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MTP – Hermeneutics II

The Abrahamic Covenant: Established, Fulfilled, and Applied

Among the most significant, yet highly debated events in scripture is God's covenant with Abraham. In recently history, with the advent of dispensationalism alongside its new hermeneutic, questions have been raised as to both the nature and fulfillment of this covenant. All of the major voices within conservative evangelicalism acknowledge the great importance of this covenant, but disagree over a variety of factors. Who is the promise made to? What exactly did God promise? Has this been fulfilled and in what way? How did Abraham understand this? Does the New Testament change or confirm the original promise? Questions such as these have divided many theologians, leading to a variety of conclusions ranging from baptism of infants to voting for politicians who pledge support for the modern nation of Israel, to much more. Given the great nature of this covenant, it is therefore important to understand what it means, both in the old and new testaments.

In this paper, we shall see that the New Testament both confirms and displays the true nature and fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, addressing the promises and benefits, the recipients of those promises, as well as it's continuing relevance in the time of the early church until Christ returns.

I. The Abrahamic Covenant – Established

Very many things could be said about Abraham, his life, and the covenant that God cut with him. Much of these are beyond the scope of this paper, and for this reason, the focus will be upon the contents of the covenant and some (not all) of its nature. The covenant is progressively revealed to Abraham throughout Genesis, and by the death of Abraham, the following can be observed about the promises and contents of the covenant.

1. **God will make Abraham into a great nation and the father of many nations (Gen 12:2, 17:5).** Abraham was to be the one whom many nations came from. This promise is twofold. First, Abraham will be father of a great nation. This is the initial promise in 12:2: from Abraham will emerge a great nation. To Abraham, this is significant not only because a mighty people will come from him, but in order for this to happen, the (yet) childless Abraham would be given a son. Second, God later expands this promise, making Abraham not just the father of a single great nation, but the father of many nations. In addition to the great nation (referring to Israel), Abraham would be the father of the Ishmaelites (25:12-18), the Edomites (25:23), and more nations through Keturah (25:1-4). This, at first glance, would seem to be referring to the nations that would be *biologically* from Abraham, however, there also seems to be something greater at play here given that Abraham's servants (presumably foreigners) were a part of the covenant. Thus most significantly, this is physical, however a spiritual aspect can also be seen. Furthermore, we see a "setting apart" of one particular people. Of the nations of the world, God is choosing and creating one to be special and set apart.
2. **God will bless Abraham (12:2).** In one sense, this aspect summarizes the rest of the covenant, as all of these are ways in which Abraham will be blessed. In another sense, Abraham is clearly blessed in ways beyond the other 7 aspects of the covenant. Abraham was materially blessed, having livestock, servants, and precious metals (13:2). Abraham was given victory in battle and was blessed by Melchizedek, the

priest-king of Salem (14:1-24). Like the previous, many, if not most of these blessings promised are physical, however, there are spiritual blessings as well, which will be discussed later.

3. **God will make Abraham's name great (12:2).** This contrasts with the biblical account of Babel, where the people of the world desire to make a name for *themselves* by are thwarted by God. Here, we see God will make Abraham's name great. This is seen throughout the Old Testament, as God continuously identifies himself as the "God of Abraham." By no means is this insignificant, for it is absurd to consider that the greater would identify himself by the lesser. What King identifies himself by his servant? Much less the all-powerful God of the universe! Here we see a deep spiritual blessing: God will make Abraham's name great, in part by causing him to be revered among many people and religions, but more significantly by identifying Himself as "the God of Abraham."
4. **God will bless/curse those who bless/curse Abraham (12:3).** In this facet of God blessing Abraham, we see that God is *for Abraham*. His favor will be on anyone who blesses Abraham, His curse upon anyone who curses him. The language used in 12:3 implies that more shall be blessed as a result of Abraham than cursed. God uses the plural "those" for the blessing while the singular "him" is used for the curse. In many ways, this promise is shown, including Laban prospering due to the presence of Jacob, or the Canaanites being killed due to their cursing of Israel. However, this also continues the concept of a separation between Abraham and the world. The nation coming from Abraham is set apart and beloved by God such that those who bless God's cherished are blessed while those who curse them are cursed.
5. **Abraham will be a blessing to all of the families of the earth (12:3).** In contrast to the previous promise where others will be blessed as a result of how they treat Abraham, God promises that *through* Abraham, God will bless the world. As with the third promise, this reveals God's hand at work in the tower of babel. Though the people of the world were divided, God intends to bless all of them through Abraham. Additionally, this ought to bring to mind the fall of man. Adam and his posterity would suffer the curses found in Genesis 3, the greatest of which is spiritual death and separation from God. In Adam, all of humanity is cursed. In Abraham (and his offspring), the world will be blessed. Abraham himself will not only be blessed, but he will also be a blessing.
6. **Abraham's descendants will be numerous (13:16).** As numerous as the stars are in the sky, so will his descendants be. It is important to note (and this will be discussed more in-depth later) that what constitutes a "descendant of Abraham" need not be understood as exclusively biological. Abraham's servants were not related to him and yet they were beneficiaries of the covenant promises. Though throughout the old testament, the vast majority of "Abraham's descendants" were his biological relatives, *not all of them were*. This, combined with the promise to bless the world shows clearly that God is doing something beyond the creation and blessing of a particular (and exclusive) nation in a particular (and exclusive) place. Regardless, we see that God promises to give the once childless Abraham uncountable children.
7. **God will give to Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan (12:7).** In contrast to the fall of man, where humanity was exiled from the land of paradise, God is now giving to Abraham the land of Canaan. In a physical sense, God is providing a place for the Abrahamic nation to settle and dwell in. Through the land will come many

