

## THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT AS THE FOUNDATION FOR MISSIONS

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*The strategic role played by the Abrahamic covenant as the expression of God's saving intention for the nations is commonly accepted. Questions remain, however, as to the nature of the Abrahamic covenant and as to how the Abrahamic covenant relates to the task of missions. This study assesses the covenant in its linear disclosure across Genesis by positing four covenant stages that range from promise to confirmation with a concluding emphasis on blessing. Alongside this, the author suggests the terminology for the covenant within dispensational interpretation should move beyond the conditional/unconditional framework to understand it as a regulated royal grant guaranteed by God. In that the covenant carries direct and indirect relationships with other biblical covenants, this understanding sets the stage for the Abrahamic covenant's role in later Scriptural revelation. As the foundation for God's unfolding plan of redemption through its particularity, agency, and intention, the covenant serves as an impetus for Christian missions and affirms a continued role for Israel within a dispensational missiology.*

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### Introduction

The significance of the Abrahamic covenant for Old Testament theology and for Christian missions is commonly recognized.<sup>1</sup> Yet interpreters continue to debate the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Williamson designates Genesis 12:1–3 as “one of the most important revelations in the whole of Scripture” (*Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, NSBT [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007], 77). Both dispensational and covenantal interpreters recognize its significance (Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., “The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Setting,” *BSac* 127 [Jul–Sept 1970]: 241–56; John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* [reprint ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1988], 4). Christopher J. H. Wright terms the Abrahamic covenant the “manifesto of mission” (“The Old Testament and Christian Mission,” *Evangel* 14 [Sum 1996]: 39).

covenant's place in the unfolding revelation of the Old Testament as well as its relationship to the task of missions. Questions remain as to how best to understand its serial disclosure across Genesis,<sup>2</sup> whether it is to be understood as a conditional or unconditional covenant,<sup>3</sup> how it relates to previous and successive biblical covenants,<sup>4</sup> and how it connects to the divine plan of redemption and a continued role for the nation of Israel.<sup>5</sup> With respect to the latter, interpreters debate whether an Old Testament foundation for missions, assuming there is one at all,<sup>6</sup> lies properly in creation,<sup>7</sup> the Abrahamic covenant,<sup>8</sup> or the exodus/Sinai event.<sup>9</sup> These discussions form the contours of the following essay through four tenets.

I argue, first, that the development of the Abrahamic covenant follows a linear progression across Genesis that incorporates four distinctive covenant stages that range from promise to confirmation. This understanding follows the contours of the earlier Noahic covenant and supports the development of the land, seed, and blessing promises (Gen 12:1–3; 13:14–18), with special focus in the successive passages on

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<sup>2</sup> Questions here relate to whether the covenant is established in Genesis 12 (John J. Mitchell, “Abram’s Understanding of the Lord’s Covenant,” *WTJ* 32 [Nov 1969]: 24–48) or Genesis 15 (Gary Gromacki, “The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant,” *JMAT* 18 [Fall 2014]: 79; Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” *JETS* 56 [2013]: 260). Some interpreters find two separate covenants in Genesis 15 and 17 (Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 84–91; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012], 176–79; Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985], 145–50).

<sup>3</sup> Historically dispensationalists have termed the Abrahamic covenant unconditional insofar as it is designated an “everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:7, 13, 19) (John F. Walvoord, “The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant,” *BSac* 102 [Jan–Mar 1945]: 27–29; Gromacki, “Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant,” 112).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Block sees two kinds of covenants—communal/missional and administrative—and he places the Abrahamic/Mosaic covenants into the former category, merging them into what he terms the “Israelite covenant” (*Covenant: The Framework of God’s Grand Plan of Redemption* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021], 4; cf. McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 59–93). Dispensational interpreters, however, are wary of erasing distinctions between the Mosaic covenant and Abrahamic covenant, usually seeing the latter as unconditional and the former as conditional (Eugene H. Merrill, “The Covenant with Abraham: The Keystone of Biblical Architecture,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 12 [Aug 2008]: 13–14).

<sup>5</sup> Interpreters have called Gen 12:3 “the most missiological passage in the Old Testament” and a revelation of God’s “universal mission of redemption so that the whole universe is redeemed from the grip of sin” (Jonathan S. Nkhoma, “Mission in the Postmodern World: A Biblical Foundation,” in *Mission in Malawi: Essays in Honour of Klaus Fiedler*, ed. Jonathan Nkhoma, Rhodian Munyenembe, and Hany Longwe, 48–76 [Luwingu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2021], 59, 65, emphasis his). Meredith G. Kline, on the other hand, sees the Abrahamic covenant as a suzerainty-vassal treaty that has stipulations which may be broken, leading to Israel’s forfeiture of the privilege of participating in redemption (*Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy, Studies and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963], 22–24).

<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Kasting begins his study of missions not with the Old Testament but with Second-Temple Judaism (*Die Anfänge der urchristlichen Mission* [Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1969], 11).

<sup>7</sup> Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 4–6; A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. H. Scobie, “Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology,” *TynBul* 43 (Nov 1992): 283–85; John H. Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, ed. Gayle G. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 49.

<sup>9</sup> William Manson, “The Biblical Doctrine of Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 42 (Jul 1953): 257.

land (Gen 15), seed (Gen 17), and blessing (Gen 22). This covenant progression cautions against typological readings of the Abrahamic covenant that undermine the reality of its land provisions, while providing a more nuanced picture of its anticipated blessing for all nations.<sup>10</sup>

Second, I offer more precise terminology with respect to the covenant's nomenclature. While typically interpreters have utilized a "conditional" versus "unconditional" framework to assess the covenant, more comprehensive study of the available ancient Near Eastern sources indicates that the situation is more complex. My proposed understanding modifies the terminology in a more nuanced and historically consistent direction. I argue that the Abrahamic covenant is best identified as a unilateral, irrevocable, albeit regulated, royal grant covenant, a pattern that follows the contours of an analogous covenant from Alalakh.<sup>11</sup> This understanding brings the terminology up to date within dispensational circles, while also arguing for a future role for the nation of Israel within a dispensational missiology.

Third, I argue that the Abrahamic covenant carries both continuity and discontinuity features with other biblical covenants. The covenant refracts earlier creational promises and stands in a hierarchical relationship to the succeeding Old Testament covenants. Such a connection hints at both direct and indirect relationships so that the covenants fulfill different purposes for different dispensations. This is why the Abrahamic covenant serves as the foundation for Christian mission rather than, say, the new covenant and why Israel has a continuing place in the task of global missions.

Fourth, I contend that the Abrahamic covenant serves as the foundation or basis for God's unfolding plan of redemption in the rest of Scripture and therefore serves as an impetus for Christian missions. While missiologies often begin with creation, the Abrahamic covenant finds unique significance as the foundation for Christian missions through three factors: its particularity, its agency, and its intention.<sup>12</sup> God's purpose of bringing soteriological blessing to the nations (intention) finds specificity in Abraham and his descendants (particularity), who are the conduit through whom the blessing is conveyed (agency). The Abrahamic covenant's nature as unilateral and irrevocable means that Israel has a continued, unalterable place in God's redemptive plan. The nation will occupy a future mediatorial role vis-à-vis the nations, a role she failed to fulfill originally due to disobedience to the Mosaic Law (cf. Exod 19:5–6). The Abrahamic covenant guarantees that Israel will realize her land, seed, and blessing promises, while the blessings promised to the nations will come to fruition through the spread of the gospel and the future millennial kingdom.

