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**Divine Covenant Faithfulness in the Face of Human  
Covenant Unfaithfulness: Is Yahweh’s Covenant Faithfulness  
Ultimately Contingent upon Human Obedience?**

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**Introduction**

Divine covenant faithfulness is a fundamental theme which occurs repeatedly in Jewish revelation and piety. In post-biblical world, for example, the prominence of this theme is clearly seen in the “Jewish phylacteries that were worn as marks of faithfulness to Jahweh” which indicates “that the wearers had been marked by Jahweh for a part in the inheritance.”<sup>1</sup> This same motif or theme is also featured in Jewish benedictions and prayer books.<sup>2</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> See Herold Weiss, “Foot Washing in the Johannine Community,” *Novum Testamentum* 21, no. 4 (1979), 317.

<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Versepunt, “James 1:17 and the Jewish Morning Prayers,” *Novum Testamentum* 39, no. 2. (1997), 186.

Qumran community, the theme of divine faithfulness is also daily recited in the *Community Rule*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the subject of divine faithfulness is also expressed in the rabbinic writings particularly in respect to divine covenant faithfulness to the patriarchs by preserving the nation of Israel.<sup>4</sup> Also, in passing, Philo alluded to the presence of divine faithfulness which providentially watches over the good and the bad.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the theme of divine faithfulness is also reflected in the book of *Jubilees* which readily underscored divine covenant faithfulness in spite of the rebellious and stubbornness of God's people.<sup>6</sup> Concerning the divine covenant faithfulness in the giving of the law, God said to Moses in the book of *Jubilees*, "I have not abandoned them on account of all of the evil which they have done to instigate transgression of the covenant which I am establishing between me and you today on Mount Sinai for their descendants." In particular, it added, "[a]nd thus it will be, when all of these things happen to them, that they will know that I have been more righteous than they in all their judgments and deeds. And they will know that I have truly been with them."<sup>7</sup> For the writer of *Jubilees*, God's wisdom, power, justice and compassion will prevailed in the long run against human wickedness and satanic rebellion. The opening of *4 Ezra* also speaks of divine covenant faithfulness in the anticipation of possible rebellion on the part of God's people.<sup>8</sup> In *Pseudo-Philo*, divine covenant faithfulness is particularly acknowledged in the

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<sup>3</sup> A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Traditions and Redaction in Acts 2:1-13," *JSNT* 55 (1994), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Have We Found Abraham to be Our Forefather According to the Flesh? A Reconsideration of Romans 4:1," *Novum Testamentum* 27, no. 1 (1985), 95. In contrast, Elaine Phillips has also described an emphasis in rabbinic literature on the merits of the patriarchs as the basis for Yahweh's dealing with the subsequent generations of Israelites which complements their recognition of divine faithfulness particularly about "God's unbreakable covenant with Abraham." For this line of thought see Elaine Phillips, "They are Loved on Account of the Patriarchs," *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*, ed. Steven A. Hunt (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010), 187-220.

<sup>5</sup> Philo, *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1993), 748-756.

<sup>6</sup> O. S. Wintermute, trans. "Jubilees," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985), 52.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> B. M. Metzger, trans. "The Fourth Book of Ezra (Late First Century A.D.)," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), 525, 528.

golden calf episode whereby the faithfulness of God prevailed over the disobedience of God's people.<sup>9</sup> In the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, though not obviously stated, yet there is the underlying assumption that divine covenant faithfulness is partly responsible for God's continuous presence in the lives of the patriarchs rather than their purported confessions and repentance.<sup>10</sup> In the same perspective, the *Prayer of Manasseh* also underscored the place of unmerited favour or grace upon the sinner that is partly based on an already conceived understanding of divine covenant faithfulness to "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."<sup>11</sup> In this forged confession of Manasseh, the work assumed the possibility of God's grace and faithfulness being made available to a worst sinner such as Manasseh. In modern times, the preservation of the nation of Israel is also linked to the theme of divine covenant faithfulness.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the theme of divine faithfulness has also entered modern discourse of ecology especially in the passing reference to the theme of divine faithfulness in the preservation of the earth.<sup>13</sup> Within this modern setting also, contemporary concern for moral integrity or faithfulness<sup>14</sup> in business, politics and family life may have in the long run some

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<sup>9</sup> D. J. Harrington, "Pseudo-Philo (First Century A.D.)," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985), 320.

<sup>10</sup> H. C. Kee, "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Second Century B.C.)," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), 775-828.

<sup>11</sup> J.H. Charlesworth, "Prayer of Manasseh (Second Century B.C.-First Century A.D.)," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985), 635-637.

<sup>12</sup> Hays, "Have We Found Abraham to be Our Forefather According to the Flesh?," 95.

<sup>13</sup> Making references in passing to the significance of divine faithfulness to the preservation of the earth, Mark Bredin observed, "God's faithfulness to this creation requires that he destroy the destroyers of the earth in order to preserve and to deliver it from evil." He also added, "This formation or creation reveals that Israel's God is one who is in charge of history and through faithfulness to his covenant will bring blessings on the faithful but will bring curses on those who transgress his covenant (Deut 26-29)" [Bredin, "Ecological Crisis and Plagues (Revelation 11:6)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 39, no. 1 (2009), 28, 30 ].

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the nature of integrity in contemporary moral discourse see Jody L. Grahama, "Does Integrity Require Moral Goodness?" *Ratio* 14, no. 3 (2001): 234-251.

possible implications on the ideal or conception of faithfulness in the Judeo-Christian traditions.<sup>15</sup>

From the preceding instances, it appears that the theme of divine faithfulness or covenantal faithfulness is a defining subject in post-biblical Jewish piety, and hence it should not be treated as a peripheral concern in Old Testament studies. Describing the importance of faithfulness as a theme and its appropriateness for modern Old Testament studies, R.W. Moberly observed,

Although the great OT (and biblical) words ‘righteousness’ and ‘holiness’ have through misuse become problematic and unattractive for many (e.g., ‘self-righteous,’ ‘holier-than-thou’), ‘faithfulness,’ in the sense of integrity, trustworthiness, and dependability, has no such negative overtones. It may, therefore, be a particularly important concept for conveying central OT (and biblical) truths in a modern context.<sup>16</sup>

Even though we did underscore this same importance, however, our immediate point of interest lies in understanding the nature of divine faithfulness within the Hebrew Bible, and to note particularly whether divine faithfulness is contingent on human obedience or not. Through a study of several aspects of faithfulness

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<sup>15</sup> While the subject of divine faithfulness is a constant preoccupation of post-biblical Jewish piety, however the subject of faithfulness in its secular or general sense is a modern concern that affects both the business, political and family fronts and not only the religious world. For example, the recent financial crisis on the Wall Street has been narrowed down to the crisis of ethics especially the failure of the corporates executives of the Wall streets to live by the ethics of moral integrity or faithfulness which had earlier formed the basis of western market economy [See for Thomas L Carson, “Self-Interest and Business Ethics: Some Lessons of the Recent Corporate Scandals,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 43, no. 4 (2003): 389-394]. In this respect, it is commonly assumed that the economic melt-down was formerly preceded by a moral melt-down whereby top shots on Wall Street became unfaithful to the founding charters of their trade. In the same way, unfaithfulness has played a dominant role in the separation of couples and subsequently resulted in the dysfunctional nature of modern families. Similarly, unfaithfulness to laid down policies, protocols and constitutions has often been the problem of developing nations of the world because often little attention is given to the faithful execution of good ideas or adherence to the dictates of the law. In all its ramifications, whether in its religious and general sense, faithfulness is an indispensable virtues needed by the modern society.

