

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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All admit the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant in understanding biblical revelation, but not all agree on its interpretation. Genesis 12 is a pivotal statement of the covenant because it contains God's first recorded speech to Abraham. There God promises to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great. Genesis 15 makes clear that the LORD took upon Himself alone the responsibility for fulfilling the covenant. Genesis 17 adds the revelation that the covenant would be everlasting. Genesis 18 and 22 restate terms of the covenant in connection with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the offering of Abraham's son Isaac. Exodus through Deuteronomy describe the initial outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant. The elements of the covenant are threefold: making Abraham into a great nation, blessing Abraham personally, and blessing all nations in Abraham. The promises of the covenant are unconditional. The rest of the OT repeatedly refers back to God's oath to Abraham in the Torah. The NT does the same by pointing out that Jesus Christ, Abraham's seed, will make possible the final fulfillment of that covenant in the future.

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The importance of the Abrahamic Covenant for a proper understanding of the whole Bible is widely accepted. For example, dispensationalist John F. Walvoord writes,

It is recognized by all serious students of the Bible that the covenant with Abraham is one of the important and determinative revelations of Scripture. It furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches for its fulfillment into the New. In the controversy between premillenarians and amillenarians, the interpretation of this covenant more or less settles the entire argument. The analysis of its provisions and the character of their fulfillment set the mold for the entire body of Scriptural truth.¹

Covenantalist John Murray also emphasizes the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant when he states,

¹John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1959) 139.

It is this Abrahamic covenant, so explicitly set forth in Gn. xv and xvii, that underlies the whole subsequent development of God's redemptive promise, word, and action. . . . The redemptive grace of God in the highest and furthest reaches of its realization is the unfolding of the promise given to Abraham and therefore the unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant.²

All segments of evangelicalism recognize the importance of a proper understanding of this covenant. Interpretive decisions concerning it will determine one's theological perspective. Therefore, it is imperative that every Bible student study the Abrahamic Covenant carefully. Paul R. House fittingly sums up the situation when he says of Gen 11:10–25:18, "Simply stated, then, it is hard to overstate this section's importance in biblical literature and thus biblical theology."³

Though widespread agreement exists about the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant, the same unanimity concerning its meaning does not prevail. William J. Dumbrell points out that "the material associated with the Abrahamic covenant is not . . . easy to systematize. Not only is it dispersed over different chapters but also it often seems repetitive in its presentation."⁴ This difficulty has led to differing answers to such fundamental questions as (1) Did the Lord make one or two covenants with Abraham? (2) What are the basic provisions of the covenant? (3) Is the covenant unilateral or bilateral? (4) When are the differing provisions of the covenant fulfilled in the Bible? The following pages will address each of these questions.

With varying answers to the questions, the procedure adopted for studying the scriptural accounts of the Abrahamic Covenant is crucial. Dumbrell suggests a viable procedure that the present study adopts: "Careful evaluation of the accounts is required and particular matters relating to the order of the presentation of the material need to be discussed."⁵ Therefore, the following discussion will follow the canonical order of biblical books. As a foundation for the study, first will come a careful evaluation of the revelation of the Abrahamic Covenant in the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Then will follow a survey of the remainder of OT references to the covenant. Finally, the study will summarize the NT revelation concerning this covenant.

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN THE TORAH

The Terms Used

Before analyzing the Abrahamic Covenant in the Torah, it is necessary to

²John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: Tyndale, 1954) 4.

³Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 76.

⁴William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984) 47.

⁵Ibid.

define terms that appear repeatedly in what follows. The term “covenant” (ברית, *bērît*) is used only in Gen 15:18 and 17:1-21 in reference to the LORD’s covenant with Abraham. However, Gen 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 18:17-33; 21:12-13; 22:1-18 also record the LORD’s communication to Abraham. Clearly, He spoke to Abraham much more than what the Genesis text explicitly calls *bērît*. The remainder of the Torah views the Lord’s promises to Abraham as *bērît* (Exod 2:24; 6:4-5; Lev 26:42-44; Deut 4:31), promises sworn by the LORD to Abraham by oath (שָׁבַע, *šābaʿ*, Exod 13:5, 11; 33:1; Num 11:12; 14:16, 23; 32:11; Deut 1:8; 4:31; 7:7-8; cf. Gen 22:16; 26:3; 50:24).

In contrast, the NT refers only five times to the Lord’s “covenant”: (διαθήκη, *diathēkē*) with Abraham (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; 7:8; Gal 3:17; 4:24). The preferred term is “promise” (ἐπαγγελία, *epangelia*), a term the LXX never uses in referring to the Abrahamic Covenant. “Promise” is used nineteen times with clear reference to the Lord’s word/promise to Abraham (Acts 7:17; Rom 4:13, 14, 16, 20; Gal 3:16, 17, 18, 21, 29; 4:23; Heb 7:6; 11:9, 13, 17).

NT usage raises the question about the relationship between the “promise” and the “covenant.”⁶ A close connection exists between the terms as evidenced by the phrase “the covenants of promise” (Eph 2:12). The Lord’s covenants with Israel include the “promise.”⁷ However, the “promise” and the “covenant” are not synonymous; Paul distinguishes the two entities in Rom 9:4. Hebrews 6:13-18, a passage dealing with God’s affirmation to Abraham, articulates the relationship between the two terms. The writer of Hebrews speaks of “two unchangeable things” in 6:18. The “two unchangeable things” in this context refer to (1) God’s word of

⁶Two evangelical OT scholars have written at length about the “promise” and “covenant” (“oath”) in the OT. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978] 32-35) views what the NT eventually calls “promise” as the center that binds various OT themes, concepts, and books together. A constellation of OT terms, formulae, and metaphors refers to the “promise.” According to Kaiser, over thirty times in the OT, the verb בָּרַךְ (usually translated “to speak”) meant “to promise.” “To these ‘promises’ God added His ‘pledge’ or ‘oath,’ thus making the immediate word of blessing and the future word of promise doubly secure. Men now had the divine word and a divine oath on top of that word (see Gen 22; 26:3; Deut 8:7; 1 Chron 16:15-18; Ps 105:9; Jer 11:5)” (33). He defends and expands this understanding in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 83-95. Thomas Edward McComiskey (*The Covenants of Promise* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985]) sees the “promise” as the basis of God’s gracious actions from the beginning of human history (190-91). “The promise comprises the heart of the biblical teaching regarding the people of God. . . . The promise thus provides a theological continuum that spans all time. . . . The promise was placed in the form of a covenant [Abrahamic] in Genesis 15 and continues in that form today” (58). For McCominsky, the “promise” is now in the “promissory covenants” of the Bible.

⁷Andrew T. Lincoln (*Ephesians*, vol. 42 of *Word Biblical Commentary* [Dallas: Word, 1990] 137) states, “The only other place in the NT where the plural form ‘the covenants’ is found is Rom 9:4. . . . The writer probably has in mind a series of covenants with Abraham (Gen 15:7-21; 17:1-21), with Isaac (Gen 26:2-5), with Jacob (Gen 28:13-15), with Israel (Exod 24:1-8), and with David (2 Sam 7).” Contrary to Lincoln’s enumeration, the OT covenants that contain the “promise” are the Abrahamic (Gal 3:16), the Davidic (Acts 13:23), and the New (Acts 2:33; cf. Ezek 36:27).

promise (2) (guaranteed by) His covenant oath.⁸

Thus, this essay will use the terms and phrases according to the following definitions: (1) *promise*—a declaration of the Lord's intention to do something for Abraham and his seed; (2) *covenant*—the Lord's binding obligation, confirmed by a culturally known practice including an oath, to do something for Abraham and his seed; (3) *the Abrahamic Covenant*—all that the Lord has declared and bound Himself to do for Abraham and his seed.⁹ Because God cannot lie (Heb 6:18), all His declarations, including but not limited to those sworn by covenant oath, will certainly come to pass.

