



COVENANT

THE FRAMEWORK

OF GOD'S GRAND PLAN OF REDEMPTION

Daniel I. Block



"A rich, detailed, and accessible exposition of covenant in the First and New Testaments. We receive not only an overview of how covenant factors into every phase of biblical history but also a grand picture of how the entire Bible coheres marvelously under the hand of God. If you struggle to see how seemingly disparate First Testament themes like creation, sin, law, and exile are interwoven with covenantal ideas and have deep relevance for Christians today, this is the book for you!"

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president and founder, God Centered Life Ministries

“While completely familiar with every nuance of critical scholarship, Block refreshingly allows the Bible to speak for itself without detours and debates. Every chapter is enriching, with illuminating exegesis from all over Scripture—a feast of good things to which the only adequate response is the last word of the book: ‘Hallelujah!’”

—**Christopher J. H. Wright**, Langham Partnership; author of *The Mission of God*

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OF GOD'S GRAND PLAN OF REDEMPTION

Daniel I. Block


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In gratitude to

Murray J. Harris

†Thomas E. McComiskey

†Elmer A. Martens

*Inspiring models of disciplined, modest,
and godly biblical scholarship*

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Preface

Despite its size, this volume is intended as *a* work on biblical theology; it is neither the definitive nor the last word on the subject. On the contrary, what I have presented here is written in soft-lead pencil and is subject to revision based on further study of the Scriptures and the counsel of the community of faith.

As I have marinated in the Scriptures, I have constantly heard the words of Paul to young Timothy ringing in my ears: “Be diligent in presenting yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Here Paul uses the word *orthotomeō*, which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament but is found appropriately twice in the Old Greek version of the book of Proverbs, which is cast as a book of instruction for a young man preparing for responsible adulthood, if not in the court, then certainly in the community. In Proverbs 3:5–6 and 11:5 the sage of ancient Israel wrote, respectively:

Trust in YHWH with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will *make straight* your paths. (NRSV alt.)

The righteousness of the blameless *keeps their ways straight*,
but the wicked fall by their own wickedness. (NRSV, emphasis added)

In these fragments of counsel, *orthotomeō* speaks of cutting a straight course, taking a direct path to the desired goal. Together these statements highlight the need for confidence in God to guide us in the straight path and the diligent demonstration of righteousness (an eminently covenantal

concept) by the person on the journey. In his pastoral word to Timothy, Paul had in mind the journey toward truth. His understanding of *alētheia* derives from the Hebrew root represented by *’ēmet* and *’ēmûnâ*, which speak of truthfulness, fidelity, and integrity.

Applied to the Scriptures as “the word of truth,” Ezra has provided me with the model of “rightly handling” this treasure for five decades: “Ezra set his heart to study the Torah of YHWH, to apply it [in his life], and to teach covenant in Israel” (7:10). Although usually translated as plurals, here the singular pair “ordinance and stipulation” (*ḥōq ûmišpāṭ*) functions as shorthand for the terms of YHWH’s revealed will for Israel, his vassal partner in the Israelite covenant. However, it also approaches the abstract notion of “covenant,” which includes both the obligations laid on the vassal and the responsibilities to which YHWH, the divine Suzerain, had committed himself. But it also includes the proclamations of gospel that underlie and provide context for the covenant, as declared, for example, in the preamble to the Decalogue (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6), Moses’ “domestic credo” (Deut. 6:20–25), Israel’s “shorter catechism” (10:12–11:1), and the people’s “national credo” (26:5b–10a).

As I note in the introduction, this book is a “Here I stand” sort of document. In this volume, after my fifty years of study, teaching, and preaching, I not only seek to explain what I see the Scriptures teaching but also how I hear them teach. This means that for every opinion expressed, readers should adopt the attitude of the Bereans in Acts 17:11, who, after hearing Paul and Silas, examined the Scriptures to see if their teaching was true. If it was necessary for the Bereans to check Paul’s words, how much more urgent it is for readers to subject my interpretations to the standard of the Scriptures. My primary desire in producing this volume is to celebrate the grace of God in designing and implementing his grand plan of redemption and to invite

conversation on the plan generally and in its details. In the end, God is most glorified and his people most transformed when they hear his voice in the Scriptures—rather than the voice of deeply flawed human interpreters.

Like my previous publication *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), this book is intended for the church. I shall be pleased if biblical theologians, pastors, and church leaders find my work helpful, and I shall be delighted if it speaks to laypeople. With the aid of the editors at Baker, I have tried to pitch the literary style and register for anyone who seriously values what the Scriptures teach about God's revealed program of salvation. Accordingly, I have resisted the temptation to present the arguments for every possible interpretation of the texts and concepts addressed and to fill the space available with endless references to secondary sources. This is, after all, intended as a *biblical theology*, not as a theology of biblical interpreters. To this end, with a few exceptions, I have reserved the footnotes for citing biblical references related to the discussion in the body. For the benefit of readers who may want to consult secondary sources for alternative opinions and fuller treatments of the subjects discussed, or wish I had investigated specific topics in greater detail here, I have provided a series of select bibliographies arranged according to the sequence of the major topics in the volume. Where applicable, these bibliographies are divided into two parts: (1) published works by other authors and (2) references to my own works where I have offered fuller treatments of related topics, generally with additional bibliography and discussion of alternative perspectives.

In this preface I need also to clarify several stylistic issues that readers may find odd and idiosyncratic:

1. *The divine name, YHWH.* I consistently render the personal name of the God of Israel as YHWH, which

scholars identify as the Tetragrammaton (four consonants). In the period between the Testaments, Jews stopped pronouncing the name of God and substituted it with the title *'ădōnāy* (Hb. אֲדֹנָי), which means “Lord, Master.” This practice is reflected in the Old Greek translation of the First Testament (called the Septuagint, also known as LXX), where “YHWH” is consistently rendered as *kyrios*, the Greek word for “lord, master.” This is a perfect translation of *'ădōnāy*, but it bears no relation to the personal name of the God of Israel, *yhwh* (Hb. יהוה). This practice carries over into the New Testament, where quotations of texts from the First Testament consistently also render *yhwh* as *kyrios*, and English versions translate *yhwh* as “the LORD.” In print the capitalization of all the letters helpfully distinguishes this epithet from *'ădōnāy*, which is properly represented by “Lord,” but in oral reading the two are indistinguishable. This creates significant interpretive problems since most readers of Scripture pay no attention to the capitalized spelling, even though the connotations and implications of referring to someone by name or by title differ significantly. Traditionally, when rendered as a name, English translations have vocalized *yhwh* as “Jehovah,”¹ which artificially combines the consonants of *yhwh* with the vowels of *'ădōnāy*. Although the original pronunciation of the name is uncertain, today non-Jewish scholars generally reject the artificial construct “Jehovah” and prefer to render the name as “Yahweh,” which is also a hypothetical form. Personally, I am grateful that YHWH expressly revealed his name to his people and invited them to address him by name (e.g., Exod. 3:13–15), but I mourn losing the practice of addressing God by name. Because of the uncertainty of the name’s original vocalization and in deference to Jewish sensibilities, in this volume I render the divine name simply with the English letters *YHWH*.

Exceptions occur only in direct quotations of English versions or secondary authors that use “LORD.”

2. *The First Testament, rather than Old Testament.* In my writings and teaching, I have generally ceased identifying the Bible that Jesus and the apostles used as the Old Testament. What we call something matters. The label “Old Testament” reinforces many Western Christians’ dismissive disposition toward the Hebrew Bible, connoting misleading notions of antiquity, irrelevance, and obsolescence, as if God’s earlier revelation has been subverted and supplanted by later revelation. Observing that we inherited “Old Testament” from the patristic period, John Goldingay rightly questions it, “because it . . . suggests something antiquated and inferior left behind by a dead person” (Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 1:15). To be sure, in 2 Corinthians 3:14 Paul uses the expression “old covenant” (*tēs palaiās diathēkēs*). However, he was talking about not the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole but the biblical texts relating to the Israelite covenant. The author of Hebrews recognized the progression in divine revelation by speaking of “this new covenant” (*touto diathēkēs kainēs*) and “the first covenant” (*tē prōtē diathēkē*), respectively (9:15), though with the latter designation he was not thinking about the “Old Testament” either. We grasp and communicate the relationship between the two Testaments of the Christian Bible better if we identify the Old Testament as the First Testament and then view the New Testament as the completion or fulfillment of the first, rather than its replacement. These two Testaments together tell a single story of God’s grand program of redemption, with the New Testament describing the arrival of Jesus as the climax of that story. Accordingly, throughout this book I

will use “First Testament” for the former Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible.

3. *Citation of biblical texts.* Unless otherwise indicated, throughout this volume all translations of biblical texts are my own. Where the English and Hebrew or Old Greek (Septuagint, LXX²) chapter and verse numbers differ, the English verse numbers will appear first, while the corresponding Hebrew or Greek numbers appear in square brackets, as in this example: Psalm 22:23 [24].

Like the oak tree in our previous backyard, the production of this volume—from the germination of the seed to the full-grown tree—has taken decades. Since I was raised in the home of a godly mother and a minister father whose first passion was the study of the Scriptures, the seed of the plant that has become this book was deposited in the soil in my childhood, but its roots went down during my three years at Bethany Bible Institute (later College) in the small town of Hepburn, Saskatchewan, and while I was pursuing my undergraduate degrees at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. In the kind providence of God during our time in Saskatoon, my wife, Ellen, and I were nurtured by our beloved pastor, Henry Harder, a former “Old Testament” professor at our denominational seminary. Under his ministry the whole Bible came alive for me. Driven by a newfound passion for the First Testament, the call of God to ministry, and the advice of Pastor Harder, in 1971 we moved across the border for seminary studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) in Deerfield, Illinois. Through the influence of the faculty and a core group of fellow students, my desire to understand the Scriptures intensified. But my learning did not stop there.

Since 1973 I have had the privilege of teaching at least a decade at four very different institutions. In the preface to a synthetic volume like this, it is fitting that I express my gratitude to faculty colleagues at Providence College in

Otterburne, Manitoba; Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota; the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky; and Wheaton College Graduate School in Wheaton, Illinois. Through insights gained in carpools, over coffee, and in each other's homes, and through inspiration derived from their godly living, discipline as scholars, and passion for their students, I have been profoundly influenced by these colleagues: sometimes through particular words of encouragement, sometimes with cautions, and sometimes with nonverbal and verbal expressions of incredulity. I am deeply grateful for the role they have had in shaping my life.

However, I must express special gratitude to the three gentlemen to whom this book is dedicated—all of whom have provided me with a model of humble but disciplined scholarship for the glory of God, a model that we need to emulate. I have had more flamboyant and charismatic professors, but my seminary experience began with an eight-week summer New Testament Greek course with Dr. Murray J. Harris. This was indeed a perfect way to start seminary, not only because Professor Harris excited me about reading the New Testament in the language in which it had been written, but also because of the quiet, gentle, and modest but disciplined disposition he displayed inside and outside the classroom. By the time the course was over, he had imprinted in my mind a model of scholarship and professorship that has never left me. Thus for me, Murray Harris modeled New Testament scholarship at its best.

Thomas E. McComiskey († 1996) was Harris' colleague at TEDS and was his Old Testament counterpart who incidentally published a helpful volume on the covenants. In addition to Harris' quiet modesty, McComiskey was the consummate gentleman professor. He taught me that we can all learn something from everyone, even those with whom we disagree. He was respectful of those whose opinions differed from his own, and he resisted *ad hominem*

responses, encouraging us to let “our work” rather than strong and hurtful words win our debates. His oral and written work represented an exemplary combination of sound analysis and gracious locution.

The third person in this triad of honorees is my good friend Dr. Elmer Martens († 2016). Because we were both nurtured in the Mennonite Brethren faith in rural Saskatchewan, our affinities were natural. After I had completed my doctoral studies, he invited me to lecture at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, in 1983—what was he thinking? However, in the summer before those lectures, our family had moved across the border, and I began participating regularly in the annual conferences of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), the Institute for Biblical Research, and the Society of Biblical Literature. Through these yearly events, Elmer became like an older brother to me, and spending time with him was always the highlight of the conventions for me. In fact, the inspiration for this volume came from him. After hearing my preliminary and programmatic paper on “Covenant” at ETS, he encouraged me to develop my thesis into a full-length volume on biblical theology. I am deeply grateful to have enjoyed a “sibling” relationship with Elmer for twenty-five years, and I miss him deeply. When we learned of Elmer’s sudden passing in September 2016, Ellen and I were in Sydney, Australia, on a short teaching assignment. Three days before his death, he had written me a note inquiring whether we could room together at the conferences in San Antonio, Texas, in November. But alas! Before I could answer his kind invitation, he was off to a much more blessed place “in [our] Father’s house” (John 14:2).

It is a great privilege and delight to dedicate this volume to these three men. However, there are others who deserve special recognition for its production. I am deeply grateful for the encouragement and counsel of Jim Kinney, the executive vice president at Baker Academic, who has

overseen the enterprise from the beginning. When the project turned out to be larger than we had envisioned at first, he gulped but stuck with me, proposing a host of ways to make the presentation more efficient. I am also grateful to Brandy Scritchfield, the acquisitions associate at Baker, and the editorial team, especially project editor Jennifer Hale, for their careful and painstaking inspection of every jot and tittle, their stylistic and technical modifications to make the presentation more readable and compelling, and their queries concerning interpretation and lapses in the presentation. They have been truly amazing.

I cannot express adequately how grateful I am for the long-standing support and friendship of Bud Knoedler and his dear late wife, Betty. While I was on the faculty at Wheaton College, they underwrote my professorial chair with incredible generosity, and I am still honored to have his name in my official title. And now we have the special privilege of being neighbors at Windsor Park Manor, where we share conversation on a regular basis. Finally, I eagerly also acknowledge Ellen, “the delight of my eyes” (נְחֻמֶּד עֵינַי, Ezek. 24:16), who has stood by me as a gracious friend and counselor for more than five decades. Without her love, patience, and wisdom in managing our household, the work represented here would either have taken a very different turn or never have been finished.

I conclude this preface and these acknowledgments with one final testimonial comment. I grew up in a hermeneutical world that was a curious mix of Anabaptist piety and dispensationalist theology. A feature of this world—one that was totally commendable and that the Christian community has largely lost—was the devotion of all, including the laity, to the personal study of Scripture as the authority on all matters of faith and life. When children began to read the Scriptures for themselves, parents would buy them their own copy of the Scofield Reference Bible as Christmas or birthday presents. But inherent in these resources were

forces that stifled the life-giving and life-transforming message of the First Testament. When I graduated from Bible college, I was part of a religious community in which we would often hear “But that’s in the Old Testament,” and with that comment the door slammed shut on closer exploration of First Testament texts.

But that was then. As I have been writing this volume, I have often felt like the starving lepers whose story we read in 2 Kings 7. After they had gorged themselves on the food left by the Aramaean army that had mysteriously abandoned their camp on the outskirts of Samaria, they admitted, “What we’re doing is not right. This is a day of good news [Hb. *yôm bēšōrâ*; Gk. *hēmera euangelias*], and we are keeping it to ourselves! If we keep silent until dawn, then we will be held liable. Let’s go now and report this to the king’s palace” (2 Kings 7:9). That is how I feel about the “bread of life” that is our Scriptures. Aided by the wise guidance and modeling of strong mentors, I have eaten and drunk deeply of all the Scriptures and have been animated and energized by their messages. During the last phases of this project, I have been reading and greatly inspired by the remarkable early ninth-century-AD Old Saxon account of the life of Jesus Christ: *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel*, brilliantly translated into New Living Translation style by G. Ronald Murphy (1992). I will be very pleased if my delight in rehearsing the whole Bible gospel under the rubric of *Covenant: The Framework of God’s Grand Plan of Redemption* is as transparent as the joy of the obviously precritical but unknown author of *The Heliand*—whom I look forward to meeting one day. In the chapters that follow, I share with readers the glorious message of grace and redemption that I have found on virtually every page of both First and New Testaments. In them we find the words of eternal life that YHWH incarnate in Jesus Christ offers us (cf. John 6:68).

So come, taste and see that YHWH is good!
How privileged are those who seek refuge in him!
Oh, fear YHWH, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have all they need! (Ps. 34:8-9 [9-10])

[1.](#) “Jehovah” appears four times in the 1611 KJV: Exod. 6:3; Ps. 83:18 [19]; Isa. 12:2; 26:4. The form is also reflected in the names Jehovah-jireh (Gen. 22:14), Jehovah-nissi (Exod. 17:15), and Jehovah-shalom (Judg. 6:24).

[2.](#) Technically, the title “Septuagint” (“70,” hence LXX) applies only to the first five books, the Pentateuch, which, according to the Letter of Aristeas, was translated by seventy Jewish scribes in the third century BC. The remainder of the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek between 200 and 50 BC and is more precisely referred to as the Old Greek version. However, the designation LXX for the Greek Torah/Pentateuch is often extended to the entire Greek First Testament.

Abbreviations

General

†	deceased
>	more than
//	parallel to
√	root of the word
×	times
alt.	altered, modified
ca.	<i>circa</i> , approximately
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
chap(s).	chapter(s)
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially
fig.	figure
Gk.	Greek lexical form
Hb.	Hebrew lexical form
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
lit.	literally
pl.	plural
p(p).	page(s)
sg.	singular
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word
trans.	translator(s), translation, translated by
v(v).	verse(s)

Bible Texts and Versions

CSB	Christian Standard Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint (Greek First Testament)
MT	Masoretic Text (Hebrew Bible)
NASB	New American Standard Bible

NIV	New International Version
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament

First Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Psal(s).	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah

Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1 Pet.	1 Peter
2 Pet.	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

Apocrypha

Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther
1 Esd.	1 Esdras
Jdt.	Judith
1-2 Macc.	1-2 Maccabees
Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira)
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran)

1QIsa ^a	Isaiah scroll (first copy from Qumran cave 1)
4QMMT	Halakhic Letter (4Q399)

Pseudepigraphon

Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon

Mishnaic Tractates

Qidd.	Qiddushin
Shabb.	Shabbat
Yoma	Yoma

Other Rabbinic Works

b.	Babylonian Talmud
m.	Mishnah
S. Olam Rab.	Seder Olam Rabbah
Tanh.	Tanhuma

Bibliographic

- ANET* *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
- BASOR* *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*

- CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2006
- COS *The Context of Scripture*. Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. Vol. 2, *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*. Leiden: Brill, 2000
- LS Liddell, H. G., and R. Scott. *Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. with New Supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996
- RIMA The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods

Introduction

Covenant and God's Grand Plan of Redemption in Scripture

Covenant as the Heart of Biblical Revelation

Theologians have identified many profoundly significant “big and unifying motifs” in the Scriptures. After five decades of marinating in the Scriptures, I have found, among those themes, that the notion of “covenant” represents the heart of all biblical revelation, and the “covenants” themselves provide the framework for that revelation. A covenant is a formally confirmed agreement between two or more parties that creates, formalizes, or governs a relationship that does not naturally exist or a natural relationship that may have been broken or disintegrated. The term “covenant” derives from an Old French verb *covenancier*, “to settle or contract.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “covenant” as “a mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts; a compact, contract, bargain; sometimes, the undertaking, pledge, or promise of one of the parties” (1:585). Normally parents need not formalize their relationship with biological children; the relationship is established by birth. However, it is conceivable that should parent and child be estranged, at some point they could reestablish the relationship through a “covenantal” procedure. In contrast to relationships established by birth, adults in many societies may establish a relationship with a person who is not their biological child

through a formal ceremony of adoption. Through this “covenant” ritual, the parents claim the child as their own and commit to caring for that child. Covenants typically involve solemn commitments establishing the privileges and obligations that attend agreements.

The Scriptures know of two kinds of covenants: parity covenants, between parties of equal social status; and disparity covenants, between parties of unequal status—usually identified as suzerain-vassal treaties. The Scriptures present marriage relationships as covenantal: two unrelated persons commit to each other and to the long-range goal of establishing a new family through a formal procedure (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). The patricentric world of the Bible considered the husband and father the head of the household (*bêt ’āb*, “a house of a father”). However, the Song of Songs suggests that within the context of marriage, the relationship between husband and wife could be quite egalitarian.

In the ancient world, covenants, also referred to as treaties, often established and governed relationships involving heads of clans or rulers of realms. These could involve “parity” or “disparity” relationships. Genesis 31:43–55 illustrates the former. By means of a covenant ritual, Laban formally acknowledged his son-in-law as his social and economic peer. Second Kings 16:7 illustrates the latter. King Ahaz of Judah expressly acknowledged that he was the “vassal” (*‘ebed*) and “son” (*bēn*) of Tiglath-pileser III, the emperor of Assyria. This obviously involved disparity—that is, a suzerain-vassal relationship.

While the notion of “covenant” dominates the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, in the Bible the concept is profoundly theological rather than economic or political: it involves the infinite God and finite parties whom he invites to covenant relationship with himself, and these finite members are to treat each other as coequal beneficiaries of these covenants. In the Scriptures all covenants involving

God are fundamentally monergistic suzerain-vassal pacts: God the divine Suzerain initiates the covenant; God chooses the covenant partner; God declares the terms; God determines the consequences for the subjects, depending on their responses to him and his revealed will (blessing for fidelity, curses for rebellion); and God identifies the sign of the covenant (rainbow, Gen. 9:12–17; circumcision, Gen. 17:9–14; the seventh-day Sabbath, Exod. 31:15–17). Accordingly, God always identifies these covenants as “my covenant,” while biblical authors or characters refer to them as “his covenant,” or “God’s covenant with X,” rather than “our covenant,” “Israel’s covenant,” or “X’s covenant with God.” YHWH’s covenant partners are never in a position to negotiate either the terms of the contract or the consequences for fidelity or infidelity; their only option is to accept or reject the relationship.

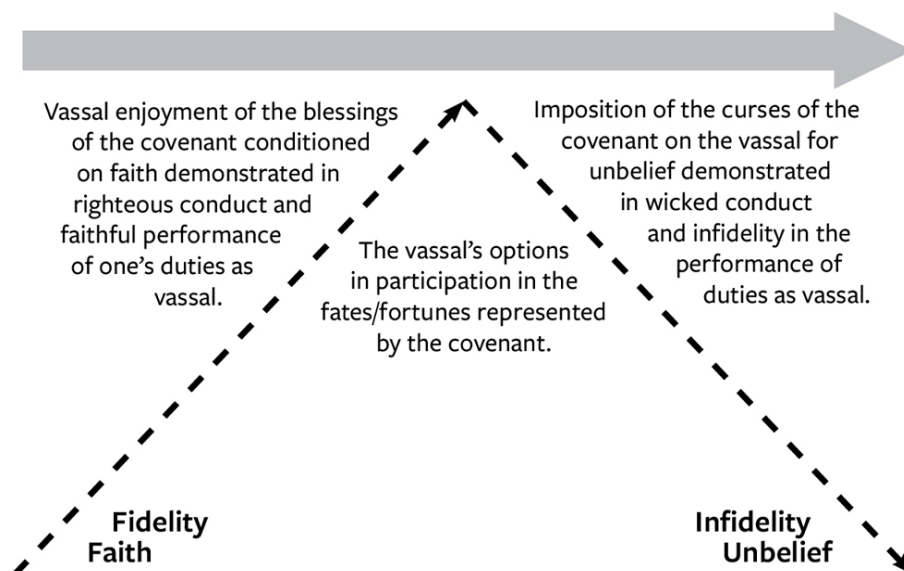
Categories of Covenants in the Bible

Biblical covenants have long been classified either as unconditional and irrevocable covenants of grant (Abrahamic, Davidic) or conditional and revocable covenants of obligation (Israelite). But this dichotomy is false: they all exhibit signs of both irrevocability and contingency. The repeated use of the word “eternal” (i.e., irrevocable; Hb. *‘ad ‘ôlām*) in association with the covenants guaranteed their perpetuity irrespective of the response of the vassal partner. God would never retract his commitments (cf. Judg. 2:1). Nevertheless, as in any relationship, the extent to which covenants achieved their goals was always contingent on the response of the vassal partners, who retained freedom at every stage to keep the covenants or to violate them (cf. Exod. 19:4–6). The consequences of these divergent courses were fundamental elements of the covenant, either implicitly or explicitly. Even in the precovenant world of Eden, the tree of life

represented the divine ideal, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented the curse for rebellion by the vassal; these respectively symbolized the alternative effects of human responses. In the Israelite covenant, YHWH spelled out in detail the alternative effects in the form of blessings and curses (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The Davidic covenant predicted negative effects with God's threat to discipline the descendant of David, but it did not spell out the reasons (2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Ps. 132:12).

Figure 0.1

God's Irrevocable Covenant Commitment



However, the imposition of the curses would not signal the termination or cancellation of the covenant. Rather, as Daniel recognized (Dan. 9:1–19), because YHWH had built punishments for infidelity into the covenants, his people's experience of the curses meant that the terms of the covenant were fulfilled to the letter. Objectively, the covenant remained in force in perpetuity, irrespective of human response; subjectively, the mission envisioned for the vassal and enjoyment of the benefactions promised by

the covenant depended upon the vassal's faithful fulfillment of the suzerain's charge (fig. 0.1).

In summary, the oft-proposed categories of conditional and unconditional covenants should be abandoned for two reasons. On the one hand, God's covenants are all irrevocable; as the divine Suzerain, he is always faithful to his covenant commitments. On the other hand, the effectiveness of all covenants depends upon the fidelity of the human covenant partner(s). Therefore, I find it best to recognize two types of divine covenants according to function rather than duration: missional/communal covenants and administrative covenants. The first category involves covenants focused on the health of the group (communal) and God's mandate for them (hence missional). These include the cosmic and Israelite covenants, while the administrative covenants involve the Adamic and Davidic covenants. I classify them as administrative because within the communities involved in ecclesial/missional covenants, God appoints individuals and their descendants to promote the smooth operation of these broader covenants. Whereas these latter covenants offered benefits to vassals chosen for a particular suzerain-vassal covenant relationship, the primary concern of administrative covenants was not the vassal as vassal but the triangular complex of relationships involved in the ecclesial/missional covenants (figs. 1.1 and 1.5 below). Three covenants revealed in the First Testament fall under the rubric of administrative covenant: the Adamic, Davidic, and Levitical covenants. Of these three, the last is an outlier and will be treated separately in an excursus after the discussion of the Israelite covenant. In the exploration of all these relationships, we will observe that just as the Israelite covenant serves as a microcosm of the cosmic covenant, so the Davidic covenant functions as a microcosm of the Adamic covenant (fig. 1.5 below).

Up to this point we have been speaking of covenants as real agreements, but we need to begin to think about the

notion of “covenant” in the abstract. In the United Kingdom this noun occasionally occurs in real estate documents in association with the governance of transactions. Even though the Scriptures never use the Hebrew *bĕrît* or Greek *diathēkē* in this sense, and “covenant” never appears in English translations, the abstract concept is useful for understanding the divine passion that drives God’s overtures to create and maintain relationships with his fallen creation. Accordingly, in this volume I shall often speak of “covenant” in the abstract, in addition to considering “covenants” in concrete cases.

Organization

The title of this volume, *Covenant: The Framework of God’s Grand Plan of Redemption in Scripture*, assumes several fundamental convictions that underlie the discussion that follows. First, this project involves a biblical theology of covenant. The Christian Scriptures, made up of the First Testament (the Hebrew Bible treasured by our Jewish friends) and the New Testament, provide our source of information on the covenants. The primary subject of our study is not natural revelation, nor human traditions or mythologies, nor the writings of biblical theologians; as Protestants we adhere to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*: the Scriptures are our only sure and ultimate source of truth concerning God and the life of godliness. Other sources provide context for biblical revelation and voices that aid us in interpreting the Scriptures. Even so, ultimately, to know the mind of God on these matters, we need to consult the writings that God, in a particularly inspiring sense, “breathed out” (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Thus the Scriptures are our primary resource in this study.

Second, this project assumes that the divine project involving the cosmos generally and humankind particularly is a redemptive project. The language of “redemption” used

in the Scriptures is both broad and varied. The Hebrew Bible, which provides the foundation for the New Testament understanding of the concept, uses two principal expressions for redemption, *gā'al* and *pādâ*. While the nuances in their everyday usage differed slightly, when used theologically both involve rescue from a desperate state (e.g., disaster, death, bondage) and transfer into a state of well-being (*šālôm*).¹ Indeed, we may look upon the history of the cosmos after Genesis 3 as a single grand story of God's determination to rescue his creation from the desperate condition that has resulted from Adam and Eve's sin and to restore creation into the ideal state for which he had originally created all things.

Third, God's accomplishment of this goal over time will be not the consequence of haphazard decisions or accidental events but the result of a deliberate plan. Many have spoken of this plan as "the drama of redemption," a notion that is quite fitting, not because this drama is played out on a stage for the entertainment of an audience but because it involves real characters in real time on a real plane. The numerous references to "before/from the foundation of the world" in the New Testament demonstrate that the plan God has implemented in time and space was in God's mind even before time and space existed.² The author of Hebrews recognized the place of "covenant" in this grand divine scheme in his concluding benediction: "Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21 NIV).

Even though I recognize communal/missional and administrative categories of covenants in the Scriptures, the divine drama of redemption transpires in four acts, which provide the broad structure for this volume:

Act Background to the drama of redemption (Gen. 1-2)
1:

Act The cosmic need for redemption (Gen. 3:1-11:26)
2:

Act The story of the chosen agents of redemption (Gen.
3: 11:27-Mal. 4:6)

Act The appearance and mission of the Redeemer
4: (Matthew-Revelation)

Part 1 of this volume will involve the first two acts, which deal with the state of the cosmos and humankind generally. Part 2 focuses on Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel, whom YHWH chose as his agents of blessing to a cursed world. Part 3 examines the Davidic covenant in the First Testament and its forward look. Part 4 investigates the fulfillment of the divine redemptive goal in Jesus, Messiah, the Son of God, and the Son of Man. All four parts will begin by exploring the communal/missional covenants involved in the drama and conclude with examinations of the role of the administrative covenants in the communal/missional agenda.

Method and Approach

Initially many readers will find my approach to the biblical notion of “covenant” to be idiosyncratic, but this is characteristic of many biblical theologians. We all make choices and then tend to interpret and present the evidence in the light of those choices. We recognize that the biblical accounts of the various covenants are sufficiently vague and ambiguous to invite more than one approach. I offer this presentation as a contribution to a lively ongoing discussion.

Readers interested in biblical theology will find many excellent books and journals in libraries and in the warehouses of publishers. These resources vary greatly in

depth of discussion, approaches to the subject, their views of Scripture, their hermeneutics, and their authors' theological predispositions. Most of us can cite resources that both reinforce and challenge the positions we hold. My aim in this volume is not to rehash previous works nor to provide an exhaustive discussion of every subject I raise. I do not intend to examine or even mention alternative views on every matter. My lack of documentation of authorities who have held similar views or who reject both my method and my conclusions will probably frustrate some readers. Rather, I offer this work as a "Here I stand" sort of statement.

With this comment I do not mean to be presumptuous. I recognize openly that the import of those words in this context is not nearly as weighty and the words themselves are not nearly as consequential as they were for Martin Luther and the history of Christianity when he declared them at the Diet of Worms before Emperor Charles V on April 18, 1521. However, as we often find in the Scriptures, in later accounts speakers and authors find antecedent statements appropriate in new settings. The Reformer's words express my state of mind as I "pen" this manuscript. What lies ahead is the result of fifty years of listening to, studying, and wrestling with the Scriptures; seeking to demonstrate the transforming truth and grace of the Scriptures in my daily life and ethic; participating in small group Bible studies; ministering pastorally in local churches; and lecturing, teaching, and preaching on every continent except Antarctica.

I could have kept this project much simpler by limiting my discussion to the essential features of the covenants serially. Biblical scholars have produced many fine monographs that achieve this purpose. My concern has been deeper, to explore how biblical authors develop the notion of covenant. This involves investigating the historical and literary contexts out of which the covenants arose and that

they address. To do this, we must read the texts closely, suspending our own presuppositions and earnestly listening for the inspired illocutionary messages that the authors of Scriptures were communicating, rather than merely finding support for our preconceived ideas. I grant that this is a modernist approach and that reading ancient texts without prejudice and without personal biases is ultimately impossible, but we must be diligent in letting biblical texts speak their own messages.

A high view of Scripture lets biblical authors say whatever they want to say. This means neither forcing them to say more or something different from their intended sense nor having them say less than they intend. Because the book of Deuteronomy never identifies its author, I resist the impulse to name the person or to fix a firm specific date to the composition as we have it. I accept that it comes with Mosaic authority, for this is fundamental to its message. With allowance for the engagement of an amanuensis or a secretary, I accept that Moses was the author of the texts that appear to be transcripts of his concluding pastoral addresses, and that from the beginning these documents had full canonical authority, because this is what the text says (Deut. 4:2; 31:9-13, 24-26). However, because the text does not identify the author of the first five verses and the final chapter of the book, and because the book contains a series of other post-Mosaic (e.g., 2:12), I do not feel obligated to identify Moses as the author of the book as we have it. By virtue of the inspiration of its final author, whom I understand to be “a prophet like Moses” (18:15-22), it comes with Moses’ authority and Mosaic content, but the style of Hebrew and other features suggest that the present form derives from a later date.

This approach applies also to issues that are more theological. When we read biblical texts, we must let them speak with their own voice before we listen to the voices of later interpreters. This is difficult, because we are all

products of our literary and hermeneutical past. But it is a goal for which we need to strive. For this reason, I have spent a considerable amount of time and space discussing both the fundamentals of covenant and the covenants and the ways biblical authors saw these notions working in their narratives, genealogies, hymns, prayers, prophecies, and epistles.

Biblical theologians follow different strategies in laying out their understanding of the theological message of the Scriptures, which for us mean the First and New Testaments. Some approach the task serially by declaring what they consider to be the common and distinctive theologies of the individual compositions that make up the Scriptures. Others present their interpretation of biblical theology thematically, tracing the progress of particular topics and perspectives (e.g., divine kingship, holiness, theological ethics), exploring the history and progress of revelation through time, beginning with the earliest compositions and ending with the book of Revelation. Because of the scope of the project, biblical theologians tend to divide with the Testaments. On the one hand, we have First (Old) Testament theologians, who begin with Genesis and end with Malachi or 1-2 Chronicles, the last of the writings in the Hebrew canon. On the other hand, New Testament theologians tend to begin with Paul, who composed his epistles somewhere between AD 48 and the mid-60s, and end with the Johannine writings, which were written between the AD mid-80s and the mid-90s.

First Testament and New Testament theologians have enough work to do in their separate areas; the complexity and sheer bulk of textual data require disciplined analysis of manageable material. Likely this partly explains why First and New Testament scholars hesitate to cross the gap between the Testaments, and when they do, they primarily seek enlightenment from the other Testament for a reference or issue in one's chosen Testament. In this volume

I will accept the charge of chutzpah for devoting almost 40 percent of my investigation to the New Testament. I freely admit that I am not a New Testament scholar, and in giving this amount of space to reading “the other Testament” from the inside out, I am traveling where other First Testament scholars (and angels?) fear to tread. The absence of First Testament scholarly voices from published discussions on the new versus old perspectives on Paul illustrates the problem. I expect that some—perhaps many—will dismiss my interpretations of New Testament texts as superficial, uninformed, and naive, but they arise out of my deep reflection on First Testament perspectives. Then I seek to read the New Testament in light of antecedent texts, rather than the reverse, which often yields forced and unnatural readings of earlier texts.

The Value of a Biblical Theology Grounded in the First Testament

Within North American evangelicalism, we hear voices explicitly calling for Christians to detach the First Testament from Christian faith because the *Old Testament* poses too many problems for those who try to present the good news (gospel) of salvation in Jesus Christ. Christians since the heretic Marcion—who argued that the God of ancient Israel and the God of the New Testament were distinct and very different deities—have hesitated to be this explicit. Yet for many evangelicals, the First Testament is at worst the problem that the New Testament supposedly fixes and at best a dead book that we would do well to bury ceremoniously in a genizah.

Our creedal statements affirm the authority of the entire Bible, First and New Testaments, for Christian faith and life, but the former is largely missing in evangelical worship. My summary of the problem below is embarrassingly autobiographical, but in our time symptoms of the

trivialization and demise of the only Bible that Jesus and the apostles had are everywhere: (1) avoidance of the First Testament; (2) walk-through-the-Bible approaches to the First Testament; (3) using the First Testament primarily as a source of illustrations for New Testament sermons; (4) using the First Testament primarily for prooftexts in apologetic debates; (5) restricting our use to a few favorite selected texts; (6) preaching biographical sermons that focus on the human characters and idealize them even when biblical authors intentionally characterize them negatively; (7) reading the First Testament with a “a homiletical hermeneutic,” which means that the message we preach depends upon what we want the people to get out of the text, rather than what the text intends to say; (8) Alexandrian spiritualizing of historical and cultural elements in the text because the “spiritual meaning” of the text supposedly edifies; (9) reading the First Testament through New Testament lenses, which means that the rhetorical use of texts or concepts in the later contexts drowns out the message of the authors as established by normal grammatical-historical interpretation; (10) Christologizing the First Testament. That Jesus Christ is the heart and goal (*telos*) of all revelation (cf. Luke 24:25–35) is an important underlying assumption of Christian exegesis, but it is not the starting point of interpretation for any given text.

These are the symptoms of a deeply rooted and pervasive problem. Modern readers offer many excuses for their disinterest in and repudiation of the First Testament: (1) As an ancient text it is out of touch and irrelevant for modern Western Christians. (2) It presents a ritualistic approach to religious expression that has ended or been superseded by Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice. (3) Its ethic of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is grossly inferior to Christ’s ethic of love, which calls us to return good for evil. (4) Literarily, it is cast in genres that range from boringly

detailed genealogies to incomprehensible metaphors and offensive rhetoric. (5) Theologically, it presents a view of a vengeful God that is utterly objectionable to modern sensitivities.

However, the greatest problem may be dogmatic. Many evangelicals subscribe to theological dogmas that highlight the contrasts between the two Testaments. Instead of treating the Scriptures as one continuous story of divine redemption, in which the incarnation and the New Testament as a document represent the climactic chapter in YHWH's grand redemptive project, they focus on and exaggerate discontinuities. Whether rooted in Martin Luther's "law-gospel" contrast, Anabaptist claims of a new and superior ethic, a neo-Reformed inability to experience the life-giving and life-transforming power of the word unless it speaks of the New Testament Christ, or a dispensationalist division of human history into discrete eras within which the divine economy operates according to divergent rules, the effects of these "discontinuities" have been deadly for the place of the First Testament in North American Christianity. Since the Reformation, we have invested too much time and effort into digging the ditch between the Testaments. The time has come to read the Scriptures as one story and to begin filling the ditch by highlighting the continuities over time in God's amazing grace toward a fallen and rebellious humanity, which has unfortunately dragged the cosmos down with it. This book offers twenty shovels of soil (chapters) between the introduction and the conclusion as my small contribution to closing the chasm between the First Testament and New Testament. To return to the metaphor of the drama of redemption, the Scriptures do not offer two distinct dramas. This is one grand story in which Act 4 represents the climax of an account that began in Act 1 and has taken us through Acts 2 and 3.

[1](#). For examples, see the following: *gā'al*, Gen. 48:16; Exod. 6:6 (both Gk. *ryomai*); 15:13 (Gk. *lytroō*); *pādâ*, Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5 [6]; Ps. 25 [LXX 24]:22 (all these, Gk. *lytroō*).

[2](#). Matt. 13:35; 25:34; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8.

PART 1

The COSMIC
and ADAMIC
COVENANTS

CHAPTER 1

The Cosmic Covenant

Introduction

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). With this grand announcement, Act 1 of the cosmic drama began. I have carefully chosen the expression “cosmic drama”; what we are about to describe concerns all creation. Christians often view the world and the Scriptures from an anthropocentric perspective—as if human beings are the center of the universe and everything exists for them. Genesis 1:1 reminds us that God has been engaged in a project that is vastly greater than the human population. The spectacular astronomical discoveries made possible by the Hubble Space Telescope and other machines that humans have sent into space reveal a creation infinitely greater than our species of primates. While human characters dominate accounts of earthly history, biblical writers never lost sight of the grander vision.

This grander vision is especially prominent in the writings of the psalmists, sages, and prophets. Psalmists celebrate the wonder of YHWH’s creation in its entirety.¹ They speak of the heavens and their expanse as spokespersons for the glory of God (19:1–6 [7]) and his righteousness (50:6; 97:6) and of the earth as belonging to YHWH.² They marvel at his care for his creatures and his control of cosmic forces to accomplish this (Ps. 104). And they call upon the cosmos and all the creatures of earth to praise YHWH (Ps. 147). Sages (Prov. 8:22–31; Job 38:4–11) and prophets join them in glorifying YHWH as creator and sustainer of all things,³

and they see heaven as YHWH's throne and the earth as his footstool (Isa. 66:1-2). Although the cosmos has been implicated in humanity's rebellion and suffers intensely under the judgment of YHWH,⁴ the prophet in Isaiah 65:17-25 promised that one day YHWH would create a new heavens and a new earth where all humanity and all creatures will enjoy perfect shalom. Indeed, on the analogy of YHWH's cosmic promise in Genesis 8:21-22, Jeremiah spoke of his irrevocable commitment to Israel (Jer. 31:35-37).

YHWH's passion for the cosmos also reverberates through the New Testament. In what is probably the best-known text, God's covenant commitment to the cosmos underlies the incarnation and saving work of the Son of God: "For God demonstrated his love for the world [Gk. *kosmos*] by giving his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world [*kosmos*] that he might judge the world [*kosmos*], but that the world [*kosmos*] might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).

John often uses the word *kosmos* to refer to "the people who inhabit the world," but the apostle also often uses words ambiguously and ambivalently. Western anthropocentrism blinds us to God's greater goal in this passage: the redemption of the cosmos, a theme that Paul picks up in Romans 8:19-22. Building on Isaiah 65:17, Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3:10-14 speak of the destruction of the old world and the re-creation of a new one.

When we look at the sweep and progress of God's redemptive plan revealed in Scripture, we recognize a glorious drama involving a series of easily identifiable acts:

Act 1: The creation of the cosmos and its inhabitants, including humanity as the divine image and vice-regent

Act 2: The rebellion and fall of the vice-regent, and with

him all creation

Act 3: The history of a people (Israel) commissioned as agents of grace in a fallen world

Act 4: The appearance within time and space of the divine Son, through whose self-sacrifice God laid the foundations for the renewal of the cosmos

Act 5: The re-creation of the new heaven and the new earth, fulfilling the original design

Like dramas played out on the stage, the Scriptures recount the story artfully. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, biblical authors and poets selected the details to include in the script, carefully arranged the scenes and acts, and skillfully crafted the details in keeping with intended rhetorical goals and desired portrayal of the primary characters. However, unlike dramas performed in our theaters, on this stage God is the primary character. Left to ourselves, the story would have ended with Act 2. But the good news is that God did not leave us to ourselves. By “ourselves” I mean not only humankind but also the world we occupy, which he charged us to govern on his behalf. Despite our rebellion and our betrayal of the divine mandate, God remained committed to the world he had created. This first chapter concerns Acts 1 and 2 of this drama. With his eye on the cosmos, the biblical dramatist sets the stage in Act 1 for all that follows (Gen. 1-2), and in Act 2 (Gen. 3:1-11:26) he presents God’s response to the crisis in the cosmos, taking action in the wake of his vice-regent’s horrific betrayal of both the Creator and the mandate/privilege granted him.

The Background to the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 1-2)

The Hebrew word for “covenant,” *bĕrît*, occurs for the first time in Genesis 6:18. The Hebrew construction is

ambiguous. “I will establish my covenant with you” could mean that God will confirm a previously existing covenant with Noah as the covenant partner. Because the usual idiom for “making a covenant” translates literally as “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bēřît*), and the present idiom involving *hēqîm*, usually means “to establish” a (preexistent) covenant, many assume that the covenant must have been made with Adam. However, we should not rule out other options too quickly, for several reasons: (1) The preceding narrative has been silent on any antecedent covenant. (2) The boundaries between the two Hebrew idioms sometimes blur in the First Testament. For example, Deuteronomy 29:1 [MT 28:69] uses “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bēřît*) for a covenant ritual that obviously involves the renewal of an antecedent covenant (on which see further below).⁵ (3) If a covenant involves a ritual that creates a relationship that does not exist naturally, then a covenant would have been unnecessary and superfluous in the scenes described in Genesis 1–2. It would be superfluous because the entire cosmos was functioning as God intended. Even though Genesis 1–2 casts *Adam* (the italicized form of the word signifies humanity) in the role of “vassal” vis-à-vis God, the divine “Suzerain,” this does not make the relationship covenantal.

However, we could also interpret “I will establish my covenant with you” as elliptical for “I will establish my covenant [with the cosmos] with you.” The context seems to support this interpretation. In addressing Noah and charging him to build an ark to preserve the created species in the forthcoming deluge, God obviously treated the man at the end of the genealogy that began with Adam (Gen. 5:32) as his vice-regent, with responsibility for the well-being of the rest of creation. A cosmic interest pervades the flood account.⁶ God’s promise to establish his covenant with his creation and do so “with you” assumes that the person who had served as the agent of creation’s survival of the deluge

would also serve as the agent in the establishment of God's covenant with creation (cf. 9:9–17). The role of Noah in the elliptical clause in 6:18 is like that of Moses in relation to YHWH's covenant with Israel (Exod. 34:27). Just as Moses would function as the administrator who transcribed the covenant terms and through whom YHWH reconstituted his relationship with Israel, so Genesis 6:18 anticipated and 9:8–17 portrays Noah as fulfilling that role.

Although the notion of covenant is absent from Genesis 1–2, the accounts of creation are vital to the present project; they offer a glimpse into the reality that was lost in Act 2 and hint at the realities that God would seek to reconstruct through the covenants that will form the framework of the divine drama of cosmic judgment and redemption. The texts that describe the world as it came from the Creator's hands provide necessary background for understanding the cosmic covenant instituted in Genesis 9.

Israel's Cosmological Catechism (Gen. 1:1–2:4a)

The Boundaries of the Literary Unit

Biblical scholars widely recognize that Genesis 1 and 2 involve two contrasting images of creation, differing in their literary style, portrayal of God, description of *Adam*/Adam's role, and placement of vegetation in creation. Scholars also agree that the division between Genesis 1 and 2 is misplaced. Although most treat 2:3 as the true conclusion to chapter 1, it is preferable to locate the boundary between 2:4a and 2:4b. The formula "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created" in 2:4a obviously signals a transition. Because elsewhere this "genealogical formula" always serves as a heading to what follows,⁷ most interpreters understand the formula here as introducing the remainder of chapter 2 and beyond. However, because the structure of headings and

conclusions (colophons) may be identical (cf. Lev. 26:46 and Deut. 12:1), the form alone is not determinative, especially when the common usage does not fit this context. Since Genesis 2:4–25 does not recount the generation (*tôlědôt*) of the heavens and the earth but focuses on the first man and woman, we should be cautious about dismissing the evidence of a single exception.

Several additional considerations reinforce the treatment of 2:4a as a colophon (titular conclusion) rather than a heading. First, the merismic reference to the heavens and the earth (*haššāmayim wěhā'āreš*, meaning “all things”) functions as a “bookend” matching the same phrase in 1:1. Significantly in 2:4b, where both words recur, they appear without the article and in the reverse order (*'ereš wěšāmayim*). Second, the verb *bārā'*, “to create [specially],” is missing entirely in the literary subunit that is defined by the next occurrence of the genealogical formula (5:1), but this is the seventh occurrence in this context,⁸ where occurrences match the days of creation. Third, if we treat 2:4a as the conclusion to the preceding, verse 4b becomes the introduction to what follows, resulting in a remarkable syntactical parallel between the opening to chapter 1 and the opening to the newly defined chapter 2: both units begin with adverbial temporal clauses. Thus 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is paralleled by 2:4b, “On the day of YHWH Elohim’s making of earth and heavens.” However, the change of verb from “to create” (*bārā'*) cosmic time and space to “make” (*'āśā*) a home for humanity suggests that the second builds on the first (2:4b). Fourth, the narrative shifts in its designations for God. Chapter 1 consistently uses *'ēlōhîm*, which is a generic expression for a (divine) being residing in the heavens, but in 2:4b the narrator identifies the Creator by personal name and divine title: “YHWH Elohim.” From the outset, the Israelite narrator of Genesis 2 equated the God who created

humankind with the One who created a new (microcosmic) humanity when he rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt.

The Style and Structure of Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Reflecting a “radical theocentricity,” Genesis 1 is composed in an elevated form of prose, exhibiting an exalted literary style for an exalted subject. Assuming a measure of poetic license, some interpret this chapter freely as a sheerly theological and literary composition disconnected from the actual process of creation. Although it exhibits few features that characterize Hebrew poetry generally (parallelism, metaphorical imagery, special syntactical features), chapter 1 looks like a creedal, perhaps even catechetical, kind of statement—formal, majestic, dignified, and easily committed to memory.

First, the characterization of creation as six days of divine work governed by a repetitious sequence of formulas gives it an artificial flavor. This flavor also comes across in the formulaic descriptions of each day, the loose chiasmic parallelism that signals the climaxes of segments of the account (vv. 10, 27), and the repetition of constructions that sound poetic in verse 16, as well as in verses 26 and 28. Several additional features reinforce the sense of artificiality in the structure and tone of the text, including the bookends in the frame of 1:1 and 2:4a; the sevenfold use of the relatively rare word for create, *bārā*; and its profoundly theological agenda, signaled by the opening line and climaxing in the consecration of the seventh day as a day for God to “rest.” These features suggest an artfully crafted composition.

But Genesis 1:1-2:4a also exhibits features that characterize prose more than poetry: (1) the logic of the argument involving a formal thesis statement that is developed and then formally concluded (1:1; 2:4a); (2) the insertion of three circumstantial/parenthetical clauses that

are separate from the discourse skeleton but offer necessary background for understanding the full account (1:2); (3) the use of a series of *wayyiqtol* verb forms to track the sequence of past actions; (4) the use of other characteristic prose markers ('et as a marker of the direct object; the definite article *ha-*; the subordinating conjunction 'ăšer, and the deictic particle *hinnēh*, "Look!"); (5) the preponderance of dialogue (eleven direct divine speeches); and (6) the use of coordinate rather than parallel pairs of words (A *and* B versus A // B; vv. 24, 26). Accordingly, the author invites us to take his presentation at face value; this is not a freely imaginative mythological composition, but a reasoned presentation of a profoundly theological subject.

The structure of Genesis 1:1–2:4a is clear. The prologue (1:1–2) includes the thesis statement (1:1) followed by three circumstantial clauses (1:2) that stand off from the narrative flow but provide necessary information to interpret the six days. The function of the six days (1:3–31; intentionally cast in parallel structure) is to resolve the issues raised by these three clauses: impose structure on a disorganized (not chaotic) mass; fill empty space with life; bring light to darkness. The conclusion of the six days (1:31) affirms the goodness and completeness of the universe as it came from the hand of God. Before the colophonic conclusion (2:4a), the epilogue that follows the six days of creation celebrates the climax of the week (2:1–3).

The Theological Agenda of Genesis 1:1–2:4a

If there is such a thing as doxological narrative, this is it. From the opening "in the beginning God created . . ." to the closing "and God ceased [*šābat*] from all his work that he had accomplished in [his] creative actions," we hear a catechetical-style statement that makes a series of profound theological points, including the following:

1. The opening affirms the divine origin of the universe (v. 1); the universe had a beginning—it is not eternal.
2. The hovering presence of the “Spirit of God” (v. 2) guarantees the perfection of the product of divine creation.
3. The announcements of the six days highlight the creative power of the divine word.⁹
4. The universe that God created was permeated by structure and order, with the heavenly bodies functioning as servants of light and symbols of cosmic stability (vv. 14–18; cf. Jer. 31:36). God created animals and plants after their kinds, and so they reproduce.
5. The creation of *’ādām* as “the image of God” and the assignment of representative and deputy status to human beings represent the climax of the creation week.
6. The divine rest on the seventh day, when the universe was complete, became the paradigm for the activity of humans, whose seven-day rhythm celebrates the creative and providential power of God (Exod. 20:11).

Although Christians often appeal to this text in debates against evolutionary theories of cosmic origins, we understand it best if we recognize the cultural and religious context out of which it emerged and which it primarily addressed. Many have observed that rather than challenging modern perspectives (whose atheistic and secular foundations all ancient Near Easterners would have rejected), this document challenges ancient pagan views of cosmic origins in several significant respects. (1) The singularity of God contrasts with the polytheistic worldviews of Israel’s neighbors. (2) The *těhôm* (great deep), which is assonantly reminiscent of the Babylonian mythological divine figure Tiamat, provides the context in which God works. (3) The seven-day structure reflects the intentionality and sacred nature of the process of divine creation, in

contrast to the ad hoc character of extrabiblical accounts, like the Babylonian Enuma Elish. (4) The creative power of the (daily) divine word contrasts with the crassly physical nature of other ancient Near Eastern accounts in which the universe was created from the body of Tiamat after Marduk had defeated her. (5) The order built into the universe, specifically the reproduction of plants and animals after their kind, contrasts with Babylonian omen texts that imagine creatures giving birth to all kinds of bizarre and mixed forms, with features seemingly derived from other species. (6) The text casts the heavenly lights as specifically created by God and appointed to their places in the heavens to govern cosmic affairs as servants of light, in contrast to pagan views in which sun, moon, and stars were all divinities in their own right. (7) The creation of humankind as a royal figure and the image of God contrasts with other accounts in which people were created to function as the slaves of the gods. (8) The final rest of God contrasts with the perpetual restlessness of the gods in pagan mythology.

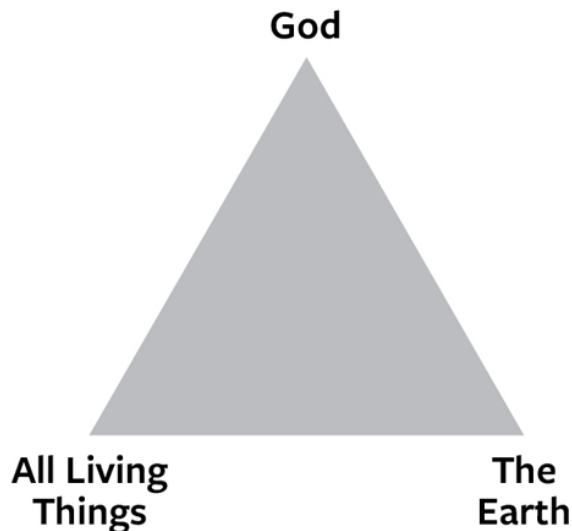
The Relationship between Creator and Cosmos in Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Having explored the literary nature of this text and its general theological trajectories, we may now focus on the issue at hand: the relationship between God and his creation. Although the relationship appears binary—Creator and created reality—the biblical picture is more complicated than that. Elsewhere First Testament texts often distinguish between “the earth/world” (*hā’āreṣ/tēbēl*) and its contents, referred to variously as “all that is in it” (*kol ’ăšer bāh*, Deut. 10:14), “its fullness” (*mēlō’āh*),¹⁰ and “those who inhabit it” (*yōšēbê bāh*).¹¹ Our text draws similar distinctions, speaking about the heavens and the earth, which includes the dry land (which God called *’ereṣ*, “earth”), the gathered waters (which God called *mayim*, “seas” [v. 10]), and living

creatures (*nepeš ḥayyâ*).¹² These include swarming land animals (*šereš*), large monsters (*tannînîm*) in the seas, birds that fly in the skies (vv. 20–21), creatures that scurry along the ground (*remeš*), high-carriage land animals (*běhēmâ*), and wild beasts that live on dry land (*ḥayětô 'ereš*, v. 24). Plants occupy a liminal place within creation (vv. 11–12); like animals, plants live, but unlike animals, they lack lungs and cannot walk.

God's relationship to inanimate creation differed from his relationship to animate creatures because the latter were animated by his breath (Job 12:7–10; Ps. 104:24–30). Therefore, we may speak not only of a binary relationship between the Creator and his created universe but also of a triangular relationship involving God, the physical environment, and all living things that occupy this space (fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1
The Cosmic Triangle



God's Relationship to Inanimate Creation (the Earth)

Inanimate creation is represented in Genesis 1:1–2:4a by the merismic pair “the heavens and the earth” (*haššāmayim wěhā’āreš*) in 1:1 and 2:4a. Obviously God’s relationship with this creation was established by his personal creative act. Whereas Isaiah speaks of the universe as the work of God’s hand (Isa. 40:12), this text observes that God spoke new elements into existence with seven jussive declarations: “Let there be . . .” or “Let X happen.”¹³ In each case the comments that follow indicate the effectiveness of the divine word, and seven times we hear of God’s assessment of the respective stages in the process, “God saw that it was good.”¹⁴ The account of God’s creative work concludes with a climactic and comprehensive assessment: “God saw all that he had made, and look, it was exceedingly good” (v. 31). Chronological markers signal the boundaries between these stages: “Then evening came. And morning came, day X.”

The way God and inanimate matter relate is striking. God exercised supreme authority over the earth and its parts, assigning all the elements their places and functions. He never addressed inanimate creation directly, but the third-person jussives each day assume the segments addressed heard him: whatever God called for did happen. This observation applies whether he called something into existence (“Let there be . . . , and so it happened”) or virtually charged inanimate elements to participate in the creative activity: “Let the earth sprout vegetation” (v. 11), “Let the water swarm with living creatures” (v. 20), and “Let the earth produce living creatures of every kind” (v. 24). However, rather than commanding (*šiwā*) the earth and the sea to do his bidding, he “spoke” (*wayyō’mer*), in effect inviting them to participate in his creative work.

However, the descriptions of the production of plants and animals are asymmetrical. In the second and third cases, the narrator follows up the charges with statements crediting God with creating (*bārā*) marine creatures (v. 21)

and making (‘āśâ) land animals (v. 25). Nevertheless, with respect to the first, the earth appears as the actant/subject (v. 12). Furthermore, verses 29–30 subordinate plants to animals; YHWH took what the earth produced and gave it to the animals as food. Psalm 104:10–15 extends the earth’s investment in creaturely life by having YHWH commission (šillāḥ) springs in the valleys to satisfy the creatures’ thirst. YHWH also provides (water) for trees so they may serve as homes for birds (vv. 16–17) and assigns mountains and cliffs as homes for mountain goats and hyraxes (v. 18), presumably as representatives of all creatures. Even the sun and the moon “know” (yāda’) their places within the divine economy (vv. 19–20) and in regulating the seasonal and daily activities of the creatures—including human beings (vv. 19–23). In short, the resources of earth are gifts from YHWH’s hand to secure the well-being of creatures. Although many interpret Psalm 104 as a nature psalm, it is in fact an ode to YHWH, framed as a celebration of transcendent glory (vv. 1–4, 31–35) but explaining with vivid poetic imagination how the entire cosmos sustains the lives of those who are animated by the divine breath (vv. 29–30).

God’s Relationship to Animate Creation

The discussion above has hinted at the special role that living creatures play within the triangular cosmic economy, but this subject deserves further treatment. Several features of Genesis 1:1–2:4a reflect the special status of animal life in God’s world. First, this subject receives extraordinary attention in the text. Although the creation of the cosmos transpires over six literary days, by word count, the last two days, involving the creation of animals, take up the same amount of space as the first four days (vv. 3–19, 207 words; vv. 20–31, 206 words). Second, the special verb for “create,” *bārā’*, which occurs in the frame (1:1; 2:3–4), occurs three times in the report of the fifth and sixth days (vv. 21, 27a,

27b) but is missing in the first four days. Third, the account specifies six branches of Israel's zoological taxonomy: marine and sky creatures (vv. 20–21), high-carriage land animals (*běhēmâ*), low-carriage creatures that scurry along the ground (*remes*), wild animals (*ḥayyat hā'āreṣ*, vv. 24–25), and human beings (*'ādām*, vv. 26–28).

Fourth, God blessed (*bērēk*) the creatures, charging them to multiply and fill the spheres of existence they occupy (vv. 22, 28). This is not explicitly mentioned for land animals (vv. 24–25), but it is undoubtedly assumed. The imperative verbs assume an “I-you” relationship between God and the creatures that was absent from his relationship with inanimate creation. The Hebrew word for “to bless” always bears a positive sense, meaning either to confer upon a person good gifts or to empower a person to achieve that which is good, in this case fulfilling the divine calling of being fruitful and filling the earth. Verses 29–30 clarify what that requires: God provided (*nātan*) sustenance for both humankind and the animals in the form of the seed of ground vegetation and the fruit of trees.

Fifth, although the survey of divine creative activity was punctuated six times with the general assessment “And God saw that it was good” (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), the sixth day ended with a comprehensive statement: “God observed everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good!” (*ṭôb mē'ôd*, v. 31). With the appearance of the animals and human beings, the cosmos was in excellent shape and set for a durative relationship involving God the producer, the physical environment as the stage, and the animals as players in this divine drama. The creatures collectively represented a third party within this cosmic economy, alongside God and the physical environment. For the moment we will note that human beings were part of this third angle of the triangle and that the primary cosmic relationships involved God, the world, and all life on the earth (fig. 1.1).

From the beginning, God intended this tripartite relationship to function symbiotically, with each member responding to the other two in a dynamic dialogue. However, the relationship did not involve parties of equal status but consisted of a divine Suzerain and his vassals, language taken from ancient Near Eastern diplomatic texts (cf. 2 Kings 16:7–9). God’s sovereignty over the other parties was grounded on three pillars: (1) He is the Creator of the earth and its inhabitants. (2) He owns the earth and its fullness—that is, all living things. (3) He determines the role the other two parties play within this relationship. With respect to the bottom right angle, he waters the earth so that plants may grow and nourish the animals,¹⁵ or he curses the ground (Gen. 3:17–19; 5:29) and turns off the rains.¹⁶ With respect to the bottom left angle, the Creator feeds the creatures or withholds food and withdraws his animating breath.¹⁷ God’s performative word energized the earth to produce all kinds of vegetation (Gen. 1:11–12), but he also energized the waters to swarm with living creatures, the sky to come alive with birds (1:20–21), and the earth to produce all kinds of land creatures (1:24–25). In the end, he blessed the creatures themselves with the charge to multiply and fill the earth (1:22).

Because these relationships were natural rather than artificially created, we do not expect the term “covenant” (*bĕrît*) to appear in Genesis 1. That blessings and stipulations, which were standard elements in ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, are evident here does not make this relationship covenantal. Rather the blessings (vv. 22, 24, 28) served as appeals for fidelity to the Suzerain and invitations to enter into the well-being (*šālôm*) and enjoy the benefactions (*ṭôb*) that God offered. The commands to the earth to produce vegetation (vv. 11–12); to the marine and sky animals to multiply and fill the seas and sky, respectively (v. 22); and to humankind to fill the earth and govern the world—these commands represent divinely

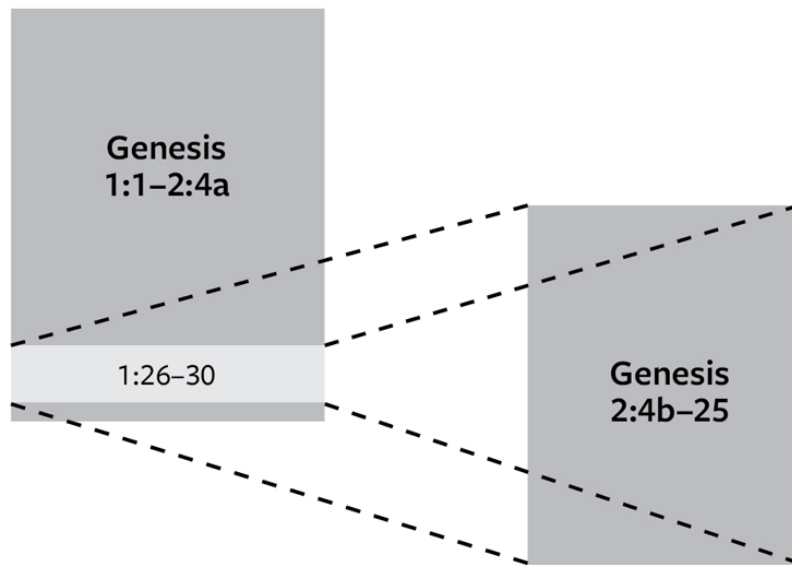
defined stipulations to be fulfilled by the vassals. Genesis 1 announces no curses as consequences for the vassals' failure to fulfill their obligations, though the charge to humankind to "dominate and govern" (*kābaš wěřādâ*, v. 28) the earth may hint at signs of revolt against the Creator and suggest that humankind was created expressly to take care of an internal administrative problem (see further below).

Israel's Cosmological Story (Gen. 2:4a-25)

Unlike Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the text of 2:4b-25 is neither self-contained nor independent but part of a larger complex sandwiched between two *tôlědôt* formulas, the first ending the preceding literary unit (2:4a) and the second signaling the beginning of the following unit (5:1-6:8). Although chapter 2 is part of Act 1 of the divine drama of redemption, it sets the stage for Act 2 (3:1-11:26). In so doing, 2:4b-25 is concerned less with presenting an account of cosmic origins (cosmogony) than with introducing the primary (human) character and setting the context for the description of humankind's response to the divine mandate (3:1-4:26). The first chapter of Act 2 (Gen. 3) demonstrates a massive failure, involving what theologians have called "the fall" of humankind and with it the demise of the cosmos. That motif is developed in three parts: (1) the context of the fall (2:4b-25), (2) the events involved in the fall (3:1-7), and (3) early consequences of the fall (3:8-4:26). The last section subdivides further into the effects of the fall on Adam and Eve (3:8-24) and the effects of the fall on their descendants (4:1-26).

Figure 1.2

The Relationship between Genesis 1:26-30 and 2:4b-25



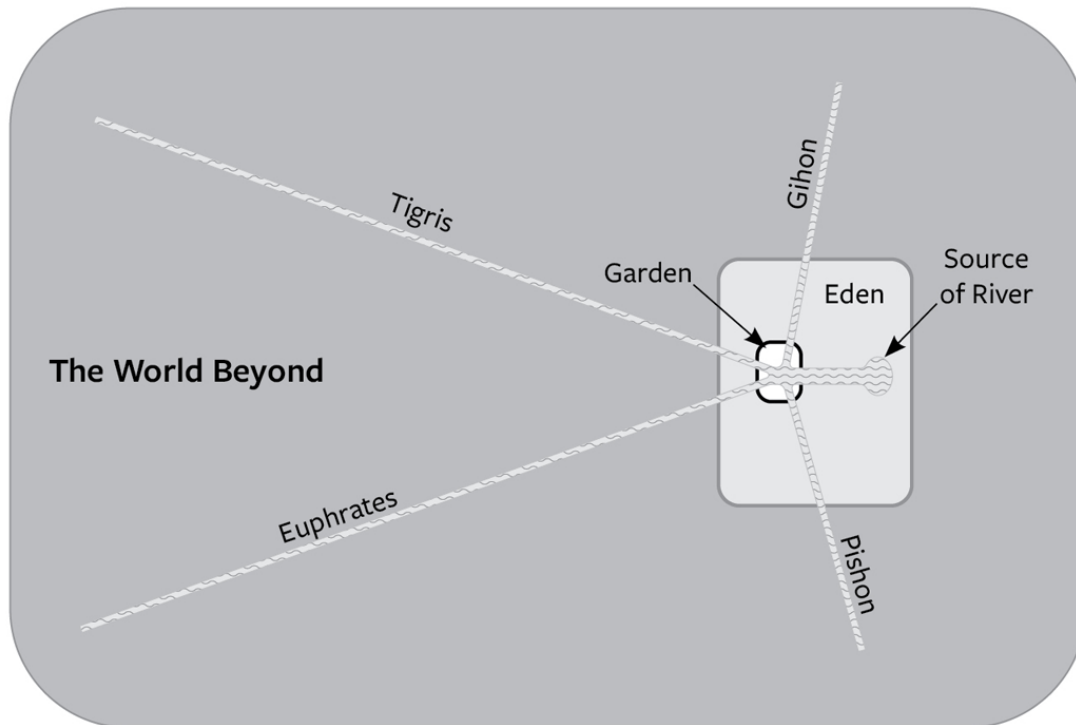
Although the flavors and tones of chapters 1 and 2 differ significantly, by juxtaposing them the author of Genesis invites us to interpret chapter 2 in the light of chapter 1. Specifically, this chapter seems to build on 1:26-30 and develop the creation of humankind in greater detail (fig. 1.2). In the process this chapter enhances our understanding of the earth and its geographical design. The picture is admittedly sketchy, and the text focuses on a small corner of the globe, but the chapter suggests the following terrestrial features:

1. In the east, YHWH Elohim planted a garden, where he placed the Man newly created (2:8).
2. The garden was located in a larger region called Eden and was watered by a river originating in Eden, yielding a garden extraordinarily lush with vegetation, satisfying the vice-regent's physical appetite for food and the aesthetic appetite for beauty (vv. 9-10a).
3. In the garden the river divided into four branches that flowed outward and watered the entire landscape around Eden (vv. 10b-14).

4. The fact that YHWH commissioned the Man to protect (*šāmar*) and serve (*‘ābad*) the garden suggests that nefarious external forces threatened the well-being and security of the garden (v. 15). This detail provides a link with 1:28, reinforcing *Adam*’s charge to subdue and govern the earth. By the time God created the first human beings, elements within creation had apparently become “unruly.” If this is a correct assessment, the freedom of creatures to act “unruly” did not jeopardize the divine assessment of the created world as “very good” in 1:31.
5. The image of a garden at the center of creation is tightly linked to ancient accounts of royal gardens associated with the palaces of kings. These gardens represented visual ideals of a world in which the physical environment, human and animal inhabitants, and the divine sovereign/Sovereign functioned harmoniously, and from which the blessing of god/God and the kind rule of the king would emanate throughout the realm.

Figure 1.3

A Schematic of Eden in Context



Genesis 2 paints a picture of a perfect world, where all needs are met, especially for *Adam*.¹⁸ The tripartite relationship observed in chapter 1 is fully operative as the physical environment, living creatures, and Deity relate to one another in a symbiotic economy. Because 1:24 presents the earth (*hā'āreṣ*) as producing the land animals, YHWH's forming (*yāṣar*) of the Man from the dust of the ground (*'āpār min hā'ādāmâ*, 2:7) affirms his earthly origins. Even so, the divine invitation to examine and name all the creatures (2:19–20) reinforces the functional superiority of the Man over the rest of the animals, though this exercise also demonstrated that no female counterpart to himself existed among the creatures. Nevertheless, unlike the universal scope of humankind's mandate in chapter 1, here the Man's administrative role is focused on the garden. Specifically, the charge "to serve" (*'ābad*) and "to guard" (*šāmar*) in 2:15 assumes that the primary concern is the well-being of the garden, rather than the Man's own *šālôm*.

EXCURSUS

Eden as a Temple?

In recent years it has become fashionable to interpret the creation of the cosmos in general and Eden in particular as an exercise in divine temple building. While Israel's sanctuaries were designed by YHWH¹⁹ and envisioned as replicas of the heavenly temple,²⁰ complete with a throne room (represented by the holy of holies) and a throne (represented by the ark of the covenant), they were also constructed as a miniature Eden. Decorated with images of cherubs²¹ and palm trees, lit by the menorah—a symbol of the tree of life—and served by a priest decked out in royal colors and precious stones, the temple employed motifs harking back to the garden where God first put human beings. But does this mean that the author of Genesis 1–3 perceived either the cosmos or Eden as a temple? I used to think so, but on the basis of a closer reading of Act 1 in Genesis and a reconsideration of the conceptual world represented by temples, I now find the case less convincing than I once thought.

Genesis 1–3 introduces readers to a world that we may consider sacred space by virtue of its divine origin but which the narrator does not explicitly categorize as a temple, either by means of a conceptual framework or by the use of distinctly priestly vocabulary. The only priestly expression in Genesis 1–2 involves the Sabbath, which God “sanctified” (*wayēqaddēš ’ōtô*, Gen. 2:3). However, the object of the action is time (the seventh day) rather than created space. As I intimated earlier, Genesis 1 portrays the cosmos as a royal world, in which the Creator deputizes *Adam* as his administrative vassal to secure the smooth operation of that world. In this environment, the sun, moon, and stars served royal rather than priestly functions (note the verb *mašal*, “to rule, govern,” in 1:16), but more significantly, the narrator casts *Adam* as a king, whom God invested with the status of his “image/likeness” (*šelem/dēmût*, Gen. 1:26–27) and charged to subdue (*kābaš*) and exercise dominion (*rādâ*) over the earth (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8; cf. further below, chap. 2).

Although critical scholars attribute Genesis 2–3 to the Yahwist (J) rather than the Priestly source (P), recently many have ironically recognized more links to Israel's sanctuary traditions here than in chapter 1 (which critical scholars attribute to P): (1) the verb “to walk about” (*hithallēk*) in the garden;²² (2) the

cherubs (*kěřûbîm*) guarding the entrance to the garden;²³ (3) the tree of life;²⁴ (4) the charge to Adam “to serve and to guard” the garden;²⁵ (5) the garments (*kuttōnet*) of skin provided for Adam and Eve;²⁶ (6) the river flowing from Eden to water the garden;²⁷ (7) the reference to gold;²⁸ (8) the precious stones (*bědōlah* and *šōham*);²⁹ (9) the lush arboreal imagery;³⁰ (10) the garden as a mountain, suggested by the rivers flowing downward in four directions;³¹ (11) the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was “good for food . . . a delight to the eyes . . . to be desired to make one wise,”³² and the illicit eating of which brought death;³³ (12) the eastern entrance to the garden (Gen. 3:24; cf. Ezek. 40:6); (13) the tripartite structure of the garden (Gen. 2:10) in which Eden = the holy of holies, the garden = the holy place, and the region outside the garden = the outer court.

While impressive collectively, each of these observations is capable of another and in many instances more natural interpretation that removes it from the priestly conceptual realm and transfers it to the realm of an ancient royal garden. In the end the temple interpretation is illusory and can be maintained only by reading later realities into the earlier text. The links with later sanctuaries are clear, but these arise from the dual functions of Israel’s sanctuary. As the residence of YHWH, it was a microcosm of his heavenly palace/temple (cf. Exod. 25:1–9, 40), but as a miniature Eden it expressed the eschatological hope of God’s favor and eventual restoration of the cosmos. The Eden narrative has provided the lexical and conceptual vocabulary for the sanctuary construction, but this does not mean that we should make Eden into a temple. Genesis 2 does not portray Eden as the holy of holies of the cosmic temple or a residence for YHWH in which Adam engages in cultic rituals.

Recognizing the function of temples in the ancient world reinforces this conclusion. Whereas Christians perceive places of worship as physical space where the faithful gather, in ancient times temples were perceived primarily as earthly palaces where the gods resided. However, the opening chapters of Genesis lack any hints of the notion that God created the world because he was homeless or needed a place for his throne. His real residence is in heaven, as the Torah (Deut. 26:15), the Psalter (Ps. 80:14 [15]), and the Prophets (Isa. 63:15) declare.

At the dedication of the temple, and after asking, “Will God actually reside with humankind on earth?” (2 Chron. 6:18; cf. 1 Kings 8:27), Solomon recognized the location of YHWH’s true dwelling: “When they pray to this place, listen from your residence, from heaven” (2 Chron. 6:21; cf. 1 Kings 8:30, 32–49). References to YHWH’s heavenly throne reinforce this notion.³⁴

Whatever God’s reason for creating the world, it was not to provide a home for himself. That YHWH should have “walked about” (*hithallēk*) in the garden (Gen.

3:8) does not contradict this conclusion. Unlike “to dwell” (*yāšab*), this verb does not speak of residence but suggests occasional presence. Since YHWH was the creator of the garden, it was YHWH’s domain. But the verb also conveys an extraordinary domestic image. In ancient times, people would relax and go for a walk in “the cool of the day” (*rûaḥ hayyôm*), when the evening breezes blow. YHWH’s appearance in the garden reflects the openness of his relationship with its inhabitants. Instead of welcoming their “extraterrestrial” Suzerain, the Man and the Woman tragically hid from him in Genesis 3. Sin had transformed an evening visit into a call to account and resulted in a tragic disturbance of all relationships. In Israelite thought, the temple served both as a symbol of the fallen world and as a symbol of the divine desire to continue to relate to that world. A pre-fall world needed no temple; relationship with God was free and open.

However, as noted, Israel’s tabernacle and temple also represented microcosms of Eden, and herein lies the key to the relationship between Genesis 1–3 and Israel’s sanctuaries. Although I reject reading Genesis 1–3 as a reflection of temple theology, I accept the notion that temple-building accounts reflect creation theology. Because the Eden narrative provides much of the conceptual vocabulary for Israel’s sanctuary tradition, the narrative contains important clues to the function of the temple in Israelite thinking. The sanctuary did indeed provide YHWH with an earthly dwelling amid a fallen people, and its rituals provided a means whereby covenant relationship with him could be maintained in a fallen world. As a miniature Eden, the Israelite temple addressed both humankind’s alienation from the divine Suzerain and the alienation of creation in general. From Zion, Eden-like prosperity would flow out to the land that YHWH gave Israel as their grant.³⁵ While the rabbis went too far in suggesting that the heavens and the earth were created from Zion (b. Yoma 54b; Tanh. Qidd. 10), the temple represented the source of Israel’s and ultimately the world’s re-creation. The temple symbolized the gracious divine determination to lift the effects of the curse from the land and the people, and the place from which YHWH’s blessing and rule (the delights of Eden) could radiate (Ps. 50:2–4) to the land and nation, and ultimately to the ends of the earth. Solomon acknowledged that the temple was built with the world in view (1 Kings 8:41–43, 59–60). Indeed, in the eighth century BC, reversing the direction of the flow of the rivers in Eden and applying the word metaphorically to people, Isaiah and Micah looked forward to the day when peoples from all over the world would “stream” (*nāḥar*) to Zion to learn the way of YHWH, and his peace would flow out and envelop the world (Isa. 2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–4).

The Institution of the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 3-9)

Introduction

By painting such hopeful pictures of the triangular relationship involving God, material creation, and the living creatures, both the catechetical and the narrative accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 provide the background to Act 2 of the divine program of redemption and establish the need for the cosmic covenant as it is revealed in Genesis 3-9. The catechetical account (1:1-2:4a) had ended with God celebrating the completion of his creative labors by blessing and sanctifying the seventh day. Meanwhile this entire “very good” creation was poised to perform its divinely assigned functions, and the individual parts were ready to fulfill their charges. God had installed the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens to govern the world by ensuring daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly rhythms (1:14-18), and, according to Psalm 104:19-20, they “knew” their places. The ground was producing vegetation (Gen. 1:11-12), which would feed the animals who appeared on days 5 and 6 (vv. 29-30). And having been blessed and charged by God, the animals were set to multiply and fill the seas, the skies, and the dry land with life. Thus the account of the “generation” (*tôlědôt*) of the heavens and the earth had ended.

Genesis 2:4b-25 reinforces this hopeful picture, particularly with reference to humankind, the primary earthly actors. Indeed, the garden east in Eden represented the superlative state of blessedness. Although this chapter expounds on 1:26-30, it opens the window on a small slice of the larger picture. According to the opening note, the ground producing vegetation without the assistance of human laborers (2:4b-6) functioned as the backdrop for the “fabrication” (*yāṣar*) of the first Man (*’ādām*) and the “planting” (*nāṭa’*) of an eastern garden in Eden to be his home (vv. 7-9). In this “paradise” (Gk. *paradeisos*) the trees

were magnificent and yielded their fruit in abundance, for the place was watered by a river that divided into four branches that brought this life-giving resource to all the lands surrounding the garden (vv. 10–14). The lands around were flush with gold and precious stones and populated with all the species of land and sky creatures that YHWH had created. YHWH brought representatives of each species to the garden for the Man to enjoy and for him to begin to govern.

However, this picture lacked one small detail, a lack the narrator characterizes as “not good”: the Man was alone—that is, without a female counterpart (2:18). The divine plan to have all the animals parade before the Man served several purposes: (1) in naming them he employed his intellectual gifts of analysis and description; (2) in naming them he demonstrated his superiority over the animals—the greater names the lesser; (3) in examining them he tried to apply his social and communicative skills, but the absence of a counterpart exposed the problem—without “the Woman,” “the Man” would be unable to populate the whole earth as mandated by the Creator. That must have been a frustrating day for the Man, because none of the creatures matched him (vv. 19–20). However, the account reaches its climax with YHWH quickly resolving the issue. By means of a special operation, he prepared the Woman, who was perfect for the Man (vv. 21–25). The Man could relate to her as his equal and counterpart, and together the two could begin to populate the earth. The account ends by noting the perfect confidence and transparency of the pair.

This was indeed a perfect world. As the originator and head of the economic triangle, YHWH delighted in what he had created: the physical environment produced vegetation in abundance, the animals were poised to go out and fill the earth, and their relationship with humankind was established. Not only had they freely come to the Man, but they apparently also accepted his lordship over them. And

when the Woman appeared, in the first quoted words from the Man's mouth, we hear a song: "Eureka! She is here!" (2:23).

The Need for the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 3:1-6:8)

The narrative is compressed, but the flow of chapter 2 into chapters 3 and 4 suggests that the idyllic context in which YHWH had placed the Man and the Woman disintegrated quickly. The Woman was formally presented to the Man and was united with him after his surgery, but before this couple could celebrate the first fruit of their union, the world and the relationships that governed it had turned upside down. Evil forces were unleashed and engulfed the garden, Eden, and the regions beyond, resulting in the corruption (*šḥt*) and violence (*ḥāmās*) of both the physical world and the animals that inhabited it (6:11, 13). Human hubris was the ultimate cause of the disintegration, and because the status of the Man and the Woman as vice-regents for God did not last, the demise of the divinely assigned realm came with the demise of that divinely appointed governorship.

The couple's rebellious action unleashed horrific forces that caused the disintegration of the cosmic order and transformed a blissful paradise into a dysfunctional environment characterized by alienation at every level. To be sure, some aspects of the original blessing and humankind's vice-regal status remained. Women would still conceive and bear children;³⁶ through man's agricultural labors the ground would yield food (3:19); animals would be domesticated (4:2, 20); and working with earthly raw materials, humans would master the arts of brickmaking and fortress construction (4:17). Furthermore, they would discover the value of the ores contained in the ground and learn the metallurgical arts of transforming these ores into useful vessels and instruments of labor (4:22, bronze and

iron). Obviously, God had not completely abandoned either his vice-regents or his world. Nevertheless, the relationships of trust between Suzerain and his creation, between Suzerain and viceroy, between the Man and the Woman, and between viceroy and kingdom were all severed.

While human characters dominate the stories embedded in Genesis 3:1–4:26 and naturally take over the genealogy in chapter 5, the narrator also notes the cosmic consequences of the first Man and Woman's actions in this garden in Eden. First, YHWH Elohim demoted the serpent, who had been the craftiest of all the wild creatures, to the lowest of creatures (3:14–15). Second, YHWH Elohim cursed (*'ārûr*) the ground that had spontaneously produced seed and fruit for human consumption so that it resisted human labor to produce food and yielded thorns and thistles instead, and he ultimately sentenced the ground to receive the dust of decomposed human bodies (vv. 17–19). Third, although YHWH's provision of garments for Adam and Eve in the face of the new realities affirmed their impulse to cover their genitalia, for the first time we read of slaughtering an animal for the benefit of humans (3:21; cf. v. 7; cf. also Abel's offering of sheep as tribute offerings to YHWH, 4:2, 4). Fourth, when Cain murdered his brother, the ground absorbed the latter's blood and in so doing became an accomplice in the blood's crying out to YHWH. Furthermore, Cain himself was cursed, and the ground served as the divine agent of that curse, intensifying its resistance to Cain's agricultural efforts (4:10–12).

Figure 1.4

The Inverted Cosmic Triangle (Gen. 3:1–6:8)

All Living
Things

The
Earth



God

The locations of the *tôlēdôt* formula in 5:1 and 6:9 invite readers to treat 6:1–8 narrowly as a prose conclusion to the genealogy that makes up chapter 5. Although the genealogy demonstrates that God was blessing human beings with offspring—both male and female—and thus ensuring the sustainability of the species, the removal of Enoch in the seventh generation from Adam reminds hearers that the world was off course spiritually. The genealogist interrupts his recounting of the line of succession between Adam and Noah with a comment on Enoch’s spiritual state: he “walked with God,” which led to God’s removal of him from among the living (5:22–24). The verb for “walk” (*hithallēk*) involves the same form as we saw in 3:8, which spoke of YHWH Elohim walking about in the garden during the cool of the day. However, in a rare moment, here the narrator reverses the roles; the human walks with God, rather than vice versa (cf. 6:9; Mic. 6:8). In contrast to YHWH’s charge to Abram to “walk *before* him” (Gen. 17:1), this expression speaks of intimate and humble fellowship (cf. Mic. 6:8). With reference to Noah, it is associated with being a righteous and blameless person (*’îš ṣaddîq tāmîm*, 6:9), suggesting in this case that by removing Enoch, God declared that Enoch was more at home with him than with his fellow earthlings.

With a few broad brushstrokes Genesis 6:1–8 summarizes the depth of human and cosmic depravity. First, males of a superrace of hominids, referred to as “sons of God” (*běné hā’ēlōhîm*) and Nephilim (*něpilîm*, “demoted ones”), copulated with female human beings, resulting in extraordinary offspring, characterized as “legendary ancient heroes” (*haggibbōrîm ’ăšer mē’ôlām ’anšê haššēm*). Scholars interpret “sons of God” variously as (1) descendants of the godly Seth (cf. chap. 5); (2) men from the upper/royal classes, in contrast to female commoners; or (3) supernatural angelic beings (Job 1:6; 2:1), who resided in the heavens, in contrast to female human earthlings. Of these options, the last is the most likely (cf. Jude 5–7), but it flies in the face of Matthew 22:30 and Mark 12:25, where Jesus declares angels to be ungendered. The grammar and syntax of Genesis 6:1–4 suggest that the narrator equates these “sons of God” with the Nephilim, gigantic figures, referring presumably to a nonhuman subspecies of hominids (non-*Adamites*; cf. Grossman, *Creation*, 211–23). Biblical narrators have preserved the memory of these creatures by applying the epithet “Nephilim” to the Anakites, a clan of extraordinarily large Canaanites (Num. 13:33) who may have been linked genetically to Goliath (1 Sam. 17; 1 Chron. 20:5–8). In the present instance, these sexual unions appear to have violated the boundaries of copulation and reproduction “after their kind” (*lěmînāh*, Gen. 1:24–25).

Second, YHWH assessed the moral and spiritual state of the descendants of Adam as “extremely wicked” (*rabbâ rā’at hā’ādām*) and their intellectual state as extremely depraved: “every impulse of their mind was only evil all the time” (6:5).

Third, YHWH expressed inner turmoil (*niḥam*) for having created humankind, because the depravity of the vice-regent had extended to all the land animals (vv. 6–7) and resulted in the corruption of the entire planet. As the

creatures multiplied and spread throughout the planet, they corrupted everything they touched. The narrator highlights the cosmic spread of human corruption in 6:11–12: “Now the *earth* had become corrupt [*wattiššāḥēt*] before God, and the *earth* was filled with violence [*ḥāmās*]. God examined the *earth*, and yes, it was corrupt [*nišḥātâ*], because every fleshly creature [*bāśār*] had corrupted [*hišḥît*] its behavior on the *earth*.”

With the “fall” of humankind, fury and hostility replaced the care and attention that YHWH had exhibited in creating “the heavens and the earth.” The creatures at the bottom left angle of the cosmic relational triangle were in YHWH’s crosshairs (see fig. 1.1).

The Divine Motivation behind the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 6:9–8:20)

Although YHWH’s declared response to the evil that had enveloped the earth was to blot out all life on its surface, like the previous *tôlědôt* account (cf. 4:25–26), the *tôlědôt* in Genesis 5:1–6:8 ends on a surprising note: “Now Noah found grace [*ḥēn*] in the eyes of YHWH” (6:8). It is important to recognize that this statement marks the end of a literary unit rather than the beginning, as the new *tôlědôt* formula in 6:9 confirms. But if we look back, we may witness many evidences of divine grace in the face of human rebellion that began with eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17):

1. By grace God promised an answer for the sin introduced by our first parents; it will come through the descendant(s) of the Woman (3:14–15).
2. By grace God affirmed the newfound embarrassment in the face of nakedness by providing more substantial covering than pathetic fig leaves, which symbolized the couple’s alienation from God and from each other (3:21).

3. By grace God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden and barred them from the tree of life; presumably eating its fruit would have sealed their alienation from God irrevocably (3:22, 24).
4. By grace God declared that life would go on, though human well-being could no longer be taken for granted. The work of producing food would be difficult, but there would be bread; conception would be frustrated, but “seed” would come, and the Woman would be named Eve, from a root meaning “life” (*ḥawwâ*, 3:16–20).
5. By grace God enabled Eve to conceive and give birth to two sons, Cain and Abel (4:1–2).
6. By grace God accepted the offering of Abel and, in response to Cain’s problematic act of worship, gave him a second chance to relate properly to himself (4:1–8).
7. By grace, after Cain murdered Abel, God spared his life and ensured his protection in exile (4:9–15).
8. By grace God blessed human work and enabled culture to advance in succeeding generations, despite the intensification of sin (4:16–22).
9. By grace God heard and accepted human beings (Seth) when they called upon his name, YHWH (4:25–26).
10. By grace one generation succeeded another, a reality that was possible because in each generation men fathered and women mothered both sons and daughters (5:1–32).
11. By grace God delighted in fellowship with Enoch and ultimately removed him from his corrupt and violent environment (5:21–24).

These divine acts were all undeserved, but none was less deserved than Noah’s finding grace in the eyes of YHWH. While I leave a fuller discussion of Noah himself for chapter 2, our present interest concerns the cosmic implications of God’s grace toward this man.

Whereas the pervasive corruption of creation called for the destruction of all living things (6:11–13), by sheer grace God devised a scheme whereby representatives of all species of animals could be preserved. He commissioned Noah to construct a vessel large enough to hold a male and female of each type of animal and to take on board sufficient food to sustain them while the earth and its inhabitants would feel the full force of divine fury (6:19–21). It was grace toward the creatures that drove God’s grace toward Noah: once the vessel had been constructed, two of every kind of animal would come to him “to preserve their life” (6:20).

When the deluge hit, it was obvious that the cosmic relational triangle—involving God, the earth, and the creatures who inhabited it—had completely disintegrated. As the divine Suzerain in this relationship, YHWH determined to destroy all life on dry land (6:7, 11–13), and he would use the resources of his creation to accomplish this: “Look, I will bring upon the earth a deluge of water myself, to destroy all creatures under heaven whose lives are sustained by breath; every [living creature] on earth will expire” (6:17).

Although God had declared *he* would annihilate all flesh (6:7, 13), the narrator portrays the heavens and earth as conspiring against the creatures: the fountains of the subterranean waters burst open, the floodgates of the sky opened up (7:11), and the rain fell for forty days and nights (v. 12). The description of the actual flood (vv. 17–22) never portrays God as the actor; instead the flood and the waters appear as actants: the deluge “happened” (*hāyâ*, v. 17), the waters “increased” (*rābâ*, vv. 17–18) and “swelled” (*gābar*, lit., “were strong,” vv. 18–20), covering the highest mountains (vv. 19–20), eliminating any refuge for creatures on the peaks. Verses 21–23 highlight the totality of the destruction: all categories of land animals named in 1:24–28—that is, those whose nostrils inhaled “the breath of life”

(*nišmat rûaḥ ḥayyîm*, 7:22). God achieved his goal: all things living on land, except for Noah and his companions on the ark, were wiped out (*māḥâ*, v. 23).

Within the overall flow of the flood narrative (6:9–8:22), Genesis 8:1 signals a turning point: God remembered Noah and all the animals with him in the ark. During their 150-day endurance of the ark bobbing around on the water (7:24), Noah and his family probably often wondered if God had forgotten them. The opening line of chapter 8 declares that he had not, either now or in the past. In this first occurrence of the Hebrew word *zākar*, we must note that, although it is usually translated “to remember,” it does not mean to awaken from amnesia. The word means “to take into account, to act on one’s awareness.” As another check on interpreters’ typically androcentric perspective, the change in God’s action remarkably arose from his concern for the human administrator (Noah) and the community that he administered, all the creatures on the ark. God had commissioned the vice-regent to construct the ark so that he might protect (*šāmar*) and “serve” (*‘ābad*) the interests of the creatures (cf. 2:15). Taking into account this odd assemblage of life, God intervened and replaced the torrents of rain with a drying wind (*rûaḥ*; or was it his Spirit, as in 1:2?) that blew over the earth (8:1). Meanwhile he called back the cosmic forces that he had unleashed to attack all creation, capping the fountains of the deep, closing the floodgates of the sky, and restraining the rain. Like God’s own fury, the wrath of the forces of nature was spent (v. 2), enabling all the creatures to emerge from the ark (vv. 14–19) almost one year later (cf. 7:11; 8:13).

Although the deluge had left the landscape devastated and all other creatures destroyed, in his grace God had preserved a remnant of all the species, through which the earth would be repopulated (8:17). Having survived the flood, as the corporate head of the community of survivors in the ark, Noah responded to God’s remarkable grace with

sacrifices of thanksgiving and fellowship (8:20–21). And by that same grace, YHWH guaranteed the continued existence of the cosmos through a covenant that he established with the cosmos.

The Essence of the Cosmic Covenant (Gen. 8:21–9:17)

In Genesis 9:8 the narrator opens a new literary subunit with “And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, saying,” and he closes it with a shift in subject from “God” to “the sons of Noah” in verse 18. We find seven of the twenty-seven occurrences of the term *bĕrît* (covenant) in Genesis in this short passage, thus highlighting the notion of covenant as the theme of 9:1–17. Three divine speeches dominate the narrative, each signaled by “And God said” (vv. 8, 12, and 17).

In these divine proclamations the register of diction rises; this is in keeping with the official nature of the speech acts involved. The narrator begins the first speech with a formula that often introduces formal or diplomatic declarations: “And God said to Noah, . . . saying” (v. 8).³⁷ The speech itself opens with rhetorical flourish, in preparation for the covenant with his creation that God announced in 9:9–11: “Now I, indeed I am [hereby] establishing my covenant with you.” The second and third speeches begin identically: “This is the sign of the covenant that . . .” Indeed, the similarities extend beyond the narrative introduction to the speeches themselves:

9:12 And God said,
“This is the sign of the covenant
that I am installing [*nātan*]
between me and between you,
and between every living creature
that is with you
for all future generations.”

9:17 And God said to Noah,
“This is the sign of the covenant
that I am establishing [*hēqîm*]
between me
and between all flesh
that is on the earth.”

Because of the focus on the rainbow as the sign of the covenant, the second speech (vv. 13–16) is much longer than the third. The last speech (v. 17) functions as a colophonic conclusion, highlighting the actual center of gravity in this episode.

These speeches identify three parties to this covenant. Most obviously, they identify God (throughout as *'ēlōhîm* rather than YHWH) as the first party and the driving force behind it. The emphatic introduction, “Now I, indeed I . . .” in verse 9a occurs outside Genesis only three times.³⁸ Here it answers to the identical introduction to an earlier divine speech with a completely different tone: “Now I, indeed I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth. . . . Every [living] thing that is on the earth shall die” (6:17). With this covenant God guarantees that he will never again inflict upon his creation the curse that these survivors had endured.

The narrator reinforces and highlights the asymmetrical and monergistic (put into effect by one party) nature of this covenant throughout these speeches:

1. God had taken the initiative earlier by treating Noah with grace (6:8) and then commissioning him to construct an ark to save the creatures in the forthcoming calamity (6:13–22).
2. In keeping with his earlier promise in 6:18, God declared that he was hereby establishing (*hēqîm*) this covenant with the other parties.³⁹
3. Being in full charge of the relationship, even before speaking formally about the covenant, YHWH had promised never to destroy all living things from the earth again (8:21–22).
4. God identified this covenant throughout as “my [God’s] covenant” (*bērîtî*) with X,” or “between me and X.”⁴⁰

5. Earlier God had committed himself to creation, without demanding anything of it, other than operating within its seasonal rhythm (8:22) and respecting human beings as his vice-regents (9:2–6).
6. God blessed and secured the well-being of Noah, as representative of all creation (9:1–7).
7. God guaranteed not only the constancy of the cosmos (8:22) but also his own covenant commitment by identifying the sign that he had established to remind himself never to forget this covenant (9:12–17). Although the narrator does not record a ritual by which YHWH bound himself to this covenant, the bow in the sky functioned as a symbol of the oath he had made. The sign applied primarily to him, but by informing the other parties of his sign, they could be confident whenever they saw it that God had not forgotten his commitment to them.

The narrator is silent concerning a reciprocal sign of commitment from the second party, but clearly that party is the earth itself. YHWH had implied this in 8:21–22 with his promise never again to curse the ground (*hā'ădāmâ*) because of the conduct of his vice-regent and his assurance of the earth's endurance. The divine mandate to humanity is to fill the earth (9:1), and the creatures are identified as “beasts of the earth” (9:2, 10) and “all flesh that is on the earth” (9:16–17)—creatures are obviously in view. However, YHWH specifically identifies the earth as his covenant partner in 9:13: “I have set my bow in the cloud; it shall be a sign of the covenant between me *and the earth*.” In verse 11, God had reinforced this notion by promising never again to destroy the earth. While “the earth” in 9:13 substitutes for its inhabitants (as in 9:15), in 6:13 both had been identified as targets of God's fury (“to destroy them [all flesh] with the earth”).

The identity of the third party is not so obvious. Many refer to this covenant as the Noachian covenant, but Noah's role in it is unclear. Noah is in the scene in verses 9 and 11. In the former, God clarifies the plural form *'ittēkem*, "with you [all]," by adding "and with your seed," referring to Noah's sons who were also rescued by the same ark as their father (8:16, 18). The plural suffix here and "on your seed" (*zar'ākem*) probably functions as a collective for the offspring of all living things that survived the deluge. Accordingly, we interpret the conjunction that begins verse 10 as an epexegetical/explanatory *waw*: "*that is*, with every living creature that is with you." At the beginning of verse 11, the language is emphatically redundant and awkward, but verse 11b also functions epexegetically and reinforces the collective interpretation: "I [hereby] establish my covenant with you; [this means that] never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God does not speak of "making [*kārat*] this covenant" with the earth or with Noah, but somewhat ironically, he used the same verb in his promise never to "cut off" (*kārat*) the living creatures by means of a flood (9:11).

These observations reinforce our earlier explanation for God's avoidance of "to cut a covenant" (*kārat bē'rît*) in 6:18, where the pronoun is singular: "I will establish my covenant with you [*'ittāk*]." This is not "the Noachian covenant," a title that assumes Noah to be the primary party. Here he functioned as the federal head and vice-regent over all living things and the earth itself—that is, as their representative through whom the covenant was established. As we will see in chapter 2, this does not mean that God did not make a covenant with Noah himself; it means simply that Noah was not the primary or separate signatory to *this* covenant. As was the case with Moses' relation to YHWH's covenant with Israel, Noah was the agent through whom God established his covenant with the cosmos.

Conclusion

Being reminded that biblical texts were written without chapter and verse divisions, we recognize that the literary unit (*tôlēdôt*) that began in 6:9 extends through chapter 9. Although the language of covenant (*bērît*) is front and center only in 9:8–17 and is missing in 8:13–9:7, we should interpret 9:8–17 as tightly tied to what precedes. Through his covenant with the cosmos, God declared on oath (with the bow as the sign) that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood, as he had in the days of Noah (9:8–17). Contrary to the anthropocentric view of the earth held by many Christians today, God acknowledged the fundamental depravity of the hearts of humans, whom he had installed as vice-regents over the earth. In effect God established a shield between his fury against humanity and his disposition toward the rest of creation (cf. 8:21). That buffer is partially represented by the fear (*môrāʾ*) and terror (*ḥat*) that would exist from now on between those installed as vice-regents of God and the creatures that inhabit the world the vice-regents were to govern (9:2). However, the grammatical construction of 9:2 is ambiguous. Most interpret “Your fear and your terror” (*môraʾākem wəḥittēkem*) as animals’ instinctive fear/distrust of humans (an objective genitive), but it could also be interpreted as humans’ fear of animals (subjective genitive). In the former case, animals will distance themselves from humans out of self-interest; in the latter case, humans will stay away from animals. But the effect is the same, diminishing the potential impact of human depravity on their environment.

God intended the post-deluge covenant to restore relationships that had been broken through humankind’s rebellion against the Creator. As noted in the beginning, by definition a covenant formally establishes a relationship that does not exist naturally or reestablishes a relationship that has disintegrated. Through the cosmic covenant, the divine

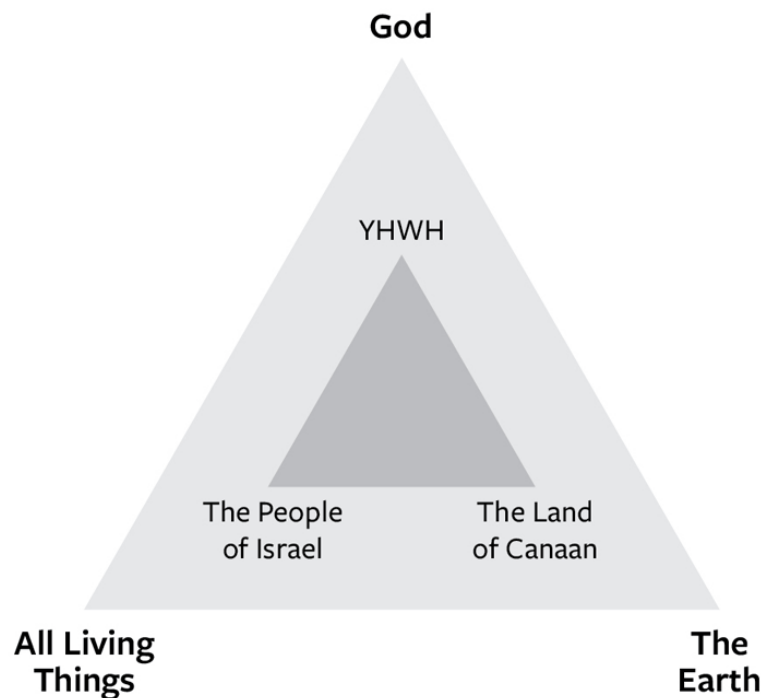
Suzerain graciously but officially put in place the means whereby the original relationship that existed among God, the earth, and the earth's inhabitants could be restored. Within this triadic relationship we recognize four essential elements. First, this covenant envisions God as the supreme and divine Administrator and Caretaker of the world that he has created, and he retains ultimate authority and responsibility for its existence. Second, as the symbol and "spokesperson" for the glory and holiness of God (Ps. 19:1-2), the earth fulfills its role when it functions in an orderly way and when its resources are fully harnessed for the well-being of the creatures that live on it (Ps. 104). Third, in this reordered world, species of living creatures copulate and multiply until the entire earth swarms with living creatures. Fourth, when the one species (humanity) that God chose from the creatures' ranks to function as vice-regent for him, the divine landowner, serves and guards creation in the interest of creation, all will be well with the cosmos. Sin had changed earthly realities fundamentally, but the cosmic covenant envisions a world as it was when it came from the hands of the Creator.

The Afterlife of the Cosmic Covenant in the First Testament

Although subsequent narratives focus increasingly on the fate of humankind, the ugliness of a fallen world resurfaced soon after the events of Genesis 9. But the poets and prophets of Israel would not let this vision of cosmic realities die. Indeed, they often appealed to the cosmic covenant in Genesis 6-9 to warn or encourage Israel in its covenantal relationships, which functioned as a microcosm of the cosmic relationships (fig. 1.5).

Figure 1.5

The Israelite Covenant Triangle as a Microcosm of the Cosmic Covenant Triangle



Conceptual echoes of the cosmic covenant are especially strong in Hosea, who sought to expose the corruption of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in its waning decades. His portrayal of the disintegration of YHWH's covenant with Israel recalls the antediluvian narratives of Genesis:

YHWH has a legal complaint [*rîb*] with the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness [*'ēmet*] or unfailing love [*ḥesed*],
and no knowledge of God in the land;
Instead there is swearing, lying, murder,
stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and one bloody crime follows another.
That is why the land mourns,
and all who reside in it languish,
including the wild animals
and the birds of the heavens—
even the fish of the sea are removed. (Hosea 4:1–3)

Prior to this formal announcement of YHWH's case against Israel, the prophet had warned the nation of the coming judgment because they had rejected the One who had placed this people in these Edenic surroundings (Hosea 2:8 [10]). But the judgment would not be the last word, either for the nation or for the world in which YHWH had placed them. On the contrary, when YHWH reestablishes the covenant with the nation, the scope of its effects will be cosmic, restoring peace for all wild animals and people, as well as communication and cooperation between YHWH, the heavens and the earth, and all the inhabitants of the earth (2:18 [20]).

Elsewhere prophets often looked back on the cosmic covenant and found in it an appropriate analogy for YHWH's eternal commitment to Israel, which the judgments of 734–722 BC and 586 BC at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, respectively, appeared to suspend, but these catastrophes could not be the last chapter of the nation's story. Isaiah is the most explicit on this theme:

As I swore that the waters of Noah

never again flood the earth,
So I swear that I will not be angry with you
or rebuke you.

.....
My unfailing love [*hesed*] toward you will never be shaken,
Nor will my covenant of friendship [*bērît šělôm*] ever be shaken.
(Isa. 54:9–10)

Although lacking specific references to Noah or the great deluge, Jeremiah grounds the irrevocability and eternality of YHWH's covenant with Israel in the fidelity he demonstrates toward creation as a whole:

Thus has YHWH declared,
the one who established the sun for light by day,
and the fixed order of the moon and stars for light by night—
the one who stirs up the sea so its waves roar—

the one whose name is YHWH of Hosts:
“If I ever forget these ordinances [of nature]—
declares YHWH—
Then the descendants of Israel will cease
being a nation before me for all time.” (Jer. 31:35–36)

A subsequent oracle ends by comparing the innumerability of the Davidic and Levitical lineages with that of the hosts of heaven, but Jeremiah will speak of YHWH’s commitment to the Davidic house with the same cosmic certainty: “Thus has YHWH declared: ‘If you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, . . . only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken’” (Jer. 33:20–22).

Although Noah’s name surfaces repeatedly in the literature of the Second Temple period, specific allusions to the cosmic covenant are remarkably rare. Some texts speak of Noah’s relationship to creation (more properly the Adamic/Noachian covenant—see below). However, we find the most explicit reference to the covenant as cosmic in scope in the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira):

Noah was found perfect and righteous;
in the time of wrath he kept the race alive;
therefore a remnant was left on the earth
when the flood came.
Everlasting covenants were made with him
that all flesh should never again be blotted out by a flood. (44:17–18
NRSV)

- [1.](#) Pss. 8:1–3; 29:1–11; 33:6–11.
- [2.](#) Pss. 24:1; 95:4–5; cf. Exod. 9:29.
- [3.](#) Isa. 37:16; 40:12–31; 45:5–13, 18; 48:1–19; Jer. 10:12–16 = 51:15–19; Amos 5:8–9.
- [4.](#) Gen. 6–8; Isa. 24:1–23; cf. Hosea 4:3.
- [5.](#) For interchangeable uses within a single book, see Ezek. 16:60, 62; 34:25; 37:26.
- [6.](#) E.g., Gen. 6:17–20; 7:14–16, 21–23; 8:1, 17–19.
- [7.](#) Gen. 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2; Exod. 6:16, 19; Num. 3:1; Ruth 4:18.

- [8.](#) Cf. Gen. 1:1, 21, 27 [3×]; 2:3.
- [9.](#) Cf. Pss. 33:6; 148:5; John 1:1; Heb. 11:3.
- [10.](#) Deut. 33:16; Pss. 24:1; 50:12; 89:11 [12]; Isa. 34:1; Jer. 8:16; 47:2; Ezek. 12:19; 19:7; 30:12; 32:15; Mic. 1:2.
- [11.](#) Pss. 24:1; 98:7; 107:34; Isa. 24:6; Nah. 1:5.
- [12.](#) Gen. 1:20–21, 24, 30.
- [13.](#) Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24; cf. Ps. 33:6.
- [14.](#) Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.
- [15.](#) Lev. 26:4; Deut. 11:14; 28:12; Job 37:1–13; Ps. 65:9–13 [10–14]; Ezek. 34:26–27; Heb. 6:7.
- [16.](#) Lev. 26:19–20; Deut. 11:17; 28:23–24; Heb. 6:8.
- [17.](#) Job 12:10; 34:14–15; Ps. 104:29.
- [18.](#) In this volume, italicized *Adam* (*ʾādām*) is a collective designation for humankind consisting of both males and females. “The Man” (*hāʾādām*) refers to the royal male member of the original pair, in contrast to “the Woman” (*hāʾiššā*), his royal female counterpart. “Adam” functions as the personal name of “the Man,” in contrast to “Eve,” the personal name of “the Woman.”
- [19.](#) Exod. 25:9, 40; 1 Chron. 28:9–19.
- [20.](#) 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Pss. 80:1 [2]; 99:1; Isa. 37:16.
- [21.](#) In ancient iconography cherubs were usually portrayed as composite creatures, often involving mammalian bodies and human and avian heads and wings, and were stationed as guardians at entrances to palaces and temples.
- [22.](#) Gen. 3:8; cf. Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14 [15]; 2 Sam. 7:6–7.
- [23.](#) Gen. 3:24; cf. Exod. 25:18–22; 26:31; 1 Kings 6:23–28.
- [24.](#) Gen. 2:9; cf. the menorah, a stylized tree of life, Exod. 25:31–36.
- [25.](#) Gen. 2:15; cf. Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6.
- [26.](#) Gen. 3:21; cf. Exod. 28:40; 29:8; 40:14; Lev. 8:13.
- [27.](#) Gen. 2:10–14; cf. Ps. 46:5 [6]; Ezek. 47.
- [28.](#) Gen. 2:12; cf. Exod. 25:11, 17, 24, 29, 36; etc.
- [29.](#) Gen. 2:12; cf. Exod. 25:7; 28:9–12, 20; 1 Chron. 29:2.
- [30.](#) Gen. 2:9, 16–17; cf. 1 Kings 6:18, 29, 32; 7:18–26, 42, 49.
- [31.](#) Cf. Ezek. 28:14, 16; also, Exod. 15:17; Ezek. 40:2; and many references to Mount Zion.
- [32.](#) Gen. 2:9; 3:6; cf. Ps. 19:7–8 [8–9]; see also Exod. 25:16; Deut. 31:26 (referring to the written law kept inside the holy of holies).
- [33.](#) Gen. 2:16–17; 3:3; cf. Num. 4:20; 2 Sam. 6:7 (touching the ark).
- [34.](#) Pss. 11:4; 103:19; Isa. 66:1.
- [35.](#) Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14; Ezek. 34:25–31.
- [36.](#) Gen. 3:16; 4:1, 17–26; 5:1–32.
- [37.](#) Cf. Gen. 21:22; 34:4; 43:3; etc.
- [38.](#) Exod. 14:17; Jer. 26:14; 40:10.
- [39.](#) Gen. 6:9, 11, 17.
- [40.](#) Gen. 6:18; 9:9, 11, 15.

CHAPTER 2

The Adamic Covenant

Introduction

In chapter 1 we explored the origins, nature, and functions of the cosmic covenant, whose goal was to restore the relationship between the Creator and his creation as a whole. Now we turn to the Adamic covenant, which focuses on a specially chosen element within creation: humankind. By my understanding, the cosmic covenant exhibits features of ecclesial/missional covenants that we will find in texts relating to Act 3 of God's grand plan of redemption (starting in chap. 3 below). This cosmic covenant involves relationships between God and his creation collectively; that creation's mission was to declare God's glory by functioning precisely as he had intended at creation and in so doing flourish under his blessing (Ps. 19:1-6; cf. Rom. 1:19-20).

As the climax of his "very good" creative week, God had created *Adam* to serve as his representative and deputy in governing this creation. For this reason, we may refer to *Adam's* role as administrative; humankind's primary task was to promote the well-being of the physical environment and all living things (creatures and plants) so that the universe might glorify its Creator in a majestic and harmonious symphony of sound and sight. In short, *Adam's* role was to keep the triangular relationship involving God, the physical world, and living things well oiled and running smoothly. However, in the wake of the administrators' rebellion against God, a grenade had been tossed, not only into this triangular relationship but also into the place of

Adam within that relationship. Just as the restoration of the triangular relationship had required a covenant involving the three parties, so the restoration of *Adam's* role as God's administrator would require a covenant between God the Creator and humankind. That covenant is the subject of this chapter.

The first question we need to address when investigating the Adamic covenant is "Where do we begin?" Many scholars begin in the first chapters of Genesis, arguing that the relationship between God the Creator and *Adam* was covenantal from the outset. On first sight, several details in the narratives seem to point in this direction.

First, in the earliest explicit reference to a "covenant" (*bĕrît*) in the First Testament (Gen. 6:18) YHWH does not use the usual idiom for "making a covenant," *kārat bĕrît*, literally, "to cut a covenant." Instead the passage uses *hēqîm bĕrît*, which suggests "to establish, confirm a covenant." This idiom seems to imply a preexistent covenant.

Second, Genesis 6:18 identifies the covenant as "my covenant" (*bĕrîtî*), rather than speaking generically of "a covenant," suggesting a covenant known to Noah. The wording invites him and us to ask "Which covenant of yours?" and to look for the answer in the preceding narratives. The best (though not the only) possibility *seems to be* the relationship between God and his creation in Genesis 1–2.

Third, the two trees in the garden that hold the keys to life (tree of life) and death (tree of the knowledge of good and evil) represent blessings and curses, essential elements in ancient Near Eastern covenants and treaties. Since God assigned Adam and Eve their special place in his economy in preliterate times, these trees expressed symbolically what Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 would declare in writing as essential elements of the Israelite covenant from the second millennium BC onward.

Fourth, Hosea 6:7 seems to allude to an Adamic covenant: “But like *Adam* they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me” (ESV, italics added).

Finally, in Genesis 2:4b–3:24 the narrator identifies the deity as YHWH Elohim, equating the divine Creator of 1:1–2:4a with YHWH, the covenant God of Israel. While devotees appear to have used this name in worship from early times (4:26), apparently YHWH did not reveal its covenantal significance until he brought Israel out from Egypt and established his covenant with them at Sinai.¹

However, the evidence for an Adamic covenant in Genesis 1–2 is equivocal, and we may interpret differently all the evidence cited above. First, it is indeed striking that the word *bērît* never occurs in Genesis 1 or 2. Although we recognize that the absence of lexical evidence does not necessarily mean absence of the concept, this silence, in conjunction with other factors, may be significant.

Second, although *hēqim bērît* usually involves the confirmation of a preexistent covenant, the Hebrew Bible is not consistent in keeping the distinction between *kārat bērît*, “to cut a covenant,” and *hēqim bērît*, “to establish/confirm a covenant.” Ezekiel freely interchanged these idioms in Ezekiel 16:60, 62 (“establish”) and 34:25; 37:26 (“cut”). Deuteronomy 29:1 [28:69] uses “to cut a covenant” of both YHWH’s establishment of his covenant with Israel at Horeb and Moses’ renewal of that covenant with the new generation on the plains of Moab.

Third, Hosea 6:7 is capable of different and preferred interpretations: “But they, to a man, have transgressed the Covenant” (NJPS), or “But they have trampled [*’ābar*] my covenant like dirt” (*’dm[h]*; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 98), or “at Adam they transgressed the covenant” (NRSV, cf. NIV).

Fourth, the use of God’s covenant name in Genesis 2–3 does not necessarily point to a covenant between YHWH and *Adam* any more than it does in Abramic narratives before Genesis 17.

Fifth, if covenants involve formal procedures to create a relationship that does not exist naturally or to reestablish relationships that have been ruptured, then we cannot define Adam and Eve's relationship with God in Genesis 2–3 as covenantal. By virtue of God's Creator status and humankind's creaturely status, God's commission of *Adam* as the divine image to govern the world on his behalf (1:26–29) obviously assumes a Suzerain-vassal relationship, but this does not make it covenantal. Their relationship derived naturally from *Adam*'s having been created by God. God's commission established the nature of that relationship (Gen. 1:28; 2:15), and the two trees symbolized for the vassal the consequences of fidelity or infidelity to the commission.

This does not mean that the relationship between Adam and God lacked features typical of later covenants. Rather, it established the divine-human/cosmic paradigm that human rebellion broke (Gen. 3), which could be recovered only through a covenant with humanity and the world, graciously designed and instituted by the Creator. Genesis 6:18 may indeed refer to the “establishment/confirmation” of a covenant previously made, but we do not find that covenant in Genesis 1–2. If we must have a preexistent covenant to explain *hēqîm bēřîť* in Genesis 6:18, God probably made it with Adam and Eve as they were leaving the garden of Eden (3:23–24), rather than at the time of their creation (chaps. 1–2). This could explain Cain and Abel's knowledge of “tribute offerings” (*minḥôt*) as appropriate ways to relate to YHWH, for YHWH's acceptance of Abel's offering (4:3–4), and for Seth's apparent effectiveness in calling upon the name of YHWH (4:26). But now we have encroached upon a subject to be considered later.

Setting the Stage for the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 1:1–6:8)

Although Genesis 1–3 does not appear to involve a covenant, it is impossible to understand the Adamic covenant that will be revealed later without first considering the status of humankind and the relationship of human beings to God and the rest of creation at the beginning of history. Only when we recognize what humankind and the cosmos lost with the vice-regents' rebellion will we be able to imagine what lay ahead for both.

The Status of Humankind in Genesis 1

Genesis 1:26–31 is the determinative text for understanding the role of humankind in the cosmic economy. Within the context of the catechetical description of the origins of the world and its inhabitants (1:1–2:4a), the creation of humankind obviously represented to the author the climax of the creation week: (1) God created *Adam* last. (2) Only *Adam* appears to have been the product of divine deliberation. (3) The narrator describes the creation of *Adam* with greater intensity and detail than any other phase in this chapter. (4) The use of the verb *bārā'* suggests that the creation of *Adam* involved a special creative act of God (cf. vv. 1, 27 [3×]). (5) Once *Adam* was on the scene, God could pronounce the created world excellent" (*ṭôb mē'ôd*, v. 31). (6) God created *Adam* expressly as his *šelem*—that is, to function as his image.

The last observation demands further comment. Theologians tend to understand imageness in terms of rationality, spirituality, intellectual freedom, relational ability (to God and fellow humans), or triunity (body, soul, spirit), but both the ancient Near Eastern understanding and the biblical evidence point in a different direction. Several ancient Mesopotamian mythological texts portray the gods as making human beings to be their slaves. In Enuma Elish, Marduk declares to Ea:

Let me put blood together, and make bones too.

Let me set up primeval man: Man shall be his name.
Let me create a primeval man.
The work of the gods shall be imposed [on him],
and so they shall be at leisure.
Let me change the ways of the gods miraculously,
So they are gathered as one yet divided in two. (Enuma Elish, *ANET*, 68)

In Atrahasis, Ea addresses the gods, saying:

You [Bēlet-ilī] are the birth-goddess, creatress of mankind,
Create *Lillû* that he may bear the yoke,
Let him bear the yoke assigned by Enlil,
Let man carry the toil of the gods. (Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis*, 57, lines 194-97)

Other texts highlight the classist structure of Mesopotamian society. A neo-Assyrian Esarhaddon text reads:

Man is the shadow of a god,
And a slave is the shadow of a man;
but the king is the mirror [*muššulu*] of god. (Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom*, 282)

The father of the king, my lord,
was the very image [*šalmu*] of Bēl,
And the king, my lord,
is likewise the very image of Bēl. (*CAD* 16 [Š]:85)

These texts all assume royal status for the image of the divine, but an interesting exorcism text recognizes this standing in religious officials:

The conjuration is the conjuration of Marduk;
The conjurer is the very image [*ša-lam*] of Marduk. (*CAD* 16 [Š]:85)

These citations suggest that in the world around ancient Israel, humankind was created to be the slaves of the gods; they were stratified with respect to status, and only special people were viewed as images of gods. A statue of a governor of Gozan, on a tributary of the Euphrates River, reinforces this conclusion, but it also illustrates the specific

use of the Hebrew words for “image” (*šelem*) and “likeness” (*děmût*, Gen. 1:26). The skirt of the statue is inscribed front and back with a bilingual Akkadian and Aramaic text. In the Aramaic portion, cognates to both Hebrew words occur:

The image [*dmwt*] of Hadad-yith‘i that he set up before Hadad of Sikan . . .
The statue [*š/m*] of Hadad-yith‘i, king of Gozan and of Sikan and of Azran . . .
(*COS* 2:34, pp. 153–54)

Although “image” and “statue” function as virtual synonyms, we may detect a slight difference in nuance. Here *dmwt* seems to reflect Hadad-Yith‘i’s relationship with the deity, while *š/m* reflects his relationship with the region that Shalmaneser III, the Assyrian imperial overlord, had deputized him to govern on his behalf. This image and its inscription reflect an administrative relationship agreed upon by suzerain and vassal, analogous to YHWH’s relationship to *Adam* in Genesis 1–2. However, unlike Genesis 1–2, it does not speak of the Aramaean vassal as an image of his Assyrian overlord. Rather, the expressions apply to the physical image bearing the inscription. Presumably *dmwt*, “likeness,” applies to the statue’s physical resemblance to Hadad-Yith‘i, while *š/m* applies to its function (cf. Garr, *In His Own Image*, 118–32). The latter suggests it is more than a *representation* of the deputized king over Gozan and Sikan and Azran; it is also a *representative* of him, so that when the deity Hadad looks upon the image standing before him, he would smile and extend his goodwill both to the image and to the person whom it represented. Just as ancient Near Easterners perceived images of gods to be imbued with the spirit of the gods they represented, so this image will have been perceived as indwelt by the spirit of Hadad-yith‘i.

The analogies are not exact, but this extrabiblical inscribed image helps us understand the role of *Adam* in God’s newly created world. Since God is spirit and utterly formless in his essence (Deut. 4:15–20), obviously *Adam*

was not cast as a physical representation of God. Nevertheless, for the watching world to recognize in him something of the person of the Deity required some links, at least in function, between this “replica” (*děmût*) and the divine original. Perhaps this is where the proposals of theologians apply: human moral consciousness, spirituality, rationality, intellectual freedom, and relational ability are necessary to be able to function as God’s image, and they derive from the God whose breath animates humans (Gen. 2:7).

However, it is as his *šelem* that God deputized *Adam* to govern the world on his behalf. Because God constituted *Adam* male and female, in Genesis 1 the word functions as a common collective noun rather than a personal name, and the status of image extends to both genders of the human species, as well as to all descendants of the first pair in perpetuity (cf. Gen. 5). Concerning the responsibilities of the respective parties in this suzerain-vassal relationship, God fulfills his role as patron of the vassals by blessing them (1:28a) and authorizing them to eat of every plant that produces seed, whether in the form of grains (‘*ēšēb*) or wrapped inside fruit (v. 29). The change in expression from “seed-bearing plant” (‘*ēšēb zōrēa’ zera’*) to ‘*ēšēb* (v. 30) unmodified assumes that humans are not fundamentally grazers.

In Hebrew thought the notion of imageness was democratized: all members of the race of *Adam* are images of God.² However, in remarkable accord with the extrabiblical texts, Genesis 1:26–31 perceives image status for the vassal primarily as a representative function. God deputized his image as a royal figure to govern his realm on his behalf (cf. Garr, *In His Own Image*, 132–65). God declared this to be his reason for creating his vassal in verse 26: “Let us make *Adam* as our image and according to our likeness, and let them govern [*rādâ*]” all the earth, with particular reference to the four primary categories of

creaturely species: sky creatures, marine creatures, high-carriage land creatures, and low-carriage land creatures. He reinforced this thesis statement with a series of imperative verbs that describe the vassal's commission, which concerns two obligations: (1) Be prolific (*pěřû*), multiply (*řěbû*), and fill the earth (*mil'û*); (2) subjugate the earth (*kibšuhā*) and exercise dominion (*řědû*) over all sea, sky, and land creatures (v. 28). The first is necessary to fulfill the second. To ensure the Creator's authority over the entire earth, humans will need to multiply and fill it.

The meaning of the verb *kābaš* is clear,³ but the charge to "subjugate" the earth is surprising, suggesting that unruly forces that needed to be domesticated were at work in the pre-fall environment and called for an aggressive style of royal leadership. The scene reminds us of the propensity of elements in subjugated states to revolt against their rulers. Whatever the significance of the verb, the Creator's assessment in verse 31 suggests that this unruliness was a part of the goodness of God's work. On the analogy of Judges 2:22-23, God may have intentionally created this situation as a perpetual test of his vassal's fidelity to the divine commission. In any case, God authorized human beings, as his images, to serve as his deputies and his representatives. He commissioned them to care for the world as he would if he were physically present.

Psalms 8 reinforces this picture of humankind as God's deputized vassal kings, distinguished from everything else God had made. Although enthusiastic praise of YHWH, whose name is majestic in all the earth, frames the psalm (vv. 1a [2a] and 9 [10]), between these refrains the psalmist celebrates humankind's status in the realm of God (vv. 1b-3 [2b-4]), the realm of humans (vv. 4-6 [5-7]), and the realm of creatures (vv. 7-8 [8-9]) before God and the world. The structure of the psalm reflects the three-tiered administrative structure of the universe. YHWH had authorized human beings to rule (*māšal*) over the rest of

creation (*ma‘ăśê yādêkâ*, lit., “the works of your [YHWH’s] hands”) and empowered them by crowning them with glory and majesty—qualities that characterize God himself. Later interpretation of the genealogy in Genesis 5 identifies Adam as “the one [“son” is often assumed] of God” (Luke 3:38). Juxtaposed with “father,” which serves as a designation for a suzerain, “son” often functioned as a title for a vassal (2 Kings 16:7).

The Status of Humankind in Genesis 2

As noted earlier, the literary style changes significantly in the middle of Genesis 2:4, but the narrator has intentionally juxtaposed these chapters so that chapter 2 functions as an expansion or exposition of 1:26–30 (fig. 1.2 above). Viewed together, these two chapters present complementary images of the divine creation of the universe, especially in their anthropology (table 2.1).

Table 2.1

A Comparison of the Anthropological Perspectives of Genesis 1 and 2

A: Genesis 1:1-2:4a	B: Genesis 2:4b-26
Cosmic creation recounted from a transcendental theocentric perspective: therefore the formal title “Elohim” is used for God.	Earthly creation recounted from an immanental anthropocentric perspective: therefore the personal covenant name “YHWH (Elohim)” is used for God.
<i>Adam</i> is the climax of creation.	Adam is the focus of creation.
The term “ <i>Adam</i> ” functions as a generic designation for the human species, consisting	The term “ <i>Adam</i> ” functions as a titular designation of a male individual, the Man, for whom and from whom the Woman is created. Cf. 4:25 and 5:1–3, where “ <i>Adam</i> ” functions as a personal name.

of two parts, male and female gender.	
The emphasis is on <i>Adam's</i> relationship to the universe.	The emphasis is on Adam's relationship to the Creator.
Day 3 involves the creation of vegetation consisting of plants (<i>deše</i>) that reproduce naturally by bearing seed.	The plants named in 2:5 designate two special kinds of vegetation: (1) <i>śiaḥ haśśādeh</i> , which the earth produces on its own in opposition to human cultivation (Gen. 21:15; Job 30:4, 7; etc.); (2) <i>'ēseb haśśādeh</i> , which the earth produces in response to human cultivation (Gen. 3:18-19). Apparently neither kind existed before the fall.
By the divine word, <i>Adam</i> (the human species) is created (<i>bārā</i>) as the image of God.	By being formed (<i>yāṣar</i>) from dust and then receiving the divine breath, Adam (the Man) is created as a "living being" (<i>nepeš ḥayyā</i>).
The designation "image of God" highlights the distinction between <i>Adam</i> and the rest of creation.	The material of which <i>hā'ādām</i> (the Man) is made ("dust from the ground") and the expression <i>nepeš ḥayyā</i> highlight the affinity among the Man and the earth and the animals, respectively (1:20-25).
The creation week climaxes in the creation of <i>Adam</i> (the human race).	The creation activity climaxes in the creation of the Woman (<i>'iššā</i>) from the Man (<i>'iš</i>) as helper (<i>'ēzer</i>) and complement (<i>kēnegdô</i>) to the Man.
The literary style is formal, dignified, artificial, catechetical, celebrating the creative role of God and the dignity of <i>Adam</i> .	The literary style is informal, earthy, historiographic, reporting events the author perceives to be as real as the experiences of the patriarchs (Gen. 12-50) and the Israelites (Exodus-Numbers). These parts are not generically distinguishable.

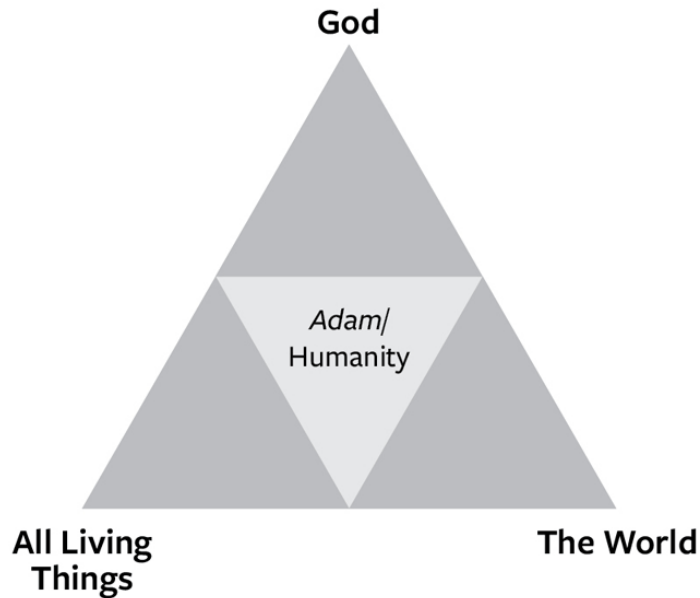
The markedly different literary styles and agendas of A and B reflect the different functions of the texts. "A" represents a traditional catechetical presentation of cosmic and human origins, while "B" functions as an exposition of 1:26-30. In so doing, "B" presents a portrait of *hā'ādām*, the Man, in his original idyllic context prior to his betrayal of his

divine Suzerain and the divine mandate. Chapter 2 portrays the Man as an oriental king, authorized by YHWH to rule over Eden, the garden of God, which functions as the capital of his domain. Through the Man, divine rule was to radiate to the ends of the earth. This chapter clarifies both the Man's role as functional image and the complementary role of the Woman in their performance of their commission. If the Man was king in the garden in which YHWH had placed him, then the Woman was queen. By setting the rebellion of humankind in chapter 3 in this paradisiacal context, chapter 2 intensifies the tragedy of that event.

In addition to expanding on humankind's honorific status, Genesis 2 concretizes and specifies the obligations laid on them as vassals of God. In relation to God, they were to submit to him, accepting the divinely established boundaries of moral and economic behavior (2:16–17) and generally governing the world on his behalf and in its interest as he would himself, if he were physically present (1:26–28). In relation to the world, the Man was charged to “serve” (*‘ābad*) and “guard” (*šāmar*) the garden (2:15). This choice of words reflects the narrator's conviction not that the world was created for humans but that they were created for the world. Humanity's function within the cosmic administrative order was to maintain the triadic triangle binding Creator, realm, and the living occupants of that realm in a vibrant and harmonious relationship (fig. 2.1). As noted above, in the preliterate world of Genesis 2, the two special trees in the garden symbolized the blessings and curses that attended their performance as vassals; such blessings and curses became regular features of ancient treaties.

Figure 2.1

The Role of *Adam*/Humanity in the Cosmic Administrative Order



The Tragedy of Genesis 3

Since the Man's role arose naturally from YHWH having created him, since the pre-rebellion world functioned perfectly according to the divine plan, and since the term *bĕrît*, "covenant," is missing from the accounts, there is no need to seek a covenant either in this environment or in the texts of Genesis 1-2. However, it did not take long for the social and physical environments to change, specifically for the vassal to betray his Suzerain and his charge.

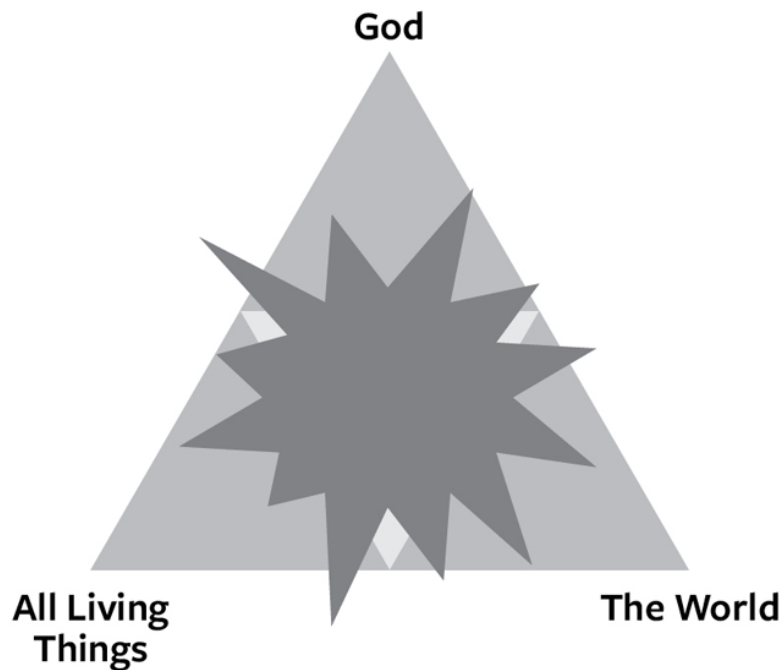
On the surface, the human act of rebellion seems minor—eating the fruit of a tree in the garden (3:6)—but the significance of the act was profound. It not only violated a specific command of the Suzerain (2:17), but also, in a blatant overreach, the Man and the Woman together rejected their vassal status and sought status equal, if not superior, to God (3:5). Indeed, by any definition, human "sin" involves repudiation of one's status as image of God and the usurpation of divine prerogatives for oneself. From the beginning, fundamental to the goodness of the world that God had created was the human freedom to choose to

accept or reject divine image status, a status symbolized by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Although the duties of the vice-regent in managing the world presented daily and constant tests of his fidelity to the divine Suzerain, the specific temptation to eat of the forbidden fruit was a specific test to determine whether or not humankind as represented by their federal heads would be satisfied with their privileged vassal status. Indeed, as he did with Abraham in Genesis 22, YHWH may have set up the test himself, engaging the serpent, the most intelligent (*‘ārûm*) of all creatures, to present the test. It is striking that when used to express a mental aptitude, *‘ārûm* bears a positive sense.⁴ Perhaps YHWH assigned the creature a role, like “the adversary” of Job (*haśśāṭān*) in Job 1-2, to be the agent of his test—which should then be viewed positively, drawing *Adam’s* attention to the tree. Not eating from this tree should have symbolized his fortitude and his determination to function within the boundaries established by YHWH.

However, something went terribly wrong: first in the mind of the creature, who twisted the significance of the tree beyond recognition, and then in the mind of the Man and the Woman, who either did not recognize the perversion in the serpent’s words or fell for the temptation to elevate themselves above their divine Suzerain and arrogate to themselves control over the boundaries of appropriate behavior. The severe curses pronounced upon the serpent (3:14-15) confirm the evil of his actions. In any case, although *Adam* was created without a physical or mental flaw, this test was a moment of decision, a chance to prove that they were “righteous” (*ṣaddîq*) and would by their choice prove their fidelity to YHWH. If they could withstand this heady test, they could withstand any test.

Figure 2.2

The Effect of *Adam’s*/Humanity’s Rebellion on the Cosmic Administrative Order



Unfortunately for them and their descendants and for the realm they were to administer, *Adam* as male and female failed the test. The royal vassals immediately felt the tragic consequences of their rebellion against the Suzerain; the symmetry and harmony (“supergood,” 1:31) inherent in the universe evaporated, and all relationships were disturbed: (1) between the Man and the Woman (3:7, 12, 16b); (2) between God and humankind (vv. 8–11); (3) between humankind and the realm he was to govern (vv. 17–19); (4) between God and the universe he had created (vv. 14–15, 17–19); and (5) between the Woman and her offspring (v. 16a). This first human sin cast a grenade into the cosmic covenantal triangle, resulted in the fundamental depravity of all humankind, and brought the dysfunction of the relationships involving the parties at the angles of the triangle (fig. 2.2).

Glimmers of Hope in Genesis 3-5

By divine grace, in a world now governed by sin and death, life went on: “the Man,” now Adam (a personal name), was able to wrest a livelihood from a hostile environment (3:19) and “the Woman,” renamed “Eve” (*ḥawwâ*, “living”), retained the privilege and power of childbearing (3:20; 4:1–2). By divine grace, YHWH provided garments more substantial than fig leaves to cover the reminders of their fallen condition (3:21). By divine grace, the answer to the sin and its effects introduced by humankind’s first parents would be found in the descendant(s) of the Woman (3:15, 22–24). By divine grace, Adam and Eve were driven from the garden and prohibited access to the tree of life, which presumably would have closed the door to redemption and rendered permanent their fallen condition (3:22–24). By divine grace, although sin intensified in succeeding generations (4:9–10, 23–24), even sinners experienced divine protection (4:14–15), and human culture advanced (4:16–22). By divine grace, parents bore children of both genders in every generation (5:1–32). Perhaps as the greatest divine grace of all, God continued to relate to his vassals, accepting the tribute offerings (*minḥôt*) of the genuinely pious (4:3–5), apparently revealing his name (YHWH), and hearing those who called upon him (4:25–26).

The narrator notes the last graces matter-of-factly, and we may only speculate how Cain and Abel learned that they could relate to God through gifts of tribute (4:3–4), how Seth learned YHWH’s name, or what form Seth’s “calling by the name of YHWH” (*liqrō’ bēšēm yhwh*) took (4:26). Adam and Eve’s children’s contacts with YHWH obviously lacked the intimacy their parents had enjoyed in the garden, where in the cool of the evening YHWH would walk about (*hithallēk*), presumably finding delight in what he had created and seeking out his vassals for consultation, conversation, and fellowship (3:8). Instead of coming down, God had apparently retreated to his heavenly residence, though he

would respond to those who approached him through cultic (4:2–3) and verbal rituals (4:26).

But how did these second-generation humans learn that YHWH would accept their offerings and prayers? The answer to this question remains a mystery, and any suggestion proposed will be speculative. Although many associate YHWH's provision of skins for clothing for Adam and Eve with the origin of sacrifice, this seems unlikely. The narrator does not speak of the flesh of the animals slaughtered (to provide the skins) as meat for either the Deity or humans to consume, presumably as an offering of well-being (*šĕlāmîm*), or of the blood as a means of atonement for sin. The animals were apparently killed for human benefit by YHWH, rather than by humans, as is the case with sacrifices.

The designation for Cain's and Abel's offerings gives a more likely clue to the significance of sacrifices, if not their origin. Biblical texts often use the word *minḥâ* (4:3–5) of tribute gifts presented by a lesser subject to a superior, especially by vassals to their acknowledged suzerains,⁵ which suits the present context. With these offerings Cain and Abel acknowledged their vassalage before YHWH, and in so doing they recognized their continuity with Adam and Eve's status in the garden. Although both men presented gifts from what their agricultural pursuits had produced, we do not know in what form they presented their offerings. In the absence of references to altars, they may have simply left their offerings on a hilltop for YHWH to receive. In contrast to Noah's offerings in 8:21, where the narrator describes YHWH's acceptance of the sacrifices as being pleased with their aroma, here he uses a rare optical expression, *šā'â*, which apparently means "to look with favor at" (4:3).

Although Cain's and Abel's dispositions differed significantly, they seem to have assumed that the pre-fall suzerain-vassal relationship continued. Externally at least, they seemed concerned to seek the goodwill of YHWH their

superior, and they presumably knew their fate depended on his response. We may speculate that as Adam and Eve left the garden of Eden, YHWH had graciously reached out, declared to them that he still sought their allegiance, and revealed to them a way they could continue their fellowship with him. If YHWH's promise to Noah in Genesis 6:18 to "establish [his] covenant" (*hēqîm bĕrît*) with him refers to a preexistent covenant, this is the most likely context in which that covenant would have been made (*kārat bĕrît*). Given Seth's apparently effective calling upon the name of YHWH (4:26), this would also have been the context in which God revealed his name, represented by the four consonants *yhwh*. Noah's unquestioning acceptance of the divine order to admit into the ark seven pairs of each "clean" animal, in addition to a male and a female of each species, suggests that in an earlier context God had also revealed his notions of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable offerings.

We may imagine that before God disclosed to Adam the stipulations (*mišpāṭîm*) of the covenant and the conditions necessary for his continued favor, YHWH had introduced himself something like this: "I am YHWH, your divine Creator and Suzerain." However, this leaves unanswered why people did not call upon the name of YHWH until the days of Seth (4:26). YHWH's divergent responses to Cain's offering and Abel's offering also raised the specter of competition and jealousy among the vassals. Although the narrator categorizes the genre of their gifts equally, the divine Suzerain did not accept their validity as expressions of homage equally.

In the end, even if God's relationship was covenantal with Adam and Eve on the one hand, and Cain and Abel on the other, the narrative lacks any signal of a restoration of the administrative status that was *Adam's* prior to Genesis 3. If this relationship was covenantal, the focus in the Genesis 3 narrative is entirely on their relationship with the divine,

rather than on their roles as deputies of God, caring for and guarding the earth. Indeed, YHWH's curse of Cain in the wake of his murder of Abel implies the annulment of this status for him. Not only had Abel's blood severed the tie between him and the ground that he tilled (*hā'ădāmâ*) and the earth in general (*hā'āreṣ*, 4:11–14a), but it also cut him off from access to the presence of YHWH (vv. 14b–17).

From the narrative of Abraham, we will learn that to be granted access to the presence of God is to be engaged officially in his service (Gen. 17:1). However, even though Genesis 4 suggests that YHWH had rejected Cain as his earthly administrator, he mercifully promised to protect him from his enemies (4:15). By common grace, on the one hand YHWH spared him the curse of childlessness, and on the other hand he enabled him to build a city—that is, to fortify his residence (vv. 17–18). God even “blessed” his descendants by enabling a variety of achievements: domestication of livestock, invention of musical instruments, refining ore found in the earth, and manufacturing tools and utensils of metal (vv. 20–22). However, the moral and spiritual vitality of his line continued to spiral downward (vv. 23–24), and eventually YHWH started afresh with Adam and Eve's third son, Seth, who represented another and more positive way. Indeed, the identification of Seth as the “likeness” and “image” (*děmût* and *ṣelem*) of Adam, who was the “likeness” (*děmût*) of God (5:1–3), suggests that this branch of humanity retained the *Adamic* relationship with God.

Persistent sin and rebellion against the divine Suzerain would compromise humankind's status as images of God. However, in the seventh generation after Adam, Enoch appeared in the line of Seth, and he was so exceptional that God removed him from the earth and apparently took him home to himself (5:18–24), setting the stage for the deluge and the judgment of an entire cosmos run amok (6:1–7).

Noah and the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 6:9-9:29)

Introduction (Gen. 6:1-8)

Despite YHWH's provision of the means by which people could relate to him as Suzerain, those who from the beginning acceptably expressed their homage and submission represented a small minority. The narrator recounts the history of the Adamic race in a separate literary document signaled by the title "This is a [written] record [*sēper tôlēdōt*] of the generations of Adam" (5:1a), and concluding in 6:8, immediately prior to the next occurrence of this document marker (6:9a). After reminding hearers that Adam and his descendants were created as images of God and specially blessed among all living creatures (5:1b-2), the narrator casts the history of Adam's descendants as a ten-generation linear genealogy, ending with Noah and his sons (5:3-32). In a remarkable aside in Genesis 5:21-24, the genealogist identifies Enoch, the seventh member of the line, as an exceptional model of piety and devotion to God.

The genealogy opens by noting that these descendants of Adam functioned as successive images of God. However, the comment about Enoch says nothing about his performance of his role vis-à-vis the realm he was to govern; it focuses solely on his relationship with his divine Suzerain: "Enoch walked [*wayyithallēk*] with God" (vv. 22, 24). This rare expression occurs elsewhere in the First Testament only twice: with reference to Noah (6:9) and those who walk humbly with YHWH (Mic. 6:8, with *qal* replacing the *hithpael* stem; cf. Rev. 3:4). While the comment reverses the Edenic roles described in 3:8, where YHWH had come down and walked about (*hithallēk*) in the garden, the Suzerain-vassal relationship was so tight that God relieved Enoch of his earthly image duties and took him out of this world (Gen. 5:24).

Apart from this exceptional case, the moral and spiritual state of humanity spiraled downward after Abel and Seth, so that YHWH finally determined to remove this version of his vassal (6:1–7) and to begin anew with Noah. After his dark verbal portrait of the state of humanity by the time of Noah and his sons (5:32–6:7), the narrator ends his history of Adam’s descendants with a surprising circumstantial clause: “By the way, Noah found grace [*māṣā’ ḥēn*] in the eyes of YHWH” (6:8). Why, in this corrupt environment, YHWH should have isolated Noah as the object of his grace and ultimately as the fountainhead of the new humanity remains a mystery. However, the choice of word suggests an act of sheer grace, which means that until Noah was selected as YHWH’s agent of redemption for a remnant of humanity and land and sky creatures, at this moment he was part of that corrupt world—like Saul/Paul at the time of Jesus’ intrusion into his life.⁶

The Historical Prelude to the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 6:9–8:22)

As noted above, the narrative of Noah begins with a new heading in 6:9a: “These are the descendants of Noah” (*’ēlleh tōlēdōt nōaḥ*). However, instead of immediately listing his descendants, the narrator offers summary commentary on the character of the principal human figure who dominates the accounts that follow: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among his generation; with God Noah walked.” Although each of these expressions bears a unique range of meanings, by citing three qualities, the narrator portrays Noah as a paragon of virtue as a divine image. As “a righteous man” (*’îṣ ṣaddîq*), Noah’s life involved conduct in accord with established norms, in this case the norms represented by his role as vassal before YHWH. The narrator hereby perceives him as a model of Deuteronomic righteousness as called for in Deuteronomy

16:20, “Righteousness, [only] righteousness you shall pursue [*ṣedeq ṣedeq tirdōp*].” While expressed as the opinion of the narrator, the assessment in Genesis 6:9 also represents the view of YHWH, who inspired the author, and a disposition that Moses described in Deuteronomy 6:25: “And we will be recognized as righteous [*ṣědāqâ tihyeh-lānû*] if we keep [the covenant] by putting into practice this entire charge before YHWH our God, as he has commanded us.” This opening statement does not explain how Noah demonstrated righteousness; the following chapters will speak for themselves.

The second quality of Noah that Genesis 6:9 notes is his blamelessness. As we will see from the closing episode of the Noah account (9:20–27), in the narrator’s mind *tāmîm* does not mean sinless perfection, any more than the use of this expression for sacrificial animals (e.g., Exod. 12:5) meant these animals had never been dirtied or experienced illness, or any more than David’s claim to be *tāmîm* (2 Sam. 22:24; Ps. 18:23 [24]) meant that he denied ever having sinned. Rather, it speaks of wholehearted commitment to godliness and purity, so that when persons are soiled, they take the steps YHWH provided to remove the defect. The narrator celebrates Noah’s distinctive blamelessness against the backdrop of the utter depravity of his generation (*dôr*).

Finally, Noah walked with God. However, unlike Enoch, whose piety God rewarded by relieving him of his duties, YHWH heightened Noah’s role as his image; in the coming cosmic upheaval, he would be the agent of rescue for the creatures that YHWH had created and become the founder of a new humanity—in effect a second Adam.

Noah’s story began with a remarkable scene: the divine Suzerain shared his assessment of the spiritual and moral state of the cosmos with his chosen vassal (Noah) and declared his determination to destroy the two bottom angles of the cosmic triangle, the earth and all living things that

inhabit it (6:11–17). YHWH also revealed to Noah the means whereby life, as he had created it, could be salvaged; he charged Noah to construct “for himself” a massive three-tiered raft (*tēbâ*). Only after God had inserted the motif of covenant did he specify the ark’s function (vv. 18–21): Noah and his family were to enter the ark, and he was to take on board male and female representatives of each species of sky, high-carriage land animals, and low-carriage land creatures, along with food provisions for all. The purpose of this boat was “to keep alive” (*lēhaḥăyōt*, vv. 19, 20; cf. *piel* in 7:3) themselves and the animals in the impending disaster. As a dutiful and righteous vassal, Noah did as God commanded him (6:22).

The reference to the covenant in verse 18 is interruptive, cryptic, and surprising: it does not resurface in the narrative that follows until chapter 9, after the impending judgment has passed. We might have expected verbal or ritual acts by which the covenant would be confirmed to follow immediately, but the narrator cast the statement in the imperfective *weqatal* form, suggesting a future moment for its fulfillment. Inserted here, it creates anticipation in the narrative for what is yet to come.

The actual flood narrative begins with YHWH’s command to Noah to enter the ark with his household, grounding this command in Noah’s exceptional righteousness in these dark times (7:1). The narrator devoted a remarkable amount of space to the entrance of this family and all the creatures into the ark (vv. 1–16), with the framework highlighting Noah’s role as divinely chosen governor over the proceedings and over the creatures. At the beginning the animals did not merely enter the ark on their own; YHWH instructed Noah to “take” seven pairs of clean land animals and birds “to himself” (*tiqqah lēkā*, 7:2). Similarly, at the end the narrator notes that all the species of animals that entered as male and female pairs “entered to Noah to the ark” (vv. 13–16). He casts Noah as the (royal) guardian and

savior of the human race and all living creatures as his charge (vv. 17-24).

In 8:1a the narrator's comment that "God remembered Noah and all the creatures and livestock with him in the ark" signals the turning point in the calamity. As had been the case in the preparation for the flood, once God had "turned off the taps" (8:1b-5), Noah dominated the arrangements for the occupants to exit from the ark (8:6-19). Noah had tested the landscape with creaturely resources that seemed totally supportive of his governing role; then at the appropriate and climactic moment, YHWH issued the command for Noah to leave the ark with his family and "bring out with you" all the creatures. He treated Noah as the one in charge. The account of the flood concludes with a summary statement declaring Noah's mission accomplished (vv. 18-19) and his reaction to what had just transpired (vv. 20-22).

Apparently as a spontaneous gesture of thanksgiving and homage, Noah constructed an altar to YHWH, on which he offered as whole burnt offerings (*'ālâ 'ōlōt*) representatives of every clean land animal and bird that had accompanied him on the ark. The narrator describes YHWH's pleasure anthropomorphically with this response: "He smelled the pleasing aroma" (v. 21a), which precipitates an effusive speech that begins in prose and concludes in elevated poetry (vv. 21b-22). Remarkably, YHWH never mentioned Noah, who had presented these offerings. Instead, he focused entirely on the realm that Noah administered on his behalf.

The speech consists of two parts: a commitment never again to destroy his creation on account of criminal actions by his deputy and representative and a promise to maintain the order of the cosmos in perpetuity (vv. 21-22). With inspired "omniscience" the narrator casts YHWH's pronouncements as internal speech rather than as promises declared to the beneficiaries. However, the publication of

God's private thoughts here invites all to find consolation and confidence in knowing his response. YHWH declared his ongoing commitment to the cosmos by promising never again to curse the ground or attack all living things as he had done here. The "ground" and "all living things" represent the two elements at the bottom angles of the cosmic administrative triangle. However, YHWH qualified both promises. To the first he added, "on account of human beings" (*ba'ăbûr hā'ādām*), because their hearts are evil from their youth, suggesting that he anticipated further human rebellion against the Suzerain. However, from here on, YHWH would never again punish the realm as a whole with such fury for the crimes of the head of the realm. This would not preclude punishing portions of the cosmos or its creaturely inhabitants for their own corruption (cf. 6:11-12). To the second promise YHWH added, "as I have done [now]." We may assume the rider to the first clause applied here as well: "on account of the evil of the image appointed to govern the world."

Genesis 8:21-22 concerns the cosmos rather than the divinely appointed governor. By means of four binary terrestrial phenomena (seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night), YHWH promised to maintain the cosmic order. However, the opening phrase of verse 22, "As long as the earth remains," may imply that the earth as we know it might not remain forever, but to the hearer, this word is consoling enough.

The Stipulations of the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 9:1-7)

The term *bērît*, "covenant," does not appear in chapter 9 until verses 8-9, where God announced to Noah and his sons that he was establishing his covenant with them and with their descendants in perpetuity. However, in verse 10 the attention on Noah and his family merges with concern

for the creatures that emerged from the ark with them, reflecting how tightly God's covenant relationship with Noah was tied to his relationship with the cosmos. On the one hand, because the class of "living creatures" included human beings, the cosmic covenant also covered Noah and his family. On the other hand, remaining in force was the unique administrative role that Noah had exercised as guardian of the creatures throughout the horrific account of the deluge.

But questions remain because of the ambiguous reference to the covenant in 6:18: When God declared that he would establish his covenant with Noah, was he thinking of a separate covenant with Noah himself? Or did he have in mind a covenant with the cosmos, with Noah merely functioning as the guardian and deputized head? Whatever the status of YHWH's relationship with Noah and the cosmos, the plural pronouns in 9:9 indicate that here he was establishing his covenant with Noah and his descendants.

The echoes of Genesis 1:28 in 9:1-2 and of 1:29-30 in 9:3 confirm that the goal of this covenant was to recover a measure of the relationship that YHWH had enjoyed with Adam in the garden and in so doing to confirm his image status and his governing role over the rest of creation. YHWH was starting over. However, because this covenant sought to recapture the relationships of the pre-fall era and because Noah was cast as a second Adam, this covenant is rightly labeled the Adamic covenant. The importance of this identification will become apparent when we consider this covenant in the New Testament. However, to grasp the nature and significance of this covenant in its original context, we need to describe the respective roles of the divine Suzerain and the human vassal separately.

The role of the divine Suzerain. The God who made this covenant with Noah was both creator of all things (Elohim) and the covenant God of Israel (YHWH). The monergism of this covenant is clear from beginning to end: (1) God

identified it as “my covenant,” not “ours” or “Noah’s” (Gen. 6:18; 9:9, 11, 15). (2) God simply announced it to Noah; it was not the result of bilateral discussions. (3) God alone established this covenant (and is the only subject of the verb *hēqîm*). (4) God determined the context of the ratification (after Noah had entered and exited the ark). (5) God alone determined the terms of the covenant; they were not established through negotiations or appeals. (6) God provided himself with a sign (’ô^t) and guarantee of the covenant’s permanence and eternity. On the last point, strictly speaking, the rainbow functioned primarily to remind God of the irrevocability of the covenant, and it was only secondarily for the vassals; when they would see it, they could relax, knowing that God had not forgotten his covenant promises. (7) The narrator focused overwhelmingly on the divine Suzerain’s obligations. In so doing he notes a series of specific promises that God made to his creation:

- a. He guaranteed the continued existence of the cosmos despite the potentially reprehensible conduct of his viceroys (8:21-22).
- b. He facilitated humankind’s performance of its duties as vice-regent by instilling instinctive fear in the animals (9:2).
- c. He placed the created world, plant and animal life, at his viceroy’s disposal (9:3-4).
- d. He authorized humankind to administer justice toward all who would violate the sanctity of the divine image’s life (9:5-6), promising benefits to his vassal (blessing) and obligating himself to the covenant.

The role of the vassal. As presented in Genesis 9, the Adamic covenant was intricately bound up with the cosmic covenant. In the latter, the living creatures that inhabited the world were the primary collective covenant partner. The

human population belonged to that group, as we noted in the discussion of Genesis 1-2, but in the divine economy, God had singled out humanity for an administrative role that had been on open display in the narrative leading up to the establishment of the Adamic covenant. Genesis 9:1-7 emphasizes that, while YHWH's concern was the cosmos, he established this covenant with Noah and his sons, who stood at the head of the new humanity (v. 9) and held the position of vice-regent over creation.

The narrative never explains why God chose Noah out of all humanity to be the object of his favor (*ḥēn*), but having been chosen, the man proved to be a paradigmatic vassal, righteous, blameless, and intimate with his Suzerain (6:9). This triadic combination suggests superlative compliance with the divine Suzerain's mandate. He demonstrated his fidelity to his role and to God with unquestioning obedience to a contextually absurd order to construct an ark on dry land⁷ and with his spontaneous whole burnt offerings of thanksgiving and worship after the crisis had passed (8:20).

As with later covenants, the human vassal was bound to specific obligations once the covenant was ratified. However, we should distinguish between the ontological eternity of the covenant (it would never be withdrawn) and human access to the benefits of the covenant. The former was unconditional and fixed by the divine guarantee; the latter was contingent on human performance. Genesis 9:1-7 summarizes the conditions laid out for Noah and his descendants.

First, God charged Noah and his sons to be fruitful, multiply, and populate the entire earth. That this charge should be repeated and frame the divine speech highlights its significance (9:1, 7). The opening charge (v. 1) repeats verbatim what God had commanded Adam in Genesis 1:28. The concluding charge (9:7) strengthens it by commanding humans to "swarm in the earth" (*širṣû bā'āreṣ*) like sea creatures "swarm the waters" (1:20-21) and as insects and

other “crawlies” swarm the ground (7:21; 8:17). And then, for good measure, he duplicated the command to “multiply” (*rěbû*) and added “in it” (9:7). Although divine blessings echoing 1:28 preceded the command, YHWH strengthened the command against the backdrop of the curse that hung over the entire world because of human rebellion. Human beings should not take fertility and reproduction for granted in an environment ruled by sin and death, but they should celebrate these moments with gratitude as evidence of divine grace. At the same time, the fulfillment of humankind’s mandate to govern the world as God’s vice-regent required multiplication of the population, hence the focus on the earth in the final frame.

Remarkably, unlike in 1:28, here YHWH did not explicitly charge Noah and his sons to subdue and rule the earth. A hearer familiar with the earlier form of the mandate might assume it, but Noah was ten evil generations removed from Adam. It is unclear whether he was aware of the earlier command. His treatment of the animals in the ark scarcely matches the verb *kābaš*, “to subjugate,” in 1:28. On the contrary, they came to him as if they were his pets, and despite being enemies in the wild, the different species apparently were quite controlled on the ark. But when the night of divine fury had passed, God instilled in them fear and terror vis-à-vis human beings. He highlighted the comprehensive scope of this disposition by specifying the four categories of species found in Genesis 1:26.

However, the statement “The fear and terror of you will be in every living creature on the earth” (9:2) is ambiguous. If animals instinctively fear humans, whose interests are served? If we assume that carnivores and other large animals pose threats to humans, then this statement concerns the protection of the divine image. Rather than overpowering humans—which many are capable of doing—they shrink back from them and even submit to them, as is the case with a hundred-pound woman handling two-ton

elephants at the circus. However, with humankind's vastly superior brains, which enabled them to invent lethal weapons, and despite the mandate from God to care for the animals, humans also present the biggest threat to their well-being. In this case, God apparently instilled the fear of humans into the hearts of animals for the animals' sake. The last clause, "into your hands they are given," is also ambiguous. It could mean that YHWH hands the creatures into people's power either for them to control (cf. Gen. 14:20) or for their care (30:35; 39:4, 8). In either case, YHWH assigned Noah and his sons patronly charge over the creatures.

The ambiguity of Genesis 9:2 extends to the specific words for "fear and terror" themselves. Most translations assume two things: (1) that here the root *ḥtt* means terror and (2) that *môrā*' functions synonymously. However, we may interpret the second word more positively, as "reverent/trusting awe" of YHWH. Since *môrā*' precedes *ḥtt* here, it should probably govern the reading of the second term. Remarkably, in Malachi 2:5, the only other text that juxtaposes these expressions, the same order occurs, requiring the more positive nuance. This supports the more positive interpretation of "into your hands they are given."

Returning to the specified charge to multiply and fill the earth, Genesis 9:18–19 and the Table of Nations in chapter 10 outline how the descendants of Noah fulfilled this charge. However, the tower of Babel incident describes the descendants of Noah (presumably in the seventh generation; cf. 10:25; 11:16–19) rebelling against this charge, banding together, and taking deliberate steps to prevent being scattered throughout the earth. But YHWH disrupted their ability to communicate, forcing them to do precisely what they had set out to prevent. If this event illustrates human perfidy, the result demonstrates YHWH's fidelity to his covenant. He did not punish the world again for the rebellion of his vice-regents (cf. 8:21–22).

The Afterlife of the Adamic Covenant

After Genesis 11 the Adamic covenant recedes into the background, and the narrator's presentation of God's covenantal plan of redemption turns to Abram/Abraham, a particular descendant of Adam. As we will see, God commissioned Abraham and his descendants to be his agents through whom the curse, under which the whole world still languished, would be lifted and replaced with the divine blessing. A few later compositions allude to the special status of humanity confirmed in this covenant, most notably Psalm 8. The poetic picture painted by this psalmist declares that, despite continued human rebellion, humankind's status as the image of God continues, though the ability to function as his image has been severely jeopardized.

Nevertheless, we hear occasional allusions to that role. YHWH built into the Israelite covenant the demand to recognize the sanctity of all life, including that of animals, with specific instructions for Israel to drain the blood of animals they slaughtered prior to preparing the flesh for consumption.⁸ Remarkably, when the apostles considered the boundaries of gentile inclusion in the new covenant community, they reiterated the ongoing force of this principle (Acts 15:29).

Although many perceive biblical wisdom writings to be secular in tone and universal in their scope, the fundamental pillar, "The fear of YHWH is the first principle of wisdom,"⁹ reminds readers that Hebrew wisdom is first and foremost covenantal. But this does not preclude universalistic statements. In two instances Proverbs bases the Israelites' wisdom ethic vis-à-vis other human beings on each individual's status as an image of God:

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honor him. (Prov. 14:31 NRSV)

Those who mock the poor insult their Maker;

those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished. (17:5 NRSV)

This perspective spills over into the New Testament,^{[10](#)} but I shall delay discussion of this matter until chapter 13.

- ^{[1](#)}. Exod. 1:1-24:18; but esp. 6:2-9 and 34:6-7.
- ^{[2](#)}. Ps. 8; Prov. 14:31; 17:5; Matt. 25:45.
- ^{[3](#)}. Cf. 2 Chron. 28:10; Neh. 5:5; Jer. 34:11, 16.
- ^{[4](#)}. Prov. 12:16, 23; 13:16, 14:8, 15, 18; 22:3; 27:12. Job 5:12 and 15:5 are vague.
- ^{[5](#)}. Judg. 3:15, 17; 2 Sam. 8:2 // 1 Chron. 18:2; 2 Sam. 8:6 // 1 Chron. 18:6; 2 Kings 17:3-4; 2 Chron. 17:11; 26:8; Hosea 10:6; cf. also Gen. 32:21.
- ^{[6](#)}. Acts 9:1-9; 22:3-16; 26:12-18.
- ^{[7](#)}. Gen. 6:22; 7:5, 9; cf. Heb. 11:7; 2 Pet. 2:5.
- ^{[8](#)}. Lev. 7:26; 17:10-16; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23; 15:23.
- ^{[9](#)}. Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Eccles. 12:13.
- ^{[10](#)}. Cf. Matt. 25:31-46; James 3:7-10.

PART 2

The ISRAELITE
COVENANT

When God reaffirmed his commitment to his creation by establishing the cosmic covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, this did not solve the fundamental problem of human sin (Gen. 8:21; cf. 9:5-6), nor did it lift the curse that hung over the world because of sin. God's commitment to the world and the grace of his heart drove him to create a new covenant relationship that should serve as a microcosm of the cosmic covenant relationship and be the means by which the latter would be fully restored. Instead of a triangular relationship involving God, the earth, and all living creatures, this relationship involved God, Israel, and the land of Canaan (fig. II.1).

Figure II.1
The Israelite Covenant Triangle



The evolution of this Israelite covenant is complex, involving four discrete stages:

Stage 1: Its origins with Abraham (Gen. 15 and 17)

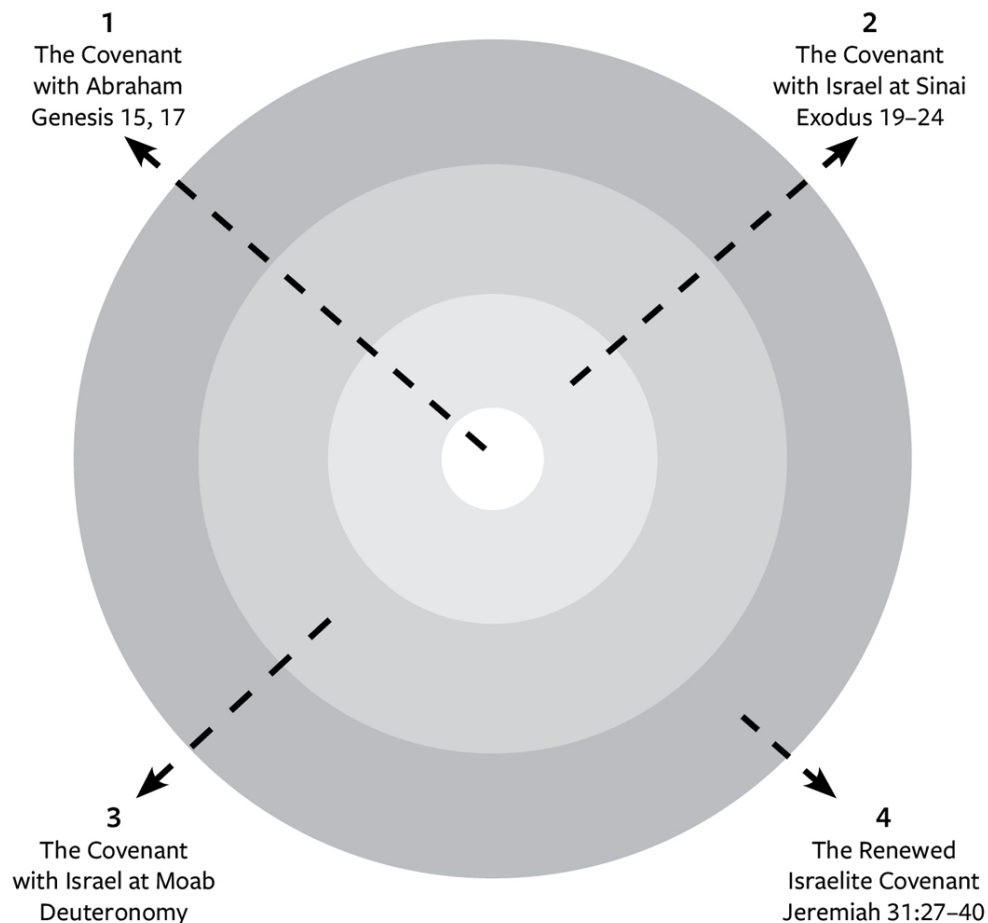
Stage 2: Its establishment at Sinai with the exodus generation of Abraham's descendants (Exod. 19-Lev. 27)

Stage 3: Its renewal with the desert generation on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy)

Stage 4: Its full realization in the distant future (Jer. 31-33; Ezek. 34; 36-37)

Figure II.2

The Evolution of the Israelite Covenant: A Bird's-Eye View

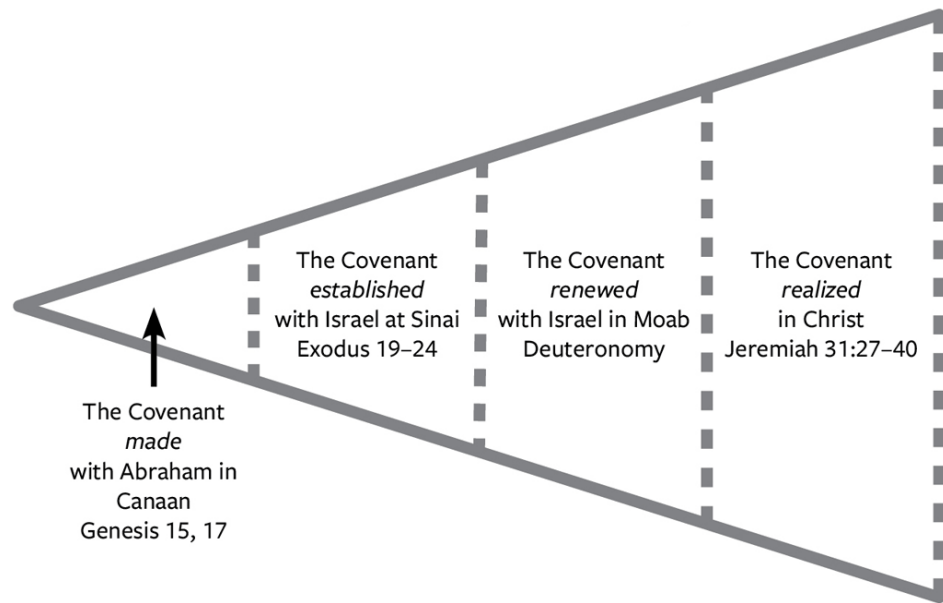


The story of this covenant began with God's call to Abraham to leave his homeland and head for the land that he would show him (Canaan), so his descendants might become a great nation and the agents through whom God would lift the curse and extend his blessing throughout the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). To formalize his relationship with

Abraham and his descendants, God made (*kārat*) an irrevocable/eternal (*‘ôlām*) covenant with the ancestor, which he promised to confirm with his descendants (Gen. 15; 17). Although he renewed the covenant promises to Isaac (Gen. 26:2–5, 24) and to Jacob,¹ only centuries later would Abraham’s descendants realize the fullness of the relationship promised. At Mount Sinai YHWH formally established the covenant with Abraham’s descendants. In so doing he promised to be their God² and engaged them in the mission of blessing to the world first announced to Abraham (Exod. 19:4–6). At that time, God reiterated his promise to give them the land of Canaan,³ and he graciously revealed to them in detail what he meant by crediting Abraham with obeying him, keeping his charge, commands, statutes, and instructions (Gen. 26:5). For their part, the Israelites bound themselves to God, promising to listen to his voice and keep his covenant (Exod. 19:5–6) and ritually accepting the blood of the covenant sprinkled on them (24:7–8).

Figure II.3

The Evolution of the Israelite Covenant: A Sheep’s-Eye View



Because the exodus generation proved faithless to YHWH and his covenant, virtually all of them perished in the desert without having received the land as promised. This necessitated a new series of rituals supervised by Moses on the plains of Moab. Through these rituals the generation born in the desert was integrated into the covenant and authorized to cross the Jordan and claim the promised land, not merely as a band of escapees from Egypt but as the people of YHWH. Despite this new generation's enthusiasm and the strength of Moses' exhortation, both he and YHWH expressed pessimism concerning Israel's full realization of the covenant promises.⁴ However, looking beyond the nation's rebellion and judgment, they anticipated the realization of the covenant promises in full (Deut. 30:1-10; 32:34-43). This Mosaic vision undergirded the eschatological hope of the prophets, who spoke of the day when YHWH would renew his covenant with them as his "covenant of peace" (*bērît šālôm*, Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:25-31). In the chapters that follow, I trace the growth of this covenantal vision by examining each of these stages separately. I will cover stage 1 in chapters 3-4, stage 2 in chapters 5-6, stage 3 in chapters 7-8, and stage 4 in

chapter 9. Throughout these chapters, I will note the continuities that link them and will highlight YHWH's grace in adopting this covenant as the means by which the curse that human sin had triggered upon the cosmos would finally be lifted and replaced by YHWH's richest blessing.

- [1.](#) Gen. 28:13-15; 35:10-12; 46:3-4.
- [2.](#) Exod. 6:7; 20:2; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 11:4.
- [3.](#) Exod. 6:4-8; 23:20-33; Lev. 14:34; 25:38.
- [4.](#) Deut. 4:25-31; 29:2-28 [1-27]; 31:1-32:33.

Stage 1 of the Israelite Covenant

CHAPTER 3

The Origins of the Abrahamic Covenant

Introduction

After the genealogy of Noah and his descendants in Genesis 11:10–26, a single issue dominates the narrative of Genesis: God’s election of Abraham and his descendants to be the bearers of his blessing to a world languishing under the curse of sin. In the New Testament Paul refers to the benefactions pledged to Abraham and his descendants as “the promises” (*hai epangeliai*, Rom. 9:4). The Greek word *epangeliai* refers to “a declaration of a benefit or action in the interest of another person.” This word occurs in the Greek translation of the First Testament only three times, most notably in Ps. 56:8 [MT 56:9; LXX 55:9], where it surprisingly renders the Hebrew *siprâ*, “account, document.”¹

Because biblical Hebrew has no separate word for “promise,” other phrases are used to capture the sense: “the good word” (*haddābār haṭṭôb*) and “the good words” (*haddēbārîm haṭṭôbîm*).² Genesis 28:3–4 applies the most explicit expression, “the blessing of Abraham” (*birkat ’Abrāhām*), to YHWH’s promises of numerous progeny and the land of Canaan. Elsewhere the benefactions constitute the essence of the covenant that God made with Abraham (15:1–21; 17:1–27) and the oath that God swore to him (22:16). We who hear the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph must realize that they were written primarily not

as portrayals of exemplary characters but for their theological significance. Indeed, God—identified variously as El, El Shadday, YHWH—was the principal actor. The significance of each episode in the patriarchal narratives depends on its contribution to the divine plan of salvation generally and the development of the notion of covenant more particularly.

The formula “These are the generations of X” in 11:10 and 37:2 mark the boundaries of the primary literary unit that informs us concerning the first stage of the evolution of the Israelite covenant. While not of primary importance for the Israelite covenant, the Joseph story that follows in Genesis 37–50 is not irrelevant to the theme. As expected, it begins with “These are the generations of Jacob,” but the word for “covenant” (*bĕrît*) never appears. However, we hear allusions to the benefactions associated with the covenant in YHWH’s blessing of Potiphar’s house (39:4–6), in Jacob’s blessing of his grandsons (48:16, 20), and in Jacob’s final blessing of the twelve sons/tribes (49:25–26). As Jacob left Canaan to find refuge from famine in Egypt, God reintroduced himself as “the God of your father” and reassured him that in Egypt he would make him into a “great nation” (46:3).

We hear the clearest echo of the covenant promises in 48:3–4, in Jacob’s recollection of an event that had happened at Bethel decades earlier:

El Shadday appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. He said to me,

“Look, I will make you fruitful,
and I will multiply you,
and I will make you into a company of peoples [*qêhal ‘ammîm*],
and will give this land to your future descendants
as an irrevocable/everlasting possession [*’ăḥuzzat ‘ôlām*].”

The promise of the land of Canaan particularly undergirded Jacob’s demand that after his decease his sons were to return his body to the ancestral tomb in the field of

Machpelah, before Mamre “in the land of Canaan” (49:29–32; cf. 50:5). As for Joseph, the chief administrator of Egypt, he insisted that when God would bring Jacob’s descendants up from Egypt “to the land he swore [to give] to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the Israelites should take his remains with them and bury them in the promised land.³

But now our reach into the distant future has exceeded the immediate concerns. Between the asyndetic (*’ēlleh*) *tôlēdôt* boundary markers in 11:10 and 37:2, the patriarchal narratives divide formally into six subdivisions, each introduced by syndetic (*wě’ēlleh*) forms of the formula (*wě’ēlleh tôlēdôt*: 11:27 [Terah]; 25:12 [Ishmael]; 25:19 [Isaac]; 36:1 [Esau]; 36:9 [Esau again]). The asyndetic form of the heading to the Shem *tôlēdôt* not only reinforces Shem’s significance within the human family tree (Gen. 11:10–26) but also establishes the cosmic context for the call of Abraham and his patriarchal successors in Noah’s blessing in Genesis 9:25–27.

The Hebrew word *bērît* occurs eighteen times in the patriarchal narratives as defined above, but its distribution is uneven. In four contexts the word refers to mundane parity relationships between humans.⁴ In the remaining fourteen occurrences, *bērît* functions theologically, referring to the disparity (Suzerain-vassal) relationship that YHWH established between himself and Abram/Abraham. Of these, the word appears once in 15:18, but the remaining thirteen all occur in chapter 17. For the present discussion these two chapters will be crucial because they involve the rituals through which God instituted a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants. For reasons of space, our treatment of the narratives that follow will be uneven, but I will break them into discrete segments as follows:

1. The Background to God’s Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 11:10–14:24)

2. Phase 1 of the Covenant-Making Ritual (Gen. 15:1-16:16)
3. Phase 2 of the Covenant-Making Ritual (Gen. 17:1-27)
4. The Afterlife of the Covenant in the Abraham Narratives (Gen. 18:1-25:11)
5. The Afterlife of the Covenant in the Isaac Narratives (Gen. 25:12-28:9; 35:28-29)
6. The Afterlife of the Covenant in the Jacob Narratives (Gen. 28:10-35:29)

I will address the first three of these in this chapter and the remainder in chapter 4.

