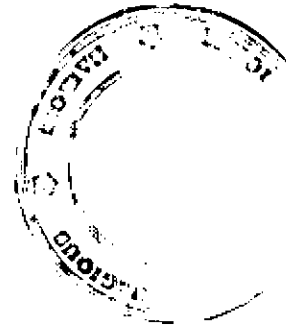


**TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

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JESUS FIRST-BORN SON: PRIEST AND MESSIAH

Moderator
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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the
Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology

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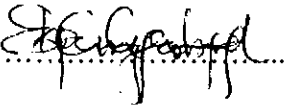
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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

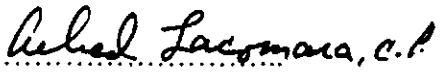
I, the undersigned, declare that this project is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Baccalaureate Degree in Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed:.....

Name of Student: Gregory Gabriel Ekpenyong C.S.Sp.

Date:.....*27/01/06*.....

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed:.....

Name of Supervisor: Rev. Fr. Aelred Lacomara, C.P.

Date:.....*27/01/06*.....

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the entire family of Mr./Mrs. Ekpenyong Gabriel Maria who have made it possible for me to develop interest in learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A grateful person is one who shows appreciation for favours received. It is on this note that I turn to God almighty in praise and thanksgiving for sparing my life up until this moment, and for enabling me with his grace to achieve the glory of bringing my theological studies to a fruitful end in Tangaza College.

My studies and especially my formation as a religious would not have been possible without the support of the Holy Ghost Congregation and in a special way the Nigerian Province and East African Province, who nurtured the growth of a seed in their bosoms. To them I say thank you.

I want to extend my profound appreciation to Rev. Fr. Aelred Lacomara, C.P. who accepted to be my moderator. Fr., thank you for your support and guidance. May I also express my gratitude to the Tangaza family; the principal and the entire staff members who through their effort I can boast of being a member of the college. On the same note, I want to thank the Nigerian community in Tangaza for their care and support.

I want to thank in a special way the Spiritan Community in Lang'ata – Nairobi, for the love and care extended to me during my four-years stay. Finally, I say thank you to my family and friends. You have kept me going with your love, support, and prayers. May God bless you all in Jesus name. Amen.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Faith, a supernatural gift of God is the only means for practical union with God. A union that has to be real, reciprocal, communicative and of mutual knowledge. This is all we experience in the revelation of the divine plan of salvation. As such, Jesus the first-born son, priest and messiah fulfils all these and concretises our relationship with God. Meanwhile, this divine sonship has to be historically revealed and experienced in the history of humanity through Israel.

For Israel to claim sonship, history and theology had to merge. The election of Israel as son therefore starts with the promise of progeny and prosperity to Abraham who through faith is found righteous and blameless before God. Isaac the apparent fulfilment of this promise bridges the hope of inheritance but introduces the historical right of the first-born son and a dimension of future hope. With this, the promise that resides in blessing grows from the personal to the national blessing.

This national blessing finds concrete expression in the formal constitution of Israel as first-born Son of God through the Sinai covenant events. In the covenant, Israel is adopted and given a mode of relation with God. This covenantal relation brings Israel to understand her special intimacy and consecration to God. Hence, the establishment of institutions like the priesthood. As sons therefore, Israel comes to understand her place as mediator.

All the historical and theological understanding of Israel as mediators and servants of God simply prefigure the ultimate end of history in the person of Jesus Christ who fulfils all the promises of God and ushers in a new promise of inheritance in the kingdom of God. The mediating role of Christ unveils the distinction between his unique sonship and Israel's adopted sonship.

The uniqueness of Christ's sonship connotes a revelation that affirms his being the eternal object of God's love. He mediates this love to humanity, as the baptism experience will show. As a revealer, he shares and reveals the Father's glory. This means that being the unique son, he sees, knows and reveals the nature of God, which finds its traces in the Exodus experience. Being son, Jesus re-establishes the grounds for inheritance and the relations required for it in the historical and cultural context. This is our priest and messiah.

This project tries to establish a unity in the history of salvation following the revelation of historical events situated in the culture and tradition of Israel. So doing, it shall see the nuances of the term "First-Born Son" to place the fact that Jesus' salvific acts are within the ambience of human traditional, historical and cultural understanding. Through it, we shall appreciate the "Son-Servant" role of Christ, which culminates in his proclamation as Messiah after the glory of the resurrection.

1. Motivation of the study

Every endeavour in life has a motivation. This project is motivated by the quest to gain experiential intimacy with God through the historical revelation of the plan of God. In other words, this project seeks to build more intimate encounter with God through his Son who is both priest and messiah by revealing that the historical process of salvation has been the constant call for communion with God.

2. Methodology

The method of data collection in this project is primarily library research.

3. Organization

This endeavour is organized within three chapters with a general introduction and conclusion. Chapter one deals with the Akkadian principle showing that the first-born is chosen by God. The chapter tries to see the origin of Israel's election in the patriarchs. Chapter two examines Israel as the first-born son. Here we shall treat the constitution of Israel as a nation adopted as son. In it, we see the significance of the Passover and Sinai covenant events. The last chapter treats Jesus the first-born son and the messianic era, in which Jesus will be seen as the absolute fulfilment of God. The general conclusion brings the project to an end.



CHAPTER I

THE AKKADIAN PRINCIPLE: FIRST BORN IS CHOSEN BY GOD

1.1 Introduction

The Akkadian principle places Abraham's faith and trust in God within the context of realising an apparent impossible promise of a son at old age in the primary plan of God's salvation of the world. So, Abraham is required in faith to give up his only hope of posterity in obedience to God (*Gen 22*). The story vivifies the ancient practice of human sacrifice but ends with a remarkable condemnation of it. The Aqedah event is the possible theological birthplace of the redemption of human beings after the events in Egypt. It originates a strong cultic practice leaving the Levites as the sacrificial offering to God thus, instituting the priesthood.

This ancient redaction theology of Abraham and Isaac proves that God has a hand in the position and election of Israel as God's chosen people in the course of her history. This believe must be assumed to rest on the essential nature of the faith (of the patriarchs) that called Israel into being as a people and their conviction that Yahweh their God was mighty above other gods. Meaning that God singled Israel out for special favours, choose her to be his people, entered into covenant with her and extended all his promises to her.

Consequently, this confidence of God's continued protection and a future filled with blessings will remain as long as Israel is faithful and obedient to Yahweh and his commandments. Israel's status as the first-born and property of God has this cultic bearing in the sense that everything in Israel; man and beast alike belong to God and are offered up to him as something sacred. The primary importance of this

practice is to acknowledge that God is the author of all life at the same time perpetrating the memorial of God's mercy in sparing the Hebrew first born in Egypt.¹

Therefore, this chapter is apt to show that the firstborn is chosen by God by trying to establish that the concept is juridical within the tradition of Israel, and that the first-born son has legal rights and privileges because he legally perpetrates the lineage of the father. Hence the firstborn son has precedence among his other brothers to property and blessing. To systematize this endeavour, the chapter shall deal with the Akkadian principle to show that Isaac is the chosen one of God by examining the promise to Abraham, the choice and sacrifice. After this, we shall see the place of inheritance as the legal right of the firstborn son as it constitutes the value, tradition and custom of Israel.

1.2 Isaac the Chosen One

Affirming that Isaac the son of Abraham is the chosen one of God presupposes a context. This context will help us place the circumstances of the choice as first and foremost promises to the old parents Abraham and Sarah, which will orient the whole of Abraham's history and Israel in general to the future. Within this ambience, we can clearly see the choice and sacrifice as an aspect of God's confirmation of Isaac as the chosen one. Therefore, let us explore this reality and its significance to the project.

1.2.1 The Promise to Abraham (Gen 12, 13, 15, & 17).

A promise is a declaration which announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist. It is to announce and guarantee a gift, to pledge one's word, to

¹ D. DIETLEIN, "First Born" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* V, 940.

proclaim oneself and at the same time to stir in one's partner the wholehearted adherence and generosity of his faith.² God's promises reveal his own unique greatness to humanity. They are the great dynamism behind salvation history because they open up a future of hope, guiding and orienting the entire course of history towards its fulfilment. The orientation of promise towards the future produces a sense of history.³

The history of the promise to Abraham is intricately tied to his call to an unknown land in which Abraham manifests his obedience and trust in God (*Gen 12:1-3*). The command to depart from his country, father's house and kindred contains the promise that will shape the status of Israel as a people chosen by God. Abraham's primal obedience reflects the relationship of the patriarchs to God.⁴ This in another sense echoes the demand to depart from Egypt to the Promised Land which is unknown to the people of Israel.

This section 12:1-3 is a theological and historical redaction in which the Yahwists try to immortalize their desert origin, representing Abraham as having come from the desert to Palestine and eventually settling in Hebron. Abraham therefore becomes a symbol of the Israelite clans moving from the desert to Hebron. Since the Israelites could not forget their desert origin they sought to preserve and give expression to the memory of it in the national tradition which was taking form.⁵

In this initial promise, we see the manifestation of God's initiative and grace which entails a demand at acceptance. The demand is obedience and faith. As grace, it presupposes that the promise would remain even if Abraham refused it. Since the

² X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 467

³ J. MOLTMAN, *Theology of hope*, 42-43.

⁴ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 98.

⁵ C. A. SIMPSON – W. R. BOWIE, "Genesis" in *the Interpreter's Bible I*, 571.

pericopes 12:1-3 portray Abraham as having obeyed and manifested faith in God, then God will have to clarify and confirm the promise and its implication which comes out as a covenant. Suffice it to say that the one single promise to Abraham is a three fold blessings: Personal, National, and Universal.⁶ Let us show this in the text.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

PERSONAL BLESSING

"I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." In this promise, there is reference to the power of fertility. The word "bless", "blessing" (Hebrew 'berakah') refers actually to the power of fertility. There is allusion to the promise of an heir to the inheritance of Abraham. The statement, "I will bless you" unites the blessing with the promise of fertility, linking the promise to the history of Abraham and consequently to the history of the nation (Israel).⁷

NATIONAL BLESSING

"I will make of you a great nation... and I will make your name great." Following from the personal promise, this promise implies descendancy and these descendants will have a great name. Here the blessing simply promises a political organization and fame which is very explicit in Exodus, at the same time it pictures the monarchy of Israel around the time of David and Solomon. For this promise to

⁶ C.J. BAKER, *Covenant and Liberation*, 62.

⁷ A. GONZALES, *Abraham Father of Believers*, 18-32.

be concrete, it has to imply the possession of a land. Therefore, it is simply a promise of land and posterity to Abraham at this stage.⁸

UNIVERSAL BLESSING

“I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.” As is explicit in this promise, it starts off with Abraham’s relationship with other nations implying that the author is convinced of the significance of Israel for the entire human race by giving expression to the universalistic aspect of the blessing. We can also infer the conviction “I will bless those who bless you...” as re-echoing the initial blessing, “I will bless you.”⁹

However, the virtue of blessing passes from the one who is blessed to those around him. This means that “blessing” or curse will be meted to those around the blessed one depending on their relationship to him. Invariably, God is promising protection to Abraham at the same time protection to all the earth since they will be blessed through Abraham.¹⁰

Having seen the content of the promise and the three-fold blessing, it is pertinent to point out that though concrete and factual, the promise seems hypothetical in the sense that it is dependent on Abraham’s compliance. Nevertheless, it will orient Abraham’s faith and trust in God to the future. With regard to this God will intermittently renew and confirm this promise with oath and covenant.

⁸ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 99.

⁹ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 99.

¹⁰ A. GONZALES, *Abraham Father of Believers*, 32.

1.2.2 God Confirms His Promise with Covenant (Gen 15-17)

For one to enter this section, it is worthy to note that the covenant with Abraham will be as a result of his difficulty or apparent impossibility of having a son through Sarah. As a faithful servant, Abraham presents this problem to God. It is good to observe that chapter 15:1-21 are the development of the promise and blessings seen in chapter 12:1-3. However 15:1-21 is a combination of two promise narratives though the structure seems to be the same.¹¹

In the first 15:1-6, Abraham is presented with a renewed blessing of greatness but he objects to this showing the difficult circumstances of the blessing: "I continue childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus, behold thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born of my house will be my heir." This lament belongs to the realm of prayer in which Abraham seems to be countering all the blessings and promises of God.¹² Though "15:2 is an ancient lament which occurs in like form in other narratives of the early period, it is the lament of the childless one."¹³

God's response in 15:4-5 is two fold: the first is the refutation of the objection and lament with a renewed promise of a son of Abraham's body with a sign; "This man shall not be your heir, look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them, so shall your descendants be." Abraham is confronted with a promise of a son from his own loins. This promise casts vagueness on Abraham's seed that is immediately taken care of by the choice, as we shall see later.

¹¹ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 117.

¹² C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 219.

¹³ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 219.

The sign of the countless stars is an extension of the promise of a son to include the promise of many descendants. This promise is a retrospection of Israel in their days of peril implying that it is a later addition. "It is nevertheless a vitalization of the promise of many descendants pronounced in an unforgettable language at a time when the people were under threat."¹⁴ The conclusion of this section is the fact of Abraham's believing faith reckoned as righteousness. This is a positive reaction from Abraham. C.A. Simpson and W.R. Bowie see this faith as an anticipation of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith (*Gal 3:6-9, Rom 4:2-3*).¹⁵

The next unit 7-21 follow the same pattern of promise-objection-confirmation. While 1-6 is the promise of a son, 7-21 is the promise of land. The opening words; "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans..." is reminiscent of the first words of the Decalogue. God's answer to Abraham's request of a sign sets the stage for a ritual covenant. Westermann sees 12-15 as a typical revelatory prediction of Jacob up to the point of the exodus.¹⁶ These passages bridge the difficulty created by a long delay between promise and fulfilment by the prediction of a peaceful death for Abraham. 17-21 reaffirms the promise with a covenant.