Exposition of the Abrahamic Covenant in the Torah

Genesis 12. Genesis 12:1-3 plays a pivotal role in the biblical narrative that records the Abrahamic Covenant. These verses contain the first recorded speech of the LORD to Abraham (here called by his former name, Abram, until his name-change in Gen 17:5; from that point on, Scripture uses the name Abraham to refer to this patriarch, except for 1 Chr 1:27, 32 and Neh 9:7). The LORD's words here are foundational to all that follows in His dealings with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the sons of Israel in the remainder of the Torah. But the verses also link the Abraham narrative to what has been recorded in Gen 1:1–11:26.

The following based on the New American Standard Bible is a schematic of Gen 12:1-4a with footnotes that give reasons for exegetical decisions made in support of this rendering.¹⁰ The observations made on these verses will then be the basis for the following discussion of the need for and the narrative concerning the Abrahamic Covenant.

Now the LORD said to Abram,
 "Go forth¹¹ from your **land**,

⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 131; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 342; Homer A. Kent, Jr. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 121; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, vol 47A of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 152.

⁹See also the definitions provided by Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Evidence from Genesis," *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. by Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 36. Chisholm notes that Gen 25:32-33 and 47:28-30 validate and illustrate the distinction between "promise" and "oath" in situations involving agreements among men. In both cases, promissory declarations were formally ratified and guaranteed through the swearing of an oath.

¹⁰See similar schematics of Genesis 12:1-3 in Chisholm, "Evidence from Genesis" 37 (based on the NIV), and Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* 64 (based on the RSV).

¹¹The Hebrew has the verb in the imperative followed by a preposition with the pronominal suffix which would literally translate, "Go for yourself." E. Kautzsch and A. E. Crowley (eds. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar [GKC]* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1970] 381 [Par. 119s]) clarify this usage of the preposition as an ethical dative, subordinated to the verb, "to give emphasis to the significance of the occurrence in question for a particular subject" and would translate, "Go, get thee away." Here, the LORD is calling Abraham to break himself away from what is specified in the following three phrases.

and from your relatives,¹²
 and from your father's house,
 to the **land** which I will show you;
 And¹³ I will make you a great nation,
 And I will *ble*ss you,
 And I will make great your name;
 And so you *shall be a blessing*;¹⁴
 And I *will ble*ss those who *ble*ss you,
 And the one who slights you I will curse;
 And all the families of the earth shall be *ble*ssed in you."¹⁵

¹²The Hebrew term מְלֵדֶת can refer to either "birthplace" or "relatives" (Paul R. Gilchrist, "mōledet," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [TWOT], ed by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke [Chicago: Moody, 1980] 1:379-80). Although either meaning would make sense here, unless the expression is a hendiadys ("land" plus "birthplace" equals "land of birth") which is unlikely because there are three coordinate phrases, *mōledet* most likely means "relatives," those in Abraham's extended family outside of his father Terah's direct authority, particularly Abraham's uncles' families (Nahor's sons other than Terah in Gen 11:25).

¹³Based on *GKC* 320 (Par. 108d), Chisholm ("Evidence from Genesis" 37) interprets the three cohortatives, since they follow the imperative "go" and are introduced with "and," to express purpose or result; he translates, "Leave . . . so that I might. . . ." However, Gordon J. Wenham (*Genesis 1–15*, vol 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary* [Dallas: Word, 1987] 266) points out that this grammatical construction can also convey intention, yielding the translation "Go . . . and I will. . . ." On the basis of Abraham's obedience, the LORD intends to do what He declares to/for Abraham.

¹⁴The form of the verb "to be" is here an imperative. H. C. Leupold (*Exposition of Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949] 1:412-13) argues that this imperative places a responsibility on Abraham. Though it is God who will make Abraham a blessing to others, "he should do his part that he may become a blessing to others." However, *GKC* 325 (Par. 110f [b]) states, "The imperative, when depending (with *wāw* copulative) upon a jussive (cohortative), or an interrogative sentence, frequently expresses also a consequence which is to be expected with certainty, and often a consequence which is intended, or in fact an intention." Thus, the Lord intends to "make . . . bless . . . make great" Abraham with the certain consequence that Abraham "shall be a blessing." After arguing that the Hebrew text should not be emended, but the imperatival form kept, Victor P. Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 369-70, 373) concludes, "Here the first imperative states the exhortation, and the second imperative touches on the results which are brought about by the implementation of the first imperative [he cites Gen 17:1; 1 Kgs 22:6; 2 Kgs 5:13; Isa 36:16 as examples]. Applied to Gen 12:1-2, this construction means that the first imperative, *go*, is related as effect to cause to this second imperative, *be*. Abram cannot be a blessing if he stays in Haran. But if he leaves, then a blessing he will be."

¹⁵The verb "bless" is in the Niphal stem here (and Gen 18:18; 28:14). The most common use of the Niphal is passive (*GKC*, 138 [Par. 51f, h]), which yields the meaning here "through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." But *GKC*, 138 [Par. 51h] also states, "Although the passive use of Niphal was introduced at an early period, and became tolerable common, it is nevertheless quite secondary to the reflexive use." Since it is argued that the original sense of the Niphal was reflexive, although the common use was passive, the question has arisen as to how to understand the Niphal here. Because the verb "bless" is found in the Hithpael stem in Gen 22:18; 26:4 (and the Hithpael is primarily used reflexively [*GKC* 149 (Par. 54e)]), the Niphal in 12:3 has been understood as reflexive also, which leads to the translation, "by you shall all the families of the earth bless themselves" (RSV). On the basis

So Abram *went* as the LORD had spoken to him. . . .

The need for the Abrahamic Covenant emerges in Gen 12:1-3. Five times the verses use the Hebrew root בָּרַךְ (*bārak*, “to bless”). Further, the LORD promises Abraham, “I will make great your name.” Significantly, both “blessing” and “name” appear repeatedly in Gen 1:1–11:26.

God’s word of blessing expresses His favor and desired good that leads to the fertility, prosperity, protection, and preservation of the one(s) blessed. “That which is blessed functions and produces at the optimum level, fulfilling its divinely designated purpose.”¹⁶ At creation, God blessed the man and the woman (Gen 1:28-30; 5:2). God’s blessing called for the multiplication of mankind who would subdue and rule over the earth. After the flood, God blessed Noah and his sons in a similar way, calling on them to multiply and exercise authority over the earth (Gen 9:1-7). The involvement of both God and Adam in naming the animals (Gen 2:19-20; cf. 1:28; 9:2) implies that mankind’s exercise of authority was to be with and for God.¹⁷

However, instead of retaining God’s favor and exercising authority on His behalf, man rebelled against the Creator who blessed him (Gen 3:1-7; 4:1-24). Instead of experiencing all of God’s blessing, God’s “curse” fell upon mankind (Gen 3:17; 4:11; 5:29).¹⁸ Just before the flood this rebellion produced “men of renown,” literally, “men of a name” (Gen 6:4). These “men of a name” were the offspring of the sexual union of “the sons of God” and the “the daughters of men.”¹⁹ The text depicts them as ancient warriors who had established their reputation or fame (the implication of the term שֵׁם [*šēm*, “name”] here²⁰) apart from God. After the judgment of the flood, mankind once again rebelled against God. Although God had

of the most common usage of the Niphal in the OT and in corresponding verbs of the NT (Gal 3:8), the Niphal is best understood as a passive (for a detailed defense of the passive rendering, see Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 13-14).

