

Nehemiah Coxe and the division of Abraham's Covenant

The preface from [Nehemiah Coxe's 'Discourse of the Covenants'](#) is so apt, instructive and beautiful, it is reproduced here.¹

“Now, as it is evident from what has already been said, that all federal transactions of God with men flow only from his good pleasure, and the counsel of his Will; so upon that ground it is certainly to be concluded that our knowledge and understanding of them must wholly depend upon divine revelation. None can pretend acquaintance with the secret of God, except as He has pleased to reveal it in his Word. This light must guide all our inquiries after it; and our sentiments about things of this nature must be strictly governed by this rule, seeing that the nature of them is such that it transcends the common principles of reason or natural light. They owe their origin to the free acts of the Divine Will and wisdom, which are unaccountable till revealed by God himself. And therefore, it becomes us to captivate all our thoughts of them to the obedience of faith, knowing that learning, and strength of parts (though of excellent use in their place), if not guided by Scripture-light in these inquiries, can only form an ingenious error, and lose a man in the labyrinth of his own imagination and uncertain guesses. Seeing that the single advantage of those assistances (in this case trusted to, and stretched beyond their line) can reach no further than to enable him to err with reason, and so to wander from truth in a path seemingly smoother, though no less dangerous than others light upon. And therefore, in these things lies the spring of most mistakes and corruptions of doctrine and practice in matters of religion. Men easily find out and agree in the true dictates of the Law of Nature. But in things pertaining to the covenants of God, how various are their sentiments! Indeed, many great, learned, and good men have been divided in their judgments about some things of great importance to the faith and edification of the Church, though not absolutely necessary to her being. Some one error admitted about the nature of God's federal transactions with men, strangely perplexes the whole system or body of divinity, and entangles our interpretation of innumerable texts of Scripture. And by this means, jars and contentions have been perpetuated in the Church, to the great grief and hindrance of all, the offence of the weak, and the greater scandal of the blind world. And all this has been much occasioned through the lack of a due and humble attention to that revelation of truth which God has given us in the holy Scriptures, and endeavouring to collect the mind of God from there without prejudgment (which is a greater occasion of these mistakes than men are generally aware of), and carefully avoiding the undue mixture or confusion of natural things, with those that are purely of a federal nature. Because the covenant of God is His secret, and he alone can make us know it — and yet our Faith and Practice, Comfort and Holiness, are closely concerned in a good acquaintance with it — we need no other motive for a diligent and humble search of the Scriptures, than for the right informing of our judgment about it. Nor do we need any other caution not to attribute too much to our own

1 An easier pdf to read and navigate is found [here](#)

wisdom or abilities, but to manage all our inquiries with earnest prayer to God for that Holy Spirit of light and truth, who alone can lead us into all this truth, and bring us to a clear acquaintance with the mind of God concerning it.”

The cautions and exhortations here are most important, and we reiterate the words of Revelation 5.1-5 to underscore them:

“And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.

And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?

And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon.

And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.

And one of the elders says unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.”

The Discourse is rich in astute scriptural observations and comment, even readers familiar with the texts he cites will find much to illumine their understanding.

His main purpose in writing the treatise is to address the use of circumcision as a sign of the Covenant of Grace given to Abraham, to refute the practice of paedobaptism. As he explains, eschewing a polemical style, he seeks to illustrate the matter peaceably and gently from the texts.

However, I fear the good doctor, for physician he was, has diagnosed his own malady. In dividing between the Covenant of Grace to Abraham and a second ancillary Covenant of Circumcision to prove his case, he has introduced unforeseen and to some extent unforeseeable consequences, which he did not intend. It is to address this briefly and concisely, that this short paper is written.

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Dividing the Covenant of Abraham

First it is necessary to show that Brother Coxe does divide the Covenant of Abraham. It is made plain in 4.10²: “This Covenant of Grace ...is one by which Abraham was made the father of the faithful. ... It was confirmed and ratified by a sure promise to Abraham a considerable time before the Covenant of Circumcision was given to him — about twenty-five years before.” There are other references to confirm his opinion, though it is not always stated so baldly.³ Incidentally, this timing is taken from Abraham’s call in Ur, at or before 75 years, until the appearance of God in Genesis 17, when he was 99 years old, Gen.12.4; 17.1. The Covenant is first made explicit to Abraham however in Gen.15.18, at least a year before Ishmael’s birth, when he was 86 years old, Gen.16.16. This oversight is significant, as we shall see. Upon what basis is this justified?