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<sup>10</sup> For a typological reading of the Abrahamic covenant that undermines its land provisions, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 826–35. For a dispensational response, see Michael A. Grisanti, "A Critique of Gentry and Wellum's *Kingdom through Covenant: An Old Testament Perspective*," *MSJ* 26 (Spr 2015): 129–37; Mark A. Snoeberger, "Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants: A Review Article," *DBSJ* 17 (2012): 99–103.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 1:231–34.

<sup>12</sup> As Arthur F. Glasser notes, Abraham's call is "the beginning of salvation history" (*Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* [revised ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 56).

Having outlined the progression of my argument, I turn now to an examination of the biblical and historical contexts of the Abrahamic covenant.

### The Nature of the Abrahamic Covenant and Its Old Testament Setting

Most biblical interpreters concur that the notion of covenant plays an integral role in the unfolding of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> The first mention of “covenant” (בְּרִית) (*bərît*) appears in Genesis 6:18 with reference to the future Noahic covenant. The word appears nearly 300 times in the Old Testament, with semantically-linked terms such as “oath” (אָלָה [’*ālā*]; שְׁבוּעָה [š**ə**bū’*ā*]) and “covenant love” (חֶסֶד [*hesed*]) occurring another 350 times. While various proposals have been offered for the etymology and meaning of *bərît* (בְּרִית), the most likely conclusion is that it relates to an Akkadian cognate *birītu*, meaning “link,” “clasp,” or “fetter,” and hence “bond.”<sup>14</sup> I define *covenant* as the formal codification of a mutually-binding, relational commitment between non-kin members so as to establish and structure the union for the good of the community and for protection against potential threats.<sup>15</sup> The covenant has a formal ceremony, including witnesses, human and divine. Witnesses are not passive but are expected to act in the case of covenant violation by effecting the pronounced sanctions, whether curses (divine) or punishments (human). The covenant often includes a physical token as a sign, an oath of confirmation, and a communal meal.<sup>16</sup> A covenant by its nature thus formalizes and governs a relationship, making former outsiders family members through the establishment of blood-kinship.

In the creation narrative, prior to the formal introduction of the covenant concept, Yahweh creates humanity in His own image and blesses them, charging them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28).<sup>17</sup> Following the fall and flood, the promised blessing and dominion mandate are imperiled, resulting in the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:1–17), the first clear covenant in Scripture and in history, established between Yahweh and the created order, specifically all living creatures (Gen 9:10–16).<sup>18</sup> The Noahic covenant

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<sup>13</sup> Probably overstated, nonetheless, are claims that the idea of covenant is “fundamental to the Bible’s story” (Alistair I. Wilson and Jamie A. Grant, “Introduction,” in *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson [Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005], 12) or “the backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture” (Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 31). A doxological kingdom focus is more integral to Scripture, as elements of royal and priestly themes find prominence in the creation narrative, while the concept of covenant is absent.

<sup>14</sup> *TDOT*, s.v. “בְּרִית,” by Moshe Weinfeld, 2:253–55; Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 36–37. On the Akkadian cognate, see *CAD*, s.v. “birītu,” 2:251–55.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 56–62; Paul Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), 51. Gordon P. Hugenberger similarly identifies covenant as “an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction” (*Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage, Developed from the Perspective of Malachi* [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 171).

<sup>16</sup> *TDOT*, 2:256.

<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural citations are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Many interpreters infer an alleged covenant with creation in Genesis 1–2, but the evidence is scant. Insofar as covenants govern chosen rather than natural relationships, and are established between non-kin

encompasses God's purposes for curtailing evil within the created order specifically by creating boundaries (i.e., human government) for the life and flourishing of its creatures. The Abrahamic covenant, the next biblical covenant, carries a slightly different focus. It particularizes God's redemptive and doxological purposes for the created order through the agency of an individual (Abraham) and ultimately his descendants (the nation of Israel). In this way we may speak of the Abrahamic covenant as refracting the original divine intention to bless humanity and by implication the whole created order, after the intended blessing had been threatened by the fall and flood, showing the dire consequences of sin and the resulting curse.

Questions remain, nonetheless, as to the timing and process by which the Abrahamic covenant is implemented across the narratives of Genesis. Some interpreters speak of the covenant as established already in Genesis 12:1–3.<sup>19</sup> Most, however, recognize its official cutting ceremony to take place in Genesis 15, where Abraham severs animals and Yahweh passes through the carcasses in the form of a smoking firepot and flaming torch.<sup>20</sup> Yet references to the covenant or to covenantal language continue in later chapters. The term *bərīt* occurs thirteen times in Genesis 17, mostly in the *wəqatal* or future sense (“I will give my covenant” [v. 2]; “I will establish my covenant” [vv. 7, 21]). Allusions in the divine oath of Genesis 22 to “blessing” evoke Abraham's initial call in Genesis 12, forming a frame around his entire storyline and thereby raising the question of when precisely Yahweh officially implements the covenant. Some interpreters thus conclude that Yahweh enacts separate covenants with Abraham over the course of his life, such as one in Genesis 15 and one in chapter 17. These interpreters would see the former as establishing a unilateral, eternal, promissory, national covenant, and the latter a bilateral, temporal, regulative, international covenant.<sup>21</sup> Others have rightly contested, however, that such a schema is doubtful, in that Scripture refers always to a singular covenant with Abraham, later confirmed unilaterally with Isaac and Jacob (Exod 2:24; Lev 26:42; 2 Kgs 13:23; Ps 105:9–10; Acts 3:25).<sup>22</sup>

A preferable approach sees the singular Abrahamic covenant as unfolding in four stages:

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members in the presence of possible risks, there is no need for a covenant with creation prior to the fall and sin curse. Block refers to the Noahic covenant as the actual cosmic covenant, as it is identified as a covenant between Yahweh and the earth (Gen 9:13) and between Yahweh and every living creature (Gen 9:10, 12, 15–16) (*Covenant*, 13–41).

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, “Abram's Understanding,” 38.

<sup>20</sup> Gromacki, “Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant,” 79; Niehaus, “God's Covenant,” 260.

<sup>21</sup> Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 89–90; Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 176–79; McComiskey, *Covenants of Promise*, 145–150.

<sup>22</sup> Niehaus, “God's Covenant,” 249; Seth D. Postell, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” in *A Handbook on the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, ed. Craig A. Evans and David Mishkin, 13–16 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 14. Postell interprets the ceremony of Gen 17 as being necessitated by Abraham's lapse of faith with regard to Hagar in Gen 16. If the Abrahamic covenant is indeed irrevocable and unilateral, however, one wonders at the need to renew the covenant per se. A preferable approach is to see the covenant intentionally revealed in stages that elaborate upon the threefold promise of land, seed, and blessing in Gen 12:1–3.