¹⁶Michael L. Brown, “בָּרַךְ,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 1:759.

¹⁷“This is the first fulfillment of God’s directive to humankind in 1:26, 28 to exercise authority over the animal, the fish, and the fowl. For to confer a name is to speak from a position of authority and sovereignty” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 176).

¹⁸Mankind continued to experience the blessing (i.e., fertility) from God in multiplication (Gen 5:1-32; 10:1-32). However, mankind’s ability to rule over the earth was compromised because God placed a “curse” on the ground (Gen 3:17). אָרַר (“to curse”) means “to bind, hem in with obstacles, render powerless to resist.” The clause “cursed is the ground because of you” means “condemned be the soil (i.e., fertility to men is banned) on your account.” See Victor P. Hamilton, “אָרַר,” *TWOT* 1:75-76.

¹⁹For discussion of the differing viewpoints concerning the meaning of “the sons of God” in Gen 6:2, 4, see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 139-40.

²⁰Allen P. Ross, “שֵׁם,” *NIDOTTE* 4:147-48. Ross uses the term “reputation” in the sense of a “good name,” and so in Gen 6:4 and 11:4 would prefer the idea of “fame,” although he acknowledges that “fame” is closely related to “reputation.” Kaiser (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* 86) sees “name” here in the sense of “renown,” “reputation,” even “superiority.”

directed mankind to populate all the earth (Gen 9:1; 11:4), men came together saying, “Let us make for ourselves a name” (Gen 11:4). Again, *šēm* has the connotation of reputation or fame apart from God.²¹ God judged mankind through the confusion of languages, not by a flood as previously because of the provisions of the covenant with Noah (Gen 11:7-8; cf. 9:8-17).

The Lord’s determination to bless mankind leads to the narrative concerning the Abrahamic Covenant. The foundation of the Abrahamic Covenant is in the promises declared by the Lord to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17. As stated above, Gen 12:1-3 is pivotal because it stated the essential features of the Lord’s promises to Abraham that would be developed in the ensuing narrative.

The first clause of the LORD’S speech to Abraham is the command to leave his “land” and go to the “land” that the Lord would show him (Gen 12:1). According to the genealogical record of the sons of Noah, the “nations” (גוֹיִם, *gôyim*) were divided according to their “lands” (Gen 10:5, 20, 31, 32). By leaving his “land,” Abraham would in essence be leaving his nation. “From your relatives” and “from your father’s house” in this verse further confirms this understanding. According to Genesis 10, common ancestry was the basis of national identity. Thus, the LORD called Abraham to renounce his identification with the nations who were in rebellion against Him. The promises of God to Abraham (12:2-3) were contingent on Abraham’s obedience to the Lord’s command.

In response to his obedience, the LORD promised Abraham three things in three clauses with the cohortative verbs.²² First, He declared, “I will make you a great nation” (12:2a). By Abraham’s renouncing of his national identity, He promised to make him the progenitor of a nation like the men listed in Genesis 10. But this nation would be distinct from all previous nations, because her ancestor is not an immediate descendent of Noah (ten generations separated Noah and Abraham [Gen 11:10-26]). In calling this nation “great,” God referred to a large population, a large territory, and a wise character (cf. Gen 12:7; 13:14-17; Deut 4:7-8).²³ Second, the LORD stated, “I will bless you” (12:2b). He promised Abraham personal favor from Himself, which would be manifest in fertility and prosperity. Third, He promised, “I will make great your name” (12:2c). What men had sought by human effort, a “name” (Gen 6:4; 11:4), the LORD will give to Abraham. The OT usually reserves this “great” reputation for God (Josh 7:9; 1 Sam 12:22; Ps 76:2; Mal 1:11), along with kings (2 Sam 7:9; Ps 72:17).²⁴ Abraham would have an exalted status and authority. Once Abraham comes into the land the Lord would show him, these

²¹Ibid.

²²“The cohortative expresses the direction of the will to an action . . . , a resolution or a wish . . .” (GKC, 130 [Par. 48c]). The cohortative gives the sense in Gen 12:2 of “I will certainly. . .”

²³Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 275.

²⁴Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 372-73; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 275-76.

promises of the Lord are certain.²⁵

The next clause (12:2d) states the LORD's intention in fulfilling these promises for Abraham. "Abraham is to be a great nation, be personally blessed, and receive a great name 'so that [he] might be a blessing.' But to whom? And how was Abraham to be a blessing? Those questions appear to be answered in the next three clauses."²⁶ The verb in the first clause of v. 3 is a cohortative. The LORD will certainly show favor ("bless") to those who are favorable ("bless") to Abraham. However, in the second clause of v. 3 the one who slights²⁷ Abraham the LORD will curse.²⁸

The climax of God's first speech to Abraham comes in the third clause of v. 3. Again the verb is *bārak* ("bless").²⁹ In the future, "all the families of the earth will be blessed in Abraham." In Gen 18:18, 22:18, and 26:5, the term *gōyim* is used. But here, the LORD uses the term מִשְׁפָּחֹת (*mišpāhōt*, "families"). These families are subunits who make up the nations.³⁰ According to Gen 10:32, the genealogy given in that chapter details "the families of the sons of Noah." The LORD affirms here to Abraham that those listed in Genesis 10 are the very ones who would receive blessing in him. "Not every individual is promised blessing in Abram [i.e., 'the one

²⁵Chisholm ("Evidence from Genesis" 38) argues that the LORD's promises of Gen 12:2-3 do not become unconditional even though he acknowledges that Abraham obeyed the only specific condition (moving to Canaan) that the Lord had commanded. The basis of his argument is that the God's oaths recorded in 22:16-18 and 26:3-5 note other instances of Abraham's obedience. Thus he concludes, "This implies that the journey to Canaan was only the first in a series of obedient responses leading up to the eventual ratification of the promises made in Haran." Though it is true that Abraham will be obedient to other commands from the Lord in the future, the grammar is clear in 12:1-3 (note *GKC* 320 [Par. 108d] that says the cohortative in dependence on an imperative expresses an intention or intended consequence): on the basis of Abraham's obedience to the LORD's command in leaving Ur and Haran and coming to Canaan, He will certainly fulfill the promises He makes to Abraham; Abraham's further obedience is not stated here as a contingency to the LORD's faithfulness to His promises.

²⁶Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 87.

²⁷The term קָלַל ("to curse") has the implication "of intending a lowered position, technically, to curse" (Leonard J. Coppes, "קָלַל," *TWOT* 2:800). The term here refers to the one who "slights" Abraham by not recognizing the exalted, blessed position given to him by the LORD.

²⁸The verb "will curse" is here in the imperfect, not the cohortative. However, as *GKC* 317 [Par. 107n] notes, the imperfect when referring to future time can sometimes be used in place of the cohortative. The use of the imperfect here does not necessarily connote any sense of conditionality to the LORD's intended determination. The one who slights Abraham, the LORD will curse (for the meaning of "curse," see n. 18 above).

²⁹The verb is a *wāw* consecutive perfect, which here again denotes the sense of a future determination (see *GKC* 132-3 [Par. 49a], "a series of future events . . . is continued in the perfect."). In contrast, Kaiser (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* 87) states, "This time the Hebrew verb shifts suddenly to the 'perfect tense' in what again can only be a result clause: 'So that in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.'"

³⁰"Family" . . . is a grouping intermediate between a tribe and a father's house" (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 278). However, Robert H. O'Connell ("מִשְׁפָּחֹת," *NIDOTTE* 2:1141) states that the term "families" is synonymous with "nations" here.

who curses you'] but every major group in the world will be blessed.”³¹ Thus, the promise is that the one in whom some of the earth’s rebellious inhabitants will be blessed from that point on is Abraham.