<sup>16</sup> R.W. L. Moberly, “אֱמוּנָה,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 430.

in the Old Testament, the paper presupposes that divine covenant faithfulness is not contingent on human obedience. First, it begins by developing a theoretical framework on which to ground the present discourse on divine faithfulness. This framework consists in the location or placement of divine faithfulness inherently in the essence of the divine being and not merely as an *apriori* characteristic that he exercises in relationship to the world outside himself. Secondly, it proceeds to understand the idea, nature and semantics of faithfulness in the Old Testament through a study of the common Hebraic terminologies of faithfulness. Lastly, looking at various covenantal highpoints in Old Testament revelation, the paper discusses Yahweh's faithfulness in the face of Israelite unfaithfulness, and particularly acknowledges the problem of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness in relationship to divine punishment and conditional commandments.

#### **A. Theoretical Framework**

Before we proceed our discussion, we must establish in theoretical terms a theological template by which to embark on this subject.<sup>17</sup> This theoretical framework is particularly defined around the essences of the divine being in direct relationship to the attribute of faithfulness. In this particular understanding, Yahweh in the Old Testament is a faithful deity and his faithfulness is no accident because for a deity to be a deity in a moral sense such a deity must exercise the virtue of faithfulness in order to be truly taken serious.<sup>18</sup> Yahweh's faithfulness did not come merely from his exercise of faithful deeds or acts but comes from his being as God. It is an inherent characteristic or attribute that in it lies his godhood or

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<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, despite the importance of divine faithfulness in the conceptions of Jewish and the Christian God, many systematic works merely give only a page or half to the subject. This treatment often did not allow a clear perspective on the nature of the divine attribute of faithfulness within the Bible. For example See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002), 317-18; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 69-70; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 195-6.

<sup>18</sup> Concerning divine faithfulness, Erickson observed, “[i]f God's genuineness is a matter of his being true and veracity is his telling of the truth, then his faithfulness means that he proves true,” that is, “God keeps his promise. Because of his unlimited power and capability, he could never commit himself to do something of which he would eventually prove incapable. He never has to revise his word or renege on a promise” [See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 317]. Though Erickson's placement and connection of Yahweh's faithfulness to his power is appropriate, however, it fails to locate or deals with the issues surrounding Yahweh's faithfulness and the human tendency towards unfaithfulness.

*godness*, hence to refuse, fail or suspense himself from being faithful will amount to Yahweh denying himself. Consequently, the attribute of faithfulness is a basic element required of a deity in order to be considered a deity and hence God must exercise this single attribute to merit the nomenclature of God.<sup>19</sup> To this end any discourse on the subject of Yahweh's faithfulness conditioned on human obedience or disobedience fails because it refuses to treat faithfulness as an intrinsic character of Yahweh which holds other attributes of the divine being together.<sup>20</sup> This is because without faithfulness as an indispensable attributes of the divine being the moral and ethical demands of Yahweh will on the long run be hollow and even hypocritical. In this sense, faithfulness becomes an obligatory attribute, that is, an attribute which is mandatory for a deity. Without this mandatory or necessary attribute, Yahweh will lack the moral authority to legislate morality or ethics. Consequently, the Old Testament assumes that Yahweh essentially is a faithful God and to deny him such an attribute would reduce him to become just like any other capricious deity of the ancient Near Eastern world, which often are depicted as unethical and who often involve in morally questionable deeds.<sup>21</sup> In addition, a god that lacks faithfulness as part

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<sup>19</sup> It is within this perspective that Louis Berkhof noted, "[t]here is still another aspect of this divine perfection, and one that is always regarded as of the greatest importance. It is generally called His *faithfulness*, in virtue of which He is ever mindful of His covenant and fulfills all the promises which He has made to His people. This faithfulness of God is of the utmost practical significance to the people of God. It is the ground of their confidence, the foundation of their hope, and the cause of their rejoicing. It saves them from the despair to which their own unfaithfulness might easily lead, gives them courage to carry on in spite of their failures, and fills their hearts with joyful anticipations, even when they are deeply conscious of the fact that they have forfeited all the blessings of God." See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 69. Berkhof's description of the practical benefits of divine faithfulness is wonderful, however, he fails to provide details on the place of divine faithfulness in the context of the unfaithfulness of God's covenant people.

<sup>20</sup> Describing God's attribute of faithfulness primarily in relationship to his promises, Wayne Grudem observed, "[w]ith respect to his promises, God always does what he promises to do, and we can depend on him never to be unfaithful to his promise. Thus, he is 'a God of faithfulness' (Deut 32:4). In fact, this specific aspect of God's truthfulness is sometimes viewed as a distinct attribute: *God's faithfulness means that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised* (Num 23:19; cf. 2Sam 7:28; Ps 141:6, et al). He can be relied upon, and he will never prove unfaithful to those who trust what he has said. Indeed, the essence of true faith is taking God at his word and relying on him to do as he has promised" [italics his; See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 196]. Unfortunately, Grudem only treats divine faithfulness in the narrow prism of divine ability to keep his promises.

<sup>21</sup> In comparing ancient deities and Yahweh especially by their attributes of faithfulness, John H. Walton said, "[f]aithfulness is one of the most frequently affirmed attributes of Yahweh because of his covenant relationship with Israel. In contrast, it is difficult to find any such affirmation for the gods of the ancient Near East. Words that convey loyalty are never used of the gods in that way. The gods have no agreements or promises to be faithful to and no obligations or commitments to fulfil." See John H. [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

and parcel of his essence will be imperfect and human because he lives in the sphere of human frailty. Noting the preceding observation, one must realize that Yahweh must in his essence exercise faithfulness, because by refusing to do so, he negates or annihilates his *beingness* as God. In this perspective, Yahweh's faithfulness is an indispensable characteristic which cements other attributes but most importantly is needed for Yahweh to be a deity in the truest sense. If the preceding discourse is right, therefore, Yahweh's faithfulness cannot be conditioned or keyed to the unstable human activity of obedience or disobedience because Yahweh's being as a faithful God precedes his doing or relationship with Israel. Consequently, Yahweh is faithful because it is his inherent nature to be faithful regardless whether men and women do right or wrong. Importantly, the disobedience of the human race cannot control or manipulate his faithfulness since his faithfulness comes inherently from his being as God. It is the chief characteristic that makes him God in the first place because a deity that is unfaithful for a minute or even in a spilt of a second cannot be trusted or relied upon to be a faithful deity. Such unfaithful deity, in this sense, could involve himself in lying, betrayal, hypocrisy and other unethical practices. This unfaithful being cannot be considered a god in the true sense since he lacks the moral power to legislate, enforce or execute morality. Hence faithfulness is a needed moral attribute because it establishes, coordinates or unifies all other divine attributes in a defined way and the attributes of divine being become like a house of cards if faithfulness as an attribute is taken away from him. Even though "[h]uman obedience should be the natural result of divine faithfulness,"<sup>22</sup> however, divine faithfulness should not merely be the result of human obedience. It must be rooted in God himself and thus preceding any moral effort on the part of the human race.

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Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 109. cf. 128, 149-61, 300, 305-6, 329, 333.

<sup>22</sup> John N. Oswalt, "Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 56–66 in the Present Structure of the Book," *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 70, eds. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 188.

