

The “Seed,” the Spirit, and the Blessing of Abraham

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One of the most foundational elements of Paul’s theology is that the blessing of God is found in Christ, not in the sphere of the Law. This has been the focus of renewed attention recently as dispensationalists have discussed the nature and application of the New Covenant in the New Testament. This article seeks to contribute to those discussions by considering further Paul’s use of the Abrahamic “seed” imagery and the role of the Holy Spirit in the inauguration of the New Covenant.

The Heirs of the Abrahamic Blessing

By appealing to the example of Abraham in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, Paul argued that the true sons of Abraham are those who are justified by faith as the patriarch was. This seems to have been a common style of argument for the apostle as he discussed faith in Christ as a fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation. In other words Paul defended his message as being more in harmony with Old Testament theology than that of his opponents.

Of particular importance in this line of thinking is Paul’s treatment of the Abrahamic promise of blessing. If the promise is extended to Abraham’s “seed,” whom does it include? Does the

promise remain valid if those who are under the Law (unbelieving Jews) are “on the wrong side”?

The Promise and the “Seed”

God told Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:1–3).

This promise was repeated a number of times (Gen 18:18; 22:18 ; 26:4 ; 28:14), but the content of the “blessing” was never specified. That may be one reason why some commentators have favored a reflexive meaning of the verb (i.e., “shall

bless themselves”), an interpretation that seems unnecessary in light of the Septuagint translation and a number of rabbinic commentators, who debated the nature of the blessing the Gentiles would receive through Abraham. For example some saw the blessing as a promise of health and fruitfulness, while others viewed it as a triumph of God’s grace over His judgment on the basis of Abraham’s merit or intercession (as may be illustrated in Gen 18).

In Genesis 12 and 18 , God had said that the nations would be blessed in Abraham. In 22:18 , the promise is “in your seed.” The reference to Abraham’s “seed” here is not just to Isaac as a single individual (as it is used of Ishmael in 21:13), but to countless individuals. This is seen in the previous verse , where God said, “I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore.”

Many other examples of this collective sense of “seed” could be cited from Genesis. It seems as though it should be understood as a collective even as the promise begins to narrow in focus through Abraham’s sons. The promise of blessing was pronounced personally to both Isaac (26:4) and Jacob (28:14), and each time it was again extended “to you and to your seed.” Therefore the promise was not given to all of Abraham’s descendants, at least not in the same sense. Ishmael would become a great nation, for he was Abraham’s seed (21:13), but the specific promises are repeated to Isaac and to his seed (26:4). In the same way the promises were repeated to Jacob and extended to *his* seed (28:14).

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Though the promises are made with respect to the group, there is a sense in which they are narrowed in each of these instances to a single individual and his descendants in the next generation. This subsequent narrowing of the promise ended with Jacob, thus limiting the promise to the sons of Israel, but including all of them in it. The 12 sons of Jacob became the “seed” to whom the Abrahamic promises were extended, and God’s faithfulness to those promises is repeatedly highlighted as He is thereafter spoken of as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exod 2:24; 3:6 ; Deut 29:13; Acts 3:13).

Since the promised blessing focuses on Israel, the representative of that nation plays a particularly important role in its fulfillment. Psalm 72:17 alludes to the Abrahamic promise in saying of the king, “May his name endure forever; may his name increase as long as the sun shines; and let men be blessed in him; let all nations call him blessed.” Anderson suggests here that “the intention may have been to stress the fact that the divine promise to the patriarch has been fulfilled in the house of David.” Similarly, Blaising writes,

This is the language of the Abrahamic covenant. The descendants of Abraham have been restructured politically so that the function of mediating blessing rests chiefly with the king... It is through

him and his rule that the Abrahamic covenant promise to bless all nations will be fulfilled.

This concept may also be seen in the Book of Jubilees 16:17, which reads, “From the sons of Isaac one should become a holy seed, and should not be reckoned among the Gentiles; for he should become the portion of the Most High, and all his seed...should be unto the Lord a people for [his] possession above all nations, and...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Bruce comments, “These late texts seem to envisage one pre-eminent descendant of Abraham through whom the promise made regarding his ‘seed’ would be fulfilled.”

