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Rising in the distance is the site of ancient Gilgal, just west of the Jordan River. Joshua was camped at Gilgal when the Gibeonites came to make a covenant of peace.

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

BY ROBERT D. BERGEN

The Bible portrays God as a relationship builder, reaching out to people, communicating guidance, promises, and expectations to them. God shows Himself to be both a promise maker and—more importantly—a promise keeper. Nowhere does the Old Testament present this more powerfully than in God's relationship with Abraham, the most outstanding biblical example of faith in the one true God (see Rom. 4:1-3,9-25).

IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

A formal agreement that defined a relationship between two parties was known in ancient Hebrew as a *berith*; that is, a covenant or treaty. An agreement of this type could be used to strengthen a relationship between two close friends (Jonathan and David; 1 Sam. 18:3) or to end a dispute between two unhappy neighbors (Isaac and Abimelech, Jacob and Laban; Gen. 26:28; 31:44). The agreement

could be between a king and his subjects, or between two people groups. It could embody God-given instructions that people were obligated to follow or express a formal commitment of a group of people to God. A covenant could even be between God and non-human aspects of His creation (God and the earth; Gen. 8:21-22).

Scholars often divide the Old Testament covenants and treaties into two categories, though I personally prefer to add a third. Those established between two people who had roughly the same amount of social power were called *parity treaties*. Many scholars use the term *suzerainty treaty* to refer to agreements that parties with vastly different amounts of social status made. These included agreements a conquering nation made with those they defeated or that God made with people. My third category includes the formal relationships established between God and people. Each of these treaty types served different purposes and possessed vastly different characteristics.

Parity treaties—those established between social peers—placed requirements on both parties involved. Arrangements of this type could help clarify details of a

relationship between two people and establish a framework of clear expectations for both parties. As a result, both parties could expect to benefit significantly from this relationship. It might take the form of a marriage commitment; a promise to care for another person's family, if needed; a trade agreement between nations; a mutual assistance treaty between nations; or hiring the services of another nation's military forces. At the time these agreements were established, participants might give gifts and share a lavish meal.

Suzerainty treaties—agreements that established the conditions for an unequal relationship between two individuals or groups. Conquering kings regularly imposed these on countries they defeated. The party in a position of power would draw up an agreement that provided a disproportionate number of benefits for the victor. In biblical narratives the formal arrangements that conquerors made with those they had defeated are similar in fashion. The victorious nations consistently placed heavy financial burdens on those they had conquered. The victors also took strong measures to enforce their demands (see 2 Kings 3:4-7; 17:3-5).

A third type of *berith* in the Bible describes formal agreements God made with the nation of Israel, with certain individuals, and with nature. Though scholars usually place these agreements in the category of suzerainty treaty, putting them in a separate category is useful. An appropriate term for this God-initiated relationship is a divine covenant. Divine covenants differ in three significant ways from a suzerainty treaty. First, they include God as a party in the formal agreement. Second, their purpose was not to impose demands on a conquered group or individual. Third, the benefits directed toward the lesser party—that is, what God offers to the people—far exceed what a conqueror offered in any suzerainty treaty. God-sized blessings are given to people and nature in divine covenants!

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God Himself initiated the covenantal relationship with Abraham. The Bible does not present the covenant as having been concluded in a onetime event. Rather, God clarified the agreement through a series of divine revelations over the course of Abraham's lifetime. Thus, getting a complete view of the divine

covenant that God established with Abraham requires examining passages from six chapters in Genesis—12; 13; 15; 17; 18; and 22.

This unique connection between God and Abraham begins in Genesis 12. Though this chapter does not use the term *berith*, later passages make clear that events recorded here mark the beginning point of one of the most important divine-human relationships in Scripture. The relationship began when God broke in to Abraham's life. In a gracious and sovereign act, the Lord communicated a series of authoritative commands and amazing promises to Abraham. The Bible gives no indication Abraham had been seeking any special association with God; the Lord initiated it on His own.

By the time the divine covenant had been fully developed between the Lord and Abraham—a process that took many years to complete—both parties had performed several key actions. First, an initiatory act took place when the Lord summoned Abraham to separate from his idol-worshipping family and go to a place of the Lord's choosing (Gen. 12:1). Second, a formal covenant ceremony took place. The covenant ritual was solemn and mysterious. As part of the

ceremony, Abraham slaughtered ritually clean mammals and birds and then separated portions of their corpses into two piles. For His part, the Lord supernaturally caused a smoking firepot and a flaming torch to pass between the divided animals (15:17), thereby obligating Himself to fulfill the terms of the covenant. Third, Abraham and all males associated with him—his slaves and all future descendants—were required to be circumcised as a sign of submission to the terms of the covenant (17:11-14) and acceptance of Yahweh—the Lord—as their God (v. 7). Finally, Abraham had to pass a test confirming his submission to the Lord of the covenant. This test confirmed his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, the key human link in fulfilling core covenant promises (22:9-12).

As part of the covenant, the Lord made several outstanding promises to Abraham—promises He later fulfilled. Most prominent among these was that Abraham, a married but childless man, would have many descendants. In fact, he would become the father of many nations (12:2; 17:4,16,20) and his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore (15:5; 22:17). More

than that, kings and tribal leaders would be among his descendants (17:6,16,20). Though Abraham would have many sons, Sarah's son Isaac—the first son sired by Abraham after he had taken the covenant sign on his body—would be the primary expression of the divine covenant relationship.

Second in prominence among the covenant promises was that of a homeland. On five occasions (13:14-15; 15:7,18; 17:8; 22:17) the Lord promised Abraham that the land of Canaan, a region stretching "from the brook of Egypt to the Euphrates River" (15:1) would be the lasting possession of his descendants, though it would not be given to them for many years (vv. 13-16).

Third, the Lord would bless Abraham and his descendants (12:2; 22:17). As part of the divine blessing, the Lord would protect Abraham (12:3; 15:1) and make him famous (12:2). God's covenant with Abraham brought blessings to the patriarch and his progeny. But more than that, the divine blessing bestowed on Abraham was extended to all peoples (vv. 2-3) through Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus (see Matt. 1:1).

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