The Four Stages of the Abrahamic Covenant			
Promise	Ratification (Cutting)	Sign of Attestation (Circumcision)	Confirmation (Oath/Sacrifice)
Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17	Gen 15:1–21	Gen 17:1–22	Gen 22:11–19
Land, Seed, and Blessing	Land Focus	Seed Focus	Blessing Focus

The promise stage anticipates the enactment of the covenant but remains prior to it. The ratification stage involves the actual cutting of the covenant (Gen 15:18) and includes the ritual slaughter of animals (cf. Gen 8:20). The sign of the covenant, in this case circumcision, is the physical token that attests to the covenant, now ratified. The oath/sacrifice consummates the covenant with divine and human confirmation. Such a four-stage covenant enactment finds general support in the four stages underlying the Noahic covenant, which Yahweh promises (Gen 6:18), ratifies (Gen 8:20–9:11), attests by sign (Gen 9:12–16), and confirms by affirmation (Gen 9:17). This understanding finds credence too in the development of the land, seed, and blessing promises initially given to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; 13:14–18). The later elaborations of the covenant bring particular focus upon land (Gen 15), seed (Gen 17), and blessing (Gen 22).

Promise: Land, Seed, and Blessing (Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17)

In Genesis 12, Yahweh calls Abraham to leave his kith and kin, and to traverse to a land that He would show him.<sup>23</sup> Part and parcel of the call are God's concomitant promises to bless Abraham. Interpreters differ as to how many promises Yahweh conveys, usually ranging from five to as many as fourteen.<sup>24</sup> For our purposes, there are roughly seven: (1) Abraham would become a great nation, with numerous offspring (12:2; 13:16); (2) he would receive the land of Canaan (12:1, 7; 13:14–15, 17); (3) he would be greatly blessed, including material wealth, life, and relationship with God (12:2); (4) his name would be great (12:2); (5) he would be a conduit of blessing (12:2–3); (6) he would be a watershed figure, bringing blessing to those who bless him as well as curse to those who curse him (12:3); and (7) his blessing would extend to every family group or ethnicity (12:3). Interpreters suggest different ways of distilling the essence of the divine promises, preferring rubrics such as personal, national, and universal<sup>25</sup> or land, people, and blessing.<sup>26</sup> The traditional triad is land, seed, and blessing.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Although somewhat anachronistic in light of the name change from Abram to Abraham in Gen 17:5, I use the name Abraham throughout for consistency's sake.

<sup>24</sup> Gromacki enumerates five blessings ("Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant," 79), while Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum lists fourteen promises, although incorporating other passages ("Israelology: Part 1 of 6," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 5 [Apr 1999]: 32–33).

<sup>25</sup> Essex, "Abrahamic Covenant," 212.

<sup>26</sup> Merrill, "Covenant with Abraham," 12.

<sup>27</sup> Kaiser, *Old Testament Theology*, 86.

Integral to these promises is the notion of blessing. The nominal and verbal forms of “bless” (בָּרַךְ [bārākā], “blessing”; בָּרַךְ [brk], “to bless”) occur five times in Genesis 12:1–3, mirroring the five occurrences of the verb “to curse” (אָרַר [ʾrr]) to this point in the narrative (Gen 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25). The correspondence thus anticipates how the blessing of Abraham will begin to reverse the effects of the curse. Moreover, prior to Genesis 12 each theme occurs five times: “blessing” (Gen 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2; 9:1) and “curse” (Gen 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25). But after Abraham’s call, blessing occurs more often than curse by a ratio of nearly 25 to 1.<sup>28</sup> The global nature of God’s intention to bless becomes concretized to a greater and greater degree. Blessing in the Old Testament sense encompasses a range of benefits: total well-being (*shalom*), wisdom, God’s presence, divine protection and provision, fertility, wealth, and triumph over enemies.<sup>29</sup> The nature of the promises suggests that the covenant is best seen as anticipated in this context but not yet enacted or cut.

#### Ratification: Land (Genesis 15:1–21)

The covenant is enacted or cut in Genesis 15 with the formal covenant ceremony. While each of the promised elements of land, seed, and blessing are evident in the ceremony, there is a special focus on the promise of land. The chapter begins with Abraham expressing some doubt that he will, in fact, have numerous offspring as God had promised (Gen 15:2). In his doubt Abraham suggests that his servant Eliezer become his heir (15:3), mirroring the ancient practice, evident in Larsa and Nuzi, of adopting a male servant if the head of a household were childless.<sup>30</sup> God responds by denying that Eliezer will be his heir but rather that his own son will be (15:4). Yahweh takes him outside, asking him to number the stars if he can, as this will equate to the number of his offspring (15:5). Abraham, who descends from ancestors who served foreign gods beyond the River (Josh 24:14–15), hails from Ur of the Chaldeans, a city whose patron deity was the moon god, Nanna or Sîn.<sup>31</sup> Abraham is to look to the sky not to gaze at the moon but to count the stars. Yahweh essentially conveys to Abraham that he is not to look for help to the moon god of his ancestors, the god who in their theology regulated fertility and seasons, but to look to Yahweh’s own power and provision, beyond his ability to calculate. In this crucial moment, not only for Abraham’s story but for the trajectory of the entire Pentateuch, Abraham believes in Yahweh and is credited with righteousness (15:6). Abraham’s faith and justification thus precedes the actual cutting of the covenant. As John Sailhamer notes, the syntax of Genesis 15:6 indicates that the verse is to be read as the background for the rest of the chapter and for the covenant ceremony.<sup>32</sup> The ensuing covenant, which will serve as the basis for God’s future dealings with Abraham and his descendants, does not produce faith and righteousness but rather flows from these realities, a point the apostle Paul is keen to make in presenting Abraham first and foremost as the man of

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<sup>28</sup> See Matt Champlin, “A Biblical Theology of Blessing in Genesis,” *Themelios* 42 (2017): 64.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, “Covenant with Abraham,” 247.

<sup>30</sup> Martin J. Selman, “The Social Environment of the Patriarchs,” *TynBul* 27 (1976): 125–27.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas R. Frayne and Johanna H. Stuckey, *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Near East* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 225.

<sup>32</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 151–52.

faith who believed in God in anticipation of the promised blessing that would extend to the nations (Gal 3:6–9).<sup>33</sup> Blessing for Abraham at the outset is primarily soteriological and prior to the implementation of the covenant, just as the blessing for the nations will be initially soteriological and prior to the full implementation of the new covenant.

Yahweh then turns Abraham’s attention to the reality of the land promise, reminding him that He called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans so as to give him the land he was standing on for a possession (15:7). Abraham, in turn, questions how he will know for sure that he is to take possession of the land (15:8). The covenant cutting ceremony that follows is essentially God’s answer to Abraham’s question. The phrase “this land” (הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, *hā’āreṣ hazō’t*) frames the ceremony, appearing at its inception (v. 7) and conclusion (v. 18). The term *land* appears three times overall in the passage (vv. 7, 13, 18), the most of any passage having to do with the Abrahamic covenant outside the initial promise to give Abraham the land (4x in Gen 13:14–17).

