When History Repeats Itself: The Theological Significance of the Abrahamic Covenant in Early Jewish Writings

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Abstract

Alongside 'Mosaic discourse', Second Temple period authors increasingly looked to Abraham as a source of instruction and authority. This article focuses on the growing importance of the Abrahamic covenant through the lens of five re-tellings of Israel's history that link the past with the present: the *Damascus Document*, the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, *4 Ezra*, Nehemiah 9, and Galatians. This article argues that various authors placed themselves within a historical narrative that spotlighted the Abrahamic covenant in order to identify themselves as the elect and demarcate the boundaries separating them from the non-elect. The ideological orientation of each text can account for why the Abrahamic covenant, rather than the later Mosaic pact, became the basis for identity politics.

Keywords: Abraham, covenant, Galatians, *Damascus Document, 1 Enoch*

1. Introduction

The centrality of Moses, both as a personality and as a lawgiver, is one of the most remarkable developments of the Second Temple period. The Torah of Moses became the touchstone of religious practice, and the urgency of conforming to its dictates became the impetus for sectarian

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controversies.[1] Yet alongside 'Mosaic discourse', writers of the Second Temple period increasingly looked to Abraham, the pre-Sinaitic patriarch, as a source of instruction and authority.[2] In this paper, I will focus on one element of this 'Abrahamic discourse', namely the growing importance of the Abrahamic covenants of Genesis 15 and 17.

I analyze four texts that emphasized the Abrahamic covenant in response to the challenges of their respective historical circumstances. The *Damascus Document*, the Enochic *Apocalypse of Weeks*, *4 Ezra*, and Nehemiah 9 did not simply re-present portions of Gen. 15 and 17. Instead, they recounted a version of Israel's history up to their own day in which the formation of the Abrahamic covenant played a pivotal role. The authors of these texts forged a link between their present and the Abrahamic covenant in order to demonstrate that the story of Israel's past was not complete. The novel events of the Second Temple period, particularly the loss of political sovereignty, a large and flourishing Jewish diaspora, and internecine strife, invited explanation and evidence that the covenant with God had survived the exile.[3] By placing themselves within a historical narrative that spotlighted the Abrahamic covenant, the authors of these texts sought to argue that it remained intact *and that their community constituted the covenantal community*. All of these texts fashion an image of the Abrahamic covenant that matches their own self-understanding and thus ensures that they represent the central element of Israel's ongoing history. Although Paul did not write a continuous historical narrative stretching back to Abraham and carrying through to his own day, he too used the Abrahamic covenant as a vehicle for situating his community within Israel's history. N. T. Wright has argued that Paul intended his treatment of the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians to serve as a

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[1] On law as the basis for sectarian controversy, see Morton Smith, 'The Dead Sea Sect in Relation to Ancient Judaism', *NTS* 7 (1960), pp. 347-60, including his famous formulation, 'But touch the Law, and the sect will split' (360). See also Yaakov Sussman, 'The History of Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Preliminary Observations on *Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah* (4QMMT)', *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), pp. 11-76 (Hebrew).

[2] On Mosaic discourse, see Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (JSJSup, 77; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[3] See N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), pp. 135-38.

'retelling of the Israel-story' that should be added to a list of such historical narratives from the Second Temple period.[4] Accordingly, I will consider his letters—Galatians in particular—alongside the aforementioned retellings of history.[5]

The historic significance of the Abrahamic covenant could be characterized in numerous ways—as the election of one man from a world of sinners, as the first stage in the election of a people, as a well-deserved reward of land for righteousness, or as a sign of God's attitude toward gentiles—and ancient Jews did not form a consensus about which description fit best. Early Jewish writers were thus free to adopt the description of the Abrahamic covenant that best matched their own self-perception. In linking that covenant with their own time and community, writers in Jewish antiquity promoted their self-understanding by choosing from among the above presentations of the covenant. Some writers believed that God had selected their particular group from among the rest of the sinners of Israel, and they invoked the Abrahamic covenant as a precedent for such a development. Paul, on the other hand, justified his belief that God had expanded the community of the elect with reference to the Abrahamic covenant.[6] Focusing on the reality of foreign domination, other writers sensed that God had abandoned his people, a development that the Abrahamic covenant could either justify (the grant of land to Abraham was conditioned upon the righteousness of his descendants) or challenge (the Abrahamic covenant was forged as part of God's rejection of the other nations).[7] If not quite a blank slate, the Abrahamic covenant did become a mirror for the self-perception of writers during the Second Temple period and an event from Israel's past that

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[4] N. T. Wright, 'Paul and the Patriarch: The Role(s) of Abraham in Galatians and Romans', in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), pp. 554-92 (572).

[5] Although the questions we ask and the texts we analyze are different, I endorse the conclusion of Nancy Calvert-Koyzis, *Paul, Monotheism and the People of God: The Significance of Abraham Traditions for Early Judaism and Christianity* (JSNTSup, 273; London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 4 that 'Abraham functioned as a key to how the Jewish people perceived their identity'.

[6] On Paul's intention to "expand" the covenant, see below, n. 75.

[7] See Ari Mermelstein, *Creation, Covenant, and the Beginnings of Judaism: Reconceiving Historical Time in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup, 168; Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 1-15.

provided the self-justification and authority that these writers sought. As a unilateral agreement between God and Abraham, the Abrahamic covenant was important as a source of consolation and reassurance for Jews of the Second Temple period.[8] However, the texts that I analyze below suggest a more robust function for the Abrahamic covenant among Jewish thinkers and provide a window into how early Jewish writers appropriated the past as a tool for evaluating the present.

Ultimately, each of these authors offered distinct portraits of the Abrahamic covenant that supported their (or their community's) self-perception as the elect group. The various authors used the Abrahamic covenant in order to identify themselves as the elect and demarcate the boundaries separating them from the non-elect. In a period when 'Mosaic discourse' had risen to prominence, the preference for the Abrahamic over the Mosaic covenant requires some explanation. The ideological orientation of each text can account for why the Abrahamic covenant, rather than the later Mosaic pact, became the basis for identity politics.

Rather than arranged in chronological order, the texts that I analyze below are grouped according to the particular way in which each characterizes the Abrahamic covenant. I begin with texts that center upon the covenant as a break from a sinful world and the importance of that characterization for two sectarian texts, the *Damascus Document* and the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, which describe their respective groups as likewise alone in a sinful world. I then move on to *4 Ezra*, whose author similarly characterizes the covenant as a break from sin as part of the book's indictment of divine justice. From there I proceed to Nehemiah 9, which portrays Abraham's origins outside of Israel rather than as part of a sinful world. I conclude with Paul's use of the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians, a text that my earlier analyses will help illuminate. In each case, the particular description

[8] See David Noel Freedman and David Miano, 'People of the New Covenant', in Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C.R. de Roo (eds.), *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup, 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 7-26 (12): 'Despite their concerns … a great optimism prevailed among the people that God would never renege on his promise … their positive outlook was based on their trust that God would keep the irrevocable covenant, the covenant of divine commitment to Abraham'.

of the Abrahamic covenant serves as a mirror for the author, his self-understanding, and his outlook on the relationship between his community's present and Israel's past. The similarities between the treatment of the Abrahamic covenant across the sources spotlight shared concerns about the relationship between the present and the past, while the differences underline the diverse ways in which early Jewish writers wrestled with those concerns.

