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The Scope of the Abrahamic Covenant

BY FRANCIS ANDERSEN

THE Bible consists of two parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament. These indicate that God's dealings with mankind have taken the form of two successive covenants. The fact that God is revealed in both parts of the Bible as a covenant-making God confers a deep unity upon the whole book.

The events recorded in the Bible stand in a single historical process involving Israel as a nation, and as the bearers of a unique religion of which the Christian Church is an outgrowth. These confer a linguistic, a conceptual, a cultural unity on the Bible, a unity not obscured in the least by the long stretch of time, the diversity of literary materials, and the different languages found within its pages. But the unity we have particularly in view lies behind this unity of historical circumstance; it lies in God, by whose providence these events were ordered and by whose superintendence this book was produced.

The unity of the Old and New Covenants lies deeper than the fact that they are successive stages of a single process. They are not called the first and second covenants as if they were unrelated (but compare Heb. x. 9). The New Covenant does not merely replace the Old, it supersedes it. Moreover, it is established with finality; there is no hint of a third covenant yet to come.

The relation of the New Covenant to the Old is not one of succession but of growth—of fulfilment. As the New grows out of the Old and fulfils it, much that is in the Old is taken up and conserved. There is a continuity and discontinuity between Old and New which cannot be presented merely by listing similarities and differences between them. Things latent in the Old are perpetuated in the New, and while they are transformed in their new setting, they are not distorted; rather do they come to their proper expression. The abundant quotations from the Old Testament in the New are sufficient proof of this fact. They are not simply put on top of the gospel to provide a decoration, being turned into interpretations alien to their original significance. The Christian use of Old Testament passages implies that the same God, who spoke before in various ways to the fathers, has now spoken in His Son, but the new message of Jesus the Christ consisted of "none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come" (Acts xxvi. 22).

It is important to indicate clearly this integral quality of the Biblical revelation in order to safeguard the faithfulness of God. The Bible insists on the truthfulness of God in His self-disclosure, and on the consistency of His dealings with men. There is a genuine indication of the real character of God in all He has said and done. There is nothing arbitrary or changeable in His purposes. His covenants, then, embody the very essence of His relations with sinful mankind. This relationship is one of grace, displayed by God in the form of promises which He guarantees to execute, and which are fulfilled in redeeming acts. On its human side this relationship evokes faith, expressed

in truthful reliance upon God's mercy and steadfast obedience to His laws.

The covenant of grace then corresponds perfectly to God's nature and man's need. This fact is nowhere more strikingly affirmed than in Paul's claim that those who have faith in Jesus Christ are the children of Abraham (Rom. iv. 16 ; ix. 6-9 ; Gal. iii. 7, 9, 26, 29). The Old Testament promise of blessing for Abraham is called a "preaching of the Gospel" (Gal. iii. 8) and the message of Jesus Christ is reciprocally "the blessing of Abraham" (Gal. iii. 14).

In calling the promise made to Abraham "the covenant that was confirmed before of God in Christ" (Gal. iii. 17) Paul sees in the evolution of the covenant relationship a more complex development than the simple succession of Old Covenant—New Covenant at first suggests. It is not the Abrahamic covenant that is called Old. The inadequate arrangement that is to be superseded by the "new covenant" is the one made with the Israelites when they came out of Egypt (Jer. xxxi. 32 ; 2 Cor. iii. 6ff.). The fulfilment of the Law of Moses by Christ is a New Testament theme with many aspects, but it is part of Paul's analysis of it that the work of Christ brought to its full term the interim function of the law, which had been temporarily interposed between the giving of the original promise to Abraham and its fulfilment in Christ (Gal. iii. 17ff. ; Rom. iv. 13-16), just as its ceremonial expression in circumcision came *after* the experience of justifying grace (Rom. iv. 9-12), and disappears with Christ (Gal. v. 2).

This does not mean that Paul regarded the Law as an interpolation, a parenthesis in an otherwise integral process. Far from it. On the contrary, Paul insists vehemently that any suggestion of a change in the economy of God's dealings with men is unthinkable. The law cannot possibly be against the promises of God (Gal. iii. 21). It is because God is one that faith does not make the law void (Rom. iii. 31). The work of Moses points directly to Christ (John v. 45ff.), and before and after him Abraham (John viii. 56) and Isaiah (John xii. 41) saw Him.

Abraham, Moses, and Christ do not stand in a series, but in a complex of which Christ is the living nexus. With fulfilment of the old economy in Christ both Abraham and Moses come into their own and are seen in their proper light.

