

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Part II

by Thomas Ice

Another way of breaking down differences in biblical covenants is to arrange them according to whether they are conditional or unconditional covenants. Conditional covenants are agreements between at least two entities in which there are stipulations that must be kept by both parties. Failure to keep conditions of the covenant leads to the implementation of stated sanctions or nullification of the agreement. The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty format is an example of a conditional covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was given in this format and is a clear instance of a conditional covenant as can be seen through the many stipulations that Israel was to keep. At this point, however, I want to focus on unconditional covenants in the Bible.

An unconditional covenant is made when only one party is obligated to keep the stipulations of the agreement as in a Royal Grant. This point is important for Bible prophecy because at stake is whether or not God is obligated to fulfill His promise specifically to the original parties of the covenant. For example, I believe that God must fulfill to Israel as a national entity those promises made to them through unconditional covenants like the Abrahamic, Davidic, and Land of Israel covenants. If this is true, then they must be fulfilled literally and that means many aspects are still future. Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains:

An unconditional covenant can be defined as a sovereign act of God whereby God unconditionally obligates Himself to bring to pass definite promises, blessings, and conditions for the covenanted people. It is a unilateral covenant. This type of covenant is characterized by the formula I will which declares God's determination to do exactly as He promised. The blessings are secured by the grace of God.¹

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Genesis 12:3 records God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants (i.e., Israel). The Abrahamic covenant is directed to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants and focuses on God's promise to give the land of Israel to the Jews. It is repeated to them at least twenty times in Genesis alone (12:1-3, 7-9; 13:14-18; 15:1-18; 17:1-27; 22:15-19; 26:2-6, 24-25; 27:28-29, 38-40; 28:1-4, 10-22; 31:3, 11-13; 32:22-32; 35:9-15; 48:3-4, 10-20; 49:1-28; 50:23-25).

Confirmation of the covenant is given in Genesis 15 when God sealed the treaty through a unique procedure whereby He put Abram into a deep sleep and bound Himself to keep the covenant regardless of Abraham's response. Since God is the only one who swore to keep the covenant, then it is clearly an unconditional covenant dependant solely upon God. Thus, we can be absolutely confident that He will bring to pass every stipulation of the agreement.

That the Abrahamic Covenant is a Royal Grant and an unconditional covenant may be seen from an examination of the expressions found in Genesis 26:5 compared with parallel expressions in the ancient near east. Genesis 26:5, a text regarding Abraham's response to his covenant with Yahweh says: "because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." The term "law" is from the Hebrew *torah* which means "to direct, teach, or instruct." The verbs of Genesis 26:5 are "obeyed" (similar terminology found at Amarna in covenant contexts),

referring to Abraham's obedience to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1-2), and "kept," where Abraham kept the instruction of Yahweh, paralleling an Assyrian grant where Ashurbanipal rewarded his servant Bulta with a grant because he "kept the charge of my kingship." These verbs indicate a personal relationship rather than a legal code of ethics. Thus, obedience to *torah* comes from the relationship of covenant.

Robert Dean elucidates the idea that the covenant the Lord initiated with Abraham came not out of compulsion to some legislation but as a response to God:

A close examination of the context reveals no covenant stipulations which could be viewed as pure legislative or ethical codes. What the context does reveal is that God has praised His servant Abraham because he has been faithful to do whatever the Lord instructed him to do. He did it not out of compulsion to legislation, but in a faith response to the instruction of God.²

Therefore, the Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional pact in which God's sovereign election of Abraham and his descendants are revealed and God's decrees for them are declared. Dr. Eugene Merrill tells us:

As most scholars now recognize, the covenant and its circumstances were in the form of a royal (land) grant, a legal arrangement well attested in the ancient New East. . . . the Abrahamic Covenant, . . . must be viewed as an unconditional grant made by Yahweh to His servant Abram, a grant that was to serve a specific and irrevocable function.³

COVENANTAL STIPULATIONS

There are three major provisions of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-3). They are summarized as (1) *land* to Abram and Israel, (2) a *seed*, and (3) a worldwide *blessing*. A more complete breakdown of the covenant can be seen in its fourteen provisions gleaned from the major passages containing the treaty and its reconfirmations. Fruchtenbaum lists them as follows:

