

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT
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INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Dispensational premillennialists understand the importance of the Abrahamic covenant to premillennialism.

John Walvoord wrote: "It is recognized by all serious students of the Bible that the covenant with Abraham is one of the important and determinative revelations of Scripture. It furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches for its fulfillment into the New. In the controversy between premillennarians and amillennarians, the interpretation of this covenant more or less settles the entire argument. The analysis of its provisions and the character of their fulfillment set the mold for the entire body of Scriptural truth."¹

Charles Ryrie wrote: "The interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant is a watershed between premillennialism and amillennialism. The question concerns its fulfillment. All agree that certain aspects of it have been fulfilled. But all do not agree on the fulfillment of other aspects of it, particularly the land promise."²

J. Dwight Pentecost wrote: "This covenant has a most important bearing on the doctrines of eschatology. The eternal aspects of this covenant, which guarantee Israel a permanent national existence, perpetual title to the land of promise, and the certainty of material and spiritual blessing through Christ, and guarantee Gentile nations a share in these blessings, determine the whole eschatological program of the Word of God. The covenant becomes the seed from which are bought forth the later covenants made with Israel. The essential areas of the Abrahamic Covenant: the land, the seed and the blessing are enlarged in the subsequent covenants made with Israel."³

¹ John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1959), 139.

² Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 526.

³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 71.

Renald Showers states two guarantees of the Abrahamic covenant: “The Abrahamic covenant guarantees Israel permanent existence as a nation and it guarantees Israel permanent ownership of the promised land.”⁴

What is the Abrahamic covenant? What promises did God make to Abraham? Has God fulfilled his promises in the Abrahamic covenant already? What is the relationship of the Church to the Abrahamic covenant? Will the land promise be fulfilled for the nation of Israel in the future millennial kingdom? This paper will attempt to answer these questions.

First, this paper will survey the promises made by God to Abraham and their fulfillment. Second, various amillennial views on the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant will be defined and critiqued. Finally, various premillennial views on the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant will be defined and critiqued (covenant premillennial view, progressive dispensational view, and traditional dispensational view).

GOD’S PROMISES TO ABRAM BEFORE THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT (Genesis 12-13)

God promised to bless Abram and make him a blessing (Genesis 12:1-3)

Now the Lord had said to Abram, “Get out of your country, from your family, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3).

God appeared to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees and commanded him to leave his country, his family and his father’s house and go to a land that He would show him. God made several promises to Abram in his initial call recorded in Genesis 12. The “I will” statements of God show His intention to bless Abram and make him a blessing to the world.

First, God promised to make Abram a great nation. God started to fulfill this promise when He gave Abram and Sarah a son: Isaac. The nation of Israel is that great nation descended from Abram, Isaac and Jacob.

Second, God promised to bless Abram. God blessed Abram with livestock, silver and gold (Gen.13:2). Abram and Lot could not live in the same area because “their possessions were so great” (Gen.13:6).

Third, God promised to make Abram’s name great. God kept his promise. Abraham is the father of the faithful. Abraham is revered by three great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

⁴ Renald Showers, *There Really Is A Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 69.

Fourth, God promised to bless those who blessed Abram and to curse him who cursed Abram. God blessed Abram's nephew Lot with great possessions (Gen.13). God cursed Pharaoh for taking Abram's wife into his harem (Gen.12). Throughout history nations that have blessed Israel have experienced God's blessing. Nations that have cursed Israel and the Jews have experienced God's curse (ie. Nazi Germany).

Fifth, God promised to bless all the families of the earth in Abram. The universal blessing promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ- the Seed of Abram (Gal.3).

The literal fulfillment of the personal promises of God to Abram show that God will literally fulfill the national promises He made to Abram later in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen.15).

God promised to give Abram's descendants the land after Abram obeyed the call of God (Genesis 12:4-7)

"So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him and Lot went with him. And Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son and all their possessions that they had gathered and the people whom they had acquired in Haran and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, *"To your descendants I will give this land."* And there he built an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him." (Genesis 12:4-7).

Abram obeyed this command of God in stages. First, he left his country Ur of the Chaldees. He took his wife Sarai, his father Terah and his nephew Lot and journeyed to Haran (Gen.11:31). The writer to the Hebrews says "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise" (Hebrews 11:8-9). Abram did not leave his father's house until his father Terah died in Haran (Gen.11:32). Abram left Haran and came to the land of Canaan. He traveled through the land to Shechem. The Lord appeared to Abram and gave this promise to him: "To your descendants I will give this land." Abram worshipped the Lord by building an altar to the Lord at that place.

It is important to see that God made a promise to Abram about the land (Gen.12) before He confirmed the promise with a covenant (Gen.15).

God promised to give Abram and his descendants the land and to multiply his descendants (Genesis 13:14-16)

God promised Abram the land again after Abram allowed Lot to choose where he wanted to live. "And the Lord said to Abram after Lot had separated from him, 'Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward and westward; *for all the land*

which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered” (Gen.13:14-16).

God promised to give Abram innumerable descendants (Genesis 15:1-6)

God told Abram that his reward would be great (15:1). Abram thought Eliezer of Damascus (his servant) would be his heir since he was childless (15:2-3). God told Abram that Eliezer would not be his heir but that his own son would be his heir (15:4). God told Abram to look to heaven and see if he was able to number the stars (15:5). God promised Abram that his descendants would be innumerable (15:5). Abram believed God’s promise and God imputed righteousness to Abram (15:6).

GOD’S PROMISES TO ABRAM IN THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT AND THEIR FULFILLMENT (Genesis 15:13-16)

God identified himself as the LORD who brought Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give him the land as his possession (15:7). Abram asked God about how he would know the land would be his (15:8). God told Abram to bring a 3 year old heifer, 3 year old female goat and a 3 year old ram, a turtledove and a pigeon (15:9). Abram then cut these animals in half but he did not cut the birds in half (15:10). Abram drove away the birds of prey (vultures?) (15:11). Abram fell into a deep sleep at sunset (15:12). A great darkness fell on Abram (15:12).

God predicted that Abram’s descendants would be sojourners and servants in a strange land for 400 years (Genesis 15:13)

“Then He said to Abram: Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs and will serve them and they will afflict them four hundred years” (Gen.15:13). Jacob and his family moved to Egypt 430 years before the Exodus (1876 B.C. according to Merrill; Gen.46; Exodus 12:40). The Israelites became servants of the Egyptians for 400 years from 1846 to 1446 B.C. Pharaoh set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens (Exodus 1:11). “The Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigor. And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage in mortar, in brick and in all manner of service in the field. All their service in which they made them serve was with rigor.” (Exodus 1:13-14). Stephen referenced the fulfillment of this promise in his defense before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:6).

God promised to judge the nation that enslaved them (Genesis 15:14)

“And also the nation whom they serve I will judge” (Gen.15:14). God sent ten plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians: (1) the Nile river was turned to blood (Ex.7:14-25), (2) frogs (Ex.8:1-15), (3) gnats (Ex.8:16-19), (4) flies (Ex.8:20-32), (5) death of livestock (Ex.9:1-7), (6) boils (Ex.9:8-12), (7) hail (Ex.9:13-35), (8) locusts (Ex.10:1-20), (9) darkness (Ex.10:21-29), and (10) death of Egypt’s firstborn (Ex.11:1-12:30).