2. The *Damascus Document* and the *Apocalypse of Weeks*: The Sectarian Legacy of Abraham's Covenant

Numerous sects that dotted the landscape of Second Temple Jewish society turned to the past in order to situate themselves as the flag-bearers of biblical Israel. For example, the sect behind the Cave 1 manuscript of the *Community Rule* claimed that it had been elected by God at creation; the Sadducees apparently invoked the authority of the written text of the Torah; and the Pharisees traced their *paradosis* back to 'the fathers'.[9] Several other authors from the third or early second centuries BCE turned to the Abrahamic covenant in order to justify their authoritative claims and locate themselves within Israel's history. In the historical narrative sketched out by these writers, the Abrahamic covenant represented the election of one individual from among the sinners of the world because of that individual's loyalty.[10] These authors offered a vision of the Abrahamic covenant that provided historical precedent for their own standing as a single group chosen by God from among a

[9] See John J. Collins, 'Sectarian Consciousness in the Dead Sea Scrolls', in Lynn Lidonnici and Andrea Lieber (eds.), *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity, and Tradition in Ancient Judaism* (JSJSup, 119; Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 177-92 (185-86); Günter Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes*, trans. Allan W. Mahnke (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Albert I. Baumgarten, 'The Pharisaic Paradosis', *HTR* 80 (1987), pp. 63-77. As Steve Mason notes (*Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees: A Composition-Critical Study* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], pp. 240-45), Josephus's statement that the Sadducees only rely on the written text does not mean that they reject oral transmission but rather laws that did not originate in the written Torah; 'the conflict is over provenance, not form' (242).

[10] For the theme of Abraham's rejection of idolatry in Second Temple literature, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, 'Abraham the Convert: A Jewish Tradition and Its Use by the Apostle Paul', in Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren (eds.), *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), pp. 151-75.

world of Jewish sinners. Their histories thus progressed toward their own day, when, in the aftermath of long periods of sin, a small, loyal community of Jews arose with whom God reestablished the covenant. The Abrahamic covenant served for these groups as a mirror through which they could situate themselves and their claims within the larger sweep of Israelite history.[11]

A. The *Apocalypse of Weeks*

In the Enochic *Apocalypse of Weeks* (=*AW*), *1 Enoch* 91:11-17, 93:1-10, Enoch provides a historical report, divided into ten weeks, that spans his time through the end-time.[12] The flood takes place in the second week, followed by a period of sin that lasts until the end of the third week, when 'a man'—Abraham—'will be chosen as the plant of righteous judgment', after whom 'will go forth the plant of righteousness forever and ever' (93:5).[13] Abraham's descendants—'the whole race of the chosen root'—were 'dispersed' following the destruction of the Temple in the sixth week (93:8). The critical moment takes place at the end of that week, when 'the chosen will be chosen as witnesses of righteousness from the eternal plant of righteousness, to whom will be given sevenfold wisdom and

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[11] Other texts from the Second Temple period capitalize on the fact that Abraham *alone* was elected as evidence that small groups of Jews would eventually increase in size; see, e.g., Isa. 51:1-2: 'Listen to me, you who pursue what is right … look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth. When I called him, he was but one, but I blessed him and made him many'. The sectarian texts I discuss presently go further, characterizing the Abrahamic covenant as election of a small group and simultaneous rejection of a larger group and not simply as evidence of demographic growth. H. G. M. Williamson ('Abraham in Exile', in Steven A. Hunt (ed.), *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010], pp. 68-78 [77-78]) has suggested that the passage in Isa. 51 originated with an exilic community that chose to accent the promise of seed rather than of land. If correct, that text would bolster my claim that the Abrahamic covenant was used both to shape and to reinforce communal self-perception.

[12] Most scholars date *AW* to the first third of the second century BCE; see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), pp. 440-41. Scholars recognize that the order of *1 Enoch* 91-93 in surviving Ethiopic manuscripts departs from the original order of the text; for discussion, see Nickelsburg, ibid., pp. 414-15. *AW* is preserved in Ethiopic manuscripts of *1 Enoch* as well as in fragmentary form in one Aramaic manuscript from Qumran, 4QEn^{g}. On the manuscript evidence for *1 Enoch*, see Nickelsburg, ibid., p. 21.

[13] All translations of *1 Enoch* are based on Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, with modifications. On the metaphor of plant in Second Temple literature, see Shozo Fujita, 'The Metaphor of Plant in Jewish Literature of the Intertestamental Period', *JSJ* 7 (1976), pp. 30-45.

knowledge' (93:10). The emergence of the elect group in the seventh week constitutes a revival of the botanical imagery first introduced with the Abrahamic covenant, and the reference to the 'eternal plant of righteousness' (93:10: *takla ʾsdq*) echoes the earlier description of the Abrahamic covenant: Abraham is the 'plant of righteous judgment' (*takla kʾʾənnanē ʾsdq*) and from him will emerge 'the plant of righteousness' (*takla ʾsdq*).[14]

The circumstances behind the group's election and their religious function mirror those of Abraham. Like Abraham, who was 'chosen' (*yəṯārray*) during a time of sin, this group is 'chosen' (*yəṯārrayu*/יתבחרון) during a sinful time, and, like Abraham, they will execute 'righteous judgment' (93:5//91:12: *kʾʾənnanē ʾsdq*). The belief in an end-time judgment is pervasive in Enochic literature, but in the case of *AW*, the theme of judgment also appears as part of the Abrahamic covenant, suggesting that the author of the *Apocalypse* is placing Enochic beliefs within the framework of Gen. 15. That chapter appears elsewhere in the description of the eschatological judgment in the *AW*. After executing righteous judgment (דין קשוט) on the wicked, the righteous will 'acquire possessions (נכסין) in righteousness',[15] a description of the end-time that echoes God's covenantal promise to Abraham in Gen. 15:14: 'And also that nation whom they shall serve will I judge (דָּן); and afterward shall they come out with great possessions (בִּרְכֻשׁ)'. The theme of a final judgment dominates the end-time expectations in *AW*, according to which judgments will take place in each of the final three weeks.[16] Thus, in *AW*, the Abrahamic covenant is not simply a guarantee of God's loyalty but a

[14] See Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, p. 448. Loren T. Stuckenbruck (*1 Enoch 91–108* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007], p. 124) suggests that the *Apocalypse of Weeks* 'uses "plant" to speak of the socio-religious matrix (Israel) within which and out of which the righteous (the true Israel) will be identified'. The partially reconstructed Aramaic of 93:10 in 4QEn^{g} 1 iv 11 reads instead the 'etern[al] pl[ant of] truth' (נ[צבת] קשט על[מ]א).

[15] 4QEn^{g} 1 4:16-17.

[16] See 91:12, 14, 15.

vehicle through which this group can express its eschatological ambitions and the grounds for its authority.

According to *AW*, the elect group in the present will blossom into a much larger group of devotees, recapitulating the emergence of the Israelites out of the original plant of righteousness. The emergence of the elect group of the Second Temple period, however, does not simply constitute a return to the status quo before the destruction of the Temple. Rather, that group initiates a new, more universalistic direction in the Abrahamic covenant. The elect group of the Second Temple period does not give rise to a large group of Jews but instead, in cyclical fashion, constitutes the beginning of a community that will culminate in a new creation. Their first priority is to 'uproot the foundations of violence (חמסא) and the structure of deceit (שקרא) in it' (91:11).[17] In doing so, they return to the time of the flood—the first hint of a more universalistic ethos—when 'deceit and violence (שקרא וחמסא) will spring up' (93:4).[18] From there, the trajectory of history concludes in the tenth week, when 'judgment … will be executed on the watchers of the eternal heaven … and the first heaven will pass away … and a new heaven will appear' (91:15-16). The recapitulation of the Abrahamic covenant does not inaugurate a new period of particularism but, to the contrary, a period of universalism that reverses the sins of the flood generation and that will eventuate in a new creation.

The election of a 'chosen' group to perpetuate the Abrahamic covenant presumably refers to the author's own community.[19] Although *AW* does refer to the Sinaitic covenant—a 'covenant for all generations'—during the description of the fourth week (93:6), the text clearly identifies the elect with the Abrahamic covenant. While the eternal nature of the Abrahamic covenant does function

[17] 4QEn^{g} 1 iv 12-13.
[18] 4QEn^{g} 1 iii 24-25. See Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch,* p. 443.
[19] Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, p. 447.

here as a guarantee of God's unbroken fidelity, the author seems more interested in retrojecting his self-perception to Abraham. The writer imagined his community as an elect group within a larger world of wickedness and similarly emphasized Abraham's emergence during a time of widespread wickedness. The author's own self-understanding thus drives his characterization of the Abrahamic covenant, and he turns to the past in order to advance a more convincing claim for his interpretation of the present.[20] By formulating a version of history that links his own community with the Abrahamic covenant, the author of *AW* seeks both to situate and confirm the unique role that his community plays within world history.

