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GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

After Abraham returned from rescuing Lot, God appeared to Abraham in a vision (Genesis 15:1). Abraham reminded God that He had not yet given him any children (Genesis 15:2). So God repeated His promise to give Abraham offspring (Genesis 15:4-6) and to cause him to possess the land in which he was living (Genesis 15:7).

Then Abraham asked God how he could know for sure that he would come to possess the land. In response to Abraham's question, God told Abraham to bring a heifer, a goat, and a ram and to cut each into two pieces. The significance of this seems to be that God was preparing to formalize a covenant with Abraham by means of animal sacrifice.

That night Abraham fell into a deep sleep and a terrible darkness came over him; and God revealed to him what would happen in the future. God said that Abraham's descendants would go into a foreign country where they would be mistreated, and from which, after many years, they would return with great possessions. God assured Abraham, however, that he personally would die in peace and at a ripe old age.

When it was fully dark, a smoking fire and a burning lamp appeared and passed between the parts of the animals. The book of Genesis says,

“On that day
the Lord made a covenant with Abram
and said,
‘To your descendants I give this land,
from the river of Egypt to the great river,
the Euphrates--
the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites,
Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites,

Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.””
Genesis 15:18-21 NIV

The obligations that God agreed to under the covenant centered on two things: (1) He would give Abraham many descendants and (2) to Abraham's descendants He would give the land of Canaan.

Under the covenant, there were also things that Abraham was obligated to do. He was supposed to (1) walk before God and be blameless (Genesis 17:1), and he was supposed to (2) circumcise all the males in his household (Genesis 17:10-11) and to instruct them to maintain the tradition of circumcision after he was gone (Genesis 17:12-14).

Abraham kept his part of the covenant, and God kept His. God made Abraham into a populous nation and gave the Land of Canaan to the descendants he had through Sarah. The descendants of Abraham through Sarah came to be more commonly known as the “children of Israel.”

THE COVENANT AT MT. SINAI

God made an additional covenant with the children of Israel at Mt Sinai as He was leading them from Egypt to the Land of Canaan. The additional covenant did not cancel out the original covenant that He made with Abraham (Galatians 3:17). It was only a temporary expansion of the original covenant (Galatians 3:19).

Concerning the covenant made at Sinai, God said,

“Now if you obey me fully
and keep my covenant,
then out of all nations
you will be my treasured possession.
Although the whole earth is mine,

you will be for me a kingdom of priests
and a holy nation.”

Exodus 19:5-6 NIV

Under the additional covenant God obligated Himself (1) to take the descendants of Abraham as His “treasured possession” and (2) to make them a “kingdom of priests” and (3) a “holy nation.”

The people's obligation under the additional covenant was to abide by the laws that God gave them through Moses. This, the people agreed to do. They said,

“Everything the LORD has said
we will do.”

Exodus 24:3b NIV

Moses wrote everything down that God said (Exodus 24:4), and he sent young men to prepare animals for a sacrifice. After the animals were slaughtered, Moses took some of the blood from the animals and sprinkled it on the people, and said,

“This is the blood of the covenant
that the LORD has made with you
in accordance with all these words.”

Exodus 24:8b NIV

So the covenant that God made with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai was also sealed with a sacrifice just as was the original covenant with Abraham.

THE SINAI-CONVENANT WAS CONDITIONAL

The stipulation of the additional covenant was that the children of Israel would be God's holy people and would possess the Land of Canaan as long as they obeyed the Law of Moses. We

know from Biblical history that they were not able to keep the Law of Moses fully. For that reason many of them were killed by the Babylonians and many were also taken to Babylon as captives.

Since the children of Israel did not keep the Sinai-covenant, God decided that He would make a new covenant with them. The prophet Jeremiah said,

“‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD,
‘when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.’”

Jeremiah 31:31 NIV

What would the “new covenant” be like? Would it be like the covenant that God made with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai? No it would not be like the Sinai-covenant, for Jeremiah said,

“‘It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
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.”

