“Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let’s make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth.” (Gen 11:4)

The Lord said to Abram: Go from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:1-3)

The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring, I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. He built an altar to the Lord there, and he called on the name of the Lord. (Gen 12:7-8)

After Abram returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the Shaveh Valley (that is, the King’s Valley). Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest to God Most High. He blessed him and said: Abram is blessed by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High who has handed over your enemies to you. And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the people, but take the possessions for yourself.

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have raised my hand in an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or sandal strap or anything that belongs to you, so you can never say, ‘I made Abram rich.’ I will take nothing except what the servants have eaten. But as for the share of the men who came with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre—they can take their share.” (Gen 14:17-21)

After these events, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; your reward will be very great. (Gen 15:1)

He took him outside and said, “Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “Your offspring will be that numerous.” Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” But he said, “Lord God, how can I know that I will possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a three-year-old cow, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” So he brought all these to him, cut them in half, and laid the pieces opposite each other, but he did not cut the birds in half. Birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. (Gen 15:5-10)

When the sun had set and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch appeared and passed between the divided animals. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “I give this land to your offspring, from the Brook of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River: the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hethites, Perizzites, Rephaim, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites.” (Gen 15:17-20)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him, saying, “I am God Almighty. Live in my presence and be blameless. I will set up my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: “As for me, here is my covenant with you: You will become the father of many nations. Your name will no longer be Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you. I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you. And to you and your future offspring I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession, and I will be their God.” (Gen 17:1-8)

God also said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations are to keep my covenant. This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations, every male among you is to be circumcised at eight days old—every male born in your household or purchased from any foreigner and not your offspring. Whether born in your household or purchased, he must be circumcised. My covenant will be marked in your flesh as a permanent covenant. If any male is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that man will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Gen 17:9-14)

But God said, “No. Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will confirm my covenant with him as a permanent covenant for his future offspring. (Gen 17:19)

Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, “By myself I have sworn,” this is the Lord’s declaration: “Because you have done this thing and have not withheld your only son, I will indeed bless you and make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your offspring will possess the city gates of their enemies. And all the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring because you have obeyed my command.” (Gen 22:15-18)

This is why the promise is by faith, so that it may be according to grace, to guarantee it to all the descendants—not only to the one who is of the law but also to the one who is of Abraham’s faith. He is the father of us all. As it is written: I have made you the father of many nations— in the presence of the God in whom he believed, the one who gives life to the dead and calls things into existence that do not exist. He believed, hoping against hope, so that he became the father of many nations according to what had been spoken: So will your descendants be. (Rom 4:16-18).

So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law? Or is it by believing what you heard—just like Abraham who believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness? You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham’s sons. Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you. Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, because it is written, Everyone who does not do everything written in the book of the law is cursed. Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith. But the law is not based on faith; instead, the one who does these things will live by them. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. The purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles by Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:5-14)

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say “and to seeds,” as though referring to many, but referring to one, and to your seed, who is Christ. (Gal 3:16)

God spoke promises to Abraham on several occasions, but probably Gen. 13:15 and 17:8 are particularly in view. And to your offspring. Paul knows that the singular (Hb. *zera‘*) can be used as a collective singular that has a plural sense (he interprets it in a plural sense in Rom. 4:18). But it also can have a singular meaning, and here Paul, knowing that only in Christ would the promised blessings come to the Gentiles, sees that the most true and ultimate fulfillment of these OT promises comes to one “offspring,” namely, Christ[[1]](#footnote-1)

For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:27-29)

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he spoke to our ancestors. (Lk 1:54-55)

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets in ancient times; salvation from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us. He has dealt mercifully with our ancestors and remembered his holy covenant— the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. He has given us the privilege, since we have been rescued from the hand of our enemies, to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days. (Lk 1:69-75)

“In addition, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, have also foretold these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your ancestors, saying to Abraham, And all the families of the earth will be blessed through your offspring. God raised up his servant and sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your evil ways.” (Acts 3:24-26)

God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the peoples have assembled with the people of the God of Abraham. For the leaders of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted. (Ps 47:8-9)

