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The Gospel Promise to Abraham

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“How were the people in the Old Testament saved?” That question is raised by students of the Scriptures in many contexts. The wary teacher usually responds by asking for a definition of the word “saved.” A related question is posed this way: “What is the nature of the gospel in the Old Testament?” Such queries open the door to a flood of concerns about the relationship between the Testaments. That flood will not abate in the wake of this brief article. The ravens and doves of biblical theology will hardly be satisfied with anything less than a preservation of past formulations on the one hand or a new theological creation on the other.

The issue which demands clarification is raised by texts such as Gal. 3:6-9, which reads:

Thus Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” So you see that it is men of faith who are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.

In this passage Paul quotes two Old Testament texts. The first is from Gen. 15:6, which reads: “And he [Abraham] believed Yahweh, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” The second is a composite quotation including elements

from Gen. 12:3 and 18:18. Gen. 12:3 reads: “By you shall all families of the ground be blessed.” The same promise appears with variations in 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:14. These passages challenge us to investigate the biblical witness to the content and character of Abraham’s faith. More precisely, how did this writer of Genesis¹ and Paul understand Yahweh’s salutary promise to Abraham and its significance? Our attempt to answer this question will focus on the character of this Genesis promise to Abraham, his relationship to that promise, and Paul’s interpretation of the gospel promise, faith, and blessing of Abraham.

THE CURSE CONTEXT OF THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

The primary promise of Gen. 12:1-3 appears at a crucial point in the framework of Genesis salvation history. Genesis 2—11 develops the theme of man’s (*‘adam*) relation to the ground (*‘adamah*). Man’s rebellion brings a curse that affects his relation to God and the ground. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” cries Yahweh (3:17). By the grace of Yahweh man survives, but for his own sake he must live outside of Eden and work that cursed ground from which he was taken. God’s grace is also seen in the clothing of man with skins. Man’s nakedness had become an expression of his disgrace and alienation from Yahweh. By clothing them

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¹ The Genesis materials under consideration reflect that theology associated with the Yahwist writer.

Yahweh accepts them as His own. But the forces of sin and the curse intensify on earth. Cain is warned about the power of sin as a demon at the door² but succumbs and suffers the curse of a fugitive upon the earth (4:11). Cain is the evidence of cursed men scattered across the cursed ground. Yet God's mark on Cain guarantees him a measure of divine protection in his wanderings. Thus for both Adam and Cain there are last-minute reprieves. By grace they survive despite the curse.

A similar rescue operation obtains in the flood narrative. The creation of man is presented as an apparent mistake. The verdict is clear: "I will blot out man (*'adam*) from the face of the ground (*'adamah*), man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry I made them" (6:7). Annihilation is the sentence. The experiment with man seems to be finished. At the eleventh hour, however, grace saves the day for some of mankind. After the rescue of Noah, Yahweh comes to terms with reality, as it were, and makes a dictum for the sake of men. Man's inability to avoid sinning is one factor that prompts Yahweh to assert: "I will never again curse the ground (*'adamah*) because of man (*'adam*)" (8:21), asserts Yahweh.

God's promise to preserve the world order did not change the basic impulse of man. The rebellious hubris of the first man, the fear of becoming fugitives like Cain, and the universal urge for evil found in the flood story all combine in the Babel

episode at the end of primeval history. The rationale of the rebellious reads: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad across the face of the whole earth" (11:4). The fate they fear is considered appropriate by Yahweh. Now what? Until this point in primeval history Yahweh has always stepped in at the last minute to provide a way of escape for some men under the curse. Now men are scattered abroad as sinners under the curse. How will Yahweh offer grace? Will He destroy them all but rescue a few as in the case of Noah? Will He let them go their own happy way to destruction? Such is the Genesis writer's context for the promise to Abraham.

THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM IN GENESIS

The answer to the question posed by the context of primeval history comes in the good news of Gen. 12:1-3. Instead of a sudden rescue operation there is a long-range plan for the future. Instead of operating with all men on a plane, Yahweh selects one man to be His instrument and *skandalon* on earth. This moment is presented as a radical turning point in human history. Yahweh announces His plan of hope through Abraham. That announcement may be called the gospel for Abraham. Here is the news that has the power of bringing men back into a right relation with God. The gospel word of Gen. 12:1-3 reads:

Now Yahweh said to Abram,

"Go from your land,
from your family and father's home
to the land that I will show you.
I will make of you a great nation,

² Gen. 4:7 is well translated "sin is the demon at the door" in the light of evidence provided by A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 32.

bless you and make your name great
 that you may be a blessing.
 I will bless those who bless you
 and curse him who curses you.
 By you will all families
 of the ground be blessed."

