

## **Israel as a Kingdom of Priests: An Exegetical Study of Exodus 19:6a**

Andrew Bundi  
Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

### **Abstract**

The promise “you will be to me a kingdom of priests” in Exodus 19:6 receives little attention from a number of commentaries. Those commentaries that discuss the promise offer varying interpretations. This article seeks to exegetically examine the promise in its immediate context and a wider context of the Pentateuch. This is done through an examination of the grammatical, syntactical and semantic implications of *waw* conjunction in the immediate literary context of the text and the text itself. The *waw* conjunctions between the clauses 5c, 6a and 6b in Exodus 19, are *waw* copulatives that function to create a hendiadys construction. This means the promises that God would make Israel his “possession”, a “kingdom of priest” and a “holy nation” are intricately related, overlapping and representing different aspects of a complex situation though not logically related. Furthermore, clauses 5c, 6a and 6b are logically contingent and consequential to clauses 5a and 5b. Stated more explicitly, Israel would become God’s possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation if they would listen to God’s voice and keep his covenant. A wider study of the promise in the context of the Pentateuch lead to the conclusion that God’s promise to make Israel a nation alludes to God’s Covenant to Abraham. Israel becomes a holy nation because of God’s presence among them. By mediating God to other nations, they act as a kingdom of priests. By being priests, they are a special possession to God.

**Keywords:** Kingdom Of Priests, *Waw* Copulative, Hendiadys, Covenant, Holy Nation

## Introduction

The phrase, “kingdom of priests” in Exodus 19:6a receives virtually no attention in a number of commentaries.<sup>1</sup> The few commentaries that pay attention to the phrase interpret it varyingly. For instance, Umberto Cassuto refers to the phrase “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” in the context of the ordinance of the firstborn sons. He suggests that the basic idea conveyed by the phrase is the consecration of Israel to the service of the creator.<sup>2</sup> He also observes that the consecration is based on fulfillment of a covenant agreement.<sup>3</sup> Tony Merida on the other hand, basing on a prior understanding of Adam and Eve as priests, and the Garden of Eden as a temple sanctuary, sees in Exodus 19:6a a continuation of this responsibility through the nation of Israel, which eventually is also placed on the Christian Church today (1 Pet 2:4-6, 9; Rev 1:5-6; 20:6). Constituent to being priests is worshiping and serving the living God and calling on God in prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Brevard Childs describes the phrase as a promise to Israel if they are faithful to the covenant. The promises are that Israel would be made “a special possession in distinction from all the peoples, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Although the first two are separated by what he considers a parenthetical remark (“surely all the world is mine”), Childs argues that the three must be interpreted in relation to each other. He proceeds to note that the phrase “my special possession” defines God’s relationship to Israel. The promise to be a kingdom of priests defines Israel’s relationship to her neighbors (carrying similar functions of a priest to a society). The promise to be a holy nation defines Israel’s quality of existence

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<sup>1</sup> Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Scott M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Paul N. Benware, *Survey of the Old Testament*, Rev. Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abraham (Jerusalem: The Hebrew Universtiy Magnes Press, 1997), 295.

<sup>3</sup> Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 312–313.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Exodus*, ed. David Platt, Daniel Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H, 2014).

(a life commensurate with the holiness of a covenant God).<sup>5</sup> Childs also observes a continuity of the Old Testament promise in the New Testament Church.<sup>6</sup>

Bernhard Anderson understands the description of Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as descriptions of how Israel belongs to Yahweh as a special possession. Like Childs, Anderson sees in the expression “kingdom of priests” reference to the “unique priestly role that Israel will perform in the world.” In becoming a “holy nation”, Anderson draws the connotation of separation from the profane world to belong to the holy God.<sup>7</sup>

According to Jacob Milgrom, people and objects in Israel could fall under four possible categories: Sacred, common, pure and impure. One who was common could be either pure or impure. However, the sacred cannot be impure or even encounter the impure. The relationship between the sacred and the common and between the pure and the impure is not static. This means the realms of the sacred and the pure can be enlarged, encroaching on and reducing the realms of the common and impure. This, Milgrom understands as the task of the priest to achieve thorough teaching and instruction. By converting the categories of common and impure into sacred and pure, Milgrom understands this as the making of Israel into a “royal priesthood and holy nation” (Exod 19:6).<sup>8</sup> He sees Exodus 19:6 as adumbrating the objective that Israel can become holy by obedience to God’s moral law and ritual commandments.<sup>9</sup>

With varying views among scholars as to what God meant when he speaks of Israel becoming a kingdom of priests, this research intends to re-examine the meaning of the phrase “kingdom of priests” through an exegetical study. The continuity of the Old Testament

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<sup>5</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 367.

<sup>6</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 375–376.

<sup>7</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Milgrom, ed., *Leviticus 1-16*, The Anchor Bible 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 617–618.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 686–687.

promise of priesthood in Exodus 19:6a into the New Testament Church and to the Christian today is evident in scripture (1 Pet 2:4-6, 9; Rev 1:5-6; 20:6). An understanding of the phrase “kingdom of priests” is therefore crucial to the Christian today who seeks to fulfil this calling.

