



God's Covenant with Israel

The Abrahamic Covenant

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Part One

Jigsaw puzzles are fascinating, interesting and challenging. As a child, I was thrilled to open the container box, look at the front picture, note the total number of pieces and begin putting them together. I soon discovered, however, that it was no good grabbing the first pieces on top of the pile and attempting to join them. Several fundamental "F.A.T." steps (as I called them) were necessary if the puzzle was to be completed:

- Find the corner pieces.
- Align the "outer edge pieces" to establish a "frame" of reference.
- Think of the "big picture" and details will fit as one proceeds.

When it comes to biblical prophecy, these same principles also apply. Many find the "eschatological puzzle" about Israel and End Time events obscure or unintelligible. Not a few believers have confided in me over the years, "It's so puzzling and confusing, I tend to give up when it comes to prophecy!" One pastor even went so far as to say: "I don't preach Revelation – it's an enigma. I can't understand it!" Another confessed: "Prophecy is divisive, so I never touch on it!" So much for "feeding the flock" the whole counsel of God! Could this explain one of the reasons why there is such a dearth of prophetic teaching in so many churches across our land? Yet 27% of Scripture was prophetic when originally written.

This series of articles on biblical covenants will set forth the corner pieces and

framework of prophecy. Within this context, Israel's fundamental role, the coming of the promised Messiah and His blessing of the nations will reveal the prophetic panorama's big picture. In this first study, we begin with some general comments and a simple overview, then highlight the first two of five aspects of the Abrahamic covenant as recorded in Genesis. These two categories involve: (1) the Covenant Promised (Gen. 12) and (2) the Covenant Initiated (Gen. 15).



The ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The Abrahamic covenant provides us with the corner pieces and framework of prophetic truth. It constitutes (in embryonic form) part of the three major prophetic themes in Scripture: *Israel, the Nations and the Church*. Initial details concerning Israel (yet to be a nation) are found in Genesis 12:1-3 and the chapters which follow (15, 17, 22, 26 and 28). Genesis 3:15 had given the first messianic promise in Scripture: "He will bruise your head. And you will bruise

His heel", but now in 12:1-3, God revealed more specific details to Abraham as to His prophetic programme.

Covenant Concepts

The accompanying graphic (being an adaptation based on that of Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1995, page 50), illustrates exactly how the Abrahamic covenant provides this framework. Several

key observations need to be highlighted. First, notice how the Cross pinpoints the disjunction between the *Former Days of Promise* and *The Latter Days of Fulfilment*. Second, observe that the *Land, Davidic* and *New* covenant aspects of this covenant with Israel gave further, explanatory details of what God had originally promised Abram in Genesis 12:1-3. Third, God's specific conditional covenant with His ancient people would be forthcoming in the later *Mosaic* or *Sinai* covenant

(Ex. [19:4-5– "... *if* you will obey..."] and chapters 20-24). It was fulfilled by Jesus, the Messiah, at Calvary (Mt. 5:16-17; Rom. 10:4). However, the *righteous requirement* of the Decalogue is realized in believers today through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4, esp. verse 4). Fourth, the *new covenant* is a further extrapolation of the Abrahamic covenant. It is *new* also in relation to the *old* Mosaic covenant with its legislative requirements written on stone, not on the tablets of the heart. Jesus' once for all sacrifice fulfilled the Law's every requirement. His shed blood atoned for

all sin (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:14-22ff) with the result that believing Jews and gentiles today enjoy the *spiritual* blessings of this new covenant (Mt. 26:28; Gal. 3:13-14; Eph. 1:3). His same atoning sacrifice is the sole basis of Israel's future reconciliation and her *spiritual and material* blessings to be received in the Kingdom (Jer. 31:31-33ff).

In Old Testament times, covenants were used frequently. Their observances and applications were well known in the ancient world – including Israel, God's sovereignly chosen nation (Dt. 7:6-8; 2 Sam. 7:24; Is. 43:1). Scripture records many of them. For example, those just highlighted; suzerainty (vassal) covenants; personal covenants; the covenant of salt – the list goes on. Essentially, they were **agreements between two parties which bound them to specified common interests and responsibilities.**

