

Engaging Gospel Doctrine (Episode 84.2)

LESSON 7 (STUDY NOTES)

The Abrahamic Covenant

Hook	
Goal	
Overview	(see below)
Conclusion	

(start by outlining the next three lessons because they go together)

My spin on this episode is how we can all work together with our differing gifts and situations for the betterment of humanity. Which is actually what the Abrahamic Covenant is about. 😊

I. Sunday School

- a. Discussion of the reading (the actual Abrahamic covenant from LDS perspective)
- b. How God works with humans through covenants (bring up flaws, tease next lesson)
- c. Covenants and our relationship with God
- d. Covenants and our relationship with each other
- e. (Important side note: Human messiness vs. sanitized stories—God works with us within the context of our weakness and problems, not when we have overcome them)
- f. Body of Christ, differing gifts, working together
- g. Concluding thoughts

II. Other Reading

- a. Discussion of Bible passages
 - i. The covenant (different narratives: **J**: 12:5-9 (God makes promises, requires nothing of Abram); **J**: 13:14-18 (God makes promises; Abram builds altar); **J**: 15:1-21 (God comes to Abram in a vision, compares posterity to stars. Abram believes Lord; “reckoned it to him as righteousness”; ritual of “self-curse”, but it is the Lord who takes it upon himself, passes through cut animals); 17:1-27 (**P** source: “God Almighty”

- (originally meant God of the Mountain), changes name to Abraham, “everlasting covenant”, requires circumcision, Sarah explicitly mentioned as mother of the covenant, name changed from Sarai to Sarah); 18: variant story from **J**, Lord appears to Abraham and Sarah (three men, one of them apparently the Lord in disguise, Sarah more central (Abraham laughs in 17; Sarah laughs in 18))
- ii. Humans trying to do their own thing (12:10-20; 13:1-13; 14:1-24; 16:1-16; 18:1-19:38; 20:1-18)
 - iii. The covenant being put at risk: (Sarai is infertile; There is a famine, Abram and Sarai go to Egypt, Abram passes Sarai off as his sister, she is put in the Pharaoh’s harem! (chapter 12); Pharaoh comes across as more righteous than Abram, as Ahimelech does in 20. Abram benefits; Lot serves as a foil to Abram (selfish and short sighted vs. altruistic and trusting); 16: Sarai still infertile, gives Abraham Hagar, she bears a son (Ishmael) but that causes serious family problems; 20: Abraham passes off his wife as his sister again, Sarah gets taken as a wife of a king again (but this time God protects everyone)
 - iv. God preserving the covenant. Sarah miraculously conceives and bears a child, God protects the family through all the risks
 - v. Insights from Oxford Bible Commentary (Melchizedek). Melechzedek was most likely a Canaanite priest-king, possibly of Jerusalem (Jerusalem is only called “Salem” in Ps.76:2, and the city is not named at all in the first books of the Bible) “Melech” (the name means king) refers to a Canaanite God. In Joshua 10 a very similarly named “Adoni-zedek” is king of Jerusalem (and killed by Joshua). Melechzedek is a servant of “El Elyon “Most High God”, which seems to refer to El, the head God of the Canaanite pantheon. “maker of heaven and earth” is wording common in Canaanite texts speaking of El. Interesting stuff. Melechzedek is a very mysterious figure in the Bible, only mentioned in Ps. 110:4 in the OT.
 - vi. Insights from Kugel (nature of God in these passages) Kugel makes the fascinating point that the God of Abraham is quite limited, human in form, and interacts personally. The distant God without passions was later retrojected.

“Because, in this earlier model, God is deemed to have a body, it is no surprise that numerous passages refer to God’s ‘face’ ‘hand,’ ‘eyes,’ ‘ears,’ ‘arm,’ ‘fingers,’ and so forth. Interpreters have often asserted that these expressions are not to be taken literally, but there is no real basis for this assertion other than the fact that such human body parts did not go well with the interpreters’ own conception of God as bodiless and omnipresent” (Thus the theme of God appearing and being mistaken as a human and then confusion leading to a moment of discovery—deep truth there) Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 109.

b. Role of Abraham in Judaism

From the *Encyclopedia Judaica*

In aggadic literature Abraham is regarded as having observed all the commandments (Yoma 28b; Kid. 4:14; et al.) even though they had not yet been revealed. He acted in strict conformity with the Oral Law: "No one occupied himself so much with the divine commandments as did Abraham" (Ned. 32a). ... Abraham's principal virtue was that he was the first to recognize God, which is variously stated to have taken place when he was one, three, ten, or 48 years old (Gen. R. 95:2; 64:4). His recognition of God sprang from the notion that every citadel must have a leader (*ibid.* 39:1). Abraham waged a strenuous battle in the cause of spreading the idea of monotheism and won over many converts. When he smashed the idols of his father, an idol manufacturer, King [*Nimrod](#) had him thrown into a fiery furnace from which he was delivered by the angel Gabriel (Pes. 118a).

Abraham became a priest (Gen. R. 55:6), after the priesthood was taken from Melchizedek and given to him (Ned. 32b; Gen. R. 46:5; et al.). He was one of the great prophets, with whom God spoke not in dreams or visions but while he was in full possession of his normal cognitive faculties. "God omitted no blessing in the world with which He did not bless him" (SER 6). ... He was granted the privilege of blessing others (Tanḥ. Lekh Lekha 5), and his blessing spread upon all who came into contact with him (Gen. R. 39:12). Renowned for his hospitality to strangers, he had open doors to his house on all four sides (Gen. R. 48:9) and himself waited on his guests, and taught them the Grace after Meals, thus bringing them to believe in God (*ibid.* 54:6). Because of his proselytizing activities, he is regarded as the father of all proselytes, who are given the patronymic Abraham.

