

PARASHAH TEN

Genesis 12:1–13:18; Joshua 24:3–18; Hebrews 11:1–10

notes by Tim Hegg

The Abrahamic Covenant

Our text this Shabbat introduces one of the most important truths ever revealed by God to mankind, namely, the covenant He made with Abraham and his offspring. Known in the one year cycle as *parashah* “Lech lecha,” (לֵךְ-לְךָ, “walk on your own behalf”), we have before us the unfolding revelation of God’s plan to bless mankind through the family of Abraham. From a rabbinic perspective, Abraham (called Abram here) is the “first Jew,” meaning that his offspring would inevitably become the nation known as “Israel,” and be dominated by the Messianic tribe of Judah (from which the designation “Jew” is ultimately derived). Indeed, it is biblical to consider Abraham to be the father of the nation Israel, for the nation would eventually take on the name of Israel (Jacob’s new name), being comprised of the families that descended from him. The first use of the name “Israel” as a national designation is found in Exodus 4:22. “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.””

For Paul, the covenant that God made with Abraham and his offspring is ultimately the promise of salvation, and thus all who are saved must surely be part of this covenant, and claim Abraham as their father (Rom 4:11-12; Gal 3:29). Thus, the words we have before us today include another significant unfolding of the promise of redemption begun in Gen 3:15. The “seed of the woman” is narrowed in scope to the offspring of Abraham. From the whole of mankind, the promise of Messiah is narrowed to one nation, for the blessing which is promised must be God’s merciful solution to the downfall of mankind at the hand of Satan. After the destruction of the flood (resulting from mankind’s rebellion) and the chaos of the tower of Babel, the story of Genesis now gives to us the divine remedy for mankind’s wicked nature—a remedy summed up in the words “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

We may note several obvious characteristics of this covenant which God makes with Abraham. First, note that He makes His covenant with an individual, Abraham, and only through him to the rest of his family or offspring. In preparing us for the coming of Messiah, God demonstrates His method of transmitting his blessing through an individual of His choosing. Abraham, like Adam before him, stands as a chosen representative through whom the covenant blessings of God would flow. In like manner God’s *ultimate* covenant blessings will be mediated through one person, the person of Messiah. Paul, in commenting on the “one man” idea (Rom 5) emphasizes this “one for the many” motif of God’s plan of salvation.

Secondly, it is obvious that the covenant God is making with Abraham and his seed is not contingent upon the obedience or faithfulness of Abraham. In fact, when one reads the entire *parashah*, one is struck with the fact that immediately following the establishment of the covenant with Abraham, he demonstrates a lack of faith as he decides to lie about his wife Sarai in order to protect himself. Rather than demonstrating a life of strong faith in God, he walks in his own strength. Yet God blesses him! Not that God rewards a lack of faith, but the point of the narrative is to emphasize the one-sidedness of the covenant: even if Abraham fails, the covenant will remain viable because it depends upon God, not on man. God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth does not depend upon Abraham or anyone else—it fully depends upon God.

A third characteristic of the Abrahamic covenant is that it goes beyond Abraham himself to embrace his offspring. It is not a limited covenant, but one which spans all time, for the number of generations of Abraham's offspring to which the blessings will flow is left open. Even in the subsequent reiterations of the covenant in the book of Genesis, nowhere does God put a limit, such as "to the 10th generation," or anything like that. As long as the offspring of Abraham exists, God's blessing upon them is assured.

Fourth, the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant goes beyond the offspring of Abraham to embrace all of mankind. In fact, this final blessing of the list stands as the zenith or culmination of the covenant, outshining (in the sense of breadth) all the previous blessings. It even appears that this final blessing forms the purpose for the earlier ones, for in the subsequent reiterations of the Abrahamic covenant in the book of Genesis, the blessing for all mankind always occupies the final position of the lists (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).

It is interesting to note that in the Abrahamic covenant texts, the seed of Abraham is always distinct from the nations who will be blessed. Abraham and his offspring become the conduit through which "all the families of the earth" or "all the nations of the earth" will be blessed. But the blessing which is promised to Abraham ("I will greatly bless you, etc.) and the blessing upon the nations are listed as two separate blessings. What does this mean? What are the implications?

