

## GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

JEFFREY J. NIEHAUS\*

How many covenants did God make with Abraham? Readers of the Bible for many generations have thought that God made one covenant with Abraham, and so they have spoken of “the Abrahamic covenant.” More recently, some scholars have proposed that God made more than one covenant with Abraham, and they find in Genesis 15, 17, and 22 sufficient material to invite or to bolster such an understanding. Those chapters offer enough data, some of them overlapping, to make the construction of an argument for two Abrahamic covenants possible, as, for example, Paul Williamson and Scott Hahn and others have done.<sup>1</sup> We will see that such arguments are in a sense inductive, leading toward a conclusion by a selection and reassembly of biblical data. Procedurally, this is not much different from the method of scholars who, for example, construct two Flood accounts (“J” and “P”) out of the repetitive material offered in Genesis 6–8.<sup>2</sup> In both cases there is sufficient material, with a mix of overlapping data and distinctive data, to make the reconstruction possible. This, however, does not mean that the reconstruction is correct, since such an approach may be flawed on other grounds.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to suggest another approach, which does not follow an inductive course but rather a deductive one. A deductive approach begins with what the Bible actually tells us about the number of God’s covenants with Abraham. Accordingly, we note that the Bible only ever refers to “the Lord’s covenant (sg.) with Abraham.”<sup>4</sup> I propose that this datum should be the governing consideration in any subsequent analysis. In other words, rather than taking Genesis 15, 17, and 22, and seeing whether one might construe two or even three covenants from them, let us take the biblical affirmation of the Lord’s *covenant* (sg.) with Abraham as the idea by

\* Jeffrey Niehaus is professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 130 Essex Street, South Hamilton, MA 01982.

<sup>1</sup> See Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 89–91; Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2009) 101–35.

<sup>2</sup> I would be quick to affirm, however, that Williamson does not espouse the “Documentary Hypothesis,” although Hahn, with his canonical approach, seems comfortable working with it. The concept of canonical criticism, as evinced by Childs and practiced by him and others, is I believe deeply flawed, and deserves consideration in a separate article.

<sup>3</sup> For example a documentary analysis of the Flood narrative produces two distinct accounts but shares the foundational flaw of the whole literary critical approach: a lack of regard for what is now understood of style (including the use of divine names) and the relation of style to authorship in the ancient Near East.

<sup>4</sup> That is, in Exod 2:24, Lev 26:42, 2 Kgs 13:23, 1 Chr 16:16, Ps 105:9, and Acts 3:25. See my own earlier discussion, Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “Covenant and Narrative, God and Time,” *JETS* 53 (2010) 535–59, esp. 242–50.

which we understand the materials of the Genesis chapters. If we do, the result will be that their data may properly be seen as all part of one covenant.<sup>5</sup>

It is probably fair to say that people have heretofore thought the Lord made a covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, and then over time added supplemental information, including name changes, requirements and promises, in Genesis 17 and 22.<sup>6</sup> This paper will seek to reaffirm that older understanding which is still held by many. Part of our procedure will be to recognize that the Lord subsequently behaved in a similar fashion in the two special grace covenants that established the OT and the NT forms of God's kingdom, that is, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant respectively. In both cases, after the covenant was made (or "cut," to use biblical parlance), the Lord added subsequent requirements and promises—for example, in the new covenant the Lord added the requirement of baptism after the "cutting" of the covenant, just as he had added the Sabbath requirement (as a covenant sign, Exod 31:16) after the "cutting" of the Mosaic covenant, and the requirement of circumcision after the "cutting" of the Abrahamic covenant. We will enter into such matters in detail below.

## I. THE LORD'S SINGULAR COVENANT WITH ABRAM

I noted in a previous article that the Bible only refers to the Lord's covenant with Abraham in the singular. The few relevant passages deserve attention in their own right, so that we can understand their import for the issue at hand.

1. *The Lord's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.* The OT refers in several places to the Lord's covenant with the patriarchs, and it is a simple but important matter to understand how this can be so. How can the Lord refer to his "covenant," in the singular, with father, son, and grandson? We read in Exod 2:24 that "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob." Shortly thereafter the Lord refers to his singular covenant with the patriarchs: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty .... I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners" (Exod 6:3–4). We are told in 2 Kgs 13:23 that "the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To this day he has been unwilling to destroy them or banish them from his presence." First Chronicles 16:16 refers in parallel terms to "the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac" as does Ps 105:9.<sup>7</sup> Similarly in the NT, Peter declares, "And you are heirs of the prophets and of *the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed"*" (Acts

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<sup>5</sup> Recognition that the covenantal data are presented as parts of a historical and narrative sequence contributes to such an understanding; see further below.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 77, who affirms this view, saying in his summary discussion of Genesis 17, "This chapter is merely a reaffirmation of the material of Gen. 12 and 15." See likewise the more extensive discussion by Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1994) 28–32, esp. 29 (regarding Genesis 17); 96–118 (regarding Genesis 22).

<sup>7</sup> "Oath" can be a synecdoche for covenant and has been often recognized as such.

3:25, citing Gen 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). One thing becomes quickly clear as we consider these statements. They not only refer to God's covenant with Abraham in the singular. They also refer to God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the singular. Peter makes the same point when he refers to "the covenant God made with your fathers" and lest there be any lack of clarity as to who the "fathers" are, he qualifies that covenant by adding: "He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed,"" thus indicating, to use the OT phrasing, the "covenant [God] made with [the fathers] Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."<sup>8</sup>

Peter's statement deserves further comment. It is in fact nicely parallel, and when we understand the parallelism we understand something about the phraseology of the Abrahamic covenant. The equation he makes is as follows:

a	b	c
"the covenant	God made	with your fathers"
b'	c'	a'
"He said	to Abraham	through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed"

Peter parallels the promise of universal blessing with "the covenant [God made with your fathers]." God first promised this blessing to Abram when he initiated special relations with him in Gen 12:3b. The promise is repeated in Gen 22:18 (by the Lord to Abraham), and 26:4 (by the Lord to Isaac in renewal of the Abrahamic covenant).<sup>9</sup> This is the background to Peter's statement. That is why he can equate what God "said *to Abraham*" with "the covenant God made *with your fathers*," since the promise entailed in the covenant was repeated to Abraham's offspring (Isaac) in a renewal of the Abrahamic covenant.

We must note further that when the Lord made this promise to Isaac, it was in the context of other promises of the Abrahamic covenant:

"For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed." (Gen 26:3b-4)

Three major promises of the Abrahamic covenant are repeated here: "I will give all these lands" (Gen 26:3b; cf. Gen 15:18, reaffirmed in Gen 17:8); "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen 26:4a; cf. Gen 15:5,

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<sup>8</sup> We find a variant phrasing in Lev 26:42, where God says, "I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land." As I have indicated, God did indeed make a covenant with each of the patriarchs, but the covenants he made with Isaac and with Jacob were renewals of the covenant he made with Abraham. A covenant and its renewal constitute one legal package, that is, one entity, and so the usual expression is, e.g., "his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob" (Exod 2:24). Cf. Niehaus, "Covenant and Narrative" 547-48.