Links between this text and the context treated above are obvious. The "name" envisioned by the aspirants to heavenly power in Babel is given to Abraham. The curse motif is perpetuated, but in a new form. Curse is now contingent upon personal relations with Yahweh's man rather than with Yahweh Himself. The curse, in turn, is countered by the blessing power set in motion through Abraham's election. Blessing is available for all families of that ground (*'adamah*) which stood under the curse and felt the dispersion of condemned people across its face. This promise of blessing stands at the head of the patriarchal history as the answer to what precedes and as the programmatic word for the future course of salvation history. In this way the gospel message for Israel is announced and interpreted by this writer of Genesis.

Two primary elements of the gospel promises of the patriarchal narratives are the hope of "a land" and "numerous seed." These two underlying promises are modified in the various traditions preserved in Genesis and subsequent Old Testament books. In the Gen. 12:1-3 tradition the promise of a land is implied by the divine impulse of Abraham to move from the cosmopolitan city of Ur to the uninviting hills of Canaan. That move is viewed as an act of faith. A mysterious land awaited Abraham at the end of his westward trek. After scouting the land under consideration, Abraham is promised, "To you and your seed I will give this land" (12:7).

The land, however, remained in the hands of the Canaanites, a people living under the curse pronounced by Noah (12:6; 9:25). To believe the promise that Abraham or his seed would actually possess the land demanded a spectacular act of faith.

The basic promises of land and seed which pervade the patriarchal promises are modified and amplified by those accents which reflect the prophetic writer's distinctive interpretation of the meaning of the gospel promises to Abraham. The promise of numerous seed is transformed into the hope of becoming a great nation (12:2; 18:18). The promise of a great nation is coupled with the promise of a great name for Abraham.³ Several additional promises revolve around the concept of blessing. Abraham is to be a source of blessing, a touchstone for Yahweh's attitude of blessing or curse and a mediator of blessing to other people. This final message is the climax of the text: "By you will all families of the earth be blessed" (12:3). Thus this writer's interpretation of the message to Abraham seems to incorporate more than physical ingredients in the concept of blessing.

The primeval context substantiates this observation. Men scattered across the cursed ground were at odds with God. They were dispersed rebels. Restoration to favor with God was needed. The promise to Abraham is presented as the opening

³ An excellent analysis of the Yahwist's interpretation of the patriarchal promises has been made by H. W. Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," *Interpretation*, XX (1966), 131-58. According to Wolff and others the context of a great name and a great nation in Israel seems to be the rule of David. The Yahwist is therefore usually dated about the time of David and Solomon.

for that possibility. And that process is described here in terms of blessing. Blessing in general means the imparting of life forces, while cursing involves the unleashing of destructive power. The word of blessing sets these life powers in motion. Fullness of blessing from Yahweh is experienced when men are in the right relation with Him (for example Deut. 28:1-14; Gen. 1:28; 26:12-14). Land, progeny, and material prosperity are part of that blessing from Yahweh and therefore a part of that gospel promise to Abraham. Abraham discovered that blessing through his undeserved election by Yahweh and the good news of future blessing. That election and that news involved more than physical goodness. Abraham was chosen to mediate blessing. Through Abraham full life and communion with Yahweh would be possible. Faith and trust in Yahweh are the implied foundations of life with Him. To be blessed by Yahweh was the goal of life for the people of the Old Testament. To be blessed in this manner meant "to be saved." To pronounce Yahweh's blessing meant speaking the word which had the power of God unto "salvation." The promise to Abraham incorporated this blessing power and the special function of mediating life power to other peoples.

