

COVENANT AND NARRATIVE, GOD AND TIME

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God has made covenants with humans, and those covenants have been central to the progress of salvation history. This is so whether one (mistakenly, I believe) affirms the “unity of the covenants” in a covenant-theological sense or whether one simply affirms the role of those covenants in God’s unified program of salvation.¹ What has not been well understood, however—or at least, not well articulated in any scholarly study—is the narrative manner in which those covenants are presented in the OT. I submit that the biblical writers (in this case, Moses and the author(s)/compiler(s) of the historical books of the OT) produced accounts of the divine-human covenants with considerable narrative and architectonic art. They composed narratives which enshrine both the divine acts of covenant making (often with the corresponding human response) and also the late second millennium BC international treaty form which those covenants took. A study of the relevant covenant narratives should help us to see more clearly both the historical embeddedness and the programmatic significance of God’s covenant making procedure in each case.²

As prolegomenon, we will make some elementary but fundamental observations on God *vis-à-vis* time. Those observations should serve to put God’s eternal relation to his covenants into a proper perspective. We will then consider the accounts of the major divine-human covenants in the OT: the

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¹ Cf. my own previous discussions of such matters in Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “An Argument against Theologically Constructed Covenants,” *JETS* 50 (2007) 259–73; and “Covenant: an Idea in the Mind of God,” *JETS* 52 (2009) 225–46. However, a rejection of the theologically constructed covenant established by covenant theology in its classic form (i.e. the “covenant of grace” construed out of the Noahic through the new covenants) does not make one *ipso facto* a classical dispensationalist either. Both classical covenant theology and classical dispensational theology are in fact archaic and ought to be discarded (or radically modified at least in terms of their understanding of covenants, as, to some extent, progressive dispensationalism has done with respect to classical dispensationalism) in favor of a realistic view of the Bible—that is, a view which understands Scripture in terms of its ancient Near Eastern context. It is *a priori* unlikely that systems developed in the seventeenth century (covenant theology) or in the nineteenth century (classical dispensational theology)—long before archaeological discoveries showed us what covenants actually were and how they worked in the ancient Near East—could, lacking such evidence, have arrived at a proper understanding of covenantal matters in the Bible. That both systems failed to do so can now be seen to be the case.

² The same procedure can appear in the making of a human covenant, such as the one between Rahab and the spies in Joshua 2.

Adamic/creation covenant (Gen 1:1–2:3); the Noahic/recreation covenant (Gen 9:1–17); the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15); the Mosaic covenant (Exod 20–24ff); and the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:1–17).³

Our study will conclude with reflections on biblical historiography. The proper understanding of biblical historiography, like the proper understanding of biblical covenants, can now be clarified with the aid of data from the ancient Near East. Historiography in the ancient Near East appears for the most part in two forms: the historical prologue portions of second millennium BC international treaties, and the historical records found in royal annals. I submit that these two categories of history writing largely define all of biblical history writing as well.

I. A NOTE ON GOD AND TIME⁴

1. *God vis-à-vis time.* God is outside of time.⁵ That is why he says, “I am the first and I am the last” (Isa 44:6, 48:12), and of all human generations he can say that he has been “calling forth the generations from the beginning . . . I, the LORD—with the first of them and with the last—I am he” (Isa 41:4). Likewise in John’s Revelation he says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev 22:13; cf. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty,’” Rev 1:8; cf. Rev 21:6). Another way of putting this is to say that God “inhabits eternity” (Isa 57:15, KJV, ESV, ASV [Heb, עַד עַד]; cf. Ps 102:12 [Heb 102:13]).⁶ One consequence of this fact is that all times are present to God. God existed eternally before he created the cosmos, and man and woman in it, and when God created them God also already dwelt in the eschaton, and in eternity beyond the eschaton. That is why Paul can say of God that “he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph 1:4). God could choose Paul’s contemporary believers (and subsequent believers as well) “before the creation of the world” because all of them were present in his view before the creation of the world. So also at this moment in human time God is already with his redeemed in our future: “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6).

³ The relevance of Genesis 17 and 22 to the Abrahamic covenantal administration will be considered below.

⁴ In what follows I use the terms, “time” and “human time,” interchangeably. A discussion of heavenly time, or divine time, is obviously beyond the scope of the present article.

⁵ I welcome the brief comment made by Gordon Hugenberger on this matter: “Of course, now with our modern relativistic understanding of the space-time continuum, where time depends on matter and relative velocity, any being who preceeded the creation of the physical universe must be ‘outside time’ by definition” (private communication). I hope to take up the matter of God’s relation to time at greater (and deserved) length in a forthcoming biblical theology.

⁶ NIV renders עַד עַד in Isa 57:15 as “he who lives forever.” It seems to me that this translation is less likely to be correct than the one we have adopted, but since it is viable we have here at least a case of fruitful ambiguity, a literary reality to which the OT is no stranger.

Paul can say that God has already “seated us with him” in heaven, because, although for Paul it was future, for God it was past. And for God, outside of time, it remains future, present, and past.⁷

2. *God, the new covenant, and historicity.* For God, then, any event is at once future, present, and past. So, for example, the institution of the new covenant was for him at once future, present, and past. That is why John can say the Son is “the Lamb slain from the foundation/creation of the world” (Rev 13:8). This does not mean that the Son was slain when the world was created. The Son was crucified at one point in human time, long after the creation. Yet for God that point in time was a present reality, and also a future reality, when he created the world. But the crucifixion was also a past reality when God created the world, because God was also the Omega when he created the world, for he is always the Alpha and the Omega.

Just as the Lamb of God was slain at one point in time on earth, so the new covenant was instituted among people at one point in time on earth. Jesus instituted that covenant proleptically at the Lord’s Supper. The covenant was actually “cut,” to use OT parlance, when Jesus fulfilled the oath-passage of the Abrahamic covenant on the cross, and the prophetic promise of his resurrection on the third day (cf. Hos 6:1–2).⁸ Those events brought the covenant into being among humans, after which the promise of the covenant—eternal life—began to be fulfilled at Pentecost.

It is important to understand the significance of such facts if we are to understand how the new covenant can be called the “everlasting covenant” (as when the author of Hebrews invokes “the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal/everlasting covenant [ἐν αἵματι διαθήκης αἰωνίου] brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,” Heb 13:20). Jesus instituted the covenant in human time. But for God, as the Alpha, that act of institution was a present reality at the creation, and also prior to the creation, so that for God it was a present future event (i.e. a future event for earth, but an event present before God outside of time at the creation)—just as for God, as the Omega, it was a present past event (i.e. a past event for earth, but an event present before God outside of time at, say, the eschaton). So, in human time, and from God’s point of view outside of time, there were aeons during which the new covenant had not yet come into existence, and yet the moment of its coming into existence was

⁷ Only a few weeks after writing this, I came upon the following lines from George Gordon, Lord Byron:

“We are immortal, and do not forget;
We are eternal; and to us the past
Is, as the future, present.”

Manfred, Act 1, Scene 1, lines 149–51.

Sadly, Byron put these words, which would be appropriate coming from an omniscient God, into the mouth of a pagan spirit. But then, he was a typical Romantic.

⁸ For a good discussion of the NT use of such OT passages, cf. Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 96–103, esp. 98–99.

eternally present before him. Once the new covenant had come into existence between God and humans, however, it would never pass away—hence it is justly called the “everlasting covenant.” It was instituted within human history, and before that it did not exist within human history, but once instituted it would endure beyond human history for eternity, because it institutes our fellowship with God, which can never pass away.

The foregoing observations not only clarify the meaning of the phrase, “the everlasting covenant” (as it applies to the new covenant); they also enable us to understand that God can endow his word with historicity. He is outside of history (although he also informs it, as he informs all of time and space, cf. Heb 1:3). He knows the flow of events thoroughly and perfectly. Indeed, because he alone is omniscient and sees all things exactly as they are, his is the only comprehensively objective point of view in the universe.⁹ Consequently, he is able to produce a Bible which is endowed with historical accuracy. And, not incidentally, he can easily foretell, through prophets, what is to come, with as much detailed accuracy as suits him, since anything that is future for the prophet and his audience is eternally present before God, and may be viewed by him exactly as it is and communicated through his prophets with accuracy. This is the implication of the statement, “*with* the first of them and *with* the last—I *am* he.” That is, he is *with* the first and *with* the last—he is the Alpha and the Omega—at *one and the same instant*.

