

The African View of the Biblical Covenant

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Abstract

To explain some obscure ancient biblical religious customs and rituals, western scholars often resort to a comparison of the Israelites and Bedouins who have retained their traditional customs from time immemorial. This being the case, it is amazing that western scholars have not seriously considered Africa's possible contribution to Israel's religio-culture, given the fact that some of the African ethnic groups, who may have been in contact with Israel in ancient times, have maintained their customs and religious traditions to this day. Some biblical texts seem to suggest that Africa impacted the religion of the Israelites during their long stay in Egypt. The references to Africa (Egypt) raises these questions. "What does the biblical text imply by saying that the Israelites multiplied and became a mighty nation while living in Africa? Why does the biblical text say that Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Jacob and Jesus visited or lived in Africa for a long time?" Questions such as these demand a systematic study of the Egyptian ethnic groups during the long Israelite sojourn in Africa. A cursory examination of some biblical texts suggests that Africans, and not only Arabs, occupied Egypt on many occasions. Therefore, a comparison of some of the African religio-cultural practices might disclose the possibility of African influence on the religion and culture of the Israelites.

The Covenant in the Ancient Near East

One aspect of the religion of Israel that eludes scholars' notice is that the Israelites worshiped Yahweh out of obligation because he was their provider, protector and, particularly, because he made a covenant with them. In other words, without the covenant, the Israelites would have

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chosen to worship one of the other gods (*'elohim*) available to them. As an African scholar, I am interested in the covenant idea because its role among the Israelites is similar to the role that covenant played and continues to play among the Ndaus, an African tribe living in both Zimbabwe and Mozambique.² Here, I examine the similarities of the Ndaus' and the Israelite covenants in three stages. First, I summarize the making of a covenant in the ancient Near East, focusing on the Hittite grant texts. Second, I demonstrate that the Abrahamic grant covenant was formulated in accordance with the Hittite grant formula, but with unique features necessitated by the Israelites' faith in Yahweh. Third and finally, I compare the Israelite and Ndaus covenant idea and suggest that the African concept of the covenant might explain the peculiarities of the Israelite grant, a divine covenant conveyed in perpetuity. To substantiate this hypothesis, this article focuses on the covenant idea in ancient Israel and traditional Africa. A more detailed discussion will appear in a forthcoming book tentatively titled: "The Old Testament and African Tradition."

Some of the many documents that have been excavated in Syria-Palestine,³ the land of Hatti (land of the Hittites),⁴ Assyria,⁵ and Babylon,⁶ record the various covenants that were made both between the kings and their subjects (the vassals) and between strong kings who made parity treaties with each other. Among these covenants was a special grant that the king made with a favored subject. It was granted because the subject merited it; but it could also be given to the favored subject gratuitously. For example, the royal grant was a transaction in which a party (hereafter

² The Ndaus people live in Gazaland, a territory that is sliced in half by the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Gazaland was founded by the Zulu people, who migrated from Natal in South Africa.

³ For example, "The grant of Abba-an of Yamhad to Yarimlin of *alalah*": published by D. J. Wiseman, *JCS* 12 (1958), pp. 124ff. I have found a paper by R. E. Friedman, "Treaty and Grant," Jan. 1973, most useful in this section, especially its references and bibliography.

⁴ For example, "The grant of Tudhaliyas IV to Ulmi-Teshub of Dattasa"; in D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome, Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), pp. 183ff.

⁵ For example, the grant of Ashurbanipal to Baltya, translated and quoted in part by Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant..." 1961, 15:13-17.

⁶ Portions cited from Weinfeld from L. W. King, *Babylonian Boundary Stones*, 1912.

