

God of Covenant

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Were the Covenants with Abraham and David Conditional?

In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that contemporary reformed theologians are taking different stances on whether the covenants God made with Abraham and David were conditional or unconditional. This is not to say that we have enjoyed complete unanimity on this and related matters in past centuries. Covenant theology has always been riddled with varying opinions. Yet, in our day, differences on this particular issue have so impacted other theological and practical dimensions of the Christian faith that they should no longer be ignored.

Details notwithstanding, two tendencies have emerged. On the one side, some theologians in our circles have argued that the covenants with Abraham and David were unconditional. That is to say, these covenants guaranteed future blessings unconditionally to Abraham and David.

On the other side, other theologians in our circles have argued that the covenants with Abraham and David were conditional. In this view, the future blessings of these covenants were gracious but in some ways dependent upon the condition of human loyalty.

In large measure, this difference of opinion has risen from comparisons made between biblical covenants and an assortment of ancient Near Eastern texts. For a number of decades now, Old Testament scholars across the theological spectrum have drawn upon ancient texts to clarify the nature of biblical covenants. A number of reformed theologians have built on these comparative studies in ways that have the potential of confusing many sincere believers. So, I have felt compelled to speak to some aspects of the matter.

I. Early Research

What concerns us here specifically is how parallels have been proposed between biblical covenants and two types of ancient Near Eastern texts: Suzerain-Vassal Treaties and Royal Land Grants.¹ In a word, Suzerain-Vassal Treaties were formally ratified international arrangements between greater kings and lesser kings in the ancient Near East. Royal Land Grants were legal declarations in which kings granted properties, usually to priests and other high-ranking officials, as rewards for faithful service. A number of scholars have argued that the covenant with Moses should be closely associated with Suzerain-Vassal Treaties and that the covenants with Abraham and David should be closely associated with Royal Land Grants. These associations provide important frames of reference out of which they describe the dynamics of these biblical covenants.

A. Suzerain-Vassal Treaties

On the one hand, similarities between the Mosaic covenant and Suzerain-Vassal Treaties have come into view. Broadly speaking, these treaties were bi-lateral, at least implicitly obligating both Suzerains and vassals to observe their respective duties. They stipulated that loyalty from the vassal would result in further benevolences and that disloyalty would result in a variety of punishments, usually from the gods. Correspondingly, the Mosaic covenant has been characterized as a bi-lateral, conditional or obligatory covenant. It stipulated that after Sinai Israel's loyalty would result in divine blessings and that Israel's disloyalty would result in divine curses.

There can be little doubt that these outlooks are fundamentally correct. By now, most students of the Old Testament are familiar with the ways Suzerain-Vassal treaties compare with the covenant with Moses. Suzerain-Vassal Treaties focused on royal benevolences, vassal obligations and the consequences of blessing and cursing. Time and again, Scriptures associated with the Mosaic covenant rehearse God's benevolences to Israel, Israel's obligation to obey the covenant law of Moses and the conditional consequences of blessing and cursing from God. It would be difficult to deny these basic similarities.

B. Royal Land Grants

In the second place, Royal Land Grants of the ancient Near East have been viewed as unconditional or promissory declarations. In line with this analysis, a number of reformed theologians have argued that the divine covenants with Abraham and David reflected these qualities as well. In this view, in covenant with Abraham, God himself fully guaranteed future fulfillment of the blessings

¹ For a rather full bibliography on such comparative studies see Williamson extensive bibliography. Paul R. Williamson *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007) pp. 211-226.

promised in this covenant. Similarly, the blessings of the Davidic covenant were also secured by an unconditional covenant that reflected Royal Land Grants. In this sense, the Mosaic covenant was an interlude, a covenant of obligation situated between the unconditional covenants of promise in Abraham and David.

II. Recent Research

Without a doubt there are positive correlations between the divine covenants with Abraham and David and ancient Near Eastern Royal Land Grants. These connections should be explored even further. But it is precisely here that past assessments run into difficulties. Most reflection in our circles on these matters is based on early research into Royal Land Grants. In more recent decades, Old Testament scholars have more fully assessed their content and function in the ancient Near East.

More recent research has indicated that Land Grants were by no means unconditional.² They were not promissory in the sense that perpetual possession of properties was unconditionally guaranteed. On the contrary, when ancient kings made Land Grants, they did so conditionally. This historical reality calls into question the use of Land Grants as frameworks for understanding the covenants with Abraham and David as unconditional.

A. General Cultural Realities

Before we point to explicit textual evidence in favor of this re-assessment, we should mention how counter-intuitive it is to believe that ancient Near Eastern kings of stature granted anything to anyone under their authority unconditionally. In the nations surrounding Israel, obligation to the throne and the certainty of consequences for disloyalty were the *sine qua non* of society. We may even go so far as to say that the requirement of loyalty to the king was so basic to ancient Near Eastern societies that it was not necessary to state it explicitly in every ceremonial and legal document. As modern governments do not repeat warnings about the consequences of treason every time they enact policies toward their citizens, the requirement of loyalty to the throne was not explicitly repeated in every context in the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, recipients of royal gifts in the ancient world were always obligated to serve their benefactors faithfully or to face the consequences.

² For the sake of convenience I depend heavily on the summaries included in the fine research of my friend Gary Knoppers. See: Gary Knoppers, "Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?" *JAOS*, Vol. 116, No. 4. (Oct. - Dec., 1996), pp. 670-697.

In much the same way, when we draw parallels from Royal Land Grants to the covenants with Abraham and David, we must remind ourselves that these covenants were made in the context of Yahweh's imperial rule. Abraham and David were citizens of God's Kingdom and were always obligated to remain loyal to their divine king. Contrary to what we might think, it was not necessary for God to state this obligation explicitly every time he enacted policies in his kingdom. The broader scope of the biblical record makes it crystal clear that Yahweh's servants were always obligated to remain loyal to him or to face the severe consequences of his judgment.

B. Evidence of Ancient Texts

In addition to this general cultural reality, it has become evident from ancient texts themselves that obligations of future loyalty applied even to Royal Land Grants. To see how this was true we will look at a number of relevant texts from several nations surrounding Israel.

1. Ugaritic

In Ugaritic texts from the second millennium we have records of royal gifts of various properties. Texts dealing with these kinds of gifts explicitly cite the requirement of continued loyalty. For instance, `Ammittamru gave land to Abdimilku, but also explicitly required allegiance from him in this way.