II. GOD’S COVENANT NARRATIVES

Although the moment of the new covenant’s institution has been, is, and will be eternally before God as a present act, God did still institute the new covenant at one point in time. Before that moment, the new covenant had not come to be; but God did institute other covenants conducive toward it.¹⁰ I have made this observation before, and will not dwell upon it now. My concern now is to examine the historiographical reports of those covenant institutions in the OT. We can take those reports as historically accurate, inasmuch as we take them as “God-breathed” material (2 Tim 3:16; cf. John 6:63), that is, written accounts produced by the Spirit of God as he worked in and through the human writers who composed the accounts.

1. *Adamic covenant*.¹¹ Since I have elsewhere produced an outline of the covenant structure as I believe it informs Gen 1:1–2:3, I will not dem-

⁹ It follows that we approximate or achieve objectivity only insofar as we approximate or achieve, in one matter or another, the divine point of view.

¹⁰ Obviously, just as the institution of the new covenant is eternally before God as a present act, so are the institutive moments of all the other biblical divine-human covenants. Not all of them, however, endure into eternity, i.e., are without end. In fact, only the new covenant has that status, as the only covenant which fulfills whatever was required, hoped for, or promised in those earlier covenants which paved the way for it in human time.

¹¹ Like covenant theology, dispensational theology has suffered from a lack of understanding of the covenant genre (and, for that matter, the covenant lawsuit genre—for which, briefly, see

onstrate that structure here in its entirety.¹² I will display it in a more concise form, however, in order to make the larger point indicated above, that the OT shows the same technique with regard to the later divine-human covenants, the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the Davidic. All are narrative passages. In all of them, elements of the narrative correspond to elements of the late second millennium BC international treaty form.¹³ The essential data for the Adamic/creation covenant may be outlined as follows:

below, n. 54) in the ancient Near East. A prime example is the so-called “Adamic covenant” identified by dispensationalists, not in Genesis 1, but in Genesis 3—a supposed covenant which consists of (1) the curse on the serpent; (2) the first promise of a Redeemer; (3) the changed state of the woman; (4) the earth cursed; (5) the inevitable sorrow of life; (6) the light occupation of Eden changed to burdensome labor; and (7) physical death (for the foregoing analysis of the supposed covenant see the *Scofield Reference Bible* re: Genesis 3). Scofield called these elements a “covenant,” but they are in fact a covenant lawsuit, with characteristic pronouncements of judgment (and a redemptive promise)—a genre which appears in the great majority of OT prophetic material (but cf. also Matt 23:13–39, where Jesus functions as the last and greatest OT covenant lawsuit messenger), and which is also now understandable from the ancient Near East. Likewise, Scofield’s discussion of the other covenants—real or supposed—of the Bible proceeds, as one would expect, without knowledge of the covenant genre as we have since understood it from the ancient Near East (and thus also as we find it in the OT). Such lack of knowledge led him and others to identify as “covenants” in the OT those things which are not in fact covenants, such as the supposed “Adamic covenant” of Genesis 3. Of course, Scofield and his predecessors and contemporaries could not have known the Hittite treaties which had not yet been discovered. His errors continue to be repeated by more recent dispensational writers, however; cf. Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 1971) 87–103.

¹² For the fuller display, see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 144–46. For further discussion of the covenantal nature of Gen 1:1–2:3, see Niehaus, “Covenant: an Idea” 230–34.

¹³ Genesis 1:1–2:3 also has the form of an ancient Near Eastern list. This becomes immediately apparent if we compare it with the Sumerian King List, and with the list of tribal offerings for the tabernacle in Numbers 7:

Theme	Sumerian King List	Gen 1:1–2:3	Num 7:1–88
Narrative introduction	II.1–7	1:1–2	7:1–11
Intermediate sections with opening and closing formulas	II.8–17 (Bad-tibira) II.18–23 (Larak) II.24–29 (Sippar) II.30–35 (Shuruppak) 1:20–23 (Day 5) 1:24–31 (Day 6) 7:48–53 (Day 7) 7:54–59 (Day 8) 7:60–65 (Day 9) 7:66–71 (Day 10) 7:72–77 (Day 11) 7:78–83 (Day 12)	1:3–5 (Day 1) 1:6–8 (Day 2) 1:9–13 (Day 3) 1:14–19 (Day 4) 7:36–41 (Day 5) 7:42–47 (Day 6)	7:12–17 (Day 1) 7:18–23 (Day 2) 7:24–29 (Day 3) 7:30–35 (Day 4)
Narrative conclusion	II.36–39	2:1–3 (Day 7)	7:84–88

I use the selection from the Sumerian King List as a control, as it is the prior exemplar. A fuller discussion of this form and related issues will appear in a forthcoming biblical theology.

Gen 1:1–2:3	Covenant elements in the narrative
1:1	Title/Preamble “In the beginning God created . . .” ¹⁴
1:2–29	Historical Prologue ¹⁵
1:28, 2:16–17a	Stipulations Deposition and Regular Reading ¹⁶
1:31	Witness (God) ¹⁷
1:28, 2:3	Blessings
2:17b	Curse (“for when you eat of it you will surely die”)

I include Gen 2:16–17 because, although those verses lie outside the pericope, 1:1–2:3, they are nonetheless part of the account of God’s creative work and relationship with his vassals. As Kitchen has noted, the so-called “second” creation account is in fact a narrative that focuses on a detailed aspect of the so-called “first” creation account, namely, God’s creation of and relations with the man and the woman.¹⁸ The contents of Genesis 2 are thus germane to the discussion, since they are complementary to the data in Genesis 1.

According to the narrative technique outlined above, the Gen 1:1–2:3 creation account is framed after the pattern of a second millennium BC ancient Near Eastern treaty—or, if that seem too strong a statement, the narrative contains elements that would be at home in such a treaty/covenant, from the identification of the Great King to the statement of his provisions for, empowerment of and commission of his vassals (that is, the blessings and stipulations which he bestows upon them). As I have noted elsewhere, these treaty elements are actually expressions of God’s nature, or, to put it

¹⁴ We note that God creates by his word; so late second millennium Hittite treaties were introduced as the “words” of the great king—quite literally, the words by which the suzerain structured the “world” in which the vassal must henceforth live and, subordinately, rule. The analogy makes it clear that God is the Suzerain in what follows. We note also that, in the ancient Near East, the creator god was typically considered to be suzerain over all and source of all authority. An ancient Near Eastern reader of Gen 1:1 would most naturally have understood that the verse made a claim for the universal suzerainty of Elohim; cf. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008) 34–62, hereafter *ANETBT*.

¹⁵ This section tells all of God’s creative work—all that the Great King has done for the lesser, vassal king (humanity).

¹⁶ There was no deposition or regular reading because Adam and Eve had no written treaty. Rather, Gen 1:1–2:3 is a narrative with elements that correspond to those of a suzerain-vassal treaty.

¹⁷ Also perhaps implicitly the heavens and earth (Gen 2:1), subsequently called to witness in prophetic literature or material with a covenant lawsuit tone (Deut 4:26, 31:28; Isa 1:2; Ps 50:4).

¹⁸ Cf. the appropriate comment by K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1973) 116–17: “It is often claimed that Genesis 1 and 2 contain two different creation narratives. In point of fact, however, the strictly *complementary* nature of the ‘two’ accounts is plain enough: Genesis 1 mentions the creation of man as the last of a series, and without any details, whereas in Genesis 2 man is the centre of interest and more specific details are given about him and his setting. There is no incompatible duplication here at all. Failure to recognize the complementary nature of the subject-distinction between a skeleton outline of creation on the one hand, and the concentration in detail on man and his immediate environment on the other, borders on obscurantism.”

another way, evidence that covenant was from the beginning an idea in the mind of God.¹⁹

2. *Noahic covenant.* The Noahic covenant, as reported in Genesis 9, shows the same compositional technique, whereby a narrative displays elements that are compatible with a second millennium BC international treaty/covenant. The following outline illustrates the covenant structure of the narrative:

Gen 9:1–17	Covenant elements in the narrative ²⁰	
9:1	Title	“And <i>God</i> blessed . . .”
9:1b (//7), 4	Stipulations	“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” not to eat flesh with its blood ²¹
9:1–3	Blessings	“And God <i>blessed</i> ” ²²