The creation, which was originally created good, has now gone wrong because of sin. If God chooses to make things right, he as the Lord and King must act savingly, which sets the stage for the development of the redemptive storyline of Scripture, for the coming of a Redeemer to set creation right—to usher in the *saving reign* of God in this world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Second, God’s kingdom also comes *through* the biblical covenants diachronically. In other words, it is *through* the biblical covenants, across time, that God chooses to reverse the disastrous effects of sin and usher in his saving reign over this world. Following the loss of Eden, redemption is linked to the election of a people—Noah and his family, the descendants of Abraham, and uniquely through the Davidic king. These people, uniquely tied to the nation of Israel, are promised a land to dwell in; they will be the means of blessing to the nations. *Through* the biblical covenants these covenant promises, which ultimately stretch back to God’s initial promise in Genesis 3:15, are realized.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the Gospels, and the entire New Testament, the *kingdom* refers primarily to *God’s kingly* and *sovereign rule*, and it is especially tied to God’s *saving reign* that has broken into this world in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It does *not* primarily refer to a certain geographical location; the phrase tells us more about *God* (the fact that he reigns) than about anything else.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Throughout Scripture these two kingdoms are contrasted, but it is only through Abraham and his seed that God’s salvation will come. In this light, it is best to view the Abrahamic covenant as the means by which God will fulfill his promises for humanity, especially in light of Genesis 3:15 (cf. Gal. 3:16). In this way, Abraham and his family constitute “another Adam,” a calling into existence of something new parallel to creation of old, but in this case a “new creation” (Rom. 4:17). The Abrahamic covenant functions as a subset of the “covenant with creation,” yet narrowed now through one family/nation, that ultimately has a universal *telos* (see fig. 11.3, which emphasizes the narrowing of the Abrahamic covenant and its ultimate universal end). In Abraham and his seed, specifically through Isaac (and then through the nation of Israel, epitomized by the Davidic king), all of God’s promises for the human race will be realized—promises that God unilaterally takes upon himself to accomplish, as beautifully portrayed in the covenant inauguration ceremony in Genesis 15.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Two other elements of the Abrahamic covenant are important to stress. First, the covenant is multifaceted. It not only encompasses spiritual elements that link us ultimately to the new covenant; it also consists of national/physical and typological elements that must be carefully unpacked as the biblical covenants unfold. Second, it also consists of unilateral and bilateral elements and it is not reducible to either one.[[6]](#footnote-6)

God’s action in Genesis 15 speaks of his unilateral action to fulfill his covenant promises, yet God also demands covenant obedience from Abraham in order for the covenant to continue (Gen. 17:1; 18:19; 22:16–18) even though Abraham is not always obedient. This growing tension between God unilaterally keeping his covenant promises *and* also demanding an obedient covenant keeper is only met, finally and fully, in the true seed of Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Contrary to the culture in the ancient Near East, where, as noted, males were circumcised as adults or at puberty, males in Abraham’s family were to be circumcised just after birth, at eight days old. The eighth day derives its significance from the account of creation, where God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Since the seventh day is indefinite, the eighth day is the beginning of the new creation, and this fits with the new creation imagery connected with Abraham as a new Adam.

There is also a negative meaning for this rite. Like the dismembering ritual in Genesis 15:7–18 (cf. Jer. 34:17–20), circumcision graphically portrayed the covenant curse of excision and threatened the cutting off of descendants (Gen. 17:14). Although other nations besides Israel practiced circumcision, the Israelites were the only nation to completely cut off and remove the foreskin. Thus the negative meaning is that circumcision symbolizes being cut off from the covenant community for disloyalty to the covenant demand to “walk before me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1). This negative aspect of circumcision is clearly supported in the text by verse 14, already cited.

Circumcision, then, was a ritual required of Abraham and his family, signifying membership in the covenant community. Negatively, the person who remained uncircumcised would be cut off from the covenant community. Positively, the rite of circumcision symbolized complete devotion to the service of God as a priesthood. The covenant sign underlines Abraham’s Adamic role as a priest in his calling to bring blessing to the nations. Paul in Romans 4:11 rightly sees the obedience of Abraham described in Genesis 17:23–27 as an expression of the righteousness of faith which, according to 15:6, characterized his relation to Yahweh.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The point of contention is whether circumcision, in its OT covenantal context, and baptism in the NT, convey identical realities. Does not circumcision also convey national and typological, as well as spiritual realities? If so, then circumcision and baptism may be similar in meaning but not identical. It is my contention, following the argument of Paul Jewett, that the paedobaptist attempt to reduce the meaning of circumcision merely to its *spiritual* significance is a classic example of reading new covenant realities into the old without first unpacking the OT rite in its own covenantal context and then carefully thinking through the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the covenantal signs. (128-129)

I basically agree with many who argue that paedobaptists, due to their stress on continuity, tend to read new covenant realities into the OT and vice versa, without first unpacking the covenants, the nature of the covenant community, and the covenantal signs in their original redemptive-historical context before thinking carefully through the issues of continuity and discontinuity now that Christ has come. (133)

