

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT – PART 2

THE SIGN OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Genesis 17:1-21

- When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him again and spoke with him about the covenant
- Genesis 17:1-21 contain a series of 5 speeches that God made to Abram:
 - Speech 1 (vs. 1-2) - God's Self-Revelation and Requirement of Obedience
 - Speech 2 (vs. 3-8) - God Changes Abram's Name
 - Speech 3 (vs. 9-14) - Circumcision as the Sign of the Covenant
 - Speech 4 (vs. 15-18) - God Changes Sarai's Name
 - Speech 5 (vs. 19-21) - The Covenant Will Be through Isaac, Not Ishmael
- Notice the themes of the AC repeated here:
 - God will multiply Abraham's descendants (vs.2)
 - Abraham will be a father of many nations (vs. 4, 5)
 - Nations and kings will come from Abraham (vs. 6)
 - This covenant is viewed as "everlasting" (vs.7)
 - All the land of Canaan is promised to Abraham (vs. 8)
- In addition, circumcision is instituted as the sign of the AC (vs.10-14)
 - Though circumcision had some health benefits, it was primarily a symbol depicting the need to cut away sin and be cleansed
 - Since the male passes on the seed that produces depraved sinners, it was the male organ that would be circumcised to symbolize the need for a deep cleansing from sin needed to reverse the effects of the fall
 - Circumcision is the sign which would identify Abraham and his seed as God's covenant people
- Abraham did exactly as the Lord commanded him with the males in his household (vs. 23-27)

THE REPETITION OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Genesis 18:1-19

- Before His destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20–19:29), God appears with two angels to Abraham (vs. 1, 13, 14, 17) to assure him that Sarah would have his son within a year
- Notice the themes of the AC repeated here:
 - God will make him a great and mighty nation (vs. 18)
 - God will bless all the nations of the earth in him (vs. 18)
- Notice also that the future fulfillment of these promises is stated as a divine certainty (vs. 18)
- Although the future fulfillment is a surety, the fulfillment is contingent on the descendants of Abraham "keeping the way of the Lord" (vs. 19)

Genesis 22:15-18

- This is the last of the recorded conversations between God and Abraham, and follows Abraham's obedience to God's test of sacrificing his only son Isaac (Gen 22:1-14)
- Notice the themes of the AC repeated here:
 - Based on obedience, God affirms His commitment to bless Abraham and to multiply his "seed" (vs. 17)
 - He also states that Abraham's seed "shall possess the gate of his enemies" (vs. 17), a reference to their taking of the Promised Land
 - Once again the Lord affirms that in Abraham's seed "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (vs. 18)

Genesis 26:3-5, 24 (reaffirmed with Isaac)

Genesis 26:3-5, 24 ~ Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. 4 I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; 5 because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws...24 The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham; Do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, For the sake of My servant Abraham."

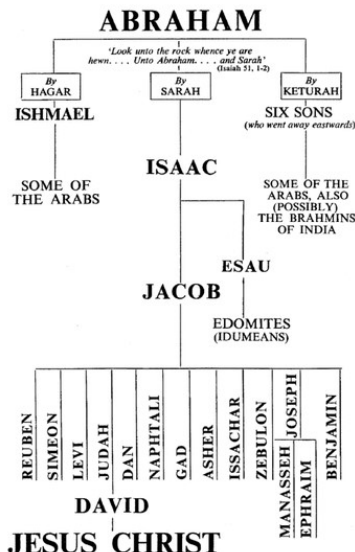
- Notice that all 3 components the AC (seed, land, blessing) were reiterated to Isaac in vs. 4

Genesis 28:13-15; 35:9-12 (reaffirmed with Jacob)

Genesis 28:13-15 ~ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. 14 Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

- Notice that all 3 components the AC (seed, land, blessing) were reiterated to Jacob in vs. 13-14

Genesis 35:9-12 ~ Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. 10 God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, But Israel shall be your name." Thus He called him Israel. 11 God also said to him, "I am God Almighty; Be fruitful and multiply; A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, And kings shall come forth from you. 12 The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, And I will give the land to your descendants after you."



