



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 3 – 2011

DIVINE COVENANT FAITHFULNESS IN THE FACE OF HUMAN COVENANT UNFAITHFULNESS

Sampson S. Ndogo
BTC Southern Africa

Introduction 1
A. Ancient Near East Covenants 2
B. Divine-human Covenants..... 5
 1. The Abrahamic ‘Grant’ Covenant 6
 2. The Mosaic ‘Suzerain-vassal’ Covenant 9
 3. Reflections 12
Conclusion 16

Introduction

The question of divine covenant faithfulness in the face of human covenant unfaithfulness pre-empts a number of issues. The explicit issue and perhaps the most obvious is whether covenant fidelity is solely contingent upon human response. The implicit issue is whether the apparent divine covenant faithfulness perennially remains regardless of recurring human covenant disloyalty. Perhaps an additional issue pertains to the contractual nature of the divine-human covenants which should be our starting point. It is presumably that in appreciating the original stipulations, if any, in the divine-human covenants that certain assumptions may be eliminated.¹ In

¹ Interestingly, Foster (2008) shows the difficulty of translating the biblical concepts תְּרִיבָה or διαθήκη *diathēkē* “covenant” into African languages to show the foreignness of the idea. See Translations of תְּרִיבָה and διαθήκη ‘covenant’ into African languages: A survey. *Scriptura* 99, 268-74.

order to satisfactorily respond to these preliminary issues, this study will commence with a sampling of divine-human covenants, continue with an exploration of the historical outworking of the selected covenants and close with deductions that can be derived from such an exercise. Such a task cannot be undertaken without the formal recognition of the historical context under which these covenants were entered.

A. Ancient Near East Covenants

Firstly, covenants were not necessarily a new phenomenological development in biblical times. Covenants were common to ancient Near Eastern cultures as unalterable and inviolable undertakings between two parties. According to Foster, covenants, in their prototypical form, could be defined under four main (1) a chosen, (2) relationship of, (3) mutual obligation, (4) guaranteed by oath sanctions.² From the beginning a covenant (בְּרִית)³ was, by design, a negotiated relationship or fellowship between parties ratified by an oath (הִלָּחֵץ)⁴. For our purposes, some emphasis must be placed on the ratification of a covenant via an “oath”. A covenant oath was in effect a conditional self-malediction in view of the obligatory undertakings hence its inviolable nature. Thus, a covenant could not be conceived outside of an accompanying oath and in fact the two terms are inadvertently employed throughout

² Stuart J Foster. 2010. The Missiology of Old Testament Covenant. *International Bulletin*, 34/4, 205-7.

³ Occurs 284 times in the Old Testament with the etymological idea of “cutting” perhaps associated with the ancient customary practice of passing between the divided parts of victim a sacrificial offering when making such solemn covenants. See Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (2003). *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*. Translation of the author's Lexicon manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum in Veteris Testamenti libros, a Latin version of the work first published in 1810-1812 under title: Hebräisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch des Alten Testaments.; Includes index. (141). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁴ Occurs 37 times to prescribe affirming the truth of something and invoking divine sanctions against one breaking that truth. The concept could be translated “curse” to emphasize the inviolable nature of a covenant. See Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.) (DBLH 457, #2). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

the Old Testament (see Gen. 26:28; Lev. 5:1; Deut. 29:11, 13; Ezek. 16:59). However, it must be stated that the oath, which sought fidelity of the partners, - though an important ingredient, was not necessarily the covenant itself, as Gentry correctly points out.⁵ A covenant in the ancient Near Eastern conception can simply be defined as oath-bound relational engagements.

