

Progressive Covenantalism:
Charting a Course between
Dispensational and Covenantal
Theologies



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by

Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E.
Parker

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To Kandace Parker

Whose constant support, encouragement, submissive spirit, and love
reflect the gospel of Christ and the blessings of the new covenant.

Proverbs 31:10–11

To Joel, Justin, Joshua, Janae, and Jessica Wellum

All of you are truly God's gracious gifts to me. May you know, love,
and serve our glorious, triune covenant Lord all the days of your life.
May he be your portion and delight, and may you stand firm without
compromise for the truth of the gospel in challenging times.

Ephesians 1:15–23



CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgments | ix |
| Abbreviations | xi |
| Introduction | 1 |
| <i>Stephen J. Wellum with Brent E. Parker</i> | |
| 1. Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in Old Testament Perspective | 7 |
| <i>Jason S. DeRouchie</i> | |
| 2. The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship | 39 |
| <i>Brent E. Parker</i> | |
| 3. The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ | 69 |
| <i>Jason C. Meyer</i> | |
| 4. Covenantal Life with God from Eden to Holy City | 101 |
| <i>Ardel B. Caneday</i> | |
| 5. Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant | 127 |
| <i>John D. Meade</i> | |
| 6. Good-bye and Hello: The Sabbath Command for New Covenant Believers | 159 |
| <i>Thomas R. Schreiner</i> | |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 7. The Warning Passages of Hebrews and the New Covenant Community <i>Christopher W. Cowan</i> | 189 |
| 8. Progressive Covenantalism and Ethics <i>Stephen J. Wellum</i> | 215 |
| 9. The Dispensational Appeal to Romans 11 and the Nature of Israel's Future Salvation <i>Richard Lucas</i> | 235 |
| 10. The Land Promise Biblically and Theologically Understood <i>Oren R. Martin</i> | 255 |
| Contributors | 275 |
| Name Index | 277 |
| Subject Index | 281 |
| Scripture Index | 285 |

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The current and prominent evangelical systems of theology broadly fall within the streams of covenant theology and dispensationalism. However, a growing number of biblical exegetes and theologians believe these two dominant systems, as helpful as they are, need careful revision in light of Scripture. “Always reforming” is necessary as we seek to bring all of our thoughts captive to God’s Word, but we also realize that when treasured theological systems are questioned, resistance is often experienced. As a result, we appreciate and are grateful that B&H Academic has given us the opportunity to articulate an alternative theological viewpoint—Progressive Covenantalism—which seeks to tweak the reigning systems of theology at some key points. Specifically we are thankful for Andreas Köstenberger and Jim Baird who listened to our proposal and were willing to publish this work. Their confidence and support of our work has been an encouragement to us and to each of the contributors. In addition, the support and help from the project team, especially Chris Cowan and Chris Thompson, have been indispensable. We are thankful for your support and hard work in making this project possible.

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I (Brent) would also like to express gratitude to my wife Kandace, to whom this book is dedicated, for being an invaluable helpmate on this project. She thoughtfully read the manuscripts and offered helpful suggestions

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Our prayer is that this book will be accepted in an irenic spirit and not be received as combative for our brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree. Questioning our theological systems is not easy, and we pray that our readers (and ourselves!) will always be open to re-thinking our views in light of Scripture. We look forward to ongoing discussion with those who disagree with us, as we seek to bring our minds and hearts captive to the whole counsel of God. Even more, our earnest prayer is that this book will edify the church and bring much glory and honor to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Stephen J. Wellum
Brent E. Parker

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------|---|
| AB | Anchor Bible |
| BAR | <i>Biblical Archaeologist Review</i> |
| BBR | <i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i> |
| BDAG | Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gringrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. |
| BECNT | Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament |
| <i>Bib</i> | <i>Biblica</i> |
| <i>BibSac</i> | <i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i> |
| <i>BJRL</i> | <i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i> |
| BNTC | Black's New Testament Commentary |
| <i>BRev</i> | <i>Bible Review</i> |
| BST | The Bible Speaks Today |
| BTNT | Biblical Theology of the New Testament |
| CTR | <i>Criswell Theological Review</i> |
| DOTP | <i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch</i> . Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003. |
| DOTPR | <i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets</i> . Edited by Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012. |

- DPL *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995.
- EBS Encountering Biblical Studies
- EDNT *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by H. Balz, G. Schneider. 3 vols. English translation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–1993.
- ERE *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*. Edited by James Hastings. 13 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908–1926.
- EV English version
- EvQ *Evangelical Quarterly*
- GKC *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910.
- GTJ *Grace Theological Journal*
- HAR *Hebrew Annual Review*
- HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible
- ICC International Critical Commentary
- JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- JETS *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JSNT *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
- JSNTSup Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
- JSOT *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
- JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
- LXX Septuagint
- MJT *Midwestern Journal of Theology*
- NAC New American Commentary
- NDBT *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by B. S. Rosner, T. D. Alexander, G. Goldsworthy, and D. A. Carson. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004.
- NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament
- NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament

- NIDOTTE *New International Commentary on the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
- NIGTC New International Greek Testament Commentary
- NovT *Novum Testamentum*
- NSBT New Studies in Biblical Theology
- NTS *New Testament Studies*
- PNTC Pillar New Testament Commentaries
- RB *Revue biblique*
- RBTR *Reformed Baptist Theological Review*
- RTR *Reformed Theological Review*
- SBJT *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*
- SNTSMS Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
- STR *Southeastern Theological Review*
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
- TDOT *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Translated by John T. Willis, David E. Green, and Douglas W. Stott. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006.
- TMSJ *The Masters Seminary Journal*
- TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
- TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
- TrinJ *Trinity Journal*
- TynBul *Tyndale Bulletin*
- UBCS Understanding the Bible Commentary Series
- VT *Vetus Testamentum*
- WBC World Biblical Commentary
- WTJ *Westminster Theological Journal*
- WUNT Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
- ZECNT Zondervan Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament
- ZTK *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*



Introduction

STEPHEN J. WELLUM WITH BRENT E. PARKER

From the beginning the church has wrestled with how to put together the biblical covenants and understand the nature of fulfillment in Christ Jesus our Lord. In fact, it is impossible to understand many of the early church's struggles apart from covenantal debates. For example, think about the debate regarding the Jew-Gentile relationship in the church (Matt 22:1–14; Acts 10–11; Romans 9–11; Eph 2:11–22; 3:1–13), the Judaizers' false covenant theology (Galatians 2–4), the need for the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the strong and weak debate (Romans 14–15), and the question of how Christians ought to relate to the Mosaic law (Matt 5–7; 15:1–20; Acts 7; Romans 4; Hebrews 7–10). All of these debates are simply the wrestling with the larger debate regarding the relationship between the covenants, specifically the old and new covenants.

Today, especially within evangelical theology, this debate continues unabated as represented by the two dominant biblical-theological systems of dispensational and covenant theology (and their varieties). Although these two views agree on many areas central to the gospel, they differ on their respective understanding of the nature and interrelationship of the biblical covenants. On these points of disagreement, there is still much division, especially on questions of how the Mosaic law applies to Christians

today, the Israel-church relationship, and the various entailments of these discussions for ecclesiology and eschatology. In this ongoing discussion a consensus seems difficult to reach, especially if one remains within the confines of the two views.

In recent years a number of people have sensed the need for a mediating position on these debates, especially arising from the discipline of biblical theology.¹ This is why Peter Gentry and I wrote *Kingdom Through Covenant (KTC)*² in which we proposed a slightly different way of thinking through the narrative plot structure of the Bible in contrast to the current views. Although we have benefited much from dispensational and covenant theology, we were also convinced an alternative view was needed to resolve some of these disputes.

We labelled our view *progressive covenantalism* (PC) to distinguish it from various alternatives. *Progressive* seeks to underscore the unfolding nature of God's revelation over time, while *covenantalism* emphasizes that God's plan unfolds *through* the covenants and that *all* of the covenants find their fulfillment, *telos*, and terminus in Christ. We strongly argue for the *unity* of God's plan-promise culminating in the new covenant. Our focus on the new covenant is *not* to exclude the other covenants since in God's plan each covenant is significant. In order to discern that significance, each covenant must be placed in its own covenantal location and then placed in terms of what covenant(s) preceded it and follow it before we can rightly discern how God's entire plan is fulfilled in Christ. By doing this, we interpret Scripture on its own terms *and* discover God's glorious plan unveiled before our eyes. We learn how in Christ all of God's promises are yes and amen (2 Cor 1:20).

In *KTC* we said that our view was a subset of *New Covenant Theology* (NCT), but we did not prefer that label, hence the reason for the title of this present work. Even though we respect many who are identified with

¹ See especially the multivolume works in the *New Studies of Biblical Theology*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity).

² Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

NCT, our hesitation to use the label was because we were not in full agreement with the diverse views fitting under its banner.³ For example, some in NCT reject a creation covenant, Christ's active obedience and imputation of righteousness, and hold little instructive place for the Mosaic law in the church's life—all points we reject.⁴ In addition some distinguish the old and new covenants merely in terms of the categories of external and internal, or that the old covenant was not gracious, or follow the "unconditional-conditional" covenantal distinction—all ideas we cannot endorse.⁵ Yet some who embrace NCT also resonate with our proposal, although we prefer to use the "progressive covenantal" label.⁶

When *KTC* was written, we only scratched the surface of the debate. In one volume it was impossible to say everything—which many of our critics were quick to point out, although few critical reviews actually engaged the argument of the book.⁷ In fact, in a number of reviews it was hard to

³ For some examples of helpful NCT, see Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002); John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998); A. Blake White, *The Newness of the New Covenant* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2007).

⁴ See, e.g., Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006).

⁵ For the "unconditional-conditional" distinction as a way of distinguishing the covenants, see Fred Zaspel's evaluation of *KTC* at <http://www.credomag.com/2012/11/26/some-reflections-on-kingdom-through-covenant>.

⁶ See Gary D. Long, *New Covenant Theology: Time for a More Accurate Way* (n.p.: Gary D. Long, 2013); A. Blake White, *What Is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), and in many areas, Fred Zaspel.