Genesis 12:4-6 clearly depicts the obedience of Abraham to God’s command. The Lord had said “go” (הָלַךְ, *hālak*) (12:1), and Abraham “went” (*hālak*) as the Lord had told him to (12:4). When Abraham came into the land of Canaan, the Lord gave a further promise to him, “To your seed I will give this land” (12:7). The land then occupied by the Canaanites was to be the land where the nation made up of Abraham’s descendants would live. Later, according to Gen 13:17, the LORD commanded Abraham to walk throughout the land because He would certainly give it to him.³² “The command ‘walk to and fro’ . . . throughout the land probably represents a symbolic appropriation of the land.”³³ Abraham’s obedience, not explicitly stated in this text (note Gen 15:6), would demonstrate his faith in God’s promise to give the land to him and his innumerable “seed”³⁴ (Gen 13:15-16).

Genesis 15. Genesis 15:1-21 records the LORD’s next communication to Abraham. Significantly, this chapter emphasizes the “seed” and the “land” (cf. Gen 12:7; 13:14-17) and describes the making of the LORD’s “covenant” with Abraham (15:18). The chapter contains a parallelism that may be charted as follows:

<i>first scene</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>second scene</i>
v. 1	The LORD’s Word to Abraham	v. 7
vv. 2-3	Abraham’s Questioning the LORD	v. 8
vv. 4-5	The LORD’s Assurance to Abraham	vv. 9-21
	v. 6, Abraham’s Faith in the LORD and Consequent Righteousness	

Both of these incidents conclude at night (15:5, 17). The text does not indicate the

³¹Wenham, *Gen 1–15* 278.

³²The cohortative is used here to again connote future certainty (see n. 22 above).

³³Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 298.

³⁴The term זָרַע (“seed”) has a prominent place in the Lord’s promise to Abraham. This noun is used 224 times in the OT and can mean 1. seedtime; 2. seed (that is scattered); 3. semen; and 4. offspring. The last sense is that used here. In this theological usage, “thus the word designates the whole line of descendants as a unit, yet it is deliberately flexible enough to denote either one person who epitomizes the whole group (i.e. the man of promise and ultimately Christ), or the many persons in the whole line of natural and/or spiritual descendants” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “זָרַע,” *TWOT* 1:252-53).

time sequence of the two encounters or the timing of what precedes (Abraham's victory over the kings of the East) and what follows (the conception and birth of Ishmael). Textually, verse six acts as a hinge between the scenes.

In the first scene (15:1-5), the main subject is Abraham's "seed." God seeks to encourage Abraham in his fear by affirming that his reward would be very great (15:1). Abraham responds by questioning Him about the validity of the reward because he is childless ("You have given no 'seed' to me") and Eliezer is his heir (15:2-3). The LORD assures Abraham that his heir would not be Eliezer, but one born naturally to him. He then assures him that his "seed will be more numerous than the stars in the heavens" (15:4-5; cf. 13:16).³⁵ He promises Abraham again what He is going to do in the future; the "seed" promise is as certain as the reliability of God. Genesis 15:6 breaks the narrative pattern. John H. Sailhamer observes, "The syntax . . . suggests that this is a comment within the narrative and is not to be understood as an event within the framework of the other events of the narrative."³⁶ The author of the text, Moses, affirms that Abraham responded to God's promise of innumerable seed with faith. But more than this one occurrence is in view; Moses is confirming that Abraham's past pattern was one of faith in the Lord's promises as seen in his repeated obedience (cf. Gen 12:1-4, 7; 13:14-18).³⁷ On the basis of Abraham's faith, the LORD reckons him as righteous.³⁸ He recognizes Abraham as His loyal servant with whom He will enter into covenant.³⁹

Genesis 15:7-21 recounts God's making of the covenant with Abraham. The emphasis in this section shifts to the "land" promised by the Lord to Abraham's "seed." He encourages Abraham with the fact that He had brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give him the land of Canaan as his inheritance (15:7). The root $\Psi\text{ר}\text{נ}$ (*yāraš*, "to inherit") connects the "land" with the "heir" (from *yāraš*) in verses 3 and

³⁵In 15:5, the imperfect tense is used in the divine promise, "so shall be your seed" (see n. 28 above).

³⁶John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 2:132.

³⁷Based on *GKC*, 339 (Par. 112ss), Wenham (*Genesis 1–15*, 329) states "The verbal form (waw + perfect) 'he believed' probably indicates repeated or continuing action. Faith was Abram's normal response to the Lord's words."

³⁸ $\Psi\text{ר}\text{נ}$ ("righteousness") is derived from a root which "connotes conformity to an ethical or moral standard." (Harold G. Stigers, " $\Psi\text{ר}\text{נ}$," *TWOT* 2:752-55). Chisholm ("Evidence from Genesis" 40) writes that $\Psi\text{ר}\text{נ}$ in Gen 15:6 appears to have "the nuance of 'loyal, rewardable behavior.' . . . Abraham's response is followed by a formal ceremony in which God rewards his faith."

³⁹"Like the royal grants in the Ancient Near East, so also the covenants with Abraham and David are gifts bestowed upon individuals who excelled in loyally serving their masters" (M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 [1970]:185). Sailhamer ("Genesis" 129) describes the relationship between Abraham's "faith" and "righteousness" and God's "covenant" in these words: "God was about to enter a 'covenant' with Abraham that would lay at the base of all of God's future dealings with him and his seed (vv. 7-21). Verse 6 opens the scene by setting the record straight: Abraham had believed in Yahweh and had been accounted 'righteous.' The 'covenant' did not make him 'righteous'; rather it was through his 'faith' that he was reckoned righteous. Only after he had been counted righteous through faith could Abraham enter into God's covenant."

4. Thus, the inheritance to be given to Abraham's "seed" refers primarily to the "land." Abraham then questions the LORD as to how he can know that he shall inherit the "land" (15:8). In response to Abraham's question, God gives assurance by entering into a covenant with him (15:9-21).⁴⁰

The covenant ceremony begins with the familiar pattern of the LORD's command and Abraham's faithful obedience (cf. Gen 12:1, 4; 13:17; 15:5, 6). The LORD commands Abraham to take to Him certain animals. Abraham obediently complies, cutting and laying some of the animals opposite each other (but not the birds) and protecting all the dead animals from scavenging birds (15:9-11). The text implies that Abraham knew the ritual to take place⁴¹ because God does not explicitly state what he is to do with these animals. He only commands Abraham to "take" (15:9), but Abraham "took," "cut in two," and "laid" (15:10). Abraham seems to understand what the animals signify: the LORD's assurance to Abraham would come through a binding "covenant" in which both He and Abraham would swear to fulfill certain obligations to each other, recognizing that death would be the certain consequence of their failure to accomplish their binding commitment faithfully.⁴²

However, this particular "covenant" is not a mutually binding obligation. A deep sleep (cf. Gen 2:21) falls upon Abraham and only the LORD, represented by a smoking oven and a flaming torch, passes between the animals (15:12, 17). He binds Himself through the "covenant" to give Abraham's "seed" the "land" described by its general borders and present occupants (15:18-21). However, this land grant will take place only after Abraham's "seed" has endured oppression in another "land" and the LORD has judged that nation. Then He will give Abraham's "seed" the "land" He has promised (Gen 12:7; 13:15), and now covenanted, to give. His promise is certain because He cannot lie; His covenant is certain because He

⁴⁰The most common expression for establishing a covenant is "to cut a covenant" (Gen 15:18). Other terms expressing the establishing of a covenant are "to give a covenant" (Gen 9:12; 17:2) and "to erect a covenant" (Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11; 17:7, 10, 19). See M. Weinfeld, "כְּרִיתָהּ," *Theological Dictionary of Old Testament [TDOT]*, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgen, trans. by John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 2:259-60.

