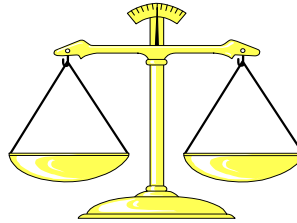


## THE SINAI COVENANT



The covenant at Sinai/Horeb (Ex 3:1, 17:6; Dt 4:10) is understood in the tradition to be the constitution of Israel. For the understanding of covenant in the Old Testament then, Sinai constitutes the central covenant moment. The covenant first articulated in Exodus continues to develop in subsequent writings. But it remains the backdrop against which most subsequent theological statements and transformations are carried out and articulated.

Just as the Abrahamic covenant of promise was preceded by a short history of call, so too is the mosaic covenant of law preceded by a history of call - the calling out of Egypt. The story of the exodus is the foundational experience of Israel that issues in a binding relationship of the people to their God who has so graciously and with so much power delivered them from oppression to freedom in order to live. Whatever were the concrete means for securing the escape of a relatively small group of people in Egypt, an event that remains unrecorded in Egyptian chronicles, the Israelites understood their liberation to have been an extraordinary gift by the God of Moses who had answered their cries because of the care and covenant given to Abraham, their distant forefather. Israel understands her very existence as having its source in a liberation from Egypt. Even in later reflection when Israel becomes a relatively powerful nation state that unified some twelve tribes numbering close to two million seeks to identify "all of Israel" as having its origins in this liberation from Egypt (hence the number of six hundred thousands men belonging to the twelve tribes enumerated in Exodus).

The covenant at Sinai then cannot be understood apart from the exodus events, any more than the covenant of Abraham is fully intelligible apart from the call of Abraham. The establishment of a covenant presumes a prior relationship that issues in a clarification, a response, and a recognition of the major aspects and responsibilities in the relationship.

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### A — The Narrative Structure of the Mosaic Covenant Ex 19--34:

(19:1-2a) (P)

- 19:2b-6 <E> Introduction: God communicates to Moses that if they keep the covenant they will be a special people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. There is to be a meeting.
- 19:7-8 <E> Moses communicates the message to the people, and they accept the meeting.  
19:9 <E> Preparations are to be done for the encounter, the LORD will come in a cloud to speak with Moses so that the people may hear and believe.
- 19:10 <E> The people are to be consecrated, and garments are to be washed.  
19:11b-13 <J> *The boundaries are clarified. When the trumpet blasts they are to come to the mountain.*  
19:14-15 <E> Moses consecrates them, the garments are washed and they are ready for the meeting.
- 19:16-17 <E> thunder and lightning,  
19:18 <J> *the Lord descends,*  
19:19 <E> the trumpet is blowing,  
19:20 <J> *the Lord comes down,*  
19:21-25 <J> *the people are not to come up the mountain with Moses, but Aaron does.*
- 20:1-17 <E> The words of God. (The purpose of the historical references is identification.)  
20:18-21 <E> The people are afraid and make Moses their speaker.  
20:22 <E> The words of God with cultic ramifications.
- 21--23 <E> The ordinances and stipulations with a conclusion of blessings to bolster the spirit for the stipulation to conquer the land. THE COVENANT CODE

#### Rituals for ratifying the Covenant

- 24:1-2 <J> *Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders are to come up the mountain, but only Moses is to draw near.*
- 24:3-8 <E> Moses tells all the words spoken to the people. There is acclamation of the people with amen. The young men offer sacrifices and blood is sprinkled on all the people.
- 24:9-11 <J> *Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy went up the mountain and concluded the covenant with a sacrificial meal.*
- 24:12-15a <E> The written tablets
- (25--31) (P) The Tabernacle, ark, table, lampstand, curtain, court, temple, etc.
- 32:1-6 <E> Moses delays, the people ask Aaron to make them gods.  
32:7-14 <E> Moses bargains with the LORD to save the people from catastrophe.  
32:15-35 <E> Moses and Joshua return and confront the sin and cowardice of Aaron.
- 33:1,3 <J> *The exodus and the covenant to Abraham are recalled.*  
33:2b,4-6 <E> The promise of a land flowing with milk and honey is recalled.  
33:7-11 <E> The tent of meeting is described, whereby Moses and the LORD communicate.  
33:12-23 <J> *The request of Moses and the special theophany at the cleft in the rock.*
- 34 <J> *Restoration of the tablets, the laws of the Yahwist, the shining face of Moses.*

