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The Covenant Ritual in Genesis 15: Examining the Nature of the Covenant in Light of its  
Cultural and Literary Context

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## **Abstract**

### **The Covenant Ritual in Genesis 15: Examining the Nature of the Covenant in Light of Its Cultural Setting and its Literary Context**

Marc-André Delalay

This thesis analyzes the role of Abraham in the establishment of the covenant between God and himself in Genesis 15. It is also interested in the ongoing responsibility of the patriarch once the covenant is ratified. First, through a study of the literary context, it was demonstrated that Abraham shows a constant and active faithfulness in his relationship with God. It is because of his obedience that God could make a covenant with him and promise him an heir and a land. Second, by comparing the treaties in the Ancient Near East with the covenant in Genesis 15, it is concluded that the biblical text reflects the Hittite land grants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, with a suzerain bestowing favors on a vassal – in this case Abraham – who had showed exceptional loyalty. The grant, though, was given in perpetuity and unconditionally only at the corporate level: individuals among the descendants of the vassal may suffer punishment and death should they disobey, but the gift can not be taken completely away from the lineage; a remnant will always remain to enjoy it.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Marie-France Dion, for her constant support, encouragement, availability, hard work and helpful comments during the preparation and writing of this thesis. Her dedication will not be forgotten.

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# 1. Introduction

Daniel Elazar has written that “the idea of covenant is perhaps the most daring in the Bible and one of the most daring in all of human history.”<sup>1</sup> It is daring, for in the Bible, we meet a God who enters into covenants with human beings; human beings who are frail, sinful, and more often than not, unworthy of trust. Some – maybe sensing this unevenness between an omnipotent, perfect God and limited, imperfect human beings – have postulated that only God must be responsible for keeping the covenant since it is impossible for mankind to do so. Others have concluded that a partnership between God and man, each with their own responsibilities, is what the biblical covenant implies. Our aim is to explore the role of human beings as they enter into covenant with the biblical God. More specifically, we shall focus on Abraham and the covenant ceremony which is described in Genesis 15. As we shall see, the covenant ritual described in this chapter raises many questions: What is Abraham's role in the covenant? Does God enter into covenant with Abraham because of Abraham's previous actions? Is the covenant conditional thus bi-lateral or solely reliant on God's word and thus unconditional? Could the covenant be broken by any of Abraham's shortcomings? Fundamentally, we are looking at Abraham's responsibility – if any – in making the covenant effective and enduring.

The hypothesis we wish to verify is that the covenant between Abraham and God in Genesis 15 is bi-lateral in nature, thus conditional, and implies that Abraham actively

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Elazar. “Covenant and Community.” *Judaism* 49 (2000): 393.



takes part in upholding the covenant for the promises of an heir and of land to come to fruition.

This thesis is mainly synchronic in its approach, as our interest lays mostly in the theology of the text rather than the history of its composition. At the same time, some diachronic methods will also be used to illuminate the synchronic approach. Another reason for our focus on studying the text in its final form is that it is notoriously difficult to decipher which sources are present in Genesis 15. Paul R. Williamson's survey of the opinions on the composition of the chapter clearly shows this problem:

“For Wellhausen the two sources follow each other consecutively (vv. 1-6 = E; vv. 7-21 = J). For Gunkel, however, they are interwoven (E = vv. 1B, 3a, 5, 11, 12a, 13a, 14, 16; J = rest), having been radically reworked by a JE redactor... Following Lohfink, more recent source critics such as Van Seters and Coats have maintained that ch. 15 is almost entirely J's reworking of an earlier tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

It appears that scholars cannot agree on which sources are present inside the narrative and which verses should be ascribed to a particular source. This has led some scholars, such as Gerhard Von Rad, who is a proponent of the documentary hypothesis, to use the text in its final form for Genesis 15. He states categorically: “We have given the text in its present form (a satisfactory source analysis seems absolutely impossible).”<sup>3</sup> For these two reasons, in an effort to understand the theology behind the covenant in Genesis 15, the text will be studied synchronically from different angles.

Our method of studying this text consists of the following steps:

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2 Paul R. Williamson. *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (JSOTSup 315), 2000: 79.

3 Gerhard Von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961: 177.

- 1) Textual Criticism: The aim of this section will be to establish the Hebrew text which shall be used as a basis for the thesis. There are variant readings among extant manuscripts and since most of the thesis rests on the study of the text, it is essential that we collect, analyze and evaluate the variant readings in order to select a source as faithful as possible to what was presumably contained in the original manuscript.
- 2) Syntactical Analysis: Having established the Hebrew text, a macro-syntactical analysis of the most theologically pertinent parts for our thesis will then be presented. This type of approach to biblical Hebrew syntax will help determine not only tense, mood, emphasis, and linguistic prominence but it will also clarify important issues such as what the author presumes his readers already know and what he presents as new developments. Since we are interested in Abraham's role in the covenant, a greater emphasis will be placed on the covenantal ceremony described in the chapter.
- 3) Translation: Based on the macro-syntactical analysis, we will then provide a suitable translation which shall be used as a reference for the rest of the thesis.
- 4) Word study: Our research will also consider the significant terms in Genesis 15, the author's use of words and their theological implications.
- 5) Structure of the text: We will not use structural analysis per se (very few authors surveyed seemed to have used this method for Genesis 15). Rather, with the help of the macro-syntactical analysis, we will examine how the text holds together and if there is an underlying structure to the text. This step is especially important because of the disagreement among scholars concerning the relationship between

the first part of the chapter (Gen 15:1-6) and the second part (Gen 15:7-21). While some see the two as forming a unified, coherent narrative others believe they are unrelated and contradict each other.

- 6) Analyzing the text within its larger literary context: In order to get a clearer picture of the relationship between Abraham and God and of the promises given in Genesis 15, we will also go beyond the chapter and examine Genesis 12 where God first speaks to Abraham and gives him promises. This could provide clues about Abraham's responsibility in the covenant with God.
- 7) Comparative Method: In this section we shall look at covenants in their cultural contexts. The Bible was not written in a vacuum and the events depicted are reflective of their milieu. The covenant in Genesis 15 is no exception. A study of treaties from the Ancient Near East could shed light on the conditional or unconditional nature of the covenant between God and Abraham. The following questions will be considered: What is a covenant in the Ancient Near East? Who are the parties involved? What did it entail in terms of responsibilities for the parties ratifying the treaty? Was it conditional, unconditional or sometimes both? Did God and Abraham in Genesis 15 use a covenant form present in the Ancient Near East or is it without parallel?

The approach described above should enable us to verify our hypothesis that the covenant in Genesis 15 is in fact conditional and involves Abraham for the promises to come to fulfillment.

## **2. State of the Question**

The previous section has given an overview of the method which will be used and the overall structure of the thesis. We will here briefly present the state of the question for various aspects of our thesis: structure of Genesis 15, study of Genesis 12 and covenants in the Ancient Near East.

### **2.1 Nature of the Text: Composite or Unified**

Genesis 15 contains an elaborate covenant ritual which is difficult to understand given the unfamiliar symbolisms and the lack of explanatory details in the text itself. Hence, to focus only on the ritual itself would be too narrow and would most probably lead to errors of interpretation. This is why it is essential to study the context in which this ritual took place. First we will examine the immediate context in Genesis 15 and, secondly, we will focus on the broader context of the Abrahamic cycle (Genesis 12).

Typically, Genesis 15 is either seen as one narrative or as two stories amalgamated into one. As will become clear, the way to view the structure of this chapter has an impact on the understanding of Abraham's role in the covenant. Those who view Genesis 15 as composed of two distinct narratives, do so for a number of reasons. One reason stems from source critical considerations. According to G. J. Wenham<sup>4</sup>, some scholars regard Genesis 15 as containing two sources: E from verses 1-6 and J from verses 7-21. They

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1-15*. Nashville, TN: Word Books, 1987: 326.

base their argument on the different foci of the chapter, with verses 1-6 having to do with the promise of an heir and verses 7-21 with the promise of land. To quote N. D. Freedman, "The chapter appears [...] to be a composite of two stories, one dealing with the question of patriarchal progeny (vv. 1-6), the other with possession of the Promised Land (vv. 7-21)"<sup>5</sup> Scholars also note contradictions between the first and the second part of the chapter. P. R. Williamson sums up the two main problems stating: "There are some features that allegedly reflect the chapter's composite nature: 1. There is an apparent time discrepancy: it is night-time in v.5 but early evening in vv. 12 and 17. 2. There is the anomaly that in v.6 Abraham expresses faith whereas in v.8 he reverts to doubt."<sup>6</sup> M. Anbar emphasizes the apparent time contradiction: "This fact [that the chapter is composed of two narratives] is revealed in the well-known contradiction regarding the time of day when God made His promises to Abraham: in v 5 it was at night, in v 12 in the evening and in v 17 once again at night."<sup>7</sup> Basically, many see a problem with the timeline of the chapter and the apparent contradiction in Abraham's response to God.

Other scholars argue, however, that these objections do not hold. They maintain that Genesis 15 is a unified text and that the source critical aspect should not be considered since it is notoriously difficult to decipher where the different sources are to be found. In considering the two different themes in the chapter, P. R. Williamson contends there is continuity between them and sees them as bound together. He in fact

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5 Noel D. Freedman. *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation Vol 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997: 171.

6 Williamson 79.

7 Moshe Anbar. "Genesis 15 : A Conflation of Two Deuteronomic Narratives." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101 (1982): 40.

proposes a symmetrical structure for Genesis 15 and explains:

The effect of this symmetry between the two distinct units of the chapter is to bind the promise of seed and the promise of land together in such a way that the fulfillment of the latter is absolutely dependent on the fulfillment of the former [...] Therefore, the two sections of Gen 15, while focusing on two different promissory elements, are nevertheless interrelated. The first section addresses the question of the inheritor; the second the question of the inheritance.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the fulfillment of the promise of land to Abraham, more than being loosely related to the promise of an heir, is in fact contingent upon him having descendants.

Concerning the time discrepancy noted by scholars, P. R. Williamson argues that “the time discrepancy between the sunset of v. 12 and the night scene of v. 5 may be resolved by postulating two separate evenings, between which Abraham brought, ritually slaughtered and arranged the animals specified by Yahweh.”<sup>9</sup> V. P. Hamilton, using the same reasoning, proposes that the events unfolded over two days, “[the] chronological problem disappears when we recall that v. 11 has mentioned birds of prey, who hunt their victims during day, thus implying that Abram's vision has moved into its second day.”<sup>10</sup>

As for Abraham's response – faith, then doubt – there is the view, put forward by P.R. Williamson, that doubt and faith are not necessarily opposed<sup>11</sup>. Faith may sometimes be affected by doubt and is looking for affirmation but it is not destroyed. W.

Brueggemann goes further by arguing that Abraham's struggle is by itself a sign of

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8 Williamson 123.

9 Williamson 129.

10 Victor P. Hamilton. *The Book of Genesis – Chapters 1-17*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990: 434.

11 Williamson 130.

faith<sup>12</sup>.

To sum up this section, some see Genesis 15 as being composed of two separate sources. A shift in subject matter – a promise of an heir then a promise of a land – as well as some apparent contradictions between the two parts of the chapter is the reason given for this dichotomy. In general, this position tends to minimize Abraham's involvement in the covenant since in the first part of the chapter, Abraham has faith but then in the second part he doubts and is portrayed as being a passive partner of the covenant. Others reject these various arguments and find Genesis to be a unified whole.

In the second section of the survey of opinions on Genesis 15, we will now consider the larger literary context of the chapter – that is, in light of the events recounted in Genesis 12.

## ***2.2 The Relationship between Genesis 15 and Genesis 12***

The relationship between God and Abraham does not begin in Genesis 15, but in Genesis 12 when God first speaks to Abraham. For this reason it is important to survey scholarly opinion as to the relationship between Genesis 12 and 15 and how it determines the nature of the covenant.

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982: 243.

Most scholars seem to believe that certain conditions are laid upon Abraham in Genesis 12 before the covenant can be ratified. Consequently this chapter is often regarded as a foundation upon which the following chapters build on. J. H. Walton states it clearly: “In Genesis 12 God called Abram from his land with the prospect of providing certain benefits. When Abram accepted the offer the agreement was ratified into a covenant in Genesis 15.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the covenant in Genesis 15 was made possible only because Abraham responded to God’s offer. Dean S. McBride also associates fulfillment to obedience and asserts: “Here in 12.1-2a the political entitlement of Abram’s heirs – concretely expressed as nationhood and sovereign name – is contingent on his own obedient response to God’s command, which directs him to leave one homeland behind and to be led into discovery of another.”<sup>14</sup> The imperative forms of the commands given by God in Genesis 12 are also used to show Abraham’s obedience. For Keith H. Essex, “Genesis 12.4-6 clearly depicts the obedience of Abraham to God’s command. The Lord said “go”, and Abraham “went” as the Lord had told him to (12.4).”<sup>15</sup> M.-F. Dion proposes an interesting thesis in which God, in Genesis 12, had a project involving Abraham but it is only through the patriarch’s obedience that this project became a promise.<sup>16</sup>

Other scholars, while they do not reject offhand the apparent conditional elements

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13 John H. Walton. *Covenant*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House: 63.

14 Dean S. McBride, Jr. “Divine Protocol: Genesis 1:1-2:3 as Prologue to the Pentateuch.” *God Who Creates*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2000: 24.

15 Keith H. Essex. “The Abrahamic Covenant.” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10 (1999): 199.

16 Marie-France Dion. “Du projet a la promesse. Analyse syntaxique et critique de la forme de Genese 12,1-3 et 12,7.” *Studies in Religion* 34 (2005): 101. Dion uses a macro-syntactical analysis to show that the cohortative verb forms in Gen 12:1-3 denote more than simply intention. They emphasize divine will or wish.



in Genesis 12, nonetheless downplay the commands given by God and focus on the promise of blessing. For example G. J. Wenham<sup>17</sup> and Cleon Rogers<sup>18</sup> acknowledge that God imperatively asked Abraham to “go” but they still maintain that the emphasis is not on the command but on the promises or intentions of YHWH which takes away from the obligation to obey.

To summarize, this analysis of Genesis 12 brings out mainly two views. One is that when God calls Abraham, there are clear demands placed on the patriarch and his obedience enables the promises made in the covenant in Genesis 15 to become reality. Another is that the emphasis in Genesis 12 is not on obedience but on the promises that God made to Abraham. In this way the covenant is unconditional and Abraham's role is downplayed. We shall now turn to the covenant forms in Ancient Near East in an effort to associate the covenant between the pieces with an ANE treaty form.

### ***2.3 Parallels with Covenants in the Ancient Near East***

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars began studying the similarities between the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) treaties and the covenants found in the Hebrew Bible. This research was inaugurated by G. E. Mendenhall<sup>19</sup> who, as noted by I. A. Busenitz “became the first to note the parallels between some biblical covenants and the ANE treaties,

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17 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 274.

18 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 274.

