Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy -**ISSN: 2971-5997 (Online)**
Volume 6, Issue 2 (July – December), 2026, pp. 33-43.

Covenant in Ancient Israel and *Májẹ̀mú* in Yoruba Culture: A Comparative Theological Study

KOLADE SAMUEL OLUWASEGUN, PhD
Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies
Glorious Vision University, Edo State, Nigeria
Sammykolade316@gmail.com &kolade.samuel@gvu.edu.ng
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3265-3198

Abstract
Covenant is an important theological category in biblical thought and a significant concept for understanding commitment and moral obligation in Yoruba culture. In the Hebrew Bible, *berît* is the Hebrew word translated as "covenant" in English. It refers to a formal relationship involving defined commitments and obligations between parties, particularly between God and human beings and among human communities. In Yoruba culture, *májẹ̀mú* denotes a binding commitment or undertaking within social, moral and religious relationships. Although scholars have extensively examined *berît* in Ancient Israel and *májẹ̀mú* in Yoruba thought, limited scholarship has systematically compared their theological and ethical dimensions. This constitutes a problem for contextual African Christian theology, particularly concerning the extent to which *májẹ̀mú* can serve as an indigenous conceptual resource for understanding biblical covenant without obscuring the distinctive meaning of *berît*. The study examined the meaning, forms, obligations and theological significance of *berît* and *májẹ̀mú*, compared their convergences and divergences, and assessed their implications for African Christian theology. It employed the historical-critical method, particularly historical and literary analysis of selected Old Testament covenant texts, complemented by comparative theological analysis of Yoruba traditions. Biblical texts, scholarly literature and selected Yoruba oral-tradition materials were used as sources. The study found convergence in commitment, obligation, fidelity, ritual confirmation and accountability, but differences in theological authority, parties, transmission and sanctions. It concludes that *májẹ̀mú* is a useful indigenous resource for contextualising covenant theology but is not equivalent to *berît*.

Keywords: Berît, Májẹ̀mú, Covenant, Ancient Israel, Yoruba Culture, Theology, Comparative.

Introduction

Covenant is central to biblical understanding of relationship, obligation and identity. The Hebrew *berît* denotes a binding relationship involving divine promises and human responsibilities, especially in the traditions of Abraham, Moses and David (McCarthy, 1972; Weinfeld, 1970). In Yoruba Culture, *májẹ̀mú* similarly expresses binding agreement, obligation and accountability within social and religious relationships (Ogunleye, 2013; Olaleye, 2022). Grounded in a worldview connecting human, communal and spiritual realities, such commitments may carry moral and religious consequences (Idowu, 1962; Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979).

Previous scholarship on *berît* includes Mendenhall (1954), McCarthy (1972), Weinfeld (1970, 1973), Kalluveettil (1982) and Taggar-Cohen (2020), who examine its linguistic, historical, legal and theological dimensions. Studies in Yoruba culture by Idowu (1962), Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), Ogunleye (2013) Berekiah and Olaleye (2022) explore covenant, religious values, covenant-keeping and covenant-breaking. Popoola and Salurante (2023) further relate Yoruba covenant concepts to Christian theology, showing their continuing religious significance.

Despite these contributions, an identifiable scholarly gap remains. Much of the established literatures examine Israelite covenant and Yoruba covenantal practices separately. Existing comparative discussions often use Yoruba covenant practices to illuminate a particular biblical passage, or they employ covenant as a broad ethical category without sufficiently examining the distinct theological assumptions underlying the two traditions. For instance, studies of Genesis 15 in relation to Yoruba worldview have identified parallels in covenant-making practices, but such comparisons do not necessarily provide a comprehensive theological comparison of the conceptual structures, functions, obligations, sanctions and understandings of the divine-human relationship involved (Olagunju, 2011)**.** There is a need to ask whether *májẹ̀mú* provides a meaningful African conceptual lens through which the theological dimensions of *berît* can be better appreciated, while also determining the limits of such comparison. The study comparatively examines *berît* in ancient Israel and *májẹ̀mú* in Yoruba culture by identifying their meanings, functions, obligations, rituals, sanctions and theological similarities and differences. The study employs the historical-critical method, analysing selected Old Testament covenant text (Exodus 19:1–8) alongside Yoruba traditions on *májẹ̀mú* for comparative theological purposes rather than detailed exegesis. The study contributes to Old Testament, Yoruba religious and African Christian scholarship by clarifying their similarities and differences while highlighting their relevance to trust, justice and communal responsibility.