The Background to God's Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 11:10-14:24)

The oracular blessing of Shem in 9:26-27 and his genealogy in 11:10-26 locates the election of Abram (later Abraham, 17:5) in its cosmic context. The blessing acknowledges YHWH as the God of Shem and promises Shem supremacy over Canaan and Japheth. In quoting this oracle, the narrator expresses awareness of the significance of the curse on Canaan and God's blessing of Shem. The former anticipates the Israelites' occupation of the land of the Canaanites (15:18-20), while the latter sets the stage for YHWH's call of Israel to be his covenant people and a light to the nations. In the context of the exodus and the revelation that the Israelites would receive at Sinai, they would learn the significance of "YHWH" as God's covenant name. That Noah should address his blessing to "YHWH, the God of Shem" highlights Shem's special role within the human population and sets the stage for YHWH's later promise to Israel (Shem's descendants): "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (e.g., Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12). Whether or not Shem was Noah's oldest son (Gen. 10:21 is

ambiguous), God was directing the course of history and electing his agents of grace from the very beginning. Except for the first (Shem's) and last (Abraham's) generations, the genealogy of Shem (11:10-26) is linear (like Adam's in Gen. 5 and Perez' in Ruth 4:18-22). Its function is to summarize the history from this son of Noah, at the beginning of the new post-flood humanity, to Abram. Remarkably, this line is bookended by two acts of divine election of one of three sons: at the beginning, Shem rather than Japheth or Ham (9:25-27), and at the end, Abram rather than Nahor or Haran (11:25-26).

In Genesis 11:27-32 the narrative becomes more vivid, introducing readers to Abram's family of origin and redundantly highlighting Sarai's barrenness: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" (v. 30). This comment introduces us not only to a dominant motif in the patriarchal narratives but also to the context in which God's grace began to intervene. While this paragraph provides no clues yet of what was in store for Abram, the narrator reminds hearers that God's chosen agent did not come from the perfect world of paradise but from a world languishing under the curse of sin. Even for the chosen family, conception was difficult (Gen. 3:16). Sarai's barrenness would prove to be a great personal frustration to both Abram and Sarai, but it was symptomatic of a universal problem.

The sequence of events narrated in 11:27-12:4 seems to suggest that Terah, Abram's father, initiated the latter's move from Ur to Haran. It appears that Canaan was their goal, but when they reached Haran, they settled down there. After noting the death of Terah (11:32), the narrator cites the words of YHWH that Abram heard. Apparently he responded immediately, packing up his personal household, along with his nephew Lot's household, and moving on to Canaan (12:4-7).

However, the substance of the message that Abram received from YHWH complicates the issue, especially the

charge to leave “your land, your kindred [*môladtěkā*], and your father’s house.” Derived from the verb *yālad*, “to give birth,” the word *môledet* is naturally associated with the circumstances, if not the place, of one’s birth. Abraham’s comment in 24:7 appears to reinforce this notion: YHWH, the God of heaven, had taken him from “my father’s house and from the land of my kindred [*’ereš môladtî*].”⁵ In the New Testament, Stephen’s declaration that God first called Abraham while he was still in Ur (Acts 7:2–4) was probably grounded on this interpretation. In the end, the issue may not be significant for our purposes, except that, as traditionally interpreted, it places the call of the patriarch in the context of the more cosmopolitan world of southeastern Mesopotamia (11:1–10), rather than the less developed northwestern world of the Aramaeans, which better fits the picture of the human population spreading out from Mesopotamia (11:9). However, biblical writers’ consistent association of Abram’s Ur with Chaldeans,⁶ who do not appear in southern Babylonia before the sixth century BC, suggests they meant to distinguish this northwestern Ur in the region of Haran from the Sumerian city (Beitzel, *New Moody Atlas of the Bible*, 98).

The biography of Abram begins in 12:1. Without warning, YHWH’s voice, which had been silent since 11:6–7, breaks into Abram’s world. This speech is remarkable at several levels. First, YHWH spoke without introducing himself. Whether or not Abram already knew YHWH—like Seth did in 4:26 or Noah in 8:20–21—the speech casts into sharp relief the patriarch’s apparently immediate and full obedience in verse 4.

Second, based on its discourse structure, the speech divides into three major parts. The first two parts (12:1 and 2, respectively) subdivide into a divine command (vv. 1a and 2a) and a statement of YHWH’s goal with respect to Abram (vv. 1b and 2b). The climactic last part in verse 3 declares YHWH’s ultimate missional goal.

Third, the narrator casts this verbal event as a commissioning speech. Like the commissions of Moses (Exod. 3–4) and later prophets (Isa. 6; Jer. 1; Ezek. 1–3), here YHWH commissioned Abram as his agent through whom the curse hanging over the world would be lifted and replaced with the divine blessing. The commission involved two commands: Abraham was to leave his family and his homeland and head for a destination that only God knew, and he was to embody divine blessing in the cursed world.

Fourth, in asking Abram to abandon his homeland, kinship roots, and domestic environment, YHWH demanded that he sacrifice these bases of ancient Near Easterners' well-being and security. This would require grounding his own security totally and absolutely on YHWH and his word. Specifically, YHWH promised to lead Abram to a new land, to make of him a great nation (*gôy gādôl*), to bless him, to make him famous (in the most positive sense of the word), and to serve as his patron and defender (blessing those who bless Abram and cursing those who curse him). Although the narrator will not speak explicitly of Abram's faith until 15:6, his response to this commission demonstrates that his life of faith had begun much earlier.

Fifth, while the narrator does not characterize this relationship as covenantal, this divine speech laid the foundation for the tripartite covenant relationship that YHWH would formally establish in subsequent narratives, involving the divine Suzerain, the faithful vassal, and the land. Remarkably, YHWH referred to the land simply as a destination, without declaring that he would give it to him as a permanent homeland. YHWH's promise that he would be the source of blessing for "all the families of the land" is ambiguous. The Hebrew expression (*mišpəḥōt hā'ădāmâ*) occurs elsewhere only in Genesis 28:14 and Amos 3:2. Our anthropocentric impulse is to limit "all the families of the land" to the clans of the human race. However, the choice of *'ădāmâ*, "land," rather than *'ereṣ*, "earth," may suggest a

more comprehensive interpretation. Although these expressions are often interchanged, *'ădāmâ* tends to involve land that yields produce to nourish and sustain the population that lives on it. In Genesis 8:19 the narrator had used this word when he spoke of all the animals leaving the ark “according to their families” (*lěmišpěḥôtêhem*). Given this link, YHWH may have located the call of Abram within the cosmic context as well as in the context of human history.

The narrator’s description of Abram’s response to YHWH’s commission is cryptic and to the point: “Abraham went as YHWH had told him.” We hear no words and observe no action. However, we need to interpret all the episodes that follow in Genesis 12:4b–14:24 in relation to the charge and the assumed relationship between YHWH, Abram, and the land—without a formally contracted relationship.

Genesis 12:4c–10 summarizes Abram’s journeys (Haran to Shechem to Bethel to the Negev to Egypt), though in the narrator’s mind, his sojourn in Egypt was off course (vv. 10–20). In the rest of this chapter, the land of Canaan (*'ereṣ kěna'an*), identified twice in verse 5, was Abram’s destination. When he arrived at Shechem, he heard YHWH’s voice again, this time declaring that this location represented the territorial grant that he promised Abram and his descendants. Abram responded by building a memorial altar to YHWH.

Figure 3.1

The Location of Shechem in the Promised Land



That YHWH should appear to him at this spot is significant, not only because it was next to the oak of Moreh, obviously a significant landmark (12:6), but because of the location of Shechem. Situated in the valley between two of the highest mountains in the heartland of Canaan, Shechem was exactly at the midpoint of a straight line drawn from Dan to Beersheba, eventually the stereotypical boundary markers of the promised land (fig. 3.1).⁷ From the top of Ebal, the higher mountain, Abram could have seen almost the entire land promised to him. But the patriarch journeyed southward as far as Bethel (v. 8). Grateful for YHWH's guidance, there he constructed another altar in his honor and called upon the name of YHWH, in the tradition of Seth (4:26). In linking the construction of an altar with calling upon YHWH, Abram established a ritual he would repeat twice more (13:4; 21:33) and that his son Isaac would imitate (26:25).

It probably frustrated Abram that he could not settle down in the land YHWH promised him. Because Canaanites occupied it (12:6; cf. 13:7), he and his successors moved about the land as sojourners (*gērîm*). The Canaanites were friendly to this entourage, but as aliens, Abram and his family could not claim land for themselves (chap. 23) or mix socially with the people (cf. chap. 34).

In contrast to the faith and obedience that Abram demonstrated in 12:4–9, the narrator's account of his descent to Egypt casts the patriarch in a negative light (vv. 10–20). His move there in response to the famine in the land suggests an eclipse of the spiritual and missional vision established by his commission and demonstrated at Shechem and Bethel. The famine signified that although he was YHWH's chosen agent of blessing and although God had promised to bless him personally, he resided in a world under the curse, where even the chosen are caught in the crossfire aimed at fallen humanity.

The text is incomplete, but it appears that in Egypt Abram was the cause of his family's troubles. He forgot YHWH's promise to give him the land of Canaan, and in blatant self-interest he sacrificed his wife to the Egyptians to save his own life (12:12). As compensation for Sarai, Pharaoh treated him well, but YHWH disrupted this apparently comfortable association by striking Pharaoh's household with a severe plague. However, Pharaoh learned of the link between the plague and Sarai's status as Abram's wife (vv. 17-19), and his reaction was decisive; he sent the patriarchal clan away.

Genesis 13 divides into two parts. Verses 1-13 involve Abram's severance from his nephew Lot. When Abram returned to Bethel (vv. 1-4), he realized that because the land could not sustain all their livestock, he and Lot would need to separate (vv. 5-7). It is unclear whether Abram's invitation to Lot to choose whichever side of the Jordan he would prefer was a sign of trust in YHWH or a sign of unbelief. Perhaps if Lot chose the west side, Abram trusted YHWH to transfer it to him eventually. However, he seems for the moment to have forgotten the divine promise and was willing to gamble away his eventual title to this land. In the end, without expressing awareness of Abram's title to the land, Lot chose the east side of the Jordan because it was more attractive physically and economically (vv. 10-12). Perhaps as a harbinger of things to come, the narrator added that Lot immediately settled down in cities near Sodom, whose inhabitants were extremely wicked in the eyes of YHWH (v. 13). This characterization reminds readers of the world from which Abram was called and sets the stage for events that followed (Gen. 14; 18).

Genesis 13:14a suggests that Abram's separation from Lot was a signal for YHWH to resume revealing to Abram the dimensions and texture of his agenda. The narrator does not identify where YHWH addressed him, but after the opening narrative notice in verse 14a, 13:14b-17 consists entirely of divine speech.

Like the speech in 12:1-3, this address consists of two primary parts arranged in a chiastic ABBA order that concludes with a summary announcement. The A elements (vv. 14b and 17a) involve commands, while the B elements (vv. 15-16) consist of promises. YHWH's first command invited Abram to survey the land in all four directions as far as the eye could see, and then he promised that he would give the entire visible landscape to Abram and his descendants (cf. 12:7). The second command and promise were more concrete. The *hithpael* form of the verb (*hithallēk*) is intentional, suggesting that Abram was to walk up and down the land and stake his claim to it. YHWH also invited him to look at the soil (‘*āpār*) on which he walked and find in the particles of dirt a picture of his descendants. Genesis 15:5 and 32:12 [13] speak explicitly of counting (*sāpar*) the stars and the grains of sand on the seashore and finding in them a picture of the innumerability of Abram's descendants. However, the change of verb to *mānâ*, “to assign, apportion, reckon,” in 13:16 suggests a change in focus away from the number of descendants to the extent of the territory YHWH promised him. As a microcosm of the divine plan for humanity to occupy every corner of the earth, the descendants of Abram were to fill up the entire space allotted to them. The speech concludes in verse 17b with a summary reaffirmation of the divine promise.

Chapter 13 concludes with a report of the resumption of Abram's journeys; he moved to Hebron, near another landmark, the oaks of Mamre. There he built an altar to YHWH as he had in Shechem. This move set the stage for chapter 14, which involves Abram and three Amorite brothers (Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner; 14:13) who had offered him hospitality and had formally and magnanimously become his allies (*ba‘ālê bērit ‘Abrām*, lit., “lords of the covenant of Abram”; v. 13). Although Abram was merely a sojourner, the narrator identifies this covenant as “the covenant of Abram” rather than “the covenant of Hebron”

or “the covenant of the Amorites,” speaking to the esteem the patriarch enjoyed in the eyes of Mamre, Aner, and Eshkol. However, since these brothers owned the land where Abram’s clan camped and because the narrator refers to them as “the lords of the covenant of Abram” (v. 13), this was obviously not a parity covenant.

After recounting YHWH’s invitation to Abram to stake his claim to the promised land in 13:14–17, the narrator offers a glimpse in chapter 14 into the operation of a developing tripartite relationship. A crisis in the Transjordan triggered the portrait: an alliance of northern and eastern invaders under the leadership of Chedarlaomer, king of Shinar. Chedarlaomer’s imperial reach extended as far west and south as the valley where Sodom and Gomorrah were located (14:1–4a). With the aid of his own allies, Chedarlaomer inflicted a crushing defeat on all the populations east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, and as far south as Mount Seir, including Sodom and Gomorrah. There he captured Lot, his family, and his entire entourage who lived in Sodom (vv. 5–12; cf. v. 16). Hearing of the capture of his nephew, Abram marshaled his household forces and those of his allies near Hebron and pursued the Mesopotamians as far as the Damascus area, where he defeated the alliance and rescued Lot and his family (vv. 13–16). On Abram’s return from the campaign, Melchizedek, the king of Salem, welcomed him (vv. 17–24).

This episode is significant for the Abrahamic covenant at several levels. First, Abram’s friendly relations with the nobles of Mamre/Hebron and Salem demonstrate that the Canaanite populations did not view him as a threat to their own occupation of the land that YHWH had promised to Abram’s descendants.

Second, the military force from Abram’s household that defeated the alliance of foreign invaders demonstrated not only that YHWH was blessing the patriarch and making his name great among the nations (cf. 12:2) but also that YHWH

was blessing those who blessed Abram and cursing those who cursed him (cf. 12:3). In the narrator's mind, Abram's victory was surely a divine work, a conclusion confirmed when Melchizedek credited the victory to El Elyon ("God Most High," v. 20) and recognized him as Abram's divine patron and guardian. By informing the king of Sodom of his oath to YHWH not to retain any of the booty he had retrieved for himself, Abram declared his own allegiance to YHWH, whom he identified with El Elyon. And by characterizing YHWH as "possessor of heaven and earth" (v. 22), Abram located his own relationship to YHWH within the cosmic context.

Third, biblical writers would not recognize its significance for many centuries, but Abram's encounter with Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem (= Jerusalem), planted the seed of Israel's monarchic tradition. On the one hand, Melchizedek would provide the paradigm for the Davidic kingship (Ps. 110). On the other hand, this event linked the chosen family with the location that YHWH would eventually choose as the place to imprint his name, from which the entire land and ultimately the world would be blessed.⁸

Fourth, not only was Abram a blessing to Lot and his own Canaanite neighbors, but Canaanites were also blessing him (14:19-20; cf. 12:3a). In fulfillment of YHWH's promise, the nations were celebrating YHWH's name and that of his agent.

Phase 1 of the Covenant-Making Ritual (Gen. 15:1-16:16)

So far in the drama, the relationship between YHWH and Abram bears all the marks of a suzerain-vassal relationship: YHWH called Abram to serve as his agent of divine blessing to the world. However, the relationship remained somewhat ad hoc and had not been formalized as a covenant relationship. In chapter 15 we begin to see that change in

part, as YHWH commits himself permanently and irrevocably by covenant to Abram and his descendants. The narrator explicitly notes the significance of the events described in this chapter with a colophonic conclusion: “On that day YHWH made a covenant with Abram” (15:18). This is the first biblical occurrence of the standard idiom for making a covenant, “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bēřît*), and it illustrates most clearly the roots of the idiom.

The Background to the Covenant-Making Ritual (Gen. 15:1-8)

The opening chronological marker, “after these events,” separates the events of chapters 14 and 15 chronologically, but it also links them by specifying the context for the latter. Abram’s defeat of Chedarlaomer had triggered the blessing of Melchizedek (14:18–20), but it had also led to another encounter with YHWH. YHWH’s summary of the content of the covenant in 15:18 notes the eventual reach of Abramic influence and in effect the reversal of Chedarlaomer’s overreach; Abram’s descendants’ territory will extend from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates.

The narrator reinforced the significance of the events of chapter 15 by characterizing what transpires as a “vision” (*maḥāzeh*, 15:1). Although dreams figure prominently in Genesis (cf. 28:10–17), this is the only vision identified as such in the patriarchal narratives. The nearest counterpart occurs in 46:2, which notes that God spoke to Jacob/Israel in night “visions.” However, there the narrator’s use of a different word, *mar’â*, may suggest a theophany, and the phrase “visions of the night” could also be a euphemism for “dreams.” In chapter 15, Abram appears to have been comatose (*tardēmâ*, v. 12), but the events described happened within the vision. In any case, the reference to the sun setting in 15:12 precludes a night vision for the first half of this chapter. The visual deictic particle, *wēhinnēh*,

“and look” (archaically rendered in many translations as “behold”), punctuates the account (vv. 3, 4, 12, 17), reinforcing the optic character of the event.

The scenes in 15:10–17 are visionary, but because verses 1b–5 and 7–9 consist almost entirely of speech, they are less obviously so. In verses 1 and 4, the dialogue is marked by variations of the utterance formula, “the word of YHWH happened/came to X, . . . saying.” This “word-event formula,” which characterizes the speech as a concrete substance that came to the recipient, occurs often in the prophetic books, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel. However, it never occurs after this in Genesis and is rare in narrative texts unless they involve prophets (1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4; 1 Kings 13:20). YHWH will identify Abraham as a prophet (*nābî*) in 20:7, but there his role involves intercession rather than revelation. Despite the absence of the word *nābî* here, by using this formula the narrator appears to cast Abram as the paradigmatic prophet receiving revelation from God.

The dialogue of 15:1–8 divides into two parts, each concluding with Abram’s response to YHWH’s speeches. However, the responses are cast in different forms. In the first instance, (v. 6), the narrator offers his own assessment of Abram’s response (a rare phenomenon in Hebrew narratives), but in the second (v. 8) he quotes Abram’s speech and leaves it to the hearer/reader to contemplate the disposition it reflects.

The first dialogical phase of the vision (Gen. 15:1–6).

Although dialogue dominates the first phase of the vision, it opens without warning and without the speaker introducing himself; Abram simply heard a voice. The sound appears to have shocked him, for the first words Abram heard were the traditional formula of reassurance, “Fear not.”⁹ YHWH reinforced this calming word by promising to be Abram’s [divine] protector (“I am your shield”) and declaring that the benefactions this relationship offered would be great. The

word *śākār* (v. 1) usually denotes wages paid for services (Gen. 30:32–33; 31:8), but here it represents all the benefits that YHWH grants as a reward for Abram’s faith and his faithful exercise of his role as agent of blessing to all the families of the earth, including but not limited to the benefactions listed in 12:1–3.

Abram’s response to this unexpected voice from heaven was rude, cynical, and accusatory (15:2–3). He recognized the speaker immediately, addressing him deferentially by status, “O Lord” (*’ădōnāy*), and by name, “YHWH.” The former epithet suggests that Abram accepted his role as vassal/servant (*’ebed*; cf. 18:3, 5), but he questioned YHWH’s power or will to deliver on his promises because he was still childless. Although to this point the promise of land had been the center of gravity (12:1, 7; 13:14–17), YHWH had also guaranteed him descendants (*zera’*; 12:7; 13:15), who would fill the land from one end to the other (13:15). Since Sarai was barren (11:30) and Abram had already designated his servant Eliezer as his heir, in Abram’s mind the promises of benefactions were empty and would go to the grave with him. Abram’s earlier designation of Eliezer as heir was not necessarily a faithless act or an alternative plan for fulfilling the promises but accorded with ancient Near Eastern custom. Furthermore, given our knowledge of Sarai’s barrenness from the outset, Abram may have made these arrangements before YHWH had called him.

If Abram’s tone in 15:2 is cynical, in verse 3 it is accusatory. As if he needed to inform YHWH of his plight, he began with “Now look” (*hēn*) and followed this up with blaming God directly for his problem: “You have given me no offspring.” In keeping with ancient thinking (cf. Jacob in 30:2), Abram assumed that God opened and closed women’s wombs, which had led him to propose another solution for the leadership of his household after he died.

YHWH responded to Abram’s frustration sympathetically but unequivocally. As he had done with previous vague

promises of land (13:14–17), he answered the patriarch's questions with a hyperbolic but concrete response (15:4–5). If Abram had stumbled over his lack of a son (sg.), the night sky provided an effective visual aid of YHWH's sincerity; like the stars, Abram's descendants would be innumerable. The image complements the promise in 13:16 that they would fill the land from corner to corner.

In a rare moment in First Testament narrative, instead of describing an action or quoting a verbal response to YHWH's exorbitant reassurance from which we could assess a person's disposition, the narrator attributes to Abram the quality of trust in YHWH (*he'ēmîn bayhwh*, 15:6). This was not the first time he had demonstrated full confidence in YHWH to keep his word (12:4), nor would it be the last (22:1–19). The narrative does not explain how Abram demonstrated faith here, but YHWH's assessment left no doubt about his disposition toward him. YHWH declared that the patriarch's trust in him while facing naturally impossible odds represented the essence of "righteousness." As elsewhere in the Bible, "righteousness" (*ṣědāqâ*) denotes conduct that mirrors the righteousness of YHWH (Deut. 32:4) and accords with an established standard. In this case the standard was set by God, though he would reveal it in detail later, when he confirmed the forthcoming covenant with Abram further with his descendants at Mount Sinai and then renewed it on the plains of Moab with the generation that would claim the land promised to the ancestors (Deut. 6:20–25).

The second dialogical phase of the vision (Gen. 15:7–8). After Abram demonstrated faith in YHWH, God rewarded Abram with further disclosure of his identity and reaffirmation of the promise of land (v. 7). YHWH cast this statement in the form of the divine self-identification formula that we will encounter with slight variations dozens of times in later Scripture. The present statement resembles

the form of the formula that became standard after Israel's exodus from Egypt:

Gen. 15:7	I am YHWH	who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans	to give you <i>this land</i> to possess.
Lev. 25:38	I am YHWH your God	who brought you out from the land of Egypt	to give you the land of Canaan.

While the form is the same, the specific examples exhibit several significant differences. First, in the present case YHWH introduced himself simply by name, leaving out the declaration of relationship, “your God.” The reason for this is clear: “I am YHWH your God” is the first half of what will become “the covenant formula”: “I am YHWH your God, and you are my people.” Although the Suzerain-vassal relationship between YHWH and Abram was already operative, for YHWH to have identified himself here as “your God” would have been premature because the covenant would not be fully established until chapter 17 (cf. 17:7–8).¹⁰ Second, YHWH inserted the geographical reference to fit the context. The narrator could have interpreted Abram's return from Egypt (13:1) as an exodus, but he refrained from interpreting that event theologically. Even if he understood the patriarch's sojourn there as within the will of God, since Abram had never actually lived there, his return was not really an exodus experience directed by God. Third, in contrast to Leviticus 25:38, where Israel's possession of the land is still a future event, Abram was in the land and had staked out his claims to it; as in Genesis 12:7, YHWH's reference to *this* land is thus appropriate to the context. These differences notwithstanding, that YHWH described Abram's migration from Ur with the same theological vocabulary as he would later use of his descendants' exodus from Egypt is remarkable. For YHWH, Abram's journey was paradigmatic for what his descendants would experience.

According to 15:8, Abram responded to YHWH's words with another question, though this time it lacks the sting of his utterance in verses 2–3. On the surface, the question suggests that the strong faith the narrator had noted in verse 6 was wavering. However, we should not be too critical of Abram. What he asked for now anticipates what Moses would speak of later as the mark of a true prophet; YHWH authenticates a true prophet with an accompanying sign (*môpēt*, Deut. 13:1–2). However, this case did not involve a true versus false prophet, and in any case the word for “sign” is missing.

Abram's question focused not on YHWH's promise of descendants—the stars represented God's explanation of how that would be fulfilled (vv. 2–5)—but on the promise of land. Apparently he had begun to recognize the formal and legal character of this encounter with his divine Suzerain. YHWH had just reaffirmed his commitment to completing what would later be the covenant triangle involving himself, Abram and his descendants, and *this land*—that is, Canaan (v. 7). As in other legal transactions, the parties to an agreement required proof of their contractual good faith. YHWH obliged with a detailed visual portrayal of his absolute and irrevocable commitment to this program, which the narrator later identified as the covenant-making ritual (v. 18).

The Nature of the Covenant-Making Ritual (Gen. 15:9–21)

Earlier I noted in passing that this text offers the clearest biblical illustration of the roots of the idiom “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bērit*). But this was not a distinctively Israelite idiom. An eighth-century-BC Aramaic treaty document (Sefire Stela) uses a similar expression, “to cut the treaty.”¹¹ The narrator's portrayal of the procedure in Genesis 15:8–17 follows ancient Near Eastern covenant-

making traditions. The participants would cut an animal in half and then walk between the two parts together. The Sefire Treaty mentioned above explains the ritual's significance explicitly: "[Just as] this calf is cut in two, so may Mati'el be cut in two, and may his nobles be cut in two" (I.A., lines 39–41, in *COS* 2:82, p. 214). However, we have evidence of this custom from more than a millennium earlier, from the time of Abram, as attested by the following eighteenth-century-BC text from Mari, on the Euphrates:

Ibal-Addu's letter reached me from Ašlakka. I went to Ašlakka and they fetched for me a puppy-dog (*mērānum*) and a goat (*ḥazzam*) for the donkey-foal killing (covenant ritual) among the tribesmen and Idamaraš. But I respected my lord; indeed, I did not give permission for the puppy-dog or goat. Instead, I myself had (them) slaughter a foal, a young of a she-ass, and in this way established peace between the nomads and Idamaraš. As far as Ḥurra—all over in Idamaraš, in fact—the tribesmen will be sated, and sated people lack belligerence. My lord should be pleased.

I have conveyed this tablet to my lord from Ratašpatum. Within three days after (posting) this tablet of mine, I should arrive before my lord. The flock and the Sim'al (troops) are well. (trans. Held, "Philological Notes," 33)

The ritual involved a symbolic oath, an act of self-imprecation whereby the parties to the covenant each declared in effect, "So be it to me [may I die] if I fail to keep my commitments in this agreement." In Jeremiah 34:17–20 the seventh-century-BC Israelite prophet expressed clear awareness of some such ritual when he mentions "the calf that they cut in two and then passed between its two halves" and all the people passing "between the two halves of the calf."

Genesis 15:9–17 describes a complex procedure involving both nonverbal and verbal actions. It divides into four parts, all of which transpire within the vision that Abram sees. Each segment calls for brief comment.

The preparation for the covenant-oath ritual (Gen. 15:9–11). Responding to Abram's request for legal proof that YHWH would keep his promise and deliver the land of Canaan into his hands, YHWH instructed him in the vision to

produce a heifer, a nanny goat, a ram (all three years old), and a young turtledove, all appropriate animals for sacrifice in the Israelite cultic system. Abram dutifully slaughtered the mammals, cut their carcasses in half, and laid the two parts opposite each other, but the bird he did not cut in half. Although these actions transpired within a vision, the narrator's reference to scavenging birds trying to take advantage of the flesh out in the open and Abram chasing them off adds a note of realism to the image.

The verbal preamble to the covenant-oath ritual (Gen. 15:12–16). The time notice opening the second phase of the ritual (v. 12a) suggests that Abram had performed the preceding actions in the daylight. As the sun was setting, he fell into a deep sleep (*tardēmâ*), but even within that state he was able to see (*wěhinnēh*), experience terror in the intense darkness, and hear YHWH speak. From the opening words (v. 13), “You may know for certain” (*yādōa’ tēda’*), YHWH’s reason for appearing to Abram this way is clear: to answer his question in verse 8, “How may I know . . . ?” The speech that follows lists seven facts that YHWH intended to imprint indelibly on the patriarch’s mind:

1. Abram’s descendants would live as sojourners in a land to which they had no claim (in contrast to Canaan) for four hundred years (v. 13b).
2. There they would be enslaved and oppressed (v. 13c).
3. YHWH would inflict judgment on that nation for oppressing his people (v. 14a).
4. They would emerge from their four-hundred-year exile with great wealth (v. 14b).
5. Abram could relax about his personal future, for he would enjoy a long life and die in peace (v. 15).
6. In the fourth life cycle (*dor*), Abram’s descendants would return to this land (v. 16a). English translations usually render *dor* as “generation,” but when the Scriptures

speak of one Israelite generation succeeding another, they speak of “forty years” (Num. 32:13), which suggests that four hundred years of exile should involve ten generations. However, the word *dor* refers to a span of time, usually undefined. In this context it could mean four successive maximum life spans (Isaac was miraculously born to a one-hundred-year-old man, Gen. 17:17; 21:5), four epochs, or four centuries.

7. At this moment the land was not ready to be taken from its present inhabitants because their degeneracy had not yet reached its limit and become intolerable to God (v. 16b).

With this speech YHWH declared in advance that the fulfillment of the land promise would take a circuitous route, but this would not catch him by surprise nor diminish the certainty of his project.

The last fact deserves additional comment. In speaking of the completion (*šālēm*) of Amorite evil (Hb. *‘āwōn*, “iniquity, perversion”) as a future event, YHWH hinted at the spiritual state of the residents of Canaan in the days of the patriarchs. Genesis 14 had presented Melchizedek, the priestly king of Salem, as a true devotee of YHWH, whom he knew as El Elyon (“God Most High,” 14:18–20). The narrator recognizes the extraordinary wickedness of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah east of the Jordan (13:13; 18:16–19:25), but the literary portraits he paints of the Cisjordanian Canaanites suggest that the spiritual and ethical integrity of the local residents with whom the chosen family interacted was often equal—if not sometimes superior—to that of the patriarchal clan. This was true of Mamre, Aner, and Eshkol of Hebron (14:13, 24); Abimelech I of Gerar/Beersheba (20:1–18; 21:22–32); Abimelech II of Gerar/Beersheba (26:26–33); the Hethites of Hebron (23:1–20; 34:1–31); and Tamar (38:24–26). Indeed, the portrayal of the religious situation in Canaan in the time of Abram in

Genesis lacks any hints of the debased fertility myths and practices associated with Baal and Asherah and the other Canaanite deities reflected in Deuteronomy and the book of Judges. It seems that out of respect for the integrity of the present inhabitants, YHWH deferred taking the land from them and giving it to his covenant people until “the fullness of time.” I have borrowed this expression from Galatians 4:4 and Ephesians 1:10, but it is conceptually suggested in Exodus 2:24–25. When God heard the groaning of the Israelites in Egypt, he took into account (*zakar*) his covenant with the ancestors “and he knew . . .” The narrator leaves the last sentence unfinished. It seems most likely that he knew the time had come to fulfill his prediction to Abram in Genesis 15:13–16.

Figure 3.2
Genesis 15: “Cutting the Covenant”



The nature of the covenant-oath ritual (Gen. 15:17). By the time YHWH had finished speaking, the sun had set and real darkness enveloped the land, including the real Abram (v. 17a). In the darkness Abram was struck (cf. *wěhinnēh*, “Look!”) by a remarkable sight: a fiery object passing between the two halves of the slaughtered animals (fig. 3.2). The narrator’s use of two expressions to identify the

object contributes to the mystery of the moment. The NIV rightly interprets “smoking firepot” (*tannûr ‘āšān*) and “blazing torch” (*wēlappîd ‘ēš*) as designations for a single object (the conjunction on the latter functions epexegetically). Since the narrator does not interpret the visual image and the First Testament records no analogous events, the quotation from Jeremiah 34:17–20 above offers the best inner-biblical clue to its meaning. This was a theophany in miniature; the flaming object represented YHWH, who shockingly hereby staked his own life on his commitment: If he failed to keep his promise to Abram and his descendants, may he be accursed and disposed of like these animals. This self-imprecating oath functions as a symbolic equivalent to the verbal oath “By my life” (*ḥay ‘ānî*, usually translated “As I live”; e.g., Num. 14:21, 28; Deut. 32:40), which YHWH frequently uses in the First Testament to undergird his own pronouncements (16× in Ezekiel!), or “By the life of YHWH” (*ḥay yhwh*, usually translated, “as YHWH lives”) that humans used to affirm their sincerity (cf. Ruth 3:13).

The significance of the covenant-oath ritual (Gen. 15:18–21). The narrator concludes this account with another quoted divine speech that is intended to explain the significance of what had just transpired: this is a covenant ritual by which YHWH guarantees his word and binds himself to Abram and his descendants and to the land. We do not yet have a direct divine verbal commitment to the human partner (“I will be your God”; cf. 17:7–8), but all the elements of the future covenant triangle are in play.

In his speech, YHWH reiterated and expanded on the core benefaction that the divine Suzerain offered his vassal within this covenant: the land, which he hereby defined in terms of its geographic boundaries and of the nations that currently inhabited it. The first statement identifies the northern and southern geographic boundaries, respectively, as the great Euphrates River (*haggādōl nēhar pērāt*) and the

river of Egypt (*nēhar miṣrayim*; referred to elsewhere always as *naḥal miṣrayim*, “wadi of Egypt”; Josh. 15:4; 1 Kings 8:65). This was not the Nile, but the wadi that served as the boundary between Canaan and Egypt: Wadi el-Arish. YHWH did not identify the western or eastern boundaries.

Regarding the former there was no choice; Canaan is a coastal land on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea. Although Israelites would later occupy land east of the Jordan (Num. 32; Deut. 3:12–22), Numbers 34:10–12 officially establishes this river as the eastern boundary of the territory south of the Sea of Kinnereth/Galilee assigned to the twelve tribes.

In Genesis 15:19–21 YHWH offered another definition of the land promised to Abram: the territory inhabited by Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites. This ten-member list adds three to the stereotypical list of seven cited elsewhere (e.g., Deut. 7:1), presumably to represent totality and to serve as a mnemonic device (like the Decalogue, one people for each finger of two hands). These names identify the populations that will eventually be in the Israelites’ crosshairs when they return from their four-hundred-year sojourn to claim their land.

These two definitions represent maximalist and minimalist projections, respectively, of the territory that Abram’s descendants would occupy/rule. The expanded geographic definition of the boundaries of the promised land (v. 18) occurs elsewhere in Exodus 23:31, Deuteronomy 1:7 and 11:24, and Joshua 1:4. These dimensions differ sharply from the minimalist definitions represented by the ethnic names¹² and the borders of the territory that Joshua allocated to the twelve tribes returning from Egypt four or five centuries later (Josh. 13–19).

I postpone a fuller treatment of this discrepancy for later, but for now I suggest that the vision of Genesis 15 reflects Israel’s wider mission to the world. Although David and

Solomon would rule over all the territory specified by the maximalist definition, they did not integrate the regions beyond the minimalist definitions into the “land of Israel.” Nor were these outlying regions ever identified as part of the “kingdom of Israel.” They were subject to the crown, hence part of the “kingdom of David,” but we must distinguish this from the land and kingdom of Israel. The broader definition accords with YHWH’s commission to Abram; he and his descendants were to be blessings to the whole world. David’s extension of his realm would be a down payment for the ultimate messianic fulfillment of the broader vision.

Epilogue to the Covenant-Oath Ritual (Gen. 16:1-16)

Given Sarai’s barrenness as background to the covenant-making ritual and YHWH’s declaration that a physical son of Abram (“who comes from your own abdomen”) would be his heir (15:2-4), it is not surprising that immediately after chapter 15 the narrator describes Abram’s and Sarai’s struggle over the woman’s barrenness. This chapter is significant for the Abrahamic covenant on three counts. First, in fulfillment of YHWH’s promise, it confirms that Abram was in fact able to father offspring—even at the age of eighty-six (16:16)—and that the problem in this household was Sarai’s barrenness rather than Abram’s infertility (contrast the case of Mahlon in Ruth 1:4-5; cf. 4:13).

Second, this chapter concretizes YHWH’s commitment to make Abram and his descendants so prolific that the offspring will be innumerable (16:10; cf. 15:5). If the episode had ended with verse 10, we might have reasonably expected Ishmael to be the son of promise. Although an earlier event had hinted at Sarai’s special place in the divine plan (12:17), YHWH had not yet explicitly declared that he

would fulfill his promises to Abram through Sarai. However, while the divine envoy's prognostication of the prospects for Hagar and her son in 16:11–12 affirm YHWH's hand in Ishmael's birth, it also marginalizes him.

Third, this chapter demonstrates that YHWH did not require ethical or moral perfection in the agents whom he called to fulfill his mission of grace and blessing to a cursed world. In this text none of the principal characters appears in a positive light; by the end of the chapter the sympathies of the divine envoy and of the readers of this account lie with Hagar, an Egyptian housemaid and virtual slave of Sarai (vv. 7–14). Hagar acknowledged YHWH by name as the God who had taken care of her in her distress (v. 13). Sarai acknowledged YHWH as well, but her tone in verse 2 was cynical and accusatory, and her treatment of Hagar was mean. And where was Abram? His acquiescence to Sarai's reaction to her barrenness (vv. 4, 6) suggests that, in his mind, the covenant promises had been eclipsed once more.

Phase 2 of the Covenant-Making Ritual (Gen. 17:1–27)

With reference to the theme of covenant that we are tracing, Genesis 17 functions as a complement to chapter 15 and marks a high point of the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant. A series of characteristics signals its special place within the overall flow of the patriarchal narratives. First, this is the only episode introduced by a date/year notice: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old." This note locates the revelation chronologically and fronts Abram's age at the time of the events that follow: Isaac will be born when he is one hundred years old (17:17; cf. 21:5).

Second, the narrator introduces this episode as a theophany. This genre may have been suggested in 15:1, which characterizes what followed as a vision (*maḥāzeh*), but as in 12:7, here the narrator declares explicitly, "YHWH

appeared to Abram” (v. 1a). The note of the ascent of “God” in verse 22 reinforces the theophanic character of the event.

Third, the term “covenant” (*bĕrît*) is clearly the key word in this chapter, appearing thirteen times. This is striking because, while the word often denotes a pact between humans, elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives the author uses it theologically for the covenant between YHWH and Abraham and his descendants only in 15:18, which we examined above.

Fourth, divine speech dominates this chapter far more than any other episode in the patriarchal narratives. In contrast to the previous theophanic experience in 12:7, where YHWH’s speech involved four words (not counting deictic *’et*), here God alone speaks through 17:14 (153 words) except for an eight-word interruption in 17:3 and a four-word introduction to the third part of the first speech in 17:9. Admittedly, in verse 3 the narrator notes that Abram responded nonverbally to God’s opening lines, but then he has God continue talking. Verses 1b–14 are cast as a divine monologue that prepares for the true dialogue in verses 15–21. But even there, divine speeches dominate. God has the first (vv. 15–16) and last (vv. 19–21) words, and the words from his “mouth” outnumber Abram’s more than 5 to 1 (73:14). In verses 22–27 nonverbal narration takes over as the narrator reports the sequel in third person, describing Abraham’s circumcision of Ishmael and all the males in his household.

Fifth, the personal name YHWH is absent from this chapter after the narrator sets the scene in verse 1a. God introduced himself as El Shadday in the opening line (v. 1), but after that only the generic designation “God” (*’ēlōhîm*) appears (9×). The epithet “Shadday” occurs five additional times in Genesis,¹³ but its significance is uncertain. In an eighth-century-BC literary inscription discovered at Deir ‘Alla in Jordan, a cognate Aramaic word, *šdyn*, designates members

of the heavenly court (*COS* 2:27, pp. 142–45). This discovery, along with a probable link between Hebrew *šdy* and the Akkadian word *šadu*, “mountain,” suggests that the epithet “El Shadday” relates to God’s role as the supreme Deity, enthroned in the heavens and surrounded by heavenly courtiers. Other biblical narratives also associate the name with God’s promise of fertility (Gen. 28:3; 35:11; Ruth 1:20). We may only speculate why the narrator avoided the personal covenant name YHWH in this chapter after verse 1a; perhaps this avoidance reflects his recognition of this episode as a uniquely formal and legal event. Appearing as the climax of covenantal revelation, we may interpret this speech as the divine Suzerain’s constitutional address, presenting to Abram the parameters of the covenantal relationship that he had graciously established with him.

The Divine Monologue (Gen. 17:1-14)

The purpose of El Shadday’s speech in verses 1b–14 is clear: to explain to Abram the essence of the covenant relationship that he was establishing with him and his descendants, to declare in principle the benefactions it promised for Abram (vv. 1b–8), and to specify the obligations that God as divine Suzerain placed upon him and his descendants as vassals within this covenant relationship (vv. 9–14).

Part 1 (Gen. 17:1b–3). The first segment of El Shadday’s speech summarizes the significance and the nature of God’s covenant with Abram. Reflecting its climactic location in the revelation of this covenant, the narrator has cast the first segment in elevated prose, consisting of a two-word introduction, “I am El Shadday,” followed by three four-word clauses. After God’s self-introduction as El Shadday, his words divide into two parts, the first focusing on the Suzerain’s expectation of the vassal (v. 1b) and the second

on promises concerning what the vassal may expect of him (v. 2).

God declared his expectations of Abram with two imperative verbs: “Walk before me and be blameless.” Unlike the case of Enoch, whose devotion and fellowship with God were expressed as “walking with God” (5:22, 24), the invitation to “walk before me” constitutes an appointment to an official role in the divine court. As his commissioned agent, God authorized Abram to walk back and forth (*hithallēk*), into and out of the presence of God. He hereby announced to his agent that his earlier commission to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (12:3) had presupposed a place for him in the divine council (*sôd*). According to Jeremiah 23:18–22, YHWH¹⁴ granted this status to all true prophets. This divinely granted rank would underlie YHWH’s sharing with Abraham his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and virtual invitation to intercede on these cities’ behalf (Gen. 18), as well as his promise to Abimelech that, as a prophet, Abraham would pray for his healing, and YHWH would respond (20:6–7, 17–18).

The second command, “be blameless,” does not necessarily demand moral or sinless perfection. The word *tāmîm* figures prominently in YHWH’s instructions regarding unblemished animals that qualify for sacrifices,¹⁵ but in this context the word bears an ethical sense of being wholly devoted to God and the mission to which he had called him. Although the narratives provide many illustrations of Abram’s less-than-perfect moral character, YHWH had placed the burden of his saving agenda on his shoulders and would not discard him for occasional failures.

The third and fourth lines of the first segment of this address summarize the entailments of Abram’s faithful performance of his commission (17:2). First, God promised to institute / put in place (*nātan*) his covenant between himself and Abram. The Hebrew *nātan* is capable of a wide range of meanings, but as in Genesis 9:12, with reference to

the rainbow in the context of the cosmic covenant, and in association with the preposition “between” (*bên*) linking two parties, it means something like “to put into force.” God identified this covenant as “my covenant” (*běřîtî*) rather than “our covenant,” which reinforces the disparity between the parties and the asymmetrical nature of the relationship.

The fourth line (17:2b) summarizes the benefactions for the vassal that attend God’s covenant. However, the construction is awkward. Instead of the usual “I will multiply your descendants,”¹⁶ El Shadday promised to multiply Abram. This statement probably functions as shorthand for “multiplying your seed,” because in Genesis 28:3 and 48:4, before YHWH announced this divine action, he declared, “I will make you fruitful” to produce “a company of peoples” (*qěhal ‘ammîm*). However, because this expression also occurs in contexts that involve success in other areas, especially the productivity of livestock and land,¹⁷ it may be purposefully vague to include all dimensions of well-being. Therefore in this context it means something like “I will make you flourish extravagantly.”

The present linkage between Abram’s performance as God’s commissioned agent and his fulfillment of his covenant promises may explain the narrator’s juxtaposing the events described in chapters 20 and 21. In chapter 20 Abram fulfilled his role as prophet by effectually praying, and in chapter 21 YHWH took note of Sarah and enabled her to conceive and bear a son, just as he had promised.

Part 2 (Gen. 17:4-8). In verses 4-8 we sense the narrator’s and God’s excitement rising. The citation of God’s speech begins awkwardly, “I, look, my covenant with you” (*’ānî hinnēh běřîtî ’ittāk*), but its purpose is obvious. Functioning as a thesis statement for verses 4-8, these opening words identify three foci. First, they introduce God as the primary mover behind the covenant; it is *his* covenant, he establishes it (*hěqîm*, v. 7), he chooses the covenant partner, he declares its goal, he fixes its duration (*’ôlām*),

and he determines the appropriate role and response of the covenant partner (vv. 9–14). This person, whom the narrator identified as YHWH (v. 1a) but who had introduced himself as El Shadday (v. 1b), will be the subject of all the primary verbs in verses 4–8. Second, the opening line introduces the theme of this discourse: the covenant (*bĕrît*). Third, it introduces the addressee (“with you”) and primary beneficiary of the covenant relationship established.

Based on its content and the discourse grammar, the remainder of the speech divides into two parts, with the declaration “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your future descendants” in verse 7a signaling the transition. The first part (vv. 4b–6) emphasizes the transformative effect of YHWH’s covenant commitment on Abram and his descendants. The second part (vv. 7–8) highlights the personal relationship between Deity and human that this covenant establishes and the land as an essential element within this relationship.

The renaming of Abram as Abraham in verses 4b–6 reflects the dramatically transformational element in this episode. The original name Abram means “exalted father” (presumably with *’āb* functioning as a divine epithet in the patriarch’s Chaldean past); by changing his name to Abraham, the man in God’s eyes was “father of a crowd/multitude [*’ab hāmôn gôyim*].” The name may involve an otherwise unattested Hebrew root *rāham* (cf. Arabic *ruhām*, “numerous”), but the common syllable *ham* suggests a wordplay on *hāmôn*, “noisy throng.” In any case, in popular thinking the new name served as a commentary on Abraham rather than on the Deity. Remarkably, after verse 5 the name “Abram” appears only twice in the entire First Testament: in 1 Chronicles 1:27, where the genealogist clarifies the name: “Abram, that is Abraham”; and Nehemiah 9:7, which refers to this event: “You are YHWH, the God who chose [*bāḥar*] Abram, brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and gave him the name Abraham.” As Suzerain,

YHWH not only chose his covenant partner; he also (re)defined his identity.

The syntax and grammar of the address requires our translation of verse 4b to reflect a change of status: “You will become the father [*wěhāyîṭā lě’ab*] of multitude of nations,” a change that verse 6b will reinforce with “I will make you into nations” (*ûntattîkâ lěgôyim*). God’s change of status in the second part matched Abraham’s change. In the opening line (v. 7a) God declared that he would establish the covenant “to become your God [*lihyôt lěkâ lě’lôhîm*] and [the God of] your future descendants” (v. 7b),” and in the closing line (v. 8b) he promised, “I will become their [the descendants’] God” (*wěhāyîṭî lāhem lě’lôhîm*). For “Abram” to become “Abraham” required significant transformation, not only for himself but also for his wife; she who had been barren would become the mother of a vast crowd of nations.

However, for Abraham this would not be a self-help project. YHWH took full responsibility for the agenda, declaring that he would make him the father of that multitude of nations (v. 5c), and he would make him (*nātan*) extraordinarily fruitful (v. 6a). YHWH’s use of the term “nations” (*gôyim*) rather than “peoples” (*‘ammîm*; cf. v. 16) is significant. Biblical writers often interchange these terms, but *gôy* tends to represent a political community with a king (*melek*) at its head (cf. 1 Sam. 8:19–20). This explains YHWH’s present clarification: “I will make you into nations [*gôyim*], [which means that] kings [*mělākîm*] will emerge from you.” In keeping with the universal scope of Abraham’s commission (12:1–3), the promise was that his descendants would take their place among the nations of the earth, and blessing would radiate forth from them.

Genesis 17:4–6 focuses on the transforming effect of God’s covenant with Abram, and verses 7–8 clarify the nature of God’s relationship with his covenant partner and the role that the land will play in his agenda for his people. However, God began by reaffirming his commitment to

establish (*hēqîm*) his covenant, the identity of the covenant partners, and its durability: “my covenant between me and you and your future descendants in perpetuity [*lēdōrôtām*, lit., “throughout their generations”].” God strengthened the last phrase by characterizing the covenant as an “eternal/irrevocable covenant” (*bērît ‘ôlām*). The word *‘ôlām* speaks of the covenant’s permanence; it will never be terminated or revoked. Rather than focusing on the material benefactions of this covenant, God surprisingly reinforced the spiritual dimension: he promised to be the God of Abraham and his descendants after him. In the preceding events, the narrator never uses expressions like “my God” or “your God.” Nor had YHWH ever referred to Abram as “my man” or his descendants as “my people.” With the covenant ritual introduced in this chapter, that changes. At the heart of God’s agenda had been a passion to establish a personal relationship with human beings—a relationship that was shattered in Genesis 3. Restoring that relationship required a covenant.

Picking up the promise that God had made to Abram when he had first arrived in the land (12:7), in 17:8 he revealed that the promise of land was an essential feature of the covenantal package from the beginning and could not be separated from his personal commitment to being Abraham’s God. When Abram had left Ur, he had left more than his homeland and his relatives (12:1–3). Like Ruth (Ruth 1:16), he had also left the gods of that land to whom his kinsfolk looked for their well-being. The present statement adds depth and warmth to El Shadday’s promises in 17:1 to compensate Abram generously and to be his protector.

The sequence of 17:7–8 suggests that from this point onward, Abraham’s title to the land was closely linked to his relationship with God. To the earlier “bare-bones” promise (“To your descendants I will give this land”), YHWH added several small but significant details in verse 8. First, he

characterized the land as “the land of your sojournings.” This also implied transformation; the status of Abraham and his descendants would change from resident aliens to owners of this land. Second, he defined the land as “the whole land of Canaan.” After 13:14–17 and 15:18–21, Abraham knew exactly what this meant. Third, God promised this territory to Abraham and his descendants as their possession (*šḥuzzâ*). This is the first occurrence of this term in the First Testament. It refers to real property, usually land that a person owns. This is the key word in Genesis 23 because Abraham, to whom God had granted title to this land, lacked the basic human right to bury his wife in his own plot (23:4, 9, 20). Fourth, recalling his words in 13:15, YHWH reiterated that, like the covenant itself, this promise of land was eternal and irrevocable (*‘ôlām*). Standing back from this segment of YHWH’s constitutional address, we notice first that this address clarifies the dimensions of the covenant, officially bringing together all three members of this tripartite relationship: divine Suzerain, human vassal, and earthly territory (fig. II.3 above). The covenant ritual in 15:12–21 had ended with the declaration of a relationship between Abram and his descendants and the land YHWH was promising them, but now we learn of the intensity of God’s involvement in the covenant. He did not merely impose it from the outside; he was the key player from within.

Second, all the verbs in 17:4–8 are cast in a future tense, which raises questions concerning the time of their fulfillment. The personal dimension of the covenant had been operative; YHWH was in fact Abraham’s God. But the promises concerning land and progeny were all delayed. We have also learned that this covenant not only applies to Abraham but will also be transferred to his descendants. Indeed, verse 7 looks forward to a future date when the covenant that YHWH had made (*kārat*) with Abram would be

“established/confirmed” (*hēqîm*) with his descendants, presumably by means of formal ceremony.

Part 3 (Gen. 17:9–14). Having laid out his own commitments and obligations within the covenant relationship, in verses 9–14 the divine Suzerain declared his expectations of the vassal. This is not a comprehensive statement of obligations but concerns only the identifying mark by which the vassal declared to his Suzerain his own acceptance of the privileges and responsibilities that accompanied participation in this relationship. In a sense the present prescriptions provide God with the answer to a question like the one Abram posed to YHWH in 15:8: “How may I know that you have committed yourself to the terms of this covenant?” However, in contrast to that event, the vassal was not free to choose the form for the proof of his commitment; like everything else in this disparity treaty, the Suzerain defined the mark for the vassal.

A single word, which functions as the key word in the rest of the chapter, answers this question: “Circumcision.” The root *mûl*, “to circumcise,” occurs six times in these six verses and five more times in the description of Abraham’s compliance with the ritual in verses 23–27. Remarkably, the word occurs only six times in two contexts elsewhere in Genesis (21:4; 34:15–24).

The narrator signals the transition from the Suzerain’s promised benefactions (*běřākôt*; cf. 28:4) to the divine decision/judgment (*mišpāṭ*) concerning the vassal’s response in 17:9 with a focusing introduction: “But you, my covenant you must keep” (*wě’attâ ’et bēřîṭî tišmōr*). This shift in focus answers to YHWH’s self-introduction in verse 1: “I am El-Shadday.” Although YHWH repeatedly identified this pact as “my covenant” (vv. 9, 10, 13, 14), in this speech not a single word concerned his action.

The speech itself opens with a summary statement of principle: the vassal “must keep [*šāmar*] the covenant.” “Keeping” the covenant involves acting in accord with its

stipulations (*mišpāṭîm* involve divine judgments concerning the vassal's appropriate conduct). In 18:19 YHWH will define "keeping the covenant" ethically: "keeping the way of YHWH by practicing righteousness and justice" (*šāmar derek yhwh la'ăśôt šědāqâ ûmišpāṭ*). However, to launch Abraham officially on what he now knew to be a covenantal adventure, God prescribed circumcision as the obligatory rite of initiation for Abraham and any male in his household who desired access to the benefactions of the covenant and who accepted its missional charge.

The opening statement is simple: "Every male belonging to your household must be circumcised." The ritual of physical circumcision was so widely practiced in the ancient Near East¹⁸ that Israelites considered uncircumcised persons barbarian and wicked.¹⁹ Although the origins of the rite are unclear, people in the ancient context seem to have performed it at puberty to mark a boy's passage to manhood and to qualify him to marry or assume civic privileges and responsibilities. Since in this context God required it to be performed on a son's eighth day of life, it cannot have served as a rite of passage.

In God's instructions concerning the Israelite practice of circumcision, he dealt with three issues: the nature of the procedure, the candidates for the procedure, and the significance of the procedure for his covenant people—though not necessarily in categories organized so neatly. Regarding the rite itself, God specified that on a boy's eighth day the foreskin of his penis (*bāśār*, "flesh," is a euphemism; cf. Ezek. 16:26) was to be surgically removed (v. 11a). Regarding the scope of the rite, the Suzerain was emphatically and redundantly clear: every male in the Israelite's household. Lest there be any questions, he listed the persons for whom this applied: those who were physically descended from Abraham and those who became part of the family economic unit by some other means and sought to identify with the spiritual commitments of the

family (vv. 10c, 12–13). “Those born in your house/family” refers to literal progeny, in contrast to the foreigner (*ben nēkār*)—that is, “one who is not of your seed” (*zeraʿ* refers to sperm). “Those you purchase in exchange for silver” are household slaves who become the property of the family. God did not mention other classes of household staff, like day laborers who worked for wages (*śākîr*), or resident aliens (*gērîm*) who lived in a community or household temporarily but were free to move on at their own discretion. However, he was clear that the prescription applied not just to Abraham and the contemporaries in his household but to all his descendants in perpetuity (vv. 9–10).

As for the significance of circumcision, YHWH identified this as the “sign of the covenant” between himself and Abraham and his descendants (v. 11b). He had used the same expression, *ʾôt (hab)běrit*, earlier of the rainbow, which was the sign of the cosmic covenant (Gen. 9:12, 13, 17), and would use it later of the seventh-day Sabbath as God’s sign regarding the Israelite covenant. In the earlier case, the “sign” was intended primarily for God, to remind him of his covenant commitments, which included the promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood.

Although God defined the significance of the “sign” of circumcision with the same word, it functioned quite differently from the other signs. Both the rainbow and the Sabbath were visible to the public; not so circumcision. Performed on the male organ of reproduction and elimination, the sign was never to be publicly displayed, which meant that the only ones who would see it were God and the man’s wife. If this interpretation is correct, then the later emphasis on circumcision as an ethnic marker, distinguishing Israelites from ethnic outsiders, was misguided (Gen. 34:15–24; Judg. 14:3). This was to be a brand seen only by God, who through the covenant had claimed this people as his own and called them to advertise

their identity with him by walking in his ways and acting justly and righteously (18:19).

The Dialogue concerning Sarah/Sarai Involving God and Abram (Gen. 17:15-21)

In 17:15 the narrator signals a new movement in the chapter by noting for the fourth time that God was talking with Abraham (cf. vv. 1, 3, 9), but as he had done in verses 1 and 9, he announced the subject of this address with the first word—in this case, “Sarai.” Whereas El Shadday’s episodic monologue had dominated verses 1–14, in verses 15–21 we encounter a true dialogue, with YHWH initiating the conversation (vv. 15–16) and Abraham responding with incredulity (vv. 17–18), which in turn precipitated YHWH’s detailed explanation of how the covenant promises would be fulfilled (vv. 19–21). Abraham’s verbal response contrasts with verse 3, where, in response to YHWH’s self-introduction as El Shadday and to his hearing of the divine charges and promises (vv. 1–2), Abraham had answered with a nonverbal physical gesture of submission and homage. He had prostrated himself (*nāpal ‘al pānāyw*, lit., “fell on his face”), but God had kept on talking. In this case, the reference to Ishmael in verse 20 means that this text is transitional, between God’s instructions on circumcision (vv. 9–14) and Abraham’s implementation of the instructions (vv. 22–27).

The point of YHWH’s first speech in verses 15–16 was to integrate Sarai fully into his covenantal and redemptive program. He did so with three significant moves. First, he changed her name from Sarai (*śāray*) to Sarah (*śārâ*). Unlike the change of Abram to Abraham, the difference is merely orthographic, with no change in meaning; both signify “princess.” Second, he promised to bless her by giving her a son. YHWH had spoken repeatedly of Abraham’s “seed” (*zeraʿ*) becoming an innumerable host, and Hagar had born him a son (*bēn*; 16:11, 15), but God had never specifically

promised him a *bēn*, which he now did for Sarah. Third, God declared that Sarah would be transformed into “nations” (*hāyâ lěgôyim*), which meant that “kings would *happen* from her.” In these expressions we hear echoes of what YHWH had promised Abraham in verses 5–6. Indeed, by making her the mother of kings (*mělākîm*), God would confirm Sarah’s royal status as “princess.” Given the ancient patricentric world, God had issued the promise concerning Sarai/Sarah to Abraham, but the content signified that she would be his equal in nobility and his female complement in the fulfillment of the divine agenda.

Abraham responded to this statement with a combination of a second gesture of homage and submission on the one hand, but incredulity and rationality on the other (vv. 17–18). He dared not express the latter directly to God, but in his mind the notion was ridiculous, if not a cruel divine joke. Perhaps out of deference to Sarah, the issue in his mind was not Sarah’s barrenness but his own and Sarah’s ages. In verse 18 he proposed a rational and culturally legitimate alternative; there was no need for God to make it so difficult for himself or for this couple. He already had a son, Ishmael, who at the age of thirteen years (v. 25) was ready to begin preparation for responsible adulthood. Surely he could fulfill the role of heir to the promise and agent of universal blessing. He cast his proposed solution as a suggestion, but the tone expressed some frustration: in effect, he said, “Why can’t Ishmael be your agent of blessing?” His use of “live before” God in verse 18 alluded to El Shadday’s earlier charge, “Walk before me” (17:1).

God responded to Abraham with two answers (vv. 19–21). First, he reaffirmed that Sarah would bear him a son, and he promised to transfer the covenantal privileges and responsibilities to him (vv. 19, 21). Indeed, he concretized the reaffirmation by naming him: “You shall call his name Isaac.” The name, which means “he will laugh,” cites Abraham’s response in verse 17 (*wayyiṣḥāq*, “and he

laughed”) verbatim. Later Sarah would also mock the prospect of having a son (18:10–15), but when the child was born, she acknowledged that God had brought her laughter (in a totally different sense) and playfully predicted that she would be the butt of jokes for many (21:6–7).

In verses 19 and 21 God promised to establish (*hēqîm*) his covenant (which he had made with Abraham) also with Isaac and in so doing extend the covenant privileges and responsibilities to him. The second half of verse 19 echoes earlier promises to Abraham (cf. v. 7), highlighting Isaac as the heir to Abraham’s material resources as well as his spiritual and missional role. Remarkably, despite this twofold promise to establish the covenant with Isaac, and although 28:4 refers to the covenant euphemistically as “the blessing of Abraham” (*birkat ’abrāhām*), neither the Isaac nor Jacob narratives speak explicitly of YHWH’s covenant (*bē’rît*) with the ancestors, let alone describe the moment when he “established” (*hēqîm*) it with them. However, the present promise that YHWH would establish his covenant “with” (*’ittô*) Isaac “as an eternal/irrevocable covenant for his future descendants” anticipates much later events at Sinai, when this statement would be fulfilled by means of another specifically covenantal ritual (Exod. 19–24) that would integrate Abraham’s descendants fully into this covenant. In so doing, the seed that had been planted with the Abrahamic stage of the covenant would come to full bloom.

Second, in verse 20 God responded to Abraham’s proposal regarding Ishmael by reiterating and expanding on the divine envoy’s message to Hagar in 16:10 with promises of blessing for this lad. The blessing echoes the blessing of humankind in Genesis 1:28, though instead of commanding Ishmael to be fruitful and multiply, God promised to do this for him. The promises for Ishmael also echo statements we have heard before with reference to Abraham and his descendants, but they also exhibit several significant

changes. Most notably, he would make Ishmael the father of a great nation (*gôy gādôl*) with twelve branches headed by twelve princes. The descendants of Ishmael would thereby be among the multitude of nations (*hămôn gôyim*) predicted in verse 5. The specification of “twelve princes” anticipates 25:12–18, where the narrator names twelve “chieftains” who headed up twelve tribal communities (*lě’ummôt*).

This statement concerning Ishmael is important for our discussion of covenant. On the one hand, it affirms that all who descended from Abraham and all who had ethnic links to him participated in some measure in the benefactions promised within the covenant relationship (cf. the profusion of Esau’s descendants in the genealogy of Gen. 36). On the other hand, the statement exposes a clear hierarchy among Abraham’s descendants, leaving no doubt about Isaac’s and later Jacob’s status in the divine program (cf. the oracles/promises regarding Esau in 25:23; 27:39–40). YHWH’s emphatically constructed last statement in the present conversation reinforces this conclusion: “But my covenant I will establish/confirm with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear for you” (17:21). However, YHWH transformed the promise into a concrete prediction by announcing the time of its fulfillment: “at this season next year.”

The Narrator’s Epilogue (Gen. 17:22–27)

With the note in verse 22 that when God had finished speaking with Abraham, he (God) went up, the narrator signals the end of the theophany. To complete this segment of the covenantal story, all that remained was for Abraham to submit to circumcision for himself and Ishmael (vv. 23–25), and then to bring the rest of his household under the covenant by circumcising all the males as well. The narrator’s twofold note that Abraham performed this ritual “on that very same day” (*bě’ešem hayyôm hazzeh*) and that he performed the rite “just as God had spoken to him”

(v. 23) reflects both his scrupulosity and his confidence (faith) in God's promises. The doubts he had expressed earlier (15:2-3; 17:17-18) seem, for the moment, to have evaporated.

Before leaving this episode, I must add a note on the chronological details inserted into the narrative. The narrator notes that this theophany transpired when Abraham was ninety-nine years old (v. 24) and that he submitted to the rite of circumcision on the day that God revealed this sign of the covenant to him (vv. 23, 26). On that day God told Abraham that "at this time next year" Sarah would give birth to a son (v. 21; cf. 18:10, 14). This means that, although Abraham and Sarah had been denied offspring for seventy years or more, as soon as Abraham engaged in intercourse with his ninety-year-old wife (17:17) as a circumcised man, "YHWH granted conception" (cf. Ruth 4:13). Isaac truly would be the *ben bĕrît*, "the son of the covenant."

Looking back, we can recognize the relationship between Genesis 15 and 17. Because of the fourteen-year chronological distance between these two chapters, some argue that the events described represent two separate covenants. Chapter 15 supposedly involved a covenant of grant that bound YHWH, the originator and primary mover behind this covenant, unilaterally to Israel. Chapter 17 reports the institution of the "covenant of circumcision" (cf. Acts 7:8), which binds Abraham and his family to YHWH. However, it is preferable to interpret these as two phases of a single covenant. Although fourteen years separated the two events, together they corresponded to the single-event ratification ritual that Moses would supervise at Sinai in Exodus 19-24. At the climactic moment in that ceremony, in two separate phases Moses sprinkled the altar and the people with the blood of sacrificed animals. Since the altar represented YHWH, this was a symbolic act whereby YHWH bound himself through a self-imprecatory ritual irrevocably

to Israel—the equivalent to the vision of the torch passing between the body parts in Genesis 15. Once YHWH had bound himself to the covenant, Moses bound the people to it by reading the stipulations; having the people respond for the third time, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do” (Exod. 24:7; cf. 19:8; 24:3); and sprinkling the “blood of the covenant” on the people. Like Abraham’s submission to circumcision, in so doing Moses put his descendants under oath to keep the covenant, and they became the officially recognized heirs of the privileges and responsibilities entailed in the covenant made with Abraham.

- [1.](#) Cf. also Esther 4:7, for Hb. *pārāšā*, “exact information”; Amos 9:6, for Hb. *’āguddā*, “vault,” a homonym.
- [2.](#) Josh. 21:45; 23:14; Jer. 33:14; cf. 1 Kings 8:56; Jer. 29:10.
- [3.](#) Gen. 50:24–25; Exod. 13:19; Josh 24:32; Heb. 11:22.
- [4.](#) Gen. 21:27, 32; 26:28; 31:44.
- [5.](#) On “land of [one’s] birth/kinred,” see also Gen. 31:13; Ruth 2:11; Jer. 22:10; 46:16.
- [6.](#) Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7; Acts 7:4.
- [7.](#) Judg. 20:1; 2 Sam. 24:2; 1 Kings 4:25 [5:5]; etc.
- [8.](#) Cf. Deut. 12:5–14; 2 Chron. 3:1; Pss. 78:68–69; 132:13–18; Isa. 2:2–4; Mic. 4:1–3.
- [9.](#) Cf. Gen. 26:24; 46:3; Deut. 1:21; Isa. 7:4; Luke 2:10.
- [10.](#) Cf. Gen. 27:20; 28:21; 43:23.
- [11.](#) Thus *gṣr* ‘*dy*’; see Sefire Stela I.A., line 7, in *COS* 2.82, p. 213.
- [12.](#) Gen. 15:19–21; cf. Exod. 3:8, 17; 23:23; Num. 34:1–12.
- [13.](#) Gen. 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25.
- [14.](#) The identification of God by his personal name, YHWH, in the following commentary is intentional and assumes that God (*’ēlōhîm*), El Shadday (*’ēl šadday*), and YHWH (*yhwh*) are one and the same. Of these, only YHWH is his personal name; all others are epithets.
- [15.](#) E.g., Lev. 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18; 6:6 [5:25].
- [16.](#) Hb. *zera*’, “seed”; cf. 16:10; 22:17; etc.
- [17.](#) Lev. 26:9; cf. 26:4–10; Deut. 7:13; cf. 7:13–16.
- [18.](#) Judg. 14:3; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36; Jer. 9:25–26 [24–25].
- [19.](#) Cf. Ezek. 32:17–21, 24–32; 31:18.

CHAPTER 4

The Afterlife of the Abrahamic Covenant

The Afterlife of the Covenant in the Abraham Narratives (Gen. 18:1-25:11)

In chapter 3 we explored the origins of the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant. The account began with the call of the patriarch in 12:1 and led to Abraham's signing and sealing the contract in chapter 17. This moment marked the end of the formal revelation of this institution (cf. the reference to YHWH finishing [*kālâ*] his conversation with Abraham in 17:22), but it did not mean the end of its history. The word "covenant" occurs later in Genesis but only in contexts involving pacts between human beings. This does not mean that God's covenant with Abraham was eclipsed by other issues; rather, like the operating system in a computer, which constantly runs in the background, the covenant was the driving force in the entire narrative until the death and burial of Jacob in 50:1-14, and indeed until the demise of Joseph in 50:22-26. After chapter 17 the narrator's attention turns to exploring how the covenant served the ancestors of Israel and how the ancestors Abraham (18:1-25:11), Isaac,¹ and Jacob responded.² Jacob will figure in chapters 37-47, but Joseph will eclipse him as the dominant character while Jacob lurks as a shadowy figure in the background.

The Abrahamic narrative had begun surprisingly with the genealogical formula citing his father Terah as the *topic*—

albeit with three sons. It ends formally and literarily with the quick review of the fortunes of Abraham's kinsmen in Haran (22:20–24), after the patriarch's remarkable demonstration of faith on Mount Moriah (vv. 1–14) and YHWH's extravagant reiteration of the covenant promises (vv. 15–19). The story of Abraham continues in 23:1–25:11, with descriptions of Abraham's actions to secure his and Sarah's covenantal legacy.

The birth of Isaac was obviously pivotal for the narrator of chapters 18–22. Indeed, we may divide the story chronologically into events that happened in the year following the specific announcement of Isaac's forthcoming birth (18:1–20:18; cf. 17:15–21) and those that postdated his arrival (21:1–22:19). We may divide the former geographically between the times when Abraham's bases of operation were first at Mamre, in the hill country of Hebron (18:1–19:38; cf. 13:18), and later at Beersheba, in the northern Negev in two parts involving events prior to the birth of Isaac (20:1–21:7) and after his arrival (21:8–22:19). Although the climactic event here involved a journey to Mount Moriah, Beersheba remained Abraham's base throughout.

Abraham at Mamre (Gen. 18:1–19:38)

Genesis 18:1–15 functions as the introduction to this entire unit. The divine stopover at Abraham and Sarah's tent provided the occasion for reaffirming the earlier promise that Sarah would bear a child within a year (17:21), a promise that will be fulfilled in 21:1–7. But this visit was also the occasion for YHWH to involve Abraham in the imminent fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16–19:38). With reference to the covenant and its fulfillment, YHWH's response to Sarah's incredulity is the key: "Is anything too difficult for God?" The brilliantly ambiguous word *yippālē*' (18:14) could mean either "beyond comprehension" (YHWH

knew that Sarah had laughed to herself in another tent) or “beyond possibility” (YHWH was aware of the couple’s physical limitations). The point is that YHWH had chosen two people as his agents who, on their own, were incapable of receiving the promises and carrying out the commission within his grand plan of redemption; this was a divine project from beginning to end.

Abraham’s intervention in the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16–19:38) is significant on several counts. First, YHWH’s opening was based on Abraham’s new official standing as YHWH’s confidant and a member of the divine court: “Shall I withhold from Abraham my impending actions?” (18:17). Abraham’s magnanimous intercession for the Transjordanian cities reflected his acceptance of this role (18:22–33; cf. 19:27–28). Although the cities were destroyed, YHWH rescued Lot out of respect for Abraham (19:29). This event testifies to Abraham’s role in being a blessing, which he fulfilled here by pleading with YHWH to lift the curse that hung over a wicked people. But we see his role highlighted also in the extraordinary gravitas with which the divine Suzerain treated his covenant partner.

Isaiah 41:8 has YHWH characterizing Abraham as *’ōhăbî*, which is usually translated too flatly as “my friend.” The Hebrew verb *’āhab* means “to demonstrate covenant commitment in action in the interest of the other person.” In the context we may interpret the participle either as a subjective genitive (the one who demonstrated love for YHWH) or as an objective genitive (the one for whom YHWH demonstrated love). The ambiguity intentionally reflects the reciprocity of the relationship between YHWH and Abraham and their confidence in each other, which were both on full display in Genesis 18–19.

Second, as I shall discuss later, YHWH’s opening third-person soliloquy in Genesis 18:17–19 on Abraham’s place in his agenda highlighted the ethical implications of the covenantal commission. In verse 19, YHWH states,

Indeed I have chosen him,
that he may charge his children and his future household
to keep the way of YHWH
by doing righteousness and justice,
so that YHWH may fulfill for Abraham
what he has promised him.

Abraham and Sarah at Beersheba, Part 1: Awaiting the Son of Promise (Gen. 20:1-21:7)

Despite the androcentric character of 20:1-21:7, the narrator's focus is on Sarah. Admittedly, in an account dominated by dialogue, she speaks only eighteen words—but she has the last word and the last laugh (21:6-7).

The events described in chapter 20 are significant for the Abrahamic covenant at several levels. They demonstrate that despite YHWH's earlier demand that Abraham be blameless (17:1), the fulfillment of the divine agenda did not depend upon the moral perfection of his agents. Of all the characters in this drama, Abraham presents the least desirable image by repeating his cowardice in Egypt earlier (12:10-20). Even after YHWH had specified Sarah as the mother of Abraham's heir, within three months, in blatant unbelief Abraham handed her over to Abimelech to marry, which could have meant the end of the promise of a son. Indeed, Abraham appears to have been in such a sorry spiritual state that he blamed God for even being in this land: God had caused him to wander off from the security of his father's house, like a sheep gone astray (*tā'â*, 20:13).

In contrast to Abraham's moral failure, Abimelech, an outsider to the covenant, embodied precisely what we should have seen in Abraham. In the wake of the crisis that Sarah's arrival in his house precipitated, Abimelech protested his innocence to God, claiming that he and his people were a "righteous nation" (*gôy ṣaddîq*, 20:4; in contrast to "wicked" [*rāšā'*] Sodom, 18:16-33), and confessed that his heart was blameless (*tôm lēbābî*) and his hands were innocent (*niqyôn kappay*) when he received

Sarah (20:5). With this patent irony, we observe a reversal of roles: the insider to the covenant charged to be blameless was faithless and self-serving, while the representative of the world under the curse was righteous. Whereas YHWH had earlier promised to be Abraham's shield (i.e., "defender") in the face of danger, here he had shielded Abimelech from the danger that Abraham represented (v. 6). Abimelech's willing return of Sarah, his granting Abraham freedom of movement within his territory, and his lavish gifts confirmed his virtuous character (vv. 14–16).

Nevertheless, despite Abraham's failure of nerve and practice, this episode confirmed his standing as a member of the divine court. Without excusing Abraham, God informed Abimelech that he was a prophet, and as such he had access to both the divine ear and the divine mouth (v. 7). The story concluded miraculously, for in response to Abraham's prayer, God healed Abimelech and his wife and other women in his household, and in so doing applied to his neighbors the blessings previously promised to Abraham. The one who had closed the wombs of women in Abimelech's household proved that he was not merely a generic or cosmic deity; he was the covenant God of Abraham.

This gracious act in the interest of the local inhabitant's household provides the backdrop for YHWH's blessing of Sarah in 21:1–7. Here the woman whom the narrator had portrayed as the compliant victim of her husband's abuse in the previous episode experienced the joy of YHWH's intervention (*pāqad*) in her own life (v. 1). The episode opens with emphatic redundancy: YHWH intervened "just as he had promised" (*ka'āšer 'āmār*), and he acted for Sarah "just as he had announced" (*ka'āšer dibbēr*, v. 1). But her conception was divinely timed so she could bear a son for Abraham when he was one hundred years old, precisely at the time that YHWH had promised him (*lammô'ēd 'āšer dibber 'ōtô*, v. 2). Abraham dutifully (and no doubt joyfully)

named the boy Isaac (v. 3) and circumcised him on the eighth day, as God had commanded him (*ka'ăšer šiwwâ 'ôtô*, v. 4). But in this episode the narrator grants Sarah the last word. In verses 6–7 she expressed amusement at the turn of events herself, but she also recognized that YHWH had done the impossible (cf. 18:14). The birth of Isaac was neither ordinary nor natural. Since both this covenant and the divine plan of redemption were conceived in the mind of God, their realization would also be by the hand of God—from beginning to end.

***Abraham and Sarah at Beersheba, Part 2:
Confirming the Son of Promise (Gen. 21:8-
22:24)***

As noted earlier, with the birth of Isaac the narrative pivots from waiting for the promised son to confirming Sarah's son—rather than Hagar's—as the son of promise. The events described in the remainder of chapter 21 also happened in the region of Beersheba, but the temporal marker in 22:1 (“Now after these events . . .”) invites us to hear the remainder of chapter 21 with chapter 22. While modern readers struggle with Abraham's expulsion of Hagar and his son Ishmael from their household with divine approval, the primary characters had planted the seeds of the stress in this home much earlier (16:1–16).

The narrator casts Hagar as the antagonist who precipitated the crisis occasioned by Isaac's weaning. Apparently Hagar had never accepted the fact that Sarah's ridiculous birthing of Isaac had undermined her own status in the family by virtue of having given birth to Abraham's firstborn, who as a fourteen-year-old (cf. 17:25) was coming of age. Sarah's demand that Abraham expel both Hagar and Ishmael distressed the patriarch intensely until God intervened, reassuring him that yes, on the one hand, Isaac was Abraham's primary heir. On the other hand, God

reassured him that because Ishmael was also his son, the blessed future for the lad that he had promised in 17:20 was in place (21:12–13), a word that God reiterated directly to Hagar after Abraham had released her and the boy (vv. 17–19). The point of this text is to secure the covenant lineage and promises for Isaac, eliminating the last contender for the position and letting all know that Abraham's name would be preserved and the covenant established in Isaac (cf. 17:19, 21; 21:12).

The covenant that Abraham and Abimelech made in 21:22–34 functions like the intermission in a dramatic performance in the theater, separating the stress of scene I (21:9–14) from the tension of scene II (22:1–19), and rhetorically camouflaging the excruciatingly painful implications of the sacrifice of Isaac. At the same time, although the lineage had been secured, the patriarch's standing among his neighbors was tenuous. The crisis revolved around water resources, but ultimately it derived from Abraham's lack of title to this land; because he was an alien, he had to negotiate everything with the local inhabitants. In this case Abimelech recognized that God was with him and initiated a covenantal process whereby a troubled relationship was resolved and a measure of shalom produced. That Abraham planted a commemorative tamarisk tree there and called upon the name of YHWH suggests he treated Beersheba as a divinely legitimized base of his sojourning movements (21:33–34). The narrator notes that at this place he called on the name of YHWH, but then he appended the epithet "Eternal God" (*'ēl 'ôlām*) to the personal name. Whether this was Abraham's act or the narrator's interpretation, the frequency with which the word *'ôlām* appears in contexts of the covenant promises³ seems to have inspired this move. In any case, here Abimelech represents the outside world, those who were beginning to recognize the special hand of God upon Abraham and who

acknowledged their own personal advantage in being allied with him (21:22–23).

The Abraham narrative reaches its zenith in chapter 22. The narrator sets the context as “after these events”—that is, after YHWH’s affirmation of Isaac as the heir to the covenant promises and commission (cf. 21:12–13). He identifies the genre of this episode as a divine test (*nissâ*). The text is clear about the source of the test (YHWH), the person tested (Abraham), and the nature of the test (the demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac as a whole burnt offering), but it does not declare *what* YHWH was testing.

We watch the patriarch’s response in amazement because from a natural standpoint, YHWH had posed a deadly case of “You’re damned if you do” (the son of promise would have been consumed by fire) and “You’re damned if you don’t” (refusal to comply with his Suzerain’s order would have constituted blatant rebellion and disqualification from the role of agent of blessing for the world). YHWH did not make it any easier at the personal level by explicitly identifying the sacrificial offering as “your son, your favored son [*yěḥîdēkâ*], to whom you demonstrate love [*’āhabtā*], Isaac” (v. 2). Having just heard YHWH reaffirm that his son by Sarah was the key to the future of the covenant and its attendant promises, Abraham must have thought YHWH’s demand preposterous; the entire divine agenda was tied up in Isaac.

We do not hear the answer to what virtue or quality YHWH was testing until the very last second, when a divine envoy intervened, stopping Abraham with “Do not harm the lad, for now I know that you fear God, because you have not held back from me, your son, your favored son” (v. 12). The key word here is obviously “fear” (*yārē*), but the Hebrew expression is notoriously flexible in its possible meanings, ranging from terror in the face of death to trusting awe (fig. 4.1). In this case what YHWH tested is actually clear: Abraham’s faith, here identified as *yārē*, signifying “trusting

awe” or “awed trust.” He demonstrated confidence that YHWH would keep his word and fulfill his covenant promises (21:12) even if he demanded that Abraham sacrifice all his hopes for the future represented by Isaac. In 22:5 Abraham had instructed his servants to wait at the base of the mountain while he and Isaac went to the top to “worship.” Like the Greek counterpart *proskyneō*, the Hebrew *hištaḥăwâ* means essentially to prostrate oneself physically before a superior in submission and homage,⁴ though in this case that disposition was demonstrated even more dramatically. This was not the first time that Abraham’s faith had been tested, as we know from YHWH’s call to him to leave his homeland and embark on a journey to an unknown destination (12:1–3), and YHWH’s promise of descendants as innumerable as the stars of the sky, despite the barrenness of his wife (15:2–6). With the words “Now I know that you ‘fear’ God” (22:12), the envoy declared to the patriarch that he had passed the test. Shortly after this, the envoy reiterated the covenant to Abraham.

Figure 4.1

The Semantic Spectrum of *Yārē*’ Words



The reiteration begins with the divine guarantee in the form of an oath (v. 16a), followed by the grounds for the declaration/oath (v. 16b). Then the envoy lists the divine commitments (v. 17a) and the divine promises (v. 17b–18a). The reiteration of the covenant ends with another declaration of the grounds for the declaration (v. 18b). Although we have seen most of these elements in previous iterations of the covenant terms, several details call for comment.

First, although YHWH did not speak explicitly of a covenant, the opening oath, “By myself I have sworn” (*bî nišba’tî*, 22:16), accords with oaths that concluded ancient treaty agreements. The present self-imprecatory oath is striking, but it alludes to the passing of the torch (representing YHWH) between the halves of the animals in Abraham’s vision in 15:17. Second, YHWH strengthened the oath and this entire utterance with the only occurrence of the divine signatory formula (*ně’um yhwh*, “the declaration of YHWH,” v. 16) in Genesis (elsewhere in the Pentateuch only in Num. 14:28, also linked to a divine oath). Significantly, Genesis 22:17a is the only place where the similes “like the stars of heaven” and “like the sand on the seashore” occur together as images of the profusion of Abraham’s descendants. Third, the singular pronouns in the divine promises in verse 17b (“Your seed shall possess the gate of *his* enemies,” *wěyiraš zar’ākā ’ēt ša’ar ’ōyěbāyw*) anticipate an individual seed who triumphs over his opposition. Fourth, the grounds for the declaration in verses 16b and 18b both link YHWH’s reaffirmation to Abraham’s performance and challenge views of many that the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional, in contrast to the Israelite covenant ratified at Sinai. These distinct features reinforce our understanding of this literary unit as the pinnacle of the narrative and the pinnacle of Abraham’s performance as agent of YHWH.

Securing the Covenantal Legacy (Gen. 23:1-25:11)

The final episodes of the Abraham narrative concern events that happened almost forty years after the birth of Isaac. The narrator recounts two events in considerable detail: the burial of Sarah (23:1-20) and the provision of a wife for Isaac (24:1-67). He links these events by noting that the arrival of Rebekah provided great comfort for Isaac

in the wake of his mother's death (24:67). The narrator undoubtedly recounts these events because of their significance for the promises linked to YHWH's covenant with Abraham.

Concerning the circumstances of Sarah's decease, the narrator notes only that she died in Kiriath-Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan in her 127th year. Her death highlighted the tenuousness of Abraham's situation; far from possessing the land that YHWH had promised him, he did not even own a plot of land to bury his wife, the royal ancestress of the massive populations to come. The narrator highlights the formality and legality of the transaction by precisely describing the boundaries of the property to which he gained the title deed: "the field of Ephron in Machpelah, located east of Mamre, the field along with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area." This ensured a burial place for the first three generations of the chosen family (cf. Gen. 35:27-29; 50:13) and served as a down payment for Israel's eventual claim to the entire land promised. This action also links the patriarchal narratives with Israel's royal tradition since Hebron would serve as the first capital of the first legitimate king of all Israel, the Judahite David (2 Sam. 5:1-5).

Whereas Genesis 23 related directly to YHWH's promise of the land of Canaan, chapter 24 concerns the second anchor benefaction of YHWH's covenant, the promise of descendants. Despite the absence of the word "covenant," the concept was obviously both the narrator's and Abraham's primary concern. This is evident in Abraham's testimony before his servant in the opening scene: "YHWH, the God of heaven . . . took me from my father's household and the land of my birth; he spoke to me and promised me on oath: 'To your descendants I will give this land'" (v. 7). Here the narrator introduces the core of the covenant with obvious echoes of 12:1 and 7. However, rather than dealing with YHWH's promise of land, the lengthy narrative that

follows concerns the descendants (*zera'*, “seed”) who would receive the land.

Concern for the covenant is evident also in the key word *hesed*, which occurs four times (24:12, 14, 27, 49). In principle an act of *hesed* involves an action within an established relationship that seeks the good of the other person. However, the word is particularly rich because it encompasses all the positive beneficent attributes of YHWH: love, loyalty, kindness, mercy, grace, goodness, faithfulness. This richness explains why English translations often render it rightly as a compound expression, as in “lovingkindness” (KJV) or “steadfast love” (ESV), or “unfailing love” (NIV). It is especially at home in natural family relationships⁵ but often involves fidelity to a relationship that has been established by treaty or covenant (e.g., Gen. 21:23). Abraham’s servant obviously had the latter in mind when he prayed to YHWH, the God of his master, that he would demonstrate *hesed* to his master by identifying the bride for his (YHWH’s) servant Isaac (24:12–14). When YHWH answered his prayer precisely as he had requested, the man’s outburst presupposed this covenant: “Blessed be YHWH, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld his *hesed* and his fidelity/faithfulness [*’ēmet*] toward my master. When I was on a mission [on his behalf], YHWH led me to the house of my master’s relatives!” (v. 27).⁶

Finally, the covenant underlies the utterance with which Rebekah’s household blessed her before her departure for Canaan: “Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads, and may your seed possess the gate of his enemies” (24:60). The statement alludes to the promises of descendants innumerable as “the sand of the seashore and the stars of the sky” (22:17), and the reference to her seed (*zar’ēk*, “descendant”) possessing the gate of his (singular) enemies recalls 22:17. As later narratives and genealogies would demonstrate, this blessing laid the foundation for

Isaac's eventual fathering of Jacob and Esau (25:21-34) and Jacob's fathering of twelve sons, who would serve as the eponymous founders of the Israelite tribes (cf. chaps. 29-30; Deut. 27:12-13; 33:6-24).

The Afterlife of the Covenant in the Isaac Narratives (Gen. 25:12-28:10; 35:28-29)

After a summary statement of Abraham's genealogical legacy through Keturah (25:1-11) and Hagar (Ishmael) (vv. 12-18), in 25:19 the account transitions formally into the Isaac narrative with a *tôlědôt* formula: "These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son." A significant motif in the "Isaac phase" of the history of the covenant is the complication for the plot created by Rebekah's giving birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. Through an oracle she learned that the younger (Jacob) would emerge as the dominant figure. Much of the narrative involves the tensions this created and the role of divine providence in human machinations to achieve this result. For our purposes the anchor texts involve a couple of significant divine speeches transferring the privileges and responsibilities that attend the covenant and the commission to be agents of blessing to the world.

YHWH's Extension of the Covenant Promises to Isaac (Gen. 26:3-4)

The first promise to Isaac occurs in Genesis 26:3-4, at the beginning of the only chapter where Isaac figures as the sole and primary character. This occurs in the context of a famine and presumably in response to Isaac's wondering whether he should seek refuge in Egypt, as his father Abram had (12:10-20). At Gerar, YHWH appeared to him and warned him not to make the move. YHWH did not explain why except to remind Isaac that he was the Suzerain in this

relationship and reassure him that he was extending the covenant with Abraham to him.

Although the term *bērît* is missing, as is any hint of a ritual of covenant transfer, the substance of 26:2b-5 and YHWH's promise in verse 3 to "establish" (*hēqîm*) the oath (*haššēbu'â*) that he had sworn (*nišba'*) to Abraham (cf. 22:16; 24:7) indicate clearly that YHWH's purpose was to extend the covenant to Isaac, along with its attendant responsibilities (stay in this land) and promised benefactions: (1) YHWH's presence with Isaac, (2) YHWH's blessing of Isaac, (3) YHWH's grant of the land of Canaan to Isaac and his descendants (note the redundancy), (4) YHWH's multiplication of his descendants like the sand of the seashore, and (5) YHWH's assignment to his descendants of the role of agents of blessing to the world. While four of these five are very familiar, the opening benefaction is new. Although others had recognized that God was with Abraham (21:22), and God had promised to be his shield (15:1), for the first time we hear YHWH expressly promise to be with his chosen vassal and his descendants (26:3).⁷

The surprising element of YHWH's first address to Isaac was his grounding of the extension of the covenant to Isaac in Abraham's specific obedience to what appear to be references to ordinances revealed centuries later. In 22:17-18 YHWH had grounded his lavish reiteration of the covenant benefactions with Abraham with "because you listened to my voice," which involved a specific command to offer his son Isaac. However, here the references to keeping (*šāmar*) "my charge [*mišmartî*], my commands [*mišwōtay*], my ordinances [*ḥuqqōtay*], and my instructions [*tôrōtāy*]" are unexpected (26:5), with vocabulary reminding us of ordinances that YHWH would not reveal until Isaac's descendants arrived at Sinai and Moses addressed the nation on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy). To this point the circumcision of all males as the sign of acceptance of

the covenant was the only specific law that YHWH had laid upon Abraham and his descendants (17:9–14), but this text suggests compliance with the entire package of Israelite covenant obligations. I leave a fuller discussion of the significance of YHWH’s intriguing comment in verse 5 for later in this chapter.

YHWH’s Second Appearance to Isaac (Gen. 26:24)

Although YHWH kept his promise and blessed Isaac for not having moved to Egypt (26:12–14a), this created tensions with his neighbors in Gerar (vv. 14b–22). Eventually Isaac moved back to Beersheba, where YHWH appeared to him a second time (26:24). Instead of introducing himself as El Shadday (cf. 17:1; 28:3), YHWH identified himself as “The God of Abraham, your father.” Whereas Abraham had earlier referred to YHWH impersonally and cosmically as “the God of heaven and the God of the earth” (24:3; cf. v. 7), his servant had identified him as Abraham’s personal deity: “YHWH, the God of my master Abraham” (24:27, 42, 48). Here YHWH claimed that role for the first time. YHWH followed up his self-identification with an appeal to Isaac not to fear because he was with Isaac and would bless him and multiply his descendants “for the sake of Abraham my vassal [‘*ebed*]” (26:24). Although Abraham had identified himself as a servant of YHWH in 18:3–5, for the first time YHWH referred to him as his vassal (LXX reads “Abraham your father”). The word ‘*ebed*’ is capable of a wide range of meanings, from “slave” to “emissary,” but it always identifies a person in a superior’s service. Because Abraham had been invited to enter the presence of YHWH (17:1), was designated a “prophet” (20:7), and was sent out on the mission of blessing the world, here the word obviously functioned as an honorific title⁸ rather than describing the role of a menial slave.

Isaac's Blessing of Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29; 28:1-4)

Isaac's blessing of Jacob in 27:27-29 provides an ironic if not satirical foil for YHWH's blessings. In other iterations of the covenant benefactions, we have heard the voice of YHWH, but despite Isaac's references to God, both as "YHWH" and "Elohim," this utterance lacks any reference to YHWH's words. Here we hear the words of a man with limited physical sight, but whose spiritual eyes also seem to be failing, whose inspiration came from the smell of the field, and who intended to bless Esau. Remarkably, Isaac focused entirely on Jacob's material and social well-being and was silent on the spiritual or missional dimensions of the covenant. He seems to have imagined God essentially as a fertility deity (v. 28) and the divine protector of his vassal's hegemonic standing among the nations.

The folly of Isaac and the scheming of Rebekah resulted in the disintegration of the family of promise, forcing Jacob to flee for his life (27:43-45). Despite the domestic dysfunction and Isaac's questionable performance in that context—and before Jacob's departure for Haran, the home of Rebekah's kin—Isaac remarkably had the presence of mind to send Jacob on his way with his blessing. Isaac first issued Jacob a charge (28:1-2), warning him not to marry a Canaanite woman but rather to secure a daughter of his uncle Laban, and then cast his utterance as a prayer for Jacob rather than as a divine oracle.

Although Isaac may have been oblivious to events swirling about him, this blessing reflected awareness of the covenant promises to Abraham. The blessing consists of an invocation of benediction (28:3a), coupled with a declaration of hope (v. 3b), and followed immediately by another invocation (v. 4a) and another declaration of hope (v. 4b). While his reference in the first invocation to El Shadday as the source of the progeny links this statement

with 17:1, his triple invocation, “May he bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you,” echoes the same triad of benefactions that Abraham heard with respect to Ishmael in 17:20. Isaac’s hope that Jacob would become “a company of peoples” condenses “May she [Sarah] become nations and may kings of peoples come from her” in 17:16. The second invocation of blessing (28:4a) employs a unique and ambiguous new phrase, “the blessing of Abraham” (*birkat ’abrāhām*). On the one hand, it could refer to YHWH’s commission to Abraham to be a blessing to the families of the earth, but on the other hand, coming from the lips of Isaac, it probably functioned as a collective designation for all the benefactions to which YHWH had committed himself in 12:1–3 and in subsequent promises.

This farewell blessing upon Jacob involves the last words we hear from Isaac’s lips. From this point onward, the narrator fixes his attention on Jacob and takes his hearers/readers with him to Haran in Paddan-Aram.

The Afterlife of the Covenant in the Jacob Narratives (Gen. 28:10–35:29)

Although the heading that marks the beginning of the Jacob account (*tôlēdôt*) does not appear until 37:2—that is, after the death of Isaac (35:28–29)—this third-generation patriarch had been the primary character from 28:10–35:27. However, in the narratives that follow, he figures as the principal figure only in chapter 46 and in 48:1–50:14.

YHWH’s First Appearance to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–22)

It is extremely significant that the first episode involving Jacob as an independent figure in the narratives involved a direct encounter with YHWH at Bethel. Having found a convenient place to spend the night on his way to Haran

(28:10–11), Jacob had a dream in which YHWH appeared to him. While angels ascended and descended a ramp up to God in heaven, Jacob saw YHWH standing over him, and he heard him speaking with words of reassurance and comfort.

YHWH's address is formal in style and tone and divides into four parts. In his self-introduction he identified himself by name (YHWH) and relationship to his addressee: "the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (v. 13). The name echoes the way he had introduced himself to Abraham in 15:7; the compound epithet offers commentary on the significance of events that had happened since he had brought Abraham out of Chaldean Ur: through covenant he had bound himself to Jacob's family.

The speech proper divides into three parts, arranged in an ABA order, with the A elements (28:13b, 15) representing his covenant commitments to Jacob, which frame the central B element (v. 14) declaring YHWH's long-range goal. Since Jacob was about to depart from the land promised to his family, appropriately YHWH began his list of commitments pastorally with a promise concerning the land (v. 13b). Whether or not his forthcoming journey created anxiety concerning the key issue in YHWH's address to Isaac in 26:2–4 and Jacob's parting prayer for him, here YHWH addressed the particular "blessing of Abraham" concerning "the land of your sojourning that God gave to Abraham" (28:4). The divine commitments at the end (28:15) also relate to the land, but they are more personal. Although the narrator gives us no record of Abraham ever hearing the words "I am with you, and I will protect you," others recognized the first clause at least to have been true for him (21:22). The promise to Jacob fleshes out magnificently what Isaac had heard the first time we hear God speaking to him (26:3): YHWH would be with Jacob to secure his well-being (*šāmar*) wherever he went, and he would bring him back to this land. Redundantly, he declared that he would not abandon (*ʿāzab*) Jacob until he had fulfilled his

commitments (28:15). Given YHWH's intervening declaration of his long-range goals in verse 14, this would have included the entire package of covenant benefactions represented by "the blessing of Abraham" (28:4). The first part of YHWH's expression of intent for Jacob's future echoes what he had told Abram in this vicinity—namely, that his descendants would be innumerable like the dust of the land (‘ăpar hā’āreṣ) and fill the land in all directions (28:14; cf. 13:14–17). The second part of 28:14 echoes YHWH's original commission of Abram at the beginning of this adventure in covenant and mission (12:3).

Jacob must have wondered how these promises would be fulfilled, but he responded to this remarkable night revelation with the same trusting awe (*yārē*) that Abraham had demonstrated in 22:12 by (1) recognizing that he had been in a sacred space in the presence of God (28:16–17); (2) renaming the place of revelation as *bêt ’Ēl*, "the House of El" (v. 19); (3) casting himself into God's care (vv. 20–21a); (4) claiming YHWH as his God (v. 21b); (5) erecting a memorial pillar to mark the place of God's residence (v. 22a); and (6) promising to return to YHWH a tenth of all that Jacob would receive from his hand (v. 22b). Although this event explains the significance of the name "Bethel" for Jacob and his descendants, by locating this promise at the place where Abram had worshiped YHWH (12:8; 13:3–4) and apparently the place of his promises concerning the land (13:14–17), "between Bethel and Ai," the narrator has retroactively linked Jacob's first encounter with YHWH with Abram's early experience in the land.

Jacob's Return to the Promised Land (Gen. 31:1–33:20)

Having laid the foundations for the fulfillment of the covenant promises through Jacob, the narrator may confidently move forward with his account of Jacob's stay in

Paddan-Aram (Gen. 29–31). His account paints a mixed picture of Jacob’s three or more decades in the land of the Aramaeans (29:1–31:1), dominated by domestic struggles between himself and his father-in-law, Laban, and between his wives, Leah and Rachel (cf. 31:36–41). As if on cue, when the relationship reached a breaking point (31:1–2), YHWH appeared to Jacob to invite him and his family back to “the land of your fathers and your kindred [*môledet*],” with the promise of his personal presence (v. 3). Although Jacob’s extrication of himself from Laban’s grip required drastic action, in the end they signed a treaty (*běrit*) by which both parties agreed never again to meddle in each other’s affairs (31:43–54). Laban and Jacob sealed the agreement with an oath, though both men spoke of the Deity as someone else’s God; Laban invoked “the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor,” while Jacob enigmatically invoked “The Terror of his father Isaac” (*paḥad ’ābîw yiṣḥāq*, v. 53).

Table 4.1

A Comparison of YHWH’s Speech and Jacob’s Prayer

Genesis 28:13–15	Genesis 32:9–12 [10–13]
“I am YHWH, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.	“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O YHWH, who said to me,
The land on which you are lying, I will give to you and to your descendants.	‘Return to your land and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’
	I am not worthy of all the <i>hesed</i> and all the faithfulness [<i>’emet</i>] that you have shown to your servant, for I crossed this Jordan with only my walking stick, and now I have become two camps.
Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants.	Please rescue me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau. Indeed, I am afraid of him, that he will come and attack me, along with the mothers with the children.
Look, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. Indeed I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”	But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”

This agreement liberated Jacob to resume his journey without fear of Laban. However, before he would cross the Jordan into the land promised to him, one additional long-term conflict remained unresolved—at least in his mind: his relationship with his brother, Esau. The words of his mother seem still to have been ringing in his ears: Esau sought to kill him for having “stolen” the birthright (27:42–45). Therefore, Jacob feared that danger still lurked ahead of him. However impersonal, if not terrifying, the connotations of the epithet “the Terror of his father Isaac” may have been, it was his terror at the prospect of meeting Esau (32:6–9 [7–9], 13–23 [14–24]) that drove him to prepare for this meeting by reorganizing his entire household (vv. 7b–8 [8b–9]) and imploring the favor of God. We may grasp the import of Jacob’s prayer (vv. 9–12 [10–13]) by juxtaposing it with YHWH’s address to him at Bethel in 28:13–15, as in table 4.1.

Significantly, Jacob not only acknowledged YHWH as the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, but he also identified him by name. Although he had not yet crossed the Jordan, he recognized that YHWH had initiated his return home that

he might do him “good.” Here the verb “to do him good” (*hêṭîb*) signifies more than “to treat him well.” This expression is shorthand for fulfilling all the covenant promises (“the blessing[s] of Abraham,” 28:4). In 32:9 [10] Jacob was obviously thinking of “your land” as the context in which YHWH had promised to do “the good” (*haṭṭôbâ*),⁹ but in 32:12 [13] he remembered YHWH’s promise “to do him good” by making his descendants innumerable like “the sand of the sea” (cf. 22:17). Remarkably, in his preface to his specific plea for rescue (*hiṣṣîl*) from Esau, Jacob characterized his time away from the land as the period when YHWH had demonstrated “all the unfailing love [*ḥesed*] and all the faithfulness [covenant fidelity, *’ēmet*] to [his] vassal” (v. 10 [11]), for which Jacob considered himself unworthy.

The remarkable scene involving Jacob’s struggle with God, who appeared in human form (*’îš*, v. 24 [25]), then followed and served a transitional function, concretizing the sense of divine presence for the meeting with Esau the next day (33:1–17) and preparing him to cross the Jordan. This man, who had departed from his homeland thirty or forty years earlier as Jacob, now returned to the promised land as Israel. Retracing Abraham’s steps a century earlier, he headed for Shechem, where YHWH had confirmed to his grandfather that he had arrived in the promised land; there Jacob erected a memorial altar, renaming it according to his new name: “El, the God of Israel.” Deity, chosen vassal, and land were together once more.

Jacob’s Return to Bethel (Gen. 34:1–35:14)

Jacob’s stay in Shechem ended badly (34:1–31), and what happened there highlighted the continued tenuousness of the chosen family’s status in the land. The native Hivites invited them to settle and be integrated into their population, expressed as “becoming one people” (*lě’am*

’eḥād, 34:16). Jacob’s sons’ brutal response to the compliant actions of the Hivites led to his alienation from the local population (v. 30). Like his stresses with Esau and with Laban earlier, the tensions with the people at Shechem precipitated another anchor encounter with YHWH. Chapter 35 opens with God (Elohim) appearing to Jacob and calling him back to Bethel (35:1–4). The journey back was significant because the divine numen (*ḥittat ’ēlōhîm*) went before them, shielding them from attack by the locals (v. 5). The reference to the protective “terror of God” suggests that despite the apparent eclipse of the covenant in Jacob and his family’s mind and the fiasco at Shechem, YHWH continued to fulfill his covenant commitment as their divine guardian. However, for our purposes, the divine speeches in verses 10–12 are of utmost significance.

When Jacob arrived at Bethel, God reappeared to him with a fresh revelation. The narrator has YHWH speaking with Jacob twice, the first speech reinforcing Jacob’s new identity as Israel (35:10) and the second reiterating YHWH’s covenant promises (vv. 11–12). As we have observed before, the structure of the second speech is simple, consisting of YHWH’s self-introduction (“I am El-Shadday”), his charge (“Be fruitful and multiply”), his goal (to make his physical descendants into nations and kings), and his promise (to give the land, for which his father and grandfather held the title deed, to his descendants; vv. 10–12). The note that at the conclusion of this speech, “God went up from him” (*wayya’al mē’ālāyw ’ēlōhîm*) recalls an almost identical observation with reference to Abraham in 17:22, after YHWH’s lengthy address to Abraham, including the revelation of circumcision as the sign of the covenant. The obvious verbal links between these two speeches in 35:10–12 and 17:1–4 reinforce this conclusion: (1) YHWH’s self-introduction as El Shadday (17:1, 35:11), (2) a charge to the patriarch (17:5, 35:10), (3) references to multiplying descendants (17:2; 35:11), (4) promises of nations (*gôyim*)

and kings (*měḷākîm*) among the descendants (17:6, 35:11), and (5) promises of the divine grant of land to the ancestor and his descendants (17:8, 35:12).

But the differences are also striking. First, echoing the “blessing” of Genesis 1:28, YHWH cast his charge to Jacob not as an ethical or professional command but as a charge to be fruitful. In Genesis 17 this was cast as a divine goal (17:2) and a promise (v. 6) rather than a human obligation. Second, whereas in the address to Abraham the renaming occurs after the divine self-identification and the charge, here it occurs first. This probably happened because the Abrahamic text had involved the moment of his renaming, whereas in the speech to Jacob it reiterated an earlier event (32:28 [29]). Third, whereas the earlier speech had emphasized the eternality/irrevocability of the divine promises, the present speech assumes them. Finally, and most striking of all, whereas the term *běřît* occurs four times in the speech to Abraham (17:2, 4, 7a, 7b), here it is missing altogether. Nevertheless, based on the lexical and conceptual echoes, apparently for Jacob this event marked YHWH’s formal “establishment of the covenant” (*wěhăqîmōtî ’et bēřîtî*) predicted in 17:7. This linkage invites us to look upon Jacob as the individual embodiment and a foreshadowing of what would be confirmed for the “nation” of his descendants at Sinai.

Jacob’s Final Years in Egypt (Gen. 42-50)

Years later, when Jacob’s clan set out for Egypt to seek refuge from a severe famine that struck the land of Canaan, Jacob’s entourage paused at Beersheba to offer sacrifices “to the God of his father Isaac.” As he had done many decades earlier in the night when Jacob left the promised land for Haran, YHWH appeared to him in a vision to reassure him of his approval of this move (46:1-4). After identifying himself as “God [*hā’ēl*], the God [*’ēlōhîm*] of your

father,” and calming his nerves (“Fear not”), God foretold Egypt’s special place in the fulfillment of the covenant promises: there God would transform this clan of about seventy individuals (46:27; Exod. 1:5) into a great nation (*gôy gādôl*, Gen. 46:3; cf. 12:2; 18:18). However, God also informed the patriarch that this would not happen in his lifetime, for Joseph would close his eyes—a euphemism for attending to him at his death (46:4).

Seventeen years later (47:28), in preparation for his imminent decease, Jacob charged his sons to bury him in the ancestral tomb in the field of Machpelah near Hebron (49:29–32). Although this request suggests a strong faith in God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises, YHWH fulfilled his personal promise to bring Jacob back from Egypt (46:4) through extraordinary means. Above and beyond the clan’s being welcomed to Egypt as most favored guests (47:1–12, 27) because of his son Joseph’s intervention, the narrator portrays Jacob’s death as a royal event (50:1–3): (1) in a forty-day procedure, his body was embalmed according to the royal Egyptian custom; (2) the people of Egypt mourned his passing for seventy days (cf. the thirty-day period for Moses, Deut. 34:8); (3) Pharaoh approved transporting his body back to Canaan (Gen. 50:4–6); (4) the funerary procession involved an extremely great company (*hammaḥāneh kābēd mě’ōd*), including chariots and horses (i.e., representatives of Egypt’s military brass, v. 9); (5) Canaanite observers interpreted the procession and the mourning rituals as a national Egyptian event (v. 11). Obviously, the ancestral family had made a mark in Egypt and Canaan far beyond their numbers.

Whereas Jacob’s blessings of his sons in 49:2–27 contain few allusions to the covenant promises, in the blessing of Joseph we hear echoes of the benefactions that YHWH had promised the ancestors. Jacob identified the Deity as “the God of your father” and “Shadday” (v. 25), and he emphasized the “blessings of heaven” while also referring to

“the blessings of my ancestors” (*birkōt ’ābîkā*, vv. 25–26). These phrases link this blessing with the earlier blessings of Joseph’s sons, where allusions to the covenant promises are even stronger.

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked;
the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day;
the envoy who has redeemed me from all evil—bless the boys.
And may my name be preserved in them,
as well as the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac;
And may they multiply greatly in the midst of the earth. (Gen. 48:15–16)

The poet has artfully crafted the blessing in two parts, each of which consists of three clauses. The first three involve three invocations of the Deity along with three modifying clauses. These are quite general and turn out to be blessings (in the sense of praise) of God. Remarkably, rather than addressing God by name (YHWH) or his self-identifying epithet (El Shadday), Jacob used the generic *’ēlōhîm* in the first two lines and the euphemistic *mal’āk* (envoy, messenger) in the third line (cf. 22:11, 15).

The first invocation acknowledges the privileges the patriarchs had enjoyed and the responsibilities they had borne as commissioned agents of God. The form of the verb (*hithallēk*) links this statement with the divine charge in 17:1, “Walk before and be blameless.” In the second invocation, Jacob lauded God for his care and guidance through the years; he had been his faithful “shepherd” (*rō’eh*). The third praises him for acting as a divine agent, redeeming (*gā’al*) him from harmful and threatening circumstances.

“May he bless the boys” in 48:16b is maximally general. In keeping with its use elsewhere in Genesis, here “to bless” signifies God’s favor and functions as shorthand for fulfilling all the covenant benefactions, especially promises of well-being, land, divine presence, and special relationship with YHWH. The Hebrew idiom involved in the second blessing is

awkward if translated literally into English: “May my name be called/read in them.” Although the concern is legacy, the issue was not Jacob’s private legacy. His naming of his father and grandfather suggests that this involved the common covenantal legacy graciously instituted and guaranteed by YHWH. We witness the fulfillment of this plan in later references to “my covenant with Jacob, my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham” (Lev. 26:42). The collapsing of this full statement into “his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exod. 2:24; 2 Kings 13:23) confirms that these were not three separate covenants but represent one single covenantal heritage. The third blessing answers the charge to Jacob in 35:11 to “Be fruitful and multiply” and reinforces YHWH’s repeated promises to make the ancestors and their descendants fruitful and cause them to multiply.¹⁰ The narrator had noted the beginning of the fulfillment in 47:27 and will describe it with emphatic detail in Exodus 1:7.

Synthesis

Without question, YHWH’s covenant with Israel’s ancestors and the attendant benefactions and mission represent the focal point of the patriarchal narratives, which suggests that we should interpret every episode in chapters 12–50 in this light. Looking beyond Genesis, this covenant provides the foundation for Israel’s later exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the land of Canaan, the kingship of David, the messiahship of Jesus, and ultimately the salvation of the world. In Abraham, all the nations of the earth are truly blessed. However, before we move to the next stage of the covenantal story, we need to pause and review what this drama involving YHWH and his chosen vassals had accomplished. In my summary of the covenant’s features, I shall focus initially on the responsibilities to which the parties to the covenant obligated themselves.

The Obligations of the Divine Suzerain

Earlier I drew attention to God's covenant with Abraham as fundamentally asymmetrical and monergistic in nature, involving YHWH, the divine Suzerain, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, his human vassals ('*ebed*').^{[11](#)} As a magnanimous covenant of grace, YHWH (1) initiated it; (2) chose the covenant partner but (3) referred to it as "my covenant" (*bĕrîtî*), not Abraham's; (4) defined its terms; (5) made and established it; (6) determined the standards of fidelity/infidelity for himself and his subject; and (7) defined its purpose (12:1-3). YHWH demonstrated this dramatically in the vision involving the flaming torch passing between the halves of slaughtered animals, as through this ritual YHWH staked his own life on its fulfillment (15:1-21). We may summarize the obligations to which YHWH bound himself on oath as follows:

1. to be the God of Abraham and his descendants,^{[12](#)}
2. to be with them,^{[13](#)}
3. to guarantee their safety and security (12:3; 15:1; 28:15),
4. to give them the land of Canaan as their eternal possession,^{[14](#)}
5. to multiply their descendants into an innumerable host,^{[15](#)}
6. to transform their descendants into a great nation,^{[16](#)}
7. to include kings among their descendants,^{[17](#)} and
8. to make Abraham and his descendants agents of blessing to the world.^{[18](#)}

These benefactions far exceeded the functions that ancient Near Easterners expected of their gods and ensured the resources that would transform them into a microcosm of humanity in a land that would serve as a microcosm of

the earth, and through which YHWH would fulfill his mission of redemption and blessing for the world.

The Obligations of the Human Vassals

Many have claimed that the covenant YHWH made with Abraham was a gracious, eternal, irrevocable, and unconditional covenant of grant—in contrast to the covenant (of obligation) with a built-in terminus a quo (end point) that YHWH made with Israel at Sinai. Furthermore, based on Galatians 3:1–9 and Romans 4:1–22, many view Abraham as a man of faith *in contrast to* a man of the commandment. However, these perceptions fly in the face of the general and specific evidence of the patriarchal narratives. To be sure, neither YHWH's call of Abraham nor his later election of Israel for covenant relationship was preconditioned by his vassal's moral or spiritual state. However, like all human relationships, the health of Abraham's relationship with YHWH and the fulfillment of the mission to which God called him were contingent on his response to YHWH's gracious gestures. What then were the obligations expected by the divine Suzerain and to which his vassals bound themselves?

1. *Trust in their divine Suzerain.* The narrator highlights this notion with an explicit reference to Abraham's faith in 15:6: "Abraham put his trust in YHWH, and he credited it to him as righteousness." As suggested earlier (chap. 3, under "The Background to the Covenant-Making Ritual"), the Hebrew word *he'ēmîn* involves putting one's full confidence in something/someone. In this case, the confidence was in YHWH, who had promised to overcome Abraham's wife's barrenness and make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. The narrator interprets Abraham's response as an act of faith and declares the divine assessment as evidence of righteousness.

Although here the narrator did not identify a specific action proving Abraham's faith, elsewhere Abraham demonstrated obvious faith through his actions, though neither the narrator nor YHWH interpreted the action with the language of trust (*he'ěmîn*) we expect. Indeed, the first occasion merely describes the patriarch's action without any explicit acknowledgment of the underlying disposition. However, this should not blind our eyes to Abraham's radical demonstration of faith in either case. Abraham repudiated all foundations of security for an ancient Near Easterner; in response to YHWH's call for Abraham to abandon his home and family and embark on a journey without a specified destination, the narrator, with elegant economy of words, simply reports that "Abraham went out as YHWH had spoken to him" (12:1-4). All Abraham had to go on was the divine word.

The patriarch matched this incredible if undeclared act of faith at the climax of his story. YHWH informed Abraham in 21:12 that the covenant promises would be realized through Isaac rather than Ishmael, but then YHWH tested him, demanding that he present this explicitly identified "son of the covenant" as a whole burnt offering to YHWH. In the face of an incomprehensible and utterly contradictory command, the patriarch walked with his son—for three days—to the destination. No doubt Abraham was deeply distressed, but he was also confident that God would solve the dilemma that God had created for himself. The word *he'ěmîn* is missing in this account, but the divine envoy characterized Abraham's obedient response with the word *yārē'*, which in this instance must mean trusting awe, or awed trust. He had passed the test.

2. *Acceptance of the divine mission (Gen. 17:1).* YHWH cast his commission for Abraham and his descendants as a divine imperative: "Be a[n agent of] blessing" (12:2) and "Walk before me and be blameless" (17:1). These two commands reflect his relationship to the world and his

relationship with God. As noted earlier, “Walk before me” signifies an invitation to audiences with YHWH; this was an official authorization to serve as his commissioned representative, a role Abraham fulfilled as a prophet while interceding on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:22–33) and Abimelech (20:7). The command to “be blameless” was not so much a demand for moral purity as a charge to wholehearted and full-bodied loyal service in keeping with membership in the divine Suzerain’s court. The charge to be a blessing addressed the cosmic problem of a world under the curse because of the vice-regent’s (*Adam’s*) rebellion.

3. *Circumcision (Gen. 17:9–14, 23–27)*. The command to circumcise all males called for a ritual or ceremonial response by those who would participate in the covenant. Through this act, Abraham demonstrated his acceptance of the covenant promises and obligations. Refusal to accept the sign would signify “breaking my covenant” (*hēpar ’et bēritî*) and would mean being cut off from YHWH’s people (v. 14).

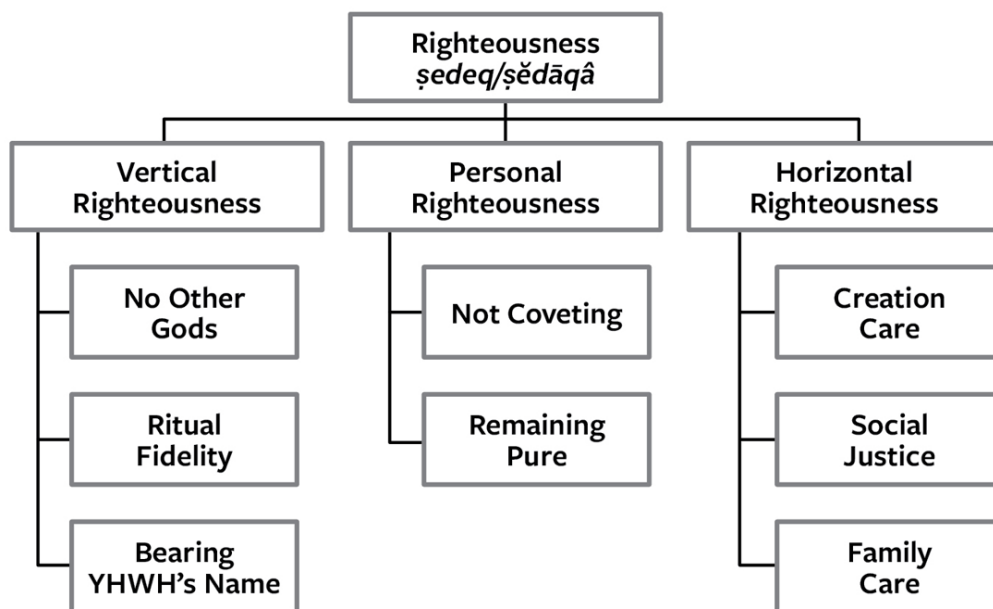
4. *Keeping the covenant (Gen. 17:9–11)*. This is a general expression for fidelity to all the stipulations to which he committed himself. Casting the charge to “keep” (*tišmōr*) as an imperative suggests that this response was neither predetermined nor a foregone conclusion. Refusal to keep the covenant would have meant the loss of the covenant benefactions and withdrawal from the mission of being a blessing to the world.

5. *Moral and ethical living (Gen. 18:18–19)*. In Genesis 18:18–19 YHWH declared that his goal was to create an ethical people, who would keep his way by doing righteousness and justice (18:17–19). His covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants was never intended to be either a private or an interior mystical matter. To represent him and bring blessing to the world, Abraham and his descendants were to demonstrate righteousness (*ṣēdāqâ*), by trusting in YHWH not in the

abstract but in action governed by the standard embodied by YHWH and established in the covenant and in the interest of the well-being of others (*mišpāṭ*). Although *šedeq/šēdāqâ* (righteousness) and *mišpāṭ* (justice) often occur together and sometimes appear to be used interchangeably, they are not true synonyms. The former is a broad expression representing multidimensional, dispositional, and demonstrated responses in keeping with the divine mission (fig. 4.2), while the latter tends to involve social and legal dimensions of “righteousness,” especially seeking the welfare of the vulnerable.

Figure 4.2

The Dimensions of Righteousness: Deuteronomy 16:20



YHWH himself declared his explicit approval of Abraham’s ethical conduct in 26:5, which grounded his extension of the privileges and responsibilities associated with the covenant to the next generation represented by Isaac (cf. fig. 0.1). Indeed, here we find the most explicit assertion of the link between access to the covenant promises and obedience to the divine Suzerain. Abraham’s attention to YHWH’s voice

(*šāmaʿ bēqōlî*) and his fidelity (*šāmar*) to his charges (*mišmartî*), commands (*mišwôtay*), ordinances (*ḥuqqôtay*), and instructions (*tôrôtāy*) undergirded YHWH's extension of the original promise of progeny, land, and blessing for Isaac. The citation of YHWH's comment in 26:4–5 echoes Deuteronomy 11:1, which summarizes the preceding tripartite answer to the question "What then does YHWH seek from you?": "You shall demonstrate love for YHWH your God and keep his charge [*mišmartô*], his statutes [*ḥuqqôtāyw*], his stipulations [*mišpāṭāyw*], and his commands [*mišwôtāyw*] always." Abraham was obviously not only a man of faith; he was also a man of "the commands" (*hammišwôt*).

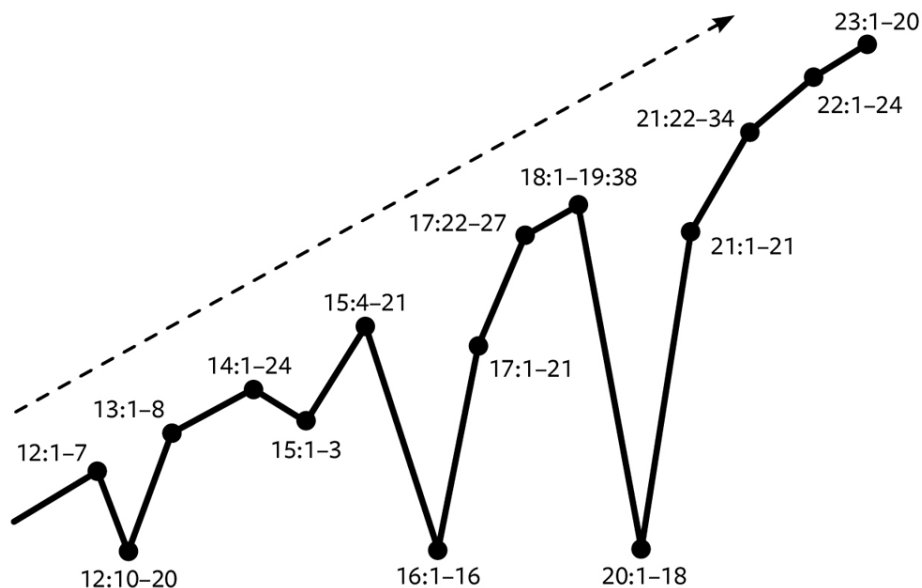
The lexical correspondence between these texts suggests that, in the narrator's mind, Abraham embodied righteousness as defined in full when YHWH established this covenant with Israel at Sinai. A closer look at the characterization of Abraham in Genesis and the ideals that Moses called for in his Torah confirms this. The narrator of the patriarchal narratives has cast Abraham as a paragon of the virtue called for in Deuteronomy 16:20: "Righteousness, only righteousness, you shall pursue" (*šedeq šedeq tirdōp*). The following "baker's dozen" highlights the Deuteronomic literary and conceptual brushstrokes identifiable in Genesis:

1. Abraham was chosen (*yādaʿ*) by YHWH (Gen. 18:19).^{[19](#)}
2. Abraham was a paragonic "God-fearer" (Gen. 22:12; cf. Deut. 4:10; 31:12–13).
3. Abraham trusted in YHWH (Gen. 15:6; cf. Deut. 1:32; 9:23).
4. Abraham listened to the voice of God (Gen. 22:18; 26:5).^{[20](#)}
5. Abraham swore by YHWH's name (Gen. 24:3; cf. Deut. 6:13; 10:20).
6. Abraham walked before YHWH (Gen. 17:1; 24:40).^{[21](#)}

7. Abraham did physical obeisance (*hištaḥăwâ*) before YHWH (Gen. 22:5; cf. 24:48).[22](#)
8. Abraham kept/walked in the way of YHWH (Gen. 18:19; cf. Deut. 5:33; 8:6; etc.).
9. Abraham demonstrated that he was a righteous man (Gen. 15:6).[23](#)
10. Abraham refused to let his son Isaac marry a Canaanite (Gen. 24:3; cf. Deut. 7:2-4).
11. Abraham passed the test of his faith (Gen. 22:12).[24](#)
12. Like his offspring, Abraham was charged to keep the covenant (17:9).[25](#)
13. Abraham kept YHWH's charge, commands, ordinances, and instructions (*hattôrôt*; Gen. 26:5).[26](#)

Figure 4.3

Abraham: Walking with God or Stumbling Along between Faith and Unbelief?



These facts demonstrate how wrongheaded are efforts to drive spiritual and ethical wedges between Abraham and Moses, as if Abraham's life of faith ("before the law")

differed fundamentally from Moses' life of obedience ("under the law"). To the narrator of Genesis, Abraham was the paragon of faith and righteousness as defined by YHWH's covenant with Israel generally and laid out in detail in Deuteronomy.

This did not mean that Abraham was perfect in obedience to YHWH and in embodying righteousness. On the contrary, while the narrator presents Abraham as a man of remarkable faith and character, he also exposes his "feet of clay" (cf. Dan. 2:33-34, 41-42). Indeed, if we plot the ethical performance of this "righteous" man, the trajectory of his conduct is not a straight line leading ever higher, but a yo-yo line alternating between extraordinary highs of faith and lows of unbelief (fig. 4.3). Nevertheless, YHWH's final verdict on Abraham in Genesis was positive (26:5), as was his reputation outside this book (Isa. 41:8; 2 Chron. 20:7).

The Afterlife of the Abrahamic Covenant in the First Testament

As we trace God's plan of redemption in the rest of the First Testament, Isaiah 41:8 and 2 Chronicles 20:7 set the stage for a quick consideration of the importance of YHWH's covenant with Abraham. Many explicit references to Abraham/Abram in the First Testament outside Genesis occur in contexts that focus on the covenant. The following sampling of texts illustrates this point:

Exodus 2:24: God heard the groaning of the Israelites in Egypt and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Leviticus 26:42-45: YHWH declared that if he sends the Israelites into exile as punishment for persistent rebellion against him, and if they then humble themselves and make amends for their iniquity, YHWH

“will remember his covenant with Jacob and Isaac and Abraham, and he will remember the land.”

Deuteronomy 4:31: When the Israelites are distressed in exile, they will return to YHWH and listen to his voice, and YHWH will not fail or destroy Israel or forget the covenant with their fathers that he swore to them.

2 Kings 13:23: In the days of Hazael of Aram, YHWH was gracious to Israel and had compassion on them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Nehemiah 9:7-8: You are YHWH, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldees and gave him the name Abraham. And you assessed his heart as faithful before you and made [cut] with him the covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, Hittite, Amorite, Perizzite, Jebusite, and Girgashite. And you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.

Malachi 2:10: By marital treachery the Israelites profaned the covenant of the fathers.

We also find many less explicit but clear allusions to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses' intercessory prayers on behalf of Israel repeatedly appealed to YHWH to remember his servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to spare the people.²⁷ In Deuteronomy Moses repeatedly highlighted the fulfillment of God's covenantal promise/oath to give Israel the land of Canaan as their possession,²⁸ but Deuteronomy 29:9-13 [8-12] is especially remarkable: “You shall keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. You stand this day, all of you, before YHWH your God, . . . that you may enter into the covenant of YHWH your God, . . . that he may establish you this day as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Texts like these challenge and correct impulses to draw distinctions between God's covenant with Abraham and his covenant with Israel. When the Israelites of the conquest generation entered into this covenant, they were confirmed as the people of God, and YHWH was confirmed as their God, in fulfillment of God's promise and oath to the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Gen. 17:7).

In Jeremiah 33:14-26, the late seventh-century prophet speaks of God's covenants with the Levites, David, Noah, and the patriarchs. Specifically, he declares that if his cosmic covenant (vv. 25-26) ever fails, then he will reject the descendants of Jacob and David, and the latter will cease to be rulers over the descendants of the patriarchs. Psalm 47:8-9 [9-10] does not refer explicitly to the Abrahamic covenant, but the psalmist celebrates the universal reign of the God of Abraham:

God reigns over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted!

Psalm 105:6-11 is equally enthusiastic (= 1 Chron. 16:13-18):

O descendants of Abraham his servant,
sons of Jacob, his chosen ones!
He is YHWH our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.
He is mindful of his covenant forever,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
the covenant that he made with Abraham,
that he promised on oath to Isaac,
which he confirmed to Jacob as an ordinance,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion for a grant."

- [1.](#) Gen. 25:19–28:9; 35:28–29.
- [2.](#) Gen. 28:10–35:27; 47:27–49:33.
- [3.](#) Gen. 13:15; 17:7, 8, 13, 19.
- [4.](#) This is the first occurrence of the word in the Scriptures, but see Gen. 23:7, 12; 24:26; 24:26, 48, 52; etc.
- [5.](#) Ruth 1:8; 2:20; 3:10.
- [6.](#) Cf. also *hesed* in Gen. 32:10 [11]; 47:29; Ps. 25:10.
- [7.](#) Cf. Gen. 26:24; 28:15; 31:3; 48:21.
- [8.](#) Cf. Exod. 32:13; Deut. 9:27; Ps. 105:6, 42.
- [9.](#) Cf. the use of the noun *ṭôbâ* in Gen. 50:20; Deut. 28:11; 30:9; and 2 Sam. 7:28.
- [10.](#) Gen. 16:10; 17:2, 22:17; 26:4, 24; 28:3.
- [11.](#) Gen. 26:24; Exod. 32:13; Deut. 9:27; Pss. 105:6, 42; Isa. 41:8.
- [12.](#) Gen. 17:7; 26:24; 28:13; 46:3–4.
- [13.](#) Gen. 26:3, 24; 28:15; 46:4.
- [14.](#) Gen. 13:15, 17; 15:7–21; 26:4; 28:13; 35:12.
- [15.](#) Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 22:17; 26:24; 28:14; 35:11.
- [16.](#) Gen. 12:2; cf. 17:4–6; 18:18; 26:24; 35:11; 46:3.
- [17.](#) Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:8–12.
- [18.](#) Gen. 12:2; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.
- [19.](#) Cf. the election (*bāḥar*) of Israel; Deut. 4:37; 7:6–7; 10:15; 14:2.
- [20.](#) Cf. Deut. 4:30; 26:17; 28:1–2.
- [21.](#) Cf. Deut. 10:8; 18:5.
- [22.](#) Cf. Deut. 5:9; 26:10.
- [23.](#) Cf. Deut. 6:25; 16:20; 25:1.
- [24.](#) Cf. Deut. 8:2, 16; 13:2 [3].
- [25.](#) Cf. Deut. 29:9 [8]; 33:9; cf. Exod. 16:28 and Deut. 17:19.
- [26.](#) Cf. Deut. 6:2; 11:1; 13:5 [4].
- [27.](#) Exod. 32:13; cf. Num. 14:16; Deut. 9:27.
- [28.](#) Deut. 1:8; 6:10; 9:5 (oath); 30:20; 34:4.

Stage 2 of the Israelite Covenant

CHAPTER 5

The Establishment of the Israelite Covenant at Sinai

Exodus 1:1–31:18

Introduction

The twenty-eight occurrences of the word *bērît* (covenant) in post-patriarchal narratives of the Pentateuch reflect the importance of the notion of covenant. However, three of these concern a particular covenant with Levites (Num. 18:19; 25:12–13), and three involve prohibitions against making covenants with Canaanites (Exod. 23:32; 34:12, 15). I will address the former in an excursus after chapter 6, but the latter references are extremely significant for the present discussion. Exodus 23:32 speaks against making covenants with the people *and the gods* of the land, which would involve sin against YHWH and transfer of vassaldom (*‘ābad*) to other gods (23:32–33). Exodus 34:12–17 expands on this prohibition, reiterating that such covenants will be snares to the people and inevitably be associated with submission and homage (*hištaḥăwâ*) before their gods, spiritual whoredom (*zānâ*) with those gods, sacrifices to them (*zābaḥ*), and sacred meals eaten (*‘ākal*) in their presence.

The events surrounding the second stage of the Israelite covenant take up the books of Exodus and Leviticus, then

spill over into Numbers. In this chapter I shall consider only the part of this narrative that ends with the completion of the rituals by which YHWH fulfilled his promise to Abraham (Gen. 17:7–8) to establish his covenant with his descendants (Exod. 1:1–31:18). However, before I launch into that discussion, we do well to consider the divine passion underlying these events.

The Passion of YHWH: The Fuel Driving the Israelite Covenant

Referring to himself in the third person, YHWH prohibits covenants with any of the Canaanite peoples and the worship of any other gods because of his passion for Israel and his relationship to the nation: “You shall not prostrate yourselves in submission and homage to another god because YHWH’s name is *Qannā’*; he is an impassioned [*qannā’*] God” (*yhwh qannā’ šēmô ’ēl qannā’ hû’*; Exod. 34:14). *Qannā’* (impassioned, zealous) was one of YHWH’s signature epithets (*šēmô*). YHWH’s use of this expression derives from its nontheological meaning. In everyday life, *qannā’* identified the legitimate passion of a husband when an outside suitor challenged his relationship with his wife (Num. 5:14–30; Prov. 6:32–35). Later prophets developed the notion of Israel as YHWH’s wife in considerable detail (e.g., Hosea 1–3), but none more fully or explicitly than Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 16 YHWH opens his oracle against Jerusalem with the image of himself twice rescuing this abandoned/naked daughter of an Amorite father and Hittite mother out in the open (vv. 1–7), and after the second occurrence, marrying her (vv. 8–14). Verses 15–59 recount in colorful but grisly detail Jerusalem’s harlotries and YHWH’s response. With insatiable lust, she pursued any and all the lovers she could engage, both divine and human. Her outrageous actions ignited YHWH’s passion, which he expressed with shocking brutality. If she insisted on baring

herself to all her lovers, he would remove her garments and have her stand naked before the world. But this would not be the last word. She may have forgotten her marriage vows, but YHWH had not forgotten his; in the end he would take her back and confirm his ancient covenant with his people (vv. 60–63).

The seeds of the image of YHWH as husband and Israel as bride were planted in the Pentateuch. It began in general terms with YHWH's description of his purpose in rescuing Israel from Egypt: "You have observed what I did to the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exod. 19:4). YHWH declared his covenantal goal in rescuing Israel from bondage to Pharaoh, often using variations of the self-identification formula, "I am YHWH your God."¹ He expanded the simple formula in many different ways, but texts declaring YHWH to have saved Israel *that he might become their God* are particularly relevant for this discussion. Texts like Leviticus 25:38, 55; 26:45; and Numbers 15:41 show clearly that YHWH's purpose in rescuing Israel from slavery to the Egyptians was to establish a covenant relationship with them.

The narrator's choice of words to describe YHWH's disposition toward Israel demonstrates that this covenant relationship was neither primarily economic nor political. We observe this in the use of the word *ḥāšaq* in Deuteronomy 7:7–8 and 10:14–15. In everyday usage this word expressed firm attachment, as in the bands of silver fastened to the pillars around the court of the tabernacle to hold up the outer curtains (Exod. 27:17; 38:17, 28), but it was also used in a derived sense of "to set one's mind on, to desire to do or have something," as we see with reference to Solomon's building projects (1 Kings 9:19; 2 Chron. 8:6). In Deuteronomy 21:11 Moses imagined an Israelite soldier "having passion for" (*ḥāšaq*) a young woman captured in battle and wanting to marry her. We saw this sort of passion on full display in Genesis 34:1–2 and 8, where Hamor of

Shechem appealed to Jacob's sons, "My son Shechem has a deep passion (*ḥāšqâ napšô*) for your daughter; please give her to him to be his wife." To Hamor, this word expressed affection, but to the narrator and Jacob's sons, it meant humiliation (*'innâ*, v. 2), defilement (*ṭimmē*, v. 5), and outrage (*něbālâ*, v. 7).

Given YHWH's abhorrence for the surrounding fertility religions and the oversexed nature of the nations' deities, we may find biblical writers' use of this word to express divine affection to be shocking. But Moses' utilization of the expression in Deuteronomy was profoundly theological. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, he declared, "It is not because your population is greater than other people that YHWH set his heart [*ḥāšaq*] on you and chose you, . . . but it was a demonstration of YHWH's love [*'āhab*] for you and his commitment to the oath that he had sworn to your fathers." Similarly, in 10:14-15, Moses says, "YHWH had set his heart [*ḥāšaq*] on your fathers to demonstrate [his] love [*'āhab*] for them." Both statements suggest that YHWH's passion for Israel preceded his election of them, but the Deuteronomy 7 reference explicitly excludes any utilitarian considerations driving his choice of this people out of all the peoples on earth. The second sets YHWH's passion for the patriarchs and his election of Israel in its cosmic context by identifying YHWH their God as the one who "owns the heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it" (10:14). Psalm 91:14-16 reverses the roles. YHWH will protect persons who are passionate (*ḥāšaq*) toward him; he will hear their pleas for help, rescue them, honor them, satisfy their desire for a long life, and ensure their salvation. The use of *ḥāšaq* to express YHWH's passion for his people and his people's passion toward him shows that this passion was the fuel that drove the covenantal engine, that led ultimately to YHWH's designation of the ancestors and Israel as "my vassal" (*'abdî*, Isa. 41:8), "my chosen one" (*běḥîrî*),² and indeed "my beloved" (*'ōḥăbî*).³

Although we touched on the last expression, *'ōhăbî*, in the previous chapter, it is especially significant in this context. Occasionally (as in Isa. 41:8) this form of the word probably means “whom I [YHWH] love,” but in the first command of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:6; Deut. 5:10), it means “who love me” (cf. *'ōhăbê yhwh*, “who love YHWH,” in Ps. 97:10). In contexts like this the verb *'āhab*, usually rendered “to love,” represents the heart of the passion underlying YHWH’s covenant relationship with his people. In popular speech we have trivialized the English word “love” by often using it as a euphemism for sexual intercourse and devalued it as a synonym for “like, enjoy,” as in “I love chocolate.” Sometimes the Hebrew *'āhab* bears the nuance of (illicit) sexual desire,⁴ but these cases involve “pseudo-love.” Fundamentally the word identifies the bond that exists between persons in a deep relationship. These relationships may be natural (as of parents for a child; Gen. 22:2; 25:28), or as entailments of other primary relationships (as of a daughter-in-law for a mother-in-law; Ruth 4:15), but they typically involve relationships that are intentionally forged: the love of a man for his wife,⁵ or a woman’s love for her husband,⁶ a servant for a master (Exod. 21:5; Deut. 15:16), a friend for a friend (1 Sam. 18:1–3; 20:17), or for the bond of political/military allies (1 Kings 5:1 [15]), neighbors (Lev. 19:18), and of a Deity for his people,⁷ and his people toward him.

In communicating the sense of the Hebrew word in English, we do well to avoid rendering it with a single word like “love,” which in our context expresses primarily a disposition toward someone. Since *'āhab* in Hebrew always involves action, we should minimally translate it as “demonstrate love.” When Moses spoke of loving YHWH, he meant keeping his commands,⁸ walking in his ways,⁹ holding fast to him (Deut. 11:22; 30:20), heeding his voice (30:20), and serving him with whole heart and body (10:12; 11:13). Indeed, *'āhab* was an action word, fundamentally

signifying *covenant commitment demonstrated in action in the interest of the other person*, a meaning that carries over into New Testament *agapaō*.¹⁰ Without this understanding, we will not grasp that in Deuteronomy 4:37–38; 7:8, 13; 23:5 [6] and elsewhere, YHWH’s love for the ancestors of Israel signified covenant commitment demonstrated in concrete actions in their interest.

This understanding also clarifies the meaning of *śānē’*, the antonym of *’āhab*. Most translations render this word as “hate,” but this English word imposes unhelpful nuances on the Hebrew—as if God is explicitly and expressly hostile toward the objects of his “hatred” and seeks to destroy them. However, the favor that he showed toward persons like Ishmael (Gen. 21:17–20) and Esau (33:5–10; Gen. 36), whom he “hates” (Mal. 1:3), disproves this interpretation. Malachi’s reference to the object of YHWH’s “hatred” as Esau rather than Edom alludes to a time when there was no evidence of divine hostility toward him. If “to love” means “to be covenantally committed to someone,” then “to hate” means “to reject” someone as a candidate for covenant relationship and the particular object of one’s beneficent actions.

The intensity and depth of YHWH’s relationship with his people was analogous to the marriage of a man and his wife, which accounts for the use of the expression *qin’â*, “jealousy,” more properly translated as “passion” in theological and covenantal contexts.¹¹ Unlike the relationship of other gods to their devotees in the ancient Near East, YHWH’s marriage to Israel called for exclusive commitment to him, not only because he was the only true and living God but especially because, out of all the peoples on earth, he had chosen this people to be his “wife,” he had demonstrated covenant commitment to them by rescuing them from Egypt, and he had called them to himself at Sinai.¹² For this reason, YHWH would not tolerate the Israelites going after any other gods (Exod. 20:3–6; Deut.

5:7–10), and for this reason they were to destroy every vestige of Canaanite worship of the gods of the land.

Background to the Ratification of the Israelite Covenant at Sinai

The first three occurrences of the term *bĕrît* in Exodus look back to the covenant YHWH had made with the ancestors in Genesis.

Exodus 2:21–22

The narrator set the stage in Exodus 2:21–22, with Moses naming his son Gershom, which reflected his own status as an exile from Egypt sojourning in the land of Midian, but also the status of the descendants of Jacob/Israel in Egypt. Abraham had complained about being a sojourner (*gēr*) among the Hittites in Genesis 23:4, but Moses' complaint, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" (*gēr bĕ'ereṣ nokrîyâ*), echoes Genesis 15:13, where YHWH had foretold to Abraham that his descendants would be "sojourners in a land that did not belong to them" (*gēr bĕ'ereṣ lō' lāhem*) and that there they would be enslaved and oppressed (*'ābad wĕ'innâ*). The narrator reinforces this link to Genesis 15 by following up the report of Moses' naming his son with a description of the Israelites' response to their plight in Egypt and God's reaction: "When God heard their groaning [*nĕ'āqâ*], God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the descendants of Israel—and God knew . . ." (Exod. 2:24–25).

Most translations mistakenly complete the final sentence with commentary, obscuring the cryptic ending that forces hearers/readers to ask, What did God know? The echoes from Genesis 15:13 and the explicit reference to God remembering his covenant with the ancestors suggest that the Israelites' cry out of their bondage had signaled to him

that the time had come to fulfill his earlier promise to Abraham to rescue his descendants, take them back to the land he had promised them on covenantal oath, and deliver it into their hands (Gen. 15:14, 16, 18–21).

It is unlikely that the people's cry in Exodus 2:23–24 was a prayer of faith calling on YHWH to fulfill his covenant promises to Abraham. In the absence of any hints of their awareness of the ancient promises in the narrative, this seems to have been simply a cry of pain, an "Ouch!" that rose up to God (cf. Exod. 6:9). However, the convergence of the Israelites' cry and the "iniquity of the Amorites" (*'ăwôn hā'ēmôrî*) back in Canaan reaching its maximum (Gen. 15:16) marked the moment for YHWH to take into account his covenant (*zākar 'et bē'rîtô*). The return of the Israelites would in one stroke signify the fulfillment of his promise to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan and provide the means of judging the peoples that lived there for their evil.

Exodus 6:1–8

Exodus 6:1–8 reinforces this interpretation, linking YHWH's promise to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go (v. 1) with a renewal of his commitment to his covenant with the ancestors (vv. 2–8). The narrator has carefully constructed this speech to highlight the covenantal significance of YHWH's actions.

Table 5.1

Exodus 6:1–8

Narrative preamble	2a God spoke to Moses 2b and said to him,
A. YHWH's self-introduction	2c "I am YHWH. 3a I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shadday, 3b but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them.
B. YHWH's past commitments	4a I also established my covenant with them 4b to give them the land of Canaan, 4c the land in which they lived as sojourners.
C. YHWH's present awareness	5a Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel 5b whom the Egyptians have enslaved, 5c and I have remembered my covenant.
D. YHWH's present promises	6a Therefore, say to the people of Israel, 6b 'I am YHWH, 6c and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, 6d and I will deliver you from slavery to them, 6e and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.
1. The promise of rescue	
2. The promise of covenant	7a I will take you to be my people, 7b and I will become your God, 7c and you shall know 7d that I am YHWH your God, 7e who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.
3. The promise of land	8a I will bring you into the land 8b that I swore 8c to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. 8d I will give it to you for a possession. 8e I am YHWH."

The fourfold repetition of the self-introduction formula "I am YHWH" (*'ănî yhwh*, vv. 2c, 6b, 7d, 8e) highlights the goal of the present speech and of the divine actions that will follow. This clause explicitly links the one who speaks here with the one who introduced himself to Abraham (Gen. 15:7) and Jacob (28:13). As YHWH he had brought Abraham out of Chaldean Ur and revealed himself to Jacob as "the God of Abraham [his] father and of Isaac." Because he had never revealed the significance/meaning of the name to the ancestors, "YHWH" was primarily an identifying cipher (Exod. 6:3). To be sure, as YHWH, he had established his covenant with them (v. 4), and as YHWH, more recently he had heard the groaning of this generation and remembered his ancient covenant (v. 5c). However, this observation heightens the significance of the use of the generic expression "God" (*'ēlōhîm*) in 2:23-25. YHWH's purpose in

the present address, especially the promises (vv. 6–8), was to introduce himself to the this generation of Israelites, who apparently, like Jacob in Genesis 28:13, lacked awareness of YHWH's prior hand in their history or their present experience. This would also explain Moses' comment on their ignorance concerning "the God of the fathers" and YHWH's response in Exodus 3:13–16.

However, even Moses had begun with a seriously deficient view of God. When YHWH called Moses to be the agent of Israel's rescue, he responded to Moses' question about his identity (Exod. 3:13) as "YHWH, the God of your ancestors: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (3:15). However, he also declared that YHWH was his eternal personal name and in effect invited the Israelites hereafter to address him by this name. But the meaning of the name remained a mystery. It was constructed of four weak letters of the alphabet—*y, h, w, h*—but the combination defies parsing or definition, and in time it defied pronunciation. YHWH's previous comment, *'ehyeh 'ăšer 'ehyeh* (3:14), does not resolve the enigma. If we must translate the expression (biblical names were typically transliterated rather than translated), we should render the verbs as imperfects, "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." This is better than casting the verbs in the present, "I AM WHO I AM," as the Greek Septuagint does. Rather than clarifying what the name means, YHWH invited Moses and his people after him to watch for the revelation of the significance of the name. Exodus 6:1–8 announces the imminent fulfillment of the invitation: When YHWH has rescued his people from Egypt (v. 6), established them as his covenant people (v. 7), and given the land of Canaan to the descendants of the ancestors (v. 8), they will not have grasped either a dictionary definition of "YHWH" or a philosophical understanding of YHWH's essence, but they will have learned what the name signified.

The groaning of the Israelites in Egypt had triggered YHWH to action on the basis of the covenant. As had been the case with Noah and the animals in the ark in Genesis 8:1, the verb *zākar*, “to remember,” does not mean that YHWH had forgotten his people in Egypt, but that the time had come to fulfill his covenant commitments: to rescue them from their misery and take them back to the promised land (cf. Gen. 15:13–14, 16–21).

The word *bērît* may be missing in Exodus 6:6–8, but as the previous two verses had signaled, the notion of covenant is front and center. First, YHWH promised to fulfill his covenant commitments in Genesis 15, which would involve great acts of judgment (*šēpāṭîm gēdōlîm*) on those who oppressed them (Exod. 6:6e; cf. Gen. 15:14). Second, YHWH promised to establish this generation of Israelites as his own covenant people. In Exodus 6:7, we encounter for the first time the bipartite version of what scholars call “the covenant formula”: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (vv. 7a, 7b). The present statement reflects both parts, but in the reverse order: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.”

The form of the first part is striking: “I will take you to be my people” adapts a common marriage formula, “to take X to himself to be his wife.”¹³ It seems that in Exodus 6:7 YHWH used the more explicitly marital idiom (“to take X as a wife for oneself”) rather than the common formula, “You shall be my people,” because this was the first time he had applied the covenant formula to “my people” collectively, rather than to the ancestors as individuals.

Earlier YHWH had referred to the current Israelites as “my people” (Exod. 3:7, 10; 5:1), but in 6:7 he announced the imminent fulfillment of his promise in Genesis 17:7, “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” The first part of verse 7 announced Israel as the chosen people of YHWH, and in the second part, YHWH promised to be Israel’s divine patron. Although earlier narratives had often

identified YHWH as the God of the ancestors generally or by name, here in Exodus 6:7 YHWH announced formally that the time had come to extend his covenant commitments to their descendants. Having fulfilled his promise to make the offspring exceedingly fruitful (Gen. 17:6), the time had come for Abraham's God to become the God of his descendants after him (in declarations that frame Exod. 6:7–8) and then to deliver the land of Canaan into their hands as their possession in perpetuity (*la'ăḥuzzat 'ôlām*, Gen. 17:8; cf. *môrāšâ* in Exod. 6:8a).

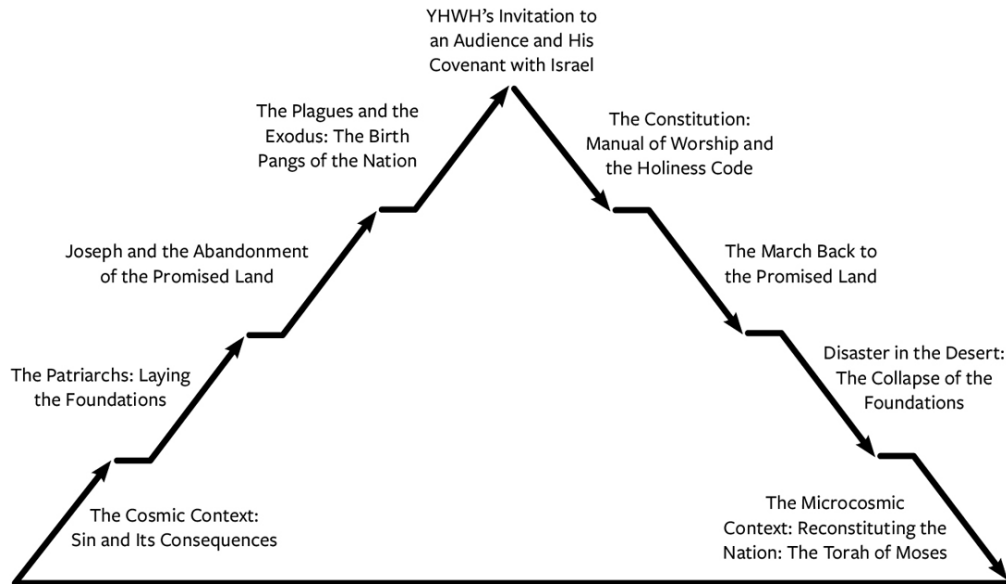
Exodus 6:7–8 perceives the fulfillment of these promises as a future event, but in Moses' demands before Pharaoh he repeatedly identified YHWH as "the God of Israel" (*'ēlōhê yiśrā'ēl*, Exod. 5:1) and "the God of the Hebrews" (*'ēlōhê hā'ibrîm*),¹⁴ suggesting that in God's mind this relationship already existed. YHWH's reiteration of the original promises reminds us that, in their essence, the covenant that YHWH made with the ancestors and the one he made with the exodus generation were one and the same. However, the time-space formalization of the relationship must await the confirmation of this covenant with the ancestors' descendants at Sinai (Exod. 19–24).

Exodus 19:1–6

As we noted earlier, the drama of the pentateuchal narratives generally and Israel's redemption in Exodus particularly reached its climax in Exodus 19 (fig. 5.1). This text divides into two parts, a narrative preamble (vv. 1–3) and a divine address for Moses to relay to the people (vv. 4–6).

Figure 5.1

The Place of Sinai/Horeb in the Plot of the Pentateuch



PREAMBLE (EXOD. 19:1-3)

In Exodus 19:1-3 the narrator signals the imminent arrival of the high point of the pentateuchal narrative by emphasizing the chronological context. “On the third month after the descendants of Israel had left Egypt, on this very day,” is ambiguous because Hebrew *hōdeš* could mean “month” generically or “new moon,” which would mean the beginning of the month. Whether the Israelites arrived at Sinai on the first day of the third month or exactly three months after they left Egypt (14 Kislev),¹⁵ Jewish tradition dates the declaration of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:1-17) on the sixth day of the third month. Even though the Scriptures portray the Festival of Weeks as a harvest festival, the festival fifty days after Passover (Pentecost)¹⁶ commemorated YHWH’s revelation of his will for Israel and with it the establishment of his covenant with them.

If Exodus 19:1-3 highlights the time of the event, it is even more emphatic about the place: in the wilderness of Sinai (vv. 1, 2), in the wilderness (v. 2b), there (v. 2c), and in front of the mountain (v. 2d). To this point neither Moses nor YHWH had provided the people with any clues about the

significance of this destination, which was absurdly far from the promised land. However, Moses anticipated this moment. In response to his objections at the time of his call, YHWH had declared: “This will be the sign [*hā’ôl*] for you that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” (Exod. 3:12). Most translations render the word *‘ābad* as “worship.” To be sure, when speaking to Pharaoh, Moses had specified sacrificing (*zebah/zābah*) to YHWH as one of the reasons for going a three-days’ journey into the desert.¹⁷ However, the Hebrew *‘ābad* is not primarily about ritual sacrifice; the word means “to serve, to act as a servant to.” Various forms of the term occur more than fifty times in Exodus 1–23. The noun (*‘ebed*, “servant”) applies to both the courtiers of Pharaoh, many of whom were high officials (7:10, 20, 28, etc.), and to the Israelites, who were Pharaoh’s slaves (1:13–14; 6:5). The narrative designates their status as “slavery” (*hā’ăbōdâ*),¹⁸ and refers to Egypt as their “house of slaves” (*bêt ‘ăbādîm*).¹⁹

YHWH and Moses exploited the word’s ambiguity when they declared to Pharaoh that the Israelites needed to go into the desert to “serve” YHWH.²⁰ They would indeed “serve” him at Sinai, but not so much—at least at the beginning—in the sense of ritual worship. Pharaoh correctly interpreted the demand as a challenge to his authority over them, for after being rescued from the servitude of Egypt, at Sinai they would be formally inducted as vassals (*‘ăbādîm*) of YHWH. In 4:22–23 YHWH had given Moses a clear signal of the purpose of the journey into the desert: “You shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus has YHWH declared: “Israel is my firstborn son,” and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” But if you refuse to let him go, take note; I will kill your son, your firstborn.’”

Although we have noted the use of the marriage metaphor to characterize YHWH’s covenant relationship with Israel, this statement introduces a new family

metaphor of adoption. The metaphor complicates our understanding of Israel's relationship with YHWH, but it adds nuance and clarifies their status. For them the "great exchange" was not deliverance from slavery to Pharaoh for slavery to the cosmic Lord—a terrifying prospect—but exchanging slavery to a ruthless earthly king for the status of a commissioned agent in the court of the King of kings. Ancient Near Eastern treaty documents frequently spoke of the suzerain-vassal relationship with father-son vocabulary. The designation of Israel as "my son" and "my firstborn" in 4:22–23 adapts this vocabulary, suggesting a vastly different role for Israel in the "house of YHWH" than they had had "in the [slave] house of Pharaoh." Herein lies the significance of what would transpire at Sinai.

Exodus 19:3 is transitional. It presents more background information for what follows. After arriving at the destination that YHWH had in mind since 3:12, Moses ascended the mountain to check in with divine headquarters: "Moses went up to God." Apparently YHWH had established the top of the mountain as his temporary throne room. The image of Moses going up to God reflects a relationship between Deity and commissioned officer that had become more confident over time.

THE DIVINE ORIENTATION ADDRESS (EXOD. 19:3–6)

Although Moses was alone with YHWH on the mountain, this was not a private conversation. Rather, these words involved a formal charge to Moses, who, as YHWH's mouthpiece, was to pass on the divine address to the people assembled at the base of the mountain. The formality of the occasion is evident in the framework and the speech itself, with the latter being cast in an elevated literary prose. The opening charge (19:3b) clarifies Moses' role in this communicative moment and identifies the

ultimate addressee by means of precisely crafted parallel lines. Both expressions, “household of Jacob” and “sons of Israel,” understand those who are about to be formally constituted the covenant community as an extended family. Although “Jacob” was the personal name of the third member of the patriarchal triad (Gen. 25:26; 27:36), “Israel” was in effect his throne name, given to him by God himself (cf. Gen. 32:28 [29]; 35:10). Whatever the etymology of the word, the divine explanation in Genesis 32:28 [29] gives it an honorific nuance, recalling the moment when God had let Jacob prevail over him. “Israel” functions occasionally as a personal name in the narratives after Genesis 32, but Exodus 1:1–7 summarizes the transition of Jacob’s household from being an extended family—a clan of about seventy people—to a vast population threatening the nation of Egypt. After this, “Israel” became the overwhelmingly preferred eponym (ancestor’s name applied to the nation).

Outsiders could always join the household (*bayit*), and even livestock were considered part of it.²¹ However, those who were genealogically related—that is, “who came from the loins” of a common ancestor²²—represented the core. This perception is clearest in references to the “seed of Israel,”²³ “seed of Jacob,”²⁴ “seed of Abraham,”²⁵ and “seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer. 33:26). “Sons of Israel” (*bēnê yīsrā’ēl*) in our text also bears this sense, though given the patricentric nature of Israelite culture and biblical diction, here “sons” functions as an inclusive expression representing both genders of descendants. With his references to “house of Jacob” and “sons of Israel,” YHWH invites Moses and us to view what was about to transpire as genetically linked to the relationship YHWH had established with Abraham. This would fulfill YHWH’s earlier promises to confirm his covenant with the ancestors also with their descendants.²⁶

The speech that YHWH charged Moses to deliver to the Israelites (Exod. 19:4–6a) consisted of a summary of Israel’s

experience with YHWH to this point (v. 4) and a declaration of the implications of YHWH's actions for Israel's status (v. 5b) and mission (v. 6a). In the first part, with a mere ten words, YHWH outlines three months of adventure with three simple declarations, cast in the first person: "You saw (1) how I dealt with the Egyptians; (2) how I carried you on the wings of eagles; and (3) how I brought you to myself." The first statement refers to the signs and wonders that YHWH performed to punish the Egyptians for their abuse of his people, to reveal himself as the God of gods and Lord of kings,²⁷ and to declare to the watching world his election and identification of Israel his chosen people.²⁸ The second statement refers to YHWH's miraculous provision of food and water in the desert, even in the face of bitterness and complaining, and his defense of his people in the face of enemy attack (Exod. 16:1–17:16). The third refers to the present moment; YHWH had brought his people to himself. This statement may be the most remarkable, for it declares that what Moses was presently experiencing on the mountain (he went up to God) would be the peoples' experience at Sinai. The third statement declares the purpose of YHWH's leading the people south to the desert of Sinai instead of along the main highway from Egypt directly to the promised land: so that YHWH might host his people without the distractions of the Canaanites or their eagerness to start building houses, plowing the land, and planting their crops.

But this decision was significant for other reasons as well. First, the ratification of the covenant at Sinai, far removed from the land promised to Israel, highlighted the radical difference between YHWH's relationship with his people and other gods' relationships with their devotees. In the ancient world, national deities tended to be perceived as divine holders of real estate. Since they were essentially gods of cities and territories, the integrity of the geographic realm was more important than the identity of their devotees. The

god of Babylon was Marduk; it mattered little to him whether his subjects were “the black-headed” natives of Mesopotamia, Aramaean immigrants, Assyrian conquerors, or Persian administrative overlords; it mattered more that when they were in his city, they gave him due allegiance. His primary relationship was with the place, not with the people.

The relationship between YHWH and Israel differed radically; indeed, we know of no other ancient Near Eastern population that enjoyed a covenant relationship with its god. To the contrary, they were terrified of their gods, and their ritual expressions of faith revolved around “smoothing the face” of their frightful and scowling deities. Not so with the God of Israel; by rescuing them from the Egyptians, by caring for them on the journey to Sinai, and by bringing them to himself at this mountain, YHWH demonstrated his primary interest in the well-being of his people.

Second, whereas many readers, Jewish and Christian, imagine that under the old covenant Israel’s primary obligation was to the law, YHWH’s statement that he had brought Israel to himself emphasizes that he called Israel to a deep personal relationship with himself apart from and prior to the revelation of the law. Indeed, the constitutional documents repeatedly affirm that obedience to the law was to be motivated by gratitude for YHWH’s saving and covenantal grace experienced before the covenant stipulations were revealed.

In Exodus 19:5, the particle, *wě’attâ*, “and now,” signals a shift from a review of YHWH’s past favors to their implications for Israel’s present status and future mission. The implications divide into two parts, the first summarizing the response that YHWH expected of his people for his demonstrations of grace (v. 5a), and the second highlighting the status/commission for Israel that arose from YHWH’s demonstrated grace (vv. 5b, 6a). While the latter declares YHWH’s purpose in rescuing Israel from Egypt and bringing

them to himself, the first announces the preconditions to the achievement of these goals.

As the Suzerain in the relationship that he was about to establish, YHWH specified the preconditions to Israel for achieving the goals for which he had rescued them from slavery. First, he demanded that the Israelites' ears be constantly open to hearing his voice. Although most English translations render *'im šāmôa' tišmē'û bēqōlî* something like, "If you indeed obey me," we capture the sense better with a more literal translation: "If you will indeed listen to my voice." What distinguishes YHWH from other gods is that he speaks; he is a communicating deity. Humans in that world tended to craft their gods with prominent mouths, but they remained speechless (Ps. 115:5; Jer. 10:5). As this address demonstrates, YHWH had no mouth, but he spoke clearly in human language so that his people could understand him.

The prevailing interpretation of this clause ("If you obey my voice") also creates the erroneous impression that when YHWH spoke to Israel, his speech consisted primarily of commands. But just as the present short address that Moses heard began with gospel, so also, when YHWH began to speak audibly to the assembly in Exodus 20:1–17, his first words were gospel: "I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (v. 2; cf. Moses' speech in Deut. 6:20–25). In his Torah preserved in Deuteronomy, Moses would emphasize that Israel's future fidelity depended upon keeping alive the memory of YHWH's grace in the founding of the nation and in an awareness of his daily presence and provision. YHWH would indeed specify in great detail the behavior he expected of his vassals, but these responses always presupposed having experienced his grace.

As a second precondition to fulfilling their mission, YHWH demanded that the Israelites "keep my covenant" (Exod. 19:5a). Like the covenant that bound him to Abraham,

YHWH identified this covenant as “my [YHWH’s] covenant.” Like the Abrahamic stage, this stage will involve a fully monergistic suzerain-vassal arrangement, in which YHWH chooses the covenant partner, determines the goals and parameters, and specifies the consequences for the vassal, depending on their response. Israel’s only voice in the arrangement will involve “Yes” or “No.”

We should also note that when the Israelites would hear Moses relay YHWH’s call to “keep my covenant,” their only point of reference would have been the covenant that he had made previously with Abraham and had promised to confirm with his descendants. Nothing in this speech, or any of YHWH’s prior speeches in Exodus, points to a new covenant with Israel distinct from the one he had made with the patriarchs. Indeed, this clause echoes Genesis 17:9: “As for you, my covenant you shall keep [*’et bĕrîtî tišmōr*—you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.” The virtually identical charge, “You shall keep my covenant,” reflects the continuity between the covenant in view here and the one made hundreds of years earlier with Abraham. The covenant of which YHWH spoke in Exodus 19:5a was the Abrahamic covenant; he was hereby entering the name of Israel into the very same contract.

YHWH’s speech reached its climax in verses 5b–6a, where he declared his vision of Israel’s role in relationship to himself, but especially in relation to the rest of the world. Matching the twofold conditions set for the vassal in verse 5a, the divine goal consists of two primary clauses (vv. 5b, 6a), with the end of 5b including the grounds for Israel’s status and commission.

First, Israel will be YHWH’s treasured possession. This is the first occurrence of the rare word *sĕgullâ* in the First Testament. Six of the eight occurrences of the word use it in its present theological and metaphorical sense.²⁹ The two exceptions provide the key to its theological meaning. In 1 Chronicles 29:3, David used the word for the royal

treasures, consisting of silver and gold that he donated for the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. This accords with Ecclesiastes 2:8, in which the (royal) figure who dominates the book declared, “I accumulated for myself silver and gold and the treasure [*sěgullâ*] of kings and provinces.”

By referring to Israel as his treasured possession, YHWH highlighted the status to which he was elevating the descendants of Abraham. In contrast to the other peoples, which we may envision as common stones, the Israelites would be his crown jewel. But this was not naturally their status. The prepositional phrase “from all the peoples” (Exod. 19:5) reminded the Israelites that they were part of humanity in general. The phrase is elliptical, assuming some verb that expresses YHWH’s deliberate selection of Israel from all the peoples to be his treasured possession. Three texts that allude to this statement confirm this interpretation by inserting the verb *bāḥar*, “to choose.” Deuteronomy 7:6 and 14:2 offer variations of this statement: “For you are a holy people, belonging to YHWH your God. You, out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, YHWH your God has chosen [*bāḥar*] to be his people, his treasured possession.” Psalm 135:4 expresses the same notion with poetic parallelism: “For YHWH has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel, to be his own treasured possession.”

In his later reflections on Israel’s privileged status, Moses denied that YHWH’s favors were based on Israel’s numerical superiority—they were the smallest nation (Deut. 7:7–8)—or its moral superiority (9:1–24). This was an act of sheer grace, a fact commemorated dramatically by Ezekiel, who spoke of Jerusalem (representing Israel), the destitute daughter of an Amorite father and a Hittite mother, whom YHWH rescued, married, and elevated to the status of royalty (Ezek. 16:9–14).

Second, within the divine plan, Israel will become YHWH’s kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The expression

“kingdom of priests” (*mamleket kōhănîm*, Exod. 19:6), which occurs nowhere else (but cf. 1 Pet. 2:9), is ambiguous. We could translate it as “a kingdom consisting of priests,” which suggests that the status applies to each individual Israelite. However, this contradicts the later separation of the Levites as Israel’s specially designated priestly tribe³⁰ and Aaron and his descendants as the high-priestly line (Exod. 28; Lev. 8–10). The context requires a collective interpretation, referring to Israel’s place in relation to YHWH and the rest of the world. YHWH, the divine King, had chosen Israel to function as his courtiers and through their priestly ministry to extend his reign and realm to the ends of the earth.

The theme of the kingship of YHWH over Israel is not as prominent in the Pentateuch as it is in the Psalter and in the Prophets,³¹ but it appears in inserted poems, as in Exodus 15:18; Numbers 23:21; and Deuteronomy 33:5. The narrator casts the experience in Exodus 19 as that of a monarch calling the people to an audience with him and declaring the people’s status as “a kingdom of priests.” The sound of the horn signaling his arrival in verses 13 and 16–20, as well as the royal imagery of Exodus 24:10–11, will reinforce this interpretation.

YHWH strengthened Israel’s priestly role by adding that they would be his “holy nation” (*gôy qādôš*, Exod. 19:6b). The First Testament rarely applies the term *gôy*, “nation,” to Israel. In contrast to *‘am*, “people,” *gôy* was a formal expression—by definition a people headed by a king (*melek*; Deut. 17:14–15; 1 Sam. 8:5, 19–20)—that was usually applied to other nations. Apart from Zephaniah 2:9 and Psalm 106:4–5, in the rare occurrences when Israel is referred to as a *gôy*, it usually has negative connotations, as if this people had become like the nations (e.g., Isa. 1:4). However, the word choice here suggests that in Egypt YHWH’s promise to Abraham and Jacob to make of them a “great nation” (*gôy gādôl*, Gen. 12:2; 18:18; 46:3) had been

fulfilled. By qualifying the “nation” as “holy” (*qādôš*) rather than “great” (*gādôl*) in Exodus 19:6, YHWH highlighted Israel’s priestly status before him and before the nations of the world. In Deuteronomy, Moses will go a step farther by adapting the inscription on the medallion of the high priest, “Holy, belonging to YHWH” (*qdš lyhwh*, Exod. 28:36; 39:30), to Israel, whom he characterized as “a holy people, belonging to YHWH.”^{[32](#)}

Now we learn that this event at Sinai signified not only YHWH’s establishment of his covenant with the descendants of Abraham, but also their collective ordination to global priestly service. In reflecting on the significance of this conclusion, we note that priests were not consecrated to serve themselves; the priesthood was not about the priests, but about the Deity who sanctified them to serve on his behalf in relation to the world out there. Through the ministry of the priests—their instruction, mediatorial ritual performance, and modeling—YHWH aimed to have all people learn that he is YHWH, that they too might “pursue righteousness, only righteousness” (Deut. 16:20) and that the curse of sin might be lifted and the blessings that Israel enjoyed would go out to the whole world. YHWH reinforced this global vision by adding, “For the whole earth belongs to me” (Exod. 19:5b). The events about to transpire at Mount Sinai involved both the exaltation of YHWH as King over Israel and the ordination and commissioning of Israel to his service within the divine plan of reconciling the world to himself. Although Israel’s missionary role does not feature prominently in Exodus–Deuteronomy, it was a fundamental theme, underlying everything that YHWH did for Israel and to Israel.

These features link this event tightly to YHWH’s call of and covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, *and with their offspring*.^{[33](#)} The events at Sinai would be momentous at several levels: (1) The motley band of slaves whom YHWH had rescued from the bondage of Egypt would be formally

adopted as his sons. (2) In fulfillment of Genesis 17:7–9, YHWH would establish (*hēqîm*) the covenant he made with the ancestors, thus confirming the Israelites, descendants of the patriarchs, as parties to the Abrahamic covenant. (3) YHWH's detailed revelation of his will at Sinai and Moses' later promulgation of the Torah on the plains of Moab would clarify the significance of the verdict on Abraham in Genesis 26:5: "He kept my charge, my commands, my ordinances, and my instructions." (4) Through Israel's ordination at Sinai, YHWH's commission to the ancestors to be agents of blessing to the whole world would be formally transferred to their descendants.

The Establishment of the Israelite Covenant at Sinai (Exod. 19:7–24:18)

Having established the geographic, chronological, and missional context for the ratification of the Israelite covenant in Exodus 19:1–6, the narrator describes the legal process by which this happened. The narrative of 19:7–24:18 divides into seven discrete stages, some of which are rendered much more intelligible in the light of archaeological and literary evidence of treaty-making procedures in the ancient Near East.

Stage 1: The Vassal's Preparation for the Coming of the Divine Suzerain (Exod. 19:7–15)

After hearing YHWH's summary of the gospel that the Israelites had experienced and his vision statement for his people in 19:4–6, Moses descended the mountain and relayed to the elders all that YHWH had told him. The elders then relayed the message to the people, who responded unanimously, "All that YHWH has spoken we will do" (v. 8).

On the surface, it appears that they responded only to the conditional clauses of verse 5: they promised to listen to

YHWH's voice and to keep his covenant. However, in keeping their promise to listen to his voice, they also accepted the report of the gospel (all that YHWH had done for them) and the priestly mission to which YHWH was ordaining them. Given their genealogical status as "the descendants of Abraham" and their official status as partners to YHWH's covenant, they accepted YHWH's commission to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). At the same time, they also promised to walk by faith as Abraham had walked (12:4; 15:6; 22:1-19), to do justice and righteousness (18:19), and to keep YHWH's charge, commands, ordinances, and instructions as Abraham had done (26:5). However, YHWH had not yet revealed his will to them in detail. This meant that when they entered into the covenant with him, they committed themselves not to a system of laws but to a person—to YHWH, who had brought them to himself here at Sinai. This is the essence of a covenant relationship as envisioned in the Scriptures: two parties reciprocally committed to each other, determined to live in the interest of the other party. For Israel, this "yes" was the appropriate response to YHWH's grace and the privileged status to which he called them.

After hearing Moses' report of the people's acceptance of the responsibilities entailed in his covenant and commission in principle (Exod. 19:7-8), YHWH announced that he would appear to them all on the mountain. For the people's own sake YHWH precluded a direct encounter with himself—which would have been lethal—but they would witness his descent and, out of the cloud that enshrouded the mountain, they would hear YHWH's voice as he spoke with Moses (v. 9). This sound would confirm for them a shift in Moses' role. To this point he had served as YHWH's commissioned agent, negotiating with Pharaoh to take the people out of Egypt and to bring them to Sinai.

Meanwhile, through his great acts of salvation, YHWH had demonstrated to Israel and the world who he was, and ultimately he would reveal what Israel's special role in his agenda of redemption was (though details of that plan had not yet been revealed). However, the time had come for divine revelation of a different sort—that is, the revelation of YHWH's determination of how Israel was to fulfill its role as his vassal. Although YHWH had revealed his glory in creation (Rom. 1:20–21) and his power and grace in the awesome acts involved in Israel's salvation, the knowledge of his will could only be communicated through words. Whereas other peoples, whose religious expressions were experimental and developed by trial and error, could never be certain they were satisfying their gods' expectations, YHWH was about to reveal his will for his vassals with crystal clarity and in human language. When the people heard YHWH speaking with Moses on the mountain, this signified for them both YHWH's interest in them and his official authorization of Moses as the mediator of divine verbal revelation.³⁴

Recognizing this role for Moses would not catch the people by surprise, but it would make it official. Exodus 12 portrays YHWH speaking to Moses (and to Aaron as his prophet; cf. Exod. 7:1–2), who obviously delivered the messages to the people, because they responded “as YHWH had commanded Moses and Aaron” (12:28, 50). However, the sound of YHWH speaking with Moses on the mountain would demonstrate to the people that YHWH had installed him as his official spokesman.

After Moses relayed the people's affirmative response back to God, God instructed Moses to prepare the people for his appearance (cf. *parousia* in the NT) and for the coming audience with himself, the great King. They would do so by consecrating themselves, washing their garments, and fasting (the significance of Moses' added reference to not approaching a woman in 19:15). Yet even this knowledge

was grace; with the invitation to approach YHWH, the generic boundaries between YHWH and his people dare not be compromised. To be sure, YHWH had brought the people to himself (v. 4), but they needed to acknowledge and respect the limits to their tolerance of divine glory and holiness. For this reason, the people were to fence the mountain as an act of consecration and to protect themselves from encroaching upon sacred space in their zeal to meet YHWH (vv. 12, 21-24). YHWH would soon emerge from heaven in a cloud that would shield the people from the lethal dose of divine sanctity. When YHWH touched down on terra firma, the mountain would be transformed into holy ground, functioning as a temporary earthly residence for the Deity. In keeping with ancient royal custom, the sound of a herald's trumpet (*yōbēl*, ram's horn) would signal the arrival of the heavenly King and invite the people to rise and climb the mountain as far as the predetermined barricade permitted (v. 13).

Stage 2: The Arrival (Parousia) of the Divine Suzerain (Exod. 19:16-25)

On the third day, as predicted, the sound of a loud trumpet blast signaled the arrival of the King (19:16). Thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, and violent tremors of the mountain accompanied YHWH's descent. The awesomely glorious King of heaven and earth (Deut. 10:14, 17), who had invaded Egypt to rescue his people and had called his people to himself, now had made his grand entrance to his temporary throne room on Mount Sinai. Then "Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God [*liqra't hā'ēlōhîm*]," and they stood ceremoniously at the foot of the mountain (v. 17). As in Numbers 11:16 and Deuteronomy 31:14, the verb *hityaššēb* highlights the formal nature of the occasion as the people took their stand

before their King, who had summoned them to an audience with himself.

Meanwhile, above the sound of thunder and the rumble of earthquake, the people heard Moses speaking with God and God answering him audibly, fulfilling his prediction in Exodus 19:9 and authenticating Moses as a divinely authorized courtier and mediator of divine speech. YHWH confirmed Moses' divine courtier role by summoning him to the top of the mountain (v. 20), and Moses confirmed his mediating role by relaying YHWH's urgent but gracious warning not to break through the barrier and enter the area that had been transformed into profoundly sacred space by the presence of YHWH (vv. 21-25).

Stage 3: The Suzerain's Declaration of the Foundations of the Covenant (Exod. 20:1-21)

I shall discuss later the form and content of 20:1-21 and reflect on the relationship of this text to subsequent revelation at Sinai. Our immediate concern is the significance of this episode for the covenant-ratification procedure transpiring on the mountain. Several features call for comment.

First, as narrated, when Moses came down the mountain, YHWH shifted his attention from his mediator to the people standing before him. We do not know what YHWH said to Moses on the mountain (19:19), but now the people heard his voice clearly, addressing them directly and speaking in their language—apparently an early version of Hebrew that was a dialect of the Northwest Semitic language spoken by Canaanites. The I-you relationship that covenant requires and that YHWH had come to establish with his people was obviously functioning.

Second, although YHWH addressed a crowd of ordinary people, he cast his speech in an elevated (as opposed to casual) stylistic register, reflecting the dignity and gravitas

of both the speaker and the occasion. We heard a variation of the introductory clause, “Then God spoke [*dibbēr*] all these words, saying . . .” (20:1), earlier in Genesis 15:1 and will hear it more than seventy times in Exodus–Numbers, usually introducing a formal address by YHWH to be relayed to the people.

Third, the narrator classified the content of the speech act generically as “all these words” (*kol haddēbārîm hā’ēlleh*). This label is extremely significant. When YHWH began to reveal the terms of the covenant, the narrator characterized them not as “legislation”—as represented by words like “ordinances” (*ḥuqqîm*), “stipulations” (*mišpāṭîm*) (cf. 21:1), or “commands” (*mišwôt*)—but as “communication” regarding Israel’s appropriate response to YHWH’s grace. Later texts reinforce this generic fact by identifying this document as “the Ten Words” rather than “the Ten Commandments” (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4).

Fourth, this close encounter with divinity left the people terrified and fearing for their lives (Exod. 20:18–21; Deut. 5:22–23). Despite having heard YHWH’s gospel in Exodus 19:4–6 and the preamble to the Decalogue, their direct encounter with the Deity had overwhelmed them. Although through covenant YHWH established a confident and trusting relationship, this did not diminish their sense of awe in the encounter.

Fifth, the people’s response demonstrated that YHWH had fulfilled his goal of authenticating Moses as his official spokesman and mediator (cf. 19:9). Although the narrative in Exodus is unclear about the people’s motives (many interpret their response negatively), when they requested that Moses serve as a lightning rod from now on by receiving communiqués from YHWH himself and then passing them on to the people, they acknowledged Moses’ role. Forty years later, when Moses recalled this event, he quoted YHWH’s commendation of the people: “I have heard the people’s reaction that they expressed to you in words;

everything they have said is good” (Deut. 5:28). This event had achieved YHWH’s goal of confirming Moses as his prophet. In contrast to the calls of other prophets,³⁵ Moses’ call happened in full view and hearing of the people.

