



God's Covenant with Israel The Abrahamic Covenant

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Part Two

MY godly seminary Professor and spiritual mentor used to say to his students: "You will never understand the Bible unless you comprehend the concept of covenant – and God's *covenant* with Israel in particular!" He was right!

Scripture – with its *progressive revelation* of divine truth (see accompanying diagram) – teaches that God has established a covenant with Israel that is foundational for a correct understanding of His Word. That covenant provides the framework for all prophetic truth since it is an *unfolding drama of redemption* pointing inexorably to the coming promised Messiah. Moreover, it is precisely because Israel is a **Special People** (God's chosen!) sovereignly located in a **Special Place** (the Land!) for a **Special Purpose** (to reveal His glory through the promised Messiah!), it may be confidently concluded that: *Israel is the key to understanding history and prophecy!* Yet to many, the prophetic Scriptures remain a conundrum. They ask: "How are the pieces of the prophetic jig saw puzzle to be put together?"

In our previous article, we began identifying the *corner pieces* and aligned the *framework pieces* of the prophetic puzzle. We studied the first two of several chapters in Genesis which present foundational details of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Relative to the Abrahamic covenant, we noted the following areas specifically:

(1) The Covenant Promised (Gen. 12:1-3) The covenant He established with Abram (later Abraham) and his *seed* (Israel) was unconditional. It promised: (a) *personal*

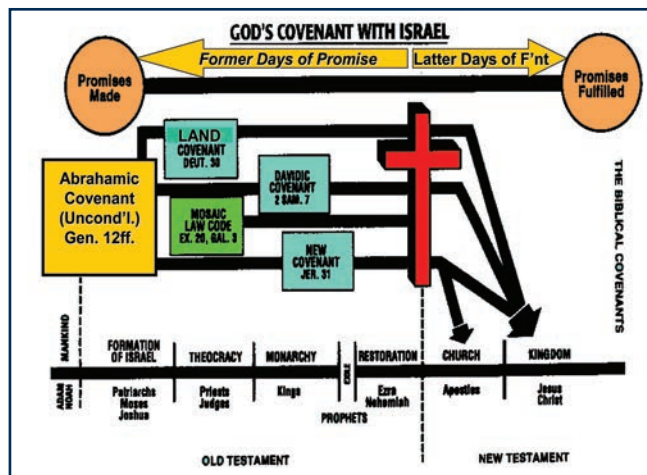
blessing (Gen. 12:1-2a), (b) *national blessing* (vs. 2a,b) and (c) *international blessing* (vs. 3).

Scripture elaborated on these three God-given promises by showing how Israel and all the nations would be blessed through the coming Messiah. He would be born a Jew (humanly speaking)! God's plan and provision of salvation was further revealed in Genesis 12, the main characters being Abram and his *seed* – Israel. In effect, God started over

of a coming Messiah in the *gospel promise* of Genesis 3:15b – "... He will bruise your head ...", but now in chapter 12, He moved Abraham onto the central stage to reveal further His salvific purposes. So whereas the first 11 chapters of Genesis were essential to explain creation, the fall and the ramifications of sinful man's self centred, autonomous independence, God's missionary heart was now manifested through His dealings with the **big** players: **Abraham, the Patriarchs and Israel!** That Scripture devotes 38 chapters (Genesis 12-50) to record the expanded *salvation story* is testimony to God's grace and His sovereign choice as to whom He wanted to occupy centre stage of history. Does this provide a clue as to why He designated Abraham as His "friend"? (2 Chron. 20:7; Is. 41:8; Js. 2:23). He was later regarded as the father of the faithful (Cf. Gal. 3:7; Rom. 4:9-12; Jn. 8:56).

