

Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus, Biblical Theology, Session 5, The Abrahamic Covenant

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This is Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus in his teaching on Biblical Theology. This is session 5, The Abrahamic Covenant.

Well, as we said last time, we've reached the conclusion of our study of the common grace covenantal package, the Adamic and Noahic, which provides and guarantees the planet as a context in which the special grace program can get underway.

And that program gets underway with the Abrahamic Covenant, which, as some have noted and we will see, actually anticipates the other special grace covenants, too. So, we start with the historical background, which I would characterize as the engagement. And here's the situation.

At this point in Genesis 12, where we're reflecting on what the Lord has told Abraham, Abraham is already a vassal of the Lord. He is, like everyone on the planet, a vassal of the Lord under the common grace package of the Adamic and Noahic covenants. So, it's perfectly legitimate for God to show up and talk to him and tell him what to do, where to travel, and so on, as well as to make promises to him.

But the Lord can do all of that in this common grace context without yet creating a covenant. And it's important to be clear on this. Many scholars think that in Genesis 12, you already got the covenant.

You don't have it because you don't have it until Genesis 15:18, where you read on that day, the Lord cut a covenant with Abraham before he changed his name. So, on that day, the covenant was made. And the covenant cutting then, in this sort of case, is rather like a treaty between nations.

Say you have the President of the United States and the President of Russia sitting down at a table. And there you've got a trade treaty. Each one has his leather-bound copy.

Each one presumably has a gold pen. And one of them just decides at the last minute, no, you know what, I'm going to back out. I can get a better deal.

I'm not going to do this. Well, here's the treaty. It's all laid out.

It's all ready to go. But it doesn't get cut. It doesn't get signed.

And so, there's no treaty in effect. And so, you may have promises and plans but no treaty. Here, you've got promises and plans, but not yet a covenant.

And so, the Lord and all this is future-looking, forward-looking. The Lord tells him, leave your country, your people, and all that. I will make you into a great nation.

I will bless you. I will make your name great. And interestingly in Hebrew, it's an imperative.

It's not; I will make you a blessing, or you will be a blessing, as it's usually translated. And I think that's significant. Because just as we are to comfort others with the comfort with which we have been comforted, so Abram, who's now going to be blessed, should bless others, too.

The Lord doesn't bless us so that we can be blessed and happy. He intends for us, shall we say, to share the wealth, to share the blessing. And that's what he's telling Abraham.

And we see shortly after this, Abraham does. The land has to be divided between him and Lot. He'll say, you pick.

You go where you want. He rescues Lot from captivity in Genesis 14. So, he is a blessing.

He fulfills that. The Lord says I'll bless those who bless you, and those who curse you, I will curse. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

That blessing is later taken up by Paul and identified as the promise of the Spirit. And that's exactly how this comes about. All nations get blessed through faith in the seed, the offspring of Abraham, namely Christ.

And the blessing is, of course, their forgiveness and salvation, but their reception of the Holy Spirit. And so, that's the blessing that's promised. And that's how Paul can later talk about the promised Holy Spirit.

You read this stuff, and you don't see the Holy Spirit mentioned anywhere. But that's how it happens. Well, okay, so this is all forward-looking.

There's also the promise of land. The Lord says to your offspring, I will give this land. All of this forward-looking stuff for the future is important because it is promissory.

And you can have a promise and yet not have a covenant. And that's important to understand. The Lord's covenants can contain promises.

The covenant renewal of Deuteronomy in chapter 18 promises a prophet like Moses. But that prophet turns out to be Christ, as Peter identifies at Pentecost in the book of Acts. But it hasn't been fulfilled yet.

So, the new covenant hasn't been fulfilled. So, a covenant contains promises that don't get realized and may even be realized in a future covenant. The ratification of the covenant comes in Genesis 15 and the cutting.

And so, I'm not going to read all of this, but we note that the Lord has Abraham cut these animals up. And then we read that a flaming torch passed between those pieces. I am not going into it here, but the term a flaming torch, oven, is used for the Lord coming sometimes in judgment.

So, this is clearly a theophany. The Lord is passing between the pieces. And we'll talk a bit more about that momentarily.

If we turn to the form criticism, and again, understanding the form criticism is not a dirty word. It's simply literary analysis. And if it's done realistically, it's a good thing.

Well, here again, we see the elements of a second-millennium treaty or covenant structure. I am Yahweh. That really is the title in verse 7, which is where the covenantal unfolding begins.

It's also a declaration made in verse 1, and that introduces the passage. Liberal scholarship in the 19th century and this still goes on; they'll say, well, you've got two different introductions here, so you must have two different sources. This completely misunderstands the passage, and good form criticism will show that.

The I am Yahweh in verse 1 introduces the whole passage, the whole event. The I am Yahweh in verse 7 is the title of the treaty, the covenant part. I am Yahweh, who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans.