Contrast of conditions

In first describing the Covenant of Circumcision, which our beloved sees inaugurated in Gen.17, he writes, ‘we first meet with an express injunction of obedience to a command (and that of positive right) as the condition of Covenant-Interest’. He is referring to ‘I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be thou perfect’ Gen.17.1. He adds, ‘then a strict and entire obedience to His precepts is required in order to inherit the good things that were to be given by this covenant.’⁴ Is this the character of a Covenant of grace or of works? Yet may this not be said equally of the New Testament, ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father, Who is in Heaven, is perfect’ Mt.5.48, ‘But as He that has called you is holy, be ye holy. Because it is written, Be ye holy, for I am holy’ 1 Pet.1.15-6, ‘Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing’ Jas.1.4, and many other like exhortations could be added.

Indeed, Abraham is set before Isaac as a paragon of virtue and beauty, ‘I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these lands; and by thy seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves; because that Abraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.’ Gen.26.5 But was he perfect, did he never sin?

To insist that commands to holiness themselves constitute a Covenant of works is a notion that refutes itself. The key issue is one upon what terms the sinner *enters* the covenant, and upon what basis is his standing *retained*. If it were perfect obedience, even Abraham would not qualify, not could any other son of Adam, but One, as we see as our brother delineates Abraham’s flaws all too clearly.⁵

2 References allude to chapter and section, and, if present, numbered subsection.

3 5.8.1 for example it is called a handmaid to the Covenant of Grace, as though supplemental and indeed he says, ‘added and made subservient to its [the Covenant of Grace’s] great ends’.

5.8.2 ‘But the truth is, notwithstanding the respect that this covenant has to the Covenant of Grace, it yet remains distinct from it’

8.11 ‘That in the prologue to this Covenant of Circumcision, Genesis 17, God expressly renewed and confirmed to Abraham, the great promise of the Covenant of Grace concerning the justifying of the Gentiles by faith in Christ.’

4 5.7

5 See all of 4.2.

To insist that the commands and circumcision per se distinguish another covenant declared in chapter 17 from the covenant in chapter 15, assumes covenants of grace do not include commands and conditions, when they manifestly do. It is begging the question by predicating a distinction between the covenant in Gen.15 and that in Gen.17 upon obedience, as a condition of entry, not merely as means of sustained enjoyment of the blessings. Grace does not mean licence or lawlessness, it requires the complete exclusion of merit, strictly considered.

Character

The Covenant made with Abram in Gen.15 is a model of imputation by faith, Rom.4.11, of which righteousness, circumcision in Gen.17, according to the same text, is the seal. The covenant, unlike that in Jer.34.8,18-19, which was broken by the majority party, does not require Abram's passage between the divided sacrifices to ratify it. On the contrary, he prepares and preserves, but does *not* participate. He is a spectator, and a beneficiary, but not a surety or an active direct participant in the covenant. The smoking lamp and burning furnace, so reminiscent of the later column of smoke and pillar of fire, underwrite the sanction. This surely is Messiah, 1 Cor.10.1-4,9, Exod.3.4,7,10-4.

Is this Covenant without condition, without command, without the need for patience? Gen.15.13-4, indicates long years of patience and suffering. However entry into the Covenant for Abram and his seed is free, it is a gracious promise, not a body of laws that must be kept prior to or to sustain acceptance.

What of Gen.17? The opening command in v.1, seems to express disapproval of Abram's acquiescence to Sarai's shortcut to progeny by Hagar, as does the narrative in Gen.21.10-12. The sign of circumcision itself implies a mortifying of the very carnal lust, which Abram has just been encouraged by his own wife to exercise. Ishmael is treated, even prior to Hagar's divorce, as a less than legitimate heir, Gen.17.18-9, though with great grace nonetheless, v.20. So the context is of significant moral failing. Yet this is the first time the LORD explicitly appears physically to Abraham, changes his and Sarah's name, as he does later with Israel, and 'goes up' from him after speaking with him, not in a vision, but to his direct, wakeful consciousness v.3,17. There is indication in the next chapter that Abraham recognises his Visitor immediately, without prompting, Gen.18.1-2. Great grace is shown, despite significant sin.