Abdimilku and his sons will render service due to the sons of the queen in perpetuity.

This text illustrates what we already expect to find in an ancient Near Eastern society. Gifts of property were not simply rewards for past service; they also obligated their recipients to future loyalty. In fact, the very act of receiving a grant intensified the requirement of future loyalty.

2. Hittite

A number of Hittite royal grants are mentioned in materials from 1400-1200 BC. As far as current research has indicated, these texts do not contain explicit conditions within them. The absence of explicit conditions led earlier scholars to infer that such grants were in fact unconditional. Yet, in Hittite society, priests and high ranking officials who received Land Grants were still under obligation to their royal benefactors. The so-called "Instructions" of the Hittite King for those who had received many benevolences from him explicitly required oaths of loyalty, enumerated crimes that would be considered treasonous and threatened the

vengeance of the gods against violators. Loyalty was required of all who were under the authority of the king, especially those to whom he had given much.

3. *Babylonian*

Evidence for the conditional nature of Royal Land Grants also appears in Babylonian *kuddurus*. *Kuddurus* were boundary markers, not Land Grants *per se*, but they give some insights into the ways grants functioned in society. *Kuddurus* threatened severe curses on those who took property granted by a king to another. These threats led some earlier scholars to believe that the grants were permanent and irreversible. Yet, it is important to note that the threat of curses in these texts was never applied to the king himself. Instead, they enumerated what might happen to people other than the king who violated a grant. In this sense, *kuddurus* were designed to uphold the authority of the king's grant over the actions of others, not to limit the freedom of the king himself. Had kings lost their rights to reverse their grants, we would expect them to be listed among those threatened with curses. The absence of divine threats against the king, strongly suggests, as we should expect in the ancient world, that kings did not give up their prerogative to confiscate land from those who later rebelled against them.

4. *Assyrian*

Neo-Assyrian Royal Land Grants have often been cited as entirely promissory. Several such grants raise explicit threats against the recipients' progeny and some interpreters have argued that no threat is made against the immediate recipient of land. Although progeny may be cursed, no curses applied to the one to whom the grant was made. For instance, in the grant of Ashurbanipal to his servant Baltaya, the following instructions are given:

If any one of [Baltaya's sons] has sinned against the king, his lord, (or) lifted his hand against a god, do not go on the word of a hostile informer, (but) investigate and establish whether the statement is true. Do not act negligently against the seal, but impose punishment upon him in accordance with his guilt.

This declaration explicitly stipulates that Baltaya's descendants were to be treated fairly, but they were still to be judged for crimes against the king. As modern readers we may be tempted to read this explicit threat too individualistically. Modern people often treat what happens to their progeny with indifference. But among honorable people in the ancient world, the threat of severe punishment against progeny was no less of a threat against the head of the family. It implied in the strongest terms how important it was for the immediate recipient of the grant to promote loyalty to his benefactor so that future generations would do the same. The curse threatened against Baltaya's progeny

was in fact a poignant threat of curse against Baltaya himself. The focus on his progeny was not intended to communicate that he was safe from recompense. On the contrary, Baltaya himself was threatened by the explicit threat against his progeny. As our Ugaritic example above suggests, the responsibilities and fates of heads of families and their progenies were intertwined in the ancient world. In fact, a threat against progeny served to heighten the threat against the immediate recipient.

We can summarize the evidence in this way. Despite the outlooks of some scholars in early research, gifts of land in the ancient Near East were always understood within the broader social context that required loyalty to the king. Nowhere do we have evidence that a king renounced his right to punish those who were disloyal by confiscating their lands. Curses threatened against future generations implied the threat of curse against the immediate recipient. Recipients of Land Grants were required to be faithful to their benefactors or deal with the consequences of their disloyalty.

We should be clear that these observations do not prove anything about the nature of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. We must always be ready to see unique features in biblical covenants that distinguish them from extra-biblical texts. At the same time, however, what we have noted does indicate how mistaken it is to argue from Royal Land Grants that the covenants with Abraham and David did not involve future conditions.

III. Biblical Evidence

In addition to extra-biblical evidence, a fuller analysis of the biblical accounts of God's covenants with Abraham and David indicates that they entailed future obligations and conditions. Unfortunately, when dealing with these covenants we encounter a number of complicating factors that often obscure this fact. We will note several of these complications before looking at the pertinent biblical texts.

A. Complications

Much of the controversy surrounding these matters results from the nature of the biblical sources we have for the covenants with Abraham and David. The biblical account of the covenant with Moses includes the primary documents of the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:1-23:33), but we have nothing comparable for the covenants with Abraham and David. In fact, there is not even a suggestion in Scripture that these covenants were ever written down in formally ratified documents.

The Scriptures only tell us about these covenants indirectly, as portions of secondary records. With respect to Abraham we only have two main narrative records in Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 as well as allusions in other Old Testament books. With respect to David, we only have the two major narrative records of 2 Samuel 7:1-29 and its parallel in 1 Chronicles 17:1-27 along with snippets of information in Psalms 89 and 132. As much as we can learn from these texts, they are by no means complete primary records.

We must constantly remind ourselves that the narrative texts that refer to these covenants are didactic narratives. In other words, they were intentionally shaped by their authors to speak in certain ways to their audiences. While the narratives of Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 are true to actual history, they are selective accounts weighted in various ways to serve Moses' literary purposes. The same may be said of the narratives in 2 Samuel 7:1-29 and 1 Chronicles 17:1-27. They too were shaped infallibly to serve the purposes of the writers of Samuel and Chronicles.

Much the same must be said of other texts that refer to the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Whether in the prophetic literature or in the Psalms, we find truthful references to these covenants, but they too are portions of larger literary contexts written for their own distinctive purposes. Larger literary purposes govern what they emphasize about God's covenants with Abraham and David. These larger contexts ought to shape our reading of the biblical references to their covenants.

Unfortunately, a survey of reformed literature on the covenants with Abraham and David quickly reveals that these complications are seldom significantly factored into discussions. For the most part, interpreters act as if they are handling actual covenant texts. In many respects, they treat the relevant passages as if they were stand-alone documents, much like Suzerain-Vassal Treaties and Royal Land Grants. Thus, many interpreters think that they have grasped a full picture of these covenants simply by summarizing what these texts say. But the biblical records of God's covenants with Abraham and David should hardly be treated in this way.