Completely different function. Not two different sources, two different functions. So the historical prologue then is there, who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans.

Blessings, he promises an heir and land and what has been called a grant to give you this land to possess. Let me say this about the grant thing, and I've written about this, but there has been a school of thought, and this was brought up by Moshe Weinfeld in the 1970s in an article called The Covenant of Grant in the Bible in the Ancient Near East. Weinfeld identified certain covenants as pure outright grants.

So, the king of Ugarit, shall we say, a city-state on the Syrian coast in the 1200s, 1100s BC, the king of Ugarit might say to an outstanding citizen, you've been an outstanding citizen. You've done good things for the state. So here, here is a grant.

Here's a farm, acreage, and cattle. Walk in, take it, enjoy it: you and your posterity.

No obligations. It's yours. Well, superficially, this would seem to be that, except for one thing.

Abram's descendants, to whom this grant is going to devolve, don't just get to walk in and enjoy the land. They have to go in and conquer it. They have to work.

They have to fight. I found a parallel, which I think fits very nicely from the annals of Tukulti-Ninurta I around 1200 BC, in which he gives a delineation of territories very much like what you read at the end of Genesis 15. He says these are the lands, boundaries, and regions that the great gods gave me to conquer.

So, it's a grant, but it's a grant of lands to conquer. It's actually a conquest mandate. And that's what Abraham is getting here.

It's not an outright grant. So, this is not a covenant of grant. It's a suzerain-vassal arrangement with a conquest mandate, which we'll call a grant as part of it.

There is the solemn ceremony that ratifies the covenant, and we'll talk about it. But it's the ratification that makes it a covenant. And so, after the ceremony, we read, on that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said to your descendants, I give this land.

It's worth noting here that back in Genesis 12:7, he said to your descendants, I will give this land. That was a promise. Now that the covenant has been cut, he says to your descendants, I give this land, or one could say, I have given this land.

It could be translated either way. The point is that once the covenant is cut, it's a done deal. This is going to happen.

This is not just a promise. It's settled. So, I think the verbal difference is an important difference.

What about the typology here, the passage between the animals? Meredith Kline, I think, was the first person to see this. Some scholars have come on board with it. Many have not.

But I think it makes perfectly good sense. In the ancient Near Eastern context, it would seem that they don't have a lot of cases of this, but when a suzerain vassal treaty was made, the vassal would pass between pieces that are cut up like this. The symbolism is, if I, the vassal, break the treaty, may the same fate befall me that has befallen these animals.

The suzerain did not make this passage because the suzerain never did anything wrong. He was not going to break the treaty. If you read about ancient Near Eastern annals, the suzerains and the kings are always terrific.

They never do anything wrong. There was an Assyrian hunt tradition for 200 years in the royal annals, which would say things like, well, wherever I shot an arrow, I brought something down. I struggled hand to paw with 80 lions, and I prevailed all the time.

So, they were flawless. Incidentally, if you compare Old Testament history, there is quite a difference. It's a difference between history and propaganda.

In the Old Testament, you get the real deal. You get history, the kings and their adulteries and their idolatries and all their shortcomings. In the ancient world, not so.

So, in the ancient world, it was the vassal that passed between the pieces. A great example of what happens if you break the covenant happens with Ashurbanipal, the last great Assyrian emperor. He talks about a rebellious vassal, one Dunanu.

In Nineveh, they threw him on a skinning table and slaughtered him like a lamb. It's a fulfillment of this kind of oath ceremony. The comparison with a lamb is interesting.

And so, this certainly implies, though, a ceremony like what we've seen in Genesis 15. You don't have to go outside the Bible to find it, though. In Jeremiah 34, we have the situation where the people have been breaking the Mosaic covenant by not releasing their slaves, their Hebrew brothers, and servants during the Jubilee year.

Well, they're conscience smitten. And so, they want to start doing what's right and obey the law. Well, all they have to do is start doing what's right and obey the law.

But in addition to that, they take it upon themselves to cut a separate covenant with the Lord to the effect that, okay, now we're going to start doing this. We're going to release the slaves. So, they do.

And then they break it. They renege on it and take it back. So, the Lord is saying, those who have violated my covenant, that is to say, the Mosaic covenant, they violated it by not releasing the slaves.

And then they have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, which is the second covenant we talked about. I will treat it like the calf they cut into and walk between its pieces. And their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

So that's a very vivid illustration of what this ceremony is and what it means, and who passes between it. In that covenant, the people took it upon themselves to make a covenant. They walk between the pieces.

They broke the covenant. They're going to suffer the consequences. In this case, it's not Abram, the vassal, who passes between the pieces.

