

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 22

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Abrahamic Covenant – Gen. 12, 15, ...

### Deuteronomy Class Assignment

The assignment for next week, includes a written analysis of the structure of Deuteronomy. I'm not looking for a lengthy paper. I'm not looking really for much more than for you to read the book of Deuteronomy but what I want you to do is reflect on the structure and the major divisions of the material. You can read Schultz that sort of summarizes the material. So what I'm really looking for is more in the form of an outline of Deuteronomy and certainly with major divisions and some indication of subdivisions. Indicate the basic purpose of chapters 1-11 and then the major category in chapters 12-26 which is the legal material which is sort of the heart of the book. And the nature of the material in chapters 27-34. So basically what I'm looking for is a structural outline of the material. That is to be done as a background for what we are going to do in class. I'm not looking for a long paper of any kind. It's just to get you to look at the structure of the book.

This course carries on through. So when I get to Deuteronomy next quarter this is preparation for that. There is only one reason I do that because I think there is motivational factor there that will encourage you to read that material carefully and reflect on it. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is when you know that you're going to be held accountable for something you usually do a better job. It's not to persecute you but to help you master this material. |

## Abraham as an Historical Figure

1. Abraham and the Philistines
2. Abraham as Our Spiritual Father
  - a. God's Covenant with Abraham

### Genesis 12:1-3 – Passive or Reflexive

We were discussing Abraham as an historical figure in the last class hour. I concluded that with our discussion of Abraham and the Philistines and the question of whether contact with the Philistines is an anachronism in the Patriarchal period. Let's go on to 2. "Abraham as our spiritual father." There are several sub-points there, but a. is "God's covenant with Abraham" which is mentioned in four passages that are listed. The first of which is found in Genesis 12:1-3. So what I want to do under that heading is look at these passages and see what is involved in God's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12:1-3 and verse 7 you have the original statement of the call of Abraham where he is told to leave his people and country for another place that God would show him. He is given certain promises. We read, "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" Then down in verse 7, "The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' [That is after he has come into the land.] So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him."

Now in verse 2 where you have the blessings discussed you find that the progeny of Abraham will become a great nation and he will be blessed and his name made great. Now remember the context for this. He has just left Haran and he has no children. But the Lord says he will make a great nation of Abraham and make his name great. Remember that reference to making a great name in the context of the early chapters of Genesis. If you go back to Genesis 6:1-4 that had been the ambition of the sons of God who entered into marriage with the daughters of men and we discussed the possibilities

of interpretation there. We read of the off-spring of those marriages at the end of verse 4 of chapter 6. The “men of old” is literally “men of the name.” Then when you come to Genesis 11 where the people gathered to build the tower whose top would reach unto heaven, they said, “Let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the earth.” When you come to Genesis 12, verse 2, the Lord says to Abraham, “I will make your name great.” God will give to Abraham what the others had sought in an improper way, God will give it to him in a proper way.

Then in verse 2 the last phrase, you read, “you shall be a blessing.” That statement is worked out in more detail in verse 3, because in verse 3 it says, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Now the last phrase of verse 3 is significant. There’s a translation question however that arises. If you compare the King James or in the NIV which says, “all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.” You notice that the translation is a passive, “be blessed through you.” Whereas if you look at the Revised Standard Version you find the translation “by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves.”

Now that phrase “all the families of the earth will be blessed in you” or “in your seed” is repeated five times in the book of Genesis. You find it here in Genesis 12:3 where the Hebrew construction is what is called a Niphal, I’ll explain that in a minute. You also have that in Genesis 18:18 and 28:14 where you have that same Hebrew construction of the Niphal. But then you have it in Genesis 22:18 and 26:4 in the Hithpael which is another type of verbal form in the Hebrew construction there. So that three times the verb is Niphal and two times the verb is a Hithpael but you have the same expression repeated sometimes to Abraham and sometimes to his descendants, Isaac and Jacob. The question is how is the phrase best translated.