19 George E. Mendenhall. *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1954.

especially the Hittite treaties between overlord and vassals dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.”<sup>20</sup> This research was followed by Walther Eichrodt's covenant-based *Theology of the Old Testament*<sup>21</sup>. W. Eichrodt's strong emphasis on covenant theology as central to the Hebrew Bible was defended by various scholars. To quote but a few, Cleon L. Rogers Jr. writes: “It is now generally admitted that Eichrodt's emphasis on covenant is not at all out of step with the ANE world.”<sup>22</sup> D. N. Freedman agrees and states that archaeological dating “has demonstrated that Eichrodt's position is not an exaggeration of the biblical situation. It can therefore be affirmed that the covenant principle is intrinsic to the biblical material and that it defines the relationship of God to his people.”<sup>23</sup>

Others argue against the presence of ANE treaty patterns in the Hebrew Bible. J. H. Walton, for example, studied the two terms used for treaties in Akkadian (*mamitu*: sworn agreement and *adu*: formal agreement) and since neither of them are cognate of the Hebrew term for covenant, he concluded that ANE treaties are not present in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>24</sup> Some, such as H. J. Kraus, are even more forceful in their objections. He concludes “that the analogy with the treaty obscures or perhaps even destroys the true idea of the covenant.”<sup>25</sup>

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20 Irvin A. Busenitz. “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; the Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant.” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10 (1999): 173.

21 Walther Eichrodt. *Theology of the Old Testament*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 1967.

22 Cleon Rogers. “The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Settings.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (1970): 241.

23 David N. Freedman. *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation Vol 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishin Co, 1997: 168.

24 Walton 13.

25 Dennis J. McCarthy. “Covenant in the Old Testament: The Present State of Inquiry.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965): 224.

Even those who agree, however, on the influence of ANE covenants often differ in their conclusions since, in the Ancient Near East, the function, meaning, and form of the treaties and covenants have varied much over time. Many of those treaties have come down to us and have been used to interpret the covenants found in the Bible. Of the many treaties, a few are found time and time again in comparison with biblical texts. From the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, we mainly have two Assyrian treaties: the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E Sefire Treaty and the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, there are the Abba-AN treaty text from Alalakh, Syria (17<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E) and the Mari letters, a great archive of royal correspondence found at the site of Mari, also in Syria.

Starting first with the Assyrian treaties from the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, we find that they display a great emphasis on the curses invoked on those who would fail to respect the covenant. Animals are killed, vividly symbolizing, in an acted out curse rite, the fate that would fall on those violating the stipulations of the treaty. For example, in the Sefire treaty, we find the following, “As this calf is cut up, thus Mati’el and his nobles shall be cut up...”<sup>26</sup>

Many commentators have compared Genesis 15 with Assyrian treaties, stating that the ceremony with the animals split in two is an acted out curse. P. D. Miller writes: “The correspondence between sin and punishment arises out of the ritual and curses accompanying covenant and treaty making (e.g. Genesis 15 and the Sefire treaties) in which animals are cut and the treaty partners pass between the severed part as an ‘acted

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26 Ralph W. Klein. “Call, Covenant, and Community: The Story of Abraham and Sarah.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15 (1988): 123.

out self-curse'. Those who cut a covenant shall themselves be 'cut' if they violate the covenant they have set up."<sup>27</sup> In this way, Genesis 15 is associated with Jeremiah 34 where the link between the killing of animals and the curses brought on the covenant's violators is clearly laid out: "I will punish those people who have violated their agreement with me. I will make them like the calf they cut in two and passed between its pieces. I will do so because they did not keep the terms of the agreement they made in my presence." (Jer 34:18). R. W. Klein mentioned this apparent relationship between the two events, "The meaning of this strange rite [Genesis 15] is not provided though Jer 34:18-19 may provide a parallel [...] Scholars have concluded that the men making this covenant had invoked a curse upon themselves when they made the agreement: just as they had cut a calf in two, so they should be cut in two if they violated the agreement."<sup>28</sup> The main difference between Genesis 15 and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium treaties is that it is God himself, the superior in the covenant, who seems to put himself under a curse (if, of course, we view the whole covenant in Genesis 15 as a curse rite). Both R. W. Klein<sup>29</sup> and P. D. Miller<sup>30</sup> see it as a self-imprecation, where God brings judgment on himself if he fails to uphold the stipulations of the treaty.

Other commentators think that the idea of a self-curse is unlikely in Genesis 15. G. F. Hasel has pointed out that "Time and again scholars felt this to produce a major problem."<sup>31</sup> He quotes H. H. Rowley as saying: "It is hard to see how God could be

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27 Patrick D. Miller. "Sin and Judgment in Jeremiah 34:17-19." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 612.

28 Klein 123.

29 Klein 123.

30 Miller 612.

31 Gerhard F. Hasel. "The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19 (1981): 64.

exposed to sanctions.”<sup>32</sup> G. F. Hasel agrees and, on that basis, cannot associate the covenant ritual in Jeremiah 34 with the one in Genesis 15, “We [...] suggest that the animal rite of Gen 15.9-10,17 is not to be interpreted by means of Jer 34.18-19. There are too many pointed differences in both settings and details to justify an interpretation of one by the other.”<sup>33</sup> The conclusion being that it is not possible to link 1<sup>st</sup> millennium treaties with Genesis 15 (though Jeremiah 34 could still be interpreted using those ANE covenants).<sup>34</sup>

This has led many to believe that there is a greater relationship between Genesis 15 and the treaties from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. As mentioned earlier, we have the Abba-AN treaty text and the Mari letters which are representative of this time period and are the most often quoted by biblical scholars. The animal sacrifices described in them are not interpreted as symbolizing curses for violating the stipulations of the treaty but more as “technical expressions for the conclusion or ratification of a treaty/covenant.”<sup>35</sup> The most famous passage of the Mari letter goes as follows: “And I went to Aslakka to kill an ass between the Hanu and Idamaras. They brought a puppy and goat, but I obeyed my lord and did not permit (the use of) the puppy and goat. An ass, the son of a she-ass, I had killed, and I established an agreement between the Hanu and the Idamaras.”<sup>36</sup> This shows the relationship between the killing of the animals and the ratification of the treaty. For Noth, this animal killing rite is the method “to complete the act of covenant-making”<sup>37</sup>. P.

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32 Quoted in Hasel 64.

33 Hasel 64.

34 Hasel 66.

35 Hasel 69.

36 Hasel 63.

37 Quoted in Hasel 63.

R. Williamson mentions G. J. Wenham and Hess as agreeing with this conclusion, the linking of Genesis 15 with the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium treaty of Alalakh (Abba-AN)<sup>38</sup>. G. F. Hasel gives an excerpt from the Abba-AN treaty, “Abba-AN swore to Yarimlim the oath of the gods, and furthermore he cut the throat of a sheep. (he swore:) I shall not take back what I gave you.”<sup>39</sup> Here again, we see the taking of an oath, the making of a covenant, associated with an animal sacrifice and no apparent curses are involved. The animal rite is only present to symbolize the treaty ratification.

The same passage quoted above from Abba-AN is used by M. Weinfeld to argue that Genesis 15 is in fact a land grant. The treaties where the superior party imposes stipulations on the inferior are referred to as suzerainty treaties. There are often no explicit demands placed on the suzerain, only on the vassal (though it is argued by some that implicit obligations are laid on the suzerain). By contrast, in a land grant, it is the suzerain who has an obligation towards the vassal.<sup>40</sup> In Genesis 15, the grant would be God giving Abraham a land and an heir. At the same time, the responsibility may not rest entirely on the suzerain making the promise to his vassal. Land grants were often a reward for faithful service but disobedience could also be punished.<sup>41</sup>

Having compared the main features of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennium treaties to Genesis 15, there is another element which needs to be taken into consideration before any conclusions are drawn. We are referring to the dating of Genesis 15 which will have an

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38 Williamson 103.

39 Hasel 65.

40 Moshe Weinfeld. “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*: Vol. 90, No. 2 (1970): 184.

41 Weinfeld 189.

impact on its comparison to ANE treaties. If the events described in the chapter are consistent with patriarchal times, we could more easily link Genesis 15 to 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium treaties. If, on the contrary, the chapter is a later reinterpretation, then it could better fit the treaties as they were known in the ANE world during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium.

For some, the covenant concept appears only late in Israel's history, which would lead one to believe that the description of the covenant in our chapter is a later addition. J. Wellhausen is the most famous proponent of this theory. Delbert R. Hiller explains: "Wellhausen objected to the covenant as a feature of Israel's early religion in part because he viewed early Israel as a primitive people, with a simple, natural, and direct relation to God."<sup>42</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz further commented that it is the rise of the documentary hypothesis that has led to the suggestion that the idea of covenant in Israel is a late development. He writes, "Following Julius Wellhausen's anti-supernatural system, many modern scholars postulate that the covenant concept was foreign to Israelite society and religion until the late seventh century B.C."<sup>43</sup> Duane Smith names Nicholson as being one of the recent scholars who supports Wellhausen's view by analyzing Hosea's use of the term בְּרִית<sup>44</sup> (*berith*).

Others believe that the concept of covenant appears early in the history of Israel. Frank M. Cross has harsh words for those who still hold to a later appearance of the covenant concept. He writes:

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42 Delbert R. Hillers. *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969: 67.

43 Busenitz 173.

44 Duane A. Smith. "Kinship and Covenant in Hosea 11:1-4." *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16 (1994): 48.

That such views persist in the face of new knowledge of the ANE, the history of religion and law, and advances in social anthropology is a testimony, not to the soundness of the Wellhausenist synthesis but to the power and perversity of Paulinist and anti-Judaic dogma, or, in other words, to the survival of stubbornly, often unconscious held traditions of Christian apologetics in biblical scholarship.<sup>45</sup>

Scott Hahn, commenting on Cross's position, explains that “the covenant institution finds its original *Sitz-im-Leben* in the natural, kinship-based organization of the Semitic tribes”<sup>46</sup> and so is an early concept in Israel.

David Noel Freedman, comparing Genesis 15 to the covenant in Jeremiah 34 and seeing no literary connection, still concludes that the two covenant ceremonies are very similar and that this is an attestation to the “tenacity of legal and religious customs in the ANE and Israel, if we assume (as I think we must) that the story in Gen 15 preserves at its core an authentic reminiscence of patriarchal times and experience.”<sup>47</sup> Later on, he concludes that, “[...] neither the patriarchal stories nor the covenant pattern are retroprojections from a later stage. The covenant with David has affinities with the patriarchal covenant, but if there is any direct dependence, which is doubtful, it is of the former on the latter.”<sup>48</sup> Others, like D.J. McCarthy, posit that Israel did have a covenant early in its history based on the fact that ANE treaties existed prior to the formation of Israel.<sup>49</sup> In the same way, G. J. Wenham states that H. Cazelles “[...] has pointed out that the leading ideas and terms in this chapter [Genesis 15] have many parallels in early

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45 Frank M. Cross. “Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel.” *From Epic to Canon* Baltimore. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000: 15.

46 Hahn 264.

47 Freedman 171.

48 Freedman 175.

49 Dennis J. McCarthy. *Treaty and Covenant*. Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978: 157.



second-millennium literature from the Ancient Near East, which supports its antiquity.”<sup>50</sup> Finally, D. R. Hillers maintains that the “archaic elements in the 'J' account of Abraham's covenant do suggest that the traditions on which it rests are of very high antiquity, so that it seems permissible to take up Noah and Abraham before David, rather than the other way around.”<sup>51</sup>

To sum up briefly the different positions presented in this section, some scholars think that the ANE covenant form is present in the biblical text while others believe it is utterly absent. But even those who argue for its presence often differ as to which kind of ANE treaties the biblical covenants should be compared. In the case of Genesis 15, the question is whether the ceremony presented is an acted out curse – similar to 1<sup>st</sup> millennium ANE treaties where God, in a self-imprecating manner, brings judgment upon himself should he fail to uphold the covenant and leaves Abraham with little responsibility – or simply a ratification ceremony – like the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium ANE treaties where God, as in the land grants of that period, makes a promise to Abraham.

Finally, there is the issue of dating Genesis 15 which could have an impact on whether we compare the text to 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium ANE treaties. Some scholars believe the covenant idea to be a late development in Israel and so place the writing of Genesis 15 in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium. Others argue that covenants appear very early in Israel's history – as far back as the patriarchal period – and so find it possible to date Genesis 15 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium.

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<sup>50</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 326.

<sup>51</sup> Hillers 101.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

A survey of scholars' opinions pertaining to the nature of the covenant in Genesis 15 reveals a definite lack of consensus on Abraham's role. This is a summary of the main points of contention that we have encountered:

- With the structure of Genesis 15 itself, there is disagreement as to whether the chapter is made up of a single unified narrative or of two separate ones. This has an impact on the conditional or unconditional understanding of the covenant in this chapter since in verses 1-6 Abraham shows a great faith praised by God while verses 7-21 – the part with the covenant ritual – is seen by some scholars as showing a doubting and passive patriarch with God being the only one actively participating in the treaty ceremony.
- A study of Genesis 15 in light of God's initial contact with Abraham in Genesis 12 also brings disagreement among commentators. Some find that the promises of God will only become a reality because Abraham has shown obedience and faith in chapter 12. Others downplay the importance of Abraham's obedience in Genesis 12 and give more importance to the promises of God.
- A comparison between biblical covenants and ANE treaties yields a wide variety

of opinions. Some find clear similarities between biblical and extra-biblical treaties while others reject any relationship. In the case of Genesis 15, as in other biblical covenants, even those who argue for a connection with ANE treaties differ in their conclusion. The question remains: is the covenant between Abraham and God similar to 1<sup>st</sup> millennium treaties where the ritual is an acted out curse? In this case, it would be God taking all the responsibility upon himself in a self-imprecating manner. Or is it more like a 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium treaty where the ceremony is only a covenant ratification where God makes a promise to Abraham. In this case, the enjoyment of the blessings is not necessarily unconditional and may imply Abraham's obedience. Another issue to consider is the dating of Genesis 15 which is also a subject of debate with some placing it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium and others in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium.

### 3. The Text

Our first task will be to present a translation of the biblical Hebrew text. The translation is mine and differs from others in that it is based upon a macro-syntactical analysis. This method has enabled us to display the emphasis present in the text, especially in regards to the identity of Abraham's heir. Abraham argues that his descendant will not come from his flesh but YHWH strongly emphasizes that his heir will indeed come from him. Also, our analysis shows, as will later be fully explained, that verse 6 is central to the chapter as the action halts and Abraham's unbroken faith is brought into sharp focus.

1. After these things, the word of YHWH came to Abram in a vision: May you not fear<sup>52</sup> Abram! I am your shield, your reward in great<sup>53</sup> abundance.
2. But Abram said: Lord YHWH, what will you give me since I am passing away<sup>54</sup> childless and my heir<sup>55</sup>, he<sup>56</sup> is Eliezer of Damascus?

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52 This Qal Imperfect is jussive for it is preceded by אֵל (Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990: Eisenbrauns: 660). Also, in discourse, a Yiqtol in 1<sup>st</sup> position can never be an indicative and is thus considered a jussive (see Alviero Niccacci. *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (*JSOTSup* 86), 1990: 78). Our translation reflects this mood.

53 The Samaritan Pentateuch has אַרְבֵּה “I shall multiply” instead of הַרְבֵּה “great”. Wenham, as per Waltke, notes that the The Masoretic text should be kept since the Samaritan Pentateuch “frequently replaces inf abs” (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 324).

54 הוֹלֵךְ means *pass away* or *die* “in phrases denoting or implying death” (Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000: 234.1. Also see Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 324).

55 מִשְׁקָ is an *hapax legomenon* whose meaning has been debated among scholars. The most common translation is “possession” (Brown-Driver-Briggs, 606.2) which sees מִשְׁקָ as having been changed from מִשְׁדָּ (understood as “possession” in Job 28.18) to produce a word play דַּמְשֶׁק (Damascus).

