

PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

Expectations, Conditions, Obedience, and Fulfillment

Following the events of the Tower of Babel involving rebellion against Yahweh and the subsequent scattering of the people to various areas of the world, Yahweh began to assemble a people unto Himself. One of the initial events was choosing Abram to be the progenitor of this chosen people group. In Genesis 18:19 we gain insight into why God choose Abraham: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.”

Genesis 12

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12:1–3 (ESV)

Promises (A): Great nation, General blessing, Great name.

Expectation: Implied that in response to God blessing Abram that he would be a blessing to others.

Promises (B): Bless those who favor you, curse those who disrespect you. This may be related to the “Expectation” statement. Abram would “be a blessing” but only those who showed favor to him would benefit from this blessing. This seems to be a condition for others to enjoy the promised blessing that would go out from Abram to others.

Condition: Abram would have to leave his country and go to “the land” to participate in the promise.

Obedience: Not mentioned in these verses whether Abram obeyed or not.

Fulfillment: The ultimate and unalterable outcome was related to the restoration of all nations to reverse the dispersion seen at Babel which would come about by what God did in the Messiah (in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed).

⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Genesis 12:6–7 (ESV)

Promise: Land to be given to offspring of Abram was specifically mentioned.

Expectation: Abram responded with worship as evidenced by an altar being built.

Condition: None stated.

Obedience: Abram obeyed when he entered (passed through) the land.

Fulfillment: Later, beginning with the conquest of Canaan and fulfilled during Solomon’s reign.

Genesis 15

⁷ And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” Genesis 15:7 (ESV)

¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” Genesis 15:18–21 (ESV)

Promise: Covenant defined the extent of “the land.”

Expectation: Offspring were “to possess” the land.

Condition: None, or the condition was the same as the expectation.

Obedience: Not applicable

Fulfillment: This would be a much later consideration that would involve actually entering the land which an entire generation was prohibited from experiencing the fulfillment of the promise because of unbelief. Nearly a thousand years later, the extent of the land was “fully controlled” by Abram’s offspring; namely, Solomon as stated in 1 Kings 4. Also, fulfilled was the promise to “make of you a great nation” as was written in Genesis 12.

²⁰ Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy. ²¹ Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. 1 Kings 4:20–21 (ESV)

Genesis 17

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Genesis 17:1–2 (ESV)

Promise: Previous covenant mentioned with emphasis on many descendants.

Expectation: Abram could expect that he would have an awareness of God’s presence.

Condition: Be blameless to experience the benefits of the covenant. Not mentioned until fourteen years after the initial covenant promises were given.

Obedience: Not mentioned in these verses.

Fulfillment: Happened many years later – see comments related to Genesis 15 passage.

⁷ 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 to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” Genesis 17:7–8 (ESV)

Promise: Covenant would be established (implemented) by God. Land was to be possessed by Abraham and his offspring. Yahweh would be their God or their connection to the spiritual realm and (by implication) would provide the precepts and principles of acceptable behavior.

Expectation: Covenant was applicable to Abraham and his offspring and would be in effect (ongoing and continuing) until all the promises of the covenant had been completed.

Condition: None added beyond what was stated in Genesis 17:1-2

Obedience and Fulfillment: Not mentioned in these verses.

⁹ And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. Genesis 17:9–10 (ESV)

Promise: God’s covenant was mentioned.

Expectation: God would fulfill His part of the covenant.

Condition: Applicable to Abraham and his offspring who were to “keep the covenant.”

Obedience: Circumcision practiced as a sign or token of being in a covenant relationship.

Fulfillment: Ultimate fulfillment would be many years in the future.

Caution: Our typical initial thought (because of the punctuation in various translations) is that “keeping the covenant” requirement was for “males to be circumcised.” The original texts did not have punctuation. If we use a “period” rather than a “colon” in verse ten, then we could argue that verse nine and the first part of verse ten are the concluding remarks of the previous verses and the second part of verse ten is beginning a new subject; namely, what is the sign or

token that the people were being true to the covenant that God initiated (see, specifically, the second part of verse eleven)? The actual adherence to the covenant that had eternal, spiritual significance on the part of the people was to “walk before God and be blameless” as God had communicated to Abram (Gen 17:1) as a condition for making the covenant function as God intended for the benefit of Abram and his descendants (Gen 17:2). [This type thinking has parallels with “baptism” in the New Testament (the church) in that emphasis is typically overwhelming placed on the ritual of immersing in water when that is a sign or token of the reality that is essential. The required reality is to be immersed into the name (character and nature) of the Triune God which is transformative.]

Genesis 22

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” Genesis 22:15–18 (ESV)

General Comments: Some commentators say that “the angel of the Lord” was God Himself speaking. It could also be that “the angel of the Lord” was speaking as God’s representative. It was the same message regardless of the route by which it reached Abraham (or us).

Promise: Repeat of Gen 12:2-3 in these specifics – “I will bless you” and “make you a great nation” seems to be recast as “multiply offspring as many as stars and grains of sand.” We also see a repeat of the “nations of earth being blessed in Abraham” (altered to clarify that the blessing would be in (by or through) his seed. Not mentioned in this statement was “to bless and to curse” those who (respectively) blessed or disrespected Abraham. We see an additional element that Abraham’s seed (offspring) would possess the gate of his enemies. Some commentators see this as fulfilled when ancient Israel took over the cities and town of the Canaanite people; while others relate this to the words of Jesus regarding “the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church.”