B. *Damascus Document*

The function of the Abrahamic covenant in the *Damascus Document* resembles closely that already observed above in the *Apocalypse of Weeks*.[21] Several passages in the *Damascus Document* link the patriarchal covenant with the sect lying behind the text. The following text, in which the author cites a series of biblical passages supporting the sect's self-presentation as the elect group, explicitly links the group's fate with the Abrahamic covenant:[22]

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[20] Daniel C. Olson (*A New Reading of the* Animal Apocalypse *of 1 Enoch: 'All Nations Shall be Blessed'* [SVTP, 24; Leiden: Brill, 2013]) has recently argued for the central role that the Abrahamic covenant plays in the eschatological scheme of the Enochic *Animal Apocalypse*. If his analysis is correct, then it would appear that scholars have seriously underestimated the importance of the Abrahamic covenant in Enochic literature generally.

[21] The oldest manuscript of the *Damascus Document* from Qumran, 4Q266, dates to the first half of the first century BCE. Joseph M. Baumgarten ('Introduction', in *Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006], p. 3) concludes that the *Damascus Document* was 'probably' composed in the last half of the second century BCE, though various source-critical theories complicate our ability to set particular passages in their original contexts; see, e.g., Charlotte Hempel, *The Laws of the Damascus Document: Sources, Tradition, and Redaction* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Jerome Murphy-O' Connor, 'An Essene Missionary Document? CD II, 14–VI, 1', *RB* 77 (1970), pp. 201-29; idem, 'A Literary Analysis of *Damascus Document* VI, 2-VIII, 3', *RB* 78 (1971), pp. 210-32; Philip R. Davies, *The Damascus Covenant: An Interpretation of the 'Damascus Document'* (JSOTSup, 25; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982).

[22] Translations from *CD* are based on Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition, Volume 1* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

> And what Moses said to Israel: 'Not because of your righteousness or the integrity of your heart are you going to dispossess these nations, but because he loved your ancestors (מאהבתו את אבותיך) and has kept his oath' (Deut. 9:5 and 7:8). So is the judgment of the converts of Israel (שבי ישראל), who turned away from the path of the people (סרו מדרך העם): Because God loved the ancients who bore witness to the people (באהבת אל את הראשנים אשר העידו על העם) following God, so too he loves those who follow them, because to them belongs the covenant of the fathers (כי להם ברית אבות). (*CD* 19:26-31)

According to this passage, God's commitment to the patriarchal covenant, beginning with Abraham, is unwavering. However, God waits until a group arises that replicates the primary achievement of the patriarchs, namely their opposition to the sinfulness that surrounds them. Thus, just as the patriarchs were those 'who bore witness to the people' (העידו על העם), so too has the sect 'turned away from the path of the people' (סרו מדרך העם). In this text, the Abrahamic covenant is significant because it serves as precedent for the claim that the sect makes about itself: God elects those who part ways with the larger group of sinners. As in *AW*, the *Damascus Document* focuses on the aspect of the Abrahamic covenant that best characterizes the author's own self-perception.

The connection between the author's self-understanding and his portrayal of the Abrahamic covenant structures his outlook on biblical history generally. The opening columns of the *Damascus Document* link the patriarchal covenant with the sect in a historical narrative that begins with the fall of the Watchers. The reference to Abraham as 'beloved' (אוהב) of God is covenantal language that echoes references to love both in column 19 and in the Hebrew Bible.[23] Isaac and Jacob, too, are referred to as 'beloved to God' (אוהבים לאל) and as 'eternal covenant partners' (בעלי ברית לעולם). The 'first covenanters' (באי הברית הראשונים) abandoned the 'covenant of God' (ברית אל), and God

[23] On 'love' as covenantal language in the Hebrew Bible, see William L. Moran, 'The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy', *CBQ* 25 (1963), pp. 77-87.

finally established his covenant (הקים אל את בריתו) with the 'remnant who held fast to the commandments of God'. According to the narrative in column 3, history has been marked by uninterrupted sin with only two exceptions: the period of the patriarchs and the rise of the sect, both occasions on which God initiated a covenant that would abide לעולם.[24] This text describes the seminal achievement of the Abrahamic covenant in a very particular way: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are an important trio because they alone broke the pattern of sin that preceded them.[25] In this way, this text mirrors the passage from the *Damascus Document* cited above and anticipates the sect's own self-perception as the group that ended generations of sin.[26] God renewed his covenant with the sect because they, like their patriarchal forebears, broke away from their ancestors by observing the law.

This passage does not refer to any additional covenants, or even to any other loyal devotees of God; the patriarchs and the sect are the only groups that enjoy this relationship with God. Moreover, the sect's accomplishments mirror those of the patriarchs. In particular, both ended a pattern whereby everyone else walked 'in the stubbornness of their hearts' (בשרירות לבם: 2:17, 3:5, 11-12), acted 'according to their will' (לעשות איש את רצונו: 2:20-21//3:12), did not hearken to the

[24] *CD* 3:2-4: 'Abraham did not walk in it and was counted as a friend for keeping the commandments of God and not following the desire of his spirit. And he passed (them) on to Isaac and to Jacob, and they kept (them) and were written up as friends of God and as members of the covenant forever (בעלי ברית לעולם)'; 3:12-13: 'But with those who remained steadfast in the commandments of God, with those who were left from among them, God established his covenant with Israel forever (הקים אל את בריתו לישראל עד עולם)'.

[25] See Maxine L. Grossman, *Reading for History in the Damascus Document: A Methodological Study* (STDJ, 45; Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 121.

[26] See Hermann Lichtenberger, 'Historiography in the Damascus Document', in Núria Calduch-Benages and Jan Liesen (eds.), *History and Identity: How Israel's Later Authors Viewed Its Earlier History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 231-37 (237): 'There is continuity only with the patriarchs, the friends of God. By walking in the way of God's heart, the community is in decisive discontinuity with the rest of Israel's history'. For surveys of the treatment of Abraham in the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Craig A. Evans, 'Abraham in the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Man of Faith and Failure', in Peter W. Flint (ed.), *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 149-58; Reinhard G. Kratz, 'Friend of God, Brother of Sarah, and Father of Isaac: Abraham in the Hebrew Bible and in Qumran', in Devorah Dimant and Reinhard G. Kratz (eds.), *The Dynamics of Language and Exegesis at Qumran* (FAT2, 35; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), pp. 79-105.

commandments of 'their maker' (עשיהם: 2:21//3:7-8), and 'strayed' (תעו: 2:17, 3:1, 4, 14) after their lusting eyes, sins for which they were 'cut off' (נכרתים: 3:1, 6, 9). As in *AW*, Abraham's covenant in the *Damascus Document* is significant because it represents a decisive break from the past and from other sinners, a central element of the sect's self-perception.[27] The Abrahamic covenant thus functions as a mirror through which the sect locates a historic precedent for its claims in the present.

C. The *Apocalypse of Weeks* and the *Damascus Document* Compared

In focusing on the Abrahamic covenant as a decisive break from the past, both *AW* and the *Damascus Document* portray Abraham as an elite, unique individual with whom God established a singular and exclusive relationship. That description matches closely how the groups represented in these texts understood their own places in history. They, like Abraham, were small groups elected by God from among the sinners of their own day, and, as such, they considered themselves to be latter-day Abrahams. This characterization of the Abrahamic covenant is not inevitable, as we will see in our analysis of other texts, and is most likely to be adopted by groups with a sectarian orientation.

