

Covenants: Clarity, Ambiguity, and Faith

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Why Make a Covenant?

In Genesis 21 is an episode where a Philistine leader, Abimelech, comes to Abraham and wants him to “swear... that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity...” (21:23). Abraham consented, but there was strife over a well which had been seized by Abimelech’s servants (21:25-26). To make sure there was understanding on both sides Abraham and Abimelech entered into a covenant (21:27, 32). In particular the point at issue was the well. Abimelech was to take seven ewes from Abraham as a witness that Abraham had dug the well (21:30). The place where the two made the oath was named “Beersheba”, which means something like “the well of the oath of seven.” The covenant clarified whose well it was and emphasized in the oath and exchange of the lambs that both parties understood exactly what the oath meant. The oath obligated the parties (particularly Abimelech, the recipient of the “witness”) to stand by the terms of the covenant.

Covenants were made to underscore *a grave and solemn clarity about a specific matter* or matters between people. They

spelled out for one or both sides, the obligations which each were committing to carry out. In the Genesis 21 incident Abraham pledges not to mistreat Abimelech; that was the specific oath which the Philistine chief wanted settled. Then Abraham complains about mistreatment from Abimelech’s servants over the well and receives a guarantee pertaining to that. The covenant reinforces both understandings. This covenant was not for the establishing of close relations between the parties, but rather a *clear understanding*.

It is inconceivable to imagine Abraham causing deliberate harm to Abimelech’s family or of Abimelech commanding his forces to take the well after the covenant was “cut”. Had either one done that we would rightly conclude that they reneged on the terms of the covenant with which they bound themselves by solemn oath, or that they took the oath in bad faith, knowing they would not adhere to its words.

God Makes Covenants

Think again of a more expansive example. In Ezekiel 16 God is rehearsing the defection of Jerusalem, with the Lord rescuing and then marrying her (16:8) through covenant. But Jerusalem played the harlot excessively (16:20-34), and would be punished (16:35-43). But at the end of it all God would restore her to himself by cleansing her sins and making a

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[New] everlasting covenant with her (16:60-63). Elsewhere marriage is called a “covenant” (Mal. 2:14). A marriage covenant does, of course, establish a close relationship, but it stipulates the terms of the relationship within its solemn pledges.

When two people covenant together in marriage before God they are obligated to fulfill their part of the covenant. The only possible exceptions are if the covenant is broken through adultery (Matt. 19:9), or if one party is an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:15), but even then it is preferable for there to be reconciliation. But again, the main thing is that covenants provide *solemn clarity about specific matters* between the covenanting parties. If either party was tempted to drift they could be called back to the words of the covenant which they had entered into and reminded of their obligations.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 makes plain,

When you make a vow before to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed – better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

The vow being referenced in the passage has to do a pledge to God to do something (Deut. 23:21-23; Psa. 76:11). God takes vows seriously, and even more so when a covenant is struck (see the crucial text, Jer. 34:18. Cf. Ezek. 17:15b).

Clarity is Paramount

This having been said, it ought to require no proof that in choosing the words of the covenant clarity is paramount. It is essential that both those making the

covenant and those to whom it is addressed have a clear understanding of what is involved. This is what the Apostle alludes to in Galatians when he says,

Brethren, I speak after the manner of men: Though only a man’s covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. – Gal. 3:15.

Thus, when the Lord swears He will bring woe upon Jerusalem in Ezekiel 24, He declares,

I, the LORD, have spoken it; it shall come to pass, and I will do it. – Ezek. 24:14a.

And when He promises to redeem Israel and make it like the garden of Eden (Ezek. 36:26-35), He says,

...I, the LORD, have spoken it; and I will do it. – Ezek. 36:36.

And He does it for His holy Name’s sake (Ezek. 36:21-23), because He is obligated to carry out the terms of the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Exod. 32:13).

When studying a covenant in the Bible it is important to pay attention to the specifics of the oath that seals it. Hence, in the first covenant recorded in the Bible it is plain to see that God pledges not to bring a great flood upon the earth the way He did in Noah’s day. When God rebukes king Zedekiah and the nobles for not performing the oath which they took in regard to the release of Hebrew slaves (which they took back after giving them a brief freedom), He points to the explicit wording of both the Mosaic covenant as well as the covenant which Zedekiah and

the princes had made (Jer. 34:8-22). In verse 14 the LORD explicitly refers to the provisions regarding Hebrew slaves in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15. God expects the clear covenant terms to be taken at face value.