Covenant (*berît*) and *Májẹ̀mú* (Binding agreement or Pledge) in Biblical and Yoruba Thought

Scholarship on covenant in biblical and Yoruba thought has developed through different but occasionally intersecting trajectories. While *berît* has generated extensive Old Testament scholarship, direct studies of *májẹ̀mú* are comparatively limited and are often embedded within wider studies of Yoruba religion, ethics, oath-taking, customary institutions and indigenous philosophy.

The modern scholarly discussion of *berît* was significantly shaped by Mendenhall (1954), whose comparison of Israelite covenant forms with Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties redirected attention from purely theological interpretation to historical and comparative analysis. His work suggested that features such as historical prologue, stipulations, witnesses and sanctions could illuminate Israelite covenant traditions. This was a major contribution because it situated *berît* within its wider Ancient Near Eastern environment. However, Mendenhall's treaty model risks making Israelite covenants appear too dependent upon political treaty structures.

McCarthy (1978) responded critically to overly rigid treaty-form interpretations. He accepted the value of Ancient Near Eastern evidence but argued that the Israelite covenant cannot simply be identified with Hittite treaty forms. For McCarthy, the Old Testament contains diverse covenant traditions requiring attention to their individual literary and theological contexts. His work therefore shifted the discussion from simple formal similarity towards a more nuanced relationship between treaty traditions and Israelite theological reflection.

Weinfeld (1973) developed the discussion further by distinguishing between the covenant of grant and the covenant of obligation. His analysis demonstrated that *berît* could communicate both a bestowed privilege and a binding obligation. He later argued that the semantic field of *berît* includes notions of oath, pledge and commitment rather than merely "agreement". This remains important because it challenges the common assumption that the covenant is simply a reciprocal contract.

During this period, Hillers (1969) examined covenant as a major biblical idea and helped move the discussion beyond the narrow identification of covenant with treaty. Bright (1977) similarly treated covenant and promise as central to Israel's understanding of its relationship with God. Kline (1968), meanwhile, defined covenant in terms of a commitment established through sanctions, thereby emphasising the relationship between covenant, authority and consequences. These approaches collectively established three major dimensions of *berît*: relationship, obligation and sanction.

The 1980s witnessed further methodological development in *berît* scholarship. Kalluveettil (1982) challenged approaches that concentrated exclusively on the word *berît* by examining covenant through declaration formulae and related Old Testament texts. His contribution is important because it demonstrated that covenant meaning must be reconstructed from textual patterns rather than from lexical analysis alone.

Nicholson (1986) gave covenant a strongly theological interpretation, arguing that it is central to Israel's understanding of its relationship with God and peoplehood. His approach differs from scholars who primarily emphasise treaty structures because he focuses on covenant as a theological means of interpreting Israel's identity and history. Mendenhall and Herion (1992) later reassessed covenant scholarship by demonstrating the continuing importance of Ancient Near Eastern evidence while recognising the complexity of Israelite covenant traditions. They further examined the ceremonial background of *berît*, drawing attention to ritual dimensions that cannot be adequately explained through legal or political categories alone.

Recent biblical scholarship has continued to question overly simplistic understandings of *berît*. Taggar-Cohen (2020) revisited the relationship between Hebrew *berît* and Ancient Near Eastern treaties, maintaining that comparative evidence remains important but should not erase the distinctive theological development of Israelite covenant. Her contribution strengthened the position that similarities in form do not automatically establish identical meaning. Riemersma (2020) challenged conventional descriptions of the "Sinai covenant", arguing for greater attention to the specific textual contexts in which the covenant is presented. His emphasis on covenant as commitment helps shift the discussion from static contractual language towards relational obligation.

Kwakkel (2021) contributed to the continuing dialogue between exegesis and theology, demonstrating the importance of allowing close textual analysis to inform broader covenant theology. This approach is especially useful for comparative research because it prevents *berît* from being detached from its biblical literary context. Mason (2007) further illustrates the diversity of biblical covenant terminology by examining the expression *berît ʿôlām* ("everlasting covenant"). His work cautions against assuming that all covenant terminology carries exactly the same theological force across different texts.

Studies in Yoruba studies such as: Idowu (1962) provided a foundational account of Yoruba religious thought through his treatment of Olódùmarè, divinities, human beings, ancestors and moral order. Although Idowu did not construct a systematic study of *májẹ̀mú*, his work provides the theological environment within which Yoruba covenantal concepts can be interpreted. His contribution is particularly important because it shows that Yoruba religious life cannot be separated from ethical and communal relationships.

