

**THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM: SEEKING AN INTERPRETIVE LINK
BETWEEN GENESIS 12:1-3 AND GALATIANS 3:13-16**

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Abstract

God promised to bless not only Abraham, in Genesis 12:1-3, but to also bless all the families of the earth through him. And in Galatians 3:13-14, Paul relates this blessing as being bestowed upon the Gentiles through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Many prosperity preachers interpret the Abrahamic blessing as prospering in material and financial abundance. They also assert that it is salvation through Jesus Christ that gives Christians, who are Abraham's spiritual children, access to the Abrahamic blessing. But when these biblical passages mentioning the Abrahamic blessing were interpreted within the context of Paul's understanding of the blessing and using a theological method of biblical interpretation that incorporates a synchronic method of biblical exegesis with the sub-method of lexical and syntactic analysis, it was found out that the blessing is that of sonship through Jesus Christ by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit and not material or financial blessing.

Keywords: The Blessing of Abraham; Prosperity Preachers; Genesis 12; Galatians 3; Paul's theology

Introduction

God's intention and desire to bless humanity, according to Brown, is a central focus of his covenant relationships.¹ For this reason, the concept of blessing pervades the Bible. While there are various types of blessings in the Bible, the emphasis in this article is on the blessing of Abraham. The Abrahamic blessing is a component of the Abrahamic covenant. God's covenant with Abraham is first set forth and initiated in Genesis 12:1-3, later reiterated in Genesis 13:14-17, ratified in Genesis 15, and signified in Genesis 17. It has been said that this covenant governs God's entire programme for Israel and the nations, and is also fundamental to the whole programme of redemption.²

Three composite parts of God's promise to Abraham have been identified: the promise of posterity; the promise of a land; and the promise of blessing.³ But our primary focus here is on the promise of a blessing and in being a blessing. Many prosperity preachers⁴ interpret the Abrahamic blessing as prospering in material and financial abundance. That is, anyone who is a Christian has access to the blessing of Abraham, which includes being rich in finances, having good health, being free from poverty, having all the good things of life and also being a blessing. According to them, it is salvation through Jesus Christ that gives the Christians, who are Abraham's spiritual children, access to the Abrahamic blessing.⁵

Certain pertinent questions arise from this interpretation of the Abrahamic blessing. Is it exegetically defensible to find in God's promise of blessing to Abraham, present day Christians not merely foreshadowed, but actually anticipated? Who is the "seed" mentioned in Genesis 12:1-3? Is it a biological seed or a spiritual seed? Are the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant applicable to present day Christians, and, if yes, are they supposed to be the spiritual blessing of salvation or the physical blessings of health and wealth?

This article intends to theologially interpret the concept of the Abrahamic blessing stated in Genesis 12:1-3 as it relates to present day Christians. This is in order to align it with Christian doctrine and the teachings of orthodox Christianity. Also, it attempts to bridge the divide between the Old Testament and New Testament using the interpretation of the Abrahamic blessing in the New Testament as a paradigm.

Within the Abraham narrative, there are three recognized promissory threads: promises relating to biological descendants; promises relating to land; and promises relating to the blessing of other people through or in Abraham's seed. The focus of this study is on the third thread of the promises whereby through Abraham and his seed, the Abrahamic blessing will extend to all the earth's inhabitants, as signified in Genesis 12:1-3 and expounded by Paul in Galatians 3:14.

These biblical passages are treated within the context of a theological interpretation method applied to prosperity preachers' conceptualization of the Abrahamic blessing. The theological interpretation method of biblical

interpretation employed the use of a synchronic method of biblical exegesis⁶ with the sub-methods of lexical and syntactic analysis.⁷ The basis for the theological interpretation method is that the canon of scripture is an organic whole rather than an accumulation of disparate individual texts written and edited in the course of history. Hence, the interpretation of any biblical passage must be in agreement with the whole of biblical revelation and must not contradict any part of scripture.

Scholars' Views of the Abrahamic Blessing

The views of selected scholars with respect to the blessing of Abraham are presented here. Williamson states that though it is obvious that the blessing of Abraham is more nationalistic in scope, that is, in reference to the ethnic descendants of Abraham, yet, it is also evident from other passages of scripture that this blessing is of international significance, transcending the national and territorial borders of Israel⁸ (cf. Isa. 42:1; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:4-8; 66:18-24; Jer. 33:9; Ez. 36:36; 37:28). Inferentially, ethnic Israel clearly depicted in the Bible foreshadows a new covenant people, the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:10).