According to God’s instruction, Abraham is to ritually slaughter five animals. These animals are each associated with later priestly sacrifices in the Torah (Lev 5:6–7, 15–18; 16:3–5; Num 7:3–8). The three large animals (heifer, female goat, and ram) he severs but not the birds, again anticipating priestly sacrifices in which the birds are not entirely torn asunder (Lev 5:8). In contrast to the slain birds, birds of prey descend on the carcasses as night falls, but Abraham drives them away. These would be unclean birds, such as ravens or vultures, which have no place in priestly sacrifices. It is difficult to know if more meaning than this is involved, although some interpreters take the animals to represent Abraham’s posterity and the birds of prey to represent foreign nations that will harass and threaten them.<sup>34</sup> Abraham falls into a deep sleep and a great terror and darkness descends (v. 12). This same word for “deep sleep” (תַּרְדֵּמָה, *tardēmā*) earlier describes the deep sleep into which God puts Adam to remove his bone (Gen 2:21), and elsewhere it describes dreams and visions (Job 4:13; 33:15; Isa 29:10). Abraham’s slumber and terror sets the stage for the dire prophecy about the enslavement of his descendants, to be followed by their deliverance and possession of the land (vv. 13–16).

In a pivotal moment in the covenant cutting ceremony, Yahweh alone passes through the carcasses in the form of a smoking firepot and flaming torch (v. 17). This action indicates that the covenant is a royal grant, akin to similar ceremonial practices in the ancient Near East. An analogous ceremony occurs in Jeremiah 34, where the human covenant partners pass through the carcasses of slain animals, an act which appears to ritually symbolize the fate that awaits covenant violators (see Jer 34:18–20). Many take this divine act to indicate that the covenant is unconditional.<sup>35</sup> As suggested earlier, however, my preferred terminology would be that the divine act signals the covenant is unilateral and irrevocable (“an everlasting covenant,” Gen 17:7, 13, 19)—it cannot be abrogated by human failure in view of the divine

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<sup>33</sup> For a compelling case that Paul quotes both Gen 15:6 and 22:18 in Galatians 3, see Jared M. August, “Paul’s View of Abraham’s Faith: Gen 22:18 in Galatians 3,” *BSac* 176 (Jan–Mar 2019): 51–61.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 172–73.

<sup>35</sup> Walvoord, “Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant,” 27–29; Gromacki, “Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant,” 112.



prerogative. God, who cannot lie or change, guarantees the successful outcome of the covenant promises. Following His procession through the carcasses, God makes one more promise to give Abraham's descendants the land, including the implied ouster of the ten nations that currently inhabit it, symbolic of the certainty that no adversaries can stand before the fulfillment of God's promises.

#### Sign of Attestation: Circumcision (Seed) (Genesis 17:1–22)

Yahweh appears to Abraham when he is ninety-nine years of age to reiterate His promises concerning the covenant. This appearance takes place thirteen years after the covenant cutting ceremony of Genesis 15. Here the focus is on the proliferation of Abraham's descendants, with the accompanying sign of the covenant, circumcision. Yahweh tells Abraham to walk before him and be blameless. Walking before someone carried the notions of representation and mediation. The agency of Abraham as the mediator of blessing is highlighted. As Walton demonstrates, when God commands someone to walk before Him in the Old Testament, this charge underscores how kings or priests were to conduct themselves as His emissaries or representatives (1 Sam 2:30; 1 Kgs 2:4; 8:23; 2 Kgs 20:3).<sup>36</sup> The imperatival form of the verbs “walk” and “be blameless” (17:1), indicate that these actions are to be viewed as regulatory for the covenant partner. This does not signal that the covenant is “conditional” or that this is a separate covenant from the one ratified in chapter 15. Rather, as a covenant beneficiary, Abraham must meet the expectations placed upon him by his divine covenant Lord as His representative and emissary. As evidenced later in Genesis, Abraham fulfills these covenant obligations (Gen 22:16–18; 26:5).

The covenant sign phase carries a special emphasis on the seed promise. This stage begins with Yahweh's stated intention to greatly multiply Abraham's descendants (v. 2). Yahweh identifies the covenant as “my covenant” (בְּרִיתִי, *bərîṭî*), a phrase that shows the divine initiative in establishing the covenant. This phrase occurs nine times in the chapter, and only here with respect to the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:2, 4, 7, 9–10, 13–14, 19, 21). For the first time in the unfolding Abrahamic covenant the term “multiply” appears (רָבָה, *rbh*), a term which means in the Hiphil “to make many,” “increase,” or “multiply.”<sup>37</sup> Also appearing here for the first time with respect to Abraham is the term “make fruitful” (פָּרָה, *prh* in the Hiphil) (v. 6), which means “to make flourish” or “cause to increase” by causing one's offspring to grow in number and strength.<sup>38</sup> Beyond this, the term “exceedingly” (מְאֹד, *mə'ōd*), repeated twice for emphasis, amplifies and guarantees the proliferation of descendants (6x in the chapter: vv. 2, 6, 20). Moreover, God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a multitude of nations, ensured by his name change from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”) (vv. 4–5). The renaming signifies that Abraham has been honored by coming formally under the headship of a covenant Master and into His family. The covenant Lord has the

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<sup>36</sup> John H. Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 72–73.

<sup>37</sup> *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 7:396.

<sup>38</sup> Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew (United Bible Societies), s.v. “פָּרָה,” available online at <https://marble.bible/dictionary>, accessed October 12, 2024.

prerogative to assign a new name.<sup>39</sup> Abraham is already a covenant partner, as demonstrated by the earlier covenant-cutting ceremony (cf. Gen 15:9–21), but here he is formally recognized and appropriated by means of the covenant sign through the name change and physical token of circumcision (Gen 17:5, 11).

Also indicative of the seed focus in this stage is the repetition of the term “seed” (זֶרַע, *zeraʿ*), occurring seven times in the chapter (vv. 7 [2x], 8, 9, 10, 12, 19), the most of any chapter in Genesis. With respect to the seed, Yahweh emphasizes that Abraham’s posterity will also be beneficiaries of an everlasting covenant (v. 7), that they will inherit the land (v. 8), that they must too keep the covenant through the sign of circumcision (vv. 9–10), that the rite of circumcision extends beyond natural seed to any male within the household (v. 12), and that the covenant will be confirmed through Abraham’s own natural seed (i.e., his biological son) (v. 19). Within this chapter the covenant is marked as an “everlasting covenant” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם, *berit ʿolām*) for the first and only times in Genesis (vv. 7, 13, 19). Abraham and his descendants must perform the rite of circumcision with every male (v. 10), in the flesh of the foreskin (i.e., amputation of the prepuce) (v. 11), on the eighth day after birth (v. 12a), and with the inclusion of both domestic- and foreign-born males (vv. 12b–13).

