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# Who are the Heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant?

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## Introduction

The media and public have concluded that 'being a Christian entails being pro-Israel'. A 'pro-Israel' stance normally infers that modern day Israel has some sort of divine or biblical right to the land of Palestine, i.e. that ethnic Israelites are the legitimate heirs of the Abrahamic covenant. How did this understanding come about, and is being 'pro-Israel' a necessary corollary of biblical Christianity?

'Popular American Christian eschatology', as represented in books such as the *Left Behind* series and in prophetic conferences of the last century, emphasized the unique status of Israel among the nations of the world in the plan of God. This plan included the ancient gift of what we know as modern day Palestine to the Old Testament people of God, known as Israel. Admittedly, if we read only the Old Testament, we would conclude that Israel is still God's nation and Palestine yet remains a gift and a promise to faithful

Jews. However, 'popular American Christian eschatology' does not represent the consensus of Christian theology worldwide, nor is it inexorably the position that best reflects biblical understanding.

All Christians must begin their reading of the Bible with the New Testament, without which there is no Christianity. Consequently, as they read the New Testament Christians become aware that the coming of Jesus introduces a fundamental change in regard to how the Old Testament is understood. This is especially true in regard to the Abrahamic covenant.

As Christians we read the Old Testament from the perspective of Christ's teaching that he was the Messiah whom the Old Testament anticipated. The Old Testament was promise; Jesus is fulfilment. Jesus was the only Israelite who truly fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law. He alone was the faithful covenant-keeper. As the quintessential seed of Abraham, he inherited all the promises given to Israel. Now, in light of the fulfilment in Jesus, all believers share his inheritance through their faith in Jesus Christ. Anyone, regardless of ethnicity,

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can become an inheritor of the Old Testament promises. This is what the New Testament teaches clearly: *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise* (Gal. 3:29).

In regard to the current struggle over the land in the Middle East, God's promises to Abraham belong to Jesus Christ and to all believers, Jews and Palestinians included, who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Jews and Palestinians who continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah are in the same boat spiritually before God. Though one or the other may be 'more just' on certain ethical and political issues, neither Jews nor Palestinians are in greater favour with God or have a divine right to the land. *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus* (Rom. 3:22-24).

Does the church of Jesus Christ have a legitimate and biblical basis to lay claim to the covenant given to Abraham? Greg K. Beale<sup>1</sup> and W. J. Dumbrell<sup>2</sup> view the Abrahamic Covenant in relationship to the broader biblical theme of creation/recreation. This context of a creation/recreation motif establishes a 'beyond-ethnicity' scope for the Abrahamic Covenant because it views the covenant in relationship to the creation-wide purposes of God. A New Testament understanding of the

Abrahamic Covenant fully allows that 'faith not ethnicity' defines the descendants of Abraham, and clarifies that New Testament believers are fully the 'seed of Abraham'. A Christian interpretation of the biblical texts containing the Abrahamic covenant establishes believers in Christ as the legitimate heirs of the promise.

Firstly, let us briefly survey the Old Testament covenantal texts and highlight their main points. Genesis 12:1-3 introduces God's purposes with Abraham as 'promise'.<sup>3</sup> The first four promises in verses 2 and 3, are all cohortatives, denoting Yahweh's resolve: 'I will make you [into a great nation]'; 'I will bless you'; 'I will make [your name great]'; 'I will bless [those who bless you]'.<sup>4</sup> The one non-perfective, 'I shall curse the one who treats you lightly', signifies a contingent future.<sup>5</sup>

Though absent in the text of the NIV, the Hebrew text contains a conjunction attached to these promises which signifies either purpose or result (in order that) after the imperative,<sup>6</sup> 'go'.<sup>7</sup> The combined sense is: 'Yahweh

<sup>1</sup> In Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliot, *Eschatology in Bible and Theology* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), pp. 11-52.

<sup>2</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), pp. 11-43.

<sup>3</sup> P. D. Miller's syntactic study of this passage is helpful. Patrick D. Miller, 'Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII, 3a.' in *Vetus Testamentum* (344. 1984), pp. 472-76.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 34.5.1a.

<sup>5</sup> Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 31.6.2.

<sup>6</sup> Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 34.6.