Stage 4: The First Expansion of the Covenant Stipulations (Exod. 21:1-23:19)

In YHWH’s address to Moses in Exodus 20:22-26, he began by reminding the people of the first command they had heard from heaven, charging them not to manufacture gods to take his place (vv. 22-23). But then he shifted his focus to the covenant-ratification ritual to come (chap. 24), instructing Moses regarding the construction of the altar to be used in that ritual (vv. 24-26).

YHWH casts Exodus 21:1 as a formal heading to a new section that extends as far as 23:19: “Now, these are the stipulations that *you* shall set before *them*.” This statement identifies the genre of this divine speech with the Hebrew word *hammišpāṭîm*, literally, “the judgments.” Perhaps because this word was used of judgments rendered in a court of law, many of the instructions that follow in 21:2-23:17 exhibit a *casuistic* “If . . . , then . . .” form. However, because the word often occurs together with *ḥuqqîm*, “ordinances, statutes,”³⁶ and was applied to regulations decreed by YHWH, we should interpret the word within a suzerain-vassal covenantal context as *judgments (i.e., decisions) by the divine Suzerain concerning the appropriate disposition and conduct of the vassal*. Scholars refer to demands that suzerains imposed on their vassals as recorded in ancient Near Eastern disparity treaty documents as “stipulations” of the treaty. This is how we should understand *mišpāṭîm* here. In covenants involving a superior authority and an inferior subject, the terms of the treaty were not negotiated but decreed by the suzerain.

Apart from the generic expression “the [divine] stipulations” (*hammišpāṭîm*) in the heading (21:1) and in 24:3, in 24:7, the narrator observes that “[Moses] took the Covenant Document [*sēper habbērît*] and read it aloud for all the people to hear.” In 24:3 the narrator had distinguished “all the stipulations” from “all the words of YHWH”—that is, the Decalogue. Most likely he or a secretary had transcribed YHWH’s oral words in 21:2–23:17 on a scroll made of specially treated sheepskin leather.

Stage 5: The Suzerain’s Appeal for Exclusive and Undivided Loyalty (Exod. 23:20–33)

While YHWH’s speech continued in Exodus 23:20–33, the opening particle, *hinnēh*, “Look!” and the change in topic (YHWH began by speaking about himself) in verse 20 signal a literary and generic shift. The style and tone become profoundly sermonic, involving an impassioned plea for uncompromised and total devotion to YHWH, the divine Suzerain. Here YHWH looked ahead to the day when the Israelites would enter the land promised to the ancestors (cf. v. 31) and be tempted by the gods of the land to betray their covenant commitment to him. In the meantime, YHWH promised them a divinely commissioned envoy (*mal’āk*; Gk. *angelos*), who would bear YHWH’s name and function as his alter ego (v. 21) and who would accompany, protect, and guide them to their destination. Once the Israelites arrived there, YHWH would commission (*šālah*) other agents, including “my terror” (*’ēmātî*, v. 27) and “hornets” (*šir’â*, v. 28, meaning uncertain), to cause panic among the Canaanites, and to drive them out (vv. 29–30). Although YHWH devoted significant space to the subject of his fulfillment of the covenant promises of land (vv. 27–31), he framed these promises with passionate appeals for the people to accept vassaldom (*’ebed*) only to himself, to repudiate submission and homage before the gods of the

Canaanites, and to demonstrate their commitment to him by destroying every vestige of Canaanite religion in the promised land (vv. 24–25, 32–33). If they proved faithful to him in this regard, YHWH would establish Israel’s boundaries from the Sea of Reeds (commonly identified as “Red Sea”) in the south to the river Euphrates in the north—in fulfillment of his maximalist promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:18.

Stage 6: The Covenant-Ratification Procedure (Exod. 24:1–11)

The narrative reaches another high point in chapter 24. After presenting the covenant terms to the people, Moses led them in a ritual through which YHWH and they as his vassals bound themselves to each other and to this covenant. While the revelation paused, Moses supervised a ceremony that “sealed the deal” between YHWH and his covenant people.

Verses 1–2 serve as a preamble to the actual ritual of covenant ratification. The account begins with YHWH’s invitation to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders to come to him on the mountain. The narrator does not provide a reason, but YHWH set the stage by inviting the official representatives of the nation to his presence, while the mass of the population remained at the base (fig. 5.2). As the official mediator and the people’s representative in YHWH’s court, Moses was summoned higher up the mountain to approach (*nāgaš*) YHWH in his throne room, presumably for instructions on how to proceed with the rituals, which consisted of several clearly recognized actions.

The oral proclamation and [second] acceptance of the terms of the covenant (Exod. 24:3). On first sight, when the narrator reports that Moses returned and “recounted to the people all the words of YHWH,” he seems to refer to YHWH’s

instructions concerning the rituals. However, the absence of any divine speech to that effect, the formality of the verb “and he recounted” (*wayěsappēr*), and the juxtaposing of “all the words of YHWH” (*kol dibrê yhwh*) with “the stipulations” (*hammišpāṭîm*) suggest that the former refer to the Decalogue, “the Ten Words” that the people had heard from YHWH’s own mouth, while “the stipulations” refer to 21:1–23:19. That the people responded with “All the words that YHWH has declared we will do” reinforces this interpretation. Addressing the people orally, Moses apparently recited the entirety of the divine revelation so far, and for the second time the people unanimously agreed to the terms of the covenant. In 19:8 the people had affirmed their acceptance of the covenant with “All that YHWH has declared we will do”; this time they affirmed, “All *the words* that YHWH declared we will do” (*kol hadděbārîm ’ăšer dibber yhwh*, 24:3). The change is subtle, but it reflects their growing awareness of the entailments of the covenant. In Exodus 19:8 they had been challenged only vaguely to “listen to my voice” and “keep my covenant,” and when they agreed, their acceptance of the challenge involved an open-ended willingness to live according to whatever words might come from YHWH’s mouth and whatever stipulations he might write into the covenant. However, after hearing YHWH’s “words” and “stipulations,” the people knew more clearly to what sort of divine expectations they were signing on.

Figure 5.2

**The Gradations of Access to YHWH among the
Participants in the Covenant-Ratification Ceremony at
Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:1–11)**



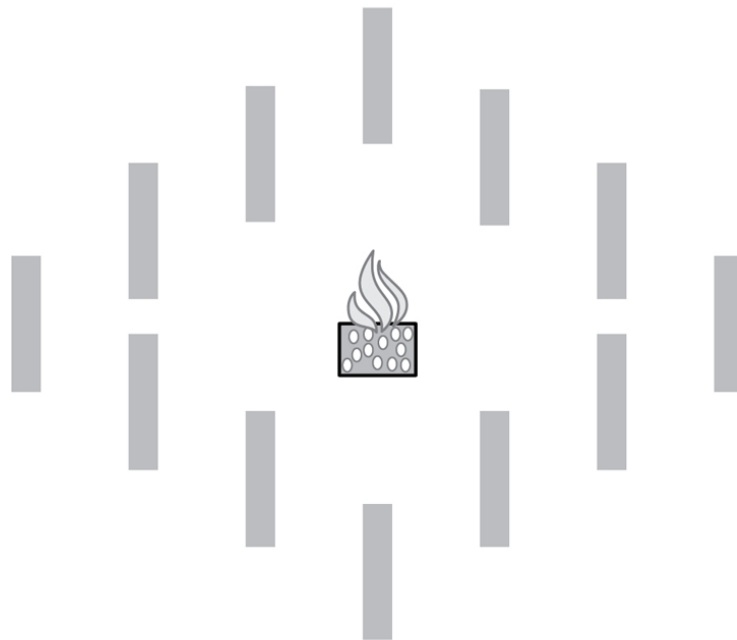
The transcription of the terms of the covenant (Exod. 24:4a). The statement “And Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH” is terse but profoundly significant. A vital part of ancient Near Eastern treaty-making procedure involved the transcription of the terms of the agreement, creating a document that would be deposited in the temple in the presence of divine witnesses as guarantors of the treaty. This document could be retrieved in the future and used in covenant-renewal events. However, the document in 24:4 was not deposited in the sanctuary but used ceremonially in the final phase of this ratification procedure.

The construction of the altar and the erection of twelve pillars (Exod. 24:4b; fig. 5.3). The next morning Moses constructed an altar at the foot of the mountain and erected twelve pillars, presumably around the altar, each one representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Although the significance of the altar became apparent immediately, the function of the pillars is unclear. The narrator declares only that they represented the twelve tribes. Moses may have set them up as symbolic monuments to the ratification procedure, but that he erected twelve suggests that even after the Israelites left Sinai, the pillars would remind YHWH that his covenant was binding equally on all twelve tribes.

As we will see below, Deuteronomy 27:1–8 adapts this motif by calling for the transcription of the Torah of Moses on pillars in the context of an analogous ceremony. Here the “words” and “stipulations” of the covenant, which were written on the *sēper* (written document) and read before the people, fulfilled that function (Exod. 24:7).

Figure 5.3

The Blood-Sprinkling Ritual at Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:6–11)



Sacrificial offerings (Exod. 24:5). Having constructed the altar and erected the pillars, Moses dispatched young men to get some young bulls, which they slaughtered and offered to YHWH as whole burnt (‘ôlâ) and fellowship (šělāmîm) offerings. The two types of sacrifices often appear together.³⁷ The first usually involved a domestic animal or bird that a vassal offered as a tribute to a superior; this would express homage and submission, often with thanksgiving.³⁸ It would be totally consumed by the fire on the altar, and narrators would describe YHWH’s acceptance

of the offering anthropomorphically as “a pleasing aroma” that YHWH smelled (Gen. 8:21). This offering signified a formal ritual recognition of the Suzerain-vassal relationship.

The second form of sacrifice, *šĕlāmîm*, often translated “peace offerings,” celebrated the establishment of a positive relationship (*šālôm*) between the parties. These offerings were not wholly consumed by the fire of the altar but cooked and eaten by the persons bringing the sacrifices to celebrate the relationship established by YHWH (Deut. 12:5-7, 11-12). In Exodus 19:22, at the beginning of this covenantal proceeding, the narrator had curiously noted the involvement of priests, who seem to have had special ritual access to YHWH, but he did not identify them. The singular pronouns in YHWH’s instructions to Moses for the construction of the altar in 20:24 suggest that he performed the critical actions himself. The young men who assisted with the sacrifices may have been selected from the cadre of people whom the community recognized as their religious leaders, but they may also have been laymen. At this time Aaron and the Levites had not yet been identified, let alone consecrated, for sacerdotal roles.

Collecting sacrificial blood and sprinkling the altar (Exod. 24:6). Without explanation, Moses collected blood from the sacrificed animals in two basins. He took the blood from the first basin and sprinkled it on the altar. Elsewhere this action was part of ritual acts of consecration and atonement for the altar.³⁹ We do not encounter the expression “blood of the covenant” (*dam habbĕrît*) until the next phase of the ritual (v. 8), but in context, this was a covenantal act whose significance corresponded to the torch passing between the halves of slaughtered animals in Genesis 15:17. In this case YHWH, represented by the altar, bound himself to the covenant and invoked on himself an anathema if he should prove unfaithful to his oath and his people. The people will be bound to the same oath in verse 7, but it is significant

that YHWH bound himself to the people in covenant before he demanded that the people bind themselves to him.

Reading the Covenant Document and sprinkling the people (Exod. 24:6–8). Before Moses sprinkled the people, in their hearing he read the text of the covenant and its stipulations from the Covenant Document (*sēper habbērît*) produced earlier (cf. v. 4a). For the third time the people answered, though this time most emphatically, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will listen to/heed [his voice].” The added clause alludes to the two conditions to the nation’s fulfillment of their mission in Exodus 19:5. Tripling this declaration of acceptance of the privileges and responsibilities of covenant relationship (cf. 19:8; 24:3) reflects ancient Semitic customs of legal attestation and confirmation requiring three witnesses. We encountered this legal convention earlier when YHWH provided Moses with three “signs” to confirm his status with YHWH before the people (Exod. 4:1–9),⁴⁰ and we will see it operative in YHWH’s provision of three witnesses to Israel’s covenant commitment in Deuteronomy 30–31.⁴¹ In Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15 Moses embedded this policy in his Torah. In this context we may also note that the twelve pillars collectively have also heard Moses read the Covenant Document. If the pillars represented individual tribes, these inanimate objects have each “heard” their respective subgroup declare their acceptance of its terms.

Moses completed this phase of the ritual by sprinkling the people with blood and formally announcing, “Look! [This is] the blood of the covenant that YHWH has made [*kārat*] with you, as specified in all these words.” By receiving the blood, the two parties to the covenant had bound themselves to each other, declaring in effect, “May my blood be shed [may I die] if I prove unfaithful to this covenant and to my covenant partner.” Although both were bound on oath in a single event, the sprinkling of the altar and the people, respectively, answers to the two phases of the ratification of

the Abrahamic covenant, which were literarily separated by Genesis 16 and chronologically by at least thirteen or fourteen years (cf. Gen. 17:25): for YHWH, the torch passing between two animal parts (15:17); for Abraham, circumcision (17:22–27).

Eating the covenant meal in the presence of the divine Suzerain (Exod. 24:9–11). In the ancient world, when people established a new relationship or healed a broken relationship by covenant, the parties would celebrate the event with a meal. If the parties to the covenant were equal in status (parity treaty), they shared the meal (Gen. 31:44–54). But if the covenant involved unequals, as in this case, the greater the distance between superior and vassal, the less likely it would be for the former to eat with the latter.⁴² Exodus 24:9–10 describes the climactic covenantal act with economy and restraint. This meal involved only the persons identified in the preamble to this ritual (v. 1) as representatives of the nation. Although the narrative does not mention a throne, it seems that after the people had participated in the sealing of the covenant, YHWH had invited them into his “virtual” throne room.

The narrator does not describe the divine Host, but redundantly notes, “They saw [*wayyir’û*] the God of Israel” (v. 10a) and “They envisioned [*wayyeḥēzû*] God” (v. 11b). In light of Exodus 33:20, where YHWH had told Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no human [*hā’ādām*] can see me and survive,” this event was extraordinary. However, as YHWH would prove with Moses in the later context, he was eager to reveal as much of his transcendent glory as these humans could tolerate.

The text does not say that the guests on the mountain saw a footstool or any other furniture symbolizing YHWH’s cosmic sovereignty, but the reference to the magnificent crystal-clear sapphire-like slab (*lěbēnâ*) “beneath his feet” suggests that they had prostrated themselves before YHWH in submission and homage. They may not have dared to

look up, or his torso and face may have been hidden. In any case, YHWH's descent on the mountain had transformed the terrestrial environment into a palace of the King of Israel and the Creator of the cosmos.

In verse 11 the narrator offers his own reaction (and perhaps that of the human participants) to what had happened. Remarkably, they had "envisioned" (*ḥāzâ*) God, but they lived to tell about it (cf. Deut. 4:33). What is more, he had hosted them at a meal eaten in his presence! Whereas in an earlier context Abraham had hosted YHWH in his own home (Gen. 18:1-8), here his descendants had been hosted in the palace of YHWH.

This is what the covenant rituals had achieved. Through this ceremony, YHWH had transformed "the slaves of Pharaoh," into "the people of YHWH." Having been formally adopted as his sons, they ate and drank at his table (cf. Deut. 12:1-14; 14:1-2). With this note the rituals had ended. What remained was for YHWH to provide his vassals with a "hard copy" of the foundational covenant document (24:12-18) and for YHWH to make arrangements for continued access to his presence via the tabernacle and its cultic rituals while he guided them to the promised land (Exod. 25-31).

Stage 7: The Suzerain's Provision of the Foundational Covenant Document (Exod. 24:12-18; 31:18)

Exodus 24:12-18 represents a postscript to the covenant-ratification procedures described in chapters 19-24. YHWH had fulfilled his promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:7-8 and had established his covenant by calling the vast population of his descendants to the covenant and commissioning this nation as his priests to mediate his grace within his grand scheme of redemption for the world. In comparison with what had already happened at Sinai and what still lay ahead

in Exodus 25–Leviticus 26 and beyond, the covenant relationship with Abraham seems primitive. However, its complexity would only increase as YHWH would put into place the rituals and institutions by which the Israelites could benefit fully from the relationship he had established with them and maintain their status as his commissioned agents of revelation and grace.

Moses had produced written copies of YHWH’s “words” and “stipulations” represented by the Decalogue and the Covenant Document (24:4, 7), but it remained for the divine Suzerain to produce the official original copy of the foundational document. For this purpose, he called Moses back up the mountain, accompanied by Joshua, his personal assistant (24:13; cf. 33:11; Num. 11:28; Josh. 1:1). Meanwhile, before the elders, Moses had deputized Aaron and Hur to assume his administrative duties during his absence (v. 14).

This epilogue opens with YHWH’s charge to Moses to come up the mountain to himself—that is, to the throne room, for the express purpose of receiving the official covenant document that YHWH would produce (24:12). YHWH described the document as “stone tablets, containing the instruction and the command that I have transcribed for their instruction” (*lūḥōt hā’eben wěhattôrâ wěhammišwâ ’ăšer kâtabtî lěhôrôtām*). Whereas Mesopotamian and Anatolian legal documents, including treaty documents, typically consisted of small clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform with a stylus, Moses and the Israelites had at their disposal sheepskin or goatskin leather, which was what Moses had probably used in verses 4 and 7. But the written document of the Israelite covenant that YHWH produced was inscribed on stone slabs. Although verses 12–18 are silent on the function or storage of these tablets, the choice of stone on which to record the text of the covenant suits the character of the covenant as an eternal/irrevocable pact (cf. 31:13–17).

YHWH's use of the plural "tablets" (*lūḥōt*) leaves open the question of how many tablets might have been involved. Ancient Near Eastern treaty convention required two copies, one for each party to the agreement. Thus the narrator notes at the end of Moses' forty-day stay on the mountain that YHWH gave him "the two tablets of the Pact, tablets of stone, inscribed by God's own finger" (*šēnê lūḥōt hā'ēdūt lūḥōt 'eben kēṭubîm bē'eṣba' 'ēlōhîm*; 31:18). It was appropriate for YHWH, as the Suzerain in this relationship, to transcribe the words the people had heard, yielding a divinely produced autograph and ensuring perfect correspondence to what the Israelites had heard from his mouth (20:1-17). Generically, YHWH characterized the inscription as *hattôrâ wēhammiṣwâ*, "the instruction and the command," which is a hendiadys meaning "the instruction in the form of command" (24:12). The addition of "to instruct them" (*lēḥôrôtām*) cautions against interpreting either *tôrâ* or the Decalogue essentially as law. Although it consists of ten commands, this is not law in the modern Western sense of legislation but a document composed to create a worldview and to serve a pedagogical purpose.

The narrator does not declare the completion of the textual project until after six speeches involving the revelation of the tabernacle, its furniture, and its personnel (25:1-31:11). The word covenant (*bē'rît*) is missing in these six addresses, but in the seventh and epilogic speech concerning the seventh-day Sabbath, the word appears for the first time since 24:8. In 31:13 and 31:16-17, YHWH declared the seventh-day Sabbath "an eternal sign" (*'ôt hiw' lē'ôlām*) to be observed in perpetuity (*lēdôrôtām*) of "the eternal covenant" (*bē'rît 'ôlām*) between YHWH and the sons of Israel. The designation of the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant links it to other covenantal signs (table 5.2).

Table 5.2

The Signs of the Covenants

Reference	The Sign	Hebrew Transliteration	English Translation
Genesis 9:13	Rainbow	<i>wěhāyětā lě'ôt bĕrît</i> <i>bênî ûbên hā'āreṣ</i>	And it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.
Genesis 17:11	Circumcision	<i>wěhāyâ lě'ôt bĕrît</i> <i>bênî ûbênêkem</i>	And it will be a sign of the covenant between me and you.
Exodus 31:13	Seventh-day Sabbath	<i>kî 'ôt hiw' bênî</i> <i>ûbênêkem</i>	For it is a sign between me and you.
Exodus 31:17	Seventh-day Sabbath	<i>bênî ûbên bĕnê</i> <i>yisrā'ēl</i> <i>'ôt hiw' lě'ōlām</i>	Between me and Israel it is a sign forever.

The resemblances in the forms of the idiom argue for treating the Sabbath as the equivalent to the rainbow in relation to the cosmic covenant and to circumcision in relation to the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant. Although neither YHWH nor the narrator speaks of the tablets of the Decalogue as a “sign,” these events are all linked by the word *bĕrît* (covenant).

Biblical characters and writers identify the tablets variously as “[the] two tablets,”^{[43](#)} “[the] tablets of stone,”^{[44](#)} “the tablets of the covenant,”^{[45](#)} “the tablets of the ‘ēdūt,”^{[46](#)} or simply “the ‘ēdūt.”^{[47](#)} The last two epithets are particularly significant here.

The narrator has recounted YHWH’s provision for the ongoing maintenance of covenant relations through the tabernacle and its rituals (25:1–31:11) and appended his “Sabbath Speech” (31:12–17). All that remained for him (the narrator) was to announce the fulfillment of YHWH’s promise to provide Israel with a token copy of the covenant document. I use the word “token” advisedly, not in the sense of “perfunctory,” “minimalist,” or “merely symbolic,” but for an object that signifies authority, validity, and points

to something bigger. Second Kings 11:4-12 (// 2 Chron. 23:1-11) recounts an event that involves the word *‘ēdût* with precisely this meaning. In the story of the coronation of young King Joash/Jehoash, the narrator recounts the climactic moment when they placed upon him “the diadem [*hannēzer*] and the [royal] insignia [*hā‘ēdût*]” and then “anointed him and proclaimed him king” (2 Kings 11:12). We do not know what the *‘ēdût* was in this case, but the word refers to an object that symbolized the king’s royal status as well as the covenant that bound him to the people—perhaps a mace, scepter, or crown. Whatever it was, it functioned as an attesting sign, a concrete symbolic guarantee. Indeed, the tablets served as the icon (Gk. *eikōn*) of the covenant. We tend to think of “icons” as objects of veneration or idols, much like the images of the Decalogue that some Christians want erected in public spaces or mounted on the walls of courthouses. Here the word “icon” identifies a physical representation of an idea, an object with symbolic meaning, in this case the symbol of the covenant relationship that YHWH had established with Israel. But it is not merely a symbol. Just as a scepter or crown served as a token of regal status, so these inscribed slabs symbolized the covenant to which YHWH and the Israelites had committed themselves. Indeed, by noting that the finger of God had inscribed these stones,⁴⁸ these documents in effect bore the divine signature. But it was more than a symbol of the covenant. Because the icon of the covenant had been deposited in the sanctuary in the very presence of YHWH, it also functioned as the Guarantee of his commitment to Israel and of his role as guardian of Israel’s commitment to him. This accounts in part for YHWH’s earlier instructions for constructing a special chest called “the ark” (*hā’ărôn*) to house the tablets that YHWH would provide when depositing them in the inner sanctum of the tabernacle, the holy of holies (Exod. 26:31-35). In this secure place, under the God of Israel’s watchful eye, the

original copy of the covenant document bearing his own signature would be stored.

YHWH highlighted the covenantal significance of the tabernacle itself by giving the ark pride of place in his instructions for this complex (25:10–22). It would function as a receptacle for the tablets (v. 16) and a virtual throne from which YHWH would keep appointments (*wěṇô‘adtî*) with the people and continue to speak with them (v. 22). Because of this provision, the tabernacle could occasionally be called “the tent of appointments” (*’ôhel mô‘ēd*, Exod. 27:21), though we should not confuse this structure with the “tent of appointments” at which YHWH met with Moses privately (Exod. 33:9–11; Deut. 31:14).

The narrator’s identification of the tablets stored in the ark as “tablets of the ‘ēdūt” in Exodus 31:18 requires further comment. The phrase *lûḥôt hā‘ēdūt* occurs elsewhere, in Exodus 32:15 and 34:29, and is obviously linked to “the ark of the ‘ēdūt,” which occurs more than a dozen times.⁴⁹ Assuming a derivation from the same root as *‘ûd*, “to testify,” and *‘ēd*, “witness,” most English translations continue to follow the ancient versions in rendering the word as “testimony.” However, this is both unhelpful and misleading because today we usually associate “testimony” with utterances of witnesses in a court of law or some less formal context (like Gk. *martyria* in John 1:7, 19; etc.). But on the surface, this makes little sense with reference to these tablets. We can make better sense of it by drawing on two types of sources.

First, extrabiblical cognates point to a possible covenantal nuance for *‘ēdūt*. If we recognize the link with Akkadian *adê* and Aramaic *‘dy*, referring to “covenant/treaty” or “loyalty oath,” then “tablets of the ‘ēdūt” could mean something like “tablets of the Pact” (thus NJPS), which is virtually synonymous with “tablets of the covenant” (*lûḥôt habbērît*) used by Moses in Deuteronomy 9:9, 11, 15. Accordingly, the plural form, *‘ēdôt* (to be distinguished from *‘ēdūt*), refers to

“contractual statutes, covenant stipulations,” to which people committed themselves through formal legal procedures, including the oath.⁵⁰

Second, the First Testament uses a cognate expression, *‘ēd*, of “testimony” with its common English sense (Exod. 20:16; 23:1) for objects that function as guarantees of commitments made: the covenant (*bērît*, Gen. 31:44), a heap of stones (31:48, 52), an altar (Josh. 22:26–28, 34), a song (Deut. 31:19, 21), the written copy of the Torah (Deut. 31:26), a tablet with text (Isa. 30:8), heaven and earth (Deut. 31:28). This is probably how we should understand it here. If we understand the two tablets together as symbolic written forms of the covenant commitments that YHWH and Israel had made reciprocally (cf. Deut. 26:16–19), then we could translate *luḥōt hā‘ēdūt* as “tablets of the [signed] guarantee.” They functioned as physical tokens/symbols, the icon of the coventantal relationship that YHWH had established.

We find reinforcement of this interpretation in the elliptical or metonymic use of the word *‘ēdūt* as an epithet for the tablets themselves. This is clearly the case in Exodus 25:21: “You shall put the special cover [*hakkapōret*] on top of the ark, and in the ark, you shall place the icon [*‘ēdūt*] that I will give you.” The same applies to 40:20: “He [Moses] took the icon [*‘ēdūt*] and put it into the ark, and he attached the poles to the ark and installed the special cover on top of the ark.” Leviticus 16:13 identifies the cover of the ark as “the *kappōret* that is over the icon [*‘ēdūt*],” suggesting that the tablets themselves were the *‘ēdūt*.

Indeed, YHWH identified the tablets so tightly with the covenant that instead of speaking of stone slabs he instructed Moses to put “the icon” (*ha‘ēdūt*) that he (YHWH) will give him into the ark,⁵¹ after which the ark could be called “the ark of the icon” (Exod. 25:22; cf. 26:33–34; etc.). Hereafter the tabernacle itself became “the dwelling of the icon,”⁵² or “the tent of the Guarantee,”⁵³ and the veil before

the holy of holies was “the veil of the icon” (*pārōket hā‘ēdūt*, Lev. 24:3). Interpreting this in context, we now realize how fundamental the tabernacle was for maintaining the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel. Its primary functions included both providing a place where YHWH and his people could continue to communicate and fellowship and providing secure housing for the symbols of YHWH’s covenant with his people.

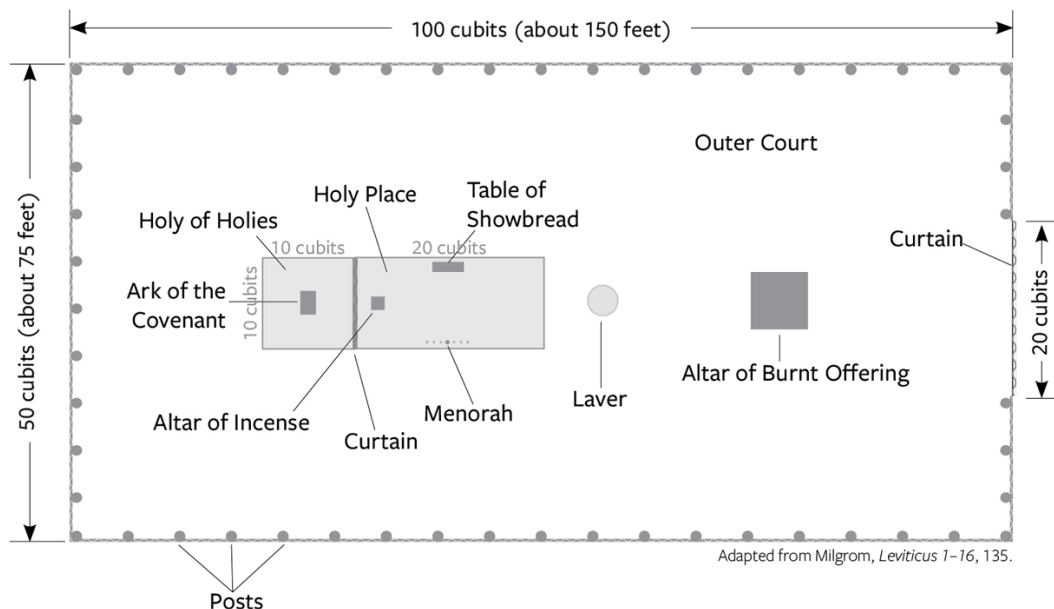
The need for two tablets of the Decalogue requires further comment. Theologians, New Testament scholars, and preachers often speak of the tablets as reflecting the two dimensions of the relationship established by the covenant. The first tablet supposedly contained the commands that related to the vertical relationship between Israelites and their God (that is, commands 1–3 or 4, depending on how they are numbered), while the second tablet contained the commands governing horizontal relationships among Israelites (commands 4–10 or 5–10, depending on the numbering; for my numbering see table 6.3 below). This approach is ancient and may be homiletically effective, but based on the internal evidence of the Scriptures and the external evidence of surrounding cultural data, it is groundless and without merit.

YHWH’s covenant with Israel called for duplicate tablets, each with the entire text of the Decalogue inscribed on it, and both deposited in a single location, inside the ark with its special crafted cover, in the holy of holies, in the tabernacle/temple, in the midst of the people. According to our knowledge of ancient Near Eastern analogues, one copy represented the Israelite’s covenant commitment to YHWH, with YHWH functioning as the guarantor of the nation’s fidelity. But the other copy was the one that YHWH had “signed.” Like the rainbow in Genesis 9, its purpose was to remind him continuously of his commitment to Israel. This anomalous arrangement reinforced the self-imprecatory oaths that YHWH had taken in the presence of Abraham

(Gen. 15:17) and the Israelites (Exod. 24:6). YHWH hereby guaranteed his fidelity, “By my life!” (*ḥay ’ānî*).

The designation of YHWH’s dwelling place as “the tabernacle of the *‘ēdūt*” may provide a helpful clue to why YHWH called Moses up the mountain to receive the tablets (Exod. 24:12), but when he arrived in YHWH’s presence, the conversation had turned immediately to the tabernacle (Exod. 25). While the narrative and the speeches of YHWH in 25:1–31:17 are silent concerning the tablets, the priority given to the tabernacle is neither inadvertent nor coincidental. In its design and decoration, the tabernacle functioned simultaneously as a replica (*tabnît*) of YHWH’s heavenly dwelling place (25:9, 20) and a reminder of Eden (fig. 5.4). The tabernacle both symbolized YHWH’s gracious determination to lift the effects of the curse from the people and functioned as the place from which his blessing and rule could radiate forth (Ps. 50:2–4) to the nation of Israel.

Figure 5.4
The Ground Plan of the Tabernacle



But Moses had climbed the mountain to God to receive the tablets of the covenant. How then did YHWH's speeches focused on the tabernacle relate to his covenant with Israel? Apart from the references to the Guarantee (*'ēdût*), an answer came as YHWH wound down the formal part of his revelation at Sinai with the covenant blessings and curses (Lev. 26:1–45; cf. the narrators colophonic conclusion in v. 46). Among the blessings that YHWH included was an expanded version of the covenant formula (26:11–12):

I will establish my residence [*miškān*] among you,
and I will not reject you.
And I will walk among you,
and I will be your God,
and you shall be my people.

Because the tabernacle functioned both as the “house” of the tablets of the covenant and the “house” of YHWH in the midst of his people, this structure provided Israel with a concrete symbol of his covenantal attachment to them and of their vassaldom to him.

- [1.](#) Seven times in Lev. 19 alone: vv. 3, 4, 10, 25, 31, 34, 36.
- [2.](#) Isa. 43:20; 45:4; cf. 44:1–2.
- [3.](#) Isa. 41:8; cf. Deut. 7:8; 23:5 [6]; Jer. 31:3.
- [4.](#) 1 Kings 11:1; Ezek. 16:33, 36–37.
- [5.](#) Gen. 24:67; 29:18, 20, 30, 32; Deut. 21:15–16.
- [6.](#) 1 Sam. 18:20, 28; cf. Song 3:1–4.
- [7.](#) Deut. 4:37; 7:8, 13; 23:5 [6].
- [8.](#) Exod. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; 6:6; 7:9; 11:1.
- [9.](#) Deut. 10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 30:16.
- [10.](#) John 3:16; 14:15, 21, 23–24; 15:13; but esp. 1 Cor. 13:1–8.
- [11.](#) Exod. 20:5 [= Deut. 5:9]; Deut. 4:24; 6:15; Josh. 24:19; Nah. 1:2.
- [12.](#) Cf. Deut. 4:32–40; 7:6–8; 14:1–2; 10:12–11:1.
- [13.](#) Exod. 6:25; 1 Kings 4:15; cf. also Deut. 22:13.
- [14.](#) Exod. 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3.
- [15.](#) Cf. 14 Aviv in Exod. 12:2–3; 13:4–5.
- [16.](#) Exod. 34:22; Num. 28:26; Deut. 16:9–10.
- [17.](#) Exod. 3:18; 5:3, 8, 17; 8:4, 21–25; 10:25.
- [18.](#) Exod. 1:14; 2:23; 5:9, 11; 6:6, 9.

- [19.](#) Exod. 13:3, 14; 20:2; cf. Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 7:8; etc.
- [20.](#) Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 7:16, 26; 8:26; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7-8, 11, 24, 26; 12:31.
- [21.](#) Cf. Gen. 12:16-17; 14:14; 17:23, 27.
- [22.](#) Gen. 46:26; Exod. 1:5; Judg. 8:30.
- [23.](#) 2 Kings 17:20; 1 Chron. 16:13; Neh. 9:2; Ps. 22:24 [23]; Isa. 45:25; Jer. 31:36-37.
- [24.](#) Ps. 22:23 [24]; Isa. 45:19; Jer. 33:26; Ezek. 20:5.
- [25.](#) 2 Chron. 20:7; Ps. 105:6; Isa. 41:8.
- [26.](#) Gen. 15:18; 17:7-10, 19; Neh. 9:8.
- [27.](#) Deut. 4:32-39; 10:17; Ps. 105:10-15.
- [28.](#) Exod. 7:3-5; Deut. 10:14-22.
- [29.](#) Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17.
- [30.](#) Num. 3:6; 18:1-7; Deut. 10:8-9; Mal. 2:4, 8.
- [31.](#) 1 Sam. 8:7; 12:12; Isa. 24:23; 41:21; 43:15; 52:7; Ezek. 20:33; Pss. 29:10; 48:2 [3]; 149:2.
- [32.](#) Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; cf. also 28:9; 33:5.
- [33.](#) Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.
- [34.](#) Exod. 19:9; cf. 20:19-20; Deut. 5:23-33.
- [35.](#) Cf. 1 Sam. 3; Isa. 6; Jer. 1; Ezek. 1; Acts 9:1-9.
- [36.](#) Exod. 15:25; Lev. 26:46; Deut. 4:1; etc.
- [37.](#) Exod. 20:24; 32:6; Lev. 4:10; Num. 10:10; Deut. 27:6-7.
- [38.](#) Gen. 8:20; 22:2; Exod. 18:12; 32:6.
- [39.](#) Lev. 8:15; 9:9, 12; Ezek. 43:18-27.
- [40.](#) Compare the three signs in 1 Sam. 10:1-13.
- [41.](#) Heaven and earth, Deut. 30:19; the Song of YHWH, 31:19-21; the written copy of the Torah, 31:26.
- [42.](#) Note how Joseph, the prime minister of Egypt, hosted his Asiatic brothers in Gen. 43:26-34.
- [43.](#) *sěné hallūḥōt*, Deut. 9:17; 2 Chron. 5:10.
- [44.](#) *lūḥōt hā'ēben*, Exod. 24:12; 31:18; 34:4.
- [45.](#) *lūḥōt habbērit*, Deut. 9:9, 11, 15.
- [46.](#) *lūḥōt hā'ēdūt*, Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29.
- [47.](#) *hā'ēdūt*, Exod. 25:22; 27:21; 30:6, 36; 40:20.
- [48.](#) Exod. 31:18, *kētubîm bē'ešba' 'ēlōhîm*; cf. 34:28-29.
- [49.](#) Exod. 25:22; 26:33, 34; 30:6, 26; 31:7; 39:35; 40:3, 5, 21; Num. 4:5; 7:89; Josh. 4:16.
- [50.](#) Cf. Deut. 4:45; 6:17, 20; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 23:3; Ps. 119:2; etc.
- [51.](#) Exod. 25:16, 21; cf. Exod. 16:34; 27:21; 30:36; Lev. 16:13; Num. 17:4.
- [52.](#) *miškan hā'ēdūt*, Exod. 38:21; Num. 1:50, 53; 10:11.
- [53.](#) *'ōhel hā'ēdūt*, Num. 9:15; 17:22, 23; 18:2; 2 Chron. 24:6.

CHAPTER 6

The Renewal and Completion of the Israelite Covenant at Sinai

Exodus 32-Leviticus 26

Introduction

Genesis 3 recounts what is probably the most tragic chapter in human history. Having been installed as God's vice-regents to govern his world, humankind (*'ādām*) repudiated not only their status but also the Creator of heaven and earth, who had endowed them uniquely with royal glory and majesty (cf. Ps. 8). Human rebellion sent the history of the cosmos in a direction from which it has never recovered—and the recovery will not happen until the eschaton. On several occasions I have suggested that God's plan for Israel in Canaan was to serve as a microcosm of humanity in the cosmos, modeling to the nations the blessing that results from divine grace. After YHWH rescued his people from the curse of slavery to Pharaoh (a picture of human bondage to sin, Matt. 1:21), he set Israel high above the nations for praise, honor, and glory (Deut. 26:16–19; 28:1–14).

Tragically, Israel began repeating the story of humanity on a localized scale. The people had been ordained as YHWH's treasured possession, his kingdom of priests, and his holy

nation (Exod. 19:4–6), but within forty days the plan went into a tailspin. While Moses was still on the mountain receiving the Guarantee of the covenant and the instructions on the maintenance of that covenant through the tabernacle and its rituals, YHWH's chosen agents revolted against their gracious Suzerain and determined to go their own way—in direct violation of the covenant and the oath to which they had just signed on.

The Repudiation and Renewal of YHWH's Covenant with Israel (Exod. 32:1–40:38)

The Form of the Repudiation (Exod. 32:1–6)

From the narrator's opening statement in Exodus 32:1–6, it is obvious that in the minds of the people the role of Moses had eclipsed the role of YHWH. Indeed, going far beyond YHWH's goal of having them recognize Moses as his authorized agent and spokesman, they asked Aaron to make for them a god (*'ēlōhîm*) who would take Moses' place and lead them to the promised land. They had forgotten completely the hand of YHWH in the signs and wonders that climaxed in their crossing of the Red Sea, the voice of YHWH in the preamble to the covenant-ratification procedure (Exod. 19:4), and the preamble to the Decalogue that they had heard from YHWH's own mouth. While YHWH was inscribing the reminder of his grace (20:1–2) and the first principle of covenant relationship to which they had signed on—the prohibition of worship of any other gods (20:2–6)—they turned apostate. Even though YHWH had identified himself by name as the one who had brought them out of Egypt (20:2), they were insecure without Moses' leadership and became convinced that he could be replaced only by a god (32:1).

Without protest, and apparently without reflecting on the theological implications of the people's demand, Aaron

requested they give him their gold jewelry, which he melted down and remade into a calf in direct violation of the first and supreme command, “You shall have no other gods besides me, nor craft for yourselves any images that you will treat as deity” (20:3–4). While scholars debate the origins of the divine calf motif, it is striking that in Canaanite mythological documents from Ugarit, dated to the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200 BC), one of the epithets of El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, was “Bull El” (*ṯr iḷ*). If the Canaanite deity had inspired the form of this image, then YHWH’s charge to obliterate every vestige of Canaanite religion in Exodus 23:23–25 had also been forgotten; the Israelites had been seduced by these alien gods long before they arrived in the land.

In his dedication speech, Aaron took the credit away from his brother, Moses (cf. Exod. 32:1), and from YHWH, attributing the Israelites’ escape from Egypt to the image he had manufactured: “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (v. 4). His proclamation was perverse, for it applied a version of the divine self-identification formula (Exod. 16:6; 20:2) to an object that had not even existed the day before. Apparently feeling constrained to link this image with orthodox theology, Aaron reinforced this impulse by announcing that the next day would be a festival (*ḥag*) to YHWH (32:5). Aaron may have viewed the religion he had just established as a clever compromise between the people’s demand and the theology the Israelites had just learned through their exodus and their experiences at Sinai to this point, but his public address was seductively syncretistic. The words of the confession were orthodox, but the form of the observance—both the calf image (v. 4) and the celebration (v. 6)—were thoroughly pagan.

The Interpretation of the People's Action (Exod. 32:7-19)

In this lengthy narrative we observe first YHWH's verbal interpretation of the people's action (32:7-14) and then Moses' symbolic and gestural interpretation of the same (vv. 15-19). Alerting Moses to what was transpiring at the foot of the mountain while YHWH and his agent were taking care of covenantal business, YHWH described the people's action in remarkable detail, complete with a verbatim quotation of Aaron's dedication speech (v. 8). The narrator captures the significance of the people's action in three clauses. First, he characterized the people's actions as corrupt and debasing (v. 7) and the people themselves as obstinate (v. 9). In everyday speech, people used the Hebrew verb *šihēt* (v. 7), "to be/become corrupt," of ruined vineyards (Jer. 12:10) or devastated landscapes (Gen. 13:10), but its usage in a moral sense here placed the actions of the people in the same category as the corrupt ways of "all flesh" prior to the great flood (Gen. 6:12). Appropriately, in a context involving a calf statue as the object of worship, YHWH used a bovine metaphor to highlight their obstinacy: "They are a stiff-necked people" (*'am qěšēh 'ōrep hū*'), like an ox that resists its owner putting on its yoke, or a yoked ox that resists going in the direction demanded by the owner (Exod. 32:9).

Second, YHWH distanced himself from the people. Although they had officially become his own covenant people through the rituals of chapters 19-24, now he disowned them. Latching on to the people's statement in verse 1, he referred to them as "your [Moses'] people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt" (v. 7). YHWH's reference to "this people" rather than "my people" in verse 9 reinforces this disposition.

Third, YHWH threatened to give full vent to his fury and destroy "this people" (vv. 9-10). Technically, this would not signify going back on his covenant commitment. By means

of a virtual curse in the first command of the Decalogue, YHWH had expressed his covenantal passion with the adjective *qannā'* (impassioned, 20:5) and followed this up with the warning that he would visit the sins of fathers on their children to the third and fourth generation of those who reject (*śānē'*) him—that is, repudiate their covenantal standing with him. Furthermore, by having the blood sprinkled on them, through the covenantal oath ritual the people had declared in effect, “So be it to me, and more, if I fail to keep the stipulations of this covenant” (24:7–8). However, by entreating Moses, “Now then, let me rest” (32:10), YHWH had opened the door ever so slightly to his intervention and so also reflected Moses’ stature in his eyes.

Rejecting YHWH’s heady offer to make of him a great nation, Moses seized the opportunity with an impassioned intercessory prayer intended to “smooth/appease the face of YHWH” (*ḥālâ 'et pēnê yhwh*), a graphic image for changing YHWH’s disposition (v. 11). In his response, Moses used four powerful arguments:

1. Israel is YHWH’s people, not Moses’ people (v. 11a).
2. YHWH has invested extraordinary effort in saving the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt: by implication, to destroy them would mean this effort was wasted (v. 11b).
3. YHWH’s reputation among the nations will be damaged if he destroys Israel; they will think his intent was malicious from the beginning—to destroy Israel in the mountains (v. 12).
4. YHWH must hold back for the sake of the patriarchs; he promised them that he would multiply their seed and give them the land of Canaan as their possession forever (v. 13).

The effect of Moses' prayer was dramatic: YHWH changed his mind (*niḥam*) about the disaster (*hārā'â*) he had threatened to bring on his people. Although Moses had managed to mollify YHWH, not even his gracious response to this prayer had smoothed Moses' own face (vv. 15–19). Except for the brief interchange between Joshua and Moses (vv. 17–18), the narrator's attention fixates on the tablets in Moses' hands as he comes down the mountain. He emphasizes their significance through an extraordinarily detailed description: (1) The "two tablets of the Guarantee" were in Moses' hands (v. 15a), reflecting his current role as their custodian. (2) The tablets were inscribed on both sides, front and back, leaving no room for additions by human hand. (3) The tablets "were the fabrication of God" (*ma'ăšēh 'ēlōhîm*, v. 16), in contrast to the common characterization of idols as "the work of human hands."¹ (4) The text on the tablets was "a divine inscription" (*miktab 'ēlōhîm*), achieved by engraving the stone, presumably with proto-Hebrew alphabetic characters. The narrator reinforced the special character of the text with a unique (*hapax*) word for "engraving," *ḥārat*, in contrast to the more common word, *pittah*, which he had used earlier of the two onyx stones engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel (Exod. 28:9, 11) and of the high priest's gold medallion, engraved with "Holy, belonging to YHWH" (28:32).

When Moses approached the Israelite camp and saw the calf and the people dancing around it, he was furious and threw the prized tablets to the ground, shattering them at the base of the mountain. This was more than an impulsive and reckless act; it was also a symbolic gesture, dramatizing before the people the significance of their actions and signaling to them that they had broken the covenant. And in so doing, they had forfeited the benefits of covenant relationship with YHWH. The most dramatic analogue to this event from the ancient Near East is represented by the fragments of Esarhaddon's vassal treaties, which were

discovered in the remains of the temple of Nabu, god of writing, in Kalḫu. Apparently the invading Medes had smashed them in a ceremonial act of desecration after they had sacked Kalḫu in 612 BC.

The Punishment of the People for Their Covenantal Infidelity (Exod. 32:20-35)

The narrative does not declare explicitly that YHWH's withdrawal of his curse upon the people was a response to Moses' intercession. To the contrary, as a ritual act of desecration, Moses burned the image of the calf, ground the remains to powder, scattered them over the surface of the water, and then forced the people to drink it (Exod. 32:20; cf. 2 Kings 23:4, 6). This, too, was a dramatic gesture, transferring the defilement and curse of the offensive object to the offending people and demonstrating that, in YHWH's eyes, idolaters not only become like the gods they worship (Ps. 115:4-8) but, through ingesting the solution of water and idol, they also became one with the idol. Furthermore, when he called all who remained faithful to YHWH to stand with him, and when the descendants of Levi responded en masse, he sent them out to slaughter the people indiscriminately (32:26-27), resulting in the deaths of three thousand people (v. 28). But this was not the end of the punishment. Despite Moses' self-sacrificial intervention (vv. 30-32), the next day YHWH personally attacked the remaining chief offenders for their part in the worship of the calf, though the narrator refrains from citing the number of casualties (v. 35).

The Issue of YHWH's Presence amid His People (Exod. 33:1-23)

Chapter 33 opens with YHWH's charge to Moses to rally the people and head out from Sinai for the land that YHWH had promised on oath to the ancestors, with a new promise

that his personal envoy (*mal'āk*) would go before them and drive the Canaanites from the land (v. 3). However, the tension between YHWH and the Israelites persisted. He still referred to them as “the people whom *you* [Moses] brought up from Egypt” (33:1), and repeating his bovine metaphor, he continued to characterize them as stiff-necked (vv. 3, 5). Most tellingly, he bluntly declared, “I will not accompany you, because I might destroy you along the way” (v. 3). The reason for this last comment is unclear. Somewhat ironically, it appears on the surface that YHWH’s decision to distance himself from his people was motivated by concern for their best interest, like “social distancing” in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this statement introduces the key motif of the chapter: the presence of YHWH.

YHWH’s obvious intimacy with Moses and his provision of a “tent of appointments” (*'ōhel mō'ēd*, 33:7–11), where he would speak with Moses “face-to-face” (v. 11), both served as a foil for the people’s own alienation from their God and provided a link for continued communication (v. 7). However, the location of this structure “outside the camp” symbolized the problem. In verses 12–23 the narrator invites hearers to listen in on a remarkable conversation between YHWH and Moses that illustrates the forthrightness and intimacy of their interaction. The word *pānîm* represents the key issue here. This word occurs seven times with reference to YHWH in verses 11–23, but English translations that vacillate between the literal rendering “face” (vv. 11, 20, 23) and “presence” (vv. 14, 15) obscure its prominence. The conversation reached its climax in YHWH’s remarkable agreement to come as near to Moses as he could physically tolerate without succumbing to YHWH’s lethal glory (v. 23).

YHWH’s Renewal of the Covenant with His People (Exod. 34:1–35)

Whereas the status of YHWH's covenant with Israel was lurking in the background of chapter 33, it is front and center in chapter 34. The word *bērît*, which we have not seen since 31:16, occurs five times, though admittedly only three of these refer directly to the Israelite covenant (vv. 10, 27, 28). The other two provide a foil against which to interpret YHWH's covenant with Israel. In verses 11–17 YHWH warned the people explicitly not to make any covenants with the inhabitants of the promised land. Echoing earlier statements in 23:24–25, 32–33, YHWH's concern here was obviously not Israel's geopolitical relations with non-Israelites, but the spiritual danger that would attend alliances with Canaanites. Although YHWH did not elaborate on the consequences of violating this principle—other than to remind his people of his deep-seated passion (34:14)—his warning was explicit, sounding like a commentary on what the Israelites had just done in their worship of the calf. Like YHWH's earlier speeches, verses 10–17 are carefully constructed.

However, before we consider that segment of this chapter, we must look more closely at the prequel, 34:1–9. As we read texts like this, we must remember that originally they were written as continuous text, without chapter and verse divisions that often break them up artificially. Although the divine speech formula in 34:1, “And YHWH said to Moses,” signals a new paragraph, verses 1–4 do not follow logically from what has preceded. Indeed, the narrative flows naturally from 33:23 to 34:5, describing YHWH's descent and appearance to Moses in response to his request to see YHWH's glory (33:18) and to his earlier request: “Please let me know your ways that I may know you” (33:13). Earlier YHWH had warned Moses that he would redefine the divine “glory” (*kābôd*), which we usually perceive as an overwhelming transcendent quality, with the profound vocabulary of immanence: “goodness” (*ṭôb*), “grace” (*ḥēn/ḥānan*), and “compassion” (*reḥem/riḥam*, v.

19). Although *derek* is an essentially geographic expression (“way, road, direction”), by “Show me your ways [*děrkîm*]” Moses did not mean a travel itinerary but the principles that motivated YHWH in his relationship to creation generally and especially to Israel. To this question, YHWH offered Moses a brilliant verbal response (34:6–7):

YHWH!

YHWH is compassionate and gracious El [*’ēl raḥûm wěḥannûn*];

slow to anger [*’erek ’appayim*],

and rich in unfailing love and faithfulness [*wěrab ḥesed we’ēmet*];

who maintains unfailing love to a thousand generations [*nōṣēr ḥesed lā’ālāpîm*];

who forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin [*nōsē’ ’āwōn wāpeša’ wěḥaṭṭā’â*],

but who will by no means let the guilty go unpunished [*wěnaqqeh lō’ yěnaqqeh*],

bringing the punishment for fathers’ wrongdoing [*pōqēd ’āwōn ’ābôt*] on the children [*’al bānîm*]

and grandchildren [*wě’al běnê bānîm*]

to the third and fourth generation [*’al šillēšîm wě’al ribbē’îm*].

At the beginning of Exodus, in response to Moses’ request to know YHWH’s name, YHWH had identified himself enigmatically as *’ehyeh ’ăšer ’ehyeh*, which translates literally as “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” (Exod. 3:13–14). In effect, with that answer YHWH had invited Moses and the Israelites to wait and see what the name signified. Although he had answered the question partially through the signs and wonders in Egypt, now, in the aftermath of the golden-calf fiasco, he had revealed the immanent and personal qualities inherent in the name: kindness, grace, compassion, and fidelity, all of which distinguished him from other gods. Moses had already observed this in YHWH’s response to his intercessory prayer (32:11–14) and in the limits YHWH had set on the punishment of the rebellious people (32:25–35). However, given the tone of YHWH’s voice and his distancing of himself from the people in 33:1–6, lingering doubts continued to nag Moses. For this reason, after hearing YHWH define himself in 34:6–7, Moses immediately threw

himself down in homage and submission, confessed his people's obstinacy, pleaded once more for divine forgiveness, and asked YHWH to take him and the people (note "us" in v. 9) back as his own possession (*ûnēḥaltānû*, v. 9).

If the events transpired in the order the narrator recorded them, then Moses should have recognized YHWH's mercy and taken consolation concerning his disposition toward his people even before his self-revelation in 34:6–7. If Moses' smashing the tablets in 32:19 symbolized the end of Israel's access to YHWH's covenant, then YHWH's command to Moses to carve out (*pāsaʾ*) for himself two stone tablets, like the former ones (with respect to size and suitability for receiving text; 34:1, 4) that he had shattered, also functioned as a symbolic act: YHWH was prepared to reinstate Israel as his covenant people. YHWH reinforced this interpretation by declaring that he would reinscribe the tablets and that the text on the new tablets would be identical to the text on the slabs that Moses had destroyed.

Exodus 34:10–17 represents YHWH's response to Moses' plea in verse 9. Emphatically but cryptically, he announced, "Look! I hereby make a covenant" (*hinneh 'ānōkî kōrēt b'ērîṭ*). Remarkably, in the announcement he neither identified the second party to this covenant nor offered any clue concerning its nature. Although the remainder of the chapter will answer these questions, the rest of verse 10 goes a different direction, predicting an unprecedented display of wonders (*nīplā'ôṭ*) and awe-inspiring deeds with the Israelites as his agents. The vocabulary recalls the descriptions of the signs and wonders that YHWH performed in Egypt, but it is clear from verses 11–17 that he was describing the means by which he would finally deliver the promised land into the Israelites' hands. However, this would require diligence, both in carrying out the military agenda against the Canaanites and in preventing the sort of

spiritual recidivism represented by their worship of the calf image.

YHWH's warning consisted of two parts, each introduced by a call for self-watch (*šēmōr lěkā*, v. 11; *hiššāmer lěkā*, v. 12). The first charge is general, appealing for careful attention to all the commands forthcoming that day. YHWH followed this up with the promise that he would drive out the Canaanite nations ahead of the Israelites (v. 11). The second is more specific, and although on the surface it appears to involve a political issue, at the deeper level it was obviously related to the problem represented by the golden calf. The warning (vv. 12–16) divides into two parts, each introduced by identical negative purpose clauses:

Guard yourselves well, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land (v. 12a).

. . . lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land (v. 15a).

In the first instance, YHWH perceived covenants with the Canaanites as dangerous because the covenants were a trap (vv. 12–14). The word *môqēš* refers to a contraption set to capture birds by seducing them with grain that birds eat. Here the covenant itself was the trap, but the temptation ("the grain") was represented by the cultic installations scattered throughout the land: altars on which sacrifices were offered and around which worshipers feasted; standing pillars, representing the male deity in the fertility religion; and Asherah poles, representing the female deity in this system. YHWH concluded his warning with a prohibition against the worship of any god other than himself. His point was that covenants with the native population would inevitably lead to adoption of their deities alongside or in place of YHWH.

The first warning focused on cultic objects; the second highlighted cultic practices, which YHWH characterized

generally as “whoring after their gods” (vv. 15b, 16c) and specifically as offering sacrifices to the gods (v. 15c) and eating those sacrifices in their presence (v. 15e)—as the “nobles of Israel” had done in YHWH’s presence in 24:11. The general characterization reflected the sexualized nature of Canaanite religion, both in its pantheon consisting of male and female deities and in its physical and sexual religious practices. However, the metaphor of “whoring after other gods” also reflected YHWH’s perception of his relationship with Israel as a marriage covenant. YHWH signaled this dimension in the middle of his appeal to self-watch (vv. 12–16). Adapting the language of the first command of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:5), he both characterized himself as “an impassioned God” (*’ēl qannā’ hū’*) and claimed *Qannā’* as an epithet for himself (*qannā’ šēmô*, lit., “Qanna’ is his name/title”; v. 14c–d). As noted earlier, the theological use of the word always occurs in the context of idolatry.² At Sinai, YHWH had entered into a marriage covenant with Israel that was to be exclusive and permanent. This distinguished him from pagan deities, who tolerated their subjects simultaneously worshiping other gods. In this text, YHWH anticipated the descent into apostasy as a four-stage process:

1. The Israelites would make covenants with the peoples of the land.
2. The Israelites would accept invitations to worship with the peoples of the land.
3. The Israelites would enter into marriage covenants with the inhabitants of the land.
4. The Israelites would abandon their marriage with YHWH and whore after alien gods.

YHWH ended this plea for absolute fidelity with a final prohibition of the manufacture of any gods of melted-down

metal. The command both recalls Aaron's manufacture of the golden calf (32:4) and highlights the perversion of idolatry: people creating images of divinities instead of accepting their own roles as images of the one true God.

With this discussion as background, we begin to recognize the significance of the instructions for the cultic observances summarized in 34:18–27. Apart from the passing reference to the seventh-day Sabbath (v. 21), the common denominator of the observances in question is that they represent appointments with YHWH at the central sanctuary (cf. 23:14–17; Deut. 16:1–17). YHWH hereby invited all Israelite males to appear “with the face of the Suzerain, YHWH, the God of Israel” (Exod. 34:23) three times a year. This statement identifies YHWH as the Suzerain and God of Israel even more explicitly than the two other occurrences of this awkward expression (Exod. 23:17; Deut. 16:16). While the three festivals (Passover/Unleavened Bread [*Pesaḥ*/*Maṣṣôt*], Weeks [*Shāvū'ôt*], Ingathering/Booths [*'āsîp*/*Sukkôt*]) presented occasions for Israel as a nation to meet with YHWH, the offerings of the first offspring of every female domestic animal (Exod. 34:19–20) and the firstfruits of the soil (v. 26) provided opportunities for individuals and families to appear before YHWH. The final clause of verse 20 signals the significance of the former. Because YHWH's covenant with Israel involved a Suzerain-vassal relationship, ancient custom considered it rude and presumptuous for the vassal to appear before the Suzerain without a gift of tribute. The invitation to bring the firstfruits of the soil “to the house of YHWH your God” makes the same point (34:26).

By ending his lengthy address to Moses in verses 10–26 with these instructions regarding Israel's routine cultic institutions, YHWH had responded to Israel's shortness of memory and its propensity to being seduced by competing spiritual allegiances. We should not interpret YHWH's appeals to his people to appear before him so often as

burdensome obligations, but as expressions of YHWH's delight in fellowship with them, both at the national level and with individuals.

If any doubt about YHWH's disposition regarding his covenant with Israel remained, in verse 27 the narrative resumes with YHWH "sealing the deal" by commanding Moses to "write down these words for yourself," presumably a reference to his preceding address (vv. 10-26), and then declaring unequivocally, "In keeping with these words, I have made a covenant with you—that is, with Israel." English translations of the last clause all create the impression that YHWH had made a covenant with Moses and with Israel, as if Moses were a covenant partner separate from the nation. However, this interpretation is misleading for two reasons. First, although YHWH had earlier declared his intent to make Moses the founder of a new covenant people, in effect superseding Abraham (32:10), Moses had rejected the offer. Indeed, elsewhere the Scriptures know nothing of a divine covenant with this man, similar either to the Abrahamic covenant, in which Abraham served as the genealogical head of the nation, or to the Davidic covenant, in which David served as the divinely appointed royal administrative head of Israel. Second, although the pronoun "with you" is morphologically singular (*'ittēkā*), it functions collectively for all Israel. This word is thus linked to the preceding speech (34:10-26), where all the second-person pronouns are singular, even though the addressee is obviously not Moses but the people of Israel. YHWH added "and with Israel" (*wē'tet yiśrā'ēl*) precisely to resolve the ambiguity and to specify that the people as a whole were the vassal parties to this covenant. Looking ahead, if this covenant had been with Moses individually, YHWH's refusal to let him enter the promised land would have created major theological difficulties since all his covenants are eternal and irrevocable.

Functioning as a narrative epilogue, 34:29 reinforces this interpretation on three counts. First, in terms of time, Moses remained on the mountain another forty days, which corresponded to the time it had taken to prepare the first edition of the tablets (24:18). Second, although on the surface the identity of the person who inscribed the new tablets is ambiguous (singular “he”: Did Moses or YHWH write?), YHWH is the nearer antecedent. Furthermore, in 34:1, YHWH had assured Moses that if he would provide the tablets, then he (YHWH) would inscribe them, which is precisely how Moses recalled this moment in Deuteronomy 10:1-5. The same fingers that had produced the original document produced the second version (cf. Exod. 31:18; 32:16).

Third, the content of the inscription was identical to the original text on the stone tablets. Whereas previously the narrator had characterized the Decalogue as YHWH’s “words” (Exod. 20:1), now (in 34:28) he was more specific, identifying the document as “the words of the covenant, the Ten Words” (*dibrê habbērît ‘ăšeret haddēbārîm*). Forty years later, in Deuteronomy 10:4, Moses would identify this document similarly, though in 4:13 he applied the numbered epithet “the Ten Words” to the first edition of the Decalogue.

Although this action concretized YHWH’s earlier declaration, “Look, I am making a covenant” (Exod. 34:10), and although he used the idiom *kārat bērît*, “to cut a covenant,” this was not a new covenant, distinct from the original one ratified in chapters 19-24. The key elements were identical: the divine Suzerain was YHWH; the vassals were the people of Israel; the substance was symbolized and represented by the Decalogue. When the tablets were deposited in the ark of the covenant and placed in the holy of holies (40:20-21), the covenant-making ritual begun in chapter 19 but interrupted by the golden-calf affair would finally be completed. By divine grace and through the

mediation of Moses, the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel was re-signed, resealed, and redelivered.

In the paragraph concluding this story of rebellion and restoration (34:29–35), the narrator adds a curious account of the transformation of Moses as evidence of YHWH's renewed presence with his people. With Moses having been authenticated as YHWH's special envoy to the people in chapter 20, a pattern of divine revelation and communication surfaces. When Moses had returned from the presence of YHWH carrying the "two tablets of the Guarantee," his face had glowed with a divine radiance so bright that he veiled his face, presumably to protect the people from the lethal dose of reflected divine glory. Remarkably, when he returned to YHWH, he would remove the veil, concretizing the comments elsewhere that YHWH spoke to Moses "face-to-face," apparently without any protective covering (cf. 33:11; Deut. 34:10). It seems that even after the restoration of the covenant relationship, the people were more vulnerable to the glory of YHWH encountered secondhand from Moses' shining face than Moses was to direct contact with that glory.

Within the drama of the confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant with his descendants at Sinai and the transfer of his commission for Abraham to the Israelites, as recounted in Exodus, all that remained was the construction of the tabernacle—the portable palace of YHWH in the midst of his people (Exod. 35–40). The narrator describes the crowning event of sealing the covenantal agreement in 40:34–38. On the propitious day designated by YHWH, on Israel's first birthday as an independent nation (40:2, 17), approximately nine months after they had arrived at Mount Sinai (19:1), and two weeks short of one year after they had left Egypt (12:6, 18), Moses set up the prefabricated structure. After recounting the erection of the skeleton and the spreading of the curtains over the compound, the narrator turns his attention to the furniture associated with the tabernacle,

and the narrative slows down: “Moses took the Guarantee [*hā‘ēdūt*] and placed it in the ark. He inserted the poles on the ark and set the special cover above the ark. Then he brought the ark into the tabernacle and set up the veil of the screen and screened the ark of the Guarantee [*hā‘ēdūt*], as YHWH had commanded Moses” (40:20–21).

After Moses had installed all the furniture and hung the curtains of the outer court, including the curtain of the outer doorway, the people watched as the cloud—the visible sign of YHWH’s presence—covered the entire complex and as the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle (also identified as the “tent of appointments”). But once the glory had entered, Moses could no longer enter the sanctuary. From now on, Aaron, the consecrated high priest, would have access to the divine presence, but Moses had completed his assignment with respect to this structure. The movement of the divine Glory signified the full implementation of the covenant formula: “I am your God. You are my people. I dwell in your midst” (cf. Lev. 26:11–12).

The Role of the Law within the Israelite Covenant

Whether mainline Protestant, charismatic, fundamentalist, or generic evangelical, the contemporary Western church has little interest in the laws associated with the Israelite covenant. While most perceive the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers (plus Deuteronomy) to be fundamentally legal texts, I prefer to speak of this as Israel’s constitutional literature. These texts do indeed include a host of laws (the Jewish rabbi Maimonides counted 613 in the Pentateuch), and as a package they served a profoundly legal function (formally establishing Israel as the people of YHWH), but our propensity to characterize this material as “legislation” has contributed significantly to the marginalization of these texts in worship and life.

We may attribute the aversion to preaching and teaching First Testament law in our churches to a series of “mythconceptional” errors regarding biblical law. First, we are deluded by the ritualistic myth—namely, that First Testament law is preoccupied with boring ritualistic trivia, in any case declared to be obsolete after Christ’s final sacrifice on the cross. Second, we are driven away by the historical myth—that is, that First Testament law concerns the times and cultural contexts of nations so far removed from our own that, unless one has purely academic or antiquarian interests, what it has to say about the human condition is hopelessly out of date. Third, we are repelled by the ethical myth, that ancient Israelite law supposedly reflects a standard of ethics that is grossly inferior to the law of love announced by Jesus and to the tolerance that is so highly valued in our enlightened age. Fourth, we are confused by the literary myth—that is, that the First Testament laws are written in literary forms so different from modern literature that we cannot understand them. Fifth, we are indoctrinated by the theological myth—that is, that First Testament law presents a view of God that is utterly objectionable to modern sensitivities. So long as these “mythconceptual” errors determine the disposition of preachers and pastors and scholars toward First Testament law, there is little hope that they will give serious attention to Israel’s constitutional literature. And if they do not, their parishioners certainly will not.

Contributing to and undergirding these “mythconceptions” are fundamental ideological and theological prejudices against First Testament law. The essentially antinomian stance of contemporary Western culture may be the most important factor in the marginalization of Israelite law, especially in our post-Christian and increasingly secular culture. But this will not explain why *within the church* the law has been subverted and dismissed for such a long time. The roots of the

aversion to First Testament law within the church may be traced back almost two thousand years to the second-century heretic Marcion. Marcion proclaimed a radical discontinuity between First and New Testaments, Israel and the church, the God of Israel and the God of the New Testament. In his canon he rejected the entire First Testament and accepted only those New Testament books that highlighted the discontinuity of the church from Israel, leaving him with radically edited versions only of the Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline Epistles (minus the Pastorals and Hebrews). This is not so different from American evangelical Christianity, which bears a distinctly Pauline stamp (cf. the Eastern Church) and hears only Paul's criticism of First Testament law.

In Western Protestantism, we observe several traditional streams of antipathy toward First Testament law. The first is associated with Lutheranism, with its fundamental law-gospel contrast. In his epochal discovery of the gospel of grace in the course of his study of Romans, Luther came to identify the Roman Catholic ritualism and works-oriented approach to salvation with the First Testament law. But he celebrated the fact that in Christ believers are declared to be free from the law! The grace of the gospel in Christ has replaced the bondage of the law under Moses.

The second antinomian stream is associated with extreme forms of dispensationalism. By dividing human history into seven dispensations, many recognize a radical change in the divine economy in the transition from the First to the New Testament. We live in the church age, which is fundamentally the dispensation of grace, in contrast to the age of Israel, under the dispensation of law.

To these two traditional sources of the problem of First Testament law within American evangelical Christianity we should add a third, more recent development: the influence of New Covenant Theology. This movement, which has its roots in Reformed theology but exhibits a remarkably

different view toward the First Testament than Calvin himself did, insists that since the “Mosaic Covenant” (which I identify as the “Israelite Covenant”) has come to an end in Christ, it has no claim on Christians. We are subject only to the law of Christ and the law of love. Consequently, if one hears preaching from First Testament law at all (which is rare!), the preaching tends to take one of three approaches. First, since through his atoning work Jesus Christ has abolished the law as a way of life, First Testament law has no bearing on Christians at all. In fact, the blessed gospel of grace liberates us from the curse of the law.³ Second, by interpreting the word *telos* in Romans 10:4 as the “fulfillment” rather than the “end” of the law, we see Jesus Christ as the culminative fruit of First Testament law, and since his righteousness is imputed to us, we are not under obligation to any external code. Third, since the “Ten Commandments” (on the designation, see the discussion below) and some of the moral injunctions of the Torah are thought to have some binding force on Christians, the operative question with respect to First Testament law tends to be, Do I as a Christian have to keep *this* law? Therefore, it is necessary to attend carefully to distinguishing among the ceremonial, civil, and moral laws. A fourth theonomist option, which views the First Testament law fundamentally to be in force even for the church, receives scant attention these days.

But how Christians can tolerate this antinomian stance remains a mystery to me, especially in the light of the New Testament’s emphatic identification of Jesus with YHWH (John 1:23; Rom. 10:13; Phil. 2:11; etc.); in light of Jesus’ own statements that he came to fulfill the Torah rather than to abolish it and his own declarations of its permanent validity (Matt. 5:17–20); and in light of his declaration that love for him is demonstrated first and foremost by keeping his commands. In John 14:15 and 15:1–17, “commands” (Gk. *entolai*) do not refer to a new set of laws that replaced

the law associated with the Israelite covenant, but the word functions as a shorthand expression for the will of God as revealed in the context of the Israelite covenant. Finally, I note also Paul's assertion that "it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Rom. 2:13), and his declaration to Timothy that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

These texts do not merely suggest that Paul and we *could* use Israel's constitutional literature as a sourcebook for optional ethical lessons, but that we *should* draw from the First Testament normative lessons for Christian faith and life. To move beyond the typical trivializing of the First Testament as a whole, we need to read First Testament law from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. We must listen to First Testament law and pay attention to how the law presents itself.

Designations for "Law" in the First Testament

The First Testament uses a series of expressions to refer to the laws of God. The most explicit and common is *mišwâ*, "command," from the verb *šiwwâ*, "to command." But "command" is not synonymous with "law." In day-to-day life we often give orders that need to be carried out immediately or in a given circumstance, but this is not the same as an ordinance by which our church or company must operate until further ordinances are handed down.

The Pentateuch often refers to laws by the standardized word pair *ḥuqqîm ûmišpāṭîm*, "ordinances and stipulations" (Deut. 4:5, 8, 14, etc.). On etymological grounds the former expression, singular *ḥôq*, "ordinance," derives from a root *ḥāqaq*, "to inscribe, incise," and refers to "inscribed" laws. These are injunctions prescribed by a superior and recorded

by incising a clay tablet with a reed stylus, or a wax-covered writing board with a metal stylus, or even a stone with a chisel. The form of the second expression, *mišpāṭîm*, “stipulations” (lit., “judgments”) apparently originates in case law. Judgments previously made in judicial contexts become laws in a prescriptive sense. When originating with YHWH, they represent the divine Suzerain’s “judgments”—that is, “decisions”—concerning Israel’s conduct in the pursuit of righteousness (*ṣědāqâ*), which scholars refer to as “stipulations” in extrabiblical treaty documents. While some suggest that *ḥuqqîm* relate primarily to religious regulations and *mišpāṭîm* to civil law, in the Pentateuch, especially in Deuteronomy, these distinctions do not hold.

To this list, we should also add *piqqûd* (pl. *piqqûdîm*), “obligation, regulation, procedure,” from *pāqad*, “to muster, commission,” which occurs twenty-four times in the Psalms. As noted earlier, when linked with other words for “laws” (e.g., Deut. 4:45; 6:17, 20), a fifth expression, *hā’ēdôt*, traditionally rendered confusingly as “the testimonies,”⁴ has little if anything to do with the utterance of a witness in a court of law or some less formal context. In the case of a person who had sworn an oath to keep an agreement but was being brought to court for violating it, the written document could be produced as a standard against which to measure his behavior, hence to serve as a witness. However, as noted earlier, it is preferable to link this form of the word with the Akkadian cognate *adê*, “covenant/treaty” or “loyalty oath.” When associated with “the ordinances” and “the stipulations,” *hā’ēdôt* (pl. of *’ēdâ*) is a synonymous designation for the requirements of a vassal as defined by the suzerain. The presence of the article on *hā’ēdôt*, *ḥaḥuqqîm*, and *hammišpāṭîm*, “the statutes, the ordinances, and the stipulations,” suggests an identifiable body of prescriptions that YHWH required of his vassals as revealed through Moses at Sinai, periodically stated en route to the promised land (cf. Num. 36:13), and promulgated on the

plains of Moab in Moses' farewell addresses to his congregation (Deut. 4:45; 6:17, 20).

The expressions discussed above tend to be associated with specific kinds of laws, but the word most often associated with "law" itself is *tôrâ*. This noun derives from the verb *hôrâ*, "to teach." In some contexts, *tôrâ* may be translated legitimately as "law." However, the book of Proverbs illustrates its everyday meaning, applying the term to the instruction that the wise provide for the community (13:14), parents provide for children (1:8 [mother]; 4:1-11), and the woman of the household provides for those under her influence (31:26). The book of Deuteronomy illustrates its theological meaning most fully. However, *tôrâ* does not mean "law," despite the Greek (and English) name of the book (*Deuteronomium*, "Second Law") and the remarkably consistent rendering of *tôrâ* as *nomos*, "law," in the Septuagint.⁵

Generically, Deuteronomy does not identify itself as "law," but as "the words of Moses that he spoke" to his people on the plains of Moab. Like Jesus' address to his disciples in his upper room discourse (John 14-16), Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy are cast as farewell pastoral addresses to his congregation. In these addresses Moses repeated and adapted many ordinances previously prescribed by YHWH, but the first eleven and the last nine chapters contain little that we would classify as "law" in a legal sense. Even the so-called Deuteronomic Code (chaps. 12-26) has a predominantly pastoral and didactic (rather than legal) flavor. In fact, in the book of Deuteronomy the semantic range of *tôrâ* is captured in Greek much better by *didaskalia*⁶ or *didachē*,⁷ both of which mean "teaching, instruction, doctrine."

The ease with which the scope of the epithet "The Torah" was extended to the rest of the Pentateuch confirms this conclusion regarding the meaning of *tôrâ*. Despite the fact that at least two-thirds of Genesis-Numbers involves the

narrative of YHWH's grace in election, salvation, and providential care for Israel, and his establishment of his covenant first with Abraham and then with the patriarch's descendants at Sinai, these books were brought under the rubric of "The Torah." When the psalmist declared that the godly delight in the *tôrâ* of YHWH (Ps. 1:2), he cannot have had in mind only the laws of Sinai, for apart from the surrounding narrative, the laws provide no occasion for joy.

The Literary Contexts and Nature of the Laws in the First Testament

The Pentateuch contains a great deal of prescriptive material through which YHWH sought to shape every aspect of the Israelites' lives. On the basis of the form of the laws, scholars generally recognize two primary types of laws in Israel's constitutional documents: laws cast as conditional regulations dealing with specific cases (casuistic law) and laws in the unconditional form (apodictic law). The former typically involve a protasis introduced with "When/If" (Hb. *kî*, or *'im* in subordinate cases) describing a specific circumstance, followed by an apodosis outlining the required response. The differences between the two types are obvious when we juxtapose specific examples, as in table 6.1.

Beyond recognizing the basic formal differences between individual laws, we do well also to recognize the differences among the series of specific documents within the Pentateuch that might qualify as law, which we may group in two classifications. The first group involves focused instructions, usually involving cultic and liturgical matters: "Instructions concerning the Passover" (Exod. 12-13), "Instructions concerning the Tabernacle" (Exod. 25-31), "Instructions concerning Sacrifice and Ritual Purity" (Lev. 1-16). The second group involves collections of ordinances and regulations governing a wide range of human activity:

the Decalogue (Exod. 20:2–17; Deut. 5:6–21); the “Covenant Document” (*sēper habbērît*, Exod. 21:1–23:19; cf. 24:7); the “Instructions on Holiness” (Lev. 17–26), unhelpfully identified by scholars as the “Holiness Code”; and the “Deuteronomic Torah” (Deut. 5–26, 28). I shall discuss these two types of text in reverse order, beginning with the latter documents, which are united in giving prescriptions that cover all of life, but each has its own distinctive flavor.

Table 6.1

A Comparison of Conditional and Unconditional Law

Conditional Law (Casuistic)	Unconditional Law (Apodictic)
If an ox gores a man or woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished. (Exod. 21:28)	You shall have no other gods before me. (Exod. 20:3)
Features	Features
Conditional	Unconditional
Declarative mood	Imperative mood
In third (or second) person	In second person
Specific: based on actual cases, often with motive or exception clauses	General: without qualification or exception
Usually positive in form	Often negative in form
Begin with “If” or “When”	Begin with the (imperative) verb

The Ethical Constitutional Documents

1. THE DECALOGUE (EXOD. 20; DEUT. 5)

Both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 present the Decalogue as the only speech that YHWH addressed directly to the Israelites at Sinai/Horeb. Significantly, the Scriptures never refer to this document as the “Ten Commandments”; both contexts identify its genre as “all these words” (*kol haddēbārîm hā’ēlleh*, Exod. 20:1; Deut. 5:22) that YHWH

“spoke” (*dibber*), rather than “these commandments” that YHWH “commanded.” Indeed, as noted earlier, whenever this document is identified by title, it is always “the Ten Words” (‘*ăšeret haddēbārîm*, Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). Here we would do well to follow the Septuagint in referring to this document as the Decalogue (*deka logos*, lit., “Ten Words”), or, since the Hebrew word *dābār* is capable of a broad range of meaning, “the Ten Principles” of covenant relationship. That two identical copies of only this document were stored in “the ark of the covenant of YHWH” (‘*ărôn bēřît YHWH*, Deut. 10:1–5), reflects its foundational significance for the covenant. Not only did Moses refer to the Ten Words as “his covenant” (*bēřîtô*, Deut. 4:13)—that is, YHWH’s—but the Decalogue also exhibits many features we expect in an ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty document (fig. 6.1):

Figure 6.1

A Comparison of Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Forms

Later Hittite	Exodus, Deuteronomy	Sefire Aramaic	Neo-Assyrian
Title	Title	Title	Title
Prologue	Prologue	Witnesses	Witnesses
Stipulations	Stipulations	Curses	Stipulations
Deposit	Deposit	Stipulations	Curses
Witnesses	Witnesses		
Curses	Blessings		
Blessings	Curses		

Adapted from K. A. Kitchen and P. J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant*, 3:268.

- a. *The preamble* (Exod. 20:1; cf. Deut. 5:1–5) sets the stage for the document.
- b. *The historical prologue* (Exod. 20:2; cf. Deut. 5:6) introduces the divine Suzerain and summarizes the history of the relationship of the parties to the covenant to this point: “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

c. *The covenant principles* (Exod. 20:3–17; cf. Deut. 5:7–21) specify the fundamental obligations placed upon the human vassal. The limitation of these principles to ten was probably driven by mnemonic concerns; since the number corresponded to the digits on two hands, people could easily memorize and recite the text of the covenant. Their unconditional (apodictic) form invests them with an absolutist flavor. Many have recognized that the Decalogue involves two dimensions of human relationships: the vertical and the horizontal. However, the issue is more complicated and the document more comprehensive than that, as table 6.2 illustrates:

Table 6.2

**The Dimensions of Covenant Commitment
in the Decalogue (Exod. 20:2–17)**

God and Israel: I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the slave house.

An Israelite and His* God	An Israelite and His Household	An Israelite and His Neighbors	An Israelite and His Heart
You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, YHWH your God, am an impassioned God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth	Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you may labor, and do all your regular work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your God. On it you may not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is	You shall not kill.	You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
		You shall not commit adultery.	
		You shall not steal.	

generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.	within your gates. For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.		
You shall not bear the name of YHWH your God in vain, for YHWH will not acquit anyone who bears his name in vain.	Honor your father and your mother, as YHWH your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land that YHWH your God gives you.	You shall not testify falsely against your neighbor.	You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

*I use the masculine pronoun intentionally to reflect the patricentric social context and the gendered nature of the Hebrew Decalogue.

Because YHWH addressed the stipulations of the Decalogue to male heads of households as potential perpetrators of offenses and threats to the divine covenantal order, we may interpret it as an ancient Israelite version of a “bill of rights” (table 6.3). However, unlike modern bills of rights, the Decalogue does not protect the addressee’s—that is, the head of the household’s—rights but seeks the well-being of those in his charge and in the neighborhood. According to the arrangement of the stipulations of the Decalogue, the *next person* involves two parties: YHWH, the divine Suzerain; and fellow members of the vassal community.

Table 6.3

The Decalogue as the World's Oldest Bill of Rights*

Command	Rights Involved
I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.	The gospel basis of the bill of rights (cf. Deut. 6:20–25)
1 You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself a carved image . . . to bow down to them or serve them.	YHWH has the right to his people's exclusive allegiance.
2 You shall not bear the name of YHWH your God in vain.	YHWH has the right to proper representation and loyal service.
3 Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.	YHWH has the right to human time (Exodus), and a man's household has the right to humane treatment from him (Deuteronomy).
4 Honor your father and your mother,	A man's parents have the right to his respect and care.
5 You shall not murder.	Others have the right to life.
6 You shall not commit adultery.	Others have the right to sexual purity and secure marriages.
7 You shall not steal.	Others have the right to property.
8 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	A man's neighbor has the right to an honest representation and reputation, especially in court.
9 You shall not covet your neighbor's house.	A man's neighbors have the right to freedom from fear that he desires his property.
10 You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, human resources, animal resources, or anything else.	A man's neighbors have the right to freedom from fear that he desires their household resources.

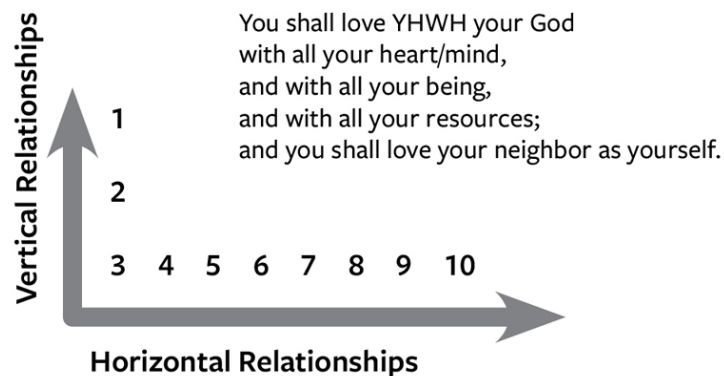
*Discourse linguistic features of the Hebrew text determine the numbering. These features support the Lutheran and Roman Catholic numbering, as opposed to the more common system derived from Reformers in the tradition of John Calvin.

The Sabbath command is transitional. The Exodus version highlights the Sabbath as a creation ordinance,

while the Deuteronomic version emphasizes its humanitarian character. If we understand the primary Hebrew word *'āhab*, “to love,” correctly—that is, as *covenant commitment demonstrated in action in the interest of the other person*—then we readily understand how Jesus and Paul could reduce all the covenantal stipulations to a single command to love YHWH and one’s neighbor (Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9; fig. 6.2). YHWH’s objective with the Decalogue is to motivate the head of the household to demonstrate love for God and for his neighbor with the kind of behavior that puts the interests of the next person ahead of his own.

Figure 6.2

The Dimensions of the Decalogue



d. *Blessings and curses* (Exod. 20:5–6, 12; cf. Deut. 5:9–10, 16). Unlike ancient Near Eastern treaty documents, which often included extensive lists of curses that would hang over vassals should they violate the will of their political overlords (only Hittite treaties included blessings for compliance), the Decalogue includes only one fragment of a covenant curse immediately following the first command (Exod. 20:5b) and two fragments that function as virtual blessings (Exod. 20:6, 12b). These clauses remind hearers of the link between

their personal fate/fortune and their response to the revealed will of their Suzerain.

e. *The declaration of the people's response* (Exod. 20:18–21; cf. Deut. 5:22–33). Both literary contexts of the Decalogue report the people's acceptance of the document and a recognition of its revelatory significance. The Deuteronomy version ends with a summary blessing as a reward for obedience (5:31–33), also common to ancient Hittite treaty forms.

f. *The deposit clause* (Exod. 24:12; 31:18; cf. Deut. 4:13). In keeping with ancient custom, the divine Suzerain produced two copies of the Decalogue. As noted earlier, long-standing tradition has it that the first of the two tablets contained those commands that dealt with Israel's vertical relationship to God, and the second dealt with horizontal relationships. While devotionally and homiletically interesting, this interpretation is without exegetical or contextual foundation.

The need for two identical stone tablets accords with ancient Near Eastern practice of providing each party to a covenant with a copy of the agreement. In Hittite contexts, each party to a treaty would take a copy home and deposit it in the temple of their respective deities, where they would be under that god's oversight but from where they could be retrieved and read aloud at prescribed intervals. In the case of the Israelite covenant, since YHWH was the only God that existed, he could obviously not take his copy home and deposit it in the temple of another divine guarantor. But deposited inside the ark of the covenant, which was located in his presence inside the holy of holies, YHWH's tablet reminded him of his covenant commitment to Israel and guaranteed that he would never forget or renege on that commitment.

The second copy represented Israel. Since it was also placed inside the ark of the covenant, it was also deposited

in the holy of holies in YHWH's presence, but for a different reason. More closely resembling the Hittite practice, this tablet invoked YHWH as the guarantor of Israel's fidelity. He would hold them accountable for any violations of its principles, which meant infidelity to him. Thus, we have one location for the two tablets but two parties, two tablets, and two different covenantal functions. However, unlike the Hittite custom, the Israelite copy could not be retrieved for use in covenant-renewal events because, being located inside the ark inside the holy of holies, it was inaccessible to human eyes or hands. Apparently in preparation for the first covenant-ratification ceremony, Moses had produced his own written copy of the document (Exod. 24:4). However, because the document reduced the covenant worldview to ten principles, it could easily be memorized and recited orally at covenant-renewal events, as Moses did to preface his second address in Deuteronomy 5 (see further below).

Although the Decalogue was not the only part of the Pentateuch associated with the covenant (cf. the Covenant Document in Exod. 24:7), the narrative of Exodus 20–24 and Moses in his recollections in Deuteronomy 4:10–14 recognized this as the original and official covenant document, announced to the people directly by YHWH himself and written by his own hand (Exod. 24:12; 31:18; Deut. 10:1–4). However, the Decalogue did not function as a law code to be administered in the courts; it was a foundational statement of principle, outlining a worldview that began by declaring YHWH's past grace in redeeming Israel from bondage and then offered a sampling of significant dimensions of covenant righteousness expected of YHWH's vassals. As Exodus 19:4 and the preamble to the Decalogue emphasize, YHWH called Israel primarily not to conformity to a code of laws but to a relationship with their gracious Redeemer.

2. THE COVENANT DOCUMENT (EXOD. 21:1-23:19)

The Decalogue was indeed the foundational and official covenant document, but it did not exhaust the terms of YHWH's covenant. Indeed, we may interpret the other constitutional documents as elaborations and practical explications of the worldview represented by the Decalogue. The Covenant Document, encompassing Exodus 21:1–23:19, derives its name from Exodus 24:7, which describes Moses taking “the written document of the covenant” (*sēper habbērît*) and reading it in the hearing of all the people as part of the ceremony ratifying the covenant between YHWH and Israel. Having heard the “words” (*děbārîm*) of the Decalogue and the “stipulations” (*mišpāṭîm*) of the Covenant Document, the people declared the third time, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do” (24:7; cf. 19:8; 24:3). Whereas the Decalogue consists of ten “words” and derives its name from the heading of the narrative in Exodus 20:1, the heading to the Covenant Document in Exodus 21:1 identifies its contents as *mišpāṭîm*—that is, YHWH's “judgments/determinations” concerning Israel's appropriate response to the privilege and mission represented by the covenant. Whereas the Decalogue consists entirely of unconditional (apodictic) statements in the second person, the Covenant Document consists largely of conditional statements in the third person. These involve mostly (though not exclusively) casuistic (conditional) stipulations governing Israel's ethical expression of devotion to YHWH in response to his past graces (21:1–23:13) and conclude with provisions for regular national celebration of YHWH's grace at the central sanctuary (23:14–19). Although the Covenant Document was cast largely in apodictic form (imperative and unconditional), faithful Israelites likely treated the Festivals of Unleavened Bread (linked to Passover), Harvest (Weeks), and Ingathering (Booths) as invitations to be

accepted with joy and celebration. The combinations of ethical and cultic ordinances in a single document highlight the link between worship and ethics. True and acceptable cultic worship arises out of and inspires worshipful living.

3. THE INSTRUCTIONS ON HOLINESS (LEV. 17-26)

Often referred to by scholars as “the Holiness Code,” the Instructions on Holiness are distinguished from the other constitutional documents by their emphasis on holiness in several dimensions: (1) YHWH identified himself as the Holy One (*qādôš*).⁸ (2) YHWH identified himself as the one who makes Israel holy (*qiddēš*, “he sanctifies them”).⁹ (3) YHWH challenged Israel to “sanctify yourselves” (*hitqaddēš*, 20:7) and “be holy” (*tihyû qēdōšîm*).¹⁰ (4) Many of the articles and persons discussed in this section are described as holy (*qōdeš*): YHWH’s name (20:3; 22:2, 32), sacrificial food (19:8), ordinary food (19:24), sacred bread (21:22; 24:9), food dedicated to YHWH,¹¹ convocations,¹² a place (tabernacle, 24:9), and a time (Year of Jubilee, 25:12).

As for the content of this long section, it involves a catchall of moral exhortations, cultic regulations, and legal prescriptions. We may only speculate what use the ancient Israelites made of these Instructions on Holiness. Whether they functioned as a catechism for young people at home or in a place associated with the sanctuary, or as a guide for priests and Levites in their ministry to the far corners of the nation from their bases in the Levitical towns, this document clarified what YHWH had meant when he referred to his people as “a kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” in Exodus 19:5.

In its present literary context, the Instructions on Holiness function as an exposition of the nature of Israel’s covenant relationship with YHWH. The eighteenfold occurrence of YHWH’s self-introduction as “I am YHWH your God,”¹³ which represents an adaptation of the covenant formula “I am

your God, and you are my people” (cf. 20:26; 26:12), reinforces this conclusion. We may treat Leviticus 19:2, “You shall be holy as I, YHWH, your God am holy,” as the watchword of this document.

The variety of topics and their relatively unorganized presentation in chapter 19 declare that the ethical principle of *imitatio dei* (imitation of God) represented by the charge in verse 2 applies to all of life. Looking far ahead to the time when the Israelites would be settled in the land that YHWH had promised them, this document seeks to govern the life of the Israelites as YHWH’s vassals (‘*ăbādîm*, Lev. 25:42, 55) living in YHWH’s land (25:23).

The addition of chapter 26 affirms the covenantal nature of this document. This chapter not only refers to the covenant six times (vv. 9, 15, 25, 42, 44, 45), but its content, consisting of blessings and curses, also accords with the pattern of ancient Hittite treaties, which typically followed up the stipulations with declarations of blessings as a reward for obedience, and curses as consequences of disobedience. Because 26:46 is cast as a formal conclusion (colophon) to an official document, chapter 27 seems to have been added as an amendment or addendum to the constitution, as were a series of texts in the book of Numbers.^{[14](#)}

At the end of Leviticus 26 YHWH concluded the formal part of the Instructions on Holiness by casting his gaze into the distant future. When YHWH will have punished his people for persistent rebellion against him by imposing on them all the covenant curses, and the Israelites amend their ways and turn from their iniquity, he will remember his covenant with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and his covenant with their ancestors whom he had brought out of Egypt expressly to become their God. With this allusion to the covenant formula and a final self-identification, “I am YHWH,” the revelation at Sinai concludes. All that remains for the narrator is to declare the

end of this stage of the Israelite covenantal story: “These are the ordinances [*haḥuqqîm*] and the stipulations [*hammišpāṭîm*] and the instructions [*hattôrôt*] of the covenant that YHWH instituted [*nātan*] between himself and the sons of Israel at Mount Sinai, mediated by Moses” (Lev. 26:46).

4. SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ISRAEL’S CONSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTS

From early times, but especially since Martin Luther, Christians have struggled with these constitutional documents. Many dismiss the laws of the Covenant Document and the Instructions on Holiness, as well as the Deuteronomic Torah (see chap. 7 below) as stipulations of the now defunct and old Mosaic/Sinaitic covenant, which has been replaced by a new covenant that knows no laws but the “law of love.” These laws keep in bondage those who try to keep them, but through the liberating work of Christ, we are now “free from the law, O happy condition!” Some have (often begrudgingly) preserved the Decalogue—always referred to as “the Ten Commandments”—as Christian Scripture, but to do so, they must regard it either as distinctively natural law or as a grand summary of God’s universal and timeless moral will, hence binding on them in some sense.

To be sure, the Decalogue was special in several senses; it alone was (1) communicated to Israel directly by YHWH himself; (2) preserved in duplicate on tablets of stone; (3) written by God’s own finger (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10; 10:4); (4) housed in its own special repository, the ark of the covenant of YHWH;¹⁵ and (5) stored in the holy of holies (Exod. 26:33–34; Lev. 16:2), never to be seen by human eyes.

However, to distinguish it radically from the other constitutional documents in terms of relevance and validity

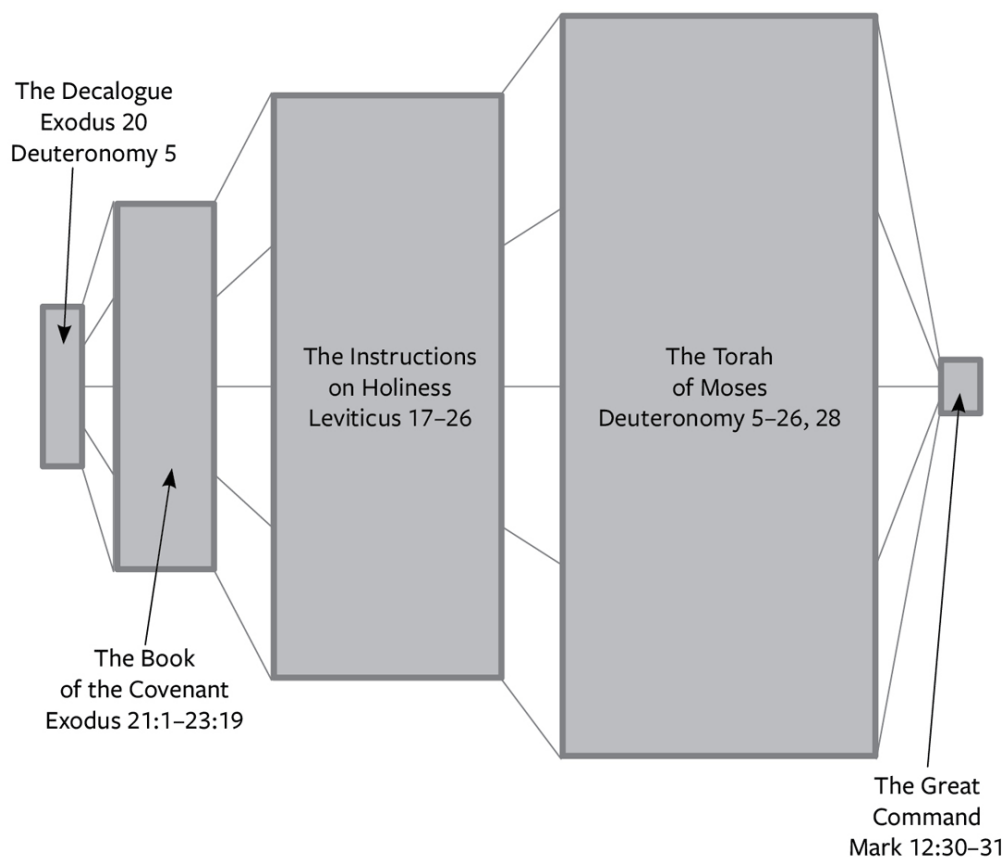
for Christians is untenable for several reasons. First, although the production and storage of the Decalogue were unique, to view the Decalogue as natural law is misleading—as if it were Israel’s contribution to universal culture arrived at through reason and therefore uniquely still in its force, in contrast to Israel’s other constitutional documents. Regarding its origin, like all the other covenant documents, the Decalogue was divinely revealed (Exod. 20:1), intended for a particular people whom YHWH had redeemed from slavery in Egypt (20:2) and who were looking ahead to life in the land of Canaan (20:12). But there is no evidence whatsoever, either in the First Testament or in the New Testament that among the constitutional documents the Decalogue had unique force or authority, either for Israel or for Christians, or that it embodied the moral will of God more perfectly than the rest of the Sinai revelation or Moses’ exposition thereof in Deuteronomy. Although Moses cited the Decalogue in full in his farewell addresses to Israel (Deut. 5:6–21), we have to listen very carefully to hear any echoes of it elsewhere in the First Testament.¹⁶ Excerpts recur in the New Testament, but we should be realistic about the New Testament evidence. The center of gravity involves a single event repeated in the Synoptic Gospels,¹⁷ and Paul quotes four of the ten commands in Romans 13:9, but the point made in each case involves a much bigger issue. Other citations of individual commands appeal to statements that are not distinctly decalogic (Matt. 5:21, 27; Eph. 6:2).

Second, this approach fundamentally misunderstands the nature and function of law in the Pentateuch and the relationship between the Decalogue and the other constitutional documents (see fig. 6.3). This document is the foundation stone of a covenant whose terms would be spelled out in increasing detail with subsequent revelation. With ten firm declarations, the Decalogue sketches a worldview and covenantal ethic to be embodied by those

whom YHWH had graced with redemption. This ethic is not different from that called for in the Covenant Document, the Instructions on Holiness, or the Torah of Deuteronomy. Indeed, the same epithet, “words of the covenant” (*dibrê habbērît*), is used of both the Decalogue (Exod. 34:28) and the Torah of Moses (Deut. 29:1 [28:69]). Furthermore, Jesus summarized this covenantal ethic brilliantly by distilling the point of Israel’s laws to a single bipartite statement: “You shall demonstrate love to YHWH your God with your whole heart/mind, your whole being, and all your resources, and you shall demonstrate love to your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27; fig. 6.3).

Figure 6.3

The Evolution of Israel’s Constitutional Tradition



Frustratingly, even among those who insist that the Decalogue retains its authoritative role for Christians, many remove the seventh-day Sabbath as irrelevant because it was supposedly part of Israel's cultic/ritual observances that ended with the coming of Christ. Observing that the New Testament never endorses the ordinance, some argue that it is not part of "the law of Christ" or that this was part of the shadow institutions that point to a future reality fulfilled in Christ. Supposedly, like the food laws and circumcision, this ordinance is rendered obsolete because in Christ the new covenant declares the end of the old covenant.

The first of these arguments is flawed on three counts. First, it is based on silence: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In fact, one may argue for the reverse hermeneutic: Christians should limit features of First Testament law that are passé especially for gentile Christians to what the New Testament declares to be so (like the food laws and circumcision, Acts 10:9-16; 15:1-20). Because the New Testament does not declare the seventh-day Sabbath ended, we should assume that it continues, as did the apostles in the book of Acts.

Second, and more seriously, it reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the Sabbath command and the context in which it is embedded. The seventh-day Sabbath was not part of Israel's cultic system. On the one hand, Israelites were observing it before they had built the tabernacle or YHWH had established the institutions associated with it, not to mention before the Decalogue had been codified as Israel's foundational constitutional document (cf. Exod. 16:22-30). On the other hand, although Levitical regulations call for special Sabbath offerings, the First Testament offers no information on what sort of cultic activities the Israelites observed on the seventh-day Sabbath. This was a domestic observance whose primary function was to give people and draft animals a chance to catch their breath, recover from

the stress and weariness of everyday work, and enjoy the shalom that YHWH had created by blessing their work.

Although the other “sabbaths” (annual and monthly observances) were essential parts of the religious cultic observances—which were declared obsolete in Christ (Heb. 8:13)—the seventh-day Sabbath ordinance addressed a fundamentally ethical concern, as did the remaining nine commands of the Decalogue. Therefore, it fell under the supreme command as identified by Jesus (Mark 12:30–31), which in its two dimensions captures the essence of the ethical worldview of the Decalogue.

Addressed principally to heads of households, the Decalogue seeks to ensure that they always act in the interest of others. The first two commands obviously seek the interest of YHWH, who had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and stamped them with his name. The remaining eight seek the interest of the members of their households and their neighbors. When we recognize that the Hebrew word *’āhab* and its Greek equivalent *agapaō* mean “covenant commitment demonstrated in action in the interest of the other person,” we understand Jesus’ comment that the entire Torah and the Prophets “hang” (*krematai*) on the two commands (Matt. 22:40): they summarize the ethical response to YHWH’s grace in calling Israel to covenant relationship with himself.

The Ritual and Cultic Constitutional Documents

This brief treatment of the Sabbath provides a convenient segue to a discussion of the second and large group of ordinances revealed at Sinai and preserved in Exodus–Leviticus that involved cultic and liturgical matters: “Instructions concerning the Passover” (Exod. 12–13), “Instructions concerning the Tabernacle” (Exod. 25–31), “Instructions concerning Sacrifice and Ritual Purity” (Lev. 1–16); “Instructions concerning Duties of the Levites” (Num.

3-4; 7-8), “Additional Instructions on Offerings” (Num. 15; 18-19). Faithful lay Israelites were surely interested in these instructions, particularly the regulations concerning the national observances of Passover, Unleavened Bread (Exod. 12-13), and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, Lev. 16), the laws concerning ritual purity—most of which concerned domestic realities (Lev. 11-25)—and the ritual sacrifices outlined in detail (Lev. 1:1-6:7). But some of these regulations involved one-off instructions (the construction of the tabernacle, its furnishings, and personnel; Exod. 25-31) or particularly priestly issues (Lev. 6:8 [1]-10:20).

Many modern readers find these instructions tedious and struggle to see the relevance for themselves. There was a time when I felt sorry for the Israelites being burdened with these obligations. However, the fact that YHWH would make such detailed provision for his people to relate to him in an ongoing manner demonstrates supreme grace. In the first instance, these instructions reminded ancient Israelites and modern readers that, although YHWH desired wholehearted and full-bodied allegiance, he did not expect perfection on the part of his devotees. Indeed, the detail with which he prescribed these rituals reflects his determination to relate to his people on an ongoing basis despite their inevitable failures.

Second, while we may find the instructions tedious, this reflects our distance from ancient perceptions of human beings’ relationship with the divine and blinds us to the intensity of the ancients’ sense of alienation from God. We need to interpret texts like Leviticus 4-6 not as relics of an archaic and primitive worldview, in contrast to our modern sophisticated and secularized world, but in the light of ancient Near Easterners’ desperation to relate positively to their gods and their insecurity before them. Their disposition is reflected in many ancient texts, especially prayers, of which the following is typical:

Prayer to Every God

May the god whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me;
May the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.

.....

In ignorance, I have eaten that forbidden of my god;
In ignorance, I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess.

.....

O my god, (my) transgressions are many; great are (my) sins.
O my goddess, (my) transgressions are many; great are (my) sins.

.....

The transgression that I have committed, indeed I do not know;
The sin that I have done, indeed I do not know.

.....

The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me;
The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering upon
me.

Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the
hand;

When I weep they do not come to my side.

I utter laments, but no one hears me;

I am troubled; I am overwhelmed; I cannot see.

O my god, merciful one, I address to you the prayer,
“Ever incline to me”;

I kiss the feet of my goddess; I crawl before you.

How long, O my goddess, whom I know or do not know,
before your hostile heart will be quieted?

Man is dumb; he knows nothing;

Mankind, everyone that exists--what does he know?

Whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know.

.....

Remove my transgressions (and) I will sing your praise.

May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted toward me;

Like a real mother (and) a real father may it be quieted toward me.

(adapted from *ANET*, 391-92)

This pathetic prayer indicts the religious systems of the world around ancient Israel and illustrates the stark contrast between them and the privileged Israelites in their relationship to their God, YHWH. To be sure, with his keen sense of sin and his awareness of ultimate accountability before deity, this person expressed greater enlightenment than many people have in our own day. However, he faced three insurmountable problems: (1) he did not know which

god he had offended; (2) he did not know what the offense was; (3) he did not know what it would take to satisfy the god/gods and restore their goodwill.

This provides a conceptual framework within which to interpret YHWH's revelation of his cultic provisions. YHWH had built into his covenant the answers to all three questions that frustrated this ancient Mesopotamian. First, he revealed himself to his people with clarity and invited them to address him by his name, YHWH (Exod. 3-4; 15; 34:6-7). Second, through his revelation of the covenant stipulations at Sinai, he gave his people a clear view of the boundaries of acceptable ethical and cultic behavior so that the Israelites were without excuse. Third, he provided his people with a place, consecrated personnel, and a set of rituals through which the universal and personal problems of sin could be resolved. In these three provisions, we observe both the scope of divine grace and the brilliance of the gospel embodied in the Sinai revelation.

It is easy for modern readers to miss the gospel in texts like Leviticus 1-6, but if our ears are attuned to divine grace in the stipulations of the Israelite covenant, we will recognize the gift in these ritual provisions. This is evident in chapters 1-3 in the sevenfold occurrence of the variations of the summary declaration "It is a gift, a pleasing waft for YHWH."¹⁸ This idiom, which surfaced for the first time in Genesis 8:21, derives from the ancient view that gods were always angry with their devotees, and a primary reason for presenting offerings before a deity was to remove the scowl from the god's face and replace it with a smile—in the words of the Aaronic blessing, "to light up the face" (*yā'ēr pānîm*) of the deity (Num. 6:25). When people offered their whole burnt offerings (*'ôlâ*, Lev. 1:1-17) and the portions of tribute (*minḥâ*, 2:1-16) and fellowship offerings (*šĕlāmîm*, 3:1-17) reserved for the deity, the smoke and aroma would rise to the god's nose, producing a smile and causing the deity to look with favor on the person who had provided this

sensation. Because YHWH has no nose—in contrast to the images of deities the ancients would craft—the language here is obviously metaphorical and anthropomorphic. But in Leviticus the idiom highlights the effectiveness of the worshiper's action: these voluntary gestures of submission, homage, and fellowship were accepted by the Deity.

In Leviticus 4:1–6:7 the issues change. In chapters 1–3 the offerings assumed the worshiper's and Deity's positive reciprocal dispositions, but following that, YHWH addresses the problem of sin, which by definition involves the vassal's violation of the Suzerain's will. To repair the disturbance in the relationship caused by sin among the Israelites, YHWH graciously revealed a series of reparation and restorative offerings that covered virtually every eventuality. Modern readers may bog down with the details and the repetition involved in these instructions, but this should not blind our eyes or close our ears to the gospel refrain that punctuates this segment of text at nine critical points: “Thus the priest shall make atonement for them [*wěkipper 'ălêhem hakkōhēn*], and he/they will be forgiven.”¹⁹ Through sin, reparation, and guilt offerings, the ruptured relationship could be restored.

Whereas Israel's neighbors' efforts to win forgiveness of sin from their deities were all experimental and never offered assurance, YHWH in his mercy not only provided sacrifices that worked but also happily declared to the Israelites that if they brought these sacrifices with contrite and penitent hearts and in accordance with his revealed will, they could know that their sins were forgiven and the relationship was restored (cf. Ps. 32:1–2). With their clear knowledge of the will of YHWH, the faithful in Israel were an incredibly privileged people and the envy of the nations. Unlike other peoples, whose gods of wood and stone crafted by human hands neither saw nor heard nor smelled (Deut. 4:28; cf. Ps. 135:15–17), YHWH heard his people when they called upon him (Deut. 4:7). And unlike the nations, whose

idols had mouths but did not speak (Ps. 135:16), Israel's God has spoken. He had graciously given his people statutes and judgments that were perfect in righteousness (Deut. 4:8): (1) they revealed with perfect clarity who he was; (2) they revealed with perfect clarity what sin was; and (3) they revealed with perfect clarity how that sin could be removed and a relationship of peace and confidence with him established/maintained.

EXCURSUS

The Levitical Covenant

Introduction

Among biblical covenants the Levitical covenant is an anomaly. It is the most narrowly defined covenant, and its scope is consistently parochial, relevant primarily for the people of Israel. Like the Adamic and Davidic covenants, the Levitical priestly covenant was administrative in function, but it was more restricted in its scope and jurisdiction than either of those. The scope of priestly and Levitical service in Israel was bilateral rather than trilateral; their role was to promote the health of the relationship between two members of the tripartite Israelite covenant—that is, YHWH and his people Israel. The institution was not established to serve the interests of priests, any more than Adam was appointed to serve the interests of Adam or David to serve David. Rather, priests were ordained to serve the spiritual interests of the citizenry and in so doing maintain divine pleasure with their people.

Unlike prophets, who often ministered to non-Israelites,^{[20](#)} Levites apparently served only Israelites. Ezekiel, an Aaronide/Zadokite Levite, spent his entire prophetic ministry in Babylon, but the book that bears his name never reports him engaging Babylonians. His oracles against foreign nations (Ezek. 25–32) are addressed to hypothetical audiences, while his real rhetorical audience consisted of fellow Judean exiles. In contrast to the non-Levite Isaiah (e.g., Isa. 56), Ezekiel never portrays the nations as beneficiaries of divine grace. His contemporary, Jeremiah of Anathoth, was also a priest (Jer. 1:1) and addressed

many oracles hypothetically to the nations (Jer. 46–51), but neither prophet ministered to them nor contemplated their inclusion in YHWH’s program of cosmic redemption. YHWH had ordained the Israelites as a nation to be his kingdom of priests (*mamleket kōhănîm*) and a sanctified nation/people (*gôy qādôš*) in the interest of the nations,²¹ but this was never part of the Levitical priestly assignment. However, because Jeremiah and later Malachi speak of YHWH’s relationship with the Levites in covenantal terms, and Jeremiah envisions a long-range relationship (*kol hayyāmîm*, Jer. 33:18), even declaring its permanence (33:19–22), we must consider the Levitical covenant within the scope of YHWH’s grand plan of redemption.

The Biblical Background to the Levitical Priesthood

By definition and function, priests are human agents charged with the responsibility of maintaining the relations between deities and their subjects/devotees. In Hebrew this office is represented by the word *kōhēn*, based on the root *khn*, which in the *piel* stem means “to act as priest.”²² Significantly, the First Testament never applies this word to divine or semidivine beings or to earthly creatures other than humans.

How people became priests varied. Judges 17:7–13 describes Micah, acting as the head of a household, “ordaining” a Levite as “priest” over his private domain. Later Danite tribesmen conscripted this Levite (identified in Judg. 18:30 as Jonathan, a grandson of Moses) and appointed him priest of the town of Dan (formerly Laish) after he accepted their argument that being priest for a tribe (*šēbet*) or a clan (*mišpāḥâ*) was preferable to being priest in a private household.²³ After the division of the kingdom, Jeroboam expelled the legitimate Levitical priests from his domain (2 Chron. 11:14) and appointed priests “from among all the people” at his national sanctuaries (1 Kings 12:31–33). Second Kings 17:28–29 observes that after the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians, syncretistic aliens who were settled in this province worshiped YHWH, the God of this land, but they appointed all sorts of commoners to serve as their priests. However, the narrators assess the actions in all these events as apostate and rejected by YHWH.

YHWH Elohim charged Adam and Eve with the sacred responsibility of governing, guarding, and serving the garden of Eden and ultimately the earth on his behalf, but narrators never describe their roles with priestly language. This is as expected, since in the pre-fall world, relationships involving the divine Creator, his vice-regents, and creation were wholesome and flawless. Reflecting

the *šālôm* that characterized this environment, YHWH would personally visit the garden and his administrators in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). However, the rebellion of the vice-regents turned this world upside down, disrupting all relationships and necessitating divine intervention through “priestly” mediators.

Mystery shrouds the origins of sacrifice and other priestly rituals. Many interpret YHWH’s clothing Adam and Eve with animal skin (Gen. 3:21) as a precursor of sacrifice, but this is unlikely on several counts: (1) The text is silent on the slaughter of an animal and on the species of animal that provided the skin. (2) The account involves no sacrificial or atonement language. (3) The action was performed by God rather than humans. (4) The precipitant to YHWH’s action was Adam and Eve’s pathetic effort to cover their genitalia with fig leaves. YHWH’s response suggests that its primary significance lay in its affirmation of shame over the exposure of organs of excretion and regeneration in a world of shattered relationships.

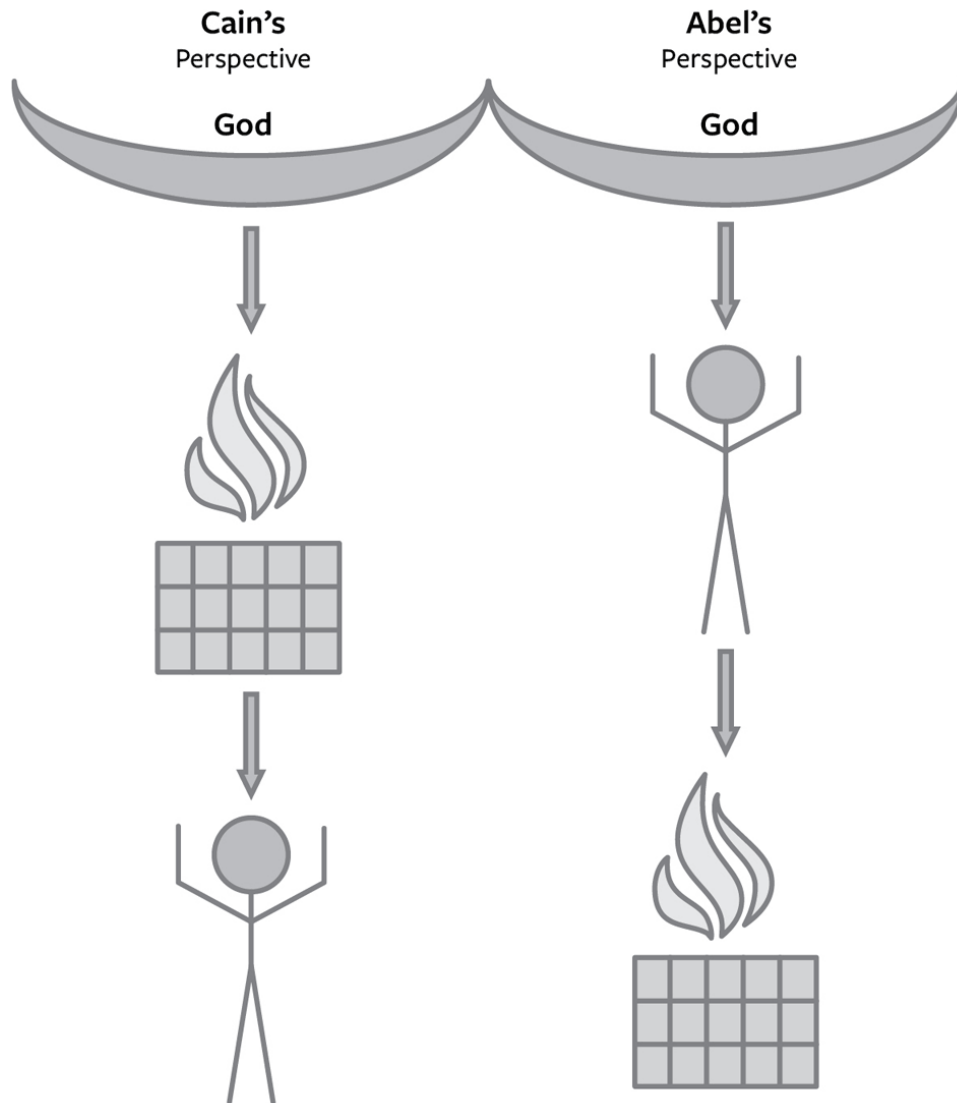
Lacking explicit revelation on the subject, it seems best to trace the origin of the universal impulse to try to placate divine fury (Mal. 1:9, “smooth the face” of deity) to specific divine revelation when YHWH expelled the first humans from the garden. We may imagine that YHWH graciously revealed a way of continuing fellowship with his vice-regent even in an environment of estranged relationships. Whatever the origin of priestly rituals, the literary door to the post-fall world opens with Cain and Abel engaged in routine and regular sacrificial rituals (Gen. 4:2–5), each presenting a gift of tribute (*minḥâ*) to YHWH from the fruit of his labor. But from the beginning we notice that God did not automatically accept these sacrificial gifts. He accepted Abel’s tribute, not because it involved an animal (from the beginning and in later priestly legislation grain and flesh forms were equally acceptable) or because Cain’s did not involve blood—like Abel, he brought what his farming efforts had produced—but because Cain’s heart and life were off course. The syntax of Genesis 4:4–5 identifies the key: YHWH looked upon Abel and accepted his tribute offering, and YHWH looked upon Cain and rejected his tribute offering. The contrast between them reveals a fundamental principle in the biblical theology of sacrifice: God does not look upon people through the lenses of the rituals they perform but the reverse; he looks upon their rituals through the lenses of their hearts and lives (see fig. E.1).

As apparently adult men, Cain and Abel performed priestly rituals for themselves. The worship of their younger brother Seth involved verbal expression of devotion to and dependence upon YHWH (4:25–26). The idiom “to call out in the name of YHWH” may mean either to proclaim the name of YHWH²⁴ or to invoke YHWH by verbalizing his name,²⁵ presumably in praise or prayer. By the time we get to Enoch (5:22–24) and Noah (6:9), authentic piety was expressed as “walking with God,” which speaks of life as a journey,

signifying ongoing intimate communion and fellowship, as opposed to ritual actions. But this did not mean that either God or his vice-regents had dispensed with ritual performances. When YHWH instructed Noah to take into his ark a male and female of every “ritually unclean” animal, and seven of every “ritually clean” animal (Gen. 7:2-3), Noah seemed to know these categories instinctively. And after the great deluge was over, his first act was to construct an altar to YHWH and sacrifice some animals on it. For his part, YHWH was pleased with the smell of the offerings (8:20-21), an idiom for his acceptance of the ritual expression of homage and submission—even though the human heart had not been altered by the deluge (v. 21).

Figure E.1

Two Perspectives on Worship: Cain and Abel



Up to this point, all ritual expressions of faith had been performed by individuals for themselves; in Genesis 8:20–21 Noah's sacrifices were in effect the actions of a priest on behalf of his family and the animals that survived the flood. This pattern prevailed in the patricentric world of Israel's ancestors as well. Once Abram reached the promised land, it seems that he built altars to YHWH wherever he stopped. Sometimes this was his response to YHWH's appearance to him (12:7; 22:9); sometimes these were spontaneous expressions of gratitude and devotion to YHWH (12:8; 13:18). The same applied to Isaac (26:24–25) and Jacob (33:20; 35:1–15). These accounts tend to report the involvement of only the respective patriarchs; thus Genesis 35:1–15 highlights Jacob's role as the head of the household on a pilgrimage from Shechem to Bethel. Decades later, at Beersheba and at the beginning of his journey with his household to Egypt, Jacob paused to offer sacrifices to the God of his father,

Isaac, and God responded with reassurances that this journey was within his plan of making him a great nation there (46:1-4). In these early stages, when the size of the chosen clan was still numerable (ca. 70; Exod. 1:5), the patriarch served as clan priest, as did Job in Job 1:1-5.

Remarkably, in these narratives and deep into the book of Exodus, the narrator reserves the expression “priest” (*kōhēn*) for persons outside the chosen clan: Melchizedek, the Canaanite king-priest of Salem (Gen. 14:18); Potephra, the Egyptian father-in-law of Joseph (41:45, 50; 46:20; cf. also 47:22, 26); and Jethro, the Midianite father-in-law of Moses (Exod. 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). We encounter the word with reference to Israelites for the first time in Exodus 19:6, where YHWH ordained the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob collectively as a “kingdom of priests” when he formalized his covenant relationship and transferred to them the Abrahamic commission to bless the whole world.

Early in the Sinai narrative, in YHWH’s instructions on preparing the nation for their audience with him, we hear of “priests” (*kōhānīm*) in the Israelite community for the first time (Exod. 19:22, 24), though in this context they, like the people, were barred from direct access to the presence of YHWH. We may only speculate who these priests might have been. Significantly, the earlier instructions for observing the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod. 12-13) are silent on professional religious functionaries. The narrator does not mention priests even when Moses informed Pharaoh of the Israelites’ intent to go into the desert and offer “whole burnt offerings” (*’ōlôt*) and “sacrifices” (*zēbāhīm*) to YHWH the God of Israel (Exod. 8:27 [23]; 10:25). Indeed, Jethro, the priest of Midian, would introduce them to these rituals (18:12). Perhaps the priests of 18:19-26 consisted of a group of “super elders” whom Moses and Aaron had set apart to perform divine service on YHWH’s behalf. In the climactic scene of the covenant-ratification ceremony in 24:1, 9-11, the narrator mentions Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu (Exod. 6:23), and seventy men selected “from the elders of Israel,” but persons identified as “priests” are missing. It appears that Moses performed all the ritual actions in the ratification ceremony. Whether or not the Levites had expressed priestly interests before the aftermath of the golden-calf affair (32:26-29), the Levites as a tribe (with the exception of Aaron) distinguished themselves in their zeal for YHWH—for which YHWH rewarded them with a special blessing.

The Historical Roots of the Levites’ Covenant Relationship with YHWH

Although several narrative texts offer sketchy details on the origins of YHWH's relationship with the Levites, Moses' "blessing" of the tribe in Deuteronomy 33:8–11 celebrates their special covenant relationship with him. The preface to the tribal sayings in Deuteronomy 33 characterizes them collectively as a "blessing" (*běṛākâ*, 33:1), but Moses cast his pronouncement concerning Levi as a prayer to YHWH. This "blessing" focuses on the ministry of the Levitical tribe within Israel, mentioning three significant priestly functions: manipulating the oracular stones (Tummim and Urim, v. 8), teaching the Torah (v. 10a–b), and performing sacrificial rituals (v. 10c–d).

The reference to the Tummim and Urim is surprising, not only because it reverses the usual order of the oracular stones, but more significantly because this is the only place where the Hebrew Bible grants the Levitical tribe generally access to these objects, which were to be used to determine the will of God in certain contexts of decision making;²⁶ other texts identify the person who manipulates them specifically as a *kōhēn*, "priest."²⁷ Furthermore, this "blessing" presents possession of the Tummim and Urim as a reward for the Levite's fidelity to YHWH (*ḥāsîdekā*, "your faithful one") at Massah and Meribah. But this presents several problems. On the one hand, the desert narratives recount two events at two places involving the Israelites contending (*rîb*) with YHWH, both of which were renamed Meribah (place of testing): one was before the establishment of the covenant at Sinai/Horeb (Exod. 17:1–7), and the other was on the verge of entry into the promised land (Num. 20:1–13). On the other hand, whereas Moses' blessing (Deut. 33:8) has YHWH testing the Israelites, both the narrator (Exod. 17:2, 7; Ps. 78:18) and Moses himself (Deut. 6:16) suggested that it was the Israelites who tested YHWH. Furthermore, none of these accounts mentions the Levites, let alone praises them for their valor. As far as we know, Moses and Aaron were the only Levites involved in these events. If the lack of water tested these two men, in the latter instance both failed miserably (Num. 20:12; 27:14; Deut. 32:51). Remarkably, the earlier narratives recount two instances of Israelite apostasy where Levites had proved faithful and were rewarded for their defense of righteousness: at Sinai, involving the golden calf (Exod. 32:25–29), and at Baal-peor, involving the worship of Baal of Peor (Num. 25:1–13). In Deuteronomy 33:8–10 Moses appears either to have conflated all four events into a single image, or he recalls an episode at Meribah/Massah that is not recorded in the Pentateuch. The accounts of the Sinai and Baal-peor events deserve a closer look.

Exodus 32:25–29

Moses' final statement in Exodus 32:25–29 is both dramatic and vague: “Today you have been ordained for the service of YHWH. Because each of you has acted against your son and your brother, today you have earned a blessing.” The language of ordination (*mil'û yedēkem*, lit., “your hands are full”)²⁸ suggests their authorization for divine service and qualification for YHWH's special blessing (*bērākā*). However, without explaining what that blessing might have been, the narrator drops the subject. Is this a reference to their special status of having YHWH as their personal “possession” (*naḥălā*),²⁹ or to their “grant” (*naḥălā*) of “the priesthood of YHWH (Josh. 18:7), or to the priestly portions of tithes and offerings received from the people (Num. 18:21–26; Deut. 18:1–5)? Deuteronomy 18:1–5 is especially significant because it speaks of YHWH electing (*bāḥar*) “the whole tribe of Levi” (v. 1) “out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the name of YHWH in perpetuity [*kol hayyāmîm*, lit., “all the days,” v. 5].”

Numbers 25:1–13

The narrator recounts the events at Shittim (Baal-peor) in graphic detail in Numbers 25:1–13, and the psalmist echoes this account poetically in Psalm 106:28–31. The account differs from the episode involving the golden calf (Exod. 32) in several significant respects. First, by simply describing the Levites' action, the earlier narrative had left the hearer to assess the protagonists' disposition; here the narrator explicitly identifies Phinehas' impassioned action (*qan'ô*) with YHWH's passion (*qin'âtî*, Num. 25:11). Second, although the earlier episode identified the impassioned protagonists as “all the sons of Levi” (Exod. 32:26, 28), here the valorous party was an individual Levite, identified twice by name, patronymic, and status: Phinehas, son of Eleazar the [high] priest” (Num. 25:7, 11). Along with the explicit reference to “his seed after him” (*zar'ô 'aḥărāyw*, 25:13), the involvement of an individual ties this text (and this covenant) more closely to the administrative Davidic covenant than to the corporate Israelite covenant. But the phrase “and to his seed after him” also links this episode with YHWH's declaration of the permanence and dynastic character of the Aaronic priesthood for the Israelites in Exodus 28:4.

Third, whereas Moses had identified the benefaction promised to all Levites in Exodus 32:29 generically as a “blessing” (*bērākā*), here (in Num. 25:13) YHWH characterized Phinehas' grant specifically as “a covenant of eternal/irrevocable priesthood” (*bērît kēhunnat 'ôlām*). Because Phinehas was the third member of the Aaronic line, it seems that “eternal/irrevocable priesthood” substituted broadly for “an eternal/irrevocable ordinance” (*ḥuqqat 'ôlām*) for Aaron and his

descendants in Exodus 28:43 and that it refers specifically to the priestly service of the Aaronides in the central sanctuary.

Fourth, although in Exodus 32 YHWH had not specified the nature of the “blessing,” here he declared that “the covenant of eternal/irrevocable priesthood” is “my covenant of peace” (*běřîtî šālôm*, Num. 25:12). YHWH was obviously the Suzerain within this covenant relationship, but the identity of the vassal is unclear. On first sight, it appears to be Phinehas. However, the collocation of the words “covenant” and “peace” recalls three other occurrences where they occur in a construct relation. Isaiah 54:10 involves a slightly modified version of this phrase: the suffix shifts from *běřîtî*, “my covenant [of peace]” to *šělômî*, “the covenant of my peace.” Ezekiel drops the suffix altogether in 34:25 and 37:26, speaking simply of “a covenant of peace.” Because these prophetic texts involve Israel as the beneficiary of YHWH’s “peace covenant,” we should probably do the same in Numbers 25:12. This makes the most sense in this context as well as in view of the “eternal ordinance” granted to Aaron in Exodus 28:43.

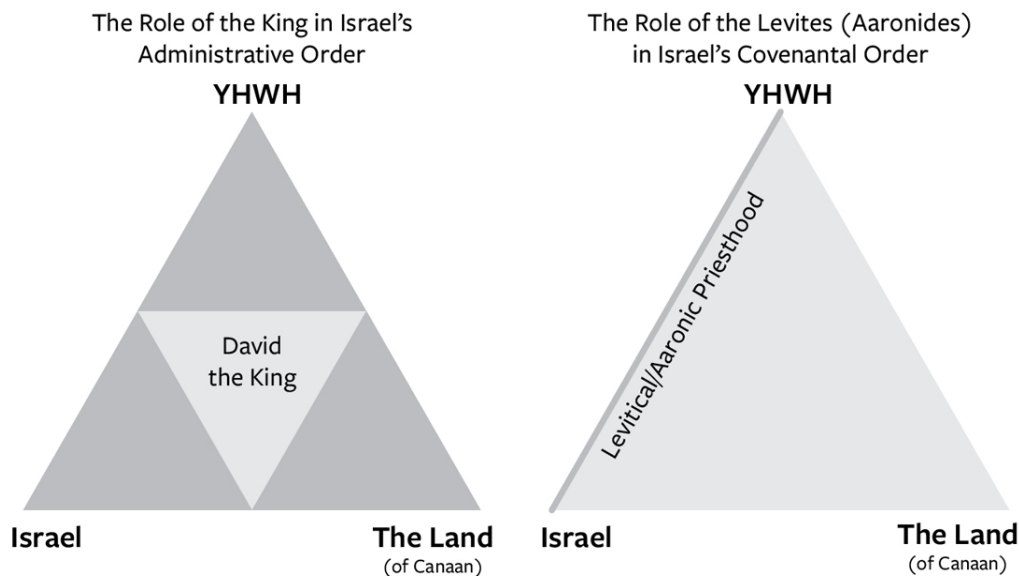
In principle, priesthoods do not exist for the officeholders. Rather, virtually by definition, priests function as administrators of relationships between divinities and their subjects—relationships that are always in danger of going off the rails. Outsiders often rooted this problem in the gods’ caprice or the profligacy of the subjects; by contrast, YHWH’s constancy and fidelity guaranteed that in Israel this could happen only through Israel’s impiety and rebellion against their divine Suzerain. For Israel, YHWH had appointed the Levites generally and the Aaronides particularly to the priesthood to maintain the *bilateral* relationship between the people of whom they were a part and whom they represented on the one hand, and YHWH on the other. This distinguished their role from that of the Davidic king, whom YHWH charged with administering the *trilateral* relationship involving YHWH, the people of Israel, and their land (fig. E.2).

Although Numbers 25:1–13 does not mention the Aaronic cultic responsibilities, Phinehas’ zealous actions in defense of YHWH’s place in the Israelite covenantal relationship and as an expression of YHWH’s own anger precipitated YHWH’s affirmation of the descendants of Aaron via Eleazar and Phinehas as his chosen administrators of this bilateral relationship. Accordingly, we may identify the covenant granted here³⁰ as the Aaronic covenant rather than the Phinehasite covenant. The relative paucity of references to Phinehas in the remainder of the First Testament contrasts with frequent references to priestly functionaries as “the house of Aaron”³¹ and “descendants of Aaron.”³² Expressions like “the seed/sons of Phinehas” never occur. Therefore, when we link the narratives of the Pentateuch with later references to YHWH’s covenant

with the Levites, we may interpret “the Aaronic covenant” as a subset of the Levitical covenant.

Figure E.2

A Comparison of the Functions of the Davidic and Levitical (Aaronic) Covenants



Later Reflection on the Levitical Covenant

The Levitical Covenant in Deuteronomy

We begin our examination of later reflection on the Levitical covenant with Deuteronomy. Remarkably, in his final pastoral addresses to his people, Moses mentioned his brother, Aaron, only three times. In 9:20 he recalled that Aaron's involvement in the golden-calf affair had so infuriated YHWH that if Moses had not interceded for him, YHWH would have killed him. In 10:6 Moses recalled the death of Aaron at Moserah, noting that his son Eleazar succeeded him in “ministering as priest” (*wayĕkahēn*). Finally, in 32:50 YHWH notes in passing that Aaron died and was gathered to his people at Mount Hor. Otherwise all priestly activity in the book of Deuteronomy involves the Levites as a tribe, identified simply as “Levi” (10:9; 27:12; 33:8), “the tribe of Levi,” or “the descendants of Levi.”³³

Although Moses never spoke of their relationship with YHWH as covenantal, he was remarkably explicit in speaking about their responsibilities as YHWH's

representatives to the people. On this count Deuteronomy 10:8-9 and 18:1-5 are especially significant. By locating the first of these statements immediately after his recollections of the aftermath of the golden-calf fiasco (9:1-10:7), Moses invited his hearers to link this text with the “blessing” (*běṛākā*) associated with the ordination of the Levites in Exodus 32:29. He highlighted the special status of the Levites in several ways. First, his use of the verb “to set apart” (*hibdîl*) recalls Numbers 16:9, where Moses had spoken of the descendants of Levi as being “separated from the congregation of Israel” by YHWH in order to bring them near to himself, to take care of the dwelling place of YHWH, and to serve the congregation by standing before them. The verb “to set apart” functions as an alternative for “to choose” (*bāḥar*, Deut. 18:5), which others use when speaking of YHWH’s election of Israel from all the nations (Lev. 20:24, 26; 1 Kings 8:53). Second, they were chosen “to stand before YHWH” (*‘āmad lipnê yhwh*; cf. Deut. 18:7). Third, instead of granting the Levites a territorial allotment like the rest of the tribes, YHWH offered himself as their grant (*naḥălâ*).³⁴ Numbers 18:6 speaks of the Levites as a tribe as a gift (*mattānâ*) to Israel, while at the same time being assigned to YHWH himself.

According to Deuteronomy 18:1-8, the Israelites were to compensate the Levites’ lack of a territorial holding by reserving for them specifically determined portions (*mišpāt*) of the offerings they brought to the central sanctuary. Although Numbers 18:1-24 had assigned these prebends to Aaron and the priestly personnel who performed the sacrificial rituals in the central sanctuary, speaking for YHWH in Deuteronomy 18:1-8, Moses granted access to “YHWH’s table” for all Levitical priests, reminding them and the rest of the Israelites of their special standing with YHWH. Moses invited lay citizens to the central sanctuary to celebrate in YHWH’s presence three times a year at the major national festivals (16:1-17), but he authorized Levites living in the far corners of the land, whenever they pleased, to come and join the temple personnel who lived there permanently. The text does not consider whether they would return to their residences in the Levitical towns and surrounding villages where they had been ministering.

Whereas earlier regulations had distinguished sharply between the roles of the Aaronic line of the tribe of Levi and the rest of the Levites, Deuteronomy blurs the distinction. Moses had obviously not forgotten their special role, for in 10:6 he mentioned that upon the death of Aaron, “Eleazar his son ministered as priest in his place.” In 17:9 and 26:3 “the priest who is in office at the time” probably involves the Aaronic high priest. The first text refers to “the Levitical priests—that is, the [assigned] judge who is in office at the time.” However, in his addresses, which Moses directed to the nation as a whole and which included the Levites as a tribe, he spoke of the Levitical priests in generic terms.

This also applies to the responsibilities assigned to the Levites, as discussed below.

Carrying the ark of the covenant of YHWH (Deut. 10:8; 31:9, 25). Whereas the early care for the ark had been assigned to the Kohathite clan of the tribe of Levi (Num. 3:30–31) and had applied to the period when the Israelites were in transit from Sinai/Horeb to the promised land (Num. 4:5; 10:33–36; cf. Deut. 1:33), Deuteronomy 10 and 31 assume that the ark will continue to be mobile, presumably leading the people when they march in religious processions (Josh. 3–4; 2 Sam. 6; 1 Kings 8) or being at the head of the army when engaged in YHWH's wars.³⁵

Representing the people before YHWH (Deut. 10:8; 18:7). While the idiom of standing before YHWH reflects the Levites' special status of having access to him,³⁶ the added comment "to minister to him" (*lěšārētô*) is vague. What sort of ministry to YHWH would this involve? In pagan contexts it would focus on the care and feeding of the gods, and with reference to the sacrifices presented by priests in the tabernacle/temple, this might apply. However, as noted earlier, priestly service involved representative service; the Levites appeared before YHWH on behalf of the people. The high priest's breastpiece, with engraved precious stones bearing the names of all the tribes, symbolized this role (Exod. 28:15–28; 39:8–14).

Representing YHWH before the people (Deut. 10:8). Moses declared this function particularly with the expression "to bless [the people] in the name of YHWH" (10:8; 21:5). Earlier YHWH had charged Aaron and his sons specifically to bless the Israelites and in so doing to stamp them with YHWH's name (Num. 6:23–27; cf. 1 Chron. 23:13). However, here the Levites' role seems specially to involve pronouncing on them the blessings of YHWH when they appeared before him in cultic worship and to announce that YHWH had accepted their worship and had declared them righteous (cf. Num. 6:25; Pss. 24:5; 129:8). Later, as the divinely appointed king who sat on "the throne of YHWH," David also performed this function (2 Sam. 6:18; 1 Chron. 16:2).

However, Moses did not limit this role as representative of YHWH to worship contexts. In his vision of Israel's judicial future, heads of households were ultimately responsible for the well-being of the community, which included the administration of justice (Deut. 16:18–19). If an insoluble case faced the elders, they were to bring it to the central sanctuary for adjudication (17:8–13). The central tribunal was not a group of civil magistrates who reinvestigated difficult cases (a sort of Supreme Court of appeal), but the Levitical priests. Most scholars view "the judge who is in office at that time" as a layperson who joins a group of priests (note the plural) to hear the case (cf. 19:15–21). However, the references to the sanctuary (17:8, 10) and the location of the procedure "before

YHWH³⁷ suggest that in 17:9 “the judge” (*haššōpēṭ*) functions appositionally to “the Levitical priests,” specifying an individual selected from among them to preside over the proceedings and to announce the decision. While the clause “who is [in office] in those days” leaves open whether these persons served for life like high priests or rotated off when their term expired, the use of the plural in 19:17 (*hakkōhānīm wēhaššōpēṭīm*, “the priests—that is, the judges”) suggests a panel of judges drawn from the priests. In Deuteronomy 17:9 the verb *dāraš*, “to seek,” means not “to [re-]investigate” but “to inquire,” to seek oracular guidance from YHWH. As priestly “judge,” the designated official is heir, not to the “judges” of Exodus 18:22 and 25 (or Deut. 1:13–16c), but to Moses, to whom the people came to “inquire” (*dāraš*) of God (Exod. 18:15, 19; Deut. 1:17). However, unlike Moses, apparently the priestly “judge” at the central sanctuary could use the Urim and Tummim to determine the divine verdict (*mišpāṭ*).

Serving as guardians and teachers of the Torah. From their role as “bearers of the ark [of the covenant]” (Deut. 10:8; 31:9, 25), we know the Levites were YHWH’s appointed guardians of the covenant, but 31:9–13 and 25–26 extend this charge dramatically to the Torah of Moses, which represents a paraenetic exposition of the covenant (cf. Deut. 29:1 [28:69]). By handing the Torah scroll to the Levitical priests “who carried the ark of the covenant of YHWH your God” and the elders, Moses recognized their status as guardians of the document (Deut. 31:9). By having the Levites place the scroll beside the ark of the covenant, Moses declared its canonical status and guaranteed its function as a witness against the Israelites in perpetuity (v. 26). Since the ark represented the throne of YHWH, the tablets of the covenant inside it reminded YHWH of his and Israel’s commitments and his role as divine overseer of the parties’ fidelity. In 17:18–19 Moses prescribed a ritual for future kings that reinforced the Levites’ role as guardians of the Torah. In their presence, the king was to write for himself a copy of this Torah, and his copy was to be his constant companion throughout his tenure on the throne. Presumably the supervision of the Levitical priests would guarantee that he had neither omitted any parts of Moses’ text nor supplemented it with his own insertions (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32 [13:1]).

In general, the Pentateuch takes the Levites’ role as teachers of the Torah for granted, but in his “blessing” (*bērākā*) of Levi in Deuteronomy 33:8–11, Moses declared this function explicitly. He recalls the fidelity of the Levites in “guarding” (*šāmar*) YHWH’s word and “keeping” (*nāṣar*) his covenant,” presumably the Israelite covenant, and like 10:8, 33:10b generalizes the cultic actions of the Aaronides to the entire tribe. But at the center of this review of Levite responsibilities, Moses acknowledged their pedagogical role within the nation as a whole. In 6:6–9 he had placed responsibility for instructing the Torah to children squarely on the shoulders of parents. However, we may well ask where and how the parents would have acquired the resources to fulfill the

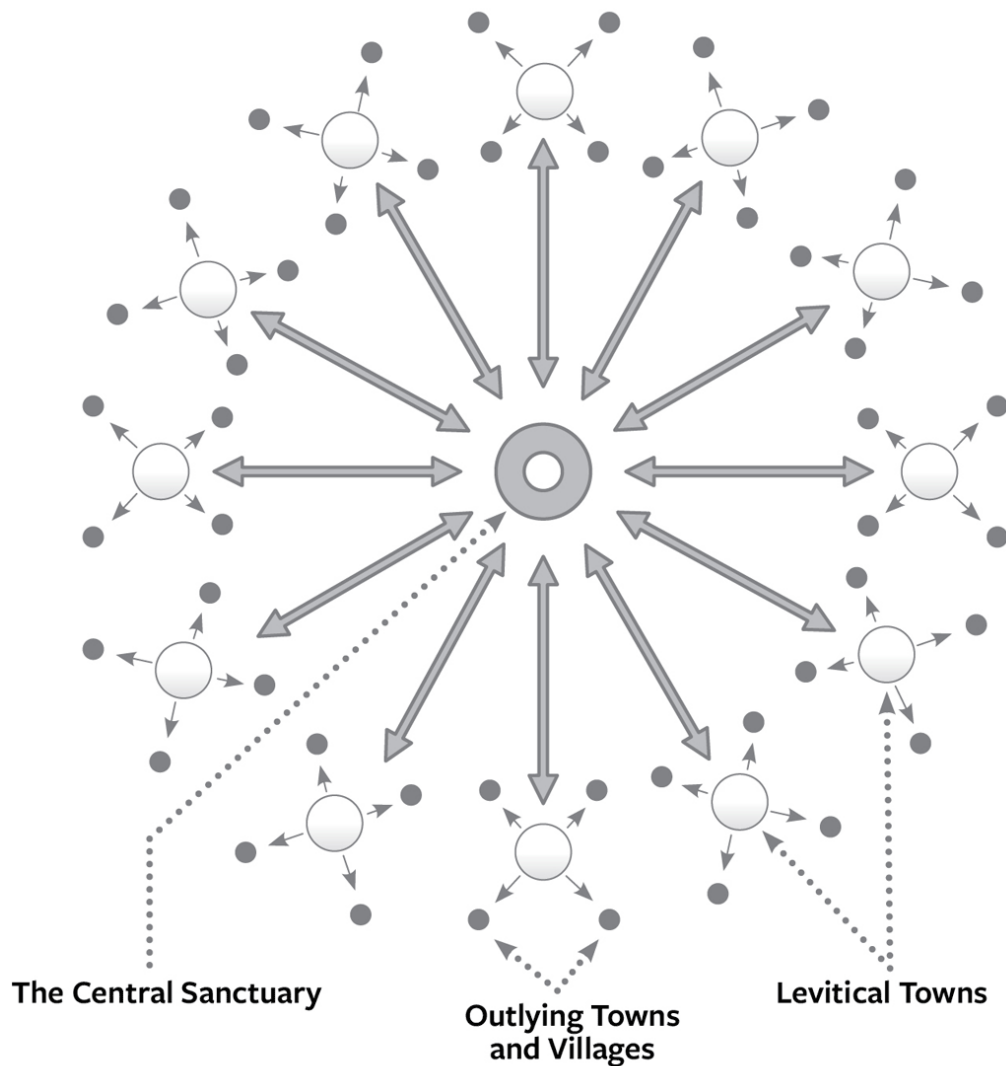
obligation. Since private individuals would not have possessed a written copy of the Torah, even the few literate persons would have depended on their memories to teach their children. But how would they learn it themselves? It is unlikely that they would have had time at the three annual festivals at the central sanctuary to memorize a document as large as the Torah of Moses. The answer probably lies in the institution of the Levitical towns.

Deuteronomy never mentions Levitical towns, and they are the primary subjects of only four texts elsewhere.³⁸ In keeping with the divine command, the Israelites set aside forty-eight towns scattered among all the tribes throughout the land of Israel. Apart from providing residences for Levites who had no territorial allotment, these texts do not specify their functions. Many scholars argue that they served the economic and political agenda of the monarchy's centralization of power, especially under King Josiah. However, it seems more likely that they functioned as "pastoral" centers from which the spiritual ministry of Levites would radiate to surrounding villages and the countryside in general (fig. E.3).

The distribution of these Levitical towns throughout the land recognizes that deep faith is demonstrated not primarily in annual pilgrimages to the central sanctuary but in everyday life, and people need spiritual mentoring and care in their daily experiences. Using the Levitical towns as bases of ministry, these priests were to go out from there to the surrounding villages, instructing the people in their faith, supervising the maintenance of purity regulations, leading in local religious observances, and providing general pastoral care to the citizens. While Deuteronomy does not speak of Levitical towns, the book often locates Levites "in your gates"—that is, inside the walled towns.³⁹ Since the designation "your gates" suggests the gates of the citizens of the nation, the Levites living here should have extended the spiritual umbrella represented by the towns set apart for the Levites.

Figure E.3

A Schematic Portrayal of the Location and Function of the Levitical Towns



Although other texts carefully draw the boundaries between the service of Levitical priests and the Aaronic/Zadokite priests of the central sanctuary, we should not view these two groups as rivals struggling for hegemony in the realm of the cult. Rather, their ministries were complementary, promoting exclusive devotion to YHWH at the central sanctuary and throughout the land, on the one hand, and giving all access to the presence and blessing of YHWH, on the other. In his blessing of the tribe of Levi, Moses' formal identification of the Levites as teachers of the Torah in Israel (Deut. 33:9-10) declared the ideal. Unfortunately, the reality on the ground rarely matched the ideal, and the historical narratives speak of quick, rampant, and persistent recidivism on all fronts (e.g., Judg. 17-18). The trauma of 586 BC would testify not to the failure of the Levitical towns as an institution but to the failure of those in whose hands YHWH had placed the care of his people—both political and spiritual.

The Levitical Covenant in the Prophets

References to priests are scattered throughout the Latter Prophets of the Hebrew Bible and occur five times in the Psalms.⁴⁰ While the words “priest” and “priests” (*kōhēn/kōhănîm*) occur more than one hundred times in the Prophets, references to Levi and the Levites are found only once in the Psalms (135:20) and eighteen times in the Prophets. Of these, ten occur in the oracles of the priestly prophet Ezekiel, who distinguishes clearly between the priestly sons of Zadok, who “keep charge of the altar,” and the rest of the “descendants of Levi.”⁴¹ Isaiah mentions the Levites only in 66:21: when looking forward to the distant future, YHWH speaks of taking some foreigners for priests and Levites. On the surface this text challenges the ethnocentric understanding of the Levitical covenant in the Pentateuch, as well as in Jeremiah and Malachi (see below). However, since this statement appears in a poetic portrayal of the distant future, it is open to a figurative interpretation. In Zechariah 12:13, Zechariah names “the clan [*mišpāḥâ*] of the house of Levi,” along with the clan of Shimeites and alongside Judah as mourning in the wake of YHWH pouring out his spirit of grace and his pleas for mercy upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. But this text has no bearing on our discussion. Jeremiah’s and Malachi’s references to the Levitical covenant deserve a closer look.

The Levitical covenant in Jeremiah (Jer. 33:17–22). Jeremiah broke with all precedent by inserting references to the Levitical covenant (33:17–22) in the context of an oracle concerning the irrevocability and eternity of the Davidic covenant. This utterance is remarkable on several counts. First, this is the first explicit reference to a Levitical covenant in the First Testament. Responding to the Levites’ zeal for YHWH, Moses had promised that YHWH would reward them with a blessing (Exod. 32:29). While blessings are essential to the Israelite covenant, God and people often bestowed blessings without reference to a covenant. Responding to Phinehas’ zeal for YHWH in Numbers 25:11–13, YHWH granted him and his descendants “my covenant of peace” (*bērîtî šālôm*) as a “covenant of a perpetual priesthood” (*bērît kěhunnat ‘ôlām*), but the scope of that covenant was restricted to his descendants. Deuteronomy 33:8–9 had associated Levi with a covenant, but the covenant that they had kept and guarded was YHWH’s preexistent covenant with Israel.

Second, although Jeremiah borrowed the expression “Levitical priests” (*hakkōhănîm halēwîyim*, 33:18) from Deuteronomy,⁴² in Jeremiah 33:21–22 he used the two words separately and interchangeably as subjects of the participle *měšārēt*, “to minister to.” Furthermore, by specifying that by the verb *šērēt*, he meant offering whole burnt offerings (*‘ôlâ*) and tribute offerings (*minḥâ*) and performing sacrificial rituals in general (*‘āsâ zebah*), he probably had in mind the

Aaronic priesthood linked with the central sanctuary, rather than the more general priestly ministry of the Levites as a whole.

Third, Jeremiah's declaration that the Levitical priests would never lack one of their own ministering before YHWH and offering sacrifices "forever" (*kol hayyāmîm*, lit., "all the days" [Jer. 33:18]) links this covenant conceptually with YHWH's covenant with Phinehas and his descendants, which is characterized as "an eternal/irrevocable covenant of priesthood" (*bērît kěhunnat 'ôlām*, Num. 25:13), but also with the Davidic covenant. However, this creates some tension, since David had recognized the universal implications of the Davidic covenant from the outset (2 Sam. 7:19). As noted at the beginning of this excursus, the Hebrew Scriptures never portray Aaronic or Levitical priests ministering outside Israel. Ezekiel proclaimed oracles against foreign nations as hypothetical audiences, but in his ordination YHWH declared emphatically that he was sending him to his own people and *not* to outsiders (2:4-11, 17-21).

As we discover when we look ahead to the New Testament, the practices that were part of Israel's sacrificial system involved shadow and replica forms of the real and the heavenly sacrifice of Christ. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the rituals themselves, the locality of the rituals, and the priestly offices held by officials performing the rituals were terminated for good. This suggests that, in this context, "all the days" (*kol hayyāmîm* in Jer. 33:18) means "as long as the shadow institutions remain valid." However, the close association of the Levitical covenant with the Davidic covenant in this context, especially the appeal to the fixed nature of the cosmos as the grounds of the hope for this covenant, raise doubts about this interpretation.

The Levitical covenant in Malachi (Mal. 1:1-9; 3:3). The First Testament closes with a final and scathing indictment of the Levitical priests' performance in the Persian-era community of Jews in and around Jerusalem. However, this indictment was a part of the general indictment of the community. The book of Malachi suggests that within a generation or two of the people's return, they suffered from the same lack of fear of YHWH that had plagued their predecessors. While the exile had weaned these Jews from idolatry, other symptoms of the old spiritual malaise remained: cynicism toward YHWH and his love (Mal. 1:2); contempt for all things sacred (1:6-12); boredom in worship (1:13); refusal to fulfill vows (1:14); intermarriage with idolaters (2:10-12); infidelity in marriage covenants (2:13-16); cynicism toward YHWH and his justice (2:17); moral and spiritual crimes (sorcery, adultery, adultery, false oaths (3:5a); oppression of the economically marginalized (3:5b); tightfistedness in relation to tithes and offerings to YHWH (3:8-9); and cynicism toward YHWH and his relationship to his people (3:13-15). In Malachi 2:1-9 the prophet lays responsibility for the absence of reverence toward God squarely on the shoulders of priests.

Malachi 2:8 is striking because it contains the only explicit reference to the “Levitical covenant.”⁴³ Indeed, the construction *bērît* + personal/national name, where the last element identifies the vassal with whom YHWH is related by covenant, occurs nowhere else. The present construction seems to highlight a special dimension to the Levites’ role in YHWH’s covenantal administration.

The declared goal of YHWH’s covenant with Levi was the promotion of “*the life and the peace*” (*haḥayyîm wěhaššālôm*, Mal. 2:5), a collocation that occurs only here in the First Testament (Prov. 3:2 omits the articles). The articles on both expressions point to a specific and recognizable entity—namely, the life and shalom offered humans through covenant relationship with YHWH in contrast to the curse of death and chaos that hangs over the cosmos. But Malachi had in mind specifically life and well-being for the Israelites, made possible through the covenant that YHWH had made with Abraham and his descendants. This text identifies the Levites as custodians of that life and well-being and credits their instruction of the Torah as the means by which to achieve those goals.

The expression “true instruction” (*tôrat ’ēmet*, lit., “instruction of truth,” Mal. 2:6) could refer to any teaching that conforms to the truth, but Malachi probably alludes to the charge to Levi in Deuteronomy 33:10 to teach YHWH’s “judgments” (*mišpāṭîm*), refracted through the Torah of Moses. People should have trusted the Levites—as messengers (*mal’ākîm*) of YHWH of Hosts—to deliver only divinely authenticated instruction (Mal. 2:7). If this did not mean the Torah itself, it would certainly be instruction in accord with and rooted in the Torah, for a true messenger never deviates from that charge (Deut. 13:1–4; 18:18–20).

However, the Levites of Malachi’s day had broken (*šihēt*) YHWH’s covenant with them by their own conduct (Mal. 2:8), departing from their former covenant righteousness described in the Torah (cf. 2:6). Furthermore, instead of using the Torah to keep the people on course, they had led people astray by twisting and selectively reading the Torah (2:8). In legal contexts Malachi’s idiom “to lift the face with the Torah” (*nāsā’ pānîm battôrâ*, v. 9) means to show partiality.⁴⁴ The language derives from the royal court, specifically judicial contexts where a person appears before the king or his representative for judgment. Since YHWH the divine Judge always does what is right (Gen. 18:25), in effect, all appear before him with coverings over their heads; he judges not by what he sees (the person’s status or identity) nor by what he hears (third-party opinions or the person’s pleas for special favor) but by the objective merits of the case (cf. Isa. 11:3) and by the standards he demands of human judges (Deut. 1:16–17; 16:19).

For the Levites, the standard should have been the Torah as received. Instead, they had disregarded Moses’ warning not to add to the Torah nor to subtract

from it (Deut. 4:2; 12:32). They offered instruction based on the identity of their audience and in effect created their own Torah. Because they did not demonstrate trusting awe⁴⁵ before YHWH themselves, neither they nor their community experienced the *šālôm* that the covenant promised.

Malachi's linkage of the fear of YHWH and life is thoroughly Deuteronomic. Indeed, in the fifth century BC his people were experiencing the opposite of the Deuteronomic Torah's recipe for life (cf. 31:9–13): because the Levites did not read the Torah, the people did not hear; because they did not hear the Torah, they did not fear YHWH; because they did not fear YHWH, they did not listen to his voice (obey); and because they did not listen to his voice, they did not live. This association of hearing the Torah, fearing YHWH, and enjoying life and *šālôm* explains Malachi's closing call: "Remember the Torah of Moses my servant, whom I charged at Horeb with ordinances and judgments for all Israel" (4:4 [3:22]).

In Malachi 2:1–2 the prophet describes YHWH's response to the Levites' perfidy: he will dispatch the curse as an agent of shame and destruction and replace the benefactions of the covenant (*birkôtêkem*, "your blessings") with curses. Whether or not the article on "the curse" refers to explicitly declared curses that were a part of the Levitical covenant or the curses of the Israelite covenant in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, the effect was disastrous. Shockingly, YHWH declared that he had indeed already lifted the faces of Levites, not to judge partially but to smear their faces with animal feces and haul them off like offal to the garbage dump (Gehenna?) to be burned (Mal. 2:2–3).

On the surface, the allusion to the refuse dump seems to envision a tragic end for the Levites. However, the *ôlām* (eternal, irrevocable) nature of the covenant would not let their story end here. To be sure, YHWH intended his judgment as punishment for their violation of the covenant and their betrayal of their sacred charge, but it would also come with a purgatory intent: to purify and refine the Levites like silver and gold are purified in a smelter, so that once again they might present to YHWH their tribute gifts (*minḥâ*) in righteousness (3:3). Thereafter, those who survived the purifying process would be pleasing to YHWH once more.

Malachi's treatment of the Levites and the Levitical covenant illustrates once more both the contingent and constant nature of all covenant relationships that YHWH established (see fig. 0.1 above). YHWH guaranteed the ongoing existence of his covenants so that they were not contingent on vassals' responses. However, whether an individual or a generation of vassals experienced the life and well-being promised by the covenants depended upon their personal trusting awe before YHWH, demonstrated in a life (and ministry in this case) of faithful and grateful service to the Suzerain.

Priestly Ministry in Ezekiel's Vision of Israel's Eschatological Future

Although Ezekiel was a priest himself, he had little to say about the ministry of Levitical priests in chapters 1–39. However, the book concludes with a remarkably detailed look at Israel's distant future beyond the judgment (chaps. 40–48). YHWH himself ordained and commissioned Ezekiel as his prophet and priest in exile in his thirtieth year (1:1–3:21). In chapters 8–11, in the context of a vision, YHWH revealed to him the abominations that his compatriots were perpetrating in the temple back in Jerusalem, evils that precipitated YHWH's departure and ultimately the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Babylonians. In the account of his tour of the temple in chapter 8, Ezekiel did not mention Levitical or Aaronic priests, but he saw that the evils conducted there were perpetrated by all sorts of people who should never have been admitted to this sacred space.

It is striking that in Ezekiel's oracles of judgment and restoration (chaps. 4–39), he mentions his own religious class only once. In 7:26–27 he pronounced judgment on all classes of leadership in Judah, including his professional priestly peers. Things changed dramatically in chapters 40–48, which develop the theme of Israel's final sanctification and the role of the temple and its worship in the maintenance of Israel's sanctity. While this section presents massive interpretive challenges, it seems best to perceive this as an ideational and profoundly theological portrayal of the nation of Israel after the covenant triangle that was shattered in 586 BC had been fully restored, as described in chapters 34–37. In 11:16, immediately before Ezekiel's description of the cherubic chariot transporting the glory of YHWH out of the temple and heading off to the east over the Mount of Olives, YHWH had spoken of personally becoming a sanctuary in small measure (*miqdāš mē'aṭ*) for the exiles far removed from the holy city. However, later in the book he concluded the restoration oracles with the best news any Israelite could hear: "I will make with them a covenant of peace; it will be an eternal covenant with them. I will give to them [the land of Israel] and multiply them. I will place my sanctuary in their midst forever [*bētôkām l'ôlām*]. My residence will be over [*a*] them, and I will be their God and they will be my people. And when my sanctuary is in their midst forever, then the nations will know that I am YHWH, the one who sanctifies Israel" (Ezek. 37:26–28).

This set the stage for chapters 40–48, which end by describing the tribal lay of the land (47:13–48:35). Prior to that, Ezekiel had focused entirely on the holy city over which YHWH resides, offering detailed descriptions of the footprint of

the temple complex (fig. E.4) and instructions for its personnel. Our concern here is the latter.

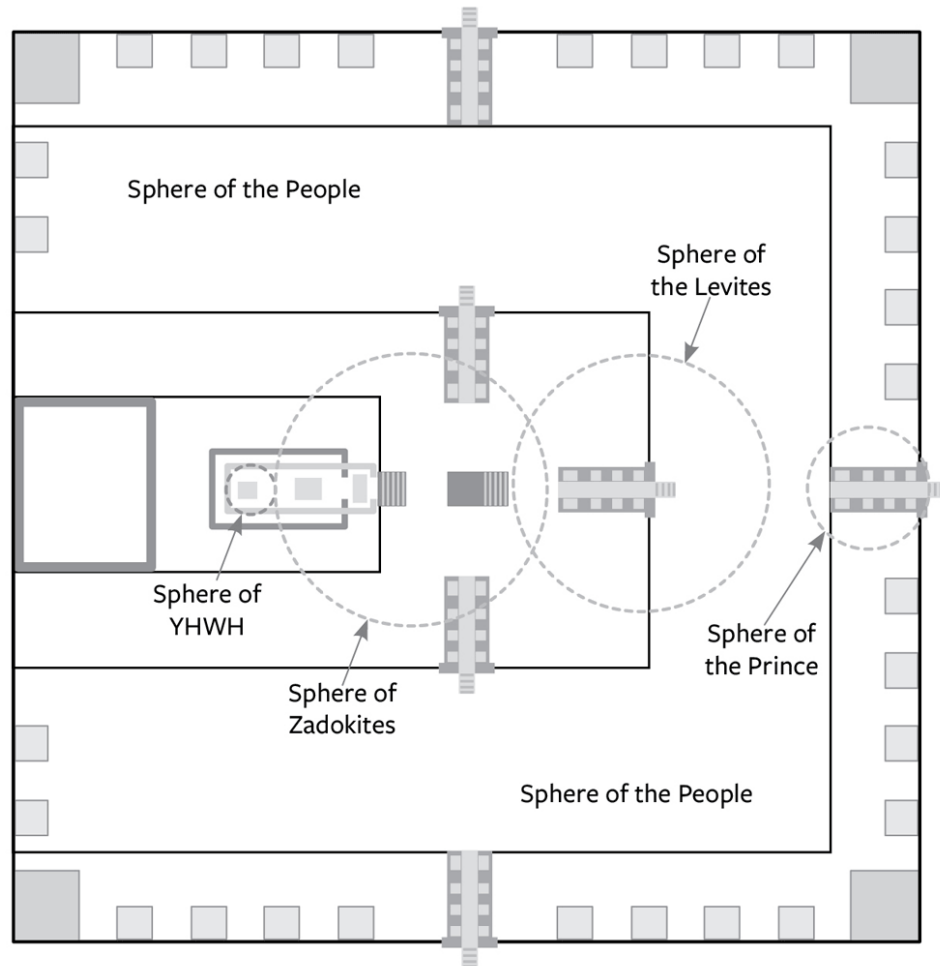
Many have observed that while this vision of the temple retains many features of the original temple, whose blueprint was revealed to David (1 Chron. 28:11–19) but was eventually constructed by Solomon (1 Kings 6–8), several features of its physical structure, its furniture, and its personnel differed significantly. The most obvious physical departures include the introduction of a gated inner court and the absolute centrality of the altar. With respect to furniture, most significantly, this temple lacks an ark of the covenant, which functioned as the throne of YHWH *Ṣěbā’ôt* (YHWH of Hosts) in the holy of holies in the previous iteration.⁴⁶

We may attribute this omission to two factors. First, Ezekiel observed that within this vision when the divine *kābôd* had filled the temple, it was no longer restricted to the dark holy of holies behind the veil. Ezekiel’s temple lacked a veil altogether, having been replaced by a(n open) doorway (41:3–4), presumably because the temple building (*miqdāš*), which was in the midst of the people, functioned as “the place of his throne and the place for the soles of his feet” (43:7), and his glory hovered over (*‘al*) it and was visible to all (37:26–28).

Second, as suggested by the designations of the receptacle that had previously functioned as YHWH’s throne (“ark of the covenant,” *’ărôn habbērît*; “ark of the *’ēdūt*), the ark was constructed in the first instance to contain the “tablets of the *’ēdūt*”—that is, the *’ēdūt* itself (Exod. 25:16–22). As the symbols of the covenant that YHWH had made with Israel, the two stone tablets and the spheres of YHWH’s residence that housed them guaranteed YHWH’s fidelity to his own oath (the first tablet) and YHWH’s holding Israel accountable for their response to his covenant (the second tablet). However, in view of YHWH’s recent promises never to hide his face from his people again (Ezek. 39:28–29) but to place his sanctuary (*miqdāš*) in their midst *lě’ôlām*, “forever, irrevocably,” and have his *miškān*, “dwelling place,” hovering over them *lě’ôlām*, “forever, irrevocably” (37:27–28), the symbols of YHWH’s and Israel’s covenant commitment to each other have become superfluous.

Figure E.4

**The Spheres of Increasing Sanctity in Ezekiel’s
Eschatological Temple Compound**



Since the ark was no longer needed and the annual ritual of the high priest inside the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) would be terminated, the office of high priest could also be eliminated. Instead, Ezekiel's vision distributes responsibility for the rituals involving the altar (40:46) for all "sons of Zadok." This epithet, rather than "sons of Aaron" (cf. Lev. 1:7; 3:13), harks back to Zadok, who was a descendant of Aaron via Eleazar and Phinehas (1 Chron. 6:1-8). Second Samuel 6 does not identify the high priest who was in office when David brought the ark to Jerusalem. But this event meant that for the first time the ark, the symbol of YHWH's covenant and presence with his people, and David, his chosen king, had arrived at the place that YHWH had chosen as his eternal dwelling place. However, 2 Samuel 8:17 identifies Zadok as senior co-high priest with Ahimelech, the son of Abiathar, under David, and 15:24-29 indicates that Zadok was in charge of the ark of the covenant. In the new world envisioned by Ezekiel, priestly responsibilities involving the rituals of the altar and the maintenance of the sanctuary (*miqdāš*) within the inner court

were distributed among all “sons of Zadok,” who functioned as virtual high priests.

Meanwhile, non-Zadokite Levites, who were barred from the inner court, retained their functions as guardians of the temple complex. As already noted, the account of Ezekiel’s vision of the abominations perpetrated in the temple in Ezekiel 8–11 never mentions either priests or Levites. However, the summary description of the roles of Zadokites and Levites in the temple portrayed in Ezekiel 44:9–31 holds Levites responsible for not guarding the entrances and for letting paganized people, including foreigners, into the temple grounds in the earlier period. In the new order, the Levites will retain this responsibility, but they will also supervise and participate in the sacrificial rituals that transpire in the outer court, preparing offerings that the people brought and providing the fare for fellowship meals in the outer court in the presence of YHWH.

Whatever the relationship between this vision, which was undoubtedly based on the covenant that YHWH had made with Levi and the special role that he had granted Aaron, and the ultimate realities for the restored Israel, Ezekiel could not have imagined a restored nation in the land worshiping at the central sanctuary without Levites and descendants of Aaron in the picture.

1. *ma’ăšēh yēdê ’ādām*, Deut. 4:28; 2 Kings 19:18; Pss. 115:4; 135:15; Isa. 37:19; cf. Exod. 32:3–4.

2. Exod. 20:5 = Deut. 5:9; Exod. 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 6:15; Josh. 24:19; Nah. 1:2.

3. Rom. 3:21; 6:14; 7:4; 10:4; Gal. 2:19–21; 3:23–26; 4:21–31; Heb. 7:12.

4. LXX *martyria*, cf. Vulgate, the Targums.

5. 202 of 220 occurrences in the First Testament; 21 of 22 in Deuteronomy, including *nomos* for the verb *hōrâ* in 24:8.

6. Cf. Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7; Rom. 12:7; 15:4; Eph. 4:14; Col. 2:10, 22; 1 Tim. 1:10; 4:1, 6, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 3:10, 16; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7.

7. Cf. Matt. 7:28; 16:12; 22:33; Mark 1:22, 27; 4:2; 11:18; 12:38; Luke 4:32; John 7:16–17; 18:19; Acts 2:42; 13:12; 17:19; Rom. 6:17; 16:17; 1 Cor. 14:6, 26; Eph. 4:14; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9; Heb. 6:2; 13:9; 2 John 9–10; Rev. 2:14, 15, 24.

8. Lev. 19:2; 20:26; 21:8.

9. Lev. 20:8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32; cf. *hibdîl*, “he separates them,” 20:24, 26.

10. Lev. 19:2; 20:7, 26 [to YHWH]; 21:6a, 6b; cf. vv. 7, 8.

11. Lev. 22:2–4, 6, 10, 14–16.

12. Lev. 23:2–4, 7–8, 21, 24, 27, 35–37.

13. Lev. 18:2, 4, 30; 19:3–4, 10, 25, 31, 34, 36; etc.

14. Num. 5–6; 28–30; 35–36.

15. Exod. 40:20; Deut. 10:8; 31:9, 25, 26.

16. Some cite Hosea 4:2; Pss. 50:7; 81:10 [11]; Jer. 7:9.

- [17.](#) Matt. 19:16–22 // Mark 10:17–19 // Luke 18:18–21.
[18.](#) *hû' 'iššēh rêaḥ nîhōaḥ layhwāh*, Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9; 3:5, 16.
[19.](#) *wēnislāḥ lāhem/lô*; Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18, 26.
[20.](#) E.g., Elijah, 1 Kings 17:8–24; Elisha, 2 Kings 5; Jonah, Jon. 1–4.
[21.](#) Exod. 19:4–6; cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 21.
[22.](#) Exod. 28:1; Lev. 7:35; Deut. 10:6; Ezek. 44:13; etc.
[23.](#) Judg. 18:13–31, esp. v. 19.
[24.](#) Exod. 33:19; 34:5; cf. Ps. 116:4; Isa. 44:5.
[25.](#) Gen. 4:26; 12:8; 1 Kings 18:24–26; Isa. 12:4.
[26.](#) Cf. Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21.
[27.](#) 1 Sam. 14:41 (cf. v. 36); Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65.
[28.](#) Cf. Exod. 28:41; 29:9, 29, 33, 35; etc.
[29.](#) Deut. 10:9; 18:2; Josh. 13:33; cf. Deut. 12:12; 14:27, 29; 18:1.
[30.](#) Note the use of *nātan*, “to give,” rather than *kārat*, “to cut,” in Num. 25:12.
[31.](#) 1 Chron. 12:27; Pss. 115:10, 12; 118:3; 135:19.
[32.](#) *zera' 'ahārôn*, Num. 16:40 [17:5]; *bēnē 'ahārôn*, Josh. 21:4, 10, 13, 19; 1 Chron. 15:4; 23:28, 32; 24:31; 2 Chron. 13:9, 10; 26:18; 29:21; 31:19; 35:14; Neh. 12:47.
[33.](#) Also, *šēbet [ha/]lēwî*, Deut. 10:8; 18:1; *bēnē lēwî*, 21:5; 31:9.
[34.](#) Deut. 10:9; 18:2; Josh. 13:33; cf. also Deut. 12:12; 14:27, 29; 18:1.
[35.](#) Josh. 6; 1 Sam. 4 involves a presumptuous and superstitious use of the ark in the absence of true trust in YHWH.
[36.](#) Cf. Deut. 4:10; 5:5; 19:17; 29:14–15 [13–14].
[37.](#) Deut. 19:17; cf. Exod. 21:6; 22:7–8 [6–7].
[38.](#) Lev. 25:32–34; Num. 35:1–8; Josh. 21:1–42; and 1 Chron. 6:54–81 [39–66].
[39.](#) Deut. 12:12, 18; 14:27, 29; 16:11, 14; 18:6; 26:12.
[40.](#) Pss. 78:64; 99:6; 110:4; 132:9, 16.
[41.](#) Ezek. 40:46; 43:19; 44:10, 15; 45:5; 48:11–13, 22, 31.
[42.](#) Deut. 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9; with *bēnē lēwî*, “sons of Levi,” in 21:5 and 31:9.
[43.](#) *bērît hallēwî*; cf. v. 4, *bērîtî*, “my covenant with Levi”; Jer. 33:21b, *'et hālēwîyim*, “with the Levites,” assuming “my covenant with” from v. 21a.
[44.](#) Lev. 19:15; Deut. 10:17; 2 Chron. 19:7; Job 13:8; 34:19; etc.
[45.](#) *môrā'*, Mal. 2:5; *yārē'*, 2:5b, 3:5, 16; 4:2 [3:20].
[46.](#) 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Pss. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16.

Stage 3 of the Israelite Covenant

CHAPTER 7

Reaffirming the Covenant on the Plains of Moab

Introduction

Approximately forty years separated the events underlying the book of Deuteronomy from the events at Sinai discussed in the previous chapter,^{[1](#)} and geographically they occurred an eleven-day caravan journey away (Deut. 1:2). Like the apostle John, who had at least forty years to reflect on the significance of the salvation that Jesus accomplished through his incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection, by now Moses had four decades to reflect on the significance of YHWH's great acts of salvation associated with Israel's exodus from Egypt. As is the case with the Gospel of John, this probably accounts for the profoundly theological nature of the book. Both books recall many events associated with the primary subject of the composition (YHWH in the case of Deuteronomy, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel), but they are less concerned than the preceding narratives (Exodus–Numbers, Matthew–Luke) to reconstruct a chronological record of what transpired than to draw out the theological and soteriological significance of those events. At the same time, because Moses' addresses offer the most systematic presentation of biblical theology in the entire First Testament, many have linked Deuteronomy with Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

At one level, Deuteronomy provides the narrative conclusion to the Pentateuch, whose chronological, theological, and literary center of gravity is YHWH's establishment of his covenant with Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, at Sinai (fig. 5.1 above). At another level, Deuteronomy concludes the biography of Moses, which had begun in Exodus 1. Indeed, we may characterize Deuteronomy as the account of Moses' death—the most complex death narrative in all of Scripture. It consists of a narrative framework, with massive amounts of embedded prose addresses by Moses;² shorter addresses by Moses alone or together with the Levites and elders, and by YHWH;³ a poetic anthem (32:1–43); and Moses' benediction for the twelve tribes of Israel (33:1–29).

In the third to second centuries BC, the translators of the Greek Septuagint sent the interpretation of the book of Deuteronomy in an unfortunate direction by remarkably and consistently rendering *tôrâ* as *nomos* and naming the book *Deuteronomium*, “Second Law” (*deutero* + *nomos*). The origin of this name derives either from the second iteration of the Decalogue in 5:6–21 (cf. Exod. 20:2–17) or, more likely, because they misinterpreted the Hebrew phrase “a copy of this Torah” (*mišnēh hattôrâ hazzō't*) in Deuteronomy 17:18 as “this second law.” Although Hebrew *mišneh*, “duplicate copy,” is linked etymologically with *šēnayim*, “two,” Hebrew *tôrâ* does not mean law. Deriving from the verb, *hôrâ*, “to teach,” which comes from the sphere of pedagogy rather than legislation, *tôrâ* refers to “authoritative instruction,” which may include legal material, but it often involves genealogies, stories, poems, parables, sermons, and so on. The book of Deuteronomy illustrates the theological and literary significance of the word *tôrâ* better than any other text of the First Testament. As noted earlier, the translators of the Septuagint would have served the text and later readers much better if they had rendered the word either as *didaskalia* or *didachē*,

“teaching,” both of which correspond more closely to the Hebrew *tôrâ*.

The narrator of Moses’ final days announced the genre of Deuteronomy with the opening clause “These are the words (*haddēbārîm*) that Moses spoke (*dibber*) to all Israel” (Deut. 1:1). The illocutionary goal of his addresses appears with his conclusion to the preamble: “Moses began to put into effect this Torah by saying . . .” (1:5). Here “this Torah” refers not to previous revelation that YHWH delivered at Sinai and which Moses now set out to “expound” but to the speeches that follow: they constitute what later writers would identify as *tôrâ mošeh*, “the Torah of Moses,”⁴ or simply *hattôrâ*, “the Torah.”⁵

The legal dimension of Deuteronomy 1:5 derives not from the word *hattôrâ* but from *bē’ēr*, which occurs only here, in 27:8, and in Habakkuk 2:2 and bears the sense “to put into effect.” Through his instruction on the plains of Moab and the attendant covenant-ratification rituals, Moses was engaged in a speech act through which the generation of Israelites standing before him were formally constituted as the covenant people of YHWH. However, because the covenant involved three parties (YHWH, Israel, and the land), and because the land could only be fully integrated into the tripartite covenant relationship after the people had crossed the Jordan and entered the land, the ritual involved two stages: YHWH’s confirming this generation of Israelites as his covenant people⁶ through the mediation of Moses and YHWH’s confirming the land of Canaan as the people’s grant⁷ through Joshua’s mediation. Because YHWH prevented Moses from entering the promised land,⁸ he could only be involved in the first stage, hence the word “began” (*hō’îl*) in 1:5.

The present stage in the evolution of the Israelite covenant was necessary because most of the Israelites standing before Moses and about to enter the land had not participated in or witnessed the original ratification ritual at

Sinai; they were born during the people's forty-year desert sojourn. For them to enter the promised land as the people of YHWH, rather than as another group of migrants coming in from the east, YHWH needed to confirm their status as his covenant people. Moses delivered the addresses in Deuteronomy in the context of that covenant-renewal ritual, but this also provided him with the occasion to deliver his farewell pastoral charge (like Jesus' upper room discourse in John 14–16). This was a richly covenantal moment. Nevertheless, whether or not Moses delivered the addresses in the order they appear in the book, his primary goal throughout the addresses was pastoral as he prepared his people for the next phase of their experience and pleaded with them to remain true to YHWH and his covenant. Although scholars debate whether the book contains three or four addresses by Moses (I prefer the latter), its structure is clear (fig. 7.1).

