

Revisiting Sinai Covenant Theology, Its Values and Resonances for Today

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of Sinai covenant (Exod 19-24, 32-34; Deut, Josh-2kings) in Hebrew and Christian religions cannot be overemphasized. It is a point of departure for understanding Israel's basic religion and its components: God's relationship with his people, the kingship of God, revelation and liberation from myth. It also illumines the riches of Israel's history, its persons, liturgy, rituals, cults and commandments, the role of the prophets, fulfilled in Christ, the Messiah stressed by our honoree in the course of his ministries. Many would see it as a conditional and relational covenant binding both God and his people. Its meaning, nature, and patterns as discussed historically, pastorally and contextually in this essay, went through various roots of nuances and shifts in the ancient Near East, Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures, including commitment, faithfulness, resilience, and obedience, trust in divine providence and sharing together. Finally, its relevance, NT resonances and theological importance of Sinai Covenant for the church in African and beyond are highlighted.

Keywords: Covenant (*Berit*), Commitment, Obedience, Relationship, Fidelity, Theology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of covenant, especially Sinai covenant in Hebrew and Christian religions cannot be overemphasized. There are a variety of covenants in the Old Testament, including the covenant with Noah (Gen 9), Abraham (Gen 15, 17, 19, and 22), and David (2 Sam 7; Ps 89:3) and with Jeremiah (Jer 31-33). Each has its own distinct characteristics. This study, broadly (etymologically, historically, pastorally, contextually and theologically) explores the meaning, nature, language, patterns of covenant as a whole, but focuses on the theology of Sinai covenant, described in in Exodus 19-24, and renewed in Deuteronomy, Joshua- 2 Kings, in the prophets and in the New Testament, It constitutes Moses' instruction to the people in Deuteronomy 4:44-26:19 and is renewed in Deuteronomy 27; Joshua 8:30-35 and Joshua 24. It is a point of departure for understanding Israel's basic religion and its components: God's relationship with his people, the kingship of God, his divine nature, revelation and liberation from sin and oppression.

Sinai covenant also forms the basis of the evaluation of the nation's behavior in Joshua-2 Kings. Echoes of this covenant is heard in numerous psalms (e.g., Ps 103), as well as in prophetic texts (e.g., Jer 11). Although there are certain differences in theological emphasis between the understanding of the Sinai covenant in Deuteronomy-2Kings (the so-called Deuteronomistic or Deuteronomistic History) and other texts that speak of the Sinai covenant, such as in Exodus 19-24 and 32-34, there is much commonality between them as well. This commonality includes emphasize on fidelity, faithfulness, resilience, courage, grateful obedience, sense of service to the Lord, and commitment to one's calling and ministry. In this case, the relevance of Sinai covenant, its New Testament resonances, values and theological importance for the church in Africa and beyond are underscored.

II. COVENANTS: AN OVERVIEW

A covenant can broadly be described as a formal agreement, oath, promise, commandments, contract, testament, or treaty between two parties, with specific obligations and responsibilities on each side. Many ancient terminologies (Hebrew- *berith*, Greek *diatheke*, Latin *testamentum*) are used quite frequently in the Bible to express the meaning and nature of covenant. In fact, *berith* occurs approximately 289 times in the OT (first use at Gen 6:18), including "*Baal-berith*" in Judges 8:33 and 9:4, "*El-berith*" in Judges 9:46), and *diatheke* 33 times in the NT, especially in the Letter to the Hebrews- about 17 times (Kessler, 2013).