God promised to deliver Abram’s descendants out of slavery (Genesis 15:14)

God said “Afterward they shall come out with great possessions” (Gen.15:14). The book of Exodus reveals how God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. “Now the children of Israel had done according to the word of Moses and they had asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold and clothing. And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.” (Exodus 12:35-36). “Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was 430 years. And it came to pass at the end of the 430 years—on that very same day—it came to pass that all the armies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:40-41).

God promised Abram that he would die in peace at an old age (Genesis 15:15)

“Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age” (Gen.15:15). Later Moses wrote “This is the sum of the years of Abraham’s life which he lived: one hundred and seventy five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people” (Gen.25:7-8).

God promised that Abram’s descendants would come back to the promised land in the fourth generation (Genesis 15:16)

“But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen.15:16). Joshua led Israel into the promised land in the fourth generation from the time of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt (1406 B.C.). A generation was viewed as 100 years. The return to the promised land was delayed because it was not yet time for the Amorites to be judged for their sins (immorality and idolatry).

The Abrahamic Covenant Ceremony (Genesis 15:17-18)

“And it came to pass when the sun went down and it was dark that behold there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.”

The Lord in a theophany (a smoking fire pot⁵ and a flaming torch) passed between the pieces of the cut animals while Abram was asleep. God alone passed between the cut pieces of the sacrificed animals. This shows that the Abrahamic covenant is a unilateral covenant and not a bilateral covenant.

⁵ Wenham comments on the smoking fire pot: “Since it is used for baking the Hebrew word may be translated oven but modern ovens are so different that this is rather misleading. The term seems to have been used for a large earthenware jar. The dough stuck to the side and was then baked by putting charcoal inside the jar or putting the jar near the fire. Smoke and fire are symbolic of the presence of God (Exodus 13:21; 19:18; 20:18). (Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol.1 (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1987), 332).

Weinfeld argues that the Abrahamic covenant was an unconditional “covenant of grant.”⁶ God alone was accepting responsibility to fulfill the covenant promises to Abram. Abram was a recipient of the covenant promises but he was not placed under any obligation for God to fulfill his promises to him.

Jeffrey Niehaus believes that the Abrahamic covenant was conditional because he said it has the structural elements of a second millennium BC suzerain vassal treaty but that it also contains a grant of lands to conquer. The fact that the land had to be conquered if it was to be possessed constitutes another problem for Weinfeld’s approach. The examples of the “covenant of grant” which he adduces are all royal grants of land to people (citizens, vassals) who have in effect earned such a gift by their loyalty to the king. In such cases no warfare is required for the grantee to possess the land. He simply walks in it, as it were, and enjoys ownership of it. The fact that Israel will have to conquer the land in order to possess it marks a major difference between the covenants of grant in the ancient Near East and Conquest commission implied in the Abrahamic covenant....the gift of the land to Abram by the Lord in Genesis 15 requires that the land be conquered if it is to be possessed, as subsequent revelation makes clear. In other words the realization of the gift of land turns out to be conditional.”⁷

Abraham earned the gift of land by his obedience to the call of God to go to a land that God would show him. Just because the Abrahamic covenant has some structural elements similar to suzerain vassal treaty (historical prologue) does not mean that it is a suzerain vassal treaty like the Mosaic covenant. The fact that Abraham did not walk with God between the sacrificed animals shows that God alone was taking responsibility for the fulfillment of the covenant promises. The fulfillment of the covenant promises would not depend upon the obedience of Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional covenant of grant and not a suzerain vassal treaty.

Victor Hamilton says that God was not placing himself under any kind of potential curse by passing through the pieces of the sacrificed animals. “Instead, what one finds here is that the slaying and arranging of the animals is simply a sacrificial practice by means of which a covenant is ratified.”⁸

Hasel states, “The killing and sectioning of the animals by Abram is a sacrificial preparation for the subsequent divine ratification of the covenant by Yahweh who in passing between the pieces irrevocably pledges the fulfillment of his covenant promise to the patriarch.”⁹

⁶ “In its original setting the promise of the land was unconditional, although it presupposed—as we have indicated—loyalty and the fulfillment of some obligations and duties (see Genesis 18:19; Psalm 132:12); the covenant of promise itself was never formulated as conditional.” (M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970), 184-203).

⁷ J. Niehaus, “God’s Covenant With Abraham” *JETS* 56.2 (June 2013): 267.

⁸ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 433.

⁹ Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15” *JSOT* 19 (1981): 70.

Wenham agrees with Hasel: “It is not a dramatized curse that would come into play should the covenant be broken, but a solemn and visual reaffirmation of the covenant that is essentially a promise.”¹⁰

Walton writes, “Texts from Mariand Alalakh feature the killing of animals as part of the ceremony of making a treaty. In these texts, walking through this sacrificial pathway can be seen as a symbolic action enacting the treaty as well as a curse on the one who violates the promise. This sort of explanation is less satisfactory in Genesis 15 because it is unclear what significance a self curse can possibly have for God. Abram’s driving away the birds of prey is identified as symbolic of future protection from Israel’s enemies provided by Abram’s faith. In the last analysis there are no parallels to this ritual that fully clarify it for us.”¹¹

Wenham writes, “The Sinaitic and Deuteronomic covenants were agreements imposing obligations on both God and Israel: their closest extrabiblical analogy is found in the ancient international treaties made by great powers with their vassals. This covenant with Abraham is different: it is a promissory oath made by God alone. Weinfeld (JAOS 90 (1970), 184-203; TDOT, 2:270-272) says the nearest parallel to this form is the royal land grant made by kings to loyal servants. These grants of land were typically made to a man and his descendants in perpetuity. In form and content they thus run in parallel to the patriarchal promises.”¹²

God promised the land to Abram’s descendants (Genesis 15:18-21)

“On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram saying “*To your offspring (seed) I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river – the river Euphrates*” (15:18). The Lord identified the inhabitants of the promised land: Kenites, Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” (Genesis 15:19-20).

This is the first time the boundaries of the Promised Land are given in the Bible. Dispensational premillennialists believe that Israel has never possessed at one time all of the land promised to them by God in the Abrahamic covenant. So we believe that there must be a future fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant land promise for Israel.

The river of Egypt is the promised land’s western border. There is debate regarding “the river of Egypt.” Ryrie believes it is a reference to the Nile river¹³ while Hamilton and Wenham say that it refers to Wadi el-Arish (which is east of Nile river).¹⁴ The Euphrates river is the promise land’s eastern border.

¹⁰ G. Wenham, “The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15: A Response to G. F. Hasel” *JOT* 22 (1982): 136.

¹¹ John Walton, *Genesis*. The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 423.

¹² Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary vol. 1, 333.

¹³ Ryrie says in a footnote on 15:18-21 that “The word for river refers to a large river. A different word meaning a stream is used for a wadi, which does not always have water in it.” (Ryrie Study Bible, 27).

