

The Five Abrahamic Covenants

The Promises to Abram

- At the time of God's original promises to Abram he was still in an unjustified state in Haran. This promise was morally and ethically binding on God, and was sufficient to establish God's intentions for Abram. However, the promise was not a covenant. In the following years God brought Abram to faith (Genesis 15) and began to produce a series of covenants with Abram based on the promises made to him in Haran. It is for this reason that Paul refers to them as "the covenants of promise (Eph 2:12)."

The Difference between a Covenant and a Promise

The Personal Promises to Abraham

Genesis 12:1, 2

Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you.² I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing.

- Note that nothing is said in the context about making a covenant with Abram. This is actually a series of promises that formed the basis for further covenants.
- "I will make you a great nation." At the time God said this, Abraham had no heirs. God's promise was fulfilled in the continuation of Abraham's line that resulted in the Jewish nation.
- "I will bless you." God gave Abraham land (Genesis 13:14-15), servants (Genesis 15:7), wealth (Genesis 13:2; 24:34-35), as well as spiritual blessing (Genesis 13:18; 21:22).
- "I will make your name great." Who hasn't heard of Abraham?

The Universal Promises through Abraham

Genesis 12:3

I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

- Divine blessings or cursing of people are based on how they treated Abraham personally. The word "you" refers to Abram, as it is the singular pronominal suffix showing the object of the verb. This is not a reference to Abram's descendents, or to the nation of Israel, or to individual Jews, as it is often applied.
- The promise that all the families of the earth would be blessed, is said to be "in you." If the "all" is an inclusive word here, which seems the most likely meaning, then all the families of the earth refers to all of humanity. Therefore this promise could only be fulfilled in Christ. The word "earth" here is *ad^emah*, not *eret^sz*. The promise therefore is *not* to "all the people of the land" (meaning the land of promise) as some have it, who desire to limit this blessing to the Jewish people. All humanity is blessed in Abram, believers and non-believers alike.

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The Covenants of Promise Between God and Abraham

Ephesians 2:12

that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

(1) The Covenant of Genesis 15:1-21 - An Unconditional Land Covenant

Genesis 15:1-21

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”² But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?”³ Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house *is* my heir!”⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.”⁵ Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.⁷ Then He said to him, “I *am* the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”⁸ And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”⁹ So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”¹⁰ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.¹¹ And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror *and* great darkness fell upon him.¹³ Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.¹⁴ “And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.¹⁵ “Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.¹⁶ “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete.”¹⁷ And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.¹⁸ On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates --¹⁹ “the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites,²⁰ “the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ “the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

- Note the extent of the land promised to Abram’s seed. This covenant is not to be confused with the second covenant of Genesis 17, which also is a land covenant. They are not, and cannot be, the same covenant. No matter how one interprets the phrase “the river of Egypt,” the boundaries of the land area are different here in Genesis 15 than in Genesis 17.
- The land covenant of Genesis 15 is broader in area than the one in Genesis 17, which does *not* extend to the River Euphrates. While both land covenants deal with seed, the first one is to “Abram’s” seed and the second to “Abraham’s seed.” When studying the fulfillment of the land covenant to Israel (Genesis 17) we will see that it does not cover the entire land area mentioned in Genesis 15. Rather it is limited to the land of Canaan.
- Why then two covenants? Undoubtedly this first land covenant includes *all of Abram’s seed*, including the descendents of Abram who do not make up Israel. Remember that Abram had male child other than Isaac named Ishmael. Also Isaac had a male child, Esau, that is not an ancestor of the nation Israel, but rather of Edom. But Esau was descended from Abram, and would therefore participate in this land covenant. The second land covenant of Genesis 17 is certainly limited to the twelve tribes, but could *not* include the Ishmaelites or the Edomites, both descendents of Abram. Nor would it include descendents of any daughters that Abram, Isaac, or Jacob might have had who married outside the chosen line, though their descendents could be included in the land covenant of Genesis 15.

