

THE SEED OF ABRAHAM: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF GALATIANS 3 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL

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Nondispensationalists often claim that Paul's identification of believing Gentiles as "the seed of Abraham" in Galatians 3 means that the church is now "spiritual Israel," and that a future fulfillment of national and political blessings to Israel are now excluded. Yet a proper understanding of the "seed" concept in Galatians and the rest of the Bible shows this is not the case. Jesus' identification as the ultimate seed of Abraham is the basis for the fulfillment of all of the Abrahamic blessings, including national and political promises to Israel along with Gentile inclusion.

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Introduction

At the heart of the disagreement between dispensationalists and covenantalists is the nature and relationship of Israel and the church. Indeed, in his classic work on defining dispensationalism, Charles Ryrie labeled the theological distinction between Israel and the church as the first *sine qua non* of the theological school, calling it "the most basic test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist."¹ On the one hand, covenantalists and other nondispensationalists² contend that the church replaces or fulfills³ Israel in such a way that various promises made to the nation of Israel should

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 46.

² Though there is a difference between a nondispensationalist in general and a covenantalist more specifically, I will use these terms interchangeably to refer to those who disagree with the dispensational position.

³ There is disagreement regarding which term is more accurate. Woudstra observes that "the question whether it is more proper to speak of a replacement of the Jews by the Christian church or of an extension (continuation of the OT people of God into that of the NT church is variously answered. Some prefer to think in terms of a growth of the church out of OT Israel" (Marten H. Woudstra, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 237). Yet this distinction in terminology is largely inconsequential, for "... in the end the result is the same—promises and covenants that were made with the nation Israel are no longer the possession of national Israel. . . . The position is the same while some

not be expected to be fulfilled to the nation, but can be fulfilled in the church. On the other hand, dispensationalists argue that while Israel and the church share many commonalities as the people(s) of God in their respective ages, they maintain distinct identities in God's program.⁴ As a result, it is not biblically feasible that the covenant blessings promised to Israel should find a spiritualized fulfillment in the church. Rather, since they have not been fulfilled in history, they will be fulfilled as promised to Israel in the eschaton, per Romans 11 (cf. vv. 11–12, 15, 23–32).

In discussion of the relationship between Israel and the church and the reception of covenant blessings, one of the key points of contention centers on Paul's remarks regarding the seed of Abraham in Galatians 3. Paul writes the letter of Galatians to safeguard the church from the heresy of the Judaizers, who were teaching that Gentile Christians must become sons of Abraham by circumcision in order to inherit the blessing of New Covenant salvation. In combating this error, Paul insists that those who believe in Christ alone for their righteousness are sons of Abraham (3:7), for Abraham believed God, and his faith was credited to him as righteousness (3:6, 9).⁵ Indeed, because the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed, and his seed was Christ Himself (Gal 3:16), therefore all those united to the true Seed become the seed of Abraham in Him, and thus heirs of the promise along with Him (Gal 3:29).

One quickly observes how the implications of such teaching become a matter of dispute between dispensationalists and covenantalists. Is Paul reinterpreting the text of the Old Testament, so as to supply it with a meaning not suggested by the original context? Does his identification of believing Gentiles as “the seed of Abraham” mean that the church is to be regarded as spiritual Israel? Since he teaches that Christ is the true heir of the promises, and that Christians are heirs via union with Him, does that mean that we should not expect a future restoration of the nation of Israel to her land? This article seeks to answer these questions. I will begin by considering the nondispensational interpretation of this passage and its implications. Then, I will evaluate that interpretation and seek to offer an alternative understanding more consistent with the biblical teaching, and, as I will show, with the tenets of dispensationalism. I will show that, in contrast to the claims of nondispensationalists, Galatians 3 in fact does not teach that Christ or the church replaces Israel or inherits the national and political blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant in a way that excludes a future, literal fulfillment to Israel.

The Nondispensational Interpretation of Galatians 3

The heart of the nondispensational interpretation of Galatians 3 revolves around two key issues; namely, the identity of “the seed of Abraham,” and the implication that designation has for those who will receive the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. We will consider each of these issues in their turn.

call it one thing and others call it another” (Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* [Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010], 10).

⁴ Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, 92–93, 96–97.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 191.

