

The Covenant with Abram, Part One

We are about to encounter the second unconditional covenant in the Book of Genesis, the covenant with Abram. It is at once similar and dissimilar to the unconditional covenant with Noah. Let's first look at how it differs.

Unlike the covenant with Noah, we see the Lord coming to Abram in a vision in which they enter into a dialog about the future. We saw no such give-and-take with Noah who was never offered the opportunity to discuss the plans concerning the Flood with the Almighty. Here, however, Abram enters into a discussion with God about the promises made earlier in Genesis chapter 12. Now, all the questions we had concerning these fantastic promises are voiced by Abram, namely, how can a seventy-five-year-old man with a barren wife be the progenitor of a great race of people who will take control of a land already in the possession of others? God's answer to that question is one of the more beautiful and poetic passages in scripture. To be honest, as a Biblical Theologian, I tend to find an *awful lot* of places in Sacred Scripture poetic but here is some truly wonderful prose:

"He took him outside and said: 'Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so,' he added, 'shall your descendants be.' Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness." Genesis 15:5-6

What is truly wonderful about this interchange is the fact that, to a certain extent, God does not answer Abram's question directly. Although God's answer is not the answer Abram is seeking, it is *the* answer God intended to give him. Remember, Abram wants to know the "how" concerning his subsequent offspring. To this question the Lord does not reply. Instead, He demonstrates His words yet again by showing Abram the heavens. This spectacle, and the fact that it is being shown to Abram during a conversation with the Almighty, is such that Abram believes yet again, for "*Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness*" Genesis 15:6. Again we see the remarkable character of the Patriarch Abram. Against everything he can observe, against everything that he has experienced concerning fatherhood and indeed nationhood; he believes everything the Lord tells him is going to happen.

There is absolutely no question at this point in the story that Abram is a man of faith, a man who wholeheartedly believes in the promises of God. We shall see this trait in Abram continuously as we read his story in the Patriarchal History.

Another difference between this unconditional covenant with Abram and the one made with Noah concerns the specificity whereby Abram's (and by definition his offspring's) future is laid out. In the Book of Genesis Chapter Nine, Noah is told nothing about what the future holds for him and his family. Here however, the Lord gets into specifics. In the pronouncements of God in Genesis 15:7-21 we hear that not only will Abram's descendants take possession of a land already in the possession of others (Genesis 15:18-21), but that later his descendants will be held captive (Genesis 15:13) for four hundred years. This effectively telegraphs the story that unfolds in the rest of the Book of Genesis as well as in the basic story arc of the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and beyond. In essence, what we see are the two plot lines, the two major stories that will permeate the bible until the tragedy of the Babylonian Captivity. These stories concern the relationship between God and His people, the Jews, and the Jews and their relationship with the land. Over time, the first story becomes *our* story as well.

The Catechism and Genesis

*The remote preparation for this gathering together of the People of God begins when he calls Abraham and promises that he will become the father of a great people. Its immediate preparation begins with Israel's election as the People of God. By this election, Israel is to be the sign of the future gathering of all nations. **Catechism of the Catholic Church, 762***

Cutting A Covenant

We discussed earlier the notion that the Hebrew word for covenant, *berit*, is derived from the Hebrew word meaning "to cut or separate." We see the cutting of a covenant in Genesis 15:9-12 when Abram, to emphasize the contractual and serious nature of the agreement that is being forged between himself and God, sacrifices five animals before the Lord. It is an interesting scene and one that bears noting. In effect, the cutting of a covenant implies a blood oath on the part of the participants, which signifies as we have said previously "let this be done unto me should I fail to live up to this agreement." Clearly, the covenant that is recorded in the Book of Genesis Chapter 15 cannot have that meaning for the simple reason that the Lord never breaks agreements. For whom then is this covenant? The answer is plain – Abram. This covenant, this ritual agreement, is to solidify for Abram (the father of the Jews and our father in faith) his relationship with God and the continuing relationship his descendants will have with the Lord. Clearly, the Lord does not *need* a sacrifice to emphasize the seriousness of what is transpiring but Abram does. We will see the effect that another, greater sacrifice has on Abram very soon in the Book of Genesis.

The Church Fathers and Genesis

*Accordingly let us learn, I beseech you, a lesson for ourselves as well as from the patriarch: Let us believe in the words of God and trust in his promise. Let us not apply the yardstick of our own reasoning but give evidence of deep gratitude. This, you see, will succeed in making us also be seen to be righteous and will quickly cause us to attain to the promise made by him. In Abraham's case, however, the promise was made that a complete multitude would develop from his descendants. The effect of the promise was beyond the limits of nature and human logic. Hence faith in God won righteousness for him. In our case...if we are alert enough to see it, he promised much more. We are able in great measure to transcend human reasoning, provided we believe in the power of the One who promises, in order that we may gain also righteousness from faith and attain to the good things promised. St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on Genesis* 36.15*

The Promise of Land

Much has been made in certain circles concerning the geographic expanse of the land promised to Abram in Genesis 15:18-21. Taken literally, it appears that God promised the descendants of Abram, the Jews, all the land from modern Egypt to eastern Iraq. Amongst certain groups of Evangelical Christians this is interpreted to mean that the modern state of Israel is to someday occupy these borders as ordained by God. To the best of my knowledge, the Roman Catholic Church has never endorsed the literal interpretation of this particular passage, i.e., it has never endorsed a State of Israel that stretched from the Nile delta to Iran. What the Church has repeatedly endorsed is a call to peace in the geographic region described in Genesis 15:18-21.