Although both Second Temple texts view the Abrahamic covenant through their own self-understanding as the chosen few, there are important differences between *AW* and the *Damascus Document*.[28] The group behind *AW* understands itself as an elect group that will grow into a much

[27] See Grossman, *Reading for History*, p. 120: '[T]he covenantal remnant ultimately stands in for and replaces the willful people of Israel, who have been rejected by God on account of their disobedient behavior'. Angela Kim Harkins ('The Emotional Re-Experiencing of the Hortatory Narratives Found in the Admonition of the *Damascus Document*', *DSD* 22 [2015], pp. 285-307) has recently argued that the opening columns of *CD* enable its audience to 'plac[e] themselves within narratives of repeated failure to uphold the obligations of the Law', allowing them to 'cultivate a predisposition for cooperative living and obedience to the Law' (p. 306). Based on my analysis, I would add that the Abrahamic covenant plays a central role in both shaping and reflecting that predisposition.

[28] The relationship between the *Apocalypse of Weeks* and the *Damascus Document*, or between Enochic literature and the sectarian scrolls from Qumran in general, is notoriously complex and a hotly debated subject.

larger group of devotees, and it describes the Abrahamic covenant in a similar manner. The text proceeds to describe Sinaitic revelation and the building of the Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple; God's covenantal relationship with Abraham subsequently extends to all of the Israelites, at least as long as they remain loyal. In contrast, the *Damascus Document* describes all of history following the patriarchs as characterized by sin. The omission of Sinaitic revelation and its covenant from the narrative in the *Damascus Document* is telling, especially considering the emphasis that the *Damascus Document*, in contrast to *1 Enoch,* generally places on the Mosaic Torah.[29] Once again, the author of the *Damascus Document* portrays Abraham and his patriarchal successors in ways that match the author's self-understanding. Like the patriarchs, the sect is a small, observant group that emerges out of a context of sin and will never give rise to a large community of followers. The sectarians are an oasis in a desert of sin just as the patriarchs had earlier been.[30] This is especially clear in the passage from column 19, which describes the sectarians as beneficiaries of the divine love bestowed

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According to Gabriele Boccaccini, 'Enochic Judaism is the modern name for the mainstream body of the Essene party, from which the Qumran community parted as a radical, dissident, and marginal offspring' (*Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], p. 16). I believe that Collins's more skeptical view is the correct one: '[I]t is far too simple to equate Enochic Judaism with the "parent-community" of the *Damascus Document*, and … there is no basis for identifying it with the Essenes' (John J. Collins, '"Enochic Judaism" and the Sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls', in *Scriptures and Sectarianism: Essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (WUNT, 332*;* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), pp. 150-63 (163).

[29] See George W. E. Nickelsburg, 'Enochic Wisdom and Its Relationship to the Mosaic Torah', in Gabriele Boccaccini and John J. Collins (eds.), *Early Enoch Literature* (JSJSup, 121; Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 81-94. The absence of the Sinaitic revelation should perhaps be connected with the fact that *CD* 1:13-14 appears to allude in part to the sin of the Golden Calf; see Maxine Grossman, 'Cultivating Identity: Textual Virtuosity and "Insider" Status', in Florentino García Martínez and Mladen Popović (eds.), *Defining Identities: We, You, and the Other in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the Fifth Meeting of the IOQS in Groningen* (STDJ, 70; Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 1-11 (6-10); Harkins, 'Emotional Re-Experiencing', pp. 295-96. The opening columns of *CD* thus overlook the giving of the Torah and, consistent with the text's emphasis on sin, instead hint at the sin that took place at Sinai.

[30] See Albert Baumgarten, 'The Perception of the Past in the Damascus Document', in Joseph Baumgarten, Esther Chazon, and Avital Pinnick (eds.), *The Damascus Document, A Centennial of Discovery: Proceedings of the Third International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 4–8 February, 1998* (STDJ, 34; Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 1-15 (9): 'This view of the past had consequences for the present: the contemporary opponents of the truth were the last link in the substantial tradition of error. Parallel to the list of villains, however, was a much smaller number of heroes … such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob … This second list also had consequences for the present: the community of the Damascus Document saw itself as one link (possibly, the last link?) in that very thin and much interrupted chain …'

upon Abraham, while all other Jews are hated by God. The Sinaitic covenant, on the other hand, could not be described in similar terms: it was not a covenant forged with a small group, it was intended for a large community, and it is not a sudden break from a sinful past. Limiting the Abrahamic covenant to one group in the *Damascus Document* stands in stark contrast to the depiction of that covenant in *AW*, where the revival of the Abrahamic covenant with the elect group initiates a retreat back in time toward a more universalistic period.[31]

Both the *Damascus Document* and *AW* illustrate well the contribution that the Abrahamic covenant made to group ideology and self-perception. The narrative of the Abrahamic covenant that they tell—the election of an individual from a larger group of sinners—was not inevitable; other groups used the Abrahamic covenant to alternate effect. The authors of these texts accented the details of the covenant that were most compatible with their worldview and viewed the past through the lens of their present-day preoccupations. The authors' choices of how to characterize the Abrahamic covenant provide us with a window into their historical self-understanding as a small, elect group separated from the world of sinners.

The Mosaic covenant is of secondary importance in *AW* and is omitted entirely in the *Damascus Document* because it did not fit these communities' self-understanding. Only a covenant that involved the election of a small, observant group from among a sinful world could provide the authors of *AW* and *Damascus Document* with an apt historical precedent. Their claims to election reflected a covenantal model that was especially compatible with the Abrahamic covenant. They formulated historical reviews that linked themselves with the Abrahamic covenant in order to argue that they constituted the exclusive remnant of ancient Israel.

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[31] The exclusivism of the Abrahamic covenant in the *Damascus Document* is related to the complete absence of Gen. 12:3, the blessing of the nations through Abraham, in the Dead Sea Scrolls; see Mladen Popović, 'Abraham and the Nations in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Exclusivism and Inclusivism in the Texts from Qumran and the Absence of a Reception History for Gen 12:3', in Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten, and Jacques T. A. G. M. van Ruiten (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 77-103.

3. *4 Ezra*: The Abrahamic Covenant as Theological Challenge

Like *AW* and the *Damascus Document*, the author of *4 Ezra*, a pseudepigraphic book authored shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple, also focused on the significance of the Abrahamic covenant as a break from 'godless' people. In contrast to *AW* and the *Damascus Document*, however, the author of *4 Ezra opposed* his present-day reality to the Abrahamic covenant of the past.[32] My analysis below further documents the role of the Abrahamic covenant as a reflection of the ideology and self-understanding of different communities. As with *AW* and the *Damascus Document*, the self-image of the author of *4 Ezra* both shapes and is reinforced by his understanding of the Abrahamic covenant.

4 Ezra is set in Babylon, thirty years after the destruction of the First Temple, with 'Ezra' as the pseudepigraphic protagonist of the story.[33] The book's historical narrative opens by describing periodic outbreaks of sin among the 'godless' people until the time of Abraham, when God 'chose for [himself] one of them' and forged an 'everlasting covenant' with him (3:13-15)—a portrait of the Abrahamic covenant reminiscent of the one we explored above.[34] As part of that covenant, God swore that 'he would never forsake' Abraham's descendants (3:15). This covenant culminated in the relationship that God established with Jacob alone: 'You set apart Jacob for yourself, but Esau you

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[32] Although the historical narrative in *4 Ezra* ends with Ezra's own day, most scholars agree that the book was written within a generation of the destruction of the Second Temple, likely during the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE); see Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), p. 10. This date is based on the Eagle Vision of 11:1-12:3. See, however, Lorenzo DiTommaso, 'Dating the Eagle Vision of *4 Ezra:* A New Look at an Old Theory', *JSP* 20 (1999), pp. 3-38, who suggests that the symbolism in that vision better fits the events of the Severans than the Flavians and dates the vision to 218 CE. The place of composition is less clear, with Rome or Israel the most likely candidates. See Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, p. 10.

[33] On the significance of using a post-First Temple period context as the pseudepigraphic setting for the book, see Hindy Najman, *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future: An Analysis of 4 Ezra* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 11-16.