<sup>9</sup> It is echoed when Abraham blesses Isaac (Gen 27:29a), a blessing which also echoes Gen 12:3 (Gen 27:29c).

reaffirmed in Gen 22:17); and “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (promised in Gen 12:3 and Gen 22:18). Since these promises of universal blessing and of numerous offspring and possession of the land all occur in the one covenant renewal with Isaac, and the Lord promised and repeated them to Abraham in Genesis 15, 17 and 22, it makes perfect sense to understand that, as they were all included in the one covenant renewal with Isaac, so they were all included in God’s one covenant with Abraham before.<sup>10</sup> In the covenant renewal with Isaac, the Lord groups all three things under the heading of “the oath I swore to your father Abraham,” and it is well understood that “oath” in covenantal matters can serve as synecdoche (*pars pro toto*), indicating the covenant as a whole, so that the Lord is saying in effect, “the covenant I swore/made with your father Abraham.”<sup>11</sup> It also makes perfect sense for Peter to mention God’s promise of universal blessing to Abraham and refer to it as the singular “covenant God made with your fathers” (Acts 3:25). He selects the promise of universal blessing as *pars pro toto* for the Abrahamic covenant (which had other promises and also had requirements) because that is the relevant part of the Abrahamic covenant on the occasion at which he speaks: the universal blessing promised to Abraham has begun with Pentecost—the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh through faith in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Incidentally, I have noted before that the material in Gen 12:1–3 initiates the Lord’s relations with Abram, but it is not yet the Abrahamic covenant, because the Abrahamic covenant is “cut” in Gen 15:18.<sup>13</sup> In Gen 12:1 the Lord told Abram to leave his homeland, and in Gen 12:2–3 he made certain promises to Abram. We do not yet have a covenant, however, but only the start of a pre-covenantal relationship. Put another way, all of this is part of the Lord’s “engagement” with Abram. When God finally “cuts” a covenant with Abram (Gen 15:18), the historical prologue of that covenant refers back to this pre-covenantal relationship (or “engagement”): “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it” (Gen 15:7, referring back to Gen 12:1, 7).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> All three are also grouped together when the Lord renews the covenant with Jacob: “‘I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring,’ that is: land for the descendants (28:13), numerous offspring (28:14a), and universal blessing (28:14b).

<sup>11</sup> Suzerains in Assyrian tradition, for example, often noted that when they had conquered a kingdom and brought it into vassal status, they made the newly created vassal king “swear the oath of the great gods,” that is, the deities which were witnesses to the newly made suzerain–vassal treaty. Cf. Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004) 38–50; cf. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (2 vols., Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972) 1.103, 2.13.

<sup>12</sup> By which faith people are saved—we are saved—and so become Abraham’s offspring, since, like him, we “believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6, Gal 3:6).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Niehaus, “Covenant and Narrative” 543–44.

<sup>14</sup> Failure to understand the difference between a pre-covenantal relationship, which may include promises and commands, on the one hand, and a covenantal relationship, which takes the prior relationship to a different level entailing different privileges and responsibilities, on the other, has led to some misunderstandings of the relationship between Gen 12:1–3 and Genesis 15. So Gerard van Groningen,

As I have suggested elsewhere, the fact that God renews with Isaac and Jacob the covenant he originally made with Abraham explains how a biblical writer (Moses in Exod 2:24) or speaker (Peter in Acts 3:25) can refer to the Lord's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (or "with your fathers," Acts 3:25) in the singular. A covenant and its renewal form one legal package. So the Lord makes a covenant with Israel at Sinai, and he makes another covenant with Israel on the plains of Moab (i.e., Deuteronomy). The latter is a renewal of the former, as the many repetitions of its stipulations (with the Decalogue as the parade example) make clear. Although the Lord made both the Sinai covenant and its renewal (the Moab covenant), and although those are indeed two covenants, the Lord subsequently refers to them as one, namely, "the covenant [sg.] I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt" (Jer 31:32; cf. Heb 8:7–13). They are referred to in the singular because a covenant and its renewal function as one legal package, and both are binding on the vassal.<sup>15</sup>

2. *A covenant with supplements.* We noted above the concept: the Lord made a covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, and then over time added supplemental information, including name changes, requirements, and promises, in Genesis 17 and 22. We observed that the Lord subsequently behaved in a similar fashion in the two special grace covenants that established the OT and the NT forms of God's kingdom, that is, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant respectively. This behavior seems to be part of God's pedagogical way with his people, and may be outlined broadly as follows:

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*From Creation to Consummation* (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 1996) 1.212–13, comments on Gen 12:1–3, "Three important factors should be recognized. First, Yahweh God did establish a specific relationship with Abraham when he called him. Second, this relationship included various integral elements. Third, this relationship served as an administrative and redeeming means. These three in combination certainly lead to one conclusion: Yahweh God initiated and established his covenant in a substantial manner with Abraham. Ratifying 'ceremonies' were included in the reiteration and explication of the various elements (Genesis 15, 17, 22, 26)." This analysis fails at the outset because it does not recognize that while Yahweh appeared in Genesis 12 to initiate a special grace relationship with Abram, and while he gave him commands and promises, these things altogether *do not constitute a covenant*. The Lord did *the same thing with Israel* (gave them promises and instructions, and even redeemed them from Egypt) *before* they agreed to enter into covenant with him at Sinai. Before Sinai, the Lord had certainly initiated a relationship with Israel, but until the covenant was cut at Sinai, the covenant did not exist. What existed was a pre-covenantal relationship, which was a good thing, certainly, but not yet a covenant. So, the covenant cutting in Genesis 15 does not ratify a covenant made in Genesis 12, any more than the covenant cutting in Exodus 20 ratifies a covenant made in the preceding chapters of Exodus. In both cases, the Lord initiates a relationship and thus "engages" the vassal-to-be. He then, later, cuts the covenant and, to carry on the analogy, "marries" the vassal (cf., e.g., Ezek 16:8: "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine"). In each case also, when the Lord cuts the covenant, he refers back to the pre-covenantal relationship in the historical prologue of the newly made covenant (the historical prologue, we note, recalls the relations between the suzerain-to-be and the vassal-to-be *before they entered into covenant*), e.g.: "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur" (Gen 15:7, referring back to Gen 12:1), and, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt" (Exod 20:2, referring back to Exod 12:31–42, etc.).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the discussion in Niehaus, "Covenant and Narrative" 547–48.

Covenant	Covenant-making	Further covenant <i>torah</i>
Abrahamic	Genesis 15	Genesis 17, 22
Mosaic	Exodus 20–24	Exodus 25–Deuteronomy
New	Matthew 27–28	Romans–Revelation

When the Lord makes his covenant with Israel through Moses, he also prepares a temple for his presence, because the goal of the covenant is to establish relations between him and Israel so that they may be his people and he may be their God and dwell among them.<sup>16</sup> The better fulfillment of this so-called “covenant formula” occurs in the NT, where the temple presence of the Lord is the individual believer and the church corporately. In both cases, the Lord’s temple presence can occur once the covenant has been cut. But even in his covenant with Abram, the Lord anticipated such a reality when he caused Abraham to go to Moriah with Isaac and initiate the symbolic sacrifice on a mountain which would be the future site of the Davidic/Solomonic temple (and cf. David’s anticipatory acquisition of, and altar building *cum* sacrifice on, the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, 2 Sam 24:18–25). Likewise, in his covenant with David, the Lord also anticipated the temple and, subsequent to the covenant making, gave instruction for it. The Lord behaves according to the same pattern in all four cases, and this behavior can also be diagrammed as follows:

Covenant	Covenant-cutting	Temple matters
Abrahamic	Gen 15:18	Genesis 22
Mosaic	Exodus 20–24	Exodus 25ff
Davidic	2 Sam 7:1–17	1 Chr 28:11–19
New	Matthew 27–28	Acts 2:1–4

In the Abrahamic administration no temple is built, so there are no instructions for temple-building. Likewise in the new covenant, the Lord constitutes as temples those made in his image and likeness, so again no instruction for temple-building appears. The Lord does give certain instructions in those cases, however. In the Abrahamic covenant, he tells Abraham *where to go* for the sacrifice. In the new covenant, he tells the people *what to do*—namely, wait—for the temple institution. In the Mosaic covenant, on the other hand, the Lord gives instructions for the temple construction and furnishings, and the same is true in the case of the Davidic covenant, as David makes clear in 1 Chr 28:11–19. It should be noted that the Davidic covenant does not replace the Mosaic, but is rather a special administration (having to do with the royal line) under the Mosaic covenant, as David himself was under the Mosaic law. Nevertheless, the Davidic covenant does entail a *change of temple*, from the tabernacle to the to-be-built Solomonic temple. Moreover, the

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<sup>16</sup> For this “covenant formula,” cf. Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: an Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), a detailed presentation of the formula, its variants and its occurrences, although distorted by a higher critical perspective.

temple is built by one who is a son of David and whose name means “His peace.” The Christology of these facts should be clear: the new covenant also entails a *change of temple*, and the one who builds that temple is also a son of David and is the “Prince of Peace,” the one who promises a peace the world cannot understand.