As to the significance of the rite of circumcision, Meade argues that the Israelite practice relates conceptually to the Egyptian practice of circumcising kings and priests.<sup>40</sup> Although Egyptian circumcision differed in some details, certain parallels suggest similar perceptions may lie behind the rites. According to Meade, Egyptian circumcision “functioned as a specific, voluntary, and initiatory rite to identify and affiliate the subject with the deity and to signify devotion to the same deity.”<sup>41</sup> Drawing parallels to Israelite circumcision, he contends for several implications: (1) circumcision signals that the nation of Israel is to be devoted to Yahweh as its God; (2) circumcision identifies the nation as Yahweh’s firstborn son (Exod 4:22–23) consecrated for His service (Josh 5:2–9), and (3) circumcision marks the whole nation as a kingdom of priests and holy people (Exod 19:5–6), mediating God’s blessing to the nations.<sup>42</sup> The sign of circumcision solidifies the seed promise through a physical token that is emblematic of the covenant between God and Abraham’s posterity and that serves as a reminder to Yahweh and the people of Israel of their covenant status.

#### Confirmation: Oath/Sacrifice (Blessing) (Genesis 22:11–19)

The fourth and final stage of the Abrahamic covenant follows on the heels of God’s charge to Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah (Gen 22:1–2).

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<sup>39</sup> Corollaries would include Pharaoh Neco’s changing Eliakim to Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 23:34), Nebuchadnezzar changing Mattaniah to Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:17), and Nebuchadnezzar changing Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael to Beltshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 1:7). The name change asserts authority, although also from the perspective of the name-changer confers status and prestige (Otto Eissfeldt, “Renaming in the Old Testament,” in *Words and Meanings: Essays Presented to David Winton Thomas*, ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars, 69–79 [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968], 73).

<sup>40</sup> John D. Meade, “The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel,” *SBJT* 20 (Spr 2016): 35–54.

<sup>41</sup> Meade, “Circumcision in Israel,” 45.

<sup>42</sup> Meade, 47–48.

Having received the promised son, Yahweh tests Abraham to demonstrate the genuineness of his faith. This final stage of the covenant emphasizes the blessing component. Genesis 22:1–19 is a finely-crafted narrative structured in two major parts: Abraham's test (vv. 1–10) and Abraham's blessing (vv. 11–19). The parts exhibit a bifid structure: God's address to Abraham in verse 1 is mirrored by the angel's address to Abraham in verse 11. In the first part Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees the place from afar (v. 4); in the second part he lifts up his eyes and sees the ram in the thicket (v. 13). Verses 9 and 10 form the center of the narrative with the peak of the drama. The confirmation of the covenant occurs in the second part of the narrative, following Abraham's successful obedience to Yahweh's command.

The Angel of the LORD, most likely the preincarnate Christ, stops Abraham from following through with the act of slaying Isaac by calling out his name twice for emphasis (v. 11). The Angel discloses indirectly that the required act was a test. Typically, the phrase "now I know" (v. 12) occurs in the context of a joyful cry from someone who has experienced God's deliverance (Exod 18:11; Pss 20:6; 56:9). Here, however, it relates to God's joyful knowledge that Abraham fears God. The fear of the Lord in the OT is equated with saving faith (Prov 1:7; 3:5–7; 9:10), so the confirmation that Abraham fears God should be related to his earlier trust in Yahweh (Gen 15:6). Abraham then spies a ram caught in a thicket, and he offers the ram as a burnt offering (Gen 22:13). Such sacrifices were a common feature of covenant ceremonies in Israel and the ancient Near East (cf. Exod 24:5–8; Ps 50:5; Zech 9:11).<sup>43</sup>

The only other occasions in which a ram is offered for a burnt offering (outside the ram as the guilt offering in Lev 5) take place when the priests are ordained (Aaron and his sons in Lev 8–9) or on the Day of Atonement by the high priest (Lev 16). Both occasions are highly significant acts of atonement and hint further, as in the covenant-cutting ceremony of Genesis 15, that Abraham functions as a proto-priest in anticipating certain cultic regulations of the Mosaic Law. As part of his own burgeoning mediatory role as God's king-priest and covenant partner, Abraham renames the mountain to reflect Yahweh's provision (v. 14).

The Angel then calls a second time from heaven to communicate significant further revelation concerning the covenant (v. 15). Of the various texts which promise blessing to Abraham, only here are the blessings presented as the outcome of Abraham's obedience, as he "has done this word" and "heeded God's voice" (vv. 16, 18). As a result, God swears by Himself as the highest authority (v. 16). Oaths were typically taken by both covenant partners in the ratification ceremony to signify the binding validity of covenant obligations.<sup>44</sup> Here Yahweh alone through the person of the Angel takes the oath to signal His intention to make good its provisions. This is the first and only divine oath in the patriarchal accounts and therefore serves as a guarantee of the solemnity and irrevocability of the covenant. Moreover, God promises to surely bless Abraham (v. 17), the only time in Genesis that the idea of certainty is added. These blessings call to mind God's original promises to Abraham with an escalation in force. Earlier, Yahweh promises Abraham that his descendants will inherit land (Gen 12:7; 13:14–17), but here they will possess even the gates of

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<sup>43</sup> *TDOT*, s.v. "בְּרִית," 2:262–63.

<sup>44</sup> *TDOT*, s.v. "בְּרִית," 2:256.

their enemies (22:17). Earlier Yahweh promises Abraham will have many descendants (12:2), but here He guarantees a multiplication of descendants (22:17) (compared for the first time to sand on the seashore). Earlier Yahweh promises blessing for the families/clans of the earth (12:3), but here whole nations come within the purview of blessing (22:18). The verb “bless” (בָּרַךְ, *brk*) occurs three times in the final verses as a point of emphasis (vv. 17, 18). Yahweh ensures that the Abrahamic covenant provisions will certainly come to pass, with a heightening of the blessing promises to include an international focus upon foreign nations to come under its purview. Having surveyed its disclosure across Genesis, I turn now to discuss the nomenclature of the Abrahamic covenant.

### The Nomenclature of the Abrahamic Covenant

Debate surrounds whether the Abrahamic covenant should be labelled as “unconditional” or “conditional,” or whether these categories are overly restrictive. Dispensational interpreters have preferred to see the covenant as unconditional, while covenantalists have argued that it is conditional.<sup>45</sup> Some nuance this conclusion by positing that while Yahweh’s promises in the covenant are unconditional, its fulfillment with respect to timing and participants hinges upon faith and obedience.<sup>46</sup> Other interpreters have called for moving beyond a binary framework of conditional or unconditional.<sup>47</sup> Rather, they argue, all biblical covenants between Yahweh and humans carry both divine guarantee and some level of human responsibility. A corollary with this debate turns upon how to classify the covenant in its ancient Near Eastern context. Dispensational interpreters usually distinguish the Abrahamic covenant from the Mosaic covenant by identifying the former as a royal grant (promissory) covenant and the latter as a suzerainty-vassal (obligatory) covenant, categories first proposed by Weinfeld.<sup>48</sup> More comprehensive study of the available ancient Near Eastern sources, however, indicates that other factors add to the complexity.<sup>49</sup> While the categories proposed by Weinfeld carry some legitimacy, at the same time no ancient covenants or treaties were truly “unconditional” in the sense of omitting all obligations upon one or both of the covenant partners. Further, the distinction between the royal grant and suzerainty-vassal covenants overlooks the reality that royal grant covenants usually presuppose a suzerainty-vassal relationship. Critics were thus right to point out that to bifurcate covenants into stringent categories of unconditional or conditional is anachronistic and incomplete.

