

## 7. Defining the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12–17; Abraham 1–2)

We may sometimes wonder why God acts in certain ways, or why he doesn't act. The answer isn't as veiled in mystery as we may think. The truth is God always acts within the context of covenants he makes with his people or with individuals. Even when he intervenes dramatically in a situation, it is according to existing covenantal agreements. Understanding the workings of these covenants, therefore, gives us power with God to bring about change for good. God's saving influence in every kind of circumstance—from daily spiritual guidance to miraculous deliverance from death—can be traced to a covenant God made somewhere with someone.

Earthly models of God's covenants are primarily three: (1) with Israel—the Sinai Covenant; (2) with King David—the Davidic Covenant; and (3) with Abraham—the Abrahamic Covenant. Extending backwards and forward in time, almost all of God's covenants follow these models. As no covenant God makes is temporary in nature, all endure to this day. The first—the Sinai Covenant—creates a unique relationship with a nation—God's people Israel; the second—the Davidic Covenant—is with their rulers, King David and his heirs, that would ensure his people's protection; and the third—the Abrahamic Covenant—is with a patriarch, Abraham, concerning an eternal posterity. As the terms of each these covenants involve increasing one's personal commitment or love of God, so their blessings increase exponentially.

With Abraham, God made a covenant in which he promised to multiply him and make him fruitful, granting him and his descendants the Land of Canaan as an everlasting inheritance: “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am Almighty God. Walk before me and be perfect, and I will make my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly.’ And Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, ‘As for me, see, my covenant is with you, and you will be a father of many nations. Nor will your name be called Abram anymore, but your name will be Abraham, for a father of many nations have I made you. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful. I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give you and your offspring after you the land in which you are a stranger—all the Land of Canaan, for an everlasting inheritance. And I will be their God’” (Genesis 17:1–8).

God later promised Abraham that his posterity would be innumerable: “In blessing I will bless you and in multiplying I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sands on the seashore. Your offspring shall inherit the gates of their enemies. And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because you have obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:17–18). Those two blessings—a Promised Land and an endless posterity—constitute the two basic blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. For Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others after them, God promised those blessings unconditionally after they had proven loyal to him under all conditions.

God's promise to Abraham of descendants as many as the sands of the seashore and stars in the heavens (Genesis 15:5; 22:17) thus isn't unique to him but was repeated to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26:4; Exodus 32:13). This shows that God is willing to do for others as he does for

Abraham—in effect, for all who “do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39). The question is, what are the “works” that qualify Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to merit such exalted blessings? The answer lies in God’s unconditional or “everlasting” covenant that he makes with them (Genesis 17:7, 19). As they prove faithful to him and fulfill its conditions, so, likewise, may others of God’s children.

Because God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and is no respecter of persons, he treats all equally and does for one as does for another. The higher law of God’s covenant that Abraham keeps brings with it the corresponding privilege of seeing and conversing with the Lord (Genesis 17:1; 18:1–2, 8, 22, 33). Abraham’s offering his only son Isaac by Sarah was but one requirement God made of him that merits the blessing of a posterity as many as the sands of the sea and the stars in the heavens (Genesis 22:1–17). As such an innumerable posterity resembles God’s own posterity, moreover, it constitutes a promise of godhood. Toward that end, the three covenants God made—the Sinai, Davidic, and Abrahamic Covenants—provide successive vehicles through which his people and individuals may attain greater degrees of holiness and ascend to the highest spiritual categories (Isaiah 4:2–3; 24:16; 52:1–2, 13; 60:14).

God’s covenant with Abraham—of which his ministering in the priesthood according to the holy order of God was an integral part—came to be known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Though, not unique to Abraham, it typified the same covenant relationship Abraham’s “fathers” had with God all the way back to Adam when their covenants with God became unconditional in the pattern of emperor–vassal relationships. While the priesthood according to the holy order of God ultimately became identified with Melchizedek—on account of his exemplary role as his people’s proxy savior on the seraph level—God’s covenants with the “fathers,” within which the holy priesthood functions intrinsically, became identified with Abraham, progenitor of God’s covenant people. God’s unconditional promise to Abraham of a posterity as numerous as the sands of the sea and as the stars of the heavens, in other words, exemplified God’s covenant with the “fathers” (Genesis 22:17; Hebrews 11:8–12; Doctrine & Covenants 132:30; Abraham 2:9–11).

It was Israel’s ancestors’ love of God that led to the Abrahamic Covenant with its promise of godhood and an eternal posterity resembling God’s own (Genesis 22:17; Hebrews 11:12; Doctrine & Covenants 132:20, 30, 37). The commandment to love God and man inherent in all of God’s covenant relationships thus forms an appeal to Israel to become like its ancestors: “That you may love your God, that you may obey his voice, and that you may cleave to him, for he is your life and length of days—that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them” (Deuteronomy 30:20); “He loveth those who will have him to be their God. Behold, he loved our fathers, and he covenanted with them, yea, even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and he remembered the covenants which he had made; wherefore, he did bring them out of the land of Egypt” (1 Nephi 17:40). To become like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in effect, Israel must do the works they did.

(Much of this material is taken from *Windows on the Prophecy of Isaiah*, 129–130, 228–229, 233 and *Endtime Prophecy: A Judeo-Mormon Analysis*, 203, 271.)