

## UNDERSTANDING OUR BIBLE

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### I. An Important Key -- Four Covenants in the Stream of Salvation-history

A. The Heritage of ancient Israel, cf. Rom. 9:4-5. After heralding the wonders of God's grace in providing salvation for all humankind, Paul's thought turns to his own people and traditions by natural descent--the Jewish people. He is broken hearted over their rejection of Christ and details the ways in which ancient Israel was THE PEOPLE through whom God chose to work. Here he recalls "the covenants" God made with Israel. There is a good possibility that the original Greek text read "the covenant." If so, this should signal to us that the covenants are interrelated and really speak of one covenant relationship Israel's God had with His people.

B. The Four Covenants: Abraham, Mosaic (Sinaitic), Davidic, New Covenant. After the Abrahamic covenant, each of the others is understood in relation to one of the former covenants. Each is referenced directly or indirectly in the New Testament and becomes a building block in what it means to live as a Christian under the New Covenant. These four covenants explain the unfolding of biblical history of God's people in the Old Testament and are climaxed with the New Covenant in the Redemptive work of Jesus Christ, through which has been birthed a New People of God.

### II. The Wonder of Israel in History--God's Footprints in History

In my opinion the most fascinating historical phenomenon of any people is to be seen in ethnic Israel, Israel as a nation and a people.

1. Ancient Israel arrived in the land called Israel with a religious heritage that was inexplicable in its ancient Near-Eastern setting. See Bright, *Kingdom of God*, 24, 26-27.

2. After achieving international supremacy in the Davidic-Solomonic era, Israel was eventually uprooted and exiled. Perhaps the final disgrace came in the 2nd century A.D. when Israel was expelled from Jerusalem by the Romans.

3. The Jews lived through eighteen centuries afterward without a homeland and scattered as a religious group amongst the nations of the earth. Their lot was often rejection and suffering. In the "Christian" West they were at times seen as the accursed people. Alienation reached its height in the attempted genocide of the World War II Holocaust.

4. In 1948 Israel was re-established as a political state. BUT EXTREMELY NOTEWORTHY IS THAT ISRAEL HAS RETAINED CONTINUITY WITH ITS ANCIENT RELIGIOUS HERITAGE WITH WHICH IT ENTERED THE LAND OF CANAAN MORE THAN 3000 YEARS AGO!

Thus, Israel is significantly unique amongst the nations of earth. Why has Israel continued to exist? Why was Israel not completely assimilated amongst the nations of the earth during the 18 centuries of exile? These are not only sociological questions. They are profound religious questions, which lead me to see through Israel God's footprints in history.

### III. The Idea of "Covenant" in the Ancient World and in Israel

The idea of covenant apparently existed in the ancient world from before the time of Abraham to about 750 B.C. It was a term that could express relationships between nations or between individuals. It was similar to our idea of "treaty," in international relations. An oath would be taken and promises and demands made to define the relationship between two parties-- nations or individuals.

This was a term meaningful in the times of Abraham, Moses, and David. Yahweh revealed Himself to His chosen people in terms they would understand. The kind of covenant that explains the covenant relationship between God and His people is one that was common between a superior monarch and a vassal king. The superior established the terms and the vassal king would agree to them.

### IV. The Abrahamic Covenant--Genesis 12; 15; 17 especially

A. Genesis 1-11 versus 12-50. Note the great contrast between these two main parts of Genesis! Gen. 1-11: After Creation and the Fall, the chapters concern humankind generally, with numerous generations and no particular locale the singular focal point. The tower of Babel event in Gen. 11 concludes with reference to "the whole earth." But once we turn to ch. 12, the focus is on one man and his family for only four generations. And the geographical focus is that of Canaan. The question we ought to ask is WHY?

#### B. The Covenant itself:

1. Promise of innumerable descendants, Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 22:17 (gate of enemies), etc.

2. Promise of a land (Canaan and beyond), Gen.12:1, 7; 13:14; 15:7, 18-19; 17:8

3. Promise of blessing to other peoples, Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18

Note "families" in Gen. 12:3. The term mishpechoth refers to the various families of earth in Gen., 10:5, 20, 31.

4. Promise of a unique relationship between God and Abraham and Abraham's seed, Gen. 17:7, 8. This is the heart of covenant relationship and is found repeatedly throughout the O.T. in different ways, e.g. "your God," "the God of Israel," "my people," "the God of your fathers," "the LORD your God," etc.

Note this is a Covenant of "Promise." It is gracious in its origin. The emphasis is upon what GOD WILL DO. He makes Promises. So Paul calls this a covenant of Promise in Gal. 3. At the same time, a response is required, in particular, circumcision, as the sign of acceptance, Gen. 17:9-14. Obedience to Yahweh is expected, cf. Gen. 22:15ff.

#### C. The Covenant and Abraham's descendants

The Abrahamic covenant is repeated to Abraham's immediate descendants:

To Isaac, Gen. 26:1-5; to Jacob, Gen. 28:1-4, 13-15; to Joseph's sons, Gen. 48:8-16; to other descendants of Jacob's sons, Gen. 50:23-25

D. The Covenant and O.T. Israel

Exod. 1:1, 7; 2:23-25; 3:6-7; Deut. 1:6; 1 Kings 4:20-23; 8:43; Isa. 49:6 (cf. vs. 3); Ezek. 33:2; 34:11-13.

E. The Covenant and the N.T. -- Fulfillment and the New Covenant

1. Prior to the Cross, Luke 1:67-75, note possessing gate of their enemies; forgiveness

2. After the Cross, Acts 3:25-26; Gal. 3:6-9

a. All families of earth blessed, Acts 3:25-26; Gal. 3:6-9. Paul grounds the blessing of justification to the Gentile world in the covenant with Abraham, that the Gentiles (nations) would be blessed through him. This is then linked with the gift of the Spirit, 3:14, 29. This is the basis of the "new Israel," the new people of God!

b. Fulfillment of the land promise. Rom. 4:13, 16-17. The Promise is extended to include the world. The greater family of Abraham is now included. Cf. 1 Cor. 3:21b-23. Cf. Sirach 44:21; Jub. 22:14; 32:19; 1 Enoch 5:7

Even as God took the initiative to establish the covenant with Abraham, so we are the family of God because of God's promise now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. **THIS IS GOD'S PLAN!** Dare we look for another way?

This is progressive revelation. It reminds us of the new earth in Rev. 21. All this stems from the promises of God in the covenant with Abraham.