

SESSION SIX

THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Genesis 11:27—25:11

I. INTRODUCTION

This *tôlêdôt* section is the heart of the book of Genesis. In fact, the book of Genesis is the foundation of the theocratic nation of Israel, and this foundation centers on the promises and covenant that God made with Abraham. Everything up to this point has been preparatory for the revealing of the divine program in Gen 12. What hope is there for the nations that are hopelessly scattered and missing the blessing from God? Out of this bleak background, God begins a new program with one man through whom He will develop a special nation. This will lead ultimately to Christ (who is of the seed of Abraham) through whom the fullness of God's blessing to all the nations will ultimately come, and will include redemption as a means to this end. We will briefly survey the highlights of each unit of this section and then discuss the two major items of the *tôlêdôt*: (1) the covenant with Abraham and (2) the development of Abraham's faith.

II. HIGHLIGHTS OF GENESIS 11:27—25:11

A. The Selection of Abram for the Divine Program (11:27—12:9)

1. The Record of Terah (11:27-32)

The new *tôlêdôt* begins with 11:27 and the name of Terah. What became of Terah? The line of Abraham and the divine program by covenant resulted. This section is an introduction, supplying the background of the family and their origins (cf. Josh 24:2,3; Acts 7:2-8).

2. The Call of Abram (12:1-9)

This and ch 15 are the key to the book (and the whole OT!). As a pagan in Ur of the Chaldees, Abram is suddenly encountered by the glory of God with the divine plan for bringing blessing to the world. The passage not only informs us of the divine program but instructs us that faith obeys the Word of God!

B. The Struggle to Believe God for the Land (12:10—15:21)

1. The Sojourn in Egypt (12:10-20)

Abram is not the mature man walking by faith at this point, for he leaves the land of promise to sojourn in Egypt due to a famine. Furthermore, he resorts to deceptive schemings . . . we see him stumbling along in his human devices, jeopardizing the promises. Nevertheless, God graciously protects His plan by divine intervention and deliverance. Note, too, the deliberate parallelism between this event and the nation in bondage, as though God were acting it out in anticipation.

2. The Strife With Lot (13:1-18)

Out of the strife with Lot, Abram allows Lot to choose first the land he desired. The point is to show how faith resolves strife: with generosity. He does not need to behave selfishly but can be generous, because he had the sure promise of the land from YHWH.

3. The Rescue of Lot from Invaders (14:1-16)

Out of an "international" skirmish, Abram is given victory over military enemies who plunder the promised land. The stress is not so much on faith as it is on the development of the promise to make Abram great and to bless those who bless him, and curse those who curse him.

4. Melchizedek and The King of Sodom Meet Abram (14:17—15:6)

Following a great victory, Abram's faith is tested. Will he cherish a worldly deal from the king of Sodom or will he cherish the blessing of the Most High God through Melchizedek (whose name suggests a righteous rule as God's representative)? Clearly, Abram desires something far more enduring than worldly treasures; only the fulfillment of God's promise . . . that which is miraculous and enduring . . . will do for him. His wise choice is applauded by God (15:1-6) who confirms that one from his loins will be his inheritor and begin the innumerable seed.

Gen 15:6 is a foundational verse to show that from the beginning of God's covenant program, righteousness is reckoned on the basis of faith (cf. Rom 4). However, this verse is not intended to convey that Abram's "conversion" came as a result of the object lesson just given.¹ Rather, it is placed here as a summary of what had taken place before, preparing us for the cutting of the covenant which will follow. Ross suggests this translation: "Now Abram (had) believed in YHWH, and He reckoned it to him, namely righteousness."²

5. YHWH's Secure Covenant (15:7-21)

This solemn event pictures YHWH entering into a unilateral covenant with Abram, assuring him of the ultimate fulfillment of the promises. New information is included . . . a long period of enslavement (400 years) is in store for the emerging nation.³ Abram is removed from the ratification of the covenant, thus giving YHWH the entire responsibility for the fulfillment. In that sense, the covenant is unconditional! So, in spite of their prospects of death and suffering, the chosen people can rest assured that God's covenantal promises will be ultimately fulfilled.

C. Struggle to Believe God for the Seed (16:1—18:15)

Whereas the previous section dealt primarily with the relation of Abram's faith to the "land" promise, this section is more concerned with the "seed." After all, by the time he takes Hagar (ch 16), eleven years have elapsed since Abram left Haran. When we come to Gen 17:1, it has been 24 years since they left Haran.