3. *Engagement, covenant, and supplemental Torah: the overlap between Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22.* We have characterized the Lord’s initiation of personal relations with Abram in Genesis 12 as an engagement. Before the Lord revealed himself to Abram in Gen 12:1, he was indeed Abram’s Suzerain—just as he was Suzerain to everyone on the planet. All people were in Abram’s day—and are in our day—vassals to the Lord under the Adamic and Noahic covenants. Those covenants are ongoing, and will continue until the Lord returns to establish a new heavens and earth. Once he does so, the covenants that governed the old heavens and earth will no longer function (e.g. we will no longer be fruitful and multiply [Gen 1:28; 9:1] but will be like the angels in heaven who neither marry nor are given in marriage [Matt 22:30]; the shedding of human blood [Gen 9:6] will no longer be an issue, because in the new world there will be no killers, but we will reflect the Lord’s glory and be like him, who, unlike Satan, was not a murderer from the beginning).

Genesis 12, then, marks an inbreaking by the Lord to initiate *personal relations* with Abram. This initiation of relations is not yet a covenant, but it does contain commands and promises. As Abram’s Suzerain under common grace, the Lord has every right to give him commands (e.g., leave your homeland, go to the land I will show you). As the Lord of creation, he also has every authority to give promises and, later, to fulfill them. The promises he makes in Genesis 12 are taken up again in Genesis 15 and 22, and, moreover, there is overlap between promises in these chapters and Genesis 17. The overlapping of statements is consistent with the understanding that Genesis 12 is the Lord’s start of pre-covenantal relations with Abram, Genesis 15 is the cutting of the covenant, and Genesis 17 and 22 offer supplemental *torah* in the context of further revelation by the Lord as he encounters Abraham later in his life and even leads him through certain life experiences (e.g. the Moriah episode). The overlap of promises may be listed as follows:

“I will bless”	12:2			22:17
Numerous descendants	12:2	15:5	17:2b.4–5	22:17
Land as possession	12:7	15:18–21	17:8	22:17
Universal blessing	12:3			22:18

The overlap of elements should make several things clear. First, the promise of numerous descendants is made in Genesis 12 and repeated in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. The sharing of the promise by the passages is consistent with the idea that the Lord made only one covenant with Abraham, a covenant which bade fair to realize the promise the Lord had made in Genesis 12 before the covenant was cut. Likewise, the promise of land made in Gen 12:7 is repeated in Genesis 15 and 17 (and 22), and this suggests that Genesis 15 and 17 do not enshrine different covenants, but that Genesis 17 reaffirms and adds further data to the covenant cut in Genesis 15.

One may argue that Genesis 22 presents us with something that implies a different covenant from the one cut in Genesis 15. That something is the reiteration of the promise that all nations will be blessed through Abraham (Gen 12:3//Gen 22:18). However, we have already noted that the promise of universal blessing and the promises of numerous offspring and possession of the land all occur in the one covenant renewal with Isaac (Gen 26:3b–4) and again in one covenant renewal with Jacob (Gen 28:13–14). It makes sense to understand that, as they were all included in each of the individual covenant renewals with Isaac and Jacob, so they were all included in God’s one original covenant with Abraham before. The same is true of the statement of the Lord’s blessing on Abram/Abraham (Gen 12:2//22:17). The blessing in Gen 22:17 prefaces and includes two promises already made in Genesis 15 and 17. The first part of the blessing, Gen 22:17b (“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky”) repeats the promise of Gen 15:5. The second part of the blessing in Gen 22:17c (“Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies”) gives point to the promise made in Gen 15:18 and 17:8. These are then followed by the third part of the blessing, that “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gen 22:18). Since all three things are included under the topic of the Lord’s blessing, and since they establish connections not only with Genesis 12 but also with Genesis 15 and 17, it seems reasonable to associate them all as material relevant to one Abrahamic covenant, just as, again, all three of them occur later in each of the individual covenant renewals with Isaac (Gen 26:3b–4) and Jacob (Gen 28:13–14). Finally, and perhaps most conclusively, we note that this threefold blessing comes under the aegis of the *oath* which the Lord swears in Gen 22:16a (“I swear by myself, declares the Lord”). This, again, parallels the statement of the threefold promise under the heading of the “oath” (synecdoche for “covenant”) the Lord swore to Abraham as reported in the covenant renewal with Isaac (Gen 26:3b–5). In fact, Genesis 22 gives us both an oath and, under it, a summary of the three great Abrahamic promises forecast in Genesis 12, and so it forms a sort of *inclusio* for the Abrahamic material, from the initial promises of Genesis 12, through the covenant cutting of Genesis 15 and the supplemental data of Genesis 17, to the summary statement of the Abrahamic covenant’s triple promise, now concluded with an oath.<sup>17</sup> Once we understand that we are dealing with a narrative corpus that reports God’s covenantal activity with Abraham, we understand also that Gen 22:18 rounds that corpus off with a divine oath. By the same token, the self-imprecatory covenant cutting passage of Gen 15:17 is not, as Lohfink reasoned, an oath, but a ceremony symbolizing the cutting of the covenant.<sup>18</sup> God’s oath appears later, in Gen 22:18.

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<sup>17</sup> One of my students put the matter quite well in a recent paper: “By God’s oath in Gen 22, we understand that all of the promises of Gen 12 have been made into part of God’s covenant with Abraham” (Anna Moseley Gissing, “Divine-Human Covenants: A Survey,” submitted to Dr. J. J. Niehaus in partial fulfillment of requirements for NT/OT 795: Seminar in Biblical Theology, April 30, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Norbert Lohfink, *Die Landverheissung als Eid* (SBS 28; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967). Lohfink views all of the material from a higher critical perspective and because of that is unable to appreciate the unity of the Abrahamic narrative materials, let alone the original unity of Genesis 15 (cf. 45–48 on the passage’s structure; cf. on Genesis 15 as narrative: “Gn 15 ist nicht Erzählung im strengen



4. *The covenant of circumcision.* When Stephen gives his testimony before the Sanhedrin, a salvation history review which upbraids his fellow Jews for being no better than their fathers who persecuted the prophets, he comments that God “gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8). By now we have seen enough of terminological usage in the Bible (e.g. Exod 2:24 as compared with Lev 26:42, above) to know Stephen’s words need not imply that Genesis 17 enshrines a different covenant from the one the Lord “cut” in Genesis 15. Every case of a term’s or a phrase’s usage must be evaluated in light of a proper understanding of its other occurrences. In Stephen’s case, his evocation of circumcision as a reminder of Israel’s distinctness and privilege *vis-à-vis* the nations is simply an allusion by synecdoche (part for the whole) to the whole Abrahamic covenant (which has been mentioned in the singular in the examples already noted). We should further note that Stephen’s address, as a brief synopsis of salvation history, cannot help but be laconic, so we should not expect it to offer a full portrayal of the Abrahamic covenant in all of its aspects. Furthermore, he could mix and put into improper sequence the events of that history, as when he puts Abraham’s call out of his homeland before his settlement in Haran, getting the order of events precisely backwards (Acts 7:2–4a; cf. Gen 11:31–12:1). This error on his part may well be attributed to the passion of the moment as he addresses his adversaries in a perilous situation. In any case, it would be a mistake to interpret the sequence of Gen 11:31–12:1 by what Stephen said in Acts 7:2–4a, and by the same token it would be a mistake to interpret the scope of the Abrahamic covenant by his allusion to it as “the covenant of circumcision.” Stephen’s speech tells us what he remembered and how he remembered it and what he thought important for the occasion at hand. The NT records those sentiments and ideas faithfully, just as it records faithfully the ideas and sentiments of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who, however, were deficient in their understanding of some very important matters.