Nothing suggests it is a different covenant from that revealed before, the future tense in 17.2,7-8,21 is indeterminate and may as easily apply to the present as the future, as it declares the certainty of God's honouring His promises as emphatically as the perfect in 15.18.

Delay

Then there is the question of the delay between the explicit revealing of the covenant, as a covenant, in Gen.15 and the reconfirmation of the same covenant, with sign and seal of circumcision, Rom.4.11 and Gen.17.11-14, at least 15 years later. Does this necessarily indicate two distinct covenants? Not at all, Noah's covenant is fulfilled after the flood, but declared a year before, Gen.6.18; 9.9,11. The New Covenant is predicted in Gen.3.15, explicitly foretold in Jer.31.31, Isa.55.3, Ezek.37.26 and Zech.9.11 and in many other passages, but only ratified many centuries later.

Our brother suggests the delay is in fact nearly 25 years, but though the blessing aspects of the promise, both to and from Abram, are revealed in Gen.12.1-3, the covenant itself is not till Gen.15, a delay of about 15 years.

Peculiarity

Our beloved brother makes much of the Covenant of Peculiarity, since circumcision forms the foundation of Israel's separation from the Gentiles, and the fence of ceremonial law, for example in dietary matters that severs Jew from Gentile, conferring peculiar privilege.⁶ This is true. But it is also true of both covenants and in a deep sense of all covenants. Any participant in a covenant gains special privilege and blessing, otherwise what were the covenant for? Adam would have gained eternal life, Noah's family are preserved, Abraham's Seed is a distinctive blessing to all the world, and David gains the prerogative of an enduring dynasty. The New Testament is a Covenant of 'Peculiarity' par excellence, fulfilling the ancient promise of Ex.19.5-6 and Isa.66.21, 1 Pet.2.9.

Does the Peculiarity promised to Abraham in Gen.17 differ from Gen.15? Hardly. In both his seed is sharply distinguished from the oppressing world around and then crowned with the blessing of blessing others, Gen.17.14; 15.13,16. In Gen.17.19, the covenant of what our brother would call circumcision, is identified with the covenant of blessing to other nations made with Isaac and Jacob, 'thou shalt call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him.' Do Isaac and Jacob also know two covenants, side by side, one of works and ethnic separation and another of grace and global blessing?

No, they are one, and the covenant or oath is revealed as one, not two, Gen.22.17; 26.3-4; 28.14.

Relation of Abraham's Covenant to New Testament, is there an identity?

Paul by Divine inspiration tells us, 'God...preached before the Gospel to Abraham' Gal.3.8 and then shows how this promise cannot be modified, abrogated or diluted by the later Law Covenant at Sinai, 'the covenant that was confirmed *before* of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years afterward, cannot disannul, that it might make the promise of no effect' Gal.3.17.

He ascribes the blessing Abraham brings to the Gentiles to the imputation of righteousness by faith, by gracious justification, without works, Gal.3.8, Rom.4.9-14, prior to the disclosure of the sign of the same covenant, circumcision.

So Abraham's covenant of grace anticipates the New Testament, is 'the Gospel' to Abraham, foreshadows the work of the cross Rom.4.18-25, it is an allegory of liberation Gal 4.24-6, and a promise of future mercy Lk.1.72-3, but is it identical to the New Testament? No doubt Abraham's Covenant depends upon the New Testament, reveals the character and nature of the New Testament to Abraham, but is it in itself the New Testament wholly and truly? Is the New Testament merely a fuller disclosure of the exact same covenant? Here again, we must dissent with our learned brother,⁷

⁶ 8.5, 5.8.1, 6.8, 7.9.3, 8.8.2, 8.8.3 etc

⁷ 'There is but one covenant of spiritual and eternal blessings in Christ Jesus, founded in the eternal decree and counsel of God's love and grace, which is now revealed to Abraham.' 4.9. If the intention was to convey dependence, confirmation and inextricable linkage, we would assent, but this statement indicates an absolute identity, between the Covenant of Grace with Abraham and the New Testament, which we deny.

Abraham 'saw these things afar off' and 'embraced the promises', he saw the day of the Messiah and was rejoiced, but the Testament was not enacted until the death of the Mediator Heb.9.15-17, though conceived and planned in Eternal Council, Tit.1.2, Rev.13.8, Jn.17.4-6 etc.

