

Abraham and the Blessing of the Nations
Jewish and Christian Interpretations

BIBL 601: Sharing a Sacred Text:
Christians and Jews Reading the Bible Together

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Introduction

Genesis 12 is a decisive turning point in the Hebrew Bible. After the fits and starts of a very good, yet unruly, Creation in Gen 1-11, Abraham¹ is chosen to be the special recipient of God's blessing. The rest of the Hebrew Bible focuses on Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel, and their relationship with God. In this first address of God to Abraham, God commands Abraham to leave his land and kindred, and go to the land that God will show him (Gen 12:1). God then proceeds to promise Abraham seven things: (1) "I will make of you a great nation;" (2) "I will bless you;" (3) "I will make your name great;" (4) "you will be a blessing;" (5) "I will bless those who bless you;" (6) "the one cursing you, I will curse;" and (7) "all of the families² of the earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3). These promises set the stage for Israel's history.

In this paper, I examine the last of these promises: the blessing of all of the nations of the earth. This promise is both enticing and enigmatic because it refers to a blessing that is universal in extent, yet any description of its mechanism or form is absent. Interpreters are thus left to their own understanding to fill in the gap of how the nations will be blessed. In the next section, I examine the text itself. Then, in turn, I review some of the classical Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation of this promise. Specifically, I address the question of how different interpreters understand the connections between Abraham, the nations, and God. What role does each play in this blessing?

The Text

וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ כָּל מְשִׁפְחַת הָאָדָמָה (Gen 12:3b, *BHS*)

The three promises of Gen 12:3 describe the three-way relationship between Abraham, God and others. First, God promises to bless the ones who bless Abraham. Second, God promises to curse the one who curses Abraham.³ These two promises establish a clear relationship between the three parties: based

¹ At this point in the narrative, his name is 'Abram.' In this paper, I refer to him by his later name (cf. Gen 17:5).

² The Hebrew מְשִׁפְחַת is variously rendered "families" (KJV), "peoples" (NIV), or "clans" (NJB). The literature often refers to this blessing applying to the "nations," which is the term I use in this paper.

³ Two different verbs are used. God will curse (אָרַר) the one who curses (קָלַל) Abraham. The latter connotes the removal of rightful honor, while the former focuses more on the removal of power (Victor P. Hamilton, "אָרַר," *TWOT*, 1:75-6; Leonard J. Coppes, "קָלַל," *TWOT*, 2:800-1).

on one's stance toward Abraham, God will either impart a blessing or a curse. The third promise is more problematic. "All of the families of the earth" is the subject of the verb **נִבְרַךְ**. This verb is the Niphal form of **בָּרַךְ** ("to bless"), which can grammatically convey a reflexive ("bless themselves"), passive ("be blessed") or middle ("find a blessing") sense.⁴ The issue is further complicated by the fact that this basic promise is repeated four more times to Abraham and the other patriarchs (Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) and in two of those cases the verb is rendered with the Hithpael stem (22:18; 26:4). The Hithpael usually conveys a reflexive sense.⁵ Some interpreters attribute great theological significance to deciding between these options,⁶ while others see the same basic meaning regardless of the choice.⁷ The role of the nations in the blessing is influenced by the interpretation of this verb.

Beyond the ambiguous verb, the roles of God and Abraham are also left with multiple possibilities. God is not mentioned at all as a party in this third promise. Abraham's role is only indicated by the prepositional phrase **בְּךָ**, which could indicate that Abraham is the instrument of blessing ("through you"), the agent of blessing ("by you"), or the co-recipient of blessing ("with you").⁸ These grammatical uncertainties allow a wide variety of interpretational traditions.

Jewish Interpretations⁹

In the Jewish tradition, this passage is part of the third weekly Torah reading (**לֵךְ לְךָ**, *Lekh Lekha* = "go forth," Gen 12-17). The classical rabbinic literature offers three basic interpretations, which I examine in turn. First is the idea that the non-Jewish nations will receive a blessing (presumably from God) because of Abraham's obedience before God. In this view, there is no direct interaction between

⁴ Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), §135, §139, §136.

⁵ Williams §152-5.

⁶ See, e.g., Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 374.

⁷ See Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, in press) 206 and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987) 277-8.

⁸ Williams, §243, §245, §248.

⁹ It is, of course, impossible to adequately deal with the full breadth of Jewish interpretation in a paper of this length. However, to make some progress toward that goal, I survey the classical rabbinic writings along with some modern commentators who are influenced by the rabbinic sources.

Abraham and the nations. This idea is implied by the Targum, which interprets the Hebrew to mean, “*in your merit* all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (emphasis original).¹⁰ Thus the obedience of Abraham will cause God to bless the nations. *Genesis Rabbah* 39:12.3 makes this point even clearer: “Rain and dew will come on account of your merit.”¹¹ Joining this viewpoint, the JPS commentary favors the passive meaning of the verb and interprets the promises of blessing to include three parts: “a blessing on Abram personally, a blessing (or curse) on those with whom he interacts, a blessing on the entire human race.”¹² This comment implies that the third category involves those with whom Abraham does *not* interact. To summarize this first view, as a result of Abraham’s obedience before God, God will show favor toward the nations of the world. The nations do not appear to have an active role.