⁷ For a helpful review from a sympathetic critic, see Douglas Moo at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-douglas-moo>. For two dispensationalist critiques of *KTC*, see Darrell Bock at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-darrell-bock>, and Michael J. Vlach, "Have They Found a Better Way? An Analysis of Gentry and Wellum's, *Kingdom Through Covenant*," *TMSJ* 24 (2013): 5–24. For two covenant theology's critique of *KTC*, see Michael Horton at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-michael-horton>, and Jonathan M. Brack and Jared S. Oliphint, "Questioning the Progress in Progressive Covenantalism: A Review of Gentry and Wellum's *Kingdom Through Covenant*," *WTJ* 76 (2014): 189–217. Not surprisingly, in the dispensational and covenant critiques, each view retreated to their theological system without directly engaging the arguments of *KTC*. In a similar way, from

recognize the actual book we had written; nevertheless we knew a follow-up book was necessary to unpack some of the points left underdeveloped or not discussed.

This present work is a continuation of *KTC*. Its purpose is to develop the overall view in more detail and depth. It is not the final word, but it is an attempt to continue the conversation on these important matters. All of the authors work from within the basic view of PC although not everyone agrees on every point. On certain doctrinal matters we do not take a position. For example on the millennium, PC advocates can accept historic premillennialism or amillennialism, yet all the authors are united in their rejection of a dispensational understanding of the land promise to national Israel “apart” from Gentile Christians. Or, with regard to a text such as Romans 9:11, people within our view may differ, yet all agree that this text does not demand a dispensational interpretation.

In the ten chapters which follow, chapters 1–4 are general essays which discuss various topics crucial to putting together the biblical covenants. They continue to develop progressive covenantalism in relation to dispensationalism and covenant theology and show key similarities and differences.

In chapter 1, Jason DeRouchie presents an engaging discussion concerning the meaning of the “seed of Abraham” and how this theme is developed from the Abrahamic covenant across the OT and brought to fulfillment in the NT. By doing so, he provides further exegetical warrant *in the OT* to new covenant ecclesiology in contrast to dispensational and covenant theology.

In chapter 2, Brent Parker turns to the much debated relationship of Israel-Christ-church. Dispensational theology tends to separate Israel and the church, while covenant theology tends to flatten the one into the other. Parker demonstrates that through the covenants, the proper relationship

the 1689 Reformed Baptist side, Samuel Renihan, “Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants: A Review Article,” *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* (2014): 153–76, also does not engage the argument of the book, wrongly assumes we deny the covenant of grace (because we do not say it the way he does), employs the tripartite division of the Mosaic law without grabbing with the problems with this understanding, and thus argues for the ongoing application of the Sabbath.

is Israel to Christ and then to the church, so that in Christ not only is Adam's role fulfilled but so is Israel's role. In Christ the identity, vocation, and prophesied roles of corporate Israel are fulfilled, and thus nothing is left outstanding for national Israel apart from Christ.

In chapters 3–4, Jason Meyer contrasts progressive covenantalism to dispensational and covenant theology's understanding of the Mosaic law and its relationship to the new covenant, while Ardel Caneday rounds out our initial essays by showing the unconditional-conditional distinction of the covenants is incorrect and unnecessary.

In the next four chapters (chaps. 5–8), specific issues related to covenant theology are discussed and developed. In chapter 5, John Meade discusses the issue of circumcision with specific focus on its meaning in its covenantal location and its typological development through the covenants. He argues that circumcision of the flesh marked one out for service to God, but in the OT this sign did not truly equal the thing signified in the life of the old covenant people of God. This sign of circumcision was also a type, foreshadowing a heart circumcision, which would bring about the devotion to God signified by the sign. As such, heart circumcision has become the sign for all members of the new covenant who are true Jews in God's kingdom. Baptism, therefore, is not a fulfillment or replacement of circumcision in the flesh, but rather it is an external sign or testimony to the heart circumcision of the member of the new covenant. As a result, it should not be applied to anyone who has not undergone the circumcision of the heart and who has not repented of sin and believed and confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In chapter 6, Tom Schreiner investigates the contentious issue of the Sabbath. He rejects covenant theology's tripartite distinction of the law and lays out how progressive covenantalism views the Sabbath in light of Christ and contends that the Sabbath command is not required for new covenant believers.

In chapter 7, Chris Cowan critiques one of covenant theology's main arguments for their mixed view of the church, that is, the warning passages of Scripture. By these warning texts, covenant theology insists that there are nonelect members of the new covenant who will commit apostasy. Cowan

rejects this interpretation by providing a critique of their arguments and an alternative view which better accounts for the biblical data.

In chapter 8, I wrestle with how new covenant believers apply the whole Bible as our ethical standard. I also reject covenant theology's tripartite division of the law and demonstrate how a progressive covenantal view seeks to determine what the moral law is and thus establish the biblical norm for doing ethics.

In the last two chapters (chaps. 9–10), specific issues related to dispensational theology are discussed and developed. In chapter 9, Richard Lucas analyses the dispensational appeal to Romans 11 to warrant their view of national Israel in the millennium. Lucas argues that their view is not justified from this text, especially when it comes to reading in a future *restoration* of Israel since none of these “restoration” features of Israel are explicitly mentioned in Romans 11. Arguments for their view will have to be found elsewhere, but they are not in Romans 11.

In chapter 10, Oren Martin critiques the dispensational argument that the OT land promise must be fulfilled by national Israel in the millennial age. He argues that this view does not do justice to the biblical story line. Instead, the land promised to Abraham begins the process of recapturing and advancing what was lost in Eden and will not be fulfilled until a “new Eden” is regained in the new creation.

It is our sincere desire that this book will contribute to our understanding of Scripture, continue the conversation between differing theological viewpoints, with the goal of resolving those differences that separate us. It is not enough to affirm the authority of Scripture; we must also seek rightly to handle the Word of truth and bring our entire thought captive to it and to Christ. Ultimately our desire is to give glory to our great triune God for his glorious plan of redemption, which we are the beneficiaries of by his sovereign grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.

CHAPTER 1

Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective

JASON S. DEROUCHIE

Jews and Gentiles as “the Seed of Abraham”

Paul refers to *both* Jews and Gentiles in Christ as Abraham’s “seed” [σπέρμα].¹ This is clear in Galatians 3:28–29 where he asserts: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female,

¹ *Author’s Note:* This essay is condensed from a longer study published in *JETS* 58 (2015) titled “Counting Stars with Abraham and the Prophets: New Covenant Ecclesiology in Old Testament Perspective.” Sections 1–5 in the present paper correspond generally to sections 1, 4, 5.2, 7, 8 in the more extended study. I am grateful to each of the editorial teams for granting the opportunity to publish both the shorter and longer versions.

The noun σπέρμα occurs 43 times in the NT, and all but seven refer to “descendants, children, posterity” (Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), s.v. “σπέρμα.”). Of these, the most predominant occurrence is to the “seed” of Abraham (22x), which refers either to Christ himself or to the whole family of God including both Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Luke 1:55; John 8:33, 37; Acts 3:25; 7:5, 6; Rom 4:13, 16, 18; 9:7[2x], 8; 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Gal 3:16[3x], 19, 29; Heb 2:16; 11:11, 18).

for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (ESV). This echoes his stress in 3:8–9 that all "those who are of faith [whether Jews or Gentiles] are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (ESV).

Similarly, citing Genesis 17:5, Paul affirms in Romans 4:16–17 that the promised inheritance "depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'" (ESV). In the next verse Paul links Abraham's fatherhood of the nations with the promise in Genesis 15:5 that the patriarch's "seed" (KJV) would be as numerous as the stars (Rom 4:18). The apostle views the Gentile Christian participation in the new covenant community as fulfilling Old Testament (OT) promises regarding the "seed" of Abraham.

Within the original OT context of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, "seed" [σπέρμα/σπέρμα] most directly designates a category of biology or ethnicity often distinguished from the "nations/Gentiles" [ἔθνη/ἔθνη]. Indeed, through the "seed" the "nations" would be blessed—God's overcoming Adam's curse and reconciling to himself some from all the families of the earth (Gen 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).²

How then can Paul in Romans 4:18 link Abraham's fatherhood of many nations (Gen 17:5) with the promise that his "offspring" (ESV) would be as numerous as the stars (15:5)? Genesis 15:5 appears to address most immediately only *natural* "seed": "Please look to the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them. . . . So shall your offspring be."³ Within Genesis 15, the "seed" promise specifically answers the dilemma raised by Abram's assertion that Eliezer of Damascus is his heir but not his "seed." God stresses that the "offspring" that would "come from your loins" (15:4)⁴ would inherit the land (15:13, 18). Also, Abram's struggle here is directly

² Cf. Gen 12:3; 18:18; Jer 4:2; Ps 72:17; Acts 3:25; Gal 3:16.

³ So too G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 430.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture translations are mine.

associated with the earlier parallel promise that his “seed” would become like “the dust of the earth” and claim the land (13:16; cf. 22:17; Heb 11:12).

Genesis associates the “seed” promise most immediately with the patriarch’s *natural* descendants, a select group of whom would inherit the promised land (e.g., Gen 28:13–14). Elsewhere, references to the “stars” and “dust” focus on the promise of land and to the old covenant nation of Israel (Exod 32:13; Deut 1:10; 10:22; Neh 9:23)—the land that would be lost and the nation that would dwindle to a small remnant through the curse of exile (Deut 28:62; cf. Isa 48:18–19). Furthermore, later OT texts, especially from Esther and Ezra–Nehemiah, explicitly restrict “seed” language to biological lineage when associated with the old covenant age.

Nevertheless, Genesis itself and several OT prophetic texts anticipate the expansion of “the seed of Abraham” to include those redeemed from both ethnic Israel and the nations during the eschatological age of the Messiah. As Paul recognizes, including “nations/Gentiles” among the “seed” (Rom 4:16–18 ESV) fulfills a new covenant eschatological hope that is associated directly with the representative saving work of the promised royal deliverer, Messiah Jesus (Gal 3:8, 14, 16, 29).⁵

This chapter considers some OT roots to new covenant ecclesiology, specifically from the perspective of the language of “seed.”⁶ Space constraints have required focusing principally on two texts: Genesis 17 and portions of Isaiah. Following a synthesis of the argument and an assessment of Paul’s use of the OT, the final segment of this paper will unpack the implications of the study for new covenant ecclesiology, arguing for the

⁵ For more on this, see Jason S. DeRouchie and Jason C. Meyer, “Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise? An Evaluation of N. T. Wright on Galatians 3:16,” *SBJT* 14 (2010): 36–48, esp. 40–43.