The special promise of mediating life from Yahweh to other peoples is repeated and its progress toward fulfillment is followed by this writer of Genesis. In 18:18 it appears as an aside by Yahweh which accentuates Abraham's greatness as a nation, his peculiar election by Yahweh, and the affirmation that "all nations of the earth shall bless themselves *by him*."⁴

⁴ In the last analysis the Niphal rendering "be blessed" and the Hithpael "bless themselves"

Gen. 18:19 indicates that Abraham's seed will need special instruction in this plan of blessing if the promise is to be fulfilled later through Abraham's line. Abraham's intercession for Sodom may be one personal effort to mediate life to the inhabitants of that city. After the account of the near sacrifice of Isaac the interpreter repeats the promise as: "*By your seed* shall nations of the earth bless themselves" (22:18). The "resurrected son," Isaac, the symbol of Abraham's hope, is also incorporated into the promise. The seed of Abraham becomes the potential mediator of blessing for mankind. Isaac is the first possibility for executing this program of divine grace. That "seed" is collective here, as it is throughout Genesis, is demonstrated clearly by the image of stars and sand in the preceding verse.

The promise is repeated to Isaac in 26:4. The accompanying narrative gives a further illustration of how this mediation of blessing worked in the case of the Philistines. The great blessing of Isaac leads Abimelech to confess: "We see plainly that Yahweh is with you. . . . You are now the blessed of Yahweh" (26:28-29; compare 26:12-14). The final appearance of the promise to mediate blessing is a composite of the earlier forms and reads: "*By you and your seed* shall all families of the ground be blessed" (28:14). Both Israel and his descendants are to mediate life. Greater fulfillment lies in the future. Jacob's mediation of blessing to Laban is made explicit in 30:27, where Laban affirms: "I have learned by divination that Yahweh blessed me because of you." The

differ little in meaning here. The source of blessing in each case is Yahweh and the mediator is Abraham.

result of this discovery is a covenant between the two men. A long sequence of blessings and curses follows in the train of Abraham's seed. One classic reference appears in Ex. 12:32, where Pharaoh offers his slaves a 3-day worship jaunt into the desert with these words: "Go and worship Yahweh as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds as you have said and be gone; and bless me also." There is the clue to the divine plan for Israel: blessing even for Egypt.

In this promise of mediating life lies the embryo of the gospel for Abraham and Israel. Fullness of life with Yahweh is effected through this message. Somehow, by the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh was working to bring all people into a similar relationship of blessing or life with Him. The Genesis interpreter reveals that Yahweh was the one who initiated this plan of salvation among men. The details of how Yahweh would execute that plan in later generations and the full dimensions of what life with Yahweh may ultimately mean are not revealed in this promise. The Christ event or the future Messianic individual is not yet an announced phase of that plan. Abraham is not a Christian. The Messiah was not yet revealed as an individual or an explicit hope. But the promise of redemptive blessing to all nations through Abraham and his progeny marks the first step in that developing line of expectation.

If, however, this writer of Genesis lived at the time of David and Solomon, as most scholars maintain, then he is interpreting the patriarchal promise for the situation in his day.⁵ He is exposing another stage

in the history of that promise. Under David, the Messiah king of that era, Israel had achieved a great name and had become a great nation (2 Sam. 7:9). Through David the Promised Land was finally given to Israel, and she was given rest (2 Sam. 7:1; 8:1). Through David the promises to Abraham were fulfilled in a richer way than before. But, proclaims the writer, all credit must go to Yahweh. This blessing of rest and prosperity is by grace. Neither the patriarchs, Israel, nor David deserved the land or life or greatness. Nor did that kind of fulfillment mean total fulfillment. For now the nation of Israel, as the seed of Abraham, was also to be the vehicle of Yahweh's blessing to other nations. All those nations conquered or in alliance with Israel were to benefit from Yahweh's presence in Israel. Israel was to recognize God's grace so that they would be effective mediators of His blessing to other peoples of the earth.

FAITH IN YAHWEH AND HIS PROMISE

In those contexts of Genesis discussed above, the issue is not only whether the promised blessing touched other people but also whether Abraham and his line would trust Yahweh and accept His promise as the ground for life in the future. While the term "faith" is not frequent, the testing of faith persists as a major motif in these patriarchal narratives. This Genesis theologian sees doubt and faith in conflict throughout the patriarchal period. In his analysis of salvation history the weaknesses, sins, and folly of the patriarchs are deliberately exposed before their progeny. God's grace is thereby isolated and

⁵ R. Clements, *Abraham and David* (London: SCM Press, 1967), gives further illustra-

tions of the connection with David and the patriarchal promises. Cf. Wolff.

emphasized to a degree that is rare in the Old Testament. The promise was born out of sheer grace and was tendered repeatedly from that same impulse.

