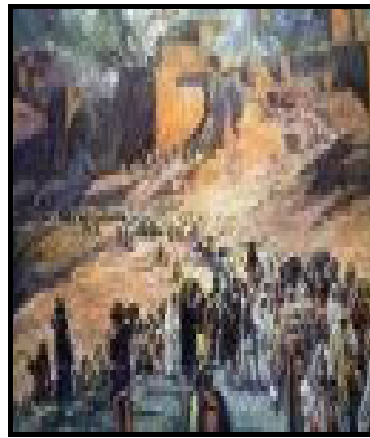


cycle where the people break their Covenant promises, are punished and forgiven. This cycle can be most clearly seen in the stories of the Judges.

In the end it looks as if God is no longer prepared to forgive and the Jewish kingdom is destroyed, and the Jews taken into captivity to Babylon (2 Kings ch.25 and Jeremiah ch.39). But God's mercy is endless. They are allowed to return (Deutero-Isaiah and the book of Ezra) and God provides an interior Covenant, one that is written on the hearts of the people (Jeremiah ch.31) so that they no longer need to be reminded of their obligations.



However, the relationship of humankind to God is not yet complete. The Jewish people know their obligations but can not yet fulfil their full potential. The question also remains about the salvation of all the other people of the Earth. The individual Covenant becomes transcended by a universal Covenant through Christ, one that brings reconciliation with God and enables all of humankind to attain its original intended position with God.

Abraham's story in Genesis provides a direct link to the Covenant of Jesus Christ. Prior to Abraham's covenant with God, he receives a visit from the priest-king of Jerusalem, Melchizedek (Genesis ch.14) who brings gifts of bread and wine to him after a military victory. Early Christian writers recognised the parallel of this event to Christ's Covenant. Not only, then, is Abraham an ancestor of Christ's, he is also Christ's complement. Abraham creates formal relationships with God, albeit limited to his Hebrew family that became the nation of Israel, and Christ completes them in a universal fashion with all nations.



Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

6

What Has Abraham's Covenant Got To Do With Jesus?

The meaning and importance of Covenant



Questions for Reflection

1. Why is Abraham seen as the founder (the first Patriarch) of the Jewish nation and not Noah?
2. Why did God make two Covenants or agreements with Abraham?
3. What is the importance of the Covenant?
4. What is the point of so many Genealogies in Genesis?

What is a Covenant?

A Covenant is a solemn agreement defining the relationship between two people or groups. Covenants can be considered as treaties and they were common in the ancient world, particularly between a victorious king and his conquered subjects.

However, as written documents were not common in early Hebrew culture, promises were made verbally, often with ritualistic signs to give the words powerful significance.

There are many such covenants in the Old Testament e.g. between Jacob and Laban (Genesis ch.31), David and Jonathan (1 Samuel ch.18), David and the elders of Israel (2 Samuel ch.5), to name but a few. The most important for our purposes are those made between God (Yahweh) and His people. In all these, it is God who takes the initiative and makes certain promises in return for certain commitments.

God's Covenants

There are 7 major Covenants with God in the Bible, 6 in the Old Testament and, of course, the New Testament Covenant of Jesus. The OT Covenants are:

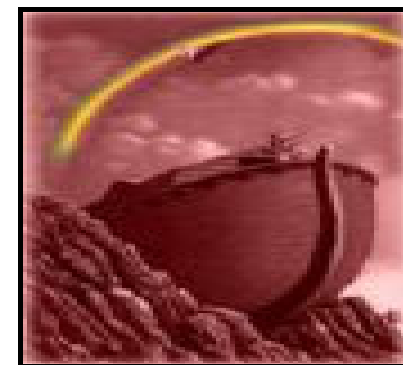
- with Noah **(Genesis ch.9)** (promise of no more floods)
- with Abraham **(Genesis ch.15 & 17)** (promise of ancestors and land)
- with all Hebrews at Sinai **(Exodus ch.19)** (promise that Israel will be God's unique people. Renewed at ch.24 and 34)
- with Phineas **(Numbers ch.25)** (promise of eternal priesthood)
- with David **(2 Samuel ch.7)** (promise of eternal kingship)
- with Israel **(Jeremiah ch.31)** (promise to forgive Israel's sins - a Covenant of the heart)

Noah's and Abraham's Covenants

God's Covenant with Noah follows the story of the Flood, with God promising never to send such a deluge again, in return for a commitment not to eat blood or commit murder. The rainbow acts as a seal on the agreement.



The Noah story is similar to Flood stories in several cultures, no doubt based on the memory of some cataclysmic event, like a tsunami. The biblical writer uses this memory as a framework to emphasise the human propensity to sin, God's hatred of sin, and His loving goodness to those who obey Him.



The writer uses genealogies from Adam to Noah, and from Noah to Abraham in order to show the continuity of God's creation, and the way that all peoples are inter-related. In the ancient world great importance was placed on a person's name and ancestry.

In particular, though, the writer wanted to stress the intimate connection between God, Adam, and the peoples that would be known variously as Hebrews, Israelites and Jews.

It is Abraham, however, who is the key ancestor in Jewish history because it was with him that God made a covenant promising that his descendants would be a great people in their own land. This covenant is seen as the original basis of Israel's relationship with God, although the one at Sinai would be seen as the fuller covenant because it was with the Hebrews as a people and nation.

Genesis presents Abraham's covenant twice (Gen 15 & 17), one sealed with the splitting in two of the sacrifices, and one with the sign of circumcision. These two presentations are most probably those of two different traditions, both known by the writer and interwoven into Genesis. This type of doublet often occurs in the Bible to ensure that memories from different traditions are incorporated in the written record.

The Sinaitic covenant will be referred to in the discussion on the Law, the Davidic Covenant with Messianism, and the Covenant of the Heart in the context of the Prophets.

The Covenant Link to Christ

If there is a single unifying theme in the OT then it is that of Covenant. The Covenant relationships between God and His people provide the tension and drama for what occurs in all the OT books. There is an ongoing process or