



This month's study with
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Abraham: Covenant with the People



"I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan . . . I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

— Genesis 17:7-8

There were ten generations between Adam and Noah, and another ten generations between Noah and Abraham. Just as humanity deteriorated from Adam to Noah, they degenerated morally between the time of Noah and Abraham. While the Noahic Covenant is eternal, it became clear that it would not serve the purpose of creating a perfected world with an awareness of God. Once again, the world in Abraham's time was engaged in idolatry and immorality.

Opinions differ as to how the world descended from having a close relationship with God to worshiping metal and stone. One idea suggests that people at first worshiped the sun, moon, planets, and stars because they were glorious manifestations of God, doing His bidding and affecting the world. Just as they honored a king's servants as an extension of the king, so, too, people reasoned that it was only appropriate to show reverence to God's great "servants" in the sky.

However, as time went on, the created replaced the Creator. Humanity forgot about God. This progressed to transforming these earthly elements into idols, representing the many "gods" ruling over the different elements affecting life on earth.

Others believe that while people believed in God, they did not consider humanity worthy of a personal relationship with the Divine. God was seen as "up there," beyond human grasp, unattainable, and therefore, off limits. This group believed that the proper way to worship God was through intermediaries; in other words, through idols. The idea that a person might have a personal relationship with God was sacrilege!

Abraham challenged the ideas of his time and shattered them. From scripture, we learn that Abraham grew up in a land and a family who worshiped many gods (Joshua 24:2). Yet, while Abraham still lived in

Mesopotamia, God appeared to him (Acts 7:2), and told Abraham to leave his country and go to "a land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Without hesitation, Abraham obeyed and took his entire family to this land.

As it says in Genesis 15:6, "Abram believed the LORD, and he [God] credited it to him as righteousness." (See also Romans 4:3, 20-24; Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23.)

Abraham became known as the *Ivri*, the "Hebrew" (Genesis 14:13), because while the whole world stood on one "side," *iver* in Hebrew, Abraham stood on the other *iver*.

With that background, it's not surprising that God chose Abraham to enter into a new covenant. Through the Abrahamic Covenant, God sought to create one nation that would follow Him rather than pinning all hope on the entire world, which had turned away from Him twice.

This nation would inspire the world, and in this way, all humankind would be blessed, as God had promised in Genesis 22:18: "through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." Indeed, it is a promise that has been handed down through the ages, as the apostle Peter reminded his audience in the book of Acts, "And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed'" (Acts 3:25).

Today, we still can see the impact of this covenant made 4,000 years ago. The Jewish people, descendants of Abraham, are returning to the very land promised to him. The covenant of Abraham is just as relevant today as it was when God established it. Our prayer is that the return of God's people to the land of Israel will allow the covenant to be fully realized: "The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

Rabbi Eckstein



A Man on a Mission

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”

— Genesis 12:1

When the Patriarch Abraham appeared on the scene at the beginning of Genesis chapter 12, a profound change in God’s interaction with humankind was about to take place. Until now, everything recorded in the Bible was the story of God and all humanity. From Adam and Eve to God’s covenant with Noah, God related to the world in a general way. But with Abraham, for the first time in history, God initiated an exclusive relationship with one individual and all his descendants.

Secondly, when we are first introduced to Abraham, he appears in context of a long genealogy of Shem’s family line. (Shem was one of Noah’s three sons.) In contrast to Noah, who we are told was righteous in his generation (Genesis 6:9) and who had found favor in God’s eyes (Genesis 6:8), we are told virtually nothing about Abraham. In Genesis 11:27-32, we learn that Abraham was born to Terah, married Sarah, who was barren, and that Abraham’s family traveled from Ur to Haran where his father died.

In addition, Noah’s purpose was clearly outlined and entirely specific – he was to build an ark that would house his family and animals while God brought about the destruction of the world and all living creatures through a devastating flood. Then Noah and his family were commissioned to rebuild the world.

Abraham’s mission, on the other hand, was conveyed in much broader strokes. With little more than a brief mention of his family lineage, we next read about God’s puzzling instructions to Abraham to leave his home for the land of Canaan, and the stirring promises that one day Abraham would become a great nation and be a blessing for all people.

How exactly this was supposed to happen was not made clear – certainly not to Abraham, who questioned God’s plan on more than one occasion. (See Genesis 15:2-3; 17:17). Why are we provided with so little information about the man through whom the most significant theological revolution in history was accomplished, and why is his purpose so unclear?

At this point in history, humanity had once again fallen into an immorality. Idolatry was the norm. Beginning with the Tower of Babel, the world turned away from God’s covenant with Noah, and sought to establish their own glory (Genesis 11:1-9). So God chose to make a covenant with a particular nation, which would, in turn, inspire, enlighten, and bless the rest of the world.

For that purpose, God needed an individual through whom this nation would arise. Why Abraham? The answer can be summed up in a famous exchange: William Norman Ewer, a British anti-Semite, once wrote, “How odd of God to choose the Jews,” to which American poet Ogden Nash responded, “It wasn’t odd; the Jews chose God.”