But what happens if, like so many interpreters, we do not pay close attention to “the words of the covenant”? Or what happens if we simply introduce a system of interpretation, like interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the Gospel, which makes it expedient to in some way alter the terms of a covenant oath?

The subject of this article has to do with how covenants clarify and underline specific terms about certain important (indeed central) theological topics. If we all spoke the truth and we all could hear it unimpeded by sin’s effects there would be no need of covenants. Covenants presuppose subjects (at least one) who have a propensity to diverge from an important truth. (It is for this reason that any pre-fall covenants, which are exegetically weak and empty in the first place, seem superfluous).

Covenants also assume the parties to the covenant (at the bare minimum) understand and acknowledge the terms of the covenant.

Premeditation

Paul Williamson’s recent work on covenants, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, emphasizes the central role of oaths in the covenants of Scripture. In his analysis the use of *berit* in the Hebrew Bible he expresses his conviction that the making of a solemn

oath, “could well be described as the *sine qua non* of a covenant.” (39).

Oaths require forethought and careful composition. Failure to think-through the words used may lead to tragic consequences, as the story of Jephthah drives home to us. Along with solemnity, premeditation persuasively argues for clarity. For a covenant that isn’t clear is hardly competent to do its job, particularly after time slips by.

True, not every oath indicates the presence of covenant, as Williamson is careful to point out (36), but when it comes to the Bible, and especially God’s covenants with men, he writes,

a Divine-human *berit* may be defined as the solemn ratification of an existing elective relationship involving promises or obligations that are sealed with an oath.²

Since covenants include solemn oath-taking, they are not slapped together indiscriminately. So perhaps the single most important thing to work on is the problem of ambiguity. Sometimes one finds deliberate ambiguity in documents. One example is the wording on atonement in the Canons of Dordt, which had to be worded to accommodate both particular and universal redemptionists. But covenants cannot admit ambiguities without self-destructing. Thought beforehand is mandatory.

² Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, 43.

Expectation

Covenants prescribe obligations and raise certain expectations. If either party is being led to expect specifically identified things included in the covenant and that expectation is wrong, then one of two things has occurred. Either the words of the covenant were not clear enough, or the other covenanting party was using premeditated terminology to mislead. This is to say, the words of the covenant unavoidably create an expectation.

The prophets understood the solemn duty they were under to communicate God's intentions. One thinks of Micaiah who responded back to those who tempted him to speak words in agreement with the false soothsayers,

As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that will I speak – 1 Kings 22:14

The words of God excite the expectations of creatures. And when God earnestly pledges something in covenants to perform it He places His own character on the line to do what He has led people to expect He will do by the words of His oath. God does not much like covenant-breakers. Zedekiah found that out according to Jeremiah 34:8-22. By the prophet Ezekiel God asked,

Can [a man] break a covenant and still be delivered? – Ezekiel 17:15c

The one who breaks the covenant midway after confirming it for one heptad (Dan. 9:27) has traditionally been thought to be a bad person, since bad people fail to carry out their covenant obligations.

The Christian Gospel contains specific promises which have created clear and well defined expectations sealed by Jesus' New Covenant blood (1 Cor. 11:25). Covenants create expectations and when the God of Truth; the One "in whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (Jam. 1:17), binds Himself by a covenant oath, there is no surer or clearer word upon which to trust.

What Happens if the Words Are Ambiguous?

In his influential little book *According To Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, Graeme Goldsworthy assures us,

God's promises to Israel, first expressed as the covenant with Abraham, are irrevocable. God cannot go back on his word.³

This all sounds very comforting (What would it mean for God (or anyone else) to go back on His word?) God's covenant with Abraham involved two main aspects: first the provision of a specified land to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (e.g. Gen. 12:7; 15; Amos 9:13-15; Ezek. 36:22-35). The second main part of this covenant is the promise that "through you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8).

The land grant within the covenant is repeated over and over again in the Old Testament, often in covenantal contexts. the fact that the New Testament

³ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According To Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, 146.

does not really mention (at least directly) the land does not abrogate all these expectations. It simply means the New Testament writers do not broach the subject. That's okay, because the Old Testament writers do! The New Testament does not, as far as I am aware, mention the fact that God will never again bring a great flood to destroy the earth. It doesn't have to, as the stipulations in the Noahic Covenant are clear enough and we can, on that basis, expect no future global deluge like that in Noah's day.