The primary text that Paul cites to express this faith response to the gospel promise is Gen. 15:6: "And he believed Yahweh, and He reckoned it to him for righteousness." While the preceding verses may derive from different traditions, verse 6 presents a consistent conclusion.⁶ Gen. 15:1 assumes the form of a priestly oracle of assurance, typical of those heard in the temple. But this assurance of protection is not enough for Abraham. He throws his childlessness back at Yahweh. Abraham's doubt is countered by the divine promise of numberless seed. Seed meant the perpetuation of the divine plan as first promoted. In the light of the circumstances, however, that promise seemed a ridiculous dream. Nevertheless, comments the Genesis interpreter, Abraham trusted Yahweh and accepted His Word. Abraham believed. In that response there was healing, and Abraham remained on the right footing with Yahweh. Living in that relationship meant righteousness, a righteousness initiated by Yahweh and recognized by Him. No cultic deed or mighty act on Abraham's part was demanded for this recognition. Faith was considered sufficient.⁷

Abraham's doubt concerning his seed is paralleled in Gen. 15:7 ff. by his uncer-

⁶ R. Clements presents a provocative analysis of this chapter.

⁷ In this the Genesis writer takes a position in tension with that espoused in cultic circles. See especially G. von Rad, "Faith Reckoned as Righteousness," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 125—30.

tainty about inheriting the land. "O Yahweh, God, how am I to know that I (personally?) shall possess it?" cries Abraham. Yahweh, in turn, binds Himself with an archaic covenant ritual to give the land to Abraham's seed rather than to Abraham directly (cf. 13:14-17). The covenant promise has the form of a salvation-assurance oracle defined in terms of the ideal boundaries of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire. The text reads: "Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham, saying, "To your seed I have given this land, from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the River Euphrates.""

Tests of faith and interventions of grace to preserve the life or line of Abraham appear in the famine crisis of Gen. 12:10-20, the involvement with Hagar in 16:1-14, the visit of the strangers in 18:1-19, the proposed sacrifice of Isaac in 22:1-19, the escapades of Jacob in Gen. 28—32, and on other occasions. The promise stood in jeopardy of rejection for generations. For the patriarchs the test of faith was largely in terms of the basic promises of seed and land. The mediation of blessing was something that Yahweh planned and set in operation despite the mistakes of the patriarchs. Ultimately, however, faith in Yahweh, the God of promise, meant life in the right relationship with Yahweh. The patriarchs were a bold group of sinners who found grace in a God who promised an unprecedented future of blessing. The promise to the patriarchs had the inherent power to bring life to them and through them to other people. That promise may therefore be termed gospel. Life, or salvation, was understood by this Genesis interpreter in terms of prosperity, land, progeny, protection from the curse, and

a full life in the right relationship with Yahweh. Yahweh was the focus of faith in that context, and His promise was the good news for all who recognized Him.⁸ This promise to the patriarchs is understood as the power of Yahweh unto salvation for all who believe in Him and His Word.

FAITH LIKE THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

Paul's use of the Abraham tradition in Gal. 3:6-9 seems to revolve around the concepts of faith, promise, and blessing. This sequence reverses the order of the Genesis traditions treated above. A broader chiasmic structure has been suggested for Gal. 3:6-14.⁹ A discussion of the complex relationship of the various Old Testament texts and traditions brought together in Galatians 3 is beyond the scope of this article. Our primary concern is with specific aspects of the Pauline interpretation of faith, promise, and blessing in Gal. 3:6-9.

Paul was apparently facing a situation in which Gentiles had come to faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel Paul had preached. In so doing they had experienced the power of the Spirit. Unfortunately rivals of Paul had challenged the adequacy of his theology. Faith was a good beginning, they affirmed, but a deeper commit-

ment was demanded. The man of Christ must also keep the law. A true son of Abraham must also be circumcised. As proof Paul's opponents could cite Genesis 17. But according to Paul, expecting acceptance before God by allegiance to Old Testament law was a repudiation of God's grace. Works of the law must not be added to faith in order to assure salvation. And so Paul cries out: "Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience such great things in vain? — if it really is in vain. Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" (Gal. 3:3-5)

