

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

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To understand the Abrahamic Covenant, we should refresh ourselves with its background in the failure of the Noahic Covenant, Abraham's predecessor. The Noahic Covenant failed to bring in the promise of Genesis 3:15, a New Covenant. In some ways it was not unsuccessful, for Noah did save the world, re-establish God's garden, and provide for a new heir. But it produced its own set of sinful conditions that painted the world into a corner. It could not get out of the sinful situation created by Noah's own sinful heirs, which meant the head of the serpent would not be crushed by his son. What was the problem?

The Noahic Covenant was not prepared to cope with *multi nations*. When it began, it responded to a corrupt world. When it ended, it was not able to respond to corrupt *nations*. The world became much more decentralized because of the confusion of languages. How could God speak to the world in one language when all the nations spoke different ones? God chose to call out one nation and use it to speak to everyone else, representing His hierarchy. This will be the story of Abraham's calling, the salvation of the world through a *nation* as opposed to a family (Noah).

Also we should consider carefully how the Noahic Covenant ends the final aspect of its covenantal arrangement, the *successional* phase. The Noahic Covenant ends with a genealogy, telling us the new successor, Abraham. But notice that the new successor is literally driven from Ur in a context of death and dying: Terah dies and Sarai is barren (Genesis 11:27-30). This is the background to Abram's exodus: dead sons and barren women. The text wants us to see that the Biblical man cannot thrive in the land of Babylon (Chaldees: Genesis 11:31). Thus, Abram is driven into an exodus through the adversity of the unfulfilled promises of God. He is called to the place where the promise will be fulfilled. With this background, we come to the covenant cycle of Abraham.

### Transcendence (Genesis 12:1-8)

The new covenant is created with Abram by means of the *Word* from God. This Word is *promissory*, forming a new creation. This new creation and new covenant, therefore, begin with the promise. What is it? The Word of the Lord promises to make Abram, one man, into many, a nation. It produces a *new creation*, because at the time of the revelation Abraham's wife is barren, meaning God created out of barrenness. Just as God had created the world out of nothing, so the Lord would raise up a son from Abram. In accordance with this new creation, it promises a new world, a land (12:1). It provides a new image in the form of a new name. And, it speaks of covenantal protection by means of blessing and cursing. Thus, the covenant with Abram begins with God's promise.

God assures His promise with His presence. He does so by beginning a pattern of meeting man at trees and wells, just as He did in the original garden. Every time He meets man at one of these places, a center of worship is established. Each place of worship remains as an ancient memorial of where God met man, that is, until Christ changes the ancient places of worship to Himself. God's presence will be found in Him and no longer at the trees and wells of Abram. Until then, however, where Abram meets God establishes a two-millennia-old geography of doxology.

The places of worship are founded when Abram acts on God's promise and he goes to the places God had commanded: Shechem, Bethel, and Ai. As God had brought Abram into covenant, so he proceeded to bring what was promised into compliance with the Word of God. These three cities are consistently the place of covenant renewal. Jacob later made these key cities of his ministry (Genesis 33:18, 20; 35:1, 6, 7, 27; 46:1). What the world called *Luz*, meaning "light," Jacob renamed *Bethel*, meaning "house of God." This was an act of faith because the place named by Jacob was not yet a "House of God." But he acted on the basis of the promise. Later, Joshua made these same cities the focus of his initial invasion of the land: Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron (Joshua 7:2; 8:30; 10:3). The places of worship were the first to be taken because from these places the land would be truly changed by God's presence.

God paved Abram's way by His promissory Word and His presence, which is the focus of the significant worship scenes. This is how God expresses His transcendence and immanence in the Abrahamic Covenant.

### Hierarchy (12:9-14:24)

After Abram sets up places of worship, a Melchizedekal hierarchy is established. As a type of Christ, Melchizedek is both priest and king. His very name is the combination of the two offices: king of righteousness. His city is *salem*, which consists of the root for the word, peace. He is its king. He fuses together in his person these two great offices. Abram recognized this when he tithed, acknowledged kingship by means of tribute, and shared a communion meal, symbolic of a special union that comes through the Melchizedekal priesthood.

