

## **Who Was the Vassal King of the Sinai Covenant?**

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As scholars began to note more than fifty years ago, the Sinai pact between God and Israel displays many common elements with what are known in biblical studies as ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties.

One aspect of the parallel between biblical covenant and ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties has garnered, I submit, insufficient attention. Within the biblical analogue, it is clear that the role of the suzerain is played by God. Yet who is it within these covenantal passages that stands parallel to the vassal king? In the Pentateuch it is true that the Israelites have a leader: Moses. Yet, Moses may not be properly termed a king. He is never referred to through this term; his children are not his 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 is forming this treaty, or covenant with the people. Scholars have universally concluded, therefore, that the vassal king in the Sinai covenant is the people themselves. Israel as a collective whole is the vassal king. In this paper I would like to propose an additional candidate for the role of vassal king in the Sinai covenant: Each individual Israelite – and not just the collective – is to see himself as a vassal king in treaty relationship with the Almighty suzerain.

I will support this claim by engaging in a close reading of several Late Bronze Age Hittite vassal treaties, and by showing close parallels within the biblical text. before I do that, however, I would like to take a few moments to explain why I feel the closer parallels to the Sinai covenant are to be found in the Late Bronze Age

Hittite treaties, and not, as has been more recently suggested, in the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

A vast scholarship has emerged over the last fifty years that seeks to compare these two bodies of literature with biblical covenant passages, and a vigorous debate as to whether various covenantal passages in the Bible more closely resemble the Hittite materials or the Neo-Assyrian ones. The trends in the scholarship have been pendular. In the 1960's and 70's the trend in research, following Mendenhall, was to see the Sinai covenant as parallel to the forms exhibited in the Late Bronze Hittite treaties. Today, more scholars would suggest comparing the Sinai covenant to the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties of Essar-haddon and others. In my opinion, it is time for the pendulum to switch back in the other direction, and for us to re-examine the stronger parallels that exist between the Sinai Covenant and the Late Bronze Hittite treaties.

It is true, that some biblical texts find much closer parallels with the the neo-Assyrian treaties, such as the curse pericopes of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Yet many other treaty elements found in the Sinai covenant passages, are elements that have parallels only in the Hittite material. The Pentateuch contains many passages that give the backdrop for the Sinai covenant, and which have been seen to parallel the historical prologues of ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties. But the historical prologue with its emphasis upon the beneficence of the suzerain as the basis for the loyalty of the vassal is a feature exclusive to the Hittite treaties, and not the Neo-Assyrian ones. The Pentateuch offers blessings to Israel for fulfillment of the the covenant, alongside curses for violation of the treaty. Yet, blessings are matched with curses only in the Hittite treaties, but never in the Neo-Assyrian ones. The Pentateuch calls upon Israel to deposit its treaty tablets in the central shrine. Yet, again,

instructions for deposition of the treaty and its periodic reading are likewise features found only in the Hittite materials and not in the Neo-Assyrian treaty or loyalty oath texts. Moreover, promises made by the suzerain 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.<sup>1</sup>

Let's turn back now, to my major question, the question of who is the vassal king of the Sinai covenant. To appreciate the issue at hand, I'd like to take a closer look at the Late Bronze Hittite treaties. The vast majority of the Late Bronze Age Hittite suzerainty treaties are unambiguously constructed as agreements between two *individuals*--the suzerain king, the king of the Hittites and the vassal king.<sup>2</sup> The language of these treaties is universally phrased to reflect the personal obligations of each king. We will hear the Hittite king say to his vassal by name, "I have given you, king Tette, land," or "I have offered you, king Tette protection," and in return, "you, king Tette are to protect my border. As the preamble of one of the treaties reads concerning the two monarchs, "They swore an oath to one another and concluded this treaty with one another."<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there are instances in these treaties in which the vassal king is referred to metonymically. When the treaties routinely call upon the vassal king to return escaped fugitives to the land of the suzerain, the expectation is surely not that the vassal king should personally apprehend the escapee, nor personally deliver him to the authorities of the suzerain. As a rule, the historical prologues attend to the interpersonal relationship between the two kings, the suzerain and the vassal, and the blessings and curses likewise attend in pointed fashion to the person of the vassal king, with virtually no attention to the subjects of his kingdom. The notion that the Hittite vassal treaty is between two kings and not between two

peoples is well evidenced in two treaties, in which the Hittite king states that in the event that the subjects of the vassal king seek his deposal, the Hittite king will remain loyal to him, against the wishes of the vassal's people.<sup>4</sup> Thus we find, (source no. 1 on the source sheet), the treaty between Mursili II of Hatti and Targasnalli of Hapalla. The Hittite king addresses his vassal and says:

If you, Targasnalli, protect My majesty, but the population somehow refuses [to remain] as your subjects, and they become hostile to you, saying as follows: “[We desire] another [lord],” I, My Majesty will absolutely refuse. I will by no means give [the land] of Hapalla to another. Only you [shall be] its lord.