### Literary Context

Exodus 19:3-6 forms the immediate literary context for Exodus 19:6a. Exodus 19:1-2 gives us the setting in terms of time and geographical location. It is three months after the Exodus. The Children of Israel have come from Rephidim and are camping in the wilderness of Sinai before the mountain. Having stated clearly the setting, the narrative proceeds to describe Moses going up the mountain and encountering God. This is the first of the many encounters Moses has with God up the mountain. The rest of the passage under study describes the message that God gives to Moses to convey to Israel.

### Text and Translation

ENGLISH	HEBREW
19:3a And Moses went up to God	19:3a מִיְהִלְאֶה-לָּא הִלְעַ הַלְשָׁמוּ
19:3b And the Lord called unto him from the mountain saying	19:3b רָמָאֵל רְהֵה-וּמ הָוְהִי וַיִּלֵּא אֶרְקִי
19:3c thus you will say to the house of Jacob	19:3c בְּקָעִי תִיבֵל רְמֵאת הָכ
19:3d and declare to the sons of Israel	19:3d לְאֶרְשֵׁי יִבְל דִּיגְתוּ
19:4a you have seen (that) which I did to Egypt	19:4a מִרְצָמֵל יִתְנִשְׁע רִשָּׂא סְתִיָּאר סְתֵא
19: 4b and carried you upon the wings of an eagle	19:4b מִיִּרְשָׁנ יִפְנִכְ-לַע סְכְתָא אֶשְׂאֹ
19:4c and brought you to me	19:4c יִלֵּא סְכְתָא אֶבְאֹ

19: 5a Now if you will surely listen to my voice	19:5a לִלְקַבְּ וְעִמַּשְׁתָּ עִוְמֵשׁ-סָא הִתְעַו
19: 5b and keep my covenant	19:5b וְגִיתִּיב־תָּא סְתָרְמִשׁוּ
19: 5c then you will be to me a possession from all of the people because all the earth is mine	19:5c וְלִכְּ גַל־יִיב מִלְמַעָה-לְכֶם הֶלְגָּס גַּל סְתִיָּהוּ זָרָאָה
19: 6a And you will be to me a kingdom of priests	19:6a מִיְנַהֲפ תְקַלְמִם גַּל־יִיָּהֵת סְתָאָו
19:6b and a holy nation	19:6b שׁוֹדֵק יִנְיָו
19: 6c these are the words which you will surely speak to the sons of Israel	19:6c לְאֶרְשֵׁי יִבְרָאָה רַבְדָּת רַשָּׁא מִיְרְבָדָה הִלָּא 19:6c

## Grammar, Syntax and Semantics

The conjunction, *Waw*, is present in this passage ten times. Therefore understanding how the conjunctions function in this passage is crucial to the understanding of how the contents of the passage relate to one other. Waltke and O'Connor assert, "The suffix conjugation preceded by *waw* is associated with two semantically distinct constructions, one with relative force and the other with coordinate force."<sup>10</sup> They illustrate the difference between the *waw*-relative and *waw*-copulative by giving the following sets of texts:

<b>1a.</b>	שְׁגָנָו הַמְחִלְמֵה-לָא סְבָרְקִס הִיָּהוּ	It will be that when you are
Deut	סְעָה-לָא רַבְדָּו נְהִפָּה	about to go
20:2		into battle, the priest will come forward
		and will speak to the army.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 519.

<b>1b.</b>	אֱלֹהִים רַבְּדָו הַשְׁעִי אֵלֹהִים רַמְאָ אִוְהָה	Does he (God) promise and
Num	הַקְּמִיקִי	not act? And does he speak
23:19		and not fulfill it?

They proceed to explain as follows, “In # 1a the priest’s speaking is relative and future to the preceding situation, in which he steps forward. In # 1b God’s speaking is not relative to the preceding situation, in which he made a promise; rather, the same situation is expressed in another way.”<sup>11</sup> The construction with a relative force is designated as the *waw*-relative (traditionally called either *waw*-conversive or *waw*-consecutive) and the construction with a coordinate force is designated as *waw*-copulative.”<sup>12</sup> They proceed to note, “These two semantically distinct constructions are similar in form in that the conjunction *waw* [sic] is inseparably prefixed to the suffix conjugation, and this bound form begins the clause.”<sup>13</sup> For this reason, the *waw* is the basis on which the division of the sentences of the passage under investigation are determined. This is in addition to the use of accents. Diagram 1 and 2 shows how the *waw* conjunctions affect how the sentences relate to each other.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 519–20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 520.

Diagram 1: Sentence structure based on Waw-Conjunction (Hebrew)