Consequently, if the *godness* or *godhood* of the divine is keyed on faithfulness and without such attribute the divine being becomes less than God, the implication is that the divine essence exists independent of human actions, and points to God's independent attribute of faithfulness, which exist irrespective of human actions. In particular, there are four implications that come from this notion of divine faithfulness. First, the placement of divine faithfulness in divine essence shows that human actions whether good or evil cannot affect or temper with the essence of God to act faithfully. Human behaviours, in this particular understanding, are inconsequential to God's faithfulness because Yahweh's faithfulness exists in himself prior to his dealings with the human world. In this sense, Yahweh's faithfulness becomes foundational attribute which defines, unifies and illuminates all other attributes within himself, hence Yahweh can never be unfaithful because faithfulness is an essential constituent of his being. In his *beingness*, Yahweh must be faithful and anything less than this will ultimately repudiate his claims to *godhood*. Secondly, the location of divine attribute of faithfulness in the divine being leads to the conclusion that Yahweh will continue to act faithfully whether in the past, the present and the future because there is no temporal plane where his faithfulness is missing or absent. Consequently, since faithfulness is his essence, Yahweh cannot change or stop to be faithful whether in this time and space or in eternity because this will negate his *godhood* or *godness*. Thirdly, the placement of the divine faithfulness in his essence has comforting significance for the believer because it implies that whether one is acting rightly or failing in good deeds towards God, we can still be confident that the faithfulness of God never ceases or changes towards us. Lamentation put it rightly when it says, "Yahweh's faithfulness never ceases because his compassion never fails. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness!" (Lam 2:22-23). Lastly, the placement of Yahweh's faithfulness in his essence implies that Yahweh's faithfulness is not merely the product of his doings but lies deeply in his being. If *beingness* precedes doing, by placing divine faithfulness in his *beingness* we remove faithfulness from being merely a superficial characteristic of Yahweh to a deeper attribute that is embedded in his *godhood*. In this perspective, Yahweh's faithfulness is not a superficial attribute but lies embedded in his essence, personality and



activity. To this end, faithfulness becomes inevitable for God to be God and Yahweh's faithfulness must come from this fundamental and intrinsic part of his being in order to ensure a covenantal security for God's people who often fail in their covenantal commitments to him.

### **B. Terminologies and Semantics**

The idea of faithfulness is captured by several words in biblical Hebrew. However, three of these words and few other synonyms will preoccupy our present interest. The first word is אֱמֵן and it has the basic meaning of being “faithful,” “to believe,” “to put trust” in something or someone, “to be reliable” or even “to support” someone or something.<sup>23</sup> In nominal form, it has the idea of “reliability,” “truth,” and “stability.”<sup>24</sup> Thus it has the idea of telling the truth or keeping one's word. In relationship to Yahweh, the word has the idea of Yahweh's ability to keep his words or to be true to his covenant with Israel. In a text that has been described as “the most extensive statement about...the character of God in the Bible. God in this text is described thus, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (Exod 34: 5-7). In the study of אֱמֵן in relationship to the text, Moberly observed,

What precisely does ‘faithfulness’ mean in this context? In general terms, it must relate to Yahweh's willingness, in response to the intercession of Moses (Exod 33:12-18), to show his true nature through renewing the covenant with Israel despite their sin with the Golden Calf, in which they had effectively forfeited their position as the chosen people of Yahweh. The general point is well expressed in the words of NT, ‘if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself’ (2Tim 2:13). The understanding of God as a God of faithfulness is naturally often celebrated in Israel's worship...<sup>25</sup>

Also within the Psalms, the faithfulness of Yahweh is generally underscored by the use of אֱמֵן (Psalms 108:4, 5; 115:1;

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<sup>23</sup> Moberly, “אֱמֵן,” 427.c.f. Ludwig Koehler & Walter Baumgartner, “אֱמֵן,” *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 63-65.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Moberly, “אֱמֵן,” 428.

117:2; 138:2). In particular, אמן is associated in the Psalms with the character of Yahweh (Psalms 33:4; 92:2, 3; 143:1). Similarly, אמן occurs in company חסד and צדיק (Deut 32:4). In addition, אמן is also employed in reference to Yahweh's faithfulness to the house of David (Ps 89:3-4, 34-36). Unfortunately, this term is one of the virtues missing in the religious life of ancient Israel. Moberly added, "[s]adly, the OT often portrays Israel's failure to maintain faithfulness in its dealings with Yahweh and with one another."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, Hosea said that "[t]here is no faithfulness" (אמן), "no love" (חסד), "no knowledge" (דעה) ...in the land (Hos 4:1).<sup>27</sup> Significantly, אמן is used in the Old Testament as the opposite of שקר where שקר means "falsehood," "deception," and "lying." Describing the importance of אמן to שקר in the Old Testament, Moberly further observed, "[i]n connection with this, it should be noted that the single most concentrated usage of" אמן "in the whole OT presents a major theological problem, for it is unthinkable that Yahweh should prove untrue to his word, i.e., be guilty of *šeqer*."<sup>28,29</sup>

The second very important word that captures faithfulness in biblical Hebrew is the word דבק which primarily means "to stick," "to cling," and "to cleave" to something or someone.<sup>30</sup> According to George J. Burke, the term is commonly used in Old Testament "metaphorically to express a state of loyalty, affection, or close proximity."<sup>31</sup> The term could also entail sexual intimacy. For example, it is possibly used with this sexual nuance in Genesis 2:14. Significantly, even though the term is used commonly in describing faithfulness among humans and possibly to show faithfulness between Israel to Yahweh (2Sam 20:2; Josh 23:12; 2Kgs 3:3.cf. Ps 101:3; Deut 4:3-4), it is nowhere used to describe divine faithfulness to Israel. Burke observed, "though it is notable that whereas *dbq* is suitably

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> George J. Burke, "דבק," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 910; Koehler & Baumgartner, "דבק," *The Hebrew*, 209-10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 911

used of human attachment to God, God's relationship to human is expressed rather through *hesed*.”<sup>32</sup>

The last word commonly used in the Old Testament to capture the idea of faithfulness is חסד. This word could mean “loyalty, faithfulness, goodness, love” or even the archaic words, “steadfast love” and “loving-kindness.”<sup>33</sup> When used as a verb, חסד has both Yahweh and Israel as its subject. The Hebrew Bible described the abundance of חסד in the universe (Ps 35:5; 119:14; 36:5; 57:10; 103:11; 108:4). The Old Testament believes that חסד ameliorates God's wrath (Isa 54:8; Mic 7:10; Lam 3:31-32). In its particular usage to describe divine faithfulness, the eternity of חסד is hereby underscored (Isa 54:10a; Hos 6:4; Ps 89:2, 28, 33; 103:17; 117:2; 138:8; 1 Chron 16:34, 41; 2Chron 5:13; 7:3,6; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Ps 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; Jer 33:11; Ps 118; 136). Despite the eternity of divine faithfulness or love in the dominant thought of ancient Israel, some Old Testament texts point to the possibility of losing divine *hesed* (Gen 24:27; Ps 98:3; 106:45; Jer 16:5; 2Sam 7:15 cf. 1Chron 17:13). It appears that there is a tension between the eternity and temporality of the Old Testament understanding of חסד. However, the dominant picture in the Old Testament is that חסד is everlasting or eternal.

In discussing biblical understanding of faithfulness, there are various antonyms of faithfulness that need to be highlighted here. Eight of these antonyms of faithfulness are worth exploring. The first word בגד means to “act faithlessly, treacherously, perfidiously,” and to “commit faithlessness.”<sup>34</sup> In its nominal form, it stands for “faithlessness,” “perfidy,” “treachery,” and even “fraud.”<sup>35</sup> In the many occurrences of the verbal form, the object of בגד is God. It is also used of faithlessness or treachery against a fellow human being.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Wakely noted the use of this term in the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> D. A. Baer and R.P. Gordon, “חסד,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 211; Koehler & Baumgartner, “בגד,” *The Hebrew*, 336-7.