But what would happen to all these expectations if the covenant oaths God took were not clear but were ambiguous? In fact, not just ambiguous but downright misleading, so that, based on the repeated words of God in the Old Testament the expectation of God's people was wide of the mark?

According to any dictionary, an ambiguity betokens uncertainty or even doubtfulness of meaning and intention. As such, ambiguous covenants are unreliable and slippery things. Ambiguity is the enemy of certainty, and if something is uncertain it is unreasonable to ask someone to have faith in it. They would not be sure just what they were supposed to believe.

As we all know, Hebrews 11:6 says,

But without faith, it is impossible to please [God]; for those who come to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Faith needs to rest in clear and unambiguous words. It cannot rest in shadows and forms. Covenants reinforce plain and certain facts. They are aids to

faith only to the extent that they are left alone to say what they say.

In the Bible there is always a correspondence between God's words and His actions. You see it in the Creation narratives – “God said”...”and it was so”. You see it in the Gospel, – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” You see it in such well known places as the curing of Naaman, or Jesus' healing of Jairus's daughter. When God says He is going to do something, you can bank on it. While there are places where God relents on judgment (especially after intercession), our faith depends upon the fixity of His meaning. God will do what He says He will do.

This is important on two fronts: first because God must be as good as His word or His character is in question. God's attributes of veracity and immutability stand behind His promises. The second reason God must mean what He says is because God requires faith from us. Faith must “know” what it is that is to be believed. Faith cannot thrive where ambiguity is let in. Faith has to be able to separate truth from error, and know which is the right path to take, or we are wasting our time warning people against error. If the meaning is uncertain, doubt has a foothold.

This is where we left off last time. Covenants necessarily take up within themselves this notion of dis-ambiguity.

But in that case what is one to make of this?

Israel is called God's son...Only later will the full import of this be

apparent as the perfect Son of God comes to fulfill in his own life all God's purposes for Israel.⁴

This is the same writer who said "God cannot go back on his word." But sadly he doesn't mean what one would think he means (that God will do what He has said He will do). Note here the equivocation on the word "son". In the case of Israel it is a figure of speech. In the case of Jesus it is actually true. No wonder "the full import" was not known in OT times! Notice also that Goldsworthy thinks that "God's purposes for Israel" (a *Nation* to whom land is covenanted – Gen. 15)), are "fulfilled" in the life of Christ (a *Person*).

According to the OT revelation, the Messiah was to "raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel" (Isa. 49:6), so that He "will make her wilderness like Eden" (Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 36:35), where – using covenant language – He has promised the Nation, "you will dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezek. 36:28; Amos 9:14-15). They have been led to expect God's blessing on their restored land (Hos. 2:18; Isa. 11:6-10; Ezek. 34:25-27), when God Himself will "betroth you to me forever" (Hos. 2:19). Since these are all covenanted promises, backed by the oath of God; and since covenants are reinforcements of clear speech which guarantee something, Goldsworthy's explanation of how God is not going back on His word by fulfilling all this in Christ is a little hard to swallow. Actually, his explanation is itself

filled with just the kind of ambiguities which covenants are supposed to eradicate.

No wonder then, we can be told that,

The semi-nomadic wanderings of Abraham and his descendants in Canaan did not serve God's purposes of revelation fully enough. Throughout the Old Testament, possession of the land is presented as a shadow of the future reality of God's people in his kingdom.⁵

And in which covenant of the Old Testament is one told this? Where are "the words of the covenant" which create this expectation? What is the expectation these covenants *do* create?

We must add here that the theological covenants of Reformed theology do not pass muster in this regard because they have nebulous specificity. Covenant theologians disagree on what each of these supposed covenants does. Since none of them are described in the Bible (they are inferred from viewing the two Testaments from a particular angle), they are in no sense on a par with the clearly defined covenants of Scripture.

According to Goldsworthy, the gospel event must be presupposed for the OT to be rightly understood (76). But if the covenants which God made could not be rightly understood until after Jesus had died and gone back to heaven, and if by the words used they raised false expectations in God's people throughout the OT era, we are forced to admit that

⁴ Goldsworthy, 141.

⁵ Goldsworthy, 130-131.

