

## **B<sup>e</sup>rîth: Old Testament Divine Covenant of Yahweh's Faithfulness vis-a-vis Human Covenant Unfaithfulness**

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### **Abstract**

*B<sup>e</sup>rîth* is the Hebrew theological word for divine covenant between Yahweh and Israel. It was a binding relationship of dedication, fellowship, commitment and responsibility. The article delved historically, textually and theologically into some salient ancient forms and features of the *b<sup>e</sup>rîth*; the similarities and contrast and to appraise the degree of Yahweh-Israel covenant faithfulness or otherwise of the parties. The research discovered that while Yahweh was faithful holistically to the terms of the covenant, Israel and the contemporary adherents of the Christian faith had flagrantly not been wholly faithful and obedient to the covenant of salvation culminated in the covenantal sacrifice of Christ. Hence Yahweh's covenant faithfulness was in no circumstance contingent upon human obedience. It is the submission of this paper that for the salvation of the faithful, if each one must be accountable for his humane covenant unfaithfulness, all the expressed features of the covenant viz: love, mercy, righteousness, holiness, faithfulness and ethical obligations must be imbibed.

## Introduction

The Old Testament (OT) divine covenant is rendered *B<sup>e</sup>rîth* in Hebrew. Covenant may be defined severally as a treaty, a formal or an informal agreement. It connotes commitment, understanding, contract or promise. Theologically, covenant is the divine relationship established upon the religious agreement between Yahweh and ancient Israel. The OT provides variant covenants over the ages between Yahweh and Israel. The patriarchs were ultimately culminated in the New Covenant of Christ in the New Testament (NT) dispensation.

The concept of *b<sup>e</sup>rîth* - covenant is of far reaching importance in the relation of individuals, groups and nations. It is a binding promise concerning social, legal, political, religious and other aspects of human life. Covenant is therefore a socio- religious institution. My interest in this study is primarily with respect to the term in its special theological sense and especially its role in Yahwism and later Judaism as presented in the OT and NT literature and its relevance to the contemporary society. As it were, covenant- *b<sup>e</sup>rîth* became a paramount religious institution in Israel; it was the basis of the national cult.

The historical and religious records of the formation of Israel as a chosen race presume an historic covenant between Yahweh and Israel: yet the origin of the ideas of covenant is obscure. Could it be in connection with the cult of the Shechemite deity- *Baal-b<sup>e</sup>rîth* whose sanctuary in Shechem became a Yahwist sanctuary (Jug. 8:33; 9:44, 46)? Certainly, Yahweh the God of Israel was the originator of the Yahweh/Israel covenant relationship. It is to this covenant that the ethical prophets like Amos, Hosea and Ezekiel referred (Amos 3:1-2; Hos. 2:15-23; Jer. 7:22-27; 31:32; Ezek.16:3-8, 60). The covenant was expressed in such features as love, mercy, righteousness, holiness, faithfulness and divine power. The election relationship of God to Israel was expressed in the context of the covenant. The entire later covenants were re-affirmations in new situations of the original *b<sup>e</sup>rîth*. The continuity of the national faith was based on the Yahweh/Israel covenant relationship.

The study examined the OT covenants, Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, and the ultimate divine sacrifice of Christ and the salvation of the faithful.

If the contents and narratives of the OT covenants are critically examined, they may be conveniently classified under three major divisions. First, the secular traditions of Suzerainty, Parity, Patron and Promisory forms. Second the God-bound Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Third, the Israel-bound of the Mosaic, Joshua, Deuteronomic reform otherwise called the Reform of Josiah and the Ezra covenant. Our focus in this study shall be limited to the God-bound and Israel bound covenants.

## God-Bound Covenants

### • Adamic Covenant:

When God created the heavens and the earth, he said that all the creation was good, and he ceased to create. This was a total and perfect display of his nature, and he reposed in satisfaction. According to A.B. Davidson, this repose and satisfaction express his relation to the creation, and on this condition he made the Sabbath the symbol of his covenant with his creation.<sup>1</sup>

According to Ecclesiasticus -Sirach 17:12, *He, God, established with them (men of his creation) an eternal covenant, and showed them his judgment.* This was the basis of his

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<sup>1</sup> A.B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament, (TOT)*, 248.

covenant faithfulness. The Adamic covenant was made of works with Adam, as the representative of the whole human race. Truly in the JE account of the creation (Gen. 2:4b-25), it was mandatory for Adam to obey and be faithful to the stipulations of the covenant. Similarly, in the JE story of the Fall and the expulsion from Eden, in Genesis 3, it was mandatory for Adam to work for sustenance accordingly.