This raises a corollary question: Was the Abrahamic covenant conditional or unconditional? Three basic observations affirm that this covenant was *unconditional*. First, having obeyed God in leaving his home city of Ur, Abram went to the land of Canaan for the covenant to be fulfilled. No further conditions were recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. Significantly, verse 1 of this passage was not a condition, but an invitation. Second, Genesis 15:7-21 demonstrated the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic covenant. God walked through the splayed sacrifices *alone*, signifying the covenant's fulfilment would be achieved by *His* faithful actions to Abram and his people. Normally, if the fulfilment of a bilateral covenant

depended on both parties committing to its obligations, *both* would walk between the sacrificial pieces together. God Himself did that as Abraham was in a *deep sleep*. Third, there are numerous passages throughout Scripture that showed the Abrahamic covenant remained in effect even though Israel failed repeatedly in her journey with God down the centuries. Of the many that could be cited, we note: Gen. 50:24; Ex. 2:24; Dt. 4:31; 9:5-6; 2 Kgs. 13:23 Mic. 7:18-20; Lk. 1:67-75; Acts 3:25-26; Heb. 6:13-20. Even the prophet Ezekiel spoke of Israel's history of failure in walking with "the God of the covenant", yet they were promised restoration to the Land – even though they would "pass under the rod of His judgement" (Ezek. 20:33-44, esp. verse 37). There can be no doubt: the fulfilment of this *framework* covenant rests solely with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God and Father of Israel's Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ!

Covenant Considered

1. Promised – Gen. 12:1-3

In these verses, we are told that God had revealed Himself to Abram (later Abraham) – in Ur of the Chaldees (Cf. Gen. 11:29-32; Heb. 11:8-10) – and that three foundational truths were involved. First, he would experience **personal blessing** (vs. 1-2) – "*I will make you a great nation. I will bless you*". Second, there would be **national blessing** (vs. 2a) – "*I will make you a great nation*". Third, He would "*bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you*". Then God added, "*...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*"

– a promise of **international blessing** (vs. 3).

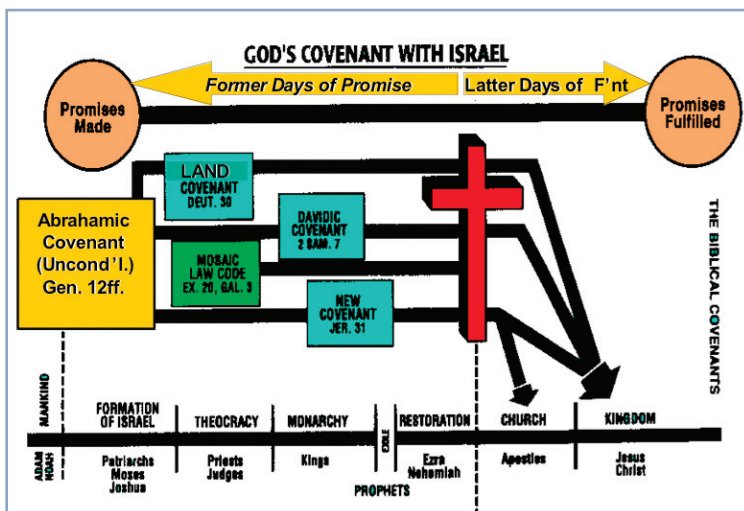
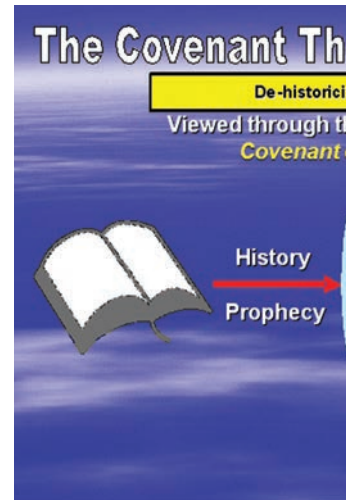
There is something very important to note here relative to the words for curse. Two different Hebrew terms are used. In the first instance, 'arar is employed.

It means 'to execrate, bitterly curse, oppose, fight, even destroy' (cf. Gen. 3:14-19; Dt. 28:20 re occupancy of the Land; Num. 23:7; 24:9 re Balak who sought Balaam to curse Israel). The second term is *qalal*, meaning 'to curse or belittle; to despise, make light of, trifle, mock, scorn, berate, humiliate, bring into contempt, revile' (cf. Num. 5:21, 23; Dt.28:15 etc). God stated to Abraham: "The one who curses (*qalal*) you, I will curse (*'arar*)"! Thus, whoever mocks or makes light of Abram's seed, will be the recipient of divine disfavour in some way, though as to how exactly was not specified at that point.

Significantly, Deuteronomy 28:15-28 highlights this "divine disfavour" aspect. There, God told Moses it related to Israel and the Land He promised them. Verse 15 introduced the series of curses (*qalal*), but in verses 16-19 each phrase was introduced by 'arar, thus designating those areas in which His people would be opposed or cursed bitterly. Then in verses 20-28, God spoke of His negative actions in the *qalal*

sense of the term's meaning. In all, these divinely initiated *curses* would relate to His covenant people, the Land and their occupancy of it. If they disobeyed, they would be scattered among the nations! (Dt. 4:25-30, esp. verse 30 "... in the latter days"; 28:64-67f).