1.2.3 Covenant with a Sign of Circumcision (Gen 17:1-27)

This chapter is mainly a dialogue between God and Abraham in comparison to chapter 16 which is basically the Sarah and Hagar story. It would not seem an understatement to state that this chapter is a doublet of 15; it is entirely dominated by the "P" (priestly) theology. "P"'s purpose is to summarize God's promise to Abraham and at the same time to associate it with the commandment requiring

¹⁴ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 221.

¹⁵ C. A. SIMPSON – W. R. BOWIE, "Genesis" in *the Interpreter's Bible I*, 600.

¹⁶ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 121.

circumcision.¹⁷ For C. Westermann, the dialogue has three parts: promise 1-8, command 9-14 and promise 15-21 which presuppose that the promise is primary and the command is based on the promise.¹⁸ The words of God to Abraham are promises with a directive, which is meant to govern the entire life of the patriarch and his descendants.

In 17:1, the directive is “walk before me and be blameless.” This presupposes the continuous presence of God in the life of Abraham. Blameless connotes perfection which is “aimed at total and unconditional dependence on God.”¹⁹ If Israel is to be perfect before the presence of God, then she needs the help of God. In 17:4, and 17:15, the command for a change of name for Abraham and Sarah implies an elevation to new status: father and mother of the nations, a title for kingship.²⁰ The command in 17:9-14 is the directive for circumcision and excommunication the implication for not circumcising. Abraham’s response is simple abandonment and obedience. Let us go back to the structure and see how the promises help our case.

The passages 1-8 should be read closely with 15-21 because they both deal with the change of name. In 1-8, there is the promise of increased posterity to Abraham associated with the covenant which imposes a solemn oath from God. 15-21 is a doublet of this promise though through Abraham’s wife Sarah. This increased posterity is anchored on the promise of a son. In the first part, 1-8, Abraham’s response is a simple submission, reverence and obedience: “Abraham fell on his face.” In the second part, Abraham shows the same response but adds a

¹⁷ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 129.

¹⁸ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 129.

¹⁹ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 130.

²⁰ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 130.

doubt: “laughed and said to himself shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety years old bear a child?” Laughter plays on the name of the promised son (Isaac).

Based on this, Abraham seems to have remembered the promise that his posterity will be with a child from his loins who at this point is Ishmael. He therefore requests for the blessing of Ishmael whom he has at that moment. With this plea God reiterates the promise and hence names the promised son “Isaac” to whom the established covenant will be continued. The treatment on choice will examine this more critically. “Abraham’s laughter is to be seen against 18:10 -15. Here it is Sarah who laughs. Her laughter at the singular announcement is understood but that of Abraham seems bizarre.”²¹

One would think that the reason for laughter in both cases is the circumstances of their old age. However, the name (Isaac) Yishaq would imply “may God laugh in delight or may God smile upon.”²² It can also mean “El laughs or rejoices or it can mean a situation name; He laughs, the father or the child.”²³ God’s response to Abraham is a confirmation of the promise and an acceptance of blessing to the request to bless Ishmael.

9-14 comprises the circumcision command and the instructions on how it is to be carried out linking it with the covenant. So circumcision is to be a sign of the covenant, imposed through Abraham on all Israel. “This requirement came into being when political collapse and exile made circumcision a sign of membership in the people of Yahweh, a confessional sign.”²⁴ The purpose of circumcision here is

²¹ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 268.

²² R.J. CLIFFORD – R.E. MURPHY, “Genesis” in *NJBC*, 22.

²³ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 132.

²⁴ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 131.

that the “P” author wants to give it the status and dignity of a divine ordinance. This command and its observance make the covenant a mutual transaction between God and his people. This will become explicit in the Sinai covenant.

The birth of Isaac in chapter 21 brings to fulfilment the promise of a son to Abraham. Having seen the promise and its significance of orienting Abraham’s faith and trust towards the future, let us turn our gaze to the examination of the choice. Here we hope to see how tradition maintains the direct motive of God in the plan of salvation. We also hope to see how through the choice the covenantal lineage progressed.

1.3 The Choice

Sequel to the call of Abraham, we have seen the implications of the promise of son and land. To show that Isaac is the chosen one of God, and that the everlasting covenant is continued through him, we shall trace the indications of this choice through chapters 15, 16, 17, and 21.

In chapter 15:3-4, we see Abraham’s lament that a slave born Eliezer of Damascus will be the heir of his house. God assures him that “Your own son shall be your heir.” Here we see Abraham’s concern for his future in terms of succession from parents to children.²⁵ This is intricately tied to the blessing of posterity and property in the call. The problem posed here comes out in chapter 16 in the sense that Abraham acquires a son (Ishmael) from his body through a slave girl Hagar.

In chapter 17:15-21, the choice becomes clearer. Though these pericopes should be read along 1-8, its central focus points to a renewed promise of a son. With Abraham’s reaction of doubt at the mention of son by Sarah, he thus requests

²⁵ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 220.

for blessing and increase on Ishmael. This prayer for Ishmael implies that Abraham does not believe the promise of a son to Sarah. Moreover, Ishmael is the apparent fulfilment of the promise of a son from his own body and thus as a father he seeks the blessing for his son (heir). It follows here that Abraham does not comprehend the extent of the promise.²⁶

God's response is straight and the choice is now explicit. That is, God repeats the promise of a son and calls his name Isaac and continues with the choice that; "I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." After blessing Ishmael, the choice is repeated; "But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." 17:21. This is Israel's way of asserting that God chose them through Isaac, son of Abraham. Having seen the divine choice, chapter 21 brings out the human choice and its confirmation from God. Before we do that, it is interesting to note that both Ishmael and Isaac are first sons of their mothers: one wife, the other concubine.

In chapter 21, Isaac is born, circumcised, and weaned. The choice opens and progresses through 8-21. The tension growing here is between the two mothers and not the children. In chapter 15, Hagar treats her mistress with contempt after she conceived Ishmael. It does not seem as though Sarah is avenging the ill treatment meted to her by her slave girl Hagar, rather she is simply asserting her position as the real wife and seeking her future since this is bound with the future inheritance of her son. Sarah sees into the future and cannot allow the foreseen peril for her son's inheritance.²⁷

²⁶ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 268.

²⁷ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 339.

Therefore, her conflict is stated in 21:10, Ishmael being “co-heir” with Isaac presupposes that Sarah is not ready to compromise the future of her son. In other words, Ishmael threatens Isaac’s and Sarah’s future even though he is also a son of Abraham. In a remote form, the tension is the question of inheritance, hence the demand for the expulsion of Hagar and her son Ishmael. This demand is sanctioned by God thus making Isaac the right primogeniture of Abraham’s possessions.

The concern for the inheritance of both sons makes the demand trouble Abraham. God intervenes and makes a proclamation of the descendency through Isaac. He promises to bless Ishmael and make him a great nation. H. Gunkel sees 21:13 as an oracle which links instruction and promise which is important for the patriarchal story.²⁸ If Abraham agrees, then the author implies that the people of Israel are that Abraham’s seed fulfilled only through Isaac. This is the explication of the choice of Isaac in particular and Israel through him. The demand to sacrifice Isaac simply confirms the choice. Thus let us see the significance of the sacrifice.

1.4 The Sacrifice (*Gen 22:1-19*)

The Aqedah highlights Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his only son at God’s command. Aqedah is derived from the root “to bind” which reflects the judgement that Isaac was bound even as the lamb used in the daily burnt offering.²⁹ Isaac in this pericopes is represented as a mature man, who willingly and joyfully accepts his fate to be the sacrificial victim. The whole Aqedah tradition regards Isaac’s act as if it had been a real sacrifice, utterly without blemish, and effective as none other to procure God’s mercy, forgiveness, and help in times of need.

²⁸ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 340.

²⁹ R. BROWN, *Death of the Messiah*, 1435.

The tradition contrast with the Christian terminology: “the Blood of Jesus”, the blood of the Aqedah (Isaac) which brings about God’s mercy and forgiveness.³⁰ This contrast is because of the similarity between the Aqedah and the passion narrative. The phrase “the blood” as expiatory shall account for what we shall see in the exodus events and covenantal relations. According to P.R. Davies, “the offering of Isaac is an actually accomplished sacrifice in which the blood of a lamb was shed constituting a definitively expiatory or redemptive act for all Israel.”³¹

Suffice it to say that the Isaac story does not exist on its own; it is within the context of showing the faith and trust of Abraham on God. However, it gives room to assert that Isaac the sacrificial lamb is the chosen one of God. The main focus on this passage is the sole issue of Abraham’s faith in God’s promise which stands the ultimate test of willing compliance with an awful command of obedience. The difficulty here is not the demand to sacrifice Isaac but how the promise would be realized or fulfilled if Isaac is sacrificed.³²

Looking at the structure of *Gen 22:1-19*, C. Westermann affirms that it differs from all other Abraham narratives in that it begins with a heading or statement of theme which synthesizes what follows in a pregnant expression: God is testing Abraham. Testing is to lay a task on the one to be tested; he carries it out, and thus one finds out whether the test has been passed or not.³³ *Gen 22:1-3* comprises three imperatives, which gives credit to the significance and tradition of the Jewish people.

³⁰ C.T.R. HAYWARD, “The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic Against Christianity” in *CBQ*, 297.

³¹ R. BROWN, *Death of the Messiah*, 1435.

³² B. VAWTER, *Genesis*, 255.

³³ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 355.

The command “Take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love” highlights the difficulty and harshness of the demand. The addition “your only son whom you love” emphasizes the relationship of the father to his child.³⁴ This underscores the whole idea of the choice in which we see the probability that Ishmael may have been within the reach of Abraham, pointing to the fact that Abraham may have opted to choose Ishmael for the sacrifice without the specification of the command. The specification also forestalls the fact that Ishmael was excluded from the inheritance of Abraham thus leaving Isaac as the son of the promise.

“Go to the land of Moriah.” This probably refers to the temple mountain of Jerusalem as attested to in (*2Chr 3:1*)³⁵ which simply places the story as a later addition and a theological redaction. The third imperative; “offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” asserts the fact of human sacrifice which it clearly rejects with the provision of the lamb. The rest of the story in *Gen 22:3-8* highlights the journey to carry out God’s command.

However the dialogue between father and son elicits the question: “Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” and the evasive answer; “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” The answer gives the place name of the mountain “The Lord will Provide.” With the answer Abraham refers Isaac to God as the one who will answer the question thus showing his faith and trust in God’s command and redemption.³⁶ Notice that Abraham does not know the fact of the redemption until it has taken place.

³⁴ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 357.

³⁵ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 160.

³⁶ A. GONZALES, *Abraham Father of Believers*, 117.

The sacrificial elements and victim as C. Westermann notes in *Gen 22:9* is in accord with the patriarchal period where the father performs the sacrifice and first must build the altar of sacrifice.³⁷ In verses 11 and 12, a call stops Abraham from completing the sacrifice. On this point hangs the whole tradition of the prohibition of human sacrifice.³⁸ On this same note hangs the confirmation of Abraham's faith in God; "Now I know you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your only son from me." Thus a ram replaces Isaac the sacrificial victim. With the climax of the test and the replacement with the ram, one can assert that the command to sacrifice must be completed and upon this ram, Abraham can ascertain that he is doing the will of God by not sacrificing his son. He also comes to a realization of God as provider.³⁹

On the knowledge of the will of God by Abraham stands the repeated blessing with all its promises as God's oath. The reinforcement of the promise by an oath points to a late stage in the history of the promises, as does the prophetic form of speech, (oracle of Yahweh) joined to it, the latter has become a fixed formula, introducing a word of God.⁴⁰ The whole story of the sacrifice finds its beginning and resolution in God. The climax prompts us to ask: if the story is a later redaction, does it mean that human sacrifice was common? To this let us examine human sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Isaac has always been understood as an exceptional testing of faith rewarded by the renewal of the divine promise to the descendants of Abraham. Its relevance for Israel shows that Israel owed her existence to the divine

³⁷ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 161.

³⁸ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 361.

³⁹ A. GONZALES, *Abraham Father of Believers*, 117.

⁴⁰ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 363.

mercy of God and to the obedience of her ancestors.⁴¹ Finally, it shows that the negation of human sacrifice which had been in place in Israel and her surrounding neighbours is a long term realization of their relationship with God.

1.4.1 Human Sacrifice

According to C. Westermann, “the history of religions attests to human sacrifice in a number of places, as well as among Israel’s neighbours, the Phoenicians, the Ammonites, the Moabites, in Egypt and Canaan. Apparently it prevailed only for limited periods...”⁴² B. Vawter also avers that “human sacrifice and particularly child sacrifice, was widely practiced by Israel’s Semitic neighbours, including those who could boast of superior cultural attainments.”⁴³ Following the story of the sacrifice and many biblical references, it is acknowledged that human sacrifice was abolished in favour of animal sacrifice.

Human sacrifice existed in various forms. Sometimes it took the form of an ultimate sacrifice to speak to a deity in times of great need or a critical situation like times of war (*2 Kgs 3:27, Judg 11*) or great remorse for sins (*Mic 6:7*). Sometimes it took the form of routine offering to satisfy the blood lust of a particular god (*2 Kgs 23:10*). At other times it was part of a consecratory rite in founding a new place (*1 Kgs 16:34*). Finally, it was the sacrifice of the first born which was seen as a universal custom that belonged to God. This was constantly repeated as expressed in (*Exod 13:12, 22:28, 34:19, Num 3:44* etc.) The sacrifices of the first-born were simultaneously abolished and condemned with the laws of redemption, (*Deut 12:31, Exod 34:20*).

⁴¹ W. KORNFIELD, “First fruits (First Born)” in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* 1, 272.

⁴² C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*, 357.