After Melchizedek leaves, never to be heard of again in detail until the New Testament, the point seems to be that Abram became the representative of these two offices. He, and he alone, is God's covenantal representative. With him the blessing is initially promised. First, when Abram leaves the land, a *famine* comes (Genesis 12:9). Notice that he departs first, "continuing toward the Negev [South]."

Second, in Egypt, one pagan hierarchy meets God's representative. Abram fears for his life and family, acting to protect both. He does not lie about Sarah's being his sister because she was. He acts shrewdly, a characteristic of the wise man, and he is protected by God. He leaves Egypt with sevenfold blessing (12:6), telling of a future exodus-to-come when the wealth of the wicked would once again be laid up for the righteous.

Third, we further see Abram as God's priest/king representative in his relationship with Lot. The point seems to be that the blessing is with his kingship and priesthood and no other, not even his uncle. This comes to a head when Lot chooses the lush-but-pagan Sodom area where he eventually becomes mayor. Abram chose the land near the places of worship, near the Word of God. But for Lot, having the best, meant living on the edge of pagan civilization, the land of the Chaldeans, Babylon. This was the trade-out that Lot was prepared to make.

In a short time, several kings came from this region of Babel (14:1) and kidnapped Lot. Once again, the promise went with Abram and he conquered Babylon's attempt to steal what belonged to God, proving himself to be a superior king and priest. But then he meets Melchizedek. He bows and serves a superior priest and king, meaning although Abram is God's covenant representative, there is one who is superior to him. Melchizedek is the true representative of God who is the real king and priest of the world.

Abram then is given an opportunity to disciple the king of Sodom. He is offered a gift from Sodom but to accept would have meant it was the king's to give. It would have also meant that Abram would be *beholding* to Sodom. Abram refused because he did not want to be in debt. He was the real head of the covenant. He did not want God's representative to be in debt to this man, making the King of Sodom the covenantal head, the priest and king of God.

#### Ethical Stipulations (Genesis 15-16)

God establishes His covenant with Abraham. He does so through *faithfulness to the sacrifice*. He speaks again to Abraham, re-iterating the covenantal promises. But He calls on Abraham to select the sacrificial animals and cut them in half. Abraham is faithful to the sacrifice, as the text later says, "obeying My charge, My commandments, and My statutes" (Genesis 26:5). This followed the normal covenant-making procedure in the ancient world, where two people would stand back to back between the cut animals and walk in a figure eight around the animals until they came face to face. Then they would burn the animals. In this case, however, God walked between the animals and brought Abram face to face with Him.

Even though Abraham is faithful, God adds His promise. He causes Abraham to fall asleep and He seals the sacrifice with His fire, His own *self-maledictory oath*, meaning God takes the curse of the covenant on Himself. A land or territorial grant accompanies the covenant promise.

Immediately after the covenant is made through the separation of animals, unfaithfulness to the word of promise leads to the wrong kind of fulfillment. God wants his people to obey His Word even when things appear to be going against God's promises. In the Hagar passage (Genesis 16), we see a miniature fail where the woman, Sarai, becomes unbelieving and gives her Egyptian maid (of all people) to fulfill God's promise. She attempts to be fruitful by *helping God* fulfill His promise on *her* time Schedule in her own way. It doesn't work and creates a problem, a false heir, Ishmael, which the Jews are still living with today. God *blesses*, but some problems never go away. We have to live with the *consequences* of our sins even though they are forgiven! Nevertheless, God is *faithful*. Abraham

is fruitful and multiplies because he obeys God's law, statutes, and ordinances (Genesis 26:5). This message will appear time and again: multiplication through faithfulness to the sacrifice and the law.

#### Oath and Sanctions (Genesis 17-21)

This section first describes the process of covenant *ratification*, the method of receiving and applying God's promise. Circumcision becomes the symbolic ritual for ratifying God's covenant. What does it mean? First, it is applied to the household as a sign of grace. It was already a ritual in the ancient world but at the age of puberty. In Scripture, it is practiced at infancy prior to manhood to remind God's people, especially their children, that the promise of God came by God's grace.