[34] Translations of *4 Ezra* are based on the NRSV.

rejected; and Jacob became a great multitude' (3:16). For the author of *4 Ezra*, the patriarchal covenant is as much about the rejection of the godless and of Esau as it is the election of the patriarchs.

Like the authors of *AW* and the *Damascus Document*, 'Ezra' employs the Abrahamic covenant—Israel's past—as a vehicle for interpreting his own present, and his experiences color his description of that covenant. 'Ezra's' description of the patriarchal covenant as constituting a break from godless people and entailing the rejection of Esau anticipates the end of his story, when he inquires why God tolerates those who are 'godless' and has punished 'Jacob' at the hands of the Babylonians. God had elected Abraham from among the godless, extended his eternal covenant to Jacob, and rejected Esau, yet he appears to prefer Babylon to Zion, the godless to the 'tribes who have so believed the covenants' (3:32). The portrait of the Abrahamic covenant here mirrors the author's own historical and ideological preoccupations—the incomprehensible fact that the 'godless' Romans, whose eponymous ancestor, Esau, had been rejected by God, now enjoyed the upper hand.[35] The Abrahamic covenant *should* ensure that God continue to spurn the godless and Esau and to maintain his relationship with Israel, but the destruction defies that expectation.

Like the *Damascus Document* and *AW*, the author of *4 Ezra* views the significance of the Abrahamic covenant as constituting a break from sinners. In all three texts, this theme is used to emphasize a distinction between the author's community, represented by Abraham, and some other group. However, whereas in the *Damascus Document* and *AW*, the text sought to distinguish between Jewish groups, some righteous and the others sinful, the author of *4 Ezra* distinguishes between Jews and gentiles. For 'Ezra', the Abrahamic covenant represents the election of the Jews and the

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[35] Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 493-94 n. 57, maintains that *4 Ezra* 6:8-9 is the oldest witness to the equation of Esau and Rome. *4 Ezra* 3 would support that suggestion. Ian E. Rock, *Paul's Letter to the Romans and Roman Imperialism: An Ideological Analysis of the Exordium (Romans 1:1–17)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), p. 292, finds evidence of the equation Esau=Rome in Romans 9:6-13.

rejection of the gentiles. For this reason, the Abrahamic covenant furnished the author of *4 Ezra* with a pessimistic outlook on the present rather than the positive evaluation that we observed in the *Damascus Document* and *AW*. Nonetheless, the Abrahamic covenant anchors the exclusivistic claims made by these authors, each of whom seeks to distance from God some other group that they label as sinful. For the author of *4 Ezra*, that opponent is the godless gentiles rather than another Jewish group, but the contrast between Abraham and a sinful world enables the authors of all three texts to distinguish between some who have been elected and others who have been rejected. The historical circumstances and ideology of each author differ but the role that the Abrahamic covenant plays is the same: the covenant serves to identify the author's group as the elect and demarcate the boundaries separating them from the non-elect.

Differences in ideological commitments and social location best account for the particular function that the Abrahamic covenant played in the *Damascus Document* and *AW* on the one hand and in *4 Ezra* on the other. The authors of the *Damascus Document* and *AW* viewed themselves as members of an eschatological community and justified that belief by tracing their community's origins back to the Abrahamic covenant. In contrast, 'Ezra', at least at the outset of the book, did not view his age as approaching the eschaton; to the contrary, he worried that the disappointing present signaled a break in God's relationship with the people.[36] Writing in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, the author of *4 Ezra* uses the Abrahamic covenant in order to craft an argument about divine injustice. God had unilaterally chosen Abraham from among the godless gentiles and then rejected Esau, yet God had allowed Esau's godless descendants to destroy the Jerusalem Temple. The author of *4 Ezra* retrojected his present onto the past by characterizing the Abrahamic covenant as simultaneously the election of the patriarchs and the rejection of the godless and of Esau. In this scheme, the Abrahamic covenant *should* ensure God's commitment to

[36] On the evolution in 'Ezra's' religious outlook, see Karina Martin Hogan, *Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra: Wisdom Debate and Apocalyptic Solution* (JSJSup, 130; Leiden: Brill, 2008).

the Jewish people; 'Ezra"s indictment of divine justice thus centers upon an unexpected reversal of fortune.

As with the *Damascus Document* and *AW*, the Mosaic covenant could not serve as an adequate precedent for the author of *4 Ezra*. The contrast between the godless and Rome's eponymous ancestor on the one hand and Jacob and his descendants on the other was central to the historical narrative in *4 Ezra* and its author's evaluation of his own period. The patriarchal covenant accommodated those themes more easily than the Mosaic covenant. When searching for a reflection of his present in the past, the author of *4 Ezra* naturally gravitated to God's relationship with the patriarchs rather than his pact with all of Israel at Sinai. The Abrahamic covenant could more easily support 'Ezra's' view that, under the terms of God's pact with Israel, the godless and Esau should be condemned.

4. Nehemiah 9: Loyal Abraham and the Covenant of Land

The texts that I have analyzed to this point all highlighted the break between the wicked and the righteous as the dominant characteristic of the Abrahamic covenant. In doing so, their authors reflected on the importance of this distinction in their own day. By contrast, the prayer in Nehemiah 9 called attention to a different dimension of the Abrahamic covenant. In the context of the book, this prayer is associated with the fifth-century community that had clashed with the Samaritans and 'separated itself from all foreigners' (9:1).[37] Rather than focus on Abraham's escape from a *sinful*

[37] The precise dating of this prayer is the subject of scholarly debate; see a survey of research in Mark J. Boda, *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and Use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9* (BZAW, 272; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 6-16. I subscribe to the view of most scholars, who see it as a fifth century text; see Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 176-78. More important than the dating of the text is the fact that its author clearly identified himself with the community represented in the text. On the flourishing of penitential prayer in the Second Temple period generally, see Rodney A. Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism: The Development of a Religious Institution* (SBLEJL, 13; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

world, Neh. 9 mentioned his departure from his *native country* and the divine gift of the land of Israel as a result of Abraham's loyalty.[38] These separate elements of the Abrahamic covenant were centrally important to the aspirations of the group behind this text. They believed that their presence in the land indicated ongoing divine commitment to the covenant and sought a complete reconciliation with God by inspiring him to recognize their Abraham-like act of commitment. Their portrayal of the Abrahamic covenant thus both reflected and made possible their beliefs and ambitions. As with the *Damascus Document*, *AW*, and *4 Ezra*, the author of Nehemiah 9 turned to the past in order to provide a mouthpiece for contemporary concerns and, in doing so, refracted the past through the lens of his present.

Nehemiah 9, while ostensibly a penitential prayer, is mostly devoted to a historical review from creation until the Persian period. The underlying theme of the passage is God's undying devotion to the covenant forged with Abraham, in which, according to v. 8, he promised the land to his progeny. After giving them the Torah and the manna in vv. 14-15, God instructs them 'to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them' (v. 15).[39] Nevertheless, the people immediately embark on a path of sin that endured until the present day (v. 16). The first sin committed by the Israelites in the wilderness, according to this prayer, was their refusal to enter the land (v. 17).[40] In spite of their sins, 'you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness' (v. 19) and, in fulfillment of the divine promise to Abraham, 'brought them into the land that you had told their ancestors to enter and possess' (v. 24). The people never break the pattern of sin, with the description of their behavior during their days in the wilderness reiterated verbatim in a summary of

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[38] Cf. Michael W. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 7:72b–10:40: An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study* (SBLDS, 164; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), pp. 172-73.
[39] Quotations from the Hebrew Bible are based on the NRSV.
[40] See Jacques Vermeylen, 'The Gracious God, Sinners and Foreigners: How Nehemiah 9 Interprets the History of Israel', in Núria Calduch-Benages and Jan Liesen (eds.), *History and Identity: How Israel's Later Authors Viewed Its Earlier History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 78-114 (p. 99).

their disobedience after centuries in the land.[41] Yet God does not remove them from the land. Especially noteworthy in the speaker's description of divine punishment is the absence of any reference to the exile.[42] God has thus remained steadfast in his promise to Abraham that his progeny would inherit the land.[43]

The texts analyzed earlier highlighted Abraham's break from sin. By contrast, Neh. 9 emphasizes not his break from sin but his departure from his birth place: 'You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham' (9:7). The choice to focus on this detail as the most salient one again reflects the theological preoccupations of the prayer's author. God's commitment to the land figures prominently throughout the prayer and will be of vital importance to an Israel-based community claiming that God remains with them.[44] The author's particular characterization of the Abrahamic covenant thus emerges from and reinforces his self-perception.