5. *Galatians 3 and the Abrahamic covenant.* Paul’s argument in Galatians 3 makes it clear that he thought of only one Abrahamic covenant. He argues that the Mosaic law which was given after Abraham does not set aside the Abrahamic covenant: “What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise” (Gal

Sinn des Wortes. Das Gewicht liegt ganz auf Jahwereden, die zusammengestellt sind. Es wird mit vorgeprägtem Sprachmaterial, vor allem aus dem Kult, gearbeitet”; p. 114). His laborious study ends up conflating categories and thus misunderstanding the solemnizing ritual of Gen 15:17 as evidence that the idiom, *kerit brit*, means “oath” in the passage: “Wir können zusammenfassend sagen, daß sich *kerit brit* nicht vom Grundsinn her, sondern erst in gegebenem Zusammenhang als ‘Bund schliessen’ (nämlich, ‘Bund durch Eidablegung schliessen’) verstehen läßt. Die eigentliche Bedeutung ist die der Selbst- oder Fremdverpflichtung, meistens durch Eid—in dem Fall, von dem der Ausdruck hergenommen ist, durch Eid unter Setzung des Selbstverfluchungssymbols der zu durchschreitenden zerteilten Tiere. ‘Verheißten’ allein heißt *kerit brit* nicht, es meint immer die Verstärkung und Absicherung einer Verheissung oder Zusage durch Eid oder ähnliches” (p. 107; cf. p. 117: “Der Ausdruck *brit* in Gn 15,18 kann nicht mit ‘Bund,’ ‘Vatergottreligion’ oder ‘Verheißung’ übersetzt werden, sondern verlangt die Übersetzung ‘Eid’”). Even if one goes so far as to think the ritual cutting involved in covenant making implies—or at the utmost symbolizes—an oath, the cutting is an act and the oath is a word, and in the Abrahamic materials they are both clearly, and separately, portrayed—the “cutting” in Gen 15:18, the oath in Gen 22:18.

3:17). It should be noted that Paul virtually equates the Abrahamic covenant and the promise of the Spirit, because the great salvation promise of the Abrahamic covenant, the blessing to all the nations, comes when they receive the Spirit through faith in Christ. The passage at hand makes this clear (Gal 3:14–18):

“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”

We note an important parallelism in verse 14:

a	b	c
the blessing given to Abraham	might come to the Gentiles	through Christ
c'	b'	a'
by faith	we might receive	the promise of the Spirit

The parallelism shows clearly enough that “the blessing given to Abraham” is paralleled by and thus identified with “the promise of the Spirit.” Paul shows that “the blessing//Spirit” “might come to the Gentiles//we might receive” “through Christ//by faith.” This blessing was promised as one of several “promises” (Gal 3:16) of the Abrahamic covenant. We turn now to those promises.

Paul mentions both “the promises ... spoken to Abraham” (v. 16) and “the inheritance ... God in his grace gave ... to Abraham through a promise” (v. 18). The “promises” are those made to Abraham which are relevant to Christ, who received them: many offspring (through faith), blessing to the nations (accomplished by the Spirit who through faith in Christ produces the “offspring”), and kingship (Christ, the royal offspring *par excellence*). The singular “promise” mentioned in verse 18 is that of the Spirit, whose work and gracious nature Paul emphasizes in Galatians (cf. Gal 3:1–5). Both “the promises” and the paramount “promise” are made in the Abrahamic covenant—a singular covenant which, as Paul says, is not set aside by the Mosaic law but continues until its fulfillment in Christ.

Since Christ has fulfilled it, the Abrahamic covenant no longer continues as a functioning covenant, as I have argued elsewhere. The logic of this statement should be obvious, but further support for it can be found in the discontinuation of circumcision as a covenant sign. At this point it will be useful to review the Genesis 17 statements about circumcision:

“Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant

with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

It is clear from the above (and especially v. 14) that an uncircumcised male may not be a member of the Lord's covenant with Abraham.<sup>19</sup> Circumcision, then, is necessary for membership in the Abrahamic covenant. But the teaching of the new covenant repudiates circumcision. If then the sign required for membership in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:10) has been abrogated (Gal 5:10–12), it follows that membership in the Abrahamic covenant is no longer possible.<sup>20</sup> Rather, one seeks admission to the new covenant, in which all of the promises made in the Abrahamic covenant have been fulfilled and thus, in a sense, live on, as Christ lives and as believers live in him.

6. *Romans 4 and the Abrahamic covenant.* Paul's memorable argument in Romans 4 also makes a case for the idea that the Lord made only one covenant with Abraham. He states that circumcision was a sign of the righteousness Abraham had by faith before he was circumcised. This statement connects the circumcision of Genesis 17 with the faith-righteousness of Genesis 15 in a way that indicates, as we have said, that there is only one Abrahamic covenant:

“We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Rom 4:9b–12)

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<sup>19</sup> We note that the phrase “everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:13) could be translated in a different and better way. The Hebrew word, *‘olam*, can mean “everlasting,” but fundamentally means of indeterminate but long duration (e.g. “Then his people recalled the days of old (Heb *‘olam*), the days of Moses [and] his people”; Isa 63:11). Whether *‘olam* means “everlasting” or simply chronologically remote is determined either by its immediate context (as in Isa 63:11) or by some other biblical statement that sheds further light on it (as Paul's rejection of circumcision for the church does in the case of Gen 17:13 and Lev 12:3). Cf. Niehaus, “Covenant and Narrative” 542, n. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Niehaus, “Covenant and Narrative” 550. Paul renounces circumcision in the strongest possible terms: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:10–12). Although his emphasis is on the circumcision required by the Mosaic covenant (Lev 12:3), he precludes admission to both the Mosaic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant when he abrogates circumcision.

First, it is clear that circumcision, which is indicated in a *pars pro toto* expression as the Lord's covenant in Genesis 17 ("This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised," Gen 17:10), is not a sign of a different covenant from the one "cut" in Genesis 15, but rather a *sign of the righteousness he had by faith*, with which Abram entered the covenant made in Genesis 15. Second, Paul makes clear that both the faith-righteousness and the sign and seal of it (circumcision) figure in Abraham's fatherhood to those who would be saved by faith, whether circumcised or not. Paul's chiasmic statement (Rom 4:11b–12a) illustrates the point:

a	b	c
He is the father	of all who believe	but have not been circumcised
a'	c'	b'
He is the father	of those who have been circumcised	and also believe

Circumcision is not the sign of a different Abrahamic covenant, but the sign of the faith with which Abram entered the one and only Abrahamic covenant, cut in Genesis 15. As mediator of that covenant, he is the father both of those who, like him, would be justified by faith without circumcision (as in Genesis 15), and those who, like him, would be circumcised (as per Genesis 17), but have the faith Abram had when the covenant was cut (in Genesis 15). Those who have such faith are the true offspring of Abraham, being saved by a faith like Abraham's, as Paul argues in Galatians.

## II. ABRAHAMIC COVENANT: UNCONDITIONAL *AND* CONDITIONAL

Our consideration of circumcision in Genesis 17 naturally evokes the question of conditionality (which the institution of circumcision seems to imply) in the Abrahamic covenant. On the other hand, what has been called the self-imprecatory oath-passage of Genesis 15 seems to imply unconditionality: the Lord himself will take the place of the fallible vassal and pass between the pieces, and thus guarantee the continuation of the covenant. This contrast, of course, has led some to see two different covenants in Genesis 15 and 17.