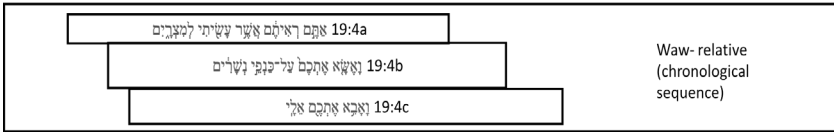
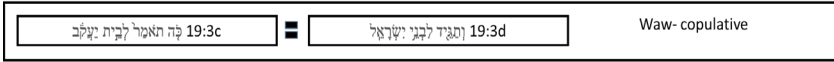
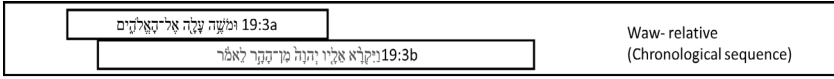
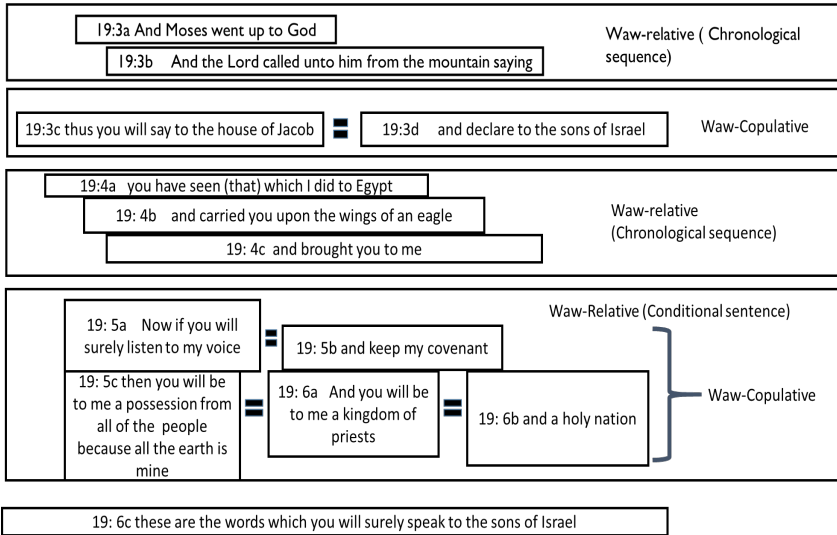


Diagram 2: Sentence structure based on *Waw-Conjunction* (English)

The semantic distinction between the two *waw*-constructions is that while the *waw*-relative construction presents “one situation as subordinate to another”, the *waw*-copulative construction presents “two situations as coordinate with one another.”<sup>14</sup> Waltke and O’Connor state that one can distinguish the two constructions based on whether they demand subordination or not as follows:

Thus, if semantic pertinence demands that the situation represented by *w«qtl* is perfective in aspect and not subordinate to the preceding situation, then the construction should be construed as a *waw*-copulative. Contrariwise, if the same factor demands that *w«qtl* represents a subordinate situation, be it (con)sequential and/or imperfective aspect, then it should be interpreted as a *waw*-relative construction.<sup>15</sup>

According to Waltke and O’Connor, the *waw*-copulative is used in at least four ways. First, the *waw*-copulative construction can serve in a hendiadys by representing two aspects of a complex

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 540.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 540.



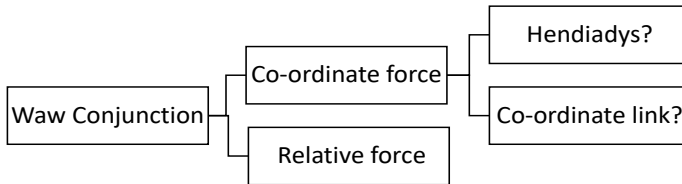
situation. For example, “I am old and gray” (1Sam12:2). Secondly, *waw*-copulative may function in juxtaposition where it contrasts two situations rather than presenting two sides of the same one. The *waw*-copulative construction is also used to coordinate and link two points in the discourse. Lastly, it may indicate a disjunction, signaling a situation out of chronological sequence.<sup>16</sup> Of the four uses, two are plausible for the *waw*-copulatives present in Exodus 19:3-6. That is as a hendiadys or as a coordinate link.

The first *waw*-copulative between clauses 3c and 3d are more likely functions as a hendiadys. The designations, which God gives to the nation of Israel, are set forth. God sees the nation of Israel as both the “house of Jacob” and “children of Israel”. Jacob and Israel are clearly the same referent. However, the concept of “house” and “children” emphasize different aspects of the same referent. While the former emphasizes Jacob as a household, the latter emphasizes Israel as descendants. The same case applies for 5a and 5b where listening to God’s voice and keeping His covenant are representing aspects to the same act which can be designated as obedience. Listening to God’s voice implies keeping His covenant and vice versa. The question as illustrated in Diagram 3 is whether 5c, 6a and 6b have the *waw*-copulative functioning as a hendiadys or a coordinate conjunction. If the former, this would mean that becoming God’s possession, kingdom of priests and a holy nation are aspects of the same complex situation and therefore must be considered together. If functioning as a co-ordinate conjunction, this means the three aspects presented are three distinct and independent entities.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 540–42.

Diagram 3: *The plausible uses for Waw- Copulative in Exodus 19:5a, 6a, 6b*



Childs' argument that one should understand sentences 5c, 6a and 6b in relation to one other seems to connote that he understands the *waw*-copulative's function in these clauses as a hendiadys. What is questionable is whether his distinction of what each of these sentences conveys is in harmony with the understanding that the *waw*-copulative is functioning as a hendiadys in the said sentences. He distinguishes the phrase "my special possession" as defining God's relationship to Israel, becoming a kingdom of priests as defining Israel's relationship to her neighbors and being a holy nation as defining Israel's quality of existence.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the complex nature of a hendiadys, there is need to consider more closely what qualifies a given series of sentences to be a hendiadys. The word, hendiadys, is a Latin modification of the Greek words, *hen* (one) *dia* (through) and *dyoin* (two).<sup>18</sup> Arnold and Choi seemingly understand the occurrence of a hendiadys to be associated with words and not clauses. This is evident in his definition of hendiadyses and the examples he offers. He states that "the *waw* conjunctive can function to conjoin two or more words into a construction that refers to a single idea, or point to a single referent. Thus, the conjoined words take the place of a single word with modifiers."<sup>19</sup> The definition he offers in the glossary is that a hendiadys is an "expression of a singular idea by two independent words."<sup>20</sup> He proceeds to note that there is either a nominal hendiadys

<sup>17</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 367.