It's the Lord in theophany. And I think the best understanding of that is the Lord is symbolically saying, Abram, if there's covenant breaking by you or your offspring, I, the Lord, will take the punishment on myself. And we know that we are the offspring.

We are the seed of Abraham, as Paul says. If you are Christ, then you're Abraham's offspring. It airs according to the promise.

So this is a promise by the Lord to take on himself the punishment that is due to the offspring of Abraham, who we are by faith. He's willing to take that on. He's promising to take it on.

That's the symbolism. Abraham doesn't have to do that. So, it's very significant.

And that, I think, is the Christological aspect of this arrangement. It's also worth noting that the animals mentioned here are the animals that will later be used, available for use, or prescribed for use in the Levitical system. So, when we read later, Jesus says, I have come to fulfill the law.

He's come to fulfill it in more ways than one. He's come to fulfill it in the sense that he fulfills the prophecies it contains about him. He fulfills it by perfect obedience to it.

And he fulfills all the sacrificial requirements that it entails by himself becoming a sacrifice. So, it's a profound statement there in the Sermon on the Mount. But you get the real foreshadowing of all this here in the covenant with Abraham.

Now, this covenant is reaffirmed with Abraham's offspring. And I say it's reaffirmed with him first. But the reaffirmation here, or in terms of our earlier translation of the verbs involved, when the Lord chooses to put it into play, put it into effect, comes in Genesis 17.

And that's where you read, I will confirm, or I will put into effect, or I will keep my covenant between us going. And he identifies different aspects of that covenant, including the promise of many nations. I will, verse 7, put it into effect as an everlasting covenant, and so on.

We understand, though, that in terms of the everlasting that we've talked about before, circumcision now precludes entry into this covenant, and it no longer functions as a covenant. So, it's not everlasting in that sense. It is important to be able to affirm that.

It may be hard for some Christians to affirm because we like to think about our father Abraham and all that. And we do indeed, and we're saved by having a faith like his. But the new covenant takes up into itself and fulfills everything that was foreshadowed or hoped for under the Abrahamic.

And so, in that sense, we can say the Abrahamic covenant lives on if you want. But we are no longer circumcised. We are no longer admitted to the Abrahamic covenant.

So, as a functioning covenant, it no longer continues. It doesn't function. And let's see here.

I'm not going to look at this in great detail, but just we'll have it here in this form and on the PDFs. Different provisions here in this restatement take up things that were said earlier. And so, what we have is circumcision here, and that is given as a sign of the covenant.

Understand here that there's only one Abrahamic covenant, and circumcision is the sign of it. There is a school of thought. It actually goes rooted in higher criticism.

The higher critics thought that you had an Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15 and an Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17. However, they didn't think these were actually two different covenants. They thought that they were two different versions of the same covenant.

In Genesis 15, you have J and E going on. Genesis 17 is the priestly account of the Abrahamic covenant, but it's only one Abrahamic covenant. Why did they think that? Well, why did they think there was only one? I suppose because the Bible never refers to more than one.

It's always my covenant with Abraham, or even my covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because it was one covenant. They were all under it, including all of the same promises, including the requirement of circumcision. It did happen, though, eventually that T. Desmond Alexander, in his book, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, thought that this view lacked precision.

We really need to understand that there are actually two different covenants here. Genesis 15 is an unconditional covenant because God himself makes all the promises and does everything. Abraham doesn't have to do anything.

Genesis 17 is conditional because Abraham has to do these things. He has to be circumcised, and so on. There's enough Abrahamic material that you can do that, but that doesn't mean you've reached a valid conclusion.

So the counterarguments would go, one, as we've said, the Bible never mentions more than one Abrahamic covenant. In fact, it mentions the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as one singular covenant because it really was the same covenant reaffirmed with the other patriarchs, the sons, and the children of Abraham. Then, two, circumcision.

All one needs to do to understand this is to look to the New Testament. I would just say, if you're going to do biblical theology, you look at the whole Bible. In Romans 4, Paul makes it clear that circumcision is not the sign of a second Abrahamic covenant.

It's the sign of Abraham's faith. Well, when did he show that faith? In Genesis 15, when the one and only Abrahamic covenant was cut. So, circumcision is a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and that makes sense of what he says about, you know if you're circumcised, you have to obey the whole law, as we've said.

Moreover, this pattern, cutting a covenant, being circumcised, and then giving some further instruction, which the Lord does to Abraham, is followed in the Mosaic covenant. The Lord makes the covenant on Sinai. Later, in Exodus 31, he gives the sign, the Sabbath.

Later, he gives more instructions. This is true with the New Covenant. Jesus cuts the covenant on the cross.

Later, he gives the sign of baptism. After that, you get more instructions on the epistles. So this seems to be a pattern that the Lord follows in these.