The Seed of Abraham⁶

The first tenet of the nondispensational interpretation of Galatians 3 regards Paul's application of distinctly "Jewish" language to the Christian church. Because Paul identifies Gentile believers as "sons of Abraham" (3:7) and the "seed of Abraham" (3:29), nondispensationalists conclude that these believers are now spiritual Jews—i.e., that the church is now spiritual Israel. George Ladd provides an example of this when he says, "I do not see how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament applies Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament church and in so doing identifies the church as spiritual Israel. . . . If Abraham is the father of a spiritual people, and if all believers are sons of Abraham, his offspring, then it follows that they are Israel, spiritually speaking."⁷ Anthony Hoekema agrees with Ladd's reasoning. He writes, "What is unmistakably clear here is that all New Testament believers, all who belong to Christ, all who have been clothed with Christ (v. 27), are Abraham's seed—not in the physical sense, to be sure, but in a spiritual sense. Again we see the identification of the New Testament church as the true Israel, and of its members as the true heirs of the promise made to Abraham."⁸ Relating the statements of 3:7 and 3:29 to the statement about Christ in 3:16, Robert Strimple summarizes, "Since Christ is the true Israel, the true seed of Abraham, we who are *in Christ* by faith and the working of his Spirit are the true Israel. . . . [W]e Christians are the Israel of God, Abraham's seed, and the heirs of the promises . . ."⁹

As Strimple concludes in that final phrase, the identification of the church as the Israel of God brings up the question of the way in which believing Gentiles are heirs of the promises made to Abraham. Because Paul identifies Christ as the true Seed of Abraham and thus the ultimate recipient of the Abrahamic promises, nondispensationalists conclude that we should expect no future fulfillment of any of the Abrahamic promises for the nation of Israel. Instead, Riddlebarger claims that "Israel's promises *vanish* in Jesus Christ."¹⁰ Similarly, Bruce concludes that Isaac him-

⁶ Much of the research presented in this section is adapted from Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 131–32.

⁷ George E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. R. G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 23–24.

⁸ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 198–99.

⁹ Robert B. Strimple, "Amillennialism," in *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 88–89, emphasis in original. Other nondispensational authors who interpret Paul's identification of believing Gentiles with Abraham's seed to mean that the church is spiritual Israel include: G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 671, 706; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012), 106; Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 108; Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 55; Bruce K. Waltke, "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 267.

¹⁰ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 70, emphasis added.

self, “as Abraham’s ‘seed,’ is *swallowed up* in Christ, in whom the promise to Abraham . . . reached its fruition.”¹¹ Further, since the church is also Abraham’s seed because of union with Christ and thus heirs of the promises to Abraham (cf. 3:7, 29), the church is understood to receive the Abrahamic blessing to the exclusion of the nation of Israel. Mathison reasons, “The covenantal promises do not require a future fulfillment by national Israel for God’s Word to be true. . . . They are now being fulfilled by the true Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). And they are also being fulfilled in and by all who are united to Christ by faith (v. 29).”¹² This brings us to the second tenet of the nondispensationalist’s interpretation of Galatians 3.

The Blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant

Dispensationalists as well as nondispensationalists believe that believing Gentiles in the church today experience blessings in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Many dispensationalists do not deny that believing Gentiles are sons of Abraham by imitating the faith of Abraham (cf. Gal 3:6–9; Rom 4:12) or that they currently partake of the rich root of the olive tree of covenant blessings (Rom 11:17). The disagreement, however, centers on which blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant these Gentiles are now experiencing. Because the nondispensationalist views the church as entirely replacing, fulfilling, or transcending Israel as the seed of Abraham, he also views the church as the singular recipient of all of the Abrahamic Covenant blessings, which are viewed as a unit.¹³ Therefore, we should not expect a future fulfillment for Israel. Hoekema asks and answers this key question explicitly: “From Galatians 3:29 we learn that if we are Christ’s then we are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise. Heirs of what? Of *all* the blessings God promised to Abraham, including the promise that the land of Canaan would be his everlasting possession.”¹⁴ He is particularly insistent that the promise of land to Israel is included and being fulfilled by the church, as elsewhere he writes, “All of us who are united to Christ by faith, therefore, are in this wider sense the seed of Abraham. And the promise of which we are heirs *must* include the promise of the land.”¹⁵

Nondispensationalists believe the land promise is in view here in Galatians 3 particularly because verse 18 speaks of an “inheritance,” which vocabulary is alleged

¹¹ Bruce, *Galatians*, 173, emphasis added.

¹² Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 29.

¹³ These promised blessings include (1) a nation of descendants/seed (Gen 12:2; 13:15–16; 15:6, 18); (2) a land for that nation of descendants (Gen 12:1, 7; 13:15; cf. 15:7, 18; 17:8); and (3) a universal blessing via this nation on all the peoples of the earth (12:3). See Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 42–46.

