

CHAPTER 3

CONTEXT, NATURE AND MEANING OF ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the literary context, nature and meaning of God's covenant with Abraham.¹ References are also made to the subsequent renewals of the Abrahamic covenant promise(s)² with Isaac and Jacob. Part of the section also relates the covenant promise(s) God made to Abraham (and his descendants) with certain events that have occurred in Ezra and Nehemiah.

One of the reasons for choosing the Abrahamic covenant is that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah seem to appeal to Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants³ as the basis for the legitimacy of the returning exiles to the land of Judah as well as for their religious and marital separation from foreigners. The appeal to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant promises as the basis for the legitimacy of

¹ Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27.

² Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

³ Nehemiah 9:7-21 refers to both Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. Moreover, Ezra 9:1-15 and Nehemiah 1:5-10 seem to refer to the Mosaic covenant. The connection between the Mosaic and the Abrahamic covenants is that the Mosaic covenant presupposes the Abrahamic covenant. In other words, Mosaic covenant appeal to Abrahamic covenant as its basis or foundation (e.g. Ex 2:24; 3:16-17; 6:2-9; Dt 1:8; 6:10-12; 10:12-22; 30:19-20). Because of that foundational link, the appeal from Ezra and Nehemiah to the Mosaic covenant may also be considered as an appeal to the Abrahamic covenant. Another link between these two covenants is that it is one God who administers both covenants. So, the appeal made from Ezra 9:1-15 and Nehemiah 1:5-10 to the Mosaic covenant logically include Abrahamic covenant as well.

the returning exiles to the land appear legitimate since certain allusions from the book of Genesis⁴ seem to testify to such a connection. A second reason for choosing the Abrahamic covenant is that it is the basis on which the Mosaic covenant is founded. Abrahamic covenants anticipate the Mosaic covenant (Gn 17:7-8).

Apparently, Ezra and Nehemiah appear to be very polemic toward foreigners concerning marriage, worship and communal relationship.⁵ My investigation of the Abrahamic covenant⁶ however, aims to reveal that foreigners ought to relate with Abram/Abraham and his descendants through appropriate covenant stipulations.⁷ Through appropriate covenant means, Abraham and his descendants are seen to be a channel through which God will also bless other nations.

In view of the connection between Abrahamic covenant promises and certain events in Ezra and Nehemiah, in this chapter I will examine the Abrahamic covenant and certain events in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning foreigners.

⁴ The book of Genesis is colored with God's promises to Abraham and 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).

⁵ Ezr 4:1-3; 9:1-10:44; Neh 2:20; 4:1-23; 6:1-7:3; 10:30; 13:1-31.

⁶ Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27

⁷ 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, the common denominator is that other nations would have to relate with Abraham or his descendants /seed in order that they might be blessed, bless themselves or receive blessings from God.

The chapter will explore how the Abrahamic covenant appears to set the stage for the relationship between foreigners and Abraham's descendants. Consequently, certain passages in Ezra and Nehemiah⁸ seem to presuppose or hint on this relationship.

3. 2. LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

3.2.1 Introduction

No passage in Scripture is isolated. Every verse occurs in the context of a larger framework of other verses. 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 (Gorman 2001:69). This principle leads this study to evaluate the context of the covenant God made with Abraham⁹ in order to see how the covenant fits into Genesis as a whole.

3.2.2 Structure of Genesis

The structure of the book of Genesis has been described in several ways.¹⁰

The proposed structures for the book of Genesis must be significantly

⁸ Ezr 9:10-14; Neh 1:5-9; 9:7-21.

⁹ Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27.

¹⁰ Wenham (1987:xxi-xxii); Dillard and Longman III (1994:48); Matthews (1996:26-41). These scholars have proposed two possible structures for the book of Genesis. The first structure is the *Abrahamic Covenant* that appeared at several points in Genesis. The second structure is

appreciated. The two structures, to a great extent, capture various aspects of the story of Genesis. Nonetheless, since the book of Genesis is a vast arena, its structure can be seen in different ways by different scholars. Consequently, my careful reading of the book of Genesis reveals a structure which is slightly different from those that have been cited above.

My observation reveals that the book of Genesis has two major parts. The first part is Genesis 1:1- 7:24; while the second part is Genesis 8:1-50:26. Each part echoes four major themes. The subject matters in each part include creation or recreation, blessing, sin and God's response. In each of the two parts, every event or narrative has fallen in one of the four named categories. The following two diagrams describe the structure of the book of Genesis. The first diagram (Table 2) describes a summary structure of the whole book while the second diagram (Table 3) describes an expanded structure of the book of Genesis.¹¹

divided into two sections: (1) Primeval History (Gn 1:1-11:32), and (2) Patriarchal narratives (Gn 12:1-50:26).

¹¹ The structure of the book of Genesis is not strictly chronological especially the first eleven chapters of Genesis. It appears that the author(s) or editor(s) is not so much akin to arranging his/her material in a strict chronological order. He/she is more concerned with narrating the stories about creation/recreation, blessing, sin and God's response. This is not to suggest that the author(s) or editor(s) is completely disinterested in chronology. Obviously, the author(s) or editor(s) has arranged some of the narratives from Genesis 12:1- 50:26 in a more chronological order. It is just that chronology is not used at the expense of the stories themselves.

