

CHAPTER 3

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TREATY AND ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss the concept and practice of *tyrIB*. (covenant/treaty) in the context of the Ancient Near Eastern people, particularly, during the second millennium BC; Yahweh's covenant with Abraham⁵⁰; the implications of the Abrahamic covenant and the relationship between the covenant promises which Yahweh had made to Abraham/his descendants and certain events that have transpired in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

There are four factors that have motivated me to discuss the concept of covenant in the context of the Ancient Near Eastern people in general and the Abrahamic covenant in particular.

First, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah appealed to the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants as the basis on which the returned Judean exiles assumed the exclusive right to own the land of Judah. The two covenants are also assumed to be the basis for the legitimization of the far-reaching religious and social reforms witnessed in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁵¹ This appeal to the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenant promises as the basis for the

⁵⁰ Yahweh, the God of Israel made a covenant with the patriarch Abraham and his descendants and has been reported in Gn 15:1-19; 17:1-27, cf Gn 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14, et cetera.

sweeping religious and social reforms during the early post-exilic period appears legitimate through a surface reading of the above mentioned passages. Certain passages from the book of Genesis⁵² and from other parts of the Pentateuch⁵³ also seem to point to such an interpretation.

Second, in my opinion, the Abrahamic covenant is the basis on which the Mosaic and other subsequent covenants in the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history are founded. Abrahamic covenant therefore, anticipates the Mosaic as well as other successive covenants (cf Gn 15:13-21; 17:2-10). It is obvious from the two examples of the Abrahamic covenant texts that Yahweh's covenant with Abraham would not be discontinued when Abraham died. Rather, the covenant would be continued with the descendants of Abraham. The covenant would remain active through an unspecified period of time.

Furthermore, since Abraham's descendants were not physically present at the initial covenant events between Yahweh and Abraham (Gn 15:1-19 and 17:1-27), it was necessary for Yahweh to conduct another covenant or renew his covenant with the descendants of Abraham (Israel) at a later stage in history. Such subsequent covenant contracts had to take the Abrahamic covenant as the reference point. This explains why later in the history of Abraham's descendants, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and other successive

⁵¹ Cf Ezr 9:1-15; Neh 1:5-10; 9:7-25; Ex 2:24; 3:16-17; 6:2-9; Dt 1:8; 6:10-12; 10:12-22; 30:19-20.

⁵²The book of Genesis is colored with Yahweh's promises to Abraham and to his descendants concerning the inheritance of the land of Canaan (cf Gn 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-18; 15:7-21; 17:8; 22:17; 26:3-5; 28:13-15; 47:29-31; 48:21-22; 49:29-32; 50:12-14, 24-25).

⁵³See Ex 2: 24-25; 3:7-10, 16-17; 6:2-8; Nm 34:1-12; Dt 1:8; 29:9-15; 34:4.

covenants were conducted between Yahweh and the people of Israel. These later covenant proceedings did not nullify the Abrahamic covenant contract. Rather, other successive covenant activities were built on top of the Abrahamic covenant framework. Therefore, the Abrahamic covenant, by implication may be understood as the foundational covenant on which the Mosaic and other successive covenant activities between Yahweh and Abraham's descendants were established.

Third, having read from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as certain Pentateuchal passages on the Abrahamic and on the Mosaic covenants, the claims made by Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations can hardly be substantiated on the basis of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenant promises. In other words, the two leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah have portrayed a very one-sided view of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenant promises on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations. This one sided perception is evidenced in their harsh attitude toward other people living in and around Judah during the early post-exilic period regarding intermarriage, worship, structural projects and communal life.⁵⁴ This harshness toward other people suggests that such people were not considered as 'Yahweh's people'. Thus, 'Yahweh's people' in the perspective of Ezra and Nehemiah are restricted to the newly returned Judean exiles.

⁵⁴Cf Ezr 4:1-3; 9:1-10:44; Neh 2::20; 4:1-23; 6:1-7:3; 10:30; 13:1-31.

However, my close reading of the Abrahamic covenant⁵⁵, as may be observed later in this chapter, seems to reveal that other peoples are to a reasonable extent linked with Abraham and his descendants through appropriate covenant procedures.⁵⁶ This is to argue that through appropriate covenant means, Abraham and his descendants had been selected by Yahweh as a channel through which Yahweh will embrace other nations as his own people. Yahweh would thereby bless them or they would receive his blessing (cf Vogels 1979:43). So, my opinion on the Abrahamic covenant is that foreigners or other nations were not completely excluded from associating with Abraham and his descendants. Other people were not severed from the benefits of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham and consequently with Moses and Israel as Ezra and Nehemiah seemed to have presupposed.

Therefore, the *crux* of the matter in my opinion is that one may find two perspectives that seem to be mutually exclusive, from the Abrahamic and from the Mosaic covenants concerning 'Yahweh's people' and other nations. On the one hand, there appears to be a perspective that supports the exclusive theological viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Abrahamic and in the Mosaic covenants. For example, in the Abrahamic and in the Mosaic

⁵⁵Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27.

⁵⁶ Cf Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14 "Through you/your seed all nations will be blessed/shall receive blessing/shall bless themselves." No matter how one understands this recurrent phrase from Genesis, my opinion is that the common denominator to be noted here is, other nations could have a certain form of an acceptable relationship with Abraham or his descendants /seed in order that the nations might be blessed, bless themselves or receive blessings from Yahweh.

covenants, the descendants of Abraham are conceived as the beneficiaries of the covenant promises Yahweh had made with Abraham (cf Gn 15:18-21; 17:6-10, 18, 19, 21) to the exclusion of non-Abrahamic descendants. The Mosaic covenant makes references to the Abrahamic covenant as its basis (cf Ex 2:24, 25; 3:6-18; 20:1-2; Dt 1:8, 10, 11; 6:3-12, 18). This also suggests that the scope of the Mosaic covenant concerning those who could benefit from its promises does not differ significantly from that of the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic covenant, like the Abrahamic covenant, indicates that the Israelites were the main beneficiaries of the covenant promises which Yahweh had made with Israel via Moses (see above references).

A conclusion certainly, may be drawn that since both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants specifically identified the descendants of Abraham as the legitimate beneficiaries of Yahweh's covenant promises, no one else was entitled to benefit from these covenant promises apart from Abraham's descendants. Therefore, by implication, everyone else who was not a descendant of Abraham could be excluded from the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants.

On the other hand, despite the existence of the supposedly exclusive perspective in the two covenants concerning other nations and on the concept of 'Yahweh's people', a close reading of the two covenant promises will reveal that there is an inclusive point of view in both the Abrahamic and

Mosaic covenants concerning ‘Yahweh’s people’ and other nations⁵⁷. This inclusive perspective contradicts the one-sided exclusive ideology of Ezra and Nehemiah on ‘Yahweh’s people’ and other nations. Unfortunately, the basis for the sweeping religious and social reforms during the early post-exilic period was this exclusive point of view.

Fourth, since the Ancient Near Eastern region is understood to have been culturally associated in certain respects with the biblical Israel (cf Dillard and Longman 1994:97-99; Baltzer 1971:89-90), I have provided an overview of the covenant practice(s) from the Ancient Near Eastern region as a background to the Abrahamic covenant activity. I suppose that this general background consideration will provide a better picture of how the concept of covenant may have functioned in the two Abrahamic covenant events in Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 as well as in the Mosaic covenant ceremony described in Exodus 19:1-24:18.⁵⁸

This is to infer that both the Ancient Near Eastern region and the world of the Old Testament have formed the socio-cultural background to the book of Genesis and ultimately to the stories that have been documented in the Pentateuch concerning the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants (cf Walton & Matthews 1997:12-13).

⁵⁷Cf Gn 17:4-5, 12-14, 24-27; Ex 12:47-49; 19:5; 20:10; 22:21; 23:9, 12; Dt 10:14, 17-19; 29:10-15.

⁵⁸ The Mosaic covenant will be considered in chapter four.

3.2 ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TREATY/COVENANT

In this section, I have examined the term tyrIB. (covenant), its origin and meaning as well as its content within the back-drop of the Ancient Near Eastern treaty concept and cultural practices, particularly, during the second millennium BC. The world of the Ancient Near Eastern people is understood to have been culturally associated with the Old Testament world, including the practice and the establishment of treaty/covenants (cf Dillard and Longman 1994:97-99; Baltzer 1971:89-90).

3.2.1 Definition of the term tyrIB. (*berit*)

The term tyrIB. (*berit*) appears to be very elastic in the Ancient Near Eastern world. Because of this elasticity, it is consequently argued (cf Soggin 2001:55; Robertson 1980:3-5; Gottwald 1987:202) that the original Hebrew meaning is also difficult to define in a straight-forward sense. Nevertheless, certain attempts have been made to define the Hebrew term, for example, Gottwald (1987:202) defined tyrIB. (*berit*) as:

“a formal, solemn, and binding agreement between parties in which there are obligations to do certain acts, or to refrain from doing them, and there are promises or threats of consequences that will follow on fulfilment or breach of the obligations”.

According to Gottwald (1987:202), the above definition does not necessarily capture the full meaning of this Hebrew term *berit*. In view of this limitation, he immediately suggested certain terms that appeared to have captured some aspects of this word. These terms include descriptions such as

agreement, arrangement, compact, contract, commitment, treaty, alliance, obligation, bond and relationship (cf Human 1983:142).

3.2.2 Origin and meaning of the term

The origin of the term *berit* (covenant) appears to be uncertain (cf Soggin 2001:55; Robertson 1980:5). However, there are several theories concerning the etymology of the word *berit*⁵⁹. According to McConville (1997: 747) and Robertson (1980:5), one perspective is that the root of the word comes from the Hebrew word *barah* which means ‘to eat’. This meaning could be related to the covenant meal eaten by both parties when a covenant was carried out. However, McConville (1997:747) dismisses this verbal root linkage on the ground that *berit* is clearly attested as a Hebrew noun and therefore does not relate to any known Hebrew verbal root.

There are three other suggestions that relate *berit* to an Akkadian root (cf McConville 1997:747 and Barre 1992:654). One of these is the proposal that the term *berit* is derived from the Akkadian preposition *birīt*, which is related to the Hebrew preposition !yBe - between (cf Robertson 1980:5). In this regard, the word *birīt* has a connotation of *mediation*. It is therefore suggested that the word *birīt* and its meaning has evolved over a long period of time to the present form *berit* (covenant).

⁵⁹ See also footnote 3 in Robertson (1980:5) for a detail explanation on the various etymological viewpoints concerning the term *berit*.

A second proposal relates *berit* to the Akkadian noun *biritu* which means ‘fetter’, or ‘clasp’ by which a covenant signifies a bond (cf McConville 1997:747; Barre 1992:654; Robertson 1980:5). In this sense, a covenant has an element of binding two or more people/parties together for a common purpose.

A third viewpoint is that *berit* may have come from the Hebrew verb *brh* which has a connection with the Akkadian verb *baru* (cf McConville 1997:747; Barre 1992:654; Robertson 1980:5) meaning ‘select for a task’ or ‘obligation’. The term ‘covenant’ could therefore be seen as entailing certain obligations or tasks for both parties.

A fourth suggestion does not relate *berit* to an Akkadian root but relates it to the Hebrew word *brr* which refers to the setting apart of a specific thing (cf McConville 1997:747).

Robertson (1980:6), however, is of the opinion that, despite the differing viewpoints concerning the etymology of the Hebrew term *berit*, the common denominator is that the result of a covenant is the establishment of a relationship “in connection with,” “with” or “between” people.

Since there is no consensus on the root meaning of the Hebrew noun *berit*, McConville (1997:747) argues that it is better to find its meaning on the use of the term or its function in the Ancient Near Eastern cultural context rather

than search for its meaning on etymological basis. It is to this suggestion that we will turn in the next section.