Relation to the Law

Abraham loved God's law and obeyed it, as we have seen. He obeyed even the most sifting and terrible commands, even to the loss of his first son's fellowship and his second son's life, had the Lord not prevented him. His faith and obedience went hand in hand. He knew God, trusted Him, walked with Him and obeyed Him. But not always, as ever the scripture reveals the flaws even of its great examples, and his deception in Egypt, in Gaza, his foolishness with Hagar, his amazed laughter at the staggering promises of God, are recorded to guide and warn us, and that we might not idolise God's friend.

What relation does the covenant bear to Abraham's exemplary, if not flawless, obedience? His faith does not begin with this covenant, but in Ur. The faith that justified him predated the solemn arrangement at Hebron Gen.12.4, Heb.11.8, Acts 7.2.

The covenant in Genesis 15 explicitly distils and frames the grace and the oath which God gives freely to Abraham, not in response to this faith, for God is the Author, not merely the Subject of faith Heb.12.2, Isa.41.2,8-9, but it is more fully revealed and more completely disclosed, as he exercises trust in its Source, culminating in his clear view of the day of the Cross Gen.22.12,14, Jn.8.56. This covenant of grace requires only trust to apply and enter, but it transforms the heart and attitude, it purifies, elevates, broadens and refines the mind, especially towards God's will. Instead of the evil reluctance of his ancestors, here is Abraham's delight, to embrace the most painful requirements, knowing the goodness of the Requirer.

James confirms the fullness of Abraham's profession, the genuineness of his faith in Christ and the reality of the prior *imputation* of Divine righteousness to him is manifest in and confirmed by his *imparted* personal righteousness in the near sacrifice of Isaac decades later, Jas.2.21-6, 'For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also'.

May not Baptism also become a 'work' which stymies grace, if relied upon for merit? May not the Lord's Table become an idol, if trusted in as a gateway to life, instead of the perfect work at Calvary? Circumcision was a signpost to the substance of the covenant, a saving faith that renounces lust and embraces regeneration, Col.2.11,13, and for Jews who embrace it, it still is. But require it for salvation and it becomes the yoke of the whole Law, Gal.5.1-3, especially for Gentiles, who should abstain, but for Jews too, if it become the focus of a new idolatry, Jer.9.25-6.

Yet this may not be said of adultery or any other breach of the Divine Law, for 'they which do such things shall **not** inherit the kingdom of God' Gal.5.20. On the contrary, the hallmark of the New Covenant is that it is inscribed in the delight and desire of a true believer Jer.31.31, Ezek.37.24-6, Isa.59.20-21.

Parties

Although Abram did not enter the covenant as a participant, in the sense of walking between the parted sacrifices, he does partake of the benefit, he is the primary recipient of the blessing, and the covenant in Gen.15 is enacted at his request and for his sake. Exactly the same is true of the covenant signified by circumcision in Gen.17. He partakes, but the benefit it signifies and seals has *already been* obtained, Rom.4.11. The benefit of his seed is also in mind, Gen.17.7.

Ishmael, conceived and born after the covenant was first revealed, is the first recipient of circumcision, 17.19-20, 23, yet not the one through whom the covenant will be established. The male slaves of Abraham are in a similar position, 17.13. Sarai is also a beneficiary, 17.15-9, although she does not partake of the rite.

Circumcision

The addition of the sign does not modify the covenant's promised blessings, or the parties, God in Christ and Abraham and his Seed. Abraham's name is changed, so is Sarah's, consistent with the blessing of many noble descendants. Ishmael's exclusion from being the agent of blessing is not surprising, given the means, but it causes Abraham grave disappointment, 17.18.

But what of the act itself? Uncircumcision excludes from the covenant, 17.14, and a work is necessary to sustain it for Abraham and to. Tell the Maccabees who imposed circumcision on the uncircumcised, 1 Macc.2.46, that the covenant is one of free grace, without works, and will they not scoff at such Hellenic liberties?⁸

To this two main arguments must be asserted. First, the work is not usually by the newborn babes, upon the eighth day, or even likely by Ishmael, in his 13th year, who had no choice in the matter, nor even the adult slaves of Abraham. It is imposed by the parents. There is in these cases no merit in the recipient, except perhaps of meek and patient submission in a teenager or an adult. When Zipporah refuses circumcision for her son, even Moses waits, Ex.4.25. This would of course not apply to a Gentile proselyte, for whom circumcision, especially if seen as a mandatory step for obtaining salvation and full forgiveness, would most certainly snatch at merit and destroy grace.