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called the donor, and normally a suzerain), gave a free gift of property or ruling authority to a weaker party, hereafter called a recipient (and generally a vassal). As a transaction, the royal grant is of particular interest; its nature in some ways explains the Israelite purpose for adopting the Yahwistic religion. The covenant was Israel's means of feeling secure living under the protection of a strong and trusted deity. They needed this protection because they were faced with the world in which, like their neighboring nations, they felt insecure because threatened by deities who were contending with each other and demanding human or national allegiance.⁷ There are other fascinating facets of the covenant idea that deserve our attention, but space allows us to focus only on the divine grant Yahweh gave to Abraham, and its implication for the understanding of the history and religion of Israel. It is this aspect of the covenant that I examine here to show how it shaped the religion of Israel and how it compares with the making of a covenant in African tradition. To achieve our objective, it is important first to outline the steps in the making of a Hittite covenant.

Form of the Covenant in the Ancient Near East

The royal grant that was in use among the Hittites in the second and first millennium in the ancient Near East had six steps: the preamble, the historical prologue, the stipulations, blessings and curses, the depositing of the document in the sanctuary, and the summoning of the witnesses.⁸ Normally, the final act was the sacrificing of an animal and eating it communally.

Preamble

The preamble served as the step in which the donor introduced his name and title. This step is consistent in all covenants, but it is more prominent in the vassal treaty.⁹

⁷ A careful analysis of the *Odyssey* of Homer shows many parallels between the Israelites' choice of Yahweh as their God while the temptation to worship Baal or the other gods of the other nations remained.

⁸ The Israelite (Sinai) covenant is similar to the Abrahamic covenant. The Davidic covenant is also related in the same way as the Abrahamic covenant. Cf. 2 Sam 7:1-16.

⁹ It is difficult to assess the extent to which the preamble was essential because the beginning (and end) part of a tablet is oftentimes broken off. For example, the

Historical Prologue

Based on current evidence, scholars do not have enough information to identify definitively the function of the historical prologue. Amnon Altman suggests, based on available extant texts, that the prologue functioned as the donor's way of presenting legal arguments that justified the imposition of obligations on the other party, usually the vassal.¹⁰ He further shows that the prologue was also found in documents such as "edicts issued by the suzerain to a subordinate party.... It was designed to address the gods that were summoned to serve as witnesses to the treaty and the oaths during the ceremony at the conclusion of the treaty, and who were believed to function in the capacity of supreme tribunal, should the inferior party violate the treaty."¹¹

The example normally cited to support this argument is that of Abba-AN, king of Yamhad, who made a grant to Yarimlin. The prologue here reflects a situation in which the grant of Alalah is made to replace Yarimlin's city of Iriddi, which Abba-AN had recently destroyed in a local rebellion.¹² In this treaty the subject of the prologue is Abba-AN speaking to Yarimlin.

Altman adds that in the historical prologue the donor describes the past relationship between him and the recipient.¹³ The nature of the prologue depended on the purpose for which the royal grant was being

grant attributed to Tudhaliyas IV is missing the opening lines, and the name of the donor is not mentioned in the body of the document. The donor is most likely to have been Hattusilis III.

¹⁰ Amnon Altman in an article "The Role of the Historical Prologue" in the Hittite Vassal Treaties: An Early Experiment in Securing Treaty Compliance," *Journal of the History of International Law* 6:43–64, 2004. Based on the way Yahweh introduced himself in the covenants that he made with the Israelites, our view on the function of the preamble is different as will be shown below.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² *AT* 456, lines 13-39. See D.J. Wiseman, "Abban and Alalah", *JCS* 12 (1958), 124-129

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

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made. If the grant was merited by the recipient, the historical prologue explained it. Moshe Weinfeld gives an example of this treaty in which the recipient, by his conduct towards the donor, deserved the grant in the form of a conveyance in perpetuity.¹⁴

Stipulations

The content of an ordinary grant given to a vassal and a special grant given to a privileged person was determined by the type of stipulations which would be made in the document. To a privileged recipient, the stipulations were given in the vassal's favor. They had a special feature; namely, conveyance in perpetuity.¹⁵ In this case, the recipient had shown outstanding loyalty through his past actions and the suzerain consequently rewarded him with a tangible show of trust. The donor (suzerain) declared the grant to be a permanent possession of the recipient. A grant that was conveyed in perpetuity was an unconditional covenant that implied that whatever the recipient did after receiving the grant did not matter. Once the grant was given it became irrevocable.¹⁶ The term "conveyance in perpetuity" means that the grant was laid before the recipient to accept or reject, to act in accordance to the stipulations or not; but the donor would not revoke it. Therefore, the privileged recipient had the stipulations written in his favor and not in the donor's favor.¹⁷