3. And Abram said: Look<sup>57</sup>, you have not given me a descendant so behold<sup>58</sup>, the one born in my house will be my heir.
4. But behold, the word of YHWH came to him: this one will not be your heir but<sup>59</sup> one who will come out from your loins, he<sup>60</sup> will inherit.
5. He took him outside and said: “Look<sup>61</sup> at the sky and count the stars, if you can count them.” Then he said: “Thus will be your descendants.”
6. And he kept on believing<sup>62</sup> in YHWH and he credited righteousness to him<sup>63</sup>.
7. I am YHWH who has made you come out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.

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The sentence could then be literally translated “the son of the possession of my house” or more simply “my heir”.

- 56 *causis pendens* construction: “my heir... *he* is”. Abraham puts an emphasis on the fact that his heir will not come from his loins but *he* will be Eliezer of Damascus.
- 57 The traditional “behold” has been replaced with “look” for stylistic reasons since it is also present later in the sentence.
- 58 According to Niccacci, הנה has “the function of introducing a past or present event, or a circumstance which has special relevance in respect of the actual moment of communication” (Niccacci 100). Here, as in verse 2, Abraham is bringing focus on his conviction that a man born in his own house - but not one coming from his own flesh - will be his heir.
- 59 כִּי־אֵם underlines the contradiction that exist between Abraham and God on the provenance of the patriarch’s descendants.
- 60 Note the presence of another *causis pendens*: “*he* will inherit, *this* one”. Here God answers with his own emphasis to Abraham’s strong belief that his heir will not come from his flesh. God stresses the point that a man born “from his loins” will indeed be his heir.
- 61 The presence of ו particle following “Look” may imply that it is a request more than an order but Waltke-O’Connor, quoting Thomas O. Lambdin, suggest also that “The particle seems ... to denote that the command in question is a logical consequence, either of an immediately preceding statement or of the general situation in which it is uttered.” (Waltke-O’Connor 578) This interpretation would make sense in our context. In verses 4-5, God, in his response to Abraham’s questions, is not pleading with the patriarch. He is telling him in a very absolute way, that an heir *will* be born from him. To stress the point further, God orders Abraham to look at the stars, followed again by the promise, “Thus will be your descendants.”
- 62 The weQATAL is used in a narrative to express a repeated action (Niccacci 183). This would indicate that Abraham’s belief was not a one time occurrence but more similar to a habit. Our translation reflects this important nuance.
- 63 What was reckoned to Abraham is the righteousness. יחשבה has a 3<sup>rd</sup> fm sing suffix. This suffix refers to the word צדקה which is the only fm sing word the verb can refer to. So “righteousness” is the object of the verb “reckoned”. Literally: “He (YHWH) reckoned her to him, righteousness.” This reveals another *causis pendens* which puts an emphasis on the righteousness that God has credited to Abraham.

8. But he said: “Lord YHWH, by what can I know that I will possess it?”
9. And he said to him: “Take for me a three-year old heifer, a three-year old goat, a three-year old ram, a dove and a turtledove.”
10. And he took all these for him and split them down the middle and placed each half opposite the other but he did not split<sup>64</sup> the birds.
11. Then the birds of prey came down on the carcasses and Abram caused them to be driven away.
12. As the sun was going down and a deep sleep had fallen on Abram, behold, a great dark terror fell on him.
13. And he said to Abram: “Know for certain<sup>65</sup> that your descendants will be strangers in a land not theirs. And they will enslave them and they will mistreat them for four hundred years.
14. But the nations that they will serve, I am to judge and afterwards they will come out with many possessions.
15. But as for you<sup>66</sup>, you will go to your ancestors in peace. May you<sup>67</sup> be buried in a good old age.
16. And in the fourth generation, they will return here for the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete.

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64 The WAYYIQTOL chain is here broken by a WAW-X-QATAL which emphasizes that Abraham cut all the animals *but* he *did not* cut the birds.

65 The Hebrew construction is emphatic with the Qal infinitive absolute followed by the imperfect form of **עָדַל**.

66 The pronoun **אַתָּה** is used to contrast the subject (Abram) with the preceding subject and also allows the writer to make this sentence a future indicative X-YIQTOL with emphasis on the “you” (see Niccacci 78).

67 Yiqtol in 1<sup>st</sup> position makes it jussive (see Niccacci 78).

17. When the sun had gone down it was dark<sup>68</sup> and behold, a smoking pot and a torch of fire passed between these pieces.
18. On that day, YHWH cut a covenant with Abram saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates<sup>69</sup>,
19. the land<sup>70</sup> of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,
20. the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaites,
21. the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites<sup>71</sup>, and Jebusites.”

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68 Protasis/Apodosis construction (shift from X-QATAL to a WAW-X-QATAL).

69 According to the BHS, this is perhaps an addition.

70 “the land” is supplied in the translation for stylistic reasons.

71 The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint add “and the Hivites”. The Masoretic text will be preferred since Wenham notes, as per Waltke, that the “Supplementation of lists with the aid of parallel passages is characteristic of the SamPent.” (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 325)

## 4. Nature of the Text: Composite or Unified

Genesis 15 portrays sharp exchanges between YHWH and Abraham. The Lord is making promises; promises pertaining to an heir, great lands, and a future that Abraham finds difficult to envision (vv 1-5 ; 7-8). But the text states that the patriarch, nevertheless, “kept on believing” (v. 6) and the chapter ends with a vivid covenant ceremony where God passes between animals split in two (vv 9-21). The passage has perplexed scholars and has led some to consider the chapter as being composed of two independent narratives (verses 1-6 and verses 7-21). The structure of the text, however, contains too many parallels between these two parts for them to be considered separate narratives. As we have previously mentioned, based on a shift of focus and apparent contradictions between the first and second part of the chapter, N. D. Freedman, P. R. Williamson, and M. Anbar argued that the text is composite. These apparent problems, however, dissolve when the text is studied carefully. We have already provided some arguments from those who maintain that the text is unified. We will now examine the structure of the text more thoroughly in an effort to demonstrate that Genesis 15 is in fact a beautifully constructed passage which loses the heart of its theological content if divided in two.

Even a brief study of Genesis 15 will reveal that the chapter mentions two promises: the promise of a descendant for Abraham in the first part (verses 1-6) and of a land in the second part (verses 7-21). Whereas some scholars assume that the shift of focus is due to the composite nature of the text, others view it as a unifying factor,



displaying the symmetry in the chapter. For example, Pierre Auffret, who wrote a detailed structural analysis of Genesis 15 explains:

A partir des formules d'introduction aux paroles de YHWH ou d'Abram on peut en un premier temps découvrir entre 1-5 et 7-21, autour de 6 donc, une certaine ordonnance ou un parallèle 'incorpore' pour ainsi dire un chiasme. Le premier volet concerne globalement le don d'une descendance, le dernier celui d'un pays.<sup>72</sup>

The chiasm can be represented in the following way:

Verse 4: Response of YHWH to Abraham's inquiry

Verse 5a: Action of YHWH

Verse 5b: Command of YHWH

Verse 6: Abraham's Faith and Righteousness

Verse 9: Command of YHWH

Verse 10-11: Action of Abram

Verse 13-16: Response of YHWH

This structure clearly highlights verse 6. The centrality of this verse is an important factor to which we shall come back to shortly.

The shift from a promise of a seed to one of a land does not necessarily imply two different traditions, as if the concepts were antithetical. In fact, it could be argued that one follows the other. K. H. Essex alludes to it when he wrote, "In the first scene (15.1-5), the main subject is Abraham's 'seed'. [...] Genesis 15.7-21 recounts God's making of the covenant with Abraham. The emphasis in this section shifts to the 'land' promised by the

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<sup>72</sup> Pierre Auffret. "La justice pour Abram: étude structurelle de Gen 15." *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114.3 (2002): 342.

Lord to Abraham's 'seed'.<sup>73</sup> The promise of land is for Abraham's seed. The patriarch cannot take possession of the whole land by himself. He will need off-springs to inhabit it, build it and make it prosper. Thus, implied in the promise of land is the promise of seed. The link between seed and land is further enhanced in the chapter by the use of two verbs: ירש (to take possession, to inherit) and ידע (to know). As H. Cazelles points out:

Deux verbes assurent l'unité du morceau: yârâs et yâda. Le premier évoque non seulement un héritier et un héritage, mais une prise de possession, d'où l'unité entre la promesse de descendance et promesse de possession du pays. Le second souligne que Dieu a l'initiative, qu'il connaît son fidèle et veut le protéger.<sup>74</sup>

ירש is used both in the first and second part of the chapter. In verses 3-4, the term is used by both Abraham and God in their discussion concerning the patriarch's heir. In these verses it means "being one's heir" or "to inherit"<sup>75</sup>. Abraham believes that his heir will not come from his own flesh but God emphatically states that he will indeed come from him. The same verb is present in verses 7-8 but in the context of the promise of a land. God tells Abraham that he will give him a land to possess ( ירש ) and the patriarch responds by asking how he will know that he shall possess ( ירש ) it. Thus, as H. Cazelle points out, both the promise of an heir and the promise of a land are linked through the use of this verb. In this same line of thought P. R. Williamson writes, "The first section addresses the question of the inheritor; the second the question of the inheritance."<sup>76</sup>

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73 Essex 199.

74 Cazelles 323.

75 Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000: 439.

76 Williamson 123.

The parallelism goes further and deeper; it cements the two parts together in an intricate way. Brueggemann sees an ABC/A'B'C' structure:

A The lord makes a promise to Abraham, using the formula “I am” (15.1).

B Abraham apprehensively questions the Lord, addressing him with the rare title “Sovereign Lord” (15.2-3).

C The Lord reassures Abraham by symbolic acts: the display of stars with reference to the seed (15.4-6).

A' The Lord makes a promise to Abraham, using the formula “I am” (15.7).

B' Abraham apprehensively questions the Lord, addressing him with the rare title “Sovereign Lord” (15.8).

C' The Lord reassures Abraham by symbolic acts: the burning torch and the smoking kiln through the carcasses with reference to the land (15.9-21)<sup>77</sup>

Basically, each part is divided in three sections in which God speaks first and makes a promise. This is followed by Abraham questioning the Lord, looking for proof that God's promises will come to pass. God then reassures Abraham. This breakdown seems to do justice to the text except for verse 6 which stands apart and has nothing to do with God reassuring Abraham. It says only: “And he kept on believing in YHWH and he credited righteousness to him.” (Gen 15.6) K. H. Essex who presents a similar structure has verse 6 standing on its own, lending support to P. Auffret’s insight about its importance.<sup>78</sup> We present it here in a way that illustrates Gen 15.6 central position:

A The Lord's word to Abraham (v. 1)

B Abraham's questioning of the Lord (vv. 2-3)

C The Lord's assurance to Abraham (vv. 4-5)

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<sup>77</sup> Brueggemann 238.

<sup>78</sup> Essex 199.

- D Abraham's faith in the Lord and consequent righteousness (v. 6)
- A' The Lord's assurance to Abraham (v. 7)
- B' Abraham's questioning of the Lord (v. 8)
- C' The Lord's assurance to Abraham (vv. 9.-21)

K. H. Essex and P. Auffret are not alone in observing that more than being a mere reflection of one another, the two parts (ABC/A'B'C') are in fact articulated around verse 6. W. Brueggemann also emphasized it even though he does not set it apart in the chapter division presented earlier. He viewed the chapter as presenting two encounters between God and Abraham with Gen 15.6 providing “[...] a janus between the two encounters. The human partner counts on God to give him an offspring, and the divine partner credits that faith as righteousness. On that basis, the Lord grants Abraham his immutable covenant (15.7-21)”<sup>79</sup>. K. H. Essex explains that this verse interrupts the flow of the narrative and he quotes John H. Sailhamer to support his assertion:

The syntax [...] suggests that this is a comment within the narrative and is not to be understood as an event within the framework of the other events of the narrative. The author of the text, Moses, affirms that Abraham responded to God's promise of innumerable seed with faith.<sup>80</sup>

It is not directly stated why syntactically this verse might be understood as a break in the narrative but our own analysis of the text provides an explanation. In the verses that precede verse 6, the narrative sections contain the WAYYIQTOL construction which is used to introduce the discourses between God and Abraham. These WAYYIQTOL make the scene move forward and the action is unfolding. Verse 4 is an

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<sup>79</sup> Brueggemann 239.

<sup>80</sup> Essex 199.

exception where a simple noun clause is used to introduce God's answer to Abraham. But this clause begins with הנה which according to A. Niccacci is sometimes used in narrative among other things to render “the immediacy of speech” and the “circumstance introduced by הנה is always very closely connected with the ensuing action.”<sup>81</sup> Thus the action is not stopped; rather the author emphasizes the action by the use of הנה. The grammatical construction of verse 6 switches to a narrative weQatal in 1<sup>st</sup> position. According to A. Niccacci this “denotes background”<sup>82</sup>. The narrative is at rest. Verse 7 picks up again where the action stopped by introducing God's speech with a WAYYIQTOL. So on either side of verse 6, the action is advancing, the story is unfolding but here, it comes to a standstill. Along with our previous study of the structure of Genesis 15, this syntactical analysis of verse 6 lends further support to its centrality. All of these arguments show that chapter 15 is not simply an amalgamation of two unrelated narratives but rather an intricately woven text articulated around verse 6.

Given the emphasis on the verse, its meaning for the understanding of the text is essential. Our interest lies especially on the responsibility of the parties involved in the covenant. The verse reads “And he kept on believing in YHWH and he credited righteousness to him.” Usually, the verb אָמַן is translated “he believed”. In our translation of the text, however, we have shown that it should be rendered “he kept on believing” since a weQatal in 1<sup>st</sup> position is used, amongst other functions, to indicate a

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81 Niccacci 101.

82 Niccacci 183.

repeated action<sup>83</sup>. But this raises the question as to what exactly did Abraham believe or have faith in? As was observed earlier, the preceding verses deal with the promise of an heir for Abraham. The patriarch seems to struggle with the idea but the Lord assures him that his heir will come from his loins. To stress the point further the Lord takes him outside, asks him to look at the sky and count the stars and states: “Thus will be your descendants” (Gen 15.5b).

Some scholars have argued that this statement of faith which followed an apparent moment of doubt reveals the composite nature of the text. The issue at stake here is the understanding of the concept of faithfulness. Does faithfulness imply a perfect faith that never asks questions and never wavers? W. Brueggemann argues that Abraham’s question in Gen 15:8 (“How can I know”) could be “interpreted as unbelief, but that understanding would not fit the narrator’s evaluation that Abraham trusts God (15.6). More likely, Abraham’s request for a sign is motivated by faith (see 15.6; cf. Isa. 7.10-14). Complaint and faith are not antithetical; complaint is based on taking God seriously.”<sup>84</sup> He also states that “It takes the spiritual energy of faith to complain in contrast to despairing in silence.”<sup>85</sup> It would make sense that a total lack of faith on Abraham’s part would not lead him to struggle with the Lord in order to seek a confirmation. Rather it would lead him to ignore what was said to him. In fact, why would total faithlessness look for a proof? The fact that Abraham asks shows that he still

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83 Niccacci 183.

84 Brueggemann 243.

85 Brueggemann 241.

has hope. Ha<sup>86</sup> mentions other texts in the Bible where a similar pattern is present. God, in Ex 7.17, states that the water of Nile turning to blood will be a sign for people that he is Lord. Moses, in Ex 33.16, expresses that he will know he has found favor in God's eyes only if the Lord goes with them on the journey. We could also mention Gideon who told God, "If you really intend to use me to deliver Israel, as you promised, then give me a sign as proof. Look, I am putting a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew on just the fleece, and the ground around it is dry, then I will be sure that you will use me to deliver Israel, as you promised" (Judges 6.36-37). P. R. Williamson argues that "genuine faith is not immune from doubts and sometimes seeks reassurance."<sup>87</sup> In the examples above there is nothing to indicate that God was disappointed with the people for demanding a confirmation. With Gideon, the Bible only states, "God did as he [Gideon] asked" (Judges 6.38a). In our chapter, the Lord willingly complies and gives reassurance to Abraham. G. J. Wenham goes so far as to say that not seeking a "proffered sign can indeed demonstrate lack of faith"<sup>88</sup> and gives Isaiah 7.10-14 as an example. In that passage, the Lord tells Ahaz to ask for a confirming sign. His refusal is interpreted as trying the patience of God.