physical blessings such as farming, resources, and defense. Yet, if we only think of the land *physically*, there is much we will miss, for even in this promise there is something else going on. Why is it that God gave to Abraham the land of Canaan specifically? Why not the fertile land of the Egyptians that was watered by the Nile? Or the land that would go on to become Babylon? Places such as modern-day Ukraine and Switzerland have better soil and defensive geography, respectively, why not those? What must be recognized is that the land promised to Abraham stands at a crucial geographic point. One traveling between Africa, Europe, and Asia (at the time, the known world) would need to go through the land of Canaan. We've already seen God's intention to bless the world through Abraham. The land, therefore, is a crucial aspect to this plan. O. Palmer Robertson thus writes, "As a narrow land bridge connecting the continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia, this place and no other was rightly situated for the extension of God's covenant blessing to the entire world."¹ We see then, that even in the promise of the land, the entirety of the world is ultimately in view. This promise points to something greater in another important way. Abraham is promised the land of Canaan and this promise is extended to his descendants after them. Abraham, however, does not receive the land in his lifetime, neither does Isaac or Jacob. Each generation beginning with Abraham either saw, heard of, or dwelt in the land, but not to the complete physical or temporal extent that God had promised. Thus, for Abraham and his descendants, the land served as a reminder of something greater. God was not unfaithful, but pointing his people to something greater than Canaan. Finally, the promise of the land is promised to a singular "offspring" (17:7-8). Of course, this absolutely applies to the generations following Abraham, but it also points back to the garden, where God promised that the seed of Eve would crush the head of the serpent. The promised individual should be in mind with this promise. The one to crush the head of the snake will inherit the land. Thus, the land, though incredibly significant, is not *the most* significant aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, both at its inauguration and its continuance with each generation, for even in the beginning it pointed to something greater.

8. **God will be the God of Abraham and his offspring (17:7).** Herein lies the greatest and most significant promise of the covenant. In the garden, humanity was exiled from the presence of God as a result of sin, storing up wrath and creating an eternal chasm between God and man. Abraham, like all humanity before him was born with original sin, separate from God, and like all humanity before him, Abraham did not deserve to be in relationship with God (let alone a covenant). Yet unlike the majority of humanity before him, God established an everlasting covenant with Abraham, and promised to be God to him. To Abraham is promised eternal salvation, not as a result of anything in Abraham, but because of God. It is this where we find the substance and core of the covenant. For Abraham did not live to see the nations of Israel, Edom, or Ishmael. Nor did he receive the land beyond a burial cave that he himself had purchased. The entirety of the world was not blessed through him in his lifetime. Abraham received very little of the physical promises, yet even lacking those, he was blessed far beyond all other men up until that point. For the God of the universe graciously promised that to Abraham, He would be God. Thus Calvin commented "In this single word we are plainly taught, that this was a spiritual covenant, not confirmed in reference to the

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, [*The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*](#) (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 11.

present life only; but one from which Abraham might conceive the hope of eternal salvation.² This also *should have been* the continuing hope of God's covenant people, though it often was not. As with the land, the physical promises were never fully realized, but, if they continued in the faith of their father Abraham, they would have the core and substance of the covenant - that God was their God. With respect to Abraham's descendants, Calvin concluded "God again repeats that He will be a God to the posterity of Abraham, in order that they may not settle upon earth, but may regard themselves as trained for higher things³." We see then, that the most significant aspect of the covenant with Abraham does not pertain to geography, materialism, or politics, but to communion with the eternal God of the universe.