⁶ G. K. Beale provides a broader, helpful overview of the OT data concerning the latter-day true Israel including a remnant from the nations (*A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 656–65). For other overviews of the “seed” data that support the schema of progressive covenantalism, see John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds: A Biblical Examination of the Presuppositions of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998); Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 632–33, 696.

legitimacy of a progressive covenantal framework in contrast to the systems of dispensational and covenant theologies.

Abraham, Father of a Multitude of Nations

I have already noted how Paul applies Genesis 17:5 to Jews *and* Gentiles in Christ (Rom 4:17). With this, Paul most likely cites Genesis 17:8 when he states in Galatians 3:16, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your seed,’ who is Christ.”⁷ These references demand a closer look at Genesis 17.

Abraham’s Fatherhood—by Nature or Adoption?

In Genesis 17:5, Yahweh changes the patriarch’s name from *Abram* “exalted father” to *Abraham* “father of a multitude” (ESV), highlighting his revealed destiny (cf. Gen 4:1, 25; 5:29; 16:15).⁸ Specifically, God would make Abraham “the *father* of a multitude of *nations*” (17:4–5 ESV), the fulfillment which Paul identifies, “In you [Abraham] shall all the nations be blessed” (Gal 3:8 ESV).⁹ Yahweh further promised, “I will give you for nations, and kings will come from you” (17:6), and then he reiterated the same proclamation with respect to Sarah (17:16). Similar promises were reiterated to

⁷ DeRouchie and Meyer write (“Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise?” 38): “The reference in Gal 3:16 to plural ‘promises . . . made to Abraham and to his offspring’ immediately sends us back to Genesis suggesting the likelihood of multiple promise texts in Paul’s mind. The inclusion of the conjunction in the phrase ‘καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου’ implies that Paul is indeed *quoting* Gen 13:15; 17:8; and/or 24:7—the only texts in the LXX of Genesis that include the entire phrase and addresses Abraham. In our view, the most likely candidate of these three is 17:8, for the mention of Abra(ha)m becoming ‘the father of a multitude of nations’ in the immediate literary context anticipates the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God—one of the key issues at stake in Galatians 3.”

⁸ So Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 21.

⁹ See also Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; cf. 12:3; 28:14.

Jacob: “A nation and a company of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your loins” (35:11; cf. 48:4).

Two observations suggest that the paternal language used in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’s relationship to the nations connotes a family tie that is *not* restricted to or perhaps even associated with biological descent. First, throughout the OT, the plural form “nations” [גוֹיִם] most commonly refers to political entities larger than tribes and usually not including Israel.¹⁰ As such, because the promise to Sarah that “she shall become nations” (17:16 ESV) most likely reiterates the parental promise made to Abraham (17:6) and because two nations (Israel through Jacob and Edom through Esau) seem far from the “multitude” promised, the parenthood to which Gen 17:4–6, 16 refer most likely points to a nonbiological relationship of authority.¹¹ Second, while the Ishmaelites, Edomites, Midianites, and several other peoples mentioned in the genealogy lists of Genesis 25 and 36

¹⁰ On my count, of the 504 instances of גוֹיִם in the Hebrew OT, only 53 refer to what would become known as Israel (= 10.52%; see Gen 12:2; 18:18; 35:11; 46:3; Exod 19:6; 33:13; Deut 26:5; 32:28; Josh 3:17; 5:6, 8; 10:13; Judg 2:20; 2 Sam 7:23; Isa 1:4; 9:3; 10:6; 26:2, 15; 49:7; 58:2; Jer 2:11; 5:9, 29; 7:28; 9:8[9]; 31:36; 33:24; Ezek 2:3; 36:13–14; 37:22; Mic 4:7; Zeph 2:1, 9; Hag 2:14; Mal 3:9; Pss 33:12; 43:1; 83:4; 106:5; 1 Chr 17:21; 2 Chr 15:6). If one only treats the 108 singular instances, 52 point to Israel (48.15%). Ezek 2:3 is the only occurrence of plural גוֹיִם referring to Israel’s “tribes” and not “nations,” unless the plural references in the Abrahamic promises also point only to Israel and not the Gentiles (see Gen 17:4–6, 16; 35:11; 48:19), which seems unlikely in light of the contrast of Israel with the “nations” in these contexts (see 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) (cf. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 381; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, AB [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983], 63). For a discussion of these texts that shows how unlikely it is that גוֹיִם refers to Israel’s “tribes,” see Chee-Chiew Lee, “גוֹיִם [sic] in Genesis 35:11 and the Abrahamic Promise of Blessing for the Nations,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 468–70.

¹¹ Cf. W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1984), 73; T. Desmond Alexander, “Abraham Re-Assessed Theologically: The Abraham Narrative and the New Testament Understanding of Justification by Faith,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, ed. R. Hess et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 17–18; idem, “Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings: Their Importance for Biblical Theology,” *TynBul* 49 (1998): 200–201; Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 210.

biologically derived from Abraham, only the one nation of Israel is known to have descended from Jacob.¹² Consequently, the fact that Jacob is to bring forth a “company of nations” suggests his “family” is larger than Israel and will include some adopted from other nations. T. Desmond Alexander’s explains the fact that Genesis 35:11 distinguishes between a “nation” and a “company of nations” seems to imply that “whereas many nations will be closely associated with [Jacob], only one nation will be directly descended from him.”¹³

Abraham’s paternal relationship over the nations is principally an elected rather than a formal/biological association.¹⁴ This more figurative use of “father” language parallels the ancient world’s use of the term for various authoritative or shepherding social roles, whether advisor (Gen 45:18), priest (Judg 18:19), king (1 Sam 24:11), master (2 Kgs 2:12; 5:13), prophet (2 Kgs 6:21), governor (Isa 22:20–21), or legal protector (Job 29:12–16).¹⁵ Perhaps most significant is the designation of kings as “fathers” of their vassal peoples (cf. 1 Sam 24:11, 16).¹⁶ While Abraham himself is never called a king in the Hebrew text, numerous textual pointers both in and outside

¹² Along with the nation of Israel, the nations that biologically derive through Abraham come from the descendants of Ishmael (Gen 25:12–18), the descendants of Abraham’s concubine Keturah (25:1–5), and the descendants of Esau (36:1–19, 31–43).

¹³ Alexander, “Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings,” 201n22.

¹⁴ Paul R. Williamson has further observed that in every other place where the construction found in Gen 17:4 occurs (i.e., the inseparable preposition לְ + the noun אָב in a resultative sense), a nonphysical concept of fatherhood is always in view (*Abraham, Israel, and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis*, JSOTSup 315 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 158–60; idem, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Promise*, NSBT 23 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007], 88).

¹⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, “אָב,” in *NIDOTTE*, 1:221; cf. Helmer Ringgren, “אָב ‘abh,’” in *TDOT*, 1:1–19. See also Alexander, “Abraham Re-Assessed Theologically,” 17–18; idem, “Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings,” 201; Williamson, *Abraham, Israel, and the Nations*, 158–60; Lee, “גַּיִם in Genesis 35:11,” 473–74.

¹⁶ For an example in Mesopotamian literature, see Ringgren, “אָב ‘abh,’” 1:3; on the use of adoption language in covenant relationships, see Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970): 190–94.

Genesis suggest we are to view him like one.¹⁷ It seems plausible then to understand Abraham's fatherhood over the nations primarily as a royal designation by which he and his wife Sarah, the "princess" (Gen 17:15), are regarded as the founders of a new dynasty that will climax in a specific, royal descendant who will rule Israelites (both native-born and alien residents) and those from vassal nations.

The Implications of Abraham's Fatherhood

With the blood tie not determinative in Abraham's "fatherhood," his status and role, at least with all nations other than Israel, must be established on the basis of covenantal adoption. Nevertheless, while this adoption will *result from* the "covenant of circumcision" (Genesis 17), the adoption is *not into* this specific covenant in its original form, for all circumcised members of the community (whether the alien resident or the father, son, or household servant among the native born) were considered part of *one nation* later named Israel (Gen 17:12; Josh 8:33)—a nation that is here only one part of "the multitude of nations" parented or overseen by Abraham (likely through his royal representative, Gen 17:6).¹⁸

These observations give rise to at least three significant implications. First, Genesis 17 highlights the progression of two distinct covenant eras anticipated in the framework of Gen 12:1–3, where Abra(ha)m must first "go" to the land in order to become a nation (realized in the Mosaic covenant) and then once there "be a blessing" in order for all the families of the earth to be blessed (realized through Christ in the new covenant).¹⁹ The

¹⁷ For royal ideology in the Abrahamic narrative, see Ronald E. Clements, *Abraham and David* (London: SCM, 1967); E. Ruprecht, "Der traditionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund der einzelnen Elemente von Gen. 12:2–3," *VT* 29 (1979): 444–64; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 275; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 465n15; Alexander, "Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings," 205; James Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," *TynBul* 58 (2007): 266–72.

¹⁸ Cf. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 429.

¹⁹ When two imperatives are linked via the conjunction *waw* (as in Gen 12:1–2 and 17:1), the second imperative is in some way contingent on the first (captured in *GKC*

initial period is shaped by Abraham's biological descendants living in the promised land as a nation that would become known as Israel under the Mosaic covenant. They would claim the promised land, bearing the charge to heed God's voice in order to serve as mediators and displayers of God's holiness to the world (Exod 19:4–6; Deut 4:5–8). That is the initial era. Next comes the final period, the age of fulfillment, which is enjoyed only after Abraham's "seed" (realized in Jesus Messiah) serve(s) as agent(s) of curse-overcoming blessing. During this new covenant period, God would reconcile mankind, and Abraham would stand as the father of many nations—a fatherhood manifest through an earthly royal descendant who would rule over all (17:4–6; cf. 22:17b–18; 49:8, 10; Isa 9:6).