<sup>7</sup> Yarchin adequately defends the command/promise structure of Genesis 12:1-3. William Yarchin, 'Imperative and Promise in Genesis 12:1-3', *Studies in Biblical Theology* 10 (October 1980), pp. 164-178.

said to Abram, Go ... to the land I will show you *that* I may make you into a great nation, *that* I may bless you, *that* I may make your name great.' At the end of verse 2, the imperative, 'you will be a blessing', signifies that these divine resolves have the further purpose that Abram 'be a blessing'. A similar construction is found in Ruth 4:11: 'May Yahweh make the woman who is entering your house like Rachel and Leah ... and so do valiantly in Israel.' God filled Abram with life that he in turn might mediate life to others. As Abraham became a blessing, verse 3 describes how God fulfilled his purpose of bringing blessing to others, i.e. by blessing those who blessed Abraham.

Though the land promise becomes an important focus of the covenant, it is significant that it is originally set apart from God's initial promises to Abraham. The idea of land is introduced in 12:1, but the concept of land as 'gift' is introduced upon Abraham's obedience and apart from the promise (see Gen. 12:7).

The additional promise, 'and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you', contrary to the translation in the *New International Version*, wherein the verb is taken as a passive, is better translated as 'find for themselves a blessing'.<sup>8</sup> This line of the covenant delineates the universal scope of God's redemptive and restorative program for the world.<sup>9</sup>

In Genesis 15:1-6, after having successfully overcome another threat to his occupation of the land, Abraham's doubt, in light of the absence of any offspring, is assuaged by divine assurance that a son will come from Abraham. Again, the innumerability of Abraham's seed is confirmed, this time being compared to the stars of heaven. This seed of Abraham, shares a corporate solidarity as indicated by the use of 'seed' in the singular. As we will see, this corporate solidarity raises the question of whether faith or ethnicity provides this solidarity among the seed of Abraham.

In Genesis 15:7 Yahweh's unsolicited affirmation concerning his promise of the land provokes from Abraham a question desiring assurance in 15:8: 'O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?'. In response to Abraham's need of assurance, in 15:9-21 Yahweh elevates the promise of land for Abraham and his seed to the status of covenant.

First, Yahweh engages in a ceremony that confirms the inviolability of his covenant with Abraham and his seed. In obedience to God Abraham

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both texts it is best to understand *barak* as 'get to themselves blessing' (Walke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, pp. 390-1). Dumbrell translates the phrases as 'win for themselves a blessing' or 'find for themselves a blessing' (Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 70-1). This is contrary to Gerhard Wehmeier's conclusion that the Niphal and Hithpael are distinct in meaning. Gerhard Wehmeier, 'The Theme "Blessing for the Nations" in the Promises to the Patriarchs and in the Prophetic Literature' in *Bangalore Theological Forum*. 6 (July-December), pp. 1-13.

8 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 70-1.

9 It should be noted that *barak* is used in the Niphal in Gen. 12:3 and in the Hithpael in Gen. 22:18. Though the causative-reflexive sense is usually reserved for the Hithpael, it is also a legitimate scheme in the Niphal. In

gathers, divides, and arranges selected animals on the ground. In the darkness of the evening, Yahweh, in a visible manifestation of himself, passes alone through the midst of the divided animals, thereby taking upon himself an oath of self-malediction.<sup>10</sup>

The significance of this ceremony lies in God's asseveration, wherein he solemnly swears death upon himself should he fail to fulfil his promise to Abraham.<sup>11</sup> This oath-taking on God's part confirms the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant as unilateral, unconditional, and inviolable. It emphasizes the importance of the gift of land in the redemptive and restorative purpose that God is fulfilling through the Abrahamic covenant.

Another covenant text in Genesis 17 reaffirms the promise/covenant, adding the rite of circumcision as the external evidence of the parents' acceptance of the covenant and their desire for the continuity of the covenant through their seed. Though Yahweh had affirmed in reference to the land in chapter 15 his commitment to keep the promise, Genesis 17 makes it clear that receiving the benefit of his commitment is not without obligation on those who participate.

The covenant itself in this chapter is now described in terms of a gracious gift in 17:2. Verses 4 and 5 contain an additional covenant arrangement that Abraham will be the father of nations.