Further Observations

Having explored the nature of the covenant promises, we now make three observations about the nature of the covenant itself. Those being, how the covenant was ratified, the sign of the covenant, and the caveats to the covenant which occurred in the life of Abraham and in the generation immediately following him that set an ongoing precedent.

First, the means by which God established the covenant with Abraham may initially seem strange, but it, like the covenant promises, is of great importance. Without the historical understanding of the symbols, it may appear odd, barbaric even, that to establish the covenant, God has Abraham bisect a few animals and then brings a pot and torch through them. Thus, in order for this to make sense, we need to understand the nature of covenants in the ancient near-east. Covenants would involve 2 parties, usually a greater (a king, ruler, master, etc.) typically called a *Suzerain* and a lesser (a subject, servant, one who was recently conquered) typically called a *Vassal*. After a preamble and reading the stipulations of the covenant, animals would be cut in half and laid out with a path in between the halves. Both or one parties would walk through (always the Vassal if only one) the cut animals. This ceremony symbolized the penalty for failing to uphold the covenant. As if to say "let what has happened to these animals happen to me if I do not uphold the covenant." With this in mind, the Abrahamic covenant makes more sense. Abraham was certainly aware of what God was doing, and as he drifted to sleep, he no doubt expected that God would appear and either walk with him through the animals or compel him to walk through them alone. In either case, what Abraham observes is, to say the least, astounding.

Abraham was not the one to walk through the animal pieces, rather scripture states "when the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces" (Genesis 15:17). The nature of these objects is not perfectly understood by commentators, as many disagree as to the meaning behind the symbolism. What is most clear, however, is that in some capacity, these objects signify the presence of God. The significance and strangeness of this can hardly be understated. Not only does the lesser vassal, Abraham, not walk through the pieces (the vassal always walked through, whether alone or accompanied), but the greater suzerain walks through the pieces alone! God is promising many blessings to Abraham, and in going through the pieces is effectively saying "may I cease to be God and exist if I do not deliver what I have promised." The covenant is a *conditional* covenant, but the conditions are not to be kept by Abraham, but God Himself. God is swearing by Himself, the highest of authorities possible. The meaning is clear, the things promised to Abraham will *surely come to pass*.

² John Calvin and John King, [Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis](#), vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 450.

³ *Ibid.* 451.

Second, despite the immense significance of the ratification ceremony, God heaps blessing and assurance on Abraham by giving him the covenant sign of circumcision. As with many aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, this may seem strange to modern readers. We therefore must understand what circumcision represents, and from that, what it prefigures. A large aspect of God's promise to Abraham was that God would give him descendants and make a great nation out of him. Doing this requires a child that Abraham did not yet have at the time of Genesis 17. Circumcision involved cutting off the foreskin of the male reproductive organ. Far from barbaric, this sign functions as a reminder to Abraham of God's promise to give him descendants. This sign was also to be given to Abraham's offspring after him (17:9-10), thus Ishmael, Isaac, Esau, and Jacob (and all of Jacob's descendants) received the covenant sign. This was to set apart God's people from the rest of the world, however it did not make them God's people by itself. One could not rightly be called a Jew or Israelite without circumcision, yet Abraham and his descendants were circumcised *because they were God's people*, not the other way around. Moses therefore indicated in Deuteronomy 30 that God's people needed circumcised hearts. Ishmael and Esau, both circumcised, were not ultimately in the covenant, though they received the sign. For while they were physically circumcised, their hearts were not. Yet for those who did have the faith of Abraham, circumcision functioned as a physical reminder of God's covenant promise to them.

Third, biology is important, but not all that there is to this covenant. As was mentioned before, the vast majority of the covenant people throughout the old testament were biologically related to Abraham, but not all of them were. Therefore, it is accurate to say that to be a Jew was not exclusively due to biology. Two examples from scripture prove this. First, we see gentiles being grafted into the covenant, even from the beginning. Eliezer of Damascus (Genesis 15:2) was unrelated to Abraham, yet as a servant in his household, Eliezer was part of God's covenant people, as were, presumably, his descendants. Ruth, furthermore, was a Moabite (Ruth 1:1-5), yet was grafted into God's covenant people and was the grandmother of King David. The greatest king of Israel had a grandmother who was not descended from Abraham. We therefore see that gentiles were able to enter into the Abrahamic covenant in the old testament. Second, two individuals in the two generations following Abraham were broken off from the covenant. Ishmael was the firstborn of Abraham and received the covenant sign, yet he was broken off from the covenant. Like Ishmael, Esau too, though a child of Isaac, was given the covenant sign, yet the covenant was established with Jacob. We see then, even in the old testament, that biology was not the ultimate determiner of who was in the covenant. To be Jewish then was not so much an ethnic identity, but a spiritual one. Even from the beginning, God grafted gentiles into the covenant people, and broke off biological descendants of Abraham.

