

## STUDY 8

# Baptism and the Covenant with Abraham

*Siew Kiong Tham*

What does baptism have to do with the covenant with Abraham? Some may say that baptism replaces the rite of circumcision in the Old Testament. Is this true? We will examine this and other related issues in this paper. To do this, firstly, we will look briefly at the Abrahamic covenant and its place in the wider context of God's one eternal covenant of creation. Secondly, we will look at the text of Galatians 3 where Paul connects the Abrahamic covenant with the fulfilment in Christ. What is the reasoning behind the link that Paul makes? Lastly, we will see how Paul relates this to baptism.

### THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The covenant made with Abraham was recorded in Genesis 15:17–21, 17:1–27, and 22:15–18. The issues covered in the covenant include the promise of land, the promise of progeny to Abraham and Sarah, and blessings to all people. This was repeated after Abraham's obedience in the aborted offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah. As a sign of the covenant, the rite of circumcision was implemented on all males eight days old.

This covenant promise formalised the call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. This call was made with the promise that the blessing of God will flow to all the peoples of the world, that is, to all the peoples of God's creation. This must not be seen as a separate covenant but rather the continuation of what God willed at creation:

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (Gen. 1:27–28).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

## *Baptism and the Covenant with Abraham*

God blessed the creational order. This blessing should not be seen only as the conferment of benefit upon the creation, but the expression of the relationship between the Creator and the creation. ‘God blesses with a benefit on the basis of the relationship . . . the human-divine relationship.’<sup>2</sup> This relationship is expressed in the covenant. We should see the Abrahamic covenant as a subset of the one covenant of creation.<sup>3</sup>

Thus in the re-affirmation of the covenant of creation, the story unfolded as God revealed His purpose for His creation to Abraham. The focus is kept on the blessing flowing to the whole of creation through Abraham, as this must be the will of God for His creation. That is why Peter reiterated this promise to Abraham when he spoke to the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem: ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Acts 3:25). This is a direct reference to the offspring of Abraham in Genesis 22:17–18. This blessing to all the families of the earth must have its reference to the one covenant of creation. While dealing with the problem of the unbelief of Israel, Paul must have had in mind the wider covenant of creation when he reminded his Roman audience that they ‘were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree’ (Rom. 11:17). The context is the unbelief of Israel, and Paul says:

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy. <sup>17</sup> But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, <sup>18</sup> do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you (Rom. 11:16–18).

What is this ‘rich root of the olive tree’? Jeremiah referred to the olive tree when speaking in relation to Israel: ‘The LORD once called you, “A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit”’ (Jer. 11:16). If the imagery of the olive tree refers to Israel, what then is this ‘rich root’? Bear in mind again that the context here is the unbelief of Israel. Paul says, ‘if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy’ (Rom. 11:16). The branches refer to Israel and thus the root referred to is the patriarch, and perhaps here he means only Abraham.<sup>4</sup> While some may have taken ‘the root’ to refer to Christ, Cranfield commented that ‘there is a very widespread agreement among commentators that it must refer to the patriarchs and that Paul’s meaning is that the unbelieving majority of the Jews are hallowed by their relation to the patriarchs’.<sup>5</sup> The reference to ‘their ancestors’ in the later part of the chapter—‘but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors’ (Rom. 11:28)—supports this understanding. So, by our grafting into Israel, we are connected to the promise of God given to Abraham, for it is ‘the root that supports you’. As we have noted in a previous paper on ‘Baptism and the Incorporation into Christ’, the two themes of

---

<sup>2</sup> K. H. Richards’s article ‘Bless/Blessing’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Doubleday, New York, 1992), p. 754. Quoted by G. Bingham, study 1, ‘The Triune God, Source of Blessing’, in *The Fullness of the Blessing of Christ*, NCTM Pastors’ School 1996, Evening Sessions, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, ‘The Several Gifts of Israel—III: The Covenants’, in NCTM Monday Pastors’ Study Group, 4th November, 1996. This study looks at the covenants mentioned in scripture and argues that they all relate to the one covenant of creation.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 411.