<sup>18</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 148.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

or verbal hendiadys. An example of nominal hendiadys he offers is “תִּמְאֵן דִּסְתָּ מִכְּמָע הַנְּהִי־שֶׁעַי הַתְּעֹן” ‘now, may Yhwh show you *true faithfulness*’ (2 Sam 2:6).” For the verbal hendiadys he offers the following example, “הִקְדָּב דְּרַתְּו רַהֲמַתְּו” ‘She *quickly lowered* her jar’ (Gen 24:18).”<sup>21</sup>

Waltke and O’Connor seem to have a different concept of what a hendiadys constitutes. We have already noted his understanding that a hendiadys represents two aspects of a complex situation.<sup>22</sup> Rather than limit a hendiadys to words, Waltke and O’Connor suggest that a hendiadys also consists of pairs of clauses. They state, “Conjunctive *waw* serves to join two clauses which describe interrelated or overlapping situations not otherwise logically related. Pairs of such clauses may form a *hendiadys*.”<sup>23</sup> However, his glossary definition of hendiadys is somewhat similar to that of Arnold and Choi. They render it as “a single expression of two apparently separate parts.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than separate words, they say parts, giving room for hendiadyses to take place between clauses and not just words. It should be noted that of the eight examples, Waltke and O’Connor offer as illustration for hendiadyses, only one consists of words joined by a *waw* conjunction. The rest are clauses such as an example he refers to in Gen 31:7, “אֶת־אֶרְבַּע־יָדָיו יָבֹלֵתָ” ‘He has cheated me by changing my wages’.<sup>25</sup>

There are two key distinguishing concepts we can draw from both Arnold and Waltke that can help us determine a hendiadys generally. These are: 1) if the words or clauses joined by the *waw* conjunctive refer to a single idea or point to a single referent; and 2) if the words or clauses joined by *waw* conjunctive are interrelated or overlapping and are not logically related hence offering different aspects of the same situation.

The *waw* conjunction joins clauses 5c, 6a and 6b, and they all point to a single referent. The referent here is Israel. They all point to

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>22</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction*, 540.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 653.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 691.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 539–542.

a single idea of what Israel becomes if it hears God's voice and keeps the covenant. Hence, in this sense, clauses 5c, 6a and 6b qualify as a hendiadys.

The clauses (5c, 6a and 6b) are interrelated if considered contextually. Within the Pentateuch, being God's possession was closely associated with holiness as evident in the following texts.

For you are *a people holy to the LORD your God*. The LORD your God has chosen you to be *a people for his treasured possession*, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deut 7:6)

For you are *a people holy to the LORD your God*, and the LORD has chosen you to be *a people for his treasured possession*, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deut 14:2)

The priest was always interacting with that which is designated as holy (Lev 6:26, Lev 7:6, Num 5:17, Ezek 42:13). Although being a special possession, a kingdom of priest and a holy nation are in some sense interrelated or overlap, they are not logically related. Based on aforementioned reasons, I propose that the *waw* conjunction between the clauses 5c, 6a and 6b functions to create a hendiadys construction. This means the phrase "kingdom of priest" is intricately related to the concepts of being God's special possession and a holy nation. Diagram 4 illustrates how clauses 5c, 6a and 6b will relate with one another if the *waw*-copulative is considered as a Co-ordinate. In contrast, Diagram 5 illustrates how afore mentioned clauses relate with one another if *waw*-copulative is considered as a hendiadys.

Diagram 4: *The relation between 5c, 6a and 6b with waw-copulative as Co-ordinate*

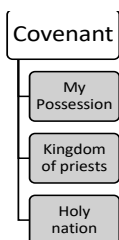
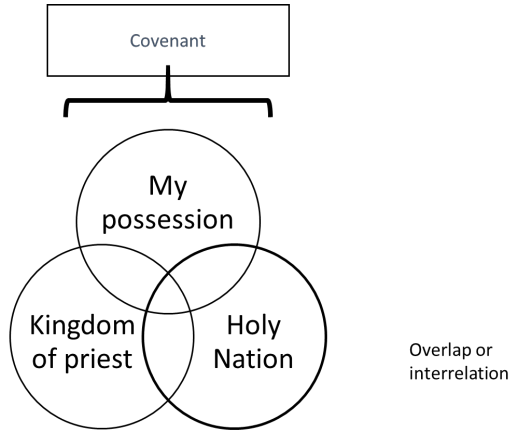
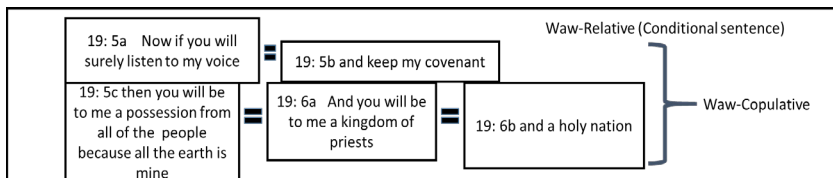


