

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Introduction: There are few divine endeavors of as great hermeneutical importance in the Bible as is that found with the covenants. The very fact that the Living God would be so motivated as to enter into pacts with Man, to design for Himself a physical people on whom to bestow His care, and to call out for Himself an eternal people to love, is overwhelming. The word covenant (Hebrew, berith; Greek, diatheke), is found often in the Old Testament (at least 25 times in Genesis alone) and of great significance, is wholly conspicuous in the New Testament: When instituting the great memorial of His death, the Savior said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). When enumerating the special blessings of God had conferred on the Israelites, Paul declared that to them belonged "the covenants" (Rom.9:4). To the Galatians he expounded the "two covenants" (4:24-31). The Ephesian saints were reminded that in their unregenerate days they were "strangers to the covenants of promise" (2:12). The entire epistle to the Hebrews is an exposition of "the better covenant" of which Christ is mediator (8:6).

In Genesis, chapters 12, 13, 15 and 17, the sovereign God establishes, explains (expands) and reaffirms a covenant with the Chaldean, Abram. From the perspective of the completed revelation of the Bible we can see that this covenant ends up being the pivotal covenant of Scripture. This paper shall outline reasons supporting this thesis.

An Explanation of the Abrahamic Covenant: A proper Biblical Theology reveals for us a scarlet thread running through the Bible, the promise by God of a redeemer, to save those who believe in Him from their sin. The promise has its beginning with the "protoewangelium" in Gen.3:15, From the seed of Shem (Noah's son) this redeemer will come. Genesis 12-17 carries the promise on with the continuation of the seed through

the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and later through Jacob (Israel). The overall covenant can be seen in three types of promises, (1) specific promises to Abram that he will in fact have a seed, despite his advanced years and the long established barrenness of his wife Sarai, (2) national promises to the seed itself (a land for the seed to inherit), and (3) universal promises to the seed relating to future blessing. As one interprets this covenant, will pretty much determine whether one is premillennial or realized ("a") millennial in his eschatology. The issues are complex, and a final resolution of the problem will not be advanced from the scope of this paper. But those issues must be surveyed, and the importance of this covenant established.

The Issues Surrounding the Interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant:

It has been said that Abraham was the first Jew, and as we distinguish Jew after the flesh, and true Jew, we see the two principles coupled in the man of Ur, Abraham. Having received a sovereign, unmerited call from God, Abram responded in faith by leaving his homeland, with no more data at hand than God's promise, perhaps only a sketch of which we are given in Gen 12:1-3. These verses along with 13: 14-17 relate the three above mentioned types of promises. These promises God reaffirms by statement (no multiplying of words, or repetition by Him being pointless), and by demonstration in the most remarkable blood covenant display in chapter 15. It is tremendous devotional value to meditate on the establishing by God of this covenant in this way (ch.15), noting that in chapter 17, the covenant is referred to by the Lord as HIS covenant. It was not a mutual one, a partnership. And it was to be a binding covenant. But as we look at some of the theological particulars involved, there arises opportunity for hermeneutical disagreement among evangelical scholars. The disagreement centers on two key issues. First, is the nature of this covenant to be understood as conditional upon Abraham, or upon Israel, for them

to enjoy the fulfillment of the blessings? This may include the matter of conditions on only part of the covenant, the other part(s) being unconditional. If the covenant can be proved conditional, then Israel has no assurance of a future national identity or possession of the land. If it is concluded that this covenant is unconditional, then how will those parts unfulfilled be fulfilled? Will they be fulfilled spiritually by the church, or literally by Israel, or both? In supporting the unconditional character of the covenant, and in referring to Gen.17:7,13b,19; I Chron.16:16,17 and Psalm 105:9,10, Charles Ryrie has this to say; "The Scriptures clearly teach that this is an eternal covenant based on the gracious promises of God. There may be delays, postponements, and chastisements, but an eternal covenant cannot, if God cannot deny Himself, be abrogated." The alleged eternal nature of the covenant is one of some twelve reasons Ryrie advances in support of ^{its} unconditional nature. This primarily relates to the land promises, as the personal promises were fulfilled in Abraham (he did become a great man, and did carry on his seed through Sarah in Isaac), and as the universal promises were fulfilled in the coming of Messiah, a Jew.

