# Covenant and Treaties in the Scriptures

A) Covenant is without a doubt one of the richest images of the Scriptures through which Israel experienced and expressed their relationship to God. At all the transitional points in Israel's history stands a covenant which binds Israel and the Lord together and in many ways defines the relationship with its horizon of expectations and with its rootedness in time and space. The very constitution of Israel as a people with a chosen identity is portrayed through the language of covenants. And so it is not surprising that we find the image of a particular covenant employed at each new undertaking.

Yet despite all this we cannot say that there exists a single, univocal notion of the covenant in the Old Testament. This might appear startling at first sight, but in fact it is quite an obvious observation. If by covenant we would simply intend a 'binding relationship' then of course there would be no difficulty in specifying a single covenant-concept in Israel. But if we ask questions regarding the understanding of the covenant in its various specifications such as the content of the covenant, a covenant of equals, between vassals and over-lords, a covenant of conditions, a covenant of promise, temporary or everlasting, then of course there is no univocal answer to the question of what is the Old Testament understanding of the covenant. Israel in fact knew of many and various forms of covenants and her relationship to the Lord was understood in light of these various covenant possibilities. This only testifies to the richness, to the variety and to the adaptability of Israel's faith which was continuously led to articulate the relationship to the Lord in new circumstances.

Though covenant is constitutive of Israel's faith, there are elements of Israel's faith that remain elusive to it. The late wisdom writings hardly give any place at all to covenant theology among their many questions and concerns. Even for Ben Sira (Sirach or Ecclesiasticus) who mentions the covenants in an historical rendering of the faith, presents the Torah with more emphasis than the covenant. Similarly the early prophets hardly make reference to the term "berit" (covenant), yet they are forever calling king and people to the faithfulness and to the obedience that properly speaking belong to the language of covenant theology. Finally the relationship between covenant and the cultic life of Israel remains ultimately unspecified and unclarified. Though covenant is constitutive of Israel's faith in that it binds Israel to faithfulness to the one Lord, very little is said as to how Israel is to give expression to its faith in the cult. A covenant renewal ceremony may be hinted at in various passages (e.g. Deut 31:9-13), but how this ceremony unfolded in Israel's cultic life is far from clear.

Though covenant is constitutive in the formation of Israel it is not the only image used to denote the relationship between Israel and the Lord: father/son, husband/wife, shepherd/flock. These are favorite images that the prophets use with metaphorical effect and transform them in order to communicate a particular message.

But covenant is not simply an image in the scriptures. Covenant in the Old Testament between the Lord and Israel was a binding juridical reality. As an agreement between two parties, covenant has the useful literary characteristics of an image in which parts can be stressed or transformed to communicate nuances of thought. But covenant in Israel is much more than an image. Because it was a binding reality, the covenant could appeal to the Hebrew mind and heart in a profound and at times drastic way. In the promissory covenant, the Lord had been bound to a promise for Israel. Such a covenant would confer dignity and surety for the Israelites for a long time to come. In the mosaic covenant, the people themselves were bound in their commitment to the Lord. Such a covenant would appeal to their integrity, eliciting from their mind and heart a decision to be faithful to the word they had given to the Lord. It is the binding reality of the covenant, as with human treaties, that makes the covenant more than a powerful poetic image. Such is the case when King

Josiah finds out that the document in the temple was the document of the covenant. He tore his clothes and began a process of covenant renewal (2 Kings 22─23; 621 BCE). The binding agreement of the covenant has that capacity to mobilize commitment and loyalty in a relationship as well the ability to confer dignity and surety to those who live in the covenant relationship

As a juridically established state, Israel was unique in her employment of the covenant image for understanding and articulating her relationship to God. Perhaps the origin for such a creative use of the image rested in the tribal life of the many peoples of the Near East whose leader was presented as having a special relationship to the tribal deity.

**B) History of Covenant Studies:**

Much of the early research on covenant theology was thematic and synthetic as opposed to philological and historical. The prime example of such a study would have been Walter Eichrodt's work, *Theology of the Old Testament*. Such an approach began with a particular understanding of the covenant and proceeded to uncover its explicitation in the many instances of covenant in the Old Testament. For Eichrodt, covenant was the central theme from which the main tenants of Israelite faith could be deduced.

Form criticism brought a new approach to covenant study which has dominated the subject field with fruitful results. With the discovery of Hittite treaties in Bogazkoi, comparisons could be drawn between the structure of these political treaties and those covenant presentations of the Old Testament. Form critics threw themselves into discovering the same pattern of Hittite Treaties in the Scriptures The covenant which most clearly shows the pattern of the treaty formulary is presented in the book of Deuteronomy. Some authors would claim the treaty formulary is clearly discernible in the Sinai accounts as well as in the book of Joshua. Since the Hittite kingdom lasted into the 12th century, the formulary would have been familiar to Israel's leaders. This fact would support the possibility of the treaty-formulary having given shape to the Sinai covenant of Exodus and the Shechem covenant of Joshua.

The enthusiasm expressed in discovering the treaty-formulary wherever possible in the Scriptures was soon criticized in favor of greater precision and less generalized statements. The covenant-formulary reached its greatest synthesis both in precision and in its theological adaptation in the book of Deuteronomy in the 7th and 6th centuries. Earlier presentations of the covenant did not explicitly use the covenant formulary of international treaties to shape their accounts. The earlier presentations of the covenant show less and less of a resemblance to the treaty formulary.

The concentration on the formulary, which was quite natural given the method of form criticism, brought forth immense results But it tended to overshadow a different strain of covenant theology in the writings namely the patriarchal covenants and their related counterpart in the Davidic covenant. These formulations of covenant theology bear even a lesser resemblance to the treaty-formulary. However these covenants show the influence in many respects of the Grant formulations. Goods or benefits are assured to some beneficiary often as the result of faithfulness or aid in battle. But these grants are not accompanied by rituals or by sworn oaths as we witness in the Old Testament.

Comparison and contrast between the mosaic and davidic covenants has occasioned a lively discussion with various consequences. First of all there is a clear contrast between the main representatives of the mosaic covenant in Exodus, Joshua and Deuteronomy which emphasize the

conditional aspect of the covenant relationship, and the main representatives of the promissory covenants given to the patriarchs and to the kings. These latter covenants emphasize the gifts that the beneficiary receives. Some authors envisage the contrast as an irreconcilable discrepancy. Mendenhall claimed that the davidic covenant was a ploy to ascertain political power at the expense of Yahwist faith in the mosaic covenant. Relevant to this discussion is the debate of Israel's pre-monarchic structure, the tribal league, the amphictyone, and the question as to what extent the reorganization of Israel into a monarchy was a new realization of the mosaic covenant or in fact a digression from it. No doubt tensions between the political realities did exist and are explicitly referred to in Samuel and Kings. But the continued and persistent success of the davidic promise in post-exilic times testifies to the enduring possibilities of the imagery of the davidic covenant to express a fundamental relation between Israel and the LORD.

There is little doubt that the davidic covenant expressed in Samuel and Kings took as its basic source the promissory character of the patriarchal covenants. But then in turn some features of the davidic covenant, particularly the notion of an everlasting covenant, are then read back into the patriarchal covenant. R.E. Clements gives an interpretation to the davidic covenant which is much more positive theologically than that of Mendenhall. And the discussion regarding continuity with respect to the mosaic and davidic covenant continues.

Newman, in his study on the Elohist and Yahwist sources of the Sinai account bases the two strains of conditional and promissory covenants in the very integration of the Sinai account in Exodus.

The relation of the covenant to cultic worship has been studied by Mowinckel and Artur Weizer who posited a cultic renewal of the covenant along the lines of the Babylonian Akitu festival which celebrated the kingship of Baal. There is no doubt that ritual and cult have a longstanding relation to the main covenants in the Old Testament. Both traditions of covenants exemplify cultic dimensions because of the rituals that are associated with them, the cutting of animals, the shedding of blood, the communal meal, the swearing of oaths.

The study of the covenant in the prophets has centered on the law-suit and the curses. The underlying question in these studies is to what extent is the vassal treaty an under current in the imagery and debate of the prophets. An interesting anomaly in the prophetic works, primarily the earliest of the prophetic works, is an apparent reluctance to use the word "berit". It is difficult to imagine that the prophets would not have been familiar with the treaty-formulary, given their detailed knowledge of the king's dealings with surrounding kingdoms. The tension between the davidic and mosaic covenants comes alive in the prophetic works. Much of the imagery of faithfulness, of punishment and of threats have their parallels in the treaty formulary which is conditional. Perhaps "berit" elicited such a negative nuance between Israel and the LORD due to the corruption of the kingdoms that the early prophets preferred to avoid its use. Instead of referring to the covenant, they appeal to other images of union, namely father/son, husband/wife as backgrounds for the message of punishment and for the appeal to faithfulness.

In all of this it should be fairly clear that there is not one single univocal way of presenting Israel's covenant with the LORD and yet each covenant has something to say of Israel's lasting, even if turbulent, relationship to the LORD.

**VASSAL TREATIES**

There is a noticeable difference between a rather simple covenant of friendship as that between David and Jonathan, and the complex and precise treaty formulations of the Hittites or the Assyrians. The one is an exchange and a promise on the part of two friends, the other is the establishment of diplomatic relations, with responsibilities and benefits. I believe it is important to have a sense of the pervasiveness of these human covenants in the societies and city-states of the Near-East in order to perceive the ingenuity and creativity of Israel's covenant articulations with the Lord. The forming of a covenant or contract was something that was done in very humble, everyday circumstances right to the complex inter-action of inter-national communities.

Yet in both cases the two individuals or parties attempted to secure a relationship in which rights and responsibilities were defined and upheld. What is it that bound these agreements? In most cases, especially in the vassal treaties, the strength of one party played a dominant role in binding the agreement. But this is only a partial answer. Among the Hittite and Assyrian empires, the leaders would be frantic in their establishment of treaties precisely when the empire was weak and threatened. In other words, treaties have their origin in a situation that is volatile, unclear, threatening. Their purpose is to establish some security, some benefit, some achievement in an otherwise compromising situation. Sheer military or other power cannot explain the establishment of treaties. The origin of what binds the agreement must be sought in the very word of the parties. It is their word that ‘legally’ binds the agreement. Even in treaties where the superior party enforces the agreement, that superior party demands the word of the inferior which then establishes the agreement. However, there are very few treaties that would insist only on the exchange of a promise. This could only be the case between two parties who knew each other well and did not expect any surprises. One's word was ratified by an oath. The oath then is probably the original basis of the Near-Eastern treaties. The oath was an expression of the seriousness of one's word. Though the treaties were not religious, the religious element entered precisely in the exchange of oaths, in the calling down of curses to ensure one's commitment to the promised agreement. As a further extension of the oath, there was a ritual enactment of the oath to highlight its effectiveness. The parties would call upon their gods to witness the exchange of oaths. The curses themselves would often be linked to the power of the gods. The word of promise then was in this religious manner buttressed by the gods and by the calling down of curses on oneself in the case of the breaking of one's word. In this way the two parties, the two individuals sought to create a stability, a relationship, a set of responsibilities and benefits that would bring harmony or achievement in the particular situation.