The etymology of the Hebrew word *berit*, so used is not clear (Boadt, 2012, 145). Some scholars, suggest it is a feminine noun from the root, "*brh*" meaning "to eat, dine, *mangiare*" (2 Sam 3:35; 12:17; 13:5, 6,

10; Ps 69:22; Lam 4:10). Others trace it to Akkadian word, *birit*, “between, among,” which corresponds to the Hebrew preposition “*bn*,” which indeed appears with the word *bérîth*, in the sense of “covenant between ‘X’ and ‘Y’.” Others like, Kutsch (1997) argues that *bérîth* is also from the root *brh*, in the sense of “to look for, or “to choose.” Kutsch traces this to an Akkadian *barû*, meaning “to look,” which later, developed into “determining,” or “fixing.” Still others associate *bérîth* with another Akkadian root, *biritu*, meaning “clasp,” “fetter.” They argue, this will be in line still with Akkadian “*risksu*” and Hittite “*išhiul*,” both words meaning “bond.” This is close to Arabic, “*‘aqd*” and Latin “*vinculum fidei*,” (bond of faith), “*contractus*” (“contract”) as well as the German word “*bund*” (Weinfeld, 1975; Idem, 1993).

In addition, it is also suggested that the Hebrew “*berith*,” originally implies an “imposition,” “liability,” or “obligation.” In Psalm 111:9 and Judges 2:20, we read, “he has commanded his covenant” which underscores the fact that, “*berith*” is commanded. *Berith* seems to be synonymous with the laws and commandment (Deut 4:13; 33:9; Isa 24:5 Ps 50:16; 103:18), and with the essence of the covenant at Sinai (Exod 24), the primary focus of this work. The term *berith* also expresses the solemn contract between Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31:44, or the alliance of friendship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:3. It describes the peace pact made by Abraham with a whole tribe of Amorites in Genesis 14:13; and the bond of marriage in Proverbs 2:17 or Malachi 2:14. It can also be a solemn treaty between kings, as the case with Solomon and Hiram of Tyre in 1 Kings 5, with Ahab and Benhadad of Syria in 1 Kings 20:34. But often it can also be used to describe the relationship between Israel and their God (Boadt, 2012, p. 146).

In 2 Kings 11:4 “*berith*” is used in the sense of “cutting a covenant” and making people to swear. In terms of a vassal and the master or suzerain, this implies an oath to be subordinate to the master and the promise of the master to protect the subordinate as we find in Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and Joshua 9:15 (Weinfeld, 1975; Idem, 1993). Hence, a “covenant” is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in the advance. Covenant often promise specific benefits, rewards, or blessings for people who keep the terms of the covenant. If I may sum this section with Boadt;

Berit is a term so rich that it captures the heart of Israel's religious beliefs (1) the people are bound to an unbreakable covenant-union with their God (2) he has made known his love and his mercy to them; (3) he has given them commandments to guide their daily life; (4) they owe him worship, fidelity, and obedience, and (5) they are marked by the signs of that covenant bond. The Covenant created the unity of the nation Israel, based not on blood relationship but on submission to the divine will and the confession that he alone is God. In turn, God pledges himself to be Israel's personal protector and helper; not only against foreign enemies, but against sickness, disease, and chaos as well. Most of all, he will be present whether it is a time of prosperity or of failure, for he has laid claim to this people as his own. Yahweh is a personal God who demands personal loyalty(...)but more often it describes the blessings that trust in the Lord will bring freedom from fear of the Promised Land, the fruitfulness of children and crops, permanent presence, and the joy of knowing God is near (2012 p. 146).

III. RITES, CEREMONIES, SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

It had its own ceremonies and rites as presented in different portions of the Bible depending on the traditions and sources (J, E or P.) In Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34:18-20 for instance, we read about cutting animals into pieces, and passing between them. This is a ceremony that depicts the fate of the victim who violates the terms of the covenant (Weinfeld, 1975).

Weinfeld also reminds us of the “touching of the throat,” attested in the Mesopotamian sources (En El VI, 98), which also highlights the punishment of the violator. The animals brought to the place of the covenant are considered sacrificial offers. In Exodus 24 (E, P.) also, the covenantal ceremony is accompanied by sacrifices, *that is* “burnt offerings and peace offerings,” but these are not cut in pieces in order to pass through them, as in Genesis 15 (J source) and Jeremiah 34. But only the blood in Exodus is used for the ceremony. Moses divides the blood of the slaughtered animals in two: one half is thrown upon the altar, and the other upon the people, i.e., their representatives (Exod 24:6-8). The blood ceremony in connection with a covenant is also attested in Zechariah 9:11. Solemn meals would usually ratify the covenants (Gen 26:30; 31:54; Exod 24:11; 2 Sam 3:20). Salt played a significant role in this meal, hence (a covenant of salt, Lev 2:13; Num 18:19; (P sources) 2 Chr 13:5).