(2) The Covenant Initiated (Gen. 15) In this passage, God followed up His promises by personally initiating the covenant in the context of a unique sacrificial ritual. He walked *solely* through the slaughtered animals (vss. 17-18) and pledged to Abram: "to you and your descendants I have given **this land** from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river

Euphrates" (vs. 18). This was set against the backdrop of Abram's descendants being in "a land that is not theirs" as afflicted servants for 400 years (vs. 13). As to *the Land*, there was mention here of south/north boundaries but no designation of borders to the east and west. Ezekiel will have something to say on these matters in chapters 40-48, when he refers to the return of the Messiah in the Last Days (note chapter 37 in reference to Israel)



The above chart showing "God's Covenant with Israel" has been adapted from that of Paul N. Benware, Understanding End Times Prophecy, Chicago: Moody Press, 1995, page 50. It illustrates how the Abrahamic covenant constitutes the framework of the prophetic scriptures.

with Abram, a man of **faith**. Whereas Adam and Eve had refused to remain dependant on the Creator, Abram "obeyed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Through man's first parents, sin entered the world and great was their fall! Their descendants came into that same, sad, sorry, eternally lost state because they (like all men since then) were "in Adam" (Rom. 3:23; 5:12-15ff). God had first revealed His prophecy

following a great war in the Middle East (38-39) and the establishment of the millennial Temple!

To further enhance the *big picture* details of the prophetic puzzle ensconced in the Abrahamic covenant, we now turn to the next chapter in Genesis where God's promises to His *friend* and his *seed* were elaborated. That chapter is Genesis 17 – a passage that revealed God's ratification (or confirmation) of the covenant.

(3) The Covenant Ratified (Gen. 17)

Why did God ratify the covenant He had previously promised and initiated? Why was there any need for this confirmation at all? Was there some special significance in this formal approval to Abram and his descendants? The text answered these questions, unequivocally: *God designated two specific, external, identifiable signs to formally sanction His divine promises to Abraham and his seed.* These were:

- **The sign of the Land** – given as “an everlasting possession” (vs. 8).
- **The sign of circumcision** – specified as the sign of “an everlasting covenant” (vss. 7, 9-3, 19, 21).

These two *signs* provide clear evidence of God's *progressive revelation*. The *land* would be **the place** to which Israel's promised Messiah would come! Salvation belongs to the LORD (Ps. 3:8), and yet it also “comes (lit. out from) the Jews (Jn. 4:22). *Circumcision* would evidence **the product** of obedience.

Several observations provide spiritual insight in the context of these two inviolable *signs*

that ratified the covenant. First of all, notice:

A. Changes of Names. The changes of names are at once apparent, prompting these questions: Why? What is the significance of God revealing Himself to Abram by a *new Name* – “Almighty God” (vs.1)? What was He communicating when He then changed Abram's name to Abraham (vs. 5) and Sarai's to Sarah (vs. 15)?

(1) Almighty God

The Hebrew designation for God here is *El Shaddai*. ‘El’ is one of 72 names of God in Scripture. The designation is found 48 times in the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament). In the New Testament it occurs in 10 places: 9 times in Revelation and once in 2 Cor. 6:18. Usually, the terms are translated as *Almighty God*. Bible scholars are divided as to the meaning of the Hebrew root for ‘*Shaddai*’. It could mean ‘mountain’ (connoting strength/stability/solid support), or, ‘breast’ (inferring sustained provision, tender care [as a mother nurses her child in a place of safety]). By combining these two understandings, the spiritual implication is obvious: God revealed Himself to Abraham as *the powerful, all sufficient God of love and provision who can do anything He pleases to meet any need for His covenant people!* He is the One who is enough! Against the marauding Kings who captured Lot, his family and goods, Abram knew the Lord as his “*Shield*” (Gen. 15:1a). After the miraculous rescue and recovery, plus his encounter with Melchizedek, Abram experienced Him as the “*exceeding great reward*” (Gen. 15:1b). Now the LORD revealed Himself as the *All Sufficient One!*

wholly devoted to the God who is enough! “God's calling always carries with it the guarantee of His enablement.” Are you resting in that truth right now?

The next verse elaborated on the significance of what God was now doing with Abram.

“As for *Me*”, He reaffirmed, “My covenant is with you and you shall be a father of many nations” (vs. 4; Cf. Gen. 12:2). Later, God would outline Abram's responsibilities in terms of “As for *you* ... every male child among you must be circumcised” (vs. 9), as a *sign* of the covenant between Him and Abram (vs. 11). It was obligatory, not optional!