- So, individual promises (seed), national promises (land), and universal promises (blessing) are made to Abraham and are passed down to Isaac and Jacob
- NOTE: From the very beginning God predicted that Gentiles would eventually be included in the blessings of the AC

THE NATURE OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

- The key question related to the nature of the AC is: Is it conditional (bilateral) or unconditional and irrevocable (unilateral)?
- This is a critical question because how it is answered determines whether this covenant is fulfilled today in the church or whether it will be fulfilled with Israel in the future
- “If the Abrahamic covenant is conditional (its fulfillment dependent on Israel’s continuing obedience to God), then a case can be made that national Israel has been set aside by her failures and disobedience and no longer can anticipate receiving the promises of the covenant. The blessings of the covenant are then shifted to the church of Jesus Christ for final and complete fulfillment. If, however, the Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional covenant (depending totally on God for fulfillment), then national Israel does have a future, since not all the promises of the covenant have been completely fulfilled. Most all interpreters agree that the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant were not completely fulfilled when the Old Testament came to an end. Therefore, the issue is how God will fulfill them – literally to Israel or spiritually to the church.”¹
- Dispensational theologians believe the AC is unconditional and irrevocable
- Although disobedience takes away the enjoyment of the covenantal blessings, the unconditional nature of the covenant guarantees its future fulfillment
- Covenant theologians believe the AC promises to national Israel were conditional
- Because Israel disobeyed the Lord and failed to fulfill their part of the AC, national Israel has forfeited all claims of the covenant
- Therefore, the national promises to Israel must be interpreted spiritually
- Therefore, the national promises to Israel must be interpreted from the New Testament apostles’ perspective (Galatians 3)
- Which is right? → The position which best explains the biblical data is 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

Some Elements of Conditionality

- It is true that there were some obligations placed on Abraham...God did give commands to Abraham on a number of occasions in Genesis:

Genesis 12:1 ~ Now the LORD said to Abram, “**Go forth from your country**, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you;

Genesis 13:17 ~ **Arise, walk about the land** through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.

Genesis 15:5 ~ And He took him outside and said, “Now **look toward the heavens, and count the stars**, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

Genesis 15:9 ~ So He said to him, “**Bring Me a three year old heifer**, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

Genesis 17:1 ~ Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; **Walk before Me, and be blameless.**”

¹ Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 34.

Genesis 22:2 ~ He said, “**Take now your son**, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, **and offer him** there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.”

- Also, he obligated Abraham and his “seed” to submit to circumcision in order to participate in the covenant

Genesis 17:9-14 ~ God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

- Furthermore, God said He would fulfill His promises to Abraham because of Abraham’s obedience

Genesis 22:16, 18 ~ By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son,...In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice

Genesis 26:5 ~ because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.

- These considerations seem to point to the AC as essentially conditional in nature, a bilateral relationship where the LORD only obligated Himself to fulfill His promises if the response was human obedience

But it is An Unconditional Covenant

- However, while it might appear that some conditions were given by God in His encounters with Abraham, a closer examination establishes the unconditional nature of the AC
- The covenant is made with no conditions given
- Thus, its ultimate fulfillment is based on God and not on the actions of humans
- “In our judgment, the conditionality was not attached to the promise but only to the participants who would benefit from these abiding promises.”²
- Support for the unconditional nature of the AC
 1. The AC was solemnized by the unilateral act of God passing through the animal pieces (Gen. 15:7-21)...Abraham did not pass through the pieces...This shows that God, not Abraham, is the One responsible for the ultimate fulfillment of the AC
 2. God formally established the AC in response to Abraham’s question, “O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?” (Gen 15:8)...the point of the covenant ceremony was to ensure Abraham that God would keep His Word
 3. The fact that the AC is an eternal and everlasting covenant infers that the AC is an unconditional covenant; no time limit was placed on this covenant relationship, which indicates that Israel was to remain a nation forever

Genesis 13:15 ~for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever.

Genesis 17:7-8 ~ I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. 8 I will give to you and to your

² Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 94.

descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Psalm 105:9-10 ~ The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac. 10 Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an everlasting covenant,

4. The AC was still in effect even after the patriarchs of Israel had sinned several times

Genesis 50:24 ~ Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.”

5. Moses promised that even though Israel would become idolatrous and be chastened, in the latter days it would have opportunity to return to God and be obedient...God would simply not forget the AC

Deuteronomy 4:25-31 ~ When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God so as to provoke Him to anger, 26 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. 27 The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you. 28 There you will serve gods, the work of man’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. 29 But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. 30 When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice. 31 For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.

6. Even after the nation of Israel had sinned over the course of several centuries, the AC was still in effect; thus, disobedience does not nullify the eventual fulfillment of the covenant

- Despite Israel’s idolatry and disobedience the AC was still in effect

2 Kings 13:23 ~ But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them and turned to them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them or cast them from His presence until now.

- David regarded the AC to be in effect with Israel

1 Chronicles 16:15-18 ~ Remember His covenant forever, The word which He commanded to a thousand generations, 16 The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac. 17 He also confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an everlasting covenant, 18 Saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan, As the portion of your inheritance.”

- It was still in effect at the time of the exile

Isaiah 41:8-10 ~ But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, Descendant of Abraham My friend, 9 You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its remotest parts And said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you. 10 Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’

- It was still in effect during the time of the Minor Prophets

Micah 7:18-20 ~ Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love. 19 He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea. 20 You will give truth to Jacob And unchanging love to Abraham, Which You swore to our forefathers From the days of old.