B. Abraham

To illustrate what we mean, consider first the main narrative texts that deal with the covenant with Abraham: Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27. These two chapters are the only places where the term "covenant" (*berith*) appears in the Abrahamic narratives, but they are very different from each other. On the one hand, Genesis 15:9-21 reports how Abraham killed animals in a ceremony of malediction and how Yahweh passed through the carnage to confirm by divine oath that Abraham's descendants would certainly inherit the land of Canaan. On the other hand, in Genesis 17:9-14 the maledictory cutting ceremony of circumcision is

required of Abraham and his descendants as a sign of their loyalty to Yahweh. These texts report truths about Abraham's covenant in very different ways. Why is this so?

1. Literary Orientation

To answer this question, we should begin with the obvious but often overlooked fact that these chapters give us access to the Abrahamic covenant from the perspective of life under the covenant with Moses. In these chapters of Genesis, Moses provided Israel with a secondary record of Abraham's covenant designed to do much more than simply report what happened in the days of Abraham. He designed his accounts to speak to issues that were important for Israel living in the time of *his* covenant. In a word, Israel viewed Abraham's covenant only through the lens of Moses' covenant.

Consider three features of Genesis 15 that reveal an orientation toward the Mosaic period. First, Genesis 15:9-10 reports that Abraham gathered animals according to God's command to prepare for the covenant ceremony, describing the dividing of all the animals except the birds. The text gives no explanation for Abraham's special treatment of the birds. This information gap perplexes many modern readers, but Moses' early readers did not need an explanation because Mosaic law had codified this practice in sacrificial rituals by the time of the writing of Genesis (see Leviticus 1:17).

Second, the symbolic significance of the "smoking firepot with a blazing torch" that passed through the midst of the carnage in Genesis 15:17 also receives no explanation in the text. Once again, modern readers are often confused as to its significance, but apparently Moses felt no explanation was needed because of the immediate association it brought to the minds of the Israelites who received his account. It reminded them of the appearance of God in the form of the "pillar of fire and cloud" leading them toward the promised land. (Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19, 24; 33:9-10; Numbers 14:14) Most early competent readers would have made this association and realized that it was God who walked among the carnage, taking the threat of curse upon himself.

Third, God's words to Abraham during his vision stressed a detail of history that spoke directly to the Israelites following Moses. As we read in Genesis 15:13-16,

Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

God's words here drew attention to Israel's future enslavement and deliverance from Egypt hundreds of years after the death of Abraham. Of all the ways Moses could have summarized God's words to Abraham, he chose to include only these details. This focus points to the fact that Moses had his original exodus audience in mind as he wrote. He wanted them to see that God's promise to Abraham was being fulfilled in their exodus. In these and other ways, we can see that Moses' record of Abraham's covenant in Genesis 15:1-21 was intentionally designed to speak to the situation of his early Israelite audience.

Similar observations can be made of Genesis 17:1-27. This passage also stresses matters that were relevant for the Israelites following Moses. First, it opens with God calling Abraham to loyal service in the broadest sense possible:

"I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." (Genesis 17:1-2).

The vocabulary of a "blameless" life (*tamim*) needed no explanation for the early audience of Genesis because it was a familiar way of summarizing conformity to the moral requirements of God in the covenant with Moses (see Deut 18:13).

Second, after Abraham fell face down in repentance, God recounted what he himself would do on Abraham's behalf in verses 4-8 (note "as for me" v. 4). But in verses 9-14 the text shifts abruptly to a description of requirements given to Abraham (note "as for you" v. 9). God turned to Abraham and said,

As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.

Interestingly enough, although Genesis 17:1 begins this passage with a very broad description of Abraham's covenant obligations, his loyalty is summed up this way in verse 10.

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Here circumcision served as a synecdoche for the covenantal requirement of a blameless life. As such, God warned that anyone who violated the requirement of circumcision would be cut off or placed under covenant curses (Genesis 17:14).

The summation of blameless covenant keeping in terms of circumcision demonstrates once again that Moses' account in Genesis 17 was designed for the Israelites following him. Through this passage Moses taught the importance

of observing circumcision to an audience that would soon be required to undergo the ceremony at Gilgal (Deuteronomy 11.30; Joshua 5:1-12).

In this sense, the records of Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 were not detached, comprehensive accounts of the entire covenant relationship between God and Abraham. They were secondary, didactic narratives that used the Abrahamic covenant to teach Israel under the covenant with Moses.

2. *Literary Strategy*

When we consider the larger literary strategy of Moses' record of Abraham's life, Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 counterbalance each other in many ways. The former focuses on God's gracious promise to Abraham's descendants and makes no explicit mention of Abraham's responsibilities. But this central concern in Genesis 15 does not appear in Genesis 17. On the contrary, while divine promises are made in 17:4-8, the requirement of loyal service and the threat of curses for Abraham and his descendants are also emphasized in 17:9-14. The larger literary strategy Moses employed in this part of Genesis explains why these chapters are so different.

First, we should note that we are not dealing with two covenants made with Abraham. In Genesis 15:18 we read that "the LORD made a covenant with Abram," or more literally "cut a covenant" (*karath*), a common way to speak of the initiation of a covenant. In Genesis 17:2, however, God said, "I will *confirm* my covenant," using the Hebrew expression *ve'ettenah*, meaning to confirm or establish what was already in existence. So, we find here not two covenants, but two facets or dimensions of God's one covenant with Abraham, the latter being a confirmation and further explanation of the earlier.

Second, the larger literary structure of Genesis 15, 16, and 17 explains why Moses presented Abraham's covenant in this twofold manner. The covenant record of Genesis 15 stresses the mercy of God even to the point of appearing to be unconditional for Abraham. Yet, in Genesis 16 Abraham turned from loyalty by seeking a child through Hagar. Appropriately then, in Genesis 17 Moses pointed out how God responded to Abraham's failure by requiring the additional cutting ritual of circumcision through which Abraham committed himself to loyal service. This larger didactic strategy indicates that God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 at least had significant implicit obligations for Abraham. If Abraham's obligation to covenant fidelity had not been assumed in Genesis 15, his actions in Genesis 16 would not have caused God to return to him with explicit explanations and threats in Genesis 17.