Paul then proceeds to demonstrate that the hearing of faith unites rather than separates the Christian and Abraham. There is a special connection between the Christian and Abraham. "For Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (3:6). The difference between the faith of Abraham and the faith of the Christian is not obliterated by Paul's polemic.¹⁰ Paul does not say that Abraham knew and accepted the kerygma of Jesus Christ. Abraham did not trust in Jesus as Lord even though Paul saw Christ as the hidden figure in the promise to Abraham (3:16).¹¹ Nor is the faith of Abraham some kind of general belief in God. Both Genesis and Paul take the exist-

⁸ Space does not permit a review of the tradition of the patriarchal promises in the subsequent history of Israel. Passages such as 2 Sam. 7:1, 9; 8:13; Num. 24:9; Ex. 19:6; Jer. 4:1-2; Ex. 31:10; Is. 2:1-4; Pss. 9:11; 67:5, and the whole complex of Is. 40—55 deserve consideration in this connection. For a survey of many of these references see R. Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962).

⁹ William Schoedel, "The Promise to Abraham: Some Observations on Gal. 3:6 ff.," a paper delivered to the Society of Biblical Literature, New York, December 1968.

¹⁰ On the various meanings of "faith" in the New Testament see especially Rudolf Bultmann sub *pistis*, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, VI (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1959). On pp. 216—18 he treats "the relationship of Christian faith to that of the Old Testament."

¹¹ The same differentiation between the faith of the Christian and that of Abraham is carefully preserved in Romans 4.

tence of God for granted. The real issue, however, revolves around accepting God in terms of His radical claim. For Abraham, on the one hand, that means accepting God in terms of a new promise of life. "He was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised" (Rom. 4: 21). For Paul's Christian, on the other hand, faith means accepting God in terms of the surprising outcome of the promise. He believes the message that God has sent Jesus to usher in the eschatological age announced and promised for generations. This posture of faith on either side of the Christ event is the common denominator for Paul. That faith makes the Christian a son of Abraham, but it does not quite make Abraham a Christian. Abraham is "saved by grace through faith" without knowing the name of Jesus as Savior-Messiah. Yahweh is Abraham's Life-Giver, and Yahweh makes Abraham the father of Christians.

PAUL'S GOSPEL PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

Paul then delineates the nature of the promise that comprised the heart of the message to Abraham. Paul does not refer to the specific promise of Gen. 15:5 which evoked the comment that Abraham believed (15:6). Rather, Paul returns to the programmatic word, the primary promise of Gen. 12:1-31, and cites the climactic message of that text in terms which reflect his own polemical thrust.¹² "In you shall all nations be blessed," he quotes (Gal. 3:8). He seems to have followed the variant interpretation of Gen. 18:18 in replacing "tribes" (*phylai*) with "nations" (*eth-*

nê). "Nations" makes the link with Gentiles explicit. They are the intended recipients of Abraham's inheritance. Justification of the Gentiles was inherent in God's promise from the beginning, says Paul.

It is perhaps significant that Paul reads "in you" (Gal. 3:8) and not "in your seed," an alternate wording that would have been related to the point he was to make in 3:16. However, Paul does not develop the expression "in him" and progress to a typological relationship between Abraham and Christ. He does not emphasize the role of Abraham as a mediator of blessing. The analogy is between Abraham and the Christian, who exhibit a common faith and possess a common promise of blessing. Jesus Christ is the one who becomes a curse to redeem men from the curse (3: 13-14). The analogous role of Abraham mediating blessing to counter the curse of primeval history is not introduced by Paul. For Paul the continuity between the Genesis promise and the fulfillment in Christ is not primarily in terms of what Abraham did as a mediator, but in terms of Yahweh's promise and Abraham's attitude to that promise.

This quotation from Gen. 12:3 is designated "the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8). How can Paul use the term "gospel" in connection with this promise? The Genesis promises discussed earlier do not name Jesus Christ or a Messianic Savior in the technical sense. The tension between the brief wording of the Genesis promises and the Pauline gospel is obvious. Both are power-filled messages of God which can evoke faith and which must be accepted on faith. And both have a common goal of life for all

¹² Cf. B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), pp. 225 ff.

peoples of the earth. Jesus Christ, the ultimate means of achieving that happy outcome, remains unknown in person to Abraham. Yet the outcome and the means are foreseen by the Scriptures (which stand as a circumlocution for God in Gal. 3:8). This foreseeing is not incidental. It suggests a divine plan and program in which there is a definite goal and a way to effect that goal. In the light of this foresight and this plan the message announced to Abraham is the early but incomplete good news of blessing to mankind.