In Israel, circumcision was considered as the “sign of the covenant” of God with Abraham (Gen 17:11, P Source). This Priestly source also explains in the Sabbath (Exod 31:16f), the rainbow (Gen 9:1-17). Hence, the Sabbath, the rainbow, and circumcision are, in fact, the three great signs of the covenants established by God in three critical stages of the history of mankind; the creation (Gen 1:1; 2:3; Exod 31:16f), the reestablishment of mankind after the flood (Gen 9:1-17), and the birth of the Hebrew nation (Gen 17).

In other words, covenants threatened sanctions, punishment, or curses for those who break the terms of the covenant. Some forms of ancient covenant needed formal ratification, usually sealed with blood and thus involving animal sacrifices. Concrete symbols or ‘signs’ were also often exchanged to remind the two parties about their agreement. Theologically, a covenant is a commitment. It is an instrument constituting the rule and the kinship of God (Mendenhall & Herion, 1992).

No doubt echoes of ancient covenant materials are heard in biblical texts, metaphorically used to describe the relationship between God and Israel (Kessler, 2013). This “Covenant” (*berith*) has grown in different forms and types, for social, political and religious reasons in the Ancient Near East (ANE) and has come to shed light on our better understanding of the OT covenant (McCarthy, 1978; Walton, 1989; Hahn, 2005).

IV. COVENANT TYPES IN ANE

Even though readers may consult resources and authors such as Hahn (2005), Mendenhall and Herion (1992) Herion (1987), Otto (2005), as well as Oden (1987) and Boadt (2012) for details of ANE covenant forms and patterns, a brief a comment on four types of ANE making emphasized by Kessler (2013) is imperative. It is imperative and essential for an understanding of covenant concept of the Bible, especially the Sinai Covenant theology.

Among these four, Kessler first draws our attention to covenants that were made between two individuals or groups of relatively equal status or power with spelt out obligations each party had toward each other as well as the benefits of this kind of bilateral parity covenants (Kessler, 2018; McCarthy, 1978; Boadt, 2012). Secondly, he points to the covenants made between a greater power (suzerainty) and a lesser one (vassal) with each side having responsibilities. Although the lesser party’s responsibilities were listed in detail, the greater party’s responsibilities were assumed with some benefits for each. This covenant, common among the Hittite inhabitants from the second millennium BCE, around the plain of present-day Turkey is what we called bilateral suzerainty and vassal treaties (Kessler, 2013, 178; McCarty, 1978, Boadt, 2012; Moran, 1963; Weinfeld, 1975). The third pattern of covenant in ANE was that of a powerful king or nation imposing a covenant upon a lesser powerful king or nation. This involved the smaller person swearing allegiance to the more powerful one under the threat of severe consequences. This is often classified as a loyalty oath (Weinfeld, 1975; Idem, 1976; Kessler, 2013). Finally, a fourth covenant ancient pattern involved a solemn promise by one party to another to grant a certain benefit, good or gifts such as ruling over a territory, exemption from paying taxes etc. These are sometimes known as promissory, or covenant grants (Kessler, 2013; Weinfeld, 1993).