Secondly, covenants were prompted by specific historical situations. As such, it “covenants were widely used to regulate human relationships on personal, tribal, and national levels throughout ancient Mesopotamia, Anatolian, Semitic, and classical (Greek and Latin) cultures”.⁶ Perhaps a testimonial to the ordinariness of various covenants as well as the obligatory aspect is in the portraiture of the improbable David/Jonathan loyalty agreement recorded in 1 Sam. 18:3 and reiterated in 23:18 during unfavourable historical circumstances. Other personal covenants worth noting to show the prototypical form of relationship determination are Abraham/Abimelech covenant in Gen. 21:22-35; Isaac/Abimelech covenant in Gen. 26:1-31 which is reminiscent of the one above; Jacob/Laban covenant Gen. 31:22-55. With each example given here, there are notable historical reasons or extenuating circumstances that necessitated the legalities to regulate the voluntary relationship or fellowship. The negotiations thereafter reveal that a relational arrangement had to be literally כָּרַת (*kā·rāṭ*) “cut” (Gen. 21:34) to specify the new loyalty terms. We can therefore deduce that each covenant was informed by *sitz im leben* (life situation) which in turn prompted the need for obligatory regulations that are unambiguous in the various covenant commitments such as international treaties (Josh. 9:6; 1 Ks. 15:19), clan alliances (Gen. 14:13), and even marriage (Mal. 2:14).⁷

Thirdly, there is compelling evidence from comparative studies to suggest that Israel adapted the covenant motifs of the day to create her own. Special attention here must be paid to the important aspect

⁵ Gentry, P J 2008. Kingdom Through Covenant: Humanity as the Divine Image. SBJT 12/1, 16.

⁶ Hahn, S W 2005. Covenant Oath, and the Aqedah: διαθήκη in Galatians 3:15-18. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67/1, 83.

⁷ Smith (2007) argues for Ruth 1:16-17 as coded in covenant language through voluntary displacement and the establishment of a new relational commitment. See “Your People shall be my people”: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16-17. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69/2, 242-58.

of covenant category (*Gattung*) which followed a specific pattern. Studies by Thompson reveal standardised ancient Near Eastern with six key definitive features:

- The Preamble – names and titles of the parties involved
- Historical Prologue – which outlined events leading to the treaty
- The Stipulation – general principles on which future relations were to be built and specific stipulations which arose out of these general principles
- The divine witnesses – guarantors of the treaty
- The associated maledictions and benedictions
- The ritualistic blood sacrifice to seal the deal.⁸

Thompson's revelation is affirmed more recently by Lopez who states that the "discovery of the Mesopotamian and Hittite cultures, along with the Babylonian *kudurru* and Syro-Palestinian and Neo-Assyrian documents, have shown that there are similarities between the structure of the ancient Near Eastern covenants and Israelite covenants".⁹ Lopez's study adequately samples the similarities by highlighting the six definitive features, and we will not repeat his findings here.¹⁰ However, in stating these similarities we must be careful not to imply that Israelite covenants and those of her neighbours were identical. As we will discover later on, there are a number of features unique to Israelite covenants.

Fourthly, as we draw towards the nature of the unique divine-human covenant, we should point out the suzerain-vassal and royal grant treaties which perhaps more than anything informed nature covenants we are primarily concerned about. These treaties were between two unequal parties. The superior initiated the treaty and also determined the stipulations. On the one hand, suzerain-vassal treaties were designed to spell out obligations of a servant (vassal) towards the master (king). Thompson affirms that the "primary purpose of all suzerain treaties was to secure the interests of the great

⁸ Thompson, J A 1963. The significance of the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Pattern. *Tyndale Bulletin* 13, 2.

⁹ Lopez, R 2004. Israelite Covenant in the light of ancient Near eastern Covenants (Part 2 of 2). *CTS Journal* 10, 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-106.

king and to guarantee the allegiance and, if need be, the economic and military support of the vassal”.¹¹ Thompson’s study utilises parallel Hittite treaties to sample such undertakings. It is this specific suzerain-vassal metaphor which is employed to establishing divine-human covenants where the sovereignty of God over his people issues the obligatory requirements.