The Abrahamic covenant remains in the background as the prayer draws to a close. At this point, the connection between the text's present and Israel's past rises to the surface, and the function of the Abrahamic covenant for the author becomes more apparent. The formal petition praises God for 'keeping the covenant and steadfast love (שֹׁומֵר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֶסֶד)' (v. 32) and admits

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[41] V. 16: 'They … acted presumptuously (הֵזִידוּ); they stiffened their necks, and did not obey your commandments (וַיַּקְשׁוּ אֶת-עָרְפָּם וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹתֶיךָ)'; v. 29: 'They acted presumptuously and disobeyed your commandments (וְהֵמָּה הֵזִידוּ וְלֹא-שָׁמְעוּ לְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ) … they stiffened their neck and would not obey (וְעָרְפָּם הִקְשׁוּ וְלֹא שָׁמֵעוּ)'.

[42] V. 31: 'Many years you were patient with them and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands'. Gili Kugler has used the lack of reference to the exile as one piece of evidence supporting a pre-exilic date for the prayer; see 'Present Affliction Affects the Representation of the Past: An Alternative Dating of the Levitical Prayer in Nehemiah 9', *VT* 63 (2013), pp. 605-26 (621). I prefer seeing this omission as part of the rhetorical strategy of the text.

[43] See Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (SBLEJL, 14; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), p. 75.

[44] See Vermeylen, 'Gracious God', p. 96, who notes that the prayer 'divide[s] the history into only two periods, the one where the people journey towards its land and the other where they inhabit it'.

that God remained 'just' (צַדִּיק) and 'dealt faithfully' (אֱמֶת עָשִׂיתָ), echoing the same concentration of phrases found in the earlier description of the Abrahamic covenant.[45] Yet the people have failed to follow the model of Abraham, who was described as 'faithful'; God is the one who has 'dealt faithfully' with them, while they have 'acted wickedly'.[46] He has kept them in Israel, but, because their ancestors 'did not serve God', they are now 'slaves' (עֲבָדִים) in their land. The only solution is to return to God, and, accordingly, they sign a 'firm agreement' (אֲמָנָה), recommitting themselves to God. This unusual term for covenant was likely used as an echo of Abraham's act of faithfulness (נֶאֱמָן): their pact replicates the acts of loyalty that led to Abraham's election in the first place.[47] The community's needs in the present explain their representation of the Abrahamic covenant: They must initiate a new beginning that replicates the original beginning in the time of Abraham.[48]

Nehemiah 9 draws upon the Abrahamic covenant in order to navigate the fine line between confidence and ambivalence, situating this text between the optimism of the *Damascus Document* and

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[45] V. 8: 'And you found his heart faithful (נֶאֱמָן) before you and made with him a covenant (הַבְּרִית) to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite; and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous (צַדִּיק)'. See Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, p. 173.

[46] See Richard J. Bautch, 'An Appraisal of Abraham's Role in Postexilic Covenants', *CBQ* 71 (2009), pp. 42-67 (56). The event to which the text refers in calling Abraham "faithful" (נֶאֱמָן) is unclear. Some scholars take it as a reference to the Aqedah (Newman, *Praying by the Book,* pp. 70, 74), others to Gen. 15:6 (וְהֶאֱמִן בַּיהוָה) (Beate Ego, 'Interpreting the Exile: The Experience of the Destruction of the Temple and Devastation of the Land as Reflected within the Nonpentateuchal Biblical Abraham Tradition', in Kristin De Troyer and Armin Lange (eds.), *Reading the Present in the Qumran Library: The Perception of the Contemporary by Means of Scriptural Interpretations* [SBLSymS, 30; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005], pp. 165-79 [175]).

[47] On אֲמָנָה as covenant terminology, see Boda, *Praying the Tradition,* pp. 72-74. On the relationship between נֶאֱמָן and אֲמָנָה, see Fredrick C. Holmgren, 'Faithful Abraham and the *'amānâ* Covenant: Nehemiah 9,6–10,1', *ZAW* 104 (1992), pp. 249-54.

[48] See Ego, 'Interpreting the Exile', p. 177. In requiring an Abraham-like return to God, this prayer does not imagine the Abrahamic covenant as entirely unilateral, as noted by Bautch, 'Appraisal of Abraham's Role', pp. 54-57. Only by reforming themselves could they completely repair their relationship with God. Nevertheless, the text's insistence that God has kept them in the land despite their disobedience suggests that they did believe that the covenant had endured despite their infidelity.

AW and the skepticism of *4 Ezra*. As we saw earlier, the sectarian groups behind the *Damascus Document* and *AW* used the Abrahamic covenant to express their exclusivistic outlook: they alone, among all Jews, constituted the covenantal elect. Though more subtle, Neh. 9 betrays a similar self-understanding. According to the prayer in that text, the Abrahamic covenant consisted of Abraham's fidelity and God's grant of the land. In order to claim the mantle of the covenant, therefore, a community must be similarly faithful and located in the land of Israel. Neh. 9 echoes the author of *4 Ezra*'s sentiment that the Abrahamic covenant is imperiled, but the fact that their community remains on their land suggests that God continues to abide by the covenant.[49] The emphasis on *the covenant* might serve to distinguish their group from others in Israel that did not subscribe to their understanding of the covenantal obligations. The clash between Nehemiah and the Samaritans earlier in the book suggests that Nehemiah's community felt the need to distance itself from groups elsewhere in the land and establish themselves as 'the embodiment of authentic Judaism'.[50] Regardless of the prayer's origin, it fits the profile of a community with sectarian tendencies, an attribute of the Persian period Judahite community implied in other biblical texts.[51] Nehemiah 9 thus characterizes the Abrahamic covenant in a particular way in order to demonstrate both that the covenant remains intact and that it endures in the form of this community.

Nehemiah 9 makes reference to Sinaitic revelation but does not refer to it as a covenantal act.[52] For a community whose occupancy of the land was a decisive factor, the Abrahamic covenant

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[49] Newman, *Praying by the Book*, p. 100, puts this point nicely: 'The reason for the de-emphasis would seem to lie with the author's desire to establish an inalienable claim to the land … How better to establish such a claim than to mitigate the aspect of the Exile having to do with the loss of land as punishment?'
[50] Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah,* 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), p. 135.
[51] See Manfred Oeming, '"See, We Are Serving Today" (Nehemiah 9:36): Nehemiah 9 as a Theological Interpretation of the Persian Period', in Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), pp. 571-88 (583), who suggests that Neh. 9 is 'concerned with conceiving and realizing a vision of the "true Israel"'. On sectarianism during the Persian period, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'A Jewish Sect of the Persian Period', *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 5-20.
[52] See Rolf Rendtorff, 'Nehemiah 9: An Important Witness of Theological Reflection', in Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (eds.), *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe*

better suited its self-representation as the covenantal group. In re-committing themselves to the 'right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments' transmitted on Sinai (9:13), members of this community will replicate Abraham's initial act of fidelity and once again flourish in the land.

