

Covenant Lawsuit (רִיב) Form

Introduction

This form, also known as the heavenly lawsuit or trial speech, depends for its elements on both the covenant treaty form and on ancient forensic (legal) procedures. The elements are listed below in terms evocative of the covenant treaty, which we have already examined (Reader 85), but they could also be listed by their forensic equivalents: thus, #2 would be “Trial: Speech by Plaintiff”; #3 would be “Trial: Speeches by defendant and examination of witnesses”; and #5 would be “Verdict and Sentence.” In any case, the trial is weighted in God’s favor: God is judge, plaintiff and jury. For witnesses, sometimes the heavens and the earth or foreign nations are invoked.

Structure

Element	Example (Amos 2:9-16)
1. Summons of witnesses (and plaintiff) the defendant is the other party in the original covenant	
2. Historical prologue list of past favors	⁹ Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorites before them, who were as tall as the cedars, and as strong as the oak trees. I destroyed their fruit above, and their roots beneath. ¹⁰ It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt, and who led you through the desert for forty years, to occupy the land of the Amorites: ¹¹ I who raised up prophets among your sons, and nazirites among your young men. Is this not so, O men of Israel? says the LORD.
3. Violation of stipulations vassal has not met obligations	¹² But you gave the nazirites wine to drink, and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.
4. Uselessness of cultic acts of worship, atonement	
5. Curses invoked	¹³ Beware, I will crush you into the ground as a wagon crushes when laden with sheaves. ¹⁴ Flight will perish from the swift, and the strong man shall not retain his strength; The warrior shall not save his life, ¹⁵ nor the Bowman stand his ground; The swift of foot shall not escape, nor the horseman save his life. ¹⁶ And the most stouthearted of warriors shall flee naked on that day, says the LORD.

Content

The covenant lawsuit details both the specific crimes the defendant is guilty of and, by implication, the terms of the original covenant. Because the crimes are specific to a group of people at a particular time, they vary from lawsuit to lawsuit.

Function

Scholars have debated whether this form functioned in a forensic or cultic context, but the consensus seems to be that the prophet adapted it to public proclamation in the royal court or temple from the legal courts.

For Further Practice

Micah 6:1-16
Isaiah 43:20b-28

Isaiah 1:2-31
Isaiah 50:1-3

Jeremiah 2