## **B — The Structure of the Sinai Covenant and the Vassal Treaty Form**

There is little doubt that in the earliest times of Israel's history in Egypt and in Canaan her leaders would have been familiar with the vassal treaty forms. The dating of the exodus event cannot be reached with certitude. Two possibilities have usually been posited. The 15th century rests on the interpretation of 1 Kings 6:9 where we have the date quoted that the exodus took place 480 years before the reign of Solomon which would place the exodus into the Amarna period. The other possibility is the 13th century. Archaeological evidence requires the presence of Israelites in Canaan by 1220, because of the Marneptah stele. This would place the exodus under the leadership of Moses during the reign of Ramses II (1290-1224). The armies of Ramses II had entered Canaan and Syria and met the opposition of the Hittites, which ended in a treaty. Under his reign as well the two cities, Pithom and Ramses, were built that are mentioned in regard to the forced labour of the Israelites in Egypt in Exodus 1:11.

The name of Moses is clearly an Egyptian name as the title Tut-Mosis and Ramesses would suggest (Moses is derived from the Egyptian word meaning "born of"). Even the memories and traditions surrounding Moses have him educated in the court and raised according to the customs of the Egyptians. It is not unlikely that the Egyptians had Semites trained in order to become delegates and rulers in the Semitic lands to the east that Egypt dominated. This situation makes it most feasible that the Israelites, or at least their leaders, would have been familiar with the vassal/parity treaty forms.

The question we face in the Sinai treaty narrative is not whether it possesses some vassal treaty characteristics. For that it seems to do in the very nature of the relationship between God and Israel. God is the lord and Israel is a special servant. The motivation for leaving their place in Egypt was to serve the Lord in the desert by celebrating a feast. The question is rather; can we recognize the adherence of the vassal treaty form in the Sinai narrative? The importance of this exercise to answer this question is not to establish dependency or lack of it, but rather to clarify the uniqueness of the Sinai covenant. What is the basic characteristic of this fundamental historical image that bound Israel and the LORD irrevocably?

First then, can we discern the covenant formulary in the Sinai covenant narrative? We do face the tremendously difficult issue of the textual tradition in dealing with this question. But it makes no sense to say the treaty formulary must have been used simply because Sinai was a covenant feast. What we can do is look at the structure as we have it in the text, and consider the treaty formulary in light of the textual traditions posited by redaction criticism. The first attempts at this study were quite optimistic in seeing the covenant formulary present in the narrative. But the tendency to make light of the differences between the narratives obscured the dominant and most characteristic features of the Sinai covenant.

Key elements in the Vassal/Sovereign Treaty Formulary

- 1) **titulature** – the title and name of the king, sometimes the name of his father and predecessors.
- 2) **the historical prologue** – all the previous benefits that the vassal kingdom has received from the great Hittite king are recorded. This record is not done with a special format with pat phrases, but

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seems to be a general record of historical events. At times rebellions of the vassal state are mentioned in this context. There is a double purpose to this historical prologue. One is ethical. By recalling the received benefits of the vassal, the king attempts to call forth loyalty to the established treaties. The other is juridical. It is history that grounds the great king's rights to demand adherence to the imposed claims.

3) **stipulations** – Often the section begins with general obligations of loyalty to the great king. they now share the same friends and the same enemies. Then there are the specific obligations one of which often is the responsibility to return fugitives, a recurring theme in most of the treaties. Somewhere within the treaty the need for a written document to be made known to the people from time to time is expressed.

4) **oaths** – The gods are invoked as witnesses to the concluded treaty. Besides the gods we have at times the heavens, the earth, rivers and springs mentioned as witnesses.

5) **blessings and curses** – these are the declared consequences positive and negative of obedience or disobedience to the treaty.

6) **concluding rites** – Often the rite is actually mentioned in the treaty. The oath taking could take place at this juncture with a gesture that would symbolize the curse that the vassal will take on himself; for instance, rubbing oil on the body, drinking the oil, cutting of animals for sacrifice, a ritual meal.

### **C – Similarities of Sinai to the Treaty Form:**

– The historical prologue, 19:3-6, 20:1. Some would see a clear example of the historical basis to the Sinai covenant in God's identification as the one who brought them out of Egypt. However no clear emphasis is drawn out from these references to the LORD's right for demanding adherence to the covenant stipulations.