In the title to this section we used the phrasing, "unconditional *and* conditional," rather than the phrasing, "unconditional *or* conditional," because it is not either-or: it is both-and. The Abrahamic covenant is both unconditional and conditional. It is unconditional in the sense that the Lord, having instituted it, will see it through until it has accomplished its purpose. It will not fail. It is conditional in the sense that any individual who participates in it may drop out of it by covenant-

breaking. That is, the individual may fail.<sup>21</sup> For the Abrahamic covenant to be both unconditional and conditional, however, two things must also be true. The first is that Genesis 15, 17, and 22 are all part of one covenant the Lord made with Abraham—a covenant with supplements, as we have said. The second is that materials contained in that one covenant can be shown to require Abraham's obedience (and likewise the obedience of other and subsequent members of the Abrahamic covenant) to divine conditions.<sup>22</sup> We believe the Bible makes it very clear that the Lord made only one covenant with Abraham, and this article has been devoted to showing the several decisive biblical statements in that regard. It remains to show that the Lord made various requirements of Abraham (and other covenant members) within the context, and as part of, the Abrahamic covenant.

Ronald Youngblood some years ago made a well substantiated case for the conditional aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, while also recognizing its unconditional aspect in much the same terms as we have stated above.<sup>23</sup> He identified fifteen passages in the OT which, he said, indicated the conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>24</sup> In our judgment, the first four of these are mistaken, and it will be worthwhile to discuss them in passing.

The first exemplar is the pair of commands in Genesis 12: "Leave your country ... and go" (Gen 12:1), and "Be a blessing" (Gen 12:2). Youngblood himself recognizes that "formalizing a covenant (Genesis 15) assumes previous (Genesis 12) as well as present and future relationships."<sup>25</sup> This is in line with our understanding that Genesis 12 gives us data regarding the pre-covenantal relationship which the Lord initiated with Abram. Accordingly, Yahweh's commands to Abram in Genesis 12 are commands given in the context of the common grace (Adamic and Noahic) covenants, under which Abram was the Lord's vassal, as was (and is) everyone on the planet. They are not commands or conditions given under the Abrahamic covenant, because the Abrahamic covenant did not yet exist.

<sup>21</sup> Of course God is in a different sense the *conditio sine qua non* of every divine-human covenant just as he is the ground of all being (*Seinsgrund*), so Paul notes in Athens quoting the Greek philosopher Epimenides, "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

<sup>22</sup> We stipulate as to the unconditional aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, indicated by the so-called oath passage in the Genesis 15 "cutting." For earlier discussion of these ideas and of the presence of conditions in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants cf. David N. Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: one Covenant Theme," *Int* 18 (1964) 426 ("The fate of individual kings or claimants was not guaranteed, but in the end the divine promise would be fulfilled," speaking of the Davidic covenant); Bruce K. Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison* (ed. A. Gileadi; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 129 ("YHWH explains [in Gen 18:19] that his grant extends only to those within Abraham's household who behave ethically").

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Youngblood, "The Abrahamic Covenant: Conditional or Unconditional?," in *The Living and Active Word of God: Essays in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz* (ed. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983). Youngblood notes that "a covenant that is everlasting from the divine standpoint may in the course of time be broken by sinful human beings" (p. 41). We would only disagree that the Abrahamic covenant, though of long duration (*olam*), is not everlasting (*olam*); cf. above.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 36–38.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

The second exemplar is Gen 12:7, in which we read that Abram “built an altar ... to the Lord” at Shechem. Youngblood remarks, “In so doing he acknowledged Yahweh as his God and further demonstrated his intention to serve him.”<sup>26</sup> However, this altar building also takes place under the common grace regime established by the Adamic and Noachic covenants. Although Abram’s act shows the acknowledgement and intention noted by Youngblood, they are not acts which fulfill any conditions of the Abrahamic covenant, since that covenant had not yet been “cut.”

The third exemplar occurs in Gen 14:22–23, where Abram vows to “the Lord, God most high,” that he will not accept anything from the king of Sodom. Youngblood comments that “such an oath presupposes obedience as well as commitment.”<sup>27</sup> Although this may be the case, it is still obedience to the Lord with whom Abram is in covenant under the Adamic and Noachic covenants. Again, the Abrahamic covenant has not yet been “cut” (Gen 15:18).

Finally, Youngblood cites the Lord’s command in Gen 15:9–10, “The Lord said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon,’ which Abram then cuts, arranging the halves opposite each other.”<sup>28</sup> This case comes closest to being an example of obedience (i.e. fulfillment of a condition or requirement) under the Abrahamic covenant, since it is part of the preparation for that covenant’s ratification. However, precision requires our recognition that here, too, Abram is operating as the Lord’s vassal under the Adamic and Noachic covenants, since, although his treatment of the animals (at the Lord’s command) prepares for the ratification of the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant has not yet been ratified. Obviously, the preparation for the ratification comes before the ratification, and the covenant does not exist until it has been ratified.<sup>29</sup>

The Lord states conditions, or those things in which he requires obedience, in the *torah* that follows the covenant cutting of Genesis 15 (much as he later does in the Mosaic covenant and in the new covenant). Genesis 17 and 22 are the obvious places to look for such conditions, and Youngblood’s next four exemplars come from Genesis 17: the Lord requires Abram to “walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1); he tells Abram, “As for you, you must keep my covenant” (Gen 17:4); he obligates Abraham and the males in his household and his descendants to be circumcised (Gen 17:9–14); and after the Lord commands circumcision we are told of “Abraham’s prompt obedience” to the command (Gen 17:23–27).<sup>30</sup> On the understanding that Genesis 17 gives us further *torah* of the one Abrahamic covenant “cut” in Genesis 15, these four data establish the conditional aspect of that covenant.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Of course it existed in God’s mind before creation, and in God’s experience before creation, too, since all times are present before God.

<sup>30</sup> Youngblood, “Abrahamic Covenant” 37–38.

Perhaps the clearest statement of conditionality comes in Youngblood's ninth exemplar, in which God said of Abraham, "I have chosen him, *so that* he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, *so that* the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Gen 18:19, emphasis added). Youngblood quotes J. Barton Payne, who understands that Abraham had to "walk obediently, in subjection to God's revealed will, if he was to receive the fulfillment of the divine promises."<sup>31</sup> This is not mere legalistic fulfillment, however. God, being outside time, knew that when Abram first expressed faith (Gen 15:6) the faith he expressed was real, because from God's point of view the works which flowed from Abram's faith (and showed that his faith was real) had already been done. For God, outside time, the events of Genesis 17 and 22 were long past, and indeed the eschaton was (and is) already over, since, as Paul says, we have already been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6). So the Lord's election of Abram to become his vassal under the Abrahamic covenant took into account the fruitful (and therefore true) faith which the Lord knew in advance (and simultaneously in retrospect) would characterize (and for God simultaneously in retrospect characterized) the life of Abram/Abraham.<sup>32</sup>

Youngblood's next two exemplars come from Genesis 22. The first is the command-fulfillment sequence wherein the Lord tells Abraham to take his son to Moriah and sacrifice him there (Gen 22:2), and this is followed by "his prompt obedience." Youngblood remarks, "That such obedience springs from divinely-implanted faith in no way negates its reality, its force or its significance."<sup>33</sup> The second exemplar is the Lord's comment on Abraham's obedience, which states that the Lord will bless him and make his descendants as numerous as the stars, will give his descendants possession of their enemies' cities, and will fulfill the promise that through Abraham's offspring all nations on earth will be blessed "because you have obeyed me." The Lord's "triple promise" as Youngblood terms it now comprises the promises made in Genesis 12, 15, and 17 under one concept: Abraham's obedience to the Lord.<sup>34</sup>

Youngblood also notes, as we have above, that the Lord repeats this "triple promise" to Isaac and states again that it is grounded in Abraham's obedience ("because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws," Gen 26:4–5). The Lord's statement to Isaac forms Youngblood's twelfth exemplar.<sup>35</sup> We have discussed this passage earlier in this article and recognized it was a renewal, with Isaac, of the Abrahamic covenant—the "oath" the Lord swore to Abraham which included the three covenant promises (or the "triple promise") found in Genesis 15, 17, and 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 39, quoting J. Barton Payne, "Covenant (in the Old Testament)," *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (ed. C. M. Tenney et al.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 1.1008.