⁴³ B. VAWTER, *On Genesis: A New Reading*, 255.

These sacrifices were thought to show the extra-ordinary determination of the people who practiced them towards their gods, expecting that the gods would protect them and their social systems. In the case of Israel as we see in all the laws that abolish human sacrifices, one could hold with B. Vawter that “Israel did, after all, almost alone of its compeers raise its eyes to a vision of God and religion that relegated the otherwise respectable institution of human sacrifice to the dank backwaters of superstition and barbarism.”⁴⁴ This means that Israel came to recognize the meaning and place of sacrifice in religion, negating human blood and rather instating animal blood as expiatory.

1.4.2 The Place of Sacrifice in Religion

Generally, sacrifice can be described as a material oblation made to the deity by means of a consecration and consumption of the thing offered. The purpose of this oblation is to establish or maintain communion with the deity.⁴⁵ Sacrifice stands at the centre of a dynamic process in which the divine and the human come into contact.⁴⁶ Sacrifice gives meaning and rhythm to the existence of the individual and community in the sense that it expresses the personal and collective piety.

From this definition, one can hold that the true essence of sacrifice consists in purity of heart and inward disposition. It also places sacrifice as integral in the religious life of people. However, sacrifice can be to satisfy or pacify a potentially wrathful deity. This idea can fittingly be called atonement sacrifice. Sacrifice can also serve to express gratitude such as the sacrifice of the first fruits or first born to open the womb.

⁴⁴ B. VAWTER, *On Genesis: A New Reading*, 256.

⁴⁵ J.L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 754.

⁴⁶ R.J. DALLY, “Sacrifice” in the *New Dictionary of Theology*, 923.

This brings to the fore the loyalty of the people toward their deity (God). With this view of sacrifice, it is obvious that tradition had to be passed on by way of blessing, which assures the patriarchs of the continuous presence of God in their lives. Here the patriarchs remain as worshippers and priests whose role is to bless and impart unseen inheritance as blessing. Therefore, let us consider this passing on of tradition from the point of view of inheritance and the place of birthright.

1.5 Inheritance through Birthright

Biblical experience shows that whenever possession is to be shared or blessing imparted, the birthright of the firstborn son is usually given prime consideration. He is given a double share of the inheritance that passes on to the rest of his brothers. Also genealogical report gives precedence to the birthright of the firstborn son. The notion of inheritance is closely linked to the covenant in which we get a triple relationship within the divine plan of salvation.

In the first place, the covenant links Israel as the inheritance of Yahweh. This spells out the self-understanding of Israel's intimate relationship with God. We shall take up this notion when we treat Israel as the firstborn of God. Secondly, we see the Promised Land as the inheritance of Israel. This concept we have dealt with within the context of promise of land and heir to Abraham, in which the theological redaction of the call, promise and blessing of Abraham gives foundation. Finally, the promise land is the inheritance of Yahweh. Here we presuppose the universal aspect of the blessing of Abraham. The covenantal relation between Israel and God on Mt Sinai and the consecration of firstlings would place and guide the faith of Israel on Yahweh.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 255.

This inheritance simply means the possession of some goods by a stable and permanent title. The manner of entering on the possession of this inheritance varies: by conquest, by gift, by division regulated according to law and by inheritance in the strict sense of the term.⁴⁸ This chapter gives consideration to inheritance in the strict sense with particular focus on birthright. The Jewish law determines the transmission of goods from father to son according to birthright, as we shall see in some biblical stipulations.

According to J. Harvey, sons of concubines received no inheritance unless they were adopted as sons of full right (*Gen 25:5-6*) and illegitimate sons were excluded from the inheritance.⁴⁹ On the same note, daughters did not inherit unless there were no male heirs (*Num 27:1-8, 36:1-9*). A widow did not inherit but she could be the custodian of her deceased husband's property until their sons came to full age. If she has no male descendant, the property of her late husband passed to his brothers or nearest male relatives and she returned to her father's house (*Gen 38:11, Lev 22:13*) or she is attached to her husband's family through a levirate marriage (*Deut 25:5-10, Ruth 2:20-3:12*).⁵⁰

To gain possession of inheritance either as blessing or actual possession, the firstborn son held prime position. To get stability in the process of inheritance, the title has to apply variously; the title firstborn son applies in the case of many wives to the first fruit of the husband for instance the case of Rueben *Gen 49:3*. In the case of twins, the first to be born was the elder, (*Gen 25:24-26, 38:27-30*). In the case of

⁴⁸ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 255.

⁴⁹ J. HARVEY, "Inheritance" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia VII*, 516.

⁵⁰ J. HARVEY, "Inheritance" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia VII*, 516.

one wife, he is the first to open the womb. The title also applies to an only child (*Zech 12:10*).⁵¹

This fits the situation of Jesus because every first son to open the womb was consecrated to God. But birthright which is reserved for the first son could be lost or transferred depending on the circumstances: It could be lost through a serious crime committed as in the case of (*Gen 49*) or transferred by selling as in the case of Esau and Jacob. Briefly, let us examine these situations.

1.5.1 Transfer of Birthright through a Serious Crime

This is simply losing one's position as primogeniture to the lineage. The only instance of transfer of birthright through a serious crime is the case of Reuben (*Gen 49:3-4*.) This comes out only in the context of Jacob's blessing to his children:

Reuben, you are my first-born, my might, and the first fruits of my strength, pre-eminent in pride and pre-eminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have pre-eminence because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it -- you went up to my couch!

This passage is an allusion to what happened in *Gen 35:22*: "While Israel dwelt in that land Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it." So Reuben's case is incest which is a punishable crime for the Jews, thus the weight of it strips Reuben of his birthright as the firstborn son of Jacob.

Notice that since there are two official wives to Jacob, the right of primogeniture is taken away from Reuben the first son of Leah and given to Joseph the first son of Rachael the beloved one. This transfer is the right of the father to grant, no one else could grant the transfer. It can also be granted through the agreement of both sons as in the case of Esau and Jacob but this seems to be illegal because the father's consent is not sought, let us examine it.

⁵¹ D. DIETLEIN, "First Born" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia V*, 940.

1.5.2 Transfer of Birthright by Selling (Contract)

As we have pointed out, the birthright of the firstborn son in the case of twins belongs to the first to be born. Hence, in the case of Esau and Jacob the right of primogeniture belongs to Esau. But as the story unfolds, Esau and Jacob are represented as having tensions in the mother's womb. The struggle as portrayed in the story is for existence and rank.

In contrast to the Abraham story (*Gen 12-25*) where promise play a major role, the Jacob to Joseph story (*26-36*) takes the promise as the promise of God's presence with a dominant role played by blessing.⁵² This indicates the redaction of a latter period in the history of Israel, giving priority to the place of blessing.

If blessing plays a major role then it is the right of the firstborn son to be given a double portion but as the story holds, there is already a prophecy that the older will serve the younger 25:23: "And the Lord said to her (Rebekah), "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." C. Westermann sees this as a redaction division for the tribal ancestors of Israel and Edom. However, the statement presupposes the existence of oracles and institution of the sedentary period which points to the period of the monarchy.⁵³ All these point to the issue of one being higher or more privilege than the other.

Esau's transfer of birthright takes place over the pot of pottage. He comes home hungry and needs some food but Jacob in his craftiness wants an exchange for it thus the only thing at hand to exchange is the birthright. "First sell me your birthright.... Swear to me first. He swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob."

⁵² C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 179.

⁵³ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 179.

25:31-34 Esau ate but at the expense of his rights as the perpetrator of his father's lineage. If Jacob thought of the birthright, it means that he was troubled for not being the first son and the one to bear the blessing.

Thus the right of the first son mattered so much to him so that the prophecy may come true. Notice that Isaac is not aware of this contract as he would call Esau for the blessing (27:1-4). In this blessing the one departing (dying) passes on vital energy to one who will continue on in life. Once the blessing is pronounced it cannot be taken back. So Isaac in this case stands in the place of God to bless his heir by so doing determining his destiny.

Within the pericopes of Gen 27, the blessing goes to Jacob who holds the birthright acquired through his crafty behaviour supported by Rebekah who wants him as heir. Isaac accepts the cheating but does not reverse the blessing. The very reason why Isaac should have chosen to give Jacob the right of Esau could have been Esau's marriage to Judith the Hittite which became a source of pain for the old parents (26:34-35).

Nevertheless Isaac saw it wise to continue his family name through Esau the firstborn son, but God's hands or fate in the destiny of Israel rather chooses Jacob. The formular of the blessing bestows fertility and victory or dominion on Jacob which reminds us of the blessing Abraham received in Gen 12. Again this aspect of blessing will orient Israel's hopes and destiny to the future.

Notice that blessing is the patriarch's way of imparting inheritance. It is only the father's prerogative to bless the children with particular reference to the firstborn son. He calls down the powers of fecundity and life on him. In the settled life of Israel, blessing becomes part of a religious rite carried out by the priests. Having

said this let us examine the place of the mother in the inheritance of their sons so as to show how the custom, tradition and law on birthright came to stay with the Israelites.

1.5.3 Place of Mother in Inheritance

Going back to the tension between Sarah and Hagar and the consequent expulsion of Hagar and her son from the inheritance of Abraham, we see a salient redaction of struggle between a legitimate wife's right and the right of the concubine. In that story the redactor gives priority to the right of the legitimate wife. Coming down to the issue of two or more legitimate wives as in the case of the 12 sons of Jacob, priority is given to the first to get a son irrespective of the love for the other (*Gen 49*). For concubines, they are true wives with a secondary rank, meaning that they are considered after the legitimate wives have been given their due.

The concubines therefore, are in between the legitimate wives and the slaves. Their sons have no inheritance unless the father chooses to give them by adopting them to full status as in the case of Ishmael (*25:5-6*) or the 12 sons. As has been observed in the history of Israel in the context of polygamy, abuses crept in whereby inheritance was given to a preferable son irrespective of the right of the first son. To check this abuse (*Deut 21:15-17*) then laid the norm for inheritance:

If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other disliked, and they have borne him children, both the loved and the disliked, and if the first-born son is hers that is disliked, then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the first-born in preference to the son of the disliked, who is the first-born, but he shall acknowledge the first-born, the son of the disliked, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the first issue of his strength; the right of the first-born is his.

With this we can say that the traditional value and juridical interpretation of the place of the firstborn son is established though not presented in a clear cut manner but in the intertwined story of the patriarchs. It is based on this that Israel

can claim salvation as coming to her first, since she considers herself as the privileged firstborn son of God (Yahweh).

1.6 Conclusion

The promise of blessing to Abraham which expresses the power of fertility, the building up of the nation, and the universal quest for God, put the entire human race in a future expectation of perfect communion with God. This orientation to the future constitutes a historical unfolding in Isaac the chosen one. In him, the election of Israel as the firstborn son of God takes its theological root, in which case, the request to sacrifice Isaac confirms him as the child of promise.

The same request vivifies the practice of human sacrifice with a radical and theological turn of its condemnation. The very fact of the demand to sacrifice Isaac places Abraham in the double role of being priest and leader, thus constituting the significance given to sacrifice in religion and its place within the human community.

Having put in place the whole idea of election through Isaac, tradition begins to unfold in the form of inheritance with its early form in blessing. Blessing confirms the privileges and right of the primogeniture. The role of the father in imparting this blessing as his inheritance puts him in the position of God, expressing the priestly blessing. For Christians, Christ is our promised child, our promise and fulfilment in whom we establish our inheritance as we shall see in chapter three.

It is to this therefore that we turn to the next chapter which would deal with the phenomenon of Israel's constitution as a Nation who is the firstborn of Yahweh based on the establishment of the promise to the patriarchs. In it, the significance of the sacrificial aspect will become clear in the Sinai covenant, as it constitutes the place of blood, priests and sacrifice.

CHAPTER II

Israel as the First-Born Son

2.1 Introduction

The theology of the institution of the people of Israel takes root in the blessing and promises of God to the patriarchs. Through historical progress, promise and blessing take on a new orientation in the covenant, which establishes a legal and privileged relationship between God and Israel, making Israel a possession for God. As a privilege, the covenant becomes a concrete offer of God's grace to humanity. The events of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt become symbolic to the national and religious consciousness of Israel.

Moses' role as the divine instrument in the redemption story straightens the whole event, and places Israel's faith on a historical revelation. Historical revelation shows history in its unity as the channel through which God manifests himself and his salvific plan. But the direction and goal of the unity comes out clearly only at the end where the process of revelation finds its ultimate expression and fulfillment in Jesus Christ who is first born of all creation. Our previous chapter established first born as chosen and elected by God.

This chapter examines the constitution of Israel as the first-born Son of God. On this ground the chapter shall deal with the commissioning of Moses, which will give credence to the scene of Moses' call, the revelation and significance of the divine name. We shall examine the Passover and Covenant events as they fashion the birth of Israel as the first-born Son of God. The political setup of the kingdom will lead us to examine kings as first-born in Israel and this will conclude the chapter.

For the sake of this revelation, let us begin by examining briefly the commissioning of Moses who stands at the background of God's revelation and communication, through him Israel is constituted as the firstborn son of Yahweh.

2.2 The Call and Commissioning of Moses (*Exod 3:1 – 6: 13*)

The call and commissioning of Moses seem to occur as a doublet in chapters 3 and 6. The possible explanation for this is that the two accounts portray the traditions held about Moses' commissioning; the Yahwist - Elohist tradition and the Priestly tradition. The commissioning of Moses reminisces the prophetic experience of calling at the same time unveiling the divine revelation.⁵⁴

The significance of the call according to George V. Pixley is that;

The presentation of the call of the liberator here in the traditional schema of the call of a prophet is a tribute to the importance of the prophets in the life of Israel. It was they who kept alive in the hearts of their hearers the memory of the egalitarian practices of Yahweh demanded of Israel, during the years when the kings were establishing a class society on the very model rejected by the Mosaic group of proto-Israelites in Egypt and by the proto-Israelite tribes in Canaan.⁵⁵

This means that the call and commissioning of Moses places him as prophet, shepherd and leader of his community. The various resistances of Moses to the call show that the human initiative and will remain a constitutive element as the one called is sent for mission. This tradition situates the importance of the prophetic and priestly function within the liturgical life of the nation.