A second interpretation involves Abraham acting as a model for the nations to emulate. This view is often associated with a trivial reflexive understanding of the verb and is summarized by Rashi: “There are many Aggadic interpretations but this is the simple meaning: A man says to his son, ‘May you be like Avraham.’”¹³ Ramban (Nachmanides) expresses the same idea: “People will take thee as a model for a blessing and say, ‘God make thee like Abraham.’”¹⁴ Hirsch expands on this by explaining that the degree of blessing depends upon the degree to which the nations emulate Abraham’s life. He writes, “all the peoples of the world will participate in this blessing inasmuch as they will all found their lives on the same foundation.”¹⁵ Other commentators focus more on gaining Abraham’s fortune rather than emulating his life: “People will take [Abraham’s] own good fortune as the desired measure when invoking a blessing on themselves.”¹⁶ In summary, this view sees Abraham living an obedient and blessed life before God. Then, as the nations become aware of Abraham and aspire to match his example, God will bless

¹⁰ Martin McNamara, tr., *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992), 86.

¹¹ Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis – A New American Translation*, v. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) 72.

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 89.

¹³ Rashi, *The Metsudah Chumash*, tr. Avrohom Davis and Avrohom Kleinkaufman (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publication Society, 1989) 116-7.

¹⁴ A. Cohen, *The Soncino Chumash: the five books of Moses with Haphtaroth: Hebrew text and English translation with an exposition based on the classical Jewish commentaries* (London: Soncino Press, 1947) 60.

¹⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch: Translated and Explained – volume 1: Genesis* (London: L. Honig and Sons, 1963) 229.

them as he blessed Abraham. As Hirsch paraphrases it: “[God] would make [Abraham] into a nation to which other nations have only to look to become conscious of what their task is.”¹⁷

These first two lines of interpretation focus on Abraham’s responsibility before God alone and do not involve Abraham in bringing a blessing directly to the nations. The third view gives Abraham a direct proselytizing role. The Targum hints at this interpretation when it describes Abraham setting out for Canaan with “the souls *they had converted*” (emphasis original, Hebrew: עשה, “to make or do”).¹⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* has R. Eleazar agreeing with this interpretation of the Hebrew: “This refers to proselytes.”¹⁹ Sforino likewise writes of Abraham’s missionary role: “[Abraham] would acquire perfection himself and teach mankind true knowledge.”²⁰ Several midrashic texts also present Abraham as the source of monotheism for the world. He is described as discovering that there is one true God by observing the sun, moon and stars. He then preaches to his mother, converts king Nimrod, and dramatically testifies to his father Terah by destroying his collection of idols.²¹ Maimonides and others portray Abraham to be “one of the very few to discover the one God, and...[he is] central in the propagation of monotheism and the refutation of idolatry.”²² Under this interpretation, one aspect of Abraham’s obedience is to *directly* teach the nations about God. The nations then have the responsibility of embracing Abraham’s revelation, resulting in God blessing them for their faith, as he has blessed Abraham. As Hertz summarizes it, Abraham is to “attract those who are far from the knowledge of God and purify them for their Heavenly Father.”²³

These three different interpretations offer very different understandings of how God, the nations and Abraham interact to produce the promised blessing. However it should be noted that all three

¹⁶ Sarna, 89.

¹⁷ Hirsch, 227.

¹⁸ McNamara, 86.

¹⁹ *Genesis Rabbah* 39:14 (Neusner, 2.74).

²⁰ Cohen, 60.

²¹ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964) 136-141. See also Julian Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 101-3.

²² Paul Mandel, “The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited,” *Prooftexts* 14 (1994) 268.

understand Abraham to be a type for all of Israel. The biblical text itself testifies to this in three of the parallel passages (Gen 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) when the promise is broadened from Abraham to his descendants. After Abraham, the promise to bless the nations is still in effect through Israel. In all three interpretations it is also clear that the blessing of the nations depends upon Abraham's obedience. The biblical text (Gen 22:18; 26:5) links the blessings to Abraham's past obedience, but interpreters use this passage to advocate continued obedience for Israel. Regardless of the roles and mechanisms, Israel is called to be faithful like Abraham, and God promises the result to be a universal blessing.

Christian Interpretations²⁴

Christian interpretations of this promise to Abraham begin with the New Testament itself. Paul writes to the Galatians: "Those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed²⁵ in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed" (Gal 3:7-9).²⁶ Paul is teaching that those who follow Abraham's example of faith join him in a position of God's favor.²⁷ This interpretation is similar to the Jewish view that Abraham is a model for the gentiles. However, this is only part of Paul's understanding. He goes on to focus on the work of Christ, concluding that "Christ redeemed us...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal 3:13-4). Paul thus goes beyond seeing Abraham as a *model*. Abraham, through Christ, is also the *means* of fulfilling the promise. Paul then explains that this was God's intention all along: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And offsprings,' as of many; but it says, 'And your offspring,' that is, to one person, who is Christ" (Gal 3:16). For Paul, God's promise to bless the nations through Abraham has two parts. First, Abraham

²³ J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 45.