Throughout the old testament, we see echoes of the Abrahamic covenant, both in the frequent remembrance of the land promise and (and more importantly) every time the phrase "I will be your God, and you will be my people" is uttered. God continues to create anticipation for the coming of the seed of Eve, Abraham, and David (Psalm 22, Isaiah 53) as well as the widespread grafting in of Gentiles to the covenant (Psalm 22:27, Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:6, 56:1-8, Zechariah 2:11). God reminds his people that they will not be saved from judgment on account of their nationality (Zephaniah 1:1-6), but that "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). Finally, with respect to the land, we see the promise of the land progressively understood not merely as the land of Canaan, but the whole world (Psalm 2:8, 72, Isaiah 54:2-3, Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45). Thus, a faithful reader of the old testament would have been able to anticipate (in shadows, not substance) a widespread grafting in of gentiles to the

covenant, the coming of a messianic king who will rule over not *just* the land of Canaan, but the whole world. And so God's people awaited the fulfillment of the promises and the coming messiah.

II. The Abrahamic Covenant – Fulfilled

Being the most significant covenant in the old testament, it is not surprising that the Abrahamic covenant is frequently referenced, interpreted, and applied throughout the new testament by Jesus and the apostles. Having understood the nature of the Abrahamic covenant in its original context, we can now understand how the new testament views and treats it.⁴

Jesus as True Israel

The gospel according to Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus, beginning with Abraham. This immediately shows us something important. Rather than beginning with Adam as Luke's gospel does, Matthew's gospel begins with Abraham. It also begins with the preface "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). Matthew's intent is to show that Jesus is the true descendant of Abraham, and, as the gospel continues, that Jesus is true Israel. As we saw, the Abrahamic covenant foreshadowed and progressively revealed the coming savior. Matthew, from the beginning, shows us that it is Jesus.

This theme continues throughout the book of Matthew, where the apostle draws clear parallels between Jesus and the nation of Israel. Beginning with Jesus going to Egypt to escape death as an infant, he is taken out of Egypt to Nazareth. After this, he is baptized (parallels the "baptism" of the red sea), and goes into the wilderness where he is tempted, yet unlike Israel who sinned in the wilderness, Jesus is thrice tempted by Satan, but does not sin. In all of this, there is explicit and implicit fulfillment of the old testament. The trip to Egypt is said to fulfill Hosea 11:1, the slaughter of the male children under two parallels the slaughter of Jewish children while Israel was in Egyptian slavery and also fulfills Jeremiah 31:15. When coming to John the Baptist, Jesus explains the necessity of his baptism by saying "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15) as Jesus identifies with his people by being baptized. Finally, though there is not explicit reference to a verse being fulfilled in Matthew's gospel, the logical progression after baptism would be wandering in the wilderness, and Jesus does just that for 40 days, paralleling Israel's 40 years.

The significance of this becomes apparent when the book of Hosea is considered. After centuries of unfaithfulness, idolatry, and wickedness, God says something striking to the nation of Israel as Hosea's wife bears his third son. "Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God." (Hosea 1:9). This shows a clear reversal of the covenant language made to Abraham ("I will be your God") and the continued affirmation to Israel ("I will be your God and you will be my people"). As a result of Israel's unfaithfulness, the unthinkable happens – God disinherits national Israel, who is also called His son (11:1).

Now, however, in the new testament, Jesus is shown to be the true Israel of God, the true Son. As we saw, Jesus's trip out of Egypt fulfills Hosea 11:1 – "out of Egypt I called my son." The point being made in Matthew's gospel, which was likely written to the Jewish people, is that where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. Where Israel fell into sin, Jesus kept the

⁴ Rather than going through each individual passage, one after another, every reference found has been grouped by theological category. This is both to have a more systematic analysis and to avoid unnecessary repetition, as many of these passages make similar (if not identical) points.

law. The nation of Israel was disinherited from God's covenant of grace, in contrast, Jesus is the fulfillment, recipient, and continuation of it.

