

## Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

### E. The Continuity of Scripture: Implications for Life Since Jesus

#### 13. The Abrahamic Covenant and Its Fulfillment

Let's conclude our look at the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament by examining its continuity with what God afterward revealed in the New Testament Scriptures.

To review, the story has its beginnings in God's gracious actions toward Adam and Eve immediately after they rebelled against their Creator. They knew right away that they were in trouble and so tried hiding from God. But in grace he came looking for the sinners. His question to them: "Where are you?" was an implicit call for them to come clean, return to believing and trusting in him, and make a new commitment to obedient living. Then, in the midst of informing them of the terrible consequences of their rebellion, among which would be continuing conflict between their offspring and the serpent, he promised that this offspring would get the upper hand, crushing the serpent's head.

The ensuing conflict became pronounced in the years leading up to the flood, first with Abel's death by the hand of Cain, and afterward, with the pronounced contrast between the conduct of Seth's offspring and that of Cain's. Over time, however, except for Noah and his family, the entire human race gave themselves, as Cain had, to the mastery of sin. That's when God started over with the cleansing flood. But afterwards, it wasn't too long before unrighteousness again prevailed.

This brings us to the Abrahamic covenant and a significant advance in the story of redemption. It began with God's call to Abraham to leave his homeland and follow him to a new place and a new life in fellowship with him. God's promises were given and reiterated, among other places, in Gen. 12:2-3, 15:5-7, and 17:3-8. In summary they were that Abraham would have many descendants, that God would provide a home for them, and that the whole world would be blessed through his offspring. An important part of this three-fold promise was also that Abraham's descendants in their new home would serve the same God that Abraham served (cf. Gen 17:8b).

Abraham believed God. He did worry particularly about the promised offspring and, more than once, made plans to compensate for his and Sarah's childlessness. But he finally saw the beginning of God's promise of descendants—as many as the stars—in Isaac's birth. It's worth noting that this was an unnatural birth. Sarah's lifelong inability to conceive, together with her advanced age, meant that Isaac was a miracle child—the fulfillment of the first part of God's promise. Notwithstanding Ishmael and the other sons Abraham would have, it was through Isaac that God would raise up a nation to serve him and also bless the world.

It was a rocky road, however, to the further fulfillment of God's promises. The lives and prosperity of Abraham's grandchildren and great grandchildren were frequently threatened, and not always by outside forces. And the family was also forced by famine to leave the land God promised Abraham. But, God provided a place where they could grow and prosper.

And when, over the next centuries, they became slaves of Egypt, God raised up a prophet—Moses—who was instrumental in their deliverance from slavery and afterwards in teaching them the laws of the Lord who was preparing a homeland for them where He himself would live in their midst and be their God. God also reiterated the promise of a homeland to Moses with these words: *My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest* (Ex 33:14).

However, it fell to Moses' successor, Joshua, to actually lead Israel into the Promised Land. Then, after a long campaign against the occupying nations, it was divided up among Israel's tribes as their inheritance. Although Israel had further work to do to secure what God had given them, Joshua 11:23 confirms that this was the fulfillment of the second part of God's promise—a home for Abraham's descendants—with these words: *Then the land had rest from war.*

It was an occasion for great joy, and yet, this was but the first stage of Israel's rest and a prelude to the fulfillment of the third part of God's promise to Abraham—that in him, all the nations of the world would be blessed. A more complete rest for Israel would come in Israel's Golden Years (the latter days of King David (cf. 2 Sa 7:1) and the first part of Solomon's reign. Then, for a time, Abraham's many descendants enjoyed a greater rest and ability to serve the Lord in the home he had given them. Also, judging from the widespread reaction to Solomon's wisdom and Israel's prosperity, it seemed that Israel was able to be a blessing to much of their world.