– The servant/Lord relationship. Clearly in the Sinai covenant Israel is depicted as God's servant. This image is used in several instances. 20:3, You shall not have other gods, for I am jealous, visiting iniquity to those who hate me and showing steadfast love to those who love me. 22:28-29, The first born of your sons you shall give to me. 23:14, Three times you shall keep a feast to me, none shall appear before me empty-handed. 23:22 If you hearken to his voice, I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. Many of these images bear striking resemblance to the vocabulary of the treaty forms.

– The written document and rituals. In Exodus 24, we have the acceptance of the words that were exchanged in the covenant. These were written on the tablets. We also have the two rituals ratifying the covenant, the union of blood and the meal.

On the basis of these points of contact with the vassal treaty form, some exegetes have postulated a clear dependency on the form in the narration of the Sinai covenant.

**D — The differences of the Sinai covenant from the vassal treaty form**

Can we claim then that the vassal treaty form constitutes the narrative basis for the Sinai covenant? There are more differences than similarities in the form. Even the similarities that we do have can be explained with reasons other than dependency on form. The over-all image of God as the lord with Israel as the servant is one that can be postulated as contributing to the similarities of certain styles.

This historical prologue of the Hittite treaties which was characteristic in them vis a vis the Assyrian treaties had for its purpose to give foundation and a right for the demands and stipulations. In 19:3 and in 20:1, which are the only two historical references that could be construed as a prologue, the historical references are more concerned with the identity of God than with his right to demand stipulations. The great historical acts of the exodus are not recounted as a basis and motivation for entering into the covenant as one would expect if the treaty formulary were used as the framework.

The motivation for Israel's acceptance of the covenant provided in the narrative is the sheer power and awesome presence of God. Considerable space in the narrative is dedicated to the description of the awesome presence and to Israel's reaction of fear and awe. True, the Lord is the one who brought them out of Egypt with a mighty arm and dreadful signs, but the exodus is not the immediate reason presented in the Sinai account for entrance into the covenant. The theophany plays a special and unique role in the Sinai narrative. The vassal treaty formulary shows no resemblance to this particular feature of the Sinai covenant. To force the text into a vassal treaty formulary does not do justice precisely to the unique aspect of the theophany in the narrative.

There are a number of features that are lacking in the Sinai narrative for the theory of dependence. The lack of curses constitutes perhaps the most serious deviation from the literary form of the vassal treaties. Both Hittite and Assyrian treaties, in different degrees, relied on the curses to bolster adherence of the vassal to the treaty. The arguments postulated to read curses into the Sinai narrative only manifest the desperate arguments to support the theory. Some argued that apodeictic laws in their imperatives implied curses. However, Hittite treaties also have apodeictic laws and still have the curses to bolster adherence to the treaty. The only reference within the decalogue that could be construed as a curse and a blessing occurs in 20:4-6. However, the place in the decalogue, namely in the general stipulations would be completely out of character from the vassal treaty form. There the curses are recited after the declaration of oath. Moreover even in this case what is emphasized is not the curse but the power and awesome presence of God. This formulation of blessing and threat is more intimately connected with the key motivation in the Sinai narrative of revealing who God is for Israel than in announcing blessings and curses.

Finally, instead of having rituals that would exemplify the curse, such as the one we noticed with Abraham, we have two different rituals that stress unity and communion in the Sinai narrative. On the one hand there is the ritual of sacrifice in which blood is sprinkled on the altar and on the people in order to highlight the unity between the people and the LORD. Both share in the unity of blood. Blood signifies the life force of living creatures. Could this ritual be construed as a ritual

curse? Blood in the Hebrew vocabulary was considered sacred, a sign of life. If blood were spilt unjustly as in the case of Abel, it would cry out from the earth (Gen 4:10-11). Blood was considered to be the very life of a being. In our case in Sinai, the LORD and the people share the blood, which is life (Leviticus 17:10-14). Far from being a curse, the sharing of the blood was more a sign of having shared in an experience. The ritual of blood then was meant to effect unity between God and Israel, which the covenant signified. The sign of blood represents a familial bond between God and the people because they share in the same life.

Certainly there was no subsequent Hebrew interpretation, which invoked the act of blood sprinkling as a curse in the case of the breaking of the covenant. It is the powerful and jealous God who is invoked as the one who will carry out terrible justice.

The other ritual that we have in the narrative, though completely different in nature, corroborates the character of union exemplified in the blood ritual. The sharing of a meal in Bedouin societies and in general exemplifies union. So in point of fact the two rituals that bind the parties of the covenant are more rituals of unity than they are ritualized curses which we would expect from the treaty formulary.

