

Christianity and Zionism

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The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacres of innocent Palestinians have led Americans to question their nation's relationship with Israel. These events have raised a special problem for evangelical Christians. Does the Bible demand Americans as a nation, or as Christians, to support Israel in their foreign policy regardless of the morality of her actions? In the past many evangelicals have answered this question in the affirmative. They have asserted that God gave special unconditional promises to Israel. He promised her that those nations who bless her will be blessed and those nations who curse her will be cursed. They conclude, therefore, that God will judge the U.S. based on the way that it treats Israel. If the U.S. blesses Israel by supplying economic and military aid, God will bless it. If, however, the U.S. does not supply this aid, or even worse from their perspective, gives aid to Arab countries, it will not be blessed. For example, Jerry Falwell remarks, ". . . if Israel acts in a sinful manner, no one should condone such actions. That, however, has nothing to do with Israel's right to exist, its right to the land, its future position in the kingdom, or the fact that God will fulfill his promise in Genesis 12:3."¹

Since the issue of Christianity and Zionism revolves around the proper interpretation of patriarchal promises, we must examine the passages which contain divine promises to the patriarchs. We must ask three questions. What is promised? To whom is the promise made? And is the promise conditional or unconditional? The passages which are the most relevant to this issue are found in Genesis 12:1-3, 15, 17; 22:16-18 and 26:5. In addition, it is important to determine how the rest of the canon interacts with the patriarchal promises.

The first passage we will examine is Genesis 12:1-3. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) translates this passage as follows:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

The RSV adds in a footnote the alternative reading to the last part of verse three: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

In this passage God promises Abraham that He will make of him a great nation, that He will bless him, that his reputation will be great and that he will be a blessing. Verse three spells out the nature of this blessing. God will bless those (note that in the Hebrew the pronoun is plural) who bless Abraham and curse the one (note that in the Hebrew the pronoun is singular)

who curses him. Perhaps the variation of the plural and the singular shows God's predisposition to bless.²

The final part of this verse creates problems for interpreters. If the verse is translated "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves", it means that Abraham's blessing will be so great that it will be proverbial. The nations would wish that they could be as blessed as Abraham. If the verse is translated "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed", it means that Abraham will be an agent of blessing to the nations. Since each of the interpretations rests on legitimate translations of the Hebrew text, we must look to the context to help us decide which interpretation is proper.

Genesis 12 links the call of the patriarchs to the primaeval stories of Genesis 1-11. In Genesis 1-11 there are two major literary patterns. The stories are arranged in such a way as to show a decline in human morality.³ In the first story the serpent has to talk mankind into sinning (Gen. 3:1-6). In the second story in which Cain slays his brother, Abel, God cannot talk man out of sinning (4:6-7). In the following flood story the wickedness of man has led to a perversion of the order of creation and God is sorry that he made man (6:5-7). Although God spares the faithful few, Noah and his family, he brings destruction upon mankind. Finally, in the story of the tower of Babel all mankind has conspired against God (11:4). Since in this story there is no righteous remnant and since mankind rejected God's authority even after the second chance they received after the flood, the story also shows the decline in human morality and responsiveness to God. This literary pattern is significant, since in Genesis 12 it seems that God has decided to work with one man rather than all of mankind.

The other major literary pattern in Genesis 1-11 is the repetition of the motif of sin, judgment, and grace.⁴ In the first story Adam and Eve sin by eating of the forbidden fruit. God judges them by casting them out of the garden; however, God manifests his grace by sparing their lives. Although God threatened immediate death for transgression of his commandment, he mitigated this judgment by his grace. In the second story, Cain sins by slaying Abel. God judges Cain by cutting him off from the land and making him a fugitive. God manifests his grace by providing a protective mark. In the flood story man sins continually. God judges mankind by bringing a flood which destroys all flesh. God's grace is shown, however, in that Noah and his family and several animals are spared. In addition, God promises never again to bring universal destruction even though man is evil from his youth (8:21-22). In the final story of the tower of Babel, man sins by building a tower with its top in the heavens. God judges mankind by confusing their language. It is significant that this story ends on the note of divine judgment. God does not mediate his judgment with grace. He does exactly what he said he would do.