The idea of a preeminent descendant seems to be present in Matthew’s recognition that Jesus Christ is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1), implying that He is the One on whom the

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promises have focused. Carson relates this reference to Abraham at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel to the Great Commission at its end (28:18–20), suggesting that the preaching of the gospel constitutes the blessing promised to the nations through Abraham. What Matthew implied, Paul stated in Galatians 3.

The “Seed” in Galatians 3

In Galatians 3:16 Paul wrote, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.” This is not an unusual style of argument from a rabbinic standpoint, but some regard the argument to be out of character for Paul. For example Hanson describes the point as “bizarre” and says that Paul distorted the original meaning of “seed.” To the contrary, it seems that Paul was aware of that meaning, and used it to make a powerful theological assertion.

The “seed” in Genesis is used to refer to the incalculable number of Abraham’s descendants, and Paul clearly recognized that collective meaning when he used the term that way himself in Romans 4:18 and 9:7 , and even more plainly here in Galatians 3:29. This being the case, how is one to understand Paul’s comment in Galatians 3:16 that when speaking of Abraham’s “seed” the promise referred to a single individual? It seems he was making a midrashic sort of distinction (similar to the rabbinic parallels noted above) to introduce what he perceived to be the true sense of the passage—the promise made to Israel had become focused on the Person of Jesus Christ.

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The unique relationship between the nation and the Messiah may allow for this sort of identification. In Isaiah’s Servant Songs, for example, the Servant is identified as Israel (41:8 ; 42:19 ; 43:10 ; 44:1–2, 21 ; 45:4 ; 48:20 ; 49:3); yet the

Servant is also described as an individual who will bring Israel back to the Lord (49:5–7 ; cf. 50:10 ; 52:13 ; 53:11). This close association between Israel and her Messiah led Martin to write, “The Messiah is called Israel because He fulfills what Israel should have done. In His Person and work He epitomizes the nation.” In this context it should be noted that Isaiah 41:8 identifies the servant, Israel, as the “seed of Abraham.”

Something similar to this may well be occurring in Galatians 3:16. Longenecker says the verse suggests a “corporate solidarity” between Christ and Israel, in which Christ is the “true descendant of Abraham and the true representative of his people.” Ellis states that “Israel was embodied in the Messiah,” and explains this further by saying, “Israel was viewed in a corporate sense, and this ‘corporate body’ was—as Abraham’s true ‘seed’—finally embodied in the One, Jesus Christ.”

Bock describes a “typological-prophetic” use of the Old Testament as one that “expresses a peculiar link of patterns with movement from the lesser Old Testament person or event to the greater New Testament person or event.” Paul’s application of the term “seed” to Christ seems to fit that description. The apostle did not discount the original meaning of the term, as his use of it in the collective sense elsewhere indicates. He simply applied it to an individual who sums up or epitomizes those persons to whom the term was applied in the Old Testament, heightening its significance in the process. That is why Goppelt and Lightfoot both identify Paul’s use of Genesis here as “typological,” and their classification seems justified.

Just as the promises were extended beyond the patriarchs to

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their offspring, so they have come to fruition in the One who epitomizes those descendants as their Messiah. As the true Seed of Abraham, Christ is the One through whom the Abrahamic promise must come.

That conclusion enabled Paul to say that those who “belong to Christ” are the true “seed,” the heirs of Abraham’s promise (v. 29). “In Christ Jesus” the blessing of Abraham has come to the Gentiles (v. 14) and “those who are of faith” are the true sons of Abraham. In this sense the Christian gospel is not a violation of the promises given to the patriarchs, but is instead a fulfillment of those promises.

The “Seed” in Romans 4

Paul’s argument in Romans 4 is similar to the one in Galatians 3. In Galatians he argued that the promise came before the Law, and in Romans 4 he made the same point with regard to circumcision. In verse 10 he noted that Abraham was not yet circumcised when he was declared righteous on the basis of faith. Just as

the Law did not invalidate the prior promise (Gal 3:17), so circumcision does not invalidate the declaration of righteousness by faith. Instead, circumcision functions as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which [Abraham] had while uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11). “Abraham’s circumcision was dependent on his *previously* having been accepted by God and on his already having been reckoned righteous—not the other way round.”