<sup>34</sup> Robin Wakely, “בגד,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 582.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

context of Israelite unfaithfulness. He observed, “Israel is accused of having dealt faithlessly with Yahweh...Israel’s character is so flawed and her conduct so incompatible with demands of covenant life as to preclude that quality of communion with Yahweh that worshippers have come to expect...”<sup>37</sup>Even though due to the overarching sovereignty of the Old Testament some texts associate Yahweh with “mischief-making spirit,” which “impelled people blindly to their ruin,”<sup>38</sup> however, the term בַּגְד is not directly linked to Yahweh.

The second antonym is the Hebrew word מַעַל which means to “behave or act contrary to one’s duty,” that is, “to be unfaithful, undutiful, disloyal.”<sup>39</sup> In nominal form, it is used to describe, “unfaithfulness,” “faithlessness,” “disloyalty,” “inconstancy,” “infidelity,” “breach of trust,” “deceit,” “deception,” and “fraud.”<sup>40</sup> In the majority of its occurrence, מַעַל has God as its object.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the word is often used to describe Israel’s breaking of faith with God (Num 32:5; 20:10-12; 27:12-14). This implies that Yahweh cannot be faithless or unfaithful in his dealing with his people.<sup>42</sup>

The third antonym is סָוָה which basically means to “diverge,” “depart from,” “decline,” “be faithless,” “shrink back,” “give

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 582.

<sup>39</sup> Wakely, “מַעַל,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 1020.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Describing the significance of this word in relationship to Israel, Wakely observed, “[t]he penalty for acting faithlessly against God is divine punishment (Ezek 14:13; 15:8), and Israel’s faithlessness was sometimes traced back to when she first entered the Promised Land. The people’s failure was characterized by radical failure from the start. The inevitable response to mutinous Israel’s chronic and terminal illness that afflicted her from the beginning...was exile (Ezek 39:23). Unfaithfulness (*Ma’al*) was the direct cause of both the deportation of the northern tribes by Assyria (1 Chron 5:25) and of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC (1Chron 9:1; 2Chron 36:14). Yet, those who had experienced God’s wrath at the hands of Babylonians were promised that, following punishment for their treachery, Yahweh would restore their fortune and have mercy on them (Ezek 39:25), after which the people would bear their shame and all the treachery that they had committed against God and would dwell securely in their land (Ezek 39:26).” See *Ibid.*, 1024.

ground,” “retreat,” or “rebellious.”<sup>43</sup> It is used to describe “inexplicably perverse and disloyal Israel” in turning away from God, “despite his many mercies and blessings.”<sup>44</sup> This rebellious character of Israel is “likened to the “defective, unreliable bow” (Ps 78:57; cf. Hos 7:16).<sup>45</sup> Significantly, סוג is only used once of “one whose faithfulness was exemplary” in Isaiah 50:5. Accordingly, the use of סוג here is positive, hence Wakely observed, “[d]espite suffering profound humiliation even maltreatment in a hostile environment, Yahweh’s dedicated servant did not shrink from his assigned task: he did not turn backwards...”<sup>46</sup>

The next term סור is employed in the Old Testament to describe a turning “aside from one’s course,” “to turn away,” “to turn toward,” “to go away,” “to desert,” to be “faithless,” “to be disloyal” and “to turn apostate.”<sup>47</sup> Despite its dominant negative connotations, סור was positively employed to describe divine activity such as the removal of sin, illness, stony hearts from God’s people, and to emphasize the active presence of God’s Spirit in the tabernacle (Isa 6:7; Deut 7:15; Ezek 36:26; Num 12:10).<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Yahweh’s Spirit is said to have departed from Saul (1 Sam 16:14; 18:12; 28:15), and Yahweh threatened to remove Judah and the support of Israel because of her sins (2Kgs 23:27; Isa 3:1).<sup>49</sup>

Other antonyms within the semantic fields of faithfulness include רמה, שוב, שקר and כזב. Despite the individual nuances of these words, the semantic domain of these four words lies in the idea of falsehood, betrayal, deception, treachery, apostasy or acting falsely. For example, שקר is the direct opposite of אמון which stands for faithfulness. In describing this term, E. Carpenter and M. A. Grisanti observed,

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<sup>43</sup> Wakely, “סוג,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 3, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 229.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> J.A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, “סור,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 3, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 238.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

In summary, it might be said that this root is tied to the world of false behavior and words, of deception and deceit in dealing with things the way they are as defined by God's character, words, and deeds. Justice, faith, and covenantal/treaty stipulations were broken/disregarded. The word is closely tied to breaking faith with others by presenting deception/falsehood rather than truth.<sup>50</sup>

In this understanding, Yahweh's character is the opposite of falsehood or behaviours generally associated with שקר.<sup>51</sup> In the same way, שׁוּב is often used in the “context of moral and spiritual lapses” particularly of apostasy or turning back to God in repentance.<sup>52</sup> However, the apostate nuance of שׁוּב is not applicable to Yahweh rather שׁוּב is used positively to describe Yahweh's reception of the repentant sinners and the turning away of his anger from them thus engendering forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, רַמָּה is employed to describe “betrayal,” or “deceit.” For example, the deception of Jacob over Rachel (Gen 29:25), the Gibeonites and Joshua (Josh 9:22), and Saul and the witch of Endor (1Sam 28:12; cf. 2Sam 19:26, 27). Accordingly, in each of the highlighted passage above “an attempt is made to give a false representation, making something to appear to be what it is not.”<sup>54</sup> In short, the word describes “the moral, ethical, spiritual and religious corruption of God's people.”<sup>55</sup> Significantly, however, the word is not associated with Yahweh. In fact, the “servant of Yahweh is notable, for no deceit was in his mouth (Isa 53:9).”<sup>56</sup> The last antonym under consideration is כִּזַּב which basically connotes “lying” or “deception.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> E. Carpenter & M. A. Grisanti “שָׁקַר,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 248.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, “שׁוּב,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> Carpenter & Grisanti “רַמָּה,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 1123.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Carpenter & Grisanti “כִּזַּב,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 619.

Categorically, the Old Testament says that “Yahweh is not a man that he should lie” (Num 29:19). Hence this word describes,

an action or word that is false, a lie, because it somehow violates God’s character, word, or deed, as expressed in himself, his prophet, or his creation. At the foundation of truth, whether according to a correspondence, coherence, or relational theory of truth, lies the character of God. He is not a man, for a man may lie...<sup>58</sup>

The cumulative inferences drawn from these brief highlights on these terms for faithfulness and its antonyms lead us to draw three very important conclusions. First, it shows that Yahweh is generally conceived as a faithful God and he is closely associated with the positive sense of faithfulness in the Old Testament. Secondly, from the study of these words there is a consistent emphasis on the unfaithfulness of God’s people. The default behaviour of ancient Israel is that it always falls short of meeting the terms of the covenant between herself and Yahweh. Lastly, despite the few possible suggestions on the temporality of divine love or faithfulness there is the dominant and overwhelming recognition of its eternity, thus pointing to the ultimate victory of divine faithfulness against human unfaithfulness or obedience.