<sup>5</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (I.C.C. series), T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1979, p. 565. This is also the view taken by Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 413.

## *Baptism and the Covenant with Abraham*

promise and purification are essential in effecting this incorporation. Here we are looking more closely at the promise.

It has often been loosely remarked that the Abrahamic covenant has been replaced by the new covenant. That is not so. God's covenant is unchanging. It is more proper to say that the new covenant is the fulfilment of the old. The premise of the Abrahamic and the new covenants is the same. Both are given by the grace of the Creator God and demand the response of faith from the created. Put another way, our response of faith is based on the gracious promise that God has made in His covenant. Thus Paul writes:

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup> as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') . . . (Rom. 4:16–17).

The unitary nature of the covenant does not change with subsequent epochs of history because there is only one people of God creationally. Jesus is aware that he has 'other sheep that do not belong to this fold. [He] must bring them also, and they will listen to [his] voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10:16). There is only one God and one people and, therefore, one gracious covenant and one response of faith. It is the same for Abraham and the Jews, and for us. So Paul maintains this link to Abraham as he writes to the Galatians:

Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' <sup>7</sup> so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' <sup>9</sup> For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed (Gal. 3:6–9).

So, 'the church grows on the trunk of the Old Testament people of God', and 'the covenant of grace into which Christ incorporates us is the Abrahamic covenant'.<sup>6</sup>

### **GALATIANS—THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT AND THE FULFILMENT IN CHRIST**

Zechariah saw the birth of John as the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. John was to be 'the prophet of the Most High', who would 'go before the Lord to prepare his ways' (Luke 1:76). Zechariah traced this through David (Luke 1:69) and ultimately to the covenant with Abraham (Luke 1:73)—an unshakable promise fulfilled right before him then.

Mary, in magnifying the Lord, was aware that her pregnancy was 'according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever' (Luke 1:55).

What is the context in which we can understand this? How is the Abrahamic covenant linked to the incarnation and the new covenant? To understand this, we want

---

<sup>6</sup> Adrio König, unpublished book on baptism, p. 42.

## *Baptism and the Covenant with Abraham*

to look at the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 22 and then at Paul's exposition of this in Galatians 3. Following the restraint on Abraham's hand by the angel of the Lord on Mount Moriah:

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven,<sup>16</sup> and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,<sup>17</sup> I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,<sup>18</sup> and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice' (Gen. 22:15–18).

Abraham was obedient to what God told him to do on Mount Moriah. Obedience is an integral part of the covenant. It is the response to the covenant expected from humanity—the recipient of the blessings of the covenant. The Jews, because of their refusal to trust, were disobedient and so cut off from the covenant blessing. This obedience also involved the offering of a sacrifice in response to the covenant blessing of God since the beginning (Gen. 4:3–4). Abraham was obedient to the point of losing Isaac, the promise of his posterity for which he had waited so long. However, on Mount Moriah, this sacrifice was aborted. The promise made by God stands and is not subject to alteration. The giving of the law does not make the promise null and void. It does not replace the promise and shift the basis of fulfilment to another configuration. This promise was destined to be fulfilled by another seed of Abraham; the anointed one, Christ himself. In juxtaposing Christ and the blessing of Abraham in Galatians 3:14—'in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles'—Paul is using an Isaac/Christ typology. What Paul has in view here is that, in the binding of Isaac, Abraham responded in obedience to the covenant requirement which promises the blessing to the Gentiles through his seed, Isaac. This prefigures the sacrifice of the only Son of God and makes the point in a very graphic way that this sacrifice of the only beloved Son will make effective that same blessing to the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> Paul sums up his reasoning this way in Galatians 3:

Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it.<sup>16</sup> Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings,' as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring,' that is, to one person, who is Christ.<sup>17</sup> My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.<sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise (Gal. 3:15–18).

The promise made by God to Abraham is inviolable. It stands for all time. So to loosely remark that the Abrahamic covenant has been replaced by the new covenant is to take a Marcionite approach to the scriptures. The covenant of God is a 'covenant of grant', a favour graciously bestowed by a superior party to the inferior party.<sup>8</sup> The response of the recipient is that of trust and grateful obedience. It was so with Abraham and so with us. The point that Paul is making here is that the law or indeed

---

<sup>7</sup> G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC, vol. 2, Word Books, Waco, 1994, p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (TNIGNT series), Paternoster, Exeter, 1988, p. 170.