⁴¹For extra-biblical parallels to the covenant ceremony recorded in Genesis 15, see Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East" 196-99; Richard S. Hess, "The Slaughter of the Animals in Genesis 15: Genesis 15:8-21 and its Ancient Near East Context," *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, ed. by R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 55-65.

⁴²Hess ("The Slaughter of the Animals in Genesis 15: Genesis 15:8-21 and Its Ancient Near East Context" 62-63) notes, "It is not clear that Genesis 15 intends to imply a substitutionary element. Nowhere is there the implication that God accepts the possibility of being torn in two if the promise to Abraham is not kept. . . . Nor is it clear that there is a transformation of the rite which somehow results in the curse being applied to anyone who interferes with the divine promise. . . . Instead, the common element found in each case is that the life of each of the animals has been taken away. The implication of this is that God's own divine life forms the surety for the promise."

cannot die! He answers Abraham's questions about his "seed" and "inheritance."⁴³

Genesis 17. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared (cf. Gen 12:7) to him and spoke about the "covenant" (*bĕrît* occurs 13 times in Gen 17:1-21). The structure of Gen 17:1-21 forms around the speeches of God. Victor P. Hamilton explains,

There are no less than five speeches of God to Abraham: I, vv. 1-2; II, vv. 3-8; III, vv. 9-14; IV, vv. 15-16; V, vv. 19-21. . . . In three of these speeches (nos. II, IV, V), the focus is on God's commitment to bless. In the remaining two (nos. I, III), the focus is on God's expectations of Abraham. The major speech by God to Abraham about Abraham's need to take appropriate action (vv. 9-14) is ringed by speeches of God's promises to Abraham (vv. 3-8 and 15-21), showing that the demands of God must be interpreted within the context of the promises of God.⁴⁴

The following schematic portrays the first speech (17:1-2), which is a summary of and introduction to what follows and is crucial to the interpretation of the segment.

Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old,
The LORD appeared to Abram,
And said to him,
 "I am God Almighty;
 Walk⁴⁵ before Me,
 and⁴⁶ you will be blameless.
 So that⁴⁷ I will give my covenant between Me and you,
 And I will multiply you exceedingly."

Here the Lord identifies Himself to Abraham as "God Almighty" (אֱלֹהִים, *'ēl šadday*, cf. Gen 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; Exod 6:3). "The context for most of

⁴³Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 438) concludes, "Nothing, however, in this chapter is imposed on Abram. He is free of any obligation. The only imposition or obligation that Yahweh lays upon anybody is upon himself, and that is the obligation to implement his promise of descendants, and especially of land, to Abram and to his descendants."

⁴⁴Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 459.

⁴⁵This verb is in the imperative mood. While the imperative can express mere admonitions or requests, its usual usage is to express real commands (see *GKC* 324 [Par. 110a]).

⁴⁶"Be" is also in the imperative mood. *GKC* 324-25 (Par. 110f) states, "The imperative in logical dependence upon a preceding imperative . . . serves to express the distinct assurance or promise that an action or state will ensue as a certain consequence of a previous action." Here, the first imperative "walk" contains the condition, while the second "be" declares the consequence which obedience to the condition will bring.

⁴⁷The cohortatives "give" and "multiply" following the imperative "walk" express purpose or result (see *GKC* 320 [Par. 108d]).

these references is the covenant, more precisely the commandment for obedience and faithfulness on the part of the vassal and the promise of progeny by God.”⁴⁸ As the powerful God, the LORD can fulfill His promise to Abraham to “multiply you exceedingly” (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5). But the powerful God demands submission on the part of His loyal servant; thus, He commands Abraham to “walk before” Himself.⁴⁹ The result of Abraham’s obedience would be a “blameless”⁵⁰ standing in the presence of God (cf. Gen 6:9; 2 Sam 22:24; Job 1:1; 2:3, 9).

The consequence or result of Abraham’s obedience will be the giving of a covenant between “God Almighty” and Abraham. “To give a covenant” is usually used in the context of the establishment of a covenant (Gen 9:12; Num 25:12). However, the LORD had already initiated His covenant with Abraham in Gen 15:18. Therefore, this covenant is either a second covenant the LORD makes with Abraham⁵¹ or a further confirmation and ratification of the covenant made previously.⁵² As Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. notes,

In the writing of a compact history, as the Old Testament, it would hardly be necessary to reproduce a treaty text with all of its formal parts. This was not done in the extrabiblical historical texts, nor is it the common practice of modern historians. . . . It may be better to speak of “component parts of a covenant” when discussing the treaty as found in historical texts. This is certainly the case with the covenant with Abraham.⁵³

⁴⁸Victor P. Hamilton, “אלהים,” *TWOT* 2:907. Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 463) describes the usage of “God Almighty”: “The same name occurs in other patriarchal stories, always in connection with Jacob. . . . In five of the six places in Genesis where El Shaddai is used, the name is followed by the promise of posterity. . . . And three times (28:3; 43:3; 49:25) the activity of El Shaddai is described with the verb *bārak*, ‘bless.’”

⁴⁹“The expression *walk in front of* . . . usually expresses the service or devotion of a faithful servant to his king, be the latter human (1K. 1:2; 10:8; Jer 52:12) or divine . . .” (Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1–17* 461). The same expression is used in Gen 24:40; 48:15.

⁵⁰The fundamental idea of the term אָלֹמֶת (“blameless”) is completeness. “It represents the divine standard for man’s attainment” (J. Barton Payne, “אָלֹמֶת,” *TWOT* 2:973-74).

⁵¹T. Desmond Alexander (*From Paradise to the Promise Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998] 52-54) lists three differences between the covenant of chapter 17 and the one in chapter 15: (1) it is a conditional covenant; (2) it is an eternal covenant; (3) it focuses primarily on Abraham as the father of many nations instead of on his descendants and land. See also McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* 146-50, who sees the covenant of circumcision as an administrative covenant separate from the promise covenant of Gen 15:7-21 and 17:2-8. Sailhamer’s (“Genesis” 138) conclusion is that “the two covenants [are], in fact, two distinct aspects of God’s covenant with Abraham—the one stressing the promise of the land (15:18-21) and the other stressing the promise of a great abundance of descendants (17:2).”

⁵²Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1994) 20.

⁵³Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., “The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Setting,” *BSac* 127 (1970): 249-50.

Thus, here Moses seems to be recounting component parts of the LORD's one covenant with Abraham, particularly: (1) the obedience of Abraham and his "seed" necessary for the experience of the covenantal blessings (17:1, 9-14); (2) the self-obligation of the Lord to multiply Abraham's descendants who will occupy the land of Canaan (17:2, 4-8a); (3) the self-obligation of the LORD to be the God of Abraham's "seed" (17:8b); (4) the sign of the covenant being circumcision (17:11); and (5) Isaac (and his descendants) being the recipient and avenue of covenantal fulfillment (17:15-21). Further, the LORD calls the covenant "everlasting"⁵⁴ in Gen 17:7, 13, 19.

