

Genesis: The Abrahamic Covenant — Abraham as Our Spiritual Father

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Abstract

This lecture examines the theological and grammatical dimensions of the Abrahamic Covenant, focusing on the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and the ratification ceremony in Genesis 15. Dr. Vannoy discusses the significant translation debate regarding whether Genesis 12:3 should be interpreted as passive ("be blessed") or reflexive ("bless themselves"), presenting grammatical evidence in favor of the passive translation and its connection to the Gospel and Christ. The lecture also addresses the land promises made to Abraham, defining theophany and discussing the extent and future fulfillment of these promises. Finally, it explores the covenant ratification ritual in Genesis 15, emphasizing the imputation of righteousness by faith and the symbolic self-malediction oath where God alone passes through the divided animals.

Outline

I. Deuteronomy Class Assignment

- A. Brief assignment overview: written analysis of the structure of Deuteronomy.
- B. Goal: reflection on the major divisions and sub-divisions.
- C. Focus sections: Chapters 1-11 (purpose), Chapters 12-26 (legal material), Chapters 27-34 (nature of material).
- D. Purpose: motivational factor to encourage careful reading and reflection as preparation for next quarter's continuation of the course.

II. Abraham as an Historical Figure

- A. Abraham and the Philistines: Concluding discussion from the previous class hour on whether contact with the Philistines is anachronistic in the Patriarchal period.

B. Abraham as Our Spiritual Father

1. God's Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)

- a. The call of Abraham: leave country, people, and father's household for a land shown by God.
- b. The promises: great nation, divine blessing, great name, and becoming a blessing.
- c. Context of "great name": contrast with Genesis 6:1-4 ("men of the name") and Genesis 11 (Babel, "let us make us a name").
- d. The translation debate of Genesis 12:3:

- i. Passive ("be blessed") vs. reflexive ("bless themselves").
- ii. Five repetitions of the blessing phrase in Genesis: Niphal (Gen 12:3, 18:18, 28:14) and Hithpael (Gen 22:18, 26:4).
- iii. Ephraim Speiser's view: Niphal can be reflexive, but Hithpael cannot be passive, meaning all five must be translated reflexively.
- iv. Allan MacRae's counter-argument: Careful investigation shows at least one-fourth of Hithpael occurrences must be interpreted as passive.
- v. O. T. Allis's view: Grammatical nuance holds significant theological consequences for the evangelical heart of the promise.
- vi. Ancient witness: Samaritan, Babylonian, and Jerusalem Targums, Septuagint, and Vulgate translate consistently as passive.
- vii. New Testament quotations: Acts 3:25 and Galatians 3:8 quote the promise as passive, with Paul calling it "the gospel" announced in advance to Abraham.
- viii. Geerhardus Vos's view: Genesis 12 highlights the tremendous significance of the call of Abraham, isolating one family to carry forward God's redemptive-revealing work.

2. Land Promises (Genesis 12:7 and other passages)

- a. Genesis 12:7: "Unto your seed will I give this land".
 - i. First occurrence in the Old Testament of the phrase "the LORD appeared".
 - ii. Definition of theophany: a manifestation of God in a temporary, recognizable form that is perceptible to the external senses.
 - iii. Verbal form: passive of ra'a ("God was seen, he appeared").
- b. Genesis 15:1: "word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision".
 - i. Visionary experience: internal sensory perception, distinct from theophany which is external.
- c. Land promised as an "everlasting possession" in Genesis 17:7-8.
- d. Interpretations of the land promise's fulfillment:
 - i. Post-exilic return from Babylon: inadequate to fulfill specific details.
 - ii. Spiritualized fulfillment: fulfilled in the church as the land expands to represent the world symbolically.
 - iii. Provisional physical fulfillment: achieved during the reigns of David and Solomon (extending from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt).
 - iv. Future physical return and literal fulfillment: Dr. Vannoy's perspective.

III. Genesis 15: Ratification of the Covenant

A. God's Covenant Oath and Visionary Setting

- 1. Word of the Lord in a vision: God as shield and great reward.
- 2. Abram's concern over childlessness and Eliezer of Damascus as his current heir.
- 3. God's promise: heir from Abram's own body and descendants as numerous as the stars.

B. Justification by Faith (Genesis 15:6)

- 1. "He believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness".

2. First linking of faith and righteousness in the biblical text.
3. Imputation or reckoning of righteousness on the basis of faith, not works.
4. New Testament application: Romans 4:3.
5. H. C. Leupold's discussion on justification by faith.

C. Covenant Oath Ritual (Genesis 15:9-17)

1. Slaying and dividing of animals: cutting halves and placing them opposite.
2. Idiomatic background: "cutting a covenant" (karat berit).
 - a. Symbolizes curse: "so may it be done to me if I do not live up to the agreement".
 - b. Jeremiah 34:18 parallel: walking between pieces of the split calf.
 - c. Mari documents parallel: "slaying an ass" to enter a compact.
3. Vision of the Smoking Furnace and Burning Lamp passing between the pieces.
 - a. Theophanic representation of God's presence utilizing fire and smoke.
 - b. Divine self-malediction: God alone passes through, swearing fidelity and taking the curse upon Himself to guarantee the promise.
4. Distinction between Covenant Types
 - a. Promise/Grant Covenant (Abrahamic): God takes the oath, representing promissory grants where a king promises land.
 - b. Law Covenant (Sinaitic / Sinai): Man/the people take the oath ("all that the Lord says we will do"), representing suzerainty/vassal treaties.
5. Terror and Darkness: Meredith Kline's description of this setting as the "Old Testament Golgotha," signifying the horror of God taking the curse upon Himself.