These two sides of the Abrahamic covenant spoke directly to the situation of the Israelites following Moses. God first sent Moses to the Israelites in Egypt and graciously brought them to Sinai "on eagles' wings" (Exodus 19:4). Israel's initial

deliverance is characterized as an act of unilateral mercy. In this way, it parallels the presentation of Abraham's covenant in Genesis 15:1-21. Yet, as the Israelites moved forward in the wilderness they turned from the promise of God like Abraham had in Genesis 16. For this reason, Moses stressed explicitly in Genesis 17 that Abraham's covenant included obligations. Loyalty had been required of him as it was of his descendants who had come out of Egypt. As God himself said in Exodus 19:4-8,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

3. Conditionality

In this light, if we want to understand the dynamics of Abraham's covenant as fully as possible, we must integrate the emphases of Genesis 15 and 17. Such a reconstruction yields a picture of Abraham's covenant that conjoins divine benevolence and the requirement of human loyalty.

It is misleading to speak of Abraham's covenant as *either* promissory *or* obligatory. There are senses in which it was *both* promissory *and* obligatory, unconditional *and* conditional. We may delineate these two sides of Abraham's covenant in a number of ways.

On the one side, God made promises in the covenant with Abraham that will certainly be fulfilled. God swore to fulfill them and he cannot fail to bring them about without violating his oath. What were these promises? In Genesis 15:16 and 18 God promised that Abraham's descendants would come out of slavery and possess the land of Canaan. This promise could not be broken. It was unconditional. As the rest of the OT indicates, Abraham's descendants did in fact receive this promise. They successfully inherited the land and established a great nation there.

God swore to keep this promise because it was a necessary step in his larger kingdom purposes. God chose the family of Abraham to be the instrument through which his original purposes for humanity would be fulfilled. As God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful, to fill the earth, to subdue it and to rule (Genesis 1:28), Abraham was promised that his progeny would possess the land

of Canaan as the beginning point of successful worldwide dominion (Romans 4:13). The Abrahamic covenant established an unfailing direction for God's imperial plan. In this sense, the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional.

On the other side, however, participation in and reception of Abraham's promised blessings was quite conditional. Despite the fact that God promised Abraham's descendants the land, this promise did not guarantee this promise for particular individuals, families or groups.

After the covenant initiation of Genesis 15 and turning away from God to have a child through Hagar in Genesis 16, God called Abraham to a blameless life for the confirmation of his covenant in Genesis 17:1. This order of events makes it clear that even Abraham's personal reception of the promises made to him in covenant were contingent on his loyalty. As we saw, on a literary level Genesis 17 focused on Moses' early readers' obligations to observe circumcision. Their reception of these promises depended on fulfilling obligations. Yet, the command for circumcision was also explicitly directed to Abraham himself as the immediate recipient of this covenant arrangement.

You must keep my covenant, *you* and your descendants after you
... every male among you shall be circumcised. (Genesis 17:9)

If Abraham *or* his descendants failed to be circumcised, they would be "cut off" (*venikeretah*; Genesis 17:14). To be "cut off" in the Mosaic period was to receive a sentence of exile or death (see Exodus 12:15, 19; Leviticus 7:25, 27). The curse of cutting in circumcision symbolized what would happen to those who flagrantly violated covenant loyalty. Neither Abraham himself, nor his descendants would escape the judgment of God if they were not circumcised. This is why later in the chapter we read that "Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on the same day (Genesis 17:26)."

As we have suggested, circumcision was a synecdoche for a blameless life in covenant with God. Genesis makes it clear that merely having the sign of circumcision did not in itself guarantee participation in the promise to Abraham. Abraham himself was circumcised, but also proved to be faithful to God. Isaac and Jacob followed suit by serving God. Ishmael and Esau, however, were circumcised but did not receive Abraham's inheritance. In this sense, the covenant with Abraham was quite conditional. No one had the right to assume that they would be heirs of the covenant promises without fulfilling the condition of fidelity. Both Abraham and his descendants would receive the blessings promised through covenant only as they fulfilled (however imperfectly) their covenant obligations.

In sum, there were senses in which the covenant with Abraham was both unconditional and conditional. Abraham was promised by divine oath that in one way or another his descendants would come out of Egypt and possess the land

of Canaan. But at the same time, for particular individuals, families and groups to enjoy this promise, they had to fulfill covenant obligations.

C. David

In many respects what we have seen about the covenant with Abraham also characterized God's covenant with David. There are four main texts that are normally in view when discussing the Davidic covenant: 2 Sam 7:1-29, 1 Chronicles 17:1-27, Psalm 89 and Psalm 132. Of these four passages only the last two actually use the term "covenant." Yet, there is warrant for focusing on all of these passages as so many interpreters have done through the centuries.

1. Literary Orientation

David's covenant is a point of concern in texts that have a variety of emphases derived from their literary contexts. To draw attention to these differences, we will summarize each passage.

First, Psalm 89 is a lament asking God to save the son of David from enemies. The Psalm alludes to the story of God's choice of David and God's covenant with the king. The covenant God made with David forms the basis of hope that the prayer on behalf of the son of David in view will be answered.

Second, in a similar way Psalm 132 calls for Yahweh to aid the king and to extol the priests of the temple. In support of this petition, the Psalm appeals to God's covenant with David. The reference to David's covenant serves as the ground for the petition.

Third, 2 Samuel 7:1-29 is a narrative that describes Nathan reporting how God rejected David's intention to build a temple. Although the word "covenant" does not appear in this passage, the text reports God's commitment to David in ways that remind us of Psalms 89 and 132 where the term covenant is applied.

Fourth, 1 Chronicles 17:1-27 is a parallel record of God's response to David's desire to build the temple. For the most part, it follows the text of 2 Samuel 7:1-29 very closely, but there are some significant differences that indicate the Chronicler's unique point of view.

2. Literary Strategies

These brief descriptions make it evident that we are not dealing here with primary sources that present detached, comprehensive records of David's covenant with God. On the contrary, we have secondary descriptions of David's covenant that

were parts of larger literary units designed to stress particular points of view. To understand the emphases of each passage, we need to look briefly at the ways the Davidic covenant fits within each literary context.

a. 2 Samuel 7:1-29

The emphases of 2 Samuel 7:1-29 become clear from its place in the overarching structure of David's life in Samuel. David's life is described in four large blocks of material: first, David's rise to power (1 Samuel 16:1- 2 Samuel 1.27); second, David's earlier ideal years as king when he was faithful to the Lord (2 Samuel 2:1-10:19); third, David's moral failure and the curses that came on his house as a result (2 Samuel 11:1-20:26); fourth, a dischronologized collection of selected events from different periods of his life that summarize the continuing hopes Israel could have in David's house despite his failures (2 Samuel 21:1-24:25).