This promise to Abraham was the first of a series of announcements revealing God's saving purpose for the Gentiles. That promise had a history in which the full ramifications and significance of the message to Abraham were periodically revealed. The appearance of Jesus Christ as the end of that history of promise shed even more light on the importance of the gospel promise to Abraham. For Paul, however, the history of the promise is virtually ignored here. He leaps from the Abraham promise to the advent of Christ. The intervening period is the era of the law, that custodian who kept men under constraint until the coming of Christ, through whom we are sons of God by faith (3:23-26). According to Paul the original promise held the hope, power, and clues of God's ultimate blessing through Christ.

THE INHERITED BLESSING OF ABRAHAM

Men of faith have more than a common bond with Abraham; they inherit the blessing promised to their forefather (3:9). "Blessed with Abraham" is virtually equivalent to being "sons of Abraham" in v. 7 above (compare 3:29). Faith makes this genuine relationship of blessing possible

for both Abraham and his sons. Again there is a common denominator in the blessing for Abraham and for his Christian sons. Righteousness, or living in the right relationship with God, is the blessing of acquittal and life imparted by God (compare Rom. 5:18). For Christians that also means being in Christ as heirs who possess the Spirit. All the eschatological ramifications of life in the Spirit were apparently not known to Abraham. Eternal life, for example, is nowhere included among the promises to the patriarchs (compare Rom. 5:21; 6:23). Nor does Paul maintain that this is the case, even in Romans 4. At the same time the material blessings of land, children, peace, and the like seem to be reinterpreted by Paul. Progeny is understood in terms of sons by faith. The inheritance of the land appears as the inheritance of the cosmos or new age in Rom. 4:13.¹³

The inherited blessing of Abraham is ratified and established by the work of Christ. What was promised through Abraham is effected through Abraham's seed. The curse of the law to be countered by Abraham's mediated blessing is nullified by Christ's act of redeeming men from the curse (3:10-13). Through Jesus Christ the blessing of Abraham comes to the Gentiles (3:14). Through Jesus Christ the promise is fulfilled. He is the seed within the seed of Abraham through whom the fullness of blessing is mediated (3:15-18, 29). With the advent of Christ the principle of salvation through faith is established as the eternally valid way once promised to Abraham (3:19-26). Christ unites all men and peoples in Himself. Those who

¹³ Cf. Matt. 5:5 and Schoedel.

belong to Him are the true offspring of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (3:27-29). By His appearance Christ fills faith, promise, and blessing with new power and meaning.

Conclusion

Paul's interpretation of the gospel promises to Abraham makes it clear that we can no longer consider the Old Testament in isolation if we are to grasp its full import. The promises to Abraham stand at the beginning of a history of promise that culminates in the surprise ending of the Christ event. They are the first good news in a long line of announcements that arise from many different Old Testament traditions. These Abraham promises are also important because for Paul they precede the giving of the law and for the writer of Genesis they antedate the expectations connected with a Messianic individual. These early promises are a vital part of the plan of redemptive history and must be related to the final proclamation of Christ's redemption.¹⁴ Unlike some ex-

pectations and predictions in Israel, these promises are never relegated to obscurity or exhausted by the preliminary fulfillments in the population explosion of Israel, the conquest of the land, and the establishment of a great nation by David.

Yet the tension between the Old Testament promises and the New Testament kerygma persists. There is both continuity and discontinuity between the cryptic promises of Genesis and the unexpected fulfillments exposed by Paul. A mass of questions and historically conditioned elements haunt the old promises of the patriarchs.

The interpretations of Paul do not always coincide with what seems to be the original intent of the interpreter in Genesis. Without the bright light of Christ's epiphany it is difficult to see how Abraham or his followers could have expected the figure of Christ as proclaimed to us in Paul. But despite this knowledge gap, Paul establishes a common ground between the promises of Abraham and the New Testament kerygma about Christ. The gospel message of life in the right relationship with God promised as a gift of grace through faith provides that common center in the Scriptures. The Christ event establishes the validity of that center and unveils the full meaning of salvation from the curse.

¹⁴ The special implications for us in the message of this Yahwist writer in Genesis deserve further attention. The role of sons of Abraham, driven by the Spirit, to mediate blessing, life, and the election message of Abraham to other people is a vital part of our mission. That blessing involves far more than spiritual gifts.