Bascom (1969) complemented Idowu through his anthropological examination of Yoruba religion and society. His attention to ritual, divination and social institutions provides a cultural basis for understanding how agreements involving religious authority could possess consequences beyond ordinary interpersonal arrangements. Abimbola (1976) already contributed significantly through his analysis of Ifá literature and Yoruba moral thought. His work demonstrates the importance of oral tradition, narrative and proverbial wisdom in preserving concepts of obligation and moral responsibility. This is particularly significant for studying *májẹ̀mú*, since its cultural meaning cannot be reconstructed exclusively from written theological sources. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) subsequently developed the study of Yoruba traditional religion by connecting religious belief, ritual and morality. Their work is relevant to *májẹ̀mú* because it demonstrates that Yoruba religious practices operate within an integrated moral and communal system rather than as isolated ritual activities.

Peel (2000) later examined the historical encounter between Yoruba religion and Christianity. His work is important for the present study because it shows how indigenous Yoruba

categories were not simply abandoned after Christianisation but continued to interact with Christian theological concepts. This provides a basis for investigating how "covenant" and *májẹ̀mú* may have influenced one another in Yoruba Christian discourse.

Oduyoye (2001), from a broader African theological perspective, advocated serious engagement between Christian theology and African cultural categories. Her contribution is methodologically significant: indigenous concepts should neither be dismissed as pre-Christian remnants nor uncritically equated with Christian doctrines. This principle is particularly applicable to a comparison between *berît* and *májẹ̀mú*. Olupona (2011) further emphasised the complexity, adaptability and continuing significance of African indigenous religions. His approach discourages viewing Yoruba religious concepts as static phenomena and supports examining *májẹ̀mú* as a category capable of transformation within changing social and religious environments.

Popoola and Salurante (2023) represented an important recent contribution. Their study directly engages covenant violation with Yoruba thought and Christian theology, showing that covenant remains a meaningful category for interpreting moral and religious relationships. Their work is particularly important for demonstrating the continuing interaction between Yoruba conceptual categories and Christian covenant theology.

More recent biblical work, such as Samji (2024**)**, continued to investigate covenant through literary and theological approaches, indicating that contemporary covenant studies are increasingly attentive to genre, textual context and the diversity of covenant traditions. This confirms that *berît* should not be reduced to a single treaty model or contractual definition.

The two traditions converged in viewing covenant as a binding relationship involving obligation, loyalty and responsibility (Weinfeld, 1973; Ogunleye, 2013; Berekiah & Olaleye, 2022). Both recognise consequences for covenant violation, possess communal significance, and may employ ritual or symbolic acts such as oaths, sacrifices, witnesses and sacred rites. These parallels support comparison, but do not imply that *berît* and *májẹ̀mú* are conceptually identical.

Despite these similarities (relational commitment, mutual obligations and ritual confirmation), significant differences exist. *Berît* is centred on Israel's relationship with Yahweh, whereas *májẹ̀mú* may involve individuals, families, communities or divinities. *Berît* is foundational to Israelite religious identity and is grounded in Scripture, while *májẹ̀mú* is transmitted through Yoruba language, oral tradition, customary practices and religious institutions.

Berit in Ancient Israel

Covenant in ancient Israel is best understood not as a simple synonym for "contract", but as a complex theological and relational institution through which obligations, identity, loyalty and divine-human relationships were constituted and regulated. Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned attempts to impose one fixed definition on *berît*. Scholars have variously understood covenant as a sacred relationship established through oath, a solemn promise, or a binding obligation, demonstrating that its meaning remains context-dependent.

A major issue is therefore the semantic, literary and contextual understanding of *berît*. Riemersma (2020) argues that in Exodus 19, 24 and 34, *berît* may be better understood as "commitment" rather than simply "covenant", since its meaning is shaped by the particular literary context in which it occurs. In Exodus 19:1–8, the *berît* is situated within Israel's encounter with Yahweh at Sinai following the exodus from Egypt. Literarily, the passage introduced the Sinai relationship and establishes the conditions for Israel's identity and vocation as Yahweh's people. Yahweh recalled what he has done for Israel and then proposes a relationship in which Israel is required to obey his voice and keep his commitment, with the consequence that Israel will become his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:4–6). Contextually, therefore, *berît* in this passage conveyed more than a general agreement; it denotes a binding relationship characterised by divine initiative, obligation, identity, vocation and accountability. The

passage also presented the relationship as reciprocal in its demands: Yahweh acts on Israel's behalf, while Israel is expected to respond through obedience.

Taggar-Cohen (2020) demonstrated that Ancient Near Eastern treaties, particularly Hittite traditions, remain valuable for understanding the legal and political dimensions of *berît*, while cautioning against viewing the Israelite covenant as mere imitation. Similarly, Eberhart and Kraus (2023) emphasised the diversity of covenant traditions and question simplistic claims of direct dependence on Assyrian loyalty treaties. Thus, Ancient Near Eastern parallels provide an important comparative context, but Israelite covenant reflects a distinctive theological development shaped by Israel's own religious and prophetic traditions.