3.2.3 Ancient Near Eastern treaty form

The origin or etymology of the term *berit* appears to have been difficult to ascertain as observed from the preceding discussion. However, this difficulty does not necessarily mean that the concept was totally absent from the socio-cultural or political life of the Ancient Near Eastern world. Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180) succinctly argue that the concept and practice of covenant transactions began as early as the art of writing itself. Accordingly, a lot of treaties from *Ebla* were recorded and have been preserved till today (cf Baltzer 1971:9-10), dating from the Early Bronze Age (about 3500 BC) to the Iron Age (about 1000 BC).

One of the mistaken approaches to the study of the ancient and the biblical covenants identified by Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180) is a situation whereby the practice of covenant is reduced to notions such as “a rigid literary form”, “a literary law code”, “a ritual act”, and “a theological or political idea or concept”. According to Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180), the concept of covenant was understood and practiced in a variety ways in the Ancient Near Eastern world more than the above mentioned limited deductions. This is to assert that the practice of contracting a covenant was a significant aspect of the ancient cultures. The concept of covenant or treaty

practice operated to transcend a narrow parochialism and therefore to prepare the platform for a wider perspective on society and history.

Consequently, two broader categories of covenant concepts or practices in the Ancient Near Eastern region and in the Old Testament world had been identified by Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1179-1180), namely:

- Covenant as socially enacted historical reality which was expected to bring about functional changes in patterns of behaviour; and
- Covenant as a formal or a symbolic dogmatic concept which was supposed to be the object of tradition and belief.

Thus, Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180) warned that scholars should recognize this varying function and use of the concept of covenant and its practice in the ancient world in order to avoid unnecessary parochialism or confusion.

In view of the above, certain broader characteristic elements of the Ancient Near Eastern treaties which existed generally in the Early and Middle Bronze Ages were identified (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1180) as follows:

- “Historical events that create relationships, usually (though not necessarily) between unequal partners;
- Customary ways of thinking characteristic of both parties, especially common religious ideas associated with deities
- Descriptions of norms for future behaviour (which are often confused with “laws”);
- Literary or oral forms in which the agreement is couched; and

- Almost always some ritual act that is regarded as essential to the ratification of the binding.”

Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180) indicated that despite the pervasive practice of covenant transactions in the ancient world, it was the Bronze Age that produced the most sophisticated and most structured form of international treaties. They also argue that there is no reason to doubt that some of these treaty patterns originated from the Hittite treaty practices and that some of the characteristic elements of the treaty forms were common among various cultures in the Bronze Age.

Furthermore, not every treaty form or pattern exhibited all the characteristic elements of a treaty or covenant at the same time (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1180). This is to argue that sometimes certain characteristic elements could be lacking in one form of a covenant document but could be found in another document. Therefore, there was no absolute or rigid uniformity in the covenant patterns among the ancient Orient (cf Pfeiffer 1966:176). The modern scholarly idea that all the covenant events had to conform to a certain rigid or specific form or a strict legalistic pattern defined in advance is unfortunately alien to the ancient culture and specifically to the Bronze Age. This wrong notion of covenant formula has been rejected (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1180; cf Baltzer 1971:10).

The above conclusion appears to be supported by the classification of the various types of treaties or covenants in the second millennium BC put

forward by Barre (1992:654). He reasoned that during the second millennium BC, there were two broad types of treaties practiced in the Hittite Empire. These were the ‘international’ and the ‘domestic’ treaties. The international treaties were more common and were subdivided into two main categories. These included the ‘parity’ and the ‘suzerain-vassal’ treaties (cf Bruce 1980:328; Pfeiffer 1966:175). By definition,

“Parity treaties sought to establish nonaggression between the parties [sometimes of equal strengths] and to guarantee the stability of the respective ruling dynasties. Suzerain-Vassal treaties served to consolidate the hegemony of the Suzerain; the Vassal’s interests were clearly subordinate” (Barre 1992:654).

Therefore, the following characteristic elements have been drawn from the various Hittite international suzerain-vassal treaty patterns during the Late Bronze Age by Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180-1183; cf Van Rooy 1977:282) in order to provide a better picture of what was involved in such treaty dealings.⁶⁰ These include:

- Identification of the covenant giver;
- The historical prologue;
- The stipulations;
- The provisions for deposit and periodic public reading;
- The list of witnesses to the treaty;
- The blessing and curses;
- The ratification ceremony; and
- The imposition of the curses.

⁶⁰ McConville (1997:747) lists six characteristic elements of the Hittite International Suzerain-Vassal treaties following from the list provided by McCarthy (1981:51-52; cf Baltzer 1971:11-14; Pfeiffer 1966:175). These include: (i) titulary (introducing parties); (ii) historical prologue (rehearsing their past relations); (iii) stipulations; (iv) document clause (requiring the preservation of the document in the temple and its regular reading); (v) god list (i.e. witnesses to the treaty); and (vi) blessings and curses (invoked for keeping or violating the treaty).

In what follows, I will discuss the above characteristic elements of the Hittite international suzerain-vassal treaty patterns in order to understand the meaning and function of each of the above characteristic elements during the second millennium BC.

3.2.3.1 Identification of the covenant giver

Identification of the covenant giver was a typical way to mark the introduction of the treaty document. It has been regarded differently as the preamble or introduction (cf Dillard and Longman 1994:98; Barre 1992:655; Bruce 1980:328; Van Rooy 1977:282-283; Pfeiffer 1966:175). In many instances, the introduction began with a formula- “The words of...” was followed by the name of the Hittite king, his genealogy, his titles, and ends with the epithet- “the hero” (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1180; cf McCarthy 1981:51; Baltzer 1971:11).

3.2.3.2 Historical prologue

In the prologue of the treaties, the suzerainty king or party often recounted his past benevolence or good deeds to the vassal king/party and his country (cf Dillard and Longman 1994:98; Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1180). This section usually included an overview of the past relationship between the suzerainty king and the vassal's forefathers (cf Bruce 1980:328; Van Rooy 1977:282-283; Baltzer 1971:11). This became the ground for the vassal king and his country to enter into a covenant relationship and live in obedience to the suzerainty king (cf Barre 1992:655; Pfeiffer 1966:175). The concept of

'reciprocity' was strongly engrained in the rationale for this characteristic element as indicated:

“The narration of the past history emphasized very strongly the benefits that the great king had already bestowed upon the vassal in the past. The implication is, of course, that the common decency of gratitude would place the vassal under obligation to comply with the wishes of his benefactor” (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181).

In other words, the past was recounted in order to instil a sense of appreciation in the mind of the vassal king/party and his subjects and as the reason or justification for their future obedience to the Hittite suzerainty king.

3.2.3.3 Stipulations

This section usually described the interests of the Hittite suzerainty king that the vassal king and his country were bound to protect when the covenant was finally ratified (cf Dillard and Longman 1994:98; Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181). Accordingly, the stipulations were sometimes phrased in the case-law pattern (i.e. “if..., then...”) or in imperatival form (Barre 1992:655). In a few instances, the suzerainty king was obliged to guarantee the succession of the vassal's family to the throne of the vassal king (McCarthy 1981:51-52). Some of these prohibitions or stipulations prescribed by the Hittite suzerainty king to the vassal king and his country are known to have included the following:

- “Prohibition of any relationship with a country outside the Hittite sphere;
- Prohibition of hostility to other Hittite vassals;
- Immediate help to the great king in times of war;

- The vassal must not listen to any slandering of the great king but immediately report it to the king;
- The vassal must not hide deserting slaves or refugees;
- The vassal must appear once a year before the king to pay his taxes and to renew the treaty” (Bruce 1980:328; cf Bright 2000:151; Baltzer 1971:13-14).

3.2.3.4 Preservation and/or periodic public reading

A copy of the covenant document was granted to the vassal king/party by the suzerainty king in order for it to be deposited or preserved in the temple of the local deity/deities of the vassal king. The suzerainty king also would keep another copy in the temple of his national god (McConville 1997:747; Dillard and Longman 1994:98; Barre 1992:655; Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181; McCarthy 1981:52; Bruce 1980:328).

Accordingly, the suzerainty king would usually require the vassal king and his subjects to conduct a periodic public reading of the covenant document deposited in the temple in order that its stipulations could be incorporated into the political, social, economic and religious life of the subordinate party members (Bright 2000:151; Pfeiffer 1966:175). The frequency of this public reading of the covenant document varied from one covenant ceremony to the other, but it was generally scheduled to be read from one to four times a year (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181). The public reading of the document could also suggest that even though the treaty ceremony was conducted between the suzerainty king and the vassal king, the covenant stipulations were binding on their respective subjects.

3.2.3.5 Witnesses to the treaty

This section usually contained a list of various gods/deities, from the side of both the Hittite suzerainty king(s) and of the vassal king(s). The list of witnesses also included mountains, rivers, heaven, and earth, et cetera who served as guarantors to the treaty ceremony (Bright 2000:151; Dillard and Longman 1994:98; Bruce 1980:328; Van Rooy 1977:289; Baltzer 1971:14; Pfeiffer 1966:175). One of the grounds for calling this host of witnesses was to enable these witnesses to observe the conduct of the party/parties under oath and to carry out appropriate punishments and rewards connected with the covenant ceremony.

Furthermore, this god list was usually very comprehensive in order that no relevant god was left out for the vassal party to appeal to for protection if he wanted to violate the terms of the covenant after it had been contracted or ratified (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181).

Another factor for calling divine witnesses to the treaty event was to enable the vassal party to use their conscience for self policing based upon their regard for the highest principles or divine principles rather than upon the fear of superior military force (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181).

3.2.3.6 Blessing and curses

Under this section, various blessings and curses which would apply to the vassal and his country/subjects in case of obedience or disobedience respectively, were usually described to the vassal king, sometimes in the

presence of his subjects; the gods and the suzerainty king may effect or carry out these various blessings and curses upon the subordinate party/parties when applicable (Bright 2000:151; McConville 1997:747; Dillard and Longman 1994:98; Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181; Baltzer 1971:14-15). Some of these blessings and curses hinged upon matters such as health/wellbeing of individuals, their lands, livestock, agricultural cash-and-food-crops as well as freedom from external violence or aggression⁶¹.

3.2.3.7 Ratification ceremony

It has been argued (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1182) that the writing of the covenant document did not mark the end of the process of contracting the covenant. Additional functions were usually performed in order to ratify the covenant. There was no single rigid formula across the ancient Orient for ratifying a treaty or covenant transaction. However, some of the usual activities which were carried out during this ratification process involved the sacrifice of an animal as well as the eating of a common meal.

The idea of sacrificing an animal was to demonstrate how the vassal party would be treated if he and his subjects violated the covenant stipulations when the covenant takes effect. Meanwhile, the practice of eating a common

⁶¹ A typical example of the blessing and curse formula of the Hittite empire of the second millennium BC is supplied by McCarthy (1981:66-67) as follows: "The words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet- should Duppi-Teshub not honor these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Teshub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land, and together with everything he owns". "But if Duppi-Teshub honors these words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet, may these gods of the oath protect him together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house (and) his country".

meal was carried out as an expression of social solidarity and peace between the covenant parties. This covenant meal sometimes could include the eating of bread and the drinking of wine as attested by a Mari document (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1194). Mendenhall and Herion also noted that since the activity of ratifying the covenant contract was a practical or visible activity, it was not written down in the covenant document.

3.2.3.8 Imposition of the curses

This segment is not found in the Hittite suzerainty treaty formula or document but Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1182) indicated that there comes a stage when the suzerainty king would know that it was time to implement, enforce or impose the curses upon the vassal king after he and his subjects had violated the oath of the covenant. Furthermore, despite the fact that the gods were required to enforce certain curses upon the vassal party through natural causes, at the violation of the oath of the covenant, the suzerainty king was also the logical instrument to enforce some of the curses through his military intervention against the vassal king and his subjects.

