

The Abrahamic Covenant – General Reference Points

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Abstract. *In the history of the scriptural covenant, a certain centrality of the Abrahamic covenant has been noticed. It was against the backdrop of this covenant that the harmonisation necessary for the relationship between Jews and God and later between all the gentiles and God was discovered. Most biblical interpretations regarding the Abrahamic covenant begin by briefly analysing and presenting key passages, which, most of the time, are identified with a key verse or a set of verses that explicitly nuance the reference framework of Covenant Theology. We can naturally ask ourselves: Why does the essence of Covenant Theology reside in the Abrahamic covenant? Why has Abraham been God’s most important dialogue partner in the framework of a covenant? In the present study, I will provide answers to these questions by resorting to the perspectives presented by well-known Western biblical scholars.*

Keywords: *commandment, revelation, patriarch, promise, Abraham.*

Establishing the Covenant “between Me and you” (Gen. 17: 7)

The questions regarding Abraham's primacy in the plan of restructuring the relationship between God and man and of anchoring it based on covenants are answered by the exegetes who tackle Gen. 15-17. It is believed that, in Gen. 16, the premises or the prerogatives of the Abrahamic covenant are created. The circle varies a lot: the emphasis which is first put on Abraham moves to Sarah and, eventually, it is Hagar who receives the lineage promise, which is strikingly like that received by Abraham. Exegetes believe the tension in Gen. 15-16 is welcome in the context in which Gen. 17 is an integral part of a Covenant Theology which was extremely well anticipated by the Adamic covenant and by the covenant made with Noah. Gen. 17 is the distinctive key of the covenants and makes the transition from universal to, by including the part in the whole. What is that supposed to mean? If the first two covenants of the Book of Genesis speak universally about the blessings and repercussions that man will be faced with, in the case of Abraham, Gen. 17 refers to the consequences of a limited divine-human covenant with which the kindred of Abraham, his offspring, will be faced. The peculiarity of immediate effects is of first importance in this case, usually manifested as a state of belonging in the case of the circumcised, while, as a long-term effect, it manifests itself universally through the unfolding of the entire world salvation plan. All these nuances will govern the interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant and will be the most authentic reference point concerning divine providence manifested in a complete and complex way over people, from the very moment of their conception.¹

¹ J. G. Janzen, “Abraham and all the families of the earth: A commentary on the book of Genesis 12-50”, in *International theological commentary*, Grand Rapids, Edinburgh, Eerdmans, Handsel Press, 1993, p. 47.

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Abraham is the standard for the image of the patriarchate of the Old Testament², but he was also among the most prolific in leading the way of world salvation.³ These arguments travel across the history of Christianity, the history of the monotheistic religions which are representative nowadays. The grandeur expressed by the historical Abraham can be very well defined in the description of the covenants in which he was anchored as receiver and keeper of the commandments: In Gen. 17: 7, God tells Abraham the following: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you”.

In a natural order of interpretation, God let Abraham know that: he had been chosen to make a covenant with Him, the covenant was not restrictive (it was oriented towards Abraham’s offspring), the covenant was not marked by a particular term (it was made for eternity), it only entailed the acknowledgement of God as the only God for all those partaking of it. However, what God conveyed through these words, through the proposal and justified the subsequent imposition of the covenant is special. Just like we cannot understand all the ideational sublayer of this verse, so was Abraham seized with confusion and bewilderment, being incapable of fathoming the world salvation plan offered by God as a gift to generations, to the entire earth, through the proposal of making a covenant with him. In what follows, I will make a short analysis of this verse to ease the understanding of Covenant theology based on the Abrahamic covenant, of the relationship between God and Abraham⁴.

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you” – these are the words God used as an introduction when He revealed His will to Abraham. The role of these words is that of making Abraham aware of what he is about to experience. From the moment this covenant was established, based on the agreement and the conditions by which God asked him to abide, Abraham would no longer walk in his own will, but God’s will⁵. In the case of this irrevocable

² S. Pașca-Tușa, „Patriarhul Avraam – etalon de credință pentru creștini (Rom 4,17-25)”, in *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca*, tom XXII (2018-2019), Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea, 2020, p. 9.