First, the nations participate in a blessing promised to them in the Abrahamic covenant, not because they are physically related to Abraham, but because God intended to bless all of mankind through the covenant He made with Abraham. That is to say, one need not be physically related to Abraham in order to experience the blessing which is promised to all the nations.

This became a vital element in the teaching and theology of the Apostles, especially in light of the fact that in the 1st Century, the prevailing rabbinic viewpoint was that only Israel could receive God's blessings, and they defined "Israel" as the physical offspring of Jacob. For them, a person born with Jewish blood was guaranteed God's blessing. This meant that if a Gentile wanted to be blessed by the God of Israel, he needed to "become Jewish"—he needed to be accorded a new pedigree. Therefore, the rabbis developed a ritual of conversion whereby a Gentile could become a Jew. But of course, this was not God's plan. A proselyte ritual is never prescribed in the Scriptures. Thus, when a native born Jew, or a proselyte (who had been declared a Jew through the ritual of conversion) based his covenant standing upon his ethnicity, the Apostles spoke of this as relying upon "the flesh." Abraham, then, became a most important paradigm: he was declared righteous before being circumcised (the central element in the conversion ritual). He was given covenant status without being a Jew. Yet being the father of the Jewish nation, he also stood as the one through whom the covenant would flow to the chosen people, the descendants of Jacob (cf. Rom 4:11–12).

A second implication: the term "blessing" or "bless" incorporates both temporal and eternal blessings. When the covenant promised to increase offspring, give a name of renown, provide protection from enemies, and so forth, these are temporal blessings. The general statement of blessing, however, may include eternal blessing, i.e., genuine and eternal communion with God. Indeed, we know through the progressive revelation of Scripture that the blessing promised to Abraham's seed as well as to all of the nations had as its ultimate focus the blessing of eternal life (cp. Gal 3:8).

Third, we should recognize that the word "seed" (עֲרֵב, *z'ra*), translated "descendants" by the NASB, is itself ambiguous, being able to carry the sense of a collective singular as well as suggesting a single individual. Paul, playing on this ambiguity, remarks that the singular word "seed"

refers to Messiah, at least in its final and ultimate sense (Gal 3:16). The blessing that comes to all of the nations is “in your seed,” and we know that this is Messiah Yeshua. But we also know that mere physical connection to Abraham secures neither temporal nor eternal blessings. Ishmael, for instance, is a case in point. While clearly the physical offspring of Abraham, he in no way shares the covenant blessings enumerated in our *parashah* and those following. The blessings of the covenant begin with God’s sovereign election (e.g., God chose Isaac to carry the covenant blessings, not Ishmael) and are confirmed through faith. While God would use the physical offspring of Abraham to carry the blessing to the world, only those who share in the faith of Abraham may participate in the eternal blessing of the covenant. It is for this reason that Paul refers to the covenant as one-and-the-same as the Gospel (Gal 3:8). Thus, the eternal blessing, the one which would come first to Israel and then to all the nations, is the blessing in which all of God’s chosen ones will participate through faith in Messiah Yeshua.

As a nation, Israel will never be forsaken by God. Indeed, the promise to the fathers is secure because it rests upon the infallible word of the Almighty. And, as those who were first given the oracles of God, Israel was first to be given the truth of the gospel and thus offered the revelation of Messiah, the object of true faith by Whom the eternal blessing are realized. As the light to the nations, Israel is responsible to share with the nations the truth of who God is and what He has done, so that “all the families of the earth” might also share in the blessings (both temporal and eternal). As “foreigners” attach themselves to the chosen people of God, they too share in the blessings He promised the chosen nation. And to the extent that they exercise genuine saving faith in Israel’s Messiah, they participate in the eternal blessings promised in the covenant as well.

It is evident, therefore, that the Abrahamic covenant has both corporate as well as individual aspects. Corporately, the nation which would come from Abraham (i.e., his offspring or seed) receives the promise of temporal blessings, and to one extent or another, all those within the corporate entity participate in these blessings. To receive the blessings given to the individual, however, requires personal faith in God, and only those who exercise such genuine faith in the promised Messiah enjoy true communion with God and all of the blessings (both temporal and eternal) promised in the covenant.