Over the generations, Jewish thinkers... have regarded Abraham as the archetypal believer, in accordance with the image of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible and Midrash: his origins in pagan environs (Josh. 24:2); the testimony of Genesis 15:6 that Abraham "believed in the Lord", and Abraham's absolute obedience to divine commandments, beginning with his leaving his homeland (Gen. 12:1) and culminating in his binding of his son Isaac (Gen. 22:2; see [*Akedah](#)). In addition to this biblical image of Abraham, Jewish philosophers found in rabbinic Midrashim views of Abraham according to which he smashed the prevalent idols and came to believe in the

one God (Gen. R. 38); Genesis 12:5 ("and the persons he had acquired in Haran") was interpreted to mean people Abraham converted (Gen. R. 39:14; cf. Targum Onkelos and Rashi to Gen. 12:5); and Genesis 34:12 ("He took him outside and said: Look at the sky") was understood as meaning that Abraham no longer had anything to do with astrology.

Eventually two paradigms evolved, in which the image of Abraham came to reflect two basic approaches to Jewish philosophy. According to the first school of thought, in which religion was understood rationally, Abraham was seen as a philosopher whose faith in God was the conclusion of scientific reasoning. According to the other school of thought, Abraham was seen as a believer whose faith and experience of divine revelation transcended his earlier philosophical or scientific speculation.

- c. Discussion of covenant in Judaism (tease Jewish Law in Lesson 14) (Bring up circumcision ☺)

III. Study Notes

- a. Any concluding thoughts on Abraham in LDS tradition/Book of Abraham (return to assigned reading with critical comments)
- b. We also need to talk about the self-righteous, ethnocentric aspects of this idea, especially in the LDS tradition (we could also talk about the problematic aspect of appropriating this Jewish tradition)
- c. Who was Abraham? (worth noting the text itself never portrays him as a monotheist even though he is known as such in later tradition. In fact, his sacrifices using different divine names in different locations very well could refer to different Gods)
 - i. Arguments for historicity: names of old gods and locations; lifestyle and details described roughly fit what we know of around 2000 bc. Ur was an actual city, and archaeological finds supported in a general way the details about Abraham.
 - ii. Pre-exilic parts of the OT never mention Abraham (possible exception of Hosea 12:3-4, 12). Anachronisms: "Chaldeans" aren't mentioned in any source before the 9th century and weren't in power until the 6th century. Philistines only were in power hundreds of years after Abraham. 12:6 "Canaanites then in the land" presupposes a time long after Abraham. 14:13 Abram being called "the Hebrew" refers to an ethnic group that didn't exist in his time, etc.

- d. Dig a little bit into differing gifts/excellence/privilege from a scientific perspective
 - i. Individual: Really complicated and potentially sensitive. Nature/nurture debate. Individually, what impacts our personalities? Our happiness? Our ability to thrive? Our ability to perform and contribute to society? (Each of these are different things).
 - 1. Happiness (50% genetics, 40% behavior, 10% environment)
 - 2. Thriving and well-being (Gifts, opportunity, education, relationships)
 - 3. Abilities, performance, contributions
 - ii. Cultural: What historical and other circumstances have resulted in a few cultures controlling a disproportionate amount of resources? (refer to chocolate exhibit and slavery). Why and how do some cultures produce members with disproportionate abilities and contributions and advantages? (Tigermom, Outliers, Guns, Germs, and Steel)
 - iii. What is the responsible reaction to these disparities? This lesson and the scriptures are very clear on the what, if not the how.
- e. Social contracts, pro-sociality and how we help each other from our differing abilities, perspectives, and contexts (remember to cover the range including libertarianish angle)
- f. Conclusion

Tigermom:

Indian-Americans earn almost double the national figure (roughly \$90,000 per year in median household income versus \$50,000). Iranian-, Lebanese- and Chinese-Americans are also top-earners. In the last 30 years, Mormons have become leaders of corporate America, holding top positions in many of America's most recognizable companies. ...Jewish success is the most historically fraught and the most broad-based. Although Jews make up only about 2 percent of the United States' adult population, they account for a third of the current Supreme Court; over two-thirds of Tony Award-winning lyricists and composers; and about a third of American Nobel laureates.

It turns out that for all their diversity, the strikingly successful groups in America today share three traits that, together, propel success. The first is a superiority complex — a deep-seated belief in their exceptionalism. The second appears to be the opposite — insecurity, a feeling that you or what you've done is not good enough. The third is impulse control.

Any individual, from any background, can have what we call this Triple Package of traits. But research shows that some groups are instilling them more frequently than others, and that they are enjoying greater success.

Outliers:

Gladwell looks at how family, culture and friendship influence success.

“10,000 hour rule” (So is the true gift the passion to put that much time and effort into something?)

What makes people successful? Culture, work ethic, luck

Individual:

Cultural:

Guns, Germs, Steel:

Several conditions are necessary for this transition [to agriculture] to occur: 1) access to high protein vegetation that endures storage; 2) a climate dry enough to allow storage; 3) access to animals docile enough for domestication and versatile enough to survive captivity. Control of crops and livestock leads to food surpluses. Surplus frees people up to specialize in activities other than sustenance and supports population growth. The combination of specialization and population growth leads to the accumulation of social and technologic innovations which build on each other. Large societies develop [ruling classes](#) and supporting bureaucracies, which in turn lead to the organization of nation states and empires. Also, proximity with livestock eventually creates a degree of immunity to certain diseases. Division of labor and competition lead to military and other advances.

Resources

Abraham in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism

“The Doctrine of Inclusion” by Elder Ballard

Outliers by Malcom Gladwell

Jonathan Haidt on Cooperation

Science article on cooperation

The New York Times article on the traits of successful cultures

Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel