

“ABRAHAM’S BLESSINGS ARE MINE”: MOOD AND MODALITY IN ABRAHAMIC COVENANT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

Rev. Dr Temitope Folashade OLOYEDE
General Studies Unit, Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education
Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso
08034452766

Abstract

Against the background of the popular chorus: “Abraham’s Blessings are Mine”, this paper attempted a study of the Abrahamic Covenant drawing implications from it for the contemporary Christians. Using the New International Version of the Holy Bible (2011 Edition) as a preferred English version believed to be very close to the original language, the linguistic resources of mood and modality were explored in the Abrahamic Covenant through the reading of Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 14:14-17. Two moods were identified in the two texts of the Abrahamic covenant considered in this paper: the declarative and the imperative. Of the nineteen (19) clauses contained in the two texts of the Abrahamic covenant, thirteen clauses (13) were in the declarative mood while only six (6) clauses were in the imperative mood. The declarative mood projects God as the solid force behind the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant while the imperative mood indicates that the partakers of the covenant have a role to play in obedience to the sovereign God who is the declaring party. The paper then concluded that while the contemporary believers in Christ should be reassured that God is personally committed to the fulfillment of the terms of the Abrahamic covenant to which they are now partakers, yet they have a responsibility to respond in obedience as a reflection of their deference for God.

Keywords: Abrahamic Covenant, Mood, Modality, Linguistics

Introduction

A popular chorus says, “Abraham’s blessings are mine, Abraham’s blessings are mine, I am blessed in the morning, I am blessed in the evening, because Abraham’s blessings are mine”. The question then arises regarding the contemporary Christians’ understanding of the concept and content of Abraham’s blessing to which they lay claim. Against this background, this paper attempts a study of the literature on Biblical covenants focusing on the Abrahamic Covenant with the view to exploring the linguistic resources of mood and modality in the content of the covenant. It further seeks to draw implications from the discovery of mood and modality expressed in the Abrahamic Covenant for the contemporary Christians.

The Concept of Covenant

Covenant has been seen as a vital part of the relationship between man and God so much that Fruchtenbaum asserts that “much of God’s relationship to man is based upon covenantal relationships” (Fruchtenbaum 1). Corroborating this, Richards affirms that “the concept of covenant is utterly basic to our understanding of Scripture” (193), stating further that “The covenant passages in Genesis show a typical interplay between human beings and God as sovereign Lord” (Richards 195). Defining the word covenant, Padfield states that “a covenant is an agreement between two parties and involves promises on the part of each to the other” (www.padfield.com). While this is a popular opinion in attempting to define the word covenant, it poses some challenges as the definition puts all forms of covenant in one category of conditional covenant (there shall be a discussion on types of covenants shortly).

Another source defines covenant as “a compact or agreement between two parties which binds them to certain commitments from one to another or to each other” (www.valleybible.net). It further states that covenant between God and man denotes “God’s gracious commitment to bless man” (ibid). This later comment rightly captures what obtains when God enters into unconditional covenant with His people. Therefore, covenant, in this paper, is construed as an agreement between two parties where either or both parties make commitments on oath to act in a particular way or to desist from specific actions. In this case, the agreement is between God and humankind. Brown affirms that the term covenant “denotes the special relationships solemnly ratified by sacrifice between God and Israel in the first instance and then between God and the church” (101).

Eight Biblical Covenants

There are divergent opinions about the number of biblical covenant between God and mankind; some identify five (e.g. Padfield, 2009) with the claim that Genesis 6 features the first mention of the word ‘covenant’ while some others listed as much as eight (Fruchtenbaum 7). To have an all-encompassing view, this paper identifies eight biblical covenants to include the Edenic Covenant, the Adamic Covenant, the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Land Covenant, the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant. The Edenic Covenant, as recorded in Genesis 1:28-30; 2:15-17, is a pact between God and humankind (with Adam representing humankind) with seven distinct provisions including the command for man to be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth (Fruchtenbaum 7-8). The Adamic covenant became necessary after the fall of humankind, and it was established between God and Adam as a representative of the entire human race (Genesis 3:14-19).

