

The Doctrine of Vows

These studies are designed for believers in Jesus Christ only. If you have exercised faith in Christ, then you are in the right place. If you have not, then you need to heed the words of our Lord, Who said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son, so that every [one] believing [or, trusting] in Him shall not perish, but shall be have eternal life! For God did not send His Son into the world so that He should judge the world, but so that the world shall be saved through Him. The one believing [or, trusting] in Him is not judged, but the one not believing has already been judged, because he has not believed in the Name of the only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son of God." (John 3:16–18). "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life! No one comes to the Father except through [or, by means of] Me!" (John 14:6).

Every study of the Word of God ought to be preceded by a naming of your sins to God. This restores you to fellowship with God (1John 1:8–10). If there are people around, you would name these sins silently. If there is no one around, then it does not matter if you name them silently or whether you speak aloud.

Introduction: There are a lot of things found in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, which seem rather quaint or mysterious, such as the concept of vows to God. Since this word occurs about 75 times in the Old and New Testaments, it is something that we ought to understand.

What ought to catch our attention first is, vows are found throughout the Old Testament, but not nearly as often in the New (and they are not spoken of in the epistles, which are Church Age doctrine). Let me suggest to you that, prior to the cross, man had a legal or a covenantal relationship with God. Although we tend to be very anthropocentric, it is the covenant which obligated God far more than it obligated us as men. If God does not do as He says He will, then God is not God (and a part of the Angelic Conflict is God vindicating His Own character). In order for God to fulfill his covenants with man, there needed to be the Suffering Servant Who went to the cross, offered Himself for our sins, and then became Israel's promised Messiah and King. Once God has fulfilled this obligation in time, a number of things change. Covenants are downplayed, as would be vows (a divine covenant is God proposing an agreement between Himself and man; a vow is man proposing an agreement between himself and God).

After the cross, God sent us the Holy Spirit, a down payment on the future blessings that we will enjoy (2Cor. 1:22). This changes everything. Our lives are now based upon grace and relationship rather than upon covenants. We receive an inheritance from God because we are in Christ, His Son, and share His inheritance (Rom. 8:17). Furthermore, there are specific mechanics to the spiritual life and to spiritual maturity, none of which are dependent upon a covenant. It is in this light that we need to understand the concept of a vow.

Topics		
Definitions	General Thoughts	Old Testament vows before the Mosaic Law
Vows in the Mosaic Law	Old Testament vows after the Mosaic Law	Jesus and vows
New Testament vows		
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The Abbreviated Doctrine of Vows	Smith's 3 Types of Vows	The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty
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Preface: Personally, I have been putting off doing this doctrine for about 10 or more years. There were times in the books of Leviticus and Numbers when it was called for; and later in the book of Samuel and the Psalms. I had hoped that someone had saved me the work, but that does not seem to be the case. After beginning this doctrine, I became somewhat more enthusiastic; and must admit to being surprised that more doctrinal churches have not covered this topic.