¹Observe the "perfect" verb with waw disjunctive in the Hebrew, clearly signaling that vs 6 is not a consecutive thought with the preceding verse.

²Allen Ross, "The Exegetical Exposition of the Pentateuch: Genesis," (unpublished class notes in 117 Exegesis of the Pentateuch, Dallas Seminary, 1979), 45.

³The reference to 400 years would indicate to the Exodus generation that the idea of leaving Egypt was no "rash plan" of Moses.

1. Hagar and Ishmael (16:1-16)

The delay of the promise results in human calculations that conclude Sarai is too old to bear the seed. So the way of faith, i.e., patiently waiting, is abandoned. The birth of Ishmael through Hagar is the couple's way to secure the seed, not God's.⁴ The lesson which Hagar learns ("YHWH hears the cry of affliction") and which she returns to convey to the couple, is the very truth the couple should have pursued. God hears, so cry out to Him in distress and wait patiently, trusting God's word!

2. The Sign of the Covenant (17:1-17)

After 14 years of silence, God confirms the promises to Abram again, specifying that Sarai herself shall bear the seed (Isaac), and renames the couple to reflect His promises. Abraham responds in faith by accepting the new names and undertaking the act of circumcision which is now a sign of the covenant (a reminder of the covenant in a most intimate way). The ritual was meant to be an act of faith whereby the father might identify himself and his infant son in the sure promises to Abraham. On the one hand, since the sign involved the sexual organ, it was a reminder that human nature was unable to generate the promised seed. The cutting back of the flesh, however, was a symbol of separation, purity, and loyalty to the covenant. It looked forward to man's need for the circumcision of the heart which only God's Spirit can do, enabling man's heart to obey (cf. Deut 30:6; Rom 2:28,29).

3. The Three Visitors (18:1-15)

The time has drawn near for the arrival of the promised seed, which at this point seems ridiculous to believe God for. Hence, the LORD personally descends (18:13) to share in intimate fellowship with Abraham (signified by the meal) and confirm the coming birth. The personal visit is a call to believe that God can do the impossible (18:14).

D. The Struggle to Intercede and Mediate Blessing (18:16—20:18)

This section seems to be united by the divine intention of YHWH to place Abraham in a unique position to other peoples as the mediator of blessing (recall 12:3). Thus, he intercedes for Lot in Sodom, and the deliverance of Lot is related to Abraham's intercession (see 19:29). Even Abimelech must realize that blessing is channeled through Abraham, the mediator of blessing at this point (20:17).

1. The Intercession of Abraham (18:16-33)

This is not an isolated account but related to the Abrahamic covenant as 18:17-19 shows. He is the one through whom blessing comes, and therefore God involves him. He is the one who must keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice. Abraham never questions that Sodom is a wicked society deserving judgment, yet he learns that despite the overwhelming wickedness, God will act with justice and compassion on the

⁴ Although Sarai's suggestion to have Hagar bear Abram's child may seem scandalous today, such a scheme was quite acceptable in their day, as archaeological discoveries have shown. Merrill notes,

"According to the Nuzi tablets, ancient Hurrian cuneiform documents dealing with custom and law of this period, the action of Abram and his wife in this respect was perfectly legitimate. Any children born of this proxy arrangement would be considered legal heirs of the husband unless and until children should be born of the wife herself" (Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980], 76; quoted in Paul Benware, *Survey of the Old Testament*, 43).

righteous few. Righteous Lot may have perished with the wicked had not Abraham, the mediator of blessing, interceded for him (19:29).

2. Judgment on Sodom (19:1-38)

This is a severe warning of becoming like the morally bankrupt Canaanite civilization. Lot hesitates to leave and only does so reluctantly. What an influence that a degenerate society has on the righteous! The family of Abraham as well as the nation Israel, must guard themselves lest they too be so influenced by wickedness in their midst.

3. Abraham and Abimelech (20:1-18)

This episode centers on the preservation of Sarah's purity. The context involves another foolish and faithless act of Abraham which creates a threat to the promised blessing, for the fulfillment of the promise is dependent on the marriage. Faith and obedience are required for the promised blessings! Fortunately, God graciously intervened. The story closes with Abraham being the mediator of blessing (Gen 12:3) to Abimelech's household (20:17).

E. Abraham's Maturing Faith (21:1—22:19)

At last, Abraham begins to experience more of the promised blessing from YHWH. In the process, his faith has matured as well. He is in the land being blessed and has the seed, but will he still obey? God will test him.