V. ECHOES OF ANE COVENANT PATTERNS IN OT

Echoes of these four ancient patterns are pointedly heard in the history of the Hebrew Bible/OT(familiar to our honoree), which contains the following covenant: those of Adam and Eve (Gen 1-2); Noah and his family(Gen 6-9); Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12, 15,17); Moses and the Israelites, that is, Sinai Covenant (Exod 19-24; 32-34; Deut 5-11); David and the Kingdom (2 Sam 7); and the new and renewed covenant (Jer 31:31-34). In other words, a covenant is way of God’s dealing with his people throughout history. Kessler (2013) points out that with regards to ANE pattern one, that is, bilateral covenant between equals, a clear biblical example may be historically seen in the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:22-34), Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:25-33), and Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:43-55). In addition, many scholars see the Lord’s promises to Abraham and his descendant (Gen 12:1-3 and 15:1-6; 7-21) and to David (2 Sam 7:1-15) as examples of the promissory type four, of ANE covenant (Kessler, 2013; Levenson, 1985; Waltke, 1988). There are also many who disagree with reducing Abrahamic and Davidic covenant as mere promissory (Knoppers, 1996; Arnold, 2009). In line with these divergent views, with regards to patterns, nature and types of covenants, unilateral or bilateral, conditional or unconditional, absolute or non-absolute, promissory or non-promissory, Ellis once described the covenant with Abraham thus:

It is bilateral: on the part of God, promises of a great posterity (Gen 12:2, 15:5 of Palestine (Gen 12:7; 15:7,18), extraordinary blessings on the patriarchs and through them on all mankind (Gen12:3; 15:5–6); on the part of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: the obligation of serving God (Gen 17:7), moral integrity (Gen17:1; 18:19; 26:5), and faith in God’s promises (Gen 15:6; cf. Rom 4:1–25). (b) It is absolute, not conditional. (c) Circumcision is given as an eternal sign of those who enter the covenant (Gen 17:10). (d) there is, as in the Adamic covenant (Gen 2), familiarity between man and God (Gen 18:17ff) (1975, pp. 23-24).

Similarly, scholars are also divided whether the Sinai covenant (to be discussed further soon) bears closer affinity to the described Hittite- bilateral suzerainty approach or the Assyrian loyalty oath. Opinions and voices are divided again. Others see it as an obligation imposed upon Israel by Israel's God and sealed by an oath of obedience. According to Waltke (1988, p. 132) "Law is unilateral with reference to Israel and unconditional with reference to Yahweh". That is to say that Israel is bound while the God of Israel is not (Kessler, 2013).

Other scholars view Sinai covenant as a given in the context of broader relationship, calling on responsibilities on both sides. This relational nature of the Sinai covenant (Exod, Deut, Josh- 2 Kings, and the prophets) to be studied further, seems to be overwhelmingly seen by many as standing closer to those ANE covenants willingly entered by two parties, and imply mutual commitment, privileges and obligations (Kessler, 2013). But, this is not to say that while, the biblical covenant, especially Sinai covenant, bear, as we shall see, some resemblance to these ANE covenants, that they are identical. A more appropriate way of looking at biblical material of Sinai covenant is to understand the biblical writers as adapting ANE covenant forms loosely and metaphorically to express God's purposes and his relationship with his grateful, responsible, dutiful and obligatory people (Kessler, 2013).

VI. SINAI COVENANT THEOLOGY

The story of the Sinai covenant (Exod 19-24), or Sinai theology, begins as the covenant people suffer oppression and all kinds of subjugation in Egypt around the 13th century B.C.E. God hears their cry and moved to liberate them, because "he remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Exod 2:24). The exodus from Egypt creates for God a special people. The experience at Sinai serves to solemnize the bond created through exodus (Nowell, 1996). In other words, As summarized by Kessler (2013) "Sinai covenant theology focuses upon the relationship between Yahweh and Israel that was sealed by covenant at Sinai following Yahweh's great deliverance at the Red Sea"(p. 196). This covenant, Kessler continue to stress, sees relationship as rooted in in God's gracious choice of Israel and liberation of the people from slavery in Egypt, in fulfilment of the promises made to Israel's ancestors. Israel after this delivery is invited to enter into a commitment of an enduring relationship with Israel's God. This God will give Israel the gift of the land of Canaan as well as continue to be their provider, protector and sustainer, delivering them the hand of their enemies. Israel in turn will "Yahweh's special possessions," out of all the nations of the earth, keeping the terms of the covenant which include worship of Yahweh alone as well as obey him (Kessler, 2013).