However, the divine will and initiative seeks to transform the messenger so as to fully incorporate his genuine human personality as he goes out to speak for God in spite of himself.⁵⁶ In essence, Moses does not volunteer himself for the work

⁵⁴ B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 73.

⁵⁵ G.V. PIXLEY, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, 17.

⁵⁶ B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 73.

of liberation, he is simply chosen. The circumstances of this choice and commission expose some roles, which Moses will carry out for the people on behalf of God.

Moses is called and commissioned to be the liberator of his people from the hand of Pharaoh and lead them to the Promised Land where milk and honey flow (*Exod.3: 10*). Moses' objection leads to a revelation of God's intention: "I will be with you... when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt you shall serve God upon this mountain." The mountain presumably is Horeb (Sinai) the holy ground on which the scene of the burning bush took place.⁵⁷

Next, Moses is to manifest the judgment and power of God on all of Egypt, (*Exod 3:20, 4:21*). This points to the ten plagues that befall the Egyptians. Finally, Moses is called to be a mediator between God and Israel. Seemingly, Moses is to share this role with Aaron who has been chosen by God to assist in speech. The superiority of Moses over his brother Aaron places him as priest, by the definition of their roles: "He shall speak for you to the people and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God." (*Exod 4:16*).

Moses' call to lead Israel to the Promised Land is linked directly to the promise to Abraham (*Exod 3:17*). Confidence on this promise is the essence of the hope that will lead Israel along her history and this will sustain her obedience to the covenantal laws. The call expresses the fact of the election of Israel for a special reason and particular purpose of worship, which will be perpetrated and realized in the covenant at Sinai.

At the end of the commission, Moses is told to address Pharaoh that "Israel is my first born son", which becomes the first pointer to Israel's election and

⁵⁷ G. LARSSON, *Bound For Freedom*, 35.

constitution, (*Exod 4:22-23*). The people's response is to bow their heads and worship, which will also become their act of worship at Sinai (*Exod 4:31*). This attitude shows total acceptance of the divine ordinances. Through it, Israel establishes a filial relationship with God.

To show the unity between the two calls and commission accounts, R.F. Johnson points out that; "The priestly account of the call is placed after Moses' return to Egypt (*Exod 6:2-7:13*). It serves as a divine reassurance after Moses' initial audience with the Pharaoh has failed."⁵⁸ This serves to bring out the role of the priests and their liturgical function in the community, linking it with the promise to the patriarchs, and portraying that priesthood is at the origin of the nation.⁵⁹

Moses' role as leader and redeemer of his people prefigures Christ's mediation of the new and more perfect covenant, the redeemer who liberates from sin those baptized in his name (*Acts 12: 38, 5:31*)⁶⁰. Moses becomes the mediator who bears what has happened to him, to the people for whom it has happened. He is singled out in such an extraordinary fashion that no one else is like him. Based on this Moses would be able to place Israel in an eschatological expectation and hope in the coming of one like him sent by God (*Deut 18:15*).

The point of the deliverance is the direct intervention of God. Moses leadership involves leading a group into and through a common experience that will be new. This experience will then have to be given enduring form in the social, economic, legal and cultic structures necessary for communal living. Israel's

⁵⁸ R.F. JOHNSON, "Moses" in the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 444.

⁵⁹ R.F. JOHNSON, "Moses" in the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 444.

⁶⁰ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 369.

structure as a nation though with some resemblance to her neighbours is fashioned out of this historical experience.⁶¹

The commission of Moses finds expression and meaning in the life of the people whom he is called to deliver in accordance with God's purpose. The scene of the encounter between God and Moses reveal some aspects of God that is necessary for the life of the people whom he is called to lead. The very fact of the commission reveals in a wonderful way the character and divine plan of God for Israel.

2.2.1 The Burning Bush

God's self revelation in the burning bush tells a lot about him, the area and the people to whom he intends to communicate himself. The encounter between God and Moses reflects the coming together of the ordinary elements of our human experience with the extra-ordinary.⁶² The encounter at Horeb anticipates Israel's experience at Sinai with the revelation of the law.

According to E. Roessler, "the burning bush is a traditional term applied to a thorn bush of uncertain species in the desert near Mt. Horeb that appeared to Moses to be on fire without burning up and by which Moses becomes aware of the presence of God.⁶³ Meanwhile, the place Horeb (Mountain of God) means "a desolate region, desert or wilderness."⁶⁴

The Hebrew word "S'neh" "the presence in the bush" used for bush seems to have been deliberately chosen because it provides a word play on Sinai, meaning an augur of things to come.⁶⁵ In most religions, the mountain, probably because of their

⁶¹ R.F. JOHNSON, "Moses" in the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 444.

⁶² B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 72.

⁶³ E. ROESSLER, "Burning Bush" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia II*, 902.

⁶⁴ G.E. WRIGHT, "Sinai Mount" in the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 378.

⁶⁵ N.M. SARNA, *Exploring Exodus*, 39.

height and the air of mystery which enshrouds them, are considered to be the point where heaven and earth meet.”⁶⁶

The mountain is regarded thus because of its permanency, and power accruing from the fact that it is high above the ground and can be used as a place of refuge in times of trouble. Again, it is considered as the dwelling place of God. Within these views, the mountain can then be taken as a place of revelation and worship. In the burning bush therefore, the command for Moses to remove his shoes stem from the immediacy of the divine presence.

According to N.M. Sarna, “the scene of the burning bush has been understood in two different ways: on the one hand, the fire that is self sufficient, self perpetrating, and wholly unaffected by its environment is a symbol of the transcendent, awesome, and unapproachable Divine presence.”⁶⁷ He justifies his stand by citing the examples from (*Gen 15:17*), where God is represented as a “flaming torch”, the exodus and wilderness wanderings traditions where God is symbolized by “a pillar of fire” and the prophet Ezekiel who depicts the divine presence in the symbol of fire.⁶⁸

On the other hand, “the burning bush is a symbol of the pathetic state of the people of Israel in Egyptian bondage, while the fire represents the forces of persecution. Just as the bush remains unconsumed, so Israel will not be crushed by its tormentors.”⁶⁹ These two ways of interpretation enhance the facts of the theophany at Sinai where God reveals himself. God’s presence as a consuming fire gives direction and consolation to his people. God’s love and total identification

⁶⁶ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 372.

⁶⁷ N.M. SARNA, *Exploring Exodus*, 41.

⁶⁸ N.M. SARNA, *Exploring Exodus*, 41.

⁶⁹ N.M. SARNA, *Exploring Exodus*, 41.

with an afflicted people by choosing a bush as a place of revelation finds expression in God's words: "I have seen the affliction of my people."

This revelation implies that there is no place that is too lowly for the presence of the Lord.⁷⁰ Moses' natural curiosity leads him to understand the sense of the 'holy', which he encounters, and the sense of his unworthiness to behold and carry out the task. This leads G. Larsson to assert: "The closer we come to the Lord, the more we experience the huge distance between ourselves and God."⁷¹ The presence of God prompts us to look deeper into ourselves to discover those impurities that need to be put aside.

Fire is used frequently as a symbol of the manifestation of God as well as of his holiness, his protection and his action on earth.⁷² God's self revelation identifies him with the past (Patriarchs); "I am the God of your fathers", and at the same time identifies him with the future: "I am who I am." Let us briefly examine these revealed identities.

2.2.2 God of Your Fathers (Exod 3:6)

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." This identity of God is supposed to help Moses identify the voice addressing him to the God of the patriarchs. By doing this, he is able to believe in the salvation that God promised to give Israel through the patriarchs.⁷³ The promise gives the allusion to God as father. This identification is a clear and obvious link with the past and future in the event of deliverance that is about to take place.

⁷⁰ G. LARSSON, *Bound For Freedom*, 28.

⁷¹ G. LARSSON, *Bound For Freedom*, 27.

⁷² E. ROESSLER, "Burning Bush" in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia II*, 902.

⁷³ G. LARSSON, *Bound For Freedom*, 29.

On this link, Moses can believe that God would fulfill his promises of the past in the present and future. The title God of your fathers expresses special intimacy, which denotes God as patron, protector and benefactor of his people. By this title, God links Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the people of Israel thus breaking with the past and inaugurating a new phase in the history of Israel.⁷⁴

N.M. Sama suggests; “the leading designation of God be one that conveys the personal, individual, familiar and elective relationship between him and the patriarchs who is promised posterity. In the new stage, it is the fortunes of the people that are the focus of interest, so that the old epithet is no longer adequate.”⁷⁵ With him, we can accept the whole idea of the new and adequate covenant in Christ.

Moses’ doubt and the peoples’ doubt prompt him to seek for the name of God. “The question contains both a request for information and explanation of its significance.”⁷⁶ With this bold quest, Moses representing himself and the people seek to know God’s new relationship with them. Already, this had been alluded to in (*Exod 3:12*), “But I will be with you.” With persistence, a revelation is given.

2.2.3 I AM WHO I AM (YHWH) (*Exod 3:14-15*)

Yahweh is the personal name of God which identifies his nature and character. The word play on the name “*'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh*” I am who I am, confirms who God is and what he does and still will do for the people of Israel.⁷⁷ According to A. Magnante, “In Hebrew language while I AM is the first person

⁷⁴ N.M. SARNA, *Exploring Exodus*, 44.

⁷⁵ N.M. SARNA, *Exploring Exodus*, 45.

⁷⁶ B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 75.

⁷⁷ B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 76.

singular of the verb “to be”, *YHWH* is the third person singular of the same verb, meaning “He is”.⁷⁸

The divine name *YHWH* was originally a causative form of the verb “to be” meaning “He causes to be what he causes to be.” This gives the first meaning of God as creator. Thus, God brings into being natural and historical events; in such a way that Moses can comprehend. *YHWH* is also the simple form of the verb “to be” usually translated as “I AM”; which brings out the philosophical understanding of being. This is the manifestation of God in history not his being in himself.⁷⁹

Consequently, the revelation I AM WHO I AM is both a refusal to answer and an answer to Moses request for name. As a refusal answer, God announces that his intentions will be revealed in his future acts, which he now refuses to explain. This portrays the unity of God as God of the past, present and future, which is given to Moses, as “I will be with you.” Though a refusal, it stands as a positive answer to Moses.⁸⁰ To know God’s name would be to have power over God. God’s refusal to reveal himself more than “I AM” implies his transcendence.⁸¹

The answer I AM reflects the experience of God’s purpose by what he does for his people in their future (deliverance from Egypt).⁸² With this, Yahweh defines his intention, and at the same time he reveals his nature.⁸³ “This is my name forever and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” The sacred name indicates a God who is near to his people, who will be appreciated and whose presence is discovered in life in their histories.

⁷⁸ A. MAGNANTE, *The Message of Exodus*, 57.

⁷⁹ A. MAGNANTE, *The Message of Exodus*, 57.

⁸⁰ B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 76.

⁸¹ J.E. HUESMAN, “Exodus from Egypt” in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia V*, 743.

⁸² B.S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 76.

⁸³ G. VONRAD, *Old Testament Theology*, 180.

The force of the argument is that God is present and will continue to be faithful to himself as God and be faithful to Israel as a nation. Israel's own experience with God in its history will confirm the meaning of God's name. That is, Israel will understand its history from the name, and the name from its history. In other words, the name shapes Israel's story, and the story gives greater texture to the name.⁸⁴ Jesus through the use of I AM will associate himself to Yahweh and thus draw him to us in the gift of the incarnation. He is the divine presence.⁸⁵

Therefore, the revelation of the name of God becomes a name to be of cultic remembrance, and henceforth it becomes the medium of continuous worship. For respect and worship, the announcement of the name *YHWH* got replaced by the vowel sound "Adonai" (Lord).⁸⁶ Hence, revelation is not information about God and his nature, but an invitation to trust in the one whose self-disclosure is a foretaste of the promised inheritance. Let us therefore look at the process of this inheritance in the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn son.

2.3 The Slaying of the Egyptian First-Born Son (Passover) *Exod 11:1-13:16*

The self-revelation of God and his name connotes the concept of creator and energizer bringing together life and being. In the ten plagues therefore, God reveals his power as being able to control the destiny of his own people and the destiny of other foreign nations. So, in the narrative of the ten plagues, God is revealed as a figure of cosmic strength.⁸⁷

By virtue of the plagues, God demonstrates his power that he alone is God, and that Israel is his chosen people. The whole of the ten plagues are simply the

⁸⁴ T.E. FRETHERM, *Exodus*, 63-64.

⁸⁵ J. PLASTARAS, *The God of Exodus*, 100.

⁸⁶ J. PLASTARAS, *The God of Exodus*, 86

⁸⁷ M.E. MILLS, *Images of God in the Old Testament*, 31.

manifestation of the power of God over nature, yet the ninth plague has a special significance to the Israelites, as it fashions the memory of their liturgy and the formation of the nation. This explains why the plagues are repeatedly referred to in the liturgical celebrations of the exodus as the marvelous works of God.⁸⁸

The account of the plagues is the interweaving of traditional accounts of the “J”, “E”, and “P” writers. For the “J”, Moses is the chief actor on behalf of God, while for the “P”, Aaron is the main actor through Moses. The “E” tradition uses the rod by Moses not Aaron.⁸⁹ The plagues are set in a religious context as divine signs that Yahweh is omnipotent Lord, and the Israelites are his chosen ones with special destiny in salvation history.⁹⁰ It is to this that we channel our examination to the Passover event.