God's word, even under oath, apparently (in some theologies) is ambiguous, and that deliberately! Just what was an OT saint supposed to believe when reading the covenants?

One might not wish to go there, but I do not see a way out – apart, that is, from our adopting ambiguous language.

If it were up to us...

If the Lord had relied upon men to fulfill their duties before fulfilling His oaths there would be no reason at all to make covenants in the first place. He was on the safest ground possible, and could have promised the universe without having to concern Himself about fulfilling anything. We all fail. Christians know that unless God is faithful to stand behind His promise in the Gospel, we are all done for. Salvation under the New Covenant blood of Christ cannot depend upon us. Inner spiritual perfection is even more impossible for us to achieve than the outward obedience of the Law (1 Jn. 1:8, 10). If God's promise of salvation and eternal life depended for an instant on our works, heaven would have one human inhabitant – Jesus!

It is for this reason that God only made one bi-lateral covenant with men: the Mosaic covenant. Exodus 24 records the solemn oath which the children of Israel took:

And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. and they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be

obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words." – Exod. 24:6-8

The writer of Hebrews refers to this episode in Hebrews 9:18-20. The Book was the covenant terms which Moses read aloud. It contained the Ten Commandments of chapter 20, and the judgments of chapters 21-23 (cf. 24:3). There is nothing in these chapters which is unclear or vague. By reading the terms in the ears of the people Moses was calling upon the people to affirm by oath those words (See John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative*, 296).

The reason for this being bi-lateral was because it was impermanent. This "old covenant" was to be replaced by another permanent one. What guaranteed the failure of the Mosaic covenant was the sinfulness of one of the parties: the people of Israel. By the same token what guarantees the permanence of the New covenant is the fact that it is unilaterally promised by the sinless Christ. Divine covenants, with the lone exception of the "old covenant", are inviolable. Paul states this in connection with the New covenant in Romans 11:29.

Problems with "Unilateral" and "Unconditional"

It has often been true that the terms "unilateral" and "unconditional" have been held by some to be unsatisfactory adjectives when applied to the biblical covenants. Noah did have to build an

ark. Abraham did have to leave Ur and he did have to circumcise his sons. Christians do have to believe on Jesus to be saved. So then, it is argued, because we find these conditions attached to covenantal promises it is inaccurate to describe any covenant with the words “unilateral” and “unconditional.”

As an example of this sort of complaint we read,

the Old Testament covenants consist of unconditional (unilateral) and conditional (bilateral) elements blended together. In fact, it is precisely due to this blend that there is a deliberate tension within the covenants – a tension which is heightened as the story line of Scripture and the biblical covenants progress toward their fulfilment [sic] in Christ.⁶

But a grave mistake is being made here (there are other mistakes too, but I shall ignore them for now). In deciding whether a covenant is or is not unilateral (or both/and) the attention must be upon the oath taken: that is, upon the words of the covenant. And there is nothing in the oaths affixed to the Noahic or Abrahamic or Priestly or Davidic or New covenants which place conditions upon the human parties. What conditions are present in the context are connected either prior to or after the taking of the oath, but if there are no conditions in God’s oath, there are no conditions in the covenant. The time of eventual fulfilment may be impacted by conditional elements, but these in no way

⁶ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 609.

get God ‘off the hook’ as it were. If God is the only Subject making the oath, and if the words of the covenant do not iterate a condition, then the covenant really is unilateral and unconditional. As we have noted before, this fact seems to be recognized by D. N. Freedman.

The conditional Mosaic covenant, by contrast, had both conditions as part of the oath and, as we saw, bound the human parties to those conditions. One older writer puts it well:

The legal covenant that God made with Israel when He brought them up out of Egypt consisted of the law, the judgments and the ordinances... Differing from the unconditional covenant that God made with Abraham, the covenant that He made and repeatedly renewed with Israel under the law was coupled with express conditions, on the breach of which fearful judgments were denounced, and both blessings and curses attached to the covenant, according as they obeyed or disobeyed...⁷

There were no blessings and curses appended to the other covenants God made for the very good reason that they were superfluous! They were unconditionally guaranteed by God Himself. Thus, when entering into covenant with Abraham we read,

...because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself – Heb. 6:13

⁷ Ford C. Ottman, *God’s Oath: A Study of an Unfulfilled Promise of God*, 191.

