

Part 13: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

The Abrahamic Covenant is an unconditional promise of God, declaring His purpose and intention to fulfill it in spite of human failure.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Genesis 15:7, Genesis 17:7, Genesis 17:9, Amos 9:13, Romans 9:11, Hebrews 6:13

Topics: "Covenant Theology", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the debate on whether the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional, contrasting the views of Amillenarians and Premillenarians. The Abrahamic Covenant, as outlined in Genesis, is shown to have been based on Abraham's obedience in leaving his homeland, with no further conditions imposed once this was fulfilled. Various scriptural evidence is presented to support the belief that the covenant is indeed unconditional, emphasizing God's sovereignty in its fulfillment despite human failures and disobedience.

Transcript

{Editor's note: Footnotes in the original printed edition were numbered 10-15, but in this electronic edition are numbered 1-6 respectively.}

Is the Abrahamic Covenant Unconditional?

Amillenarians believe that the Abrahamic Covenant is based on certain conditions, and its fulfillment hinges on these conditions being met. Premillenarians hold that the Abrahamic Covenant is a declaration of God's intention which is not conditional upon the obedience of individuals or nations for its fulfillment--an unconditional plan of God.

As given in the Scriptures, the Abrahamic Covenant is hinged upon only one condition. This is given in Genesis 12:1, "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee." The original covenant was based upon Abraham's obedience in leaving his homeland and going to the land of promise. No further revelation is given him until he was obedient to this command after the death of his father. Upon entering Canaan, the Lord immediately gave Abraham the promise of ultimate possession of the land (Gen 12:7), and subsequently enlarged and reiterated the original promises.

The one condition, having been met, no further conditions are laid upon Abraham; the covenant having been solemnly established is now dependent upon divine veracity for its fulfillment. A parallel can be found in the doctrine of eternal security for the believer in the present dispensation. Having once accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, the believer is assured a complete salvation and eternal bliss in heaven on a gracious principle quite independent of attaining a degree of faithfulness or obedience during this life. The original condition having been met, the promise continues without further conditions.

Evidence that the covenant is unconditional. The Scriptures afford a most complete line of evidence in support of the unconditional character of the covenant. (1) All Israel's covenants are unconditional except the Mosaic. The Abrahamic Covenant is expressly declared to be eternal and therefore unconditional in numerous passages (Gen 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chron 16:17; Ps 105:10). The Palestinian Covenant is likewise declared to be everlasting (Ezek 16:60). The Davidic Covenant is described in the same terms (2 Sam 7:13, 16, 19; 1 Chron 17:12; 22:10 ; Isa 55:3; Ezek 37:25). The new covenant with Israel is also eternal (Isa 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5 ; Heb 13:20).

(2) Except for the original condition of leaving his homeland and going to the promised land, the covenant is made with no conditions whatever. It is rather a prophetic declaration of God of what will certainly come to pass, and is no more conditional than any other announced plan of God which depends upon God's sovereignty for its fulfillment.

(3) The Abrahamic Covenant is confirmed repeatedly by reiteration and enlargement. In none of these instances are any of the added promises conditioned upon the faithfulness of Abraham's seed or of Abraham himself. While God promises in some instances the larger aspects of the covenants in recognition of Abraham's faithfulness, nothing is said about it being conditioned upon the future faithfulness of either Abraham or his seed.

(4) The Abrahamic Covenant was solemnized by a divinely ordered ritual symbolizing the shedding of blood and passing between the parts of the sacrifice (Gen 15:7-21; Jer 34:18). This ceremony was given to Abraham as an assurance that his seed would inherit the land in the exact boundaries given to him in Genesis 15:18-21. No conditions whatever are attached to this promise in this context.

(5) To distinguish those who would inherit the promises as individuals from those who were only physical seed of Abraham, the visible sign of circumcision was given (Gen 17:9-14). One not circumcised was considered outside the promised blessing. The ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and possession of the land by the seed is not hinged, however, upon faithfulness in the matter of circumcision. In fact the promises of the land were given before the rite was introduced.

(6) The Abrahamic Covenant was confirmed by the birth of Isaac and Jacob to both of whom the promises are repeated in their original form (Gen 17:19; 28:12-13). To them again no conditions were delineated for the fulfillment of the covenant. The added revelation is that the promised seed would be channeled through them.

(7) Notable is the fact that the reiterations of the covenant and the partial early fulfillments of the covenant are in spite of acts of disobedience. It is clear that on several instances Abraham strayed from the will of God, as for instance in his departure out of the land and sojourn in Egypt. Jacob has the promise given him in spite of his disobedience, deceit, and unbelief. In the very act of fleeing the land the promises are repeated to him.

(8) The later confirmations of the covenant are given in the midst of apostasy. Important is the promise given through Jeremiah that Israel as a nation will continue forever (Jer 31:36). The place of the new covenant given through Jeremiah in its relation to the Abrahamic Covenant and the extensive and numerous predictions in the Minor Prophets concerning Israel's regathering and restoration to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant will be considered in later discussion. The very existence of this large body of Scripture is an important link in the proof of the unconditional character of the Abrahamic Covenant.