Williamson further states that the blessing God promised Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is in two segments. In the first segment (vs. 1-2a), Abraham is to be the recipient of the blessing. And it indicates that Abraham will be blessed, become a great nation, and have a great name. These have been termed as promises relating to nationhood.⁹ However, the second segment (vs. 2b-3) shows that Abraham is to be the mediator of the blessing to others. This has been termed as a promise relating to international blessing and international community.¹⁰ For Alexander, the promise that Abraham will become a great nation must be understood as being subservient to God's principal desire to bless all the families of the earth.¹¹

In Johnston's opinion, the new covenant blessings are the ultimate fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant promise of blessing. The new covenant is that which restores God's people to a relationship with Yahweh. Also, Gentile believers have become co-heirs with Jewish believers in the new covenant. Besides, Paul did not relate the new covenant blessing to Gentiles to the Abrahamic blessing for the physical seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:2), but to the universal blessing for the nations (Gen. 12:3).¹² Gregg, however, hints that one popular viewpoint holds that the promises to Abraham pertain to the Jewish race as the "seed" of Abraham and that their ultimate fulfilment awaits the millennial kingdom after the future return of Christ. So, Christians should recognize a special status of national or ethnic Israel and "bless" them by giving them their unconditional political, economic, and moral support.¹³

On his part, Kwon asserts that the promise of blessing that God gave to Abraham and his seed was the promise that God would bless the Gentiles through Abraham, which was effectively fulfilled when God bestowed the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles who were *ἐκ πίστεως* (Gal. 3:8).¹⁴ According

to Kwon, a survey of most commentaries on this passage shows that many scholars agree that the blessing of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:14), as the initial gift of the new life in Christ, is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham.¹⁵

More importantly, the blessing component of the Abrahamic covenant is understood by many scholars as being fulfilled in redemptive terms, and not a guarantee of material abundance or financial prosperity. In essence, Christians who are Gentiles (non-Jews) have inherited the universal blessing aspect of the covenant, which is being redeemed, without having to become Jews, or becoming subject to the law. Thus, the Abrahamic blessing is primarily soteriological rather than material or financial.¹⁶

Interpreting Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3 NLT).

In this biblical passage, God asked Abraham to leave the settled world of the post – Babel nations and begin a pilgrimage with God to a more prosperous world which was of God's making. This new relationship between God and Abraham was one that had the consequences of blessings for Abraham, his physical descendants, and for others. According to Westermann, there is a progression in the promise God gave to Abraham. In verse 2, the promise of blessing is made to Abraham; in verse 3(a), it goes beyond Abraham to those with whom he comes in contact; and in verse 3(b), it affects the whole of mankind. The blessing promised to Abraham accompanied him, extended to the Israel of the Monarch, and beyond that to all the families of the earth.¹⁷

Our point of emphasis in this study is on the terms "bless", "blessing", or "blessed" and "families". The terms for blessing abound in the Old Testament (OT), occurring over 600 times. These terms are related to the word meaning "to kneel", since in earlier times one would kneel to receive a blessing. In the OT, ceremonial blessings were received within the institutions of the family, society, government and religious practice¹⁸ (Gen. 14:19; 27:27-29; 49:25-26; Lev. 9:22; Deut. 10:8; 21:5; I Sam. 2:20; 2 Sam 6:18; I Kgs. 8:14, 55).

Three common themes are present in formal OT blessing. First, the greater blesses the lesser (cf. Heb. 7:6-7); second, the blessing is a sign of special favour that is intended to result in prosperity and success (Deut. 28:3-7); and third, the blessing is actually an invocation for God's blessing (Gen. 28:3). Absolutely two distinct ideas are present in the use of the term "blessing" in the OT. First, a blessing was a public declaration of a favoured status with God.

Second, the blessing endowed power for prosperity and success.¹⁹ Thus, modern versions of the Bible translate “bless” in the OT as “praise” or “extol” when it is a personal response of an individual towards God as a result of being blessed by God (Ps. 103:2).

