

ARE YOU PARTY TO THIS CONTRACT? ⇒THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM←

In the last chapter I wrote about the first of God's covenants with men, which was made through Noah, and in the introduction, I looked forward to the New Covenant, which Christ made. In this chapter I shall take the story forward to God's second covenant with men. It is God's covenant with Abraham. His original name was Abram, but I will use Abraham throughout.

Abraham's father Terah set out from his home in Ur in the fertile plain of the River Euphrates to travel to Canaan (now Palestine or Israel), but he stopped in Haran high up in the Euphrates valley. We may surmise that he was reluctant to leave the fertile area to cross the comparative desert region into Canaan. Abraham, his wife Sarah, and Lot, Abraham's nephew were also on the journey of about 700 miles.

While Terah was still living in Haran, God spoke to Abraham and said: "Leave your own country, your kinsmen, and your father's house, and go to a country that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great that it shall be used in blessings." Abraham obeyed. Sarah of course went with him and so did his nephew Lot. They also had with them their herds of sheep and goats and any servants or slaves. We are given no details of the journey, only that it ended at Shechem, which is about thirty miles north of what is now Jerusalem. The journey itself was about 500 miles. Abram was 75 years old at the time. At Shechem God appeared to Abraham and promised: "I will give this land to your descendants".

Abraham's obedience and God's promises to him are important when we come to the covenant or contract God made with Abraham.

After a number of Abraham's successes and failures, and problems with neighbours, and amongst his own party, God made his contract, or covenant, with Abraham. He renewed his promise that Abraham would have a child, as he did not yet have one. Abraham believed this and God found his faith pleasing. God renewed his promise that Abraham's descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. That was God's side of the contract. Abraham had already kept his by migrating to Canaan as God had instructed him.

We saw in the last chapter the position of animal sacrifices in God's covenant with Noah. We find the same in the covenant with Abraham. Abraham prepared some sacrificial animals and fire appeared from nowhere to burn them up. So the covenant was made. The details are in Genesis. (Chapter 15).

The years passed by and Abraham did not have a son from his wife Sarah. A son was essential if God was to keep his side of the contract, and of course Abraham was eager to have a son. So, at his wife's suggestion, he took Sarah's maid Hagar as a concubine. Ishmael was born.

Eventually God reappeared to Abraham and repeated his promise of a son from Sarah. He repeated the promises of the contract and added a sign to the contract. We saw in the last chapter how the sign of God's contract with Noah was the rainbow. The sign of God's contract with Abraham was male circumcision. Ishmael was circumcised with the rest of Abraham's household. He was by then 13 years old, and it may be significant that the Arabs, who trace their descent to Ishmael, traditionally circumcise at about this age, though in modern practice it is often earlier.

A year later Isaac was born to Sarah. He was circumcised a week after his birth, in keeping with the sign of the contract. This sign differs from the sign of the contract with Noah in that it had to be performed by those under the contract.

Further reading of the story of Isaac, Ishmael, and Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau, shows that the main line of the contract passed through Isaac and Jacob to the exclusion of the others, though God did make special promises to some of them, such as Ishmael.

So is this contract for you and me?

Basically no. If you are not a descendant of Jacob, that is a Jew, this contract is not for you. As non-Jews we may hopefully learn something about God from reading the story. We may be encouraged to ask the question of whether God has a personal contract for us. But at the end of the day this contract is not for us. We are not a party to this contract. This result may be unexpected when we remember that we are a party to the contract with Noah.