In summary, we have noted that the idea of covenant carried a fundamental concept of 'relationship' between individuals, kings and their subjects, et cetera, within the Ancient Near Eastern Hittite treaty culture. This relationship could take different forms such as parity or suzerain-vassal treaty forms, et cetera, as we have discussed earlier. In view of this, the Abrahamic and the

Mosaic covenants shall be considered in this chapter and in the next one with reference to the concept of 'relationship'.

My argument therefore is to point out that through the institution of a covenant, Yahweh had established a relationship between Abraham, his descendants and other nations (cf Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27; Ex 20:1-26; Dt 5:1-6:25; Bright 2000:149). This relationship was not a casual or an informal one. The relationship included the ultimate issues of life and death (cf Gn 17:14; Dt 5:33; 6:2, 15, 24; Robertson 1980:8). Therefore, the concept of 'relationship' should be taken seriously as one of the foremost theological, religious and socio-cultural centrepieces on which Yahweh established his covenant with Abraham, his descendants and other nations.

3.3 ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

3.3.1 Literary context of the Abrahamic covenant

No passage in Scripture is isolated. Every verse occurs in the context of a larger literary framework. Because of this inseparable link of scriptural passages, it is very important to read a particular passage in light of its larger context in order to have a full grasp of what the smaller building-stone passages are all about (cf Gorman 2001:69). This principle leads this study to evaluate the literary context of the covenant God made with Abraham⁶² in order to see how the covenant fits into Genesis as well as the Pentateuch as a whole.

⁶² Texts that deal with the Abrahamic covenant include: Gn 15:1-19; 17:1-27, cf 12:1-3.

3.3.2 Structure of Genesis

The structure of the book of Genesis has been described in several ways, for example, Wenham (1987:xxi-xxii), Dillard and Longman III (1994:48) and Matthews (1996:26-41) have identified two possible structures for the book (see also Von Rad 1972:5 and Westermann 1984:1; 1985:9). The first structure is directed by the term $\tau\delta\omicron\lambda .AT \ hL,ae$ which is translated variously as ‘these are the generations’, ‘this is the family history’ or ‘this is the account of’ and they appear at least eleven times in the book of Genesis.⁶³ The second structure is divided traditionally into two main parts: (1) Primeval history (Gn 1:1-11:32), and (2) Patriarchal narratives (Gn 12:1-50:26). Von Rad (1972:5) and Westermann (1984:1, 1985:9) also followed this latter structure in their commentaries on Genesis.

The two above proposed structures for the book of Genesis must be significantly appreciated. The above mentioned structures, to a great extent, capture various aspects of the story of Genesis. Nonetheless, since the book of Genesis is a complex text, its structure can be seen in different ways by different scholars. Consequently, my close reading of the book of Genesis reveals a structure which is slightly different from those that have been suggested from above.

My observation therefore, reveals that the book of Genesis contains another structure which I would regard as a structure bound or determined by the two

⁶³ Cf Gn 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2.

themes ‘Creation and Re-Creation’⁶⁴. This structure has two major parts which include, first, Creation (Genesis 1:1- 7:24) and second, Re-Creation (Genesis 8:1-50:26). Each of the two parts echoes four important biblical motifs. The four themes in both the first and the second part include creation or re-creation, blessing, sin, and God’s response. In each of the two parts, every event or narrative has fallen in one of the four mentioned categories. There is no event in each part which is completely isolated or independent from these four sub-structural categories. The following two diagrams therefore describe the ‘Creation and Recreation’ structure of the book of Genesis.

The first diagram (Table 2) describes a summary structure of the whole book so that the reader may capture the content of the structure at a glance while the second diagram (Table 3) describes an expanded version of it which includes important details from the book of Genesis.

Table 2: Summary structure of the book of Genesis

SN⁶⁵	GENESIS 1:1-7:24	THEMES	GENESIS 8:1-50:26
1	1:1-27	Creation/Re-Creation	8:1-20
2	1:28-2:25;4:25-5:32	Blessing	8:21-9:19
3	3:1-13;4:1-24; 6:1-6	Sin	9:20-11:7
4	3:14-24;6:7-7:24	God’s response	11:8-50:26 ⁶⁶

⁶⁴ This ‘Creation and Recreation’ structure differs from other traditional structures proposed on the book of Genesis. I am solely responsible for its content as described in table 2 and 3.

⁶⁵ SN = Serial Number.

Table 3: Expanded structure of the book of Genesis

SN	PART 1 (GN 1:1-7:24)	THEMES	PART 2 (GN 8:1-50:26)	SN
1	Creation	GOD CREATE	Re-Creation	1
	God created 1:1	process	God remembered ⁶⁷ 8:1	
	Water/deep 1:2, 6-10	water	Water, deep, flood 8:1-5	
	Heaven/ Earth 1:1	universe	Heaven/Earth 8:1-3	
	Livestock 1:20-25	creatures	Livestock 1:1,15-17, 19	
	Sun, moon, stars 1:3-5, 14-19	luminaries	Sun, moon & stars 8:22	
	Adam, Eve 1:26-27	humankind	Noah & family 8:1, 15-16, 18	
	God's image 1:27-27	nature of man	God's image 9:6b	
2	Blessing	GOD BLESSES	Blessing	2
	Fruitfulness 1:28	fruitfulness	Fruitfulness 8:22; 9:1,7	
	Rulership 1:28; 2:15	rulership	Rulership 9:2	
	Food 1:29-30; 2:16	food	Food 9:3	
3	Sin	SIN	Sin	3
	Sin anticipated 2:17	sin anticipated	Sin anticipated 8:21;	
	Adam & Eve ate 3:6	ate, drank, built	Drank 9:21; built Babel 11:4	
	Nakedness 3:7	1 st consequence	Nakedness 9:21-22	
	Fig leaves 3:7	human effort	Garment 9:23	
4	God's response	RESPONSE	God's response	4
	God appeared quickly 3:8	God appeared	God appeared later 11:5	
	Garment 3:21	cover	Human used God's example (cf Gn 3:21 and 9:23)	
	Man separated from garden and from God 3:23	separation	Later man separated from tower and from God 11:8-9	
	Promise of victory 3:15	promise	Promise of blessing 12:1-3	
	Short term response to sin	time frame	Long term response to sin	

⁶⁶ This section has a mixture of the three themes: sin, blessing and God's response. Sin aspect narrates the stories about the weaknesses/failures of humankind. Blessing aspect deals with God's blessing on humankind after the fall of Babel. The blessing includes fruitfulness/child bearing, material wealth and acquisition of land and property. God's response in one sense is his conferment of particular blessing to all other nations through Abraham and his descendants. God's response in this regard specifically relates to covenant promises and activities that include but also transcend Israel as a nation.

⁶⁷ The word *remember* (~yhiil {a/ rKoz>YIW •}), with reference to God as the subject, almost always denotes God's active response to an external situation (eg Gn 19:29; Ex 2:24; 1 Sm 1:19; Ps 105:42). So, the phrase "God remembered Noah and his creatures" in Gn 8:1 may in a sense be regarded as God's active way of calling (recreating) Noah and other creatures into existence after the flood.

	through Noah 6:1-7:24		through Abram 12:1-50:26	
--	-----------------------	--	--------------------------	--

This 'Creation and Recreation' structure of the book of Genesis is not strictly chronological especially in the first eleven chapters of the book. It appears that the author(s)/editor(s) of the book of Genesis was not necessarily arranging his/her material in a strict historical chronological order. The editor(s) was more concerned with narrating the stories about creation/recreation, blessing, sin and God's response. This is not to suggest that the author(s)/editor(s) was completely disinterested in the events as they happened chronologically. Obviously, the author(s)/editor(s) had arranged some of the narratives from Genesis 12:1-50:26 in a more historical chronological order. However, the author(s)/editor(s) did not use historical chronology at the expense of the stories themselves.

3.3.3 Movement of the narrative

The movement of the narratives in a plot in Genesis as portrayed in the above 'Creation and Re-creation' structure may be described in each part (i.e. Part 1: Gn 1:1- 7:24 and Part 2: Gn 8:1-50:26) as follows.

In the first part, which is Creation, '*elohim* (~yhi1 {a /}) created the universe including humankind (Gn 1:1-2:25). He blessed them and all other things which he had made, as noted in the first two chapters of the book. There is a close relationship between '*elohim* and humankind because he made them in his image and likeness (cf Gn 1:26-27; see also Walton & Matthews 1997:18). He also made humankind vicegerent on earth (cf Gn 1:28-30; 2:15-17). As

vicegerent, humankind must do *'elohim's* will on earth and live in good relationship with their creator as well as with other creatures.

Unfortunately, Genesis 3:6-7 indicates that human beings failed or sinned against $\sim y h i l \{ a / h w " h y \}$ (Yahweh *'elohim* or Lord God⁶⁸). Yahweh responded in several ways toward humankind and his creation. First, human beings were separated from him⁶⁹. Second, Yahweh pronounced a curse with resulting enmity between the serpent and the woman as well as between their seed (Gn 3:15). This verse may be understood as a curse as well as a promise of victory, superiority of humankind against the serpent or against various sources of evil temptations (cf Fretheim 1994:363; Robertson 1980:96-97).⁷⁰ But because of the pervasive nature of human sin (cf Gn 4:1-

⁶⁸ Beginning with Gn 2:4 following, the name *'elohim* has been linked with the name *Yahweh*. Similarly, several divine names such as *'elohim*, *Yahweh* and *El-Shaddai* et cetera have been used interchangeably or side by side. Therefore, I have used these same names interchangeably in order to reflect the flexibility that exist in the final form of the text of the Pentateuch. It is with no doubt that the documentary hypothesis (for example the JEDP) has made several efforts to explain the sources of the documents which were used for the composition of the Pentateuch. The names of *Yahweh* and *'elohim* in some cases have been separated to suggest the separateness of the sources or documents. Despite this hypothetical source development, no one has ever come across any of these documents in a particular form as suggested by the JEDP documentary hypothesis. The documents are only hypothetical or educated guesses. However, the finished copy of the Pentateuch is already here though with some minor variations. This present version of the Pentateuch testifies to the work of a responsible editor(s) who has put the stories together to explain his presumably theological or religious viewpoint. In my judgment, the editor(s) assumes that his audience could understand that *'elohim*, *Yahweh*, *El Shaddai* et cetera refer to the same God. Where this is not so, the editor points it out. Therefore, I have used the divine names flexibly as attested by the final form of the Pentateuch itself.

⁶⁹ This separation is considered by other scholars as the symbolic description of the act of dying (cf Fretheim 1994:364, 369 with Gn 3:19, 23-24). When human beings are separated from *Yahweh*, they are by implication severed from their source of life and existence.

⁷⁰ There are differing views concerning the identity of the serpent in the above text (cf Westermann 1984:237), such as, the serpent is Satan in disguise; the serpent symbolizes human curiosity; the serpent is a mythological figure for prosperity, life and death, chaos, demon or God's enemy; the serpent is an animal that is clever. This study assumes that the serpent is used in Gn 3 to symbolize evil force in opposition to God/*Yahweh* (cf Is 27:1; 2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9;

24; 6:1-8), Yahweh almost wiped out humankind and other creatures completely from the face of the earth (cf Gn 7:21-24). However, he spared Noah, his family and some other selected creatures from every kind in order to have a renewed creation.