¹⁹ Cf. Niehaus, “Covenant: an Idea” 225–30, 245–46. One idea that the Gen 1:1–2:3 creation account makes clear in more than one way is God’s authority over all that he has created. The suzerain-vassal aspect of the account makes this clear, as does the opening verse (cf. above, n. 14), as well as what has been called the “command-fulfillment” pattern that informs the passage (e.g. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” On the pattern in general as a way of stating the authority of the one who gives the command, cf. Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, Vol II (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975) 77–79; and, for a good NT example, cf. Matt 8:9). Another indication of God’s authority in Genesis 1 is that he names things he has created. Naming in the OT does not always imply the authority of the namer over the entity named, but in the case of Genesis 1 the other authority elements in the context lead naturally to the conclusion that God’s naming the things he has created does in fact indicate his authority over them. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 38, in the context of his discussion of Genesis 1, erroneously asserts without qualification that naming connotes authority; speaking of God’s naming in the Gen 1:1–2:3 account, he says: “And if he named these things, he then owned them, for one only names what one owns or is given jurisdiction over” (cf. also Kaiser, *Promise-Plan* 38, n. 7). Although it is generally true of naming in the OT that “one only names what one owns or is given jurisdiction over,” such a claim ought to be qualified by an actual study of the OT naming idioms, something which Kaiser apparently has not done (e.g. the one naming idiom he mentions in support of his argument, “to call one’s name over,” is not even used in Gen 1:1–2:3). So, for example, only a few chapters further on in Genesis, Hagar “names” the Lord *El Roi* (“God who sees me”): “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her.” The naming idiom Hagar uses (lit. “to call the name of X”) is the same the Lord uses when he names Sarai, Sarah (Gen 17:5) and when the Lord names Jacob, Israel (Gen 35:10). However, when Hagar names the Lord, it is not true that—to use Kaiser’s words—“if [s]he named [him], then [s]he owned [him], for one only names what one owns or is given jurisdiction over.” Hagar named the Lord *El Roi*, but she did not own the Lord or have jurisdiction over him.

²⁰ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 188, notes some of the covenant elements of the narrative but only in a rudimentary way: “God’s blessing” (9:1–17), including (apparently), the commands (and *inclusio*) of vv. 1–7, the affirmation that a covenant is taking place—“the eternal covenant” (vv. 8–11), and the “sign of the covenant” (vv. 12–17).

²¹ Including a repetition of the command to be fruitful and multiply, given as an *inclusio* (v. 1b // v. 7)—perhaps as an emphatic encouragement that God indeed would not send another flood, so that the earth was now once again a safe place in which humans could be fruitful and multiply.

²² The blessings include 9:2, the fear of man imposed on all creatures for human protection, 9:3, the donation of all plants and animals for food, and perhaps also 9:11b, the promise that God would send no second flood.

9:5–6	Curse	man's blood demanded from man and beast
9:9–11a	Oath	"I establish my covenant . . ."
9:12–17	Sign	rainbow and explanation of its meaning ²³

The passage does not contain a historical prologue. But it is important to remember that we are dealing with a narrative, although a narrative which, in Genesis 9, contains covenantal elements. We easily see, when we recall Genesis 6–8, that a history of relations between the Lord and Noah has been provided, and that narrative may be said to play the role of a historical background to the Noahic covenant. Since we are dealing with narrative, Genesis 6–8 remain properly in the realm of narrative, and should not be pressed into service as a formal "historical prologue."²⁴ An analogous situation arises, I believe, in Genesis 12–14, which form a history of relations between the Lord and Abram before the cutting of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15, to which we will soon turn.

It remains to note that the Noahic covenant is a renewal of the Adamic covenant. I and others have written to this effect, so I will not devote space now to the arguments in favor of such a view.²⁵ I will note simply that the two covenants—the Adamic and its renewal—subsequently form one legal package under which all humans have lived, live, and will continue to live until the Lord returns. That legal package constitutes the common grace foundation upon which (and common grace context within which) the Lord now initiates his program of special grace among humans. That program begins with the Abrahamic covenant, a covenant which is unique because it promises foreshadow three subsequent covenants: the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the new.

3. *Abrahamic covenant.* Since Gen 15:18 makes the statement, "On that day the Lord made (lit. "cut") a covenant with Abram," scholars generally recognize that Genesis 15 enshrines the "cutting" of the Lord's covenant with Abram, although not all of them appreciate that the Abrahamic covenant

²³ It should be noted that this covenant, which is termed an "everlasting covenant" in Gen 9:16, is not in fact "everlasting" or eternal, and translators do their readers no service by translating it so. The Hebrew term, עולם, can also mean remote in time and yet having an end (or a beginning), as in Isa 63:11, "Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people [Heb. כִּי־עוֹלָם מֹשֶׁה עִמּוֹ, lit. "the days of old, Moses, his people," with rhetorical/poetic asyndeton]." "The days of Moses" were not eternally remote from Isaiah, but they were long enough prior for him to call them "the days of עולם." Likewise the "everlasting covenant (בְּרִית עוֹלָם)" of Gen 9:16 does not in fact endure forever. Once we have a new heavens and earth, the Noahic covenant, which applies to the current heavens and earth, will be a dead letter, no longer applicable to humans or to their world—although the moment of its institution remains eternally present before God.

²⁴ It is important to distinguish between a historical *background*—a historical narrative which comes *before* the narrative of a covenant's institution—and a historical *prologue*—a section *within* the treaty/covenant which alludes to the earlier, historical background.

²⁵ Cf. Niehaus, "Argument" 270–73; William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 25–26.

did not and could not exist before it was “cut.”²⁶ The narrative has elements which are consistent with a second millennium treaty/covenant:

Gen 15:1–18	Covenant elements in the narrative	
15:1, 7a	Title	“I am the Lord”
15:7b	Historical Prologue	“who brought you out”
[26:5	Stipulations	“because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws”] ²⁷
15:4, 6–7b	Blessings	promises heir, land
15:18–19	Grant	“to your descendants I give this land”
15:9–11, 17	Solemn Ceremony	passage between cut-up animals (= Curse) ²⁸

We noted that the chapters, Genesis 12–14, form a history of relations between the Lord and Abram before the cutting of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15. It is beyond dispute that the Abramahic covenant is “cut” in

²⁶ For those of a higher critical bent, like Rendtorff, the “Priestly” source thinks that the Abrahamic covenant begins with Genesis 17. Cf. Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 49–51. Cf. Claus Westermann, “Genesis 17 und die Bedeutung von berit,” *TLZ* 3 (1976) 162–70. The documentary hypothesis, however, has been rendered archaic and shown to be unscientific by hard data unearthed by archaeology, data which have shown its foundational assumptions to be erroneous: cf. Cyrus Gordon, “Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit,” *CT* 4 (Nov. 23, 1959) 3–5; Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1941); K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1973), *The Bible in Its World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978); G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); and, more generally, K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). The hypothesis continues to have life, and is prevalent in colleges and in OT studies, not because it has merit, but because it has become an orthodoxy which its adherents are content not to subject to scientific rules of evidence.

²⁷ Data imparted during the Lord’s promise of renewal of the Abrahamic covenant with Isaac (Gen 26:3–5); cf. the brief discussion in Niehaus, “Argument” 260–61.

²⁸ Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 295–300, has seen that the circumstances of the theophanic oath passage between the cut up pieces in Gen 15:17 presage the sacrificial sufferings of Christ: “the darkness, the sword’s violence, the broken flesh, accursed death, abandonment. God’s oath-passage was a commitment to the death-passage of Jesus in the gloom of Golgotha. It was a covenant to walk the way of the cross.” The significance of the “oath passage” is clear enough from inner-biblical evidence, e.g., Jer 34:8–20 (and especially 34:18–20, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth”). Mutilation of rebellious vassals in the ancient Near East appears to have been the outworking of such treaty/covenant curses. Cf. the discussion in Niehaus, *God at Sinai* 176–78.