This reaffirmation highlighted the truth of God's covenant promise (Gen. 12:1-3) and initiative (Gen. 15:1-21) to *Israel*, as Abram's seed would be later known. Interestingly, God told Abram that his descendants would be “as the dust of the earth” in Genesis 13:16, while in chapter 15:5 He told his servant to “look now toward heaven and count the stars if you are able to number them”. The former reference connoted *physical* descendants – the Jewish nation (Cf. Mt. 3:9), while the latter passage foreshadowed *spiritual* progeny.

These two aspects must not be overlooked because the seed of Abraham is used in the Bible in three ways:

- His Physical Descendants* – These are referred to particularly in reference to the sons who came through Isaac and Jacob. Clearly, the Genesis account reveals a narrowing of focus to those who were descendants of Abraham through Jacob (Gen. 12-50). As the text here indicated, the descendants of Ishmael, the six sons through Keturah, Esau and others were excluded from the covenant. (Gen. 17:20-25).
- Those Israelites/Jews who were genuine believers/people of faith* – In both the Old and New Testaments, there are clear distinctions within Israel – some were true



DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
PRE-FALL	CONSCIENCE	GOVERNMENT	PATRIARCHAL	MOSAIC	CHURCH	MILLENNIAL
ISRAEL				CHURCH		

“Progressive Revelation” →

Based on an historical, grammatical, literal hermeneutic of Scripture & noting that God has established an unconditional, everlasting covenant with Abraham/Israel (Gen. 12; 15; 17; 22; 26; 28; Ps. 105:7-11 etc), Israel and the Church are distinctive entities! (1 Cor. 10:33)

Church Age believers (Jews & Gentiles) are blessed because of the Abrahamic covenant – Gal. 3:13-14; Cf. Mt. 26:28. Israel, nationally, is yet to come into blessing – Jer. 31:31ff.

Moreover, this newly revealed Name prefaced God's associated command to obedience with: “walk before Me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1c). The Hebrew word is sometimes translated *perfect*, but the term more accurately connoted *without blame, sincere, single heartedly*. Abram was to be



believers and others are not. Paul dealt with this phenomenon in Romans 9:6b "...For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel". The same point is made in Romans 2:28-29 and 4:12). For the promises of God to be realized in personal, as well as national terms, His people must

be people of faith – a spiritual seed.

(c) A third use of the term seed of Abraham is applied in Scripture to *Gentiles who are in Christ because of their personal faith in Him*. They may also be designated as a spiritual seed of Abraham, as in Galatians 3:6-9ff, and therefore "heirs of the promise" given to all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:13-14). We must note in this context that gentile believers are not said to fulfil the promises that were given to the physical descendants of Abraham (Cf. Gal. 3:26-29).

(2) Abraham

In Genesis 17:5-14, God decreed a name change for Abram. "*Abram*" (exalted father) became "*Abraham*" (father of many nations). Again, there is a wealth of spiritual significance revealed here.

First, as J. Sidlow Baxter so dramatically pointed out as he publicly expounded this text, the term was the "expression of the Divine Breath" – Ab...**RAH** ... am! To obey God and be engaged in His service, one needs the "unction and function" of the Holy Spirit – *ru'ach hakodesh* (Lit. Wind/Breath, the Holy [One]). How true! Zechariah taught: "... it is not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD" (Zech:4:6). Jesus later reiterated the truth when He said: "Without Me you can do nothing!" (Cf. Jn. 15:5 and note 14:17, Acts 1:8).

Secondly, God had told Abram earlier in Genesis 12 that He would raise up **seed** to him and a nation would be born according to His promise (vss. 2-3). Now he was told that he would become "exceedingly fruitful" and that God would "make nations of (him),

and kings shall come from (him)" (vs. 6). Just think of it: Whenever Abraham spoke his name, or others addressed him, this "father of the faithful" would be a positive witness of God's gracious promises! How about your testimony?

Thirdly, the word "nations" in verse 6, and the subsequent points in the text relative to Ishmael, encompassed both the Jewish and Arab worlds (Cf. Gen. 25:1-4). Whether descendants of Abraham are Jewish or Arab, *only those who put their trust in the Messiah become "Abraham's seed"* (Gal.3:6-9). As the latter verses of Genesis 17 indicated, Ishmael and his descendants are not part of the covenant promises in the same sense as indicated to the "seed" to come through the "son of promise", Isaac. (Cf. vss. 8-19 with 20-25). We shall have more to say on this later, relative to the issue of **the Land**.