In this contrast/comparison between Sinai and the treaty form, the unique features of the Sinai covenant arise to the fore. Moses as the leader is the mediator of the covenant. The basis for this binding is the theophany in which the Lord appears in all his immediacy and power to reveal his will for this chosen people. The covenant is accepted by the people and is ratified by a ritual of communion. These unique characteristics of the Sinai covenant stress the personal dimension of the Lord's relationship to Israel as well as the familial bond that is effected in the covenant.

This analysis of the unique features of the Sinai covenant can also be tested in light of redaction criticism, which separates the Yahwist/Elohists traditions of the text. Neither of these strands reflects the treaty form. There is some difficulty in separating the two strands precisely and more recent canonical approaches have given up stressing the differences in the narrative. The redactor had woven the two strands together quite successfully. In general introducing a division with the story of Israel's early sin of idolatry - the sin of the golden calf has cleverly joined the two accounts. The golden calf occasions the re-establishment of the covenant. In this way the two strands of the Sinai covenant were mingled into a single narrative. Much of the Elohists presentation was incorporated into the first covenant. The end result of the narrative is one which has the covenant ratified again in the recopying of the tablets. The separation of the two strands and their eventual amalgamation reveal interesting theological features of the Sinai covenant.

#### The Yahwist/Elohists strands

Elohists				Yahwist
19:2b-6	—	introduction	—	34:10
19:10-11a,14-15	—	cultic prayer and preparation	—	19:11-13

19:16-17	—	the theophany	—	19:18 + 33:18-23, 34:5
20:1-2	—	God's name and nature	—	34:6-8
20:18-21	—	Moses as Mediator	—	19:24
19:7-8; 24:3	—	acclamation		
24:4-8	—	sealing of the covenant with ritual	—	24:1-2,9-11; 34:27-28

For the first time, the conditional nature of the covenant is introduced, but it is hardly overemphasized in 19:5-6. Though the Yahwist also has a law code which emphasizes what is called forth from the people to do, namely adherence and commitment to the LORD's teaching, his commandments, conditionality is not mentioned (34:11).

The theophany has a central place in both Elohist and Yahwist traditions. In both cases the awesomeness, the power and the glory of God are emphasized as the main motivation for the covenant binding. This would confirm the importance of the theophany in the Sinai narrative from the point of view of both traditions.

Perhaps the main difference in the accounts centers on the understanding of the role of Moses in the covenant making. For the Elohist Moses is acclaimed as the mediator because of the people's fear to deal directly with the LORD. For the Yahwist, it is the Lord who has chosen to speak with the people through Moses. This different understanding is born out also in the narratives for establishing the covenant. In the Elohist account, it is Moses who ratifies the covenant with the people. The sprinkling of the blood on the altar and on the people emphasizes the communal dimension of the covenant. Both Moses and the people actively share in the establishment of the covenant. In the Yahwist account, the covenant is ratified in a hierarchical manner perhaps to emphasize the succession of priestly power to Aaron's followers. It is only a select group that shares in the covenant meal at the top of the mountain: Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders. Moreover, in the Yahwist account, Moses receives a special theophany, which highlights his unique relationship to God (33:18- 23, 34:5). In this way the Yahwist emphasizes Moses as the one who is especially gifted as the leader of the people, as the one who therefore can speak the LORD's will. He is the one who has spoken face to face with God.

What is interesting of course is that these two strands have been joined into a single narrative which also does not highlight in a conclusive manner the treaty formulary. Apart from certain breaks and repetitions in the narration, the episode does read as a coherent whole. The foundational narrative is that of the Elohist with its emphasis on the familial bond between God and the people, with its emphasis of conditionality for being a special people. But the promise of land in the Yahwist account with its special emphasis on the role of Moses is integrated into the narrative. In contrast to the vassal treaty, the Sinai covenant stresses features that are not present in the treaty formularies. These are in the first place the theophany itself where the Lord establishes a prerogative right by the noumenal presence and power and fire. There is the covenant binding through rituals of communion which highlight the familial bond that the covenant has established. The values and characteristics of a Bedouin people figure more dominantly in the formulation of the Sinai covenant treaty than do the

literary features of city-state peace treaties. Though some of these features may be reflected in the Sinai narrative, the literary characteristics of the vassal formulary do not unlock the unique features of the Sinai covenant. Still, the agreement of the people to follow the words of the LORD by their commitment and 'amen' is very much shared with the vassal treaty formulary in that the very structure of the form is geared to emphasize the agreement and commitment on the part of Israel. In light of this gift-task relationship between God and Israel, the feature of task is given significant prominence and dignity. The LORD solicits the agreement of all the people in this new enterprise. Space and dignity is afforded to this particular feature of the relationship between God and Israel. The Sinai Covenant forever will recognize the importance of the people's deliberate cooperation in fulfilling the triple promises of the Abrahamic Covenant – descendants, land, and blessing.