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(2) The First Covenant of Genesis 17:3-6 – The Unconditional Name Covenant

Genesis 17:3-6

Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying:⁴ “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.⁵ “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.⁶ “I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

- This covenant is clearly for Abram alone, and does not apply to his descendants. Throughout the statement, the word “you” is singular.
- Several elements make up this covenant 1) Abram will be the father of many nations (*goyim*); 2) Abram’s name (“exalted father”) is changed to Abraham (“father of a multitude”), in connection with which; 3) Abraham will be “exceedingly fruitful,” and 4) kings will be descended from him.
- This covenant sets the stage for the next covenant, which would be meaningless without Abraham having a multitude of descendants.

(3) The Second Covenant of Genesis 17:7, 8 – An Unconditional Land Covenant

Genesis 17:7,8

“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.⁸ “Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

- This covenant is clearly distinguished from the previous in that it is directed toward not only the one now named Abraham, but also to the descendants promised in the previous covenant.
- Unlike the first covenant in this chapter, this covenant is called “everlasting” (Hebrew *olam* meaning perpetual or on-going in this context), a statement that would not be applicable to the previous one which was applicable to Abraham alone.
- This land covenant is not to be confused with the land covenant of Genesis 15. Here only the descendants of the promise are included (in their generation)¹, not the other descendants of Abraham. Indeed, this is the covenant which later is described as being the covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Vs. 19 indicates that an “everlasting” covenant will be made with Isaac, not including Ishmael.) The land portion here is limited to Canaan, whereas the land of the Genesis 15 covenant covers from “the river of Egypt” to the Euphrates, a land area never considered under the title “Canaan.” There is no reason (except, perhaps, perversity) to attempt to make these two covenants the same.
- The covenant of Genesis 17 will be fulfilled when Israel comes into the land of promise permanently. It has not been brought to fulfillment in any literal sense of the word. If it had been, there would be no question that Israel is permanently attached to the land. Nor has the land ever been divided as it is predicted to be in Ezekiel 47:13-48:35, a direct reference to the geography of Canaan in the future. As we shall see later, this division is quite precise and includes an accurate understanding of the members of the twelve tribes, something not yet possible at the time that God gave this covenant to Abraham.

¹ The phrase “in their generation” (לְדֹרֵיהֶם) has provoked multitudes of comments and interpretations. The best view seems to be that the Hebrew phrase means “according to their generations” and is distinguishing the various groups that would come from Abraham’s loins, not all of whom will participate in the future land of promise.

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(4) The Third Covenant of Genesis 17:9-14 – The Conditional Circumcision Covenant

Genesis 17:9-14

And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.¹⁰ “This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;¹¹ “and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.¹² “He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.¹³ “He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.¹⁴ “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

- This covenant is the only covenant to Abraham with a statement that Abraham was required to do anything. Both Abraham and his descendents were required to keep this covenant. Indeed, it is this covenant that provides the individual basis for claiming to participate in the unconditional covenants.
- It must be kept in mind that the condition is upon individuals here, not the entire Abrahamic family. The only issue is whether any given individual would remain attached to the covenant people or would be “cut off from his people.” This is actually very insulting language. The uncircumcised male is referred to here using the feminine pronoun “her.” Such males were viewed as women, which at the time, was as bad an insult as one could give a man.
- This covenant includes a way for people who are not physical descendants of Abraham to also be counted as part of Abraham’s family. It includes one bought from a foreigner as a slave. This person, “who is not of your descendants” is included Abrahamic program.

(5) The Covenant of Genesis 22:15-18 – The Unconditional Seed Covenant

Genesis 22:15-18

Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven,¹⁶ and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only *son* --¹⁷ “blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.¹⁸ “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

Gal. 3:15, 16

Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though *it is* only a man’s covenant, yet *if it is* confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.¹⁶ Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ.

- This event was actuated by Abraham’s willingness to slay his own son. Interestingly, here Isaac is called Abraham’s “only son.” In the program of God for His chosen family, Ishmael is clearly discounted. The meaning of “only” becomes “unique,” a meaning which is reflected in Hebrews.²
- The willingness to sacrifice is not unimportant. According to the author to the Hebrews, Abraham was placing faith in the fact that God could and would raise Isaac from the dead. This was only possible because Abraham took the promise concerning Isaac previously made by God literally and seriously. No allegorizing exists here! Abraham was a literalist.