However, it was not long before the worship offered by Solomon himself was compromised and Israel became a divided kingdom. After that, the devotion to the Lord in both Israel and Judah deteriorated, eventually so much so that the Lord evicted his people from the Promised Land. It became clearer, particularly in this time of crisis, that God must have a more complete fulfillment in mind for the Abrahamic promises—something that would involve more than the return to the homeland written of in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Jeremiah spoke of this, prophesying that God would not only bring his people back to the land, he would also put a new heart in them so that they could live under his mastery and fulfill his intentions for them. *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* (Jer. 31:31-34)

Other prophets had a similar message. Among them was Joel, who also expanded upon it (Joel 2:26-29): *You will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.*

Just to be clear, what Jeremiah and Joel and other prophets were speaking about was what every faithful Israelite longed for: the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Promises, but in such a way that God's people would never again experience the shame of being disinherited and excluded from fellowship with God. And in such a way, too, that they would really be able to become a blessing to their world.

The good news is that this fulfillment has been found in Jesus Christ. Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) explained this, saying that the outpouring of the Spirit was in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. He also said that whoever repented would likewise receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This means that the threefold Abrahamic promise of (1) a community, (2) living in fellowship with God, and (3) bringing blessing to the world (represented by the diverse nations who had gathered in Jerusalem at that time)—this wonderful promise of God was for all people in whom the Lord inspired such a spirit of repentance. (Acts 2:38-39).

What is implied in Peter's sermon is that Israel's inheritance, which for so long was identified with a particular land, was really fellowship with God such as was being demonstrated that day. Abraham himself had known this. Although he attached some importance to the land as illustrated by his concern to have a burial plot there, he knew that it was really his fellowship with God that was important. For God had summed up his blessings with these words, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield and your exceeding great reward" (Gen 15:1).

Many of Abraham's descendants lacked his spiritual perception and failed to look beyond a physical land. But Abraham had the conviction, spoken of in Heb. 11, that his ultimate destination was a city with spiritual foundations, a city in which the redeemed might enjoy everlasting fellowship with the Lord.

Abraham was probably not as clear, however, about the means God would use to ensure such fellowship for his descendants. That became clearer in Peter's Pentecost sermon. And this was reinforced and further clarified in the continuing ministry of the apostles. For example Paul made a direct connection between the Abrahamic promises and Christ when he wrote in Gal 3:16, *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.*

In other words, by insisting that the text of the Old Testament said 'seed' (a collective singular noun), instead of 'seeds' (a plural noun), Paul argued that Christ was the one that God really had in mind in his promises to Abraham. So Christ is the collective head of all those who have received the promised Abrahamic blessing by their faith in him.

Paul understood God's promise to Abraham very much like we understand God's much earlier promise to Eve in Gen 3:15—of an offspring to crush the serpents head. Eve's promised offspring, as Walter Kaiser points out, is a collective noun and embraces all of the God-fearing offspring of Eve. At the same time, however, there was something individual and unique about this seed, for a certain 'he' would have it out with the Evil One in some future day, even though 'he' was only one of the woman's descendants. (Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* [Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids MI, 1995], pp. 48-49.)

This "he" of course, was and is Jesus Christ, who won the victory, and in whose victory the human race can share. Both promises point to Christ. To sum up what I've been saying, Christ is the offspring of Eve whom God had in mind to crush the serpents head (Gen 3:15). And Christ is the offspring of Abraham whom God had in mind as the one who would perfectly fulfill his intentions for human fellowship with God and through whom that condition could be reproduced in his descendants.

Rev 12 alludes to the fulfillment of what God promised Eve in Gen 3:15 and what he expanded on in his promises to Abraham. This chapter pictures a pregnant woman about to give birth, and an enormous dragon prepared to devour her child as soon as it is delivered.

This woman is a composite portrait of the Old Testament covenant community, but more particularly, she is faithful Israel. She includes people like Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Hannah, David, the prophets, etc. – and after the exile, those people who desperately wanted God’s Kingdom and temple to be rebuilt. She also includes Anna the prophetess and Simeon, the righteous and devout old man in Jerusalem, who spent years waiting for what Luke calls the consolation of Israel. The woman is a picture of all of the faithful people of God who lived before Christ came. And she is in pain for the as yet undelivered blessings and salvation of God. The child whom she carries in her womb is none other than the Messiah whom God brought forth out of the faithful remnant of his people.