1. Isaac's Birth and Ishmael's Expulsion (21:1-21)

At last the fulfillment of the promised seed arrives and Abraham and Sarah are boosted in faith. Naming him Isaac commemorates the fulfillment of the promise, and the circumcision confirms the covenant. Yet the incident of Ishmael's mocking pictures unbelief ridiculing the promise of God as foolish and threatening and minimizing the work of God. The threat to the promised seed must be removed.

2. The Covenant at Beersheba (21:22-34)

Abraham makes a covenant with the residents of the land that enables him to dwell there in peace. Significantly, they recognize him as the recipient of God's blessing and seek peace with him. Abraham is at last in the land and being blessed there.

3. The Sacrifice of Isaac (22:1-19)

This is the big test of Abraham's faith: will obedience be regarded above love? Now that he has the seed and is prospering in the land, will he remain loyal to YHWH? [Note: The Canaanites found it necessary to appease their gods, even through human sacrifices. Abraham discovers that YHWH does not demand human victims. If there is to be any human sacrifice, it will be at God's expense when He willingly offers His only Son to be crucified.] Note that the place of sacrifice, Mt. Moriah, was located at what would one day be Jerusalem . . . where the Temple for sacrifices would be built and where eventually Christ Jesus would die (Gen 22:2; 2 Chr 3:1).

F. The Transition of the Covenant Program to Isaac (23:1—25:11)

The final three sections trace the transition of the covenant program to Isaac. Abraham is now being phased out, but the divine program continues. God has provided for the continuance of the program with the birth of the promised seed, Isaac. Yet the fullness of the blessing is not found with Abraham. He is only in the land, but not really possessing it. At his death, he only

possesses a burial plot. As Heb 11:13 points out, he "*died not receiving the promises.*" The nation must look to another of Abraham's seed through whom the fullness of the promises will be found. They will find that "seed" in Jesus of Nazareth (Gal 3).

1. Purchase of the Cave at Machpelah (23:1-20)

The significant thing here is that Abraham ignores the ancestry when it comes time to bury Sarah. Rather than going back to Padan Aram for burial, he testifies that his hope is in the land. He is faithfully pursuing the covenant program that must involve the promised land.

2. Choosing the Bride for Isaac (24:1-67)

This passage looks at the loyalty to the covenant both from God's perspective (His providential provision) and from man's (a pagan Canaanite will not do). The loyal love of God sovereignly works through the circumstances of those acting in faith.

3. Abraham's Death and Isaac's Inheritance (25:1-11)

With the life of Abraham drawing to a close, he provides for the transference of the blessing to Isaac. With the transference of the blessing to the son of promise, the divine program will continue.

III. THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

The promises and covenant made with Abraham are the key to the book and even to the whole OT (we could even say for the whole Bible, because it is through Jesus, the seed of Abraham, that the promises are ultimately realized). In one sense, the rest of the Bible is the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant (it is not simply a dispensation that ends at Ex 19 with the giving of the Law). Furthermore, this is the basis for God's program with Israel.

The covenant with Abraham is the beginning of a divine program to bring blessing to the whole world (the creation of Israel was never intended to restrict God's blessing and relation to only one nation). As has been mentioned, the purpose of Gen 1—11 was to show how badly this blessing was needed. The divine program begins with Abraham and establishes the Hebrew nation as a new nation (Abram was called out of a pagan civilization). So, this is the foundation of Israel and the intention of God's program with them . . . to mediate blessing to all the families of the earth.

A. The Structure of Genesis 12:1-3

There are two imperatives followed by three promises in these verses:

1. 1st Impv: Go forth!
 - a. I will make you a great nation
 - b. I will bless you
 - c. I will make your name great
2. 2nd Impv: Be a blessing!
 - a. I will bless those who bless you
 - b. I will curse (אָרַר) the one who curses (קָלַל) you
 - c. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed

The first part focuses on Abraham and what is to become of him if he obeys the command to leave. The second part focuses on both Abraham and his seed and what God will do in their regard if they obey the command to be a blessing. In the latter phase, the nation will enjoy God's favor and protection. The principle boils down to this: God will be favorable to those who show favor to His chosen nation, but to those who treat Abraham (and Israel) indifferently (קלל), God will bring judgment upon them (אָרַר). This principle, however, should not be taken in isolation, for there are other biblical principles just as applicable. Israel (as a nation) has ethical responsibilities, and her unfaithful conduct unto God and her unethical conduct toward others should not be overlooked (e.g., her responsibility to love the alien living in the land—Deut 10:19). God will hold her accountable in these regards and discipline the nation when she is unfaithful (Deut 28–29). Consequently, the nations of the world are not expected to approve of Israel in her unfaithfulness or support her in such instances. Ultimately, the principle of blessing Abraham's seed finds its realization in Christ: one should not pass Jesus by indifferently; for the person who does, there is no salvation but only eternal judgment.

B. Abraham's Response

The promises in Gen 12:1-3 are contingent upon Abram's response in obedience, and this would demand faith. He does respond in faith and obeys. He gets out of his land, and he begins to become a blessing:

Go forth! 12:4 "*Abram went forth . . .*"

Be a blessing! 12:8 "*He built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.*"

In doing this, Abram is bearing testimony to YHWH in the midst of the Canaanites . . . He is being a blessing. So, at this point he is obeying the LORD (although partially—he allows Lot to tag along). The statement in Gen 15:6 ("*Then he believed in the LORD*") may look back to these earlier moments when he obeys the call in faith . . . he simply takes God at His word and depends on it (counts on it), and this is the essence of faith. When Abram gets to the land, YHWH promises the land to his seed. There is a lesson for the exodus generation here: they too must leave by faith for the land of promise.

C. Phases to the Divine Program

1. God Separates Out One Individual—Abraham

He leaves Haran at the age of 75 about the year 2091 BC to enter Canaan.⁵ At this time, Ur was a well-developed city of affluence (possibly the most advanced civilization of the day), while the Canaanites were a wretchedly immoral civilization. Yet this is where God chose to begin His program.

2. God Makes One Nation Out of Abraham's Seed

Abraham's seed is not constituted a nation until Moses leads them out of Egypt (1446 BC) to be joined into a covenant relationship with YHWH in Ex 19. So there is a period of 600 years between the promise and the fulfillment. To have a nation, three factors must be present:

⁵Note the following verses: Gen 12:4; 21:5; 25:26; 47:9; Ex 12:40; 1 Kgs 6:1. The Temple of Solomon was built ca. 966 BC. Cf. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests (75-79)* for a discussion of patriarchal chronology. Merrill suggests that Abram departed from Haran within 25 years of leaving Ur (p 29).

- a. A common people
 - b. A land (generally spelled out in Gen 15:18)
 - c. A constitution to bind them together
(in primitive form at Gen 17; formally, Ex 19)
3. God Commissions Abraham to be a Blessing

To "bless" is to enrich someone, and this would include both the physical and the spiritual. What must be observed is that this commission is to be to "*all the families of the earth*," i.e., Gentiles as well. This will be ultimately achieved through Jesus Christ and explains the inclusion of gentiles being brought in as fellow-partakers of the Church (Eph 2). This blessing also includes divine revelation, in that the Jews have blessed the world by giving everyone the Scriptures (Rom 3:1-2).

D. The Ratification Of The Promises

Gen 15:7-21 is probably the most important section in all the OT. The promises given to Abram in ch 12 are now ratified by a covenant. The promise of the land, given upon entering the land (12:7), is strengthened with the promise "forever" once Lot separates (13:15), and is now defined in Gen 15 with the ratification of the covenant. This covenant is significant, for it determines God's entire eschatological program for the nation Israel.

1. Types of Covenants

According to oriental custom, there were various ways that a legal contract was drawn up between two consenting parties:

- a. Shoe covenant (see Ruth 4:8)
- b. Salt covenant (see Num 18:19)
- c. Blood covenant

When two people wanted to bind themselves in an unchangeable covenant, they used the death of a living animal. This had a two-fold significance: (1) the animal represents the one making the covenant, the idea being that a dead man cannot go back on his word; and (2) if one party did not fulfill his part, a death was to be required and his blood to be shed.

The ceremony of the blood covenant was to be accomplished by having both parties split the carcass and walk between the parts to signify the ratification of the covenant. In the scene in Gen 15, Abram is in a deep sleep, and YHWH (signified by the oven and torch) passes between the carcass parts alone (15:17). The point is clear: the fulfillment of the covenant depended on YHWH alone, not Abram. Therefore, this is an unconditional covenant! God has bound Himself to the fulfillment of the promises, and the conditions rest on God alone, not Abram. However, the unconditional covenant had conditional blessings.⁶ No generation would realize the promises apart from faith and obedience.

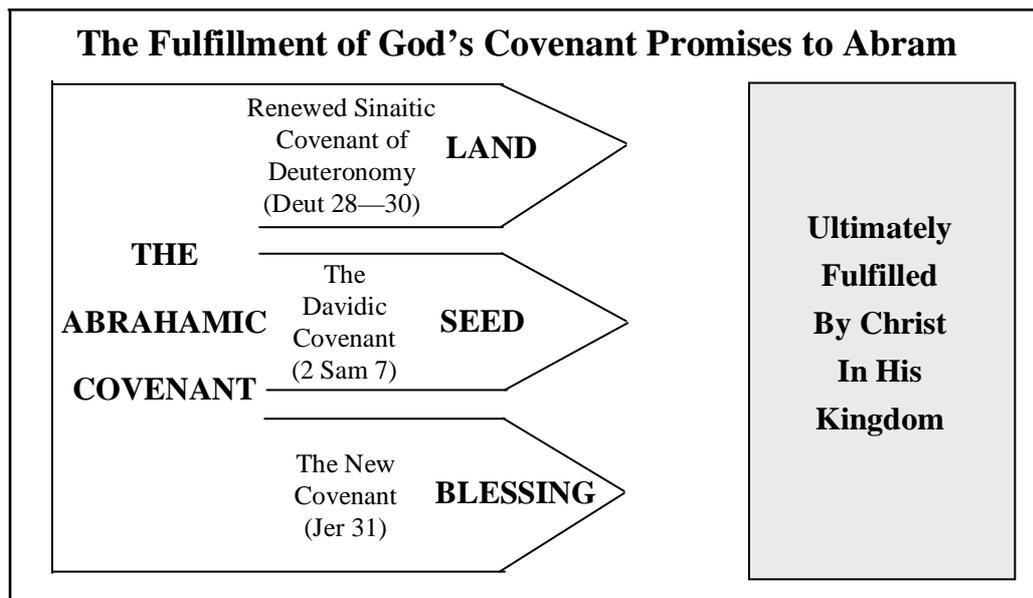
⁶ Benware states,

"The eventual complete fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant depended on God, and not on Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or the nation of Israel. But the sins of these men and the unbelief of Israel did have significance. Although their failure would never negate the covenant, it would affect their own blessing and could even temporarily hinder the program of God. . . . So even though the Abrahamic Covenant had

For the Exodus generation, this covenant was the basis to leave Egypt and take the land of promise. The covenant with Abraham will be the basis of God's dealings with Israel throughout Scripture. When He calls them out of Egypt, it is on the basis of the covenant (Gen 50:24; Ex 2:24,25; 3:16). When He makes a new covenant in Deuteronomy, it is because of the Abrahamic covenant (Deut 1:8-11). When the nation disobeys, He does not obliterate them (2 Kgs 13:22-23). The Psalmist praises God in light of this covenant (Ps 105:8-11). Jesus' birth is in keeping with the covenant (Lk 1:55). Peter's message in Acts 3 to the Jews is based on the covenant. Finally, it is the basis for the future hope of Israel as a nation (Rom 9—11).

- 2. The Promise Aspects to Abram and His Seed
 - a. A land
 - b. A seed
 - c. Blessing

These three aspects of promise will be taken up and further developed in later covenant revelation: God's principles for having the land (Deut 28—30), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7), and the New Covenant (Jer 31). Even though these covenants will ultimately be fulfilled in Christ's millennial kingdom, there will be partial realization in the interim (we will discuss this more when we come to the prophets).



IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Throughout the *tôlêdôt*, there is a continual struggle on Abram's part to trust God for the promises . . . to obey . . . to walk in faith. When he comes to Canaan, he brings Lot, although God's call included complete separation from his relatives. He ventures out of the land when famine comes without any instruction from God. He attempts to gain the seed through Hagar. In many ways, he stumbles. On the other hand, he exhibits faith on many an occasion (e.g., on meeting the king of Sodom).

no conditions attached to it, unbelief on the part of its recipients could, and often did, remove them from the place of favor and blessing" (Paul Benware, *Survey of the Old Testament*, 39).

God gives delay to the promises to allow Abraham to mature in faith and obedience. Finally, Abraham receives the promised seed and is being blessed in the land. But will he still obey? This is the question Gen 22 answers with the sacrifice of Isaac. He does, and God reconfirms to him the promises. The lesson is clear: despite God's assurance of the covenanted promises, faith and obedience are prerequisite for the realization of them!