¹⁴ Hamilton writes that “The river of Egypt (see Numbers 34:5; Joshua 15:4 which use *nahal* instead of *nahar*) is not the Nile but the modern Wadi el-Arish, the dividing line between Palestine and Egypt” (Victor Hamilton, *The Book*

THE PROMISES OF THE LAND TO ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB AFTER THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

God again promised the land to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:5-8).

“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you; and kings shall come from you. And will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. *Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession;* and I will be their God”

God promised to make Abram fruitful and make nations come from him. Abraham is not only the father of the nation of Israel he is also the father of the Arab peoples (from Ishmael as well as the sons from his wife Keturah- cf. Gen.25:1-4).

God promised that kings would come from Abram. Jacob made a prediction about his son Judah: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah. Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes. And to Him shall be the obedience of the people” (Genesis 49:10). The word “Shiloh” means “whose it is.” The Messiah who had the right to the scepter would come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah. Later God promised David in the unconditional Davidic covenant that one of his descendants would sit on the throne and rule Israel forever (2 Samuel 7:12-13). Jesus is the king of Israel who fulfills the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. The angel Gabriel told Mary about her son Jesus: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). Mary responded in worship to the angel’s announcement praising God for fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant through Jesus: “He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy. As He spoke to our fathers to Abraham and to his seed forever” (Luke 1:54-55).

God promised to establish his covenant between Himself and Abraham and his descendants. God said that the Abrahamic covenant is an “everlasting covenant” (Gen.17:7). God also promised the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants as “an everlasting possession” (Gen.17:8). The word “everlasting” shows that the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional. The word “everlasting” would not have been used if the Abrahamic covenant is conditional. In that case if Israel disobeyed God’s commands then they would forfeit what God promised. Since Israel has never possessed all of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants there must be a future fulfillment for this promise. Later the psalmist would say of the Lord that “He remembers His covenant forever, the word which He commanded, for a thousand generations.

of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 438). Wenham also believes that the river of Egypt refers to Wadi el-Arish (*Genesis 1-15*.Word Commentary, 333).

The covenant with which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac and confirmed to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying To you I will give the land of Canaan as the allotment of your inheritance” (Psalm 105:9-11).

God promised the land, multiplied seed and blessing to Abraham’s son Isaac (Genesis 26:3-5)

God promised the land to Abraham’s son Isaac and not to Ishmael. God said, “Dwell in this land and I will be with you and bless you; *for to you and your descendants I give all these lands*, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; *I will give to your descendants all these lands*; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept my charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.” (Genesis 26:3-5)

God promised the land, multiplied seed and blessing to Jacob (the father of the nation of Israel) (Genesis 28:3-4; 13-14; 35:11-12; 48:3-4)

Isaac blessed deceptive Jacob rather than Esau. He said, “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be an assembly of peoples; and give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your descendants with you, *that you may inherit the land in which you are a stranger, which God gave to Abraham*” (Genesis 28:3-4).

At Bethel God renewed the Abrahamic covenant with Jacob. “I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; *the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants*. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 28:13-14).

God renewed the covenant with Jacob again after he returned to Bethel and built an altar. God said, “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you and kings shall come from your body. *The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land*” (Genesis 35:11-12).

Jacob rehearsed for Joseph the Abrahamic Covenant before blessing his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh: “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me and said to me, “Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a multitude of people and *give this land to your descendants after you as an everlasting possession*” (Genesis 48:3-4).

AMILLENNIAL VIEWS ON THE FULFILLMENT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Amillennialists differ on the time of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Some amillennialists (Riddlebarger, Allis) believe that the Abrahamic covenant has already been fulfilled by Israel in the past. Some amillennialists (Pieters) believe that the Abrahamic covenant is being fulfilled today by the Church. Some amillennialists (Hoekema) believe that the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled by the Church in the future eternal state.

Amillennial View: The Abrahamic Covenant land promise was fulfilled in the time of Joshua. (Riddlebarger)

Joshua 21:43-45 says “So the Lord gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. The Lord gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand. Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.” Before he died Joshua said, “Behold this day I am going the way of all the earth. And you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one things has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spoke concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one word of them has failed” (Joshua 23:14).

Kim Riddlebarger writes, “This promise of a land was fulfilled when Joshua led the people of Israel back into Canaan.”¹⁵

Israel took possession of the land during the time of Joshua and experienced peace for as long as their leader lived. But the first chapter of Judges records what happened in Israel after the death of Joshua. Various tribes of Israel failed to take the land allotted to them (Judges 1:19, 21, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36). The struggle of the twelve tribes to possess the land after Joshua’s death shows that the Abrahamic covenant was not completely and finally fulfilled in the time of Joshua.

Nehemiah commented on how Israel possessed the land in the time of Joshua (cf. Nehemiah 9:24-25). But Nehemiah wrote that Israel’s disobedience led to God delivering Israel into the hands of their enemies (Neh.9:26-27). Kaiser writes, “The emphasis of Joshua 21:44-45 was on the promised word which had not failed Israel, nor would it. But whether any given generation remained in the land has depended on whether it has set a proper value on God’s promised inheritance.”¹⁶

Ryrie writes, “God had kept his promise to give Israel the land of Canaan as recorded in Genesis 17:8. It is true that the Israelites had not yet fully conquered it, but God had told them they

¹⁵ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case For Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 46.

¹⁶ Walt Kaiser, “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View” 307.

would do so gradually. See note on Deuteronomy 7:22. The promise of Genesis 15:18-20 involving a larger territory will be fulfilled in the Millennium.”¹⁷

Donald Campbell writes, “Some theologians have insisted that the statement in Joshua 21:43 means that the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled then. But this cannot be true because later the Bible gives additional predictions about Israel possessing the land after the time of Joshua (e.g. Amos 9:14-15). Joshua 21:43, therefore, refers to the extent of the land as outlined in Numbers 34 and not to the ultimate extent as it will be in the messianic kingdom (Genesis 15:18-21). Also though Israel possessed the land at this time it was later dispossessed, whereas the Abrahamic Covenant promised Israel that she would possess the land forever (Genesis 17:8).”¹⁸

Amillennial View: The Abrahamic Covenant land promise was fulfilled in the time of David-Solomon (Allis).

1 Kings 4:21, 24 says “So Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the River (Euphrates) to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life...For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the River from Tiphshah even to Gaza, namely over all the kings on this side of the River; and he had peace on every side all around him. And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, each man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan as far as Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.”

1 Kings 8:65 says “At that time Solomon held a feast and all Israel with him, a great assembly from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt, before the LORD our God, seven days and seven more days—fourteen days.”