On the one hand the language of these treaties more than likely is extremely foreign to us. We would be more familiar with either the legal language of contracts, where we do not use curses, but where we sign our lives away with a mere signature, a mere twist of a pen. Or we would be more at home with the personal expression of fidelity in marriage commitments. Curiously, in the Near-Eastern world, the treaties and the tribal agreements reflect a combining of what we would call the legal intricacies and the personal bond of treaty and covenant.

On the other hand, the language of the treaties will strike a familiar cord when we consider the similarity that focuses on the conditional covenants of the Old Testament. In reading the Hittite and Assyrian treaties in light of our knowledge of Old Testament covenants, we find ourselves surprisingly on very familiar turf.

It is clear that the Scriptural language of covenant is taken up from the personal and social covenants and treaties that belonged to Israel and to Near-Eastern societies. This in itself is

significant and quite expectable and consistent with Israelite faith which continuously sought her Lord, her God in her history. The treaty which was a significant cultural achievement in exploring and elaborating on the relationship between peoples became the image and the mediating factor for Israel's relationship to the LORD. Of course, covenant, as applied to the relationship between Israel and the LORD would eventually take on its own life, its own particular form.

**The Structure of Vassal Treaties:**

The evidence we have of treaties in the Near East is some what limited. The extant material depends on discoveries made at specific tels. But a picture can be drawn of a formula for negotiations in treaties used by the great kings of different empires. A major source of treaties come from the tel of Boghazkoi in central Turkey. These treaties testify to the great treaty capacity of the Hittite Kingdom which extended from 1600-1200. Prior to the Hittite Empire, our sources for the treaty are scarce and really quite tentative. Korošec in 1931 published an excellent study on Hittite treaties that prompted so much research on the treaty form. His presentation of the basic treaty elements will be of assistance.

1) **titulature** – which contains the title and name of the king, sometimes the name of his father and predecessors.

2) **the historical prologue** – all the previous benefits that the vassal kingdom has received from the great Hittite king are recorded. This record is not done with a special format with pat phrases, but seems to be a general record of historical events. At times rebellions of the vassal state are mentioned in this context. There is a double purpose to this historical prologue. One is ethical. By recalling the received benefits of the vassal, the king attempts to call forth loyalty to the established treaties. The other is juridical. It is history that grounds the great king's rights to demand adherence to the imposed claims.

3) **stipulations** – Often the section begins with general obligations of loyalty to the great king. they now share the same friends and the same enemies. Then there are the specific obligations one of which often is the responsibility to return fugitives, a recurring theme in most of the treaties. Somewhere within the treaty the need for a written document to be made known to the people from time to time is expressed.

4) **oaths** – The gods are invoked as witnesses to the concluded treaty. Besides the gods we have at times the heavens, the earth, rivers and springs mentioned as witnesses.

5) **blessings and curses** – these are the consequences of obedience or disobedience to the treaty.

6) **concluding rites** – Often the rite is actually mentioned in the treaty. The oath taking could take place at this juncture with a gesture that would symbolize the curse that the vassal will take on himself; for instance, rubbing oil on the body, drinking the oil, cutting of animals for sacrifice, a ritual meal.

This outline is not adhered to strictly or with equal weight given to all the parts. If we compare the Hittite treaties to the Assyrian we will have a clearer picture of the important elements in Near-Eastern treaties.

Starting with this treaty-formulary, we can discern certain elements of the treaty in very ancient Mesopotamian documents. We have the Vulture Steele of Eannatum of Lagash (2400) in which Eannatum, ensi of Lagash commemorates victory over Umma, and we have the Elamite Tablet of Naram-Sin (2300). In the Vulture Steele which is partially damaged, we have an historical prologue, but it is unsure whether or not this was stated for the establishment of the steele itself, or whether it was part of the treaty which follows. The two essential parts of the treaty formulation are present. (McCarthy, Treat and Covenant, p. 16, 18). There is no historical prologue in the Naram-Sin treaty, but we do have stipulations and oath. Hittite Treaty: (McCarthy TC intro. p. 2) Muwatilis the titulature and preamble McCarthy p. 202, parity, p. 203 vassal. historical introduction p. 202-3 stipulations, future kings and the issue of fugitives,wholeheartedly, Anet 204, the identity of enemies and friends, loyalty of the son is promised, McCarthy 8, 10.invocation of the gods, McCarthy 18 Curses and blessings, TC p. 184, Anet 203 Suppiluliumas.

With the Syrian and Assyrian Treaties we notice different emphases in their treaty formulations. Rarely do we find an historical prologue that would be comparable to that of the Hittites. Emphasis is placed on the curses and on the ritual acts that exemplify explicitly the reality and immediacy of the curses. The parity treaties as one would expect show a certain amount of restraint in the use of curses, similar to that of Hittite vassal treaties, (TC, p. 188). But the Syrian vassal treaty shows the common Assyrian trait of a multiplication of curses to ratify the bond. This feature even in the treaties is consistent with the ruthlessness of the Assyrian empire (TC 189). Esarhaddon's Vassal Treaty with Ramataiz, ensi of the city of Urakazabanu (TC 198): the preamble states the treaty is enacted with all of them and their sons after them; we have the deuteronomic phrases, "with all your heart", "teach your children after you with all your heart", "you will serve him as your god"; and there is an extensive enumeration of the curses.

In the Hittite treaties, the outstanding feature is the historical prologue. With this prologue which was not a foundational history, but rather an historical account of the events that led to the situation of the treaty, the Hittite king sought to ratify the treaty by establishing a basis for the demand and obligations that were to be made. In other words, the treaty was not made from the sheer position of force and power, though to be sure that was never lacking. The Hittite tradition of treaty making sought to co-involve the defeated party. A treaty without the inner consent of the vassal was thought to be fragile indeed, with the possibility of disobedience at the first opportunity, with the possibility of rebellion at the first sign of weakness in the empire. The stipulations themselves are often mentioned in an apodictic sense rather than in the terminology of case law. This is particularly true when we consider the texts of treaties between the royal family or at least parties who are on very familiar terms. The use of the second person then, such as thou shalt, thou shalt not, presumes a familiarity, almost a familial relationship. The ritual acting out of the curses is never mentioned in the actual formulation of the treaties. No doubt the Hittites knew of such rituals, but they do not connect treaty with ritual.

The curses for the most part follow characteristics of the Hittite treaty, priority must be given to the stipulations and to the calling upon witnesses for the taking on of the curses which is part of the oath declaring. The historical prologue is a unique feature in Hittite treaties, but it is not an essential feature.

Of course in the Assyrian treaty form, the historical prologue is practically non-existent. This in itself shows that the formulary in the near-east itself was varied, though sharing common features. To compensate as it were for an historical prologue that would give motivation for the vassal to adhere to the treaty, the Assyrian texts multiply the curses. Moreover, associated with the curses

there was a dramatization of the curses which is clear from the texts. The cutting of animals in relation to a treaty was a common west semitic trait that no doubt was shared with Mesopotamia. Note in the Abba-An treaty, the oath was done with the cutting of a sheep's throat. The cutting of animals in sacrifices is associated with divine power. But we cannot be sure how manifest this was outside of semitic practice. The dramatic enactment of the curse would imply an identification between the animal and the one who makes the oath, but this explicit identification is rarely made in the texts themselves, though the identification is done or presumed in an Assyrian treaty between Mati'ilu and the Assyrian King and between Esarhaddon with his vassals. This seems by far to be the most consistent interpretation of the rituals in the Assyrian treaties. The motivation in the dramatization is to instill fear in the vassal for breaking the oath and the treaty.

We can discern clear differences in the ideologies of the Hittite empire and the Assyrian empire, in the very formulation of their treaties. For the Hittites, the treaties were a pragmatic means of ensuring peace on its frontiers. Any kingdom or city that was not in a treaty relationship with Hatti was considered an enemy. The vassal cities or kingdoms that were in treaty relationship with Hatti recognized the great king with the acceptance of stipulations, paying a tribute, returning fugitives and recognizing Hatti's future, hereditary king. It was a loose union of cities through which Hatti attempted to extend its reach and powers typical of any empire.

With the Assyrian empire there is a slightly different emphasis that we noticed in the formulary itself which shows signs of a different ideology. Universal dominion was attributed to the god Ashur. The king was considered to be the trustee, the enforcer of this universal dominion. In this sense vassalship was only a temporary stage before the city or kingdom became outrightly annexed to the Assyrian kingdom. When a treaty was broken by an insubordinate vassal, Assyrian armies would move in and annex the land, deporting peoples and inhabiting the land with others. The drive for power was much more linked to the dominion of the god Ashur than what we can surmise from Hatti. The gods that were evoked as witnesses to the treaty under oath was considered to be a real power among the ancients. This was not a mere formality. The threat of breaking the oath under the gods' watchful eyes was real and effective. The curses were a means of ensuring the validity of the treaty where other means were failing. The Assyrians relied much more on fear than on favor. The blessings that the vassal received were rarely mentioned in the Assyrian treaties, unlike those of the Hittite treaties. Yet there were definite favors received. Baal of Tyre received new territory from his master, Asarhaddon, (TC 91). The gods evoked were for the most part Mesopotamian gods unlike the Hittite treaties where the gods of both parties were witnesses. All of these emphases and differences point to a Hittite empire that was a loose unity of cities tied to the city of Hatti, whereas the Assyrian empire was a central city-state that sought to annex city after city to its empire.

The features of these many treaty forms that we will see taken up in one way shape or form in Israelite covenants will be quite complex. Not one single treaty form is taken up and applied to Israel and the LORD. The historical prologue, characteristic of the Hittite treaties, but not exclusively confined to Hatti is an important feature in the Moab covenant. Yet even here the specialized history is characterized by a credal history that is unknown in Hittite treaties. The Hittite treaties also have the apodictic stipulations in the second person, which of course has its immediate parallel in the decalogue. This feature is unlike the code of Hammurabi which confines itself to caselaw, if... then... To be sure case law itself is shared by all of Mesopotamia and is testified in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. The calling of gods as witnesses of course would have difficulties in being applied to Israel and the LORD, but we do have the heavens and the earth as witnesses to the covenant, along with altars etc. The curses in the book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy show striking parallels to that of the Assyrian treaties. Can we argue for an historical dependency, given the differences between

the Hittite and Assyrian treaties? This can be answered only very tentatively. To say that the Moab covenant, which thrives on an elaborate and concise historical prologue, is dependent on Hittite treaties which ended in 1200 BC is conjectural indeed. We have seen that the formularies are loosely applied and that the most common features are the stipulations and the oaths. Our extant sources of treaties is very limited. That there are no Akkadian treaties from the height of Babylonian power, and the extending Assyrian empire leave us with several lacunae. To argue for historical dependency of Israel's religious covenants on specific vassal treaties can only be tentative, not conclusive. Considering the variations of the formularies, we would be better to argue that Israel was familiar with the formulary in its essential traits. In other words, the historical prologue was more than likely used in treaties at a later date than that of the Hittite treaties, but we do not have the sources. The lack of extant treaties between 1200 and 800 BC (crucial dates for the development of Israel's covenant) should warn us not to make hasty historical conclusions. That Israel used the formulary of treaties in its articulation of the relationship to the LORD is clear. But the persistence of the formulary in the ancient orient shows that Israel would have had contact with treaty formularies throughout her history.