Recent scholarship presented *berît* as a dynamic relational and theological category rather than a fixed legal formula. Kwakkel (2021) emphasised that covenant establishes relationships in which Yahweh often initiates and determines the terms, challenging the idea of covenant as a purely mutual agreement. In the Abrahamic tradition (Gen. 15; 17), divine promise and human responsibility coexist, while the Sinai tradition (Exod. 19–24) links covenant, obedience and Israelite identity; Riemersma (2020) accordingly cautioned against treating the Sinai covenant as a single uniform arrangement. Similarly, Johnson's diachronic study of Samuel challenges rigid classifications such as conditional/unconditional and unilateral/bilateral, showing that covenant functions differently across literary contexts.

Covenant also contributes to identity formation, ritual practice and communal responsibility. It is expressed through signs, sacrifice, circumcision, meals, oaths and stipulations, while covenant violation constitutes relational breach with consequences such as judgement and restoration. Thus, *berît* integrates relationship, promise, obligation, law, identity and accountability rather than belonging exclusively to either legal or relational categories. Recent scholarship consequently asks not simply what *berît* means, but how it functions within particular contexts. Riemersma (2020), Taggar-Cohen (2020), Kwakkel (2021), Eberhart and Kraus (2023) and Johnson demonstrated this increasingly contextual and dynamic approach.

Recent scholarship viewed *berît* as a multidimensional, context-sensitive institution rather than merely a contract or relationship, integrating commitment, obligation, identity, accountability and consequences across Israelite covenant traditions. The key scholarly tension is therefore between uniformity and diversity. For this study, *berît* has been examined within its Israelite contexts (considering its parties, authority, obligations, rituals, sanctions and theological purposes) and how, then does it foregrounds connection with Yoruba *májẹ̀mú*?

Májẹ̀mú in Yoruba Culture

Májẹ̀mú is best understood within the wider Yoruba semantic field of agreement, pledge, oath, obligation and binding commitment. The term is related conceptually to *ìmùlẹ̀* (covenant/bond), *àdéhùn* (agreement), *ìlérí* (promise) and *ìbúra* (oath). This distinction is important because Yoruba covenantal thought is embedded primarily in oral tradition, customary institutions, ritual practice, proverbs and religious experience, rather than in a single canonical text.

Májẹ̀mú reflects the Yoruba relational worldview in which Olódùmarè, divinities, ancestors, humans and moral order are interconnected (Idowu, 1962; Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). It is therefore not a rigid institution but may involve individuals, families, communities, authorities or divinities. Its significance lies in transforming agreement into binding moral obligation. Ogunleye (2013) particularly associated covenant-keeping with trust, responsibility and social cohesion, showing that *májẹ̀mú* functions beyond agreement as an ethical mechanism for sustaining relationships and communal order.

A serious study of *májẹ̀mú* must give priority to Yoruba oral tradition. Yoruba religious and ethical knowledge has historically been transmitted through *Ifá* verses, *oríkì*, proverbs, myths, narratives, ritual formulae and communal memory. Abimbola (1976) demonstrated the importance of *Ifá* literature as a repository of Yoruba philosophy, ethics and conceptions of human conduct.

These oral materials are particularly valuable because they preserve ideas about promises, loyalty, taboo, oath, responsibility and the consequences of violating established obligations.

The oral character of Yoruba tradition, however, presents a methodological challenge. Oral traditions are not necessarily uniform, as different towns, families, lineages and practitioners may preserve varying versions of the same narrative or ritual (Awe, 1997; Apter, 1987). Consequently, a single oral account should not automatically be presented as representative of the entire Yoruba people. Scholarship on Yoruba oral traditions likewise recognises their historical and contextual character, requiring them to be critically assessed rather than treated as timeless descriptions of an unchanging culture (Akinpelu, 2020; Apter, 1987). This is particularly relevant to *májẹ̀mú*. Its meaning should therefore be reconstructed through converging oral, linguistic, historical and ethnographic evidence rather than from a single informant or isolated ritual practice (Awe, 1997; Apter, 1987).

The central consequence of *májẹ̀mú* is obligation. Once a binding commitment is made, the parties are expected to fulfil its terms. In this respect, Yoruba covenantal thought is closely connected with the moral ideal of keeping one's word. Failure to honour an agreement can damage personal reputation, family relationships and communal trust. Ogunleye (2013) therefore interpreted covenant-keeping as an ethical resource for addressing wider social problems. His argument is significant because it moves *májẹ̀mú* beyond the sphere of traditional religion into questions of public morality. If agreements are continually violated, social relationships become unstable; conversely, faithfulness strengthens trust and cooperation.