In the Bible passage under focus, the Hebrew word for “blessing is ברכה (beracah) and that for “to bless” or “bless” is בָּרַךְ (barak). They are translated εὐλογία (*eulogia*) and εὐλογέω (*eulogeo*) respectively in the Septuagint. ברכה (beracah) does not merely signify “blessing” or “a blessing”, but also “being blessed” or “being filled with blessing”, as well as the concrete blessings which ensue, for example, good fortune and power.²⁰ As with other places in the OT, the use of “blessing” in this passage derives from the primitive belief that something material comes with the blessing. People who are blessed by the deity are not only blessed but are likewise endowed with the power to transmit such blessing.²¹ The only exception, in this context, is that it is Yahweh that possesses and dispenses the blessing.

The Greeks understood ברכה (beracah) in the passive and translated it ἐνευλογηθήσονται (“they shall confer blessing upon” or “they shall bestow blessing upon”). Because of this Greek understanding of the term, most ecclesiastical exegetes have treated God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:36 as referring to the communication of salvation which went forth from Abraham’s posterity to the nations.²² But Westermann states that scholarly exegesis of the Old Testament favoured predominantly the reflexive meaning of *beracah*. The reflexive meaning reads: “are to bless themselves in you” (Gen. 12:3b) while the passive meaning reads: “are to find blessing in you” or “so that in you they are able to gain blessing”.²³

Although, biblical scholars make a case for both the reflexive and passive meanings of Genesis 12:3b, other references outside this passage in Genesis such as Psalms 72:17a and Jeremiah 4:2 favour the reflexive meaning. As Westermann states, the reflexive translation is to be preferred because it is philologically more probable.²⁴ But it must likewise be stated that there is no opposition in context of both the reflexive and passive (or receptive) meanings of Genesis 12:3b. When the “families of the earth bless” themselves “in Abraham” (reflexive), that is, call a blessing on themselves under the invocation of his name (as in Ps. 72:17 cf. Gen. 48:20), then, it is presupposed that they receive the blessing. As Skinner puts it, “the name of Abraham will pass into a formula of benediction, because he himself and his seed will be as it were blessedness incarnate”.²⁵ Also when “the families of the earth” are connected to the “blessed Abraham”, they receive the blessing.

According to Rotenberry, there is a messianic and non-messianic interpretation of Genesis 12:1-3. With respect to the messianic interpretation of the verse, “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed...” (ASV) is understood to refer to the blessing received through Jesus the Messiah who came

of the seed of Abraham, so that truly all families of the earth were blessed through Abraham. Or that in Jesus the Messiah and the seed of Abraham, all families of the earth would avail themselves of the blessings while the non-messianic interpretation would see in the verse only that the name of Abraham (or his descendants cf. Gen. 22:18) would be used in pronouncing a blessing. In this sense, Gen. 12:3 would be understood to mean that when one “blessed himself in” or “by” Abraham, he would simply say, “God make me as Abraham”. But in the early church, the messianic interpretation was given by men such as Peter (Acts 3:25ff) and Paul (Gal. 3:8).²⁶

On the other hand, the verb for “shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3 NKJV) has a *niphal* stem, which makes the verb passive. That is, Abraham was not the active agent of blessing. Rather he was only the channel. Hence, the one who is the agent of the blessing is the “seed” of Abraham (cf. Gen. 3:7).²⁷ From the earliest indication of the reference to the Abrahamic blessing in the Old Testament, it seems the blessing resides solely within the nation of Israel who are the physical descendants of Abraham. But progressively within the Old Testament itself, the blessing is transmitted to non-Israelites who are in right relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel:

He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation (Psalm 24:4-5) and “blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord” (Jer. 17:7 NKJV).

Our attention now shifts to the use of the word “families” in Genesis 12:3. The Hebrew word for “families” is **משפחה** (*mishphāhā*). It means a clan; family connection of individuals; and could also be used in a wider sense for people, and nations.²⁸ Bowie, quoting Johannes Pederson, states that family (*mishphāhā*) is the designation of those who are of the same kind and have the same essential features.²⁹ Also, these families are subunits who make up the nations apart from the Israelite nation.³⁰ Above all, we can infer from God’s promised blessing to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that God’s promised blessing to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth.