Table 2. Summary structure of the book of Genesis

S/N	GENESIS 1:1-7:24	THEMES	GENESIS 8:1-50:26
1	1:1-27	Creation/Recreation	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 ¹²

Table 3. Expanded structure of the book of Genesis

N	PART 1 (GN 1:1-7:24)	THEMES	PART 2 (GN 8:1-50:26)	N
1	Creation	GOD CREATE	Recreation	1
	God created 1:1	Process	God remembered ¹³ 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	

¹² 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 the 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. God looks forward to Abram, his descendants and other nations as the parameters of His response.

¹³ The word *remember* ($\sim yhil\{a/ rKoz>YIw\}$), 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 Genesis 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.

	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 ¹⁴	
	Man separated from garden	Separation	Later man separated from	
	and from God 3:23		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	
	through Noah 6:1-7:24		through Abram 12:1-50:26	

3.2.3 Movement of the narrative

The movement of the narratives in Genesis as portrayed in the above structure may be described in each part (Part 1: Gn 1:1- 7:24 and Part 2: Gn 8:1-50:26) as follows. In part one, God created the universe including humankind (Gn 1:1-2:25). God blessed them and all other things He had made as noted in the first two chapters of Genesis. There is a close relationship between God and mankind because He made them in His image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27; Walton & Matthews 1997:18). God made humankind vicegerent on earth (Gn 1:28-30; 2:15-17). As vicegerent, they

¹⁴ Compare Gn 3:21 with 9:23.

must do God's will on earth and live in good relationship with their creator including other creatures.

Unfortunately, human beings failed, by disobeying (sinned against) God (Gn 3:6-7). God responded in several ways toward mankind and His creation. First, human beings were separated from God¹⁵. Second, God pronounced a curse/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 mankind against the serpent or various sources of temptations (see Fretheim 1994:363; Robertson 1980:96-97)¹⁶. But because of the pervasive nature of human sin (Gn 4:1-24; 6:1-8), God almost erased mankind and other creatures completely from the face of the earth (Gn 7:21-24). God however spared Noah, his family and few creatures out of every kind in order to have a renewed creation.

In part two, Noah, his family and few other creatures begin a new life (recreation: Gn 8:1-20). Human beings were reminded once again about their close relationship with God. They are made in God's image and likeness (Gn

¹⁵ This separation is considered by other scholars as death (Cf. Fretheim 1994:364, 369 with Gn 3:19, 23-24). When human beings are separated from God, they are by implication severed from their source of life and existence.

¹⁶ There are differing views concerning the identity of the serpent in this text. 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 (see Westermann 1984:237). Based upon several biblical passages (e.g. Is 27:1; 2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9; 20:2), this study assumes that the serpent is used in Genesis 3 to symbolize the devil (Satan), who is opposed to God.

9:6). They are blessed by God (Gn 9:1). They are also reminded of their vicegerent role (Gn 9:2-3). They are expected to live in obedience to God and in good relationship with their fellow beings as well as the rest of the other creatures (Gn 9:4-17).

Regrettably, humankind disobeyed (sinned against) God (Gn 9:21-23; 11:3-4) as they had done in the previous part. God responded in almost the same ways as He did at first. Mankind is separated from God (Gn 11:8). God initiated a process through which He would renew His relationship with humankind through Abram (Gn 12:1-3; cf. Fretheim 1994:425-426). The covenant between God and Abram/Abraham (Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27) may therefore be understood as God's renewed response toward mankind in order to restore the relationship that had existed between God and humankind including other creatures before the fall (cf. Fretheim 1996:85; Soggin 2001:55).

Through God's relationship with Abraham, He will bless them and restore them to their vicegerent role (Gn 12:1-3). The events that follow the covenant God made with Abraham may be understood in two ways. Some events narrate an advancement of the Abrahamic covenant promises¹⁷ while other

¹⁷ 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).

events seem to derail the covenant promises from being realised¹⁸. Despite the occurrence of positive and negative events concerning the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant promises, Genesis (Gn 50:19-21,24-25) tells its readers that Yahweh, the God of Israel was successfully guiding and controlling the events and the covenant promises He made to Abraham and his descendants to His intended destination.

3.3 NATURE AND CONTENT OF COVENANT¹⁹

3.3.1 Introduction

In what follows, the nature or content of a covenant is explained. This includes particular characteristics of a so called Ancient Near Eastern treaty or agreement among the Ancient Near Eastern people. I have attempted to identify the constituent elements of and the goal for making a covenant. This task is very difficult because of two reasons. Firstly, the term **tyrIB.** is very elastic. It is somehow difficult to explain the original Hebrew meaning (Robertson 1980:3-4; Gottwald 1987:202). Secondly, the scope of this research is too limited to offer an exhaustive discussion on certain terms. Given these two concerns, I have not provided an in depth discussion on the term **tyrIB.** However, I have discussed briefly the nature and content of

¹⁸ God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his only son Isaac (Gn 22:1-12). This event almost brought tension to God's covenant promise (Gn 15:4-6; 17:16-19).

¹⁹ Specific texts that deal with the covenant God made with Abraham include Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27.

tyrIB. (covenant) in the context of the Ancient Near Eastern people. The Ancient Near Eastern region is culturally associated with biblical Israel. These worlds form the socio-cultural background to the book of Genesis (Walton & Matthews 1997:12-13).

3.3.2 Nature and content of covenant

3.3.2.1 Definition

The term *tyrIB.* (*berit*) has been defined 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” (Gottwald 1987:202).