Abraham was chosen because Abraham chose God.

We find plenty of evidence regarding Abraham’s character and his “choosing of God” in the Jewish oral tradition. These stories, passed down for thousands of years, teach us that

Abraham, born into an idolatrous society, was a spiritual seeker who discovered the truth that there was one loving God Who had created the world.

Armed with this truth, Abraham was determined to share it with the world in spite of adversity. Abraham would set up his tent at a crossroads, build an altar to the Lord, and offer hospitality to whomever came by. (See Genesis 12:8; 13:18; 18:1-6). Sharing warmth and wisdom, Abraham brought many people close to the one true God.

However, even if we simply look closer at the Scripture itself, we can discover that Abraham was chosen because “Abram went, as the LORD had told him” (Genesis 12:4). The rabbis teach that the call that went out to Abraham went out to every human being. Only Abraham chose to answer the call. That is why he alone was chosen for God’s mission.

Abraham’s obedience to God’s call is underscored in the Christian Bible. The Jewish-educated and trained apostle Paul referred to Abraham as a “man of faith” (Galatians 3:9), and in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations” (Romans 4:18). The author of the book of Hebrews wrote, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8).

Now we can understand why Abraham’s task was vague. It wasn’t about the details of the mission. Abraham was willing to follow the God he believed in no matter what God would demand of him. He didn’t need to know exactly what God’s plans were. It was enough to know that God had a purpose for him; he was willing to follow in obedience and faith come what may, and indeed, he did.

think about it

1. Consider ways you can empower yourself and the next generation to stand firm and proud in what you believe.
2. God promised Abraham both descendants and land so that he would have people and a space in order to fulfill his God-given mission. How might you use spaces, such as your home or church, in order to spread kindness, truth, and light?
3. The covenant God made with Abraham, including the promise of the land of Israel for his descendants, is eternal. How does that inform the way you view current events in Israel today?
4. Consider the talents, treasures, and resources that God has given you. How might you contribute to God’s world by using these resources?
5. Today, we are witnessing the return of Abraham’s descendants to the land of Israel. As a valued partner with *The Fellowship*, how might you encourage others to join you in fulfilling biblical prophecy?



A People with a Purpose

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” — Genesis 17:1-2

Shortly after we meet Abraham, we find God making many promises to him in Genesis 12:1-7: that God will bless Abraham and, in turn, Abraham will be a blessing to all mankind (v.2); that He will bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him (v.3); and that He will give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s offspring (v.7). These promises are repeated in various forms, but it isn’t until Genesis 17 that God enters into covenant with Abraham, the covenant that has become known as the Abrahamic Covenant.

When Abraham was 99 years old, God said to him, *“I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you . . .”* In this covenant, both Abraham and God have obligations. God promises Abraham children and land, and Abraham was to be faithful and blameless. In other words, God expected Abraham to follow in obedience and to uphold His high standard of righteousness. In return, God would give him children and a homeland.

It is important to note that God’s side of the contract – the promise to give Abraham descendants and land – is not a reward for Abraham’s righteousness. Rather, it was the means by which Abraham was to fulfill his God-given mission. If Abraham was to serve as an example for all humankind and bring humanity closer to God, he needed people to help carry out his mission through all time and a place in which to do so.

But it was not easy for Abraham to understand how that was going to happen. After all, we learned early on that it was impossible for Sarah to bear children. We are told that she was childless *“because she was not able to conceive,”* (Genesis 11:30), and that she was *“well past the age of childbearing”* (Genesis 18:11). Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, God created the miracle of Isaac’s birth so that Abraham and Sarah could fulfill their divine purpose. God confirmed that it is through Isaac that Abraham’s nation will be built (and not Ishmael, Abraham’s other son) in Genesis 21:12, *“it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”*

God repeated the promise to Isaac’s son Jacob (and not his other son, Esau) in Genesis 28:13-14, *“I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth . . . All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.”* It is the 12 children of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28), who ultimately form the nation of Israel. Ultimately, his great-grandson would bear Abraham’s legacy and serve as a light to the nations.

In the Christian Bible, the apostle Paul taught that this promise given to Abraham centuries ago was extended to all through faith, *“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all*

Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all” (Romans 4:16). Because of this, Paul also wrote in his letter to the church at Rome, *“For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings”* (Romans 15:27).

As the real estate agents’ mantra goes, location, location, location. The land of Canaan was not a random choice of land for God’s people. It sat at the crossroads of the ancient world, connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe. It was the perfect location for an ideal nation to inspire and influence the world. In addition, according to Jewish tradition, the land of Israel is imbued with spiritual qualities as the place from which God began creation and the place He chose for His earthly dwelling place. God’s covenant with Abraham ensured that Abraham and his descendants could do their job in the right setting, and therefore, help perfect the world.

When God established His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17), He promised that it would be an everlasting covenant. *“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you”* (v.7). While the nation of Israel would sin, and eventually be exiled from the land of Israel as punishment for their sins, its covenant was never abolished. It is an eternal contract, which can never be broken. No matter how many times Israel has strayed, or how long it might take for Israel to fulfill its purpose, the covenant remains.