Passover is the first of the three great festivals in Israel’s liturgical calendar, commemorating the deliverance from Egypt. It is observed in the spring. The term “*Pesah*”, “passing over” may be related to the verb “to limp”. In contemporary Judaism, *Pesah* is used to refer to the whole range of observances related to the season.⁹¹

The Passover is the major feast celebrated on the night of the 14th to the 15th of Nisan (March or April). It is combined with the feast of unleavened Bread, which is kept from the 15th to the 21st of Nisan. “Passover in the restricted sense appears in the oldest allusions as a sacrifice and sacrificial meal of quite unique different

⁸⁸ J.C. MIHELIC – G.E. WRIGHT, “Plagues in Exodus” in *the Interpreter’s Bible I*, 822.

⁸⁹ J.C. MIHELIC – G.E. WRIGHT, “Plagues in Exodus” in *the Interpreter’s Bible I*, 824.

⁹⁰ M.J. REDLE, “Plagues of Egypt” in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia XI*, 423.

⁹¹ J.C. RYLAARSDAM, “Passover” in *the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 663.

significance and background.” A lamb was sacrificed on the evening of the full moon and its blood was spread around the doorframes of homes.⁹²

H.L. Ellison sees this smearing of blood on the lintels and doorposts as the major difference between the Egyptian Passover and its annual memorial.⁹³ However, the origin of the Passover is obscure as M.M. Bourke states: “The origin of the Passover sacrifice itself is obscure, though many scholars believe that it certainly ante dated the Israelite celebration. Perhaps it may be related to a spring departure feast of nomads whereby they dedicated the first born of their flocks in sacrifice to their god.”⁹⁴

On the same note M.M. Bourke holds that;

The feast, originally independent, has been “historicized”, that is, its origin has been explained by the events of that first Passover night. The feast of Mazzoth, and agricultural feast to celebrate the first fruits of the barley harvest, is associated in Exodus with the Passover sacrifice and “historicized” in the same way.”⁹⁵

More concretely, the Passover describes a sacrifice made by night or alternatively the animal use in this sacrifice.⁹⁶

The Passover is the liturgical expression of the liberation from Egypt, which is a concrete bringing to present a historical memory. For M.J. Redle, “the memory of this night when the Lord spared the firstborn of the Israelites to kill those of the Egyptians was liturgically perpetrated in the Israelite feast of the Passover.”⁹⁷ The miracle is that, the plague is selective becoming the decisive moment of Exodus and it marks the first celebration of the Passover.⁹⁸

⁹² G.W. MACRAE, “Passover, Feast of” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia X*, 1068.

⁹³ H.L. ELLISON, *Exodus*, 64.

⁹⁴ M.M. BOURKE, *The Book of Exodus*, 44.

⁹⁵ M.M. BOURKE, *The Book of Exodus*, 44.

⁹⁶ M. NOTH, *Exodus*, 88.

⁹⁷ M.J. REDLE, “Plagues of Egypt” in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia XI*, 424.

⁹⁸ M. NOTH, *Exodus*, 88.

The Passover is preceded by the command, "And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son.... Let my son go that he may serve me; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first born son.'" (*Exod 3:22-23*). The command finds its force in the commission of Moses and its significance is expressed as a prophecy. Israel is already seen as the first born of God for whom the Egyptian firstborn would be sacrificed, thus alluding to the building of the nation.

The story has its own arrangement through the three chapters 11:1-13:16, as it introduces laws covering three of Israel's socio-cultic observances: Passover, Unleavened Bread and the Dedication of the first-born sons.⁹⁹ In chapter 11:1, we have a prefatory prediction that Pharaoh will let Israel go... he will drive them away completely." This re-echoes the commission in 6:1, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, yea with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land."¹⁰⁰

11:4-8 expresses the fact that the announcement of the Passover is made to the Hebrews and not to pharaoh. It is a prediction that spells out the severity of the plague and the fact of the choice, election and recognition of Israel by God. Chapter 12 initiates the inauguration of the Passover celebration as a liturgical celebration to be observed yearly: "This month shall be for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you." (*Exod 12: 2, 14*).

In 12:21-28, the command is being put to practice for the first time. Here, Moses reiterates the event's importance as a liturgy: (*Exod 12:14, 25 and 13:10*),

This day shall be for you a memorial day and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance for ever. And when you come to the land which the Lord will give you, as he has promised,

⁹⁹ J.C. RYLAARSDAM – J. E. PARK, "Exodus" in *the Interpreters Bible I*, 915.

¹⁰⁰ B.D. NAPIER, *Exodus*, 43.

you shall keep this service. You shall therefore keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year.

As a liturgical act, the idea of memorial takes its position in 13:3, "Remember this day, in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage, for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place; no leavened bread shall be eaten." The details of the rite come in 12:3-46. The most important part of it is the reason for Israel's delivery, which is the blood on the lintels and doorposts. The consequence of this is the death of the Egyptian first-born sons.

The details bring out the aspect of licit celebration. That is Jews who are circumcised and foreigners who become Jews by accepting circumcision. Finally, the chapter shows that Israel did what the Lord commanded and thus the Lord fulfilled his promise. Hence, Israel sees the steadfastness of God from the patriarchs to their time.

Chapter 13 presumes that Israel is already out of Egypt so the Passover event is being enforced as a liturgical act showing that its celebration has taken the position of law to be observed. Nevertheless, the most important part of the chapter is the consequences of the exodus, which is the consecration of the first-born sons of the Israelites and their firstlings (*Exod 13:11-16*).

2.3.1 Consecration of the First-Born Sons (Exod 13:11-16)

Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.

The meaning of this rite is that Israel and its possessions belong to God for what is first to open the womb represents all that comes from it. This points to the fact that Israel is taken as a consecrated nation as we shall see clearly in the Sinaitic covenant. Consecration of every first-born son representing the whole thus means

that Israel is a kingdom of priests, a holy nation as distinct from other nations based on their experience that God led them by himself out of Egypt.¹⁰¹

However, the literal meaning of the first-born is everything. On this basis, blessing or curse on him means blessing or curse on the entire endeavours for the family. This stands points to the building or destruction of the entire nation. Consecration of the first-born sons of Israel is that every first-born son has the position of a consecrated person set apart for the service of God. They automatically are priest within the religious sphere.

In this light, Yahweh is a true father to Israel because he does what a natural father does like sparing the first-born of the Israelites, making the nation and guiding them. Consecration is one of the reason why Israel in (*Lev 19:2. 20:7, 26*) is asked to be Holy as God is Holy. To guard against idolatry, Israel is told in (*Deut 14:1*), “You are the sons of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead.”¹⁰²

For the sake of the redemption of the first born sons of the Israelites, the Levites are taken in place of the whole nation’s first born notwithstanding the fact that each first born son retains the right of being consecrated. This gives any member of the community who is first born to take up priestly role in the family and in the case of emergency in the community. For the sake of order, the Levites are given the status of dedication to God. Let us examine this reality briefly.

2.3.2 Levitic Consecration in Place of the First-Born

The Levites are members of a landless tribe in Israel set aside for the service of the lord. Moses and Aaron are held to belong to this tribe (*Exod 2:1*). One of the

¹⁰¹ J.C. RYLAARSDAM – J. E. PARK, “Exodus” in *the Interpreters Bible I*, 847.

¹⁰² D. MCCARTHY, “Israel My First-Born Son” in *The Way*, 188-189.

meanings of the word *Levi* is “to be given over as a pledge, to be consecrated” as found in Minaean inscription, from the root “*hw*”, used for persons consecrated to a divinity.¹⁰³ The Levites are said to assume priestly function of all the tribes.

The description of the Levites as priests must have come from a period when all priests were Levites. However, there is a difference between the Levites and priests. This distinction places them as inferior ministers who assist the priests and perform sacred but sacerdotal functions in the sanctuary. Accordingly, they purify the holy things, prepare the bread, sing praises and have general care of the sanctuary.¹⁰⁴

Tradition ascribes the origin of the Levitical priesthood to Moses. This is probably due to their part in killing the worshippers of the golden calf.¹⁰⁵ Or to maintain sanity and order in the religious spheres since every first born son was dedicated. If the former is the case then while Aaron is constituted high priest, his sons the Levites are constituted priests. But if the latter is true, then the Levites find their consecration in place of the first born of every family.

Therefore, the Levites find their position in the liturgical sphere as first-born of God or possessions of God because “Every first born of man among your sons you shall redeem” (*Exod 13:13*). The cost of the redemption is what places the Levites in cultic roles as priests: “Take the Levites instead of all the first-born among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle; and the Levites shall be mine: I am the Lord” (*Num 3:45*).

Since the Levites were dedicated to an auxiliary ministry for the priest, they substituted for each family’s first born by virtue of the Passover. Their functions n

¹⁰³ O. BUCHER, “Levites” in *the New Catholic Encyclopedia VIII*, 684.

¹⁰⁴ J.L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 504.

¹⁰⁵ O. BUCHER, “Levites” in *the New Catholic Encyclopedia VIII*, 684.

the cults came to be of ritual cleansing and dedication. That is, the sanctuary tithes of redemption, Levitical cities and support from the people are given to them.¹⁰⁶ For the sake of their cultic roles, anointing constituted the priests and Levites.

The Passover is taken to have enacted the birth and delivery of Israel from Egypt as a nation. It also sees to the birth of the liturgical year whereby the three most important feasts; the Passover, the Unleavened Bread and the dedication of the first-born son are placed within the cycle of the year. The dedication in its stead institutes the priestly role of each first born but given to the Levites at redemption.

Describing the Passover sacrifice, Ellison believes that,

As a sacrifice, it was unique, for it did not fit into the framework of any of the sacrifices detailed in the early chapters of Leviticus. This may be due to the fact that the latter were intended in various ways to maintain the covenant once Israel had come into it, while the Passover made the covenant possible.¹⁰⁷

If we agree with Ellison, then it presupposes that the covenant becomes the rules, which establishes the relationship between God and Israel. Once made, it will solidify the bilateral relationship. The covenant expresses the meeting point between God and man realizing the primary intention of God to communicate with man.

2.4 The Sinai Covenant (*Exod 19:1-24:18*)

According to G.E. Mendenhall,

Covenant is a solemn promise made binding by oath, which may be either a verbal formula or a symbolic action. Such an action or formula is recognized by both parties as the formal act which binds the actor to fulfil his promise. Covenant may be between parties of different socio-political groups, in which case the covenant creates a relationship between them regulated by the terms of the covenant; or a covenant may take place within a legal community, in which case obligations are assumed which the law does not provide for- that is, it makes new obligation binding.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ J.D. DOUGLAS, *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1028.

¹⁰⁷ H.L. ELLISON, *Exodus*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ G.E. MENDENHALL, "Covenant" in *the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 714.

One can deduce that covenant connotes a religious expression of daily human living. Thus the covenant is the bilateral relationships of religion and law.

For the patriarchs, the covenant elicits their personal and mystical experience of God in their ordinary way of living and thought. The sinaitic covenant fulfils God's promise to Abraham by extending it to the whole of Israel and amplifying the laws and obligations thus giving birth to Israel as a nation: God's first born son.¹⁰⁹ The final dimension of this reality is the person of Christ, in whom God promises his blessing, protection, prosperity and peace.

As P.F. Ellis sees it, the sinaitic covenant is bilateral in nature; meaning that on the part of God, all the promises made to the patriarchs especially Abraham are extended to the whole nation. And on the part of the nation, all that was required of Abraham is now required of them including obedience to the Mosaic laws."¹¹⁰ This is expressed in (*Exod 19:5-6*) "if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Just like Abraham, circumcision remains an external sign for those who enter into the covenant. The covenant in a very strong way establishes the worship of Yahweh as Israel's national religion.¹¹¹ If God had prepared Israel right from the time of Abraham, then we suppose that he makes Israel the object of election and the depository of a promise as 5-6 points out.¹¹² The most important significance of the

¹⁰⁹ P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 24.

¹¹⁰ P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 24-25.

¹¹¹ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 93.

¹¹² X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 94.

sinaitic covenant is that God communicates with man and establishes his kingdom here on earth.¹¹³

Since the sinaitic covenant though unique, is similar to the covenantal pattern of the Ancient Near East, it suffices to point out that there were covenant of various types: Promissory, Patron, Parity and suzerainty covenants. The suzerainty covenant is closest in form to the sinaitic covenant. This is a situation where the superior binds an inferior to obligations defined by the superior as the Hittite suzerainty covenant show. It contains the following elements:¹¹⁴

The Preamble: This gives the name of the covenanting king along with a list of his titles and attributes. In the Decalogue, the preamble is expressed as “I am the Lord your God.” (*Exod 20:2a.*)

The historical prologue: This recounts the benevolent deeds of the king in favour of his vassals, which obliges the vassal in perpetual gratitude to obey the Kings command. In other words, the king shows from past deeds what he will continue to do in the future if the vassal remains subject to him. In the Decalogue it is, “who brought you out of Egypt...” (*20:2b.*)

The List of Stipulations: These are the lists of obligations imposed on the vassal. It excludes relationships to other sovereign powers, meaning that it demands an unwavering trust on the suzerain. For G.E. Mendenhall, “the stipulations define the interests of the suzerain whom the vassal is bound to protect, and to considerable extent have to do with regulations which preserve the peace within the domain of the

¹¹³ P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 22.

¹¹⁴ P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 25-26.

suzerain.¹¹⁵ However, the stipulations detail obligation of relationship with each other for the vassal, (*Exod 20:3-17, 23:17, and Deut 17:8-13.*)

Deposit of the pact in the temple and periodic public reading of the pact. As shown in (*Deut 10:5*), the 10 commandments are deposited in the Ark of the Covenant and they are read by the priests to the people at the feast of Booths, (*Deut 31:9-13*). The fact that Moses wrote down the Laws in *Exod 24:7* affirm the fact of the deposit.