Berekiah and Olaleye (2022) developed this issue through the distinction between *ìmùlẹ̀* and *ilẹ̀ dída*, covenant-making and covenant-breaking. His discussion demonstrated that the meaning of covenant becomes particularly visible when its obligations are violated. Covenant-breaking is not merely failure to keep a promise; it can disrupt relationships and weaken the moral foundations of community. Thus, *májẹ̀mú* involves at least three related obligations: faithfulness to the agreement, accountability to the other party and responsibility for the consequences of violation.

Yoruba covenantal practices historically vary according to the parties and purpose involved. They may include spoken declarations, oath-taking, witnesses, ritual acts, symbolic exchange, sacrifice and appeals to supernatural authority. Such practices transform an internal intention into a publicly recognised commitment.

Jegede's study of Yoruba oath-taking showed that the practice operated across religious, social and juridical spheres, linking ritual commitment with truth, conduct and communal responsibility (Jegede, 2011). His analysis was relevant to *májẹ̀mú* because public recognition, witnesses and sacred authority could strengthen the binding force and accountability of a commitment. Thus, oath-taking provided a useful contextual basis for understanding the ritual and social dimensions of *májẹ̀mú* without equating the two concepts.

The religious significance of *májẹ̀mú* derives from the Yoruba understanding that the visible and invisible dimensions of existence are interconnected. Idowu (1962) and Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) demonstrated that Yoruba religious thought recognises a moral and spiritual order in which human actions can have consequences beyond the immediate social sphere.

Where a covenant is made with or before a divinity, its obligations may include observance of particular taboos, ritual requirements and ethical restrictions. Recent scholarship explicitly notes that Yoruba covenants with divinities may carry sanctions and require devotees to observe the codes and taboos associated with the particular cult. Thus, religious *májẹ̀mú* can function as a mechanism through which religious commitment is translated into concrete behaviour. This also explains why covenant-breaking may be regarded as more serious than ordinary disagreement. The violation may be perceived as an offence against the other party, the community and, where supernatural powers are involved, the sacred order itself.

A critical distinction must nevertheless be maintained between *májẹ̀mú* and oath-taking. Although they overlap, they are not necessarily synonymous. An oath can serve as a means of confirming the truthfulness or seriousness of a commitment, whereas *májẹ̀mú* concerns the binding relationship or agreement itself. Oath-taking may therefore constitute one practice through which covenantal commitment is established or enforced. This distinction is supported by recent research on Yoruba oath-taking, which treats oath-taking as an institution with religious, juridical and social functions rather than simply equating it with covenant.

The strength of *májẹ̀mú* lies in integrating relationship, promise, morality, ritual, community and spiritual accountability (Ogunleye, 2013; Popoola & Salurante, 2023). However, it should not be equated with every Yoruba agreement or oath, since these concepts overlap without being identical (Ogunleye, 2013). Moreover, *májẹ̀mú* is dynamic, having been reshaped by Christianity, Islam, colonialism, modern law and changing social structures (Akanni, 2019; Popoola & Salurante, 2023). Recent research on *yamīn* among Yoruba Muslims further demonstrated the continuing interaction between traditional patterns of commitment, religious obligation and contemporary practice, particularly in relation to trust and the fulfilment of oaths (Akanni & Salau, 2024).

Májẹ̀mú can therefore be understood as a Yoruba culturally embedded form of binding commitment through which relationships are established, obligations defined and accountability enforced. Its foundations lie in Yoruba language, oral traditions, moral philosophy, customary institutions and religious worldview. Its practices may include verbal commitment, oath, witness, ritual, sacrifice and observance of prescribed obligations, while its violation may produce social, moral and religious consequences.

The most important insight for comparison with biblical *berît* is that *májẹ̀mú* is not simply a Yoruba translation of "covenant." It has its own conceptual history and operates within a distinct Yoruba worldview. Yet its emphasis on binding relationships, obligation, faithfulness, ritual confirmation, communal responsibility and consequences of violation provides substantial grounds for comparative theological dialogue. The comparison is therefore strongest when *májẹ̀mú* is allowed to speak from within Yoruba categories while *berît* remains grounded in its Israelite theological context. In spite of their independent theological categories, they could both dialogue in terms of similarities and differences under the subsequent inquiry.

