

# 3. Abrahamic Covenant

## The [Biblical] Range or Reach of the Covenant

- There are *four* major passages that deal with the Abrahamic covenant: Genesis **12.1-3**; **15.1-21**; **17.1-21**; **22.15-18**.
- However, there are numerous other references throughout the book of Genesis: 12.7; 13.14-17; 18.18; 21.12; 26.2-6, 24-25; 27.28-29, 38-40; 28.1-4, 10-22; 35.9-15; 48.3-4, 10-20; 49.1-28; 50.23-25.
- References to the Abrahamic covenant fill the pages of Scripture suggesting it is still in existence and therefore unconditional and “everlasting” (17.7). The full realisation of its promises lies in the future millennial reign of Christ.
- The covenant is referred to by: *Joseph* (Genesis 50.24); *God* (Exodus 2.24; 6.4; Deuteronomy 32.4); *Moses* (Exodus 32.13); *David* (1 Chronicles 16.15-18; Psalm 105); *Jehoshaphat* (2 Chronicles 20.7) and the *Levites* (Nehemiah 9.6-7).
- The NT refers to the Abrahamic Covenant as a “covenant” (cf. Luke 1.72; Acts 3.25; 7.8; Galatians 3.17; 4.24) but more typically as a “promise” (cf. Acts 7.17; Romans 4.13-20; Galatians 3.16-29; 4.23; Hebrews 7.6; 11.9-17).
- ‘Promise’ and ‘covenant’ are not quite the same (cf. Hebrews 6.13-18). A *promise* is the declaration of God’s intention to do something (Genesis 12.1-3). A *covenant* is a binding obligation, confirmed by oath (Genesis 22.16).

## The Requirement of the Covenant

- After the flood, God made a new start with a ‘new Adam’ (Noah). But the *heart* of mankind was unchanged (8.21). By the end of Genesis 9, Noah is drunk and naked resulting in heinous *moral failure*. Genesis 10 introduces Nimrod, a type of Antichrist, who sought to establish a *political* empire (Babel) in opposition to God. Genesis 11 illustrates *religious confusion* centred in Babylon, the tower of Babel being a monument to the gods (idolatry).
- The divine judgment of Babel (confusion of tongues) created nations which God suffered “to walk in their own way” (Acts 14.16). But God has designs on the blessing of *every* nation! Having temporarily abandoned them to the consequences of their sins (Romans 1), He singles out **one** man from whom the chosen nation of Israel would spring.
- Against this background of *total anarchy* and *spiritual darkness*, the “God of glory” (Acts 7.2) appeared to Abraham and made promises to provide universal blessing (salvation) through him.
- It is amazing what God can do with **one** man who is strong in *faith* and *devotion* to His God. And this man was an older gentleman! It seems to stand against all human reason. Abraham and Sarah are even beyond the power of nature to conceive. Why? So that when the covenant is fulfilled, **God** will be glorified.