**2 - Secular Covenants in Israel**

a) Secular Covenants:

1) Ancestral Covenants: Gen 21:22-34, 26:26-33, 31:43-55.

2) With the Gibeonites: Jos 9:3-27, 10:1-11, 2 Sam 21:1-10, (Ex 23:32, 34:12,15, Deut 7:2, Judg 2:2.

3) Covenants between Israelite and Foreign Kings: lK 5:1-12, 9:10-14, 15:16-20, 20:26-34, 2K 16:5-9, Ez 17:11-21.

4) Covenants between the king and the people: 2 Sam 3: 12-21, 5: 1-3, 2K 1:1-17, 2Ch 23:3.

5) Friendship Covenants: 1 Sam 18:1-4, 20:1-42, 23:12-18, 2 Sam 9:1-13, marriage covenants: Hab 2:14, Ez 16:8, Hos 2, Jer 2:2, 3:1

b) Covenants with YHWH:

Adam: Gen 2:16-25.
Noah: Gen 6:18, 8:20-21, 9:1-17.
Abram: Gen 12, 13:14-17, 15, 17.
Isaac: Gen 26:2-4.
Jacob: Gen 28:1-9.
Sinai: Ex 19-24, 31, 33-34
Moab: Deuteronomy
Shechem: Jos 8:10-35, 24.
David: 1 Sam 11:14-12:25, 2 Sam 7, 1 Ch 17.
Solomon: 1K 3:1-15, 2Ch 1:3-13.
Josiah: 2K 22-23, 2Ch 34-35.
Ezra: Neh 9

c) Covenant considered by the prophets: Amos 3-4, Hos 2: 16-23. Isaiah (5), 24, II 42:1-4, 5-9, 49:7-13, 54:9-10, 55:1-5, III 56, 59:21. Jeremiah 31:31-34. Hab 1:6-2:9, 2:10-167, 2:17-3:5. Ez (16), 17:1-21.

d) Covenant in the poetic didactic books: Psalms 50, 89, 132. Sirach 44:1-50:24.

The variety of covenants that we encounter in the Old Testament point to the pervasiveness of the covenant as a supreme medium of human communication. In point of fact, for the semites, the covenant in its many varieties constitutes a complex achievement of dialogue and commitment in situations of tension and difficulty. The covenant can express a desire for peace and secure relations as we have in the case of Abraham and Abimelech king of Gerar (Gen 21:22-34). The context is one of the meeting of Abraham's clan with the indigenous peoples. There is discussion and bargaining with the intention of establishing a peaceful coexistence. Abraham swears peace to Abimelech and then reproaches him for the aggression of his servants against Abraham's. Sheep and oxen are given to Abimelech for the pact and a gift of seven ewes is offered as a sign of ownership of the wells. Both swear an oath by their Gods. A similar pact is established between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen

26:26-34). However here the covenant is also bonded with a feast, and the exchange of oaths with one another takes place in the morning.

The covenant between Jacob and Laban contains some interesting features that figure predominantly in Israel's relationship with the Lord. The tension between the two tribes resulted in a split that led to an escape and a pursuit. Laban confronts Jacob and the ensuing situation is resolved with a covenant. When Laban fails to find evidence that the household gods are in Jacob's possession, he faces the counter accusation of Jacob. An account of his service is given. There is nothing left for Laban to do but to establish peace and recognize Jacob's rights. Jacob sets up a stone as a witness to the exchange. He ordered his servants to gather the stones and they broke bread over the mound. Laban called the place, Yegar-sahadutha, Aramaic for mound of testimony. Jacob called it, Galeed, Hebrew for the same term. Laban is clearly considered to be the superior party but he is granting to Jacob rights. The mound and the stele were meant to be a sign of the pact. Neither tribe was to pass the border with hostile intent. The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor were the witnesses and guarantors of the covenant. Jacob took the oath by the Awesome one of Isaac. He offered a sacrifice and there was a meal.

The David Jonathan Sequence 15 18:1-4: After the Goliath narrative, David is shown as having found favour in the eyes of both Saul and his son Jonathan. Even though the friendship between David and Jonathan, perhaps the most moving of those related in the Old Testament, is described in personal terms, we should not lose sight of its formality. Political overtones are clearly discernible in the narrative. Jonathan is the formal successor to the throne of Saul. David, son of Jesse, has been anointed clandestinely as king by Samuel. In other words, in narrating the friendship between Jonathan who is a hero in his own right, more worthy than Saul himself in insight and in daring, and David, the choice of YHWH and Samuel, the book of Samuel is blending two political traditions, Israel, the north and Judah, the south. The personal friendship between David and Jonathan symbolizes the unity between the north and the south. In the emergence of David as the one recognized even by Jonathan to be truly leader we have the reflection of Judah emerging as the centre of leadership for both the north and the south.

We do not have very much formal preparation developed within the narrative for the covenant expressed between Jonathan and David. But there are clues of the intent of this covenant in the narratives that precede it. Since the episode of Jonathan's bravery and cunning preceded the Goliath account, there is discernible in the text a deliberate attempt to make both Jonathan and David into similar heroes. Both are daring and cunning, facing impossible odds in the name of YHWH their God. The narrative leads us to believe that Jonathan, in seeing David challenge the Philistine, recognized in him the ideals of bravery and cunning that he himself loved. The covenant that is established between David and Jonathan is a personal bond of love that is primarily motivated by Jonathan himself. It is Jonathan who loves David as his very own soul, and David accepts this love. Jonathan is the one who is taking the initiative. He is clearly the superior member of the party. The personal overtones of the covenant are stressed several times in the narrative.

a) Jonathan's soul was knit to the soul of David.
b) Jonathan loved him as his own soul.
c) He made a covenant because he loved him as his own soul.
d) He gave him personal gifts: the robe, armour, a sword, a girdle. These could very well be a concrete sign of investiture. Jonathan is accepting David into his ranks with pomp and ceremony, recognizing his bravery and cunning spirit. The following accounts concentrate on David's success as a soldier which surpasses that of Saul.

The first covenant is the basis for David's appeal to the first covenant (1 Sam 20:1-42). David comes to Jonathan with a serious complaint that Saul desires to kill him. This is similar to the complaint between Jacob and Laban that issues in a covenant. David appeals to Jonathan's personal love expressed in the swearing of a covenant in order to discover for certain Saul's intentions. Another covenant is established. Jonathan swears his friendship and that he will provide the truth of the matter. Jonathan asks a favour from David at this point, to be loyal to his house forever. Even in this narrative it is clear that Jonathan is formally the superior although we already have hints that the power base is switching in favour of David. Jonathan is recognizing that David is to be the leader of the tribes. In asking for David's life-long loyalty, Jonathan is recognizing his own volatile and fragile situation. Finally in the last covenant of the sequence (1 Sam 23:15-18), Jonathan formally announces that David will be king and he accepts to be his second. Even Saul is said to have accepted this state of affairs. In 2 Sam 9:1-13, David keeps this covenant that he had sworn to Jonathan by helping Jonathan's only surviving son Mephiboshet.

There is clearly a development in the David/Jonathan sequence that points to political overtones. Jonathan at first is the legitimate heir to the throne, but David has secretly been anointed by Samuel. Through a personal friendship, the narrative bridges the gap between the north and the south. This is legitimized not only through the formal anointing of David by Samuel, but by the formal covenant relationships between David and Jonathan. Where David began as a covenanted soldier to Jonathan he ends by promising favour to the posterity of Jonathan.

The covenant is clearly a supreme achievement of human dialogue, decision and commitment. When it comes to the relationship between Israel and God it is not surprising to see the relationship understood and expressed according to the supreme image that the Israelites used in their own dealing with one another, the sworn covenant. Perhaps what is more surprising is the fact that we have no other witness to such an employment of the image to depict the relationship between a people and their god, namely the image of covenant expressed in juridical language binding together the familial relationship between a clan and their god and the ethical demands of a law code.

# ABRAHAM ─ A COVENANT OF PROMISE

There are several questions to keep in mind as we explore the specific presentation of a given covenant between Israel and the God of the Hebrew scriptures. What are the presuppositions of the image in the covenant? What are the implications? Where is the emphasis placed? Such questions will highlight the theological possibilities for the employment and transposition of the covenant in later situations within the history of Israel. Each image obviously has a horizon of possibilities with a boundary of limitations.

To see the text as it stands is important for gleaning specific and unique features of the covenant. But the stories also have a message in the larger context as well. To grasp the meaning of a story then implies an unfolding of its inner dynamic and its outer thrust.

**The call out of the Land of Ur:**

Gen 12 ─ This short story regarding the call of Abraham to leave his land and family in search of a quest for land is related to the covenant bond that will follow. It anticipates the covenant, and it sets the context for the covenant to be established in chapter 15. The command, 'go forth' implies an invitation, a call (in Hebrew, *lech-lecha* – "go your going" or "getup and go!"). Something new is about to be started. This newness is a response from God to the tragedies of the human family that have been described in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Abraham is specifically asked to leave his birthplace and his father's home. But there are promises implied in the call. 1) Abraham is asked to go to a land that God will show him. 2) There he will be made into a great nation, and 3) all the communities of the earth will consider themselves blessed through Abraham.

What is the likely origin of these promises associated with the call of Abraham? They do in fact express the longings and values of a semi nomadic people or tribe. Along with Fensham we can note that the values of the nomadic tribe described in the call of Abraham are not dissimilar to those blessings of the overlord in vassal treaties.[1] There the overlord was concerned with the maintenance of the land with its boundaries, there too he would promise blessing to the family which would thrive under his protection and finally all would be well with them.

In one sense of course there is nothing extraordinary in these promises. They do express the longings and desires of any nomadic people for whom land is paramount, for whom family ties and bonds are crucial, and who ultimately share the blessings they have expressed in their love for generosity and welcoming gestures towards guests. What is extraordinary in the narrative is the initiative of God who is understood as having sought out Abraham and his clan. What is extraordinary is the realization of these promises and the declaration that the God of Abraham has brought them about. All of a sudden, in the context of the entire Genesis narrative, the focus switches from the universal in general to a particular corner of the earth, and to a specific individual from within the human family (E. Speiser, *Genesis* AB).

[1] F.C. **FENSHAM**, "Covenant, Promise and Expectation in the Bible", *TZ* 23 (1967).