But deciding whether there's more than one covenant with Abraham is simply a matter of looking at the evidence and being ruled by it rather than trying to create our own construct out of it. And it's something one has to be careful about because, as I've said, there's enough material in the Abrahamic narratives to enable you to play with the stuff and come up with two covenants if you want to. But the broader biblical picture doesn't support that at all.

But anyway, that's the deal here. The Lord is putting into effect, and now giving a covenant sign, that covenant that he had cut earlier with Abraham. A study of the covenant idioms, which I've done in my second volume, has been done by one or two other scholars, too.

I think my treatment of it is more extensive than any that was done before that, but be that as it may. A study of the use of the covenant idioms, covenant-related idioms, supports this idea that, except for the exceptional reason we've noted with the Noahic covenant, these idioms are used in the Bible only for the reaffirmation, or the putting into effect of existing covenants. They're never used for making new covenants.

And so, we have key promises here. The promise of offspring, the promise of land, the promise of royal offspring as well. It's designated as everlasting, and so on.

But we've talked about that. And the statement here, the covenant in your flesh is an everlasting covenant in Genesis 17.7. Actually, the Hebrew idiom says it will become an everlasting covenant, which actually supports the interpretation that the Lord is now putting it into effect. He's cut it. It existed as a legal entity, but it's now putting it into effect with the sign, and that's what it's going to become.

It's going to become, not everlasting, but it's going to last so long that, Abraham, from your point of view, it's out of sight. It's so far in the future that you can't see it. I'm putting it into effect as of now, and that's what it's going to be.

Okay, however, since, as we've said, circumcision is now no longer to be practiced as a covenant sign, the covenant cannot be everlasting for hygienic purposes, but that has nothing to do with this. Okay, then, in Genesis 22, we have this requirement that Abraham sacrifice his son, and then the Lord relieves him of that and provides an alternative. And the Lord says, well, I swear by myself that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you, and so on.

And he repeats these earlier promises, pretty much all of them. And so, this incidentally, I think, is a great sign of the faith that the Lord saw in Abraham in the beginning, and it bears this wonderful fruit. And the Apostle Paul, of course, as we've noted, identifies the seed with Christ, so it's a tremendous promise.

We are justified by faith, as Abraham had, and we are the true children of Abraham by faith in that one singular seed that Paul identifies, namely Christ. Okay, as for believing God, I would say, you know, if righteousness is paralleling one's self with God, and one's being and doing, then even the act of faith is a righteous act. Jesus is Jesus Christ, the righteous.

He is also, in Revelation 1:5, the faithful witness. So, the very act of faith is a righteous act, but the exercise of faith doesn't mean that we are totally righteous. And so, God credits to us a righteousness that we don't yet have completely.

However, as we grow in following the Lord, we expect that righteousness to increase. But, of course, there's a mystery involved in this because faith itself wouldn't be

possible unless God enabled it. So, there is the question implied here of free will and predestination, which we'll look at in the new covenant a little bit.

But for now, you know, here you have the importance of faith, and that's what identifies us as Abraham's offspring. Well, the Lord reaffirms this with Abraham's more immediate offspring, with his son Isaac, and we've talked about this already. And the Lord says in this reaffirmation that I will confirm the oath, or shall we say put into effect for you, continuing the oath that I swore to Abraham.

Covenants typically ended with oaths in the ancient Near East and also often in the Old Testament. And so, the oath is used sort of as a synecdoche for covenant, a part for the whole. It's a way of saying I will confirm the covenant with you.

And this reaffirmation, which I would call it, contains the same promises that we've seen earlier in the Abrahamic material. Promise of land, descendants like the stars, and all nations being blessed. Yes, call these reaffirmations and not renewals.

In an earlier article, I referred to them as renewals, and then I corrected myself because these restatements, these reaffirmations with Isaac and Jacob, don't have the full-blown form in the narrative material. They don't have all the details that you would expect in a real covenant renewal. So, I don't think these are renewals, and they're reaffirmations.

Isaac and Jacob are parties to the Abrahamic covenant. They are circumcised, they're walking with the Lord, and he's simply reaffirming this with them, which is a very gracious thing. Again, when he addresses Jacob, he basically repeats these promises. Interestingly, the promise to Abraham and Isaac is the descendants will be like the stars.

To Jacob, they'll be like the dust. It's intriguing. Jacob, of course, does, with Joseph, end up in Egypt.

And in the Ancient Near East, you have two very well-known comparisons with something for numerosness. And the Mesopotamians would compare an opposing army with the stars of heaven. They were saying they're like the stars of heaven for a number.

There were so many of them. The Egyptians would compare them with the sand or the dust. They were closer to the sea.

So, it's just kind of interesting. So, in the Abrahamic line, you get both. And with Jacob, you get the comparison with the dust, but the point's the same anyway.