We should remember that the Abrahamic covenant encompasses the whole of God’s redemptive plan, including the Mosaic, Davidic, and “New” covenants. Each of these covenants are a re-emphasis or further revelation of what God has already promised in the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic covenant functions to identify those who share in the Abrahamic faith, and those who do not. It gives divine guidelines for living in communion with God, and condemns those who reject Him. The Davidic covenant promises the ultimate reign of the Messiah—the consummation of the blessings enumerated in the Abrahamic covenant. And the “New” covenant is a prophetic promise that Israel *as a nation* will one day enter into the eternal aspects of the covenant, aspects which have only been enjoyed by a remnant of Israel throughout her long history.

Thus, the Abrahamic covenant, given first in our Torah text, and reiterated to each of Abraham’s sons, stands as the all-encompassing expression of God’s plan to save His chosen people. In choosing the nation that would come from Abraham, He sovereignly chose His “servant” who would carry out His plan for all of mankind. Thus, while Israel is chosen as a corporate entity, the final blessing of the covenant envisions those who would be chosen from every “tribe, kindred, and tongue,” and who would therefore also enjoy the blessings of God’s kindness in Messiah. The Abrahamic covenant is thus God’s plan of salvation, and as the gospel is given and individuals

come to faith in Yeshua, the ancient promise given to Abraham is being fulfilled.

This gives one renewed hope and encouragement in telling others about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for it is here, early in the biblical history, that we see God's intention to bless the nations. If God has committed Himself to such a blessing, surely our efforts to tell others will be successful as He faithfully accomplishes what He has said. We have the message of the covenant, we need only to shine it forth.

There is an interesting use of language in the *haftarah* portion attached to this *parashah*. It is obvious why the Sages chose Joshua 24:3-18 to accompany Gen 12. It begins: "Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac." So the *haftarah* summarizes the *parashah* in a single verse. But note that it does not say that Abraham begot Isaac, but that God gave (נתַן, *natan*) him Isaac. In the next verse (24:4), the text records that God gave (נתַן, *natan*) Jacob and Esau to Isaac. But this is not the normal language for how the Scriptures record genealogies. In fact, except for these two instances in Joshua 24, I can find only one other place where God is said to "give" a child: "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given (נתַן, *natan*) to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace" (Is 9:6[5]).

Thus, as the Abrahamic narrative unfolds, we see the divine hand of God giving children who will specifically carry the promise of the covenant, itself pointing toward the ultimate Son Who was "given," even Yeshua. And thus the Apostolic section chosen for this *parashah* emphasizes the faith of Abraham, who awaited the promise God had given to him, looking for that "city whose architect and builder was God." Abraham was given the promise of Messiah, and it was in this One that he placed his hope and faith.

The Scriptures make clear that the Abrahamic Covenant is central to the unfolding plan of redemption. It is in the Abrahamic Covenant that the initial, somewhat veiled promise of redeemer to Chavah (Gen 3:15) is revealed in clear covenant terms. The one promised to Chavah is simply said to be among mankind in general ("of your offspring"). Here, in the Abrahamic covenant, the scope is narrowed to the descendants of Abraham. And as the Genesis narrative unfolds, it will be the purpose of Moses to show how the promise of the redeemer continues to be narrowed until we discover that He will come from the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10). Eventually, in the progressive revelation given to Israel by the prophets, we learn that the promise of the Redeemer is narrowed to one family from the tribe of Judah, that is, the family of David (2Sam 7).