Taking the opposite view, that of a conditional nature of the covenant, O.T.Allis states that "obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances. 'The rebellious dwell in a parched land' (Psa. 68:6), has been true of God's people in every age. This is the general principle of God's providential and also of his gracious dealings with His children. The sin of Adam and Eve was a sin of disobedience; and it was especially heinous because they knew but 'one restraint, lords of the world beside.' The second fact is that in the case of Abraham the duty of obedience is particularly expressed." Also supporting this view, Walter Kaiser says that the connection between condition and promise is undeniable."The duty of obedience (law,if you wish) was intimately tied

up with promise as a desire sequel." So, the matter is not easily decided, but is immensely important in determining the second key issue; does this covenant promise Israel a permanent existence as a nation, and does it promise Israel permanent possession of the promised land? This is the more visibly relevant issue today as we watch Israel again maneuvering for world recognition and as we anticipate the Lord's second coming. Systematic theologians divide their eschatology up on this matter primarily.

Another problem needing consideration is the relation of the church to the Abrahamic Covenant. In what sense is a saved Gentile in the church related to the covenant? The New Testament books of Galatians (ch.3) and Hebrews address this matter. Promises made to Abraham's ultimate seed, which was Christ, attach themselves to those who are His also. "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal.3:29). Those supporting an amillenial interpretation of Scripture understand this verse to be the present and eschatological theme of the Bible. They believe that God has fulfilled all that He has promised to Abraham concerning the land of Palestine, and that the covenantally employed words "forever" and "everlasting" are figurative terms as they relate to the land. Since Abraham had solely a heavenly country and not an earthly country in mind, along with all Old Testament saints, the goal of the church is a heavenly Canaan, and not an earthly one. ^(Heb. 11:8-16) The result as they see it, is that God is finished with the physical Jew in His program. If this view is correct however, a suitable interpretation must be found for Rom.11:1 ff, where we read, "...God has not rejected His people has He? May it never be! For I to am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin..."

Conclusions: That we need to give serious consideration to the covenants of Scripture has been ascertained. Though the covenant with Abraham is central to understanding God's program, the covenant for which we should be most thankful is the New Covenant. "I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people..." (Heb.8:10).

But the Abrahamic covenant is the initial covenantal relationship entered in to by God with men ^{after that with Adam and Noah.} And since it concerns both Jew and Gentile, it needs to be given high priority in the study of hermeneutics, and indeed, primary place in the understanding of the blessed hope, and the future and sure program of our wonderful savior and Lord.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PASSOVER
(Exodus 12)

The assertion has often been made that the central message of the Bible is the full redemption of God's people, carried out by Him alone, and that those two biblical divisions which we know of as the Old and New Testaments are in fact coupled by this purpose. In investigating this claim, we must survey the acts of God recorded in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments and see if in fact God is doing this. When we pass from the book of Genesis (where we learn of God's creating and early on sustaining for Himself a distinct people), to the book of Exodus, we read accounts of God further caring for His people, Israel. It should never be of any small amazement that God even cares at all for, or is motivated to involve Himself in the affairs of a people. We read in Exodus 3:7-9,

and the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, . . . And now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them."

So God's servants, Moses and Aaron, have spoken the word of the Lord, one of deliverance, to Pharaoh of the Egyptians. They have demanded of whom was probably the most powerful ruler of earth, complete release of Israel. Pharaoh has refused, even under the discipline of seven greivous plagues brought upon his people. And due to his continued refusal, God pronounces the most ter-

rifing plague to come, that of destruction of all the first-born in Egypt. In Exodus 12 is given the account of divinely engineered protection for Israel, in the midst of God's judgment of Egypt, in the midst of deliverance, God protects and sustains His people. This chapter relates the specific instructions to be carried out obediently by all Israelites for the carrying out of their protection, and for ~~the~~ ^{it} continual remembrance ~~of it~~. The ^{purpose} task of this paper is to briefly discuss the significance of this Passover to the Jews of the Old Testament, and to interpret its meaning for us of the New Covenant under Christ.

An Evening to Remember

God commanded each Israelite to take an unblemished, year-old male lamb or goat, prepare and eat it according to strict instructions, and to smear its blood over and ^{on the sides of} beside the door of his house. When the Lord passed through Egypt with death, He would pass over the Israelites, delivering them from that death. As sure as God said it would happen, it came to pass that "there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead" (Ex. 12:30b). God also ordained a yearly feast to be held by the Israelites in memorial of this terrible night, but to them full of wonder. The Passover feast was to last seven days, during which time they were to partake of no food containing leaven. This was the symbol of separation from the world they were leaving behind in Egypt, with all its entrapments. Specific instructions for that one night were given, and the memorial feast was governed by a number of rules. But the remembrance was basically to be a simple one, designed to solemnly (12:15b)

remind God's people of His great care. Their attention was to be on Him during the feast;