Figure 7.1

Hearing the Voice of Moses in Deuteronomy: Four-Sermon Model

qādôš layhwh);¹⁰ his “chosen people” (*bāḥar*),¹¹ that the people might be high above the nations for the praise, honor, and glory [of God] (26:19); his “sons” (*bānîm*, 1:31; 8:5; 14:1); and his “treasured possession” (*‘am sěgullâ*).¹² Out of all the peoples on earth, YHWH had chosen Israel specially for this privileged status. So special was Israel to God that he created a name of endearment for her: *Jeshurun* (*yěšurûn*) “[my] straightened one” (32:15; 33:5, 26; Isa. 44:2). Jeshurun is cast as a passive participle form, referring to Israel as one who has been “straightened,” not necessarily ethically, but socially. For the people who had been previously bent over by Egypt’s oppression, the bars of the yoke have been broken, and they may now walk erect (Lev. 26:13; Ezek. 34:27). This interpretation is reinforced by Malachi 2:6, which speaks of “walking” with YHWH “in peace and uprightness” (*běšālôm ûbēmîšôr*).

As already noted, Deuteronomy is cast as Moses’ farewell sermon, but the notion of covenant is so pervasive that it has even determined the structure of the book. In the ancient Near East, treaties between nations tended to follow a particular pattern. This was especially true of suzerain-vassal treaties. In contrast to parity treaties (agreements involving two parties of equal status), suzerainty treaties involved unequal parties (see fig. 6.1 and its surrounding commentary for additional information on other ancient Near Eastern treaty forms). Table 7.1 summarizes the typical features of late second-millennium-BC (roughly contemporary with Moses) Hittite treaties governing suzerain-vassal relations.

Table 7.1

Typical Features of Second-Millennium-BC Hittite Suzerain-Vassal Treaties

Preamble	An introduction of the suzerain
Historical	A summary of the prior relationship of the two parties with

prologue	explanation of what led to this treaty
Stipulations	Detailed outline of the response demanded of the vassal, usually focusing on absolute loyalty to the suzerain
Document clause	Arrangements for the transcription of the document, its storage, and regulations for its reading in treaty-renewal contexts
Blessings and curses	A detailed outline of the consequences of the vassal's response, with an emphasis on the curses as warnings against disobedience or disloyalty
Treaty witnesses	A detailed listing of the names of all the gods invoked as guarantors of the treaty

Whoever was responsible for the final form of Deuteronomy (with the arrangement of Moses' farewell addresses) incorporated many of these features into its structures and contents (table 7.2).

In the covenantal relationship underlying Deuteronomy, YHWH was the great king (33:5) and Israel was his vassal. However, unlike other vassals of the day, Israel did not become his vassal by being conquered and beaten into submission; they became his vassal when YHWH defeated the earthly suzerain who held them in bondage. For the Israelites, vassaldom to YHWH was not humiliating but was an honorific status; they were drawn to YHWH himself, called to a personal relationship with him, and exalted high above the nations as trophies of divine grace so that the world might give praise, honor, and glory to their Redeemer (26:19; 28:1, 9).

Table 7.2

The “Treaty Structure” of Deuteronomy

Preamble (1:1–5)	This is not an actual introduction of the king but an editorial introduction to the document that follows.
Historical prologue (1:6–4:44)	A summary of YHWH's relationship with Israel, including a concluding sermonic exhortation by Moses (4:1–40), rooted in YHWH's gracious revelation of his will (4:1–8), his gracious gift of covenant relationship (4:9–31), and his miraculous

rescue of his people from slavery (4:32–40). The sermonic style reminds hearers that the book of Deuteronomy is not the actual covenant document but a hortatory record of YHWH's covenant with Israel.

General stipulations
(4:45–11:32)

This section incorporates the foundational covenant document, the Decalogue, but presents it as the foundation for Israel's covenantal worldview, particularly YHWH's demand for exclusive devotion to him as the divine Suzerain.

Specific stipulations
(12:1–26:19)

While maintaining the sermonic tone established earlier, this address outlines in considerable detail how Israel's covenantal worldview is to be lived out once the people have claimed and received their grant of land (*naḥălâ*; cf. 11:26–32). Note especially the concluding statement of principle (26:16–19), with the stated missional objective.

Document clause
(31:9–13, 24–26)

Although the second address begins appropriately with a recitation of the original official and divinely produced version of the Israelite covenant (5:6–22; cf. 4:13; 10:1–5), Moses produced a transcript of his covenantal farewell addresses and delivered it to the Levitical priests and elders as custodians of the covenant and the community, respectively. He charged the Levites to deposit this document next to the ark of the covenant as a permanent record of YHWH's and Israel's commitments, and he instructed them to retrieve it and read it in its entirety in the context of covenant-renewal observances involving the entire community every seven years at the central sanctuary during the Festival of Sukkoth (Booths).

Blessings and curses
(28:1–29:1 [28:1–69])

An outline detailing how the consequences for Israel depend on their response to the covenant terms. Following the structure of Leviticus 26, verses 1–14 summarize the blessings, while verses 15–68 expand on the curses in considerable detail.

Covenant-ratification
proceedings
(29:2 [1]–30:20)

Cast as a fourth address, these two chapters highlight the process whereby the present generation of Israelites bound themselves to the covenant and, expanding on 4:25–31, emphasize the permanence of the agreement, both in the validity of its blessings and curses and in the ultimate triumph of YHWH's grace in reinstating Israel as his covenant

	people after their apparently inevitable judgment for infidelity to their divine Suzerain.
Covenant witnesses (4:26; 30:15–20; 31:28)	Unlike Hittite and Assyrian treaties, the monotheistic character of Israel's faith precludes the listing of other deities as witnesses to Israel's and YHWH's declarations of covenant commitment. In their place, at the end of the first (4:26) and last (30:15–20; cf. 31:28) addresses, Moses identifies the heavens and the earth as cosmic witnesses to this covenant. However, he also assigns the role of witness (<i>'ēd</i>) to the written Torah (31:26) and to Israel's national anthem, the Song of YHWH (32:1–43; cf. 31:19).

Deuteronomy's Perspective on Earlier Stages of the Israelite Covenant

In Deuteronomy Moses links the words “covenant” and “fathers” (*'ābôt*) five times. He remembers YHWH's covenant “with your fathers that he swore to them” (4:31); he assures Israel that YHWH will keep his people with “the covenantal unfailing love” (*'et habbērît wě'et haḥesed*) that he swore to the fathers” (7:12); he speaks of YHWH as confirming the covenant “that he swore to your fathers,” referring expressly to the promise of land (8:1); and he anticipates the day when the Israelites will abandon “the covenant of YHWH [*bērît yhwh*], the God of their fathers” (29:25 [24]). This leaves only Deuteronomy 5:3, where Moses rhetorically denies that at Horeb YHWH made “this covenant with our ancestors” and declares that it was made with the present generation.

In 5:3 “our fathers” obviously refers to the immediate fathers of the people in Moses' audience, but in the other texts it is unclear whether he had in mind the patriarchs or the generation of ancestors who came out of Egypt and with whom YHWH made the covenant at Horeb. In Exodus 2:24 and Leviticus 26:42, which frame the Sinai narrative (cf. also 2 Kings 13:23), the naming of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob clarifies the issue, but in his addresses, Moses' blurring of

the distinctions reinforces our interpretation that the two covenants are really one and the same. Of course, Moses was well aware of YHWH's earlier sworn covenantal oath to give the land of Canaan to the patriarchs and their descendants,¹³ but he was also aware that YHWH promised to give this land to the exodus generation as well. Because YHWH first characterized the land as "flowing with milk and honey" in conversation with that generation,¹⁴ Moses' use of this descriptor¹⁵ seems to allude to YHWH's promises to them (cf. 29:24-25; also Ezek. 20:6, 15). Even so, in many references to the land that YHWH swore to give to the fathers, it is unclear whether he meant the patriarchs or the exodus generation.¹⁶

The promise of land was not the only covenantal promise to the ancestors that Moses cited. In Deuteronomy 29:12-13 [11-12] Moses acknowledged that the covenant ceremonies on the plains of Moab fulfilled YHWH's promise on oath to the ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, specifically) that he would be their God and the God of their descendants (cf. Gen. 17:7). But YHWH had also made this promise to the exodus generation.¹⁷ In short, what transpired on the plains of Moab was the fulfillment of the promises to both the patriarchs and the generation that had come out of Egypt. Moses anticipated that, in the minds of future generations, the covenant promises to the first and the second group of beneficiaries would merge into a single covenant (Deut. 4:31).

Even so, Moses' reserve about speaking explicitly about the context of the making (*kārat*) of the covenant with the patriarchs is striking. The book opens with him citing YHWH's speech defining the boundaries of the land in maximalist terms (1:7-8), an obvious reference to Genesis 15:18. The book closes with YHWH declaring that, from Mount Nebo, he had shown Moses the land he had sworn to give the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut. 34:4). By naming the other patriarchs, he suppressed the

original covenant-making context, and he reinforced the suppression by defining “all the land” promised in a minimalist and counterclockwise sweep: “YHWH showed him the whole land [*kol hā’āreṣ*]” (34:1–3). All other references or allusions to the covenant with the patriarchs are vague and general in nature.¹⁸

This is not the case with respect to the covenant proceedings at Horeb/Sinai. Moses’ attention to the events that had happened there confirms our earlier observation that the events at Horeb were both the foundation for his addresses in Deuteronomy, but also the heart of the entire Pentateuch. Moses veiled his comments slightly by avoiding the name Sinai, which occurs only in 33:2 and which refers to the theophany at the mountain rather than the covenant. Elsewhere in Deuteronomy, Moses always identified the mountain of revelation and covenant as Horeb (*ḥōrēb*). The preference for “Horeb” suggests that the narrator was caught up by the spirit of Moses. Since the name is related to *ḥorbâ*, “wasteland, ruin,” perhaps an intentional nickname to contrast this barren wasteland with the “good land” (*’ereṣ ṭôbâ*) of Canaan (8:7–10; 9:6; 11:10–12). For Moses, after four decades of putting up with the Horeb generation (cf. Deut. 1:9–12), the place represented a spiritual “wasteland.” This should have been the location where Israel’s history as the people of YHWH officially began. Here, on “the day of the assembly,” YHWH had revealed himself and his will to Israel in a manner previously unimaginable (4:9–15, 36; cf. 18:16). But for Moses, Horeb represented rebellion (9:7–21) and a false start (cf. 5:1–5), because there the previous generation had apostatized and ignited YHWH’s fury (9:8).

Despite the people’s failures at Horeb, Moses, especially in 4:9–14, highlighted the covenantal significance of the place. The emphatically redundant opening (“Only guard yourself and guard yourself diligently”) and the focus in verses 9–10 on “the events [*haddēbārîm*] that the people

witnessed” and “a day” when all Israel stood before YHWH their God at Horeb distinguish that event from what was currently transpiring on the plains of Moab. We may summarize the “events” on that “day” as follows (4:10b–14):

1. YHWH charged Moses to assemble the people for an audience with him (v. 10b).
2. The people assembled at the foot of the mountain, which blazed with fire and whose top was shrouded in deep darkness (v. 11).
3. YHWH spoke audibly from the mountain, declaring his covenant—that is, the ten basic principles of covenant relationship (the Decalogue, v. 13).
4. YHWH charged Moses to teach the “ordinances and stipulations” (*ḥuqqîm ûmišpāṭîm*) to Israel (v. 14).

Moses’ recollection here is cryptic, awaiting a fuller recounting in chapter 5, but several features signal the formality of Israel’s encounter with YHWH at Horeb. First, Horeb was the place where Israel stood before YHWH (v. 10). Second, in essence, this event was not primarily theophanic, but auditory—an audience with YHWH. The people saw no form (*těmûnâ*) of God (4:12, 15); indeed, the mountain was shrouded in “darkness, cloud, and deep gloom” (cf. Exod. 19:16; 20:21). Metaphorically, the intense darkness and cloud expressed the perceptible though invisible presence of God, but practically, they protected the Israelites from the lethal dose of divine glory.

The use of “the words” (*hadděbārîm*) to refer to “the events that your eyes saw” hints at the focus of the revelation—that is, “words” (Deut. 4:9, 12), and the “voice/sound” (v. 12a, b) of YHWH. The preponderance of verbs for speech reinforces this impression: YHWH caused the people to hear his words (v. 10), he spoke to them

(*dibbēr*, v. 12), he declared to them his covenant and commanded the Ten Words (v. 13). Here “the Ten Words” (*‘ăšeret haddēbārîm*) functioned as shorthand for the covenant YHWH made with Israel at Horeb. Significantly, although the Israelites standing before Moses gained no visual image of the Horeb experience, the “sound” of YHWH’s voice had been transcribed to stone tablets (v. 13; cf. 10:4), referred to elsewhere as “the tablets of the covenant” (9:9, 11, 15). Contrary to the NIV, which treats “the Ten Commandments” [read “Ten Words”] as appositional to “covenant,” verse 13 actually consists of two clauses, the first declaring the principal idea and the second clarifying it: “Then he declared to you his covenant—that is, he commanded you to do the Ten Words.”

Third, “on that day” YHWH charged Moses to teach Israel the ordinances and stipulations, a shorthand expression for all the laws revealed at Horeb (4:14). The verbs are significant because they describe Moses’ role not as a lawgiver or legislator but as the teacher and mediator of the revelation to follow. In 5:22–31 Moses will explain how he was inducted into that role.

Moses began his second address (5:1b–11:32) by recounting further details of the Horeb encounter. His opening summons creates anticipation for instruction on all the ordinances and stipulations of the covenant received at Horeb: “Hear, O Israel, the ordinances [*haḥuqqîm*] and stipulations [*hammišpāṭîm*] that I am declaring today in your hearing, and you shall learn them and keep them by doing them” (5:1b). However, instead of lecturing the people on the Covenant Document (cf. Exod. 21:1–23:19), the Handbook on Worship for the Priests and Levites (Lev. 1–16), or the Instructions on Holiness (Lev. 17–26), Moses recited the Ten Words (Deut. 5:6–22) and then reviewed the people’s response to this revelation and its aftermath (5:23–33). With the opening line of 6:1, he revitalized the hearers’ anticipation for an exposition of the ordinances (*haḥuqqîm*)

and stipulations (*hammišpāṭîm*) of the covenant (5:1–33), but instead, as the divinely authorized interpreter, he offered a profoundly theological exposition of the first two principles of covenant relationship: the importance of exclusive devotion to YHWH (6:4–10:11; cf. 5:6–10) and the spiritual and ethical implications of bearing his name (10:12–22; cf. 5:11). As Moses concluded this address, he challenged the people to accept the privileges and responsibilities of covenant relationship (11:26–28) and gave a sketchy anticipation of a second phase of the current covenant ritual, to be executed in the land across the Jordan (11:29–32).

In Moses' third address, he fulfilled his threefold earlier promise of an exposition of the ordinances (*haḥuqqîm*) and stipulations (*hammišpāṭîm*)—that is, the spiritual, ritual, and ethical regulations that YHWH had revealed at Sinai. He began by repeating the heading we had heard earlier (4:1; 5:1; 6:1) and reminding his audience that what followed concerned particularly their enduring fidelity to YHWH once they have crossed the Jordan and entered the promised land (cf. 4:1b; 6:1b; 11:31–32). His instructions in the third address were obviously grounded in the constitutional documents revealed at Horeb, but now he fixed his gaze on the future. In this address, he occasionally looked back, particularly to the fathers' past religious commitments (28:36, 64), to YHWH's covenant with sworn promises of land to the fathers,¹⁹ and to the promise of numerous progeny (13:17). In passing, Moses spoke of the Egyptian enslavement of the descendants of Israel (26:7), but he also spoke of "the day of the assembly" (*yôm haqqāhāl*) in 18:15–19, the only explicit reference to the Horeb events in this address. He cited the Horeb experience here because it provided the context for YHWH officially authorizing him as prophet and mediator of revelation (cf. vv. 18–22). Remarkably, in Moses' creedal survey of YHWH's grace to his people in 26:3–10a, he omitted any reference to Horeb

and moved directly from YHWH's deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt to their entry into the promised land (vv. 7–9). The narrator signaled the end of the third address with a colophonic reference to the covenant that YHWH made with Israel at Horeb, summarizing the relationship between what had transpired on the plains of Moab and the earlier covenantal and revelatory events at Horeb (28:69 [29:1], on which see further below).

The Significance of the Covenant Rituals on the Plains of Moab

The conclusion to the third address reflects the narrator's awareness of Moses' role in the covenant ritual that he supervised in his final days as Israel's spiritual leader: "These are the words of the covenant that YHWH charged Moses to make [on his behalf] with the descendants of Israel in the land of Moab, apart from the [words of] the covenant that he [YHWH] made with them at Horeb" (Deut. 29:1 [28:69]). I have inserted the bracketed words to make sense of the elliptical Hebrew. Because of the text's cryptic nature, some argue that the covenant made (*kārat*) on the plains of Moab was distinct from the covenant made at Horeb/Sinai. However, the citation of the Decalogue at the beginning of the second address and Moses' repeated references to "the ordinances and the stipulations" not only ground this ritual in the founding document but also equate its terms with the constitutional documents from Horeb. This statement does not declare the introduction of a new covenant but recognizes a new covenant ceremony involving new speech acts that put in force for this generation what had happened to their parents at Horeb.

On the surface this seems to run against the grain of the expression "words of the covenant" (*dibrê habbērît*), which elsewhere in the Pentateuch always refers to the terms of a covenant rather than to the rituals involved in making it.

Exodus 34:28 had identified the Decalogue (the Ten Words) as “the words of the covenant,” a notion that Moses had reiterated in Deuteronomy 4:13 (see above, chap. 6, under “1. The Decalogue [Exod. 20; Deut. 5]”). These were the words that Moses had recorded and read along with the Covenant Document (*sēper habbērît*) containing the “stipulations” (*hammišpāṭîm*) as part of the ritual by which the Israelite covenant had been ratified at Horeb/Sinai (Exod. 24:3–8).

We may find support for this interpretation in later occurrences of the phrase “the words of the covenant.” After hearing Huldah read the Torah document (*sēper hattôrâ*) that King Josiah’s men had discovered in the temple, the young king assembled the people of Jerusalem in the temple courtyard for a covenant-renewal ritual (2 Kings 23:1–3). This ritual involved the king (in the role of Moses in Exod. 24 and Deut. 5–26, 28) reading “all the words of the document of the covenant” (*kol dibrê sēper habbērît*). In this case *sēper habbērît* applied not to the document used in the Horeb ritual (Exod. 24:7) but to the scroll that was found in the house of YHWH (2 Kings 23:2). Josiah stood by the pillar of the temple and covenanted before YHWH to walk after YHWH by keeping his commands, statutes, and ordinances (*mišwôtāyw, ‘ēdôtāyw, ḥuqqôtāyw*) wholeheartedly by fulfilling (*hēqîm*) “the words of this covenant that were written in this document” (23:3).

The expression “the words of this covenant” (*dibrê habbērît hazzō’t*) also occurs five times in a divine speech in Jeremiah 11:1–8. Although YHWH did not specify what he meant by “*this* covenant,” the allusions to Deuteronomy are clear: (1) Jeremiah 11:3 echoes Deuteronomy 27:26; (2) 11:4a echoes Deuteronomy 4:20; (3) 11:4b echoes Deuteronomy 27:10 and numerous other statements in Deuteronomy;²⁰ (4) 11:5a echoes Deuteronomy 7:8 (but also Gen. 26:3, a very Deuteronomistic verse); and (5) 11:5b echoes Deuteronomy 11:9 and other texts (6:3; 26:9, 15;

27:3). This combination of echoes confirms that “the words of this covenant” in Jeremiah 11:1–8 were Moses’ addresses on the covenant as recorded in Deuteronomy. However, Jeremiah added one more significant piece to this puzzle in 34:18: “And I will treat the men—those who violated my covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant [*dibrê habbērîṭ*] that they made [*kārat*] before me—like the calf that they cut in two pieces and then passed between its parts.” Here the idiom “to cut the calf” refers metaphorically to the ceremony alluded to in Deuteronomy 29:10–13 [9–12], apparently assuming that the “words of the covenant” to which they agreed were the terms of the covenant entered into on the plains of Moab (29:1 [28:69]).

Accordingly, “the words of this covenant” that Moses cut (*kārat*) with the descendants of Israel on YHWH’s behalf are his addresses in Deuteronomy. As noted above on Deuteronomy 1:5, by declaring them in this assembly in the context of a covenant-ratification/renewal ritual, he put his Torah into effect (*bē’ēr*). However, his use of different words for this ceremony does not mean that this statement refers to two distinct covenants, identified geographically as “the Sinai covenant” and “the Moab covenant,” respectively. The book of Deuteronomy itself precludes this interpretation. First, Moses laid the foundation for his own covenantal “words” on the plains of Moab (1:1) by reciting “the [primary] words of the covenant”—that is, the Decalogue (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13). His comment with reference to the duplicate copies inside the ark of the covenant—“And there they are, as YHWH commanded me” (10:5)—and his reference to the tribe of Levi as custodians of that covenant (10:8) rule out any notions of displacement or substitution. Second, Moses’ “words of the covenant” in Deuteronomy are deeply indebted to the Covenant Document (Exod. 21:1–23:19) and the Instructions on Holiness (Lev. 17–26) that YHWH gave at Horeb after the ritual described in Exodus 24. Third, the covenantal ethic represented by the earlier

constitutional documents is identical to that represented in Deuteronomy: “You shall be covenantally committed to YHWH and to your fellow Israelites (and aliens in your midst), so that you always act in their interests” (a paraphrase of Jesus’ summary of all the commands in Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). To be sure, Moses’ “words” highlight different features and bring out fresh nuances, but this is because they appear not as new legislation but as pastoral instruction applying and adapting the Sinai/Horeb covenant stipulations for the Israelites’ life in the promised land immediately on the horizon.

This interpretation of Deuteronomy 29:1 [28:69] assumes that the verse functions as a colophon, summarizing what has transpired in the course of the previous addresses, rather than as an introduction to what follows in chapters 29–30, as it appears in all English translations (following the Latin Vulgate). My interpretation has the support of the major ancient versions (MT, LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch), preserving an effective *inclusio*, involving the idiom “to cut a covenant” (*kārat bērit*) with the beginning of the second address (5:2–3). The colophonic-style conclusion recalls Leviticus 26:45–46, which formally ends the covenant revelation at Sinai and which follows the blessings and curses earlier in the chapter. Furthermore, the reference to “the words of the covenant” links this statement conceptually to Deuteronomy 26:16–19, which portrays Moses as presiding over a verbal ritual in which Israel had heard YHWH affirm the terms of the covenant that applied to him and YHWH had heard Israel affirm their acceptance of the privileges and obligations that applied to them.

The flow of the account and the conceptual links between 28:16–19 and 28:1–14 suggest that originally chapter 28 followed immediately after 26:19, and that chapter 27 was inserted in its present location later. In any case, in 27:9–10 we hear Moses and the Levites make an official declaration that reflects the significance of the proceedings on the

plains of Moab: “Hush and listen, O Israel. Today you have become a people belonging to YHWH your God. So listen to the voice of YHWH our God and keep his commands and his ordinances that I am charging you [to keep] today.”

- [1.](#) Exod. 16:35; Deut. 1:3; 2:7; 8:2, 4; 29:5.
- [2.](#) Deut. 1:6–4:40; 5:1b–11:32; 12:1–26:19; 28:1–68; 29:1–30:20.
- [3.](#) Deut. 27:1–26; 31:1–30; 32:44–52.
- [4.](#) Josh. 8:31–32; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 23:25; Ezra 7:6; Neh. 8:1; cf. John 7:23; 1 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 10:28.
- [5.](#) Pss. 1:2; 19:7; 119:1, 72; etc.
- [6.](#) Deut. 26:16–19; 27:9–10; 29:2–30:20.
- [7.](#) Deut. 11:26–32; 27:1–26; cf. Josh. 8:30–36.
- [8.](#) Deut. 3:21–29; 32:48–52; 34:1–12.
- [9.](#) Deut. 5:6; 26:17–19; 27:9; 28:9; 29:12 [11].
- [10.](#) Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9.
- [11.](#) Deut. 4:37; 7:6–7; 10:15; 14:2.
- [12.](#) Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18, on which see above, chap. 5, under “The Divine Orientation Address.”
- [13.](#) Deut. 1:8; 6:10 (cf. vv. 18, 23); 9:5; 30:20; cf. Exod. 32:13; Num. 32:11; Deut. 10:11.
- [14.](#) Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; 14:8; 16:13–14.
- [15.](#) Deut. 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20.
- [16.](#) Deut. 6:23; 7:13; 8:1; 11:9, 21; 19:8; 26:3, 15; 28:11; 31:7, 21, 23.
- [17.](#) Exod. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 11:45; 22:33; 25:38; 26:12, 45; Num. 15:41.
- [18.](#) Deut. 6:10; 9:5, 27; 29:13; 30:20.
- [19.](#) Deut. 12:1; 19:8; 26:3; 26:15; 28:11.
- [20.](#) Deut. 13:18 [19]; 15:5; 27:10; 28:1, 15, 45; 30:8, 10.

CHAPTER 8

The Nature of the Covenant Rituals and Laws on the Plains of Moab

The Nature of the Covenant Rituals

To this point I have focused on the significance of Deuteronomy as a covenantal document. But this raises the question of what sort of ritual was involved in the renewal of the Israelite covenant on the plains of Moab. Unfortunately, Deuteronomy consists largely of Moses' verbal covenantal activity and provides only sketchy hints regarding the nonverbal ritual acts that accompanied these oral utterances, so our reconstruction of what actually happened is tentative and depends on reading between the lines. This contrasts with the remarkably detailed descriptions of the events associated with stages 1 (Gen. 15 and 17) and 2 (Exod. 19–24) of the Israelite covenant. Based on the data provided, we may recognize several significant features, discussed below in the chronological order of the rituals involved.

1. The Formal Assembly of the People of Israel in the Presence of YHWH

Although in Deuteronomy 4:10a Moses recalled the covenant event forty years earlier as “the day you stood

before YHWH your God at Horeb,” in verse 10b he cited YHWH’s orders to him at that time: “Assemble the people before me, that I may let them hear my words, so they may learn to fear me throughout the days they live on the earth and so may instruct their children” (4:10b). Later, in 18:16 he highlighted the formality of that day by giving it an official name, “The Day of the Assembly.” Deuteronomy is rather informal in speaking of the events on the plains of Moab, at least initially. To be sure, the narrator set the stage for the second and fourth addresses by announcing, “And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them” (5:1; cf. 29:2), but there is no reference to YHWH commanding him to assemble the people. Indeed, the opening verse of the book suggests that the “words” Moses spoke to all Israel east of the Jordan reiterated and represented the climax of a series of addresses he had delivered as the Israelites journeyed through the desert to their present location (1:1). The narrator’s added comment, “Moses spoke to the descendants of Israel according to all that YHWH had charged him [to say] to them” (1:3), speaks of Moses’ action once the people had assembled, rather than the process of assembly. Not until the final address, which offers the best clues to the covenant-ratification rituals, do we learn that Moses had delivered the preceding addresses in a formal context involving the assembly of all Israel. He had done so for the explicit purpose of “entering into the covenant of YHWH your God and into his oath that YHWH your God is cutting with you today” (29:12 [11]). Moses emphasized that this was a formal assembly involving all Israel: “You have taken your stand [*’attem nišṣābîm*] today, all of you, before YHWH your God: your tribal leaders, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, as well as your small children, your wives, and the foreigners in your camp, from those who chop your wood to those who draw your water” (29:10–11 [9–10]).

His verb of choice, *niṣṣab*, “to take one’s stand” (from *yāṣab*), rather than the more common *‘āmad*, “to stand,” reflects the formality of the occasion and links the people’s posture here with that of the people at the Horeb event, though Exodus 19:17 had used the *hithpael* stem of the same verb. Moses also used it in Deuteronomy 31:14 when speaking of his and Joshua’s appearance for an audience before YHWH in the tent of meeting.

The narrator reinforced the significance of the covenant-renewal moment by noting the specific date on the calendar: on the first day of the eleventh month in Israel’s fortieth year—that is, Shebat 1, year 40 (Deut. 1:3; cf. Exod. 12:2). This specification of the date aligns its significance with the date of Israel’s departure from Egypt (Exod. 12:2), the official inauguration of the tabernacle as YHWH’s residence (Exod. 40:17), the people’s departure from Sinai (Num. 10:11), and the death of Aaron (Num. 33:38), but makes it even more specific than the date of the assembly at Sinai (Exod. 19:1).

We do not know how long the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab. Jewish tradition suggests that Moses’ addresses ended on Adar 6 (S. Olam Rab. 10 [41]), which would mean the proceedings took thirty-six days. However, Joshua 5:10 notes that the Israelites celebrated the Passover inside the promised land on Nissan 14, on the fortieth anniversary of their departure from Egypt. If we consider that the people mourned Moses’ death for thirty days (Deut. 34:8), that the mission of the two scouts took at least four days (Josh. 2:22), and that the Israelites camped at Shittim for three days (3:2) before crossing the river, then the duration of the rituals was considerably shorter, perhaps two or, at the most, three weeks.

2. The Presentation of the Torah to the People

The amount of space devoted to the presentation of the Torah to the people in Deuteronomy reflects its importance in the covenant-making ritual underlying Moses' presentation of the Torah—that is, “the words of the covenant” (*dibrê habbērîṭ*, 28:69 [29:1]). Although most interpret the addresses as “the law of Moses,” this is a generic mistake as old as the Septuagint, which sent the history of interpretation on a false course. This book portrays Moses not as a legislator but as a pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11). Indeed, while the only title that Deuteronomy ascribes to him is “prophet” (*nābî*, 18:15–22; 34:10–12), the verbs that he used to describe his speech acts connote communication and instruction rather than legislation: *limmēd*, “to teach”;¹ *dibbēr*, “to speak” (5:1). Posing as an outsider, the narrator assesses Moses' actions with verbs from the same semantic field: *'āmar*, “to say” (1:5; 31:2; 32:5); *dibber*, “to speak”;² *qārā*, “to summon” (5:1; 29:1 [2]; 31:7); *limmēd*, “to teach” (31:22); *bērēk*, “to bless” (33:1); *śîm lipnê*, “to set [the Torah] before [the people]” (4:44), as well as *nātan lipnê*, also “to set before, present” (4:8 [the Torah]; 11:32 [the ordinances and stipulations]; 11:26 and 30:1, 19 [the blessing and the curse]; 30:15, 20 [life and death, well-being and disaster]). This explains why what Moses said is classified generically as *tôrâ*, “teaching,” from *hôrâ*, “to teach.” This expression is didactic and pedagogical rather than legal. To be sure, he recited the Decalogue, and his instructions included “ordinances and stipulations” (*ḥuqqîm ûmišpāṭîm*).³ However, what follows are not new laws but passionate applications of YHWH's covenantal vision and stipulations to new situations in the promised land across the Jordan. When he cited laws or appeared to mandate specific behavior—which he frequently did—this is command subordinated to a higher goal; namely, covenant fidelity. This is law in the service of theology and spirituality, rather than law for its own sake or for the sake of deontologically motivated obedience—behavior

driven only by a sense of duty to a superior. Accepting these speeches as pastoral and as prophetic farewell addresses opens new vistas of meaning and certainly new visions of YHWH's grace.

But these are not merely sermons to a congregation or impassioned lectures to students. As already suggested, the idiom *śîm lipnê*, "to set before, to present," suggests a more formal and official goal as well. In Exodus 19:7 the narrator had used this expression for Moses' speech to the people that presented YHWH's offer of a covenant relationship to them, and YHWH had also used it in his charge to Moses to relay the terms of the Covenant Document at Horeb (Exod. 21:1).

However, the narrator captures Moses' legal illocutionary goals even more clearly in Deuteronomy 1:5, where he chooses the rare word, *bē'ēr*, which occurs elsewhere in the First Testament only in Deuteronomy 27:8 and Habakkuk 2:2. Most English translations render this word along the lines of "to explain, to expound," assuming that what follows involves an exposition of the revelation given at Horeb. However, in this context "this Torah" refers to what follows, not to previous revelation. Furthermore, as the two other contexts in which it occurs indicate, the verb *bē'ēr* does not mean "to explain, "to expound." In Deuteronomy 27:8 the word identifies the illocutionary significance of the transcription of the Torah on the pillars at Mount Ebal in a future and supplementary covenantal ritual, suggesting that the oral presentation of the Torah and its written transcription have similar or complementary goals. In Akkadian (a related Semitic language) texts, the cognate expression *burru* connotes "to confirm, to put a legal document in force." In this case, Moses' presentation of the Torah represented a vital element in the series of actions that, for the present generation, put into force the covenant that YHWH had established with their parents at Horeb. This probably accounts for Moses' curious and grammatically

awkward introduction to the second address, where he suggested that through the present covenant proceedings, the people standing before him were in effect transported back to Horeb: “YHWH our God made a covenant [*kārat bĕrît*] with us in Horeb. It was not with our fathers that YHWH made this covenant, but with us, we, these, here, today, all of us who are alive today. Face-to-face YHWH spoke with you at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between YHWH and you at that time, to declare to you the word of YHWH” (Deut. 5:3–5).

Of course, this statement is not literally true; most of the people standing before Moses had not been born when YHWH made his covenant with Israel at Horeb. This is a rhetorical ploy that Moses used to emphasize that the present covenant procedures figuratively transported this generation back to Horeb and that through these proceedings they officially replaced their parents as “the assembly” before YHWH (18:16), they became the true covenant people (cf. 27:9), and they received the commission to be YHWH’s treasured people (*‘am sĕgullâ*), his royal priesthood (*mamleket kōhănîm*), and his holy nation/people (*‘gôy/‘am qādôš*). In so doing, they became the bearers of YHWH’s charge to Abraham to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (cf. 26:19, on which see further below).

3. The Verbal Binding of the Covenant Partners

When the previous generation of Israelites had arrived at Sinai, they heard YHWH declare what it meant for him to be their God: “You saw what I have done to the Egyptians; I have carried you on eagles’ wings; and I have brought you to myself” (Exod. 19:4). Once the covenant proceedings began, the first words they heard from his mouth were “I am YHWH your God” (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). The previous generation of Israelites had verbalized their acceptance of

the covenant and its terms by declaring three times, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7). These verbal declarations preceded the ritual actions by which they put themselves under oath to the covenant obligations and privileges (Exod. 24:8). We observe a similar pattern in Deuteronomy, with Deuteronomy 26:16–19 representing the former phase and 29:9–13 [10–14] the latter.

Deuteronomy 26:16–19 consists of two parts, an opening transitional statement (v. 16), followed by an enigmatic review of the speech-act ritual by which YHWH and the Israelites bound themselves verbally to each other through covenant (vv. 17–19). The first part of verse 16 is a retrospective colophonic summary of the significance of the preceding addresses: “This day YHWH commands you to put into practice these ordinances and stipulations.” The reference to “these ordinances and stipulations” is doubly significant. First, the pair of expressions *haḥuqqîm* and *hammišpāṭîm* functions as shorthand for “the words of the covenant” revealed at Sinai and to which the previous generation had bound themselves in Exodus 24. Second, the qualification, “*these* ordinances and stipulations” that YHWH commands you “this day,” places the “the words of the covenant” that the people had heard from Moses on the plains of Moab on par with the Sinai revelation. While this pair (ordinances and stipulations) occurs nine times in Moses’ first two addresses,⁴ its combination with the verbs *šāmar*, “to keep,” and *‘āśâ*, “to do, practice,” links this statement stylistically and thematically with 12:1, as the following synopsis illustrates:

Deuteronomy 12:1

*These are the ordinances and the stipulations
that you shall keep by doing [them] in
the land*

Deuteronomy 26:16

*This day YHWH your God
is commanding you to do
these ordinances and the
stipulations,
and you shall keep and do them*

that YHWH your God gave to your
ancestors
to possess all the days
that they live on the land.

with all your heart and with all
your being.

These two verses frame Moses' third address, much of which consists of discourse on the specific ordinances that YHWH had revealed at Sinai, applying them to life in the promised land. The second part of Deuteronomy 26:16 functions as a hortatory appeal for the people to be true to their covenant commitments, concretizing the Shema in 6:4-5 and preparing for 26:17-19: "And you shall keep them and put [them] into practice, with your entire inner being [*lēb*] and your entire being [*napšēkā*]."

In verses 17-19 Moses' second address reaches its climax. The abrupt opening and the repetition of "today" (*hayyôm*) in verse 17 set these statements apart from verse 16. Whereas the previous "today" statement in verse 16 had signaled the conclusion to Moses' "words of the covenant," by repeating "today" in verse 17 he signaled the formal incorporation of the *tôrâ* that he had proclaimed into the covenant itself. The syntax and content of verses 17-19 are awkward, but the tone is true to the entire third address. Moses emphasized that Israel's obedience to YHWH should be driven not merely by the sense of duty toward the Suzerain but by keen awareness of the special nature of their relationship. In the process his words alluded to a formal juridical procedure that he had apparently supervised during the delivery of this address, through which YHWH and the new generation of Israelites formalized their covenant relationship.

Deuteronomy 26:17-19 divides into two parts, which may be unequal in size but display a remarkable parallelism. The corresponding features are highlighted in the following synopsis, with a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew text:

17 Today you have had YHWH

18 Today YHWH has had you declare:

declare,
to be your God,
and to walk in his ways,
and to keep his decrees,
laws, and commands,
and to listen to his voice.

to be his treasured people,
just as he promised you,
19 and to keep all his commands,
and to set you high above all the
nations that he has made
—for praise, and renown and honor
—
and to be a holy people belonging
to YHWH your God
as he promised.

The opening declaration of each part is particularly striking because they involve a special *hiphil* form of the verb *'āmar*, “to say, declare,” that occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible (First Testament). Many English translations assume an intensive significance of the *hiphil* (NIV, CSB, ESV) and have the people of Israel first declare that YHWH will be their God, after which YHWH declares that Israel will be his people. However, this reading misunderstands the exceptional verb forms and attributes the respective statements to the wrong person. More seriously, it alters the structure of this covenant relationship theologically, which was grounded in YHWH’s unmerited election of Israel and which called Israel to demonstrate acceptance of this status through faithful obedience. However, if we assume the normal causative significance of the *hiphil* and render the text literally, verse 17 opens with “You have caused YHWH to say this day . . .” And verse 18 opens with “And YHWH has caused you to declare this day . . .” However, because of the extreme disparity between the parties involved in these declarations, it seems inappropriate for a human vassal to force the divine Suzerain to say or do anything, so we may render it more sensitively as “You have had/let YHWH say,” or even more periphrastically as “You have accepted/acknowledged YHWH’s declaration that he will be your God,” and “YHWH has had/let you say,” that is, “YHWH has accepted/acknowledged your declaration that you will be his

treasured people” (cf. NRSV). Here the *hiphil* form of *’āmar* functions quasi-juridically, with each party to an agreement hearing the other party declare their commitment to their obligations under the agreement.

Given the social distance between YHWH the Suzerain and Israel his vassals, the mutuality reflected in these declarations is remarkable and without equal in ancient records. The closest extrabiblical analogue involves a thirteenth-century-BC parity treaty between Rameses II of Egypt and the Hittite king Hattusili III, which they signed after many years of indecisive conflict. The treaty has been preserved in both Egyptian and Hittite versions (*ANET*, 199–203). Remarkably, the Egyptian version reflects the voice of the Hittite king, while in the Hittite version we hear the voice of the pharaoh. The procedure underlying these texts appears to have transpired something like this:

1. Diplomats representing both states settled upon the terms of the agreement.
2. Representatives of each side produced a version styled as the words of the respective monarchs.
3. These versions were inscribed in cuneiform on tablets of precious metal (silver in this case), using the Akkadian language (the language of international diplomacy).
4. These tablets were exchanged and taken home.
5. The texts were translated into the native language, providing the Egyptians and Hittites, respectively, with constant reminders of the obligations to which the other party had bound himself.

Our text (Deut. 26:17–19) seems to presuppose an oral version of this procedure, according to which Israel heard YHWH declare his commitment to them, and YHWH heard the people declare their commitment to him. Accordingly, these verses do not quote YHWH’s and the Israelites’

declarations but cast the verbal ritual as indirect speech. If Moses functioned as the covenant mediator here, as he had at Horeb (Exod. 19:3–8), and if he cast this report as direct speech, it might have sounded something like this (the italicized font highlights the respective parties' accepted responsibilities and privileges within the covenant relationship, and normal roman font highlights the obligations of the other party):

Moses' voice: Today, you have had YHWH declare:

YHWH's *I will be your God,*

voice: And you shall walk in my ways,
and keep my ordinances, my commands, and my judgments,
And you shall listen to my voice.

Moses' voice: Today, YHWH has had you declare:

Israel's *We will be your treasured people—*

voice: *just as you promised us—*

And we will keep all your commands.

And you shall set us high above all the nations you have made,
for praise, fame, and honor.

*And we will be a holy people, belonging to YHWH our God—
just as you promised.*

The bilateral nature of YHWH's covenant relationship with Israel is more explicit in Deuteronomy 29:13 [12], which declares the purpose of the covenant (*bě'rît*) and the oath (*'ā/â*) that YHWH made with his people more completely: "that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." The statement obviously alludes to Genesis 17:7: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." Just as the covenant ceremonies at Horeb had fulfilled this promise with the exodus generation, so forty years later the

present ritual fulfilled it with the generation about to enter the promised land.

Through this verbal ritual, YHWH confirmed his status as Israel's God, committed himself to treating them as his treasured possession and his holy people, and agreed to setting them high above the nations for praise, fame, and honor. Deuteronomy 26:19 ends abruptly without clarifying how YHWH will elevate Israel above the nations.

Deuteronomy 28:1-14—which offers commentary on 26:17-19 and originally followed immediately after chapter 26—answers this question. Chapter 28 opens with a reminder that Israel must be true to their covenant commitments to YHWH and then reiterates the promise: “YHWH your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth” (Deut. 28:1b). In the covenant blessings that follow, Moses describes how this status will be experienced: (1) YHWH will bless Israel fully in all their economic enterprises (vv. 2-6, 8, 11-12); (2) YHWH will protect them against all their enemies (v. 7); (3) YHWH will establish them as his holy people, so that all the peoples of the earth will recognize on them the “brand” of YHWH's name (vv. 9-10).

The last expression is obviously metaphorical, but the vocabulary and the image derive from the portrait of Israel's high priest, wearing on his forehead a gold medallion engraved with “Holy, belonging to YHWH [*qdš lyhwh*]” (Exod. 28:36; 39:30). The status envisioned for Israel within the covenant as “A holy people, belonging to YHWH” (*‘am qādôš layhwh*) comes with a missional charge: as a nation, they are to be agents of blessing and grace to a world languishing under the curse because of human rebellion against the Creator and the rejection of their status as the vice-regental images of God.

Whereas Deuteronomy 26:16-19 declares the status and obligations to which YHWH committed himself in imprecise and summary forms, it presents the status and obligations to which the Israelites committed in greater detail, though

in language that is totally familiar. On the one hand, they accepted their privileged status as a people belonging to YHWH (v. 18a), as his treasured possession, and as his consecrated people, set high above all the nations (v. 19; cf. 7:6; 14:1, 21). On the other hand, in keeping with the wholehearted and full-bodied vassaldom called for in verse 16, they agreed to (1) walk in YHWH's ways; (2) keep his ordinances, commands, and stipulations; and (3) listen to his voice (cf. 28:1-2, 9, 13-14).

With this verbal ritual, this generation formally agreed to the terms summarized in Exodus 19:5-6: "Now therefore, if you will indeed listen to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples—for all the earth belongs to me. Thus you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These two passages function as bookends around the intervening narrative from Exodus 19:7 to Deuteronomy 26:15.

The role of the people of YHWH as a light to the world and a blessing to the nations receives little explicit attention in the intervening material, but as the narrator recounts the challenges Moses and YHWH faced in creating this holy people, this framework provides context and significance for that narrative. On the one hand, we see God determined to lift the curse from the world and replace it with his blessing, choosing this unlikely nation as his agent. On the other hand, we observe a nation eager to pay lip service to the status and mission assigned to them but fundamentally oblivious, if not resistant, to that calling and persistently rebellious against their divine Suzerain. But YHWH had not separated Israel from the nations merely to be the recipients of his admiration, like a pet Siamese kitten or expensive artwork on the wall. Like the ministry of Aaron, Israel's was to be a priestly service, declaring to the nations the glory of its God, modeling for them what divine grace can accomplish, and in so doing, drawing the nations to him (cf. Deut. 4:5-8).

4. The Concluding Oath Ritual

The narrator signals the commencement of Moses' fourth address (29:2 [1]-30:20) with Moses summoning the Israelites for one more assembly, at which he would review the background to the current covenant-making event (29:2-8 [1-7]). He concluded with one more pastoral appeal to the people to "keep the words of this covenant and put them into practice," which would be the key to YHWH's blessing their efforts in the promised land (v. 9 [8]). Having mentioned "the words of this covenant," Moses paused to reflect on the significance of the rituals on the plains of Moab (vv. 10-13 [9-12]). To modern hearers his language in verses 12-13 [11-12] seems vague, but his topic was the final (nonverbal) ritual by which YHWH and the Israelites bound themselves irrevocably in covenant to each other. After noting that the entire community participated in this ritual (29:10-11 [9-10]), we may limit our discussion to the essentials.

As was the case at Horeb, Moses convened the present assembly before YHWH, the God who had brought Israel to himself (Exod. 19:4) and called them to himself (Deut. 4:10). However, in these contexts YHWH played three roles: (1) He was the divine host who had invited the people to an audience with him. (2) He was the divine witness to the promises the Israelites would make and the oath under which they would place themselves.⁵ (3) He was Israel's covenant partner, which meant that he was not merely a witness to the proceedings but also a participant in them.

In verses 11-12 [12-13] Moses reminded the people of the purpose of the assembly and the covenant rituals performed there. His choice of words was deliberate: "To pass into the covenant of YHWH your God" acknowledges the disparity between the partners and the monergistic nature of this covenant. This was YHWH's covenant. Like the covenant rituals with Abraham and the exodus generation at Horeb,

YHWH chose his covenant partner, established the covenant terms, and determined the consequences for compliance and noncompliance by the vassal partner. As Moses would emphasize at the end of the fourth address (30:11–20; cf. 11:26–28), Israel’s only options were to accept or reject what YHWH had offered them.

Whereas at the end of 29:12 [11] and elsewhere in the book Moses spoke of the covenant that YHWH “cut” (*kārat*) with the ancestors and with Israel,⁶ here he spoke of Israel “entering into” (*‘ābar bē*) the covenant of YHWH. This idiom occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible and should not be confused with “to transgress/violate the terms of a covenant” (*‘ābar bēřît*), as in Deuteronomy 17:2 and elsewhere.⁷ We could treat the idiom as a stylistic variant of the more common expression “to enter into a covenant” (*bô’ bibrît*).⁸ However, the verb “to pass” (*‘ābar*) probably derives from the ritual of covenanters cutting an animal in two and then binding themselves to its terms by *passing* between the parts (cf. Gen. 15:9–10, 17). Playing with a combination of the words “to pass through” (*‘ābar*) and “covenant” (*bēřît*), Jeremiah interpreted Moses’ image this way: “As for the men who violated [*‘ābar*] my covenant and did not keep the words of the covenant [*dibrê habbēřît*] that they made [*kārat*] before me, I will treat them like the calf that they cut in two and passed [*‘ābar*] between its parts” (Jer. 34:18–19).

The added reference to the “oath” in Deuteronomy 29:12 [11] strengthens this interpretation. The word for “oath,” *’ālâ*, derives from a root meaning “to swear, to curse, to take an oath.” Remarkably, it usually occurs in covenantal contexts (cf. Ezek. 16:59; 17:19). Here and in verse 14 [13] the coordinate word pair “the covenant and the oath” (*habbēřît wēhā’ālâ*) functions as a hendiadys denoting a treaty that concludes with or is based on a curse. In verse 21 [20] the phrase *’ālôt habbēřît*, “the curses of the covenant,” corresponds to Akkadian *adê māmīt*,

“treaty/pact adjuration,” which also refers to the oath sworn in the ritual of covenant making. Some associate “his oath” with the curses listed in Deuteronomy 28:15–68, but in light of Jeremiah 34:18–19, it probably refers to a ritual act that symbolizes the fate of those who violate the covenant. In Genesis 15:9–10, 17, YHWH had obligated himself irrevocably to the covenant with Abraham by passing between the halves of the slaughtered animals. In Exodus 24:5–8 Moses had achieved this effect by sprinkling the blood of sacrificed animals on the altar, symbolizing YHWH, and then on the people themselves. In this context, Moses did not comment on the nature of the imprecatory ritual to which he subjected the people. However, because the narrator used the verb *kārat* with Moses as the subject in Deuteronomy 29:1b [28:69a], whatever the form of the ritual, as in Exodus 24:5–8, Moses stood in as YHWH’s authorized representative and supervisor of the ritual.

In Deuteronomy 29:13 [12] Moses pointed out the significance of the present covenant-ratification rituals for YHWH’s overall agenda and alluded to Genesis 17:7. Through the Israelites’ actions on the plains of Moab, YHWH fulfilled his ancient promise by having the Israelites born post-exodus “pass into the covenant and the oath.” YHWH had kept his word; he had remembered his covenant with Abraham and hereby established (*hēqîm*) his covenant with Abraham with this generation of the ancestor’s descendants. The infidelity, faithlessness, and consequent death of the exodus generation had raised questions about the viability of YHWH’s covenant promises. But through the present proceedings at least the personal aspect of his covenant commitment (“I will be your God and the God of your descendants”) had been fulfilled. The only question that remained was, What about the covenant promise of land? Moses answered that question in Deuteronomy 11:29–32 and chapter 27.

5. The Territorial Addendum to Stage 3 of the Israelite Covenant

Moses had concluded his second address (Deut. 5:1–11:28) with a challenge to the Israelites to choose the blessing instead of the curse (11:26–28). On the basis of the conclusion to the fourth address (30:11–20), we might have expected this to be the end, but unexpectedly Moses cast his gaze across the Jordan to the land that YHWH their God was giving them, focusing particularly on the twin peaks he could see across the Jordan to the northwest, Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. In these two texts Moses prescribed a new ritual to be performed there. Whatever the significance of “You shall place the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal” (11:29), for some undeclared reason Moses was focused on geography. In 11:29–31 he listed a series of place names that apparently the Israelites were to recognize as markers on the way to the twin mountains. However, it is unclear whether he intended them as an itinerary or simply a series of significant places the Israelites would encounter on the way, named in random order. What is most significant about these locations is that they are all in the land that YHWH was about to deliver into the hands of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 29). Indeed, this was YHWH’s gift to them, to occupy and to claim it as their homeland.

Moses made an opening reference to the blessing and the curse in 11:29 and gave a final comment in 11:32 that when the Israelites live in the land, they are to keep doing all “the ordinances and stipulations” that he set before them “today.” Thus Moses hinted at a covenantal significance for whatever was to transpire on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. The words for “the blessing and the curse” (*běṛākâ wəḡēlālâ*) involve the same pair of terms that Moses would use to introduce the catalogs of blessings and curses in 28:1–14 and 28:15–68, respectively. Elsewhere “the ordinances and

stipulations” are shorthand for the “words of the covenant” that YHWH commanded Moses to make with the descendants of Israel on the plains of Moab (29:1 [28:69]).

Chapter 27, which the narrator has inserted into Moses’ third address between his review of the verbal covenant ritual (26:16–19) and the covenant blessings and curses (28:1–68), picks up the theme of 11:29–32 and elaborates on the rituals the Israelites were to perform at Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. The chapter divides into three parts (three discrete speeches), prescribing a future performative ritual (27:1–8), a present declarative challenge (vv. 9–10), and a future verbal ritual (vv. 11–26). The small central section concerns Moses’ immediate audience and the significance of the rituals he had supervised on the plains of Moab; the outer sections concern two elements of a ceremony separated in space (across the Jordan and inside the promised land) and time (after Moses had died) from the current rituals that Moses had been supervising. Even so, we should not overlook the profoundly covenantal and theological significance of all that has happened “today,” which he summarized in 27:9: “Sh! Hear O Israel! Today you have become the people of YHWH your God!” In his first address (1:6–4:40), Moses had prepared his hearers for “tomorrow” by three times expressing his personal frustration with the people and with God that he was not able to enter the land that had been on his chronological and spatial horizon for forty years (1:37; 3:26; 4:21–22). However, YHWH had refused to relent and let Moses enter the land (3:26–27). Deuteronomy 27:1–8, 11–26 concerns that “tomorrow” without him.

The charges to transcribe “all the words of this Torah” (27:3, 8) on pillars covered with plaster and to perform a ritual of blessing (*lěbārēk*, v. 12) and cursing (*qělālâ*, v. 13) presuppose the transcription of Moses’ addresses, including chapters 28 (note the same word for “curse” in 28:15, 45) and chapters 29–30 (cf. 29:27 [26]; 30:1). Earlier Moses had

referred to “a copy of this Torah” that future kings were to copy and read for themselves (17:18–19), but until Moses had finished his addresses, there was no such written document (cf. 31:9–13, 25–26). This suggests that Moses delivered these instructions after he had completed all four addresses and also after the Israelites had completed the covenant-renewal rituals alluded to in 26:16–19 and 29:10–15 [9–14].

Although the word “covenant” (*bĕrît*) does not appear in chapter 27, the rituals prescribed here are profoundly covenantal. Four particular elements highlight this agenda: (1) the centrality of “this Torah”; (2) the references to erected pillars and an altar on which the people would offer whole burnt (*’ôlôt*) and fellowship (*šĕlāmîm*) offerings (27:1–8), elements that had featured prominently in the covenant-ratification rituals at Sinai/Horeb (Exod. 24:4–5); (3) the passing reference to the blessings and curses (Deut. 27:12–13; cf. chap. 28); and (4) the concluding twelve personal and individual imprecations to be recited (27:14–26) as an oral counterpart to the rituals through which the Israelites had “entered the covenant” by binding themselves to YHWH with the oath (*’ā/â*).⁹

Having recognized the covenantal nature of the rituals in chapter 27, we must ask what covenantal role these activities played, particularly the ritual in verses 1–8.

Deuteronomy 27:1–8 divides into three parts: (1) a brief opening appeal for scrupulous adherence to the present prescriptions (27:1b); (2) summary instructions regarding the prescribed ritual (vv. 2–3); and (3) a more detailed description of the ritual prescribed (vv. 4–8). My present concern is especially the ritual described in parts 2 and 3, which function as parallel panels of an impressive diptych. Each of these two segments commences with “and it shall be” (*wĕhāyâ*), followed by a temporal and spatial marker of the context when and where the ritual would be performed: when the Israelites have crossed the Jordan. Thereafter

these panels share a common skeleton, consisting of three basic commands:

You shall set up [large] stones,
And you shall plaster them with plaster,
And you shall write on them all the words of this Torah.

Each of these elements deserves brief discussion.

The large stones. The verb “to erect, set up” (*hēqîm*) suggests that the stones were vertical pillars. Ancient Near Easterners erected commemorative monuments for a variety of reasons: as memorials to military conquests, political accomplishments, treaties, judicial achievements, and religious devotion. The plural “large stones” in verse 2 suggests more than one pillar, but the text does not state how many were required. On the basis of the number of tribes named in verses 12–13 and then involved in the liturgical imprecations in verses 14–26, twelve seems appropriate, in which case the present ritual would echo part of the covenant-ratification ceremony celebrated at Horeb forty years earlier (Exod. 24:4). Although the function of the stones would differ, after the Israelites crossed the Jordan in Joshua 4:1–9, they set up a memorial consisting of twelve stones, “according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel” (cf. 1 Kings 18:31). Given the convention of later Greek colonizers who erected monuments to commemorate arrival at a destination, and to Moses’ charge to perform these rituals “on the day you cross the Jordan,” some view these stones as memorials to the conclusion of a journey. If the ritual involved twelve stones, it would have signaled the end of the journey for all the tribes of Israel, including those who claimed land east of the Jordan.

The plaster on the stone monuments. The action probably involved plastering the stones with a white alkaline compound consisting of water and calcium oxide derived from limestone, which was readily available in the vicinity of

Ebal and Gerizim. The practice of plastering rough surfaces for artistic and literary purposes dates back several millennia, but it is not clear how the Torah was to be written on these pillars. Moses could have called for inscribing the text with chisels, which would have resulted in a durable text, but that would have involved arduous work and required much more space for the text. If the plaster was etched with a sharp object, the dark color of the rock beneath the plaster would constitute the text.

Moses probably expected scribes to write the Torah with ink or paint, something like the eighth-century-BC Balaam Text at Deir 'Alla in Jordan. Whereas the Balaam Text was preserved because it was written on inside walls and covered with debris when the house was destroyed, a text written on plastered pillars exposed to the elements would not survive long. However, the pillars themselves could have stood for generations as lasting memorials to the event. When Joshua assembled the tribes of Israel at Shechem to renew the covenant after his work of conquest had been completed (Josh. 24), they probably met at this very spot, where Joshua had earlier erected the pillars himself (8:30–35). The pillars may have been reused later as a rallying point, but Moses' prescriptions have anticipated a single moment in time.

The text of the Torah on the stones. Earlier Moses had charged the people to write his words on their hearts, the doorposts of their houses, and the gates of their towns (Deut. 6:9; 11:20) and had instructed the future king to write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll (17:18). If the speeches in chapter 27 were part of the proceedings at the end of chapter 31, then “all the words of this Torah” involved the entirety of Moses' farewell pastoral addresses now preserved in Deuteronomy. If the twofold occurrence of *bē'ēr*, “to put into force,” at 1:5 and 27:8 functions as bookends around what is included, then minimally it involved the first three addresses. This would not have

posed a logistical problem. Taken together, Moses' four speeches are approximately twice as long as Hammurabi's law code, which takes up less than three-fourths of the surface area of a stela about seven feet tall. The entire text of Moses' speeches could easily have been transcribed on two six-foot stelae. But if, on the analogy of Exodus 24:4, the present rituals involved twelve pillars, then the average number of words on each pillar would have been fewer than two thousand, and the pillars themselves would have needed to be no taller than three feet. Even so, for the moment the purpose of the inscription remains unspecified.

In any case, the transcription of "the words of this Torah" bore profound covenantal significance for the people and the land. Regarding the people, while Moses never used the term "covenant" (*bĕrît*) in his instructions for the oral rituals called for in Deuteronomy 27:11-26, the involvement of all the tribes in the recitation of the curses and blessings alludes to chapter 28. First, plural forms of the words for "the curse" and "the blessing" are used of the curses (28:15, 45) and the blessings (28:2, 8) that conclude the third address of Moses' Torah (11:26 uses the collective singular). Second, the narrator identifies the Torah that concludes with the blessings and curses as "the words of this covenant that YHWH commanded Moses to make with the descendants of Israel" (29:1 [28:69]). Third, in his final address, Moses explicitly referred to the curses as "the curses of the covenant written in this document of the Torah" (29:21 [20]). The final imprecatory ritual, by which individual Israelites bound themselves on oath to the terms of the covenant (27:11-26), reinforces this interpretation. The final comprehensive imprecation explicitly links the oath with the Torah that had been inscribed on the pillars: "Cursed is anyone who does not confirm the words of this Torah by doing them" (27:16).

Regarding the land, by inscribing the words of this Torah on the stones, the terms of the covenant involving YHWH,

the people, *and the land* were formally put into effect (*bē'ēr*, 27:8). The covenant ritual at Horeb was a bipartite ritual that occurred far away from the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. There Moses read the words of institution orally for the people's sake (Exod. 24:3–7). Through the blood-sprinkling ritual, the Israelites had bound themselves to the “words” and “stipulations” that were written in the “Covenant Document” (*sēper habbērît*) they had heard (Exod. 24:1–8). The present ritual is silent on the oral reading of the words of the covenant at Gerizim and Ebal. The only party to receive the words was the land. The stones represented the land. Through the act of inscription, they received “the words of this Torah,” and the land that they represented was formally integrated into the tripartite covenant relationship. According to Joshua 8–9, once this ritual had been performed, the Israelites were legally authorized to claim the land by conquest, land that YHWH had promised them.

It is scarcely coincidental that YHWH should have prescribed this ritual on the mountains of Gerizim and Ebal, in the vicinity of the oaks of Moreh (Deut. 11:30).

Geographically not only were these mountains among the highest in the promised land, but they were also located at the very midpoint of an imaginary line drawn “from Dan to Beersheba,” a formulaic definition of the northern and southern extremities of the settled land of Israel (see fig. 3.1 above).¹⁰ However, for the covenant people the location was even more significant historically and traditionally. The phrase “oaks of Moreh” links this event to the only other reference to “the oak of Moreh” in Scripture, in Genesis 12:6. This was the place near Shechem where Abram had first stopped when he came from Haran and crossed the Jordan into the promised land. This was also the place where YHWH appeared to him and told him that he had arrived in the land that he had promised to give to Abram and his descendants (v. 7). And this was Jacob's first stopover when

he returned from Haran and crossed the Jordan. Here he had erected a memorial altar, which he named “El, the God of Israel” (33:20). Through this ritual YHWH, the Israelites, and the land were bound by covenant, and the Israelites staked their claim to the promised land. This meant the conquest of Canaan by YHWH’s people in YHWH’s land could begin.

The Nature and Function of Israel’s Law within Its Covenantal Context

Before we move to the next stage in the evolution of the Israelite covenant, we need to pause and reflect further on the nature and function of Israel’s laws within the context of their covenant relationship with YHWH. At the end of chapter 6, we began our reflection on why evangelicals have such a negative view of the law. In this chapter we have reexamined Deuteronomy and discovered that rather than being a legislative document, this book represents Moses’ farewell pastoral addresses to Israel. In these speeches he presents an impassioned plea to his people never to forget the grace of YHWH, which has made them who they are. Now we may ask what function the laws of Deuteronomy and the remaining constitutional documents played in Israel’s life. To answer the question, we must read the First Testament texts themselves and listen to their voices without the clutter of later abuse or polemics against that abuse. In this regard, the Torah Psalms offer magnificent guidance from the pens of the authentically pious in Israel, especially Psalm 19:7–14 [8–15] and the 176-verse “Ode to the Torah” in Psalm 119. In addition to letting the text of Deuteronomy speak with its own voice, we do well to let their perspectives be the lenses through which we view the laws. I begin this discussion with a partial translation of the former:

A Meditation on the Torah of YHWH

The Torah [*tôrâ*] of YHWH is perfect,
renewing one's life;
the precepts [*'ēdût*] of YHWH are trustworthy,
making the ignorant wise.
The injunctions [*piqqûdîm*] of YHWH are right,
bringing joy to the heart;
the command [*mišwâ*] of YHWH is radiant,
making the eyes light up.
The fear [*yir'â*] of YHWH is pure,
enduring forever;
the stipulations [*mišpāṭîm*] of YHWH are true
and altogether righteous. (Ps. 19:7-9 [8-10])

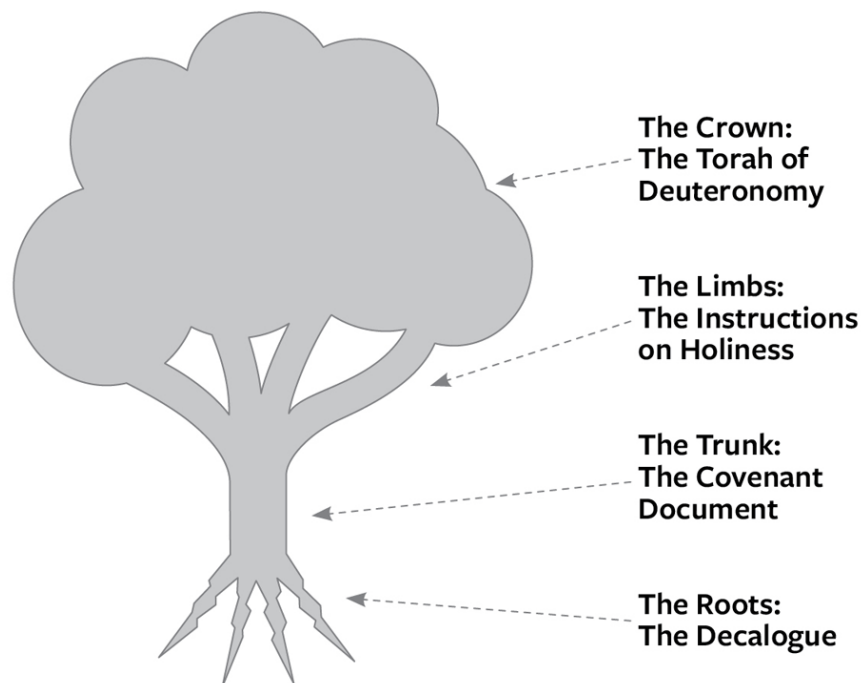
Unless and until we interpret pentateuchal covenant stipulations within their own historical and covenantal contexts, we will continue our hypocritical ways by claiming all Scripture to be inspired and authoritative for Christians but, in effect, will be grounding our beliefs and practices on only a small and selective portion of the Bible. And we will continue to portray God minimally as speaking out of both sides of his mouth and maximally as blatantly contradicting himself. My aim here is to offer a synthetic and sympathetic reading of Israel's constitutional documents from the inside out and to recognize their function in ancient Israel's faith and life. Although I earlier touched on some of the concepts expressed here, we need to bring together these loose threads. I shall do so by proposing a series of postulates that characterize Israelite law.

1. Although Israel's laws were revealed in stages and in their detail envisioned different circumstances (Israel on the journey to the promised land; Israel settled in the promised land), these laws, originating with YHWH, their covenant Suzerain, exhibit a common conceptual, ethical, and spiritual perspective. We may view the constitutional texts as a series of divinely revealed sets of instruction for Israel, sets that increase successively in length and complexity but have a common goal: to govern the life of Israel as the people who bear the name of YHWH (fig. 6.3 above). Since the documents and the laws are organically related to one

another, we may imagine the growth of Israel's constitutional tradition as a tree whose roots are represented by the Decalogue (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-22), whose trunk is the Covenant Document (*sēper habbērît*; 21:1-23:19) read in the covenant-ratification ritual at Sinai/Horeb (Exod. 24:1-11), whose limbs are the Instructions on Holiness (Lev. 17-26), and whose crowning glory is the Torah of Moses in Deuteronomy (Deut. 5-26, 28; fig. 8.1). Read in sequence as arranged in the Pentateuch, we discover that although they often exhibit new and distinctive nuances in keeping with new circumstances, they reflect a common outlook and promote a common goal.

Figure 8.1

The Growth of Israel's Constitutional Tradition



The Decalogue was indeed distinctive in the form of its terms (dominated by unconditional apodictic commands), in its craftsmanship (written by the finger of God on tablets of stone), and in its symbolic significance (stored inside the

holy of holies as the Guarantee [‘ēdût] of YHWH’s and Israel’s commitments). However, there is no biblical evidence that this document was ever deemed more authoritative or more universal in scope than any of the other documents. If any of these documents were to be deemed most normative, that honor would go to the Deuteronomic Torah, the only part that came with explicit instructions for its use in public rituals (Deut. 31:9–13) and whose echoes are more pervasive in the rest of the First Testament, especially the Psalter, and the New Testament than any of the other documents.

In truth, these documents all exhibit a common worldview, celebrating Israel’s status as YHWH’s covenant people, grounded in YHWH’s saving and sanctifying actions. In their disposition toward the nation’s relationship to YHWH, they all repudiate any and all other deities as objects of Israel’s worship, and all demand exclusive devotion to their divine Suzerain. And with reference to Israel’s horizontal relationships, they share a covenantal ethic that consistently places the well-being of others above self-interest.

2. Israel’s constitutional documents are unanimous in their portrayal of Israel’s laws as the divinely revealed and acceptable response to YHWH’s grace in choosing them to be his treasured and sanctified people (‘am sēgullâ and ‘am qādôš layhwh), in redeeming them from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, and in giving them the land of Canaan as their territorial grant. While the well-being of the nation and the fulfillment of its mission as a blessing and light to the nations were contingent upon faithful compliance with the laws, obedience to the laws is never presented as the precondition to YHWH’s election, his salvation, or his call to covenant relationship. Although we do not find the slightest hint of a works-salvation soteriology in these laws, a salvation that works and transforms pervades all. They call for cultic worship and an ethical system that are

fundamentally countercultural within the ancient Near Eastern context and driven by the goal of “righteousness, only righteousness” (Deut. 16:20). This involves more than pietistic expressions of devotion to YHWH and more than creedal affirmations of core beliefs; it calls for full-bodied and wholehearted love for YHWH and for others, demonstrated in actions in their interest. Moses’ “domestic catechism” in Deuteronomy 6:20–25 summarizes the relationships as involving obedience to the law, life, and the approval of YHWH:

In the future, when your child asks you, “What is the meaning of the covenant precepts, ordinances, and stipulations YHWH our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your child: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but YHWH brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. YHWH inflicted severe and devastating miraculous signs and wonders upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household before our eyes. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. YHWH commanded us to put into practice all these ordinances by demonstrating fear for YHWH our God, for our perpetual good and for our survival, as is the case today. And we will be recognized as righteous if we keep [the covenant] by putting into practice this entire charge before YHWH our God, as he has commanded us.” (Deut. 6:20–25)

Few scholars and lay readers associate the patriarchal narratives with Israel’s constitutional traditions. However, on the one hand, YHWH remarkably deemed Abraham righteous (*ṣĕdāqâ*) because he trusted YHWH to keep his promise to grant Abraham innumerable progeny (Gen. 15:5), and on the other hand, YHWH deemed him a “God-fearer” because he obeyed YHWH, confident in his promise to fulfill his promise through Isaac (22:12). Ultimately YHWH acknowledged Abraham as the embodiment of Torah covenant righteousness. Of him YHWH declared, “Abraham listened to my voice and kept my charge, my commands, my ordinances, and my instructions” (26:4–5). The vocabulary derives from the constitutional documents associated with the covenant that YHWH made with the exodus generation of Israelites at Sinai and renewed with

their descendants on the plains of Moab under the leadership of Moses.

3. Far from being a burden that no one could bear, Israel's knowledge of the will of their God as revealed in their laws was deemed a high privilege, making them the envy the world. As I noted earlier, Psalm 19:7–14 [8–15] and the “Ode to the Torah” that is Psalm 119 declare how the genuinely faithful in Israel viewed the law. In Deuteronomy 4:5–8, Moses acknowledges the admiration, if not envy, of non-Israelites who observed the benefits that accrued to the covenant people because they possessed a divinely revealed *tôrâ* that was righteous by definition and in its effects. Indeed, ancient Near Eastern texts like “Prayer to Every God” help us recognize Israel's privileged status as people who knew their Deity personally, who knew the will of their God, and who knew the solution he provided them when they faltered in their performance of the divine will (see above, chap. 6).

Furthermore, while YHWH revealed his will for his vassals in the form of commands, ordinances, and stipulations in the context of the establishment of his covenant with Israel, we should recognize that this event was also the moment of YHWH's commissioning of his people to a worldwide mission. Here the Abrahamic mission of being a blessing to the nations was extended to his descendants and characterized as a priestly calling, because the whole earth belongs to him (Exod. 19:5–6). Although this missional calling does not receive much attention in the constitutional documents, this text functions as the first bookend framing the revelation of the second and third stages of the Israelite covenant. Moses offered the second bookend as he approached the end of his ministry in Deuteronomy 26:16–19. The blessings of 28:1–14, which originally followed this statement, reinforce this theme. When the nations observe the benefits that accrue to Israel as the divine reward for their fidelity to the stipulations of the covenant, Israel's

status as a holy people belonging to YHWH will be established, and the nations will acknowledge that Israel bears the name of YHWH (vv. 9–10).

4. *Whereas YHWH's revelation, given directly to Israel at first (Exod. 20:1–21; Deut. 5:1–27) and subsequently through the mediation of Moses, had offered the people access to his will, YHWH's expectations, expressed by the laws he prescribed for his people, were both clear (Deut. 29:4, 29 [3, 28]) and attainable (Deut. 29:29 [28]; 30:1–14).* I recognize that this conviction challenges prevailing theological and pastoral opinion, which is often indebted to the Reformers' recognition of three functions of First Testament law:

- a. The *usus politicus sive civilis*. Standing apart from the work of salvation, the law represents God's general revelation and serves as a common grace for unbelievers as well as believers to restrain sin.
- b. The *usus didacticus sive normativus*. The law serves as a guide for believers, teaching the way of righteousness, but it has no power to condemn.
- c. The *usus elencticus sive paedagogicus*. The law serves as a pedagogue, which, through fear of punishment, forces us to confront our sin—because we are unable to keep the law—and points us to Christ.

Martin Luther and many since the sixteenth century have given lip service to the first two of these functions but have put their emphasis on the third function, claiming that the laws imposed a heavy burden on Israel, a burden from which only the work of Christ could deliver them. But this view raises other serious questions. Why would God rescue the Israelites from the death-dealing slavery of Egypt (cf. Exod. 20:2) and then impose on them a heavier burden of the law, which no one could keep and which inevitably sentenced them to damnation under his own wrath? Viewed

this way, the exodus turns out to be not such a good deal after all. This is not grace; it is deceit and tyranny of the highest order.

Luther's understanding of the law would have baffled Moses and the poets who penned Psalms 19:7-14 and 119. As the culminating moment in covenantal revelation, Moses had declared unequivocally that the law yields/sustains life (*ḥāyâ*)¹¹ and well-being (*ḥaṭṭôb/yîṭab*, "the good" / "to prosper").¹² The ethical and ceremonial performances that YHWH demanded of the Israelites were both reasonable and doable. Not a single command was impossible; YHWH did not demand that his people leap over twelve-story buildings or swim across the Mediterranean. On the contrary, no ancient Near Easterner would have protested that the food laws, the prohibitions on murder and adultery and theft, or the sacrificial laws were impossible or even burdensome. Their own law codes expected the same. From beginning to end, Moses' challenges to righteous living (Deut. 16:20) assume that YHWH's people are able to achieve the divine demands. His answer to what YHWH required of Israel in 10:12-13 is entirely reasonable: to fear YHWH, to walk in his ways, to love him, to serve him with whole heart and body, and to keep his commands. Romans 12:1-2 offers Paul's equivalent appeal: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers [and sisters], by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may comply with the will of God, [doing] what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Recognizing that the Hebrew *lēb* represents the seat of thought as well as the will and passions, Paul's command to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind" corresponds to Moses' charge to "circumcise your hearts and stop stiffening your neck" (Deut. 10:16). Moses reinforced his conviction of the accessibility and achievability of the law in

30:11-14: “Now this charge that I am setting before you today is neither too difficult for you nor too far away. . . . No, the word is very near you! It is in your mouth and in your heart, so you can do it.” This statement builds on his transitional comment between the horrific images of judgment in 29:14-28 [13-27] and the amazing images of restoration in 30:1-10: “The secret matters belong to YHWH our God, but the matters that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, *that we may do all the words of this Torah*” (29:29 [28]).

If the Israelites failed in their performance, it was not the fault of the law, either its incomprehensibility or its stringency—YHWH’s revelation is never flawed. Rather, the fault was within them; they lacked the will and the motivation to keep the law. Moses’ goal in Deuteronomy was to inspire the people to righteous living by constantly reminding them of YHWH’s past graces and offering the prospect of well-being for grateful and full-bodied obedience on the one hand, and by threatening them with the dire consequences of disobedience in the form of the curses of 28:15-68 on the other. His presentation of the choice between the blessing and the curse in 11:26-28 and his call to choose the life and the good and reject the death and the disaster in 30:15 were not hypothetical. This involved a real choice, dependent on real obedience to the gracious divine Suzerain. In response to protests that this represents “works salvation,” we note that the laws were given not to Israel in Egypt as preconditions to their salvation (in their case, from the bondage of Egypt) but to people who had been redeemed.

However, the redemption that Moses celebrated was not merely physical redemption, but also spiritual. In contrast to the masses of Israelites who came out of Egypt but were buried in the desert because they lacked the will to obey, Caleb—a Kenizzite convert—represented a different paradigm. Of him YHWH declared, “Because my servant

Caleb has a different spirit [*rûah*] and is full after me [*wayěmallē' aḥărăy*], I will bring him into the land he surveyed, and his descendants will possess it" (Num. 14:24; cf. Deut. 1:36; Josh. 14:8). Although the First Testament rarely speaks of this notion, in the light of later New Testament revelation we may say that Caleb was transformed through heart circumcision (Deut. 30:6) and heart transplant and empowered by the indwelling Spirit of YHWH (Ezek. 36:26–27). Joshua 14:6–14 presents the grant of Hebron to him as a reward for faithfulness; he had the motivation, the will, and the inner power (the Spirit of YHWH) to serve YHWH fully. If the rest of the Israelites failed to receive their grants of land, it was not because they *could* not keep the laws, but because they *would* not.

5. Although in Western nations laws are created by legislative bodies in response to problems in a society and as resources for courts in adjudicating guilt or innocence, the function of Israel's laws was to create a vision for a righteous society and to offer an inexhaustible (though not exhaustive) resource for learning what that looks like in everyday life. Through his tripartite covenant with Israel, YHWH intended to create a paradigmatic society for the world that was based on covenant rather than law. The foundational declaration in Exodus 19:4–6 says nothing about the law but focuses on YHWH's covenant relationship with Israel and his mission for them. The stipulations came later, as a gift graciously revealed, so that they might respond to YHWH's grace in ways that pleased their divine Redeemer and learn what it meant to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" before a world under the curse of death.

We have already noted the covenantal ethic that Jesus proposed in his summary of YHWH's expectations of Israel: "You shall demonstrate wholehearted and full-bodied love [= covenant commitment] for YHWH your God with actions that glorify him, and you shall demonstrate love

[= covenant commitment] for your neighbors with actions that seek their well-being as we may assume you do for yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39). This is the New Testament’s “law of love” and “the law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12; Gal. 6:2), but it expresses perfectly the prescribed covenantal ethic of Israel. All who desired to live by this ethic found in the constitutional revelation of YHWH (the “laws”) inexhaustible resources for learning what that looks like in life.

This is extremely significant, for it brings into sharp contrast communities based on covenant and communities based on law, as summarized in table 8.1.

Table 8.1

A Comparison of Societies Founded on Covenant and Societies Founded on Law

	Covenant	Law
Purpose	Covenants create a community where none existed before by establishing a common relationship to a common lord.	Law functions as an instrument for maintaining orderly freedom and security for a community that already exists.
Basis	Covenants produce gratitude: human actions represent responses to benefits already received, usually by grace.	Law produces social fear: human responses to attempts to protect society from disruption and attack by threat of force.
Enactment	In covenantal contexts people gratefully receive privileges of membership in the community and willingly accept the obligations presented.	In law-based contexts social authorities obligate all individuals by virtue of status as members of the social organization, usually by birth.

	Covenant	Law
Validity	Covenantal obligations bind each person irrespective of social or geographic context; they are universally applicable, reflecting a vision of the “omnipresence of God.”	Law-based obligations are tied to social boundary lines and are irrelevant to those who cross the boundary of the social order.
Sanctions	Social organizations do not control covenant communities; cause-and-effect concepts in human history connect them; this includes both positive and negative sanctions (promises of blessing and threats of curse).	Social organization controls/enforces law-based communities through chosen authorities; while sanctions are largely negative, organizations may promote conformity through economic and prestige motivation.
Norms	Community norms are typically presented as verbal abstractions (righteousness, fear of God, love for God and fellow citizens, walking in God’s ways, serving him, listening to his voice), which are applied in concrete circumstances; conformity is based on commitment to seeking the interest of the next person, whether that be God or fellow citizens.	Community norms are defined in detail by social authority in advance, usually with specific sanctions defined for specific violations; they are often arbitrary and formal in nature, since only visible actions may be assessed in courts of law; they rely on conformity based on self-interest.
Orientation	Covenants provide a basis for both private and public security by promoting responsible individual behavior; expectations are addressed to heads of households, but predictions of consequences extend to members of the household (four generations in case of violation).	Law-based societies aim to create security by legislating punishments for specific violations of the public order and in advance defining penalties the society has power to impose upon violators. They assume a short attention span, as reflected in statutes of limitations.

	Covenant	Law
Social aspect	While the obligations in covenantal societies are individualized, consequences (blessings and curses) are social, often viewed as “acts of God”—drought, epidemic, defeat in war, and so on; they focus on individual responsibility to society and social responsibility not to protect the guilty.	In law-based societies obligations defined by society are binding upon all members, but sanctions are imposed only upon guilty individuals, involving adversarial procedures and rites.
Goal	In covenant-based societies, the goal of the legal system is not merely justly rewarding righteous behavior and punishing evil but also restoring shalom in the community by healing ruptured relationships.	Law-based societies focus on justly rewarding righteous behavior and punishing evil, but efforts to restore broken relationships are limited; perpetrators of crimes and their victims are prevented from contact with each other.
Evolution	In covenant-based societies, covenantal norms ground bases for social custom, especially in early stages; as the society becomes more complex, social control may take over and degenerate into ritual reinforcement of a social solidarity.	Law-based societies presuppose a customary morality that law attempts to protect but cannot create. They tend to become increasingly rigid and detailed in formal definition, and increasingly devoid of and disinterested in ethical content.

	Covenant	Law
Administration	Since a covenant-based society is not produced by society, it cannot be guaranteed by society. Because the maintenance of justice is everyone's business, righteousness among the people may be encouraged through persons with no legislative authority: prophets, the Christ, apostles. For this reason, destruction of the social control system does not mean the end of the value system.	Law-based societies cannot exist apart from social institutions—king, priest, political officers, legislative, executive, judicial; they cease to exist when political structures fall. Professional police play a vital role in ensuring social order. Destruction of the social control system means the end of the value system.

Adapted from Mendenhall, "Conflict between Value Systems and Social Control," 174-76.

On the basis of these categories, the contrast between modern Western societies' and ancient Israel's constitutional ideals are stark. Large American cities answer pervasive social and economic decay with increasingly burdensome security systems (e.g., cameras on every corner), security personnel (e.g., police inside schools), and legislated statutes that seek to regulate every conceivable circumstance, but the Israelite covenantal system called on citizens sacrificially to abandon their own rights and freedoms and seek the well-being of others.

6. *The primary objective of biblical law is the creation of a righteous society.* Moses declared this goal in paradigmatic form: "Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20). Because this statement follows charges to appoint judges and the warnings not to distort justice (*mišpāṭ*, vv. 18-19), most translations and commentators render *šedeq šedeq* in 16:20 as "Justice, only justice." However, this interpretation overlooks the shift in vocabulary and the variegated nature of Deuteronomic Law. The word *šedeq* refers broadly to behavior in accord with an

established standard, in this instance the covenant stipulations as defined by YHWH. But the word was also used in this sense in extrabiblical texts, most notably in Panamuwa and Bar-rakib's fidelity (*ṣdq*, translated "loyalty") to Tiglath-pileser, their overlord (*COS* 2:37, 38, pp. 158–60). Elsewhere Deuteronomy applies the root *ṣdq* to YHWH—who always acts perfectly, justly, faithfully, and uprightly (32:4)—and to his ordinances and stipulations, whose righteous character is acknowledged by the nations (4:8). In 6:25, YHWH acknowledges full obedience as righteousness (*ṣaddîqîm*), while 24:13 identifies returning a debtor's cloak at nightfall as a specific act of righteousness (*ṣědāqâ*). We rightly view social justice as a dimension of righteousness, but the actions cited immediately after 16:20 involve religious behavior (16:21–17:7). Within Deuteronomy 12–29, *ṣedeq* applies to fidelity to the divine judgments (*hammišpāṭîm*) regarding right behavior in relationship to YHWH (e.g., 16:21–17:7), one's family (e.g., 24:1–5), the community (e.g., 24:17–22; 25:13–16), and even to the environment (22:6–7; fig. 4.2 above).

7. Biblical law assumes a compassionate and godly citizenry that protects those who are economically and socially vulnerable from abuse at the hands of those with economic and social power. This is clearly evident in the Deuteronomic version of the seventh-day Sabbath command. It grounds the ordinance not in the divine pattern of creative work and rest (Exod. 20:11) but in the need for rest by all—including animals—who work in the domestic unit, and it reminds heads of households of Israel's own experience of abuse in Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15). The frequent appeals to care for widows, the fatherless, aliens, and Levites reflect the same concern,¹³ as do calls for charitable treatment of indentured servants (15:1–18), a foreign wife taken in battle (21:10–14), the son of the unloved wife in a bigamous household (21:15–17), domestic animals (22:1–4), a wife who is wrongfully divorced (24:1–5), and the widow of

a man who has died without an heir (25:5–10), to name just a few.

The instructions on kingship (17:14–20) are part of this picture. If the Israelites were to model paradigmatic righteousness before the world, this text has the head of the nation modeling that righteousness before his people. In the ancient world, people expected kings to fulfill three primary roles: (1) ensure the administration of justice within the kingdom; (2) secure the nation's well-being in the face of foreign threats; and (3) patronize the national cult in order to promote the goodwill of the gods of the land by building temples for them. However, this paradigm often degenerated to self-interested exploitation of royal power over citizens. Deuteronomy's "charter for kingship" neither addresses any of these three functions, nor is it critical of kingship in principle. Rather, it aims to curb royal excess, declaring that the primary responsibility of Israel's kings involved embodying covenant righteousness by submitting to the Torah, fearing YHWH, walking in his ways, and remembering that they were brothers within the Israelite population. Like heads of households and other leaders, kings exist for the well-being of those they lead, rather than the reverse.

8. Biblical law reflects a profoundly democratic and egalitarian impulse. The social world of ancient Israel was pervasively patricentric, which meant that male heads of households governed domestic affairs, and elders (a collection of male heads of households) governed the affairs of the community. Accordingly, most stipulations in the constitutional documents are addressed to the heads of households, whom the Deuteronomic Law holds primarily responsible for the pursuit of "righteousness, only righteousness" (Deut. 16:20). These laws recognize the particular functions of kings (Deut. 17:15, 20), Levitical priests (10:9; 18:2, 7), prophets (18:15, 18), and judges (1:16), but the well-being of the community and the pursuit

of justice were everyone's business. Leaders were to treat every Israelite as a member of the family (*'āḥ*, lit., "brother"), and those with economic or judicial power were deemed "brothers" to their servants.¹⁴ Indeed, every individual Israelite enjoyed the privileges and shared the burden of being a vassal of YHWH.

Within the narrative world of Israel's laws, egalitarian notions derived from several sources. First, the extensive use of the word "brother" perceives Israelites in the main as ethnically cohesive, sharing descent from a common ancestor, Jacob/Israel. This conviction is reinforced by ubiquitous references to Israel as "sons of Israel" (*bēnê yiśrā'ēl*) or "household of Israel" (*bêṭ yiśrā'ēl*) and in references to the patriarchs as "your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deut. 6:10; 9:5, 27; etc.). However, this sense of "brotherhood" extended beyond Israel. The ordinance of Deuteronomy 23:7 [8] forbids abhorring an Edomite, because he is Israel's brother (cf. Gen. 25:19–34; Deut. 2:8).

Second, the laws ground this egalitarian vision in the Israelites' shared experience of slavery in Egypt and redemption by YHWH,¹⁵ their survival of divine judgment at Horeb (Exod. 20:18–21; Deut. 9:7–26), and their testing in the desert (Deut. 8:2–16; 11:5–6).

Third, although the laws do not use the language of *imitatio dei*, Leviticus 19:2 calls on the Israelites to be holy as YHWH is holy, and Deuteronomy 10:17–19 calls on the Israelites to extend egalitarian compassion to neighbors and resident aliens (*gēr*) alike. Like YHWH, they were to demonstrate covenant commitment ("love," Hb. *'āhab*) to them with concrete acts of love, remembering that once they too were aliens in Egypt.¹⁶ Indeed, the Deuteronomic Torah extends the compassion prescribed for marginalized natives (widows, fatherless, Levites) to resident aliens,¹⁷ prohibits oppressing Israelite hired servants (24:14), and

calls on Israelites to offer asylum to fugitives fleeing slavery under a foreign master (23:15–16 [16–17]).

9. While desiring sinless perfection of his people, YHWH actually did not expect it; accordingly, he provided a festival calendar to keep alive the memory of his past grace in redemption and covenant and a cultic system headed by Aaronic and Levitical priests to deal with the problem of human sin and to maintain their covenant relationship with him. Other peoples' responses to a fundamental consciousness of sin and its consequent alienation from deity were experimental and could not yield confidence in the changed disposition of the deity, but embedded in Israel's constitutional tradition was a divinely revealed system of ritual that truly worked. This was why the psalmist could declare with such joyful exuberance,

O the privilege of the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered!

O the privilege of the one whom YHWH does not consider guilty,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit! (Ps. 32:1–2; cf. Ps. 51).

But on what grounds did the Israelites experience forgiveness of sins when they performed these rituals? And how are we to reconcile these texts with Hebrews 10:1–4, which declares that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins? Some answer these questions by arguing that when godly Israelites brought their sacrifices, they looked forward to Christ (Messiah), whose death would ultimately atone for their sins. However, the Pentateuch provides no evidence that First Testament believers expected a future Messiah to take the punishment for their sins and die in their place. Indeed, the revelation given at Sinai and associated with God's covenant with Israel is completely silent on a future royal Messiah. The association of a messianic figure with sacrifice and substitutionary death occurs for the first time in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. This passage conjoins the rich tradition of atonement found in

Israel's sacrificial theology and the royal tradition of the Messiah in a glorious symphony of grace. However, by Isaiah's time Israel had been performing sacrifices at the tabernacle and temple for centuries—apparently without a trace of messianic hope in the ritual itself.

We may explore the grounds for the effectiveness of First Testament sacrifices from two angles. First, when First Testament saints presented their sacrifices in faith, they based their hope of forgiveness on the word of God. Although the story of Cain (Gen. 4) and many other texts (Ps. 51; Isa. 1; Mic. 6:6–8) demonstrate that mere performance of rituals does not guarantee divine favor or forgiveness of sin, YHWH had graciously revealed to the Israelites a way that this could happen. The desired effect depended on worshipers' trust in the word of God and their covenant commitment to him. If they came to the ritual with clean hands and a pure and penitent heart (Pss. 15; 24), God would forgive them.

Second, when God observed faith demonstrated in a pure life and rituals performed as he instructed, he applied to that person the forgiveness made possible through the blood of Christ, whose redemptive work was “foreknown” (Gk. *proginōskō*; cf. the use of this verb in Rom. 8:29; 11:2) and who was slain “before the foundation of the world” (cf. 1 Pet. 1:20). But now we have reached far beyond the data available in the First Testament. For the rest of *that* story we must await further revelation (see chap. 16 below).

Conclusion

Given these postulates, it is not difficult to understand why the nations around them would have viewed the Israelites as extremely privileged because they had a God so near as YHWH was to them and possessed a body of revelation from him that was fundamentally and essentially righteous (Deut. 4:5–8). It is time for Christians to acknowledge that they

have received the same grace that came to Israel and to treasure the Torah that is their Scripture, by virtue of having been grafted into the covenant community (cf. Rom. 9:3-5; cf. 11:17-24).

[1.](#) Deut. 4:1, 5, 9, 14; 6:1: those in his audience are “learners”; also see 4:10; 5:2-5.

[2.](#) Deut. 1:1; 4:45; 27:9; 31:1; 32:44, 45.

[3.](#) Deut. 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 11:32; 12:1.

[4.](#) Deut. 5:1, 31; 6:1, 20; 7:11; 11:32; 12:1; 26:16, 17.

[5.](#) Cf. Judg. 20:1-2, 8-11; 21:5.

[6.](#) Deut. 4:23; 5:2-3; 9:9; 29:1b [28:69b]; 29:12, 14, 25 [11, 13, 24]; 31:16.

[7.](#) Josh. 7:11, 15; 23:16; etc.

[8.](#) 2 Chron. 15:12; Jer. 34:10; Ezek. 16:8; cf. “to bring into a covenant,” 1 Sam. 20:8.

[9.](#) Deut. 29:12, 14, 19-21 [11, 13, 18-20].

[10.](#) Judg. 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20; 2 Sam. 3:10; 17:11; 24:2, 15; 1 Kings 4:25; 1 Chron. 21:2; 2 Chron. 30:5.

[11.](#) Deut. 4:1; 5:33; 6:19-20; 8:1; 16:20; 30:15-16.

[12.](#) Deut. 4:40; 5:29; 6:3, 18, 24; 10:13; 12:25, 28; 22:7; 26:11; 28:1-14; 30:1-5, 15.

[13.](#) Deut. 10:18-19; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17-22; 26:12-13.

[14.](#) Deut. 15:2-3, 7, 9, 11-12; 23:19-20 [20-21]; 24:7, 14.

[15.](#) Exod. 20:2; 22:21 [20]; 23:9; Lev. 19:34, 36; 25:42; Deut. 6:12, 21; 7:8; 8:14; etc.

[16.](#) Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19; cf. 23:7b [8b]; 24:22.

[17.](#) Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-21; 26:12-13.

Stage 4 of the Israelite Covenant

CHAPTER 9

The New Israelite Covenant

Introduction

With our review of these three stages of the growth of the Israelite covenant, we have established the context for the final stage, represented by the new Israelite covenant. As anticipated in Deuteronomy 29 and 31, the history of Israel in the promised land proved to be a history of failure—not of the covenant, but of the people. Finally, after centuries of rebellion, in 722 BC Samaria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians (2 Kings 17), and in 586 BC Judah and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (2 Kings 24–25). Having had enough, YHWH brought on his people the full fury of the covenant curses predicted in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Contrary to common opinion, the devastation of the land and the exile of its population did not signal the termination of God’s covenant with his people.

On the contrary, the covenant curses written into the constitutional covenant documents (Lev. 26:14–39; Deut. 28:14–68) had warned of these consequences, and prophetic warnings of judgment (especially by Jeremiah and Ezekiel) were rooted in those curses. In his prayer of confession for his people, Daniel recognized the curses as essential elements in the covenant itself (9:1–19). Indeed, the exiled Judean acknowledged that the judgment had transpired precisely as predicted (see esp. vv. 7–14).

However, as we have noted, within the covenant itself YHWH had planted seeds of hope for Israel's future after the judgment. In the end, he would remember his covenant and mercifully regather the people, renew the covenant, and restore their relationship with the land, thereby restoring in full the triangular covenant relationship.

The Vocabulary of the New/Renewed Israelite Covenant

The Greek expression for “new covenant,” *kainē diathēkē*, occurs five times in the New Testament,¹ but the Hebrew counterpart, *bērît ḥădāšâ*, appears only once in the First Testament. In Jeremiah 31:31, YHWH declared, “Look, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant [*bērît ḥădāšâ*] with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” Although other prophets never used this phrase, they used several alternative expressions for the same covenantal moment. On three significant occasions (for our present purposes) we encounter “a/my covenant of peace” (*bērît šālôm*: Isa. 54:9–10; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26; cf. Num. 25:12–13, where it occurs in the context of God's covenant with Phinehas and his priestly descendants). Remarkably, the Greek equivalent, *diathēkē eirēnē*, never occurs in the New Testament. We have noted that the cosmic covenant was characterized as *bērît ʿôlām*, “an eternal/everlasting covenant” (Gen. 9:16; Isa. 24:5), as were the Abrahamic covenant² and the Israelite covenant made at Sinai (Lev. 24:8; cf. Exod. 31:16–17). However, this expression also applied to the eternal covenant/ordinance that YHWH made with Aaron and his priestly descendants (Num. 25:12–13; cf. Exod. 25:43, *ḥuqqat ʿôlām*), as well as his covenant with David (2 Sam. 23:5), on which see further in part 3 (below). What interests us here are occurrences of this and related phrases in the Prophets.³ In the discussion below, we will see that they all speak of the event that Jeremiah had in

mind in 31:31. Remarkably, the Greek equivalent of “eternal covenant” appears in the New Testament only in the benediction in Hebrews 13:20–21: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant [*diathēkēs aiōniou*], equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (NRSV). In part 4 we will consider the New Testament perspectives on and Jesus’ role in the establishment of the new covenant.

Against the grain of prevailing opinion, I identify the subject of this chapter as “the new Israelite covenant.” My reasons for doing so are textual and exegetical, but for now it is sufficient to note that within God’s grand plan of redemption, the new Israelite covenant represents the culmination of God’s work with Israel—the moment when we finally witness the realization of the ancient Israelite covenant’s ideals. The tree, whose roots were represented by the covenant YHWH made with Abraham, whose trunk was the Israelite covenant established at Sinai, and whose limbs and branches were the covenant renewed with the new generation on the plains of Moab, will finally bear the fruit for which it was first intended in the “new Israelite covenant.”

Precursors to the New Israelite Covenant

Prophetic texts that speak of the “new covenant” all set the stage for its fulfillment in the distant future, after the nation of Israel has felt the full force of YHWH’s wrath for their rebellion against their covenant Suzerain. They all look forward to a new day when YHWH’s relationship with Israel will be renewed. In that day Israel will be elevated “high above the nations that he has made, for praise, fame, and honor,” and they will be “a holy people belonging to YHWH”

as he had originally intended (Deut. 26:19); then the nations will recognize that they are a people belonging to YHWH (stamped with his name; Deut. 28:1–14, esp. v. 10).

However, YHWH had planted the seeds of this “eschatological hope” many centuries earlier, within the terms of the covenant he established with Israel at Sinai and renewed on the plains of Moab. We cannot understand the prophetic new Israelite covenant texts without first looking at their precursors in the Pentateuch.

Leviticus 26:40–45

And they will confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers. . . . If at that time their uncircumcised heart will be humbled, and they pay the penalty for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham I will also remember. And I will remember the land. For the land will be abandoned by them, making up for its sabbatical years by lying desolate without them, while they pay the penalty for their iniquity, because they rejected my stipulations and abhorred my ordinances. However, in spite of all this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them totally and break my covenant with them. Look, I am YHWH their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations that I might be their God. I am YHWH.

Here YHWH did not speak of a new covenant but declared that, on the basis of his covenant commitments to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on the one hand, and the exodus generation of their descendants on the other, he would restore Israel after the judgment and exile. The present juxtaposing of these two covenantal events reinforces the tight link we have recognized between the Abrahamic covenant and the covenant established at Sinai. In the end, YHWH had obligated himself by covenant and sworn oath to both groups of ancestors. Many may have felt that he had forgotten his commitments, but because they were irrevocable, he could not reject Israel forever. He is YHWH their God; he keeps his word.

Deuteronomy 4:25-31

When you have had children and grandchildren, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing the evil in the sight of YHWH your God, so as to provoke him to anger, . . . you will quickly perish totally from the land. . . . When you are in distress, and all these things have happened to you in the distant future, you will return to YHWH your God and listen to his voice. Truly, YHWH your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.

As Moses stood before his people on the plains of Moab, the sequence of future events seemed inevitable to him. After the Israelites had settled and were prospering in the land that YHWH gave them, they would commit the great sin, abandoning their divine Redeemer and Suzerain and going after other gods. They would exchange the God who had no form but was near to them, who had no mouth but who revealed his will to them in words (4:25-28), for gods of their own fabrication, who had all the sensory organs but who were unresponsive to human efforts to relate to them. Infuriated by his privileged vassal's treachery, YHWH would toss a grenade into the covenant triangle, expelling the people from his land and driving them to lands where the worship of idols pervaded society. He would give them over to the lie they had chosen in place of him, the living God. Verse 26 and statements elsewhere in the book (8:19; 30:18) suggest that YHWH would destroy his people totally. However, 4:27 declares that (in YHWH's mysterious grace) a remnant of the population would survive.

Far away in pagan lands something remarkable would happen. When the Israelites would be in darkest distress, they would change their minds and search for YHWH, their covenant Suzerain. Even more remarkably, if they would search for him wholeheartedly, he would come out of hiding (cf. 31:16-18) and let himself be found by them! The grounds of this response are clear from verse 31. Rejecting the notion of Israel's merit—they had earned utterly

annihilating divine wrath—Moses attributed the change in their destiny to YHWH alone. With respect to character, he is a fundamentally compassionate God (*'ēl raḥûm*; cf. Exod. 34:6); with respect to fidelity to Israel, he will not fail them (*lō' yarpěkā*; i.e., drop them; Deut. 31:6); with respect to memory, he will not forget or break his covenant (*hēpîr bĕrît*, Judg. 2:1) with the ancestors. As elsewhere, here the term “remember” means “take into account.” Unlike his vassal covenant partners, prone to “forget” the covenant (4:23; 2 Kings 17:38), YHWH would be faithful to his covenant, even in the implementation of the curses. However, he had declared the covenant to be irrevocable, and in the end his sworn oath and his mercy would triumph over his fury. Because of his covenant commitments, the judgment upon Israel could not be the last word.

Instead of calling for a new covenant, this text grounds YHWH's future restoration of Israel in the ancient covenant with the ancestors. As we learn from Leviticus 26:42, 45, because YHWH's covenant commitments are one and the same, and because the chronological vantage is the distant future, earlier stages of the covenant's growth merge in the texts.

Deuteronomy 30:1-10

When all these predicted events [*haddēbārîm hā'ēlleh*] have happened to you—the blessing and curse that I have set before you—and you come to your senses [*√ šûb*] while you are [living] among all the nations where YHWH your God has driven you, and you and your children return [*šûb*] to YHWH your God and listen to his voice with your whole heart and mind, and with your whole being, by acting according to everything I am charging you today, then he will restore [*šûb*] your fortunes, have compassion [*riḥam*] on you, and return [*šûb*] and gather you from all the peoples where YHWH your God has scattered you. (Deut. 30:1-3)

Although this text lacks an explicit reference to the covenant, in verses 1-10 Moses has picked up several significant themes from 4:25-31 and offered a resumptive exposition. Following the horrific images of judgment in

29:14–28 [13–27], Moses presented a brilliant example of the mysteries of YHWH's actions (*hannistārōt*, 29:29 [28]). Between chapters 29 and 30 his disposition appears to have turned on a dime. The picture Moses envisioned in 30:1–10 picks up the motif of divine compassion (*rḥm*) from 4:31 but assumes that YHWH would not relax his hand, drop Israel, or forget the covenant.

In the future anticipated in 30:1–10, we observe the reversal of all the curses the Israelites will have endured and the causes that precipitated those curses. (1) Instead of Israel abandoning (‘*āzab*) YHWH and YHWH abandoning them (‘*āzab*, 31:16–17), Israel would turn (*šûb*) to him, and YHWH would turn (*šûb*) to them (30:2, 3, 8, 9, 10).

(2) Instead of refusing to listen to YHWH's voice, the Israelites would heed the demands of the Torah (30:2, 8, 10). (3) Instead of scattering the Israelites among the nations, YHWH would regather them from all the peoples (30:4). (4) Instead of expelling Israel from the land, YHWH would bring the nation back to it (30:4–5). (5) Instead of having uncircumcised hearts and stiff necks (cf. 10:16), the Israelites' hearts would be circumcised by YHWH (30:6).

(6) Instead of rejecting (*śānē*) YHWH (cf. 5:9; 7:10, 15; 32:41), the Israelites would demonstrate love (‘*āhab*) for him with their whole being (30:6). (7) Instead of being the objects of YHWH's curse and their enemies' violence, the Israelites' curses would be imposed on their enemies (30:1, 7). (8) Instead of experiencing deprivation and famine, the people and the land would enjoy YHWH's lavish blessing (30:5, 9).

In short, the curses of 28:15–68 would be lifted and the blessings of 28:1–14 would finally be realized. The covenantal triangle consisting of YHWH, Israel, and the land would be fully restored and operative, and not just a handful but all Israelites would demonstrate circumcised hearts and enjoy YHWH's favor (cf. 10:16), and they would all be wholeheartedly and bodily committed to him. Then YHWH's

favor would be evident in the unrestrained productivity of their families, livestock, and the land. In this world the previous dystopia (frightening/bad place) had been solved not by creating a utopia (etymologically, “no place”—that is, an “unreal place”) but by creating a new real world. In this microcosmic Eden the effects of human rebellion would be removed, and the microcosmic humanity would be in right relationship with the divine Creator once more. This would involve not the creation of a “new covenant” but the fulfillment of the ideals of the original covenant that YHWH had made with Abraham and his descendants.

Jeremiah’s Vision of the New Israelite Covenant

Probably because the expression “new covenant” appears only in Jeremiah, most treat Jeremiah 31:27–40 as the determinative text on this matter. It is important that we take into account verses 27–40 in their entirety, but I offer verses 31–34 here as the heart of this passage:

“See, the days are coming,” *the declaration of YHWH*, “when I will make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah a new covenant; not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—my covenant, which they broke, though I was their husband,” *the declaration of YHWH*. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” *the declaration of YHWH*:

“I will put my Torah within them,
and on their hearts, I will write it.
And I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
And no longer will they each teach their neighbor
and each their brother,
saying, ‘Know YHWH,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,” *the declaration of YHWH*.
“For I will forgive their iniquity,
and their sin I will remember no more.”

This passage occurs in the center of a gloriously hopeful series of oracles by the prophet, which we may refer to as Jeremiah's "Book of Comfort: Building and Planting" (30:1–33:26). Addressing the exilic situation (cf. 29:1–32), this segment opens with a thesis statement (30:1–3) announcing the reversal of the exile. From the broader context (30:1–33:26) it is evident that in this text on the "new covenant," Jeremiah was concerned primarily—if not exclusively—with the destiny of his own people the Israelites, their relationship to God, and the land they once occupied. As certain as God's cosmic order (33:20, 25), so certain were YHWH's immutable and irrevocable covenants with Israel and the Davidic house (33:14–26). Jeremiah anticipated the day when the covenantal triangle would be completely restored, a reality demonstrated concretely by the land being fruitful once more (33:1–13). Whereas the book of Isaiah—especially in its closing chapters—tends to universalize the scope of YHWH's great restorative actions, Jeremiah tends to focus on his own people and his own land. In 31:1–3, YHWH had declared to the survivors of the judgment from all the clans of Israel, "I have loved you with an everlasting love [*wě'ahăbat 'ôlām 'ăhabtîk*]; therefore I have drawn you with my unfailing love [*'al kēn mēšaktîk ḥesed*]." The nations enter the picture briefly, but only as agents of God's judgment (32:26–35) or as the objects of YHWH's destructive power (30:8–11), not as participants in his salvation.

Against all odds, and in the face of apparent hopelessness (cf. 32:17, 27), YHWH would do a miraculous work, creating (*bārā*) a new thing on earth: a woman would embrace a man (31:22). By this YHWH meant that his days of running after Israel would be over; finally, she (Israel) would embrace him (YHWH). But how could and how would this happen? Jeremiah 31:27–40 provides the answer.

References to plucking up and overthrowing (31:28, 40) frame this text. Between these boundaries the text divides

into three prose parts, each signaled by the announcement “See, the days are coming,” followed by the signatory formula “the declaration of YHWH” (vv. 27–30, 31–34, 38–40). Highlighting the certainty of the announcement and answering questions concerning the veracity and origin of his statements, Jeremiah punctuates his utterances four more times with the signatory formula (vv. 28, 32, 33, 36) and twice with the citation formula “Thus has YHWH said” (vv. 35, 37). The citation formulas punctuate a poetic segment, inserted to declare the certainty of the announcement being made. Accordingly, this text breaks down into four segments:

1. The Announcement of the New Population for Judah (31:27–30)
2. The Announcement of the New Relationship between YHWH and His People (31:31–34)
3. The Divine Guarantee (31:35–37)
4. The Effect: The New City (31:38–40)

The first segment sets the stage for what follows, especially our primary concern, Jeremiah’s announcement of the “new covenant”: (1) The land will be fully populated once more (v. 27). (2) YHWH’s deconstructive fury will have given way to reconstructive mercy (v. 28). And (3) the people of Israel will recognize their responsibility for their behavior and its devastating consequences (v. 30).

From Ezekiel 18:2 it is evident that the proverb quoted in verse 29 was also circulating among the exiles: “The fathers have eaten unripe grapes, and the children’s teeth are blunted.” The Hebrew verb *qāhâ*, usually translated “to set on edge,”⁴ describes the puckery, styptic sensation in the mouth when we eat unripe fruit. Whereas among the exiles (cf. Ezekiel’s citation) this statement became proverbial for YHWH’s fundamental unfairness in the administration of

justice, the utterance in Jeremiah metaphorically expressed the doctrine explicitly declared in Lamentations 5:7:

Our fathers have sinned and are no more,
And we are the ones who have borne their guilt.

In Jeremiah's context the issue was theodicy: How could God punish children for the sins of their fathers? In a subversive inversion of the Decalogue statement (Exod. 20:5; 34:6-7; Deut. 5:9-10), Jeremiah's contemporaries quoted the proverb to complain about this divine injustice. However, Jeremiah declared that in the new order the reworked proverb will recognize people's accountability for their own sins; the days of blaming someone else will be over.

In 31:31-32, Jeremiah identified two problems that had plagued Israel throughout their history and that the "new covenant" would correct. First, instead of internalizing the Torah and writing it on the tablets of their hearts, the Israelites had taken pride in the stone tablets containing the ten principles of covenant relationship inscribed by the finger of YHWH himself and deposited in his presence. This object was their Guarantee/Icon (*'ēdūt*) of God's commitment to them. Second, instead of "keeping" (*šāmar*) the covenant, they broke it (v. 32), not literally like Moses had done when he came down Mount Sinai (Exod. 32:19-21; Deut. 9:17, 21) but in their rebellion against their divine Suzerain, the God of the covenant, and in their violation of his will.

In 31:31-34, Jeremiah recognized the monergistic nature of the "new covenant" with his focus on the divine actions involved in its implementation. First, YHWH determined the timing. The phrase "days are coming" occurs three times in this passage (vv. 27, 31, 38) and fourteen times elsewhere in Jeremiah (7:32; 9:25 [24]; 16:14; etc.) but only six times in the rest of the First Testament. The phrase suggests an indefinite future time, set by YHWH. Second, YHWH

determined the fact of the event and its nature. On Jeremiah 31:27–40 the prophet stamped the signatory formula “the declaration of YHWH” nine times, highlighting both the divine origin of the utterance and YHWH’s involvement in the implementation of the “new” covenant. Third, YHWH chose the covenant partners: the houses of Israel and Judah—that is, the Northern and Southern Kingdoms—the very ones whose regathering Jeremiah had described in verses 7–22 and 23–26, respectively. The scope of this “new” covenant was both parochially and comprehensively Israelite. Fourth, there is nothing new in the terms of the “new covenant.” On the surface, the idiom *kārat bēřît*, “to cut a covenant,” appears to suggest a brand-new covenant, rather than the confirmation (*hēqîm*) of an old covenant. The characterization of this covenant as “new” (*ḥădāšâ*), seems to reinforce this view.

However, this raises the question, What is new here? Verse 32 teases us with a response that seems to address the question in part: “Not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.” As already noted, the foil for this covenant was the one represented by the tablets of stone. Literally, Moses was the one who had smashed the tablets, the symbol of YHWH’s irrevocable commitment to Israel. However, the verb “they broke” alludes to the golden-calf incident, where Israel’s behavior had made a mockery of the preamble to the basic covenant document and high-handedly violated the chief command: “You shall have no other gods besides me” (Exod. 20:3–6; Deut. 5:7–10). The problem represented by the former covenant was not the covenant itself but the divinely privileged covenant partner: three times the people had declared that they would do all that YHWH commanded (Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7) and had put themselves under oath (24:1–11), but at the

first opportunity, the people proved their fundamentally apostate disposition.

But we must ask more precisely, From Jeremiah's perspective, of whom does the third-person plural verb form *hēpērû* (they broke) in verse 32 speak? The short answer is the exodus generation, whom YHWH had taken by the hand and led out of Egypt. At Sinai, this redeemed people had been formally constituted as the bride of YHWH. However, within weeks they proved the superficiality of their commitment to their divine Husband. However, as Moses had anticipated in Deuteronomy, this proved to be characteristic of most of the nation's history. The problem lay with collective Israel and Judah.

To be sure, some striking exceptions to the corporate problem emerged. YHWH obviously did not consider Moses guilty of breaking the covenant at Sinai, or he would not have proposed transferring to him the privilege of primary heir to the Abrahamic covenant (Exod. 32:10; Deut. 9:14). The Levites were expressly rewarded with the (covenant) blessing for their faithful action against the idolaters (Exod. 32:29), as Moses explicitly recognized in his blessing for them (Deut. 33:9–10). Since Joshua was on the mountain with Moses, he could not have participated in the rebellion (Exod. 32:15–18). Although the golden-calf narrative does not mention Caleb, later narratives show that, along with Joshua, he proved his fidelity at Kadesh-barnea by encouraging the people to trust God and enter the land (Num. 13:30–14:9). In Numbers 14:24 YHWH explicitly recognized him as “my servant Caleb,” who “has a different spirit and has followed me fully” (cf. Josh. 14:6–15). Although Caleb was a proselyte, for his faithfulness YHWH not only brought him into the land but also granted him Hebron, the burial place of the ancestors, as his allotment of land (Josh. 14:12–15). So even when Jeremiah said, “which they broke” (Jer. 31:31), he meant not every single Israelite

but the nation as a whole. The significance of this observation will become apparent below.

When Jeremiah's speech approaches the essential elements of the covenant, his literary register elevates, shifting into semi-poetic mode (vv. 32–33). As he envisioned it, the new covenant would involve four core features, all of which directly address previous problems in the Israelites' relationship with YHWH: (1) the internalization of the Torah (31:33b); (2) the renewal of the covenant, expressed in the formula "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (31:33c); (3) the knowledge of YHWH (31:34a); and (4) the forgiveness of sin (31:34b). Israel's faithlessness at Sinai (Exod. 32) and at Kadesh-barnea (Num. 13–14) demonstrated that none of these features characterized the whole generation that YHWH had rescued from Egypt.

Despite having heard the Decalogue from YHWH's own mouth and having heard Moses recite it, along with the "stipulations" (*mišpāṭîm*) of the Covenant Document (Exod. 24:3–4, 7), the Torah was not written on the people's hearts.

Despite having participated in the covenant-ratification ceremony and having bound themselves on oath to YHWH (Exod. 24:7–8), the words of the covenant formula (an adaptation of the marriage formula; cf. Jer. 31:32) had not taken root in the minds/hearts (*lēb*, Jer. 31:33) of Israel.

Despite having witnessed YHWH's "signs and wonders" in Egypt (which proved that Israel's Savior was YHWH),⁵ having experienced YHWH's grace in the wake of the golden-calf fiasco (Exod. 32–33), and having received the revelation of YHWH's will for them in great detail, the masses of Israelites obviously did not know him.

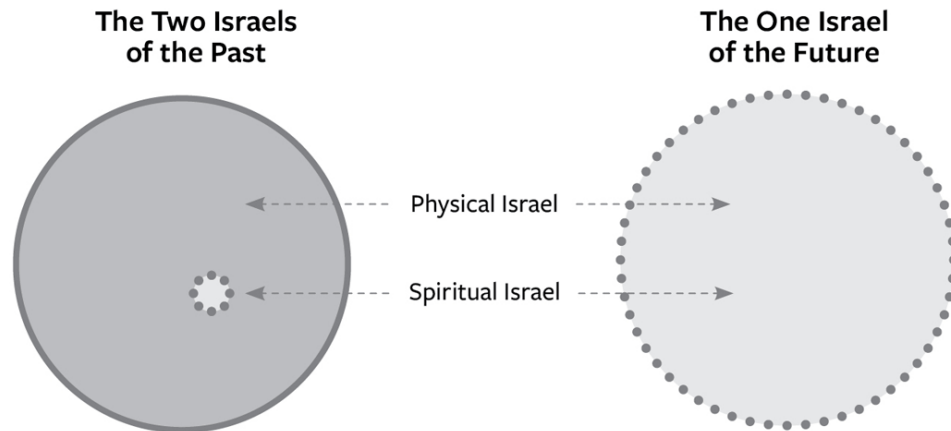
Despite YHWH's promise that he forgives every kind of sin (Exod. 34:6–7), and despite his provision of rituals to effect forgiveness (Lev. 4–6), that generation's persistent rebellion in the desert and faithless refusal to receive YHWH's promise of land (Num. 13–14) proved that they had forfeited the privilege of forgiveness.

When we explore the essential features of the “new” covenant more closely, we discover that none of these features was actually new. There had always been “new-covenant” Israelites who had the Torah of God in their hearts/minds,⁶ who delighted in covenant relationship with God (Exod. 29:45; Lev. 26:12), who knew God (Exod. 33:13; cf. Judg. 2:10), and who rejoiced in the knowledge of sins forgiven. Examples included not only Abraham and faithful descendants like Moses, Boaz, David, and Josiah, but also gentile converts like Caleb, Rahab, and Ruth.⁷

Since everything promised in the “new” covenant had already been experienced by some within the Israelite covenant, the “new” element cannot have been its essence. Rather than introducing an absolutely new institution, Jeremiah envisioned the renewal of the Israelite covenant; except that this time, YHWH guaranteed that in the renewed covenant the ideals of the original Israelite covenant would be finally and fully realized by “all” Israel. The word *kûlām*, “all of them,” in 31:34 captures the newness of the “new” covenant: “They will *all* know me, from the least to the greatest.” In the past, true covenant relationship had been experienced by only a few, the righteous remnant. For the masses, the covenant remained an external reality, symbolized by tablets of stone, but its essence and heart were not imprinted on their hearts. With the establishment of the new covenant, YHWH’s actions on the nation as a whole would finally resolve this problem.

Figure 9.1

**The Relationship between Physical Israel and Spiritual
Israel as Perceived by Moses and Jeremiah**



Jeremiah 31:21–22 set the stage for the promise of the “new” covenant; YHWH looked forward to a new day when all Israel would embrace him. At that time, the boundaries of spiritual Israel and physical Israel would finally be coterminous (fig. 9.1), and the bond of commitment from both sides would be indissoluble. But this would not be a *new* covenant in an absolute sense. It would indeed take a new divine action to institute this stage of the Israelite covenant (hence the verb *kārat*, “to cut/make,” 31:31). However, in terms of its content and goal, it is better to think in terms of a *renewed covenant*, as some ancient scholars in the Qumran community at the turn of the era and some modern Hebrew Bible scholars have recognized (Talmon, “Community of the Renewed Covenant,” 12–13). Jeremiah anticipated no deliverance from the law as if, like Pharaoh, the law had held the people in bondage. Nor did he anticipate any adjustment in God’s standards of righteousness. Rather, the institution of the “new” would signal the day when all Israel would finally enjoy the freedom and well-being envisioned in the original Israelite covenant, a freedom that would celebrate both the knowledge and the application of the Torah because it would be internalized in their hearts and demonstrated in life. For all these reasons, we should read in context and look upon Jeremiah’s new covenant as a renewal and ultimate

realization of the same covenant that God had made long ago with Abraham, established with the exodus generation of his descendants at Sinai, and renewed with the conquest generation on the plains of Moab.

The Divine Guarantee of the “Renewed” Israelite Covenant (Jer. 31:35-40)

With this glorious utterance, YHWH appealed to the certainty of the cosmic order (Gen. 8:22; 9:9-17) as an analogical guarantee of the certainty and irrevocability of the new Israelite covenant—that is, his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. As if he anticipated later tendencies to spiritualize and universalize the “new covenant,” Jeremiah explicitly linked the irrevocability of YHWH’s commitment to Israel with the fixed order of the universe (Jer. 31:35-36), and he specifically identified the (physical) descendants of Israel (*zera’ yiśrā’ēl*, v. 37) as the beneficiaries of his commitment. He also concretized his perception of the beneficiaries in verses 38-39 by describing the transformation of Jerusalem. As in Moses’ vision of Israel as “a people holy to YHWH,”⁸ Jerusalem will be a city “holy to YHWH”⁹ when the new covenant is in place.

At that time, YHWH will indeed have created (*bārā*) something new (*ḥădāšâ*) on the earth: “a woman will embrace a man” (v. 22). This touching metaphor of the restored relationship between YHWH and Israel is appropriate here, given the adaptation of the marriage formulary in the covenant formula: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” This formula is grounded on formal pronouncements at ancient weddings, “I will be your husband, and you will be my wife.” For centuries YHWH had been running after Israel, but she had persisted in running off after other gods. When the Israelite covenant is renewed, then all the ideals of the earlier iterations of the covenant

will be realized, and finally Israel will throw her own arms around YHWH.

Ezekiel's Vision of the New Israelite Covenant

Although Ezekiel, Jeremiah's exiled professional contemporary, does not use the expression "new covenant," the concept remarkably plays a more prominent role in his vision of Israel's future than in Jeremiah's. As noted above, Ezekiel uses two alternative expressions, "a covenant of peace" (*běřît šālôm*, 34:25; 37:26) and "an eternal/irrevocable covenant" (*běřît 'ôlām*, 16:60; 37:26). These expressions occur in four contexts.

Ezekiel 16:59-63

Ezekiel left little doubt concerning which covenant he had in mind when he spoke of "an eternal/irrevocable covenant" in 16:59-63. First, the five occurrences of the term *běřît* in this paragraph link his topic to the marriage covenant mentioned in verse 8. Second, as in verses 22 and 43, the expression "in the days of your youth" (*bîmê ně'ûrāyik*, v. 60) points to some early period in Israel's history, presumably the period reflected in Jerusalem's infancy and adolescence (vv. 6-8). Third, the prophet characterizes this covenant as an "irrevocable covenant" (*běřît 'ôlām*, v. 60).

From our previous discussions we know that YHWH's cosmic covenant (Gen. 9:16) and his covenants with Abraham (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19) and Israel (Exod. 31:16; Lev. 24:8) fall into this last category, as do the Levitical covenant of salt (Num. 18:19), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 55:3), and an eschatological covenant (Isa. 61:8; Jer. 32:40; Ezek. 37:26). The modifier *'ôlām*, usually rendered "eternal," implies that YHWH will never forget (cf. Jer. 50:5), break (Judg. 2:1; cf. Deut. 7:9), or revoke it. If the vassal breaks the covenant (e.g., Isa. 24:5), this does not mean the

covenant is canceled. It merely frees YHWH to suspend its benefits. In Ezekiel's context, the Levitical and Davidic covenants are ruled out, since they were not made in the time of Israel's youth. The covenant of salt is too specific and the cosmic covenant too general, leaving only the Abrahamic/Israelite covenant, or some covenant specifically designated as "eternal" elsewhere.

The sources that have inspired this paragraph, particularly the blessings and curses of Leviticus 26, answer this question. The curses climax with a fearful warning of exile (26:33-39), as noted above; but according to verses 40-45, YHWH had promised Israel that if, when they had suffered the ultimate judgment, they would confess their iniquity and make amends, then YHWH would remember (*zākar*) his covenant with the fathers and restore them to the land (vv. 42, 45). Moses held out the same hope in Deuteronomy 4:31 and 30:1-10. In the present context, Ezekiel envisioned YHWH not making a new covenant to meet the needs of a new historical situation but confirming/establishing (*hēqîm*) the eternal covenant made long ago in Israel's youth (Ezek. 16:8). Jerusalem's infidelity had indeed infuriated him, precipitating the suspension of its benefits and the imposition of its curses. However, this response was neither permanent nor irrevocable. Accordingly, Ezekiel's present message of hope was based not on wishful thinking or on some utopian flight of fancy regarding the nation's future but on YHWH's immutable word. Jerusalem may have treated YHWH's covenant with contempt, but YHWH would never do so. If his punishment of Israel followed the line of his ancient warnings, their restoration was assured by his ancient promises. After all, he is YHWH; he has spoken, and he will make good his (ancient) word (cf. Ezek. 17:24; 36:36; 37:14).

In this prophecy Ezekiel displayed some familiarity with the text of Jeremiah, his contemporary, who, in 31:31-34, had spelled out his vision for YHWH's new covenant with

Israel. We may readily recognize the links between these two documents in (1) references to the earlier covenant (“my covenant,” *bērîtî*) that YHWH had made with Israel (Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:60; cf. 16:8); (2) references to the rupture of this covenant employing the same verb, *hēpîr* (Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:59); (3) allusions to the consequences of the rupture (Jer. 31:32 uses *bā‘altî*, “I was a husband,” in the past tense, but Ezek. 16:59 speaks of YHWH treating Israel as they had treated him); (4) promises of a future renewal of the covenant (Jer. 31:31, 33; Ezek. 16:60); (5) promises of the forgiveness of sin (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 16:63); (6) a common divine vantage point; and (7) connections between the covenant and Israel recognizing YHWH (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 16:62).

However, these connections should not blind us to the exiled prophet’s distinctive emphases: (1) Jerusalem’s memory will be quickened. In the past she had stifled the memory of YHWH’s grace, but when he restores her, she will acknowledge her ungrateful and spiteful response. (2) YHWH’s new expressions of grace will evoke an intense sense of shame in her. YHWH will give Samaria and Sodom to Jerusalem as her daughters. Through this act, those whom she had previously despised will be rendered her subordinates. (3) Jerusalem will acknowledge YHWH. Finally, after YHWH’s lengthy review of Jerusalem’s history, we encounter the recognition formula (16:62–63), which plays such an important part in the rest of the book. When YHWH himself (note the emphatic pronoun) reestablishes (*hēqîm*) his covenant with Jerusalem, she will know him. (4) The concluding clause of this complex recognition formula (“once I have forgiven you [*kippēr*, lit., “made atonement for you”] of all you have done”) affirms Jerusalem’s need for a fundamental spiritual renewal, specifically, the elimination of her sins, which only YHWH can effect (cf. Deut. 32:43).

Ezekiel 34:23-31

In Ezekiel 34:23-31 the prophet prefaces his description of the “covenant of peace” with an announcement of YHWH’s appointment of a new vice-regent over Israel. The identity and functions of this ruler are clear: (1) he will be a singular shepherd (*rō’eh ’eḥād*), resolving the nation’s divided history since 931 BC; (2) his name is David, in fulfillment of the Davidic administrative covenantal promise (2 Sam. 7, on which see further below, chap. 10); (3) he will be YHWH’s servant (*’abdî*), resolving the dynasty’s history of self-service and exploitation (cf. 34:1-10); (4) he will be a “prince” (*nāśî*), a modest designation, in deliberate contrast to Israel’s kings, who tended to elevate themselves above their fellow (“brotherly”) Israelites (contra Deut. 17:20). Remarkably, in this context the new ruler is not the agent of deliverance and regathering of the covenant people—that role is reserved for YHWH, the divine Shepherd (Ezek. 34:11-22). Rather, in keeping with the original role of David, YHWH appoints him to promote the smooth functioning of the covenantal triangle involving YHWH, the people, and the land after the covenant triangle has been reconstituted. This Israelite covenantal context is highlighted by modifications of the ancient covenant formula, which frames verses 24-31:

Then I, YHWH, will be their God, and my servant David will be ruler among them. (34:24)

Now you are my flock; you are the [human] flock of my pasture, and I am your God. (34:31)

Significantly, YHWH follows up each of these statements with a speech-act formula. The first, “I am YHWH; I have spoken” (*’ănî yhwh dibbartî*), adapts the divine self-identification formula and refers to the ancient irrevocable covenant promises to Israel and to David. The second, the signatory formula “the declaration of the Lord YHWH”

(*ně'um 'ădōnāy yhwh*), speaks to his commitment to the present prophetic utterance.

The characterization of the new engine that will drive Israel's relationship with Israel's Deity and land as a "covenant of peace" (*bērît šālôm*) speaks to YHWH's renewed commitment to his flock and the new reality. The Hebrew word *šālôm*, usually rendered "peace," involves much more than the absence of hostility; it summarizes in one word the well-being that YHWH provides by means of his blessing, as spelled out in Leviticus 26:4–13 and Deuteronomy 28:1–14, often referred to as "the [covenantal] good"¹⁰ that YHWH has promised and that Israel's presence in their own land should have provided.¹¹

Given Ezekiel's heavy dependence upon the covenant curses in Leviticus 26:14–39 for his pronouncements of doom against Judah, we should not be surprised to find that Leviticus 26:4–13 has inspired the prophet's vision of Israel's restoration in Ezekiel 34:25–30. Among the borrowed elements the following are noteworthy: (1) "rains in their season" (Lev. 26:4; Ezek. 34:26); (2) the land yielding its produce and the trees their fruit (Lev. 26:4; Ezek. 34:27); (3) living securely in the land (Lev. 26:5; Ezek. 34:25, 27–28); (4) granting peace in the land / establishing a peaceful plantation (Lev. 26:6; Ezek. 34:29); (5) "with none to frighten you/them"; (Lev. 26:6; Ezek. 34:28); (6) removing dangerous animals (Lev. 26:6; Ezek. 34:25); (7) the covenant formula (Lev. 26:12–13; Ezek. 34:30); and (8) "breaking the bars of your/their yoke" (Lev. 26:13; Ezek. 34:27). The last element is especially significant because this metaphor occurs in only these two texts in the entire First Testament. Although Ezekiel borrowed all these motifs, he freely rearranged the elements, modified expressions, expanded on some, and abbreviated others. The prophet's description of the marks of YHWH's covenant of peace focuses on security and prosperity. He highlights the comprehensive nature of the *šālôm* and security¹² that

attend this covenant by repeating three themes in an ABCABC order:

- A peace with the animals (Ezek. 34:25b-d)
- B the blessing of the vegetation (vv. 26-27c)
- C deliverance from oppression (vv. 27d-28a)
- A' peace with the animals (v. 28b-d)
- B' the blessing of the vegetation (v. 29a-b)
- C' deliverance from oppression (v. 29c)

In short, YHWH will restore security by eliminating predatory animals from the land,¹³ blessing the land with great fruitfulness, and removing the oppression of foreign enemies. Thus he will reverse the tragedy of 586 BC finally and permanently.

Ezekiel's vision of the messianic age (34:25-30) has temporarily suspended the shepherd-flock imagery that dominates the oracle to this point. He has not related the wild animals to creatures that prey upon the flock, nor connected the rejuvenation of vegetation with the renewal of pastureland. Even the evil shepherds have disappeared. Therefore, it is fitting to wrap up the prophecy by returning to the central issue. Verse 31 reaffirms that the flock of which the prophet had spoken earlier represents the nation of Israel, doing so by reversing the order of the bipartite form of the covenant formula. In place of "You are my people," the prophet declares, "You are my flock." YHWH reiterates that Israel is the flock of his pasture¹⁴ and inserts an affirmation that the flock he is talking about is indeed a human (*'ādām*) flock. YHWH's concluding renewed commitment to be their God represents the obverse of YHWH's taking Israel as his flock.

The theological implications of Ezekiel 34 are both profound and exhilarating. In the future, when YHWH will extend his grace to Israel again, the disintegrated Deity-nation-land triangle will be restored. Ezekiel's vision of the "covenant of peace" (34:25) is determined completely by

previous iterations of the Israelite covenant, whose seed was planted with Abraham, whose trunk was established at Sinai, and whose limbs were reinforced on the plains of Moab. Now that tree has reached its final magnificent form. At that time, when YHWH's people live securely in their land, are ruled by a divinely appointed David, and enjoy the *šālôm* of God's presence and grace, they will finally acknowledge God as their Savior and covenant Lord. As was the case with Moses' vision of Israel's future in Deuteronomy 30:1-11 and 32:43, the three angles of the covenant triangle represent essential elements of the vision of restoration. And as was the case with Jeremiah, this text does not universalize the boundaries of the covenant community nor replace the nation represented essentially by the physical seed of Abraham with some sort of spiritual community. The irrevocability of YHWH's commitment to Israel is not in question.

Ezekiel 37:21-28

Ezekiel 37:21-28 represents the conclusion to YHWH's interpretation of the sign act involving two inscribed pieces of wood / boards (*'ēšîm*) that Ezekiel had taken and combined into a single stick (37:15-20). The oracle divides into two parts, corresponding to the two pieces of wood that the prophet has put together. The first segment (vv. 21-24a) announces four dimensions of Israel's restoration: (1) their ethnic integrity, all the tribes of Israel will be involved (v. 21a); (2) their territorial integrity, YHWH will bring them to their own land (v. 21b); (3) their political integrity, they will be one "nation" (*gôy*) in the land with a single king over all (vv. 22, 24a); and (4) their spiritual integrity, YHWH will "rescue" them from their "apostasies"¹⁵ and will purify them (v. 23).

The verb "I will save" (*wěhōša'tî*, 37:23) is exodus language (Exod. 14:30), which often speaks of deliverance

from external enemies (cf. Ezek. 34:22). However, as in 36:29 (“I will save [*wěhōša’tî*] you from all your uncleanness”), in a rare move, this statement envisions the people’s sin as the oppressive enslaving power. The next verb, “to cleanse, purify” (*ṭihar*, 37:23), also recalls 36:25–29, which, in offering a fuller description of the cleansing process, had associated the experience with a heart transplant and the infusion of YHWH’s spirit. The reference to covenant renewal, expressed in both instances by citing the covenant formula, reinforces this link. The final declaration in 37:23, “They will be my people, and I will be their God,” signals the full restoration of Israel’s relationship with YHWH.

The second segment (37:24b–28) divides into three parts. In the first, YHWH announces three new realities that will mark Israel’s renaissance: (1) a new commitment to the will of YHWH, the divine patron (v. 24b); (2) occupation of their hereditary homeland “forever” (*‘ad ‘ôlām*, v. 25a); (3) the return of “David, my vassal” (*‘abdî*) as head “forever” (*lě‘ôlām*, v. 25b).

In the second part YHWH identifies the source of Israel’s renaissance: the divine institution (*kārat*) of a “covenant of peace” (*běrit šālôm*, 37:26–27). He announces the essence of the covenant by citing the covenant formula for the second time (cf. v. 23b), this time in the conventional order by declaring his own commitment to his people first (“I will be their God”), and then declaring his acceptance of Israel as his people (“They will be my people”). The use of this formula reminds hearers again that this covenant is not new but is fundamentally linked to the commitments that YHWH had made to Abraham (Gen. 17:7–8) and to his descendants at Sinai and on the plains of Moab.¹⁶

This “covenant of peace” comes with several corollary entailments. First, YHWH will “grant them [their hereditary homeland].” Without an object, the verb *ûnētattîm* is best interpreted as a truncated form of the land-grant formula,

forms of which appear in connection with the Abrahamic (Gen. 15:18; 17:8) and Israelite covenants (Exod. 6:8; Deut. 27:2–3). Significantly, three of the four occurrences of the covenant formula in Ezekiel link it with YHWH’s promise to restore the nation-land tie (11:17; 36:28; 37:21–22).

Second, YHWH will multiply the nation (37:26), alluding to the promise to Abraham to multiply his descendants as the stars of the sky, the grains of sand on the seashore, and the dust of the earth.¹⁷ Third, with climactic and semi-poetic parallelism, YHWH promises to establish his own residence in the midst of the nation:

And I shall place	my sanctuary (<i>miqdāšî</i>)	in their midst forever,
And	my dwelling place (<i>miškānî</i>)	will be over them. (37:26b– 27a)

Since the original exodus from Egypt provided the paradigm for the new exodus from among the nations (cf. also Jer. 31:31–34), the present announcement of the establishment of the covenant, the delivery of the promised land into Israel’s hands, the references to the people walking in “my stipulations and ordinances,” and YHWH’s promise to establish his residence in Israel’s midst all link this entire passage with Israel’s experiences at Sinai. An extremely significant new element in the present context is YHWH’s promise of a new exodus in rescuing Israel from its sin (Ezek. 37:23), which links this “covenant of peace” with Jeremiah’s “renewed covenant” (Jer. 31:34). This internal transformation accords with Moses’ anticipation of YHWH circumcising the Israelites’ hearts, which will result in them demonstrating wholehearted and full-bodied love for YHWH (Deut. 30:6) by listening to his voice and observing all his commands (v. 8). The persons in whom the will of God will be implanted are transformed in their natures so that the covenant will surely never be broken. Looking back briefly,

although Ezekiel does not use “new covenant” vocabulary in 36:16–38, this passage explains in intricate detail how YHWH will transform his people in the context of their restoration. In verses 23–30 YHWH replaces Moses’ metaphor of heart circumcision with the metaphor of heart transplant, which yields the same result as Moses had anticipated in Deuteronomy 30:6.

The terms of the covenant established at Sinai and renewed on the plains of Moab clearly provide the background for both Israel’s judgment and the hope for its restoration. Built into the original Israelite covenant was the prospect that YHWH would not reject his people forever. Indeed, like Ezekiel 34:25–31, the present complex of promises bears a striking resemblance to Leviticus 26:1–13, a text that has figured so often in Ezekiel’s oracles. Furthermore, here the prophet also anticipates nothing less than the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 4:30. Dispersed among the nations, the Israelites will learn that YHWH, their God, is a compassionate God. He will neither fail them nor utterly destroy them. The basis of the nation’s eternal hope is YHWH’s eternal, immutable covenant with the fathers.

Building on 36:23, Ezekiel 37:21–28 concludes with an expanded form of the recognition formula, which highlights the effect of Israel’s renewal on the nations among whom the Israelites are scattered. YHWH hereby reiterates that pity for his people is not the primary motive behind his salvific activity on Israel’s behalf. Rather, summarizing a prominent motif in 36:16–32, his restoration of Israel was driven by a concern for his reputation beyond Israel. So long as the Israelites remained in exile, the nations would stumble over questions concerning YHWH’s fidelity and competence to function as the divine patron of the nation. But his saving actions on behalf of a rebellious people will demonstrate his grace and mercy toward them. Ezekiel does not hereby anticipate the conversion of the gentiles or their grafting into the covenant relationship with YHWH. Rather,

he foresees them as spectators watching the mighty new works of YHWH on behalf of his covenant people. The realization of the ideals of the Israelite covenant will transpire not in the back corners of the desert but in the sight of all the nations so that they may acknowledge YHWH's presence, action, and character.

Of the four “forever” (*‘ôlām*) gifts (renewed obedience, occupation of the land, Davidic rule [37:24–25], and divine presence [37:27]), the last is climactic. YHWH's dwelling (*miškān*) over (*‘al*) his people will finally convince the nations of his sanctifying power. The final statement answers to the two elements of the covenant formula. The presence of his sanctuary (*miqdāš*) in the midst of the people (v. 28) will be the ultimate proof that “I am your God,” and his sanctification (*qiddēš*) of Israel will be the proof of his election of Israel as his holy nation, consecrated to himself for his glory: “You are my people.”

The designation of the covenant realized as a “covenant of peace” symbolizes the goal of YHWH's saving actions. As noted earlier, this shalom is much more than the absence of war; it denotes a state of harmony and equilibrium among all participants in the divine-human-territorial relationships. The renewal of covenant vows, the cleansing of the population, the restoration of the people to their hereditary homeland, and the establishment of YHWH's residence among his people are prerequisites and the marks of this peace.

Ezekiel's unequivocal declaration that finally all descendants of Jacob would be heirs of the covenant blessings was especially significant for the Northern Israelites. Against the grain of centuries of history and deep-seated prejudices, YHWH will extend his grace to the whole house of Israel—not only Judah but Joseph and his confederates as well. He will rescue them from sin and their divisive past. By establishing his residence in the midst of the nation, all the tribes will be back, enjoying equal access

to the divine patron and participating in the benefactions that emanate from him (cf. the concrete vision in Ezek. 48–49).

Remarkably, although both Jeremiah and Ezekiel anticipated the eschatological appearance of a Davidic Messiah,¹⁸ and although both had associated his arrival with the renewal of YHWH's covenant with Israel,¹⁹ neither prophet links the coming Messiah specifically with forgiveness of sin. We might have expected them to build on Isaiah 53, a magnificent text that envisions a royal servant of YHWH being slaughtered like a lamb for the transgressions/iniquity (*pěšā'îm/ 'ăwônôt*) of his people (vv. 4–6, 8), and thereby dying as an offering for his people's guilt (*'ăšām*, v. 10), but neither picks up this theme.

Ezekiel 38–39

Among Ezekiel's audience of fellow exiles in Babylon, who apparently were unresponsive to his ministry during his lifetime, some seem to have questioned both the veracity of his promises of Israel's restoration and the permanence of that new world should it happen. It seems the oracle concerning Gog and his allies in Ezekiel 38–39 was intended to address those concerns. In this "literary cartoon," YHWH offers a hypothetical scenario set long after Israel's return to and secure settlement in the land (38:8, 10, 16). It envisions an alliance of nations from the four compass points attacking Israel and challenging its secure and prosperous world—as if to say in the post-restoration environment that even if the entire world were arrayed against YHWH's people, he would intervene and rescue them. With this oracle Ezekiel declared to his people that once the covenant triangle involving YHWH, his people, and his land had been restored, 586 BC could never happen again. The oracle concludes by declaring the definitive basis of Israel's irrevocable security: "For I will have poured out my Spirit on

the house of Israel” (39:29). Related declarations involving this liquid metaphor occur four times in the prophets, in each case securing Israel’s post-restoration well-being (cf. Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Joel 2:28–29 [3:1–2]; see further below, chap. 15, under “The Israelite Covenant in the Book of Acts”).

Isaiah’s Vision of the New Israelite Covenant (Isa. 54:4–10)

I conclude this discussion of the new Israelite covenant with a brief glance at one more celebratory poetic meditation on this glorious subject, Isaiah 54:4–10. This extraordinary text begins by setting YHWH’s original covenant with Israel in its cosmic context—the one who established his covenant with Israel in the first place is both the people’s Redeemer (*gō’ēl*) and the “God of the whole earth” (*’ēlōhê kol hā’āreṣ*, v. 5). However, by identifying YHWH as Israel’s “husband” (*bō’ālayik*, v. 5) and Israel as “the wife of [his] youth” (*’ēšet nē’ûrîm*, v. 6), Isaiah alludes to the covenant that YHWH made with Israel at Sinai/Horeb. Tragically, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the exile of its population (v. 6) appeared to put that covenant in jeopardy. In his fury at Israel’s infidelity, YHWH appeared to have abandoned Israel and hidden his face from the nation (vv. 7a, 8a), but Isaiah celebrates the reigniting of YHWH’s great compassion (*raḥāmîm gēdōlîm*, v. 7) and his irrevocable unfailing love (*ḥesed ’ôlām*, v. 8).

Appealing to the permanence and stability of the universe itself (v. 8), YHWH declares that just as he had promised that a flood would never again destroy all humankind (v. 9), so he has guaranteed that he would never again pour out his fury on Israel because the “covenant of [his] peace” can never be shaken (v. 10). Here “covenant of my peace” (*bērît šēlômî*) identifies the same covenant as the one that Jeremiah and Ezekiel foretold. Like Moses before him (Deut.

30:1–20; 32:36–43) and like his later prophetic colleagues, Isaiah declared that the judgment could not be the last chapter in Israel’s history; in his compassion YHWH would renew and restore his covenant with them. When we discuss the “new Israelite covenant” in the New Testament, we will see how the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ made all this possible.

- [1.](#) Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8; 9:15.
- [2.](#) Gen. 17:7, 13, 19; Ps. 105:10 = 1 Chron. 16:17.
- [3.](#) Isa. 55:3; 61:8; Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26.
- [4.](#) Cf. LXX Jer. 38:29: *hēimōdiasan*; in Ezek. 18:2, LXX translates *egompiasan*, “to have a toothache.”
- [5.](#) Cf. Exod. 6:6–7; 10:2; etc. (for Israel’s benefit). Exod. 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4, 18; etc. (for Egypt’s benefit).
- [6.](#) Gen. 26:5; Num. 14:24; Deut. 6:6; Ps. 119:11.
- [7.](#) Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7 [5:26]; 19:22.
- [8.](#) *‘am qādōš layhwh*, Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19.
- [9.](#) *qōdeš layhwh*, Jer. 31:40; cf. Isa. 48:2; 52:1.
- [10.](#) *ṭōb/haṭṭōb*, 1 Sam. 25:30; 2 Sam. 2:6; 7:28 = 1 Chron. 17:26; Ps. 23:6; Jer. 32:42; cf. *šālôm* and *ṭōbâ* combined in Deut. 23:7.
- [11.](#) Exod. 18:23; Num. 6:26; Deut. 29:19 [18]; Pss. 29:11; 35:27; 37:11; 72:3, 7; 85:8, 10 [9, 11]; 119:65; 122:6–8; Isa. 9:6–7 [5–6]; 26:3; 32:17–18; 45:7; 52:7; 53:5; 55:12; 60:17; Hag. 2:9; Zech. 8:12; etc.
- [12.](#) The Hebrew word *lābetāḥ*, “in safety, security,” occurs three times, vv. 25c, 27c, 28c.
- [13.](#) Cf. Job 5:23; Isa. 11:6–9; Hosea 2:18–23 [20–25].
- [14.](#) The word *mar’îṭî*, “my pasture,” occurs elsewhere only in Jer. 23:1; cf. *mar’îtekā*, “your pasture” in Pss. 74:1; 79:13; *mar’îṭô*, “his pasture” in Pss. 95:7; 100:3.
- [15.](#) Reading *môšēbōt* as *mēšûbōt*, which occurs in Prov. 1:32; Jer. 2:19; 3:6, 8, 11, 12, 22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; Hosea 11:7; 14:4 [5].
- [16.](#) Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 27:9; 29:12–13 [11–12]; cf. Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 13:11.
- [17.](#) Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 28:14; 32:12 (also 17:2, 6); cf. Ezek. 36:10–12 and 36:37.
- [18.](#) Jer. 23:5–8; 30:9; 33:14–17; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–25.
- [19.](#) Jer. 33:23–26; Ezek. 34:24–31; 37:23–28.

PART 3

The DAVIDIC
COVENANT

Along with the cosmic covenant discussed at the beginning, the Israelite covenant represents what I consider to be an ecclesial/missional covenant. Through the Israelite covenant, God created a relationship with a particular people, who, by responding to his grace in election, salvation, and well-being, were to demonstrate paradigmatically to the world the privilege and benefits of his grand plan of redemption. The tripartite covenant involving YHWH, Israel, and the land of Canaan was to serve as a microcosm of the restored reality that awaits creation when God's cosmic redemptive scheme has been realized. In the cosmic arrangement, God had installed *Adam* (humanity) as his administrator of the tripartite relationship involving God, the earth, and all living things that fill the earth. Mirroring this arrangement, God later established a covenant with Noah and his descendants to fulfill this role in a post-fall context. Much later, YHWH established a special Suzerain-vassal relationship with David and appointed him and his descendants as administrators of the Israelite covenant.

The Adamic and Davidic covenants exhibit a remarkably close relationship: both specially chosen vassals functioned as servants of all three angles/members of triangular covenants. As the vassal of God, *Adam* was to serve his divine Overlord, the creator of the heavens and the earth, but he was also deputized to serve his physical environment, the earth and all living things that inhabited it. As the vassal of YHWH, David was to serve his divine Overlord, but he was also deputized to serve the particular land assigned to him and to serve Israel, the human population that occupied that land. Indeed, since Israel functioned as a microcosm of *Adam* (humanity), and the land of Canaan functioned as a microcosm of the earth,

David likewise functioned as a microcosm of *Adam* (fig. III.1). However, as we will note below, the Adamic and Davidic covenants were not symmetrical. Whereas Adam functioned as the head of a segmented royal genealogy—that is, his deputy status extended to all his descendants—David functioned as the head of a linear royal genealogy; divine deputy status was restricted to a single descendant in any given generation. Other royal descendants often served in the king's court, but in the eyes of YHWH, they were ordinary Israelites.

Figure III.1

**The Davidic King in Israel as a Microcosm of
Adam's/Humanity's Role in the World**

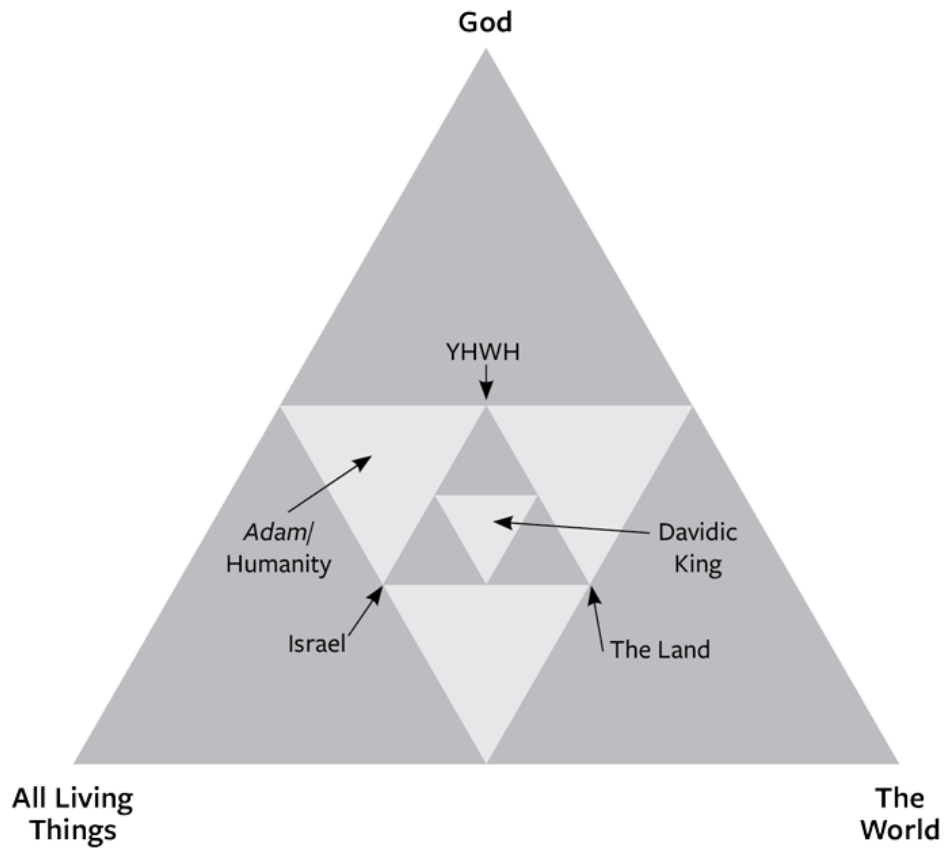
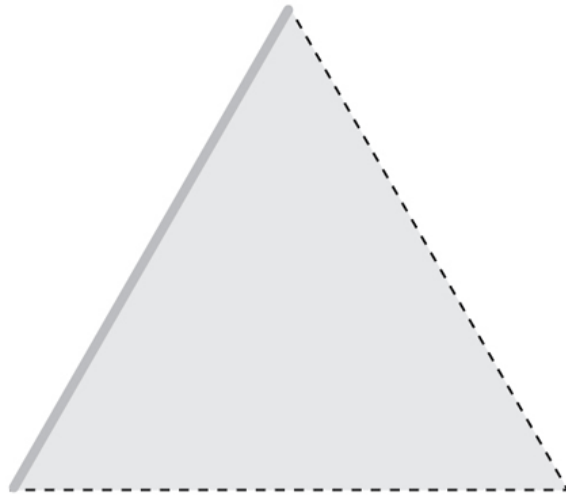


Figure III.2

**The Bilateral Covenantal Relationship Involving YHWH
and Israel**

YHWH



**The People
of Israel**

**The Land
of Canaan**

CHAPTER 10

The Historiographic Context, Nature, and Significance of the Davidic Covenant

Introduction

Since the covenant involving YHWH, the land of Canaan, and Israel served as a microcosm of the covenant involving God, the cosmos, and all living things, we could expect that God's covenant with David would be a microcosm of his covenantal relationship with *Adam* (fig. 10.1). Just as God appointed *Adam*/humanity to supervise and promote the smooth operation of the triangular cosmic economy, so he appointed David and his heirs as administrators of the Israelite economy. David was the man after God's own heart, meaning that he was the person whom YHWH had in mind from the beginning to be Israel's king (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. Deut. 17:15).

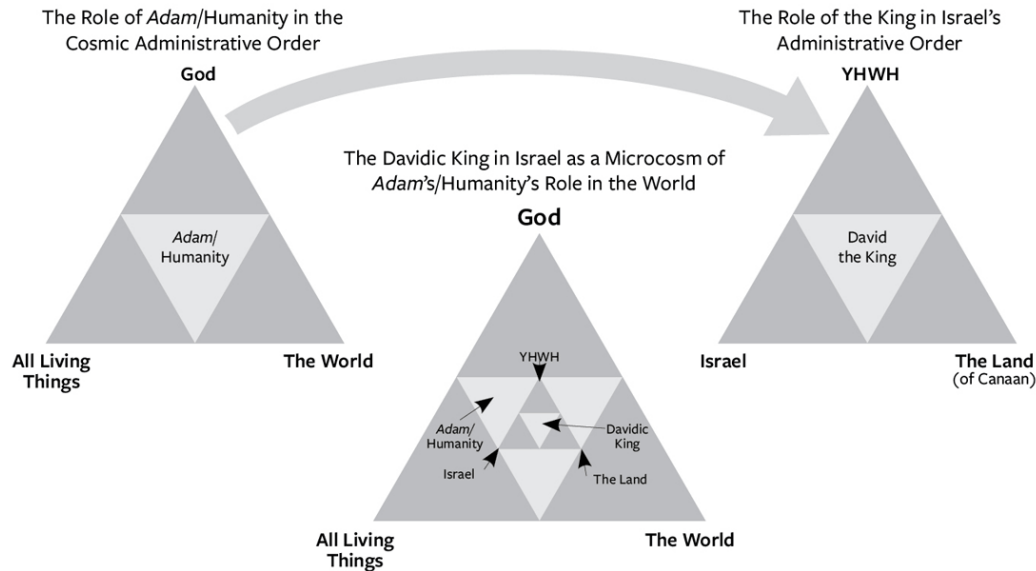
Precursors to the Revelation of the Davidic Covenant

Given the ill-conceived beginnings of Israel's monarchy (1 Sam. 8–15), the disastrous consequences of the kings' rule, and the scathing denunciations of the prophets, many interpret kingship in Israel itself to have been antithetical to

the plan of God and the smooth operation of the theocratic kingdom represented by Israel's covenant triangle. However, this interpretation flies in the face of a long history of royal expectation suggested in biblical texts that deal with the premonarchic period. Appealing to Genesis 3:15, some trace this royal hope back to the beginnings of human history: "I will set hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). As in English, we may translate the Hebrew word *zera'* (seed) as either a particular descendant or a collective plural, the descendants of the woman as a group. The singular sense represents the view of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah produced by rabbis for Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century BC. Their renderings of both the pronouns (*autos/autou*, "he/his") and the verb (*tērēsei*, "he will strike [your head]") expected a single person to fulfill the promise of this protevangelium. The New Testament and Qumran texts inform us that all sorts of messianic expectations were in the air in Jewish communities at this time. Although this interpretation of Genesis 3:15 is possible, a collective understanding is preferable and equally hopeful for the destiny of the world; through the woman's descendants, the problem of evil, represented by the serpent in the garden of Eden, would be resolved.

Figure 10.1

The Place of David in the First Testament Covenantal Program



We are on firmer ground when we note YHWH's promises to the patriarchs predicting that Abraham would become a great nation (*gôy*), which by definition involves a people with a king (*melek*) at its head.¹ Although patriarchal texts tend to refer to royal descendants as plural (*mēlākîm*, "kings"; Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11), Genesis 22:17–18 conceived the offspring of Abraham as singular: "Your offspring will possess [*wěyirāš*] the gate of *his* enemies [*'ōyēbāyw*], and in your offspring will all the nations of the earth be blessed" (cf. 24:60). Genesis 49:8–10 focuses this royal hope on the tribe of Judah, claiming that "the scepter will not depart from Judah or the staff from between his feet" (v. 10 CSB). Verse 9 depicts Judah as a lion: "He crouches; he lies down like a lion or a lioness—who dares to rouse him?" (CSB). This exact wording is echoed by the pagan prophet Balaam when speaking enigmatically of a king higher than Agag in Numbers 24:9. In the following oracle, Balaam anticipated "a star coming from Jacob and a scepter rising from Israel" (24:17).

In Deuteronomy 28:36, at the heart of his litany of covenant curses, Moses warned that should the Israelites persist in their rebellion against YHWH, he would send "you

and the king whom you have installed over yourselves” (*malkěkā ’ăšer tāqîm ’ālêkā*) off into exile among the nations. Moses’ only other reference to an Israelite king occurs in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, where he offered his vision for kingship in Israel. Several features of that vision are striking. First, he anticipated that the notion of a human monarch would arise from the people, but he did not reject it as problematic in principle. Second, he emphasized that the people may only install a king whom YHWH their God would choose—a notion widespread in the ancient Near East. Third, with his prohibition of excessive accumulation of horses, women, and silver and gold, he cast a vision of kingship that contrasted sharply with prevailing monarchic paradigms of his time and later. Fourth, Moses proposed a revolutionary vision of the role of the king in relation to his people, his God, and his land. In the ancient world people expected kings to fulfill three primary roles: (1) ensure the security of the people against outside threats by leading the nation’s military forces (cf. 1 Sam. 8:20); (2) ensure the well-being of the citizens by seeing to it that justice was administered in internal conflicts; and (3) ensure the well-being of the nation vis-à-vis the deity by providing for the proper worship of the divine patron and building a temple for the deity. In Moses’ mind, the king’s primary role would involve not a task to be performed but the embodiment of Torah righteousness before the nation. The charge, to write and read the Torah for himself and to embody its ethical and spiritual teaching as the precondition to long tenure on the throne and ultimately the kingdom’s well-being, was revolutionary. Although the narrator of Judges lamented the absence of a king in Israel (17:6; 21:25), the experiments in kingship in the book (8:22–9:57) reflect royal impulses that contradict the Deuteronomomic vision. In the dark days of the tribal chieftains (*šōpěṭîm*), the problem was that not even YHWH was king; all Israelites did what was right in their own eyes.

Perhaps as expected, we hear the clearest anticipations of kingship in texts recounting events in Israel immediately before the appearance of the first king. In the books of Samuel, the source of Israel's anticipation of a king is surprising. As the time for the arrival of an Israelite king approached, a depressed and barren second wife in a dysfunctional household vowed to dedicate her child to YHWH as a Nazirite if he would grant her a son (1 Sam. 1:11). YHWH answered her prayer, so at the time of Samuel's weaning, Hannah dedicated him at the central sanctuary in Shiloh. Her presentation of Samuel precipitated an outburst that 1 Samuel 2:1 calls "prayer" (*hithpallēl*), but the Aramaic targum rightly interpreted it as an inspired prophetic utterance. Hannah's "ode to joy" (1 Sam. 2:1-10) climaxed in a brilliant declaration of confidence in YHWH:

YHWH will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and raise high the horn of his anointed [*māšîaḥ*, v. 10].

The narrator has cast Hannah as the mouthpiece for the theme of the narratives that run through 1 Kings 2:46: Who might this king be? Indeed, the figure of David so dominates 1 and 2 Samuel that the message of these books would have been better served by naming them 1 and 2 David, after the anointed one whose coming Hannah heralded.

The book of Ruth was probably composed much later than the events it purports to describe, perhaps in the days of Josiah. At the surface level (locution) the author has written a compelling short story of *ḥesed* embodied by Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz and demonstrated by YHWH with his gracious involvement in their lives. The narrator portrays the modest town of Bethlehem Ephrathah (cf. Mic. 5:2 [1]) as a refreshing island of integrity and devotion to YHWH in the morally compromised swamp that was Israel in the period of the judges. However, the concluding genealogy (Ruth 4:18-22) provides the key to the book's literary and theological

significance. The author composed this book to bridge the gap between the books of Judges and 1 Samuel. At the illocutionary level, it is a historiographic essay explaining how the darkness of the premonarchic period could produce the Davidic kingship. Providentially, YHWH incorporated three ordinary people in his plan: Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth. As the seventh figure in a ten-member linear (royal) genealogy, Boaz is cast as an Enoch figure, the seventh name in the ten-member genealogy linking Adam with Noah (Gen. 5). Boaz embodied the righteousness of the Torah of Moses, as prescribed for kings in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, and in so doing, he set the line of Perez on a course that led directly to David.

The Significance of David in the Narratives of Samuel-Kings

Samuel wore several official hats—administrator (judge, *šōpēṭ*), priest, and prophet—according to the narrator of the books of Samuel. Nevertheless, this person’s primary significance lay in his role as Israel’s kingmaker. He was the divine agent, miraculously born to a barren woman and exceptionally trained in the temple at Shiloh. Through his supervision Israel made the transition from an extended family, governed on tribal bases, to a nation (*gôy*) in its own right. Through Samuel, YHWH fulfilled his promises to Abraham: kings emerged among the descendants of the patriarch.

The frequency with which David’s name appears in the First Testament suggests that he was by far the most important character in Israel’s history. The name’s 1,075 occurrences compare with 767 for Moses, 349 for Jacob, and 236 for Abram/Abraham. The amount of biblical material devoted to him, especially in the historiographic writings, reinforces this impression of the man’s extraordinary significance (table 10.1).

Table 10.1

The Attention to David in Samuel-Kings

Approximate dates	Historical period	Narrated time (years)	Narrative time (number of chapters)
1030–930 BC	United monarchy	100	66
930–722 BC	The divided kingdoms	208 (× 2)	28
722–586 BC	The kingdom of Judah	136	8
1030–586 BC	Iron Age Israel	444	102

If we assume that David is the focus of all of 1 Samuel (cf. Hannah's oracle, 1 Sam. 2:10), then fifty-seven chapters (1 Sam. 1–1 Kings 2) cover about fifty years (11 percent) of Israel's history. However, the statistics are even more extreme because the middle period involved two Israelite kingdoms. If we double the years in this phase, fifty-seven chapters (about 56 percent) cover the fifty years of David's public life out of 652 years of political history (about 7.5 percent). Compare this with Manasseh, whose fifty-five-year reign exceeded David's by 37.5 percent but whose tenure the narrator disposed of in eighteen verses (2 Kings 21:1–18). The narrator "insulted" other kings similarly.

David represented the fulfillment of Jacob's prediction of Judah's future as well as the Mosaic vision for Israel's kingship. Although Saul figures as a prominent character in the narrative of 1 Samuel 9–31, he was deemed so inconsequential for the movement of the divine program that the editors/copyists of 1 Samuel allowed the length of his reign to drop out of the text (1 Sam. 13:1). YHWH and Samuel and David referred to Saul as "YHWH's anointed," but the narrator never does; he reserved that status for David. Indeed, the way he described the anointings of Saul and David reflected his negative disposition toward Saul (table 10.2).

Table 10.2

A Comparison of the Anointing Accounts of Saul and David

1 Samuel 10:1-13	1 Samuel 16:1-13
The anointing happened in an unnamed town in the region of Zuph, presumably Samuel's home in Ephraim (cf. 9:5-21).	The anointing happened in Bethlehem, David's hometown and the home of Boaz, as well as the burial place of Rachel, Saul's ancestress (Gen. 35:19).
The anointing was preceded by a dinner with thirty guests but then conducted as a private affair on the street at the edge of the town at dawn with no witnesses (9:22-27).	The anointing was preceded by a sacrifice to YHWH (<i>zābaḥ layhwh</i>) and conducted in the presence of the elders of the town, with Jesse's family watching.
The election involved YHWH announcing to Samuel privately that he was to anoint "a man from the land of Benjamin" (9:16-17).	The election involved an elaborate public process, climaxing in calling David in from the field (he had not even been invited to the sacrifice!) and identifying him as the chosen one (v. 12).
The instrument of anointing was a <i>pak</i> , an ordinary flask, a juglet (10:1).	The instrument of anointing was the official "horn" (<i>qeren</i> , 16:1, 13).
The verb of anointing was <i>yāšaḡ</i> , "to pour" (10:1).	The verb of anointing was <i>māšaḥ</i> , "to anoint" (16:13).
Samuel responded verbally to the event with a curious rhetorical question: "Has not YHWH anointed you ruler [<i>nāgîd</i>] over his human grant [<i>naḥălâ</i>]?" (10:1).	No verbal response was needed. Samuel left immediately for Ramah.
YHWH confirmed his election of Saul with three attesting signs (<i>'ôtôt</i> , 10:2-13), linked to the "Spirit of YHWH/God" rushing upon him (<i>šālah 'ālāyw</i>). That Spirit would come and go, sometimes replaced by "a disastrous spirit from God" (<i>rûaḥ rā'â mē'ēt yhwh</i> ; 16:14-23).	YHWH confirmed his election of David by having "the Spirit of YHWH" (<i>rûaḥ YHWH</i>) rush to him (<i>šālah 'el</i>) (and remain with him) from that day forward. Remarkably, the Spirit of YHWH with David is never mentioned again in the Samuel narrative until the end, where David acknowledges the inspiration of "the Spirit of YHWH" behind his literary work (2 Sam. 23:2).

The song the women sang after David killed Goliath matched the narrator's literary shrinking of Saul's personality and his elevation of David, who towered above him:

Saul has slain his thousands,
but David his ten thousands. (1 Sam 18:7; 21:11)

The narrator's fixation on David was linked with a preoccupation with Jerusalem and its heart, the temple. The first hints of this theme occur in 1 Samuel 1, where the narrator notes that Elkanah and his family made annual pilgrimages to the "temple of YHWH" (*hêkal yhwh*, v. 9; *bêt yhwh*, "house of YHWH," v. 24) in Shiloh. On one of these occasions, Hannah wept before YHWH and vowed that if he gave her a son, she would return him to YHWH for a lifetime of service. She began her prayer with "O YHWH *Ṣěbā'ôt*" (v. 11). This epithet translates literally as "YHWH of armies," and it functions as YHWH's throne name, as is indicated in texts that speak of "YHWH *Ṣěbā'ôt* enthroned above the cherubim" (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; Isa. 37:16). After conquering Jebus (Jerusalem) and making it his capital, David's significance grew "because YHWH, the God of Armies [*yhwh 'ēlōhē ṣěbā'ôt*], was with him" (2 Sam. 5:10), and "David knew that YHWH had established [*hēkîn*] him as king over Israel and had elevated his kingship [*mamlākā*] for the sake of his people Israel" (v. 12). The narrator does not explain what inspired David to bring the ark of the covenant to the city of David. After several initial setbacks, he celebrated the ark's arrival with great joy and fanfare (2 Sam. 6; 1 Chron. 13; 15–16). For the first time in history, the throne of YHWH *Ṣěbā'ôt*, representing God's presence among his people; the king chosen by YHWH to shepherd his people Israel; and the place that YHWH would choose for his name were together in Zion, the city of David (2 Sam. 5:7; this is the first occurrence of the name "Zion")! From this moment onward, the thrones of YHWH and David would

be so intricately bound that the Chronicler will refer to David's throne in Jerusalem as "the throne of YHWH" (see 1 Chron. 29:22–23). Later, while speaking to Jeroboam II, Abijah, king of Judah, would equate YHWH's kingdom with David's (see 2 Chron. 13:5, 8).

As we will see, this preoccupation with David (i.e., the Messiah) extends far beyond the historiographic writings. Indeed, the Davidic figure provides focus for the entire First Testament canon. As the king goes, so goes the kingdom, which is precisely the way Matthew interpreted Israelite history in his genealogy (Matt. 1), to which I shall return in chapter 18.

The Establishment of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17)

The events described above and the perspectives represented by Samuel-Kings and Chronicles relate directly to the revelation of YHWH's covenant with David, whose inauguration is recorded in parallel versions in 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17. Admittedly, the Hebrew word *bĕrît*, "covenant," does not occur in these chapters. Indeed, even though YHWH's special relationship with David drives the narratives from beginning to end, explicit references to YHWH's covenant with this king occur only four times in the books of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles: 2 Samuel 23:5; 1 Kings 11:11; 2 Chronicles 13:5; and 2 Chronicles 21:7.

Despite the absence of the word *bĕrît*, the oracle by Nathan in 2 Samuel 7:5–16 and 1 Chronicles 17:4–14 constitutes the title deed of the Davidic dynasty to rule Israel and Judah "from Dan to Beersheba" (2 Sam. 3:10) in perpetuity. This oral document exercised authority over the tribes that became the Northern Kingdom of Israel—as opposed to the Southern Kingdom of Judah—only until 931 BC, when the nation split in two. However, it remained in force for the latter for almost four hundred years, until 586

BC, when the Babylonians removed the last Davidic king, Zedekiah, from the throne. Nevertheless, for prophets, psalmists, and New Testament writers, the covenant itself was never retracted—not even the original vision of all twelve tribes participating in the reign of “David.” In fulfillment of the warning inherent in the oracle, the benefits may have been suspended, but YHWH’s commitment to his eternal and irrevocable word guaranteed its ultimate fulfillment precisely as promised.

I shall base my discussion of Nathan’s oracle and its aftermath primarily on the 2 Samuel 7 version, with occasional references to 1 Chronicles 17, especially where it aids or complicates the interpretation. The chapter consists largely of direct address, but it divides into three parts: (1) the background to the covenant (vv. 1–3), (2) the announcement of the covenant (vv. 4–17), and (3) David’s response to the covenant (vv. 18–29). Each section deserves separate treatment.

The Background to the Covenant (2 Sam. 7:1–3)

The first paragraph introduces us to three vital facts. First, David was comfortably and securely settled in his palace (his “house of cedar,” v. 2). This meant that there were no competitors for the throne, and he had established the old Jebusite fortress (“the stronghold of Zion,” 5:7) as his capital, renaming it “the city of David.” The man whom YHWH had called from tending his father’s sheep to be ruler (*nāgîd*) over “my people Israel” had exchanged the shepherd’s abode (7:8; cf. Jer. 33:12) for the “city of David,” and the shepherd’s staff for the king’s scepter.

Second, YHWH had given David rest from his enemies on all sides (2 Sam. 7:1). Given the summary of David’s victories in chapter 8, this statement seems to be chronologically misplaced. However, the opening temporal marker in 8:1, “After these events,” and the singular

pronoun “him” in 7:1 suggest that the reference was either to his elimination of contenders for the throne (i.e., 2 Sam. 1:1–5:4) or the defeat of Israel’s enemies in the land, the Canaanites represented by the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:6–10) and the Philistines (5:17–25). Deuteronomy 12:10–11 provides vital background for this statement: “When you [pl.] cross the Jordan and you occupy the land that YHWH your God is giving you as your grant [*naḥălâ*], and he gives you rest from all the enemies around you and you live securely, then YHWH your God will choose the place to set his name there.”

Apparently the significance of the events of 2 Samuel 6 had dawned upon David. The ark of the covenant and the chosen king were together for the first time. He was undoubtedly aware of the ancient Near Eastern royal role as patron of the national religion and the customary royal duty of providing the national deity with a temple befitting his glory. The Chronicler notes that after they had successfully transported the ark inside the walls of the “city of David,” David had pitched a tent for the “throne of YHWH” (1 Chron. 15:28–16:1; 29:23).

The texts do not report that, in fulfillment of his promise in Deuteronomy 12:10–11, YHWH had identified this very spot as the place where he would imprint his name; confirmation would come later with the purchase of the Jebusite Araunah’s threshing floor (2 Sam. 24:18–25; 1 Chron. 21:18–22:1). Whether or not the mountain to the north of the “city of David” was the “place YHWH had chosen,” the incongruity of the present situation struck the king. It was not right that he lived in a fine palace of cedar while only a tent and its curtain protected the ark of God from the elements.

David had come to the prophet Nathan for authorization to construct a temple for YHWH in which the ark could be housed. Although the narrator does not record the request, Nathan interpreted David’s comment about the disparity

between his own house and the ark's residence as a virtual request to build YHWH a temple. Without checking with YHWH, the prophet approved (2 Sam. 7:3), perhaps assuming that since the Spirit of YHWH was obviously with David (cf. 1 Sam. 16:13), his impulse was congruent with the mind of YHWH.

The Announcement of the Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4-17)

That night YHWH revealed to the prophet his disposition toward the king and the project on his own (YHWH's) mind. In the address that he commanded Nathan to relay to David, he represented the king's issue with the word *bayit*, "house," which, as the key word of this entire chapter, occurs fifteen times, twice in the introduction (vv. 1-2), six times in YHWH's address (vv. 5-16), and seven times in David's response (vv. 19-29). YHWH's answer to David's intent divides into two very uneven parts (vv. 5-7 and 8-16). The first part summarizes his rejection of David's initiative, while the second offers an incredible divine counterproposal. In both parts we recognize YHWH's high regard for David, whom he identified as "my servant" (*'abdî*, vv. 5, 8). In the First Testament this phrase connotes not menial status but the opposite; David was the vassal of YHWH, and as the king would recognize seven times in his response, YHWH was his Suzerain (*'ădōnāy*, vv. 7:18, 19a, 19b, 20, 22, 28, 29). This reflects his role as the one whom YHWH had promoted from tending his father's sheep to take charge (*nāgîd*, "one promoted for leadership") over YHWH's flock (v. 8). This was indeed a high honor.

YHWH began his speech with a rhetorical question, whose answer depended upon the hearer's point of view: "Would you [really] build me a house to reside in?" (v. 5c). David's answer was obviously yes, so he probably expected YHWH to provide him with instructions on where and how to build it

—as YHWH had instructed Moses for the tabernacle (Exod. 25–31) and would later do in writing by his own finger (1 Chron. 28:11–19). But YHWH’s answer was negative, though this did not mean a repudiation of David or his idea. On the contrary, treating David as his confidant, YHWH explained in considerable detail why he rejected the king’s overture.

First, appealing to precedent, he declared that to this point in Israel’s history he had been satisfied with a portable tent (2 Sam. 7:6). Earlier narratives suggest that although the ark had been moving about (cf. Judg. 20:27), the “house of God” had been stationary at Shiloh for centuries (cf. Josh. 18:1; 1 Sam. 1:3; 14:3), until the Philistines apparently destroyed the site (Jer. 7:12–15). Although Samuel had been called to prophetic ministry at Shiloh (1 Sam. 2–3), YHWH had never declared this to be his permanent home. In any case, after the Philistine capture of the ark and its recovery by the Israelites, for twenty years it was in Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam. 7:2), though 1 Samuel 21–22 suggests that more recently—apparently after the destruction of Shiloh—the sanctuary and its priesthood were based in Nob.

Second, YHWH had never requested that any of his chosen shepherds of Israel build him a permanent house (2 Sam. 7:7). Whereas earlier he had conceded to the people’s premature request for a king, he would not concede to a premature introduction of a vital element in his program for Israel, despite the nobility of David’s motives in contrast to those of the people in 1 Samuel 8.

Although YHWH rejected David’s request, he did not reject his project; he merely delayed it, leaving it for David’s son (2 Sam. 7:13; cf. 2 Chron. 22:8, which links the rejection to David’s military past). YHWH devoted most of the remainder of the speech to an incredible counteroffer, vastly exceeding in significance the construction of a temple. Verses 8–16 divide into two segments, almost equal in length (59 words, 69 words), each introduced with a new announcement of

divine speech (vv. 8a-b, 11c). In the first part (vv. 8c-11b) YHWH recalled the history of his special relationship with David (vv. 8c-9b) and then declared his commitment to support him in the future (vv. 9c-11b). That he began with a historical review accords with the common structure of ancient treaty texts, which often set the stage for the pact by summarizing how the relationship between the suzerain and his vassal had arrived at the present moment. In this case, YHWH cites three specific benefactions that provide background to this conversation.

1. *YHWH's election of David to be the leader (nāgîd) of his people (2 Sam. 7:8c-d).* The metaphor for election derives from David's real experience. As we have seen, at the time of his anointing, he had been tending his father's sheep while the rest of the family was partying, and Jesse had had to call him in from the field for this moment (1 Sam. 16:1-13).
2. *YHWH's personal presence with David (2 Sam. 7:9a).* We had observed this since David's anointing, when the Spirit of YHWH came upon him and remained on him from that day onward (1 Sam. 16:13), and we have heard Nathan recognize this fact (2 Sam. 7:14; cf. 16:18). Both Saul and Jonathan prayed that this would be the case for David (1 Sam. 17:37; 20:13).
3. *YHWH's rescue of David from all his enemies (2 Sam. 7:9a-b).* This probably refers to Saul and later to Ishbosheth, Goliath (1 Sam. 17), the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:6-10), and the Philistines (5:17-20). YHWH had indeed given him rest from all his enemies in the land (7:1).

YHWH's comments shift from past benefits to future benefactions in 7:9c-11b. The recitation of benefactions carries on to the end of this address, but YHWH signals the climactic moment of this segment with a fresh iteration of the divine speech formula in verse 11c. In verses 9c-11b

YHWH promised four benefactions, arranged in an ABBA order, with the outer elements involving personal benefits for David and the inner two naming benefits for the nation of Israel. The personal promises include making David's name great (v. 9c) and giving him rest from his enemies (v. 11b). Most references to a "great name" speak of YHWH's name (cf. 2 Sam. 7:23; 1 Chron. 17:21), but the present comparison, "like all the great ones who are on the earth," involves human models (2 Sam. 7:9c). This benefaction echoes YHWH's promise to Abraham at the time of his call (Gen. 12:2) and sets David on a parallel missional trajectory. As noted earlier, the First Testament testifies to the fulfillment of the promise to David by naming him more often than all the patriarchs combined. The name also survives on a ninth-century Aramaic stela inscription that celebrates the victory of Hazael, king of Damascus, over the ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and "the house of David" (*bytdwd*), a reference to Judah. This second promise (2 Sam. 7:11b) reminds David that his struggles are not over; more opposition will surface, both in his own family (Absalom) and outside Israel (2 Sam. 8).

The location of the two national promises at the center in this chiasm (ABBA) suggests that they represent the center of gravity: the king functions as the divine guarantee of Israel's possession of a homeland, and through the king's reign, the people will be secure in their land. YHWH does not promise material prosperity explicitly, though the use of the verb *nāṭa'*, "to plant" (2 Sam. 7:10), seems to allude to it (cf. Ezek. 34:11–16). Rather, he emphasizes the people's relationship to potential enemies, who could be outsiders, as in the days of the judges (2 Sam. 7:11a–b); the citizens themselves bullying each other (cf. Ezek. 34:17–22); or even their own rulers, including Davidic kings (Ezek. 34:1–10). These promises suggest that YHWH elevates David to kingship not for David's sake but to be a servant of the people—as Adam was to serve the world that he governed

(Gen. 2:15). The image here envisions the tripartite covenant involving YHWH, Israel, and the land fully operative, with the king as its patron, whose function was to keep the covenantal machine well oiled and running smoothly.

