

Lesson 8

ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The Abrahamic Covenant is the most basic and important covenant in the whole Bible. How one interprets this covenant will ultimately determine whether he is premil or amil in eschatology. The issues are does this covenant promise Israel a permanent existence as a nation and does this covenant promise Israel permanent possession of the Promised Land?

There is also the issue as to whether this covenant is conditional or unconditional, for if it can be proved conditional then Israel has no assurance of a future national identity or possession of the land. If it is concluded that this covenant is unconditional, then how will those parts yet unfulfilled be fulfilled? Will they be fulfilled spiritually by the church or literally by Israel or both?

THE PREMILLENNIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

All Dispensationalists and most historic premils give a literal interpretation to the Abrahamic Covenant. A few historic premils see this covenant as totally fulfilled in the church but this does not seem to be a consistent interpretation.

Scriptures. (Gen. 12:1-7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 22:15-18). God made certain promises to Abraham who was the father of the Jewish race and the father of all who believe.

The Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant

Personal Promises (Individual Blessings): Abraham was to get the special blessing of God; a great name, and he was to be a blessing to others and he was to receive an heir by Sarah (Gen. 15:4).

National Promises (National Blessings): Abraham was given assurance that his physical seed (descendants) would become a great nation (Gen. 17:6) and even kings would come through his descendants (Gen. 17:6,16). This covenant also promises that the physical seed of Abraham will possess the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:8).

Universal Promises (Universal Blessings): There are two universal promises:

1. The promise of divine blessing of others because of their positive treatment of the Jews, which is a universal as well as a personal promise (Gen. 12:3a)
2. That the whole world would be blessed through Abraham and his seed (Gen. 12:3b).

The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant

Biblical scholars all agree that the personal promises were fulfilled to Abraham for he became a great man and had Isaac through Sarah, and that the universal promises were filled through the coming of Messiah who was a Jew. However, Biblical scholars disagree over the national promises. Premils say the national promises are as binding as the other promises and the national promises will find their ultimate fulfillment in the millennial kingdom on earth after the second advent of Christ.

The issue is whether the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional or unconditional and if unconditional then nothing can be spiritualized and all must come to pass.

The Abrahamic Covenant Is Unconditional

Definition: By unconditional it is meant that God sovereignly made this covenant with Abraham

and it is no way dependent upon Abraham's or his descendant's obedience for the fulfillment of the covenant. God has made a solemn oath. His word cannot be broken.

Reasons for the Unconditional Element of the Covenant

1. The Abrahamic Covenant is called an everlasting covenant. (Gen. 17:7, 13b, 19; 1 Chron. 16:16-17; Psa. 105:9-10) and God established it forever (Gen. 13:15).
2. In the original promise to Abraham there are no conditions set forth at all. There is simply no hint of conditions until Genesis 17:9-10.
3. The covenant was reiterated and enlarged and it was again and again said to be everlasting.
4. The covenant was later confirmed to Isaac (Gen. 26:2-4) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15).
5. The covenant was given the visible sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14). Circumcision was an act by believing parents that God would fulfill His covenant to them and their seed. It was an outward sign but not a condition to the fulfillment of the covenant. A family that did not have their sons circumcised would declare themselves unbelievers and would not receive the spiritual blessings of the covenant, but the covenant was in force with or without men's obedience.
6. The covenant was confirmed in spite of disobedience by the Jews. In the midst of terrible: apostasy God said to Israel that He would be faithful to His covenant (Jer. 31:35-37).
7. The Abrahamic Covenant was confirmed by a solemn oath (Gen. 15:13-16). A blood covenant was the most solemn kind of oath for a Jew and it could only be invalidated or rendered void by the death of the one making it. The custom was to take an animal, divide the carcass, and put the two pieces on the ground. The two persons would then join hands and walk together between these two carcasses. They were binding themselves on the penalty of death if either should break the contract. Abraham was prepared to make this contract but God put him to sleep and walked through the animals Himself, binding Himself to this promise.
8. The New Testament specifically declares the Abrahamic Covenant immutable (Heb. 6:13-18). This covenant cannot be broken because it is God's solemn oath. If the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional and this passage is talking about our salvation as it relates to this covenant, then is our salvation conditional too?
9. Conclusion: The Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional because it is an eternal covenant. God will fulfill His promise and it is no way conditioned on obedience. Men may miss the blessings if disobedient but this does not deny the validity of the covenant.

“There may be delays, postponements, and chastisements, but an eternal covenant cannot, if God cannot deny Himself, be abrogated.” (C. C. Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*)

The Seed and Land Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant

Assuming that the national promises are unconditional, there still is disagreement between amils and premils. Some amils see the Abrahamic Covenant as unconditional but the personal and national promises have been fulfilled while only the universal promises are eternal in nature. The universal promises are fulfilled in the church. Premils see that all the Abrahamic Covenant must be literally fulfilled, even the national promises. A premil has a definite future for the Jew.