Gen 3:15 Gen 12 Gen 49:10 2Sam 7

mankind ➡➡➡ Abraham ➡➡➡ tribe of Judah ➡➡➡ house of David

Thus, what begins in seed-form in Gen 3:15 is made more and more specific in the progressive revelation of the Scriptures. In fact, the Genesis narrative is structured in such a way as to emphasize that its primary purpose is not to tell the history of the Patriarchs, but rather to show how the promise made to Chavah of a coming redeemer is worked out in the course of history by God's sovereign plan. For instance, even though Ishmael will enter the story (Gen 16), Moses takes up the history of Isaac, not Ishmael, because it

is through Isaac's offspring that the Promised One will come. Likewise, even though Esau plays a role in the story of Isaac's family, the Genesis narrative focuses on Jacob because God had decreed that the Promised One should come from his offspring. If we step back and look at the Genesis story as a whole, we see that it is Moses' purpose to lead us to the Promised Redeemer as he relates the story of the Patriarchs. Moreover, he includes the failings of the Patriarchs in the unfolding drama to emphasize that the success of the promise made in the Abrahamic covenant is not dependent upon the Patriarchs themselves, but entirely rests upon the faithfulness of God. In our *parashah*, for instance, immediately after Abram is promised the Land, a famine comes which forces him to seek food in Egypt. In the hostile, foreign environment of Egypt, Abram fears for his life on account of Sarai's beauty, so he seeks to deceive the Pharaoh into thinking that Sarai is only his sister. As a result, Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem! Now if we read the Genesis story with a mind to see the unfolding plan of God to bring the promised redeemer, and if we bear in mind that God has already promised to bless Abram's seed and to bring the blessing through his offspring, we face a real quandary. Pharaoh's having taken Sarai spoils everything! Will God's promise be thwarted because of Abram's deceit? But then the answer is given: God is in control and He is working out His plan in faithfulness to His promise. He communicates to the Pharaoh through a dream, and Sarai is returned untouched. The promise is intact in spite of Abram's failure because it rests entirely upon God's faithfulness and His omnipotent sovereignty to bring about His will within the history of mankind. Indeed, we will encounter similar issues throughout the Genesis story. The Hagar/Ishmael plot appears as a significant roadblock to the fulfillment of the covenant promises, as does Esau's selling of his birthright to Jacob and the apparent demise of Jacob's family through treachery against Joseph. But in each case, the all-controlling hand of God overcomes the failures of the Patriarchs to bring about the blessings of the covenant just as He has designed.

This same motif is also seen throughout the history of Israel. Even as the failings of the Patriarchs cannot foil the divinely ordered fulfillment of the covenant promises, so the unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel cannot render the covenant null or void. For if the sinfulness of man could overturn the covenant promises made to Abraham, then the coming of the redeemer would have also been nullified. But the Abrahamic covenant is decidedly one-sided as is dramatically demonstrated in the covenant ceremony of Gen 15. God will maintain the Abrahamic covenant in spite of Israel's failure to be faithful to it because encapsulated within the covenant is the promise of the coming Redeemer. This is precisely Paul's point when he writes concerning the viability of Israel's covenant (Rom 11:29, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." And Ezekiel makes this clear as well, for he notes that when God acts to bring Israel back to Him in faithfulness, He does so, not on the basis of Israel's goodness, but on the basis of His own faithfulness:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went." (Ezek. 36:22)

"I am not doing this for your sake," declares the Lord God, "let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!" (Ezek. 36:32)

Sandwiched between these two verses (which form book ends of the prophet’s message here) is the promise that God will (1) take Israel from the nations and bring her back to the Land, (2) cleanse her from all of her idolatry and unfaithful ways, (3) remove her heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh, (4) put His Spirit within her, (5) cause her to walk in all of His statutes and ordinances, (6) bless her with abundance in the Land, (7) bring her to true repentance so that (8) a genuine covenant relationship will exist between Himself and His people (“so you will be My people, and I will be your God”). Here we see that by God’s own grace and sovereign purposes, the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are realized upon the people of Israel just as God had promised.

The “big picture,” then, in our *parashah*, is the unfailing faithfulness of God to His word. What we have in our text this Shabbat is the beginning of a theme that runs throughout the whole of Scripture, a theme that culminates in the person of Yeshua as the promised Redeemer, the Anointed One (Messiah), the Savior Who is Immanuel, “God with us.” “For as many as are the promises of God, in Him (Yeshua) they are yes...” (2Cor 1:20).