In all the above passages, Adam did not swear to any oath or obligation, rather, it was God who bound himself in the priestly writer's account of the creation (Gen.1:1-2: 4a), to bless Adam and the whole mankind. The condition of obedience was not attached in the priestly account. When the two different accounts of the creation are put together as in Genesis 1-2, it is commonly presumed that while God bound himself by promising life eternal to mankind, the covenant was upon the condition of faithfulness and obedience, with death as penalty of transgression and unfaithfulness. While this view is correct, yet it is clearly obvious that it is a one-party covenant in the sense that it was only God who bound himself to some obligation.

- **Noahic Covenant:**

God the creator and governor of his creation made another covenant with the new race that survived the flood. It was directed to the human race as a family. Genesis 9: 4 ff. gives the conditions of the covenant; the new race should abstain from eating blood; they should cherish the sacredness of human life by refraining from shedding their own blood (suicide), and the blood of their neighbours (murder). The sign was the light in the heavens appearing on the face of the cloud. In Genesis 9:12-13, Yahweh established the sign of the covenant by setting a bow in the cloud, for Noah and for all future generations. It was a symbol of the new light of God's face and of life shining on the dark background of the watery firmament. This visible natural phenomenon signified the divine appeasement. P Code has taken this ancient concept with a new theological meaning.

In Genesis 9:11, God bound himself to obligations never again to cut off all flesh and destroy the earth with the waters of a flood. It is also appropriate to add that it is implied according to Genesis 8: 22 that another sign of the covenant was that the recurrence of the season and of day and night should not cease. This is attested by Jeremiah 33:20. It shows that with J Code there is emphasis on the restoration of the life of man with God. His firm salvific now dictates mercy and the continuation of salvation history. His faithfulness and mercy are thus symbolized in nature, the rhythm of the days and seasons, which would not be disturbed again.

- **Abrahamic Covenant:**

Probably the most original of the God-bound covenants was the Abrahamic covenant, which is preserved for us in two forms, the Yahwist form J tradition in Genesis 15, and the Priestly tradition (P) in Genesis 17:11-14. In these forms, Yahweh is re-establishing his covenant with Abraham in response to Abraham's request for certainty of the promise which Yahweh had earlier on made (Gen. 12:2-3). For the following reasons, this covenant tradition is of immense historical importance, if taken as a model for the later covenant tradition, such as the Mosaic and Davidic.

First, the covenant was established by means of cutting the sacrificial animal provided (Gen. 15:9-10) into two parts. This was a very archaic form of pre-Mosaic tradition. Second, from the Hittite treaty tradition (a pre-Mosaic period), it was a usual practice for the head of the family to make a covenant with a particular deity. This was therefore one of the important elements in the pre-Mosaic heritage of ancient Israel. In these J and P forms, Abraham did not swear to any obligation; rather it was Yahweh in his covenant faithfulness that swore the oath

to create out of Abraham a great nation, defend him at all costs, and gave to his generations the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup>

It is thus obvious that the initiative of this covenant was taken by Yahweh himself, who bound himself to some specific obligations. There were requirements made by Yahweh of Abraham. He was to completely dissociate himself from the pagan past, and to migrate to a land of Yahweh's directive. The J account shows vividly that Abraham's response to the covenant obligations was factual and not verbal. In other words, Abraham did not swear to any oath, nor bound himself in any form, though his obedience was total.

The Abrahamic covenant should be seen as an unconditional bestowal of the salvation of Yahweh to Abraham and his generation (Gen.17:2, 7, 19, 21). This is otherwise referred to as an election covenant. Thus with Abraham from the viewpoint of salvation history, a new era begins. This unfolding plan of God reached its climax in the concrete and historical events of the Exodus and Sinai. In Genesis 17, the rite of circumcision is given as a 'sign' or 'seal' to appropriate the divine offer of salvation in confessional form. Both Abraham and his descendants were to perform this rite faithfully. This vividly expresses the original intention of the covenant to make the patriarchs a specific part of the Abrahamic covenant. Genesis 17:11-14 says, among other things:

You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations.

From all available records in the OT, it is a plain fact that the patriarchs, that is, the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel) were the descendants of Abraham. Therefore it is appropriate to infer that the patriarchs were still within the provisions of the covenant with their ancestor, Abraham. In this account, Abraham did not swear to any obligation. The covenant with Abraham and David, otherwise known as the Royal Grand is of promissory type modelled on ANE types. But they included an element of obligation. So also an element of promise is implied in the Mosaic Covenant, though of obligatory type.

The above passages show that the Abrahamic covenant contain three promises, namely, that Abraham will become a people or great nation; and that he attained a new and special relationship with God; and that he was to possess a land (Canaan), a sign of a completed redemption and salvation. Thus, the covenant made with Abraham was of grace. It was a development over the Noahic covenant. It passes from the wide area of creation and natural life. The conditions of the covenant were the above faithful promises, while circumcision, the sign of covenant, was the symbol of putting off the natural life and the putting on of a new spiritual life.