This is ultimately fulfilled in and through the church (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 4:16-17; Rom. 15:8-16). Also there is included an additional note in 17:7 that a relationship between Yahweh and Abraham's seed results from the establishing of this covenant. This promise extends to the true seed of Abraham, i.e. to Isaac, not Ishmael (Gen. 17:15-22) and to Jacob, not Esau (Gen. 27:27-9; 28:10-15). The gift of land is also reaffirmed in 17:8,

Circumcision is then set forth as the outward sign of the covenant relationship that exists between Yahweh and Abraham and his seed in verse 10: This rite was open also to Gentiles, the significance of which is brought out by O. Palmer Robertson:

This absolute openness to the incorporation of Gentiles into the community of Israel has far-reaching significance affecting the interpretation of massive portions of the Old and New Testaments. Many traditions of interpretation build on an implicit assumption that God has a distinctive purpose for the racial descendants of Abraham that sets them apart from Gentiles who respond in faith and obedience to God's program of redemption. This entire hermeneutical structure begins to totter when it is realized that 'Israel' could include non-Abrahamic Gentiles just as well as ethnically related Jews.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, though Israel maintained outward circumcision, they often lacked circumcision of the heart

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10 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), p. 130.

11 Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, pp. 130-1.

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12 Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 154

which is the true mark of the seed of Abraham (Rom. 2:28-29).

Another covenant text is Genesis 22 which records the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his seed, Isaac, in obedience to the command of Yahweh. Upon this forceful demonstration of Abraham's loyalty to Yahweh, the promise/covenant is now bound with an oath in 22:16, 'I swear by myself ....'

The oath-bound promise/covenant, employing cohortatives of resolve, reaffirms personal blessing to Abraham, the innumerability of Abraham's seed, an additional motif of victory over enemies, and blessing to the nations through Abraham's seed. The numerous seed and the victory over enemies are administrations of 'to bless.' Once again 'bless' signifies 'to confer abundant and effective life upon something ... someone'.<sup>13</sup>

The granting of this oath-bound promise/covenant is connected to Abraham's obedience. It is worth noticing that in the Abraham narratives (12-22), both the issues of Abraham's obedience and the blessing to the nations form an *inclusio* for the cycle.<sup>14</sup> If any conditionality is involved, as some have suggested, it is removed on the ground of Abraham's obedience.

Later both Isaac and Jacob had the covenant reiterated to them. Through-

out the Pentateuch are found frequent restatements and allusions to the promise/covenant.<sup>15</sup>

Having looked exegetically at the primary covenant texts, we will now proceed to highlight their significant elements from a New Testament vantage point.

### The Significant Elements of the Abrahamic Covenant

Clines recognizes three basic elements in the promise: posterity, divine-human relationship, and land.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, VanGemen identifies four areas of the promise: a seed, a land, blessing to the patriarchs, and blessing to the nations.<sup>17</sup> VanGemen's categories of blessing to the patriarchs and to the nations correspond to Clines' division of 'divine-human relationship.'

This author has chosen to follow Clines' three-fold breakdown as a concise encapsulation of the major elements of the Abrahamic covenant and has chosen to deftly exegete those elements as found in Gen. 12:1-3,7; 13:14-17; 15; 17:1-22; 22:15-18.

### The Promise of Posterity

The Abrahamic covenant often speaks of 'seed'. The Hebrew word for 'seed' and the related Greek word for 'seed'

13 John N. Oswalt, John N., *et al.* in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Vol. 1. Edited by R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 132.

14 See Yarchin's discussion of these narratives wherein he sees imperative/promise 'gauged toward the formation of a sort of framing of the whole Abraham cycle....' (Yarchin, 'Imperative and Promise', p. 174).

15 David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1982).

16 Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, p. 31.

17 Willem VanGemen, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1988), p. 104.

present a complex concept in identifying the recipients of the Abrahamic promise. 'Seed' is used at times to include the physical descendants of Abraham and those who share the faith of Abraham, whether physical seed or not; Galatians 3:16, Paul argues forcefully that 'seed' in the singular finds its ultimate reference to Christ as 'the' offspring of Abraham. This variegated usage produces perplexity in understanding, 'who are the recipients of the Abrahamic covenant?'

Part of the solution to this complexity is to understand that 'seed' is used to describe both a singular entity and a collective. The promise was given to Abraham and to his seed (Gen. 12:1-3,7; 15; 17:1-22; 22:15-18), i.e. both to Isaac (27:27-29) and to Jacob (28:10-15). Both Isaac and Jacob stood representatively in the Messianic office, an office fulfilled in Jesus Christ. McComiskey notes: 'The collective function of *zera* allows the writer to refer to the group or to a representative individual of the group.'<sup>18</sup> The focus is not on the physically related 'seed', for those who are not physically related can participate in the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). The collective singular disallows any notion of 'seeds', physical and spiritual. There is but one seed.