Expectation: Rest in the expectation of the fulfillment of covenant promises.

Condition: Promise was tied to “because you have not withheld your only son.”

Obedience: Abraham obeyed God’s voice to offer his only son.

Fulfillment: Ultimate fulfillment would be many years in the future.

Genesis 26

³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” Genesis 26:3–5 (ESV)

Promise: Repeat of promise was made to Isaac. (Personal blessing, many offspring, the land, and nations blessed were specifically mentioned.)

Expectation: God would be with Isaac

Condition: Isaac needed to dwell in the land. Notice also the mention of the promise being passed on to Isaac with Abraham’s obedience which is defined as “kept God charge, commandments, statutes and laws” (which was prior to the “Law” being given via Moses).

Obedience: See comments under “conditions.”

Fulfillment: Some fulfilled in Isaac’s life and other parts came later.

Genesis 28

¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Genesis 28:13–15 (ESV)

Promise: Repeat of the promise was made to Jacob. (Land, many offspring, and nations blessed in you and your seed. Added information - Jacob would spread abroad which seems to be linked to families of earth being blessed (possible link to Pentecost event in which Jews from all over the known world were in Jerusalem to witness the coming of the Holy Spirit and then returned to their homes). Also added is a promise to be with Jacob and bring Jacob back to the land. The final new "bit of detail" added to the covenant is that God would be with Jacob (his descendants) until God had accomplished or finish all parts of the promises in the covenant. The last part that was completed was the work of the Messiah that made it possible for all nations of the earth to be blessed.

Expectation: Presence of God during Jacob's journey and his safe return to Canaan.

Condition: None stated

Obedience: None stated

Fulfillment: Jacob did return with a daughter and many sons to the land (that would be the beginning of many descendants). Other aspects of fulfillment were for a later time. The most significant was the work of Jesus (the seed of Abraham) who died to redeem those who were separated from God so they could be blessed under the new covenant that was instituted the night before His death and ratified by His shed blood on the cross on which He proclaimed "It is finished!"

Exodus 23

²² "But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. Exodus 23:22 (ESV)

³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. ³¹ And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

Exodus 23:30–31 (ESV)

Promise: Repeat of the covenant promise regarding extent of the land was made to Moses. It also has a similar promise regarding blessing those who bless (Gen 12) but is stated here only with respect to adversaries and enemies.

Expectation: Descendants would possess and occupy the land from which God would drive out the inhabitants (verse 30).

Condition: 1. Carefully obey God's voice (verse 22) and 2. Drive out the inhabitants of the land that God would deliver into Israel's hand (verse 31).

Obedience and Fulfillment: Later

Observation: Apparently, God's part in "driving out the inhabitants" (verse 30) would be to deliver the inhabitants into the hand of Israel, but the actual accomplishment would require participation of the descendants of Jacob. Possession of the land was linked to certain things that Israel was required to do. Again, we see that the extent of the land promised here and before found its fulfillment by Solomon as was mentioned earlier regarding 1 Kings 4.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Most instances of God's covenant promise to Abraham and when repeated to his descendants (Isaac and Jacob and Moses) had conditions and (in most cases) provided additional information regarding the covenant. We even see conditional language used in the statement of why God choose Abram: "that [those after him] do righteousness and judgment, that Jehovah may bring on Abraham that which He hath spoken concerning him."

Regarding the land, the extent of land and their inability to keep all that Solomon had acquired was linked to sinfulness of the nation. They lost control and even occupancy of much of the land as Moses (in Deuteronomy 28) had warned them would happen. However, God was merciful and allowed them to return to the land as was promised regarding the exile. This allowed return was necessary because an essential promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was yet to be fulfilled. That promise was regarding "all nations being blessed in the seed of Abraham." The plan was to reclaim not just the Jews but everyone who would believe and have the "faith of Abraham." This would include people from every place on earth, not just those who were from the "land of Israel."

The Jews were needed for the plan to be fulfilled because the Messiah must come from the Jews. In the fullness of time, after the Jews returned to the land of Israel and rebuilt the city and the temple, the Messiah was born and He proclaimed and implemented God's plan of salvation. Following the sacrifice of the Spotless Lamb of God for the sins of the world, the resurrection and the ascension, there was another step to take this good news of redemption to all the world.

God's plan made use of the fact that Jews had been scattered all over the known world at the time the Messiah came. Jews from everywhere were in Jerusalem and witnesses the events of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on those who put their trust in the completed work of the Messiah on the cross and His resurrection. These heard the gospel, saw the work of the Holy Spirit and then returned to their homes to tell others in their sphere of influence. We would assume that this was mainly shared with other Jews living in those areas and to some extent with some Greeks. Consequently, when Paul went into an area of with the gospel message, the Jews had some familiarity of what had happened in Jerusalem years before Paul came "first to the Jews and then to the Greeks."