5. Galatians 3: The Abrahamic Covenant between a Sinful World and the Sinaitic Covenant

Perhaps more than any other Second Temple author, Paul linked his community's self-perception with the Abrahamic covenant, but my analysis above enables us to understand that strategy as part of a broader Second Temple trend. I turn now to consider the ramifications of my study for Galatians 3, one of Paul's seminal treatments of the Abrahamic covenant.[53] Scholars correctly contrast Paul's argument for distinguishing the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants with Second Temple works such as the book of *Jubilees*, yet other writers of the period shared his belief in the primacy of the Abrahamic covenant.[54] My earlier analysis suggests that Paul was not alone among Second Temple Jews in driving a wedge between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant. The difference between other writers and Paul lies in their respective interpretations of the *source* of the Abrahamic covenant's uniqueness. According to the texts analyzed earlier, the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants *should* have been continuous, but the people (in the *Damascus Document*, *AW*, and Nehemiah) or God (in *4 Ezra*) caused a break that necessitated a return to the Abrahamic pact. By

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Greenberg, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 111-17 (116): 'According to this prayer, there is only one covenant God has made with Israel, and he made it at the very beginning with Abraham'.

[53] In the form of the so-called 'New Perspective', Paul himself has been subject to the kind of re-reading that I have described in the various sources in this paper. Numerous scholars have drawn attention to the apologetic motivations of Pauline scholars reconsidering Paul's message in a post-Holocaust context; see, e.g., Jeffrey S. Siker, 'Abraham, Paul, and the Politics of Christian Identity', *JSQ* 16 (2009), pp. 56-70, and the essays collected in *Biblical Interpretation* 13 (2005).

[54] For the contrast between Paul and *Jubilees*, see, e.g., Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), pp. 31-32. Aside from Galatians 3, Paul also devotes attention to the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians 4:21-31 and Romans 4 and 9-11.

contrast, Paul denied the continuity between the two covenants and asserted that they were fundamentally different in kind.[55] Nevertheless, all of these authors used the Abrahamic covenant in order to characterize Israel's covenantal past in light of the present and claim the mantle of that covenant for their own community.

Although not presented in the form of a historical narrative, Paul's discussion of the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians 3 offers an account of history that, like the texts that I analyzed above, situates the present as a continuation of Israel's past and reads that past in light of the present.[56] Paul, who detects great significance in the fact that the Abrahamic covenant is chronologically prior to the Mosaic covenant, divides salvation history into eras.[57] The Abrahamic covenant belongs to the era of faith, which sees its fulfillment in Christ, the 'offspring' of Gen. 15:18 (Gal. 3:16).[58] The law was subsequently 'added' but, as with a codicil to a will, did not function to 'add to' or 'annul' it (Gal. 3:15).[59] The era of law was meant to be limited temporally; the law was a παιδαγωγός, a house-slave who would guide and protect children until their late adolescence (Gal. 3:24).[60] God had intended that his people should constitute one family, while the law necessarily created divisions between people.[61] The death of Christ marks an end to that era—a 'new creation'

[55] See Calvert-Koyzis, *Paul, Monotheism and the People of God,* p. 95.
[56] See Wright, 'Paul and the Patriarch: The Role(s) of Abraham in Galatians and Romans', p. 572, who characterizes Galatians 3 as a 'retelling of the Israel-story'.
[57] See Don Garlington, 'Role Reversal and Paul's Use of Scripture in Galatians 3.10–13', *JSNT* 65 (1997), pp. 85-121 (108), who suggests that the distinction between 'faith' and 'works' is not simply a conceptual distinction but rather an 'epochal delineation of the respective places of νόμος and πίστις in salvation history'.
[58] For an alternative understanding of σπέρμα in Gal. 3:16 as a collective noun, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 162-67.
[59] Translations of Galatians are based on NRSV.
[60] On the significance of the παιδαγωγός imagery for the temporality of Paul's thought, see Norman H. Young, '*Paidagogos:* The Social Setting of a Pauline Metaphor', *NovT* 29 (1987), pp. 150-76 (174); David J. Lull, '"The Law was Our Pedagogue": A Study in Galatians 3:19–25', *JBL* 105 (1986), pp. 481-98 (495).
[61] Wright, *Climax of the Covenant,* pp. 166-67.

(Gal. 6:15)—as a consequence of which 'we are no longer subject to a παιδαγωγός, for in Christ Jesus you are all the children of God through faith' (Gal. 3:25-26).[62]

According to one prominent line of thought among 'New Perspective' scholars, Paul sought to demonstrate to the Galatians that gentile followers of Jesus could enter into a covenant with God even without observing Jewish law.[63] The examples that Paul provides—circumcision, laws of kosher food, and the festivals—are markers of the covenant that traditionally separate Jews from gentiles.[64] Paul delineates the crux of his argument in ch. 3, where he elaborates upon his understanding of the Abrahamic covenant. Scholars generally assume that Paul's observations about that covenant were a response to claims made by his opponents, who likely contended that physical circumcision was the means to perfection and that the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants should be synthesized.[65] Yet the appearance of Abraham in Romans 4 and 9-11 suggests that the Abrahamic covenant was not simply important to Paul because his opponents used it in constructing their argument.[66] Unlike the sources surveyed above, Paul's self-perception was *challenged* by the

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[62] Paul's exposition in Galatians 3 shares much in common with that in Romans 4, though there are important differences. On the latter text, see, e.g., N. T. Wright, 'Paul and the Patriarch: The Role of Abraham in Romans 4', *JSNT* 35 (2013), pp. 207-41; Andrew T. Lincoln, 'Abraham Goes to Rome: Paul's Treatment of Abraham in Romans 4', in Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige (eds.), *Worship, Theology, and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin* (JSNTSup, 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), pp. 163-79; U. Wilckens, 'Die Rechtfertigung Abrahams nach Römer 4', in R. Rendtorff and K. Koch (eds.), *Studien zur Theologie der alttestamentlichen Überlieferungen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), pp. 111-27; Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6* (WUNT, 224; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Ernst Käseman, 'The Faith of Abraham in Romans 4', in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 79-101.

[63] See James D. G. Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', *BJRL* 65 (1983), pp. 95-122 (105).

[64] See esp. Dunn, 'New Perspective'.

[65] Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians,* p. 172. For the complications associated with this process of 'mirror-reading', see John M. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case', *JSNT* 31 (1987), pp. 73-93. Barclay concludes that it is 'highly probable' that Paul's opponents relied upon the Abraham narratives in presenting their arguments to the Galatians (p. 88). For a more skeptical view about the possibility of reconstructing the claims of Paul's opponents, see George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 96-112. Nickelsburg, 'Abraham the Convert', p. 168, speculates that the Galatians may have initially learned about Abraham from Paul himself.

[66] See N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology', in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 205-36 (232): '[E]ven if his opponents had never mentioned Abraham … Paul would have wanted

Abrahamic covenant and its association with circumcision. His great achievement lies in his ability to transform that covenant from a drawback to an asset, utilizing it like the authors analyzed above to support his community's self-perception.

Paul appears to use the Abrahamic covenant to support two related, fundamental propositions: first, that, with the coming of Christ, all people are eligible to join the covenant, and, second, that membership in the covenant does not require the observance of Jewish law.[67] Like the sources I analyzed earlier, Paul sets out to situate his present in continuity with Israel's covenantal past and to argue, based on the Abrahamic covenant, that his followers constitute the present-day community of the covenant.

Paul's primary objective in the opening chapters of Galatians is to define the parameters of the covenant. 'Sonship' in Galatians—the subject of ch. 3—refers to covenantal membership. The analogy that he draws between the 'promise' and a will—διαθήκη, the word for both will and covenant—further suggests that Paul's focus is on covenant (3:15).[68] God forged his covenant with Abraham because of the latter's faith (πίστις) (3:6), and, as such, 'those who have faith are children of Abraham' (3:7)—that is, members of the Abrahamic covenant.[69] As N. T. Wright has argued, Paul uses δικαιοσύνη in his quotation of Gen. 15:6 (Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to

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to tell this story to address and controvert the point the agitators were urging, that Gentiles who wanted to join the people of Israel had to be circumcised'. Contrast Ian J. Elmer, *Paul, Jerusalem and the Judaisers: The Galatian Crisis in Its Broadest Historical Context* (WUNT, 258; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), p. 136, who concludes that 'Paul's innovative (even arbitrary) reinterpretation of the Abraham narrative indicates that he is responding directly to the arguments of his opponents, for it seems unlikely that Paul would have used such an argument against circumcision, since the issue of circumcision and the covenant are intimately related to the Abraham story'.