So, as we've said, these reaffirmations are probably not covenant renewals because of form criticism and also the verbs used. These verbs are not used in the Bible for making new, even renewal-type covenants. Well, we have one covenant here that implies three others.

The Mosaic covenant is implied with the promise of offspring. In Deuteronomy, we read that this promise has, at least at one level, been fulfilled. Moses can say, the Lord God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky.

Well, Israelites hearing this would know exactly what it's alluding to. God has fulfilled what he promised to Abraham. And the Exodus is going to be, and that's something that's a fulfillment of a promise, too.

The Lord says, you know, Abraham, your descendants are going to go down into a country that's not theirs. They're going to be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years, but I'll punish that nation. And afterward, your descendants will come out with great possessions.

This is exactly what happened with Israel and Egypt. The Lord hears their groaning. He remembers his covenant, which again doesn't mean he has forgotten it.

And then he remembers it, but he now turns his attention to it actively. And so he's going to do it. I'm the Lord.

I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptian. I'll free you from being slaves to them and so on. And so he fulfills this promise.

Psalm 105, much later reflecting on this, he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham. He brought out his people with rejoicing, his chosen one with shouts of joy. So, the Exodus foreshadowed in the Abrahamic covenant, Genesis 15 gets fulfilled under the mosaic.

The conquest is also foreshadowed because he's going to bring the people back into the land and the combat needed. The conquest is not delineated in Genesis 15, but we later know that's how it's going to happen. And so, the conquest does fulfill that promise. He's going to give Abraham's descendants this land, and the Lord in Exodus 6 promises, I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He does this, and Psalm 105 also reflects on this. He remembers his covenant, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath, which is, again, synecdoche for covenant. He swore to Isaac, confirmed it to Jacob as a decree.

Again, that's part of the covenant. It's a part of the whole of Israel as a long-lasting covenant, shall we say. We're not going to say everlasting because we know it doesn't last forever.

To you, I'll give the land of Canaan. And then he gave them the lands of the nations. They fell heir to what others had toiled for that they might keep his precepts and obey his laws.

It's worth noting why God did this. God isn't just saying, you know what, you children of Abraham, frankly, I've looked all over the world, and I think you're terrific. So, you deserve this.

I'm going to give it to you. No, as you read in Deuteronomy 4, he chose them because they were the least of the people. He chose them to glorify himself.

He blesses them so that they can be a blessing, just as he said to Abraham, you know, be a blessing. That's the intent here. He's bringing them there so they can obey him.

And as Moses says in Deuteronomy, other nations can see, you know, what God is there like this, that has taken one person out of the midst of another nation, giving them these wonderful laws. This is also that God can have witnesses in the earth. And, of course, as we know, Israel turned out to be a very imperfect set of witnesses.

But that's the purpose. So, the Abrahamic promise of numerous offspring is fulfilled at one level as a precondition to the Mosaic covenant. There is now a people with whom God can make this new Mosaic covenant.

The Abrahamic promise of liberation from bondage is fulfilled also as a precondition to the Mosaic covenant. He brings them out of bondage before he makes the covenant. Then, the promise of land is fulfilled under the Mosaic covenant.

Well, the Davidic covenant is also implied in the Abrahamic in Genesis 17, where the Lord, shall we say, gives the sign and puts it into effect, the covenant. I will make you very fruitful; nations and kings will come from you. And there are also, I think, intimations, and of course, the kings then come.

You have Saul, but then you really have the kings, plural, through David and the Davidic covenant. So that's kind of implied. In Genesis 22, you have an interesting statement that I think prefigures or hints at the Solomonic temple.

We know that the Lord has Abraham go to Moriah, and that's the mount on which he is to sacrifice Isaac. And, of course, the Lord spares him from that. And provides a substitute, the ram whose horns are caught in a thicket.

So, Abraham called that place the Lord will provide. To this day, it is said that on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. Well, we'll talk in a moment about how that might be translated differently, and that's rather intriguing.

But it's worth noting here, first of all, that that name, Jehovah-Jireh or Yahweh-Yireh in Hebrew, is not a divine name. It's a place name. He says he called that place, called the name of that place Jehovah-Jireh.

I've been in a number of churches where I see placards of divine names, and one of them is Jehovah-Jireh. And it's not a divine name, folks. And you don't need to know Hebrew to know it.

All you need to do is read it. Abraham called the place the Lord will provide. You have scholars, I won't name them, but you have scholars who say this is a divine name.

It's not a divine name. But anyway, it is the name of a place. It's called the Lord will provide.

It literally says the Lord will see. It could mean the fuller idiom would be the Lord seeing to it and providing. That's okay.

However, it also says that on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided, the passive of that verb, see. On the mountain of the Lord, it will be seen to. But the translation of these statements could run this way.