Second, at one level both the old covenant and the land promise should be treated as "eternal," for God would fulfill his purposes for the Abrahamic covenant progeny and property (Gen 17:7–8; cf. Deut 4:31). Nevertheless, at another level, the eternality is qualified by the period of fulfillment. That is, while the Abrahamic covenant is eternal, the participation and property aspects get transformed in the age of the Messiah. Genesis 17 envisions a day when Abraham's "fatherhood" will expand beyond ethnic Israelites to include the nations. The fact that God chose to use Israel as the agent of the world's deliverance will ever establish a temporal, positional distinction within the one family of Abraham (see Rom 1:16; 2:9; cf. Acts 13:46). Yet, as Paul would note, there are *natural* and *wild* branches in the tree of new covenant life (Rom 9:11–27; cf. 3:1–2; 9:4–5; Eph 2:11–22), for the promise of a global inheritance is for both Jews and Gentiles, who share "the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Rom 4:16; cf. Gal 3:18). With this, there is an implication that God's kingdom will no longer be limited to the promised land but will, like the original vision for the garden of Eden, expand to include the whole world (Gen 1:28; Matt 5:5; Rom

by the term "consequence," §110f and i), while still maintaining its imperatival force (so esp. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 230–34; cf. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 78–79, 82–84). With this, when imperatives are followed by volitional *yiqtol*s, the latter often expresses purpose (GKC §108d; Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [New York: Scribner's, 1971], §107c).

4:13),²⁰ God's blessed glory filling the earth as the waters cover the sea (Num 14:21; Hab 2:14; Ps 72:19).²¹ This kind of expansion is suggested in Gen 22:17b–18 where the unique, male deliverer will not only bless “all the nations of the earth,” but will also possess “the gate of his enemies,” claiming once-enemy territory, his kingdom expanding to fill the earth (cf. 24:60). The same expansion appears evident in 26:3–4 where, in the context of the global blessing promise, God pledges to give Isaac and his “seed” not only “the land” but also “these lands” (plural).

Third, because Abraham will oversee Israel and many nations as covenant father and because the particular male, royal descendent of Abraham alone will inaugurate the age of blessing (Gen 22:17b–18; Acts 3:25–26; Gal 3:14, 16, 29), *Genesis 17 works with 15:5 to set the stage for Paul, in a context of eschatological fulfillment in Christ, to identify Jews and Gentiles as having a place in the one family of Abraham apart from circumcision and the law that would later be associated with it.* That is, the progression from the Abrahamic and Mosaic administrations to the new covenant in Jesus answers how Paul can apply “seed” language to Christian Gentiles who never became Jewish proselytes. They are counted as “seed” only because they are identified by faith with *the* “seed, who is Christ.”²² The makeup of the new covenant community is shaped around the connection with Christ through a faith like Abraham's (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3–5). Whether Jew or Gentile, covenant membership requires adoption into Christ by faith (Rom 8:15; Gal 3:26; 4:4–5; Eph 1:5). This new covenant community stands distinct from that of the previous era because: (1) the members include elect from both ethnic Israel and many other nations of the world (Gen 17:4–5); (2) all of whom are heirs of the life-giving, barrenness-overcoming, miraculous power of God (17:21; 18:14; cf. Rom 4:19); (3) who have witnessed a pattern of faithfulness (Gen 12:2; 17:1); and (4) through this have become recipients of divine blessing (12:2–3; 22:18); and (5) who are now serving

²⁰ Cf. Eph 6:2–3; Heb 11:13–16.

²¹ See Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 81–167. Cf. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 468–70; cf. 703–16.

²² See DeRouchie and Meyer, “Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise?” 36–48, esp. 40–43. Cf. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 430.

together under a king in the line of Abraham who bears global influence and rule (17:6; 49:8, 10). All of these are features of progressive covenantalism that highlight the centrality of Christ in God's redemptive purposes.

The Servant and His “Seed” in Isaiah

While tagging Abraham as the future “father of a multitude of nations” sets the stage for non-Israelites in the age of fulfillment to be considered part of the Abrahamic “family,” we have thus far not focused on any OT texts that overtly apply the term “seed” to nonbiological descendants of Abraham (though Gen 15:5 and similar promises do so through their long-range fulfillment). The Pentateuch teaches that nonnative aliens and household slaves could become Israelites and their children would be considered the patriarch's “seed” (e.g., Rahab, Ruth, Uriah the Hittite), but this required full incorporation into the Abrahamic and (later) Mosaic covenant communities, including male circumcision and other law keeping (see Exod 12:48–49; Lev 19:34; Num 9:14).²³ A number of OT eschatological texts, especially in Isaiah, explicitly anticipate a broadening in how “seed” language is applied in the new covenant age of the Messiah.

More than any other OT prophet, Isaiah detailed the nature of the messianic age that would fulfill the Abrahamic promises of worldwide curse-destruction. Like other OT prophets (e.g., Hos 3:1–5; Zech 3:9; 12:10; 13:1; Dan 9:2, 24–27), he envisioned Israel's restoration coming in two stages, the second of which parallels the second stage of the Abrahamic covenant highlighted in Genesis 12:2–3 and 17:4–5: (1) initial physical restoration to the Promised Land (Isa 42:18–43:21) and then (2) spiritual reconciliation with God (43:22–44:23).²⁴ Stage one (liberation), later associated with Jeremiah's “seventy years” (Jer 25:11–12; 29:10), would be

²³ Cf. Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:29; Ezek 47:22. See R. J. D. Knauth, “Alien, Foreign Resident,” in *DOTP*, 26–33; cf. also G. H. Haas, “Slave, Slavery,” in *DOTP*, 778–83; K. Kuhn, “προσῆλυτος,” *TDNT*, 6:728–29.

²⁴ For the following breakdown of Isaiah, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 437–38; and Peter J. Gentry, “The Atonement in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13–53:12),” *SBJT* 12 (2007): 21–24 [20–47].

wrought by one named Cyrus (Isa 44:24–48:22; cf. 2 Chr 36:20–22). Stage two (atonement) would be secured by the royal Davidic servant (Isa 49:1–53:12) and would include blessing reaching the nations, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (stage 2). The book ends with the proclamation of such glories to Zion and the world (54:1–55:13) and the climactic vision of the new creation (56:1–66:24). Wrapped into the midst of these eschatological texts are a number of references to “seed” that help clarify Paul’s application of “offspring” language in the New Testament (NT).

The “Survivors of the Nations” as the “Seed” of Israel

It is intriguing that the assertion in Isaiah 45:25 that “in Yahweh all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and will glory” directly follows the identification of Cyrus as the agent of exilic release (45:1, 13, my translation), a comment regarding the salvation of the nations (45:14), and an extended call for “the survivors of the nations” [פְּלִיטֵי הַגּוֹיִם] to repent (45:20–24). Who are the “survivors” (45:20), and what is their relationship to the “offspring” (45:25)?

“Survivors” in 45:20 is the plural form of the masculine noun פְּלִיט and could refer to the remnant of Israelites who experienced exile. Nevertheless, elsewhere in the book the restored Jews are called “the survivors of Israel” (4:2 ESV) and “the survivors of the house of Jacob” (10:20; 37:31; cf. 37:32), all with the plural form of the feminine noun פְּלִיטָה. Furthermore, the fact that God calls “all the ends of the earth” to turn to him and be saved (45:22) suggests that the “survivors” are actually members of the nations amid which Israel was exiled. In Isaiah’s words elsewhere, “Yahweh has bared the arm of his holiness before the eyes of all the nations, and all *the ends of the earth* shall see the salvation of our God” (52:10; cf. 5:26; 24:15–16; 41:5). Similarly, though using a singular instead of a plural, Isaiah wrote of the representative messianic servant’s mission: “It is too light a thing that you [Israel] should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to *the end of the earth*” (Isa 49:6 ESV; cf. Acts 1:8;

26:23).²⁵ Though plagued in idolatry (Isa 45:20), the nations were being called to recognize the superiority and authority of Israel's God (45:15–17).

These observations are significant because, after the climaxing declaration that “to me [i.e., Yahweh] every knee will bow, every tongue will swear [allegiance]” (45:23 ISV; cf. Rom 14:11; Phil 2:10) and noting the shame that God will place on all nations that remain angry with him (Isa 45:24), verse 25 then speaks of the righteousness and praise of “the offspring of Israel.” While the point may simply be that the saving of the nations does not nullify the promises to Israel,²⁶ the prophet is more likely suggesting that in the new age of fulfillment Yahweh will consider *all* who turn to him, both from Israel and the nations, full “offspring” of the patriarchs, as if all were biological descendants of Abraham.²⁷ This latter possibility is grounded by two facts: (1) The phrase “offspring of Jacob/Israel” in 45:19 and 25 shapes an inclusio around the call for Gentile repentance, and (2) the remark about “the seed of Israel” in verse 25 (KJV) would be extremely abrupt if indeed it bore no reference to the nations just addressed.

The “Many” Becoming “Seed” Through the Servant King’s Atoning Work

Does Isaiah clarify what generates the broader application of “seed” language in the age of fulfillment? He elucidates this in the last servant song, which highlights the Davidic servant’s substitutionary atoning work (Isa 52:13–53:12). The prophet earlier highlighted that following the fires of judgment against Israel, Yahweh would cause a “holy seed” in the line of

²⁵ Here the Davidic servant is named “Israel” (Isa 49:3), who God in turn commissions to redeem a remnant from both “Israel” and the “nations” (49:5–6; cf. 42:6; 52:13–53:12). See Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 656.

²⁶ So John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 225n83.

²⁷ So F. Delitzsch, *The Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 2:231; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:218; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 176; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 356; Robert L. Hubbard Jr., “פֶּלֶט,” in *NIDOTTE*, 3:624.

David to sprout (6:13)—a royal “seed” whose kingdom would be eternal, whose life would bear fruits mirroring the likeness of God and in a new and consummate garden of Eden, and whose reign would include a remnant from every nation (6:13; 9:6–7[5–6]; 11:1–5, 10–11).²⁸ Building off this botanical imagery (6:13; 11:1), the prophet later says of Yahweh’s servant, “He grew up as a tender plant before him [i.e., Yahweh], and like a root from dry ground, neither form nor majesty was to him” (53:2). Thus the servant of Isaiah 53 is none other than the promised royal Son of David anticipated throughout the book. While he would indeed be exalted overall and enable spiritual sight and understanding to nations and their kings (52:13–15; cf. Rom 15:21), such would be accomplished only by his bearing the sins of “many” in his death so that the “many” could in turn be counted righteous (Isa 53:11–12; cf. Rom 5:18–19; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9). This righteous servant would suffer as a substitutionary guilt offering under Yahweh’s just wrath, but having fulfilled his purpose unto death, he would rise and be completely satisfied at the sight of “*his* offspring” now redeemed (Isa 53:10–11). What is the identity of the “many,” the servant’s “seed”?