Diagram 5: *The relation between 5c, 6a and 6b with waw-copulative as a Hendiadys*



Also notable is that a *waw* conjunction joins clauses 5a and 5b to clauses 5c, 6a and 6b forming a conditional construction as noted in Diagram 6 below. Waltke and O’Connor note that “Conditional sentences represent one situation as logically contingent on another and entail a temporal sequence as well.”<sup>26</sup> He further quotes Lambdin’s broad definition of a conditional sentence as follows: “Any two clauses, the first of which states a real or hypothetical condition, and the second of which states a real or hypothetical consequence thereof, may be taken as a conditional sentence.”<sup>27</sup>

Diagram 6: *Conditional sentence*



<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 525.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 525.

In this case as illustrated in Diagram 6, clauses 5a and 5b form the protasis, while clauses 5c, 6a and 6b form the apodosis. Clauses 5c, 6a and 6b are therefore logically contingent and consequential to clauses 5a and 5b. Stated more explicitly, Israel would become God's special possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation if they would listen to God's voice and keep his covenant. That God's special possession are expected to keep all of God's commandments is echoed in Deut. 26:18: "And the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments,"

### Priests as God's Possession

The Hebrew word translated as possession in Exodus 19:5 is הֵלְגָהּ. Bible writers used the word to designate an individual's personal property or private accumulation (1Chr 29:3, Eccl 2:8). Theologically, the word is used to refer to Israel's relationship to God as his possession or prized treasure (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Mal 3: 17, Ps 135:4).<sup>28</sup>

The Hebrew Bible does not use the word הֵלְגָהּ in relation to priests. However, connotations of priests as belonging to an entity are evident. For instance, the first mention of priest in the Hebrew Bible designates Melchizedek as the הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל לֵאלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי הַיְהוָה "priest of God most high" (Gen 14:18). The preposition לְ in afore clause bears the sense of possession, belonging or pertaining to.<sup>29</sup> Joseph's wife was daughter to הַכֹּהֵן אֶן (priest of On - Gen 41:45, 50; 46:20). הַכֹּהֵן is in its construct state hence dependent on אֶן which is in the absolute state hence independent. Weingreen states, "*When two (or more) words are so closely united that together they constitute one compound idea, the dependent word (or words) is (are) said to be in the Construct State.*" The word (in the absolute state)

<sup>28</sup> David J. A Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2007), 6:117; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgardner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994-2000), s.v. "הֵלְגָהּ".

<sup>29</sup> Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 4:479.

upon which the construct depends, is said to be in the genitive.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the god possesses the priest. In addition to the Hebrew Bible depicting priests as belonging to God or gods, it also depicts the priest as belonging to a place, as is the case with Jethro, *יְהוֹרָאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי* (priest of Midian - Ex 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). Here the Construct, absolute construction, which connotes possession, is evident.

Constituent to the idea of being one’s possession is the exclusion of other existent parties hence the distinction is made between what belongs to a person and that, which does not. Just like Israel is to be God’s possession *מִכָּל־עַמְּוֹלָדֵי־לֵבָנָיִם*, literally “from all peoples” (Ex 19:5); God chooses Aaron and his sons to serve as priests to God from among Israel (Ex 28:1). In both instances, a distinction is made. In the former, a distinction is made between Israel as a special people as opposed to the rest of the earth. In the latter case, the distinction is between Aaron and his sons as priests as opposed to the rest of Israel. Hence, God establishes a unique relationship between Himself and the said party.

As argued above, we conclude that priests are described in the Hebrew Bible as belonging to God/god or place and depicted as chosen from among a group of people hence establishing a special relationship with the entity that chose them. There is therefore an interrelationship between being God’s possession and a kingdom of priests.

## Priests as Holy

The priest’s association with holiness is explicit in the Hebrew Bible. The priest would minister in the holy place (Ex 29:30; 35:19; 39:41). His garments are designated as “holy garments” (Ex 31:10; 39:41; 40:13, Lev 16:32). The priest would not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled or a divorced woman “for the priest is holy to his God” (Lev 21:7). People brought holy donations to the priests (Num. 5:9-10). A portion of the wave offering was

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<sup>30</sup> J Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 43–44; see also Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 138–139.

designated as a holy portion for the priests (Lev. 23:20, Num. 6:20). The high priest was anointed with holy oil (Num. 35:25). Perhaps the most explicit association of the priesthood to holiness is evident in the plate of pure gold engraved with the words “Holiness to the Lord,” put on a blue cord and placed in front of the priest’s turban (Ex 28:36- 37; 39:30- 31).