Second, circumcision removes the flesh, reminding them of the need for the shedding of blood to have a relationship with God. Someone must ultimately die for them to have life.

Third, circumcision brings life. When the flesh is removed the promise is fulfilled, bringing life, in this case the birth of Isaac the promised seed. Abram and Sarai receive new names at the circumcision to remind them of new life in the promise. An "h" sound is added to their names, causing a breath to be breathed out when they are said.

Fourth, circumcision speaks of the coming of the incarnation. This ritual is performed on the only place where man has *new skin or flesh* underneath the old. When the old is removed, new flesh appears just as the New Adam will some day come, as is typified in Isaac.

After the circumcision passages, God's sanctions are demonstrated. God takes Abraham into His confidence and tells him of the destruction of Sodom. Abraham learns to reason with God. He seeks God's *level of commitment* as he bargains with God. The result is that Lot is allowed to flee but Sodom is destroyed for breaking covenant, a sanction lesson to Abraham and to his seed forever.

Abraham learns a final sanction lesson: *dealing with sins of the past*. He realizes that physical separation from a past problem does not make it go away in the situation with Ishmael. In this passage we see the contrast between Sarah's way of creating and dealing with the problem of Ishmael. But, God honors His word even with Ishmael just as He does with Isaac. This is the point. If God's Word is not good with one, it won't be with the other.

#### Succession (Genesis 22-25)

Succession is by passing the tests of marriage in the Abrahamic covenant. The transition points of Genesis are the marriages of sons and the events that follow. The first test regarding marriage is to find the right spouse, one who will be faithful to the covenant Word of God. Abraham sends his servant to a far country to find the proper bride for his son. The great patriarch could trust a servant to perform such an important task, which should not be minimized in importance. How many of us would trust someone else to find a marriage partner for our children. Abraham could because he had disciplined his servant well, a man whose name is not even given. The faithfulness of a servant in fetching the bride from a far country is an important Abrahamic covenant theme, one which will appear in the Gospel parables.

The second test of marriage concerns a man's covenant child. It is one thing to trust God with ourselves and another with our children. It takes more faith when it comes to our children. God calls on Abraham to let Him have his way with Abraham's child. But this is the point. Isaac does not belong to Abraham. He was only given back on loan to the father to raise. He *actually belongs* to God, which is what God determines to teach Abraham.

Finally, a faithful marriage preserves the inheritance. At the death of Sarah, as well as at Abraham's death, we see the purchase of land for the people of the covenant. These scenes represent a return to the promise itself, the real inheritance, symbolized by the return of the body into the covenantal land, dust, the Lord Himself. Thus, the covenant sequence ends with the return of man to God's promissory covenant, a testimony to the faithfulness of God's Word. As the old hymn goes, "Great is Thy faithfulness O God my Father."

#### Christ: The New Abraham

If we keep the covenant in mind, the Life of Christ clearly reveals Him as the new Abraham.

#### Transcendence

The two distinctive of transcendence in the time of Abraham are promise and presence in their own unique forms.

As for the Abrahamic promise, Christ reveals Himself as the fulfillment of the unique patriarchal promises, which consisted of land, seed, and blessing. Abraham gained the land through the covenant, but he also lost what was given to him through his descendants, namely the twelve sons of Jacob. They fled to Egypt and left the land at a time of famine. In Christ's day, the land had become a second Egypt (Matthew 2). The Lord went into the land to reclaim it, starting at the Jordan river and transversing all through Palestine. Eventually, however, He implies that the land will be rejected and become "salted" (Matthew 5:13). He even casts off the land as He weeps for Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37-39).

But, Christ implies that the promise of land will go to another, when He says, "The meek shall inherit the earth [land]" (Matthew 5:5). In this section of beatitudes, literally blessings, reminding us of the ancient blessing that came through Abraham, Christ defines who inherits. In the meekness blessing He describes the characteristic of inheriting land. Specifically, Christ is the one who fulfills all of these beatitudes. In fact, He is the only one who is the embodiment of them all. This is His point. He wants the disciples to realize that He is the true son of Abraham, as the genealogy in the Book of Matthew already explains. Thus, He is the one who inherits the land!