A list of Witnesses: As shown by P.F. Ellis, the list is missing in the sinaitic covenant but present in (*Deut 32:1 and in Is 1:2*) where the heavens are called upon to witness Israel's infidelity to the covenant.

Formulas of blessings and curses: Here we find the hypothetical nature of the covenant, "If ...then". In (*Exod 24:3*), "All the words which the lord has spoken we will do" is the public declaration which seeks to accept the blessings of the covenant. This oath significantly makes the sinaitic covenant valid and binding.

Since covenantal pacts were common in the Ancient Near East, Israel's religious conception of God and their relation to God made the distinction between them and their pagan neighbours.¹¹⁶ Thus the covenant gave form and structure to the social and religious life of the Israelite community. P.F. Ellis maintains that; "At Sinai a revealed religion with laws, rites and hierarchy becomes a historical fact. It is communicated by Moses, transmitted by him to the Israelites and eventually committed to writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁷

The covenantal episodes in *Exod 19:1-24:18* which saw the birth of the nation as God's son at Sinai would be examined in three parts: the preparation for

¹¹⁵ G.E. MENDENHALL, "Covenant" in *the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 720.

¹¹⁶ G.E. MENDENHALL, "Covenant" in *the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 720.

¹¹⁷ P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 21.

the institution of the covenant, 19:1-25, the laws; 20:1-23:33 and finally, the ratification of the covenant; 24:1-18.

The pericopes in 19:1-25 make explicit in the requirements and preparation for the covenant the purpose of God 19:3-13, and the people's willing response "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" which will come again at the ratification of the covenant.¹¹⁸ The preparation explains the need for willing readiness to encounter the divine. In spite of the various traditions in the narrative, the chapter elicits the fact that God is God and Holy.

God promises to enter into covenant provided Israel obeys his voice. At acceptance, God prepares them for the theophany through which nature bears testimony to the power of God. But by virtue of the request "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation", God links Israel with the event and meaning of the consecration of the first born son. Here, he extends the priestly status to all. In the New Covenant in Christ, all become priests through baptism.

Part II, chapters 20-23 spell out the legal relationship between man and man and between man and God, hence the name the "Book of the Covenant". The law here is an expression of Israel's experience of the Sinai covenant which called them into one as a nation. It contains both the apodictic and casuistic laws, which govern the whole socio-political and religious life of Israel.

¹¹⁸ M. NOTH, *Exodus*, 153.

Within the religious sphere, it contains laws on worship, the Sabbath and the pilgrimage feasts. On the social level, it binds every aspect community living.¹¹⁹ The details of the law portray some incorporation of common laws of the time similar to the Hammurabi code. The whole idea of the covenant brings to light the unity of God and the unity of the nation which finds expression in the liturgical faith of (*Deut 6:4-9*). The Decalogue and covenant code are placed here to show its relation with the covenantal relationship.

Part III 24:18, is the ratification of the covenant. There seem to be a very close knit between chapters 19 and 24 in the sense that it is the continuation of the theophany. This part is the ritual sacrifice that binds the relationship of the covenant. It contains the sacrificial meal and the pouring of blood upon the altar. It is on this background that Christ's sacrifice can be said to be a new and fulfilled covenant.

The ratification presupposes certain things such as the sacrificial meal, which is symbolic to the sealing of the covenant. The clouds represent the divine presence. The sprinkling of the blood on the altar and on the people symbolizes the unity between God and Israel.¹²⁰ The altar on which Moses poured the blood stands as a testimony to the act of consecration, it also represents the active presence of God in the relationship.¹²¹

The "blood of the covenant" means the blood by means of which the covenant is established. Hence, the blood becomes a metaphor for the covenant in the New Testament. The people's assent makes the bilateral covenantal laws binding on them: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." Finally, the tradition of the law

¹¹⁹ M.M. BOURKE, *The Book of Exodus*, 70-76.

¹²⁰ M.M. BOURKE, *The Book of Exodus*, 77.

¹²¹ J.C. RYLAARSDAM – J. E. PARK, "Exodus" in *the Interpreters Bible I*, 1017.

holds strongly that Moses wrote them down, giving security and purpose to the future celebration of the liturgy; (*Exod 24: 4, 7*).

Consequently, the sinaitic covenant stands for the systematic interpretation and implementation of the faith which is the gift of revelation. Sinai symbolizes the establishment of Israel as the church. In this case, sinaitic covenant bring together the relationship that exists in the social and religious institutions of Israel with the exodus events. Therefore, it expresses the incorporation of other cultural forms to enhance the meaning of the faith.¹²²

2.5 Kings as First-Born in Israel

The position of kings in Israel does not suppose the biological and legal right as first fruits of the mother's womb. Rather it is defined by his position as leader of a political entity. Since the institution of kingship is intimately connected with the mythical understanding of royalty as divine, then it belongs to the sphere of the divine.¹²³ Thus kingship was associated with the kingdom.

Since Israel is the nation that understood itself under the leadership of God, it supposed therefore, that she was the Kingdom of God and God was their ultimate ruler and king by virtue of the covenant.¹²⁴ By implication, the human kingship of Israel understands itself as associated to the kingship of Yahweh whom they ought to serve. Yahweh in return regards kings especially the descendants of David as His sons.¹²⁵

In comparison to the Israelites' neighbours, kings were understood to be the incarnation of gods, whose duties and actions are considered divine. Based on this,

¹²² J.C. RYLAARSDAM – J. E. PARK, "Exodus" in *the Interpreters Bible I*, 841.

¹²³ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 288.

¹²⁴ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 288.

¹²⁵ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 293.

D. McCarthy agrees that the monarchy made Yahweh say of the king, “you are my son”.¹²⁶ Within these kingdoms, the king is regarded as high priest and his role is that of mediation between God and man through whom peace, prosperity and blessings reach his subjects.¹²⁷

Kingship in Israel in the strict sense is associated with the monarch, and it developed with the enthronement of Saul. With David it took root and became firmly established. Through the prophecy of Nathan, the Davidic dynasty is established as a permanent institution. For this dynasty to last, it was presumed that God established a covenant with David in like manner to the Mosaic covenant.¹²⁸

In Israel, especially in the time of the monarchy, the position of kings took on a secular nature, but remained subject to the covenant and law, which paradoxically enabled the king to play a sacred role. His primary role is to maintain righteousness based on the law of the covenant. For the king to be able to maintain this role he is guided by the spirit of Yahweh which is symbolically shown by the anointing.¹²⁹

By virtue of his role as priest-king, his position with respect to God became adopted son (*2Sam 7:14, Ps 2:7, 89:27*), depository of God’s powers, and virtually established as the head of all the kings of the earth.¹³⁰ With the collapse of the Davidic dynasty, Israel was plunged into an expectation of this ideal and faith king, who will be anointed by God. This expectation ushered in the Messianic era.

¹²⁶ D. MCCARTHY, “Israel My First-Born Son” in *The Way*, 183.

¹²⁷ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 288

¹²⁸ J.D. DOUGLAS, *The New Bible Dictionary*, 692.

¹²⁹ J.L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 477.

¹³⁰ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 289.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to show that the constitution of Israel as First-Born Son of God is heavily rooted in the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For this consciousness to be deep seated in the life of the people, the historical process and revelation pave the way for the social and religious encounters with God under the leadership of Moses.

Israel seemingly avoided the use of God as father because of her neighbours' theological stance on idolatry (polytheism). But when it came to wealth and religion, Israel saw itself as first-born son, which the exodus events make clear. This fashioned the first word of the Decalogue "I am the Lord your God." On this background the whole journeys with God create the symbolic birth of the nation as son.

The call and commission of Moses bring out the role of the prophets and priests in the national formation. Significantly, it revealed the nature, identity and purpose of God for Israel and humanity at large. Primarily, the purpose of God for humanity is his self-communication. As sons therefore, Israel experienced the loving presence of God in the Passover events where God choose them to carry out his divine plan of salvation.

Hierarchically, Israel understood itself as first among other nations in the presence of Yahweh their God and thus, the consecration of the first-born sons placed all within the priestly function. With this, the whole of Israel becomes a mediator of God's blessing to other nations. For this fact to be realized, the covenant becomes the concrete offer of God's grace both to Israel and to all by establishing the required relationship between God and man.

The symbolisms of the covenant find great significance in the blood, as it brings to mind the blood of the Passover sacrifice pointing to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, which seals and fulfils every ritual sacrifice. On the blood of covenant therefore, God established Israel as his own possession. The covenant creates the unity in Israel and their unity with God. The monarchy established kingship as an entity ruled by God, though rooted in the covenant.

Kings came to be seen symbolically as the adopted sons of God. Their role as leader of the community placed them as first-born. But at the collapse of the monarchy, Israel through the prophets looked with hope to the coming of a future king endowed with the spirit of God. On this expectation, the messianic era was given birth to. The next chapter seeks to establish that Jesus the first born of God fulfils this era and all requirements to be priest and messiah.

CHAPTER III

JESUS THE FIRST-BORN SON AND THE MESSIANIC ERA

3.1 Introduction

In chapter two, we dealt with the whole history of how Israel understood itself as Son of God within their various historical encounters. One big swing in the process of this realization was the Sinai theophany event, which brought about the covenant as statutory to the demands of Yahweh's relationship with them. The eschatological dimensions of these events led Israel to a future hope because their relation with Yahweh anchored heavily on promise and fulfilment.

In this chapter, we shall deal with Jesus the first-born son and the messianic era as it points to the whole fact of God's fulfilled plan of salvation in the son, which would show Jesus' qualification for priesthood and messiah. That Jesus is first-born Son of God the Father and the first fruit of Mary's womb is incontestably attested to in scriptures. In Jesus Christ, we get the intimate encounter and principles of loving relation with God, and the fulfilment of the new covenant with his blood. The manifestation of God's fulfilled plans in the son starts with the incarnation.

The Mystery of the incarnation, unlike the covenantal relation is the indissoluble unity between God and humanity. In it Jesus becomes the fulfilled promise to Abraham, opening up a future filled with revelatory participation with God. If the mystery of the incarnation and indeed the whole Paschal mystery is the fulfilment of God's promise, then it has to occur in a situation understandable to the human mind in history. This situation is the messianic era. Let us examine it.

3.2 The Messianic Era

Messianism is often looked at as the eschatological hope in the restoration of Israel's past glory especially the Davidic dynasty by the messiah who will be anointed and filled with the spirit of God. Messianism paves the way for the realization of the divine plan of salvation in Christ, which had already started in the history of Israel's encounter with Yahweh. Messianism is understood to be a divine intervention in history and the establishment of the kingdom of God.¹³¹

According to P.F. Ellis,

Messianism may be defined in the broadest sense of the word as Israel's expectation, based on revelation of a great and glorious destiny. More narrowly, messianism may be defined as Israel's divinely founded and firm expectation of a reign of God over Israel in which Israel will enjoy spiritual regeneration, complete freedom, and continual happiness, and be the vehicle for the same for the rest of humanity.¹³²

Messianism always draws up a history that points to the future.

The unique character of Jewish messianism arises from this history, which moves towards a final establishment of the kingdom of God. In this history, Israel and particularly the kings become the medium through which the kingdom is established. However, this whole idea of kingdom finds its radical expression in the election which begins with the promises and blessings to the patriarchs. The apparent fulfilment of these promises and blessings is the Sinai covenant and the inheritance of the promise land.¹³³

The covenant being the basic origin of Israel's religion and politics, established their God (Yahweh) as ruler, which developed into a monarchic rule. Due to infidelity to the covenant, the prophets announced the imminent doom

¹³¹ J.L. MCKENZIE, "Royal Messianism" in *CBQ*, 25.

¹³² P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 342.

¹³³ J.L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 569.

awaiting the nation. To show the holistic bounds of the covenant, the prophets expressed it in terms of laws or juridical pacts, where God sits enthroned as King.

The shortcoming and infidelity to the covenant led to the future and eschatological hope of a new covenant. This new covenant will be an inner principle prompted by the spirit as the prophet Jeremiah thought:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers 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, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (*Jer 31:31-33*)

Ezekiel developed this idea arriving at the new covenant as the spirit that would not be destroyed by sin. "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (*Ezek 36:26*) For him therefore, the new covenant is eternal and of peace, which will renew the Sinai covenant.¹³⁴

This mighty act of God is to be carried out by God's anointed which Israel had during the monarchy bestowed on the kings. During this period, the fulfillment of Israel's hope becomes inextricably linked with the Davidic family. This means that the kingdom of God is to be exercised by kings through David's blood. Thus, the father-son relationship with God had to be transferred to the kings. Because God is the ruler of the world, Israel expected her king's dominance over the world.¹³⁵

Sequel to the collapse of the monarchy, especially the Davidic dynasty, the whole idea of royal messianism arose for an ideal king. As J. Klausner believes, the messiah is a strong redeemer who by his spirit and will, will bring complete

¹³⁴ X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 96.

¹³⁵ P.F. ELLIS, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament*, 344.

redemption; political and spiritual, earthly bliss and moral perfection to the entire human race.¹³⁶ Within the royal messianic expectation, there arose a personal or individual messianism fully anchored on the dynastic messianism.

For J. Desrochers therefore, “the figure of the messiah took various shapes. For some he will be a king, for others a priest or a prophet, for some others still, the mysterious figure of the son of man of Daniel. Yet, for the ordinary man, the messiah meant a political and military figure, a new and greater king than David, or a national leader more powerful than Judas Maccabaeus.”¹³⁷ The most popular expectation of the messiah-redeemer as a political and military figure as seen during the birth of Christ, meant a God sent who will destroy foreign rule in Israel.