Recognizably, when Isaiah speaks of redemption accomplished and applied in this unit, he regularly uses the first common plural: “And he was being pierced on account of *our* wrongdoings, being crushed on account of *our* iniquities. The chastisement that secured *our* peace was on him, and with his stripes he has secured healing for *us*” (Isa 53:5). While Isaiah was an old covenant enforcer, the “us” referred to did not include most of his Israelite peers, who were never granted ears to hear (6:9–13) and from whom the prophet’s visions were “sealed” (29:9–12; cf. 8:16). Indeed, anticipating that the rebel majority would remain unmoved at the messianic servant king’s coming, Isaiah declared, “Who has believed unto our report?” (53:1)—a passage both Jesus and Paul cite in relation to Jewish hard heartedness (John 12:37–38; Rom 10:16). Certainly the “us” included a remnant of ethnic Israelites, but at least five reasons suggest that a saved, adopted remnant from the nations is also included and is part of the “many” and the “offspring” in Isaiah 53:11–12, fulfilling the Abrahamic promises

²⁸ Cf. Jer 23:5–6; 33:14–26.

(cf. Rev 7:9). (1) The book has highlighted the international nature of the royal servant's saving work (Isa 42:1–4, 6; 49:6; 51:4–5). (2) Leading into the servant song, we are told that the age of fulfillment would include testament that “God reigns” in Zion (52:7) and a vision of “the salvation of our God” by all the nations at the ends of the earth (52:10).²⁹ (3) This servant song explicitly opens with a message of *global* salvation (52:13–15), with the mention of “kings” perhaps echoing the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 17:6, the “many” nations of Isaiah 52:14–15 paralleling the redemption of the “many” in 53:11–12, and the “sprinkling” of the nations in 52:15 highlighting direct benefit from the servant's sacrifice.³⁰ (4) Isaiah explicitly shifts from the first common plural referents (“our, we”) to the generic “many.” (5) The New Testament (NT) authors readily draw on these texts with application to all the redeemed in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Rom 4:24; 1 Pet 2:24). Significantly, Messiah Jesus neither married nor fathered physical children. His “offspring” in whom he delights (Isa 53:10), therefore, must be identified through spiritual adoption. This means the “offspring” of the new covenant community will only include the “many to be accounted righteous” in Christ (53:11 ESV). This bears significant implication for new covenant ecclesiology.

New Covenant “Seed” as the Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant

The next chapter of Isaiah supports this view of “offspring” and develops a portrait of this messianic age. The text opens: “Sing, O barren one—she did not bear! Break forth a song and cry aloud—she did not experience labor pain, but many more are the children of the desolate one than the children

²⁹ Directly following this statement in Isa 52:10 is a call to purity that Paul applies in 2 Cor 6:17 to the new covenant church. The same group of OT quotations in 2 Cor 6:18 includes the “sons and daughters” reference in Isa 43:5–6.

³⁰ Cf. J. Alec Motyer, “Stricken for the Transgressions of My People’: The Atoning Work of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 252; cf. 264–66.

of the married one!” (Isa 54:1). Here the “barren one” recalls Sarah’s barrenness (Gen 11:30), whereas “the married one” appears to point to Hagar, maidservant whom Sarah gave to Abram as wife in order to answer the “offspring” problem (16:3–4). Like Paul years later (Gal 4:21–31), what Isaiah sees in this historical account is a layer of prophetic allegory that anticipates the certain fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the new and that also foresees the new covenant’s superseding of the Mosaic covenant through the death and resurrection of the servant king.³¹

Earlier, while unpacking his message of eschatological *global* salvation (Isa 51:4–5; cf. 45:14–25), Isaiah urged any who pursued righteousness and sought Yahweh to return to their roots, looking “to the Rock [צור] from which you were hewn” and “to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you through birth pain [חיל], for as one I called him so that I might bless him and multiply him” (Isa 51:1–2). The “Rock” is probably an allusion to Deuteronomy 32:18, which designates Yahweh as the “Rock” [צור] who bore Israel through birth pain [חיל]—likely an enigmatic reference to the symbolic representative judgment Yahweh underwent in redeeming Israel from Egypt, specifically during their sixth act of rebellion (Exod 17:1–7).³² The initial call, then, is for the audience to consider the implications of divine mercy.

With this Isaiah grounds his discussion of the eschatological hope for salvation in the original patriarchal promises that Abraham’s headship over a blessed multitude would be assisted by his “princess,” matriarch Sarah (Gen

³¹ Cf. Charles H. Cosgrove, “The Law Has Given Sarah No Children (Gal. 4:21–30),” *NovT* 29 (1987): 231. For an argument that the allegory is original to Genesis itself and not simply part of prophetic interpretation, see A. B. Caneday, “Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured: ‘Which Things Are Written Allegorically’ (Galatians 4:21–31),” *SBJT* 14 (2010): 50–77; cf. Karen H. Jobes, “Jerusalem, Our Mother: Metalepsis and Intertextuality in Galatians 4:21–31,” *WTJ* 55 (1993): 317–18.

³² Jesse R. Scheumann, “A Biblical Theology of Birth Pain and the Hope of the Messiah” (ThM Thesis, Bethlehem College and Seminary, 2014), 54 with 26–29; cf. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988), 120–28. We will see that the veiled reference to Deut 32:18 in Isa 51:2 (first exodus) works with the reference in 42:14 (new exodus) to set the stage for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant promises in the new covenant age.

17:4–6, 16). Furthermore, the mention of Sarah in Isaiah 51:2 enables the prophet to use her life in chapter 54 to explain the greatest covenantal progression of the ages. For like Sarah, whose barrenness continued until there appeared to be no hope of promise fulfillment (18:13–14; cf. Rom 4:18–21; Heb 11:11–12), so too the Abrahamic covenant had extended through centuries without fulfillment (Gen 12:3; 17:4–5). Nevertheless, in calling his audience to “look to Abraham . . . and Sarah,” Isaiah reminded them of the Genesis promises and pushed them to anticipate salvation rising out of the exilic judgment. Just as Sarah in her old age did give birth to Isaac and ultimately the Israelite nation, so too the Abrahamic covenant would reach its goal: the children of the desolate one would become even more numerous than those of the rival old covenant, represented by Hagar (Isa 54:1; cf. 49:21).

In that future day the covenant community’s dwelling place (“tent”) would need to be expanded because of the family’s abounding growth—“your offspring will inherit the nations” (54:3; cf. 49:20). In light of the Abrahamic context, this phrase suggests not only the expansion of the Promised Land to include the world (see Gen 1:28; 22:17b; 26:3–4; Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13)³³ but also the fulfillment of the blessing reaching all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3; 22:18; cf. Isa 49:22–23).³⁴ Abraham will have become the father of a multitude of nations. And because the redeemed nations operate as an “inheritance,” they appear to be fully identified with and incorporated into the “offspring” of Abraham, their head (cf. Jer 3:17–18 with 4:2; 12:16; 30:8–11).

Importantly, Isaiah 54:1 notes that the generating of “offspring” in the new covenant occurs *without* labor and *without* birth pain for the covenant people: “Sing, O barren one—*she did not bear!* Break forth a song and cry aloud—*she did not experience labor pain*, but more are the children of the desolate one than the children of the married one!” (cf. 49:21). We can draw two significant implications from this, one ecclesiological and the other soteriological.

³³ Cf. Eph 6:2–3; Heb 11:13–16.

³⁴ See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 442.

First, in contrast to previous covenants, the “seed” of the new covenant are *not* physically born into covenant membership. Even Sarah ultimately experienced labor and pain at Isaac’s birth (Isa 51:2), but the “barren one’s” lack of labor and childbearing in 54:1 suggests that *spiritual adoption, not physical birth, would characterize the identity of the new children*.³⁵ The physical genealogical principle so evident in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants does *not* continue once the Abrahamic covenant reaches its fulfillment in the new, for membership is now solely conditioned on *spiritual* rebirth, generated through the sacrificial death of the servant king (53:10). While nothing in the text suggests that ethnic distinction will be eradicated in the new covenant, the wording does mean that membership will not be assumed simply because of ethnicity. Furthermore, because Abraham’s “offspring” have now been reidentified as only the servant king’s spiritual “offspring” who have thus been accounted righteous (53:10–11), Isaiah would not affirm the view of covenant theologians that an infant’s birth into a family with at least one believing parent grants the child full membership in the new covenant.

Second, because throughout Scripture labor pain is directly associated with judgment (Gen 3:16) and only rarely accompanied by hope,³⁶ the absence of birth pain in Isaiah 54:1 most likely means that the judgment through which new covenant salvation is birthed was borne by another—namely, the servant king of the previous chapter (Isa 52:13–53:12), whose sacrificial death would satisfy God’s wrath against the people and display the curse-bearing mercy of God himself.

That the royal servant’s substitutionary atonement described in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is indeed the “birth pain” punishment that brings forth the new covenant family in chapter 54 is suggested by four parallels.³⁷ (1) The “many” in 52:14–15 and 53:11–12 are the “many” in the “miracle family” of 54:1. (2) The servant’s “offspring” in 53:11 are Sarah’s “offspring” in 54:3 who have been expanded by inheriting nations. (3) In 53:11 the “righteous” servant king makes many “righteous,” and in 54:14 the redeemed

³⁵ Scheumann, *A Biblical Theology of Birth Pain and the Hope of the Messiah*, 57.

³⁶ See Scheumann’s summary of the evidence with implications in *ibid.*, 112–19.

³⁷ Adapted from Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 441.

city is established in “righteousness” (cf. Jer 23:6; 33:16). (4) The “servant” singular in Isaiah 52:13 and 53:11 gives rise to “servants” plural in 54:17 and beyond (cf. 65:8–9, 13–15; 66:14)—servants that explicitly include a remnant from the tribes of Israel (63:17) *and* the nations (56:6).

