



Abraham and Isaac, painting by William Whitaker



The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament

Michael Goodman

Michael Goodman is an instructor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

In 1993, President Boyd K. Packer taught us that “if you give each one of [your students] a framework upon which the truths they discover at random can be organized into a personal testimony, you will have served them well. . . . There is great value in presenting a *brief* but very carefully organized overview of the entire course at the very beginning.”¹

I have found President Packer’s counsel to be true in my own teaching. I have especially enjoyed teaching the Old Testament. It contains so many faith-filled stories as well as soul-stirring symbols that are a joy to share with our students. However, with the tremendous length and diversity of the book, we can get lost in the details and forget our purpose in teaching it in the first place. The Abrahamic covenant provides a foundational theme and conceptual framework from which we can better understand God’s work in the Old Testament. From the days of Adam, the Lord has always worked through covenants to save His children. By studying how God worked with ancient Israel, we will understand the importance of covenants today as well as the consequences of obedience or disobedience to those covenants.

The Gospel and Abraham

The gospel is generally known as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Nevertheless, *gospel* is used in other instances, such as “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23), “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts

20:24), “the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1), “the gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15), and “the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13). However, for our purposes in the Old Testament, the name “the gospel of Abraham” (D&C 110:12) is of particular interest. It is the only name that refers to someone other than Christ. The other names are simply descriptive terms.

Why would the Lord refer to His own gospel as the gospel of Abraham? A similar example is the renaming of the higher priesthood. We learn from Doctrine and Covenants 107:2–4 that the name of the priesthood was changed to avoid the too-frequent repetition of the Lord’s name and to honor Melchizedek, who was a great high priest and who serves as a type or shadow of Christ. In the same way, the gospel covenant given to Abraham serves as a type and shadow of the gospel covenant given to us through Jesus Christ. Therefore, to understand the Abrahamic covenant is to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Covenants and Ordinances

Before we define the Abrahamic covenant and apply it to our study of the Old Testament, a brief discussion of covenants and ordinances may be helpful. A covenant denotes an agreement between two parties and, in the gospel sense, is a binding agreement between God and man.² This connecting link gives us access to a protection and power far beyond our own unaided efforts. Heavenly Father works through covenants to save His children, both in times past as well as today.

Ordinances are closely related to the principle of covenants. Elder Henry B. Eyring taught: “Our Heavenly Father . . . provided covenants we could make with him. And with those covenants he provided ordinances where he could signify what he promised or covenanted to do and we could signify what we promised or covenanted to do.”³ Doctrine and Covenants 84:20–21 states: “Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh.” It would be difficult to find a place in the scriptures where ordinances and covenants are more central to the text than in the Old Testament. By making the study and understanding of ordinances and covenants in the Old Testament a foundational principle, we are enabled to understand the power of godliness and of God Himself.

The Abrahamic Covenant—The Lord’s Part

A number of key scripture passages help us define the Abrahamic covenant. Genesis 12:1–3 and Abraham 2:9–11 list several aspects of the covenant. The Lord promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, that his name would be great, that he would be blessed, that the Lord would bless them that blessed him and curse them that cursed him, that he would be a blessing to his own seed, and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. In Genesis 13:14–16, the Lord summarizes several of these blessings in two main promises: first, that Abraham would receive an eternal inheritance of land and second, that he would be blessed with “seed as the dust of the earth,” or in other words, innumerable posterity. The other blessings fit into the category of Abraham’s becoming a blessing to his seed and to all the families of the earth. Abraham 2:9–10 says that “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.” Thus, Abraham was promised that the priesthood and the gospel would be given to him and his posterity through eternity. We can summarize the Lord’s part of the Abrahamic covenant with three promised blessings: land, seed, and the gospel. Once we understand these three principles, we will begin to see them throughout the Old Testament, especially in the book of Genesis.⁴

These three promises have more than local significance to Abraham and his family. They were promised to all of Abraham’s seed. Abraham 2:10 teaches us that all who accept the gospel are accounted as his seed. Thus, these promises apply to us as well. However, we must see them in an eternal perspective if we are to apply them to our own lives. Abraham was promised a land of inheritance for all eternity. From the prophets, we learn that this earth will be perfected and receive its paradisiacal glory and ultimately become our celestial kingdom.⁵ If Abraham is (and we ourselves are) given an everlasting inheritance on this earth, we are ultimately promised eternal life in the celestial kingdom if we are faithful to our covenant. Abraham was (and we were) promised seed as the sands of the seashore or the stars of the sky. This promise can also be fulfilled only through our exaltation, which will allow us to have eternal increase. Finally, through living the gospel, we, just like Abraham, will ultimately inherit eternal life. So the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant can be summarized as celestial inheritance, eternal increase, and eternal life. These promises make up God’s part of the Abrahamic covenant.