As in Gen 12:4, this passage portrays Abraham as obedient to the LORD's commands. "God Almighty" commands Abraham to "walk before" Him (17:1) and Abraham "falls on his face" (17:4), a gesture of the loyal submission commanded by God. On the basis of Abraham's obedience, the LORD affirms that "My covenant is with" Abraham. Later, the Lord calls for Abraham to circumcise every male of his household (17:10, 12-13). The text again affirms Abraham's obedience (17:23). Circumcision⁵⁵ is the "sign" of the Lord's "everlasting" covenant with Abraham, one that will endure into the far distant future (17:9-13). Significantly, the one in future generations not circumcised "shall be cut off from his people," that is, be expelled from the community that will experience the blessings of this "everlasting" covenant (17:14).⁵⁶

With the ceremony recorded in Gen 15:7-21 and the sign given in Gen 17:1-21, the Abrahamic Covenant is finalized. This covenant binds the LORD to fulfill the promises He has made to Abraham in Gen 12:1-15:5. Two further statements of God recorded in the Abraham narratives (Gen 18:17-19; 22:15-18) confirm that He is committed to fulfill His covenant obligations to Abraham.

Genesis 18. Before His destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20-19:29), He appears with two angels to Abraham to assure him that Sarah would have his son within a year (Gen 18:1-15; cf. 17:15-21). The text also reveals His thinking that leads Him to reveal to Abraham what He is about to do to the two cities (Gen 18:17-19⁵⁷). He makes it clear that Abraham will certainly become a

⁵⁴עולם ("everlasting") has the basic meaning "most distant times." The term can be used in reference to the past (Gen 6:4) or as here to the future. The term in itself does not contain the idea of endlessness, but a far distant past or future. (See Allan A. MacRae, "עולם," *TWOT* 2:672-63.)

⁵⁵"Circumcision is called both 'My covenant' (v. 10) and a *mark* (or sign, 'ōt) of the covenant (v. 11). The designation of circumcision itself as a covenant is a synecdoche for covenantal obligation: 'This is [the aspect of] my covenant you must keep.' . . . Circumcision is a means by which Abraham and his seed ratify God's lordship over them. It is their identity sign as God's covenant people" (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* 470-72).

⁵⁶Chisholm ("Evidence from Genesis" 45) explains, "Though future generations were obligated to observe the rite (cf. 17:11-13), their failure in this regard would jeopardize only their personal participation in the promised blessings, not the oath itself."

⁵⁷For a grammatical analysis of Gen 18:17-19, see Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* 34, 37.

“great and populous nation” (cf. Gen 12:2a) and “all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him” (cf. Gen 12:3b). The future fulfillment of these promises is stated as a divine certainty (Gen 18:18). Although the future fulfillment is a surety, the fulfillment is contingent on the descendants of Abraham “keeping the way of the Lord” (Gen 18:19).⁵⁸

Genesis 22. The LORD’s final recorded verbal communication to Abraham is in Gen 22:15-18.⁵⁹ These words follow Abraham’s obedience to God’s test, seen in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (22:1-14). On the basis of Abraham’s obedience the LORD reaffirms by oath His commitment to both bless Abraham and multiply his “seed” [in this context, definitely the corporate physical progeny of Abraham] (22:16-17a). Further, He affirms that “your ‘seed’ shall possess the gate of his enemies [’*ḏyēb*]” (22:17b). The ‘seed’ in this context could also have its plural sense, pointing forward to Israel’s conquest of the land of Canaan.⁶⁰ However, as T. Desmond Alexander points out,

Unfortunately, the identity of this ‘seed’ is not easy to determine. While the first mention of ‘seed’ denotes ‘descendants’ in the plural [22:17a], the remaining references are ambiguous [22:17b-18]; they could refer either to many descendants or to a single descendant. This latter possibility, however, would be in keeping with the overall aim of Genesis to highlight a royal lineage.⁶¹

Ultimately, according to Gen 49:8, it will be Judah, particularly the final ruler from Judah (49:10), whose “hand shall be on the neck of your enemies [the only other use of ’*ḏyēb* in Genesis].” He will be the one whom the peoples will obey and who will lavish blessing to all (49:10-11).⁶² Truly, “all nations of the earth will gain blessing for themselves”⁶³ (22:18) through obedience to “the lion from the tribe of Judah” (Rev 5:5). Therefore, it seems best to understand the “seed” in Gen 22:17b and 18 in the singular; the final fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant comes through

⁵⁸Sailhamer (“Genesis” 149) remarks, “Here the intention is directed internally (‘to keep the way of the Lord’) with the end in view that Abraham and his descendants do ‘what is right and just.’ Only then will the Lord fulfill what he had promised Abraham. . . . The notion of an internalized obedience found in this verse is remarkably close to the terms of the ‘new covenant’ found in the prophetic literature [Jer 31:33].”

⁵⁹For a grammatical analysis of Genesis 22:15-18, see Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* 98-99.

⁶⁰Representative of this understanding is Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* 112. He cites Gen 24:60 as a parallel passage; however, although the “seed” here is clearly plural in sense, the term “enemies” is not used.

⁶¹Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* 40. “Royal lineage” refers to the unique family line that starts with Adam and continues through the sons of Jacob, anticipating the royal dynasty that will arise from the descendants of Judah (6-18).

⁶²See the discussion of Gen 49:8-12 in Sailhamer, “Genesis” 276-77.

⁶³The verb stem is in the hithpael, indicating a reflexive meaning (see n. 15 above).

Abraham's "seed," the king of the sons of Israel from the line of Judah. All of this is certain because Abraham obeyed God's voice (22:18).

After the death of Abraham, the next time the biblical text used the term *b'et* to refer to the Abrahamic Covenant it speaks of "His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod 2:24). The LORD reaffirmed the promises He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He recognized Isaac and Jacob as recipients of His covenant commitment because of His choice of them among Abraham's progeny (Gen 17:19, 21; 25:23; 27:27-29). He commanded Isaac to obey Him so that he would receive the blessings already assured to come to fruition because of Abraham's faithful obedience (Gen 26:2-5). When Isaac faced trials after his obedience, He reaffirmed His intention to bless him for the sake of Abraham (Gen 26:24). Likewise, the Lord promised Jacob personal blessing [His presence and protection] and a large progeny that would become a great nation and inherit the "land" (Gen 28:14-15; 35:10-12; 46:2-40). The narrative of Genesis concludes with Joseph's confession of confidence in the God's faithfulness to His covenant oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 50:24-25; cf. Josh 24:32).

Exodus through Deuteronomy. The experience of the nation of Israel recorded in Exodus through Deuteronomy is an initial outworking of the promises the LORD gave to Abraham. First, the children of Jacob/Israel grew into a great nation in Egypt in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. God had promised to make Jacob a great nation in Egypt (Gen 46:3). Later, Pharaoh confessed, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we" (Exod 1:9). Two of the terms used to describe this growth in Exod 1:7, "bear fruit" (cf. Gen 17:6) and "multiply" (cf. Gen 17:2), echo the LORD's covenant commitment to Abraham. In a similar way, Balaam's words concerning the people of Israel in Num 23:10, "count" and "dust" (cf. Gen 13:16) recall the LORD's promise to Abraham.

Second, the LORD delivered the nation from bondage in Egypt in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. In Gen 15:13-14, the LORD told Abraham that his "seed" would "serve" another nation and be "oppressed," but He promised to judge that nation and have his "seed" "come out" from her. Later, Israel was "afflicted" by (Exod 1:11-12; same term as "oppressed" in Gen 15:13) and "served" (Exod 2:23 ["bondage" in NASB]; cf. Gen 15:13, 14) Pharaoh and the Egyptians. But God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and "brought them out" of Egypt (Exod 3:10; 6:6; 12:41; 13:4; 14:8; 18:1; 20:2; cf. Gen 15:14).