Comparative Analysis: *Berît* and *Májẹ̀mú*

A meaningful comparison between *berît* in ancient Israel and *májẹ̀mú* in Yoruba culture must move beyond lexical similarity. Although both refer to binding commitments, they emerge from different theological systems, social institutions and historical experiences. The strongest argument is therefore that the two concepts are structurally comparable but theologically non-identical. Their convergence lies principally in relational obligation, ritual confirmation, accountability and sanctions; their divergence concerns the identity of the parties, source of authority, theological purpose and mechanisms of enforcement (Idowu, 1962; McCarthy, 1972; Ogunleye, 2013; Taggar-Cohen, 2020).

Taxonomy of the Comparison

Taxonomic dimension	*Berît* in Ancient Israel	*Májẹ̀mú* in Yoruba Culture	Convergence	Critical Divergence
1. Basic meaning	Binding covenant, commitment or relationship involving obligations and promises (McCarthy, 1972; Taggar-Cohen, 2020).	Binding agreement, commitment or pledge within interpersonal, communal or religious relationships (Ogunleye, 2013; Berekiah & Olaleye, 2022).	Both exceed the meaning of an ordinary agreement.	*Berît* possesses a more developed biblical-theological vocabulary, whereas *májẹ̀mú* operates within a broader Yoruba semantic field.
2. Parties	Frequently Yahweh and Israel, but also individuals, families and political rulers.	Individuals, families, communities, authorities and, in religious contexts, humans and divinities (Idowu, 1962;	Both can involve human and transcendent parties.	Yahweh's unique covenantal sovereignty is distinctive to Israelite theology; Yoruba *májẹ̀mú* permits a more plural range of

Taxonomic dimension	*Berît* in Ancient Israel	*Májẹ̀mú* in Yoruba Culture	Convergence	Critical Divergence
		Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979).		religious parties.
3. Initiation	Often initiated by divine action, particularly in Abrahamic and Mosaic traditions.	May originate from human agreement, communal need or religious commitment.	Both may involve deliberate commitment.	Divine initiative is substantially more constitutive of major biblical covenant traditions.
4. Authority	Grounded ultimately in Yahweh and mediated through Israel's covenantal tradition and Scripture.	Grounded in social authority, customary institutions, communal recognition and, where religious, supernatural authority (Idowu, 1962; Ogunleye, 2013).	Both require recognised authority to sustain commitment.	Biblical authority is centred on Yahweh; Yoruba authority is more distributed across social, customary and religious structures.
5. Obligations	Obedience, loyalty, worship, justice and observance of stipulated commands.	Faithfulness, truthfulness, loyalty, fulfilment of promises and respect for agreed obligations.	Both transform commitment into ethical responsibility.	Biblical obligations are especially articulated through divine commandments; Yoruba obligations are frequently embedded in custom, oral tradition and communal expectations.
6. Ritual expression	Sacrifice, blood, circumcision, signs, meals, oaths and written stipulations.	Oaths, verbal declarations, witnesses, ritual acts, symbolic exchange and, in some contexts, sacrifice or invocation of supernatural powers.	Ritual makes commitment publicly recognisable.	Biblical ritual is embedded within Israel's covenantal history; Yoruba ritual varies considerably according to context and institution.
7. Witnesses	God, human witnesses, written testimony and symbolic signs may confirm covenant.	Community members, elders, witnesses and supernatural powers may validate commitment.	Public recognition reinforces accountability.	The biblical covenant frequently locates ultimate witness within the divine sphere, while Yoruba practice may combine human and supernatural witnesses.
8. Sanctions	Divine judgement, punishment, curse, exile and loss of covenantal benefits may follow violation.	Social exclusion, loss of trust, reputational damage and, in religious contexts, feared supernatural consequences (Ogunleye, 2013; Berekiah & Olaleye, 2022).	Violation has consequences beyond mere cancellation of an agreement.	Biblical sanctions are systematically embedded within theological notions of divine judgement; Yoruba sanctions vary according to the type of *májẹ̀mú*.
9. Identity	Covenant is constitutive of Israel's identity as God's covenant people.	*Májẹ̀mú* contributes to relational and communal identity but does not constitute the single organising principle of Yoruba identity.	Both can strengthen communal solidarity.	The covenant-community relationship is more explicitly foundational in Israelite theology.
10. Moral function	Connects relationship with Yahweh to obedience, justice and communal holiness.	Sustains trust, fidelity, social cohesion and responsibility (Ogunleye, 2013).	Both provide mechanisms of moral regulation.	Biblical morality is explicitly theocentric; Yoruba morality is embedded in communal, cosmic and religious relationships.
11. Transmission	Primarily preserved through written Scripture and subsequent interpretative traditions.	Preserved substantially through oral traditions, proverbs, *Ifá* literature, ritual memory and customary practice (Abimbola, 1976; Idowu, 1962).	Both depend upon communal memory.	Their primary modes of transmission are historically different.
12. Breach and restoration	Covenant violation may produce judgement but also repentance, renewal and restoration.	Breach may damage relationships and social order and, in religious contexts, require reconciliation or ritual response (Berekiah & Olaleye, 2022).	Both recognise the possibility of serious consequences and restoration.	Biblical restoration is strongly articulated through Israel's theological concepts of repentance and renewed relationship with Yahweh.