In terms of literary genres, we have nothing here of the vassal treaty form. But we do have a form similar to that of the oracle of assurance. The story which is formulated as a narrative places specific emphasis on the command to go forth in order that God might confer the promises. How exactly these promises are to be fulfilled is not explained, and this heightens the expectation of fulfilment in the dynamic of the story. The promise of land is clarified to some extent in the following narrative. When Abram travels to Canaan, near Shechem, he receives another vision in which the LORD says: *"I will give this land to your offspring"* (12:6-7). Although the expectation of fulfilment is heightened, the reality of unfulfillment is continuously brought to the fore. The same procedure is used as Abram travels on to Hebron which appears to be the particular place of sojourn for Abraham.[2] In response to the anxiety generated in the narrative regarding the fulfilment of the promise of land and offspring, God speaks to Abram:

> *"Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you"* (Gen 13:14-17).

The initial response of trust on the part of Abraham is to be tested again and again. Abraham places the promise in jeopardy in Egypt when he claims Sarai is his sister so that Pharaoh takes her to himself. The promises of God to Abraham throughout these ensuing narratives become integrated into the ordinary events of human existence - survival, bargaining, friendship, loyalty, war, agreements, birth and death.

**The Making of a Covenant:**

Gen 15 ─ The covenant account in Gen 15 opens with another imperative which touches on the nerve of unfulfillment in the previous promises. *"Fear not. I am your shield, your reward shall be great"*. The latter promise is recalled with emphasis. But here, unlike in the initial opening account, Abram asks for clarification of the promise of descendants. How can any of the promises be fulfilled if Abraham remains childless? The fear of a tribe that their smallness would lead to an absorption by another (Eliezar in this case) appears to be the background for Abraham's real concern. Emphasis is placed on an heir to Abraham to be the one to inherit the promises. (This emphasis could in fact be a reflection of a later redaction when other peoples, all descendants of Abraham, 'Ishmael' for example, were claiming the land as their own inheritance). The response is a meditation on the skies and the stars as a sign to Abraham of the surety of the promises. Abraham put his trust in the LORD, who accounted it to his merit - that most celebrated of phrases. It points to a basic thrust in the Abraham accounts. The challenge is to trust God's word and God's plan. The anxiety over childlessness is put to rest.

In verse 7, God intervenes with an account of what he has done up to that point. *"I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession."* The wording of this declaration is significant because it recurs in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. The

[2] For this reason, he was buried here in the cave of Machpelah, where he had buried his own wife Sarah. Later tradition would also have Adam and Eve buried here. You can see the "footprint of Adam" in the ancestral burial tombs underneath the Mosque of Ibrahim in Hebron today.

words, ‘to bring out’ become the terms for leaving Egypt. Moses was called to bring out the people from the land of Egypt to worship God in the desert. This is a prime term in the paradigmatic forms of liberation. This image of ‘bringing out’ provides a point of contact between the two covenants. In Hebrew, the verb ‘to leave’ is often associated with birth, the leaving of the womb, whereas ‘to go in’ is often associated with death, returning to the earth. Ps 121:8, I know your going out and your coming in. In Greek the same images convey the very opposite. The exodus is death whereas entrance is life. To exit implies to leave life which means death. To enter implies to enter life from the womb which means birth.

The second part of the declaration renews the subject of the land. Again this is a key element of the promise that is part of this covenant of promise and which continuously will be referred to throughout the narratives that follow regarding Isaac and Jacob.

But again Abram is agitated over the issue as to how he is to know that he will in fact possess the land through his descendants. To assure him of this realization, the LORD brings Abraham into a covenant relationship with him. In other words the Lord assures his promises and his word through the binding oath of a covenant.

The preparation of the animals was done for a sacrifice in preparation for covenant making, and in Mesopotamia this was also done for oracles. In this case it seems to be the making of a covenant, though the oracle is not to be excluded, because essentially the content of this covenant is a promise of what will happen, which is more in keeping with an oracle. But because the LORD is the one who promises the gifts, we have the mingling of an oracle form and covenant binding. There are references to the use of animals in other covenant contexts, 1 Sam 1:24-28, Jer 34:16-19

After the preparation, Abram waits and nothing happens. Finally a deep, dark dread fell upon him, the same dread that came upon Adam when in the Yahwist account, Eve was fashioned from a rib of Adam. For the Hebrew, hearing the word "tardema" would immediately be a reminder of the creation account. It would provide a hint that what was about to happen here with Abram is something extraordinary, a new creation.

Verses 13-16 again refer to the history of Abram's descendants and to the future of Abram's own death. He himself shall go down to his ancestors at a ripe old age. This is clearly a later reflection inserted into the narration to explain the delay of the fulfilment of the promise of land. This is attributed either to the Elohist or to a Deuteronomistic hand.

With the actual covenant making we witness an extraordinary event. A smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces of animals. This is an image used in Akkadian incantations: "I sent out against you ‘a going over’ a fire that has caught." Does this flaming torch which passed between the pieces signify that a sacrifice has been accepted? (Cain and Abel, Gen 4:3-6), or that an oracle is to be given, or that a covenant is made? Certainly in this context, the story appears to be intimately associated with a covenant. *"That day the LORD concluded a covenant with Abram saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates"* (Gen 15:18). This manner of ‘covenant making’ whereby animals are cut and readied for sacrifice has echoes in Jer 34:17-19 where the parties are said to pass through the parts of the animal as a sign of their commitment to keep their promise. It is possible that this action represents an ‘acted out curse’ whose purpose is to assure Abraham that his descendants will in fact inherit the land. The covenant then is essentially a covenant of promise, initiated by God and ratified by a ritual oath. All that Abraham is asked to do is to trust the Lord, to be bound to him even as God has bound his word to Abraham's future.

If we divide the text according to the Elohist and Yahwist traditions, then we can perceive different emphases in the traditions. J = lb, 2, 7-12, 17-21. E = 3-6, 13-16. The Elohist is primarily concerned with relating the promise of descendants, whereas the Yahwist is concerned to transmit the promise of land. Abraham for the Elohist is assured of the promise through a tranquil meditation of

the heavens and the stars. For the Yahwist Abraham is in sheer dread for fear of unfulfillment and must be drawn into a binding covenant with the Lord to provide assurance of both land and descendants.

**The Freedom of Abraham:**

The story of Abraham and Isaac is an occasion for the confirmation of the covenant, and it makes some interesting observations regarding the Abrahamic covenant. In many respects it appears to be the climax of the entire Abraham cycle. Certainly it is the most dramatic moment, whereby both the fear of the unfulfillment of the promise and Abraham's own decision to trust are brought to paradoxical intensity.

At the outset of the story we know this command is a test. Just as the LORD had called Abraham to leave Ur, to ready the animals, he here commands him to take his beloved son to offer as a burnt offering. The narrative that follows is one of the more dramatic, subtle and personal stories of the pentateuch. Abraham passes the test. The Lord is pleased. "*I swear by myself, that because you have acted thus, and did not withhold your beloved son from me, I will bestow my blessings upon you"*. The promises are reiterated from the previous narratives. 1) Abraham's offspring will become as numerous as the stars (E). 2) The descendants will take over the gates of their enemies (a reference to possessing the land) (J). 3) All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by Abraham's descendants, because he obeyed his command (J).

Now it is interesting that the last phrase should have been added to the narrative, *"all because you obeyed my command"*. The original covenant is not conceived as being absolutely unconditional, though the weight of the promise is still strongly on the side of gift. For this promise to be executed by the LORD, it is necessary for Abraham and presumably for his descendants to have unswerving trust in the Lord. The account is not merely a test to discover what Abraham really believes, but it is a test that explicitly calls forth from Abraham an act of faith and brings him to a deeper belief and trust.

The meaning of the story can be seen in its relationship to the original promises of the covenant with Abraham. On its own the story might very well have been a polemic against human sacrifices which were practised by the Canaanites, particularly with the first born (2 Kings 3:27, 1 Kings 16:34). But in the context of the Genesis narrative, human sacrifice is hardly the main issue of the story. Furthermore to have the LORD order child sacrifice in a polemic against such sacrifice would certainly not have been an apt way of introducing such a polemic. To say that perhaps this order was Abraham's false understanding of the will of the Lord which is finally made known at the end of the narrative would resolve the unacceptable features of this command on the part of God. But such an interpretation or resolution does not do justice to the entire context of the story as a test, like the testing of Job.

The significance of this story can best be seen in light of the call of Abraham and the covenant. From a literary point of view, this connection is clearly established in the repetition of the promises which the LORD reaffirms. The wording of the promise is taken from both the call and the covenant of Abraham. We can ask ourselves, why is this story of the sacrifice added here at this particular point of the narrative? There is no new promise given. Abraham has already shown obedience and personal decision in taking up God's call. The added element in this challenging story is the profound commitment and freedom that Abraham achieves in the story. For the enterprise which God has initiated to be successful, unswerving trust and radical faith is necessary. For God to bestow freely the gifts that are promised, the cooperation of Israel is necessary. The gifts cannot be given without the trust and faith of Israel. Though the initiative is on the part of God, though the promises are sheer gift, the personal involvement of Abraham is the only way that God will in fact be

able to bring about the realization of the promises. For the promises will take generations to realize. The vision that God had given Abraham would have to stand the test of time. In the words of Speiser, "It was a vision that could be pursued only with single mindedness of purpose and absolute faith, - an ideal that could only be perpetuated if one was ready to die for it, or had the strength to see it snuffed out".[3]

The inner battle that Abraham must have gone through (which to a great extent is left to the imagination of the reader)[4] has significant psychological implications. A rabbinic interpretation of Abraham's moral dilemma lays great significance on the double prohibition, 'not to lay his hand on the boy, and not to harm him in any way' (Gen 22:12). The test that God is having Abraham undergo centres precisely on Abraham's relationship to his son who signifies the future promises. The issue really is whether or not Abraham is free to let the promises come to their fulfilment, or will Abraham's attachment be such that his supposed "love" for the boy would really smother and kill the promises. The test is really a challenging moment where God is asking Abraham to become free of a smothering attachment. The rabbinic interpretation of the double prohibition suggests that God was aware of the deep attachment Abraham had for his future which would in fact put into jeopardy the promises. Abraham's "love" would in fact kill Isaac. The entire test is meant to free Abraham from this attachment.

A few indices in the narrative regarding the boy Isaac corroborate the possibility of such an interpretation. Up till now Isaac has not come of age. He has not yet been "separated" from the household (the servants). He has not yet spoken a word in the narrative. But during the course of this narrative Isaac becomes an equal with his father Abraham. He is separated from the young men, Gen 22:5; he begins to speak with Abraham, "Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" ... so the two of them walked on together" (Gen 22:7-8). In the course of the narrative, Abraham has allowed Isaac to be his equal, a true inheritor of the promises enunciated at the outset in chapter 12. He has overcome his own fear of seeing the promises crushed. The test of Abraham was God's way of liberating Abraham from any attachment that could put into jeopardy the fulfilment of the promises.