³ The Fathers of the Church believe that Abraham was constantly trained by God against the backdrop of the virtues with which God identified him. Saint John Chrysostom considers that God’s waiting until Abraham turned ninety is full of pedagogical meaning. He believes that God wanted to show us Abraham’s strength, the resilience and virtue of a man whom he considered righteous. On the other hand, Saint Ambrose of Milan feels that Abraham received God’s acknowledgement, and, through it, he was also made accountable. For, being “flawless, as *Saint Ambrose believed*, means being in a position of constant training”. [our translation]. M. Sheridan, “Genesis 12-50. Ancient Christian Commentary”, in *Scripture OT 2*, Downers Grove, Ill, InterVarsity Press, 2002, p. 50.

⁴ V. P. Hamilton, “The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17”, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997, p. 408-410.

⁵ S. Pașca-Tușa, „Reprezentarea artistică a jertfei lui Avraam în creștinism și iudaism (sec. III-VI) – prototipuri și direcții de interpretare”, *Studii Teologice*, 2016, no. 2, p. 124. Rastko Jovic, "Delusion of Truth: Church as Community," in *Astra Salvensis*, VI (2018), no. 12, p. 479.

presentation of God's will, the Abrahamic covenant also reflects the presence of the law. In a way, Gen. 17: 7 expresses both the presence of a covenant and that of a law. The reflection of this double work and presentation of an engagement between God and man – where, as we have seen in terminological determinations, God represents the superior and Abraham the inferior – can also be found in other places in the Holy Scripture. An eloquent example in this respect is the passage in Jer. 31: 33, where God says that He will make a covenant with Israel, using the formula: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people”⁶.

Thus, we can conclude that, when God makes a covenant and expresses Himself at the end, there is also a law that ensures the continuity of the covenant. When it comes to determining the reference area for the biblical covenant, for its theology, this law is usually associated with the presence of a symbol⁷, of a commandment that must be applied or of an agreement that must be regularly renewed.

Biblical commentaries draw attention to several aspects related to this introduction of the Abrahamic covenant. On the one hand, by expressing possession over the covenant – *I will establish my covenant*–, God marks the irrevocable nature of the proposed covenant and the impossibility of altering it⁸. His very presence at the end of this covenant represents the maximum that Abraham can receive. Usually, God begins His covenant with a man without expressing the possibility of challenging it. What is paradoxical is the fact that, during the period when the covenant is applied, man can either obey or disobey the imposed conditions, which were agreed upon and registered in an engagement at the beginning⁹.

Having the possibility of taking heed to his condition (1 Cor. 10: 12), man is not subordinate to a commandment of God, but to a condition marked by acknowledgement, obedience, love, fear, and hope. Therefore, when God tells Abraham about the covenant He will make, Abraham does not get landed with an obligation, but with the joy of partaking in God's will. To highlight this supremacy of the Abrahamic covenant, exegetes draw attention to the fact that there is a significant difference between what is said in Gen. 17: 7 and in Gen. 9: 9. Although both covenants are expressed on an imperative note (*I establish my covenant with you* – Gen. 9: 9), the beginning of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17: 7) conveys the permanence of a relation (*between me and you* – Gen. 17: 7a), as well as its novelty and durability¹⁰. Although Gen 12: 1-3 and the prefigurative formulas used at the end of Gen 11 represent the first sequence of the set of promises made to Abraham and the creation of a covenant, for Covenant theology, Gen. 17: 7-23 constitutes the

⁶ G. J. Wenham, “Genesis 16-50”, in *WBC*, Dallas, Word Incorporated, 2002, p. 13-15.

⁷ C. Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12-36*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p. 273.

⁸ Joseph Benson, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *Joseph Benson's Commentary*, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/rbc/genesis-17.html>.1857.

⁹ G. J. Wenham, “Genesis 16-50”, in *WBC*, Dallas, Word Incorporated, 2002, p. 15-16.

¹⁰ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 122.

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essence of divine-human covenants. The reason for stating this is the fact that, for approximately fourteen years, Abraham lived waiting, uncertain of his being acknowledged as part of God’s plan. Marked by a terminological peculiarity which we will tackle in a moment (from *Jehovah* to *El Shaddai*)¹¹, the entire chapter 17 constitutes the basis of Covenant theology, making the Abrahamic covenant stand out. After God revealed Himself to him and gave him a complex law, Abraham found himself in an engagement with Elohim, the God Who, through the name received, literally fills the entire people of Abraham with joy, with all the joy of kindness¹².