Jeremiah 31:32 NIV

Since the children of Israel “broke” the Sinai-covenant, that covenant was nullified. The “new covenant,” which God promised through the prophet Jeremiah would be different from that old one. It would not be written on tablets of stone, as the Ten Commandments were, but in people’s hearts. God said,

“‘This is the covenant I will make
with the house 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.’”
Jeremiah 31:33 NIV

THE NEW COVENANT

The New Testament gives full and specific information about the new covenant to which Jeremiah referred. In fact, the expression “New Testament” means “new covenant.”

Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke, started out his narrative by describing a time when Roman legions dominated the Land of Canaan. At that time many of the children of Israel were wondering when and if God would remember His covenant with Abraham and redeem Abraham's people from their oppressors.

An angel of the Lord appeared to a priest named Zechariah and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son (Luke 1:13-17). Zechariah perceived that if God allowed Elizabeth to bear a son in her old age, it would be a miracle and a portent of great things to come.

After Zechariah and Elizabeth's son (John the Baptist) was born, Zechariah praised the Lord, and said,

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come
and has redeemed his people.”

Luke 1:68 NIV

Zechariah was well acquainted with the Old Testament and knew that if God were going to “redeem” His people, He would do it through a king of the house of David. He knew that king would be the Messiah. Zechariah said in his song of praise,

“He [God] has raised up
a horn of salvation for us

in the house of his servant David.
(as he said through his holy prophets
of long ago).”

Luke 1:69-70 NIV

Zechariah also knew that the Messiah would bring about the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham. The Messiah would give them, as Zechariah said,

“salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us--
to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham.”

Luke 1:71-73 NIV

Zechariah may not have understood in what way the Messiah would bring “salvation” to the children of Israel. He may have been thinking of a military solution to their problems, but Zechariah was right about one thing: The Messiah would fulfill God's covenant with Abraham.

JESUS INSTITUTED THE NEW COVENANT

Jesus was well aware that the new covenant would have to be sealed with his own blood, and He wanted His followers to remember Him. So, as He sat at table with His disciples for the last time, He took the cup that was before Him and said,

“This is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many
for the forgiveness of sins.”

Matthew 26:28 NIV

The fruit of the vine in the cup represented His blood, which He knew He must shed to seal the new covenant. This new covenant had to be sealed with sacrifice, just as the previous two covenants had been.

THREE COVENANTS

So we have before us three covenants: (1) The covenant that God made with Abraham, (2) the covenant that God made with Abraham's descendants at Mt. Sinai, and (3) the new covenant established by Jesus. How are these three covenants related to each other?

It is important for us to realize that God's having made a covenant with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai did not cancel out the covenant that He had made earlier with Abraham. The apostle Paul made this very clear when he said,

“What I mean is this:
The law, introduced 430 years later,
does not set aside the covenant
previously established by God
and thus do away with the promise.”

Galatians 3:17 NIV

It is also important for us to realize that the fact that God had made the Sinai-covenant with the children of Israel did not prohibit Him from making a new covenant, which would include a wider group of people.

The Sinai-covenant had some severe limitations. It was not suitable for all mankind, in all lands, and for all time. It was given to a specific people, in a specific land, and for a specific time. For this reason then and for other reasons too the new covenant has replaced the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. The book of Hebrews says,

“For if there had been nothing wrong
with that first covenant,
no place would have been sought for another.”

Hebrews 8:7 NIV

Again the book of Hebrews says, in recalling Jeremiah's
prophecy about a new covenant,

“By calling this covenant ‘new,’
he has made the first one obsolete;
and what is obsolete and aging
will soon disappear.”

Hebrews 8:13 NIV

The new covenant is far superior to the Sinai-covenant. The
Book of Hebrews says,

“But the ministry Jesus has received
is as superior to theirs [the Old Testament priests]
as the covenant of which he is mediator
is superior to the old one,
and it is founded on better promises.”

Hebrews 8:6 NIV

JESUS FULFILLED THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

After Jesus was raised from the dead, the apostle Peter
caused a lame man to be healed. The man had been sitting at one
of the entrances to the temple grounds in Jerusalem begging alms.
After Peter healed him a crowd of curious people gathered around
to see what was going on. Peter explained to them,

“By faith in the name of Jesus,
this man whom you see and know
was made strong.