1. Definition of a vow and basic considerations:

- 1) In a divine covenant, God proposes an agreement to man, which obligates both man and God. Obviously, we can reject God's covenants. In a vow, man proposes a contract which obligates both man and God; and God can reject any vow.
- 2) A vow is a promise that you make to God, either to do something or not to do something, in exchange for something that you ask God to do for you. Vows often occur when a person is under pressure. Financially, they cannot make their monthly obligations; they are in a foxhole and mortar fire is coming in at them; they have just received a cancer (AIDS, shingles) diagnosis; they face some intolerable situation and/or person at work (school, the barracks), etc. The person under this pressure asks God for relief from this pressure and he offers up something somewhat sacrificial in exchange (I will begin tithing at church; I will stop cheating on my wife; I will begin being honest in my business dealings; I will start attending church again). Gen. 28:20–22
- 3) Although the vow is officially made between man and God, vows are also observed by angels, who make up a cloud of witnesses. Heb. 12:1
- 4) Although there is real interaction between ourselves and God, there is not going to be any audible response from God. God is not going to say from on high, "Deal." He is not going to send a bolt of lightning next to you.
- 5) Vows are made by believers (in Jesus Christ and/or in God), unbelievers, agnostics and outright atheists. It is not out of the question for an out-an-out avowed atheist to, under very difficult circumstances, make a vow to God or knowingly refuse to make a vow with God because they don't want to give in.
- 6) Consequences: it is reasonable to suppose that, if God agrees to your vow, and then you renege on this vow, then there are consequences that we face. Eccles. 5:4
- 7) A vow is not defined under the Mosaic Law, but given some regulation. People made vows to God long before the Mosaic Law and people make vows to God as recently as the last second (and we are not under the Mosaic Law today).
- 8) The Bible legitimizes vows (it is found in at least 62 verses in the Bible). That is, we have examples of people who have made such vows; we have followed some of these vows out (not in depth, but enough to know the outcomes). It is reasonable to assume that God will keep up His half of a vow when He chooses to honor the vow.
- 9) Some vows can be goofy and even blasphemous; e.g., "If You make me a millionaire, I will blink my eyes 4 times in the next few seconds." Some vows offer up things in exchange which God is not interested in—a donation to PETA, for instance.
- 10) If a vow gets an unbeliever in proximity with the gospel (e.g., I promise to go to church, a vow made by an unbeliever), then God often will agree to such a thing. If a similar vow gets a believer to move toward spiritual maturity, God will often agree to such a thing. Most people who make vows have no doctrinal conception of what they are doing. God agreeing to a vow is a matter of grace and the consequences for us are going to be gracious as well. A person who agrees to go to church, where the end result is, they hear the gospel or they learn some doctrine—this is obviously quite beneficial to them, even though they may see it as some great sacrifice that they are making.

2. ISBE¹ definition of a vow:
 - 1) A vow could be positive (nedher) and included all promises to perform certain things for, or bring certain offerings to, God, in return for certain benefits which were hoped for at His hand (Gen. 28:20–22, Jacob; Lev. 27:2, Lev. 27:8; Nu 30; Judges 11:30, Jephthah; 1Sam. 1:11, Hannah; 2Sam. 15:8, Absalom; Jon. 1:16, vows of heathen); or negative ('iššaṯr), and included promises by which a person bound himself or herself to abstain from certain things (Num. 30:3).
 - 2) Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find the making of vows regarded as a religious duty (Deut. 23:22), but the fulfilling of a vow was considered as a sacred and binding duty (Deut. 23:21–23; Judges 11:35; Eccles. 5:4; compare Psalm 22:25; Psalm 66:13; Psalm 76:11; Psalm 116:18).
3. Smith's² definition of a vow: A vow is a solemn promise made to God to perform or to abstain from performing a certain thing. The earliest mention of a vow is that of Jacob. Gen. 28:18–22; Gen. 31:13. Vows in general are also mentioned in the book of Job, Job. 22:27. The law [of Moses], therefore, did not introduce, but regulated the practice of, vows [Genesis certainly predates the Law of Moses and Job is thought to predate it]. Smith **suggests** that there are 3 sorts of vows: (1) Vows of devotion; (2) Vows of abstinence; (3) Vows of destruction.
4. The next few points are general thoughts on vows: There is a lot in Christianity which is not understood today. I think of, immediately, a person's credit record, the importance of work and paying your own way; honesty in business dealings or the concept of a corporate witness. When it comes to vows and oaths, we need to keep focused on the Angelic Conflict. When we give a vow, which can include a contract or a handshake agreement, our personal integrity is on the line, as is our witness before the angels.
5. A vow or an oath means that you are agreeing to do something or obligating yourself to do something (or a group of things). In the Old Testament, there were vows which were made to God, and we make those as well, to a lesser degree; but most of the vows which we make today are before men and with men (I use the word *men* in the non-gender-specific sense).
6. Early on, in the Old Testament, we are introduced to the concept of the **Suzerain-vassal treaty**, where a sovereign makes an agreement with those who are often subject to his whims (that is, he could simply march his army into their city and destroy them all). Except to develop a reputation, a city of dead people does a Suzerain no good unless he simply wants this city for himself. Preferably, a suzerain wants to turn a city filled with people into an income producing entity. So he offers them a treaty of sorts. Sometimes, this treaty can be rather nasty (for instance, requiring that the right eye of every male be plucked out) and sometimes it can be somewhat reasonable (a payment of taxes or tribute to the suzerain). More information on the **Suzerain-Vassal treaty** can be found in the appendix.
7. When you say something, this is heard, not only by those around you, but by the angels who surround you, both fallen and elect angels. Therefore, what you say is reasonably important. Remember when Jacob, who was pretty much an experiential loser throughout much of his life, spoke of his sons individually and blessed them—these blessings were meaningful, even though Jacob was not necessarily prophesying what would come to pass. He spoke of some general trends of these various tribes, and men have read this passage many times, and angels heard what he said; so God, therefore, would be put upon to see that, to some reasonable degree, that the blessings comes to pass.
8. When you sign a contract, it is incumbent upon you, as a believer in Jesus Christ, to make every reasonable attempt to understand what it is you are signing, and then to perform your duties as laid out by the contract. You should do no less.
9. A covenant is a treaty, contract or agreement which is made between two parties. A suzerain vassal covenant is a treaty/contract/agreement/covenant made between two unequal parties. The suzerain (king) dictates all the terms, lays down the law, makes certain promises, and explains the sanctions if the covenant is violated.³ What follows is not a suzerain-vassal treaty, which requires the ratification of the vassals and requires something from them (they will have obligations, duties, and/or taxes to render to their suzerain).

¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; from E-Sword; Topic: Vows.

² Dr. William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary*; 1894; from e-Sword, topic: Vows.

³ Taken from <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/10/cutting-covenant-and-when-covenant.html> accessed June 3, 2008.

What follows is known as an unconditional covenant—God makes unconditional promises to David and to Israel concerning what He will do on their behalf in the future. David is not required to do anything in order to receive God's blessing.⁴

10. Old Testament vows before the Mosaic Law:

- 1) One of the first vows made in the Old Testament was made by Jacob:
 - (1) [Jacob vowed a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, and Yahweh will be my God, then this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, will be God's house. Of all that you will give me I will surely give the tenth to you."](#) (Gen. 28:20–22; WEB).
 - (2) Jacob was asking for logistical grace (food and clothing) so that Y^ehowah would be his God, and that the stone that he set up would be a place of meeting God; and he promised to give a tenth of his income to God.
 - (3) This was after God appeared to him in a dream the previous night and reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Him (Abraham was his grandfather and Isaac his father). Unlike his grandfather Abraham, you might say that Jacob was less than faithful in his relationship with God. Gen. 28:11–17
 - (4) There was some kind of an understood votive system in existence before the Mosaic Law, as is implied by Job 22:27.

11. Vows in the Mosaic Law:

- 1) One could not offer up substandard merchandise in a vow. For instance, you don't take a sickly calf and make some vow to offer it up to God. Lev. 22
- 2) A vow in the Mosaic Law was often dedicating one's self, animals, possessions or land to God (that is, you promise to give some of these items to the Levites). Deut. 6 You could, instead, substitute money. You cannot vow something which is already due God (e.g., a tithe). Lev. 27.
- 3) Becoming a Nazarite was a system of vows, dedicating oneself to God. Num. 6
- 4) Num. 30 summarized: *ISBE: A vow was as binding as an oath (see OATH) and therefore to be kept to the letter; and it was not to be lightly made (Prov. 20:25). A father could veto a daughter's vow, and a husband a wife's. If a husband did not veto a wife's vow, and then caused her to break it, the sin was his and not hers.*⁵
- 5) There are things which are not appropriate to vow to God. Deut. 23:18
 - (1) **Application:** Offering up God some bit of human good will not be considered in order to get you out of some jam. That is, you can vow, "I will give \$1000 to the Democratic party" or "I will begin to purchase carbon credits from one of Al Gore's companies." God is not interested.
- 6) We have to be careful as to what we say, so that we do not make a rash vow. There are human witness, angelic witnesses and God's witness. Deut. 23:23
- 7) No one is required to make vows under the Mosaic Law. Deut. 23:22

12. Old Testament vows after the Mosaic Law:

- 1) Israel, when moving up toward the land, in Num. 21:2–3, vowed to kill all of the Canaanites if God delivered them into their hand in battle. This suggests that a culture can completely destroy the souls of its children and women, to where such are not even redeemable as slaves.
- 2) Jephthah's tragic vow of Judges 11:30–31.
 - (1) [Jephthah vowed a vow to Yahweh, and said, If you will indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be, that whatever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be Yahweh's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. So Jephthah passed over to the children of Ammon to fight against them; and Yahweh delivered them into his hand. He struck them from Aroer until you come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and to Abelcheramim, with a very great slaughter. So the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel. Jephthah came to Mizpah to his house; and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances: and she was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. It happened, when he saw her,](#)

⁴ From **2Samuel 7** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)).