This is further shown by the apostle Paul in the letter to the Galatians. Paul, speaking of Abraham, writes "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ." (Galatians 3:16) In this passage, Paul is making the point that the law does not annul the promises made to Abraham, however, this verse speaks much to the nature of the covenant as a whole. We've already seen that Jesus is true Israel, Paul now gives the implications of this reality – that Jesus is the promised and true seed of Abraham, the one to whom the covenant blessings in their greatest and truest sense are given. Christ, being true Israel, is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. R. Scott Clark explains this well, saying "The promises given to Abraham were NT gospel promises. They were given before Moses and they were fulfilled in Christ. Jesus is Abraham's true Son, he is "the seed" promised to Abraham."⁵

The Israel of God

The implications, however, do not end there. While Christ is the true *descendant* of Abraham, the reality of plural *descendants* is emphasized by Paul as well. The question, therefore remains: who are Abraham's true descendants and who is the Israel of God?

This is answered by the gospel accounts as well as the epistles, both showing that the Israel of God, those who receive the covenant blessing, are the one people of God consisting of Jews and gentiles who are united with Christ by faith.

Despite the nature of the Abrahamic covenant shown in the old testament – that salvation is by faith alone apart from ethnicity, there appears to have been misunderstandings that crept in to the Jewish people. They (specifically the scribes and pharisees), seemed to believe that their Abrahamic ancestry and law-keeping would save them. After Christ's death and resurrection, the Judiazers continued this error by insisting that the gentile Christians had to undergo circumcision (and keep the ceremonial law) in order to be saved. As the end of the old covenant nears, John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness against the pharisees and Sadducees, saying, "you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. *And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.'*" (Matthew 3:8-9, Luke 3:7). The pharisees, while having the blood of Abraham, lacked the faith of Abraham, and as such were not true children of Abraham. John the Baptist, still under the old covenant, reminds God's people what has always been true, that no one is a true son of Abraham if they do not believe in God by faith.

Jesus, speaking to the pharisees, says "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father [the devil] did" (John 8:39-41). Paul further elaborates on this concept in the letter to the Romans, writing,

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For

⁵ Clark, R. Scott. "The Israel of God." The Heidelberg, May 19, 2018. <https://heidelberg.net/2018/05/the-israel-of-god/>.

no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God⁶

We see then that those who are physically descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are not automatically in the Abrahamic covenant and therefore saved. Paul describes this excellently, stating that “not all who are descended from Israel are belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Romans 9:6-7). Almost all of the Jews are biologically related to Abraham, yet many (if not most) of them are not truly his children and thus are not heirs of the covenant. He continues, “but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (9:7-8). Ishmael and Esau were biologically related to Abraham, yet they were not children of promise. As we examined previously, this is not a new reality, but one that has existed from the beginning. The spiritual blessings of the covenant are for the true children of Abraham.

If only the true children of Abraham are in the covenant, than what makes someone a “child of Abraham?” The new testament answers this as well. Jesus told the pharisees that if they were truly sons of Abraham, they would be “doing the works that Abraham did” (John 8:39). What the “works of Abraham” are, is discussed in-depth by Paul in Romans and Galatians. Paul, in Romans 4, shows that Abraham was justified by faith, quoting Genesis 15:6, that Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). Paul similarly says “know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” in Galatians 3:7. Thus, one is a child of Abraham, not ultimately by biology, but through faith. Paul later shows that the necessary object of our faith is Jesus Christ. Jesus thus said to the pharisees, “your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (8:56). The irony of the pharisees’ clinging to Abraham is that they rejected the object of Abraham’s faith, who was there in front of them. They had his blood, but lacked his faith. This is why the pharisees were called children of the devil, even though they were descendants of Abraham: they rejected Christ and sought to be saved by works of the law rather than faith. As a result of this, they, alongside *every other Jew who did not have faith in Christ* were broken off from the covenant (11:20).

From this, it follows that if those of faith are the true children of Abraham (and thus the recipients of the covenantal blessings), then gentiles who have faith in Christ are rightly Abraham’s children.

Jesus spoke of this reality during His earthly ministry. Upon entering Capernaum, a gentile centurion came to Jesus, asking that He would heal his paralyzed servant. When the centurion demonstrates remarkable faith, Jesus says

“Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁷

That Jesus says this to a gentile and describes many coming from “east and west” to dine with the patriarchs shows the adding in of the gentiles to God’s covenant people.