For what purpose did God do this? The writer of Hebrews tells us:

Thus God, determining to show the more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath – Heb. 6:17

God had previously “determined” what He was going to do through the Abrahamic covenant. It was to be something which *could not change*. Therefore, by swearing by Himself He showed the immutability of the covenant. Yet Wellum says,

the physical genealogical link from the Abrahamic covenant is transformed...in the dawning of a regenerate people from every nation who become the “one new man” in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 2:11-21).⁸

He goes on to call this people “the true Israel” (Ibid). But in view of what we have just seen, this is not an option. God cannot “transform” the meaning of words in a covenant. But He doesn’t need to because the Abrahamic covenant houses promises both to the nations of Israel *and* to all the peoples of the earth (see Gen. 12:1-3, 7).

As I have said, at the most rudimentary level covenants are for the purpose of reinforcing plain speech about specific things. They do this formally in the terms of the covenant and its obligations upon specified parties. God holds human beings to the very words of their covenant

⁸ Gentry and Wellum, 608.

oaths (Jer. 34:18; Ezek. 17:15c). The Bible also indicates that God “keeps covenant” (Deut. 7:9; Neh. 9:32; Dan. 9:4). We would expect no less from Him who cannot lie and who does not change.

Of all verbal communications, written and oral, surely the most steadfast and adamant are covenants. And surely the least ambiguous and fluid would also be covenants?

The Oaths in the Covenants

The oath is the decisive ingredient in any covenant. We have already taken a look at the oath which the people took in answer to God’s Book of the Covenant in Exodus. Now we need to examine, if only briefly, the oaths of the other Divine covenants which can be easily spotted in Scripture. (There are certain covenants of a speculative nature which it is impossible to pin down in the text of the Bible. These include the three theological covenants of Reformed covenant theology; the so-called “Adamic” and “Edenic” covenants of some sectors of Dispensational theology; and the “Creation” covenant of New covenant theology).

A. Noah

As nearly all non-evangelical scholarship recognizes, the first covenant one comes across in Scripture is the one God made with Noah. Its oath is found in Genesis 9, with a possible personal oath in 8:21-22.

Surrounded by a preamble (9:8-10), and a sign of remembrance (9:12-17) the covenant oath is found in 9:11:

Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood;

never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

This is the specific thing that God binds Himself to. The form the covenant takes and the source-critical issues with the passage need not detain us. Neither am I here bothered with the problem of whether the Noahic covenant is entered at Genesis 9 or whether it signals a perpetuation of a previously established covenant (Cf. W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 24ff.). The sole concern here is with showing just what it is that God pledges to do in the covenants, and to demonstrate the clarity of those commitments. That God takes His own oath literally is proved by Isaiah 54:9:

For this is like the waters of Noah to me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so I have sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you.

Since this is the first clearly defined and specific covenant, and since it “provides the biblical-theological framework within which all subsequent divine-human covenants operate” (Paul R.

Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 68), the fact that its terms are so clear and are universally acknowledged by all believers should not escape our notice. Nobody believes the Noahic covenant can be transformed or reinterpreted to mean something other than what the plain words of the oath say it means. It is a hard-and-fast marker telling us that God will maintain the present order until the New Creation. If other Divine covenants can be treated differently then we must have two

kinds of unilateral Divine covenants in the Bible, and the uncertainty creeps in again.

B. Abraham

The Abrahamic covenant has its basic outline in Genesis 12:1-3, although we don't get a covenant oath until chapter 15. Even the famous promise which elicited Abram's faith-righteousness was not part of the covenant proper, but it does show that God is as good as His word, and that to have faith in that word requires that its terms are unambiguous and unequivocal.

On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates.. – Genesis 15:18

This corresponds with Genesis 12:1c – 2a, & 7; 13:14-15 and concerns the land. Williamson believes that ch. 15 is a separate covenant than that in ch.17. I demur, but it is worth noting that Williamson calls the land covenant unilateral (Ibid, 87).

But there is more which the LORD swears in this covenant. When He changed Abram's name and before giving him the token of the covenant (which has been kept) God said,

Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly

fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. – Genesis 17:4-8

And to this must be added Genesis 22:

And the Angel of the LORD called to him a second time out of heaven, and said: By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son – blessing

I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies (Cf. Heb. 6:13-17).