On the other hand, royal grant by contrast stipulated the obligation of the master towards the servant. In the Hittite royal edicts analysed by Lopez, the king imposes his covenant on the vassal.¹² As the initiator of the treaty, the king was mandated to assist the vassal in an evidently unconditional fashion. The grant for protection or via land offer, however, had implicit loyalty to the king coded on the part of the vassal.

B. Divine-human Covenants

While the close parallels in covenant making between Israel and her neighbours are indisputable, the divine-human covenant between Yahweh and Israel presents a unique development. In the parallel cultures, the deities and their earthly agents were merely witnesses but never parties to the covenant as Niehaus correctly espouses.¹³ From as early as Genesis 6:18 with the establishment of the Noahic covenant the biblical account reveals Yahweh initiating covenants at critical historical points.¹⁴ The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:12-21; 17:1-27), set the context for the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 19:3-8; 20-24 reiterated in the book of Deuteronomy) at the founding of a people. This rather didactic stipulation in turn necessitated a re-visitation with through the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:1-17 and reflected in Ps. 89) at the onset of a monarchy. With the

¹¹ Thompson, J A 1964. *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament*. London: The Tyndale Press.

¹² Lopez R 2004. Israelite Covenant in the light of ancient Near eastern Covenants (Part 2 of 2). *CTS Journal* 10, 72-106.

¹³ Niehaus, J J 1995. *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible Ancient Near East*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 149.

¹⁴ Gen. 6:18 is the first instance where the concept בְּרִית “covenant”. Gentry argues for a creation covenant prior to this because of the language in Gen. 6:18 וְהָקַמְתִּי אִתְּךָ בְרִית “and I will establish a covenant” (cf. 9:9, 11, 17). In Gentry’s conception, this phrase departs from the norm כָּרַת בְּרִית “cut a covenant” (Gen 15:18) which seems to suggest a new as opposed to an already existing one as the Noahic situation seems to insinuate. That being the case, Gentry proposes that the God had already “cut” a covenant at creation. See Gentry P J 2008. Kingdom through covenant: Humanity as the divine image. *SBJ* 12/1, 16-42.

historical development of a seemingly faithless Israel, a new covenant was initiated as recorded in the prophetic writings (see Jer. 31-34; Ez. 33:29-39:29 interestingly to re-establish was originally set out in Gen 15:17. To underscore the significance of divine-human covenant in the Old Testament, Friedman is worth citing here when he comments:

With the Noahic covenant promising the stability of the cosmic structure, the Abrahamic covenant promising the people and land, the Davidic covenant promising sovereignty, and the Israelite covenant promising life, security and prosperity, the biblical authors and editors possessed a platform from which they could portray and reconcile nearly every historical, legendary, didactic, folk, and the like, account in their tradition. If we could delete all the references to covenant – which we cannot do precisely because it is regularly integral to its contexts – we would have an anthology of stories. As it is we have a structure that can house a plot.¹⁵

As attempted above, Friedman’s comment situates covenant establishment as the common denominator. Similarly, McComisky purports to a covenantal structure underlying the entire Old Testament story.¹⁶ For this reason, McCarthy is not sure how the Septuagint chose to translate the concept *b^erit* “covenant” to the rather unusual “testament”.¹⁷ Because the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is not between equal parties, there will be a resemblance of the suzerain-vassal as well as the royal grant treaties of the ancient Near East. In order to verify this possibility and in the light of other insights we have discussed, we will now turn our attention to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as case studies to hopefully respond to our original question – is covenant fidelity solely contingent upon human response?

1. The Abrahamic ‘Grant’ Covenant

A close reading of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 reveals a close resemblance to the royal grant treaty. Firstly, in prototypical fashion, it commences with a historical preamble in Genesis 11:26-32 which normally necessitates the dialogue that

¹⁵ R E Elliot 1987. ‘The Hiding of the Face: An Essay on the Literary Unity of Biblical Narrative’ in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (eds. J Neusner *et al*) Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 215.