At the beginning of the chapter, we have another hint that Abraham's faith was enduring and it also brings some more clarity on what faith entails in terms of personal responsibility. In verse 1, the Lord spoke to Abraham and told him not to fear and that he, Yahweh, would be his shield and his reward. Here, the word used for reward is שכר

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86 Quoted in Williamson 127.

87 Williamson 130.

88 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 331.

(śākār). W. Brueggemann explains that this is “probably a term for a mercenary's pay”<sup>89</sup>. A pay is earned, given in exchange for an activity. In the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semitic Domains*, it is defined as “what is a just recompense for services or loyalty to someone.”<sup>90</sup> The term is used again in Gen 30.18 where Leah says, after being able to conceive a son, “God has given me my wages [שֹׁכֵר] because I gave my servant to my husband.” Clearly, she interprets her blessing as a payment from the Lord for having given her maid-servant to Jacob. Also of interest, the Septuagint renders this word as *misthos* which refers to “a recompense based upon what a person has earned and thus deserves, the nature of the recompense being either positive or negative”<sup>91</sup>.

At the very beginning of verse 1, we have a clue as to what service led to the reward. It simply says אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה (“After these things”), a statement that connects what had previously taken place (ch 14) to what will occur in ch 15. What are the events referred to in this verse? In chapter 14, Abraham fights Kedorlaomer, the king of Elam and the three other kings who were allied with him. The kings had taken the food and possessions from the people in Sodom and Gomorrah and had also taken Abraham’s nephew, Lot, captive. Upon hearing this news, Abraham fights the kings, liberates Lot and retrieves the stolen property. Melchizedek then comes and blesses the Patriarch, who gives a tenth of everything he has to the priest. Even more, Abraham, in a vow to the Lord, refuses the spoils of war. W. Brueggemann provides an interesting parallel between

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89 Brueggemann 241.

90 James Swanson. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew*. electronic ed. Of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2001: 8510.2.

91 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996, c1989: 38.14.



Abraham's refusal of the spoils of war and God's subsequent reward to the patriarch, a parallel which builds a bridge between the events of the two chapters: "Abraham's reward for faithful service is much greater than the tarnished booty the king of Sodom offered. Only God can reward Abraham with innumerable offspring and land that others possess."<sup>92</sup> When the Lord claims he will reward Abraham, there is a background, a history to that statement. The reward is based on Abraham's past faithfulness. The reward of the Lord to Abraham is not an unconditional gift. Viewed in this light, the statement of verse 6 that Abraham "kept on believing in the Lord" makes even more sense. He had previously, at multiple times, actively showed his obedience to the Lord, and his response to God is one of continuing and uninterrupted faithfulness.

Many have attempted to argue that no action on Abraham's part was necessary for him to get the reward. There seems to be conflicting opinions which revolve around the understanding of free will and the implications of faith. For some, faith is not an action word but something more akin to a state of mind. G. Von Rad writes, "Belief is an act of trust, a consent to God's plans in history. From the viewpoint of man's attitude, belief is something rather passive, at least within the framework of God's governing."<sup>93</sup> B. K. Waltke is another scholar who seems to adhere to this conception of faith. He writes, on the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 15:

It [the promise] is one-sided as a commitment on the part of God to Abraham and exacts no comparable allegiance from Abraham to God. It is a commitment of free grace. The unqualified commitment of God in verses 18-21 has its counterpart in verse 6. In both passages it is affirmed that God's movement toward Abraham is

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92 Brueggemann 241.

93 Von Rad 180.

free and unconditional. Abraham *need only trust*.<sup>94</sup>

The author's statement that Abraham “need only trust” betrays his view of faith.

He goes so far as to say:

The faith of Abraham should not be understood in romantic fashion as an achievement or as a moral decision. [...] This is how this faith of Abraham is. He did not move from protest (vv. 2-3) to confession (v. 6) by knowledge or by persuasion but by the power of God who reveals and *causes his revelation to be accepted*.<sup>95</sup>

B. K. Waltke seems to contradict his statement that Abraham need only trust, since the patriarch is here discharged even of this responsibility by the affirmation that God “causes his revelation to be accepted”. More than having no action to perform, Abraham’s mental consent to God’s plan is not up to him: the Lord made it happen in this fashion. But we are here faced with the difficult question of free will which, while being an interesting subject in its own right, is beyond the scope of this thesis. We can safely say, however, that nowhere in Genesis 15 is it stated that Abraham’s faith comes from God’s action. It simply says, as shown earlier, that Abraham “kept on believing in YHWH”. He did not suddenly move from faithlessness to trust by God’s divine intervention as B.K. Waltke proposes. We have argued that Abraham did not stop having faith in God. Doubt and faith are not in opposition. Furthermore, the translation also makes it clear that there was no break in Abraham’s trust of the Lord: he kept on believing. B. K. Waltke seems to struggle with his own interpretation since it is hard to deny the evidence for Abraham’s active role in the chapter. The author is aware that the

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94 Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001: 150.

95 Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 145. Italics added.

chapter begins with God's promise of a reward and that while, according to him, this "is not a prize that is earned", it is still "a special recognition given to a faithful servant of the king who has performed a bold or risky service"<sup>96</sup> He admits this is one of his most difficult problems in interpreting the text. He is aware of the contradiction and concludes: "Clearly, trusting is not the cause of fulfillment, for that would reduce things to quid pro quo. On the other hand, it is clear that only those who hope will be given the gift. This does not make a very logical argument."<sup>97</sup> We concur with his assessment of his argument. In light of the text, to argue for Abraham's total lack of responsibility is to require one to make biblical faith somehow illogical.

The most straightforward way to interpret the text, without having to resort to paradoxical arguments, is to acknowledge that God's promise was made possible through Abraham's faithful and active service. This vision of faith is not limited to Genesis 15 as it pervades the Hebrew Bible. Freedman comments on other situations where this pattern has been displayed:

The divine promise to Noah, Phineas, and David follows upon an act of obedience and faithfulness, beyond normal expectation, on the part of each of these men: Noah builds the ark, Phineas slays the sinners who wantonly desecrated the sanctuary, while David, in addition to all his other services, had expressed the earnest desire to build a house in honor of God.<sup>98</sup>

Each of those men has acted on their faith. Biblically speaking, a faith that produces no active response is no faith at all for unfaithfulness breeds passivity.

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96 Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 141.

97 Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 141.

98 Freedman 171.

Following these acts of obedience, YHWH was willing to make a promise. If we come back to Abraham's story, D.G. Buttrick is even blunter in his conclusion. He states that "believed":

[...] means more than an inward assent to the promise of God. Abram's response might be termed *active* trust. If God guaranteed an heir, presumably Abram and Sarah strived actively to make babies; they trusted the promise. The text implies a living trust and not merely an acquiescent nod of the head.<sup>99</sup>

It was a partnership between God and his servants. He promises to open the womb of Sarah, but for the heir to be conceived, both the patriarch and his wife must actively come together in trust of God's promise.

Finally, the question as to why it is important to determine the unified or composite nature of the text is simply because it provides important insights into the nature of the covenant. If we conclude that the chapter is made up of two separate narratives, then Abraham's role in the covenant is downplayed. Commentators would then focus on Abraham's passivity during the covenant ceremony and thus view the covenant as unilateral. Scholars would also focus on the apparent incongruity between the statement of faith of verse 6 and the moments of doubt and questioning.

If, however, we conclude, as we did, that the chapter forms a unified whole, then faith, as expressed in verse 6, is the main focus of the chapter. Not just faith, but as was argued, an *active* faith; a faith that trusts by obeying God's commands and taking Him

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<sup>99</sup> David G. Buttrick. "Genesis 15:1-18." *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 395.

seriously. Abraham did trust God's promise and based on that faith, God could ratify the covenant with the patriarch.

In this chapter we have argued that Genesis 15 is not a composite text but a unified narrative. First, a structural analysis has lent support to this conclusion. There is a parallelism (ABC / A'B'C') in the chapter with the pattern of a promise by the Lord (A), a question from Abraham (B) and the reassurance of YHWH (C). Also the ideas of descendants (in the first part of the chapter) and land (in the second part) do bind the text together through the use of the verb *וירש* (to inherit). We have also shown that in this structure verse 6 stands apart, making it a central part of the chapter.

Secondly, the analysis of the grammatical constructions of the text has further proved the important role of verse 6 since, in this verse, the narrative comes to a standstill and focus is brought upon it. Furthermore, syntactically, we have demonstrated that in this verse the faith of Abraham is described as something habitual and not just a onetime occurrence. We have argued that Abraham's questioning stemmed from faith itself and that he did not shift from unbelief to faith. We have also shown that according to other biblical texts, the demand for a sign is not assessed as unbelief.

Finally, we have pointed out that the chapter begins with YHWH promising a reward to Abraham; explaining that a reward is something earned, not unconditionally given. And by examining the events that took place just before Genesis 15, we find that

Abraham's faith was in fact active and did extend in the past. The reward that God wants to give is indeed based on past faithfulness.

All of these arguments enabled us to conclude that Abraham had a most important role in God making a covenant with him. What YHWH wants to give him is only possible because the patriarch has shown constant faith.

We have not yet looked at the covenant ceremony in itself but it was essential to first establish the background to the ratification. Chapter 6 will take up that particular aspect. For now, we will turn to Genesis 12 - where God's relationship with Abraham was initiated - in the hope of getting even more insight into the patriarch's role in the covenant.

## 5. Genesis 15 and its Larger Literary Context

In the previous chapter, we have discussed how Abraham exercised a responsibility in the covenant between him and God. Abraham continuously trusted in YHWH; a trust expressed in concrete actions rather than merely a mental consent. To corroborate this claim, we shall now examine Genesis 12 – which presents the birth of the relationship between YHWH and Abraham. This text will demonstrate that the active faithfulness of the patriarch extends back to the very first command given to him by God. The parallels between chapters 12 and 15 will shed more light on Abraham’s role in obtaining the blessings.

In the state of the question, we have seen that some scholars argue for the unconditional nature of God’s plan in Genesis 12 by shifting away from the command of God to “go” by focusing instead on YHWH’s wishes for Abraham. For G. J. Wenham, “The divine speech consists of a command ‘Go... to the country...’ followed by a series of promises (vv 2-3) that heavily outweigh the command, showing where the chief interest of the passage lies. Indeed, the command itself contains within it an implied promise of the land.”<sup>100</sup> Along the same line Cleon Rogers, discussing the implications of the commands in Genesis 12, uses a syntactical argument to move the focus from the conditional elements to the promises. “In Genesis 12.1 the imperative is used - ‘get thee out’ - followed by a series of lengthened or cohortative imperfects with the simple waw.

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100 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 274.

[...] it seems that the stress is not on the imperative as a condition but rather on the cohortative and the purpose or intention expressed by it.”<sup>101</sup> Quoting Wolff, he concludes, “The preceding imperative does not thereby have any kind of conditional undertone as if the promise of Yahweh were dependent on the obedience. Rather it sounds like a summons to receive the repeatedly promised gift.”<sup>102</sup> Even someone like C. Rogers, who discerned an intentional aspect in the text, still essentially seems to consider the blessings as unconditional, and weakens the imperative to “go” by simply viewing it as a call to accept the promise. We agree that the pericope deals mostly with the aspect of blessings; but not unconditional blessings. We cannot ignore the nuance of intentionality in God’s words, which something we will come back to. Others, though, will almost exclusively focus on the command. R. Youngblood, for example, writes, “‘Leave your country ... and go’ (Gen 12.1) is a clear obligation imposed on Abraham.”<sup>103</sup> He then spends very little time dealing with the list of blessings.

What we propose is that there is no need to downplay one aspect at the expense of the other: to emphasize the command to the detriment of the list of blessings or conversely, to weaken the command by somehow making it irrelevant to God’s overwhelming promises. When God’s “promises” in Gen. 12.2 are more appropriately understood as desires, the commandment to “leave your country . . . and go” makes perfect sense.

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101 Cleon Rogers. “The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Settings.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (1970): 252.

102 Rogers 252.

103 Youngblood 36.



First, the chapter begins with an imperative **לְךָ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית** (Go from your country and your kindred and father's house). God, in no uncertain terms, orders Abraham to go and leave his country. Any interpretation of the text will have to coexist with this syntactic feature. To simply state that the promises of God overshadow the command, without providing other supporting arguments, seems to not consider the structural and syntactic evidence present in the passage. The brevity of the text somehow hides the magnitude of the demands that were placed on Abraham. “Throughout the entire story one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men almost the impossible.”<sup>104</sup> Abraham is expected to break many important bounds:

The most general tie, that with the 'land', is named first, then follow, narrowing step by step, the bonds of the clan, i.e., the more distant relatives, and the immediate family. These three terms indicate that God knows the difficulties of these separations; Abraham is simply to leave everything behind and entrust himself to God's guidance.<sup>105</sup>

The statement by G. J. Wenham that “the command itself contains within it an implied promise of the land”<sup>106</sup> can be somewhat misleading. It is true insofar as the command is *obeyed*. The command by itself does not imply a promise: it awaits a response. It is the obedience to the word of YHWH which unlocks the possibility of receiving the blessing. Youngblood had a simple but convincing argument, “The implications [of obedience to the command] in the succeeding verses are clear: if Abraham leaves and goes he will receive the divine benison, and if he does not he will

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104 Von Rad 156.

105 Von Rad 154.

106 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 274.

not (indeed, how could he?).”<sup>107</sup> How could Abraham get the blessings if he stays in Haran? How could he possess the land and populate it with descendants if he ignores the command and continues on with his life as if nothing had happened? Unless of course we assume that when God orders something, it will automatically be obeyed. This comes back to the same comment we made in the previous chapter about the role of free will in mankind’s dealings with YHWH. We shall only repeat what we argued before: nowhere in the chapter are we given the impression that Abraham is forced or somehow coerced into obeying, and we assume that the patriarch had the capacity to choose his own course of action: to stay or to leave. We could speculate that if he had decided to disregard God’s command and stay in Haran, YHWH would have had to choose someone else to fulfill his desire of making a people for himself.

Having dealt with the command, we agree – along with scholars like C. Rogers – that there is an intention in the cohortatives which follow the commandment of God to Abraham to leave his country. In verse 2, God wishes three things for the patriarch: for him to be a great nation (לְגוֹי גָדוֹל), to be blessed (אֲבָרְכָךָ), and for his name to be great (אֲגַדְלֶה שְׁמֶךָ). Most translations render this text by conjugating the verbs in the future indicative: “Then I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great.” (NET Bible, Gen 12.2) This seems to imply that what God says will most definitely come to pass. Unfortunately, it does not do justice to the text. The three verbs are weYiqtol preceded by an imperative:

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107 Youngblood 36.