Oswald Allis writes: “The question naturally arises whether or to what extent the Abrahamic covenant has been fulfilled....This would indicate that the promise was regarded as fulfilled in this respect in the golden age of the monarchy. That it was so fulfilled is confirmed by the words of Hebrews 11:12. As to the land, the dominion of David and of Solomon extended from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt (1 Kings 4:21), which also reflects the terms of the covenant. Israel did come into possession of the land promised to the patriarchs. She possessed it, but not for ever. Her possession of the land was forfeited by disobedience, both before and after the days of David and Solomon.”¹⁹

Notice that the borders of Solomon’s kingdom were from the eastern border of the River (Euphrates) to the land of the Philistines and as far as the border of Egypt. It does not say that Solomon ruled to the river of Egypt. Second, Solomon’s kingdom did not include the land of the Philistines (modern Gaza strip) which was also included in the borders of the promised land

¹⁷ Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, 366.

¹⁸ Donald Campbell, “Joshua” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. Roy Zuck and John Walvoord (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 364-365.

¹⁹ Oswald Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 57-58.

given in the Abrahamic covenant. Third, the promised land was not totally possessed by the Israelites as it says the kingdoms brought tribute and served Solomon. Finally ancient Phoenicia (part of the promised land) was never ruled by Solomon.

Fruchtenbaum argues that even though David and Solomon conquered their enemies the land was still possessed by their enemies and not by Israel: "While David and Solomon extended Jewish control close to the borders of the Promised Land, it was not total since Phoenicia (Lebanon) retained its independence to the very end. Even if Phoenicia had fallen, it would not have fulfilled the covenant promises for with David and Solomon most of the non-Jewish territory, such as Syria, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, etc. was merely under military control and they had to pay tribute (1 Kings 4:21) which could hardly be considered a fulfillment of a promise that concerned actual possession and settlement in the land and not merely military control."²⁰

Walvoord points out that later prophecies in the prophetic books regarding the future possession of the land argues against the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant land promise during the days of Joshua and/or David and Solomon. "If its promises regarding the land were fulfilled in Joshua's time or in Solomon's, why do the Scriptures which were written later still appeal to the hope of future possession of the land? Practically every one of the Major and Minor Prophets mention in some form the hope of future possession of the land. All of them were written after Solomon's day. This is an obvious rebuttal to the amillennial position."²¹

Amillennial View: The Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled today by the Church (Pieters).

Pieters believes that the Church replaces Israel and inherits the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. He writes "Since the Christian church is now the Seed of Abraham under the New Covenant, all the promises of God to his people must be understood as her heritage, and all the prophecies concerning Israel not yet fulfilled and still to be fulfilled must be fulfilled in her; leaving nothing at all of either promise or prophecy for those who are merely descendants of Abraham after the flesh."²²

Michael Vlach gives a summary of various forms of replacement theology: "Some replacement theologians prefer the title 'fulfillment theology' in describing their view of Israel's current and future role in relation to the church. Since supersessionism is a term that describes both replacement theology and fulfillment theology that term can be used interchangeably with replacement and fulfillment terminology in describing various forms which the two theologies may take. Supersessionism is the view that the NT church is the new and/or true Israel that has forever superseded the nation Israel as the people of God. It may take the form of punitive supersessionism, i.e. God is punishing Israel for her rejection of Christ. Or it may be in the form

²⁰ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, "The Land Covenant" in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron Bigalke Jr., (New York: University Press of America, 2005), 98.

²¹ John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 178.

²² Albertus Pieters. *The Seed of Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 121.

of economic supersessionism, i.e. it was God's plan for Israel's role as the people of God to expire with the coming of Christ and be replaced by the church. The final form of supersessionism is structural supersessionism, i.e. the OT Scriptures are largely indecisive in formulation of Christian conviction about God's work as consummator and redeemer. Strong supersessionists hold that Israel has no future in the plan of God, but moderate supersessionists see a divine plan for the future salvation of the Jews as a group, but not their national restoration to the promised land. This last view holds that Israel is the object of God's irrevocable gift of grace and calling, but that such a role guarantees them no national blessing as the OT promised. It assures them only of becoming part of the church as the people of God."²³

What New Testament texts show that God is not finished with Israel?

Matthew 19:28: "So Jesus said to them, Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Jesus predicts that he will sit on the throne of his glory (the Davidic throne) in the regeneration (a reference to the millennial kingdom). At that time the disciples will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. This NT verse shows that the nation of Israel will be in existence in the future millennial kingdom and will be divided into twelve tribes.

Luke 22:29-30: Jesus said: "And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me. That you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Jesus predicts that the disciples will enter and enjoy the kingdom. Jesus predicts that the disciples will dine with him in his kingdom. Jesus also predicts that the disciples will sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel in His kingdom. This verse shows that the 12 tribes of Israel must be in existence in the coming kingdom.

Acts 1:6-7 "Therefore when they had come together, they asked Him, saying "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority." The disciples of Jesus anticipated the restoration of kingdom to Israel after the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus did not say that the disciples were wrong in anticipating a kingdom. He said that their timing was off. The kingdom is future and not present.

Has the Church replaced Israel so that Israel has no future in the plan of God? No. Paul wrote that the covenants and the promises are given to the Israelites (Rom.9:4).

Romans 11:1: Paul wrote "I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul argues that God is not finished with his people Israel. Paul uses himself as example A to show that God is not finished

²³ Michael J. Vlach, "Various Forms of Replacement Theology," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20/1 (Spring 2009), 57.

with Israel. Paul was a Jewish Christian. Paul claimed to be an “Israelite” and of the “seed of Abraham.” Paul is an example of a physical-spiritual Jew. He is a physical descendant of Abraham and he also had the faith of Abraham.

Paul argues that the natural branches (the Jews) have been cut off so that the unnatural branches (the Gentiles) could be grafted to the olive tree (the place of blessing of the Abrahamic covenant). God is able to graft them in again (Rom.11:23)

Romans 11:25-26: Paul wrote: “For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.” During the present time many Jews are spiritually blind and have not received Jesus as their Messiah. Blindness has happened in part since some Jews have received Jesus as their Messiah. During the present time many Gentiles are being saved. All Israel will be saved in the future at the second coming of Jesus to earth (cf. Zech.12:10-13:2).

Amillennial View: The Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled as the Church (made up of OT and NT saints) inherits the world in the eternal state = the new heavens and new earth (Hoekema).

Hoekema writes, “Prophecies about the restoration of Israel may also be fulfilled antitypically—that is, as finally fulfilled in the possession by all of God’s people of the new earth of which Canaan was a type. The Bible indicates that the land of Canaan was indeed a type of the everlasting inheritance of the people of God on the new earth. In the fourth chapter of the book of Hebrews the land of Canaan which the Israelites entered with Joshua is pictured as a type of the Sabbath rest which remains for the people of God. From Hebrews 11 we learn that Abraham, who had been promised the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (v.10). This future city, then, will have to be the final fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that he would everlastingly possess the land of Canaan. What can this future city be but the holy city which will be found on the new earth? From Galatians 3:29 we learn that if we are Christ’s then we are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise. Heirs of what? Of all the blessings God promised to Abraham, including the promise that the land of Canaan would be his everlasting possession. That promise will be fulfilled for all of Abraham’s spiritual seed (believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews) on the new earth. For if it is true, as we saw, that the church is the New Testament counterpart of Old Testament Israel, then the promises given to Israel will find their ultimate fulfillment in the church.”²⁴

Hoekema believes that the Old Testament says nothing about a millennial reign of Christ. He thinks that Old Testament texts describe the The phrase “new heavens and new earth” is used by Isaiah in Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22-23. Hoekema argues that since the same phrase is used

²⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 211.

in Revelation 21:1 to describe the eternal state, then the Old Testament references must refer to the eternal state.

