Weeks presents here his findings on the differing forms treaties and covenants can take throughout ancient Near Eastern governments and cultures and what those forms can reveal about the people employing them. He presents his work in a terse manner, which allows him to be comprehensive in his evaluation of the evidence within the confines of such a diminutive book. Along with this terseness Weeks assumes an audience that is very well-versed in ancient Near Eastern treaty/covenants. This renders facile reading by the nonspecialist a challenge. His assumption of an expert audience is somewhat surprising, given the fact that the author says “the topic of treaty and covenant was a major concern in ANE scholarship in the 1950s–1960s. After that it virtually disappears” (1). But he is also sure to make the specialist work too by his frequent use of vague language to cite texts. The learned reader is forced into the footnotes to find out which text is being discussed. But despite the onus that Weeks places on his readers, his findings are worth the effort. Weeks shows himself to be a thorough and careful scholar who says the minimum that the evidence will allow rather than the maximum. He also displays a breadth of scholarship with his treatment and personal translation of treaty/covenant texts from Egypt to Hatti that is truly noteworthy. Almost all texts are presented in translation with discussion of linguistic aspects reserved only for necessary cases.

Weeks begins his study by noting that the history of the discussion of ancient Near Eastern treaties/covenants “began with the observation of significant similarities between biblical covenants and Hittite treaties on the one side and Assyrian treaties on the other” as well as the idea that these treaties evidenced fixed forms. Thus “the discovery of commonness was the starting point of the whole investigation” (2). But what no one
Weeks also feels that the forms that treaties/covenants take can reveal something about the people using them. He notes, “By comparison of variations … we are able to discern tendencies of different cultures. That provides a way to bring cultures into comparison. It also generates intriguing suggestions as to the distinctives of some of the main cultures we encounter. I will further suggest that styles of historical writing and even governmental form correlate with differences in treaties” (4). Thus he postulates “a rough correlation between centralization of political power and seeing fear as motivation versus the resort to appeals to history to motivate when there is not such centralization” (11). Noncentralized powers, therefore, place a “historical argument for loyalty before the stipulations in order to motivate obedience to those stipulations,” while centralized powers place “a god list and consequent threat of divine punishment in that position” (11).

This leads Weeks into his discussion of evidence, which begins with the Mesopotamian data. His general findings are that the characteristic traits of “Mesopotamian treaties are lack of history and a giving of a specific curse to each deity” (54). These findings illustrate the caution with which he makes his conclusions. More specifically he notes, “Motivation [for obedience to the treaty] is essentially fear of divine wrath” (53). Yet in the late Assyrian period, as the empire weakened, appeals to benevolence were used to motivate. This switch is most likely “a case of independent invention” rather than borrowing from the Hittites (53). He also discusses the numerous terms used for “treaty” and “oath” in Akkadian, their interrelation, and the texts related to treaties, such as kudurru, loyalty oaths, and mutual agreements. There are times, however, when one wishes Weeks had said a little more. For instance, when he observes in connection to
certain treaties of Esarhaddon that “treaties have an occasional tendency to show repetitions,” one longs for a footnote giving references to these other treaties. Further, when he uses language such as “normal forms,” “common patterns,” “standard concerns,” and “normal treaty practice,” one would expect an early and clear definition of what these terms entail and even what “treaty” means. Instead, we are given a rather terse definition conjoined with a discussion of differences between “treaty and an oath to uphold the treaty” (20) and an even less direct definition in an examination of “the treaty between Zimri-Lim of Lari and Ibal-pi-El II of Eshunna” (28). Clear definitions serve not only the neophyte but also the specialist by allowing one to understand explicitly what is meant.

In his discussion of the Hittite evidence, Weeks is more explicit in defining his terms. Or perhaps we should say in not defining his terms, since, although “[w]e can define a typical treaty form [i.e., a suzerain-vassal treaty]…, treaties, decrees, grants, and instructions so blend into each other in the Hittite corpus that is difficult to draw clear boundaries. Almost every formal definition of a treaty is contradicted by one or other Hittite text” (55). The reason for this is the “extensive use of treaties and the penetration of treaties into many aspects of political relationships” (91). This penetration is particularly prevalent in the New Kingdom and indeed constitutes one of the prominent features of the Hittite evidence. Treaties were so prevalent because the Hittites “sought to create a network of diplomatic and personal relationships” founded on “dependency and loyalty relationships” (83). The cornerstone of these relationships was past interactions among the parties involved, in other words, “history.” This “argument from history” forms the second “prominent feature of the Hittite evidence” (91).

Even though “[a]ppeal to obligation-inducing history runs through their political life for centuries,” the multiplicity of the parties involved prohibited a strict, uniform pattern of treaties/covenants. Thus Weeks notes,

If one perceives relationships as those of a loyalty induced by history, then it is also natural to suspect that the gods will approve and sanction those relationships. Hence a curse was perceived as appropriate for those who showed ingratitude. On the other hand, several other relationships were seen as less suitable for appeals to history. Those in a strictly subordinate relationship to the king, such as his servants, would be expected to understand their position and be submissive, though the appeal to history still comes through in that relationship in the use of warning anecdotes. At the other end of the scale, other great powers are not likely to have benefited from the paternalistic benevolence of the Hittite king, and hence appeals to history are not a feature of parity treaties. In those cases divine curse was used to guarantee commitments which could not be induced by other means.
Thus the appeal to the gods’ punishment of oath-breakers may reinforce appeals to history or may stand by itself. (93)