In the second part of the structure which is 'Re-creation', Noah, his family and few other creatures began a new life. Thus, the new life is understood as a recreated life (cf Gn 8:1-20). Human beings (Noah and his family) were reminded anew about their close relationship with Yahweh. They were made in God's image and likeness (cf Gn 9:6). They were blessed by God (cf Gn 9:1). They were also reminded of their role as God's vicegerent (cf Gn 9:2-3). They were obliged to live in obedience to God and in good relationship with their fellow human beings as well as with the rest of the other creatures (cf Gn 9:4-17).

Regrettably, humankind disobeyed or sinned against God (cf Gn 9:21-23; 11:3-4; cf 9:1, 7) as they had done in the first creation episode. God responded in almost the same ways as he did at the fall in the garden. Humankind was separated from Yahweh, this time, by scattering them all over the earth (cf Gn 11:8). Yahweh thereby, initiated a process through which he would renew his relationship with humankind via Abram/Abraham (Gn 12:1-3; cf Fretheim 1994:425-426). The covenant between Yahweh and Abram/Abraham (cf Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27) may therefore be understood as

20:2). This opinion does not negate the fact that the serpent could be an instrument of death or a means of obtaining life and healing (cf Nm 21:6-9; Jn 3:14).

Yahweh's renewed response toward human disobedience and their subsequent separation from Yahweh. In my opinion, Yahweh's renewed response via Abrahamic covenant was motivated by his love and desire to restore the relationship that had existed between himself and humankind including other creatures at creation, prior to the fall in Genesis 3 (cf Fretheim 1996:85; Soggin 2001:55).

Through Yahweh's relationship with Abraham, he will bless the entire human race and restore them to their vicegerent role (cf Gn 12:1-3). Yahweh's relationship with human beings and his creation must be accomplished through Abraham and his descendants via the covenant. The events that have followed the covenant, which Yahweh had made with Abraham and his descendants, may therefore be understood in two ways. Some of the events narrate an advancement of the Abrahamic covenant promises⁷¹ while other events seem to derail the covenant promises from being realised.⁷²

Despite the occurrence of positive and negative events that restrained or advanced the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant promises, the book of Genesis reveals that Yahweh, the God of Israel was successfully guiding and controlling the events and the covenant promises which he had made to Abraham and his descendants to his desired goal (cf Gn 50:19-21,24-25).

⁷¹ The birth of Isaac, a legitimate son of Abraham (Gn 21:1-7), indicates an advancement in the covenant promises God made to Abraham (cf Gn 15:4-6; 17:16-19).

⁷² God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his only son Isaac (Gn 22:1-12). Esau harbors a plan to kill his brother Jacob for receiving his blessing (Gn 27:41). These events almost derail or brought tension to God's covenant promise with Abram (Gn 15:4-6; 17:16-19).

As a consequence, every event that has transpired through Abraham and his descendants including the history of the world should not be considered as a haphazard or accidental happening. Rather, all the events that had happened in the life of Abraham, his descendants and in the life of other nations should be understood as moving toward Yahweh's ultimate goal for the establishment of covenant relationship with humankind via Abraham and his descendants. Thus, the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history (Dt - 2 Ki) are a narration of the advancement of or derailment to the fulfilment of the covenant promises which Yahweh had made to Abraham and his descendants.

3.3.4 Characteristic elements of the Abrahamic covenant

The passages that deal specifically with the covenant which Yahweh had made with Abraham include Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27. Genesis 12:1-3 might be regarded as introductory background to the above covenant passages. The two Abrahamic covenant episodes have received considerable attention among biblical scholars for almost a century.⁷³

Source criticism suggests that the two covenant texts originated from two separate source traditions (cf Brueggemann 1982:153; Westermann 1985:214-217, 256-257; Fretheim 1994:444, 457). Consequently, chapter 17 is considered as originating from the Priestly (P) source tradition (cf

⁷³ Cf Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone (2001:111-112, 138); Fretheim (1994:444); Wenham (1987: 326; 1994:18-19); Westermann (1985:214-217, 254-256).

Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone 2001:112). However, there appears to be no consensus on the source of chapter 15. There is still debate about whether to assign chapter 15 to 'Yahweh' (J) and or to *'elohim* (E) source traditions (cf Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone 2001:112; Westermann 1985:214, 216-217). But Westermann himself is reluctant to assign the chapter to any specific hypothetical source tradition; rather, he has regarded it simply as a patriarchal promise narrative which was designed to assure God's people in times of national danger. Fretheim (1994:445) notes that chapter 15 should be considered as originating from the exilic period when divine promises were a major topic of discussions.

Despite the above uncertainties concerning the sources of the two chapters, there is agreement on the idea that both chapters deal with Yahweh's covenant with Abraham, the patriarch. In view of this, my opinion is that chapter 15 is an account of the initial covenant activity between Yahweh and Abraham, while chapter 17 recounts Yahweh's renewal of his covenant with Abraham. Both passages, in my opinion, are likely to have emerged from the same source tradition since there is nothing extraordinary in any of the passages to point to a separate source tradition. Furthermore, it has already been argued that among the Hittite people, it was a usual practice for the suzerainty-vassal treaty covenant to renew their covenant (cf Bruce 1980:328; Bright 2000:151). Therefore, it is not strange to find a situation where Yahweh renews his own covenant with Abraham or his descendants as we have assumed to have happened in the two above covenant passages.

Consequently, there are several indications in each chapter that they could be linked or related to each other. The first indication which could relate the two chapters together is that Genesis 15:1-21 is historically prior to 17:1-27. The following discussion will clarify this historical chronology of the two covenants better.

At the time when the initial covenant (Gn 15:1-21) was contracted between Yahweh and Abraham, Abraham did not have his own biological child; as a result, he was contemplating having Eliezer, a servant in his own house to be his heir (Gn 15:2-3). Yahweh objected to Abraham's proposal; instead, he promised to provide Abraham with his own biological child (Gn 15:4). It is also clear that Abraham did not have a child from Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant, at the time when the initial covenant was made. But after the initial covenant event, Hagar delivered a son to Abraham. By then, Abraham was eighty six years old (Gn 16:16). Thus, the second covenant event or the renewal of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham (Gn 17:1-27) took place at a time when Abraham was already ninety-nine years old (Gn 17:1), while Ishmael was thirteen years old (Gn 17:25).

A second indication that links the two chapters together is that chapter 17:1-27 presupposes some knowledge about the events that had happened in chapter 15:1-21. For example, in Genesis 17:1, Yahweh commanded Abraham to walk before him and be blameless. On what basis did Yahweh make such a claim if the previous covenant event was not that basis?

Yahweh would not place upon Abraham a demand for a blameless walk, if he had no previous contact with Abraham, particularly, a contact in the form of a covenant.

Furthermore, Yahweh hurriedly brought in the idea of a covenant in Genesis 17:2, to remind Abraham about the basis for his above claim on his walk with him. Yahweh also brought in the promise of multiplying the descendants of Abraham in order to stress the fact that he had not forgotten the promises which he had made to Abraham concerning the provision of his offspring in chapter 15. Yahweh pointed out that Abraham would have a son through Sarah; this son would be the person Yahweh would continue the line of his covenant (Gn 17:19, 21). Thus, the promise of Abraham having a son from his own body is carried forward from chapter 15 to chapter 17 where the son is finally identified by the name Isaac (cf Gn 17:19, 21).

In view of the above reconstructed historical chronology and connections, it is understandable to regard the second covenant event as a covenant renewal, therefore, confirmatory or possibly complementary to the first covenant (cf Adar 1990:66; Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone 2001:112). Another factor is that Genesis 15:1-21 does not possess some of the other relevant characteristic elements of an Ancient Near Eastern covenant formula. Therefore, Genesis 17:1-27 provides additional characteristic elements which were absent in chapter 15:1-21. For example, there were no covenant obligations for Abraham in Genesis 15:1-21. It should be noted once again

that the concept of covenant renewal was a usual practice among the Ancient Near Eastern people (cf Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181; Pfeiffer 1966:175). So, it is not strange for Yahweh to contract a covenant with Abraham in chapter 15 and have the same covenant renewed in chapter 17. It also fits into the course of the plot and building of tension in the literary story of Genesis.

We had indicated earlier that the two covenant texts are considered as originating from two separate source traditions (J, E or P).⁷⁴ But this does not negate the fact that after all we are, in both chapters, dealing with the same God who contracted his covenant with the same person Abraham at two separate intervals. The first passage (Gn 15:1-17) describing the initial covenant ceremony; while the second passage (Gn 17:1-21) describing the renewal of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham. Therefore, this second covenant activity becomes a confirmatory covenant episode.

In addition, it seems that there is a historical chronology in the two chapters. The first covenant event happened when Abraham was less than eighty-six years old while the second covenant event was at a time when he was ninety-nine years old (cf Gn 16:16; 17:1, 24-26). As result of the above historical/literary chronology and connections between the two covenants, I will consider both chapters as a theological unit. I will discuss the two

⁷⁴ Cf Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone (2001:112); Fretheim (1994:444, 457); Westermann (1985:214-217, 256-257); Brueggemann (1982:153).

Abrahamic covenant events in relation to the characteristic elements found in the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form.

The characteristic elements of the Ancient Near Eastern treaty forms, as discussed previously, were not rigid. According to Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180), the concept of covenant was understood and practiced in a variety ways in the Ancient Near Eastern world. During the second millennium BC, the Hittite Empire appeared to have produced the most sophisticated and a well organized form of the suzerainty-vassal treaty form.

On the contrary, Bright (2000:150-151) pointed out that the Israelite covenant formula could have hardly been derived from the Hittite empire because the Empire had already vanished from the scene when Israel arrived in Palestine. So, in his judgment, the covenant formula presented below, represents a general trend in the ancient Orient during the second millennium B C, but incidentally was transmitted to us through the texts of the Hittite Empire. However, Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180) reiterated that there is no reason to doubt that some of these treaty patterns originated from the Hittite treaty practices and that some of the characteristic elements of the treaty forms were common among various cultures in the Bronze Age.

Therefore, the characteristic elements which are drawn from the various Hittite international suzerainty-vassal treaty patterns during the Late Bronze Age by Mendenhall and Herion (1992:1180-1183) and others (cf Soulen and Soulen 2001:200; Vogels 1979:2-6 and Bright 2000:150-151) will be

compared with those that exist in the two Abrahamic covenant episodes (Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27). This comparison will give us a better picture of what is involved in the Abrahamic covenant⁷⁵ as a whole. The Ancient Near Eastern Hittite suzerainty-vassal treaty pattern discussed previously includes:

- Identification of the covenant giver;
- Historical prologue;
- Stipulations;
- Preservation and periodic public reading;
- Witnesses to the treaty;
- Blessing and curses;
- Ratification ceremony; and
- Imposition of the curses.

3.3.4.1 Identification of the covenant giver

In both passages of the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 15:1; 17:1), Yahweh is the initiator and the one who is the covenant giver. In the first covenant event (Gn 15:1), Yahweh identified himself to Abram as his 'shield' and 'reward'; Yahweh also cautioned him about fear. Meanwhile, during the renewal of the covenant, Yahweh introduced himself as the 'Lord Almighty' (Gn 17:1). These introductory statements from Yahweh to Abraham could be understood in several ways.