The New Testament clarifies that Jesus Christ is the ideal representative seed, while those in Christ comprise the collective seed, i.e. the community of faith (Gal. 3:16,29). Isaac and Jacob cannot ultimately fulfil the promise. Only Jesus Christ can bless the earth in

a final sense. The collective seed has no identity apart from its relationship to the ideal representative, Jesus Christ.

This dual concept of 'individual representative' and 'corporate community of faith' is essential to understanding 'seed'. It appears that later in the progress of revelation the Davidic covenant expands on the royal status of the representative individual who guarantees the covenant and the New covenant expands on the spiritual nature of the corporate community of faith who participate in that covenant.

As indicated earlier, another step in resolving the complexity of 'seed' is to understand that 'seed' does not equate to 'physical descendants'. Though Ishmael was a descendant of Abraham, he was not the seed of Abraham to whom the promise was guaranteed. Likewise, Esau was a descendant of Isaac, yet was not in the line of promise. Also, there were many who were physically seed of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, yet who stood outside the covenant (Rom. 2:28-29).

Clearly, not all of the physical seed of Abraham inherit the promise. Only those physical descendants bound in a unique 'covenant' relationship or those non-physical seed who by faith enter that covenant of Abraham inherit the promise.

The unique relationship that establishes someone as the true seed of Abraham is one built on a faith participation in a divinely initiated covenant.<sup>19</sup> O. Palmer Robertson rec-

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> See O. Palmer Robertson, 'Genesis 15:6, New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text,' *WTJ* 42 (1980b), pp. 259-289.

ognizes covenant as the bond that determines relations between God and his people:

By creation God bound himself to man in covenantal relationship. After man's fall into sin, the God of all creation graciously bound himself to man again by committing himself to redeem a people to himself from lost humanity. From creation to consummation the covenantal bond has determined the relation of God to his people.<sup>20</sup>

Daniel P. Fuller in his discussion of the seed of Abraham concludes that since faith is the prerequisite for participation in the Abrahamic covenant by both Jew and Gentile, then '... faith which produces obedience, rather than physical descent, is the primary aspect of the seed of Abraham'.<sup>21</sup>

It holds true then that physically related seed are not guaranteed participation in the Abrahamic promise, but the promise is insured '... to all the people of faith throughout all ages'.<sup>22</sup> Once again, the New Testament affirms that not all Israelites were inheritors of the promise (Rom. 2:28-29) and that some of those outside Abraham's physical seed do inherit the promise (Gal. 3:29).

The 'seed' of Abraham are those who by faith engage The Seed, whether physically related or not. It remains for

the New Testament to clarify the notion more specifically. In any case, there is no basis for a distinction between physical seed and spiritual seed in these accounts in Genesis.

### The Promise of Divine/human Relationship

The promise of divine/human relationship is bound in the terms of blessing and cursing. Divine blessing extended from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and to their seed. The presence of blessing depicted the liveliness of the relationship between God and his people. McComiskey comments regarding blessing:

The blessing of the Abrahamic promise then connotes every aspect of God's favour, both temporal and spiritual, bestowed on the patriarchs. The emphasis seems to be primarily on the spiritual blessing of the promise. This secured a bright future for the progeny of the patriarchs in a land in which they could grow to become a great nation and affirmed that, in some yet unforeseen way, the offspring would become a blessing to Gentiles.<sup>23</sup>

This promise of personal blessing was reaffirmed to both Isaac (Gen. 26:3) and Jacob (Gen. 35:9-12). That relationship was dominant as the essence of this blessing is clarified in Gen. 17:1-8 where is found the concept of divine-human relationship inherent in the words, 'to be your God and the

20 Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 25

21 Daniel P. Fuller, *The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*. Doctoral Dissertation (Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957).