### **C. Yahweh’s Faithfulness in the Old Testament**

From the preceding discourse, it is obvious that Yahweh’s attribute of faithfulness is independent of the deeds or actions of the Israelites. In several highpoints in Old Testament, this point is further underscored because Yahweh is generally conceived to be a faithful God in spite of the failings of his people. To this end, Erickson rightly observed, “God’s faithfulness is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the pages of Scripture.”<sup>59</sup> Even though God often presents the Old Testament people with laws in order to encourage or enrich their moral life, however, it did not assumed that failure to keep those laws will engender “unfaithfulness” of God to his people.<sup>60</sup> The unfaithfulness of his people will no doubt bring divine chastisements

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 317.

<sup>60</sup> On the description and nature of faithfulness in the Hebraic thought see K. D. Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

and even threats of their annihilations, but even then God will be faithful to seek and restore his people back to himself. In the worst scenario, this restoration will result in divine deliverance and redemption for the remnants.<sup>61</sup> In this understanding, divine faithfulness to his people particularly his covenant with them becomes inevitable. Several incidences in Israel's sacred history points to this conclusion that Yahweh is indeed a faithful God and his faithfulness to his people is readily expressed despite the covenantal unfaithfulness of Israel. For example, Yahweh called the patriarch Abraham in spite of his pagan background and unethical practices. Yahweh made a covenant with him and declared and sworn by himself to honour the terms of these covenant even after the death of Abraham and his succeeding covenant partners.<sup>62</sup> In fact, to the succeeding generations of Israelites Yahweh introduced himself by these patriarchs and identified himself solely with these patriarchs in his subsequent relationships with their descendants, thus Yahweh called himself, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."<sup>63</sup> In this introductory phrase, Yahweh underscores his faithfulness to the patriarchs and his fidelity to work only within the context of this relationship in dealing with men and women of subsequent generations. It is based on this faithfulness that Yahweh expressed his continuous protection and hedge over the descendants of Abraham. Underscoring this divine faithfulness to Abraham, John Hughes observed, "[t]hus while national disobedience to the terms of the Mosaic covenant resulted in captivity and desolation of the land, the ultimate outcome was Yahweh's merciful covenant faithfulness to his pledge to Abraham."<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, Yahweh's faithfulness to Abraham is not entirely based on the good deeds of Abraham, but in Yahweh's choice of being faithful to him. Describing the importance

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<sup>61</sup> Rikk E. Watts, "Echoes from the Past: Israel's Ancient Traditions and the Destiny of the Nations in Isaiah 40-55," *JSOT* 28, no. 4 (2004), 496, 507.

<sup>62</sup> It is in context of this covenant that Robert Walls has observed, "Israel's ongoing hope for the promise land/life depends on the faithfulness of both covenant partners." See Robert W. Walls, "Mary and Martha (Luke 10: 38-40) in the Context of a Christian Deuteronomy," *JSNT* 35 (1989), 27.

<sup>63</sup> Noting the importance of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, Phillips rightly observed, "[f]ollowing the biblical tradition, the rabbis affirmed the inviolability of the covenant with Abraham and his descendants." See Phillips, "They are Loved on Account of the Patriarchs," 218.

<sup>64</sup> John J. Hughes, "Hebrews IX 15ff. and Galatians III 15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure," *Novum Testamentum* 21, no. 1 (1979), 81.



of Yahweh's faithfulness to Abraham, Larry Helyer observed, "[a]s Abraham and Sarah are caught up in this drama, they illustrate the folly of human initiatives. Ultimately, however, they testify to the faithfulness of Yahweh in keeping his promises."<sup>65</sup> In particular, Helyer noted,

the Abraham cycle underscores the faithfulness of Yahweh to his covenant promise; indeed, it demonstrates beyond any doubt that Israel exists because of divine intervention... This divine initiative, however, calls for a response—the response of faith. In this regard, the narrator wants to impress upon the reader the necessity and example of Abraham's faith.<sup>66</sup>

Though the theme of Abraham's faith is a point of theological interest or importance from the New Testament point of view, however, as rightly observed by Hays, in the Abrahamic cycle, "[e]ven more important than Abraham's faith is *God's* faithfulness."<sup>67</sup> Subsequently, it is within the framework of this unflinching faithfulness that Yahweh programs and plans were not only framed locally within the religious consciousness of ancient Israelites but also were expressed and extended to the benefits of the entire world. Consequently, the identity of Israel and its subsequent importance on the sacred stage of history was basically founded on the premises of Yahweh's faithfulness to his people.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, this faithfulness of Yahweh occurred even when the initial initiators such as the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were dead and long gone. In his willingness in dealings with the ancient Israelites irrespective of the presence of these patriarchs and the attending moral duplicity of their descendants rightly show the faithful character of Yahweh and

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<sup>65</sup> Larry R. Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in Patriarchal Narrative," *JSOT* 26 (1983), 82.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>67</sup> Hays, "Have We Found Abraham to be Our Forefather According to the Flesh?," 92.

<sup>68</sup> For example, in his study of Genesis 38, Steven D. Mathewson observed, "[t]herefore the normative meaning of this story may be stated as follows: Yahweh will carry out His purpose(s) despite His people's unfaithfulness and its tragic consequences on their lives. His purposes will not be frustrated, even if He has to use means other than His people to accomplish them. But at the same time, His people will experience a loss of joy and blessing in their relationship with Him." See Steven D. Mathewson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1989), 393.

underscores his fidelity to the terms of the covenants with the patriarchs.<sup>69</sup>

In Exodus, Yahweh's attention to the groaning of the Israelites in captivity was primarily footed on his faithfulness to the patriarchs. It is in this understanding that Pierre Auffret has rightly observed, "YHWH, took an oath with the Fathers, and that is why...when he hears the groanings of the Israelites in bondage, he must remember his oath. The remembrance of the oath has as its foundation on the divine faithfulness, and as its occasion the groanings of the Israelites."<sup>70</sup> In the event of the golden calf, Bernard W. Anderson noted, "[i]n any case, the Old Testament does not just talk about the divine mystery that eludes us but about the God who is graciously committed to a people in faithfulness (*hesed*), despite their attempts to 'domesticate God' in various ways."<sup>71</sup> Significantly, he observed, in the context of this open rebellion against Yahweh, "the name of Yahweh is proclaimed and the accent falls on Yahweh's faithfulness in spite of human sin."<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly, it is within this emphasis of Yahweh's faithfulness that the rebellious character of Israel is also underscored and repeatedly stressed in Deuteronomy. For instance, Yahweh's faithfulness is underscored after the unbelieving reports of the spies. Concerning this event, Gerald Janzen noted, "[t]he central importance for Deuteronomy of the ancestral covenant, and of Yahweh's faithfulness to it is underscored by the way in which Deuteronomy recasts Moses' intercession for the unbelieving people following the report of the spies (9: 25-29)."<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, the Deuteronomist, describes, in the laments and final speeches of Moses, the rebellious character of ancient Israelites and their propensity towards disobedience (Deut 32:1-43). However,

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<sup>69</sup>Gerald Janzen has described the place of divine faithfulness in the pronouncement of the divine blessing through the three patriarchs. He observed the "[t]hree ancestral formula" was readily employed in order "to invoke Yahweh's faithfulness on the descendants of the patriarchs." See J. Gerald Janzen, "Resurrection and Hermeneutics: on Exodus 3:6 in Mark 12:26," *JSNT* 23 (1985), 45.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Auffret, "The Literary Structure of Exodus 6:2-8," *JSOT* 27 (1983), 47.