A grant to an ordinary recipient, however, came with stipulations, which were typically written solely to benefit the donor. The grant could be forfeited in the event of betrayal by the recipient. A good example, again taken from Abba-AN's stipulations on the grant of Alalah that he made to Yarimlin, stated: "If in days to come Yarimlin sins against Abba-AN, (if) he repeats anything Abba-AN says to him and reveals (it) to

¹⁴ Cited in Moshe Weinfeld's book *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 185.

¹⁵ Yahweh's covenant to David in 2 Sam 7:1-16. Verse 16 states it succinctly: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." This is clearly a covenant granted in perpetuity because it is not conditional on Israel's obedience to Yahweh.

¹⁶ Israel's nationalism in First Isaiah's time was based on the belief that God would always honor his covenant conveyed in perpetuity to David in 2 Sam 7:1-16.

¹⁷ In a sequel to this article, more examples of these types of grants will be given and fully discussed as we continue to do some research on Africa's possibly contribution to the religio-culture of the Israelites.

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another king, if he lets go of the hem of Abba-AN's robe and takes hold of another king's robe, he (shall forfeit) his cities and territories."¹⁸

Grant Deposited in the Sanctuary

The provision for the grant document was that it should be placed in the sanctuary. This step was taken so that the gods who could see everything that the donor and recipient were doing following the acceptance of the grant would monitor the covenant and hold accountable the party that breached the covenant. The Ndaou have a saying: "*Mwari unoona*" (God sees).

Witnesses

Following the grant's deposit in the sanctuary, both divine and human witnesses were called, and typically included cosmic entities like the heavens and the earth.¹⁹

Blessings and Curses

The last step in the making of a covenant was the pronouncement of blessings and curses. These typically took two forms: (a) cursed would be "anyone who takes anything from Ulmi-Teshub or from his descendants, or who violates his borders, (or) breaks this treaty, may the gods of the oaths destroy him and his descendants because of his iniquity;"²⁰ (b) alternatively, the donor might direct the curse at himself in the event of violation of the grant that he himself granted to the recipient. Thus, Abba-AN stated: "(May I be cursed) if I take back what I gave you."²¹ The blessings-and-curses part of the grant was formulated in such a way that it protected the interests of the recipient, both from outside interference and also from betrayal within the grant community.

¹⁸ Altman, Amnon, "The Role of the Historical Prologue" in "*The Hittite Vassal Treaties: An Early Experiment in Securing Treaty Compliance*," *Journal of the History of International Law* 6:43–64, 2004.

¹⁹ Tudhaliyas to Ulmi-Teshub, beginning reading from line 48.

²⁰ See Amnon Altman's article, "The Role of the "Historical Prologue,"" lines 42-57.

²¹ *Ibid.*, line 44 following Weinfeld's translation.

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The Swearing of an Oath

To finalize the oath, the donor made an oath to uphold the grant. Abba-AN's oath to Yarimlin is a good example. He made an oath to Yarimlin to honor the grant, and as a sign of that oath he cut the neck of a lamb. The donor then specified the granted territories, naming all the boundaries. In another example, Tudhaliyas stated: "The country I have given thee, Ulmi-Teshub, the boundaries I have set for thee, keep them, do not cross them. The boundaries are as follows...."²² Then followed a detailed list of boundaries. To legitimize the grant, the suzerain went further than he would have gone regarding an ordinary grant. In a conveyance-in-perpetuity grant, the donor engaged in an adoption procedure, as was done by Abba-AN who adopted Yarimlin. In like manner, Hattusilis I adopted Labarna, declaring, "Behold, I declared for you the young Labarna: He shall sit on the throne, I the King, called him my son;²³ he is for you the offspring of my Sun."²⁴