[67] Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians,* p. 104.

[68] Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), p. 38; Wright, 'Paul and the Patriarch: The Role(s) of Abraham in Galatians and Romans', p. 574; Scott W. Hahn, 'Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah: Διαθήκη in Galatians 3:15-18', *CBQ* 67 (2005), pp. 79-100.

[69] G. Walter Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts* (JSNTSup, 29; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 112-15.

him as δικαιοσύνη') as covenantal language (3:6).[70] Wright's interpretation of δικαιοσύνη does have its detractors, but, in any case, the biblical context for Gen. 15:6 is certainly a covenantal one. Because Christ is the 'offspring' mentioned in Gen. 15:18 who will inherit Abraham's covenant (3:16), his arrival renews the covenant of Abraham, which was a covenant based on faith rather than law (3:18). As such, all humanity, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free (3:28), can join the covenant through faith in Jesus (3:26).[71] This community would fulfill God's objective in forging the Abrahamic covenant from the outset, namely establishing a single, undivided family as the people of the one God.[72]

In Galatians, we again see that Second Temple writers accentuated the aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that were conducive to interpreting the reality of their own time. Thus, according to Paul, Christ's death and resurrection triggered a reconceptualization of the covenant that would encompass both Jew and gentile.[73] The Abrahamic covenant could serve as the sole precedent for this covenantal model.[74] The *Damascus Document*, *AW*, and Nehemiah (as part of its editor's polemic against other groups in the land) used the Abrahamic covenant as a way of *narrowing* the scope of Israel's covenant with God to cover a small sub-set of Jews. By contrast, Paul appropriated the Abrahamic covenant in order to *expand* the scope of the covenant and encompass

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[70] See Wright, 'Paul and the Patriarch: The Role of Abraham in Romans 4', pp. 219-23. For criticisms of his translation, see Richard K. Moore, 'N. T. Wright's Treatment of 'Justification' in *The New Testament for Everyone*', *ExpTim* 125 (2014), pp. 483-86, and Wright's response, 'Translating δικαιοσύνη: A Response', *ExpTim* 125 (2014), pp. 487-90. On δικαιοσύνη as covenantal language in Paul, see Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 3:783-804.

[71] On the relationship between the antitheses in 3:28 and the circumcision controversy, see Troy W. Martin, 'The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17:9–14) and the Situational Antitheses in Galatians 3:28', *JBL* 122 (2003), pp. 111-25. See also Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 22, who regards this verse as the 'hermeneutical key' for not just Galatians but also 'Paul altogether'.

[72] Wright, *Climax of the Covenant,* pp. 170-71.

[73] See Dunn, 'New Perspective', p. 115.

[74] See Wright, 'Letter to the Galatians', p. 232: 'According to 3:15–22, God promised Abraham a *single* worldwide family, but the Torah would forever keep Jews and Gentiles in separate compartments … God has done in Christ and by the Spirit what the Torah could not do'.

within it both Jews and gentiles.[75] The Abrahamic covenant, which did not require that its adherents observe Jewish law, had been temporarily overshadowed by the Mosaic covenant, which imposed legal obligations on its constituents; by using the Abrahamic covenant as his model, Paul extended the reach of the covenant to gentiles as well.[76] Paul thus develops a completely different temporal model of Israel's past history that enables him to place the gentile followers of Christ in continuity with the past: while the other sources I have analyzed characterized the Abrahamic covenant as a new event, Paul described the Mosaic covenant as the novel development. That argument allows him to confine the law to a discrete period that lasted until the death of Christ.[77]

A comparison between Paul and the other texts above reveals the range of views that the Abrahamic covenant could accommodate. On the one hand, it supported exclusivistic claims such as

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[75] My formulation of Paul's use of the Abrahamic covenant as an 'expansion' of the covenant betrays the influence of scholars of the 'New Perspective' who read in Paul a polemic against practices that generated ethnic difference, thereby separating Jew from Gentile; see, e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 232; Boyarin, *Radical Jew,* pp. 6-7. More recently, Jon D. Levenson (*Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012], pp. 154-57) has argued that Paul redefined, rather than expanded, the covenant. According to this reading, members of the new covenant have 'left the universal identity associated with the sin-infected human essence and been recreated as one who attains righteousness in the sight of God on the basis of his faith, just as Abraham did in the Pauline reading of Genesis 15:6' (*Inheriting Abraham,* p. 157). Even if this important critique of the New Perspective calls into question Paul's universalistic ethos, we nonetheless can speak of Paul's covenantal model as an 'expansion'. At a minimum, he envisioned a multiethnic community 'in which differing cultures are enabled to share common life' (John M. G. Barclay ['"Neither Jew Nor Greek": Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul', in Mark G. Brett [ed.], *Ethnicity and the Bible* [Boston: Brill, 2002], pp. 197-214 [214]). As noted by Barclay ("Neither Jew Nor Greek"', p. 211]), Paul never mandates that Jewish Christ-believers renounce Jewish law, only that gentiles need not adopt it in order to join the covenant. Distinct cultures thus come together under the banner of divine love and grace. Paul's innovation, and the driving force behind his argument in Galatians, is to argue that the covenant can include within it gentiles *qua* gentiles. In other words, as 'New Perspective' authors have argued, Paul's intention is to advocate for the *inclusion* of gentiles rather than for the *exclusion* of Jewish non-believers, even if the latter outcome is indeed a byproduct of his view; that is, 'the leading edge of Paul's theological thinking was the conviction that God's purpose embraced Gentile as well as Jew' (Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law,* p. 232). This view should be contrasted with that of texts such as the *Damascus Document, AW,* and Neh. 9, which do not emphasize the expansion of the covenant to encompass new groups but rather the narrowing of the covenant to cover only a sub-set of groups that had been covered to that point.

[76] See Brendan Byrne, *'Sons of God', 'Seed of Abraham': A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul Against the Jewish Background* (AnBib, 83; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), p. 160. For this reason, Gen. 12:3 figures prominently in Paul's argument while largely absent from other Second Temple sources; see Popović, 'Abraham and the Nations'.

[77] Lull, 'Law was Our Pedagogue', p. 483.

those in the *Damascus Document*, *AW*, and Neh. 9. The author of *4 Ezra* views the covenant in similar terms: the Abrahamic covenant did not only entail the election of some but also the rejection of others. The authors of all of these texts used the Abrahamic covenant in order to create and reinforce boundaries between communities. On the other hand, Paul drew upon the Abrahamic covenant in order to produce a broader community in which 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female' (Gal. 3:28); he did not use the Abrahamic covenant in order to *reject* some but rather to *include* others.[78] Because the essence of the covenant could be characterized in numerous ways, it could be recast in the image of each particular author's worldview.

6. Conclusion

Various early Jewish texts that spanned the Second Temple period and beyond drew explicit connections between the Abrahamic covenant and their own communities. In each case, this link enabled the authors of those texts to argue that the covenant had survived the exile and the challenges of the Second Temple period. The authors of numerous texts made an even more audacious claim, arguing that their group in particular constituted the covenantal community.

Each author elected to appropriate the Abrahamic covenant rather than the Mosaic pact as the basis for his special relationship with God. With the exception of Paul, this choice did not necessarily indicate an aversion to the Mosaic Torah but rather a better fit between the Abrahamic covenant and the ideology and self-perception of many of the authors in question. The Mosaic covenant extended to all of Israel, while many early Jewish writers claimed that the covenant was now restricted to their respective groups alone. In addition, the Abrahamic covenant could serve

[78] See n. 75, above.

better the exclusivistic tendency of many writers who argued that God had rejected their adversaries just as he had earlier rejected the sinners of Abraham's day. Ironically, the very same covenant could serve the needs of those preaching a universalistic message as well those who insisted on an exclusivistic outlook—an observation that demonstrates the urgency of finding a precedent for the present in Israel's past and the tendency to interpret that past from the vantagepoint of the present.