¹⁴ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 211, emphasis added.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 279.

to be especially associated with the land promise.¹⁶ However, it is quickly acknowledged that the church does not literally inherit the land of Canaan. Thus, in Galatians 3, “Paul doubtless understands this in a spiritual sense, although he does not pause to make this explicit.”¹⁷ Accordingly, they argue that the land promise is “typological of the creation,”¹⁸ should therefore be spiritualized and expanded to include the entire world, and finds its consummation eventually in the new heavens and the new earth which all believers inherit.¹⁹ Along with Matt 5:5, which speaks of the meek inheriting the earth (i.e., not simply the land of Canaan), particular recourse is had to Rom 4:13 to establish that the land promise has been expanded to include the new heavens and the new earth. There, Paul says that Abraham was promised to be heir of the *world*, not simply the land. Strimple concludes, “In the New Testament we also learn that Canaan, the land of promise, was but a type of that fuller and richer inheritance that is to be Abraham’s and all his children’s in Christ: the whole world, heaven and earth, renewed and restored in righteousness (2 Pet 3:13) as the home of God’s new race of men and women in Christ Jesus, the second Adam.”²⁰ Thus, covenantalists are content to say that Paul was simply “radically reinterpreting”²¹ the Old Testament text “in a way not suggested by the Old Testament context.”²²

In summary, because the church is identified as the seed of Abraham, which nondispensationalists interpret to mean “spiritual Israel,” the church now inherits in a spiritualized manner the blessings promised to Israel, particularly the Abrahamic Covenant blessings of a nation of descendants, the land of Canaan in which those descendants would settle, and a universal blessing of the nations. The church is a holy nation (1 Pet 2:9) which will inherit the world (Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13) when the Lord returns to renovate and rule the earth. Because these promises find their fulfillment in Christ, the true Seed (Gal 3:16), and in all those who belong to Christ (Gal 3:29), it is wrong to expect a future restoration of the nation of Israel to the land of Canaan.

¹⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 230; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 155.

¹⁷ Fung, *Galatians*, 155.

¹⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 633–34.

¹⁹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 211; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 71; Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 269.

²⁰ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 90. Strimple immediately goes on to discuss Rom 4:13. Other authors who view Rom 4:13 to be expanding the land promise include: Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 757, 762; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 708; Mathison, *Rightly Dividing*, 27–28; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 274; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 72.

²¹ Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 142.

²² Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 20–21.

A Dispensational Interpretation of Galatians 3

However, such an interpretation does not do justice to the text of Scripture. There is no warrant to conclude that applying “seed of Abraham” language to the church means that the church is Israel. Neither is there any warrant that the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant must be fulfilled as a unit, flattening out what is a multifaceted promise. In this section, I will evaluate the nondispensational arguments and offer an alternative interpretation that is more consistent with biblical revelation.

Multiple Senses of “Seed”

One factor that contributes to the diverging opinions on the nature of the “seed of Abraham” stems from Paul’s use of the Old Testament text in Gal 3:16. Both Hebrew and Greek terms for “seed” can be used in a collective sense even while remaining grammatically singular.²³ Yet in Gal 3:16, Paul insists on the singular sense in order to show that the Christ is the true Seed and the ultimate heir of God’s promises. There have been various approaches to explaining Paul’s use of the Old Testament here, with disagreement abounding not only regarding Paul’s exegetical method but even on which text he is quoting.²⁴

While a full discussion of the New Testament’s use of the Old is beyond the scope of this article, it is necessary to mention along with Silva that “it would be ludicrous to suggest [as some have suggested] that Paul was unaware of the collective sense of *sperma* or that he was hoping that his readers would not detect this ‘logical flaw.’”²⁵ Indeed, Paul relies on this very collective sense later on in this very passage when he tells believers, “if you belong to Christ, then you [plural] are Abraham’s [seed]” (3:29). Rather, I am persuaded by the exegesis of Alexander²⁶ and Collins²⁷

²³ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson, electronic ed., BibleWorks 8 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1994–2000), שָׂרָף (3); Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, electronic ed., BibleWorks 8 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), σπέρμα (2a).

²⁴ See the discussion in Schreiner, *Galatians*, 228–30, in which he identifies five views on Paul’s use of the OT: (1) allegory, (2) midrashic exegesis, (3) a contextual, typological narrowing, (4) the seed referring to a singular family rather than many families, and (5) literal exegesis based on Gen 22:17–18. Schreiner himself opts for (3), arguing that Paul cannot be quoting Gen 22 because the LXX lacks the καὶ that he insists on repeating in Gal 3:16. Instead, he believes Gen 13:15 or 17:8 is in view.

²⁵ Moisés Silva, “Galatians,” in *A Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 807.