Gottwald (1987:202) argued that the above definition does not necessary capture the full meaning of the Hebrew term *berit*. In view of this limitation, he immediately suggests certain terms that capture some aspects of the Hebrew word *berit* (covenant). These terms include descriptions like agreement, arrangement, compact, contract, commitment, treaty, alliance, obligation, bond and relationship (cf. Human 1983:142).

Similarly, Robertson (1980:4-5) sees the biblical *berit* as capturing varied aspects. Following from that recognition, he defined *berit* as a “bond in blood sovereignly administered.” He argued that a covenant is a bond in blood

because it involves life and death. It is also sovereignly administered by the higher party. In terms of Israel, God administered it sovereignly. In as much as it is sovereignly administered by the higher party, its goal is to establish a binding relationship between two or more parties. Such relationship has to be acceptable to both the sovereign and the lesser parties.

Certain basic characteristics of a covenant can be seen from the Ancient Near Eastern treaty given by Soulen and Soulen (2001:200)²⁰. These include:

- i). Introduction of the speaker;
- ii). Historical explanation of past relations;
- iii). Obligations of the vassal party are spelled out;
- iv). Statement showing the necessity of keeping the agreement and regular public reading of it;
- v). Naming of the witnesses to the treaty;
- vi). Pronouncement of curse and blessing.

3.3.2.2 Content of Abrahamic Covenant (Gn 15:1-21; 17:127)

The relationship between the covenant texts of Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 is that the passages complement each other (Adar 1990:66; Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone 2001:112). Genesis 15 does not fully describe the content of God's covenant with Abram/Abraham²¹. Chapter 17 provides additional elements of the content of the covenant which were lacking in

²⁰ Soulen and Soulen (2001:200) derived the above example from a covenant Treaty of the Hittite empire.

²¹ I have used the names Abram and Abraham interchangeably in discussing the Abrahamic covenant passages. The reason for using the names interchangeably is that the text of Genesis uses the name Abram up to chapter 17. Abram's name finally changes to Abraham in chapter 17:5.

chapter 15.²² In view of this complementary relationship, I will consider the two covenant texts as a unit²³.

In what follows, I will discuss the Abrahamic *berit*²⁴ (covenant) in relation to the characteristics found in the above named Ancient Near Eastern treaty form. The reason for discussing this covenant form and that of the Hittite covenant formula is that both covenant formulas share certain features in common, as might be observed in the following discussion.

3.3.2.2.1 Introduction of the speaker (Gn 15:1; 17:1).

In the normal Ancient Near East treaty, the higher party introduces himself/herself to the lower (vassal) party. In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, God (who is the higher party) introduces Himself to

²² Read a detail explanation on the complementary relationship of the two passages in the next two foot notes.

²³ I do know that the two covenant texts are considered as originating from separate sources. There appears to be no consensus on the source of Chapter 15. Meanwhile, chapter 17 is considered as P Source (Brueggemann 1982:153; Westermann 1985:214-217, 256-257; Fretheim 1994:444, 457). However, I have decided to take the two passages as a unit here because I am dealing with Abrahamic covenant as a whole. Both texts talk about Abrahamic covenant.

²⁴ The *berit* between God and Abram/Abraham takes place in Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27. These two covenant passages complement each other in the following ways. One way is that the first passage (Gn 15:1-21) anticipates the second passage (Gn 17:1-27). The covenant was made with Abram but the obligations for Abram were not spelled out in the first passage (Brett 2000:62), rather his obligations were spelled out in the second passage (Gn 17:1, 9-14). A second complementary indication of the two covenant passages is that the second passage (Gn 17:1-27) predicates the first passage. Chapter 17 is a confirmation (cf. 17:2) of chapter 15. Another complementary factor is Abram and Sarai's name change. Abram and Sarai's name change occur in the context of the confirmation of the covenant. The name change did not happen in the first covenant passage (Gn 15:1-21). The name change that takes place in the second covenant passage complements the lack of it in the previous covenant text.

Abram/Abraham (the lower party) in the first verse of each chapter that deals specifically with the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 15:1; 17:1). In chapter 15:1, God began a formal introduction of Himself to Abram by cautioning him about fear. One reason God might have started with an introductory statement of caution to Abram concerning fear might be that He appeared to Abram here in a vision²⁵. But prior to Genesis 15:1, God had appeared to Abram without any specific indication of the mode of His appearance.

A second reason for what is suggested by Speiser (1990:115) who argued that the promises God made to Abram according to Genesis 12:1-3 seem to hinge upon Abraham's descendants. However, Abraham did not have a child up to the point of chapter 15. 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 has died and then inheriting his father's property. Since Abraham had no legitimate children up to this point, he may have been very worried or anxious about the lack of a child to succeed him (cf. Adar 1990:60; Walton & Matthews 1997:35).

A third reason for the caution might be that the story preceding Genesis 15:1 suggests that Abram fought and rescued his relative Lot from the hands of their enemies. So, Abram might have had ill feeling about this previous

²⁵ Adar (1990:60) argued that 'vision' is a world of mystery. It is totally different from our mundane world. God's appearance to Abram here in a vision is not visible to the eyes of Abram but audible to his ears.

experience (Ross1988:308). In view of Abram's inner feelings or anxiety, he might have needed God's assurance and a level of certainty about the one who was talking to Him. God is not Abram's enemy. He does not appear to create trouble for Abram nor his relative Lot; rather, God's intention is to establish a cordial relationship with Abram. He is declaring that He is Abram's shield (!gEm') and his very great reward (daom. hBer>h; ^r>k'f.).