The call of Abraham fits into this motif by providing the element of grace. It completes the story of the tower of Babel. God has judged mankind who had become progressively worse. In the call of Abraham, God is selecting a person to be his representative to the world and an agent of

salvation for mankind. Therefore, the translation "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" and the interpretation which envisages Abraham becoming an agent of salvation for mankind are preferred. Thus, in Genesis 12:1-3, God promises Abraham that he will be a source of blessing for all mankind.⁵

Regarding Genesis 12:1-3, the third question with which we must deal involves the conditional character of the promise. This question is significant, because if God's promise to Abraham was unconditional, then the promise which was extended to his descendants might be unconditional as well. We should observe that Abraham is told to leave his land, kindred and father's house. This would appear to set a condition for the promise. Cleon L Rogers Jr. remarks that even though there may be a condition expressed by the imperative, the stress is not upon the imperative as a condition, but rather on the cohortative and the purpose or intention expressed by it.⁶ Hans Walter Wolff adds, "The preceding imperative does not thereby have any kind of conditional undertone, as if the promise of Yahweh were dependent upon the obedience of Abraham."⁷

Even if the emphasis is upon the blessing that Abraham will receive, the fact remains that the promises are conditioned by Abraham's obedience. Wolff overplays his hand, since in Hebrew as in English condition and consequence may be expressed by a simple juxtaposition of two clauses.⁸ If Abraham leaves, he will become a great nation, he will be blessed and his name will be great. If he obeys, God will bless those who bless him, curse the one who curses him and in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

The promise in Genesis 12:1-3 is conditioned by Abraham's faith, which would be manifested by his leaving his land, kindred and father's house. As James Muilenburg points out, "It is a heavy burden that Yahweh calls upon Abram to bear . . . All that gives a man identity and security in the ancient world of the Near East is denied him. He must sacrifice these stabilities and go forth to a land the name of which he is not even told."⁹

The next passage which is germane to the issue of the promises to the patriarchs is Genesis 15. In this passage God promises Abraham a son, a multitude of descendants and land from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates. Furthermore, God tells him to cut various animals in two and place their carcasses side by side. While Abraham slept, God, symbolized by a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, passed between the carcasses. While the significance of this ceremony may not be comprehensible to us, it would be understood by Abraham. In the ancient world when kings wanted to make treaties with one another, they would cut animals in two and arrange the carcasses on opposite sides of a path. The person bound by an obligation of the treaty would walk between the bodies. This practice is also reflected in Jeremiah 35:17ff. Since God is the only one who passes between the carcasses, the promises are unconditional and God is unilaterally obliged to keep the covenant according to Genesis 15.¹⁰

In Genesis 17, God again appears to Abraham and promises him that

he will be the father of a multitude of nations. God promises an everlasting covenant relationship with his descendants and that his descendants will have the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. This presentation of the covenant relationship differs from its presentation in Genesis 15, however, since the promises seem to be presented as conditional promises. In Genesis 17:1-2 God tells Abraham to walk before Him and be blameless and He will make a covenant with him. The sign of this covenant will be circumcision. This passage presents a problem. Whereas Genesis 15 presented the covenant as an unconditional covenant, Genesis 17 seems to present this as an explicitly conditional one. Abraham must walk before God blamelessly for this covenant to be in place. This is not a new covenant. Instead, it is a restatement of the previous covenant, yet apparently having an explicit conditionality.