Structural Parallels between the Israelite and Hittite Covenants

The Hittite grant structure is very much reflected in the accounts of the Abrahamic covenant, revealing that Israel was well connected politically, socially, and religiously to the ancient world of the second and first millennia. In making the grant with Abraham, God began with a preamble, as is clear in Genesis 15:7 where the J text states: "I am Yahweh..." In Genesis 17:1, the Priestly source writes: "I am El Shaddai..."²⁵ The historical prologue in the Abrahamic covenant makes Abraham the privileged recipient. The text reports Abraham's record of loyalty to God as we read in Gen 15:6: "And he (Abraham) believed the

²² Weinfeld, citing F. Sommer-A. Falkenstein, *Die Lethitischakkadische Bilingure des Hattusili I (Labarna II) Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Phil. hist. Abt. N.F. 1b, 1938.

²³ Cf. 2 Sam 7:12-15 where Yahweh declares to David that his offspring will be Ywhweh's son and in turn, Yahweh will be his father.

²⁴ Weinfeld, *Ibid.*

²⁵ There are several questions that are sparked by God's name El Shaddai. Is he one of the many gods: *El Elyon, El Olam, El Bethel*, etc.? If the assumption is that if there was only one God, then there would have been no need for a grant treaty binding Abraham to El Shaddai.

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Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Even though the beginning of the text in verse 7 is a little confusing by implying that the covenant made was ordinary and not privileged, verse 6 counteracts this implication.²⁶ The privileged recipient grant between Tudhaliyas IV to Ulmi-Teshub had a similar prologue and yet it was given to a privileged vassal.

The Priestly account of the divine grant to Abraham in Gen 17 has no historical prologue. It therefore sheds no light about the status of Abraham and why he deserved the grant. We can infer that it was the same type of grant given in Gen 15 because in Gen 26:5 we hear God telling Isaac that the grant of progeny and land was given “because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” Moreover, in Gen 22 God repeated the promise of progeny for Abraham following Abraham’s act of loyalty in obeying Yahweh and not withholding his only son.

By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,¹⁸ and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice. Gen 22:16-18

Therefore, Abraham is a privileged grant recipient and the grant is in the form of a conveyance in perpetuity.

The stipulations of the Abrahamic covenant consisted of the Promised Land, but later on the gift of innumerable progeny was added to the gift of the land (v. 18; cf. also v. 7). The grant is guaranteed by an eternal promise as contained in Gen 17:7: “I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”²⁷ This is

²⁶ Cf. David Noel Freedman, “Divine Commitment and Human Obligation,” *Interpretation*, XVII (1964): 419-431.

²⁷ 2 In Samuel 7:12-15 we read: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14. I will be a

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reaffirmed in v. 19. That the covenant is forever is repeated in Psalm 105:8, 9:

He is mindful of his *covenant forever*,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
⁹ the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
¹⁰ which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as *an everlasting covenant*,
¹¹ saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion for an inheritance.

In the Abrahamic covenant, the witnesses as well as the blessings and curses are missing. The fact that the former are theological documents whereas the latter are political texts explains this difference between the Abrahamic covenant and the ancient Near Eastern grants. In the Abrahamic grant, Yahweh himself is party to the grant. A covenant between God and humans did not need to be deposited in the temple nor did it require to be publicly read. The word of God was to be trusted because God was not accountable to anyone else. For the Hittite covenant, the possession of the document by the recipient was important because it protected the recipient from retraction of the grant after the death of the suzerain. In the divine grant, all this was not necessary because God does not die. In the Israelite covenant, however, the document was unnecessary because the Israelites had already demonstrated their loyalty and their previous actions had proven them to be trustworthy. However, several times Yahweh has established a sign that would remind him of the covenant he had made.²⁸ This need also explains why some covenants Yahweh made with the Israelites called for witnesses.²⁹ In some of the ancient Near Eastern royal grants, the blessings and curses were directed either against the suzerain himself or against those who might interfere

father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15. But I will not take my steadfast love from him...”