2 Samuel 7:1-29 is near the end of David's early ideal years as he reached the pinnacle of his achievements. David succeeded in bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem to centralize worship and political power in the city (2 Samuel 6:1-23). 2 Samuel 7 begins with David expressing his desire to complete this task by building a temple for God. Temple building was expected of successful kings in the ancient world because building temples honored the king's god and coupled the rule of the king with the rule of that god. So, it is not surprising that David wanted to build a temple for Yahweh. He desired to honor Yahweh as Israel's Suzerain and he wanted to couple his kingship with the supreme rule of Yahweh.

This way of thinking about temple construction was so ingrained in ancient Near Eastern royal ideology that the writer of Samuel had to explain why David did not build a temple for God.³ To assure his readers that David had not failed in this matter, Samuel reports that God himself ordered David not to build. To counter misgivings about David's actions, the writer of Samuel reported how Nathan assured David of God's favor in 2 Samuel 7:8-9. He recounted how God had blessed David in the past and promised that David would be counted among the greatest men of the earth. Nathan also assured David that God would bless the entire nation of Israel with the imperial success of an undisturbed homeland and rest from their enemies.

2 Samuel 7:1-27 also focuses specifically on how this bright future would be accomplished. Instead of David building a house for God, God would build a house or dynasty for David through Solomon. Solomon would build the temple and secure Israel's future. Now, by the time of the writing of Samuel, Solomon had brought much trouble to Israel. In fact, his sins caused the judgment of the

³ See Richard L. Pratt, Jr. *Royal Prayer and the Chronicler's Program* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Dissertation, 1987) pp. 51-52.

division of the nation (1 Kings 11:26-40). So, in 2 Samuel 7:14 we find that Nathan qualified Solomon's success by adding these words.

I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.

When Solomon sinned, God would punish him with the "rod of men;" Solomon would suffer politically and militarily. Yet, God assured David that his love would not be taken from Solomon as it had been taken from Saul. As a result, David's dynasty and Israel's kingdom would endure forever. The main concern of 2 Samuel 7:1-27 was to assure early readers of Samuel that Solomon's success as the temple builder secured the Davidic dynasty and a bright future for Israel.

At the same time, however, 2 Samuel 11:1-20:26 clearly depicts David as jeopardizing his participation in the benefits of God's covenant with him. His sin with Bathsheba brought great curses on the king and his immediate family. In this larger context, the writer of Samuel dramatically displayed the genuine threat of severe judgment against David. Yet, the writer of Samuel also closed his book in 2 Samuel 21-24 with a series of dischronologized accounts that explained and illustrated God's continuing favor toward David. At the center of this series we find two passages that reaffirm the righteousness of David and thus the fact that he and his other faithful descendants would participate in the promises of his covenant.

In 2 Samuel 22:21-22 we read,

The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness,
according to the clearness of my hands he has
rewarded me.
For I have kept the ways of the Lord;
I have not done evil by turning from my God.

As the superscription of this passage indicates (2 Samuel 21:1), this passage referred to David's covenant faithfulness prior to the events of 2 Samuel 7. Here David's words contrasted his own covenant faithfulness with the failures of Saul.

In 2 Samuel 23:1-7, however, we find a second section reporting words of David. This passage is described as "the last words of David" (2 Samuel 23:1). So, they refer to David's life *after* he was granted a covenant from God. In 23:3b-5 David wrote these words,

When one rules over men in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
he is like the light of the morning at sunrise...
Is not my house right with God?

Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant,
arranged and secured in every part?
Will he not bring to fruition my salvation
and grant me my every desire?

In 2 Samuel 23:3 David extolled royalty figures who rule “in righteousness” and “in the fear of God. Then in 2 Samuel 23:5, David declared that his own house was “right with God.” In other words, David had fulfilled the ideal of a righteous rule in the fear of God. Here the writer of Samuel highlighted David’s personal loyalty after God made covenant with him as meeting the conditions of loyalty that would lead to David’s “salvation” and the fulfillment of his “every [royal] desire.” From this perspective, the promises of David’s covenant were hardly viewed as unconditional. David’s participation in future blessings was conjoined with his fulfillment of obligations.

b. 1 Chronicles 17:1-27

1 Chronicles 17:1-27 parallels 2 Samuel 7:1-29 but was written after the return from exile. Although the Chronicler did not contradict the perspectives of 2 Samuel 7:1-29 his emphases were different. At least two differences between the two accounts indicate how he had his own literary purposes.

In the first place, as we have already noted, 2 Samuel 7:14-15a is a very important qualification of the reign of Solomon.

I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him.

The Chronicler’s outlook becomes evident, however, in the way he deviated from Samuel at this point. By contrast, 1 Chronicles 17:13 reads:

I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor.

The Chronicler omitted reference to Solomon’s failures and punishments and simply affirmed that God would never take his love away from Solomon.

At first glance, this omission may lead us to think that the Chronicler presented the covenant with David as completely unconditional. Yet, his larger literary strategy explains this shift much more effectively. The Chronicler wrote after a number of Israelites had returned to the land from exile. His chief concern was to provide the post-exilic community with priorities for kingdom restoration. One of these priorities was that the house of David must commit itself to the temple. It is well attested that this concern led the Chronicler to de-emphasize the failures of

David and Solomon. He did not omit all of their shortcomings, but his record does not mention the troubles that plagued David's house because of his adultery or Solomon's responsibility for the division of the nation. Instead, Chronicles presents David and Solomon as Israel's astonishingly successful leaders. For this reason, the focus of attention in 1 Chronicles 17 is exclusively on the facts that David wanted to build the temple and that Solomon succeeded in building it. As such, David and Solomon represented models for the post-exilic returnees as they struggled with responsibilities toward the temple in their own day.

In the second place, the Chronicler's record of Nathan's closing words differs from what we find in 2 Samuel. In 2 Samuel 7:16 we read these words:

Your (David's) house and your (David's) kingdom will endure forever before me; your (David's) throne will be established forever."

By contrast, the Chronicler ended Nathan's speech this way in 1 Chronicles 17:14:

I (God) will set him (Solomon) over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever."