Hence we see three specific elements in the Abrahamic covenant:

1. The land given to the physical seed of promise (cf. 35:1-12)
2. Inextricably tied to this is the promise that Abraham's descendants through Isaac will become a nation (cf. 12:2)
3. Abraham becoming the father of many nations (although not necessarily through Sarah – 18:18)

Because of 17:1-2 Williamson thinks this is a bilateral agreement and so separate from the covenant in chapter 15. I shall deal with that later. But the passage above does give an expansive view of this covenant. As well as recalling the land aspect of the covenant, this passage harks back to the promise of Genesis 12:3; 15:5 about all the families of earth being blessed through Abraham. It is important to notice that this expression is tied to Abraham's physical descendants (see also 19:19), and does not seem to contemplate his spiritual descendants as Paul does (see Rom. 4:9-18; Gal. 3:8-16, 29). But this is because there is a missing element. The crucial part that has to be supplied is Genesis 22:18, which brings in Christ (Gal. 3:16). Thus, in Paul the corporate is included in the One (Jesus) through the same faith as Abraham. And since righteousness obtained by faith apart from physical lineage leads to salvation, the Apostle can conclude that we are all Abraham's seed through faith unto salvation.

But this does not rub out the connotations of being "the father of many nations", and the promise of Genesis 12:2 & 7; 15:3-4 concerning Abraham's physical descendants through Isaac (cf. 17:21). If it did, the spiritual seed (in Christ) could not be realized because Jesus had to come through the physical line of Abraham to be the Christ, and we had to be in Christ to be considered within the third aspect of the Abrahamic covenant.

As many have pointed out, the threefold elements of the Abrahamic covenant are taken up and amplified in the "Land", Davidic and even New covenants. That

these connections can even be seen is owing to the fact that the covenants mean what they say, and what they say is clearly identifiable in the covenant oaths.

C. Phinehas ('Priestly')

Since I have treated this covenant elsewhere⁹ in some detail I shall just briefly rehearse the salient facts.

Owing to the zeal of Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, a devastating plague was stopped and God's wrath appeased (Num. 25). Although Phinehas could have had no idea what God would do next, his honoring of God's holiness elicited a quite un-looked-for covenant between God and Phinehas's offspring (Num. 25:13; Psa. 106:28-31). This covenant stands behind the promise of ministering Levites in New covenant contexts as seen in Jeremiah 31:14; 33:17-18, 21-22; Ezekiel 44:15, and other places.

The oath is as follows:

Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace: and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood... – Num. 25:12-13a (cf. Jer. 33:21)

Despite the difficulties (more often presumed than proven) of Levites ministering in a New covenant kingdom context this pledge must mean what it says. One may perhaps wish to put a limit on the duration of the promise, such as the end of the Millennial Reign, which is permissible under some circumstances,

⁹ *The Forgotten Covenant*,
<http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/documents/articles/index.htm#181>

but one cannot begin to meddle with the unambiguous oath and make it fulfilled in the past in violation of God's oaths (Num. 25 and Jer. 33). That is to say, it is illegitimate to make this covenant oath ambiguous because of a perceived clash with the writer of Hebrews. This point is reinforced when one considers that at the time God made the covenant with Phinehas, he was under the terms of the temporary Mosaic covenant. Hence, the Priestly covenant transcends the Mosaic covenant.

D. 'Land'

Sometimes wrongly called the 'Palestinian' covenant ("Palestine" was the name given by Hadrian to Israel after the Bar Kokhba revolt in A.D. 132-135), the Land covenant is really a reaffirmation of the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant, and is often alluded to under those terms in the OT. Although there are New covenant overtones to account for in Deuteronomy 30:1-6, the land promises in Deuteronomy 29-30 are tied to the Law (Deut. 29:21, 25; 30:10). Therefore I prefer to refer to the unconditional land promise within the Abrahamic covenant (see above).

E. David

It is well known that 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17 do not mention the word for covenant (*berith*). That a covenant was initiated is substantiated by Psalm 89:3-4, 33-37 and Jeremiah 33:17, 21. In 2 Samuel the Lord says to David,

And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever. – 2 Sam. 7:16

The Psalmist notes the two bound concepts in the covenant: the longevity of David's line and the establishment of his throne:

My covenant I will not break, nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. Once have I sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me; it shall be established forever... – Psa. 89:34-37a

The all-important promise pertaining to the subject of the throne of Israel is repeated in the slogan,

David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel – Jer. 33:17 (cf. 1 Ki. 2:4)

This pledge does not necessary mean the line of Davidic kings will be unbroken. The Davidic covenant was made under the auspices of the Mosaic economy and awaits its New covenant fulfillment. What is guaranteed is the perpetuity of the line under New covenant kingdom conditions. God's oath cannot and will not be sidetracked. David will yet have a man reign in the nation Israel (e.g. Jer. 23:5-6; Ezek. 34:11-31; Dan. 7:13-14).