The above taxonomy reveals that *berît* and *májẹ̀mú* converge mainly in their relational and obligatory character: both bind parties to faithfulness and responsibility (Ogunleye, 2013). However, *berît* is specifically grounded in Israel's theological relationship with Yahweh, whereas *májẹ̀mú*

encompasses broader human, communal and religious relationships. Both are also ritualised, although biblical covenants are preserved within a defined scriptural tradition, while Yoruba covenant practices rely largely on oral and customary transmission (Abimbola, 1976). Finally, both recognise sanctions for violation, but biblical sanctions emphasise divine judgement, whereas Yoruba sanctions may be social, moral or supernatural (Ogunleye, 2013; Berekiah & Olaleye, 2022). There are strands of agreements and disagreement, considering the theological, ethical, ritual, and social categories of the distinct concepts.

Findings and Implications

The study finds that *berît* and *májẹ̀mú* share a fundamental understanding of commitment as a binding relational and moral responsibility, although their theological foundations and cultural expressions differ. *Berît* is centred on Yahweh and Israel's covenant identity, whereas *májẹ̀mú* operates within the relational, communal and spiritual structures of Yoruba society. This convergence demonstrates that covenant can be meaningfully interpreted through African categories without assuming that indigenous concepts are exact equivalents of biblical ones.

Theologically, the comparison contributes to African Christian theology by demonstrating the value of engaging indigenous concepts in biblical interpretation. *Májẹ̀mú* provides a culturally intelligible framework for explaining covenant as commitment, fidelity, responsibility and accountability, while the biblical *berît* provides a theological framework that critically reshapes these ideas around God's initiative, faithfulness and moral demands. Such dialogue supports contextual theology without reducing biblical covenant to Yoruba categories.

Ethically, the findings highlight trustworthiness, fidelity, integrity and communal responsibility as shared covenantal values. The consequences associated with covenant violation in both traditions suggest that commitment is not merely verbal but requires responsible conduct. For African Christian communities, this has implications for marriage, leadership, ecclesial relationships, political responsibility and social justice, particularly where broken promises, corruption and declining public trust weaken communal life.

Contextually, the study shows that African Christian thought should neither reject indigenous categories as merely traditional nor adopt them uncritically. Instead, concepts such as *májẹ̀mú* can serve as interpretive bridges through which biblical theology engages African experience while maintaining the distinctive claims of Scripture. The major implication is therefore a critical contextualisation in which biblical covenant and Yoruba *májẹ̀mú* enter into dialogue: their similarities facilitate theological communication, while their differences prevent cultural categories from replacing biblical theology.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes to knowledge by establishing a distinction between functional equivalence and conceptual identity in the comparison of *berît* and *májẹ̀mú*. It demonstrates that although the two concepts converge in functions such as commitment, obligation, ritual confirmation, accountability and sanctions, they remain conceptually and theologically distinct. The study further develops a comparative taxonomy through which *berît* and *májẹ̀mú* were examined in terms of their theological centres, sources of authority, parties involved, obligations, ritual practices, sanctions, modes of transmission and social functions. This systematic comparison provides a clearer framework for understanding both the similarities and differences between the two concepts.

The study also contributes to contextual African Christian theology by demonstrating that *májẹ̀mú* can serve as an indigenous functional resource for explaining selected dimensions of biblical covenant theology without being equated with *berît*. In doing so, the study emphasises the importance of preserving indigenous conceptual integrity in comparative theological studies. Rather than imposing biblical categories upon Yoruba traditions or assuming that similarities imply identity, it shows that comparative theology should recognise points of convergence while

maintaining the distinctive meanings, structures and theological foundations of each tradition. Finally, the study integrates the theological and ethical dimensions of *berît* and *májẹ̀mú* by demonstrating that commitment, fidelity, responsibility and accountability constitute significant ethical features of both concepts, despite differences in their sources of authority and religious contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that *berît* and *májẹ̀mú* converge in understanding commitment as a binding relational, moral and communal responsibility, but remain distinct in theological foundation, authority and cultural expression. While *berît* is centred on Yahweh, Israel's covenant identity and divine obligation, *májẹ̀mú* operates within Yoruba relational, communal and spiritual structures. Their similarities therefore indicate functional convergence rather than conceptual equivalence. For African Christian thought, *májẹ̀mú* provides a valuable indigenous category for contextualising covenant themes such as fidelity, trust, accountability and communal responsibility, without replacing the distinctive claims of biblical covenant. The study therefore recommends greater engagement with indigenous concepts in African theological education and preaching, careful distinction between biblical and indigenous categories, further oral and ethnographic research on *májẹ̀mú* across Yoruba communities, and practical application of covenantal ethics to contemporary concerns such as leadership, integrity, social justice and public trust. Such critical contextualisation can strengthen African Christian theology while preserving both biblical integrity and indigenous cultural meaning.