The Abrahamic Covenant—Abraham’s Part

As shown above, the promises of the Lord to Abraham are truly remarkable. So what was Abraham’s part in this covenant? Ultimately, it can be divided into two parts. Two of Abraham’s promised blessings would have to await fruition until after his death. He would never own all the land the Lord promised him, nor would his posterity number as the stars in the sky in his lifetime. However, the third promise, the bestowal of the gospel, was given to him in his life.

As a consequence, two things were required of him in relation to this promised blessing. In Genesis 17:1, the Lord said to Abraham, “I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.” Simply speaking, Abraham was commanded to be obedient. This is the first aspect of Abraham’s part. Second, as contained in so many of the scriptures promising Abraham the gospel, he was to share the gospel with the rest of Heavenly Father’s children. Repeatedly, he was told that he would be a blessing to his own seed and to all nations. One example of this work can be seen through his missionary labors in Haran (see Genesis 12:5). In Abraham 2:6, the Lord says, “I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make thee a minister to bear my name.” To summarize, Abraham’s (and our) part in the covenant is to live the gospel teachings and commandments and to share them with those around us.

In Genesis 17:7, the Lord promised Abraham, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” In Exodus 6:7, the Lord told Moses, “And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God.” This could be said to be the ultimate summary of the Abrahamic covenant. The Lord covenants to be our God and to exalt us (see Moses 1:39) if we will but be His people and stay faithful to Him. All scripture can and must be interpreted through this very lens. All that the Lord does is for our ultimate exaltation (see 2 Nephi 26:24). If we remember this as we strive to understand difficult aspects of the Old Testament as well as while we strive with difficult aspects of our own lives, we are likely to gain a greater understanding of the Lord’s role in the scriptures and in our daily lives.

Framing the Old Testament in the Abrahamic Covenant

With a basic understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, we can begin to understand better the extraordinary and yet diverse storyline

and text that make up the Old Testament. Consider the story of Noah. It is difficult for many people to understand how a loving God would drown all but eight of His children. Why would an all-loving God be so harsh? The answer to such a question lies in a basic understanding of the eternal nature of our existence and the relationship God desires to have with us. At the time of Noah, God's children had become very wicked. Genesis 6:11 states, "The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence." It is difficult to imagine the pain of an all-loving Father as He watched His children destroy one another. Not only were they prematurely ending each other's mortal lives but also they were damning themselves in the process and thus destroying the possibility of returning to live with Heavenly Father again. Is it any wonder that the God of heaven looked down and wept? (see Moses 7:28). However, we should realize the importance of understanding the Lord's love, not only for those who were hurt but also for those doing the hurting.⁶

Though the scriptures speak of His indignation and anger, He did not send the floods to further damn His children but to stop them from further damning themselves. Once His children had gone past the point of repentance, leaving them in that state would be contrary to the Abrahamic covenant and the plan of salvation. It would further damn the people who perpetrated the wickedness and make it impossible for His innocent children to live safely. In such conditions, they could never continue to grow in the gospel and to share with others the promised covenant blessings. Hence, the most merciful, loving thing the Lord could do was to interrupt the perpetual cycle of violence and wickedness, thus sending the perpetrators to another realm in which they could be taught and hopefully saved (see 1 Peter 4:6).

The story of Israel's removal to Egypt, four hundred years of enslavement, subsequent exodus, and settlement in the promised land begins to take on new meaning when viewed through the lens of the Abrahamic covenant and the plan of salvation. At the time of Israel's removal from Canaan to Egypt, the people of Israel were barely more than an extended clan. Together, only seventy souls went with Jacob to Egypt. Remember that one of the responsibilities borne by the children of Abraham under the covenant was to share the gospel with the world. Seventy souls in the midst of the most powerful (and hostile) nations of the day stood very little chance of surviving, much less of proselyting. However, as the Lord had done with Abraham before, and as He would do in the future with His Only Begotten Son, the Lord used Egypt as a safe haven for the protection and growth of His cov-

enant people. Life was not easy for Abraham's descendants in Egypt; nevertheless, they thrived and became a mighty people as a result of their time there. By the time the Israelites left Egypt, they numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Once again the Lord placed them in the middle of the most powerful nations on earth, at the crossroads of the ancient world. But this time, if they would be faithful, they would be ready to fulfill their role in the covenant and share the gospel with all those with whom they came in contact. There was an obstacle, though: the land they were to inherit already belonged to another group of people—the Canaanites.