Third, Israel was to inherit the land of the Canaanites in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. The LORD multiplied the sons of Israel and brought them out of Egypt so that they might occupy the land He promised to Abraham (Exod 3:8; 6:4, 8; cf. Gen 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:8). The Torah closes with an anticipation of a fulfillment of this promise to Abraham in the conquest of the land under Joshua in the near future (Deut 31:1-8). However, the Torah predicts that Israel would forfeit the land because of disobedience and be scattered among the

nations (Deut 29:22-28). In the distant future,⁶⁴ after the scattering (Deut 4:30-31), the LORD will return repentant Israel to the land in accordance with His covenant with Abraham (Lev 26:40-45).

Fourth, sinful Israel's continuance as a nation is a result of the LORD's mercy extended to her in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. At Mount Sinai, Israel practiced idolatry with a golden calf, provoking God's anger (Exod 32:1-10; cf. 20:4-6). The LORD would have destroyed Israel, but He did not because of His covenant commitment to Abraham (Exod 32:11-14).

Fifth, the blessings of the LORD promised to Israel in the Mosaic Covenant are in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. William D. Barrick aptly notes,

The blessings recited in Leviticus 26:4-12 are at least in part a fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham. Those blessings fall into six categories:

- productivity (vv. 4-5; cf. Gen 24:35; 27:28; 30:43)
- peace (v. 6; cf. Gen 22:17)
- power (v. 7-8; cf. Gen 22:17)
- population (v. 9; cf. Gen 12:2; 15:5; 17:6)
- provision (v. 10; cf. productivity, above), and
- presence (vv. 11-12; cf. Gen 17:7-8).

All these blessings were associated with the land that Israel would receive from Yahweh. They are consistent with various statements and restatements of the Abrahamic Covenant.⁶⁵

This exposition of the Torah demonstrates the vital role the Abrahamic Covenant played in God's dealings with Abraham and Israel: Gen 1:1–11:26 anticipates, Gen 11:27–50:26 elucidates, and Exod 1:1–Deuteronomy 34:12 substantiates the Abrahamic Covenant.

Elements of the Abrahamic Covenant

Because of the many statements of promise given by the LORD to the patriarchs, a question concerning the number and content of these promises has

⁶⁴Deuteronomy 4:30 uses the phrase "end of the days," one of four usages in the Torah. At the phrase's first usage, Gen 49:1, Sailhamer ("Genesis" 275) explains, "The same expression occurs in the Pentateuch as an introduction to two other poetic discourses, the oracles of Balaam (Num 24:14-24) and the last words of Moses (Deut. 31:29). On all three occasions the subject matter introduced by the phrase 'in days to come' is that of God's future deliverance of his chosen people. At the center of that deliverance stands a king (Gen. 49:10; Num. 24:7; Deut. 33:5). In Genesis 49 that king is connected with the house of Judah."

⁶⁵William D. Barrick, "Inter-covenantal Truth and Relevance: Leviticus 26 and the Biblical Covenants" (a paper presented to the Far West Section of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, California, April 23, 1999) 5. See also Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991) 35.

arisen.⁶⁶ The predominant viewpoint is that the Lord's promises to Abraham can be grouped into three main categories: (1) land; (2) seed; and (3) blessing.⁶⁷ An alternate, threefold grouping proposes the promises as: (1) national; (2) personal; and (3) universal.⁶⁸ This final grouping of the promises seems to emerge most naturally from the foundational text (Gen 12:1-3), with further explanation in later texts (Gen 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 18:17-19; 22:15-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 35:10-12; 46:2-4).

First, the LORD promised to make Abraham into a great nation. This is the first promise given in Gen 12:2, being reiterated in 18:18 and 46:3. Ishmael, as a son of Abraham, will also become a great nation (Gen 17:20; 21:18), but the great nation of the LORD's covenant will come through Isaac (Gen 17:19, 21; 26:3-4) and Jacob/Israel (Gen 28:13-14; 35:11; 46:3).

People coming from a common ancestor inhabiting a particular land (Gen 10:5, 20, 31-32) comprise a nation. Thus, if Abraham is to be a great nation, he must have numerous offspring who will occupy a certain land. Accordingly, the LORD promised Abraham a multitude of descendants (Gen 13:16; 15:5; 17:2, 4-6; 22:17a) who would receive the land of Canaan (Gen 13:14-15, 17; 15:18-21; 17:8). The LORD's word to Abraham when he first came to the land of the Canaanites summarized this promise: "To your seed I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). He reiterated the promise of numerous descendants who would receive the land promised to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and Jacob/Israel (Gen 28:13-14; 35:11-12).

Second, the LORD promised to bless Abraham personally (Gen 12:2). He showed His favor to Abraham in His provision of livestock (Gen 13:2), victory in battle (Gen 14:1-24), and sons (Gen 16:15; 21:22-3; 25:1-4). The following statement comes toward the end of the narrative of Abraham's life: "The Lord had blessed Abraham in every way" (Gen 24:1). The LORD also gave a promise of personal blessing to Isaac (Gen 26:3) and Jacob/Israel (Gen 28:15).

Third, the Lord promised to bless all the nations (families) of the earth in Abraham (Gen 12:3). Even though the LORD called Abraham (Gen 12:2) and all his descendants (Gen 18:18-19) to be a blessing to the nations, the ultimate fulfillment

⁶⁶Craig A. Blaising and Darrel L. Bock (*Progressive Dispensationalism* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books/BridgePoint, 1993] 130) see one promise from God to Abraham, to bless him and bless all peoples on earth through him, expanded into a collection of nine promises. Chisholm ("Evidence from Genesis" 49-50) lists six promises: (1) numerous offspring; (2) personal blessing; (3) universal influence; (4) possessed land; (5) personal relationship; and (6) eternal oath. Willem VanGemeren (*The Progress of Redemption* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995] 104-8) writes of four basic areas of promise: (1) a seed; (2) a land; (3) a blessing to the patriarchs; and (4) a blessing to the nations through the patriarchs.

⁶⁷Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 42-46. David J. A. Clines (*The Theme of the Pentateuch* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1978] 29-43) refers to these as land, posterity, and relationship with God. Kaiser (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* 86-94) calls these inheritance, heir, and heritage.

⁶⁸Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953) 49-50.

of this promise is stated to be the singular “seed” of Abraham (Gen 22:18).⁶⁹ Again, God repeated this promise of universal blessing to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and Jacob/Israel (Gen 28:14).

Nature of the Abrahamic Covenant

During the last century, the most discussed issue concerning the Abrahamic Covenant has been its nature. Paul N. Benware introduces this topic with the following words:

Probably the most significant issue related to the Abrahamic covenant has to do with its nature. Is it a conditional (bilateral) covenant or an unconditional (unilateral) covenant? How one answers that question determines the framework of one’s prophetic studies.⁷⁰

In the biblical text God placed definite indications of obligation on Abraham. First, He gave commands to Abraham on a number of occasions in Genesis (“go,” 12:1; “arise and walk to and fro,” 13:17; “look and count,” 15:5; “take,” 15:9; “walk,” 17:1; “take,” 22:2). Second, He obligated Abraham and his “seed” to submit to circumcision in order to participate in the covenant (Gen 17:9-14). Third, He said He would fulfill His promises to Abraham because of Abraham’s obedience (Gen 22:18; 26:5). These considerations seem to point to the Abrahamic Covenant as essentially conditional in nature, a bilateral (i.e., obligations placed on two parties) relationship where the LORD only obligated Himself to fulfill His promises if the response was human obedience.⁷¹

However, the biblical text also has strong indications of unconditionality. First, the LORD made promises to Abraham whose only human contingencies were clearly stated as being met (Gen 12:1, 4; 17:1, 3). Thus, the present obligation rests solely upon Him to do what He has promised. Second, in the covenant-making ceremony, only God walked through the animals (Gen 15:17). Although He and Abraham were both parties to the covenant, the covenant was unilateral in the sense that He obligated only Himself to fulfill His commitments. Third, the promises (Gen 13:15) and covenant (Gen 17:7-8, 13, 19) were called “everlasting.” The fulfillment lies far into the future and thus rests upon the LORD alone for realization. These considerations seem to point to the conclusion that the Abrahamic Covenant is essentially unconditional in nature, a unilateral (i.e., obligations undertaken by only one party) relationship where only the LORD has bound Himself to fulfill His

⁶⁹See n. 61 above.