The terms shield and reward are figurative or metaphorical speech probably suggesting protection and provision (Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:210; Ross 1988:308).

According to chapter 17:1, God introduces himself as 'God Almighty' (yD;v; lae-ynIa]). This introduction also denotes God's repeated assurance to Abram. God is sovereign, powerful, mighty and probably a mountain²⁶ (Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:222-223; Ross 1988:330; Fretheim 1994:458; Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001:109). God's power, sovereignty, and completeness show that He is dependable and trustworthy. Based on God's nature and character, Abram could be assured that God's covenant relationship (tyrIB.) with him is dependable and trustworthy.

²⁶ The interpretation of the name *el-shaddai* to mean probably 'mountain' is a conjecture.

3.3.2.2.2 Historical explanation of past relations (Gn 15:7)

Another characteristic in the Ancient Near East treaty is the historical explanation of the past relation between the higher party and the vassal. With regard to the Abrahamic covenant, God explains His past relationship with Abram in Genesis 15:7. According to the passage, God informs Abram that He was the one who brought Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans, though Genesis 11:31-32 seems to suggest that Abram moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan through the initiative of his father Terah. The above passage also appears to say that it was after the death of his father Terah (in Haran, on their way to Canaan), that God appeared to Abram and called him to leave his country (Gn 12:1). Should we say that Terah and his family moved from Ur (of the Chaldeans) to go to Canaan through God's initiative as Genesis 15:7 seems to suggest?

I concur with the suggestion that Genesis 11:27-32 ought to be understood as a summary or an overview of Genesis 12:1-9 (Ross 1988:258-259). In this sense, Abram may have received God's call (Gn 12:1-3) and may have moved with his family and 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). God appeared to Abram in Genesis 15:1-21 in order to establish a covenant relationship with

him. This later explanation would fit with what Genesis 15:7 seems to suggest. This interpretation logically implies that God is reminding Abram in Genesis 15:7 of their past relationship. Abram had already been following God's initiative, so he would now consider establishing a covenantal relationship with God based upon their previous mutual relationship.

3.3.2.2.3 Obligations for the vassal party (Gn 17:1b, 9-14)

A third characteristic in the Ancient Near East treaty form is the obligation of the vassal or mutual obligation. Such obligations are spelled out by the higher party to the vassal party (Ross 1988:327). In the case of the covenant between God and Abram, Abram is the vassal party. God is therefore responsible for spelling out the covenant obligations for Abram. To this effect, God spells out covenant obligations for Abram in Genesis 17:1b, 9-14. The first obligation (v.1b) is that Abram will have to walk²⁷ before God and must be blameless (~ymit' hyEh.w< yn:p'l. %Leh;t.hi). Abram is bound to obey God's covenant obligations. Similarly the use of the imperative hyEh.w< (to be) adds another impetus to the seriousness of the command. Abram must walk in the presence of God without any defect. He must be complete in his devotion.

²⁷ The word %Leh;t.hi is *hitpael* imperative masculine singular meaning 'walk'. The use of *hitpael* imperative here denotes a strong command.

Another covenant obligation God spelled out for Abram also includes his descendants and possibly his infinite generations to come. Abraham's immediate descendants as well as all his coming generations must keep God's covenant just like Abraham is expected to keep it (17:9). Here, the covenant ties Abram to his descendants. The word $\%Leh;t.hi$ is *hitpael* imperative masculine singular meaning 'walk'. The use of *hitpael* imperative here denotes a strong command, even to an infinite period of time. This covenant keeping obligation also is applied to the obligation of circumcision (17:10-13). Abram is commanded to circumcise himself and all the males in his household as a permanent (memorable) sign of the covenant. Every male must be circumcised. Whoever lives in Abraham's household must be circumcised. The covenant obligation of circumcision also extends beyond the blood related descendants of Abram. The covenant obligation of circumcision covers the aliens, those that have been bought from foreigners, temporary residents and virtually everyone who lives under the auspices of Abram and his descendants. Any person who is brought (or who comes by himself) to the house of Abraham must be made to obey this covenant law of circumcision.

In other words, the covenant sign of circumcision also ties Abram to his descendants as well as to his infinite generations to come. In the covenant sign of circumcision, Abram is also linked with foreigners, aliens, slaves or virtually every other person who comes to live under the auspices of Abram or

his descendants. The covenant sign of circumcision therefore includes virtually everyone. This sign does not discriminate nor does it exclude others on the basis of race, language, tribe, social status etcetera provided a person is willing to live in obedience to the covenant laws. Once a person is willing to obey the covenant laws, including the law of circumcision, that person is permitted to living under the care and protection of Abrahamic covenant. The person becomes a covenant member.

Since covenant involves blood letting, circumcision practically binds a person by blood to Abraham and God's covenant. The sign of circumcision would always remind Abram and his descendants, including foreigners, of God'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 or obligations.

3.3.2.2.4 Necessity of keeping the covenant (Gn 17:7, 13-14).

Since a covenantal relationship was viewed as a serious relationship among the Ancient Near Eastern people, the higher party would normally include a statement showing the necessity of keeping the agreement. With respect to the Abrahamic covenant, this characteristic is found in the previous element (Gn 17:7, 13) concerning the obligations of Abraham and his descendants. Abraham and his descendants are previously commanded to walk before God

and be blameless. They are also commanded to circumcise every male living among them.