In fact, Obedience to these covenantal obligations constitute a response of gratitude on Israel's part for God's goodness. Such grateful obedience is essential to the ongoing maintenance of the covenant. Failure to obey, or breaking the covenant attracts God's judgment, who of course is a merciful God, who eventually forgives, and restore Israel with compassion (Exod 32-34). In Sinai covenant, motif of forgiveness are also found other biblical texts (1 Kings 8; Mic 7:18-19; Jer 31:3-34; 36:2-3; Joel 2:12-14; Hosea 1:10; 3:1-4; 11; 8-9; Ps 85-86; 103).

Looking closely at the textual development of this covenant, many would say, it is a conditional covenant, binding both God and the people. It is made in the midst of the theophany on the mountain. And inserted in the midst of this, is Israel's charter, the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:3-17), and the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22-23:30). The latter is divided into casuistic stipulations (20:22-22:17), "conditional sentence, in which specific situations are addressed (Coogan, 2006; Zuck, 1991), and apodictic stipulations (Exod 22:18-20 and 22:21-23:9), "characterized by absolute or general commands or prohibitions (Zuck, 1991; Coogan, 2006). In line with this, Nowell, rightly suggests, the beauty of all these laws though, some with different dating and redaction, but place together, signifies the fact that all Israelite law is incorporated into and dependent on the covenant bond at Sinai (Nowell, 1996).

This Sinai covenant, as mentioned earlier, is sealed by a dual ceremony: a meal and a blood rite (Exod 24:1-11). Both rituals signify the sharing of life. Those who eat together share the nourishment that sustains their lives. This ancient custom, of sharing meal, is still being practiced in different part of Africa today, the continent of our honoree. To share bread with someone was to become responsible for that person's life. The sprinkling of the blood on the altar, which signifies Yahweh, and on the people indicates that Yahweh and the people have become blood relatives, next-of-kin (Nowell, 1996). Summarizing Sinai covenant Ellis says;

It is bilateral; on the part of God, the promises made to Abraham and are extended to the whole Israelite nation; on the part of the nation, what was required of Abraham is now required of Israel, plus obedience to the Mosaic law (Exod 20–23). It is conditional. De facto it is broken by the Israelites and repudiated by God (Exod 19:5; Jer 30:31; Matt 20:28; Mark 14:24). Circumcision is continued as the external sign of those who enter the covenant. There is extraordinary familiarity. God himself dwells in the midst of the nation in the Tabernacle above the Ark of the Covenant (1976, pp. 24-25).

Significant too, in our discussion is God's preparation of Moses as a mediator and prophet (Exod 2-6) the providential liberation of the Israelite from bondage (Exod 14), the theophany of the inauguration of the covenant (Exod 19:16ff), the giving of the Book of the Covenant (Exod 21-23:10; 24:7), and the ratification of the covenant by the people as a group (Exod 24:1-8).

Above all, and as mentioned in my introduction, Yahweh's covenant with Israel at Sinai is not limited to languages found in Exodus 19-24 and 32-34. Sinai covenant, informs the Pentateuch, and constitutes the languages and the theological center of DH or Dtn (Deut, Josh- 2 Kings, that stresses one, God, one people, one nation, one land, obedience and loyalty to God, etc.), as well as certain prophetic books and Psalms, with motifs of faithfulness, obedience, commitment, loyalty, and forgiveness, some of which we have listed above. For example, the following text of Deuteronomy, which include the famous *shema*, is typical of the Deuteronomist understanding of the Sinai covenant:

Now this is the commandments-the statutes and the ordinances-that the LORD your God charmed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (NRSV) (Deuteronomy, 6:1-5).

In other words, most of the significant words and phrases characterizing the Sinai covenant are also found in this text. Notably, "the LORD your God" (vv.1,2,5), "keeping the LORD's commandments, statutes and ordinances" (vv. 1, 3; cf. Deut 4:23; 5:1, 22; 6:3-4; 7:11-12), "fearing the LORD" (v. 2; Exod 20:20) and "land that the LORD promised your ancestor," (Exod 6:8; 12:25; Deut 1:8 etc). All these, as Kessler would put it points to relational responses, that characterized the ministry of our honoree, such as, (a) a call to God's people to lives of grateful obedience and joyful worship, (b) a call for loyalty and exclusive worship of God alone, (c) a call to exclusive commitment to God alone and must be translated on how we deal with one another with compassion, (d) a call to recognized the reality of sin and failure, (e) a call to hold fast to justice and faithful mercy of God, (f) and finally, a call to sincere and undivided response to the demands of the covenant with a committed heart as stressed in Deuteronomy 6:5; 6:6; 8:2; 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 31:33 and in Ezekiel 26:26-27 (Kessler, 2013).