(3) Sarah

Abraham, now with his new name, was told by God that his wife's name would be changed.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her, then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be from her" (Gen. 17:15-16)

The name '*Sarai*' means 'my princess' and the nearly identical term '*Sarah*' means 'Princess' or 'Noble Woman'. There is a similarity, but a subtle distinction is also inferred. The point is that she had been Abram's wife as a *local identity*. She was now to be known not only as Abram's wife, but the wife of '*Abraham*' – the "father of many nations". God deemed that she be now elevated to a new plain of significance in his plan of redemption through Isaac (note verse 23) and ultimately the coming Messiah! As 'Princess', this 'Noble Woman' would become a "mother of nations" and a "mother of kings"! Yes, she had her faults – see

Gen.18;9-15 – but from Hebrews 11:11, we learn that she "believed God" and became the mother of the Jewish nation (Is. 51:2).

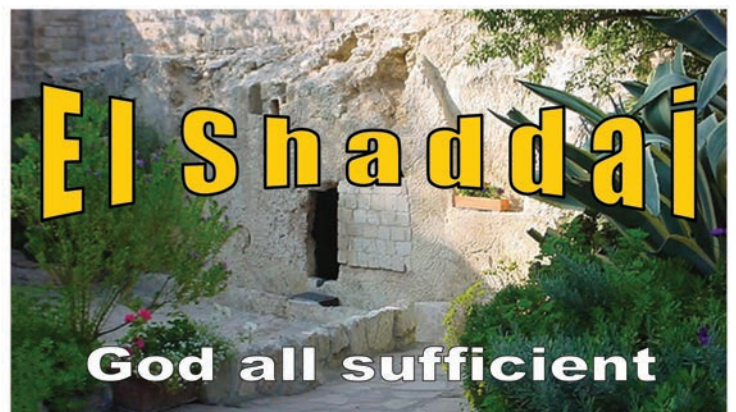
What can we learn from this today? Writing about the sanctity of life, author Warren Wiersbe summed it up with compelling words:

"The womb of the mother is a holy of holies where God is at work (Psalm 139:13-18). How tragic that we turn the womb into a tomb, that holy of holies into a holocaust".
(*Be Obedient*, page 71).

(4) Isaac

Here we find more spiritual gems! When God told Abraham that Sarah would be the one through whom "kings and peoples shall come", he laughed inwardly for joy and thought of the natural impossibility (Cf. Rom. 4:16-21). Sarah would laugh in incredulity (Gen. 18:9-15) for she was 90 and Abraham even 10 years older! (Gen.17:17). The son of promise, Isaac, would also bear a testimony of similar vein – for his name means "he laughs"! Furthermore, Isaac is named by God before he was born. There was only one other before him about whom this could be said: Ishmael (Gen. 16:11). After this, several other prebirth names should immediately attract attention:

- **Immanuel**, God with us (Is. 7:14).
- a **Child born** "unto us", a **Son** who "is given"; the One on whose shoulder the government (of the universe) shall be given, whose name will be called **Wonderful-Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace** and the increase of His government and peace there will be "no end" (Is. 9:6-7a).





- This One is **'Yeshua' (Jesus)**, Saviour (Mt. 1:21).

Jewish or gentile friend, do you know Him? He's waiting for you to call upon Him and be saved (Is. 52:13 – 53:1-12; 55:6-7; Jn. 1:12 and Rom. 10:13ff).

B. Confirmation as to "the Land" (Sign 1)

– The first of the two specific signs being reviewed is **"the Land"**. The text stated that God gave "all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession" (vs. 8). Moreover, as the chapter later pointed out, "the Land" was entrusted to him and his descendants *through Isaac*. (Cf. verses 18-20, esp. 21). But what about the present time?