Both Rogers and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. argue that in Genesis 17 the covenant is not presented as a conditional one. They note that since the two imperatives are followed by two cohortative imperfects, the stress is upon what Yahweh will do. Furthermore, it is argued that since the promises have already been given previously *w'e'ttēnah* in verse 2, which is usually translated "I will make" or "I will establish", in reality should be translated "I will make operative the one that is in force."¹¹ Kaiser avers, "The identical argument would apply for 17:9-14 where circumcision might, at first blush, seem like another condition on the promise. But verse 11 completely settled the argument: circumcision was only a "sign" of the covenant, not its condition."¹² Ronald E. Clements adds that in this passage the covenant is an unconditional one having permanent validity since it is presented as an "everlasting covenant" (*berit ôlam*).¹³

Regarding the first argument, while the stress may be upon the promises, the conditional aspect of the promise remains, as was pointed out earlier. Concerning the proposed translation of *w'esettēnâh*, that this should be translated "I will make" is borne out by the parallel expression *wahâqimoti 'et-beriti* which means "I will establish my covenant" and does not mean "to make operative the one that is in force" as shown by its usage in Genesis 9:9, 11, 17. Verses 17:9-14 do demand circumcision since, as verse 14 indicates, an uncircumcised male is excluded from the community of faith. Even if circumcision is a sign, it is a sign which is a condition of the covenant. As for the argument that the covenant is eternal and therefore unconditional, as will be pointed out, Psalm 132 affirms both the conditionality and the eternity of the Davidic covenant.

The next passage which is important for our study is Genesis 22:15-19. Following Abraham's demonstration of faith as shown by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the angel of the Lord calls to him and says that because he has done this, and has not withheld his only son, God will bless Abraham. In this passage Abraham is promised a multitude of descendants, that they will possess the gate of their enemies, and that through his descendants all the earth shall be blessed. This passage presents the covenant as a conditional one. Verse 16 states, "... because you have done this thing

...” and verse 18 concludes, “. . . because you have obeyed my voice.”¹⁴

Finally, in Genesis 26:2-5, the blessing is repeated to Isaac and God promises to bless him and fulfil what he promised “. . . because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” This passage reiterates the patriarchal promises and presents them as conditioned by the manifestation of Abraham’s faith.

The tension created by the conditional and unconditional presentation of the patriarchal covenant is also found in the Davidic covenant, since the latter is presented both as an unconditional covenant and as a conditional one. 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17 and Psalm 89 present the Davidic covenant as an unconditional covenant. For example, in the midst of an exilic lament the psalmist asserts:

*I will sing of thy steadfast love,
O Lord, for ever;
With my mouth I will proclaim thy
faithfulness to all generations.
For thy steadfast love was established for ever,
thy faithfulness is firm as the heavens.
Thou has said, “I have made a covenant
with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant;
‘I will establish your descendants for ever
and build your throne for all generations.’”*

Since the monarchy was destroyed by the Babylonians, the psalmist concludes by asking:

*Lord where is thy steadfast love of old,
which by thy faithfulness thou didst swear to David?*

Psalm 132, however, presents the Davidic covenant as a conditional covenant when it states in verses 11-12:

*The Lord swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:
“One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and my testimonies which I shall teach them,
their sons also for ever
shall sit upon your throne.”*

Note that verse 12 expresses the condition *if your sons keep my covenant*.¹⁵

Canonically, how do we resolve this tension between the conditional and unconditional presentations of a covenant? Perhaps the resolution to this tension lies in the proper understanding of covenant. A covenant entails a specification of obligations involved in a relationship. The obligations may be explicit, as in the case of a conditional covenant, or they may be implicit, as with an “unconditional” covenant. With reference to Genesis, the passage in Ch.17, 22:16-18 and 26:5 makes explicit what Genesis 15

leaves implicit.¹⁶ God demands faith which manifests itself in righteousness. The descendants of Abraham are not merely his physical descendants. If this were the case, why is not Ishmael, the father of the Arabs, an heir to the promises of Israel? While it might be argued that the heirs of the promise are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah rather than those of Abraham and Hagar, this argument is not compelling, since Esau, who is a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, is not an heir of the promise. The descendants of Abraham are not merely those who are circumcised. indeed, Genesis 17:25 records that Ishmael was circumcised. The descendants of Abraham are those who are chosen by God and who respond to this choice by walking before God blamelessly.