22 McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 17.

23 McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 40.



God of your descendants after you' (v.7).<sup>24</sup>

Also, included in this divine/human relationship, is the promise that Abraham's name would be great. McComiskey explains:

It is the promise of an enhanced reputation.... Because of Abraham's faithfulness his name still lives today. His example of faith and his role as mediator of the promise permeate the teaching of both testaments.... If it were not for his obedience to God, his name probably would have been lost.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, this divine/human relationship includes the promise of blessing for those who favour Abraham and cursing for those who disfavour him. Cursing is the experience of one who curses Abraham. Again, McComiskey offers helpful insight into 'cursing':

The word *curse* in the statement of the promise clearly denotes the expression of an unfavorable attitude toward Abraham. Its emphasis on treating contemptuously or regarding as unimportant defines an attitude. It is an attitude toward Abraham that deems him unworthy of attention. It regards his example of faith as not important enough to emulate. One who disregards the fact that through Abraham God is urging everyone to faith in the promise is treating Abraham contemptuously, and may expect that

God will treat him or her the same way.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the promise of divine/human relationship includes, as a result, the extension of blessing to the nations of the world. This guarantees that Abraham's seed will be the mediator of blessing to the nations. By invoking in faith the name of Abraham's God, the nations of the world share in the covenant to Abraham.<sup>27</sup> Through the Abrahamic covenant 'this rectification of curse is worldwide in scope.... "All the families of the earth" may turn from the history of curse and enter that of blessing by their own historical involvement with Abram and his descendants, the blessed of Yahweh.'<sup>28</sup>

Divine/human relationship entails responsibility for those in the covenant. Genesis 12:2b commands Abraham to be a blessing.<sup>29</sup> His living within covenant obligations is part of the link of bringing blessing to the nations of the world.

### The Promise of Land

The land is promised to Abraham in Genesis 12:5-7 and 13:13-17, covenanted in Genesis 15:7-18, and explicated in verses 19-21. This promise of land is repeated to Isaac (Gen. 26:3-4) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:3, 13-15; 35:9-12). Deuteronomy 12:8-32

<sup>24</sup> McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> See footnote number 40.

<sup>28</sup> Yarchin, 'Imperative and Promise', p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> Yarchin forcibly defends the command/promise structure of Genesis 12:1-3 (Yarchin, 'Imperative and Promise', pp. 164-178).

describes the land as ‘... a “resting place” (*menuha*) and an “inheritance” (*nahala*). It is the place where God will choose a site as a “dwelling for his Name” (v.11).’<sup>30</sup>

Land in the Old Testament is both a physical reality and a theological symbol. The 2,504 uses of ‘land’ in the Old Testament speak of its importance to theology.<sup>31</sup> Though God promised to Abraham a specific piece of geography, Abraham apparently understood it as more than geography (Heb. 11:16, 39-40).

Theologically, land is the gift of God. Land is the place of blessing. Land is the fulfilment of promise. Land is that sphere of life where one lives out one’s allegiance to Yahweh. Land is that place where Yahweh uniquely chooses to dwell and to reveal himself.<sup>32</sup> Land is the sphere of God’s kingdom activity.

This land promise retains a fulfilled, yet not consummated aspect. There are indications within Scripture that the land promise is fulfilled (Josh. 1:13; 11:23; 21:43-45), not yet consummated (Josh. 13:1-7; Ps. 95; Heb. 4:6-11), and yet to be consummated in a new cosmos (Heb. 11:39-40).

The conquest under Joshua was more than just a military invasion, it was a theological event wherein the pious in Israel had their faith confirmed in God’s promise to Abraham. Joshua 21:44-45 indicates that to a measure the promise was fulfilled in

Joshua’s day, in Solomon’s day (1 Kgs. 8:56) and in Nehemiah’s day (Neh. 9:7-8). However, since the land promise is eternally operative, each and every successive generation looks for the promise of rest in ‘land’.

Concerning the land promise, some of the poetic material (ca. Pro. 2:21) ‘... demonstrates the vital principle that although the promise is irrevocable in nature, its benefits are only enjoyed by those who maintain a proper relationship to God through the obedience of faith’.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately the realization of the land promise awaits the time of the resurrection, the removal of the curse, and the restoration of all things (Rev. 21-22) under the rule of Christ.

The prophets (cp. Zech. 14:1-11) maintain an expectation that there will be, not simply a return to the land of Palestine by the seed of Abraham, but an expansion of the territorial borders of the promised land to include the world.

Land was always important to the original purpose of God for man. At creation this land included the entire earth and all its resources. Man was given dominion over this land (Gen. 1:26-28). In the fall man lost this dominion.

In an act of redemptive grace, God granted to the seed of Abraham the land, then defined more narrowly (Gen. 15:18-21), as the nation of Israel was to enjoy in a microcosmic way what God intended originally and now eschatologically for the people of God (Rev. 21-22). As old Israel found rest in the

30 McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 43.

31 Martens, Elmer, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 97.

32 Martens, *God’s Design*, pp. 242-7.

33 McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, p. 48.

land of Palestine, so the church experiences a spiritual deliverance out of the bondage of Satan's world of sin and death to inherit rest in Christ (Heb. 3-4) and ultimately expects a restored cosmos.