The Abrahamic Covenant – the Crowning of the Covenants of the Old Testament

The most concrete example of the superiority of the Abrahamic covenant, beyond the introductory formula used in this verse, Gen. 17: 7-23 is the place where, in a prefigurative and plenary manner, the Abrahamic covenant incorporates most of the peculiarities of the other covenants of the Old Testament. While the Sinaitic covenant can be discerned in the Abrahamic covenant, we cannot say the same thing about the Davidic covenant. The Sinaitic covenant focuses on presenting an interdependence between covenant and law, a fact signalled by exegetes through an analogy between Deuteronomy and the Book of Psalms. This manner of tackling and presenting the connection established between covenants based on certain associations exists in the studies of most of the authors I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, but it is Sigmund Mowinckel¹³ and Gerhard von Rad who speak about a resemblance of the covenants at the level of structure and ideas¹⁴.

Mowinckel considers that the text in Psalm 50: 5 and Psalm 81 (the Hebrew version) keeps the same structure as the Sinaitic covenant, containing a theophany marked by an engagement and a series of legal references, of laws, concentrated in the Decalogue¹⁵. By extrapolation, von Rad identifies the Deuteronomy as a covenant, using a chapter division based on the elements of a covenant from the Old Testament: the first chapters (Deut. 1-11) present the history of the covenant, the next one (12: 1-26: 15) the laws this covenant entails, followed by a brief presentation of common obligations (26: 16-19), while the last chapters are oriented towards the presentation of blessings¹⁶ and curses (27-30)¹⁷. Using the same analysis and structure, von Rad notices that we can speak about a similar

¹¹ Joseph S. Exell, Spence-Jones, Henry Donald Maurice, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *The Pulpit Commentary*; <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/tpc/genesis-17.html>.1897.

¹² John Gill, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible*, <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/geb/genesis-17.html>.1999.

¹³ Joseph S. Exell, Spence-Jones, Henry Donald Maurice, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *The Pulpit Commentary*; <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/tpc/genesis-17.html>.1897.

¹⁴ C. Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12-36*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p. 252.

¹⁵ P. Kissling, *Genesis*, vol. 2, Joplin, College Press Publishing Company, 2009, p. 121.

¹⁶ J. G. Janzen, “Abraham and all the families of the earth: A commentary on the book of Genesis 12-50”, in *International theological commentary*, Grand Rapids, Edinburgh, Eerdmans, Handsel Press, 1993, p. 49.

¹⁷ C. Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12-36*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p. 253.

systemisation in the case of the Book of Exodus (Ex. 19-24). What I would like to underscore by nuancing these aspects is the fact that, whether to a maximal or to a minimal level, whether to an extended or a basic level, there is a binding connection between covenant and law, between covenant and the consequences of obeying or disobeying it. The structure history-law-covenant-consequences is frequent in the Jewish tradition and has been kept and applied throughout history, which is why, in the following pages, I will tangentially mention it about the Abrahamic covenant.

Nonetheless, the covenant made with Abraham and the one made with David are considered different and focused on promises. The reason this part of the covenant exists is to convey the very superiority of covenants and their implicit high importance. While Abraham is promised a land, a country (Gen. 15: 17), David is promised a dynasty (2 Sam. 7).

Indirectly, even Abraham is promised a dynasty, the patriarch being unaware of the fact that, when God uttered the first words, the covenant he made was for a long time, for eternity. Therefore Gen. 17: 7-23 also concentrates on the message of the covenant an aspect that is specific to covenants, namely the duration. Gen. 17: 7 synthesises this temporality by resorting to the idea of eternity and by explaining through it the very covenant: “(The covenant) is eternal in an evangelical sense, from the eternity contained in its proposals (advice) to the eternity of its effects (consequences)”¹⁸. [our translation]. What is important for the Abrahamic covenant is its perpetuation. David enjoyed the promise of a dynasty, but Abraham enjoyed a covenant for centuries to come, a “perpetual covenant”¹⁹. [our translation].

In the critical analysis of the historicity of the covenant, starting from Adam, continuing with Noah, and reaching Abraham, the covenant has gained new nuances, new peculiarities, apparently progressing at the same pace as did. Our attention is drawn however to a particular aspect. This Abrahamic covenant also identifies with man’s impossibility to fulfil the imposed conditions, which is why, when it comes to perpetuation, we speak about a symbol of its acceptance: “Even if we cannot see man’s capacity to fulfil the condition, we can rest assured that what God intends to do will somehow be achieved. Abraham’s seed will embrace the entire human family, who will partake of God.”²⁰ [our translation].