Secondly, after Sinai, circumcision represents the keeping of the whole Law heartily, entirely and cheerfully, it becomes an emblem of failure, after the golden calf, Deut.10.16, and one that can only be remedied by that foretaste of the New Covenant found in the New Covenant at the Plains of Moab, as the Apostle reminds us, Rom.10.6-8, Deut.29.1; 30.6,11-14. Hence the Lord attributes circumcision to Moses, Jn.7.22, whilst tracing its origin to the patriarchs.

Whilst exclusionary to Gentile outside Israel, circumcision is but a symbol of regeneration and its fruits, Rom.2.25, Gal.6.15.⁹

8 The Maccabees circumcised infants and children, the fault lay with their parents, though the consequence of exclusion from the Passover, sanctified Temple worship and national life, by virtue of Gen.17.14 would have been devastating. It must be viewed in the context of enforced Hellenisation by the Seleucids, often on pains of death.

9 There is much more to circumcision than we can explore properly here: the full details of what took place in Ex.4.24-26 and its implications, the allusion and links to the Firstborn, the uncircumcised generation in Sinai, and the significance of Gilgal, for example.

Unfulfilled and unconfirmed

The covenant in Genesis 17 also contains clear indications that the substance of this Covenant is yet to be established, yet to be ratified, despite the ritual in Gen.15, for example 17.7,19,21. There is a hint of as yet unfulfilled ratification, not just future blessing, also in Gen.22.18, and this is confirmed by its reiteration to Isaac, showing he is not himself *the* Seed, Gen.26.4, and in citation in Ps.72.17 of *Solomon's* greater coming Son.

Typical

There is no doubt, the Covenant as a whole, not just in Gen.17, has a strong prophetic and predictive character. The literal and historical miracle of Isaac's birth especially anticipates the Virgin Birth, and many other miraculous births, not least John's. The Blessing of the Seed anticipates blessing to all the Gentile families, as well as being a recipient of blessing, without the means of this being clear. Circumcision as we have seen respects the denying of lust, the mortification of the flesh, the gift of a chaste and pure heart in regeneration. Brother Coxe recognises this, 'Again, the typical respect and analogy of the Covenant of Peculiarity to the Covenant of Grace (as it will be more fully revealed later and accomplished in Christ), affords another occasion and reason for the interweaving of those promises which require a distinct application.'¹⁰ Yet these types, given the later introduction of circumcision, are common to the covenant of both Gen.15 and Gen.17. There is one other typical component that requires our special attention.

Focus

When Abram believes God, in Gen.15.6 and receives imputed righteousness, the subject is his Seed, its innumerable character, and the preservation of his inheritance to his own offspring. However this does not prompt the revelation of the arrangements for the covenant. It is Abram's search for assurance in another matter that does,

"And He said unto him: 'I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.'

And he said: 'O Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?'" 15.7-8.

The focus of the covenant, and its immediate occasion was assuring Abram of the promise of inheriting Canaan. It is reiterated explicitly in Gen.17.8

"I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

It is repeated in Psalm 105.7-11:

"He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth.

He hath remembered His covenant for ever, the word which He commanded to a thousand [not merely 3 to 4, or even one hundred] generations;

[The covenant] which He made with Abraham, and His oath unto Isaac;

And He established it unto Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an everlasting covenant;

Saying: 'Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance.'"

We will return to this matter shortly.¹¹

Ishmael firstborn, yet disinherited

Ishmael was the first to be circumcised, Gen.17.23, despite already being dismissed as heir. It is intriguing that in two passages that refer to his relationship to Abraham, he is still referred to as the firstborn son, Gen.25.13, 1 Chr.1.29. In both cases, this is obscured by translations into Greek (LXX), the Aramaic targumim and in other languages, but the Hebrew literally is 'the names of the generations of the firstborn Ishmael', and the construction is highly unusual compared to other name lists which contain the title firstborn. For example, perhaps the closest is Num.3.2, 'the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar', the title first born is preceded by an article and follows the construct phrase, 'the sons of Aaron'. In Gen.25.13, however the term firstborn is without either article or suffix and *precedes* Ishmael's name, as his rather than Nebaioth's title. The same construction occurs in 1 Chr.1.29, immediately after the listing of Abraham's first two sons as 'Isaac and Ishmael' in v.28.¹²

It is a gentle, guarded admission, by the Holy Spirit, that his birthright *was* removed by Hagar's expulsion.

