



CHAPTER 10

The Abrahamic Covenant

IN THE BIBLE, ABRAHAM IS THE FIRST INDIVIDUAL after Noah's Flood whose story is told because he is the first one after Noah to enter into a covenant with God. Covenants are sacred agreements between individuals or groups and God. Since the first five books of the Bible are concerned with the covenant between God and Israel, those books focus on individuals who are part of the covenant.

The section of the Book of Abraham dealing with his covenant is one of the most mentioned and discussed parts of the Book of Abraham. In the Bible, Abraham is promised land and posterity. In the Book of Abraham, Abraham is promised posterity, but the promise of land is deferred to his posterity. Abraham will be "a minister to bear [the Lord's] name in a strange land," but he will not be given that land. Instead, God "will give [it] unto [his] seed after [him] for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to [God's] voice" (Abraham 2:6). Additionally, Abraham is promised the right to "bear



A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ARTIST'S DEPICTION OF GOD ESTABLISHING HIS COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM. GOD, WHOM THE ARTIST SAW AS INCORPOREAL, IS DEPICTED BY USING THE NAME OF GOD IN HEBREW. UNFORTUNATELY, THE ARTIST HAS TAKEN EVERY HEBREW LETTER AND REPLACED IT WITH A DIFFERENT BUT SIMILAR LOOKING LETTER. AS A RESULT, HE HAS WRITTEN *dihdah*, WHICH DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING. THE LATIN INSCRIPTION READS, "THIS IS MY COVENANT: EVERY MALE SHALL BE CIRCUMCIZED." COURTESY OF WENCESLAUS HOLLAR (PUBLIC DOMAIN), WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations" (Abraham 2:9) and that "this right shall continue in [him]," as well as "in [his] seed after [him]" (Abraham 2:11).

Abraham's covenant, as recorded in the Book of Abraham, has several features that appear in other covenants and treaties of the ancient world. Treaties and covenants in Abraham's day typically have a preamble or title, stipulations, an oath or other solemn cere-

mony, and, more rarely, curses conditional on violation of the covenant. Surprisingly, curses for violation of covenants are rare in written records of covenants at this time because they were extensively discussed and negotiated before the covenant ceremonies. The covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern for Abraham's day and thus can be divided into sections that show this structure:

SOLEMN CEREMONY

But I, Abraham, and Lot, my brother's son, prayed unto the Lord, and the Lord appeared unto me, and said unto me:

PREAMBLE

Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice.

For I am the Lord thy God;

I dwell in heaven;

the earth is my footstool;

I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice;

I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot;

I say to the mountains—Depart hence—and behold, they are taken away by a whirlwind, in an instant, suddenly.

My name is Jehovah,

and I know the end from the beginning;

therefore my hand shall be over thee.

STIPULATIONS

And I will make of thee a great nation,
 and I will bless thee above measure,
 and make thy name great among all nations,
 and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee,
 that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and
 Priesthood unto all nations;
 And I will bless them through thy name;
 for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after
 thy name,
 and shall be accounted thy seed,
 and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father;
 And I will bless them that bless thee,
 and curse them that curse thee;
 and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed
 (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that
 this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee
 (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall
 all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings
 of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of
 life eternal. (Abraham 2:6–11)

Treaties and covenants after Abraham's day—in the late second millennium (including the time of Moses)—have a more complex structure. They typically have a preamble, a historical prologue, stipulations, sometimes oaths, witnesses to the agreement, and blessings and curses conditional on keeping or breaking the covenant. They have a different form than those of Abraham's day.

By the time of the first millennium (from about the time of David to the time of Josiah), the form of treaties and covenants was once

again simplified. They typically have a preamble, witnesses, stipulations, and curses for disobedience.

So the covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern of treaties and covenants in his day and not the pattern of later times. The covenant pattern is thus an indication that the text dates to Abraham's day.

A couple of features of Abraham's covenant are clarified when compared to practices from Abraham's day. First, covenants were typically made between specific individuals. An individual's posterity would have to renew that covenant on an individual basis. God specifically includes Abraham's posterity in the covenant, but though "this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee" (Abraham 2:11), each individual of a successive generation needs to renew the covenant for himself or herself.

Second, agreements concerning land carried different connotations than they did later. Owning a settlement meant that the owner had to supply service and labor to his lord and had to take care of the settlement, sustaining it with food if necessary but receiving the fruits of its labor. Possession could be either revocable, in which case the owner owned them only as long as he did obeisance to his lord, or irrevocable, in which case the owner could pass them down as an inheritance to his posterity. The Book of Abraham's covenant of the land touches on both of these types of ownership: the Lord gives the land "unto [Abraham's] seed after thee for an everlasting possession," but this is effective only "when they hearken to [the Lord's] voice" (Abraham 2:6).

Latter-day Saints appropriately focus more on the content than on the ancient form of the covenant. They see themselves as descendants of Abraham (whether literally or by adoption) and thus as participants in that covenant. As partakers of that covenant, they see themselves as having the obligation to bless "all the families of the

earth . . . with the blessings of the Gospel” (Abraham 2:11) by sharing the gospel with others so that they too can be part of the covenant.

The next thing that God teaches Abraham after the covenant is a revelation on astronomy.

FURTHER READING

Hvorka, Janet. “Sarah and Hagar: Ancient Women of the Abrahamic Covenant.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*. Vol. 3 of Studies in the Book of Abraham, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 147–66. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005. This article discusses how women figure into the Abrahamic covenant and points out that they receive equal blessings through marriage.

Kitchen, Kenneth A., and Paul J. N. Lawrence. *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012. This is the standard work about treaties, laws, and covenants in the ancient Near East. It provides original text and translations of most published examples, and it discusses how the forms of the covenants can be used to date them. Though the authors do not consider the Book of Abraham, the covenant in the Book of Abraham fits into the patterns discussed in the early second millennium BC in the western half of the Fertile Crescent.

Lane, Jennifer. “The Redemption of Abraham.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*. Vol. 3 of Studies in the Book of Abraham, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 167–74. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005. This article discusses how redemption figures into the Abrahamic covenant.

Lauinger, Jacob. *Following the Man of Yanbad: Settlement and Territory in Old Babylonian Alalakh*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2015. This careful study of property transactions at Alalakh in Old Babylonian times

clarifies the processes involved in granting settlements to individuals during Abraham’s day.

Sasson, Jack M. *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015. This collection is a treasure trove of information that translates hundreds of letters from ancient Mari and is arranged topically. Pages 82–103 deal with the mechanics of making treaties and covenants.