

Part 12: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

The Abrahamic Covenant is a key revelation of Scripture that furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches for its fulfillment into the New, and its provisions should be taken literally.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Romans 4:11, Romans 9:6, Galatians 3:6, Galatians 3:29

Topics: "Covenant Theology", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significance of the covenant of God with Abraham, emphasizing its pivotal role in understanding the Old Testament and its extension into the New Testament. The interpretation of this covenant is crucial in the debate between premillenarians and amillenarians, with the former asserting the literal fulfillment of the covenant's provisions, including the everlasting possession of the land by Israel as a nation. The covenant with Abraham encompasses promises to Abraham personally, his seed, and all families of the earth, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between the natural and spiritual seed of Abraham.

Transcript

It is recognized by all serious students of the Bible that the covenant of God with Abraham is one of the important and determinative revelations of Scripture. It furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches for its fulfillment into the New. In the controversy between premillenarians and amillenarians, the interpretation of this covenant more or less settles the entire argument. The analysis of its provisions and the character of their fulfillment^[1] Cf. "The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant," Bibliotheca Sacra, 102:405, January-March 1945, pp. 27-36, by the author. set the mold for the entire body of Scriptural truth.

Most of the discussions on the issue are distinguished for their disregard of the specific provisions of the covenant. Albertus Pieters in his closely reasoned book on this subject^[2] Albertus Pieters, *The Seed of Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 161. is no exception. Like Louis Berkhof,^[3] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), p. 277. Oswald Allis,^[4] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), pp. 32ff. and other amillenarians, he finds it convenient and suited to his purpose to overlook the details of the promise and seize upon its general promises of blessings. This is of course necessary for the amillennial interpretation which does not provide any fulfillment of the details ignored. The premillennial

interpretation on the other hand is able to account for the entire prophecy and its ultimate complete fulfillment.

The issue, in a word, is the question of whether Israel as a nation and as a race has a prophesied future. A literal interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant involves the permanent existence of Israel as a nation and the fulfillment of the promise that the land should be their everlasting possession. Amillenarians generally deny this. Premillenarians affirm it. What, then, are the provisions of the covenant with Abraham and do they promise what premillenarians affirm?

The Provisions of the Covenant

The language of the Abrahamic Covenant is plain and to the point. The original covenant is given in Genesis 12:1-3, and there are three confirmations and amplifications as recorded in Genesis 13:14-17; 15:1-7 ; and 17:1-18 . Some of the promises are given to Abraham personally, some to Abraham's seed, and some to Gentiles, or "all families of the earth" (Gen 12:3).

The promise to Abraham. Abraham himself is promised that he would be the father of a great nation (Gen 12:2), compared to the dust of the earth and the stars of the heaven in number (Gen 13:16; 15:5), and including kings and nations other than the "seed" itself (Gen 17:6). God promises His personal blessing on Abraham. His name shall be great and he himself shall be a blessing. All of this has had already the most literal fulfillment and continues to be fulfilled.

The promise to Abraham's seed. In addition to the promises to Abraham, the covenant includes blessings for Abraham's seed. The nation itself should be great (Gen 12:2) and innumerable (Gen 13:16; 15:5). The nation is promised possession of the land. Its extensive boundaries are given in detail (Gen 15:18-21). In connection with the promise of the land, the Abrahamic Covenant itself is expressly called "everlasting" (Gen 17:7) and the possession of the land is defined as "an everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8). It should be immediately clear that this promise guarantees both the everlasting continuance of the seed as a nation and its everlasting possession of the land.

Miscellaneous promises are included in the covenant. God is to be the God of Abraham's seed. It is prophesied that they would be afflicted, as fulfilled in the years in Egypt, and that afterwards they would "come out with great substance" (Gen 15:14). In the promise to Abraham, "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed," it is anticipated that the seed should be a channel of this blessing. In particular this is fulfilled in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

All the promises to the "seed" in Genesis are references to the physical seed of Abraham. General promises of blessing to Abraham's seed seem to include all his physical lineage, but it is clear that the term is used in a narrower sense in some instances. Eliezer of Damascus, while according to the customs of the day regarded as a child of Abraham because born in his house, is nevertheless disqualified because he is not the physical seed of Abraham (Gen 15:2). Further, not all the physical descendants of Abraham qualify for the promises to the seed. Ishmael is put aside. When Abraham pleads with God, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" God replies, "Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him" (Gen 17:18-19). The line of the seed and its promises is narrowed to the one son of Abraham. Later when Jacob and Esau are born, God in sovereign choice chooses the younger as the father of the twelve patriarchs and confirms the covenant to Jacob. The particular Abrahamic promises and blessings are thereafter channelled through the twelve tribes.