(9) The New Testament declares the Abrahamic Covenant immutable (Heb 6:13-18; cf. Gen 15:8-21). It was not only promised but solemnly confirmed by the oath of God.

(10) The entire Scriptural revelation concerning Israel and its future as contained in both the Old and New Testament, if interpreted literally, confirms and sustains the unconditional character of the promises given to Abraham.

There are then many and weighty reasons for considering the Abrahamic Covenant unconditional. The later discussion of the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant constitutes a further indication of the unconditional character of God's promises to Abraham's seed. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in history down to the present day adds its weight to all the other arguments. In spite of these important considerations, the amillenarian insists that the covenant must be interpreted spiritually and that it will never be completely fulfilled because of the failure to meet the supposed conditions.

The amillennial argument for a conditional covenant. The amillennial point of view almost takes for granted that the Abrahamic Covenant is subject to conditions. In fact the statement is frequently made that obedience is always the prerequisite for blessing. In the words of Oswald Allis: "It is true that, in the express terms of the covenant with Abraham, obedience is not stated as a condition. But that obedience was presupposed is clearly indicated by two facts. The one is that obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances.... The second fact is that in the case of Abraham the duty of obedience is particularly stressed." [1] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 33. Allis is guilty here of begging the question with a very hasty dogmatism. It is not true that obedience is always the condition of blessing. The seed of Abraham have been disobedient in every moral category. Yet in spite of that disobedience they have fulfilled many of the promises of the covenant. The very principle of grace is that God blesses the unworthy. The individual is not saved on the ground of moral obedience or of attaining moral perfection. The security of the believer, a doctrine which Allis certainly believes, is quite independent of human worth or faithfulness. Allis is saying in effect that God can make no certain promises where human agency is concerned. As a Calvinist, where is Allis' doctrine of unconditional election? Is it not better to avoid such a sweeping universal and to recognize that, while covenants may be conditional as for instance the Mosaic Covenant was, covenants can also be unconditional? The Abrahamic Covenant is a declaration of God's purpose and, while human agency is involved, the main point of the covenant is that God will fulfill it in spite of human failure.

Amillenarians while admitting that obedience is never made the condition of the covenant--which ought to be decisive in itself--point out that obedience is stressed. An examination of the various references to human obedience reveals that Abraham had promises reiterated and further revelation given concerning them because of his obedience. It is never stated or implied, however, that the covenant was in abeyance until Abraham was obedient. The role of obedience was important for individual blessing under the covenant. In other words, an individual could deprive himself of the immediate blessings of the covenant through gross disobedience. The point is that in spite of such individual actions the covenant would have

its complete fulfillment. It is anticipated that there would be a godly remnant, as there was, in whom the covenant would have its complete fulfillment (cf. Gen 18:18-19); but in the renewal of the covenant to Isaac, the certainty of it is not built upon the future obedience of the seed of Abraham, but upon the past obedience of Abraham (Gen 26:3-5). In recognizing the obedience of Abraham in offering Isaac, God repeated the same promises given before (Gen 22:16-18). Obviously if these promises were conditioned on the worthiness of Abraham's seed, the large probability of human failure would have robbed the promises of any real hope of fulfillment.

It is of course anticipated in the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God that, to the extent that obedience entered into the fulfillment of the covenant, such obedience was predestined and determined. The agency and circumstances of the fulfillment of the covenant are not the important point. God was promising that the covenant would be fulfilled, and the premillenarian believes that it will be fulfilled exactly as promised.

Most of the other amillennial objections to considering the covenant unconditional stem from their main premise that all covenants are conditional. In support of this idea, numerous smaller claims are made. Attention is directed to Jonah's command to preach judgment on Nineveh, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4), a promise cancelled when Nineveh repented. The answer, of course, is that this is not a covenant but a warning. The very fact that Nineveh was brought to repentance shows that they understood it in this light. This at best is argument by analogy, and the circumstances show it is not a parallel case.

The judgment on Eli's house for its sin is cited by Allis[2] Ibid., p. 32. to prove that an unstated condition is implied in every covenant (1 Sam 2:30 with Exod 29:9. Cf. Jer 18:1-10; Ezek 3:18-19; Exod 32:13ff). In this case, premillenarians will agree with the illustration, disagree with the principle which it is supposed to illustrate. The covenant with Eli's house was a part of the Mosaic Covenant, which all agree is a conditional covenant which was not intended to be eternal. This has no bearing whatever upon the Abrahamic Covenant. In God's dealings with nations other than Israel He is free to pluck up and cast down. In Israel's case, He has pledged His word, and Moses is quick to remind God of His unalterable covenant in the face of Israel's sin (Exod 32:13-14).