The instrument by which messianism is to be fulfilled would have the following qualities as summed up by J. Bourke:

The Messiah is a son of David (2 Sam 7:13-16, 3Kgs 8:25, 1Par 17:11, 28:5ff, 29:24ff, 2Par 9:8, 13:8ff, Isa 9:7, 11:1-10, 16:5, Jer 23:5-6, 30:9, Ezek 34:23-24, 37:24-25, Amos 9:11 etc.) endowed more or less mysteriously with divine sonship (2Sam 7:14, 1Par 17:13, Pss 2:7, 89:26-27 etc), who, having in the power of God of Israel subdued the nations of the world (Amos 9:2, Pss 2:8-12, 18:44, 110:1-2, 5-6, 72:8-11 etc), and extended the bounds of David’s kingdom to the ends of the earth (Mic 5:3, Zech 9:10, Is 9:7, 11:14ff, Pss 2:8, 72:2-4, 89:4-29 etc) inaugurating thereby an age of paradisiacal prosperity (Isa 9:7, 11:6-9, Zech 9:10, Pss 72:6-7 etc). These are to say, the “constants” of the messianic idea.¹³⁸

In Jesus, the messianic prophecies have been fulfilled bringing together the two spheres of the physical and spiritual worlds.¹³⁹ This is where Jesus places his strongest allusion that the kingdom of God, the messianic kingdom is present in the world now, working invisibly towards its due consummation like leaven hidden in

¹³⁶ J.L. MCKENZIE, “Royal Messianism” in *CBQ*, 25.

¹³⁷ J. DESROCHERS, *Christ the Liberator*, 134.

¹³⁸ J. BOURKE, “The Wonderful Counsellor” in *CBQ*, 123.

¹³⁹ J. BOURKE, “The Wonderful Counsellor” in *CBQ*, 124.

the meal (*Matt 13:33*) or the invisible growth of seed in a field (*Mark 4:26-29*). This does not negate the continuation of the present world order.¹⁴⁰

In other words, Messianism fulfilled in the life of Jesus means that, in this world, he acts and directs people to the reality of the kingdom of God, which is invisible. But in the next world, in the Parousia, he will come with all might and pomp as expected of the messiah. This stance for J. Bourke is what accounts for the tension between the 'Realized' and 'Futurist' eschatology in the New Testament.¹⁴¹ The messianic promises rest in Christ as the infancy narratives show.

3.3 The Infancy Narratives

So far in our endeavour, we have shown that God communicated in ways that were within the human understanding and experience. In the infancy narratives, we shall see again how this mystery of the incarnation fulfilled the promises of the patriarchs, and placed Christ within the categories of the socio-religious sphere of Israel yet bringing out the dimension of a hope in the final eschatological fulfilment in God himself. If the Sinai covenant was God's fulfilment of his promises to Israel, then it only prefigured and prepared the final universal covenant in Christ.

The Infancy narratives simply point out the birth of God's son and the connotations to his ministry and salvation history. The narrative in Matthew shows that Jesus the Messiah is the Son of David, Son of Abraham. The account places Jesus as the new Moses, the giver of the new and perfect law, which finds expression in the baptism and transfiguration events. Luke shows that Jesus is the new Adam, the Son of God who is the fulfilment of God's promises to humanity. Due to the limitation in space, we shall treat the narrative according to Matthew.

¹⁴⁰ J. BOURKE, "The Wonderful Counsellor" in *CBQ*, 124.

¹⁴¹ J. BOURKE, "The Wonderful Counsellor" in *CBQ*, 124.

Matthew introduces the Jesus story with the title “The Book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (*Matt 1:1*). In doing this, he reminds the reader of a similar formula in *Gen 2:4a, 5:1 and 6:7*. The closest to *Matt 1:1* is *Gen 5:1*, the genealogy of Adam.¹⁴² In contrasting the two, Matthew shows that “in Christian salvific history, there can be no genealogy of Jesus’ descendants because history has reached its goal in Jesus.¹⁴³ His contrast is simply the origin of man with Christ.¹⁴⁴

According to R.E. Brown, “the name “Jesus Christ” binds the title “Messiah” indivisibly to Jesus and serves as a good preparation for a genealogy and a narrative both of which will stress that Jesus is the fulfilment of Jewish messianic hopes.”¹⁴⁵ Jesus is both Christ and son of David because he is son of Abraham on whom the promise was given in antiquity. Bringing Jesus’ ancestry to Abraham, Matthew intends to justify the coming of large numbers of Gentiles into Christianity. In it, Matthew inserts the divine into human history.¹⁴⁶

In dividing the genealogy into three-fourteen generations, Matthew presupposes the royal Davidic lineage of Jesus. Fourteen is the numerical value of the Hebrew name David. If fourteen is the double of seven, then Jesus stands at the beginning of the seventh series, the number for fullness. This invariably shows that in the infant Jesus, the new beginning of perfection takes its root, making Jesus a new beginning for humanity.¹⁴⁷ The genealogy simply demonstrates God’s

¹⁴² R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 66.

¹⁴³ R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 67.

¹⁴⁴ H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 22.

¹⁴⁵ R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 67.

¹⁴⁶ R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 67.

¹⁴⁷ H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 24.

providence for mankind. H. Hendrickx believes that the place of the names of four women is a sign that God came for the sake of sinners and Gentiles.¹⁴⁸

In showing the place of Joseph in the genealogy, Matthew makes sure that Joseph is placed as the foster father because he is not the natural father of Jesus. Jesus' natural origin is divine as the conception and birth shall point out. But Joseph acts like the father to give the messiah a Davidic ancestry and dignity within the Jewish society.

3.3.1 Conception and Birth (Matt 1:18-25)

In the conception and birth of Jesus, Matthew points out the origin and identity of Jesus as divine. He clarifies the how of Jesus' parentage and his Davidic descent.¹⁴⁹ The statement, "before they came to live together, Mary was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit" shows Jesus' divine sonship. The place of dream or vision is to show the divine revelation of mysteries. This revelation gives the name and mission of the expected child to history.

Based on the foregoing, Joseph can accept Jesus by naming him and making him son of David. According to R.E. Brown, "when Matthew tells us that Jesus, who through Joseph's acknowledgement is the descendant of the royal Davidic line, he has been begotten in the womb of a virgin through God's Holy Spirit, he sees a very tight connection between Davidic and divine sonship."¹⁵⁰ The conception of Jesus alludes immediately to his destiny as saviour.

3.3.2 The Destiny of the Messiah (Matt 2:1-23)

Here Matthew is linking the history of Israel in Egypt to the history of Jesus. Defining the destiny of Jesus, Matthew shows that he is the new Moses. He also

¹⁴⁸ H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 24.

¹⁴⁹ H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 50.

¹⁵⁰ R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 137.

incorporates the Gentiles into the salvific plan in bringing in the visit of the Magi. The Magi in return exemplify people's response to the messiah. If Jesus is the Messiah, it implies two things: the fulfilment of the messianic scriptures prophesied long before his birth and his kingship.¹⁵¹

With the Magi, Matthew tells us that the Gentiles recognize the Messiah. They pay homage and offer gifts, which are implicit citations of *Ps 72:10-11* and *Is 60:6*, concerning foreigners bringing gifts of gold and frankincense in homage to the king, God's royal son.¹⁵² The signification to the gifts show that gold stands for Jesus as king, frankincense for Jesus as God and Myrrh for Jesus as the one to die.¹⁵³ These gifts simply remind us of the homage of the Queen of Sheba to the son of David with her gifts of spices and myrrh.¹⁵⁴

Consequently, R.T. France believes that the use of myrrh in the crucifixion (*Mark 15:23*) and burial (*John 19:39*) of Jesus has led to the tradition that it symbolized his suffering, but in the Old Testament, it is rather a symbol of joy and festivity.¹⁵⁵ With the flight into Egypt, we see a fulfilment and the remaking of the history of Israel, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

In the killing of the innocents from two years and below, Matthew indicates that the Magi placed the birth of Jesus at two years from their observance of the star. Thus, killing the innocents tells again the story of Moses in Egypt and hence fulfils the prophecy of Jeremiah: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her

¹⁵¹ W.D. DAVIES – D.C. ALLISON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew I*, 253.

¹⁵² R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 179.

¹⁵³ W.D. DAVIES – D.C. ALLISON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew I*, 249.

¹⁵⁴ R.T. FRANCE, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 84.

¹⁵⁵ R.T. FRANCE, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 84.

children.” (*Jer 31:15*). The return from Egypt to Nazareth alludes to another prophecy: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

These simply confirm two things; the Old Testament prediction that Jesus will be called Nazarene (Nazoraioi), at the same time, it is the fulfillment of the prediction, as Nazareth is the hometown of Jesus.¹⁵⁶ Tracing the historicity of the infancy events, J.P. Meier seems to hold that the infancy stories are in isolation to the whole Gospels.¹⁵⁷ R.E. Brown on the contrary points out that the theology of the infancy narratives give the themes and background to the whole Gospel, though they are post resurrection redaction.¹⁵⁸

The point of agreement in the above argument is the fact that the infancy narratives are the products of Christian reflection on the salvific meaning of Jesus Christ in the light of Old Testament prophecies, as the baptism experience will explicate. These meaning fashion the understanding of Jesus’ relation to the world and the place of Christians as the new covenant people.

3.4 The Baptism Experience *Matt 3:13-17, Mark1: 9-11, Luke3: 21-22, John 1:29-34.*

The baptism of Jesus is placed before his public ministry as a way of confirming his mission, which serves as his entry to his public ministry. The synoptic attest to the historicity of this event at the Jordan. According to Matthew, Jesus baptism was to fulfil all righteousness. Looking at the baptism of John as baptism of repentance, one can assume that Jesus accepting to undergo this baptism sought to identify with sinful humanity though sinless himself. On the same note God the father identified with his son in a direct communication.

¹⁵⁶ H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 52.

¹⁵⁷ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 209.

¹⁵⁸ R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 48-54.

One of the motifs for the baptism is to show that with Jesus, the expected time of salvation has come. It also helps us to see the uniqueness of Jesus' sonship as different from the adopted sonship of Israel.¹⁵⁹ Jesus' divine sonship is a central point in the baptism experience because he will be the anointed one, being anointed by the spirit. The implication of the baptism experience in the synoptic as it will fashion the understanding of baptism in scripture is that, it is incorporation into Christ as St. Paul points out in *Rom 6:3-5*.

Christian baptism as belonging to Christ gives a requirement for belonging in the kingdom of God as expressed in *John 3:1-5*. If Jesus' baptism experience portrayed him as Son of God, then all who are baptized in him are adopted sons of God (*Gal 3:20-27*). Since Jesus' baptism is placed before his public ministry, it presupposes that it is linked with preaching as *Matt 28:19* portrays: "Go therefore and make disciples baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

However, it involves repentance and faith as shown by John's preaching, this faith includes the gift of the Holy Spirit portrayed in the distinction between John's baptism and Jesus'. All these put together supposes that baptism is incorporation into the kingdom of God; "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." At this juncture, it is pertinent to point out that the account of Matthew seems to have being an attempt to address the embarrassment of the early Christians about Jesus' acceptance of the baptism of John.

In his dealings on the meaning of Jesus' baptism and trying to clear the embarrassment surrounding it, J.P. Meier tries to show Jesus' superiority over John. First of all, Meier holds that Jesus' baptism is placed as the fulfilment of New

¹⁵⁹ H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 22.

Testament prophecies of John: “The one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and the one on whom the spirit rests.” Jesus fulfils these. It is also the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies as the infancy narratives established; “The heavenly voice proclaims Jesus to be God’s Son” in the words of *Ps 2:7*.¹⁶⁰

The symbolic anointing with the spirit implies that Jesus is the royal Davidic messiah. The word “The beloved” for J.P. Meier reminisces Isaac the “only beloved son” of Abraham, which is possibly meant to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.¹⁶¹ He also traces the words “in whom I am well pleased” to *Isa 42:1* “Here is my servant... with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit.” This emphasises the redaction theology, placing Christ as Son-Servant of God.

Therefore, the Son of God-Messiah is the servant of Yahweh who is empowered by God’s spirit to re-establish the covenant-community of Israel by his justice, his meekness, his teaching, his prophetic ministry and his sacrificial death for sinners. Also, the splitting of the heavens connotes the theophany in the Exodus events.¹⁶² Thus, the baptism of Jesus explains that Jesus the son of God, the royal Davidic messiah is anointed with God’s spirit to be the final prophet and servant of the lord sent to a sinful people.¹⁶³

If all these are true, it means then that Jesus is superior to John the Baptist in origin, ministry and destination. However, the problem remains: Why did Jesus accept to be baptized by John knowing fully well that John’s baptism was of

¹⁶⁰ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 106.

¹⁶¹ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 106.

¹⁶² J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 106-107.

¹⁶³ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 107.

repentance? Did Jesus commit any sin? For Meier, Jesus' acceptance of baptism at the hands of John says many things about Jesus' religious state at the time.¹⁶⁴

It indicates that Jesus knew and agreed with the eschatological message of John that the end of Israel's history as Israel had experienced it up until now was fast approaching, Israel as a people had gone astray and so was in danger of God's punishment. To avoid this impending punishment was to pass through a change of mind expressible in their way of life, which had to be sealed in the baptism of John. Above all these, Jesus recognized John as a prophet sent by God to all Israel meaning that Jesus saw John as an eschatological prophet.¹⁶⁵

The statement "I have not come to abolish the laws but to fulfil them" could mean that Jesus accepted the religious situation in Israel. His acceptance of baptism from John points in the direction of his acceptance of the religious situation and rituals as was practiced. In this therefore, let us ask: What kind of identification did Jesus show? Meier addresses this compassionate identification from the point of view of confession and national identification, he states:

Confession of sin in ancient Israel did not mean unravelling a lengthy laundry list of personal peccadilloes, with the result that worship of God was turned into a narcissistic reflection on self. Confession of sin in ancient Israel was a God centered act of worship that included praise and thanksgiving. Confession of sin often meant recalling God's gracious deeds for an ungrateful Israel, a humble admission that one was a member of this sinful people, a recounting of the infidelities and apostasies of Israel from early on down to one's own day, and a final resolve to change and be different from one's ancestors. Even apart from the question of one's particular personal sins, one was part of this history of sin simply because one was part of this sinful people.¹⁶⁶

Therefore, Jesus' baptism becomes an integral part in the one single plan of salvation. So the baptism experience, like the infancy narratives announces Jesus as Son of God who is priest, king and Messiah. For us Christians, baptism stands at the

¹⁶⁴ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 109.