Furthermore, it is important to see that two times already in Isaiah, Judah has declared herself unable to “give birth”—that is, to generate her own deliverance (26:16–18; 37:3). Instead, the people continued godless and desolate under the Lord’s judgment (49:19; 64:10). Because no one was “being a blessing,” divine favor was not reaching all the families of the earth (Gen 12:2–3). Thus the Abrahamic covenant remained unfulfilled, while the Mosaic covenant flourished in carrying out its judgment curses on the unfaithful people (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). Yet Yahweh, in alignment with his character and in fulfillment with his past promise (Exod 34:6; Deut 4:30–31), announces that he would act in mercy on his people’s behalf. Though they were unable to rescue themselves from divine wrath, Yahweh promises concretely and completely to bear Israel’s judgment of “labor pain” in their place and complete a new, antitypical exodus: “I have been quiet; I have restrained myself. Like a woman in labor, I will groan, gasp, and pant altogether. . . . And I will lead blind ones in a way they do not know; in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will change darkness before them into light and rough places into a plain” (Isa 42:14, 16).³⁸

Isaiah 51:1 charges the audience to consider the first exodus labor pain that Yahweh symbolically endured on behalf of Israel (Deut 32:18 with Exod 17:7). In contrast, in Isaiah 42:14 the prophet emphasizes that the new covenant and second exodus would be marked by an actual penal substitution for sin, accomplished by Yahweh, ultimately through his royal servant

³⁸ For the second exodus theme in Isaiah, see G. P. Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the ‘Servant Songs’ of Isaiah: A Second Moses,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 105–40, esp. 126–28; Bernard W. Anderson, “Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenberg*, ed. Bernard W. Anderson and Walter J. Harrelson (New York: Harper, 1962), 177–95.

(52:13–53:12).³⁹ Yahweh’s actions in 42:10–17 closely parallel those of the servant king in the first servant song (42:1–9), thus identifying how closely the two work together. Both bear influence among the coastlands (42:4, 10, 12), redeem the blind (42:7, 16), serve as guides (4:4, 16), overcome darkness with light (4:6–7, 16), and put to shame carved idols (42:8, 17). The servant would be the “the arm of Yahweh” (53:1; cf. 51:9), the Spirit-endowed agent of God (Isa 42:1; cf. 11:2; 61:1; Luke 4:18), who would be given “as a covenant for people, a light for nations” (Isa 42:6; cf. Luke 2:32). Yahweh would be pleased to crush him in order to secure far-reaching atonement (Isa 53:6, 10, 12), but this servant king would also die the substitutionary death willingly, for the joy set before him (42:4; John 10:17–18; Heb 12:2).⁴⁰ This royal figure would embody the presence of God and bear the character of God (Isa 7:6; 9:6),⁴¹ and through him God would establish his reign on the earth (9:7; 52:7; 53:10). As the representative royal “offspring” of Abraham and David (Gen 22:17b–18; 2 Sam 7:12; Jer 33:26), the royal servant’s faithful covenant obedience would secure new life for all who submit to his kingship (Isa 55:3–5),⁴² and these redeemed would then be counted “his offspring” (53:10)—a children no longer desolate but now flourishing and expanded, having inherited the nations (54:1, 3; cf. Gen 28:14). What hope is found in Isaiah’s “good news” (Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:6)!

Summary

Other texts address becoming “sons and daughters” of God by identifying with the royal Son (Isa 43:5–7; 44:4; 45:25; cf. 2 Cor 6:18) or the multiethnic “seed” as servants of Yahweh in the new creation (Isa 59:20–21; 61:9; 65:9, 23; 66:18–23). Nevertheless, the noted texts show that Isaiah envisioned the new covenant age to be fulfilled by the Servant King, who would

³⁹“What was symbolic substitution at the rock (Exod 17:1–7; Deut 32:18) becomes actual substitution for sin in this Fourth servant song” (Scheumann, *A Biblical Theology of Birth Pain and the Hope of the Messiah*, 55).

⁴⁰Cf. Isa 50:6–7; 53:3, 5, 7–8, 10, 12; Heb 10:4–7.

⁴¹Cf. Isa 28:29; 10:21; 63:16; 66:12; Matt 1:23.

⁴²On this text, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 406–21.

have Jewish and Gentile “offspring” identified with him solely by spiritual adoption. As Israel’s representative, he would become the agent of universal blessing, the instrument by which Abraham’s royal fatherhood would be realized on a global scale.

Synthesis and Fulfillment in Christ

Abraham’s Fatherhood Realized Through Christ

As noted earlier, Paul’s application of the “seed” designation to both Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Rom 4:16–18; Gal 3:28–29) marks a redemptive-historical shift from an age of promise to an age of fulfillment. Both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants incorporate “seed” language in three primary ways: (1) all those who by physical birth were part of Abraham’s family, (2) a subset of Abraham’s biological descendants who would take on national status as Israel within the Promised Land, and (3) a unique individual biological son who would play a significant typological role in redemptive history (types leading to Christ, the antitype). While the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants did not regard first generation proselytes as “seed,” their children were considered to be such, almost completely overlapping covenant membership and “offspring” status.

While the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants initially restricted “seed” language to physical descent, they also pointed ahead to a day when covenantal, spiritual adoption would replace ethnicity as the foundational mark of the patriarch’s “fatherhood.” The promise that Abraham would become an adoptive “father” of many nations anticipated this shift (Gen 17:4–6; cf. 22:17b–18), and then prophets like Isaiah (esp. Isa 53:10; 54:3; 66:22) predicted it through their eschatological new covenant promises (see above). Together these prophets envisioned an international people gathering in an eschatological Zion under a single Davidic king, whose own penal substitutionary death would exalt him over all. At the cross Christ experiences the divine labor-pain judgment (Isa 42:14; 52:13–53:12) that births salvation for the many (49:20–21; 52:15; 53:11–12; 54:1), securing for him the inheritance of the nations (49:22–23; 54:3; cf. Ps 2:8). Since Christ’s

atonement work, the *true* “offspring” of Abraham are those who have become the “seed” of the messianic servant king (Isa 53:10; cf. 59:21; Gal 3:29) through spiritual rebirth (Isa 54:1–3; cf. 49:20–21). They have experienced the great exchange that their representative head supplies: he bears their sins and counts his righteousness as their own (53:11; Rom 5:18–19; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9; 1 Pet 2:24).

The Narrowing of the “Seed” and the Hope of the Promised “Offspring”

The Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant texts often identify a continuum of various types of “offspring” in the covenantal community. Not all the “offspring” are the same. For instance, Asaph writes that the “Israel” to which God is good is only “those who are pure in heart” (Ps 73:1 ESV). Such narrowing resulted in a “mixed” community, made up of those “offspring” associated with Abraham only by biology or ethnicity and those *true* “offspring” linked to him by faith in God. Both types of members received the covenant sign of circumcision and were ultimately called upon to keep the Mosaic law, but only the latter group typologically pointed to those in the new covenant: “Those from faith are blessed with the believing Abraham” (Gal 3:9).

Within the new covenant Paul speaks of his fellow ethnic Israelites, saying, “Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6 ESV). Similarly, Paul earlier affirms, “No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, . . . but a Jew is one inwardly” (2:28–29 ESV). Elsewhere we learn that God regards both Jews and Gentiles as part of the *true* “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16; cf. 3:28–29) if they are joined by faith to Christ Jesus, the *true* Israel (Isa 49:3, 5) and Abraham’s *true* “seed” (Gal 3:16).⁴³

From the beginning the revealed goal of the national aspects of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1–2; 17:7–9) was that the progeny and

⁴³ For “the Israel of God” in Gal 6:16 referring to the whole church (Jews and Gentiles in Christ), see Christopher W. Cowan, “Context Is Everything: ‘The Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16,” *SBJT* 14 (2010): 78–85; G. K. Beale, “Peace and Mercy upon the Israel of God: The Old Testament Background of Gal. 6,16b,” *Bib* 80 (1999): 204–23; cf. *idem*, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 722–23.

property associated with the patriarch would expand into a global kingdom with Abraham serving as the father of a multitude of nations through his representative king (12:2–3; 17:4–6; 22:17b–18; 26:3–4). Faith in God to fulfill the “offspring” promise is what fueled Abraham’s life of obedience (15:4–6; Heb 11:17–19),⁴⁴ and it testifies to the patriarch’s inability to bless the world (Gen 12:2–3); only the true “offspring” could fulfill it.⁴⁵ That is, from the beginning, the believing remnant viewed the promised royal deliverer as representative of the many, and only through his representative obedience and substitutionary sacrifice would blessing ultimately reach worldwide. This one, Messiah Jesus, is the *true* “offspring” of Abraham (Gal 3:16) in that he, in fulfillment of the Genesis promises (Gen 17:4–5; 22:17b–18), bears the role of father, enemy destroyer, and blessing mediator on Abraham’s behalf. But he is also the patriarch’s superior, for the hopes of both Abraham and the world rested upon him (John 8:56, 58; cf. Heb 6:20 with 7:8). Those who surrender to Jesus’ representative authority will participate in the single family of God and be counted as Abraham’s “seed” (Gal 3:29).

The Centrality of Christ in OT Interpretation

In Romans 4:16–18 and elsewhere, when Paul applies the “seed” promise of Gen 15:6 (“So shall your offspring be” ESV) to spiritually reborn Jews and Gentiles in Christ, he identifies the ultimate fulfillment of Genesis’s original predications. Following closely Moses’s argument, Paul recognizes that Abraham’s fatherhood of a multitude of nations is the intended ultimate

⁴⁴ See Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Is It the Case That Christ Is the Same Object of Faith in the Old Testament? (Genesis 15:1–6),” *JETS* 55 (2012): 291–98.

⁴⁵ Yahweh charged Abra(ha)m, “And you shall be a blessing *so that* . . . in you may be blessed all the families of the land” (Gen 12:2–3). Ultimately, the “in you” [ךָ] (12:2) becomes “in your offspring” [בְּנִי] (22:18)—that is, “in Christ” [ἐν (τῷ) Χριστῷ]. For the grammatical uses and theological import of this phrase in Paul, see Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 122–28; and Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 67–199.

realization of his “offspring” being as numerous as the stars. Employing a redemptive-historical and canonical hermeneutic that finds its basis in the OT itself, Paul reads all Scripture in light of the fulfillment secured in Christ.⁴⁶

Following this pattern, those “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11 ESV) must see Jesus as the center of history, to whom all promises point, and from whom all fulfillment comes (Matt 5:17–18; Luke 24:44; 2 Cor 1:20). He is the last Adam (1 Cor 15:45; cf. Rom 5:18–19), the hoped-for “Offspring”-Deliverer who discloses true humanity by imaging God as a royal Priest-Son (Gen 1:26–28; 5:1–3) and by serving as the ideal provider and protector (2:15). He also fulfills Israel’s mission (Exod 19:4–6; Deut 4:5–8), representing the nation as the true royal “seed” of Abraham (Gen 22:17b–18) and son of God (Exod 4:22; 2 Sam 7:12, 14; Ps 2:7), through whom blessing (i.e., reconciliation with God) reaches the nations (Gen 12:3; Isa 42:1–6; 49:5–6; 51:4–5; Ps 72:17), ultimately through his perfect obedience unto substitutionary death (Isa 52:13–53:12; 55:3–5). The NT uniformly asserts that Christ’s teaching through the apostles provides the essence of Christian instruction (Matt 17:5; 28:19–20; John 16:12–14; 2 Thess 2:15). As such, Christian doctrine and preaching of the whole counsel of God must work through the lens that the apostles provide, which is colored by the fulfillment realized in Christ (Acts 2:42; Heb 1:1–2). As Stephen J. Wellum asserts, the NT places the revelation that comes through Jesus in a “qualitatively different category” to previous revelation, highlighting how everything that preceded him was “incomplete and by its very nature was intended by God to point beyond itself to God’s full self-disclosure in his Son” (Gal 3:24–26; Heb 1:1–2).⁴⁷ Christ’s new covenant work fulfills the hope of OT saints; therefore, the NT provides

⁴⁶ For more on the NT authors’ redemptive-historical, canonical hermeneutic, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 82–108; cf. G. K. Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 393–95, 401.