The first mention of the word ‘covenant’ in the Bible occurs within the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 6:18 (Busenitz 173). In the Noahic Covenant, God re-enacted the Adamic Covenant and promises to establish His covenant with Noah and his descendant so that they can repopulate the earth after the flood. The Noahic Covenant was a show of God’s “gracious mercy toward all mankind, both the redeemed and unredeemed, causing it to rain on the just and the unjust and assuming the ongoing, uninterrupted circle of seasons” (Busenitz 182). The Abrahamic Covenant indicates that God would bless Abraham and his descendant and make them his special people through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. The Mosaic Covenant is a biblical covenant with aspects revealing the holiness and righteous standards of God, the distinct choice of Israel, the edging out of Gentiles and the nature of sin. With the Mosaic Covenant, the Gentiles are alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and it is obvious that “a man cannot attain the righteousness of the Law on his own” (Fruchtenbaum, 23).

The Land Covenant “reaffirms the title deed to the Land as belonging to Israel” (ibid. 31). With the Davidic Covenant God established eternal dynasty for David and his household. This is not limited to the occupancy of the physical throne of Israel’s kingdom, but it also extends to the spiritual establishment of the kingdom of the Messiah who would come through the lineage of David. Corroborating this, Busenitz affirms that “In the Davidic Covenant, God promised the perpetual reign of the descendants of David, ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah and His millennial reign” (182). The eighth covenant identified by Fruchtenbaum is the New Covenant as recorded in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (35). It stands as a departure from the Old Covenant – the Mosaic Covenant; “the New Covenant really is a new covenant, not a renewed old covenant” (Pettegrew 253).

Types of Biblical Covenants

Broadly speaking, covenants may be classified into two based on the level of commitment of covenanting parties. Thus, there are conditional and unconditional covenants. Conditional covenants demand that certain reciprocal commitments be maintained for the covenant to be binding (www.valleybible.net). As such, this type of covenant is “a bilateral covenant in which a proposal of God to man is characterized by the formula: if you will, then I will whereby God promises to grant special blessings to man providing man fulfils certain conditions contained in the covenant (Fruchtenbaum 5).” The Edenic and the Mosaic Covenants have been identified as the conditional covenants in the Bible (Busenitz 176, Fruchtenbaum 5). On the other hand, unconditional covenants are those which involve God’s sole responsibility and are not dependent on human compliance for their fulfillment. “This covenant is characterized by the formula: I will which declares God’s determination to do as He promises” (Fruchtenbaum 6). The other six covenants, including the Abrahamic Covenant, are categorised as unconditional (Busenitz, 182, Fruchtenbaum, 6). In the section following, this work shall concentrate on the Abrahamic Covenant to which the contemporary Christians lay claim as shown in the opening chorus.

Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic covenant, God’s promise to bless Abraham and his descendants, has been divided into three components, namely: “promises involving the Land of Canaan, promises involving the descendants of Abraham and promises of blessing to God’s people” (www.valleybible.net). These components have been identified as the Land, the Seed and the Blessing aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant; (Fruchtenbaum 16) thus reflecting the link between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Land Covenant, the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant. Fruchtenbaum affirms that “the Abrahamic Covenant contains both physical and spiritual promises. While the physical blessings were limited to the Jews only, the spiritual blessings were to extend to the Gentiles, but only through the Messiah” (ibid.). It is in the sense of the spiritual blessings that contemporary Christians can lay claim to the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant.