On the mountain of the Lord, one will see the Lord. And on the mountain of the Lord, not it will be provided, but he will be seen. And that verb, it will be provided, as it's usually translated, is actually used in theophanies all the time for the Lord's appearing.

So, a possible translation would be that Abraham is naming the place, one will see the Lord here, and that's why it is said on the mountain of the Lord, he will be seen, or he will appear. Well, is there any later evidence that would support that idea? We learn in 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared, same verb, to his father David, threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. So, if we translate the statement in Genesis 22 differently, we would say Abraham named that place, and one will see the Lord.

And so, it was said on the mountain of the Lord he will appear. Later, we read that the Lord appeared to David on that mountain. I think it fits together nicely.

It's a viable translation. It's interesting. In a matter like this, I would suggest, too, that one doesn't have to pick one translation or the other because both are viable.

And I think sometimes in Scripture, it's the wittiness of God that he gives us something that could be taken two ways, and both are true. And I think this is perhaps a case of that. So, anyway, the mountain, then, is a place of sacrifice, as it turns out, under the Mosaic covenant.

Deuteronomy 12:5 says that you'll bring your sacrifices to the place among your tribes where the Lord chooses to dwell. That is, in those days, wherever he would pitch the tent. We know that in the days of Eli, that was at Shiloh.

Eventually, the dwelling of the Lord came to be Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, if you will, in the temple. However, there are Christological aspects to this event in Abraham's life. His son, who is offered his sacrifice, is very Christological.

The father offers his son. But then there's a substitute sacrifice for the son, and that's Christological, too. So, it's a fantastic episode.

Interestingly, I think, you know, the Lord, this could look like a grievous trial, and I think it must have been for Abraham. But the Lord actually puts him in a remarkably privileged position because he gets to be in the same position in the structure of things that the father himself is in. The father sacrifices his son, Jesus.

Abraham is in that position. He gets to have a little bit of that. And I think we won't go into this much, but I think that he does something like this with Hosea, too, where he has him marry a promiscuous wife, just as the Lord is married to a promiscuous Israel.

So, he can do that. He can set the prophet into a position that is parallel, in some ways, with his own. And not many prophets have that, I think, and it's a great privilege, although it can be very distressing, I think, too, in one's life.

But the new covenant that is implied in these ways, what has been called the oath passage in Genesis 15, the offering of the only son, the substitutionary offering of the ram. If we look at the Abrahamic covenant, and then in terms of what I've called the major paradigm, God does work by his spirit through a prophet figure, Abraham. I just bring into the discussion here 2 Peter 1, which tells us that the prophets were carried along by the spirit, and Abraham was a prophet.

Genesis 20, verse 7 identifies him as a prophet, the first use of the word in the Bible. He wars against and defeats his foes, and there's some of that in Genesis 14. He goes out and rescues his relative, Lot, and his folks.

He establishes the covenant then. That establishes Abraham and his family as God's people, at least formally, and by circumcision. And of course, again, here, though

there's no temple yet because there are not enough people for that, the Lord isn't doing that yet.

Well, the Lord then remembers this covenant, and as we've talked about this a bit already, he remembers it as a motive for delivering them from Egypt. We've read those passages, and for giving them the land, and we've read that. He will also, it is foretold, remember them, remember the Abrahamic covenant, that is, as a reason for delivering them from future exile.

Leviticus 26 foretells this. If they confess their sins and the sins of their fathers, then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they pay for their sins, I will remember my covenant with Jacob, my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. It is worth noting that he's not redeeming them on the basis of the Mosaic covenant, which they broke.

He's remembering the Abrahamic covenant, which forecasts the bigger redemptive program, and for the sake of that, he redeems them from exile. The covenant that they broke, of course, which led them into exile, was the Mosaic covenant, and that also continues, but it's just important to remember the overarching redemptive significance of the Abrahamic covenant in all this, and I'm not sure how much of this we really need to read in detail. The covenant that I made with their ancestors, whom I brought out of Egypt, clearly does refer to the Mosaic covenant, and that's the covenant they broke here.

One might argue that the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled by the Mosaic with the same covenant sign, but as we've noted, that can't be the case. The Mosaic covenant sign is the Sabbath. This is just to note that the Mosaic covenant is not a renewal of the Abrahamic.

It's a different covenant with different terms and conditions. It constitutes a people in a new way. It has a temple presence, has sacrifices prepared for sins, and so on.

One might argue, and I think one should argue, that the Abrahamic covenant was still in force. Psalm 105 reflects on this covenant, and we've looked at these verses already. Here, in the early going, we have him confirming this to Jacob and to Israel as an everlasting covenant.

This, however, is not Israel corporately. It's Israel as an individual. Israel is the name given to Jacob because he struggled with God.

These verses, 8 through 11 in Psalm 105, tell us that the Lord has confirmed this in the past. He confirmed this covenant. He continued it.