Genesis 17:7, 13 indicates that the covenant obligations are permanent. The obligations must be obeyed from one generation to the other. The necessity of keeping the covenant obligation is also strengthened by the threat to cut away anyone who fails to circumcise, from the house of Abraham (Gn 17:14). Though the public reading of the covenant document is not mentioned in this text, the covenant sign of circumcision however, is an indelible mark that reminds Abraham and his descendants about their covenant obligation before God. Abraham, his descendants and foreigners living among them must all keep the covenant.

3.3.2.2.5 Witnesses to the treaty (Gn 15:17-18)

In normal Ancient Near Eastern treaty the higher party invokes witnesses to the covenant event. However, in terms of the covenant between God and Abraham, God did not invoke the name of any other god. According to Ross (1988:312), God Himself is a witness, symbolized in the passing of the fire pot between the severed animals because there is none greater than God to whom He would swear upon (Gn 15:17-18).

3.3.2.2.6 Pronouncement of blessing²⁸ and curses²⁹

Another feature in the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form is the pronouncement of curse and blessing. This pronouncement is done in two ways. Firstly, the parties would pass between severed animals set aside for the purpose (Adar 1990:63; Walton & Matthews 1997:41-42; Jr 34:8-9, 18-19) as a witness to what would happen to both parties if they violate the terms of the covenant. Secondly, the higher party would normally make 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 party if the vassal party keeps the covenant.

Regarding the covenant between God and Abraham, God pronounces the covenant blessings and curses in both the first and second covenant texts (Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27). God made several promises of blessing to Abram and his descendants. First, He 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 long peaceful years (15:15). Meanwhile, Sarah also would be blessed by God. She will give birth to the son whom God had promised Abram (17:16, 19). God would eventually continue (establish) His covenant relationship with Isaac whom Sarah would deliver (17:21). In addition, Abram will become fruitful (17:6).

²⁸ See Gn 15:4-5, 15; 17:6-8, 16, 19, 21.

²⁹ See Gn 15:9-10, 17; 17:14.

Second, God would give to Abram and his descendants the land 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(15:7, 18-21; 17:8).

Third, Abraham would be the father of many nations (17:4). Surprisingly, God had already made him the father of many nations before He even related it to Abram (17:5). God also made a promise to Abram that kings would emerge from him (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 recreation (Gn 9:1-3).

Fourth, God would become the God of Abram and his descendants (17:8). God's promise that He would be Abraham's God indicates that Abram and his descendants would live under the protection, blessing and favour of God. God would protect and sustain Abram and his descendants in the land of promise. Abram should not look forward to other gods in times of trouble. God is able to care for Abram and is basically able to provide for all the needs of Abraham and his descendants.

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

Meanwhile, the curses God pronounced over Abram/Abraham in the course of disobedience are not immediately in view in Genesis 15. Rather what is striking here is that God has committed himself to keeping his promises. If he does not keep to his covenant promises, his fate is here symbolized, in the event of the severing of the animals (Gn 15:9-10, 17, cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:214; Ross 1988:312; Fretheim 1994:449). As the animals are slaughtered and God's representation passes between the slaughtered animals, the same would apply to God if he breaks the covenant obligations/promises.

Meanwhile Abram obliged to keep the covenant by circumcising all the males in his household. Failure to circumcise will result to being severed from the

covenant relationship or being cut off ($ht'r>k.nIw>$ ³⁰) from Abraham's household (Gn 17:14; cf. 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 (Gn 15:18). Since the process of covenant making involves blood letting, cutting and eliminating, the consequences of disobeying the covenant obligations also may be considered as blood letting³¹.

3.4 IMPLICATIONS OF ABRAHAMIC COVENANT.

3.4.1 Exclusive and Inclusive.

There are a number of implications that could be noted from the Abrahamic *berit* (covenant). Firstly, the Abrahamic *berit* is both exclusive and inclusive. On the one hand, the covenant is between God and Abraham. On the other hand the covenant is also between God (the higher party Gn 15:1, 18) and Abraham (the vassal party Gn 15:1, 18) including his descendants (Gn 15:18-19; 17:6-8) as well as foreigners (Gn 17:4-5, 12-14, 16, 24-27). A practical example of this exclusive and inclusive scenario is in the conversation between God and Abraham concerning Ishmael (Gn 17:18-19). This

³⁰ The word $ht'r>k.nIw>$ used in Genesis 17:14 is a *niphal waw* consecutive perfect third person singular which is derived from the verb trk meaning to 'cut off', 'kill' or 'eliminate' (Kelly 1992:384).

³¹ This is my personal view concerning the implication of circumcision.

conversation if viewed on the surface may appear that Ishmael is excluded from the covenant between God and Abraham.

Surprisingly, it turned out that Ishmael is also included in the covenant because he will also enjoy Abrahamic covenant blessing. In addition to that blessing, Ishmael is also made to bear the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, that is, circumcision (Gn 17:26). The Abrahamic covenant therefore may be understood as both exclusive and inclusive in its nature and application (cf. Adar 1990:66).