לְךָ־לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ־ךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אִרְאֶךָ  
וְאַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל  
וְאַבְרַכְךָ  
וְאַגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִיךָ

According to Gesenius-Kautzsch this is often used to express “a consequence which is intended, or in fact an intention”<sup>108</sup> as was pointed out by C. Rogers. M.-F. Dion, along the same line, explains, “L'emploi de ces *weYiqtol* (cohortatifs) a pour but de souligner l'intention de celui qui parle. Pour bien rendre cette idée, il convient de traduire le texte comme suit: ‘je veux faire de toi une grande nation, je veux te bénir, je veux faire grandir ton nom’.”<sup>109</sup> So God *wishes* to bless Abraham, to give him land and a descendant, but from the syntax this intention had no definite certainty of being accomplished. With this conclusion, we are going along with M.-F. Dion’s macro-syntactic exegesis of the text which argues that God has a project in which he wants to involve Abraham. The project only becomes a promise when the patriarch obeys. As we have seen, Abraham is expected to make a break with three different elements: his land, family and house. Yet at the same time, God is there to reciprocate with three promises should Abraham step out in faith. M.-F. Dion explains :

v.1 indique, au moyen d'un impératif suivi d'une triade, ce qu'Abraham doit faire. Il doit faire une triple rupture: quitter son pays, sa parenté et la maison de son père. Le v.2 présente une deuxième triade exprimant ce que Yahvé veut faire pour Abraham. Il veut faire de lui une grande nation, il veut le bénir et faire grandir son nom. Nous avons, dans ce texte, l'énonciation d'un projet auquel les deux parties impliquées doivent participer.<sup>110</sup>

108 Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. ed. E. Kautzsch and Sir Arthur Ernest Cowley, 2d English ed. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2003 : 325.

109 Dion 101.

110 Dion 101.

Genesius and Krautzsch mentioned that a cohortative which follows an imperative could be interpreted as an intention or a consequence. We have mostly dwelled on the intentional aspect in the last few paragraphs; but even when understood as a consequence, we still arrive at the same conclusion. The consequences, which God expresses, of land, blessings and a great name refer to a result which stems from a previous action, namely the obedience to the command given previously. Whereas M.-F. Dion focused on the intention behind God's words, V. P. Hamilton focused on them being a consequence. He explains,

Here the first imperative states the exhortation, and the second imperative touches on the results which are brought about by the implementation of the first imperative. Applied to Gen 12.1-2, this construction means that the first imperative, *go*, is related as effect to cause to this second imperative, *be*. Abram cannot be a blessing if he stays in Haran. But if he leaves, then a blessing he will be.<sup>111</sup>

This goes along with our previous conclusion that for YHWH's words in verse 2 to become reality, Abraham's active participation is required. Whether understood as a desire – an intention – on God's part or a consequence of obeying the command, the list of blessings would not have become reality without Abraham's participation.

Now that we have examined God's command to Abraham to leave his country and YHWH's intentions towards the patriarch if he obeys, we will move further along in the text to a verse which reports Abraham's obedience; a verse whose brevity, again, should not detract us from its relevance. In verse 4, the text simply says: וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם (and Abram

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111 Hamilton 373.

went). The Lord commands and Abraham goes. G. Von Rad explains,

The one word wayyelek ('and he set out') is more effective than any psychological description could be, and in its majestic simplicity does greater justice to the importance of this event. [...] Here is one of the passages where Abraham becomes a kind of model. Throughout the entire story one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men almost the impossible.<sup>112</sup>

G. Von Rad makes it clear that the Bible's report of Abraham's obedience, though short, is still of the utmost importance. There is no arguing on the patriarch's part: only a faithful and simple obedience. Not simple in terms of its cost – for we are reminded by the author that God was expecting something nearly unthinkable for a man of that era – but simple in its resolve to do whatever YHWH asks, no matter how difficult.

It is only following Abraham's obedience that God's intention of blessing him becomes more akin to a promise. In verse 7 God says, "To your descendants I shall give this land". As V. P. Hamilton explains, "Interestingly, the promise to give the land to Abram (v. 7) follows the promise to show the land to Abram (v. 1), and 'show' becomes 'give' only when Abram makes his move."<sup>113</sup> Structurally, we find verse 7 acting as a central point in the chapter: it is Abraham's obedience which prompts God to promise what he had only intended to give earlier on. A parallel can be drawn between the role of this verse and of verse 6 in chapter 15. In the latter, if we recall, we find the statement that Abraham "kept on believing in YHWH". Based on that faith, the event of the second part of the chapter – namely the ratifying of the covenant – became possible. Just as Abraham's active faith enabled God to commit himself by covenanting with the patriarch

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112 Von Rad 156.

113 Hamilton 371.

in chapter 15, so does the obedient faith of Abraham in chapter 12 serves as a bridge between God's vision and its ultimate concrete realization. In both chapters, faith and trust serve as catalysts which move the heart of God.

One interesting aspect in God's response is that in the same sentence, the themes of descendants and land are linked. To whom will God give the land? To Abraham's descendants. Wenham captures the importance of what God says, "This monumental statement, the shortest of all the promises, yet names both people and land and unites them by the verb give, here uttered for the first time."<sup>114</sup> In fact, as P. R. Williamson points out, one implies the other, "For the promise of Gen 12.2 to be fulfilled [promise to be a great nation], it was essential that Abraham's descendants inherit the land as promised explicitly in Gen 12.7"<sup>115</sup> The author then goes on to make a parallel with Genesis 15, "It comes therefore as no surprise that both these elements (i.e. descendants and land) should be brought together in Genesis 15. Nor is it at all surprising that the verb uniting both aspects within the chapter is *yrtw*."<sup>116</sup> This lends even more support to our understanding that the double promises of descendants and land in Genesis 15, far from being the demonstration of the composite nature of text, actually binds the first and second part of the chapter together. P. R. Williamson here also refers to the verb *yrtw* (to inherit) as a unifying element, something that we have already argued in the previous section.

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114 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 279.

115 Williamson 136.

116 Williamson 136.

To sum up, we have demonstrated that in Genesis 12, the statement that God will give land and descendants to Abraham is not an unconditional promise. YHWH orders Abraham to leave his country and reveals to him his intentions should he obey the summons. It is only following the patriarch's faithful obedience that God promises to give him the blessings. In fact, how could Abraham lay hold of the blessings without moving?

This conclusion then sheds light on the events of Genesis 15. As we have previously seen, the view that this chapter is composed of two narratives often leads to a downplaying of Abraham's role in what leads to the ratification of the covenant. Abraham is seen as doubting (verse 3 and 8) which seems to contradict the statement of faith in verse 6. Also, the subject shifts from promise of an heir to promise of land which further displays, for many scholars, the fragmented nature of the text. We have demonstrated, though, that the chapter in fact forms a unified whole with verse 6 as a central element. One argument was that the shift of focus from heir to land is in fact logical and that the two concepts are intimately related. Genesis 12 substantiates this conclusion by having God link descendants and land in the same sentence: "I will give this land to your descendants". Someone has to lay hold of this new country and it will be Abraham's seed. Furthermore, chapter 12 reinforces our previous conclusion that faith, not unbelief, was Abraham's habitual response to God. Because of Abraham's obedience, the Lord promised to give him the blessings. So when we study Genesis 15, one has to remember that Abraham's dealings with YHWH have been anchored in active faithfulness from the beginning.

With this background, Abraham's moments of doubt in chapter 15 should not be interpreted as unbelief. Yes, there may have been frustration in Abraham when he addressed God: "What will you give me since I pass away childless?" In chapter 12, the Lord had promised to give him an heir and descendants but later, the patriarch, still childless cannot help but ask the question: what will you give me? Patiently, without rebuke, God reiterates the promises. The text, by its structure, draws us to verse 6 as a central focus: "And he [Abraham] kept on believing in YHWH and He credited righteousness to him." This sentence beckons us to consider Abraham's past faithfulness to the Lord as an uninterrupted flow which has its source at the beginning of the relationship between Abraham and God described in Genesis 12.

Through the study of the structure and syntax of Genesis 15 and Genesis 12, we have so far demonstrated that Abraham was not passive in the events that led up to the covenant between the pieces. He had an active part in receiving the promises. With that in mind, we will now turn to the covenant ceremony itself in Genesis 15 – where the promises are ratified – and discuss the responsibilities of each party.



## 6. The Covenant between the Pieces

Starting in verse 9 of Genesis 15, we are witnesses to the covenant ceremony between YHWH and Abraham typically referred to as “the covenant between the pieces”. It follows God’s promise in verse 7 that he will give a land to Abraham and the patriarch’s subsequent question in verse 8, “Lord YHWH, by what can I know that I will possess it?” YHWH asks Abraham to get certain animals which are then cut in two. Abraham falls into a deep sleep and a smoking pot and a torch of fire pass between the carcasses. The text then simply states that on that day, “YHWH cut a covenant with Abram” (verse 18) with the Lord describing the boundaries of the land that he promises to give to Abraham’s descendants.

Since the ceremony is quite obscure with only one apparent parallel in the Hebrew Bible (Jeremiah 34), we shall compare it to similar Ancient Near Eastern treaties. First we will demonstrate that it is quite likely that Ancient Near Eastern treaty forms do appear in the Hebrew Bible. Then, based on this fact and through a step by step study of the covenant between the pieces, we shall attempt to associate the ceremony of Genesis 15 with a known ANE treaty form in an effort to evaluate the responsibilities of each party in the covenant.

## **6.1 Presence of ANE Treaty Forms in the Hebrew Bible**

It is hard to argue that this ceremony does not represent a covenant making of some sort. It is stated plainly that YHWH cut a covenant with Abram which, as we will later show, was used in the Ancient Near East to describe the ratification of treaties. As the state of the question made clear, we found very few scholars who deny outright the presence of Ancient Near East (ANE) covenant patterns in the Bible. Since Mendenhall in his *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* so convincingly pointed out the similarities between the covenants between the Bible and the ANE treaties, there seems to be a widespread acceptance that the biblical material reflects the covenant making conventions of its cultural milieu. The few who reject this idea use arguments that we find insufficient compared to the strong evidence for the presence of ANE treaties within the Hebrew Bible.

For example, we have briefly mentioned in the state of the question that J. H. Walton uses an etymological argument to deny the influence of ANE treaties on biblical material. He explains that there are two terms in Akkadian - the language of Babylonia and Assyria – to describe the concept of covenant,

The first term, *mamitu*, refers to an oath or a sworn agreement. While these oaths are typically sworn in the name of deity, they are not descriptive of agreements between God and man. The second term, *adu*, refers to a formal agreement, and is therefore more likely to overlap with the Old Testament concept of covenant. And *adu* is often finalized with a *mamitu*... Since neither of these terms is a cognate to the Hebrew term for covenant, and since neither represents agreements between God and man involving promises and election, I conclude that the extant literature of the ancient Near East offers no direct parallels to the covenant of the Old

Testament.<sup>117</sup>

Other than the argument for the difference in terms between Hebrew and Akkadian, Walton also states that *adu* and *mamitu* are never used to speak about covenants between God and man which is a further proof, according to him, that the ANE literature cannot be compared to the biblical material. We will come back to that second point later, but will attempt in the next section to address the first point through the study of the word ברית (*b<sup>e</sup>rît*). Since the aim of our thesis is to discern the roles of the parties involved in a covenant, it seems particularly important to define it as precisely as possible.

### 6.1.1 Study of ברית

ברית is used in Gen 15:18 to indicate the ratification of the covenant: ביום ההוא כרת יהוה את־אברם ברית (On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram...). The term ברית (*b<sup>e</sup>rît*) stands at the heart of our question: what does covenant imply in terms of responsibilities for the implicated parties? Etymologically, there are various views on the origin of ברית. Some, like E. Meyer and L. Kohler propose that the term derives from the root ברת (*brt*): “[...] which means 'to eat' alluding to the meal which frequently accompanies the covenant-making ceremony”<sup>118</sup> G. Gerleman<sup>119</sup> has proposed the

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117 Walton 13.

118 Gordon J. McConville, W. VanGeremen ed., *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis Vol. 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997: 747.

meaning “something specially set apart”, deriving ברית from the root בּרר (*brr*). These interpretations, however, are marginal and seldom seen in literature. The two most common views are well summarized by J. H. Walton:

The Hebrew term for covenant is *berit*. Although a number of suggestions have been proffered for the etymology of the word, the two most common derivations are from Akkadian, *birīt* (between, among) and Akkadian, *biritu* (clasp, fetter).<sup>120</sup>

The main proponent of ברית deriving from *biritu* is M. Weinfeld. According to him, ברית “implies first and foremost the notion of 'imposition,' 'liability,' or 'obligation,' as might be learned from the 'bond' etymology.”<sup>121</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, in his commentary on Genesis, also takes this view without regard to the other possibilities. He states: “Etymologically the Hebrew word for covenant, *berit*, is associated with Akk. *biritu*, ‘clasp, fetter.’ This etymology suggests that covenant, in the biblical sense, is not an agreement between two parties, but something that is imposed, an obligation.”<sup>122</sup> M. Noth, according to J.-G. Heintz<sup>123</sup> and H. J. McConville<sup>124</sup>, is the main scholar arguing that ברית should be considered a derivative of the Akkadian *birīt*. R. Youngblood also strongly supports this view. He uses a convoluted phonological argument to try to disprove the etymological relationship between ברית and *biritu* and claims that a “semantic shift from ‘fetter’ to ‘bond’ to ‘covenant’ is a bit difficult to swallow.”<sup>125</sup> He

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119 McConville 747.

120 Walton 13.

121 Quoted in W. David Jones, and John K. Tarwater. “Are Biblical Covenants Dissoluble?: Toward a theology of marriage.” *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 7.38 (2005): 5.

122 Hamilton 437.

123 Jean-Georges Heintz. “Alliance humaine--Alliance divine: documents d'époque babylonienne ancienne & Bible hébraïque.--Une esquisse.” *Biblische Notizen* 86 (1997): 74.

124 McConville 747.

125 Youngblood 34.

presses his point further by appealing to social conventions of the time:

It is highly unlikely that a covenant was conceived of as a fetter in ancient times by even the most despotic of tyrants. Whatever the actual facts in any individual case, covenant relationship stressed mutual loyalty and love between even the most exalted monarch and the lowliest slave rather than crushing overlordship or craven submission<sup>126</sup>.

For R. Youngblood, a more acceptable etymology for ברית is *birit* (between) and he mostly supports his argument by referring to the Mari documents, “I went to Aslakka and they brought to me a young dog and a she-goat in order to conclude a covenant (lit. “kill a donkey foal”) between the Haneans and the land of Idamaras...”<sup>127</sup> He explains that “The Akkadian *birit* occurs here precisely where we find the Hebrew *ben*, ‘between’, in similar contexts – often displaying the same syntactic relationship as well by repeating itself before relevant noun or pronoun.”<sup>128</sup> So the preposition *birit* emphasizing what is “between” two parties, would “have been substantivized and adopted into Hebrew by the Israelites as their specific word for ‘covenant’.”<sup>129</sup>

P. R. Williamson has challenged R. Youngblood's conclusions, arguing that even though the connection between the ברית and *birit* (between) might be established on the base of the Mari letters, it does not necessarily impose obligation on both covenant partners. At most, “it merely establishes that in Hebrew thought a *berit* was understood as sealing or formalizing a relationship between two or more parties [...] it no more implies the presence of bilateral obligations than does the use of the English preposition 'between'

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126 Youngblood 34.

