

Logic behind the Covenant with Abraham

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Abstract

The logic behind God's covenant with Abraham and the people of Israel is examined. In particular, apparently contradictory sides of the covenant, conditional and unconditional, are discussed, as is why the covenant with the nation of Israel is still valid, even in the 21st century, and always will be.

While the selection of the nation of Israel has often been considered irrelevant since the days of the New Testament, in the last century or so, an increasing number of people have begun to realize this may not be the case.¹ In particular, people have begun to realize and acknowledge the special relationship between the church and the nation of Israel that was intended in the Bible, particularly in the writings of Apostle Paul.² This letter aims to address this issue of the selection of Israel by examining the logic behind the covenant that God made with the people of Israel through Abraham.

Does the covenant God made with Abraham over 4,000 years ago still hold with the people of Israel, even in the 21st century? Before Jesus arrived on earth, that is, in the days of the Old Testament, many people agreed that Israel was the chosen people and nation. Does it still hold true that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remain special, and are still the chosen people in the days of New Testament, after Jesus came? A clue can be found in Romans 11:1.

The verse stating that God has not rejected the Jewish people is in Romans, and was written by Apostle Paul. Through the writings of Paul, we may understand that God did not reject His people even in the days of the New Testament, and that also applies to the present day. However, how did Paul know for certain that God did not disregard the nation of Israel in the days after Jesus came and ascended into heaven? We, in the 21st century, have the New Testament Bible, and can be sure of the selection of Israel in the days of the New Testament, but how was Paul, who had only the Old Testament, so certain?

Let us examine the selection of Israel and go to Genesis where God initially makes a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:7, 9). This is the part where the promise is made to the nation of Israel. If we examine these two verses carefully, in verse 7, God is promising an everlasting covenant and to be the God of Israel forever. Even in our daily lives, we often use the word “everlasting” or “forever”. For example, in a romantic story, Bob says he loves Alice very much and promises his love will last forever. He uses the word forever in order to emphasize his love toward Alice and that is the way that Alice understands it. However, the manner in which we use the word forever, that is, in order to emphasize our intentions, is quite different from the way it is used in the Bible. When God says He will be the God of Israel forever, it is not merely an emphasis; He literally means that He will be.

Going back to the romantic story of Alice and Bob, when Bob says to Alice (or *vice versa*) that his love will be forever, what does that mean? It means that, regardless of her condition, whether she is sick or healthy, young or old, his love for her will not change. When we

examine verse 7 of Genesis, the covenant promise that God will be the God of Israel forever appears to be unconditional. While the word forever is a way of expression when used by Bob, God's everlasting covenant is a literal promise; it appears to be an unconditional covenant with Israel.

However, when we look at verse 9, it appears to be a different story. In this verse, God is warning the people of Israel that they should live by following the Word of God. He is imposing a condition. Therefore, the word "everlasting" in verse 7 seems to present an unconditional covenant, while, according to verse 9, the statement that Israel should follow the rules of God appears to imply that the covenant is conditional, depending on the behavior of Israel. Therefore, the covenant appears to present the following two aspects,

1. Unconditional (verse 7: Everlasting)
2. Conditional (verse 9: Obedience of Israel is required)

History tells us that the people of Israel often looked at the unconditional side of the covenant, and misunderstood what it said about their being the chosen people, and therefore sometimes became arrogant. Indeed, John the Baptist warned (Matthew 3:9) that even with the stones God could raise up the children for Abraham. At the time, many Jewish people noticed the unconditional covenant and were satisfied, being Israelites, and believed that God would always be their God, regardless of their behavior.

After Jesus ascended into heaven and the Gospel started to spread to gentiles, one of the reasons why many gentile Christians did not recognize the selection of Israel was due to the conditionality described in (2) above. The covenant between God and Israel was based on the condition of obedience, but when Jesus came to earth, and many Jewish people did not accept Jesus, some Christians believed that this meant that the selection was no longer valid.

Is the covenant between God and Israel unconditional as in (1), or conditional as described in (2)? The resolution of this problem should not be considered with the partial truths of (1) and (2) up to certain degree. This letter aims to address why the selection is fully unconditional and, at the same time, fully conditional. Apostle Paul explains the conditionality of (2) in Romans 9:7, stating that Isaac was the descendant promised by God. Another example is provided in Romans 9:13. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. However, Jacob became the son of promise. What is Apostle Paul trying to explain here? The covenant between God and Israel continues to hold through the promised descendants who obey the Word of God. This was so even in the days of Isaac and Jacob, and explains why the conditionality in (2) applies fully.

How did Apostle Paul, with only the Old Testament, know that, when many Jewish people did not accept Jesus, the covenant God had made with Israel still held? It was because Paul knew that he himself was one of the very first examples of evidence of this fact. The numbers were small, but there remained sufficient Jewish people who were still obedient to the Word of God. The covenant had continued to hold through those remnant people, meaning that Paul, looking at himself and the disciples of Jesus, as well as thousands of Jewish people at the church of Jerusalem, knew that it had not perished (Romans 11:1). The condition of the validity of the covenant does not rest upon the majority rule of the Israeli people; long as there is at least one obedient person, the covenant remains valid.

Thus far, we have examined the conditional aspect of the covenant, that is, how this conditionality applies fully, but what about the unconditional side in (1)? Why did God say that the people of Israel would be His people forever? Romans 11:2 states that God foreknew. What did He know in advance? What was it that He knew such that He promised that He would be the God of Israel forever? God chose Isaac as a promised descendant and knew Jacob would submit in advance (Romans 9:11). God foreknew that Moses, David, and Daniel, as well as many prophets, would obey the Word of God. In the 1st century, God knew Paul, Peter, and many believers from the Jerusalem church, in advance. God knew which people of Israel would submit to His Word, and, through these people, the covenant continued to hold.

Why then, did God make a promise that He would be the God of Israel forever? It was because He foreknew that there would be people of Israel who would be obedient continuously. Who are the obedient Jewish people in the 21st century? They are those Jewish people who believe in Jesus; Messianic Jews. God foreknew these people of the 21st century. God knew in advance that there will be obedient people in Israel, until Jesus returns, and even after that time, therefore He chose Israel. Since God foreknew this, He said that the covenant with Israel would be forever. In this way, both the unconditionality in (1) and conditionality in (2) are fully valid.

What, then, are the promises made between God and Israel? God gave Israel His Word (Romans 3:2), the Law (Romans 9:4), and the firstborn son status (Exodus 4:22). By His eternal grace, God has also blessed gentiles to be His children. However, as examined above, the covenant with the Israeli people remains valid, even now, because there are faithful Jewish people. The covenant will be valid forever, because there will always be faithful Jewish people. God foreknew this and chose His people.

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