3.4.2 God unilaterally administered the covenant.

In normal ancient covenant treaty, both parties agree to the terms involved in the relationship symbolized by both parties passing between the severed animals before the contract becomes binding (Adar1990:63). In this regard, if one party rejects the terms and conditions set up for the relationship, the relationship will no longer be possible. On the contrary, the covenant between God and Abraham is unilaterally administered by God. It is God who initiates the covenant (Gn 15:9-10; 17:2). He alone pronounces the purposes of the covenant (Gn12:2-3; 17:7; 18:19). He alone spells out the terms of the covenant (Gn 17:1, 9-14). Abraham is simply brought in to receive the blessings of the covenant and to keep the terms of it together with his descendants. .

3.4.3 Goal of Abrahamic covenant.

Among the Ancient Near Eastern people, a covenantal relationship always has specific goal(s) or value(s). The importance or value of such an agreement is highlighted in the process of making the covenant. If the covenant relationship has no relevance, it is almost meaningless. In addition, both parties ought to know the relevance of establishing such a relationship.

Similarly, the Abrahamic covenant had specific relevant goals (cf. Gn 12:2-3; 15:1, 4, 7; 17:4—8; 18:19). One of the main purposes of Abrahamic covenant was relationship (Gn 17:7). Before God 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 begins by having a covenant³² relationship with Abraham and his descendants (12:1-17:27). Through God's covenant³³ relationship with Abraham, God will accomplish all other things he had promised to Abraham (Gn 18:19).

Another significance of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants seen from Genesis 18:19, is that Abraham will direct his children and his

³² 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 God and mankind (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 mankind through Abraham.

³³ One may ask 'would God not able to reveal himself to mankind through other means apart from the covenant?' The answer is that God can use any means that accords to His will to accomplish His purposes. So, God may have chosen another means to reveal Himself to mankind without using the mechanism of a covenant. However, God used the means of a covenant because that was the means He wanted to use.

household to keep the way of the Lord and to do what is right and just. In other words, leadership, obedience, righteousness and justice are also at the heart of God's covenant with Abraham. More than that God plans to bless Abraham and his descendants with land, children, wealth, nations and make him and his seed a channel of blessing to other nations (Gn 12:2-3; 15:4,7; 17:4-8; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14).

Walton (2001:382, 401) also argues that God chose Abraham and his descendants for several meaningful objectives. The main purpose for electing Abraham and his descendants was to serve as instruments through which God will reveal Himself to His creation (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, God brought this self-revelatory purpose to fruition through the mechanism of a covenant. God's self-revelation was always at the centre of His covenant with the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. Moreover, all the nations were also included in this self-revelation of God (Walton 2001:401-404). God did not want to limit His self-revelation to Abraham or his descendants; He did not want His self-revelation to be obscured before other nations. He always had all the nations in His mind as the target of His revelation. He intended that His entire creation should know Him and reverence Him as their creator, sustainer and redeemer through Abraham and his descendants.

Another relevance of the covenant between God and Abraham was salvation³⁴. Salvation was embedded in this covenant on multiple levels. Firstly, Abraham's descendants would live as slaves in a foreign nation but God would deliver them and bring them to the land he promises to Abraham (Gn 15:13-16). Secondly, Abraham and his descendants (seed) would serve as a channel through which God would bless other nations (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 hinge-pin between Abraham and other nations. In these covenant promises, there is an inseparable link between God and Abraham as well as God and other nations (see also Dt 10:12-22). The covenant obviously imposes itself upon Abraham to relate with other nations in order that God's self-revelation and blessing would be known and reverend among other nations.

3.4.4 Significance of name change.

According to Walton & Matthews (1997:44), there was a great significance attached to names of persons in the ancient world. It was also believed that giving a name to someone shows that the person has control or power over the one that is named. Similarly, God's changing of Abram and Sarai's names (Gn17:5, 15) denote a reiteration of the covenant promises and his

³⁴ Gn 15:13-14; 48:21; 50:24-25.

control and authority over their course of life and destiny. In the same way, Freedman (1992:39) 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 ABRAHAMIC COVENANT PROMISES CONCERNING FOREIGNERS

3. 5. 1. Introduction

In this section, the study will examine Genesis 12:3b and some related texts³⁵ that deal with God’s promises to Abraham, particularly the promise that concern the blessing of other nations through Abraham and his descendants. The study will examine the Hebrew grammar and syntax of the passages. There are several passages from the book of Genesis that expresses God’s promise to Abraham concerning the blessing of all nations through him or his seed. These passages include Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18. Hereby, the

³⁵ Gn 17:4-5, 12-16; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14.

Abrahamic covenant promise with Isaac (Gn. 26:4,) and Jacob (Gn. 28:14)³⁶ are reaffirmed. The five different texts are translated in the footnote³⁷.

3.5.2 Perspectives on Abrahamic covenant promise(s)

There are two basic concerns in this section. Firstly, Scholars³⁸ have contended about the correct translation and interpretation of the word

³⁶These passages are quoted below from the Hebrew-BHS (4th edition) and English-NAS (New American Standard Bible) versions of the Bible respectively, for a better understanding of the issue at stake here.

³⁷ Genesis 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.

Genesis 18: 18 `#r,a'h' yyEAG lKo Ab

Wkr>b.nIw

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

Genesis 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.

Genesis 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;

Genesis 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.

³⁸ See Hamilton (1990:373-376) for a list of some of the scholars.