<sup>71</sup> Bernard W. Anderson, "Book Reviews: Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM, 1983)," *JSOT* 29 (1984), 118.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>73</sup> See J. Gerald Janzen, "An Echo of the Shema in Isaiah 51:1-3," *JSOT* 43 (1989), 77.

within this same pericope, the lament recognizes the faithfulness of Yahweh to see that Israel did not fail ultimately as the people of God, thus Moses said, “He is the rock, his work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.”<sup>74</sup> Yahweh has also earlier said, “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands” (Deut 7:9). It is from this context that Jacqueline Lapsley has described or summarized Yahweh’s faithfulness to Israel in the following words,

Israel’s election depends on God’s freely given love, the logic of which cannot be fully understood. God’s love for Israel in Deuteronomy is both irrationally passionate, driven by affectionate desire, and enacted in God’s faithfulness to the promises to the ancestors...<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, Yahweh has also shown his faithfulness to Israel in the many incidences of rebellion within the wilderness narratives as described in Numbers. The same faithfulness characterized Yahweh’s covenant dealing with Israel in the giving of the law at Sinai that despite their unruly behaviours at Sinai Yahweh’s fidelity to the terms of the covenant prevailed over the rebelliousness of the nation of Israel. The book of Joshua revealed the faithfulness to Israel by providing land for the descendants of Abraham. Similarly, D. M. Hudson, in the book of Judges, speaks of “a once faithful Israel which has constantly refused faithfulness to YHWH.”<sup>76</sup>

In the same way, Yahweh’s covenant to David and his house also reiterates the faithfulness of Yahweh as a faithful deity. In fact, Yahweh’s faithfulness to the Davidic covenant continued after the demise of David, and his faithfulness continued despite the wickedness of the subsequent Davidic dynasty. Describing the

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<sup>74</sup> Commenting on this song, B. J. Oropeza had also observed, “[t]he Song of Moses thus emphasises the faithfulness of God as the “rock” in the wilderness who keeps his covenant with those who love him and destroys those who hate him (cf. Deut 7,9). God’s faithfulness to his covenant suggests that God will not tolerate his own elect if they violate the covenant, and this is vividly spelled out in the blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy 28–30.” See B.J. Oropeza, “Laying to Rest the Midrash: Paul’s Message on Meat Sacrificed to Idols in Light of the Deuteronomistic Tradition,” *Biblica* 79 (1998), 63.

<sup>75</sup> Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 65, no. 3 (2003), 360.

<sup>76</sup> D. Michael Hudson, “Living in the Land of Epithets: Anonymity in Judges 19-21,” *JSOT* 62 (1994), 65.

unflinching faithfulness of Yahweh to David and his dynasty, T. L. Thompson in his passing comments on Psalm 86 observed,

Yahweh announces that he has chosen and anointed a hero as his servant, namely David, to control chaos; namely, the sea and the kings of this world (20-28). This faithfulness will endure even if his sons abandon his laws. Yahweh will punish them but he, himself will be true (29-37).<sup>77</sup>

Even though Yahweh punishes them by sending them to exile, his faithfulness to the Davidic covenant continued against all odds and it is deriving from this covenant faithfulness that the messianic motif took up a full-fledged form. This messianic motif appears to compensate for the rebellious characters of the Davidic kings.<sup>78</sup> In particular, the messianic king was called a “Son of David” and it is expected to compensate for the lapses of the Davidic kings and to create the Davidic king *par excellence*. In providing hopes for a messianic king, the prophets reiterated further the faithfulness of Yahweh to create an everlasting dynasty for David. Consequently, in the messianic motif and personage, the Old Testament prophets largely explored these theological premises to underscore the faithfulness of Yahweh which their contemporaries possibly have thought had now been dashed by the demise or taking into exile of the last Davidic kings. In this regard, the prophets employed the messianic motif to address the theological questions of their countrymen who saw in the collapse of the Davidic dynasty a big blow on the reputation of Yahweh as a faithful deity who has earlier

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, “The Messiah Epithet in the Hebrew Bible,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 15, no. 1 (2001), 79.

<sup>78</sup> In Chronicles, the centrality of faithfulness is readily described especially in the chronicler’s quest to describe the failing of Davidic kings in terms of their infidelity to the God of David. Describing the dominant theology of the chronicler in this perspective, Steve Delamarter observed, the chronicler “seeks to show time and again not only that faithlessness leads to punishment and death but also that faithfulness leads to life [See Steve Delemarter, “The Death of Josiah in Scripture and Tradition: Wrestling with the Problem of Evil?” *Vetus Testamentum* 54 (2004), 48]. Similarly, Simon J. De Vries had also observed that unfaithfulness forms the “inclusio” on which the structure of Chronicles is based and hence pointing to the importance of divine faithfulness in the Chronicler’s thought. See Simon J. De Vries: *1 and 2 Chronicles*. Forms of Literature 11. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 424.

promised to be faithful to the house of David forever (2 Sam 7:12-16). Contrary to these feelings of their contemporaries, the prophets underscored the faithfulness of Yahweh to the house of David and the entire nation of Israel. The prophets accomplish these feats by showing not only the coming of the messiah and the messianic age, but by showing Yahweh's faithfulness in providing a return for the remnant in exile, favour for Israel's exiles before pagan rulers and a great future for the post-exilic community. In this way, the prophets reiterated the faithfulness of Yahweh to his people that goes beyond their moral conditions. Significantly, in describing himself as God, it is expected that Yahweh's moral essence must exceed the morality of his people, and it is to this end that Yahweh's faithfulness to the terms of the David or Abrahamic covenants rightly go beyond the moral boundaries or conditions of his people. The Old Testament bears a testimony of Yahweh's faithfulness in spite of the flaws of Israel to keep the moral terms of the covenants. According to Anderson, the "reverberations" of this theme is reflected in the entire Old Testament. He observed,

Indeed, it is Yahweh's faithfulness which is the premise of Israel's expostulations with God, as well as her laments, thanksgivings, and hymns. Moreover, the various theological perspectives of the Old Testament (Deuteronomic, Davidic, Priestly, Prophetic), whatever their shortcomings, attempts to deal with the faithfulness of the God who has chosen to be known, even by name, in Israel.<sup>79</sup>

In particular, he noted, "[i]n the pilgrimage of the people of God, searing suffering and horrible evil called into question not only the presence, but the faithfulness, of God."<sup>80</sup> This theological template is the framework by which the stories of the Old Testament were framed. It is the baseline that runs throughout the Old Testament.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the divine attributes of love, grace, mercy and patience have their theological fulcrum in the theme of divine faithfulness to Israel and it is within these perspectives that Yahweh

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<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Importantly, the faithfulness Yahweh demands from the Israelites was not only in moral or spiritual terms but include financial faithfulness. For the study of divine decrees against fraud or financial deceptions in the Bible see Ben-zion Rosenfeld and Joseph Menirav, "Fraud: From the Biblical Basis to General Commercial Law in Roman Palestine," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 37, no. 4 (2006): 594-627.

attributes and characteristics derived their lasting significance and essence. Consequently, divine faithfulness harmonized other divine attributes, and for the Old Testament, Yahweh's faithfulness is largely independent of the moral conditions of his people. It was this independence and the impossibility of Israel to fully please Yahweh that the New Testament dispensation derived its motif of salvation by grace alone thus undercutting the basis or quest to attain salvation by the means of works or other human efforts.<sup>82</sup>