When Yahweh made a statement of caution to Abraham from the first covenant encounter, Yahweh's appearance to Abram was in the form of a vision. But prior to Genesis 15:1, Yahweh had appeared to Abram and the

⁷⁵ McConville (1997:747) lists six characteristics elements of the Hittite international suzerain-vassal treaties following from the list provided by McCarthy (1981:51-52; cf Pfeiffer 1966:175). These include: (i) titulary (introducing parties); (ii) historical prologue (rehearsing their past relations); (iii) stipulations; (iv) document clause (requiring the preservation of the document in the

mode of Yahweh's appearance seemed to have been left unexplained from that passage. Adar (1990:60) argued that 'vision' is a world of mystery. It is totally different from our natural world. God's appearance to Abram here in a vision is not visible to the eyes of Abram but audible to his ears. A contrary idea is suggested that Abram was awake, and was able to witness some visible appearances of the *Shechinah*, or some sensible token of the presence of the divine glory (Church 1973:30). Westermann (1985:218) said that this method of introduction presupposes prophecy (cf also Fretheim 1994:444) and therefore suggests a later period in the history of the monarchy comparable to other passages (cf 1 Sm 15:10; 2 Sm 7:4; 1 Ki 12:22; 16:1; 17:2, 8; 18:31; 21:17) from that period.

Concerning the statement of caution Yahweh had made to Abram, Speiser (1990:115) held the opinion that the promises Yahweh had made to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3, seemed to focus upon Abraham's descendants. But Abraham did not have a child before chapter 15. Therefore, this might have been heart-breaking for Abram (cf Ross 1988:308), because among the Ancient Near Eastern people, a son was responsible for burying his father after he had died and then inheriting his father's property. Since Abraham had no legitimate children of his own at that stage, he may have been very worried or anxious about the absence of his own biological son who could be the heir (cf Adar 1990:60; Walton & Matthews 1997:35).

temple and its regular reading; (v) god list (i.e. witnesses to the treaty); and (vi) blessings and curses (invoked for keeping or violating the treaty).

Another reason for the caution might be that the story which preceded Genesis 15:1 suggests that Abram fought against his enemies and rescued his relative Lot from their hands. So, Abram might have been engulfed by an intense feeling concerning his experience from the rescue mission (Ross 1988:308). In view of Abram's inner state of mind or his exhaustion, he might have needed Yahweh's assurance, comfort and a great deal of certainty about the one who was communicating with him. Yahweh is not Abram's enemy. He does not appear to create another problem for Abram nor his relative Lot; rather, Yahweh's intention was to establish a friendly (covenant) relationship with Abram. Yahweh, therefore, declared that he was Abram's shield (šm) and his very great reward (daom. hBer>h; ^r>k' f.). The terms 'shield' and 'reward' are figurative or metaphorical descriptions of Yahweh's functions of divine care to Abram. These terms probably suggest that Yahweh is Abram's protection and provision (cf Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:210; Ross 1988:308).

According to the preamble found in chapter 17:1, Yahweh introduces himself as 'I am God Almighty' (yD;v; lae-ynIa]). This introduction also denotes Yahweh's repeated assurance to Abram. Yahweh is sovereign, powerful, mighty and metaphorically a mountain (cf Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:222-223; Ross 1988:330; Fretheim 1994:458; Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001:109). Yahweh's power, sovereignty, perfection and completeness show that he is dependable and trustworthy. Based on

Yahweh's nature and character, Abram could be assured that Yahweh's covenant relationship (tyrIB.) with him is dependable and trustworthy.

Abraham and his descendants are going to be safer and be blessed when he accepts Yahweh's invitation to have a covenantal relationship with him.

3.3.4.2 Historical prologue

Another characteristic element in the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form was the historical explanation of the past relation between the higher party or the suzerainty king and the vassal king (Bright 2000:151; Vogels 1979:3; Nicholson 1986:57). Here, with regard to the Abrahamic covenant, the historical prologue can be found in Genesis 15:7.⁷⁶ In this verse, Yahweh explains his past relationship with Abram. We have already noticed from the Hittite treaty practice that the purpose of recounting the past was to instil a sense of appreciation in the mind of the vassal king/party and his subjects and as the reason or justification for their future obedience to the Hittite suzerainty king.

A similar motive might have undergirded Yahweh's statement described in Genesis 15:7. Here, Yahweh recounts his previous benevolent activities to Abram by reminding him that he had brought Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans to give him this present land.

⁷⁶ Gn 15:7 "And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."

Genesis 11:31-32⁷⁷ seems to suggest that Abram moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan through the initiative of his father Terah. The passage also appears to say that it was after the death of Abram's father, Terah, from Haran, on their way to Canaan, that Yahweh appeared to Abram and called him to leave his country (cf Gn 12:1). Should we therefore, understand that Terah and his family moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan through Yahweh's initiative as Genesis 15:7 seems to suggest or should we understand their move to be at the initiative of Terah, Abram's father (cf Gn 11:31)?

In answering the above question, I am convinced by the suggestion (cf Ross 1988:258-259) that Genesis 11:27-32 ought to be understood as a summary or an overview of Genesis 12:1-9. The reason is that the historical progression of the events narrated in this entire Abrahamic story would appear to be more chronological if Ross' suggestion is followed. The chronology of the events here is that Abram may have received Yahweh's call (Gn 12:1-3) and may have moved with his family including his father Terah to Haran. Afterwards, his father might have died in Haran (Gn 11:32), then Abram and his family including Lot might have moved from Haran to Canaan (Gn 12:4-5). At a later stage, Yahweh appeared to Abram in Genesis 15:1-21 in order to establish a covenant relationship with Abram. This explanation

⁷⁷ Gn 11:31 - 31 "Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. ³² The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran".

seems to fit well with what Genesis 15:7 appears to suggest. The interpretation logically implies that Yahweh was reminding Abram in Genesis 15:7 of their past relationship. Abram had already begun to follow Yahweh's initiative, so he would likely consider establishing a covenantal relationship with Yahweh based upon their previous mutual relationship.

3.3.4. 3 Stipulations/obligations

A third characteristic element in the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form was the obligations of the vassal party⁷⁸ or in some instances it was mutual obligations (cf Vogels 1979:3; Nicholson 1986:57; Bright 2000:151). Such obligations were spelled out by the higher party or the suzerainty king to the vassal king/party (cf Ross 1988:327).

In the case of the covenant between Yahweh and Abram, Abram represented the vassal party. Yahweh was therefore, responsible for spelling out the covenant obligations for Abram. Yahweh spelled out in Genesis 17:1b, 9-14. The first obligation (v.1b) was that Abram should walk⁷⁹ before Yahweh and be blameless (~ymit' hyEh.w< yn:p'l. %Leh;t.hi). Abram was bound to obey Yahweh's covenant obligations. The use of the imperative

⁷⁸ Such obligations included for example, the "Prohibition of any relationship with a country outside the Hittite sphere; Prohibition of hostility to other Hittite Vassals; Immediate help to the great king in times of war; the Vassal must not listen to any slandering of the great king but immediately report it to the king; the Vassal must not hide the deserting slaves or refugees; the Vassal must appear once a year before the king to pay his taxes and to renew the treaty" (Bruce 1980:328; cf Bright 2000:151).

⁷⁹ The word %Leh;t.hi is *hitpael*, imperative, masculine, singular, and means 'walk'. The use of *hitpael* imperative here denotes a strong command.

הַיְהֵאָו (to be) adds another impetus to the seriousness of the command. Abram must walk in the presence of Yahweh without any defect. He should be complete or perfect in his devotion.

A second covenant obligation which Yahweh spelled out for Abram included Abram's descendants and virtually Abram's infinite future generations. Abraham's immediate descendants, as well as, all his coming generations should keep Yahweh's covenant just like Abraham was expected to do (17:9⁸⁰). Here, the covenant ties Abram to his future descendants.

This strong command also applied to the third covenant obligation which was circumcision (17:10-13). Abram was commanded to circumcise himself and all the males in his household as a permanent or memorable sign of Yahweh's covenant with him and his descendants including other nations. Every male should be circumcised. Whoever lives in Abraham's household should be circumcised.

The above covenant obligation of circumcision appeared to have extended beyond the blood related descendants of Abram. The covenant obligation covered the aliens, those that had been bought from foreigners, temporary residents and essentially everyone who lived under the auspices of Abram and his descendants. Any person who was brought (or who comes by

⁸⁰ The word הַיְהֵאָו is *hitpa'el*, imperative, masculine, singular, and means 'walk'. The use of *hitpa'el* imperative as I had indicated earlier, denotes a strong command which must be carried out or obeyed by Abraham and his descendants for as long as they live. It is a timeless obligation.

himself) to live in the house of Abraham should keep this covenant law of circumcision.

In other words, the covenant sign of circumcision virtually tied Abram to his descendants as well as to his infinite generations that shall be born. In addition, the covenant sign of circumcision linked Abraham with foreigners, aliens, slaves or every other person who came to live under his auspices or under the care of his descendants. This sign did not discriminate nor does it exclude others on the basis of their race, language, tribe, social status, et cetera, provided the person was willing to live in obedience to the covenant laws (cf Gn 17:10-13). The keeping of the covenant laws, including the law of circumcision, was one of the essential prerequisites to living under the care and protection of the Abrahamic covenant. Any person who came and lived with Abraham or his descendants and kept the covenant laws became a covenant member by implication. A native born descendant of Abraham could be separated from Yahweh and from the Abrahamic covenant if he does not circumcise or keep these covenant laws.

Since a covenant involved blood-letting, circumcision practically bound a person by blood to Abraham and Yahweh's covenant. The sign of circumcision would always remind Abraham and his descendants, including foreigners, of Yahweh's covenant with them. Circumcision would also remind Abraham and his descendants, as well as foreigners, about the consequences of failing to obey the covenant laws/obligations.

3.3.4. 4 Preservation and/or periodic public reading

We have already noted from the Hittite suzerainty-vassal treaty pattern that a copy of the covenant document was granted to the vassal king/party by the suzerainty king in order for it to be preserved in the temple of the local deity/deities of the vassal king; while the suzerainty king also would keep another copy in the temple of his national god (cf McConville 1997:747; Barre 1992:655; Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1181; McCarthy 1981:52; Bruce 1980:328). Accordingly, the suzerainty king would usually require the vassal king and his subjects to conduct a periodic public reading of the covenant document in order that its stipulations might be incorporated in the political, social, economic and religious life of the members of the vassal king/party (cf Bright 2000:151; Pfeiffer 1966:175).

But Yahweh's covenant with Abraham did not have a similar provision for the preservation and periodic public reading of the covenant document. However, the motive for the preservation of the covenant document and the periodic public reading of it was to impress the provisions of the covenant on the minds and hearts of the members of the vassal king/party in order that they would keep the terms of the covenant.

Thus, in my opinion, there are two obligations that have been impressed upon Abraham's mind that might be understood as fulfilling this characteristic element. The one is the command to circumcise (cf Gn 17:10-14, 24-27).

Circumcision was an external visible sign which would permanently remind Abraham and his descendants about their covenant relationship with Yahweh.

The other command was that Abraham should teach his children to keep the way of the Lord and to practice justice and righteousness (cf Gn 18:19). Abraham and his descendants would undertake *leadership* role and live in *obedience* to Yahweh and exhibit *righteousness* and *justice* in their relationship with others. This responsibility of teaching becomes a beacon by which the descendants of Abraham would know and keep this covenant. Therefore, the two above mentioned commands fulfilled the requirement of the periodic reading of the covenant document, since the essence of it was to impress its terms and obligations upon the minds of the vassal party members.

3.3.4.5 Witnesses to the treaty

It has already been observed that during a normal Ancient Near Eastern treaty ceremony, the higher party invokes various kinds of witnesses such as gods, mountains, rivers, heavens, earth, et cetera, to serve as guarantors of the covenant ceremony (cf Bright 2000:151; Nicholson 1986:58; Bruce 1980:328; Vogels 1979:3; Pfeiffer 1966:175). These witnesses were expected to carry out appropriate punishment and rewards upon the vassal party in case of disobedience or obedience respectively.