Wkr>b.nIw used for “blessing”.³⁹ The concern among scholars (e.g. Hamilton 1990:374; Wenham 1987:277) here is whether the *niphal* be translated as a passive⁴⁰ (shall be blessed), middle (shall find blessing) or reflexive (shall bless themselves) voice. Secondly, there is debate about the nature of the Abrahamic promises. The question is what kind of blessing God promised other nations via Abraham and his seed? Is this blessing material, political, social, agricultural, messianic or both etcetera? In what follows, this study will examine the views of certain scholars on the two matters mentioned above.

3.5.2.1 Passive interpretation of *barak*

Wenham (1987:278), Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) and other scholars⁴¹ argue that even though the verb forms Wkr>b.nI in Genesis 12:3b may 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,

³⁹ Hamilton (1990:374), Wenham (1987:277), Waltke (2001:206) and Leupold (1942:414).

⁴⁰ 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.”

⁴¹ Walton (2001:402-403) and Hamilton (1990:375).

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 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), to support his own premise. He argued further that the result of Allis' study showed that there are 18 Old Testament references where the *hitpael* form may have a passive meaning. Therefore, 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 for similar viewpoint).

3.5.2.2 Reflexive interpretation of *barak*

Scholars⁴² 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. Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues that whether one translate it as

⁴² Such as Leupold (1942:414), Albrektson (1967:79), Weinfeld (1980:426) and Waltke (2001:206)

passive or reflexive, it still carries the same implication (that 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/find blessing in him), given the context of the word.

3.5.2.3 Perspective of Walton on the verb forms.

This study agrees with Walton and other Bible interpreters⁴³ who suggest that the verb forms for the word *barak* be translated passively. Walton (2001:392-394) has offered a cogent and preferable explanation to the above contentious verb forms of *barak*. He disagrees with those who translate the verbs forms as reflexives⁴⁴ by arguing that all the five passages are covenant formulations. However, this does not necessarily mean that all the forms should be interpreted in the same way. Walton argues that the *Niphal* and the *Hithpael* were used by the author to convey his specific perspective on the blessings other nations may have through Abraham.

Walton (2001:393) argues that within the context of the two passages that have 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

⁴³ Leupold (1942:413, 414), Luther (1960:260), Church (1973:26), Leale (1974:232), Keil & Delitzsch (1975a:193,194) and Walton (2001:402-403).

⁴⁴ E.g. Leupold (1942:414) and Waltke (2001:206).

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 *hithpael* voice serves these features better.

Walton (2001:393-394) reiterated that the use of the preposition **ב**, following the verb ‘bless’, describes the one whose care, protection and favor are desired and relied upon. 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 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 God/king/Abram’s seed.

By contrasting the two passages (i.e. Gn 22:18; 26:4) with the remaining three texts (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 28:14), Walton (2001:394) explained that these 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 preferred⁴⁵.

5.3.2.4 Nature of the blessing

Concerning the nature of the blessing promised to other nations via Abraham and his descendants, Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues that it is material prosperity. However, he did not elaborate on that assertion.

On the contrary, certain Jewish rabbis (such as Freedman and Simon 1939a:323) argue that this promise was not intended to be a material blessing. They contended that if the blessing was meant to be wealth, other nations were wealthier than the Jews. In this sense, they suggested that the blessing was meant to be a counsel as well as messianic activities. In regard to the counsel, whenever other nations are in trouble they may seek counsel from Abraham and his descendants. In reference to the messianic activities Freedman and Simon (1939b:575) argued that the promise God made with Abraham and his descendants included the work of the Messiah. During the messianic period, all other nations would be blessed. Unfortunately, Freedman and Simon did not elaborate on their viewpoint as regards to the person, work and time frame of the Messiah.

⁴⁵ 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).

Walton (2001:401-403) also clarified the meaning of this blessing by saying that God chose Abraham and his descendants-Israel to be a channel of God's revelation⁴⁶ to other nations.⁴⁷ Through Abraham's family, the Mosaic Law was given; the prophets came from them; the scriptures were written by them; their history became a public document of God's revelation. Then the highest epochal blessing was the coming of the Messiah—the seed of Abraham. Through Him, all nations have received their redemption and the forgiveness of sins and are reconciled with God and fellow human beings.

3. 6. RELATING EZRA-NEHEMIAH TO ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

⁴⁶ "For I have chosen him [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Gn 18:19). In other words, God will let Abraham know his will (way). As a consequence, Abraham will lead (direct) his children to do according the revealed will of God. The implication of this text is that Abraham is chosen to lead his children in God's righteousness and justice so that other nations may see the will of God in Abraham and his descendants.

⁴⁷ The eschatological climax of God's revelatory program was not as obvious to the eyes of the Old Testament Israel as it is to the New Testament audience today. They did not fully comprehend the dimension that God's revelation would take. However, they were not completely obscured from comprehending God's eschatological intervention in the history of the world for soteriological purposes. Furthermore, a number of passages that points to all nations as the grand parameters of God's revelation include: Ex 10:2; Jos 4:21-24; Is 49:26; 60:1-3; Ezk 36:23; 37:28; 39:21-22; Jl 3:14-17; Rm 3:1-2.

3.6.1. Introduction

There are several features that tie Ezra-Nehemiah to the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and his descendants. These include the status of foreigners in both the context of Ezra-Nehemiah and in the Abrahamic covenant promises as well as the affinity between Ezra-Nehemiah and the covenant promises concerning land ownership et cetera. In the following discussion, the study will describe how there is an unrelenting relationship between Ezra-Nehemiah and the Abrahamic covenant promises concerning the relationship between Israel and other nations.