127 Youngblood 34.

128 Youngblood 34.

129 Youngblood 34.

when used with reference to a relationship between two or more parties.”<sup>130</sup>

According to J.-G. Heintz, the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. He argues that the two might in fact go together and produce a richer understanding of ברית. The “in between” of *birīt* would only make sense if associated with the “bond” of *birītu* which would lend the following definition: “(le lieu de) l'entre-deux (ou s'instaure) le lien fort et durable.”<sup>131</sup>

From this etymological survey, no clear definition seems to emerge for ברית. Does it stress the relationship, the “betweenness” of the parties with little regards to the obligations involved (Akk. *birīt*)? Or on the contrary, does it emphasize obligation (Akk. *birītu*)? Is J.-G. Heintz right in thinking that both definitions are possible? We can safely say, however, that whatever the etymology of ברית might be, it at least shows that a relationship is created through the ברית. It is difficult to assess if obligations are imposed on one or both parties. We need to rely on more than etymology. As G. J. McConville states, “In the end, the meaning of ‘covenant’ must be sought by means of a study of its usage.”<sup>132</sup> And this is what we will turn to later when we survey what covenants were and what they meant in the Ancient Near East.

Through the study of the word ברית it becomes clear that it is not enough to deny the relationship between ANE treaties and biblical covenants based solely on different

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130 Williamson 136.

131 Heintz 74.

132 McConville 747.

etymologies, as J. H. Walton proposed. In fact, we could use the etymological argument to prove the opposite. If the Hebrew ברית derives from the Akkadian *birit* (between), and since this word is found in the context of some covenants in the Ancient Near East, giving an emphasis on what is established between two parties, then we could assume that the Hebrews were influenced by ANE covenantal forms. The Israelites could have borrowed an Akkadian word which, when brought into the context of a covenant, did convey the same meaning as *adu* or *mamitu*.

Even more, the fact that J. H. Walton agrees, along with many other scholars, that ברית does derive from an Akkadian word (though not *adu* or *mamitu*) does show that Israel had contact with the culture around them. It could hardly be argued that they developed in a vacuum with no interaction and social influences from the neighboring people. For example, there are multiple evidences for Israel having contact with the Hittite Empire and that these contacts happened early in the history of the Hebrew people.

Manfred R. Lehmann gives an example from Genesis 23 where Abraham wants to buy the cave of Machpelah from the sons of Heth (Hittites) to bury his wife Sarah. According to the conventional interpretation, “the ‘trading’ centered around the price only”<sup>133</sup> with Ephron the Hethite seemingly trying to get a large amount of money out of Abraham and trying to sell him not only the cave but the entire field. But why would Ephron insist on selling him the entire land? By looking at a Hittite Code, “found at

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133 Manfred R. Lehmann. “Abraham’s Purchase of Machpelah and Hittite Law.” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 29 (1953): 15.

Boghazkoy in Asia Minor among the ruins of Hattusas (which was destroyed about 1200 B.C.E., but flourished as the capital of Hittite Empire from 1800 to 1200 B.C.E.)”<sup>134</sup>, we find a real estate law which sheds light on what is at stake in Genesis 23. In one passage, the document speaks about the “[...] individual’s obligation to the king to perform the *ilku* or feudal services arising from land ownership.”<sup>135</sup> This obligation was imposed on the buyer of a land only when “*all* of the seller’s property passed into the possession of the new owner.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, Ephron, probably desiring to remove himself from the *ilku*, tries to sell the cave *and* the field while Abraham only wanted to buy the cave *at the end of the field* (v.9). The author explains that Abraham’s insistence was probably due to an unwillingness to place himself under obligation to the king, since that could imply religious actions which would have interfered with his own beliefs.

Furthermore, the “prominent mention made of the trees on the purchased property (v. 17, ‘[...] and all the trees which were on the field, along its entire border-line’)” is another “[...] evidence for a Hittite legal background of our account [...]”<sup>137</sup> since the counting of the number of trees on a land is a staple of Hittite real estate transaction documents. The conclusion of the M. R. Lehmann is important for our thesis:

We have thus found that Genesis 23 is permeated with intimate knowledge of intricate subtleties of Hittite laws and customs, correctly corresponding to the time of Abraham and fitting with the Hittite features of the Biblical account. With the final destruction of the Hittite capital of Hattusas about 1200 B.C.E., these laws must have fallen into utter oblivion. This is another instance in which a late dating must be firmly rejected.<sup>138</sup>

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134 Lehmann 15-16.

135 Lehmann 16.

136 Lehmann 16.

137 Lehmann 17-18.

138 Lehmann 18.



Thus, this strongly suggests that Abraham had contact with Hittite culture and that it took place during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. Since Abraham apparently knew about Hittite laws and customs, it is also very likely that he knew about their covenant form. What is also noteworthy and which was pointed out by Mendenhall is that the treaty form in vogue during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium was not unique to the Hittite but also shared by many. He states:

It seems certain that the Hittites themselves did not originate the covenant form which we shall discuss. Rather, there is abundant indication that they themselves borrowed the form from the East, i.e. ultimately Mesopotamian sources, and consequently it must have been common property of any number of peoples and states in the second millennium B.C. It is by its very nature an international form.<sup>139</sup>

From this preliminary examination, it would seem that the most probable covenant form that Abraham would have known was the Hittite's, dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. Later in this chapter, we will examine the ceremony in Genesis 15 in detail and determine, based on a comparison with ANE treaties from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, if this conclusion is valid.

### **6.1.2 On Covenants between Man and God**

Now, we shall address the second objection to the presence of ANE treaty forms in the Bible, namely that there are no examples in the Ancient Near East, of covenants between man and God. If we assume, as we do in this thesis, that Genesis 15 refers to events that have actually happened, we can ask the question: how would God establish an alliance with a man? Would He not use symbolisms, rites and customs with which they

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139 Mendenhall 28.

were familiar? This is what William D. Barrick assumes when he wrote on the Mosaic Covenant, “When God revealed the Mosaic Covenant to Israel, He chose to accommodate the form of the revelation to a format with which they were familiar.”<sup>140</sup> Otherwise, how could men understand the will of God if he used means unknown to them? It would simply be unintelligible to them. Michael Tinker, writing about divine accommodation, explains:

If God is infinite and we are finite, if God is outside of time and we are bound by time, if it is impossible to reach God’s great height by ourselves, yet if God wishes to communicate with his creation, God must, of necessity, lower himself to our level so that we can come to know him personally.<sup>141</sup>

He later uses the example of the sacrificial system in the Hebrew Bible as a concrete illustration of this principle:

Here [in the sacrificial system] God appears to accommodate himself to the practices of the people around his own. That is, it would have been normal practice in that culture to desire to sacrifice to the gods. Since Israel was surrounded by this practice and would have felt it normal to express worship in such a way, the LORD has them sacrifice to *him*. He thus brings the practices of these ancient people to focus on himself and thus helping them to keep the first commandment.<sup>142</sup>

The same could be said for biblical covenants. We have already shown that there are evidences for a cultural influence of neighboring people on Israel. So it is conceivable that God, wanting to establish a covenant with man, would have used a form which was widespread in the Ancient Near East and with which Israel would have come into contact. It is noteworthy that Abraham, in the ceremony of Genesis 15, seems to know what his role is and the actions to perform without God having to explain the details. The Lord

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140 William D. Barrick. "The Mosaic Covenant." *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10 (1999): 221.

141 Michael Tinker. "John Calvin's Concept of Divine Accommodation: A Hermeneutical Corrective." *Churchman* 118, no. 4 (2004): 332.

142 Tinker 341.

commands him to bring Him some animals. He cuts these animals and lays them opposite to each other, except the birds. K. H. Essex states: “The text implies that Abraham knew the ritual to take place because God does not explicitly state what he is to do with these animals”.<sup>143</sup> Commenting on Abraham cutting the animals in two, Brueggemann writes: “The narrator blanks how Abraham knew that he should cut them.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the writer of Genesis 15 does not explain how Abraham obtained the necessary knowledge to perform the ritual but it seems implied in the text that God did not have to do so. God apparently used a means of communication that would be readily understood by the people of that culture.

In the previous section we argued that the ceremony described in Genesis 15 was quite likely based on covenant forms prevalent in the Ancient Near East. The arguments against this Ancient Near Eastern influence are not strong enough to warrant the conclusion that Israel’s covenant forms were unique to her. The definition of ברית discussed above suggests that the Israelites were influenced by foreign nations, thus it is unlikely that their conception of covenant developed apart from outside influences. Also, we have shown that the absence of covenants between man and God in Ancient Near Eastern treaties does not prove that the covenant form of Genesis 15 is unique to Israel. In an example of divine accommodation, God used a form with which they were familiar. Abraham’s apparent knowledge of the ceremony to be performed is a testimony to this.

The question we now have to ask is: considering that the covenants presented in

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143 Essex 201.

144 Brueggemann 243.

the Bible reflect the covenant forms of the Ancient Near East, can we find an Ancient Near Eastern parallel to the covenant between the pieces described in Genesis 15? There are hints that it might be similar to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E. Hittite treaties but a more thorough study is needed and this is what we will do in the next section.

## **6.2 Genesis 15 and Ancient Near East Treaties**

As was surveyed in the state of the question, there seem to be mainly two types of ANE treaties to which the biblical covenants are compared to: the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE Assyrian treaties represented mainly by the Sefire treaty and the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon and the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE treaties like Abba-An and the Mari letters. In the Assyrian treaty ceremony, the animals sacrificed display – in an acted out curse – the fate of the party who would fail to uphold the stipulations of the covenant. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, the animal sacrifices have a different purpose and tend to simply represent the ratification of the covenant. While variations in meaning and symbolism can be found within the treaties in each category we think it is useful to try to position the Genesis 15 covenant in one of them. Only then will we be able to refine our understanding of the treaty and the role of each party.

The problem with our text, as G. F. Hasel pointed out, is that “[...] the animal rite in Gen 15.9-10,17 is still without an exact extra-biblical parallel” but as he remarks, there are a “number of distinct relationships.”<sup>145</sup> In order to associate the covenant between the

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145 Hasel 68.

pieces of Genesis 15 with a particular category of ANE treaty, we shall now turn to each element in the ceremony and attempt to unearth those relationships.

### **6.2.1 Animals in Treaties**

The first element of importance is the number, age and use of the animals in the covenant ceremony. God asks Abraham in verse 9 to bring him a three-year old heifer, a three-year old goat, a three-year old ram, a dove and a turtledove. It seems that the use of animal sacrifice in treaties was widespread in the Ancient Near East and is present over a large period of time. G. F. Hasel writes that the “earliest reference to animal rites as part of treaty making is in the Mari letter dated to the 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C.”<sup>146</sup> It is also present in 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C.E. texts like the Sefire treaty. The mere presence of animal sacrifices, however, is not enough to shed light on the nature of our covenant. If we examine the type and number of animals we see a wide range of beasts being used, even within the same period in time.

Regarding the letters of Mari, M. Weinfeld writes that “the provincial tribes seem to prefer a goat and a puppy for the ceremony while the king of Mari insists on killing an ass.”<sup>147</sup> And even though the ass was the main animal used in the treaties of Mari, we cannot conclude that our covenant is not based on a treaty of this type. “It may be assumed”, argues A. Malamat, “that the ass, an unclean animal in the Bible, was

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146 Hasel 64.

147 Weinfeld 197.

considered unfit for treaty making, as it was in the sacrifice of the firstlings.”<sup>148</sup> Thus the same type of covenant ceremony could have been used but with an accommodation for the fact that the ass was considered impure and consequently replaced by another animal.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium Assyrian treaties the “number of animals could vary from one to several... The types of animals used for these rites include ewe, male and female yearlings and spring lambs, and a calf...”<sup>149</sup> In another Assyrian treaty made between Ashurnirari V and Mati’ilu, it is a ram which is sacrificed.<sup>150</sup>

As to the number of animals used in Genesis 15, G. F. Hasel argues that it “need not cause concern, because we have seen that different animals in various numbers could be used in treaty ceremonies as West Semitic texts have indicated.”<sup>151</sup> For scholars, the only meaning that can be deduced from the killing of a large number of animals is that the event is of great importance. N. D. Freedman comments on Genesis 15, “The use of three animals doubtless emphasizes the importance of the occasion: a threefold oath carries more weight than a single vow.”<sup>152</sup> The same idea is expressed in a different way by G. J. Wenham, “The use of five different kinds of sacrificial animal in this occasion underlines the solemnity of the occasion.”<sup>153</sup>

As to the age of the animals, God asks Abraham to bring him three year old beasts

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148 Abraham Malamat. “A Note on the Ritual of Treaty Making in Mari and the Bible.” *Israel Exploration Journal* 45.4 (1995): 228.

149 Hasel 68.

150 Weinfeld 197.

151 Hasel 68.

152 Freedman 172.

153 Wenham, *The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15*, 135.

– except for the birds where the age is not specified. Commenting on the animals’ age, W. Brueggemann writes, “The animals are all of the prime age, since full-grown and broken for service.”<sup>154</sup>

From the list of animals used in Genesis 15, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the type of treaty it might be based on. Animals found in both kinds of categories of covenants are used in the ceremony. Also, even in the same period and culture, different types and number of animals were used. Thus, the list of animals should not be a determining factor in our attempt to categorize the ritual. From the number of animals used we can infer that the covenant between the pieces was a particularly important event. Finally, the sacrificed animals were not old or lame but in the prime of their life – something consistent with other ANE and Old Testament sacrifices. Also of importance, since it has precedents in ANE treaties, the animals were cut in two and the pieces laid opposite to one another. We shall, however, postpone the discussion of this detail to our later analysis of verse 17 where God passes through the pieces.

### **6.2.2 Birds in Treaties**

The birds – a dove and a turtledove – seem to be in a category of their own. Their age is not specified and we are specifically told that Abraham did not cut them up (verse 10). Scholars seem perplexed about the role of the birds in the covenant of Genesis 15. We find the presence of doves in the Sumerian Vulture Stela which is older than the Mari

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154 Brueggemann 243.

letters or the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon. C. T. Begg explains that “a standard feature of Sumerian treaty-making was the release of decorated doves towards the sanctuary of a given deity as messengers summoning that deity to punish infractions of the agreement.”<sup>155</sup> C. T. Begg argues that this interpretation is unlikely since the deity, YHWH, is himself present during the treaty ceremony, implying that there is “no need of messenger activity by the birds with regard to him [YHWH] (or any other divinity), comparable to what we have in Vulture Stela.”<sup>156</sup> He suggests that it might be more akin to how doves were used in the Esarhaddon Vassal Treaty: “[...] as the source of noise that will keep the treaty-breaker from rest”<sup>157</sup>. Here the birds, “like the beasts that are cut up, intimate the painful consequences violation of the treaty will entail.”<sup>158</sup> We do not agree with this conclusion since, as will be argued later, we do not think that the covenant in Genesis 15 represents an acted out curse.

Another explanation may be, as G. Hepner explains, that “Abraham does not split the birds because of the prohibition in Leviticus.”<sup>159</sup> This law states, “And the priest shall tear it open by its wings but not divide it.” (Lev 1.17) In this way, the birds would serve the same purpose as the animals but an accommodation would have been made for the law of Leviticus. This would imply, though, that the covenant as described in Genesis 15 is not contemporary to the time of the patriarchs but is only a later reinterpretation. There are no strong arguments that warrant such a conclusion. Since the Israelites, as we have

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155 Christopher T. Begg. “The Birds in Genesis 15:9-10.” *Biblische Notizen* 36 (1987): 9.

156 Begg, *The Birds in Genesis 15:9-10*, 9.

157 Christopher T. Begg. “Doves and Treaty-Making : Another Possible Reference.” *Biblische Notizen* 48 (1989): 10.

158 Begg, *Doves and Treaty-Making*, 10.

159 Hepner Gershon. “The Sacrifices in the Covenant between the Pieces Allude to the Laws of Leviticus and the Covenant of the Flesh.” *Biblische Notizen* 112 (2002): 42.



seen previously, most probably came into contact early in their history with the covenant concept – in part through the Hittites – it is not inconceivable for Abraham, living in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, to have known the treaty form presented in Genesis 15.