The new divine speech formula in 2 Samuel 7:11d signals the high point of Nathan's oracle. The prophet began with a thesis statement: "YHWH will make a house" for David.² While *bayit*, "house," is the same word that David had used in verse 2, now the meaning has obviously changed, for this house consists of people, David's descendants, rather than cedar planks from Lebanon. YHWH hereby guarantees an enduring dynasty that will be known as "the house of David" after its founder, like "the house of Jeroboam"³ or "the house of Ahab,"⁴ or modern counterparts such as "the House of Windsor" (the British monarchy), "the House of Hapsburg" (the Austria-Hungary monarchy), or "the House of Romanov" (the second imperial dynasty of Russia).

Second Samuel 7:12–16 expands on the thesis statement with key details about this benefaction. First, using the same expression we encountered in Genesis 15:4, the house will consist of David's physical progeny (*yēṣē' mimmē'êkā*, "who come from your own loins"). Second, YHWH will establish his royal throne (*kissē' mamlaktô*, lit., "the throne of his kingdom") forever (*'ad 'ôlām*, vv. 12b–13). The tight linkage of the throne of David to the construction of YHWH's temple is significant (v. 13). Although the sanctuary would function primarily as a permanent earthly residence for YHWH, it would also symbolize YHWH's commitment to the dynasty.

Third, YHWH will adopt David's heir(s) as his son(s), which means that he will be their father. The statement "I will become a father to him, and he will become a son to me" (v. 14) adapts an ancient adoption formula, just as "I will be their God, and they will be my people" had adapted the marriage formula. This is suzerain-vassal relationship language, used elsewhere of the relationship between an

imperial overlord and a vassal king, as exemplified by Ahaz' declaration to Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria in 2 Kings 16:7: "I am your vassal [*'ebed*] and your son [*bēn*]. Come up and rescue me." This resembles Shattiwaza of Mittanni's description of his relationship with his overlord, Suppiluliuma I of Hatti: "[The Great King] took me by the hand and rejoiced over me. . . . The Great King and Hero spoke as follows: 'If I conquer Shuttarna and [the troops of] the land of Mittanni, I will not reject you but will adopt you as my son. I will stand by you and place you on the throne of your father'" (Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, #6B §3).

That the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel never refer to David as "the son of YHWH" or "the son of God" or "my son" does not mean the title did not apply to him. On the contrary, when Samuel anointed him, the Spirit (of sonship) of YHWH came upon him in a particular sense and remained on him permanently (1 Sam. 16:13). In Psalm 89, which represents a meditation on the Davidic covenant, the psalmist speaks poetically with YHWH's voice in verses 26-27 [27-28]:

He will cry to me, "You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation."
And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.

The same notion appears in Psalm 2:7, which apparently was written for some king's enthronement ritual:

He said to me, "You are my son [*bēnî 'attâ*];
I today have become your father [*'ănî hayyôm yēlîdîkā*].

But the notion of a king being divinely chosen and adopted as the son of the deity appears in other ancient Near Eastern writings. Especially striking is the resemblance of Psalm 89:26-27 [27-28] to the words of a hymn addressed by a king to Re, the sun god, which was composed for the conclusion of a ritual for the defeat of the dragon Apophis, his cosmic adversary:

O my Father, Lord of the gods,
Great One (most ancient) of the great nineness!
First primeval god of gods, who created humankind,
Everything that came to be became after he came to be.
I am your son, your truly beloved,
The one with a divine heart,
who went forth from your secret [place]. (my trans. of J. Assmann,
Ägyptische Hymnen, 118)

The last clause of 2 Samuel 7:14 identifies an important entailment of divine sonship; it means that the vassal accepts the divine Suzerain's correction when he goes off course. Once more this raises the question of the relationship between the eternality of the title to kingship and the contingency of the flourishing of that status (fig. 0.1). As was the case with the Israelite covenant and all 'ad 'ôlām covenants, the Davidic covenant was eternal and irrevocable; YHWH never reneges on or withdraws his commitments. These commitments continue objectively irrespective of the responses of the vassal. However, for vassals, access to the benefactions of the covenant was always dependent upon the vassal's fidelity to YHWH. Just as the nation of Israel would experience the curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 should they persist in rebellion against YHWH, so the benefits of this covenant would be withheld from kings who went off course ('āwâ, 2 Sam. 7:14) ethically and spiritually.⁵ YHWH did not clarify for David what he meant by 'āwâ, but here Moses' instructions on royal conduct in Deuteronomy 17:18-20 become critical. The primary role of the king in Israel was to embody the covenant righteousness demanded of all Israelites. YHWH gave the king unique access to the Torah precisely to promote this sort of exemplary righteousness.

This link between proper royal conduct and the Torah accounts for the nature of David's charge to his successor, Solomon, at the time of his death (1 Kings 2:1-4). Here (in 2 Sam. 7:14) YHWH warned David that should his heirs deviate from their divinely assigned role or disregard the

covenantal expectation of “righteousness,” YHWH would discipline them as humans ordinarily do with children in need of correction—with the rod (*šēbet*) and with flogging (*nega*). Presumably this could include the ultimate punishment authorized by Moses in Deuteronomy 21:18–21.

In 2 Samuel 7:15, however, YHWH raised the specter of Saul, whom he had obviously chosen to be king. However, in the face of persistent rebellion, YHWH tore the kingdom away from him and transferred it to his worthier neighbor.⁶ Here YHWH declared that this would never happen to the Davidic line; he would never retract his commitment to this dynasty and transfer the office of king to another line.

I noted earlier that the word *bērît*, “covenant,” does not occur in this chapter. Despite its absence, the concept is obviously present, represented by the word *hesed* in verse 15. As I have frequently observed, this expression exhibits a broad range of meanings, wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty. Here the word functions as shorthand for YHWH’s covenant commitment to David, promising David and his sons that they need not worry that YHWH would ever remove this line’s title to the throne of Israel. This did not mean that individual heirs’ occupancy of the throne would be guaranteed or unconditional; YHWH could remove any heir at any time as punishment for treachery or malfeasance. In those cases, he would transfer the kingship to another member of the Davidic household.

Nathan closed his dynastic oracle (in 7:16) with a final emphatic statement: “Your dynasty [*bayit*] and your kingship [*mamlākâ*] are guaranteed [*ne’man*] before me forever [*‘ad ‘ôlām*]; your throne will be established [*nākôn*] forever [*‘ad ‘ôlām*]!” Having received this “dynastic” oracle from YHWH, Nathan dutifully relayed these words and this “vision” (*hizzāyôn*) to the king (v. 17). The use of this rare word for “vision,” which appears only here in the

historiographic narratives, reinforces the significance of this moment in the mind of the author.

David's Response to the Covenant (2 Sam. 7:18-29)

DAVID'S POSTURE (2 SAM. 7:18A)

Remarkably, the narrator devotes as much space to David's reaction to Nathan's oracle as he had to the oracle itself. He begins with an extraordinary note of the king's gestural reaction: he entered the tent in which the ark rested (2 Sam. 6:17) and sat before YHWH. Apart from this text (and its parallel in 1 Chron. 17:16), references to people sitting before YHWH occur only twice elsewhere, (1) as a gesture of intense grief over defeat in battle (Judg. 20:26) and (2) of the "prince" (*hannāśî*) in Ezekiel's vision of Israel's restoration and renewal (44:3), a royal Davidic figure (cf. 34:24; 37:24) whom YHWH authorized to sit in the gateway to eat before YHWH after his glory had entered the temple. The present image recalls the figures of pious Gudea, a third-millennium-BC king of Lagash, that were placed before deities in the temples that he built (fig. 10.2). Worshipers normally prostrated themselves before YHWH in submission and homage and waited for his invitation to rise (cf. Pss. 24:3; 95:6-7; Ezek. 1:28); from David's verbal response (2 Sam. 7:18-29), here his posture was obviously neither casual nor presumptuous. Rather, it communicated piety and confidence in keeping with the status that YHWH had just awarded him. David would express his disposition verbally with his sevenfold address of YHWH as "Sovereign YHWH" (*'ādōnāy YHWH*; vv. 18, 19a, 19b, 20, 22, 28, 29), and eightfold reference to himself as "your servant/vassal" (*'abdēkā*; 2 Sam. 7:19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29; cf. 7:5, 8).

Figure 10.2

**Gudea, Temple Builder of Lagash, Seated in the Temple
before His God**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund,
1959.



DAVID'S AMAZEMENT AT THE REVELATION (2 SAM. 7:18B-21)

David's speech in response to Nathan's oracle (vv. 18b-29) takes up the remainder of this chapter. The address consists of three parts that increase progressively in length: (1) David's amazement at the revelation (vv. 18d-21, in forty-eight words), (2) his reflection on the significance of revelation (vv. 22-24, in fifty-six words), and (3) his prayer in response to the revelation (vv. 25-29, in eighty-eight words). I shall deal with each separately.

David began his response to Nathan's prophecy with two rhetorical questions expressing amazement that YHWH had chosen him for the privilege announced in the oracle, "Who am I, and who is my household that you have brought me to this point?" In the first part, David seemed to recall the context of his anointing. Although his father, Jesse, had considered seven of his brothers as eligible for kingship over Israel, he had excluded David from the festivities and sent him out to tend the sheep (1 Sam. 16:6-11). The second part of the question may refer to his family's residence in modest Bethlehem (cf. Mic. 5:2 [1]).

If a man with lesser integrity achieved in the name of YHWH what David had, he would probably have wondered when YHWH would reward him for his labors. However, far from a sense of entitlement and with poignant irony, David acknowledged that his personal insignificance was insignificant to YHWH his Suzerain (2 Sam. 7:18-19a). David's interpretation of what Nathan had just reported to him expressed astonishment so intense that his words seem to have baffled the Chronicler, and it certainly has baffled critical scholars, many of whom rewrite the last sentence of verse 19 to make it more reasonable and realistic. But as it stands, the Hebrew syntax and meaning are clear:

You have spoken of your servant's house concerning the distant future [*lēmērāḥôq*]; and this is the *tôrâ* of humanity [*wězō't tôrat hā'ādām*], O Adonay YHWH!

In the first clause David acknowledged the long-range temporal significance of the dynastic oracle: it concerned the distant future. In the second he recognized its universal scope. This significance is clear whether one prefers this version of the statement or that found in 1 Chronicles 17:17: "And you have revealed to me concerning the future course of humankind" (*ûrě'îtanî kětôr hā'ādām hamma'ălâ*).

David's recognition of the universal significance of his kingship invites us to consider the geographical range of David's kingdom. When David was recognized as the king of all Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-5), theoretically the boundaries of the "kingdom of David" were coterminous with territory that the Israelites occupied or the boundaries specified by Joshua in the allotment of the territorial tribes (Josh. 13-19). However, by the time the kingdom was transferred to Solomon, the boundaries of his kingdom extended from the river of Egypt (Wadi el-Arish) to the Euphrates River, incorporating Edomite, Moabite, Ammonite, and Aramaean territories. Because David did not try to annex them to "the country of Israel" but accepted their status as tribute states, we must distinguish between the kingdom/kingship of David and the kingdom of / kingship over Israel. David's reflections in 2 Samuel 7:22-24 involve the former, but in verse 19 David's eyes were opened to the broader significance of his kingship. These two expressions, "the kingdom/kingship of David" (cf. 1 Kings 2:12, "his [David's] kingship") and "the kingdom of / kingship over Israel" (1 Sam. 15:28; 24:20), correspond to the maximalist definitions of the land promised to Abraham in Genesis 15:18⁷ and the minimalist definition ("land of Canaan") in Genesis 15:19-21,⁸ plus the Transjordanian supplement of the two and a half tribes,⁹ respectively. Therefore, although David was "king of Israel,"

he would become king of a lot of non-Israelite territory, which David extrapolated to humanity (*hā'ādām*) in 2 Samuel 7:19.

Although YHWH had promised David eternal title to the throne through Nathan (2 Sam. 7:13, 16), the narrator does not explain how David discovered the universal significance of the dynastic promise. However, commenting on this revelatory event in 2 Samuel 23:2–5, David acknowledged his inspiration: “The Spirit of YHWH spoke through me, his word was on my tongue. . . . For he has made with me an everlasting covenant [*bērît 'ôlām*]; he has ordered and secured all things.” Inspired by God in 2 Samuel 7:19, David hereby laid the foundation for the universalizing of Israel’s messianic hope that we find in the Psalms and Prophets.

The rhetorical question in 2 Samuel 7:20a–b expressed the king’s openness before his divine Suzerain: “What more can David say to you?” Indeed, he acknowledged that there is no need to speak, for the Lord YHWH knows him inside out. But this did not prevent him from baring his heart through words. Verses 22–29 reflect David’s inner disposition toward YHWH’s actions and express his profound understanding of the significance of Nathan’s oracle. However, before he addressed the heart of the oracle, he declared his amazement at YHWH’s irrevocable election of his house for kingship in Israel, as well as the fact that YHWH had revealed to him his agenda. In verse 21, “your word” (*děbārěkā*) means much more than a spoken utterance. Here *dābār* signifies YHWH’s agenda and the role of the chosen one in the execution of that agenda. David reinforced his expression of amazement at YHWH’s transparency by adding “and according to your heart”—that is, YHWH’s inner passion and plan. This expression links David’s response conceptually to Moses’ anticipation in Deuteronomy 17:15 and lexically to Samuel’s statement in 1 Samuel 13:14 that YHWH had identified the man “according to his own heart” (*kilěbābô*). The man YHWH had

in mind from the beginning was David. In 2 Samuel 7:18–19 David expressed amazement that YHWH had chosen him and his house as agents of his universal mission, and in verse 21 he expressed amazement that YHWH had revealed his plan to David. Indeed, David characterized the revelation itself as “this whole grand [plan]” (*kol haggědûlâ hazzō’t*).

DAVID’S DECLARATION OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REVELATION (2 SAM. 7:22–24)

David’s comments that followed are remarkable on several counts. First, he broke into a doxology of praise to YHWH and to his people that echoed Moses’ coda at the end of the blessing of the tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33:26–29. But we also hear clear echoes of Deuteronomy 4:32–39. Apparently with Moses’ paeans of praise ringing in his ears, David placed the revelatory significance of this dynastic event alongside YHWH’s rescue of Israel from Egypt and his delivery of the land of Canaan into their hands. This doxology divides into three parts.

1. *The incomparability of YHWH (v. 22)*. David expressed YHWH’s incomparability in climactic triplicate: “You are great!” “There is no one like you!” “There is no God besides you!” Earlier what the Israelites had heard set YHWH apart from all other gods. Although David was a singular audience in this dynastic revelation, his use of the plural in “all that we have heard with our ears” distributes its significance to all Israel. In fact, in these three verses he never mentioned the special relationship that YHWH had established with him personally.

2. *The incomparability of Israel (v. 23)*. Remarkably, in verse 23 David imagined himself talking to his people rather than to YHWH: “Who is a people like you?” But then he caught himself (“like Israel?”) and added a series of details of the nation’s experiences that render it “a distinctive nation on the earth” (*gôy ’eḥād bā’āreṣ*). The awkwardness

of the Hebrew reflects his excitement: he spoke of YHWH in the third person (God) and of the Israelites in the second person as if they were his addressees (v. 23b-e), and then cast the verb as a plural when it should be singular: “whom God have gone [’ăšer hālěkû] to redeem for himself.”

YHWH’s actions on Israel’s behalf had achieved three effects, the first two for his own advantage, and the last for Israel’s benefit. First, recalling Deuteronomy 4:34, YHWH had “redeemed a people for himself” (*lipdôt lô lě’am*). Second, YHWH had thereby “established a name for himself” (*lāšûm lô šēm*). This could mean that he had gained the reputation within Israel and among the surrounding peoples that he sought,¹⁰ but it could also signify that through his acts of redemption, YHWH had answered the question of the meaning of his name, YHWH, which until that moment had been a riddle. Through the exodus and his forgiveness of the Israelites after the golden-calf fiasco (Exod. 34:6-7), YHWH had demonstrated that while these events may not have provided a dictionary *meaning* of the name YHWH, they had demonstrated what the name *signified*: YHWH is by definition the omnipotent Savior of his people, but he is also the graciously forgiving God (Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name*).

Third, for Israel’s benefit YHWH had performed great and awesome deeds (*haggědûllâ wěnrā’ôt*). But David’s emotional state again interfered with his grammar. The rest of verse 23 is quite confused: *lě’aršekā mippěnê ‘amměkā*, translated literally as “for your land before your people.” The first word, “for your land,” inserts a territorial dimension to David’s reaction, but the syntax is strange. NJPS offers the most likely solution, borrowing “by driving out” (*lěgārěš*) from 1 Chronicles 17:21 and inserting as the objects “nations and their gods” (*gôyim wě’lōhāyw*, lit., “nations and its gods”), which the Masoretic text strangely locates at the end of 2 Samuel 7:23. This sort of comment is anticipated in Exodus 23:29-33 and Deuteronomy 33:27, which apply the

verb *garaš* to the dispossession of the Canaanites and the transfer of their territory into the Israelites' hands. The former also highlights the problem of the Canaanite nations' gods, with whom the Israelites were to make no covenants. Delivering the land into the Israelites' hands had been YHWH's goal when he redeemed Israel from Egypt.^{[11](#)}

3. The incomparability of YHWH's covenant with Israel (v. 24). The last interpretive comment may be the most remarkable of all. Here David took YHWH's election of him as Israel's king and the revelation of his eternal title to the throne of this nation and placed them within the context of his larger agenda: YHWH's covenant relationship with his people. Echoing the ancient covenant formula, David recognized the primary goal of YHWH's rescue of his people from Egypt: that he might fulfill his promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:7-8—that is, establish his covenant (*hēqîm bēřîô*) with Abraham's descendants and deliver the land of Canaan into their hands (which happened under Joshua). David had obviously grasped that the primary concern of the dynastic oracle was not the king himself. In verse 19 he had recognized its universal significance; now he recognized his place within the nation's covenant relationship with YHWH and the land that YHWH had granted them. Unlike the kings of the nations, from the outset Israel's king was subservient to the broader agenda of YHWH's mission to the world through his people. The conquest of the land and David's achievement of rest from war for the nation had set the stage for the dynastic oracle.^{[12](#)}

DAVID'S PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO THE REVELATION (2 SAM. 7:25-29)

In verse 25a the particle *wě'attâ*, "So now," followed by the vocative, "O YHWH God," signals a new phase in David's response to the present revelation. After recognizing the significance of the dynastic oracle for his own people and for

all humanity, David moved to an impassioned plea for YHWH to fulfill his promise to him. The prayer divides into two parts, the first involving a request that YHWH fulfill his dynastic promise (vv. 25–28), and the second that he bless his servant (David) forever.

The opening petition functions as the thesis statement, pleading for YHWH to fulfill (*hēqîm*) his word/promise/agenda (*haddābār*) announced to David, his vassal (v. 25a–b). However, in verse 26 he immediately explained his motivation: this was not a self-interested plea, but an urgent request that YHWH fulfill his word that his [YHWH's] name might be magnified eternally and irrevocably (*‘ad ‘ôlām*). Then the world would recognize that YHWH *Ṣēbā’ôt* is God over Israel—there is no other.

Thus David declared his larger concern in 7:26a; then in 26b he specified his request that YHWH would establish (*nākôn*) the house/dynasty of his vassal David before himself. To concretize his request, he cited the promise that YHWH had earlier revealed to him: “You have opened the ears of your servant,” that is, “caused him to hear ‘A house I will build for you’” (v. 27a). The word order follows Nathan's citation in verse 11, but the replacement of *‘āśâ*, “to make,” with *bānâ*, “to build,” along with “house” as the object concretizes the promise. Hearing with his own ears YHWH's commitment to establishing his dynasty emboldened David to implore him to keep his promise. Without that revelation this prayer would have been presumptuous.

As had been the case in verse 25, “And now, O Adonay YHWH” in verse 28 signals a transition to a new thought, in this instance declaring his confidence in God's integrity. First, David confessed, “You are the God.” This sounds like a summary of verse 22, except that by adding the article to *‘ēlōhîm*, he declared that YHWH is sui generis and the only One worthy of the epithet “God.” Second, he declared, “Your promises will certainly prove true” (*dēbārêkâ yihyû ‘ēmet*). This collocation occurs nowhere else in the First Testament,

though the equivalent sense is expressed in legal contexts with “the case is established” (*’ēmet nākôn haddābār*, Deut. 13:14 [15]; 17:4).

Third, with “You have promised to your servant this benefaction [*haṭṭôbâ hazzō’t*],” David recognized the covenantal significance of the dynastic oracle. We have noted before that although the word *bērît* is missing in this chapter, the notion is still present. In verse 15 “my faithful love” (*ḥesed*) had functioned euphemistically for “my covenant commitment” (v. 15). Here “the good” (*haṭṭôbâ*) refers to the benefactions a suzerain promised a vassal in the context of a covenant. Deuteronomy 28:1–14 lists a series of “good things” identified as “the blessings” (*habbērākôt*) that YHWH promised Israel if, as his vassals, they would faithfully serve him, their Suzerain. Elsewhere Moses spoke of the enjoyment of these blessings as “to experience good” (*hēṭîb*) in the land (e.g., Deut. 1:23; 4:40; etc.).

This lexical link between *haṭṭôb*, “the good,” and *hēṭîb*, “to enjoy [the] good,” and the conceptual link between “the good” and “the blessings” explains why David moved so easily from YHWH’s promise of “good” in verse 27 to “the blessing” in verse 28. Indeed, a third occurrence of “And now” (*wē’attâ*) and the threefold use of the root *brk*, “to bless,” in verse 29 signal a brilliant climax to this chapter. First, David appealed to YHWH’s disposition: “Be pleased [*hō’ēl*] to bless the house of your servant that it may exist forever.” Second, he appealed to YHWH’s promise: “Because you, O Adonay YHWH, have promised, from your [storehouse of] blessing may the house of your servant be blessed forever before you.” In requesting divine blessing for the dynasty, David recognized that he and his sons may not automatically bank on the promise of God. Their tenure on the throne would be conditioned on YHWH’s favor, which would be conditioned by the performance and covenantal integrity of the persons who occupied the throne (cf. v. 14;

also Deut. 17:19–20). Like all relationships, the status of David and his sons before YHWH and before their people would depend on their own fidelity to the principles established within the Israelite covenant. To be sure, YHWH would not cancel or retract this covenant any more than he would retract the covenant from his people Israel. In requesting that it continue forever “before you,” David expressed verbally his present physical act of “sitting before YHWH” (v. 18) and reinforced his sense of vassal status. He served as the vice-regent of YHWH and at his pleasure, which explains why the Chronicler could speak of the Davidic throne as “the throne of YHWH” (1 Chron. 29:23). Like any other relationship, the health of the association between YHWH and his appointed vice-regent would depend upon the regents’ disposition and loyalty to him.

The Afterlife of the Davidic Covenant in Israelite Historiography

The reference to “the throne of YHWH” in 1 Chronicles 29:23 raises the question of the role of the Davidic covenant in the historiographic narratives that follow. As intimated earlier in this chapter, given the significance of 2 Samuel 7 within 1–2 Samuel and more broadly in Israel’s history, the paucity of explicit references to this covenant in the subsequent historiographic books (1 Kings–Ezra–Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther) is surprising. However, absence of the lexical terms is not evidence of absence of the concept. YHWH’s covenant with David lurks behind many episodes recorded in these narratives. Here are a few select illustrations.

The Succession Narrative of Solomon (1 Kings 1:1–2:46)

In keeping with Deuteronomy 17:19–20, David charged Solomon to keep YHWH’s covenant stipulations as they are

written in the Torah so that he might prosper in his administration and that “YHWH would fulfill his promise” to David: “If your sons guard their way by walking before me with fidelity [*’ēmet*] with their whole inner being [*/ēb*] and person [*nepeš*], your successors will never be cut off from the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:3–4). Although cast as a quotation, this statement paraphrases 2 Samuel 7:12b–13. References to “the throne of [king] David” (1 Kings 1:27; 2:12, 24, 45), “my throne” (1:13, 17, 24, 30, 35, 48), your throne (1:47), and “his throne” (2:33) reinforce this conclusion. David had expressed the same notion in his blessing in 1 Kings 1:48, “Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel, who has granted one to sit on my throne today while I can see it with my own eyes.”

Like David, Solomon recognized the role that God’s covenant with his father had in his own rule. For example, when Solomon responded to Adonijah’s attempted coup in 1 Kings 2:28, he echoed 2 Samuel 7, declaring that as surely as YHWH had placed him “on the throne of David,” Adonijah would “be put to death.” Similarly, in 1 Kings 2:45, in his response to treacherous Shimei, he based his blessing on YHWH’s promise to establish David’s throne forever. Later, in the context of his inaugural sacrifices at Gibeon, Solomon expressed keen consciousness of his privilege as heir of David’s throne and the significance of this office for Israel’s sake (3:6–8; cf. YHWH’s response in vv. 13–14).

The Pinnacle in the History of the Davidic Covenant (1 Kings 5:1–10:13)

Under Solomon’s rule the reputation of David and the covenant YHWH had made with him spread far beyond the boundaries of his empire. The account of Solomon’s construction of the temple provides additional examples of him acknowledging his connection to his father’s throne. First, when he negotiated assistance for constructing the

temple with Hiram of Tyre, he grounded his overture deeply in the dynastic oracle: "I intend to build a house for the name of YHWH my God, as YHWH said to David my father, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name'" (1 Kings 5:5). Second, when the time came for the dedication of the sanctuary, Solomon recognized the link between the construction of this building and YHWH's selection of "the city of David, which is Zion" (8:1), as his eternal dwelling place: "I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to reside forever" (8:13). Then the king turned to the whole assembly of Israel standing before him and blessed YHWH with a lengthy soliloquy on the relationship between this moment and Nathan's oracle to David, and in the end he recognized its significance for the covenant that YHWH had established with Israel. He announced to the people, "YHWH has fulfilled the promise he made. I have risen in the place of my father David, and I sit on the throne of Israel, as YHWH promised. I have built the temple for the name of YHWH, the God of Israel. There I have provided a place for the ark, which contains YHWH's covenant that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 8:20-21).

Adding to the words of David and Solomon, the words of YHWH in 1 Kings 9:1-9 confirm that the covenant of David lurks behind the succession of Solomon to David's throne. In a second encounter at Gibeon, YHWH declared his acceptance of Solomon's blessing and prayer of dedication for the sanctuary, affirming that he had indeed consecrated the building and put his name there forever (v. 3) and that he would establish his kingship over Israel forever, just as he had promised to David. However, the promise came with a stern warning that if Solomon or his heirs to the throne would fail in their primary function of embodying loyalty to YHWH and demonstrating covenant righteousness, he would

dissolve the covenant triangle, expel Israel from the land, and turn his back on his own house.

As with all YHWH's covenants, his commitments were irrevocable ('*ad 'ôlām*), but access to the benefits of the covenant would be contingent on fidelity to the Suzerain. However, with reference to the Davidic covenant, YHWH reiterated that this covenant was not primarily about the well-being of the king. Rather, the king was to be the agent through whom Israel would stay on course with YHWH; he was a servant of the people, rather than vice versa, the paradigm that prevailed in the ancient world.

The queen of Sheba expressed this notion brilliantly in her blessing of Solomon: "Because of YHWH's eternal covenant commitment [love] to Israel, he has made you king, that you may demonstrate justice and righteousness" (1 Kings 10:9). Just as the head of the family is responsible for the well-being of the household, so YHWH placed the mantle of responsibility for the citizenry of Israel on the shoulders of the king. We may adapt Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 4:1 to this situation: "We think of the king this way: as servants of YHWH and stewards of the mysteries of God." This meant that if the king would fail in his leadership, the nation would suffer the consequences.

The Demise of the Davidic Monarchy (1 Kings 10:14-2 Kings 25:30)

Sadly, Solomon quickly compromised his divine calling and the throne of David that he occupied. Within the narrative time of 1 Kings, he had scarcely finished the temple and caused the name of YHWH to be known to the far ends of the Arabian peninsula when the spiritual rot set in: Solomon did "the evil in the sight of YHWH" (*hāra' bē'ênē yhwh*), satisfying his foreign wives by sponsoring all sorts of pagan worship around Jerusalem (11:6-8) and thereby provoking YHWH's ire (vv. 9-10). YHWH's verbal response in

11:11–13 echoes with dynastic-oracle vocabulary and allusions as he promised Solomon that on account of David, his father, he would wait until after Solomon’s death to “tear the kingdom away” and that he would preserve one tribe for Solomon’s son (cf. vv. 30–31, 34–37).

Remarkably, although Jeroboam was an Ephraimite (11:26) and not a descendant of David, YHWH promised to do for him in relation to the northern ten tribes what he had previously promised David in relation to all Israel—namely, to be with him and build for him a “secure house” (*bayit ne’ēmān*) as he had built for David (v. 38; cf. 1 Sam. 25:28). Furthermore, he would use the house of Jeroboam as agents of punishment for the descendants of David (1 Kings 11:39). However, YHWH limited this promise with a significant caveat. He declared it contingent on Jeroboam and his successors proving themselves spiritual (if not physical) heirs of David, YHWH’s servant, by listening to all of YHWH’s commands, walking in his ways, doing “the right in the eyes of YHWH,” and observing his ordinances and commands (v. 38). Jeroboam quickly confirmed that YHWH’s promise to him would compromise his relationship with the Davidic house, but this first king of northern Israel immediately established a paradigm of syncretism and apostasy that every king after him, and the Northern Kingdom as a whole, would follow.¹³ In the end, the houses of Jeroboam and every successor house were destroyed, and the nation experienced the full horror that the covenant curses had predicted (Lev. 26:24–39; Deut. 28:15–68). As the kings went, so went the kingdom.

After Solomon, the Davidic dynasty would survive until 586 BC, with no one from outside the Davidic house ever sitting on the “throne of YHWH” in Jerusalem, though the boundaries of the kingdom were drastically diminished when ten tribes repudiated the Davidic house (1 Kings 12:16–20). The narratives that follow rarely refer to Nathan’s oracle, though the ethical and spiritual

assessments of the successor kings against the Davidic model hint at the person whom YHWH chose to be Israel's king.¹⁴ The clearest allusion occurs in 2 Kings 8:19, where we learn that despite Jehoram's adopting the moral standards of the Northern kings, "For the sake of David his servant, YHWH was unwilling to destroy Judah, because he had promised to give him and his sons a lamp forever." Later YHWH's covenant with David obviously undergirded his declaration to Hezekiah that he would rescue Jerusalem from the Assyrians "for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (2 Kings 19:34).

The narrator's summary assessment of Hezekiah's reign in 2 Kings 18:3-8 is laudatory, suggesting that he cast his kingship in the Davidic mold. However, with the accession of his son Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1-18), spiritually the nation spiraled downward. Indeed, by the end of the seventh century BC, YHWH had sealed Judah's doom (22:16-17; 23:26-27). Under Josiah, a young ruler of extraordinary virtue, it appeared for a moment that he might stave off the judgment day. However, in the context of an ill-advised effort to control the nation's destiny, an Egyptian arrow struck him, and like he had done for Enoch prior to the great deluge (Gen. 5:21-24), YHWH "took him" and spared him the horrors of divine judgment that would shortly engulf Judah (23:28-30; 2 Chron. 35:20-27).

The opening summary of Josiah's reign observes that Josiah "did the right [*hayyāšār*] in the eyes of YHWH and walked in the whole way of David his father; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left" (2 Kings 22:2). Later through Huldah we hear YHWH's commendation: "Your heart was tender [*rak*], and you humbled yourself before YHWH" (22:19). And the narrator offers a fuller assessment of Josiah's piety: "Before Josiah there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his being, and with all his resources, according to the whole Torah of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him" (23:25).

Although the historian substituted *šûb*, “to turn,” in place of the verb *’āhab*, “to demonstrate love, covenant commitment to,” it is striking that Josiah is the only biblical character whom the inspired authors recognized to have embodied the Shema (Deut. 6:4–5). However, by noting that he kept the Shema “according to the whole Torah of Moses,” he also recognized Josiah as the embodiment of the royal mandate in Deuteronomy 17:18–20. The narrator seems to have linked this king’s response to the newly discovered Torah scroll (i.e., Deuteronomy; cf. 2 Kings 22:8–20) with Moses’ original charge that the king’s primary duty was to embody covenant righteousness as described in the Torah of Moses.

Given Josiah’s extraordinary godliness, it is striking that apart from the opening reference to David, the Deuteronomistic Historian never mentions David or alludes to the dynastic oracle delivered to David again. The Chronicler names David several times in his account of Josiah’s reign, but only with reference to his celebration of the Passover “as prescribed in the written instructions [*kětāb*] of David king of Israel and the written instructions [*miktab*] of Solomon his son” (2 Chron. 35:4; cf. also v. 15).

The closing chapters of both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles speak often of the implications of Judah’s apostasy for the fate of the temple.¹⁵ The narrator of Kings in particular held David’s heirs responsible for the fate of the nation, but remarkably, neither historian offers any serious reflection on the implications of the demise of the royal house for the Davidic covenant. It seems that the death of Zedekiah meant extinction of the last ray of hope for the dynasty.

But wait! There may yet be hope. The narrator concludes 2 Kings on an enigmatic note: “Evil-merodach, king of Babylon, took note of [*nāśā’ rō’š*, lit., “raised the head of”] Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and released him from prison” and then allowed him to dine “regularly at the king’s table for the rest of his life” (2 Kings 25:27–30). Far away in Babylon,

the royal Davidic flame still flickered. As we shall see from the Prophets, within the broader scheme Nebuchadnezzar's deportation of Jehoiachin from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 BC (24:12–16) turned out to be a magnificent divine providential move. If YHWH had wiped out the nation of Judah,¹⁶ he would have jeopardized both his irrevocable covenant with Israel and his covenant with David. For this reason, the exile of ten thousand Judeans to Babylon (24:12–16) and their settlement in favorable circumstances proved to be an incredible grace. While Judah and Jerusalem burned, far away a remnant, which one day would be able to return, was preserved. Concomitantly, in YHWH's kind providence, Nebuchadnezzar had not executed treacherous Jehoiachin but had deported him alive. Initially Jehoiachin's experience was extremely humiliating, but Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Evil-merodach, exhibited a sympathetic disposition toward the captive Judean monarch. He released him from prison and offered him most favored status among the royal captives in the Babylonian court.

To complete the discussion of the significance of the Davidic covenant in the biblical historiographic records, we glance quickly at Ezra-Nehemiah, which recounts the rebuilding of the commonwealth of Israel in Jerusalem in the Persian era. The book of Ezra opens with a report of the return of more than forty thousand Jewish exiles in response to Cyrus' decree (Ezra 1–2). David's name appears eleven times in the narratives that follow, but his significance is derived from his role in establishing the forms and nature of temple worship. Allusions to the Davidic covenant or to David's rule are absent.

To be sure, the narrator(s) mention(s) Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, eleven times by his name, but he further identifies him only by the patronymic tag "the son of Shealtiel."¹⁷ Along with Jeshua, son of Jozadak, a priest, this Zerubbabel was instrumental in the initial return of the exiles from Babylon. However, opposition to the rebuilding

of the temple ground construction to a halt until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah arose to revitalize the enterprise (Ezra 5:1–2). Although it would have been appropriate for Zerubbabel as a Davidide to lead in this project—kings build temples—the narratives never identify his official status in Jerusalem, nor do they link him to David. For the answer to the first issue, we must consult the prophet Haggai, who identified him as “governor of Judah” (*paḥat yěhûdâ*).¹⁸ For the answer to the second issue, we leap forward five centuries to Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:12), and the genealogy of Luke (Luke 3:27, 31). Serving at the good pleasure of the king of Persia, Zerubbabel did not function as a king in the model of the dynastic prophecy. However, his presence among the returnees added one more dimension to the “minuscule” (*mě‘aṭ*, Ezra 9:8; Neh. 7:4) nature of the return and reconstruction of the nation in the sixth century: the “horn” could yet “sprout” for the house of Israel (Ezek. 29:21).

- ¹. Cf. Deut. 17:14–15; 1 Sam. 8; Ezek. 37:21–24.
- ². 1 Chron. 17:10d replaces the verb *‘āśâ*, “to make,” with *bānâ*, “to build,” which is more natural in conversation about constructing houses.
- ³. 1 Kings 13:34; 2 Kings 9:9; 13:6; Amos 7:9.
- ⁴. 2 Kings 8:18, 27; Mic. 6:16; etc.
- ⁵. Cf. 2 Sam. 19:20; 24:17; 1 Kings 8:47; 2 Chron. 6:37; Ps. 106:6.
- ⁶. 1 Sam. 15:28; 28:17; cf. 2 Sam. 3:10.
- ⁷. Cf. Exod. 23:31; Deut. 1:7; 11:24; Josh. 1:4.
- ⁸. Cf. Gen. 17:8; Exod. 6:4; Num. 34:1–15.
- ⁹. Num. 32; Deut. 3:12–20; Josh. 14:1–5.
- ¹⁰. Cf. Deut. 4:35, 39; but also Exod. 6:7; 7:5; 14:4, 18.
- ¹¹. Cf. Gen. 50:24; Exod. 3:8, 17; 6:4–8; 33:1; Lev. 25:38.
- ¹². 2 Sam. 7:1; cf. Deut. 12:10; 17:14–15.
- ¹³. 1 Kings 12:25–33; cf. 15:34; 16:19, 25, 31; 22:52; 2 Kings 3:3; 9:9; 10:29; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 23–24, 27–28; 17:7–23.
- ¹⁴. 1 Kings 15:5; cf. vv. 3, 8, 11; 2 Kings 14:3; 16:2; 18:3; 22:2.
- ¹⁵. 2 Kings 21:2–9; 23:27; 24:13; 25:9–17; 2 Chron. 33:2–9; 36:7, 10, 17–19.
- ¹⁶. 2 Kings 21:13–15; 22:16–17; 23:26–27.
- ¹⁷. Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Neh. 12:1.
- ¹⁸. Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21.

CHAPTER 11

The Afterlife of the Davidic Covenant in Israelite Prophecy

Introduction

We find prophetic utterances alluding to the Davidic covenant in at least half of the prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible. Many of these are commonly identified as messianic texts, but the notion of a single eschatological anointed Davidide is not evident in all of them. Rather than following the canonical order, I shall review the perspectives of these books in the most likely order of their composition.

Amos

Amos was a Judean prophet called away from herding his sheep (1:1) and tending his sycamore-fig orchard (7:14–15) to be a mouthpiece of YHWH to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (ca. 786–746 BC). Only a few decades before that nation's demise, YHWH graciously sent Amos to prophesy, warning the people to repent of their apostasy. The book mentions David only twice. The first reference in 6:5 reflects the prophet's awareness of David's giftedness as a musician but has no bearing on the present discussion. The second reference occurs at the end of the book, in the context of a rare hopeful utterance. In keeping with the covenantal

anticipation of Israel's ultimate restoration after its punishment for persistent rebellion against YHWH (Lev. 26; Deut. 4:25–31; 29–30), the book concludes with a remarkable oracle anticipating YHWH restoring the fortunes of his people Israel and reestablishing them irrevocably in their hereditary homeland (Amos 9:13–15). Remarkably, this oracle begins with an announcement of the restoration of the Davidic dynasty: “In that day, I will restore the fallen booth of David . . . so they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name” (9:11–12).

The reference to the Davidic dynasty as a “booth” (*sukkâ*) rather than a “house” (*bayit*), as the dynastic oracle had it (2 Sam. 7:11–16), reflects the diminished and fragile nature of the Davidic kingship in the eighth century BC. In Amos' time Davidides still ruled Judah, but the dynasty had lost control of the northern ten tribal territories almost two centuries earlier. Nevertheless, the modifier “fallen” (*nōpelet*) anticipates the demise of the Davidic house, which would happen in the wake of the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BC. Like all Israelite prophets, Amos considered the Davidic dynasty to be the only legitimate royal house for all the tribes of Israel.

In his vision of the restored Davidic dynasty, Amos both remembers the ancient territorial scope of the Davidic empire—which extended far beyond Israel's borders—and anticipates the fulfillment of what David had declared when he spoke of “the Torah concerning humanity” (*tôrat hā'ādām*) in 2 Samuel 7:19. Whether one vocalizes *'dm* in Amos 9:12 as *'ēdôm* (“Edom,” as in MT and most English translations) or *'ādām* (“humanity,” as in LXX: *tōn anthrōpōn*), “all the nations who are called by my name” envisions the reach of Davidic rule extending far beyond territorial Israel (vv. 13–15). Just as originally David had functioned as YHWH's servant and vice-regent, even occupying the “throne of YHWH,” and the throne had been branded with YHWH's name, so in the distant future the

restored Davidic house will function as YHWH's vice-regent to the nations.

Hosea

Like Amos, Hosea was a prophet whom YHWH called to warn the Northern Kingdom of Israel of their imminent demise if they would not return wholeheartedly to YHWH, the God of all twelve tribes of Israel. However, unlike Amos, the dialectical features of the book suggest that he was a native Northerner, though his birthplace and home are unknown. The single reference to David in the book is extremely significant. Looking beyond his nation's apostasy and judgment, the prophet embodied the distant future renewal of this people's relationship with YHWH by taking back his faithless wife, Gomer. In Hosea 3:4-5 he interprets this symbolic action: "The descendants of Israel will return and seek YHWH their God and David their king. With trepidation and awe [*ûpāḥădû*] they will come to YHWH and to his goodness [*ṭûbô*] in the last days."

This text is remarkable on several counts. First, despite almost two hundred years of Northern apostasy and separation from Judah, Hosea assumes that YHWH is the God of all the descendants of Israel. Second, his use of the verb "to seek" (*biqqēš*) recalls Moses' prediction in Deuteronomy 4:29 of Israel's renewed dependence on and return to YHWH from their exilic location, and the use of its synonym *dāraš* elsewhere (e.g., Deut. 12:5) suggests pilgrimages to the central sanctuary. Third, by adding "David their king" to "YHWH their God," Hosea ties devotion to YHWH tightly with allegiance to the Davidic king. Fourth, the prophet characterizes the Northerners' new disposition toward YHWH as "trepidation and awe" (*pāḥad*). Fifth, by seeking YHWH they will become beneficiaries of the covenant relationship once more. In verse 5, "goodness" (*ṭûb*; cf. *ṭôb* in 2 Sam. 7:28) functions as a shorthand

expression for the well-being that comes with covenant relationship. In all these features, Hosea assumes that, despite all appearances to the contrary, YHWH will never forget his covenants with Israel and with David.

Micah

The superscription to the book of Micah suggests that he prophesied in Judah from a few decades before the fall of Samaria (to the Assyrians in 722 BC) to the time of Hezekiah (ca. 700 BC). This book never mentions David by name, but he frequently speaks of Zion, an alternate name for the city of David (2 Sam. 5:7; 1 Kings 8:1) and an epithet that was extremely significant for the theology of kingship in Judah. Indeed, Micah devotes an entire oracle (4:1–13) to the eschatological (cf. “last days” in 4:1) restoration of Zion—that is, Jerusalem—when the former kingship (*hammemšālâ hārî’šônâ mamleket*) will return to the daughters of Jerusalem after a long period without a king (vv. 8–9). If the prophet had in mind Nebuchadnezzar’s termination of the Davidic dynasty’s rule in Jerusalem in 586 BC, he veiled this referent with a profoundly theological portrayal of kingship based in Jerusalem. Indeed, the focus throughout and in verse 7 explicitly is on YHWH ruling over his people in Mount Zion.

Immediately following this profoundly theological portrayal of Zion as the seat of YHWH’s rule, we encounter a remarkable earthy portrayal of a human vice-regent who will govern Israel on YHWH’s behalf (5:2–5a [1–4a]).

And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
too small to be [considered] among the clans of Judah—
From you one will go out for me
to be ruler in Israel,
one whose origin is from of old,
from ancient times.
.....
He will stand and shepherd [his flock] with the strength of YHWH.

.....
Then his greatness will be experienced
to the ends of the earth;
and this one will personify peace.

Micah does not name David here, but the allusions to his humble origins and eventual elevation are clear. First, the oracle is addressed to the subject's place of birth, Bethlehem Ephrathah. Bethlehem figures prominently in Judges 17-19 but is better known as the ancestral home of David.¹ The geographic name "Ephrath/Ephrathah" occurs only six times in the First Testament. Three of these occur in the Jacob narratives, where "Ephrathah" is used interchangeably with "Bethlehem" (Gen. 35:16-19; 48:7), and two others occur in the book of Ruth (4:11; Ephrathites in 1:2). Given the probable late seventh-century-BC date for the composition of Ruth, it seems that Micah's oracle inspired that historiographic short story.

Second, Micah highlights this ruler's lowly origins, characterizing Bethlehem Ephrathah as the smallest [town] among the clans of Judah. The patriarchal travels and the conquest of the land involved many towns more significant than Bethlehem in the patriarchs' stories (Shechem, Hebron, Beersheba, Jericho, Hazor, Jerusalem), and a royal figure could have come from any of them. However, YHWH often chose the foolish course to embarrass the wise, and weak individuals to embarrass the strong (1 Cor. 1:27).

Third, the election of this man to be ruler in Israel (*môšē/ bēyisrā'ēl*) was neither an impulsive nor arbitrary decision; YHWH had chosen him long ago. Whether one interprets "From you one will go out for me, . . . one whose origin [*môšā'ōtāyw*] is from of old, from ancient times" in a literal sense (as a statement of his preexistence) *or* as a reference to YHWH's ancient decree calling him to kingship (which seems more likely),² David's rise was neither a personal accomplishment nor a last-minute correction of the failed experiment represented by Saul.

Fourth, the characterization of his vice-regency as “shepherd[ing] with the strength [‘ôz] of YHWH” and “with the majesty [gā’ôn] of the name of YHWH his God” recalls YHWH’s declaration in 2 Samuel 7:8, “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be ruler [nāgîd] over my people, over Israel.” The vocabulary differs slightly, but conceptually the echo is clear. As for shepherding with the strength of YHWH and with the majesty of his name, this recalls David’s verbal rejoinder to Goliath’s challenge in 1 Samuel 17:45–47.

Fifth, although Micah 5:3 [2] paints an earthy picture of a real child’s birth in real historical time, the final two cola take the image far beyond the historical David. In keeping with YHWH’s ancient promise to Abraham and more recent statements,³ David’s greatness was experienced from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates (2 Sam. 8; 1 Kings 4:21). However, in keeping with David’s phrase “the Torah of humanity” in 2 Samuel 7:19, the king’s rule would extend under this figure to the ends of the earth, and all would recognize him both as the embodiment of *šālôm* and as the agent of universal well-being.

Isaiah

Given the size of the composition, and perhaps the prophet’s family ties to the royal line (thus Jewish tradition), it is probably not surprising that the prophecies of Isaiah, son of Amoz—whose ministry coincided with the reign of the good king Hezekiah of Judah—touch on YHWH’s covenant with David and/or the line of David more than any other prophet. In some texts, like 32:1–8 (which does not name David or allude specifically to the dynastic oracle), the concern is general, focusing especially on the righteous rule of the king, who seeks the well-being of his compatriots rather than self-interest, perhaps applying the royal model of Torah righteousness established in Deuteronomy 17:18–

19. In keeping with the Deuteronomistic perspective on the notion, the Hebrew word “righteousness” (*ṣedeq/ṣědāqâ*) and its correlative term “justice” (*mišpāṭ*) involve social justice, but they also involve much more (fig. 4.2 above). Mindful of the covenant triangle, righteousness involves the practice and promotion of the internal *šālôm* (spiritual health) of each citizen, *šālôm* among citizens and YHWH, *šālôm* among citizens and their neighbors, and *šālôm* between citizens and the physical world that YHWH has placed in their charge.

Isaiah 7:10-17

The first section of the book of Isaiah contains three texts that many consider messianic: 7:10-17; 9:2-7 [1-6]; and 11:1-10. Despite the New Testament usage of 7:10-17 (in Matt. 1:23), it is the least explicitly messianic of the three texts. In many respects this passage is a riddle, raising more questions than it answers: Who is the young woman of 7:14? Who is the child? Who is the son of Tabeel (7:6)? What is the immediate significance of the birth of this child for Ahaz? And what long-range significance did Isaiah foresee? Remarkably, none of these questions relates specifically to a Messiah who will save Israel, either in the short term or in the distant future.

However, this prophecy *does* involve the Davidic covenant, which is front and center. In its historical setting (cf. 2 Kings 16), Judah’s northern neighbor Israel (under King Pekah) and their allies, the Aramaeans of Damascus (under King Rezin), were contemplating military action against King Ahaz (Jehoahaz; *ṁla-ú-ḥa-zi* in Assyrian texts; COS 2:117D, p. 289). Ahaz ruled Judah from 743 until 714 BC, though this crisis caused him to seek support from Emperor Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria, whose vassal he became (2 Kings 16:7). Attempting to get Ahaz to change course and trust in YHWH (Isa. 7:9) rather than the king of Assyria, the prophet

Isaiah invited him to ask YHWH for a sign (v. 11) that YHWH would be willing to help. When Ahaz refused, Isaiah declared that YHWH would give him a sign in any case: the young woman would conceive and bear a son (v. 14), and before he would be morally sentient, YHWH would dispose of Rezin and Pekah (vv. 15–16).

Remarkably, the significance of this “sign” (*’ôṭ*) did not lie in the child himself. Isaiah does not present his birth as miraculous; the Hebrew word *hā’almâ* means simply “a young woman.” The boy will have a special name, Immanuel (*’immānû ’ēl*), which means “God is with us.” But like most biblical names, this epithet is not a commentary on the boy himself—he is not the God who is with Israel, and he will not be a “savior king” for the nation. In the coming events, the boy will play no role whatsoever. Rather, with this advance notice, the timing of the boy’s birth points to the presence of God and his sovereign hand in the affairs of the nations. YHWH is near; for this reason, Ahaz may relax (v. 4). However, in verse 9 the prophet issues a threat to the king; if he does not trust (*he’ēmin*) in YHWH, his role in the history of the Davidic line will be canceled. Indeed, in verses 17–18 YHWH threatens more directly to act against Judah and “your father’s house” (*bêṭ ’ābîkâ*) in a way unprecedented since the kingdom had divided in 931 BC; at YHWH’s direction, Ahaz’ allies (the Assyrians) will invade the land. The prophet did not hereby declare the end of the Davidic line—its endurance was guaranteed by the covenant (2 Sam. 7)—but à la 2 Samuel 7:13–15, the reigning representative of that house would be disciplined. And unfortunately, the land they ruled would suffer for the king’s crimes.

The point of this prophecy for Isaiah and for Ahaz was not to predict the coming of a Messiah who would rescue the nation from the Assyrians or who would secure the endurance of the Davidic line (we do not even know whether the boy would be royal). Rather, as the vocative “O

house of David!” in verse 13 indicates, this message is issued as a challenge to Ahaz to fulfill his role as the representative of that house and to warn him of the consequences of continuing on the course he was currently following. If he would stand firm on the promises fundamental to the Davidic covenant, all would be well for him and his kingdom. The child’s birth and his name were simply signs of God’s fidelity to his covenant; within a few short years he would deliver the nation from the current threat. For discussion of what Matthew did with this prophecy, see “Matthew’s Birth Narrative” in chapter 18.

Isaiah 9:2-7 [1-6]

Here Isaiah had his eyes particularly on the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, which were the first to fall to the Assyrian hordes in Isaiah’s day. However, Isaiah looked beyond the gloom to a brilliant new day, when the burden of the oppressors would be broken, and overflowing joy would return. Without warning, in verse 6 [5] his attention turns to a little figure on whose shoulders will rest the mantle of government. The plot of this text is clear:

1. It begins with the birth of a child (unnamed), who is God’s “gift” to Israel for its well-being.
2. On his shoulders he places the mantle of government—that is, responsibility for the well-being of the citizens.
3. Analogous to kings at their accession in Egypt and elsewhere, YHWH awards him a complex—but singular—throne name that involves four pairs of words. These pairs consist of a substantive identifying his status and a modifying descriptor: “Wonder of a Counselor—Mighty God—Eternal Father—Prince of Peace.”
4. The boundless growth of his authority/responsibility and the *šālôm* produced by his administration will yield an

increasingly perfect universe, without opposition or challenge.

5. Through his promotion of justice and righteousness, the throne of David, on which he sits, and the kingdom of David, for which he is responsible, are established eternally and irrevocably.

The prophet ends this glorious prophecy with the divine imprimatur: the passion (*qin'â*) of YHWH will ensure that this happens.

Isaiah presents this child as a gift to Israel and the agent of divine administration. He introduces him as a normal human being, but his throne name and the superlative geographical and temporal description of his reign point to a person who is no ordinary human figure. This prophecy, which is rooted in YHWH's covenant with David, confirms the covenant as irrevocable and the scope of "Davidic" rule as universal, offering brilliant commentary on David's "Torah of humanity" (2 Sam. 7:19).

Isaiah 11:1-10

Although the oracle in 9:2-7 [1-6] had mentioned David only at the end, allusions to David frame Isaiah 11:1-10. Admittedly David's name is missing, but his father, Jesse, appears in the opening line (v. 1a) and the closing stanza (v. 10). Remarkably, the subject of this "ode to the shoot of Jesse" is not David or his father, but a sprig that will emerge from what survives of the house of David. Horticultural metaphors dominate the framework: a "shoot" (*ḥōṭer*) emerging from the "stump" of Jesse, a "branch" (*nēṣer*) emerging from its "roots" (*šōrēšîm*) and bearing fruit (*pārâ*, v. 1), and the "root" (*šōreš*) standing as a rallying ensign (v. 10). The "root" signifies the dynasty of David, the son of Jesse, represented in Isaiah's time by Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). However, peering off into the distant

future, when that dynasty will have been missing from the landscape for a long time, he foresaw a shoot emerging oddly from the “stump.” Growing from a branch would be more natural, but this image alludes to the violent end of the magnificent dynastic tree at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. The stump had been out of view and its roots dormant underground all those centuries, but it had not died. In God’s immaculate timing, the emergence of the shoot would trigger the nations into rallying to the one represented by the shoot and the transformation of the cosmos, eliminating all hostilities and tensions in nature.

Within this framework we find two stanzas, 11:2–5 and 11:6–9, respectively, of virtually identical length (both consist of 346 Hebrew characters; with forty-seven words and fifty-three words, respectively). This remarkably symmetry reflects the harmony between the character of the shoot/branch and this new order. The first stanza is expository in function, beginning with a celebration of this figure’s spiritual endowment (v. 2). It opens with a thesis statement (“The Spirit of YHWH will rest on him”) and then in three parallel lines describes the Spirit with six modifiers, yielding a total of seven occurrences of the word “Spirit” (*rûah*). Because the Spirit of YHWH rests on the shoot (v. 2a), he is endowed with divine wisdom (*ḥokmâ*), understanding (*bînâ*), counsel (*‘ēṣâ*), strength (*gěbûrâ*), knowledge (*da‘at*), and the fear of YHWH (*yir’at yhwh*). The fear of YHWH is often recognized as the first principle of wisdom,⁴ and here it is the zenith of divine endowment, a conclusion reinforced by the first line of verse 3. Here the Hebrew word *yir’â* (fear) obviously does not mean fright but trusting awe (fig. 11.1).

Figure 11.1

The Semantic Spectrum of *Yārē’* Words



Terror Fright Anxiety Awe Reverence Submission Allegiance Trust

Verses 3–5 reinforce this interpretation, describing how the figure demonstrates the presence of the Spirit and the fear of YHWH. Immune to superficial observation or rumor, he will administer the will of YHWH with righteousness (*šedeq*, vv. 4a, 5a), equity/fairness (*mîšôr*, v. 4b), and fidelity (*'ěmûnâ*, v. 5b). This means that the wicked are punished (v. 4b–c) and the marginalized and oppressed protected (v. 4a–b).

The next stanza's message is clear (vv. 6–9): as a result of the shoot's rule, all spheres of existence will enjoy true *šālôm*. This figure will not only restore the garden of Eden, but Eden will encompass the globe. Isaiah concludes this stanza with a foundational declaration: this will happen *because* the earth will be filled with the knowledge of YHWH (v. 9c). But this knowledge will not be merely theoretical or intellectual. Through the administration of this Davidic figure, the entire world will observe the embodiment of divine righteousness, compassion, justice, and fairness. The ideals of Deuteronomy 17:18–20 will finally not only be realized among the chosen people, Israel, but will also be on full display throughout the world. According to verse 10, he will draw the nations (*gôyim*) like a magnet to himself in his resting place, and they will seek out the “root” of Jesse. Then the fullness of the whole earth will finally be his glory (cf. 6:3), and this King may rest because all is well with his universe.

Isaiah 16:5

Inserted into an oracle of judgment against Moab (Isa. 16:1–14), we find a clear if sketchy anticipation of the restoration of the Davidic house in Jerusalem:

In unfailing love [*ḥesed*] a throne will be established;
And a judge will sit on it in faithfulness [*’ēmet*] in the tent of David—
He will seek justice [*mišpāṭ*] and be zealous for righteousness [*ṣedeq*].

The opening choice of *ḥesed* links this statement to 2 Samuel 7:15, “My *ḥesed* will not depart from him [David’s son].” As with “booth of David” in Amos 9:11, the reference to David’s dynasty as a “tent” (*’ōhel*, Isa. 16:5) rather than a “house” (*bayit*) alludes to the diminished and vulnerable state of the dynasty. But true to his word, YHWH will reestablish his throne (i.e., kingship) and install one who will promote justice and righteousness in accord with the vision of the “shoot” in 11:3–5.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Scholarly discussion of Isaiah’s fourth “Servant Song” tends to revolve around the identity of the servant. The contextual and textual evidence points to a royal Davidic figure rather than to Moses, a prophet, or Israel. First, the identification of this figure as “my servant” (*’abdî*) suggests David, who is identified by this epithet three times more often than Moses (see esp. 2 Sam. 7). Second, Isaiah often uses the expression “my servant” of royal figures (37:35; etc.). Third, the declaration that YHWH has put his Spirit on his servant (42:1) accords with a royal identity and finds explicit support in 11:1–3.⁵ Fourth, the servant’s role as one who establishes justice to the ends of the earth (42:1–4; cf. 51:4) accords with royal functions. Fifth, the reference to the response of kings (52:14–15) and the promise of victory (52:12–13) supports a royal interpretation. Sixth, the botanical imagery of 53:2 recalls 11:1 and other references that are horticultural, Davidic, and messianic. Seventh, the reference to the servant’s “superhuman anointing” in 52:14⁶ and the notice of a rich burial in 53:9 suit a royal person.

We may find additional support for a Davidic interpretation of the servant in the postexilic prophecy of Zechariah, who spoke of a Davidic figure as a shepherd whom the people rejected (Zech. 11:8; 12:10) and who was struck by the will of YHWH for the good of the people (13:7–9). Ancient Near Easterners commonly perceived kings as shepherds installed by the deity, but the First Testament presents David in particular as the divinely appointed shepherd charged to govern Israel (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:1–3; 7:8). It appears that Zechariah’s portrayal of the suffering shepherd intentionally built on and adapted the royal dimension of Isaiah 53.

Although both Isaiah and Zechariah speak of a suffering Davidic Messiah, Isaiah’s portrayal of this figure as a substitute sacrifice for the people is unique within the First Testament. Since Isaiah 53:10 specifically declares the servant to be an acceptable *’āšām* to YHWH, the origin of this notion probably lies in the guilt offering (*’āšām*). Within the cultic regulations the *’āšām* was the only type of regular offering that required a ram, a male sheep (Lev. 5:14–6:7 [5:14–26]). Because *’ayil*, the Hebrew word for “ram,” was often used of rulers,⁷ the *’āšām* ritual could readily be adapted to a royal substitutionary ritual.

A further consideration derives from outside the First Testament—namely, the Assyrian ritual of the substitute king. According to the custom, in response to an omen that threatened the life of the king, diviners would choose a man from the population to serve as a substitute king and take the curse of the omens upon himself. They would dress him in the king’s robes and give him the insignias of royalty (crown, weapon, scepter) and a queen, who would share his fate. Playing the role of the king, the substitute would both sit on the throne and present offerings before the altar and offer incense on the incense altar. Depending on the length of the omen threat, the true king would perform various purifying rituals, while the substitute would take upon

himself the evils that threatened the king by reciting omen litanies, having them transcribed, and keeping them in a fold in the hem of his robe. The climax of the ritual involved the execution of the substitute king for the sake of the true king and his prince, thereby achieving their redemption. The king or his agents would then give him a royal funeral and bury the man in a tomb prepared for him. They would burn the royal garments and accoutrements of office, perform elaborate apotropaic rituals, and recite penitential psalms and litanies to ensure that the evils would descend to the netherworld with the substitute king and never return. Through the ritual the real king and the land were purified and the omens warded off; the diviners claimed that the ritual provided the gods with a victim through whom to achieve their aims.

We cannot establish a direct connection between Isaiah 53 and this Mesopotamian ritual. However, the ritual of the substitute king persisted from the nineteenth century BC to the time of Alexander the Great, with the strongest evidence deriving from Neo-Assyrian reigns of Esarhaddon (681–669 BC) and Ashurbanipal (669–631 BC; Parpola, “The Substitute King Ritual,” xxii–xxxiii; Walton, “Imagery of the Substitute King Ritual,” 734–43). The Neo-Assyrian involvement in Judean politics during the ministry of Isaiah (2 Kings 18–19 = Isa. 36–37) increases the likelihood that this Israelite prophet was familiar with the custom, a conclusion reinforced by evidence of the prophet’s awareness of Mesopotamian religion and custom elsewhere in the book.

Isaiah 53 involves the appointment of a sheep as YHWH’s servant, not as a substitute king but as the real king in the line of David, Israel’s shepherd king (2 Sam. 7:7–8; cf. Ezek. 34:23; 37:24). This king allows himself to be abused and killed as a substitute for the flock, which consists of wretched sinners. It is remarkable that the motif of a shepherd giving his life as a substitute offering for the sheep appears only here in the First Testament and explicitly

only in John 10:11, 14–15 and 1 Peter 2:21–25 in the New Testament.

In our enthusiasm for the gospel that we hear so clearly proclaimed in the fourth Servant Song—the shepherd has given his life for the sheep—we should also note another feature that is novel and revolutionary here. For the first time in God’s grand program of redemption, the grace of divine revelation has linked the Messiah to a way of dealing with sin that yields atonement and forgiveness.⁸ Whereas the Messiah was by definition to be a royal Davidic figure who would one day rule Israel and the world with righteousness and grace, this amazing passage portrays him also as the true sin/guilt offering, the Lamb whose own sacrifice actually effects forgiveness. Isaiah 53 declares the true grounds of all divine forgiveness—past, present, and future: the substitutionary sacrifice of the perfect Lamb, the Davidic Shepherd not only of Israel but also of the cosmos.

Isaiah 55:3-5

On the basis of the preceding oracle (Isa. 54) and the reference to “the Holy One of Israel” (*qědôš yiśrā’ēl*) in 55:5, Israel continues to be the prophet’s primary audience. The appeal to listen and YHWH’s offer of life through an eternal covenant (*běrit ‘ôlām*) with them (*lākem* is pl.) seem to involve the fulfillment of the Israelite covenant. However, the references to the “acts of unfailing love and faithfulness of David” (*hasdê dāwid hanne’ěmānîm*, v. 3) complicate the picture. The combination of “unfailing love” (*hesed*) and “faithfulness” (*ne’ěmānîm*) with David invites us to associate this text with the Davidic covenant instead.⁹ In this view, the plural forms refer to the benefactions YHWH promised David—and this is how most translations and scholars interpret it. However, the interpretation of the CSB is preferable: “I will make a permanent covenant with you on the basis of the faithful kindnesses of David.” This

treatment of David as the agent of the action not only accords with the normal usage of bound phrases like this (Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 406–21) but also suits both the immediate and the broader literary contexts better. As David recognized in 2 Samuel 7, the covenant that YHWH made with him was not ultimately for his own benefit but for the benefit of Israel. Within the triangular covenant relationship involving YHWH, Israel, and the land, the king's role was to ensure that the blessings of the covenant might be realized by all. As we will see in Ezekiel's treatment of this subject in Ezekiel 34, YHWH casts the Davidic ruler as the sponsor of the *šālôm* promised in the original covenant with Israel.

This interpretation also accords perfectly with the following portrait of YHWH making David a witness to the peoples and a leader and commander for them (Isa. 55:4). In verse 5 YHWH refocuses on Israel, whose influence as a magnet for the nations is grounded on YHWH's faithfulness as their God who will have glorified them. Moses had used different language in Deuteronomy 26:19, but Israel's glorification means that YHWH will finally and irrevocably have set his people "high above all nations for praise, fame, and glory" and that Israel's status as "a holy people" (*'am qādôš*) will correspond to that of YHWH himself, "the Holy One of Israel" (*qědôš yiśrā'ēl*). The placement of Isaiah 55:3–5 after the celebrative chapter 54, which follows immediately after the fourth Servant Song in 52:13–53:12, suggests that the future David's acts of unfailing love (*ḥāsādîm*) and faithfulness (*hanne'ēmānîm*) involve the Shepherd of his people taking the form of a lamb and offering himself as an *'āšām* offering, and in so doing the Servant of YHWH, "the Righteous One" (*šaddîq*), will bear their iniquities and through his atoning work make many righteous (*hišdîq*; 53:10–12).

Jeremiah

With the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel we fast-forward the calendar a full century, to the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the aftermath of Hezekiah's foolish revelation of Jerusalem's treasures to the king of Babylon (2 Kings 20:12–18). Both prophets ministered in the waning years of Judah as a nation and of the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem. In the final decades of the seventh century BC, Jeremiah had witnessed Josiah's efforts to lead in a national spiritual renewal, only to see his work come crashing down with the premature death of the king with the tender heart (2 Kings 22:19), who embodied fully the commitment expressed in the Shema (23:25; cf. Deut. 6:4–5). Jeremiah's heart must have broken as he watched the demise of the dynasty of David, whose integrity Josiah had worked so diligently to restore (2 Chron. 35:25). In Jeremiah 21:1–23:8 the editor has collected seven of Jeremiah's prophecies against Judah's last kings, all descendants of Josiah. Sometimes the boundaries between these oracles are indistinct, but we may recognize the following general arrangement:

1. An oracle against Zedekiah (21:1–10)
2. An oracle against the Davidic dynasty (21:11–14)
3. An oracle against the Davidic dynasty (22:1–9)
4. An oracle against Jehoahaz/Shallum (22:10–12)
5. An oracle against Jehoiakim (22:13–23)
6. An oracle against Jehoiachin/Coniah (22:24–30)
7. An oracle against the Davidic dynasty (23:1–8)

The collection begins with Zedekiah, the last Davidic monarch in Judah (597–586 BC), but the arrangement of the oracles against three named kings in 22:10–30 reflects the order of these occupants of the throne of David. Between the oracle against Zedekiah and the three preceding kings, we find two general oracles against the Davidic dynasty,

and the seventh climactic oracle also belongs to this type. This alternation is intentional. The three oracles against the house of David present the standard against which Jeremiah evaluated the kings identified by name, revealing the utter corruption of the dynasty and justifying YHWH's hostility toward them. For our purposes, the oracles against the dynasty in general are particularly relevant.

Jeremiah 21:11-14

In keeping with what we have witnessed in Isaiah and elsewhere, this oracle reinforces the notion that the Davidic kings' standing with YHWH was determined by the fidelity/infidelity with which they administered justice in Judah. Failure to do so would ignite the fury of YHWH against them and against all the inhabitants of the land.

Jeremiah 22:1-9

This complex oracle involves at least four registers of embedded speech, all directed against the king (sg.) of Judah, who sat "on the throne of David" (v. 2). This text is thoroughly Deuteronomic, declaring that the fate of the king and his palace depended on the king's practice of justice and righteousness (vv. 2-3). YHWH threatened on oath to turn their palace into a heap of ruins. In his language of destruction and its aftermath (vv. 8-9), Jeremiah borrowed heavily from Moses' fourth address in Deuteronomy (Deut. 29:24-28 [23-27]). He probably assumed that his audience knew both the entire antecedent text and Deuteronomy 17:18-20, which required kings to copy the Torah and read it for themselves as long as they sat on the throne. In keeping with the Torah scroll that Josiah's men had found in the temple (2 Kings 22:8-17), Jeremiah threatened David's descendants on the throne with all the curses in the Torah. Those curses sound final, except that in YHWH's mysterious providence (cf. Deut. 29:29 [28]), the image of the

devastated land gives way to the image of wholesale restoration (30:1–10).

Jeremiah 22:28–30

Here Jeremiah concludes a series of oracles of judgment directed at the kings who ruled between Josiah and Zedekiah (who had been addressed in 21:1–10). The first target, Shallum (= Jehoahaz), was Josiah's immediate successor, but he ruled for only three months (609 BC) before he was removed and taken to Egypt, where he died, in fulfillment of 22:10–12. Jeremiah's pronouncing of woe upon Jehoahaz' replacement (Josiah's second son, Jehoiakim; 609–597 BC) cast him and his fate as the polar opposite of his father (22:13–17). YHWH promised to gather Josiah to his fathers in peace (2 Kings 22:20), and YHWH's representative, Jeremiah, lamented his death (2 Chron. 35:25). But no one would lament the passing of Jehoiakim, and he would be given a donkey's burial (Jer. 22:18–23).

For our purposes, the oracle against Jehoiachin (here Coniah), Josiah's grandson, is the most critical of these three (22:24–30). This utterance exhibits a significant twofold structure. Jeremiah began with YHWH's sworn repudiation of Jehoiachin as his signet ring (*ḥôtām*) on his right hand (v. 24). Technically, a *ḥôtām* was a precious stone, often engraved with the symbol or name of the person whom it represented.¹⁰ The designation of Jehoiachin as YHWH's seal reflects YHWH's disposition toward the Davidic dynasty (cf. Hag. 2:23). David and his descendants were YHWH's choice gems, selected from Israel, his treasured people (*'am sēgullâ*),¹¹ and installed on the throne of YHWH (1 Chron. 29:23; cf. Jer. 3:17). As YHWH's signet, they symbolized before the watching world YHWH's claim upon Israel, and to the Israelites they signified YHWH's authority over them. After declaring YHWH's rejection of Jehoiachin, Jeremiah predicted that he would have no immunity from the fate

awaiting the nation as a whole (vv. 25–26). On the contrary, he would be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (cf. 20:4–5), hurled into a foreign land,¹² and ultimately experience the indignity of burial outside the land, without hope of returning home (22:27).

Because of its implications for the future prospects of the Davidic dynasty, the second part of this oracle is particularly significant for this discussion. Jeremiah signaled a new phase in this oracle with a couple of rhetorical questions. The first (22:28a) anticipates a positive answer, declaring that Jehoiachin is not a treasured signet ring (v. 24) but a clay pot about to be shattered and rejected. The second question (v. 28b) suggests that Jehoiachin and all his descendants (*zeraʿ*) have been tossed into the foreign rubbish bin. By associating the 597-BC deportees from Jerusalem with the royal and temple treasures that Nebuchadnezzar took to Babylon, the narrator of 2 Kings 24:12–16 notes that these exiles represented the upper classes. To YHWH, however, Jehoiachin, the pinnacle of society, was nothing but trash.

With that land as his addressee (v. 29), YHWH announced his verdict and sentence on Jehoiachin and his descendants (v. 30): “Record this man as childless” (involving the word *ʾărîr[ā]*, which appears elsewhere only in Leviticus 20:20–21 and Genesis 15:2). The transcription of the sentence reinforces both the gravitas and pathos of the sentence while also suggesting an irrevocable decision (cf. John 19:19–22). By itself, this oracle does not necessarily announce the end of the Davidic house—Jehoiachin’s uncle Zedekiah currently sat on the throne of David (Jer. 27:1; 2 Kings 24:17). However, the ultimate outcome of this prediction will catch us by surprise and will demand further comment later.

Jeremiah 23:1-8

The final oracle in this complex of prophecies against the Davidic kings is the best-known messianic text in Jeremiah. The prophet framed his utterance with statements highlighting the flock as the primary subject (vv. 1-3, 7-8). Embedded within these borders we find a coherent but scathing woe oracle, indicting the “shepherds of Israel”—that is, the rulers from the Davidic house—for their mistreatment of YHWH’s flock. YHWH followed up this pronouncement of woe on the rulers with a promise to regather the flock from all the countries where *he had driven them* (v. 3), declaring that this “new exodus” will so outshine Israel’s original exodus that the ancient divine introduction formula will need to be revised (vv. 7-8).

The transition from ordinary prose to an elevated register in 23:5-6 signals the climax of the oracle. The opening particle, “Look!” and the following temporal clause, “days are coming,” announce a shift in focus from the dynasty generally to a particular representative of the Davidic house and thrust the prophet’s gaze into the distant future. Jeremiah’s statement exhibits significant links with Isaiah’s portrayals of the messianic hope.¹³ These links include the specific reference to David;¹⁴ the horticultural metaphor (Isa. 11:1, 10); the administration of justice and righteousness (*mišpāṭ ûṣědāqâ*);¹⁵ the effectiveness of his rule expressed with *hiškîl*, “to succeed, prosper” (52:13); the motifs of salvation from enemies (9:4 [3]) and safety and security (11:6-9); the assumption of a new throne name, with the expression “his name will be called” (9:6 [5]); and the characterization of this person as “righteous” (*šaddîq*; cf. Isa. 53:11). Like his predecessor a century earlier, Jeremiah presented the new “David” as the agent and administrator of YHWH’s covenant with Israel.

However, Jeremiah’s prophecy also involves some significant modifications to Isaiah’s words. First, Jeremiah has this person raised up “for David” (*lědāwid*), which could mean “for David’s benefit,” in “David’s interest,” or “with

reference to David.” Second, whereas Isaiah’s horticultural vocabulary had involved several parts of a plant, Jeremiah used a general expression, *šemaḥ*, “growth, sprout, branch.” Third, whereas Isaiah 11:1–10 had this sprout emerge naturally from the stump/root, Jeremiah attributed this to YHWH’s intervention: “I will raise up a sprout for David” (Jer. 23:5), perhaps suggesting a miraculous revival of the Davidic house long after the stump had rotted. Fourth, whereas both Isaiah and Jeremiah treat this figure as embodying and administering covenant righteousness, Jeremiah integrates the word into this person’s new throne name, “YHWH our Righteousness” (*yhwh šidqēnû*). The personal pronoun suggests the transfer of the king’s righteousness to his subjects, in which case it could mean “YHWH makes us righteous,” or “YHWH is the key to our righteousness.” Either way, in the throne name we observe an ironic play on the name of Judah’s last king, Zedekiah, which means “YHWH is my righteousness.” This Branch represents the total contrast to the last king and prepares the way for the New Testament’s portrayal of the work of Jesus the Messiah.

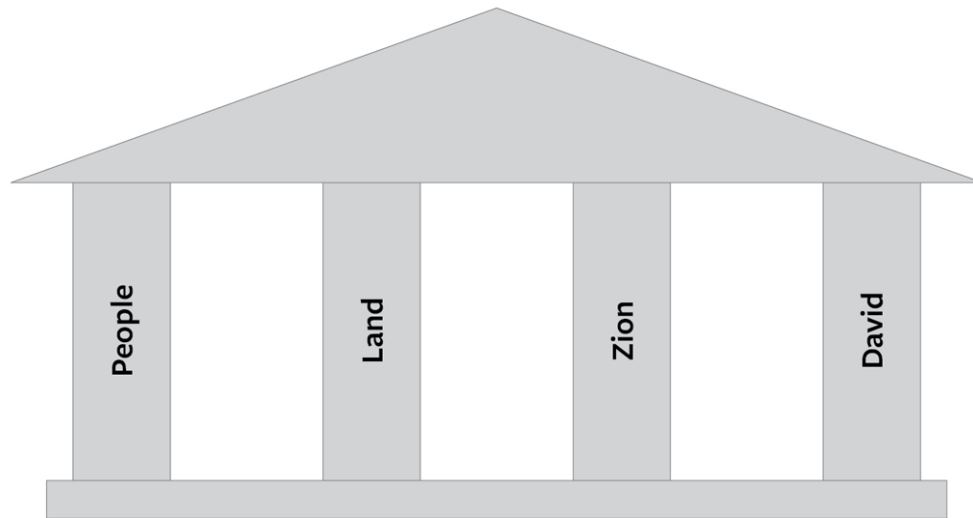
Jeremiah 33:12–26

The clause in 23:5, “Look, days are coming,” links Jeremiah’s announcement of the restoration of the Davidic throne with the establishment of the new Israelite covenant in 31:27–40. However, the bond between 23:1–6 is much tighter with 33:12–26, which opens on a similar note (33:14). Here, at the end of Jeremiah’s “Book of Comfort” (chaps. 30–33), we encounter a classic illustration of *resumptive exposition*. The subject (the righteous Davidic branch) that Jeremiah had introduced briefly earlier but then dropped without further development, he picks up and offers a fuller treatment. This is a lengthy and complex passage, bringing together a series of prophetic fragments

deliberately stacked to proclaim an exhilarating message of hope.

Figure 11.2

The Covenantal Pillars of Israel's House of Pride



Particularly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel we observe the prophets employing deliberate rhetorical strategies to subvert and demolish false grounds for optimism in the face of Jerusalem's impending demise. With the rise of the Babylonians and their intervention in Israelite/Judean affairs, the people had staked their entitlement to "eternal security" on four covenant promises by YHWH (fig. 11.2):

1. YHWH had promised eternal title to the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 13:14-17).
2. YHWH had confirmed his eternal covenant with Abraham's descendants at Sinai (Exod. 31:13-17).
3. YHWH had chosen Jerusalem as his eternal dwelling place (Ps. 132:13-18).
4. YHWH had given David and his descendants eternal title to the throne of Israel (2 Sam. 7).

Despite Israel's history of apostasy and covenantal betrayal, the nearer Nebuchadnezzar's armies came to Jerusalem, the tighter the people hung on to YHWH's irrevocable and eternal (*'ad 'ôlām*) promises. However, YHWH did not stop the Babylonians from invading Israel's land, slaughtering and deporting the most of the population, removing the last Davidides from the throne, and perhaps most shocking of all, invading and razing the temple (cf. Jer. 7:4). On the contrary, they came in as his agents of judgment (cf. Lev. 26:27–33; Deut. 28:49–57). This disaster created a horrific crisis of faith at all four levels; had Marduk really defeated YHWH? However, as Daniel recognized in his prayer in Daniel 9:1–19, the perfidy and treachery belonged only to the people; YHWH had kept his covenant commitments to the letter (9:11–14), which included the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. However, as anticipated in Leviticus 26:40–45 and Deuteronomy 30:1–10, Israel's story could not end with the judgment. In 33:12–26 Jeremiah looks beyond the judgment to the day when YHWH will restore Israel and his original vision for the nation will be realized.

Jeremiah's first prophetic fragment (33:12–13) focuses on the land, which was vital to the covenant triangle and at the heart of YHWH's promise to Abraham. But he fixed his gaze on Judah and Benjamin, the latter being added presumably because Jerusalem, the site of David's capital, was located within Benjamin's tribal allotment (Josh. 18:28), and when the nation divided in 931 BC, the Benjaminites remained loyal to Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:21–24).

The second fragment (Jer. 33:14–18) expands the vision of restoration beyond Judah to include the former Northern Kingdom of Israel (v. 14) in fulfillment of the covenant promise ("the good word") that YHWH had made to both houses. The shift in focus to the restoration of the Davidic house suggests that here "the good word" involves the benefactions involved in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam.

7:28), which, as David had acknowledged, were not primarily about him but were prerequisites for the smooth functioning of YHWH's covenant with Israel (7:23–24).

Jeremiah 33:15 summarizes what YHWH had declared earlier in 23:5: YHWH will cause a righteous Sprout (*ṣemaḥ*) to sprout (*ʾaṣmîaḥ*) for David. As in 23:5, he will prove his righteousness by administering justice (*mišpāṭ*) and righteousness (*ṣĕdāqâ*) in the land. Whereas 23:6 had named both Judah and Israel as beneficiaries of this administration, 33:16 mentions only Judah, presumably because YHWH's focus was progressively narrowing: from the houses of Israel and Judah (v. 14b) to Judah alone (v. 16a) and then to Jerusalem (v. 16b–d). The fragment concludes with a striking extension of the throne name of the Davidic Sprout to Jerusalem: "YHWH our Righteousness."

By introducing the citation formula in 33:17a with the causal particle "because" (*kî*), YHWH signals the grounds for the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem (and by extension the northern territories): "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel," which is a paraphrase of 2 Samuel 7:16, "Your house and your kingdom will endure before me forever; your throne will be established forever." To reinforce the certainty of the Davidic promise, YHWH introduced another covenant as an analogue, his covenant with Levi (Jer. 33:18; see the excursus at the end of chap. 6, above).

The third fragment (33:19–22) confirms the image of YHWH's irrevocable commitment to David (and Levi) by juxtaposing it first with the cosmic covenant and then with the covenant promises to Abraham. As Jeremiah had done with reference to the new Israelite covenant in 31:35–37, here he presents YHWH's commitment to the cosmos itself (represented by day and night) as the analogue to his covenants with David and Levi. If the sun and the moon and the stars ever spin out of their orbits, then the Israelites

may begin to worry that the Davidic covenant is in jeopardy—though that contingency was purely hypothetical. The prophet ups the ante in 33:22 by declaring that YHWH will multiply his servant David's descendants as he had Abraham's, making them as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore.

YHWH cast the fourth fragment (33:23–26) in the form of a disputation speech, whose essential features involve an opening citation of people's comments in verses 23–24a (which function as a thesis statement), followed by YHWH's interpretation of the people's comment in verse 24b, then YHWH's response in verses 25–26, which either refutes the thesis or presents a counterthesis.

Jeremiah addressed this disputation to cynics and skeptics in his audience. Given their present state and their theology, YHWH's people have concluded that he has changed his disposition toward Israel, whom he chose and ordained to be his kingdom of priests, his treasured possession, and his holy nation so that through them the world might be blessed. YHWH responded by reiterating that they may take his commitment to the cosmos as a guarantee of his commitment both to the descendants of Jacob (i.e., Israel) as his covenant people and to his servant David. Indeed, YHWH had tied his restoration of the fortunes of the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to his restoration of David his servant. As Moses had promised in Deuteronomy 4:31, YHWH's covenant commitment and his compassionate heart combined to guarantee Israel's future. The verb *riḥamtîm*, "I will treat them with compassion" (Jer. 33:26), involves the same root as the epithet *'ēl raḥûm*, "compassionate God" (Deut. 4:31). Although the language is missing in Jeremiah 33:26, David was YHWH's signet, the visible symbol of YHWH's commitment to his people, whom he had stamped with his own name, as in 22:24; they were not "the people of David" or "the house of David" but "the

people of YHWH.” With this statement, Jeremiah concluded his promissory words concerning David.

Ezekiel

Jeremiah’s contemporary Ezekiel spent his entire ministry as a prophetic priest in exile in Babylon along with ten thousand others from the upper classes of Judah (2 Kings 24:10–16). Even more obviously than in Jeremiah, his announcements of Judah’s demise in chapters 4–24 intentionally demolished the pillars on which the last generation of Judeans staked their security. Our present concern is his handling of YHWH’s covenant with David.

Scattered Allusions to the Davidic Kings

In Ezekiel 21:24–27 [29–32] the prophet alluded to Genesis 49:10 to debunk the claims for Judah’s security that were based on the Davidic pillar. In 29:21 Ezekiel mixed his metaphors by speaking of a horn (*qeren*) sprouting (*ṣāmaḥ*) from Israel. The statement is obviously intended as a hopeful word for the exiles, but it is vague. The same combination of motifs in Psalm 132:17 has provided the basis for a long-standing messianic interpretation of Ezekiel 29:21.

Several of Ezekiel’s oracles explicitly predict the demise of the dynasty. By means of a dramatic sign act, in 12:1–14, Ezekiel provided a fuller picture of YHWH’s disposition toward Zedekiah and of the fate that awaited him. In 17:7–21 he reinforced this image with a fanciful tale of a grand eagle (Egypt) to whom a vine (Zedekiah) turned for support, but in the end the Egyptians would not help—and YHWH would capture the Judean king like a lion in his own snare.

Combining the metaphors of lions and vines derived from Genesis 49:9–12, Ezekiel composed a lament for the dynasty in 19:1–14. Verses 1–9 portray three of the last four

kings as arrogant and violent lions, the last of whom (Zedekiah) was captured and taken to Babylon, “so that his voice should never be heard again on the mountains of Israel” (v. 9). As if this leonine utterance in 19:1–9 were not explicit enough, in verses 10–14 the prophet’s attention shifted to the dynasty itself, portrayed as a vine that was plucked up, dried up, and completely burned, so that “no strong branch [*maṭṭēh* ‘ōz], no ruler’s scepter, remained in it” (v. 14). The colophonic ending, “This is a dirge. It was treated as a dirge,” confirms Ezekiel’s anticipation of the demise of the Davidic house. But for the people this would create an intense theological problem. How could YHWH terminate the Davidic dynasty when he had declared the irrevocability of his covenant promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and reiterated it in Jeremiah 33:14–26?

Ezekiel 17:1-6, 22-24

The framework that identifies chapter 17 as a riddle (*ḥîdâ*, 17:2) portraying the demise of Zedekiah in 17:7–21 provides a partial answer. As noted above, in 17:1–6 the prophet presents a fable about a magnificent eagle who plucked off the crown of a cedar and brought it to a land of commerce and a city of traders (ciphers for Babylon). When the eagle planted it there in ideal circumstances, it took root and as a luxuriant vine sent its branches out to the eagle. At this point Ezekiel interrupted this phase of the fable to introduce the second eagle (Egypt), to which the vine (the Davidic dynasty, represented by Zedekiah, vv. 13–21) turned, but who ultimately was doomed because of his treachery, against both Nebuchadnezzar and YHWH. Finally, in verses 22–24 the prophet gets around to interpreting the first phase of the fable (vv. 1–6).

In verses 22–24 YHWH informs the prophet and his audience that the magnificent eagle was YHWH himself, and that the sprig that he snipped off from the cedar of Lebanon

was Jehoiachin, whom Nebuchadnezzar removed to Babylon in 597 BC, where he planted it. Apparently, he would sprout there, for from the top of the plant's shoots, YHWH would snip off a tender sprig (*rak*) and plant it on the towering mountain of Israel (Zion). This new sprig is not Jehoiachin—he would die in exile as Jeremiah predicted under oath (Jer. 22:24–27). But on the mountain of Israel, this sprig (the messianic descendant) would grow into a magnificent cedar, giving food and protection to all the birds. Then the trees of the countryside would know that he is YHWH; indeed, YHWH brings down the high and elevates the low.

This interpretation of the fable offers an incredibly positive view of Jehoiachin's exile to Babylon in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:10–16). To be sure, for the exiles this was humiliating and painful. However, in his providence, YHWH had marked 586 BC on his calendar as the time for Judah and Jerusalem to fall and the Davidic dynasty to be removed from the throne, both as punishment for persistent rebellion. By removing these ten thousand Judeans in advance, he could spare a remnant from the coming conflagration and preserve them for the future when he would restore both the house of Israel and the royal house of David. Just as Egypt had been a refuge for Israel from the famine that swept across the Near East in the days of Jacob, so Babylon would provide refuge from the fury of YHWH's wrath as Jerusalem burned. At the appropriate time, when the judgment had passed, YHWH would bring back the remnant of the seed of Abraham and the seed of David.

At first, Jehoiachin's personal fate was traumatic. However, as attested in Babylonian royal ration records (*ANET*, 308) and in 2 Kings 25:27–29, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Amel-Marduk (Evil-merodach), released Jehoiachin from confinement in Babylon after thirty-seven years in captivity and, for reasons unknown, elevated him above all the other captive kings. We do not know if Amel-Marduk ever considered releasing Jehoiachin and his family

to return to Jerusalem, but under the Persian regime, his grandson Zerubbabel (Matt. 1:12) would return to provide leadership in the establishment of the new community in Jerusalem (see the ending to chap. 6 above).

However, this outcome raises serious questions about YHWH's sentence on Jehoiachin (Coniah) as declared by Jeremiah (Jer. 22:30). In preserving Jehoiachin, YHWH had indeed remained true to his ancient covenant promise to David, but he had apparently gone back on his word through Jeremiah. The most likely solution to this apparent contradiction involves careful attention to the transition from an irrevocable prediction sealed with an oath in Jeremiah 22:24-27 to a threat that lacks the oath (vv. 28-30). The change in genre from prose to semi-poetic style signals a break in the text (cf. the Masoretic *setumah* notation) between the oath (vv. 24-27) and the declaration of the end of Coniah's line (vv. 29-30). The rhetorical questions in verse 28 serve a transitional rhetorical function, announcing a new focus and at the same time opening the door just a crack to a different outcome. After all, there may be more than one answer to these questions. It seems that the prediction of doom for Jehoiachin's offspring was less fixed than the doom of his personal exile (cf. Patton, *Hope for a Tender Sprig*, 67-69, 202-5). In biblical prophecy, pronouncements that YHWH seals with an oath are irrevocable and unchangeable, but as Jonah's announcement of the doom of Nineveh illustrates (Jon. 3:4) and YHWH himself explains (Jer. 18:1-10; cf. Ezek. 18:21-32), divine fury can be withdrawn if there is a change in circumstances or in the disposition of the target of his wrath (Jer. 18:1-10; cf. Ezek. 18:21-32). In any case, as Matthew 1:11-12 indicates, Jehoiachin played a pivotal role in the maintenance of the royal line that culminated in the Christ/Messiah.

Ezekiel 34:20-31

In an oracle obviously inspired by Jeremiah 23:1-8, Ezekiel develops more fully both the indictment of the Davidic house for gross dereliction of their shepherding charge and YHWH's replacement of the self-seeking shepherds with his own appointed representative of the Davidic line. After pronouncing woe on the Davidic shepherds in Ezekiel 34:1-10, the prophet describes in detail YHWH's promise to rescue his victimized and scattered flock and bring them back to the mountains of Israel, where they may flourish with lush pasture and abundant water (vv. 11-16). However, although the external issues would be resolved, in this metaphorical presentation problems remained. YHWH must still deal with aggressive stronger goats and sheep, who abuse the weaker members of the flock. This restoration of order within the flock sets the stage for a climactic announcement of David's return in verses 23-24.

The center of gravity in this part of the oracle, which takes up the rest of the chapter, is obviously the "covenant of peace" (*běřît šālôm*, Ezek. 34:25-30), which we discussed in the context of the new Israelite covenant (see above, chap. 9). Now our concern is verses 23-24, which are cast in an ABA structure, with the outer elements commenting on the divinely appointed agent and framing what most identify as the first half of the covenant formula: "Then I, YHWH, will be their God" (v. 24a; cf. vv. 30-31).

Four specific epithets clarify the role and function of this royal figure, who will be installed by YHWH himself. First, he will be a singular shepherd who tends (*rā'â*) YHWH's flock. The reference to "one shepherd" (*rō'eh 'eḥād*) reverses the division of Israel into Northern and Southern Kingdoms, which occurred after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 11-12). Like the rest of the prophets, Ezekiel perceived the nation as one and recognized as legitimate only the dynasty reigning from Jerusalem.

Second, he will be David. There is no thought here of the resurrection of the historic king, as some sort of David *redivivus*. The reference is to a descendant of the eponymous ancestor of the dynasty, who may perhaps embody the dynasty but who will sit on the throne of David himself. Having foretold and witnessed the fall of the Davidic house (chaps. 17; 19), Ezekiel now declares its restoration on the basis of YHWH's covenant with David, which Nathan the prophet had announced in 2 Samuel 7:8 (1 Chron. 17:7).

Third, the shepherd will be the servant of YHWH. Ezekiel's repetition of *'abdî* (my servant) simultaneously presents an intentional contrast with the self-seeking shepherds of Ezekiel 34:1–10 and recalls the traditional view of David's willing subordination to YHWH. In the First Testament, moreover, "servant of YHWH" (*'ebed YHWH*) also served as an honorific title for people functioning as commissioned officials for God, often with the implication of a special election to a task. YHWH expressed most clearly David's own standing with him, identifying him as "David my servant, whom I have chosen" (1 Kings 11:34).

Fourth, the shepherd will be a "prince" (*nāšî'*) in the midst of his people. Ezekiel's use of the archaic title *nāšî'* contrasts with Hosea and Jeremiah, who had both spoken explicitly of "David their king." However, it is consistent with Ezekiel's intentional downplaying of the roles of Israel's monarchs and harks back to 1 Kings 11:34, where YHWH said of Solomon, "I will make him 'prince' (*nāšî'*, meaning "one promoted") all the days of his life for the sake of David my servant." Ezekiel's preference for *nāšî'* over *melek* (king) did not deny this new David's true kingship but highlighted the qualitative distinction between him and the recent occupants of the office. "The promoted one [prince] in their midst" may allude to Deuteronomy 17:19–20, which had required Israel's kings to read the Torah "to prevent their hearts from being exalted above their kinsfolk." In the

present arrangement, YHWH was the divine patron of the people; the new David would be his representative and deputy.

Ezekiel intended his announcement of the appointment of a new David for Israel to instill new hope in the hearts of the exiles. Contrary to appearance, the demise of the Davidic house in 586 BC did not reflect divine impotence or indifference to previous commitments. These events had both fulfilled previous prophetic utterances¹⁶ and set the stage for a dramatic and new act of YHWH. The decadence of the old had been removed; now Ezekiel challenged the people to look forward to a new day when YHWH's Davidic servant would be reinstated in accordance with his eternal and irrevocable covenant.

Ezekiel 37:21-28

This text concludes a larger oracle (vv. 15-28) involving YHWH's promise to regather Israelite and Judean exiles scattered throughout the nations and to reunify the two nations that had been divided since 931 BC. However, this segment also represents the climax of a series of restoration oracles that began in chapter 34 and extended through this chapter. As the high point of chapters 34-37, these verses collate a host of themes that have been anticipated in hopeful fragments embedded in the judgment oracles¹⁷ and developed in considerable detail in 34:1-37:14. Our particular concern involves statements that reflect on the implications of YHWH's grand scheme of restoring the covenant triangle for the Davidic house.

We have noted repeatedly that YHWH's ecclesial/missional covenant with Israel involves three parties: YHWH, Israel, and the land of Canaan. We have also observed that the Davidic house was not fundamental to that triangular relationship but had been specially appointed by YHWH to

administer that relationship. More than any other, this text speaks to all these issues.

YHWH cast his thesis in the form of a sign act. Ezekiel took two pieces of wood (‘ēṣ) and combined them to create a single piece of wood (37:15–20). The prophet inscribed these two pieces, respectively, “Pertaining to Judah and to the sons of Israel that are associated with him” and “Pertaining to Joseph (the wood of Ephraim) and to the entire family of Israel that are associated with him” (v. 16). In verses 21–28, YHWH interprets the sign act. Verse 21 establishes the context for the reunification of the nation: YHWH will reverse the captivity of the populations of both the Northern (734–722 BC) and Southern (597–586 BC) Kingdoms and in a grand exodus bring them out of the nations that held them and reunite them with their hereditary and covenantal homeland. This sets the stage for the reunification of two distinct “nations” (*šěně gôyim*) into “a single nation” (*gôy ’eḥād*), never again to be divided. Since in the Hebrew Bible a *gôy* is by definition a people headed by a king (*melek*),¹⁸ YHWH adds, “A single king [*melek ’eḥād*] will be king for all of them,” a natural corollary of the previous statement, as is the following: “Never again will they be two nations [*šěně gôyim*], and never again will they be divided into two kingdoms [*šētē mamlākôt*].”

However, verse 23 emphasizes that unlike twentieth-century Zionism, which produced the modern state of Israel, rebinding the link between population and land will not be a political achievement but will involve a wholesale transformation of the people of Israel. YHWH will rescue them from all their apostasies by which they have sinned. In so doing he will also cleanse them of the idols (*gillûlîm*, “pellets of dung”) and their disgusting practices, with which they had defiled themselves. Undoubtedly the last bipartite statement in verse 23 is the most significant here: “Then they will be my people, and I will be their God.” As we saw

in 34:24a, 30–31, this statement establishes the context for Israel’s national reunion under a single king; those events presuppose the complete reconstitution of the covenant triangle; YHWH, Israel, and the land will be enjoying full *šālôm* (cf. 34:25–29).

In 37:24–25 YHWH concretizes the promises he made in verses 21–23. First, he no longer speaks of a king generally but, as in 34:23, identifies his royal appointee as “my servant David,” who will be shepherd over all Israel, and declares, “My servant David will be king [*melek*] over [*‘a*] them.” Remarkably, verses 24b–25a associate the presence of this Davidic king with the people’s obedience to YHWH’s “stipulations and ordinances” (*mišpāṭîm ûḥuqqôt*), shorthand for fidelity to the covenant as revealed at Sinai and expounded in the Torah of Moses (Deuteronomy). Having been cleansed by YHWH (v. 23), in keeping with Deuteronomy 17:18–20, the king will serve as a model of covenant righteousness and inspire the people’s fidelity. The reward for the people will be eternal and irrevocable (*‘ad ‘ôlām*) residence in the land promised to the ancestors. YHWH concludes verse 25 by affirming that just as he has kept his promise to the nation of eternal title to the land, so he will keep his promise to David and his descendants of eternal title to the throne of Israel. These two commitments go hand in hand.

As in 34:23–25, the installation of the new representative of the Davidic house functions as the seal of YHWH’s making (here *kārat*, “to cut”) “a covenant of peace for them” (*bērît šālôm lāhem*). In keeping with 34:25–30, this does not involve a new covenant but represents the divine fulfillment of the Israelite covenant, first made with Abraham and then established with his descendants at Sinai and confirmed a generation later on the plains of Moab. By the time we reach the end of chapter 37, all four pillars of Judah’s earlier misplaced security, which Ezekiel had systematically demolished in the judgment oracles of

chapters 4–24, have been reconstructed: (1) YHWH’s covenant promise to Abraham that his descendants would occupy their hereditary homeland forever (37:21, 25); (2) YHWH’s covenant promise to Israel to be their God and to have them as his people forever (vv. 23b, 27b); (3) YHWH’s covenant promise to David of eternal title to the throne of Israel (vv. 24a, 25b); and (4) YHWH’s promise that Zion/Jerusalem is his chosen dwelling place forever (vv. 27a, 28). The appointment of the new David—that is, the Messiah—as YHWH’s servant and the shepherd of his people symbolizes his irrevocable covenant commitment to the descendants of Abraham and his provision of a Davidic administrator of the Israelite covenant.

Haggai

With the prophets Haggai and Zechariah we have neared the end of the sixth century BC. Following the Persian takeover of Babylon in 539 BC, one of Cyrus the Great’s first actions was to authorize Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1–2). Faced with intense opposition from the locals, the people’s initial enthusiasm waned, and the project lay dormant for sixteen years—until Haggai and Zechariah appeared.¹⁹ Finally, in 516/515 BC the reconstruction was completed.

The book of Haggai expresses particular interest in Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel and governor of the Persian administrative district of Judah/Yehud.²⁰ Since Shealtiel was the son of Jehoiachin (1 Chron. 3:16–17), his significance for the survival of YHWH’s covenant with David was particularly acute, which probably explains why the book concludes with an oracle to Zerubbabel (2:21–23). Verses 21–22 set the context for the announcement in verse 23, but the divine signatory formula interrupts the one-sentence announcement concerning a signet three times. The first and third expand the normal version of the formula “the

declaration of YHWH” (*ně’um yhwh*) to “the declaration of YHWH *Ṣěbā’ôt*.” The phrase functions as a verbal signature, placing the divine imprimatur upon the oral word, analogous to the inscribed signature or seal imprint of an authority stamped on a written text. This formula adds gravitas to the prophetic pronouncement by pointing to its divine source.

As was the case with the people’s threefold declaration in the context of the covenant ratification at Sinai, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7), here the threefold stamp reflects the legal and irrevocable quality of YHWH’s announcement. These features were evident when we encountered the word *ḥôtām* (signet) in Jeremiah: “By my life—the declaration of YHWH—even if Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet [ring] on my right hand, I would tear you off and hand you over to those who seek your life . . . that is, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and the Chaldeans” (Jer. 22:24–25). This statement rightfully suggests that signets were objects worn on the finger, but they could also be attached to a chain or string and worn around the neck or as a bracelet on the arm (Song 8:6).

In the ancient world royal seals were made of precious stones, exquisitely crafted and designed as works of art (cf. Ezek. 28:12–13), often bearing the owner’s name or an image representing him or her. Since seals functioned as insignias of authority and authenticity, possessing the seal of a superior was a mark of honor, signifying that one had been deputized to sign documents on his behalf.²¹ However, although resembling the status of the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28:11–14 and Jehoiachin’s hypothetical status as a seal (Jer. 22:24), YHWH’s portrayal of the person Zerubbabel as a seal is odd. Ezekiel 28:12–14 suggests that as a signet the king of Tyre was deputized to represent divinity in paradise. This would certainly have fit the role of David, though he was never characterized this way. Although in Haggai’s time Zerubbabel was “merely” the governor of Judah (*paḥat*

yěhûdâ, Hag. 2:21), as the descendant of David via Jehoiachin, he embodied Israel's hope for the restoration of the dynasty—a hope that was fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Christ) on the opening page of the New Testament.

Zechariah

Like Haggai, Zechariah also addressed an oracle to Zerubbabel, whose significance in this book is tied to his role as leader in the reconstruction of the temple (Zech. 4:6–10). Since temple construction was the responsibility of kings, Zerubbabel's status has royal undertones. Although Zechariah does not develop this issue further, in two oracles he spoke enigmatically of “the sprout.”

Zechariah 3:7-10

Zechariah's combination of “my servant” (*‘abdî*) and “sprout/branch” (*šemaḥ*) was obviously inspired by Jeremiah 23:5–6, which meant that this person must be a Davidide. However, whereas Jeremiah's “sprout” seemed to involve a future figure, Zechariah spoke of an imminent event, suggesting that this sprout was Zerubbabel. His role as temple builder in 6:12–13 reinforces this conclusion. Accordingly, Zechariah 3:10 also anticipates the new community's imminent experience of peace and security—in contrast to the opposition that the returned exiles had been experiencing since they arrived from Babylon. The idiom of all citizens sitting under their own vine and fig tree derives from the portrait of the ideal Edenic world under Solomon, painted by the historian in 1 Kings 4:25 [5:5], though Micah 4:4 had applied the image to the characterization of YHWH's rule in the eschatological future.

Zechariah 6:12-13

This is a poetic fragment embedded in a larger oracle addressed to the high priest (6:9–15). For this reason, some understand the sprout in verse 12 to refer to Joshua, who assumed the role of king as well as priest. However, the opening “Look, a man . . .” distinguishes this third character from Joshua the addressee. Furthermore, the concluding prepositional phrase “between the two of them” (*bên šěněhem*) confirms a distinction between two characters, not merely two offices held by one person.

Zechariah played on the root *šmḥ*, speaking of a “sprout” (*šemaḥ*) “sprouting” (*šāmaḥ*). Apart from the links to Jeremiah, we know that this person is royal: (1) he will build the temple of YHWH; (2) he is dressed in majestic garb; (3) he will sit and rule on his throne. Zechariah’s reference to the temple here and in 8:9 as *hêkal yhwh*, “YHWH’s big house, palace,” highlights its function as the residence of YHWH, the supreme ruler. This accounts for the characterization of the sprout’s garments as “majestic” (*hôd*, 6:13), which is often associated with YHWH.²² These allusions to YHWH set hearers up for the sprout’s enthronement and rule in verse 13, suggesting he will reign as vice-regent alongside and on behalf of YHWH himself. Together they will offer the counsel of shalom (‘*ăṣat šālôm*) for the citizens.

The reference to the priest (apparently Joshua) also sitting on his throne in verse 13 complicates the picture and points to a diarchic authority structure. This element provides one more link with Jeremiah’s portrayal of the future of the Davidic dynasty. In Jeremiah 33:14–22, in a surprising move the prophet had reaffirmed YHWH’s eternal covenant with the Levitical priests, alongside his eternal covenant with David.

Zechariah 9:9–10

These two verses are embedded in a longer oracle (*maššā'*) of bad news for Israel's enemies but good news for Israel itself (9:1–11:17). After the introduction (9:1–3), YHWH appears as a divine warrior dealing with those who have made life difficult for his people (9:4–7) and then returning to his “house” to guard it. This is the image of a king who, while he was away on military campaigns, had left his palace vulnerable to attack. In verse 9 the addressee changes to the survivors of the judgment that YHWH's own people have experienced during the past couple of centuries.

In verse 9c YHWH announces the reason for the call to the Daughter of Zion to celebrate: “Look! Your king is coming to you.” Given the introduction, we might interpret this as a summons to await the arrival of YHWH himself. In view of Zechariah's earlier borrowing from Jeremiah's references to the Davidic sprout (Zech. 3:8; 6:9–15) and because the description of the king that follows scarcely fits YHWH, this summons announces the imminent arrival of YHWH's vice-regent. And given the addressees and the construction of this clause, this oracle may intentionally answer a question Micah had raised two centuries earlier: “Why do you now cry aloud? Have you no king? Has your ruler perished, that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?” (Mic. 4:8–9). YHWH hereby announces the imminent end to the protracted period without a king that Micah anticipated.

The remainder of these two verses describe the coming king, whose epithets fit into four groups of three. First, he is a righteous and virtuous man. (1) He is righteous (*šaddîq*), which means that like YHWH himself,²³ like the servant of Isaiah 53:11, and like the sprout of Jeremiah 23:5, his life accords fully with the standards established in the covenant.²⁴ (2) He is “saved” (*nôšā'*). The passive verb assumes that YHWH is the agent of rescue and presupposes a period when the kingship has been in jeopardy. Perhaps Zechariah had in mind the vulnerable status of the dynasty

during the Persian period, or the sentence of childlessness that hung over Jehoiachin (Jer. 22:28–30), which could only be resolved through divine intervention (cf. Hag. 2:23).

(3) He is modest (*‘ānî*) in social stature. Elsewhere the word for “modest” identifies the needy, who lack resources for a secure existence, are dependent on others, and are often abused. However, some use it of a positive inner quality, humility,²⁵ in which case this king represents the opposite of Israel’s and Judah’s past arrogant kings as well as foreign rulers.

Second, he is a noble and respected figure, who comes riding into town on a donkey (Zech. 9:9e–f). Most interpret his riding a donkey—as opposed to a war horse—as visual commentary on his humble status, but this understanding is doubtful. Despite the syntax, the characterization of the king as “modest” belongs with the preceding “righteous” and “saved.” Furthermore, the First Testament offers no evidence that riding on a donkey was a mark of humility. In Judges 10:4 and 12:14 Jair’s thirty sons and Abdon’s forty sons and thirty grandsons rode on one hundred donkeys (*‘ăyārîm*), a mark of social elevation, if not hubris. Ordinary citizens walked. Finally, the three expressions for donkeys are not randomly arranged but ordered to reflect increasing specificity and quality of animal: (1) *ḥămôr*, the general term for “donkey,” without respect to gender or function; (2) *‘ayir*, “jackass, male donkey”; (3) *ben ‘ătônôt*, “purebred donkey.” Judges 5:10 refers to luxury donkeys as “tawny purebreds” (*‘ătônôt šěḥôrôt*), with saddle blankets (*middîn*, i.e., “robes”) on their backs, on which the riders sat. When this king rides into town, everyone will recognize him as a ruling figure.

Third, he will demilitarize the land, eliminating all implements of war. The reference to Ephraim and Jerusalem as the targets of the purge recalls Ezekiel’s prediction that when YHWH appoints the single shepherd, “my servant David,” Israel will be unified under his rule.

Fourth, this reign will bless the entire world, a prospect emphasized in the three geographic expressions: “the nations,” “from sea to sea,” and “from the river to the ends of the earth.” With the declaration “He will speak peace,” YHWH means that the words of his mouth will seek the well-being of all the nations, not merely by ending hostilities but also by actively promoting/creating *šālôm* in their relationships with him and one another. Taken together, the two halves of verse 10 reflect the reciprocal extension of divine rule, based in Zion/Jerusalem, spreading out to all Israel, extending as far as the river Euphrates, which was the northern boundary of David’s empire, and out to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah’s portrait of the coming king borrows heavily from Psalm 72, a messianic psalm. With YHWH’s promise of the return of his vice-regent and the extension of his rule to the ends of the earth, the prophet has reminded his audience that YHWH has neither willfully reneged nor forgotten his ancient covenant promise to David. On the contrary, when the new David arrives, the universalization of his reign that the original David anticipated in 2 Samuel 7:19 will be realized.

Zechariah 9:11-11:17

Interest in the Davidic house continues after 9:9-10. Although the name David does not appear, the pastoral motif involving YHWH’s flock²⁶ and the shepherds of his flock²⁷ dominates the remainder of 9:11-11:17. Two of these texts identify YHWH as the shepherd (9:16; 10:2-3), while in the remainder the participial noun *rō’eh*, “shepherd,” and the verb *rā’â*, “to pasture, tend,” apply to human shepherds. “Shepherd” could involve leaders generally, but in the light of allusions to Ezekiel 34 and 37 and to Jeremiah 23:4-6, most occurrences involve governors, Persian-era successors to the kings of earlier times. The reference to sheep

wandering among the nations and afflicted for lack of a shepherd and YHWH's angry response in Zechariah 10:2–3 recall Ezekiel 34:1–10. His punishing of the male goats within the flock (10:3) recalls Ezekiel 34:17–22. His intervention on behalf of the flock—using vocabulary associated with the exodus from Egypt (*hōšî'a*, “to save,” Zech. 10:3–6b; *pādâ*, “to redeem,” 10:8; *hēšîb*, “to bring back,” 10:10; *hēbî' el*, “to bring to [the land],” 10:10)—recalls Ezekiel 34:7–16. Although YHWH changes the expression for the pieces of wood involved, his taking two staffs (*maqlôt*) bearing names and cutting one up, as a symbol of his revoking his covenant (11:7–10), parodies Ezekiel's sign act involving two inscribed pieces of wood (‘ēṣ) that he joins as an image of YHWH's eventual reunion of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (Ezek. 37:15–22). Similarly, his promise to “raise up” a shepherd who will not care for the sheep (Zech. 11:16) parodies Jeremiah's promise of a righteous shepherd whom YHWH will raise up (Jer. 23:5). But his final pronouncement of woe on the worthless shepherds (Zech. 11:17) coheres with Jeremiah's “woe” in 23:1–2 and Ezekiel's “woe” in 34:2–6.

Although these shepherds appear to be contemporary to the prophet Zechariah, their specific identity is unclear. The narratives in Ezra–Nehemiah concerning Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and the image of him in Haggai and Zechariah all paint a consistently positive picture of the man—though he never rises to the status of king. If he was the target of these pronouncements of judgment, then we might suppose that the broad outline of his life mirrored that of Solomon; once he had completed the temple project, his style of government became increasingly self-serving and religiously compromising. However, the plurals suggest more than one Persian-era governor. If Zerubbabel maintained his integrity throughout his tenure as governor, then “my worthless shepherds” may refer to his successors. Nehemiah speaks of “former governors” who “imposed

heavy burdens on the people and confiscated their food and wine, in addition to taking forty shekels of silver,” and says “their servants lorded it over the people” (Neh. 5:15). The evidence of 1 Chronicles 3:17–19 and extrabiblical seal inscriptions from Yehud (Judah) indicate that governors who succeeded Zerubbabel probably included his son-in-law Elnathan (married to Zerubbabel’s daughter Shelomith), Yeho‘ezer, and Ahazai, though we have no evidence that these were Davidides. In any case, Zechariah suggests that YHWH’s disposition toward these governors differed little from his disposition toward the royal successors to Josiah.

Zechariah 12:7-10

In 12:1–13:9 we encounter Zechariah’s final and most complex Davidic text, in which David’s name appears six times.²⁸ The boundaries separating subsections of Zechariah 12:1–13:6 are not clearly marked by literary/rhetorical signals and shifts in topic. However, following the preamble (12:1), the oracle divides into two parts: 12:2–9 and 12:10–13:6. The first deals generally with YHWH’s victory over the nations on Judah and Jerusalem’s behalf, while the second concerns YHWH’s cleansing of Judah and Jerusalem. The first segment expresses no explicit interest in the royal house until verses 7–8, where YHWH describes the implications of the triumph over the nations for Judah and its relationship to David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Verse 7 assumes that YHWH’s salvation of Judah and Jerusalem will result in their glorification. The use of *tip’eret* as the expression for “glory” suggests that he has in mind Deuteronomy 26:19, where Moses declared long ago that YHWH’s intent was to set his people high above all the nations “for praise, fame, and glory [*tip’eret*].” However, as a reminder that this victory is not primarily about either the king or Jerusalem, his capital city, he reins in their glorification to ensure that the glory of

Judah, the nation, is never overshadowed. Like many modern states, the Judah of history was plagued by tensions between the urban seats of power and the people who lived in the villages and towns.

This does mean that either the inhabitants of Jerusalem (government officials) or David himself will be suppressed. On the contrary, even the weak—that is, those who stumble—will share in the glory of David. As for David himself, he will be like God, specifically like the envoy (*mal'āk*) of YHWH (Zech. 12:8). This obviously does not mean divinization (Gk. *theōsis*) of David but is a declaration of the way people will perceive him. Early in the historical David's life, his defeat of Goliath had been for the benefit of the whole earth, as well as YHWH's own people, that all might know that there is a God in Israel and that in David's victory they had witnessed the triumph of YHWH (1 Sam. 17:46–47). The Davidic kings sat “on the throne of YHWH” (1 Chron. 29:22–23) and governed the people as his vice-regents. This statement also recalls YHWH's clarification of the role of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 4:16: the people will perceive Aaron as the prophet of Moses, and Moses will play the divine role by declaring to him the messages he was to pass on to the people. The reference to “the envoy of YHWH” recalls 2 Samuel 14:17, where the woman of Tekoa declared that in his judgment between good and evil, David was “like the envoy of God.”

The second half of this oracle (Zech. 12:10–13:6) concerns the cleansing of Judah and Jerusalem. It opens with YHWH's engagement of the spirit in the transformation of the house of David and the inhabitants of the capital (its government officials): “I will pour over the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for grace. Then they will look on me, the one they have stabbed. They will mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and grieve intensely over him, as one grieves over [the death of] a firstborn” (12:10).

Although the verbs may vary, this text uses the motif, found in four earlier texts, of YHWH's pouring (here *šāpak*) a spirit upon his people.²⁹ However, the operation of the spirit here is quite different from the rest. First, here "spirit" (*rûah*) lacks the article, distinguishing this phenomenon from the references to "my Spirit" (*rûhî*) in the last three references in footnote 29. The poetic nature of Isaiah 32:15 renders the article or a suffix "my" on the word optional, but the modifier "from on high"³⁰ confirms its definiteness.

Second, in all the other contexts involving the liquid metaphor, the outpouring of the Spirit occurs at a critical moment in Israel's eschatological restoration, an occasion for great celebration. There it signifies YHWH's confirmation of Israel as his renewed covenant people, and in so doing guarantees their security and well-being (see esp. Ezek. 39:29). In Zechariah 12:10-11 the outpouring of the spirit has a totally different effect, causing people to recognize the violence they have done to YHWH ("They will look on me whom they have stabbed") and leading them to intense mourning and grief for him. The word *sāpad*, "mourning," occurs in contexts of great loss, especially of a loved one;³¹ in Ruth 1:20, Naomi used *mārar* to speak of the bitterness of the same sort of loss. YHWH's present reference to the bitterness of the loss of a firstborn recalls Abraham's agony over offering his "only son" (*yāhîd*; cf. Jer. 6:26; Amos 8:10).

Remarkably, here the roles are reversed. Ancient Near Easterners often spoke of the suzerain-vassal covenant relationship with father-son language. Thus YHWH was Israel's father and Israel was his (adopted) son (Deut. 1:31; 14:1), and more particularly, YHWH was David's father, and David was his son.³² But here Judah and Jerusalem (the son) is the one mourning the loss of YHWH (the father). Ezekiel dramatically illustrates the rupture between YHWH and Israel by the staged departure of the glory from the temple in the first temple vision (9:1-11:23). However, that moment had been provoked by a series of abominations perpetrated

in his temple (8:3–16). Significantly, in the third scene (8:14–15) the women weeping “the Tammuz” apparently attribute Judah’s crisis before the fall of the city to the death of YHWH—though by means of a pagan ritual. In the present text (Zech. 12:10–11), YHWH plays on that motif shockingly, attributing his own death to the people’s actions (they have stabbed him), perhaps an allusion to and intensification of the enigmatic metaphor in Ezekiel 8:17: “They have put a twig to my nose.” As a result of the outpouring of a “spirit” (Zech. 12:10), the people will acknowledge their responsibility for YHWH’s departure (portrayed metaphorically as his death) and will grieve over their loss of YHWH, a necessary prerequisite to the restoration of the covenant relationship (13:9) and for his own return as King in Jerusalem and King over the whole earth (Zech. 14).

Third, Zechariah 12:10 characterizes this “spirit” as “a spirit of grace and pleading for grace.” The construction is awkward for us because English literary style discourages the use of cognate forms of the same root within a sentence. But that is precisely what YHWH has done. The Hebrew root *ḥnn* underlying the nouns *ḥēn* and *taḥănnûn* speaks of the favor the lesser needs from the greater (cf. Ruth 2:2, 10). Because it is often undeserved, we define grace as “undeserved favor.” This is certainly the case here. The two words reflect the bidirectional nature of Judah’s current need. The first focuses on the disposition that is fundamental to YHWH’s character,³³ while the second focuses on the expression of need by a suppliant.³⁴ Given the intensity of the offense committed against YHWH and the stubborn disposition of his people, neither is possible without YHWH taking the initiative and pouring his spirit of grace over his people, or without the people coming to their senses and pleading for his grace.

The need for YHWH to pour this spirit over the house of David as well as the inhabitants of Jerusalem (i.e., the locus of power and administration for the nation) reflects the

critical role that Davidic kings were to play in the operation of the tripartite Israelite covenant involving YHWH, Israel, and the land. YHWH had indeed appointed them as his vice-regents, but because they had failed in their performance, YHWH had thrown a grenade into the covenant triangle, turned his back on his people, and abandoned his land (cf. Lev. 25:23), just as he had warned them he would do within the terms of the Israelite covenant.³⁵

- ¹. 1 Sam. 16:4; 17:12, 15; 20:6, 28.
- ². Cf. Gen. 22:17; 49:10; Deut. 17:14–15; 1 Sam. 13:14.
- ³. Gen. 15:18; Exod. 23:31; Deut. 1:7–8; 11:24.
- ⁴. Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Eccles. 12:13.
- ⁵. Cf. also Isa. 61:1–3 and 1 Sam. 16:13.
- ⁶. Reading *mšḥt mē'îš* in v. 14 with 1QIsa^a as “more than a human anointing.”
- ⁷. Exod. 15:15; 2 Kings 24:15; Ezek. 17:13; cf. Jer. 25:34; etc.
- ⁸. Cf. Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7.
- ⁹. 2 Sam. 7:15; 22:51; 1 Kings 3:6; 8:26; 11:38; 1 Chron. 17:24; 2 Chron. 1:8, 9; 6:7, 42; 7:6; Pss. 18:50 [51]; 89:28, 49 [29, 50]; Isa. 16:5.
- ¹⁰. Cf. Exod. 28:11, 21; 39:6, 14.
- ¹¹. Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18.
- ¹². Cf. Jer. 16:13; Deut. 28:36; 29:28 [27].
- ¹³. Isa. 9:2–7 [1–6]; 11:1–10; and 52:13–53:12.
- ¹⁴. Isa. 9:7 [6]; cf. Jesse in 11:1, 10.
- ¹⁵. Isa. 9:7 [6]; 11:4, 5.
- ¹⁶. Ezek. 12:1–16; 17; 19.
- ¹⁷. Ezek. 5:3–4; 11:16–21; 16:60–63; 17:22–24; 20:34–44.
- ¹⁸. Cf. Deut. 17:14–15; 1 Sam. 8:19–20.
- ¹⁹. Ezra 5:1–2; 6:14–15; Hag. 1:1–15.
- ²⁰. Hag. 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 23; cf. Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2; Neh. 12:1.
- ²¹. Gen. 41:42; Esther 3:10; 8:8–10.
- ²². 1 Chron. 29:11; Pss. 8:1 [2]; 148:13; Isa. 30:30.
- ²³. Deut. 32:4; 2 Chron. 12:6; Ps. 145:17.
- ²⁴. Cf. Deut. 16:20; 17:18–20.
- ²⁵. Num. 12:3; 2 Sam. 22:28; Ps. 18:27 [28].
- ²⁶. Zech. 9:16; 10:2; 11:4, 7, 11, 17.
- ²⁷. Zech. 10:2–3; 11:3–5, 7–9, 15–17.
- ²⁸. Zech. 12:7, 8a, 8b, 10, 12; 13:1.
- ²⁹. Cf. Isa. 32:15, *‘ārâ*; 44:3, *yāšaḡ*; Ezek. 39:29, *šāpak*; Joel 2:28, 29 [3:1, 2], *šāpak*.
- ³⁰. Cf. Ps. 102:19 [20]; Jer. 25:30.
- ³¹. Gen. 23:2; 50:10; 1 Sam. 25:1; 28:3; 2 Sam. 1:12; etc.

- [32.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 7:14; Pss. 2:7-8; 89:26-27 [27-28].
- [33.](#) Exod. 34:6; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; Jon. 4:2; all using the form *ḥannûn*.
- [34.](#) Cf. Pss. 28:2; 116:1; Jer. 3:21; 31:9; Dan. 9:3, 17, 18, 23.
- [35.](#) Deut. 31:17-18; cf. Ezek. 8:12; 9:9.

CHAPTER 12

The Afterlife of the Davidic Covenant in the Psalter

Introduction

The existence of the Psalter itself testifies to the significance of the Davidic covenant in Israelite history, tradition, and theology, for this magnificent collection of prayers and hymns is both profoundly Davidic and pervasively royal. The book opens with a congratulatory poem for the man (*'ašrê hā'îšš*) who refuses to associate with the wicked, sinners, and scoffers, but who delights in the Torah of YHWH and meditates on it constantly. By the time the Psalter was compiled and this psalm was inserted at the beginning of the collection, and by the time we enter the New Testament era (cf. Luke 24:44), the scope of the name “The Torah” had been extended to encompass the five Scrolls of Moses—that is, the Pentateuch (“five writings”). However, in Psalm 1, as elsewhere in the Psalter, “the Torah” (*hattôrâ*) still identifies a smaller document, the written record of Moses’ addresses (referred to as “this document of the Torah” in Deuteronomy 31:9–13 and elsewhere) preserved in the book of Deuteronomy. This was the scroll that Josiah’s men found while refurbishing the temple (2 Kings 22) and the scroll that Ezra read before the assembled residents of Jerusalem in the fifth century BC (Neh. 8).

Of course, in Psalm 1 “delight” means much more than merely enjoying the Torah aesthetically as beautiful literature—even though it is! It also means finding delight in Moses’ retelling of the story of divine grace in YHWH’s election of the ancestors as his chosen people, his rescue of their descendants from the slavery of Egypt, his selection of Israel for covenant relationship with himself and for the commission of blessing the world, his revelation of his will in all its dimensions, and his gift of the land of Canaan as the Israelites’ hereditary homeland. It also means delighting in the Torah as the divinely revealed “instruction” (which is what the Hebrew word *tôrâ* means) and in the embodiment of this revelation in life (Deut. 6:24–25; Pss. 19:7–14 [8–15]; 119).

The person congratulated in Psalm 1:1 is not an ordinary citizen but a member of the court, one who has no ear for the advice of, and rejects the company of, unseemly advisers. Indeed, this poem may have been penned as counsel for a prince in line for the throne. On the one hand, both the characterization of this blessed man as one who delights in the Torah and the promise of a productive and fruitful life as the reward for having done so allude to the final statements in Moses’ “Charter for Kingship” in Deuteronomy 17:18–20. On the other hand, although it is cast as a congratulatory note rather than an exhortation, the reference to the Torah and the promise of reward mirror the structure of David’s exhortation to Solomon in 1 Kings 2:2–4.

If the first psalm is implicitly royal, the second is explicitly so; in it the psalmist celebrates the adoption of the Davidic king as a “son of God.” I will examine this psalm more closely below. However, for now I note summarily that these two psalms, focusing on the king as a student of Torah and as the divinely installed vice-regent, invite us to hear and meditate on the Psalter as a window into the minds of the faithful in ancient Israel, focusing on how the Torah was to

be read. To be sure, following the introduction (Pss. 1-2), the fivefold division of the Psalter mirrors the five scrolls of the Pentateuch: Scroll 1, Psalms 3-41; Scroll 2, Psalms 42-72; Scroll 3, Psalms 73-89; Scroll 4, Psalms 90-106; Scroll 5, Psalms 107-50. Contrary to common practice, especially in evangelical churches, of regularly reading and preaching from the Psalms in public worship but rarely opening the Torah (i.e., Deuteronomy), the Psalter was not produced to subvert or replace the Torah or even to supplement it. As the Torah Psalms (1; 19; 119) suggest, if we will not claim the Torah of Moses as our guide for faith and life, we have no right to claim the Psalter as part of the Christian canon.

The royal and Davidic character of the Psalter is evident in other ways as well. First, the psalm titles associate 74 out of 150 psalms with David. The proportion is 74:116 if we take into account that 34 psalms lack a heading. While often understood as reflecting Davidic authorship, the Hebrew construction *lēdāwid*, is capable of a variety of meanings: by David, dedicated to David, about David, in David's honor, for the use of the Davidic kings, and so on. The title does not necessarily attribute authorship of these psalms to this man. But other names in these titles also have royal implications: most obviously the two associated with Solomon (Pss. 72; 127) but also the twelve associated with Asaph and those associated with Heman (88) and Ethan (89), since these three were all Davidic appointments involved in the music of temple worship (1 Chron. 15:19; 25:1).

Second, within the psalms the word "king" (*melek*) is used of Israel's [Davidic] king fourteen times.¹ Third, Scroll 3 ends with a colophonic statement, "The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended" (72:20). Fourth, the Psalter is punctuated by psalms that focus on the Davidic kingship, many of which we identify as messianic (2; 45; 72; 89; 110; 132). But to these we should add others that mention the Davidic king or throne explicitly,² as well those like Psalm

23, which, while developing the metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep, in the end turns out to be a royal Psalm composed by a “sheep” in praise of YHWH, his Shepherd—that is, his king. The royal significance is clear at the end. However, this psalm, which the title associates with David, makes the most sense if David, the shepherd of his father’s flock, is the poet. Fifth, psalms that exhibit military features—such as references to the army or armies (18:29 [30]; 27:3; 33:16) or warfare/battle³—reflect the interest of the king as leader in warfare.

Before we examine the royal psalms that focus on David’s kingship or the dynastic covenant, the passing references to these issues elsewhere deserve a comment. Psalm 18:49–50 [50–51] concludes a lengthy psalm of praise for deliverance. The title interprets the deliverance generally as David’s rescue from all his enemies but explicitly mentions his rescue from Saul. Given the references to battles and the significance of the victories, this understanding is entirely plausible. Throughout the psalm the poet speaks consistently with the first-person singular—until we get to the last verse, where he speaks in the third person of David, YHWH’s king, and his anointed. He concludes the song of praise with a climactic note of praise to YHWH, the living God, and a determination to sing his praise among the nations (vv. 46–49 [47–50]), and then specifies that these deliverances have involved David:

He magnifies his acts of salvation for his king,
And he acts with unfailing love for his anointed,
For David, and his offspring forever. (18:50 [51])

Remarkably, the psalmist speaks of David as YHWH’s king and YHWH’s anointed, rather than as “the king of Israel” or “the anointed of Israel.” Although David (1 Sam. 24:14; 26:20) and Achish the Philistine (1 Sam. 29:3) used the expression “the king of Israel,” Michal, Saul’s daughter and David’s first wife, was the only person who applied this

epithet to David, and she did so sarcastically (2 Sam. 6:20). Elsewhere people referred to David as “king over Israel” (e.g., 1 Sam. 23:17) and even as “anointed as king over Israel” (2 Sam. 5:3, 17; 12:7; 1 Chron. 14:8) but never as “the king/anointed one of Israel.” The use of the word *hesed* (“unfailing love”; cf. 2 Sam. 7:15) and the reference to “David and his offspring” (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12) in Psalm 18:50 [51] link this statement explicitly to the dynastic oracle.

Psalm 20 is also a psalm of praise for YHWH’s victory on behalf of “his anointed” (v. 6 [7]). As with Psalm 18, if David was the composer of Psalm 20, he has camouflaged his identity. The psalm begins with the voice of someone praying for the addressee (note the second-person singular “you” in vv. 1–5 [2–6]), but then the psalmist switches to the first-person plural (“we,” “us”) in verses 5, 7–9 [6, 8–10], apparently speaking for himself and the king, or perhaps for the community. But in his confession in verse 6 [7] he reverts to the first-person singular and speaks of the king in the third person: “Now I know that YHWH saves his anointed.” However, he concludes with the first-person plural: “O YHWH! Save the king! May he answer us when we call” (v. 9 [10]). If David was the psalmist here, he went to great lengths to invite his people into his experience. After all, he was YHWH’s vice-regent, chosen for the sake of the people, and the paradigm of godliness for the people.

Praise for divine rescue continues in Psalm 21. However, this piece is composed differently. Consisting of thirteen verses, it divides into two balanced halves (vv. 1–6 [2–7], forty-nine words; vv. 8–13 [9–14], forty-four words), separated by verse 7 [8], which functions as a hinge between the celebration of the benefactions that attend the privilege of being YHWH’s appointed king (vv. 1–6 [2–7]) and the celebration for the victories that YHWH has achieved on behalf of his king (vv. 8–13 [9–14]). In verse 3 [4] *birkôt tōb* triggers our interpretation of the first part of the verse. The usual translation, “rich blessings,” obscures the link with

2 Samuel 7:28, where David had spoken of the benefactions of the covenant that YHWH had just granted him as “this good thing” (*haṭṭôbâ hazzô’t*). The report of the king’s response in the hinge statement (v. 7 [8])—“Indeed the king trusts [*bōṭēah*] in YHWH; and through his *unfailing love* [*ḥesed*] he will not be shaken”—reinforces the link with 2 Samuel 7 (cf. 7:15). Although the motif of kingship surfaces only in verses 16–17 of Psalm 33, the psalmist declares the same confidence (*bāṭah*, v. 21) in YHWH’s unfailing love (*ḥesed*, vv. 18, 22) as the guarantee of his and the community’s security.

As in Psalm 20, we observe the psalmist in Psalm 61 offer yet another plea for deliverance, camouflaging his identity through subtle shifts in pronouns. In the psalmist’s prayer for help in verses 1–5 [2–6], as well as in the concluding expression of thanksgiving (v. 8 [9]), he uses the first person. However, when he reflects on the grounds of his confidence in verses 6–7 [7–8], he shifts to the third person:

May he be enthroned forever in the presence of God;
Appoint unfailing love [*ḥesed*] and faithfulness [*’ēmet*] to guard him!
(v. 7 [8])

Again the lexical echoes of 2 Samuel 7 are clear. The same pattern is evident in Psalm 63. Not only does the king’s security rest in YHWH’s unfailing love (*ḥesed*, v. 3 [4]), but the psalm is also composed in the first person until the final verse, 11 [12], where the psalmist speaks of the king in third person: “But the king will rejoice in God.”

Psalm 78 presents an interesting case. Apart from Psalm 119, with its 72 verses this is the longest composition in the Psalter (by number of words, it is approximately half the length of 119). The psalm consists largely of a recitation of YHWH’s faithfulness to Israel as a nation, from their time in Egypt through the desert wanderings, the conquest of Canaan, and the period of settlement under the tribal chieftains (judges). Amid the Israelites’ troubles brought on

by their infidelity to their divine Suzerain and his covenant, it must have seemed as though YHWH had abandoned them (cf. Deut. 31:17–18) or fallen asleep on the job.⁴ But when he was aroused to intervene on Israel's behalf, according to 78:65–72, his intervention took a curious turn. The psalmist speaks of two significant actions by the divine Suzerain (*'ădōnāy*, "Lord"): he chose the place for his sanctuary, and he chose his vice-regent. The order is curious, since historically YHWH's election of David preceded his revelation of Zion as his chosen dwelling place. But the declaration that YHWH had rejected the tent of Joseph and the tribe of Ephraim (an allusion to Shiloh, v. 60) in favor of the tribe of Judah and Mount Zion for his sanctuary is equally striking, raising questions about the legitimacy of the centuries-long location of the sanctuary at Shiloh (vv. 67–69). Was this symptomatic of Israel's rebellion during this entire period?

The psalmist presents YHWH's election of David as the climax of this psalm and the climax of the history of YHWH's relationship with Israel to the point of the psalm's composition. The language chosen in 78:70–71 to describe that election and the transfer of David's sphere of shepherding from his father's to YHWH's flock echoes 2 Samuel 5:2 and 7:8. However, as we have come to expect, in YHWH's election of David, YHWH was not thinking primarily about David and his descendants. This action was taken for the sake of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, his people (*'ammô*) and his reserved possession (*naḥălātô*). But the psalm ends with an assessment of David's performance: "He tended them with pure heart and guided them with his skillful hands" (v. 72).

Remarkably, apart from the psalm titles and Psalm 132, which functions as a sort of commentary on Psalm 72:68–71, the name of David occurs in Scroll 5 (Pss. 107–50) only in 122:5, which speaks of thrones of judgment—that is, the thrones of the house of David—and in 144:10, an exuberant

psalm of praise to YHWH for his rescue of the psalmist. Once more, the psalmist speaks in the first person (144:1–9, 11–14), except in verse 10, where he speaks of the king in the third person: “YHWH gives salvation to kings and has rescued David from the deadly sword.” Has David the psalmist camouflaged his identity once more?

Having briefly examined the passing references to David and his kingship, we may now focus on psalms whose major themes relate to these subjects. These represent a subcategory of psalms that scholars have recognized as “royal psalms,” relating specifically to the Davidic kings (Pss. 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132), and that are often interpreted messianically.

Psalm 2: The Triumph of YHWH and His Anointed

The date and authorship of this psalm are unknown. Although most scholars relate it to the accession of one of David’s descendants, the content makes the most sense if we link it directly to an event in David’s life. It cannot have been the moment of his original anointing, when the Spirit of YHWH had come upon him and he was actually adopted as the “son of God” (1 Sam. 16:12–13), since that was a relatively private event in Bethlehem. It seems more likely that an inspired poet—perhaps Nathan—composed this for some formal public celebration of what had transpired in 2 Samuel 7; that is, the formal announcement of David’s line being granted eternal title to the throne in Jerusalem. However, we could also imagine this having been written for Solomon’s inauguration, when optimism concerning the monarchy was high in the wake of David’s remarkable rule.

The plot of the psalm is clear, as is reflected in table 12.1. Our concerns here are (1) the psalm’s portrayal of the relationship between YHWH and the king whom he installed on Mount Zion and (2) this figure’s role in YHWH’s response to worldwide rebellion against his rule (vv. 1–3). YHWH’s

sarcastic laughter and taunting (v. 4) and his terrifying fury (v. 5) reflect the disposition of the one enthroned in the heavens toward a world in revolt against his authority. Remarkably, instead of punishing the kings of the earth and their minions directly, as he had in the great deluge (Gen. 6-8), he put his vice-regent in charge of subduing the world.

Table 12.1

Psalm 2: The Triumph of YHWH and His Anointed

1 Why are the nations restless, And the peoples plotting in vain?	A. The International Revolt
2 The kings of the earth take their stand, And the rulers conspire together against YHWH, and against his anointed.	1. The Signs of the Revolt
3 Let us tear off their shackles, and toss their cords away.	2. The Nature of the Revolt
4 The one enthroned in the heavens laughs; The Lord taunts them.	a. The Leaders
5 Then he speaks to them in his anger, and he terrifies them in his fury.	b. The Focus
6 But as for me, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.	c. The Goal
7 I will proclaim the decree of YHWH: He said to me, "You are my Son; Today I have become your father."	B. YHWH's Response to the Revolt
8 Request of me, and I will give you the nations as your grant, and the ends of the earth as your possession.	1. YHWH's Derision
9 You will break them with an iron rod; You will shatter them like a potter's jar.	2. YHWH's Anger
10 Now therefore, O kings be wise; Be warned, O rulers of the earth.	3. YHWH's Action
11 Serve YHWH with trusting awe, And celebrate with trembling.	C. The Consecration of YHWH's Anointed
12 Pay homage to the Son, lest he be angry, and you will be doomed in the way, for his wrath will quickly be ignited.	1. The Declaration of His Status
How privileged are all who find refuge in him!	2. The Announcement of His Jurisdiction
	3. The Prediction of His Triumph
	D. The Challenge to the Rebels
	1. The Charge
	2. The Exhortation
	a. The Required Action
	b. The Required Attitude
	3. The Warning
	E. The Challenge to the Readers

Perhaps we should not worry about the precise sequence of events, but significantly the worldwide conspiracy is not only against YHWH but also against his Messiah (*měšîḥô*, v. 2). This suggests the anointing of the Messiah was not

YHWH's response to the rebellion but one of the factors triggering it. YHWH's response was installing him on Mount Zion (v. 6). In any case, verses 1-6 are critical for understanding the relationship between YHWH and the Davidic kings.

Between verses 6 and 7 the speaker changes. Whereas in verses 1-5 we hear the psalmist or a hypothetical interlocutor announcing YHWH's installation of his king on Zion, in verse 6 we hear YHWH's voice explaining how and why David or his son has been anointed and authorized to govern the earth in his place; he was there by divine appointment. And then in verse 7 the anointed one speaks for himself, proclaiming to all what YHWH had declared to him: "You are my son; today I have become your father." This statement echoes 2 Samuel 7:14, but the form derives from ancient Near Eastern adoption proceedings. Earlier I noted that the Israelite covenant formula, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people," represented an adaptation of ancient marriage rituals, in which the groom would declare, "I will be your husband, and you shall be my wife," and the bride would respond with "I will be your wife, and you shall be my husband." Adoption formulas were similar: "I will be your father, and you will be my son," and if the son was of age he would respond, "I will be your son, and you shall be my father" (cf. Isa. 63:16; 64:8).

Now we learn that if Israel collectively was YHWH's firstborn son (*bēkôr*, Exod. 4:22; Jer. 31:9) and Israelites could be called "sons [children] of YHWH" (Deut. 14:1), YHWH bestowed the title "son of God" on the king in a particular sense. The reference to this declaration as "YHWH's decree" (*ḥōq*) casts the speech that follows as the citation of an official royal proclamation. As we have seen before, "father-son" terminology in contexts like this derives from ancient treaty-making procedures, in which the suzerain was identified as "father" and the vassal as his "son" (e.g., 2 Kings 16:7). But as we noted earlier (see

above, chap. 10) the notion was not unique to this text (cf. Ps. 89:26–27 [27–28]) or to ancient Israel. Applied to the historical David or Davidide who was the subject of the psalm, the epithet “son of God” was merely a metaphor. By the time we get to the New Testament and realize its full significance in the new David, the ultimate Messiah (the Christ), it turns out to be literally true.⁵

In verse 8, YHWH’s voice returns, as he invites his vice-regent to ask for the world! As YHWH’s grant (*naḥălâ*) and possession (*’ăḥuzzâ*), the nations and the ends of the earth will be to this anointed one what the land of Canaan was to the king of Israel. However, this promise extends the boundaries of the anointed one’s rule far beyond the maximalist definition of the promised land (Gen. 15:18–21; Exod. 23:31; Deut. 1:7–8), and beyond what David achieved (2 Sam. 8). This promise both confirms the universal significance of the dynastic oracle that David grasped (2 Sam. 7:19) and inspires prophetic utterances concerning the geographic scope of YHWH’s rule from Zion (Isa. 2:2–4; Mic. 5:2–5 [1–4]) and the Messiah’s rule particularly (Isa. 11:1–10; Amos 9:11–12). However, YHWH’s promise to grant his “son” the ends of the earth is no empty promise. In verse 9 the one enthroned in the heavens predicts that the anointed one will shatter all resistance to his rule.

The final strophe involves a challenge to the rebellious nations and their kings to respond wisely (*hiśkîl*) and accept the installation of the son as king on YHWH’s throne as a warning of his seriousness (vv. 10–12). They may yet avert the fury of YHWH’s wrath by accepting his suzerainty, serving (*’ābad*) him with trusting and reverent awe (*yir’â*), celebrating (*gîl*) with trembling, and paying homage to the Son, presumably by “kissing” (*nāšaq*) his feet (cf. NRSV). The psalm concludes with a congratulatory note to all who find refuge in him. This would apply first and foremost to the Israelites, who look to “David” or his royal successor for security. As vice-regent, his reign was an extension of

YHWH's reign, which meant that the son dispensed the security that people find in YHWH, his Father.

Psalm 45: Celebrating a Royal Wedding

Although form critics are correct in classifying Psalm 45 as a "royal psalm," the psalm title recognizes its uniqueness among exemplars of this genre; it is a love song (*šîr yědîdôt*). From its contents we learn that this is not merely a popular love song; it is a wedding song composed for the occasion of a royal groom's marriage. We do not know for whose wedding it was composed. Given the dynasty's checkered history, few of David's descendants embodied the values represented here. If this was for the wedding of a renegade ruler, the poet who composed it was certainly clear about the ideals of the Davidic monarchy. The recitation of his accomplishments suggests that he was a reigning monarch, rather than a young prince for whom the throne was still a dream. The structure of the song proper is clear:

- A. Preamble (v. 1 [2])
- B. In tribute to the royal groom (vv. 2-8 [3-9])
- C. In tribute to the bride (vv. 9-15 [10-16])
- D. Coda (vv. 16-17 [17-18])

In the preamble the poet declares his intention to compose a poem in honor of the king. Given the patricentric character of the royal court, the absence of a reference to the bride in the introduction is not surprising. Although the less urbane Song of Songs gives equal attention to the voices of the bride and groom, this composition is intended for a formal occasion, when established social roles would be strictly respected. What is surprising is that the poet devotes almost two-thirds as much space to the bride as to

the groom (40:65 words, respectively). Our concern here is primarily the tribute to the groom (Ps. 45:2–8 [3–9]).

Except for the absence of reference to construction of a temple for YHWH, the “ode” to the king is concerned with conventional ancient Near Eastern matters: the king as military leader (vv. 3–5 [4–6]) and the king as administrator of justice internally (vv. 6–7 [7–8]). Remarkably, in keeping with his royal role as the embodiment of uprightness and righteousness (*mîšōr*, *ṣedeq*, vv. 6b–7a [7b–8a]), his task in his campaigns against outside enemies was to stamp out chaos and evil and to establish fidelity, humility, and righteousness (*’ēmet*, *’anwâ*, *ṣedeq*, v. 4 [5]). Only verses 7b–9 [8b–10] concern the present celebration, highlighting the multisensory nature of the event: the scene of the anointing, the aroma of the king’s garments, the sound of the royal orchestra, and the sight of the noble women, including the queen standing at his right hand (*niṣṣēbâ šēgal lîmînēkâ*, v. 9 [10]). Even the choice of a rare loanword for “queen” (*šēgal*, from Akkadian *ša ekalli*, “she of the palace”) contributes to the aura of the scene.

Given our present concern for the theology of kingship generally and the Davidic covenant particularly, verses 6–7 [7–8] are most significant for this discussion. In this, the heart of the song, we hear themes that by now are very familiar. First, the psalmist speaks of the king’s eternal title to the throne of Israel. The first line raises significant interpretive issues because it appears to address the king as God (*’ēlōhîm*). Although the modern Jewish translation interprets the word as an adjective, “your divine throne,”⁶ presumably with support from references to David’s throne as “the throne of YHWH” (1 Chron. 29:23; cf. Jer. 3:17), the Masoretic Jewish punctuation clearly favors the traditional interpretation. To understand the meaning of *’ēlōhîm* here, we should note that, technically, this is a generic expression for divine or semidivine beings—that is, residents of heaven, as opposed to residents of earth. Among the epithets for

“semidivine beings,” we especially note the phrase “sons of God” (*běně ’ělohîm*), which in Job 1:6 and 2:1 refers to the members of the heavenly council (cf. also Job 38:7). Psalm 82:6 suggests that the full expression could be abbreviated to “gods” but then adds the following epithet: “You are gods [’*ělohîm*], sons of the Most High [*běně ’elyôn*].” The Qumran fragments and the Old Greek translation of Deuteronomy 32:8 are more specific, assigning to members of the heavenly court (*bny ’lym*; *angeloî*) supervisory roles over the nations of earth. Like Abraham, the friend of God (Gen. 18), and prophets, who were perceived as members of the divine council (*sôd yhwh*, Jer. 23:16–22), the epithet *’ebed yhwh*, “servant of YHWH,” which was often applied to David and his heirs, recognizes their administrative function in service of the heavenly king. Indeed, we might note here that when the witch of Endor described the person she had brought back from the grave for Saul, she said, “I see a god” (*’ělohim*, 1 Sam. 28:13). With this epithet she recognized Samuel not as a normal earthling but as a member of YHWH’s court, and it was as such that Samuel predicted Saul’s imminent demise at the hands of the Philistines (28:15–19). Because Psalm 2:6–8 had spoken of the Davidic king as “my son” and had charged him with subduing the nations in revolt against YHWH and himself (cf. 45:3–5 [4–6]), in 45:6 [7] the vocative “O God” functions as an abbreviation for “O son of God.” Although here the Old Greek translation, *ho theos*, follows the Hebrew, the interpretation of this text in Hebrews 1:8 reinforces this as the correct interpretation: “But concerning the Son [he declared]: ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.’”

Second, the scepter symbolizes the agenda for the king’s reign: the promotion of “uprightness” (*mîšôr*) and “righteousness” (*šedeq*) and the rejection of “wickedness” (*reša’*). The expressions used here are all significant. On the one hand, the ethical use of *mîšôr* is relatively rare, occurring elsewhere only in Psalm 67:4 [5]; Isaiah 11:4; and

Malachi 2:6. It is probably not coincidental that the poet uses a word cognate to “Jeshurun,” YHWH’s pet name for Israel, meaning “[my] straightened one” (see above, chap. 7, under “The Importance of the Notion of Covenant in Deuteronomy”).⁷ Malachi 2:6, which speaks of “walking” with YHWH “in peace and uprightness” (*běšālôm ûbēmîšôr*), reinforces this interpretation. When used in judicial/administrative contexts, as here and Psalm 67:4 [5] and Isaiah 11:4, *mîšôr* speaks of official determinations that enable the oppressed (*’ānāw*, Isa. 11:4) to walk upright.

On the other hand, the psalmist uses language often associated with covenants to declare his commitment to righteousness and repudiation of unrighteousness. Although *’āhab* is capable of a wide range of meanings, in theological contexts it denotes “covenant commitment to someone demonstrated in action,” while *śānē’* represents its opposite, “rejection of a person from a covenant relationship,” again demonstrated in action (Ps. 45:7a [8a]). The First Testament never records anyone declaring this *’āhab* disposition toward God in the first person, but the present identification of an ethical quality—that is, life in conformity to an established (covenantal) standard (*ṣedeq*)—as the object of that *’āhab* commitment recalls repeated references in Psalm 119 to “love for” YHWH’s Torah.⁸ Remarkably, Isaiah’s portrayal of the messianic sprout of Jesse in Isaiah 11:3–5 picks up both *mîšôr* and *ṣedeq* expressions.

Finally, the poet speaks of the king not as one anointed by the prophet but as one whom God has anointed (Ps. 45:7 [8]). He is indeed YHWH’s Messiah. This anointing has elevated him above his companions, and this wedding offers an occasion to celebrate both events—hence “oil of gladness” (*šemen śāśôn*; cf. Isa. 61:3).

Psalm 72: A Prayer for the Davidic King

Psalms 72 is one of two psalms whose titles associate it with Solomon. As in Psalm 127, the expression *lišlōmōh* could mean “by Solomon,” “for Solomon,” “about Solomon,” or “in the name of Solomon.” However, the appended note, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended” (v. 20), suggests that before its incorporation into the five-scroll Psalter that we possess, this psalm was the last of a collection associated with David (Pss. 42–72; cf. the doxology that concludes Scroll 1 in 41:13).

Psalms 72 is cast as a prayer for the king’s welfare, and especially for him to govern his people with righteousness (*ṣědāqâ*, vv. 1, 3; *ṣedeq*, v. 2). Whether it was composed for a king’s coronation or for a wedding, it provides an exposition of the ideals of royal rule that we had heard earlier in Psalm 45:6–7 [7–8]). On the surface, the plea for his rule to extend from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth, the specification of the boundaries as Tarshish (to the west) and Sheba and Saba (to the east), and the call for all kings and nations to serve him (vv. 8–11) seem to support a messianic interpretation of this psalm. However, the presence of oppressors who still torment the poor (vv. 12–14) suggests a picture of a historical reality that differs significantly from the vision of the messianic age that we observed in the Prophets (Isa. 9:2–7 [1–6]; Ezek. 34:25–31). Furthermore, this psalm is not cast as a prophetic oracle; rather, it is a prayer for the realization of long-standing ideals for the Davidic kingship.

We do not know when the psalm was composed; if it was written prior to the exile, it expresses hope for the reign of the current king. If it was composed during the exile or the Persian (postexilic) period, it reflects the longing of a people whose well-being is currently threatened and who desire the return of the Davidic king. If and when he comes, and if he reigns with righteousness, the vulnerable will be protected, *šālôm* will prevail, and the earth will yield its abundance for the population. In short, the covenant triangle will be fully

functional once more. The concluding doxology (vv. 18–19) reinforces this recognition of the corporate significance of the rule of “David.” When the Davidic ideals are realized, YHWH’s name will be praised forever and the entire world will be filled with his glory (cf. Hab. 2:14).

Psalm 89: A Meditation on YHWH’s *Hesed* to the Davidic House

Like Scroll 2 (Pss. 42–72), Scroll 3 (Pss. 73–89) ends with a royal psalm. Psalm 89 poses major difficulties for interpretation. However, within the context of the present discussion, this is undoubtedly the most important text in the Psalter for grasping the ancient Israelite perspective on the substance and significance of the Davidic covenant. Indeed, outside of 2 Samuel 7, it may be the most important text in the entire First Testament on this matter. Exceeded in length only by 119 and 78, this psalm has 52 verses, with a total of 382 words. Complicating its interpretation is its extremely complex structure that alternates hymnic praises (vv. 1–2 [2–3], 5–18 [6–19]) with reflections on the dynastic oracle to David (vv. 3–4 [4–5], 19–37 [20–38]), and then concludes with a lengthy and poignant lament (vv. 38–51 [39–52]). As with the other Psalm Scrolls, the editor of Scroll 3 inserted a blessing to conclude the collection (v. 52 [53]).

If we examine the hymnic and oracular sections separately, we observe that in each case we have a brief statement of the thesis, followed by a resumptive exposition of that thesis (table 12.2).

A Hymnic Declaration of YHWH’s Faithfulness (Ps. 89:1–2 [2–3])

I will sing of the acts of ***unfailing love*** of YHWH forever;
With my mouth I will make known your ***faithfulness*** to all
generations.
For I have said, “Forever ***unfailing love*** will be built up;

In the heavens you will establish your **faithfulness**."

Like typical Hebrew poetry, the open hymnic summary depends heavily on standardized pairs of words or phrases:

"unfailing love" (*ḥesed*) and "faithfulness" (*'ěmûnâ*) (2x)
"forever" (*'ôlām*) and "to all generations" (*lědōr wādōr*)
"I will sing" (*'āšîrâ*) and "I will make known" (*'ôdîa'*)
"to build up" (*bānâ*) and "to establish" (*kûn*)

Table 12.2

The Parallel Structures of the Hymnic and Oracular Material in Psalm 89

Hymnic thesis	Hymnic exposition
vv. 1-2 [2-3]	vv. 5-18 [6-19]
Oracular thesis	Oracular exposition
vv. 3-4 [4-5]	vv. 19-37 [20-38]

Obviously, the key concept here is YHWH's faithfulness to his people and to his word, expressed by *ḥesed* and *'ěmûnâ*, respectively. Verses 5-18 [6-19] develop this theme by repeating the words *ḥesed* (v. 14 [15]) and *'ěmûnâ* (vv. 5, 8 [6, 9]) and its cognate *'ěmet* (v. 14 [15]) and adding the attribute of "righteousness" (*ṣedeq/ṣědāqâ*, vv. 14, 16 [15, 17]) as the foundation of YHWH's throne and the foundation of the people's privileged status (*'ašrê*, v. 15 [16]). Given the combination of YHWH's unmatched power (vv. 5-10 [6-11]) and cosmic sovereignty (vv. 11-13 [12-14]), his consistent operation according to established (covenantal) standards (*ṣedeq/ṣědāqâ*), and the goodwill (*rāṣôn*, v. 17 [18]) he expresses in blessing his people (vv. 14-16 [15-17]), Israel's security and the status of their king before "the Holy One of Israel" should have been guaranteed (vv. 17-18 [18-19]).

An Oracular Recollection of YHWH's Covenant Promise to David (Ps. 89:3-4 [4-5], 19-37 [20-38])

This declaration of YHWH's faithfulness provides context for the recollection of the dynastic oracle, summarized in verses 3-4 [4-5] and expounded in full in verses 19-37 [20-38]. The summary offers a more complete and concise declaration of the benefactions (*haṭṭôbâ*, 2 Sam. 7:28) entailed in YHWH's covenant with David than we find in the core narrative text, 2 Samuel 7:

[You have said,]

"I have made a covenant [*kārat bēřît*] with my chosen one [*bēḥîrî*];
I have promised on oath [*nišba*] to David my vassal [*'abdî*]:
'I will establish your offspring forever [*'ad 'ôlām*],
and build your throne for all generations [*lědōr wādōr*].'"

The lexical links of the last two lines with verse 1 [2] are intentional. As eternal as is YHWH's character, so eternal is his covenant commitment to David and his descendants. The exposition in verses 19-37 [20-38] highlights the eternality—that is, the irrevocability—of YHWH's covenant (*'ôlām* in vv. 28, 36, 37 [29, 37, 38]), YHWH's "faithfulness" (*'ēmûnâ*, vv. 24, 33 [25, 34]), and YHWH's "unfailing love" (*ḥesed*, vv. 24, 28, 33 [25, 29, 34]).

I will examine the exposition of the dynastic oracle more fully below, but for now I note that this is precisely the reason for the theological crisis that the psalmist (who speaks for Israel) expresses in his lament in the remainder of the psalm (vv. 38-51 [39-52]). The psalmist spends eight verses accusing YHWH, focusing on his betrayal and abuse of his anointed (cf. v. 38 [39]) and on his repudiation (*ni'ēr*) of the covenant of his servant (*bēřît 'abděkā*, v. 39 [40]). As is typical of many laments, in verse 46 [47] he voices the question concerning YHWH's general disposition, which is on his mind:

How long [must we wait], O YHWH? Will you hide yourself forever?

Will your fury continue to burn like fire?

However, in verse 49 [50] his questions become more pointed:

Where are your former acts of unfailing love [*ḥesed*], O Sovereign
[*’ădōnāy*],
Which in your faithfulness [*’ēṣmûnâ*] you promised on oath [*nišba*] to
David?

In verses 50–51 [51–52] the psalmist declares that YHWH has made a mockery of his servants (Israel) and of his anointed one. Moses had warned YHWH of this: that if he should destroy the Israelites after the horrendous offense of the worship of the golden calf in Deuteronomy 9:28 (cf. Exod. 32:11–12), Israel’s enemies would taunt Israel.

This final lament offers the best clue concerning the date and provenance of Psalm 89. It was obviously composed at a time when the Davidic monarchy was in serious demise, resulting in a severe crisis of faith for the psalmist (cf. vv. 46–47 [47–48]), who expressed the sentiments of many of his compatriots. The question “How long, O YHWH?” is conventional for laments, but the next line, “Will you hide your face forever?” suggests that the people have lacked a monarchy for a long time. A Persian-era date is most likely, perhaps even as late as the end of the fifth century. To be sure, Zerubbabel, a descendant of Jehoiachin, and apparently some of his offspring had been governors, but the hope they represented for the reinstatement of the Davidic monarchy never materialized, leaving the remnant in and around Jerusalem spiritually exhausted and emotionally demoralized.

Although the poet cast his feelings in strong terms, this psalm is a statement of strong faith. He has not succumbed to the theological crisis and cynically transferred allegiance to other gods who appear to have proved stronger than YHWH, who seems to have betrayed his own people. The

hymnic elements of this psalm represent strong affirmations of trust in YHWH, which is necessary background for both his questions at the end and his exposition of the Davidic covenant in verses 19–37 [20–38], to which I now turn.

The exposition of the dynastic oracle was triggered by the final verse of the ode to YHWH’s faithfulness:

For our shield belongs to YHWH,
And our king belongs to the Holy One of Israel. (v. 18 [19])

The threefold occurrences of *hesed* (“unfailing love”) in verses 24, 28, 33 [25, 29, 34] suggest a three-part structure of this exposition, each of which highlights a different dimension of the nature and significance of the Davidic covenant: (1) the divine election and exaltation of David (vv. 19–25 [20–26]); (2) the status of David (vv. 26–29 [27–30]); (3) the prospects for the kingship of David (vv. 30–37 [31–38]).

The Divine Election and Exaltation of David (Ps. 89:19–25 [20–26])

We recognize intertextual connections throughout this section. Verses 19–21 [20–22] summarize the narrative of 1 Samuel 1–17. The reference to YHWH speaking in visions to his “faithful ones” (*ḥăśîdîm*, v. 19a [20a]) refers primarily to the foundational role of Samuel. He was specially conceived and then trained in a priestly environment to prepare for his role as herald of David the king / the anointed one, whose coming Hannah (Samuel’s mother) predicted in 1 Samuel 2:10. Verses 19b–20a [20b–21a] speak of David’s election, alluding to Deuteronomy 17:15, which speaks of YHWH choosing (*bāḥar*) a man to be king from among Israelites.⁹ YHWH’s statement “I have found [*māṣā*] David my servant” in verse 20a [21a] answers to Samuel’s statement in 1 Samuel 13:14, “YHWH has sought out [*biqqēš*] for himself [the] man he has had in mind, and

YHWH has charged him to be prince [*nāgîd*] over his people.” As noted earlier, the epithet “my servant” is used of David more frequently than of any other person in the First Testament, but earlier we noted particularly its prominence in 2 Samuel 7. “With my sacred oil I have anointed him” in Psalm 89:20b [21b] obviously alludes to 1 Samuel 16:12–13. If one follows the chronology in 1 Samuel, then Psalm 89:21 [22] probably refers to David’s defeat of Goliath, which he accomplished with YHWH’s hand strengthening him (cf. 1 Sam. 17:45–50).

The focus and tone change in Psalm 89:22–25 [23–26] as the psalmist raises the specter of opposition to David’s rule. The singular in verse 22 [23] probably refers to Saul (1 Sam. 18–30), while the switch to plural forms in verse 23 [24] may refer to the hostile enemies within and around Israel whom David defeated during his reign (2 Sam. 5; 8; 10). The geographic references to “the sea” and “the rivers” allude to the boundaries of David’s empire, reinforcing this interpretation of verse 23 [24]: the promised land was bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, the Euphrates River to the north, the Jordan River on the east, and the river of Egypt to the south.¹⁰ But verse 24 [25] interrupts these recollections with the notice that YHWH’s “faithfulness” (*’ămûnâ*) and “unfailing love” (*ḥesed*) were the key to David’s elevation.

The Status of David (Ps. 89:26–29 [27–30])

In verses 26–29 [27–30] the psalmist expands on the decree of YHWH cited earlier in Psalm 2:7: “You are my son; today I have become your father” (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14). However, this time he reverses the roles of speaker and addressee, citing the response of the son: “You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.” Taken together, it is evident that “You are my son” and “You are my father” represent the two formal declarations that would

be heard in a legal context by which a father declares his adoption of a younger man and the younger man accepts that adoption. But in this instance, the newly adopted son does not merely take his place among a host of other adoptees; rather, he is designated YHWH's "firstborn," which means he is elevated above all earthly kings. As in earlier biblical narratives, we should not interpret *běkōr*, "firstborn," literally or biologically, but sociologically: within a family context, whether or not he was the oldest son, the person so designated was identified by the father as the one responsible for the well-being of the extended family and the integrity of the hereditary holdings. Echoing 89:4 [5], the psalmist reiterates that this status as his son and as his firstborn among all the kings applies in perpetuity (*lā'ad*), and its irrevocability is guaranteed by alluding to the fixed order of the universe. As he had done in verse 24 [25], in verse 28 [29] the psalmist interrupts the flow of his discussion of the son of God to ground the irrevocability (*lě'ôlām*) of his promises to his son/firstborn in his "unfailing love" (*hesed*) and in his covenant (*bērît*).

The Prospects for the Kingship of David (Ps. 89:30-37 [31-38])

In Psalm 89:30-37 [31-38]) the psalmist shifts his attention from the status granted Davidic kings to their future prospects, contemplating specifically what happens to the Davidic covenant if the occupant of the throne goes off course spiritually and administratively. In Nathan's oracle, YHWH had declared that if this should happen, like a father YHWH would discipline his son (2 Sam. 7:14), even while promising that the throne of David would be established forever and that he would never retract his "unfailing love" (*hesed*) from the dynasty (7:12-15). But what would happen if the king would egregiously pervert his

office? This is the situation contemplated by the psalmist here.

In the first six lines (Ps. 89:30–32 [31–33]), the words of Nathan are obviously ringing in the psalmist's ears as he explains what YHWH had meant by *he'ěwâ*, often rendered "to commit iniquity" or "to do wrong" in 2 Samuel 7:14. It signified (1) abandoning YHWH's Torah, an expression the Chronicler used of Rehoboam (2 Chron. 12:1; cf. Jer. 9:13 [12]); (2) failing to walk in YHWH's stipulations (*hālāk b'ěmišpāṭay*, used elsewhere only of the Davidic shepherd in Ezekiel 37:24); (3) violating YHWH's ordinances (*ḥillēl ḥuqqōtay*); (4) failing to keep YHWH's commands; (5) committing transgression (*peša'*, often translated "rebellion"); and (6) committing iniquity, twistedness (*'āwôn*, cognate to the verb *he'ěwâ*, in 2 Sam. 7:14). The psalmist was clearly thinking of a thorough repudiation of a king's role as the embodiment of covenant righteousness, as specified by Moses in Deuteronomy 17:18–20. He characterized YHWH's response as intervening "with a rod [*šebet*] and with punitive affliction [*nega'*]."

But how would that affect the duration of the covenant as promised originally to David (2 Sam. 7)? The psalmist spends the remainder of this strophe addressing that problem (Ps. 89:33–37 [34–38]). As in 72:5, 7, 17, the psalmist's reference to the sun and the moon appeals to the certainty of the cosmos as a guarantee of the endurance of the Davidic covenant (Gen. 8:22; cf. Isa. 54:9–10; Jer. 31:35–37). However, ultimately, the fate and fortune of the Davidic covenant will be determined by YHWH's uncompromising *ḥesed* and *faithfulness* (*'ěmûnâ*, Ps. 89:33 [34]).

As noted earlier, in verses 38–51 [39–52] the psalmist struggles with the apparent contradiction between the guarantees for the Davidic throne and the demise of that throne, which threw all YHWH's dynastic promises into question. We may reconcile these apparent antinomies by acknowledging both the irrevocability and the conditionality

of YHWH's covenants. YHWH's own character (his *hesed* and his *'ēmûnâ*) and the oath that he had sworn irrevocably guaranteed the objective continuity of the covenant, but the claim to the benefactions of the covenant by any member of the Davidic house depended upon their fidelity/infidelity to their divine Suzerain and to the covenant to which they were bound.

Psalm 110: YHWH's Promotion of the Davidic King

The significance of Psalm 110 for the history of Israel's messianic hope is reflected in the fact that the New Testament cites or alludes to this psalm more often than any other First Testament text.¹¹ Although the psalm never names David, his presence is recognizable throughout. In the absence of any clear evidence for its date and provenance, it seems best to link the psalm with David's conquest of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and his claim to the Jebusite throne in about 1000 BC (2 Sam. 5:6-9). David's seizure of that moment to establish Jerusalem as his capital was probably inspired by the ancient story of Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, a predecessor of the current Jebusite king. Melchizedek was the king-priest of [Jeru]salem (Gen. 14:17-24) who had hosted Abram, blessed him in the name of El Elyon, and then accepted the tithe offering from the patriarch. The name of the priest who served under David with Abiathar (2 Sam. 8:17) was Zadok (*ṣādôq*), which strengthens the link with Melchizedek (*malkî-ṣedeq*). Although 1 Chronicles 6:1-15 locates Zadok in the line of high priests descended from Eleazar, David may have given him the name Zadok as the high-priestly version of a royal throne name. If this psalm was composed in the context of David's conquest of Jerusalem, it probably antedated Nathan's oracle by several years (cf. 2 Sam. 5:11-7:29).

Psalm 110 divides into two parts, each introduced by a divine oracle addressed to the king, which may suggest that, like the composer of Psalm 45, this psalmist was a court poet, perhaps a court prophet, either Nathan himself or Nathan's predecessor in the palace. Like Psalm 2, here the oracles are cast in the second person of direct address, as if YHWH is speaking directly to the king. In the first oracle YHWH announces his promotion of David to the status of vice-regent:

YHWH says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool."

Rendering the Tetragrammaton as "YHWH" rather than "The LORD" resolves the confusion that English translations create by following the custom of the Old Greek (*eipen ho kyrios tō kyriō* [LXX Ps. 109:1]) and rendering God's personal name as "Lord" (Hb. *'ădōnāy*). YHWH's invitation to David (*'ădōnî*, "my Lord," from the psalmist's perspective) to sit at his right hand signifies his promotion to a place of honor (cf. 1 Kings 2:19), his installation as his vice-regent. Because Israel was a theocracy with YHWH as the actual king, David ruled on YHWH's terms and by his invitation. The comparison with Melchizedek in verse 4 suggests that in this relationship, what Melchizedek had been to El Elyon, David was to YHWH. The psalmist assumes that El Elyon was an ancient title for the deity who had introduced himself to Israel as YHWH.

Borrowing the language and imagery of an ancient court, YHWH first promised to make David's enemies his footstool. The metaphor recalls fourteenth-century-BC Amarna letters in which Canaanite vassal kings spoke of themselves as the footstool of Pharaoh. Second, YHWH extended the king's strong scepter—the royal mace—from Zion, which David had claimed as his capital (cf. 2 Sam. 5:7), but which, in the Psalter, was YHWH's favored designation for his own

mountain. Accompanying this act, he had authorized David to rule amid his enemies (Ps. 110:2). As for David's subjects, YHWH promised that they would volunteer for service to the king. However, by noting that they will dress in "holy regalia" (*hadrê qōdeš*, v. 3), the psalmist recognized that this was no secular army and prepared hearers for the priestly dimension of David's reign in the second part of the psalm.

The first oracle is cast as a formal announcement of the king's installation as YHWH's vice-regent, but the second is cast as a sworn and irrevocable oath by YHWH (vv. 4-7). Having declared the installation of David as king, the psalmist explains the king's role within the divine economy in the second oracle. The oath itself catches us by surprise. We might have expected to hear, "You are king forever" (*'attâ melek lě'ôlām*), but instead we hear, "You are a priest forever" (*'attâ kōhēn lě'ôlām*), which clarifies the previous reference to the "holy regalia." Although neither David nor any of his successors ever competed for power with Levitical priests and the Aaronic high priesthood in particular, this does not mean that the king's role was secular, as opposed to the priests' sacred office; within a theocracy, everything is sacred. As the founder of the dynasty, David was involved in a series of cultic and religious exercises that began with his anointing. According to 1 Samuel 16, this happened in the context of a sacrificial observance presided over by Samuel. To this early event we should add the following:

- (1) David donned an ephod and sought an oracle from YHWH concerning the intentions of the men of Keilah when Saul and Doeg were after him (1 Sam. 22:9; 23:6-14);
- (2) David supervised the transportation of the ark of the covenant, above which YHWH was enthroned, from Baale-judah to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1-11);
- (3) David donned the ephod and headed the procession as the ark arrived in Jerusalem (6:12-23);
- (4) as patron of the national cult, David presented to Nathan his desire to build YHWH a house in

Jerusalem commensurate with his glory and honor (2 Sam. 7:1–17); (5) David organized the temple personnel, particularly the musicians (1 Chron. 15–16; 23–26); (6) David built an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah/Ornan, on which he offered whole burnt offerings and peace offerings that YHWH accepted (1 Chron. 21:18–26); (7) Like Gudea of Lagash more than a millennium earlier (cf. fig. 10.2 above and the comment on him in chap. 14 under “Hebrews”), David received in writing the blueprint—written by YHWH’s own finger—for the temple that Solomon would build (1 Chron. 28:11–19); and (8) David gathered the materials for the temple and then led the community in public worship that included prayers and sacrifices (1 Chron. 29:1–22).

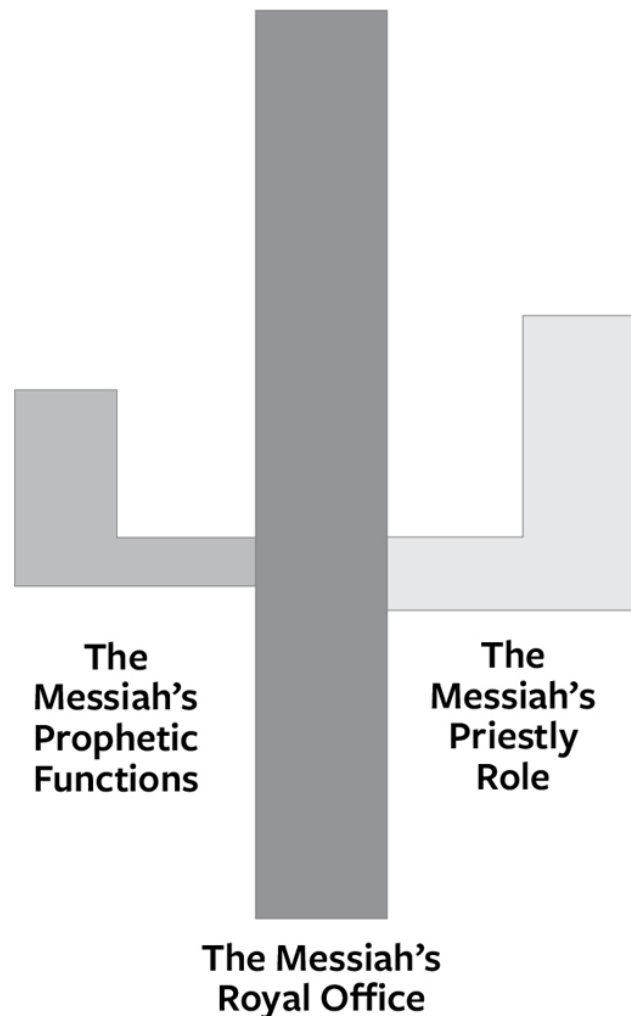
If we assume that Psalm 110 reflects events that happened early in David’s reign, all the priestly activities that he performed seem to have transpired with the approval of YHWH. Just as Moses, a Levite—but not an Aaronide—had served as patron to the tabernacle cult and functioned as a priest in the Sinai covenant-ratification rituals (Exod. 24), so David functioned as patron of the nation’s worship once they were settled in the land. However, perhaps to remind the king and his subjects that his priesthood was distinct from that of Aaron, the oath quickly adds “after the order of Melchizedek” (*‘al dibrātî Malkî-šedeq*). YHWH’s statement assumed familiarity with the tradition preserved in Genesis 14:18, according to which in Salem (= Jeru-salem) Abraham had encountered a figure identified enigmatically as “Melchizedek, king of Salem, . . . priest of El Elyon” (*Malkî-šedeq melek šālēm . . . kōhēn lē’ēl ‘elyôn*). Melchizedek represented a pre-Israelite form of monarchy, in which royal and priestly offices were held by the same person. Remarkably, after declaring the genre of his priesthood and instead of speaking of the king’s sacerdotal duties, the composer of Psalm 110 returns to his role as monarch. Indeed, switching roles from verse 1,

where YHWH invited the king to sit at his right hand, here YHWH is at the king's right hand, offering aid and securing victory over the opposition. The image of a vice-regent in the service of the divine Regent has given way to the divine Regent in the service of the vice-regent.

The distinctive features of David's Melchizedekian priesthood are (1) its bestowal by divine oath ("YHWH has sworn and will not change his mind," v. 4a), (2) its eternality ("You are a priest forever [*l'ě'ôlām*]," v. 4b), and (3) its association with the royal office. These features may explain why, unlike the Hasmonean rulers of the second century BC, in the First Testament no Davidide ever claimed this divine oath as a basis for reining in Aaronic/Zadokite authority or exerting himself over the official priesthood in Jerusalem. Rather than attaching royal prerogatives to the priesthood, Psalm 110 attaches priestly prerogatives to the monarchy. But it does so without compromising the Aaronide-Davidide distinction or subsuming the Aaronic priesthood in the Davidic house (fig. 12.1). Instead, the psalm appeals to the kind of kingship that existed in Jerusalem in the time of Abraham, the father of Israel.

Figure 12.1

The Office, Roles, and Functions of Israel's Messiah



Psalm 132: David and Zion

Psalm 132 is a carefully composed psalm, consisting of two panels that exhibit significant overlap in vocabulary, style, and structure. Panel 1 spans verses 1–9, and Panel 2 spans verses 10–18. David features prominently in this psalm, appearing in the prayer that opens each panel (vv. 1, 10), and twice more in the second panel (vv. 11, 17). As royal and Davidic as the Psalter is, it is remarkable that outside the psalm titles, the name David occurs within the psalms themselves only nine other times. And if we isolate Psalms 89 and 132, in each of which it occurs four times,^{[12](#)} the five

remaining occurrences are widely dispersed.¹³ However, if this song is about David, it is actually about his concern for another matter, a home for YHWH in Zion. This is extremely significant because it reflects how tightly the Davidic kingship, with its capital in Jerusalem/Zion, was tied to YHWH's own rule and residence in the land of Israel.

Although Psalm 132 highlights David's role as YHWH's vassal (*'ebed*, v. 10) and anointed one (*mēšîaḥ*, vv. 10, 17), as well as YHWH's irrevocable oath to reserve the throne for one of David's descendants (vv. 11–12), this psalm also recognizes David's administrative function within the tripartite covenant relationship involving YHWH, Israel, and the land. The psalm does not address YHWH as "my [i.e., David's] God"; rather, he is "The Mighty One of Jacob" (*'ăbîr ya'ăqōb*, v. 2), a title with roots in the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 49:24), but which Isaiah picked up.¹⁴ Jacob was the original name of the eponymous ancestor of the covenant people, but YHWH had changed it to Israel. While biblical historians rarely use the personal name Jacob for the nation of Israel, poets often utilized it as an alternative epithet for Israel.

The psalmist expresses the national covenantal context explicitly in verse 12, where he declares that fidelity to YHWH's covenant (*bērîtî*) and his covenant stipulations (*'ēdōtî*) was a precondition to David's sons sitting upon his throne. Since the psalmist had referred to the covenant that YHWH made with David as "my covenant" in Psalm 89:28, 34 [29, 35], many interpret the phrase here accordingly, treating "my covenant stipulations" (*'ēdōtî*) as the essential elements of the Davidic covenant. Although First Testament texts never speak of human fidelity to the Davidic covenant as "keeping my covenant" (*šāmar bērîtî*), variations of this expression with reference to the Israelite covenant are common.¹⁵ Here we should recognize an allusion not only to Deuteronomy 17:18–20—which calls on the king to be the paradigmatic righteous Israelite and thus to live according

to all that is written in “this Torah”—but also to Deuteronomy 29:9 [8], which is addressed to all Israelites: “So keep all the words of this covenant by doing them, so you may prosper in all that you do.”

For the people the reward for fidelity was success in all their endeavors; for the chosen king and his descendants, it was long tenure on the throne (Deut. 17:20). This is precisely what Psalm 132:12 promises faithful descendants of David. As David had recognized in 2 Samuel 7:23–25, the significance of YHWH’s covenant with him was tied to the relationship this king was to have with the people of YHWH, identified in this psalm as YHWH’s “faithful ones” (*ḥăśādîm*, vv. 9, 16) and “her [Zion’s] needy ones” (*’ebyônêhā*, v. 15).

