

UNVEILING THE GRAND PLAN: THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT
UNPACKAGED

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ABRAHAMIC COVENANT EXAMINED

Introduction

Throughout Biblical history, God has interacted with His people within the context of covenants. Each covenant has gradually unfolded the plan of God for redemptive history. Perhaps the most influential covenant found in the Bible is the Abrahamic covenant. The impact of the Abrahamic covenant is not only in the spoken words, but also in the symbolic foreshadowing which God used. The Abrahamic covenant is a picture of God's covenant promise to save His people by His own grace in order to extend His purposes.

Covenant Overview

God's interaction with Abraham unfolds over several chapters in Genesis with the covenant culminating in Genesis 15. To properly understand the covenant, it is important to analyze and investigate the call of Abraham found in Genesis 12.¹ God's call can be summarized as a call to go, a promise to birth a new nation, a promise to be blessed, and the intention to use Abraham to be a blessing. It is interesting to note that this end goal is repeated twice in the commissioning. In Genesis 12:2, God proclaims He is doing all these things "so that you will be a blessing" and concludes that "in you all the families of

1. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 46.

the earth will be blessed". Hence, God is declaring that Abraham is blessed to be a blessing. This is critical to understand as it extends the covenant and the workings of God beyond Abraham's direct descendants to all the nations of the earth. Thus, the New Testament commission to go into all the world is ultimately no different than Abraham's mission.

Genesis 15 provides the details of the Abrahamic covenant. Covenants are contracts which always involve at least two parties reaching a common agreement on an issue.² In addition, there is always a penalty or a consequence that both parties agree to assume should they fail to uphold their end of the bargain. The Abrahamic covenant follows this mold. Two parties are present in the covenant: God and Abraham. As already noted, Abraham was chosen to bless all the nations of the earth. Hence, in a symbolic sense, Abraham acts as a representative for all those who he is going to bless. The consequences for failure to maintain the covenant are illustrated in the sacrificial animals that Abraham prepares. Their carcasses are placed in such a way as to provide a pathway between the dead animals. Symbolically they represent the failure to keep the covenant will result in being strewn asunder just like the animals. Finally, Abraham falls into a deep sleep while God's presence passes between the animals as He finalizes the covenant.

Symbolism Unfolded

2. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 128.

As with much of the Old Testament, the passages unfold within the framework of a now and not yet. All throughout the Bible, there are immediate, literal applications to everything which occurs as well as secondary, symbolic applications. The now points to what is happening. In addition, the present merely mirrors the real thing which is yet to be fully unfolded in the future. Despite this, one must be careful to interpret Scripture within its proper framework. Contrary to the opinion of some, Abraham's account should not be seen as completely figurative.³ It was a real account anchored in reality.

The symbolic features are plentiful throughout the account. While everything literally occurred, they also point toward a secondary meaning. The presence of God appeared in the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch as seen in Genesis 15:17. This is not the only time that God's presence took this particular format. The Exodus account displayed God leading His people toward the Red Sea as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day (Exodus 13:21). God often took the form of fire throughout the Bible.⁴ Scholars have noted that fire is often symbolic of God's holiness and His cleansing zeal.⁵ Hence, the holiness and majesty of God was what passed through and sealed this covenant.

Another extremely important symbolic factor is the number of parties passing between the slain animals. It is very important to note that Abraham physically does not and cannot move in any direction. Abraham fell into a deep sleep and was incapable of

3. This, for example, is the view of Keil and Delitzsch. Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 134.

4. D.K. Stuart, *New American Commentary: Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 113.

5. Ibid, 55-56.

doing anything. This is highly unusual. The covenant relationship always involved all the parties equally committing. Hence, God symbolically demonstrated the reality of Ephesians 2. Mankind, as represented in Abraham, is physically incapable of fulfilling the covenant God has set forth. Instead, man can do nothing but watch from the sideline as God agrees to fulfill both ends of the covenant – His and ours.⁶ In addition, He agrees to take upon Himself the weight of the entire penalty. This is ultimately seen in Christ taking upon Himself humanity's sin and being the One who fulfills all facets of the covenant that man is unable to live up to. Hence, the gospel as being by grace through faith is symbolically demonstrated in God's covenant with Abraham.

The animal sacrifice was symbolic beyond signifying the penalty for the covenant breaker. All of the animals chosen or the sacrifice would later be incorporated into the sacrificial system.⁷ The splitting of the larger animals in two was the symbolic shedding of blood – necessary for the forgiveness of sins.⁸ The animals that Abraham does not split in two (the birds) were animals that remained whole and intact when brought for sacrifice under the Mosaic law.⁹

Conclusion

The entire account of the Abrahamic covenant was one of foreshadowing and pointing toward that which was to come. The symbolism of the entire sacrifice pointed

6. A. Edersheim, *Bible History: Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 90.

7. Keil and Delitzsch, 136.

8. Hebrews 9:22

9. Keil and Delitzsch, 136.

toward a covenant which God alone would fulfill and in which man was the sole beneficiary. God assumed the penalty justly to be imposed upon mankind, while man receives all the blessings that belong to the covenant keeper. In addition, there was a delay in the sacrifice and the covenant ceremony. Abraham was required to wait, watch, and guard until God appeared. This points toward the waiting, watching, and guarding that occurred between the promise of the Messiah and God's fulfillment of His plan. A secondary application of this might be the waiting, watching, and guarding that Christians do as we anticipate the return of Christ, when all covenants will meet their final consummation. The animals pointed toward the sacrifices that were to come and the ultimate Sacrifice that was to come. Abraham was blessed to be a blessing, which is exactly the same charge for modern day Christians. In many ways, the early great commission was seen in the Abrahamic covenant. The covenant with Abraham has far deeper implications than simply being the beginning of a nation. It pointed to what was happening in the present, while ultimately directing us to see what is not yet. In it, the gospel was unveiled as being a blood sacrifice because of the breaking of the covenant (sin) which was fulfilled by the one party who never failed to uphold His end.

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