present them likewise ... do not turn your eyes anyone else!... if anyone utters words unfriendly toward the king or the Hatti land before you, Duppi-Teshub, you shall not withhold his name from the king..."*

## WITNESSES

[a list of over seven dozen gods] *"... all the olden gods, ... the mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great sea, heaven and earth, the winds and the clouds – let these be witnesses to this treaty and to the oath."*

## CURSES AND BLESSINGS

*"should Duppi-Teshub not honor the words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Teshub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together everything that he owns. But if Duppi-Teshub honors these words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet, may this gods of the oath protect him together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, and his country..."*

## c) Assyrian texts

With the coming of the Iron Age we have a smaller number of texts, the structure of the treaties change, and we see a sort of simplification of the pattern. The basic formula:

- (1) title;
- (2) stipulations;
- (3) curses;
- (4) witnesses.<sup>12</sup>

A few differences surface when comparing Hittite treaties with later Assyrian texts. The historical introduction, the instructions for storing and reading the text, and the requirement of the oath taking ceremony are central differences, all of them missing from the Assyrian versions.

It is worth taking a closer look at these through the lengthy vassal treaties of Esharhaddon.<sup>13</sup>

## The Treaty between Esharhaddon and Baal of Tyre

## TITLE/PREAMBLE AND CENTRAL MESSAGE

*"This is the treaty which Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, has established with you before the great gods of heaven and earth, on behalf of the crown prince designate Ashurbanipal, the son of your lord Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who has designat-*

<sup>12</sup> MATTHEWS: Treaties and Covenants, 301.

<sup>13</sup> ANE II, 53–69.

ed and appointed him for succession. When Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, departs from living, you will seat the crown prince designate Ashurbanipal upon the royal throne, he will exercise the kingship and overlordship of Assyria over you.”<sup>14</sup>

## STIPULATIONS

“If you will not be subject to this crown prince designate Ashurbanipal, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, your lord, so that he cannot exercise kingship and lordship over you ...if you hear any wrong, unseemly, improper plans, which are improper or detrimental to the exercise of kingship by the crown prince, ... whether they be spoken by his brothers, his father’s brothers, his cousins, or any other member of his father’s lineage, or by officials or governors, or by the court personnel, eunuchs or not, or by the army, or any human being whatsoever, and conceal it and do not come and report it to the crown prince...”

## EXACT DATE

“the 16<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Ajaru, in the eponymy of Nabu-bel-usur, governor of Khorsabad.”

After examining the text above, several observations can be made about differences and similarities between this text and Hittite treaties:

- As it is visible, the historical background of the Assyrian text is not described; in the focus of this document we find a future obligation (“you will seat the crown prince upon the royal throne”). Interestingly enough, the reader has a strange feeling: the present king is pretty sure about his own position, but he is also a little bit worried about the future!
- At the beginning of the long list of stipulations we find the conditional statement (“if you will not be subject to this crown prince...”) followed by the exact details of all kinds of negative attitudes towards the future just ruler. It is obvious that whoever wrote this one lengthy sentence knew quite a lot about palace intrigues! More important to observe is the orientation of this text, from the beginning to the end the text deals with the future.
- In the case of the Esarhaddon text the instructions for storing and reading the text are missing. We find the exact date of composition instead, something we would expect when we deal with the composition of a well-trained bureaucrat. This is an important reminder and also an indirect evidence for the nature of this text as a scribal document. These texts were to be stored carefully, and it was likely the duty of the appointed officials to make the content of such texts available to all (or at least the concerned).
- This Assyrian text is written in a very direct, dictated way. We find a long list of deities in front of whom “the bidding” took place, that part is followed by the cases of non-loyal behavior, and after the detailed description of all possibilities of human unfaithfulness we go back to the gods, whom will wipe out the unjust. “May Shamash, the light of heaven and earth, not give you a fair and equitable judgment, may he take away your eyesight; walk about darkness! ... May Venus, the brightest among the stars, let your wives lie in the embrace of your enemy

<sup>14</sup> ANE II, 55.