⁵ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; from E-Sword; Topic: Vow.

that he tore his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! you have brought me very low, and you are one of those who trouble me; for I have opened my mouth to Yahweh, and I can't go back. She said to him, My father, you have opened your mouth to Yahweh; do to me according to that which has proceeded out of your mouth, because Yahweh has taken vengeance for you on your enemies, even on the children of Ammon. She said to her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may depart and go down on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions. He said, Go. He sent her away for two months: and she departed, she and her companions, and mourned her virginity on the mountains. It happened at the end of two months, that she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she was a virgin. It was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year (Judges 11:30–40; WEB).

- (2) Although it appears as though Jephthah's vow was to dedicate the first thing he saw come through the gates to Y^ehowah and that he would offer this same thing up as a burnt offering, that is not necessarily the case. She does not bewail her upcoming sacrifice as if she were an animal to have its throat cut, but she mourned her sacrifice as being and remaining a virgin for the rest of her life. See the exegesis of **Judges 11** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)).
- 3) Hannah's vow to God concerning Samuel:
 - (1) So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his seat by the door-post of the temple of Yahweh. She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to Yahweh, and wept sore. She vowed a vow, and said, Yahweh of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your handmaid, and remember me, and not forget your handmaid, but will give to your handmaid a man-child, then I will give him to Yahweh all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come on his head. It happened, as she continued praying before Yahweh, that Eli marked her mouth. Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. Eli said to her, How long will you be drunken? put away your wine from you. Hannah answered, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I poured out my soul before Yahweh. Don't count your handmaid for a wicked woman; for out of the abundance of my complaint and my provocation have I spoken hitherto. Then Eli answered, Go in peace; and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of him. She said, Let your handmaid find favor in your sight. So the woman went her way, and ate; and her facial expression wasn't sad any more. They rose up in the morning early, and worshiped before Yahweh, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and Yahweh remembered her. It happened, when the time was come about, that Hannah conceived, and bore a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of Yahweh. The man Elkanah, and all his house, went up to offer to Yahweh the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. But Hannah didn't go up; for she said to her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned; and then I will bring him, that he may appear before Yahweh, and there abide forever. Elkanah her husband said to her, Do what seems you good; wait until you have weaned him; only Yahweh establish his word. So the woman waited and nursed her son, until she weaned him. When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, and one ephah of meal, and a bottle of wine, and brought him to the house of Yahweh in Shiloh: and the child was young. They killed the bull, and brought the child to Eli. She said, Oh, my lord, as your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood by you here, praying to Yahweh. For this child I prayed; and Yahweh has given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have granted him to Yahweh; as long as he lives he is granted to Yahweh. He worshiped Yahweh there (1Sam. 1:9–28; WEB).
 - (2) Hannah, a barren wife of Elkanah, was quite distraught over the fact that she had not children; so she vowed to dedicate her first child to God, so that he would be raised up in the Tabernacle of God.
 - (3) It is important to note that God listened to her vow and did His part of the bargain.