## The Ratification & Realisation of the Covenant

- The divine *promises* to Abraham are first made in response to his obedience to God’s invitation (12.1-3). The covenant is then *formalised* and *confirmed* in Genesis 15.1-21; 17.1-18 and 22.15-18. It is *reaffirmed* and *renewed* with both Isaac (Genesis 26.2-5) and Jacob (Genesis 28.10-17).
- In Genesis 12.1-3, promises are made that relate to a *land* (v.1), a *seed* (v.2) and *blessing* (vv.2-3). In Genesis 15, the **land** is ratified by *sacrifice*. In Genesis 17, the **seed** is confirmed by a *sign*. In Genesis 22, the **blessing** is verified by *swearing* (oath). Every promise of Genesis 12 is therefore reinforced in subsequent chapters.
- The promises were made to Abram at **75** years of age when he departed Haran by the obedience of faith (12.1-4). The covenant was ratified by *sacrifice* **ten** years later (Genesis 15), and then by the *sign* of circumcision when Abraham was **99** years old (Genesis 17). After another **15-20** years, God further ratified the covenant by *swearing* an oath (Genesis 22.16). The making of the covenant was therefore stretched out over a period of **40-45** years. Why?
- God gave the Abrahamic covenant in *pieces* over a *long* period of time to show Abraham its importance, but also that the complete fulfilment of all its provisions would take a long time.
- In addition, the crucial provision of the covenant was universal blessing through Christ – which blessing is enjoyed by faith (Galatians 3.8). The ‘stretching out’ of the covenant therefore tested and exemplified the key principle of faith in the life of Abraham. The prevailing pattern of his life was one of faith in Jehovah (Genesis 15.6).
- Whilst some provisions occurred *immediately* (like the change of names), some took several *years* (like the birth of Isaac), and still others awaited the *distant future* (cf. Hebrews 11.13). Abraham died before receiving every promise.
- Abraham had a lapse of faith in the matter of Hagar and Ishmael. 13 years after his birth, God appeared to Abraham as the “almighty God” (17.1). He does not need fleshly manoeuvres to accomplish his purpose! Divine promise will be accomplished by divine power. We must be *patient* in the things of God and learn to wait on Him.

## The Recipient/s of the Covenant

- The Abrahamic covenant was made with “Abram” (15.18; 17.2) and his descendants. “*I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.*” (Genesis 17.7). The word “**seed**” is used to describe Abraham’s descendants.

- In the Hebrew text, “seed” is always *singular* but used in two different ways: **1. Absolute singular**, meaning one individual person. **2. Collective singular**, meaning one group. For example, see 13.15-16 which is clearly collective as the “seed” are compared to an innumerable company (15.5). See also “*their land*” (15.13) and “*their God*” (17.8).
- In the context of the Abrahamic covenant, when “seed” is used in a collective sense, it always refers to the nation of Israel – those who would come out of Abraham’s loins (15.4; Hebrews 7.5) – his *biological, genetic* descendants.
- However, after the ‘sacrifice’ of the only begotten son (Isaac) in Genesis 22, the word “seed” is used as an *absolute singular*. “Thy seed shall possess the gate of **his** (singular) enemies” (22.17). Paul also quotes Genesis 22.18 in Galatians 3.16 saying, “*Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.*” The absolute singular refers to one specific individual – the Messiah. Note Genesis 3.15 which must also be the *absolute singular* – “**his heel**”!!

Abraham has *four* ‘seeds’ in Scripture:

- A *natural* seed. This is the primary reference, referring to Abraham’s *literal*, physical descendants – ethnic Jews.
- A *natural-spiritual* seed. In both the OT and NT, a distinction within national Israel is seen, a distinction determined by faith. *Romans 9.6: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel”* (see also *Romans 2.28-29; 4.12*). Inside the larger circle of the *natural* Israelites, there was a smaller circle of true *spiritual* Israelites. There is an Israel within Israel! Nathanael was an ‘Israelite indeed’, one who had accepted the Messiah and belonged to the ‘inner circle’. Many of God’s promises to Abraham will be ultimately enjoyed by the true, spiritual Israel.
  - Note. This is illustrated in Luke. The rich man of Luke 16 was a child (natural descendant) of Abraham but ended up in hell. “*But Abraham said, Son [teknon], remember...*” (Luke 16.25). In contrast, the rich publican, Zacchaeus, was converted and became a true *spiritual* son of Abraham. *Luke 19.9: “And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son [huios] of Abraham.”*
- A *spiritual* seed. This consists of *believing* Gentiles. *Galatians 3.29: “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”* This does not mean that all the promises of the Abrahamic covenant are fulfilled in the church. The particular promise Paul has in view is the spiritual blessing of salvation by faith in Christ and the consequent reception of the Spirit (Galatians 3.8, 14). John Walvoord writes, “*Gentiles who are in Christ and are spiritual seed of Abraham, thereby qualifying for the promise of blessing to Gentiles in Abraham.*” Through Christ (“the” Seed), we are sons of Abraham. Not sons in *flesh*, but in *faith*; not sons by *circumcision*, but by *conversion*.
- The *ultimate Seed* – **Christ!** He will be the agent of the blessing of the nations (Galatians 3.8, 16).
- Note. Abram’s seed is compared with the *dust* of the earth (13.16; 28.14), the *stars* of the heavens (15.5; 22.17; 26.4) and the *sand* of the seashore (22.17; 32.12). These do not represent *earthly* seed (Jews) and *heavenly* seed (the church). They are merely *three* illustrations to make the same point – that of **innumerability**.