Of the eighteen suzerainty treaties whose texts are in our possession, only a single one is between a Hittite king as suzerain, and an entire people, with no mention of a king.<sup>5</sup> The form of this treaty differs in significant ways from the treaties made with vassal kings. This treaty bears no historical prologue and also bears no section delineating the blessings that will accrue to the vassal for compliance with the stipulations of the treaty. It is worth noting in this context that both Exodus and Deuteronomy contain narratives outlining the beneficence of the “suzerain king” -- God--toward Israel. Put differently, the Sinai narratives resemble the form of the Late Bronze Age Hittite vassal treaty made with a vassal king, and not a vassal people.

Let us turn now to the Sinai covenant. We see here that God relates to individual Israelites. The nature of each and every one of the commandments of the Decalogue is such that it can be fulfilled, or transgressed, by an individual. Conversely, none of the commandments of the Decalogue 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 and

differentiates between those that adhere to His covenant, and those that don't. 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 (Ex. 20:5-6). When God, as the suzerain, bestows honor, he does so selectively, and not only collectively. In 1 Sam 2:30 in the admonition to Eli the High Priest, God says "those who honor me, I will honor, and as for those who despise me, they will be diminished, or dishonored."<sup>6</sup> I do not wish to overstate my case. This should not be taken to imply that God does not at all relate to Israel as a corporate body in the Sinai covenant. Rather, it shows that the picture is a complex one, in which individuals are not automatically at all times subsumed within the identity of the collective.

Thus we may posit that to some degree the vassal king with whom God forms a political treaty is, in fact, the common man of Israel; that every man in Israel is to view himself as having the status of a king conferred upon him--a servant, vassal king under the protection of, and in gratitude to, a divine suzerain.

The deepest proof of this may be seen in striking parallels between the stipulations and language used in the Hittite treaties regarding the vassal king, and parallel biblical laws and commandments that bind each and every common man of Israel. Several of the Hittite treaties mandate that as a show of fealty the vassal king must make regular appearances before the suzerain. The language here is instructive. In source no 2. on the source sheet we see that In a treaty with a vassal by the name of Sunashshura of Kizzuwatna, the Hittite king mandates that

"Sunashshura (the vassal king here) 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.”<sup>7</sup>

Note that the visit of Sunashshura is a state visit replete with honor, as the Hittite king’s nobles must rise in his presence. Note also that both of these passages refer to the visitation as an act of “looking upon the face of His Majesty,” a term used throughout the Bible to refer to a court appearance (e.g. Gen 43:3, 5, 23; Exod 10:28-29; 2 Sam 3:13, 14:32).

We find similar language in the stipulations of the covenant narrative of Exodus 19-24. In source no. 3 on the source sheet, Exodus 23:17, the commandment of pilgrimage to the central shrine states, “three times a year, all of your males shall be seen by the face of *the Lord*--YHWH.”<sup>8</sup> 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 (Exod 33:20): “And God responded, you may not see My face, for no man may see Me and live.” Thus, it is highly incongruous to suppose 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 epithet, “the Lord” (Heb. *hā-adōn*), while attested elsewhere, is not commonplace in the Bible as a reference to YHWH. Yet when seen in the context of the Hittite suzerainty treaties, the meaning is clarified. The command that each Israelite male embark on pilgrimage is patterned after the requirement that a vassal king visit the court of his suzerain, to “see the face of his lord (master).” What is most instructive here is the fact that this is enjoined upon all adult males. In the Hittite political treaties, of course, only the vassal king is called upon to visit the suzerain. Indeed, it would be beneath the dignity of the suzerain to receive all of the commoners subject to the vassal king. Thus, it emerges that the

treaty imagery in the Bible does not bypass the vassal king. The common man of Israel himself takes on aspects of a vassal king. He is the one addressed by the covenant; he is the one upon whom God has bestowed favor, and it is he who is enjoined to pay a fealty visit within the “court” of the divine suzerain.

We may see how the common man of Israel takes on aspects of the vassal king of the Hittite political treaties with regard to treaty stipulations that mandate the periodic reading of the treaty within the vassal king’s court. In source no. 3 on the source sheet, we find a vassal treaty, forged with one Kupanta-Kurunta of Mira-Kuwaliya, in which the Hittite king states,

“[This tablet which] I have made [for you, Kupanta-Kurunta], shall be read out [before you three times yearly].”<sup>9</sup>

In another treaty, source no. 4 on the source sheet, this time with a vassal 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.”<sup>10</sup>

Once again, we see a parallel stipulation in the Bible, but one that is extended to include all members of the children of Israel. In the Late Bronze Age suzerainty treaty it is the vassal king who is ultimately responsible to execute and follow the terms of the treaty, and thus he personally must be read its provisions. 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, because each and every member of the people is responsible for its faithful implementation. We find, in fact, that “treaties” or, the terms of the covenant between God and Israel are read out before the whole people on a number of occasions, as does Moses so at Sinai, in source no. 5 on the source sheet (Exod 24:3-4, 7-8):

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!”