- **Davidic Covenant:**

The Davidic covenant is a subsequent and most important covenant, in which Yahweh bound himself. In II Samuel 3:9, Abner attested that it was Yahweh himself who swore to David. The king also claimed in II Samuel 23:5, that Yahweh had made an 'everlasting

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<sup>2</sup>. *And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves (Gen.12:2-3). Also in Gen.15:5, the Lord says: Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, "so shall your descendants be". See G.O.Abe, Perspectives in Religious Studies, II, 200: 20.*

covenant' with him. This undoubtedly was a reference to the oracle of Prophet Nathan (II Sam. 7). It was God's beneficence to a just ruler being climaxed in the 'everlasting covenant'.

*B<sup>e</sup>rîth* is used to express the divine promise to establish a dynasty for David according to Prophet Nathan's oracle in II Samuel 7:5-16. Israel was the chosen nation of Yahweh and David's dynasty would last forever. While we maintain the continuous demonstration of God's love, faithfulness and grace towards his people, it was however, David's devotion to Yahweh that earned him the promise of eternal grace. This simply means that God saw in David, a person suitable to effect the fulfilment of his covenant. The LORD appreciated all the moves of David to provide him an abode (II Sam. 7:2). As a token of divine faithfulness and gratitude, God promised to build a 'house', that is, a dynasty for David (II Sam. 7:4-16).

In Psalm 132:2-5, we find David making an oath to the LORD not to rest until he found a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob. Again, the LORD here swore to establish the throne of David forever. Thus, God bound himself in covenant faithfulness with his servant who proved his loyalty and devotion to his master and Lord. In Psalm 89:3, 28-29; 110:4, it is also stated that it was Yahweh who swore to establish David and his descendants forever. In the above covenant, Yahweh alone was bound to a promise. The kingship now shared in the solidarity of the Mosaic covenant.

The covenant with David is similar to the Abrahamic covenant. While God made a pledge to establish David's dynasty forever, he made an oath with Abraham to give his children the land of Canaan everlastingly. These two covenants were quite different from the Mosaic covenant, in which Israel pledged loyalty and faithfulness to God, and is an obligatory type, while the former two are a promissory type. The unconditionality of the Davidic covenant is as pronounced as the Abrahamic covenant (II Sam. 7:13-15). By this token, the treaty with the patriarchs is considered as valid forever. When on the part of Israel, the covenant was breached, she would be punished severely. But God would intervene to restore Israel to himself, because as a faithful suzerain, he would never breach his covenant.

The dynasty of David succeeded convincingly in Judah (as against chaotic dynasty in Israel, the Northern Kingdom), through which Yahweh was going to fulfil his faithful promise to Abraham. The intention of this covenant may be to establish a stable state and dynasty void of constant revolution and struggle for succession at the death of each king. Thus, God made a covenant with David and bound himself to sustain it at all costs. This was a perfect divine faithfulness; thereby fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant in progress, "In David, the promise to the patriarchs is fulfilled, and renewed."<sup>3</sup> In the prophetic books, the covenant was bound up with the prophetic-messianic expectation of the Davidic shoot (Isa. 11:1, 10; Jer.23:5; Ezek.34:23-24). The Messianic concept of the above passages should not surprise us, because as Mendenhall states.<sup>4</sup> The application of the term 'Davidic shoot', to the Davidic covenant was to establish the continuity of his dynasty forever.<sup>5</sup>

The unconditionality of this covenant was most probably similar to such unconditional covenants found in their environment. This covenant was certainly a reshaping of the older covenant, i.e. the Abrahamic treaty. The editor looked at the accomplishment of David as the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham. That is to say when God was directly dealing with Abraham, he did not specify the exact boundary of Canaan to be inherited by Abraham and his descendants, but simply, he would be given the land (Gen.12:1,7; 15:7 ff.; 17:8) as a possession forever.

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<sup>3</sup> For this concept, see G.E.Mendenhall, *Covenant*, IDB, I,718.

<sup>4</sup> The belief in the king-saviour who will appear in the future and bring bliss to the nation was prevalent in the ANE.

<sup>5</sup> See Mendenhall, *Covenant in IDB*, SV.191.

Thus it may be concluded that the Adamic covenant was given the symbol of the Sabbath and the grace of eternal life. The Noahic covenant expresses the sacredness of life, and of the consciousness of man as belonging to God. The Abrahamic covenant was a grace, and of spiritual life. The Davidic covenant was subsequent to the previous ones which were now being re-established by promising an everlasting dynasty to the devoted king.

In all the above covenants, it was God who bound himself to his creation and mankind, and especially Israel his elect.

### **Israel-Bound Covenants**

In contrast to the God-bound covenants discussed above, there are other covenants which are directly opposite and could be termed 'Israel-bound covenants.' There are four such covenants, namely: the Mosaic or Sinai covenant, the covenant of Joshua, Deuteronomic reform and the covenant of Ezra. They are all identified with the Decalogue.