There is a final reason why Abraham did not split the birds. It may imply, according to C. T. Begg, “not that he sacrificed them [the birds] in some other way, but rather that he kept them alive, thereby suggesting the survival of the good realities the birds symbolize.”<sup>160</sup> The birds would then stand for, “the people of Israel as a whole, representative groups or figures within it, fertility signs...”<sup>161</sup> We believe this interpretation would make sense in the context of Genesis 15. After dividing the animals, it is said in verse 11 that “[...] the birds of prey came down on the carcasses and Abram caused them to be driven away.” We here have other birds which stand in opposition to the dove and the turtledove. Obviously, the birds of prey are not welcomed during the ceremony and the Hiphil (“caused them to be driven away”) puts an emphasis on Abraham’s active involvement in chasing the birds away. According to Wenham, “The birds of prey are unclean and represent foreign nations, most probably Egypt.”<sup>162</sup> So with this action, Abraham is protecting Israel from enemies. It is “Abraham’s faithful obedience to the covenant that guaranteed the blessing of his descendants [...]. The bird scene therefore portrays the security of Israel as the consequence of Abraham’s piety.”<sup>163</sup> Again, we find another example of Abraham’s direct involvement in obtaining the blessings from God. As we will see in the next section, Abraham falls into a deep sleep

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160 Begg, *The Birds in Genesis 15:9-10*, 7.

161 Begg, *The Birds in Genesis 15:9-10*, 7.

162 Wenham, *The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15*, 135.

163 Wenham, *The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15*, 135.

during the ceremony and this is often used as an argument to diminish the patriarch's involvement and role in the covenant. But this argument fails to take into account that Abraham gathered the necessary animals, cut them in two and placed each half opposite to the other. He then chased the birds of prey away, protecting his descendants – represented by the birds – from their enemies.

### 6.2.3 A Trance-Like Sleep

After chasing the birds, the Bible says in verse 12, “As the sun was going down and a deep sleep had fallen on Abram, behold, a great dark terror fell on him.” Few theories seem to exist in literature regarding the meaning or purpose of this trance-like sleep. No similar events are found in ANE treaties. R. W. Klein writes, “During this rite Abram is fast asleep – a deep sleep like that which befell Adam settled upon him.”<sup>164</sup> This suggests that it is God's action or appearance which provokes this state. As we have commented before, some interpret this unconsciousness as a display of the supposedly one-sided nature of the covenant. J. L. Townsend, for example, writes: “Abraham made no oath; he merely observed the vision in a deep sleep.”<sup>165</sup> Then quoting Jocz, he concludes “[...] according to the text the Abrahamic covenant is absolutely conditionless.”<sup>166</sup> This statement seemingly fails to take into account Abraham's previous activities, even during the ceremony itself. Abraham, from the onset of the relationship

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164 Klein 123.

165 Jeffrey L. Townsend. “Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985): 322.

166 Quoted in Townsend 322.

with YHWH, had been faithful, believing and acting on God's plan for his life and his descendants.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that later on, it is only God who passes between the pieces and swears to give the land to Abraham's descendants. And this is done while the patriarch is in a trance-like sleep. What needs to be taken into consideration, though, is the faithfulness and participation of Abraham up that point – even in the beginning of the ceremony itself. It is only at the moment when the promises are given that Abraham seems passive. The question that remains then is whether the covenant becomes unconditional from the moment of ratification onward. Once God decides to make a covenant with Abraham because of his past faithfulness, do Abraham's subsequent actions have any bearing for the blessings to become a reality? Do we find an implication of future faithfulness on the part of the recipient of those promises? As we move to the heart of the covenant between the pieces and compare it to Ancient Near Eastern treaties, it is mainly these questions we will answer.

#### **6.2.4 Passing between the Pieces**

From verses 13 to 16, God speaks about the future of Abraham's descendants, how they will be enslaved for four-hundred years and then delivered. Then in verse 17 comes the crux of this ceremony. It simply states: "When the sun had gone down it was dark and behold, a smoking pot and a torch of fire passed between these pieces." There seems to be wide agreement amongst scholars that the smoking pot and the torch represent God himself. Wenham sums up the consensus writing: "It is generally agreed

that the smoking fire pot and flaming torch symbolize the presence of God, as they do elsewhere in the Pentateuch (e.g. Exod. 13.21-22; 19.16; 20.18; 40.34-38 etc.)<sup>167</sup> Once God walks through the split animals, the Bible says in verse 18, “On that day, YHWH cut a covenant with Abram saying: “To your descendants I have given this land...” and then the text proceeds to list the borders of the land that Abraham’s descendants will inherit.

#### **6.2.4.1 Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34**

To interpret this passage scholars have mainly compared it to the covenant ceremony of Jeremiah 34:

I will punish those people who have violated their agreement with me. I will make them like the calf they cut in two and passed between its pieces. I will do so because they did not keep the terms of the agreement they made in my presence. I will punish the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests, and all the other people of the land who passed between the pieces of the calf. I will hand them over to their enemies who want to kill them. And their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals. (Jer. 34-18-20)

At first glance, it is true that there are obvious similarities. These are the only two passages in the Hebrew Bible where we find a covenant making ritual in which animals are cut in two and people pass between the carcasses. The problem is that there are main differences that cannot be ignored.

First, in Jeremiah, the curses brought upon the vassal for having not kept the terms of the covenant are clearly at the forefront. The vassal, by passing through the pieces,

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<sup>167</sup> Wenham, *The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15*, 135. See also for a similar view: Buttrick 394; Cazelles 344; Klein 123; Bruce K. Waltke. “The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants.” *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*. Ed. By A. Gileadi, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988: 127; Brueggemann 244; Hamilton 436.

puts himself under potential curses – which are plainly and graphically spelled out – should he fail to fulfill his side of the agreement, his fate will be the same as that of the animals. This is very similar to 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C.E. Assyrian treaties. As we have briefly noted in the state of the question, these are often acted out curse rites and the Sefire treaty was given as an example. The vassal treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'lu of Arpad in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. is also a very good and well-known representation of this type of treaty for which we give here only a brief excerpt:

This spring lamb has been brought from its fold not for sacrifice; it has been brought to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mati'lu. This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'lu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati'lu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, the head of Mati'lu be torn off, and his sons [...]<sup>168</sup>

G. F. Hasel explains: “The act of animal killing serves evidently the purpose of substituting for the fate of the vassal of the treaty. As such, it can hardly be a pure ratification rite.”<sup>169</sup> The treaty serves a greater purpose than only sealing the covenant. D. J. McCarthy states that it is “[...] all aimed at one end: symbolizing and effecting the ruin of the oath-breaker.”<sup>170</sup> In Genesis 15, we have no such hints that a curse is involved as Hamilton points out: “The comparisons of this text with Gen. 15 are obvious: the custom of slaughtering animals in covenant ritual. But there is no indication that the slaughtering procedure constituted a symbolic curse on one of the contracting parties.”<sup>171</sup> There are no words from God, Abraham or the narrator concerning any potential curses. From the Assyrian treaties we have surveyed, the verbalization of the list of curses is an integral

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168 Hasel 65.

169 Hasel 65.

170 McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 150.

171 Hamilton 430.

part of the ceremony but this list is notably absent in the covenant between the pieces.

Second, in the Jeremiah passage, it is the vassals who pass between the pieces – placing themselves under potential sanction – where as in Genesis 15, it is God himself, clearly the superior party who performs the action. If the two treaties were similar, it would then be God invoking curses upon himself should he fail to uphold the terms of the covenant. We have already noted in the state of the question that many scholars find this problematic since it is difficult to see how God could curse himself: there are no precedents in the Hebrew Bible for such an action. Another important reason for questioning this interpretation is given by Petersen:

In Genesis 15, the possibility of indicting Yahweh by means of a symbolic curse is highly improbable, however, since we know of no covenant in which the obviously superior party, much less a deity, is put under a potential curse, though to be sure Yahweh is pictured as taking an oath or making a grant.<sup>172</sup>

In this way, it is more similar to a grant than a treaty. We have briefly mentioned the differences earlier on in the state of the question but at this point, it is important to reiterate the differences since it has implications for our understanding of Genesis 15. M. Weinfeld explains:

While the “treaty” constitutes an obligation of the vassal to his master, the suzerain, the “grant” constitutes an obligation of the master to his servant. In the “grant” the curse is directed towards the one who will violate the rights of the king's vassal, while in the treaty the curse is directed towards the vassal who will violate the rights of his king. In other words, the “grant” serves mainly to protect the rights of the servant, while the treaty comes to protect the rights of the master.<sup>173</sup>

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172 David L Petersen. “Covenant Ritual: A Traditio-Historical Perspective.” *Biblical Research* 22 (1977): 9.

173 Weinfeld 185.

Based on this definition, Jeremiah 34 clearly shows that a treaty had been ratified between God and the people. The people who had passed between the pieces were the vassals and they had sworn that they would free the slaves, which they did. But then they reneged on their oath by taking back the slaves and, having broken the agreement, God called the curses upon them. By contrast, Genesis 15 is very different and more similar to a grant where the master – in this case God – promises land to his vassal’s descendants. We shall continue exploring this possibility further on.

In the covenants mentioned in the literature we have surveyed, when a curse is involved, it is always the vassal who bears the burden of possible future calamities. It is important to mention though, that one 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E. treaty that we have cited previously, the Abba-AN treaty, is used by Weinfeld and others to prove that Genesis 15 is in fact an acted out self-curse: “[...] a similar oath [to Genesis 15] occurs in the Abba-El-Yarimlim deed where Abba-El, the donor, takes the oath by cutting the neck of a lamb (*kisad 1 immeru itbuh*)”<sup>174</sup> D. L. Petersen, following Wiseman’s presentation, quotes line 39-42 of the Abba-AN:

39    Abban  
 40 a-na ia-ri-im-li-im ni-is ilani (MES)  
 41 za-ki-ir u ki-sa-ad l immerim it-bu-uh  
 42 sum-ma sa ad-di-nu-ku-um-mi e-li-qi-qu-[u]<sup>175</sup>

This is translated by Wiseman as:

Abban placed himself under oath to Iarimlim and had cut the neck of a sheep (saying): (Let me so die) if I take back which I gave thee.<sup>176</sup>

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174 Weinfeld 196-197.

175 Petersen 9.

176 Quoted in Petersen 9.

From this translation, it is understandable why some scholars would see it as a dramatized curse where the suzerain, Abban, seemingly places himself under a curse. The problem is that the translation from the Akkadian is debated. D. L. Petersen states: “[...] this interpretation [as a dramatized curse] is improbable, if we follow carefully the syntax of the Akkadian text.”<sup>177</sup> More specifically, he explains,

The problem with such a rendering is that the “so” must syntactically refer to the status of the slain sheep, i.e., according to such a translation, Abba-AN would seem to be saying: I will become like this slain sheep if I violate our agreement. This implication is, however, neither stated nor implied in the text. The problem centers on the treatment of the word *summa*, which we contend is a negative particle of asseveration in an oath.<sup>178</sup>

Based on this, it is more accurate to follow D. J. McCarthy’s definition, supported also by D. L. Petersen, V. P. Hamilton and G. F. Hasel,

Abba-An is under oath to Yarimlim and also he cut the neck of a lamb. (He swore): I shall never take back what I gave thee.<sup>179</sup>

Here, the “Let me so die if I take back...” is replaced with “He swore: I shall never take back...” which gives a totally different picture. V. P. Hamilton concludes: “This translation suggests that animal slaughter is a genuine part of treaty ratification but does not constitute an acted-out curse.”<sup>180</sup>

Thus, since there are no extant Ancient Near Eastern treaties where the superior party invokes a curse upon himself and since as we also demonstrated, there are no mentions of curse at all in the chapter, we can conclude that Genesis 15 is not a curse rite

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177 Petersen 9.

178 Petersen 10.

179 McCarthy *Treaty and Covenant*, 185. Cf. Petersen 10; Hamilton 430; Hasel 65.

180 Hamilton 430.



and should not be interpreted in light of Jeremiah 34. It would seem then that the animal slaughter served simply as a way of ratifying the covenant. If we had concluded that the rite was indeed a self-curse, the responsibility for upholding the covenant would have rested squarely with God. In the cursing rites, the focus is clearly on the vassal and the list of threats is a reminder of the burden which is laid upon him. It serves as a way of dissuading the vassal from betraying the master.

#### **6.2.4.2 Cutting a Covenant**

What is noteworthy for us and which is something we have already mentioned is that it is only God who passes between the pieces and who swears to give land to Abraham, while the patriarch is in what seems a very passive state of induced sleep. Here the expression used to state that a covenant has been made - כרת ברית (to cut a covenant) - is interesting and worthy of further consideration. As we have seen, the act of killing an animal is central to many covenant ceremonies and there is an expression found in the Mari letters which reminds one of כרת ברית. It is to “to kill (cut) an ass”. We have already quoted the part of the treaty where that expression is mentioned but we shall recopy it here for clarity’s sake,

And I went to Aslakka to kill an ass between the Hanu and Idamaras. They brought a puppy and goat, but I obeyed my lord and did not permit (the use of) the puppy and goat. An ass, the son of a she-ass, I had killed, and I established an agreement between the Hanu and the Idamaras.<sup>181</sup>

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181 Hasel 63.

Different scholars have noted the similarity between the expression “to kill (cut) an ass” and כרת ברית. G. F. Hasel notes:

The ceremony of animal cutting in Gen 15 may be seen in relationship with the rites in Mari and Abba-AN. So carat berit and hayaram qatalum ‘to kill (cut) an ass’ seem to derive from the ritual act itself and both are technical expressions for the conclusion or ratification of a treaty/covenant.”<sup>182</sup>

D. J. McCarthy gives a more detailed explanation:

In fact, the term ‘to kill an ass’ is a technical expression for making a covenant, but it was not necessary that the animal be an ass in every case. [...] The expression ‘to cut a covenant’ is surely based on this association of symbolic rite and covenant and it is widespread: it occurs in cuneiform texts from Qatna dating to the 15th century and is found in Hebrew, Aramaic and Phoenician. When the Hebrews “cut” a covenant they split a heifer and goats or a calf, while the Arameans of Arpad cut, or, with the Assyrians, beheaded and dismembered a sheep. In other words, the subject and method of the killing could vary, but the meaning remained the same.<sup>183</sup>

We can conclude that the symbolism of killing (cutting) an animal, no matter which animals were used, was pervasively associated with covenant making in the Ancient Near East. The widespread expression to “cut a covenant” is a testimony to this enduring link between killing and treaty ratification. It is not that cutting and covenant come from the same root:

Different words appear for cut and for covenant. It is the meaning which remains constant. It must have been basic in the conception these peoples had of covenant making. But what is the meaning? It does not appear at once in the expressions themselves! How can one ‘cut’ oaths or a curse or a bond or a decision or definition? The paradox is built into the ancient expression: one cut and the result is a tie or obligation.<sup>184</sup>

On the one hand, in the treaty of Aslakka we find the idea of the “in-between”. In

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182 Hasel 69.

183 McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 91.

184 McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 91.

the section where we investigated the meaning of ברית, we have discussed how Youngblood used the Aslakka treaty to argue that ברית meant “between”. This seems to make sense since by the act of killing an animal, some type of bond was established between the parties involved. The animal is killed (cut) “between” them. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the covenant of Genesis 15. Animals are cut, God passes “between” them and the solemn affirmation is made that on that day, “YHWH cut a covenant with Abram”. The idea of “betweenness” is kept and the killing of the animals serves as a seal for the oath that God will give land to Abraham’s descendants.