Also touching the land issue, Christ promises another *nation*, further indicating that the Nation of Israel will no longer be the privileged nation of God's using (Matthew 21:43). This new nation arising from the old land is none other than the Church, who is called the New *Israel* (Galatians 6:16). The twelve apostles replace the twelve tribal leaders, forming the new unit through whom God works. Moreover, since Abraham was told that he would be the father of many nations, this too is fulfilled through Christ who takes the Gospel to the nations. On this basis, the old Israel will be converted and brought back into the kingdom through the new nation, the Church.

As for seed, Abraham received the promised son, being willing to offer him up. Ultimately, this son was Jesus Christ, as Matthew's Abrahamic genealogy proves conclusively. The true seed, however, was offered up and God did not restrain. Thus, the true Abrahamic seed was forever determined not by blood but by baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:27-29). The true Jew is the one who believes in Christ!

Finally, the blessing of Abraham was eventually lost through the apostasy of Israel. The blessing was transferred to Christ, however, at His baptism when God the Father said, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The inheritance went to Christ and is in terms of Christ. *He* is the one who dispenses the blessing after

His Resurrection (John 20). Consequently, if Christ is the true blessing to Abraham, the bless-those-who-bless-you promise refers to Christ not to the Jewish people. Those who bless Christ are blessed and those who curse Him are cursed. This lesson is taught time and again in the Book of Acts, especially to the Jews who cursed Christ and were cursed. The blessing promise that went to the Jews now goes to Christ and His Church!. Hence, Jesus is a greater than (not less than) Abraham.

Thus, Christ uniquely fulfilled all of the Abrahamic promises. He was none other than the true Abraham. But turning from the transcendent element of the promises we can also discover the special character of presence during the patriarchal era.

The presence of the Lord was revealed to Abraham through wells of water. Consistently during the patriarchal period, wells are prominent. Why a well? A well is a stream of water that pushes through the dust of the earth. It is a special symbol of overcoming the curse, because the dust of the earth is cursed in Genesis 3. It provides cleansing and refreshment in desolate places. It can only be explained in relation to the Living God who created water and has a sea of water around His throne. The curse, the dust of the earth, is overcome through the presence of the Lord. Thus, wells appear where the Lord manifests Himself to man.

When we come to the gospels, we see wells and pools of water in connection with important encounters and healings. Christ consistently meets people at or near bodies of water. The point is twofold: He is the presence of the Lord, because He is God; and, He is the new Abraham at the well, who will overcome the curse on the land, more to the point, the world. He will transform the world into a new garden by His presence.

Christ is the new Abraham in the unique transcendence and immanence of the Abrahamic covenant.

#### Hierarchy

The hierarchy of the Abrahamic covenant was Melchizedekkal. Abraham represented priest and king in his person. The two offices came together in Abraham because of Melchizedek. Abraham was priestly in that he communed with heaven while on earth, as illustrated when the angels came to dine with him (Genesis 18). He was kingly in that he showed his ability to outwit kings, particularly the king of Egypt, Abimelech.

Christ in a similar fashion displayed the same unique priestly and kingly functions. He communed with heaven while on earth as manifested at His baptism where angels were said to be ascending and descending on Him. He also outsmarted kings at His birth, when He fled from Herod. And, He displayed His superiority to the kings of the earth when He played with Pilate, the political leader who prided himself in being concerned with the truth. The irony is that when Pilate met the Truth, he couldn't recognize it.

Thus, the unique Melchizedekkal features of hierarchy are revealed in Christ as He fuses the offices of priest and king together in His person.

#### Ethics

The prominent ethical theme in the Abrahamic covenant is **faith**. As I have mentioned before, faith is faithfulness not simply mere profession. Nevertheless, Abraham was reconciled because he believed God. As we turn to the gospels, Christ constantly proclaims the same distinctly Abrahamic covenant message. He calls His people to believe. He reminds them that they would believe in Him if they believed Moses (John 5:46), a reference to Abraham no doubt because Moses recorded the life of Abraham for

us. Finally, He rebukes His people and tells them that they are not of their father Abraham because they are without their spiritual father's faith (John 8).