The entire Abrahamic cycle of narratives is encased in two challenges placed before Abraham by God. In both of these challenges that are given to Abraham, we see God's call to engage him fully into the vision or plan that God has for humanity. In the first call, Abraham is called to abandon his homeland, his roots, his past, in order to be engaged in this enterprise with trust. In the second call, Abraham is called to let go of his son, his tangible hope, his future, in order to be engaged and fully committed to the LORD. In the middle of these two challenges rests the covenant - the bond between the LORD and Abraham, in which Abraham is promised land, and descendants in order to bring about in some inexplicable way, the blessing for all of humanity which is so much called for in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. The faith of Abraham in both challenges and in the covenant of assurance is paradigmatic of the faith of all subsequent followers: Moses, the prophets, the pharisees, christians, muslims, in short, everyone who looks to Abraham as a 'father' of faith.

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[3] E.A. SPEISER, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, New York: 1964.

[4] For a thorough existential treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard particularly highlights the inner freedom that Abraham acquires through anguishing reflection during the emptying journey with his son up mount Moriah.

Genesis 22, the *Aqedah* (the binding), [S.D. Walters, "Wood, Sand and Stars: Structure and Theology in Gn 22:1-19," *TJT* 3 (1987) 301-330].

**A** [1]After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "*Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am.*" *A*

[2]He said, "**Take your son, your only son**, whom you love, yes, Isaac.

**B** Go to the land of Moriah and *offer him there as a burnt offering* on one of the mountains that I shall show you." *B*

[3]*Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and, yes, his son Isaac; he split kindling for the burnt offering, and set out and went* to **the place his God had mentioned to him**. *C*

**C** [4]On the third day, *Abraham looked up and saw the place* in the distance. [5]Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; *D*

I and the lad will go over there; *we will worship and then come back to you*." [6]Abraham took the kindling for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, while he himself took the fire and the blade. **The two of them went along together**. [7]Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, "Father," he said, and he answered, *E*

**D** "Here I am, **my son**." He said, "The fire and the kindling are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" [8]Abraham answered,

**D'** "*God will see*
*to his own animal for a burnt offering*, **my son**. *F*

**C'** **The two of them went along together**.

**B** [9]*They reached* **the place his God had mentioned to him**. There Abraham built the altar, arranged the kindling, bound Isaac his son and placed him on the altar on top of the kindling. [10]Abraham reached out and grasped the blade to slaughter his son. *G*

**A'** [11]Then the LORD's messenger cried out to him from the heavens and said, *"Abraham, Abraham!" He answered, "Here I am.*" *A'*

[12]He said, "*Do not lift your hand against the lad! Do not hurt him in any way*! *B'*

*For I am now sure that you fear God, since you did not hold back* **your son, your only son**, from me." *C'*

[13]Then Abraham looked up and there he saw a ram, just caught in a bush by its horns. *D'*
At once Abraham took the ram and *offered it as a burnt offering* in place of his son. *E'*

[14]Abraham named that place, *'the LORD sees,' as it is still said today, 'on the LORD's mountain, he is seen.'* *F'*

[15]Then the LORD's messenger cried out to Abraham a second time from the heavens, [16]"An oracle of the LORD! he said. "I swear by all that I am, because you have done this -- because you did not hold back your son, your only son -- I am going to bless you richly. [17]I am going to give you descendants without number, as the stars of the sky and as the sand on the seashore, and your descendants will possess the gates of their enemies. [18]And by your descendants will all the peoples of the earth be blessed, because you listened to my voice.

[19]Then Abraham returned to his young men. They got up and went along together to Beersheba. Abraham stayed in Beersheba. *G'*

**Literary features of the *Aqedah***

| | |
|---|---|
| 22:1 | Abraham, the G has the name doubled to parallel 22:11. |
| 22:2 | your only one,<br>Moriah, 2Ch 3:1 speaks of this mountain as mount Zion, tradition has it that this is where Abraham sacrificed Isaac. |
| 22:3 | he split kindling, in the Heb this in mentioned after that of Isaac, which would suggest Abraham did not want Isaac to know what was happening. |
| 22:1,3,9 | the Hebrew actually has his God, referring to Abraham which is meant to be a parallel to the Abraham/Isaac relationship, his son. |
| 22:7 | Father, here I am = Gen 27:18, Jacob and Isaac, in both cases the younger son Isaac, Jacob have priority over the elder, Ishmael,Esau. This is a hapax legomena. |
| 22:8,14 | play on the verb to see, God will see to his own animal |
| 22:9 | binding, test = *Aqedah*. |

**Linking techniques to the previous episodes**

| | |
|---|---|
| 12:1 | *lech-lecha* = 22:2 only occurrences |
| 12:2 | The naming of God as the subject links the passage to everything that God has been doing in the previous chapters, one who makes promises, 12:2; makes a covenant, 15; gives Abraham and Sarah a new name and land 17; protects Abraham and Sarah in their interaction with other peoples 20--21, this God now tests Abraham. |
| 12--21 | there is a play on promise unfulfillment, hope danger. Abraham twice tries to implement the promise on his own 15:1-6, 16:1-16 (note Moses and Saul who initially attempt to exercise leadership).<br>The impossible dream of having a son is realized in Isaac, yet this dream turns into a nightmare. Where Abraham and Sarah have been most blessed, there at that very spot they have been most stricken. |

Three poems on the Aqedah by Yehuda Amichai

1) A Poem which interprets the Aqedah in light of rabbinic discussion

**The Real Hero**

By Yehuda Amichai

The real hero of the Isaac story was the ram,
who didn't know about the conspiracy between the others,
As if he had volunteered to die instead of Isaac.
I want to sing a song in his memory –
about his curly wool and his human eyes,
about the horns that were so silent on his living head,
and how they made these horns into shofars when he was slaughtered
to sound their battle cries
or to blare out their obscene joy.

I want to remember the last frame
like a photo in an elegant fashion magazine:
the young man tanned and manicured in his jazzy suit
and beside him the angel, dressed for a party
in a long silk gown,
both of them empty-eyed, looking
at two empty places,

and behind them, like a coloured backdrop, the ram,
caught in the thicket before the slaughter.
The thicket his last friend.

The angel went home.
Isaac went home.
Abraham and God had gone long before.

But the real hero of the Isaac story
Was the ram.

2) Another poem by Yehuda Amichai on the Aqedah

Three sons had Abraham, not just two.

Three sons had Abraham: Yishma-El, Yitzhak, and Yivkeh.
First came Yishma-El, "God will hear,"
next came Yitzhak, "he will laugh,"
and the last was Yivkeh, for he was the youngest,
the son that Father loved best,
the son who was offered up on Mount Moriah.
Yishma-El was saved by his mother, Hagar,
Yitzhak was saved by the angel,
but Yivkeh no one saved.
When he was just a little boy, his father
would call him tenderly, Yivkeh,
Yivkeleh, my sweet little Yivkie
but he sacrificed him all the same.
The Torah says the ram, but it was Yivkeh.
Yishma-El never heard from God again,
Yitzhak never laughed again,
Sarah laughed only once, then laughed no more.
Three sons had Abraham,
Yishma, "will hear," Yitzhak, "will laugh," Yivkeh, "will cry."
Yismah-El, Yitzhak-El, Yivkeh-El.
God will hear, God will laugh, God will cry.

3) Yehuda Amichai

Every year our father Abraham would take his sons to Mount Moriah
the way I take my children to the Negev hills where I once had a war.
Abraham hiked around with his sons. "This is where I left
the servants behind, that's where I tied the donkey to a tree
at the foot of the mountain, and here, right here, Isaac my son, you asked:
Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?
Then, up a little further, you asked for the second time."
When they reached the mountaintop, they rested a bit, ate and drank,
and he showed them the thicket where the ram was caught by its horns.
After Abraham died, Isaac started taking his sons to the same place.
"Here I lifted the wood, this is where I got out of breath,
here I asked, and my father answered: God will see to the lamb
for the offering. Over there, I already knew it was me."
And when Isaac's eyes were dim with age, his children
led him to that same spot on Mount Moriah, and recounted for him
all that had come to pass, all that he might have forgotten.

*The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, edited by Stephen Mitchell, Chana Bloch, Los Angeles: University of California, 1996.

Four decades of poetry from Amichai, who immigrated from Germany to Palestine in 1936. His perennial themes are the threat of death versus the joy of faith in God.

Yehuda Amichai is Israel's most popular poet as well as a literary figure of international reputation. His poetry has been translated into more than thirty languages. Renowned translators Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell have selected Amichai's most beloved and enduring poems from his eleven volumes and have included forty new poems from his recent work in this revised and expanded collection (*from the cover of the book*).

The *Aqedah* (*The Sacrifice of Isaac*) is a story that continues to exert tremendous influence on the Arts. In a sense, every age must come to terms with this story where it appears that a father is close to killing a son, only to have the mysterious outcome where both the father and the son are saved. But notice the new twist in Yehuda Amichai's poetry which concentrates on the ram, or even a most recent film "Hunger Games" which introduces into the mix the "daughter" of Abraham. You can see a particular contemporary concern of the "absence" of women in the original story and our contemporary desire to fill in the gaps with values and concerns that our paramount in our own cultural horizon.

**From the Hunger Games (directed by Gary Ross, Lionsgate, 2012)**

**Lyrics to Abraham's Daughter - Arcade Fire** :

Abraham took Isaac's hand
And led him to the lonesome hill
While his daughter hid and watched
She dared not breathe she was so still
Just as an angel cried for the slaughter
Abraham's daughter raised her voice

Then the angel asked her what her
Name was she said 'I have none'
Then he asked how can this be
'My father never gave me one'

And when he saw her raised for the slaughter
Abraham's daughter raised her bow
How dearest you child defy your father
You better let young Isaac go

Woody allen and the akedah

This is classic, all over the web. Take a look at William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (ed. and annotated by), *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 220.

**WOODY ALLEN ON ABRAHAM AND ISAAC**

**The Sacrifice of Isaac**

And Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, Isaac, "I have had a dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, so put your pants on."

And Isaac trembled and said, "So what did you say? I mean when He brought this whole thing up?"

"What am I going to say?" Abraham said. "I'm standing there at two A.M. I'm in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?"

"Well, did he say why he wants me sacrificed?" Isaac asked his father.

But Abraham said, "The faithful do not question. Now let's go because I have a heavy day tomorrow."

And Sarah who heard Abraham's plan grew vexed and said, "How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes, for the Lord hateth practical jokes and whosoever shall pull one shall be delivered into the hands of his enemies whether they pay the delivery charge or not."

And Abraham answered, "Because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant voice, well modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that."

And Sarah said, "And thou art willing to carry out this senseless act?" But Abraham told her, "Frankly yes, for to question the Lord's word is one of the worst things a person can do, particularly with the economy in the state it's in."

And so he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and said, "How could thou doest such a thing?"

And Abraham said, "But thou said —"

"Never mind what I said," the Lord spake. "Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?" And Abraham grew ashamed. "Er – not really … no."