²⁸ In Genesis 9:14-15, Yahweh made a covenant with Noah and said, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will *remember* my covenant that is between me and you...”

²⁹ In Deut 30:10 God calls on heaven and earth to witness against his people, Israel.

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with the recipient. But since Yahweh served as the sovereign, it would be ridiculous for him to direct curses and blessings against himself in the form of sanctions. As for interference by a third party, it is pointless to suggest this for the divine power can prevent it from happening.

When we come to the oath, we realize that in the ancient Near Eastern royal grants, it was the suzerain who swore the oath rather than the vassal. We have also noted the special arrangement in the Abba-AN grant whereby the vassal provided a lamb whose neck was cut to finalize the oath ceremony. Similarly, in Gen 15, Abraham provided animals and prepared them. The divine promise was made as the blazing torch passed between the halves of the sacrificed animals. The sacrifices, the holding of the torch, and the association with a furnace or stove are all characteristic elements of oath ceremonies in the Surpu documents.³⁰ In Genesis 15 nothing is said about Yahweh swearing an oath, but this tradition is repeated often in several other sources (Gen 26:11; Deut 1:35; 7:8, 12; 10:11; 11:9; 28:11; 34:4).

In the Abrahamic covenant, we have specifications of granted territories found in Gen 15:18-21 stipulating the extent of the land as stretching “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.” This is followed by a list of various peoples occupying the territory to be given to Abraham’s descendants. Gen 17:8 states in a more general way that Abraham would occupy “all the land of Canaan.”

Now we turn to the greatly discussed covenant between Yahweh and Israel in the light of ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties.³¹ Since the appearance of Law and Covenant in Israel and the Near East, the discovery of the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon have widened the base of comparison of ancient Near East sources to include Neo-Assyrian documents. This brings the dates of treaty materials down into the first millennium. This late date is important because it justifies the inclusion of the Deuteronomic Covenant of the Plains of Moab in the covenant picture.³²

³⁰ Cf. Weinfeld, citing E. Reiner, “Surpu,” *AFO Beiheft II* (1956). Weinfeld regards this ceremony as containing an element of self-curse; but the possibility of a divine self-curse is extremely difficult to accept in the absence of any clear statement of such in the ceremony.

³¹ G.E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (The Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

³² Cf. Weinfeld (note 36); Mendenhall, *Ibid.*, reading from page 30, for an analysis of the differences between the Hittite and the Neo-Assyrian treaty forms. See also

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The Old Testament and African religio-tradition have many striking similarities as regards holding to tradition, the concepts of land and of marriage, and belief in ancestors, among many others. As I have written about these similarities at length in several other publications³³, in this article I limit myself to the similarities regarding the covenant idea as it relates to the African and the Israelite traditions.

The Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants depict Yahweh making a covenant with humans; that is, the covenants are made between two unequal parties. Whereas in the ancient Near Eastern treaties a vassal might become strong enough to conquer the suzerain, this is not possible with respect to Yahweh in the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants. In other words, God grants these covenants based on sheer grace and not as an obligation to Abraham or to the Israelites. The Israelites were aware of Yahweh's gracious act and in Psalm 8 made it plain that as creator of the universe, Yahweh was more than gracious to regard humankind as his most significant creation. Thus, they sang:

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth! (*Ps 8:1*)

...

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,

D.J. McCarthy, *Ibid.*, 96-106; he points out that while the two groups of documents are not formally identical, they are basically the same.

³³ Mafico, T. "The Divine Name Yahweh Elohim and Israel's Polytheism," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*, Vol.22/1(1996): 1-18; "God's New Name Yahweh Elohim and the Unification of Israel: A Challenge to African-Americans," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. 23/1(1995): 49-69; "Were the 'Judges' of Israel Like the African Spirit Mediums?" *Text and Experience: Toward a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible*, ed. D. Smith-Christopher (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 330-343. "The Divine Name Yahweh Elohim from an African Perspective," in *Reading From This Place: Social Local and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspectives*, eds. F.S. Segovia & M.A. Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 21-32; "Parallels Between Jewish and African Religio-cultural Lives," *Christian-Jewish Relations in Ecumenical Perspectives*, (WCC, 1978), 36-47. Also, published in French as: "Le Cadre Culturel de la Bible et la Société Africaine," *Service International de Documentation Judeo-Chrétienne*, No. 2 (1978), 9-15.