### The Revelation of the Promises

The Abrahamic covenant makes *fourteen* separate provisions (Fruchtenbaum):

- 1. A great nation would come out of Abraham [12.2; 13.16; 15.5; 17.1-2, 7; 22.17].** That is, Israel. A nation is comprised of people coming from a common ancestor, inhabiting a particular land (10.5, 20, 31-32). The nation of Israel descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In addition to the 70 nations of Genesis 10, there will now be *one* additional nation.
- 2. He was promised a Land [12.1, 7; 13.14-15, 17; 15.17-21; 17.8].** Amillennialists believe the land should be spiritualised to represent the spiritual blessings the church enjoys today in Christ. But they are wrong. God showed Abraham this land – it was real, literal land upon which he walked (12.6-7). It was called “all the land of Canaan” (17.8), the boundaries of which are given in 15.18-21. The promised land includes the modern-day nation of Israel and parts of modern-day Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. This unconditional promise of the land has never been completely fulfilled in *history* but will be fulfilled in the *Millennium* (Isaiah 60.21; Ezekiel 34.11-16).
  - If God desired to institute a programme for the rescue of humanity, why did He choose this land rather than the garden land of Mesopotamia? Canaan is a stony place! Because this land is the “centre (naval) of the earth” (Ezekiel 38.12, NET). She is at the “centre of the nations with countries all around her” (Ezekiel 5.5, NET) – at the conjunction of *three* continents! Geographically, there would be no more strategic place to reach and bless the world!
- 3. Abraham himself was to be greatly blessed [12.2].** Abraham himself would be blessed, both materially and spiritually – the word often being used in the sense of prosperity and fertility (cf. 13.2; 22.17). *Genesis 13.2: “And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.”*

**4. Abraham's name would be great [12.2].** Abraham would become famous and revered. And he is to this day. Three of the world's religions honour him to a lesser or greater degree: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What the builders of the Tower of Babel wanted for themselves, a great name (11.4), is now promised individually to Abraham.

**5. Abraham would be a blessing to others [12.2].** Abraham would be a medium of blessing to others – especially through his descendants. The general principle is clear – people who have been blessed should in turn be a blessing to others. They are *channels* of blessing and not *reservoirs* (cf. John 7.38). Exactly *how* Abraham would be a blessing is answered in the next three clauses of 12.3.

**6. Those who blessed Israel would be blessed [12.3].** In their attitude to Abraham, men would reap what they had sown, either blessing or cursing. This principle was extended to Jacob (27.29) and then the whole nation of Israel in *Numbers 24.9*: “Blessed is he that blesseth thee (Israel), And cursed is he that curseth thee.” Those who bless the Jews will be blessed. The phrase “bless thee” is *plural*, whereas “curseth thee” is *singular* – many more will be blessed than cursed.

**7. Those who cursed Israel would be cursed [12.3].** The word used of the curse of men means ‘to treat lightly’ or ‘hold in contempt’. The word used of the curse of God – “I must curse” [NET] – is stronger. Even a *light* curse against Abram or against the Jews will bring a *heavier* curse from God. Fruchtenbaum notes, “On the judgment side of the promise, Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and Germany are some of the well-known nations who were at one time great world powers but because of their mistreatment of the Jews were destroyed or became second class nations.”