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<sup>45</sup> On the dispensational side, see John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959), 149–58; Rolland D. McCune, “The Church and the Abrahamic Covenant” (ThM thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1966), 38–41. For a defense of the amillennial position and the Abrahamic covenant as conditional, see Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1947), 32–36; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 284–89.

<sup>46</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 92–94; Keith H. Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” *MSJ* 10 (Fall 1999): 209–10.

<sup>47</sup> Block, *Covenant*, 2–4; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 316, 662–66.

<sup>48</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (Apr–Jun 1970): 184–203.

<sup>49</sup> Nearly all extant ancient Near Eastern treaties, covenants, and law codes may be found in Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012).

My proposed understanding modifies the terminology in what I suggest is a more nuanced and historically consistent direction. One may refer to the *promises* that will be codified in the Abrahamic covenant as unconditional (Gen 12:1–3), inasmuch as God is the guarantor. Yet the covenant itself is best identified as a unilateral, irrevocable, albeit regulated, royal grant covenant. This means that the covenant has both expectations for the covenant parties and a divine guarantee that brooks no alteration or annulment. That the covenant is, in fact, unilateral, irrevocable, and divinely-guaranteed is evident in each stage of the covenant program: (1) God takes the initiative in calling Abraham during the promise phase (Gen 12:1–3); (2) God alone passes through the severed animals during the ratification phase, taking full responsibility for its fulfillment (Gen 15:17); (3) God refers to the covenant as “my covenant” nine times during the sign of attestation phase, demonstrating that the covenant originates from His prerogative (Gen 17:2–21); and (4) God alone takes the oath in the oath/sacrifice confirmation phase, again taking complete responsibility (Gen 22:16).

Yet the covenant also carries stipulations to govern Abraham’s conduct. Yahweh commands Abraham to follow certain patterns of behavior, with fourteen imperatives over the course of the covenant stages.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Yahweh expects Abraham to “keep the covenant” by faithfully implementing the rite of circumcision for his household and all his descendants (Gen 17:9–13). Any male who fails to do so is a covenant violator and is to be cut off from his people (Gen 17:14). Moreover, the covenant confirmation comes after Abraham has demonstrated fidelity and obedience by heeding the voice of Yahweh (Gen 22:18). Yahweh highlights the significance of Abraham’s faithful conduct in his later covenant affirmation with Isaac: “I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, *because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws*” (emphasis added; Gen 26:3–5). These tensions highlight the difficulty of the unconditional versus conditional framework. To say the covenant is *conditional* minimizes the divine guarantee that the covenant will certainly come to fruition, a reality evident at each stage of the covenant implementation. However, to say that the covenant is *unconditional* minimizes the clear expectations given to Abraham specifying how he must act in the light of his covenant status. Rather, a more nuanced approach seeks to balance these tensions while assessing the covenant in its ancient Near Eastern context: God guarantees blessing, but Abraham and his descendants have a vital role as the faithful agents of blessing.

When silhouetting the Abrahamic covenant against its ancient Near Eastern background, a similar type of covenant discovered in Alalakh of ancient Syria

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<sup>50</sup> These imperatives include “go” (Gen 12:1), “get up” (13:17), “walk” (13:17), “take” (15:9), “walk” (17:1), “be blameless” (17:1), “take” (22:2), “walk” (22:2), and “offer” (22:2). The rite of circumcision omits imperatives, but the sense is clearly imperatival from the context.

(modern-day Türkiye) sheds light on these features of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>51</sup> The covenant partners in this other covenant are Abba-AN of Aleppo, the suzerain, and Yarim-Lim of Alalakh, the vassal. The date of the covenant (c. 18th–17th centuries) falls between Abraham and Moses, later than the historical date of the Abrahamic covenant (c. 2091–2046 BC) but earlier than the composition of Genesis (c. 1446–1406 BC).<sup>52</sup> The language of the covenant is Old Babylonian, and its provenance is ancient Alalakh in northern Syria. The covenant begins with a historical prologue listing various cities that Yarim-Lim once happily ruled. A rogue governor named Zitradu, however, incited rebellion, leading the cities to revolt against Yarim-Lim and, by implication, his overlord, Abba-AN. The latter responded militarily by killing the insurrectionists and by razing certain rebel towns, particularly Irridi. In exchange for the destroyed cities, Abba-AN offers a royal grant to Yarim-Lim, consisting of other towns to be donated in the place of the destroyed Irridi.

To ensure the legitimacy and permanence of the grant, Abba-AN imposes upon himself a self-maledictory oath, together with the ritual slaughter of animals, elements that correspond to the ratification and confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:17; 22:16).

Abba-AN swore to Yarim-Lim the oath of the gods,  
And cut the neck of a lamb (saying):  
(May I be cursed) if I take back what I gave you.<sup>53</sup>

The covenant also carries stipulations for how Yarim-Lim must conduct himself in remaining loyal to Abba-AN as the lead king.

If ever in the future Yarim-Lim sins against Abba-AN,  
Or if he gives away (any) word (that) Abba-AN confides to him,  
Giving it away to another king;  
If he (Yarim-Lim) lets go of the hem of Abba-AN's garment  
And takes hold of the hem of another king's garment,  
He shall forfeit his cities and territories.<sup>54</sup>

These regulations pertain not just to Yarim-Lim but also to his descendants, who must adhere to the covenant stipulations. They will keep the donated territory in perpetuity if they remain faithful to Abba-AN and his descendants. The pact concludes with a list of covenant witnesses, who attest that Yarim-Lim has sworn oaths pledging fealty to the covenant statutes.

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<sup>51</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, “Abban and Alalah,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12 (1958): 124–29; Anne Draffkorn, “Was King Abba-AN of Yamhad a Vizier for the King of Hattuša?” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 13 (1959): 94–97; Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 307–8; Kitchen and Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant*, 1:231.

<sup>52</sup> For biblical chronology, I follow Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Kitchen and Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant*, 1:233.

<sup>54</sup> Kitchen and Lawrence, 1:233.

Similarities to the language, provenance, and protocols of the Abrahamic covenant suggest a common cultural background. There are several implications. These correlations indicate that the land promise should be foregrounded as integral to the Abrahamic covenant, the very provision that contemporary covenantalists often deny.<sup>55</sup> Further, the self-maledictory oath should be seen as equivalent to Yahweh's solitary passing through the severed animal parts (Gen 15:17) and His unilateral oath (Gen 22:16). This is a divine guarantee for the land provision as well as the other promises. Yet the regulations of the covenant hint that Abraham too would be expected to "take hold of the hem of Yahweh's garment," meaning that he and his descendants would be faithful and devoted servants of the Great King. Understood in these ways, both covenants function analogously as royal grants with stipulations, guaranteed by the suzerain but ensured with regulations governing the conduct of the vassal-kings. We may, then, extrapolate that here too Yahweh is granting territory, progeny, and life/protection/blessing in perpetuity to Abraham and his descendants, but also that He expects Abraham and his posterity to conduct themselves faithfully to Yahweh as God and King.