First, God gave a land grant to the Jews (Gen. 17:7, 8; 2 Sam. 7:10; Psa. 89:34-37) and Christ will confirm this covenant (Rom. 15:8). Genesis 15:18 says that the land went from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. The land was bordered on the east by the Euphrates River and by the river of Egypt on the southwest. The river of Egypt may refer to the Nile or the Wady-el Arish near the southern border of Simeon, which drains the middle of the Sinaitic desert (Num. 34:5; Joshua 15.4 cf.

Isa. 27:12).

Genesis 50:24 seems to rule out any part of Egypt as belonging to the land of promise, thus making the Nile an impossible boundary. Joshua 21:43 would also seem to exclude any territory west of the Brook of Egypt.

Second, in the reign of King Solomon it seems as though Israel had conquered the promised land (2 Chron. 9:26, 1 Kings. 4:21-24): Solomon did not officially rule over all the territory and at best they were only tributaries and furthermore they did not possess the land forever.

There are prophecies regarding the return of Israel from the Babylonian captivity that were fulfilled after the seventy years' captivity, such as Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10. Other prophecies can only be fulfilled by a permanent residence of Israel in the land (Gen. 17:8; 2 Sam. 7:10; Isa. 11:11-16; Jer. 16:15; 24:6). These and many other prophecies could not possibly have been fulfilled during the brief period of political independence and expansion under the Maccabees, as is sometimes claimed. Even the present return can be, at the most, only a beginning of the fulfillment of these prophecies. They require the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7; Matt. 24:21) and the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ (Zech. 14).

Third, Israel has had three dispersions and two re-gatherings up to date, and is looking for a future re-gathering. Ryrie says,

“It is recognized that Israel has been in dispersion various times in her history, but these dispersions do not abrogate the promise of the permanent possession of the land since they were imposed as a penalty for sin. This is easily proved by noting that the prediction concerning the first dispersion into Egypt was given (Gen. 15:13-16) after the land was promised to Abraham (Gen. 15:18-21). The dispersion and re-gathering were brought about as promised. The second dispersion into Babylon was also accomplished and some, but not all, returned to the land. A representation of the whole nation was reassembled in the land. The third and last dispersion began in 70 A.D. and continues to the present day. Israel has not yet returned from this dispersion although the prophecies of her final re-gathering are manifold, which prophecies must be fulfilled if the Bible is the Word of God (cf. Deut. 30:3, Isa. 11:11-12; Ezek. 37:21, Amos 9:15). The literal interpretation of these passages makes it clear that these promises have not been fulfilled. For example, at no time have the Jews been gathered from the four corners of the earth (Isa. 11:12). Israel's re-gathering is surely future.” (*Basis of the Premillennial Faith*)

The Relation of the Church to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:16, 29): The issue is over the term “the seed of Abraham.” In what sense is a saved Gentile in the church related to the Abrahamic Covenant?

1. In the New Testament there are four classifications of the seed of Abraham: Physical seed only or natural lineage (John 8:33, 37; Acts 7:5-6; Rom. 9:7), believing Gentiles (Rom. 4:16, 18; Gal. 3:29); believing Jews (Rom. 9:8; 2 Cor. 11:22) and Christ (Gal. 3:16).
2. In Galatians 3:16, the Apostle Paul says that the seed to which the Abrahamic Covenant was ultimately made was Christ. This is a quote from either Genesis 13:15 or 15:18. Paul purposely quotes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in order to retain the “and.” This promise was to Abraham and Christ. Both Genesis 13:15 and 15:18 are dealing with the land promises to Abraham and his seed, which is Christ. The promise of the land was ultimately to Christ.
3. However, Jews or Gentiles who believe in Christ in the church belong to Christ and are Abraham's spiritual seed and heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:29). This verse does not say that believing Gentiles are the seed of Abraham but they are a seed. They are spiritual heirs of the covenant by faith, but this does not mean that God is through with the physical seed of Abraham who also believe in Christ. The Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled in Christ, even the land promise, and all those who believe in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, are spiritual seed of Abraham and they too will inherit the land. The land promises are expanded in the New Testament to include the whole world (Rom. 4:13).
4. The fact that the church will participate somehow in the land seems to be taught by other

Scriptures. Matthew 19:28 states that the twelve apostles who are the foundation of the church will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Revelation 5:10 states that the church will reign on the earth. Matthew 21:43 states that the kingdom would be taken from Israel and given to another nation, and that new nation is the church (1 Pet. 2:9; Rom. 10:19). The kingdom promises will again be given to Israel when they are restored to the place of blessing (Rom. 11:26-27).

THE AMILLENNIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Some amils believe the whole Abrahamic Covenant was a conditional promise and that it was fulfilled to Abraham because he was obedient (Gen. 22:17-18). However, this covenant was enacted many years before, says the Premil, and Abraham was disobedient at times during this period but the covenant was still in effect. The premil says that Abraham received the blessing of the covenant in his experience because he was obedient but the covenant did not stand or fall on Abraham's obedience. Furthermore, the premils say that the universal or soteriological aspects of the covenant are not conditional and these are fulfilled to the church. If the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional, then so is our salvation conditional and there is no security in Christ.