¹⁶ McComisky, T E 1985. *The covenants of Promise: A Theology of Old Testament covenants*. Leicester: IVP.

¹⁷ D J McCarthy 1972. *Old Testament Covenant: A survey of current opinions (Growing points in theology)*. Louisville: John Knox Press.

ensues. However, the remarkable observation in this genealogical data is that it does not present a rationale that pointedly validates the choice of Abram by Yahweh. All we realise is that Abram's father Terah intended to relocate his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan but somehow settled in Haran, thereby abandoning his original plan. In retrospect, we come to realise that this move was by divine designation (see Gen. 15:7 and Acts 7:2-4).

Secondly, enmeshed in this preamble leading to Genesis 12:1, there is also the historical prologue. With the deaths of Haran and later of Terah, Abram was now the most senior member of the family. The narrator is also careful to shed some light on the important detail that Abram's wife, Sarai, "was barren" and the reiteration "she had no children" (Gen 11:30). This revelation plays a significant part in the development and outworking of the covenant (cf. Gen. 15:2-6; 16:1; 17:15-21; 18:10-15 and 21:1-7). If Yahweh had serious nation building plans, as indicated later, the historical prologue suggests that Abram was the unlikely candidate.

Thirdly, in line with the royal grant covenant, the superior initiates the dialogue. We already know that a royal grant places emphasis on the superior party's obligation towards the vassal. In line with that it is possible for us to then see the seemingly unconditionality of the promissory offer that Abram is given "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). However, what is issued here contains both an imperative and an intention. On the one hand, the imperative "to leave" predicates the promissory offer on Abram's obedience. In other words, Abram could not benefit from the grant unless he obeyed. In saying this we can already detect that the grant is not necessarily unbound as it demanded loyalty. On the other hand, intention represents a purpose apparently regardless of Abram's response. Having already surmised how the imperative predicates the promise, we must point out that the construction intimates Abram's subjective accessing of the blessing. The objective intention of Yahweh supersedes Abram's response. In fact Lopez affirms our thesis by stating that "an unconditional covenant with blessings

conditioned on obedience is not contradictory”.¹⁸ After all Abram had no idea where he was set to go.

Fourthly, the stipulations in Genesis 12:2-3 rightly place prominence on Yahweh’s obligations to underscore that honours rested with him and not Abram. The threefold grant of (a) a great nation, (b) a great name and (c) a great blessing, are unconditionally set as divine commitments indicated by the precursory phrase “I will”.¹⁹ In stating these obligations we get a real sense in which these stipulations are unalterable on the basis of the One making the promise, as well as on universal nature of the sworn intentions. What God is promising to fulfil here is therefore not dependent on human performance but Him alone. For this reason, the intended development of events is outlined in Genesis 15:12-21 in no uncertain terms.

Fifthly, to underscore sole divine obligation in this grant covenant, in Genesis 15:17 only Yahweh passed between the pieces of the animals that had been cut for this ritualistic affirmation of a covenant. Under normal circumstances, both parties should have passed between the pieces of animals thus placing themselves under oath or self-malediction. In effect the symbolic passage between the pieces placed oneself under inviolable obligations which if transgressed it was a self imposed death penalty. Did Yahweh in the declaration which accompanied the theophany place himself under such a covenant oath? We refer to Genesis 22:15-18 where the covenant is reiterated and confirmed in which Yahweh declares “I swear by myself” and “since God could “swear” (confirm the covenant) by none greater, “He swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13). In other words this was a unilateral covenant. So its promises are absolutely sure”.²⁰ Similarly, Richards comments:

Usually covenants were confirmed by both parties. This implied that each accepted obligations related to carrying out the intentions the covenant

¹⁸ Lopez, R 2003. Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants (Part 1 of 2). *CTS Journal* 9, 107.

¹⁹ Twice in these promissory statements this first person verb form appears in the cohortative mood which expresses a strong intention.