On the other hand, and in a way derived from it, “in-between” involves an obligation; that space where the covenant is made is not a vacuum. As D. J. McCarthy mentions, there is a paradox: the cutting creates a tie.

In view of these two aspects of “cutting a covenant”, a rite which establishes a relationship “between” parties and forges a bond, it would make sense to conclude that the meaning of the word ברית is closer to what we earlier quoted from J.-G. Heintz, “(le lieu de) l’entre-deux (ou s’instaure) le lien fort et durable.”<sup>185</sup> In this definition, we find the establishment of a tie between the covenant making parties, a tie which is forged in that “in-between” place of killed (cut) animals. In this sense the Akkadian terms *birit* (between) and *biritu* (bond), suggested as potential etymology for ברית, are harmoniously brought together.

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185 Heintz 74.

Based on what we have just concluded – namely that Genesis 15 is not the depiction of a cursing rite – and since we have here the suzerain, YHWH, making an oath to give land to his vassal’s descendants, we here hypothesize that the covenant between the pieces might be based on Hittite land grant treaties of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E. This is reinforced by the earlier conclusion that there is no reason to deny that Israel had come in contact early in its history with the covenant concept in Hittite culture during that time period and that Abraham was aware of Hittites laws and customs. In the next section, we shall examine the covenant of Genesis 15 in light of Hittite land grants.

### **6.3 Hittite Land Grant**

We have seen that Genesis 15 is not an acted-out self curse where God is invoking maledictions on himself - in the way vassals would do in treaties - should he fail to uphold the stipulations of the covenant. The animal sacrifices serve the purpose of ratifying the covenant and God swears an oath to give land to Abraham’s descendants. He is making a land grant which can be compared to Hittite land grant of the same time period, namely the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E. J. Krasovec explains that “in contrast to numerous suzerainty treaties, which impose particular obligations on vassals, the ‘grant’ declarations confer gifts of ‘land’ and ‘house’ upon his [the king’s] officials or vassals who had shown exceptional loyalty to their suzerains.”<sup>186</sup> This is an important nuance. The grant is not given to just anybody. It is given to vassals who have shown faithfulness. This is very significant since we can then conclude that the covenant is unconditional

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186 Krasovec 59.

since it is only God who passes through the pieces and swears. But if Genesis 15 is based on a Hittite land grant, it would be very useful to determine in which context they were made. And from what we found, the suzerain would promise land to faithful vassals. Weinfeld explains that “[...] while the grant is a reward for loyalty and good deeds already performed, the treaty is an inducement for future loyalty.”<sup>187</sup> In the same way, Robert B. Chisholm Jr. explains that in a covenant of grant, “[...] a king would reward a faithful servant by elevating him to the position of sonship and granting him special gifts, usually related to land and dynasty.”<sup>188</sup> Finally, J. H. Walton writes: “While the grant is mainly a promise by the donor to the recipient, it presupposes the loyalty of the latter.”<sup>189</sup>

The fact that a land grant is a reward for loyalty is consistent with our analysis of Genesis 15. First by our analysis of the structure of the chapter itself, we have demonstrated that Abraham’s continual faith was central to the narrative. Furthermore, by going back to the beginning of the relationship between God and Abraham in Genesis 12, it became even more evident that the patriarch’s loyalty also extended in the past. We concluded that it was based on his active faith that God could make a covenant with him and promise him land. B. K. Waltke, summarizing D. J. McCarthy’s view on the relationship aspect of the covenant concept, writes:

McCarthy emphasizes the important point that the making of a covenant does not initiate a relationship. But rather formalizes and gives concrete expression to one already in existence. In every covenant of divine commitment, the beneficiary first creates a spiritual climate leading to the commitment. As in the royal grants in the ANE, God also grants gifts pertaining to land and progeny to Noah,

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187 Weinfeld 184.

188 Quoted in Michael A. Grisanti. “The Davidic Covenant.” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10 (1999): 241.

189 Walton 20.

Abraham, and David, because they excelled in loyally serving him.<sup>190</sup>

To only examine the covenant in Genesis 15 without regards to its context, both biblical and cultural, would lead to the wrong conclusion that Abraham had no role to play in the covenant being established; that the relationship between himself and God was initiated at the moment of YHWH's walk through the split animals. But from our analysis of the biblical accounts and ANE treaty forms we find that what Abraham received was a reward for his faith, something that is echoed in Genesis 15.1 where God states, "I am your shield, your reward in great abundance." So there is, in a sense, conditionality involved. At the same time, it is often believed that the covenant is unconditional from that point on. S. Hahn explains that in these particular treaties, "a suzerain would grant a faithful vassal various benefices in perpetuity as a reward for loyal service."<sup>191</sup> Again we find the idea of past obedience but also of non conditionality: these promises are in "perpetuity". Michael A. Grisanti, in the same way, writes, "Unlike the suzerain-vassal treaty (e.g. The Mosaic Covenant), a covenant of grant was a unilateral grant that could not be taken away from the recipient."<sup>192</sup> M. Weinfeld, though, readily points out:

[...] the Hittite suzerain did not always grant land unconditionally. In a land grant of Mursilis II to Abiraddas, the Hittite suzerain guarantees the rights of DU-Tesup, Abimardas' son, to throne, house and land, only on condition that DU-Tesup will not sin against his father.<sup>193</sup>

Even though there are some exceptions, it cannot be argued that most of the time, the grants are given unconditionally. There is, however, an intriguing twist in the

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190 Waltke, *The Phenomenom of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants*, 126.

191 Scott Hahn. "Covenant in the Old and New Testaments: Some Current Research (1994-2004)." *Currents in Biblical Research* 3.2 (2005): 269.

192 Grisanti 241.

193 Weinfeld 193.

understanding of non conditionality. Some scholars, in exploring that notion, differentiate between the loyalty of the *individual* versus that of the *collectivity*. It is sometimes argued that although a suzerain could promise land to a vassal – and to his descendants –, some individuals in the vassal's lineage could be punished for their disobedience and not participate in the blessings of the grant. M. Weinfeld gives the example of the treaty between Hattusilis III and Ulmi-Tesup of Datasa where it is stated,

After you, your son and grandson will possess it, nobody will take it away from them. If one of your descendants sins the king will prosecute him at his court. Then when he is found guilty... if he deserves death he will die. But nobody will take away from the descendants of Ulmi-Tesup either his house or his land in order to give it to a descendant of somebody else.<sup>194</sup>

Similarly, in a treaty between Tudhaliyas IV and a Hittite high official,

Nobody in the future shall take away this house from Umanava (or Tesup-Manava), her children, her grandchildren and her offspring. When anyone of the descendants of U-manava provokes the anger of the kings... whether he is to be forgiven or whether he is to be killed, one will treat him according to the wish of his master but his house they will not take away and they will not give it to somebody else.<sup>195</sup>

The gift is unconditional in the sense that it will not be taken from the descendants as a *whole*. The lineage of the vassal will always retain possession of what was promised. But it is also conditional for each *individual* member of the descendants for they always could, by their disloyalty, be cut off from the blessings. There is the assumption that there will always be a remnant who will be faithful enough to enjoy the covenant blessings. Analyzing the covenant between YHWH and David, J. Krasovec has this insight about the existence of a remnant:

Past and present obedience or faithfulness to God can be regarded as a firm ground for hope that the members of the dynasty will never become so disloyal

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194 Weinfeld 189.

195 Weinfeld 189.

that its existence will be endangered, for the history of various communities and of mankind as a whole clearly shows that all the members of a community or all its generations were never radically unfaithful. The theology of the “remnant” is based on this historical fact.<sup>196</sup>

By making a covenant in perpetuity, YHWH seems to assume that not all of the descendants will be unfaithful. Some will err and be disciplined – even executed – but this will not prevent the lineage, should they be loyal, to get the blessings. But how would YHWH be certain that not all of the offspring’s fall into unfaithfulness? B. K. Waltke might have an answer in his discussion on the covenant between God and Abraham:

Through YHWH's sovereign grace, a loyal remnant always exists, giving hope for a full realization of the grant. YHWH explains that his grant extends only to those within Abraham's household who behave ethically: “For I have chosen him, in order that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing what is right and just, so that YHWH will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” (Gen 18.19)<sup>197</sup>

God has chosen who he will make a covenant with. And because Abraham has shown past faithfulness, it is the Lord’s conviction that the patriarch will be able to instruct his children and his children’s children to follow Him with integrity and faithfulness. Even though some might fall and be punished by God along the way – as the story of Israel throughout the Hebrew Bible clearly shows – there will always be some who will be obedient and remember the deeds of their ancestor, the father of faith, Abraham.

In this, both aspects of conditionality and non conditionality in the covenant

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196 Krasovec 66.

197 Waltke, *The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants*, 129.



between the pieces can be brought together harmoniously. It is not a case of contradiction. We here conclude that the covenant between the pieces is unconditional in the sense that YHWH would never withdraw the blessings from the lineage of Abraham and that some will always be obedient enough to lay hold of the promise. But also, it is conditional insofar as individual members of the lineage, by their disobedience, could incur the wrath of God and be prevented from enjoying the benefits of the covenant.

## 7. Conclusion

In this thesis, we attempted to demonstrate that the covenant between the pieces in Genesis 15 is conditional and required Abraham's obedience for the blessings of land and heir to be bestowed on the patriarch. We were also interested in determining if the covenant remained conditional once ratified.

The first step was to establish our text. We used a macro-syntactical method which has enabled us to display the emphasis present in the text especially in regards to the importance of verse 6. There, the action halts and Abraham's habitual faith is brought into focus. Abraham seems to doubt, questioning YHWH about the identity of his heir. But the Lord emphasizes that an heir will indeed be born from his own flesh. Verse 6 is the expression of Abraham's ultimate answer ("And he kept on believing") to YHWH's hard to believe promise. Contrary to what some scholars have argued, Abraham's faith was not broken; the syntax clearly makes it evident. This was our first hint that the Lord's promise might not be unilateral but rooted in the soil of the patriarch's trust in Him.

Secondly, a structural analysis of the chapter cemented our hypothesis that verse 6 is central to the text with verse 1-5 and 7-21 articulated around it in a chiastic structure for some or an ABC - A'B'C' parallelism for others. The Lord makes a promise to Abraham (A), Abraham questions the Lord (B) and the Lord reassures (C). In the first part, the promise has to do with an heir and the second part with a land. These two concepts go hand-in-hand since the land needs to be inhabited and the Lord promises that

it will be taken by his heir. The use of the verb  $\Psi\Gamma\prime$  (to inherit) in the two parts makes this even clearer and further unifies the text.

We have thus shown that Abraham's faith is paramount in this chapter and is the focal point around which the promises of God and the covenant gravitate. The apparent doubt of Abraham had to be reconciled with his faith and we have demonstrated that the two are not mutually exclusive. Abraham has struggled with the Lord's vision but not to the point of losing his trust as we are reminded that "he kept on believing" even in the face of an insurmountable obstacle, namely having a son born despite his old age. There are other biblical examples, the story of Gideon being one, where the Lord complies without disapproval to man's desire for a sign.

Furthermore, the use of the term "reward" at the very beginning of the narrative in verse 1 sets the tone for the rest of the chapter as it refers to something that is given in exchange of a service. This statement comes right after Abraham's display of faithfulness in chapter 14 where he refuses the spoils of his war with Kedorlaomer and gives a tenth of everything he has to Melchizedek. Biblical faith is active and requires more than a simple mental belief. The reward for the patriarch's concrete actions comes in God's promise of descendants and of a land.

Thirdly, we examined the beginning of the relationship of YHWH with Abraham in Genesis 12 and did find that the patriarch's active faithfulness did extend in the past, which lent support to our hypothesis that the Lord made the covenant with him based on

a long history of unbroken trust. The chapter starts with the imperative given by God for Abraham to leave his country and go (verse 1). This is followed by a cohortative in verse 2 where God expresses his intention: he *wants* to make Abraham into a great nation, bless him and make his name great. But this desire on the Lord's part will only be realized if Abraham obeys. It is only after the statement in verse 4 that Abram went that it is possible for God to declare in verse 7 that he *will* give the land to his descendants. In fact, how could Abraham possess the land if he does not leave his own country? God makes the closely related promises of heir and land only after Abraham's faithful action. This corroborates our conclusion about Genesis 15 where we argued that the covenant is established only after the emphasis on Abraham's both past and present faithfulness.

Finally, we examined the covenant in Genesis 15 in light of other Ancient Near Eastern treaties. While some deny the presence of ANE covenant patterns within the Hebrew Bible, we showed that Abraham did have close contact with the Hittite culture and that if God desired to establish a relationship with a man, he would have used a means readily understandable to them. Even the Hebrew word for covenant, ברית, is a testimony to this influence as it derives from two Akkadian words - *birīt* (between) and *birītu* (bond) – and reflecting the meaning of both, as ברית creates a tie between two parties.

We found that Genesis 15 was often compared with the covenant in Jeremiah 34 which clearly has an emphasis on the curses being brought down on the vassal should he fail to uphold the stipulations of the treaty. In that way, it could hastily be concluded that

the covenant between the pieces is similar to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium Assyrian cursing rites. God would take upon himself all the burden of obeying the covenant – relieving Abraham of any responsibilities – and cursing himself should he break the promise. We argued, though, that this was a highly unlikely scenario. First of all, there is no mention of any curses in Genesis 15 whereas they are prominent in Jeremiah 34 and in Assyrian treaties. Second, in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium covenants we have surveyed, it is always the vassal who is threatened by the curses, never the superior party and even less a deity. Also the expression used to ratify the covenant, כרת ברית (to cut a covenant), is similar to one found in the Mari letters from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E: “to kill (cut) an ass”. It is present in the context of the ratification of a treaty and is used to establish a relationship between two parties and bond them together. YHWH passing through the split animal is just a way for Him, the superior party, to make an oath to Abraham by promising an heir and a land. In this way, the covenant is more like a grant where the master obligates himself to his vassal.

Since we demonstrated that Abraham had contact with the Hittites and that Genesis 15 seems to reflect both a grant and the covenants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE rather than the cursing rites of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, we made the assumption that Genesis 15 is based on a Hittite land grant from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. We explained that land grants were a reward from a suzerain to his vassal for loyal services which is in accordance with our text: God promised a land to Abraham based on his past and present faithfulness to Him, thus making the ratification of the covenant conditional. It is important to specify, though, that land grants were mostly unconditional after being

bestowed by the suzerain. But this, only in relation to the lineage of the vassal as a whole: individuals among the descendants could be severely punished if they disobeyed the stipulations of the grant even though there would always be at least a part of the descendants who would enjoy the covenant blessings. We thus concluded that the covenant with Abraham is unconditional from the point of ratification onward only in the sense that God would always keep a remnant from the descendants of the Patriarch. At the same time, each individual by his unfaithfulness could be prevented from enjoying the blessings of the promise.

In most research that we have surveyed, the judgments seem to be polarized with scholars either arguing for the total conditionality of the covenant or for its non-conditionality. We offer a more nuanced approach where we differentiate between the responsibility before and after the signing of the covenant, something that seems to be lacking in the literature. We conclude that it is Abraham's faithfulness which enabled God to ratify the covenant which verifies our thesis that the making of the covenant is conditional. But we also discovered that non-conditionality was also present after the promises were made albeit only at the corporate level: individuals still had the personal responsibility to actively obey YHWH.

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