Hoekema argues that the word “everlasting” in the Abrahamic covenant promises suggests a fulfillment in the eternal state rather than just the millennial kingdom proposed by premillennialists.

Critique of Hoekema

God says “For behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create. For behold I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing. And her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people. The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying. No more shall an infant from there live but a few days; nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days. For the child shall die one hundred years old, but the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for as the days of a tree so shall be the days of My people. And My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble. For they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the Lord and their offspring with them. It shall come to pass that before they call I will answer and while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; The lion shall eat straw like the ox. The dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, says the Lord” (Isaiah 65:17-25).

Various Old Testament texts reveal conditions that are part of the millennial kingdom on earth but not part of the new heavens and new earth in the eternal state. Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22-24 reveal conditions that cannot be part of the eternal state. These descriptions require an intermediate kingdom prior to the eternal state.

Isaiah states that the child will die one hundred years old and the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed (Isaiah 65:20). The death of children at 100 years old shows the longevity of life in the millennial kingdom. This verse also shows that King Jesus will judge those unbelieving children of the tribulation saints who physically survive the tribulation period and enter the kingdom in their physical bodies.²⁵ Physical death will not happen in the new heavens and new earth. John wrote “There will be no more death” (Rev.21:4).

The tribulation saints who survive the tribulation period will have to rebuild houses and plant vineyards after the devastating judgments of the tribulation period (cf. Rev.6-19). Isaiah 65:21 says: “they will build houses and inhabit them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.”

²⁵ Only believers (tribulation saints) will enter the millennial kingdom after the judgment of the nations by King Jesus (Matthew 25). Their children will still need to trust in King Jesus as their Savior. Apparently some will reject Jesus as Savior and King. Their judgment shows that the age of accountability in the millennial kingdom will be 100 years old!

Believers will not have to build houses in the eternal state because we will be living in the Father's house which has many rooms (John 14:1-3) also called the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev.21-22)

Tribulation saints who survive the tribulation period will marry and have children in the millennial kingdom. Isaiah predicted "They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; For they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the Lord and their offspring with them." (Isaiah 65:23).

Isaiah 66:22-24 says "For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before me, says the Lord. So shall your descendants and your name remain. And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me, says the Lord. And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against me for their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

Isaiah 66:23 says that all people will come to worship the Lord each new moon and Sabbath. This is a millennial scene. It cannot be a scene from the eternal state in the new heavens and new earth. Revelation 21:23 states that there will be no need for the sun or the moon in the eternal state. The last verse of Isaiah is a strange one. Will believers look at corpses in the eternal state when they go to worship the Lord? No. This must be a millennial scene. Millennial saints will see the corpses of people who refuse to believe and worship the Messiah: King Jesus.

Feinberg writes "Hoekema's view of history is not redeemable by the postulation of a new earth because the goal of history (the new heavens and new earth) is beyond history. The reason that a premillennialist can genuinely be optimistic about history in spite of the spread and intensification of evil is that he believes that God will make an incursion into history and establish his kingdom on this earth. Thus, while the course of human history apart from the visible establishment of God's kingdom will see the intensification of opposition to God, history will also see the righteous rule of God's king."²⁶

New Covenant Theology: The Abrahamic covenant has a physical fulfillment of the land promise for Israel as Israel conquered the land under Joshua. The Abrahamic covenant has a spiritual fulfillment of the land promise in a spiritual rest for believers (Steve Lehrer, Tom Wells, Fred Zaspel)

Lehrer believes that the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant were already fulfilled historically "by the time of the conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua."²⁷ New Covenant Theology teaches that the "Abrahamic Covenant contains both the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant is the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise and the New Covenant is

²⁶ Paul Feinberg, review of Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, *Trinity Journal* 1 (Spring 1980): 108.

²⁷ Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p: Steve Lehrer, 2006), 32.

the spiritual fulfillment.”²⁸ Tom Wells says that the Old Testament writers and New Testament writers “read the terms of the Abrahamic covenant in two different ways.”²⁹ OT writers saw the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant for Israel. NT writers saw the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant for the church. Citing Joshua 21:43-45 and Hebrews 11:8-9 and 39-40 Wells writes, “Everything is fulfilled in Joshua; nothing is fulfilled in Hebrews. Clearly they are reading the evidence from different perspectives.”³⁰

Bill Barrick has written an excellent analysis of New Covenant Theology: “Though New Covenant Theology (NCT) has positive aspects such as an insistence on a biblically based theology, several aspects of the system are not so positive. For example in pursuing a middle course between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology its theologians rely on a strained view of Dispensationalism and adopt an interpretive methodology called supersessionism. A noteworthy omission in NCT’s listing of covenants is the Davidic. To a degree, NCT agrees with Dispensationalism on the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants, but the system fails to grasp the thematic continuity of the OT covenants. Instead, NCT stresses discontinuity as the defining characteristic of a covenant because of the biblical contrast of the Old and New Covenants, and follows a redemption, fulfillment, and kingdom hermeneutic rather than a literal, normal or plain hermeneutic. NCT and Dispensationalism agree on the centrality of the Abrahamic Covenant in the theology of the OT, but NCT sees one kind of fulfillment of that covenant’s land promises in the days of Joshua. It understands the spiritual aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant as ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah and the possession of the promised land as ultimately fulfilled in a spiritual rest. The system holds that the gospel was not clearly revealed before the coming of Christ. The system takes the Old Covenant as fulfilling the physical parts of the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant as fulfilling the spiritual parts. NCT holds that the Israelites redeemed from Egypt were physically redeemed, but not spiritually redeemed because the Mosaic Covenant was based on works. This leads to the strange position that OT saints were not saved until after the death and resurrection of Christ. NCT thinks that the Davidic Covenant was fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ and fails to allow for the NT teaching of a future kingdom. With all its positive features, NCT misses vital points featured in the OT covenants.”³¹

Progressive Covenantalism: The Church inherits the world in the eternal state because of its connections to Jesus, who is Lord of the whole world (Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum).

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum in their book *Kingdom Through Covenant* view the land of Israel as a type of the future new heavens and new earth. They write, “The land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant must also be understood in terms of what preceded it, namely, the

²⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁹ Tom Wells, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*, 60.