As a result of his faith and his circumcision, Abraham is father “of all who believe without being circumcised” (v. 11b) and to those who are circumcised, provided they are also of faith (v. 12). As Cranfield notes, the promise is to “those who as uncircumcised believe, and...those who, being circumcised, are not only

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circumcised, but also believe.” Only those who are rightly related to God through faith may rightly claim Abraham as father, whether they are circumcised or not. If those who were of the Law only (and not also of faith) were legitimate heirs of the Abrahamic promise, then the promise itself would be nullified, for it was made on the basis of faith (v. 14). “All the seed” in verse 16 describes not unbelieving Jews and believing Gentiles, but Jew and Gentile believers collectively.

Paul’s argument here and in Galatians 3 is essentially the same. A person who claims to be a true child of Abraham must be rightly related to God on the basis of faith. If the claim is based on ethnicity alone or on adherence to the Mosaic Law, it is fundamentally inadequate. Paul clearly recognized the narrowing of the promise even in Genesis (Rom 9:6–7), and his point is that it has now narrowed to Christ and those who believe in Him. Does this mean that God has set aside ethnic Israel? On the basis of these statements some have supported a “replacement theology,” which makes the church the new Israel. However, Paul stopped short of denying Jewish kinship to Abraham “according to the flesh” (Rom 4:1) and he did not view ethnic Israel as altogether excluded from the promises. He took up the question in chapter 11, where he pointed out that God’s promises to Israel are to be fulfilled through a believing remnant.

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God had promised that the nations would be blessed through Abraham and his “seed.” Paul argued that the blessing comes to Gentiles as they by faith become Abraham’s heirs through his consummate “Seed,” Jesus Christ. “Those who are of faith are blessed” (Gal 3:9), but what is the content of that blessing?

The Spirit and the Abrahamic Blessing

Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13–14). As noted earlier, the Abrahamic Covenant did not specify the nature of the blessing to be

received by the nations through Abraham and his “seed.” Paul appears to identify that blessing as the promise of the Spirit (cf. vv. 2, 5).

But what is the basis for this idea? It seems to be rooted in the prophets’ promise of national restoration through the Holy Spirit, the Bearer of life in fellowship with God.

The Spirit and the Covenant

In Ezekiel 36:26 the Lord promised Israel that He would give them a “new heart” and put a “new spirit” (רוּחַ נְיָוֶה) within them. God referred to that spirit in verse 27 as “My Spirit” (רוּחַי), who would cause the people to walk in His statutes. Just as His departure coincided with the nation’s exile (Ezek 10–11), so the Lord’s presence by the Spirit here will coincide with the nation’s restoration to the life God has intended for them—they will live in the land of promise, and they will be His people and He will be their God (36:28). Israel will one day enjoy all the blessings of fruitfulness and prosperity promised to them under the Mosaic Covenant (vv. 29–30).

This restoration is vividly portrayed in Ezekiel 37 as the resurrection of Israel by means of the life-giving Spirit. God

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promised to bring them up out of the graves of their exile and restore them to life in the land through His animating Spirit (vv. 11–14). This is not just physical existence, but life in all its fullness, with all the blessings promised to the nation in a covenant relationship to God. As the agent of this restoration the Holy Spirit also acts as a sign of the New Covenant’s permanence: “‘And I will not hide My face from them any longer, for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel,’ declares the Lord God” (Ezek 39:29).

Isaiah also associated the outpouring of the Spirit with Israel’s restoration to a life of blessing (Isa 32:15–18). Of particular interest are Isaiah 44:3–4 and 59:21 , where the presence of the Spirit helps guarantee an eternal covenant relationship between God and Israel’s seed: “For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants; and they will spring up among the grass like poplars by streams of water” (44:3–4). “‘And as for Me, this is My covenant with them,’ says the Lord: ‘My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,’ says the Lord, ‘from now and forever’” (59:21).