The above purpose was not needed in the case of the Abrahamic covenant. According to Ross (1988:312), Yahweh himself was the witness, symbolized

in the passing of the fire pot between the severed animals since there was none greater than Yahweh to whom he could swear (cf Gn 15:17-18). In addition, Yahweh was responsible for carrying out the appropriate rewards and punishments. Thus, Yahweh did not need a witness to this covenant ceremony. Yahweh is God. There is no other god. Yahweh does not recognize any other god as a god. All the supposed gods were powerless or dead gods. So, it was appropriate for Yahweh not to call upon any other god to serve as a witness.

However, elsewhere, there are certain allusions to Yahweh's call for the heavens, the earth, the mountains and the valleys to be witnesses to his relationship with Israel (cf Dt 32:1; Is 1:2; Mc 6:1-2). These texts are not fundamentally covenant passages, but they reflect or reveal Yahweh's relationship with Israel essentially as covenantal. The heavens, earth, mountains and valleys are therefore summoned to serve as witnesses to what Yahweh is saying to his covenant partner Israel.

3.3.4. 6 Blessing and curses

Another characteristic element in the Ancient Near Eastern Hittite treaty form discussed earlier was the pronouncement of blessing⁸¹ and curses⁸² by the suzerainty king/party over the vassal king/party should he obey or disobey the covenant terms respectively. It is asserted that the gods were summoned or called upon to bring curses or blessings upon the vassal party in case of

⁸¹ See Gn 15:4-5, 15; 17:6-8, 16, 19, and 21.

obedience or disobedience respectively (cf Vogels 1979:3; Nicholson 1986:58; Bright 2000:151). This pronouncement was done in two ways:

- First, the parties would pass between the severed animals that had been placed for that purpose (cf Adar 1990:63; Walton & Matthews 1997:41-42; Jr 34:8-9, 18-19), as a witness to what would happen to both parties should any of them violate the terms of the covenant.
- Second, the higher party would usually make a verbal pronouncement of the curses resulting from any violation of the covenant in addition to the passing between the divided animals. He/she would also pronounce the blessing for the vassal or lower party on the condition that the vassal party keeps the covenant.

Regarding the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, Yahweh pronounced the covenant blessings and curses in both the first and second covenant texts (cf Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27). He made several promises to bless Abram and his descendants and to curse them in cases of obedience or disobedience respectively.

Concerning the result of obedience, Yahweh made several promises to bless Abraham and his descendants in the following ways:

- First, Yahweh made a promise to provide Abram with a son who would come from Abram's own body (15:4-5) and he would also provide him with

⁸² See Gn 15:9-10, 17; 17:14.

long and peaceful years (15:15). Meanwhile, Sarah also would be blessed by Yahweh. She would give birth to the son whom Yahweh had promised to Abram (17:16, 19). Yahweh would eventually continue or establish his covenant relationship with Isaac, the son whom Sarah would bear with Abraham (cf 17:21). Consequently, Abram would become fruitful (17:6).

- Second, Yahweh would give to Abram and his descendants the land which began from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: this land would cover the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Rephaim, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite and the Jebusite tribes (cf 15:7, 18-21; 17:8).

- Third, Abraham would be the father of many nations (17:4). Surprisingly, Yahweh had already made him the father of many nations before he disclosed it to Abram (cf 17:5). Yahweh also made a promise to Abraham that kings would emerge from his descendants (17:6). This role of kingship may be understood as the vicegerent role assigned to Adam and Eve from the beginning of creation (Gn 1:28) and also to Noah and his family from the beginning of re-creation (Gn 9:1-3).

- Fourth, Yahweh would become the God of Abram and his descendants (17:8). Yahweh's promise that he would become Abraham's God seemed to suggest that Abram and his descendants would live under the protection, blessing and favour of Yahweh. Yahweh would protect and sustain Abraham and his descendants in the Promised Land and elsewhere. As a result,

Abraham should not look to other gods in times of trouble. Yahweh could care for and protect Abraham, and could also provide for all the needs of Abraham and his descendants.

- Fifth, Yahweh will bless Ishmael (cf Gn 17:20). Ishmael will be fruitful and will become the father of many tribes. Despite the fact that Ishmael would receive Yahweh's blessing, Yahweh would not make or continue the line of his covenant with Ishmael (cf Gn 17:21); rather, he will continue the line of his covenant with Isaac and presumably Isaac's descendants. In regard to this specific direction of the Abrahamic covenant, it is possible to argue that Ishmael may receive Yahweh's covenant blessings via Abraham and his descendants just like other nations, aliens, foreigners and tribes would receive similar covenant blessings through Abraham and his seed (cf Gn. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26: 4; 28:14).

Meanwhile, the curses which Yahweh pronounced over Abram/Abraham and his descendants in the course of disobedience are not immediately in view from the account in Genesis 15:1-21 but are found in Genesis 17:14. What is striking about the account from Genesis 15:17 is that Yahweh had committed himself to keeping his promises through the symbolic animal sacrifice.

The event of the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch passing between the severed animals represented the identification of the deity with the slaughtered animals as a guarantee of the reliability of the promise (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1190). Westermann (1985:228) relates this

passage to Jeremiah 34:18-22 and argues that both events represent “a conditional self-cursing under the form of the split animals; the one who passes between them calls their fate upon himself should he violate the obligation”. This would appear strange if God is to implicate himself to that depth but Fretheim (1994:449) dismissed such fear when he argued that,

“some commentators had difficulty conceiving of God as a participant in an oath of self-imprecation;....However, that God would swear that the animal’s fate would apply to God should the promises be broken is the most natural, and the more difficult, reading of rite....God commits to the promise at such a depth that God considers an experience of suffering and even death. This reveals the depth of the divine faithfulness to Abram and the divine willingness to become vulnerable for the sake of the promise”.

Therefore, if Yahweh does not keep his covenant promises, his fate is here symbolized in the event of the severing of the animals (cf Gn 15:9-10, 17; Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:214; Ross 1988:312 and Fretheim 1994:449). As the animals are slaughtered and Yahweh symbolically passes between the slaughtered animals, the same would apply to Yahweh if he breaks the covenant obligations or promises.

On the part of Abraham, he is obliged to keep the covenant terms by circumcising all the males in his household. Failure to circumcise will result in being severed from the covenant relationship or being cut off

(*h't' r>k .nIw>*)⁸³ from Abraham's household (cf Gn 17:14; Fretheim 1994:459). This would also mean that the person will be excluded from all the covenant blessings. It is the same word which is used for cutting a covenant (cf Gn 15:18). Since the process of making a covenant has an element of shedding animal blood, the consequences for disobeying the covenant obligations also may involve the shedding of blood by the covenant breaker.⁸⁴

3.3.4.7 Ratification ceremony

It has been noted previously that a covenantal relationship was viewed as a serious relationship among the Ancient Near Eastern people. In view of this, it was a usual practice to ratify the covenant so that it could have bearing and force upon the parties involved. We also learned that there was no single rigid formula across the ancient Orient for ratifying a treaty or covenant. However, some of the usual activities which were carried out during this ratification process involved the sacrifice of an animal as well as the eating of a common meal.

The idea of sacrificing an animal was to demonstrate how the vassal party would be treated if he and his subjects violated the covenant stipulation when it takes effect. According to Robertson (1980:14-15),

⁸³ The word *h't' r>k .nIw>* used in Gn 17:14 is a *niphal waw* consecutive, perfect, third person, singular which is derived from the verb *t'r'k* meaning to 'cut off', 'kill' or 'eliminate' (cf Kelly 1992:384).

⁸⁴ This is my personal view concerning the theological implication of circumcision.

“At the point of covenantal inauguration, the parties of the covenant are committed to one another by a formalizing process of blood-shedding. This blood-shedding represents the intensity of the commitment of the covenant. By the covenant they are bound for life and death.”

Meanwhile, the practice of eating a common meal was the expression of social solidarity and peace between the covenant parties (Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1194).

Thus, in the Abrahamic covenant, we had noted how Yahweh imprecated himself through the symbol of a fire pot and a flashing torch passing in the midst of the divided animals (Gn 15:17). Fretheim (1994:449) and Westermann (1985:228) have already dismissed any fear about Yahweh’s self-imprecation. His self-imprecation shows the depth of his commitment to his covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants. But Abraham and his household did not pass through the same divided animals for reasons not known to us; alternatively, Abraham and his descendants were made to bear a permanent sign of the covenant (cf Gn 17:11-14, 24-27).

3.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

3.4.1 Exclusive and inclusive character

There are a number of implications that could be noted from the Abrahamic covenant. One of them is that the Abrahamic covenant is both exclusive and inclusive in character. On the one hand, this covenant according to Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 was between Yahweh and Abraham. On the other hand the covenant was also between Yahweh (the higher party Gn 15:1, 18) and

Abraham (the vassal party Gn 15:1, 18) including his descendants (cf Gn 15:18-19; 17:6-8) as well as other people or foreigners (cf Gn 17:4-5, 12-14, 16, 24-27).

A practical example of this exclusive and inclusive scenario is found in the conversation between Yahweh and Abraham concerning Ishmael.⁸⁵ This conversation, if viewed on the surface, may appear as if Ishmael was completely excluded from the covenant programme between Yahweh and Abraham. Yahweh appears to be saying that he will not make a covenant with Ishmael but rather he will make it only with Sarah's child, Isaac.

But it turned out that Ishmael is also included in the covenant institution because he is also brought in to enjoy the Abrahamic covenant blessing (cf Gn 17:20; see also Goldingay 2003:225-226). In addition to his inclusion in the covenant blessing, Ishmael is also made to bear the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, which is, circumcision (cf Gn 17:26). Furthermore, foreigners are also brought in to bear the sign of the covenant (cf Gn 17:12-13, 23, 27). Finally, other nations are also anticipated to benefit from this covenant blessing (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). The Abrahamic covenant therefore, may be understood as having both exclusive and inclusive dimensions in its nature and application (cf Adar 1990:66).

3.4.2 Yahweh unilaterally administered the covenant.

⁸⁵ "And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!" 19 But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him (Gn 17:18-19).

The covenant ceremony between Yahweh and Abraham was unilaterally administered by Yahweh (Gn 15:1-21 and 17:1-27). Yahweh represented the suzerainty king while Abraham represented the vassal king. It was Yahweh who initiated the covenant (cf Gn 15:9-10; 17:2). Also he alone pronounced the purposes of the covenant (cf Gn 12:2-3; 17:7; 18:19). He alone spelled out the terms of the covenant (cf Gn 17:1, 9-14). Abraham was simply brought in to receive the blessings of the covenant and to keep the terms of it together with his descendants as well as other nations. Thus, this covenant can better be described as a unilateral covenant.

3.4.3 Goal(s) or value of the Abrahamic covenant

Among the Ancient Near Eastern people, a covenantal relationship usually had specific goal(s) or value(s) (cf Mendenhall and Herion 1992: 1180). Like in any other committed relationship, the importance or value of such an agreement was highlighted in the process of making the covenant. If the covenant relationship had no value, it amounted to saying there was no basis for such a covenant to be contracted. In addition, both parties were required to know the value for establishing such a covenant relationship. Similarly, the Abrahamic covenant had specific relevant goals (cf Gn 12:2-3; 15:1, 4, 7; 17:4-8; 18:19) as follows:

3.4.3.1 Yahweh will be Abraham's God

One of the main values or goals of the Abrahamic covenant was to provide a platform for Yahweh's relationship with Abraham and his descendants

whereby Yahweh will become their God and they will become Yahweh's people by implication (cf Gn 17:7). Before Yahweh would intervene in human history in a special way to execute long term plans for his creation after the event of Babel (Gn 11:1-9), he began by establishing a covenant⁸⁶ relationship with Abraham and his descendants (12:1-17:27). Through Yahweh's covenant⁸⁷ relationship with Abraham, Yahweh will become Abraham's God and Abraham and his descendants will become Yahweh's people. As a consequence of this covenant relationship, Yahweh will accomplish all other things he had promised to Abraham (Gn 18:19b).