"I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it."

And Abraham fell to his knees, "See, I never know when you're kidding."

And the Lord thundered, "No sense of humor. I can't believe it."

"But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?"

And the Lord said, "It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice."

And with that, the Lord bid Abraham get some rest and check with him tomorrow.

**The Renewal of the Covenant Promises to Isaac and Jacob:**

The extension of the covenant of promise to the ancestors, Isaac and Jacob is carried out in contexts that call the ancestors to make a decision and to allay fears of challenge and failure, similar to the journey of Abraham.

With Isaac, precisely because there was a famine in the land, the LORD appears in a theophany to tell him where to stay and to affirm the promise (Gen 26:2-4). All three promises are mentioned again with particular emphasis on the land. Finally after thriving in the land of his sojourning, Abimelech of Gerar orders Isaac to depart. In the midst of this uncertain future, the LORD intervenes at Beersheba to allay Isaac's fears (Gen 26:24-25). *"Fear not, for I am with you, I will bless and keep you and increase your offspring, for my servant Abraham's sake"*.

Similarly with Jacob, God intervenes to extend the promises in order to allay fears of unfulfillment and failure and to direct Jacob's travels. In connection with the promises, in this case asserted by Isaac, Jacob was sent off to Haran to find a wife according to the priestly writer (Gen 28:1-9). According to the Yahwist, it was Rebekah who tells Jacob to go to Laban her brother to avoid the anger and revenge of Esau whose birthright had been stolen.

In a dream during the journey at Bethel, the LORD allays the fear of Jacob's uncertain future with an extension of the promise (Gen 28:10-15). Instead of the opening words, ‘fear not', as with Abraham and Isaac, it is the concluding part of the communication that allays the fears of Jacob.

> *"Remember I am with you, I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you"* (Gen 28:15).

Though in the case of Abraham and Isaac the first communications involved a command as to what to do and the secondary promises were to allay fears of unfulfillment, with Jacob the inverse is true. the LORD begins by allaying the fears with his promise and concludes by calling him to Egypt with the extension of the promise.

> *"I am God, the God of your ancestor; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation, I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes"* (Gen 46:1-4).

The extension of the covenant promises of Abraham to Isaac and Jacob is not done without the continual engagement of the ancestors. The very same activity of trust that dominated the Abraham cycle is brought out in the Isaac/Jacob sequences. Just as Abraham responded to the call of the LORD through trust and obedience, so too do Isaac and Jacob respond to the call. Just as Abraham is assured of the promises and blessings through a covenant of trust to allay the fears of uncertainty and failure, so too are the ancestors’ fears allayed by the extension of the promises and assurances to their generation. But the primacy of the covenant belongs to Abraham. The pure gift that is given to Abraham is continually extended to his descendants, the LORD does not make another covenant with Isaac and Jacob. Rather the promises and assurances bound to Abraham in covenant are extended to his descendants.

Notice the concentric structure of the Jacob cycle (M. Fishbane, *JJS* 26 (1975) 15-38; J.T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, 2001, 31).

A Jacob steals the birthright from Esau and flees from him (25:19-28:9)
  B Jacob meets God on the road to Bethel (28:10-22)
    C Jacob works for 20 years at Paddan-Aram for Laban (29:1-31"55)
  B' Jacob meets God on the way by the Jabbok (32:1-32)
A' Jacob returns home and is reconciled with Esau (33:1-35:29)

This structure is also much more detailed

**A** Descendants of Ishmael (25:12-18)
  **B** Rebekah labours at the birth of Jacob and Esau – Isaac' age (25:19-26)
    **C** Jacob gains the birthright of Esau (25:27-34)
      **D** Rebekah in a foreign land; covenant with foreigners and their relationship (26:1-35)
        **E** The blessing is stolen from Esau (27:1-46)
          **F** Jacob flees from Esau and *meets God along the way* (28:1-22)
            **G** Jacob arrives in Haran [deception-wages] (29:1-30)
              **H** Jacob's blessing of children from fertile women (29:31-30:24)
              **H'** Jacob's blessing of animals from fertile flocks (30:25-43)
            **G'** Jacob leaves Haran [deception-wages] (31:1-55)
          **F'** Jacob returns to Esau and meets God along the way (31:1-32)
        **E'** The Blessing is returned to Esau in the forms of gifts (33:1-20)
      **D'** Dina in a foreign land; covenant with foreigners is broken (34:1-31)
    **C'** Jacob gains the blessing of God (35:1-15)
  **B'** Rachel labours at the birth of Benjamin; Jacob's children, age and death of Isaac (35:16-29)
**A'** Descendants of Esau (36:1-43)

**The Narration of the Ancestral Cycles:**

Before summarizing some of the significant features of the Abrahamic covenant, I would like to address briefly the historicity of these accounts. Can we say that there is any basis in history for these ancestral accounts at all? Are they merely retrospective projections from the time of the kingdom (1000 BC) or even from the exile (6th cent. B.C.) as Wellhausen believed?[5] When the historical critical method began to be applied to the pentateuch, the retrospective projection was the prime category and presupposition. But subsequent studies of Ancient Near-Eastern laws and customs have shown that the world of the ancestors in Genesis reflects many of the customs of ancient semi-nomadic clans. The issue for our study is this: was the covenant with Abraham merely a retrojection back into history which formed a basis for the Sinai covenant? Or was it a memory that saw its confirmation in Sinai and in David?

To be sure, time and time again, we can observe retrospective projections in the accounts, which provide clarifications, explanations and concerns of a later age. For instance, the name of the LORD was used in all the ancestral accounts by the Yahwist, but not with the Priestly and Elohist writers. Even within the Yahwist account, the God of Moses receives the formal name of the LORD only in the Exodus, specifically in the account of the burning bush. Surely this is clearly an anachronism. The Yahwist sought to establish the identity of the God of Abraham and the God of Moses by relating the same divine name in the ancestral accounts. Similar instances of

[5] J. WELLHAUSEN, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, 1872. See L. BOADT, *Reading the Old Testament*, New York: 1985, pp 82-83.

understandable anachronisms occur with geographical locations. Abimelech in some accounts is described as the king of the Philistines, whereas in fact the Philistines established themselves on the coastal plains and cities only at a much later time (Gen 26:1). Yet when the accounts were formulated in the latter part of the period of the judges, the area of Gerar was in the hands of the Philistines.

We can observe explanatory retrospection such as those by a Deuteronomist or even the Yahwist or Elohist that use the categories of the Sinai covenant or the Moab covenant. For instance, in Gen 15:13-16 we have an explanation of what will happen to the descendants in Egypt before they will be taken out by the Lord with mighty deeds. Or notice the explanatory clause in the first extension of the covenant promises to Isaac in Gen 26:5. All of the blessings given to Abraham are extended to Isaac because 'Abraham heeded my call and kept my mandate: my commandments, my laws, and my teachings'. These are all nouns that refer to the conditions of the Sinai covenant or even that of Moab. In relating them here, the attempt was made to draw parallels between the covenant of Abraham and the covenant of Sinai.

It is clear then that we do have retrospective projections in the ancestral accounts. It would be surprising if this were not the case. But not every retrospective comment implies mere projection. There are other features of the ancestral accounts that testify to their originality, to their authentic flavour. They are not merely legendary stories for the sake of retrojection, though they certainly are folkloristic. The various names of God that have survived in the accounts testify to their originality. El Shaddai (Hebron), El Olam (Beersheba), El Elyion (Jerusalem), El Roi, El Yireh, El Bethel. These titles referred to the patron God of the clans. They were worshipped as the God of the ancestors. Jacob swears his oath to Laban by the Kinsman of Isaac. The clan which had a god as a patron conceived of the relationship in familial terms. Again the names in the ancestral accounts reflect this familial tone. Ab (father), Eliab (the God of my father), Abiezer (my father is a helper), Abimelech (my father is king), Ammi El (my people belongs to God).

(Notice that the various terms that are used to denote the literary devices of story-telling vary from one scholar to another: myths, legends, folklore, heroic tales, stories, sagas, epics.

1) — **Myth** is ordinarily associated with various figures that are related to the creation of the cosmos and stories related to origins in general.
2) — **Legend** refers to a specific story that employs fictitious characters.
3) — **Folklore** refers to stories or legends that relate the customs and social life of a specific group.
4) — **Heroic tales** are stories or legends that explore the courage and wisdom of a specific people.
5) — **Story** is the most generic term for a narrative that follows the exploits of given characters.
6) — **Saga** is a complex story that relates the inner life of a clan and its continuous relations with others.
7) — **Epic** refers to a complex story that follows the life and exploits of a specific character or group of characters.)

The ancestral accounts contain examples of ancient laws (Hurrian) that seem not to have been understood by the redactors, yet were accurately enough written so as to enable far later generations to identify them at later stages. Such is the case with the complex narrative that relates Laban chasing Jacob because the household gods are missing. Household gods in Hurrian law establish ownership and inheritance. When Rachel stole away the household gods from her father, she in fact had removed Laban's proof of ownership. It was this lack of proof, and Laban's failure to prove theft that forced him into a covenant relationship with Jacob. On the surface reading of the text, it is not clear by any stretch of the imagination that the redactor knew of this law.

Finally, the main reason for considering the originality of the Abrahamic covenant is the difference it manifests from the Sinai covenant. It could hardly be a retrospective projection solely based on the Sinai conception of the covenant since it bears so many marked differences. The Abrahamic covenant is referred to in many contexts throughout Scripture, Ex 2:24, 6:4; Lev 26:42; 2K 13:23; 1Ch 16:16; Ps 105:9.

In ancient Sumer, the common person, often chose a lesser god to be his special patron. Each clan of semi-nomadic peoples had their special patron god - the High God of Canaan El - which manifested a quasi familial relationship of solidarity. In the ancestral accounts this familial relationship is ratified by a covenant of promises - promises that are the deep rooted values of a semi-nomadic people: descendants, land and blessings.

**The Uniqueness of the Abrahamic Covenant:**

To summarize the significant features of the covenant with Abraham then we can focus on the very word promise. This term which has often been designated to describe the Abrahamic covenant highlights the emphasis of this foundational covenant. This covenant is a pure gift; it is God's initiative alone that has brought it about. It is unconditional in the sense that its validity as covenant cannot be undone or destroyed. The covenant did require acceptance on the part of the ancestors - an acceptance which implied an extraordinary trust and faith. The covenant itself places the emphasis on the part of God. It is God who has initiated this relationship with Abraham and who has promised a threefold blessing in the solemn oath of a covenant. The initiative of God remains the hallmark of the Covenant. And this says something of Israel's relationship to her God. In this relationship it is God who is the first to speak a word and to act; it is Israel that constantly seeks to respond to the word and action of God.