### **E — The Content of the LORD's Will in the Sinai Covenant**

The presentation of a code of conduct in the context of a personal covenant was a revolution in the history of religious ideas. Regardless of whether or not the Sinai covenant is understood as an example of a vassal treaty, the joining of a covenant ratification and a code of law into a single unity is unique to Israel. Law codes as such were in the mainstream of Mesopotamian life in the third millennium BC. They were even connected with the gods, in that they were either dedicated to them, or understood as the wisdom of the god himself given to the people or the king as is the case with the laws of Hammurabi. But never had the will of a god directed to a particular people, bound by agreement, appeared until the Israelites established and lived the Sinai covenant. This is significant in a number of respects.

To appreciate the Decalogue in the context of the covenant I think we would do well to consider the revolutionary character of a law code which expressed the will of the LORD embedded firmly in a covenant relationship. The terms that denote the decalogue are not juridical terms in the first instance. In the first place the content of the covenant is defined as the ten words (*'ašeret ha debarym*). The Hebrew word, *dabar*, has the connotation of deed or word. Even the use of the word, *tôrah*, to denote the content of the covenant has the connotation of instruction rather than a legal binding law. *Torah* would become a technical word summarizing the entire field of commandments and requirements for cultic and social life at the time of the writing of Deuteronomy. In Exodus it is used explicitly as a word to express the LORD's will for the people - the LORD's instruction, Exod 16:4. The Hebrew verb, *yarah*, from which the noun, *tôrah*, is derived has three distinct meanings: 1) to throw or to lay down a marker, 2) to give to drink, 3) to instruct, to teach. In connection with the LORD's word the *tôrah* is a term that strives to convey the LORD's will and the LORD's plan for the people.

Though we tend to understand the decalogue as a law-code, there are a number of differences between these "ten words" of the LORD and the law codes of the Ancient Near East. To begin with the law codes of Lipit Ishtar, Echnunna or Hammurabi are all codes that employ case-law or casuistic constructions. A condition or case is presented with the appropriate response or punishment to be meted out. (when . . . if . . . then. . .) The codes cover the practical areas of human life, business transactions, rights and responsibilities of slaves and masters, husband and wife relations, inheritance and, in general, the social life of the people.

A parallel to such codes is to be found in the extension of the decalogue in Exod 21-23 and in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This is clearly not the case in the decalogue where we have a series of



declarations in imperative forms. This form of articulating a law through a command or exhortation is often termed called apodeictic (*apo+deiknumi* = to be demonstrable) as opposed to case law. This form of commandment is closer to the imperative commands of the Hittite Vassal treaties where the stipulations are expressed in forms of commandments, "You shall, and you shall not". But in the vassal-treaty formulary, these imperative commands do not cover the social life of the vassal, only the responsibilities with respect to the sovereign.

What we encounter in the decalogue is a unique blending of the form of Hittite treaty commands in the imperative and the laws of social well being of the great law codes. Notice that the Hittite or Assyrian vassal treaty forms were not concerned with the internal social organization of the respective peoples. In contrast, the great law codes stressed only the social organization of rights and duties of the people. The decalogue expresses the value of cultic life in the first three commandments, the value of life in four and five, and finally the respect to be shown to one's neighbour in the remaining five (of course depending on how you divide up the commands to reach ten – see the treatment of the 10 commandments under the Book of Deuteronomy). They are all general commands to illustrate directions for human decision and conduct. For the most part the decalogue is formulated in negative commands (only three and four are positive) which in form is more vague than positive commands or exhortation. Activities formulated in negative terms simply denote those activities, which would mark one as not belonging to the sphere of God's will. These are general directives, which illustrate the direction according to which Israel's values should be oriented. They are pointers, but backed up by imperative commands.