⁷⁰Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 34.

⁷¹Ronald Youngblood, “The Abrahamic Covenant: Conditional or Unconditional?” *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. by Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 31-46. He states, “Obedience language presupposes the withholding of promised blessing in the absence of obedience” (41).

promises to Abraham.⁷²

Differing understandings of the biblical affirmations of divine commitment and human obligation in reference to the Abrahamic Covenant have arisen. First, some assert that human obedience is necessary for the fulfillment of the covenant. Without this obedience, God is not obligated to fulfill His promises.⁷³ Second, some declare that no human obedience is required for the instituting or the fulfillment of the covenant.⁷⁴ Third, some state that the Abrahamic promises were originally unconditional, but were understood as conditional in later Israelite history.⁷⁵ Fourth, some aver that the LORD made two covenants with Abraham, one unconditional (Gen 15:17-21) and one conditional (Gen 17:1-21).⁷⁶ Fifth, a consensus is growing that the promises the LORD bound Himself to fulfill in the Abrahamic Covenant are unconditional, but the timing of and participants in that fulfillment are conditioned by faith-produced human obedience. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. writes,

In our judgment, the conditionality was not attached to the promise but only to the participants who would benefit from these abiding promises. . . . The duty of obedience (law, if you wish) was intimately tied up with promise as a desired sequel.⁷⁷

This fifth viewpoint accords with all the biblical data.⁷⁸

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN THE REMAINDER OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The remainder of the OT, from Joshua on, contains few specific references to the Abrahamic Covenant. However, Psalms 105 and 106 are reminders that the Abrahamic Covenant lies behind all that the God did for Israel in the past and provides the foundation for Israel's hope for what He will do in the future.

In Psalm 105, the LORD is praised for His loyalty to His covenant with

⁷²Victor P. Hamilton ("Genesis: Theology of," *NIDOTTE* 4:668) notes, "Nowhere does God ever add a conditional if clause to any promises he makes to Abraham or Jacob that suggests that obedience or faithfulness is a sine qua non for the fulfillment of that promise."

⁷³E.g., Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945) 31-36, 56-58.

⁷⁴E.g., Clarence E. Mason, Jr., *Prophetic Problems* (Chicago: Moody, 1973) 27-42.

⁷⁵E.g., Weinfeld, "בְּרִית" 270-72.

⁷⁶E.g., Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* 51-54.

⁷⁷Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* 94. See also Fred H. Klooster, "The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Continuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. by John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988) 150, and Bruce K. Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants," *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, ed. by Avraham Gilead (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 123-39.

⁷⁸See nn. 43, 56, and 58 above.

Abraham (vv. 1-10). The Psalmist recalls how He multiplied Jacob/Israel in Egypt (vv. 37, 43), and provided for Israel in the wilderness (vv. 39-41) in accordance with His word to Abraham (v. 42). The culmination of God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant was His gift of the land of Canaan to the Israelites (v. 44).⁷⁹ The Former Prophets, the history of Israel in the land, see this continued pattern of God's faithfulness to Abraham. He gave the Land to Israel (Josh 21:43-45), multiplied Israel in the Land (1 Kgs 4:20-21), and in mercy delayed His judgment of Israel (2 Kgs 13:23) because of His promises to Abraham.

Psalm 105 ends with the reminder that the LORD brought the Israelites into the Land so that they might keep His statutes and observe His laws (v. 45). Psalm 106 recounts Israel's lack of loyalty to the LORD (v. 6). The pattern of Israel's rebellion before the conquest (vv. 7-33) had continued while Israel was in the land (vv. 34-39). As a result, the LORD gave Israel into the hands of her enemies, yet delivered her when she cried out for help (vv. 40-45; cf. Judg 2:11-23). From the experience of Israel's exile (v. 47),⁸⁰ the Psalmist calls upon the LORD to deliver him and the nation to the land and its prosperity (vv. 4-5, 47) in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 45). Confidence that He would fulfill His promises to Abraham sustained Israel as they experienced God's judgment (Isa 41:8-16; Mic 7:18-20). Jeremiah 33:23-26 connects this fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant with the LORD's sending of His king in fulfillment of Num 24:17 and 2 Sam 7:16, an event that will take place in the distant future (cf. Num 24:14; 2 Sam 7:19).

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

With the coming of Jesus as the Christ, the NT demonstrates how this development relates to the Abrahamic Covenant. First, and fundamentally, the coming of Jesus is in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. Jesus is viewed as the one the Lord has sent to effect the deliverance of Israel from her enemies according to His promises to Abraham (Luke 1:54-55, 68-75). This deliverance will be accomplished, and the Abrahamic Covenant fully fulfilled, when the Messiah turns the sons of Israel from their wicked ways (Acts 3:25-26). It will be at the time of Israel's repentance which will lead to the period of restoration of all things spoken by the prophets, including Israel's possession of and prosperity in the land of Canaan (Acts 3:19-24).⁸¹

Second, the NT views national Israelites as the descendants of Abraham (Luke 16:24; 19:9; John 8:37; Acts 13:26; Rom 11:1). However, being the physical

⁷⁹This was not the full and final fulfillment of the land promise to Abraham. See Jeffrey L. Townsend, "Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament," *BSac* 142 (1985):320-37.

⁸⁰Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, vol. 21 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1983) 44-56; William A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *EBC* 5:679-81.

⁸¹The NT does not abrogate the land promises associated with the Abrahamic Covenant. See Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 50-57.

“seed” of Abraham does not guarantee experiencing the future blessings associated with the promises to Abraham (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28). An Israelite must come to faith leading to repentance to experience the Lord’s deliverance and blessing (Acts 3:19-26). Nevertheless, the NT does affirm that the present remnant of faithful Israelites is an indication that the Lord will in the future deliver “all Israel” and bless her in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant (Rom 11:1-32).

Third, the NT calls Gentile believers “the seed of Abraham” because of their union with Jesus Christ, “the Seed of Abraham” (Gal 3:6-29). Jesus as the Christ is the “Seed” who brings the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant to Israel and the Gentiles (Gal 3:16; cf. Gen 22:17b-18). The church today experiences in Christ some spiritual benefits that Israel and the nations will experience (with physical results) in the future when Jesus implements fully the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. The NT, like the Old, views the complete fulfillment of the Lord’s promises to Abraham as a future event (Matt 8:11; Acts 3:19-26; Rom 11:25-32).

CONCLUSION

The Abrahamic Covenant undergirds the totality of the biblical revelation. Specifically elucidated in Genesis, its promises govern the pattern of all that follows in Exodus to Revelation. On the basis of Abraham’s faithful obedience, the LORD gave Abraham many promises. Ultimately, He bound Himself by covenant to bring to pass what He had promised Abraham. The Scriptures, from Exodus to Revelation, continually speak of one covenant between the LORD and Abraham. This covenant promises Abraham personal, national, and universal blessings. Because He based this covenant on Himself alone, the final fulfillment of the promises to Abraham have no human conditions. However, the faithful obedience of man determines the participants in and timing of its final fulfillment. Although Abraham experienced personal blessings from the LORD in the past and some Israelites and Gentiles enjoy spiritual blessings at present, the full and final fulfillment of the covenant, particularly the “great nation” promises, await the future coming of Jesus Christ.