In our time, we are witnessing the continued fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant established so long ago. Abraham’s descendants are returning to the land of Israel (Isaiah 11:12) and have begun to shine their light. The nation of Israel, as the descendants of Abraham, has a certain destiny – to bless and to be blessed, to serve as a conduit through which godliness will be spread to the world.

apply it...

1. **OPEN YOUR HOME.** Just as Abraham and Sarah taught about God by opening their home to others, we can also teach others about God’s love by extending hospitality. (Job 31:32; Romans 12:13)
2. **SPEAK THE TRUTH.** Abraham was willing to speak the truth even though it was contrary to the popular culture. We can influence our world significantly when we stand up for what is right. (Isaiah 62:1; Acts 26:16)
3. **TRUST GOD TO LEAD YOU.** Abraham obediently followed God, not knowing where he would end up. We also need to trust that God is leading us, and that we will end up exactly where we need to be. (Proverbs 3:5-6; 2 John 1:6)

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Partners in Perfection

“This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.”

— Genesis 17:10

Eight days after a Jewish boy is born, he is circumcised in a ceremony called the *brit milah*, “the Covenant of Circumcision.” Family and friends join in the celebratory event as the baby enters into the covenant of Abraham. It is a deeply emotional and powerful moment when the baby’s father recites the blessing before the circumcision: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to enter him into the Covenant of Abraham our father.”

Through circumcision, the new baby becomes part of a 4,000-year-old chain, linking all the way back to Abraham.

The ritual of circumcision has its roots in God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. After God introduced the covenant that He would establish with Abraham, He commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and all males in his household: “*You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you*” (v.11).

Just as the rainbow was the *oht*, the “sign” and “seal” of the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant also calls for a symbolic sealing of the contract. In this case, the sign is the circumcision – a sign that is literally carved into the flesh of every male of Israel as an eternal symbol of our relationship with God and our obligations as partners in the covenant.

And while Christians today do not adhere strictly to having sons circumcised, Jesus, whose family descended from Abraham (see Matthew chapter 1), was circumcised by his Jewish parents. Luke, in his account of Jesus’ life, recorded, “*On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived*” (Luke 2:21).

In fact, the topic of whether Gentiles should be circumcised was the source of contention among the early church leaders. (See Acts 15:1-5). Peter argued, “*It is my judgment . . . that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God*” (Acts 15:19).

Likewise, Paul taught, “*Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts*” (1 Corinthians 7:19). He described circumcision in the following way: “*And he [Abraham] received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them*” (Romans 4:11).

The significance of circumcision as the symbol of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants is best captured in an exchange between Turnusruphus, the Roman governor who ruled Judea shortly after the destruction of the second Temple and Rabbi Akiva, the leading Jewish scholar of that time (as cited in the

midrash tanchuma, part of Judaism’s Oral Tradition).

Turnusruphus asked: “Whose actions have greater beauty, God’s or man’s?” Rabbi Akiva answered, “Human actions are more beautiful and complete.” Turnusruphus argued that human beings cannot possibly compete with the Creator of heaven and earth, implying that Rabbi Akiva was most certainly wrong.

Turnusruphus then asked, “Why do you Jews circumcise yourselves?” Rabbi Akiva answered, “I understood immediately that this was the question you were really asking, and I therefore preempted you by stating that the actions of human beings are more complete than the actions of God.”

To demonstrate his point, Akiva asked Turnusruphus to bring him sheaves of wheat and baked rolls. Rabbi Akiva pointed out that the sheaves are the produce of God and the rolls are the products of human beings, then asked, “And yet aren’t the rolls more complete?” Next Akiva requested that stalks of flax and linen fabric be brought to him. Akiva again noted that one was the produce of God while the other was the product of man, and inquired, “And yet isn’t the linen cloth more beautiful and perfect?”

Finally Turnusruphus asked, “If God prefers circumcised human beings, why don’t they emerge from their mother’s womb already circumcised?” Rabbi Akiva replied, “Why does the umbilical cord emerge with the baby so that it needs to be cut by the mother?”

The point Rabbi Akiva was making, and the symbolic meaning of circumcision, is that perfection of human beings requires human effort. We must play an active role in our spiritual, emotional, moral, and ethical development. God will not do it for us.

God gave us the raw material with which to create even greater things, including our very selves. Every person has the ability to become the kind of person he or she wishes to be. God could have created us perfect from birth. However, He desires that we play the key role in becoming the best that we can be.

We are partners with God in creating our best selves. Our partnership is expressed in the Abrahamic Covenant and symbolized in the act of circumcision, a sacred ritual that Jews cherish to this very day.

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4. **MAKE A SMALL CHANGE.** One way to affirm your partnership with God is to change for the better. Many small changes add up to big change! (Job 22:22; 1 Timothy 4:7)
5. **BLESS ISRAEL.** God promises Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that He will bless those who bless him. Bless the nation of Israel, Abraham’s descendants, and be blessed. (Genesis 12:3; Romans 15:27)