²⁰ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. 1983-c1985. *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (1:56). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

expressed. How significant Abram's deep sleep becomes. God alone passed between the parts of the sacrificed beasts. Abram has no part in making the covenant, so nothing Abram does can cause it to be canceled.²¹

With Yahweh playing the active role here, we read "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (Gen. 15:17) a realisation that all obligatory aspects rest with Yahweh. With these thoughts in mind we endorse Lopez's summation:

Thus, the Abrahamic grant covenant helps one understand the following: First, the preamble displays the awesomeness of God, the guarantor of the covenant. Second, the historical prologue explains the origin of blessings that will cure the fallen world. Third, the absence of stipulations binding the recipient assures the perpetuity, because God is the sole provider. He bound Himself by crossing through the cut pieces of animals and by swearing to fulfil His promises.²² With that said, we now turn our attention to the Mosaic covenant.

2. The Mosaic 'Suzerain-vassal' Covenant

The obvious choice of the Mosaic covenant of Exodus 19-24 is duly selected for its close resemblance of the Ancient Near East suzerain-vassal covenant. In fact Thompson includes a few other sections of the Old Testament under the suzerain-vassal treaty when he concedes that "such passages as Exodus 19-24; Joshua 24, and Deuteronomy as a whole or in some of its parts, as well as a considerable variety of other passages in the Old Testament may be interpreted readily in terms of the standard near Eastern treaty".²³ Even more compelling is the comprehensive description by Richards who writes:

Yahweh's words here, and later the structure of the Book of Deuteronomy (see Deuteronomy), reflect a distinctive covenant form from the mid second millennium B.C. This is a covenant made between a superior—a ruler, or king—and his people. Such covenants refer to what the ruler has done for his people

²¹ Richards, L. O. 1991. Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (35). Wheaton: Victor Books.

²² Lopez, R 2004. Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants (Part 2 of 2). *CTS Journal* 10, 98.

²³ Thompson, J A 1963. The Significance of the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Pattern. *Tyndale Bulletin* 13, 3.

(cf. 19:4), and explain the responsibilities of the people to their ruler and the ruler to his people (cf. vv. 5–6). Such covenants served as the constitution of nations. Thus what we see here is the birth of Israel as a nation under God: a nation which is to look to God as its Sovereign, Protector, Ruler, and Lord.²⁴

We also need to state upfront that the Mosaic covenant cannot be treated in isolation since the Abrahamic covenant predates it. For our purposes, we will highlight the aspects or vocabulary that constitutes the prototypical covenant ratification. With the Mosaic covenant being quite detailed and penned out in a relatively lengthy section, our exegetical analysis will be highly selective.

Firstly, for the purposes of the covenant ratification the immediate historical preamble is stated in Exodus 19:3-4 and reiterated in 20:2. However, the appropriate historical preamble has to be traced all the way back to Abraham. Conversely, for purposes of providing a valid and immediate plausible historical reference point, the exodus event was the most decisive. Pre-empted in the Abrahamic narrative (Gen. 15:13-14), freedom from Egyptian bondage and the accompanying phenomena rates as the most significant historical development hence its selection as a preface. Not only that, divine sustenance is also brought into play here via the statement “*how* I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself”.²⁵ Here we would not be remiss to sanction the thought that “*how* I bore you” *i.e.*, to Sinai, the mount of God, represents divine providence and direction to where it pleased Yahweh especially to reveal Himself to the Israelites.²⁶

Secondly, the prologue is found in Exodus 19:5-6 in which Yahweh as the superior pre-empted His requirements on the part of the vassal. The important word “covenant” is employed in this section to indicate the expected loyalty. With that we also notice that the threefold offer (a) my treasured possession, (b) a kingdom of priests, (c) a holy nation. These three concepts represent the privileged position Israel would enjoy in light of the implicit universal plans. A

²⁴ Richards, L. O. 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (62). Wheaton: Victor Books.