- **Mosaic covenant:**

The Mosaic otherwise referred to as Sinai covenant was the climax of the Yahweh-Israel covenant relationship, in which Yahweh was recognized as the moral and spiritual God and father of a moral and redeemed people, Israel. The faith that the choice of Israel by Yahweh was a genuine one, made the Israelites to consider Yahweh as their faithful tribal God,<sup>6</sup> and his religion -Yahwism, a tribal religion. This concept also yielded particularism in that the Israelites restricted both Yahweh and his religion to themselves. Israel was a religious community by the means of their covenant relationship with Yahweh, conclusively formed at Sinai under the instrumentality and leadership of Moses.

The Mosaic covenant came as the culmination in which the relationship between Yahweh and Israel was formalized. It is to be said, therefore, that the Sinai covenant was a formal ratification and ceremonial establishment of any early covenants made between the patriarchs and God. Henceforth, according to Prophet Jeremiah, *God's covenant with Israel was as steadfast as the laws of nature* (Jer.33:20-21).

When the ethical prophets, such as Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah examined the condition of the covenant, they realized that the covenant was basically theological, conveying religious truth to the entire world through the chosen nation, though it also included the social, economic and political organization of the people. Here the political and religious history of the Israelites is inseparable. Every life experience of the Israelites was given a religious interpretation within the covenant context. Covenant thereby became the foundation or symbolic base of the community. Every action, religious or otherwise, must be in conformity with the stipulations and law of the covenant. When the ethical prophets commanded the people, it was to reshape their unfaithful life-behaviours which were contrary to the terms of the covenant.<sup>7</sup> The prophets believed that the Sinai covenant was the era of Israel's birth as a religious nation. It was then that Yahweh created her, according to Isaiah 40, and became her father. God, by nature is moral and spiritual. He created the rational and moral creature with whom he entered into a covenant, to be a spiritual creature, able to enter into close relations with him. Israel must therefore be entirely submissive to God.

To establish the Mosaic covenant, according to Exodus 24:7-9, the "blood of the covenant", that is, the blood of the victim was sprinkled partly on the altar and partly on the people. The conditions of the covenant were clearly stated also by the book of the covenant

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<sup>6</sup> *On the concept of the overlordship of Yahweh over Israel, as his vassal, and his kingdom among them, see J. Bright, 149f.*

<sup>7</sup> *H.W.Robinson, (1956) Religious Ideas of the Old Testament, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Duckworth: SCM Press, 187.*

by which Israel was bound to remain a faithful party to the covenant, thereby becoming God's own people *par excellence*. If the covenant traditions associated with Moses are compared with the international treaty forms, especially those of the Hittites, the similarities between them are very striking. This, however, does not mean that the Mosaic covenant forms were basically an imitation of such secular forms. The following similarities were found in many of the covenant forms of early Israel:

- **The preamble:**

In the Decalogue, Yahweh is identified as the covenant giver (like the ANE overlord who grants the treaty to his vassals, the other party). This is contained in Exodus 20:1-2a. Here the preamble is simply reduced to *I am the LORD your God*. This introduces Yahweh as the suzerain who wishes to go into a covenant relation with his people. It was he who formulated the covenant and established it. Thus Yahweh is the overlord of Israel politically and religiously.

- **The historical prologue:**

The second feature of the Sinai covenant is the historical prologue. It is as brief as the preamble. Yahweh is here presented as the God who delivered the people from the bondage of Egypt. This is contained in the words *that brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*. Grammatically, it is obvious here, that in the Mosaic tradition, both the preamble and the historical prologue are inseparable, contrary to the Hittite form. The importance of this is that the revelation of Yahweh is a component part of the historical events which were foundation of the covenant itself, and the obligation attached to it.

- **The Stipulations:**

The deliverance of Israel was a free and voluntary act of the saving God. Obligations were thereby stipulated for the people if they wanted to retain a lasting relationship with that God. This common and unique relationship made the community to be a special people and property of a single sovereign God.

The Sinai covenant can be described as a new "Genesis"; that is, it marks the beginnings of newly and all the various theological themes which were later developed in the religious life-history of Israel. Among such are: the providence, or Grace of God; the kingdom of God; the sin of man and the wrath and judgment of God; the holy people as God's community; the rewards of their faithfulness and obedience, and punishment of unfaithfulness and disobedience; and ethical norms to make God's people purer than the universal idolatrous life. Like the Mesopotamian stipulations, the stipulations of the Sinai covenant took the forms of the case of "apodictic" law. They formed the basis for the above "genesis", and can be summed up thus:

First, Israel should have no other gods, but only Yahweh. The elect people should refrain from any religious or social functions that were associated with these various deities. The superiority of Yahweh and the observance of his commands should always be upheld. Second, God's name should not be taken in vain. This emphasizes the sanctity of oaths which should be maintained. Third, the Sabbath (that is, the seventh day) was to be strictly observed as a holy day. This was similar to the Roman custom in the first century B.C.;<sup>8</sup> farmers, work-animals and slaves were permitted to rest every eight day. This is precisely the interpretation given to Deuteronomy 5:14:

But the seventh day is a Sabbath day to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maid-servant, or your

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<sup>8</sup> G.E.Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant*, v. 228.

ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maid servant may rest as well as you.

Fourth, parents were to be honoured and treated with due respect. It was particularly necessary to give such a command in a time of upheaval. Fifth, killing of persons by persons, even by accident if it involved negligence, was considered as a usurpation of the divine sovereignty over life. This was different from execution of persons condemned for crime, or killing of the enemy in warfare. In this situation it was believed that human beings were acting as agents of Yahweh or some deity. Furthermore, under such divine command, persons and properties otherwise referred to as “spoil” or “booty” were considered as burnt offering to God, who was actually prosecuting the war. Yahweh commanded thus in Joshua 6:17 and 8:8, *and the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. And when you have taken the city, you shall set the city on fire, doing as the LORD has bidden.*

The above injunction was entirely a religious principle. It had nothing to do with immorality or wickedness. Similarly, when officials or agents of the state government carried out such a duty, they could not be held guilty of murder, since they were representing constitutionally established authority.

Sixth, other commandments were made against theft, adultery, false witness, for the security of property and family relationships and for true lineal succession, integrity and justice in the society. Seventh, in conclusion, coveting was prohibited. The fundamental human rights should always be respected. One's neighbour's possessions in all respects should not be tampered with, in order to have a healthy and holy society. Most of these commandments, if not all, are ethically based. They show that neither socially organized forces, nor the political power structure like the ancient idolatrous states, could make Israel or other society ideal. The divine orders must be kept as ethical obligations for the well-being of the community in general.

- **Deposit and Public Reading:**

Like the Hittite treaty forms, there was a provision made for the deposit of the Mosaic covenant document in the sanctuary. This was placed in the “Ark of the Covenant”, which resided in the Holy of Holies. Like the ancient world, it was placed in the sanctuary of the vassal, and a requirement was made to read it publicly at stipulated intervals of the year.

Deuteronomy 31:26 states that the Decalogue was to be deposited in the sacred Ark. If the ark had contained the two tablets of the law, why then should it be kept in the darkness of the sanctuary as a hidden mystery? The law was supposed to be the companion of the Israelites. Moreover, it was the high priest who entered into the Holy of holies where the Ark was kept, but only once a year on the Day of Atonement. If it is true that the Ark contained the tablets of the law, which was most probably so, their presence therein must have served a different purpose. Exodus 20 and 34 contain two accounts of the Decalogue which are quite different. It is obvious from this situation that it was not certain which of the two laws was actually written on the stones or tablets, taking for granted that the Ark contained the stones; but according to Deuteronomy 31:28, the book of the Law in the Ark was to serve as witness against the people. It may therefore be supposed further that nothing was written on the tablets, but they were simply to serve as witness.

Moses enjoined the people in Deuteronomy 31:10 f. to read the book of Law before the assembly of all Israel at the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release at the feast of booths. Since this account had undergone Deuteronomic revision and had been subjected to interpolation, this assumption may therefore not be tenable. But it is certain, that in whatever form the book of the Law was preserved and read, the periodic reading of the

book of the covenant cannot be denied. This is well illustrated by the book of the Law given to Joshua; and the discovered book of the Law by King Josiah.

When God handed over the “Book of the Law” to Joshua, the same procedure was implied (Josh.1:8). This is supposed to have influenced the covenant at Shechem according to Joshua 24. The purpose of Joshua 1:8 is almost self-explanatory. Apart from being a documentary authority to guide Joshua the new leader in his new duties, it was also to familiarize the entire people of Israel with the obligations attached to the covenant-relation with the faithful Yahweh their “suzerain”. This will enable the new generation to retain the age-long fellowship and covenant relationship. Also, since the sacred document was always kept in the holy sanctuary, in effect this practice was to indicate the loyalty and faithfulness of deity to the obligations of the covenant; that is, he would not aid in breach of the covenant. The “vassal state”, Israel, should in the like manner constantly be faithful, respect and keep the provisions of the covenant.

- **List of Witnesses:**

In the usual legal contracts, witnesses are called to participate in the establishment of such agreements. Similarly, in the Hittite treaties, a number of witnesses were called to effect the conclusion of such treaties. Among such witnesses were both the suzerain gods and those of the vassal states hence gods of the two parties participated in establishing and enforcing the treaties.