F. New

The New covenant is first introduced as such by the Prophet Jeremiah in chapter 31 of his book:

But this covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts...No more shall every man

teach his neighbor...saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me...For I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more. – Jer. 31:33-34

The New covenant is a salvific covenant. In fact, it is the salvific covenant!

This is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you – Lk. 22:20 (cf. 2 Cor. 3:5-6; Eph. 2:20)

Without the salvation and restoration contained in this covenant none of the other Divine covenants can achieve their fulfillment. This covenant is wrapped up in the Person of the Messiah. As I have written previously,

The promises appended to the biblical covenants are not supplemented with a means of fulfillment within those same covenants. The fulfillment lies outside of those covenants, within the New Covenant as it supplies the Noahic, Abrahamic, Priestly, and Davidic Covenants with the means of their realization. And the New Covenant must be "enabled" by Christ, the "Man from Heaven" (1 Cor. 15:47). Hence, the Plan of God outlined in the biblical covenants converges on the crucified Jesus and emerges from the resurrected Jesus!

Because Jesus Christ is the One for whom everything was made in the first place (Col. 1:16-17), it is absolutely fitting that the New covenant in His blood, whether enacted in the present with the Church (1

Cor. 11:23-26), or in the future in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34 upon Israel, be the basis upon which God's other covenants are satisfied. The New covenant, as it were, takes the other unilateral covenants into itself and prepares sinners to receive their joint benefits in accordance with the oaths taken by God – whether the recipients are Israel, the Church, or the Nations. [For more on these themes please see the series [Christ at the Center: The Fulcrum of Biblical Covenantalism¹⁰](https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/05/12/christ-at-the-center-conclusion-pt-7a/)]

What God's New covenant oath means is that sinners made in God's image will be saved and the marred image fully restored; and as this earth is made for man for living in, the planet and its creatures will be restored too (see e.g., Isa. 11:1-10; 49:6-8; Mic. 4:1-3; Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:18-23).

If this is true then there is no reason to transform or reinterpret or typologize the great covenantal oaths which God voluntarily entered into, knowing beforehand how He would make everything come together just as He said it would. The covenants mean what they say. We ought to have full confidence in them as amplifications of God's plain words to our dull ears and autonomous inclinations. Any approach which changes the plain sense of these unambiguous oaths for the sake of a theological program cannot be biblical, for the simple but profound reason that nothing which cuts across these Divine oaths can be in line with the Divine intent in these very covenants.

¹⁰

<https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/05/12/christ-at-the-center-conclusion-pt-7a/>

Think: Who Questions These Covenants?

Noahic – Does anyone believe God will again bring a flood like Noah's flood upon the earth? Why?

Mosaic – Does anyone think that God did not mean what He spelled out to Israel in the Law?

New – Does anyone think that God will renege on His clear offer of salvation in the Gospel?

If they did, they would have no reason not to fear another Deluge or that God would change His mind about what He meant in the Gospel offer (or the offer of salvation to Israel when Christ returns).

To give another, human covenant set up by God, the covenant of Marriage (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). Putting aside the question of whether marriage needed to be a covenant in Eden, who honestly would be prepared to say that the marriage oaths do not mean precisely what they say? Who would wish to teach that these oaths could be transformed or reinterpreted? No one, because covenants mean what they say. They are incontrovertible so long as they are in force (Gal. 3:15).

It is true to say that any other stipulated covenant in the Bible, be it Divine or human, is a solemn bond which obligates the one who makes the oath to do exactly what they pledge to do. Yet there are theologies which question the very oaths God took, as if when He stipulated a land (Gen. 15) or a people (Jer. 33), He meant it spiritually or typologically not literally (at face value). But covenants are not vulnerable to such

amendments. Covenants bring clarity and mutual understanding. They present the antithesis of double-meaning or transformation. That is why it is our duty, as those prone to hear what we want to hear, to insist that nothing in our belief system cuts across the clear wording of the biblical covenants.



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org