He kept it going with the patriarchs and reflected on them when they were strangers, few in number. They wandered through the land. He allowed no one to oppress them.

For their sake, he rebuked kings and so on. He says he would not let them do his prophets any harm. Incidentally, that verse seems to affirm that the patriarchs were prophets.

We know that the Lord was keeping this going with the patriarchs from Psalm 105 and Genesis also. But we also know from the fact that the Mosaic covenant required circumcision that the Abrahamic covenant was continuing. That's just an important thing to keep in mind.

If you were an Israelite, you had two covenant signs. Circumcision, which meant you were a member of the Abrahamic covenant and you would obey the Sabbath, which was the indication of your faithfulness to the Mosaic covenant. These were continuing until Jesus came to fulfill them both.

Paul makes this distinction, and it's an important one, between the Abrahamic covenant and the law, the Mosaic covenant. He says the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He points out that that's singular, so that's Christ.

The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus does away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise, but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise, the promise that all nations would be blessed through him. The Mosaic covenant does not promise that.

So you have the Abrahamic covenant. It's continuing. The law is given also, and they're both in force.

We'll look at this more when we look at the new covenant, but we remember that Paul here talks about, well, why then the law, *ti hon hamas*, meaning not what is the law, but why the law. The law was given as a pedagogue to show us our need for Christ, and we'll talk about that more. But in his wisdom, the Lord gave the law so that Israel could realize they couldn't fulfill it, and they needed Christ to fulfill it for them.

But over and above the law, in a sense, traveling along with it through history was the Abrahamic covenant, and that's the one through which all people are going to be blessed. That's the one that entails the promise of the spirit, and that turns out to be really a lot better than the law. So, the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant.

We've seen that the Abrahamic prefigures the new. We've talked a bit about the covenant signs and their significance. The sign of the Abrahamic covenant is circumcision.

The sign of the Mosaic covenant is the Sabbath. A lot of people in church would be very confused about this. If you understood this, it would be a nice thing to clear up for anybody that you know.

The sign of the new covenant is baptism. The change of covenant signs suggests that the new covenant supersedes the Abrahamic and also, actually, the Mosaic. But in fact, it does supersede both of those, just as Jesus's ministry is superseding and superior to the ministry of the old covenant.

And looking ahead a little bit to the new covenant here, because you can't really talk about the Abrahamic without talking about the new, and then you can't really talk about the new without referencing the old, we look at what Hebrews says. The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he's mediator is superior to the old one, and it's founded on better promises, namely the Abrahamic. If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another one.

Well, let me just anticipate here a little bit of what we will be saying soon. And again, when we look at the new covenant, what was wrong with the old covenant? One scholar has said, look, this came from God. There's nothing wrong with it. Well, in a strict sense, there was nothing wrong with it, but it was deficient in this sense.

The law gave the standard to which God expected his people to live, but they couldn't do it. They couldn't live up to the law. They were doomed to failure.

What they needed was what was promised in Ezekiel 36:27, and which they didn't get under the old covenant, that the Lord would put his spirit in them and move them to obey his laws and decrees. Without that, they couldn't do it, and they didn't, and so they failed. And their failure was pedagogical.

It was meant to lead them to realize they needed Christ to fulfill the law for them. And that's the promised seed of Abraham, and with him comes the promise of the spirit whom Ezekiel prophesied in Ezekiel 36:27, I will put my spirit in them and move them to obey me. And so, the law was pedagogical to that, and one may wonder, why in the world, Lord, did you give Israel a law that they couldn't fulfill, tell them they had to fulfill it, send them into brutal and terrible exile when they failed to fulfill it, and all that.

And I don't think anyone has an answer to that. But the Lord knows what he's doing. We might think we would do differently.

I think I would do it differently. I sometimes think, look, if I were God and I knew that I was going to create this man and woman and what would happen as a result to most of the human race, I wouldn't do it. But then, when I'm with the Lord, I'll think differently because I'll see, I'll understand in ways I cannot now that he was right.

And so, as Abraham said in Genesis 18, will not the judge of all the earth do what is right? And the answer is yes, he will. We can't understand it all, but we can understand enough here to see that he is being gracious and saving people, and that's what he's doing with the new covenant. But just to address this briefly, the old Mosaic covenant is obsolete.

It does disappear. And there's the promise of a new covenant, which Hebrews 8 quotes from Jeremiah 33. This is the covenant I will make with them.

The Hebrew idiom is cut, so this is a distinct covenant. It's not a renewal of anything. I'll put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.

It's another way of saying, I think, what we're told in Genesis, or rather in Ezekiel 36, 27, or in Deuteronomy 30, circumcising their hearts. I will be their God, they will be my people, and so on. We're all going to know the Lord.

