

Sacred Space in Promise: God's Call and Covenant with Abraham

I. Introduction

1. Genesis 1-11 sets the stage for the *patriarch narratives* that are the focus of the Genesis text.
2. Genesis 12 introduces the Abraham narrative: *The call of Abram narrows the narrative focus to one man and formally initiates the process of restoration portrayed in the Flood.*
3. God's covenant with Abram also provides His answer to the human assertion in Babel: *He alone could make a name for man – i.e., see man attain to his human identity and purpose.*
4. So the promise of a victorious seed advanced from Seth to Shem (*name*), with Shem's genealogy (the fifth "generations" section) following immediately after the Babel episode and culminating with *Abram*. * Genesis 11:10-26

*Abram was God's answer to man's attempt to establish his own greatness by making a name for himself: **God would make Abram's name great, thus fulfilling Shem's name. Thus Abram was the focal point for the salvation history and God's restoration of sacred space.***

II. Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant

A. Abram's Call

1. Abram was the *root of Israel*, called out of the pagan world to form a *new people* defined by *covenant relationship* with the God of all creation, and so the God of all men.
2. God called Abram to forsake his life circumstance, but also his *native land*. God was forming a *household* – a covenant family to dwell with Him in the place of His chosen habitation.

B. The Abrahamic Covenant

1. This call, and the promises attached to it (Genesis 12:1-3), was the foundation for God's formal covenant, ratified many years later (15:1-21).
2. The promises comprised seven components, all centered in the principle of *blessing*.
 - a. The first four pertained to Abram's personal and national greatness.
 - b. The final three clarified the basis and significance of Abram's greatness and how he would be a blessing to others: *Abram's greatness was bound up in his unique status and favor; **God would bless Abram in order that he would be a blessing to all mankind.*** (Note the reciprocating pattern of God's interaction with mankind.)
3. This global blessing echoed the mandate to *fill* and *subdue*, such that God's presence, rule and glory should fill the earth, thus achieving His goal of all creation becoming sacred space.

"The mention of 'all the nations of the earth' being 'blessed' by Abraham's 'seed' alludes to a renewed human community bearing God's image and 'filling the earth' with regenerated progeny who also reflect God's image and shine out its luminosity to others in the 'city of man' who do not rebel and also come to reflect God." (G. K. Beale)

C. Shechem and Bethel

God's call involved Abram and his family journeying to an *undisclosed* land. That journey led to Haran, and then into Canaan, where Abram traveled south from *Shechem* as far as *Beersheba*.

1. At Shechem Abram built his first altar to the Lord (12:6-7). *This is the first mention of an altar subsequent to Noah's, and Abram, too, constructed it in response to divine revelation.*

Abram's altar affirmed his understanding that this land was also God's habitation – *the place where He would dwell with His people. Canaan represented restored sacred space, evident in the scriptural depiction of it.* * cf. Exodus 3:6-8, 15:17, 25:1-8; Numbers 13:16-27

2. From Shechem Abram journeyed south to the area around Bethel ("house of God") and there he built his second altar, again acknowledging God's presence with him. * 12:8
3. Abram's subsequent brief interlude in Egypt further underscored Canaan's status as God's habitation. *Abram built no altar in Egypt, but traveled to his altar near Bethel when he and Sarai returned to Canaan. There, he once again called on Yahweh's name.* * 12:10-13:4
4. Abram would continue to build altars as he journeyed south, indicating his conviction that all of this land was Yahweh's habitation, and so part of the covenant kingdom pledged to him.