<sup>32</sup> Cf the discussion in Niehaus, "Covenant and Narrative" 550.

<sup>33</sup> Youngblood, "Abrahamic Covenant" 39.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 40.

Youngblood's thirteenth and fourteen exemplars are more questionable. They come from the realms of covenant curse (Deut 28:15–68) and covenant lawsuit (Jer 4:1–2), respectively.<sup>36</sup> However, the covenant to which they most immediately relate is the Mosaic covenant, not the Abrahamic. Regarding Deut 28:15–68, he notes that the promises made to the patriarch could be annulled by national apostasy.<sup>37</sup> Regarding Jer 4:1–2, he connects national obedience under the Mosaic covenant with fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessing:

“If you put your detestable idols out of my sight  
and no longer go astray,  
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way  
you swear, ‘As surely as the Lord lives,’  
then the nations will be blessed by him  
and in him will they glory.” (Jer 4:1–2)

There is, however, a more appropriate way to understand these two exemplars. The body of curses in Deut 28:15–68 show what consequences will befall Israel if they are disobedient to the Mosaic covenant. The conquest of the land is to be fulfilled under that covenant. Therefore the Mosaic covenant is the instrument by which the Lord will realize the promise of the land made in the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>38</sup> With regard to Jer 4:1–2, it is clear that if Israel had—or could have—obeyed the conditions of the Mosaic covenant, the Abrahamic blessing to the nations would have been realized because of their obedience. Of course, they did not and could not—and their failure, as we learn from the NT, came about because no one can be justified by obedience to the law. Israel had no hope of fulfilling the law, which, however, had the pedagogical function of showing them their need for Christ to fulfill it on their behalf.

The fifteenth and final exemplar is a NT refection on Abraham's obedience: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed” (Heb 11:8). As noted above, however, the Lord's call to Abram to leave his homeland, and Abram's obedient response, took place in Genesis 12, be-

<sup>36</sup> I submit that there are two major types of prophet in the Bible, and especially in the OT: covenant mediator prophets, each of whom mediates a covenant from God with respect to himself and contemporary and future people (e.g. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus), and covenant lawsuit prophets or messengers, who bring God's lawsuit against his people (but also bring exhortations to repentance and promises of restoration and hope, and messianic predictions) when they have broken the covenant (the broken covenant being the Mosaic covenant; e.g. Micaiah, Elijah, Elisha, the writing prophets, and, in the NT, John the Baptist; Jesus shows himself in Matthew 23 to be the last and greatest lawsuit prophet under the Mosaic covenant—as he was “born under the law,” Gal 4:4—before he mediates the new covenant).

<sup>37</sup> The promise of the land should, then, be seen as conditional. In fairness to Youngblood he is quoting George Shama on this point, and noting that Shama at that time was counselor at the Jordan Mission in the United Nations (and thus perhaps implying that Shama was tendentious and overstated the case), he concludes that Shama's “understanding of the relationship between the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants is surely on the right track.” Youngblood, “Covenant” 40.

<sup>38</sup> Although an article on the singularity of the Abrahamic covenant may properly explore the matter of unconditionality and conditionality (since both qualities seem to appear in the materials of Genesis 15, 17, and 22), a discussion in detail of the ways the promises of the Abrahamic covenant play out, and perhaps in particular how the promise of the land is fulfilled, is beyond the scope of an article. Youngblood does offer a brief discussion of “Multiple Fulfillments of the Land Promise” (pp. 41–42).



fore the Abrahamic covenant had come into existence (was “cut”), so it cannot be cited as an example of Abraham’s obeying a condition under the Abrahamic covenant. Youngblood comments, “Obedience language presupposes the withholding of promised blessing in the absence of obedience.”<sup>39</sup> This seems to be a fair conclusion, but it still applies to obedience to commands given by the Suzerain of the world before the Abrahamic covenant was “cut.” We would add, as indicated above, that the Lord already knew Abraham’s faith was true (as he knew the obedience that would flow from it) before Abraham was born.

Our twofold proposition, which must be among the simplest of propositions, should be clear. The Abrahamic covenant was unconditional because the Lord would see it through: it would not fail; on the other side of the same coin, the Abrahamic covenant was also conditional: any member of it could fail. Youngblood has done us a service by pointing out and discussing several evidences of conditionality in the Abrahamic covenant, and even his errors, as in his first four (and fifteenth) exemplars, are instructive: they remind us not to categorize data as being part of a covenant when the covenant has not yet been “cut.” We can be grateful that the Lord’s magnificent and unprecedented covenant with Abraham did not depend on fallible humans for its success, even though individuals might drop out of it through rejection (as, for example, Esau rejected his birthright, Gen 25:34).<sup>40</sup> The Abrahamic covenant would accomplish all that it should, no matter what human failures might (and would) occur along the way.

### III. THE COVENANT OF GRANT CONCEPT AND THE DAMAGE IT HAS DONE

Moshe Weinfeld has argued that Genesis 15 enshrines a “covenant of grant” which he says is unconditional.<sup>41</sup> His proposal has arguably muddled discussion of the Abrahamic covenant even while appearing to clarify it, and it has led some scholars to think there is more than one Abrahamic covenant. Although Weinfeld has identified a real type of grant covenant in the ancient Near East, and although certain aspects of the Lord’s covenant with Abraham reflect that type (as he has ably demonstrated), the Abrahamic covenant is not a mere grant and is different in two major respects, as we shall see. We will argue that Weinfeld’s discussion of the

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<sup>39</sup> Youngblood, “Abrahamic Covenant” 41.

<sup>40</sup> And so it is Jacob and not Esau who receives the blessings of international dominion, rule (perhaps implicitly royal), and the blessing/curse formula (“May those who curse you be cursed/and those who bless you be blessed,” Gen 27:29, cf. Gen 12:3a) which hark back to the Abrahamic covenant and its precontractual promises.

<sup>41</sup> M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOs* 90 (1970) 184–203. I have argued elsewhere that Genesis 15 is a narrative account with the structural elements of a second millennium BC suzerain-vassal treaty but that it also contains a “grant” of lands to conquer (Niehaus, “Covenant and Narrative” 543). In other words, the passage is more complex than Weinfeld acknowledges. Likewise, Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (AnBib 21A; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978) 88, disagreeing with Weinfeld in his discussion of the Abba–AN text from the first half of the seventeenth century BC, remarks, “Treaty and grant, therefore, are not simply discreet phenomena. They lie along a continuum in which one leads over into the other.”

Abrahamic covenant has three major flaws: it employs a higher critical perspective which inevitably misunderstands the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and Deuteronomy; it does not recognize the limits of the “covenant of grant” genre; and although it recognizes that the Abrahamic covenant is both unconditional and conditional it fails to understand the *goal* of its unconditionality, namely, the promise of blessing to all nations (a goal to be accomplished by the Lord’s sacrifice of himself—as he symbolically adumbrates by his theophanic passage between the pieces, an act which establishes the unconditional aspect of the covenant).<sup>42</sup>

Since Weinfeld takes a higher critical view of the biblical materials, he is comfortable seeing different sources for (and hence different theologies in) Genesis 15 and Deuteronomy. Under such an approach, Genesis 15 contains an unconditional covenant of grant (analogous to royal grants in Ugarit and elsewhere in the ancient Near East) whereby the Lord guarantees the gift of land, whereas Deuteronomy contains conditions for possession of the land and comes from a different hand.<sup>43</sup> The key issue, then, is the basis on which the land will be possessed by Abraham’s descendants. Weinfeld sees both the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant as covenants of grant, and although we will not explore the Davidic covenant here, we note Weinfeld’s comment on both covenants:

The covenant of promise itself was never formulated as conditional (cf. Gen 15; 2 Sam 7). But Deuteronomy and the deuteronomic school made both the grant of the Land and the promise of dynasty conditional on observance of the Law—in their view the most dominant and fateful factor in the history of Israel.<sup>44</sup>

According to Weinfeld, both the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant are grant-type covenants and both were originally unconditional. Although as we have already stated we will not take up the issue of the Davidic covenant here, we do note that according to Weinfeld the Priestly source added to the Genesis 15 covenant (= “JE”) an implication of dynasty in its royal promise in Genesis 17; and this later, Priestly account of the Abrahamic covenant was, like that in Genesis 15, unconditional.<sup>45</sup>

One would think that the flaws of a higher critical approach to the Pentateuch had been sufficiently exposed even by the time Weinfeld composed his

<sup>42</sup> Cf. further Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 74–81.

