Understanding the Conditional and Unconditional Nature of God’s Covenants

Unilateral vs. Bilateral Covenants

Covenants in the Bible can be categorized as either **unilateral** (one-sided) or **bilateral** (two-sided). A **unilateral covenant** is one in which only **one party (God)** takes full responsibility for fulfilling its promises, regardless of human actions. An example of this is the **Abrahamic Covenant** (Genesis 15:17-18), where only God passed through the covenantal pieces, signifying His sole commitment to its fulfillment. In contrast, a **bilateral covenant** requires **both parties** to fulfill certain conditions for the agreement to remain valid. The **Mosaic Covenant** (Exodus 19:5-6) falls into this category, as Israel was required to obey God’s commands to receive blessings.

The Conditional Nature of the Mosaic Covenant

The covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai was clearly **bilateral** and **conditional** upon their obedience. This is evident in multiple passages such as **Exodus 19:5-6**, where God declares, *“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.”* The presence of the word **“if”** highlights the conditional nature of this covenant. Similarly, **Deuteronomy 28** outlines blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, reinforcing the necessity of Israel’s faithfulness. The same principle is found in **Leviticus 26** and **Jeremiah 11:3-4**, both of which emphasize that failure to uphold the covenant would result in divine judgment. History

attests to this reality, as Israel's repeated disobedience ultimately led to exile and national suffering.

The Unconditional Nature of the Abrahamic Covenant

In contrast, the Abrahamic Covenant was **unilateral** and **unconditional**, meaning God alone bound Himself to fulfill its promises. In **Genesis 12:1-3**, God tells Abraham, *"I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great."* Importantly, no condition is attached to this promise. In **Genesis 15:17-18**, the covenant ceremony further emphasizes its unilateral nature, as only God (represented by the smoking furnace and burning lamp) passed through the sacrificial pieces. **Genesis 17:7** confirms its everlasting nature, indicating that it was not dependent on human obedience. Even **Psalm 89:30-37** affirms that, although discipline may come for disobedience, God will not annul His covenant.

Theological Perspective on Semitic Lineage and Antisemitism

From a biblical perspective, Shem's lineage includes Abraham and his descendants, meaning that both Jews and Arabs are **Semites**. Ishmael, as Abraham's son, was also a Semite, and many Arab groups trace their ancestry to him. However, the term "antisemitism" has been historically redefined to apply only to hostility toward Jews, despite the fact that Arabs are also of Shemitic descent.

The historical complexity deepens with the case of **Esau and the Edomites**, who were also Semites. In the second century B.C., **John Hyrcanus forcibly converted the Edomites to Judaism**, further complicating the identity of who is considered a Jew. Despite this reality, modern definitions of antisemitism do not account for Arab Semites, revealing an

inconsistency in how the term is applied.

Scripturally, lineage alone does not secure participation in the covenant. **Romans 9:6-8** states, *"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel… but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called."* This clarifies that being a physical descendant of Abraham does not ensure covenant participation—**faith in Christ does**. **Galatians 3:7** further supports this by stating, *"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham."* Thus, the true heirs of Abraham are those in Christ, not merely those of physical descent.

Dispensational vs. Covenantal Perspectives on the Covenants

The classification and interpretation of biblical covenants vary significantly between **dispensational** and **covenantal** theology.

Dispensational theology traditionally distinguishes **eight covenants**: Edenic, Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, and the New Covenant. This view often sees these covenants as progressive stages in God's administration of history, particularly focusing on the distinct roles of Israel and the Church. Dispensationalists typically emphasize a **future fulfillment of the Davidic and Palestinian covenants**, where national Israel is restored in the millennial kingdom.

Covenantal theology, in contrast, tends to see fewer covenants, focusing primarily on the **Covenant of Works** (with Adam before the Fall), the **Covenant of Grace** (initiated through Abraham and fulfilled in Christ), and the **New Covenant**. This view emphasizes continuity between the Old and New Testaments, seeing the Church as the spiritual fulfillment of Israel. **Romans 11:17-24** describes Gentiles being grafted into the olive tree of Israel, suggesting that covenant blessings are not tied to ethnicity but to faith in Christ.

A key theological debate arises over the **Palestinian Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:1-10)**, which dispensationalists view as an everlasting land promise to Israel, while covenantalists often see it as conditional and fulfilled in Christ. Likewise, the **Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-16)** is interpreted by dispensationalists as a future earthly reign of Christ from Jerusalem, whereas covenantalists argue that Christ's current reign at the right hand of the Father fulfills this promise.

The New Covenant: Unilateral in Christ, Conditional for Individual Participation

The **New Covenant**, prophesied in **Jeremiah 31:31-33**, signifies a shift from the Mosaic Covenant. Unlike the old covenant, which depended on Israel's obedience, the New Covenant is based on God writing His law on the hearts of His people. **Luke 22:20** reveals that this covenant was inaugurated through Christ's blood. While it is **unilateral in its fulfillment**, individual participation is conditional upon belief. As **Romans 10:9** states, *"If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."* Thus, while Christ's atonement is sufficient for all, only those who place their faith in Him become partakers in the New Covenant.

Conclusion: A Balanced View on Covenant Conditionality

The question of whether God's covenant is conditional or unconditional should be answered **"yes" to both"**. The **Mosaic Covenant** was **bilateral and conditional**, requiring Israel's obedience. The **Abrahamic Covenant** was **unilateral and unconditional**, finding ultimate fulfillment in Christ. The **New Covenant** is **unilateral in Christ's fulfillment, but conditional for individuals who must believe**.

Ultimately, while God's promises to Abraham were certain and

Christ has fulfilled them, each person must **believe in Christ’s finished work** to partake in the New Covenant. This perspective maintains biblical clarity while harmonizing the different aspects of covenant theology.