### Sanctions

The peculiar Abrahamic sanction is circumcision. Christ fulfills this in that He is circumcised as a boy. He also implies that His people are not truly circumcised when He refers to their father the Devil (John 8).

But, to see the unique fulfillment of the Abrahamic circumcision in Christ, we must comprehend the meaning of circumcision. The rite symbolized being completely cut off in one's person or flesh. It was ritual excommunication to remind one of what could happen if apostasy occurred.

All of this happened to Christ. He was cut off from His people in His death. He was crucified outside the city. And, circumcision explains why Christ was beaten and marred so much. His flesh was damaged, symbolizing that He was being cut off. He became what circumcision represented, in other words, that His people might not be cut off forever.

### Succession

The method of transfer in the Abrahamic covenant involved marriage and childbearing. When we turn to the gospels, a marriage scene meets us at the beginning of Christ's ministry, the wedding at Cana. As Christ restores this marriage feast, a redemptive act in itself, the message seems to be that another marriage is in view. The gospel writer wants us to see that the marriage between Christ and His bride is the means of succession in this world. The way to transfer inheritance is through Christ not procreation alone. Thus, Christ dramatically reveals Himself as the true Abraham.

#### The Church: The New Sarah

The Abrahamic covenant appears in the Book of Acts and the epistles. The Church is called into the Abrahamic covenant through Christ. If Christ is the new Abraham, however, then the Church is the new Sarah.

### Transcendence

In the Abrahamic covenant, promise was one of the main emphases. When we turn to the Book of Acts, we meet the Abrahamic promise almost immediately. We find it at the point of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which is extremely important: the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled in the establishment of the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter makes this abundantly clear when he says, "But the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off" (Acts 2:39), virtually a direct quote from Genesis 17:7, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant."

I have also observed that the presence of God was made known at wells and bodies of water in the Abrahamic covenant. In particular, the bride consistently meets the seed of the Abrahamic covenant at a well or river. This emphasis reappears in the Book of Acts. The Apostle Paul encounters Lydia at a river. She is a unique symbol of

Sarah, Rebekah, and the Church: in other words, the bride. She is a widow with a household. She meets her true Groom, Jesus Christ, through the Apostle Paul who is analogous to the servant who went to fetch a bride for Isaac, the son of Abraham. Instead, the Apostle finds a bride for the ultimate son of Abraham. In this scene, the special presence of the Lord is manifested to the bride at a body of water.

### Hierarchy

The Melchizedekkal order provided the priest/king hierarchy for the Abrahamic covenant. In the New Testament, the Melchizedekkal order reappears. The Apostle Paul refers to it in the Book of Hebrews (Hebrews 7). He says that Christ is of the order of Melchizedek (7:11), implying that the Church is the new Abraham who is called to submit just as the Abraham of old. Thus the Church is both priest and king (Revelation 1:6) as the new Abraham.

### Ethics

The Abrahamic covenant stressed faith in terms of obedience. In the Book of James, whose name is literally Jacob, one of the patriarchs, we read that the faithful obedience of Abraham is commended to the Church. James says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called a friend of God" (James 2:21-23). Because James calls the Church to believe as Abraham, the implication is that one who is faithful to Christ is the true Abraham. This becomes more apparent as we consider the next aspect of the covenant.

### Sanctions

Circumcision was the sanction of the Abrahamic covenant. The New Testament calls baptism the New Testament form of circumcision. It coalesces the two when it says, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:27-29). Thus, the Church is the new Abraham and even the new Isaac.

### Succession

I noted that marriage played an important role in succession during the Abrahamic covenant. In the New Testament, marriage does the same. The institution of marriage is a direct reflection of God's relationship to man. The quality of a married person's relationship to God can be measured by his (her) relationship to the spouse (1 Peter 3:7). And, bearing godly children is part of persevering in the faith for the woman (1 Timothy 2:15). Thus, the marriage is still one of the vital tests for the succession of the faith to the next generation.

In conclusion, the Church is not only the new Abraham but it is the new Sarah. It is the ultimate bride of God. The fulfillment of Abraham in Christ and the Church again proves the unity of Scripture.