*before your very eyes, may your sons not have authority over your house, may foreign enemy divide your possessions! ... May Belet-ili, Lady of all creatures, put an end to birth giving in your land, so that the nurses among you shall miss the cry of babies in the streets...*" After statements like this, the oath-taking ceremony really seems unnecessary: the ruler, the great king simply declares the future in the style of a decree. He seems to be saying, "OK, my friend, the decision is yours, but you do not really have any options."<sup>15</sup>

#### d) Biblical texts

In the Hebrew Bible, covenant language is presented several times. Since Israel was never a world power, naturally the biblical examples describe different situations; the kings in Jerusalem had no vassals so we do not expect any vassal treaties in the Hebrew Bible. But whenever people found themselves in similar situations, they could behave in a comparable way. Pacts between individuals, groups, states were formulated as covenants.<sup>16</sup> It should be no surprise that even among the patriarchs we find examples of covenant-making acts, e.g. when Jacob and Laban made a deal of separation. According to Gen 31 when Jacob decided to leave the territory of his father-in-law, he practically had to escape, and when they met again after a serious debate over the missing household gods they set up a heap of stones to mark the border between them. This text appears to be a story of family matters, but upon closer examination we find all the central elements of covenant-making.

From the sociological perspective, the story of Jacob and Laban can be explained as a story of a clan-division, something happens whenever the size of flock grows above the accessible grazing fields. From this point of view, the use of covenant language is especially fitting. Verse 44 reads: "*Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us*".

#### The covenant between Jacob and Laban [NIV]

INTRODUCTION; Jacob reminds Laban of his past two decades of service (vs. 38–42)  
*"I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you."*

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Esarhaddon-treaties see FRANKENA: The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy, 122–154.

<sup>16</sup> See the list of UNTERMAN: Covenant, 190.

## STIPULATIONS (vs. 48–52)

*Laban said, „This heap is a witness between you and me today.” ... „If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.” Laban also said to Jacob, „Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me.”*

## DIVINE WITNESS AND SACRIFICE (vs. 53–54)

*„May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there.*

The above cited text is a covenant between two clan leaders; from the theological point of view more important is the adaptation of the covenant-terminology to relationship of God and his people. The previous example came from the everyday life, and the partnership of states is a similar situation (see the pact between Asa of Judah and Ben-Hadad of Aram, 1Kings 15,18–20). Behind the theological usage we find the experience of covenant between two unequal parties, like a suzerain and a dependant. God and humans, the divine sphere and the mortals are not cooperating as individuals, but according to the biblical notion God gifted his people with this particular relationship. Texts like the Decalogue, Joshua 24, or the Book of Deuteronomy as a whole reminds the reader that the receivers of the covenant have certain responsibilities, and the giver is just. The most important duty is simply to keep the covenant, based on acceptance. With all this in mind we can compare the structure and terminology of some biblical texts with Hittite and Assyrian documents.

Table 1. Treaty form – structural elements<sup>17</sup>

	LB Hittite treaties	IA Assyrian treaties	Hebrew Bible (some examples)
title / preamble	+	+	Ex 20:2a; Deut 5:6a; Josh 24:2a.
historical prologue	+		Ex 20:2b; Deut 1–3; Josh 24:2b–13.
stipulations (obligations imposed upon the vassal)	+	+	Ex 20:3–17; Deut 5:7–21, 12–26; Josh 24:14.
storing and reading instructions (the text is to be kept in a shrine or other safe place, the requirement of periodic public reading)	+		Ex 25:21, 40:20; Deut 10:5, 27:2–3, 31:1–10.
list of (divine) witnesses	+	+	Josh 24:22, 27
blessings and curses upon those who keep or break the terms (obedience / disobedience)	+	+	Deut 27–28
[oath of the vassal (pledge)]			Ex 24:3; Josh 24:24
oath-taking ceremony and affirmation of the sanctions	+		Ex 24:3–8

The visible similarities are striking. According to the well-known and generally accepted view, the structure of the Hittite vassal treaties compares well to and lies behind the covenants involving Moses and Joshua, in the lengthy accounts of the Sinai and Sikem events. Mendenhall argues: “*this treaty structure was likely a thousand years old by the time of Moses and was part of the common knowledge of people throughout the region.*”<sup>18</sup>

### The usage of the parallels

The parallels and differences between Hittite and Assyrian treaties and covenants made in the Hebrew bible clearly show that the treaty form is evidenced in the biblical texts. Without a doubt, the biblical authors adopted the terminology from the common knowledge of their world. However, there is a point of debate here as well. At first glance the question may seem odd for those not specializing in the biblical studies, but biblical scholars must ask whether the Hittite or the Neo-Assyrian texts influenced the development of the biblical concept of covenant. The Hittite parallels as it was mentioned previously came from the 14<sup>th</sup> century context, and their proposed usage can be seen as a positive evidence for the an-

<sup>17</sup> MENDENHALL: Ancient Israel's Faith and History, 57–59, 67–69, GOTTWALD: The Hebrew Bible, 117.