**8. In Abraham all nations would be blessed [12.3; 22.18].** Abram was to become a channel of blessing to the whole world. This blessing would be accomplished through the ultimate Seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus. This is not only revealed by Paul in Galatians 3.16 but was also revealed by OT prophets such as Isaiah and Amos. *Isaiah 49.6*: “I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, That thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.” See also *Isaiah 42.1, 6*; *Amos 9.11-12*. “All families” or ‘nations’ likely refers to *all* without *distinction*. This universal blessing not only includes the Messiah, but also the gospel (Galatians 3.8) and the word of God, which is primarily a Jewish book (Romans 3.2).

**9. Abraham would receive a son through his wife Sarah [15.1-4; 17.16-21].** This promise did not materialise for 25 years. In 15.2-3, Abram questioned the fact he continued to be childless, and was promised a son from his “own body” (15.4). Sadly, Abram and Sarai contrived to produce a son for Abram (Ishmael) through fleshly means. He was born of a slave-woman (Hagar) and became an allegory of the *old* covenant of law. It was not until Genesis 17.16 that God revealed that *Sarah* would be the one to bring forth Isaac, a son of divine promise born of a free-woman, a fitting symbol of the *new* covenant of grace (Galatians 4.21-26).

**10. His descendants would undergo Egyptian bondage [15.13-14].** God told Abram his seed would be “strangers in a foreign country” for **400** years, a round number which is more precisely given as 430 in Exodus 12.40. Henry Morris superbly explains the apparent inconsistency here with Paul. “Galatians 3.17... suggests that the 430-year period was from the time of the covenant with Abraham until the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. This, in turn, suggests that Genesis 15.13 can be interpreted: ‘Thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and [all the people among whom they dwell, both Canaanites and Egyptians] shall afflict them four hundred years.’ Similarly, Exodus 12.40 can be understood as follows: ‘Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was [altogether, that is, from the time of the covenant until they left Egypt] four hundred and thirty years.’ If this is the intended meaning, then the actual sojourn in Egypt itself would only be approximately 215 years, taking the entry of Abram into Canaan as the effective date of God’s covenant promise. This interpretation is also supported by the Septuagint translation of Exodus 12.40, which substitutes the words ‘in the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan’ for the words ‘in Egypt’. In this case, the ‘four generations’ could refer to the 215 years, rather than the four hundred years. The reason for the delay, God said, was that ‘the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full’. Just as God delayed the judgment of the Flood for 120 years, so here He waited four hundred years.”

**11. Other nations as well as Israel would come forth from Abraham [17.3-4, 6].** The single “great nation” (12.2) is expanded to “many nations”. This was fulfilled in two *Jewish* nations, Israel and Judah, and also in the many *Arab* countries and tribes descended from *Ishmael* and also through *Keturah*.

**12. His name would be changed from Abram to Abraham [17.5].** Abram means ‘exalted father’. His name would now be Abraham meaning ‘father of a multitude’ because of the Gentile peoples that would spring from him.

**13. Sarai’s name would be changed to Sarah [17.15].** Sarai’s name [‘my princess’] would be changed to Sarah [‘the princess’]. The change in name probably reflects the promise that kings would descend from her (17.16). She is the only

woman in Scripture to have her name changed, and her age at death recorded (23.1). In contrast to Abraham, who would become the father of “many nations” (17.4), she would become the “mother of nations” including Judah, Israel and Edom (via Esau).

**14. Circumcision would be a token of the covenant [17:9-14].** The practice of circumcision did not begin with Abraham. It was apparently practiced by the Egyptians, as well as Arabs, Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites (Jeremiah 9.25-26). Circumcision became the token of the Abrahamic covenant. It was a sign of identity with God’s promises through Abraham and the symbol of the transmission of ‘Jewishness’ (the seed) from one generation to another. The act of circumcision resulted in the spilling of some blood and was therefore a constant reminder of the way God ratified the covenant in Genesis 15. Though the *act* of circumcision was not unique, the *timing* of the eighth day was, and signified a new beginning. If a father failed to circumcise his son, he was cut off or executed (see Moses, Exodus 4.24-26).

