

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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Preliminary Considerations

Two major systems of theology (Dispensational Theology and Covenant Theology) often differ from each other in their approaches to the major biblical covenants. These differences are significant, because they lead to contrasting views concerning the Millennium or future Kingdom of God foretold in the Bible. These differences are significant for another reason: they lead to contrasting views regarding the permanent existence of Israel as a nation and Israel's permanent ownership of the promised land. Has God promised Israel permanent existence as a nation? Has He guaranteed Israel permanent ownership of the promised land and, therefore, the right to possess that land?

A number of the biblical covenants will determine the final outcome of these important issues. Therefore, the approach that a person takes to these covenants is most crucial. Because that is so, this and future articles will examine the biblical covenants which relate to these issues.

Major Issues Related to the Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant involves three major issues. First, does it promise Israel permanent existence as a nation? Second, does it promise Israel permanent ownership of the promised land? Third, is the covenant conditional or unconditional in nature? If it is conditional, then the fulfillment of its promises is dependent upon the obedience of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their physical descendants, the people of Israel. If the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional, then the fulfillment of its promises is dependent upon the faithfulness of God to His word, not upon human obedience.

The Parties of the Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant was established by God with Abraham and his *physical* descendants, Isaac, Jacob, and the people of Israel. Genesis 15:18 states, "In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates." In Genesis 17:4, 6-7 God said to Abraham, "As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee... and I will make thee exceedingly fruitful,... And 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."

The fact that God established the Abrahamic Covenant with the *physical* descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, is made even more clear in several Genesis passages. In Genesis 17:19-21 God said to Abraham, "Sarah, thy wife, shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear unto thee." When Isaac became an adult God established the Abrahamic Covenant with him (Genesis 26:1-4). Later God established the covenant with Abraham's physical grandson, Jacob (Genesis 28:10-14; 35:9-12; 48:3-4). The instructions which Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, gave at the end of his life clearly indicate that he understood the Abrahamic Covenant to have been made with

Abraham and his *physical* descendants, the people of Israel (Genesis 50:24-25).

The Historical Establishment of the Abrahamic Covenant

Although some of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were given by God in Genesis 12:2-3 and 13:14-17, the covenant was not formally established until Genesis 15:7-21. Genesis 15:18 specifically states that “In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.” God formally established the covenant in the following manner: while Abraham slept a deep sleep, God (represented by a smoking oven and a flaming torch) moved between the pieces of animals which He had commanded Abraham to cut into two halves. Jeremiah 34:18 indicates that this procedure of passing between the halves of animals was a common way of establishing covenants in Old Testament times.

The Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant

God made three major kinds of promises in the Abrahamic Covenant. First, there were *personal promises to Abraham*. God promised to bless Abraham and to make him a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2), to make his name great (Genesis 12:2), to give him many physical descendants (Genesis 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:6), to make him the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:4-5), to give him the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Genesis 13:14-15, 17; 15:7; 17:8), and to bless those who blessed Abraham and curse those who cursed him (Genesis 12:3).

Second, God made *national promises concerning Israel*. God promised to make a great nation of Abraham’s physical descendants (Genesis 12:2), to give the land of Canaan from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River to Abraham’s physical descendants forever (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8), and to give the Abrahamic Covenant to his descendants for an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:7, 19). The Genesis 17:19 passage indicates that God intended the covenant to continue on through Isaac, Abraham’s biological son, and Isaac’s descendants—thus, through Abraham’s *physical* seed. The fact that God promised to give Abraham’s physical descendants the land of Canaan *forever* and the covenant for an *everlasting* covenant demands that Israel never perish as a people. Should Israel ever perish as a nation, it could not possess the land forever, and its Abrahamic Covenant could not be everlasting.

Third, God made *universal promises which would affect all peoples of the world*. God vowed that all families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s physical line of descent (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 28:14). Later we shall see that great spiritual blessing has been made available to all peoples through Jesus Christ and the Jews.

In addition, Jesus’ statements in Matthew 25:31-46 (especially verses 40 and 45) seem to indicate that, when God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and to curse those who cursed him, He intended this to be applicable, not only to Abraham, but also to Israel. In other words, God’s blessing or cursing of the peoples of the world would be determined to a large extent by their blessing or cursing of Israel. Jesus’ statements in Matthew 25 promise blessing to saved Gentiles who will aid persecuted Jews of the future Tribulation period and judgment to unsaved Gentiles who will not aid them.

For a comparison of Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology obtain the following book: Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is A Difference!* (The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry. Telephone: 800-257-7843. Mailing address: P.O. Box 908, Bellmawr, NJ 08099).

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