There have been different arguments on how the church came to share in the Abrahamic Covenant. Some have argued that the church became a replacement of Israel, others argue that it is either there are two new covenants, or the new covenant has two sides: one for Israel and one for the church while another school of thought projects the “partaker view” (ibid. 37-38). This current work agrees with the “partaker view” which opines that gentiles become partakers of the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant by the reason of their relationship with Christ. This view is supported by Ephesians 2:11-16 which clearly explains how the gentiles, who were once alienated from the covenants of the promise, are now integrated into the Abrahamic Covenant through the blood of Jesus. Ephesians 3:2-6 also presents the mystery of gentiles becoming heirs of the covenant together with Israel through the gospel.

Mood and Modality in Abrahamic Covenant

Mood is the linguistic resource with which the intention of the participants of a communicative event is expressed and accessed (Bankole & Ayoola 140; Khomutova 395–401, and Mcshane, Nirenburg, & Zacharski 57). It is the grammatical element that is used to characterise information as indicative, interrogative, imperative or subjunctive (Halliday 74). Modality, as a linguistic resource, employs moods as grammatical devices to indicate the intention of participants of a communicative event. “Modality means the speaker’s judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he is saying” (ibid. 75).

Therefore, in this section, attempts are made at identifying the linguistic devices with which the intentions of the covenanting parties in the Abrahamic Covenant are revealed. In identifying the linguistic resources of

mood and modality in the Abrahamic Covenant, this work stays with the English text of the covenant using the New International Version (NIV) of the Holy Bible, 2011 (Nigerian Baptist Convention Centenary) Edition. The NIV is preferred as it is widely considered as one of the English versions that are very close to the original language. This choice of the English version, rather than a study of the original Hebrew text, is deliberate to make the content of the paper open and accessible to interested believers who may have difficulty with understanding the Hebrew text.

(1) The LORD had said to Abram, (2) “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and (3) go to the land I will show you. (4) I will make you into a great nation and (5) I will bless you. (6) I will make your name great, and (7) you will be a blessing. (8) I will bless those who bless you, and (9) whoever curses you I will curse; and (10) all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

(11) The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, (12) “Lift up your eyes from where you are and (13) look north and south, east and west. (14) All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. (15) I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, (16) so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. (17) Go, (18) walk through the length and breadth of the land, for (19) I am giving it to you” (Genesis 14:14-17).

Of the nineteen (19) clauses contained in the two texts of the Abrahamic covenant as marked above, the majority of the clauses (13) are in the declarative mood while only six (6) clauses (numbers 2, 3, 12, 13, 17, 18) are in the imperative mood. Here below is a discussion of these two types of mood present in the texts of the Abrahamic covenant above.

S/N	CLAUSE NUMBER	SUBJECT	FINITE
1	1	The LORD	had said to Abram
2	4	I	will make you into a great nation
3	5	I	will bless you
4	6	I	will make your name great
5	7	you	will be a blessing
6	8	I	Will bless those who bless you
7	9	I	Will curse, whoever curses you
8	10	All peoples on earth	Will be blessed through you
9	11	The LORD	said to Abram after Lot had parted from him
10	14	I	will give to you and your offspring forever, all the land that you see
11	15	I	will make your offspring like the dust of the earth
12	16	your offspring	could be counted, if anyone could count the dust
13	19	I	am giving it to you

From the thirteen (13) declarative clauses, ten (10) have their subject as “The LORD” or “I” – both referring to God. The two clauses having “The LORD” as subject have finites that express the declaring role of God (“had said”, “said”). Subsequently, the first person pronoun “I” obviously has “The LORD” as its antecedent. Going with the first person pronoun subject is the preponderant use of “will”, the modal verb which

expresses God's commissive stance in the covenant discourse. "Will" in this context indicates certainty rather than probability; this clearly reveals that God is committed to the promises He made.

The only clause with the subject "you" – referring to Abraham – has a finite which expresses a state of being rather than an action. As such, the clause does not express what will be done; instead, it expresses what the subject will become apparently as a result of what another part will do. Therefore, Clause 7, which is the only clause having "you" as subject, expresses how Abraham will be a blessing consequent upon God making him great. Again, the strength of Abraham's state of being a blessing is dependent on God as the declaring party, not on Abraham as the obliging party.