There is indication too that despite Ishmael's mocking (using the root of Isaac's name) of Isaac, his casting out from the family, by Hagar's divorce precisely because of the danger his primogeniture posed and the consequent allegory in Gal. 4.24,30, that Ishmael later came to faith in Abraham's God. First, there is the faith of his mother, Hagar, who is the first person in scripture recorded to have seen the LORD, Gen.16.13, and receive particular provision for her son. The place of the sacred encounter was sanctified by a name she gave, which was honoured by Isaac afterwards, Gen.24.65; 25.11. After the divorce too, there is at Abraham's plea, a dramatic intervention to save Hagar and Ishmael's life, for the sake of the boy Gen.21.17, and the Angel, for it seems to be the Saviour who again intervenes, though not this time appearing, 'for God has heard the voice of the lad, where he is'. Then finally when Ishmael dies, in deliberate echo of Abraham's death a few verses earlier, 'he is gathered to his people', 25.8,17. If Ishmael was not gathered to the bosom of his believing mother and at last to his dear believing father, to whom else might he be?

11 Other passages that allude to the focus of the Abrahamic covenant being the perpetual grant of Canaan are Ex.6.4, Lev.26.42-5, Neh.9.8. Whilst it is plain that violating the covenant of Sinai prevented Israel's enjoyment of the land, Deut.29.24-8, it could not break the original endowment.

12 In 1 Chr.2.25,27 another similar form of expression, the title firstborn precedes the begetter, not the begotten, and so the name lists are the grandchildren of the name that succeeds the term.

Sign and seal

Our brother reasons, “Nor did it have till then any outward sign or token immediately belonging to it. For if it had been so, this sign or token, like the covenant itself, would have remained without change, and not have vanished away with the other shadows of the Mosaic economy.” 4.10.1 But did the rainbow appear when Noah entered the Ark, when the covenant was announced, or afterwards, when it was established? Did the Lord command baptism before or after the sealing of the New Covenant in his own blood? The signs were not always revealed at the time of the covenant, even when considered essential to church membership.

A sign illustrates and signifies a covenant, a seal is 'that by which anything is confirmed, proved, authenticated',¹³ like a signet or seal on a decree.

Mr Coxe correctly argues Baptism is not a seal of anything, “For we don’t read that any other ordinance (not even baptism) is so called in Scripture. But in the New Testament, the sealing of believers is attributed to the Holy Ghost.” 8.10 Sealing is not in water, but by a good conscience answering to the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

Circumcision however, as the brother rightly underscores, *was* both a sign and a seal, Rom.4.11.

Both circumcision and baptism are tokens of a new birth, Col.2.11-13, intertwined. But these operate from different perspectives. One anticipates and declares the nature of the future mystery of the regeneration of the New Covenant, Deut.30.6, though enjoyed by OT believers, without fully exploring its significance or appreciating its foundation, Lk.7.28. The other looks back at the completed death & resurrection of our Saviour, by which we too are raised by faith to new life, Rom.6.3-4. The first a national token of future promise, Ex.12.48, Jer.4.4, the latter is a banner of each individual work of grace in the heart, Mt.28.19, Mk.16.16, Acts 2.38,41.

It is a great error to propose the latter replaces the former, not primarily as symbols of different kinds of covenant, but as signs with wholly different administrations, ends and purposes, which did and may even yet run concurrently to different effects.

For although there is truth that circumcision, whilst administered under a covenant of *grace* has become a metonymy, a representation, of whole obedience to the *law*, Rom.2.25, 3.1, Phil.3.3 which to those seeking justification *by its means*, namely by depending for merit on the law it signifies, it could only possibly lead to slavery, guilt and disappointment Acts 15.10, Gal.5.1-3, Rom.9.31-2.