To New Testament believers, this 'landedness' presently finds expression in their current experience with Jesus Christ (Col. 1:13) as the fulfillment of the theological symbol, accompanied by an expectation, as seen in the eschatology of the Old Testament prophets and of the New Testament, that the physical reality involves an expansion of the territorial borders to include the entire earth and ultimately the New Creation, as originally intended in Gen. 1 and 2.<sup>34</sup>

Whether ethnic Israel occupies the land of Palestine in a millennial kingdom or the New Creation as fulfillment of the promise to the seed of Abraham is a question built on a constricted understanding of the terms 'land' and 'seed'. Limiting the seed of Abraham to ethnic Israel confines the land promise to Palestine. Allowing for the inclusion of all believers in the seed of Abraham coincides with the expansion of the land promise to include the whole earth and ultimately the new cosmos.

As noted earlier, McComiskey pointed out that covenant theology does not demand an abrogation of the promise of land. To him the New Testament expands the promise of land to include the whole redeemed world under the kingship of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup> He

concludes his discussion saying:

The land will belong to the people of God because it is part of the larger triumph of Christ. Perhaps the definable borders of Canaan will no longer be important under the rule of David's son, but the promise of the land as a territorial heritage need not be considered as abrogated if one approaches the promises through covenant.<sup>36</sup>

The Abrahamic covenant is God's answer to the failures of Genesis 1-11. In those chapters the 'seed' of mankind became corrupted through the fall, the 'land' was cursed with a consequent loss of man's dominion over it, and the 'divine-human relationship' was ruptured. The Abrahamic covenant restores to believing mankind the promise of seed, land, and divine-human relationship.

The words of Dumbrell capture the significance of that covenant:

The covenant with Abraham is a response to the situation created by the fall, remotely, and immediately to the circumstance arising from the humanistic attempt by man to find the center of his world in himself. The aim of the Abrahamic covenant is to redress all the aberrations of Gen. 3-11. Striking as it does a note of 'land' and 'people' as concepts with which the blessings of this covenant will be bound up, it points initially to Israel's history about to unfold. Finally, however, it directs us to the political unity sought by men in Gen. 11:1-9. These will come to the 'great

<sup>34</sup> See Beale's discussion of 'Eschatological Conception' in Brower and Elliot, *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, pp. 11-52.

<sup>35</sup> McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, pp. 199-209

<sup>36</sup> McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, pp. 208

nation', the company of the redeemed, which will rise by commitment to the God of Abraham. The call of that patriarch began a programme of redemption, which aimed at full and final restoration of man and his world. It will end with a series of relationships established by which the new creation will be brought into being.<sup>37</sup>

### The New Testament Perspective

We have looked at the significant elements of the Old Testament texts on the Abrahamic Covenant from a New Testament perspective. We will now listen to key New Testament texts as they affirm the church as the legitimate heir of the Abrahamic Covenant. The New Testament unequivocally affirms that the promises of this Covenant belong to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Look at some selected New Testament Texts relating to the Abrahamic Covenant.

In Romans 4 the apostle continues his argument from chapter 3 that justification is by faith alone. It is faith, not rite or law that establishes man in relationship to God. He illustrates from the experience of Abraham to whom justification was granted prior to the requirement of the rite of circumcision. The apostle contends that circumcision was not the link between Abraham and those who participated in the covenant with him, but rather 'faith' was that link (Rom. 4:9-12). Circumcision merely portrayed that faith. He further asserts that Abraham received the promise by faith prior to the giving

of the law (Rom. 4:13-15). Paul here understands the Abrahamic promise as primarily having redemptive significance.

His conclusion is that the promise comes by faith and that those who share Abraham's faith are related to the promise. 'He is the father of us all' and the promise is 'guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring' (Rom. 4:16).

In quoting Gen. 17:3 Paul equates the Gentile believers of Rome with the 'many nations' of the Abrahamic covenant. Both Genesis 17 and Romans 4 make no distinction between the 'many nations' and the 'seed of Abraham'. Abraham is the father of both. Romans 4 shows that Genesis 17 anticipated that 'seed of Abraham' and 'many nations' involved, not physical descendance, but a relationship of faith.