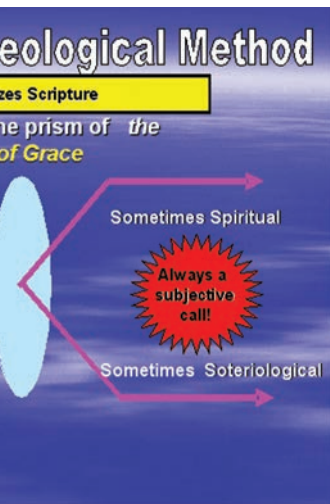
But what was meant when God said "... and in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed"? The answer is clear: the coming Messiah would be the *Seed* (not 'seeds' as Galatians 3:16 emphasized), who would fulfil this covenant blessing to gentile believers (Gal. 3:13-14). Today, they (along with their Jewish counterparts in this *Age of Grace*) are blessed in Christ because of this pledge made with Abraham, God's "friend" (2 Chron. 20:7; Is 41:8; Jas. 2:23).



But how would the LORD view (Jewish or) gentile believers, who, under the new covenant (Mt. 26:28; Jer. 31:31-34), dismiss Israel as a nation, mocking her by making light of, or even disregarding her on theological or other grounds? Is He pleased when they denigrate “the apple of His eye” (Dt. 32:10; Zech. 2:8)? Is it a concern to Him when people dismiss Israel as being *prophetically irrelevant* because they refused their Messiah and King 2,000 years ago?

One must avoid presumption, but three observations are considered pertinent in the context of this present study:

- If Genesis 12:3 is taken literally, then well may we express genuine concern at those brothers and sisters in the Lord who espouse *replacement theology*



believing that the Church has replaced Israel. Furthermore, they contend that the Church existed in the Old Testament as *the assembly (or congregation) of God's people*. They deny that it began on the day of Pentecost after Christ's exaltation (Cf. Acts 2:1-4ff, 16, 22-

34, 36). Their views are derived from *covenant theology* which is exemplified in the following diagram. In short, covenant theologians believe that in eternity past, God the Father and God the Son entered into a covenant of *redemption*, thereby establishing *the elect*. Covenants of *works* and *grace* followed, prior to and after the *Fall* of man, respectively. To them, soteriology (the salvation of man) becomes *the* main focus of biblical revelation. But should not Scripture's primary purpose be seen as the glorification of God, not man (1 Cor. 10:31)? This doxological understanding of scriptural revelation ensures a divine perspective and while appreciating man's need for

salvation, keeps that aspect in its subservient role.

- Those who espouse the *covenant theological method* and dismiss the nation of Israel today as being *prophetically irrelevant*, use a *dual hermeneutic* in interpreting Scripture. They *de-historicise* God's Word in regard to His dealings with Israel. Israel's history and prophecy are seen through the *covenant of grace* and a subjective call is then given as to whether **Israel** is to be taken literally ('Israel') or spiritually ('the Church'). Yet of the seventy three occasions where **Israel** is used in the New Testament, the term is to be understood as literal **Israel** – even in Galatians 6:16, where “... and the Israel of God” rightly refers to Jewish believers. The classic expression of this method is to read the New Testament back into the Old Testament, rather than seeing the *New* as in the old concealed; the *Old* is by the new revealed. This latter approach rightly accounts for *progressive revelation* and the associated unfolding in detail as to God's prophetic themes.
- As a dear friend and colleague politely asked an aggressive, anti-Israel *covenant theologian* at a public meeting he addressed recently: “Did you ever consider that in making known your anti-Semitic views and vitriolic public denunciations against Israel's prophetic relevancy so widely, you may in actual fact be an inherent part and cause of her prophesied *isolation* in the Last Days? Could it not be true that because of your incessant protestations, you are inadvertently preparing the way for God's judgement in the “time of Jacob's trouble” (Jer. 30:7) prior to her final reconciliation to the LORD? After all, He made an *irrevocable covenant* with her! (Gen. 12:1-3; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 20: 23-44; Ps. 105:7-11; Rom. 9, 10, 11, esp. verse 29). A stunned look of shock, incredulity and

a stony silence were the only replies as the guest speaker slowly walked away – seemingly unable to proffer an answer!

2. *Initiated* – Gen 15:1-18

The details of the covenant God initiated with Abram are outlined in Genesis 15. Ten aspects were revealed which provide a wealth of spiritual insights and prophetic understanding.