- a. A great nation was to come out of Abraham, namely, the nation of Israel (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:1-2, 7; 22:17b).
- b. He was promised a land specifically, the Land of Canaan (12:1, 7; 13:14-15, 17; 15:17-21; 17:18).
- c. Abraham himself was to be greatly blessed (12:2b; 15:6; 22:15-17a).
- d. Abraham's name would be great (12:2c).
- e. Abraham will be a blessing to others (12:2d).
- f. Those who bless will be blessed (12:3a).
- g. Those who curse will be cursed (12:3b).
- h. In Abraham all will ultimately be blessed, a promise of Gentile blessing (12:3c; 22:18).
- i. Abraham would receive a son through his wife Sarah (15:1-4; 17:16-21).
- j. His descendants would undergo the Egyptian bondage (15:13-14).
- k. Other nations as well as Israel would come forth from Abraham (17:3-4, 6; the Arab states are some of these nations).
- l. His name would be changed from Abram to Abraham (17:5).
- m. Sarai's name was to be changed to Sarah (17:15).

n. There was to be a token of the covenant—circumcision (17:9-14) and so according to the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision was a sign of Jewishness.⁴

The above breakdown of the Abrahamic covenant exhibits a wide variety of promises that will prove to give direction to an interesting history for Israel and the world. Fruchtenbaum notes that fulfillment of these fourteen promises are distributed among the following three parties:

- a. ABRAHAM—The following promises were made to Abraham: a, b, c, d, e, f, i, k, l, m.
- b. ISRAEL, THE SEED—The following promises were made to Israel: a, b, e, f, g, j, n.
- c. GENTILES—The following promises include Gentiles: f, g, h, k.⁵

John Walvoord summarizes the importance of the Abrahamic covenant as foundational to the study of God's plan for history:

The Abrahamic covenant contributes to the eschatology of Israel by detailing the broad program of God as it affects Abraham's seed. . . . It is not too much to say that the exegesis of the Abrahamic covenant and its resulting interpretation is the foundation for the study of prophecy as a whole, not only as relating to Israel, but also for the Gentiles and the church. It is here that the true basis for premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures are found.⁶

The Abrahamic covenant is important when studying biblical covenants, for it expresses many unconditional decrees that will be expanded upon in subsequent revelation and surely fulfilled in history. Expansion of a biblical theme in the later revelation of Scripture has been called "progressive revelation." Much of the Abrahamic covenant is implemented through God's later dealings with national Israel.

COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to stop and contemplate the relationship of an unconditional covenant, such as the Abrahamic covenant, to that of a conditional covenant, such as the Mosaic covenant. Unconditional covenants provide humanity with God's sovereign decree, telling us where He is taking history. On the other hand, conditional covenants provide us with the means He will use to get us there. God has said in the Abrahamic covenant that he will do certain things for the seed of Abraham, and the Mosaic covenant provides conditional stipulations that must be met before a decree from the Abrahamic covenant can take place. God decreed that Israel would receive certain blessings within the land of Israel, but that they would only enjoy them if they were obedient. When the Israelites disobeyed, they would be cursed. That cursing would eventually lead to obedience and finally result in the ultimate blessing promised in the Abrahamic covenant. "The primary purpose of the Sinaitic covenant," explains George Harton, "was to instruct the newly redeemed nation how they were to live for YHWH."⁷ Harton then concludes:

The covenant program revealed in the Pentateuch rests squarely on the twin pillars of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants. This covenant program contains unconditional elements which reveal some things that God has

bound himself to do for the nation Israel. It also contains some conditional elements which define the conditions upon which any individual Israelite may receive the benefits of the covenant. The Jews in Christ's day felt that the unconditional covenant guaranteed their participation in the promised kingdom. They had forgotten that an unconditional covenant may have conditional blessings. The Sinaitic covenant is essentially an amplification of these promises and covenant on which they rested.⁸

Just such a covenantal relationship is displayed in Deuteronomy providing a masterful interplay between the certainty of Israel's destiny, while at the same time insisting that they will get to their blessing by traveling God's road. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, Calif.: Ariel Ministries Press, 1989, 1992), p. 570.

² Robert L. Dean, Jr., "Theonomy, the Mosaic Law, and the Nations," (unpublished paper), p. 13.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in Roy B. Zuck, editor, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), p. 26.

⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 574-75.

⁵ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 575.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp. 44-45.

⁷ George M. Harton, "Fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28—30 in History and in Eschatology," Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, August 1981, p. 16.

⁸ Harton, "Fulfillment," pp. 17-18.