Genesis 15 (so Gen 15:18). Weinfeld and others have noted that such covenant “cutting” ratifies a covenant, or brings it into existence.²⁹ It follows that the Abrahamic covenant did not exist before that event. What then of Genesis 12–14? The events of Genesis 12–14 form a historical background of relations between the Lord and Abram before the making of the Abrahamic covenant (just as Genesis 6–8 form a historical background of relations between the Lord and Noah before the making of the Noahic covenant); Gen 15:7b, which corresponds to the “historical prologue” of a treaty/covenant, refers to that background, just as the historical prologue of a late second millennium Hittite treaty refers to the background of events and relations between the two parties who would become parties to the treaty, but who have not yet entered into a covenant (or, into a “covenant relationship”).³⁰ They would not enter into that covenant until the covenant was ratified or, to use OT parlance, “cut.” One might ask, then, what Abram’s relation to the Lord was in Genesis 12–14. The answer is that Abram was indeed in covenant with the Lord—but under the Adamic covenant and, more proximately, under the Noahic covenant.³¹ So, of course, the Lord can show up and give orders to Abram and promise blessings, as he does in Gen 12:1–3 (one would reckon that, as God, he could do so in any case), without having yet entered into what is now called the “Abrahamic covenant” with Abram. He is already Abram’s Suzerain under the Noahic covenant, and has every right and freedom to give him commands and/or make promises to him. Again, that Abrahamic covenant is “cut” in Genesis 15.³²

I note here in passing the matter of the land grant which the Lord bestows upon Abram in Gen 15:18–19. Moshe Weinfeld has understood this grant by analogy with ancient Near Eastern land grants made by kings to deserving citizens.³³ Scholars generally have accepted this comparison. There is an obvious parallelism between a royal grant of land to a subject and the Lord’s grant of land to Abram, but, with all due regard for the value of Weinfeld’s comparison, the ancient world has a better parallel to offer. That parallel is a grant of lands by a god or gods to a human vassal king, with the understanding that the king must conquer the lands in order to possess them. This is obviously a more exact parallel than the one which Weinfeld has pro-

²⁹ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 102; cf. *BDB* 503.

³⁰ There is no covenant relationship without a covenant.

³¹ We recall that the Adamic and Noahic covenants, as covenant and covenant renewal, form one legal package, under which all of humanity have continued to live subsequent to the Noahic covenant; cf. Niehaus, “Argument” 270–73.

³² Subsequent although brief narrative reports make it clear that the Lord reaffirms the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham’s son, Isaac (Gen 26:2–6) and then again with his grandson, Jacob (Gen 28:12–15). Together, the Abrahamic covenant and its renewals constitute one legal package, as is the case with the Adamic/creation covenant and its renewal, the Noahic/recreation covenant (and the same is true later, with the Sinai covenant and its renewal, the Moab covenant, i.e. Deuteronomy; see below). Cf. discussion in Niehaus, “Argument” 260–61.

³³ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* 78–79; cf. earlier idem, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970) 184–203.

posed. Cyrus Gordon has pointed out that Abraham was a “king” in ancient Canaanite parlance.³⁴ Moreover, the land which the Lord grants to Abram must certainly be obtained by conquest.³⁵ It is not, like property in the ancient Near Eastern “covenant of grant” (as per Weinfeld), property which the vassal obtains by grant and without any further effort.

A good illustration of the sort of “grant” which the Lord makes to Abram in Genesis 15 may be seen in ancient Assyria. A passage from the annals of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244–1206 BC) tells how the gods allotted him lands that he subsequently had to conquer with their help (just as Israel, with the Lord’s help, had to conquer the lands which the Lord had allotted to them). The Assyrian passage closely parallels Gen 15:18–19:

At that time, from Tulsina the . . . mountain, (the region) between the cities Sasila (and) Mashat-sarri on the opposite bank of the lower Zab, from Mount Zuqusku (and) Mount Lallar—the district of the extensive Qutu—, the entire land of the Lullumu, the land of the Paphu to the land Katmuhu (and) all the land of the Subaru, the entirety of Mount Kasiliari to the border of Nairi [and] the border of the land M[akan], to the Euphrates—those regions the great gods allotted to me.³⁶

By comparison, Gen 15:18–19 reads:

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

In both cases, the Assyrian and the biblical, we have a grant from a god to a mortal king; in both cases, it is a grant of lands to be conquered. There is an important difference between the two: the “great gods” command Tukulti-Ninurta to bring other peoples under the suzerainty of Assyria’s gods; but the Lord’s commission to Abram will bring about the annihilation of the foes—that is, a judgment. In a fallen world the Lord wages war in order to establish a presence among a covenant people. His warfare is a judgment upon the foes of God and of God’s kingdom. One great example of such warfare in the OT is the Lord’s judgment against Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt through Moses, his covenant mediator prophet. That warfare liberates Abraham’s offspring and thus makes possible the establishment of that people as God’s

³⁴ Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York: Norton, 1965) 288–89.

³⁵ Albeit, in this case, by the king’s descendants. The conquest will occur, however, as a partial fulfillment of the Lord’s covenant with Abram, cf. Gen 15:18–19.

³⁶ A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia B.C.*, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Assyrian Periods*, Vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 236–37 (A.O.78.1, lines iv 24–35); cf. Niehaus, *ANETBT* 78, and discussion on pp. 56–82, where I argue that such conquest mandates took place in the context of divine-human covenants in the ancient Near East. Cross had already argued for the existence of such divine-human covenants in the ancient Near East; cf. F. M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon, History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998) 6.

people by covenant at Sinai. Further warfare—the conquest—is then required to establish them in God’s kingdom on earth, in the form which that kingdom then took: the form of a geopolitical state. Once God’s kingdom has been established, however, warfare is also required to maintain that kingdom. The historical books of the OT give us, among other things, the record of this warfare.³⁷ The Lord’s covenant with David takes place after the resolution of such warfare, and we will soon turn to that covenant.³⁸ But now we consider briefly the character of Genesis 17, and some issues in Genesis 22, as they relate to the Abrahamic covenant.

a. *Genesis 17 and the Abrahamic covenant.* Genesis 17 provides further details of the Abrahamic covenant. It begins with a theophany (“the Lord appeared” to Abram), in which the Lord identifies himself as El Shaddai, that is, “God the mountain-one” (compare Assyrian addresses to the god Ashur as *sadû rabû*, “the mighty mountain”), an epithet either intended to identify God as the one to be found on mountaintops (such as Moriah, Horeb/Sinai, the Parable Mount, the Mount of Transfiguration, and, ironically, the Mount of Olives, where he was betrayed), or as one who is like a mountain, strong and unshakable.³⁹ When the Lord appears, he immediately gives two commands: “walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1).⁴⁰ He then promises to confirm his covenant with Abram and to increase his numbers greatly (v. 2). It is well understood that the Hebrew idiom employed, “to confirm covenant,” can be used of covenants already in existence, which are now being reaffirmed.⁴¹ Since the Abrahamic covenant came into being in Genesis 15, that understanding is appropriate here.

The Lord has already given Abram two commands at the outset of his appearing, and he soon adds to those. He adds the command of circumcision for Abram and all males belonging to his household (Gen 17:10–14). He also changes Abram’s name to Abraham (with the implicit command that Abram accept the change and go by that name from now on, Gen 17:5), and Sarai’s

³⁷ In the OT form of the kingdom, a nation state under the Mosaic covenant, the warfare was physical. In the NT form of the kingdom, the church under the new covenant, the warfare is not physical but spiritual (e.g. Eph 6:10–18). The form of the kingdom determines the form of the warfare.

³⁸ We note here that the Lord realizes his promises to Abram, later, in the Mosaic context (seed, Gen 15:3 // Deut 1:10; redemption from bondage, Gen 15:13–14 // Exod 6:4–7, cf. Ps 105: 42–43; land, Gen 15:18–20 // Exod 6:8, cf. Ps 105:8–11.44–45), and in the Davidic context (royal offspring, Gen 17:6 // 2 Sam 7:1–17); he also realizes Abrahamic promises antitypically—more wonderfully and completely—through the new covenant.

³⁹ Or both, with intentional ambiguity. We find the identification of Shaddai with Akkadian *sadû* as far back as the late nineteenth century; cf. George A. Barton, “National Israelitish Deities,” in *Oriental Studies, a Selection of the Papers read before the Oriental Club of Philadelphia, 1888–1894* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1894) 101 (citing Halevy, *Recherches Bibliques* 52) that Shaddai may be an archaic form of *sadû*, “mountain,” and that the form may mean “dweller on the mountain.” Cf. Knut Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götter-epitheta* (Helsinki: Societas Orientalis Fennica, 1938) 221 (*sadû rabû* as a divine name).

⁴⁰ Or a hendiadys, “Walk/live blamelessly before me.”