Furthermore, the description of the “sons of the kingdom” being thrown into what is almost certainly hell shows a dual reality – that Jews lacking faith in Christ are removed from the covenant, while gentiles possessing saving faith are added into it.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 2:25–29.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 8:10–12.

This reality is explicitly stated by the apostle Paul. Describing who the covenant blessings are for, Paul states

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.⁸

He shows that Abraham is both father of Jews (circumcised) and gentiles (uncircumcised) who have saving faith. He similarly says in Galatians

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.⁹

In essence, it is not a matter of being related to Abraham biologically, but having faith in Christ, Abraham's true descendant. Paul therefore says "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29).

It is sometimes objected that what Paul is referring to here is not the gentiles being given the promised blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (usually assumed to mean the land and an earthly, millennial kingdom), but being given the same salvation of Abraham. Thus, Paul is simply showing that in order to be saved one need not become Jewish, but simply have faith. The covenantal promises and blessings remain for the Jewish people, not gentile believers. Gentiles are in the church, not Israel.

The problem with this assertion, is that it misunderstands the Abrahamic covenant. As we saw, being Jewish was not so much an ethnic identity as it was a spiritual one. In the time before Christ, a gentile who had the faith of Abraham could be added into the covenant people, becoming a true Jew and having children who would be considered true Jews as well. Under the new covenant administration, this reality does not change. Believing gentiles, having the faith of Abraham, are called "children of Abraham," "heirs according to promise," and "blessed along with Abraham." If having the faith of Abraham does not include one in the promises made to Abraham, this shows a strange and significant shift from the old to the new covenant. Before Christ, a believing gentile could expect to receive the full promises and blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, yet after Christ should he now be excluded? The pattern of the new covenant is that it improves upon and expands the old. For believing gentiles to be excluded from the promises made to God's people after Christ has come is contrary to the nature of the new covenant. Furthermore, if gentiles are excluded from the promises made to Abraham, shouldn't they seek to undergo circumcision and become Jewish in order to receive greater blessing? Of course not, because, as Paul says, "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6).

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 4:9–12.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 3:7–9.

Furthermore, we see both Paul and Peter speaking to the church as true Israel. In Romans 11, Paul describes the gentiles being “grafted in” to the olive tree on account of their faith, while unbelieving Jews are broken off. The concept of the “olive tree” references Jeremiah 11:16 and Hosea 14:6, both of which describe *Israel* as an olive tree. What Paul describes is not a new tree being planted, or a tree for the Jews and a separate tree for the gentiles, but *one* already existing tree. In this tree, to Israel, to whom the promises were made, unbelieving Jews are broken off and believing gentiles are grafted in. The illustration is clear in Romans 11, that believing Jews and gentiles are true Israel and both groups are heirs of the covenant.

Yet what Paul illustrates in Romans, he says clearly in Galatians and Ephesians. In the conclusion to Galatians, he states “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the *Israel of God*” (Galatians 6:15-16). It may be argued that the “Israel of God” doesn’t refer to the gentiles, but immediately before writing this phrase, Paul reaffirms that circumcision (being ethnically Jewish) and uncircumcision (being gentile) count for nothing, but only being a new creation. Similarly, in Ephesians, Paul writes

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.¹⁰

In this, Paul could not be clearer as to the unity of Jews and gentiles into one body. The gentiles were at one time “strangers to the covenants of promise,” but now “have been brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ.” Paul clearly states that Jesus has one people in place of the true. In Christ, gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens,” the implications being that not only are Jews and gentiles gathered into one body, but gentiles are no longer strangers to the covenants of promise. The plural “covenants” further shows that this is not merely a giving of salvation, but a grafting in to the fullness of old testament promises.

Therefore, the clear and simplest reading of the text is that believing gentiles have been added into the covenant, and are the Israel of God alongside believing Jews. The church does not replace Israel, the church *is* the Israel of God, being made up of those who have the faith of Abraham in Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 2:11–22.

This Israel is not only a spiritual people, but a true nation. The apostle Peter writing to the church says

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.¹¹

The church then, is the Israel of God, a holy nation before Him. It therefore follows that the promises made to Israel are not for the physical, unbelieving nation of Israel, but for the church who has faith in Jesus, who is the true Israel and by whom all covenant promises are mediated.