By placing directives of ethical demands in the context of a covenant relationship between the LORD and Israel, the exodus narrative depicts the LORD as a God who is concerned with the well being of this chosen people. Not only is God powerful and mighty, able to change the course of history by liberating the people out of Egypt. But the LORD is able to challenge the people in the decalogue and in the subsequent interpretations of the decalogue to live a life of blessing and a life of continuous liberation that expresses the dignity of people. God's actions with respect to the cosmos to humans and to Israel will forever be marked by the moral qualities of justice and righteousness. Just how this justice and righteousness is conceived will become the focus of attention in several prayers of lament and of course in the book of Job. But the Sinai Covenant, with its decalogue and code of law forever marks the relationship between God, the cosmos and Israel with justice and mercy.

This notion of a God who is concerned with the well-being of a people represents a significant break-through in the near-eastern idea of divine beings who are often depicted as volatile, capricious and unpredictable, who act on whims and so are not bound to any law.

In the Sinai covenant, the LORD is presented as challenging the people to a decision to pursue the values of commitment to the one God and to social well being achieved in respect to one's neighbour. The ten words are conditional in the sense that by following the LORD's directives, the Israelites will be participating in the blessing and life of God. But they are not conditional in the sense that the covenant of being God's people only comes into effect once obedience has been rendered. The commandments are not truncated from the blessings in the sense that if the commandments are obeyed then God will bestow a rewarding blessing. The value contained in the commandment implies the corresponding blessing to which the commandment is connected. The

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Israelites have become the LORD's special people in accepting the covenant.

The covenant at Sinai is a covenant of commitment to the liberating instructions of the LORD. It is situated in the intermediate stage of Israel's exodus of liberation, between being brought out and being led into the promised land. This stage itself was perceived as a time of self-discovery, namely the discovery of Israel's fear and disobedience, and a time of discovery of the LORD's power and willingness to bless. Continuity between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants rests on the promise of blessing and on the identity of the one who initiated and maintained the covenants. But there are differences in the two covenants that will henceforth present divergent possibilities for theological adaptations. The promises of the Abrahamic covenant were to be realized in the somewhat distant future. They presumed a mere trust in the plan of the LORD. The blessings of the mosaic covenant are intimately connected to the expression of the LORD's will and directives -- the law.

What is stressed in the mosaic covenant is the commitment of the people to the challenging and liberating call of the LORD expressed in the decalogue. Inherent in this covenant of commitment is an expressed value of cooperation in the plan of the LORD to bring about a blessing to all peoples of the earth. Israel is not to be a passive recipient of a blessing. She is called to actively participate in the enactment of the blessings. This aspect of Israel's active participation in God's enterprise is noticeable throughout the exodus narrative, but most succinctly in the covenant agreement at Sinai. With these two covenants, the covenant of promise to Abraham, and the covenant of commitment at Sinai, the two dominant features of Old Testament covenant theology are founded. Covenant is a relationship of gifts and tasks, of promise and responsibilities. The adaptation and clarifications of future issues in the light of the LORD's desire for Israel will turn to either of these covenants in order to ground the issue into an authoritative biblical image.

## CONQUEST, INFILTRATION, INTEGRATION

The books of Joshua and Judges cover the time span, which saw Israel coming into possession of the land of Canaan. Though the first twelve chapters of Joshua speak of a conquest that was organized, swift, violent and complete, there are internal indications within Joshua and certainly in the book of Judges that suggest a more tempered view of Israel's gradual possession of the Land. The fact that the tribes are described in Judges as continuously falling back to worship the various gods of the Canaanites, the Philistines, and the Amorites, and as practising inter-marriage with local peoples that weakened the commitment to the Sinai covenant, would suggest that Israel's penetration in Canaan was gradual, with a great deal of integration with the local inhabitants, some of which would have been their own kin.

The archaeological evidence is quite confusing in light of the evidence of conquest in Joshua. The most spectacular destruction of the walls and city of Jerico described in Joshua 6 cannot be verified in the excavations of Jerico. The massive destruction of Jerico took place in the Middle Bronze Age no later than 1550 BC. In Joshua 10:2 Gibeon is described as a large and powerful city, yet archaeological evidence has Gibeon quite insignificant at the time of the conquest. The city of Ai was destroyed in 2500, yet in Joshua 8 we have this city taken by cunning strategy. In Joshua 10:36 the important city of Hebron is taken and destroyed, yet archaeological evidence shows nothing substantial in the Late Bronze Age of 1200. On the other hand, some cities were destroyed violently in the LB age such as, Debir, Lachish, Eglon and Hazor although there is no clear evidence that this was done by the Israelite tribes.