⁴¹ Cf. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* 26; Moshe Weinfeld, “*berit*,” *TDOT* 2 253–279, esp. 260.

name to Sarah, and he commands Abraham to call her Sarah from then on (Gen 17:15). Abraham obeys all of these commands. He institutes circumcision among all the males of his household (Gen 17:23–27), and he henceforth refers to Sarai as Sarah (e.g. Gen 17:17). His obedience demonstrates his faithfulness to the covenant, that is, his faith in action—a faith which was credited to him as righteousness before God (Gen 15:6).

At this point, we are in a position to understand how the Abrahamic covenant relates to other covenants which it anticipates. We have already seen how the new covenant is foreshadowed in the self-imprecatory oath-passage which the theophanic Glory makes between the cut-up animals in Genesis 15. We understood that two covenants were anticipated in that one, Abrahamic covenant: the new covenant in Christ's blood, but also the Mosaic covenant with its fulfillment of the promises of land and offspring that would possess the land after a period of oppression in a land not their own. The Lord now adds a further promise, and it implies yet another covenant, the Davidic: "I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you" (Gen 17:6).⁴² The promise of kings anticipates an Israelite monarchy, which began with Saul but was more truly and importantly grounded via David, from whom would come not only kings but the King of kings. Moreover, there is room for a figurative meaning as well, since God's people in the new covenant (those from many nations who are Abraham's "offspring," Gal 3:29) are made a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2:9) by the work of great David's greater Son.

It is important to note here that Genesis 17 does not present us with another covenant that the Lord made with Abraham in addition to the one "cut" in Genesis 15. The Lord's appearance in Genesis 17 does have to do with covenantal relations, as he indicates when he says, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you" (NIV; וְאֶתְּנָה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ Gen. 17:2).⁴³ But the covenant he means is the covenant he made with Abram in Genesis 15, and he now adds further data explicative of that covenant. Some, like Williamson, argue that Genesis 17 shows us a second covenant the Lord made with Abraham, one with a different agenda.⁴⁴ However, later evocation of the

⁴² For a helpful display of the Lord's promises to Abraham and how they are echoed in the Davidic covenant (found in 2 Samuel 7), cf. Kaiser, *Promise-Plan* 120. This is perhaps a good place to remark that, in the view of this writer at least, Kaiser's book does an effective overall job of mapping out the Lord's promises and their levels of fulfillment in the various biblical covenants, and for that purpose is a good introductory book. The execution of its purpose is unfortunately marred by methodological missteps of the sort noted above (in Kaiser's discussion of naming in Genesis 1), and below (in his discussion of Genesis 22). Another, major problem is his discussion of the "new covenant" in Jer 31:31–34, in particular his stress on the importance of Heb 8:8–9 (that there was "no fault" with the old covenant: the problem was not with the old covenant, but with the people), in which he does not take into account the clear statement of Heb 8:7 ("For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another"); cf. Kaiser, *Promise-Plan* 201.

⁴³ As I have indicated elsewhere, the Lord can use the phrase, "my covenant," to refer to covenants he has already made (Niehaus, "Covenant: an Idea" 241, n. 63).

⁴⁴ Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 86–91.

Abrahamic covenant renders this view untenable. When the Lord first encounters Moses on Sinai, he refers to his earlier revelation “to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob,” and states, “I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens” (Exod 6:4). “To give them the land of Canaan” refers to Gen 15:18–21 but also to Gen 17:8 (where the same promise is repeated). In fact, Genesis 17 repeats two important promises found in Genesis 15: the promise of land, as just noted, and the promise of numerous offspring (Gen 15:5 // Gen 17:2b, 4–5). These repetitions indicate clearly enough that Genesis 17 presents us with a reaffirmation of the original covenant the Lord “cut” with Abram in Genesis 15—along with important supplemental information—and not to a second covenant between the Lord and Abraham. But more important and decisive in the matter is that Exod 6:4 refers to the Lord’s past covenantal relations with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by stating, “I established my covenant with them.” We note that “covenant” is in the singular, although it refers to the Lord’s covenantal relations with three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is so because the covenants confirmed between the Lord and Isaac and Jacob were renewals of the original, Abrahamic covenant.⁴⁵ As such they could be considered as continuations of it, or, to use phraseology I have used before, as one legal package—just as, later, the Sinai and Moab covenants together could be referred to by the Lord as “the covenant [sg.] I made with their forefathers” when he took them out of Egypt (Jer 31:32). To conclude on this matter: the fact that Exod 6:4 refers to the covenant, singular, that the Lord made with Abraham, tells us clearly enough that Genesis 17 does not enshrine a second covenant between the Lord and Abraham, additional to the one the Lord made with Abram in Genesis 15. The Lord refers to the “covenant,” not to the “covenants” he made with Abraham.

b. *Genesis 22 and the Abrahamic covenant.* We noted that Genesis 17 repeats or reaffirms promises made in Genesis 15. Once those promises are made in Genesis 15, they become part of that special grace covenant which the Lord “cuts” with Abram. However, those promises were also made earlier in Gen 12:1–9: the promise of offspring (Gen 12:2) and the promise of land for that offspring (Gen 12:7). When God made those promises, Abram related to him in the context of the Adamic/Noahic covenants. Once the special grace covenant is instituted in Genesis 15, Abram does still relate to the Lord in the context of those common grace covenants, but also now in the context of the new, “Abrahamic” covenant. The Lord has proceeded by stating and restating promises, and I suspect the reason for this is pedagogical. And as the Lord restated promises in Genesis 17, he also, subsequently, restates a promise in Genesis 22, to which we now turn.

⁴⁵ Later, the Lord can say, “I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham” (Lev 26:42). Although this looks like a reference to three covenants, it so only in the sense that the second and third covenants in view are renewals of the first, Abrahamic covenant. Exodus 6:4, which identifies all three as “the *covenant* I made with them,” makes clear that such is the case.

Without rehearsing the wonderful and familiar account of the sacrificial substitution that takes place at Moriah, we can affirm the typological/Christological aspects of it, in which the Lord provides a substitutionary sacrifice for the offspring of Abraham—especially because we, in turn, are that offspring (Gal 3:29), for whom God has in the fulness of time provided a substitutionary sacrifice. We now turn our attention to two other important aspects of Genesis 22. The first is the translation of a verb in Gen 22:14; the second is the covenant reaffirmation which takes place in Gen 22:16–18.

i. *Yahweh Yireh*.⁴⁶ In Gen 22:14, we read, “So Abraham called that place The Lord Will provide (Heb. יְהוָה יִרְאֶה | יְהוָה יִרְאֶה). And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided’” (NIV; Heb. יְהוָה יִרְאֶה). The Niphal of the verb, translated “it will be provided,” is also used often of theophanies, “He appeared/will appear,” and that translation possibility should not, as it seems to me, be excluded here. On the basis of this possibility, an alternate translation of the verse could be: “So Abraham called that place One Will See The Lord. And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the Lord he [i.e. the Lord] will appear.’”⁴⁷ If this reading is correct—and it is entirely possible grammatically—the verse becomes prophetic or anticipatory of a later reality, when the Lord does in fact *appear* to David at the threshing floor of Arauna the Jebusite, the future site of the Solomonic temple: “Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared (נִרְאָה) to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David” (2 Chr 3:1). It is noteworthy that here, as in Gen 22:14, the Niphal of the verb (רָאָה) appears.

ii. *Genesis 22 covenant reaffirmation*. The second matter I would like to consider in Genesis 22 is the covenant reaffirmation that takes place in Gen 22:16–18. Here, as in Genesis 17, the Lord reaffirms promises made earlier. He reaffirms (Gen 22:17a) the promise of numerous offspring made in Gen 12:2 and instituted covenantally in Gen 15:5; he reaffirms (Gen 22:17b) the promise of conquest both made and instituted covenantally in Gen 15:18–20;

⁴⁶ “Yahweh Yireh,” or, as it has also been transliterated, “Jehovah Jireh,” has commonly been taken as a divine name. Kaiser, *Promise-Plan* 65, actually claims that it was a name for God during the patriarchal period: “In the patriarchal narratives, there was a series of names for God. He was El Olam, ‘the Everlasting God’ (Gen 21:33); El Elyon, ‘the Most High God’ (14:18–20, 22); and Yahweh Yireh, ‘Yahweh will provide’ (22:14).” This idea must be abandoned, however, and on the most obvious evidence. The passage tells us unmistakably that Yahweh Yireh is not a divine name but a *place* name (cf. NIV as quoted above; the Hebrew reads literally, “And Abraham called the name of that place, Yahweh Yireh,” Gen 22:14).