"And the first day you shall have a holy assembly, and another holy assembly on the seventh day; no work at all shall be done on them, except what must be eaten by every person, that alone may be prepared by you. You shall also observe the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, for on this day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt; therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent ordinance." (Ex. 12:16, 17)

God was not merely creating a flurry of religious activity for Israel to keep them busy. A Jewish writer, Jacob Gartenhaus, (quoted by Schaub) tells us in his book The Jewish Passover, that "the Passover in Egypt was comparatively simple, observed altogether in the homes; the permanent Passover as observed in Palestine was connected in part with the ceremonies of the Temple and was more elaborate, more symbolic and more ceremonious. In Egypt the lamb and matzoth (unleavened bread) were consumed hurriedly, with the people ready for a long journey; in Palestine the paschal meal was eaten leisurely and comfortably, accompanied by solemn prayers as well as with recitations. Four cups of wine for each person, several edibles (as an egg, parsley, charoseth, and so forth) were introduced to commemorate certain events." (This "evolution" from simple worship to complex ritual seems to echo the history of the church from the first century to the middle ages). But, the feast was designed to focus their regular attention on His deliverance and grace, and their remembrance on His method of requiring a blood sacrifice to obtain it. He is full of grace and provision for His people, but He expects from them humble dependance and worship! This gracious

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deliverance and its foreshadowing of the Messiah of God is the real overall significance of the Passover. Calvin tells us that "the Lamb was a type of Christ, who by His death propitiated His Father, so that we should not perish with the rest of the world. But . . . He desired to bear witness . . . that He would not be reconciled ^{but} by sacrifice of a victim."

Meaning For Us

It is noted that by the time of Christ, the Passover feast (as with most Jewish ceremonies) had lost its meaning. But at the time of the Exodus, the memory was fresh within them that all that stood between them and death was a thin film or sprinkling of blood. Obedient sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice was an acceptable act of faith in the divine warnings and precepts. They solemnly bowed in obedience to God's promise. That appointed night, at midnight, the cry in Egypt was great, and surely there was sober thankfulness in the heart of every Hebrew. The circumstances were such that the plague brought them both into direct contact (each and every individual) with the sovereign God, and brought about their ultimate release from 430 years of Egyptian bondage. But what of all this for us as Christians today? Does the significance end here, as an ancient testimony that God worked marvously among men some four millenia ago? Or is there more? The Apostle Paul does have a word for us on this. It is a short mention, but one of great hermeneutical effect. In I Corinthians 5, Paul has it in mind to exhort the Corinthians to holiness. He climaxes his discussion here masterfully in verses 7 and 8,

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"clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Paul has shown us that what was figuratively represented in the passover, ought to be at this day accomplished in us, and explains the correspondence which exists between the figure and the reality. He makes mention of both the sacrifice and the feast. They were given to Moses at the same revelation by God. God just wasn't going to deliver them, and that would be that. He expected remembrance of His grace--a practice which in fact could only help but bolster their faith. Christ was sacrificed (once), and on this condition, "The efficacy of that one oblation should be everlasting" (Calvin). Also, as it was unlawful to mix leaven with the passover, so we should never feed on the communion with Christ with malice and wickedness, but only with sincerity and truth. Paul's leading up to the topic of the Lord's supper (I Cor. 11) is deliberate. He does not discuss the matter of the Lord's supper until he has dealt with the leaven in his readers' hearts. Perhaps the ordinance of the Lord's supper was not specifically designed on the type of the Passover in every respect, but the presence in the mind of Paul (and of Jesus too) of memorial feasts, and the atonement of the Lamb of God, makes the desired effect of the Lord's supper the same as that of the Passover. The Passover foreshadows the coming of Messiah in at least four ways:

(1) the sacrifice lamb was typical, all too clearly. Christ is

the Lamb, a male in his prime, without blemish, set apart four days previous (when Christ entered Jerusalem), killed by the whole congregation. (2) The sprinkling of the blood was typical. It was not enough that the blood of the lamb was shed, it had to be sprinkled (applied). The atonement must be received. (3) The solemn eating of the lamb was typical of our duty to Christ--we must receive spiritual nourishment from Him. (4) The feast of unleavened bread was typical of the Christian life. Having received Christ Jesus the Lord, we must keep the feast, continually devoting ourselves to Christ, remembering the great things He has done for us.

It is of little value to speculate beyond what Scripture tells us should be so, of the attitudes, emotions and thoughts in the minds of the Hebrews on their way out of Egypt. But by the help of the Holy Spirit, freely given to us in Christ, let us keep the feast of Christ in our hearts, remembering His constant faithfulness in the past, sure to prove the same in the future.

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