It might seem strange that the Lord would command the Israelites not to mingle with the Canaanites if He really wanted to share the gospel with all of His children. However, as with His children in the time of Noah, the Canaanites appear to have passed the point of repentance. The Lord knew the corrupting influence they could have on those assigned to share the gospel with the rest of the world. Thus, He commanded the Israelites not only not to interact with them but also to remove them from the land. Through these actions the Canaanites, like the people in Noah's day, could be sent into another sphere where hopefully they would be ready to listen, and the Lord's covenant people could begin in earnest to fulfill their part of the covenant and bring the gospel to all the earth.

The Israelites were not faithful to the Lord's command to remove the Canaanites from the land and, as a result, lived among a people who would not of themselves repent and who posed a great threat to the purity and integrity of the Lord's covenant people. Could this be the reason behind so many of the Lord's commandments not to mingle with their neighbors? Even before they entered the promised land, the Lord was already teaching the Israelites to be a separate people. So many of the regulations in the law of Moses set Israel up as a separate people right down to what they ate (see Leviticus 11), what they wore, and even how they farmed (see Leviticus 19). These restrictions would seem to make it impossible for them to fulfill their covenant responsibility to share the gospel with the rest of Heavenly Father's children. However, they were not commanded to be separate from all people—just from those with whom the Lord commanded them not to live. A careful reading of many of the commandments shows them to be related to keeping the Israelites separate from the Canaanites. They were commanded to be a peculiar people, not an exclusionary people (see Exodus 19:5). However, exclusionary is what they began to be. The Israelites, as Abraham's descendants, simply had to live and share

the gospel. The story of the Old Testament largely witnesses to what happens when the Lord's people do not do these two things.

It seems obvious that when we get past Abraham himself, there appears to be little effort by the Israelites to share the gospel with the world. When the Israelites had righteous leadership, it appears that the Lord's focus was to get the people obedient and ready so they could begin to share the gospel with others. The Lord constantly sent His servants, the prophets, to call Israel to repentance. Whether we speak of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Ezra, or Malachi, the prophets were doing then exactly what prophets are doing now—trying to bring the covenant people to the point of obedience and readiness where they can share the gospel with the rest of Heavenly Father's children. By evaluating God's work in light of His desire to prepare us to live and share the gospel, we stand on more solid ground in our attempt to understand difficult passages in the Old Testament.

Without an understanding of the Abrahamic covenant and the plan of salvation, it might appear that the Old Testament is somehow different from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though many of the practices differed, the gospel was the same and the Lord's purposes were the same. John Taylor taught that “the same principles that now exist, in relation to the gospel, existed in the various dispensations that have been in being in the different ages of the world. They existed in the days of Moses, in Enoch's day, and in the days of Adam; and they existed in eternity in the mind of God, before this world rolled into existence, the morning stars sang together, or the sons of God shouted for joy.”⁷ Brigham Young also taught that “we are safe in saying that from the day that Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden to this day, the plan of salvation and the revelations of the will of God to man are unchanged, although mankind have not for many ages been favored therewith, in consequence of apostasy and wickedness. There is no evidence to be found in the Bible that the Gospel should be one thing in the days of the Israelites, another in the days of Christ and his Apostles, and another in the 19th century, but, on the contrary, we are instructed that God is the same in every age, and that his plan of saving his children is the same. The plan of salvation is one, from the beginning of the world to the end thereof.”⁸

The Old Testament and the Restored Gospel

This knowledge helps us relate the Old Testament directly to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Though forms or practices may change, the purposes of the Lord do not. He desires to help us become His

people not only in name but also in deed. He sought to prepare ancient Israel to share the gospel as He continues to prepare modern Israel to share the gospel. The Lord Himself desired to dwell among His people and be their God as He desires to dwell with us and be our God (see Exodus 29:45–46; Doctrine and Covenants 110:7–8). This was part of what He covenanted to do with Abraham. However, from the beginning, ancient Israel seemed ill at ease having a living God in their presence. When the Lord commanded Israel to come up to Mount Sinai, the people were afraid of the Lord’s presence and said to Moses, “Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19). In further attempts to “dwell amidst” His people, the Lord commanded Israel first to build a tabernacle and later in the Old Testament to build a permanent temple. In Exodus 40, we see that when the tabernacle was completed, the presence of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Likewise, in our day, the Lord has repeatedly asked us to build temples so He can dwell with us. We have so much to learn from both the successes and failures of ancient Israel.