Returning to the structure and argumentation of Psalm 132, I note that the psalm opens with a citation of a comment by David that reflected his disposition toward what had become a fixture in his mind: the lack of a permanent home for YHWH (vv. 1–5). In 2 Samuel 7:2 the king had revealed his preoccupation by declaring an intolerable incongruity: while he dwelled in a palace of cedar, the ark of God, representing YHWH’s throne, was housed in a (pathetic) tent made of curtains (cf. 2 Sam. 6). Psalm 132:6–9 telescopes the lengthy process of bringing the ark to its divinely chosen location and constructing the temple there into only eight lines. Here the psalmist refers to the temple as YHWH’s “residence” (*miškān*, v. 7a), his “footstool” (*ḥădōm raglāyw*, v. 7b), and the “resting place” (*měnûḥâ*) for him and his ark (v. 8). Verse 8 expresses David’s enthusiasm at the prospect of YHWH and the ark moving into their permanent home.

This panel ends with a reference to the people who worship in his presence. Reflecting the character and fidelity of the divine king, the courtiers (his priests) were clothed with righteousness, while faithful ones (the Israelites) celebrated in his presence (v. 9).

I have already commented on the first three verses of the second panel (vv. 10–12). In verses 13–16 the focus shifts from David, the chosen king, to Zion, “the chosen place” that Moses had anticipated centuries earlier and to which he referred (without naming it) twenty-one times in his valedictory addresses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab (Deut. 12:5–14; etc.). Although the sanctuary had been located at Shiloh for more than three centuries,¹⁶ the Philistine destruction of the complex and the exile of the ark of the covenant meant that this was not the permanent site YHWH had in mind. Not until YHWH had fulfilled his promise and given rest to the land (cf. Deut. 12:10 and 2 Sam. 7:1) and not until David had brought the ark to Jerusalem, which he had established as his capital and where he had prepared a tent to protect the “throne of YHWH *Ṣěbā’ôṭ*” (2 Sam. 6:1–19; 7:2), do we learn that the Jebusite Araunah’s/Ornan’s threshing floor was the place that YHWH had chosen for his own residence.¹⁷ But along with Psalm 78:67–69, here 132:13–14 provides the most explicit declaration of YHWH’s election of Zion as the place for his name to be imprinted. In Psalm 78 the psalmist had made the announcement; here in Psalm 132 it is cast as a divine proclamation. Verses 15–16 describe YHWH’s delight in this place.

On the surface, YHWH’s attention appears to revert back to David in verses 17–18, but the first word, *šām*, “There,” actually keeps the focus on the temple. From Zion, where YHWH sat enthroned between the cherubim, the God of Israel would cause the horn of David to sprout. The use of the “horn” (*qeren*) as a symbol of royal strength assumes familiarity with the aurochs, the massive wild bovine—and ancestor of domestic cattle—with gigantic horns (cf. Deut. 33:17). From Zion, YHWH guarantees the permanence of the Davidic “lamp” (*nēṛ*; cf. *nîr* in 1 Kings 11:36). From Zion, YHWH gives David victory over his enemies. And from Zion, YHWH places the shining crown on David’s head.

The conclusion to this final Davidic/messianic psalm demonstrates the integral relationship between Zion as the location of YHWH's divine throne and Zion as the location of the throne of David, YHWH's chosen vice-regent. We can scarcely speak of Davidic covenant theology without at the same time speaking of Zion theology. YHWH's election of Zion and his election of David were integrally related.

[1.](#) Pss. 2:6; 18:50 [51]; 20:9 [10]; 21:1, 7 [2, 8]; 33:16; 45:1, 11, 14, 15 [2, 12, 15, 16]; 61:6 [7]; 63:11 [12]; 72:1; 89:18 [19].

[2.](#) Pss. 18:49-50 [50-51]; 20:9 [10]; 21:1, 7 [2, 7]; 33:16; 61:6 [7]; 63:11 [12]; 78:70; 122:5; 144:10.

[3.](#) Pss. 18:34, 39 [35, 40]; 27:3; 33:17; 55:18, 21 [19, 22]; 68:30 [31]; 76:3, 5 [4, 6]; 78:9; 89:43 [44]; 120:7 [8]; 140:7 [8]; 144:1.

[4.](#) Cf. Pss. 7:7 [8]; 35:23; 44:23 [24]; 59:4-5 [5-6].

[5.](#) Cf. Matt. 1:1, 17, 18-25; Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5.

[6.](#) NJPS; so also RSV, though NRSV has returned to the traditional rendering, "Your throne, O God."

[7.](#) For *yěšurûn*, see Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26; Isa. 44:2.

[8.](#) Ps. 119:97, 113, 163, 165; cf. also vv. 47, 48, 119, 127, 140, 159, 167.

[9.](#) Cf. *'aḥêkâ*, "your brothers," in Deut. 17:15; *'am*, "[the] people," in Ps. 89:19c [20c].

[10.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 10:16; cf. Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7-8; etc.

[11.](#) E.g., Matt. 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Luke 20:42-43; 22:69; Acts 2:34-35; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 5:6, 10; 7:17, 21; 1 Pet. 3:22.

[12.](#) Pss. 89:3, 20, 35, 49 [4, 21, 36, 50]; 132:1, 10, 11, 17.

[13.](#) Pss. 18:50 [51]; 72:20; 78:70; 122:5; 144:10.

[14.](#) Isa. 49:26; 60:16; cf. also "Mighty One of Israel" in Isa. 1:24.

[15.](#) Gen. 17:9, 10; Exod. 19:5; Deut. 29:9 [8], "words of this covenant"; 1 Kings 11:11; Pss. 78:10; 103:18; 132:12.

[16.](#) Josh. 18:1; 19:51; 1 Sam. 1-4; Jer. 7:8-15.

[17.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 24:16, 18-25; 1 Chron. 21:15, 18-30; 2 Chron. 3:1.

PART 4

COVENANT
in the NEW
TESTAMENT

In the preceding discussions we have observed the dominant role that covenant plays in the First Testament. Because many Christians perceive the relationship between the two Testaments of our Bible as radically discontinuous, they highlight the contrasts between the Abrahamic and Israelite covenants on the one hand, and between the Israelite and new covenants on the other. In my discussions of these covenants from a First Testament perspective, I have questioned this approach fundamentally, arguing for greater continuity than many expect or allow. My goal in part 4 of this volume is to explore how the New Testament treatment of the respective covenants builds on the First Testament presentation. In my view, rather than dismantling the old and completely replacing it with something new, the New Testament (with a single possible exception, the Levitical covenant) records and celebrates the climax of God's covenantal agenda, which began at the beginning of human history, if not sooner, even "before the foundation of the world," an expression that occurs frequently in the New Testament.¹

Before we commence our discussion of the New Testament perspective on the respective covenants, we need to review how this part of the Bible speaks about the issue. The most obvious change involves vocabulary. The First Testament was written in Hebrew (with small segments in Aramaic), where the primary word for covenant is *bērît*. The New Testament was written in Koine (*koinē*) Greek, where the preferred word for "covenant" is *diathēkē*. In classical Greek *diathēkē* refers fundamentally to the disposition of property by means of a will and testament. Only one instance of a "covenantal" usage is attested in classical Greek. In Aristophanes' *Birds*, Pithetaerus demanded a "binding agreement/covenant" (*diathēkē*, line

439). Otherwise the word always refers to a testament involving the disposition of property after the testator's death.

However, of the more than thirty occurrences of this word in the New Testament, only three involve this testamentary meaning:

Galatians 3:15: Brothers and sisters, I shall use an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human will/testament [*diathēkē*] that has been duly established, so it is in this case.

Hebrews 9:16–17: Where a will/testament [*diathēkē*] is involved, it is required to prove the death of the one who established it, because a will/testament [*diathēkē*] is in force only after a person has died; it never takes effect while the one who established it is living.

Remarkably, in both contexts these comments set the stage for a discussion of the Israelite covenant in which *diathēkē* carries the full theological and covenantal weight that the Hebrew *bērît* bears in the First Testament.

Since *diathēkē* derives from the same root as *diatithēmi*, which involves making formal arrangements for something to be done or accomplished, applying the noun to a formal agreement, a testament, or even a covenant is not that farfetched. The fact that the Septuagint (LXX) translators consistently rendered divine covenantal *bērît* as *diathēkē* makes magnificent sense; YHWH's covenants always involve formal arrangements establishing or reconstituting his relationship with his covenant partners. However, we might have expected the translators to use another word derived from the same stem, *synthēkē*, "joint agreement," which is attested in the First Testament (LXX Isa. 28:15; 30:1; Dan. 11:6, 17), appears in Second Temple period literature,² and is widely known in classical Greek but is unattested in the

New Testament. Isaiah 28:15 is a poetic text cast in roughly synonymous if chiastic parallelism:

We have “cut” a covenant [Hb. *běřît*; Gk. *diathēkē*] with death,
And with Sheol we have made an agreement [Hb. *hōzeh*; Gk. *synthēkē*].

Remarkably in verse 18, where the same pair of concepts occurs, the Greek translators rendered the second expression for “agreement” (Hb. *hāzûṭ*) with *elpis*, “hope.”

Although the Greek First Testament (LXX) renders the Hebrew *běřît*, “covenant,” consistently with *diathēkē*, divine covenants involve agreements that are never between equals (parity covenants) but always between radically and socially distinct partners (disparity covenants): the transcendent and infinitely glorious Creator of all things vis-à-vis that which he has created, whether human, living things, or inanimate creation—as in the cosmic covenant. Furthermore, as Galatians 3:15 and Hebrews 9:16–17 suggest, we must expunge from the First Testament’s theological use of *diathēkē* all associations with the death of a testator. Unlike human testators, the divine Testator is eternal, not subject to the curse of sin and death. The eternality of the divine Suzerain contributes fundamentally to the characterization of all these covenants as eternal and irrevocable (*‘ad ‘ôlām*).

In reviewing New Testament evidence for the general notion of covenant and its specific treatment of First Testament covenants, I shall follow the same sequence we developed for the covenants in the preceding chapters. Thus I begin with the cosmic and Adamic covenants (chap. 13), followed by the Israelite covenant in all four stages (chaps. 14–17), and concluding with the Davidic covenant (chaps. 18–20).

[1.](#) Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Luke 11:50; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8.

[2.](#) 1 Macc. 10:26; 2 Macc. 12:1; 13:25; 14:20, 26–27; Wis. 1:16; 12:21; Pss. Sol. 8:10.

CHAPTER 13

The Cosmic and Adamic Covenants in the New Testament

The Cosmic Covenant

The New Testament never speaks explicitly of a cosmic covenant, whether the interest lies in the role of the cosmos as covenant partner, or Noah (a second Adam) as the human administrator of the cosmos' relationship with God (cf. Gen. 6:18; 9:8-17). Noah is named eight times in the New Testament, usually in association with the great flood,¹ which includes references to the antediluvian epoch as "the days of Noah."² Two texts portray Noah as an exceptional man of faith (Heb. 11:7) and a herald of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). In his genealogy of Jesus, Luke (3:36) locates Noah in the tenth generation, with the first generation represented by Adam, who was the ultimate human ancestor of Jesus, "the one of God" (*tou Theou*, v. 38). That Luke traced Jesus' ancestry back to Adam might suggest a universal interest, except that the genealogy is concerned with Jesus' administrative standing as the representative head of humanity, rather than as the embodiment of humanity as a whole—let alone the cosmos.

We should not interpret the absence of "cosmic covenant" language from the New Testament as ignorance of or disinterest in that covenant. We hear clear allusions to it in Romans 8:18-25, where Paul considers his own and other

believers' present suffering in its cosmic context. Although the apostle's chief concern was to offer perspective on human suffering, specifically of Christians (cf. vv. 26–39), here he took his hearers back to the origins of the problem and the implications that human rebellion had for the rest of creation, which is our primary concern here. Paul obviously assumed humanity's representative and administrative role, which I shall discuss below in the second part of this chapter.

The Greek word *ktisis*, “creation,” occurs four times in this short text (Rom. 8:19, 20, 21, 22) and once in verse 39. The expression is common in the New Testament and other Second Temple texts, but it never appears in the Greek First Testament. This suggests that while Paul presents a thoroughly biblical theology of creation, his vocabulary derives from the Hellenistic world. “Creation” (*ktisis*) includes “the world and all it contains,”³ which includes living organisms (plant and animal) and nonliving objects (e.g., rocks, rivers, etc.). Remarkably, the apostle portrays the cosmos as animate and sentient: creation waits with eager longing (*apekdexetai*, v. 19), hopes (*elpis*, v. 20), recognizes the status of humanity within the cosmos as “sons of God,”⁴ has a will (*hekōn*, v. 20), acknowledges its bondage to corruption (*tēs douleias tēs phthoras*, v. 21), groans collectively (*systemazō*, v. 22), and is aware that its present fate and future hope depend upon the redemption of humanity. This literary picture assumes that the cosmic covenant is still in force but shows that the human vice-regent's rebellion resulted in the suspension of divine blessing (symbolized by the tree of life in the garden of Eden) and its replacement with the curses (symbolized by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil).

Earlier in this epistle, Paul had noted that ever since God created the world, his invisible attributes—that is, his eternal power and his divinity—have been displayed in the creation of the world (*apo kitseōs kosmou*, Rom. 1:20),

rendering all sentient beings without excuse. Hebrews 4:13 espouses a similar perspective, declaring that no part of creation (*ktisis*) is hidden from God's eyes and that all must give account to him.

The longer ending of Mark is problematic text-critically (16:9–20 is missing in the oldest manuscripts), but this perspective underlies Mark's "creational" version of Jesus' Great Commission: "Go into all the world [*kosmos*] and preach the gospel to all creation [*ktisis*]" (Mark 16:15). In the Matthean version of the commission, Jesus acknowledged his own authority over heaven and earth and defined the scope of the charge as "Go and make disciples of all nations" (*panta ta ethnē*, Matt. 28:19). This reference to "nations" confirms that here the target of the mission is the human population of the earth.

The *kosmos* at large and the earth (*gē*) in particular figure prominently in the New Testament, but texts that build on or allude to the cosmic covenant are scarce. The Greek word *kosmos*, usually translated "world," occurs seventy-eight times in John's Gospel, but it exhibits a wide range of meaning. *Kosmos* can mean the physical earth (when it follows prepositions "in" or "into"), human inhabitants of the earth, or even unbelieving human inhabitants, in opposition to citizens of the kingdom of heaven (people who believe in Jesus; John 3:3, 5). However, the ambiguity of *kosmos* in John 3:16 raises intriguing possibilities: "For God demonstrated his love for the *kosmos* by giving his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but would have eternal life." The notion of covenant underlies the word *agapaō*, which is usually translated with a single word, "love." However, like the Hebrew word *'āhab*, which Greek *agapaō* represents, this word suggests "covenant commitment demonstrated in action in the interest of the other person." This meaning explains Peter's preference for *phileō*, "to have affection for," when Jesus asked him, "Do you love [*agapaō*] me?" (John 21:15–16). How could Peter

claim to be covenantally committed to Jesus so that he always acted in Jesus' interest after he had just denied him three times (John 18:17, 25, 26)? Such denial is the very opposite of "love"—that is, "reject, repudiate" (Hb. *śānē*; Gk. *miseō*), usually rendered "hate." To be sure, God's covenant commitment was to humanity, but it was not limited to the human population. The gift of Jesus ensured that all humans who believed in him would have eternal life, but we need not limit the scope of *kosmos* in John 3:16 to "the people of the world"; God's entire creation is the object of his unfailing love. Through the work of Christ, the original cosmic covenantal triangle will ultimately be restored (fig. 1.1 above). God's grand plan of redemption looked beyond humankind to the world that he had created, desiring that it might once more function fully to the praise of his glory (Ps. 19:1-6).

Romans 8:18-25 does not portray this hope as a present reality but awaits the eschatological future moment when the "sons of God" are revealed (v. 19), their adoption as sons is realized, and their bodies are redeemed (v. 23). While Paul's analysis of the present state of creation was realistic, his hope for the future, especially of humanity, was more optimistic than YHWH had portrayed it in Genesis 8:21: "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, because the intentions of humans' hearts are evil from their youth." His follow-up promise, never again to annihilate all living things from the earth, sounds hopeful, but it does not yet envision the day when sin and its effects would be eradicated.

The prophet Isaiah picked up this theme. At the end of the collection of his prophetic utterances, he spoke of YHWH's restoring the covenant triangle involving himself, his people Israel, and their hereditary homeland in the context of the creation (*bārā*', Isa. 65:17) and fabrication (*'āśā*, 66:22) of [the] new heavens and [the] new earth ([*haš*] *šāmayim* [*ha*] *ḥādāšîm wē[ḥā]'āreṣ* [*ha*] *ḥādāšâ*). The use of the verb

bārā’ in the first reference suggests a dramatically new creative moment, but in the second reference, ‘*āśâ*, the most common Hebrew verb for the manufacture of anything, tones this down. Although Isaiah predicted YHWH’s re-creation of the heavens and the earth, in both contexts his focus was on the reconstitution of Israel. This probably explains why he did not elaborate on the process that YHWH would use to recreate the heavens and earth.

The language of “new heavens and a new earth” surfaces twice in the New Testament. As in the Isaiah texts, in both New Testament texts the juxtaposing of “new heaven” (*ho ouranos kainos*) and “new earth” (*hē gē kainē*) functions as a merism for all that YHWH has created. In Revelation 21:1 John testifies, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared [*aperchomai*], and the sea had ceased to exist [*ouk estin eti*].” However, taking a cue from Isaiah, the appearance of a new heaven and a new earth provides context for John’s primary focus, the new Jerusalem. On the surface, John’s statement suggests some sort of replacement cosmography; the substance of the old cosmos seems to have been destroyed, and a new cosmos has been created, apparently disconnected from the previous creation. One form of creation replaces an earlier form, but the Greek word *kainos* does not demand the creation of something absolutely new, as if it did not exist before. As I noted with reference to the “new covenant” (*diathēkē kainē*) of Jeremiah 31:31 [LXX 38:31], the expression may apply to the renewal of a preexistent entity. Therefore, Revelation 21:1 need not rule out re-creation—that is, reconstituting the cosmos from materials derived from the previous version.

Many interpret 2 Peter 3:3–14 as predicting the total annihilation of the cosmos. This text is framed by Peter’s declaration of the purpose of this letter: to stimulate wholesome thinking and reflection on past revelation

through prophets and apostles (vv. 1-2) and to present a concluding appeal for holy and peaceable living before God (v. 14). The apostle warns his readers to beware of mockers, who ridicule the notion of God's imminent coming to judge the world as he has predicted. Although he had referred to previous prophecies generically in verse 2, without citing a specific prediction or identifying a prophet, he seemed to recall Ezekiel 12:17-28. This text involves three short oracular pronouncements: (1) a sign act and its interpretation predicting the violent overthrow of Jerusalem (vv. 17-20); (2) a prophetic response to people who cynically dismiss the announcement of Jerusalem's doom (vv. 21-25); and (3) an oracle responding to the charge that even if the city will be demolished, that event is pushed into the distant future and the present generation need not worry about it (vv. 26-28). Aware of these prophecies and their fulfillment in the holocaust of 586 BC, Peter adapted them to the future of the cosmos, when the present order would be destroyed.

Peter highlighted the scope of his concern with his opening reference to "creation" (*ktisis*, v. 4) and his repeated pairing of "heavens" (*ouranoi*, 3:10; cf. the singular in 1:18) and "earth" (*gē*, 3:5, 7, 10, 13) to refer to all creation. In verses 10 and 12 he specified the scope of "heavens" by adding, "the elements" (*stoicheia*), which refers either to the components of the heavens (ESV "heavenly bodies") or perhaps to the nearer observable parts as opposed to the distant invisible parts.

Alternatively, Peter may have inherited his conception of the cosmos from his own Hebrew world, which spoke freely of "the heaven of heavens,"⁵ which expresses the superlative degree, "highest heaven." Ancient Near Easterners generally, including Israelites, perceived the universe as a multitiered structure consisting of Sheol below (the realm of the dead), earth (the realm of the living), and heaven (the realm of God/the gods and semidivine beings).

However, some imagined these tiers to be subdivided further. Jewish traditions speak of as many as seven heavens, and even in the New Testament we read of multiple heavens generally (Eph. 4:10; Heb. 4:14) and the third heaven specifically (2 Cor. 12:2).

The last clause of 2 Peter 3:10 is difficult. According to many interpreters, this statement speaks of the exposure or laying bare of the earth and “[human] works in it” (*ta en autē erga heurethēsetai*). However, this requires an awkward interpretation of *heurethēsetai*, “to be found,” and obscures the parallelism involving the destiny of the heavens and the earth. Given the echoes of First Testament expressions for creation elsewhere in this passage, it seems more natural to interpret *erga* (works) not as “actions” but as the products of actions, and the assumed “worker” as God rather than human beings. Accordingly, the *erga* are the works of God’s hands—that is, the things on earth that he has created.⁶

In the First Testament we read often of the earth and “all it contains,”⁷ or “all who are on it” (*kol ’ăšer bāh*, Deut. 10:14), or “all who dwell on it.”⁸ These expressions usually apply to living occupants of the earth, like human beings, large animals, sky and sea creatures, and the smallest insect. The first may also apply to vegetation and even nonliving things extending to particles of dust.

The verb *heurethēsetai*, “to be found”—representing a declaration of existence, not the result of a search—is also awkward in 2 Peter 3:10. To be sure, this passage speaks of “the day of judgment and the destruction of ungodly people” (v. 7), but the center of gravity here is the fate of creation. Analogous to the *kosmos*, which “was destroyed” (*apōleto*) in the days of Noah by being inundated with water (v. 6), the “heavens and the earth have been reserved for fire” (v. 7), will “disappear” (*pareleusontai*, v. 10), “be burned up” (*kausoumena*, v. 10), “be broken up” (*lyomenōn*, v. 11; *lythēsontai*, v. 12), “be set on fire” (*pyroumenoi*,

v. 12), and “melt in the heat” (*kausoumena tēketai*, v. 12). This requires a correlative sense for the ending of verse 10, a meaning easily achieved by emending *heurethēsetai* to *ouch heurethēsetai*, “will not be found.”⁹ Using a similar expression, the Septuagint translators rendered the Hebrew of Genesis 5:24, *’ênennû*, as “he [Enoch] was not”—that is, “he disappeared.”¹⁰ Furthermore, just as Hebrew *nimṣā’*, “to be found,” functions idiomatically for “to exist,” so *lō’ nimṣā’*, “He/It is not found,” means essentially, “He/It ceased to exist.”¹¹ In this context, “to vanish” or “to cease to exist” as previously known makes perfect sense.

Even so, we should not forget the human conduct that had precipitated this outpouring of divine fury on the cosmos. In Romans 8:18–25 Paul had explicitly spoken of creation having been frustrated (*mataiotēti*, v. 20), enslaved (*tēs douleias*, v. 21), and corrupted (*phthora*, v. 21), and also as groaning (*systemazō*, v. 22) and in labor pains (*synōdinō*, vv. 20–23), but he also offered hope for creation, though he linked that hope to God’s gracious redemption and adoption of humankind as his sons and daughters. Second Peter 3:3–14 concurs with Paul’s attribution of the cosmic crisis to human perfidy, which will precipitate “the day of the Lord” (v. 10), but defines this moment of divine intervention as a “day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (v. 7). The vocabulary of destruction and the images of the cosmos being consumed by fire have led many to interpret this passage as predicting a total annihilation of the cosmos. However, several considerations argue against this interpretation.

First, in Genesis 8–9 YHWH had acknowledged that the destruction of all living things had not solved the problem of human sin, but he had also established an eternal/irrevocable covenant with all living creatures. To ensure that he would never forget this covenant, he placed the rainbow in the sky. This specification of the deluge as the means of destruction (9:11, 15–16) left open the door

for other means of judgment, but the characterization of the covenant as *‘ad ‘ôlām*, “eternal,” and later citations of the durability of the cosmos as the guarantee for the eternality of other covenants (Jer. 31:35–37; 33:20–22) appeared to close this door.

Second, despite the limited data in the New Testament on the future state of the cosmos, it speaks clearly of God’s final reconciliation (*apokatalassō*) of all things to himself, having made peace (*eirēnopoieō*) through the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20–22; cf. Eph. 2:16). Furthermore, Romans 8:21–23 anticipates a day when creation itself will enjoy “the freedom of the glory of the sons of God” (*tēn eleutherian tēs doxēs tōn teknōn tou Theou*), in the context of humankind’s redemption (*apolytrōsis*) and adoption as sons (*huiothesia*). Paul’s use of childbirth as a metaphor for the present pains creates an image of anticipated new life on the other side of the judgment. This accords with Isaiah’s portrayal of a transformed world with God’s new heavens and new earth (in Isa. 65–66).

Third, although pronouncements of divine judgment in the First Testament often involve fire imagery, even in oracles of judgment against YHWH’s own people,¹² total and final annihilation is out of the question. Within the fine print of YHWH’s covenant with Israel, he had declared not that Israel’s history would end in judgment but that the conflagration would be followed by the full restoration of the covenant triangle involving YHWH, Israel, and their hereditary homeland.¹³ This was the consistent hope of the prophets.¹⁴ To be sure, these promises involved primarily Israel. However, since Israel’s role from the beginning was missional, exemplary, and microcosmic of the cosmic fate and fortune, their restoration functions paradigmatically for the restoration of the cosmos; in Israel’s blessing, the world is blessed.

Fourth, while images of fire dominate Peter’s vision of the end of the cosmos as we know it, the associations are not

limited to destructive conflagrations. The image of the elements melting (*tēketai*) in 2 Peter 3:12 derives from the world of metallurgy and recalls prophetic pronouncements by Jeremiah (Jer. 6:27–30) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 22:18–27). The Greek word *tēkō*, “to melt,” links Jeremiah 6:29 (LXX) with 2 Peter 3:12. The word denotes the transformation of solid material into a liquid state through a change in temperature. Just as ice turns to water at 32 degrees Fahrenheit (zero degrees Celsius), so metals turn to liquid at consistent temperatures (table 13.1). According to the image suggested by Jeremiah 6:29, the cosmos will be melted down and transformed in preparation for its final state. Looking ahead to the holocaust of 586 BC, Jeremiah declared that its goal would be to purge the pure substance of its dross, which had piled up over the centuries and resisted purging. He identified the dross itself as *rā’îm*, usually rendered in English as “the wicked,” and rightfully so. Earlier he had characterized the people as hardened rebels, carrying on like slanderers (*sārê sōrērîm hōlēkê rākîl*, v. 28). However, YHWH had assessed (*bāḥan*) his people (*‘ammî*, “my people,” v. 27) as compromised metal, and he stamped this lump with the label, *kesep nim’ās*, “rejected silver.”

The Greek word *tēkō*, “to melt,” does not occur in Ezekiel 22:18–27 (LXX), but here the exiled prophet expanded the metallurgical motif to declare the forthcoming doom of Israel. YHWH explicitly identified his people as dross (*sîg*), consisting of metals that may be valuable in their specified contexts, but when inherent in silver ore, they compromise its quality. Indeed, instead of silver representing YHWH’s people, they are the metallic impurities that prevent the silver from fulfilling its function. To resolve the problem, YHWH designated Jerusalem as the blast furnace into which he will dump the dross and intensify the heat by “blowing on you with the fire of my wrath.”¹⁵ He will raise the temperature in the smelter so high that the dross elements

liquefy ($\sqrt{ntk}$, hiphil, Ezek. 2:20) and are flushed away ($\sqrt{ntq}$, niphil, Jer. 6:29) at their respective melting points (table 13.1), preserving the silver to be poured into a new mold when the judgment is over.

Biblical authors knew nothing of modern laws of physics, such as Antoine Lavoisier's law of conservation of mass: "Matter is neither created nor destroyed" (1785).

Nevertheless, the prophetic metallurgical imagery alluded to in 2 Peter 3:7–13 accords with this principle. Jerusalem's holocaust in 586 BC was microscopic of God's ultimate macroscopic judgment and destruction of the ungodly (v. 7). The conflagration of divine fury will envelop the entire cosmos, reducing its substance to liquid state, so he can pour it into a new mold, identified in verse 13 as the new heavens and the new earth, in which righteousness (Gk. *dikaiosynē*; Hb. *ṣědākâ*) dwells. In Revelation 21:1–5 the apostle John recorded his vision of the evidence of God's having made all things new: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared, and the sea was no more. . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among human beings. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have disappeared'" (NRSV alt.).

Table 13.1

Melting Points of the Metals Listed in Ezekiel 22:18

Metal	Fahrenheit	Celsius
Tin	449.5°	231.9°
Lead	621.4°	327.5°
Bronze	1,742°	950°
Silver	1,763°	961.8°

Metal	Fahrenheit	Celsius
Iron	2,800°	1,538°

While reflecting on this glorious prospect, we must add that biblical authors perceived the ultimate destiny of the cosmos and its inhabitants in very material terms. Neither the world nor the creatures living on it (including human beings) will be reduced to nothing and replaced by a vacuum. Nor do they envision this material reality being transformed into a spiritual ethereal reality floating about in vast empty space. This applies to human beings as well; we were not created to inhabit the heavens. In the interim, when believers die they are transported in some sense into the blessed presence of our Savior “in Paradise” (Luke 23:43 NRSV; 2 Cor. 12:4), but this is not our ultimate destiny. We were created to function as earthlings, and we look forward to the day when we will do so perfectly and without the debilitating effects of sin—for all eternity!

The Adamic Covenant

The New Testament never refers explicitly either to an Adamic covenant or to the covenant that God made with Noah. However, the terms of this covenant in Genesis 8:15–9:7 clearly installed the latter as a second Adam and sought in some measure to restore the relationship that bound God, creation, and humankind before the pollution of the cosmos with human sin. In this context, the words “Adam” and “Adamic” do not refer to the first man, whose personal name was Adam, but to *’ādām* as a designation for humanity in the generic sense, according to its original usage in Genesis 1:24–31. Both individuals, Adam and Noah, functioned as federal heads of the human race, which had been assigned collectively the role of God’s vice-regents of creation (Ps. 8). However, the New Testament never refers to Jesus as a cosmic administrator after the order of Noah;

the comparison is always with Adam, the original administrator of the cosmos, presumably because the goal for the restoration of the cosmos is the original creation rather than the world Noah served.

The name Adam appears nine times in five contexts in the New Testament.¹⁶ Several of these imply a relationship analogous to that established by a covenant, but the word for covenant is missing in all, and references to the terms of the covenant as established with Noah in Genesis 9 are also absent.

The issue does not differ markedly with respect to Noah, the second Adam, though it seems that when he is named, God's covenant with him is even farther in the background. Noah's name appears eight times in six contexts.¹⁷ Most of these concern the individual Noah: his righteousness stood out in contrast to the wickedness of his contemporaries, who were destroyed by the great Deluge.¹⁸ The only exception is Luke 3:36, where Noah's name appears in the genealogy of Jesus as the tenth name from the end (i.e., the beginning) of the chain of human names tracing Jesus' descent from God. No references hint at the Adamic covenant. Our task in this section is to explore the relationship between Jesus and Adam, both with respect to the direct links and with respect to the contrasts between the two.

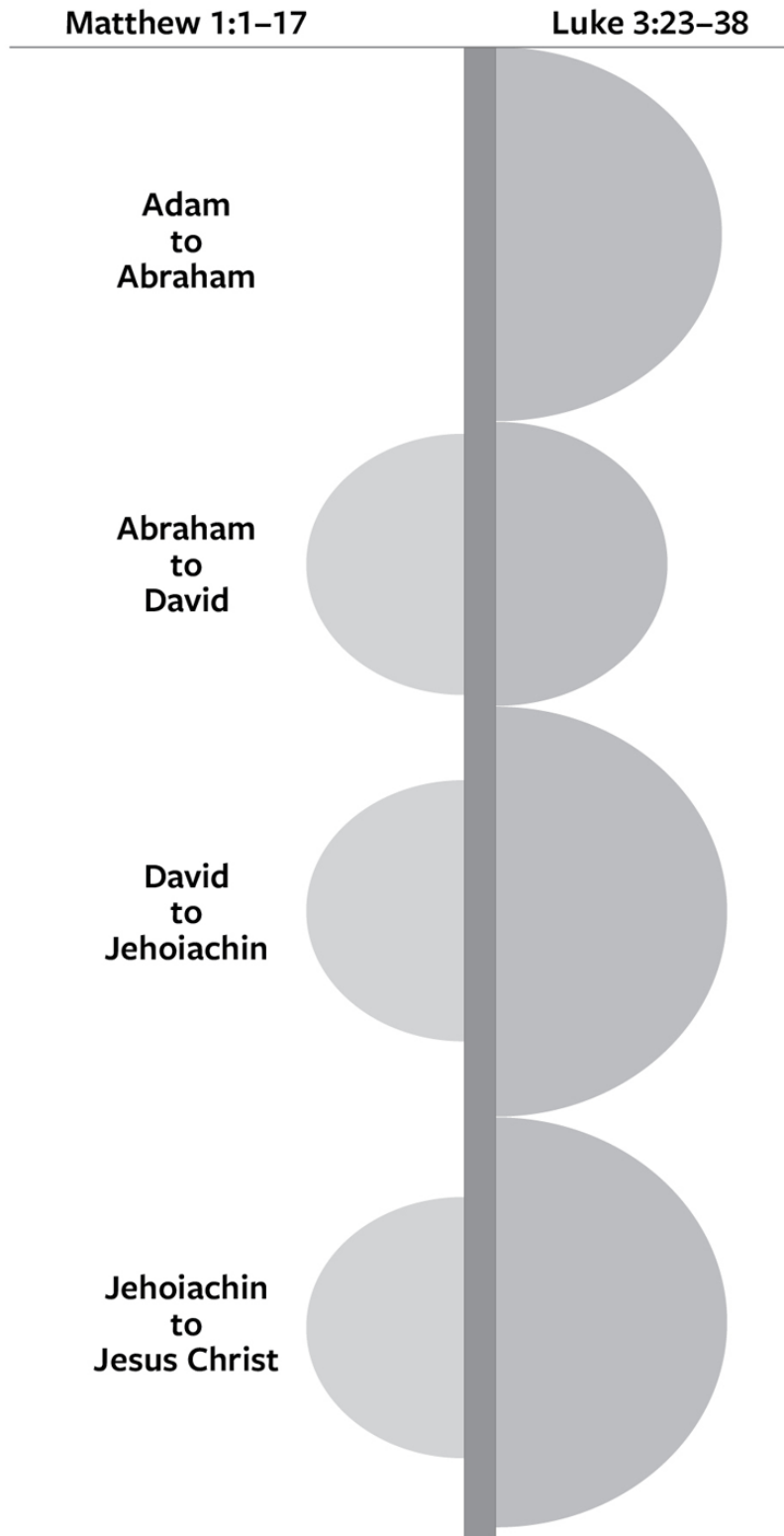
Jesus as the Heir to Adam, the One of God (Luke 3:23-38)

Most students of Scripture are aware that the Gospels contain two genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Both are "linear" (as opposed to "segmented") genealogies, which means their primary function is to establish the legitimacy of the most recent person named as a genuine heir of the founder of the line represented. Matthew deviates from the purely linear form

by (1) inserting the names of five women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah [Bathsheba] in vv. 3–6; Mary in v. 16); (2) twice noting segmentation: Judah had two sons, Perez and Zerah (v. 3), and Josiah was the father of Jeconiah and his brothers (v. 11); and (3) adding a historical note concerning the deportation to Babylon, which represented a critical moment for the line (vv. 11–12). By word count, the two genealogies are approximately equal in length (ESV renders Matt. 1:1–17 with ca. 330 words; Luke 3:23–38 with ca. 320 words), but this is illusory. Luke’s list extends back from Abraham to Adam and contains thirty-three more names than Matthew’s (cf. fig. 13.1). Despite their superficial similarities, the genealogies differ profoundly in form, style, and content, reflecting fundamentally different functions within their respective narrative contexts. Luke’s concern was to demonstrate that Jesus was the legitimate Adamic figure and as such also “of God.” However, Matthew demonstrates that Jesus was the messianic king in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, and more emphatically of the promises to David within the Davidic covenant. For this reason, I shall delay exploration of Matthew’s genealogy until chapter 18.

Figure 13.1

**A Graphic Portrayal of the Relationship between
Matthew’s Genealogy of Jesus the Christ and Luke’s
Succession List of Jesus “of God”**



Luke's genealogy poses a study in contrasts. He opened the record by identifying the subject simply by personal

name, Jesus (*Iēsous*, Luke 3:23), and then traced Jesus' origins back to Adam, whom most English translations identify as "the son of God." However, neither the opening nor the closing of the genealogy fits this interpretation. Luke inserted this genealogy awkwardly after announcing the beginning of Jesus' ministry in 3:23a. The narrative would have proceeded smoothly without the genealogy, with Jesus' temptation following immediately after this announcement: "When Jesus began his ministry, he was about thirty years of age." Prior to this age notice, Luke had described in summary form Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, and the voice of his heavenly Father declaring Jesus' relationship to himself in second-person address: "You are my Son, the Beloved [One]; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22; cf. longer versions of this event in Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11).

Although YHWH considered Israel to be his firstborn son among the nations (Exod. 4:22), the phrase "son of God" was messianic, reflecting the particular Suzerain-vassal relationship that David's anointing (1 Sam. 16:13) and YHWH's covenant with him had established in 2 Samuel 7 (cf. 1 Chron. 17). However, for David and his sons, the expression was a metaphor representing legal fiction; they were not ontologically the descendants of God but were declared to be his sons by adoption.¹⁹ In religiopolitical contexts like this, father-son language reflected a special relationship between the divine Superior and his chosen vassal, who by covenant became God's "son" and whose function was to sit on the throne of Israel as vice-regent for YHWH and as the administrator of the covenant between YHWH and his people (cf. 2 Sam. 7:19-29; cf. 1 Chron. 29:23). By declaring Jesus to be "the one in whom he was well pleased" (Luke 3:22), God publicly declared Jesus to be his chosen agent of rule, through whom the messianic vision of Psalm 89:19-29 [20-30] would be fulfilled literally.

Nevertheless, in Luke's account of Jesus' conception and birth, the divine envoy Gabriel had offered a more literal interpretation of the title. After announcing to Mary that she would conceive and give birth to a son, whom she was to call Jesus, he had added an extravagant commentary on the significance and status of the son whom Mary was to bear: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33 ESV). In response to Mary's puzzlement over this happening to her, a virgin, Gabriel had explained how this would transpire: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (1:35 ESV).

Luke established two grounds for Jesus' bearing the title "Son of God." The first involved the metaphorical use of the expression to reflect the Suzerain-vassal relationship that existed between God (the Father) and Jesus (the Son) within the holy Trinity; as heir of the Davidic throne, he was the adopted Son of God. The second explanation was grounded in the literal reality: through the Holy Spirit, God would impregnate Mary so that the title "Son of God" would be literally true of Jesus. For the first time the metaphorical "son of God," a descendant of David, would at the same time be the Son of God ontologically.

As Luke was composing the narrative of Jesus' early ministry, he seems to have been contemplating the significance of this title. No doubt he was intrigued by the people's response to Jesus—they commonly perceived (*enomizeto*) him to be the son of Joseph (Luke 3:23). The evangelist does not contemplate whether the people fulfilled Matthew's fears and interpreted Jesus as the child of a scandalous premarital sexual encounter (Matt. 1:18-25), or whether three decades later people had forgotten the rumors about his conception. Mary and Joseph obviously

knew better, as did Luke as he wrote this Gospel. Jesus was legally Joseph's son, so according to the Matthean genealogy, he was legitimately heir to the title of David's throne. But he inherited no genes from his adoptive father. Remarkably, instead of repeating the grounds for Jesus' bearing the title "Son of God," in this genealogy, Luke went a completely different direction and in so doing offered a third potential ground for this epithet—namely, his descent from Adam (fig. 13.1).

Luke crafted his genealogy carefully. Despite the rendering in most modern English translations, which for each entry is in the form "Z, the son of Y, the son of X, the son of W . . ." for each generation, Luke's Greek reads simply "Z of Y, of X, of W . . ." Since Luke had used the word "son" (*huios*) in verse 23 (remarkably in the case where it did not apply genealogically) and since this is a succession list, to render each entry as "son of" the predecessor seems natural. Modern translations in the tradition of the King James Version (NASB [1977 ed.], NKJV) are more honest than most. By italicizing *son*, they signal to readers that the translators have knowingly inserted an element into the rendering that is not in the original. We should rather interpret the genitive expression something like "Z heir of Y, heir of X, heir of W . . ." or "Z successor to Y, successor to X, successor to W . . ."

While this adequately accounts for Jesus' relationship to Joseph at the beginning and Adam's relationship to God at the end, it does not account for the significant differences from Matthew's genealogy in the overlapping time frame from David to Jesus. Matthew has Jesus descended from Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba (Matt. 1:6–7), while Luke traces the succession through Nathan, the third of thirteen sons born to David in Jerusalem.²⁰ Thereafter the lines diverge, only to converge again momentarily during the Babylonian exile in the generations of Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, presumably to assure authentic claims to the

lineage in the liminal and dislocated exilic context. Because of Luke's distinctive interest in socially marginalized people, especially women (and non-Jews), many scholars assume that Luke has preserved Mary's lineage, which ensures that Jesus' DNA was royal in a double sense—as the descendant of the first cosmic vice-regent (on which see further below in this section) and as the descendant of David. This is probably correct, but it is striking that here he provides no hint of the Mary connection. Indeed, she has been out of Luke's picture for thirty years, since Jesus was presented to the Lord in the temple as an infant (Luke 2:22, 34), he appeared as a youth in the temple (2:48–50), and he returned to Nazareth with his parents (2:51). Mary would not be named again in this Gospel.²¹ It is equally striking that Matthew, who was especially concerned with Jesus' title to the throne of David, glossed the name “Joseph” with “the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ/Messiah” (Matt. 1:16). If Luke had added some such note, we could be more certain about his succession list as a Marian counterpart to Joseph's genealogy in Matthew 1.

Although we may have clarified the form of Luke's succession list, the question concerning its significance for the New Testament understanding of the Adamic (humanity's) covenant remains. A series of features of this list suggest that in Luke's mind the arrival of the adult Jesus, rather than his birth, represented both the climax of the royal line and the climax of human history:

(1) chronologically the lineage is arranged backward; (2) the list consists of more than seventy names; (3) it ends uniquely with twenty names tracing the lineage back from Abraham to Adam; (4) the names between Joseph and David represent a byline to the messianic line; and (5) more than half of these (39) identify obscure individuals, most of whom are never mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. These features, which are not tightly linked to the Israelite and Davidic

stories as recounted in biblical narratives, subtly raise hopes for the cosmos.

Although Jesus was literally the Son of God, and although he was heir to the throne of David, who was metaphorically the son of God, Luke avoids the term “son” in this succession list. The issue is rendered all the more striking by the likelihood that the names from Adam to Eli probably represented a line of genealogical descent—if this succession list traced Mary’s lineage, then Joseph, her husband, would have been grafted in by adoption, and we might have expected some gloss after his name like “the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus” (cf. Matt. 1:16). However, including Joseph in the list probably accounts for the avoidance of “son” (Gk. *huios*) anywhere after the introductory comment (Luke 3:23).

This raises another issue: in what sense could Adam be identified as the successor/heir to God in the first place? As the opening chapters of Genesis insist, God “made” (Hb. *‘āśâ*; Gk. *poieō*, Gen. 1:26; 5:1b) Adam; it was a special act of creation (Hb. *bārā*; Gk. *poieō*, 1:27; 5:1a, 2). God did not “generate/beget/father” (*hōlîd*) Adam the way Adam fathered (*hōlîd*) Seth, or as all the rest of the individuals in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 10 generated successors, or the way the royal line from Perez to David was “generated” (*hōlîd*) in Ruth 4:18–22. This may explain the Nicene Creed’s declaration concerning Jesus: “We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” The Scriptures know of only Jesus having been “begotten/generated” (*monogenēs*) by God (the Father).²² For this reason, as a sequel to verse 22, in verse 23 Luke could have written, “When Jesus began his ministry, he was about thirty years of age, being the Son of God,” including the word “son.” However, by fixing Jesus’ location within the context of human history, he discreetly

avoided the word and cast each element in this succession list cryptically as “*tou Z, tou Y, tou X . . .*,” which is appropriate for the final two links, “of Adam, of God” (*tou Adam tou Theou*, v. 38).

If Adam’s relationship with God was not genealogical, then what was it? To answer the question, we need to return to Genesis 1:26–28 and especially 5:1–3: “This is the written record of the generations [*sēper hattôlēdôt*] of humankind. When God created [*bārā*] humankind he made [*‘āśâ*] them as the likeness [*bidmût*] of God. Male and female he created [*bārā*] them, and he blessed them and named them Humankind when they were created [*bārā*]. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered [*hōlîd*] a son as his own likeness [*bidmûtô*], after his image [*kěšalmô*], and named him Seth” (Gen. 5:1–3).

As we noted in our discussion of humankind’s relationship to God (chap. 2, under “The Status of Humankind in Genesis 1”), and as the Aramaic Tell Fekheriye inscription of Hadad-yith‘i suggests (*COS* 2:34, pp. 153–54), while broadly synonymous, the nuances of the two critical words used to describe the relationship of the created object and its creator differ slightly. Whereas the Hebrew *dēmût*, “likeness,” seems to relate particularly to the relationship between the Creator and the created being, *šelem*, “image,” relates to the role of the image in the Creator’s governing of the environment. That is, the image functions as the representative and deputy of the Creator and in so doing establishes a suzerain-vassal relationship. In the biblical case, as Creator, God enjoys supreme authority both over the world that he has created as well as over the image he has created and assigned the role of vice-regent (Ps. 8).

In this regard the ground of God’s relationship to humankind is analogous but not identical to, say, Adam’s relationship to Seth at the beginning of the Genesis 5 genealogy or Lamech’s relationship to Noah at the end of it. Obviously, fathers enjoyed a relationship with their sons (as

děmût) that was not true of their relationship with persons outside the family, and they expected them to carry on their legacy in administering their respective domestic realms (as *ṣelem*). As vice-regents over God's creation, humankind was invested with appropriate status and authority so that they could be characterized as royal figures (*melek*)—that is, as vassal kings vis-à-vis God. In the ancient Near Eastern world, this relationship was often referred to metaphorically as a father-son relationship (cf. Ahaz' relationship to Tiglath-pileser III in 2 Kings 16:7). In that sense, as the end of the succession of human figures in Luke 3:38, Jesus could have been viewed as "son of God" in a metaphorical sense, as Luke did in verse 23, where he cast Jesus in the messianic role as descendant of David.

The theological and christological significance of Luke's succession list is profound. First, the list presents the arrival of Jesus and his entry into his ministry as the climax of history. The human story, begun with the creation of Adam, had reached its redemptive climax.

Second, as a bona fide member of the race of Adam, the person whom the voice from heaven had identified as the "Son of God" (Luke 3:22) is also literally the "Son of Man." Indeed, this genealogy sets the stage for the frequent use of the title "Son of Man" (25× in Luke), which compares with only five occurrences of "Son of God."²³ Indeed, the latter phrase occurs only once after chapter 4. This accords with the relative frequencies of these two expressions in the New Testament as a whole. "Son of God" occurs just over forty times, while "Son of Man" occurs more than eighty times. In keeping with Adam's/humanity's status as vice-regent for God, many occurrences of "Son of Man" in Luke and elsewhere highlight Jesus' authority on earth and in heaven.²⁴

Third, this succession list confirms Jesus as the legitimate heir of Adam/humanity's vice-regent status in the administration of the cosmos. Through humankind's

rebellion, their exercise of that authority had been thoroughly compromised, but the beginning of Jesus' ministry (cf. Luke 4:23) signaled his assumption of the role of God's vice-regent and the beginning of the restoration of divine rule. But as had been the case in the garden of Eden, his claims to authority over the world would not come without challenge. The central issue in the devil's testing of Jesus in the desert was his status as "Son of God" (4:3, 9) and with it his authority over the cosmos ("all the kingdoms of the world," *pasas tas basileias tēs oikoumenēs*, 4:5; cf. v. 43).

Jesus as the Replacement for Adam (Rom. 5)

After he had laid out in detail the lostness and total depravity of humanity in Romans 1-3, in 4:1-22 Paul presented Abraham as a model of faith that yields justification and the verdict of "You are righteous." It is remarkable that in the development of an argument that takes up more than 360 words Paul never refers to the Second Person of the Trinity by name ("Jesus"), by status ("Lord"), title ("the Messiah/Christ"), or any other epithets like "Son of God" or "Son of Man." But in the end he cannot leave hearers with the notion that the faith of Abraham and his heirs was a generic reliance on faith itself, as we frequently hear today—news reporters often speak of persons in stressful circumstances trusting in their faith—or faith in just any deity, as if any of them are able to solve the human predicament. This was a particular faith, focused on the God of Israel, who had in Abraham's day promised life and hope to all who believed in him. But in Romans 4:23-25, where Paul highlights this same God's recent actions, he cannot avoid the name Jesus and his title "our Lord," through whom he has established the bases for any sinful human being gaining the favor of God and being reconciled to him: "[He] raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was

handed over [to death] for our crimes [*paraptōmata*] and was raised for our justification.”

In Romans 5:1–11 Paul expounds on this statement, highlighting the predicament of a lost humanity with words like “pathetic, helpless” (*asthenōn*, v. 6), “ungodly, impious” (*asebōn*, v. 6), “sinners” (*hamartōlōn*, v. 8), objects of the “wrath” (*tēs orgēs*, v. 9) of God, and “enemies, hostile” (*echthroi*, v. 10). However, Paul also highlights the benefactions we have received from God through the work of Jesus Christ: peace with God (v. 1), our standing in this grace (v. 2), our hope in the glory of God (v. 2), our receipt of the love of God through the Holy Spirit (v. 5), our justification (v. 9), our escape from God’s wrath (v. 9), our reconciliation (vv. 10–11), and our salvation (vv. 9–10). Indeed, he emphasizes the centrality of Jesus Christ in God’s magnificent plan of reconciliation by framing this paragraph with the prepositional phrase “through our Lord Jesus Christ/Messiah” (*dia tou kyriou hēmōn ’Iēsou Christou*, vv. 1, 11), and then by inserting “Christ” an additional two times (vv. 6, 8) and “his [i.e., God’s] Son” in verse 10. To these epithets we should add the string of third-person pronouns referring to Jesus in verses 9–10. In Paul’s view, Jesus has been at the heart of God’s solution to the human and cosmic predicament from the beginning.

In the second half of the chapter, Paul presents a detailed explanation of the origins of the human (and with it the cosmic) predicament beginning with Adam’s sin and then offers a contrasting detailed explanation of the solution to this predicament in Jesus, who actually fulfills an “anti-Adamic” role. On the surface, that Paul should refer to Adam as a “type” (*typos*, 5:14) suggests continuity between him and Jesus like that assumed in the succession list of Luke 3:23–38. When we compare the two figures, some parallels are immediately obvious. (1) Both Adam and Jesus represented the founders of a new race of people. Adam was the physical ancestor of all humanity, while Jesus was

the spiritual ancestor of a new redeemed humanity. (2) The descendants of both derived their names from their first ancestor. Adam was the name of the first male human, but *'ādām* was the collective name of the species of which he was the first member. Jesus' followers are never called "Jesusites," but the epithet "Christian," which was first used in Antioch (Acts 11:26; cf. 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16), derives from Jesus' messianic title *Christos*. (3) The Scriptures characterize both Adam and Jesus as "images of God." As already observed, Genesis 1:26-28 and 5:1-3 use two words to identify Adam's status: *ṣelem*, "image,"²⁵ and *dēmût*, "likeness" (LXX *homoiōsis*; also James 3:9). Although the second expression is never used of Jesus, Paul applies the first to him in 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15. (4) God assigned to both Adam and Jesus authority to administer/govern the world on his behalf.

However, as already observed, rather than describing how Jesus was like Adam, Paul develops in detail how dissimilar Adam and Jesus were (Rom. 5:12-21). Indeed, the contrasts are so stark that in this context Greek *typos* bears the sense of "foil." To be sure, within the divine administrative plan for the earth designed "before the foundation of the world," the creation of Adam anticipates the eventual arrival of a "second" or "new" Adam, but in Paul's present argument, the second/new Adam reverses/resolves the chaos that the first Adam had precipitated with his misadministration and rebellion against his divine Suzerain. Table 13.2 highlights the contrasts between the two Adams and the effects of their responses to their mandates as vice-regents of God.

The work of the new/second Adam neutralized the evil that was let loose in the world through the rebellion of the old/first Adam. By the free and gracious gift of God through "our Lord Jesus Christ," fallen human beings are offered hope and salvation from the fury of God and the curse that hangs over the world.

Table 13.2

The Contrast between the First and Replacement Adams (Rom. 5:12-21)

Text	The First Adam	The Replacement Adam
v. 12	Adam introduced sin and death to the world. Adam's sin resulted in the infection of the entire human race.	
v. 15	Through Adam's crime many died.	Through Jesus' gift, God's grace flourished for many.
v. 16	The judgment following the crime of one man brought judgment/condemnation.	The free gift following many crimes brings justification.
v. 17	By the crime of one person, death reigned through that person.	Those who receive abounding grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through one person, Jesus Christ.
v. 18	One crime brought condemnation to all humanity.	One act of righteousness brings life to all.
v. 19	Through one man's disobedience many are made sinners.	Through one man's obedience many are made righteous.
v. 21	Sin reigns in death.	Grace reigns in righteousness.

Jesus as the Liberator of Adam and the Cosmos (Rom. 8:18-30)

Later, in Romans 8:18-30, Paul elaborates on this hope, speaking of the revelation of the “sons of God”—that is, the new humanity—and the reversal of the curse that the Adamic administrator's infidelity had brought on the cosmos. This special relationship between the divine King and his human vice-regent had been established for the well-being of the cosmos, but the revolt of the (human) king had plunged the whole system into chaos. Since then creation has been groaning under the weight of the vice-

regent's sin and is waiting to be set free from the bondage of corruption (*phthora*) and to be ushered into "the glorious freedom of the children of God [*tōn teknōn tou Theou*]" (8:19–22). The connection between the fate and fortune of the cosmos and the fate and fortune of God's vice-regents is clear.

In verse 23 Paul shifts his focus from creation generally to humankind as the administrators of the cosmic covenant and guardians and caretakers of the world. The hope of the world rests on the hope of humanity. In verses 23–25 the apostle describes this hope in terms of the latter's adoption as sons, the redemption of their bodies, and their own salvation from the bondage of corruption and into the freedom of the status originally assigned to them as vassals of God and endowed with his glory and majesty (v. 21; cf. Ps. 8).

We should not overlook the covenantal significance of Paul's reference to their "adoption as sons" (*huiiothesia*, Rom. 8:23). This language derives from First Testament references to Israel as the covenant community of YHWH. In Egypt YHWH had demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites, whom he identified as "my firstborn" (*běkōrî*, Exod. 4:22) and "my son" (*běnî*, 4:23). This is the language of potential. Pharaoh had claimed the Israelites as his slaves (*'ăbādîm*), the lowest of the low, but YHWH's designs were to set Israel high above the nations for praise, renown, and glory (Deut. 26:19). This required his rescue of Abraham's descendants from the bondage of Egypt and his formal adoption of them as his sons, which is what happened when he entered into covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai.

At the beginning of this volume, I defined a covenant as a formal legal process whereby a relationship that is not natural is created or formalized, or whereby a natural relationship that has been broken is reconstituted. For this reason, although God's relationship with humanity at the

beginning involved a Suzerain-vassal relationship, this relationship was natural (Adam belonged to God because God had created him) and thus did not involve a covenant. However, once that relationship had been broken by the vassal's rebellion, a covenant was required to restore humankind's vassal status—which is what happened in Genesis 8:20–9:7. Although this restored humanity's official status as vice-regents of God, the power and effects of sin persisted both in the vice-regents and in the realm that they were to administer. This is the problem that Paul has been addressing in Romans 5 and 8. In Jesus Christ that “salvation” has been achieved, but the full realization of the renewal it promised awaits the eschatological revelation of the “children of God” and their “adoption as sons”—that is, the full renewal of the Adamic covenant.

Building on Paul's reference to the work of the Holy Spirit in Romans 5:5, in 8:12–30 the apostle emphasizes the Spirit's role in the renewal of humanity and the reconstitution of their relationship with God. Verses 14–17 are particularly significant in this regard: “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons [*pneuma huiothesias*], by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God [*tekna Theou*], and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (ESV).

After describing the ongoing work of the Spirit in verses 26–27, Paul adds a paragraph in which he describes the relationship in this new order between Jesus Christ, who is the second/new Adam, and the new humanity: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [*tēs eikonos tou huiou*]

autou], in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:28–30 ESV).

Within the broader context, the new humanity consists of “the sons of God”—that is, “all who are led by the Spirit of God” (v. 14), “who love God” (*tois agapōsin ton Theon*), and “who are called according to his purpose” (*tois kata prothesin klētois ousin*, v. 28). We need to note especially the covenantal significance of the last two modifying clauses. As noted repeatedly in this volume, the verb *agapaō* is a covenantal expression, referring to “covenant commitment demonstrated in action in the interest of the other person.” Here “those who love God” are those who have accepted their status as his vassals and always act in his interest and in accordance with his will.²⁶

The last clause in Romans 8:28 clarifies the scope of their response: they have accepted God’s calling and serve as his vice-regents in the administration of the cosmic covenant—that is, in caring for and guarding his creation. This is not so much a general call to salvation but a renewal of the mandate that God gave to Adam when he created him. This was God’s predetermined plan for his vice-regents. However, God also knew in advance (*proginōskō*, 8:29) that humankind collectively would abandon their divine Suzerain and their calling. To ensure the ultimate accomplishment of his cosmic purposes, out of the mass of treacherous humanity, God selected those through whom his plan would be achieved. Paul summarizes the process/sequence of their advance from participants in humanity’s bondage to corruption to effective agents of divine rule in verse 30: election, commissioning, justification, and glorification.

However, in verse 29, in the very middle of this statement, Paul inserts an extremely significant comment explicitly linking the new humanity (these “sons of God”) to Jesus Christ (“his Son”; cf. Rom. 1:3–4, 9; 5:10): “For those

God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Rom. 8:29 NIV). The preamble to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (1:1–6) invites hearers to interpret “his Son” primarily as a metaphoric messianic (as opposed to Adamic) title, inherited from David and reflecting his role as head of the covenant community, here identified with the plural counterpart “sons of God.” However, the picture is complicated by the repeated application of the epithet “his Son” to our Lord Jesus Christ and then his portrayal of Christ in 5:10 as the second/new Adam. It seems that in the present context of 8:29, Paul has either merged these roles or overlaid the Adamic template with the messianic paradigm.

The use of the expression “image” (Gk. *eikōn*) suggests an Adamic allusion,^{[27](#)} except that here Paul makes no reference to Jesus Christ as the “image of God” (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Furthermore, the present paradigm, with “the sons of God” being conformed (*symmorphous*) to “the image of his Son” (*tēs eikonos tou huiou autou*, Rom. 8:29), reflects precisely Moses’ preview of the relationship between Israel’s king and his subjects in Deuteronomy 17:18–20. In contrast to prevailing models of kingship in the ancient world, Moses prohibited Israel’s kings from using their office for self-aggrandizement (vv. 16–17). Then Moses prescribed that the king write a copy of the Torah *for himself* and read it (for himself) as long as he lives, that he may learn to fear YHWH his God, that he may keep all the words of *this Torah* by fulfilling its ordinances. The intent of this charge was that his heart be not lifted up above his compatriots (lit., “brothers”), that he may not turn aside to the right or the left, and that he and his sons may continue long over the kingdom of Israel. In short, the king, as YHWH’s vice-regent, was to be the model citizen, embodying covenant righteousness as spelled out in the Torah and inspiring his compatriots to pursue righteousness—that is, to be

conformed to YHWH's image. Speaking sociopolitically, like the king in the Mosaic model, Jesus Christ will be "the firstborn among many brothers" (*prōtotokos en pollois adelphois*, Rom. 8:29). In the patricentric world of ancient Israel, the rights and responsibilities of primogeniture usually fell to a married couple's first male child. However, this was not always the case. Indeed, in Israel's history a *běkōr*, usually translated "firstborn" (Gk. *prōtotokos*), functioned primarily as a sociological construct, often applying to a person designated as the de facto leader of a household, not necessarily the literal firstborn. As such, it would have been an appropriate designation for the king in Deuteronomy 17:18–20, and it certainly applied to Christ, who was the model for "many brothers" (cf. the reference to "brothers" [Hb. *'aḥîm*; Gk. *adelphoi*] in Deut. 17:20). However, in this instance, the "sons of God" will not be merely subjects of the king (Jesus Christ); as a community of vice-regents, they will also reign with him on the newly constituted earth.^{[28](#)}

Jesus as the Second Adam (1 Cor. 15:20–49)

But there is more to the notion of Jesus Christ's status as the firstborn. Because he was the "founder/source" of the salvation of the "sons of God" (Rom. 5:1–11) and the founder of the new humanity (cf. the use of *archēgon* in Acts 3:15; Heb. 2:10; 12:2), the epithet *prōtotokos* (Hb. *běkōr*) was doubly applicable to him. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 15:20–49 Paul had gone to great lengths to apply this paradigm to Jesus, not because he was born first, but because he was the first to be raised from the dead. Assuming that Paul wrote Romans several years after he had written 1 Corinthians, we may interpret his declaration that Jesus Christ's resurrection had demonstrated him to be "the Son of God" in Romans 1:3–4 as a summary of his

earlier lengthier commentary on the significance of Jesus' resurrection.

Since in that context Jesus' supremacy was grounded not on his priority in the birth order but on his priority in the resurrection order, Paul had appropriately used a different word to describe Jesus' status vis-à-vis the "sons of God." Instead of *prōtotokos* (= Hb. *běkōr*), in 1 Corinthians 15:20 and 23 he refers to the resurrected Christ as the *aparchē*, "firstfruits"²⁹ of those who are asleep, a euphemism for death. As he would do later in Romans 5:1–11, Paul used Adam as a foil for Jesus Christ. As the founder of the previous humanity doomed to die, Adam dragged down all humanity with him, leaving all under the curse of death. Christ is the replacement Adam and the founder of a new humanity. Just as Christ was resurrected from the dead, so in him shall all who follow in this new humanity experience the same resurrection (15:20–23).

In 1 Corinthians 15:39–49 Paul continued his contrast between the humanity represented by "the first man Adam" (*ho prōtos anthrōpos Adam*) and the humanity represented by "the last Adam (*ho eschatos Adam*, v. 45; see table 13.3).

Table 13.3

A Comparison of the Humanity of the First and Last Adams (1 Cor. 15:39–49)

	The Humanity of the First Adam	The Humanity of the Last Adam
v. 40	Their body is earthly (<i>sōmata epigeia</i>).	Their body is heavenly (<i>sōmata epourania</i>).
v. 41	Their glory is like the of stars (<i>doxa asterōn</i>).	Their glory is like the sun (<i>doxa hēliou</i>).
v. 42	Their body is perishable (<i>en phthora</i>).	Their body is imperishable (<i>en aphtharsia</i>).
v. 43	Their body is sown in dishonor (<i>en atimia</i>).	Their body is raised in glory (<i>en doxē</i>).

	Their body is sown in weakness (<i>en astheneia</i>).	Their body is raised in power (<i>en dynamei</i>).
vv. 44, 46	Their body is natural (<i>psychikon</i>).	Their body is spiritual (<i>pneumatikon</i>).
vv. 47, 48	They are earthy (<i>ek gēs choikos</i>) like the first man.	They are heavenly (<i>ex ouranou</i>) like the second man.
v. 49	They bear the image of the earthy man (<i>tēn eikona tou choikou</i>).	They bear the image of the heavenly man (<i>tēn eikona tou epouraniou</i>).

In addition to these stark contrasts between the two humanities, in 15:40–49 we observe two remarkable features at play. First, verse 45 presents a sharp contrast between the respective heads of these humanities. On the one hand, the first Adam began his existence as a lifeless earthy object that was transformed secondarily into a living being. Apart from the addition of the bracketed words to serve the present rhetorical function, the clause, “The [first] man [Adam] became a living being” (*egeneto ho [prōtos] anthrōpos [’ādām] eis psychēn zōsan*) is lifted verbatim from the Septuagint of Genesis 2:7 (= Hb. *wayēhî hā’ādām lēnepeš ḥayyâ*). Indeed, with “It is written” (1 Cor. 15:45), Paul informs his addressees that he was basing his statement on a written text. His hearers could probably fill in the lacuna regarding the process by which the earthy material became a living being, for the same text had preceded the result with a statement of causation: “[YHWH God] . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gk. *pnoēn zōēs* = Hb. *nišmat ḥayyîm*). However, the last clause of verse 45 catches us by surprise. We might have expected “The last Adam *granted* a life-giving spirit so that those who had died in the first Adam might become living beings in him” (cf. v. 22). Instead, assuming that *egeneto*, “became,” in the first line did double duty, Paul awkwardly preserved the Hebrew idiom of transformation from one state to another in Genesis 2:7 by repeating the preposition *eis* from *lēnepeš* but dropping the verb: “Thus it is written, ‘The first

man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam [became] a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). However, by changing the resulting state of the transformed person from "living being" (*psychēn zōsan*) to "life-giving spirit" (*pneuma zōopoion*, more literally, "spirit who makes alive"), he linked this statement with his earlier comment in verse 22. There he had used the same verb: "In Christ all shall be made alive" (*en tō Christō pantes zōpoiēthēsontai*). But he also shifted the focus from Christ's own transformation from a dead body to a living (resurrected) being and identified him with the life-giving Spirit himself. To grasp the effect, we must respect the precise parallelism of verse 22:

*Hōsper gar en tō Adam pantes
apothnēskousin,*

*houtōs kai en tō Christō pantes
zōpoiēthēsontai.*

For as in Adam all die [are put to death],

even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

Just as the first statement holds Adam responsible for the death of all humans, so the second credits Christ with the fact that all in the new humanity come to life. Closely identifying the work of the Holy Spirit and the Second Person of the Trinity, Paul declares that the one who had been raised by the Spirit of God becomes the agent of resurrection for the new humanity.

Just as Paul emphasizes the newness of the second Adam and the newness of the second humanity in his dissertation on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, he also emphasizes the continuity between the two humanities. The new humanity does not involve a new species that God creates specially (*bārā'*), but it consists of those members of the original species who have died but have experienced the life-giving power of Christ by the Holy Spirit. They have been consigned to death through the sin of Adam and have proved that they deserved death because of their own crimes (*paraptōma*, Eph. 2:5). Yet through the free and

gracious act of God in Jesus Christ, as the resurrected and ultimately as images of Christ, they will share in his reign over the cosmos.

Following his presentation of Christ as the firstfruits of those who sleep but have been raised from the dead, Paul writes of the cosmic implications of the new humanity. In 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 Paul momentarily leaves his contemplation of the resurrection “of those who are Christ’s at his coming” (v. 23) to offer a doxological excursus on the eschatological and cosmic implications of the resurrection of Christ and those who follow in his train. Here we see the new/second Adam, the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, fulfilling his role as vice-regent of God. He has subdued all the powers that stand in opposition to God and has established the rule of God in the cosmos. Whereas the first Adam had failed miserably in the divine mandate to “subdue” (*kābaš*) and “exercise authority over” (*rādâ*) the earth (Gen. 1:28), the second Adam fulfills that role perfectly, bringing to subjection all those forces of evil that had been unleashed with the first Adam’s sin.

Jesus as the Supreme Adam (Heb. 2:1–10)

I conclude this discussion with a brief glance at Hebrews 2:1–10, which offers fresh insight into Jesus’ role as cosmic administrator. Here the author of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint version of Psalm 8:4–6 [5–7] to declare Jesus’ status in relation to the cosmos:

What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet. (Heb. 2:6–8 NIV)

Here the author of Hebrews makes two very significant moves. First, rather than interpreting Hebrew *ben ’ādām* (Gk. *huios anthrōpou*) in verse 6b as a collective synonym of

Hebrew *’ēnôš* (Gk. *anthrōpos*) in verse 6a (with v. 6a referring to humankind and v. 6b referring to members of humankind), he interprets both singly and applies the expressions to Jesus (vv. 9–10). This means that the authority over all creation deeded by God to humanity by virtue of humanity’s status as his image (Gen. 1:26–28; MT Ps. 8) has been localized in Jesus, “the Son of Man” par excellence. Second, he utilizes the Septuagint rendering of Hebrew *’ēlōhîm* (“God”) in verse 7a as *angelous* (“angels”), apparently an abbreviation for *bēnê ’ēlōhîm*, which often refers to angelic members of God’s heavenly court.³⁰ Then he declares that “for a little while” (*brachu*) God reduced Jesus’ standing in the cosmic administration below the status of angels (v. 9). Obviously alluding to Jesus’ incarnation, he adds that this was a temporary arrangement so that in life and death Jesus could identify with humanity. Although humans should experience suffering and death as the just reward for their sin, because of Jesus’ death on their behalf, God would crown Jesus with glory and honor in a glorious reversal. Curiously, through the suffering of Jesus, the true Administrator of the cosmos (Jesus) would be made perfect, presumably, among other factors, by achieving the goals of God’s grand plan of redemption, which would mean the salvation and glorification of many “sons.”³¹ This remarkable text celebrates the role of Jesus, “the Son of Man,” in achieving the salvation of “the sons of man” from the fury of God and their restoration to their original glorious state.

Concluding Thoughts on the Adamic Covenant

In our discussion of the disposition of New Testament characters and writers toward the Adamic covenant, we have only scratched the surface. As we shall see in the concluding chapters, the dominant theme in the New Testament is the status of the messianic hope as the

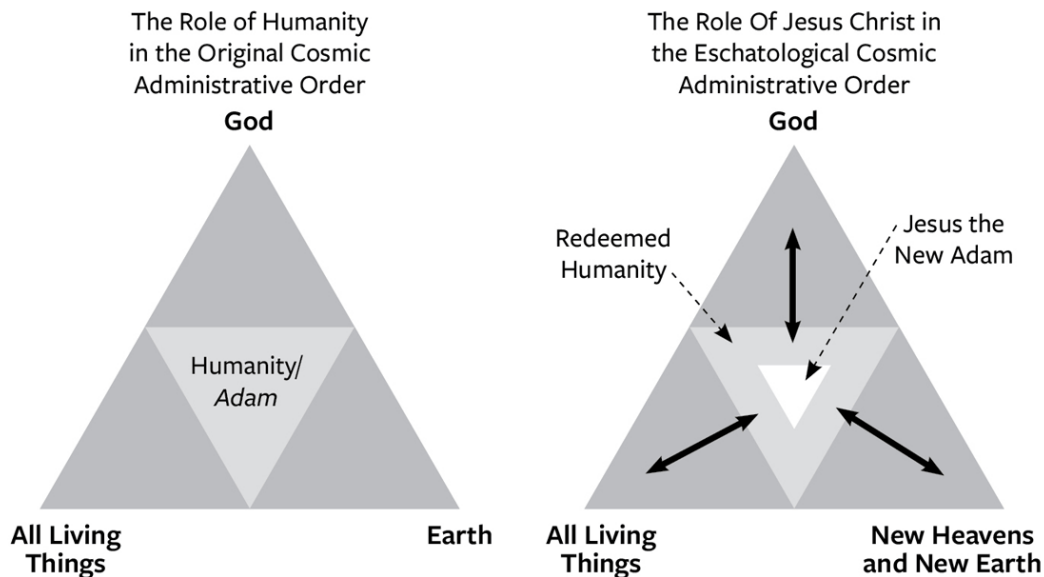
fulfillment of God's covenant with David, the king of Israel. However, this awareness should not blind us to the cosmic significance of the incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus as a new/second Adam. This motif reaches a brilliant crescendo in Paul's outburst of thanksgiving to the heavenly Father and his ode to Jesus Christ, the Father's beloved Son (*tou huiou tēs agapēs autou*, Col. 1:13), that opens his Epistle to the Colossians. Like John 1:1–3, which assigns to the incarnate Word a significant role in cosmic creation, this text paints a picture of Christ that goes far beyond the Adamic role of having been specially created to serve as vice-regent over the cosmos. While coming short of making Jesus the grammatical subject of verbs of creation, the prepositions in Colossians 1:16 are critical: "For in him [*en autō*] everything was created. . . . Through him [*di' autou*] and for him [*eis auton*] everything has been created." He exercises authority over all creation by virtue of his role in creation, his existence prior to creation, and his providential sustaining of creation (vv. 16–17). Curiously mixing his metaphors, after speaking of Christ as the head of the body (which is the church [*ekklēsia*]), Paul then changes the horticultural language of firstfruits (*aparchē*) used to describe those who have been raised from the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:20–23 to the sociological language of "firstborn [*prōtotokos*] from the dead" (Col. 1:17–18). Both metaphors portray "the image of the invisible God" as one in whom the latter had invested "all his fullness" (*pan to plērōma*, v. 19). This takes Jesus far beyond Adam and his race, to whom YHWH had assigned a role a little lower than himself and whom he had crowned with glory and majesty appropriate to the fulfillment of that role (Ps. 8:6 [5]). It pleased God to invest Christ Jesus with "all [his] fullness." Whatever else this means, it involves full divinity and perfection in all the Father's attributes, which was critical for his sacrificial role

in reconciling not only humanity but also the entire cosmos to himself (vv. 20–23).

We may compare the role of Christ with the role of humanity (*'ādām* collectively) by juxtaposing the images of the original cosmic triangular covenant relationship with the eschatological cosmic covenant relationships (fig. 13.2). The original model was quite simple: Adam as representative of all humanity was charged to care for and govern the world on God's behalf. His role was analogous to that of a symphony's orchestra conductor, invested with the privilege and obligation of ensuring that all elements in the universal orchestra played and sang for the glory of their Creator. However, Adam and Eve—and all who followed in their train as vassals of God and conjoint lead conductors of the cosmos—rebelled against their divine Suzerain, who unleashed his fury on them and on the kingdom they served as vice-regents.

Figure 13.2

A Comparison of the Role of Humanity in the Original Cosmic Order and the Role of Jesus Christ in the Eschatological Cosmic Order



Of the full-blown trinitarian portraiture of God that we find in the New Testament, that original picture had contained only the faintest of hints: God the (Holy) Spirit hovering over the surface of the deep (Gen. 1:2); God (the Father?) addressing the heavenly court and saying, “Let us make humankind in our image” (1:26, note the plural pronouns); God the Son being anticipated in the prediction that the woman’s “seed” would crush the head of the serpent (3:15). But the prediction concerning the woman’s seed says nothing about the extraordinarily significant role the new/second Adam would play as head of a new humanity and as “kingpin” in the new heavens and the new earth as envisioned especially in the book of Revelation.

- [1.](#) Matt. 24:37–38; Luke 17:26–27; Heb. 11:7; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5.
- [2.](#) Matt. 24:37; Luke 17:26; 1 Pet. 3:20.
- [3.](#) Cf. Ps. 89:11 [MT 12], *tēbēl ūmēlō’āh*; cf. Gk. [LXX 88:12], *tēn oikoumenēn kai to plērōma autēs*.
- [4.](#) Rom. 8:19, *tōn huiōn tou Theou*; cf. v. 21, *tōn teknōn tou Theou*.
- [5.](#) Cf. *šēmē haššāmayim*, Deut. 10:14; 1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6 [5]; 6:18; Neh. 9:6.
- [6.](#) As in Heb. 1:10 = Ps. 102:25 [LXX 101:26]; the longer version in Heb. 2:7 = Ps. 8:6 [LXX 8:7]; as in NKJV, KJV, NAS.
- [7.](#) *kol [hā]’āreš ūmēlō’āh*; cf. Deut. 33:16; Pss. 24:1; 89:11 [12]; 96:11; Isa. 34:1; 42:10; Jer. 8:16; 47:2; Ezek. 12:19; 19:7; 30:12; 32:15; Mic. 1:2.
- [8.](#) *kol yôšēb bāh*; cf. Ezek. 32:15; Hosea 4:3; Amos 9:5; Nah. 1:5.
- [9.](#) Thus one version; preferred by Nestle-Aland, *Greek New Testament*, 28th ed.
- [10.](#) *ouch hēurisketo*; so Heb. 11:5; for *’ênennû* rendered by LXX with negative particle + *heuriskō*, see also Ps. 37:10 [LXX 36:10].
- [11.](#) Gen. 2:20; 1 Sam. 25:28; Isa. 35:9; Dan. 11:19; cf. Rev. 16:20; 18:21.
- [12.](#) Isa. 1:31; 4:4; 5:24; Mic. 1:3–5; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; Mal. 4:1 [3:19].
- [13.](#) Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 4:25–31; 30:1–10; 32:36–43.
- [14.](#) Isa. 40–45, esp. 44:1–8; 51–52; 60–62; Jer. 30–31; 33; Ezek. 11:14–25; 34; 36–48; Joel 2–3; Zeph. 3:14–20; etc.
- [15.](#) Hb. *wěnpahtî ’ălêkem bē’ēš ’ebrâtî*, Ezek. 22:21; cf. Jeremiah’s “bellows” (*mappūah*, Jer. 6:29).
- [16.](#) Luke 3:38; Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:20–49 (vv. 22, 45); 1 Tim. 2:13–14; Jude 14.
- [17.](#) Matt. 24:37–38; Luke 3:26; 17:26–27; Heb. 11:7; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5.

- [18.](#) Matt. 24:37–38; Heb. 11:7; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5.
- [19.](#) See Pss. 2:7; 89:19–29 [20–30]; cf. 2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13–14; 22:10.
- [20.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 5:14–16; 1 Chron. 3:5–8; 14:4–7.
- [21.](#) She appears without a name in 8:19–21. Cf. Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; 15:47; John 19:25.
- [22.](#) John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9.
- [23.](#) Luke 1:35; 4:3, 9, 41; 22:70.
- [24.](#) Luke 5:24; 6:5; 9:26; 12:8; 19:10; 21:27, 36; 22:69.
- [25.](#) LXX *eikōn*, from which we get “icon”; cf. 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:18.
- [26.](#) Cf. Deut. 30:6–8; John 14:15; 15:7–14.
- [27.](#) Hb. *šelem* in Gen. 1:26–28; 5:1–3.
- [28.](#) Cf. 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 20:4; 22:5.
- [29.](#) Hb. *rē’šît* [*pěřî*], Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Lev. 2:12; 23:10; Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:4; 26:2, 10; Neh. 12:44.
- [30.](#) E.g., Job 1:6; 2:1; etc. See above, chap. 12 on Ps. 45.
- [31.](#) Here *huiōi* (sons), presumably an abbreviation for *huiōi tou anthrōpou* = *běně ’ādām*, is intended as a reference to human beings inclusively, without reference to gender.

CHAPTER 14

Stage 1 of the Israelite Covenant in the New Testament

The Abrahamic Covenant

Introduction

Of all the ancient covenants dealt with in the New Testament, the Israelite covenant is the most complex, but it derives this complexity from its evolution in four stages, according to the First Testament: (1) Early in the second millennium BC, YHWH planted the seed for this covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 15; 17). (2) Intent on fulfilling his promises in Genesis 15:12-21 and 17:7-8, YHWH rescued their descendants from Egypt and “established” (*hēqîm*) the covenant with this “people of Israel” at Sinai/Horeb (Exod. 19-24). (3) In the wake of that generation’s faithlessness, YHWH renewed the covenant with the new generation on the plains of Moab, just before their entry into the promised land (Deuteronomy). (4) Moses and the prophets envisioned a moment in the distant future, after God’s judgment of Israel for persistently rejecting YHWH and their own mission of being a light of God’s grace to the world, when the original vision of the covenant would finally be realized in the renewed Israelite covenant (Jer. 31:31-40). Like the First Testament, New Testament texts sometimes blur the boundaries of these four stages. Paul

declared, “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12 ESV). The plural “covenants of promise” (*tōn diathēkōn tēs epangelias*) invites hearers to treat these covenants the same since they were all promissory. This recalls Paul’s earlier statement in Romans 9:4, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants [*hai diathēkai*], the giving of the Torah, the vassaldom, and the promises.”

In the discussion of New Testament perspectives on these covenants, I shall treat these not as separate covenants but as stages in the development of a single covenant. I will explore stage 1 in this chapter, stages 2 and 3 in chapters 15 and 16, and stage 4 in chapter 17. I will treat stages 2 and 3 together since in the First Testament stage 3 largely reaffirms the issues in stage 2, even though they were established by separate covenant-making/renewal rituals.

Explicit References to Stage 1 of the Israelite Covenant

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob figure prominently in the New Testament, their names occurring seventy-seven, twenty, and twenty-seven times, respectively. In Acts 7:32 Stephen streamlines YHWH’s self-introduction to Moses in Exodus 3:6: “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.” Elsewhere we hear repeatedly of “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”¹ Although the word “covenant” is missing from this triadic epithet, its roots lie in the covenant that YHWH initiated with Abraham and extended to Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 2:24), and ultimately in the first element of Israel’s “covenant formula,” “I will be your God.”²

While the Abrahamic narratives in Genesis 12–24 present him as a complex character, with flaws that plague all

human beings, thereafter historians, poets, and prophets paint him with an idealized brush. The New Testament view of Abraham as a paragon of virtue and faith matches the later images. Responding to those who claimed descent from Abraham as an irrevocable mark of privilege (John 8:39–40), Jesus declared that the mark of Abraham’s true children is that they “do the deeds of Abraham.” In Romans 4:1–6 and Galatians 3:6–18, Paul highlights Abraham as a man of faith (*pistis*), in contrast to Judaizers among his addressees who count on their works to give them right standing with God. However, despite the absence of a word for “faith” in Genesis 12, the author of Hebrews rightly interpreted Abraham’s departure from Ur as an act of faith (*pistis*, Heb. 11:8). Whereas the divine envoy interpreted Abraham’s obedient preparations to sacrifice Isaac as a demonstration of “fear” (*yārē’*; Gk. *phobeō*) of God (Gen. 22:12), the writer of Hebrews again rightly assessed this also as an act of “faith” (*pistis*). James is even more explicit: on the basis of his “work” (*ergon*) of preparing to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice on the altar, Abraham was “justified”—that is, “declared righteous” (*dikaiaō*, James 2:21).

Whereas the name Abraham occurs only forty-four times in the First Testament outside the book of Genesis, his significance for the New Testament is reflected in the fact that the name appears seventy-seven times. These references to Abraham tend to occur in the following kinds of contexts:

1. In genealogies linking Jesus the Christ to Abraham: Matthew 1:1, 1, 17; Luke 3:34.
2. Where Jews claim descent from Abraham as the basis of special privilege.³
3. Where people recognize an outsider to have access to Abrahamic privilege. In Matthew 8:10–13 Jesus declared a Roman centurion’s faith superior to that found

anywhere in Israel, which led him to predict that people from all over the world will recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom are cast out.

4. In debates over and references to the afterlife.⁴

According to Luke 13:28, the righteous will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but “workers of evil” will be cast out. Luke 16:19–31 refers to the afterlife of the righteous as being in Abraham’s bosom. When the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus from Hades to warn his family, Jesus said that Abraham pointed people to Moses and the Prophets as the ultimate authorities.

5. In allusions to the Abrahamic covenant: See Luke 1:54–55 (Mary’s Magnificat), 68–74 (Zacharias’ prophecy). The latter is especially significant, for it links the birth of Jesus and YHWH’s covenant with Abraham within the grand divine program of redemption.

But these are not the only references to Abraham with strong covenantal overtones. Jews called this patriarch “[our] father Abraham,”⁵ claimed descent from Abraham with expressions like “seed of Abraham”⁶ or “daughters” (cf. Luke 13:16) and “sons of Abraham,”⁷ or more crassly, said they had “emerged from the loins of Abraham” (*exelēlythotas ek tēs osphyos Abraam*, Heb. 7:5). These statements allude to Second Temple Judaism’s conviction that physical descent from Abraham entitled Jews to the covenant benefactions promised to Abraham. Paul challenged this assumption in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. John 8:33 does not refer explicitly to the covenant, but it alludes to YHWH’s comment when he bound himself by covenant to Abraham and his descendants. Responding to Jesus’ statement “The truth shall make you free” (v. 32), some folks retorted, “We are Abraham’s

offspring [*sperma*] and have never been enslaved to anyone.” The statement was categorically false, flying in the face of their enslavement in Egypt (cf. Exod. 1–2), which YHWH explicitly predicted in Genesis 15:13, and later their subjugation by Assyrians (2 Kings 17) and Babylonians (2 Kings 24–25).

Explicit references to the covenant (*diathēkē*) with the ancestors occur only in Acts 3:13 and 7:8; both occur within historical summaries of Israel’s rebellion and rejection of God’s revelation. Addressing the people in Jerusalem as “people of Israel” (Acts 3:12), Peter declared, “You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (3:25). The combination of cognate verb (*diatithēmī*) and object (*diathēkē*) derives from Genesis 15:18, the only place where the Septuagint renders YHWH’s making the covenant with Abraham with these two words (Hb. *kārat bēřîṭ*). Although Genesis 15:18–21 had identified the land of Canaan as a covenant benefaction, Abraham’s response of faith to YHWH’s promise to multiply his descendants like the stars of the sky (15:5–6) had precipitated that covenantal moment. On the surface, this promise looks like a purely personal benefaction—Abraham would live on in innumerable progeny. However, by citing “in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed,” Peter had grasped the missional significance in the Abrahamic iteration of the Israelite covenant. Although in Acts 3:25 Peter renders “families” from Genesis 12:3 as *patriai* (perhaps influenced by Ps. 22:27 [21:28]) instead of the Septuagint’s *phylai*, he seems to have lifted this clause from Genesis 12:3 and 28:14, the only two places where YHWH speaks explicitly of all the families (Hb. *mišpāḥôt*; LXX *phylai*) of the earth being blessed by Abraham’s descendants (28:14, Hb. *zera’*; LXX *sperma*).

In Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin, whose members were fellow Israelites, he picked up the theme of God's covenant with the patriarchs: "And he gave him [Abraham] the covenant of circumcision. And subsequently Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac [became the father] of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs" (Acts 7:8). In this, the only place in Scripture where anyone speaks of "the covenant of circumcision," Stephen had in mind Genesis 17, which involves the second stage of rituals ratifying YHWH's covenant with Abraham. Here YHWH had declared circumcision to be the sign (Hb. *'ôṭ*; LXX *sēmeion*) of his human partners' acceptance of the privileges and responsibilities of covenant relationship with himself. Although other peoples practiced circumcision, this rite was explicitly covenantal for the descendants of Abraham, marking them off as the people of YHWH—hence Stephen's label, "the covenant of circumcision" (*diathēkēn peritomēs*). Indeed, God had declared that any male in Abraham's household or among his descendants who was not physically circumcised had broken the covenant (*hēpar 'et bēritî*) and would be cut off (*kārat*) from the covenant community (Gen. 17:14).

Two features of Stephen's summary of the life of Abraham in Acts 7:2–8 are significant here. First, the word "covenant" (*diathēkē*) is missing in verses 2–7, but with his citation of specific texts from Genesis 15 and 17, he conflated the two phases of ratifying the covenant as if they represented a single entity. After summarizing Abraham's journey from Mesopotamia to the promised land, he quoted Genesis 17:8. Reading this text alongside Acts 7:5b highlights the links between the two texts.

It is clear that Stephen has summarized the promise of land that had been given and reiterated earlier in Genesis 12:7 and 13:14–15, 17. His reference to Abraham not receiving any land, not even a piece of ground the size of

his foot, alludes to YHWH's invitation to stake his claim to the land by walking back and forth (*hithallēk*) throughout its length and breadth, because that would define what YHWH would give to him. Centuries later, Moses had concretized the image before the Israelites poised to enter the land: "Every place on which the sole of your foot steps shall be yours. . . . YHWH your God will instill the fear of you and the dread of you on the whole land, wherever you set foot, as he promised you" (Deut. 11:24–25; cf. Josh. 1:3). Moses' maximalist definition of the promised land derived from Genesis 15:18, which follows YHWH's declaring the context for the fulfillment of the land promise.

Indeed, in Acts 7:6–7 Stephen followed this line of reasoning by adapting and paraphrasing Genesis 15:13–14 for his present address. In Acts 7:2–8 the brevity of Stephen's reference to the events surrounding the original institution of the ritual of circumcision is striking. He declared simply that God instituted "the covenant of circumcision." Instead of reviewing how Abraham had circumcised himself and all the males in his household, including Ishmael (Gen. 17:22–27), he leaped forward to Abraham becoming the father to Isaac, whom he circumcised on his eighth day (21:1–7), as God had specified (17:12). The relationship between the narrative time and the narrated time in Genesis 17–18 is uncertain, but the structure of the narrative in Genesis had apparently inspired Stephen to telescope the account. To the narrator it seems not to have been coincidental that "the covenant of circumcision" led immediately to the divine announcement of Sarah's coming pregnancy and the birth of her son "in due course [next year]" (*kā'ēt ḥayyâ*, LXX *kata ton kairon touton eis hōras*, Gen. 18:10; cf. v. 14). By juxtaposing these two events, Stephen presented the birth of Isaac as the reward for Abraham's demonstrated confidence in YHWH's fidelity to his promises. Furthermore, Stephen associated Abraham's circumcision—that is, the sign of his acceptance

of the covenant—with the immediate beginning of the fulfillment of the covenantal promise of progeny (Acts 7:8). And he concluded this segment of his speech by linking “the covenant of circumcision” to both Isaac and Jacob. The birth narrative of Jacob (and Esau) is silent on the circumcision of these lads, but Stephen assumed that Jacob was a legitimate heir to the covenant made with Abraham and extended to Isaac.

Allusions to Stage 1 of the Israelite Covenant in Luke

Of the four Gospel writers, the gentile Luke remarkably has preserved the clearest references to specific benefactions of the Abrahamic covenant (Luke 1:55, 73). However, neither reference represents the evangelist’s independent thinking, because both occur within longer quotations by primary characters in Jesus’ nativity.

Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

Mary’s Magnificat resonates with echoes from Hannah’s utterance in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Hannah’s oracle had celebrated YHWH’s grace in elevating this humble woman and granting her a son, Samuel, and then concluded with a forward look at YHWH’s anointed king (v. 10). Mary also celebrated YHWH’s action in bringing down the mighty and elevating the lowly (herself included), and she concluded by placing her own conception in the context of YHWH’s aid to his servant Israel and his fulfillment of the eternal covenant as promised to the ancestors—that is, to Abraham, and to his descendants: “He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever” (Luke 1:55).

The word “covenant” (*diathēkē*) is missing in this ode, but several features of the final two verses suggest that the covenant is lurking in the background. First, Mary observed

that God had spoken to our fathers (v. 55). The plural probably refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom he announced and reiterated the benefactions and mission associated with the covenant. Second, she zeroed in on Abraham, God's primary addressee. Third, she noted that the word given to him applied also to his descendants (*tō spermati autou*). Fourth, she characterized God's word as "eternal, irrevocable" (Gk. *eis ton aiōna*).

The notions expressed in verse 55 derive not from Hannah but from YHWH's own words in Genesis 17:19: "No. Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him." What followed (17:19-21) in God's plan exhibits links to each of the features of Mary's statements noted above. First, God explicitly declared that he would establish (*hēqîm*) his covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah would bear to him one year from then (v. 21). Here God not only named Abraham's son a year in advance, but also applied his promise to the second of the three primary ancestors. Second, the statement was given to Abraham, the primary ancestor and the one with whom God had first ratified the covenant. Third, it involved the only occurrence of the phrase "and for his descendants" (*kai tō spermati autou*), which Mary quoted verbatim. Fourth, God characterized the covenant that he would establish with Isaac as "eternal, irrevocable" (*bērît 'ôlām*), which the Septuagint renders as *diathēkē aiōnion*, thus involving the same word that Mary used in Luke 1:55 to describe the duration of God's word.

By alluding to Genesis 17:19 Mary created a triangular intertextual relationship involving three women whose conception and bearing of a son were the result of divine intervention in the reproductive process. To be sure, the need for and nature of the divine intervention in each case differed. In Sarah's case, when God announced that he would bless Abraham with a son by her (Gen. 17:16), she

was ninety years old—past the normal years of producing progeny (18:11–12), but more seriously, she had been incapable of bearing a child during her normally fertile years (11:30; 16:1). This had turned her into a self-interested pragmatist, who devised her own scheme for solving Abraham's lack of an heir (Gen. 16:1–6). And when the scheme worked, she became bitter and invoked a curse on Abraham and abused (*'innâ*) her handmaid, forcing her to flee to the desert. When God announced to Abraham that Sarah would bear him a child, Abraham interpreted the announcement as a joke (*yīṣḥāq*). But God kept his word, and a year later Sarah had the last laugh (Gen. 21:6–7).

Hannah shared Sarah's barrenness, which also led to a poisoned domestic atmosphere. But in this home she and her co-wife competed for the affection of their husband, Elkanah (1 Sam. 1:3–8). Sarah had proposed a rational solution to her barrenness (Gen. 16), but Hannah presented her case directly to YHWH *Ṣěbā'ôt* at the central sanctuary. Indeed, she promised YHWH that if he would give her a son, she would give (*nātan*) the lad back to him for his service (1 Sam. 1:9–11). This set the stage for her ode in 2:1–10.

Mary's physiological situation was different. Being a young virgin, she would not have known whether or not she was capable of having children. As Joseph recognized, YHWH's intervention created more problems than it solved, threatening their relationship and her reputation in the community as an immoral person (Matt. 1:18–20). When God's envoy announced her impending pregnancy (Luke 1:29–34), she humbly submitted to God's strange intervention in her life (1:35–38). The movement of the yet unborn John the Baptizer inside Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:39–45) stimulated Mary's Magnificat (vv. 46–55). This John would herald the arrival of her son in his maturity.⁸

In recording these events Luke drew three remarkable women into this divine vortex of intertextual revelation. In the Genesis narratives Sarah never acknowledged the

covenantal and missional significance of the birth of Isaac, but both Hannah and Mary opened their responses to the outworking of God's plan by celebrating his salvation:

Hannah:

My heart is overjoyed in YHWH;
my horn is raised high because of YHWH.
My mouth is agape over the fate of my enemies,
for I celebrate your salvation. (1 Sam. 2:1)

Mary:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit is overjoyed in God my Savior,
for he has noticed the affliction of his servant.
Indeed, look! From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name. (Luke 1:46–49)

We understand Hannah's expressing joy at her personal salvation, since she had been delivered from the curse of barrenness, but what bondage held Mary? Although she too expressed her joy in terms of her personal rescue, it is difficult to identify what the crisis was from which she needed deliverance. It seems best to interpret this statement as part of a larger prophetic utterance in which she spoke in a first-person singular voice for all Israel.

Mary's identification of herself as "his servant" (*doulēs autou*) and her crisis as "affliction/humiliation" (*tapeinōsis*) reinforces this interpretation. Her combination of these two expressions echoes Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 1:11, where this word represents Hebrew *'ōnî*, which often referred to the Israelites' oppression in Egypt.⁹ Mary's self-identification as God's servant echoed the Septuagint rendering of Hannah, who, as a Hebrew speaker, used *'āmâ*. Instead of using the feminine form of *'ebed*, biblical Hebrew prefers either *'āmâ* or *šipḥâ*, which have no male counterparts. In Greek, inflected forms of Greek *doulos* function for both genders. When Jews familiar with their Scriptures heard Mary's words in this Gospel, they would

readily have linked her use of *doulos* to Israel's status before YHWH. To be sure, individuals in YHWH's service were frequently designated "servant of YHWH" ('*ebed YHWH*; Gk. *ho pais / doulos kyriou*), but the epithet also often applied to Israel/Jacob collectively as YHWH's vassal,¹⁰ and the verb *douleuō*, "to serve, function as vassal," often described their actions as his agents.¹¹

When Mary acknowledged God's aid to "Israel his servant" in verse 54, she used a different word, *pais*. However, in the next line she grounded divine aid in God's "remembering mercy" (*mnēsthēnai eleos*). The phrase "to remember mercy" with God as the subject occurs four times in the First Testament, three times in petitions to YHWH¹² and once in the acknowledgment of YHWH's having done so (Ps. 98:3 [LXX 97:3]). To these we should add Psalm 106:45 [LXX 105:45]. In these texts Hebrew *zākar*, "to remember," does not resolve some sort of amnesia, as if his unfailing love (*ḥesed*) had slipped his mind. Rather, it means to take into account, in this case to apply the *ḥesed* that is essential to his character. In these contexts the Septuagint renders *ḥesed* consistently with *eleos*, which refers to emotion that is ignited at the sight of someone else's undeserved affliction. As I have noted repeatedly, we cannot adequately represent Hebrew *ḥesed* with a single English word. Like the Hebrew expression 'āśâ *ḥesed*, "to demonstrate unfailing love," Greek *poieō eleos* means acting in the interest of those with whom one has a relationship, as with family members. In unnatural cases it often implies a covenant relationship (e.g., 1 Sam. 20:8), which explains why *ḥesed* (Gk. *eleos*) often serves as a natural correlative of *bērît*, "covenant" (*diathēkē*), as in Deuteronomy 7:9.

Zacharias' Prophecy (Luke 1:68-79)

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Zacharias, the father of John the Baptizer, recognized the covenantal significance of

eleos in his own prophetic utterance in Luke 1:72–74. The expression “to show mercy” (*poiēsai eleos*) in verse 72 links this statement with Abraham’s servant’s highlighting his dependence on YHWH’s fidelity to Abraham in his prayer: “O YHWH, God of my master Abraham, please grant me good fortune today and show unfailing love [*poiēson eleos*] to my master Abraham” (LXX Gen. 24:12). In Abraham’s formal commissioning of his servant to get a wife for Isaac from Haran, he had reminded his servant that YHWH, the God of heaven, had taken him from his native land, spoken to him (cf. Luke 1:55), and sworn to him (*nišbaʿ*; Gk. *omnyō*; cf. Luke 1:73), saying, “To your descendants I will give this land” (Gen. 24:7). Although the word “oath” is missing in Genesis 15, Abraham may have had in mind the visionary enacted oath in 15:7–11, 17, which is framed by verbal declarations of the promise of “this land” (vv. 7, 18). However, Zacharias’ reference to being “rescued from the hands of our enemies” in Luke 1:74 seems to have conflated the moments of oathtaking in Genesis 15:9–17 with 22:16–18. In the latter, YHWH explicitly swore (*nišbaʿ*; Gk. *omnyō* [by himself]). Here the content of the oath includes the promise that his descendant (*zeraʿ* with singular suffix; Gk. *sperma* with singular pronoun, *sou*, “your”) would possess (*yāraš*, sg.; Gk. also sg., *klēronomēsei*, “claim as a grant”) the gate of “his enemies.” The Greek word in Genesis 22:17 (*hypenantios*) differs from Zacharias’ (*echthros*, Luke 1:74), but conceptually, “possessing the gate of one’s enemy” is equivalent to “being rescued from the hand of one’s enemies.” Zacharias’ comment on “serving him without fear and in uprightness [Gk. *hosiōtēs*, representing Hb. *yōšer* in Deut. 9:5] and righteousness [Gk. *dikaiosynē*, representing Hb. *šēdāqâ*] before him in perpetuity” seems to anticipate the fulfillment of Genesis 18:19, which describes in part the mission to which YHWH had called Abraham and his descendants.

On the basis of the wording of Mary's and Zacharias' poetic utterances, it is clear that they (and the author, Luke) interpreted the conception and birth of Jesus in the light of and in fulfillment of the promises to the primary ancestors. In him the descendants of Abraham would experience mercy, and through him they would be delivered from their enemies and forever be enabled to serve God fearlessly, in holiness, and in righteousness.

Allusions to Stage 1 of the Israelite Covenant in Paul

Paul names Abraham nineteen times in his epistles, though all but four of these occurrences (Rom. 9:7; 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Gal. 4:22) appear in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. The interpretive and theological issues these passages raise are extremely complex and far beyond the scope of this investigation. Here I must focus on what they say about Paul's disposition toward stage 1 of the Israelite covenant. The word "covenant" (*diathēkē*) occurs five times in these two epistles (Rom. 9:4; 11:27; Gal. 3:15, 17; 4:24), but only twice in connection with Abraham (Gal. 3:15, 17). Even so, Gal. 3:15 is not about God's covenant with Abraham, but a generic statement about how human covenants operate.

Because scholars agree that Paul wrote Galatians (ca. AD 48–54) before he wrote his Epistle to the Romans (ca. AD 55–57), I shall discuss Galatians 3 first. However, I must preface my comments on these passages with a review of how I understand the use of the expression *ho nomos*, "the law," which dominates these epistles and recurs often in the New Testament generally. With few exceptions, the underlying Hebrew expression in the First Testament that the Septuagint translators rendered *ho nomos* is *hattôrâ*, which means not "the law" but "the instruction." This instruction may include law, but it may also include historiographic narrative, prayers, addresses, songs,

sermonic exhortations, creedal-like statements, and many other literary genres. These are all represented in the book of Deuteronomy, the primary and original exemplar of Torah. The generic expression *tôrâ*, “instruction,” could apply to individual laws,¹³ and the articular form, *hattôrâ*, could identify instructions on a particular subject.¹⁴ However, as a designation for an identifiable block of instruction presented in either oral or written form, *hattôrâ* (hereafter “the Torah” with uppercase *T*) was first applied to Moses’ valedictory addresses in Deuteronomy¹⁵ and secondarily to the written document that contained all the addresses on a single scroll, a version of the book of Deuteronomy.¹⁶ This was what Josiah’s men discovered when they were refurbishing the temple: what priests were to teach (Deut. 33:10; Jer. 2:8) and what prophets proclaimed (Zech. 7:12).

Later, the documents that make up the Pentateuch were combined into a coherent narrative but for the sake of convenience were divided into five scrolls (*penta* + *teuch*). At some point, probably in the intertestamental period, the name of the last component (Torah) became the collective designation for the entire composition. Although there is no internal evidence for the use of the expression *hattôrâ* this comprehensively in the book of Psalms, scribes who produced the Psalter recognized five segments, apparently mirroring the five-scroll Torah. From the prologue to the book of Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira), we know that by the second century BC the Law (*ho nomos*) and the Prophets (*hoi prophētai*) were two identifiable parts of the canon. By New Testament times people recognized three segments, including “the Writings” (*hakkētûbîm*), but which Jesus and others identified as “the Law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms.”¹⁷ Because the Greek expression *ho nomos* is capable of a wide range of meanings, when we encounter it (usually rendered “the law”) in English translations of the New Testament and especially in Paul’s epistles, we always need to determine whether the reference is to (1) law in

general, (2) an individual law, (3) the transcribed speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy, (4) the book of Deuteronomy, (5) the law as a body of covenant revelation, or (6) the Pentateuch.

When Paul wrote of the law coming 430 years after Abraham (Gal. 3:17), he undoubtedly meant the stipulations of the Israelite covenant revealed by God on Mount Sinai. However, in his debates with Judaizers in Galatians and Romans, “the law” often designated not only the 613 commands of the Pentateuch identified much later by Maimonides but also the Oral Torah, consisting of regulations devised by the Pharisees and rabbis to aid the people in circumscribing behavior but ultimately constricting them and robbing the Torah and its adherents of the spirit of Moses. However, Paul also occasionally appears to use *ho nomos* in a more restricted sense of the external identity markers that set one apart as a member of the covenant community: circumcision, participation in Israel’s three annual festivals, keeping kosher food laws, purity regulations, and keeping the seventh-day Sabbath as prescribed by the Pharisaic legal system.

Furthermore, *ho nomos* could also continue to refer to any “law” in principle, as is represented by expressions like “the law of sin and death” (Rom. 7:23, 25; 8:2), “the law of works” and “the law of faith” (3:27), “the law of marriage” (7:2), “the law of my mind” (7:23), “the law of the Spirit of life” (8:2), and “the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2), or the common contemporary expression of “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). When we encounter *ho nomos* in Paul’s epistles and elsewhere in the New Testament, we need to ask constantly which meanings of “the law” are intended. Like First Testament prophets, Paul often used single lexemes bi- or multivalently—that is, with more than one sense in any given context.

Galatians 3

Remarkably, Galatians 3 is silent on the circumstances and process by which God made his covenant with Abraham, except that this happened 430 years prior to the coming of the law (v. 17). As noted, here *ho nomos* refers to the stipulations of the Israelite covenant as established at Sinai; indeed, the expression functions as synecdoche for “the covenant.” Paul’s current preference for this term was determined not by antecedent First Testament usage of the word but by his debate with Judaizers, who had perverted the grace-based covenant relationship with God into a merit- and law-based religious system.

When we examine Galatians 3 for information on Paul’s disposition toward the covenant that God made with Abraham, two themes predominate: the identification of Abraham’s seed (*sperma*) and the means by which Abraham’s seed can access the benefactions of that covenant. In the context of Paul’s debate with Judaizers, he argues that his antagonists have it wrong on both counts: they insist that physical descendants of Abraham have an inside track, and they claim that access to relationship with God requires prior submission to the external identity markers of Judaism. I shall deal with each subject separately.

The identity of the “seed” of Abraham. The word *sperma* occurs three times in Galatians 3:16, once in verse 19, and once in verse 29. Like the Hebrew *zera’* in the patriarchal narratives, here *sperma* refers metaphorically to the descendants of an ancestor. Paul’s choice of word derives from ancient views of conception and reproduction, according to which through intercourse males planted the seed in the womb of a woman, where it would sprout and grow into a human being. However, as we observed regarding *zera’* in the patriarchal narratives, in 3:16 *sperma* refers not to the seed that Abraham planted in Sarah’s

womb but to the seed that was produced when that original seed sprouted, matured, and produced multiple reiterations of itself, in the form of offspring/descendants.

The identity of “the seed of Abraham” was never an issue so long as God’s work of grace among human beings was concentrated on Israel, a nation consisting largely of physical descendants of Abraham—which explains why Ezra could speak of intermarriage with outsiders as compromising “the holy seed” (*to sperma to hagion*), mixing the seed among the peoples of the land (Ezra 9:2). To be sure, from the beginning “gentiles” like Caleb, Rahab, and Ruth had been “grafted” in and granted full status as members of the covenant community, but with the coming of Jesus Christ and the commissioning of Paul as “the apostle to the gentiles,” this world was turning upside down. It did not take long until gentile believers in Jesus outnumbered Jewish believers, which challenged the old formula to which Judaism held—namely, that membership in the covenant community was based on ethnic identity and descent from Abraham.

Because Christianity was an outgrowth of the faith of Israel, people did not challenge the validity of these religio-ethnic markers for Jewish believers in Jesus. However, this changed when outsiders became Christians in significant numbers. Like Paul before he came to faith in Jesus (Gal. 2:13; Acts 21:20; cf. Gal. 1:13–14), the zealots for Judaism (often called Judaizers) insisted that gentile believers in Jesus needed to submit to Jewish identity markers (like circumcision, Gal. 2:12) to be accepted as full members of the new Christian community.

In Galatians 3 Paul addresses this issue head-on by reflecting on what it means to be “the seed of Abraham” and therefore children and heirs of the “promise” (*epangelia*, 3:17–22, 29; cf. 4:23, 28). In 3:16 he begins his discussion of the “seed” on a curious note: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed [*spermatī*].

Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds’ [*spermasin*, dative pl. of *sperma*], meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed’ [*spermati sou*], meaning one person, who is Christ” (NIV).

This statement is extremely difficult because it capitalizes on the distinction between Hebrew and Greek morphology, specifically the Greek distinction between singular “seed” (*sperma*) and plural “seeds” (*spermata*). First Samuel 8:15 contains the only occurrence of the plural form *zar‘êkem*, “your [pl.] seeds” in the Hebrew First Testament. This singular case reinforces the notion that the Scriptures represent only a linguistic fragment of ancient Hebrew usage and confirms that the form *zērā‘îm*, “seeds,” was used in everyday speech. The remaining 228 occurrences all use the singular form, which, as in English, may either refer to an individual seed or function as a collective. When YHWH promised Abraham that his seed (*zera‘*) would become innumerable like the stars of the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4) or the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:17; 32:12), he obviously used the singular form collectively. However, immediately after using “seed” of an innumerable host (like stars and sand granules), in Genesis 22:17b (and 24:60) singular forms of the verb and pronominal suffix require a singular sense for *zera‘*: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your ‘seed’ as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your ‘seed’ [he] shall possess [*wěyiraš*, sg.] the gate of *his* [sg.] enemies [*’ōyěbāyw*; *šōnē’āyw*, “his haters,” in 24:60].”

If Paul’s form of argument does not work in Hebrew, it does not work in Septuagintal Greek either. The plural form *spermata* does indeed occur four times, but it always involves seed that is sown in planting.¹⁸ However, in the patriarchal narratives the translators always rendered collective *zera‘* with collective *sperma*, even in Genesis 22:17. The same pattern emerges in the New Testament, which uses the plural literally for (grain) seed that is sown

(Matt. 13:32; Mark 4:31) or metaphorically (1 Cor. 15:38), but never for offspring or descendants.

It is clear from Galatians 3:29 (and Rom. 4:13, 16, 18; 9:7, 8, 29) that Paul can use *sperma* as a collective and that his reasoning in Galatians 3:16 is anomalous. He obviously cannot mean that Christ is the only seed that Abraham produced; to do so would be to contradict himself, for in Romans 11:1 he claims this status for himself: "I myself am an Israelite, from Abraham's seed [*sperma*], [from] Benjamin's tribe." He has rooted the present strained argument in his christological passion as he faces the Judaizers. In the wake of the incarnation and Jesus' redemptive work (Gal. 3:13), Paul recognizes that the claim to being a true seed of Abraham depends entirely upon the work of Christ: (1) Christ has redeemed us from the curse that hangs over sinners, as specified in the covenant curses.¹⁹ (2) In Christ the blessing of Abraham is made available to gentiles (v. 14a). (3) In Christ the promise of the Spirit may be received through faith (v. 14b). (4) In Christ God's promise to the ancestors is made accessible to all who believe (v. 22). (5) Through faith in Christ Jesus, we not only become Abraham's "seed" but also become "children of God" (*huioi Theou*, v. 26). (6) In Christ the distinctions with reference to relationship with God all dissolve (v. 28). (7) In Christ we are all Abraham's seed, which means we are heirs of the promises made to Abraham (v. 29).

Accordingly, when Paul speaks of Christ being the singular "seed," he must mean that he is the most important seed of Abraham, in a sense the "kingpin," whose identity and work are indispensable for anyone to claim the status of Abraham's seed. Therefore to propose any other means of access to the community of Abraham's descendants distorts the gospel of Christ (1:7), nullifies the grace of Christ (2:21), nullifies the promise (3:17), and means a return to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world (4:9), replacing the freedom of Sarah with the bondage of Hagar (4:21-31),

abandoning the leadership of the Spirit, and being driven by the desires of the flesh (5:16–26).

The benefactions available to Abraham's seed. In Galatians 3, Paul uses two primary expressions for the benefactions promised the human vassal by the divine Suzerain within the terms of his covenant with Abraham: “blessing” and “promise.” With respect to the former, in verse 14 he refers to “the blessing of Abraham” (*hē eulogia tou Abraam*). Allowing for a change in grammatical case (nominative versus accusative), this expression echoes precisely the Greek version of the only occurrence of the phrase in the First Testament, in Genesis 28:4 (*tēn eulogian Abraam*). The latter occurs within a blessing that Isaac pronounced upon Jacob (and his “seed”) before Jacob headed for Haran to escape the fury of Esau, but the benefactions assumed under this rubric applied primarily to the physical heir to Abraham's estate. Isaac had previously invoked El Shadday to bless Jacob by making him fruitful and multiplying him—that is, his descendants—to the point where they become a company of peoples (Hb. *liqhal ‘ammîm*; Gk. *eis synagōgas ethnōn*, 28:3; cf. Gen. 48:4). As I noted earlier, it is appropriate that in this reference to the blessing of progeny, Isaac should have identified God as El Shadday, since this epithet is associated especially with the promise of numerous progeny in 17:1–2; 35:11; and 48:3–5. Isaac ended this statement concerning “the blessing of Abraham” (Gen. 28:4a) with a specific request: that he might possess the land that God had given to Abraham (v. 4b).

These two benefactions—numerous progeny and land—represent the two anchor benefactions that YHWH had promised Abraham within the terms of his covenant. If we interpret the former as physical progeny and the latter as the land of Canaan, we readily grasp why in Israelite and Jewish history their identity had been so closely linked to physical descent from Abraham and occupation of the piece

of real estate on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. However, YHWH had added other promises to these benefactions associated with the covenant (as we noted earlier):

1. Making Abraham's descendants into a great nation²⁰ and including kings (*mě'lākîm*) among their descendants (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11). This benefaction is closely tied to the two anchor blessings.
2. Establishing a special relationship with the ancestors and their descendants, as embodied in the first element of the covenant formula: "I will be your God and the God of your descendants."²¹ Perhaps as corollaries of this spiritual blessing, he also promised to be with the ancestors and their descendants,²² thus guaranteeing their protection from hostile forces (Gen. 12:3; 28:15).
3. Assigning the ancestors and their descendants a special role as agents of blessing in his soteriological economy in a cursed world.²³
4. Blessing the ancestors and their descendants, which meant lifting the curse of sin that hangs over all humanity and replacing it with Edenic well-being.²⁴

It is not surprising that in Paul's justification of his stance on the full inclusion of the gentiles in the covenant community, the second anchor benefaction in Genesis 28:3–4—that is, the promise of land—was irrelevant. In Galatians 3:8 he expressed particular interest in the last two of the four additional benefactions listed above. He addresses the third with a citation of Scripture: "Foreseeing that God would justify the gentiles by faith, the Scriptures preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.'" Versions of this statement occur five times in Genesis;²⁵ in the Septuagint all involve the verb *eneulogeō*, which is cognate to *eulogia*, the noun that had

been used in the phrase “the blessing of Abraham” in Galatians 3:14.

This benefaction of status for Abraham and his descendants involved a virtual commission—to be YHWH’s chosen agents of blessing to the nations. In reflecting on the need for such an agent and this commission, we note that since Genesis 3 the cosmos had been languishing under the curse of sin. Sarah’s own barrenness at the time of Abraham’s call symbolized that curse (Gen. 11:30; cf. 3:14–16). What humanity and the cosmos needed was for the curse to be lifted and replaced with the blessing, so people could realize the hopes and dreams of Eden. Paul latched on to this commission as the grounds of his passion for the gentiles and their justification (Gal. 3:8). In it he recognized that YHWH’s call of Abraham was not driven by a narrow interest in this man and his descendants. On the contrary, this was an “advance announcement of the good news” (*proeuangelizomai*) to Abraham that God intended also to justify the gentiles by faith. As a descendant of Abraham himself (Rom. 11:1) and as a specially commissioned apostle to the gentiles, Paul viewed himself in this role: he was the agent of blessing to them, and the Galatian believers were beneficiaries of this soteriological agenda.

However, in the final analysis, the fourth benefaction listed above—that is, God’s promise to bless the ancestors and their descendants—is at the heart of Paul’s eagerness to redefine “the seed of Abraham,” which relates to the first anchor cited in Genesis 28:3. Not only are the gentiles the targeted audience of the agents’ announcement of blessing to outsiders, but the work of Christ has also made possible their inclusion as descendants of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). As his spiritual seed they too may be justified (v. 8), be blessed (*eulogeō*, v. 9), experience redemption from the curse brought on by sin (vv. 10–13), and receive the promise of the Spirit (v. 14). Although Paul was interested in the first anchor benefaction—the blessing of innumerable progeny—

he took that promise in a surprising direction, away from the notion of physical progeny to the concept of spiritual progeny, thus including all who trust in and belong to Christ (vv. 26–29).

In Galatians 3:7–14 Paul spoke of the benefactions of God’s covenant with Abraham that were accessible to gentiles, but in verses 15–29 he latched on to a special word with which he had ended the previous section: “promise” (*epangelia*). Various forms of this expression appear seven times in verses 15–29, ²⁶ to which we may add the passive verb *epēngeletai*, “the promise was made,” in verse 19. Because *angelos* (angel, envoy) underlies the same root, we may justifiably interpret *epangelia* as an official verbal announcement, usually delivered by a commissioned agent. This suits the role that Abraham and his descendants were to fulfill, and it certainly suits the role that Paul played as the apostle to the gentiles. However, here he was not talking primarily about his own role. He frames this paragraph by linking the “promise” with Abraham in verses 16 and 29, and in verse 18 he speaks of the “promise” as the means whereby God has granted the benefactions of the covenant (cf. v. 17) to Abraham. Abraham did not receive the promise through an envoy; God delivered it himself.

Paul’s presentation of the content of the promises is vague and must be largely assumed from the foregoing (vv. 7–14). In verse 17 he links it to the covenant ratified (*prokyroō*) by God. In verse 18 he speaks of a promised “inheritance” (*klēronomia*), though he does not identify it. In the contexts of Deuteronomy and the narratives involving Israel’s claiming of the promised land, the word (Hb. *naḥălâ*) usually refers to personal, tribal, and Israel’s national allotment within and of the land of Canaan (Deut. 4:21; 12:9; etc.). However, even if this would have been relevant for the Galatian believers (which it was not), no one in the Genesis narratives used the word *naḥălâ* of the promised

land. The last verse (Gal. 3:29) provides the best clue: whether Jew or gentile, those who belong to Christ are Abraham's offspring, which means they are heirs of the benefactions promised him and his descendants. The divine promise guarantees this hope.

Accessing the benefactions of God's covenant with Abraham. This issue is at the heart of Paul's debates with the Judaizers, who insisted that to become full participants in the covenant community and participate in the inheritance (*klēronomia*, Gal. 3:18) that comes with this status, gentiles must submit to the legal requirements of the Israelite covenant, particularly the initial rite of circumcision and the other external identity markers. Presumably these Judaizers were believers in Jesus, but unlike Paul, who shared their past in Judaism, they had not been able to shake the merit-based religious system in which they had grown up. In responding to those who would make cultural Jews out of gentiles, Paul uses four basic arguments.

First, he declares that access to the blessings of and promises to Abraham is a supernatural and spiritual gift, received simply by hearing with faith (*ex akoēs pisteōs*; 3:2, 5; cf. Rom. 10:17) rather than as a reward for meritorious efforts ("works of the law," *ex ergōn nomou*). The expression "works of the law" occurs six times in Galatians (2:16 [3×]; 3:2, 5, 10) and twice in Romans (3:20, 28), but the First Testament provides no Hebrew equivalent. Strikingly, a counterpart has surfaced in a Qumran text, 4QMMT, whose links with Paul's discussion in Galatians are obvious:

Now, we have written to you some of the works of the Law [מקצה מעשי] (התורה), those which we determined would be beneficial for you and your people, because we have seen that you possess insight and knowledge of the Law. Understand all these things and beseech Him to set your counsel straight and so keep you away from evil thoughts and the counsel of Belial. Then you shall rejoice at the end time when you find the essence of our words to be true. And it will be reckoned to you as righteousness [ונחשבה לך] (לצדקה), in that you have done what is right and good before Him, to your

own benefit and to that of Israel. (Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 462)

We do not know if Paul was aware of this document, but its nature suggests that the author of 4QMMT was concerned about issues similar to the ones Paul addressed in Galatians. For Paul, “works of the law” functions as a summary formula for the argument that his detractors used for requiring gentile believers to submit not simply to the Torah as law but also to the conservative reinterpretations and amplifications of Torah regulations like those preserved in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Especially important among these identity markers were circumcision, purity rituals, kosher diet, observing Jewish festivals, and keeping the Sabbath regulations as prescribed by the Pharisees.

Returning to Galatians 3:1–5, Paul’s expression “receive the Spirit” functions as shorthand for the process whereby his hearers became heirs of the grace of God. In this book the Spirit is not only a gift received (v. 2) from God (v. 5) but also the gift whose reception marks the beginning of believers’ new status (v. 3). From this point on, the Spirit plays a vital role in Paul’s argument and is mentioned no fewer than eighteen times.²⁷ The association of “the promise of the Spirit” with “the blessing of Abraham” in verse 14 suggests that this same Spirit was behind the blessing of and promise to Abraham. In full trinitarian mode, Paul declares in 4:6 that this Spirit was also the Spirit of adoption, authorizing and inviting even gentiles to address God (YHWH in the First Testament) as Father (*abba ho patēr*) and making former slaves into heirs of the blessing and the promise (4:6–7; cf. Rom. 8:15). Galatians 4:29 expressly links this Spirit with the patriarchal stories contrasting Ishmael, whose birth can be explained in purely physical terms (*kata sarka*), with Isaac, whose birth was a supernatural work of the Spirit. This brings us back to 3:2–3, where Paul treats the Judaizers’ proposal as a purely

“fleshly” approach for accessing the covenant community, in contrast to his position, which involves simply receiving the Spirit through “hearing it with faith” (*ex akoēs pisteōs*, v. 2).

In light of what follows in verses 6–9, Abraham heard the covenant promises, to which he responded with faith. However, the phrase “hearing it with faith” links this experience with the Deuteronomic paradigm, which placed in the hands and mouths of the Levitical priests the formula for life: “Read the Torah, that they may hear, that they may learn, that they may fear, that they may ‘hearken’ to the voice of YHWH (act on what they hear), that they may live” (Deut. 30:9–13). In his valedictory addresses, Moses repeatedly reminds Israel of the gracious acts of YHWH on their behalf (Moses’ gospel). In this context the verb *yārē*’, usually translated as “fear,” does not connote “fright” but means “trusting awe.” Thus *yārē*’ functions as an alternative to *he’ēmîn*, “to believe, to trust in,” in Genesis 15:6.

This observation leads naturally to Paul’s second argument: Abraham serves as the model of how anyone, whether Jew or gentile, has access to the blessings of and promises to the original ancestor (Gal. 3:6–9). Citing Genesis 15:6, he declares that YHWH’s attribution of “righteousness” to Abraham was his response to Abraham’s trust in him to fulfill his promises, specifically the promise of multiplying his descendants like the stars of the sky. In the immediately preceding phase of this episode, Abraham had expressed doubts about YHWH’s fidelity to his promises (vv. 1–3). However, YHWH’s rhetorical strategy—taking him outside at night, showing him the heavens, and challenging him to count the stars—achieved its intended goal: now he trusted in YHWH to fulfill his promises. This was not the first time he had demonstrated faith (cf. 12:1–7), nor would it be the last. In the preceding paragraph, we have observed that *yārē*’ in the Deuteronomic formula for life means “trusting awe.” This is certainly the sense of the word as used by the envoy

from heaven in Genesis 22:12; he recognized Abraham's action in sacrificing Isaac as evidence of "awed trust" in YHWH that he would fulfill his promise concerning Isaac even if he offered him as a whole burnt offering (22:1-2, 10-12). But Paul bases his point on the episode where Abraham demonstrated his confidence in YHWH by a mental and dispositional act, not by an overt bodily action.

Paul quoted the Greek (LXX) when he declared that God recognized this disposition of trust as "righteousness" (*dikaïosynē*), but he had in mind the underlying Hebrew, *šĕdāqâ*, which denotes action in accord with an established standard, in this case God's standard of the appropriate response of his vassal to his overtures/demands. Elsewhere the notion of "reckoning someone as righteous" typically follows actions the person performs.²⁸ However, apparently because his detractors used these "active" cases to support their meritorious interpretation of "righteousness" (cf. 4QMMT), apparently without reference to faith, Paul seizes on Genesis 15:6 to defend his version of the gospel (cf. Gal. 1:6-9). And he drives the point home to his audience, that anyone who has Abraham's faith is Abraham's son (3:7). To ensure that his gentile hearers grasp that God will justify (*dikaioō*) them—that is, count them as righteous on the basis of their faith—he quotes the missional clause of the covenant that YHWH had made with Abraham: "All the nations will be blessed in him" (v. 8). Accordingly, anyone who has faith is blessed with Abraham, the paradigm of faith (*tō pistō Abraam*, v. 9).

Third, Paul argues that those who rely on the works of the law for their justification are under the curse of the law. The notion of curse is subdued in God's covenant with Abraham, but it is not absent. Where it occurs, it functions differently from the curses in most covenants/treaties. As in Leviticus 26:1-39 and Deuteronomy 28:1-68, blessings and curses are included in treaty documents to motivate fidelity to the suzerain, either by promising reward (blessing) or

threatening punishment (curse). However, in the only instance where it occurs in conjunction with the terms that would ultimately become a part of his covenant with Abraham, as a virtual promise of his protection (cf. Gen. 15:1), YHWH pronounced a curse on all who would curse his chosen vassal (12:3). To support his case, that reliance on the law apart from faith renders one subject to the curse built into the law, Paul could have appealed to the stage of the covenant that he established with Israel at Sinai (Lev. 26:14–39), but instead he works with the later, Deuteronomic version of the covenant curses. And even then, he appeals primarily not to the formal curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28:15–68 but to the final comprehensive curse in the series of twelve individualized imprecations (Deut. 27:12–26) that the Israelites invoked when they completed the covenant-ratification rituals on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal after they had crossed the Jordan (Deut. 11:29–32; 27:1–26).

For the sake of his argument, it is significant that Paul cites the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 27:26, which highlights the comprehensive scope of this curse, both with respect to the object of the curse (Gk. *pas*, “all”) and the prescriptions to which the persons are accountable (Gk. *pas*, “all”): “Cursed is *everyone* who does not persist in *all* the words of this *book of the Torah* by doing them.”²⁹ The Deuteronomic version of this curse assumes that hearers/readers understand what is meant by “the words of this Torah,” but Paul specifies the written record of the Torah. Although variations of the expression “this book of the Torah” (*touto biblion tou nomou*) occur eighteen times in the Septuagint First Testament, it occurs only here in the New Testament. The expression obviously derives from Deuteronomy,³⁰ so that when Paul specifies the range of stipulations to which God holds his people accountable as “all [the words] that are written in this book of the Torah,” he has in mind Deuteronomy 28:58 (“all the words of this

Torah that are written in this scroll [Hb. *seḇer*; Gk. *biblion*]”) and 30:10 (“his commands and ordinances that are written in this scroll [Hb. *seḇer*; Gk. *biblion*] of the Torah”). In the First Testament, the Hebrew expression, *sēper hattôrâ hazzeh*, “this document of the Torah,” referred primarily to the written record of Moses’ final sermons on the plains of Moab. However, by New Testament times people understood the Greek equivalent, *to biblion tou nomou touto*, more comprehensively for the entire Pentateuch and would have incorporated all 613 commands identified by Maimonides.

After appealing to Habakkuk 2:4 to reiterate that the life promised within the covenant was accessible by faith (Gal. 3:11), Paul reinforces the strength of the curse’s grip on those who trust in meritorious “works of the law” to gain access to the blessings/promises of the covenant (v. 12) by citing Leviticus 18:5. However, his appeal to this verse here (and in Rom. 10:5) is curious. Paul has taken a simple statement of principle, that God promises life to those who live according to his revealed covenant standards, and employed it as a virtual curse. This is clearer in Romans 10:3–5, where he seems to argue that those who seek to establish their own righteousness through “works of the law” (cf. Gal. 3:10–14) are doomed because this standard demands perfect obedience (cf. James 2:10).

Before we explore Paul’s usage of Leviticus 18:5 further, we must understand it in its original context. In promising life to those who keep YHWH’s ordinances and covenant stipulations, Leviticus 18:5 is neither an exceptional nor an isolated statement of this principle. In Ezekiel 20:11 the exilic prophet quotes the awkward Hebrew construction of the critical clauses, “The person who does them [the revealed ordinances] will indeed live by them” (*’ăšer ya’ăseh ’ôtām hā’ādām wāḥay bāhem*). Closer to Paul’s frame of reference, after summarizing the story of YHWH’s gracious acts of salvation in response to a child interlocutor’s question concerning the significance of the

entire package of covenantal stipulations (Deut. 6:20–23), Moses advised adult Israelites to declare: “And YHWH charged us to do all these ordinances, to fear (i.e., demonstrate trusting awe) YHWH our God, for our good always, to sustain our lives [*lěḥayyōtēnû*], as is the case today. And we will be reckoned righteous [*ûṣědāqâ tihyê lānû*, lit., “it will be righteousness for us”] if we keep [the covenant] by doing this entire command before YHWH our God, as he has commanded us” (6:24–25).

Here “our good” (*ṭôb lānû*) refers to enjoyment of all the blessings promised within the covenant (cf. 28:1–14), and “life” means the satisfying existence within the shalom offered by the tripartite covenant involving YHWH, Israel, and the land. The final verse declares that if the Israelites respond to YHWH’s gracious salvation and provision of land with full-bodied and wholehearted obedience to their divine Suzerain, they can delight in knowing that he approves and declares them righteous (cf. Ps. 24:5). The life-yielding function of the Torah generally and the covenant stipulations specifically are also celebrated in the so-called Torah Psalms of the Psalter, Psalms 19:2–14 [3–15] and 119. Indeed, the latter is a 176-verse ode celebrating the knowledge of the will of God revealed in the form of life-giving divine ordinances, stipulations, precepts, promises, and words.

So when Paul (in Gal. 3:12) quotes Leviticus 18:5 to bolster his case that “works of the law” are the key to the promise/blessing, he does not make this quotation the normative lens for viewing the law and force us to go back to these First Testament texts and reinterpret them in the light of his use of these texts. Rather, we need to consider the context in which Paul appeals to Leviticus 18:5. He exposes the problem with his Judaizing antagonists: by insisting that access to the blessings/promise of Abraham is a reward for keeping the law, they had lost sight of the perspective of Moses and the psalmists. The law was not

given to persons outside the covenant, nor was it intended as a key to the door by which people could gain access to the benefactions of the covenant. Rather, it was intended as a moral and spiritual guide for people whom YHWH had already redeemed and graciously called to himself (Exod. 19:4). The law instructed those who received God's salvation by faith on how to respond to that gift as an expression of their gratitude and as a means of fulfilling their mission. Access to the covenant has always come by faith in YHWH, who invites us to himself. And to the person who demonstrates that faith by uncompromised devotion to YHWH through righteous living as defined in the covenant, YHWH promises life—that is, enjoyment of the full blessings of covenant relationship.

However, by insisting that keeping the law—especially the identity-marker regulations—is necessary for gentiles to gain access to the blessings of and promises to Abraham, the Judaizers have put the cart before the horse (à la Gal. 4:21–31), in which case perfect obedience would be required. However, God did not call the righteous; he called sinners to repentance and faith in his word (cf. Luke 54:32). The gospel that the Judaizers preached was fundamentally at odds with both Moses' and Paul's gospels and has both placed them under Paul's anathema (Gal. 1:6–10) and subjected them to all the curses of the covenant.

Returning to his christological focus, in verses 13–14 Paul declares that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law that hangs over sinners and given all, including gentiles, access to the blessing of and promises to Abraham. We should not misinterpret being set free from the curse as redemption from the law, as if the law itself is a curse. Psalm 119 will not allow this, nor will Deuteronomy 4:5–8, which presents the Torah as an unprecedented gift that has made Israel the envy of the nations. It is the curse brought on by rebellion and the fury of God's wrath from which we are redeemed. People who rely on the works of the law for

their salvation apart from faith are shut up under sin. God grants the blessing of and promise to Abraham only to those who, like their spiritual ancestor, believe in the word of God and demonstrate faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:22).

Romans 4

I turn my attention now to the book of Romans, especially chapter 4, where Paul resumes his consideration of the implications of the Abrahamic covenant for his new audience in Rome. The word “covenant” is missing here, but Paul devotes an entire chapter to contemplating the ultimate significance of a key covenantal benefaction that YHWH promised Abraham: innumerable offspring. The threefold occurrence of the word *sperma*, “seed, offspring” (vv. 13, 16, 18), highlights the notion’s importance, but the way Paul identifies Abraham at the end of the opening rhetorical question in 4:1 hints at what is to come: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh [*Abraam ton propatora hēmōn kata sarka*], discovered?” With the pronoun “our,” Paul points his readers, who consist of both Jewish and gentile believers, to the physical ancestor of his own ethnic people, the Israelites. But his choice of verb, “discovered” (*heuriskō*) sets us up for a surprising redefinition of what it means to have Abraham as “our ancestor/father,” and, as a corollary, what it means to be his “offspring” (*sperma*). In arguing that the “seedship” of which he speaks is not ethnocentric and physical but is spiritual and without ethnic constraints, Paul does not follow a modern Western definition of logic. Rather, it is rooted deeply in Scripture by means of citation, summary, and allusion. And rather than offering a straightforward syllogistic argument, he examines the issue from several different sides, which results in some circularity.

While the subject of Abraham's offspring receives a lot of attention in Romans 4, this is not the primary issue in the chapter. Reminiscent of his earlier epistle to the Galatian churches, he responds to Judaizers who insist that in order for gentile believers in Jesus to be granted free and equal access to fellowship within the new covenant community, they must submit to Jewish laws, especially those that many viewed as identity markers within Judaism, particularly circumcision. Here Paul addresses only circumcision because of its timing in relation to Abraham's being declared righteous by YHWH (vv. 1-10). However, we may assume that it also functions as shorthand for the other "works of the law" (identity markers) listed earlier in this chapter. Paul's primary reason for appealing to Abraham is to demonstrate that the original ancestor of the Israelite/Jewish people was justified by faith rather than by adherence to the law (*ek [tou] nomou*; 4:14, 16). But to prove this point, he must clarify the identity of Abraham's seed.

After declaring emphatically that YHWH had grounded his justification of Abraham (i.e., he deemed him righteous) on his faith (Rom. 4:3; cf. vv. 5, 9) and that this declaration preceded the patriarch's having submitted to the initiatory covenantal rite of circumcision (vv. 9-12), Paul concluded that this was an intentional element in the divine agenda in two respects: (1) to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be attributed to them as well; and (2) to make him the father of the circumcised, who are not merely circumcised but also walk in the footsteps of the faith that their father Abraham had before he was circumcised (vv. 10-12). To this point Paul has spoken of Abraham as "our forefather" (*propatora hēmōn*, v. 1), "the father of all who believe without being circumcised" (v. 11a), and "the father of the circumcised . . . who walk in the footsteps of Abraham's faith" (v. 12). He will use the term "father" (*patēr*) three more times in verses 16-18.

Paul had opened the chapter by speaking of Abraham as “our forefather according to the flesh” (*ton propatora kata sarka*), but in verses 1–12 he had not yet spoken explicitly of his descendants as either his offspring (Gk. *sperma*; Hb. *zeraʿ*) or his heirs (Gk. *klēronomeō*; Hb. *yāraš*), two expressions that the patriarchal narrator conjoins with reference to Abraham in Genesis 15:3; 22:17; and 28:4. This changes dramatically in verses 13–18, where he correlates three additional references to Abraham as “father” (*patēr*, vv. 16–18) with three references to his “seed” (*sperma*, vv. 13, 16, 18) and a single reference to “heirs” (*klēronomoi*) in verse 14.

Although Paul obviously borrowed his vocabulary from the covenantal benefactions promised Abraham, we must note his dramatic redefinition of both Abraham’s fatherhood and of his offspring (seed). The opening reference to “Abraham our forefather according to the flesh” (v. 1) alludes to Genesis 15:4, the only place in the patriarchal narratives where YHWH offers a physical clarification of Abraham’s “seed.” Rejecting Abraham’s (here Abram’s) proposed solution to his childlessness with graphic concreteness, YHWH answered Abram’s charge that he, God, had failed to give him seed. Although usually translated as “offspring” or “descendants,” the word *zeraʿ* (Gk. *sperma*) is interpreted by YHWH more crassly. As noted earlier, given the ancients’ prescientific and phenomenological perception of the world around them, conception involved implanting male seed (*zeraʿ*) in the fertile soil of a female’s womb.³¹ Drawing on this understanding, YHWH’s answer to Abram was graphic and earthy: “one who comes out of your organ” (*ʾāšer yēšēʾ mimmeʾêkā*), a euphemism for the penis—hence Paul’s reference to Abraham as “our forefather *according to the flesh*”; that is, our physical ancestor. Jews and Judaizers would have understood this physical specification as a reference to the physical descendants of their day, whom Paul identifies later as “my brothers, my kindred according

to the flesh” (*tōn adelphōn mou tōn syngenōn mou kata sarka*)—that is, “my physical relatives” (Rom. 9:3). Paul’s explicit reference to physical descent in 4:1 alludes to Genesis 15:4 and sets the stage for the topic of this chapter: faith as the key to access the blessing of Abraham, which he grounded on the narrator’s explicit declaration that YHWH recognized Abraham’s faith as “righteousness” (*ṣědāqâ*; Gk. *dikaiosynē*, v. 6).

Paul’s use of the plural pronoun “our,” referring to the mixed congregation in Rome, suggests a more comprehensive understanding of Abraham’s fatherhood and also a more comprehensive understanding of Abraham’s “seed.” He argues this case on the grounds of YHWH’s acknowledgment of Abraham’s righteousness—that is, his faith. He signaled this as his foundation by quoting Genesis 15:6 almost verbatim from the Septuagint:

Genesis 15:6: *kai episteusen Abram tō Theō kai elogisthē autō eis dikaiosynēn*

Romans 4:3: *episteusen [de] Abraam tō Theō kai elogisthē autō eis dikaiosynēn*

“Abraham trusted in God, and he attributed it to him as righteousness.”

Hereafter Paul developed his theme of the basis of justification with great care and impressive logic, making the following points:

1. Chronologically, YHWH declared Abraham righteous *before* the physical act of circumcision; hence a meritorious human act (circumcision), which Paul generalizes as “work” (*ergazomai*), cannot precondition access to the blessings of Abraham (vv. 1–10).
2. God intentionally granted Abraham “the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had

by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (v. 11 NRSV), thus in a state of impiety (*asebēs*, v. 5) by Jewish standards. This enabled Paul to open the door for other uncircumcised people “who believe without being circumcised” and “who walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had”; even while in a state of uncircumcision (*akrobystia*), such are declared righteous (vv. 11–12).

3. God promised that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the world in response to the righteousness the patriarch demonstrated by his faith. Since this was not in response to Abraham’s keeping of the law, it proves that the benefactions of the covenant are not a reward for meritorious observance of the law but a gracious and unmerited gift (*kata charin*, v. 16). This means that the promise is accessible both to those of Abraham’s offspring who possess the Torah (*ek tou nomou monon*) and to those who prove themselves his offspring by sharing this faith (vv. 13–16).
4. God’s promises to Abraham, “I have made you the father of many nations”³² and “So [like the stars of the heavens] shall your offspring be,”³³ open the door to Abraham being the father to many who are not his physical descendants. Accordingly, many who are not Abraham’s physical descendants may claim the status of his offspring (vv. 16b–18).
5. The intensity and depth of Abraham’s faith that God recognized as righteousness was paradigmatic for all who are counted as righteous (vv. 19–25). Paul ended his argument with a christological analogy and a Christocentric focus: Abraham’s belief that God would keep his promises required him to believe essentially in the resurrection of the dead (represented by his own one-hundred-year-old body and Sarah’s barren womb); this belief served as a model for Paul’s addressees “who

believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (v. 25).

Here Paul’s argument concerns the identity of “the seed of Abraham.” His response to his Jewish kinsfolk and Judaizing Christian gentiles, who restricted the notion to those who were physical descendants of Abraham—with allowance for outsiders being “grafted in” (cf. Rom. 11:17-24) by submitting to the initiatory rite and seal of membership in the covenant community and observing other external markers of Israelite identity—is shocking on two counts.

First, claims to physical descent from Abraham alone do not grant one access to the blessing of Abraham or the favor of God. For God to grant the status of a true offspring of Abraham, his physical descendants must demonstrate the faith of Abraham. In the wake of the death and resurrection of Jesus, such faith is impossible apart from the recognition of Christ Jesus both as the Son of God (Rom. 1:1-7) and as the embodiment of God himself (9:1-10:16, esp. 10:13).

Second, access to the “blessing of Abraham” is not restricted to the physical descendants of Abraham but is open to all who prove themselves to be his spiritual descendants by sharing the ancestor’s faith. All who put their trust in God and demonstrate confidence in his promises are his offspring. This notion is not new in the New Testament. From the First Testament, Paul could have adduced examples like Rahab, the professional Canaanite prostitute (Josh. 2:8-14); Caleb ben Jephunneh the Kenizzite;³⁴ and Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 1:14-18; 4:13-15). In Galatians 3:16 Paul drew attention to Christ as the singular and principal seed, but here he celebrates the extension of the offspring of Abraham to all gentiles who share his faith in God without reference to the external requirements that Judaizers sought to impose on gentile

believers in Jesus. Remarkably, he does not develop the notion of Christ as the singular seed of Abraham through whom God's favor would be made available to humanity and through whose descendants the promise of blessing the whole world would be fulfilled.

Allusions to Stage 1 of the Israelite Covenant Elsewhere in the New Testament

Hebrews

Given the identity of the primary addressees, it is not surprising that the book of Hebrews features the patriarchs more than any other New Testament book. Abraham's name appears eleven times,³⁵ Isaac's four times (Heb. 11:9, 17–18, 20), and Jacob's three times (11:9, 20–21). In my examination of the book I will focus on the implications they have for understanding the author's perspective on the Abrahamic covenant.

The first reference to Abraham is remarkable. In Hebrews 2:16 the author speaks of the “seed of Abraham” (*spermatos Abraam*) as the beneficiaries of the work rendered by Jesus, whom he had identified by name for the first time in 2:9. Prior to this he had referred to Jesus as both the Son of God (1:2, 5, 8) and the Son of Man (*hē huios anthrōpou*, 2:6). Although 2:6 declares Jesus' identity as a human (Hb. *ben 'ādām*, Ps. 8:4 [5]), the series of excerpts from Psalms 2; 45; and 110 in Hebrews 1:5–13 highlights Jesus' messianic identity, recognizing him as the Davidic king to whom YHWH had granted cosmic sovereignty (on which see further below, chap. 18). However, the linguistic links between Hebrews 2:16 and Isaiah 41:8–10 suggest that at this point the author is identifying Jesus with YHWH, the God of Israel's exodus from Egypt.

What is striking in Hebrews 2 is not only a shift in Jesus' identity as Davidic “Son of God” and Adamic “Son of Man”

to YHWH, but also the maintenance of Jesus' identification with the descendants of Abraham, whom the author of Hebrews refers to as "[his] brothers" (*tois adelphois*, 2:17). Although the phrase "seed of Abraham" links this passage to the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant, by also linking them to the exodus generation, he blurs the boundaries between the Abrahamic covenant and the covenant made at Sinai. The suggestion that these were not two separate covenants finds support in the author of Hebrews' restriction of the word "covenant" (19x) to the Sinai stage of the Israelite covenant or the "new covenant" fulfilled in Christ.

Allusions to the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant are most obvious in Hebrews 6:13–18, where the author refers explicitly to God "making a promise" (*epangeilamenos*) to Abraham and sealing that promise with an oath. He summarizes the content of that promise (noun, *epangelia*, vv. 15, 17) by quoting the Greek version of Genesis 22:14 almost verbatim.

Genesis 22:17: I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply *your seed*.

Hebrews 6:14: I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply *you*.

This statement summarizes all the benefactions associated with the covenant that YHWH made with the ancestors. However, the author highlights the irrevocability of the promise by characterizing YHWH's purpose/determination (*boulē*) as unchangeable (*ametathetos*, 6:17) and sealing the promise with an unchangeable oath (v. 18).

Human agreements settling disputes and normalizing relationships often concluded with an oath securing higher powers as guarantors of the agreement (v. 16). However, because the God of Abraham was supreme over all that

existed in heaven and on earth, it was impossible for him to invoke a higher authority to guarantee his promise to Abraham, forcing him to swear by himself. This divine oath referred to in Genesis 22:16 would have been expressed verbally with the formula *ḥay 'ānî*, “by my life,” and YHWH had bound himself to the promise nonverbally by passing between the two parts of the animal that Abraham had slain (Gen. 15:17–18). Therefore, with this ritual oath YHWH had put his own life on the line should he alter or retract the covenant. The immutability and irrevocability of both promise and oath guarantee the hope of the believers addressed in this letter. However, once again the author merges the two stages of the Israelite covenant.

Hebrews 6 concludes by highlighting Jesus as our forerunner (*prodromos*) and the one whose eternal (*eis ton aiōna*) priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek anchors our soul and offers us a secure hope (v. 20). But the blending of covenant stages is awkward. The reference to the veil (v. 19) alludes to the ministry of the priests within the Israelite covenant’s cultic system, but Melchizedek never entered that veil. As we will see below, Melchizedek represents a different order of priests.

Although Abraham’s name appears six times in Hebrews 7:1–10 (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9), allusions to the covenant that YHWH had made with him are muted. Verse 6 identifies Abraham as the one who possessed the promises (*epangelias*), and verse 5 speaks of the sons of Levi and the other Israelites as “coming from the loins of Abraham.” However, Hebrews 7 is not about the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant. If anything, it is about the covenant with Abraham’s descendants ratified by YHWH at Mount Sinai (see below, chap. 16).

Abraham reappears as a significant figure in Hebrews once more, in the preacher’s celebration of faith represented by the roster of men and women of faith in chapter 11. That he used 201 out of 633 words to celebrate

Abraham's faith (vv. 8–19) reflects his profound admiration for this man; by contrast, his discussion of Moses takes up only eighty-eight words (vv. 23–28). The word for “promise” (*epangelia*) occurs four times in these verses (vv. 9a, 9b, 13, 17) and the verb “to promise” (*epangellomai*) one additional time (v. 11), but the word “covenant” is missing from this section—and from the whole chapter. The writer was obviously aware of the terms of the covenant made with Abraham, but his focus was on the extraordinary faith with which Abraham pursued the destiny that God had ordained for him. His eulogy to Abraham and his trust in God commences with his departure from his native land to embark on a journey to a city that only God could build (vv. 9–10, 13–16).

In the course of pursuing the mission, which required innumerable offspring (11:12), Abraham encountered two normally impenetrable roadblocks: (1) the barrenness of his wife Sarah, which would not be resolved until she was past childbearing age and Abraham was an old man (vv. 11–12), and (2) God's incredible demand that he sacrifice Isaac, the one whom YHWH had expressly identified as the promised heir (vv. 17–18). In the first instance the promise was as good as dead because Abraham was an old man without the descendant intended by God. In the second, the promise was as good as dead because God demanded that he offer up the only key to Abraham's future and the promise's future (v. 19). To the narrator, both moments of resolution represented virtual resurrection of the dead.

However, I find the preacher's interpretation of Abraham's unsettled life in 11:8–9 especially intriguing: “For he was expecting [to find/arrive at; *exedeche to*] the city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (v. 10). The “Deuteronomic Credo” characterizes his life (or the ancestors' lives collectively) as “a precarious/insecure/wandering Aramaean,”³⁶ and the present author speaks of him as going out, but not knowing

where he was going, and then “living as an alien.”³⁷ These two clauses reflect the two phases of Abraham’s life, first as an emigrant from Mesopotamia to Canaan, and then as a sojourner within the land of Canaan. Verse 10 expresses his longing for a time and a place when he could replace his tents with a permanent home, with “foundations” (*themelious*).

Although many assume that Abraham was looking for a heavenly city (à la Rev. 3:12; 21:2, 10), two other possibilities seem more likely. First, he was simply looking for a fixed residence himself so that he could settle down permanently in a place he could call home. Sociologically, to live in tents means forever being at the mercy of one’s hosts, and economically, it means to spend one’s life foraging to find grazing for one’s flocks and having to barter with the hosts for other staples. To be sure, YHWH had promised to bless him and to be his shield, but in the ancient world, a sense of security was concretized by a permanent residence with a wall around the complex and gates by which access could be controlled. Since every other aspect of YHWH’s promise depended on his direct intervention on Abraham’s behalf, he logically assumed that God would need to design and build this structure. Second, Abraham may have been looking for the temple of YHWH in the promised land, either as an already-existent site or as a structure that YHWH would reveal to him. He came from Mesopotamia, where traditions of deity-designed temples were ancient. The best-known example is drawn on the lap of Gudea, king of Lagash in southern Mesopotamia (ca. 2144–2124 BC; see fig. 10.2 above, chap. 10, under “David’s Posture”) and described in detail on an inscribed terra-cotta cylinder. As we would learn from the later construction of the tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem, sanctuaries in Israel were also divine projects from beginning to end (Exod. 25–31; 1 Chron. 28–29).

Abraham obviously did not require a temple to be aware of YHWH's presence with him. He had YHWH's promise,³⁸ and the narrative includes many accounts of his active presence.³⁹ Nor did Abraham need a temple to relate cultically to YHWH, for we frequently see him building altars⁴⁰ and offering sacrifices (Gen. 22:1–13). However, reflecting his own unsettled state, he built these wherever he encountered YHWH. While the site that YHWH would eventually choose would be revealed later, Abraham had two close calls with the place eventually chosen. According to 14:18–24, at Salem he encountered Melchizedek the king, who was simultaneously the priest of El Elyon, and spontaneously offered him the tithe of all the property he had gained by defeating the Mesopotamian alliance. In chapter 22 YHWH ordered Abraham to take a three-day journey and offer his son as a whole burnt offering on the mountain he would identify for him in the land of Moriah (v. 2). Although many centuries would pass before this mountain would be recognized as the place YHWH had chosen, the narratives offer no clues that Abraham could have considered this as the long-range solution to his quest for a city. But in this treasure hunt, twice Abraham had been “hot.”

James and Peter

In presenting Abraham as the paragon of faith, the preacher to the Hebrew Christians had followed in the train of Paul in Galatians 3 and Romans 4. But he would not be the last to do so. In James 2:21–24 the brother of Jesus recognized Abraham's significance in the history of the divine plan of redemption: he was the paragon of active faith. According to James, faith is not merely a mental or emotional disposition. People of faith inevitably demonstrate its presence with actions arising out of deep trust in God, as it was epitomized by Abraham's preparations to offer his

son as a sacrifice. Without the action, there is no faith. But when faith was demonstrated in action, as Abraham did, those who heard the Epistle of James could be assured of God's approval: "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

The final reference to Abraham in the New Testament occurs in 1 Peter 3:6. However, here the focus is not on Abraham and his faith but on the fidelity and loyalty of Sarah to her husband. Specifically, Peter declares that women who treat their husbands like Sarah treated Abraham and conduct their lives well (*agathopoieō*) are true daughters of Sarah.

Conclusion

Allusions to the promises associated with the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant occur elsewhere in the New Testament, but our eyes need to be trained to see them without the aid of semantic ciphers like the word "covenant" or occurrences of the names of the three primary ancestors of Israel. It is difficult to isolate the patriarchal stage of the Israelite covenant from the stage involving their descendants, but in the broad outline of the book of Acts, we recognize the fulfillment of the universal (com)mission of Abraham to be the agent of blessing to all the nations and families of the entire world. Jesus' final words to his disciples prior to his ascension sketch out the plan: "But you will be empowered when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This statement recalls examples of the extraordinary energy that YHWH's agents demonstrated when the Spirit of YHWH came upon them in the First Testament, as in the cases of Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Samson (14:6, 19; 15:14), and Saul (1 Sam. 11:6). However, the promise "You will receive power [*lēmpesthe dynamin*] when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" is vague,

and we often overlook the way this promise was fulfilled serially. The Greek form of the collocation “The [Holy] Spirit has come upon you,” involving the verb *eperchomai* with the Spirit of God as the subject, occurs only three times in Scripture: LXX Isaiah 32:15, Luke 1:35 (with reference to Mary’s conception), and Acts 1:8. The Isaiah reference is especially significant in this context: “until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is considered a forest.” In the Prophets, this is one of four references to the “liquid metaphor”—that is, the outpouring of the Spirit of YHWH (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28–29) in the context of Israel’s after-judgment restoration (Zech. 12:10 involves the house of David). Once the triangular relationship involving YHWH, Israel, and the land had been restored, the outpouring of the Spirit would seal that covenant relationship irrevocably.

It is not accidental that in Acts 2 Peter based his Pentecostal sermon on Joel 2:28–29. Jesus’ allusion to Isaiah 32:15 in Acts 1:8 sets the stage for this rhetorical ploy. Although the Pentecost moment displays significant links with the Sinai covenantal event, the phenomena that transpired in Acts 2 recur three more times in the Acts account of the church’s history, as the boundaries of the covenant community, consisting of people who believed in Jesus, the “Kingpin” seed of Abraham, expanded serially to include Samaritans (Acts 8:14–17), a Roman centurion and his household (10:44–48; 11:15–16), and finally people in distant Ephesus (19:1–7; on which see more fully below, chap. 15, “The Israelite Covenant in the Book of Acts”).

We observe the fulfillment of the promise also in the book of Revelation, where 5:9–10 speaks of the Lamb ransoming people for God “from every tribe and language and people and nation,” making them “a kingdom and priests to our God,” and declaring that they “will reign on the earth.” Revelation 7:9–10 describes the impressive heavenly scene

of “a great and innumerable multitude, consisting of people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, holding palm branches in their hands, and shouting loudly, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” Although other passages portray the tribes and nations in other contexts, these highlight the cosmic scope of God’s plan of redemption, the “seed(s)” of which God planted in his covenant with Abraham.

- [1.](#) Matt. 22:32; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37; Acts 3:13.
- [2.](#) Gen. 17:7–8; 28:21; Exod. 6:7; cf. Exod. 29:45; Lev. 19:2, 34, 36; etc.
- [3.](#) Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:7–9; John 8:35–40; 2 Cor. 11:22.
- [4.](#) Matt. 22:29–32; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:34–38.
- [5.](#) Matt. 3:9; Luke 1:73; 3:8; 16:24, 30; John 8:39, 53, 56; Acts 7:2; Rom. 4:1, 12; James 2:21.
- [6.](#) *Sperma/spermatos Abraam*, John 8:33, 37; Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Heb. 2:16; cf. Gal. 3:16.
- [7.](#) Luke 19:9; Acts 13:26; Gal. 3:7.
- [8.](#) Luke 3:15–17; cf. Matt. 3:1–3; Mark 1:1–8; John 1:19–27.
- [9.](#) Exod. 3:7, 17; 4:31; Deut. 16:3; 26:7; Neh. 9:9; etc.
- [10.](#) Isa. 65:9, 13, 14; Jer. 46:27.
- [11.](#) Judg. 2:7; 10:16; 1 Sam. 7:3; 12:20, 24; 2 Chron. 30:8; 33:16; 34:33; Ps. 100:2 [LXX 99:2]; Isa. 65:9, 14; Jer. 46:27; Ezek. 20:40; etc.
- [12.](#) 2 Chron. 6:42; Ps. 25:6 [LXX 24:6]; Hab. 3:2.
- [13.](#) E.g., Exod. 12:49; Lev. 7:7; Num. 15:16, 29.
- [14.](#) Lev. 7:37; 14:54; Num. 5:30; 19:2, 14; 31:21.
- [15.](#) Deut. 1:5; 4:8, 44; 17:18–19; 27:3, 8, 26; 28:58, 61; 29:21, 29 [20, 28]; 30:10; 31:9–12, 24–26; 32:46.
- [16.](#) 2 Kings 22:8–13; 23:24; 2 Chron. 34:14–31.
- [17.](#) Luke 24:44; cf. Matt. 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16, 29, 31 (simply “Moses” in vv. 29, 31); Acts 13:15; Rom. 3:21.
- [18.](#) Lev. 26:16; 1 Sam. 8:15 (for Hb. *zar‘êkem*); Ps. 126:6 [LXX 125:6]; Isa. 61:11.
- [19.](#) Gal. 3:13; cf. Lev. 26:14–39; Deut. 27:26; 28:15–68.
- [20.](#) For *gôy gādôl*, see Gen. 12:2; cf. 17:4–6; 18:18; 26:24; 35:11; 46:3.
- [21.](#) Gen. 17:7; 26:24; 28:13; 46:3–4.
- [22.](#) Gen. 26:3, 24; 28:14; 46:4.
- [23.](#) Gen. 12:2; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.
- [24.](#) Gen. 12:2; 17:16; 22:17; 26:3, 24.

- [25.](#) Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.
- [26.](#) Gal. 3:16, 17, 18a, 18b, 21, 22, 29.
- [27.](#) Gal. 3:2-3, 5, 14; 4:6, 29; 5:5, 16-18, 22, 25; 6:1, 8, 18.
- [28.](#) Deut. 6:25; 24:13; Ps. 106:31.
- [29.](#) The Hebrew is translated, "Cursed is [the one] who does not confirm the words of this Torah by doing them" (Deut. 27:26).
- [30.](#) Cf. Deut. 28:61; 29:20-21, 25 [19-20, 24]; 30:10; 31:9, 24, 26.
- [31.](#) Cf. Lev. 15:16, 32; 19:20; 22:4; etc.
- [32.](#) Rom. 4:17, *patera pollōn ethnōn*; cf. *'ab hămôn gôyim* in Gen. 17:5.
- [33.](#) Rom. 4:18, *houtōs estai to sperma sou*; cf. *kōh yihyeh zar'ekā* in Gen. 15:5.
- [34.](#) Num. 13:6; 13:30; 14:6-10, 24; Deut. 1:36; Josh. 14:6-14.
- [35.](#) Heb. 2:16; 6:13, 15; 7:1-2, 4-6, 9; 11:8, 17.
- [36.](#) Deut. 26:5: *'ărammî 'ōbēd*; Gk. *apoballō*, "to be lacking [something]."
- [37.](#) Gk. *paroikeō* = Hb. *gûr*, "to sojourn," in Gen. 12:10; 19:9; 20:1; 21:23, 34; 26:3; 32:4 [5]; 35:27; 47:4.
- [38.](#) Gen. 21:22; cf. 24:40; 26:3.
- [39.](#) Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 15:1; 17:1; 18:1; etc.
- [40.](#) Gen. 12:7; 13:4, 18; 22:7-9.

CHAPTER 15

Stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite Covenant in New Testament Narratives

*The Covenant Ratified at Sinai
and Reaffirmed on the Plains
of Moab*

Introduction

Although Moses led his people in a covenant-ratification ceremony on the plains of Moab that was distinct from the ceremonies at Sinai/Horeb (Deut. 29:1 [28:69]), this involved not a new covenant, distinct from the one established at Sinai, but a renewal of the original with the new generation of Abraham's descendants that had been born in the desert during the previous forty years. To be sure, this ritual produced a new series of covenant documents proclaimed as the Torah of Moses and then transcribed and placed beside the ark of the covenant (31:9–13, 24–26), to be retrieved minimally every seven years and read before all the people at the Sukkoth festival. But the terms of this covenant were identical to the one made at Sinai (with the Decalogue as its core), and the perspective on the relationships was the same. This ritual

would be completed inside the promised land on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal (Deut. 27). Because the rituals at Sinai and on the plains of Moab represent two iterations of the same covenant, I will treat them as one in this chapter.

The Status of the Israelite Covenant in New Testament Times

When the pages of history opened to the New Testament, the status of the Israelite covenant was on everyone's mind. Although the population of Palestine included many gentiles, descendants of Abraham were concentrated in Jerusalem and its environs, in the Jezreel Valley, and around the Sea of Galilee. Most of these were Jews in the narrow sense of the word (that is, descendants of the tribe of Judah) or Levites (that is, the descendants of the priestly tribe of Levi). These two groups had represented the majority of the population of Judah when Nebuchadnezzar devastated the land in 586 BC. However, by God's providence ten thousand upper- and industrial-class Judeans were deported to Babylon in 597 BC, in advance of the coming holocaust. Thus God had preserved a remnant that would be the key to the continued existence of the descendants of Abraham as YHWH's chosen people. When the imperial power passed from the Babylonians to the Persians, in about 539 BC, YHWH stirred the heart of Cyrus to encourage the exiles to return to their homeland and reconstruct their society around the worship of YHWH in Jerusalem. More than forty thousand had returned (Ezra 2; Neh. 7). The Jewish population around Jerusalem and Galilee consisted largely of the descendants of these returnees.

Although technically only descendants of Judah were "Jews," by New Testament times the expression served as a gentilic for all Israelites, especially worshipers of YHWH irrespective of their tribes of origin. Second Temple records attest to the presence of representatives from the other

tribes among the population. First Esdras 2:8 remembers that “the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin” led the group that returned from exile in 538 BC. Second Maccabees 3:4 identifies an opponent of Onias the priest as “Simon of the tribe of Benjamin.” The first-century-BC book of Judith identifies a magistrate as “Uzziah son of Micah, of the tribe of Simeon” (Jdt. 6:15). In the New Testament, the only persons identified by tribal affiliation are “Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher” (Luke 2:36) and Saul/Paul “of the tribe of Benjamin” (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5). These tribal affiliations were obviously significant at the personal level, but they remind us that despite the depopulation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel through slaughter and dispersion by the Assyrians in the eighth century BC, some people from the north who remembered their tribal roots survived and eventually found their way back to the homeland.

Nevertheless, the status of the Israelite nation in Second Temple times was nothing like what Moses had imagined in Deuteronomy 30, or the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had envisioned in their oracles of restoration. In contrast to the comprehensive scope of restoration envisioned in the Israelite covenant and the Prophets, the hope for all Israel was fulfilled only “in small measure” (Hb. *mēʿaṭ*, Ezek. 11:16). Revelation 7:1–8 speaks of an eschatological future involving full representation from all the tribes, but that was a far cry from the present reality. The covenant that YHWH established with all the tribes of Israel at Sinai and renewed with the next generation on the plains of Moab and Mounts Gerizim and Ebal (Deut. 27; Josh. 8) was hanging by a thread.

But the crisis for the covenant affected every side of the covenantal triangle and was not restricted to the deity-nation pillar of their past claims to security (see fig. 11.2). As already suggested, the territory that YHWH had promised Abraham and had been distributed among the tribes earlier

was only partially occupied. Specific territories still bore the names of the tribes that once had inhabited them (Matt. 4:13, 15), but names had become toponyms rather than ethnicons. And the Jewish populations of Galilee and Jerusalem were separated by Samaria, occupied largely by people of mixed race, the descendants of the remnant of the Northern population that had survived the Assyrian onslaught and the foreigners they had brought in to rejuvenate the economy. The Samaritans treasured the Torah as their Scriptures, but they lacked the remainder of the First Testament (cf. John 4). And even if Israelites had occupied more of their hereditary homeland, the demise of Persia in the fourth century BC had caused Palestine to be ruled for several centuries by Greek-speaking overlords, who had flooded the holy land with pagan influences.

And now in New Testament times, the Jews were under the thumb of the hated Romans. The remnant of the original population may have been reunited with the land that YHWH had guaranteed irrevocably to their ancestors, but in the wake of the returns in 538 BC and subsequent years, the identity of Israel as a people remained tenuous in several respects: (1) their numbers involved only a small portion of the descendants of the tribal ancestors (Jacob's sons); (2) they occupied only a small portion of the original land promised to Abraham and his descendants; (3) the evidence of God's presence among them was seriously compromised. Although the returnees had reconstituted a covenant community and had rebuilt the temple, the divine glory had not returned and the ark of the covenant—with the tablets of the Decalogue as the icon, the token (*hā'ēdût*) of YHWH's and Israel's commitments—was missing. Indeed, the temple that existed in New Testament times was a political statement by a pagan representative of the Roman Empire, designed and constructed by Herod the Great as a sop to mollify Jewish hostility to him. To be sure, this temple sat on the site of the first temple, but without the divine glory in

the holy of holies and without the ark of the covenant, the people could not observe the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) as YHWH had prescribed in Leviticus 16. Undoubtedly in the minds of many Jews, even of Jesus and the apostles, this remnant of Israel was in exile in their own land, awaiting the arrival of a Messiah who would deliver them from the Roman yoke. Jesus' coming answered the prayers of the pious (Luke 1), but framing their prayers in traditional terms of deliverance from their enemies, many focused their hopes on salvation from the hated Romans (Luke 1:67–79, esp. 71) rather than on the salvation from sin announced by the angel to Joseph in Matthew 1:21.

The cry of the crowd gathered in Jerusalem five days before Passover, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord [*kyrios* = YHWH]—the King of Israel!”¹ reflected popular hopes. However, Jesus' refusal to take up the challenge disheartened many: five days later, stirred up by the chief priests, the crowds in Jerusalem cried out, “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:11–13). Indeed, in direct contradiction of the people's earlier acclaim, the chief priests declared, “We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:15). With that declaration they flushed away six hundred years of hope for the restoration of the covenant triangle involving YHWH, the people, and the land, not to mention the hope of a Davidic Messiah.

Even though the New Testament contains few explicit references to the Israelite covenant, and despite the compromised spiritual state of Abraham's descendants as a whole, the place of the Israelite covenant in the daily lives of Jewish people is evident throughout. The following exploration of its significance divides into two parts: (1) the role of the covenant as reflected in the narrative accounts of Jesus' interaction with the Jews in the Gospels and the apostles in the book of Acts, and (2) the role of the covenant in the epistolary writings of the New Testament. The common denominator in debates about the essence of

covenant life involves the identity, nature, and function of the Torah.

We hear the word “covenant” (*diathēkē*) from Jesus’ lips only once, and that in the institution of the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper as a [new] covenant meal.² I reserve that discussion for chapter 17. Our concern here is Jesus’ teaching concerning the meaning of “to fulfill all righteousness,” a theme fundamental to the covenant that he announced the first time we hear his voice in the Gospel of Matthew (3:15). The phrase is quite ambiguous, but for him “righteousness” began with submitting to John the Baptizer’s baptism, upon which the heavens opened, the Spirit of God came upon him, and the voice from heaven declared, “This is my Son, the Beloved One, in whom I delight” (3:16–17).

But what is “righteousness” (*dikaïosynē*)? Whatever the word meant in the Greek world, for Jesus, a Jew steeped in the Torah and thinking in Hebrew, the answer lay in the underlying Torah expression *šedeq/šēdāqâ*, “conduct in accord with an established standard”—in this case, the standard of the covenant. Being the incarnation of YHWH, Israel’s covenant Suzerain, Jesus was faithful to YHWH’s covenant commitments (cf. Deut. 32:4), but as the son of Mary and ultimately a son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1), he also fully accepted the mission and the requirements that YHWH had laid out for his vassals in the stipulations of the Israelite covenant. Much of Jesus’ teaching and service to others would involve declaring and demonstrating what “righteousness” meant for his followers, which immediately triggered conflict with the religious leaders, whether Pharisaic or priestly.

The Israelite Covenant and the Sermon on the Mount

The Matthean narrative has Jesus beginning his public ministry in the Galilee region, announcing the arrival of “the

kingdom of heaven” and demonstrating the dawn of the new era by summoning his first agents and performing all sorts of miracles (Matt. 4:12–25). Responding to the crowds that flocked to him, he climbed the mountain, sat down, and began to teach his disciples—with the crowd listening in (5:1–2; 7:28–29). Many interpret Jesus’ role in delivering the Sermon on the Mount as that of a new Moses, but this reflects a low Christology. At Wheaton College a group of administrators and faculty meets every semester over lunch with Jewish rabbis from several different traditions to discuss issues of common concern and especially to discuss texts our respective religious traditions treasure. A couple of years ago the subject of study was the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of a ten minute presentation of a Jewish interpretation of the sermon, the rabbi selected for that day to lead the discussion asked a probing question: “Who does the person talking think he is?” They answered emphatically and unanimously in effect, “He thinks he is God, and that’s why we reject him. To us, that’s blasphemy.” But this captures precisely what is happening here. The one who sat before the people—as if enthroned—was the same person whose voice the Israelites had heard on Sinai more than a millennium earlier.

Jesus is YHWH incarnate, and in this address, he delivered a (new) covenant manifesto. By designating this as a “new-covenant” address, I do not suggest that his utterances here subvert, marginalize, or replace the original revelation given to Israel at Sinai (Exod. 19–Lev. 26). Jesus himself declared that he had come not to dismantle or abolish (*katalysai*) the Torah and the Prophets but to fulfill (*plērōsai*) the entire canon of Scripture—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Matt. 5:17–19; cf. Luke 24:44). We may interpret his word “fulfill” in several ways: (1) to put the whole thing into effect (no prophet, not even Moses, was able to do this), (2) to declare its meaning and significance fully, and (3) to embody its ethic and values perfectly. It cannot mean “to

put an end to” or “terminate” the validity and authority of the Torah and the Prophets. For Jesus, the canonical assemblage of texts represented a fixed, authoritative, permanent, and irrevocable record of the very “words of God” (cf. Rom. 3:2).

The sermon opens with a picture of the well-being of Jesus’ covenant community, based not on material prosperity but on ethical flourishing (Gk. *makarioi*, Matt. 5:3–12). The form of the “Beatitudes” recalls the *’ašrê* (Gk. *makarios*) declarations in the First Testament that celebrate the privileged status of specific classes of people, whether or not they apply to Israel as a whole, because they have YHWH as their God generally³ and because they delight in his Torah,⁴ walk in his ways,⁵ and live by his revealed will (Ps. 119:2; Isa. 56:2). The best-known link is with Psalm 1:1, which highlights the joy of those who delight in the Torah, suggesting that Jesus is hereby presenting the spiritual and moral essence of covenant relationship. Jesus concluded this opening statement with his missional vision for his followers of bringing light to the world (Matt. 5:13–16), which recalls the Torah’s portrayal of YHWH’s mission for Israel (Deut. 26:19, 28:1, 9–10).

Jesus declared his vision for his covenant community in Matthew 5:17–20 and then explained the place of the Hebrew Scriptures generally and the Torah in particular in his constitution: by grounding his community on the Torah, he portrayed them as true heirs of previous revelation. Indeed, he concluded this segment by delivering his ethical vision of the kingdom of heaven. In this respect as well, the new community is heir to the old. In Deuteronomy 16:20 Moses had summarized the charge to the Israelites: “Righteousness, only righteousness you shall pursue.” Jesus built on this goal in Matthew 5:20: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (ESV).

Here “scribes and Pharisees” refers to the class of professional religious authorities on the Torah, both written (biblical) and oral. Originally the Hebrew word *sōpēr* referred to a person who transcribed oral speech to text (e.g., Baruch, the scribe in Jer. 36:32). It seems that Ezra the priest, “who was skilled in the Torah of Moses,”⁶ was the first *sōpēr* for whom the word represented an expert in the written Scriptures, specifically the Torah of Moses and the stipulations of the covenant revealed at Sinai (Ezra 7:10). The New Testament occasionally uses *grammateus* in the original sense of *sōpēr* (Acts 19:35), but the Old Greek rendering of Ezra “the scribe” as *ho grammateus* provides the background for its most common usage. By New Testament times the scope of the traditions over which these officials posed as authoritative interpreters and teachers encompassed the Oral Torah, traditional interpretations, and applications of Torah handed down by rabbis over the centuries. The scribes, who are often associated with the priests, appear to have been drawn from the Levitical tribe, which Moses had portrayed as custodians of the Torah (Deut. 31:24–26; 33:10; cf. 17:18). Many Pharisees probably had Levitical roots, but this was not true of all: Paul was a Benjaminite (Phil. 3:5). Although the public viewed the scribes and Pharisees as authorities on the Torah, the latter especially perceived themselves as paragons of the virtue taught by the Torah. Like Hebrew *šedeq* and *šědāqâ*, in contexts like Matthew 5:20 the Greek term *dikaíosynē* involves conduct in keeping with an established standard, in this instance the standard set by YHWH in his covenant.

With Jesus’ call for a righteousness that surpassed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, he announced a motif that would characterize his ministry and create intense conflict with the religious authorities, who had subverted divine authority by supplementing the ethical and liturgical laws with endless specifications of proper behavior

that they deemed implicit in the demands of the Torah. While they rightly perceived the Torah itself as a gift unprecedented or unparalleled among the peoples of the earth (Deut. 4:6–8), they had transformed its spiritual and covenantal ethical vision, which was motivated by gratitude for grace received and compassion for the well-being of others, into a merit-based legal system. The postexilic community was indeed Torah based, but with the elevation of the Torah to virtual idol status, Second Temple Judaism had become a meritocracy in which the Oral Torah regulated every detail of life and for which the Pharisees considered themselves not only definers but also models of Torah piety.

Jesus had signaled his concern for an alternative righteousness in the fourth beatitude: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6 ESV). He declared this theme again two more times in 6:1 and 6:33. However, in his rhetoric, Jesus treated the Pharisees as foils against which to present his alternative righteousness, alongside the gentiles (*hoi ethnikai*, 5:47; 6:7; *ta ethnē*, 6:32).

In the remainder of Matthew 5, Jesus raised five ethical topics, opening each with variations of the formula “You have heard that it has been said, ‘You shall/You shall not . . .’” The statements that follow the opening all involve quotations from Israel’s constitutional documents: the Decalogue (5:21, 27), the Instructions on Holiness (5:33, 38, 43), and the Torah of Moses (5:31, 33, 43). However, the formula functions rhetorically, not to contrast Jesus’ utterances with the covenant documents but to subvert the Oral Torah espoused by the Pharisees (v. 20 is transitional). In each case his critique was not of the laws but of what religious authorities had done with them. He ended by placing the Pharisees in the same class as the gentiles (5:47).

This set the stage for Jesus’ more focused critique in 6:1–18, where he did not name the Pharisees specifically, but he

characterized the religious leaders as hypocrites who appeared to the public in the synagogues and the streets (6:1, 5, 16) to be spiritual giants, but whom God perceived as dwarfs. The entire section involves Jesus' sustained plea for authentic piety—which is demonstrated in private and gains the praise of God—and his repudiation of religious expression for show. He identified three dimensions of the problem: horizontal, in alms toward poor fellow human beings (vv. 1–4); vertical, in communication with God (prayer, vv. 5–15); and internal, in private expressions of piety (fasting, vv. 16–19).

In the remainder of chapter 6, Jesus called his followers to full-bodied and wholehearted trust in God, instead of trust in material resources. Seeking first God's heavenly kingdom and his righteousness (vv. 32–33) meant repudiating the treasures of earth and finding security entirely in his hands; this covenant community had no room for alternative "gods" (vv. 22–24). Material "idols" are utterly unreliable; they rot and rust and are consumed by creatures or stolen by thieves (vv. 19–21). By contrast, as the birds of the air and the grass of the field demonstrate, people may find true security only in God, who each day provides his own with resources they need (vv. 25–34).

In chapter 7 Jesus returned to themes he had touched on earlier. He began with the problem of hypocrisy, exhibited particularly in judgmental preoccupation with the flaws of others and in oblivion to one's own faults (vv. 1–6). Then he returned to the theme of trust in God, who as divine Father is eager to give gifts that ensure the well-being of his children (vv. 7–11), and concluded with an appeal to treat others the way people wish to be treated (v. 12). The last statement sets the stage for Jesus' later reduction of all the laws associated with the Israelite covenant to the bilateral law of demonstrated love for God and demonstrated love for others. In verses 13–14 Jesus alluded to a problem that had plagued the covenant community from the beginning: there

had always been two Israels—the majority, who claimed descent from Abraham and scrupulously kept the finest regulations of the Oral Torah, and the few, who actually participated in the life the divine Suzerain offered.

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a warning to his followers to beware of false prophets. He did not identify these *pseudoprophetas*. Prophets rarely figure in the Gospels, apart from conversations about Jesus or John the Baptizer being the eschatological prophet⁷ and gnomic statements like, “A prophet is not accepted in his own country”⁸ or “No prophet is from Galilee.”⁹ References to past prophets abound, and Jesus occasionally warned people against future false prophets (Matt. 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22). Unlike the book of Acts, which knows of contemporary true and false prophets, the Gospels do not identify living prophets other than John the Baptizer.

Early Jewish historical and rabbinic sources seem to reinforce this impression. Josephus suggested that since the time of Artaxerxes (i.e., Esther), there had been no “exact succession of prophets” (*Against Apion* 1.8 [41]). This sentiment also appears among the rabbis: “When the last prophets [Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi] died, the holy spirit ceased in Israel. Despite this, they were informed by means of oracles” (Tosefta Sotah 13.2 [Leiman, *Canonization*, 66]). However, the reference to “oracles” in the last sentence implies that people may occasionally have heard prophetic utterances. A second-century-AD tractate, Seder Olam Rabbah 30, clarifies the perception of the rabbis vis-à-vis the prophets: “Until then, the prophets prophesied by means of the holy spirit. From then on, give ear and listen to the words of the Sages” (Leiman, *Canonization*, 66). While the rabbis considered prophets to experience a higher level of inspiration, they apparently viewed themselves as authoritative guardians and interpreters of Torah traditions, both written and oral.

Jesus' warning against false prophets in Matthew 7:15 seems to treat the matter neither as a problem of the past (which it was: Jer. 23; Ezek. 13) nor as a distant future threat (unlike other NT warnings) but as a "clear and present danger" for his followers. But wherein does the danger posed by false prophets lie? First, they are hypocrites. They appear as sheep—like everyone else in the flock—but beneath the garb is an entirely different animal. Second, they do not serve the people's interests but are self-serving monsters, like ravenous wolves looking for victims to devour (Matt. 7:15; cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). Third, true prophets demonstrate their identity not by the impressive words they speak but by the fruit they bear (Matt. 7:16–20). In John 15:1–13 another evangelist recalls Jesus' words to his disciples that echo these and offer a definition of good fruit as faithful and loving obedience to God and self-sacrificing service toward one's associates. Fourth, false prophets falsely declare their vassaldom and allegiance to God with "Lord, Lord" (Matt. 7:21–23).

On the surface the Greek *kyrie kyrie* appears to be simply an emphatic duplication, which appears outside of Matthew 7:21–22 only in 25:11 and Luke 6:46. The last text is particularly significant for two reasons. First, it occurs in the context of Luke's equivalent to the Sermon on the Mount, but which he locates on "a level place" (*pedinos*, 6:17). Second, although Luke offers a drastically abbreviated version of Matthew 7:21–27, he fleshes out the meaning of the expression by declaring its opposite: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46).