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mortals^{34a} that you care for them? (*Ps 8:3-4*)

This Psalm, among many similar texts, shows that Yahweh gave a grant to the Israelites whom he created but made just a little less than God. This made the Israelites feel that he had elected or favored them and freely gave them the land, not because they merited it, but simply because he chose to do so. All that the Israelites were expected or required to do was to respond in gratitude to Yahweh, not only for what he promised to do in the future, but for the many things he had already done and was still doing for them. The Exodus event marked the climax of Yahweh's graciousness to the Israelites and this graciousness was based on *hesed*. Yahweh's *hesed* was intended to induce obedience and loyalty on the part of the Israelites. These aspects of the covenant distinguish the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants from those of the ancient Near Eastern nations.

The study of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants shows that the Israelites must have borrowed the idea and structure of the covenant from the nations of the ancient Near East. But is that assumption the end of research on the covenant?

The African Perspective of the Israelite Covenant

While western scholarship assumes that the Israelites borrowed the covenant idea from their northern neighbors, which is hard to deny, it can also be argued that the impact of African culture on Israelite religious and cultural institutions has been overlooked by biblical scholars. While in the past biblical scholars were only aware of the history and religions of the ancient Near East, and compared Israelite religio-cultural practices only on the extant texts of the ancient Near East, the time has come to pay attention to the African contribution to the research. As an African scholar who was born and raised in a rustic environment like that of ancient Israel, my view is that the biblical text gives hints in various ways to how the African tradition has had an impact on the religion of Israel. It could be argued that this contribution made the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants unique as regards the covenants of the ancient nations of the Near East. The major difference between the western and African studies of the covenant that I am proposing is this: whereas westerners analyze original

³⁴ Heb *ben adam*, lit. *son of man*.

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ancient written covenants and compare them to the Israelite covenants, Africans rely on oral tradition and observation of covenant traditions still practiced in rural areas of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Of course, African scholars are now collecting and writing down these oral traditions to make them available to global scholarship.

The Ndaou people practiced covenant ideas although they did not follow any discernible steps. However, research shows that the function of the covenant was the same for the Israelites as it was for the Ndaou religious tradition. It therefore behooves the researchers of the religion and history of Israel to scrutinize the possible contribution of Africa to the Israelites' other religious institutions.

Back when I was researching the Hebrew root *spt* and its cognates for my Ph.D. dissertation, it became clear to me that the Israelites recognized Yahweh as their patron deity who also played the role of an earthly king.³⁵ In that position, the Israelites regarded Yahweh (not to be confused with Elohim) as a human being with human characteristics like theirs. Thus, in Gen 3 we read about Adam and Eve hiding from Yahweh behind the bushes in the Garden of Eden:

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

The J source is anthropomorphic to underscore the fact that early in their religious beliefs the Israelites regarded Yahweh as the supreme human being living among them. As such, he was limited like humans and did not know that Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit. He did not even hear the conversation between the snake and the women. Yahweh was a deity who not omniscient and omnipresent, although he might have been omnipotent. Thus, like a human being, Yahweh had to seek Adam and Eve because they had hidden from him by calling: "Where are you?" [Adam] said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden..." This conversation clearly relates to humans conversing with one another. Both Yahweh and humans

³⁵ Cf. the Israelites' affirmation in Isaiah 33:22: "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; he will save us."