The prominence given to Abraham in the New Testament is, then, not a merely Judaistic colouring of the Gospel due to no more than historical circumstances. It is a direct result of the Christian insistence on the unity of God and the unity of His dealings with men. The whole process of revelation and redemption is the disclosure and implementation of the covenant of Grace. The covenant with Abraham is more than an illustration or a type of the new Covenant in Christ's blood. More than analogy underlies Paul's allegorical comparisons in Gal. iv. 22-31 by which he concludes that Christians are the children of promise, like Isaac. The promise of life in Christ is not *just like* the promise made to Abraham ; Christ *is* precisely that seed of Abraham to whom the promise was made (Gal. iii. 16). Whatever exegetical difficulties there may be in the subtle arguments Paul bases on the grammatically singular word "seed" (cf. Rom. ix. 8), the import is

clear—the covenant made with Abraham is now seen to have no significance in itself independently of Christ. Now that the purpose of God is fully disclosed, and the redeeming act of God is fully accomplished in Christ, a Jew can no longer rest on any guarantees of the blessing of God through the Abrahamic covenant, except through faith in Jesus as the Christ (Rom. ii. 28 ; x. 1-4). Paul's agonized analysis of the condition of this fellow-countrymen in Romans xi is circumscribed by his refusal to allow his "heart's desire for Israel" to hold out hope of a mode of salvation for them apart from the righteousness of faith in Christ.

* * * *

So far our discussion of the Christian significance of the Abrahamic covenant has depended heavily on Paul's treatment of the question. Other New Testament writers are in clear agreement with him, even though their approach and terminology are their own. From the very beginning of the Christian movement, the purpose of the "Lord God of Israel" in sending Jesus was understood to be :

" To perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
And to remember his holy covenant ;
The oath which he sware to our forefather Abraham "
(Zacharias : Luke i. 72f.).

" He hath holpen his servant Israel
In remembrance of his mercy,
As he spake to our fathers,
To Abraham, and to his seed for ever "
(Mary : Luke i. 54f.).

These references are not to be dismissed as the remnants of Jewish nationalism to be left behind as Christianity grew to maturity.

From its very inception the Christian movement had already burst out from the bondage and limitations of contemporary Judaism, not by abandoning its Old Testament inheritance, but by bringing it to its proper exposition. Already in the preaching of John the Baptist a distinction is made between those who vainly rely upon their physical descent from Abraham and those who are raised up by the power of God (Matt. iii. 9 ; Luke iii. 8)—an oblique reference to the miraculous circumstances of Isaac's birth (?) ; but the connection is preserved, since it is precisely as children for Abraham that God can give life to dead stones.

If Paul emphasizes the faith of Abraham as the mark of his genuine children, Jesus emphasizes the complementary feature of "the works of Abraham" as the signs of His authentic seed (John viii. 33-41 ; cf. James iv. 21f.). Jesus concedes that His opponents are in a sense Abraham's seed (John viii. 37), but His words, "If you were Abraham's seed . . ." (verse 39), imply that there was a sense in which they were disqualified from this honour. It was not simply because they tried to kill Jesus. Behind this perversity lay a failure to recognize Jesus as "a man which hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God : this did not Abraham" (verse 40).

These examples are sufficient to permit us now to summarize the

main characteristics of the true followers of Jesus Christ who are also the true children of Abraham.

1. They exercise the faith of Abraham
2. They do the works of Abraham
3. They recognize Jesus as the one who brings the truth of God
4. They are raised up by the power of God.

These are the ones who come into Abraham's inheritance, and share it with him. Without us, Christian believers, Abraham himself remains spiritually incomplete (Heb. xi. 39f.). To be in paradise is to be gathered into Abraham's bosom (Luke xvi. 22); to enter the Kingdom of God is to come and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Luke xiii. 28).

Our Lord's words in John viii. 40 contrast the acts of Abraham with those of his natural descendants. They imply, moreover, that Abraham would (and John states explicitly that he *did*) recognize Jesus Christ as the object of his faith and the ground of his hope. It is entirely in line with this that Jesus deliberately names a crippled woman who was the object of His healing compassion "a daughter of Abraham" (Luke xiii. 16). And again in this incident there is a pointed contrast with those representatives of formalized and fleshly Judaism who objected to what Jesus was doing (verse 14). To these people Jesus states firmly and clearly that they will be excluded quite contrary to their expectation from the Kingdom of God in which people will come from all over the world to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (verses 24-30).

If we travel back to the story of Abraham with these New Testament passages at hand, the question arises as to whether the Christian interpretations are forced. Can the Church make good its claim to be the new Israel, the present sphere, and now the only sphere of the Abrahamic covenant? When the New Testament honours Abraham as "the father of us all" (Rom. iv. 16) are these merely the swaddling clothes of Judaism around the infant Church, of which it was hardly conscious, but betraying an incomplete liberation of a spiritual movement from the material background? The points are made, as we have seen, in a wide variety of New Testament contexts, where the matter has been thought out with such clarity, made so integral to Christian doctrine, and stated with such force, that it cannot be now discarded as incidental to our understanding of the ways of God.

Are the New Testament claims that Christians are the real heirs of Abraham merely an apologetic device, designed to conciliate the Jews—to make it easy for them to be converted to Christ without becoming disloyal to their national inheritance? The practical effectiveness of such a policy in relation to the evangelization of Jesus is not our concern here, since it is not a proper indication of the validity of the interpretations we are discussing. The New Testament hermeneutics will stand or fall (whether it is practically successful or not) by the test of its perspicuity in relation to the Old Testament passages being expounded. Has the New Testament brought the Abrahamic covenant to its proper expression, or has it distorted it?

This question cannot be settled by showing that Old Testament

materials reappear in the New Testament unchanged. This is not in fact what happened. The principle of organic development which we have already noted as binding the two parts of the Bible together does not lead us to expect it. The fruit need not resemble the root from which it is the proper outgrowth.

In applying this principle to the scope of the Abrahamic covenant, the similarities and differences observed between passages in Genesis and their exposition in Christian terms need to be related to the pattern of growth that connects Old Testament prophecies with New Testament fulfilment. The most striking similarities or constants are shown in those predictions which, in their plain and immediate sense, describe exactly the actual embodiment of the plan of God as it ultimately appeared in Christ. In the story of Abraham the best examples of this kind of thing are the promises that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in Abraham and in his seed (Gen. xii. 3). Whatever indirect benefits have come to mankind as a whole through the benefactions of the Israelite people—and a recollection of the fantastic achievements of Jews in the realm of science and culture will show that they are incalculable—this promise has never come in terms of Judaism to the fulfilment it has found in the Christian Church, overstepping all the bounds of race and nation, and going into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature (Matt. xxviii. 19), to the Jew first, but also to the Gentile. Similarly we may say that the spiritual destiny of every man was defined from the first not in terms of descent from Abraham, or of membership in the Israelite nation, but in terms of his attitude of benediction or malediction to Abraham himself (Gen. xii. 3). Anyone who perceives that Abraham is the definitively blessed man will be "blessed with faithful Abraham". The converse is also true. Abraham's faith became normative for saving faith universally, and this was made explicit from the beginning (Gen. xviii. 18f.).

* * * *

But other things in the story of Abraham are left out in the New Testament. These are matters related to the historical circumstances of his call, and some of a political kind. Here the most obvious is the promise that Abraham's descendants would receive the land of their sojournings (Canaan) as a gift from God (Gen. xiii. 14-17; xvii. 2-8) in perpetual possession (Gen. xiii. 15; xvii. 8). This has given the Israelite an undying hope which has been the direct cause of the rebirth of Israel as a nation on the very soil promised to Abraham nearly four thousand years ago, a phenomenon without parallel in the whole of human history, and constituting such a striking agreement between event and biblical exhortation, that many readers of the Bible would suppose that God was talking to Abraham about the Modern Israeli State! Are we to suppose then, that Israel remains a distinct entity in the purposes of God, pursuing its own proper destiny parallel to, but unrelated to the Church? Are we interfering with the plan of God if we are not content to let the Jew alone, but try to convert him to Christ?

There are several biblical passages which strongly suggest that this part of the Abrahamic covenant found only transient historical

expression. While, on the one hand the promises appear to be made unconditionally, there are other solemn warnings that they might forfeit the benefit of residence in Canaan by disobedience (Deut. xxviii. 15-68, for example). This does not mean that this part of the covenant would come to nothing. Far from it. The prophets who give warning of threatened deportation from Palestine also hold out hopes of redemption by restoration to the promised land. But in the New Testament such a matter is wholly spiritualized; the land of promise is "a better heavenly city" (Heb. xi. 10, 16), a thought in line with Paul's teaching that Sarah, as the mother of us all, is "Jerusalem which is above" (Gal. iv. 26). The promised rest continues to remain, then, to the people of God and those who believe in Jesus enter into it (Heb. iv).

Similar considerations apply to the promise of numerous progeny. It found its historical fulfilment in the fact that Israel became a populous nation, and its spiritual fulfilment in the multitudes of all nations who learn through Christ that Abraham is their spiritual progenitor. Yet these two levels of interpretation interpenetrate, if only by an overlap of the two classes of descendants involved.

In the same way, that particular son about whom the promises spoke directly, that is, Isaac, and the seed of Abraham which is Christ, do not point to a double meaning (a historical and an allegorical) of a single expression, but to a complex of meaning. For Jesus was also the son of Abraham (Matt. i. 1) and Isaac was heir of the spiritual promises as one "born after the Spirit" (Gal. iv. 29), so that God became known as the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac (Gen. xxxi. 53; Exod. iii. 6, etc.).

The evangelical prophet preached his glad news by urging Israel to "look unto the rock whence ye are hewn" (Is. li. 1), that is, to Abraham. It was therefore proper that the first Christian believers should be Jews (Acts iii. 25) to whom the Gospel was preached in the words: "The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our Fathers, hath glorified his son Jesus" (Acts iii. 13).

So, although "Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for" (Rom. xi. 7), "Israel . . . hath not attained to the law of righteousness" (Rom. ix. 31); "what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (Rom. xi. 15). "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Gal. vi. 15f.).