3.4.2. Affinity between Israel and foreigners in the Abrahamic covenant

There are several ways that the covenant promises between God and Abram/Abraham in Genesis 12:3 can be related to Ezra-Nehemiah. This study has already examined the nature of the covenant. It is obvious that God's purposes for establishing the covenant with humanity were manifold. One of the main goals was to establish a relationship between Himself and other nations through Abraham and his descendants. Through this covenantal relationship, God will also make known his will to humankind. The God-man relationship that was lost in the Garden of Eden and the event of Babel was to be restored through the institution of a covenantal relationship. God selected Abraham and his descendants as instruments through which this covenantal

relationship and His will/programme would be accomplished (Gn 17:7-9; 18:18-19; cf. Dt 4:9-10; 6:4-13).

According to the covenantal relationship with Abraham, God intended that all other nations should know Him and reverence Him as their creator, sustainer and redeemer. Abraham and his descendants were never intended to live an isolated life from the rest of other nations but should be the light of God shining in darkness in order to disperse that darkness (Gn 17:7-9; 18:18-19; Dt 4:9-10; 6:4-13). Keck (1994:424) argued that Abraham's election presupposed his missionary task to the nations. This was the inseparable link between Abraham and other nations.

The circumcision of Ishmael and other people of Abraham's household seem to strengthen this Abrahamic-foreign relationship (Gn 17:12-14, 25-27). Foreigners, aliens and all those living under the auspices of Abraham and his descendants were to be circumcised. Foreigners were not to be ignored, pushed aside or left uncircumcised because of their ethnic, racial or national background. They all participated in the covenant ceremony between God and Abraham through circumcision. Abraham adhered to this covenant charge by circumcising all males in his household, including aliens, foreigners and those who were bought from other nations (Gn 17:23-27).

The covenantal function of circumcision and other obligations were to be in effect at all times. There was no time in the history of the covenant people that foreigners were totally excluded from rallying around the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob if they accepted the God of Abraham and in return, abandoned the worship of other gods. The inclusion of Ruth (the Moabite), Rahab (the Canaanite), Beersheba (the Hittite) et cetera, sustained the argument that Israel was inseparably linked with other nations in order to extend God's will and blessings of the covenant relationship.

In view of this, events in Ezra and Nehemiah must be examined and understood in light of the obligations of the covenant relationship. The role of the post-exilic Jewish community in relation to other nations must therefore be examined in light of the grand-purpose of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and later with Moses and Israel. The manner Ezra-Nehemiah applied the Abrahamic covenant promises to their post-exilic situation is one of the reasons why I am relating the covenant promises in the book of Genesis to the events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

3. 6.3. Affinity in Ezra and Nehemiah to the Abrahamic covenant

What strengthens the relationship between Ezra-Nehemiah and the covenant promises is Ezra and Nehemiah's acknowledgement of God's promises to

Abraham.⁴⁸ This acknowledgement obviously suggests that an undiminished link exist between the events in Genesis⁴⁹ and the events in the period of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 is situated in the context of Israelites' confession concerning their disobedience and intermarriage with the people of the land. In the above passage, it is more compelling to suggest that the Israelites wanted to highlight their legitimacy to the land of Judah during the post-exilic period. The Israelites seem to assert that the election of Abram, his name change and the covenant/promises God made to him and his descendants defined the status of the returning exiles with respect to the land. In view of this, the returning Jewish community were inseparably tied with the previous Israelite community and their land through the covenant promises God made with Abraham (Williamson 1985:318-319; Blenkinsopp 1989:303-304; Breneman 1993:236-237; Klein 1999:810-811). They understood themselves as the descendants of Abraham.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 is also closely related to Ezra 9:10-15. The text concerns Ezra's prayers about Israel's disobedience on intermarriage. Though the two

⁴⁸ 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 1977).

⁴⁹ Gn12:1-3; 15; 17; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14

passages (Neh 9:7-8; Ezr 9:10-15) does not mention the rest of the other covenant promises, the texts inescapably forces its readers to see the inseparable link that exist between the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and Israel and the events that have occurred during their time. If the covenant promises between God, Abraham and his descendants were so central in deciding the status of the early post-exilic Jewish community concerning the ownership of the promised land and marital relationship, the same principle might be seen in operation through the covenantal role of this post-exilic Jewish community toward other nations, that is, the extension of God's covenantal blessings and will (Gn 12:1-3; 17:7; 18:18-19; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14) to other nations. In effect, this is to assert that as the covenant promises determine who should own the land of Israel and whom they should marry, so, the same covenant promises determine how Israel should relate with other nations or foreigners.

Closely related to the above thought, Fretheim (1994:426) argued that the entire history of Israel and its 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 God's blessing to other nations. Israel must function as an instrument through which God's knowledge and blessings may reach other nations.

It should also be borne in mind that intermarriage was not essentially prohibited for its own sake as the events in Ezra and Nehemiah seem to imply. The context of Deuteronomy 7:1-26, where intermarriage was prohibited, clearly reveals that God's concern was to safe-guard Israel against the worship of other gods. God did not want Israel to worship other gods besides Him. So, intermarriage prohibition was done to address the issue of idolatry or religious syncretism. It had no ethnic, racial or national separation as its intention. In view of this, the early post-exilic Jewish community is unavoidably tied to other races, tribes and nations through the Abrahamic covenant promises and obligations.