Whereas the Abrahamic covenant is implicitly conditional and stresses God's commitment to Abraham's descendants, the Mosaic covenant is explicitly conditional and stresses Israel's responsibility. Exodus 19:5 declares, ". . . if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." There is no unconditional presentation of the Mosaic covenant. According to this covenant, Israel's enjoyment of the land depends upon her obedience to the demands of God set forth at Sinai. Leviticus 18:24-28 declares that if Israel violates the covenant at Sinai the land will vomit them out. Deuteronomy 4:25-26 states that if Israel lapses into idolatry, they will soon utterly perish from the land and will not live long on it.

When the prophets take up the tradition of the patriarchal promises, they treat them as conditional promises. John Bright notes that if the text of Jeremiah 4:1-2 is trustworthy, "We seem to have here an allusion to, or even a citation of, the promise to Abraham as that is found in Genesis 18:18 and similar passages. As we read it in Genesis, the promise to Abraham carries no expressed conditions. But Jeremiah introduces one. He says that God will make good his promise to Abraham if—but only if—the people truly repent. Jeremiah knew of no unconditional promises."¹⁷

The prophet Ezekiel takes up the tradition of the patriarchal promises in Ezekiel 33:23-29.¹⁸ During the exile there were some Israelites who remained in the land of Palestine while the rest of the nation was in exile in Babylon. With regard to those remaining in Palestine, they reasoned that Abraham was only one man and he possessed the land; they were many, therefore, they should possess the land. Their argument went as follows:

Abraham and his seed were promised this land.

The promise was unconditional.

We are Abraham's seed.

Therefore we shall possess the land.

Ezekiel responds to their argument by telling them that God will judge them because they have not behaved righteously. They have trusted in their own military might rather than trusting in God. According to Ezekiel it was not sufficient to be a mere physical descendant of Abraham. They had to manifest the faith of Abraham. Since they had failed to manifest this faith,

God would bring judgment rather than blessing. According to Ezekiel, the patriarchal promises were not unconditional.¹⁹

The New Testament is in harmony with this understanding of the patriarchal promises. In Romans 2:28-29 the apostle Paul testifies that physical circumcision counts for nothing. In Galatians 3:16 he states, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say 'and to seeds' referring to the many; but, referring to one, 'and your seed', which is Christ." According to Paul, the Abrahamic covenant finds its fulfillment in Christ. The relevance of this for the church is expressed by the apostle in Galatians 3:29 when he adds, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise." This means that the church and not Israel are the heirs of the patriarchal promises.

Concerning this line of argumentation, Falwell remarks, "I do not deny that the saved are the people of God. But we must also follow Scripture when it says Israel is God's special inheritance (Deut. 7:6-8; Ps. 135:4; Isa. 41:8-9), and when the New Testament teaches that God has not cast off his people Israel (Rom. 11:1-2, 11:25-27)."²⁰ As regards Falwell's use of the Old Testament, the Mosaic covenant explicitly, and the Abrahamic covenant at least implicitly, show that Israel is God's special inheritance only if they fulfill the demands of the covenant. As regards his use of the New Testament, Paul points out that God has not cast off Israel, because a remnant has been saved. In Romans 11:1-2 Paul notes that he himself is an example of this remnant since he is both a Christian and a physical descendant of Abraham. While Paul may anticipate the future salvation of his kinsmen in Romans 11:25-7, he argues that in their present state of unbelief they have been broken off the tree of God's kindness and that the Gentiles who believe in Christ have been grafted into the tree in their place (Romans 11:17-24). Referring to Israel, Paul states in Romans 11:23, "And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again." This means that Paul anticipates Israel's renewed status as the people of God only when they manifest faith in Christ. As for the present state of the Gentiles who believe in Christ, Paul writes in Romans 9:8 that it is not the children of flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise who are reckoned as Abraham's descendants. This means that the Church and not Israel in its present state of unbelief are to be reckoned as Abraham's descendants.