#### The Abrahamic Covenant in Relation to Other Biblical Covenants

Given this paper's limitations of scope, I can only briefly address here the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and other biblical covenants. As mentioned above, the Abrahamic covenant carries a direct and indirect relationship with other biblical covenants. The covenant refracts earlier creational promises and stands in a hierarchical relationship to the succeeding OT covenants. The Noahic covenant codifies the means by which Yahweh would preserve life on earth, while specifying norms of human conduct with regard to the sanctity of human life. The Noahic covenant bears an indirect relationship with the Abrahamic covenant, insofar as it anticipates the Abrahamic covenant in terms of expressing God's will for the flourishing of human life through the restraint of evil. The Abrahamic covenant particularizes principles of the Noahic covenant to focus the divine redemptive plan for humanity through the agency of an individual (Abraham) and his descendants (the nation of Israel). Following the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant stands, in turn, as the spring from which issue the other covenants of Scripture. Its land, seed, and blessing promises are later codified or particularized through the successive Mosaic, Priestly, Davidic, and new covenants in both direct and indirect ways.

Therefore, discontinuity features also distinguish the Abrahamic covenant from some other covenants. For example, the temporal and material limitations of the Mosaic covenant render it a bilateral and negatable covenant in a way that the Abrahamic covenant is not.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the prophets may speak of violating the Mosaic covenant so that it is broken (Jer 11:10; 31:32; Ezek 17:19; 44:7; Zech 11:10), language that is never used of the irrevocable Abrahamic covenant (cf. Lev 26:44; Judg 2:1; Jer 31:35–36; 33:20–21; Ezek 37:12–14). Moreover, the polarity between

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Gentry and Wellum argue at length for taking the land provision specifically as typological rather than normative (*Kingdom through Covenant*, 703–16).

<sup>56</sup> This is evident, for example, in the blood sprinkled upon the Israelites and in their oath to adhere to all the words of the covenant (Exod 24:1–8).

the Mosaic covenant and new covenant, as expressed in passages such as Jeremiah 31 (“a new covenant ... *not like* the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” [vv. 31–32] [ESV]) (cf. 2 Cor 3:5–18; Heb 7:11–8:13), means that the biblical writers view the new covenant as expressly superseding the Mosaic covenant, rather than all previous covenants.<sup>57</sup> Further, the new covenant, which includes land provisions as well as blessing (Hos 2:14–23; Ezek 37:1–28), has been cut but not yet enacted fully with Israel as originally promised. The Abrahamic covenant may thus carry an *indirect* relationship with some other biblical covenants. The relationship of the biblical covenants is visualized in the following chart:

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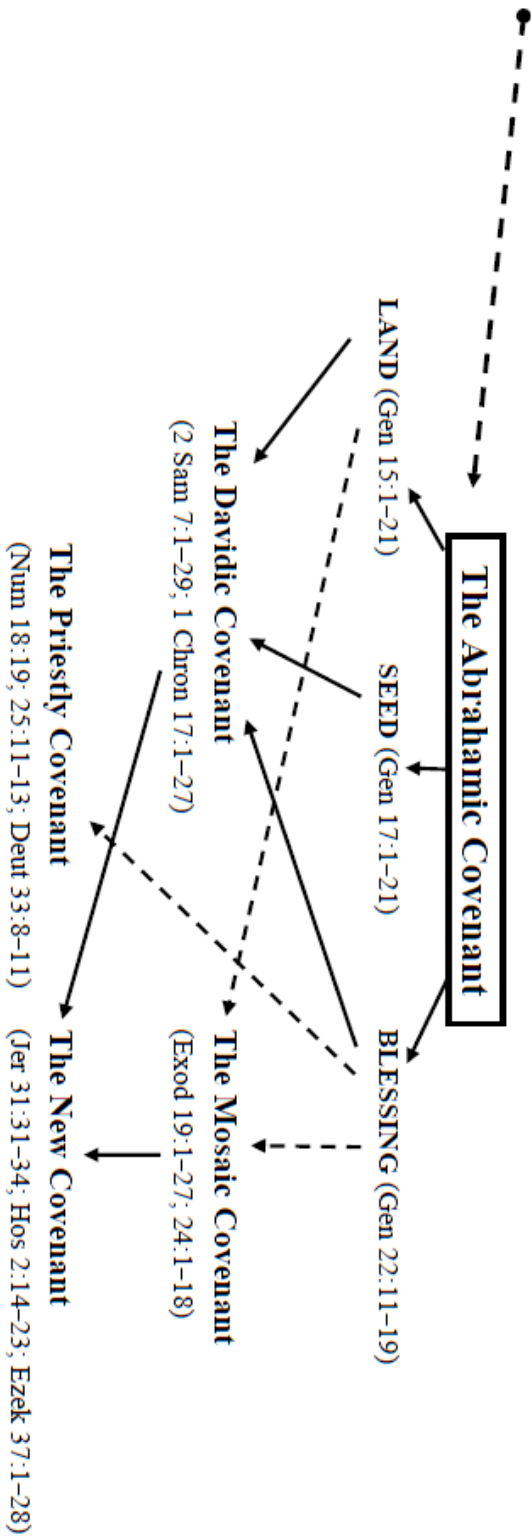
<sup>57</sup> One of the principal weaknesses of progressive covenantalism in this connection is its conclusion that the new covenant consummates and thereby abrogates *all former covenants*, rather than seeing it as a corollary specifically to the Mosaic covenant alone (see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 660–62; John D. Meade, “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, 127–58 [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016]). Rather, while the new covenant is a corollary covenant to the Mosaic covenant, it is a *subsidiary covenant* with respect to the Abrahamic covenant. The new covenant, by means of the Spirit’s work, brings to fruition the blessings promised to Abraham in a way that the Mosaic covenant could not.



### The Relationship of Old Testament Covenants

**The Noahic Covenant (Gen 8:20-9:17)**

Establishment of government for protection of human life in God's image.



\*Solid line represents direct relationship; dotted line represents indirect relationship.

### The Abrahamic Covenant and God's Redemptive Plan

Having surveyed the nature and place of the Abrahamic covenant, I turn finally to address its place specifically as the foundation of Christian missions through its particularity, agency, and intention. The covenant holds a pivotal place in God's unfolding plan of redemption, as the wellspring of ensuing biblical redemptive history. A key goal of the Abrahamic covenant is to bring blessing to the nations, concretized through a vital relationship with the living God, so that God's kingdom might extend through all the earth.<sup>58</sup> Abraham and his descendants are the agents of this blessing of redemption for the nations. This comes particularly through the chosen Seed, the coming Messiah, who will reverse the curse so that the whole created order may be freed from sin and its consequences. Yet the coming Messiah will not exhaust or cancel the promises made to Israel. Israel occupies a mediatory role in God's soteriological plan, not only in the past but also, with regard to the future, in relation to God's coming eschatological reign over the restored cosmos. In that the covenant is irrevocable and divinely guaranteed, Israel's place in God's plan of redemption cannot be superseded or abrogated. The nation thus continues to occupy an integral role in a dispensational theology of missions.<sup>59</sup>