<sup>18</sup> MENDENHALL: Ancient Israel's Faith and History, 57.

cient nature of the biblical notion.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the Assyrian treaty forms emerge several centuries later, and theoretically we cannot reject the assumption of dating the formulation<sup>20</sup> of the covenant concept in the Bible to the eighth/seventh centuries B.C. In this case the concept of covenant is a *theological reflection* of the people's situation.

## Ancient idea shaped through centuries of experience

In the Hebrew Bible, one may say, Moses is the figure who acts as the chief covenant mediator. However, the Moses traditions (according to Gottwald) themselves are poor in direct covenant references. The non-P references in Ex 19–24 and 32–34 are

*seen by some critics as simply a theophany. Indeed, some who claim a Deuteronomistic revision of the non-P Sinai units deny that there are any pre-D references to covenant in the Sinai texts, which they tend to read as theophanies throughout. Identifiable J and E traditions do not refer to the covenant, except for J's 'ark of the covenant' (Num 10:33, 14:44)."*<sup>21</sup> ... "Some maintain, however, that the Israelite formulas are more closely correspond to the typical concepts and language of the suzerainty treaty form than they do to any other ancient Near Eastern forms of agreement. Moreover, the adoption by Moses is viewed as a highly effective way to assert that in the new community of equal families/clans (later tribes) of Israel there were to be no human overlords but simply a sovereign god who legitimate the familiar / clan-based (later tribal) social organization of the covenant people."<sup>22</sup>

The idea of covenant is practically absent from the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets, probably because of political reasons. The covenant between YHWH and the house of David in Judah was mainly a pledge to the dynasty, and in the northern tradition it was without any central importance.

We find clear references to the concept of covenant in the exilic period. The treaty model is clearly represented in the structure of Deuteronomy, where the entire book is formulated around the covenant form.<sup>23</sup> *Table 1* shows that aside from Deuteronomy the treaty forms' major elements are nowhere represented by any

19 According to the balanced evaluation of Hoffner, we must be aware of the distance between the Israelite and Hittite cultures both geographically and historically. He proposes a "channel of cultural influence in the late second and early first millennium that allowed influences from Anatolia to be felt in Palestine." HOFFNER: Hittite-Israelite Cultural Parallels, xxxiv.

20 The terminology of treaty and covenant is discussed briefly by FRANKENA: The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy, 138.

21 GOTTWALD: The Hebrew Bible, 115. See also the detailed description of CHILDS: The Book of Exodus, 354–360.

22 GOTTWALD: The Hebrew Bible, 116.

23 According to Dearman Deuteronomy contains elements from two Neo-Assyrian literary models: vassal treaties and law codes. DEARMAN: Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel, 1992. Goldingay states: „Deuteronomy as a whole can be seen as a covenant document.” GOLDINGAY: Covenant, 773.

single text, they must be gathered from different parts of Biblical books.<sup>24</sup> Joshua 24 is another text where the majority of elements can be seen – again, a relatively late and well-composed chapter.<sup>25</sup> We can state it was an important position to stress for the Deuteronomic author, because all covenants can be summarized in a very simple and brief statement: remain loyal to God.<sup>26</sup>

Covenant theology helps to interpret Israel's life.<sup>27</sup> This is the basic aim of the large historic work of Joshua – 2 Kings. Deuteronomy, as a preamble underlines the conditional nature of the covenant, as it is made clear in Deut 28.<sup>28</sup> Through the evaluation of Israel's past, the authors looked for a relevant answer to the challenging questions raised from the national tragedy of the Exile. They realized that the centuries of unfaithfulness led to the destruction of the capital and the captivity of the royal family and nobility. The scribes focused on one term that was easy to apply – covenant.<sup>29</sup> In the book of Jeremiah, a composition of the same scribal group,<sup>30</sup> the term remains central. If YHWH abandoned the people the only solution for a restored relationship would be a new covenant (Jer 31:31),<sup>31</sup> probably better to say a renewed covenant. Behind this notion there is the voice of hope and trust. YHWH wills to continue the way with the elected people. Abandonment is momentary (Is 54:7–8); the Exile can last for decades, but not forever. This new covenant will be everlasting, won't be broken or violated by disobedience (Ez 37:26).<sup>32</sup>

