

The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 11:27- Chapter 22)

The Abrahamic covenant is presented in a very sophisticated and complex series of tightly related stories.¹ It centers around two motifs, land and seed, and the structure reflects this. The covenant is divided into two great sections: the first beginning with 11:27 and ending in Chapter 15, and the second comprising chapters 16-22. When we look closely at these sections, we can see that each acts as a literary “panel” whose individual parts mirror each other. Wheaton organizes the structure in the following way:

Panel A

a. The introduction of the problems of land and seed and a human solution to land attempted	Gen 11:27-32	
b. The call to a land and motivating promises	Gen 12:1-9	A
c. Doubts about the sufficiency of land	Gen 12:10-20	
d. Abraham’s graciousness: sharing of the land	Gen 13:1-18	
e. The defense of the land for others	Gen 14:1-20	
f. The rejection of exploiting the land for selfish gain and choice to bless others	Gen 14:18-24	
g. Abraham’s belief & God’s covenant/oath re: the land	Gen 15	B

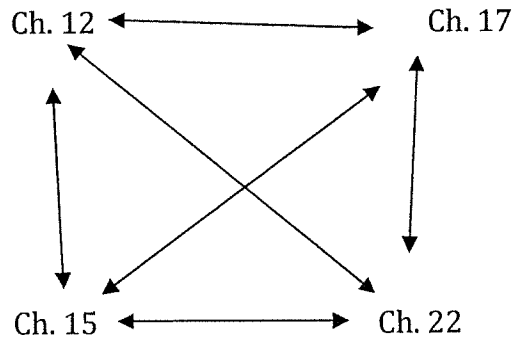
Panel B

a’. Abraham’s human solution to the problem of barrenness	Gen 16	
b’. The call to obedience and motivating promises	Gen 17	B’
c’. Doubt’s about the ability of God to give seed	Gen 18:1-16	
d’. Abraham’s graciousness: prayer for others	Gen 18:17-19:38	
e’. The prayer for restored fruitfulness of others	Gen 20	
f’. The rejection of the humanly begotten heir and choice to bless others	Gen 21	
g’. Abraham’s obedience and God’s covenant/oath re: seed	Gen 22	A’

The a//a’ sections (Gen 11:27-32 // Gen 16) act as introductions to each of the panels where Terah “takes” his family from a cursed land associated with Babel, but fails to lead them all the way. Likewise, Sarai, whose barrenness is introduced in 11:30, “takes” her maid in response to her problem only for her human solution to fail in the end. The b//b’ sections (chapters 12 and 17) share the same format introduced by a command (12:1 with regard to land, and 17:1 with regard to the walk of perfection; both “go” and “walk” share the same Heb. root followed by a promise of land and seed, including a statement indicating that Abraham did what he was told (12:5, 17:23). Both unbelief and falsehood mark the c//c’ sections (Gen 12:10-13:4 // 18:1-16) where, in the first, famine drives Abraham from the promised land to Egypt where his faith fails and he encourages Sarai to lie, and in the second where Sarai laughs in unbelief over the promise of a son and lies. The figure of Lot is central in the d//d’ sections (13:1-18//18:17-19:38). In the A Panel we find Abraham magnanimously offering his nephew his choice of the land that we know was promised to Abraham, and in the B Panel Abraham is graciously praying for Lot in Sodom. The e//e’ sections (14:1-20//20:1-18) display Abraham’s interaction with foreign powers. He defends the land against the four kings, which parallels his dealings with Abimelek the Canaanite king in a situation that centers on seed, that of Sarai who is endangered, and Abimelek’s household which becomes fertile because of Abraham’s intercession. The f//f’ sections (14:18-24//21:1-20) demonstrate that the spoils of the land must be rejected and that Ishmael, who is the seed of human machinations, must be rejected as well. Finally, the Theophany passing through the animal pieces as divine oath concerning the promise of land (section g, chapter 15) parallels the divine oath made to Abraham about seed in chapter 22 (section g’). Though land and seed are concerns of the narrative as a whole, the A Panel emphasizes the promise of land, whereas the B Panel emphasizes seed.

¹ The following analysis is taken from Byron Wheaton, *Focus and Structure in the Abrahamic Narratives* in *TrinJ* 27NS (2006) 143-162.

Of the sections above, it is also clear that the most pivotal are the b//b' and the g//g' sections, for they contain the call of Abraham as well as his response of faith and divine oath. Moreover, it is clear that the b section (Gen. 12) parallels the g' section (Gen. 22) and the g section (Gen. 15) parallels the b' section (Gen. 17), forming a chiasmic ABB'A' structure as indicated above in the chart. In fact, there are rhetorical structures that bind all four chapters together in a most complete way.



As for the chiasm, chapters 12 and 22 form an *inclusio* in that they mark the first and last occasion on which God speaks to Abram, the first introduced by “go forth ... to the land which I will show you” (12:1) and the last with “go forth to the land of Moriah ... which I will point out to you (22:2).² The first tells of a son leaving the father, a break from the past; the second tells of a father prepared to sacrifice his son, a break from the future. The journey ends in the first at the oak of “Moreh” (12:6,) and in the second, “Moriah” (12:2, Heb.), a pun that the Hebrew ear would pick up. Abraham builds altars in both (12:7, and 22:90), and the blessings given to Abraham are alike in both (12:2-3 and 22:17-18). Likewise, chapters 15 and 17 are tightly connected in that both begin with a theophanic vision (15:1 and 17:1), God speaks of reward and increase (15:1, 17:2), and the promise of fatherhood (15:3 and 17:4) emphasizing that the offspring will come from Abraham’s own old body (15:4 and 17:6). Then we have the promise of land (15:7 and 17:8) followed by ritual (preparation of animals in 15:9-11 and circumcision in 17:10-14), a declaration from God with regard to offspring (15:13 and 17:15), closing with the completion of the ritual (15:17ff. and 17:23-27).

We have seen the connections between Gen. 12 and 17, 15 and 22, and the chiasm formed by the parallelism between 12 and 22, and 15 and 17. However, it is also clear that chapters 12 and 15 are linked together in the same way as chapters 17 and 22. Chapter 15 presupposes the promises of chapter 12 and ratifies them while chapter 22 presupposes the promise of 17 and ratifies it. In other words, each of the panels described above has a promise scene after the introductory sections (chapters 12 and 17) and ends with the taking of oath and covenant ratification (chapters 15 and 22).

Finally, the purpose of “covenant” is to solemnize, or “make official,” promises that are made. In this case, it was to confirm the promises of 12:1-3, 13:14-18 and 15:1-6. The ritual followed the forms of its day (cf. Jer. 34:17). Animals were halved, and the halved pieces were laid opposite from each other creating a path through which the partners of the covenant passed. This action calls down a curse upon the party that breaks the terms of the covenant. Hence, the terminology (*kārat berit*), “to cut a covenant,” which is simply translated “to make a covenant.”

The climax of the covenant is Genesis 22 which is called the “Binding of Isaac” (Heb. “*Aqedah*”) which is central to the whole of the sacrificial system going forward through the Mosaic Covenant and on into the New Covenant in Christ.

² The parallelism of the Hebrew of Gen 12:1 and that of 22:2 striking.