It is interesting that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew, translates all five phrases consistently as future passive not future middle. In other words, it is quite clear in the Greek it was understood consistently as passive. Now you come to the RSV and you don’t have it as a passive, you have it as what would be

termed a reflexive: “in you all the families of the earth would bless themselves.” It’s a reflexive kind of action. The question is why did they translate it differently? If you look at commentaries you will find that most modern commentaries translate it like the RSV and make it reflexive. It is often said in that connection in these commentaries that the Niphal which is generally a passive stem can be translated as reflexive but that the Hithpael which is generally a reflexive stem cannot be translated as passive.

Now there is an illustration of that in the bibliography. Notice the entry at the top of page 13, Ephraim Speiser from his book *Genesis in the Anchor Bible series*. Speiser says on page 86, “the Hebrew form is often translated ‘shall be blessed’ in as much as it is Niphal which is generally, although not always, passive. There are however parallel passages with the Hithpael a form that can be reflexive or reciprocal but not passive.” There’s the key Speiser says, the Hithpael cannot be translated passive. What the clause means therefore is that the nations of the world will point to Abraham as their ideal either in blessing themselves or one another. The passive, on the other hand, would imply that the privileges to be enjoyed by Abraham and his descendants shall be extended to other nations. The distinction may be slight on the surface, yet it is of great consequence theologically, nor may one disregard the evidence from linguistic usage. Now Speiser is right on that point that there is great theological significance whether you translate it reflexively or passive. Is this saying in a predictive way that other nations are going to be blessed as something that will happen to them, through Abraham and his seed? Or is it just saying that other nations are going to look to Abraham as their ideal and bless themselves in some sense. So it is significant. But Speiser says the Hithpael cannot be translated as passive. It seems clear all five should be translated in the same way, it’s the same phrase that is repeated. So instead of translating them all passive Speiser and others translate them reflexively even though you have a Niphal which is normally passive in the Hebrew.

Now the question is: is that really true that a Hithpael cannot be translated passive? On your bibliography I have the reference to Allan MacRae’s “Paul’s Use of Isaiah 65:1,” in the volume *The Law and the Prophets* page 372. The article is not on

Genesis 12 or on this text but he does discuss the use of the Hithpael. And in this volume page 372 he says, “Most books on Hebrew today tend uncritically to repeat the statements made in the Hebrew grammars of a hundred years ago, and sometimes these statements will not stand up under full investigation. Thus many Hebrew grammars say that the Hithpael is only rarely passive.” Now you look at some Hebrew grammars they will say it is never passive. But he says, “many Hebrew grammars say that the Hithpael is only rarely passive but careful examination shows that at least one fourth of its occurrences must be interpreted as passive. At the most not more than one third are reflexive and extremely few can be interpreted as reciprocal. It’s only within the last few years that the existence of the iterative and durative Hithpael have been recognized” and then he goes beyond into something else. But the point is MacRae says, “one fourth of its occurrences have to be translated as passive.” So there is no basis for the statement that the Hithpael cannot be translated as a passive. It can be.

Now that means when you come to that statement again, you can translate it reflexive or passive. It depends a lot on your understanding of the significance. The grammar allows it to go either way and it is not as many commentaries and as Speiser would express that the Hithpael can’t be translated as passive.

If you’re interested in this question, and maybe it seems like an obscure point, there is a good an article you can read on it in the entry from O. T. Allis, “The Blessing of Abraham,” in the Princeton Theological Review of 1937. He discusses the question very thoroughly there and very carefully. I might just say on the first couple of pages he says, he speaks about a well-known grammar that again says that the Hithpael can’t be passive only reflexive, he says, “the student, if he knew of the omission would be disposed to be grateful to Dr. McPhadon for sparing him the necessity for bothering with the doubtful or negligible exceptions to the general rule. But if the student were told that it’s upon the validity this unimportant exception to the general rule that the historic interpretation of the blessing of Abraham depends and that Dr. McPhadon’s key to the grammar cuts the evangelical heart out of that glorious promise. If he were seriously minded he would feel quite differently with regard to this matter. The question of the

possible meanings of the Hithpael would cease to be the dry bones of Hebrew grammar and become a live issue of no small moment to the Christian faith.” So that here is a place where Hebrew grammar does play a rather significant role in interpretation of a rather important passage.

Now Allis in that article goes further to point out that all these five passages are translated in the Samaritan, Babylonian and Jerusalem Targums as passives, not only in the Septuagint, but also in the Targums. The Targums are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Old Testament, after the exile when Aramaic became the dominant language in the Near East. In every case those Targums are passive. The Septuagint and Vulgate and New Testament quotations of these passages are always passive.

Now the New Testament quotations, are of course, particularly significant for us. That’s Acts 3:25 where you read, “And you are heirs of the promise and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’” Then Galatians 3:8, “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” It is passive. It is striking there in Paul’s words, what does he call this promise? He calls it the gospel. He says, “and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” Now I think that highlights then the significance of this statement in Genesis 12:3. How will Abraham be a blessing to the nations? I think the blessing is to be realized in his seed who, going back to Genesis 3:15, will crush the serpent. It points back there to Genesis 3:15 and points forward to Christ and the salvation that he secured. So in that promise I think you have the idea that is central to the whole Bible. Questions and comments?

In neither of the New Testament passages do you have a direct quotation of any one of the five. It is sort of a rewording that combines elements of the five. There are slight variations in the five. You see that argument could be said, “they could be quoting one of these Niphal statements.” But I don’t think you can say that, because of the way it is slightly paraphrased and reorganized. It’s just repeating the essence of that basic

statement. That also becomes a reason to translate all of them consistently rather than half of them one way and half of them the other way.

In Acts 13:17 through the rest of the chapter, Paul traces Old Testament history. He traces Old Testament history from the exodus through David to Christ. This is Acts 13. He speaks in several places there of Christ as the fulfillment of the promise to the fathers. If you look at Acts 13:23, “From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.” Where was the promise to the fathers of the seed? Acts 13:32, “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus again as it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’” So references like that move from the promise to Christ I think is also an allusion back to Genesis 12:3 that’s with the understanding that it is a passive not a reflexive.

So in this statement and in these statements of the presentation of these promises to Abraham we have what Vos says on page 77, which is listed there on your bibliography, that “in Genesis 12 one family is taken out of a number of Semitic families and within it the redemptive revelatory work of God is carried forward. This is the tremendous significance of the call of Abraham.” See what we’ve been trying to trace is this progression of the line of the promise rooted back in Genesis 3:15 and here we take another significant step forward. The line of Abraham is the line through which that line will proceed.

#### Genesis 12:7 – Land Promised

Genesis chapter 12, verse 7 speaks of the land of promise. “Unto your seed will I give this land.” You notice that verse begins with the statement “the LORD appeared unto Abraham and said, ‘unto your seed will I give this land.’” This is the first time that it is said in the Old Testament that the LORD appears to someone. Of course, we know that the LORD walked in the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. But this expression “the LORD appeared to someone” this is the first time it occurs. There is a technical term that is used for this and subsequent occurrences of the appearances of the LORD

and that term is “theophany”—a manifestation of God. Now I think if you were to define “theophany” you would say: it is a manifestation of God in a temporary form that is perceptible to the external senses. So through a theophany God makes his presence visible and recognizable to various people. Now what the form of theophany was in this particular instance is difficult to say, we’re not told. But in any case, it was some visible revelation of God’s presence. Actually the verbal form “the LORD appeared” is a passive form of the verb ra’a. It is passive, “God was seen, he appeared.”

