

**COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 27)**

2) *The Abrahamic Covenant: Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:1-14.*

The main elements of God's covenant with Abraham are listed in 12:1-3. There are seven distinct provisions, and no conditions are attached. He only needed to accept God's promises by faith. That is, he "believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Trusting God, he took up the promised Land, and "sojourned there," although there were other inhabitants already there.

The seven provisions are *a)*, I will make you a great nation, *b)*, and I will bless you, *c)*, and make your name great, *d)*, and you will be a blessing, *e)*, and I will bless those who bless you, *f)*, and the one who curses you I will curse, *g)*, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

The first four of these have been fulfilled, while the last three are still in process of being fulfilled. The rest of the Bible relates how this narrowing of divine interest from the creation as a whole to Adam and his descendants, then to Abraham and his seed, was fulfilled. Every addition (codicil) to this covenant made personally with Abraham, expands one or more of these provisions to Abraham's family. All the fulfillments of these seven provisions noted in Scripture have been "literally" fulfilled, including spiritual blessings, in one way or another, both in external and internal blessings. The central provision is that Abraham would himself be a blessing, and the unfolding of messianic prophecy becomes the vehicle for this. The "spiritual" promises were also literally fulfilled. That is, fulfillments are not allegorical or otherwise metaphorical or merely symbolic, but correspond exactly to the original terms in the text. This fact is not altered by any *additional spiritual dimensions* that may be added later.

The first codicil accompanies the official (and probably public) ratification of the covenant. In 15:13 Abraham is warned of a 400-year captivity "in a land not theirs," after which God will judge that land, and the people will leave it "with many possessions." God is careful to allow Abraham no part in making this covenant (verses 12 and 17), which will from now on be unambiguously unconditional. Every fulfillment will be gracious only, starting with the definition of the eventual dimensions of the Land, "from the river of Egypt (now a wadi, a dry river bed separating Israel from Egypt) as far as the great river, the river Euphrates." This has never been fulfilled despite treaties under David and Solomon, which guaranteed *safe commerce* over a wide area. Even Joshua in 23:11-14 warns the people that the Mosaic Covenant is still a conditional covenant. In Gen 17:1-14, God confirms that the covenant is *a covenant of physical descent* by adding circumcision and changing Abram's name to Abraham, to signal the certainty of his becoming "the father of many nations." The promise is then narrowed to the descent through his wife Sarah, not through his concubine Hagar. Ishmael will become the father of "twelve princes," but the covenant promise will be limited to Sarah's son (Isaac).

From then on, the covenant promising *a People in their Land* is fixed by repeated reaffirmations to Isaac and Jacob, until the promise of relief after 400 years of oppression is fulfilled in the Exodus. At that event, a *new conditional covenant* is made with the Nation as a whole, "added" as Paul says, to the Mosaic Covenant, to define sin until Messiah comes, the "Seed" of Gen 3:15. To that we now turn.

2) *The Mosaic Covenant: Exodus 3-19:5, 24:7-9, 32:15-17, 34:1 and 27-28, and Deut 9:9-11.*

The Mosaic Covenant was "added," says Paul, "because of transgressions...until the Seed should come...But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (Gal 3:17-25).

What exactly, was “added”? While the Ten Commandments summarize the heart of covenant obligation toward God and man, elaborate detail of civil and moral legislation are added also. These together lead to the inevitable fact that “they broke,” this covenant as Jeremiah tersely puts it (31:32). The sacrificial system sets forth in great detail the spiritual needs of the sinner whether Jew or Gentile, and provides for a temporary postponement for one year based on faith (believing Jehovah), of the curses outlined in Deuteronomy 28. Finally, the burden of national sin and apostasy to paganism led to a final destruction of the northern Kingdom, and then of the southern Kingdom in 586 BC. The first destruction of the Temple showed that the Mosaic Covenant had been broken, and the second destruction in 70 AD that it was no longer even necessary, for “faith had come” (Gal 3:25, John 1:17). The Law’s functions of clarifying the real nature of sin and of leading us to Christ had been fulfilled. The Law now has no function at all in the Christian life, except in retrospect “for our learning” (Rom 15:4). The “faith” that came with Christ is of course, the faith of the New Covenant, not of the Law.

It is important to see that the added provisions and conditions of the Law made no difference to the fulfillment of the previous unconditional Promise (Gal 3:17). The occasional references to the future of a People in their Land in the story of the Exodus, only shows that the Land Promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were understood at face value. The fact that the Nation’s hold on the land could be loosened and even lost, did not alter the final vision of the original Promise. The Mosaic Covenant presupposes the truth of the Abrahamic, but the contribution of the Abrahamic Covenant is totally independent of the later Law system. In fact, the argument of Romans 3 insists on Law and Promise as *contrasting principles* of life. Promise is effective, while Law is not. In fact, righteousness was never based on Law in the first place (3:21). Now that Law is past, faith is still operating on the basis of the Promise (3:18), just as it always did. The way of salvation has not altered one bit; justification is and always was, by faith in the Seed *to come* (Gen 3:15), and *now come* (Gal 3:19). Paul is very clear in Romans 4:9-14 that circumcision was added *after the Promise* so that Abraham might be seen to be father of *all the faithful*, whether Gentile *or Jew*. That is, even the National elements of the Promise were not dependent on circumcision. This mark merely identified the Nation, but saved nobody. Faith saves, and faith “*allein*” (alone), as Luther put it in his famous gloss on Romans 3:28.

If there is one thing clear in all this, it is that there is *no hint of a unifying meta-covenant* behind the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants on which they secondarily or derivatively depend. No doubt they depend on the attributes and eternal decree of God to create this world rather than some other, but that is not a “covenant” in the historic sense, and the covenants of Scripture are all *historical*.

Much could be said of the role of the Mosaic Law in civilizing the Jews and even those Gentile nations (like England or the USA) who have been partly guided by it in formulating their own national laws, but this does not mean it ever had a saving function beyond setting forth the need for faith in God. And the nearest thing the Jews as a nation ever had to true holiness (sanctification) was that the Law (and later through the Talmud too), would function to keep the Jews *separate* from the other nations, and preserve their identity among the surrounding Gentiles. And it still performs that function today. While the Mosaic system functions as an instrument of common grace, all who deliberately place themselves under it to any degree as a sanctifying force, are under “a curse” (Gal 3:10), for the Law is a moral unity and to break *any* of its multiple provisions is to break the whole lot (Gal 5:3, Jas 2:10). Since the Cross, over the Law-gate should be a sign warning, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.” And dividing the 613 commandments into moral, ceremonial, and civil, is no help at all. The Law is a unity, and we may not be found “dividing the substance” thereof. To fail in one is to fail in all (Jas 2:10). There are no degrees of *anomia* (1 Jn 3:4), and all acts not arising from faith is sin (Rom 14:23).