As a symbol of something substantial, circumcision would have acted as a token signifying to all OT saints, who renounced works righteousness, embraced free atonement and the gift of God's Spirit, and delighted in God's law after the heart, much as Christians now delight in the fruits of regeneration, Ps.40.8; 73.25; 112.1; 119.24-5, but, as our brother properly insists, it was a retrospective *seal of* Abraham's particular faith and situation.¹⁵ It is to be remembered too that this

¹³ Strong's vid. loc.

¹⁴ 1 Pet.3.21

¹⁵ 8.11.2 and 8.12 “Even so, it was to Abraham a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had, etc. But this arose from the peculiar and extraordinary circumstances, and the capacity he was in.”

sign was recognised by these authors to be the experience of the *minority* of those circumcised.¹⁶ It must be remembered that baptism too, though a cardinal sign of initiation in the covenant grace, could similarly be misused, if instead of being a banner of what has *already* occurred in the heart, it is treated as a necessary step to *gaining* regeneration, 1 Pet.3.21, Acts 10.47-8.

For Gentiles, Christ ministers inward circumcision to us, Rom.15.8, Phil.3.3, Col.2.11.

Infant baptism

Brother Coxe is right to point out that circumcision and baptism into Christ ran concurrently for a while in the Jewish Church,¹⁷ and indeed still do in Israel and amongst believing Jews in the diaspora.

His five arguments for distinguishing circumcision from child baptism,¹⁸ although flawed in parts, are not dependent on the separating Abraham's covenant into two.

His main argument for this separation is to oppose the Covenant of Circumcision to the Covenant of Grace, and thus establish Paul's argument in Galatians.¹⁹ However, again, if baptism is misused it too can as readily become an obstacle to grace, as it in churches that hold to the heresy of baptismal regeneration. They repeat the offence of the Judaizers with a Christian rite. Baptism wasn't at issue with the Judaizers, circumcision was, but it was misuse of the sign ever to claim that it was necessary for salvation, rather than admission to the commonwealth and feasts of Israel. Job and Jethro, as far as we can know, were both uncircumcised, but saved, so were countless others before and after Abraham.

Our dear brother has misconstrued Abraham's covenant, in a misguided attempt to strengthen a good case, that infant baptism is needless and unwarranted, and is not equivalent to circumcision. However as his eloquent preface indicates, there are unintended consequences also and it is our unpleasant duty to touch on these, in closing.

The Jewish People

Are God's covenants mutable? Is God Himself subject to change?

Jeremiah 31 and 33 contain strong assertions of Divine faithfulness to the nation of Israel, as a people, as the literal seed of Israel. So do numerous other passages.²⁰

"If these ordinances depart from before Me, says the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever.

¹⁶ Many of the enemies considered in these psalms were themselves circumcised.

¹⁷ 8.12 Conclusion.

¹⁸ 7.12

¹⁹ 8.12 as a whole summarises this position, but it aggregates the arguments throughout the treatise.

²⁰ Jer.23.8, Jer.32.40-44, Isa.63.11-19, Isa.49.14-22, Deut.32.43, Rev.7.4 compare 7.9, amongst an innumerable list of others.

Thus says the LORD: If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, then will I also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the LORD.” Jer.31.34-5 The prophet then gives detailed geographical description of Jerusalem’s literal border.

“Thus says the LORD: ‘If My covenant be not with day and night, if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth;

then will I also cast away the seed of Jacob, and of David My servant, so that I will not take of his seed to be rulers over the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; for I will cause their captivity to return, and will have compassion on them.” Jer.33.25-26

Can this covenant be annulled or amended without God breaking his pledge? The Apostle tells us explicitly otherwise,

“Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall, salvation is come unto the Gentiles, to provoke them to jealousy.

Now if the fall of them be riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles, how much more their fullness?” Rom.11.11b-12

“For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what *shall* the receiving *of them* be but life from the dead?” v.15

There remains a purpose for Israel, not *just* as individuals, though salvation from sin is always an individual affair, Zech.12.11-14, but *also* as a nation, as promised. Just as in the Exodus, many fell in unbelief, yet *the nation* was delivered from slavery and bitter servitude.

How is this accomplished and why is circumcision *still* a witness to this?