⁴⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 90. Cf. Matt 11:13–14; Acts 13:22–26; 19:4.

confirmation that our OT interpretations are correct.⁴⁸ In Christ alone does proper understanding of the OT come (2 Cor 3:14; cf. Isa 30:8; Jer 30:24; Dan 12:4).

Implications for Theological Systems

In conclusion, let us consider how the biblical portrayal of the “seed” of Abraham supports a progressive covenantal framework. To do so, I will distinguish my interpretation from that of dispensational and covenant theologues. I write this section with deepest affections for my brothers and sisters who see these other frameworks evidenced in Scripture, and I pray that my words will nurture greater pursuit of the truth rather than discord.

Progressive Covenantalism and Dispensational Theology

Highlighting discontinuity between the testaments, *dispensational theology* has traditionally viewed the new covenant church not as a continuation or replacement of Israel but as a unique people of God in redemptive history. In this framework ethnic Jews in Christ still maintain a distinct privilege to the Promised Land that they will enjoy in a future millennium separate from believing Gentiles.

This study affirms the newness of the new covenant community without distinguishing the privileges of any members within it. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike are “co-inheritors, fellow body members, and co-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6; cf. 2:12). The inheritance is “out of faith, in order that, according to grace, the promise may be certain to all the offspring—not only to those out of law but to those out of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, just as it is written, ‘A father of many nations I have made you’” (Rom 4:16–17). Furthermore, Christ fulfills *in the church* God’s long-range purposes given to Abraham. Because all the world’s hopes for reconciliation with God rested on God’s

⁴⁸E.g., *hope*: Matt 13:17; John 8:56; Acts 13:32–33; Rom 1:1–6; Heb 11:13, 39–40; 1 Pet 1:10–12; *fulfillment*: Matt 5:17–18; 11:13–14; John 5:39, 45–47; 2 Cor 2:20.

work through Abraham (Gen 12:3), national Israel's disloyalty and punishment heightened the world's condemnation, greatly distancing all from hope (Rom 3:19–20). Nevertheless, when King Jesus, Abraham's ultimate "seed" and Israel's representative (Isa 49:3, 5–6; Gal 3:16), performs all required obedience, he secures life and blessing for redeemed Jews and Gentiles alike (Gen 22:17b–18; Jer 4:2; Ps 72:17; Gal 3:8, 14), who together make up one regenerate people of God, the "seed" of Abraham (Gal 3:29). Rather than being an unexpected formation, the new covenant church in Christ is the natural, anticipated end in the progress of the biblical covenants.

Many progressive dispensationalists today affirm Scripture's teaching that "Christ is the true and ultimate Israel, temple, seed of Abraham, and so on."⁴⁹ Most of these, however, would agree with Michael Riccardi that the application of "seed" language to Gentiles in Galatians 3:28–29 ("There is neither Jew nor Greek. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring" ESV) requires only that Gentiles enjoy the "blessing" promise; the patriarchal nation–land promises continue only for ethnic Jews who are in Christ: "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.'"⁵⁰ Further, Robert Saucy states, "The promises concerning the physical seed constituting the nation of Israel remain alongside the universal promise even as they did in the original statement in the Old Testament."⁵¹

I believe this line of reasoning falters on a number of fronts. First, this view fails to appreciate the two-stage *progression* evident within the Abrahamic covenant itself (see above). Stage one was realized in the temporary Mosaic covenant, wherein Israel became a nation enjoying the land. Stage two was inaugurated when this nation, through its representative

⁴⁹ Michael Riccardi, "The Seed of Abraham: A Theological Analysis of Galatians 3 and Its Implications for Israel," *TMSJ* 25 (2014): 59.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 60–63, quote from 63. See also Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 200.

⁵¹ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50.

head, fulfilled the charge to “be a blessing” (Gen 12:2) and thus served as the instrument of blessing to the world (12:3; cf. 22:18; Jer 4:2; Ps 72:17; Acts 3:25–26; Gal 3:8, 14). In fulfillment of the OT hopes, stage two—realized in the eschatological, everlasting new covenant in Christ—sees the “seed” and land promises fulfilled in a way that includes the nations, yet without geopolitical barriers (Eph 2:13–17). This is accomplished as the true “seed” of Abraham narrows first to Christ, the ultimate “seed,” and then to those identified with him by faith (Gal 3:16, 29). Christ, the royal “offspring” deliverer, claims once enemy strongholds (Gen 22:17b; 24:60; cf. plural “lands” in 26:3–4) through his ever-expanding new royal family, who now globally bears witness to him (Acts 1:8) and offensively confronts the gates of hell (Matt 16:18) with the testimony of Christ’s victory over evil and with the certainty of the new heavens and earth. Within this family Jews and Gentiles are “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28), “one new man” (Eph 2:15), together enjoying “adoption as sons” (1:5) with equal partnership in the “inheritance of the saints” (Col 1:12; cf. Gal 3:18; Eph 3:6).

Second, the view that Gentiles in Christ participate only in the blessing promise but not also in the ultimate fulfillment of the “seed” and land promises fails to recognize the reference to plural “promises . . . made to Abraham and to his offspring” (Gal 3:16 ESV). Paul in Galatians 3 had in mind *multiple* promises in Genesis, not just the one focused on blessing.⁵² I agree with Saucy that, “because the concept of ‘nation’ [promised in Gen 12:2] carries a territorial aspect, the land must be viewed as the necessary corollary to the promised seed that would constitute the ‘great nation.’”⁵³ Nevertheless, if the blessing promises include a reconstituting of the “seed” with a global identity in Christ, then one should be cautious to separate the land promise from this same transformation. Indeed, within the argument of Galatians 3, the eschatological fulfillment of the land promise appears to stand behind Paul’s argument.⁵⁴ We see this in at least two ways: (1) The

⁵² DeRouchie and Meyer, “Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise?” 38.

⁵³ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 44.

⁵⁴ Contra F. F. Bruce, who says, “The reference to the land . . . plays no part in the argument of Galatians” (*The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 171).

inclusion of the conjunction in the phrase “*and* to your seed” [καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου] in Galatians 3:16 implies that Paul is indeed quoting Scripture, most likely Genesis 13:15; 17:8; and/or 24:7, for they are the only instances of the phrase addressed to Abraham in the LXX of Genesis. Of these, the most likely candidate is Genesis 17:8, “for the mention of Abra(ha)m becoming ‘the father of a multitude of nations’ in the immediate literary context anticipates the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God—one of the key issues at stake in Galatians 3.”⁵⁵ Regardless, all three texts in Genesis address the *land* promise, which means Paul in Galatians 3 is stressing that the blessing, “seed,” *and* land promises find their culmination in Christ, that each can be understood rightly only in light of him, and that the eschatological fulfillment of the land promise is part of the “inheritance” enjoyed by the reconstituted “seed” of Abraham (Gal 3:29). (2) Paul’s language of “inheritance” in Galatians 3:18 likely is rooted in the OT land promise (e.g., Num 26:53–56; Josh 11:23),⁵⁶ which marked the context wherein God’s global kingdom purposes first highlighted to Adam and Eve (Gen 1:27–28) would be realized. That is, the inheritance of Canaan always anticipated the expansion of the kingdom to include the world.⁵⁷ And because the male, royal deliverer’s global work of blessing was to reverse the serpent’s kingdom-thwarting purposes (Gen 3:15) and to result in possessing enemy gates (22:17b–18; 24:60), Paul likely saw Messiah Jesus as inaugurating the fulfillment of the original Edenic vision to see God’s earthly sanctuary expanding to fill the earth through his royal-priestly imagers.⁵⁸ In Christ,

⁵⁵ DeRouchie and Meyer, “Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise?” 38. For more on this theme, see Oren Martin’s essay on “land” in the present volume and Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 703–16.

⁵⁶ So too Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 230; cf. Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 155. Cf. Num 18:20; 32:18–19; 33:54; 34:2; Deut 4:21, 38; 12:9; 15:4; 19:14; 20:16; 24:4; 25:19; 26:1; Josh 13:6–8; 24:28.

⁵⁷ E.g., Gen 22:17b; 24:60; 26:3–4; Pss 22:27–28; 47:7–9; 72:8–11; Zeph 3:9–10; Rom 4:13; Heb 11:10, 13–16; 13:14; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1–22:5.

⁵⁸ For arguments that Gen 3:15 and 22:17b–18 indeed point to a single, male deliverer, see Jack Collins, “A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman’s Seed Singular or Plural?” *TynBul* 48 (1997): 139–48; T. Desmond Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *TynBul* (1997): 363–67; cf. John C.

God's blessings of "seed" and land are becoming universalized, just as the OT itself anticipated would happen in the age of the fulfillment.

Progressive Covenantalism and Covenant Theology

As for *covenant theology* this system has traditionally viewed the church as a continuation or renewal of Israel, though some view it more as a replacement.⁵⁹ In both views, however, the makeup of the new covenant community remains substantially the same as those of past eras, for all the biblical covenants are simply various expressions of one covenant of grace. Because membership in the covenants associated with Abraham and Moses was always guided by physical birth into the family of the mediator or by a reorientation in spiritual loyalty (e.g., Ruth 1:16), covenant theologians have seen no reason both features would not remain operative in the new covenant. Thus, they baptize babies born into homes with at least one Christian parent, convinced that covenant membership and election, ecclesiology and soteriology, may be overlapping in this age but are never aligned preconsummation. While more regenerate members are present this side of the cross, the new covenant community continues to be "mixed" with remnant and rebel, saved and unsaved.