This brings us to underscoring the importance of Sinai covenant and its theological resonances in the NT, and values for the Church and Christian communities, especially in Africa and Ikot Ekpene Diocese in particular.

VII. IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE OF SINAI COVENANT

The importance of Sinai covenant discussed, cannot be taken lightly. Exodus 1-18, for example, moves from Israel's slavery through Moses' struggle against the pharaoh to freedom and the dangerous journey to the sacred mountain of Sinai. While the remaining chapters of Exodus- Numbers 10 describe a single stay at this mountain where God makes a covenant with his people, Israel. This important covenant, is the central event of the Pentateuch (Boadt, 2012).

In addition to many other texts cited thus far, the book of Deuteronomy, unavoidably alluded throughout this study, is written as a whole, in covenantal language from the beginning to the end, "seeking a national renewal of fidelity to Yahweh in the promised land" (Boadt, 2012, p. 145). This theme is reflected in the covenant scenes in DH (Jos 23-24; 2 Kings 22-23). In the prophetic literature (major and minor) Amos and Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as illustrated above, echo many of the covenant motifs and ideals.

As if these were not enough, the postexilic reforms of Ezra (458-400BC) is rooted in covenant renewal-affirming the centrality of covenant in the Bible. No wonder, and as noted by Haffemann, Walther Eichrodt once argued that, the 'covenant' is the central concept of the Old Testament, "by which to illuminate the structural unity(...) of the message of the Old Testament,' since in the concept of the covenant, Israel's fundamental conviction of its special relationship with God is concentrated," (Eichrodt, 1961, 11; Haffemann, 2007, 24). In other words, "all biblical history may be called the theology of covenant," (Boadt, 2012, p. 145).

Covenant theology not only applies to the time on Mount Sinai; it also provides the framework for understanding God's earlier promises to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; it gives the entire Pentateuch the character of "torah," or instruction, rather than history"; it becomes the standard for judging Israel's national success or failure for the period of the conquest in Joshua and Judges. It serves as a yard stick for each king of Israel in the books of Samuel and Kings. It forms the background of the prophets' oracles of promise to and judgment on Israel from the tenth century until after the exile; and it shapes the thought of

Deuteronomy (already discussed), in interpreting the entire history of Israel in light of fidelity to the covenant on Sinai (Boadt, 2012, p. 145). Its importance also extend to the NT theology and Christian communities all over the world.

VIII. ECHOES AND RESONANCES OF SINAI COVENANT IN NT

As rightly stressed by my professor in Rome, Boschi, Jesus Christ is identified in the NT, for example in Matthew 1:1-17 as the Messiah, the son of David, as a fulfillment of the messianic prophecies, and depends on the theology of unconditional covenant with David and Abraham (Boschi, *Le' Alleanza Nella Bibbia*", pp.8-9). This is also seen in the theology of the last supper (1 Cor 11:25; Lk22:20; Matt 26:27; Mk 14:24). Paul also refers to the lasting covenant between God and Abraham and his descendant (Rom 4:1-25). Throughout the NT the covenant imagery persists. For example, the parent-child relationship (Matt 6:9-15), the Christian and God (Rom 8:14-170); the bridegroom image (Matt 9:15; 25:1-13) and the imagery of the wedding of the lamb (Rev 19:6-10; 21:2-3).

Additionally, Kessler (2013, 272) argues that Sinai covenant in particular has indisputable resonances in the NT that must also have impacted the teaching, writing and preaching of our honoree. We readily see echoes of this contrast between OT and NT, in John 1:17; Galatian 4:24-25; 2 Corinthians 3:7 and in the Letter to the Hebrews 3:1-7.