Other amils admit that the covenant was unconditional especially as it relates to the spiritual promises to the church, which is spiritual Israel. However, they feel that the promises to Israel as a nation and the possession of the land have been fulfilled already and God is entirely finished with the Jew.

The Words "Forever" and "Everlasting" Are Figurative Terms as They Relate to the Land

The words "forever" and "everlasting" are often used as expressive figurative language in Hebrew but do not necessarily mean forever in duration.

1. God said to the Jews that they were to keep the Feast of the Passover forever (Exo. 12:14) but this feast stopped with Christ and now He is our Passover (1 Cor. 5:7). Premils say that the Passover is forever in Christ, but the memorial has stopped.
2. The lamp stand in the tabernacle is said to be forever (Exo. 27:21); yet, the lamp stand and the tabernacle are gone forever.
3. The Sabbath day keeping is said to be a perpetual covenant (Exo. 31:16-17) but it passed away when Christ established the New Covenant.
4. The Day of Atonement was said to be forever (Lev. 16:29-30) and yet this is fulfilled only in Christ.
5. Circumcision was an everlasting covenant (Gen. 17:13) but it is no longer practiced because it was done away with in the New Testament. (Gal. 5:6; Phil. 3:3).

God Has Fulfilled All That He Promised Abraham Concerning the Land of Palestine

The Promise (Gen. 15:18). The promise included land boundaries from the river of Egypt unto the great river Euphrates.

God Commanded Them to Take the Land (Deut. 1:7-8; 11:25; Josh. 1:2, 4). God promised to give them the land.

God Said He Gave Them the Land (Josh. 21:43, 45; Neh. 9:7, 24; Jer. 32:21). God said He gave them the land as He promised.

Solomon Saw the Fulfillment of This Promise (2 Sam. 8:3; 1 Kings 4:21, 24). Solomon had dominion and reigned over all the land.

A Premil answers by saying that the Jews have never occupied the territory of the covenant completely and surely not forever. At best, Solomon merely had some outlying area paying tribute to him. Furthermore, if the land promises were fulfilled in Solomon's day, why did the Jews keep looking for the return to the land forever years after Solomon (Amos 9.15)? The Jews did not think that God had fulfilled the land promise completely.

The Jews Goals Were Eternal, Not Just Earthly

Abraham and all Old Testament saints were not looking for an earthly country but a heavenly country (Heb. 11:8-16). The goal of the church is heavenly Canaan, not earthly Canaan.

The premils say that Abraham had both a heavenly and an earthly country in mind, for both are promises to God's children of any age.

God is Finished With the Physical Jew as He Is Related to Judaism

God took the kingdom from physical Israel (Matt. 21:43, 45) and left Jerusalem desolate (Matt. 23:37-38) and God's wrath has come upon them to the uttermost (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

Premils counter by saying, "What about Romans 11?" This passage gives a future to physical Jews.

Jews and Gentiles Are One in Christ (Gal. 3:27-29; Eph. 2:11-22)

Jews and Gentiles are one new man in Christ Jesus. God broke down the middle wall of partition between them forever in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross of Calvary. There is no future for Israel as a nation.

NOTE:

"Forever" and "Everlasting" As These Terms Relate To The Abrahamic Covenant

"All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever."

SCRIPTURAL USE OF YOLAM (FOREVER)

1. The land of Canaan forever (Gen. 13:15).
2. The Feast of the Passover forever (Exo. 12:14).
3. The Feast of Unleavened Bread forever (Exo. 12:17).
4. The lamp stands in the tabernacle forever (Exo. 27:21).
5. The Sabbath day forever (Exo. 31:16-17).
6. The Day of Atonement forever (Lev. 16:29-30).
7. Circumcision as an everlasting covenant (Gen. 17:13).
8. The throne of David forever (2 Sam. 7:13).
9. The city of Jerusalem forever (1 Chron. 23:25).
10. Christ's personal rule in Jerusalem forever (Mic. 4:7).

GENERAL OBSERVATION

Dispensational Premils. To hold consistently to a literal interpretation, this would demand an unending Jewish nation existence in a literal land of Canaan, a literal capitol in Jerusalem, a temple, a sacrificial system, a festival calendar, a Davidic throne with Christ reigning on it personally.

The problem is that the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Day of Atonement, which are said to be "forever," are obviously already fulfilled in Christ (1 Cor. 5:7). Circumcision which is said to be "forever" is done away with in the coming of Christ (Gal. 5:6; Gal. 2:5), and circumcision is now spiritually rather than physically for the Church

(Philip. 3:3; Col. 2:11ff).

Amils. If the Passover, Day of Atonement and circumcision are said to be “forever” but are spiritually fulfilled in Christ, then the promises of a land forever are also spiritually fulfilled in Christ, referring to heaven or the New Jerusalem.

Historic Premils. Whenever the New Testament indicates that something is spiritually fulfilled in Christ, then it has been fulfilled in Christ. However, if the New Testament does not speak to an issue, such as “a land forever,” then we accept it as written. Each Old Testament passage that has the word “forever” must be dealt with individually. It cannot be denied that “forever” is sometimes fulfilled spiritually in Christ, but this is not case such as the land promises and the throne of David.