Paul’s Interpretation of the Abrahamic Blessing in Galatians 3:13-14

In the New Testament, there are two Greek words translated as *blessed* or *bless*. These are μακαριος (*makarios*) and ευλογεω (*eulogeo*). μακαριος (*makarios*) also carries the meaning of happiness (Matt. 5:1-12; Lk. 6:20-23; Rom. 4:6-8) and εύλογέω (*eulogeo*) focuses more on good words or the good report that others give of someone and also describes the blessing that we say over our food (Matt. 26:20). It is from *eulogeo* that we get the English word

eulogy. In a general sense in the New Testament, the terms for blessing are used to designate that one is favoured by God (Mk 11:9-10; 10:13-16; Lk 1:42, 47; 24:50; Jn. 20:29; Jam. 1:12; 5:11). However, in the New Testament, the emphasis is more on the spiritual rather than on physical or material blessings.³¹

In Galatians 3:13-14, Paul states:

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree; that the *blessing of Abraham* might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ that we might receive the promise of the spirit through faith (KJV; italics added).

The promise that “all peoples on earth shall be blessed” through Abraham (Gen. 12:3) is said to be fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ, (cf. Rom. 4:6-9; Eph. 1:3). We understand from the biblical records that Israel was chosen by God to become a light to the Gentiles (non-Israelites). The emergence of a universal family in God came into clear and final light in Jesus Christ who died to be the saviour of, not only a nation, but that of all nations (cf. Acts 17:26).

The understanding of the “blessing of Abraham” from Paul’s perspective is connected to his mention of the *seed* in Galatians 3:16. Paul’s understanding of *seed* contradicts the Jewish nationalistic interpretation of this term. Jews were convinced that the term is same as the rabbinic practice of exegesis which understood the term *seed* as a specific singular referring to an individual such as Isaac, David or Solomon.³² But Paul’s interpretation is based on his conviction that Jesus Christ is the sole heir and channel of God’s promised blessing. So, although, he uses common Jewish methods of exegesis, Paul’s messianic interpretation of *seed* restricts the reference to Christ and negates the common nationalistic interpretation. Therefore, being a recipient of the promised blessing is to be in Christ and not necessarily to be in the Jewish nation. And in Galatians 3:29, Paul’s usage of *seed* is no longer on its singularity as in verse 16, but that Christ, the one seed of Abraham, includes within himself a new community of believers (Jews & Gentiles) where there are no racial, gender or social divisions.³³ God’s people are now identified by their union with Christ and not along ethnic lines.

This interpretation is in line with the common New Testament understanding of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah.³⁴ By implication, all non-Israelites will enjoy the blessing which Abraham possessed during his lifetime of relationship with Yahweh by their connection to Christ and not by blood relationship with Abraham. This blessing cannot be that of material wealth because Abraham already possessed this before entering into a covenant relationship with God (see Gen. 12:4-5).

Prior to Galatians, Paul had used the term “blessing” in 1 Corinthians 10:16 (KJV) liturgically; in Romans 16:16 (KJV), he used it as the word meant in secular Greek – “fine speaking”; and in 2 Corinthians 9:5 (in KJV), he calls the

collection for the Jerusalem church a “blessing”, which includes the Old Testament sense of generosity or abundance in gifts. In Galatians 3:14, Paul used the Greek word εὐλογία for “blessing”. εὐλογία and its verb εὐλογέω are New Testament words that do not take their meaning from secular Greek but from the renderings of Hebrew words which acquired their religious significance in the Old Testament and other Jewish writings.³⁵ Literally, εὐ λέγειν means, both in form and content “to speak well” either in the sense of “to speak finely” or “to speak well of someone”, and can also mean “to praise”, “to extol”, or “to eulogise”.³⁶ In the classical world, the concept of “blessing” had no specific terminology. ολβος is used to signify the good fortune that the gods wish on men and all that is necessary to well-being.³⁷

But Paul’s usage of εὐλογία (blessing) in Galatians 3 is in the context of the doctrine of justification, which is a Christological usage.³⁸ For Paul, as Watson asserts, the blessing of Abraham is in relation to the God who blesses, hence, the blessing of Abraham is to be found in his relationship with God, not in the possession of material things. And according to Galatians 3:13-14, the promise of the blessing in Genesis 12:3 has now become realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁹

Moreover, in Galatians 3:14a, the reference to the “blessing of Abraham” is in the singular and not “blessings of Abraham”. This blessing is referred to in Galatians 3:14b as the blessing of the Holy Spirit, which is the seal of redemption upon the redeemed (cf. Eph. 2:18). As a matter of fact, the Holy Spirit was the singular legacy that Jesus bequeathed to his disciples when he left for heaven (Jn. 15:29; Acts 1:8). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the person that connects a believer into a working relationship with God in spite of age, race, gender and qualifications (Lk. 11:13; Rom. 8:16, 23; Eph. 1:13; 2 Cor. 5:5; I Jn. 3:24; 4:13).