²⁵ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Ex 19:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

²⁶ *The Pulpit Commentary: Exodus Vol. II*. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (107). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

treasured possession (cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17) prescribes a highly valued people who would become a kingdom of priests as in those who could draw near and have access to God hence a holy nation of those entirely set apart for divine service. In line with our thinking Smith says that “God set forth a twofold condition to the challenge, and a three-fold promise. Israel must (1) obey God’s voice and (2) keep God’s covenant. If they met this challenge they would be (1) God’s special possession; (2) a kingdom of priests; and (3) a holy nation”.²⁷ Interpreted correctly, these are blessings Israel would enjoy conditioned to her meeting the stipulations below. In fact these stipulations were designed to motivate Israel to assume all three privileges.

Thirdly, in thinking about the stipulations, Exodus 20:3-17 presents a summarized version of divine requirements. These requirements are then expanded upon in 21:1-23:33 and elsewhere throughout the Old Testament. These stipulations specify the obligations of loyalty on the part of Israel as the vassal that will mandate Yahweh to assist in realizing the promised blessings specific to this covenant. Unlike the Abrahamic covenant dominated by divine promissory statements, the Mosaic covenant is dominated by obligations Israel has to meet. Smith is correct when he makes the following statement:

What sets the Mosaic (Law) Covenant apart is that what God says He will do does hinge on how His people behave. If God’s people guarantee that, God will bless and protect them. If, on the other hand, God’s people turn aside to worship pagan deities and forsake God’s righteous ways, then God will discipline and punish them. Here alone what God does is in response to choices made by the people of Israel.²⁸

We need to point out that this statement is related to the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant which must be understood as a suzerain-vassal treaty. In this case covenant obligations on the part of the vassal determine the outcome.

²⁷ Smith, J. E. 1993. *The Pentateuch* (2nd ed.) (Ex 19:3-8). Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co.

²⁸ Richards, L. O. 1991. Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (62). Wheaton: Victor Books.

Fourthly, the ratification of the covenant as given in Exodus 24:1-8 is done through a blood sacrifice. Ryrie tells us that a covenant could be ratified through various forms of ritual acts which included blood sacrifice (as in this instance), passing between pieces of a slaughtered animal sacrifice (as in the Abrahamic covenant Gen. 15:17), partaking a fellowship meal (Gen. 31:54) and eating salt together (Num. 18:19).²⁹ Perhaps the blood sacrifice was the most appropriate as the obligation involved a large amount of people. It was appropriate to have a public and written (Book of Covenant) undertaking here which would act as a witness against the people (Ex. 24:7). It was equally significant that the people committed themselves to divine requirements (Ex.24:7 cf 19:8) by indicating their willingness to obey. With that commitment the covenant could then be ratified.

Finally, all that was left was for representatives of the elders to have an encounter with divine glory symbolic of meeting their King under whose suzerainty they had committed themselves.

3. Reflections

By this juncture in this discussion, we should have come to the realization that outside of ancient Near East context, the biblical usage of covenant can be prejudicial. Thankfully, “two centuries of archaeological discoveries have revolutionized the understanding of biblical covenant. Thus, after defining covenant in the light of ancient Near East context, one can see the close parallels that Israelite covenants share with their ancient Near Eastern neighbours”.³⁰ In cutting out covenants with Israel, God employed the familiar nuances of royal grant and suzerain-vassal treaties but also initiated something new by prescribing the unprecedented divine-human covenant. Thompson explains:

The Old Testament understanding of covenant had depths of meaning which were never dreamed of in the secular covenants between the suzerains and vassals of the ancient Near East. A profound transformation and an intimately

²⁹ See *Ryrie Study Bible* (Expanded Edition). 1994. Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 126.