#### **D. Divine Faithfulness and Conditional Covenants**

Interestingly, most of the biblical covenants are framed in conditional form that often suggests that Yahweh's faithfulness invariably depends on his people's ability to obey the laid down precepts which normally attends the covenant stipulations. For example, in the making of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, Yahweh demands Abraham and his children to keep to the terms of the covenant (Gen 17:1-27). It appears that the "eternal covenant" here is conditioned on the fidelity of both Yahweh, Abraham and his descendants. This conditional character of the covenant often raises serious problem for the discussion of divine faithfulness because it seems that Yahweh's faithfulness is conditioned on the behaviours of the successive generations of Abraham's descendants. However since the attribute of faithfulness is inherent in the divine being and the divine essence cannot do anything

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<sup>82</sup> In discussing the theme of divine faithfulness in Paul and the Old Testament, Sylvia Keesmaat observed, "Paul in Romans is struggling with the question of God's faithfulness to Israel. And that struggle results in a transformation of tradition similar to those found in Isaiah and Jeremiah, who were struggling with this same question. In Rom. 8.14-30 Paul affirms God's faithfulness to Israel, drawing on the motif central to Israelite consciousness which revealed God's faithfulness to Israel" [Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Exodus and the Intertextual Transformation of Tradition in Romans 8: 14-30," *JSNT* 54 (1994), 49]. See also J. Christiaan Beker: "The Faithfulness of God and the Priority of Israel in Paul's Letter to the Romans," in *The Romans Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991); W.S. Campbell, "The Freedom and Faithfulness of God in Relation To Israel," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13 (1981): 27-45. Further underscoring the place of divine faithfulness to Israel in the New Testament, Susan Rieske has also observed, "[a]lthough judgment has come, God will show his covenant faithfulness by once again restoring Israel and fulfilling her still unmet promises after her sins have been atoned for through the blood of Christ." She also added, "Certainly, the advent of the Messiah issued in a new dispensation in relation to some aspects of the way He deals with mankind. However, this crucial event should not and does not abrogate his everlasting faithfulness and promises to Israel. Perhaps in some sense a greater theological continuity between the testaments should be asserted, but let this also include a continuity between God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament and his dealings with the nation in the New. Let it also affirm a correspondence between the prophetic announcements in the New and those in the Old, including the promise of future restoration." See Susan Rieske, "Jesus' Use of Old Testament Themes in Matthew 23:34-39," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 4, no. 1(2001), 24.

less than faithfulness, we must understand differently the conditional nature of the covenant stipulations. In this regard, the conditional nature of the covenant does not presupposes that Yahweh will become unfaithful if the descendants of Abraham become unfaithful but it suggests that the covenant stipulations are guidelines to assist in cultivating the needed moral atmosphere which is necessary for the human-divine relationship to thrive or continue. Yahweh cannot be unfaithful to either himself or to the descendants of Abraham because faithfulness is the essence of his being, thus the conditional character of the covenant is largely to help the descendants of Abraham to live in an environment of morality that is compatible to the holiness demand of Yahweh. Unfortunately, in discussing biblical covenant excessive reading of it in the context of human contracts has often made Yahweh to be like another human participant who also bails out from the covenant when the other party cannot keep to the covenant stipulations.<sup>83</sup> In this popular reading, Yahweh's faithfulness to the covenant is not often linked to the discussion on Yahweh's inherent essence of faithfulness which is present whether Abraham descendants keep to the covenant or become unfaithful to the covenant. This understanding places Yahweh above the human party in the covenant relationship since his fulfilment of his covenant objectives is not primarily controlled by the morality of the human party but by his attribute of faithfulness in his essence. In this understanding, Yahweh's moral character transcends the morality of his human participant and rightly underscored his supreme moral character. In the biblical revelation, the assumption of human depravity runs throughout the Bible and thus Yahweh's covenantal dealing with the human world must take into cognizance that the human race will ultimately fail to keep these covenant demands and hence every covenant demand must be understood from the vantage point of divine faithfulness which ought to be a constant factor in the human-divine covenant relationships. Without such constancy in divine faithfulness, all the parties involved in biblical covenants become in the long run the same since the human race by default cannot keep the terms of the covenant and Yahweh also turns his back

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<sup>83</sup> See Scott Hahn, "Covenant in Old and New Testaments: Some Current Research (1994-2004)," *CBR* 3, no. 2 (2005): 263-269.

on his people for their inability to keep his covenant. Despite the excessive human dimension in the reading of the biblical covenant, however, the overriding understanding in the Old Testament is that Yahweh's faithfulness transcends the morality of his people. In this perspective, the biblical revelation often points to the love, mercies and grace of God in context of Yahweh's faithfulness to save his people despite their breach of the covenant stipulation. The Old Testament again and again shows divine intervention to help his people in spite of their breach of the covenant. This is not only true of the Abrahamic covenant but also extends to the Davidic and Mosaic covenants. Yahweh appears not only to keep his own end of the bargain, but he often goes beyond this covenant commitment to offer salvation or help to his faithless people. Describing the significance of this, Paul L. Owen noted, "Human disobedience highlights the covenantal faithfulness of God (rather than negating it...) for when salvation takes place in the face of human failure to comply with God's righteous will, the utterly gracious nature of God's intervention is all the more evident."<sup>84</sup>

Interestingly, the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people is often described by the metaphor of marriage. In particular, the use of this metaphor to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is profound since marriage in ancient Israelite community is one of the greatest social contracts and it is the foundation of social and religious stability. Yahweh, in this marriage relationship to his people, often goes beyond the threats of divorce and punishment but to also welcome back his unfaithful marriage partner, Israel. This message of Yahweh's faithfulness in matrimonial metaphor is clearly seen in the story of Hosea and Gomer whereby Yahweh commanded Hosea to take back his faithless wife Gomer and her children. The graphic description of Yahweh and his faithless wife in Hosea provides us with the underlying theology of divine faithfulness in the Old Testament which duly transcends human norms, cultural boundaries and ethics. This underlying motif goes throughout the biblical covenants that despite Yahweh's threats of banishing his people to exile, or other horrible fate, yet his

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<sup>84</sup> Paul L. Owen, "The 'Works of the Law' in Romans and Galatians: A New defense of the Subjective Genitive," JBL 126, no. 3 (2007), 559.



faithfulness to the covenant often make allowance for their return to fellowship with him again. Following the preceding discourse on the intrinsic characteristic of the divine being we must understand that these conditional covenants did not affect Yahweh's faithfulness because Yahweh must essentially exercise faithfulness in order to live up to this nomenclature of God. In this regard, God has always kept to his own ends of the bargain even though Israelites have woefully failed to keep hers. How then should we understand the conditional covenants which appear to suggest that if the people of God stop being faithful Yahweh also will turn against his people? Turning against his people to punish them in terms of defeat in battle, famine, exile, disease and even death does not point to the fact that Yahweh has become unfaithful, but Yahweh punishes the sins of his people because these sins undermined his nature or intrinsic attribute of holiness and justice. Consequently in faithfulness to himself, he punishes the unfaithfulness of his people and seeking to bring them back to the path of faithful relationship with him. In this perspective, failure to keep the divine laws does undermine divine attributes of justice and holiness, hence Yahweh's turning against his people does not presupposes that he has ceases to be faithful to his people, but point to the fact that through such difficult processes or means God wanted to bring his people back to himself, and through such process Yahweh underscores his faithfulness to his attributes of justice and holiness which normally come in conflict when his people sinned against him. Thus, God's conditional covenant terms do not presuppose that when his people failed in keeping his covenant stipulations he will become unfaithful, but it shows that God will remain faithful to his people by bring them back to himself, and most importantly, God will be faithful to himself because his attributes of justice and holiness demand that sin must be punished. Hence, the charge of unfaithfulness cannot be levelled against God of the Old Testament since he faithfully seeks the return of his people despite his punishment or judgment against them. In some cases God uses even threats of divorce, abandonment, exile and rejection in order to persuade his unfaithful people back to himself. These individual divine threats should not be treated alone, but must be placed in the entirety of the books or even the Hebrew Scriptures. The culminating picture that emerges from this canonical template is that Yahweh's