Concerning the holiness of the priestly garments, Dam writes that the priestly garment: “is indicative of the high priest’s holiness that his garments were made of the same basic material as the curtains of the tabernacle (Ex 26—27; 28:5; 39:1; cf. Lev 19:19), and the blue of his robe matched the blue covering of the ark used when traveling (Num 4:6). Also, the glory of the tabernacle was reflected in the splendor of the high-priestly dress. The high priest was thus equipped to be in God’s presence and mediate between God and his people in the Most Holy Place.”<sup>31</sup>

### Kingdom of Priests

הַכֹּהֲנִים designated in Ex 19:6a as kingdom is echoed in the succeeding clause by the word אֶתְּנָה designated as nation and connote reference to a specific people.<sup>32</sup> While the construction “kingdom of priests” is only evident in the Ex 19:6, the concept of a group of priests is already evident in scripture. The Genesis account mentions of land in Egypt designated to priests (Gen 47:22, 26). When Moses meets God on Mount Sinai, He tells Moses to warn “priests” and the people not to come up to the Lord on the mountain. The whole tribe of Levi are designated as priests and consequently have no inheritance with Israel (Deut.18:1; 21:5). A community of priests is therefore not a strange concept in scripture.

<sup>31</sup> C. Van Dam, “Priestly Clothing,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 645.

<sup>32</sup> Köhler, *HALOT*, 57, 199; Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 5:331.



## “To Me”

Childs has interpreted the clause “kingdom of priests” as a description of the relationship of Israel is to have with other nations. They are to be to the nations what priests are to a society.”<sup>33</sup> However, evident in the passage is the twofold emphasis that whatever Israel became it is לִי (to me), that is “to God”. This emphasis is both in clause 5c and in 6a. לִי consists of לְ which is a particle preposition designated as “to” and יְ which is a pronominal suffix for first person common singular. Waltke and O’Connor state that when “attached to a noun or preposition, the suffixes are in the genitive case.” They proceed to note that: “Adverbial genitive suffixes may represent a direct or mediated object,”<sup>34</sup> and that “prepositional suffixes serve the role as substantive objects of prepositions.”<sup>35</sup> This therefore means that God is the substantive object of whatever Israel becomes when they become priests. Becoming a possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation are developments towards God.

## Covenant

בְּרִית designated as agreement, alliance and covenant refers to a “covenant, agreement or obligation between individuals (e.g. friends, spouses) or groups, ruler and subjects, deity and individual or people.”<sup>36</sup>

Williamson divides covenants in the Bible into three categories. These are the universal covenant, the ancestral covenant and the national covenant. The universal covenant is the Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9:8-17). The ancestral covenant is that which God made with Abraham (Genesis 15 and 17). The National covenant is that which God made with Israel on Mt Sinai (Ex.19ff) and Moab

<sup>33</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 367.

<sup>34</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Hebrew Syntax*, 303.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>36</sup> Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 2:264; See also Köhler, *HALOT*, s.v. “בְּרִית”; P. R. Williamson, “Covenant,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 139. According to Williamson, a covenant is “a solemn commitment guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenanting parties

(Deuteronomy). Williamson argues that the ancestral covenant forms the theological backbone supporting the national covenants and against which they must be understood. To substantiate his argument, he proceeds to show that God's intervention on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt was prompted by the covenant promise he had made to the patriarchs by referring to Exodus 2: 23- 25. Hence, he concludes that "the deliverance from Egypt and God's revelation at Sinai must be interpreted in the light of the programmatic agenda set out in Genesis (cf. the allusions to the patriarchal promises in Ex 3:7-8, 16-22; 6:4-6; 13:5, 11)."<sup>37</sup> Bearing similar sentiments the connection of the Mosaic covenant to the Abrahamic covenant, Anderson writes:

"In the final form of the Pentateuch (Torah), the Mosaic covenant is subordinate to the Abrahamic. In this canonical context the Abrahamic covenant, which guarantees the promise of land and posterity, is the overarching theme within which the Mosaic covenant of law is embraced."<sup>38</sup>

According to Williamson, God announces a programmatic agenda to Abraham in Genesis 12:1- 3. It introduces a new stage of God's dealing with humanity and fixes the agenda for the rest of the Pentateuch and beyond. The divine speech is a series of promises that are contingent to Abraham's willingness to obey. Williamson suggests that the agenda in Genesis 12:1-3 consists of two conditional promises. The first promise is that Abraham is to be a recipient of a blessing (Gen 12:1-2a) hence focuses only on the relationship between Yahweh and Abraham. The second promise is that Abraham is to be the mediator of blessings (Gen 12: 2b-3) hence introducing the relationship between Abraham and those God will bless or curse through him.<sup>39</sup> He goes even further to designate the promises as national blessing and international blessing with the latter being dependent to the former as follows:

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<sup>37</sup> P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," 149.

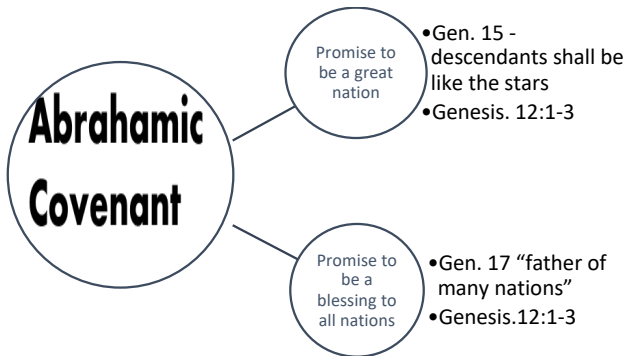
<sup>38</sup> Anderson and Bishop, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," 143, 145.