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were limited in their knowledge and had to enquire in order to know.³⁶

There is a similarity between the Israelites and the African view of creation. The Ndaus traditional belief is that their supreme king was and is still the creator of humans. The current king of the Ndaus, who is from a long genealogy, still bears the title *Musikavanhu*, “Creator of Humans.” Thus, the idea of God becoming human and living among humans, as we read in John 1:14, is not new to Africans. There are African mythological stories that relate that God lived among humans in the beginning of creation. That the African and Israelite concept of God was similar explains why their early religion as attested in the Bible is similar. Did the Israelites come into contact with the Africans in Egypt prior to the expansion of the Sahara desert? My initial research on this subject suggests that this might be the case although more research remains to be done.

Because of their theological similarities, God’s stipulations in the covenant with Abraham are not much different from the African view of their covenantal relationship with God. The Ndaus felt an obligation to *Mwari Musiki* (God the Creator) who was at the head of their tribal circle. He was the god who provided them everything that they needed. Even though there is no record of them making a formal covenant, the Africans were quite aware that *Mwari* expected them to abide by certain rules and regulations to maintain good relationship with him and avoid his wrath and punishment. What was remarkable with Ndaus was that God was regarded as an equal player in a virtual covenant relationship. A human being could challenge God if he felt that God had punished him wrongfully or excessively.³⁷ It could be argued, then, that the Ndaus believed in a sort of parity covenant with God. For creating them and giving them the land, the Africans felt obligated to feed God with sacrifices and shower him with praises. But they also expected that God would, in return, honor his side of the bargain by continuing to protect them against the elements, give them a good harvest, and maintain their health. When rain stopped falling,

³⁶ Cf. Gen 11 where Yahweh, even though he was in heaven, was still limited by his human form. He had to call an entourage to go down and inspect what the people were doing in building the Tower of Babel. The same investigatory behavior is repeated in Gen 18. Yahweh, accompanied by two other human-like divinities visited Abraham, ate food, and then Yahweh disclosed that he was on his way to investigate the severity of the behavior of the people of Sodom. (Gen 18:19-25).

³⁷ Cf. Cain complained to Yahweh saying: “My punishment is greater than I can bear!” (Gen 4:13).

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or when it fell so amply that it flooded the land and destroyed the crops, the Ndaus would ask the *svikiro*, “the medium” who could communicate with God directly, to enquire what “statute” they might have breached.³⁸ Rallying behind their king as a tribe, the Ndaus would endeavor to correct the wrong. This would be followed by offering sacrifices accompanied by singing and dancing to celebrate their reconciliation with God.

It could also be argued that for obvious reasons the Ndaus did not have steps in the making of covenant with God. After all, they knew who *Mwari* was and what he had bound himself to do for them. Intuitively, they also knew their obligation to maintain the covenant relationship with *Mwari*.

There were other covenants that the Ndaus made with one another. When a young man and woman fell in love but did not intend to marry immediately, they made a covenant with each other symbolized by the exchange of some articles, much as westerners do with engagement rings. The woman might give the man her favorite thing like a voile, and the man might give her his handkerchief, pocket knife, or arrow. This gift exchange served as a *chigondiso*, “a covenant of commitment.” Should the relationship be broken unilaterally or mutually, the exchanged articles were to be returned to symbolize the couple’s disengagement from each other, lest either party use the *chigondiso* to harm the other following the breakup.³⁹ A close biblical analogy of the lovers’ covenant is the covenant between David and Jonathan, which we read about in 1 Sam 18:3-4 as follows:

Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

Julius Wellhausen found Arabian analogies that seemed to suggest the understanding that the clothes and other personal objects that a person used in everyday living were imbued with the living substance of their

³⁸ Saul went to the medium (*svikiro*) of Endor to call back the spirit of Samuel in the face of a military campaign against the Philistines. The *svikiro* did and this is what she reported: “I see a divine being (or gods) coming up out of the ground.” (1 Sam 28:13).

³⁹ Cf. Excretion texts in James Pritchard, *ANET*, 328-329 and Jer 19:10-11.

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owner. Therefore, the personalities of the two of them fused with one another. That is what happened to David and Jonathan.⁴⁰ By accepting the clothes and weapons of Jonathan, David attached his essence to the person of Jonathan and each became like the other (יָשָׁה אִתּוֹ).