It has been argued that the Old Testament recognizes the conditionality of the patriarchal promises, and that the New Testament views Christ and his body, the church, as the descendants of Abraham. If this conclusion is correct, the scriptures do not demand that the modern state of Israel be accorded any special treatment. God will not judge Americans, as Christians, or as a nation, based upon the amount of foreign aid we give to Israel.

If we are searching for an Old Testament standard against which American foreign policy can be judged, we should turn our attention to Amos 1:3-2:3. This passage is particularly relevant for the issue of foreign

policy, since Amos condemned the states surrounding Israel for their international sins. The standard which the prophet employed was the canon of universal law. According to Amos, Israel's neighbours were guilty of violating basic humanitarian principles and, therefore, were liable for judgment. Amos' condemnation of Moab in Amos 2:1-3 for her treatment of Edom demonstrates that the nations were not denounced simply for opposing Israel. They were denounced for their violations of human rights.

The canon of universal law and human rights provides a helpful standard for determining what the role of the United States should be in the Middle East. While humanitarian reasons may lead Americans to favour an independent secure Jewish homeland, they need not demand that they support every action undertaken by this nation. This same humanitarian interest may lead Americans to favour an independent secure Palestinian homeland even though they may not support every action undertaken by this nation. This standard also demands that Americans should be actively working for peace rather than helping either side to wage war on the other.

NOTES

1. Jerry Falwell, "Jerry Falwell Objects", *Christianity Today*, 22 January 1982, p. 17.
2. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 159-60.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 152 ff.
5. Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: 1982), pp. 175-76 argues that the variation between the passive and the reflexive is not significant since the reflexive "bless themselves by you" envisages the nations receiving a blessing since they would indirectly bless Abraham.
6. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "The Covenant with Abraham and its Historical Setting" *Bibliotheca Sacra* Vol. 127, (1970), p. 252.
7. Hans Walter Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist" *Interpretation*, Vol. 20, (1966), p. 138. It should be noted that scholars who argue for an unconditional Abrahamic covenant are not necessarily Christian Zionists.
8. E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford, 1909), §159b.
9. James Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations: Blessing and World History" *Interpretation*, Vol. 19, (1965), p. 391.
10. John Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 25-26.
11. Rogers, p. 253, and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 93.
12. Kaiser, p. 93.
13. Ronald E. Clements, *Abraham and David: Genesis 15 and Its Meaning for Israelite Tradition* (London, 1967), p. 71.
14. These and all scriptural citations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.
15. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1973), pp. 94-97, 232-34 dates this psalm to the reign of David and notes that it may be the original formulation of the Davidic covenant.
16. If one is unwilling to permit diversity and implicit conditionality, and if one is forced, thereby, to select either a conditional or an unconditional Abrahamic covenant, one ought to select the former in view of the explicit presentations of conditionality in Genesis 12:1, 17:1-2, 22:16-18 and 26:5. One would also be forced to understand Genesis 15 as giving assurance to Abraham after he had manifested faith (15:6) which is the chief requirement of the covenant.

17. Bright, p. 160.
18. For a fuller treatment of this passage see Walther Zimmerli *Ezekiel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969) pp. 815-24 and "Prophetic Proclamation and Reinterpretation", in Douglas A. Knight (ed.) *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 88.
19. James A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy" in George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (eds.) *Canon and Authority* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 32 notes that both Ezekiel 33 and Isaiah 51:2-3 use the same texts and hermeneutics but differ only because of contexts.
20. Falwell, p. 16.