The Sign of the Covenant

Before Christ, God's covenant people received the sign of circumcision. To Abraham and his descendants, this was a reminder of God's promises, given for assurance and to strengthen faith. As was mentioned before, under the Abrahamic and mosaic covenants, if a gentile desired to follow God and had the faith of Abraham, he and his household would undergo circumcision. One was not saved because they were circumcised, they were circumcised because they had saving faith. This sign was for God's people, marking them as set apart among the rest of the world.

Upon the inauguration of the new covenant, one might expect that circumcision would continue as the sign of God's covenant. What we see, however, is that in Christ, the covenant sign is no longer circumcision, but baptism.

Christ, before ascending to heaven, commands the apostles to make disciples of all nations, and to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). When one becomes a Christian, the sign of initiation into God's people is now baptism. This is confirmed by a few other passages.

The Apostle Peter, after preaching the gospel to the Jews at Pentecost tells them to "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:38-39). These people, upon salvation, are told to be baptized. The reason attached to this, is "the promise" which is said to be "for you" (the Jews), "for your children," and "for those who are far off" (the gentiles). The promise is salvation, which brings to mind the quintessential promise of the Abrahamic covenant, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." What this means for the children is beyond the scope of this paper, however, we see that both Jews and Gentiles who are saved are to be given the covenant sign of baptism. Later on in the book of Acts, when gentiles are saved, Peter does not command them to be circumcised, but baptized (Acts 10:47). Paul, who simultaneously is staunchly for gentile inclusion in the Abrahamic covenant yet

staunchly against gentile circumcision for the purpose of works-based salvation, says For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.¹²

11 [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Pe 2:9–10.

12 [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 3:27–29.

For the church, who is the true Israel of God, the sign of being united with Christ, of being in the covenant, is no longer circumcision, but baptism. Thus, when showing that believing Jews and gentiles are one people in Christ, he reminds them that they were all baptized into Christ, and in Christ there is no longer a dividing wall between Jew and gentile.

Similarly, Paul writes

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.¹³

This shows that the sign of circumcision is fulfilled in baptism. Those, particular gentiles, who have faith in Christ and are added into the Israel of God are therefore no longer circumcised, but baptized as the sign of the covenant. As with circumcision, baptism does not save faith, but it is a sign of saving faith and initiation into the covenant people of God, that is, the church.

The Land

The promise of the land to Abraham and his posterity is among the most highly debated aspects of the Abrahamic covenant. Many, if not most evangelicals today believe that the original land of Canaan will be given to Israel (consisting of ethnic Jews) as a nation during a future 1000 year reign of Christ. This, however, does not seem to be consistent with how the new testament treats the land. As we shall see, the new testament does not seem to be focused on the land as a promise to be fulfilled in a future millennial rule, but as a promise that is presently being fulfilled in the world, and ultimately will be fulfilled in God's church inheriting the new earth.

As we saw, the original promise of the land to Abraham had clear signs of the ultimate intention, which was continually hinted at in the Psalms and prophets as being the world. The new testament shows and affirms this reality.

Jesus, in the beginning of the sermon on the mount states, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:3, 5). Much of the beatitudes is in reference to various old testament passages. Verses 3 and 5 are no exception to this. Verse 5 points back to Psalm 37:11, which says "But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." This reference, interestingly, is not a 1:1 correspondence. Where the Psalmist says that the meek shall inherit "the land," no doubt referring to the land of the Abrahamic covenant, Jesus says that the meek shall inherit the earth. This shows what was anticipated in the old testament, that the promise of the land is meant to be understood as referring to the whole world. This, however, is not the only meaning shown by Jesus. Jesus refers not only to the world being inherited, but also the "kingdom of heaven." Those blessed receive both. G.K. Beale summarizes this well, saying "the 'earth' here is wider than the promised land's old borders and is coextensive with 'the kingdom of heaven.' This is likely a way to say that the 'blessed' will inherit the new heaven and earth and not some mere ethereal heavenly realm."¹⁴

Likewise, the apostle Paul in Romans 4:13 says "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith." The context of this verse shows that Abraham was justified, not by works of the law, but faith. That the true inheritance of Abraham is not *merely* the land of

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:11–12.

¹⁴ G. K. Beale, [A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 757.

Canaan, but the world is not argued by Paul but assumed. Paul states this passively, seemingly under the assumption that the Roman (gentile and Jewish) audience would understand this. Compounded with the previous passage, where Paul argues that it is those of faith (Jew and gentile) who are the true children of Abraham, this shows that not only is the promise of the land fulfilled in the world, but the promise is for Jew and gentile who profess faith in Christ.