While the promises to the "seed" must be limited in their application according to the context, it is clear that much of the general blessings attending the Abrahamic Covenant such as the general blessing of God upon men is larger in its application. Thus the sign of circumcision (Gen 17:10-14, 23-27) is administered not only to Isaac later, but also to Ishmael and the men in Abraham's house either born in the house or bought with money. Circumcision is wider in its application than the term seed, as far as the use in Genesis is concerned.

The promise to Gentiles. As a part of the Abrahamic Covenant, "all families of the earth" are promised blessing (Gen 12:3). It is not specified what this blessing shall be. As a general promise it is probably intended to have a general fulfillment. Abraham himself has certainly been a blessing to all nations and has the distinction of being honored alike by Jew, Mohammedan, and Christian. The seed of Abraham or the nation of Israel itself has been a great blessing as the channel of divine revelation and the historic illustration of God's dealings with men. The seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, has also been a blessing to all nations. The blessing bestowed includes not only the salvation of many but the revelation of God, the revelation of moral law, and the many by-products of Biblical Judaism and Christianity. The promise has already been abundantly fulfilled.

A solemn part of the covenant as it deals with the Gentiles is the provision, "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee" (Gen 12:3). This of course would be true even of an Israelite, but the primary application is to Gentiles. Long sections of the Old Testament pronouncing judgment upon the Gentiles for their ill-treatment of Israel enlarge on this provision. History has recorded graphic fulfillment in the wrecks of Nineveh, Babylon, and Rome, to say nothing of smaller groups and peoples. Down to modern times, the nation that has persecuted the Jew has paid dearly for it.

Further distinctions. The promises to Abraham, to Abraham's seed, and to "all families of the earth" are to be distinguished clearly. It breeds utter confusion to ignore these Scriptural divisions and to muddle the whole by reducing it to a general promise. Not only should these distinctions be observed, but it should be carefully noted what is left out of the covenant. While Abraham is personally justified by faith because of his trust in God's promise concerning his seed, it is obvious that the Abrahamic Covenant itself is not the gospel of salvation even though the promised blessing anticipated the gospel (cf. Gal 3:8). Those in the covenant are promised that God will be their God in the general and providential sense. It is true that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise of blessing to all nations. But the covenant does not contain the covenant of redemption, a revelation of the sacrifice of Christ, a promise of forgiveness of sin, a promise of eternal life, or any of the elements of salvation. The promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 is, by way of example, a far clearer picture of the promise of redemption than any of the long passages dealing with the Abrahamic Covenant. While the Abrahamic Covenant is essentially gracious and promises blessings, it deals for the most part with physical blessings and with a physical seed. To make the covenant a phase or a statement of the covenant of redemption is hardly justified by the study of its precise provisions.

Literal Versus Spiritual Interpretation

While the premillennial interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant distinguishes the promises to Abraham, to Abraham's seed, and to "all families of the earth," the amillennial view largely blurs this distinction. In order to understand the amillennial view, it will be necessary to summarize its main arguments.

The amillennial position. Albertus Pieters in his recent work, *The Seed of Abraham*, has summarized the amillennial position as follows: "The expression 'Seed of Abraham,' in biblical usage, denotes that visible

community, the members of which stand in relation to God through the Abrahamic Covenant, and thus are heirs to the Abrahamic promise." [5] Albertus Pieters, op. cit., p. 20. In other words, all who are heirs of the covenant in any sense are the seed of Abraham. In discussing the circumcision of Abraham's entire house including the servants, Pieters concludes, "Yet they were all accounted, for covenant purposes, to be 'The Seed of Abraham.'" [6] Ibid., p. 17. He states further in regard to the question of whether promises were made to Abraham's physical seed, "Whenever we meet with the argument that God made certain promises to the Jewish race, the above facts are pertinent. God never made any promises to any race at all, as a race. All His promises were to the continuing covenanted community, without regard to its racial constituents or to the personal ancestry of the individuals in it." [7] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

The expression seed of Abraham under this interpretation loses its literal meaning and is considered the seed of Abraham only in a spiritual sense. Coupled with this spiritualizing of the terms is the general assumption that the covenant as a whole is entirely conditioned upon the faith of the individual. Hence the promise of everlasting possession of the land by the seed of Abraham is thrown out as having been forfeited by Israel's failures in the Old and New Testament. To all practical purposes the Abrahamic Covenant has its fulfillment in the church according to the amillennial viewpoint.