If we are not careful, however, the notion of *the* “covenant of grace” may be misleading, because Scripture does not speak of only one covenant with different administrations. Rather, Scripture speaks in terms of a *plurality* of covenants (e.g. Gal 4:24; Eph 2:12; Heb 8:7–13), which are all part of the progressive revelation of the one plan of God that ultimately is fulfilled in the new covenant. In reality, the “covenant of grace” is a comprehensive *theological* category, not a biblical one. This does not mean that it is illegitimate. (134)

But if it is used to flatten the relationships and downplay the significant amount of progression between the biblical covenants, which then leads us to ignore specific covenantal discontinuities across redemptive-history, then it is unhelpful, misleading, and illegitimate (135)

In order to make headway in the baptismal divide and think biblically regarding the relationships between the covenants, we should place a moratorium on “covenant of grace” as a category when speaking of the biblical covenants and the relationships between them. In its place, let us speak of the one plan of God or the eternal purposes of God centered in Jesus Christ, for that is what the language of the “covenant of grace” is seeking to underscore. But when it comes to thinking of the “covenant,” let us speak in the plural and then unpack the relationships between the biblical *covenants* vis-à-vis the overall eternal plan of God centered in Jesus Christ. We may then think more accurately about how the one plan of God, tied to the promises of God first given in Gen 3:15, is progressively revealed in history *through* the biblical covenants. (135)

In fact, this flattening of Scripture is clearly taking place when the paedobaptist identifies and equates the Abrahamic covenant with the “covenant of grace” as though it actually were *that* covenant. Instead of first understanding the Abrahamic covenant in its own context, in all its diverse features (e.g., national/physical, typological, and spiritual), and then relating it to God’s overall plan vis-à-vis the biblical covenants, the paedobaptist tends to reduce it merely to its spiritual realities while neglecting its other aspects (135).

he takes the genealogical principle operative in the Abrahamic covenant—“you and your seed” (Gen 17:7)—as applicable *in exactly the same way* across the canon without suspension, abrogation, and especially reinterpretation in the new covenant era (136)

God’s promises to Abraham of a great name, seed, and land (Gen 12:1–3; cp. Gen 15:4–5; 17:1–8; 18:18–19; 22:16–18) must be understood in view of the unfolding drama of Genesis 3–11, especially the promise given in Gen 3:15. (137)

In addition, the promises made to Abraham are also the basis on which God delivers Israel from slavery in Egypt. God’s calling and establishing his covenant with Israel through Moses is in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and his seed (Exod 3:6; cp. 2:24–25; Deut 4:36–38; 1 Chr 16:15–19; 2 Kgs 13:22–23) (138)

Indeed, as D. A. Carson reminds us, “the promise that through Abraham’s seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed, gradually expanded into a major theme in the Old Testament, now bursts into the Great Commission, the mushrooming growth of the Jewish church into the Gentile world, the spreading flame reaching across the Roman Empire and beyond, in anticipation of the climactic consummation of God’s promises in the new heaven and new earth” (140) D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 263.

as we move from Abraham to Christ, there is a significant progression and advance that takes place. The Abrahamic covenant sets the context and anticipates the coming of the new covenant, but promise and type are not the same as fulfillment and antitype. No doubt continuity exists between the covenants, but there is also significant discontinuity. This has implications for how we view the nature of the covenant community and the significance of the covenant signs. (140)

We must be careful that we do not equivocate on the term “redemption.” In the OT context, it can simply refer to God’s deliverance of the nation from Egypt without the full NT sense of redemption from sin and ultimate salvific blessings. To speak of the nation of Israel as a “redeemed” people does not necessarily mean that they were all redeemed in the same sense that the church is the “redeemed” people of God. No doubt there are typological relations but the type is not the same as the antitype. (142)

As we have noted above, paedobaptists understand to “you and your seed” as “you and your physical seed” (i.e., believers and their children)—a principle that continues without suspension or change from Abraham to Christ. But does this understanding do justice to the Abrahamic covenant in its own context, let alone in light of the fulfillment in Christ? My answer is no. We see this by answering the important question, Who is the seed of Abraham? Who is the true heir of God’s promise? Scripture teaches that there are four senses that must be distinguished and not confused. Let us look at each of these in turn.