Pope Benedict XVI and the Holy Land

Religious leaders must therefore be mindful that any division or tension, any tendency to introversion or suspicion among believers or between our communities, can easily lead to a contradiction which obscures the Almighty's oneness, betrays our unity, and contradicts the One who reveals himself as "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6; Ps 138:2; Ps 85:11). My friends: Jerusalem, which has long been a crossroads for peoples of many different origins, is a city which affords Jews, Christians and Muslims both the duty and the privilege to bear witness together to the peaceful coexistence long desired by worshippers of the one God; to lay bare the Almighty's plan for the unity of the human family announced to Abraham; and to proclaim the true nature of man as a seeker of God. Let us resolve to ensure that through the teaching and guidance of our respective communities we shall assist them to be true to who they are as believers, ever aware of the infinite goodness of God, the inviolable dignity of every human being, and the unity of the entire human family. Address to the President of Israel May 11, 2009

The Birth of Ishmael

The birth of Ishmael is a biblical story, that I must admit, causes me a great deal of consternation. It is one of those stories when, at least initially, everyone seems to be doing what they are expected to do, yet for some unknown reason the end result does not come out the way you expected. Case in point, the maidservant Hagar is a woman, who in keeping with the cultural norms of her time, was given to her master for the sole purpose of conceiving a male heir.

This may seem a bit harsh but taking a second wife was quite common in the time of the Patriarchs. As expected, the maidservant conceived a child with the full knowledge and consent of both Sarai and Abram.

Here is where the story gets interesting. Sarai instructed Abram to “go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her”. But instead of being happy that the desired result occurred, Sarai sensed Hagar’s contempt and dealt harshly with her. This caused Hagar to flee into the desert where she had an encounter with the Lord:

“The LORD’s messenger found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur, and he asked, ‘Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?’ She answered, ‘I am running away from my mistress, Sarai.’ But the LORD’s messenger told her: ‘Go back to your mistress, and submit to her abusive treatment. I will make your descendants so numerous,’ added the LORD’s messenger, ‘that they will be too many to count. Besides,’ the LORD’s messenger said to her: ‘You are now pregnant and shall bear a son; you shall name him Ishmael, For LORD has heard you, God has answered you. He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; In opposition to all his kin shall he encamp.’ To the LORD who spoke to her she gave a name, saying, ‘You are the God of Vision’; she meant, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’”

Genesis 16:7-14

Things didn’t exactly end on a happy note for Hagar and Ishmael. Later they were cast out into the desert to fend for themselves. It is interesting to note that in this story the Lord appeared to and communicated with someone who was not in Abraham’s family line - a person who would later be called a pagan. Even more remarkable, the Lord made promises to Hagar who was an Egyptian - promises that sounded very much like some of the promises made to Abraham (“ ... I will multiply you exceedingly ...” Genesis 17:2). We may then ask what purpose does this story serve in the biblical narrative?

On one level, the story of Hagar and Ishmael serves to explain the origins of the Ishmaelites to later generations of Jews. These nomadic traders will later be seen in the story of Joseph and many believe they could have been the pre-cursors to the many Arab peoples that populate the Middle East today. This story not only names a specific people (often seen in the book of Genesis) but also explains why they are so numerous, so volatile and, most importantly, how they are closely related to the other descendants of Abraham and Isaac.

The story also re-emphasizes something we have seen before and will see again, namely that the LORD decides which child receives His blessing. As we saw with Cain and Abel, we will see again with Jacob and Esau and also in the story of Joseph and his brothers - one can never tell which child the Lord will favor. More often than not it will be the one least expected - the second born, the youngest, etc. In the Book of Genesis, favor rarely rests upon the first-born male descendant.

The Story of Ishmael in the Qur'an

Another interesting side note to the story of our biblical Ishmael is that Muslims have a very, very similar story in their holy book, the Qur'an. There is, however, one fundamental difference, namely that the promise that God makes to Abraham concerning his future greatness and the greatness of his descendants does not flow through Isaac as it does in our biblical narrative, but through Ishmael. Clearly our two traditions have drastically different interpretations of exactly what was promised to whom. Be that as it may there is one aspect of the above story in which all traditions, Judeo-Christian and Islamic, are in complete agreement and that is the idea that on a very real level Jews and Muslims share a common ancestor in Abraham. The Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have that fundamental relationship upon which to build.

Later Christian writers (most notably St. Paul) made much of the story of the birth of Ishmael from the bondswoman (in some translations) or maidservant Hagar. In the fourth and fifth chapters of the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul drew out a long allegory comparing Christians to the offspring of Sarah and the Jews, strangely enough, to the offspring of the slave Hagar. St. Paul was evidently trying to make a connection to those who were enslaved to the Torah as opposed to those who freely embraced the Gospel of Jesus. He used this story from Genesis to flesh out that particular theme. The Church Fathers Tertullian and Origen similarly used this story to contrast those who embraced orthodox Christianity (the Church) with those who did not (Jews, heretical Christians, etc.). Hagar and her son Ishmael represent the path not taken, or indeed the path not favored, by the Lord in the Bible. Yet they continued to be of great concern to Him; they continued to receive his protection and the fulfillment of His promises to them. But they were not the main story; for that we have to return to the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.

©Copyright 2021. The Cornerstone Catholic Scripture Study

thecornerstonescripturestudy.org