³⁰ Lopez, R 2003. Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants (Part 1 of 2). *CTS Journal* 9, 111.

personal application of the covenant idea took place when Israel adapted the Near Eastern metaphor to express her covenant with Yahweh.³¹

In establishing covenants with Israel, we have observed in this study that the formal and legal elements as well as the jargon are fashioned along the common Ancient Near East treaty patterns. We have intimated the typical historical preamble, the prologue, covenant stipulations, ratification through an oath and a ritual ceremony. However, when we read the Yahweh-Israel covenants, ultimately we come to the awareness that God is not necessarily establishing these covenants for Israel's sake but His own.

Firstly, the divine-human covenants reveal the divine agenda. In establishing the covenant with Abraham and with Israel, Yahweh's universal agenda is unmistakable. As such, this is a chosen relationship He establishes for His holy purposes. The statement "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"³² suggests that Abram was called that he might be a blessing to others. "God promised to show him a land, make him into a great nation, and use that nation to bless the whole world. God *blesses* us that we might be a *blessing* to others, and His great concern is that the whole world might be blessed. *The missionary mandate of the church does not begin with John 3:16 or Matthew 28:18–20. It begins with God's covenant with Abraham. We are blessed that we might be a blessing*".³³ If that was God's original intention surely it was risky to hinge in on human response hence the grant covenant. Hahn is right in insisting on the "the historical priority of the Abrahamic covenant vis-a-vis the Mosaic covenant as revealing the theological primacy of God's sworn obligations to bless all nations, over and against Israel's sworn obligations to keep the Sinatic Torah."³⁴

Secondly, from the above sentiments we can deduce that the type of covenant in question is obviously significant. The Abrahamic covenant as a grant covenant had specific implications that are

³¹ Thompson, J A 1963. The Significance of the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Pattern. *Tyndale Bulletin* 13, 6.

³² *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Ge 12:3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1991). *Be obedient* (Ge 11:27). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

³⁴ Hahn, S W 2005. Covenant Oath, and the Aqedah: διαθήκη in Galatians 3:15-18. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67/1, 98.

different from the suzerain-vassal type as in the Mosaic covenant. As a promissory undertaking, the grant covenant was hinged on the obligated One. Thus Hegg argues:

The emphasis of the grant is that nothing can change the ultimate purpose of the covenant, and this emphasis must likewise be allowed into biblical exegesis. To argue that sin or disobedience has annulled or cancelled the Abrahamic covenant is to disregard the structure and pattern of the covenant itself. This is an excellent example of an instance where lexicography must be instructed by the literary genre in which the word is found.³⁵

On the contrary, the Mosaic covenant as a suzerain-vassal covenant as Foster hints “elevated exclusivity, security, accountability and purpose” based on prescribed obligations.³⁶ The obligations on the part of Israel as the vassal, could never frustrate Yahweh’s ultimate purposes other than Israel evoking either blessings or curses depending on their response. In the explanatory notes that follow the issuing of the first commandment “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), divine jealousy initiated an exclusive loyalty which if violated attracted certain consequences. The consequences on the part of the vassals must be distinguished from covenant intentions on the part of the suzerain which remained irrespective of the response on the part of the vassal. Thus, Israel either enjoyed the blessings accompanying covenant fidelity or the curses that infidelity attracted as Deuteronomy 28 clearly outlines. Hahn is right therefore correct when he says that “God’s oath to Abraham preserved the life of rebellions Israel ... the laws and curses of the Mosaic covenant will not cause or prevent the promises and sworn blessings of the Abrahamic covenant from reaching Israel and the nations”.³⁷ By the same token, we must point out that “the blessings and curses in the Abrahamic covenant are of a different nature than those in conditioned covenants: that is, unlike the blessings and curses of a treaty that affect those within it, in the grant covenant the blessings

³⁵ Hegg, T 1989. The Covenant of Grant and the Abrahamic Covenant. Paper read at the Regional Evangelical Theological Society. © Tim Hegg thegg@bigplanet.com, 13.

³⁶ Foster, S J 2010. The Missiology of Covenant. *International Bulletin* 34/4, 205-7.