<sup>43</sup> A higher critical approach, of course, opens the door to seeing later biblical data (like Deuteronomy) as contradictory to Genesis 15. It also renders biblical theology impossible, and the rise of canonical criticism, for example, has attempted to give the higher critic a way out of this impasse so that he, too, can do a theology of a whole book, or even of the whole OT, and not just a theology of, for example, “D.” We, however, are not bound by such strictures, if we believe that all of Scripture is “God-breathed.” Such a view of the Bible does not entail a “unity of the covenants” in the classic sense meant by covenant theology, but it does enable us to read the Bible as a coherent whole, accept as relevant its perspicuity, and be grateful for its unified and true program of salvation, unfolding through history by a program or plan of interconnected covenants culminating in the new covenant.

<sup>44</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* 81.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

book.<sup>46</sup> A better way to view the materials, consistent with their being “God-breathed” and true, is to understand that the Mosaic covenant was the instrument by which the promise of land to Abraham was to be fulfilled. It was the Mosaic covenant that constituted Abraham’s descendants a people with a unified constitution and commission, rather than just an ethnic collection of tribes in Goshen. Under the aegis and terms of the Mosaic covenant God’s people, by conquest, would fulfill the Abrahamic land promise.

The fact that the land had to be conquered if it was to be possessed constitutes another problem for Weinfeld’s approach. The examples of the “covenant of grant” genre which he adduces are all royal grants of land to people (citizens, vassals) who have in effect earned such a gift by their loyalty to the king. In such cases, no warfare is required for the grantee to possess the land. He simply walks in, as it were, and enjoys ownership of it.

The fact that Israel will have to conquer the land in order to possess it marks a major difference between the “covenants of grant” in the ancient Near East and the Conquest commission implied in the Abrahamic covenant. We are not (yet) in a position to ask Abraham what he thought when the Lord promised that his offspring would possess the lands delineated in Gen 15:18–20, but it probably does him no injustice to assume he understood warfare would be involved—that the inhabitants of the land would not simply recognize that Israel had been given the land by a “grant” and surrender it to them without a fight. Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, there is a better analogy than that of a royal land grant to the Lord’s gift of territory in Gen 15:18–20.<sup>47</sup> The annals of the Assyrian monarch, Tukulti-Ninurta I, report the king’s claim that the gods gave him certain lands in prospect, to conquer and bring under the rule of Assyria and her gods. This theology was hardly uncommon in the ancient Near East, and it provides a more precise analogy to what happens in Genesis 15, which is no mere “grant” for Abram (and/or his descendants) to walk in and enjoy the land in perpetuity. Like the gift of land to Tukulti-Ninurta I by his gods, the gift of the land to Abram by the Lord in Genesis 15 requires that the land be conquered if it is to be possessed, as subsequent revelation makes clear.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the *realization* of the gift of land

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Cyrus Gordon, “Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit,” *CT* 4 (November 23, 1959) 3–5; Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961); cf. subsequently K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1973); idem, *The Bible in Its World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978); G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); and, more generally, K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000); cf. perhaps ironically, earlier, H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament* (London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1950) 46: “That it [the Wellhausen view] is rejected in whole or in part is doubtless true, but there is no view to put in its place that would not be more widely and emphatically rejected ... the Graf–Wellhausen view is only a working hypothesis, which can be abandoned with alacrity when a more satisfying view is found, but which cannot with profit be abandoned until then.”

<sup>47</sup> This remains so even though, as Weinfeld has pointed out, there are many conceptual and phraseological parallels between the ancient Near Eastern covenant of grant and the Lord’s transactions with Abraham. Cf. M. Weinfeld, “Covenant of Grant” 184–203.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. the discussion in Niehaus, “Covenant and Narrative” 244–46.

turns out to be conditional. The generation which came out of Egypt with Moses failed to achieve it (with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb, e.g. Num 14:30–38, 26:65, 32:12) because they lacked faith that the Lord would both fight for them and empower them to wage the needed warfare. In any case, the unqualified royal “grant” explanation of Gen 15:18–20 should be abandoned, because the land must be conquered by Abraham’s obedient descendants in order to be possessed, and the sort of “covenant of grant” to which Weinfeld appeals does not appear to be a genre which imposed warfare on the grantee in order for him to possess the land.

The third problem with Weinfeld’s presentation is that although it recognizes the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional (and yet entails conditions!) it fails to understand one important aspect—indeed, what is arguably the main goal of its unconditionality—namely, the promise of blessing to all nations, which is fulfilled through the new covenant. He comments:

In its original setting the promise of the Land was unconditional, although it presupposed—as we have indicated—loyalty and the fulfillment of some obligations and duties (see Gen. 18:19; Ps. 132:12); the covenant of promise itself was never formulated as conditional.<sup>49</sup>

Since Weinfeld cites Ps 132:12, we note that Ps 132:11–12 seems quite ironic in this regard:

“The LORD swore an oath to David,  
a sure oath he will not revoke:  
‘One of your own descendants  
I will place on your throne.  
<sup>12</sup> If your sons keep my covenant  
and the statutes I teach them,  
then their sons will sit  
on your throne for ever and ever.” (emphases added)

We have already observed that the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional in the sense that God will see it through until it accomplishes all that it should; it will not fail (and the same is true of the Davidic covenant, cf. Ps 132:11). But it is conditional in the sense that an individual may forfeit his place in it; the individual may fail (and the same is true of the Davidic covenant; cf. Ps 132:12). The Abrahamic covenant does not come to an end if an individual member of it betrays (i.e. is disobedient to) the Lord. The individual may indeed “forfeit the gift” of the covenant (as did Esau), but the covenant goes on through history, blessing its other members and culminating in its ultimate fulfillment (in the new covenant).<sup>50</sup> Its fulfillment in the new covenant is the key point which Weinfeld has not understood. He recognizes the self-imprecatory nature of the ceremony in Gen 15:18 and understands that it is in effect a statement of unconditionality. But he attaches the unconditionality of the Abrahamic covenant to the *land*. Since the Lord in Genesis 15 ratifies a

<sup>49</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist* 81.

<sup>50</sup> We note that God knew in advance that *Abraham* would not disobey and thus forfeit the covenant and its promises at its outset; he also knew this in retrospect, and could comment to Isaac how “Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions” (Gen 26:5).

covenant to which he adds supplemental *torah* in Genesis 17 and 22, the oath passage of Gen 15:17 should be seen not simply as rendering unconditional the promise of land which follows it in Gen 15:18–21, but also the promises of an heir and many descendants made earlier in Gen 15:4–5 (and cf. later in Gen 22:17), and indeed proleptically rendering unconditional the promises of royal offspring and blessing to all nations made in the subsequent Abrahamic covenantal *torah* of Genesis 17 and 22.<sup>51</sup> The Lord would see to it that all of these promises would be fulfilled, even though individual members of the future covenant community might forfeit them through disobedience; and indeed, generations of Israel would forfeit the land and the royal promise, and many ethnic Israelites would forfeit a place in the global blessing because they would not accept the Christ through whom it would come. This, then, is another and more important sense (in addition to the implicit conquest mandate of Genesis 15) in which the pagan “covenant of grant” and the Abrahamic covenant are profoundly different. In the pagan “covenant of grant” there may be a curse, but if there is, it is directed against one who would violate the vassal’s rights.<sup>52</sup> In the Abrahamic covenant-cutting by contrast there is a curse, but the Suzerain pledges to *take it upon himself*. Weinfeld, and, so far as I can see, those who have accepted his characterization of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15 simply as a “covenant of grant” on the pagan model, have not taken this difference sufficiently into account as a distinguishing characteristic. The Lord’s “self-imprecatory oath passage” reminds us of ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty ratification, but (since, as far as we know, no ancient Near Eastern suzerain ever took it upon *himself* to ratify a treaty by walking between the pieces) what the Lord does by submitting himself to this symbolic ritual makes the Abrahamic covenant truly *sui generis*.