What is down played in the actual covenant image with Abraham, is the task that Abraham has to be actually fully engaged in the covenant promises. The covenant itself does not highlight Abraham's role in order to emphasize the sheer gift of God. But notice how the task of Abraham to trust and show extraordinary faith clamours for attention within the wider spectrum of the entire cycle. At the outset, Abraham was challenged to embark on a journey, to leave his homeland and his father, his past. At the end of the cycle Abraham is challenged to give up excessive reliance on his future, his son Isaac.

In every covenant there will be the polarity between gift/promise and task/responsibility. The lack of emphasis of task/responsibility in the image of the Abrahamic covenant, is overcome within the narrative itself that shows how Abraham was engaged constantly to become free in order to become more fully a part of the enterprise.

Within the context of Genesis, the covenant with Abraham unfolds the larger plan of God in the history of all peoples. The call of Abraham in chapter 12 follows the tragic presentation of the flood and the chaotic experience of Babel. The subtlety of human fear and sin is not going to be overcome by God easily. Within the very narrative of Genesis, there is a sense of a foreboding fear and a persistent resistance on the part of humans to stand vulnerable in the space of freedom and creativity. Though the fear of the unworthiness and instability of creation itself is allayed through the covenant with Noah, the human heart remains the focus of God's attention. A new creation is begun with Abraham that is going to be thorough, detailed and long lasting. The ancestral accounts set the initial stage for God's plan in history. The narrative movement within these accounts is based on a gift, the promise, God's initiative; but it is fraught with tension, uncertainty and with doubt on the part of the ancestors. The covenant with Abraham calls forth great expectations and tension between promise and fulfilment. The promises are the motor in the ancestral narratives; trust in God is the essence of the ancestral quests.

The ancestral narratives which end with Jacob and the clan in Egypt, continuously testify to the unresolved promises which highlight the expectations of the Abrahamic covenant. Jacob, about to die, knows that he is far from the promised land. The request he makes to Joseph, that his bones be brought back to the land promised to Abraham to be buried in the cave of Machpelah is a touching conclusion that embodies both the tension of unfulfillment and the expectation that is rooted in the Abrahamic covenant.

# The Context of the Exodus for the Sinai/Horeb Covenant

Though the Sinai covenant stands on its own merit, based on the authority of a new revelation to Moses at Horeb, it does find its fullest theological expression within the larger spectrum of the sequence of the exodus events. This context of the exodus from Egypt and entrance into the promised land throws light on the final meaning and significance of the Sinai covenant within the pentateuch. The covenant established between Israel and the LORD is one event in the story which encompasses the liberation from Egypt to possessing the promised land. And even this story of liberation which is the foundational experience of Israel reaches back further into history. It is presented in the context of the Abrahamic covenant of promise. The promise to Abraham has bound God to intervene on behalf of the people who find themselves oppressed in Egypt. The covenant at Sinai is in continuity with the Abrahamic promises, but there is also a new dimension reflected in the establishment of another covenant with the entire people.

Von Rad has presented the credo or proclamation of the exodus event as the foundational experience of the Israelites.[6] The credo consists of a confession, a declaration of faith. These confessions form the bedrock of Israelite religious aspirations. As such the confession is terse, declarative and brief. It is the very stuff of liturgical expression. From a literary point of view, the confession of salvation becomes paradigmatic. The exodus is narrated in the credos as the paradigm of salvation. (See David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible*, London: Faber and Faberr, 1963.)

In the final redaction, the Sinai covenant forms an integral part of the liberation/salvation experience of the Israelites. Through the activity of this covenant, Israel experiences liberation and salvation.

The Biblical Paradigm of Liberation:

The simplest form of the paradigm has only two terms: leaving and entering. Such is the case in Exod 3:8. The more developed paradigm includes a middle term which can be described as an intermediate stage between leaving and entering.

| *to bring out* | *to lead through* | *to bring into* |
|---|---|---|
| God is to bring the people out from Egypt, out of slavery, oppression and bondage | to lead them through the desert and the wilderness | to bring the Israelites into the promised land. |
| EGYPT | WILDERNESS | THE 'GOOD' LAND |

[6] G. von RAD, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I, II, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, London: 1975.

This paradigm of liberation can be noticed throughout the development of the exodus narrative.

Notice the chiastic/concentric structure of Exod 3:7-9:

A 7a I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt

B 7b I have heard their cry, I know their sufferings

C 8 I have come to deliver them out, to bring them out of that land

C' 8b to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

B' 9a The cry of the people has come to me.

A' 9b I have seen the affliction with which the Egyptians oppress them.

Exodus 6:2-8 similarly reflects a chiastic structure. The paradigm of liberation is used throughout the Hebrew writings, but particularly in the prophets.

A 6:2 – I am the LORD

B 6:3 – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob

C 6:4 – covenant

Z 6:5-6 – I have heard the groaning of the Israelites... I have remembered my Covenant... I am the LORD ... I will free you...

C' 6:7 – I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.

B' 6:8a – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob

A' 6:8b – I am the LORD

Amos 2:10 — I brought you up from the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness to possess the land of the Amorites.

Jer 2:6-7 — Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no one dwells? And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruit and its good things.

It is in the identification of the subject of this adventure that continuous linkage is drawn to the God of the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Exod 3:6; I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

Exod 3:16-17; ... say 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac of Jacob has appeared to you'.

Exod 4:5; ... that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has appeared to you.

Exod 13:3-16; When the LORD brings you to the land he swore to your ancestors, to give you a land flowing with milk and honey...

This identification of the LORD as the God of the ancestors sets into motion the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises. Already in the opening of the exodus event, with a casual remark of the Egyptians, we discover that the first promise to Abraham, that of numerous descendants, has been fulfilled (Exod 1:7-12).

But not only are the promises to be fulfilled. The plan that the LORD had set into motion with the call of Abraham is taking a major turn. The covenant of Sinai itself was not an expected event from the point of view of the Abrahamic promises. Only the promise to be a blessing to all peoples of the earth leaves the future activity of the LORD towards Israel open to such an event as Sinai. The covenant of Sinai reflects the goal of the LORD's plan to draw the people more deeply into this adventure, this enterprise initiated in the call of Abraham.

On the one hand, Sinai is seen to be in continuity with the call of Abraham because the LORD is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The numerous Hebrews in Egypt are presented as being the realization of the first Abrahamic promise - the gift of descendants. In Exod 3:7 the LORD says,"I have seen the affliction of my people." It is this continuity which obligates the LORD to intervene at the call and the cry of the people.

On the other hand, the covenant at Sinai is unexpected strictly from the point of view of the Abrahamic covenant. The covenant at Sinai fulfils a dimension of God's plan in the world that was not particularly explicit in the Abrahamic promise - namely the personal involvement and commitment of the people to the life of God, the moral life of the people. This dimension of commitment is a new reality for Israel that in fact establishes Israel as a people committed to the LORD. Though the Abrahamic covenant stressed the "giftness" of the promise from God, the narratives themselves continuously touched on the task of Abraham to leave the land of Ur, to trust in the Lord's promise, to be free from one's roots and even one's future (Isaac). Precisely this side of the covenant, the "human task", is brought to the fore in the Sinai covenant, the commitment of all the people to the ways of God expressed in the laws.

We have several trajectories to be aware of in the reading of the pentateuchal narratives.

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Call | → | Abraham's Covenant | → | Exodus | → | Sinai (wilderness) Covenant | → | possession of land |

Sinai in the dynamic of the Exodus Pattern:

Within the context of the Exodus paradigm, the Sinai covenant is located in the intermediate stage of the wilderness experience.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| to bring out of Egypt | → | to lead through the wilderness | → | to possess the land |

SINAI

Simply from the point of view of the narrative, the ratification of the covenant takes place soon after the extraordinary deliverance from Egyptian power. Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites crossed through the desert until they came to Mt. Sinai/Horeb. It is possible to consider the covenant as the completion of the exodus account or as an event within the middle term in the exodus trajectory, namely the wandering in the desert.

There were two motives that the LORD had given to Moses for leading the people out of Egypt. The first was that they serve the LORD as their God (Exod 5:17, 8:1). The second was that the LORD might fulfil the promise to Abraham and bring the people into the promised land (Exod 3:18, 5:1-3). This theme of serving God as a prime motive for leaving Egypt is reiterated throughout the account of the plagues. It represents also the new dimension of commitment to the LORD that is a dominant feature of the Sinai covenant. The liberating event from Egypt is then consistent with the Abrahamic covenant in that God is intervening in Israel's oppression to fulfil the second promise - that of land. But the liberating event is new in that God is bringing the people into a new relationship of service and commitment.

Since the Sinai covenant takes place during the wandering through the wilderness, it will be significant to see the function of the wilderness episodes within the structure of the paradigm. There are three characteristics that dominate the wilderness episodes. Though there are different interpretations of this unstable period of time, they are not mutually excluding interpretations.

1) **The intermediate stage**. In the most value free judgment on the wilderness journeys, the wandering is presented as an intermediate stage between the exodus from Egypt and the gift of the promised land. It is a time of fear and fragility in which the LORD leads the people as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. (Ex. 13:17-22) It is a time of "already, but not yet". It is a period expressive of the fragility of a nation being born.

2) **The purgative stage**. The episodes in the wilderness are presented as the time of purging in light of Israel's stubbornness and sin. All those who had disobeyed Moses and the LORD will have to die in the desert. It is the little ones who will enter the land.

This particular understanding of the wilderness episodes, as a purging process, points to a dominant motif throughout the Exodus paradigm - resistance. This activity of the will to resist is the counterpart to, the antithesis of the challenge of the Sinaitic covenant - commitment to the will and ways of the LORD. Resistance to liberation is portrayed on three levels in three groups of subjects: Moses, Pharaoh, and the people. Resistance on the part of Pharaoh is not surprising. What is more surprising in the narrative is the realization of the internal resistance to the liberation offered to the people. On several occasions we notice the resistance of Moses in leading the people to liberation, Exod 3:11, 4:1,10, 5:22-23; Num 20:10-13. Though the people initially believe and accept the word of Moses, they also resist the pain and insecurity of liberation, Exod 14:11, 15:22-25, 16:1-3,20, 17:2-4; Num 14:3. All of these accounts of resistance which occur both before and after the Sinai covenant highlight the importance of the idea of commitment to the LORD. Commitment to the ways

of God is what the Sinai covenant is all about. The betrayal of the covenant in the episode of the golden calf is a fitting literary touch that portrays both the depth of resistance to liberation and the tenacious call of the LORD to bring the people into a deeper commitment.

3) **The learning stage**. A third interpretation of the wanderings in the desert is implicit in the exodus accounts and became explicit at a later time primarily in the theology of the deuteronomist. This is a time for the LORD to teach the Israelites to trust in divine providence. It is a time of instruction and testing. A key text in this interpretation is Deut 8:2-5.

*Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord* (Deut 8:2-3).