²⁶ “Whereas the first שָׂרָף obviously refers to a very large number of descendants, the second would, following Collins’ approach, denote a single individual who is victorious over his enemies. . . . If the immediately preceding reference to ‘seed’ in 22:17 denotes an individual, this must also be the case in 22:18a, for there is nothing here to indicate a change in number. The blessing of ‘all the nations of the earth’ is thus associated with a particular descendant of Abraham, rather than with all those descended from him” (T. Desmond Alexander, “Further Observations of the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48:1 [1997]: 365).

²⁷ C. John Collins, “Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete Was Paul?” *TynBul* 54, no. 1 (2003): 75–86.

who believe Paul arrives at this singular sense of “seed” from a sound exegesis of Gen 22:17–18.²⁸ This would be entirely consistent with other Old Testament uses of the noun to refer to single individuals, such as Seth (Gen 4:25), Ishmael (21:13; cf. 16:11), Samuel (1 Sam 1:11), Solomon (2 Sam 7:12; cf. 12:24),²⁹ and, perhaps most significantly, the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), which “moves from the collective many to the singular ‘he’”³⁰ within that single verse.

This brief foray into the New Testament use of the Old is helpful in order to underscore the fact that “seed” is used in multiple senses throughout Scripture.³¹ Understanding these multiple senses helps us make proper conclusions about the distinctions between Israel and the church, and, as a result, the covenant promises each receives. We have already observed the first two senses very clearly in Galatians 3. In a typological way, Abraham’s seed may refer to the unique and ultimate Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ (3:16), who fulfills in the truest sense the promise of God to Adam and Eve in the *protoevangelium*. Secondly, there is a spiritual sense in which all believers in Christ—all Jews and Gentiles who share Abraham’s faith—are the seed of Abraham (3:29). This includes not only believing Gentiles, but also believing Jews, even during the times of Messiah (cf. Luke 19:9).

Aside from these two senses there is the biological sense—the natural seed. This sense includes the physical descendants of Abraham, whether they were true believers in Yahweh or not. Indeed, the nation of Israel was Abraham’s seed, yet not everyone was elect. But as God’s chosen nation they nevertheless “had the supreme privilege of bringing God’s blessing to all the nations through the coming of Messiah.”³² In fact, even in the New Covenant era, unbelieving Jews are still referred to as the seed of Abraham. Jesus Himself acknowledges even the Pharisees, whom, just a few verses later, He will call sons of the devil, are the seed of Abraham (John 8:37; cf. 8:44). The rich man in Hades calls out to Abraham and addresses him as “Father” (Luke 16:24). In his sermon in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, Paul addresses the Jews there as “sons of Abraham’s family” (Acts 13:26). And finally, in lamenting over the widespread blindness and hard-heartedness of the Jews in his day, he nevertheless refers to them as Israelites, the seed of Abraham (Rom 11:1).

²⁸ See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 289; John MacArthur, *Galatians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 84.

²⁹ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1968), 135.

³⁰ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 44.

³¹ Though they are nondispensationalists, I have found the most helpful presentation of the multiple senses of Abraham’s seed to be in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 632–33, in which they offer the following categories: (1) natural (physical), (2) natural (physical), yet special, (3) true/unique, and (4) spiritual. Elsewhere they dub these: biological, biological/special, typological, and spiritual (696). Another helpful categorization is found in Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin CA: Ariel Ministries, 2001), 700–02, in which he lists: (1) physical seed, (2) Messiah, the unique individual Seed, (3) believers today, i.e., the church, and (4) the remnant of Israel. Finally, one should also see the presentation in John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 72–73, in which he lists (1) ethnic, (2) political, (3) spiritual, and (4) typological.

³² Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 632.

While the descendants of Isaac in particular—the nation of Israel—are the physical seed of Abraham, they do not lay exclusive claim to being Abraham's physical descendants. Because they were chosen to mediate the blessings of Yahweh to the nations, they might be called a “natural, yet special seed.”³³ Yet the Scriptures also reveal that the physical seed of Abraham includes all of Abraham's biological descendants, which would also include Ishmael (Gen 21:13), the sons of Keturah (cf. Gen 25:1), and, by extension, even Esau and his descendants. “In each case, all of these children received the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, i.e., circumcision, even though many of them were unbelievers, and even though it was only through Isaac that God's promises and covenant were realized (Gen 17:20–21; cf. Rom 9:6–9).”³⁴ Thus, as Fruchtenbaum observes, the seed of Abraham would also include Arabs.³⁵