Most exegetes believe that, beyond the literary meaning of the expression referring to Abraham’s offspring, *your offspring after you throughout their generations*, there is also a spiritual connotation describing the universality of the Abrahamic covenant²¹. Circumcision will not be a passing symbol, but a symbol regarded by

¹⁸ Joseph Benson, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *Joseph Benson’s Commentary*, <https://www.studydrive.com/commentaries/eng/rbc/genesis-17.html>.1857.

¹⁹ Albert Barnes, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *Barnes’ Notes on the Whole Bible*, <https://www.studydrive.com/commentaries/eng/bnb/genesis-17.html>.1870.

²⁰ Albert Barnes, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *Barnes’ Notes on the Whole Bible*, <https://www.studydrive.com/commentaries/eng/bnb/genesis-17.html>.1870.

²¹ J. Sweetnam, “The Curious Crux at Romans 4, 12,” in *Bib*, 1980, no. 61, p. 110–115.

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peoples as eternal for a covenant and an everlasting relationship²². For natural descendants, circumcision remains a symbol of the partaking of the covenant, expressed in their own country given binding themselves to it, but, with the advent of the Messiah, the gesture itself, the symbol, becomes worship²³. The eternity of the Abrahamic covenant has also described the presentation of the natural and spiritual environment: “The natural seed must continue the true worship of God in the seed’s own country given an eternal covenant, until the advent of the Messiah, when circumcision ends and fulfils its mission. All these so that, understood as spiritual seed, the blessings brought by the covenant are eternal and never withdrawn or simply cancelled.”²⁴ [our translation].

Thus, the Abrahamic covenant not only refers to all that is necessary for a special relationship with God, but it also takes the form of a document, an engagement for centuries to come, placed beyond the historical reality of the event, beyond a unidirectional interpretation, which entails a pretesting of eternity and the feeling of the “true worship” of the Messiah²⁵. [our translation].

Another peculiarity of the Abrahamic covenant, which is also valid for the Davidic one, consists in the fact that they do not focus on obligation, but are oriented towards the idea of pledge, of the divine promise. In Covenant theology, there is even a genre called “of promise”²⁶, which is specific to the presentation of man’s loyalty to God, of his obedience to the One Who is called the God of the people. [our translation]. Usually, divine promises are eternal and are not conditioned by the stringency with which the promise is faced. The interpretations of the engagements God made about Israel draw attention to the fact that irrespective of the state of the people, God does not break His promise, as it is meant *forever*, just like the covenant. “The covenant made with the patriarchs is forever valid (‘adh’okam). Even when the sins of Israel must be harshly punished, God intervenes to help, for He *will not break the covenant* (Lev. 26: 44)”²⁷. [our translation].

Conclusions

The Abrahamic covenant is marked by the promise of prosperity and of the land, which is why, when presenting the differences between compulsory covenants, meaning those which are proposed without mutual consent, the promise represents a distinctive aspect. This royal guarantor, as it is particularly called in the literature, is the subject of the Abrahamic covenant, and even of the Davidic one. It is called royal because its literary origin is found in the history of

²² C. Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12-36*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p. 271.

²³ K. A. Mathews, “Genesis 11: 27-50: 26 (electronic ed.)”, in *Logos Library System, The New American Commentary*, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007, p. 197.

²⁴ John Gill, “Commentary on Genesis 17”, in *The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible*, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/geb/genesis-17.html>.1999.

²⁵ V. P. Hamilton, “The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17”, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997, p. 411.

²⁶ P. Kissling, *Genesis*, vol. 2, Joplin, College Press Publishing Company, 2009, p. 123.

²⁷ J. Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision”, *JSOT*, 2000, no. 88, p. 3–18.

the Hittites, where the terms *aššul* and *kannešunar* are used, which correspond to the Hebrew terms *tobhab* and *chedesh*, to the Akkadian *ṭabtu* and *damiqtu*, or the Aramaic term *ṭbt*. All these terms explain the goodness and the promise-marked different relations of the covenant. What is important, however, is the fact that this promise must be kept and considered by the receiver as irrevocable and incontestable. The fact that this royal character of the covenant is also reduced to define a man as being “honourable” or, easier for us to understand, as “keeping his word” can also be seen in the Jewish tradition and sometimes even in Ps. 89: 20 [19]²⁸.

²⁸ K. A. Mathews, “Genesis 11: 27-50: 26 (electronic ed.)”, in *Logos Library System, The New American Commentary*, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007, p. 198.

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