These verses present a strong association between the Spirit, the renewal of the covenant, and the Abrahamic language of a promise extended to Israel’s

“seed.” In short, the blessings promised through Abraham come through the outpouring of the Spirit on all his descendants (Num 11:29; Joel 2:28–29).

Paul has been appropriately described as “the theologian of the Spirit.” However, it would be a mistake to regard this area of his theology as wholly original. Apparently the apostle had a rich

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foundation on which to build when he wrote in Galatians 3 about the promise of the Spirit. Noting the language of Isaiah 44, Hays writes, “Isaiah 44:3 might well have been grouped with these other passages [Gen 3:15 and 2 Sam 7:12–14] as a testimonium concerning the messianic μ [‘seed’]. If so, it would provide the basis for Paul’s inference that the Spirit now given to Christians constituted a fulfillment of the promised blessing.” However, the relationship between these passages need not have been that mechanical. There was a strong association between the promise of the Spirit and the renewal of the covenant blessings, and Paul seems to have been drawing directly from that tradition while regarding it as having been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The Spirit’s indwelling is related to the beginning of the Christian life in Galatians 3:2–3, suggesting that like justification it is experienced at conversion. For this reason it is interesting to note that Paul also associated the promised blessing with justification by faith in this chapter. To be “blessed with Abraham” is to be justified by faith (vv. 8–9). If the blessing is presently experienced in justification and the Spirit’s indwelling, it has the additional effect of making one a child not only of Abraham but also of God. In a statement that is almost directly parallel to 3:13–14, Paul wrote in 4:5 that God has redeemed those who were under the Law “that we might receive the adoption as sons.” This is accomplished through the coming of the Spirit (v. 6), who enables believers to address God as “Abba! Father!” (cf. Rom 8:15).

The Spirit fulfills Old Testament promises not only through His indwelling presence, but also through His ministry of ethical transformation. As promised in Ezekiel 36:26–27 the Spirit’s indwelling will cause believers to walk in obedience, and Paul’s description of progressive transformation through the Spirit is directly related to that expectation (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:13).

The Spirit in the Present and the Future

Paul referred to “the Holy Spirit of promise” in Ephesians 1:13, probably meaning, “the Holy Spirit who was promised.” By

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contending that He had already come as the pledge of still more blessings to come later (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13; 4:30), Paul treated the Spirit as “essentially an eschatological gift; the power of the future operative in the present.” Dunn rightly

speaks of the Spirit as “the eschatological gift *par excellence*,” and it is this connection between the present and the future that makes it so, as Turner notes.

The apostle uses Spirit terminology in close connection with activities which have already commenced in believers but which will be heightened at the consummation of all things. It is the inner connection between what Paul claims to be an activity of the Spirit now and what the same Spirit will do at the end that makes his pneumatology “eschatological” in character: for an event or activity may usefully be designated “eschatological” if it is closely related in inner quality (but not necessarily in time) to the decisive End-events.

Similarly, Bruce writes, “The bestowal of the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit, in the New Testament is primarily an eschatological phenomenon in the sense that it is presented as the fulfillment of Old Testament promises associating this bestowal with the age of renewal.” The Spirit is the tie between the present and the future. “The Spirit was the presentness of future blessing. The Spirit was that power of the resurrection age already experienced and active to make its recipients fit for that age yet to come.”

Through His presence the Holy Spirit brings life—spiritual resurrection in an intimate relationship with God at the present time and physical resurrection in the future. Since the Spirit is

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the common Agent of each stage of the resurrection process, His presence now provides a link between this age and the next—a secure seal and a down payment of things to come (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5 ; Eph 1:13–14; 4:30). This is directly related to the promise of life in the New Covenant. It is life in fellowship with God for those who have now become His people through faith in Christ.

Conclusion

The blessings promised to the seed of Abraham have been extended to all believers (even those who are Gentiles) through Jesus Christ as his consummate Heir. The specific promise of life in fellowship with God is mediated through the promised Holy Spirit, whose indwelling presence now guarantees the complete fulfillment of God’s promises in the future.