However, unlike the Hittite or ANE treaties, this type of provision cannot be referred to in the Yahweh-Israel covenant-making, because Yahweh was the only God of the people. The Israelites, as the “vassal”, had no other gods and as such they could not be called upon to present their gods or “pantheon”, to bear witness to any covenant. A close look at Exodus 20 will substantiate this claim. But in Joshua 24, the people were referred to as witnesses against themselves. So also, in Joshua 24: 27, the great stone which was set up under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD was declared as *a witness against us*; that is, a testimony against themselves.

In Deuteronomy 32: 1, Moses called upon the natural phenomena as his witnesses, *Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let earth hear the words of my mouth*. In this quotation, however, the situation was unequivocally quite different. It was more or less the act of giving a charge by the leader to his subjects. It was not a covenant-making between him and Israel, or between him and Yahweh. Rather the witnesses were called upon to see that Moses performed his divine duty effectively. This same idea is found in Isaiah 1:2; the heavens were to bear witness to prophet Isaiah’s effective ministry in assessing the state of spiritual unfaithfulness and bankruptcy of Judah, and his call for repentance and religious meaningfulness.

In no way should one infer that both Moses and Isaiah were suggesting animism. The features of the natural world such as mountains, rivers, springs, the great sea, heaven and earth, and winds and clouds, implied in the above passages, should all be seen as the handiwork of Yahweh. Therefore it was another way of calling upon the God of the people to bear witness against the people for their unbelief, unfaithfulness and religious bankruptcy or wanton religiosity.

- **Blessings and Curses:**

In order to effect the continued loyalty of the vassals to the treaty-obligations, a formula for blessings and curses was designed in the Hittite treaty to be administered as situations called for. In case of breach, the Hittite king would proceed against the vassal with military forces, in this case, acting as the agent by which the divine curse was brought down

upon the erring vassal.<sup>9</sup> But as long as the vassal state was faithful and kept the provisions of the treaty, it would continue to enjoy the blessings, especially the security of the suzerain. This formula has to be seen as the exclusive action of the gods of both parties, since the deities of the vassal would not be party to the vassal's breach of the treaty. They would also agree with the suzerain gods in meting out judgments upon the erring vassal, or vice-versa.

This formula is reflected in Exodus 20, though it is not as explicit as that of the Hittites. But in Deuteronomy 26-28, the formula was more explicit. The word "curse" does not appear in Exodus 20, but the substance is there in the description of Yahweh as a jealous God who punishes the sins, or visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, to the third and the fourth generations of those who "breach his covenants." However, in Exodus 24, which continues the Sinai covenant ceremonies, the curse is implied in the ritual sprinkling with the blood of the covenant. This idea is in accordance with the Hittite formula, according to Mendenhall.<sup>10</sup> In order to conclude a covenant; rather than adopting a "puppy and lettuce" form, that is, a kind of "communal meal" ceremony, a young donkey was cut into two halves, and the two parties concerned would enter, thereby physically entering into the covenant. At the same time they identified themselves with the slaughtered animal. That is to say, that just as the head of the donkey was cut off, so may the gods, already invited as witness to the covenant, do to any erring party. In this case the vassal was primarily involved.

In Exodus 24: 6, Moses poured some of the blood of the oxen slaughtered for the peace and burnt offerings on the altar, representing the physical presence of Yahweh; and in verse 8, Moses threw the other part of the blood (which was put in basins) upon the people, and declared, *Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.* It follows therefore that to breach the covenant provision was to suffer the calamity suffered by the oxen slaughtered. But to obey the provisions of the covenant, according to verse 7, was to enjoy all the blessings associated with the covenant.

- **The Oaths:**

There is no clear indication of oath taking in Exodus 20:18-19; shortly after Moses had given the Decalogue. The obligations of the Sinai covenant were merely stated; but in Exodus 24, Yahweh offered the covenant, the people agreed informally in verse 3, *All the words which the LORD has spoken, we will do.* This oath-like promise helped Moses to conclude covenant formally. He wrote the covenant law, set the covenant altar, and offered the covenant sacrifices. Following these he read the written "book of the covenant" to the people, and in verse 7, the formal oath was taken, thereby enabling Moses to conclude the covenant between Yahweh and Israel.

It is clear here that there was no formal obligation on Yahweh's part, just as the Hittite king did not swear to perform anything in the treaty with the vassal. However, the goodwill of the suzerain was implicitly implied as long as the vassal behaved well and was faithful to the treaty. In the treaty between Yahweh and Israel, the goodwill of Yahweh was similarly demonstrated all along in the historical experiences of the people. In the Mosaic covenant, this benevolence of Yahweh was implicitly shown as well, but Yahweh did not swear anything which explicitly bound him. The covenant was mutual in the sense that these are two distinct parties who had a certain freedom and initiative in concluding it. Israel on their part took oaths voluntarily and bound themselves to the obligations of the Sinai covenant; hence the covenant is commonly referred to as the "Israel-bound covenant."

