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ON THE OBLIGATION OF BLESSING “ABRAHAM’S SEED”

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“Now the LORD had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Gen. 12:1–3, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.).

The entire remainder of the Bible after these verses can be viewed as an exposition of God’s fulfillment of the promises contained in this remarkable passage. On this point most Bible scholars agree. What is less unanimous among believers is precisely what those verses actually are predicting.

Promises, Promises. These verses enumerate certain promises made to Abram (a.k.a. Abraham), and comprise what is usually referred to as the “Abrahamic Covenant.” The promises pertain, primarily, to some unspecified “blessing” that would be received by Abram and distributed to all other families of the earth through him. Furthermore, there would be “blessings” on those who “bless” Abraham, and all the families of earth would be blessed “in” him. In many subsequent passages, we find a virtual repetition of these themes, often with the addition of new details—especially the important fact that these promises do not pertain so much to Abraham alone as to his “seed” (Gen. 12:7; 13:15f; 15:5, 18; 17:7ff; 21:12). Many newer translations, unhelpfully, paraphrase the word “seed” with the more interpretive “descendants.”

One popular viewpoint, of relatively modern origins, holds that the Abrahamic promises pertain to the Jewish race as the “seed” of Abraham, and that their ultimate fulfillment awaits the millennial kingdom, after the future return of Christ. Many who hold this view identify the “blessings” due to Abraham and his seed with temporal prosperity, political independence, and, eventually, exaltation to prominence above all the nations. Thus, they have interpreted Genesis 12:3, with its stated obligation to “bless” Abraham, so as to teach that Christians should recognize a special status of

national/ethnic Israel, and “bless” them by giving them their unconditional political, economic, and moral support. Some even appear to believe that such an obligation to bless Israel defines one of the leading duties incumbent on Christians living in the last days (which would include the present time).

Who Gets Blessed? In seeking to understand the nature and fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, we face a two-pronged challenge: we must (1) identify the “seed” of Abraham to whom the promises pertain and (2) identify the nature of the “blessing” promised.

The strength of the viewpoint outlined above would appear to be its agreement with the expectations of the Jews of Old Testament times, namely, that the ethnic offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the promised “seed” to whom and through whom the promises are to be fulfilled. These hopes rest on a rather literalistic reading of a number of prophetic passages in the Old Testament. The assumption is that the Jews would be the best qualified to understand their own Scriptures.

Revelation of Truth. The answer of historical Christianity follows a different logic. It proceeds as follows: (1) The Jews were not entrusted with the correct understanding of these predictions, which was “hidden from ages and from generations” (Col. 1:26) until the time of their intended fulfillment. Peter tells us that even the prophets themselves were perplexed concerning the nature of the fulfillment of their own predictions, and, when they inquired of God for more light, they were put off by the declaration that such matters were not for them to know, and that it was only for those in the age of the fulfillment to understand (1 Pet. 1:10–12). Paul boldly states that the Jews, when reading the Old Testament, are blinded to its true import, due to a “veil” remaining over their hearts, which can only be removed on turning to Christ (2 Cor. 3:14–16). This being the case, it would be precarious to accept an understanding of the Old Testament on the basis that it prevailed as a consensus among spiritually blind readers.

(2) Though Jesus talked to His disciples about the fulfillment of certain prophecies during His lifetime, even they remained, to a very large extent, in the dark until He, after His resurrection, “opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). He also promised them that the coming Paraclete would guide them even further “into all truth” (John 16:13). Such divine illumination into the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures would seem entirely unnecessary if there existed the alternative of gaining a correct understanding of the Scriptures merely by consulting the rabbis. Apparently, the correct meanings of the Old Testament prophecies could not be found among the Jewish teachers and had to be revealed to the disciples through the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 2:9–10; Eph. 3:5).

The special understanding of God’s plan, which the apostles preached, is said to be “according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began, but

[which] now has been made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures has been made known to all nations" (Rom. 16:25–26a).

The correct understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures, then, is to be sought independently of any notions that may have been current among the Jews. The only safe approach must be to inquire whether the apostles, after having their "understanding opened," ever spoke on any Old Testament passage and gave the correct understanding of its meaning. This approach alone will lead us to the distinctly "Christian" understanding of the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Paul's Perspective. On this theme, we are fortunate to have in Galatians 3 a clear discussion from the pen of Paul addressing both of our pertinent questions—the identity of the "seed" and the nature of the "blessing."

In three different statements, Paul identifies the "seed" of Abraham to whom the promises relate: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (v. 16). Also: "What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made" (v. 19).

These verses are calculated to nullify the claim of any race to being "the seed" holding title to the Abrahamic promises. The caveat, "He does not say 'and to seeds'" (v. 16), is emphatic that there are not multiple seeds, and that no race or family (e.g., ethnic Israel) need apply. There is one Seed, whom Paul identifies as Christ in the above two verses. Christ *is* the promised Seed. The promises are His alone. If Paul's words do not have this meaning, what possible meaning could they bear?

Then Paul says something quite surprising (in light of the previous affirmations). He tells his Christian readers: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (v. 29). What is surprising is that Paul had previously ruled out any thought of the "seed" of Abraham being a reference to a large number of "seeds," yet here he seems to be affirming the idea of the seed as being multiple people (all who are Christ's). Has Paul contradicted himself? No, because he does not see believers as "many" but as "one, in Christ." He stated in the preceding verse: "For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28).

Thus, Christ is the one Seed of Abraham who is the heir of the promises—and so are we, if we are in Him. We are all one (the one "Seed") in Christ.

Christ and the church are one organism. Christ is the Head, Christians are the body, and together we form "one new man" (Eph. 2:15), which is "Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12), and is itself the one Seed that can lay claim to the Abrahamic blessing. Thus, Paul tells the

Christians that we are the “heirs according to the promise” given to Abraham and his Seed.

Paul has deliberately framed his argument so as to preclude any claim of ethnic Israel to the status of heirs to the Abrahamic promises, and has recognized Christ (and all who are in Him) as the desire of Abraham’s heart. To be a child of Abraham is not a matter of natural descent (Rom. 2:28–29; 9:8; cf. Matt. 3:9), but rather of having the same faith that Abraham had (John 8:39, 56). So Paul reasons: “Just as Abraham believed God...know that [only] those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:6f).

In the same chapter of Galatians, Paul also clarifies the nature of the “blessing” that is so prominent in Genesis 12:1–3. This he identifies with the blessing of receiving, by faith, justification and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The blessing is, therefore, *salvation through Christ*. Note Paul’s thinking here: “God would justify the Gentiles by faith...So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham...that the blessing of Abraham [justification] might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (vv. 8–9, 14).

The Abrahamic Covenant is thus nothing other than the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul makes this identification explicit: “Foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, [the Scriptures] preached the gospel to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8).

A Broad Blessing. So, are we obligated to “bless” the Jews today? Of course—and all other families of the earth as well! The blessing (salvation) of Abraham’s Seed (Christ) is for all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3)—Jew and Gentile alike. Peter, while preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, spoke of God’s intended blessing for them: “To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities” (Acts 3:26). The blessing to the Jews and to every nation is identical—namely, the gift of salvation in Christ, brought about by “turning every one [of them] from [his] iniquities” through the preaching of the gospel of Christ.

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