The reality that not all physical descendants of Abraham are Jews is strikingly significant for the debate between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists on Galatians 3. We must remember that a key claim for the nondispensationalist is that in applying the “seed of Abraham” designation to Gentile believers in the church, Paul has identified the church as spiritual Israel. However, Fruchtenbaum is right to note that “[e]ven in the physical realm not all the children of Abraham are Jews. Arabs are as much the descendants of Abraham as Jews, but in no way can they be classified as Jews. . . . Being a child of Abraham alone is not enough to make one a Jew. . . . *the seed of Abraham* by itself does not mean that the seed is Israel.”³⁶ In fact, he goes on to make the very insightful point that for the nondispensational interpretation to pass biblical muster, they need to present a scriptural statement that New Testament church is the seed of *Jacob*, for “the very term *Israel* originated with Jacob and not Abraham.”³⁷ Of course, Scripture never applies such a designation. Neither does the Bible ever call the spiritual seed of Abraham *Israel*.³⁸ On the contrary, as Carl Hoch has demonstrated, the church is never said to have been incorporated *into* Israel; rather, they have become sharers *with* Israel in the promised covenant blessings:

Paul never writes of Gentiles as ‘in Israel’ in any of his letters. The key sense in which Gentiles are made near to Israel is the preposition *sun*. Paul uses six *sun* compounds to express the relationship of Gentiles to Jews/Israel in [Ephesians 2 and 3]. . . . The Gentiles are brought near to Israel in Christ to share with Israel in its covenants, promise, hope, and God. They do not become Israel; they *share* with Israel.³⁹

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 702.

³⁶ Ibid., 700–01, 702.

³⁷ Ibid., 702.

³⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 161; Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 702.

³⁹ Carl B. Hoch, Jr., “The New Man of Ephesians 2,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, 113, italics in original.

One could say that *unity* does not imply *identity*. There is no reason why the union of Jews and Gentiles in one body, the church, should be equated with teaching that Israel and the church are the same entity. Unity does not banish all distinctions. There can be unity in diversity.⁴⁰ Therefore it simply does not follow that referring to the church as the spiritual seed of Abraham means the church is spiritual Israel.

Typology and Corporate Solidarity

In addition to recognizing these multiple senses of “the seed of Abraham,” as well as noting that identifying Gentile believers as the spiritual seed of Abraham in no way requires that they be regarded as a spiritual Israel, dispensationalists have also insisted that “no sense [of the seed of Abraham] (spiritual especially) is more important than any other, and that no sense cancels out the meaning and implications of the other senses.”⁴¹ This leads to a further observation regarding proper principles for interpreting types and typology; namely, the principle of corporate solidarity.

Typically, nondispensationalists approach typology with an underlying assumption that the presence of an antitype cancels the meaning, significance, or historicity of the original type. Indeed, as we observed before, Bruce sees Old Testament promises to Israel as typological of blessings to come for the church which are “swallowed up in Christ.”⁴² Riddlebarger views those promises as “vanish[ing] in Jesus Christ.”⁴³ “Since Christ is the true Israel . . . we who are *in Christ* by faith and the working of his Spirit are the true Israel,”⁴⁴ and “the covenantal promises do not require a future fulfillment by national Israel for God’s Word to be true.”⁴⁵ Thus, when Christ is presented as “true Israel,” “true temple,” or “true seed,” nondispensationalists take that to mean that the NT authors were reinterpreting the OT such that the original meaning is no longer valid. We should no longer expect a role for the nation of Israel, a rebuilt millennial temple, or a restored nation of descendants as promised in the OT.⁴⁶

However, this hermeneutical assumption is without warrant. Many dispensationalists, including myself, agree with nondispensationalists that Christ is the true and ultimate Israel, temple, seed of Abraham, and so on. Yet Christ is not Israel in

⁴⁰ “Although distinct from the Gentile Christians, the Hebrew Christians are nevertheless united with them in the Body of Christ. Does not this distinctiveness violate the unity? Not at all. For unity does not mean uniformity. . . . Looking at the Body of Christ from a different angle, all believers are united in one body, but they are not all uniform. There are differences in position and function. All have spiritual gifts, but not the same number or kind. All are in equal standing before God, yet each is distinct. The same is true for the Jewish and Gentile element in the Body of the Messiah. In Christ, the two are one in unity but not in uniformity. Before God, we are all equal in terms of salvation but distinct in position and function” (Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 759).

⁴¹ John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 73.

⁴² Bruce, *Galatians*, 173.

⁴³ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 70.

⁴⁴ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 88–89.

⁴⁵ Mathison, *Rightly Dividing*, 29.