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<sup>9</sup> G.E.Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention that by the Sinai covenant, Israel emerged as a community founded on a covenant relationship, thereby appearing as a dependent vassal-state under the protection and mercy of the suzerain, Yahweh. Furthermore, Yahweh was conceived as the King of kings, the God whose sovereignty had no equal. In addition, he was seen as a powerful “God of War”. These characteristics of Yahweh had been viewed right from the “call of Israel” in Egypt and lingered on throughout the entire history and vicissitudes of the Israelites, until they finally settled in the Promised Land. But with the establishment of the Sinai covenant these characteristics became theologically interpreted rather than mere historical experiences. The presence and faithfulness of Yahweh to his people now became a threat to the strong, wicked and idolatrous suzerains around them. The uniqueness and supremacy of Yahweh was therefore a contrast to the various idolatrous deities and their people.

The Sinai covenant should also be seen as a development of religious awareness on the part of the people. By this, religious values and moral obligations were placed above political and economic interest. This was true of both the Hittite and other ANE, and principally the historical experience of Israel.

- **The Covenant of Joshua:**

The covenant of Joshua is otherwise referred to as “the Shechem covenant”. Before the arrival and stay of Israel in Shechem, it is believed that the Canaanites there had established an important covenant tradition. The name of its god was *Baal-b<sup>e</sup>rîth*, LORD of the covenant (Judg.9:4). The Shechemites would most probably have had a local social structure based on covenant.<sup>11</sup> Hence Israel that had been influenced by this early developed covenant was called upon by Joshua to choose between Yahweh and the cults of the Amorites (Josh. 24).<sup>12</sup>

From the Sinai covenant to the eventual settlement of Israel in Canaan, they were to remain religiously loyal and faithful to Yahweh alone all the time; hence the covenant of Joshua which was principally to make Israel faithful to Yahweh, has been described as depicting almost all the features of the Mosaic covenant in an abridged form in the covenant narrative of Joshua 24 at Shechem.<sup>13</sup> Although this is true, yet the Shechemite covenant should be considered as an independent narrative; for instance, Yahweh spoke in the first person as the author of the covenant in the prologue, but as we come to the stipulations, it was Joshua who spoke. What justifiable excuse could one attribute to this? Could it be that the

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<sup>11</sup> See H.G.May, *Joshua*, p.303. *the name El-berith or Baal-berith, means “El of the covenant” or “Baal of the covenant”. This name presupposes that Shechem was associated with covenant-making by the Canaanites before the Israelites settled there (Josh.24:1; Judg.9:4, 46).*

<sup>12</sup> *The covenant renewal in Joshua 24 provided a framework for Israelite worship which was taken up in subsequent centuries. The following pattern may be adduced from the text, traces of which are common to most liturgical forms in churches today.*

1. *Call to the people to present themselves before Yahweh-Call to Worship.*
2. *Recitation of the kerygma-Reading of Scripture and the singing of hymns or songs.*
3. *Call to decision and response-Sermon, prayers, intercession and the Lord’s Prayer.*
4. *Putting away of foreign gods-Decision and the Creed.*
5. *Covenant act and giving of law-Holy Communion Service.*
6. *Closing admonition and Ibid dismissal-Benediction or Grace-See W.Harrelson, Worship in Early Israel, in Biblical Research, III.10f.*

<sup>13</sup> G.E.Mendenhall, 41.

original obligations were missing and editors had to make provision for that? Or could it be, that Joshua was still in order here as a worthy representative of Yahweh, even though this was not the pattern in the Mosaic tradition? In any case, whatever our feelings about the stipulations might be, the people voluntarily and unanimously gave their consent (oath) to abide by the conditions, and a great stone was set up under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD as witness to the covenant.

Joshua 24:22 shows that apart from the great stone, the people also were witnesses to themselves in the covenant, thereby binding themselves to the stipulated obligations, namely: to put away other gods and serve Yahweh only. This of course was the foundation of other obligations. In this narrative, it will be observed that both the blessings and the curses, as found in Deuteronomy 27, are missing. G.E. Mendenhall has suggested that the curses in Deuteronomy 27 would fill in the gap of Joshua 24 perfectly.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting, however, to note that this covenant narrative preserves some historical connection of presenting all the tribes of Israel as a people of God in Shechem, and this was the very centre of the Sinai covenant.

The Shechemite covenant may be seen therefore as the covenant renewal between Yahweh and Israel, not only to make Israel loyal and faithful to Yahweh as such, but to involve the new generations after the Sinai covenant. This covenant may also be viewed from a political dimension, that of a full gathering of the tribes of Israel (and other ethnic groups) at Shechem because a renewal of the covenant sealed the conquest and the final apportioning of the land. It also seems to indicate the conversion to the worship of Yahweh of those Hebrews who did not sojourn in Egypt. In addition to the above, it was necessary to involve the non-Jews who had since come into the Jewish community in the wilderness wandering. Thus Israel was once again bound to the obligations of the Yahweh-Israel covenant relationship.