Echoes of grateful obedience stressed in Deuteronomy is heard in John 14:15, 21; 15:10, which also informs Paul's ethics that calls Christians everywhere, in including Africa, to walk in the Spirit, "to fulfil just requirements" of the law (Rom 5:1; 8:1-4); and in light of the "mercies of God" (Exod 32-34) to offer themselves as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1-2). Like in the OT covenant laws, the NT stresses the goodness of the law. Paul describes it as "holy, just, and good" (Rom 7:12).

Furthermore, the language of the "new covenant" in the NT (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8:8; 13; 9:15; 12:24) presupposes that which we have studied in the OT. Affirming this Kessler (2013, 273) writes "we have seen that the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is not a different or changed covenant from the Sinai covenant. Rather, its distinctiveness lies in Yahweh's transformation of the human heart, which produces a sincere internal commitment to do God's will." Loyalty and exclusive worship of YHWH alone stressed in Sinai covenant is heard passages of the NT (Matt 28:17; Heb 1:6; 1 Cor 12:2; 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Thess 1:9 and 1 John 5:21).

Other resonances, which I would recommend for further reading, include election and responsibility (1 Pet 2:9// Exod 19:6; Eph 2:10), the dangers of disrespect of the covenant (1 Cor 1:22; Rom 6:1; Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 11:29-30; 1 Pet 4:17; Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31), divine mercy and assurances of forgiveness as earlier heard in Exodus 34:6-7; Psalm 103:12. Finally, the theology of the renewed heart as heard in Deuteronomy 30:6 and repeated in Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 26:26-27, the NT sees the renewal of the human person as stemming from heart, hence stresses, for instance, in Romans 2:29 for the need to circumcise one's heart (Kessler, 2007, p. 274). The theological values, echoes and NT resonances of Sinai covenant for the Church in Africa and Ikot Ekepen Diocese is equally worth noting briefly.

IX. VALUES OF SINAI COVENANT FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA AND BEYOND

The immediate and primary ecclesial and civil contexts within which our honoree devoted toiled and served with commitment for years are mostly that of Africa, Nigeria and Ikot Ekepen diocese with shared values. The church in these communities is widely and popularly acknowledged as a "Family of God's People" distinguishable from all other African human communities by its listening faith, hope, and love, rooted in the discussed Sinai covenant, and prophetically continues and centers on Jesus and his redemptive work as recorded in the NT (Isichei, 1995; Muli, 2020).

This church-family in African context served by our honoree, has already been blessed in many ways: in her sacramental life, her deep sense of the sacred, her sense of the mission and existence of God, her lively liturgical celebrations, and her deep-cherished sense of family values (Udoekpo, 2019). Such blessings notwithstanding, her numerous challenges and yearnings include poverty, political instability, social disorientation, misery, war, injustice of all forms, terrorism, division, anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism, selfishness, tribalism, the inordinate urge for material things, syncretism, family and ethnic conflict, violence, betrayal, jealousy, and gloating over one another and ones' neighbors and abuse of religions and worship. We will take a few of these. But these are all didactically anti-the above discussed ideals and motifs of Sinai covenant (faithfulness, fidelity, honesty, love, obedience, commitment, pure heart, steadfastness, worship of YHWH alone etc), professed by our honoree.

While discussing Amos 5, a co-champion of Sinai covenant (Boadt, 2012), I dwelt extensively on the ugly socio-political and economic situations of Nigeria, which to the best of my knowledge are antithetical to the true ideals of Sinai covenant (Udoekpo, 2017). This essay invites all Nigerians, especially her

politicians to rethink their socio-political values in light of the Sinai covenant's texts and theology including, Exodus 19-24; 32-34, Deuteronomy, prophetic messages manifested in the NT's life of Christ.