² Compare the Hebrew *yachiyd* in Genesis 22:16 with *monogenes* in Hebrews 11:17. The writer to the Hebrews evidently understood the Hebrew to refer to the uniqueness of Isaac rather than to his aloneness, which is universally the meaning of *monogenes*.

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- This is the only covenant where the argument of Galatians 3:15, 16 can be applied. Previously in Genesis the word “seed” referred to Abraham’s descendents broadly. It is only here that the singular seed will bless all the families of the earth.
- The word “seed” is a collective noun in Hebrew, and has no singular vs. plural form. The same form can be translated “seed” or “seeds.” How then do we know that this passage refers to a singular “seed” since the same form is used for both? It is because we read in the context “and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies.” The Hebrew form for “his” is, and can only be, singular.” It’s antecedent is “seed” and therefore the word “seed” can be seen only as a singular. This is true despite the NASB’s sad translation of the word as “their.” (Shame, shame!)
- The ultimate referent here is clearly the Lord Jesus Christ. It is only through the Lord Jesus Christ that all the nations (*goyim*) of the earth will be blessed.

The Objections to the Unconditional Nature of the Covenants

“The unconditionality of the Abrahamic Covenant furnishes an important support for premillennialism, since the land promise needs a future time (the Millennium) in which it will be fulfilled. Therefore, amillennialists allege that there were in fact conditions attached to the fulfillment of the covenant which make it impossible to view the covenant as unconditional.” - Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*, page 455.

- Because they confuse the Genesis 12:1, 2 passage with a covenant, and because of a lack of the clear distinctions referring to the “covenants of promise,” amillennialists attempt to make the Abrahamic covenant conditional. Unfortunately, many premillennialists do not adequately deal with the covenants, as the above quote from Dr. Ryrie clearly shows. Dr. Ryrie attempts to defend the unconditional nature of the covenants by defending against the attack of Genesis 12:1-2.
- As we have seen, Genesis 12:1-2 does not meet the requirements of an established covenant. This was a morally binding promise made by God to Abram. Abram, though not yet justified, had a belief in God and acted upon the promise. Had he not, say the amillennialists, he would not have received the benefits that God promised.
- In fact, God chose Abram precisely because God had brought Abram to a place of action in his life. God not only knew, but planned, that Abram would respond positively to the promise of Genesis 12:1-2.
- Concerning the promise of Genesis 12, the amillennialist, treating the promise as though it were “THE” Abrahamic covenant, claims following conditions exist: 1) Genesis 12:1 “Go forth from your country” expresses a condition that would have invalidated the covenant if Abraham had not obeyed;” 2) Genesis 12:2 “Be a blessing” expresses a condition; and 3) Genesis 17:1 “Walk before me” is a condition for fulfillment of the covenant.
- In fact, even if this were “THE” Abrahamic covenant, the following are actually the case: 1) the command is imperative “go,” not a condition “If you go” as the covenantalist would have it; 2) The series of *cohortative imperfects* in verses 2-3 express intention, not condition, including the statement “Be a blessing” which is, grammatically speaking, an expression of an intended consequence of the previous statement, not a condition (The *Hebrew Grammar* by Gesenius, Kautzsch, Cowley cites this passage as an example of intention, not condition); and 3) This is the same kind of expression as Genesis 12:1 and expresses intention rather than condition.

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The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenants

The Amillennial Viewpoint

- All the promises have been fulfilled, including the land promise. Usually this is done by spiritualizing the land promise so that the church fulfills it. Others see it fulfilled in Israel's past history, such as in Joshua's day, or during the reign of Solomon.

The Premillennial Viewpoint

- Since the covenants are unconditional, they must be fulfilled in all provisions. Those parts of the covenants that have been fulfilled already, were fulfilled literally. Therefore, what is still to be fulfilled must be fulfilled literally.
- While it is true that Israel has occupied part of the land she was promised temporarily, never has Israel occupied all the land promised. Clearly the Old Testament prophets expected a literal fulfillment of these "covenants of promise." See the vision of the future temple beginning in Ezekiel 40, for instance. See also the previously mention division of the land beginning in Ezekiel 47.