⁴⁶ E.g., Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 70–80.

such a way that “‘transcends’ or removes the idea of corporate ethnic, national Israel.”⁴⁷ Indeed, “the truth that all the promises are fulfilled in Christ does not, as some say, dissolve their meaning into the person of Christ.”⁴⁸ The prophets persistently speak of the coming Servant “Israel” who will obey and succeed where Israel had disobeyed and failed, and in the process *restore* the nation to its right relationship to Yahweh (Isa 49:5–6a) as well as to extend Yahweh’s salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6b). Jesus Himself “preaches the kingdom to Israel and ascends with the promise that he will restore the kingdom to Israel at his return (cf. Acts 1:3, 6–7; 3:19–21).”⁴⁹ And Paul states that the adoption as sons, the covenants, and the promises *presently belong* to Israel, his kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom 9:1–5), notwithstanding their present hostility to the gospel (11:28; cf. 9:1; 10:1–4). “God has not rejected His people (11:1), and though they have stumbled and are presently under God’s judgment, they have not stumbled so as to fall (11:11).” There is a coming fulfillment for Israel (11:12) in which they will be grafted back into the rich root of covenant blessing (11:23–29).

Thus, especially given the flexibility of “seed” as a collective singular noun, able to refer to both one person and to many people, this principle of corporate solidarity means that Christ in His first coming can fulfill the prophecies regarding Israel’s blessing—even such that He can be true Israel, true temple, and true Seed—on *behalf* of Israel, rather than *instead* of Israel. The restoration and salvation of the many is not *canceled* but rather *accomplished* by the redemptive work of the One. In summary, then, Christ is the true and ultimate Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16), and by union with Him the Gentile church is also the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:7, 29), *and* the nation of Israel also remains the seed of Abraham, and will inherit the blessings promised to Abraham and to his seed through faith in Christ.

The Multifaceted Nature of the Abrahamic Covenant

Yet, in order to gain a proper expectation of the fulfillment of covenant blessings to the nation of Israel, we must have an accurate understanding of the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant. We can conceptualize the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant according to three categories. First, Abraham was promised a nation of *descendants*, or seed (Gen 12:2; 13:15–16; 15:6; 18). As has been shown above, even though the One true Seed would one day represent the many (Gal 3:16), and that all who are in Him by faith, even though they are Gentiles, are also the fulfillment of that promise (Gal 3:29), that in no way cancels the physical and biological senses of the “seed.” These descendants were to be as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen 13:16; 22:17) and were to be named through Isaac. Aside from this, it is significant to note that these promised descendants were to be “a great nation” (Gen 12:2; 18:18), because “the concept of ‘nation’ in the Old Testament involved race, government,

⁴⁷ Craig A. Blaising, “A Premillennial Response,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 145.

⁴⁸ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 32. Elsewhere Saucy states, “. . . the idea that a move away from the material to the spiritual is a genuine advancement in salvation history sounds suspiciously Platonic” (31).

⁴⁹ Blaising, “A Premillennial Response,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 146.

and territory. Thus the term points to the physical nature of the seed that would come from Abraham. But it also signifies the political form that the seed was to take.”⁵⁰ Therefore, there is an ethnic and a political aspect to this original promise of the Abrahamic Covenant.

A second category of blessing promised to Abraham concerned a *land* for this nation of descendants. Indeed, the very first aspect of Abraham’s call was Yahweh’s command to go to the land which He would show him (Gen 12:1). It was to the promised descendants that Yahweh also promised to give this land (Gen 12:7; 13:5; 15:7, 18). These designations are significant. In the first place, “because the concept of ‘nation’ carries a territorial aspect, the land must be viewed as the necessary corollary to the promised seed that would constitute the ‘great nation.’”⁵¹ Further, the land of Canaan was promised to Abraham’s seed “for an everlasting possession” (Gen 17:8). Thus, the physical and political realities tied to this promise, along with the guarantee that it would be an everlasting possession, ensure that the land may not be spiritualized away or made to be merely a type of something heavenly that vanishes into its antitype.⁵²

Finally, along with the promises of a physical and ethnic line of descendants who populate a political and territorial land, the third component of the Abrahamic Covenant was the *universal blessing* that would come upon all the peoples of the earth through the mediation of this nation. Yahweh promises Abraham, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3; cf. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Through the ministry of the seed of Abraham, all the Gentile nations of the earth would experience Yahweh’s blessings.

Therefore, it is plain that the Abrahamic Covenant contained multiple promises of a variety of blessings. There were physical, national, and political blessings promised (i.e., the seed and the land) as well as spiritual blessings promised (i.e., the universal blessing of the nations). Thus, when Paul declares the Gentile church to be Abraham’s seed and heirs according to promise (Gal 3:29), we must ask, “Which of the various promises of the Abrahamic Covenant does the church inherit?” Should we assume that all of the Abrahamic promises are in view in Galatians 3? Is Hoekema correct when he insists that Gentile believers are heirs of “*all* the blessings God promised to Abraham, including the promise that the land of Canaan would be his everlasting possession”?⁵³ I believe the answer is no. There is no reason to require that every blessing in the multifaceted promises of the Abrahamic Covenant is in view every time the covenant is mentioned or alluded to.