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

³¹ Bill Barrick, “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 18/1 (Fall 2007), 165-180.

covenant of creation. When this is done, there is further biblical warrant to view the land as a type or pattern of the entire creation.”³²

They write, “Within the Old Testament and especially in prophetic anticipation, the “land” of Israel is identified with the new creation associated with the inauguration of the new covenant age... The New Testament announces that the inheritance of the “land” is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ, who brings to completion all of the previous covenants (along with their types and shadows), and who in his cross work inaugurates the new creation.”³³

“It is important to note that in this entire discussion of what Christ has accomplished in his new covenant work, there is little evidence that the land promise finds its Christological fulfillment in terms of a specific piece of land given to national Israel. The story line of Scripture simply does not move back in this direction. Rather, the entire New Testament instead announces that in Jesus, the last Adam and true Israel, our inheritance is nothing less than the new creation...Christ who is Lord over the whole world, inherits as a result of his work the entire world. He is the Messiah of Israel, but his rule extends far beyond the borders of the original promised land (e.g. Phil.2:10; cf. 1 Cor.3:22-23; Eph.1:10). This way of thinking of the fulfillment of the land promise in Christ is confirmed by other important New Testament texts (Rom.4:13; Eph.6:3; and Heb.3:1-4:13; 11:8-22). For example, in Romans 4:13, Paul is clear that Abraham did not view the land promise as referring merely to a small piece of Palestinian territory but ultimately saw it as a type and pattern of the entire world. Or, in Ephesians 6:3, Paul can quote the fifth commandment (which clearly pertains to the land of Canaan in its Old Testament context) and now expand it to the entire earth.”³⁴

“Another crucial text which also makes this same point, similar to what Paul says in Romans 4:13 is Hebrews 11:8-22. There the author contends that Abraham’s inheritance ultimately was not the land of Canaan but a heavenly inheritance linked to the New Jerusalem and the new creation.”³⁵

“Given how the biblical covenants unpack the theme of land it should not surprise us how the entire story line ends in Revelation 21-22. In the final chapters of Scripture the consummated state is pictured as rest in terms that recall Eden of old, yet far greater. In this new creation, we have the geographical boundaries of Eden (“the land”) expanded to the entire creation, which is also beautifully described in the dimensions of the Holy of Holies, signifying God’s covenantal presence throughout the entire creation, not just in the limited dimensions of the Old Testament tabernacle/temple. In this vision of the new heavens and new earth, God’s people take up residence in God’s presence, a residence described as the antitypical fulfillment of the Old Testament land. In fact, in this final vision we discover our final inheritance—what Abraham

³² Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 709.

³³ *Ibid.*, 713.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 714.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 715.

is said to have looked for—namely, a city whose builder and maker is God and a creation that is full of God’s glory.”³⁶

Michael Vlach gives a detailed review and critique of the book *Kingdom Through Covenant*.³⁷ Vlach points out that Gentry and Wellum fail to make significant comments about key NT texts such as Matthew 24-25, Luke 1-2, Acts 1-3, Romans 9-11 and Revelation 19-20. In Luke 1:32-33 the angel Gabriel told Mary that Jesus’ coming is linked to the Davidic covenant and a kingdom reign over national Israel. Zacharias referred to both the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants as evidence that Israel would be saved and rescued from her enemies (Luke 1:67-74). Peter tells the leaders of Israel that they are still “sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25).

PREMILLENNIAL VIEWS

Premillennialists believe that the Abrahamic covenant will be finally fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. The Lord Jesus Christ will return to earth in power and great glory before He establishes his kingdom on this earth (Rev.19). At this time the promises of the Abrahamic covenant will be finally and totally fulfilled.

Covenant Premillennial View: The Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled as the Church (made up of OT and NT saints) inherits the world in the future millennial kingdom (Fuller).

Fuller writes: “When New Testament saints are perfected at the resurrection then Old Testament saints will be resurrected and perfected as well (Heb.11:40). So the manifold wisdom of God (Eph.3:10), which was manifest when Gentile believers were included in the church as well as Jews, will be evident from the final glorified state of all the saints. Since Old Testament saints (mostly Jewish) are going to be made perfect along with New Testament saints, the group that will emerge at this perfecting will be an enlarged church which shows the manifold wisdom of God in among other things, having Jews and Gentiles on the same footing.”³⁸

Fuller thinks that Israel will be saved at the time of Christ’s premillennial second coming and that the Jews will then be part of the Church. He sees Israel and the Church enjoying the same blessing in the millennial kingdom. “But any thought of such a division of blessings must be rejected on the basis that Gentiles are joint heirs (Eph.3:6) and share the fat root of the olive tree (Rom.11:17). ...But also since believers are going to reign with Christ during the millennium, they will no doubt have access to Palestine and will surely be a part of those who will sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 8:11).”³⁹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Michael J. Vlach, “Have They Found a Better Way? An Analysis of Gentry and Wellum’s *Kingdom Through Covenant*, The Master’s Seminary Journal 24/1 (Spring 2014), 5-24.

³⁸ Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 196.

³⁹ Ibid., 192.

Critique of Fuller

Hebrews 12:23 presents a problem for Fuller's view of an enlarged "church" in the millennium and eternal state. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect." In the New Jerusalem distinctions are made between the residents. The church is distinguished from the spirits of righteous men made perfect (a reference to OT saints). Hebrews 11:40 states that "God provided something better for us (the church) so that apart from us they (Old Testament saints) should not be made perfect."

Fuller thinks that Christians (NT saints) will be resurrected at the same time as OT saints as he holds to a post-tribulation rapture of the church. Dispensational premillennialists argue for a pre-tribulation rapture of the church (1 Thess.4:13-18; 1 Cor.15:51-58; Rev.3:10). Christians who have died will be resurrected before the tribulation period. Old Testament saints and tribulation martyrs will be resurrected at the end of the tribulation period when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth in glory (Dan.12:13; Rev.20:4).

One problem with the post-tribulation rapture view is that if the church is raptured at the end of the tribulation, then no one would enter the millennial kingdom with physical bodies. What nations would Christ rule with a rod of iron (Revelation 19:15)? Fuller believes that unbelievers enter the millennial kingdom. He says "if Christ can work to convert rebels after he has returned to earth, then unbelievers can enter the millennium and be saved after they respond favorably to Christ."⁴⁰ Fuller does not give any scripture to support his assertion. Matthew 25:31-46 states that when Christ returns all the nations will be gathered before Him and he will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep (Gentile believers from the tribulation period) will enter the millennial kingdom in their physical bodies and enjoy the blessings. The goats (Gentile unbelievers from the Tribulation) will be sent away into eternal punishment. Unbelieving Gentiles who survive the tribulation period will not enter the millennial kingdom in their physical bodies.⁴¹

Fuller gives these arguments for his view: (1) The church is not unique because the Holy Spirit indwelt men in the Old Testament in the same way that He indwells believers today (Numbers 27:18; Colossians 1:27). (2) Ephesians 3:5 indicates that the mystery of Jew-Gentile equality in the church was not made known in the Old Testament to the extent that it is now made known in the New Testament.

The following arguments can be given to the arguments given by Fuller in his book. First, John 14:17 indicates that the relationship of the Holy Spirit to men in the Old Testament was different from the relationship that the Holy Spirit has to believers today. Colossians 1:26 also

⁴⁰ Ibid., 188.