3.4.3.2 Leadership, obedience, righteousness and justice

Another value or relevance of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham and his descendants is found in Genesis 18:19.⁸⁸ Here, Yahweh stated that Abraham will have to direct his children and his household so that they would keep the way of Yahweh and may do what is right and just. In other words, from the perspective of the Abrahamic covenant, 'leadership', 'obedience', 'righteousness' and 'justice' are all at the heart of Yahweh's covenant

⁸⁶ The fall of Adam and Eve (Gn 3:1-22) and the event of Babel (Gn 11:1-7) resulted in the severing of the loving relationship between Yahweh and humankind (Gn 3:23-24; 11:8-9). These events of human disobedience and separation from God became fundamental precursors to the re-establishment of a covenantal relationship between God and humankind through Abraham.

⁸⁷ One may ask 'why Yahweh used the means of a covenant to establish his relationship with Abraham and his descendants?' The answer is that Yahweh could have used any other means that accorded to his will to accomplish his purposes. However, it should be borne in mind that the concept of covenant was a familiar concept among the Ancient Near Eastern people. Therefore, Yahweh may have decided to use something which was already familiar among the people living in the region where Abraham had originated.

⁸⁸ Gn 18:19: "For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Abraham and his descendants were to undertake *leadership* role and live in *obedience* to Yahweh and exhibit *righteousness* and *justice* in their relationship with others. Through this process, other nations shall know and embrace Yahweh, the God of Abraham, and live in obedience to him.

3.4.3.3 Abraham will be blessed and be a channel of blessing

Very crucial to the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant is the blessing with which Yahweh had planned to bless Abraham and his descendants. This blessing includes land, children, wealth and nations (cf Gn 12:2; 15:4-5, 18-21; 17:2, 4-6, 16, 19, 20; see also Goldingay 2003:218). Abraham and his seed also shall become a channel of Yahweh's blessing to other nations (cf Gn 12:3; 15:4,7; 17:4-8; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14). Other nations are linked to Abraham and his descendants in order that they might receive the blessing that Yahweh had promised them via Abraham (see Excursus 3.7 for details on the blessing).

3.4.3.4 Covenant as a means of Yahweh's self-revelation

It has been asserted (cf Walton 2001:382, 401) that Yahweh chose Abraham and his descendants for several meaningful purposes. One of the central purposes was for Abraham and his descendants to serve as instruments through which Yahweh will reveal himself to his creation (cf Ross 1988:260; Walton & Matthews 1997:36-37). Abraham and his descendants could benefit from the covenant (e.g. by having land, prosperity, national identity etc) if they

remained faithful to the covenant obligations. So, Yahweh brought this self-revelatory purpose to fruition through the mechanism of a covenant which he had established with Abraham and his descendants.

My opinion is that, Yahweh's desire to reveal himself is subordinate to the concept of covenant relationship. The concept or idea of relationship appears to be the bigger umbrella under which Yahweh would accomplish his other relevant goals for Abraham, his descendants, and other nations. It is understandable that when Abraham and his descendants work together in a covenant relationship, their understanding of Yahweh and their knowledge of his will would naturally expand and progress. Therefore, God's self-revelation would become a subordinate factor to the controlling factor of *relationship*.

3.4.3.5 Redemption of Abraham's descendants

Another value of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham was the redemption of Abraham's descendants and the judgment of the nation that shall enslave them.⁸⁹ The event of salvation and judgment appeared to have been embedded in the covenant purposes between Yahweh and Abraham as indicated from the above reference. Before the redemptive episode shall take place, Abraham's descendants shall live as slaves in a foreign nation, suggestive of Egypt; but Yahweh shall judge that nation and then redeem his

⁸⁹ "God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴ "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions" (Gn 15:13-14; cf 48:21; 50:24-25).

people and bring them to the land which he had promised to Abraham and his descendants (cf Gn 15:13-16).

In a similar way, Abraham and his descendants or seed shall serve as a channel through which Yahweh shall bless other nations (cf Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14). In other words, the seed of Abraham by implication becomes the means of blessing as well as the linchpin between Yahweh and other nations. In these covenant promises, there is, therefore, an inseparable link between Yahweh and Abraham as well as between Yahweh and other nations (cf Dt 10:12-22). The covenant obviously imposes a mediatory function upon Abraham and his descendants between Yahweh and other nations in order that Yahweh's relationship, self-revelation, lordship and blessing would be known, received, revered, and enjoyed by other nations.

3.4.4 Significance of name change

There was a great deal of significance which was attached to the names of persons in the ancient world (Walton & Matthews 1997:44). Specifically, the Hebrew thought was that a name could reveal or express something about the nature and character of its bearer (cf Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone 2001:264; Moberly 1992:5; 1 Sm 25:25). According to the Ancient Near Eastern tradition, the giving of a name to someone would show that the person who gave the name had control or power over the one who was named. It is therefore argued that similar perception supposedly undergirded the Adamic authority in naming the rest of the other creatures which Yahweh

had made (cf Parke-Taylor 1975:1; Gn 2:19-20). Adam also named his wife, *hV' êa.î* (woman, cf Gn 2:23), probably as an indication of her closeness to him but also as suggestive of his headship over his female partner. Obviously, Adam and Eve were given the mandate to rule over the rest of the other creatures (cf Gn 1:26-30; 9:2-3).

Thus, from the above understanding of the importance of naming, it could be argued that when Yahweh changed Abram's and Sarai's names to become Abraham and Sarah (Gn 17:5, 15), it denoted that Yahweh had control and authority over the course of their lives and destinies henceforth. A similar viewpoint has also been suggested by Freedman (1992:39) who argued that "Genesis introduces the longer name as part of the covenant God made with Abram, so the new name confirmed God's control and marked a stage in the patriarch's career" (cf Fretheim 1994:459; Wenham 1994:21).

3.5 EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

3.5.1. Introduction

There are several connections between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the covenant promises which Yahweh had made in the Pentateuch to Abraham and his descendants. First, the status of other nations or foreigners has been spelled out in the Abrahamic covenant. Second, the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah attempted to connect certain events from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to the covenant promises which Yahweh had made to Abraham and to his descendants, as has been

discussed above. In view of this, the following discussion will describe how the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the Abrahamic covenant promises have been connected to each other.

3.5.2 Ezra, Nehemiah and the Abrahamic covenant

The strength of the relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah and the Abrahamic covenant promises is shown by the appeal which Ezra and Nehemiah have made to Yahweh's covenant promises to Abraham.⁹⁰ This appeal obviously suggests that there is a theological link between the events that have happened in Genesis⁹¹ and those that took place during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah.

For example, Nehemiah 9:7-8 is situated in the context of the Israelites' confession concerning their disobedience and intermarriage with the people of the land. In the passage, it is more compelling to argue that the returned exiles intended to demonstrate their legitimacy to the land of Judah during the early post-exilic period by appealing to the Abrahamic covenant promises as their basis. The newly returned exiles appear to assert that the election of Abram, his name change, and the covenant/promises Yahweh had made to him and his descendants defined the status of the post-exilic Judean

⁹⁰ Neh 9: 7-8. 7 "Thou art the LORD God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, And gave him the name Abraham. 8 "And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee, And didst make a covenant with him To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite-To give it to his descendants. And Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise, For Thou art righteous (The quotation is from New American Standard Bible 1995).

⁹¹ Cf Gn12:1-3; 15; 17; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14.

community with respect to land usage, marriage custom, worship, and structural projects such as rebuilding the temple and the city wall.

In view of the above presupposition, the returned Jewish exiles saw themselves as inseparably tied to the previous Israelite community and to their land, worship, marriage custom, and other functions through the covenant promises Yahweh had made to Abraham (cf Williamson 1985:318-319; Blenkinsopp 1989:303-304; Breneman 1993:236-237; Klein 1999:810-811). These Judean exiles understood themselves as the legitimate descendants of Abraham, who ought to reap the benefits of the covenant blessing Yahweh had promised to Abraham. Thus, in their perspective, no one else had the privilege to dwell upon this land and enjoy its benefits as predetermined by the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 is also closely related to Ezra 9:10-15. The two texts concern the prayers about Israel's disobedience through intermarriage. Though the two passages do not mention the rest of the other covenant promises, the texts inescapably force its readers to see the inseparable link that exists between the covenant promises which Yahweh had made to Abraham and to the pre-exilic Israel and the events that have occurred during the early post-exilic period.

My argument therefore, is that if the covenant promises between Yahweh, Abraham and his descendants were so central in deciding the status of the early post-exilic Jewish community concerning the ownership of the land,

worship, and marriage, and other functions, the same principle should be seen to be in operation through the covenantal role of this early post-exilic Jewish community toward other nations. This is to suggest that the covenant role of the early post-exilic Jewish community also included the extension of God's covenantal relationship and blessings (Gn 12:1-3; 17:7; 18:18-19; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14) to other nations. Abraham and his descendants were to mediate between Yahweh and other nations in order that Yahweh's promises to bless other nations via Abraham and his seed shall be accomplished.

Therefore, to my mind, as the covenant promises determine who should own the land of Judah, who should worship or who should be their marriage partners, the same covenant promises determine how Israel should relate with other nations or foreigners. The role of Abraham and his descendants as the hinge pin or the mediator between Yahweh and other nations should have been acknowledged by these Judean exiles as they had done with the other covenant promises.

Fretheim (1994:426) argues that the entire history of Israel and their role to the nations was constituted and shaped by God's covenant promises. The covenant determines the relationship between Abraham and his descendants with other nations. Israel cannot shy away from this covenant role of being a channel of Yahweh's blessing to other nations. Israel must function as an instrument through which Yahweh's knowledge and blessings may reach other nations.

In the case of intermarriage, it should be borne in mind that it was not essentially prohibited for its own sake, as the events in Ezra and Nehemiah seemed to have presupposed. The context of Deuteronomy 7:1-26, where intermarriage was prohibited and elsewhere in the Pentateuch, clearly reveal that Yahweh's intention was to safe-guard Israel from the worship of other gods. Yahweh did not want Israel to worship other gods. This was a usual practice in the Ancient Near East for the suzerainty king to prohibit the vassal king and his subjects from having any official dealing with another king, particularly the king that was antagonistic to the Hittite suzerainty king. Consequently, prohibiting intermarriage was done to address the issue of idolatry and religious syncretism. It had no ethnic, racial, or nationalistic motive; rather, its objective was religious or theological. In view of this, the early post-exilic Jewish community (539-350 BC) are unavoidably tied to other races, tribes, and nations through the Abrahamic covenant.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the concept and practice of *tyrIB*. (covenant/treaty) in the context of the Ancient Near Eastern people, particularly, during the second millennium BC; Yahweh's covenant with Abraham⁹²; the implications of the Abrahamic covenant and the relationship between the covenant promise(s) which Yahweh had made to Abraham and his descendants and certain events that have transpired in the books of Ezra

and Nehemiah. The discussion has provided a background picture of how the concept of covenant functioned in the Ancient Near Eastern socio-cultural context. The nature and function of Abrahamic covenant is also discussed at the backdrop of the Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty-vassal treaty pattern of the second millennium BC.

The next chapter will describe a perspective of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and concerning other nations, foreigners and aliens as portrayed in the Pentateuch.

3.7 EXCURSUS: Blessing of other nations

3.7.1 Introduction

The purpose for this excursus is to point out the theological link between Yahweh and other nations evident in Yahweh's covenant promises with Abraham and his descendants.