In my view covenant theology's construal does not fully account for Scripture's teaching of the newness of the new covenant and the distinctiveness of Jesus and his work in redemptive history. First, by treating the Abrahamic covenant as a monolithic reality substantially equated with the new covenant, many covenant theologians miss that Genesis 17

Collins, "Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete Was Paul?" *TynBul* 54 (2003): 75–86; DeRouchie and Meyer, "Christ or Family as the 'Seed' of Promise?" 36–48, esp. 38–40; Jason S. DeRouchie, "The Blessing-Commission, the Promised Offspring, and the Toledot Structure of Genesis," *JETS* 56 (2013): 228–29.

⁵⁹ For the continuation model, see e.g., Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 656; Michael S. Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 130–31; idem, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 730. For renewal, see Jeffrey D. Niell, "The Newness of the New Covenant," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 127–55.

distinguishes *two* progressive eras for the everlasting Abrahamic covenant—the first national (Gen 17:7–8) with a genealogical principle as its guide and circumcision as its sign (17:9–13); and the second international with the patriarch’s fatherhood being established by spiritual adoption and no longer bound by biology, ethnicity, or the distinguishing mark of circumcision (17:4–6) (see above; cf. Gen 12:1–3). Elsewhere, Genesis clarifies that the initial stage would find fulfillment only in the second when an obedient king, *the* “seed” of the woman and of Abraham from the line of Judah, would rise, overcoming all enemy hostility and blessing all the nations of the earth (3:15; 22:17b–18 with 26:3–4 and 49:8–10). Christ’s arrival inaugurates the age of fulfillment, thus shifting the covenant community’s makeup away from the genealogical principle to one of corporate identity, established through spiritual adoption by faith. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, in order that he might redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption” (Gal 4:4–5). “In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:4–5 ESV).

G. K. Beale rightly articulates the OT hopes in this way: “When the Messiah came, the theocracy of Israel would be so completely reconstituted that it would continue only as the new organism of the Messiah (Jesus), the true Israel. In him Jews and Gentiles would be fused together on a footing of complete equality through corporate identification.”⁶⁰ We

⁶⁰ Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 654. Beale, himself a paedobaptist, seems inconsistent in the working out of his own model with respect to baptism. On the one hand, in alignment with the quote above, he affirms in a comment on Col 2:11–13 that “OT physical circumcision as a type *has been fulfilled* in eschatological spiritual circumcision and is no longer relevant for entrance into the new-covenant community. Instead, spiritual ‘circumcision made without hands’ and ‘baptism’ are ongoing realities designating entrance into the covenant community. . . . Physical circumcision can be seen to have its *typological fulfillment* also in the physical rite of baptism” (*A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 808–9, emphasis added). In these quotations (both in the footnote and the one cited in the body), Beale appears to be affirming a high view of fulfillment that marks substantial discontinuities between old and new. Indeed, to speak of a type’s “fulfillment” is to speak of escalation, of reaching a goal, and of antitype, which identifies physical baptism as something distinct from and superseding physical circumcision. In contrast, when later arguing that baptism should be applied to infants,

must see covenantal progression in the move from promise to fulfillment. In Christ, spiritual adoption, not physical descent, becomes the mark of the new covenant community. While ethnic distinctions are not eradicated (e.g., Rom 1:16; 2:9; 9:25–27; cf. Acts 13:46), new covenant membership is grounded solely in “corporate identification” with the Messiah and is no longer assumed simply because of biological connection. In this and many other senses, Christ’s new covenant work marks an escalation beyond all previous eras.

Second, covenant theologians must consider further the significance of Jesus’ being the *last* Adam (1 Cor 15:45; cf. Rom 5:18–19), the head of a *new* creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), *the* “offspring” of Abraham and David who mediates a *new* covenant (Heb 9:15; 12:24) that creates the church as one *new* man (Eph 2:15). All members in the new covenant are identified with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:5–6; Col 2:12–13; 3:3); they are children of “the Jerusalem above” (Gal 4:26, 31; cf. Heb 12:22–24), meaning that, regardless of one’s original heritage, all have new birth certificates declaring, “This one was born there”—in Zion (Psalm 87). Indeed, as Isaiah asserts, every member of this community is spiritually reborn and thus regenerate (Isa 54:1, 3), having become “offspring” of the servant king by his bearing their iniquities and counting them righteous (53:10–11). Similarly, Jeremiah stresses that, in distinction from the mixed nature of the old covenant, *all* in the new covenant know Yahweh for *all* are forgiven (31:34). The fact that the new covenant “has been enacted” in Christ (Heb 8:6, using the perfect passive *νομοθετέομαι* and thus stressing the completed action with continuing results) means that *already* the new covenant community is made up of only regenerate, even if some aspects of salvation are *not yet* complete. Jesus’ atoning sacrifice both effects and is effectual, and

Beale is forced to change his wording: “[Water] baptism is the redemptive-historical and typological *equivalent* to circumcision” (816). In moving from fulfillment language to equivalence language, he minimizes the significance and centrality of the work of Christ and the distinctiveness of the new covenant community that he had earlier so beautifully articulated.

within the new covenant, soteriology gives birth to ecclesiology in a way that the two are completely overlapping *already*.⁶¹

Because Messiah Jesus had no physical children and yet enjoys “offspring” (Isa 53:10) and because new covenant membership comes without

⁶¹ As Wellum rightly states, “Unlike Israel of old, by definition, the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the redeemed are one” (Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 689). In contrast, in an attempt to maintain a “mixed” nature to the new covenant while affirming the clear teaching of Jer 31:34, covenant theologian Richard L. Pratt Jr. is forced to substantially deny the “already” nature of Christ’s work, claiming that the full establishment of a regenerate community is yet future: “Many evangelicals object to infant baptism because the new covenant distributes salvation to all of its participants. As with the previous objections, this point of view is correct insofar as it relates to the complete fulfillment of the new covenant in the consummation” (“Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” in *The Case for Covenant Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003], 172 [156–74]). But such a view cannot stand for several reasons. (1) Every promise is *already* yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20). (2) As James R. White correctly notes of Heb 8:6: “There is nothing in the text that would lead us to believe that the full establishment of this covenant is yet future, for such would destroy the present apologetic concern of the author; likewise, he will complete his citation of Jer. 31 by asserting the obsolete nature of the first covenant, which leaves one to have to theorize, without textual basis, about some kind of intermediate covenantal state if one does not accept the full establishment of the new covenant as seen in the term νομοθέτηται” (“The Newness of the New Covenant [Part I],” *RBTR* 1 (2004): 157; cf. idem, “The Newness of the New Covenant [Part II],” *RBTR* 2 [2005]: 83–104). (3) Other paedo-baptists like G. K. Beale correctly recognize that when the writer of Hebrews declares, “By a single offering he [Christ] *has perfected* [perfect active indicative of τελειόω] for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:14), and then supports it by citing Jer 31:33–34 (Heb 10:15–18), he is asserting the *inaugurated* nature of forgiveness (i.e., positionally, through our identification with Christ our representative) and the *already* completed certainty of final, complete cleansing from sin (*A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 735; cf. Heb 12:2, 23). (4) Samuel E. Waldron observes that, in alignment with its inaugurated nature, the new covenant’s ordinances have *already* been established (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), its officers have *already* been installed (2 Cor 3:6; Eph 2:20; 4:11; Heb 8:1–6), and the knowledge of God predicted in Isa 54:13 and Jer 31:34 is *already* being enjoyed whenever a believer is redeemed (John 6:45; Heb 10:26) (“A Brief Response to Richard L. Pratt’s ‘Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,’” *RBTR* 2 [2005]: 106–7 [105–10]). (5) Pratt’s delayed-fulfillment view of the new covenant removes the clear pastoral hope for perseverance in *this age* found in passages like Jer 32:40: “And I will cut for them an eternal covenant that I will not turn away from after them from doing good to them, and my fear I will place in their heart to not turn from unto me.”

birth-pain judgment for all but the covenant head (54:1; cf. 42:14), the genealogical principle is no longer operative. Abraham's "fatherhood" of a multitude of nations becomes fully enacted through the spiritual adoption effected by his "offspring," Christ (Gal 3:14, 16). Just as Yahweh stressed to Abraham that the nations of the earth would be blessed "in your offspring" [בְּרַבְרָב/ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου] (Gen 22:18 ESV; cf. Jer 4:2; Ps 72:17; Gal 3:14, 16), so now "God . . . has blessed us *in Christ* [ἐν Χριστῷ] with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," even as we await the full inheritance (Eph 1:3, 14 ESV; cf. 1 Pet 1:3–5).⁶² Christ is the "seed" of Abraham and of David (Gen 17:4–5; 2 Sam 7:12, 16; Jer 33:26; Acts 3:25–26; Gal 3:16) and the one through whom both Abraham's fatherly headship over a multitude and David's eternal throne find fulfillment (Luke 1:32–33; 2:68–75; John 8:53–59; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8). Today—whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, males or females—all become "offspring" of Christ and then of Abraham (Isa 53:10; Gal 3:28–29) only through union with Jesus by faith.⁶³ The NT knows no new covenant community apart from this relationship; and, therefore, the church should apply the new covenant sign of baptism only to those who are reborn through faith in Christ. Those *in Christ* are "sons of God," those *who have put on Christ* who are baptized, and those *who are Christ's* who are counted "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:26–27, 29 ESV; cf. Rom 6:1–4; 1 Pet 3:21).⁶⁴

⁶² On reading "seed" here as a single, male descendant of Abraham, see the resources in footnote 50.

⁶³ Troy W. Martin argues that the three antitheses mentioned in Gal 3:28 are context specific to the argument in Galatians, each pair pointing to spheres in which the old covenant made distinctions by circumcision but where the new covenant does not ("The Covenant of Circumcision [Genesis 17:9–14] and the Situational Antithesis in Galatians 3:28," *JBL* 122 [2003]: 111–25, esp. 117–19). If correct, Paul is stressing high discontinuity between the old and new covenants in a way that discourages a mere equating of the covenant signs of physical circumcision and water baptism, the latter being linked solely with faith in Christ.

⁶⁴ G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Baptism," in *DPL*, 62; cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 154–56; Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 249–52.