The covenant is similarly read out to the entire people by Joshua at Shechem (Josh 8:30-35) and by Josiah during his reform (2 Kgs 23:2-3). The public readings of the laws in these instances are reported as one-time events. Yet, a similar requirement is rooted in deuteronomic law as well, in the Hakhel convocation, source no. 6 on the source sheet (31:10-12):

Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to be seen by the face of YHWH 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.

Of course, Many aspects of the covenant are enjoined only upon the polity as a whole, such as the command to erect a sanctuary (Exod 25:8), or to engage in the conquest of the land of Canaan. And intermediaries, such as Moses and the priesthood, still function in the mediation between the common man and the Almighty. Nonetheless, the parallels drawn here enable us to conclude that the common man of Israel was endowed by covenant theology with aspects of the vassal king of the Late Bronze Age suzerainty treaties.

What we have seen here today can help fill out the picture for us concerning what the Pentateuch has to say about kingship. It is well known that Deuteronomy limits the powers of the king. And as Bernard Levinson has pointed out, the Torah's silence in many areas concerning kingship is just as telling. Nowhere is the king called upon to lead the people in battle, as he is in the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East, and nowhere does the Pentateuch stipulate a role for the king in Temple building, as was routine in the surrounding cultures. Kingship does have its place in the Pentateuch, but it is not as the head of the polity. Rather, the collective whole of Israel, and as I have argued here today, each individual member of Israel are endowed with kingship – as a vassal of the Almighty suzerain.

The elevation of the common man of Israel to the status of a vassal king is part of a wider ideological tapestry that we find across the Pentateuch – and that is the articulation of a social blueprint in which the focus is not upon the king, but upon an empowered and ennobled citizenry. We have seen here, in part how this was achieved in the realm of theology. But it comes out in the economic laws of the Pentateuch, which serve to secure the economic well-being of the common citizenry, and in the laws of political office, which tend to suspect the abuse of power.

Throughout the ancient Near East the truth was self-evident: All men are *not* created equal. By reconstituting ancient norms and institutions, as I have tried to demonstrate here, the Pentateuch laid the ground for a much more egalitarian society. I explore all of this in greater detail in my volume, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, which has just been released by Oxford University Press.

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<sup>1</sup> The most up to date summary of this argument is in K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 283-94, and more broadly throughout Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*. 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: Scholars Press, 1980), 142-52; George E. Mendenhall, Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” *ABD* 1:1179-1202; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 59-157.

<sup>2</sup> See Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, treaties no. 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 (a parity treaty), 16, 17, 18. For the corresponding numbers in the *Catalogue des Textes Hittites* see the synoptic table of Hittite treaties in Beckman, 6-8.

<sup>3</sup> “Treaty between Tudhaliya II of Hatti and Sunashshura of Kizzuwatna,” §1 (A i 1-4), *CTH* 41 (Hittite), *CTH* 131 (Akkadian); translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Documents*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> See “Treaty Between Mursili II of Hatti and Targasnalli of Hapalla” § 7 (obv. 41’ - rev. 1), *CTH* 67; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Documents*, 71, and “Treaty Between Muwattalli II of Hatti and Alaksandu of Wilusa,” § 5 (A i 57’-79’), *CTH* 76; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Documents*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> “Treaty between Arnuwanda I of Hatti and the Men of Ismerika,” *CTH* 133; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 13-17. The treaty between Muwattalli II of Hatti and Talmi-Sharrumma of Aleppo (*CTH* 75, translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* 94) makes reference to a treaty that an earlier Hittite king had made with residents of the region of Aleppo (§ 10, A obv. 28-32). Another two are composed as a treaty with the vassal king together, yet in a fashion

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that makes reference to that king's subjects in the course of the treaty. See "Treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Shattiwaza of Mittani," *CTH* 51; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 42-48; "Treaty Between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Huqqana of Hayasa," *CTH* 42; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 26-34.

<sup>6</sup> God likewise bestows honor upon non-royals in Ps 91:15 and esp. Isa 43:4. See Olyan, "Honor, Shame and Covenant Relations," 205.

<sup>7</sup> "Treaty between Tudhaliya II of Hatti and Sunashshura of Kizzuwatna," §9 (A i 38-44), *CTH* 131; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 19. See also "Treaty between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Tette of Nuhashshi," §3 (A ii 1-5): "Tette shall come yearly to My Majesty, his lord, in Hatti" (*CTH* 53; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 55). See also "Treaty between Šuppiluliuma of Hatti and Aziru of Amurru," §1 [i 13]: "[You] Azira [must appear] yearly before My Majesty [your lord] in the land of Hatti" (*CTH* 49; translated in Singer, "The Treaties Between Hatti and Amurru," 94.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Exod 34:23; Deut 16:16.

<sup>9</sup> "Treaty between Mursili II of Hatti and Kupanta-Kurunta of Mira-Kuwaliya," §28 (I iv 1'-8'), *CTH* 68; translated in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Treaty between Muwattalli II of Hatti and Alaksandu of Wilusa §16 (A iii 73-83) (*CTH* 76; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 91). Another treaty, between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Shattiwaza of Mittani, states (§13, A rev. 35-53) 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," *CTH* 51; Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 46.