However, it is preferable to interpret the redundancy not only as emphatic duplication but also as a Hebraism carried over from the First Testament. This duplication recalls the double identification of God as *'ādōnāy yhwh*, which occurs 313 times in the First Testament, 217 of which occur in Ezekiel. The Septuagint typically rendered the conjoined epithets with a single word, *kyrie*, though on thirteen

occasions they read *kyrie kyrie*, “Lord Lord”—though this only occurs where the divine name is vocalized as *yěhwih*.¹⁰ The combination of *’ădōnāy yhw* is especially common in vocatives of direct address in which supplicants express their subordination to God, in some cases reinforcing their status with self-identifying expressions like “your servant.”¹¹ Remarkably, in both Matthew 7:21–22 and Luke 6:46 Jesus identified himself as the divine addressee (“You address me as ‘Lord, Lord’”).

The frequency of the double divine epithets (> 130×) occurring in the citation formula at the beginning of prophetic pronouncements is striking: “Thus has Adonay YHWH declared” (e.g., Isa. 7:7; Ezek. 2:4; 3:27). In Matthew 7:21, Jesus declares that merely addressing him as “Lord, Lord” counts for nothing; this is not a ticket to the kingdom of heaven; people demonstrate their qualification for entrance by doing the will of their Father who is in heaven. If by “false prophets” in verse 15 Jesus meant the scribes and Pharisees, this was a shocking rebuke of their supercilious “fencing” of the true Torah with their countless regulations. In his summary statement he characterized those most scrupulous about keeping their man-made commands as “lawless” (*anomia*, v. 23).

In verse 22 Jesus identified a fifth problem with the false prophets: they falsely claimed to make prophetic pronouncements and perform miracles in the name of God—that is, with his authority. This statement links Jesus’ critique directly with YHWH’s pronouncement of the death sentence on all who presume to speak a word in his name when he had not commanded them to speak (Deut. 18:20). False prophets claiming to speak for YHWH were a perpetual problem in ancient Israel, to which Jeremiah (23:16–22) and Ezekiel (13:1–9) gave most eloquent and forceful expression. Jesus’ comments suggest that he may have had the Ezekiel text in mind when he denied entrance into the

kingdom of heaven to those who falsely addressed him as Adonay YHWH (Matt. 7:21).

In Moses' citation of YHWH's promise of future prophets, he had highlighted the importance of listening to the words of YHWH that will come from true prophets' mouths:

"Anyone who will not listen to my words that he [the truly commissioned prophet] shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (Deut. 18:19). The authority of the prophet's utterance rested not on his status in the community but solely on his role as the commissioned mouthpiece of YHWH. When true prophets speak, YHWH speaks (cf. Amos 3:7).

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a surprising introduction and a sobering analogy. In a move that must have shocked the scribes and Pharisees and shocks our Jewish friends to this day, Jesus declared, "Whoever hears these words *of mine* and acts on them . . ." (Matt. 7:24). True prophets never began their pronouncements this way. They regularly began with some sort of divine citation formula, like "Thus has Adonay YHWH declared," and then used the first person in the utterance to speak in the name of God. Jesus used no such formulas in this address. In declaring the contrasting fates of those who act upon the words that *he* spoke (7:24-29), Jesus did not speak as a divinely commissioned prophet rather than a false prophet, nor did he speak in the name of God; he spoke as God.

But what has all this to do with the Israelite covenant? Everything. In the kingdom of heaven that has arrived and is embodied by the King himself, covenant commitment to YHWH is demonstrated by accepting the identity and authority of Jesus as YHWH. The one who spoke at Sinai sat before those gathered on the mountain. At the same time, in a shocking rebuke of the religious establishment, Jesus hereby denounced the scribes and Pharisees as charlatans, who not only were self-appointed guardians of the people's

piety but whose teachings, particularly the Oral Torah, were auto-inspired: they arose from the minds of the creators and interpreters of Torah whom YHWH had never authorized to speak for him (cf. Ezek. 13:1-2).

This would be only the beginning of his altercations with the religious authorities. Matthew concluded the transcript of the Sermon on the Mount by cryptically summarizing the effect of Jesus' rhetoric on the people who heard him: they were amazed at his teaching (*didachē*), and they recognized the contrast between the authority with which he spoke and the lack of authority of their scribes (*hoi grammateis autōn*). Jesus hereby launched a critical element in his agenda: to separate the people from the religious authorities who kept them in bondage to their own legalistic fabrications. Just as Moses had concluded Deuteronomy 18:15-22 by absolving his hearers of the burden of false prophets (they need not be afraid [*gûr*] of them, v. 22), so Jesus ended his invective against false prophets by contrasting the authority of his own words with theirs.

Before we move on to Jesus' other conversations regarding the Israelite covenant, we need to reflect on the significance of what has happened in Matthew 5-7. According to Matthew's narrative, it appears that at least four of the twelve apostles were present to hear his address: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Luke fleshes out the picture, naming all twelve apostles. That Jesus called them after a night in prayer to God (Luke 6:12-16) suggests that this was a formal and formative moment in the establishment of an alternative covenant community, an observation reinforced by the fact that they numbered twelve (like the twelve tribes of Israel). However, these facts also suggest a deliberate repudiation of the religious establishment centered in Jerusalem as the foundation for the kingdom of heaven that he was establishing.

Matthew had introduced the sermon by noting that Jesus' disciples came to him after he sat down on the mountain

and that his teaching was directed to them (Matt. 5:1-2), though until this point he had named only four, all of whom were blue-collar fishermen (4:18-22). Luke provides a more complete picture. After Jesus had prayed all night on the mountain, he called twelve disciples, whom Luke names. Then Jesus “descended with them” (Luke 6:12-17). Furthermore, with the crowds all around Jesus, Luke observes that his true audience consisted of his newly minted disciples: “Looking up at his disciples, he said, ‘How privileged you are who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’” (6:20). The second person of direct address throughout both the Matthean and Lukan versions of the address(es) treats this band of uneducated Galilean commoners as the pillars on which he would establish this “kingdom of God” (cf. Matt. 19:28-30; Luke 22:28-30). This was indeed a new order, where the learned scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem would have no part and would be completely marginalized.

The Israelite Covenant in Jesus’ Ongoing Conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees

Jesus’ conflict with the scribes and Pharisees represents a major theme in his redefinition of covenant righteousness as maintained by these religious leaders. We have time and space here to comment on only two issues that symbolized the redefinition: Jesus’ disposition toward the seventh-day Sabbath and, very briefly, his disposition toward Pharisaic regulations concerning ritual purification.

Jesus and the Sabbath, the Sign of the Covenant

Jesus seems to have gone out of his way to provoke the scribes by violating the strictures that the Pharisees had imposed on the people’s Sabbath activities. The tensions

are evident in all the Gospels.¹² Exodus 31:12–18, which underlies the conflicts, is the last of YHWH's seven addresses (in chaps. 25–31) to Moses on the mountain after he and the Israelites had ratified the Israelite covenant. Like the creation week (Gen. 1:1–2:4a), these seven speeches¹³ follow a 6 + 1 model, with the first six addresses providing instructions for human effort in setting up Israel's religious system, and the seventh calling on the Israelites to imitate God by ceasing from their work on the seventh day to rest.

Although many consider Israel's seventh-day Sabbath to be part of the people's cultic regulations, this misses the point of the observance. If we search the Torah for data on cultic practices that the Israelites observed on the Sabbath, we come up empty. The Sabbath was a domestic observance, calling workers in from the field before sundown (when the Sabbath began) and inviting them to stop their workaday efforts (*šābat* means "to cease/stop"). All were to celebrate the blessing of God on their work, to demonstrate their essentially theological perspective on life by emulating God's creative work, and to ensure the well-being of all who worked in the family unit, including draft animals, by offering them a day of rest. On the one hand, the Sabbath was a gift to be received with joy and faith, confident that YHWH would provide for all their needs through their six-day efforts (Exod. 31:14–15). On the other hand, it was YHWH's sign of the irrevocability and eternality of his covenant with Israel (vv. 13, 16–17). To violate the Sabbath as a day of rest was to repudiate the covenant.

Because the written Torah does not include detailed instructions for observing the Sabbath, it was perhaps inevitable that well-meaning religious leaders would try to assist commoners by "fencing the Sabbath"—that is, specifying with increasing detail the types of activity that might constitute lawful and unlawful work. In the Mishnah, Shabbat 7:2 specifies thirty-nine prohibited activities, including sowing, reaping, spinning, weaving, slaughtering,

writing two or more letters (of the alphabet), or transporting an object from one domain (private) to another (public) domain. In addition to specifying the categories of permissible and impermissible activities, the rabbis expanded their control over the people with detailed limitations on these basic activities, as illustrated in the following:

The measure that determines liability for carrying out a bone is equivalent to that which is used to make a spoon. Rabbi Yehuda says: In a measure equivalent to that which is used to make from it a key. The measure that determines liability for carrying out glass is equivalent to that which is used to scrape and smooth the top of a bobbin, a sharpened stick used by weavers. The measure that determines liability for carrying out a pebble or a stone is equivalent to that which is used to throw at a bird to chase it away. Rabbi Elazar bar Ya'akov says: Equivalent to that which is used to throw at an animal, which is larger. (m. Shabb. 8:6).

On the other hand, the tractate encourages the following activities: spending Sabbath with one's immediate family; attending the temple for prayers; visiting family and friends (within a specified walking distance); hosting guests (hospitality); singing special songs for the Sabbath; reading, studying, and discussing Torah, commentary, the Mishnah, and the Talmud; and learning some halakah and midrash.

By the time Jesus entered the Jewish world, the spirit of the Sabbath as a gift had been lost, and preoccupation with correct observance of regulations invented by the Pharisees had drowned out the liberating freedom that YHWH had originally intended with this institution. As Jesus would demonstrate, the eternal sign of covenantal joy had been transformed into a symbol of bondage.

Jesus made no effort to evade the scribes and Pharisees in their interpretation of the seventh-day Sabbath ordinance. According to the sequence recorded in Matthew, Jesus ended a lengthy address with an invitation to those who were crowding around him: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon

you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (11:28–30 ESV).

Given what follows, Jesus invited people to abandon the burdensome regulations established by the Pharisees and accept his disposition toward the covenant as the way of freedom rather than bondage. In Jewish rabbinic tradition, the yoke of slavery in Egypt had been replaced by the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. Reciting or reading the first part of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–5), which they interpreted as a declaration of the unity of God (“Hear O Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH is one”), meant accepting the yoke upon oneself daily, and reciting or reading the second part (“You shall love YHWH with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your resources”) meant accepting the yoke of the commandments. Representing the Pharisees’ understanding of the principle, Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah said, “Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah, they remove from him the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly concerns, and whoever breaks off the yoke of the Torah, they place on him the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly concerns” (Pirke Avot 3.5; trans. in Rabinowitz, “Yoke,” 381).

The rabbi’s statement may be fine if the Torah is limited to the written Torah of Moses, but with their own Oral Torah, the religious leaders had imposed a heavy yoke of their own making on the people. In Matthew 11:28–30 Jesus invites people to take up his yoke, which is comfortable (*chrēstos*) and light (*elaphros*), and offers true Sabbath rest (*anapausis*) for their souls. And this is what we should expect, since the one who places the yoke on his people is “gentle” (*praus*) and “modest” (*tapeinos*), rather than harsh and overbearing. Jesus’ choice of *anapausis* for “rest” is intentional; this word is frequently associated with the Sabbath rest in Israel’s covenant texts.¹⁴

The sequel reinforces this interpretation, suggesting that in Jesus' mind the religious leaders' circumscription of people's activities on the Sabbath symbolized what was wrong with their entire system. If we remove the chapter division (which was not in the original Gospel) and note the timing of the episodes that followed—"at that time" (*en ekeinō tō kairō*; Matt. 12:1-14)—Jesus appears to have deliberately timed many of his actions to take place on the Sabbath to strike at the core of the Pharisaic system. In this instance, after his overture of rest to all who would hear him, the path on which he and his disciples were traveling led them through a farmer's field. Famished after a long day together, the disciples picked some heads of grain and ate the kernels. According to the Torah, this was both ethical and legal: "When you enter your neighbor's field of standing grain, feel free to pluck heads of grain with your hand, but you may not put a sickle to your neighbor's grain" (Deut. 23:25 [26]).

As pastoral spokesman for the divine Landlord, Moses' instructions were realistic, generous, and responsible at the same time. Except for those whose allotments abutted the boundaries of their town or village, men and women going out to work their fields or to visit friends or relatives in a neighboring village would often need to pass through other people's fields of grain, groves of olives and fruit, and vineyards. Because the land was entrusted to the nation, landowners must allow casual travelers to pass through the land and let them pick as many grapes (Deut. 23:24 [25]) and rub as much grain out of its heads in their hands as they desire to eat on the spot. However, because specific plots of land had been allotted to individual families, travelers must respect the rights of the owners of those properties. Even though this short paragraph makes no reference to God, it presupposes divine values: the people of YHWH are to base their ethics on love and trust.

The Pharisees raised no objection to Jesus' disciples plucking and eating the grain (Matt. 12:1; Mark 2:23), though Luke 6:1 adds, "rubbing the heads with their hands," which is necessary to separate kernels of grain from the chaff covering them. The problem was the timing; their actions had violated the Sabbath ordinance. But the recorded rabbinic tradition is minimalist on this matter. According to the Babylonian Talmud,

One may pick them [heads of grain] with his hand and eat, as long as he does not pick them with a vessel. And one may crush and remove the seeds with his hand and eat them, as long as he does not crush a lot with a vessel; this is the statement of Rabbi Yehuda. And the Rabbis say: One may crush them only with the ends of his fingers, in an atypical manner, as long as he does not crush a lot with his hand in the manner that he does during the week. (Shabb. 128a)

Because of the vagueness of the Pharisees' charge, "Your disciples carry out unlawful actions on the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:2), we may speculate that the disciples had either used utensils to aid in their plucking or crushing the heads of grain or that the amount they had crushed exceeded what the Pharisees deemed allowable. Presumably in the Pharisees' minds, the disciples had violated one or all the following Sabbath prohibitions as represented in Mishnah Shabbat 7:2: reaping, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting. But this accusation raises questions concerning their motivation for and the duration of their following the disciples so that they were able to make these assessments. Or had they simply made "an executive decision" in declaring the disciples' actions unconstitutional?

Jesus' response involved four elements. The first had nothing to do with the Sabbath, but it involved hunger and the suspension of a sacred institution to feed a famished man (David, Matt. 12:3-4). The second involved the Sabbath and the suspension of restrictions on priestly actions to ensure that the sanctuary rituals continued on the Sabbath

(vv. 5–6). The third involved the prioritizing of laws: laws affecting the well-being of people take precedence over liturgical and ritual observances (v. 7). As he had done earlier, in 9:13, he cited Hosea 6:6 as the prophetic declaration of principle: “I desire mercy [Gk. *eleos* = Hb. *ḥesed*] and not sacrifice [Gk. *thysia* = Hb. *zābah*].” Fourth, he declared to them his own status vis-à-vis the rituals of the sanctuary and the Sabbath.

Jesus made the last point with an oblique declaration of the presence here of something (or someone) that/who was greater (*meizon*) than the temple (Matt. 12:6) and a forthright declaration that the Son of Man was the Lord of the Sabbath (v. 8). With respect to the former, he left it to the Pharisees to solve the riddle. With respect to the latter, rather than explicitly claiming the title “Lord of the Sabbath,” he spoke in third person of “the Son of Man.” Some probably identified this as a messianic title (cf. Dan. 7:13), but as Peter would demonstrate in Matthew 16:13–20, to identify Jesus as “the Son of Man” required supernatural insight, which the Pharisees obviously lacked. But Jesus’ point here is profound; far from dispensing with the seventh-day Sabbath as a covenantal ordinance, and far from granting the Pharisees the final say on how the Sabbath was to be observed, he identified with YHWH, who had instituted the ordinance in the first place. The Pharisees failed to grasp that YHWH, who is greater than the temple and who was the originator of the Sabbath, stood before them.

To Jesus’ four responses in Matthew, the Markan version adds a fifth: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). While the Exodus version of the Sabbath command in the Decalogue interprets its significance in profoundly theological and theocentric terms (Exod. 20:8–11), in Deuteronomy 5:12–15, Moses, apparently influenced by Exodus 23:12, cast the ordinance in essentially humanitarian terms: the Sabbath is a gift for all engaged in everyday efforts to make a living, even draft

animals. However, the Pharisees had robbed the essential sign of the covenant of its life-giving function and transformed it into a burdensome load too heavy to bear.

But Jesus was not through with his challenges to the Pharisees' control of the Sabbath. We may assume that in Matthew 12:9–12 the Pharisees of 12:2 are still the subject (though Luke 6:6 suggests “another Sabbath,” *en heterō sabbatō*). When Jesus entered the synagogue and as he was teaching (Luke 6:6), presumably as a follow-up to the preceding episode in the field, the presence of a man with a withered hand provoked the Pharisees to question whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Because they expected a positive answer, the question was a trap (Matt. 12:10), and Jesus did not disappoint. In contrast to the intricate rabbinic discussion of what sorts of healing actions were lawful on the Sabbath in the Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 108, Jesus responded with a rhetorical question of his own: “If a sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will its owner not rescue it?” Apparently Jesus did not wait for an answer but assumed a positive reply on the rabbinic principle of *qal wahomer* (arguing from the lesser to the greater). This opened the door to highlight the superior significance of a human being in the eyes of God and therefore to declare that in principle one may (always) act in the interest of human well-being on the Sabbath. Having declared the principle, Jesus immediately applied it, commanding the man to stretch out his hand, and it was healed.

This was precisely the evidence the Pharisees wanted, and from that point on, they conspired to destroy him (*apollymi*). Meanwhile, Jesus continued “doing good” on the Sabbath by healing all who came to him (Matt. 12:15).

Jesus and the Purification Rituals in the Tradition of the Elders

Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees' disputes over the essence of fidelity to the covenant did not end with the Sabbath. Responding to their criticism of his disciples for not adhering to "the tradition of the elders" with respect to purification rituals, he scolded them for transgressing "the command of God" and invalidating "the word of God" for the sake of their own tradition (Matt. 15:1-3, 6; cf. the more explicit version in Mark 7:1-5). With support from Isaiah 29:13, he exposed their blatant hypocrisy: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain they worship me, teaching man-made commands as [established] doctrines [*didaskalias*]" (Matt. 15:8-9; Mark 7:6-13). His added comment, that it is not what enters the mouth that defiles a person but what comes from the mouth, must have shocked them. Here he was not speaking of spittle or regurgitated food, but the teachings of the religious leaders. Posing as those who hold the keys to divine favor with their Oral Torah, they ignited God's fury toward themselves and their followers, so that in the end, rather than being firmly planted, they are uprooted and destroyed (Matt. 15:10-14).

Jesus' Exclusion of the Scribes and Pharisees from the Covenant

The tensions reached their climax as Jesus' passion approached. Earlier he had cast his pronouncements of judgment on the religious leaders obliquely (Matt. 7:15-22; 15:13-14), but as he neared the passion week, his denunciations became more pointed. In Matthew 23 (cf. Mark 12:38-39; Luke 20:45-46) he spoke with the voice and tone of YHWH himself, pronouncing woes upon them that First Testament prophets reserved for foreign enemies of Israel and especially exploitative leaders of their own people.¹⁵ Earlier Jesus had offered a comfortable and light yoke in comparison with the burdensome Sabbath yoke that

the Pharisees had imposed on the people (Matt. 11:28–12:14); now he described the yoke as “tie[ing] up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay[ing] them on the shoulders of others, while they themselves refuse to lift a finger to move them” (23:4). They claimed authority equal to that of Moses by sitting on his seat, and they demanded places and titles of honor, while they treated the people like donkeys (vv. 1–12). Their style of leadership and disposition toward commoners was not only the polar opposite of the style of Moses, “the humblest human on earth” (Num. 12:3), but also flew in the face of the Mosaic paradigm of kingship. In Deuteronomy 17:14–20 Moses had declared that the monarch’s primary responsibility was to embody covenant righteousness as called for in the Torah, warning particularly against his heart rising above that of his compatriots.

In Matthew 23:13–31 Jesus’ seven pronouncements of woe against the religious leaders are laced with damning charges: (1) Rather than opening the door to the kingdom of heaven, they shut the door so that neither they nor those who wanted to enter had access to it (v. 13). (2) They consigned proselytes to Judaism to their own fate in hell with the burdens they imposed on them (v. 15). (3) As reflected in their ludicrous approach to oaths, they depended on the presence of the temple and its furnishings for their security, when they should have been concerned about pleasing God, who is enthroned in heaven (vv. 16–22). (4) They superciliously tithed every conceivable agricultural product but neglected the weightier matters of Torah, which involves practicing justice and mercy and faith (vv. 23–24; cf. Deut. 10:12–11:1). (5) They paid ridiculous attention to the ritual purity of vessels while neglecting their own abusive and corrupt behavior that filled their cup (vv. 25–26). (6) They were preoccupied with appearing righteous to observers when inwardly they were filled with hypocrisy and iniquity (vv. 27–28). And (7) they disdained their ancestors, claiming that had they lived in their ancestors’ day, they

would not have murdered the prophets—but with behavior analogous to that of vipers and serpents, they proved themselves to be of the same ilk and deserving of hell (vv. 29–36).

But what have these woes to do with the Israelite covenant? Plenty. First, in Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders, he highlighted the gulf between their own definition of covenant righteousness and that called for by the Torah of Moses. Elsewhere¹⁶ he had reduced all covenant stipulations to one principle in two parts: (1) love for God—covenant commitment to the LORD (YHWH) that is wholehearted and full bodied and involves all one's resources—demonstrated in action in YHWH's interest and for his glory (Deut. 6:4–5; cf. 10:12–11:1); and (2) love for one's neighbor, having the same covenant commitment to others so that one always operates in their interest rather than in self-interest.

Second, and even more shockingly, in pronouncing woe upon the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus excluded them from the covenant community, also known as the kingdom of heaven. Those who viewed themselves as the gatekeepers to the kingdom were themselves consigned to hell. This does not necessarily mean that there was no hope for the scribes and Pharisees. The examples of Nicodemus¹⁷ and Saul/Paul¹⁸ give eloquent testimony to the grace of God reaching even some religious leaders.

The Israelite Covenant in the Book of Acts

Earlier we noted that *diathēkē* occurs only twice in Acts, and in both instances it refers to the patriarchal stage of the covenant that God made with Israel (Acts 3:25; 7:8). But absence of the vocabulary does not mean absence of interest in the covenant that YHWH established with Israel at Sinai and confirmed with the conquest generation on the plains of Moab. In his final speech, Stephen paid

considerable attention to Israel's experiences at Sinai (Acts 7:30-44), but he was more concerned about the person of Moses, the mediator of the covenant, and the people's responses to him than in the covenant per se. We hear a hint of the covenant stipulations in his reference to Moses receiving living oracles to pass on to the people (v. 38) and in the instructions for the construction of the "tabernacle of the covenant documents" (Gk. *skēnē tou martyriou*, v. 44).¹⁹ This alludes to the stone "tablets of the Guarantee [of the covenant]"²⁰ that were stored in the "ark of the Guarantee [of the covenant]"²¹ inside "the veil of the Guarantee [of the covenant]" (*pārōket hā'ēdūt*, Lev. 24:3). In these contexts, the two tablets of the Decalogue functioned analogously to the [royal] insignia (*hā'ēdūt*) in 2 Kings 11:4, 10-12—that is, as concrete symbols of YHWH's sworn covenantal commitment to Israel and of Israel's sworn acceptance of all the privileges and responsibilities associated with their status as his vassals (Exod. 24:1-11; see the full discussion in chap. 5, under "Stage 7: The Suzerain's Provision of the Foundational Covenant Document [Exod. 24:12-31:18]"). Although this interpretation differs from that of most English translations of Acts 7:44, it suggests a fundamental if indirect link to the covenant that YHWH established with Israel at Sinai.

Acts 2 provides more obvious links to Sinai. First, the event described occurred on the day of Pentecost, which in the Jewish festival calendar was commemorated fifty days after Passover and in Jewish tradition involved the celebration of the covenant that YHWH established at Sinai with the descendants of Abraham after he had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Second, the Pentecostal event in Jerusalem involved the sound of rushing wind from heaven filling the place where Jesus' followers were gathered and the appearance of flames of fire over the heads of the assembled people. These were physical signs that what was happening in this room was a microcosmic

experience of what the Israelites had witnessed at Sinai.²² Third, and less obviously, the event climaxed in the sound of God's voice, in the first instance proclaiming the Decalogue (Exod. 20; Deut. 5) and in the second his Holy Spirit being poured out upon the people in Jerusalem, with the result that they declared in their native tongues what the Spirit inspired them to say (Acts 2:4–11). Whereas in the earlier encounter the participants involved Abraham's descendants whom YHWH had brought out of Egypt, in Acts 2 they involved Jews from all over the Roman Empire who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the establishment of YHWH's covenant with Israel but who had encountered and put their trust in Jesus, YHWH incarnate (2:14–47).

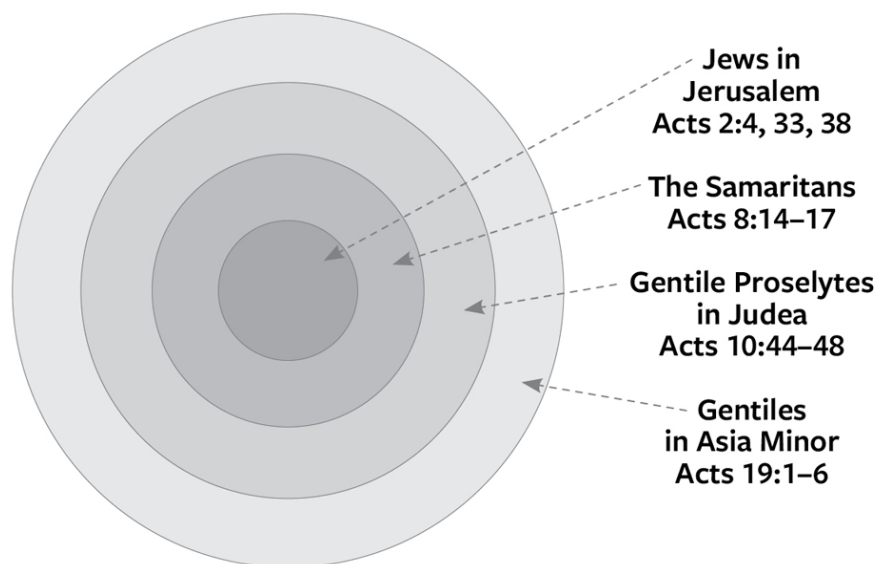
What happened on this first Christian Pentecost was profoundly covenantal in its significance and scope. Responding to cynical observers, Peter offered a full explanation of what had transpired, grounding his comments on Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit of YHWH in Joel 2:28–32 [3:1–5]. Many interpret the outpouring of the Holy Spirit here either as a moment of conversion for those gathered or a glossolalic moment, as in 1 Corinthians 12–14. However, the people's alien speech in Acts 2:4–11 required no interpretation, which proves that these were two fundamentally different experiences.

Furthermore, although Peter grounded his interpretation of what happened in Joel 2 [3], he could have cited three other texts that used the "liquid metaphor" to describe the activity of the Holy Spirit. The verbs vary, but we find evidence for the same conceptual framework in Isaiah 32:15; 44:1–5; and Ezekiel 39:29. The notion of "pouring" the Spirit is rooted in the perception of the *rûah* as a sort of divine fluid that covers the object. In each of the four occurrences of the concept in the First Testament, the outpouring of YHWH's Spirit occurs in the eschatological but parochial context of the renewal of YHWH's covenant with Israel after their judgment and signifies the ratification and

sealing of the covenant relationship with his people. This “outpouring” was the definitive act by which YHWH would claim and seal the newly gathered nation as his own covenant people in the “covenant of peace” (*běřît šālôm*)—that is, the “eternal covenant” (*běřît ‘ôlām*) that guarantees new life, well-being, and security for Israel.

Figure 15.1

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts



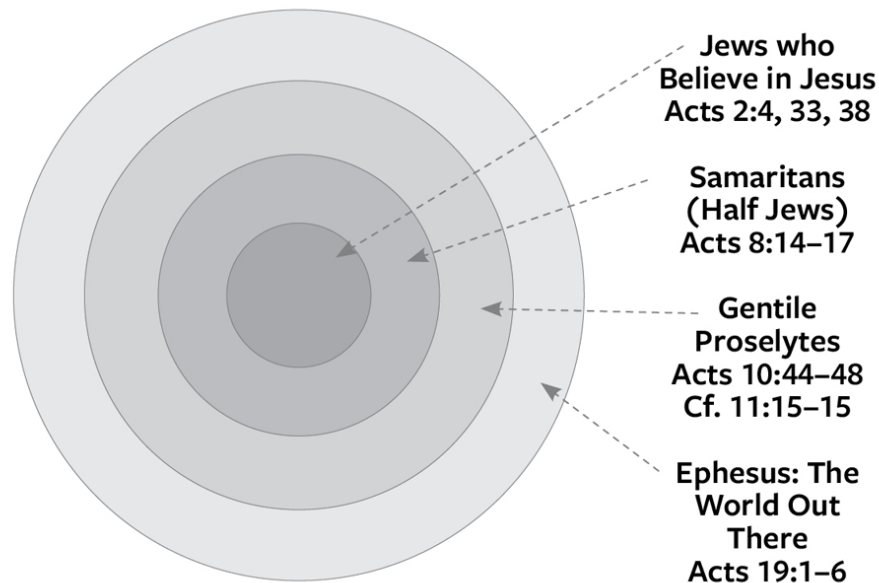
With this background we may now grasp the significance of the Christian Pentecost moment, especially when we observe that the recipients of God’s Spirit were Jews from all over the world who believed in Jesus. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people gathered in Jerusalem, YHWH, the God of Israel, had claimed and sealed these people as his covenant community. In the wake of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, from this point on, true membership was impossible apart from faith in Christ.

This would become a sore spot in Judaism, but the story of the redefinition of the covenant community did not end here. In what amounts to a summary outline of the advance

of the gospel in Acts, we find the covenant community expanding through three additional stages (fig. 15.1). Although citations of Joel and explicit use of the liquid metaphor are missing, the phenomena of Pentecost recurred three more times as the boundaries of the covenant community expanded (fig. 15.2). In Acts 8:14–17, Peter and John arrived in Samaria in response to the Samaritans receiving “the word of God” concerning “the kingdom of God” and “the name of Jesus” through Philip’s preaching. When the Samaritans were baptized, they received the Holy Spirit. The ethnic and spiritual identity of the Samaritans is significant here. They were descendants of the remnant of Israelites that the Assyrians had not deported in 722 BC and the foreigners whom they had brought in to revitalize the economy. Spiritually, they were half Israelite; they had their own version of the Torah of Moses, but their canon lacked “the Prophets” and “the Psalms.” This meant that they were monotheistic devotees of YHWH, but they did not have the full revelation that the Jews treasured. After Acts 8, believers in Jesus in this community were fully integrated into the covenant without becoming Jews first.

Figure 15.2

**The Expansion of the Boundaries of the Covenant
Community in Acts**



Acts 10:44–48 describes a “Pentecostal” moment in Cornelius’ house in Caesarea Maritima. Cornelius was “a devout God-fearer” (*eusebēs kai phoboumenos*, 10:1–2), but he was a Roman centurion. When he and his household believed in Jesus in the wake of Peter’s instruction, the Holy Spirit fell on them. When the circumcised (i.e., Jewish) believers realized that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on gentiles and they heard them speaking in tongues and exalting God, they were amazed. All agreed that these gentiles should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Luke recounts the fourth stage in the expansion of the covenant community in Acts 19:1–6. However, this time the outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred far from the land of Israel, in Ephesus in Asia Minor. Encountering some disciples of Apollos who had been baptized into John’s baptism, Paul introduced them to Jesus, and he baptized them in his name. After Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Now the covenant community was fully circumscribed: it involved Jews, Samaritans (half Jews within the land of Israel), former gentile God-fearers within the land, and now faraway gentiles. The declared common

denominator among these groups of peoples was not adherence to the Torah—whether the Torah of Moses or the Oral Torah of the rabbis—but faith in Jesus Christ. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit meant that all who believed in Jesus were fully integrated into the covenant community. While their experience surely involved the regenerating work and the indwelling of the Spirit, the receipt of the Spirit poured out on people in these texts signified the divine imprimatur of the recipients as the covenant people of YHWH.

Remarkably, this progression was not spearheaded by gentiles clamoring for access to the privilege of membership in the covenant community (cf. Deut. 4:5–8), but by the apostles, all of whom were Jews. After the initial phase, which involved Jews exclusively who believed in Jesus, the expansion of the boundaries was not easily accepted even by the apostles. As Peter would learn from his shocking divine vision in Acts 10:1–23, and as Paul would learn apparently through his three-year stay in Arabia (Gal. 1:15–18), these developments called for a fundamental paradigm shift, away from the ethnocentric and cultural understanding of covenant membership as defined by the rabbis in Judaism and to a transnational definition based on belief in the saving work of Christ.

- [1.](#) John 12:12–13; cf. Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9; Luke 19:38.
- [2.](#) Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.
- [3.](#) Deut. 33:29; Pss. 33:12; 34:8 [9]; 40:4 [5]; etc.
- [4.](#) Pss. 1:1; 94:12; 119:1–2; Prov. 29:18.
- [5.](#) Pss. 112:1; 128:2; Prov. 8:32.
- [6.](#) Ezra 7:6, 11, 12, 21; Neh. 8:1, 4, 9, 18; etc.
- [7.](#) Matt. 11:9; 14:5; 16:14; 21:11, 26, 46; Mark 6:15; 8:28; 11:32; Luke 1:76; 7:16, 26, 39; 20:6; 24:19; John 1:21, 25; 4:19; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17.
- [8.](#) Matt. 13:15; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; John 4:44.
- [9.](#) John 7:52; cf. also Matt. 10:41; Luke 13:33.
- [10.](#) Deut. 3:24; 9:26; Judg. 6:22; 16:28; 1 Kings 8:53; Pss. 69:6 [MT 69:7; LXX 68:7]; 109 [LXX 108]:21; 130 [LXX 129]:3; 140:7 [MT 140:8; LXX 139:8]; 141

[LXX 140]:8; Amos 7:2, 5.

[11.](#) Deut. 3:24; 2 Sam. 7:19, 20, 28, 29.

[12.](#) Matt. 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6; Luke 6:1-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18.

[13.](#) Exod. 25:1-30:10; 30:11-16, 17-21, 22-33, 34-38; 31:1-11, 12-17.

[14.](#) Exod. 16:23; 23:12; 31:15; 35:2; Lev. 23:3. Lev. 25:4-8 extends the rest to the land in the [seventh] Sabbatical year.

[15.](#) Isa. 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22; 10:1, 5; Jer. 13:27; 22:13; 23:1; Ezek. 13:3; 18; 16:23; 24:6, 9; Amos 5:18; 6:1, 4; Mic. 2:1; Hab. 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19.

[16.](#) Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37.

[17.](#) John 3:1-16; 7:50-52; 19:38-42.

[18.](#) Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5-6.

[19.](#) The Greek expression *skēnē tou martyriou* represents Hebrew *miškan hā'ēdūt* in LXX (Exod. 38:21; Num. 1:50, 53; 10:11) or *'ōhel hā'ēdūt* (Num. 9:15; 17:7, 8; 18:2), which meant “dwelling/tent of the Guarantee/icon [of the covenant].”

[20.](#) *lūhôt hā'ēdūt*, Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29.

[21.](#) *'ārôn hā'ēdūt*, Exod. 25:22; 26:33; etc.

[22.](#) Exod. 19:16-20:1; Deut. 4:11-14, 32-36; 5:23-24; 18:16.

CHAPTER 16

Stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite Covenant in the Epistles

Explicit References to Stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite Covenant

In part 2 of this volume we traced the development of the Israelite covenant through four stages: (1) YHWH's initiation of the covenant with Abraham (chaps. 3-4), (2) his establishment of that same covenant with Abraham's descendants at Mount Sinai (chaps. 5-6), (3) his ratification and renewal of that covenant with the next generation on the plains of Moab (chaps. 7-8), and (4) the ultimate realization of the promises of that covenant in the new (renewed) Israelite covenant (chap. 9). Explicit references to the second and third stages of the Israelite covenant are altogether absent in the Gospels and Acts. They appear for the first time in Romans 9:3, where Paul expresses his passion for his fellow Israelites, whom he addresses as "my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh," and for whom he reviews their divinely granted privileges. Paul used the plural "covenants" in verse 4 along with references to "the adoption, the glory, . . . the giving of the Torah, [and] the service [vassaldom]" (concepts associated with the establishment of the Israelite covenant at Sinai) all in the same breath as "the promises" (*hai epangeliai*) and the following specific reference to the patriarchs. All this

suggests a blurring of the boundaries between the patriarchal, Sinaitic, and Deuteronomic stages in the revelation of the Israelite covenant.

Most translations render *hē latreia* in Romans 9:4 as “temple service” or “worship,” but the present association with the other concepts in this list suggests that behind this word is Hebrew *‘ăbōdâ*, “service,” not in a cultic sense but as privileged vassaldom to YHWH after the oppressive slavery to Pharaoh.¹ The exodus narrative repeatedly used the verb *‘ābad*, “to serve,” to characterize what the Israelites would do after a three days’ journey into the desert.² Moses’ occasional substitution of this word with *zābaḥ*, “to sacrifice,”³ in his demands to Pharaoh to release the Israelites invited them to expect that the excursion into the desert would involve sacrificial rituals—which it did. However, the preference for *‘ābad* in these contexts indicates that these sacrifices were a subset of actions through which the Israelites became “the servant of YHWH.”⁴ By YHWH’s acts of claiming the descendants of Abraham as his firstborn (Exod. 4:22–23; etc.), rescuing them from the oppressive bondage to Pharaoh, and having them pass through the Reed Sea, the new nation was “born.” By means of the covenant rituals at Sinai, the Israelites were formally adopted as YHWH’s sons, a metaphor for their newfound status as the privileged vassals of YHWH (cf. Deut. 14:1).

We encounter a second explicit reference to the Israelite covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:14–15, where Paul’s laments the obtuseness of “the sons of Israel” (*tous huiouōs Israēl*, v. 13) in their reading of the “old covenant” because they do not recognize its fulfillment in Christ. What Paul meant by “the old covenant” (*tēs palaias diathēkēs*) in verse 14 he answered in part in verse 15 by substituting the name “Moses” for “old covenant.” To read the “old covenant” is to read “Moses.” Although by itself “old covenant” could refer to the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant, we have

no record of a document associated with the patriarchal stage that the Israelites could have read, and more importantly, the link with Moses establishes these readings as some version of the covenant established at Sinai. However, we probably need to choose from several candidates for this document: the Decalogue (presumably Exod. 20:2–17), Israel’s first “Scripture”; the Covenant Document (*sēper habbērît*) containing the “stipulations” (*mišpāṭîm*, 21:1–23:19; cf. 24:3–7); the Instructions on Holiness (Lev. 17–26); or the Torah of Moses promulgated on the plains of Moab, transcribed by him, presented to the Levitical priests as guardians of the covenant, and eventually combined and edited to produce the book of Deuteronomy. Since Paul was writing to Christians in Corinth more than a millennium after Moses and long after the Pentateuch had been produced, “old covenant” and “Moses” both probably functioned as metonymy for the Torah of Moses preserved in Deuteronomy, which is a fundamentally “covenant document” from beginning to end. In any case these expressions refer to some document that represents the second or third stage of the Israelite covenant’s development.

But the issue is even more complicated than that. Because in New Testament times Jews considered Moses to be the author of the entire Pentateuch, the record of the Abrahamic stage of the covenant could also be included in the document called “Moses.” In Acts 7:8 Stephen identifies the covenant with Abraham as “the covenant of circumcision” (*diathēkē peritomēs*), but in Acts 15:1 Jewish believers in Jesus refer to circumcision as a “custom of Moses” (*tō ethei tō Mōuseōs*) and insist that gentile believers must submit to the rite as a necessary part of observing the Torah of Moses (*tērein ton nomon Mōuseōs*, v. 5). But this is odd, because Moses neither observed the practice in his own family (Exod. 4:24–26) nor enforced its observance in the community that he pastored (Num. 27:17;

cf. Josh. 5:2–9). Indeed, in the Torah (whether that means Deuteronomy or the Pentateuch) Moses never spoke about physical circumcision. If anything, in Acts 15 the Jews should have characterized the practice as “according to the custom of Abraham” (cf. Gen. 17).

It is possible that “the old covenant” and “Moses” that Jews were reading in the synagogues served as comprehensive epithets for the entire Pentateuch. If that is the case, we have further evidence for the conflation of the covenant made with Abraham and established with the Israelites at Sinai as a single covenant. By identifying and interchanging references to what they are reading as “the old covenant” and “Moses,” Paul suggests that the people’s problem is not the text of the Torah/Deuteronomy but the covenant itself and their legendary prophetic forerunner (Moses). According to 2 Corinthians 3:14–18, if they would turn (*epistrephō*) to “the Lord” (*kyrios*, i.e., YHWH) as Josiah had (LXX 2 Kings 23:25, *epistrephō*)—that is, commit themselves to the Lord rather than to their Torah scroll—the Spirit would remove the veil that covers their minds (*noēma*, 2 Cor. 3:14) and hearts (*kardia*, v. 15). I shall have more to say about this issue later.

In Galatians 4:24–27 Paul introduces a metaphor (Gk. *allēgoreō*) involving Hagar and Sarah to explain the problem with the Judaizers’ disposition toward the gospel. Although Paul does not identify Sarah by name, she represents the heavenly Jerusalem; the allusion to the barren woman who bears many children (v. 27) and the citation of Genesis 21:10 (Gal. 4:30) point to her. In Paul’s mind the Judaizers have caricatured Israel’s history. For them, that history starts at Sinai, where the law was given. But this metaphor exposes their problem; they have put the cart before the horse. If Israel’s history began at Sinai rather than in YHWH’s great acts of redemption from Egypt, the Torah would indeed have bound Israel, for they would have lacked both the freedom and the motivation to keep the

commands. But the first words the people heard from God's mouth at Sinai were "I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the slave house" (Exod. 20:2). Israel's history did not begin at Sinai, nor did it begin with law; it began with gospel. A law that requires people to earn the saving favor of God inevitably becomes a noose about their necks (birth into slavery), but a person born supernaturally by the Spirit is born into freedom.

Explicit references to the Sinai stage of the Israelite covenant occur in two contexts in Hebrews: 8:9 and 9:3-4. The former is embedded in a lengthy citation of Jeremiah's prediction of the new Israelite covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. By timing the antecedent covenant as "when I took them out of the land of Egypt," the author obviously had in mind the covenant established at Sinai. However, because Israel had not persevered in YHWH's covenant, he had abandoned them precisely as predicted in Deuteronomy 31:16-18. "For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them" in Hebrews 8:9 serves as commentary on "my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband" in Jeremiah 31:32. The inserted signatory formula, "the declaration of YHWH" / "says the LORD," immediately thereafter in both contexts confirms this observation.

The references to "the ark of the covenant" and "the tablets of the covenant" in Hebrews 9:3-4 also allude to the second stage of this covenant, because these objects played no role in Israel's story after Moses had deposited them in the ark at Horeb/Sinai (1 Kings 8:9 // 2 Chron. 5:10). Hebrews 9:1-5 explicitly ties the ark to the "first [covenant]" (*prōtē* [*diathēkē*], 8:7; 9:1, 15, 18) and presents it as a unique and essential element only of God's earthly sanctuary. However, John's observation of the ark in the heavenly temple in Revelation 11:19a suggests that the ark in the tabernacle was a replica of the heavenly counterpart.

These texts exhaust explicit New Testament references to the second and third stages of the Israelite covenant. However, as always, we need to beware of the lexical fallacy that treats the absence of technical vocabulary as evidence for the absence of the notion represented by that vocabulary. Awareness of the covenant that YHWH made with Israel at Sinai and renewed on the plains of Moab permeates the entire New Testament.

References to Stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite Covenant in Paul

Earlier in this chapter I discussed briefly two Pauline texts where the word “covenant” occurs. But Paul’s conversations about stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite covenant are not restricted to these passages. In the epistles to the Galatians and the Romans, the covenant is at the heart of his theological presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ as Paul expounds on the covenantal implications of the incarnation, ministry, passion, and glorification of Jesus Christ for the Judaisms of the Second Temple period. We could begin this discussion naturally with Romans 9–11, where with great passion Paul expressed desire for the salvation of all Israel (9:1), whom he identified as “My brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, [who are] Israelites; . . . to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the gift of the Torah, the liturgical expression of vassaldom [to YHWH],⁵ and the promises, as well as the patriarchs, from whose physical descendants came the Messiah, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen!” (Rom. 9:3–5).

Paul desired the salvation of a people who deemed itself “saved,” if not by definition, then by virtue of all its divinely granted privileges, and who celebrated its salvation annually in the Passover ritual (Exod. 12:25–26; 13:5). This suggests that in Paul’s mind membership in the covenant community was not what his fellow Jews imagined it to be.

In Romans 9–11 Paul looks forward to the eschatological moment when “all Israel will be saved” (11:26)—that is, the institution of the new/renewed covenant as envisioned in Deuteronomy 30:1–10 and Jeremiah 31:27–40. Therefore I shall defer discussion of Romans 11:26 until the next chapter. I shall focus here on Paul’s debates with “Judaizers” in Galatians and Romans over the means by which people have access to the Israelite covenant and the means whereby they could maintain their good standing with God within that covenant relationship.

To understand the Paul we encounter in the book of Acts and in these epistles, we must recall his roots in the very Judaism that he combated here. In our review of Jesus’ conflicts with the scribes and Pharisees, we noted on several occasions that this world of Judaism represented Paul’s spiritual heritage. He was not native to “the land of Israel,” but prior to his commission as “apostle to the gentiles,” Saul of Tarsus had been schooled in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a teacher of the law (presumably the written Torah and the Oral Torah) who was highly respected by all the people (Acts 5:34). From Gamaliel, Saul had learned both the strict interpretation (*akribeia*) of the ancestral law (*tou patrōou nomou*) and a zeal for its enforcement (Acts 22:3; cf. 7:58–8:3). However, having been arrested by God on the way to Damascus while in pursuit of violators of the law as defined by the Pharisaic tradition (9:1–22), and in preparation for his commission as “apostle to the gentiles” (Rom. 11:13), Saul/Paul spent three years in Arabia (apparently a cipher for Horeb/Sinai; Gal. 1:17–18). He never explicitly declared the purpose of this retreat away from the apostolic action in Palestine, but it seems that God intended to wean Paul of “the traditions of [his] ancestors” (*tōn patrikōn mou paradoseis*, Gal. 1:14), get him to abandon his own Judaizing agenda, recover the spirit of Moses and the heart of covenant theology, and grasp the cosmic significance of the

new revelation in Christ. It seems that to accomplish these goals, God arranged for this divine appointment at Horeb (cf. Exod. 3:12; 19:1–3) so that Paul might experience personally the truth of Exodus 19:4–6, grasp anew YHWH's missionary vision for Israel, and rediscover the spiritual foundations for his own mission—that is, of bringing people from every tribe and nation into the covenant community. This encounter with YHWH (Jesus?) at Sinai best explains the radical shift in the focus of his zeal, away from his Judaizing agenda and to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for which he would give his life.

Acts portrays Paul in conflict with the religious leaders of the Jews similar to Jesus' experiences (Acts 23). However, in Romans and Galatians his detractors were not Pharisees themselves but Jewish believers in Jesus who insisted that in order for gentile believers in Jesus to have full access to the covenant community, they needed to become Jews. This meant that gentile believers needed to adhere to the Oral Torah, especially the external markers of Judaism: circumcision, kosher dietary laws, purification rituals, observance of the Sabbath according to Pharisaic prescriptions, and participation in Jewish national and religious festivals. By the standards of these Judaizers, the new people of God consisted of Jewish believers in Jesus and gentile believers in Jesus who submitted to Jewish identity markers and thereby ceased to be gentiles.

Paul had grown up in the world of the Pharisees; when he spoke of the enslaving power of their version of Judaism, he understood the problem as an insider. In our earlier discussion of Romans 4, we observed that according to the new Paul, the only precondition to membership in the covenant community was the faith of Abraham, which, in the wake of the Christ event, signified confidence in the grace made available through Jesus Christ. In Galatians 4:21–31 he contrasted the Judaizers' approach with his own by painting an imaginative word picture (*allēgoreō*)

involving the mothers of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. He did not intend for his readers to interpret this word picture as a literary photograph of what happened literally and historically; rather, it was impressionistic literary art, communicating two contrasting dispositions toward a historical event. His rhetorical strategy features sharply contrasting images of the Judaizers' and his own perspectives (table 16.1).

Table 16.1

Two Contrasting Images of Covenant Relationship with God (Gal. 4:21-31)

Feature	The Judaizers' Perspective	Paul's Perspective
Identity of the sons' mothers	Hagar (vv. 24-25)	
Status of the sons' mothers	Female slave (<i>hē paidiskē</i> , vv. 22-23; Hb. <i>hā'āmā</i> , Gen. 21:10, 12)	Free woman (<i>eleutheros</i> , vv. 22-23, 31)
Nature of the sons' conception	Natural/physical (<i>kata sarka</i> , vv. 23, 29)	By divine word of promise (<i>di' epangelias</i> , vv. 23, 28) Spiritual (<i>kata pneuma</i> , v. 29)
Geographic origin	Mount Sinai in Arabia (vv. 24-25)	
Destiny of mothers' sons	Slavery (<i>eis douleian</i> , vv. 24-25)	Freedom (<i>eleuthera</i> , v. 26)
Referent of the symbol	Present earthly Jerusalem (<i>tē nyn Ierusalēm</i> , v. 25)	Jerusalem above (<i>anō Ierusalēm</i> , v. 26)
Identity of the sons		Isaac (v. 28)
Role of sons	Abuser (<i>diōkō</i> , v. 29)	Victim of abuse (v. 29)
Fates of the sons	Cast out (<i>ekballō</i> , v. 30 = Hb. <i>gāraš</i> , Gen. 21:10) Rejected as heirs (<i>mē klēronomēsai</i> , v. 30 = Hb. <i>lō' yīraš</i> , Gen. 21:10)	Heirs (<i>klēronomeō</i> , v. 30)

This text is remarkable in several respects—in addition to its “allegorical” style and function. It opens with two different uses of the word *nomos* in a single sentence: “Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not hear the law?” (Gal. 4:21 CSB). The expression “under law” (*hypo nomon*) is never found in the Greek First Testament or elsewhere in the New Testament, but it occurs eleven times in Paul’s epistles.⁶ In these contexts, it refers to the particular law-based economy—essentially the Oral Torah—constructed by Pharisaic rabbis over the centuries and to which the Judaizers (whom Paul calls “the circumcision party” in Gal. 2:12) adhere. However, when Paul speaks of “hearing the Torah” at the end of 4:21, he is thinking not of the Oral Torah of the rabbis but of the Torah of Moses, either as preserved in Deuteronomy or as a cipher for the Pentateuch, the first and foundational section of the Hebrew canon. The allegory that follows in 4:22–31 suggests the latter, for it is grounded not in the stipulations of the Israelite covenant, and certainly not in the Oral Torah, but in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis.

When we read Romans and Galatians especially, we need always to ask in what sense Paul used the word *nomos* and avoid homogenizing all occurrences to a single meaning. The word occurs thirty-two times in Galatians. In Galatians 3:10, “the book of the Torah” obviously refers to Deuteronomy, since it echoes Deuteronomy 27:26. “The curse of the law” in 3:13 alludes to the curses built into the Israelite covenant, including Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, but in this instance referring specifically to Deuteronomy 21:23. Paul’s reference to “the law” (*nomos*) that came 430 years after Abraham could refer collectively to the covenant stipulations in the Decalogue, the Covenant Document (Exod. 21:1–23:19), the Instructions on Holiness (Lev. 17–26), or all of these. The third stage of the covenant’s development, whether the Deuteronomic Torah more narrowly (Deut. 5–16; 28) or the book of Deuteronomy,

seems unlikely because it is off the chronological mark by forty years (cf. Exod. 12:40–41). Similar questions arise in Galatians 3:19–21, where Paul spoke of the *nomos* as “added” and “given” (by God), presumably as divine passives, and in no way contrary to the promises of God.

In this discussion of *nomos* as “Torah” or “the Torah,” we should note also Galatians 5:14 and 6:2. The former echoes half of Jesus’ distillation of all the stipulations of the covenant to a single and supreme command: “For the whole Torah is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”⁷ In Galatians 6:2, Paul gave this command a new label: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the Torah of Christ.” We should not interpret this as a new law, subverting or superseding the old covenant law, but as a change of label from “the Torah of YHWH” to “the Torah of Christ.”

Stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite Covenant in Galatians

Galatians 3:24 is particularly important for understanding Paul’s view of the role of the Law (in the sense of divinely revealed Torah) in Israel’s experience prior to the coming of Christ: “So then, the Torah was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.” The Torah as *paidagōgos* demands further comment. The word appears elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Corinthians 4:15 but nowhere in the Old Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. In extrabiblical Greek texts, *paidagōgos* referred to a member of the household—usually a slave—charged to watch over a male child until he reached puberty. Although members of the household expected these “pedagogues” to model good manners and virtue before the child, they were not teachers. Rather, they served as guardians, protecting the child from danger and molesters, accompanying them as they walked to and from

school, and carrying their bags. Their roles were theoretically positive, promoting the well-being of the household. However, they could also be rude and heartless, and they often lacked public respect.

Paul derived the word from the Hellenistic cultural environment of the Galatian addressees. But given his Pharisaic training in the Torah under the venerable Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), his Judaizing detractors, and his self-conscious status as a prophet in the tradition of Moses, he appears to have harnessed the word for his own theological agenda. Indeed, his usage seems to be rooted in the Torah itself. First, given the context in which the *paidagōgos* operated, supporting the education of youngsters, it seems natural that Paul should have attached the word to “the Torah” since the word *tôrâ* means “teaching, instruction.” Second, since the narrator of Deuteronomy and Moses himself characterized his role in the book primarily as “teacher,” the written copy that Moses gave to Israel (Deut. 31:9–13) was a gift, granted in anticipation of his departure and to function as a “pedagogue” in his absence. The Torah was not the teacher but the divinely inspired word of the teacher inscribed in a scroll. Although in the short range, Moses appointed Joshua to fulfill his mission and lead the people across the Jordan to claim the promised land (Deut. 31:1–8), for the *longue durée* he provided them with the Torah (Deut. 31:9–13). The official written copy was stored safely in the sanctuary, and the king was commanded to make his own written copy to accompany him like a pedagogue all the days of his life (Deut. 17:19). If the people would hear it read in its entirety at the Festival of Booths (Sukkoth), receive the instruction of the Levites in the communities where they lived, and inscribe the Torah on their hearts, it could serve as YHWH’s designated guardian and accompany them to the farthest corners of the land. The Torah was needed because Israel had just come out of Egypt. Before YHWH’s establishment of his covenant with them, they had

had limited experience with him and therefore very limited awareness of the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate ethical conduct. They also had no awareness of the ritual provisions that made relationship with YHWH possible for the people as a community (cf. Gal. 3:19–21). As I have noted repeatedly above, Moses anticipated that the peoples outside Israel would perceive the nearness of Israel's God and the clarity and righteous quality of their Torah as an unprecedented and unparalleled privilege (Deut. 4:5–8). With the coming of Christ, the Israelites of Jesus' day should have recognized in him the perfect embodiment of covenant righteousness, for he was the divine teacher behind the voice of Moses. By faith the Israelites should have claimed his forgiveness of their own transgressions and the power to live righteously themselves.

Alluding to the reputation of some pedagogues as tyrannical and mean-spirited, Paul's reference to the Torah as pedagogue was a frontal attack on the Judaizers. They and their Pharisaic predecessors in Judaism had robbed this precious gift of its heart and life-giving power and transformed the Torah into an enslaving and stifling institution. The Torah was intended as a gracious gift, defining the will of the divine Suzerain and symbolizing the nearness of God and his invitation for them to flourish under his favor, thus stirring up the envy of the nations (Deut. 4:5–9). Instead, with all the man-made accretions of the Oral Torah, the Torah as *nomos* (law) had become a noose around their necks, dealing death instead of life.

We may link this transformation directly to the break in the chain involved in the Deuteronomic formula for life: At the Festival of Sukkoth the Levites were to “read [the Torah], that they may hear, that they may learn . . . , that they may listen to him, that they may live!” (Deut. 31:9–13; cf. 17:18–20). As in Jesus' response to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23, Paul perceived that the missing element in the Judaizers' demands of gentiles was “the fear of YHWH,”

which for him was a cipher for faith. Moses' pastoral instruction (Torah) in Deuteronomy was sandwiched between the rescue of Israel from Egypt and the deliverance of the promised land into the hands of the Israelites (Deut. 6:23). Through Moses, YHWH had revealed his will to them to promote fear/trust in YHWH for the good of his people and to maintain/sustain life (6:24). He challenged the people to respond to the privilege of relationship with YHWH, so graciously established, with trusting awe, walking in his ways, demonstrating unfailing love to him, and serving him wholeheartedly (Deut. 10:12–13). Instead, the Judaizers' focus on keeping his commands had created a merit-based caricature of the divine ideal. Devotion to their Redeemer (cf. Exod. 19:4–6) was exchanged for devotion to the Torah (i.e., law), which is idolatry. We hear classic expression of the problem from Rabbi Hunah (ca. third century AD). Jeremiah 6:11 raises the question whether the land of Judah had been devastated because Judeans in another time had abandoned the Torah, to which the rabbi responded: "Is it possible that they have kept my Torah? *Would that they would abandon Me but keep my Torah.* For if they had abandoned Me but kept My Torah, then in the course of their study of the Torah, the yeast that is in it would have brought them back to Me" (Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 15.4 [Neusner, *Treasury of Judaism*, 2:77], emphasis added).

We find evidence for this elevation of the Torah in contemporary Jewish rituals. According to Jeffrey Tigay,

The Torah is carried in procession when it is taken out of the Ark to be read and when it is returned there after the reading. Like a king, an Ashkenazi Torah is dressed up in a mantle, belt, and crown, and even has a hand (the Torah pointer). The Torah is housed in an Ark which, in traditional Jewish sources, is called the *heikhal*, the "palace," and we pray facing this Ark. Ashkenazi . . . Torahs . . . indicate what the Biblical Ark indicates: access to God is not gained by means of idols but through the Torah and its commandments. In other words: the Torah and its commandments are more than a book and a series of rules and customs, they are a way of establishing a relationship with God and coming to know Him. (Tigay, "Parashat Terumah"; cf. Tigay, "Torah Scroll")

Tigay's description of the treatment of the Torah Scroll recalls our earlier consideration of the Decalogue tablets as an icon of the covenant. But far from being treated as an object of veneration, they were stored in the ark of the covenant inside the holy of holies, never to be seen by human eyes.

It is true that through reading the Torah, people may encounter YHWH, but according to Israel's experience and the paradigm set by the Torah, relationship with YHWH was the precursor to knowledge of the law and therefore the precursor to obedience. As early as the Decalogue we learn that obedience was to be the response to grace, not the precondition to it—in which case it would not be grace at all, but merited favor.

In contrast to the positive disposition toward *nomos* as (the) Torah—that is, the divinely revealed and inspired exposition of privileges and responsibilities entailed in the Israelite covenant—Paul's use of the word is quite negative in most of the other occurrences of the word in Galatians. For the sake of his argument, *nomos* referred either to the entire system of laws incorporating the Torah plus the Pharisaic interpretations of the laws or to the external identity markers that set off people as belonging to the covenant, whether within Judaism or within the community of believers in Jesus, who were targets of the Judaizers' zeal. The Judaizers' perspective was prefaced with the notion that "righteousness" is based on merit and that membership in the covenant community is contingent on prior fulfillment of the legal requirements of the law.

This is what the apostle had in mind when he spoke of "the works of the law" (*ergōn nomou*; 2:16 [3×]; 3:2, 5, 10) and being "under the law" (*hypo nomon*, 3:23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:18) or attaining righteousness "through the law" (*dia nomou*, 2:19, 21), "by the law" (*en nomō*, 3:11; 5:4), or "from/by the law" (*ek nomou*, 3:18, 21). With these comments Paul cannot be contradicting Moses, who

declared, “We will be considered righteous if we keep [the covenant] by doing this entire command before YHWH our God, as he has commanded us” (Deut. 6:25). In that context Moses was dealing with the significance of obedience for those who have been redeemed, and who, like Abraham, demonstrated their fear (read “faith”) in full-bodied and wholehearted obedience to YHWH. This is not a merit-based salvation but a salvation experienced undeservedly and to which YHWH’s covenant people respond with faith and obedience. Paul was hereby discrediting a legal and religious system that places the cart before the horse: as if obedience leads to faith rather than faith leading to obedience. But saving faith is a gift of God, effected by the Spirit of God (Gal. 3:2, 5; 5:18), and the works that God seeks are not “works of the law” in the merit-based sense but the fruits of the Spirit (5:22–23) rather than human effort. These fruits are the prerequisite to the fulfillment of the mission and the blessing promised the covenant community, but they are not prerequisite to God’s election or salvation of members of that community.

In Paul’s debates with the Judaizers, the role of physical circumcision was key. According to Genesis 17, the ritual of physical circumcision of all males was instituted as the rite by which Abraham and his household signed on to the covenant that YHWH had made with them. When male Jewish believers came to faith in Jesus, they obviously entered the new fellowship as circumcised followers of Christ. However, those of the “circumcision party” were unable to break from their past in a Judaism that placed high stock in external markers. Therefore they insisted that before gentile believers could be granted full and equal access to the fellowship of followers of Christ, their males needed to undergo the physical rite of circumcision. Once they had been initiated this way, they needed to abide by the Jewish customs that set them apart from other ethnic and religious groups. Although the “circumcision party” (*hoi*

ek peritomēs, Acts 10:45; 11:2) would have grounded their position in Genesis 17, as others of their persuasion did prior to the Jerusalem Council, they probably invoked the name of Moses to support their case, as had the proponents of this stance who spoke of it as “the custom of Moses” at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1, 5).

However, Moses would probably not have been flattered by this credit. If we ask which side Moses would have favored in Paul’s debate with the Judaizers, the answer is as shocking as it is clear. First, Moses did not even circumcise the males in his own family (Exod. 4:24–26). Second, although the male Israelites who came out of Egypt apparently were all circumcised (Exod. 12:44–49), in Joshua 5:2–9 the narrator notes that the rite was suspended during the forty-year desert sojourn. Ironically, the generation that had come out of Egypt and that bore the physical brand of the covenant would not enjoy the fulfillment of YHWH’s covenant promises; they died in the desert (Deut. 1:26–2:1). Meanwhile, despite the uncircumcised state of its males, the generation that stood before Moses on the plains of Moab was formally accepted as YHWH’s covenant people,⁸ and as such those people would claim the land promised to the patriarchs.

Third, although Moses could use the metaphors “uncircumcised of lips” (*‘āraḥ šēpātayim*, Exod. 6:12, 30) and “circumcision of the heart” (Deut. 10:16; 30:6), in Deuteronomy he never spoke of physical circumcision, not even as a prerequisite to participation in Israel’s annual festivals (cf. Exod. 12:48). In Deuteronomy 31:12 he charged the Levitical priests to read the Torah publicly (before men, women, children, and “your alien”) at the central sanctuary every seventh year, when they assembled for the covenant-renewal ritual. Based on the Shema (Deut. 6:4–5) and Deuteronomy 10:12–11:1, YHWH’s principal and primary expectations were clear. In response to the catechetical question “What does YHWH your God ask

[šā'a/] of you?" Moses presented three answers (in 10:12b-15, 16-19, and 20-22). The first answer is striking: "To fear [demonstrate trusting awe before] YHWH your God, to walk in all his ways, to demonstrate love for him, to serve YHWH your God [as vassals] with your whole heart and with all your being, and to keep the commands and ordinances of YHWH that I am commanding you today for your good" (Deut. 10:12-13).

In this context Moses did not say a word about physical circumcision; instead, he focused on the appropriate disposition toward YHWH (demonstrated fear [trusting awe] and love) and then called for general commitment to him (walking in his ways, accepting vassal status, and obedience to his will). This is the antithesis to preoccupation with external identity markers and picky prescriptions that bind rather than free human behavior.

In his appeal for heart circumcision and flexible necks (10:16), Moses reinforced this fundamental call for internal transformation demonstrated in external behavior, in God-like love for the alien (vv. 17-19), and in exclusive and uncompromising allegiance to YHWH (vv. 20-21). This was precisely the full-bodied and wholehearted sacrifice to which Paul would call the Roman Christians (Rom. 12:1-2); this was the covenantal ethic of love and the Spirit-empowered walk to which he called the Galatian Christians (Gal. 5:13-25). If the Spirit is the source of the believer's new life in Christ, the Spirit must also be the driving divine power behind the life of godliness, which is to be the distinguishing mark of membership within the covenant. On these matters, Paul was not debunking, dismissing, marginalizing, or subverting Moses but seeking to recover the heart and spirit of the covenant, as reflected in YHWH's speech introducing the covenant-ratification ceremony in Exodus 19:4-7: "You have seen for yourself what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. So now, if you will indeed listen to my voice and keep my

covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for the entire earth is mine; and for me you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

In this opening statement we learn that, with reference to the covenant, (1) gospel always precedes law; (2) God takes the initiative in calling people to covenant relationship; (3) God calls people to a relationship with himself before he specifies the implications of that relationship; (4) covenant relationship with God is not based on merit but is a graciously granted privilege; and (5) the goal of covenant relationship is missional: to serve the nations as his priestly vassals, and in so doing to fulfill YHWH’s call to Abraham by bringing blessing to a world languishing under the curse. These five points not only summarize YHWH’s vision for Israel, but they also capture Paul’s vision for “the new creation,” “the Israel of God,” and gentile Christians (Gal. 6:12–16).

However, the Pharisaic rabbis and their successors in Judeo-Christendom, the Judaizers, had lost the spirit of Moses, overlooked the gracious foundations on which covenant relationship was based, and forgotten that covenant involves primarily not commitment and obedience to a written code but faith in—that is, commitment to—their gracious Redeemer. Devotion to God had been replaced by devotion to the laws, which explains why, for them, insistence on circumcision and other identity markers took precedence over faith.

On the surface, Paul’s comment in Galatians 3:21b appears to contradict the life-yielding function of the Torah as expounded in Deuteronomy and Psalm 119: Paul declares, “If a law had been given that was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.” However, we must recognize that now *nomos* does not mean the Torah, which is what *ho nomos* had meant in Galatians 3:17 and what it would mean again in verse 24. Paul directs the hypothetical statement in verse 21b at the

Judaizers, who were treating “a law”—that is, the identity regulations established by the Pharisees and the adherence to the Oral Torah that undergirded them—as merit-based righteousness apart from faith. Indeed, in verse 23 Paul appears to speak from his own experience: “Now before the faith [in Christ] came, we were held captive under law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.” With the plural “we,” Paul probably spoke for Jews like himself who had come to faith in Jesus Christ. But the comment’s autobiographical nature becomes more transparent if we assume a singular pronoun, for this had been precisely his experience prior to his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9) and his three-year retreat to Arabia (i.e., Sinai; Gal. 1:17; 4:25). He can scarcely have been speaking of the Torah, for to Moses and his Torah, Sinai was a symbol of liberation from the slavery of Egypt and of the privilege that was granted Israel as agents of divine grace and blessing to the world.

Paul concluded this part of his discussion by declaring that in terms of access to the grace made available in Christ, Jews and gentiles are equal. They are all “sons of God” (*huiioi Theou*), an expression now also applied to gentiles that Moses had applied to Israelites in Deuteronomy 14:1; they are all justified by faith—rather than by adherence to Jewish regulations; they are all baptized into Christ; they have all clothed themselves with Christ; they are all one in Christ Jesus; they all belong to Christ; and therefore they are all Abraham’s descendants and heirs according to promise (3:26–29). In 4:1–20 Paul appears to direct his attention to gentile believers, reinforcing their sonship with God through faith in Christ Jesus, regardless of what the Judaizers may say. And this set the stage for 4:21–31, his pointed appeal to those who had succumbed to the pressure of the Judaizers, which is where this discussion began.

Stages 2 and 3 of the Israelite Covenant in Romans

Paul's argument against Judaizing detractors is shorter and less developed in Galatians than it is in Romans, which should not surprise us since the former had been written in the late 40s to early 50s, whereas the latter was written in the mid to late 50s. Underlying the first section of Romans—a magnificent treatise on “the gospel of God” (1:1; 15:16), “the gospel of his Son” (1:9), and “the gospel of Christ” (15:19; cf. Gal. 1:7), whose agenda was “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name” (Rom. 1:5 NRSV)—was a concern similar to that which drove the book of Galatians: clarifying the grounds on which God granted gentiles access to the benefits and responsibilities of the Israelite covenant.

In chapter 14, I discussed in considerable detail the place of the Abrahamic stage of the Israelite covenant in the salvation of non-Jews as Paul presented it in Romans 4. At that point I noted that through faith in Jesus Christ, gentiles become spiritual children of Abraham and heirs of the benefactions that the covenant promised him. In Romans 2–3 Paul argued in careful detail that possession of the law offers Jews no soteriological advantage over gentiles because “the righteousness of God” is available “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe,” without distinction between Jew and gentile (3:22). Apart from saving grace made available by faith, all are condemned as sinners and fall short of the glory of God (vv. 23–24). For Jews, who are the privileged possessors of the Torah (*ho nomos*), but to which they have added the Oral Torah, even most scrupulous adherence to the law as a system of covenant righteousness is insufficient to merit the saving favor of God. Paul had made this point in Galatians 5:3: if one established a legal act like circumcision as the means whereby one gains access to the grace of God, then one is

obligated to keep the whole law to merit divine granting of that access (cf. Rom. 2:12–16).

In Romans 2:17–29 Paul addressed the heart of what it means to be a “Jew,” not in an ethnographic sense but spiritually—that is, as a member of a community confident in God’s saving favor. He opened with a critique of the prevailing disposition among many Jews, particularly religious leaders, that was reminiscent of Jesus’ critique of the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospels: “But if you claim the name ‘Jew,’ rely on law, boast [*kauchasai*] in God, know his will, and affirm what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law. . . . You who boast [*kauchasai*] in law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? Indeed, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles because of you’” (vv. 17–18, 23–24).

Here the ethnicon “Jew” (*Ioudaios*) functions as a cipher for what remains of the once-proud twelve-tribe nation of Israel. The word “Jews” (*yěhûdîm*; LXX *tous Ioudaious*) occurs for the first two times in the First Testament in 2 Kings 16:6 and 25:25. In the former it refers to men of Judah from Elath in the last decade of the Northern Kingdom’s existence, while in the latter it refers to the remnant of the tribe/nation of Judah after the Babylonian conquest in 586 BC. By New Testament times the word served as a collective designation for all the descendants of Abraham, in contrast to gentiles (Gal. 2:14), so that although Paul was a Benjaminite, he identified himself as a Jew.⁹

As was the case with most occurrences of *nomos* in Galatians, in Romans 2:17–29 this word refers not merely to the Torah of Moses or the Pentateuch but also to the Oral Torah of the scribes and Pharisees. Paul was obviously referring not only to Jews in general but particularly to those who claimed a monopoly on the legal regulations that governed every aspect of ordinary peoples’ lives. The apostle accused such Jews of smugness, arrogance, self-

importance, and hypocrisy, for while they were experts in the minutest details of Jewish religious law and viewed themselves as police-like enforcers of the legal requirements, they had lost its spirit and its heart and acted as if it had no bearing for their own lives.

The concluding citation in 2:24 is shocking. The words derive primarily from Isaiah 52:5, which concerns the effects of Israel's exile among the nations: YHWH's name is blasphemed¹⁰ because in their minds YHWH had been either unable or unwilling to protect his own people. Their fate and fortune reflected on his character and reputation. However, conceptually the present citation bears an even closer relationship to Ezekiel 36:20–21. The cause of Israel's earlier exile was their abominable behavior, which had defiled the land in which they lived (36:16–19). Because they had committed these crimes in full view of the nations (cf. Ezek. 5:5–12), they had brought shame on the name of YHWH, and their exile reinforced the blot on YHWH's public reputation. Although the religious leaders represented those who had returned to the land that YHWH had promised his people, Paul strikingly linked the religious leaders' dishonorable conduct with the shame the Israelites had brought on the name of YHWH through their exile. This suggests that, while the tripartite relationship involving God, Israel (the "Jews"), and the land appeared intact in some measure in Paul's day, this was deceiving. The Jews' claim to the name "Jew," with their boasting in (their relationship with) God (Rom. 2:17) and in the law (v. 23), camouflaged the reality demonstrated by their lives; they may have borne the name of YHWH (cf. Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11), but they did so futilely (Hb. *laššāw*; Gk. *epi mataiō*), for beneath their pious veneer lurked a hypocritical and ungodly reality. Claiming the name "Jew" and boasting in God and the law did not mark these people as members of the covenant community.

Speaking of identity markers, in Romans 2:25–29 Paul focuses on the *sine qua non* of Israelite identity: physical circumcision. This paragraph reveals that the church in Rome was dealing with the same issues that had plagued the Galatian churches a half decade earlier. Apparently the Judaizing party among them insisted that in order for gentiles to become full members in the Christian covenant community, they had to undergo the physical initiation rite of circumcision and sign on to all the laws associated with Judaism. But in the firm tradition of Moses (Deut. 10:16; 30:1–10) and Jeremiah, Paul declared that the identifying brand of a true Jew (i.e., a member of the covenant community) is not physical circumcision (which in any case would not be visible to anyone but one's wife in the bedroom) but heart circumcision performed by the Spirit apart from following the letter of the law.

Although no citation formulas appear here (cf. Rom. 2:24), the semantic and conceptual links with Jeremiah 9:23–26 [22–25] suggest that Paul alluded to this text in Romans 2:17–29. To him, the people to whom he referred in verses 17–24 represented contemporary equivalents to Jeremiah's audience. The central point in verses 25–28 was that physical circumcision—which may be shorthand for all the external markers of Jewish identity—counts for nothing if it is not accompanied by wholehearted and full-bodied adherence to the Torah. Indeed, taking another page from Jeremiah's notebook (Jer. 8:4–12), Paul declared that possession of the Torah in written form is no substitute for living the Torah (Rom. 2:27). And then he pushed his understanding of the true mark of Israelite identity back seven or eight centuries to the founding of the Israelite covenant at Mount Sinai (Lev. 26:41) and to Moses' reiteration of the same in his Torah addresses, where he promised life to those whose hearts YHWH had circumcised and who proved their status with him by wholehearted and full-bodied love for YHWH, demonstrated in action that

served YHWH's interest; these were and still are the prerequisites to life (*ḥay*, Deut. 30:6; cf. 10:16).

Fully in the spirit of Moses, Paul declared with unequivocal clarity his understanding of "true Jewish identity"; that is, the mark of membership in the true Israelite covenant community: "Jewish identity is an internal matter, and circumcision involves the heart, by the Spirit, and not by the letter. That person's praise does not come from other people, but from God" (Rom. 2:29). With a single sentence he pulled the rug out from under the Pharisaic religious leaders within Judaism and among the Judaizing believers in Jesus. Invitation to membership in the covenant community was based not on merit earned by scrupulous keeping of the written laws (whether the Torah of Moses or the Oral Torah of the scribes and Pharisees) but on a free gift of God, performed by the Spirit. Through the death of Christ, they had died to the law and its merit-based foundations, and through his resurrection they had joined him who was raised from the dead so that they might bear fruit for God and serve as his vassals in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of adherence to the written code (Rom. 7:4-6).

This does not mean that the Torah was sin, or that living according to the precepts of the Torah was irrelevant. On the contrary, the Torah was still holy, and the commands of God were still holy and righteous and good (7:7-12). God's call for wholehearted and full-bodied allegiance to him had not changed (cf. Rom. 12:1-2), and bearing fruit for God was still the goal (7:4-5). But the Mosaic paradigm stands. What has changed for him is that the works-centered ethic of Judaism has been replaced by the grace-based community.

But this was not new. This is what we witnessed in the Decalogue, which begins with gospel, and in the "domestic catechism," in which recitation of YHWH's gracious saving actions precedes command (Deut. 6:20-25). As Boaz demonstrated in the book of Ruth in the dark days of the judges, he was guided by Torah but driven by the Spirit, and

in so doing he represented a paradigm totally different from his Israelite contemporaries like Samson, who, although he was circumcised (cf. Judg. 14:3), was ethically indistinguishable from the Philistines and Canaanites. Boaz and Caleb represented the paradigm that Judaism had lost, one that Paul declared could be rediscovered in Christ. Indeed, in the wake of the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ, membership in the covenant community is no longer possible apart from trust in him (Rom. 10:13).

The preceding conversation with Jesus and Paul drives us to ask, What on earth has happened to Moses' vision of Israel's covenant relationship in Deuteronomy? Earlier we referred to George Mendenhall's comparison of societies based on covenant and societies based on law (see above, near the end of chap. 8). The Israel that Moses had in mind in Deuteronomy was an independent but theocratic nation, governed by their divine Suzerain and administered by his appointed representatives (Deut. 16:21–18:22). However, in the wake of the holocaust of 586 BC, the once-proud nation was subservient to a succession of imperial powers: Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. While under foreign political and military control, the Jewish population that occupied what was available of the promised land enjoyed a measure of religious and cultural independence. This meant that those who controlled Israel's culture gained increasing control over the daily lives of the people.

We might have expected that control to fall to the priests, but community life revolved around local synagogues, where Levitical heritage was not a prerequisite to rabbinic status or to becoming an expert in the Torah—as the Benjaminite Rabbi Saul demonstrated. Over time people looked to the Pharisees as custodians of Israel's scriptural tradition, particularly the Torah, for guidance. The guidance they offered included both the Mosaic Torah and the Oral Torah, which had evolved over the centuries within Judaism

since the fall of Jerusalem. Intending to aid the general population in their obedience to the Torah, the rabbis over the centuries had “fenced” it with specific instructions on how to apply the 613 commands identified by Maimonides in the Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch), often trying to anticipate every conceivable circumstance. The collection of regulations and the rabbinic discussions concerning their application formed a vital part of the Oral Torah, which, by New Testament times, was recognized in mainstream Judaism as being equal in authority to the original Mosaic Torah.

However, as we saw in Jesus’ altercations with the scribes and Pharisees, the people paid a heavy price for the increasing specificity in the application of the Torah that they mandated. Over time they lost the spirit of the original Torah and Moses’ vision of a covenant community that was based on full-bodied and wholehearted yet voluntary devotion to YHWH, along with commitment to the well-being of others demonstrated in action in their interest (love). This vision was eclipsed by increasing preoccupation with fidelity to the regulations, driven by the conviction that such scrupulous adherence to the growing Pharisaic tradition was reckoned as merit by God. However, instead of liberating people to enjoy life to the full in response to divine grace, these regulations laid a heavy yoke upon them and enslaved them to man-made rules. The vision of a community based on covenant morphed into a community based on law, with the scribes and Pharisees functioning as moral and ritual police. This was the religious world of Second Temple Judaism against which Jesus had railed and against whose debilitating influences Paul sought to protect the gentile churches that were planted in Asia Minor, Greece, and as far west as Rome.

References to the Israelite Covenant in Hebrews

I conclude this discussion of the Israelite covenant in the New Testament with a quick look at the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews. As noted earlier, the Greek word for covenant, *diathēkē*, occurs thirty-three times in the New Testament. The fact that we find more than half (seventeen) of these occurrences in Hebrews reflects the significance of the notion in this book. Of these seventeen, two employ the word in its original Greek sense of “last will and testament” rather than “covenant” (Heb. 9:16, 17); the remainder bear the theological sense of *bērît* in the Hebrew Bible.

The book of Hebrews devotes a lot of attention to the contrast between the ancient covenant that YHWH established with Israel at Sinai and the covenant instituted by Jesus. The author identifies Jesus as the guarantor of a better arrangement (*engyos*, 7:22). Indeed, variations of *agathos*, “good,” and its comparative form, *kreittōn*, “better,” occur sixteen times in the book. The basic form, *agathos*, “good,” occurs three times, referring to the benefactions that come with the covenant,¹¹ leaving thirteen occurrences of the comparative *kreittōn*, “better.”¹² Significantly, the first occurrence of the word “covenant” (*diathēkē*) announces that Jesus was the guarantor of a “better covenant” (*kreittonos diathēkēs*, 7:22), even though the focus of this text is not the Israelite covenant per se, but the role of the Levitical/Aaronic priests as administrators of the Israelite covenant.

Hebrews 8 provides the most protracted discussion of the Israelite covenant. The author begins by continuing the conversation on the relation of Christ to the Aaronic high priesthood (vv. 1–5) and the tabernacle’s role as a “replica and shadow . . . of heavenly realities” (v. 5). Verses 6–13 offer the most pointed reference to the Israelite covenant, which the author characterizes as “the first covenant” (*hē prōtē* [*diathēkē*], v. 7), “my covenant” (*hē diathēkē mou*, v. 9b), and “the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to take them out of the land of

Egypt” (v. 9a). Because this entire section presents the Israelite covenant as the foil for the “better” (*kreittonnos*, v. 6) and “new covenant” (*hē diathēkē kainē*, vv. 8, 13), I delay further discussion of that issue until the next chapter, which concerns the new covenant in the New Testament. Hebrews 9 and 10 continue to contrast features of the “first covenant”¹³ with the “new covenant” (*diathēkē kainē*, 9:15). However, in so doing the author presents the clearest description in the entire Bible of how the tabernacle and its rituals were used in maintaining the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel.

First, the tabernacle system—including the sanctuary itself (cf. 9:2–5), the priestly personnel (7:18–23, 28; 9:6–9), and its rituals (9:1, 6–10, 13; 10:1–3, 11)—represented fundamental elements of the Torah that YHWH had revealed when he established his covenant with his people at Sinai (9:17–22). The Greek word *nomos*, signifying the divine revelation associated with the covenant, occurs fourteen times in chapters 7–10.¹⁴

Second, although the tabernacle rituals performed by the priests on behalf of the people involved other elements and functions, the most significant threat to YHWH’s relationship with his people was human sin. The author represents the rituals with general expressions like *latreia*, “rituals, service, ministries” (9:6), and *leitourgeō/leitourgia*, “liturgy, service” (8:6; 9:21; 10:11). But he also represents the rituals with specific expressions for offerings presented to God: (1) Gk. *thysia*, “sacrifice” (= Hb. *zēbah*), which may refer to sin offerings¹⁵ but also functions generically for all sacrifices;¹⁶ (2) *prosphora*, “tribute offering”;¹⁷ (3) *holokautōma*, “whole burnt offering” (= Hb. *’ôlâ*; 10:6, 8); and (4) *dora*, “gifts” (= Hb. *qorbān*; 8:3, 4; 9:9).

Even so, the author was preoccupied specifically with sin, the consequent guilt, and its effects on the relationship between YHWH and his people. The Greek word for sin (*hamartia*) occurs twenty-five times in Hebrews, but more

than one-half of these (thirteen) are found in chapters 9 and 10.¹⁸ The understanding of sin is obviously derived from the Hebrews' sacred tradition rather than from the Greco-Roman world, in which the addressees of this epistle lived. The use of *hamartia* (sg.) for "sin offering" represents *ḥaṭṭā't* in the Pentateuch and elsewhere,¹⁹ reinforcing this conclusion.

In the mind of the author, when people sin and there is no ritual response and divine intervention, they are defiled (9:13), engaged in acts that lead to death (9:14), deeds that bring the fury and judgment of God (10:27–31)—that is, death without mercy (9:27–28; 10:28). Of course, the Israelites and the addressees of this book were not alone in their awareness of the horrific implications of sin, as we learned from the "Prayer to Every God" (cited above in chap. 6). The poor suppliant who composed that prayer knew that (1) the gods were angry with him, but he did not know which god he had angered; (2) his sin had ignited the fury of the gods, but he did not know what the sin was; and (3) some sort of ritual was needed to remove the sin and restore the favor of the deity, but he did not know what sort of ritual would accomplish that. Whatever he was doing, it brought him no relief or reassurance of divine favor.

In his portrayal of the solution to human sin, the author of Hebrews was a true heir of Moses, through whose mediation the Torah was revealed (Heb. 8:5; 9:19; 10:28), and of faithful Israelites like King David, who had experienced full restoration with YHWH (cf. Pss. 32 and 51). In our discussion of the Israelite covenant in the First Testament, we noted that the covenant stipulations that YHWH presented to Israel at Sinai (Exod. 19–24) and the Torah that Moses proclaimed on the plains of Moab provided the answers that eluded the pathetic Mesopotamian suppliant mentioned in the previous paragraph. By YHWH's revelatory grace, the Israelites knew YHWH to be their God and the one who was offended by their sin; they knew precisely the boundaries of

divine moral and ritual expectations. The violation of these standards would result in YHWH's damning fury. Yet through YHWH's instructions on cultic service, the Israelites knew the solutions to the sin question and were promised forgiveness and restoration with YHWH.

As reflected in the phrase "to draw near" (*proserchomai*), which occurs seven times and is distributed widely in the book,²⁰ the crisis that faces human beings is alienation from God. Exodus 19:4 declares YHWH's response to this problem on Israel's behalf pointedly: "You have observed what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings *and brought you to myself*." This had been his goal in rescuing Israel from the Egyptian slave house; this was what YHWH accomplished at Sinai, where he invited the entire nation to their first audience with him;²¹ and this would be the goal of YHWH's eventual designation of the place where he would imprint his name within the promised land, which he designated as Israel's "resting place" (Deut. 12:4-15). Echoes of this text reverberate through the book of Hebrews, not only the motif of "rest" (Deut. 12:9-10) but also YHWH's gracious invitation "to draw near" with confidence and joy.²² The entire ritual system—including the sanctuary (Heb. 9:2-8), the priestly intermediaries (7:4, 11-23; 9:25), and the sacrificial rituals²³—was designed to facilitate "drawing near" to God. But as the Israelites recognized at the onetime assembly at Sinai (Deut. 5:23-31), not all were entitled to equal access to YHWH.

In the extensive and varied use of vocabulary employed by the author of Hebrews to explain God's solution to the human sin problem, we recognize not only how deeply the author had drunk from the Torah but also how comprehensive was his understanding of what needed to be done to solve it. What people need is characterized as "salvation" (*sōzein*, Heb. 7:25; *sōtēria*, 9:28)—the Torah on people's hearts/minds (8:10; 10:16); knowledge of God (8:11); divine mercy in discounting of sin (8:12; 10:17);

being cleared/perfected (*teleioō*, 7:19, 28; 9:9 [*syneidēsin*, conscience]; 10:1, 14); redemption (*lytrōsis*, 9:12; *apolytrōsis*, 9:15); sanctification (*hagiazō*, 9:13; 10:10, 14, 29); cleansing/purification (*katharotēs/katharizō*, 9:13–14, 22–23; 10:2); having hearts sprinkled/purified (*ranitizō*, 10:22; cf. 9:13, 19, 21); forgiveness, cancellation of guilt (*aphesis*, 9:22; 10:18); cancellation/removal of sin (*athetēsis*, 7:18; 9:26); having sins borne/carried (*anapherō*, 7:27; 9:28); and having sins taken away (*aphaireō*, 10:4; *periaireō*, 10:11). When we read the First Testament, we discover that the genuinely pious in Israel's history experienced this through the rituals that YHWH in his mercy had revealed to his people. In the detailed instructions for the rituals involving a series of different sacrifices, we hear variations of this glorious declaration nine times in Leviticus 4:1–6:7: “Thus the priest shall make atonement for the offerer/sin, and he will be forgiven.”²⁴ And in Psalm 32:1–2, which the title attributes to David and which he presumably composed after his confession/prayer of Psalm 51, he celebrates the joy of experienced forgiveness.

On the surface, repeated assertions in Hebrews of the ineffectiveness of the Israelite priesthood, sanctuary, and rituals fly in the face of First Testament texts like the ones cited above. In Hebrews 7 the author appeals to Psalm 110 to declare that Jesus was a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:11, 17), rather than “according to the order of Aaron” (7:11).

The issue here is Jesus' identification with Melchizedekian priesthood, which was superior to that of the Levitical priests under the headship of Aaron. The author makes this point with five principal arguments. First, the fact that Abraham presented tithes to Melchizedek demonstrates the superiority of Melchizedek over the patriarch and the Levites who descended from him (Heb. 7:1–10). Second, although the Aaronic priests played a vital role in the spiritual administration of Israel, their sacrificial functions were part

of a system that would eventually be replaced by a royal representative from Judah, after the order of Melchizedek, who as king of Salem also functioned as the divinely ordained priest of El Elyon (vv. 11–16). Third, buttressed by Psalm 110:4, the author declares that Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood was superior to the Levitical priesthood because he was installed as king-priest forever; there is now neither a need for a succession of priests nor the prospect of replacing this priesthood with another (Heb. 7:17–24). Fourth, as a corollary to the preceding and because the new priesthood is eternal, as the Melchizedekian priest, Jesus performs a ministry that is effective for all time for all who draw near to God (v. 25). Fifth, the Levitical priests shared with the general population a fundamental sinful condition, requiring offerings for themselves before they could minister on behalf of the people, but the moral perfection of the Melchizedekian Son of God meant that offerings for himself were unnecessary and that his once-for-all atoning sacrifice actually solved the problem of human sin (vv. 26–28).

The author suggests that because the Melchizedekian priesthood represented by Jesus had supplanted the Aaronic priesthood established by the Torah, the “antecedent command” (7:18) was set aside/annulled (*athetēsis*) because it was weak/defective (*asthenēs*) and useless (*anōphelēs*). Furthermore, the law was ineffective in producing perfection (*teleiōō*) in people. Here *nomos*, “law,” represents the purification and atonement rituals of the sanctuary. These deficiencies necessitated “a better hope” (*kreittonos elpidos*) through which people could in fact draw near to God (7:19).

The author of Hebrews reinforces this interpretation later, declaring explicitly that the gifts and sacrifices offered in the sanctuary cannot make the conscience of the worshiper perfect (*teleiōō*, 9:9) and that the “law” (*nomos*) can never “make perfect those who draw near” (10:1) through the continuous and annual offering of the same sacrifices.

Chapter 8 reintroduces the form of argument he had used with reference to the superiority of Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood, arguing that the very existence of "the new covenant" (*diathēkē kainē*, 8:8) proves that the first covenant must have been faulty: "If the first [covenant = *prōtē diathēkē*] had been without fault, there would have been no need to look for a second [covenant]" (8:7).

However, the author reserves the most definitive contradictions to the First Testament texts cited above for chapter 10. First, he declares categorically, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (10:4). Second, apparently for the sake of argument, he interprets several First Testament texts literally, asserting that God neither desires nor takes pleasure in sacrifices and offerings (vv. 5–9). Third, he implies that the work of priests, who offer the same sacrifices day after day and at festival after festival, is so much wasted effort because they can never take away sins (v. 11).

At this point the tension between the author of Hebrews and the Torah reaches a breaking point. These categorical statements in Hebrews appear antithetical to the record of the divine revelation at Sinai, which presents the sanctuary rituals to be ordained by God and to be effective for the worshiper when performed as revealed and with hearts that were humble before him. How we reconcile these texts is a major challenge in biblical interpretation, especially if we assume that God never errs in his revelation, that his revelation is as consistent as his character, and that later revealed truth cannot contradict earlier revealed truth.

We move forward cautiously, first by noting again Hebrews' references to "a better hope" (7:19), "a better covenant" (7:22; 8:6), "better promises" (8:6), "better sacrifices" (9:23), and a "better possession" (10:34). In Greek the word *kreittōn* functions as the positive comparative expression for *agathos*, parallel to the relationship between "better" and "good" in English. The

repeated use of “better” suggests that the antecedent versions of the respective notions were in fact “good.” This was certainly how people expected outsiders to view Israel’s Torah; in fact, the Israelites’ entire Torah was exceptional/superlative with respect to its righteousness (Deut. 4:5–8). For this reason, as one inspired by God, the author of Hebrews cannot declare the Torah of Moses/YHWH a mistake or Israel’s history with the Torah a waste of revelation and thirteen hundred years of resources and energy.

Second, the author of Hebrews provides another clue in his characterization of the old order (the “first covenant,” the Torah, the Aaronic priesthood, and the antecedent sanctuary rituals), describing them as “becoming obsolete and outdated and about to disappear”—that is, becoming passé (8:13)—and as normative and applicable “until the time when the new order is instituted” (9:10). Despite Hebrews’ strong statements about the effectiveness of the sanctuary rituals as rituals, these comments (8:13; 9:10) remind us that although the “first” order has been replaced by a “new” order, that replacement does not necessarily mean that their institutions were invalid, and certainly not that God had duped the Israelites into imagining that their system actually offered forgiveness and purification when in fact it did not. If we take the author of Hebrews at face value and in isolation from what the First Testament says about the effectiveness of Israel’s sacrificial system, then the Israelites were in no better position than the pathetic Mesopotamian author of “Prayer to Every God” (see above, in chap. 6).

We find a third clue to the relationship between the passing order and the new order in the phrase “from/since the foundation of the world” (*apo katabolēs kosmou*), which occurs twice in Hebrews. Although Hebrews 4:3 speaks generally of YHWH’s creative work having ceased when he established the foundations of the *kosmos*, in 9:26 the

author explains the difference between the Levitical high priest's need to enter into the holy of holies annually to atone for the sins of Israel and Jesus' onetime offering of himself. If Jesus had followed the old (Aaronic) priestly pattern, then he would have had to die annually between the foundation of the world and its consummation in the eschatological future. However, as a measure of the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice in contrast to the priest's annual service on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the benefits of his onetime sacrifice extended *back* to all whom God had redeemed and claimed as his own, and they extended forward to all his people until the consummation of the cosmos. Accordingly, in his portrayal of the solution to the problem of sin, the author of Hebrews was clearly aware that the restoration of all things is a divine work and intimates that this grand scheme was planned by God before the foundation of the world.

When we interpret these texts in the book of Hebrews in the light of five other occurrences of the expression "from/since the foundation of the world" (*apo katabolēs kosmou*) in the New Testament,²⁵ plus three occurrences of "before the foundation of the world,"²⁶ we discover that when God created the cosmos, and even before that, he had anticipated humanity's rebellion against him. And with the demise of their deputized rule of the earth, God also foresaw the demise of the cosmos itself. The calls for Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3; etc.) and to function as a kingdom of priests, mediating his grace to all humanity (Exod. 19:4-6), were critical to that mission. YHWH's goal in rescuing Israel from Egypt, calling them to be his covenant people, and giving them the land of Canaan as their divine grant (*naḥălâ*) was universal. The purpose of covenant, including YHWH's instructions on Israel's status as a holy people before the watching world and the sanctuary rituals designed to maintain Israel's standing before YHWH, was to present

Israel as a sanctified people and a trophy of grace and ultimately to invite all nations to participate in that grace (Deut. 26:19). However, there was a dimension to that agenda that receives scant attention in the First Testament but comes to full bloom only in the New—namely, the role of Jesus Christ as the key to the entire enterprise.

In the New Testament we come face-to-face with this dimension, but from the scattered references to God's activity "before the foundation of the world," we learn that it was operative from the beginning. In his first epistle, the apostle Peter speaks of Jesus Christ's redemptive work being "foreknown" (*proginōskō*) "before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:20). Whatever else verse 20 means, near the conclusion to verses 12-21, it declares that the plan of salvation based on the sacrificial work of Christ was designed before the world was created and that the provision of redemption through the shedding of the precious blood of the unblemished Lamb, the Messiah (Christ), was the time-space manifestation of this prehistoric divine decision and act. While transpiring at the turn of the epochs, the Triune God planned and implemented the events associated with Calvary before time began.

Peter's was not an isolated statement of God being at work redemptively before the creation of the world. Matthew 13:35 announces the revelation of a mystery (the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven) concealed since the day God laid the foundations of the earth. Again, speaking in parables, in Matthew 25:34 Jesus declared that those who are blessed by his Father inherit the kingdom prepared for them "from the foundation of the world." In John 17:24, Jesus expressed his longing that those whom the Father has given him be with him where he is, that they might see the glory that the Father gave him because the Father was covenantally committed to (*agapaō*) him "before the foundation of the world." However, Ephesians 1:3-10 offers the most remarkable insight into God's precreation

soteriological plan. Paul states, “He chose [*eklogomai*] us in him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, . . . which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:4-5, 9-10).

The book of Revelation completes the picture, speaking of the names of God’s people being written in the “Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8 NIV; cf. 17:8). As we will demonstrate in the next chapter, apparently the way of forgiveness has been the same for the saints of all ages—that is, through the sacrificial work of Christ—though we, on this side of the cross, have the full benefit of knowing the objective reality as well as experiencing the subjective blessing.

To appreciate how the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ in time and space could be applied to Israelites “before Christ,” particularly how the author of Hebrews understood the relationship between the sacrifice of Christ and ancient Israel’s sacrificial system, we need to reexamine what happened at Sinai when YHWH revealed to Moses the way of forgiveness for his people. Here Exodus 25:8-9 and 45 are crucial. At Sinai, YHWH instructed the Israelites to construct a residence for him, according “to the structure of the dwelling place” (*tabnîṭ miškān*) and the structure of all the furniture and utensils (*tabnîṭ kol kēlāyw*) that he would show Moses. Although most translations render *tabnîṭ* as “pattern,” during his time on the mountain Moses probably saw much more than a blueprint or even a model. This may be what the word means in 1 Chronicles 28:19, which speaks of YHWH revealing to David in YHWH’s own handwriting the structural details of the temple that Solomon was to build, but then it may also have been a picture of the heavenly reality. Elsewhere *tabnîṭ* usually refers to the object itself, not to a copy or a plan of

something.²⁷ None of these texts involves a copy or plan; at issue is the object itself. Second Kings 16:10 may be the exception that proves the rule: “King Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model [*děmût*] of the altar—that is, its form/structure [*tabnît*] according to its entire construction.” Obviously, he sent him not the altar itself but a depiction represented by *děmût*, “likeness,” not *tabnît*, “structure, form.”

This raises questions concerning what YHWH showed Moses on the mountain. It seems that YHWH opened the windows of heaven, enabling him to see the heavenly reality, of which the tabernacle would be a replica. The Septuagint (LXX) supports this interpretation by translating *tabnît* as “paradigm” (*paradeigma*) in Exodus 25:9 and as “type” (*typos*) in 25:40. In classical Greek writings the word *typos* exhibits a wide range of meanings, including “form” and “archetype.” This is how the translators understood it in Amos 5:26, the only other occurrence of the word in the Old Greek First Testament. Here *typos* (Hb. *tabnît*) clearly refers to an idolatrous image itself rather than a plan for an image.

This interpretation accords perfectly with the book of Hebrews, which juxtaposes a series of expressions to describe the relationship between the tabernacle and the heavenly residence of God (table 16.2). On the mountain, Moses apparently saw the true heavenly dwelling of YHWH and then received instructions to have the Israelites construct a replica in which the sacrifices and rituals would represent replica actions of the singular heavenly sacrifice of the true Lamb of God.

To clarify the concept, an analogy from the sporting world might be helpful. The oldest trophy in North American professional sport is the Stanley Cup. Only one Stanley Cup exists; it is stored in the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto. Every year, each member of the winning team receives a replica of the trophy to display at home. Although the replica is not the real object, players display their “Stanley

Cup” proudly as a symbol of the reality located elsewhere. Similarly, the replica tabernacle and its rituals pointed to YHWH’s heavenly temple and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, to which the Triune God had committed himself before the foundation of the world. Whether or not Moses saw the sacrificed Son of God in the heavenly sanctuary, this sacrifice alone provides the grounds for our forgiveness, and it provided the grounds for YHWH’s forgiveness of the Israelites.

Table 16.2

The Relationship between the Heavenly Temple of Hebrews and the Earthly Tabernacle of Exodus-Leviticus

Designations for the Heavenly Dwelling of God	Designations for the Earthly Dwelling of God
“type” (<i>typos</i>), Exod. 25:40; Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5	“replica” (<i>hypodeigma</i>), Heb. 8:5; 9:23 “antitype” (<i>antitypos</i>), Heb. 9:24
“true” (<i>alēthinos</i>), Heb. 8:2; 9:24	“shadow” (<i>skia</i>), Heb. 8:5 (cf. 10:1)
“heavenly” (<i>epouranion</i>), Heb. 8:5; 9:23	“earthly” (<i>kosmikon</i>), Heb. 9:1 “of this creation” (<i>ktiseōs</i>), Heb. 9:11 “handmade” (<i>cheiropoiētos</i>), Heb. 9:11, 24

We might add an analogy from the world of electrical engineering. When we flick a light switch, neither we nor the switch creates light. Light is produced by energy constantly flowing through the circuits. In the sacrificial system, God graciously provided the Israelites with a “light switch”; the ritual actions in the tabernacle triggered the application of divine power—the power to forgive made possible by the sacrifice of Christ.

The author of Hebrews was right: the blood of bulls and goats did not remove the Israelites’ sins (Heb. 10:4).

However, when faithful and godly Israelites trusted in the promise of God and presented their sacrifices as he instructed, Christ's sacrificial death atoned for their sins. It is doubtful that many, if any, in ancient Israel understood the relationship between their replica actions and the real sacrifice of Christ. However, just as my using this computer does not depend on my understanding how it works, the efficacy of the rituals did not depend upon full and perfect knowledge. The rituals' efficacy depended on YHWH's word. Having presented their offerings in faith, faithful Israelites could and would rejoice in his forgiving grace. We will have more to say about this later, but the new covenant of Hebrews 8 is better than the prior covenant because the replica/shadow means of maintaining covenant relationship have been replaced by the arrival in real time and real space of the heavenly, the true, and the divine sacrifice.

Concluding Reflections on the Future of the Israelite Covenant

Before we leave our discussion of stages 2 and 3 in the New Testament, we must address briefly one more subject concerning the Israelite covenant. Paul and the apostles in the book of Acts expanded the vision of the Israelite covenant beyond the geographic boundaries of the promised land and beyond the ethnic descendants of Abraham. So then, what shall we make of the eternality of the tripartite covenant that YHWH made with Abraham, established with his descendants at Sinai, confirmed with the next generation on the plains of Moab, and then completed at Mounts Gerizim and Ebal by sealing the land as their possession in perpetuity? And what shall we make of the anticipated wholesale restoration of all twelve tribes in their tribal allotments in Ezekiel 34-48? As noted earlier, both Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's visions of the restoration were parochially ethnocentric; they declared that the physical

seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be back. Where does the New Testament trajectory leave these covenant commitments by YHWH? After all, he is YHWH! He has spoken! He keeps his word.²⁸

The New Testament has remarkably little to say about the ethnic restoration of all Israel and virtually nothing to say about the territorial restoration of the promised land to the descendants of Abraham. The twelve tribes figure prominently in the apocalyptic visions of Revelation, often echoing the Hebrew prophets, but the images also often involve heavenly or at least visionary realities. Salvaging the covenant in the New Testament as promised to Israel and as portrayed throughout the First Testament requires a fairly fine strainer. From the relative silence in the New Testament, many conclude at best that God is no longer interested in these dimensions of the covenant, and at worst that he has totally and permanently suspended all the promises made to the patriarchs and to the nation: the Israelite covenant has become irrelevant. By this interpretation the promises of a physical homeland and physical benefactions morph into ethereal realities involving a spiritual relationship with God and spiritual benefactions of well-being and peace with God. This often leads to a doctrine of supersessionism, according to which God's commitment to the church universal eclipses his interest in the physical descendants of Abraham. Tragically, in many circles this doctrine has led to sinister, hateful, and triumphalist anti-Semitism, dating back before the Nazi pogroms, to Martin Luther, to the Crusades and the religious art of the high Middle Ages, and to the church fathers like John Chrysostom and Justin Martyr, and of course the heretic Marcion. Given YHWH's promises in the First Testament, is this even conceivable, when he had so emphatically declared his eternal commitment to the physical seed of Abraham? Where then would that leave his unfailing love (*hesed*) and his fidelity (*'ēmet*, *'ēmûnâ*)?²⁹

We find a hint of an affirmative answer in Galatians 6:16, where Paul distinguishes between gentile believers “who walk by this rule” and “the Israel of God” (*Israēl tou Theou*). Because the text is somewhat ambiguous and my interpretation of this verse represents a minority view among biblical scholars, I cannot stake too much on this brief statement. We are on firmer ground in Romans 9–11, where Paul laments the unfortunate fact that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (*ou gar pantes hoi ex Israēl houtoi Israēl*; 9:6). He specifically identifies with the former by calling his fellow physical Israelites “my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (*tōn adelphōn mou tōn syngenōn mou kata sarka*; 9:3). In what follows he argues that physical Israelites share the sacred traditions, including their adoption as sons of God, the glory of the theophany at Sinai, the covenants, the Torah, their status as God’s vassals (*hē latreia*), the promises (*hai epangeliai*), the patriarchs, and ultimately physical kinship with the divine Messiah/Christ (Rom. 9:4–5). However, in the wake of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, and the transforming work of his Spirit, salvation is a gracious gift received by any and all “who call upon the name of YHWH [incarnate in Jesus Christ]” (10:13). On the one hand, this principle applies to both gentiles and Jews, but on the other hand, this becomes a prerequisite to membership in the (true) Israel of which Paul spoke in 9:6.

Paul opens chapter 11 with an emphatic declaration that God has not rejected “his people” (*ton laon autou*, vv. 1–2), in which Paul claims membership as an Israelite, a descendant (*sperma*) of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin. He reiterates his denial of God’s rejection of “his people” as a nation whom he chose in advance (*proginōskō*) for that role, but then he acknowledges that as it was in the days of Elijah, so also at the present time the beneficiaries of God’s gracious election (*kat’ eklogēn charitos*) involve only a remnant (*leimma*; vv. 2b–7). In the meantime, the

majority of the Israelite nation remains unresponsive to the gospel embodied in Jesus Christ. That gospel has gone out to the gentiles, many of whom have come to faith and have been grafted into the olive tree representing God's life-giving program of grace and salvation (vv. 8–24).

So much for the present. In 11:25–29 Paul's attention turns to the future destiny of his people, which involves a mystery—that is, a fact or event that is incomprehensible until and unless God reveals it through its fulfillment. In this case the mystery involves not only collective Israel's hardened spiritual condition but also its transformation in the wake of the salvation of the full complement of gentiles and their being grafted into the olive tree, when in fulfillment of the Scriptures (Isa. 59:20) and of Paul's current hope and prayer (Rom. 10:1), "all Israel will be saved" (11:26).

Paul juxtaposes collective Israel's present hardened condition and its (eschatological) collective salvation ("when the fullness of the gentiles has been realized"), and he speaks of this transformation as a "mystery" (11:25). All this recalls Deuteronomy 29:29 [28]: "The hidden facts [*hannistārōt*; Gk. *krypta*] belong only to YHWH our God, but what has been revealed [*hanniglōt*; Gk. *phanera*] to us and our children is ours forever, that we might observe all the words of this Torah." This enigmatic statement is located in the middle of Moses' fourth and final pastoral address to his people on the plains of Moab (Deut. 29:1 [28:69]–30:20), at a critical juncture, marking the transition from an incredibly horrific image of divine fury (29:22–28 [21–27]) and incredibly exciting images of restoration (30:1–10). With reference to the former, what remained of the population of Israel will be scattered, and the land will be totally devastated because "they abandoned the covenant of YHWH, the God of their fathers, that he made [*kārat*] with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt" (29:14–28 [13–27]; esp. v. 25 [24]). However, in

Deuteronomy 30:1 Moses signals a hopeful transition with “when all these events have happened—that is, the blessing and the curse,” the curse giving way to an incredible verbal portrait of transformation and the restoration of YHWH’s covenant relationship with his people (30:1–10). That restoration involves YHWH’s people coming to their senses with full-bodied and wholehearted repentance. It also involves YHWH’s change of disposition (“repentance”) and his circumcision of their hearts, so that all will demonstrate unfailing love for him by complete compliance with the stipulations of the covenant written in the “Torah document” (30:1–10).

Although the will of YHWH was no mystery to Israel—it had been clearly revealed (29:29b [28b]) and finally would be completely fulfilled by the people—the ways of YHWH remained a mystery. How could one understand the utter transformation in the divine heart so that the people who had been the targets of wrath had become the objects of his unfailing love? The effects of the transformation are clear, but how this could happen is a mystery.

Moses had provided a summary answer near the end of his first address: “For YHWH your God is a compassionate God. He will not drop you, nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them” (4:31). It seems that 29:29 [28] was inserted precisely at this point to be a buffer between the contrasting images. Like the intermission in a theatrical performance, it gives hearers a chance to catch their breath, to reflect, and then to prepare for the final scene.

The transformation in the divine heart and in Israel’s response that Paul envisages in Romans 11:25–26a is this sort of mystery—which explains his doxological outburst when he contemplates the end of the story in verses 33–36. Through the action of the Savior who comes from Zion, he removes ungodliness from Jacob (v. 26b), an allusion to the circumcision of Israel’s hearts in Deuteronomy 30:6, and

fulfills his covenant promises by removing their sins (Rom. 11:27). Remarkably, two allusions to Jeremiah's new Israelite covenant frame this statement (vv. 26-27). "All Israel will be saved" alludes to Jeremiah 31:34, which declares that when the ideals of the Israelite covenant will finally be realized, "they will all know me from the least to the greatest." However, we should not limit this comprehensive element to the knowledge of God but expand it to include the three other essential elements of the new Israelite covenant: YHWH will write the Torah on their hearts, he will reinstate the covenant formula, and he will forgive their sins and remember them no more (vv. 33-34). Paul's citation in Romans 11:27 derives from the last clause in Jeremiah 31:34.

But what did Paul anticipate with "All Israel will be saved"? Given the context of Romans 9-11, in which this statement is embedded, and the clear allusions to Jeremiah 31:33-34, the answer to the question of the identity of "all Israel" is clear; this is the nation of Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham. In lockstep with Moses (Deut. 30:1-10), Jeremiah (Jer. 31:33-34), and Ezekiel (Ezek. 34:1-31; 37:15-28), Paul looks forward to the fulfillment of the Israelite covenant, when all physical Israel will also be "all spiritual Israel." This does not mean that "spiritual Israel" is limited to physical Israel; on the contrary, one of the key motifs in the book of Romans is that gentiles who believe in Jesus have been grafted into the olive tree and now are full members of a redeemed humanity (11:11-25). This is an image worthy of Paul's doxology in verses 33-36.

Like the prophets, Paul anticipated this as a climactic development in the distant future, at the end of the ages, when the fullness of the gentiles has been realized. They all looked forward to the day when "all Israel will be saved." It is not clear whether this involves a millennial reality, as some dispensationalists propose, or is a part of the picture of the new heavens and the new earth. However, whatever

the role of Israel will be when God's redemptive plan has been fully accomplished and instituted, for Paul—and for Moses and Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him—a future without a people identifiable as the physical descendants of Abraham was inconceivable.

- [1.](#) Exod. 1:13–14; 2:23; 5:9, 11; 6:6, 9.
- [2.](#) Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 7:16, 26; 8:20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7, 8, 11, 24, 26.
- [3.](#) Exod. 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8 [4], 25–29 [21–25]; 10:25.
- [4.](#) Isa. 41:8; 44:1, 21; 45:4; 49:3; cf. Ezek. 28:25.
- [5.](#) Gk. *hē latreia* = Hb. *ʿăbōdâ*, Exod. 12:25–26; 13:5; Josh. 22:27.
- [6.](#) Rom. 6:14; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:18.
- [7.](#) Cf. Matt. 7:12; 22:36–40; Mark 12:28–33; Luke 10:25–28; Rom. 13:8.
- [8.](#) Deut. 5:1–5; 26:16–19; 27:9–10; 29:10–13 [9–12].
- [9.](#) Acts 21:39; 22:3; 1 Cor. 9:20.
- [10.](#) *blasphēmeitai* as in Rom. 2:24 = Hb. *minnō'āš*, “treated with contempt,” as in Isa. 52:5.
- [11.](#) Heb. 9:11; 10:1; 13:21; Gk. *agathos* = Hb. *ṭōb* in 2 Sam. 7:28; 1 Chron. 17:26; Pss. 34:10 [11]; 84:11 [12].
- [12.](#) Heb. 1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6a, 6b; 9:11, 23; 10:1, 34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24; 13:21.
- [13.](#) Cf. *prōtē diathēkē*, Heb. 9:15; *prōtē* (with *diathēkē* assumed, 9:1, 18; cf. also 10:9).
- [14.](#) Heb. 7:5, 12, 16, 19, 28a, 28b; 8:4, 10 (though in 8:10 and 10:16, as in LXX, the pl., *nomous*, seems to refer to individual stipulations rather than the Torah as a body of revelation); 9:19, 22; 10:1, 8, 28.
- [15.](#) Heb. 7:27; 9:26; 10:11, 12, 26.
- [16.](#) Heb. 8:3; 9:9, 23; 10:1, 5.
- [17.](#) Gk. *prosphora* = Hb. *minḥâ*, 10:5, 8; though *prosphora* functions more broadly as well; 10:1 (verb form), 14, 18.
- [18.](#) Singular: 9:26, 28b; 10:18 (in 10:6 and 8 it refers to “sin offering”); elsewhere in Hebrews, 3:13; 4:15; 11:25; 12:1, 4; 13:11. Plural: 9:28a; 10:2, 3, 4, 11, 12, 17, 26; elsewhere in Hebrews, 1:3; 2:17; 5:1, 3; 7:27; 8:12.
- [19.](#) E.g., Exod. 29:36; Lev. 4:8, 20; 8:2, 14; 16:6, 11, 27; Ezek. 43:21; 45:22.
- [20.](#) Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22.
- [21.](#) Deut. 4:10–14; 5:22; 9:20; 10:4; 16:8; 18:16.
- [22.](#) Gk. *proserchomai* occurs in the LXX of Deut. 4:11; 5:23–27.
- [23.](#) Heb. 7:27–28; 8:3; 9:6–13, 18–22, 25; 10:2–3.
- [24.](#) Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7.
- [25.](#) Matt. 13:35 (*kosmou* implied); 25:34; Luke 11:50; Rev. 13:8; 17:8.
- [26.](#) *pro katabolēs kosmou*, John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20.
- [27.](#) Deut. 4:16–18; Josh. 22:28; Pss. 106:20; 144:12; Isa. 44:13; Ezek. 8:3, 10; 10:8.

[28.](#) Ezek. 17:24; 22:14; 36:36; 37:14.

[29.](#) E.g., Exod. 34:6-7; Deut. 32:4; John 1:14.

CHAPTER 17

Stage 4 of the Israelite Covenant in the New Testament

The New Israelite Covenant

Introduction

That the expression “new covenant” (*kainē diathēkē / diathēkēn kainēn*) occurs only once in the First Testament (Jer. 31:31 [LXX 38:31]) but seven times in the New reflects the change that transpired between the end of the old era (BC, “before Christ”) and the dawn of the new (AD, *anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord”). The forms of the expression vary. The three New Testament references outside Hebrews place the modifier “new” (*kainē*) before the substantive (*diathēkē*).¹ Twice the author of Hebrews followed the Septuagint version of Jeremiah 31:31 [LXX 38:31], reversing the order of the substantive and modifier (Heb. 8:8; 9:15); once he replaced the Greek word for “new,” *kainē*, with a synonym, *nea* (Heb. 12:24); and once he used an elliptical expression, mentioning only “new,” *kainē*, and dropping the substantive *diathēkē*, “covenant” (8:13). Within this context, it is clear that the author of Hebrews had the “new covenant” in mind. In my discussion of these texts, I shall first consider 2 Corinthians 3:6, which uses the expression strangely as metonymy for the post-resurrection covenantal order. Then I shall consider together

the two references associated with the institution of the Lord's Supper (Eucharist, Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25) and conclude with a discussion of how the book of Hebrews understands the concept.²

The Life-Giving New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6)

In 2 Corinthians 3:5–6 Paul contrasts the old Israelite covenantal order and the new covenantal order with a remarkable statement: “We are not sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a *new covenant*, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (ESV alt.).

To grasp the significance of “a new covenant” (*kainē diathēkē*) here, we must consider the larger context in which Paul embeds verses 1–18. On the surface this text seems disjointed, jumping from topic to topic. It begins with a short introduction (vv. 1–4 [66 words]), followed by two segments roughly double the size of the first (vv. 5–11 [120 words] and vv. 12–18 [120 words]). However, upon closer reflection, the motifs of text and of reading provide the passage with a measure of thematic coherence.

In the first segment (vv. 1–4), Paul identifies the Corinthian believers as letters (*epistolai*) inscribed by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the hearts of Paul and the community that he represents (note the pl. pronouns). The metaphor is daring, if not bizarre. The apostle casts the hearts of those whose reputations are at stake as a tablet and their believing converts as the inscribed text, accessible for all to read. The text has been imprinted on their hearts, not by ink on the tablet but by the Spirit of God, which ensures their integrity and authenticity.

Speaking of the Spirit of God as the guarantee of a text's authenticity and effectiveness, in the second segment (vv. 5–11) Paul introduces another text whose life-giving power

derives from the same Spirit: the new covenant (*kainē diathēkē*), for which God had authenticated him as agent and carrier (*diakonos*, v. 6). Although Paul also contrasts this text/covenant with a text consisting of letters engraved on stone (v. 7), now the word “letter” does not refer to the medium of communication. Nor does Paul specify a writing material on which the text is inscribed corresponding or in contrast to the “tablets of stone” (*plakes lithinai*), as he had in verse 3.

But this raises a question: What then does Paul mean by “letters” in verses 6–7? English translations are confusing because we use the same word “letter” for transcribed messages (*epistolē*, as in vv. 1–3) and for orthographic symbols that in alphabetic scripts correspond to sounds, which is represented in verses 6–7 by Greek *gramma/grammatos*. The New Testament identifies three of these: *iōta* (= Hb. *yod* [י], the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet; Matt. 5:18), as well as *alpha* (Gk. *A/α* = Hb. *aleph* [א]) and *ōmega* (Gk. *Ω/ω*, Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). In this orthographic context, we should also mention the “tittle” (Gk. *kerasia*), which represents a small stroke of a Hebrew letter that distinguishes it from another similar form (ט [*ṭ*] versus ח [*ḥ*]; ב [*b*] versus כ [*k*]). Because the Hebrew alphabet is restricted to consonants, technically *ōmega* is unrepresented, though in later stages of the development of the script, the letter *w* [ו] signified a long *o* vowel. Paul used *gramma* for an alphabetic symbol in Galatians 6:11: “See how large the letters are that I use to write to you with my own hand[writing].” On first sight, this meaning appears to underlie Paul’s reference to “the ministry of death in letters engraved on stones” (v. 7). However, on the basis of speech-act theory, when he adds “that came with glory,” he refers not in a locutionary sense to the calligraphic beauty of the individual letters but to the transcendent illocutionary significance of the message communicated by this particular combination of characters.

But which document did Paul have in mind? Because the First Testament uses “tablets of stone”³ exclusively for the (two) tablets of the covenant,⁴ also called “the tablets of the icon/Guarantee [of the covenant],”⁵ inscribed by YHWH’s own finger,⁶ Paul undoubtedly had in mind the tablets of the Decalogue. Stored in the holiest and most restricted space inside the tabernacle and its successor the temple, these objects were inaccessible to humans, inside the container known as “the ark of the covenant,”⁷ or “the ark of the icon [of the covenant]” (*’ărôn hā’ēdūt*), behind the veil inside the holy of holies. The Torah never envisions these tablets being retrieved for cultic or liturgical purposes; rather, they were kept in the very presence of God and away from human view. Modern efforts to reconstruct the tablets and erect them as sacred monuments in public spaces or hang them on walls of houses fundamentally misinterpret the tablets. But in this context of alluding to their function as guarantees, Paul was correct. The primary function of the pair of tablets inscribed with the Decalogue was to serve as signs, reminding YHWH respectively of his own irrevocable commitments to Israel, analogous to the rainbow in relationship to the cosmic covenant (Gen. 9:12–17), and of his role as divine Guarantor of Israel’s fidelity to him and his covenant with them.

These tablets were destined for placement in YHWH’s throne room inside the sanctuary; thus it is appropriate that Paul should associate the tablets of stone with “glory” (Gk. *doxa*; Hb. *kābôd*, 2 Cor. 3:7–11). In recounting the production of the first edition of the twin tablets, the narrator of Exodus emphasizes that the tablets themselves were a divine creation and that the text they displayed was inscribed by God himself (Exod. 32:15–16), which rendered them “glorious” by definition. The tablets’ “glory” was reinforced by the function of the ark of the covenant that housed them as the throne of YHWH (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam.

6:2) and the magnificent decoration of the inner sanctum where the ark was placed.⁸

Nonetheless, the event to which Paul alluded in 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 transpired before the construction of both the ark of the covenant and the sanctuary, where the tablets would be stored. In the wake of the golden-calf debacle and after Moses had won YHWH's change of heart regarding the fate of the nation (Exod. 32:14), YHWH had inscribed "the words of the covenant, the ten words," on a new set of tablets (Exod. 34:27–28). According to Deuteronomy 10:1–5, the text on these tablets was identical to the text of the first set.

However, Exodus 34:29–35 highlights a remarkable phenomenon associated with the production of the new tablets. As Moses descended Mount Sinai with the new tablets in hand, unbeknownst to him, his face was shining with the radiance of YHWH, who had invited Moses into his presence. However, once he was out of the presence of YHWH and among the people, the glory of Moses' face could not be sustained. To prevent the people from "reading" this fading glory, Israel's leader covered his face with a veil (2 Cor. 3:13; cf. Exod. 34:33–35).

Returning to 2 Corinthians 3:14–15, Paul ended his treatment of the "new covenant" with a couple of curious rhetorical turns. First, instead of resuming his discussion of the text on the tablets of stone, he talked about "the reading of the old covenant." As noted earlier, here "old covenant" functions either as a collective designation for the texts associated with the establishment and renewal of the Israelite covenant as preserved in the Pentateuch or as the Pentateuch itself. But the context suggests that "the letters engraved on stones" in verse 7 function metonymically for the covenant itself. This makes perfect sense when we realize that the tablets deposited in the ark of the covenant and stored in the presence of YHWH in the holy of holies were the sign, the icon, of God's own

commitment to his people and his role as divine Guarantor of Israel's fidelity.

The switch in the role of the veil signifies a second surprising rhetorical turn in verses 12–18. Paul had begun by talking about Moses wearing a veil so the people could not observe the glory fading on his face (vv. 7, 11–13), but by the end of Paul's argument, it was the people who were wearing the veil—as if it had been removed from Moses and placed on their heads (vv. 14–16). But with this move the veil's significance also changed; it was not to prevent Moses or anyone else from watching the glory fade from the people's faces, as had been the case earlier. Now the veil itself represented the problem, for in covering their hearts (v. 15) it prevented the people from grasping or experiencing the life-giving power of the old covenant. However, with the institution of the new covenant centered in Christ, that veil is removed, and whenever a person turns to him (YHWH), the Spirit of YHWH (= Hb. *rûaḥ yhwh*) liberates that person from bondage and triumphs over the forces of death and condemnation that operated previously. Then the faces of those for whom the veil has been lifted reflect the glory of YHWH, and the people themselves are transformed into evermore glorious images of Christ (vv. 17–18).

Many questions remain, but one is critical here. How is it that the inscribed tablets of stone, which originally functioned as symbols of YHWH's liberation and Israel's privileged status as YHWH's covenant partner, have become symbols of death and condemnation (vv. 6–7)? The statement that opens the inscription on the tablets renders the question all the more poignant: "I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). This poignancy intensifies in light of the life-giving power of the commands celebrated in the Torah itself (Deut. 6:24) and in Torah Psalms.⁹ Verses 6–7 remind us of Paul's discussion of a

related topic in Romans 7:4–11. Although in the sequel he acknowledges that the law is holy, righteous, good, and spiritual (vv. 12–14), in verse 6 he had spoken of being released from the law that held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (*palaiotēti grammatos*).

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul appears to make the point that it was the ministry of death represented by the letters on stone tablets that created the need for the new covenant. But when did the stone tablets take on that role? It seems best to correlate this chapter with the rise of intertestamental Judaism, in which the Pharisaic and rabbinic efforts to fence the Torah with oral traditions stifled the life out of YHWH's covenant, while elevating the laws to virtually divine status. When rabbis say, "If only my people would abandon me and keep my commands" (Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 15.4 [Neusner, *Treasury of Judaism*, 2:77]), we know the world is upside down. Apart from a living relationship with God propelled by the Spirit of God, the law as law cannot deliver life; it can only become a noose that gets ever tighter around one's neck. In Paul's mind, the new covenant, which is of the Spirit, is the only answer to this tragic development.

The New Israelite Covenant and YHWH's Table (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25)

Accounts of Jesus' institution of YHWH's Supper occur in four New Testament contexts: Matthew 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–28. Although each account is idiosyncratic in its portrayal of the event as a whole, our concern here is particularly the phrase "the new covenant in my blood," which we find only in the Lukan and the Corinthian versions. However, to understand these two we do well to consider Matthew's and Mark's portrayal of

this element as a foil for Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25 by citing Jesus' words in all four texts:

"This is my blood of the covenant [touto estin to haima mou tēs diathēkēs], which is poured out for many," he said to them. "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14:24–25 NIV, emphasis added)

This is my blood of the covenant [touto gar estin to haima mou tēs diathēkēs], which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. (Matt. 26:28–29 NIV, emphasis added)

This cup is the new covenant in my blood [hē kainē diathēkē en tō haimati mou], which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:20 NIV, emphasis added)

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood [hē kainē diathēkē en tō emō haimati]; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's (*kyrios* = YHWH) death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:25–26 NIV, emphasis added)

Apart from their added reference to Jesus' anticipation of drinking from the fruit of the vine in the kingdom of God, the most significant feature of the Matthean and Markan renderings is the identification of the wine (fruit of the vine) as "the blood of the covenant" rather than "the new covenant in my blood." Their wording links this observance directly to the Israelite covenant-ratification ritual in Exodus 24:8, where the Hebrew version of this expression (*dam habbērît*) refers to the blood sprinkled on the people, binding them by covenant to YHWH. The expression also occurs in Zechariah 9:11, where "the blood of your covenant" provides the grounds for YHWH's ultimate restoration of Israel after its judgment. Matthew adds one more significant detail, "for the remission of sins" (*eis aphesin hamartiōn*), which ties this ritual to the atoning sacrifices in Israel's sanctuary.

The phrase "new covenant in my blood" in Luke 22:20 is cryptic and probably signifies something like "This cup [of

suffering] seals the new covenant in my blood.”¹⁰ But what does he have in mind with “the new covenant”? The most obvious answer is found in Jeremiah’s oracle of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:27–40. As we noted earlier, YHWH’s promise of a new covenant in this passage built on Moses’ vision of Israel’s full restoration after the imposition of the covenant curses in the nation’s distant future, as declared in Deuteronomy 30:1–10. Moses spoke of Israel’s spiritual renewal in terms of YHWH’s circumcision of the entire nation’s heart so that they will all demonstrate covenant love (*’āhab*) for him by walking in his ways and listening to his voice, which means wholehearted and full-bodied obedience to all that is written in the Torah. Jeremiah identified four dimensions of the nation’s spiritual renewal: (1) YHWH would put his Torah in people’s hearts; (2) he would renew the covenant relationship—defined by reiterating the covenant formula, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people”; (3) all will know YHWH; and (4) all would experience remission of their sin (Jer. 31:33–34). Matthew’s addition of the phrase “for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28; cf. Heb. 9:20) to “my blood of the covenant” links his version with Jeremiah (cf. Jer. 31:34) differently from Luke’s and Paul’s references to “the new covenant.”

When Jesus identified the cup with “the new covenant in my blood,” he announced the grounds of Israel’s eventual spiritual transformation. Through his sacrifice he laid the foundations for and instituted God’s new covenant with his people Israel. However, one issue remained: the scope of redemption from sin envisaged. As noted earlier, since Jeremiah’s vision of the range of the benefits of the new covenant was quite parochial, I identify the covenant as “the new *Israelite* covenant.” Although the prophet had a lot to say about the nations as YHWH’s agents of judgment against Israel, as hosts of the scattered remnant of Israel, and as observers of his actions against and in favor of

Israel,^{[11](#)} Jeremiah never envisaged the nations as participating in the benefits of the new covenant.

In the immediate context of Luke 22:20, we find no hint of the covenant's range being expanded. On the contrary, the institution of "the new covenant" was timed to coincide with the Passover meal, which commemorated Israel's departure from Egypt (v. 7) and the public declaration of this people as YHWH's firstborn son (Exod. 4:22). Furthermore, the participants in the moment were the eleven apostles (Judas had left the company earlier; 22:3–6), whom Jesus addressed when he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out *for you*" (22:20). Indeed, later in this same gathering, Jesus declared explicitly, "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (22:28–30 ESV). It is difficult to imagine a more parochial statement.

However, this changes in 1 Corinthians 11:25, where, in Paul's citation of Jesus' words of institution with respect to the cup, he drops, "which is poured out for you." We should not overplay the significance of this because he had included "which is for you" with respect to Jesus' body in his statement concerning the bread (v. 24). But here "you" no longer applies just to the apostles or just to Jewish believers. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians is addressed "to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2 ESV). This congregation included both Jewish and gentile believers (cf. 1:24; 12:13). The expression "church of God" (*ekklēsia tou Theou*) occurs five times in this book, including twice in the present context.^{[12](#)}

"Church of God" refers to a global community of Christians, given the Septuagint's regular rendering of Hebrew *qāhāl* as *ekklēsia*.^{[13](#)} However, the identification of

Christians irrespective of ethnic identity as *ekklēsia*, “[summoned] assembly,” reinforces the church’s continuity with Israel. Paul did not need to justify his application of the body and blood of Christ to non-Jewish believers. Since Paul was the apostle and minister of Christ to the gentiles,¹⁴ we may assume (based on Rom. 11:11–24) that underlying the extension of YHWH’s table fellowship to gentiles in 1 Corinthians 11 was Paul’s conviction that gentile believers in Jesus were grafted into the Israelite olive tree. The goal of YHWH’s election of Abraham and his descendants was, through them, to extend his blessing to all the nations of the earth. But ironically, according to Paul, the grafting in of the gentiles as heirs of YHWH’s benefactions for Israel (cf. Rom. 4–5) coincided with Israel’s rejection of that mission. In the end the full realization of the new Israelite covenant awaits the arrival of “the fullness of the gentiles” (*to plērōma tōn ethnōn*, Rom. 11:25). Paul’s comment that thus “all Israel will be saved” (11:26) grasps the only element of Jeremiah’s new Israelite covenant that is actually new: the Israelites will *all* know YHWH (Jer. 31:34). This comprehensive expression technically modifies only the scope of the knowledge of YHWH, but we may assume that it applies to all four elements of Jeremiah’s new Israelite covenant (vv. 33–34).¹⁵ Paul links his vision of Israel’s full restoration under these circumstances with his summary statement: “and this will be my covenant with them, when I remove their sins” (Rom. 11:27). The elements of this statement represent paraphrastic renderings of the opening and closing phrases/clauses of Jeremiah 31:33–34.

The New Israelite Covenant in Hebrews (Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24)

Now we have arrived at the book of Hebrews, which offers the fullest treatment of the new [Israelite] covenant in the New Testament. Indeed, the new covenant is central to the

author's explanation of the ministry of Jesus Christ and of the relationship of his work to the original Israelite covenant—and in fact all the covenants of the First Testament. The new covenant is mentioned in three contexts in the epistle, but only the first offers sustained treatment of the subject, and the bulk of the treatment consists of a nearly verbatim quotation of the Septuagint version of Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Hebrews 8:8–12, which is the longest quotation of any First Testament text in the entire New Testament.

The Greek expressions vary enough to show that the citation is not exact and suggest that the author was reciting from memory rather than reading from a written text. For example, in Hebrews 8:8 the author uses *legei* (says) where the Septuagint has *phēsin* (Jer. 31 [LXX 38]:31) and *syntelesō* (make, establish) where the Septuagint has *diathēsomai*. Hebrews 10:16–17 buttresses this conclusion by repeating 8:10, 12 with further variations. Although the author was preaching/writing to Hebrew Christians, the book of Hebrews remarkably agrees with the Old Greek version when the latter differs from the Hebrew text. This confirms that the text in his mind was the textual tradition underlying not the Hebrew but the Old Greek version, which was produced by Jewish rabbis in Alexandria for the Jewish community in Egypt, for whom Greek had become the primary language.

The author has embedded his discussion of the new covenant (8:7–13) in the very heart of a longer discussion of the superiority of Jesus Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood over the priesthood of Aaron, which was so important in maintaining Israel's relationship with YHWH under the first covenant (7:1–9:28). He created some anticipation for this discussion in 7:21–22 by declaring that through YHWH's oath to David (Ps. 110 [LXX 109]:4), Jesus became "the guarantee of a better covenant." Because YHWH had made no such oath at the installation of Aaron as priest (Heb. 7:20–21) and because that high priesthood itself was weak

(v. 28), the vitality of the original Israelite covenant was dependent on the maintenance operations of an inferior priesthood. Speaking of “inferior,” in 8:6–7 the focus switches from the superiority of Jesus Christ’s priesthood to the superiority of the new covenant. Indeed, the author frames the lengthy citation from Jeremiah 31 [LXX 38] in Hebrews 10:8–12 with references to its superiority in verses 6–7 and verse 13.

But what did the author mean when he said the new covenant was superior to the first covenant? In answering this question, we must examine both the terms of the respective covenants and the way he spoke of them. Regarding the first issue, it is clear that both covenants concern Israel, specifically the provision of a way of maintaining Israel’s relationship with God. To be sure, the name Israel appears only three times in the book, twice in the citation of Jeremiah 31 (Heb. 8:8, 10; cf. also 11:22). However, on the basis of that citation, the author presupposed that he and his readers were beneficiaries of the relationships provided by the respective covenants. The ubiquitous use of first-person plural pronouns, “we,” “us,” and “our” (> 100×) in the book reinforces this conclusion.

The author never identified his addressees, though the pervasively Jewish flavor of the book and the traditional name, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” suggest that they were physical descendants of Abraham who through faith in Jesus Christ had experienced spiritual resurrection (cf. the magnificent concluding benediction, 13:20–21), but who were tempted to return to their former spiritual location (6:1–8). The author seems to perceive them and their relationship to him as analogous to the Israelites of the conquest generation and their relationship to Moses as he delivered his farewell addresses on the plains of Moab (3:12–4:13; cf. Deut. 5:1–5). He apparently wrote to his physical and spiritual kinsmen from Italy (Heb. 13:22–24), encouraging them to hold fast to Jesus amid intense

suffering and persecution (10:32–39). If this interpretation is correct, then, unlike in the book of Acts or Paul’s epistles to gentile congregations, the author seems disinterested in expanding the boundaries of either the original first covenant or the new covenant to the human population generally. His concern was to ensure that in their commitment to the Israelite covenant the readers would not miss the centrality of Jesus Christ to the new Israelite covenant or miss out on all that he offered through the new Israelite covenant.

In terms of the content of the new covenant envisioned in 8:8–12, the author clearly recognized the fundamental unity between the new covenant and the original Israelite covenant. First, by beginning his citation with Jeremiah 31 [LXX 38]:31, he announced both the arrival of the fulfillment of YHWH’s promise through Jeremiah (“days are coming”) and the houses of Israel and Judah as God’s chosen covenant partners. More specifically, by discounting the exodus generation, who had failed in their response to the covenant (Heb. 8:9), and turning his attention to their successors, he seemed to perceive his addressees as the true covenant people. This is just as Moses had considered those who stood before him on the plains of Moab and were poised to enter the promised land as the true people of YHWH (Deut. 5:1–5; 27:9–10). Like Moses, the author of Hebrews had a pastoral goal; he pleaded with his audience to stay true to their redeemer and covenant Lord (cf. Deut. 11:26–32; 30:11–20).

Second, as we noticed with respect to Jeremiah 31 [LXX 38] (see chap. 9 above), the four divine benefactions declared to be at the heart of this covenant were not only identical to Jeremiah’s new Israelite covenant but also fundamental to the Israelite covenant established at Sinai and renewed on the plains of Moab (Heb. 8:10–11). Whatever else we say about the relationship between these two covenants, we may not discount and should not

overlook the continuity between the original Israelite covenant and the “new covenant” mediated by Jesus Christ (cf. the epithet for Jesus, “mediator [*mesitēs*] of the new covenant” in 9:15; 12:24; cf. 8:6, “mediator of a better covenant”).

How then did the author of Hebrews perceive the relationship between the two entities? We find the first clues in his preferred designations for the respective covenants. He uses the expression “new covenant” three times. Two of these involve the Greek expression *diathēkē kainē*,¹⁶ and one involves *diathēkēs neas* (12:24). Remarkably, unlike Paul, who speaks of “the old covenant” in 2 Corinthians 3:14 (*tēs palaias diathēkēs*), and despite the author’s characterization of the Israelite covenant as “becoming obsolete” (*palaiō*) and “aging” (*gēraskō*) and “becoming invisible” (*aphanismos*, 8:13), the author of Hebrews never refers to the Israelite covenant as “the old covenant.” Instead, suggesting sequence and progress, he prefers “first covenant” (*hē prōtē diathēkē*, 9:15) or elliptically “the first [covenant]” (*hē prōtē* [*diathēkē*], 8:7; 9:1, 18), followed by “a/the second [covenant]” (*deuteros*, 8:7), which was new (*kainē*, 8:13; *nea*, 12:24) and better (*kreittonos*, 7:22).

But how shall we interpret the narrator’s declaration in 8:7 that the very existence of the second proved that the first was faulty? The key to the answer is the intended sense of *amemptos*, which normally means “blameless” or “without fault.” The word appears in the Old Greek First Testament in Genesis 17:1, eleven times in Job (e.g., 1:1, 8; 2:3; etc.), and in a lengthy addition to Esther (Add. Esth. 8:12n). Outside our text, it appears four times in the New Testament.¹⁷ Except for Hebrews 8:7, it always refers to a human being of exceptional moral and spiritual merit; only here does it describe some *thing* other than a person. The absence of *memptos* (without the prefix *a-*, negating the root, hence *amemptos*, “without blame”) from the New Testament frustrates our search for its meaning. However,

memptos/mempteos occurs occasionally in classical Greek literature (LS, s.v.), always with the sense of “to be blamed, faulty, flawed.”

However, this interpretation of *amemptos* in this context is flawed on both hermeneutical and theological grounds. First, the terms of the Israelite covenant were revealed by YHWH to Israel from beginning to end. This included the entire sacrificial system, with its design of the sanctuary for YHWH, the rituals to be performed in them, and the promises of forgiveness if people performed the rituals as revealed (Lev. 4–6). Second, unlike other gods in the ancient Near East, YHWH was never capricious, arbitrary, or inconsistent in his actions or in his revelation. The opening characterization of him in “Israel’s national anthem” applies to both his actions on Israel’s behalf and his revelation of himself and his will for his covenant people:

The Rock, his actions are perfect [*tāmîm*],
for all his ways demonstrate justice [*mišpāṭ*].
He is a God of faithfulness [*’ēl ’āmunā*] and without caprice [*’ēn
’āwe*],
righteous [*ṣaddîq*] and true [*yāšār*]. (Deut. 32:4)

This means that God can be neither untrue to himself or deviant in his revelation. He cannot reveal a sacrificial system and promise forgiveness through it in one moment and then retract the system or any detail within it as flawed, faulty, or mistaken in another. We must find a better way to interpret Hebrews 8:7. The citation from Jeremiah and the broader context offer several clues for an alternative reading that both acknowledges the eternality and irrevocability of YHWH’s covenant with Israel (cf. Heb. 13:20) and celebrates the newness of the revelation in Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 1:1–4).

First, Hebrews 8:6–13 distinguishes between permanent and impermanent elements within the Israelite covenant. The author cites (vv. 10–11) YHWH’s promises (in Jer. 31:33–

34) to put his Torah in the people's hearts/minds, to be Israel's covenant God and claim them as his people, to grant knowledge of himself, and to forgive their sins. As already noted, these promises offer nothing new but reaffirm four foundations of the Israelite covenant. Furthermore, his promise to inscribe the Torah on people's hearts cannot involve the replacement of the graciously revealed terms of one covenantal system with another, as if the first was trashed as flawed, imperfect, and ineffective. Rather, it means extending the boundaries of the true covenant community to the entire nation. Until now that true covenant community had generally consisted only of a minority of Abraham's descendants, those who experienced the essential elements of covenant relationship (cf. Rom. 11:25–27). Jesus Christ—the incarnation of YHWH, the God who brought the people to himself at Sinai and drew Israel into covenant relationship with himself and a generation later had inspired Moses to proclaim the Torah on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy)—had himself reaffirmed the permanence of the Torah (Matt. 5:17–20) and declared his disciples' adherence to its stipulations as proof of membership in the covenant community (John 14:15; 15:9–11).

Nevertheless, in the wake of the full revelation of God in Jesus, something has changed; certain elements of the Israelite covenant have obviously been rendered obsolete and superfluous in the new order (Heb. 8:13). What these elements are is evident, especially when we recognize that the book of Hebrews was written without verse numbers and chapter dividers. The statement that follows immediately after the lengthy text we have been exploring (8:7–13) announces the beginning of the solution to the interpretive problem: “Now the first [*prōtē*] [covenant] included regulations for cultic service involving an earthly sanctuary” (Heb. 9:1). The author then details the relationship between earthly and humanly executed shadow

and replica institutions involving the sanctuary, the high priesthood, and sacrifices of atonement inside the holy of holies. As a contrast, he next presents the heavenly, divinely executed, true and once-and-for-all ministry of Christ. What have become obsolete and irrelevant in the new order are the replica actions. It is not that the earlier ministries in the sanctuary were false or faulty, but that they did not involve the real basis of Israel's covenant relationship. As I noted in the previous chapter, the real soteriological event happened "before the foundation of the world" (cf. Heb. 4:3; 9:26), but YHWH had granted Israel free access to the benefits of Christ's sacrifice through these replica actions. Now that Christ had been revealed, the replica actions are passé; in fact, for these Hebrew believers to continue doing them would be an anachronistic act of unbelief. From now on, the covenant relationship would be maintained not through replica personnel in a replica sanctuary but directly through the mediatorial work of Christ. Through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20), who is "Jesus our [divine] Suzerain," and specifically through his sacrificial blood, the "eternal covenant" with Israel has been established, ratified, confirmed.

As noted earlier, in the First Testament the expression "new covenant" occurs only in Jeremiah 31:31. This was the covenant that the author of Hebrews (8:7-13) declared to be fulfilled in Christ. However, the roots of the expression "eternal covenant" (*diathēkē aiōnios*, 13:20) are ancient. The First Testament applies this phrase to three of the four stages of the Israelite covenant: the original covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 17:7, 13), the covenant with his descendants established at Sinai (Exod. 27:21; 31:16), and the new Israelite covenant (Jer. 50 [LXX 27]:5; 31 [LXX 38]:35-37; Ezek. 37:26). Presumably Moses did not need to characterize the third stage (the confirmation of the covenant with the post-exodus generation on the plains of

Moab) this way explicitly because of its tight linkage to the second stage, which he signaled concretely by beginning his second address with the Decalogue, the foundation of the second stage. Thus all the stages of this singular covenant find their fulfillment in the work of Jesus Christ. In the context of a fallen world, his sacrifice provides the basis of every gracious overture from God to Israel, and by extension to a fallen and depraved humanity.

As we witnessed in Jeremiah 31, the book of Hebrews is addressed to Hebrews, though these are Christian descendants of Abraham. The book pays remarkably little attention to the cosmic implications of Jesus Christ's redemptive work. However, this dimension is not missing. The book opens with an ode to the cosmic reach of God's revelation in his Son: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, *whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe*" (Heb. 1:1-2 NIV, emphasis added).

This semi-poetic introit with its cosmic view is answered in part as Hebrews 11 surveys the history of faith in the biblical tradition. Remarkably, this survey commences with three significant individuals who antedated the Israelite covenant but whom God recognized as fully righteous: Abel, Enoch, and Noah (vv. 4-7). By faith, demonstrated in action in accord with what would later be described as covenant righteousness, these representatives of humanity generally were able to access the grace of God. As the closing verse of the chapter declares, like those who follow in this "hall of faith," these men also "were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (11:39-40 NIV). While they too participated in replica-and-shadow ritual activities, their acceptance was also based on the

finished work of Christ. Ultimately it was not the blood of their offerings that established their covenant relationship with God, any more than would be the case with the Israelites under the Israelite covenant. Rather, YHWH in his grace had revealed to these saints a means by which they could experience the atonement provided by Jesus Christ, the mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood “speaks a better message than Abel” (Heb. 12:24 NIV). Although most translations probably clarify the meaning rightly by inserting “blood of” before Abel’s name, the issue here is not Abel’s own blood that cried out from the ground after Cain had murdered him (Gen. 4:10), but the blood of Abel’s sacrifice, which God recognized as evidence of proper faith. Therefore, God accepted not only the sacrifice, but especially Abel himself. The promise of the shadow/replica/earthly act was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.

- [1.](#) Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6.
- [2.](#) Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24.
- [3.](#) Exod. 24:12; 31:18; 34:4; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:9–11; 10:1, 3.
- [4.](#) Hb. *lūḥôt habbērit*, Deut. 9:9, 11, 15.
- [5.](#) Hb. *lūḥôt hā’ēdūt*, Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29.
- [6.](#) Exod. 31:18; cf. 32:16; 34:28; Deut. 9:10.
- [7.](#) Hb. *’ārôn habbērit*, Josh. 3:6, 8, 11; 4:9; 6:6.
- [8.](#) Exod. 25:10–22; 26:31–35; cf. the temple in 1 Kings 6:16–28.
- [9.](#) Pss. 19:7; 119:40, 93, 107, 156.
- [10.](#) Cf. Matt. 20:22; 26:39; Mark 10:38; 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11.
- [11.](#) Jer. 33:9; cf. Deut. 26:19; 28:8–10.
- [12.](#) 1 Cor. 11:16, 22; cf. 1:2; 10:32; 15:9.
- [13.](#) E.g., Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:2–4, 9; 31:30.
- [14.](#) Rom. 11:13; 15:16; Gal. 2:8–9; Eph. 3:8; cf. Acts 13:46; 18:6; 22:21; 26:20, 23; 28:28; Gal. 3:14.
- [15.](#) (1) YHWH would put his Torah in people’s hearts; (2) he would renew the covenant relationship—defined by reiterating the covenant formula, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people”; (3) all will know YHWH; and (4) all would experience remission of their sin (Jer. 31:33–34).
- [16.](#) Heb. 8:8; 9:15; in 8:13 *kainēn* functions elliptically for *diathēkēn kainēn*.
- [17.](#) Luke 1:6; Phil. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess. 3:13.

CHAPTER 18

The Davidic Covenant in the Gospel Accounts of Jesus' Early Life and Ministry

Introduction

Our exploration of the notion of covenant in the Scriptures reaches its climax in an examination of the Davidic covenant in the New Testament. This subject is large enough to justify an entire volume on its own. Admittedly, the New Testament never uses the name David and the word for “covenant” in the same sentence or refers explicitly to the Davidic covenant. However, the sheer frequency of the name David and associated epithets reflects the importance of this dimension of Israel’s covenantal traditions in the New Testament (table 18.1).

The title “Christ” (*Christos* = Messiah) celebrates his role as the long-awaited Messiah of the Israelite/Jewish people, as do compound epithets like “King of Israel”¹ and “King of the Jews,”² and even presentations of Jesus as Shepherd³ and the Servant (of YHWH).⁴ Given the wealth of information on Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic messianic hopes, approaches to this subject are almost as diverse as the number of scholars who dare to tackle the subject. It is difficult to decide how to do justice to it. In this and the next chapter, I shall focus on how the Gospels

portray Jesus as the heir to the Davidic promise; then in chapter 20 I will offer some summary observations on the remainder of the New Testament. In the exploration of the Gospels I will attend to six phases of the narratives of Jesus' life and ministry where the messianic motif is particularly strong: (1) Jesus' nativity, (2) Jesus' inauguration as Messiah, (3) the time between Jesus' anointing and Peter's confession, (4) Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, (5) Jesus' transfiguration, and (6) Jesus' passion as the moment of his messianic elevation. The first five will be treated in this chapter, and the sixth will take up the next chapter. Even then, my treatment of texts will be selective, cursory, and unbalanced.

Table 18.1

Frequency and Forms of References to the Name David and Related Epithets in the New Testament

	Matt.	Mark	Luke	John	Acts	Rom.	1 Cor.	2 Cor.	Gal.	Eph.	Phil.	Col.	1 Thess.	2 Thess.	1 Tim.	2 Tim.	Titus	Philem.	Heb.	James	1 Pet.	2 Pet.	1 John	2 John	3 John	Jude	Rev.	Total
David	17	7	13	2	11	3										1			2								3	59
Jesse	2		1		1	1																						5
Judah	4		3																2								2	11
King [of Israel/ Judah/Jews]	14	7	7	16	2										2												3	51
Servant [of the Lord]	1		1		5	1					1																	9
Shepherd [of Israel]	4	2		6															1									13
Son of God																												
Lion																											1	1
Lamb				2	1		1														1						29	34
Christ/ Messiah	16	7	12	19	25	65	64	47	38	47	37	25	10	10	15	13	4	8	15	2	23	8	8	3		6	7	568
Totals	53	21	36	37	39	69	64	47	38	47	37	25	10	10	17	14	4	8	16	2	23	8	8	3		6	16	658

Jesus' Nativity and the Davidic Covenant

YHWH laid the foundation for the New Testament's portrayal of the birth of Jesus as the messianic son of David by promising that his chosen king and his offspring would have eternal title to the throne of Israel (2 Sam. 7:12–17). David had expressed his confidence in YHWH's covenant promises in 2 Samuel 22:51 (= Ps. 18:50 [51]) by including all four critical words in a single statement:

He is a tower of salvation for his king [*malkô*],
and shows *hesed* to his anointed [*mēšîḥô*],
to David and his descendants [*zar'ô*] forever [*'ad 'ôlām*].

Solomon expressed similar confidence when he spoke of eternal peace from YHWH being upon David, his descendants, his household, and his throne forever.⁵

I shall discuss the role of the Davidic covenant in Jesus' nativity under five headings: (1) Gospel References to Jesus' Davidic Descent; (2) Matthew's Genealogical Portrayal of Jesus' Davidic Descent; (3) Matthew's Birth Narrative of Jesus the Messiah; (4) The Visit of the Magi; and (5) Luke's Birth Narrative of Jesus the Messiah.

Gospel References to Jesus' Davidic Descent

The New Testament picks up YHWH's irrevocable promise to David and his descendants (*sperma*) on three occasions. According to John 7:40–43, some thought that Jesus was the expected eschatological prophet, while others were convinced that he was the Messiah (*ho Christos*). Obviously unaware of Jesus' Judean and Davidic origins, opponents of this view argued that the Galilean Jesus could not be the Messiah because the Scripture (*hē graphē*) says “the Messiah will come from the descendants [*spermatos*] of David, and he will come from Bethlehem, the village where David lived” (v. 42). They were correct about the Scripture but quite wrong about Jesus.

This and other New Testament references to Jesus as the long-awaited descendant of David (Mark 12:35; Luke 1:32) were rooted in YHWH's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-13: "I will raise up your descendant [Hb. *zera'*; Gk. *sperma*] after you, . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Matthew's Genealogical Portrayal of Jesus' Davidic Descent (Matt. 1:1-17)

These passing references to Jesus as the descendant (*sperma*) of David set the stage for our consideration of the portrayal of Jesus' Davidic roots in Matthew. I begin with the genealogical preamble (1:1-17) with which Matthew set the stage for the narrative of Jesus' birth (1:18-2:14). The evangelist signals the Davidic/messianic theme with the opening words of his Gospel: "The book of the ancestral line [*geneseōs* = Hb. *tôlēdôt*] of Jesus Christ, the son of David" (1:1). By casting the heading this way, Matthew suggests that the coming of Jesus represented a continuation of the story begun long ago and recounted in the book of Genesis, where similar genealogical formulas appear eleven times. However, it may be more significant that this opening formula links what follows with its last occurrence in the First Testament. In Ruth 4:17 the name David appears for the first time. Then in 4:18 it appears in the heading of the ten-member genealogy of David, which underlies a part of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Ruth 4:18-22).

We recognize Matthew's grasp of Jesus' messianic role in the three epithets he used for Jesus. As the heavenly envoy will explain in 1:21, "Jesus" was the Messiah's personal name. This was the Greek form of Hebrew Yehoshua, the origins of which we find in Numbers 13:16. Grasping the significance of the signs and wonders the Israelites experienced in connection with their rescue from Egypt, Moses changed Joshua's name from Hoshea ("salvation" or

“He has saved”) to Yehoshua (“YHWH is salvation” or “YHWH has saved”). The former form was susceptible to being understood as crediting any deity with salvation, but in the wake of the exodus, Moses foreclosed any alternative interpretation. The name itself is not by definition messianic, but as the envoy declared in Matthew 1:21 and as Paul recognized, with the identification of Jesus as “Savior” (Acts 13:23), the notion of salvation became an essential feature of the messianic vision and hope. In 2 Samuel 3:18 Abner cites a promise YHWH had made to David: “By the hand of my servant David I will save [*hōšîaʿ*, Gk. *sōsō*] my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies.”

As noted earlier, “Christ” is the most overtly messianic epithet that Jesus bore, because it means “anointed one,” which in Hebrew is *māšîaḥ*, “Messiah.” Matthew created a rhetorically effective *inclusio* around the genealogy at the end by identifying the son whom Mary bore as “Jesus, who is called Messiah” (Matt. 1:16).

I have dealt with the significance of the title “son of David” earlier, when I dealt with the Davidic covenant in the First Testament in part 3. The Pharisees reflected the commonly accepted messianic significance of this epithet in Jesus’ day in their response to Jesus’ question, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”—to which they answered, “the son of David” (Matt. 22:42; cf. 12:18). In 1:20, the angel of the Lord addressed Joseph as “son of David” (*lōsēf huios David*), but elsewhere in Matthew (and the entire New Testament) the phrase always functions as a messianic epithet. People would use it when they addressed Jesus directly, either in entreaty (9:27; 15:22; 20:30, 31) or in accolades (21:9, 15).

The opening to this genealogy is exceptional in that it identifies its subject not as the founder of the line but as the person who terminates the line (contra Ruth 4:18–22). This renders all the more awkward the insertion of “the son of

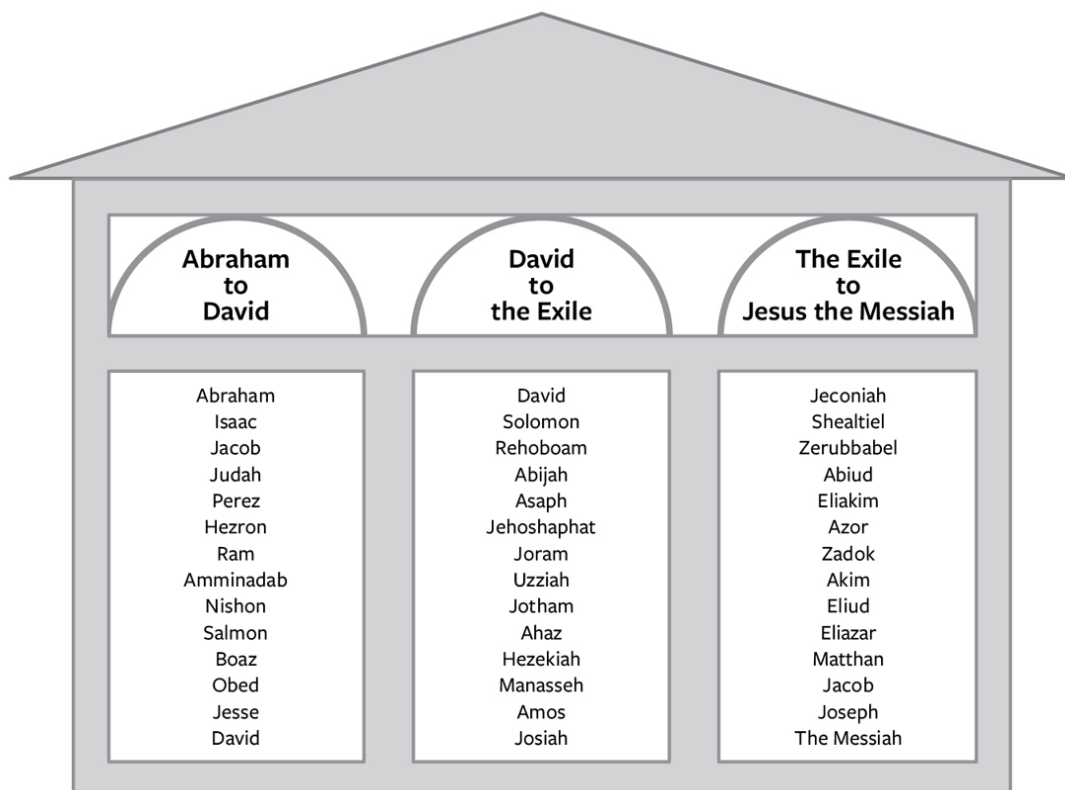
Abraham” after “the son of David” (Matt. 1:1). In this heading Matthew gives the background to Jesus’ nativity in the reverse order of the genealogy that follows and the reverse order of history. The content of the genealogy suggests that the heading should have read, “This is the book of the genealogy of Abraham.” This would have followed the customary model, because Abraham was the founder of this line. But it would also have compensated for a significant gap in the patriarchal narratives, which, for all the occurrences of the genealogical (*tōlēdôt*) formula in Genesis, do not apply it to Abram/Abraham, the most significant human character in the record (cf. Gen. 11:27; 25:12). Given the present genealogy’s messianic form and function, the addition of “Abraham” in the title may recall YHWH’s promises to the ancestors that “kings” (*mēlākîm*) would be among Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11), or to be more specific, a singular seed from Abraham would possess the gate of his enemies (22:17; 24:60). In any case, the insertion of Abraham’s name reminds us that the story of the Messiah did not begin with David; Matthew has recognized its roots in the ancestor of the Israelite nation, and in so doing he has honored Abraham as the ancestor of the Messiah.

The effect of Matthew’s identification of the subject of this genealogy as the person at the end of the line rather than at the beginning is dramatic. Instead of the final link finding his significance in the identity of the line’s founder, the founder finds his significance in the identity of the final link. This means that in Matthew’s mind the birth of Jesus was not only the climax of history but also its goal (*telos*; cf. Matt. 24:6) and its fulfillment (*telos* in Luke 22:37).

If Jesus’ titles in the preamble to the genealogy reflect Matthew’s claim of Jesus’ messianic status, then this conviction also undergirds the form of the genealogy. As the colophonic conclusion declares (Matt. 1:17), the history of the messianic line divides into three royal arches, each

consisting of fourteen links and resting on four pillars: Abraham, David, Jehoiachin (Jeconiah in Greek), and Jesus, “the Messiah” (fig. 18.1). Although verse 17 declares each arch to consist of fourteen generations, the tally of names falls one short (forty-one instead of forty-two). We may solve the problem in several ways, but the most likely solution would recognize Matthew’s intent to highlight David by entering him as both the end of the Abraham segment and repeating his name to head the middle segment, which Matthew does in his summary statement (v. 17). This has the delightful consequence of ending the David segment with Josiah, a model Davidic king (2 Kings 22:19; 23:25) but in whose reign YHWH declared Judah’s end (22:15–20).

Figure 18.1
The History of Israel’s Royal House



But how did Matthew arrive at the number fourteen? The number seems artificial—a fairly common feature of genealogies. Some sources explain the artificiality by suggesting that Matthew’s lineage of Jesus is not exhaustive and that his structure of 14 + 14 + 14 is artfully crafted (7 x 2 x 3). Seven is a prominent symbolic number in Scripture, though most scholars agree on a special rationale for this genealogy’s double-septimal structure: this was the numerical value of the name David. In consonantal Hebrew the name consists of three letters: *d*, *w*, and *d*. Since these letters also functioned as numbers, the numerical value of David is 4 (*d*) + 6 (*w*) + 4 (*d*) = 14.

While Matthew portrays Jesus as the climax, the *telos*, and the legal heir of the royal lineage, he acknowledges the artificiality of his claim in his summary of the final stage: “To Jacob was born [*egennēsen*] Joseph the husband of Mary, from whom [*ex hēs egennēthē*] Jesus was born” (v. 16). This change in the form of the verb—from active *egennēsen*, “to become the father of” (39× in vv. 1–16), to passive *egennēthē*, “to be born”—and the prepositional phrase *ex hēs*, “from whom,” signal a change in the relationship between the persons represented by the last two names in the lineage. Joseph did not “father” Jesus. Biologically, Jesus was the son of Joseph’s wife, Mary, but he was Joseph’s heir by legal “fiction.”

Matthew’s Birth Narrative of Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 1:18–25)

Matthew signals the transition from the review of Jesus’ lineage to the narrative of his birth and infancy with a formal announcement of what is to follow: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah happened like this . . .” (v. 18). By introducing the principal character as “Jesus the Messiah” (*Iēsou Christou*), Matthew reiterates what he had declared in the introduction to the genealogy (v. 1), in his clarification of

the identity of Jesus with “Who is called the Messiah” (*ho legomenos Christos*) in the final link (v. 16), and in the colophonic conclusion to the genealogy, “the Messiah” (*ho Christos*, v. 17). The genealogy reflects the history of Israel’s waiting for the Messiah, but even without this preamble, it is clear from the outset that the child whose birth he was about to recount was no ordinary child.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth exhibits many features of special birth narratives in the First Testament: (1) The account introduces a pious parent (vv. 19, 24). (2) By special revelation God announces the conception of a special child and/or the special destiny of the child (vv. 20–21). (3) Someone (here the narrator) announces child’s birth (v. 25a). (4) The child is named (v. 25b). However, this account differs from other birth narratives in several extremely significant ways.

First, for the first time in such narratives, the pious person introduced is a man who, ironically, will not be the child’s biological father. Even so, Matthew keeps the focus on Joseph from beginning to end: (1) Matthew introduces him, not the child’s mother, as the pious (here “righteous,” *dikaios*) figure, who demonstrated this quality by intending to break off his engagement to Mary secretly out of concern for her reputation (vv. 18–19) when she became pregnant prior to their marriage. (2) Joseph, rather than Mary, was the addressee of the heavenly messenger, identified as “the angel of the Lord.” Because the Hebrew expression *mal’ak ’ădōnāy*, meaning “envoy of the Lord,” never occurs in the First Testament, we should understand this figure as “the envoy of YHWH,” the messenger from the court of heaven who often appears in the First Testament, but particularly as the messenger of a coming birth. In Judges 13 he foretold the birth of Samson to Manoah’s unnamed wife (Judg. 13); in Genesis 18:2, 16, 22, the messenger appeared to Abraham as a man but throughout spoke with YHWH’s voice. Although Matthew does not name him, Luke identifies

the envoy whom God sent to Mary and Elizabeth as Gabriel (Luke 1:19, 26). (3) In the wake of the visit of the envoy, including the announcement of the child's birth, Joseph carries the plot (Matt. 1:24-25): he arose, acted as the envoy had commanded, took Mary as his wife, kept her a virgin, and named the baby. The only role denied him would have been impossible: "She gave birth to a son."

This attention to Joseph is both surprising and ironic. Mary would not give birth to this child for him, but for God. Even so, this narrative insists that Jesus' role as heir to David came through Joseph, a role he could have gained only by legally becoming Joseph's son. The Gospels do not record the moment when Joseph became his adoptive father, but Jesus was born in Bethlehem because this "city of David" was Joseph's ancestral home (Luke 2:4), and at his birth as a legal parent Joseph named Jesus (Matt. 1:21, 25). While everyone in Nazareth considered Jesus to be the "son of Joseph" (Matt. 13:55; Luke 3:23; John 1:45; 6:42), in Galilee generally people seem to have been unaware of Joseph's Davidic roots (John 7:41-42). The Gospels often refer to Mary as "his [Jesus'] mother" (Matt. 1:18; Luke 2:33; John 2:5; etc.), but only God refers to him as "my Son,"⁶ but always with reference or allusion to First Testament messianic texts.⁷

A second difference between this birth narrative and others of this genre involves the timing of the heavenly envoy's announcement. In Luke, the angel announced to Mary her impending conception (1:26-31) before the envoy came to Joseph, but in Matthew, Joseph's response to Mary's pregnancy had precipitated the envoy's visit (Matt. 1:18-19). The envoy came to him to explain what had happened to Mary and to advise him what to do.

That Herod ordered the slaughter of the children two years of age or younger in Bethlehem (2:16) suggests a gap of more than one year between Matthew 1 and 2. Instead of returning to Nazareth after Jesus was born, Joseph and his

family settled in Bethlehem, presumably with relatives. Although David’s name never surfaces in chapter 2, the royal motif dominates the narrative, which concerns the conflict of crowns involving King Herod and Jesus; even as an infant from the insignificant village of Bethlehem, Jesus threatened the kingdoms of this world.

A third and extremely significant difference from other birth narratives is Matthew’s insertion of his own (obviously inspired) interpretation of the significance of the birth of Jesus. The evangelist casts 1:22–23 as a parenthetical comment, announcing the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 7:14: “Look, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, whom people will call Immanuel, which in translation means ‘God is with us.’” This is a remarkable statement, in part because it adds one more epithet to Matthew’s list of titles of Jesus at the head of his genealogy (1:1) and in his birth narrative (vv. 18–21)—namely, Immanuel.

Table 18.2

A Synopsis of Three Versions of the Immanuel Prophecy

Isaiah 7:14 (Hebrew)	Isaiah 7:14 (Old Greek Translation)	Matthew 1:23 (Matthew’s Greek Version)
Look, the young woman (‘ <i>almâ</i>) will conceive and will bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.	Look, the virgin (<i>parthenos</i>) will be pregnant and will bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.	Look, the virgin (<i>parthenos</i>) will be pregnant and will bear a son, and they will call his name Immanuel, <i>which is interpreted as</i> <i>“God is with us.”</i>

Before we discuss the significance of this new name, we need to consider how Matthew has adapted the prophet’s original statement to the present context. We may begin by

comparing literal translations of (1) the Hebrew wording of the original; (2) the Old Greek translation; and (3) Matthew's version of the prophecy.

Matthew's citation differs from the Hebrew original in three significant details. First, following the Old Greek, he identifies the "young woman" specifically as a "virgin" (*parthenos*), which normally translates Hebrew *bēṭûlâ*. Hebrew *ʿalmâ* also refers to a "young woman," but most contexts suggest a "woman of marriageable age." In the First Testament *ʿalmâ* is used in contexts that may involve a virgin, but the issue need not be her virginity.⁸ The impetus for the Greek translators' rendering of *ʿalmâ* as *parthenos* (virgin) rather than *neanis* (young woman)⁹ in Isaiah 7:14 in the third to second century BC is unclear. However, considering the preceding birth narrative (Matt 1:18–21), it is obvious why this Greek rendering was particularly relevant for Matthew.

Second, Matthew changes the second-person singular verb in "You will call [*kaleseis*] his name Immanuel" (LXX Isa. 7:14) to a third-person plural form, "They will call [*kalesousin*] his name Immanuel" (Matt. 1:23), hinting at a significance of Immanuel's birth beyond the woman and her household, and if the child would be born into the royal family, potentially beyond the dynasty and the nation of Judah.

Third, Matthew (1:23) inserts a "translation" (*methermēneuō*) of the obviously Hebrew name "Immanuel" for the benefit of his Greek readers: "God is with us." This is precisely the sense of Isaiah 8:8, where morphologically the elements of the name are repeated. However, the words involved did not identify the boy by name but referred to the message his name signified. There the name signified Ahaz' and Judah's only hope in the face of the threat from Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Samaria. However, in Matthew's use of the name, we recognize a profound shift. In Isaiah the birth of the boy to the young woman would be the sign that

God (a third person) was with Judah, but here in Matthew the sentence represented by the name actually applies to the person who bore the name. As we see in John 1:14, for Matthew, Jesus was not merely a sign of God's (i.e., someone else's) presence but the embodiment of that presence: Jesus, who is with us, is God (Hb. *'ēl*; Gk. *ho theos*, Matt. 1:23). On this count, Matthew may have been indebted to the Old Greek rendering of Isaiah 8:10. After citing the name Immanuel in Isaiah 8:8, the Septuagint renders Hebrew *'immānû 'ēl* in verse 10 as a reassuring declaration: *meth' hēmōn kyrios ho theos* (= Hb. *'immānû yhwh ha'ēl*), "YHWH God is with us." The Septuagint's addition of the divine name YHWH here reinforces the link with the heavenly envoy's identification of Jesus with the God of the exodus two verses earlier in Matthew 1:21 (see the discussion on the naming of Yehoshua/Jesus earlier in this chapter under "Matthew's Genealogical Portrayal of Jesus' Davidic Descent [Matt. 1:1–17]").

Matthew's interpretation of the birth of Jesus raises the question of the relationship between Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23—specifically, whether or not the former predicts the latter. Our responses to the question will depend on what we make of the Greek word *plēroō*, "to fulfill," in verse 22. If we insist that *plēroō* means the fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction in the eighth century BC, the answer is probably negative. On the one hand, nothing in the text of Isaiah 7 points unequivocally to a fulfillment of the prophecy apart from or beyond the immediate crisis facing Ahaz and the Judeans. On the other hand, there is no doubt that in Matthew's mind the birth of Jesus was the literal fulfillment of the words represented by the Greek version of Isaiah's statement concerning the young woman. In so doing he has invested in the words of the prophet a new and incredibly messianic meaning. Other than the son of the young woman in Isaiah 7, no one else in the First Testament bore the name Immanuel. But here Matthew

testifies to the identity of Jesus by declaring Jesus to be the God who is with his people. He is not merely a son of God, in the metaphorical sense that applied to David and his heirs; he is the embodiment of God. First Chronicles 29:23 had spoken metaphorically of David sitting on the throne of YHWH, but since Jesus is YHWH, he would literally sit on his own throne.^{[10](#)}

We may now trace the development of this notion textually and theologically. (1) In the eighth century BC, Isaiah declared by inspiration, "Look, a young woman will conceive and bear a son, who will be a sign for you" (Isa. 7:14). (2) Working on behalf of the Jewish population of Alexandria, Egypt, in the second to first century BC, the translators of the Old Greek version interpreted the broad Hebrew expression *'almâ*, "young woman," more narrowly as *parthenos*, "virgin." Whether we may speak of these translators as inspired by God, as was the prophet originally or Matthew later, remains an open question. (3) Obviously under divine inspiration, at the turn of the eras, Matthew found in the words of the Greek translation an opportunity to declare the extraordinary significance of the birth of Jesus. However, when he applied the word *parthenos* to Mary and the name Immanuel to Jesus, he was not employing metaphors. Both facts were literally true! Concerning the relationships among these texts, the least we can say about them is that in the remarkable providence of God, the rendering of the Greek translation provided Matthew with the precise vocabulary he needed for interpreting the incarnation. When the time came to announce the birth of the Messiah, the Scriptures used by Greek-speaking Jews had exactly the words he needed to describe this event. The birth of Jesus the Messiah marked the dawn of an unprecedented three-decade era, when God would be present with his people literally and physically.

The Visit of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-23)

Although the visit of the magi was separated from the birth of Jesus by as much as two years, the Gospel of Matthew integrates this event with the nativity of Jesus. The magi played a critical role in Matthew's royal portrait of Jesus, for through their response to his birth, they provoked Herod to actions that confirmed him as the perfect negative foil for Jesus' royal authority, which was Matthew's primary concern. First, he set the tone by having magi come from the east, probably as experts in astrology and omens of all sorts from Babylonia or beyond. Given their mission to find the "King of the Jews" and the gifts they presented to Jesus (Matt. 2:11), they probably represented some Near Eastern court.

Second, the magi were the first in the entire Bible to use the expression "King of the Jews" (*basileus tōn loudaiōn*, v. 2). This title will not reappear until Jesus' crucifixion.^{[11](#)} Perhaps the magi had heard "King of the Jews" as the title of the ruler of the Roman province of Judea, which would explain why they came to Jerusalem, his capital, to seek the newly born heir to his throne.

Third, Matthew highlights the role of the star, which the magi interpreted as an omen of the birth of some extraordinary child and which would guide them to Jesus (vv. 2, 9-11). The singular form of the Hebrew word for star, *kôkāb*, appears in the First Testament only twice. Only Numbers 24:17 is relevant here: "A star [Hb. *kôkāb*; Gk. *astron*] will come from Jacob, and a scepter [*šēbet*] will arise from Israel." The star in the sky was a sign marking the dawn of a new era and the fulfillment of Balaam's oracle.

Fourth, for Matthew the birth of Jesus represented the fulfillment of one of the most explicit prophecies of the Messiah in the First Testament, Micah 5:2-5a [1-4a]. Responding to Herod's request concerning the place where Jewish tradition expected the Messiah to be born, the priests

and scribes treated Micah's eighth-century-BC oracle as the road map for the magi, pointing them to the insignificant town of Bethlehem, a few miles south of Jerusalem. This first appearance of these religious leaders in Matthew's Gospel set the stage for later conflicts with Jesus. They knew the texts of their Scriptures, but they were blind to their meaning.

Fifth, although the title "King of the Jews" is ethnocentric, the response of the magi to Jesus signals a much broader significance for his reign. The preceding genealogy had hinted at this issue by extraordinarily inserting the names of three women, two of whom were ethnically non-Israelites (1:3, 5), and the third was formerly the wife of a Hittite (v. 6; cf. 2 Sam. 11:3-4; 1 Kings 15:5; etc.). In fulfillment of David's declaration "This is the Torah for humanity" (2 Sam. 7:19), the magi, with their gestures of prostration, represented the world for which the Messiah had come (cf. Matt. 28:19-20).

The royal motif continues in the sequel to the visit of the magi (vv. 13-23), but the evangelist develops it more subtly. First, the excessive response of King Herod to Jesus' birth demonstrates that he perceived the infant Jesus as a clear and present rival to his own reign (2:16-18). Second, the citation of Hosea to explain why the family sought refuge in Egypt introduces us to the epithet that will figure prominently in the Gospels: "Out of Egypt I have called my Son" (v. 15). This quotation transforms a prophecy concerning Israel in Hosea 11:1 into a royal prophecy. Matthew has hereby overlaid an epithet that originally applied to Israel collectively and invested it with its later predominantly messianic sense, as recognizable in royal "adoptive" texts like 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 89:26-29 [27-30]. In treating Joseph's relocation of the family to Nazareth as the fulfillment of a "Nazarene" prophecy, Matthew 2:23 alludes to Isaiah 11:1: "A shoot [*ḥōṭer*] will emerge from the stump [*gēza*] of Jesse, and a branch

[*nēšer*] from his roots [*šōreš*] shall bear fruit [*pārâ*]." The reference to Jesse, David's father, secures the dynastic connection.

Luke's Birth Narrative of Jesus the Messiah (Luke 1:5-2:38)

With reference to content and style, Matthew's and Luke's accounts have little in common. The Lukan account involves two birth narratives: the first of John the Baptizer (1:5-25, 57-80), the herald of the primary subject; and the second of Mary's conception and her giving birth to Jesus (1:26-56; 2:1-38). To grasp Luke's disposition toward the Davidic covenant, I shall deal with them separately.

Luke's birth narrative of John the Baptizer (1:5-25, 57-80). This account also exhibits significant classic elements of this genre in the First Testament: (1) A pious parent is introduced (Luke 1:5-7). (2) By special revelation God announces the conception of a special child and/or the special destiny of the child (vv. 8-20). (3) The child's birth is announced (vv. 24-25, 57-58). (4) The child is named (vv. 59-66). Although Luke develops these elements more fully than most First Testament birth narratives, our concern is the David connection.

The parallels that Luke draws to the account of Hannah and the birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1-28) are remarkable. In both cases, God answers peoples' prayers (1 Sam. 1:10-17; Luke 1:10-13) by intervening so that previously barren women (1 Sam. 1:2-6; Luke 1:7) conceive (1 Sam. 1:19-20; Luke 1:24-25). Second, in both accounts the child's name credits God for the baby's birth (1 Sam. 1:19-20; Luke 1:58-63). Third, both accounts end with an oracular pronouncement, interpreting the significance of the birth (1 Sam. 2:1-10; Luke 1:67-79). In the former case, the speaker was the boy's mother; in the latter case, the prophet was the boy's father, Zacharias. Fourth, each of

these miraculous births introduces the forerunner of YHWH's anointed and puts him on the historical stage: as Samuel was the forerunner of David,¹² so John was the forerunner of Jesus.¹³

These common structural features set the context for Luke's specific reflections on the Davidic covenant and the messianic hope. In Luke 1:15–17 the envoy of YHWH, identified later as Gabriel (v. 19), casts the future son of Zacharias and Elizabeth as a prophet after the order of Elijah, who will (1) be great in the sight of YHWH (Gk. *kyrios*, v. 14); (2) turn many Israelites back to YHWH (Gk. *kyrios*) their God (v. 16); (3) be a forerunner of YHWH in the spirit and power of Elijah, turning the hearts of fathers to children and transforming disobedient Israelites into righteous persons (v. 17); and (4) prepare the people for the coming of the day of YHWH (Gk. *kyrios*, v. 17). The echoes of Malachi 4:5–6 [3:23–24] reinforce our identification of the Greek *kyrios* with YHWH, the personal name of Israel's God.