Again though Joshua 10:40-43; 11:16-23 speak of a total annihilation of the inhabitants of the respective lands from Kadesh to Gaza, and the land of Canaan, with peace being made only with the Hivites, we have numerous examples in Judges of Israel waging wars with separate city Kings, of the Israelites intermarrying and worshipping the local gods. In fact there are touching stories that explain how many local groups and families and perhaps even cities came into solidarity with the worshippers of the God of Sinai who is a liberator from oppression. The story of the prostitute, Rahab and her family (Joshua 2; 6:22-25) who helped the spies of Jerico, and thereby lived in Israel shows how local inhabitants who accepted the desert God became integrated into Israel. (See also the story of the Gibeonites, Joshua 9). Furthermore, we have the important city of Shechem, which nowhere is described as having been taken, yet in Joshua 23-24 this city is the local for a solemn covenant renewal ceremony. This has led to the conjecture that the inhabitants of Shechem who could very well have shared ancestry with the new tribes actually welcomed the new faith in the desert God and became part of the covenant of Sinai. Notice how Ruth a Moabitess through marriage becomes an ancestor to David (Ruth 4:13-22). Much later we will see how the Jebusites become integrated into the Kingdom of David, to the extent that it is possible that even their priesthood, represented in Zadok is integrated into the Levitical priesthood.

All of these indications would suggest that the tribal possession of the land of Canaan involved a gradual process with a great deal of integration and assimilation of local inhabitants and customs. After all Canaanite and Philistine and Phoenician cultures were superior in architectural and organizational techniques than anything Israel possessed. The Israelite tribes had to learn how to live and organize themselves in city structures and this they did by appropriating slowly and critically the traditions of the Canaanite cities. This means that the conquest testimony presented in the first 12

chapters of Joshua has a theological or ideological purpose. This tradition emphasizes the continuity of God's intervention on behalf of the Israelites from the time of the Exodus to the complete possession of land. The other tradition that stresses the gradual penetration into the land seeks to highlight the power and might of the God of the Exodus and of Sinai who is able to succeed even with a people who constantly rebel and fall away from the covenant, and who continuously comes to their aid when they cry out for help.

### **Joshua 24 and the Period Prior to the Monarchy -- The Tribal League**

The covenant form of Joshua 24 (the Shechem covenant) stresses the commitment of the people to the Lord as a response to the saving deeds of Exodus and the penetration into the Canaanite lands. In this respect it follows the Sinai tradition. The pattern of the vassal treaty formulary is more readily seen as a backdrop to the covenant, primarily because of the historical prologue. However as in the Exodus texts, the key feature of blessings and curses are missing. Moreover the Sinai Covenant is not explicitly mentioned. The paradigm of liberation is presented in its ternary form:

exodus from Egypt → the wilderness → entrance into Canaan.

The emphasis in the covenant focuses on the activity to elicit a commitment of the people to the Lord. Joshua seems to already have been committed. The entire covenant takes place as if Sinai had not occurred. Moreover, Joshua 23-24 presumes all of the people entering into the land, possessing the respective cities together. This does not tally with the following book of Judges that presents the individual tribes struggling to take or maintain the allotted cities.

A possible explanation could be that we have in Joshua a witness of a covenant which draws into it peoples who were not part of the Sinai/Kadesh tradition. Various peoples who joined the Israelites in the gradual penetration into Canaan (N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*). The liberation from Egypt becomes their liberation. The promise of land is extended to them as well. Also the call to serve the Lord with commitment to his plan and law is presented. It is likely that the Israelites celebrated such a covenant renewal ceremony yearly, during one of the feast celebrations such as the Feast of Weeks (Shevuot, 50 days after Passover, Deut 26).

In the context of deuteronomistic history, the covenant of Shechem is a sign of transition. It exemplifies the change from nomadic existence to the beginnings of sedentary life. This semi-nomadic life is presented throughout the books of Joshua and Judges. Though much of this period is described from the point of view of the monarchy, many of the stories have a folklore ring that gives credence to their origin from the period itself. In any event, the Israelite tribes in Canaan were a loose federation. What bound them together was the religious commitment of the covenant or at least the common hope to stand under the protection of the liberating God of the desert.