The two other clauses (Clause 10 and Clause 16) which have subjects that are different from what have been discussed above are rendered in the passive voice. The passive voice may be used for a variety of reasons including its use when it is considered unnecessary to specify the performer of the action possibly because it can be easily inferred from the context or when the intention is to draw attention to the recipient of the action rather than the performer (Arema 311). Either of these reasons (or both) is applicable to the two clauses in the passive voice in the Abrahamic covenant. Clause 10: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" and Clause 16: "if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted" draw attention to the recipients of the action rather than the actor. From the context, however, it is clear that the actor is "The LORD" thus justifying the choice of the passive voice for these clauses. Apparently, an attempt at converting these passive clauses to active will result in having "The LORD" or "I" as the subjects of the two clauses; thus, making them at par with the ten other clauses discussed earlier.

TABLE 2: ELEMENTS OF THE IMPERATIVE CLAUSES IN THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT					
S/N	CLAUSE NUMBER	PREDICATOR	OBJECT	COMPLEMENT	ADJUNCT
1	2	Leave	your country, your people and your father's household	-	-
2	3	go	-	-	to the land I will show you
3	12	Lift up	your eyes	-	from where you are
4	13	look	-	-	north and south, east and west
5	17	Go	-	-	-
6	18	walk through		the length and breadth	of the land

As shown in the table above, the imperative clauses do not have subject as "it is implied in the meaning of a command that the omitted subject of the imperative verb is the 2nd person pronoun you" (Quirk & Greenbaum 201). Therefore, in these imperative clauses of the Abrahamic covenant it is implied that the commands are directed at Abraham who is the second person in the covenant exchange. This challenges the stance that the Abrahamic covenant (or any covenant at that) is unconditional, "that God alone was obligated to keep the tenets of the covenant" (Busenitz 176).

As shown in these imperative clauses of this covenant, Abraham as a covenanting party was obligated to “leave, go, lift up his eyes, look, and walk through”. While the actions expressed by the later three verbs are intended to reassure Abraham, the former two (leave and go) are indicative of steps to be taken towards the fulfillment of the covenant. Disobedience to these imperatives could have hampered the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Richards affirms that “Abraham responds to God’s revelation with faith and obedience. Thus, Abraham personally experienced the blessings that God promised” (Richards 195). Corroborating this view, Padfield argues that “in making a covenant with Abraham, God promised to bless his descendants and make them His own special people – in return, Abraham was to remain faithful to God and to serve as a channel of blessing to the rest of the world” (3).

While the preponderance of declarative mood indicates that the strength of the covenant rests on the declaring party (God), not necessarily on the obliging party (Abraham), the significant occurrence of the imperative mood suggests power differential between the covenanting parties as commands usually go from a superior to a subordinate, in this case, from God to Abraham. This proposition classifies the Abrahamic covenant as a suzerainty covenant, usually made between a superior and an inferior (www.valleybible.net). Against this background, the use of imperative clauses in the Abrahamic covenant cannot be adjudged to connote polite requests as the clauses are devoid of politeness markers such as “please” (Quirk & Greenbaum 201). As it stands, the sovereign God issued commands which Abraham was obligated to keep as His part of the pact.