On the surface, these features are not overtly messianic. The “day of YHWH” refers simply to the moment of God's intervention in Israel's affairs. However, in Zacharias' interpretive prophecy, he will paraphrase Malachi 3:1 to reinforce the role of his newly born son as herald of YHWH's arrival, calling him “the prophet of the Most High” who will “go before the Lord [*kyrios*, read “YHWH”] to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76). The statement is ambiguous, but in Malachi, YHWH sends a herald (*mal'āk*), identified as “the messenger of the covenant” (*mal'ak habbērît*), to prepare the way for YHWH. The covenant he had in mind is unclear, though the close linkage between the Davidic throne and the temple of YHWH suggests the Davidic covenant.

The most explicit allusion to the Davidic covenant in the birth narrative of John occurs at the beginning of Zacharias' oracle (vv. 68–69): “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has . . . raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” The expression “horn of [my] salvation”

links this statement with the only occurrence of the phrase in the First Testament, in David's inspiring song of rescue in 2 Samuel 22:2-3 (= Ps. 18:2-3 [3-4]): "YHWH is . . . my shield, and the horn of my salvation." Zacharias' reference to "the house of his servant David" reinforces the connection between the birth of John and the Davidic covenant. Although his son, John, would be the herald of YHWH, Zacharias recognized the connection to the imminent resurrection of the Davidic dynasty (house).

Luke's birth narrative of Jesus (1:26-56; 2:1-38). Jesus' messianic status, based on the Davidic covenant, is front and center in Luke's narrative of his birth. Luke prepares us for the messianic significance of what follows by introducing the messenger (*angelos*) of the good news by name; he is Gabriel, the same envoy from heaven who had announced to Elizabeth that she would bear a son (cf. 1:19). When Gabriel came to Mary, he had not introduced himself by name, but the narrator had identified him by name in verse 26. Gabriel's name occurs elsewhere in Scripture only in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21. In his previous recorded appearance he had announced to Daniel the coming of an anointed one, a prince (*māšîaḥ nāgîd*) who would be cut off (Dan. 9:24-26). Now that this prince was about to appear, God sent the same envoy to announce his imminent arrival.

Although Gabriel did not use the word "Messiah" in his message to Mary, his address suggests that he had come to her to announce the end of the seventy weeks he had foreseen in Daniel 9:24-26; Mary would be the agent through whom this person would come. Allusions to the Davidic covenant dominate Gabriel's speech to Mary (Luke 1:30-33), including Jesus' name and references to "the Son of the Most High," "the throne of his father David," "the house of Jacob," and "his kingship." Gabriel's pronouncement divides into two parts, each involving three lines. The first three lines (a triad) concern the conception

and naming of Jesus, while the last three concern his royal status.

Since Gabriel's visit to Mary preceded the envoy's announcement to Joseph (Matt. 1:20–21), Mary knew of the saving role represented by the name Jesus before Joseph did. Gabriel's characterization of Jesus as "great" (*estai megas*, Luke 1:32) is vague, but it recalls an explicitly messianic utterance in Micah 5:4 [3]. The singular form of the epithet "Son of the Most High" (*huios hypsistou*, Luke 1:32), which occurs only here and in 8:28 (// Mark 5:7), adapts the plural "sons of the Most High" (Hb. *běně 'elyôn*; Gk. *huioi hypsistou*) in Psalm 82 [LXX 81]:6, where it refers to angelic princes who participate in the divine council.¹⁴ However, as progeny of Elyon (Most High), Jesus was unique among the heavenly beings. Gabriel fleshed this out somewhat by announcing that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and Elyon (Most High) would overshadow her (Luke 1:35). This obviously does not fully account for the mystery of her conception, but it explains why the son would be identified as "the holy one" (*hagion*) and "the Son of Elyon" in a sense that was true of no other being (cf. Luke 6:35, where Jesus calls his followers "sons of Elyon" [*huioi hypsistou*]). Furthermore, since John, the son of Elizabeth, would be the forerunner of Jesus, whom Zacharias, John's father, identified as "Lord" (*kyrios*), he (John) would be called "a prophet of Elyon" (*prophētēs hypsistou*, Luke 1:76).

Gabriel identified three marks of royal status that Mary's child would exhibit (1:32–33): (1) occupancy of the throne of David his father by divine grant; (2) the entire nation of Israel (Jacob) as his realm; and (3) an eternal title to the kingship. These benefactions were rooted in YHWH's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12–16 and echo statements we heard from David (1 Kings 1:48), Solomon (1 Kings 5:5), and the queen of Sheba, who represented the world beyond Israel's borders (1 Kings 10:9; 2 Chron. 9:8). They also echo

Ben Sira's comments about David a couple centuries before the birth of Jesus: "The Lord took away his sins and exalted his power forever; he granted him a covenant of kingship [*diathēkēn basileōn*] and a glorious throne [*thronon doxēs*] in Israel" (Sir. 47:11). Significantly, it was the gentile Luke who highlighted an aspect of Gabriel's speech that Christians often overlook in their reflection on and celebration of Christmas—namely, that Jesus was a very Israelite messianic *king of Israel*. In Matthew 1:21 the divine envoy had implied this when he had spoken of Jesus as saving "his people" from their sins, though there "his people" is capable of a much broader interpretation than "Jacob" in Luke 1:33.

After Zacharias and Elizabeth had circumcised and named their child "John," his previously dumb father issued his own oracle of praise to God (cf. 1:64–66), in response to the question that was on everyone's mind: "What then will this child be?" (v. 66). This sounds like a cryptic version of Manoah's question when he learned that his previously barren wife would have a son: "What will be the commission [*mišpāṭ*] and the task [*ma'āśeh*] of the lad?" (Judg. 13:12). Gabriel's earlier speech announcing that Zacharias' barren wife would bear a child in her old age (1:13–17) and declaring the Nazirite nature of his ministry (cf. 7:33; Judg. 13:7) reinforces this linkage with the Samson narrative.

Building on what Gabriel had said in Luke 1:16–17 and addressing the child directly in verses 76–79, Zacharias answered the people's question (v. 76) by casting his son in the role of "the prophet of the Most High" (*prophētēs hypsistou*), charged to prepare the way for YHWH (Gk. *kyrios*) and announce to his people (i.e., Israel) knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins (cf. Matt. 1:21). Luke 1:78–79 suggests that John's appearance had signaled the dawning of the new day driven by the "unfailing love" (*eleos* = Hb. *ḥesed*; cf. above, chap. 14, "Zacharias'

Prophecy [Luke 1:68–79]”) of Israel’s God and the peace anticipated in Isaiah 9:6 [5] (cf. 59:8).

However, before Zacharias answered the people’s question, he interpreted the present events in ethnocentrically Israelite and royally messianic terms. In Luke 1:68–71 his opening outburst of praise to YHWH, God of Israel, celebrates John’s birth as a signal not only of Israel’s redemption but also of the restoration of the covenant relationship between YHWH and his people (v. 68), whose binary foundations were reflected in the long-standing covenant formula: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” Apart from the doxologies marking the ends of “books” in the Psalter in Psalms 41:13 [MT 14] and 106 [LXX 105]:48 (cf. Ps. 72:18), variations of the truncated form of Zacharias’ doxology occur six times in the First Testament, always in connection with David and/or his throne.¹⁵

In Luke 1:69 the motif of the Lord raising up the horn of salvation is also thoroughly Davidic. Hannah was the first to juxtapose “horn” (Hb. *qeren*; Gk. *keras*) and “salvation” (*yěšû‘â*; Gk. *sōtēria*) in 1 Samuel 2:1, in an oracle that ended with the anticipation of YHWH giving strength to his king and lifting up the horn of his anointed/Messiah (v. 10). However, David coined the phrase “horn of my salvation” (*qeren yiš‘î*; Gk. *keras sōtērias mou*) after YHWH rescued him from Saul (2 Sam. 22:3 = Ps. 18:2 [3; LXX 17:3]). In Luke 1:69, Zacharias spoke for the nation when he identified the horn that God had raised as coming from the house of David. In fulfillment of the prophets’ words, this horn would provide salvation from all Israel’s enemies. This vision of a militaristic Davidic Messiah will be on full display on the first Palm Sunday, but it is a paradigm that Jesus would deliberately reject.¹⁶

Luke’s account of the actual birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1–38 highlights the Davidic motif in several ways. First, he emphasizes that Jesus’ birth happened in “the city of David”

(vv. 4, 11). Although David referred to Bethlehem as “[my] city” (1 Sam. 20:6), in the First Testament the expression “city of David” always refers to Zion, the Jebusite fortress on the narrow geographic tongue south of what became the Temple Mount, between the Tyropoeon valley to the west and the Kidron valley to the east. This probably explains why Luke added, “which is Bethlehem” (2:4). But he also added the rationale for Joseph happening to be in Bethlehem at what turned out to be precisely the place where Jesus was to be born: “because he was of the household [*oikos*] and family line [*patria*] of David” (2:4). Significantly, Luke does not say that Joseph and Mary went down to Bethlehem so that Jesus could be born in the patrimonial estate of their royal ancestor. Rather, he observes that Joseph went there in response to Emperor Augustus’ decree that every inhabitant of his empire be registered.

Luke 2:6 suggests the evangelist was aware of the significance of this moment. In the kind providence of God, the appointment established by the emperor of Rome coincided with one of the most important moments of Israel’s—and indeed of human—history: the birth of the Messiah, the God-man, whose mission would not be to throw off the Roman yoke but to rescue his people from their sins, a vital prerequisite to the restoration of all creation.

The angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in Bethlehem adds nuance to the event (2:8–14). First, for the first time in recorded Israelite history, God engaged a heavenly envoy to announce the birth of a child. However, against conventional protocol, Jesus’ birth was announced not in a public forum to important government officials like Herod the king (cf. Matt. 2:1–6), the Roman governor Quirinius, Emperor Augustus, or Jewish officials, like the Pharisees or the Sadducees (Matt. 2:1–6), but out on the hillside to lowly shepherds (Luke 2:8–20). A single unnamed envoy announced Jesus’ birth. That the glory of

YHWH (*doxa kyriou*) accompanied the envoy reinforces our equation of this *angelos kyriou* with *mal'ak yhwh*, “the envoy of YHWH,” who spoke for YHWH.

Second, despite being delivered to shepherds outside modest Bethlehem, the divine envoy’s message involved good news (*euangelizō*) of extreme joy (*charan megalēn*) for all the people (2:10). With few exceptions, in the First Testament, “all the people” (*panti tō laō*) translates Hebrew *kol hā’am*, referring to the population of Israel/Judah. The Septuagint typically communicates the universal sense of “all the peoples/nations of the earth” (Hb. *kōl ‘ammê/gōyê hā’āreṣ*) as *panta ta ethnē tēs gēs*.¹⁷

Third, the angel’s announcement highlights the significance of this birth with three loaded epithets: the child is Savior, Messiah, YHWH. Zealots in the capital would have interpreted “savior” (*sōtēr*) as a deliverer from the Roman overlords (cf. 1:71), but as the story unfolds, we will learn that this expression represents the fulfillment of Gabriel’s message to Joseph in Matthew 1:21; this person will save his people from their sins.

This is the first of twelve occurrences of the word *christos* (= Messiah) in this Gospel. The absence of the article “the” strikingly recalls Daniel 9:25–26, which spoke of seventy weeks being decreed “to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness” (v. 24 ESV), apparently through the agency of Messiah Prince (*māšîaḥ nāgîd*), who would himself be cut off.

The absence of the article with Jesus’ last epithet, *kyrios*, “Lord,” is puzzling. Since “prince” without an article follows “Messiah” without an article in Daniel 9:25 and “king” follows “Messiah” without an article in Luke 23:2, most translations assume a similarly titular sense—that is, “Lord/Sovereign.” However, Luke’s references to John the Baptizer as the one who prepares the way for “the LORD”—that is, YHWH¹⁸—suggests that we should interpret

inarticulate *kyrios* as YHWH. Although the closest we get to a divine Messiah in the First Testament is Isaiah's identification of "the child born to us" as "Mighty God" (*'ēl gibbôr*, Isa. 9:6 [5]), the apostles did not hesitate to treat Jesus as divine (John 1:1–2; Rom. 9:5).

Fourth, the words of the chorus of angels in Luke 2:14 proclaim the cosmic significance of the birth of Jesus. On the one hand, the birth of Jesus is cause for the praise of God in the heavens, but on the other hand, his birth ensures the ultimate restoration of peace (Gk. *eirēnē*; Hb. *šālôm*) on earth. The statement lacks any specific link to David except that it recognizes the universalization of the messianic hope that began with David's statement "This is the Torah for humanity" in 2 Samuel 7:19 and that was given full voice in the Psalms (Pss. 2:8; 72:8) and the Prophets (1 Sam. 2:10; Mic. 5:4 [3]). However, the final phrase cautions us against a universalist theology: "to those with whom YHWH is pleased" (*en anthrōpois eudokias*, Luke 2:14). This comment presupposes that the benefits that the Messiah offers to humanity will not in fact reach all. As it was in the First Testament, so it is in the New: the beneficiaries will be the objects of God's particular favor (LXX Isa. 42:1; Eph. 1:5).

The Inauguration of Jesus' Messianic Ministry

However brief, the narratives of Jesus' early years provide many links to the Davidic kingship, links that we could explore with great benefit, but in the interest of space I leap over these events to the inauguration of Jesus' messianic ministry. His formal preparation for his public work involved two signatory moments that established his status as the Messiah: his baptism, through which he was publicly installed as the Messiah, and his testing in the Judean desert, by which he resisted a challenge to his messiahship and established the foundations of his service.

All four Gospels report the baptism of Jesus,¹⁹ though the respective accounts of the baptism itself vary significantly in detail and content. Mark and Luke are quite minimalist, resisting the inclusion of details that might detract from the final pronouncement. Only Matthew preserves Jesus' voice or anything close to a declaration of the significance of his baptism: "This is appropriate [*prepon*] for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Significantly, these are the first words we hear from Jesus' lips in this Gospel.

Jesus' statement is vague and capable of several interpretations. As I have noted repeatedly, in the First Testament the Hebrew word *šedeq/šědāqâ* (Gk. *dikaïosynē*) refers to conduct in accord with norms established by YHWH's covenants with his people. In the present context, Jesus' baptism by John, who was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), obviously involved not the forgiveness of his own sins but his identification with those who needed to turn toward God and commit themselves to covenant fidelity, as declared by Moses in Deuteronomy 16:20: "Righteousness, only righteousness, you shall pursue." However, because this episode will end on a profoundly messianic note, we should also link this statement to the Davidic covenant. Jesus' baptism would trigger the spiritual anointing of Jesus for his messianic mission, the divine inauguration of Jesus as Messiah, who by fulfilling all righteousness himself became the agent through whom sinners' repentance was accepted and forgiveness was granted.

Mark distinctively opened his Gospel with this inaugural moment: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1 NIV). Although all four Gospels have Jesus being baptized after John the Baptizer was introduced as the herald preparing the way for YHWH (Gk. *kyrios*), citing both Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3, Mark began his Gospel with the introduction of John, followed immediately by his baptism of Jesus. Indeed, the promise

declared in the heading to this book found its fulfillment in the announcement from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

Matthew’s conviction that Jesus’ mission would involve fundamentally fulfilling righteousness may underlie the distinctive disposition of the Gospel of John to Jesus’ baptism. When Jesus showed up where John was baptizing, John introduced him to the crowd as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). This was certainly a vital element in Jesus’ fulfilling all righteousness. Furthermore, while all the Gospels have John the Baptizer declaring that he was unworthy to untie Jesus’ thongs,²⁰ the Gospel of John alone noted that Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire was more important than his own baptism with water and that John the Baptizer distinguished baptizer and baptized more fundamentally: “After me comes a man who is my superior in rank [*emprosthen*] because he existed before me [*hoti prōtos mou ēn*]” (1:30). The statement expresses remarkable theological awareness because John surely knew that as a “man” (*anēr*), he was older than Jesus.

John the Baptizer’s comment in John 1:30 involves another distinctive feature of this Gospel; he recounts Jesus’ baptism entirely from the Baptizer’s point of view. Beginning with “Look! The Lamb of God,” of the 105 words in verses 29b–34, we see that 100 words are cast in the first person as John’s own speech, rather than as a third-person report of an outsider. This extends to the very last pronouncement. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels bring their accounts to a climax by quoting divine speech, the Gospel of John casts this as the Baptizer’s report of an event to which he was a witness. Rather than “You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” as the heavenly Father’s assessment of Jesus, or converting this into the assessment of the evangelist, John 1:34 casts it as John the Baptizer’s conclusion concerning the identity of Jesus.

The differences among the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism should not blind us to their common features. All four are profoundly trinitarian, involving the earthly Jesus, the Son of God, who was baptized; the Holy Spirit, who descended from heaven upon him; and the Father, whose voice was heard from heaven. Furthermore, all four end with a very messianic public declaration of Jesus' status as the Son of God. But what did the statement by this voice from heaven mean?

The Greek version translates readily as "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." The nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke had established the meaning of "my son"; through the impregnating agency of the Holy Spirit, Jesus, the son of the virgin Mary, was simultaneously the physical Son of God (Matt. 1:18–20; Luke 1:35) and the metaphorical Davidic "Son of God." But in what sense was Jesus God's *beloved* Son (*ho agapētos*)? At the human level in the New Testament, the adjective *agapētos* applies to dearly beloved children²¹ and dearly beloved associates in the faith.²² The Epistles frequently refer to addressees as *agapētoi*, "beloved," or *mou agapētoi*, "my beloved."²³ Variations of the present form involving God the Father identifying Jesus as "my beloved Son" (*ho huios mou ho agapētos*) represent the climax of two events in Jesus' life, his baptism and his transfiguration.²⁴ In the Greek First Testament, God speaks of "my beloved son" (*huios agapētos*) only in Jeremiah 31:20, where he questions whether Ephraim belongs in this category, though here the Greek translates the Hebrew *hăbēn yaqqîr lî 'Eprayim*, "Is Ephraim precious to me?" The closest counterpart to the present expression involves YHWH's recognition of Isaac as Abraham's "unique [*yāḥîd*] son, whom you love" (*'ăšer 'āhabtā*; Gk. *hon ēgapēsos*; Gen. 22:2). Isaac was not Abraham's only son, but he was special because he was the son of Sarah, and only through him would the covenant promises to Abraham be fulfilled. The

phenomena that accompanied the baptism of Jesus demonstrated that Jesus was the Son whom God the Father loved in a special sense and with whom he was “well pleased.”

We encountered the noun *eudokia* (good will) in Luke 2:14, but now the related verb *eudokeō* demands closer scrutiny. In New Testament Greek, the expression exhibits a range of meanings: “decide,”²⁵ “prefer” (2 Cor. 5:8; cf. Sir. 25:16), “to identify/choose something/someone as the object of favor.”²⁶ The last meaning explains why, in the account of the transfiguration, Luke renders the pronouncement concerning Jesus as “This is my Son, my Chosen One” (*ho eklelegmenos*, Luke 9:35). As the climactic proclamation at Jesus’ baptism, we may interpret *en soi eudokēsa* (Mark 1:11) as “in you my good pleasure rests.” Submitting to John’s baptism, Jesus’ first public act as an adult in all the Gospels precipitated this divine expression of favor. Here *eudokēsa* refers to God the Father’s identification of his “beloved Son” as the special object of his favor, demonstrated in the visible descent upon him of “the Spirit of God” (Matt. 3:16)—that is, “the Holy Spirit” (Luke 3:22).

The Greek root for “anoint” does not appear in any of these accounts of Jesus’ baptism, either as a verb (*chriō*) or as a noun (*Christos*), but in Mark, Luke, and John, the evangelists set the stage for this event with explicit references to Jesus as the Christ—that is, the Messiah. In Mark this event appears immediately after his opening thesis statement, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God,” suggesting that this was the moment of his “christological” inauguration. In Luke and John, the baptism follows questions that people raised about John the Baptizer, whether he might be “the Christ.” The Gospel of John links these events geographically and chronologically. The questions about John’s identity were raised “in Bethany beyond the Jordan where John was

baptizing,” and “the next day” Jesus appeared (John 1:28–29). Remarkably, this evangelist frames the baptism account with “Look! The Lamb of God!” (vv. 29, 36), a messianic title derived from Isaiah 53. However, by adding “who takes away the sin of the world [*kosmos*],” he not only clarifies the nature of the Messiah’s deliverance²⁷ but also expands the reach of his messianic reign in keeping with David’s response to having received the dynastic promise: “This is the Torah of humanity!” (2 Sam. 7:19). Luke reinforced the messianic significance of Jesus’ baptism by following up this narrative with the genealogy, explaining one dimension of Jesus’ right to an administrative cosmic rule (3:23–38). Equally, if not more significant, both Matthew and Luke follow up the baptism of Jesus with the account of the devil testing Jesus as Messiah, albeit under the title “Son of God,” as announced by the voice from heaven at his baptism (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–12).

We find a significant key to understanding the inaugural and anointing significance of Jesus’ baptism in the account of the anointing of David as king of Israel in 1 Samuel 16. After rejecting Saul as king, YHWH instructed Samuel to go to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse and anoint one of his sons as his chosen king (v. 1). When David came in from herding Jesse’s sheep, YHWH said, “Rise and anoint him, for this is the one” (v. 12). The narrator’s description of what happened then is cryptic but profound: “Samuel took the horn [*qeren*] of oil and anointed [*māšaḥ*] him in the midst of his brothers, and the Spirit of YHWH took hold of him [*ṣālaḥ*] from that day forward” (v. 13). This marked the moment of David’s inauguration as messianic (anointed) king of Israel, the day of his empowerment for the role, and the day of his adoption as “son of God” in the messianic sense,²⁸ vis-à-vis all Israelites as “YHWH’s sons” (Deut. 14:1). The declaration from heaven after Jesus’ baptism confirmed his status as the special object of the Father’s love and the seal of his appointment to the royal office of Messiah. From this point

on, Jesus would act and speak as the long-awaited occupant of the throne of YHWH.

Although this much is clear from the Father's declaration at Jesus' baptism, the obvious parallels between the narratives of David's and Jesus' rise to the throne of Israel in the Gospels, especially in Luke (table 18.3), reinforce Jesus' messiahship and his status as the true heir to the throne of David. Jesus had come as the new David, the Messiah anticipated by historians, psalmists, and prophets alike, but in his mission and in his performance, he would outshine the original David with a brilliance that is blinding to the uninitiated, but gloriously luminating to the eye of faith. The story of Jesus the Messiah represents the climax of a story that was anticipated earlier²⁹ but began with the presentation of David as the king and messiah of whom Hannah had spoken.

The Davidic Covenant between Jesus' Anointing and Peter's Confession

Having been installed as the messianic Son of God and having passed his probationary test through the devil's testing in the wilderness,³⁰ Jesus could begin his messianic work. Because on the surface the topic seems to be suppressed and Peter's confession as recorded in all the Synoptics³¹ represents a turning point, at least in the disciples' awareness of Jesus messiahship, I shall deal with the intervening period between Jesus' anointing and Peter's confession only in summary form.

If we take the frequency of messianic epithets for Jesus as a barometer of interest in the Davidic covenant for the evangelists' purposes, their restraint is surprising. In the discussion that follows, I define the textual boundaries of the narratives in question in the three synoptic accounts as follows: Matthew 4:12–16:12; Mark 1:14–8:26; Luke 4:14–9:17. The boundaries of corresponding texts in John are

more difficult to pinpoint because both the nativity of Jesus and Peter's confession are missing. I consider John 1:43–11:53 to be roughly equivalent. The chronologies of the events narrated between these boundaries are subject to debate, and some, especially in John, may have happened after Peter's confession. But for our purposes, these boundaries isolate a convenient block of material for examination. The following discussion considers briefly the distribution of the respective epithets in these narrative blocks.

Table 18.3

Parallels in the Narratives of David's and Jesus' Rise to the Throne of Israel

Structural Element	David	Jesus
1. God prepared the herald of the coming king by miraculously granting conception to a pious barren woman and her pious husband.	1 Sam. 1:1–20	Luke 1:5–25, 57–58
2. The child was formally presented in the sanctuary.	1 Sam. 1:21–28	Luke 1:59–66
3. In the wake of the presentation, God inspired a prophetic oracle that celebrated the significance of this child in the light of Israel's messianic hope.	1 Sam. 2:1–10, esp. v. 10	Luke 1:67–79, esp. vv. 68–71
4. The heralds were primary characters in the episodes involving the anointing to royal messianic status.	1 Sam. 16:1–13	Luke 3:1–22
5. The Messiah appeared as the fulfillment of a long-standing hope of God's people.	Gen. 49:10; Deut. 17:14–20; 1 Sam. 2:10; 13:14	Luke 1:26–33, 46–55, 68–79; 2:10–14; 3:15–17
6. The candidate was presented away from the centers of political and religious power.	1 Sam. 16:1–5	Luke 3:1–6
7. The candidate emerged from the community of ordinary people.	1 Sam. 16:6–10	Luke 3:7–14

Structural Element	David	Jesus
8. In each case the Messiah was an unlikely candidate, and his elevation caught the observers by surprise.	1 Sam. 16:11-12	Luke 4:22
9. Immediately after the ritual act of anointing, the Holy Spirit came upon the Messiah.	1 Sam. 16:13	Luke 3:22
10. The anointed one was declared to be the son/Son of God.	2 Sam. 7:14; Pss. 2:7; 89:26-27 [27-28]	Luke 3:22
11. David's threefold anointing as king (i.e., "son of God") was matched by three significant moments when God declared Jesus to be "the Son of God."	1 Sam. 16:13; 2 Sam. 2:1-4; 5:1-5	Luke 3:22; 9:35; Acts 9:20-22
12. The Messiah was declared the king of Israel, but his reign extended far beyond the national borders.	2 Sam. 7:19; 8; 10; Pss. 2; 72:8	Luke 2:11-14, 29-32
13. The Messiah sat on the throne of YHWH and was elevated to his right hand.	1 Chron. 29:23; Ps. 110:1-2	Jer. 3:17; Matt. 26:64; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 1 Pet. 3:22

Christ (Christos = Hb. Māšîaḥ)

Remarkably, this quintessential messianic epithet occurs only once in Matthew 4:12-16:12, in a thirdhand report of what the imprisoned John the Baptizer had heard concerning "the deeds of the Messiah" (*ta erga tou Christou*, 11:2). The title is missing entirely in Mark, and in Luke it appears only once (4:41), in a note clarifying the demons' use of "Son of God," signifying that they knew Jesus was the Messiah. By contrast, the title appears a dozen times in the Johannine narratives, though half of these occur in John 7:25-44.^{[32](#)}

Son of David (Huîos Daud)

"Son of David" occurs three times in Matthew (9:27; 12:23; 15:22), but this epithet is missing in Mark and Luke.

John does not use it as an epithet, but he recognizes Davidic descent as critical to the Messiah's identity in 7:42.

Son of God (Huios Tou Theou, Theou Huios)

All three Synoptic Gospels include a report of the demons who tormented people and acknowledged that Jesus was the "Son of God." While Matthew cites a specific case involving the Gadarene demoniacs (8:29), Mark 3:11 and Luke 4:41 speak more generally of demons doing so. Matthew adds a second case involving the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee (14:33). Responding to Jesus walking on the water and calming the wind, they prostrated before Jesus, exclaiming, "Truly, you are the Son of God." John uses the epithet six times, more than all the other Gospels combined.³³ While the messianic significance of "Son of God" is clear in each case, in John 11:27 Martha explicitly equates the two epithets: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

King (Basileus)

Mark and Luke never apply the epithet *basileus* to Israel's king within these textual boundaries, and Matthew does so only once, where he refers to Jerusalem as "the city of the great King" (5:35). However, it is unclear whether he has the Davidic Messiah in mind or YHWH/God himself. In John the word appears twice. Nathanael obviously uses it in a messianic sense in 1:49: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!" The word also occurs in 6:15, where the people attempted to take Jesus by force and make him king.

Servant (Pais)

Quoting one of Isaiah's Servant Songs, Jesus claimed the epithet of "servant" of God in Matthew 12:18, but in his citation describing the nature of his messianic "service," he extended its scope to include the gentiles by citing Isaiah 42:1-3. Neither *pais* nor *doulos* is ever used in a messianic sense in Mark, Luke, or John.

Shepherd (Poimēn)

Although the term for "shepherd" occurs twice in the later chapters of Matthew (25:32; 26:31), within the material that concerns us here it occurs only in 9:36. Jesus never claimed the title *poimēn* within our predetermined literary boundaries, but Matthew observes that when Jesus saw the distress of the Jews in the Galilee "he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The statements about the people's condition and Jesus' response certainly recall Ezekiel 34:1-19, but neither Matthew nor Mark (whose words he echoed) links this comment to Ezekiel's prophecy.

By contrast, John records a lengthy speech devoted entirely to Jesus' claim of the title and his treatment of the people as his flock (John 10:1-18, with an addendum in verses 25-30). While the echoes of Ezekiel 34 are clear here, it is not so clear whether Jesus was hereby claiming "shepherd" as a messianic title as Ezekiel presents it in Ezekiel 34:23-24, or if he was claiming identity with YHWH the divine Shepherd in 34:1-22. In Ezekiel 34:10 YHWH the divine shepherd rescues his people from their oppressive royal shepherds and brings the scattered and battered flock back to their hereditary homeland, fulfilling promises of Israel's ultimate restoration in the Israelite covenant³⁴ and reconstituting the covenant triangle (vv. 11-16). Verses 17-22 indicate that restoring the intended shalom also involves dealing with nasty sheep who bully others in the flock. To this point, no messianic shepherd has appeared. But in

verses 23–24 YHWH declares, “Then I will install over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will feed them: he will feed them and be their shepherd. And I, YHWH, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince [*nāšîʾ*] among them. I am YHWH; I have spoken.” Like Ezekiel 37:22–24, these two verses obviously involve a messianic Davidic shepherd. However, it is evident that the text on which Jesus drew in John 10 was not limited to Ezekiel; John 10:11 finds its inspiration in Isaiah 53: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” The article before “shepherd” is significant: Jesus is not merely one in a class of good shepherds; he is *the good shepherd*. The servant of Isaiah 53 is the only possible First Testament antecedent of his definition of “the good shepherd” as one who “lays down his life for the sheep.”

Judging by the peoples’ response to Jesus’ speech, some were curious and tried to interpret his speech messianically: “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24). However, Jesus’ portrayal of himself did not fit that picture. Others interpreted Jesus differently. In their view, Jesus was not hereby claiming to be the shepherd of Ezekiel 34:23–24, which would not have been a problem to the religious leaders. From the Qumran scrolls and elsewhere in the New Testament, we know that in the world of Second Temple Judaism, different forms of messianism were acceptable to the Jews. But some in the crowd found Jesus’ claims to be much more consequential. Charging him with blasphemy, they declared, “You claim to be God!” (John 10:33). In their minds Jesus was identifying not with the Messiah of Ezekiel 34:23–24 but with YHWH of Ezekiel 34:1–22, and that was a capital crime, requiring punishment by stoning (John 10:31). However, in the end, Jesus set the record straight: since his Father had sanctified and commissioned him, he should not be accused of blasphemy, because, he claimed, “I am the Son of God.” However, by observing his work they should

realize the intimacy of his relationship with the Father: “The Father is in me, and I am in the Father” (vv. 35–38).

Son of Man (Ho Huios Tou Anthrōpou)

I treated this epithet briefly in my discussion of the Adamic covenant in the New Testament. The expression “son of man” is a Hebraism, from *ben ’ādām*, which occurs more than one hundred times in the First Testament, though ninety-three of these occur as YHWH’s favored epithet for Ezekiel, presumably reminding him that although he was called into divine service, he was an earthling, a descendant of Adam. The expression also bears this sense elsewhere.^{[35](#)} In Daniel 8:17 Gabriel addressed Daniel like YHWH had repeatedly addressed Ezekiel.

The only First Testament exception occurs in Daniel 7:13–14, which uses the phrase for a royal figure to whom the Ancient of Days grants eternal and universal rule. Admittedly, the name David is absent here, and this Son of Man is not identified as a king or a Messiah. However, since the realm granted to him is a kingdom (*malkû*, Gk. *basileia*), this was obviously a royal figure, which was true in the generic sense of the descendants of Adam, but here it applies to a particular representative of the human race.

In the New Testament the phrase “Son of Man” always applies to Jesus, including the citation in Hebrews 2:6 (which in Ps. 8:4 [5] refers to human beings collectively), and it is used of him in two ways. On the one hand, when the focus is on his ordinary human experiences, this expression identifies him with the rest of humanity.^{[36](#)} On the other hand, some texts portray the Son of Man as one with authority to forgive sin and in the same context to command a paralytic to pick up his bed and walk.^{[37](#)} He even claimed lordship over the Sabbath.^{[38](#)} Indeed, God the Father had stamped him with his own seal (John 6:27) and

authorized the Son not only to have life in himself (5:26) but also to exercise judgment on his behalf (5:27).

The authorization and provisioning of the Son of Man is evident in the first occurrence of the phrase in the Gospel of John. In John 1:51 Jesus predicts that his followers will see the heavens opened and the angels of God going back and forth between himself and heaven. Furthermore, he characterized his realm as “his kingdom” (*basileia*), which he administered through commissioned angels (Matt. 13:41). As the Son of Man, he sows only good seed (Matt. 13:37) and offers food that yields eternal life (John 6:27). Moreover, life for human beings is impossible if they have not drunk of his blood (John 6:53). Through belief in him, the blind see (John 9:35–41), and those who are reviled on account of the Son of Man are declared privileged (*makarioi* = Hb. *’ašrê*; Luke 6:22).

The fragments of (auto)biographical information that we find in Jesus’ portrayals of the Son of Man are interesting. As the Son of Man, Jesus began to hint that his future would take some troublesome turns. Just as Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a great fish, so he must spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40). And he spoke ominously of his own being “lifted up.” We may interpret the expression positively, to be elevated, promoted. Indeed, his being lifted up will mean that all who believe in him will have eternal life (John 3:14–15) and that people will recognize his true identity and his relationship to the Father. He has been sent by the Father, and the Father will not abandon him, because he always does the will of the Father (8:25–29).

Jesus’ references to his own unique experience of having descended from heaven (John 3:13; 6:62) are especially intriguing. The links with the Danielic “Son of Man” (*bar ’ěnāš*) are strongest here. Obviously, these texts do not portray Jesus as a second Adam figure or a symbol of corporate humanity; his qualities and role are unique to him.

But these references authorize us to interpret “Son of Man” as a messianic epithet, alongside “Son of God.” The roots of the latter derive from his links to the Davidic king; from the perspective of earthlings, Jesus had a special tie to God in heaven, hence “Son of God.” “Son of Man” presents the obverse view. From God’s heavenly perspective, Jesus was the Son of Man—yes, a physical descendant of Adam (through Mary)—but he was also a commissioned agent of heaven. When *we* see Jesus, we see God incarnate; when *God* looks at him, he sees man divinized. As the son of David, he was the Son of Man and the Son of God, but most importantly, he was the chosen Messiah. In some respects, in the epithet “Son of Man” the roles of the ultimate Adam and the ultimate David merge. The Davidic “Son of Man” does not replace the Adamic “Son of Man” but brings his royal role into sharper focus.

Peter’s Declaration of Jesus’ Messianic Identity (Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21)

Peter’s confession, “You are the Messiah,” at Caesarea Philippi marked a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. While the respective Gospels had previously offered vague hints of Jesus’ coming passion, immediately after Peter’s declaration in the synoptic narratives, Jesus announced his coming death.^{[39](#)} Indeed, Matthew notes that this signaled the beginning of increasing attention to the motif of suffering (16:21). The Gospel of John lacks the episode involving Peter’s confession. However, many interpret Peter’s response to Jesus’ question “Do you also wish to go away?” in John 6:67-69 as a Johannine variation of this theme: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (NRSV).

Significantly, in this version of the confession Peter replaced official messianic vocabulary (*Christos*) with

priestly vocabulary. The expression “Holy One of God” (*ho hagios tou Theou*) occurs elsewhere only in Mark 1:23–24 and its parallel in Luke 4:33–34, where an unclean spirit/demon (*pneuma/daimonion*) uses this expression.

Matthew offers a much fuller account of the event involving Peter’s confession than does Mark or Luke. The correspondence among the three is closest in the heart of this passage, in Jesus’ questions concerning his identity and the disciples’ (including Peter’s) responses. But before we examine his confession, we must set the context. The conversation about Jesus’ identity transpired at Caesarea Philippi (Banias) while Jesus and his disciples were on retreat following a busy time of ministry on and around the Sea of Galilee. The series of events leading up to this moment began with an interchange at the north end of that sea. Religious leaders from Jerusalem challenged Jesus and his disciples concerning traditional Jewish customs as established by the rabbis.⁴⁰ As recorded, the conversations lack explicit references to the Messiah, but apparently the question driving the scribes and Pharisees in their pursuit of Jesus was “How can he claim to be the Jewish Messiah if he and his followers do not live according to the traditional Jewish practices established by the rabbis?”

Jesus did not answer this question directly, but according to Matthew 15:21–16:12 and Mark 7:24–8:26, his response triggered a series of events that demonstrated what an extraordinary person he was: (1) healing a Canaanite woman’s daughter possessed by a demon; (2) physically healing many in the gentile region of Decapolis; (3) feeding a crowd of four thousand who had followed them; (4) responding to the religious leaders’ demand for a sign; and (5) healing a blind man at Bethsaida.

Following this period of public ministry, Jesus and his disciples retreated to Caesarea Philippi, the regional capital built by Herod Philip at the foot of Mount Hermon. Since this band of men sought privacy (Luke 9:18), it is doubtful they

entered the city. Jesus had given his disciples many opportunities to watch him work and listen in on his conversations with the religious leaders. Now he had taken them with him to a solitary place and had set the stage for the critical question of his life and of their preparation for future service in his name.

Jesus began by inquiring whether they had heard the people's conversations in the crowds as they watched and listened to him: "Who do people say I am?" (Matt. 16:13; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18). The disciples had obviously overheard the people talking, so they replied by naming several candidates for Jesus' identity whom they had heard others suggest: John the Baptizer redivivus, who had recently been executed (Matt. 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29); Elijah (cf. Mal. 4:5 [3:23]); one of the other prophets redivivus, perhaps Jeremiah (Matt. 16:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19). Remarkably, there was no mention of the Messiah.

Then Jesus asked them directly, "But who do you say that I am?" Although they had answered the previous question as a group, for the first time Peter spoke up as the spokesman for the Twelve. Of the synoptic evangelists, Matthew provides the fullest account of Peter's answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15). I have already commented on the messianic significance of "Son of God," an expression we will hear again at the transfiguration of Jesus, but why did Matthew note Peter's addition of "living"? The root *ḥay* often occurs in divine oaths in the First Testament (cf. Matt. 26:65), as in *ḥay yhwh*, "by the life of YHWH" (e.g., 2 Sam. 4:9; etc.), or *ḥay 'ānîl'ānōkî*, "by my life" (Deut. 32:40; etc.). The fact that YHWH lives distinguishes him from all other gods, which probably explains why in David's encounter with Goliath he noted twice that the Philistines have defied "the living God" (*'ēlōhîm ḥayyîm*; Gk. *Theou zōntos*, 1 Sam. 17:26 [missing in LXX], 36).

However, the present reference to “the living God” was probably determined by the geographic context. In First Testament times this lush region at the foot of Mount Hermon was the heartland of Baal worship (cf. the possible identification of Banias/Caesarea Philippi with Baal-gad). However, that was centuries earlier. When Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi, this was the site of a significant pagan temple to the centaur nature-god Pan, as well as a temple built in honor of Caesar Augustus. In orthodox Jewish faith, there was only one God, YHWH; all other gods were figments of the human imagination, and their images were mere wood and stone.

Matthew recorded that Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah was not merely his private interpretation; this is striking. Indeed, Jesus declared in the hearing of all the apostles that Peter could not have arrived at this conclusion through human wisdom or natural reasoning (“flesh and blood”); it was revealed to him by Jesus’ Father in heaven. In short, unlike Peter’s earlier demand to be invited to walk on the water (Matt. 14:28–29), here he spoke neither impulsively nor cleverly but by prophetic inspiration, which was undoubtedly a significant factor in Jesus’ later handing over to him the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:18–20).

Although all three accounts note Jesus’ charge to his disciples not to broadcast their discovery that he was the Messiah, Jesus turned his attention to refining their view of his fulfillment of this role. Specifically, after his ministry in the region of Galilee, he set his sights geographically on Jerusalem and personally on his coming suffering.⁴¹ Earlier he had hinted at his fate by comparing his forthcoming three days and nights in the heart of the earth with Jonah’s experience in the belly of the fish (Matt. 12:40), but having been recognized as the Messiah, he could now focus on what lay ahead. With remarkable foreknowledge, he identified four significant facts in impending events: (1) his fate will be determined in Jerusalem, (2) the political and

religious leaders there will cause him great suffering, (3) he will be killed, and (4) he will rise again on the third day. Luke cast this sense of mission as Jesus own words; Matthew and Mark also suggested that it was essential to his actions and teaching. Mark comments that Jesus “spoke openly about this matter” (8:31–32). As the narrative proceeds, we will see that Matthew’s reference to this as the beginning of Jesus’ predictions of his coming fate will be fleshed out in at least two additional formal pronouncements.⁴²

In the wake of Jesus’ granting Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” and perhaps with new boldness in the face of what lay ahead, Peter protested, declaring that Jesus should never suffer what he had just predicted (Matt. 16:22). In stark contrast to his previous declaration that Peter had spoken by divine inspiration (Matt. 16:17), Jesus recognized Satan’s voice in Peter’s objection and rebuked him for siding with humanity in its rebellion against God. (Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:33).

Jesus followed this rebuke with a lecture, though not on the implications of his messianic mission as he had just defined it for his followers.⁴³ After declaring that unless they were willing to follow him in his suffering—including taking up their cross(!)—they forfeited their lives. His address reached a climax in Matthew 16:27 (cf. Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26), where he grounded his charge to his disciples on his status and place in the Father’s agenda: “For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory, and then he will reward all persons according to their actions.” Mark and Luke cast the parousia of the Son of Man as a day of judgment, where those who have rejected Jesus and his mission will find themselves rejected by the Son of Man himself.

The Transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–10; Luke 9:28–36)

If Peter's confession of Jesus' messiahship marked the turning point, then the transfiguration that occurred six days later was the high point, both literally (it occurred on a high mountain, probably on some peak on the south slope of Mount Hermon) and theologically (his divinity was on transparent display). The Gospel writers reserved the declaration of its messianic significance for the end, but the theophanic moment adds depth and nuance to the Gospels' portrait of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus' unequivocal revelation of his messianic identity had happened in private with only his band of disciples around him, but now the witnesses to the transfiguration were even more restricted. The texts do not explain why he selected Peter, James, and John for this extraordinary event. After Jesus granted Peter the keys to the kingdom and declared him the rock on which he would build his church, we expect Peter's participation, but the presence of the sons of Zebedee probably puzzled them and may have precipitated their request a short time later for preeminence in Jesus' kingdom.⁴⁴ In any case, Luke adds that the reason for this trek up the mountain was to pray (9:28–29). Only Luke mentions that the three disciples were exhausted at the time—no doubt from the pace of Jesus' ministry in the preceding weeks, but more immediately from the climb up the mountain (v. 32). While Jesus was in deep communion with his Father, his appearance was transformed (*metamorphoō*, Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2), including his body (his face shone like the sun) and his clothing.

We do not know what Jesus was wearing, but his garments turned the most brilliant white possible. Here each of the Gospels uses a different expression: "white as light" (*leuka hōs to phōs*, Matt. 17:2); "radiant, intensely white, whiter than any fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:3); and "dazzling white" (*leukos exastraptōn*, Luke 9:29). Because we do not normally associate the color white with royalty, we should probably look for a different association here. The most obvious candidate is the garment of the Aaronic high

priest on the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16 does not specify the color of the linen garment worn for the ritual, but Jewish tradition held it to be white. But if this was the case, it was probably the white of linen in its natural state. However, given the New Testament's general association of white with purity (Rev. 3:4-5; 7:9, 13-14), the superlative whiteness of Jesus' garments at the transfiguration probably reflected the absolute and untarnished purity of divinity and all things heavenly (cf. Rev. 19:14).

Although we cannot be more specific about the significance of Jesus' dazzling white garments from the evidence here, it is scarcely coincidental that at the end of this scene, a voice from heaven once more will identify Jesus as "my Son," and Jesus will refer to himself as "the Son of Man," a title that originates with the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13. However, just before the scene involving the Son of Man in Daniel, Daniel described another heavenly being:

As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire. (7:9 ESV)

The linkage of dazzling white garments suggests that at the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus the Messiah had appeared as One whose home was in heaven. Remarkably, when the two women named Mary arrived at the empty tomb later, they encountered "an angel of the Lord," who came down from heaven and whose "appearance was like lightning and his garment was as white as snow" (Matt. 28:2-3).

When Jesus appeared, the three disciples were surprised, not only by his appearance but also by two figures whom they recognized as Moses and Elijah engaged in conversation with him (Matt. 17:3-4; Mark 9:4-6; Luke 9:30-

33). Many interpret Moses' and Elijah's presence here as representing the Law and the Prophets, the two primary revelatory institutions of revelation. However, this interpretation is unlikely. Moses was indeed a major figure in relation to the law, but the historical Elijah was a regular—if not marginal—rather than a paradigmatic prophet. A more likely explanation comes from the nature of the two figures' respective demises. According to 2 Kings 2:1–14, Elijah was transported directly to heaven on a fiery heavenly chariot without experiencing death. As for Moses, he was the only person in history said to have been buried by God himself (Deut. 34:5–6); this caused much speculation about what happened to his body. We can imagine the two figures beside Jesus to be the most likely candidates to show up since the transfigured person was obviously a heavenly figure.

While the latter explanation seems logical, a third interpretation is possible; these two figures probably function as an embodied merism of the prophetic institution. We should probably not separate Moses and Elijah as representing two different and contrasting institutions, the law and the prophets, but view them as the chronological extremities in the history of prophecy in Israel. Moses served as the paradigmatic prophet at the front of the line (Deut. 18:15–22), while Malachi identified the prophet at the end of the line as an Elijah figure, an eschatological prophet who would reappear before the arrival of the day of YHWH (Mal. 4:5 [3:23]). Together, Moses and Elijah were the *alpha* and *omega* in the history of the prophetic institution. Accordingly, the purpose of Jesus' transfiguration was not only to declare his divinity but also to present him as the one of whom all the prophets of Israel had spoken from the beginning.⁴⁵

Matthew and Mark do not inform us concerning the subject of Moses' and Elijah's conversation with Jesus, but Luke adds that they spoke (*elegon* is pl.) to Jesus about the

exit (Gk. *exodos*) that he was about to experience in Jerusalem (9:31). The fact that these two prophets spoke to him about this invites these disciples to anticipate receiving messages from God concerning Jesus themselves and to perceive themselves in the roles of “prophets like Moses,” which will be confirmed in the near future in Jerusalem. This accords perfectly with Jesus’ own sense of mission and his urgency in his earlier prediction of his passion (Matt. 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22). If Moses’ and Elijah’s “exoduses” were extraordinary in glory, Jesus’ would be extraordinary in humiliation. In fulfillment of Isaiah 53:8, this would involve “cutting him off from the land of the living,” but in fulfillment of Isaiah 52:13–15, he would emerge “high and lifted up, and greatly exalted.” As witnesses to Jesus’ transfiguration, Peter, James, and John learned that the grand program of redemption, with the Messiah at its heart, was about to be fulfilled.

The three disciples were understandably terrified (Mark 9:6) because the sight had awakened them (Luke 9:32). The adjective *ekphoboi*, “terrified,” links their response with that of Moses’ reaction to the theophany at Sinai as reported in Hebrews 12:21, the only other occurrence of the word in the New Testament. Mark suggests that when Peter proposed that the disciples construct a booth for each of the participants in this scene, he was likely blurting out the first idea that came to his mind.

Although Peter had addressed Jesus directly and respectfully—each Gospel uses a different epithet for Jesus (*kyrios*, “Lord,” Matt. 17:4; *rabbi*, “my Master,” Mark 9:5; *epistata*, “Sir,” Luke 9:33)—neither Jesus nor Peter’s companions acknowledged him or his proposal. Instead, they heard a voice from the cloud, uttering words that recalled those of the voice at Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). In this instance the message consisted of two parts: a declaration of Jesus’ identity,

followed by the charge “Listen to him” (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35).

The synoptic evangelists all begin the first part with “This is my Son” (*houtos estin ho huios mou*). But whereas Matthew and Mark modify the clause with *ho agapētos*, “beloved,” Luke has *mou ho eklelegmenos*, “my chosen one.” As we noted earlier, this represents the notion expressed by *en hō/soi eudokēsa*, “whom I have identified as the object of my favor,” in Matthew 3:17 and Luke 3:22. These expressions declare Jesus to be the Messiah, the person whom YHWH had chosen and anointed as his agent to restore shalom to a world in chaos and under the curse.

When the voice ceased, Jesus’ transfiguration was over, and natural experiences perceived by the senses of touch, sound, and sight returned: Jesus touched his disciples, he calmed them with reassuring words, and they saw only him (Matt. 17:6–8; Luke 9:36). As Jesus had done after Peter’s confession (Matt. 16:20; Mark 8:30; Luke 9:21), now during their descent from the mountain he charged the three disciples not to divulge the spectacle (*horama*) to anyone until he, the Son of Man, had risen from the dead (Matt. 17:9; cf. Mark 9:9). No doubt it was difficult for them not to report this vision to the rest of the disciples, but both Mark and Luke declare that they faithfully kept Jesus’ word (Mark 9:10; Luke 9:36), though Mark adds that they were puzzled by what Jesus meant with his reference to rising from the dead. Clearly, Jesus’ earlier preview of what would happen to him in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22) had entered one ear and exited the other.

As before, Jesus did not explain why the disciples should keep silent about this event. On the basis of Malachi’s references to Elijah (Mal. 4:5 [3:23]), we may speculate that if the disciples had spoken up after Jesus’ transfiguration, the people would have demanded that he prove a messianic status by throwing off the hated Roman yoke and restoring Israel’s independence. Whatever the case, the three

apparently tried to reconcile this spectacle with the Jewish scribes' insistence that before the day of restoration Elijah must return (cf. Matt. 17:9–13; Mark 9:9–13). But after his appearance with Jesus on the mountain, Elijah had disappeared. To their question, Jesus answered that Elijah *had* come, but no one had recognized him. On the contrary, they did to him just as they pleased, and the returned Elijah's experience was a harbinger of the suffering to which the Son of Man would be subjected. At that point the three disciples apparently grasped what he was saying about John the Baptizer (Matt. 17:13), but they did not grasp what he was saying about himself (Mark 9:32; cf. 10:32). Yes, John the Baptizer was Elijah, but they still did not get Jesus' pointed statements about his own imminent destiny.

- [1.](#) Matt. 27:42; Mark 15:32; John 1:49; 12:13.
- [2.](#) Matt. 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37; Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:3, 37, 38; John 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21.
- [3.](#) Matt. 2:6; 9:36; 25:32; 26:31; Mark 6:34; 14:27; John 10:1–18; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4; Rev. 7:17.
- [4.](#) Matt. 12:18; Luke 1:69; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:25, 27, 30; Rom. 15:8; Phil. 2:7; cf. Matt. 8:14–17; Luke 22:35–38; Acts 8:26–35; Rom. 10:11–21; 1 Pet. 2:21–25.
- [5.](#) 1 Kings 2:33; cf. also Ps. 89:3–4 [4–5].
- [6.](#) Matt. 2:15; Luke 9:35; Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5.
- [7.](#) Pss. 2:7; 89:3 [4]; Isa. 42:1; 49:7; Hosea 11:1.
- [8.](#) Gen. 24:43 (rendered *parthenos* in LXX). In Exod. 22:16 [15]; Judg. 21:12; etc., where virginity is the issue, the Hebrew reads *bētûlâ*, rendered *parthenos* by LXX.
- [9.](#) As the LXX translated in Exod. 2:8; Ps. 68:25 [67:26]; Song 1:3; 6:8.
- [10.](#) Cf. Matt. 5:34; 19:28; 25:31; Heb. 1:8; 12:2.
- [11.](#) Matt. 27:11, 29, 37; Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:3, 37, 38; John 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21.
- [12.](#) 1 Sam. 13:13–14; 15:28–29; 16:1–13.
- [13.](#) Matt. 3:1–17; Mark 1:1–11; Luke 3:1–22; John 1:6–8, 19–36.
- [14.](#) “Sons of God” in LXX Deut. 32:8 and at Qumran; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7.
- [15.](#) Cf. 1 Sam. 25:32; 1 Kings 1:48; 8:15; 1 Chron. 16:36; 2 Chron. 2:12 [11]; 6:4.
- [16.](#) Matt. 21:9–15; Mark 11:9–10; John 12:13.
- [17.](#) Gen. 18:18; 22:18; Deut. 28:10; etc.
- [18.](#) Luke 1:17, 76; 3:4; cf. Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1; 4:5 [3:23].

- [19.](#) Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34.
- [20.](#) Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:27.
- [21.](#) 1 Cor. 4:14, 17; Eph. 5:1.
- [22.](#) Acts 15:25; Rom. 16:12; Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:7; 4:7, 9; Philem. 1, 16; 2 Pet. 3:15; 3 John 1; etc.
- [23.](#) Rom. 12:19; 2 Cor. 7:1; 12:19; Heb. 6:9; 1 Pet. 2:11; etc.
- [24.](#) Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; cf. Luke 9:35; remembered by Peter in 2 Pet. 1:17, on which see below in this chapter, under "The Transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36)." Cf. also allusions in Mark 12:6; Luke 20:13.
- [25.](#) Luke 12:32; Rom. 15:26-27; 1 Cor. 1:21; Col. 1:19; 1 Thess. 3:1.
- [26.](#) Ps. 147 [LXX 146]:10-11; Matt. 12:18; Luke 2:14; Gal. 1:15-16; 1 Thess. 2:8.
- [27.](#) Matt. 1:18-21; cf. Rom. 5:21; 6:23; 8:2; Heb. 9:28.
- [28.](#) Cf. 2 Sam. 7:14; Pss. 2:6-7; 89:19-29 [20-30]; Isa. 11:1-5.
- [29.](#) Gen. 49:10; Deut. 17:14-20; 1 Sam. 2:10.
- [30.](#) Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.
- [31.](#) Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21.
- [32.](#) Cf. John 3:28; 4:25, 29; 9:22; 10:24; 11:27.
- [33.](#) John 1:49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27.
- [34.](#) Lev. 26:40-45; Deut. 4:30-31; 30:1-10.
- [35.](#) Num. 23:19; Job 16:21; 25:6; Ps. 8:4 [5]; Isa. 56:2.
- [36.](#) Matt. 8:20; 11:19 // Luke 7:34; perhaps also Matt. 12:32.
- [37.](#) Matt. 9:2-6 // Mark 2:5-10 // Luke 5:20-24.
- [38.](#) Matt. 12:8 // Mark 2:28 // Luke 6:5.
- [39.](#) Matt. 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33; Luke 9:22.
- [40.](#) Matt. 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-41.
- [41.](#) Matt. 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33; Luke 9:22.
- [42.](#) In Matt. 17:22-23 (cf. Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:43b-45) and Matt. 20:17-19 (cf. Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34).
- [43.](#) Matt. 16:24-28; Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 9:23-27.
- [44.](#) Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; cf. Luke 22:24-27.
- [45.](#) Cf. Luke 18:31; 24:25-27; Acts 3:18-26; 7:37-38, 51-53; 1 Pet. 1:7-12.

CHAPTER 19

The Davidic Covenant in the Gospel Accounts of Jesus' Passion and Resurrection

Introduction: The Davidic Covenant between Jesus' Transfiguration and His Processional Entry into Jerusalem

After recounting the transfiguration of Jesus, the evangelists who gave us the Synoptic Gospels seemed to be in a hurry to get to the passion week, beginning with Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. The messianic motif is relatively subdued in the transitional period in which Jesus set out on his last journey to the cross: Matthew 17:14–20:24; Mark 9:14–10:52; Luke 9:37–19:27. Jesus' messianic title *Christos* occurs only once (Mark 9:41). The epithet "Son of David" occurs only at the very end, from the lips of blind Bartimaeus, who cried out repeatedly, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"¹ By juxtaposing this event with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which opens the passion narrative, Matthew and Mark have prepared the way for what is to follow, where the kingship motif dominates the accounts in all four Gospels. The Synoptic Gospels speak often of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew's preferred form of the expression) or the kingdom of God (preferred by Mark and Luke), but the King, whether he be God the Father or

Jesus the Son, is mentioned only once, and that by way of analogy in Jesus' instructions concerning the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:23).

To the extent that Jesus figures as the Messiah, the Gospels tend to identify him as the "Son of Man." In Mark all three occurrences come from Jesus and allude to his suffering, ending with a reference to giving his life as a ransom for many.² Matthew adds a fourth reference, which is overtly royal and narrowly ethnocentric in focus, but envisions a special place for the disciples: "Truly, I tell you, when the world is renewed and the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, administering the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). Luke mentions the Son of Man thirteen times in his accounts of events between the transfiguration and passion, but his chronology is not clear, and some of these occurrences parallel texts found in earlier contexts in Matthew and Mark.

The Synoptic Gospels all have Jesus predicting his imminent death at the hands of the Jewish leaders and the gentile authorities in Jerusalem three times prior to his arrival in the city.³ Although the Gospel of John is clear about Jesus' earlier awareness of the Jewish leaders' determination to kill him because of his violation of the Sabbath and his close identification of himself with the heavenly Father,⁴ Jesus' raising of Lazarus (the seventh and climactic sign of his identity) and its aftermath were the last straw; after this, ad hoc efforts gave way to a concerted plot to eliminate him (John 11:47-57).

The Processional Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem

In their portrayal of the involvement of the people in Jesus' death, all four Gospels present his "processional" entry into Jerusalem as the foil for their demanding his crucifixion later in the week.⁵ A series of events that began with their

acclamation of Jesus as “the son of David” (Matt. 21:9; cf. v. 15; Mark 11:10), “the one who comes in the name of YHWH,”⁶ “the king of Israel” (John 12:13; cf. Luke 19:38), and the one who ushers in “the coming kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:10) would climax with “Away [with him]! Away [with him]! Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!”⁷ With that fateful cry the descendants of Abraham flushed away a thousand years of messianic anticipation and hope.

The Davidic covenant obviously underlies the people’s response to Jesus’ processional entry into Jerusalem. However, Jesus’ redefinition of the nature of the Davidic Messiah’s reign is at the heart of this event. On the surface, the opening line of the people’s acclamation echoes many pleas for YHWH’s deliverance from some frightening threat in the Psalms,⁸ but several features of the citation fix Psalm 118 (v. 25) as the source text. First, the Hebrew construction, *hôšî‘â nā’* (Gk. *hosanna*), which is a transliteration rather than a translation, occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. Second, the following benediction (v. 26), “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD [YHWH]!” never occurs elsewhere in pleas for salvation. Third, although Greek *eudōson* (LXX 117:25) reflects Hebrew *hašlîḥâ*, “Grant success” or “Cause us to prosper,” this verb never occurs elsewhere alongside *hôšî‘â*, “Save.”

However, the people’s adaptation of the plea for divine help to a person whom they considered the descendant of David is problematic. Psalm 118 interweaves exclamations of praise to YHWH for past deliverances and pleas for deliverance in what seems to be a current crisis. The use of the first person, semantic links with other psalms attributed to David, and the reference to previous threats as “all the nations” (*kol gôyim*, v. 10) surrounding him suggest that the psalmist was David himself or one of his successors on the throne in Jerusalem. However, the Davidic king was so identified with YHWH that the throne on which he sat was

referred to as YHWH's throne (1 Chron. 29:23), and people perceived the king as the royal agent of divine rule for the nation. With the people's blessing of Jesus, they deemed him to be the one who had come "in the name of YHWH" and was YHWH's right hand (Ps. 118:15–16), and who had already declared three times, "In the name of YHWH, I will surely cut them [the nations] off" (vv. 10, 11, 12).

In exploring what sort of king the people were expecting, we need to assume that in citing two lines from Psalm 118, the people had in mind the entire psalm, which inspires a messianic vision of a ruler who would arise and rid Israel of the oppressive Roman rule. Several variant notions concerning the identity and role of the Messiah circulated in first-century Palestine, but predominantly, the Jews longed for a savior who would end this version of the exile by delivering them from foreign rulers and inaugurating the eschatological messianic age. To some groups—like the Zealots, who tried to hasten the messianic age—the sight of Jesus riding through the eastern gate into Jerusalem on an equid ignited their passion so that without restraint they hailed Jesus as the conquering Messiah. Along with their verbal exclamation and as physical gestures of homage, the people spontaneously removed their outer garments and spread them out on the road to prevent the donkey's feet from touching the ground. By serving as the seat for "His Majesty," the donkey itself was an essential element of this royal spectacle. The scene recalls 2 Kings 9:12–13, which recounts rituals involved in a king's ascent to the throne: anointing by an official, covering the steps on which the event happened with the people's garments, blowing the trumpet, and all together exclaiming, "Long live King Jehu!"

The crowd likely did not realize the incongruity of their actions. Admittedly, donkeys served primarily as pack animals, but before the emergence of the Davidic monarchy, significant persons would often ride donkeys rather than walking (e.g., Balaam, Num. 22; Jair's and

Abdon's sons, Judg. 10:4; 12:14), and especially significant individuals would ride "purebred" (*'ātôn*) animals (Judg. 5:10). However, if the crowd was expecting a conquering Messiah who would liberate them from the Roman yoke, those who were not swept along in the excitement would have viewed this donkey as a pathetic, if not useless, instrument of war. A horse or a lavishly decorated chariot pulled by horses would have served the motif much better.⁹ However, desperate for liberation from the Romans, the crowd was blind to the incongruity of the sight before them and certainly deaf to the message of the prophets, as Matthew and John both point out—though in different ways. Both evangelists treat this event as the fulfillment of a prophecy of Zechariah 9:9–10, which we need to reproduce in full:

Celebrate with enthusiasm, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Look, your king will come to you;
he is righteous and one who experienced salvation,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the military bow shall be cut off;
and he will proclaim peace to the nations;
his rule will extend from sea to sea,
and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth.

Matthew declares explicitly the significance of the event: "This happened to fulfill what was declared by the prophet, saying . . ." However, his odd insertion of the citation between Jesus' instructions to fetch a donkey and the report of the disciples' compliance highlights Jesus' self-consciousness and his own understanding of the significance of the moment. He had timed his return to Jerusalem precisely, and although the people interpreted this as a triumphal entry, the form was intentionally

underwhelming. Matthew notes the disciples' procurement of the donkey after he cited the Zechariah text.

As is often the case, Matthew's citation is selective, adaptive, and cryptic:

*Say to the daughter of Zion,
"Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a mare."*

Viewed in isolation, it appears that for Matthew the link with this text is primarily the fact of Jesus' riding on the donkey. He includes a single interpretive word on the Rider, "humble" (Hb. *ʿōnî*; Gk. *praūs*) but omits the characterization of the King as "righteous" (*ṣaddîq*) and "saved" (*nôšā'*), whatever that enigmatic expression means here. Even more striking, he omits in its entirety Zechariah 9:10, which explicitly repudiates the messianic paradigm reflected in the crowd's acclamation, suggesting that this king has rejected completely the militaristic vision. While proclaiming *šālôm* for Israel, he extends his peace-promoting rule (*māšal*) to the nations, even to the ends of the earth. The people surely had in mind the entire context of Zechariah 9:9-10, but the evangelist lets the image of Jesus on the donkey do all the talking.

Significantly, Matthew notes that Jesus rode into town on the foal of an adult donkey, which reinforces the image of modesty and disinterest in pretension. Matthew's observation that the disciples brought both the colt and its mother to Jesus (21:7) heightens the incongruity. Why would a thirty-year-old adult choose to ride the smaller and untrained younger animal (which may still have been nursing) when he could have ridden the larger and fully trained adult? This expands the distance between this image and the focus on chariots and harnessed horses and riders in Zechariah 9:10. Jesus was obviously not putting on a show to display his majesty and glory. On the contrary,

after the paradigm of the Isaianic Servant of YHWH, “He had no beauty or majesty that we should look at him, and there was nothing in his appearance that we should find him desirable” (Isa. 53:2).

John took the image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem in a significantly different direction. First, he highlighted the deliberateness of Jesus’ action by omitting any recollection of the disciples’ involvement in the procurement of the donkey and by noting that Jesus found the donkey himself (*heuriskō*, John 12:14). Second, when citing Zechariah 9:9, instead of having Jesus “ride” (Hb. *rākab*; Gk. *epibainō*), John had him “sitting” (*kathēmai*) on the donkey (John 12:15), which bears the closest resemblance to Mark’s locution (*kathizō*, Mark 11:7).¹⁰ Although the word used in the Old Greek of Zechariah 9:9 (*epibainō*) occurs frequently with reference to a person of significant status riding on an equid,¹¹ *kathēmai* is never used this way. However, narrators and poets regularly use *kathēmai* when referring to a king sitting on his throne,¹² when referring to God on his throne,¹³ and in the New Testament, when referring to the Son of Man sitting on his throne (Matt. 19:28). Jeremiah 22:4 illustrates the distinction in usage clearly: “For if you will indeed fulfill this word, then kings who sit [LXX *kathēmai*] on David’s throne will enter the gates of this palace, riding [*epibainō*] on chariots and horses, along with their officials and their people” (cf. also Jer. 17:25). These references suggest that, in John’s view, the colt functioned as Jesus’ throne! At the time of his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus’ disciples had not recognized this, but the significance of his action dawned on them after Jesus was glorified (*edoxasthē*, John 12:16).

The meaning of Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey deserves one further comment. With his “processional entry” Jesus redefined in sign act form the nature of his messiahship, a version that he would demonstrate again in a few days, before the Passover

Festival, by washing his disciples' feet (John 13:5–15). Three decades earlier the angelic heralds had signaled the messianic paradigm that he would fulfill when they announced to lowly shepherds his birth in Bethlehem, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11–12 NIV).

If those who had followed him around during his three-year ministry in Judea and Galilee had been listening, they would have repeatedly heard him describe his messiahship verbally. Shortly after Jesus' third prediction of his imminent death in Jerusalem,¹⁴ the mother of James and John, Zebedee's sons, had requested that Jesus appoint her sons to preeminent positions of authority in the kingdom. However, Jesus had answered with a pointed lecture on the nature of his messiahship and their place within his kingdom (Matt. 20:23–28; cf. 23:10–12).

From Jesus' actions then and there, the observers of his processional entry into Jerusalem could not have anticipated the depths to which he would humble himself, but he had announced it at the end of his rebuke of James and John: he would "give his life as a [substitutionary] ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). The Gospel of John had declared the same theme by quoting Jesus: "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."¹⁵ This was a clause not of classification but of identification; by this definition Jesus was not "*a* good shepherd" but "*the* Good Shepherd." The statement alludes to the last Servant Song in Isaiah, in which "my servant," whom we recognize as a Davidic figure, the shepherd of Israel (2 Sam. 5:2; 7:7), takes on the role of a sheep and dies as their substitute (Isa. 52:13–53:12). In his epistles, Paul often presented this vision of the humble Messiah.¹⁶

Jesus' Messiahship in the First Half of the Passion Week

It is difficult to track with confidence the sequence of events between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey and the beginning of the legal proceeding that led to his crucifixion. In the days that followed, Jesus continued to teach his disciples, preparing them for the future without him by expounding on the nature of the kingdom of God and instructing them on his return in the distant future. He warned his followers not to be seduced by false messiahs and false prophets who might lead people astray in the eschatological day when the Son of Man appears.¹⁷ Ironically, these false Messiahs would claim to come in the name of the true Messiah, but they would not recognize the Son of Man as that person. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus did not seize this opportunity to speak of his own present messiahship. In Luke's cryptic and seriously modified account (Luke 17:20–21), Jesus answered the Pharisees' questioning by denying that the arrival of the "kingdom of God" would be signaled by visible signs, but he said nothing of either "false Messiahs" (*pseudochristoi*, cf. Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22) or of his own messiahship (cf. Matt. 23:10). Sadly, during the passion week the Pharisees would not recognize in him the presence of the kingdom of God. On the surface, this seems to contradict the central thesis of the Gospel of John (John 20:30–31). However, John's preceding citation of Jesus' words to Thomas (v. 29) signals to the hearers of the Gospel that only those with the eyes of faith connect these dots.

Matthew set the stage for Jesus' impending death with clear allusions to his earlier comments¹⁸ and obvious echoes of messianic texts in the First Testament.¹⁹ In what follows, Jesus identifies himself in the third person as "the King" who acts in judgment on behalf of his Father and declares the destiny of all; the righteous are granted eternal

well-being in the kingdom prepared before the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34–40), while the wicked are consigned to eternal punishment (vv. 41–46).

The Arrest of Jesus

As we look forward to the passion accounts in the Gospels, the motif of Jesus' kingship gains prominence, though it is couched in shockingly ironic terms. John does not refer to the kingship of Jesus explicitly, but his version commences with Caiaphas' reaction to the panic of the chief priests and Pharisees in the wake of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:45–48). As regnant high priest that year, Caiaphas rebuked his colleagues in the council: "You are totally ignorant; you do not grasp that it is better for you that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation should perish" (vv. 49–50). In a rare overt assessment of the grounds of a character's statement in biblical narrative, the Gospel writer comments that this was not Caiaphas' own private opinion but an inspired verdict on a current crisis to which he had access by virtue of his role as high priest (cf. Deut. 17:9–10).

Despite Caiaphas' own motivation, John interpreted this as a prediction of Jesus' substitutionary death for Israel and as the signal that the moment had come for extending the boundaries of divine grace to "the children of God" (*ta tekna tou Theou*) scattered abroad and establishing them as a single covenant people (John 11:51–52). Jesus would reiterate this notion later when he declared that the time had arrived for him, through his death, to glorify the Father's name, to judge the world, to cast out its [evil] ruler, and to draw all people to himself (12:27–33). In short, this would mean the realization of what David had anticipated a millennium earlier. In response to YHWH's announcement that he and his descendants had been granted eternal title to the throne of Israel, he had exclaimed, "Now this is the Torah of humanity, O Adonay YHWH!" (2 Sam. 7:19). We do

not know whether the people had this statement in mind, but in the absence of any reference to “an eternal Messiah” in the Torah (perceived minimally as Deuteronomy or maximally as the Pentateuch), the crowd’s linkage of “the Torah” with “the Messiah [who] remains forever” (John 12:34) points to David’s statement.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ and the disciples’ preparation for the final Passover meal, the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the betrayal of Judas, Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane, and his arrest in the garden are all silent on the messianic motif. When the people arrested Jesus, Judas greeted him verbally as “Rabbi” (Matt. 26:49; Mark 14:45) but gesturally with a treacherous kiss (Luke 22:48). However, when Jesus twice asked the soldiers and officials sent by the chief priests and Pharisees for whom they had come, both times they identified their target as “Jesus of Nazareth” (John 18:4–7), a very earthy epithet. The closest the synoptic narrators come to a messianic image is in Jesus’ rebuke and symbolic gesture in response to Peter’s cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant. According to Matthew, Jesus declared that if he had appealed to his Father, his Father would have sent more than twelve legions of angels to defend him. However, determined to fulfill the Scriptures, he had resisted this urge (Matt. 26:51–54).

The Gospel of John is more direct in declaring the nature of Jesus’ kingship: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36). Through his gesture of healing Malchus’ ear and his verbal commentary, he reinforced earlier declarations and demonstrations that his messiahship would not be instituted by force. If he had been conspiring to overthrow any earthly powers, he would not have spent the last three years teaching in the temple and in synagogues where crowds gathered.[20](#)

The Legal Proceedings against Jesus

The issue of Jesus' messiahship changed dramatically once the legal proceedings against him began, for now the primary question concerned Jesus' identity, not merely as a Nazarene—which would surface—but his status in the divine economy. The process by which he was finally condemned to die was extremely complex, involving no fewer than four formal hearings.

Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-71; John 18:13-24)

All four Gospels recount Peter's threefold repudiation of Jesus as concomitant with Jesus' appearance before the Sanhedrin. The epithets for Jesus used by those who questioned the apostle reflected popular disposition toward him: "Jesus the Galilean" (Matt. 26:69), "Jesus of Nazareth" (*lēsou tou Nazōraiou*, v. 71;), "the Nazarene Jesus" (*tou Nazarēnou tou lēsou*, Mark 14:67), and "this man" (*tou anthrōpou toutou*, John 18:17).

However, things changed when the evangelists' attention shifted to Jesus. Matthew notes that those who had turned against him addressed Jesus directly as "Messiah!" (*chrīste*, Matt. 26:68). This prepared the way for Caiaphas' demand that he declare whether or not he was "the Christ, the Son of God."^{[21](#)} The evangelists differ in the first part of Jesus' response. Mark has Jesus answering the question in the affirmative: "I am" (*egō eimi*, Mark 14:62); Matthew has Jesus toss the ball back to his interrogators, "[That's what] you said" (*sy eipas*, Matt. 26:64); Luke has Jesus backing off from answering the question, because even if he answered, they would not believe him (Luke 22:67). All three synoptists agree in general concerning Jesus' follow-up comment. With what must have seemed to be remarkable authority, he declared, "But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of

Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”²²

According to Luke 22:70, this precipitated the entire Sanhedrin responding with one voice: “So you are the Son of God?” Note the replacement of “Son of Man” with the more explicitly messianic title “Son of God.” Obviously grasping the allusion to Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, Caiaphas tore his priestly garments in a gesture of horror and declared his verdict: there was no need for further witnesses. With his utterance Jesus had committed blasphemy, a capital crime, in the Jewish court (Matt. 26:65–66; Mark 14:63–64).

In contempt and jest the officials holding Jesus blindfolded him, spat in his face, and slapped him, and then they demanded that he identify the man whose hand had struck him. That they demanded a prophecy suggests that they (mockingly) treated him as having prophetic status. However, they also addressed him as “Messiah” (*christe*, Matt. 26:68), which suggests that they interpreted Jesus’ answer to the high priest’s opening challenge (v. 63) affirmatively.

Their response raises the question of legality. In his answer Jesus did not explicitly claim to be God, which is the crime calling for death. *Christos*, “Son of Man,” and “Son of God” were all messianic titles. Nowhere does the First Testament declare that claiming to be a Messiah is a capital offense. That he will sit on the right hand of Power (Luke 22:69 reads “right hand of the power of God”) suggests a position subordinate to God himself, which agrees with Psalm 110:1.

Jesus before Pilate (Matt. 27:1-2, 11-14; Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:1-5; John 18:28-38)

The next morning the Sanhedrin reconvened. They had decided that Jesus must be executed, but because they were under Roman rule and had no authority over matters

of life and death, even in matters of religion such as blasphemy (John 18:29–32; cf. Rom. 13:1–4), they brought him to the palace of Pilate, the Roman governor (Matt. 27:2). However, rather than charging Jesus with blasphemy against God (Matt. 26:63; Mark 14:64), they cast his crime as treason against Caesar: “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king” (Luke 23:2 NIV).

In a rare moment, all four Gospels cast Pilate’s verbal response in identical terms: “Are you the King of the Jews?”²³ This reaction recalls the only previous occurrence in the Bible of the epithet “King of the Jews” (*basileus tōn Ioudaiōn*), at the outset of this grand story of Jesus, the Messiah: “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2).

Pilate’s reaction also set the stage for what is to follow, for this epithet recurs repeatedly in subsequent court proceedings.²⁴ Indeed, as many commentators have noted, although many of the actions and utterances of the characters involved in this sinister plot to eliminate the King of the Jews in their midst have a mocking intent (the illocution), ironically, like Caiaphas’ utterance in the wake of the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:49–51), they were in fact declaring the truth (the locution). Even so, the events that followed would signify the glorification and exaltation of Jesus within a cosmic context and result in the universal recognition of him as the Messiah—that is, the Son of Man (John 12:27–36). However, like the accounts of Jesus’ birth, the picture painted by the narratives of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion is pervasively ethnocentric and Jewish: Jesus was crucified as “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”²⁵

According to the synoptic accounts, Jesus’ response to Pilate’s question concerning his kingship, “[That’s what] you are saying,”²⁶ was as cryptic as Matthew’s version of Jesus’ earlier response to Caiaphas’ question concerning his messiahship: “[That’s what] you said” (*sy eipas*, Matt.

26:64). Obviously, this response did not satisfy the chief priests and elders, and they continued to press charges, though none of the Gospels specify the crimes. Remarkably, Jesus refused to dignify them with an answer or even respond to Pilate's reminder of the seriousness of the charges.²⁷

John's recollection of the interaction between Pilate and Jesus is much fuller. He cast Jesus' answer in the form of a question concerning the origin of Pilate's query: "Is this your own question, or are you the mouthpiece of others?" (18:34). Pilate reacted curtly, suggesting that as a gentile the notion would never have crossed his mind; on the contrary, Jesus' own nation (*ethnos* = Hb. *gôy*) had handed Jesus over to him.

Perhaps because Pilate found the Jewish leaders' reason for handing Jesus over to him in John 18:29–30 so pathetic, he asked Jesus directly to recount his crimes: "What have you done?" (v. 35c). With a tone of even greater authority than he had exhibited before Caiaphas (cf. Luke 22:67–69), Jesus offered a discourse on the nature of his kingship rather than answering either of Pilate's questions directly:

My kingship is not from [*ek*] this world;
if my kingship were from [*ek*] this world,
my servants would fight,
that I might not be handed over to the Jews;
but my kingship is not from here [*enteuthen*]. (John 18:36)

Most translations render *hē basileia hē emē* as "my kingdom." However, as the italicized words indicate, the issue is not geography but the source of Jesus' authority to rule.

Rather than reacting to Jesus' vague statement concerning the source of his royal authority, Pilate's next question focused on Jesus' status: "So you really are a king?" To this, Jesus responded, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose, I was born and for this purpose I have

come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37 ESV). Pilate’s reaction, “What is truth?” suggests that Jesus’ words had mystified him, but his declaration of Jesus’ innocence to Jesus’ Jewish accusers indicates that Jesus’ words did not trouble him (v. 38; cf. Luke 23:4). Pilate’s question was probably serious for him, but for the narrator it highlights a key feature of the narrative. At the locutionary level, Jesus was suffering horrendous humiliation, but at the illocutionary level, with the advantage of four decades or more of hindsight, John recognized this as the moment of Jesus’ coronation and exaltation. At the locutionary level, Jesus was no threat at the moment to either Pilate’s position as governor or Caesar’s position as emperor. However, according to Luke, Pilate’s verdict, “I find no crimes in this man,” heightened the urgency for the accusers, who cast Jesus as a rabble-rouser whose unsettling influence extended beyond Judea to Galilee (23:5). But Pilate did not bend to their pressure (23:13–14).

Jesus before Herod [Antipas] (Luke 23:6–12)

The sequence of events becomes confusing, but for Pilate the reference to Galilee seems to have triggered a possible way out of his dilemma. Having learned that Jesus was a Galilean, it dawned on him that as a resident of the territory ruled by Herod Antipas, Herod the Great’s son, he might be able to pass off to him responsibility for Jesus. Conveniently, Herod was in Jerusalem at this very moment. Herod had looked forward to meeting Jesus, but it did not take long for him to establish the futility of this encounter. At the outset he apparently was warm toward the Messiah before him because his primary intent was to witness Jesus perform some miraculous sign (*sēmeion*), but Jesus refused to dignify him with a display of his extraordinary powers. Combining this indignity with the continued din of the

accusations by the chief priests and scribes, Herod's disposition toward Jesus changed dramatically. As a gesture of contempt and mockery, he had his men dress Jesus in elegant garments and sent him back to Pilate.

This act marked a turning point in the trial of Jesus. The mockery of his kingship had begun. Little could Herod or his men realize the irony of this moment and the events that would follow. While they intended to humiliate Jesus by mocking his claim to kingship over the Jews, they had initiated a chain of events that would have the opposite effect, ensuring the proclamation of Jesus' messiahship not only in this momentous week but throughout the decades, centuries, and millennia that have followed, even to the present day. Like the corrupt Judeans in Jerusalem in Ezekiel's time (Ezek. 8:12; 9:9), the perpetrators of evil, through their speech and actions, had become the heralds of the central theme of the narrative.

Jesus' Second Appearance before Pilate (Matt. 27:13-32; Mark 15:3-22; Luke 23:13-32; cf. John 19:1-17)

Pilate's second encounter with Jesus opened with the governor reiterating his conviction of Jesus' innocence of any of the charges that the Jewish leaders had leveled against him (Luke 23:13-16; cf. v. 4) and announcing his intent to have Jesus flogged and then released. He apparently hoped this would satisfy the Sanhedrin. Because this was the day before the Passover, he proposed an institutionalized way of solving his dilemma. In keeping with a custom that he had established earlier—releasing any prisoner the people would select on the day before the Passover—he apparently hoped that the people would call for the release of Jesus.²⁸ The custom seemed to provide for the release of *anyone* whom the people chose, but in this instance he gave them a binary option: Jesus or Barabbas, a

notorious criminal who had been incarcerated for murder and for inciting crowds to revolt against their Roman overlords (Luke 23:19).

The two men presented a study in contrasts. Barabbas was known for his notoriety (*episēmon*, Matt. 27:16), but Jesus was a righteous man (*dikaios*), as even Pilate's wife recognized (v. 19). Barabbas was a murderer (*phonos*, Luke 23:19), but Jesus brought life to the sick and dying. Barabbas had led in an attempted insurrection to overthrow the Romans (v. 19), but Jesus was respectful of human governments and showed no interest in regime change (Luke 23:19; cf. John 18:33–37). Pilate reiterated that he could find no evidence of guilt in Jesus (Luke 23:22), but Barabbas presented a negative foil against which to highlight the character of Jesus' messiahship; Jesus was a righteous man who refused to seize power by violent means.

However, the contrast between Matthew's presentation of Jesus' messiahship and that of the other Gospels is telling. Whatever lay behind Pilate's locution, "Shall I release for you the King of the Jews?" (Mark 15:9; John 18:39), he intended this as a snide political question to insult the Jewish leaders. He certainly would not acknowledge Jesus' right to reign in the place of either Caesar Tiberias in Rome or Herod Antipas, as he implied in his follow-up question, "What shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?" (Mark 15:12; cf. John 18:33–35). To Pilate, Jesus was an innocent ordinary man,²⁹ but a contemptible man at that (Luke 23:11). However, the governor should at least have listened to his wife, who acknowledged Jesus as "a righteous man" (*dikaios*) and whose dream about him the previous night had brought her great anguish (Matt. 27:19).

In John 19:4–15 the Fourth Evangelist recounts that after Pilate's pronouncement of Jesus' innocence and his formal presentation of him to the crowd, "See, the man!" the people demanded that Jesus be crucified. But when Pilate

repeated his verdict of innocence, the people declared their own verdict of his guilt, which had nothing to do with political issues or threats against regnant authorities: based on the Torah, Jesus must die because he claimed to be “the Son of God.” As we have seen repeatedly, this is a messianic title, which in singular form applied only to kings, but it reflected the Israelites’ perception of the king’s special relationship with God.^{[30](#)}

Pilate probably did not grasp the uniquely Jewish understanding of the expression, but hearing this intensified his fear. Presumably he interpreted it from his own Roman perspective. The Caesar on the throne at the time of Jesus’ birth as “King of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2; cf. Luke 2:11) was Caesar Augustus, who identified himself as *Imperator Caesar divi filius*, “Commander Caesar, son of the god [Julius].” Caesar Tiberius, Pilate’s ultimate overlord, minted coins on which he referred to himself as *Tiberius Caesar divi Augusti filius Augustus*, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.” The Jewish leaders’ reference to “the Son of God” frightened Pilate. Now apparently fearing that he was dealing with more than “a man from Galilee” (*anthrōpos Galilaïos*, Luke 23:6), he asked Jesus from where he had come (John 19:9), but Jesus refused to answer his question.

When Pilate retorted that he had the power either to release or crucify Jesus, he replied, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you *from above*. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (John 19:11 NIV, emphasis added). While the first statement is brilliantly ambivalent, the second is frustratingly vague. Pilate probably missed the double entendre and interpreted “from above” (*anōthen*) in a political sense, in which case the one who had granted him the authority to sit in judgment over Jesus was Caesar. But the expression *anōthen* echoes John 3:3, where Jesus had

spoken of being born “from above,” which clearly refers to God in heaven.

The present statement drips with irony, declaring to all who grasp what is happening the true reversal of roles; the one who thought he presided as judge in this legal hearing was on trial himself. Meanwhile the prisoner who stood before him bound (John 18:12)—whom he had flogged (19:1) and whom he had let the soldiers mock by crowning him, dressing him in purple, feigning allegiance by exclaiming, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and then striking him with their hands (19:2–3)—had taken complete charge. Jesus not only declared the source of Pilate’s power but also declared his verdict on those responsible for this charade.

Jesus’ vague declaration of the verdict (19:11b) forced all present to reflect on the identity of “the one who handed me over to you.” If we interpret the singular participle “who handed me over” (*ho paradous me*) and the verb “possesses, has” (*echei*) collectively, then the persons whom he pronounced as having committed a greater crime than Pilate could be the soldiers who had mistreated him (19:2–3) or the Jewish leaders who had charged him with the capital crime of blasphemy, sought his death, and declared his punishment, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (vv. 6–7). At the same time, we could interpret these groups as representative of all humanity who have rebelled against God and abused his Servant (cf. Isa. 53:7–9), who in this moment faced his death at our hands but in dying bore our sins (vv. 4–6, 11).

However, it seems more likely that the singular verbs refer to an individual. Despite Isaiah 53:10, in this moment Jesus did not have in mind his heavenly Father, since the person was charged with crimes greater than Pilate’s. Judas comes to mind immediately (John 18:2–12), except that he has been out of the picture for some time and did not actually deliver him into Pilate’s hands. The most likely candidate is Caiaphas, the high priest, who had earlier declared

prophetically that it was better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish, which had driven the religious leaders to seek Jesus' death (John 11:47-53; cf. 18:13-14). All the Gospels are silent on Caiaphas' involvement in the proceedings before Pilate, but given the high priest's earlier counsel (18:14), his questioning of Jesus (18:19), and the fact that he seems to be the last person to "host" Jesus before he appeared before Pilate (cf. 18:24, 28), apparently the responsibility ultimately lay with him.

Jesus' statement in John 19:11 left Pilate between a rock and a hard place. Perhaps his wife's comments were ringing in his ears (Matt. 27:19), or Jesus' pronouncement of greater guilt upon those who handed him over to the governor offered him cover. In any case, Jesus' response reinforced his conviction that Jesus was innocent, and Pilate determined to release him (John 19:12). With this development the Jewish leaders had only one more card to play. Seeing that they made no progress with Pilate by focusing on Jesus' crimes, they played the ad hominem card. Releasing Jesus would make the governor an accomplice ("friend") of the man before him and an enemy of the emperor above him (19:12). In Roman records, the expression "Friend of Caesar" (*amicus Caesaris*) served as a title granted to elite officials who had demonstrated exceptional loyalty to the emperor. We have no evidence that Pilate had been granted this honor at this time, but he certainly would have welcomed it had it been offered him. Furthermore, he must have been aware of the brutality with which Tiberius disposed of people who betrayed him. Ironically, the Jewish leaders, whose hatred toward their Roman overlords was well known as far away as Rome itself, had cast themselves as allies of the emperor and guardians of the loyalty of his representative in Jerusalem.

Pilate responded first with a nonverbal gesture. He brought Jesus out to the porch in front of his palace, and on a raised platform (*lithostrōton*) sat down on the governor's

seat, from which official decisions were announced.³¹ Perhaps in response to Jesus' earlier seizure of the upper hand in the legal proceedings (John 19:11) and as a gesture of defiance before the crowd, he tried to regain control of events that were rapidly spiraling downward. With an inserted circumstantial clause, the evangelist captures the significance of the moment: at the sixth hour, when people came in from the fields and began preparing for the Passover meal, Pilate sat down and declared, "Here is your king!" (19:14).

Whether we interpret "the sixth hour" as 6:00 a.m. (according to Roman timekeeping) or noon (according to Jewish reckoning), John's purpose in noting this synchrony is theological: at the very moment when heads of households were selecting the lamb to be slaughtered, Pilate unwittingly introduced the supreme Passover Lamb, much like Caiaphas had unwittingly prophesied in John 11:50-51. However, as the Lamb of God, Jesus' death would be more than substitutionary; it would also be atoning. As John the Baptizer had announced at the beginning of this Gospel, "See the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 36; cf. Isa. 53). After decades of reflection (cf. 20:30-31), John the evangelist had connected the dots and paved the way for a dominant motif in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:8-14; etc.).

In a patently ironic scene, by introducing Jesus with "Look! Your King!" Pilate unwittingly heralded the arrival of a monarch, excerpting words from a prophecy of Zechariah: "Celebrate enthusiastically, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you!"³² Pilate's move was a setup, tossing the ball back into the crowd's hands and forcing them to commit themselves. In this formal context, if they shouted "Hail, King of the Jews," as the soldiers did in utter jest,³³ Pilate could have charged them with sedition and called in the Roman troops.

However, the Jews did the opposite. They intensified their demand to have Jesus crucified and declared their allegiance to Caesar alone. With “We have no king but Caesar!” the chief priests and all the people not only repudiated their status as the people of YHWH but also flushed away a thousand years of messianic anticipation. Their history had sunk to a new nadir.

We have explored the way Mark, Luke, and John develop the messianic theme; now we may return to Matthew, who thrusts the messianic motif explicitly into the foreground. Pilate introduced the motif himself with his opening question: “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Messiah?” (Matt. 27:17). When the people demanded Barabbas rather than Jesus, Pilate asked, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Messiah?” (27:22). According to the synoptists, this sequence of events had precipitated the people’s demand for Jesus’ crucifixion,³⁴ Pilate’s washing his hands of the whole affair (Matt. 27:24), the people’s acceptance of guilt for the death of Jesus and their implication of their descendants in it (v. 25), Pilate’s release of Barabbas, and his scourging of Jesus and handing him over to Romans soldiers for his crucifixion.

Matthew’s silence on the involvement of the crowd in the preparation of Jesus for his crucifixion suggests that Roman soldiers had taken Jesus inside the governor’s official residence (*praitōrion*, Matt. 27:27; Mark 15:16). However, Pilate’s absence is striking. Presumably, having washed his hands and wanting nothing more to do with Jesus, he left the preparations entirely in the hands of the soldiers. What transpired in those confines involves a coronation ceremony that is simultaneously comedic and tragic, satirical and burlesque. Each of the elements deserves brief notice.

1. An entire battalion of soldiers (*holēn tēn speiran*) gathered before Jesus in the praetorium. The scene

borders on the absurd; does it really take six hundred soldiers to guard Jesus and prepare him for his crucifixion?

2. The soldiers humiliated Jesus by stripping him of his clothes and then dressing him in the purple robes of royalty. As was the custom in the ancient world, changing clothes often symbolized a change in identity. A criminal had been transformed into a king.
3. They crowned Jesus with a wreath of plaited thorns. The chosen material was not only insulting but also painful as the thorns were pressed down on his head.
4. As a symbol of authority, instead of a royal mace, they placed a reed in his right hand.
5. They knelt before him in mock submission and homage.
6. Mockingly, they shouted, "Hail! King of the Jews!"

With these actions the soldiers were obviously making sport of Jesus, but like Caiaphas' earlier pronouncement about the preferability of one dying for the people rather than the people themselves perishing, they did not realize the profundity or the significance of their actions. This was the preparation for Jesus' exaltation. In the coming hours and days, the entire universe would witness Jesus' being lifted high above all principalities and powers. The Roman soldiers represented the kingdom of darkness arrayed against the Messiah, but their kneeling before Jesus also anticipated the day when people from every tribe and nation will bow before him.³⁵ The royal robes, the crown, and the mace all anticipated the transformation of this "man of sorrows" into the ruler of the cosmos (cf. Isa. 52:13-15). At the same time, the cry "Hail! King of the Jews!" reminds us that in this cosmic scheme of redemption, the person who would be slain for all humanity also bore the epithet "King of the Jews." God had not forgotten the

physical seed of Abraham as his own covenant people. David is back.

Matthew and Mark note carefully that the humiliation of Jesus did not end with his mock coronation. Instead of anointing the Messiah with oil as the Israelites had anointed David in 2 Samuel 5:1-3, the soldiers spat in his face. Then they took the symbols of royalty and used them as instruments of abuse. The scene ends with the soldiers stripping Jesus of the royal robes and replacing them with what he had been wearing (Matt. 27:30-31; Mark 15:20). Now he was ready to be led away to be crucified—the perfectly righteous Son of God and Son of Man between two bona fide criminals (*kakourgoi*).³⁶ Luke's account is striking: he alone notes that as Jesus was headed to his death, he advised the women to weep not for him but for themselves as daughters of Jerusalem because of the awful days that lay ahead for the city and its population (Luke 23:27-31).

The Crucifixion of Jesus (Matt. 27:33-44; Mark 15:22-32; Luke 23:33-43; John 19:16-42)

After the completion of Jesus' trial and conviction, where the issue was Jesus' identity and role, the messianic motif in the narratives is understandably muted. In the accounts of his crucifixion, the most obvious signal was the inscription that Pilate had attached to the cross over Jesus' head: "JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."³⁷ The versions of the inscription (*hē epigraphē*) in the Synoptic Gospels vary slightly, but they all appear without comment. Although Matthew and Mark cast it as an anonymous summary of the charge (*aitia*) against Jesus, Luke inserts his reference to the inscription as a circumstantial comment after referring to the derision from spectators and religious leaders.

Written much later, John's Gospel touches on the inscription's messianic significance by offering commentary on its origins. To do so, he reintroduced Pilate, who had

either been silent in or absent from Jesus' mock coronation. Indeed, he explicitly attributes the inscription to Pilate and recounts the debate that the governor had with chief priests over it. John also offers a few new details about the inscription itself. First, he cast it as a "public notice" (*titlos*) identifying the person on the cross, rather than as a summary of the charges. John may hereby have tried to reflect Pilate's ambivalence toward Jesus. While Pilate had asked Jesus whether he was "the King of the Jews,"³⁸ he never cast the title in the form of an accusation. Indeed, earlier he had distanced himself from the charge and attributed it to the people: "What then shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" (Mark 15:12).

Second, Pilate identified the one on the cross by personal name and place of origin: "Jesus of Nazareth." This addition may have reflected his earlier puzzlement regarding Jesus' identity and his origin. It is striking that we never hear Jesus' name spoken by the characters in this drama, with two notable exceptions in Matthew. In his presentation of the options open to the people concerning which man they preferred for release, Barabbas or Jesus, twice Pilate identified Jesus as "Jesus who is called Messiah" (Matt. 27:17, 22). Concerning Jesus' Nazareth roots, in Luke 23:5–7 the report of his Galilean roots had been significant in Pilate's sending him on to Herod (Antipas), who was tetrarch over that region. But his subsequent interaction with Jesus obviously raised further questions about his origin. Apparently in the privacy of his own court, he had asked Jesus specifically, "From where have you come?" Rather than naming the place where he had grown up, Jesus had spoken of the origin of his authority: "from above" (John 19:9–11). By identifying Jesus as from Nazareth, which was outside Pilate's jurisdiction, the governor had cast him as an outsider, and as such Jesus had invaded his space. Pilate was also probably aware of the disdain that the religious leaders and many snobbish residents of Judea felt toward

their Galilean countryfolk. Most of the spectators and passersby who saw the inscription would have been residents of Jerusalem and its environs, though there must have been others because it was the Passover weekend.

Third, John notes that Pilate's inscription was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (*Hebraïsti, Rhōmaïsti, Hellēnistī*, 19:20). The first represented the prevailing language of the population, the second the administrative language of the government, and the third the lingua franca of the region. The trilingual character of the document symbolized its official function and ensured that its message would be universally accessible and significant. However, in John's mind it probably meant much more. To be sure, Jesus was crucified as "King of the Jews," but his sacrificial death would be the means by which he would be lifted up and draw all people to himself (John 12:32–34). Furthermore, through him the long-expected Messiah (cf. John 1:41; 4:25) and David's vision of a "Torah for humanity" (*tôrat hā'ādām*, 2 Sam. 7:19) would be fulfilled.

Although these are three distinctive features of John's presentation of the inscription, the critical element for him was the title common to all four versions: Pilate's identification of Jesus as "King of the Jews." He reports the chief priests' protest of the inscription, for it might be read as a statement of fact. They demanded that he alter it to read as a statement of Jesus' claim—that he said he was the King of the Jews. As a matter of fact, taken literally, that was not the crime for which they had charged Jesus. When Pilate had first asked the religious leaders for their accusations against him, they had answered ridiculously, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you" (John 18:30). Their following comment (v. 31) suggested only that whatever the crime was, it was a capital offense.

John has Pilate introducing Jesus' status as "King of the Jews" (John 18:33). In the follow-up conversation, the Jewish

officials justified their demand for Jesus' crucifixion by declaring that Jesus had identified himself as "the Son of God," which they interpreted as a declaration of divinity, hence as blasphemous and subject to the death penalty. It is true that as a title for humans in the First Testament, this epithet was reserved for Davidic kings, which in Second Temple times would have been equivalent to "King of the Jews." However, their charge against Jesus was not political, and Pilate would certainly not have linked the expressions this way. Although he could have interpreted the title "Son of God" as a challenge to Roman authority, including his own as a representative of Rome, Pilate never expressed any interest in applying the epithet "Son of God" to Jesus. In any case, by insisting that the inscription stand as is (19:22), he accomplished two purposes: (1) vis-à-vis the Roman authorities, he had removed a potential threat to their administration in the region, and (2) vis-à-vis the Jewish religious authorities, he had eliminated a person who had threatened their control over the population (cf. 11:47-53).

The issue of Jesus' messiahship surfaces again in the mockery that transpired among the spectators to his crucifixion.³⁹ Matthew and Mark speak of passersby who addressed Jesus directly, challenging Jesus, who had said he could build the temple in three days, to prove he was the "Son of God"—that is, the Messiah—by saving himself and coming down from the cross (Matt. 27:39-40; cf. Mark 15:29-30). Luke speaks of the commoners as spectators, standing by and watching, without response (Luke 23:35a).

All three Synoptic Gospels highlight the mockery of the Jewish religious leaders, though they cast it as conversation among themselves that Jesus must have heard, rather than directing it to him. The issue is the same as it had been for the passersby: if Jesus were the Messiah and if he had saved others, surely he could rescue himself by extricating himself from the nails and the ropes that bound him to the cross.

The mockers used a variety of epithets for Jesus. Matthew has them explicitly identifying Jesus as “the King of Israel” (Matt. 27:41–42); Mark is more explicit with “the Messiah, the King of Israel” (Mark 15:31–32), and Luke is most theological with “the Messiah of God, his chosen One” (*ho Christos tou Theou ho eklektos*, Luke 23:35b). The expression “the chosen One” occurs elsewhere of the Messiah only in Isaiah 42:1, speaking of the messianic Servant of YHWH. In Matthew’s version the religious leaders bolstered their challenge by quoting Psalm 22:8 [9], “His confidence is in YHWH; let him deliver him, since he delights in him” (cf. Matt. 27:43).

The nature of the religious’ leaders’ challenge, their citation of Scripture, and indeed the direction and saving significance of Jesus’ action all recall the devil’s second test of Jesus, when he challenged Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and let the Lord and his angels rescue him (Matt. 4:5–7). In their previous determination to kill Jesus and in their present mockery of him on the cross, the chief priests and scribes confirmed Jesus’ assessment of their genealogy: they are not Abraham’s faithful children; their father is the devil (John 8:37–44).

It appears that the two criminals crucified next to Jesus had initially joined in the mockery (Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32b), though Luke suggests that only one had done so (23:39–43). Responding to the first criminal’s challenge to Jesus to prove that he was the Messiah by saving himself and them, the second recognized the justice in their punishment and pleaded with Jesus to remember him when he arrived in his kingdom. Jesus responded by declaring the second criminal’s welcome to that kingdom, which he identified as paradise.

The Death and Burial of Jesus (Matt. 27:45-66; Mark 15:33-47; Luke 23:44-56; John 19:28-42)

We should not be surprised by the muting of the messianic motif in the accounts of the death of Jesus, for on the surface this appears to be the ultimate proof that Jesus' claims to messiahship were bogus. Some interpret some of Jesus' final words on the cross as proof that he was the Messiah, fulfilling the supposed prediction in Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). However, we must be aware of what is happening here. There is no reason to question the psalm title's attribution of Psalm 22 to David. Assuming this to be correct, the psalm expresses David's own reaction to a crisis, when he feared that his very life was in danger. The statement itself is cast in the past tense, as if the divine abandonment had already happened to him, rather than as a prediction of a crisis happening to someone else. What Jesus had hereby done was appropriate the words of the founder of the messianic line for himself and apply it to his own death. As a descendant of David, Jesus' use of David's words was entirely appropriate.

However, when Jesus applied these words to himself, he acknowledged a much more profound significance to what David had uttered than David himself could have imagined. Whereas Psalm 22 represents David's expression of his own desperate state because he perceived God to have abandoned him, David's perception was in fact incorrect. Not only was this song composed after YHWH had demonstrated his presence and the crisis had passed, but it also ends with a strong declaration of praise to YHWH.^{[40](#)} Furthermore, with the benefit of historical hindsight, the narrator in 1 Samuel 16:13 declares that from the moment of his anointing forward (*wāmā'lâ*), the Spirit of YHWH was strong upon David. With Jesus, the issue differed fundamentally. Just as the application of the title "Son of

God” shifts from being metaphorically true of David to being literally true of Jesus, so the outburst “My God, why have you forsaken me?” which seemed phenomenologically true of David, was for a brief moment literally true of Jesus. Because Jesus was the sin offering⁴¹—the embodiment of sin—the Father’s face had turned away from him. The darkness of Jesus’ experience would have by far exceeded the dark valley through which David had walked.

In the account of Jesus’ actual death, we find a messianic hint in the response of one of the criminals to the “man” crucified between them. One of them mocked Jesus, as did the crowds below (Luke 23:39), but the other expressed “godly fear” (*phobeō*), recognizing the justice of his own punishment and pleading with Jesus to remember him when he entered his kingdom (Luke 23:39–43). Whatever he understood by “your kingdom” (*tēn basileian sou*), the expression may have been triggered by the inscription above Jesus, “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (John 19:19; cf. Matt. 27:37). With the same confidence and authority that he had expressed in his conversations with the people,⁴² Jesus graciously declared, “Certainly [*amēn*], I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The expression *paradeisos* occurs only three times in the New Testament (cf. 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7) but frequently in the First,⁴³ especially in contexts involving or alluding to the garden of Eden. The Greek word derives from Persian *pairi-daēza*, “enclosure, park, garden.” That Jesus told the criminal he would be with him “today” suggests to some that it refers to the immediate afterlife, if not the intermediate state of the dead. However, it is preferable to interpret this as a symbolic reference to the well-being of the righteous in the afterlife, which climaxes in their final abode, in the context of the new heavens and the new earth, when the entire world will be a veritable garden of Eden.

We recognize a second witness to Jesus' messianic status in the supernatural phenomena (signs) that accompanied the moment of Jesus' expiration: the curtain separating the holy of holies from the holy great hall of the temple was torn from top to bottom, the earth quaked, tombs opened up, and resurrected bodies emerged and appeared to many in the holy city (Matt. 27:51-53; Mark 15:38). Ironically, the divinely inspired interpreter of these phenomena was a gentile, a Roman centurion serving guard duty in front of Jesus. Luke has him going beyond Pilate's earlier verdict of innocence (Luke 23:4, 14, 22) and declaring, "Certainly this man was righteous" (*dikaios*, v. 47). The irony is obvious: by dying as a sin offering, Jesus demonstrated his righteousness.

However, according to Matthew and Mark, the centurion who declared, "Truly this [man] was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39) gives most explicit witness to Jesus as Messiah. This gentile was the first witness to and herald of the truthfulness of the religious leaders' accusation (John 19:7) and the bystanders' mockery, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."⁴⁴ Jesus proved his messiahship, not by rescuing himself from Pilate or coming down from the cross but by submitting to their brutality and dying!

John adds a third messianic witness. To hasten the death of the men on their respective crosses, Jewish leaders asked Pilate to have his soldiers break their legs, so they could dispose of the bodies before sundown. Since Jesus had already expired, his bones were not broken. However, one of the soldiers stabbed his side with his spear, resulting in blood and water gushing out. Although Psalm 34 is not explicitly messianic, the Gospel writer interprets the fact that Jesus' bones were not broken as a fulfillment of a Davidic statement in verse 20 [21]. He then interprets the piercing of Jesus' side with the statement in Zechariah 12:10: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the

inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced” (NIV). The syntax is difficult, especially the use of the first-person pronoun, “me,” but in John’s mind, what happened to Jesus was foreseen by Zechariah and represented another sign of his messianic status.

The Gospels mute Jesus’ messianic status even more in accounts of his burial. All four mention the involvement of Joseph of Arimathea, whom they characterize economically as a rich man (*plousios*, Matt. 27:57), sociopolitically as a high-standing member of the council (*bouleutēs*, Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50), ethically as a good and righteous man (*anēr agathos kai dikaios*, Luke 23:50), dispositionally as a courageous man (*tolmēsas*, Mark 15:43), and spiritually as one who waited eagerly for the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 15:43) and who was a secret disciple of Jesus (John 19:38; cf. Matt. 27:57). Having received authorization from Pilate to bury Jesus’ body, Joseph deposited it in his own new tomb. Because people buried their dead in family tombs, a new tomb for Jesus signified the beginning of a new family, which would be the family of the resurrected.

John also notes the involvement of Nicodemus, another member of the council who had earlier expressed his discipleship secretly by coming to Jesus for instruction at night (John 19:39; cf. 3:1–12). John highlights Nicodemus’ respect for Jesus by noting that the weight of spices (myrrh and aloes) with which he embalmed Jesus’ body amounted to one hundred litras (= 75 pounds)! This burial in a new tomb in a garden by two significant men of the community, who dressed him in linen and rubbed the body down with this extravagant amount of spices, was indeed a burial fit for a king (19:38–42) and placed him in the company of the rich (Isa. 53:7–9). That his tomb bore the seal of Pilate, the Roman governor, and was guarded by his forces (Matt. 27:62–66), reinforces this image, even though this had been done to protect the body from Jewish religious leaders who

were haunted by his earlier predictions of his resurrection (cf. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19) and feared the disciples would steal his body to make it look like this had happened (27:64).

The Post-Resurrection Narratives of Jesus

Jesus' Appearance to Mary of Magdala, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome (Matt. 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-9; John 20:1-13)

Although no witnesses had observed Jesus' resurrection, the significance of the event was signaled by a great earthquake, associated with the arrival of the angel of the LORD (= YHWH; Gk. *angelos kyriou* = Hb. *mal'ak yhwh*), who rolled away the stone guarding the entrance (Matt. 28:2). Obviously, unlike in the raising of Lazarus (John 11:39), the stone at the entrance was no obstacle for Jesus' emergence from the tomb (cf. Matt. 28:2). The first post-resurrection event recounted by all four Gospels involved the visit to the tomb by two or three women.⁴⁵ Although John notes only the visit of Mary of Magdala (20:1, 11-13), Mark identifies a trio of Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, while Luke, who names them only later (24:10), notes that they were from Galilee (23:55-56).

Coming to the tomb in the morning after the Sabbath, they were dismayed to find the tomb empty and terrified by the sight of an angel of YHWH dressed in a dazzling robe as white as snow. Also terrified by the figure, the guards had fallen down on their faces (Matt. 28:3-4; Luke 24:4-5). That God should have sent his personal emissary from heaven to greet the women reflects the magnitude of the event and the status of the missing person. This contrasts with the way the angel spoke of Jesus; appropriating their point of view, he identified the one they had come to honor as "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified."⁴⁶ Luke adds that the

heavenly envoy reminded them of Jesus' words on their home turf in Galilee—namely, that the “Son of Man” was destined to be delivered into the hands of sinful men who would crucify him but that he would rise on the third day (24:6–7). It is fitting that the representative of the Ancient of Days (cf. Dan. 7:9–10) was dressed in dazzling white robes, for he had come as the herald of the “Son of Man,” to whom cosmic authority would be granted (Dan. 7:13–14). On behalf of God in heaven, the envoy charged the women to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen and that he would meet with them in Galilee. John's confusing insertion of Peter and John's response to Mary of Magdala's report need not detain us, except to note that after they had seen the empty tomb with the grave clothes still in place, they went home (John 20:2–10).

***Jesus' Private Appearance to Mary of Magdala
(Matt. 28:9–10; Mark 16:9–11; Luke 24:10–11;
John 20:14–18)***

Jesus' private encounter with Mary of Magdala receives limited attention in the Synoptic Gospels, but John recounts it in considerable detail (John 20:1, 11–18). Peter and John had returned home after visiting the empty tomb, but Mary remained behind, weeping and distraught. When the two angels dressed in white and sitting where the body had lain asked her why she was weeping, she replied, “They have taken away my Lord.” She did not say, “They have taken away Jesus,” but used the vague epithet “My Lord” (*ton kyrion mou*), probably with the plain sense of “my Master” or “my Superior.” Her demand that they reveal where the body was so she could pay her respects probably reflected her personal relationship to Jesus rather than a conviction of his messianic status.

But when she turned around, she saw a fourth figure in the picture, a man, whom she took to be the gardener.

Addressing him respectfully as *kyrie*, “Sir,” she repeated her request to know where the body was. Jesus needed only to say her name, “Mary,” and she recognized him, exclaiming in Aramaic⁴⁷ “*Rabbouni!*” (“My [beloved] Teacher!” lit., “great one”). When she impulsively reached out to embrace him, Jesus rejected her advance, suggesting that she delay this response until he had returned to the Father. And then he added, “Go to my kinsfolk [*adelphoi*] and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” This striking statement highlights both Jesus’ kinship with God (“my Father”) and his kinship with his followers. In words whose form recalls Ruth’s commitment to Naomi (Ruth 1:16), he reinforces the sense of kinship by declaring that he and they have a common Father and a common God. This statement offers remarkable commentary on his two kinship messianic titles, “Son of God” and “Son of Man.”

When Mary found the disciples, her testimony to Jesus’ identity was classic: “I have seen the Lord [*ton kyrion*]!” (John 20:18). The article replacing her previous first-person pronoun signals that she no longer perceived him as merely her beloved earthly rabbi, but as divine Sovereign, if not YHWH, which *kyrios* often represents in the New Testament.

Jesus’ Appearance to the Emmaus Disciples (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-32)

Luke is the only Gospel that preserves a detailed account of Jesus’ conversation with the Emmaus disciples. Although Luke identified one of them, Cleopas, by name (Luke 24:18), they were probably not from the inner circle of apostles. On the first day of the week, while out walking, they were engaged in serious conversation about what had happened over the weekend. When Jesus joined them, they recounted to him how the man Jesus of Nazareth, whom they identified as a prophet and miracle worker equal in stature to Moses,

and on whom they had pinned their hopes for Israel's national redemption (*lytroō*), had been crucified by the religious leaders. This, and the absence of Jesus' body, had dashed all their hopes. They had heard reports of some women visiting his burial site and of their encounter there with angels who told them that Jesus was alive, but so far they had heard no reports of his sighting (vv. 19-24).

Luke's account of the conversation demonstrates how confused even Jesus' followers were in their perception of the Messiah. They envisioned a Moses-like figure in whom images of a prophetic Messiah merged with images of a military figure who would redeem Israel from the tyranny of their Roman overlords, the way Moses had redeemed their ancestors from Egypt. Their perception of Moses as a prophet (*prophētēs*, Deut. 18:15-22) and a man who had performed miraculous acts was correct. They recognized that Jesus of Nazareth was also "powerful in word and deed before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19), an assessment that recalls Deuteronomy 34:10-12. But their perception of Moses as the redeemer of Israel from the bondage of Egypt was certainly wrong. In the Hebrew Bible his name never appears as the subject of *pādâ* with Israel as the object, and in the Old Greek translation the name of Moses never appears as the subject of *lytroō*. These disciples had obviously not grasped the significance of Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on a donkey a week earlier.

With apparent amazement at their ignorance of the prophetic witness and of the significance of all the words and deeds that he himself had performed in the sight of all the people, Jesus gave them a lecture on the true nature of the Messiah (the Christ) and his mission. He declared his thesis with a rhetorical question: "Was it not necessary for the Messiah to experience what he had gone through [*pathein*] and then to enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Here we should not limit the Greek word *pathein* to the sufferings that Jesus had endured over the past week. The

word itself is neutral and may refer to experiences that stimulate passion of any sort, including the good. Preceding “to enter into his glory,” the word *pathein* summarizes all that Jesus experienced in his incarnation—that is, as “Son of Man.” Indeed, Paul gave a brilliant poetic exposition of this notion in his Carmen Christi (hymn to Christ) in Philippians 2:5–11. Jesus’ first clause is summarized by Paul’s declaration in Philippians 2:6–8, and his second clause is summarized in Philippians 2:9–11.

Beginning with Moses and including the witness of all the prophets, Jesus expounded on the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. Grammatically, Luke’s statement does not mean that in every Scripture he found a statement concerning himself as the Davidic Messiah. Rather, using all the Scriptures as his resource, he expounded on their collective significance in the revelation of himself. The Scriptures to which he appealed obviously involved those that we recognize as explicitly messianic, but Luke’s phrase “concerning himself” (*ta peri heautou*) rather than *ta peri tou Christou*, “concerning the Messiah,” opens the window to other dimensions of the revelation of Jesus in the First Testament.

Many New Testament texts identify Jesus with First Testament texts about YHWH: Isaiah’s call to prepare the way for YHWH;⁴⁸ Joel’s declaration that “whoever calls upon the name of YHWH will be saved”;⁴⁹ Paul’s declaration in the Carmen Christi that one day people from every tribe and nation will proclaim that Jesus is *kyrios*—that is, YHWH (Phil. 2:11); the angel of YHWH’s charge to Joseph to name Mary’s son “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21); and John’s magnificent statement that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”⁵⁰ The statement by Luke in 24:27 and Jesus’ own speech in verse 44 open the door to interpreting YHWH in the First Testament as preincarnate Jesus.

The two Emmaus disciples' eyes were fully opened to Jesus' identity when he joined them for a meal in the late afternoon (24:28-32). His actions at the meal declared who stood before them: assuming the role of the host (rather than the guest), "he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and handed it to them" (v. 30). But as soon as they recognized him, he vanished.

Jesus' Appearances to the Eleven Apostles in Jerusalem (Luke 24:33-43; John 20:19-29)

After briefly reflecting on their experience on the road and then at the table, the disciples who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus returned to Jerusalem and stopped at the place where the eleven apostles were gathered. When someone announced that Simon had seen Jesus, they described what had happened to them on the road and his breaking of the bread at the meal.

While they were talking, Jesus appeared among them, greeting them warmly with the traditional Jewish greeting, "Peace be to you."⁵¹ According to Luke, Jesus responded to their fright at his arrival by demonstrating that yes, he really was Jesus, their rabbi in the flesh; he showed them the scars of his wounds and ate a piece of broiled fish in their sight (24:36-43). The point of Luke's account is not so much to prove that Jesus was the Messiah in an official sense, but simply to concretize their image of his post-resurrection appearance.

In John's account the issues are quite different. After describing his appearance among the apostles in summary form, John supplements Luke's account by noting how he immediately began functioning as the resurrected Messiah. In his farewell discourse for the apostles, Jesus had promised that he would ask the Father to grant them another Advocate (*paraklētos*), the Spirit of truth/fidelity (*alētheia*), who would dwell with them and would be in

them. Jesus also promised that he would not leave them orphans but would come to them (14:16-18). Furthermore, he would demonstrate not only that he is in the Father but also that they are in him, and he is in them (v. 20). His speech and his actions in John 20:21-23 signify the fulfillment of these promises: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent me, I also send you.' After saying this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

Jesus' repetition of the greeting sets this segment off from what has preceded, and the following statement establishes this as a formal commissioning event (v. 22). As the one commissioned by the Father and as the one who is now commissioning his followers, we see his messiahship on display. However, the middle clause is the key. The apostles' reception of the Holy Spirit here was obviously not the moment of their regeneration, nor the moment they experienced the indwelling of the Spirit either in a soteriological or sanctifying sense, nor the moment of their baptism with the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:5). Superficially, Jesus' act of breathing on his disciples compares with YHWH's breathing his own breath into the molded piece of clay, which yielded "a living being" (*nepeš ḥayyâ*, Gen. 2:7), placing human beings in the same category of existence as all the other creatures (cf. Gen. 1:20, 21, 24, 30). But as we saw in our discussion of the Adamic covenant, even though humankind is linked with all other creatures, the fact that YHWH breathes his breath not only brings humankind to life (he could have done this by fiat, as for other creatures) but also distinguishes them from the creatures and authorizes humankind to function in God's universe as his deputized governing agents.

This notion appears in ancient rituals involving the creation of images representing the gods. According to Neo-

Assyrian accounts, the critical moment in the transformation of a physical object into a living representative of the deity involved the “opening of the mouth” (*pīt/mīs pī*) ritual, through which the spirit of the deity entered the image. From that point on, what the eyes of the image saw, the deity saw; what the ears of the image heard, the deity heard; and what the mouth of the image spoke, the deity spoke.

True to Jesus’ promise in John 14:16–18, from this moment on, and especially in Jesus’ absence, the apostles were authorized to act and speak on his behalf. As an illustration, Jesus cited the issue of forgiveness of sin; from now on, the work of the apostles and the work of Jesus would be so tightly identified that what the apostles would do, Jesus would do. Luke recognized the operation of this notion in his introduction to the Acts of the Apostles: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1–2). In that sense, in his recounting the origins of the Christian covenant community, the Gospel according to Luke functions as the first volume and concerns the life and ministry of Jesus in person, while the book of Acts is the second volume, in which Jesus continued “to act and teach” through the agency of his “apostles” (i.e., commissioned agents), on whom he had breathed his Spirit.

For some reason, Thomas was absent from the gathering of the apostles at Jesus’ first appearance (John 20:24–29). When the ten told him that they had seen the Lord, he doubted their statement and demanded specific proof that the person they had seen was Jesus. Eight days later, Jesus obliged and reappeared to the Eleven. The significance of this episode lies in Thomas’ outburst when he had seen Jesus’ scars: “My Lord and my God!” This was not merely a trivializing expletive as we hear so often today, even from

the mouths of Christians. In the Gospel of John, this signifies the pinnacle of the revelation of Jesus the Messiah, for here we hear the clearest and most direct declaration of Jesus' divinity. To be sure, after decades of theological reflection, the evangelist had begun with a prologue that proclaimed Jesus as the divine Word (John 1:1) and the embodiment of divine glory, grace, and fidelity (1:14), and Jesus had earlier identified himself as "I am" (*egō eimi*), but here the statement is unequivocal: "Jesus is *my Kyrios* [Suzerain, Hb. 'ādōnāy] and *my Theos* [God, Hb. 'ēlōhāy]."

Jesus' Appearances to the Apostles in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20; John 21:1-23)

Shortly after this encounter in Jerusalem and complying with Jesus' earlier charge to return to Galilee (Matt. 28:7, 10; Mark 16:7), the apostles headed north for an appointment with Jesus that he had promised even before his crucifixion (Matt. 26:32). From Paul we learn that there were additional appearances: to a gathering of five hundred followers, to James (probably Jesus' own half brother; cf. Gal. 1:19), once more to all the apostles (presumably a reference to his ascension), and extraordinarily to himself, Paul (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Despite a millennium-long history of Jerusalem as the seat of kingship and the heart of the messianic hope, Jesus chose Galilee to be the location of his final commissioning events. He had grown up in this region, and it was the home territory of most of his followers, including the apostles and many women (cf. Mark 15:41). Although the accounts differ significantly, it is equally remarkable that these two Gospels (Matthew and John) report his official commissioning of the apostles and conclude their account of the life and ministry of Jesus with these actions in Galilee, rather than ending back in Jerusalem with Jesus' ascension from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:4-11).[52](#)

Given the lack of chronological notices, it is difficult to tell which event happened first: Jesus' final commissioning of his apostles as recorded in Matthew 28:16–20 or his recommissioning of Peter as the head of the apostolic band in John 21:1–23. Since John included the latter as an addendum following a formal statement concluding his Gospel (John 20:30–31), and Matthew's conclusion is integrated more tightly with the preceding, I shall treat first the latter's account of what many identify as "the Great Commission" (Matt. 28:16–20).

Matthew does not identify the specific mountain Jesus chose as the site for his official commissioning of his disciples, but that they gathered on a mountain at Jesus' direction signals the significance of the moment. Just as YHWH had anticipated the Israelites' going to Sinai for an appointment with him in Exodus 3:12 (cf. 19:1–4), so Jesus had this appointment in mind when he had predicted in Matthew 26:32 that after his resurrection he would go before them to Galilee. In a sense this event signified the climax not only of his post-resurrection appearances but also of his earthly ministry. With this commission, Jesus, as God incarnate, cast his sights far beyond his homeland and his own Jewish people, even to the ends of the earth.

Despite continued misgivings among the apostles, when Jesus appeared, they fell down before him in homage and submission (*proskyneō*, Matt. 28:17). Jesus began his address with a declaration of his credentials: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." As Paul recognized in Romans 1:4, through Jesus' resurrection the physical descendant (*sperma*, "seed") of David was declared to be the Son of God—that is, "Jesus Messiah, our Lord"—in power through the Spirit of holiness (cf. also Heb. 2:9). In Jesus' words we hear clear allusions to Daniel 7:13–14. He followed up his declaration of cosmic authority with a succinct but clear announcement of his mandate for the apostles: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20 NIV). This declared commission, which would be remarkably earthly, involved four dimensions:

1. The assignment of the mission: “Go and make disciples”—that is, followers of Jesus
2. The scope of the mission: “of all nations”
3. The means of the mission:
 - a. “Baptizing them” with the full authority of each person within the Triune Godhead—in the name of the Father, the name of the Son, and the name of the Holy Spirit
 - b. “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”
4. The inexhaustible divine resource for the mission: “Look, I am with you always [*pasas tas hēmeras*, lit., “all the days”], to the consummation of the age”—that is, the final realization of God’s grand plan of redemption. God had demonstrated his presence with Adam in the garden of Eden, and he had promised to be with Abraham and his descendants and all who followed him. Now Jesus likewise reinforced an earlier commitment to the disciples (Matt. 18:20) and concluded the commission by casting his gaze into the eschaton with the promise of his presence: “Look, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20).

The second part of point 3, “the means of the mission,” demands further comment. This is a thoroughly Deuteronomic statement at every level. First, Jesus hereby installs the apostles in the train of Moses, whose primary role in the book of Deuteronomy is cast as pedagogical (not

legislative; see chap. 8, under “The Presentation of the Torah to the People”). Accordingly, disciples of Jesus are to observe whatever Jesus has commanded *them*. Second, the relationship between Jesus and the apostles corresponds precisely to the relationship between YHWH and Moses; Jesus’ commands are the substance of the apostles’ teaching.⁵³ Third, what is required of disciples is that they respond to the apostles’ teaching by observing all that Jesus has commanded them. Although the Greek First Testament never uses the verb *tēreō* (“to attend to, watch, guard, protect”) in conjunction with keeping the stipulations of the covenant, the association of this verb with “all that I command [*entellō*] you” (i.e., “the commands”; Hb. *mišwôt*; Gk. *entolai*) functions as a New Testament equivalent of Hebrew *šāmar mišwôt*, “to observe the commands.”⁵⁴ Fourth, because the New Testament identifies Jesus with YHWH (as in John 14:15, 21; 15:10), we should not interpret “what I command you” as a revelation of his will that displaces, annuls, or subverts the authority of the original covenant revelation. Rather, just as the Torah of Moses in Deuteronomy built on the Instructions of Holiness in Leviticus, the Covenant Document in Exodus, and the Decalogue, so Jesus’ teachings build on his previous revelation as YHWH in the First Testament. Finally, the sequence of “teaching that they may observe” is shorthand for the Deuteronomic formula for life: “Read that they may learn, that they may fear, that they may hearken [listen to my voice], that they may live” (cf. Deut. 31:11–13).

Jesus’ Recommissioning of Peter (John 21:1–23)

Returning to John, we see that he has penned a formal colophon for his Gospel announcing his goal and rhetorical strategy in all that has preceded (20:30–31). Then the evangelist appended a fascinating account of an event involving a final conversation with Peter (21:1–23), which he

authenticated as his own testimony (21:24-25). This last episode in John's Gospel (21:1-23) involves a commissioning as well, but the opening statement casts this as a revelatory moment (the verb *phaneroō*, "to appear," appears twice in v. 1). Although Matthew cast his account as a formal commissioning, John's report involves a personal conversation between Jesus and Peter, intended pastorally to reaffirm his leadership of the new community of believers in Jesus. However, since Jesus had this conversation in the presence of at least six of the remaining apostles, its message was also for them. Remarkably in the end, when Peter attempted to implicate his colleagues in the conversation, Jesus would have none of this; what he asked of the other apostles was ultimately none of Peter's business (vv. 20-23).

An extraordinary sequence of events precipitated Jesus' conversation with Peter (John 21:1-14). After a frustrating night of fruitless fishing, the disciples returned to the shore and were greeted by a man whom they did not recognize. He advised them to get back into their boats and cast their nets on the right side of the boat so that they would have better results. They complied, resulting in a haul of fish so great (v. 11) that they were unable to pull it into the boat. This prompted "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (presumably John) to conclude that the man on shore must have been "the Lord" (*ho kyrios*, v. 7). Apparently Peter agreed with John, because he got dressed, jumped out of the ship, and hurried to shore. When the ship landed, the disciples saw Jesus beside a charcoal fire with a breakfast of bread and fish. Responding to his request that the disciples bring some fish from their catch and join him, Peter ran back and hauled the entire net of fish ashore. By now all the disciples knew it was "the Lord, but they dared not ask him about his identity" (v. 12). Meanwhile, assuming the role of host at the meal, Jesus served them their portions of bread and fish.

When breakfast was over, Jesus questioned Peter about the depth of his commitment to him. And well he should have, given the sound of the rooster crowing after Peter had publicly denied any relationship with Jesus three times (18:15–18, 25–27; cf. 13:38). Although many treat Jesus' use of *agapaō* (= Hb. *'āhab*, “to demonstrate love”) and Peter's response with *phileō*, “feel/ demonstrate affection,” in verses 15–17 as merely stylistic variation, this interpretation is unlikely.

First, three days earlier Peter had denied Jesus three times, an act that Hebrew expresses with *śānē* and Greek expresses with *miseō*, both of which mean “to hate, to reject, to repudiate” (e.g., Exod. 20:5; Deut. 5:9). These verbs are, respectively, the precise opposites of Hebrew *'āhab* and Greek *agapaō*, which mean “to demonstrate covenant commitment in actions that serve the other person's interest.” For Peter to have agreed with Jesus while using Jesus' word (*agapaō*) would have been a categorical lie.

Second, the Scriptures contain many injunctions to love YHWH/God, but if Peter had used *agapaō*, he would have been the first person in the Israelite record to claim he measured up to the standard demanded by this word. Neither the Hebrew *'āhab* nor the Greek *agapaō* ever occurs with a first-person subject (singular or plural) and a designation for God as the object. Peter's preference for *phileō* to describe his affection for Jesus is more realistic and probably explains Jesus' concession to this word in the last iteration of his question.

Jesus' response to Peter's confession highlights the significance of this account. Accepting Peter where he was spiritually, Jesus commissioned him, “Tend my sheep,” which means to assume responsibility for the flock of believers whom Jesus would leave behind. However, after reminding Peter of his independence in his youth, Jesus cast his gaze into Peter's future, foretelling in vague terms his

ultimate fate, a brutal death by which he would glorify God (vv. 18–19). This was not merely an empty line tacked onto the end to address Peter’s or the readers’ curiosity. Rather, it confirmed Peter’s statement “Lord, you know everything” (v. 17) and declared Jesus’ confidence in Peter. The man who had just repudiated Jesus three times would eventually demonstrate the ultimate in covenant commitment (cf. John 15:13).

With reference to its messianic significance, this passage demonstrates that Jesus, the Good and Chief Shepherd (John 10:7–18; 1 Pet. 5:4), not only cares for the flock by appointing their leaders but also cares pastorally for his appointed shepherds. In this event we witness Jesus doing for Peter in the presence of his apostolic colleagues what YHWH had promised Ezekiel at the very end of the exiled prophet’s last preserved and somewhat enigmatic prophetic utterance (Ezek. 29:17–21): “On that day I . . . will grant you opening of the mouth in their midst.” The narrative preamble indicates he received this prophecy on New Year’s Day in the twenty-seventh year of his exile (Nisan 1 = April 26, 571 BC; cf. Block, *Ezekiel*, 146). Although Ezekiel does not identify the historical context, it seems this statement, obviously intended for the prophet himself, represented YHWH’s response to Ezekiel’s loss of credibility/standing as a prophet among the Judean exiles when word had reached them of Nebuchadnezzar’s lifting of his siege of Tyre, without having destroyed Tyre as envisioned in Ezekiel 26:7–14. Whereas Ezekiel had been vindicated as a true prophet fourteen years earlier, when word reached Babylon that Jerusalem had fallen (Ezek. 33:21; cf. 2:5; 33:33), the outcome of Nebuchadnezzar’s campaign against Tyre had raised questions among the Judean exiles. Granting Ezekiel “opening of the mouth” (*pithôn peh*) is idiomatic for reauthenticating him as YHWH’s spokesman and ensuring him freedom to continue to speak for YHWH among the exiles. Remarkably, this statement followed immediately

after what many have interpreted as an awkwardly inserted messianic text: “On that day I will cause a horn to sprout (*’ašmîaḥ qeren*) for the house of Israel” (cf. Ps. 132:17). Although Peter’s own betrayal of Jesus had created the need for his “rehabilitation” and “reaccreditation” among the disciples (cf. Matt. 16:18), in this event the Messiah himself publicly, but with keen pastoral sense, restored and recommissioned Peter to lead the apostles in tending Jesus’ flock.

Conclusion

Having explored in considerable detail the significance of the Davidic covenant and the messianic motif in the Gospels, we recognize that the colophon to John’s Gospel turns out to be true in large measure of all four Gospels: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book; but these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31).

The Gospels recount events and conversations involving many other dimensions to Jesus’ life and ministry (e.g., his divinity and identity with YHWH), but his messiahship was obviously a primary concern for all four evangelists. It is also evident that Jesus descended from David, to whose offspring YHWH had promised eternal title to the throne of Israel. Even so, that descent alone did not determine the character of his messiahship. A prominent thread in the Gospels involves demonstrating that although the messianic title “son of God” was true of the kings that followed in the Davidic line in a metaphorical sense, with reference to Jesus the Messiah, the expression was literally true, from the announcement of Mary’s supernatural conception (Matt. 1) to his resurrection (John 20:28) and beyond (Rom. 1:3–4).

- [1.](#) Matt. 20:30-31; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 18:38-39.
- [2.](#) Mark 9:31; 10:33, 45; cf. Matt. 17:22; 20:18; 20:28.
- [3.](#) Matt. 16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34; Luke 9:22; 9:43b-45; 18:31-34.
- [4.](#) John 5:16-18; 7:1, 19; 8:37, 40, 59; 10:31.
- [5.](#) Matt. 26:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19.
- [6.](#) Matt. 21:1-28:20; Mark 11:1-16:20; Luke 19:29-24:53; John 12:12-21:25.
- [7.](#) John 19:15; cf. Luke 23:18, 21.
- [8.](#) Pss. 12:1 [2]; 22:19 [20]; 28:9; 60:5 [7]; 108:6 [7].
- [9.](#) Cf. Exod. 14:9, 23; 15:1, 19, 21; 1 Kings 10:29; 20:1; Esther 6:10-11; Jer. 17:25; 22:4; Ezek. 23:6, 12, 23; Zech. 1:8; 6:3-7; Rev. 6:2-8; 19:11, 14.
- [10.](#) Matt. 21:7 has him "sitting" (*epikathizō*) on the garments; Luke 19:35 uses *epibibazō*, "to [cause to] mount."
- [11.](#) Donkey: Num. 22:22; Judg. 5:10; 10:4; 12:14; 2 Sam. 18:9; 1 Kings 13:13; Zech. 9:9; mule: 2 Sam. 18:9; horse: Esther 6:8; Jer. 17:25; 22:4; 46:4; Hab. 3:8; Zech. 1:8.
- [12.](#) Exod. 11:5; 12:29; 1 Kings 1:17-48; 8:25; 22:10, 19; 2 Kings 10:30; 15:12; Esther 5:1; Jer. 13:13; 22:2; 36:30 [LXX 43:30].
- [13.](#) 1 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 18:18; Ps. 47:8 [46:9]; Isa. 6:1; Dan. 7:9; Matt. 23:22; Rev. 4:2-10; 5:1-13; etc.
- [14.](#) Matt. 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34.
- [15.](#) John 10:11; cf. 10:17-18; 12:24-25.
- [16.](#) 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5-8; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Titus 2:13-14; cf. also Heb. 9:28; Rev. 1:5-6.
- [17.](#) Matt. 24:23-28; Mark 13:21-23.
- [18.](#) E.g., Matt. 16:27-28; 19:28; 24:30.
- [19.](#) Matt. 25:31-32; cf., e.g., Dan. 7:13-14.
- [20.](#) Matt. 26:55; Mark 14:48; Luke 22:52-53; John 18:20.
- [21.](#) Matt. 26:63; Mark 14:61 reads, "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed [*tou eulogētou*]; Luke 22:67 reads simply "the Christ."
- [22.](#) Matt. 26:64 ESV; cf. Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69.
- [23.](#) Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33.
- [24.](#) Matt. 27:29, 37; Mark 15:9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:37, 38; John 18:39; 19:3, 19, 21.
- [25.](#) *IESOUS HO NAZŌRAIOS HO BASILEUS TŌN IOUDAIŌN*, John 19:19; cf. Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38.
- [26.](#) Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3.
- [27.](#) Matt. 27:12-14; Mark 15:3-5; cf. Luke 23:9-10.
- [28.](#) Matt. 27:15-23; Mark 15:6-14; John 18:39-40.
- [29.](#) Luke 23:4, 6, 14, 22; John 18:29; 19:4.
- [30.](#) Pss. 2:7; 89:26-27 [27-28].
- [31.](#) Called *bēma*; cf. Acts 18:12, 16-17; 25:6, 10; 2 Cor. 5:10.
- [32.](#) Zech. 9:9; cf. Matt. 21:5; John 12:15; cf. "See, your God," in Isa. 35:4; 40:9.
- [33.](#) John 19:3; cf. Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:18.
- [34.](#) Matt. 27:22-23; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23:21-23.
- [35.](#) Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Eph. 1:21; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:8-14.

- [36.](#) Luke 23:26–32; cf. Matt. 27:31–32, 38; Mark 15:20–21, 27; John 19:17–18.
- [37.](#) Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19.
- [38.](#) Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33.
- [39.](#) Matt. 27:38–43; Mark 15:27–32a; Luke 23:35–38.
- [40.](#) Pss. 22:25–31 [26–32]; cf. vv. 10, 18 [11, 19].
- [41.](#) 2 Cor. 5:21; *hamartia*, used for *ḥaṭṭā't* as in LXX Exod. 29:14.
- [42.](#) Luke 4:24; 12:37; 18:17, 29; 21:32.
- [43.](#) In LXX: Gen. 2–3; 13:10; Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8–9.
- [44.](#) Matt. 27:40–32; cf. Mark 15:32; Luke 23:35.
- [45.](#) Matt. 28:1–8; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–9; John 20:1–2.
- [46.](#) Matt. 28:5; Mark 16:6; cf. John 20:13, where Mary of Magdala identifies Jesus as “my Lord.”
- [47.](#) Gk. *Hebraïsti* stands for both Hebrew and Aramaic.
- [48.](#) Isa. 40:3; cf. Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23.
- [49.](#) Joel 2:32 [3:5]; cf. Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13.
- [50.](#) John 1:14, with obvious echoes from Exod. 33–34, esp. 34:6–7.
- [51.](#) Gk. *eirēnē hymin* = Hb. *šālôm lākem*, in Luke 24:36; John 20:19; cf. Gen. 43:23.
- [52.](#) English translations regularly end the Gospel of Mark with a report of a commissioning in Jerusalem (Mark 16:9–20), but this text is missing from the most reliable New Testament manuscripts, and most scholars agree it was probably added later.
- [53.](#) Cf. Deut. 1:3; 4:1–2, 5, 14; 6:1; 26:13–14.
- [54.](#) The earliest attested substitution of *tēreō* occurs in Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) 29:1, “The merciful lend to their neighbors; by holding out a helping hand they keep the commands [*tērei entolas*]” (NRSV). This combination is common in the New Testament: Matt. 19:17; John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 Tim. 6:14; 1 John 2:3, 4; 3:22, 24; 5:3; Rev. 12:17; 14:12, while *phyllassō* + *entolē* never occurs in the same sentence. However, Mark 10:19–20 is close. When Jesus said, “You know the commands [*tas entolas*]” (v. 19), the inquirer responded, “All these I have kept [*ephyloxamēn*]” (v. 20). The recipe for well-being in Jesus’ kingdom is the same as it was in ancient Israel.

CHAPTER 20

The Davidic Covenant in the Remainder of the New Testament

As noted in previous chapters, explicit citations of or allusions to the Davidic covenant are remarkably infrequent in the New Testament. The name David appears in Paul's epistles only four times, two of which identify him simply as the source of a statement he makes or quotes (Rom. 4:6; 11:9; cf. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8). However, almost three-fourths of the occurrences of the epithet *Christos* (= anointed one, Messiah) in the New Testament occur in Paul's letters and speeches in Acts; this reflects the profoundly christological (messianic) nature of his message. In his first recorded address in Acts, Paul expressed clear awareness of the circumstances of David's emergence as Israel's king, noting that God raised up David to be king, God identified this son of Jesse as the king he had had in mind from the beginning, and that in bringing Jesus to Israel he had kept his promise to David that a Savior (*sōtēr*) would come from his descendants (*spermatos*; Acts 13:21–25). In 2 Timothy 2:8 Paul summarizes his gospel with two points: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David" (*ek spermatos David*). In his introduction to the Epistle to the Romans, Paul fleshes out both notions slightly, presenting them in their historical order: "concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh [*ek spermatos*

David kata sarka] and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:3–4 ESV). As previously noted, these references to Jesus as the long-awaited descendant of David were rooted in YHWH’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12–13: “I will raise up your descendant [Hb. *zera*‘; Gk. *sperma*] after you, . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

Acts and Paul

When we move from the Gospels to the book of Acts, throughout the book the presence, power, and authority that Jesus had passed on to the apostles by breathing on them his Spirit (John 20:22–23) were on full display. This is evident in the actions they performed in the name of Jesus Messiah: pronouncing forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38), healing sick and disabled people (3:6; 4:10; 9:34), baptizing believers (10:48), driving out demons (16:18), and risking their lives (15:26). However, because of what the Scriptures had declared and they had witnessed personally in their time with Jesus, their preaching and testimony were undergirded and pervaded by the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah.¹ This centrality of the messiahship of Jesus to the proclamation of the gospel is evident also in Paul’s epistles,² as it was in the preaching of John (1 John 1:1–3).

Hebrews

The same is true of the book of Hebrews, which is cast as a discourse for a Jewish audience and develops the central thesis that in Jesus Christ the shadow institutions, through which covenant relationship had been maintained in the previous stage of the Israelite covenant, had been replaced by the heavenly reality that had come down to earth in Jesus Christ, who had returned to his exalted place in the

heavens to intercede on our behalf before the Father. Although the epithet *Christos* occurs only fifteen times in the book, the discourse begins with an announcement of Jesus' elevated status: "In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. . . . After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:2–3 ESV).

The author followed up this introduction with a series of First Testament quotations by which he demonstrated Jesus' elevated status: identifying him as "Son of God" (Heb. 1:5 = Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14); declaring his throne to be everlasting and the scepter in his hand to be a scepter of righteousness;³ proclaiming him as one anointed by God because of his commitment to righteousness (1:9 = Ps. 45:7 [44:8]); and quoting God's invitation/command for the Son to sit at God's right hand until God makes the Son's enemies the Son's footstool (1:13 = Ps. 110 [109]:1). Following the Old Greek version of Psalm 8:4–6 [5–7], he applied the epithet *ben 'ādām* (son of man) to Jesus and declared that God had created him a little lower than the angels (Hb. reads *ělōhîm*, "God"), but had crowned him with glory and majesty and installed him as king over the cosmos. This is ostensibly an Adamic image, but its pronounced royal flavor suggests that the author perceives the kingship of Adam as refracted through the kingship of David.

The title Messiah (*Christos*) appears in Hebrews for the first time in 3:6, where the author declares Christ to be the faithful Son (of God) with authority over God's house—in contrast to Moses, who was but a "household steward/attendant" (*therapōn*, 3:5). On four occasions Hebrews applies the messianic epithet "Son of God" to Jesus, the great high priest (4:14; 6:6; 7:3; 10:29). However, to make this work and to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus' priesthood over that of the Aaronic high priest, the

author (in Heb. 5:5–6) linked “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” from Psalm 2:7 with “You are a priest forever, according to the paradigm of Melchizedek” from Psalm 110:4 [LXX 109:4], and then devoted Hebrews 5–7 to developing this point. The author recognized Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18–20 (Heb. 7:1–10) as an extraordinarily significant event involving an extraordinary biblical figure because, as the head of a Canaanite city, he sat on the throne as both king and high priest of Salem (= Jerusalem).

This is not to say that the Davidic kingship was identical to that of Salem under Melchizedek eight hundred years or more earlier. In Israel the Aaronic priesthood and the Davidic kingship were sharply distinguished. Nor does this mean that the royal office was a secular office. On the contrary, as patron of the national religion, David had received the blueprint for the temple design as YHWH’s concession for not letting him build the temple (1 Chron. 28:11–19; cf. 22:1–19), and he had organized the temple worship, including the service of musicians and gatekeepers (1 Chron. 16:1–6; 23–26). Indeed, without censure he had worn the ephod as he led the procession that escorted the ark into the City of David (2 Sam. 6, esp. v. 14). However, to make his point on the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood over that of Aaron, the author of Hebrews harked back to Genesis 14, where Abraham (representing Levi and Aaron) acknowledged the superiority of Melchizedek.

The argument strikes modern readers as forced, but the point is clear. Jesus’ messiahship was complex. To be sure, the throne on which he sat was essentially the throne of David, but the occupant of this chair could be involved in both priestly (e.g., 2 Sam. 6:1–23; 1 Chron. 21:18–26) and prophetic (2 Sam. 23:1–3; Acts 2:30) functions (fig. 12.1 above). However, the author of Hebrews recognizes a priestly role to Jesus’ messiahship (Heb. 9:11–28) only through the Melchizedekian connection.

According to Hebrews 9–10, the image of Jesus Christ's priesthood was complicated because he was at the same time the sacrificial offering, whose blood both sealed the covenant (9:16–20), à la the ritual involving the blood of victims of the whole burnt and fellowship offerings (*šĕlāmîm*) in Exodus 24:5–8, and effected forgiveness and atonement (Heb. 9:7–14; 9:25–10:19). To presume upon the grace of God and continue in willful sin is to trample underfoot the Son of God, to hold in contempt the blood of the covenant that has sanctified us, to insult the Spirit of grace, and bring upon oneself the terrifying fury of God (10:29–31). The author was aware of the metaphorical portrayal of the Messiah as a shepherd who gave his life for the sheep (13:20), but in chapters 9–10 he took the metaphor far beyond what Isaiah envisioned in Isaiah 53. Nevertheless, in his final benediction to his audience he offers a summary verbal picture of his view of the Messiah in Hebrews 13:20–21: “Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (NIV).

1 Peter

With its twenty-three occurrences of the title Christ/Messiah, Peter's first epistle is one of the most christological books in the New Testament.⁴ Space constraints preclude full discussion of his Christology, but the first thirteen verses offer as full and dense a statement as we can find in the New Testament and would deserve an entire monograph itself. Here we find a brilliant review of the work of the Messiah within God's glorious plan of redemption from the pen of the apostle who, inspired by Jesus' Father, had first

declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”⁵ and who had heard the voice from heaven at the Mount of Transfiguration, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”⁶ This was also the same apostle who had precipitated the crowing of the rooster with his threefold sworn rejection of Jesus,⁷ but in the end he had been fully rehabilitated and affirmed by the risen Christ as the lead shepherd of his flock after his departure. Indeed, as Jesus predicted, he would experience the ultimate fate for his faithfulness, crucifixion, but through that he would glorify God (John 21:15–19).

Peter began his fully trinitarian introduction by identifying himself as a commissioned agent (*apostolos*) of Jesus Messiah and ended it with a prayer for a full measure of grace (*charis*) and peace for the divinely chosen beneficiaries of God’s grand plan of redemption (1 Pet. 1:1–2). This is certainly what humanity and the world under the curse needed—grace and peace. Between these frames he summarized the roles of the three persons within the Trinity: God the Father designed this plan (according to the *prognōsis*); God the Holy Spirit sanctified those who were defiled and under the curse; and God the Son, Jesus Christ, gave his blood, atoning for the sin of those whom God chose and whom the Spirit sanctified.

What follows in verses 3–21 is in effect an ode to God’s grand plan of redemption. Although the Holy Spirit is mentioned twice in this text as the divine agent of prophetic inspiration (vv. 11–12), this eulogy (*eulogētos*, v. 3) is directed to “God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” though it focuses on the work of his Son, the Messiah. This relative silence on the role of the Spirit is typical of the New Testament, in which we never find anyone addressing, praising, or praying to the Holy Spirit (cf. Block, *For the Glory of God*, 46–53, 361–74).

Peter’s celebration of the role of God the Father in the grand plan of redemption forms a grand inclusio framing the

discussion concerning the role of Jesus Christ. In verses 3–5, the apostle declares that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he caused us to be born again, he has secured in heaven the inheritance of those who believe, and by his power he guarantees the security of those who await the *telos* of their salvation in the eschaton. In verses 20–21 Peter reminds us that before the foundations of the cosmos were laid, God (the Father) “established the plan” (*proginōskō*) whereby sinners could be redeemed, and then he implemented the plan by raising Jesus from the dead. Because he raised and exalted Jesus Christ, our faith and hope in him are guaranteed.

Between these two frames, Peter composes an essay on the role of Jesus Messiah in that grand plan of redemption as the “Son of Man,” the “Son of God,” and the “son of David.” Peter never mentions David or the Davidic covenant in this book, but without reference to the history of the messianic hope rooted in David, the role of Jesus as Messiah is incomprehensible. Even with the strong Davidic tradition in which Jews would have been schooled, according to Peter, the history of the prophetic institution is a history of inquiry into the manner in which the hope of salvation, grounded in the work of the Messiah, would be fulfilled (vv. 10–12). The epithet *Christos* appears nine times in these twenty-one verses.⁸ Linking the royal messianic texts with Isaiah 53, the prophets were aware that the Messiah’s mission would involve both suffering and glorification, but they also knew that the suffering would happen before the glorification (1 Pet. 1:11). Nevertheless, they scoured the Scriptures and the prophetic traditions for information on the circumstances surrounding the fulfillment of the glorious redemptive plan focused in the Messiah. Undoubtedly they also sought the nature and identity of the Messiah himself. It appears that when the foreordained plan was implemented in time and space, the “revelation” (note the root *apokalypsis* in vv. 5, 7, 12, 13) of both the nature of the

event and the identity of the Savior caught people by surprise. Who could have imagined a Messiah who did not eliminate every source of stress and testing (vv. 6–7), and would demand of Peter that he give his life for the mission? And who could have imagined that the Messiah would himself suffer (v. 11), shed his blood (vv. 2, 19), and die (v. 3)? Who could have imagined that the Messiah would be raised from the dead (vv. 3, 21) and ultimately glorified (vv. 7, 11, 21)? That in so doing, not only would he deal with the sin question once and for all (vv. 2, 19), offering salvation from the curse of sin and the fury of God (vv. 5, 9, 10), but he would also establish an absolutely secure basis for hope (vv. 3, 13, 21) of our own eternal heavenly inheritance (*klēronomia*, vv. 4–9) and of sharing in the resurrection and glorification of the Messiah (vv. 7–8)?

This entire section is a brilliant exercise in intertextuality and allusions from the First Testament. The blessing of God the Father opens by noting that the entire plan was grounded in his great mercy. “According to his great mercy” (*kata to poly autou eleos*) in verse 3 echoes *polyeleos*, the Septuagint rendering of *rab ḥesed* in YHWH’s essential self-portrait in Exodus 34:6–7.⁹ Although the vocabulary differs, the threefold description of the heights to which God has promoted his own through the work of Christ in 1 Peter 1:7, “for praise and glory and honor” (*eis epainon kai doxan kai timēn*), certainly echoes Moses’ description of Israel’s elevation high above the nations “for praise, fame, and glory.”¹⁰

We should not interpret Peter’s discussion of the ethical implications of membership in the Messiah’s covenant community (1:13–17) as some sort of geological erratic—a rock deposited by a glacier far from its origin and obviously out of place. On the contrary, Peter delivers at least four grounds for this ethical appeal. First, he calls on Christians (*christianoī*), who by definition bear the name of Jesus Christ (cf. 4:14–16), to adopt the same *imitatio dei* ethic that was

true of people under the Israelite covenant (1:14–16). This means that holiness is not simply a status or a condition; it is demonstrated in action and in life, just as Jesus, who took on our sins, lived a blameless life. Second, within this covenantal arrangement, believers' conduct is grounded in the knowledge of their accountability to God the Father as their divine Suzerain (v. 17). Third, just as Moses considered "fear" (Hb. *yārē*; Gk. *phobō*) to be the fundamental element in Israel's covenantal ethic (Deut. 10:12; 31:12), so Peter observes that in this covenant community ethical conduct arises from deep fear (*en phobō*) of God/Christ (1 Pet. 1:17), not in the sense of fear of punishment but in the sense of the trusting awe that characterized Abraham in Genesis 22:12 (see above, chap. 4, under "The Confirmation of Isaac as the Son of Promise [Gen. 21:8–22:24]").¹¹ Fourth, just as Israel's ethic was driven by gratitude for YHWH's great acts of redemption (e.g., Deut. 4:32–40; 6:20–24), so Christian ethical conduct is energized by gratitude for the redemption experienced through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and through his resurrection and glorification we have faith and hope in God (1 Pet. 1:20–21). Finally, related to an earlier comment, the sequence of Peter's call for holy living (vv. 15–16), after his declaration of their elevated status in Christ (v. 7), takes its cue from Deuteronomy 26:19, where Moses had declared the goal of Israel's privileged status: "that you might be a holy people to God, as he has declared."

Indeed, in 1 Peter 1:1–21 we hear strong echoes of the psalmist's expression of hope in Psalm 130:5, 7–8 [LXX 129:5, 6c–8]:

I wait for YHWH, my whole being waits,
and in his word I hope;

O Israel, hope (*yaḥē*; LXX *elpizō*) in YHWH!
For with YHWH there is unfailing love (*ḥesed*; LXX *eleos*),
and with him is full redemption (*pědût*; LXX *lytrōsis*).
And he will redeem (*pādâ*; LXX *lytroō*) Israel

from all their iniquities.

According to Peter, through the plan and power of God the Father and the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, this hope is fully satisfied. His blood has purchased our redemption.

Revelation

I conclude this exploration of the Davidic covenant as fulfilled in Jesus Messiah with citations of key passages in Revelation. The opening words of the book announce the theme—“the revelation (*apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ”—and the greeting that follows summarizes God’s grand agenda of redemption centered in Jesus Messiah:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (Rev. 1:4–7 ESV alt.)

In Revelation 11:15, the seventh angel heralds the completion of the program with a trumpet blast and then this grand announcement: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (NIV). In 12:10–12 a voice from heaven fleshes out this announcement with a declaration of the imminent triumph of God over all the forces of evil and a call for enthusiastic cosmic celebration:

Now the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God,
and the authority of his Messiah have come.
For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,
who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down.
They triumphed over him
by the blood of the Lamb

and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much
as to shrink from death.
Therefore celebrate, you heavens
and you who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
because the devil has gone down to you!
He is filled with fury,
because he knows that his time is short. (Rev. 12:10-11 NIV alt.)

After noting that the blessed and holy ones will share in the Messiah's reign for a thousand years (20:4-6) prior to the final demise of the devil, the Apocalypse concludes with a brilliant gaze into "a new heaven and a new earth," which represent the final re-creative stage of God's redemptive program (chaps. 21-22). Although the epithet "Messiah/Christ" never appears in these final chapters, the Messiah plays a prominent role, being identified six times as "the Lamb." Building on the marriage-covenant motif evident already at Sinai but expounded in explicit detail in Ezekiel 16:6-14, an interpreting angel takes John to the holy city, Jerusalem descended from heaven, and shows him the redeemed people identified as "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9). The twelve foundations of the city wall were named after the twelve apostles of the Lamb (v. 14).

John noticed the absence of a temple in the city but then observed that in a redeemed and perfect world, it would have been superfluous, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple (v. 22). He also observed the absence of sun and moon to light up the new heavens and the new earth but then concluded that these too would have been superfluous for its light is the glory of God (Hb. *kěbôd YHWH*), and the lamp is the Lamb (v. 23; cf. Ezek. 43:1-5; 44:4). Frequently borrowing motifs from Ezekiel's grand vision of Israel's eschatological future in Ezekiel 40-48, John's visual tour of the heavenly city concludes fittingly at the throne of God and of the Lamb, from which flowed "the river of the water of life, brilliant as crystal" (Rev. 22:1).

Coursing through the city, it watered the tree of life, which yielded a new kind of fruit in every month of the year. Even the leaves of the tree were symbols of well-being, for they provided balm for the healing of the nations (22:2-3). This image of the life-giving stream flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb symbolized the total and final lifting of the curse that had held the cosmos in its grip from the early days of creation; the reign of God and the Lamb guaranteed this perfect paradise forever and ever (vv. 3-5).

Occurring more than four times as often as *Christos* (7×) in Revelation, “Lamb” (*arnion*) is John’s favorite epithet for the Messiah. The word *arnion* occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in John 21:15, where Jesus had charged Peter to “Feed my lambs.” It occurs only four times in the Old Greek First Testament, of which only Jeremiah 11:19 seems to have any bearing on John’s usage. Here Jeremiah complains to YHWH, “I had been like a gentle lamb [*arnion*; Hb. *kebes*] led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me” (NIV). However, the motif was not new to Revelation. At the beginning of John’s Gospel, using a different Greek word (*amnos*), John the Baptizer introduced Jesus with “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) and again the next day with “Look! The Lamb of God” (v. 36).

The phrase “Lamb of God” is missing in the First Testament and occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, but John’s characterization of the Lamb (*amnos*) as one “who takes away the sin of the world” links the epithet with the sin offering in Israel’s sacrificial rituals.¹² Mark 14:12 and Luke 22:7 associate Jesus’ death with the Passover lamb by noting that Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist occurred on the night the Passover lambs were slaughtered. However, since the Passover lamb was a substitutionary offering without reference to atonement or sin, John the Baptizer’s use of the motif of the lamb as an atoning sacrifice seems ultimately to be rooted in Isaiah 53, particularly verses 7–

12. According to verse 7, “He was led like a lamb [*probaton*] to the slaughter.” We can scarcely understand the book of Revelation without this passage ringing in our ears. The image is striking: the Davidic Messiah as a shepherd gives his life for the sheep. Given the prominence of the sacrificial theme in the book, it is appropriate that we close this exploration into God’s covenants with Israel generally, and his covenant with David particularly, by accepting the call to celebrate the achievement of the Lamb in redeeming us and the entire cosmos.

[1.](#) Acts 2:22–36; 3:12–26; 4:9–12; 5:42; 8:5, 12; 9:22; 10:34–43; 11:15–18; 17:1–3; 18:5, 28; 20:18–25; 24:24; 26:15–23; 28:31.

[2.](#) Rom. 15:20; 16:25; 1 Cor. 1:17–23; 15:11–14; 2 Cor. 1:19; 2:12; 4:5; Eph. 3:8; Phil. 1:15–18; Col. 1:27–28; 2 Tim. 2:8.

[3.](#) Heb. 1:8 = Ps. 45:6 [LXX 44:7]; cf. Heb. 1:10–12 = Ps. 102:25–27 [101:26–28].

[4.](#) A ratio of references to “Christ” vis-à-vis words in 1 Peter is approximately a 1:73 ratio; cf. Ephesians (1:51); Galatians (1:58); Romans (1:109); Matthew (1:1146); John (1:823).

[5.](#) Matt. 16:16–17; cf. Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20.

[6.](#) Matt. 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; cf. Luke 9:35.

[7.](#) Matt. 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:55–62; John 18:16–18, 25–27.

[8.](#) In 1 Pet. 1:1, 2, 3a, 3b, 7, 11a, 11b, 13, 19.

[9.](#) Cf. also Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:5, 15 [LXX 85:5, 15]; 103 [102]:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2.

[10.](#) See LXX Deut. 26:19, *onomaston kai kauxēma kai doxaston*; Hb. *lithillâ ûlēšēm ûlētîp’āret*.

[11.](#) The Greek expression *en phobō*, “in fear,” usually bears this sense, both in the First Testament (2 Chron. 26:5; Neh. 5:9; Pss. 2:11; 5:7 [8]; Prov. 14:26; 23:17) and in the New (2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 1:17; 3:2).

[12.](#) Lev. 4:27–35 and 5:6–7, LXX uses *probaton*; Num. 6:14, *amnada*, fem., thus a ewe lamb.

Conclusion

Reflections on Covenant and God's Grand Plan of Redemption in Scripture

By a curious coincidence—no, providence—as I have been putting the finishing touches on this manuscript, the entire world is engulfed in the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. On the surface, this scourge is a severe plague on the world economy, but at a deeper level, it serves as a metaphor of what is wrong with the cosmos. A measly microscopic organism has risen up against humankind, apparently lacking any of the “fear” (*môrā*) that repels more complex creatures from humans, who have been installed as God’s deputies and vice-regents to govern the work on his behalf (cf. Gen. 9:2). In the meantime, we feel helpless and unsure of the solutions to the problem that our scientists, politicians, and social engineers are offering. We understand instructions like washing our hands, though this does remind us of the preoccupation with cleansing rituals that we witness within elements of Judaism in Jesus’ day—except that in certain critical respects the people then were more enlightened than we are today. They did not know about viruses and germs, but they knew about defilement caused by sin—and in God’s grace, he provided a means of atonement for that sin.

A more surprising response is represented by the neologism “social distancing,” which, instead of breaking down barriers among people and peoples, has institutionalized alienation. Although scientists are exploring

whether the COVID-19 virus was transmitted from an animal (a bat) to a human, they are not debating its deadly force or fiercely communicable character. In our time human carriers have become the biggest threats to another person's health. COVID-19 is no private virus that we could hoard and keep to ourselves even if we found it to be advantageous. This virus presumably gained admittance through a single human being. However, because of the "social intimacy" that characterizes the modern world, this has become a global pandemic, not only leaving in its wake the death of many of its primary victims but also taking a dreadful toll on the social, economic, and mental fabric of masses of humanity. It does not take a rocket scientist or a social scientist to recognize that the symmetry of the cosmos seems to have been compromised.

In our "enlightened" time we have achieved what no other civilization has accomplished, or perhaps even dared: we have largely removed the divine dimension from the picture and become absolute materialists. Christians are mocked for even bringing God into the conversation. As the "Prayer to Every God" cited above (see chap. 6) demonstrates, it has not always been this way. In his inscriptions regarding the rebuilding of Babylon, Esarhaddon recognized the relationship between evil human behavior, the disposition of the gods, and the effects on the landscape; he noticed the consequent disintegration and alienation at all levels and attributed them to "bad omens." Responding to the breakdown of human society, expressed in all sorts of cultic and moral crimes, Esarhaddon wrote:

The God Enlil saw and his heart became angry (and) his mood became furious. The Enlil of the gods, the lord of the lands, plotted evilly to level the land and to destroy its people. His heart was angry. A bitter curse was placed in his mouth.

Many bad omens concerning the destruction of mankind occurred in heaven and on earth. The path of the Enlil-stars, the path of the Anu-stars, (and) the path of the Ea-stars changed their position(s) for the worse (and) they constantly revealed signs portending destruction. The river Arahtu,

(normally) a river of abundance, turned into an angry wave, a raging tide, a huge flood, like the deluge. It swept (its) waters destructively across the city, its dwellings, and its shrines, and turned them into a swamp. The gods and goddesses dwelling in it flew up to the heavens like birds, and the *šēdus* (and) *lamassus* [protective spirits] fled and were wandering around outside. The people living in it were hidden in another place and took refuge in an unknown land. (adapted from Leichty, RIMA 4:244–45, and parallel texts)

This text describes a disintegration of the covenant triangle (in this case involving Marduk, Babylon, and the Babylonians) as clearly as we find anywhere in ancient texts, but it also provides a remarkable parallel to the biblical portrayal of the human problem. The alienation portrayed here is reminiscent of the disruption of every relationship that resulted from Adam and Eve's first sin and that spread like a virus wherever people go. The fate of Babylon turned in a positive direction when the patron god Marduk ostensibly had a change of heart. Feeling homesickness toward his city, he shortened the decreed duration of his own exile from the city from seventy years to eleven by cleverly reversing the numerical digits from 70 (𐎶𐎵) to 11 (𐎶𐎵), since adding or subtracting signs was impossible in a decreed outcome.

However, the Scriptures recount God's response quite differently. Ancient deities tended to be territorial and were less concerned about the identity of human populations than the real estate they governed. But YHWH had installed humankind as his images, and his response focused on restoring his relationship to his vice-regents. This did not mean that he was unconcerned about their physical environment, which sin had transformed into a severely dystopic state. On the contrary, as John 3:16 suggests, he was committed to the *kosmos*, but as Paul observes in Romans 8:18–25, the key to restoring health and *šālôm* to creation involved the restoration of humankind, the “kingpin” in the world that he had created. It is not that YHWH had created the world for us, but the opposite; he

created us for the well-being of the world so that everything he had made might function as a magnificent symphony, bringing endless glory to God simply by performing as he had intended in the first place.

But how could this be done? Adapting a metaphor from the ancient world of administrative and international diplomacy, the New Testament speaks of YHWH, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Redeemer (Isa. 49:7)¹ and Holy One of Israel, devising a plan before the foundations of earth were laid; this plan was to restore all the broken relationships and ultimately lead to the creation of new heavens and a new earth. The message of Scripture casts that story as a magnificent covenantal drama in four acts. We hear hints and echoes of creation throughout the Scriptures, but in keeping with the brevity of the period, Act 1 receives limited attention in the grand drama of redemption: only Genesis 1-2.

By word count, Act 2 (Gen. 3:1-11:26), which recounts the divine response to human and cosmic rebellion, receives four times as much attention. I have argued above that because the relationships involving God, the earth, and all living things on the earth were functioning normally in Act 1, no formal covenantal action was required to create a symbiotic relationship. Human beings functioned as the divine Suzerain's administrative vassals by virtue of his acts and purposes in their creation. However, human rebellion (Gen. 3) resulted in the disruption of all relationships among the principal characters in the cosmic portrait: the relationship of Deity to the physical universe, Deity to humankind, and humankind to the rest of the physical universe. This comprehensive picture of alienation precipitated the need for Act 2 because it had changed everything.

After the horrific judgment upon humankind and all the earth as his realm (Gen. 6-8), God enacted the cosmic covenant. Thereby God laid the foundations for restoring his

relationship with the physical world and reinforcing humankind's status as cosmic administrator, but he promised never again to destroy the world as he had through the deluge. God's first step toward achieving that goal was establishing a covenant relationship with creation (Gen. 9) and placing the rainbow in the sky as a public declaration of that covenant commitment (9:8-17).

Although this ecclesial/missional covenant recognized the role of human beings as divinely appointed administrators of the cosmos, it did not address directly the fractured relationship between humankind and God on the one hand, and humankind and the rest of creation on the other. This required a second covenant (in Act 3) to lay the foundations for the restoration of our status as deputized and empowered images of God. In earlier narratives we observed hints that the link between Deity and human beings had not been totally broken. In his grace, presumably at the time he expelled humans from the garden, God revealed a means of continued fellowship via ritual (Gen. 4:1-4; 8:20-21), verbal communication (4:26), and "walking with God" (5:22-24), but these dimensions did not relate directly to their role as stewards of God's creation. However, we also see hints that the administrative role was still in effect in some measure. Human beings domesticated elements of their physical environment (4:16-22), though this did not camouflage their fundamental depravity (4:5-9, 23-24) or the wretched condition of the environment (6:1-7, 11-12).

What was required to restore a semblance of Adam's status in the world was an administrative covenant authorizing Noah and his descendants to play the role of the original Adam. YHWH had anticipated this by demonstrating grace (*ḥēn*) toward Noah (6:8) and engaging him as an agent of rescue from the devastating fury of God and the forces of nature as God's agents (6:9-8:19), and Noah had responded with righteous behavior, which is in accord with

his status as vassal of YHWH (6:9, 22; 7:5). The Adamic covenant formalized this relationship.

Genesis 12:1–3 launches Act 3 of this drama. Although the population of the entire globe is still in view, the divine attention zooms in on a segment of humanity specially chosen to serve as the agent and exemplar of a specially designed plan. By this plan the curse that still enveloped the world could be lifted and replaced by divine favor in the form of blessing. The first stage of this Israelite covenantal program involved the call of Abram/Abraham, the identification of a specific geographic stage on which the divine Director would have Act 3 performed, and the establishment of a tripartite covenantal relationship involving Israel, the land of Canaan, and YHWH. However, this act involved three stages: (1) YHWH created a covenant relationship with Abraham and his family (Gen. 12–50); (2) YHWH confirmed that covenant with Abraham's descendants and transferred to them the mission of being a blessing to the world (Exod. 1–Lev. 26); and (3) YHWH renewed that covenant with the generation that was born in the desert after the exodus generation had proved so faithless (Deuteronomy). The tripartite covenantal relationship was formally completed by integrating the land through a supplementary phase of the ritual begun on the plains of Moab.² The goal of this tripartite covenantal arrangement was to present to the world an image of what divine grace can accomplish; as the redeemed people on their own land, the Israelites were set high above the nations for praise, honor, and glory (Deut. 26:19; 28:1–10).

When YHWH had completed this phase of the project and the land was securely in the Israelites' hands, YHWH identified David as his chosen royal administrator of the Israelite covenant. If the relationship involving YHWH, Israel, and the land of Canaan was to function as a microcosm of the cosmic covenant, then the appointment of David signified the installation of a microcosmic *Adam* (humanity).

The point of YHWH's election of David to be Israel's king was not simply to honor this king and elevate him above the people, but to provide the people with a model of covenantal righteousness (Deut. 17:17-20) and to keep the Israelite covenantal engine well oiled, so they would successfully fulfill their mission as a "kingdom of priests" and agents of blessing to the world.

Although these were the ideals, the history of Israel and its royal house was largely a history of failure, like the story of Adam and the cosmos. To be sure, some individual Israelites and some representatives in the dynastic history had "tender" hearts and "turned to YHWH with all their inner being, their whole person, and all their resources" (2 Kings 22:19-20; 23:25). But by the time we reach the end of the First Testament, we see that the nation itself had fallen down under the weight of its own crimes and rebellion against their divine Suzerain. Responding with judgment totally in accord with the warnings in the covenant documents (Lev. 26; Deut. 28), YHWH tossed a grenade into the covenantal triangle, causing the whole complex to disintegrate.

Although both YHWH and Moses had anticipated this outcome (Deut. 31:14-21, 29), they declared that this would not be the end of the story. They had also predicted that in the distant future—after the sequence of prosperity, apostasy, and judgment had been fulfilled—the covenantal triangle would be reconstituted. Because they knew that YHWH's covenants are all eternal and irrevocable, they foresaw that in the distant, far-off future Israel would be fully restored in its own land, enjoying YHWH's full blessing. Finally, as a collective group they would experience the circumcision of hearts (Deut. 10:1-10) that heretofore had been true of only a remnant of individual righteous persons (Jer. 31; Ezek. 34; 37). However, they anticipated the ideals of the Israelite covenant being fully and permanently realized.

Many Israelites anticipated the ultimate fulfillment of the Israelite covenant. Simultaneously, psalmists and prophets expressed intensified longing for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty (e.g., Ps. 89:46–51 [47–52]) for the reign of God among his people. Indeed, there was increasing hope for the extension of God’s reign through the king, even to the ends of the earth—in fulfillment of David’s reaction to YHWH’s dynastic promise: “This is the Torah of humankind!” (2 Sam. 7:19). YHWH had engaged the Babylonians to bring about the end of Judah and the Davidic monarchy. However, before the holocaust of 586 BC, the Babylonians had removed a significant portion of the population, including King Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:10–16) and many of the elite, and settled them securely in Babylon. With hindsight we recognize in this event the grace and providence of YHWH. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed that herein lay the future of all YHWH’s covenantal promises. Both the nation and David would be back.

This set the stage for Act 4, which is represented by the writings of the New Testament. With reference to the covenantal drama playing on the stage, this act opens ambivalently. The covenantal promises have been fulfilled—but only *mě’aṭ*, “in small measure.” Whereas the prophets had envisioned the resurrection and return of all the tribes, those who returned were primarily Judahites and Levites. Although the prophets had envisioned the Israelites resettling in the entire promised land, their settlements were concentrated in and around Jerusalem and in the Galilee region. The prophets had also anticipated a full restoration of the relationship with YHWH, symbolized by his return to the temple (Ezek. 40–48). Although the temple had been rebuilt, it was a political statement of an alien ruler, and in any case the glory of YHWH had never returned. The prophets envisioned a revived Davidic throne; obviously there were Davidides in the population, but after the first

century BC the country was in the grip of Roman rule, administrated by the emperor's appointees.

This ambivalent image concerning the Israelite covenant provides background for the real story—the return of David. In our review of the New Testament evidence, we observed that in Jesus Christ we discover a new and second Adam. We also discovered that this theme is vastly overshadowed by interest in the new and final David. Jesus the Christ (Messiah) represents both the heart and soul of the divine program of redemption and the goal (*telos*) of everything that had happened to this point. However, not only was Jesus Christ the ultimate David, who would be crucified as the King of the Jews, but he was to be lifted high and installed as king of the cosmos, and one day, every knee will bow before him (Phil. 2:10). He was also the divine solution to the problem that engulfed all of creation. Before the world was created and in anticipation of human rebellion, the Triune Godhead had devised a plan whereby, ultimately, the divine vision for all creation would be fully realized. That vision involved one member of the divine Trinity leaving the heavenly throne room and taking on human form. Shockingly, in time and space, the sinless Son of God and Son of Man would offer himself up as a sin offering, taking on himself the punishment we deserve. Herein lies the hope of humankind and the hope of the cosmos.

The divine drama of redemption did not end with the close of the New Testament: Act 5 is still to come. The Son of Man and Son of God will return (Acts 1:9-11) and implement the final eternal chapter: the reconstitution of the cosmos in the form of new heavens and a new earth. In the meantime, we live in the era of “already-but-not-yet.” We are indeed numbered among the redeemed, delighting in the knowledge of God, enjoying covenant relationship with him, liberated by the forgiveness made possible by the work of Christ, and having the Torah written on our hearts.

This incredible hope is ours today, in the current environment, when the whole world is languishing under the effects of sin and alienation, which has been institutionalized through virtually universal social-distancing mandates. In the interim we are not immune from the burden of sickness, pain, grief, and calamities of every sort that are pandemic in a fallen world. And if we are not carrying this burden personally now, we grieve with loved ones and neighbors who are, knowing that our turn will come. Nevertheless, while others seek refuge in substances that only exacerbate the problem, we do everything we can as stewards of God's grace to ameliorate the pain and the grief of our world.

In words remarkably appropriate for this troubled context, in which many are mystified by issues of pain and suffering and alienation, James, the brother of Jesus, invites us to "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8 NIV). Even more pointedly and in view of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, the author of Hebrews invites us: "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:16 NIV). And we hear tender words of restoration, comfort, and relief from our Savior himself. Instead of pushing us away, he invites us: "Come to me, all you who are exhausted and loaded down, and I will give you rest. Receive my yoke and learn from me, for my heart is tender and sympathetic, and you will find rest for your troubled souls. Look! The [covenantal] yoke I put on you is comfortable and the load I ask you to carry is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Soon the "not yet" of our own time will become part of the glorious "already." While New Testament visions of hope are guaranteed by the power of God in Jesus' resurrection and our Redeemer having gone before us, information on the not-yet world is frustratingly limited, and much of what the

Scriptures provide is cast in apocalyptic form, as in the book of Revelation. It is fitting that we conclude this study of God's grand plan of redemption with a coda drawn from this grand and hopeful book.

The theme of redemption of the cosmos and the creation of an eternal new heavens and new earth dominates Revelation, but chapter 5 transports hearers into the heavenly abode of the infinitely holy and glorious God, seated on his throne (4:1–5:1). There we see his Messiah, identified as “the Lion from the tribe of Judah,”³ “the Root of David,”⁴ and “a Lamb, standing as if slain” (5:5–6). The Occupant of the throne hands the Lamb a scroll bound by seals that only he is authorized to open, symbolizing his supreme authority over the cosmos. When he has received the scroll, the four attendant creatures fall down spontaneously before him in homage and submission, and then they join in a new song of adoration, which, at the end of this story, is our song:

Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth. (Rev. 5:9–10 ESV)

Then the chorus of celebrants expands to an innumerable host of angels around the throne, living creatures, and elders—representatives of the people. And from the heavenly presence of God and the Lamb, the celebration expands to the entire cosmos, as every living creature in heaven, on earth, in the sea, and in the netherworld chimes in. With their “Amen!” the four living creatures attending the throne add the final punctuation mark to the drama. The last action we see in this heavenly court involves the elders prostrating themselves in submission and homage before the Lamb. But scenes and sounds like this recur frequently in the book.⁵ Even now we enjoy the fruit of God's gracious

offer of covenant relationship to humanity and the cosmos. We are amazed by his grand divine plan of redemption/salvation made possible by the blood of the Lamb, which washes our robes white. We too anticipate the day when we will stand before the throne of God, enjoying the blessed shepherding of the Lamb—a magnificently ironic image! (7:9–17)—and we will celebrate, not just as observers but also as participants and beneficiaries in the covenant marriage of the Lamb and his bride.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! (19:1–9).⁶

¹. Along with “Holy One of Israel” (*qēdōš yisrā’ēl*), the term *gō’ēl*, “redeemer,” is a favored epithet for YHWH in Isaiah: 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8; 59:20; 60:16; 63:16. Elsewhere in the Prophets this usage occurs only in Jer. 50:34.

². Deut. 11:29–32; 27:1–26; Josh. 8:30–35.

³. Rev. 5:5; cf. Gen. 49:9; Ezek. 19.

⁴. Rev. 5:5; cf. Isa. 11:1, 10; Rom. 15:12.

⁵. Rev. 7:10–12; 11:16–17; 14:1–3; 19:1–9.

⁶. Praise YHWH! Praise YHWH! Praise YHWH! Praise YHWH! (Rev. 19:1, 3, 4, 6).

For Further Reading

Note: This bibliographic supplement serves several purposes:

1. To compensate for the absence of references to secondary literature in the footnotes
2. To offer readers access to further and fuller discussions and alternative interpretations
3. To introduce readers to the author's works, where the issues dealt with synthetically here are dealt with in fuller detail and with more interaction with other scholars

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‘almâ, “young woman,” [336](#), [539](#), [541](#)
‘āmad/hālak lipnê, “to stand/walk before [a superior],” [33](#), [94-95](#), [102](#), [123](#), [126](#), [155](#), [215](#), [623](#)
‘āmar, “to say”; hiphil, *he’ēmîr*, “to have another person say,” [247-49](#)
‘āšām, “reparation offering,” [340-433](#)
- bāḥar*, “to choose, elect,” [96](#), [128](#), [150](#), [211](#), [214](#), [232](#), [382](#)
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bērākâ, “blessing.” See *bērēk*
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- dābār* (pl. *dēbārîm*), “word, statement, principle, event,” [73](#), [155](#), [158](#), [182](#), [189](#), [195](#), [230](#), [237](#), [279](#), [320](#), [323](#)

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he’ēmîn, “believe, trust in,” [85](#), [125-26](#), [336](#), [444](#)

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