Martin Noth saw in the Delphic League, known as the *amphictyone*, a loose organization that was parallel in structure to that of the twelve tribes of Israel. Though scholars disagree point for point in the comparisons, the amphictyonic leagues of Greece of the 6th-5th centuries at least point to a structure that bears resemblance to the loose and periodic organization of the Israelite tribes during the period of the Judges.

*amphiktiones* - dwellers around,  
*amphiktuones* - league/council.

The Delphic League of the 5th century BC centred around a common religious shrine that was served by the respective grouping for a specific period of time, usually monthly with a division of six or twelve. In Israel the shrine centred on the ark, which was transferred to several places, Shechem, and of course Shiloh, before it was captured by the Philistines and then placed at Kiriath-Jearim. There are several organizational features that can be gleaned from the books of Joshua and Judges regarding this period. There were judges and a hereditary priesthood, which served the shrine. The leadership was charismatic in the sense that prophets or military leaders would emerge as ones on whom the spirit or hand of the Lord descended. These were individuals who succeeded in some extraordinary feat, or who managed to secure the trust and respect of several tribes. The defense of the tribes rested on the mobilization of warriors from the tribes under the leadership of a renowned person. There seems to have been an explicit refusal in these charismatic leaders towards dynastic political succession. Gideon had refused to become king,

*Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian." Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (Judges 8:22-23).*

Regular pilgrimages to the location of the ark served to promote cohesiveness and unity. These pilgrimages would have occasioned the recital of Israel's salvation history, the recital of instructions and covenant obligations. Joshua 8:30-35 is a reference to covenant renewal where in fact the laws and statutes to be adhered to were read in the hearing of all the people. More than likely there would have been yearly a ceremony of covenant renewal of which Joshua 24 may be an example and prototype. Deut 27:11-26 could also be an example of such a renewal. The covenant of Sinai, the recital of the saving deeds of the exodus, the ancient promise to Abraham, these would have been the main subjects that gave a sense of unity within such a loose organization. Trusting in the Lord's power, and commitment to the words of the Lord were the religious fabric of these peoples. God was the Lord of the Exodus, the Lord of Sinai and the Lord who brought them into their land. Since the covenant renewal was really understood as a reenactment of the Sinai covenant, this could explain why in the credal statements of liberation (Exod 3:7-12; Deut 26:3-9; Joshua 24:5-8) the actual reference to the Sinai covenant does not occur.

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The three main feasts where a yearly pilgrimage was held at least during the 2nd temple period were:

**1 Pesach (Passover)** 14-15 Nisan (March/April), Exod 12:1-14; Lev 23:4-8. The feast implied the remembrance of the liberation from Egypt. [Song of Songs is read in the synagogue services during Pesach] The Feast of Unleavened Bread is associated with passover.

**2 Shavuoth (Weeks, Num 28:26, seven weeks after Pascha, 1st Wheat Harvest (Exod 34:22), Pentecost** (it was celebrated on the 50th day after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, hence the Greek designation of Pentecost, end of May, 2 Macc 12:31; Tobit 2:1), **First Fruits** (Num 28:26, whereby the earlier Feast of First Fruits in Deut 26 was understood as an anticipation of this feast). The second of the great Pilgrimage Feasts. Lev 23:15-22. By the 2nd cent. BCE, the rabbinic tradition associated the remembrance of Sinai and the Law with this feast. [Book of Ruth is read in the synagogue services]

**3 Sukkoth, (Tents, or Booths, Huts, Tabernacles, Ingathering, Feast of the LORD.** The end of the grape and olive harvest, 15-22 Tishri (late Oct to mid Nov). Lev 23:33-36, 39-43. By the time of Christ, this feast had become the most popular. Themes relating to the celebration of the New Year (1-2 Tishri - Mishna), especially those of creation would have been recalled. [The book of Qoheleth – Ecclesiastes is read in the synagogue services].

Other celebrations not requiring the yearly pilgrimage or celebrations added to the great festivals:

The Feast of **Trumpets** (*Yom Teruah*) which calls for preparation of the **Day of Atonement** (*Yom Kippur*) became the New Year Festival. At the end of sukkoth a special day was added **The Last Great Day** (*Shmini Atzeret*).

Finally we have the civil celebrations of the **Festival of Lights** (*Hanukkah*) which commemorates the enduring light of the menorah in times of persecution, and the **Festival of Lots** (*Purim*) inspired by the book of Esther where the heroine's wisdom saved the people in times of persecution.

Diagram locating the timing of Jewish Feasts in the Jewish and Gregorian calendars