As if to anticipate this work, the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) in their last concluded First Plenary Meeting in the year 2022 described in their "Communique" the state of the Nigerian nation. They described a nation, which in my own evaluation, does not live up to the expectation of the ideals and motifs of Sinai covenant theology. The bishops noted that politics although politics is the prudence search for the common good, Nigerian politician irrespective of their political platform, creed, ethnic group, sex and ideology are not living up to the sense of the common good, and oneness (one God, one people, one nation, one land) found in the message of DH and Sinai covenant. The CBCN noticed lack of observance of the character principle listed in the Nigerian constitution. There is no functional, stable, qualitative and affordable educational system to teach the people, especially the young ones, among other things, ethics of life (obedience, hard work, sacrifice, resilience, integrity, endurance, perseverance, honesty, peace, dialogue, non-violence, justice and human fraternity etc). These, again, are all elements of "torah" (teaching), and the bedrock of any development. They also rightly observed lack of gross lack of job opportunities, equity, gender balance between male and female, good moral standards, adequate justice system, transparency and accountability found in theology of the Deuteronomy (Deut 12-16), mostly designed in a Sinai covenantal pattern (CBCN, 2022). Religiously, Nigeria has become a floodgate of proliferation of worship centers, fundamentalism, and all forms of divisiveness, some of which are antithetical to the ideals of Sinai covenant (Udoekpo, *Divided Nation*, 2020). In these centers, abuses are found especially in the liturgical music, that was supposed among other things, to be full of vitality, solemn and bring glory to God as well as sanctify the faithful (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997, p. 1157).

This is the reason why the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Special Assembly for Africa emphasizes that the worshipping assemblies in Africa are sustained by the vitality of their liturgies and living ecclesial communities (no.7). Truly African worship and liturgical settings are unique, lively, and joyful with songs and hymns. The harmony of these songs, signs, words, music, and action is even more fruitful when expressed in the cultural richness of the people of God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1158). Elocchukwu E. Uzukwu, applauds this emphasis. He notes that "body language" or gestures of praise, adoration, contemplation, and ritual assemblies with dances and movements are a means through which African people worship and joyfully express their Christian faith (Uzukwu, 1997). He endorsed inculturation that does not disregard the faith expressed in the Sinai covenant, continued in NT church, nor change the essential element of Christian faith.

Worship songs must be theological such that the faithful and worshippers, poor and rich, can better understand and live the meaning of liturgical celebrations (*Ecclesia in Africa*, nos. 59-64). But this is not always the case. The more reason, Immaculate Offiong, during the First Synod of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene expressed concerned about liturgical syncretism. She was also concerned, and rightly so, about some Church musicians' inability to differentiate between music from secular settings, African Traditional Religion (ATR) settings, and the Church's theological settings (Offiong, 2002). This is why Amos, one of the ancient champions of Sinai covenants would reject the empty songs without ethical commitments and justice (Amos 5:23).

X. CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the preceding, we have highlighted the meaning, nature, content, language, rites, patterns, ceremonies, signs, theology and relevance of Sinai covenant (Exod 19-24, 32-34, Deut- 2 Kings) which has been so dear to the heart of his teaching, administrating and preaching apostolates. Sinai covenant, as we have historically, contextually and pastorally explored, remains a point of departure for understanding Israel's basic religion and its components: God's relationship with his people, the kingship of God, revelation and liberation. Many see it as a conditional covenant binding both God and his people, continuing in the prophets. Its components are fulfilled in the NT and emphasizing obedience, faithfulness, resilience, trust in divine providence, loyalty to God and commitments, among other ideals and motifs. Although its meaning went through various roots of nuances and shifts in the ancient Near East, Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures, its fundamental theological message of God's relationship with his people, a true liberator, and universal king has been stressed throughout this study. Its resonances in the NT and echoes and values in the Church in Africa and beyond were also underscored.

In sum, this study challenges us (a) God's people to lives of grateful obedience and joyful worship, (b) loyalty and exclusive worship of God alone, (c) exclusive commitment to God alone and must be translated on how we deal with one another with compassion, (d) a recognition of the reality of sin and failure, (e) holding fast to justice and faithful mercy of God, (f) and finally, to an invitation to sincere and undivided response to the demands of the Sinai.

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