Romans 9-11 is critical to any interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant because it concerns the apparent failure of the covenant promises to the nation of Israel. The apostle's explanation of God's past, present, and future relation to Israel sheds light on the intent and scope of the Abrahamic covenant.

In brief, Romans 9 dispels the notion that physical lineage constitutes Israel as the people of God and clarifies the true nature of that people. Using both the choice of Isaac over Ishmael in 9:6-9 and the choice of Jacob over Esau in 9:10-13, Paul argues that Abraham's true offspring are those who inherit the promise (v.8) and that those inheritors of the promise become such through their faith participation (9:30-10:21) in the sovereign plan of God (9:1-21).

God's plan to gather a people for

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37 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 50.

himself also includes those Gentiles who share that faith response (9:22-26; 10:12-13). This inclusion of Gentiles is not to be perceived as a rejection of ethnic Israel. Though ethnicity in itself does not guarantee participation in the purposes of God, God's present extension of his grace to the nations does not exclude the availability of his grace to ethnic Israelites (11:1).

The salvation of any Israelite, such as Paul (11:1-2), Elijah (11:2-6), or Jews today, demonstrates God's faithfulness to his promises to ethnic Israel. God's present abrogation of Israel's favoured nation status and his glorious work among the nations, serve the dual purpose of saving Gentiles and arousing envy in Israelites.

However, the present extension of God's mercy to the Gentiles should not be construed as a negation of his promises for Israelites.<sup>38</sup> The partial hardening of Jews and the fullness of the Gentiles is the manner<sup>39</sup> in which God is accomplishing the saving of Israel. This is consistent with the Scripture that anticipated the coming of the Deliverer to Zion to take away sins. The Deliverer has come and is now gathering both Jew and Gentile unto himself (11:25-27). Martin

Woudstra argues that the 'saving of all Israel' in Romans 9 is presently being accomplished through the formation into one body of both Jew and Gentile and that Israel '... will not form a separate program or a separate entity next to the church'.<sup>40</sup>

The olive tree illustration sets forth the unity and continuity of the people of God. As the ingrafting of Gentiles does not replace the original branches, so the ingrafting of Israelites will not supplant the position of Gentiles.

The apostle's understanding of God's past, present, and future work among the nations and Israel coincides with the understanding that 'the undeniable center of Old Testament religion lies in the believer's response to the words of the covenant God that he would be Abraham's God and the God of his descendants'.<sup>41</sup> Included in those descendants are all those who have faith in Abraham's God.

In Galatians 3, as the apostle Paul discusses the relationship of the law to saving faith, he introduces Abraham as a paradigm of saving faith and inclusion in the promises of God. In the course of his discussion the apostle makes some interpretive statements, based on his understanding of the Genesis passages. These reflect on the Abrahamic covenant.

These statements are: (1) 'those who believe are children of Abraham' (v.7); (2) 'The Scripture foresaw that

<sup>38</sup> See, Robert G. Andrews 'Romans 11:11-32: The Future of Israel', Th.M. Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1982.

<sup>39</sup> *houts* is here used with the sense of 'in this way' (W. F. Arndt and, F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 602). As in its two other occurrences in this chapter (vv. 5, 31), it describes the manner in which something takes place.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Woudstra, 'Israel and the Church: a Case for Continuity', in *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Westchester, ILL: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 236-7

<sup>41</sup> Woudstra, 'Israel and the Church', p. 227.

God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you" (v.8); (3) 'those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham' (v.9); (4) 'He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Jesus Christ' (v.14); (5) 'The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ' (v.16); (6) 'But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe (v.22).'

Paramount in these verses is the redemptive significance of the Abrahamic covenant as it finds its consummation in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ as the quintessential seed of Abraham is both the guarantor and inheritor of the promises of the covenant. Relationship with Christ, established by emulating the faith of Abraham, guarantees one's participation in the promises of the covenant. It is neither the keeping of the law nor physical descendance from Abraham that constitutes one as a child of Abraham, but rather faith in Jesus Christ.

These verses sanction the redemptive nature of the Abrahamic covenant. They confirm that covenant as the unifying factor between Jews and Gentiles and they substantiate the view that there is one people of God of all ages that share the covenants of Scripture which find their consummation in Christ.