Often when discussing matters of old testament promise, the question of “how did the original readers understand this?” comes up. In the case of the land, the new testament in the book of Hebrews removes the guesswork and tells us how Abraham understood the promise of the land. Hebrews 11:8-12 describes Abraham and Sarah, leaving their homeland and living by faith. Hebrews 11:13-16, speaking of them, says

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Thus we see, consistent with the old testament anticipation of the land promise and the words of Jesus and the apostle Paul, that even Abraham himself understood the promise of the land to be referring to something greater. In the old testament, the full realization that was hinted at was the world, yet its expanded even further in the new to be a heavenly city. As we saw, Abraham seemingly never obtained the land that was promised to him. In this, God was making him to look to something greater than the land. The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that this thing was the heavenly city, which God has prepared for his people.

This city is seen clearly in the book of Revelation and is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of the land. In his vision, John writes

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”¹⁵

And later on continues,

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.¹⁶

¹⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 21:1–4.

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 22:1–5.

Here we see the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. God's people will be given the new heavens and the new earth as their inheritance, where God Himself will dwell with them. "I will be your God, and you will be my people" will be true to the fullest extent. Abraham, alongside all of those who trusted in Jesus by faith will live and reign on the new earth.

III. The Abrahamic Covenant – Applied

Aside from the matter of geopolitical foreign policy, there are a variety of ways in which this view of the Abrahamic covenant can be applied to believers today.

Assurance of Salvation and Faith

If indeed the promises of the covenant are for the church, our assurance of salvation ought to be strengthened. To Abraham, who was justified by faith alone, God made an irrevocable covenant, saying "I will be your God." Thus, to us who have been justified by faith in Jesus and thus are grafted into the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, we can rest knowing that the promises of God are irrevocable. As God's passing through the pieces surely brought much comfort and assurance to Abraham, so too should it bring us great assurance.

Abraham's justification by faith, apart from works of the law also reminds us that our ultimate assurance should come from our profession of faith. Abraham sinned various times after the inauguration of the covenant, yet it was not his works that made him right with God or sustained the covenant, it was his faith. God's covenant with Abraham was not contingent on Abraham's perfection, but God's faithfulness. Thus it is important to recognize that the Abrahamic covenant is *conditional*, but that God has taken all of the conditions upon Himself. We neither accomplish nor sustain our salvation, God does both.

Such is it with us. Though works absolutely play a role in assurance of salvation as the book of James makes clear, the bedrock of our assurance should not be our works, but our profession of faith in Jesus. If it were our works, we could find a multitude of reasons to doubt our salvation, but if we have made a profession of faith in Jesus and God has irrevocably promised that all such people will surely be saved, we can be truly assured of our salvation.

For further assurance, Abraham was given the covenant sign of circumcision, to remind him of the promises and strengthen his faith. Likewise, we have been given the covenant sign of baptism for the strengthening of our faith. Baptism, which physically represents the washing away of dirt from the body, reminds us that God has washed us clean of our sins. In our baptism, we remember that we have been saved, united with Christ, and that this is not of us, it is a gift of God. Water baptism, as a sign, does not save, but as circumcision was given to strengthen Abraham's faith, so too should it strengthen ours.

Hope

A right understanding of the Abrahamic covenant should calibrate and thus strengthen our hope as believers. As Christians, our hope is found fully in Christ and his return to judge the living and the dead. While we should care about what happens in the middle east, praying for and weeping with those who weep over the often-broken and violent state of affairs, we must remember that our hope ultimately does not rest completely or even partially in any earthly nation, but in the future new heavens and earth. Our hope is not in a return to the shadows and types of the old covenant system (or the any shadows and types of the old testament for that matter), but our hope is rightly in the fulfillment of these things, that the perfect lamb of God has been sacrificed once for all sins and that no future sacrifice is necessary.

Summary

Therefore we see that the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the promised true descendant of Abraham – the true Israel. To Jesus and by Jesus the covenant promises of old (including the other covenants made) find their fulfillment. Under the new covenant administration, ethnicity is not important, only faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, inheriting the covenant promises is not through being biologically related to Abraham, but by being spiritually related to Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ. Those who are in Christ, are the Israel of God, a true and heavenly nation, given the covenant sign of baptism. This nation will, in the future, receive the ultimate fulfillment of the Abraham covenant in the new heavens and earth, where the church shall dwell with God and enjoy Him forevermore. In light of these things, the believer should have a strengthened faith, hope, and assurance of salvation, knowing that because of his faith, God has irrevocably said to him and every other believer: "I will be your God and you will be my people."