In Chronicles the focus is not simply on the endurance of David's dynasty as it is in 2 Samuel. Instead, Solomon is highly exalted in extremely imperial language as the one whose throne "will be established forever" as he rules "over [God's] house" and "over [God's] kingdom." The son of David is extolled as the one who would construct and manage the temple as well as the rest of God's kingdom.

This emphasis fit well with the Chronicler's overarching concern for the post-exilic community. As he wrote to inspire and guide the faltering returnees, the Chronicler appealed to God's covenant with David that his son Solomon would preside over the temple in Jerusalem and thus establish the reign of God on earth. He mentioned no explicit conditions in this passage because he wanted the post-exilic community to learn that the Davidic covenant permanently tied the success of God's kingdom on earth with the success of the son of David ruling over the kingdom and especially over the operations of the temple.

c. Psalm 89:1-51

As we have mentioned, Psalm 89 appeals to God's covenant with David as the basis of a petition for divine help for some unnamed son of David. We do not know the precise origins of this Psalm, but it was collected in the Psalter as a prayer for David's sons whenever they were threatened or troubled by enemies.

The Psalmist's complaint is found in Psalm 89:38.

But you have rejected, you have spurned,
you have been very angry with your anointed one.

This complaint is based on a recital of the covenant God made with David,
recorded in verses 28 and 29.

I will maintain my love to him forever,
and my covenant with him will never fail.
I will establish his line forever,
his throne as long as the heavens endure.

Psalm 89 continues to describe David's covenant with allusions to 2 Samuel 7.
But differences between Samuel and the Psalm are telling. You will recall that 2
Samuel 7:14 reads,

I will be his (Solomon's) father, and he will be my son. When he
does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings
inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him.

By contrast in Psalm 89:30-33 we read similar words applied not to Solomon but
to all of David's sons.

If his sons forsake my law
and do not follow my statutes,
if they violate my decrees
and fail to keep my commands,
I will punish their sin with the rod,
their iniquity with flogging;
but I will not take my love from him,
nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.

It is evident that Psalm 89:32 depends on the language of 2 Samuel 7:14, but it
differs in the number of the pronoun. While 2 Samuel 7:14 says that God will
"punish him (Solomon) with the rod ...with floggings ...," the Psalm says, "I will
punish *their* (the descendants of David) sin with the rod ... with floggings...." The
Psalm applies the threat against Solomon to every generation of David's dynasty.
The sons of David will be punished for their sins, but with the qualification that
God said, "I will not take my love from him (David)" (Psalm 89:33). The covenant
with David would not be broken, even though David's sons would be punished for
their sins.

In sum, Psalm 89 applies the covenant God made with David to situations his
descendants faced throughout their generations. When a son of David violated
covenant he would be punished. The book of Kings makes it clear that these
punishments were quite severe at times, even culminating in death, the

destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. But these punishments did not invalidate the covenant promises to David. David had fulfilled his obligations and was assured of his own participation in the future blessings of his family. Moreover, his covenant guaranteed that his lineage would remain the divinely ordained dynasty of Israel despite what happened to any particular son of David.

d. Psalm 132

The manner in which Psalm 132 refers to David's covenant is similar to what we have seen in Psalm 89. This Psalm was probably associated with ritual celebrations of David bringing the ark into Jerusalem.

In this celebration, the covenant with David is mentioned as the basis of hope that the son of David and the priests of the temple will be exalted. As we read in Psalm 132:11-12:

The LORD swore an oath to David,
a sure oath that he will not revoke:
"One of your own descendants
I will place on your throne—
if your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit
on your throne for ever and ever."

As a text designed for the ongoing line of David, the Psalm first appeals to the dynastic promise given to David in verse 11. Yet, not only did God swear to maintain David's dynasty, but added that this promise would apply to particular sons of David only as they "keep my covenant." With this twofold focus, Psalm 132 not only affirmed the right of David's sons to the throne, but also emphasized that each son of David had to attend to his duties as the ruler of Israel.

So, we see here another application of David's covenant to the generations that followed him. Although the permanence of David's dynasty was rooted in David's covenant, particular sons of David were to remain faithful to God and to his laws or face the consequences.

3. *Conditionality*

As we consider the question of conditionality with respect to David's covenant, we face a situation similar to what we saw with Abraham. It is misguided to speak of this covenant as *either* unconditional *or* conditional. On the contrary, there are senses in which it is *both* unconditional *and* conditional. On the one side, certain aspects of the covenant with David would be fulfilled no matter what David or any

of David's descendants did. But on the other side, certain aspects of the covenant are conditional, depending on the obedience and disobedience of David and his royal descendants.

In the first place, the covenant with David established unconditionally that the house of David would be the legitimate royal house of Israel forever. This aspect of the covenant is repeated in each passage. In fact, the permanence of the Davidic dynasty was central to the hopes of Israel. The books of Kings, Chronicles and a number of prophetic books appeal to this dynastic hope. Perhaps one of the most powerful expressions of this hope appears in Psalm 72:17

May his name endure forever;
 May it continue as long as the sun.
All nations will be blessed through him,
 and they will call him blessed.

This passage is important for our discussion because it alludes to Genesis 12:3 and turns God's word to Abraham into a royal matter. As the kingdom of God unfolded, the hope of extending God's blessings to the world through Abraham rested on David's house. One day a great son of David would rule with such perfect righteousness that he would fully accomplish all of Israel's hopes.

The eventual success of the Davidic dynasty was a thoroughly unconditional dimension of the covenant with David reaching back to the covenant with Abraham. Although the Scriptures indicate that this promise was fulfilled by Christ in ways that were not expected by Old Testament believers, it was unconditionally secured by divine oath to David and simply could not fail.

In the second place, it is also clear that the covenant with David entailed conditions. With the exception of 1 Chronicles 17:1-27, the main biblical passages dealing with David's covenant emphasize that he and his royal descendants faced the possibility of severe curses from God if they failed to be faithful to Yahweh. David himself declared his faithfulness to God as the grounds of his assurance of full participation in his family's future (2 Samuel 23:5). 2 Samuel 7:14 indicates that Solomon would be severely punished for his sins and Psalms 89 and 132 extend this conditionality to every son of David.

In effect, as with the Abrahamic covenant, the certainty of eventual outcomes for the kingdom of God rested on the unconditional dimension of David's covenant. Yet, this certain hope did not imply that every royal figure in David's family would enjoy the blessing of God. On the contrary, only those who were faithful to covenant could expect to participate in the blessings promised to David's house.