⁴⁷ Or, with a witty play on the meanings of the verb, “So Abraham called that place The Lord will See to It (i.e. Provide). And to this day it is said, ‘On the Mountain of the Lord he [i.e. the Lord] Will Be Seen (i.e. Appear).’” The OT is no stranger to such witty use of a verb and its conjugations; cf. Jer 23:2.4: “Because you [the shepherds of the Lord’s flock] have not *bestowed care* on them [פָּקְדוּם], I will *bestow punishment* on [הִנְנִי פֹקֵד] you” (v. 2); “I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, *nor will any be missing* [וְלֹא יִפְקְדוּ], declares the Lord” (v. 4). The Jeremiah example is *a propos* because it involves the witty use of the same verb (in this case, פָּקַד) in the Qal and the Niphal, just as in Gen 22:14 (with רָאָה).

and he reaffirms (Gen 22:18) the promise (Gen 12:3b) that through Abraham's offspring all nations on earth will be blessed. This last promise was made when Abram still lived only in the context of the Adamic/Noahic covenants—before the Lord “cut” a new covenant with him in Genesis 15. It is now confirmed within the context of the Abrahamic covenant.

All of these reaffirmations or confirmations are made on the stated ground of Abraham's obedience to the Lord's command to sacrifice his son (Gen 22:16, 18b) and a word is in order about that fact. It will be appropriate now to draw upon the observations made earlier about God and time. Since God is outside time, he can foreknow exactly what may be future in a human time line, because for him it is at once future, present, and past. So Paul can say that “those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Rom 8:29). It follows that God foreknew how Abraham would be obedient even to the offering of his only son (Gen 22:16). That obedience, as James tells us, was the proof that Abraham's faith was real (Jas 2:20–24). Therefore, when the Lord “credited” Abraham's faith to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6), it was on the basis of a sure knowledge that Abraham's faith was true faith, and that Abraham's faith would show its truth by appropriate obedience—works—later on (i.e. after Genesis 15). Again, God knew all of this because for him the faith, and the works that resulted from it, were all, and continue to be, a present reality—not to mention that God knew the workings of Abraham's soul.

It remains to be noted that the Abrahamic covenant, although it contains the promise of the Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants, is itself no longer a functioning covenant. This becomes instantly obvious if we consider that the covenant sign, circumcision, is no longer a covenant sign for God's people. One cannot be a participant of the Abrahamic covenant without taking upon oneself the covenant sign; therefore, if the covenant sign has been abrogated, participation in the covenant is no longer possible.⁴⁸ Whatever was promised and of eternal import in the Abrahamic covenant has been taken up in the new covenant, as Paul argues so eloquently. As the Abrahamic covenant does foreshadow the Mosaic, however, we now consider the narrative material which enshrines the Mosaic covenant.

4. *Mosaic covenant.* Scholars have understood for some time, since the work of Mendenhall, Kline, and Kitchen, that the book of Deuteronomy has the literary and legal form that characterized late second millennium BC Hittite international treaties.⁴⁹ As some have pointed out, it also takes the

⁴⁸ It is clear that circumcision, as a sign of the Mosaic covenant, has been replaced by baptism as a covenant sign, and when Paul argues so strenuously against circumcision, he is arguing against that circumcision which would submit the person who undergoes it to participation in the Mosaic covenant. However, it remains true that circumcision—whether as part of the Mosaic covenant or as part of the Abrahamic covenant—is no longer a covenant sign for the true Israel, the people of God in the new covenant.

⁴⁹ The groundbreaking study on the relevance of the Hittite treaty form to OT materials was by G. E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *BA* XVII/3 (1954) 50–76, followed by the analytical work of M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); and K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1966).

form of three addresses by Moses to Israel, meant to charge and prepare them for the impending conquest and future life in the promised land.⁵⁰ Deuteronomy thus resembles Gen 1:1–2:3, as a narrative that incorporates more than one literary genre: as we noted, the creation narrative has the elements of a second millennium treaty, but also has the form of an ancient Near Eastern list; similarly, Deuteronomy presents us with three addresses by Moses, but also has the form of a second millennium treaty. I submit that the architectonic skill shown by such literary polyvalence is virtually unique in the OT among ancient documents, and one may reasonably attribute the resultant sophistication (and I use that word in a good sense) to the Spirit whose God-breathed work such material is.

Because Deuteronomy so well embodies the form of a treaty/covenant, it naturally contains the sort of historiographic material that one finds in such treaties, namely, a historical prologue (essentially, Deuteronomy 1–4). Deuteronomy, however, is also a renewal covenant, that is, a renewal of the covenant the Lord made with Israel at Sinai (cf. Deut 29:1). Together, the Sinai covenant and the Moab covenant (i.e. Deuteronomy) form one legal package under which Israel shall henceforth live.⁵¹

The covenant form of Deuteronomy and the place of historiography within its covenant structure are thus in a formal sense well enough understood. I wish here to survey briefly the covenantal aspects, or components as they may be called, that appear in the narrative of the earlier, Sinai experience. Those elements form part of the outline of biblical historiography later in this article, but they are also pertinent to the discussion at hand:

Exodus 3–Numbers 36	Covenant elements in the narrative
Exodus 3–19	Historical background to the Mosaic (Sinai) covenant
Exod 20:2a	Title (“I am the Lord”)
Exod 20:2b	Historical prologue (“who brought you”)
Exodus 20:3–23:33	Preliminary stipulations
Exod 24:(3–7)8	Ratification (solemn ceremony)
Exod 24:9–11	Covenant meal
Exodus 25–Leviticus 27	Further <i>torah</i> of the Sinai covenant
Numbers	Life under the Sinai covenant and further Sinai covenant <i>torah</i>

Some comments are in order, and first with regard to the historical background and prologue. One might wish to say that the historical background

⁵⁰ Cf. John A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975) 14–15. He identifies the addresses as: Deut. 1:6–4:40/43 (first address); 5–28 (second address); 29–30 (third address).

⁵¹ Similarly, as we have observed, the Adamic/creation covenant and the Noachic/recreation covenant form one legal package, under which all of humanity have lived since the Noachic was instituted, and under which all of humanity will continue to live, being fruitful and multiplying, ruling over and subduing the earth (with the animals’ fear of humans in general facilitating rather than impeding the advance of human dominion, Gen 9:2) until the Lord returns.

to the Mosaic covenant begins at Exodus 1, or even further back, in Genesis. But there is good reason not to adopt either of those views. Everything from Genesis 15 onwards is better understood as a history of life under the Abrahamic covenant, including that covenant's reaffirmations and renewals.⁵² Exodus 3 forms a better point of departure for the historical background *specific* to the Mosaic covenant, I submit, because the Lord appears to Moses in Exodus 3 in order to start Israel (and history) moving in that direction. From that point on, the narrative material that comes before the actual covenant institution provides the historical background—the history of relations between the Suzerain and the vassal-to-be under the soon to be inaugurated covenant (we saw the same with the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants). It also, in effect, renders a historical prologue non-obligatory (and so one does not appear in, for example, the Noahic covenant narrative in Genesis 9). In the case of the Abrahamic covenant there is nonetheless a small historical prologue (following the title): “I am the Lord *who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans*” (Gen 15:7). In that verse “I am the Lord” is the title, and “who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans” is the historical prologue. In the Sinai covenant likewise there is a small historical prologue, following the title, in the Decalogue: “I am the Lord your God, *who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*” (Exod 20:2). “I am the Lord your God” is the title, and “who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” is the historical prologue. The historical prologue recalls to memory the good things the Suzerain has done for the vassal-to-be. The history of Exodus 3–19 has recorded those things, beginning with the call and commissioning of Moses, by whom the Lord led his people forth from Egypt. It follows that Exodus 3 forms the point of departure for, or the beginning of, the historical background specific to the Mosaic covenant, and the historical prologue of Exod 20:2 implies, or invites us to understand, that *terminus a quo*.

Important as the historical background and the historical prologue may be, two other elements of the narrative also deserve comment—the solemn ceremony and the covenant meal. The solemn ceremony consists of the slaughter of young bulls as peace offerings. The intent is to signal the “peace” accomplished between God and his people by the institution or “cutting” of the covenant. Moses then sprinkles the people with the blood from the bulls, a gesture that apparently symbolizes their purification and thus their admissibility, with pardon and the future possibility of pardon, into a new covenantal relationship with the Lord:

When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was neces-

⁵² Cf. the outline in the historiography section of this article, below.

sary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these (Heb 9:19–23).