¹⁶⁵ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 109-110.

¹⁶⁶ J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew*, 113-114.

root of our faith and serves as the entrance to the new covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus through the spirit, and in the spirit we have our principle of relationship. To see how this principle works, let us now examine Jesus as priest, king and messiah.

3.5 Jesus as Priest, King and Messiah

Jesus' role as priest, king and messiah according to the categories of the messianic era enthrones him as the ultimate source of mediation and point of encounter between God and man. The incarnation and the Paschal events inaugurate this integration into the Old Testament categories for the sake of experiential and holistic relationship with God. The whole anchor for Christ's kingship and Messiah is the fact of his death and resurrection, which shows his priestly office by the sacrifice of his life. With the aid of the letter to the Hebrews we shall ascertain this.

Comparing Israel's ancient institutions, the letter to the Hebrews sums up the whole history and mystery of salvation showing the eternal priesthood of Christ thus: (*Heb 1:1-4*)

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

In the Old Testament, priesthood is the representation of Israel's union with God expressed in *Exod 9:5-6*. The Levitical priesthood is the consequence of the Passover and consecration of the firstlings that came to be an institution after the Sinai covenant. The sanctity required of the people for the service of God is symbolized in the priesthood, which becomes the mediator of the covenant.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ R. ABBA, "Priest and Levites" in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 876.

The Levitical priesthood therefore, is hereditary with its hierarchy whereby the High Priest, through his function of entering the sanctuary once in a year, is the head of the hierarchy, the priests second and the Levites who are subordinate to the priests, last. As a whole, Israel's priesthood embodied the duty, honour and privileges of the whole nation as the covenant people of God marching towards the eschatological kingdom of God.¹⁶⁸ Everything of the Old Testament priesthood finds its perfection and fulfilment in Christ.

If the primary role of Israel's priesthood is mediation especially related to the covenant, then Christ's priesthood is an exercise of eternal mediation of the New Covenant, (*Heb 8:1-9:28*). This mediation has a dual dimension: on behalf of God in relation to men, signifying that Christ's mediation is to lead people to God by offering his life as gifts and sacrifices for their sins once and for all. (*Heb 5:1-4*). Since Christ is sinless, he did not need to offer sacrifices for his sins like the high priests of the Old Testament. He simply gave himself for us as the sacrifice.

Based on the promises of the Sinai covenant to which Israel was unfaithful to, Christ's mediation becomes better because "he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant." (*Heb 9:15*). The authority of Christ's priesthood is through his compassion, obedience and accomplishment on the cross. Let us examine how this qualification is attributed to Jesus.

¹⁶⁸ R. ABBA, "Priest and Levites" in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 877.

3.5.1 How Did Jesus Christ Become High Priest?

Simply put, Jesus Christ became high priest through the consecration in his blood. He is priest and victim of his sacrifice.¹⁶⁹ As we have seen in *Exod 28-29*, Aaron and his sons were consecrated priest by washing, anointing and external garments. This meant that they were separated from others and made holy for the service in the sanctuary of God. In general terms, Israel as a consecrated nation was separated from other nations so as to be mediators of God's injunctions.

On the contrary, Christ's consecration was in solidarity with all. He accepted to be one with us in his incarnation so that he may deal directly with us in our way of understanding as *Heb 2:17* puts it: "he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people."¹⁷⁰

Because of this, A. Vanhoye accepts *Heb 2:17* as affirming the necessity of the passion, in which Christ's total identification with humanity, makes him become high priest through his resurrection. The self emptying of Christ forces the author of *Eph 5:2* to state: "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God in an odor of sweetness"¹⁷¹ an action carried out only by high priests. This function, Christ extends to all through baptism.

It is on the grounds of Christ's high priesthood that his death becomes a sacrifice, expiatory for sins.¹⁷² In *Rom 3:24-26*, M. Barth thinks that the words 'Hilasterion' and 'in his blood' make it necessary for St. Paul to assert Christ's death

¹⁶⁹ W. BARCLAY, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 85.

¹⁷⁰ C. OWCZAREK, "Hebrews and the Theology of Priesthood" *Class Notes*.

¹⁷¹ A. VANHOYE, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 75.

¹⁷² M. BARTH, *Was Christ's Death A Sacrifice?*, 8.

as expiatory, an atoning sacrifice in concordance with the action of the high priest before the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies.¹⁷³

He sees Christ's consecration as enacted by God because Christ's sacrifice is brought by God: "God put him forward as expiation." Consequently, Christ's sacrifice is an act of revelation of God's judicial act, which changes the situation of man by making him righteous before God. Seemingly, M. Barth holds that "Paul preserved an Old Testament tradition against (and for) the Jews and Gentiles of his time – scarcely for its own sake, but rather since he felt bound to say that it had pleased God, to hold judgment over all mankind."¹⁷⁴

This means that Christ's sacrifice is theocentric, and could not have been done through any other means apart from his blood. Christ gave himself completely in obedience to his father's will, so that he may redeem God's creation for him. This is why St Paul sees Christ's death as expiatory. With the strength of Paul's argument, let us examine our relationship and participation in this priesthood of Christ.

3.5.2 Christian Participation in the Priesthood of Christ

The sacrifice of Christ in his blood sanctifies us and gives us the authority to participate in his priesthood through our incorporation into him in baptism. In like manner, we share in Christ's priesthood in two capacities: Our common priesthood and Ordained or ministerial priesthood. In both cases, we enter into the sanctuary of God by the blood of Christ (*Heb 10:19*). We who enter God's sanctuary become a priestly people (*1Peter 2:5*).¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ M. BARTH, *Was Christ's Death A Sacrifice?*, 28.

¹⁷⁴ M. BARTH, *Was Christ's Death A Sacrifice?*, 30-34.

¹⁷⁵ A. VANHOYE, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 251.

The strength of our fulfilled priesthood in Christ puts no barrier to our right of access into the sanctuary, which was to be entered by the high priest only. Hence, the letter to the Hebrews exhorts that we approach God in purity and confidence as we profess confident faith and trust in Jesus. (*Heb 10:22-24*). Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.¹⁷⁶

Our Christian vocation to the sanctuary of God through our baptism reminisces the covenantal consecration in Exodus. However, through consecration, the Levites were called to service of God, in like manner, through the sacrament of Holy Orders, priests are called to minister to the people of God. It is rather unfortunate to point out that ordained ministry is not very explicit in the letter to the Hebrews. Nevertheless, its brief statement on it can support the argument for ordained ministry in the church.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you. (*Heb 13:7, 17*)

Other passages of the scripture give the support and reality to ordained ministry. For instance *Eph 4:11-12*: “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Looking at the requirement of Old Testament priesthood, St. Paul admonishes sanctity in carrying out the ministry (*Rom 12:1-2*).

¹⁷⁶ F.F. BRUCE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 249.

Since ordained ministers are consecrated to minister unto the people of God, their physical inheritance comes from the spiritual work. Therefore, St. Paul reminds us “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” (*1Cor 9:13-14*) The Law of Moses prescribes this.¹⁷⁷

Because Christ is the only high priest, ordained ministers are to work with the same compassion that Christ showed. The ministry has to be carried out in union with Christ so that the sufferings of Christ becomes theirs and their ministry in union with Christ becomes a priestly ministry as St. Paul put it: “But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” (*1Cor 15:15-16*)

Having alluded to the Kingship and Messianism of Christ in our treatment of the messianic era and infancy narratives, suffice it therefore to assert that Christ qualifies as priest, king and messiah because of the Paschal events. His kinship is synonymous with the Kingdom of God which dominates his preaching. His resurrection gives him secure and eternal reign in that kingdom of God.

Jesus’ life on earth manifested him as king and messiah especially in the ways he treated the laws and traditions, interpreting them, deepening and even correcting them. He even claimed the right to transgress the Sabbath when it served

¹⁷⁷ A. VANHOYE, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 268.

better to fulfill the loving intention of the Divine Will.¹⁷⁸ His activities in the temple show his priesthood, his miracles as overpowering Satan and his association with the poor as bringing God's people together professed him Messiah.¹⁷⁹

The Messiah as an anointed one of God finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This means that the expectation of the messianic era in which Judaism believed that an anointed king of the Davidic dynasty who would establish in the world a definitive reign of God has been realized in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the unity and continuity of the plan and history of salvation has been brought to its perfection in Christ. Our meaning of life is therefore Jesus Christ.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with Jesus the first-born son as priest, king and messiah within the messianic era. In the messianic era, we have seen Israel's eschatological hope in the restoration of the Davidic dynasty. The goal of this hope for Israel is the physical establishment of the kingdom of God. However, the instrumentality in bringing about this kingdom of God is to be an anointed king bestowed with the spirit and power of God.

This anointed one from the messianic prophecies is to be the son of David endowed with divine sonship, whose powers would be felt in the whole world, and whose reign would finally bring peace both in the spiritual and physical realm. All these expectations came to be embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, who through the incarnation entered human history and becomes the fulfillment of the promises of old and source of our eschatological inheritance in the kingdom of God.

¹⁷⁸ A. GELIN, *Son and Saviour*, 68.

¹⁷⁹ M. LEPIN, *Christ and the Gospel*, 151.

The infancy narratives and baptism experience made this clear. In the birth account, the Son of God, the Messiah was announced and born. In the baptism experience, he was proclaimed and commissioned. Thus, Christ as Son of God embodied both roles of Servant and Son of Yahweh. It is in this that the unity of the whole Paschal events attributes the title Priest, King and Messiah to Christ. The letter to the Hebrews helped in the establishment of this truth.

It helped us to establish Christ's royal priesthood within the categories of Israel's divine institutions, being the one and only mediator between God and Man. In Christ's eternal priesthood therefore, we find our inheritance through our incorporation to him in baptism. We then participate in this priesthood in two ways: through the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood. For the sanctity of this priesthood, we become unblemished offerings to God in union with Christ. Therefore, in our participation, we proclaim Christ as Priest, King and Messiah.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The historical dynamism in the salvific plan of God finds its unity, meaning and purpose in the promise of inheritance, which finds its final realization and fulfilment in Christ, yet opening up the hope of an eschatological summation in the Parousia. The acquiescence of this inheritance demands faith, which in itself is an adoring and loving relationship with the divine. This has been revealed in history, practiced by the patriarchs and perfected in Christ who becomes the only primogeniture in whom all have their inheritance.

This truth of our faith journey is what this project is apt to realize. We started off with the issue of faith imbued with the promise of land and progeny, and ended with faith imbued with final inheritance in the kingdom of God. The former is intricately tied to the righteous faith of Abraham, the latter is anchored on the faith of all in Jesus Christ through the grace of baptism. Jesus the Son of God grants us unity through his death and resurrection meriting the title Priest and Messiah.

Hence, in chapter one, we dealt with the Akkadian principle where Isaac mediates the promise and election of Israel. In the chapter, we see the origin and the nuances of the term first-born son as a divine purpose. In it, the place of sacrifice as integral to human communion with God is traditionally revealed. The promise of blessing expounds the historical beginning of Israel as a nation, putting in place priestly blessing and inheritance.

Chapter two settles on the constitution of Israel as the first-born of God. Here the clear role of mediation is expressed in Moses' duty to liberate the nation. So in being a mediator between Israel and God, he reveals the divine name, nature and relationship required of Israel as son. In that relationship, Israel discovers her special intimacy as son, mediated through the covenant, priesthood and kingship. With these institutions and their collapse, Israel looks forward to a restoration ushering in the messianic era.

Chapter three takes up Jesus the first-born son and the messianic era. Within it, Israel's eschatological hope and messianic expectations are seen to be fulfilled in Jesus whose uniqueness as son elicits the divine plan of salvation. In Jesus' servant-son mediation role, he brings Israel's eschatological hope to a fulfilment. In his death and resurrection, he is acclaimed Priest, King and Messiah. In his priesthood, kingship and messiahship, Christians through baptism become the covenant people and adopted children in the sonship and sacrifice of Christ.

Consequently, "Son" becomes a general term for relationship with God. This term helped Israel to think of itself as a family where God's position fits as father. So it is basically in the covenantal rules that Israel claims sonship because it established a relationship of love which is both national and filial. Christians in their baptismal commitment realize sonship in Christ who is the only unique Son of God. With this project, we hope our knowledge and intimacy with God will improve.

ABBREVIATIONS

1kgs	1Kings
1Peter	1Peter
1Sam	1Samuel
2Chr	2Chronicles
2kgs	2Kings
2Sam	2Samuel
3kgs	3Kings
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Amos	Amos
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
Deut	Deuteronomy
Eph	Ephesians
Exod	Exodus
Ezek	Ezekiel
Gal	Galatians
Gen	Genesis
Heb	Hebrews
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
John	John
Lev	Leviticus
Luke	Luke
Mark	Mark
Matt	Matthew
Mic	Micah
<i>NJBC</i>	<i>New Jerome Biblical Commentary</i>
Num	Numbers
Ps(s)	Psalm(s)
Rom	Romans
Zech	Zechariah

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