I'll forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more. And by calling this covenant new, he's made the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear. And as we mentioned, the cutting of the covenant, indicates that's an idiom that is used for cutting covenant renewals or cutting covenants.

It's not simply reaffirming an old covenant. But the fact that this cannot simply be a renewal of the old covenant is made clear, I think, right here. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.

An ancient Near Eastern person, I think, would never say that a renewal covenant is not like the covenant that it renews. The whole point is that it renews the covenant, it restates it, with some tinkering for an adjustment for changed circumstances. If you look at Deuteronomy, the Moab covenant, vis-a-vis the Sinai covenant, that's exactly what you get.

You get the same Decalogue; you get many of the same laws; it's essentially the same covenant; you've got the same priesthood, and the same sacrificial system is implied. Nothing changes, nothing substantial changes. The New Covenant is a totally different deal.

We have one sacrifice, as a lot of Hebrews is devoted to this. We don't bring bulls and goats to the Lord any more for our sins. We have one sacrifice and that's that.

Where there's a change of priesthood, there's a change of law. We have a new high priest. The old priesthood, the old law, is over. So, it's not a renewal.

There are scholars who think it's a renewal, but I think that they just do not understand what renewals were in the ancient world or even in the Bible. We mention here that the idiom to cut a covenant can be used for the ratification of a renewal covenant, and that's true in Deuteronomy. And there you read that this is the covenant that the Lord cut with them in addition to the one that he cut on the Mount of the Assembly.

And that's just a way of saying, I think, you have a Sinai covenant, now we're cutting this one, but we understand it's a renewal. What happened there was he cut a covenant with Israel at Sinai. We remember that that generation balked at the prospect of going to the promised land, Numbers 13 and 14.

The spies brought back this wonderful-looking fruit, but also the reports of the giants and the walls of the cities that reached as high as heaven, and the people were intimidated. And so the Lord in Numbers 14 says, you know what? They didn't believe I could do it, they didn't abandon me. They didn't believe I could do this.

So they're going to wander in the wilderness. Bodies are going to drop there, and their children will grow up and take the land. And that's what happened.

Well, in the ancient world, when a vassal was dead, the suzerain would renew the treaty with, shall I go on? Will renew the treaty with the subsequent son of the vassal, the son of the dead vassal. That's what the Lord is doing in Deuteronomy. He's renewing the Sinai covenant with a new generation, the children of the dead vassals.

That's a renewal. That's not what you get here. So, the same verb is used to cut a covenant, but that's not what's going on in the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah.

That's going to be a different covenant. It's not going to be like the one he cut with their ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt—so, the same verb, but not a renewal covenant.

So, the New Covenant is not an Abrahamic. And is it then a renewal of the sorry, not a renewal of the Mosaic? Is it a renewal then of the Abrahamic? And I think that's untenable also since the Abrahamic has passed away.

Renewal covenants renew and continue on the covenants they renew. They don't require a different covenant sign. And the sign of the previous covenant doesn't get abrogated, which is what happens with the Abrahamic covenant.

Paul also characterizes the Abrahamic covenant as the promise or the promises. He uses an interesting phrase, which I think is very revealing in Ephesians 2. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves circumcision.

Remember that at that time, you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise without hope and without God in the world. But now, in Jesus Christ, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. The covenants of the promise, the promise in Pauline usage here, basically means the Abrahamic covenant.

And so he is cluing us to the fact that the Abrahamic covenant entails other covenants. Those are the covenants involved in the promise made to Abraham. And we've already seen what those are.

The Mosaic covenant stems out of the Abrahamic, the Davidic stems out of it, and, of course, then the new. So those are the covenants of the promise. These pagans were foreigners to those, but now, being brought into Christ in the new covenant, there are participants in all of that.

The redemptive program is constituted of the covenants of the promise, but now, of course, there's only the new covenant, which is the one that we're under. And as we read in Galatians just to wrap this up, as we read in Galatians 3:15 through 25, the Abrahamic covenant continues until the new. The new fulfills it, and that's where we are today.

So, the promise was made to Abraham, enshrined in the Abrahamic covenant. It's now given through faith in Jesus Christ in the new covenant. It includes the Holy Spirit.

That's the dynamic essential thing about it, in a sense. So Paul can say that by faith, we might receive the promise of the Spirit, and this is all fulfilled through Christ. John tells us what Abraham knew of all of this, what he anticipated, and what he could tell.

John 8:56 says, Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad. So apparently the Lord let Abraham see quite a bit.

We don't know all the details, but that's just another aspect of the laconic reporting that we've seen in the Bible, and we'll see other cases of it too. Next time, we will start to look at the Mosaic Covenant, its requirements, and the conquest that takes place under it.

This is Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus in his teaching on Biblical Theology. This is session 5, The Abrahamic Covenant.