1. The “seed of Abraham” first refers to a *natural* (physical) seed, namely, every person who was in any way physically descended from Abraham such as Ishmael, Isaac, the sons of Keturah, and by extension Esau, Jacob, etc. (141)

2. The “seed of Abraham” also refers to a *natural, yet special* seed tied to God’s elective and saving purposes, namely Isaac, and by extension Jacob and the entire nation of Israel. (142)

3. The Messiah is the third sense of the “seed of Abraham. (143)

4. In this last sense of the “seed of Abraham,” the NT emphasizes its *spiritual* nature now that Christ has come. (143)

Thus, in the coming of Christ, a new era of redemptive history has dawned where the structures, types, and shadows of the old have given way to the reality and fulfillment of what the OT was all along pointing to. (143-144)

it is illegitimate to identify and equate the Abrahamic covenant with the new covenant without noting the diverse aspects within it (national/physical, typological, spiritual) and the discontinuity that results as we move from Abraham to Christ. For example, to identify and equate the *natural/special* seed (Israel) with the *spiritual* seed (church) as well as to equate the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism is a mistake often made by paedobaptists. It not only fails to do justice to the diverse aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, but also to the way that covenant is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. So Israel, as a nation, is a type of the church. But this is the case, not because the church is merely the replacement of Israel, but because Christ, as the true seed of Abraham and the fulfillment of Israel, unites in himself both spiritual Jews and Gentiles as the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). (144)

In the OT era, the people of God were both a nation and the spiritual people of God; circumcision signaled one’s affiliation with the nation. But even though circumcision marked one as a *natural* seed of Abraham and brought one into the nation of Israel, not all who were part of Israel were the *spiritual* seed (see Rom 9:6). This, as I will argue below, is *not* the same in regard to the new covenant people of God. The new covenant people of God are all those, regardless of ethnicity or circumcision, who have confessed Christ as Lord, the *true/spiritual* seed of Abraham. It includes all those who believe in Christ and who have been born of his Spirit. That is why, in the end, Scripture teaches that we should only baptize those who are Christ’s covenant children—those who are actually in the covenant by God’s grace through regeneration and saving faith. (144)

A second implication is that the genealogical principle of the Abrahamic covenant is reinterpreted as we move from promise to fulfillment.80 Under the previous covenants, the genealogical principle, that is, the relationship between the covenant mediator and his seed was *physical* (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, David). But now, in Christ, under his mediation, the relationship between Christ and his seed is no longer physical but *spiritual*, which entails that the covenant sign must only be applied to those who in fact are the *spiritual* seed of Abraham. (80)

Yet the Lord was pleased to crush him severely. When you make him a guilt offering, he will see his seed, he will prolong his days, and by his hand, the Lord’s pleasure will be accomplished. After his anguish, he will see light and be satisfied. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will carry their iniquities. (Isa 53:10-11)

Now it is not as though the word of God has failed, because not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Neither is it the case that all of Abraham’s children are his descendants. On the contrary, your offspring will be traced through Isaac. That is, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but the children of the promise are considered to be the offspring. For this is the statement of the promise: At this time I will come, and Sarah will have a son. And not only that, but Rebekah conceived children through one man, our father Isaac. For though her sons had not been born yet or done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to election might stand—not from works but from the one who calls—she was told, The older will serve the younger. As it is written: I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau. (Rom 9:6-13)

No doubt within national Israel there were many believers. But as an entire community not “all Israel was Israel” (Rom 9:6). Within the national community, there was a distinction between the physical and spiritual seed of Abraham. Under the old covenant both “seeds” received the covenant sign of circumcision and both were viewed as full covenant members in the national sense. However, it was only the believers—the remnant—who were the spiritual seed of Abraham, the “true Israel” in a salvific sense. (153)

Circumcision benefits you if you observe the law, but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if an uncircumcised man keeps the law’s requirements, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? A man who is physically uncircumcised, but who keeps the law, will judge you who are a lawbreaker in spite of having the letter of the law and circumcision. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person’s praise is not from people but from God. (Rom 2:25-29)

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: “This is what the Lord says: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night so that day and night cease to come at their regular time, then also my covenant with my servant David may be broken. If that could happen, then he would not have a son reigning on his throne and the Levitical priests would not be my ministers. Even as the stars of heaven cannot be counted, and the sand of the sea cannot be measured, so too I will make innumerable the descendants of my servant David and the Levites who minister to me.” (Jer 33:19-22)

33:22 Like Abraham’s descendants, the offspring of David will be innumerable (Gen. 15:1–6), for believers in the Messiah will be innumerable. They will share the Messiah’s inheritance (Rom. 8:17). They will also serve as God’s priests (Ex. 19:5–6; Isa. 66:21; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). my servant. Like Moses (Num. 12:7), David was God’s servant in that he was God’s undershepherd for Israel, God’s means of writing revelation, and God’s close friend. The Messiah was to be the greatest servant (see note on Isa. 42:1–9).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hebrews unambiguously applies Jeremiah to the church (Heb 8–10). As D. A. Carson notes, this means that whatever complex relationships obtain between Israel and the church, at least, in this context, it is a typological connection since the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah is made to “the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (v. 31). (154)

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