The *fourteen* promises can be categorised and tabulated in the following way:

<b>Provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant</b>			
<i>Promise of Gen. 12</i>	<b>1. Land (Soil)</b>	<b>2. Seed</b>	<b>3. Blessing (Salvation)</b>
<i>Confirmed in...</i>	Genesis 15	Genesis 17	Genesis 22
<i>Ratified by...</i>	Sacrifice	Sign (Circumcision)	Swearing
<i>Developed in...</i>	<b>Land Covenant</b>	<b>Davidic Covenant</b>	<b>New Covenant</b>
	<i>Deuteronomy 30.1-10</i>	<i>2 Samuel 7.12-16</i>	<i>Jeremiah 31.31-34</i>
<i>Type of Promise</i>	National	National	Universal

- Why these *three* promises? Abraham is the answer to Adam. What Adam lost, God will restore by unconditional promise through Abraham’s Seed, Christ. **1.** When Adam sinned, he *lost the land* – he was put out of the garden. **2.** Sin caused conflict between the seed of Adam and Eve as Cain slew Abel. **3.** Sin brought a *curse* on the ground. Now God invokes blessing. The Abrahamic covenant is initiating a reversal of a damaged creation through sin.
- A further way of summarising the promises is: **1. Personal** – promises to Abraham, like making his name great and receiving a son. **2. National** – promises concerning Israel as a nation, such as the possession of the land of Canaan. **3. Universal** – promises that would affect the whole world, for all the families of the earth would be blessed.
- In summary, the **personal** promises of the covenant were fulfilled and enjoyed by Abraham during his lifetime. The **national** promises of the covenant were experienced by Abraham’s *natural* seed (in measure) but will be enjoyed in their fulness by his *natural-spiritual* seed in the Kingdom (true Israel). Abraham’s *spiritual* seed (Gentiles) enjoy the **universal** promise of salvation blessing. All the promises are guaranteed through the ultimate Seed – **Christ**.

#### The Remembrance [Permanence/Perpetuity] of the Covenant

- Down through scripture, there are frequent references to God’s ‘remembrance’ of this covenant. The first such mention is after **400** years of **sojourning** and **servitude** in a foreign land (Exodus 2.24).
- After *another* **400** years, this time of **sinning** in the Promised Land, God still remembered His promises to Abraham. See Psalm 105.42. Psalm 105 is the record of *divine faithfulness* in the midst of *human unfaithfulness* (Psalm 106).
- Finally, after **400** years of **silence**, the Lord again *remembered*. Luke 1 introduces Zacharias [‘the Lord remembers’] and Elisabeth [‘God hath sworn’]. Here were two individuals who had not lost hope in the faithfulness of God to keep His promises! Zacharias says, “*To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, And to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham.*” (Luke 1.72-73).
- The Abrahamic covenant is **unconditional** and “everlasting” (cf. Genesis 17.7). An unconditional covenant does not mean that the content of the covenant contains no conditions, obligations, or commands. Rather, it means that God intends to fulfill the terms of the covenant regardless of whether man fulfills his obligations.
  - When the covenant was ratified by sacrifice, only God walked between the divided animals, not Abram. He was in a “deep sleep”! This suggests he was not a *participant* in the covenant but a *recipient* of the covenant.
  - The Abrahamic Covenant is still in effect even though the Jewish people were unfaithful. Their failure, no matter how grievous or prolonged, did not set aside the covenant (Genesis 50.24; Exodus 2.24; Luke 1.72-73; Acts 3.25-26).
  - Disobedience and sin can cause delays, postponements, and chastisements (cf. Numbers 14), but an eternal covenant cannot be *abrogated*. A parallel would be like sin in the life of a Christian. It will ruin the enjoyment of salvation and its blessings, but can never cancel the salvation we have.