It is Jesus' name
and the faith that comes through him
that has given this complete healing to him,
as you can all see.”

Acts 3:16 NIV

The apostle Peter told the people in Jerusalem that this miracle had happened as an outworking of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. He said,

“And you are heirs of the prophets
and of the covenant God made with your fathers.
He [God] said to Abraham,
‘Through your offspring
all peoples on earth will be blessed.’”

Acts 3:25 NIV

With these words the apostle Peter reminded people that God's covenant with Abraham had implications not only for Abraham's fleshly descendants, but also for all peoples as well.

AN ALEGORY CONCERNING ABRAHAM'S COVENANT AND THE SINAI-COVENANT

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, reminded his readers that Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born to a slave women (Hagar), and Isaac was born to a free woman (Sarah). Paul remarked that Ishmael was born in the ordinary way, that is, at the instigation of a man and a woman, whereas Isaac was born as a result of a promise that had God made to Abraham and Sarah (Galatians 4:22-23). Concerning this, Paul said,

“These things may be taken figuratively,
for the women represent two covenants.”

Galatians 4:24a NIV

The apostle Paul compared the Sinai-covenant to Hagar, who was Sarah's slave. Paul said,

“One covenant is from Mount Sinai
and bears children who are to be slaves:
This is Hagar.”

Galatians 4:24b NIV

The apostle Paul carried his analogy further by comparing Hagar and the Sinai-covenant to the city of Jerusalem. He said,

“Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia
and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem,
because she is in slavery with her children.”

Galatians 4:25 NIV

The apostle Paul no longer felt bound by the Law of Moses. Nor did he consider himself to be a citizen of the Jerusalem that is in Palestine. Paul said,

“But the Jerusalem that is above is free,
and she is our mother.”

Galatians 4:26 NIV

So we of today are faced with a choice: Do we wish to be Hagar's children or Sarah's? Do we wish to be slaves to the Law of Moses or free from it? Do we pledge our allegiance to Jerusalem on this earth or to the heavenly Jerusalem? The apostle Paul asked,

“But what does the Scripture say?”

Galatians 4:30a NIV

He found his answer in Genesis 21:10 where Sarah said,

“Get rid of the slave woman and her son,

for the slave woman's son
will never share in the inheritance
with the free woman's son."

Galatians 4:30b NIV

The apostle Paul exhorted believers in Christ in the following way, by saying,

"Therefore, brothers, we are not children
of the slave woman, but of the free woman."

Galatians 4:31 NIV

CONCLUSION

Jesus fulfilled the covenant that God made with Abraham. He also fulfilled the covenant that God made at Sinai with the children of Israel. However, Jesus fulfilled each of these covenants in a different way. He fulfilled the covenant with Abraham by bringing about those things that were promised to Abraham (Acts 3:25-26). The Sinai-covenant He fulfilled by making righteousness possible, to which the Law of Moses pointed (Romans 3:21-22).

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you suppose it was that God made a formal covenant with Abraham? Would not God's promise have been sufficient, without a covenant?
2. Why do you suppose it was that God made an additional covenant with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai? See Galatians 3:19.
3. With whom did God make the Sinai-covenant? See Exodus 19:5-6.

4. Can people be righteous today without keeping the Law of Moses? See Romans 3:21.
5. What was wrong with the Sinai-covenant? See Hebrews 10:3-7.
6. Is it possible for people today to participate in the new covenant? If so, how can they become a part of it? See Galatians 3:26-29.
7. Both the covenant with Abraham and the Sinai-covenant contained promises and blessings as a part of the covenant. Are there any promises and blessing connected with the new covenant? See Hebrews 8:6.
8. What are some of the promises under the new covenant? See 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1 and 2 Peter 1:4.
9. The promises and blessings under the first two covenants were conditional. Are the promises and blessings under the new covenant also conditional? See 1 Corinthians 10:11-12.