References

Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifá: An exposition of Ifá literary corpus*. Oxford University Press.

Akanni, A., & Salau, M. O. (2024). The practice of *yamīn* (oath-taking) among Yoruba Muslims in South West Nigeria.

Akinpelu, O. M. (2020). An overview of Yoruba oral literature, its viability as a historical data source and its contribution to modern Yoruba historiography. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research, 3*(6), 1–24.

Apter, A. (1987). The historiography of Yoruba myth and ritual. *History in Africa, 14*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.2307/3171830

Awe, B. (1997). Praise poems as historical data: The example of the Yoruba Oríkí. *Africa, 67*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.2307/1161261

Awolalu, J. O., & Dopamu, P. A. (1979). *West African traditional religion*. Onibonoje Press.

Bascom, W. (1969). *The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Bergsma, J. (2016). Covenant. In C. R. Matthews (Ed.), *Oxford bibliographies in biblical studies*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393361-0225

Eberhart, C. A., & Kraus, W. (Eds.). (2023). *Covenant—Concepts of berit, diatheke, and testamentum* (WUNT 506). Mohr Siebeck. https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-161774-4

Idowu, E. B. (1962). *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba belief*. Longmans.

Jegede, C. O. (2011). *Shrines, oath-taking and jurisprudence in Yoruba and Igbo religions of Nigeria*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

Kalluveettil, P. (1982). *Declaration and covenant: A comprehensive review of covenant formulae from the Old Testament and the ancient Near East* (Analecta Biblica Dissertationes, Vol. 88). Biblical Institute Press.

McCarthy, D. J. (1978). *Treaty and covenant: A study in form in the ancient oriental documents and in the Old Testament* (Rev. ed.). Biblical Institute Press.

Mendenhall, G. E. (1954). Covenant forms in Israelite tradition. *The Biblical Archaeologist, 17*(2), 50–76.

Mendenhall, G. E., & Herion, G. A. (1992). Covenant. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 1, pp. 1179–1202). Doubleday.

Mason, S. D. (2007). Another flood? Genesis 9 and Isaiah's broken eternal covenant. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, *32*(2), 177–198. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089207085882

Oduyoye, M. A. (2001). *Introducing African women's theology*. Sheffield Academic Press.

Ogunleye, A. R. (2013). Covenant-keeping among the Yoruba people: A critique of socio-political transformation in Nigeria. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 3*(9), 81–85.

Olagunju, O. (2011). Covenant making in Genesis 15:9–18 in the context of archaeology and Yoruba world view. *Continental Journal of Arts and Humanities*, *3*(2), 15–25.

Berekiah, O. O., & Olaleye, S. K. (2022). Berith and *Ìmùlẹ̀* as means of curbing corruption among rulers in ancient Israel and indigenous Yorùbá culture. *AIPGG Journal of Humanities and Peace Studies, 3*(1), 1–17.

Olupona, J. K. (2011). *City of 201 gods: Ilé-Ifè in time, space, and the imagination*. University of California Press.

Peel, J. D. Y. (2000). *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press.

Popoola, O., & Salurante, T. (2023). Covenant violation as a pathway for interpreting the Gospel: An engagement with Schilder and the Yoruba thought. *Jurnal Jaffray, 21*(1), 37–54. https://doi.org/10.25278/jj.v21i1.826

Riemersma, N. (2020). Berît in the book of Exodus (19:3–8; 24:3–8; 34:10–28). *Kerk en Theologie, 71*(2), 153–166.

Samji, K. (2024). Genre and Genesis: Locating covenants in the Qurʾān and the Bible. *Religions, 15*(11), 1380. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111380

Taggar-Cohen, A. (2020). The Hebrew biblical bĕrît in light of Ancient Near Eastern covenants and treaties. *Canon & Culture, 14*(2), 5–50.

Weinfeld, M. (1970). The covenant of grant in the Old Testament and in the ancient Near East. *Journal of the American Oriental Society, 90*(2), 184–203.

Weinfeld, M. (1973). בְּרִית. In G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 2). Eerdmans.