D. Hebron and Beersheba

1. Back in Canaan, God told Abram that his inheritance would comprise all that his eyes saw, ruled by countless descendents. *Hence his symbolic "walk" claiming the land.* * 13:12-17
2. Abram built his third altar in Hebron (13:18), where God ratified His covenant with him (15:1-21). Two revelations accompanied this: the *pledge of a genetic heir* in view of the covenant promises, and a *delay in possessing the covenant land.* (* Note that the intervening episode in chapter 14 serves to reinforce Abram's covenant status and grant, as is also the case with the Sodom and Gomorrah episode.)
3. Ishmael's birth (16:1-16) laid the foundation for God to reveal *Sarai* as the covenant matriarch (17:1-18:15). Sarai was henceforth to be called *Sarah* – *princess.* * 17:15-21
4. God also elaborated on His promise of global blessing by declaring that *Abram's fatherhood was to extend to many peoples* (17:1-6). As Sarai was now *Sarah*, Abram was now **Abraham** – "father of many peoples." ***Abram would bring God's blessing to all mankind by bringing all nations and peoples into his own covenant family under his covenant God.*** * 17:4-13
5. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abram journeyed south to Gerar, where he again jeopardized the covenant (Genesis 20; cf. chap. 12). God again intervened, *but this encounter with Abimelech served its own important purpose in the covenant's outworking.*
 - a. It demonstrated Abraham's greatness as God's prophet and mediator of blessing, as Abimelech, a Canaanite king, petitioned him to intervene on behalf of his household.
 - b. This episode was both an echo and amplification of the parallel one in Genesis 12:10-20: *Both involved Abraham delivering his wife to a foreign king out of fear for himself, and both implicated the covenant, but the latter more explicitly and with greater culpability.*

Abraham delivered Sarah to Abimelech with the knowledge that she was God's chosen covenant matriarch. He knew the covenant depended on her as much as it did on him.

- c. Here, too, God intervened to prevent Abraham from sabotaging His designs, but this time in a way that explicitly showed His intervention to be a matter of *covenant fidelity*.

God would uphold His covenant and secure its fulfillment, regardless of the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of the human parties (i.e., Abraham and his descendents).

So Abraham's covenant preeminence over Abimelech, a Philistine king, presaged Israel's eventual triumph over Philistia and underscored the divine and covenantal nature of that monumental triumph for all future generations of Israelites.

6. Later, Abimelech again petitioned Abraham for his favor, which culminated with a covenant agreement that established Abraham's permanent foothold in Canaan. That encounter led to Abraham naming the place *Beersheba* ("well of seven," or "well of oaths").
 - a. The *tamarisk tree* he planted there reinforced the significance of this covenant grant. This tree is known for its hardiness and ability to survive in hostile soil, and so *speaks of perpetual, flourishing life in the face of adverse, even impossible circumstance*.
 - b. After planting the tree, Abraham called on the name of the Lord, indicating that this tree represented a kind of altar – *a symbolic representation of sacred space*.

*The tamarisk tree planted by the well at Beersheba would henceforth serve as perpetual testimony that God is a covenant-keeping God. * cf. 22:19, 26:23-25, 46:1-4*

- c. Abraham's permanent foothold in Beersheba looked back, but it also looked forward in proclaiming the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant oath.

*Beersheba was the foundation for Israel's full inheritance and dominion in Canaan, and the fact that it sat on the border of the future Philistine kingdom anticipated the day when David, the regal son of Abraham, would break the Philistine stronghold and establish the fullness of the kingdom pledged to Abraham. * cf. Genesis 15:18-21; 1 Kings 4:20-21*

Conclusions:

1. The Abraham narrative to this point highlights the fundamental nature and governing principles of God's covenant with him.
 - a. It was a covenant whose fulfillment would involve God bringing life out of death.
 - b. And, while it obligated Abraham as covenant party, it didn't ultimately depend on him – *indeed, God would secure the covenant's continuance and guarantee its promises in spite of the failure of the human parties*.
2. Already with Abraham it seemed clear that the human condition would always jeopardize the covenant; the covenant sons would not be able to fulfill their calling. *But Yahweh continued to show that He would remain ever-faithful, and later He disclosed His intent to resolve the children's failure by bringing out of Israel a faithful Israelite through whom He would cause Israel to become Israel in truth.* * Isaiah 49:1-13