That statement forms part of the argument made by the author of Hebrews for the superiority of Christ's sacrifice—which instituted the new covenant—to the sacrifice which instituted the old covenant. The covenant meal in both cases—the Mosaic and the new—solemnizes and acknowledges the covenant making procedure, although in the case of the Mosaic covenant it follows the “cutting” (Exod 24:9–11), whereas in the case of the new covenant it precedes the “cutting” (i.e. the crucifixion). In the latter case one may say that it is celebrated proleptically.⁵³

Finally, it is worth noting that subsequent chapters of the Pentateuch contain further *torah*, or divine covenantal instruction, interleaved with historical narrative which provides the context for the impartation of such instruction. That is just what one could expect in a developing relationship between the Lord and his people as they journey from Sinai through the wilderness. For although the covenant made at Sinai sets the terms of Israel's future relationship with the Lord, and although that relationship is to be strongly characterized by certain parameters of law which had not been in place before the covenant was agreed upon, still, the relationship whose parameters have been established by the covenant is not static, if only because the people disobey, and that disobedience must be addressed by their covenant Lord in terms of the covenant. The ultimate form of such address in the Pentateuch is, sadly, the prophetic poem of Deuteronomy 32, the first full-blown covenant lawsuit in the Bible.⁵⁴

5. *Davidic covenant.* Like the narrative that enshrines the Adamic covenant, the narrative which enshrines the Davidic covenant does not even use the term, “covenant.” But like the Adamic narrative (Gen 1:1–2:3), the Davidic narrative does contain the elements of a second millennium BC international treaty/covenant. Later references make it clear that the Lord did make, or “cut,” a covenant with David (e.g. Ps 89:3 [Heb. 89:4]: עָבָדְי כְרַתִּי בְרִית לְבָחִירִי; נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְדָוִד, lit. “I have cut a covenant for/with my chosen one // I have sworn to David, my servant”; 2 Chr 21:7: כְּרַת לְדָוִד הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר, lit. “the covenant

⁵³ Interestingly, the covenant feast is also celebrated before the oath is sworn (which apparently ratifies the covenant) in the covenant making proceedings between Isaac and Abimelech, Gen 26:26–31. After the meal and the subsequent oath, “Isaac sent them [i.e. Abimelech and his staff] on their way, and they left him in *peace*.” Peace is the result of the covenant making for them as, in a far superior sense, for members of the new covenant.

⁵⁴ Which, however, follows the form of ancient Near Eastern covenant lawsuits to be found among, e.g., the Assyrians and the Hittites, for examples of which cf. Jeffrey Niehaus, *Amos*, in *The Minor Prophets* (ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 317–23; on Deuteronomy 32, cf. the seminal article by G. Ernest Wright, “The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,” in Bernard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson, eds., *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (London: SCM, 1962) 26–67.

which he [i.e. the Lord] cut for/with David”). That testimony may be seen as a validation of the way the treaty elements become manifest within the narrative of its institution, and may even imply a similar validity to the perception of treaty/covenant elements in the narrative of Gen 1:1–2:3.⁵⁵

The Lord makes a covenant with David after “the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him” (2 Sam 7:1). David’s warfare is in fact the Lord’s warfare against those who would resist the establishment of his chosen king, and, *ipso facto*, the establishment of the Lord’s earthly kingdom in the form and manner which he intends. The statement of 2 Sam 7:1 announces that the stage is now set for any covenant making the Lord may want to initiate. It also forms a natural prelude to David’s obliquely stated intention to build the Lord’s temple (2 Sam 7:2). Any ancient Near Eastern king, once he had secured victories with the help of his god, would want to build a temple for that god, or, if a temple already existed, to renovate it, or, if that were not needed, at least to dedicate some of the booty from his victories to the god. David’s desire to build a temple for the Lord is perfectly consistent with that royal ethos. Nathan understands this, and so encourages David to do whatever he has in mind, because “the Lord is with you” (2 Sam 7:3). David’s desire is that of an ancient Near Eastern monarch, and Nathan’s response is that of an ancient Near Eastern man. However, the Lord then speaks to Nathan and reveals that he has other plans in mind. David wants to build the Lord’s “house” (i.e. temple), but the Lord will not have it. Rather, the Lord will build David’s “house” (i.e. dynasty). So the narrative which enshrines the Davidic covenant begins, and the outline of the covenant may be traced in the narrative as follows:

2 Sam 7:1–17	Covenant elements in the narrative	
7:5–7	Title	the Lord identified
7:8–9	Historical Prologue	the Lord’s election of David
7:10–16	Blessings	National security, Davidic dynasty
7:14b	Curses	Chastening of son

The presence and identification of the covenant elements are clear enough, and I will leave them without further comment at this point, inasmuch as we have seen the literary procedure which enshrines such covenant elements in the narratives of all of the previous covenants. We should note, however, the obvious but important point that the Davidic covenant does not replace the Mosaic covenant. Rather, it is a special arrangement under the Mosaic covenant. Its purpose is to establish the Davidic dynasty (“The Lord himself will establish a house for you,” 2 Sam 7:11). Traced in a biblical-theological manner through Psalm 2 to the NT (e.g. Ps 2:7; Heb 1:13), the Davidic covenant can be seen as an important installment along God’s covenantal path

⁵⁵ With ancillary material in Genesis 2, as noted above.

to the new covenant and its mediator, great David's greater Son.⁵⁶ The Son, in that new covenant, takes up into himself all that could have been hoped for from the Davidic covenant, just as he does with regard to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, and we have more to say about this below.⁵⁷ What concerns us more immediately, however, is the fact that we have here again a narrative which contains elements compatible with, or corresponding to, the elements of a late second millennium international treaty/covenant.⁵⁸ We thus find the same combination of genres—covenant form and narrative—which we have found in the covenants that came before it (i.e. the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants).⁵⁹

6. Covenant and narrative: A summary. We recognize that 2 Sam 7:1–17 embodies the making of a covenant between the Lord and David, even though the term, “covenant,” does not appear in the passage. How can we do so? We are able to see covenantal elements embedded in the narrative, and those elements lend structure to, and show the covenantal character of, the recorded proceedings. This is the same procedure that we have seen in the narrative records of the previous major divine-human covenants: the Adamic/creation, Noahic/recreation, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants.

The combination of genres—narrative and covenant—can thus be seen to be a characteristic mode of revelation, since all of the reports of divine-human covenant making are recorded in this way. Such a combination does

⁵⁶ The following comparison illustrates briefly the correspondences between the Davidic covenant narrative and Psalm 2:

THEME	2 Sam 7:1–17	Psalm 2
1 Security from foes	vs 11	vss 1–5
2 the Lord establishes the throne forever	vs 13b	vss 6, 8–12
3 the Lord = father the king = son	vs 14	vs 7 (cf. Heb 1:5)
4 chastening	vs 14	_____

No “chastening” appears in Psalm 2. If the psalm was composed for the occasion of Solomon's accession to the throne, that might account for the lack of such a theme: one might not want to sound a somber note in the midst of a celebratory event.

⁵⁷ Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), has done a splendid job of arguing, and I believe demonstrating, that the new covenant fulfills those aspects of the Mosaic covenant which may thus be said to continue, while understanding that the Mosaic covenant itself is no longer a functioning covenant (e.g. as with the Abrahamic covenant, the sign of admission to it—circumcision—has been abrogated, and thus the covenant itself, as a functioning covenant, has “passed away,” to echo the phraseology of Hebrews).

⁵⁸ The second millennium form is suitable to David's case, as he lived through the turn of the millennia.