- 4) Absalom, in planning out his revolution against his father David, lied about taking a vow in Geshur in order to go down to Hebron and complete his plot to overthrow the established government in Jerusalem. His life would be cut short. 2Sam. 15
 - 5) Don't be rash with your mouth, and don't let your heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven, and you on earth. Therefore let your words be few. When you vow a vow to God, don't defer to pay it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay that which you vow. It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay (Eccles. 5:2, 4–5; WEB). Often times, in the Old Testament, a vow would be made, which involved additional animal sacrifices or additional monies for the Tabernacle or the Temple or for the Levites. The writer of Ecclesiastes recommends that these vows be paid—otherwise, do not make the vow in the first place.
 - 6) We find a similar thing in Deut. 23:21–23: When you shall vow a vow to Yahweh your God, you shall not be slack to pay it: for Yahweh your God will surely require it of you; and it would be sin in you. But if you shall forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in you. That which is gone out of your lips you shall observe and do; according as you have vowed to Yahweh your God, a freewill-offering, which you have promised with your mouth.
 - 7) Psalmists spoke of fulfilling their vows to God. Such vows are mentioned about a dozen times in the psalms, including Psalm 66:13 76:11 116:14, 18 119:106 132:1–2. In fact, this actually reveals a whole other aspect to David's life, as we do not read of David making any vows in the narrative of Samuel (unless one was made without using the word vow); however, his many mentions of them in the psalms indicates that David made a number of vows throughout his life.
 - 8) Vows tend to be mentioned much less often in the prophets. Isa. 19:21
 - 9) When Jonah evangelized the Assyrians, they both fears God and made vows. Jonah 1:16
13. Jesus and vows:
- 1) Jesus did not condemn the practice of vows; simply their abuse.
 - 2) One common abuse was, a person would take an oath and devote their money to God (R. B. Thieme, Jr. called this the Corban gimmick) so that they would not have to give it to their parents for the needs of their parents. "For God commanded, saying, "Honor your father and mother"; and, "He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him die by death." But you say, Whoever says to his father or mother, Whatever you would gain from me, It is a gift to God; and in no way he honors his father or his mother. And you voided the commandment of God by your tradition." (Matt. 15:4–6; MKJV).⁶ The parallel passage in Mark 7:10–13 includes the word *corban*.
14. New Testament vows:
- 1) There does not appear to be any sort of emphasis upon vows made in the New Testament, although some were made. In the Old Testament, the crucifixion was in the future, although it was a promise made by God. Our relationship to God was, in many ways, contractual (e.g., the covenants God made with Abraham and David). However, in the New Testament, we have the historic perspective and understanding of the cross, and recognize that God is completely gracious to us. In this way, both sides of a vow can often be seen as God's grace to us.
 - 2) Paul's vow associated with the shaving of his head was likely a mistake on his part. Acts 18:18
 - 3) Many Jews banded together to kill Saul, vowing not to eat and drink until he had been killed. Acts 23:12–15
 - 4) Vows are not mentioned in any of the epistles.
15. There is no reason to think that the God of the Bible does not listen to or consider the things which we have said. How many military men have made promises to God when pinned down in a fox hole, only to later honor their vow; or to ignore their vow. In any case, God clearly kept many such men alive.
16. J. Vernon McGee: *Christians today are notorious at making vows and breaking them. I noted this when I first began to move in Christian circles. As a young Christian, I went to a young people's conference and watched eighteen young people go forward and dedicate themselves to the Lord for full time Christian service. I wouldn't go forward because I did not know whether I could make good my promise. May I say*

⁶ As an aside, this helps to explain Jesus's words to the rich young ruler, where He tells him to sell everything, give it to the poor and follow Him.

that out of all of those who dedicated themselves to the Lord's service that night, not one of them entered full time service! Have you made a vow to God? If you have, He wants you to keep it.⁷

[Topics](#)

[Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines](#)

The Appendix

This is taken from the Doctrine of Vows (HTML) (PDF) (WPD).

The Abbreviated Doctrine of Vows

[Chapter Outline](#)

[Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines](#)

Smith's 3 Types of Vows

Smith suggests that there are 3 kinds of vows: (1) Vows of devotion; (2) Vows of abstinence; (3) Vows of destruction.

1. As to vows of devotion, the following rules are laid down: A man might devote, to sacred uses, possessions or persons, but not the first-born of either man or beast, which was devoted already. Lev. 27:28.
 - 1) If he vowed land, he might either redeem it or not. Leviticus 25; Leviticus 27.
 - 2) Animals fit for sacrifice, if devoted, were not to be redeemed or changed, Lev. 27:9–10; Lev. 27:33, persons devoted stood thus: devote either himself, his child (not the first-born) or his slave. If no redemption took place, the devoted person became a slave of the sanctuary: see the case of Absalom. 2Sam. 15:8. Otherwise, he might be redeemed at a valuation according to age and sex, on the scale given in Lev. 27:1–7.
2. General regulations affecting vows, the following may be mentioned:
 - 1) Vows were entirely voluntary, but once made were regarded as compulsory. Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21; Ecc. 5:4.
 - 2) If persons in a dependent condition made vows as
 - (1) an unmarried daughter living in her father's house, or
 - (2) a wife, even if she afterward became a widow, the vow, if
 - (3) in the first case, her father, or
 - (4) in the second, her husband, heard and disallowed it, it was void; but, if they heard without disallowance, it was to remain good. Num. 30:3–18.
 - 3) Votive offerings arising from the produce of any impure traffic were wholly forbidden. Deut. 23:18.
3. For vows of abstinence, see Corban.
4. For vows of destruction or extermination, see Anathema and Ezra 10:8; Mic. 4:13. It seems that the practice of shaving the head at the expiration of a votive period was not limited to the Nazaritic vow. Acts 18:18; Acts 21:24.