Like the ancient Israelites, we have been commanded to be a peculiar people. This commandment means we must not touch that which will corrupt us spiritually. Like ancient Israel, we have been asked to be a separate people. We have been given a dietary law to keep us healthy and safe from unclean substances. We have been asked to abstain from some of the fashions of the day that are offensive to God. We have been asked to be a temple-building and temple-attending people. In all things, the Lord continues to try to “bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). The question is whether we personally will be more successful than ancient Israel in fulfilling our part of the covenant. We have so many examples in the Old Testament of various individuals and groups who were more or less faithful to their covenants. The Old Testament may be one of the clearest places to see the results of faithfulness to the covenant versus the lack thereof.

So as we, like ancient Israel, strive to be faithful to the gospel covenant, what would the Lord have us do? First, like Abraham himself, the Lord would have us be humble, faithful, and fully obedient. One of the finest formulas for accomplishing this is contained in Abraham 1:2: “And, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of

peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers.” Abraham wanted what we all want: greater happiness, peace, and rest. His formula was simple. He sought greater knowledge of God and of the gospel so he could be more righteous than he was. He also knew that as he grew more righteous, he would gain more knowledge. And in turn, this knowledge would enable him to be more righteous. It is a great circle. This circle can be restated in terms of the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. We all seek to increase our faith in Christ. As our faith in Christ increases, the natural result is that we want to repent (see Helaman 14:13). As we repent and draw nearer to God, we make covenants with Him. As we keep those covenants, His presence in the form of the Holy Ghost begins to play a more active role in our lives. The Holy Spirit confirms and strengthens our faith, which starts the cycle over again.

It is important to remember that there are two aspects to our part in the Abrahamic covenant. First, we must live the gospel, and then we must share it. The Lord told Abraham in Abraham 2:11 that in him and in his seed “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.” How was this to happen? Though there is little information in the Old Testament on this aspect of the covenant, the latter-day prophets have helped us to understand it more clearly. President Spencer W. Kimball said in the Saturday morning session of the April 1981 general conference,

My brothers and sisters, as the Brethren of the First Presidency and the Twelve have meditated upon and prayed about the great latter-day work the Lord has given us to do, we are impressed that the mission of the Church is threefold: To proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; To perfect the Saints by preparing them to receive the ordinances of the gospel and by instruction and discipline to gain exaltation; To redeem the dead by performing vicarious ordinances of the gospel for those who have lived on the earth. All three are part of one work—to assist our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, in Their grand and glorious mission “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).⁹

It is through working to accomplish the threefold mission of the Church that we will ultimately be able to fulfill our part of the covenant. There are really only two groups of people associated with “all the families of the earth.” There are those who are living and those who

are dead. The only way we can bless those who have passed on with “the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” is through our efforts to redeem the dead. It is through our family history and temple work that we are able to be ministers of salvation to our ancestors. As for the living, they can also be divided into two groups: those who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those who are not. For those who are not members, the only way we can bring them salvation is to proclaim the gospel to them. This great missionary effort of the Lord’s covenant people is part of what the Lord referred to when He told Abraham that in him and in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. Finally, membership in the Lord’s Church does not promise salvation or exaltation. These promised blessings are gained as we are faithful to the covenants we make in the Lord’s Church. Therefore, there is a great need to minister even among those who are already members. We call this ministry the work of perfecting the saints. Thus, by proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the saints, and redeeming the dead, we are ultimately fulfilling our part of the great covenant God established and named the Abrahamic covenant.

Conclusion

The Old Testament is the first testament of Jesus Christ. Rather than an out-of-date, irrelevant story of a people long since passed, the Old Testament is the story of Israel’s attempt to live faithful to the covenants the Lord had given to them. This, of course, did not start with the prophet Abraham. Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, and all of the other prophets before Abraham lived the same covenant just as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and all the prophets after Abraham continued to live the same covenant. However, it did not stop at the end of the Old Testament or at the end of the New Testament. Joseph Smith and all the prophets of this dispensation continue the very same work. The work goes by many names, two of which are the gospel of Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. By framing our study of the Old Testament within this covenant, not only are we able to understand the Old Testament better but we are also better able to live our own covenants in this the dispensation of the fulness of times. **RE**

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” address delivered at the seventeenth annual Church Educational System Religious Educators’ Symposium, August 10, 1993, 2; emphasis in the original.

2. See Bible Dictionary, "Covenant," 651.
3. Henry B. Eyring, "Making Covenants with God," *Brigham Young University 1996–97 Speeches*, September 6, 1996, 14.
4. See Genesis 15:5–7; 17:2–8; 18:18–19; 22:17–18; 26:3–4; 28:13–14 for examples of these three promises being given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
5. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:26.
6. See John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1878), 19:158–59.
7. John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 12.
8. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 103–4.
9. Spencer W. Kimball, "A Report of My Stewardship," *Ensign*, May 1981, 5.