⁵⁹ David Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993) 57, also notes this concept of “genre fluidity” in OT historical writing, although without specific reference to any of the covenant-enshrining narratives which form the main subject of this article. His analysis of 2 Samuel 7 does not recognize the covenantal elements of the narrative (ibid. 160–61).

not rule out an even more sophisticated blending of genres, such as we find in Gen 1:1–2:3. In that passage, three (or even four) genres combine: the genres of covenant, ancient Near Eastern list, and narrative.⁶⁰ Such observations might be made of other OT genres, for example, in the prophets, although a study of that sort is beyond the scope of this article.⁶¹

III. A NOTE ON BIBLICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

We move from our survey of covenant narrative to some very basic observations on biblical historiography. Those observations form the minor portion of the present study. Historiography in the ancient Near East, as we noted above, appears for the most part in two forms: the historical prologue portions of second millennium BC international treaties, and the historical records found in royal annals.⁶² The covenant prologues document the relationship that existed between the suzerain-to-be and the vassal-to-be before they entered into a new, covenantal relationship. That *precovenantal* relationship, such as it was, could be hostile, since the vassal-to-be often would become a vassal only after the suzerain-to-be had conquered him. The royal annals, on the other hand, document the subsequent history of the suzerain in relation to his vassals, including rebellious vassals; they also document his conquests, which lead to further treaties, that is, new suzerain-vassal relationships.

I submit that these two categories of history writing largely define all of biblical history writing as well, so that all of biblical historiography (including the covenant narratives which have formed the major portion of this

⁶⁰ If one considers the "Framework Hypothesis" articulated by Meredith Kline as a genre, one may add it as a fourth, since it certainly is present in the passage on any fair-minded reading. One might hold back from calling it a genre, however, on the basis that it does appear to be *sui generis*.

⁶¹ A handy example is the combination of parable and covenant lawsuit genres in Isa 5:1–7, a passage which also contains a sophisticated transition from hypocatastasis (vs 1) via parabolic development to metaphor (v. 7).

⁶² Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary* (trans. David E. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 11, made a very brief but similar observation about the historical prologue (which he calls the "antecedent history") of a Hittite treaty: "The description must be considered as a form of historiography." By "description" he means the account of prior events and relations between the two parties to the treaty, in other words, the "antecedent history" or historical prologue. We should note here the long tradition, amply documented in Mesopotamia, of dedicatory inscriptions which contain historical episodes. Jerrold S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions, I* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986) 13, notes, "The historical narrative is attested as early as Urnanshe, full-blown, as it were, and sources before his reign are too few to pinpoint a specific moment when reports of political successes were introduced into building and dedicatory inscriptions, or commemorated on monuments specially designed for that purpose." Urnanshe's reign has been dated c. 2520 BC. Such inscriptions portray a range of concepts, including the god's choice of and commissioning of the king to do various works, from conquests to public works to the impartation of law both for the nation of the god and for subjugated foreign kings and their lands. Such elements obviously have to do with relationships, whether elective or enforced, that entail obligations and thus have a covenantal tone to them, even when covenants are not explicitly mentioned. For the basic concept, cf Niehaus, "Covenant, an Idea," *passim*.

study) may be said to originate in the relationship of the suzerain, in this case the Great King, or God, to his vassals. In other words, all of biblical historiography is covenantal.⁶³

Proper discussion of this matter requires more than an article.⁶⁴ For now, the following schema broadly illustrates the idea:

Biblical data	Covenant/Covenantal History
Genesis 1–2	Adamic/creation covenant
Genesis 3–5	Life under that covenant
[Genesis 3–Rev 21	The same, more broadly considered]
Genesis 6–8	Historical background to the Noahic covenant
Genesis 9	Noahic/recreation covenant
Genesis 10–11	Life under the Adamic + Noahic covenants
[Genesis 10–Rev 21	The same, more broadly considered]
Genesis 12–14	Historical background to the Abrahamic covenant
Genesis 15	Abrahamic covenant
Genesis 15–Exodus 2	Life under the Abrahamic covenant
[Genesis 15–Matthew 27	The same, more broadly considered]
Exodus 3–19	Historical background to the Mosaic (Sinai) covenant
Exod 20:2a	Title (“I am the Lord”)
Exod 20:2b	Historical prologue (“who brought you out”)
Exodus 20:3–23:33	Sinai covenant preliminary stipulations
Exod 24:(3–7)8	ratification
Exod 24:9–11	and covenant meal
Exodus 25–Leviticus 27	Further <i>torah</i> of the Sinai covenant
Numbers	Life under the Sinai covenant and further Sinai covenant <i>torah</i>
Deuteronomy	Mosaic covenant renewal at Moab (Deut 29:1)

The schema understands that all of humanity continue to live under the legal package formed by the Adamic and Noahic covenants (although most of them are unaware of that fact), and will continue to do so until the Lord destroys the old and creates a new heavens and earth. The schema also illustrates the progress of the Lord’s program of salvation via special grace covenants, including the history of precovenantal relations prefatory to and specific to each covenant. It will culminate in the new covenant, the covenant toward which, in one way or another, the prior special grace covenants all point.

⁶³ I have already put forth this thesis in a rudimentary fashion in a chapter, “The Warrior and his God: The Covenant Foundation of History and Historiography,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 299–312.

⁶⁴ The subject forms part of a forthcoming biblical theology.

More detail may be added to nuance further the above outline.⁶⁵ I believe that enough has been shown to indicate (and to invite others to explore further) what we have proposed under this heading: that biblical historiography may justly be called covenantal literature. That understanding is grounded in an appreciation of the Bible's place in the realm of ancient Near Eastern historiography.⁶⁶

The Bible is, moreover, covenantal literature because, although he is outside time, God has proceeded in time, that is, historically, in a series of covenantal dealings with humanity, and he has caused those dealings to be recorded in narratives for us. Through those covenant dealings God shows—from Genesis through Revelation—what his mode and degree of revelation shall be. That is, he chooses the manner of his self-disclosure and the degree of his propositional revelation in and for each covenant. After the fall, God chose to renew the Adamic covenant through Noah. The Adamic/creation covenant and the Noahic/recreation covenant together form one legal package under which humanity continues to live until the Lord returns. Those covenants provide for the ongoing history of common grace, within which God's special grace activities take place. Those special grace activities take covenantal form beginning with the Abrahamic covenant. That covenant foreshadows the Mosaic and Davidic covenants, each of which fulfills certain promises made within the context of the Abrahamic covenant (e.g. numerous descendants, land, royal seed). The Abrahamic covenant also foreshadows the new covenant—the final, great covenant in God's special grace program.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ I expect to illustrate, in the forthcoming biblical theology, particulars of the schema with more specificity, for example, some details of the Abrahamic covenant renewals, of the Sinai covenant institution, of the Davidic covenant and life under it, and, of course, of the NT materials, which do not appear in outline here.

⁶⁶ This approach ought, I believe, to be foundational to a proper understanding of OT, and indeed biblical, historiography. Analyses and appreciation of such narrative features as plot, character, setting, etc., may all have their place, as Howard, *An Introduction*, 44–55, argues. I would submit, however, that one ought to begin a study of OT historiography with an accurate grasp of historiography in the ancient Near East of which Israel was a part. Otherwise, one runs the risk of importing alien cultural values into one's understanding of the material. Moreover, as Lewis rightly noted (and as Howard, *An Introduction*, 48–49, approvingly quotes him), the Bible is “not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach.” Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 33.

⁶⁷ As a result, Paul can speak of the “covenants of the promise” (Eph 2:12), that is, the covenants which contribute as history progresses toward the ultimate fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, a fulfilment which is achieved by the new covenant—a covenant which may entered into by faith in its covenant Mediator. On the other hand, Paul laments of his brothers, the Jews, that they have not found that righteousness which is by faith, even though “Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises” (Rom 9:4). Without going into extensive discussion of the “covenants” in Rom 9:4, we note that some, e.g., John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 35, think that Paul refers here to all of the covenants made between God and man. But the covenants of which Paul speaks in Rom 9:4 are clearly the covenants peculiar to Israel—thus, the Abrahamic (and its renewals), the Mosaic (Sinai) and its renewal (Deuteronomy), and the Davidic. There is no reason to include the common grace covenants—the

The new covenant takes up into itself and fulfills everything that the earlier special grace covenants promised or could hope for. It is in that new covenant, and through its great Mediator, that we anticipate the renewal of all things, a new heavens and earth, and a renewed humanity, made afresh in the image of its Creator and Redeemer.

Adamic and the Noahic—since those are not particularly Israel's, but are common to all humanity. Likewise, there is no reason to include the new covenant, because Paul's whole point is that Israel has *not* become party to the new covenant. The new covenant was certainly *promised* to Israel in the OT, but it does not become theirs until they choose to become party to it. When they do, they—like anyone else who so chooses—are then justified by faith in its covenant mediator, Christ.