Conclusively, the covenant of Joshua is best appreciated as being based on some early traditions—reinterpreted in a new environment, to create a breakthrough, a sort of discontinuity of the past among the non-homogeneous Palestinian community. It served as an effective regulation and administration of that community.<sup>15</sup>

### **Yahweh's Covenant Faithfulness And Ancient Israel's Covenant Unfaithfulness**

In the entire covenant forms, Yahweh was emphatically displayed by the ethical prophets as a holistic substance encompassing divine power and commitment, love, holiness, goodness, righteousness, mercy, creativity and faithfulness. These qualities are evident in all the covenant forms be it God-bound or Israelite-bound covenant. Conversely, the reverse was the case with the Israelite unfaithfulness.

Historically the Hebrews were supposed to spend forty days in their wilderness vicissitude to the Promised Land. But due to their gross unfaithfulness to the covenant

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> It is very difficult to escape the conclusion that this narrative (i.e. Josh 24) rests upon traditions which go back to the period when the covenant form was still living, but that the latter writer used the materials of the tradition which were of importance and value to him, and adopted them to his own contemporary situation. The formation of the covenant in Palestine is itself precisely what we should expect. The traditions are insistent upon the fact that there was a discontinuity between the generation of Moses and that of Joshua—only Joshua himself and Caleb survived the wilderness period. There was furthermore not only a new generation, but the amalgamation with groups already in Palestine.

Consequently there was a new covenant formed—that which became the basis of the federation of tribes. See G.E.Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant*, pp.41f.

relationship, they neglected Yahweh and turned to the worship of Baal and the deities. This in consequence earned the Northern Kingdom a political and religious oblivion in the Assyrian captivity in 722/1 BCE. The Southern Kingdom was confined in the Babylo- Persian exile between 597 and 539 BC. Yahweh's covenant faithfulness fulfilled his promised that the remnant shall return in accordance with the Deutero- Isaiah and Jeremiah's prophesy. It is worthy of note that such prophets as Trito-Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and Ezra the priest played pivotal roles in the theological interpretation of the exilic experience. The episode was inflicted upon the elect nation due entirely to the covenant unfaithfulness of Israel. But at the appointed time according to Deutero-Isaiah, Yahweh liberated the release of the captives to return to their home land of Judea to establish Yahwistic monotheism holistically.

### **The salvation of the faithful:**

The exilic period was truly a period of genuine religious formation. It is however significant to note that during the pre-exilic, exilic and post exilic periods in Israelite history, Judaism or Yahwism was never conceived as a universal religion<sup>16</sup>, but rather features of particularism were evident in the OT cult. Hence Yahwism was not evangelical and Israel could not make converts. Yahwism was considered the exclusive religion of the elect nation.

Yahweh was to be apprehended in a wider scope as the Elohim of all nations. He is a universal God of all creation. This religious dimension all the early and ethical prophets dealt with rigorously and elaborately. The universalistic scope of Yahwism was the vivid theology of the Servant Songs. The fact that efforts of the prophets did not yield positive dividend of converting Babylo-Persians into Judaism was a demonstration of the particularism of the Israelites. This school of thought and practice persisted during the post-exilic, intertestament and new dispensation periods; it further portrayed the Jews as naturally discriminative and exclusive. Such phenomenon is non irenic and incongruous with the divine covenant faithfulness. It is a vivid demonstration of human covenant unfaithfulness. The covenant theology which is basically irenic, is that Yahwism must be embraced as a universal religion and salvation must be extended to the end of the earth among the Jews and the gentiles.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Divine covenant faithfulness does not provide avenue for collective responsibility. For the salvation of the faithful, each person must be accountable for his human covenant faithfulness and or unfaithfulness.

The righteousness, holiness, justice and faithfulness of Yahweh must be apprehended by individuals in a personal covenant relationship and responsibility to Yahweh.<sup>18</sup> Covenant ethical obligations for the well being of the human must be imbibed. The above is a vivid concept that particularism in this context is in no way in conflict with the concept of universalism of the Yahweh covenant faithfulness. To checkmate the human covenant unfaithfulness of all believers in the covenant of salvation provided by Christ the Messiah, each one must account for his disobedience and unfaithfulness to the covenant relationship with Yahweh, the God of covenant.

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<sup>16</sup> G.O.Abe, *The Religion of the exile*, Lagos (Newdawn International, 2005), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus Christ himself preached particularism. This is evident in his charge to the disciples during their evangelism tour in Matthew 10:5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Abe, G.O., 56.