The Land promise

Our brother writes, “..the other difficulty arises from the extent of the promise in point of time. For here God promises to give this land to Abraham and to his Seed forever; and again in Gen 17.8, for an everlasting possession. Whereas it is evident they have now, for many ages, been disinherited of it.” 5.4.2

This is no longer true. God has kept His covenant with Abraham to the literal seed, especially the increasing number of believing Jews. Had the promise to David the covenant with Abraham would endure for 1,000 generation really been cut short after a mere 42, or 45 or 54,²¹ and God’s faithfulness not be deeply impugned, whilst Jews are slaughtered by malice, despite some looking to His Son? God forbid!

21 Matthew 1.1-17 with the excision of the three kings and without, Luke 3.23-34.

Many Christians were the first movers and shakers, seeing God's hand in this, in making it happen, long before Theodor Herzl.²²

The Jews' need for a refuge from ubiquitous, evolving and multifaceted hatred drove Herzl and motivated many Christian Zionists. The land promise has flamed in the heart of Jews since their expulsion, despite great risk and many deaths. The return of Israel to its land, despite very strong opposition has been miraculous. Herzl himself wrote in his diary, at the first Zionist Congress in 1897, that if he declared a Jewish State would be established, 'I would be answered by universal laughter'.²³ This is not in small part at first to intense Jewish anti-Zionist lobbying, fearing an aggravation of hatred by the initiative.²⁴

Our brother's justification for this position is to cite the end of the ceremonial elements of Jewish worship, "For the priesthood of Levi is called an everlasting priesthood, Num 25.13; and the gates of the temple are everlasting doors, Psa 24.6. And in this same sense, Canaan is said to be an everlasting inheritance. No more is intended than the continuance of these for a long time" 5.4.2

However Barnabas, a Levite, was made a priest of Christ, so was Matthew, or Levi, and every believer, Jew or Gentile, is the covenant then annulled or overruled? Has not God done *more* than He promised?

Yet if a believing Jew seeking shelter from persecution, or a Jewish child sought refuge from murderous physical enemies, would not Abraham raise his eyebrow at the notion that the promised land was closed up and unavailable until the resurrection, despite the blemishless merit and excellence of his beloved Seed? That Seed is the New Covenant.²⁵

The promise Of Messiah's birth in Bethlehem is literal, the prophecy of His entrance into Jerusalem on a foal is literal, His death in Jerusalem literal, is then the promise of His return in glory to the Mount of Olives in a literal Israel, an allegory?²⁶

The Temple is gone and a rebuilding, with the renewing of animal sacrifices will be a useless shell, an insult, a repudiation of the sacred Covenant, paving the way only for darker abominations.²⁷ The priesthood and the Law has been changed, failed mediation replaced and superseded by the only flawless Mediator.²⁸ Do not all the glorious lines and contents of the Tabernacle witness to Him?²⁹

Yet the land promise **remains**, a token of the cosmos to come, yet necessary now too to its own part, in the last stages of the Divine plan.³⁰ Circumcision is not salvific. Yet it is still a living testimony to this crucial aspect of the promise of the survival of the Jewish nation, "this 'genea' will not pass till all these things be fulfilled", may mean race or stock, as well as generation.³¹

22 A Short History of Christian Zionism from the Reformation to the Twenty First Century, Donald M. Lewis, 2021 IVP, 978-0-8308-4697-9.

23 Israel a history, Martin Gilbert, 1999, Black Swan, 0-552-99545-2.

24 The Balfour Declaration, Jonathan Schneer, 2010, Random House, 978-0-8129-7603-8

25 Isa.49.8, Isa.42.6

26 Mic.5.2, Zech.9.9, Lk.13.33, Acts 1.10-11, Zech.14.4-5

27 Isa.66.1-4, Dan.11.30-2, Mk.11.14,17, 2 Thess.2.4

28 Mal.2.8, Zech.6.12,13, Heb.9.14,15

29 Jn.2.19

30 Zech.8.7-8, 12.1-3, Ezek.37.21-27, 39.23-29 (after Gog and Magog), Lk.21.24

31 Mt.24.34

It is testimony curiously that Muslims, most Arabs and other 'Abrahamic' faiths also share to this day, through Ishmael's blind, but wise obedience to the sign of *his* covenant. The Rechabites were praised for their tenacious obedience to their father's oath.³² Does Jewish and Muslim adherence to this ritual, that testifies to a hope of reconciliation to the God of Abraham and each other in Him, promised to the elect by the sacrifice of His dear Son not also betoken a future 'life from the dead'?

32 Jer.35.13,16,18-9