- 1) Abram was seen as *thinking about his safety!* (vs. 1). In answer, God graciously promised him *protection* and *provision*. Are you appropriating His protection and provision, right now? Remember: All God's promises are in Him 'yes' and 'amen' (2 Cor. 1:20).
- 2) Abraham was *concerned about a Son and Heir* (vss. 2-6). He was “still waiting ...”, but God would come through on His promise, ultimately. History proved it! The promised son would not be an adopted son, but a (super)-natural son – even in his old age! What He was waiting for was for his servant to be “as good as dead” (Rom. 4:13-25, esp. vss.17-22). Blessed indeed are those who “wait on the Lord” (Ps. 27:14; 62:5; Is. 40:30-31; 66:4). For believers today in a *busy* world, this is a hard principle by which to live. Too often perspiration is mistaken for inspiration! If we abide in Him, we will abound unto every good work! (Jn. 15:1-8; 1 Jn. 3:1-16ff). Alan Redpath put it this way: “Beware of the barrenness of a busy life!”
- 3) The sacred record revealed that Abram *trusted God and His promise* (vs. 6).



Paul addressed this issue again in Romans 4. A living God wants to live *His resurrection Life* through *dead* people. That is, those who believe and are “dead to themselves” by virtue of spiritual union with the risen Messiah (Rom. 6:1-11; 5:10; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27, 3:1-4a), will produce “fruit unto holiness” (Rom. 6:22ff) and experience the realization of *security* and “victory” in Him (Rom. 8:1-17, 32-39). Do these things characterize our daily walk with Him?

- 4) Abram was given assurance of *God’s pledge and purpose* (vss. 7-11): the Land would be given as an inheritance (vs. 7). It had been mentioned previously (Gen. 12:7; 13:15, 17), but here for the first time the specific boundaries are identified: from the river of Egypt to the River Euphrates (vs. 18). Interestingly, no East-West boundaries were given. This land aspect of God’s promise to Abram and his descendants has never yet been fulfilled historically, though there are fellow believers who interpret such passages as Joshua 21:45 and 1 Kings 8:56 to argue to the contrary. However, the full extent of Israel’s occupancy of the Land will be fully realized only when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to establish His Millennial Kingdom, centred in Jerusalem.
- 5) Abram was *alone in the “horror of great darkness”* as God sovereignly permitted this life-changing experience (vs. 12). What was involved here? Perhaps there is a spiritual clue in Isaiah 50:10 for all to ponder – “Who among you fears the LORD? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and reply upon His God”. Deep, personal experiences and encounters with the God of the universe often defy verbal expression. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:13).
- 6) Abram was revealed as *anticipating the future suffering of his descendants*. They would be scattered slaves in a “strange land” for 400 years (Cf. Acts 12:6; Ex. 12:40-41; Gal. 3:17 which stated 430 years). This promise would serve as the *foundation for faith* for that coming generation who would

see the deliverance of His chosen people (Dt.7:6-8) from Egypt by Moses. Faith comes through hearing the “word of God” (Cf. Rom. 10:17; Heb. 11:23-29).

- 7) The question may reasonably be asked: Why did Israel have to wait so long? God gave the answer in verse 16. He cited ten pagan nations (vss. 19, 20 and 21) and Israel’s years of bondage to give them time to repent. He is ever the God who is “not willing that any should perish, but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pt. 3:8-10; Mt. 23:32).
- 8) The “smoking oven” and the “burning torch” (verse 17) would have their divine counterparts as described in Exodus 13:21 – “The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of cloud to give them light, so as to go by day and night”.
- 9) It was God Himself who walked alone through the divided pieces of the sacrificial animals. The symbolism of the *smoking oven* and the *burning torch* pointed to this most significant fact. The fulfilment of the covenant promise would be solely dependent on God Himself!
- 10) The record tells us that this was a pivotal, history-making day – not only for Abram, but for his descendants, future Israel and even the world. Look at verse eighteen: “*On the same day ...*” It was the LORD who made (literally “cut [in two]”) the covenant saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates - ...” Yet today, Israel’s right and claim to live in her land – the land which is indissolubly united with Abraham’s physical descendants for over 3,700 years – is disputed and denied. Though she has the right to exist under international law (as voted by the United Nations in November, 1947), and notwithstanding David Ben Gurion’s declaration of the modern State of Israel on 14th March, 1948 (as the British flag was lowered [upside down!] thus ending the British Mandate), Israel still struggles to survive. She continues

to be hated by her inveterate enemies – most of whom come from the 130 million inhabitants of the Arab League Bloc. Like Iran’s President, Mahmoud Ahmadinajad, they openly speak and act to bring about her annihilation. Will they win? Or is it *half time* in this international game for supremacy?

As we will go on to establish in future articles, **Israel is ‘the key’ to understanding history and prophecy!** This study has identified the *corner pieces* and aligned the *framework* of the prophetic puzzle in two of the five chapters in Genesis. Further *big picture* details (the covenant ratified, subject to divine oath and confirmed to the Patriarchs) will be identified and assembled later.

(To be continued ...)



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