#### Other Abrahamic Covenant Passages: Land Promised

In the first verse of Genesis 15 you read, “After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’” Now usually the visionary situation is distinguished from a theophany by the language. The visionary experience is not involved with external sensory perception, it is internal. This seems to be a visible appearance or representation of God in temporary form. But he not only sees something, because the LORD appeared to him, he also hears something, God spoke and said, “Unto your seed I will give this land.” Now that land promise is alluded to again later in chapter 17 verse 7 and also in chapter 15. But in Genesis 17:7, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” So it seems like this promise is to have long indefinite continuance into the future.

The land promise raises a lot of questions as to whether it has already been fulfilled adequately, whether this everlasting aspect of the promise continues with validity into the present. I’m of the opinion that it does remain in the parallel of Genesis 17:7 and 8 the promise of the land is parallel to the Abrahamic covenant as everlasting. It seems to me that as long as the Abrahamic covenant continues to be a valid entity the promise of the land corresponds to that. So it is still valid. It seems to me that the full

realization of that remains to be seen. My own understanding of various sections of the Old Testament prophetic books is there will be a future return of Israel to the land. The prophetic books say an awful lot about the land after the dispersion and a future return.

There are two things that are done with those land promises. Some people say they were adequately fulfilled when they returned from the Babylonian exile. But I think if you look at them in detail a lot of the specifics do not fit with the return from exile. So that is not an adequate fulfillment. Others would recognize that and say the land promises have a spiritual fulfillment realized in the church in the sense that the land is expanded to the world and it just becomes a symbol not something to be viewed as a geographic fulfillment with the Jewish people in the future. That however goes beyond the scope of this course. But I think we will yet see a future fulfillment of the specific details.

I think it was provisionally fulfilled in the time of David because if you look at the borders in Genesis 15 from the Euphrates down to the river of Egypt in the time of David the kingdom was extended to those boundaries. When Solomon took over it mentions exactly those boundaries. That seems to me to be a provisional fulfillment of it but it was lost and it seems to me that the promise is no longer operative but I look for a future fulfillment of it.

#### Genesis 15 Ratification of the Covenant

Let's go on to Genesis 15, which is the second passage pertaining to the Abrahamic covenant. I think we could view chapter 15 as the ratification of the covenant by the LORD's covenant oath. I want to read down through this because this is an interesting chapter and I think we should have the whole text in mind. "After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.' But Abram said, 'O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.' Then the word of the LORD came to him: 'This man will

not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

“He also said to him, ‘I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.’ But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?’ So the LORD said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.’ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’”

“When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land’” and then the borders are mentioned.

So you have the Lord speaking to Abraham in a vision as we noticed in the first verse, as I mentioned it is a visionary setting where the person receives impressions apart from normal sense perceptions. He can see things and hear things but not through the external mechanisms of the ear and eye. It’s internal. In verses 4 and 5 the Lord repeats the promise of a great seed. Eliezer is not going to be the chosen descendant, there is one who is going to come from his own lions. And again there is the promise of the multiplication that a great nation would come from him.

Verse 6 is striking: Abraham's response. "He believed the LORD and it was counted to him for righteousness." That is the first time in the Bible that those two important concepts of faith and righteousness are linked. "He believed the Lord and it was counted to him for righteousness." Notice how that is worded. It's not by his faith that he is made righteous but the Lord reckoned it to him for righteousness. In Romans 4:3 Paul alludes to this where he says, "What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Here you have this imputation or reckoning of righteousness on the basis of faith. So redemption of the sinner, Paul is saying, is not by works but by grace through faith. Leupold's discussion on the justification by faith is excellent.

#### Covenant Oath Ritual: Cut a Covenant Ritual -- Vision of the Smoking Furnace Passing Between the Parts

As we go down further you have this rather mysterious scene painted for us where Abraham has taken animals and slain them and laid the halves open. Then you read in verse 12, "As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep." Now remember you're already in a visionary context, so within the vision you have Abraham falling into a deep sleep "and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him." And then in verse 17 you have this smoking furnace, that burning lamp, that passes between the pieces of the slain animal which is a rather mysterious and strange phenomena. Now what's going on, is the question?

There's a good discussion of this in Meredith Kline's book *By Oath Consigned*. That's about the middle of page 13 in your bibliography. You might want to look at that sometime pages 16 and 45. But also Meredith Kline in a much briefer way in the *New Bible Commentary*, section "Commentary on Genesis," the Genesis section of that volume page 95. Kline there says, "the oath ritual for which Abraham prepared was customary in treaty ratifications. From it derived various idioms for making a covenant,

like the Hebrew idiom ‘cut a covenant.’” Those of you who have had any Hebrew probably realize that when you read in the English so-and-so made a covenant or the Lord established a covenant or whatever the translation is, the literal rendering from the Hebrew is “cut a covenant.” The Hebrew expression is *karat berit*--to cut a covenant.” If we say “cut a covenant” it doesn’t make any sense because the background of the idiom is lost to us. You see the background of the idiom is the ratification ceremony that was associated with the concluding of these kinds of arrangements where the animals were cut in two. The implication of the slaying of the animals was: so may it be done to me if I don’t live up to the obligation of the agreement.

So Kline continues, “The oath ritual for which Abraham prepared was customary in treaty ratifications from it derived various idioms for making a covenant like the Hebrew ‘cut a covenant.’ The curse conditionally invoked in the oath was symbolized by this slaying and sundering of the animals ‘so may it be done to him who breaks this covenant.’”

Now a passage that relates to this is Jeremiah 34:18, where you read, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.” You see there is a reference to cutting the calf in two and passing between the parts in the context of formalizing a covenant. “The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.” You see the language of that reference to a covenant ratificatory ceremony is very similar to what is going on here in Genesis 15.

Speiser notes in his Anchor Bible commentary that the Amorites of the Mari documents, those texts that were found at Mari, used asses in rituals of this sort with the result that in the terminology of the Mari documents the idiom was “to slay an ass” for entering into a compact or a covenant. In Hebrew you have *karat berit*, “cut a covenant”

idiomatic for establishing a covenant but reflecting this ritual that was associated with an establishment of this covenant.

Now when you get to verse 17 you notice it says, a smoking fiery furnace that passes between the slain parts of the animals and most understand the smoking furnace and burning lamp to be a sort of theophanic representation of God himself. It's God who is taking the oath. He is passing between the parts of the slain animals. So Kline says in his commentary "that theophany utilizes, as often elsewhere, the elements of fire and smoke to indicate God's presence. By passing alone between the pieces God swore fidelity to his covenant promises and took upon himself all the curses symbolized by the carcasses."

Now Kline in his book *By Oath Consigned* discusses in some detail the difference between the promise covenant and a law covenant. In the promise covenant it's God who takes the oath. In the law covenant it's man who takes the oath. So if you compare, for example, this covenant, the Abrahamic covenant with the Sinaitic covenant you find here in the Abrahamic covenant it is God who is taking the oath. It's God who passes between the parts of the slain animals. If you've got to the Sinai Covenant it's the people who say "all that the Lord says we will do." So at Sinai it's the people who take the oath. It's a distinction between two different types of covenant. So this kind of ritual is indicative of the promissory nature of the Abrahamic covenant. God is saying this is what I will do for you.

In the suzerainty/vassal treaties the lesser partners took the oath not the great king, so Sinai is parallel to the law treaty. Some people try to parallel that treaty form with Genesis 15 and 17. I think there are some aspects of it that are parallel but the parallel is much stronger with the Sinai covenant than with the Abrahamic. The Abrahamic covenant really parallels more what are called the promissory grants where a great king promises a vassal land or something of that sort.

Question: What is usually said about the significance of the terror and darkness?

Vannoy: It's just a picture of a very solemn frightening event. Meredith Kline in *By Oath Consigned* says this is the Old Testament Golgotha, where God is taking upon

himself the curse to assure that those promises will be fulfilled. So there is something of that horror, you might say, built into the setting.

Okay, we'll pick up at this point tomorrow.

Transcribed by Ted Hildebrandt

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