

Week 5. Abraham and the Patriarchs

[A] THE COVENANT IN GENESIS 15

1. The Covenant Promises of Offspring/ Seed and Land

First reference to covenant in Abram story at 15:18. Promises: (i) son/ offspring; (ii) land. Not new. See 12:2; 12:7. Repeated and enlarged upon (See 13:14, 15, 16, 17). Each promise the focal point of one of the two scenes in ch 15: son/ offspring (vv 1-6); land (vv 7ff). Sarah still barren – the context for the covenant-making ceremony.

Abram trying to figure out how the promises are going to be fulfilled. Deep soul-searching: vv 2-3 – will it be fulfilled through Eliezar? V 4 – further revelation given: ‘from your own body!’ Again, regarding the land (v 8) ‘How can I know?’ The answer comes through the ritual (vv 9-21). Our prayer life with God should reflect this robust engagement with God.

2. The Elaborate Covenant Making/ Cutting Ceremony (vv 9-21)

An example of ‘cutting a covenant’? NIV ‘made a covenant’, literally ‘cut a covenant.’ Partial parallel in Jeremiah 34:18ff - acted curse or imprecation: ‘May this cutting of the carcass in two happen to me if I fail to keep this covenant ...’ The smoking brazier with a blazing torch (v 17) symbolises the presence of God. He alone commits himself to keeping this covenant. Abram is asleep (v 12). We’re reminded of the unilateral (one-sided) nature of this covenant. God who takes the initiative at every point.

3. Abram Declared Righteous/ Justified by Faith

Paul makes much of the fact that in Genesis 15 Abram simply took God at his word. Contrast 45:26 –Jacob ‘was stunned; he did not believe [Joseph’s brothers]!’ Abram was declared righteous by faith alone in the word and promise of God. And that’s the way it is for us too.

[B] THE COVENANT IN GENESIS 17

Note the alternating pattern: divine self-revelation/ promise in vv 1a, 2, 4-8 (‘as for me ...’), 15-22; and response required of Abraham in vv 1b, 3, 9-14 (‘as for you ...’), 23-27. More emphasis on the obligations and responsibilities. Yet, initiative still lies with God - ‘my covenant’ (vv 2, 7, 9, 19).

1. **The Promises of the Covenant Elaborated.** Offspring (vv 2b, 6, 7-10, etc); land (v 8) here too.

Nations (vv 4-6); related to name change (v 5); also Sarah (v 16). Who are these nations? Not just physical descendants, but all the 'peoples on earth' (12:3)? [See also 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 49:10.] Ultimately fulfilled through the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ. See Romans 4:16-18.

Kings (vv 6, 16). [See also 35:11.] Future kings of Israel (Genesis 36:31). Link between the Abrahamic Covenant and Davidic Covenant. Point to Israel's own royal status? Suggest Abraham's royal status? See alliance with kings (ch 14); 23:6 'mighty prince – in Ezekiel the Hebrew word here is used for the kings of Judah. [Sarah - 'princess'/ ruler.] Abraham - a new Adam, new Noah?

Your God/ Their God (vv 7, 8) God commits himself to this people

2. Demands placed on Abraham (i) 'walk before' God (v 1); (ii) (v 1) 'be blameless' - not moral perfection, but wholeheartedness of devotion to God [see 18:19]. (iii) ensure male circumcision (v 10), as sign of the covenant.

[C] TRACKING THE FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISES

Read the stories of Abraham and the other Patriarchs in the light of the promises of God (12:2-3) They are the story of the unfolding of God's promise(s); so is OT; and NT – promises fulfilled (Yes and Amen) in Jesus. [See Matthew 1].

Three main elements of promise: (i) **posterity/ descendants**; (ii) **relationship with God**; (iii) **land**. With each new story we need to ask the question: Does this story have anything to do with any element of the promises of God? E.g., promise of posterity/ seed/ descendants. In Genesis 12-20: will Abraham have even one son; then in Genesis 22 'will he survive to produce a posterity?'

Other examples: (a) Each patriarch has a barren wife (11:30; 25:21; 30:1). Why?; (b) Abraham and Isaac put their wives in danger (Gen 12:10ff; 20:1ff; 26:7ff) - to save their own skin! (c) human 'initiatives' that lead to disaster (see ch 16 and Sarah's plans for Hagar); (d) fraternal rivalries that endanger the life of one or more of the heirs of the promise (Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his brothers). (e) famines in the land of Canaan (Gen 12:10; 26:1; 41:54). The fulfilment of the promise of posterity is either threatened or frustrated (i) through difficult providential circumstances; but often by failures of God's people (ii) through fear, unbelief or impatience; or (iii) through fighting, squabbling and hostility – little has changed. Yet, bit by bit the promise is fulfilled (see 46:27; Ex 1). Promise is fulfilled only because of the faithfulness of God. Genesis 12-50 is a story of God's faithfulness to his promises. Hebrews 10:23. Every Christian is now in a new covenant relationship with God and will be forever (Rev 21:3).