And the dragon is the great enemy of God and his people, identified in v.9 as Satan. The seven crowned heads and ten horns identify him further with the four Beast-empire of Daniel's prophecy (7:3-7). The Dragon stands behind them all as "the age long enemy of the people of God." And his goal throughout history had been to prevent the birth of the Messiah. And now, having miserably failed to stop God’s saving activity to this point, the Dragon stands ready to devour the offspring of the woman, i.e. to kill the Messiah as soon as he is born.

What happened? Rev 12:5-6 says, *She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.* The child was protected by God and received into the throne room of heaven, from where he will one day rule all the nations.

This story skips over Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection to get right to the eventual outcome: his ascension to heaven’s throne. Rev 12 does on to speak of the dragon’s pursuit of the woman (God’s true people), and the outcome. But our purpose here is simply to indicate that Christ is the offspring of the woman in whom the battle begun in Genesis is concentrated. And God’s promises to Abraham are a further development in the story. The seed promised to Abraham is the same seed promised to Eve, but with a little more detail. And the woman—the faithful people of God—flees into the wilderness to await her salvation.

More could be said about this. But here we leave this story to move on to see the identity of those who are the true inheritors of God’s promises to Abraham—those who participate in the fellowship with God that was promised to Abraham and accomplished by Christ. We do it, the apostle Paul says, the same way Abraham did. Had Paul gone no farther than this, he would have been misunderstood because his fellow Jews took it for granted that Abraham’s status as the epitome of righteousness and friend of God was due to his righteous works.

But Paul specifically contradicts this notion in Rom. 4:2-3—*If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”* This is a quotation of Gen 15:6, and this passage makes no mention at all of any work of Abraham, but simply refers to his faith. God's crediting therefore, is not a payment for services rendered, but an unmerited decision of divine grace. At the time God called Abraham, he was still an idol worshiper. And even though he responded positively to God’s call, that response was not considered to be meritorious work, but simply an expression of faith in God. Rom. 4:5 says as much: *However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.* Reading on at v 21: *Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

And this has implications for identifying who will inherit the Abrahamic promises. Paul continues (v. 23): *The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* That is to say, we get righteousness the same way Abraham did, by God's crediting; through faith God makes available to us a gift of righteousness because of the atoning work of Christ. It's the best gift possible, because it's the gift that will keep us forever in the arms of God.

Rom 9:6-8 confirms this, *"For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children...In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.."*

Paul writes on this same topic in Galatians 3, basically saying: "Since Christ is Abraham's seed and since the inheritance still comes by faith, everyone who has faith in Christ becomes united in him as the true seed of Abraham." This "Israel of God," as Paul calls the Body of Christ, is far from being genetically determined. He says (Gal. 3:28-29): *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

How does that work? Well....

- Fulfilling the "many descendants" promise, Jesus, although he never had any biological children, has untold millions of adopted children, all those who believe in him and serve him as their Savior and Lord. Each one is like the long-awaited Isaac, the miracle child, born to sterile parents, and with the promise of a rich inheritance.
- Fulfilling the promise of a home in which to flourish, Jesus invites all people to find rest in him and live as God's children in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Fulfilling the promise that Abraham's offspring would be a blessing to the world, we have Christ's body—his church—the members of which are to bless the world by living as citizens of Christ's kingdom and sharing the gospel of God's grace. For our inheritance is given not merely for our own benefit, but to make known the wisdom and glory of God. As Eph 3:10 tells us, *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*

To sum it up: There's an amazing continuity between what God was doing in Old Testament times and what he has done in Christ and continues to do in this present age. In Christ, all of God's promises to Abraham have come true and are being brought to perfect fulfillment.