Weeks’s cautious findings on the Hittite texts compare nicely with his on Egyptian texts. He observes that the “earliest periods of Egyptian history, down to the end of the Old Kingdom, are bereft of any evidence for treaties” (99). It is only in the New Kingdom when the Egyptians came in contact with the Hittites that we encounter a formal treaty between Ramesses II and Hattusilis III, and “the possibility exists that initiative and form of the treaty came from the Hittites and was slightly modified to suit Egyptian perceptions” (103). Even the Amarna evidence with its vassal and treaty-like language does not contain a single example of a treaty/covenant. Weeks follows Leverani in positing “a difference between the way the vassal saw the relationship and the way the pharaoh saw it. The pharaoh treated his Syro-Palestinian “vassals” not as vassals in the sense that they would expect but as peripheral bureaucrats to be used or ignored according to pharaoh’s wishes” (105). He further remarks, “Pharaoh projects the image of power: divine power. As such pharaoh will not be bound to a vassal even if the binding treaty places almost all the obligations upon the vassal” (111). Weeks, therefore, infers from the Egyptian evidence that “any assumption that every great power uniformly used the treaty form is suspect” (112).

Weeks turns next to the Syrian evidence and notes that it “would be unwise to postulate a distinct, coherent Syrian treaty tradition” (132). This is due to a lack of cultural continuity in the region. Yet there seem to be “two distinct sets of practices” for making treaties. In the one practice

the treaty was made by kings in a meeting and there was no mention of a written text or of the ritual of touching the throat. In contrast, touching the throat was used when two kings distant from each other were making an alliance and hence needed to communicate the terms of that alliance in a written form. While one cannot be dogmatic, killings of donkeys seem to take place more around Mari and in the territory to its north, while touching the throat and treaty texts occur more with the larger powers of Mesopotamia. (123)

He goes on to note, “Where the evidence for the minor powers of the middle Euphrates and Jazirah largely agrees with the evidence from the greater Mesopotamian powers is in the lack of attention to detail in the treaties. Lists of gods, stipulations and curses are characterized by brevity” (123). Thus Weeks concludes that “[t]his opens the possibility that there are two approaches represented in this period. The native Mesopotamian one inclined towards detail and specificity; the other did not” (123). As far as his overall findings of the Syrian evidence are concerned, he remarks that there is a “clear possibility
that elaboration of the treaty form, for example with detailed stipulations, curses and long god lists may be a cultural rather than a chronological indicator” (132–33).

Weeks ends his examination of the ancient Near Eastern treaty/covenant evidence by exploring the material from Israel as documented in the Hebrew Bible. He agrees with Mendenhall that “biblical monotheism is covenant monotheism,” although Weeks disagrees with him in seeing ancient Near Eastern treaties as having fixed and datable forms (162). In reference to the book of Deuteronomy, he notes, “Deuteronomy stands alongside the treaties of the Hittite Empire and the late Assyrian Empire as three parallel developments. The Hittite treaties show more emphasis on history than on curse. The Assyrians do not put the emphases on history and curse together in the one treaty—it is merely a matter of both approaches being present in the same historical period. Deuteronomy brings the two emphases together” (170). The other biblical texts dealing with covenant such as those detailing the Sinai and Shechem covenants are not as unambiguous in connecting the biblical covenant to the wider ancient Near Eastern treaty: Deuteronomy not only shares the same elements, but “these elements occur in the general order in which they are found in Hittite treaties” (156).

Even though this is the case, Weeks maintains, “the larger the portions of text considered, the greater the relationship” (156). Thus if one does not break the biblical text up into smaller units, as the form and source critics do, one sees greater affinities between the biblical material and ancient Near Eastern treaties. What is more, Weeks notes that the very elements used to divide the biblical text into constituent parts are present in ancient Near Eastern treaties. Thus “changes from first to third person are known in Hittite instructions” (140; see also 164–65), and apodictic and casuistic law both “occur in Hittite instructions” (140). He goes on to state, “It should also be pointed out that the repetitions which are often used as proof of growth and accretion are found in other treaties. Our canons of taste may see repetition as an inelegant form of emphasis, but we must not judge another age by our literary tastes. Thus, it is more plausible to see Deuteronomy as created in full than to see it as the result of a gradual development” (169). Unfortunately, he does not provide any specific references from source texts to support this point. With reference to the similar use of history in both Israel and Hatti, Weeks finds that each developed the “common inheritance” in similar ways “because of the lack of strong political and social centralization” (173). With regard to the prophetic use of covenant language, he observes “the prophets reflect the tradition of treaty curses because covenant concepts and terminology are the background to the prophets” (160).

Weeks concludes his study with a summary of his findings. He notes, “There is no conclusive evidence for locating the origin of the treaty form in one particular culture,” and “[t]here is no fixed treaty form, even within one society at one particular time” (174).
He further maintains that “it is false to assume that the formal genre of texts available in one culture will correspond to that in another” (174). Instead what we find in the ancient Near East is “an original inheritance, for the whole Near East, of relationships guaranteed by oaths” (177). Israel does, however, predominantly differ from the surrounding cultures in that it applied treaty/covenants to “religious use” (179). All in all, I believe the reader will find Weeks’s work worth the effort it takes to understand. His findings are cautious and well-reasoned, and he certainly gives the scholarly community a great deal to think about. This is so not only with reference to ancient Near Eastern treaty/covenants themselves but also to the challenges he presents to redaction critics by positing that their main vehicles for determining editorial layers are normal forms of unified composition. We wait now with much anticipation to see how Weeks will influence the scholarly discussion. I end by noting a few typographical errors and curious spellings. On pages 16ff. Eanatum is variously spelled. Also read “plane” for “plain” (127), “build” for “built” (154), “indictment” for “inditement” (164), and “Tash” for “Yash” (180).