Though this interpretation is a much later reflection with penetrating insight into the psychology of the wandering experiences, it is sufficiently exemplified in the narrations of the wilderness episodes. The immediate reason and motivation for bringing the people out of Egypt was to bring them to serve the LORD in the wilderness. But even before serving the LORD the people were challenged to trust in the power of God to deliver them from the Egyptian forces of resistance. In the second interpretation, what was primary was Israel's sin which needed to be purged. The third interpretation takes the same episodes depicting Israel's fear as occasions for the LORD to teach the Israelites to trust, Exod 14:11, 15:22, 16:1-3, 17:2-4. The murmuring of the Israelites in each of these instances was met with the generous help and intervention on the part of the LORD.

It is in the context of this teaching in the wilderness that the will of the LORD is manifested to the people at Sinai. It is in this intermediate stage of passage that the people are called to commit themselves. And it is also in this time of fear and resistance that the LORD challenges the people to the deliberate choice of accepting this new relationship of being a special people with gifts and with tasks, with promises and with responsibilities.

All of these presentations of the wanderings in the wilderness point to the covenant established at Sinai as a covenant of commitment. The liberation from the oppression of Egypt was not a once and for all liberation. The yearning of the Israelites to return to the security of slavery and oppression in Egypt was a constant factor during the intermediate stage. The covenant of Sinai represents the clear challenge of the LORD to co-involve the people into the enterprise, to bring them all more deeply into the over-all plan of the LORD which had been begun with Abraham. In order to be a blessing for all the peoples of the earth, the Israelites must share in the life and ways of the LORD.

The mosaic covenant then is in continuity with the Abrahamic promises by virtue of the identity of the God of the ancestors who has taken initiative for both covenants and by virtue of the promise of land which is what unites Sinai to the exodus and to Abraham respectively. The new dimension in the mosaic covenant is the emphasis on the commitment of the people to the LORD's will. This is the very dimension that was underplayed in the Abrahamic covenant. The dominant feature of Abraham's relationship to the LORD centred on the extraordinary gifts of God and on Abraham's open acceptance of these gifts. But even in the narratives surrounding the Abrahamic covenant the dimension of commitment was not entirely lacking as was represented in the Isaac/Abraham sequence. Ultimately gift and commitment cannot be radically separated from each other in human experience. With Abraham, the beginning of the salvation history highlighted the extraordinary giftness of the promise. The one demand that was made was to continue to trust. The

content of the LORD's will was simply to move here and there, to give time for the conditions to be fulfilled in which the LORD could make known his will more explicitly.

**The Character of Moses: intermediary and leader**

The character of Moses is displayed before the eyes of the reader with more detail than the narratives of Abraham provided. The narratives of Genesis which depict God's call of Abraham begin with Abraham as an adult, similar in fact to the situation of Adam and Eve who come onto the opening scenes of Genesis as adults. But in Exodus the readers accompany the early history of Moses even before his call, right from his birth. The tenuous clinging to life of the infant Moses foreshadows the tenuous birth of Israel as a nation, being freed from the oppressive power of Egypt. Even the name of this leading character of the Torah (the Pentateuch) manifests the ancient memory of Israel as having sojourning roots in the land of Egypt. For the name Moses, despite the etymological source given in Exod 2:10, "to draw out" is Egyptian, as many such names testify (e.g. *Tutmosis*) which means "born of". The salvation of the infant from the reed basket at the hands of Pharaoh's daughter, has the leading hero of Exodus brought into the courts of Pharaoh. Though little is said of the training of Moses, it is presumed that he has been trained in the court. On several occasions Moses is actually referred to as an Egyptian (e.g. Exod 2:19).

Despite his court training, despite his own desire to be with his people, the first attempts of Moses to be a leader for his people ended in disaster. His own people oppose him ("who set you to be ruler over us"?) and Pharaoh seeks to bring him to justice. The narrative contrasts the specialized court training of Moses to the simple life of a shepherd that he leads for his father-in-law, Jethro. He has a wife and a son is born to them. Over and against any desire that Moses might have to lead on his own, with his own abilities, emerges the extraordinary call from God in the burning bush.

The narrative has been emphasizing the fact that the leadership of Moses did not arise from his own abilities or desires, but in the call from God. The burning bush symbolizes the extraordinary experience that has given rise to a new mandate, a new desire, a new passion. The reluctance of Moses to take on the mandate reinforces the clarification that the leadership of Moses is rooted in a call from God. Each of the four excuses that Moses offers not to be a leader is met by a response by God. Each response reveals God's care and action in human events: 1) God will be with Moses (Exod 3:12), 2) This God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:14-15), 3) God will provide signs to prove divine intervention (Exod 4:2-9), 4) God will provide human collaboration (Exod 4:14-15).

Another feature that emerges within the leadership of Moses is the collaborative aspect. This is quite consistent with the emphasis of his leadership being rooted in God. Moses had received in the very beginning a relative to collaborate in the exercising of authority, Aaron. Similarly in the desert, after the crossing of the Red Sea, Jethro encourages Moses to share the burdens of judgment, which of course Moses follows up on. Though the character of Moses dominates the scenes, he is not presented as a person who wanted to collocate power in himself or his family. Though he exuded extraordinary authority (all forms of power, prophet, priest and king seem to be invested in him), collaboration appears to be a value through which he exercised his leadership. Mosaic leadership appears embued with a clan-like anti-monarchic perspective.

**Resistance to Liberation:**

On the human side of this story, namely from the point of view of Moses, Pharaoh and the people, if there is one word that could characterize their stance toward the plan of God. *Resistance*. But in each case the effect of resistance is different. In the case of Moses, his own resistance to

undertaking leadership emphasizes his rootedness in God. In effect it is the extraordinary experience of God which gives to the leadership of Moses his effective power. In the case of Pharaoh, his resistance highlights the continuous and determined will of God to transform even what appears to be a tragic and hopeless situation into a moment of liberation[7]. In the case of the people, their resistance in turn highlights the mercy of God and the need for their own continuous conversion.

[7] This ability of God to transform a tragic situation into one beneficial to people in the long run covers the entire Pentateuch. Notice Joseph's response to his brothers who were afraid that he might have held a grudge against them for the mistreatment of selling him off as a common slave. "The evil that you have done to me has by God's design been turned to good, in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today (Gen 50:20)".

**The resistance of Pharaoh and the plagues:**

| **Pharaoh's heart is hardened** חזק **Q** *hazaq* | the plagues | *pharaoh's resistance* | God hardens Pharaoh's heart. |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 4:21 אֲחַזֵּק **P** |
| **(3:19)** בְּיָד חֲזָקָה | | | |
| | | | 7:3 |
| **7:13** | | | |
| **7:14** כָּבֵד לֵב *kabed leb* | | | |
| | 1st blood | | |
| **7:22** | | | |
| | 2nd frogs | *8:8 pharaoh wants the frogs removed* | |
| **8:15** וְהַכְבֵּד אֶת־לִבּוֹ **H** | | | |
| | 3rd gnats | *8:19 magicians: this is from God* | |
| **8:19** | | | |
| | 4th flies | *8:28 "Go sacrifice but not far"* | |
| **8:32 H** | | | |
| | 5th livestock | | |
| **9:7** | 6th boils | | 9:12 |
| | 7th thunder/hail | *9:27 "I have sinned"* | |
| **9:34-35** | | *9:30 "I know that you do not yet fear the Lord"* | |
| | | | 10:1 הִכְבַּדְתִּי |
| | 8th locusts | *10:8 "Adults but not little ones"* | 10:20 |
| | | *10:17 "Forgive my sin"* | |
| | 9th darkness | *10:24 "Everyone but not flocks and herds"* | 10:27 |
| | | | 11:9-10 |
| | 10th firstborn | *12:31 "Rise up and go"* | |
| | | | 14:4 |
| | | *14:5 "What have we done in letting them go?"* | 14:8,17 |

Destruction of Pharaoh's army, the escape of the Israelites

The Hebrew phrase "*to harden the heart*" is a unique idiom that has actually made its way into many modern languages. When we use the phrase "*a hard heart*" we imply that someone has little compassion, someone who refuses to empathize with others over their plight or hardships. The phrase becomes complicated for us when we see that it appears God is the one who 'causes' the hardness of heart of Pharaoh. Notice there are two phrases that are used in the text. One set of phrases simply states that pharaoh's heart was hardened. The second set states that God is the subject who hardens the heart. The first set dominate in the first half of the plague narrative; the second set dominate in the latter half when the resistance of Pharaoh is most acute. Much ink has been spilt over trying to understand what this second phrase could possibly mean. The most common interpretation depends on the Hebrew notion of God's omnipotence. Since God is understood to be all-powerful, even the wickedness of human beings must be directly under divine control. However in light of the other phrase which attributes the hardness of heart to Pharaoh himself, but which God foresees, this is not likely the best meaning of the phrase "God hardened Pharaoh's heart". It is true that God is said to be causing something to happen. But perhaps God is causing Pharaoh to reveal his hardness of heart. The only way for someone to know they "have a hard heart" is to encounter situations where it is revealed. Every plague which is sent actually reveals the depth of Pharaoh's lack of compassion. And each rejection and instance of Pharaoh's show of "hardness of heart" is met by God's resolve to elicit conversion or to force Pharaoh to reveal the depth of his stubbornness by facing yet another plague. Each plague in turn reveals to everyone involved including Pharaoh, the depth of his resistance. So the phrase could mean, that God has forced Pharaoh to reveal the depth of his stubbornness and hardness of heart. This explains why the phrase would be used more predominantly in the second half of the narrative where each plague explicitly reveals the depth of

Pharaoh's resistance to letting the people go. The corresponding motive, that “God may be glorified” shows both God’s providence in continuously offering Pharaoh a chance to change, and God’s ultimate power to bring liberation to completion. This “glory” of God only takes place with the judgement against Pharaoh at the Red Sea after the tenth plague (14:4,17,18).

**The resistance of the People:**

Resistance to liberation is a common theme that also highlights the very uniqueness of any individual or people striving for freedom. To be free, not simply freedom from coercion but also freedom to act for someone or for some task, is a creative responsibility. It requires the active consent of the subjects and normally entails the continuous activity of choosing and acting. This creative responsibility which encounters resistance is a burden. So it is not surprising to see the people who are being led by Moses out into the wilderness plagued by doubts and fear of survival. Perhaps a little more surprising is the ease at which, on several occasions, they posit slavery and oppression in Egypt to be better than the burden of freedom.

A foreshadowing of the people's resistance to liberation and to the demands of freedom begins very early in the narrative when the extra burdens are placed on the slaves because of the request of Moses and Aaron to let the people go and serve the Lord. *"The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odour with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us"* (Exod 5:21). At the crossing of the Red Sea, the experience of being caught between the sea and the encroaching army, incites the Israelites to recall their original resistance to the plan of liberation (which the narrator did not offer earlier). *"Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness"* (Exod 14:12). Even despite the numerous interventions attributed to a divine plan, the people continuously complain and grumble in the desert, recalling with nostalgic memories the security and passivity of their slavery and oppression. *"The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger"* (Exod 16:3). *"The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'* (Exod 17:3). This chorus of complaint is reiterated time and time again throughout the subsequent narrative.