From: Dr. William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary*; 1894; from e-Sword, topic: Vows.

⁷ J. Vernon McGee, *Joshua Judges*, ©1976 by Thru the Bible Books; pp. 181–182.

Chapter Outline

Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines

[These are] notes from lectures of Dr. Meredith Kline, presented at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in Massachusetts.

This particular doctrine was taken out of **1Chronicles 11** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)).

The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty

Brief Summary of Suzerain Treaties:

In the Ancient Near East, treaties between kings was common. These were treaties drawn up among equals and mostly outlined agreements to honor each other's boundaries, to maintain trade relations, and return run-away slaves. These treaties are preserved in the Mari Tablets and in the Amarna texts.

Also preserved in these collections are treaties drafted between a superior and his inferior. If the relationship was familial or friendly, the parties are referred to as "father" and "son." If the relationship is bereft of kindness and intimacy, the parties are referred to as "lord" and "servant," or "king" and "vassal," or "greater king" and "lesser king." The greater king is the suzerain and the lesser king is a prince, or a lesser lord in the service of the greater king. The lesser lord is a representative of all the common people who are under the protection of the greater king. He enforces the treaty among the masses.

These Suzerain/Vassal treaties open with two sections: 1) The identification of the Suzerain by his name and titles; 2) The historical survey of the Suzerain's dealings with the vassal. The purpose is to illustrate to the vassal how much the Suzerain has done to protect and establish the vassal who therefore owes submission and allegiance to the Suzerain. These two sections are referred to as the "Preamble."

The next section of these treaties list the "stipulations." What the vassal is required to do is spelled out in principal and detail. This section is often concluded with the requirement that the vassal deposit his copy of the treaty in his temple, where he is to occasionally read and study it to refresh his memory concerning his duties.

The last section of these treaties contains the blessings and curses of the Suzerain. If the stipulations are met by the vassal, he will receive the Suzerain's blessings, which are listed. If the vassal fails to meet the stipulations, he will receive the Suzerain's curses, which are also listed.

The Suzerain would keep one copy of the treaty and the vassal would keep one copy of the treaty. A number of ratifying ceremonies were used depending upon the era and culture. But the most widely used rite was that of cutting the bodies of animals in halves and placing them in two rows with enough space between for the two parties of the treaty to walk side by side. As they walked between the pieces, they were vowing to each other, "May what has happened to these animals, happen to me if I break this covenant with you."

Covenant Documents of the Bible Patterned After Suzerain Treaties:

Exodus 20

5. "Yahweh" is the Suzerain who delivered this Preamble to Moses, the vassal-lord who represents the people under the authority of the Suzerain. Ex. 20:1–2
6. Names & titles = "I am the Lord, your God." Ex. 20:2
7. Historical prologue = "Who brought you out of Egypt..." Ex. 20:2
8. Stipulations with selected blessings and curses. Ex. 20:3–17
9. Stipulations = the 10 commandments. Ex. 20:3–17
10. Blessings and curses Ex. 20:5b–6, 7b, 12b

The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty

Deuteronomy

11. This entire book of Moses is saturated with Suzerain Treaty language and structure. It is not properly the treaty document itself, but it is based upon such a treaty, making reference to it often. Below are some examples.
12. Historical Prologue language and structure. Deut. 4:32–40
13. Stipulations. Deut. 4:44–5:21
14. Blessings and Curses. Deut. 6:4–25
15. Reflects all the sections of a suzerain treaty. Deut. 8
16. Reflects all the sections of a suzerain treaty. Deut. 11
17. Reflects the relationship of a vassal king to the Suzerain., Deut. 17:14-20
18. Reflects the language and structure of war-time arrangements between a Suzerain and his people. Deut. 20
19. Curses and Blessings. Deut. 27–28
20. Covenant Renewal. Deut. 29
21. Classic presentation of Ancient Near East Treaties! Deut. 30:11–19
22. A question along the lines of "what came first, the chicken or the egg?" Did God see fit to present his covenant to his people in a cultural form developed by Near Eastern empires, or did God's original pattern for his covenant in Eden inform and form the cultural pattern of the Ancient Near East?