The premillennial view of the covenant. As distinguished from the amillennial position, the premillennial interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant takes its provisions literally. In other words, the promises given to Abraham will be fulfilled by Abraham; the promises to Abraham's seed, will be fulfilled by his physical seed; the promises to "all families of the earth," will be fulfilled by Gentiles, or those not the physical seed. While possession of the land forever is the promise to the physical seed, the promise of blessing is to "all the families of the earth." Both are to be fulfilled exactly as promised.

While the premillennial position insists upon fulfillment of promises to Israel as the physical seed, and thereby its national preservation and future hope of possession of the land, the premillenarian recognizes that there is a spiritual as well as a natural seed of Abraham. The New Testament in numerous passages refers to the spiritual seed of Abraham. Abraham is called "the father of all them that believe" (Rom 4:11). In Galatians 3:7, it is noted, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." Again in Galatians 3:29 it is revealed, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." These passages teach beyond doubt that there is a spiritual seed of Abraham, those who like Abraham of old believe in God, and are children of faith.

Premillenarians also recognize the distinction between the natural and the spiritual seed within Israel itself. In Romans 9:6, this is stated in a few words, "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." This is defined later, "That is, They which are children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom 9:8). Within Israel, then, there is a believing remnant who are both natural and spiritual children of Abraham. These inherit the promises.

There are, then, three different senses in which one can be a child of Abraham. First, there is the natural lineage, or natural seed. This is limited largely to the descendants of Jacob in the twelve tribes. To them God promises to be their God. To them was given the law. To them was given the land of Israel in the Old Testament. With them God dealt in a special way. Second, there is the spiritual lineage within the natural. These are the Israelites who believed in God, who kept the law, and who met the conditions for present enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant. Those who ultimately possess the land in the future millennium will also be of spiritual Israel. Third, there is the spiritual seed of Abraham who are not natural Israelites. Here is where the promise to "all the families of the earth" comes in. This is the express

application of this phrase in Galatians 3:6-9, "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham." In other words, the children of Abraham (spiritually) who come from the "heathen" or the Gentiles fulfill that aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant which dealt with Gentiles in the first place, not the promises pertaining to Israel. The only sense in which Gentiles can be Abraham's seed in the Galatians context is to be "in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). It follows: "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). They are Abraham's seed in the spiritual sense only and heirs of the promise given "to all the families of the earth."

While premillenarians can agree with amillenarians concerning the fact of a spiritual seed for Abraham which includes Gentiles, they deny that this fulfills the promises given to the natural seed or that the promises to the "seed of Abraham" are fulfilled by Gentile believers. To make the blessings promised all the nations the same as the blessings promised the seed of Abraham is an unwarranted conclusion.

The weakness of the amillennial position is shown by examination of their exegesis of such passages as Genesis 15:18-21, where the exact boundaries of the promised land are given, and the kindred passage in Genesis 17:7-8 where the covenant is called everlasting and the land is promised as an everlasting possession. Albertus Pieters, in his discussion of "The Seed of Abraham in the Patriarchal Period,"[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-23. finds it convenient to pass over these passages entirely. His argument is that modern Jews have lost their lineage and therefore nobody today is qualified to claim the promises given to the Jew anyway--a radical and questionable line of argument to say the least. Most amillenarians as well as premillenarians recognize the modern Jew as having some racial continuity with ancient Israel, however polluted by intermarriage with Gentiles.

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Oswald Allis,[9] Oswald T. Allis, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-36. on the other hand, while an ardent amillenarian, faces these promises on an entirely different basis. His argument is that the promises have either been fulfilled literally for Israel or that they were conditional promises and Israel failed to meet the conditions. The contrast between the approach of Allis and that of Pieters illustrates that amillenarians are quite at odds among themselves not only on details but the main principles of their interpretation.

The issue which divides premillenarians and amillenarians in the interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant is the familiar question of literal versus spiritualized interpretation. If taken in its ordinary literal sense, the sense which Abraham no doubt understood it, the covenant promised the land of Abraham's seed as a lasting possession and along with this the promise of being in a special way the object of God's care, protection, and blessing. The Scriptures give fully adequate indication that the Abrahamic Covenant was intended to be interpreted literally as indicated in its partial fulfillment and the frequent prophetic revelation of Israel's glorious future and repossession of the land. Before considering this evidence, it is necessary first to examine the amillennial claim that the Abrahamic Covenant does not require literal fulfillment because it was intended to be fulfilled only if conditions were met. In other words, Israel's failure being what it was, amillenarians feel that there is no need for the promises to be fulfilled. Only spiritual blessings are left and these are for those who are Abraham's spiritual children.

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