Implications for Contemporary Christians

Erickson affirms that “New Testament converts are participants in or heirs to the covenant...” (Erickson 1021). He then concludes that “the situation of believers both in the New Testament and today is to be understood in terms of the covenant made with Abraham” (ibid.). This aligns with Pettegrew’s solution to the controversies around the interpretation of the New Covenant that “the church participates in the New Covenant” (269). To this end, contemporary Christians can lay claim to Abraham’s blessings to the extent to which they are partakers of God’s kingdom through Christ Jesus. As partakers of the Abrahamic covenant, therefore, contemporary Christians have great assurance in God’s commitment to the covenant promised; yet, they have a role to play.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the almost exclusive use of the subjects “I” or “The LORD” (when all clauses are in the active voice) in the Abrahamic covenant is indicative of the fact that the strength of the covenant rests on God as the declaring party. Furthermore, the preponderance of the “will” modal auxiliary is indicative of God’s commissive stance, His commitment to the certainty of the fulfillment of the terms of the covenant. These are combined evidences of God’s commitment and ability to keep to His side of the pact. With these, the contemporary Christians can be assured that “God made a spiritual covenant with Abraham and with his descendants.... This covenant has continued to this day” (Erickson 1021) and the contemporary Christians are partakers of same by their faith in Jesus Christ.

As exciting as it may be for the contemporary Christians to accept their place as partakers in the Abrahamic covenant which has been identified as an unconditional covenant, they must also realise that they have roles to play. This paper has established, through the occurrence of the imperative clauses, that even unconditional covenants come with obligations on the part of the recipients. Closely related to this is the position of this paper that the Abrahamic covenant is one instituted between the divine and the human parties. Against the background that God’s covenant with man is suzerainty covenant made between a superior and a subordinate, contemporary Christians should play their role in obedience to the sovereign

Lord. Obedience to the terms of the covenant is apparently going to be a reflection of the regard they have for God.

Conclusion

This paper has identified eight biblical covenants, and it has zeroed in on a discussion of the Abrahamic covenant. It can be concluded that though the covenant was originally instituted with Abraham and his descendants, the contemporary Christians gained access to the blessing content (as reflected by extension in the New Covenant) through Jesus Christ. Two moods were identified in the two texts of the Abrahamic covenant considered in this paper: the declarative and the imperative. The declarative mood projects God as the solid force behind the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant while the imperative mood indicates that the partakers of the covenant have a role to play in obedience to the sovereign God who is the declaring party. From the foregoing and from the content of the popular chorus "Abraham's blessings are mine", the contemporary Christians' understanding of the concept and content of Abraham's blessing should propel them into re-assurance and responsible living. The contemporary believers in Christ should be reassured that God is personally committed to the fulfillment of the terms of the Abrahamic covenant to which they are now partakers. On the other hand, the contemporary Christians have a responsibility to respond in obedience as a reflection of their deference for God.

Works Cited

- Areomo, Bolaji. *An Introduction to English Sentences*. Ibadan: Scribo Publications Limited, 2004.
- Bankole, M. A. and M. O. Ayoola. "Mood and Modality in Christian Magazines: A Systemic Functional Analysis of Christian Women Mirror" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(14), 2014
- Busenitz, I. A. "Introduction to Biblical Covenants: The Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant" *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Fall 1999.
- Erickson, Millard. *Christian Theology* (Third Edition) Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013.
- Fruchtenbaum, A. "The Eight Covenants of the Bible". Retrieved from www.ariel.org.
- Halliday, M. A. K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Second). London: Edward Arnold Publishers Limited., 1994.
- Khomutova, T. N. "Mood and Modality in Modern English" *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 154, 2014: 395–401.
- Larry D. Pettegrew, "The New Covenant" *The Master's Seminary Journal* Vol 10 Issue 2, 1999.
- Mcshane, M., S. Nirenburg, & R. Zacharski. *Mood and Modality: Out of Theory and into the Fray* Vol. 10. (doi:10.1017/S1351324903003279) 2004.
- Padfield, D. "Bible Covenants". Retrieved from www.padfield.com, 2009.
- Quirk, Randolph and Sidney Greenbaum. *A University Grammar of English*. London: Longman, 1973.
- Richards, L. O. "Covenant" *Encyclopedia of Bible Words*. Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Publishers, 1998, 193-.
- The Biblical Covenants. Retrieved from www.valleybible.net