The approach to the Abrahamic covenant that I have advocated pushes back against some theological and especially missiological readings of Scripture that ground missions in creation or in the exodus/Sinai event. Such interpretations often minimize or even bracket out Israel from God's redemptive purposes. Thus, for example, Christopher J. H. Wright sees the mission of humanity as grounded in creation and therefore as encompassing a "holistic gospel" that focuses missions primarily in the care and keeping of creation: "Out of this understanding of our humanity ... flows our ecological responsibility, our economic activity involving work, productivity, exchange and trade, and the whole cultural mandate."<sup>60</sup> While Abraham was chosen as an agent by God, his role was specifically (and merely) to be a conduit of blessing to the nations: "Israel came into existence as a people with a mission entrusted from God for the sake of the rest of the nations. All that Israel was, or was supposed to be—all that Yahweh their God did in them, for them, and through them—was ultimately linked to this wider purpose of God for the nations."<sup>61</sup>

Israel is thus downgraded in some sense to serve simply as "the midwife" for the Messiah so that the nations, rather than Israel, may become the conduit of blessing. The Abrahamic covenant thus concerns not ethnic Israel but "the church, the

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<sup>58</sup> Nkhoma, "Mission in the Postmodern World," 50. Glasser rightly argues that the kingdom of God is fundamental to the biblical concept of mission (*Announcing the Kingdom*, 20–28).

<sup>59</sup> On the latter, see Chris Burnett, "Toward a Dispensational Missiology: Eschatological Parameters for the Global Task," *MSJ* 31 (Spr 2020): 59–78.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, "Truth with a Mission: Reading All Scripture Missiologically," *SBJT* 15 (Sum 2011): 8. His basis for mission as extending from creation itself leads, however, to an essentially Marxist view of property rights: "Since the earth was given to all mankind, access to and use of its resources were meant to be shared and available to all. The creation narratives cannot be used to justify privatized, individual ownership, since it is to mankind as a whole that the earth is entrusted" (*An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983], 68). Such a conclusion stands in clear contrast to the OT's consistent concern for property rights as encoded, e.g., in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21).

<sup>61</sup> Wright, "Truth with a Mission," 9.

community of believing Jews and Gentiles who constitute the extended people of the Abrahamic covenant, to be the agent of God's blessing to the nations in the name and for the glory of Jesus Christ."<sup>62</sup> Such a turn impacts how God is working in the present age to restore the cosmos: "It is not so much ... that God has a mission for His church in the world as that God has a church for His mission in the world. Mission is not just something we do (though it certainly includes that). Mission, from the point of view of our human endeavor, means the committed participation of God's people in the purposes of God for the redemption of the whole creation."<sup>63</sup>

In a similar way, to ground missions in the exodus/Sinai event is to adopt a supersessionist agenda for the task. Here Thomas Manson finds the basis for Christian missions: "The conception of the Church's universal mission is bound up, first and last, with the thought of the Church being 'the Israel of God.'"<sup>64</sup> In the exodus, Israel experienced a redemptive event that, in turn, "underlies the Gospel of Jesus and the inauguration of the new era of Christianity."<sup>65</sup> Jesus both completes and transcends Israel's Old Testament role so that He represents "fulfilled Judaism" as too does the church. This creates a dichotomy between "Israel after the flesh," who "hangs on to historic claim and privilege" and "Israel of the New Covenant" (i.e., the church), who has been set free to enjoy "the inward law of the Spirit."<sup>66</sup>

My proposed understanding of the Abrahamic covenant pushes back against such readings of the covenant and of Scripture as a whole.<sup>67</sup> Rather, the Abrahamic covenant concerns primarily the manner in which the Lord intends to convey land, seed, and blessing provisions to Israel (Abraham's descendants) and through them to bring blessing to the nations. Israel's own participation cannot be omitted from the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant; her mediatory role is integral to its implementation. The covenantalist perspective often tends to rule out Israel's continued mediatory role in view of the Messiah's coming. Yet Paul affirms that Christ's incarnation does not abrogate the former covenants: "Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, *in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs*" (emphasis added; Rom 15:8).

So then, with respect to the nations and thus to the church, the primary intention of the Abrahamic covenant is to bring blessing rather than to transmogrify original promises into spiritualized or typologically-eviscerated provisions (e.g., land) that have no consummation within human history. Instead, with respect to the nations, the promised Abrahamic blessing comes to fruition by means of the inauguration of the new covenant. Jesus Christ cuts the new covenant through His atoning death (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), by which the church, encompassing all nations, participates in the promised soteriological blessings through the work of the Spirit (Rom 4:9–11; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Gal 3:14; Heb 7:22; 8:6–13; 9:15; 10:15–18;

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<sup>62</sup> Wright, "Truth with a Mission," 10.

<sup>63</sup> Wright, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Manson, "Biblical Doctrine of Mission," 257.

<sup>65</sup> Manson, 259.

<sup>66</sup> Manson, 265.

<sup>67</sup> For a critique of Wright's missiological hermeneutic, see John A. Wind, "Not Always Right: Critiquing Christopher Wright's Paradigmatic Application of the Old Testament to the Socio-Economic Realm," *SBJT* 19 (Sum 2015): 81–100; Wind, "The Church's Mission Constrained by the Covenants: Engaging Christopher Wright's Conception of the Bible's Covenant Structure," *SBJT* 23 (Fall 2019): 61–73.

12:24; 13:30).<sup>68</sup> Gospel laborers who carry forth the good news to the nations do so as part of “a wild olive shoot” that has been “grafted . . . in the nourishing root of the olive tree” (Rom 11:17). They labor so that “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” by the power of God’s Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel (Gal 3:14). As the emissaries of Christ, the promised Seed of Abraham, they go “in the fullness of the blessing of Christ” (Rom 15:29). Yet they also minister so that God might create a people for Himself from among the nations in anticipation of the coming kingdom (Acts 15:13–18) and so that the Jewish people might be provoked to jealousy and thereby believe in the Messiah (Rom 11:11–15).

The Abrahamic covenant’s unilateral and irrevocable nature as an “everlasting covenant” means that Israel has a continued place in God’s redemptive plan. She will occupy a future mediatorial role vis-à-vis the nations in the millennial kingdom. This role she failed to fulfill originally due to disobedience to the Mosaic Law (cf. Exod 19:5–6) but will fulfill under the aegis of the new covenant when consummated (Jer 31:31–34; Hos 2:14–23; Ezek 37:1–28). The Abrahamic covenant thus guarantees—because God Himself guarantees—that Israel will realize her land, seed, and blessing promises, and that the blessings promised to all nations will too certainly come to fruition. The global purview of missions does not begin, therefore, in Matthew 28 but in Genesis 12. The spread of the gospel extends God’s intention to bring soteriological blessing to every ethnicity and nation on earth in preparation for His coming kingdom. The covenant may thus rightly be termed the foundation of God’s mission, occupying a formative place in the storyline of Scripture. The importance of the Abrahamic covenant for realizing God’s purposes for redemption can thus hardly be overstated.

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<sup>68</sup> R. Bruce Compton, “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” *DBSJ* 8 (Fall 2003): 3–48.