⁴¹ Gary Gromacki, A Critique of the Use of Galatians 3 in the Theological Systems of A. Pieters, D. Fuller and A. Hoekema (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), 52.

states that the mystery (Christ in you) was hidden from past ages and generations. Second, the comparative adverb “as” in Ephesians 3:5 can be taken grammatically as descriptive (a comparison of kind) instead of in a restrictive (a comparison of degree) sense. Fuller understands the mystery as partially revealed in the Old Testament and fully revealed in the New. Dispensational premillennialists understand Ephesians 3:5 to teach that the mystery was not known in the Old Testament, but was revealed by the apostles and NT prophets in the New Testament. Ephesians 3:9 indicates that Paul was called to reveal the dispensation of the mystery (the church age).

Progressive Dispensationalist View: The promises of the Abrahamic covenant are fulfilled in Jesus, the seed of Abraham. The new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled. (Bock/Blaising).

Bock and Blaising believe that the Abrahamic covenant . “From the standpoint of the New Testament the promises of Abraham are being and will be fulfilled through the Christ, who is proclaimed as Jesus...God blesses Christ, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, and all those of Abraham and of the nations of the earth who are in Him”⁴²

“The New Testament gives the good news concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of David, to whom the grant covenant of David has been confirmed. He has been anointed by the Holy Spirit, raised up even from the dead, declared to be Son of God, being made Lord and Christ as He has been enthroned at the right hand of God, becoming the highest of the kings of the earth. In receiving Davidic blessings, he has become the heir of the blessings promised to Abraham, and He mediates those blessings to others, both from Israel and from the nations, as they are blessed in Him.”⁴³

Bock writes, “It is important to note that the blessing which Paul has in mind in Galatians 3 is the reception of the Holy Spirit (see 3:2, 5; 4:6) and the gift of righteousness (3:21-22). These are in fact new covenant blessings, but Paul presents them as blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Again, this shows that the new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled. It is also important to note that Paul, just like Peter, sees the Abrahamic covenant blessing mediated in stages which are tied to the history of Christ. The stages distinguish not only between degrees of blessing but also between different kinds of blessing. Thus Peter spoke of the restoration of all things predicted by the prophets at the future coming of Christ. This certainly includes the national promises to Israel, since these promises are included in “all things predicted by the prophets.” Paul likewise spoke of the salvation of all Israel at the coming of Christ (Rom.11:26).”⁴⁴

⁴² Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Bridgepoint Book), 190.

⁴³ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 191.

The emphasis in progressive dispensationalism is on the present fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant for the church. Bock and Blaising say that “the new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled.” They believe that Jesus sits on the Davidic throne in heaven and mediates the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to the church (the Holy Spirit and the gift of righteousness). Traditional dispensationalists argue that Jesus sits on the Father’s throne in heaven and will sit on the Davidic throne in the millennial kingdom (Rev.3:21; Mt.19:28; 25:31). In their book *Progressive Dispensationalism* Bock and Blaising mention the “national promises to Israel” but they do not focus on the fulfillment of the land promise for saved Israel in the millennial kingdom.

Traditional Dispensationalist Premillennial View: The Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled by saved Israel in the future millennial kingdom. Saved Israel will inherit the promised land in the millennial kingdom. (Walvoord; Pentecost; Ryrie; Johnson; Gromacki)

Ryrie believes that the Abrahamic covenant promises will literally be fulfilled in the future for Israel. He writes, “Israel is promised permanent possession of the land and permanent existence as a nation. This is based on the unconditional character of the covenant. Since the Church does not fulfill the national promises of the covenant, these promises await a future fulfillment by the nation Israel. Other Scriptures were cited to show that the Lord has promised a future restoration of the nation and a return to the land. Thus, the unconditional, partially fulfilled Abrahamic covenant becomes an important plank in the solid basis for the premillennial faith.”⁴⁵

Arguments for an Unconditional Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic covenant is called eternal. In Genesis 17:7-8 God promised Abraham that the covenant he established with him will be an everlasting covenant and the land of Canaan will be given to him and to his descendants for an everlasting possession. David praised God that the covenant made with Abraham was confirmed to Israel as an everlasting covenant (1 Chron.16:17). The word “eternal” rules out the possibility that Israel because of disobedience could abrogate the covenant.

The covenant ceremony of Genesis 15 was unilateral and not bilateral. God alone passed through the pieces of the sacrificed animals. Abram was asleep when God passed through. God alone made the promise regarding the land. Abram was a recipient of the promises of the covenant. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant is not dependent upon the obedience of Abram or his descendants.

The Abrahamic covenant is a covenant of grant and not a suzerain-vassal treaty. Weinfeld writes, “The structure of both types of these documents is similar. Both preserve the same elements: historical introduction, border delineations, stipulations, witnesses, blessings and cursings. Functionally, however, there is a vast difference between these two types of

⁴⁵ Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953):74-75.

documents. While the treaty constitutes an obligation of the vassal to his master, the suzerain, the “grant” constitutes an obligation of the master to his servant. In the grant the curse is directed towards the one who will violate the rights of the king’s vassal, while in the treaty the curse is directed towards the vassal who will violate the rights of the king. In other words, the grant serves mainly to protect the rights of the servant, while the treaty comes to protect the rights of the master. What is more, while the grant is a reward for loyalty and good deeds already performed, the treaty is an inducement for future loyalty. The covenant with Abraham, and so the covenant with David, indeed belong to the grant type and not to the vassal type.”⁴⁶

Fruchtenbaum writes, “It must be stressed that, although a covenant may be made at a specific point of time, it does not mean that all provisions of the covenant go immediately into effect. Some do, but some may not for centuries. The Abrahamic covenant is a good example. Some of God’s promises did go immediately into effect, such as providing for Abraham’s physical needs in the land, his change of name and circumcision. Others were fulfilled only in the near future. For example, Abraham was promised a son through Sarah, but had to wait twenty five years before that promise was fulfilled. Other provisions were fulfilled only later in Jewish history, such as the Egyptian sojourn, enslavement, and the Exodus (400 years later), which was also part of the covenant. Finally, other provisions are still future, never having been fulfilled, such as Abraham’s ownership of the land and Israel’s settlement in all of the Promised Land. It is important to note that although a covenant is made, signed, and sealed at a certain point of history, this does not mean that all the promises or provisions go immediately into effect. It should come as no surprise that not all of the provisions of the unconditional Jewish covenants are presently being fulfilled to, in or by Israel today. This is not necessary for the covenants to still be in force. Nor is this a valid reason to teach that the church has taken over these covenants or that they are now being fulfilled to, in, or by the church.”⁴⁷

The Mosaic covenant did not change the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul writes, “And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ that it should make the promise of no effect” (Galatians 3:17). The Mosaic covenant (the Law) did not nullify the Abrahamic covenant (the promise). What was the relationship of the conditional Mosaic covenant to the unconditional Abrahamic covenant? The Mosaic covenant defined the means by which each individual generation of Israel could enjoy the blessings of the unconditional Abrahamic covenant. When Israel disobeyed the law they were disciplined by the Lord. The ultimate discipline was Israel’s removal from the land.

The book of Hebrews declares the Abrahamic covenant to be immutable. “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater He swore by Himself saying Surely blessing I will bless you and multiplying I will multiply you and so after he had patiently

⁴⁶ M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 185.