## *Baptism and the Covenant with Abraham*

any subsequent development in the working out of the covenant does not alter the premise of the covenant. The law has a function of its own and the keeping of the law does not nullify the promise. God brought about the fulfilment of His covenant because He has promised to do so and not because the law was kept. The working out of the promise involves the purification from sin and Isaac could not have accomplished this.

And so, ‘in your offspring’ (ESV)<sup>9</sup>—that is, in Christ—‘shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves’ (Gen. 22:18). Christ, the descendant of Abraham, is the Isaac of Mount Moriah, and he brought about the fulfilment of the covenant promise. It is through him that we become identified with Abraham and Israel.

In changing his name from Abram, it was made clear that Abraham is ‘the ancestor of a multitude of nations’ (Gen. 17:5). Right from the beginning in the giving of the covenant, the incorporation of the Gentiles (nations) through Abraham has been the focus of what God intends to fulfill. The blessing to Abraham and to Israel is to flow out to the whole of God’s created people (Gen. 12:1–3). As we have noted, the incorporation into Christ involves the promise of God and the purification from sin. The promise to which we look is the Abrahamic covenant and this promise finds its fulfilment in Christ as the new Isaac of Mount Moriah because ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’ (Gal. 3:13–14).

It is with this connectedness with Israel and the Abrahamic covenant that we look forward to the day when ‘a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb’ . . . saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10). This is the final realisation or fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant and we are part of that multitude, together with all Israel, worshipping before the throne. Indeed through Abraham all the nations of the world shall be blessed. Thus, Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by addressing the believers as the ‘Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16), ‘a direct rebuff to the Judaisers of Galatia’.<sup>10</sup>

### **THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT AND BAPTISM**

Our baptism is a baptism into Christ. We have seen that Paul links this with the Abrahamic covenant in his letter to the Galatians:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.<sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:27–29).

Elizabeth and Mary saw the new life in their wombs as the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham. Paul sees us as the descendants of Abraham through

---

<sup>9</sup> The NRSV has, ‘by your offspring’.

<sup>10</sup> W. Dumbrell, *Galatians: A New Covenant Commentary*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006, p. 95. He further comments here that ‘the Christian church is the true inheritor of Old Testament Israel’s expectations (cf. Rom. 9:6; Phil. 3:3)’.

## *Baptism and the Covenant with Abraham*

Christ: 'then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise' (Gal. 3:29). So Paul draws a direct line from Abraham to us, through Christ. As a result, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female'. Humanity is no longer classed under ethnic, social or gender categories. A new humanity has emerged through the cross and this is bound up in the person of Christ. It incorporates the whole of creation. We are all one in him and all of creation will be taken up and incorporated into Christ (Eph. 1:10).

So does this mean that baptism has replaced circumcision? Baptism is not the replacement for circumcision in the new covenant, though there may be parallels. Circumcision was required of all males in the Jewish household, including slaves born there or brought from without (Gen. 17:10–14). The meaning of this ritual for them was their incorporation into the Abrahamic covenant. This ritual of course implied that the participant had repented and embraced the God of Israel. However, in the three sets of contrasts in Galatians 3:28, only the first-mentioned is linked with circumcision—Jew, slave and male. Although the Greek and the free may choose circumcision, the female may not. Females are not required to be circumcised. Circumcision had a narrow framework in the Abrahamic covenant, but baptism encompasses all of created humanity.

When Paul says that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, he is not abolishing those distinctions in humanity, but rather declaring that these distinctions do not figure in our incorporation into Christ and into the Abrahamic covenant. This incorporation into Christ is primarily the work of the Triune God through the promise and the cleansing from sin. The distinctions of ethnicity, sociological status and gender are secondary. There continues to be this distinction and diversity within the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–14) and it is out of this heterogeneity that the expression of our incorporation in Christ reaches its harmonious climax.