7. Even after Israel had been wicked throughout OT history, the Holy Spirit indicated that the AC was still in effect at the beginning of the NT

Luke 1:67-75 ~ And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: 68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of David His servant— 70 As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old— 71 Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES, And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US; 72 To show mercy toward our fathers, And to remember His holy covenant, 73 The oath which He swore to Abraham our father, 74 To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.

8. Even though the Jews committed the ultimate wickedness of rejecting their Messiah, they were still regarded as children of the AC

Acts 3:12-14 ~ But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, “Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. 14 “But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,

Acts 3:25-26 ~ “It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.’ 26 “For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

9. The writer of Hebrews confirms that the AC was God’s unchangeable purpose

Hebrews 6:13-18 ~ For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, “I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU.” 15 And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. 16 For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. 17 In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

10. If the AC was conditional, then the blessing part of the AC would have been jeopardized, thus undermining the plan of redemption

11. The NT in other places emphasizes the unconditional nature of the AC

Galatians 3:17-18 ~ What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

CONCLUSION

- The AC is an unconditional covenant; thus, the events promised in Israel’s national life are inevitable
- The unconditional nature of the AC means that God will bring the fulfillment of the covenant since He has bound Himself to fulfill His promises to Abraham
- This does not mean that every person or generation will experience the benefits of this covenant since a person or group’s relationship to the covenant is based on faith
- Thus, there can be a conditional element to an unconditional covenant
- God will fulfill the AC, but one’s connection with the blessings of the AC is based on faith
- “Again, it is important to observe that an unconditional covenant, which renders a covenanted program certain, may have conditional blessings attached. The program will be carried to fulfillment, but the

individual receives the blessings of that program only by conforming to the conditions on which the blessings depend”³

- “Because there simply are no conditions added to this covenant, some might conclude that, since God was guaranteeing the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, it did not make any difference what Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or any of their descendants did. But that would not be accurate. If any involved in the covenant relationship chose not to ‘walk before the Lord,’ they would lose out on the benefits and blessings of the covenant. That is a critical distinction to keep in mind. Sin and disobedience would cause the loss of the covenant blessings but would never cancel the covenant. The blessings of the covenants were indeed conditioned on the obedience of an individual. But the complete and final fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant depends on God alone. He intends to fulfill this covenant even if His people Israel are not faithful and obedient.”⁴
- Since God made this covenant with Abraham and his descendants, it is reasonable to expect that the fulfilling of this covenant would involve those same parties (not the church replacing Israel in its fulfillment)
- Being the physical “seed” of Abraham, however, does not guarantee experiencing the future blessings associated with the promises to Abraham
- An Israelite must come to faith leading to repentance to experience the Lord’s deliverance and blessing

Acts 3:19-21 ~ Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; 20 and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, 21 whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.

- This will occur with national Israel when Christ turns the sons of Israel from their wicked ways

Zechariah 12:10 ~ I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.

Acts 3:25-26 ~ “It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.’ 26 “For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

- 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
- Thus, the NT views the complete fulfillment of the AC as a future event

Romans 11:11-15 ~ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. 12 Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! 13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Romans 11:25-29 ~ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.” 27 “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.” 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 79.

⁴ Benware, *End Times Prophecy*, 38-39.

- Also, although Gentile believers are called the “sons of Abraham” in Galatians 3:6-9, 16 and thus experience some of the blessings described in the Abrahamic covenant, it is critical to understand that the initial promises made to Abraham were made to his physical descendants (i.e. national Israel)
- Jesus as the Christ is the “Seed” who brings the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant to Israel and the Gentiles
- So 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 AC
- In other words, Gentile believers do not fulfill the promises that were given to the physical descendants of Abraham
- We should not conclude that since believing Gentiles are now part of Abraham’s seed that there is no future for national Israel or that believing Gentiles now comprise a new spiritual Israel
- “The fact that the true seed of Abraham includes both Jews and Gentiles does not rule out a continuing distinction for Israel in the New Testament. Nor should the calling of the Gentiles as the seed of Abraham be construed as the formation of a ‘new spiritual Israel’ that supersedes the Old Testament nation of Israel.”⁵
- Furthermore, not all promises of the AC have been fulfilled
- While some of the promises have been fulfilled, key portions have not yet been fulfilled
- In light of the unconditional nature of the AC, those portions await their future fulfillment when Christ returns and resumes his plans with Israel

Already	Not Yet
Abraham to be blessed	Land dimensions of Gen 15:18-21
Great nation (Israel)	Permanent peace for Israel
Gentiles to be blessed	Permanent city to come
Initial land fulfillment	More Gentile blessings (Rom 11:12-15)
Nations come from Abraham	
Kings come from Abraham	
Many descendants of Abraham	

⁵ Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50.