The rite of circumcision is cited as proving the covenant is conditional. All agree that the individual enjoyment of blessing under the covenant is to a large degree dependent upon the individual's faith and obedience. This is quite different than stating that the fulfillment of the covenant as a whole is conditioned upon obedience of the nation as a whole. This also explains what seems to Allis to be a contradiction, that C. I. Scofield taught that Israel must be in the land of promise to be fully blessed.[3] Ibid., p. 34. The issue here again is individual blessing or blessing on any one generation of Israel. The question of ultimate fulfillment is not in view.

Esau is also cited by amillenarians as proof that the covenant is conditional. Allis says, "That Dispensationalists do not regard the Abrahamic covenant as wholly unconditional is indicated also by the fact that we never hear them speak of the restoration of Esau to the land of Canaan and to full blessing under the Abrahamic covenant.... But if the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional why is Esau excluded from the blessings of the covenant?"[4] Ibid., pp. 35-36. The answer is quite simple, of course, and Allis anticipates it somewhat in his discussion. The promises to Abraham are not fulfilled by all the natural seed of Abraham, but by some of them. Those who will fulfill the covenant descend from Jacob, and Esau is excluded. Allis should be reminded that Esau is excluded by solemn choice of God before obedience became an issue, a fact clearly brought out in Romans 9:11-13.

Allis in his argument changes pace quite rapidly in his next objection to the premillennial view. He states: "The certainty of the fulfillment of the covenant and the security of the believer under it, ultimately depend wholly on the obedience of Christ." [5] Ibid., p. 36. This is, of course, absolutely true, but it has no bearing on the argument here and is actually against the amillennial position. If it all hinged upon the obedience of Christ, and that obedience was absolutely certain, it would follow that the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant was also absolutely certain, which is exactly what premillennarians are trying to uphold and mean by its being unconditional. The main issue is whether the complete fulfillment of the covenant is certain, in spite of human failure.

Allis dips somewhat into the usual premillennial form of argument in still another point. He holds in effect that the covenant has already been fulfilled and that the promise of the multiplied seed was already realized by Solomon's day (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5 ; 22:17 ; I Kings 4:20; 1 Chron 27:23; 2 Chron 1:9; Heb 11:12). This, of course, all concede. It is in fact a stock premillennial argument that partial fulfillment of the covenant in a literal way demands literal fulfillment of the rest of it.

Allis goes right on to state, however, "As to the land, the dominion of David and of Solomon extended from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt (1 Kgs iv.21), which also reflects the terms of the covenant. Israel did come into possession of the land promised to the patriarchs. She possessed it, but not 'for ever.' Her possession of the land was forfeited by disobedience, both before and after the days of David and Solomon." [6] Ibid., p. 58. Allis admits, however, that the possession of the land did not really fulfill the covenant.

According to the Abrahamic Covenant, the land would be completely possessed, and would be permanently possessed as "an everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8). The fulfillment under Solomon breaks down under every requirement. As Allis very well knows, neither David nor Solomon "possessed" all the land for which the boundaries are given with precision in Genesis 15:18-21. At best much of this land was put under tribute, but was never possessed. Further as Allis admits, it was soon lost again, which in no wise fulfilled the promise of permanent or everlasting possession (Gen 17:8). Besides, Allis is quite oblivious to a fact that nullifies his entire argument here. That is that the prophets who lived after Solomon were still anticipating the future fulfillment of the promises of the everlasting possession of the land (cf. Amos 9:13-15) and reiterate in practically all the Minor Prophets the theme song that Israel is to be restored to the land, to be regathered there, and to continue under the blessing of God. While the promises relative to a large progeny may have been fulfilled in Solomon's day, the promises relative to the land were not. were spiritual in character, at the same time it very literally fulfilled the prophecy which offered no physical promises to the Gentiles. There is no necessity to explain away the ordinary and plain meaning of the text to find the most accurate and complete fulfillment. The nations who blessed Israel have been blessed; the nations who cursed Israel have been cursed (Gen 12:3). Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt are clear Biblical examples, and in profane history it has been fulfilled ever since. The nations which have been notably friendly to Israel have been blessed, and the nations notably persecuting Israel have paid for it, witnessed in modern Russia, Germany, and Spain. As each detail of the provisions of the covenant is noted, fulfillment has followed the literal pattern.

All agree that certain provisions of the covenant are unfulfilled. The unfulfilled portions coincide with the future program for the world and for Israel as set forth by premillennarians. The promise of complete and everlasting possession of the land is to be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom and will issue in possessions in the eternal new earth. Israel will continue as a nation, and will be dealt with as a nation by God. Israel's distinct place and promises are apparently eternal. The day of full blessing, Israel's

regathering, her exaltation over the Gentiles, and her bliss under the righteous reign of the Son of David will provide the ultimate fulfillment which will complete the story of God's faithfulness to His covenant. Because of the decisive importance of the issue of Israel's future fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, this will be considered next. Her continuance as a nation, her possession of the land, and her restoration are important themes of Scripture which fully confirm the premillennial concept of the Abrahamic Covenant.

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