making of these threats is not because he has now become unfaithful, but because he wanted his people to return back to him in fellowship. For example, in the preceding reference to the symbolic or real universe of Hosea, Yahweh despite the several highlighted cases of Israel's unfaithfulness nonetheless said, "I will show my love to the one I called, 'not my loved one. I will say to those called, 'Not my people, 'you are my people'; and they will say, 'you are my God.'" Therefore, the single aim of these divine threats or even actual judgment is not to cast Israel away or to annul Yahweh's covenant to her, but to bring her back to fellowship with her Lord, master, husband and God. Consequently, the conditional covenants as well as the divine threats did not point to a "Yahweh" who has abandoned Israel, but a "Yahweh" who seeks to give Israel a new fresh start as the people of God. This fresh starts consist of returning back to the faithful covenant relationship between God and his people. To this end, at every level whether of the narrative or symbolic universe, Yahweh ultimately want his people to return to him and he works faithfully in the context of his holiness and justice to see that this become truly possible.

#### **E. Divine Faithfulness and Punishment**

Divine punishment appears incongruous to the subject of divine faithfulness because some people think that the presence of punishment is incompatible to the discourse on divine faithfulness. On the face value, it appears that the theme of divine faithfulness annuls or negates divine faithfulness because divine faithfulness connotes divine protection, blessing and abundance which normally are absent in times of punishment or divine judgment. God, in this way of thinking should ignore human frailty and disobedience and should continue to act faithfully in the face of human rebellion by making available his blessings and abundance and not the withdrawal of them. Similarly, one may also reasoned, as argued in the preceding discourse, that since human unfaithfulness does not affect divine faithfulness what is the need for punishing human unfaithfulness in the first place? However this line of thought is clearly distracting since it ignores the nature of divine faithfulness. In biblical thought, divine faithfulness presupposes that God is faithful not only to his people, but also that he is faithful to himself. In this understanding, God is faithful to his character of justice, righteousness and holiness

and does not contradict these attributes in his quest to remain faithful to his people. In fact, it is inevitably for God to punish sin because he needs to be faithful to his attribute of justice and holiness. Punishment of sin in this regard becomes a way by which the divine being remains faithful to his moral and ethical personality as a just and a holy God. Underscoring the place of divine righteousness and faithfulness in salvation and judgment, Morna Hooker observed, “[i]n Jewish thought, God’s righteousness is his integrity, his faithfulness to the covenant, his justice,” which “is demonstrated in putting things right, and is therefore revealed in both salvation and judgement.”<sup>85</sup> Consequently, in the moral universe, God punishes the sins of his people not because he is not faithful to them, but because his faithfulness to himself demands such punishment. In this perspective, God does not annulled his faithfulness to his people by punishing them or setting moral boundaries for them, but the need of faithfulness to himself demands that he punishes sin. Moberly rightly observed, “Yahweh’s faithfulness towards Israel is combined with a strong sense of moral integrity and is in no sense morally lax or indifferent.”<sup>86</sup> Without punishment of his people, the divine being becomes unfaithful to his nature of justice and holiness, and thus becomes unjust and unholy in this regard. In his quest to be true to himself, the divine being created a moral universe whereby reward and punishment becomes an inevitable option. For example, if God rewards evil and punishes goodness, he created a universe that is untrue to his being as a just God, and thus such moral inclination contradicts his being of justice and holiness. It is in this perspective that punishment of wrong or evil becomes a moral necessity and comes from the quest of the divine being to remain true to his attributes of holiness and justice. Consequently, punishment does not contradict or negate God’s attributes of love or faithfulness but to the contrary underscored it. In respect to the history of the Israelites, God’s punishment of their sins does not show unfaithfulness on the part of God, but rightly emphasized his fidelity to his nature as a just and a holy being. More so, God often reveals his will for Israel, and it

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<sup>85</sup> Morna D. Hooker, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: Another look at 2 Cor. 5:21,” *Novum Testamentum* 50 (2008), 370.

<sup>86</sup> Moberly, “יְהוָה,” 429.

is the failure of Israel to pursue or follow after such revealed will that normally demands divine punishment. In this perspective, Yahweh punishes his people because they have failed to live faithfully according to his commandments. By punishing Israel, Yahweh revealed his desire to bring Israel back to his covenant faithfulness and such punishment is the outcome of his quest to satisfy his being as a just and a holy God. Accordingly, in the Old Testament there is “the recognition that the calamity suffered by the people for their perfidious conduct was fully justified, and an appeal to the faithfulness of God to his promises (punishment for treachery; compassion in response to genuine repentance) as the ground for fresh hope...”<sup>87</sup> Thus Yahweh punishes his people because he wanted to be true or faithful to his nature of justice and holiness. In this understanding, there is an intricate relationship between divine attributes of faithfulness, his love, his justice and holiness.

### **Conclusion**

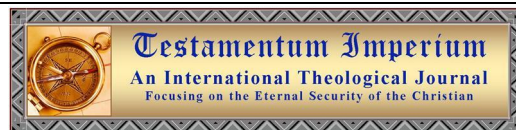
In the Hebrew Scriptures, Yahweh’s faithfulness is greatly emphasized and the understanding of this faithfulness as independent of the morality of God’s people is clearly envisaged. In this sense, Yahweh’s faithfulness is not primarily conditioned on external human factor or behaviour but on Yahweh himself. In this particular understanding, Yahweh’s faithfulness is independent of the behaviours of his people. This consideration underscores the presupposition that Yahweh’s faithfulness needed not to be affected by human deeds because Yahweh is a faithful God in spite of the moral inclinations of his people. If this preceding assertion is right, it thence follows that Yahweh’s faithfulness is consistent and constant despite the changes in the behaviours of his people. The faithfulness of God to his people is thus established in God himself and not in anything outside himself. In the same perspective, it is the outcome of such divine fidelity or faithfulness to himself that necessitates the need for him to punish sin or the disobedience of his people. Such punishment is not the permanent rejection of his people, but a chastisement to bring back his people to a close relationship with him. Ironically, divine punishment is not incompatible with the biblical

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<sup>87</sup> Wakely, “מטל,” 1024.

understanding of faithfulness because faithfulness of God to his attributes of love and justice naturally demands that he punishes sin in his quest to faithfully draw his people back to himself.

Consequently, using the theoretical framework of faithfulness inherent in divine essence, the paper argues that Yahweh is essentially faithful and cannot cease to be unfaithful to himself or to his people. It is this divine faithfulness that demands God seeking his people from exile whether this exile is the exile from the Promised Land or the primordial exile from the Garden of Eden. In all these critical moments in sacred history, the Old Testament clearly agreed that God waited faithfully while initiating moves in order for his people to come back to him. Thus God has always remained faithfully and true to his people, and in his faithfulness, calls for them to come back to him despite the pains and judgment of the exiles. It is this same divine faithfulness to humanity at large that brought about in the New Testament salvation and messianic motifs which were first expressed in the Old Testament, but now found their fullest realization in the gospel of Jesus Christ.



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