

Genesis: Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15-17) and the Akedah (Gen. 22)

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Robert Vannoy explores the development and ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant across Genesis 15, 17, and 22, including the significance of the smoking furnace theophany and the geographic extent of the Promised Land. It examines the initiation of circumcision in Genesis 17 as the covenant's outward sign and token, linking it to the spiritual necessity of internal cleansing or 'circumcision of the heart.' Finally, the lecture analyzes the ultimate test of Abraham's faith in Genesis 22 with the command to sacrifice Isaac (the Akedah), addressing the theological interplay between divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and the nature of obedience as a divinely ordained means of covenant administration.

Outline

I. Genesis 15 and the Ratification of the Covenant

A. The Smoking Furnace and Flaming Torch (Gen 15:17)

1. The ratification rite involving passing between slain animals
2. Meredith Kline's perspective in *By Oath Consigned*
 - a. Represents a "strange self-malediction" of the LORD who undergoes the covenant's curse of cutting asunder
 - b. Prefigures the abandonment of the Son of God (Old Testament Golgotha)

B. The Extent of the Promised Land (Gen 15:18)

1. Boundaries specified: from the river of Egypt to the River Euphrates
2. Repetition of boundaries in the Old Testament:
 - a. Moses at the Plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 1:7, 11:24)
 - b. Joshua's commission (Joshua 1:4)
3. Historical fulfillment of the land promise:
 - a. Partial fulfillment under Joshua's conquest (Joshua 13:1-6)
 - b. Failure of individual tribes to drive out inhabitants (Judges 1)

- c. Full realization under David's military campaigns (2 Samuel 8:3)
- d. Solomon's dominion from the Euphrates (Tiphshah) to Gaza/Egypt (1 Kings 4:21-24)
- 4. Everlasting possession and national continuity:
 - a. Canaan given as an everlasting possession coextensive with the covenant (Gen 17:7-8)
 - b. Israel's perpetuity linked to creation ordinances (Jeremiah 31:35-36, Genesis 8:22)

C. Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant Administration

- 1. Overarching unity of the "covenant of grace" across Old and New Testaments
- 2. Differing administrations: circumcision vs. baptism
- 3. Resolution of physical vs. spiritual seed of Abraham (Romans 4 / Paul)

II. Genesis 17: Covenant Renewal and the Sign of Circumcision

A. Covenant Renewal and Name Changes (Gen 17:1-8)

- 1. Context: Abram is 99 years old, 13 years after Ishmael's birth, 24 years after original promise
- 2. Command to "walk before me, and be perfect" (wholesome life, walking in faith)
- 3. Name changes:
 - a. Abram ("the father is exalted" / "God is exalted" - theophoric name)
 - b. Abraham ("father of many nations")
- 4. Promise of royal lineage ("kings shall come out of you")
- 5. Source-critical views (ascribing Gen 15 to 'J' and Gen 17 to 'P') refuted as mere covenant reiteration

B. Circumcision as the Sign of the Covenant (Gen 17:9-14)

- 1. Requirement of circumcision for all males in the household (including slaves)
- 2. The severity of the command: failure results in being "cut off" from the people
 - a. Scriptural example: Moses' life threatened in Exodus 4:24-25
 - b. Comparison with Feast of Unleavened Bread/Sabbath violations (Exodus 12, 31:14)
 - c. Interpretive debate: execution vs. excommunication
- 3. Comparative ancient near eastern context:
 - a. Circumcision was practiced by other nations (Egypt, Edom, Ammon, Moab)
 - b. Unique significance given by God as a covenant sign for Abraham

C. Circumcision of the Heart

- 1. Symbolism: removal of uncleanness and the problem of generational sin
- 2. Old Testament roots (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6)

3. New Testament perspective (Romans 4:8-11):

- a. Faith reckoned as righteousness before circumcision
- b. Circumcision is a sign/seal of faith, not a means of salvation

III. Genesis 22: The Akedah (The Binding of Isaac)

A. The Command to Sacrifice Isaac

- 1. Context: Sometime later, God "tests" Abraham (NIV) rather than "tempts" him (KJV)
- 2. Distinction between God's "testing" (to strengthen faith) and Satan's "tempting" (to draw away)
 - a. Illustrated by Job's trials
 - b. Cosmic battle between God and Satan manifested in human experience

B. The Theological Tension of the Akedah

- 1. Apparent conflict between God's command (slay Isaac) and God's promise (seed through Isaac)
- 2. John Calvin's commentary on Abraham's faith:
 - a. Reconciling command and promise through hope and trust in God's faithfulness
 - b. Relinquishing human affections and facing the disgrace of perceived cruelty
 - c. Preserving faith in God's consistency and power to raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19)

C. Obedience and Covenant Promulgation

- 1. Reaffirmation of covenant blessings (Gen 22:16-18)
- 2. The theological difficulty of "because you have done this thing... because you have obeyed my voice"
- 3. John Calvin's explanation of the "because":
 - a. God pays nothing as a debt, but titles His free benefits as "reward" for motivation
 - b. Obedience is not the efficient or meritorious cause, but the divinely ordained means of administration of the promise
 - c. Faithfulness is the fruit of divine grace operative in Abraham's life
- 4. Meredith Kline's view in Kingdom Prologue (claims a meritorious ground) contrasted

D. Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

- 1. The challenge of separating election/sovereignty from human response
- 2. Mystery and apparent contradictions in theology:
 - a. Divine sovereignty vs. human responsibility
 - b. The two natures of Christ (Christological formulation)
 - c. Organic view of the inspiration of Scripture (divine and human elements)