This conditional quality of the Davidic covenant is a central feature of much of the Old Testament. It formed the basis of the critiques of royal figures in the books of

Kings and Chronicles. It was the foundation for the numerous condemnations of particular kings found in the prophetic books. To characterize David's covenant as entirely unconditional is to mischaracterize it. It was unconditional in its dynastic guarantees, but conditional in its requirements for David and his sons.

To reinforce what we have seen at this point, we should mention that the language of conditionality is the same in all three covenants God made with Israel. As we have already seen, in Genesis 17:9 God told Abraham and his descendants to "keep my covenant" by observing circumcision. This expression also appears in the Mosaic covenant when God says to Israel in Exodus 19:5 "and you must keep my covenant". In the same way, in Psalm 132:11 the Davidic line is also required to "keep my covenant." This shared language makes it clear that the fundamental dynamics of all three covenants are the same. God will keep the promises he made in each covenant, but participation in those blessings for individuals, families and groups among God's people is conditional upon their keeping covenant.

V. Conditions and Reformed Soteriology

Perhaps the most crucial issue for most Christians is how the conditional features of God's covenants with Abraham and David harmonize with reformed perspectives on soteriology. This issue is significant because the reformed tradition has held that salvation has been applied to believers in all ages essentially in the same way. Although the accomplishment of salvation has been brought to its eschatological stage in the New Covenant in Christ, the application of salvation to individuals has followed very similar patterns throughout history. How then does the conditionality of the divine covenants with Abraham and David harmonize with reformed soteriology?

A. Reformed Ordo Salutis

The reformed tradition is well-known for the doctrine of *sola gratia*, the belief that each dimension of the *ordo salutis* (e.g. effectual calling, regeneration, faith and repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification) is the application of divine grace to individuals who have been unconditionally elected for salvation solely on the basis of Christ's merit (*solo Christo*) This emphasis helps us understand why some reformed theologians resist characterizing the covenants with Abraham and David as conditional. Such a characterization appears to disconnect Abraham and David from what we know to be true of the gracious nature of salvation.

When viewed as unconditionally guaranteed, these covenants seem to provide Old Testament roots for the doctrine of *sola gratia*. If Abraham and David were granted unconditional covenant promises because of their past loyalty to God,

then their situation anticipated the unconditional promises secured by Christ's loyalty to God. Despite the elements of truth that are evident in this and similar formulations, the analogy fails at one critical point. Christ rendered perfect obedience to his Father, but Abraham and David did not render perfect obedience, neither prior to nor after God established covenants with them.

A better path to understanding is to consider the ways reformed soteriology has also highlighted the place of human loyalty and fidelity in the application of salvation. One way this other side of reformed soteriology becomes evident is in the distinctions reformed theologians have made between justification and sanctification. While these two dimensions of salvation interconnect in many ways, the agency of each has been distinguished rather sharply.

On the one hand, justification has been described as utterly monergistic. That is to say, the Trinity alone is active in justification; human beings are passive recipients of a celestial, forensic declaration and personal imputation of Christ's righteousness. John Murray stressed this feature of justification by saying, "Justification ... is an act of God and of God alone."⁴

On the other hand, believers' ongoing sanctification is in some senses synergistic; both God and human beings are active agents. In sanctification the Holy Spirit works within us to bring about the good works of holy living. We can do nothing good apart from his empowerment. Yet, ongoing human effort is also a dimension of sanctification. Again, Murray pointed to this distinctive feature.

While we are constantly dependent upon the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit, we must also take account of the fact that sanctification is a process that draws within its scope the conscious life of the believer. The sanctified are not passive or quiescent in this process...our whole being is intensely active in that process which has as its goal the predestinating purpose of God that we should be conformed to the image of his Son.⁵

This distinction makes it rather plain that reformed soteriology does not simply stress gracious divine activity but also human loyalty. It is not contrary to *sola gratia* to speak of active human effort involved in sanctification as a vital dimension of the process of an individual's salvation.

To take matters a step further, we may even say that a measure of conformity to God's standards of holiness is a *necessary* condition for receiving salvation. The conditional character of sanctification becomes clear in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1955) p. 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

Again, we refer to John Murray as a representative expression of this doctrine,

... it is utterly wrong to say that a believer is secure quite irrespective of his subsequent life of sin and unfaithfulness. The truth is that the faith of Jesus Christ is *always* *respective* of the life of holiness and fidelity... those united to Christ by the effectual call of the Father and indwelt by the Holy Spirit will persevere unto the end... It is not at all that they will be saved irrespective of their perseverance or their continuance ... Consequently the security that is theirs is inseparable from their perseverance.⁶

In fact, the matter may be put in this way,

...it is possible to have very uplifting, ennobling, reforming and exhilarating experience of the power and truth of the gospel, to come into such close contact with the supernatural forces which are operative in God's kingdom of grace that these forces produce effects in us which to human observation are hardly distinguishable from those produced by God's regenerating and sanctifying grace and yet not be partakers of Christ and heirs of eternal life.⁷

The doctrine of perseverance recognizes that not everyone who benefits from divine covenants in this life has truly been justified. As we have already seen, not everyone joined to Old Testament covenants with Israel through circumcision exercised saving faith. Examples abound of circumcised, covenanted people who are destined for the eternal judgment of God. The same sort of situation continues in the New Covenant at this time as well. Although the New Covenant was inaugurated with the earthly ministry of Jesus, it will not reach the fullness of salvation for everyone participating in it until Christ returns in glory. Prior to that day there will be both justified and unjustified people in the ranks of the visible church. For this reason, the New Testament makes sanctification a necessary condition for eternal salvation. As the writer of Hebrews put it in chapter 12:14,

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy;
without holiness no one will see the Lord.

It is important to note that in reformed theology these soteriological perspectives apply to every person and in every age. The necessity of perseverance applied even to Abraham and David, as well as to their descendants. Divine covenants in Scripture begin with and are sustained by divine grace. In fact, even human compliance with the moral obligations of biblical covenants is the result of divine grace. Yet, the reformed doctrine of perseverance should help us see that

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.154-155 (emphasis his).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

receiving the blessings of divine covenants has always entailed the condition of human loyalty. No one has ever been guaranteed eternal salvation apart from loyalty to God.