We may conclude that Yahweh’s speech in Genesis 12:1-3 anticipates two quite distinct prospects linked by a logical progression: the first section focuses on national blessing promised to Abraham; the second section focuses on international blessing promised through Abraham. While clearly distinct, these two promissory goals are nevertheless related by the fact that the blessing promised in the second part of the divine speech is in some way dependent upon the promise related in the first; that is, Abraham’s role as a mediator of blessing is contingent upon his being a recipient of blessing.<sup>40</sup>

Desmond Alexander expresses similar sentiments designating the promise to make Abraham’s descendants a nation to be secondary to God’s purpose to bless all the families on earth.<sup>41</sup> Williamson observes that one of the fundamental differences between Abrahamic covenants of Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 is each of the covenants focuses on one of the promises found in the programmatic agenda of Genesis 12:1-3 at the expense of the other. As illustrated in Diagram 7, Genesis 15 focuses on Abraham becoming a great nation while Genesis 17 focuses on Abraham being a blessing to other nations.<sup>42</sup>

Diagram 7: *God’s programmatic agenda*



The designation of Israel as a nation in Exodus 19:6a is likely an allusion to the programmatic agenda of Genesis 12:1-3 and

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>41</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 101.

<sup>42</sup> P. R. Williamson, “Covenant,” 148.

Abraham's covenant (Gen. 15) where God promises Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation. Williamson notes that the use of the noun *goy* ("nation") in Gen 12:1-3 signifies a geopolitical entity hence the existence of Abrahams's descendants as a nation is intrinsically related to the territorial aspect of the divine promise (Gen 12:7; 17:8; 18:18). He notes, "Abraham's landless descendants constitute a people (*'am*), but in order to be a nation (*goy*), they must have territory of their own."<sup>43</sup> However God's intention as indicated in Exodus 19:6a is not only to make Israel a great nation, but also to make Israel a holy nation. Concerning the designation of Israel as a holy nation in Exodus 19:6, Williamson writes:

This text clearly indicates what kind of nation God intends Israel to be: a holy nation, set apart to God from all others. As such, Israel is clearly to function as "a light to the nations." While ultimately this is the mission of Abraham's individual "seed" (cf. Is 42:6; 49:6; 60:3), such a role is at least implicit in Israel's description here as a "priestly kingdom." The latter phrase (found only here in the OT, but cf. Is 61:6 for a similar idea) has given rise to various interpretations, but its most straightforward sense (i.e., "kingdom of priests") suggests that it is a statement of Israel's distinct status as "a servant nation." The whole nation thus inherits the responsibility, formerly conferred on Abraham, of mediating God's blessing to the nations of the earth.<sup>44</sup>

In making Israel a holy nation, Williamson concludes that Israel becomes a light to the world. The designation of Israel as a kingdom of priests, Williamson argues, implies the task of shining of light to the world. Through sharing the light to the world through the priestly ministry, Israel fulfils its second programmatic agenda of Abrahams descendants becoming a blessing to the families of the world.

Hartley on the other hand notes that "Yahweh, Israel's God, is inherently holy as conveyed by the statement that God's name is holy (Lev 20:3; 22:2, 32; lit. 'it is the name of my holiness')."<sup>45</sup> He notes further that in scripture, holiness is exclusive to Yahweh and that anything else derives its holiness either from God's presence or

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>45</sup> J. E . Hartley, "Holy and Holiness, Clean and Unclean," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 420.

from consecration to the sanctuary. Furthermore, because holiness belongs to God alone, there is nothing within humanity or the earth that is inherently holy. Concerning Israel getting into a Covenant relationship with a Holy God and the implication on Israel becoming a holy nation, Hartley writes:

In order that Israel might be in covenant with the holy God, she was exhorted to “be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2; 20:7, 26; also Lev 11:44-45). To heed this call the Israelites were to respond to God by becoming like God; that is, they were to develop in themselves characteristics such as those God possesses. Specifically, Israel’s being holy meant: (1) they were in a covenant relationship with God; (2) God was present in their midst; (3) they were to promote justice throughout the community by keeping divine instructions; and (4) they were to observe the rules of ritual purity.<sup>46</sup>

Hartley also notes that God instituted priests to help Israel maintain their Covenant relationship with a holy God.<sup>47</sup> Duke describes the priest’s positions as one that “occupied the boundary zone or ‘no man’s land’ between the holy (the presence of Yahweh) and the common... Those set aside to be priests were placed in a special state of holiness that allowed them access to the ‘dwelling’ of God.”<sup>48</sup> The priests functioned within a divine order symbolized by the classification systems of the clean/unclean and the holy/common, which the priests were to create, maintain and re-establish.<sup>49</sup> Duke explains the basis on which the classification for clean and unclean are presented as noted below:

For Israel, the standard by which something was clean or unclean appears to have rested on a theology of creation that is represented in Genesis 1:1—2:3. In this account of creation, one sees how God rules over the elements that are contra life and order (the symbols of chaos: darkness, a watery deep and a formless “earth”). God created an orderly separation of these elements into life-ready realms and then filled those realms. God created an orderly, life-filled world and called it good. For Israel, then, that which was associated with the divinely

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 430.