## Theological importance and conclusions

The present writer is not denying the ancient nature of the notion of covenant. Segmentary societies do not keep written agreements; in those communities the spoken word and the witnesses must take a central role. For them, a view that lays the emphasis on fidelity is an acceptable and meaningful idea. Behind the developed concept of covenant, visible in the book of Deuteronomy, in the historical

24 GOTTWALD: *The Hebrew Bible*, 116.

25 MCKENZIE: *Aspects of Old Testament Thought*, 1298.

26 The requirement of exclusive loyalty is the most obvious parallel between the quoted political covenants and the Biblical material. GOLDINGAY: *Covenant*, 770.

27 BRUEGGEMANN: *Reverberations of Faith*, 38.

28 The similarities of Deut 28 and the Assyrian treaty is strikingly presented by FRANKENA: *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy*, 148–150. According to his analysis it is possible to understand Deuteronomy as a document of a renewed relationship: instead of being a vassal of the Assyrian king from now on the real and only king to serve will be Yahweh. After the death of Ashurbanipal the political power of Assyria declined, “consequently he (Josiah) and his people had no longer to serve the Assyrian king as their lord and to revere Ashur in addition to Yahweh, but could return to the religion of their fathers by removing from their midst all the hated vestiges of Assyrian influence and by abolishing the cults of foreign gods...” (152–153.)

29 For Deuteronomy as a scribal document: NELSON: *Deuteronomy. A Commentary*, 3–8., TOORN: *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 143–172.

30 DEARMAN: *My Servants the Scribes*, 412–13. HODOSSY-TAKÁCS: *The Wrath of Jeremiah*, 94–113. For the scribal culture in general: TOORN: *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 2007.

31 FLANDERS–CRAPPS–SMITH: *People of the Covenant* (Fourth ed.), 404.

32 BRUEGGEMANN: *Reverberations of Faith*, 39.

work of Joshua – 2Kings, and the prophetic book of Jeremiah, we most likely find the Neo-Assyrian treaties rather than the more ancient Hittite structure.

When compared to depictions of God's relationship with Israel in other contexts in the Hebrew Bible, the covenant as an analogy for the relationship of God to Israel is less intimate than the husband-wife image (Hos) or the picture of sheep and shepherd (Ps). The Lord as king and the people as the ruled is a familiar view of understanding the divine – human relationship. For those living in a kingdom ruled by a royal figure covenant language was easily understandable. The kingship as an experienced reality shaped the theological interpretation, the formulation of the texts, and should be seen today as the result of careful scribal activity.

The introduction of the covenant language to the biblical texts was a useful and innovative element.<sup>33</sup> In the immediate context of the Exodus traditions covenant language creates an obvious environment for the legal material, we even can say the laws themselves depend on the previously granted covenant.<sup>34</sup> The laws balance human superciliousness; they show the need for responsible behavior. Similarly, the covenant theology clarifies the fact of election that does not result a privileged position but through covenant it transforms into the election to responsibility. The gifts of election and covenant are not acts of favoritism.<sup>35</sup> One of the major strengths of applying the term theologically was its complexity. It can be seen in the private realm (eg. marriage contract), in the political life (eg. international treaties, or lord and ruled within a society); it can be seen collectively (eg. obligation of a city) and individually (eg. a particular person's relationship with someone else, credit / debt, etc.).

In sum, this term is inclusive, complex, and the major theological importance of using covenant language lays in its emphatic involvement of responsibility. This notion, at least in its developed form describes the partnership between people and God comprehensively; it is not necessarily an ancient, genuine element of Israelite thinking but rather seems to be a reflection. As such, due to its applicative character the covenant theology fulfills its role.

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<sup>33</sup> The concept of covenant is seen by some scholars as the most distinguishing element of Yahwism. WALTON: *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 110.

<sup>34</sup> Of course this way of understanding and dating the material puts the understanding of Moses as a chief mediator into doubt. GOTTFWALD: *The Hebrew Bible*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> MCKENZIE: *Aspects of Old Testament Thought*, 1298.

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