⁵⁰ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 43; cf. R. E. Clement, “אֶרֶץ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols., eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. by David E. Green et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 2:428.

⁵¹ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 44.

⁵² Contra Berkhof, who says of the land, physical offspring, and protection against national and political enemies: “These temporal blessings did not constitute an end in themselves, but served to symbolize and typify spiritual and heavenly things” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1941], 296).

⁵³ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 211, emphasis added; cf. 279; see pages 54 and 55 above.

In fact, a conscientious study of the context of Galatians 3 yields just the opposite conclusion. Immediately after he identifies all those who believe in Christ to be Abraham's sons (3:7), Paul links the gospel of justification by faith alone to the Abrahamic Covenant. He says, "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations will be blessed in you'" (3:8). What is extraordinarily significant about this is that the one Abrahamic promise Paul mentions in connection with the Gentiles becoming sons of Abraham by faith is the universal spiritual blessing that would come upon all nations, not the physical, political, or territorial blessings promised to the nation Israel.⁵⁴ Even nondispensationalists have made this observation. Fung notes the "intimate relationship between . . . justification by faith, sonship to Abraham by faith, and reception of the Spirit by faith,"⁵⁵ and identifies "Abraham's blessing" as justification by faith.⁵⁶ Similarly, Bruce explicitly acknowledges that "the reference to the land . . . plays no part in the argument of Galatians."⁵⁷ Yet they err when they suppose that equating the Abrahamic promise with justification by faith and not mentioning the land means that the Abrahamic promise only ever was the promise of justification by faith, or that the land promise is no longer valid. Therefore, Paul's teaching about the seed of Abraham and the inheritance of the Abrahamic promise in Galatians "is not a reference to the promises given to Abraham regarding the land . . . but refers to the spiritual blessings that come to all who, being justified by faith just as Abraham was (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3–11), will inherit the spiritual promises given to Abraham."⁵⁸

Thus, the key to properly interpreting Galatians 3 is to recognize the multifaceted nature of the Abrahamic Covenant—i.e., that it included both (a) physical, political, and territorial promises to the nation of Israel *as well as* (b) spiritual promises to the nations. The failure of nondispensational theology has been its tendency "of flattening the Abrahamic covenant by reducing it primarily to *spiritual* realities while neglecting its national . . . aspects."⁵⁹ But the New Testament never indicates physical promises given to the nation of Israel find their fulfillment in the church. Rather, the blessings the church receives are the spiritual aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant that were ultimately promised to Gentiles in the first place. Because God's promises to Abraham "encompassed *both* 'a great nation' *and* 'all peoples on earth' (Gen 12:2–

⁵⁴ "It is significant that when the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise is related to Gentiles, it is specifically this statement about 'all nations,' not any reference to the 'great nation' or Israel, that the apostle uses as OT support (Gal 3:8)" (Robert L. Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 254). "Notice that in Galatians 3:8 Paul focuses on only one promise in the Abrahamic covenant, namely, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you'" (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 161). "Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ receive the blessings of Abraham consistent with the promise to bless all nations in him" (Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993], 193).

⁵⁵ Fung, *Galatians*, 152.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 151. "Therefore, justification, by faith is seen to be the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, a conclusion which is in line with our earlier observation (on 3:8) that the promise to Abraham implicitly involves and anticipates the doctrine of justification by faith" (177).

⁵⁷ Bruce, *Galatians*, 171; cf. Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 307.

⁵⁸ MacArthur, *Galatians*, 101.

⁵⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 633, emphasis original.

3),”⁶⁰ “. . . when part of the referent (fulfillment) of these promises turns out to be the church, we should not be surprised.”⁶¹ And we certainly should not conclude from this that the church must be spiritual Israel, and thus inherit a spiritualized version of Israel’s physical and national promises in such a way that fulfillment for the nation is excluded.⁶² Rather, in Galatians 3 Paul presents justification by faith in Messiah as the fulfillment of the promise of universal blessing to the nations through Abraham’s true Seed. It does not cancel or reinterpret the promise of land for that “great nation.”