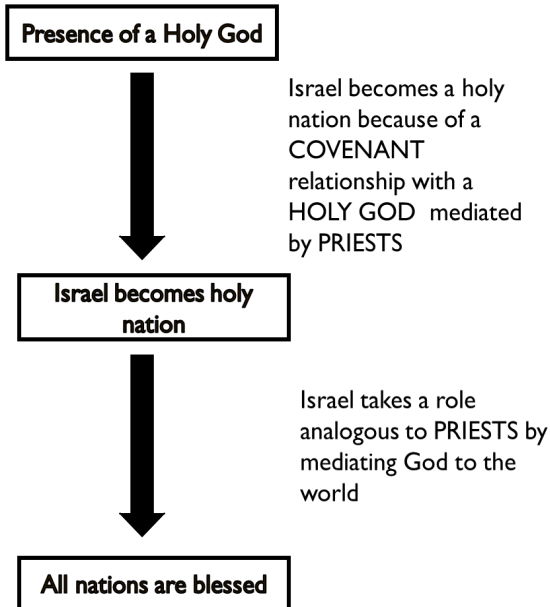
<sup>48</sup> R. K. Duke, “Priests, Priesthood,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 651–652.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 651.

created order or life was clean, and that which somehow was symbolic of chaos or death was unclean.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the distinctions between the holy/common and the clean/unclean, there was also gradation of holiness. God considered the nation of Israel holy by getting into a covenant relationship with God. However, the priests have a higher level of holiness in order to serve at the sanctuary. “The priestly families were organized into three levels or classes corresponding to the levels of holiness at the sanctuary: the Levites, the priests and the high priest. The levels of holiness in the members of the community also paralleled those in the sanctuary.”<sup>51</sup> The concepts discussed above on how God’s covenants with Israel relates to Israel becoming a holy nation and a blessing to all nations can be illustrated in Diagram 8 below.

Diagram 8: How *Israel becomes a Holy Nation and Kingdom of priest*



<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 650.

<sup>51</sup> J. E. Hartley, “Holy and Holiness, Clean and Unclean,” 424.

More interestingly, Duke also observes that the Israelite priests had a parallel role to that of Israel as a holy nation as evident in this statement, “Because Israel was called to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests to the nations (Exod 19:6), the Israelite priests had an analogous function of being a holy priesthood to Israel.”<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

The first issue that the article set out to determine in the quest of understanding the promise to Israel that they would be made a “kingdom of priests” was how the threefold promises in Exodus 19:5-6 relate to one another. These are the promises that Israel would become to God a special possession, a kingdom of priest and a holy nation. The study noted that the *waw* conjunction played a crucial role in determining the relationship between the three clauses. It has been determined that the *waw*-conjunction between the clauses 5c, 6a and 6b function as copulative. Even further, it has been noted that the copulative conjunction functions as a hendiadys and not as a co-ordinate conjunction. This means the three promises point to the same referent and overlap or interrelate although they do not logically relate to one another. The common referent to the triple promise is Israel as the context indicates.

The article proceeded to show throughout the Pentateuch that there are inter- relations and overlaps when the promises are considered. The concept of being a priest carries with it the idea of being a special possession in the sense that the priests belonged to a particular god or place. Even further, the priests were closely associated with holiness. Since holiness is an innate attribute of God and Israel had gotten into a covenant relationship with a Holy God, the office of the priest is instituted to mediate between God and the people. Hence, in a culture that graded holiness, the priests were more holy than the common people were. Hence, the research finds that the copulative conjunction between clauses 5c, 6a and 6b functions as a hendiadys.

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<sup>52</sup> Duke, “Priests, Priesthood,” 649.

The work also observes that clauses 5a and 5b relate to clauses 5c, 6a and 6b in a way that the latter clauses are contingent, subordinate and consequential to the former clauses. This means that the above sentences as a whole form a conditional sentence. This further means that God's promises to Israel were dependent on their willingness to be faithful to the Covenant. The article also observes that God's covenant with Israel as nation is based on the covenant God had made with Abraham. God's covenant with Abraham on the other hand aligns with God's programmatic agenda that he stipulates in Genesis 12:1-3. Hence, God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 aligns with God's programmatic agenda to make Abraham a great nation while God's covenant in Genesis 17 aligns with God's programmatic agenda to bless all the families on the earth through Abraham.

The purpose for God making Israel a "great nation" was so that Israel would become a blessing to others. The former purpose is subordinate to the latter. Therefore God's promise in Exodus 19:6a to make Israel not only a nation but also a holy nation alludes to God's Covenant to Abraham. Israel becomes a holy nation because of God's presence among them. By mediating God to other nations, they act as a kingdom of priests. By being priests, they are a special possession to God. Also by mediating God to other nations, they fulfill the ultimate goal that God had when he made a covenant with Abraham. The research therefore shows that a proper understanding of the full implications of Israel becoming a kingdom of priests, contingency to God's covenant, and interrelation to the flanking promises to be made a special possession and a holy nation need to be considered.

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Andrew Bundi is a PHD student in Biblical Studies (New Testament) at Adventist University of Africa, Kenya. He could be reached at [bundia@aua.ac.ke](mailto:bundia@aua.ac.ke)