Taken from <http://www.fivesolas.com/suzerain.htm> and edited.

[Chapter Outline](#)

[Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines](#)

This doctrine was taken from **2Samuel 7** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)).

God's covenant to David does not follow the Suzerain-Vassal Treaty model exactly.

God's Unconditional Covenant to David and the Suzerain-Vassal Treaty

Section	Suzerain-Vassal Treaty	Davidic Covenant (2Sam. 7:8b–16)
1. Preamble:	Identifying the Lordship of the Great King & stressing his greatness, dominance & immanence	This is what the LORD of Hosts says:
2. Historical Prologue:	Recounting the Great King's previous relationship to his vassal (with special emphasis on the benefits or blessing of that relationship).	I took you from the pasture and from following the sheep to be ruler over My people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you.
3. Ethical Stipulations:	Enumerating the vassal's obligations to the Great King (his guide to maintaining the relationship)	God does not list those things which David must do in order to maintain this relationship.

God's Unconditional Covenant to David and the Suzerain-Vassal Treaty		
Section	Suzerain-Vassal Treaty	Davidic Covenant (2Sam. 7:8b–16)
4. Sanctions:	A list of the blessings for obedience and the curses that will fall on the vassal if he breaks the covenant.	There is no list of blessings or cursings which apply to David; however, with respect to David son, God says: <i>I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will discipline him with a human rod and with blows from others. But My faithful love will never leave him as I removed it from Saul (vv. 14–15).</i>
5. Succession Arrangements:	Arrangements and provisions for the continuity of the covenant relationship over future generations.	<i>I will make a name for you like that of the greatest in the land. I will establish a place for My people Israel and plant them, so that they may live there and not be disturbed again. Evildoers will not afflict them as they have done ever since the day I ordered judges to be over My people Israel. I will give you rest from all your enemies. "The LORD declares to you: The LORD Himself will make a house for you. When your time comes and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will discipline him with a human rod and with blows from others. But My faithful love will never leave him as I removed it from Saul; I removed him from your way. Your house and kingdom will endure before Me forever, and your throne will be established forever.</i>

Obviously, I will go into greater detail throughout this study when it comes to explaining what we have here.

The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty outline comes from:

<http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/charts/The%20Covenant%20Treaty%20Format%20in%20Sacred%20Scripture.htm> accessed June 3, 2008. This approach ultimately can be attributed to Meredith G. Kline (see http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/02-Exodus/Text/Articles/Kline-TwoTables-WTJ.htm accessed June 3, 2008).

I could not find this doctrine posted on any doctrinal site.

Bibliography

Some information came from:

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.;

Bibliography

© by Hendrickson Publishers; from E-Sword; Topic: Vows.

Dr. William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary*; 1894; from e-Sword, topic: Vow.

Most of this came out of the Bible.

Notes to myself: Also check Strong's #'s 631 and 632 (binding with a bond) and swearing [or, oath] an oath (Strong's #'s 7650 & 7621—BDB #989). See Scofield's footnotes Num. 30:2 (mentioned in Deut. 6:13) See Gen. 28:20 Ex. 20:3 Num. 21:2 30:2 Deut. 23:21–23 I Sam. 1:11 20:3 Psalm 50:14 66:13 76:11 116:14, 18 132:2–5 Prov. 20:25 31:2 Eccles. 5:4–5 Matt. 5:33–37 Acts 23:12–15. Keep in mind that making a vow is a natural thing for a man to do. We often, in order to get out of a jam, make a vow or a promise to God. See also Barnes' Notes Vol. II pg. 284 v. 13. (see ZPEB, p. 890) Check 1Sam. 1:28. Also check out *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, p. 194. Don't forget our vows in marriage (Matt. 5:33–37 follows Jesus' teaching on divorce)!!

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