This is also substantiated by the fact that Scripture presents Abraham as the father of both Jews and believing Gentiles. Paul labors to explain that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised, “so that he might be the father of *all* who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who *not only* are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom 4:10–12). If Abraham were merely the father of the circumcision—the spiritual father of the Jews only—it would be necessary that Gentiles who become the seed of Abraham become part of Israel. But because Abraham received the promise while he himself was not yet a Jew (i.e., while he was uncircumcised), he can be the spiritual father of Gentiles *as Gentiles*—without their having to become spiritual Jews—because the Abrahamic Covenant always included a promise of spiritual blessing for the nations.⁶³ Thus, even though believing Gentiles are identified as the seed of Abraham, “the promises concerning the physical seed constituting the nation of Israel remain alongside this universal promise even as they did in the original statement in the Old Testament.”⁶⁴ These promises will be fulfilled to the nation of Israel (Rom 11:12) at the time when “the Deliverer will come from Zion [and] remove ungodliness from Jacob” (11:26). As they look on their Messiah whom they have pierced, and mourn in repentance over Him as for an only son (Zech 12:10), the nation Israel will be saved and restored (Rom 11:26; cf. Isa 49:5–6), and will thus be grafted back into the rich root of covenant blessing (11:23–24). In this way, all of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled through the New Covenant.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Saucy, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 254.

⁶¹ Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 127.

⁶² “Far from seeking to merge the Gentiles into some sort of ‘new Israel’ by calling them ‘the Israel of God,’ Paul was asserting their equal participation with Jews in the new messianic salvation that came through Christ. The apostle’s ministry to the Gentiles was in his mind the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that ‘all the nations shall be blessed in you’ (Gal 3:8, citing Ge 12:3). That same promise included statements about Israel (Gen 12:2), but Paul did not refer to these. The salvation of the Gentiles was not the fulfillment of the promises to the nation of Israel, according to the letter to the Galatians” (Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 200).

⁶³ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50. “True, Galatians 3:29 says that all of us in Christ, Gentile believers included, are Abraham’s descendants. Remember that Paul traced the Abrahamic paternity of Gentile believers to the Genesis 17 promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations. In Galatians 3, he develops his argument from the promise that ‘all nations will be blessed through you’ (3:8) . . .” (Blaising, “A Premillennial Response,” 146–47).

⁶⁴ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50.

⁶⁵ What the Old Testament saw as a single coming of Messiah is to be fulfilled in two comings. Because of this, the notion of “a present preliminary and future complete fulfillment of God’s end-of-the-

Conclusion

Having adequately considered the implications of the multiple senses in which Scripture speaks of the “seed of Abraham,” the principle of corporate solidarity as it relates to typology, and the multifaceted nature of the Abrahamic Covenant promises, we may come to a proper interpretation of Paul’s point in Galatians 3. Rather than identifying the present Gentile church as spiritual Israel who receives a spiritualized version of the Abrahamic Covenant promises made to the nation, Paul is simply announcing that Yahweh’s promise to Abraham of universal blessing to the nations has come in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The descendants of Abraham have mediated Yahweh’s blessing to the nations, for the true and ultimate Seed of Abraham has come from Israel, having atoned for sin and provided righteousness for sinners. Rather than being circumcised and keeping the provisions of the Mosaic Law, all the nations may become the seed of Abraham and enjoy covenant salvation as they simply follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham, who believed God and was reckoned righteous 430 years before the Law was given (3:17).

Therefore, in isolating the Lord Jesus Christ as the true Seed of Abraham, Paul does not revoke the physical, political, and territorial promises given to national Israel. Rather, he rebukes the Judaizers who, similar to the Pharisees (cf. John 8:33), supposed they were children of Abraham (and thus heirs of the promises) simply by virtue of their Jewishness. By referring to the Gentiles’ participation in such covenant blessings (cf. 3:7, 29), Paul echoes John the Baptist who warned the crowds that God is able to raise up children of Abraham from lifeless stones (Luke 3:8). His point is that the Abrahamic Covenant will not be fulfilled by the Mosaic Covenant, as if the promise had merely been made to the “seeds” who faithfully observed the stipulations of Torah. Rather, the Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled by the New Covenant, whose great mediator is *the* Seed, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. To put it in the terms of corporate solidarity, Paul is telling the Judaizers that they cannot be “the many” (hence the plural, “seeds”), who inherit the covenant promises to Abraham, by circumcision and law-keeping (i.e., by the Mosaic Covenant). Rather, they can only be “the many,” who inherit the covenant promises to Abraham, by being united by faith alone (i.e., by virtue of the New Covenant) to “the One,” Jesus Christ (hence the singular, “seed”). It is only by faith in Him that every promise of God finds its “Yes” (2 Cor 1:20). And indeed *every* promise will find its fulfillment in Christ, including even the promise of a great nation of Abraham’s seed settled in their land as an everlasting possession.

age promises should not surprise us. For this is precisely the pattern we see in the eschatological promise of the coming Messiah, who came, as history has now shown, first as the suffering servant and who will come again in the future as the reigning, earthly king over all. The already-not yet nature of the new covenant’s fulfillment parallels the same two-stage manner of messianic prophetic fulfillment” (Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 95); cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 189, 193–94.