Currently, Israel is a battleground! It is the subject of international debate. The issue of **The Land** divides nations, governments, communities and families – even churches! Yet when all is said and done, Israel has the right to exist under international law, given the UN vote in 1947. More than that, however, the bottom line for Bible believing Christians is this: the Land belongs to God (Ps. 24; Ezek. 36:5 etc); He has entrusted it to Israel, His chosen people (Gen 15:18; 17:8; Dt. 28-30) and finally, the *Title Deed* to the Land is enshrined in the Abrahamic covenant! The Messiah will one day rule the world from David's throne in Jerusalem (Is. 2:1-4), in the Land (Zech. 14:9).

While Israel's *ownership* of the land is by divinely initiated covenant right, *possession* of it, and the blessing of living within it (Gen. 15:18) depended on their obedience to the Lord. When a survey is done of Israel's history throughout the Old Testament and beyond, this becomes abundantly clear. God's people would be "scattered among the nations" whenever they breached the

conditional covenant regulations (Cf. Ex. 19:4-5; 23:1-8; Dt. 4:25-30; 28:64-67 and 30:1-10; Cf. Lev. 26:33-45; The Prophets, *passim*).

C. Confirmation as to "Circumcision" (Sign 2)

– The Almighty God revealed to Abraham the importance and significance of circumcision in Genesis 17:10-13ff. Circumcision would be the second of *the* tell tale signs of God's "everlasting covenant" between Himself and His people (vss. 10-13). It

was obligatory, lest any be "cut off from his people" (vs. 14). It evidenced **the product** of the male's obedience. It didn't make a male a Jew, but it was to be the outward sign that he was born a Jew (or became one by choice) and therefore a recipient of the everlasting covenant promises (Gen. 17:10-13). The "mark" of circumcision must be differentiated from the "means" of salvation, for salvation is a matter of faith and the heart! (Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8; Col. 2:12; Phil.3:1-3ff).

As implied in the cutting off (separation) of the foreskin, God's intention was that His people be a separated people unto Himself. No wonder Jeremiah later commanded God's people to "break up the fallow ground ... take away the foreskins of your hearts ..." (Jer. 4:4; cf. Hos. 10:12). Therein lay the essence of Israel's restoration to the Land and spiritual revival. Yet still today, the nation of Israel does not comply with this command. One day she will – after passing under the rod of God's judgement (Jer. 30:7) and being brought under "the bond of the covenant" (Ezek. 20:37). On that day of spiritual revival, her surviving remnant will "call on the name of the Lord" and be saved. (Zech. 13:8-9; Ps. 118:18-23ff; Is. 68:8; Mt. 23:37-39; Rom. 11:25-26a). In the meantime in this day of grace, let us pray for her people to respond to the Lord and acknowledge Him as their Messiah, Saviour and Lord!

As we conclude this enriching chapter of God's Word, our study prompts five personal applications:

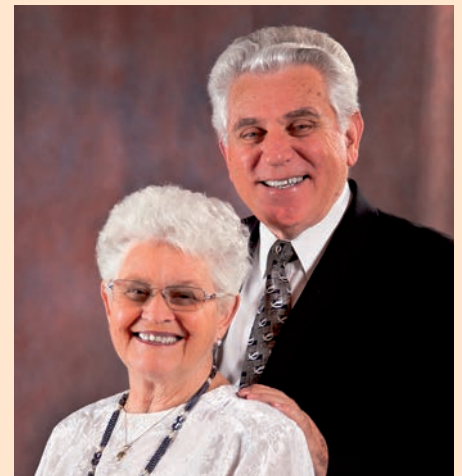
- Are you experiencing the all sufficiency of the Lord in all things?
- Has your name been 'changed', spiritually speaking? That is, is your **new** name "written down in glory" in the Lamb's book

of life? (Cf. Jn. 3:3,5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 20:11-15).

- Is your life a testimony of the life-changing grace of God like Abraham's, at this point?
- On biblical grounds, do you stand in solidarity with Israel?
- Is it time for you to "break up the fallow ground" (that is, the 'land' of your life that at one time has been fertile and productive, but is now packed down, hardened and fruitless because of spiritual neglect!) and sow seeds of righteousness that will break forth into "fruit unto holiness" (Rom. 6:22; Cf. Jn. 15:1-8)?

Our next study will investigate "The Covenant Subjected to Oath" (Gen. 22) and "The Covenant Confirmed to the Patriarchs" (Gen. 26 and 28).

(To be continued)



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