³⁷ Hahn, S W 2005. Covenant Oath, and the Aqedah: διαθήκη in Galatians 3:15-18. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67/1, 98-99.

and curses affects those outside”.³⁸ For this reason it is worthwhile to categorise the major covenants in the Old Testament:

COVENANT	TYPE	PARTIES	DESCRIPTION
Noahic Genesis 9:8-17	Royal Grant	Yahweh and the Noah, his descendants and all of creation	An unconditional promise never to destroy all creation with a catastrophic disaster to the magnitude of the great flood. The promise was ratified through the sign of a rainbow
Abrahamic Genesis 12:1-3; 15 and 17	Royal Grant	God and Abraham and prospectively all peoples of the earth	An unconditional threefold grant of a great nation, a great name and a great blessing, ratified by Yahweh
Mosaic Exodus 19-24	Suzerain-vassal	Yahweh and Israel	A conditional pledge for divine providence and protection based on Israel’s total obedience towards the making of a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation
Davidic 2 Samuel 7:4-17	Royal Grant	Yahweh and king David	An unconditional commitment to the establishment of a Davidic dynasty
New Covenant Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-28	Royal Grant	Yahweh and Israel	An unconditional commitment to forgive and restore faithless Israel

Thirdly, divine-human covenants reveal the character of God. From the above table we can see that the majority of all the major covenants belong to the royal grant category in which the obligations

³⁸ Lopez, R 2004. Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants (Part 2 of 2). *CTS Journal* 10, 96.

rested with Yahweh and not His people. Niehaus' comments are useful when he writes:

From the beginning, Yahweh has been a God of covenant. Covenant suzerainty and covenant faithfulness are therefore essential attributes of God and are manifest in God's dealing with all creation. This means that God will remain faithful even though his creatures prove unfaithful. God will not abandon his covenant faithfulness toward what he has made.³⁹

For this reason, even after Israel had historically proved to be unreliable and constantly breached all covenants, when she was about to be exiled from the Promised Land in the actualisation of curses that her infidelity had attracted, Yahweh grants a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Thus we agree with Bright who observes that "virtually all pre-exilic prophets, albeit by no means in identical ways, looked beyond the judgment they were compelled to announce to a farther future when God would come once again to his people in mercy, restore their fortunes and establish his rule over them in righteousness and peace".⁴⁰ He continues:

This promise of future salvation is one of the most distinctive features in the message of the prophets and it is this perhaps more than anything else that serves to bind the Old Testament unbreakably with the New in a single canon of Scripture.⁴¹

Conclusion

To come back to our original question on whether covenant fidelity is contingent upon human response, the answer lies in understanding covenant theology in the Old Testament and the One who initiates these. Divine covenant faithfulness is based on the immutability of God on the one hand, and on the other His essential slow to anger (Exo. 34:6-7). For this reason, priority must be placed on royal-grant covenants which outline irreversible divine purposes. However, human infidelity invites punishment without obliterating divine purposes. That is why "one of the fundamental aspects of the Old Testament theology is the promise that was given to Abraham [is]

³⁹ Niehaus, J J 1995. *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

⁴⁰ Bright, J 1976. *Covenant and Promise: The Prophets undertaking of the future in pre-exilic Israel*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15

reiterated to his descendants”.⁴² For this reason the Apostle Paul declares in Galatians 3:6-8:

⁶ Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” ⁷ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” ⁹ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. ⁴³

By employing the Abrahamic royal grant covenant as his point of departure, Paul effectively intimates the divine obligatory sentiments in the universal offer of salvation. Salvation is a divine grant. But in order to enjoy the blessing we need to stand in Abraham’s “faith” position as an indication of our acceptance of that offer. Our negative response will not any way make this offer inoperative.



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

⁴² McComisky, T E 1985. *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*. Leicester: IVP.

⁴³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.) (Ga 3:6-9). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.