Weinfeld’s use of ancient Near Eastern royal grants (which he has chosen to call “unconditional”) as a sort of hermeneutical key to Genesis 15 has won a large number of adherents, so that its validity seems to be considered virtually axiomatic.<sup>53</sup> The analogous data which he presents from the ancient Near East certainly seem to demonstrate that Genesis 15 and the related Abrahamic materials in Genesis have aspects of a grant-type relationship. It should be clear from the conquest

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<sup>51</sup> We should note that although the promise that Abram’s descendants would *receive* the land is unconditional (i.e. they have to conquer it—so in that sense the fulfillment of the promise was *conditional*—but the Lord would *see to it* that they did eventually conquer it—so in that sense the *promise itself* was *unconditional*: the Lord would see to it that the conquest took place), Israel’s subsequent *retention* of the land would *not* be unconditional, as the Mosaic covenant would make clear.

<sup>52</sup> Weinfeld, “Covenant of Grant” 185. This of course resonates with Gen 12:3, where, however, the curse against any hostile party (“whoever curses you I will curse”) is a promise, since the covenant has not yet been “cut.” The curse ceremony of the actual covenant cutting, by contrast, is a *self-imprecatory* act, quite different from what we find in the ancient Near Eastern “covenant of grant,” and more akin to what we find in ancient Near Eastern suzerain–vassal treaty ratifications (where, however, it is the vassal who passes between the pieces).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. S. E. Loewenstamm, “The Divine Grants of Land to the Patriarchs,” *JAO* 91 (1971) 509–10; J. van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) 259; T. E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 63; B. K. Waltke, “Phenomenon of Conditionality” 123–39, esp. 127–30.

mandate which Genesis 15 implies, however (as noted above), and from the Suzerain's act of self-imprecation, that it cannot properly be considered a mere covenant of grant. It should also be clear that it is unhelpful to characterize the Abrahamic covenant simply as "unconditional" and to link that concept with the "covenant of grant" as Weinfeld does with regard to both the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants.

A full exploration of Weinfeld's influence in this matter is well beyond the scope of the present article, but his influence should, I believe, be noted in the work of three more recent scholars, two of whom have written major books on the covenant idea. Paul Williamson and Scott Hahn in their books on the biblical covenants have both adopted Weinfeld's "covenant of grant" characterization of Genesis 15, and, following Weinfeld, think of it as unconditional. However, since they (correctly) see conditions in Genesis 17, they both conclude (mistakenly, I believe and unlike Weinfeld) that Genesis 17 reports a different, because conditional, covenant.<sup>54</sup> In their separation of Genesis 15 and 17 into two fundamentally different covenants Williamson and Hahn follow T. Desmond Alexander. Alexander characterizes the supposed two covenants in Genesis 15 and 17 in this way: "Whereas the promissory covenant of Genesis 15 is unconditional, the establishment or ratification of the covenant of circumcision is dependent upon Abraham's continuing obedience to God."<sup>55</sup>

#### IV. SUMMARY

Those who, like Alexander, see two different covenants (unconditional and conditional respectively) in Genesis 15 and 17 have not understood how the *one* covenant the Lord made with Abraham can be *both* unconditional and conditional. Moreover, they have failed to appreciate the significance of what the Bible itself says about the Abrahamic covenant.

As we have shown above, the Bible only ever refers to the Lord's covenant with Abraham in the singular. It can even refer to the Lord's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or "with the fathers," in the singular. It does so because the Lord in fact made only one covenant with Abraham and then renewed it with his

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<sup>54</sup> Cf., Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* 89, who characterizes the unconditional/conditional difference between the Genesis 15 covenant and the Genesis 17 covenant in other language amounting, however, to the same thing: Genesis 15 is "unilateral," Genesis 17 is "bilateral"; Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, characterizes Genesis 15 as an unconditional grant type treaty ("God unconditionally binds himself to the various elements of his promissory oath," p. 102), and Genesis 17 as a conditional suzerain-vassal type treaty ("Both Deuteronomy and Genesis 17 are of the same covenant type, that is, they resemble the so-called 'vassal treaty,'" p. 115). Weinfeld, following classical higher criticism, had simply considered Genesis 15 ("JE") and Genesis 17 ("P") to be earlier and later reports or versions of the same covenant, and thus combined them for purposes of discussing the Abrahamic covenant diachronically from a documentary point of view.

<sup>55</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 52; cf. his discussion on pp. 48–62. Williamson followed Alexander in this contradistinction of Genesis 15 and 17, and Hahn subsequently followed Williamson (cf. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* 10).

descendants. The statements of the OT (e.g. Exod 2:24) and the NT (e.g. Acts 3:25) agree on these points without exception.

We have allowed such biblical data to guide us as we considered the narratives of Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22 that report the Lord's covenant-related interactions with Abraham. Those reports extend from the promises of Genesis 12 through the covenant-cutting of Genesis 15 and the supplemental *torah* of Genesis 17 to the resumptive and summary mention of the "triple promise" under the finally reported oath of Genesis 22.

Once we take the biblical statements of the Lord's (singular) covenant with Abraham at face value and allow them to govern our analysis, we find that the scope of the narrative material, Genesis 12–22, becomes clear as regards the Abrahamic covenant. It begins with commands (Gen 12:1–2) and promises (Gen 12:2–3) made under common grace, proceeds to the cutting of a covenant (Genesis 15) which evokes the earlier command in its historical prologue (Gen 15:7, cf. Gen 12:1); it continues with a reaffirmation of the Genesis 15 covenant along with supplemental *torah* (Genesis 17—a pattern of supplemental *torah* given after covenant cutting later apparent in the Mosaic and the new covenants, as noted above), and concludes with a divine oath that repeats the "triple promise" and thus summarizes and concludes the narrative material of the Abrahamic covenant. We speak here of the narrative material in its scope which provides a history of the Lord's interactions with Abraham as regards the covenant, while affirming again that the Lord's one and only covenant with Abraham is actually "cut" and thus comes into being in Genesis 15. Such conclusions are made possible by an acceptance of what the Bible says about the number of covenants the Lord made with Abraham (namely, one), and also by an appreciation of the difference between an actual covenant cutting (Genesis 15) on the one hand and a comprehensive narrative of covenant-related dealings (Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22) on the other.

We can be grateful that the Lord's covenant with Abraham was both unconditional and conditional. Its unconditionality showed his commitment to the accomplishment of its ultimate salvific purpose (the universal blessing available to all nations by the Spirit). Its conditionality showed he was still the holy God with holy and kingdom requirements that would not be dismissed by cheap grace. Finally, we can be grateful that the Lord did see the Abrahamic covenant through to its fulfillment in and by Christ, so that those who have the faith of Abraham may know salvation by that same faith. The Abrahamic covenant no longer functions as a covenant (e.g. we are no longer required to be circumcised) but its great promise has been fulfilled, and continues to be fulfilled every day, by those who are and those who become the children of Abraham, and who know the circumcision of the heart by the promised Holy Spirit.