Strikingly, Paul perceives redemption in Christ to be the dominant,

though probably not exclusive, feature of the Abrahamic covenant. He finds the consummation of the covenant in Christ and participation in the covenant to be predicated on relationship to Christ. Though admittedly an argument from silence, the 'earthly' nature of the promises to Abraham appears to be somewhat idealized in Christ. Though not necessarily eviscerating those 'earthly' elements of the Abrahamic covenant, it certainly places them in a new light.

In the pericope of Ephesians 2:11-22 Paul offers a contrast between Gentiles apart from Christ (2:12) and Gentiles in Christ (2:13). In delineating that contrast, Paul asserts the unity and continuity of the people of God. In the past Gentiles were able to participate in the covenants of God only through their identification with the God of Israel and their becoming proselytes of the religion of Israel. The advent of Christ ushered in a marked change in the focus of redemption.

No longer does common participation in the religion of Israel guarantee one's participation in the covenants, but rather common participation in the Lord Jesus Christ (the true Israel?) binds one to the covenants of promise. Formerly, Gentiles apart from Christ were 'excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise' (2:12); whereas now, Gentiles in Christ 'are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household' (2:19).

The dividing wall (2:14) between Jew and Gentile is destroyed through the person and work of Jesus Christ. A new order has been established, replacing the old and forbidding its

reconstruction. The temple of Judaism is now replaced with a temple composed of Jew and Gentile sharing alike the life of the Spirit (2:21-2). Paul interprets the present experience of believing Jews and Gentiles in Christ as that which was anticipated by the covenants.

In 1 Peter 2:9-10 Peter assigns the elevated status granted to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 to New Testament believers. In unmistakable language—'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (2:9)—Peter removes any thought of a continuing distinction between Jew and Gentile, formerly marked by supremacy of the nation of Israel.

Dumbrell cogently discusses the significance of these concepts in their Old Testament context. The Hebrew word for 'possession' derives from an Akkadian term which refers 'to what is owned personally or what has carefully been put aside for personal use'.<sup>42</sup> It is a term that is nuanced by its use in suzerain/vassal relationships.

The Hebrew words 'kingdom' and 'priests' and the corresponding Greek words describe the mediatorial function of the nation. In an ancient society the priest was separated from the people in order to serve them. The separation of the people was a demonstration of their allegiance to the covenant. Israel was to serve the world by being distinct from it.

By this new relationship, as disclosed in these terms, Israel is 'withdrawn from the sphere of common international contact and finds her point of contact as a nation in her rela-

tionship to Yahweh'.<sup>43</sup> Under this new constitution she becomes 'a societary model for the world. She will provide, under the direct rule which the covenant contemplates, the paradigm of the theocratic rule which is to be the biblical aim of the whole world.'<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, 'now, the people of God' (2:10) becomes the designation that Peter grants to New Testament believers, echoing the words of Hosea the prophet (Hos. 2:23).

### Summary

The preceding passages share a common perspective of the Abrahamic covenant and of the people of God. In these representative New Testament texts the covenant is largely viewed in light of its redemptive significance. Apart from Romans 11:25-27 a future restoration of the nation of national Israel is not even hinted at. Of the seventy-four references to Abraham in the New Testament, not one clearly focuses on the 'earthly' elements of the covenant. Even the acceptance of a mass conversion of Israelites at some future time does not demand a return to a former order of things.

Due to the advent of Christ, as the seed of Abraham, the New Testament text sees a semi-realized fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant in New Testament believers and an ultimate fulfilment for all those who are 'seed' of Abraham by faith.

The texts that consider the question of 'who are the legitimate heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant?' unequivocally

<sup>42</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 87

<sup>44</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 87.

answer, 'all of those who are in Christ Jesus'. In reference to the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles George N. H. Peters cogently concludes:

Both elect are the seed, the children of Abraham; both sets of branches are on the same stock, on the same root, on the same olive tree; both constitute the same Israel of God, the members of the same body, fellow-citizens of the same commonwealth; both are Jews 'inwardly' (Romans 2:29), and of the true 'circumcision' (Phil. 3:3), forming the same 'peculiar people,' 'holy nation,' and 'royal

priesthood'; both are interested in the same promises, covenants, and kingdom; both inherit and realize the same blessings at the same time.<sup>45</sup>

Who are the legitimate heirs of the Abrahamic covenant? The legitimate heir is Jesus Christ, the quintessential seed of Abraham. Israelite believers, Palestinian believers, and all other Gentile believers share in that inheritance through faith in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>45</sup> George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*. Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), p. 404.

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