In this excursus, the study will discuss aspects of Genesis 12:3b; 17:4-5, 12-16; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14⁹³. These texts deal with Yahweh's promises to Abraham,

⁹² Yahweh, the God of Israel made a covenant with the patriarch Abraham and his descendants and has been reported in Gn 15:1-19; 17:1-27, cf Gn 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14 et cetera.

⁹³ Gn 12: 3b `hm'd'a]h' txoP.v.mi lKo ^b.

Wkr>b.nIw>

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Gn 18: 18 `#r,a'h' yyEAG lKo Ab Wkr>b.nIw

and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?

Gn 22: 18 #r,a'h' yyEAG lKo ^[[r>z:b.

Wkr]B't.hi.

`yliqoB

T' [.m;v' rv,a] bq,[e

And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.

Gn 26:4b `#r,a'h' yyEAG lKo ^[[r>z:b.

Wkr]B't.hiw>

and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed;

Gn 28:14 `^[,r>z:b.W hm'd'a]h' txoP.v.mi-

lK' ^b. Wkr]b.nIw>

and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

particularly the promise that concerns the blessing of other nations through Abraham and his descendants. The Hebrew word Wkr>b.nIw> (be blessed) which appears in two verb forms from several passages in Genesis listed above will be discussed.

The basic concern in the following section is that scholars⁹⁴ have contended about the correct translation and interpretation of the word Wkr>b.nIw used for “blessing”.⁹⁵ The concern among scholars (e.g. Hamilton 1990:374; Wenham 1987:277) here is whether the *niphal* be translated as a passive⁹⁶ (shall be blessed), middle (shall find blessing) or reflexive (shall bless themselves) voice.

3.7.2 Passive interpretation of *barak*

Wenham (1987:278), Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) and other scholars⁹⁷ argue that even though the verb forms for the word Wkr>b.nI in Genesis 12:3b could be translated as a reflexive or a passive voice, it is most appropriate to translate the word as a passive voice. Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues further that, on the one hand, the reflexive meaning suggests that other nations were to use Abraham’s name in invoking blessing upon themselves. On the other hand, the passive interpretation points toward other nations being blessed by Abraham and his descendants.

Hamilton (1990:375) also argues that Psalm 72:17b may be a support for a passive interpretation of *barak* in Genesis 12:3. According to him, both LXX and Vulgate translate the *barak* in Psalm 72:17b as a passive verb form. He also disputed the truism that the *hitpael* form is never translated passively. He cited the works of Kaiser (1978:13) and Allis (1927:281), to support his own premise.

Kaiser (1978:13) argued that the two verb forms of *barak* found in the five passages from Genesis (cf Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) have been rendered as passives by the Samaritan, Babylonian (Onkelos) and by the Jerusalem (Pseudo-Jonathan) Targums. Similarly, Allis’ (1927:281) study has shown that there are 18 Old Testament references where the *hitpael* form may have a passive meaning⁹⁸. Hamilton (1990:375) added Proverb 31:30; Ecclesiastes 8:10; and Psalm 72:17 to Allis’s list. In doing so, he reiterated that “it is best to retain the passive force of 12:3, and to see in this last of seven phrases [Gn 12:1-3], with its emphatic perfect, the culmination of this initial promise of God in the patriarch” (cf Ellington 1994:203-207).

3.7.3 Reflexive interpretation of *barak*

The English translation and the Hebrew version of the passages are extracted from the English-NASB (New American Standard Bible) and the Hebrew-BHS (4th edition) versions of the Bible respectively, for us to have a better picture of the issues at stake in this discussion.

⁹⁴ See Hamilton (1990:373-376) for a list of some of the scholars.

⁹⁵ Hamilton (1990:374), Wenham (1987:277), Waltke (2001:206) and Leupold (1942:414).

⁹⁶ Hamilton (1990:374) argues that “if the verb in question has passive force, then [Genesis] 12:3 clearly articulates the final goal in a divine plan for universal salvation, and Abram is the divinely chosen instrument in the implementation of that plan.”

⁹⁷ Walton (2001:402-403) and Hamilton (1990:375).

⁹⁸ These references include Gn 37:35; Nm 31:23; Dt 4:21; 23:9; 1 Sm 3:14; 30:6; 1 Ki 2:26; Job 15:28; 30:16, 17; Ps 107:17, 27; 119:52; Is 30:29; Lm 4:1; Ezk 19:12; Dn 12:10; Mi 6:16.

Scholars⁹⁹ who support reflexive interpretation claim that the inherent idea of the *niphal* is reflexive; as a result, this *niphal* should be interpreted as a reflexive, similar to the *hitpael* form of Genesis 22:18 and 26: 4 and Psalm 72:17b. But Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues that whether one translates it as passive or reflexive, it still carries the same implication, which is, if those who bless Abram are blessed, and all families of the earth bless Abram, then it follows that all families would be blessed or find blessing in him, given the context of the word.

In my opinion, it is misleading to regard a reflexive meaning of a verb as being the same with a passive voice as Sarna appeared to have presupposed. It should be noted that the reflexive voice conveys the idea of an action which is carried out by the subject upon himself/herself. While the passive voice of a verb conveys the idea that an external action is carried out on an object without the active participation of the object in the action. The object here becomes a passive beneficiary of the action of the subject. So, it is grammatically incongruent to regard the passive voice as carrying the same meaning with the reflexive voice as suggested by Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183). Consequently, the following section will examine the interpretation of the Hebrew verb of *barak* as a passive voice in light of the discussion put forward by Walton (2001:392-394).

3.7.4 Examining the passive interpretation of the verb forms.

This study agrees partially with Walton and other Bible interpreters¹⁰⁰ who suggest that all the verb forms for the word *barak* be translated passively. But Walton (2001:392-394) has offered an explanation of these verb forms which is loaded with a number of problems and is thereby misleading in certain aspects. He appears to disagree with those who translate the verbs forms as reflexives¹⁰¹ by arguing that all five passages are covenant formulations. But given the fact that these are covenant formulations does not necessarily mean that all the verb forms of *barak* should be interpreted reflexively, according to Walton. He argues further that the *Niphal* and the *Hithpael* were used by the author to convey the author's specific idea on the blessings that other nations might receive through Abraham.

Walton (2001:393) continues that within the context of the two passages which contain the *hithpael* forms (i.e. Gn 22:18 and 26:4), "the blessing declaration is immediately preceded by clauses of domination over land/cities of their enemies (22:17; 26:4), and immediately followed by an acknowledgment that this condition will come about because of an act of obedience (22:18; 26:5)." These two passages have been distinguished from the other three texts (i.e. Gn 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) because of certain features like domination, acknowledgement, and obedience. The force of the *hithpael* voice according to Walton, serves the above mentioned features (domination, acknowledgement, and obedience) better.

Further, he (Walton 2001:393-394) argued that the use of the preposition *ב*, following the verb 'bless', describes the one whose care, protection and favor are desired and relied upon. Consequently, in Genesis 22:18 and 26:4, the *hithpael* form is used and the preposition *ב* is added to "your seed," to suggest that other nations

⁹⁹ Such as Leupold (1942:414), Albrektson (1967:79), Kaiser (1978:13-14), Vogels (1979:43), Weinfeld (1980:426) and Waltke (2001:206).

¹⁰⁰ Cf Luther (1960:260), Church (1973:26), Leale (1974:232), Keil & Delitzsch (1975a:193,194) and Walton (2001:402-403).

¹⁰¹ E.g. Leupold (1942:414) and Waltke (2001:206).

will get the protection and favor through Abraham's seed. In other words, the *hithpael* form is used here to express people's efforts or interests to grovel to Abram's seed.

But a close reading of the five passages reveals that not only the two suggested passages (Gn 22:18; 26:4) are preceded by an act of domination on the part of Abraham and his seed as Walton seemed to have presupposed. The remaining three passages (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) also have an element of domination explicitly or implicitly. For example, in Genesis 12:2 and 18:18, God promised Abraham that he will become a great nation. This promise actually found its fulfillment in the event of the descendants of Abraham subverting the control of and taking over the land of the Canaanites as well as establishing their kingdom known as the kingdom of Israel in that land.

Similarly, in Genesis 28:13-14, God made a similar promise. Here, God specifically mentioned the parameters of the land. Already, some other nations were living on that same piece of land. So, if the land was to be given to the seed of Abraham, what would be the fate of those nations who were already living in that land? It is obvious that the nations would have to make way for the descendants of Abraham to take over the land. This implicitly suggests an act of domination on the part of Abraham and his seed over the cities and land of their enemies.

Furthermore, in my understanding of the Hebrew grammar, the preposition *b.* should not have been given as much emphasis as suggested by Walton (2001:393-394). Walton seems to argue that the above preposition prefixed to Abraham's name or his seed in Genesis 22:18 and 26:4 suggest that other people will have to actively seek favour or Abraham's blessing; whereas in Genesis 12:3; 18:18 and 28:14, the blessing will come to other nations without their effort. But one finds the preposition *b.* in almost all of the five passages being prefixed to the name Abraham, his seed, or to a pronoun referring to Abraham or his descendants. So, it is misleading to make a serious case for a passive interpretation based upon the appearance of the preposition *b.* prefixed to the name of Abraham or his descendants as Walton appears to have suggested.

By contrasting the two passages (i.e. Gn 22:18; 26:4) with the remaining three texts (i.e. Gn 12:3; 18:18; 28:14), Walton (2001:394) explained that these last three passages have the *niphal* voice, suggesting that this blessing will come to other people or nations through Abraham, his family or his seed without people's attempt to ingratiate themselves with Abraham, his family or his seed. This blessing is not conditioned on obedience and does not come as a result of domination. In this sense, Walton argues that the passive translation of the above three passages be preferred¹⁰².

As I have alluded from above, Walton's argument that the above remaining texts suggest that people will receive Abraham's blessing without their attempt to obtain it cannot be substantiated. For example, Genesis 12:2-3 shows that the blessing other nations will receive from Yahweh via Abraham are conditioned. They are based on the manner in which such nations would relate to Abraham. If their relationship with Abraham and his seed is in line with what Yahweh has promised, they will also be blessed; but if it is not, they would be cursed. So, it seems that the blessing other nations would receive from Yahweh via Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is also conditional.

¹⁰² The passive translation of the passages include: "And in you all the families of the earth **shall be blessed**" (Gn 12:3b); "since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth **will be blessed**?" (Gn 18:18); "and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth **be blessed**" (Gn 28:14).

Those nations who bless Abraham will be blessed but those who curse Abraham would also be cursed.

Walton also seems to argue that the blessing from these three passages would come to Abraham not on the condition of obedience. But contrary to Walton's viewpoint, Genesis 18:18-19 suggests that Abraham will have to keep the way of Yahweh and do justice and righteousness so that Yahweh will accomplish what he had promised Abraham. The use of a prepositional particle ! [;m ;] . (in order that) in Genesis 18:19 is meant to introduce a purpose clause. It means that what Yahweh had spoken previously must be carried out before Yahweh will accomplish what he had promised. Yahweh's fulfilment of the promise is in this verse based on Abraham's obedience, introduced by the prepositional particle ! [;m ;] . .

Despite the limitation of Walton's viewpoint, the conclusion he and others have reached about the interpretation of *barak* as passive voice in the five passages serves as the only viable alternative interpretation, according to my understanding. As it has been argued by Allis (1927:281), Kaiser (1978:13) and Hamilton (1990:375), there are several other witnesses to the passive translation of all the five passages such as the Samaritan, the Babylonian (Onkelos), the Jerusalem (Pseudo-Jonathan) Targums, the Septuagint (LXX) and other English versions namely, the New International Version, the King James Version and the New American Standard Version. Therefore, given the immense number of witnesses to the passive interpretation of the verb form of *barak*, I also concur with this passive rendering of all the five passages.