The non-aggression treaty that Laban and Jacob made with one another (Gen 31:43-54) is analogous to the parity treaty among the kings of the ancient Near East. A brief examination of the text of the treaty between Jacob and Laban reveals several aspects common to various agreements made by the African people. Laban said to Jacob:

Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.”⁴⁵ So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar.⁴⁶ And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, “Gather stones,” and they took stones, and made a heap;...Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” ...he said, “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. ...though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me.” ... May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor”—the God of their father—judge between us.” So, Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac,⁵⁴ and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country.

The first aspect common to agreements is the belief that stones could be called upon to act as witnesses represents the African view of natural phenomena. We have already seen that any so-called inanimate thing Africans considered a living “being.” It was living by itself or it was living because it was inhabited or possessed by the divinities. Thus, when one walked a distance of five or six miles, one might pass several places that were sacred: wells, trees, rock formations, hills, mountains, and pools

⁴⁰ J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*² Heft (1927); *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten, Series 3*. Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1887.

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in the river. The belief that the earth was flourishing with the spirits explains why people poured libations on the ground all the while invoking the spirits to partake of the drink, food, conversation, or ceremony. It is this same belief that made Laban call upon the gods of his ancestors to guard the covenant since he and Jacob would be far away from the heap of rocks and from each other. Though the covenant was not written down, it was enacted and solemnized by the invocation of the gods. It was, therefore, deposited in the sanctuary, i.e., the heap of rocks over which the gods watched.

The second concept common to agreements that Africans make, a concept that typically eludes western scholars, is the concept of *pars pro toto*. *Pars pro toto* is a deep belief that a person is more than just the body. Anything about a person such as their name, hair, shadow, blood, tooth, and so on, can stand for the actual person in Ndaou tradition. Therefore, by touching the stones as they were bringing them and by stepping around the heap of these stones, Jacob, Laban, and their kinsfolk were ever present and united at the site of the covenant. If either Laban or Jacob should try to move against another, as soon as they remembered the heap of stones, not only would they remember the covenant, they would also be seeing themselves in the covenant-witnesses of stones. That realization is also reinforced by the presence of the patron divinities who not only witnessed the establishment of the covenant, but also acted as arbiters with the power to inflict punishment on the offending party.

African agreements were always solemnized over a banquet. An animal was slaughtered and it became the center piece of the big meal. Every person partook of the meal to show solidarity of purpose and of relationship. The same practice was employed at the conclusion of the Laban-David covenant. "Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country." (Gen 31:54)

The covenant had the power to change a bellicose situation into *shalom*, "peace." It turned Laban's hot pursuit of Jacob and the resultant argument with each other into a banquet that apparently lasted all night. A covenant fused two contentious parties into one whole. It was like an exchange of personalities where Jacob became Laban and vice versa.

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Conclusion

The discussion on the covenant leads us to this conclusion: The difference between the African and ancient Near Eastern covenants is that the latter were written down and may be studied based on extant ancient texts while the African covenants and cultural norms were and are still being passed on from generation to generation by oral tradition and practice. In the tribal and rural areas of any African country, ancient tradition still holds: very little has changed. Life is still lived according to the happy tradition of and with the ancestors. The discussion on the covenant consolidates the argument that while textual evidence corroborates that the Israelites borrowed the covenant idea from the people who lived to the north of them, western scholarship should now turn its focus on the oral tradition of the African people who lived and still live to the south of Israel and decide how or whether Africa had any impact on Israelite religious beliefs and cultural norms. When researching on ancient Israelite customs, western scholars often refer to Bedouins and certain traditional Arab ethnic groups' customs and compare them with those of the Israelites. In my research, I have not found serious consideration of Africa's role in Israel's religion. We should ponder the question: "What does the biblical text intend to communicate by saying that the Israelites multiplied and became a mighty nation in Africa?" I have not found any systematic study of Egyptian ethnic groups during the long span of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt.

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