B. Moral Guidance

The doctrine of perseverance provides a helpful framework out of which we may understand why conditions were included in the covenants with Abraham and David. Ongoing covenant conditions provided even truly justified persons with guidance for grateful living. The so-called *tertius usus legis* (third use of the law)⁸ designates the function of biblical mandates as moral guides for those who have been justified.

The requirement of circumcision highlighted in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:10-11) guided Abraham and his descendants in the ways of righteous living. The requirement that David and his sons must “rule in the fear of God” (2 Samuel 23:5) reminded the house of David of the way of expressing gratitude to God. The Old Testament indicates that the requirements of covenant loyalty were much broader than we might expect. Abraham was required to “walk before [God] and [to] be blameless” (Genesis 17:1). The narratives of Abraham’s life illustrate time and again the breadth of moral requirements this command entailed. David and his sons were explicitly required to observe the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) and further revelation through David and other prophets. These requirements of covenant loyalty were not designed to lead to justification. They were designed to guide those who had already been justified by faith into paths of gratitude.

C. Blessings and Curses

The conditionality of the covenants with Abraham and David also indicated the standard by which God would bless or curse his covenant people. For instance, God’s confirmation of his covenant blessings to Abraham was explicitly conditional on Abraham’s blameless life (Genesis 17:1). Moreover, generations to come who observed circumcision as a sign of broader loyalty would be blessed and those who did not would be cursed (Genesis 17:14). In much the same way, David and his sons must not violate the conditions of the covenant with David for fear of suffering divine curses (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 132:11-12).

Now it would be misguided to conceive of this function of covenant conditions in a mechanical fashion. Although there are abundant examples of obedience resulting in blessing and disobedience resulting in curse, the narratives of the Old Testament as well as wisdom books like Job and Ecclesiastes indicate that

⁸ Following the order of the *Formula of Concord*.

God's administration of these matters is often inscrutable. That is to say, while in principle blessings and curses come in response to covenant loyalty and disloyalty, God's penetrating judgment, as well as his patience and mercy, often exceed human expectations. Nevertheless, blessing and cursing in response to loyalty and disloyalty are stable dynamics throughout the biblical records of life under the covenants with Abraham and David.

In this regard, it is also important to distinguish between the ways blessings and curses function for justified and unjustified persons in covenant. On the one hand, for those in covenant who have been justified by saving faith, temporal covenant blessings are preludes to eternal blessings to come in the new heavens and new earth. Temporal curses are "discipline" designed to produce "a harvest of righteousness and peace" as a prelude to eternal blessings (Hebrews 12:11).

On the other hand, for those in covenant who are never justified by faith, temporal blessings merely store up the wrath of God against them when they are brought to eternal judgment. Temporal curses are mere preludes to the eternal curses that will come their way.

Despite these qualifications, requirements in the covenants with Abraham and David were designed to indicate which attitudes and behaviors would lead to blessings and to curses. To ignore these dimensions of the Abrahamic covenant is to eliminate the dynamics of God's responses to characters in the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. To overlook these dimensions of the Davidic covenant is to erase the assumptions lying behind the explanations of blessings and curses in the lives of Israel's kings found in the books of Kings and Chronicles, as well as in the prophetic books.

D. Testing

The conditionality of the covenants with Abraham and David also remind us that the Scriptures often speak of life in covenant with God as a time of testing. In this sense, a test is a divine challenge to obedience that reveals the true condition of our hearts. The way John Murray summarized the matter for New Testament believers applies to all believers in all ages.

[Christ] set up a criterion by which true disciples might be distinguished, and that criterion is continuance in Jesus' word. ... The crucial *test* of true faith is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his word."⁹

Under the covenant with Abraham, God tested the patriarch by calling him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). This test was designed to reveal whether

⁹ Murray, *Redemption* pp.151-52 (emphasis mine).

Abraham loved God more than he loved his son (Genesis 22:12) and Abraham's obedience vindicated him as a previously justified man. As James 2:21-24 puts it,

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

In much the same way, under the covenant with David, David and his sons were tested in their generations. Time and again, David's sons were called to obey the commands of God to demonstrate the true condition of their hearts. In fact, 2 Chronicles 32:31 explicitly states that God tested Hezekiah in this manner.

But when envoys were sent by the rulers of Babylon to ask him about the miraculous sign that had occurred in the land, God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.

What we see in the Old Testament extends to the New Testament as well. Those who profess faith in Christ go through a period of testing. This is why Paul can write these words to the Colossian church in Colossians 1:22-23.

But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

Notice here that Paul explicitly stated a condition that those who profess faith in Christ must meet. Only those who "continue in your faith" will be presented as "holy" and "without blemish." This is not to say that we reach perfection. Nor is it to say that we earn salvation. It is merely to say that true saving faith will pass the test of a life of faithfulness.

James said much the same in James 1:12.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Once again, we see that life in this world for one who professes faith in Christ is described as a test. The crown that awaits us will be received only if we pass the test of a sanctified life.

So we can see that the conditionality of the covenants with Abraham and David in no way mitigates against reformed soteriology. On the contrary, the contours of reformed soteriology align in significant ways with the conditionality of these and other biblical covenants. The distinctions between justification and sanctification, the importance of moral guidance for the justified, the experience of divine blessings and curses, and the reality of testing in the Christian life fit perfectly with the belief that God's covenants with Abraham and David entailed conditions.

Conclusion

In my estimation reformed theologians who argue that the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants were unconditional are fundamentally misguided. Although we may distinguish the central concerns of Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants from each other and from other biblical covenants, there is little justification for arguing that the difference is conditionality and unconditionality. God's plan for his kingdom has unfolded across history in a way that is unified. The one God of Scripture designed all of his covenants as administrations of his one immutable kingdom purpose. Moreover, God has granted the reception of salvation promised in every covenant through the same process in every covenant administration. His grace undergirds every aspect of covenant life and personal salvation. Yet, life in covenant with God has always entailed the condition of loyalty as the demonstration of saving faith.

This continuity allows New Testament believers to benefit from all of God's covenants in the Old Testament. The covenants with Abraham and David reveal much about covenant life and salvation in the New Testament. But the same is true of other covenants as well. God's people have always been justified by faith in the promises of God in Christ apart from works. Yet, faith that justifies has always resulted in meeting the requirements of good works. Works of righteousness through the sanctifying power of the Spirit have been required in every covenant in Scripture.

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