Theological Interpretation of the Abrahamic Blessing

The blessing of Abraham is primarily redemptive in realization, as opposed to a guaranteed material and financial prosperity. This has been validated by such New Testament passages like Romans 11:17-24 and Galatians 3:7-9. The blessing inference shows that the privilege of having a Father-Son relationship, referred to as the *New Covenant* which was once available only to Israel (Jews), is now available to Gentiles (non-Israelites).⁴⁰ God’s promise to bless Abraham and the families of the earth through him is amplified in the *New Covenant* as recorded in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Heb. 8:7-13). This has nothing to do with material or financial abundance. It is the blessing of a people connected to God as his people, enjoying a place of fellowship and communing with God as Israel the descendant of Abraham enjoyed. As Pitchford asserts:

The blessing of Abraham comes to nations because they are in Christ, Christ is the seed of Abraham; therefore, if we are in Christ, we too are the seeds of Abraham by virtue of our

relationship in Christ. We, not ethnic Jews or Arabs, are Abraham's true children and heirs.⁴¹

To properly situate the "blessing of Abraham" in Galatians 3:14, we have to allude to verses 6 and 9:

In the same way, Abraham believed God and God counted him as righteous because of his faith... so all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith (NLT).

The emphasis here is on ὁ πιστοῦς Ἀβραάμ³ (the faith of Abraham); the Gentiles will be blessed "in the believing Abraham". That is, the "believing" Gentiles are blessed "together with" (σύν) the "believing" Abraham.⁴² "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal. 3:9 NIV). Just as Abraham was blessed by his faith, the Gentiles will also be blessed by the same faith. In essence, Paul's argument is to prove that the Gentiles are indeed part of God's original plan of salvation.

McAvoy writes that by implication, Galatians 3:14 indicates that the Gentiles were to receive Abraham's blessing in Jesus Christ, who is the offspring of Abraham, and the blessing is that of being justified through faith.⁴³ In this way, according to Fung, Christ's coming opened to the Gentiles the door of faith and of justification through faith apart from the works of the law. And the blessing of Abraham, which has been revealed in Jesus Christ, is revealed in the gift of the promised Holy Spirit.⁴⁴

Therefore, in interpreting Galatians 3:14 as the promise of Christians inheriting the blessings of Abraham, prosperity preachers ignore the second half of the verse which reads, "... that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (KJV) or "... so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith" (NLT). Thus, Paul, in this verse, was reminding the Galatians of the spiritual blessing of salvation and not material or financial blessing. Moreover, Abraham was already materially wealthy even before God called him and made a covenant with him in Genesis 12:

So Abram departed as the Lord had instructed, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, *and all his wealth* – his livestock and all the people he had taken into his household at Haran – and headed for the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:4-5 NLT emphasis added).

So, from Paul's perspective, the promise of Abraham dealing with those outside of his race (the Gentiles) only finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his work. The content of this promise is nothing less than the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the distinguishing mark of the child of God, who is now in relationship

with God.⁴⁵ In other words, the blessing of Abraham is that of sonship to God through Jesus Christ by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit as the believer is now identified as the true seed of Abraham.

Conclusion

In the Old Testament, the blessings of God were physical, earthly and temporal whereas in the New Testament the blessings of God were spiritual, heavenly, and eternal. The context (Gal. 3:7-29) where Paul refers to the Abrahamic blessing is in the context of discussing justification by faith. The discussion has nothing to do with the blessing of financial and material blessing contingent upon redemption as accomplished by the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Also, when the theological interpretive method of biblical interpretation was applied to Genesis 12:1-3, where the promise of blessing for Abraham's seed was made by God and Galatians 3:13-16, where Paul enumerated the New Testament's perspective of the Abrahamic blessing, it is evident that the Abrahamic blessing is not financial and material prosperity but the extension of salvation to non-Israelites through Jesus Christ and son ship by the same token.

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