⁴⁷ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “Where Are We Now? The Prophetic Plan of the Abrahamic Covenant” in *The Fundamentals of the Twenty First Century*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 162-163.

endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:13-18).

Premillennialists argue that God has not yet kept his promise to Abram to give him and his descendants all of the promised land. Since God cannot lie, He must keep his promise.

Seed of Abraham: Who will inherit the promised land?

The promise of the land was made to Abraham and his descendants. Who are the seed of Abraham? Amillennialists believe that seed of Abraham refers to the Church (believers who have the faith of Abraham). Dispensational premillennialists distinguish four different possible meanings of the "seed of Abraham" in the Bible.

First, the seed of Abraham can refer to the physical descendants of Abraham. Ishmael and Isaac were the physical sons of Abraham by different women. Ishmael was the physical son of Abraham and Hagar (Sarah's concubine) and the father of the Arab peoples. Isaac was the physical son of Abraham and Sarah and one of the fathers of the Jewish people. Before Isaac was born, God made it clear that He would establish his covenant with Isaac and not Ishmael. "Sarah your wife shall bear a son and you shall call his name Isaac: I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him...But my covenant I will establish with Isaac" (Genesis 17:19, 21). So the Arab peoples who currently live in the Middle East cannot claim to be owners of the promised land. God made his covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: the nation of Israel.

Second, the seed of Abraham can refer to physical/spiritual seed of Abraham = saved Jews. Not all Jews were spiritually saved. Israel was an elect nation but not all Jews were elect (spiritually saved). Many Jews in Jesus day thought that they would inherit the kingdom. But John the Baptist told the unrepentant Jews "Brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Luke 3:7-8). The Jewish leaders said to Jesus "Abraham is our father. Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham" (John 8:39). Jesus told the unrepentant Jewish leaders that they were of their father the devil (John 8:44). Paul wrote "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham but In Isaac your seed shall be called" (Rom.9:6-7). Within the elect nation of Israel there are saved and unsaved Jews. Dispensational premillennialists believe that only saved Israel will inherit all the promised land in the future millennial kingdom. Unsaved Jews will not enter the millennial kingdom.

Third, the seed of Abraham can refer to Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: "To Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say and to seeds as of many but as of one, and to your Seed, who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). Ultimately the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant

come to those who are related by faith to Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham. The seed promise of the Abrahamic covenant was developed in the unconditional Davidic Covenant. God promised King David that a descendant of his would sit on his throne and rule over Israel forever. Jesus Christ is the physical son (descendant) of David will sit on the Davidic throne and rule over Israel in the future millennial kingdom.

Fourth, the seed of Abraham can refer to the spiritual descendants of Abraham = saved Gentiles who have the faith of Abraham. Paul identified the saved Galatians as spiritual sons of Abraham. "Those who are of faith are sons of Abraham" (Gal.3:7). "So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham" (Gal.3:9). "And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise" (Gal.3:29). Saved Gentiles will reign with Jesus Christ in the millennial kingdom. They are heirs of the universal blessings of the Abrahamic covenant but not of the land promise which is specifically for the physical/spiritual seed of Abraham (saved Jews).

Land: Will saved Israel inherit the promised land in the future millennial kingdom?

Dispensational premillennialists believe that saved Israel will inherit the promised land in the future millennial kingdom.

Pentecost wrote "...because of the rejection of the offered kingdom, God brought the Gentiles into the place of blessing, which program continues throughout the present age. When that program ends, God will inaugurate the theocratic kingdom at the return of the Messiah and fulfill all the covenanted blessings. Thus, throughout the New Testament the kingdom is not preached as having been established, but is still anticipated."⁴⁸

Elliott Johnson writes "Therefore all covenant agreements with Israel will be inaugurated in fulfillment when Israel receives the One whom they crucified-the Son of David, the Son of Abraham-when He returns (Zech.12:10)."⁴⁹

The land promise of the Abrahamic covenant was developed in the Land Covenant found in the book of Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy was a second law or restatement of the Sinaitic covenant for the generation of Israel about to enter the promised land under Joshua. It is a Suzerain-Vassal treaty (a conditional covenant). The nation of Israel would experience blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience. If Israel obeyed God's laws they would enjoy blessing in the land (Dt.28:1-14). If Israel disobeyed God's law they would experience the curses (including locust judgments, invasion by foreign nations and the final judgment of deportation from the land) (Dt.28:15-68).

⁴⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 468.

⁴⁹ Elliott Johnson, "Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 155.

God made a promise to Israel that if Israel repented and returned to the Lord that the Lord would gather Israel from the nations and they would possess the promised land (Deuteronomy 30:1-6). Dispensational premillennialists believe that in the future Israel will repent at the second coming of Messiah Jesus to the earth at the end of the tribulation period. God will circumcise the hearts of the repentant Jews to enable that future generation of Israel to inherit the land and blessings associated with it in the kingdom (Dt.30:6). God will fulfill his new covenant promises to Israel at this time (cf. Ezekiel 36:25-26; Jeremiah 31:31-34). Since the saved Jews will have the law written on their hearts they will be enabled to obey the Lord in the kingdom. The final fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant is guaranteed because God will change the hearts of the Jews and they will trust in Jesus as their Messiah.

Ezekiel predicted that God would give the promised land as an inheritance to Israel. Ezekiel 47:13 "Thus says the Lord God: These are the borders by which you shall divide the land as an inheritance among the twelve tribes of Israel..." Ezekiel 47:13-29 gives the borders of the promised land in the millennial kingdom. Ezekiel 47:29 concludes: "This is the land which you shall divide by lot as an inheritance among the tribes of Israel and these are their portions. Says the Lord God."

Amos predicted, "Behold the days are coming says the Lord 'When the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it. I will bring back the captives of my people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them, says the Lord your God.'" (Amos 9:13-15).

Jews who trust in Jesus as their Messiah and survive the tribulation period will enter the millennial kingdom and inherit all of the land promised to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant. They will rebuild the waste cities (cities that have been destroyed during the tribulation period) and inhabit them. God will plant Israel back in their land.

OT Jewish saints will be resurrected at the second coming of Messiah Jesus and will inherit the land. God promised Daniel that he would die but then be resurrected to enter into rest and receive his promised inheritance at the end of the age. "But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age" (Dan.12:13).

Jews who are martyred for their belief in Messiah Jesus and their refusal to take the mark of the Beast in the tribulation period will be resurrected and reign with Jesus during the millennial kingdom. They will reign over cities in the promised land (Revelation 20:4).

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown the importance of a literal interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant to a defense of premillennialism. Traditional dispensationalists argue that God has fulfilled some promises of the Abrahamic covenant in past history but God has not fulfilled every promise that he made to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant. There has never been a time in history when Israel possessed all of the land promised to them by God in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15). God will fulfill his covenant promise to Abraham in the future at the second coming of Jesus Christ to earth. The Jews will trust in Jesus as their Messiah. "All Israel will be saved." God will forgive the sins of his people. Saved Jews will inherit all of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants in the Abrahamic covenant (from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates river). All the nations will be blessed as a result of King Jesus reigning over the world from Jerusalem during the millennial kingdom.