²⁴ See n. 8. In this paper, I survey the Christian interpretations from the NT, the church fathers, and later commentators who base their work on these classical sources. Statements such as "Christians believe" or "Christian theology teaches" refer to this stream of Christian thought.

²⁵ Note that Paul follows the LXX here by using a passive Greek tense to translate the Hebrew verb.

²⁶ All Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989) unless otherwise noted.

²⁷ Paul similarly argues that Abraham provides the model of faith for the nations in Rom 4:13, 16.

provides the model of faith that the nations imitate in order to gain God's blessing. Second, Abraham provides the offspring of his flesh, Jesus, who actualizes the blessing to the nations.

Peter makes this point even stronger in his sermon to the Jews at Solomon's Portico. He calls for them to repent of having rejected Jesus (Acts 3:14, 19) and warns them that those who do not listen to Jesus "will be utterly rooted out of the people" (Acts 3:23). He then proclaims to them, "You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:25-26). His point is that the physical descendants of Abraham, the ones through whom the nations were to gain God's blessing, are now at risk themselves of being removed from God's people. But Jesus, Abraham's offspring, offers to bring them back under God's blessing. In Peter's interpretation, God's blessing is not to be assumed by Israel. Instead, Jesus is the true descendant of Abraham through whom all of the nations, *including Israel itself*, will be blessed.

Later Christian interpreters follow this New Testament lead. The church fathers see Abraham as both the model of faith and the source of Christ (in the flesh), who is the blessing. Eusebius writes that Christians follow the model of Abraham: "We who are of Christ practice one and the same model of life and have one and the same religion as those divinely favored men of old."²⁸ Ambrose also sees Abraham as a model and a source of instruction: "There is our father Abraham, who was formed and called for the instruction of generations to come."²⁹ But beyond modeling and instructing, Abraham begets Christ himself to be the blessing of the nations. Theodoret writes, "The manhood of Christ sprang from the seed of Abraham, and fulfilled the promise made to Abraham."³⁰ Augustine is even more explicit: "Now hath come the Seed of Abraham, in whom are blessed all nations."³¹ Much later, Calvin follows this same line of interpretation. He allows that it is a valid interpretation for the nations to bless themselves in the name

²⁸ *The Church History of Eusebius* 4:15 (Schaff, 2d series, I.88).

²⁹ Ambrose, *Duties of the Clergy* 1.24:107 (Schaff, 2d series, X.19).

³⁰ Theodoret, *Dialogues*, "Dialogue I." (Schaff, 2d series, III.164).

of Abraham (the reflexive interpretation of the verb). However, he then follows Paul's view that Abraham is not only a model but a *cause* of blessing, through Christ as the mediator in Abraham's loins, who brings a blessing to all nations.³²

Christians, who see the Church as the great fulfillment of God's plan of salvation for the entire world, look to this promise as part of the proto-evangelium that comes to fruition in Christ.³³ It is in retrospect that Christians see God's plan for the inclusion of the gentiles into God's chosen people through the Church.³⁴ Indeed, it was the Christians' *experience* of God's blessing—freedom, peace, and power—that caused them to reflect on the Jewish scriptures and re-interpret them according to Christ.³⁵ The result is that the Church saw itself as playing a pivotal role in the future of the world.³⁶ This promise to Abraham had “always imparted some sense of mission to Israel; yet it never became a programme of concerted action until the ascension.”³⁷ Christian theology sees the Church's mission to be the blessing of the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the promises to Abraham are seen to be a gracious response to humanity's self-deification at Babel and subsequent scattering into various nations (Gen 11). Abraham was chosen to found the nation through whom all of the other nations would be gathered back to God. Abraham's faith set the pattern, yet Israel could not bring the blessing of faith to the nations. However Abraham's descendent, “Jesus Christ, who is the true Judah and Israel”³⁸ is both “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2). Through his ministry, God “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5) so that those “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13) so that both Jews and gentiles have been brought together to make “one new humanity in place of the two” (Eph 2:15). Thus the mission of the Church becomes the propagation of this message, proclaiming

³¹ Augustine, *On the Psalms*, Psalm 66:13 (Schaff, 1st series, VII.278).

³² John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, tr. John King (London: Banner of Truth, 1965) 348-9.

³³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 120.

³⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961) 156.

³⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 101-4.

³⁶ Johnson, 100.

³⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1974) 114.

the blessing of Christ to all of the nations, to both the Jews and the gentiles.

Conclusion

What light can these two traditions of interpretation shed on one another? All three Jewish perspectives presented above focus on the necessity of God's people living obediently before God. If God's chosen people violate the special relationship God has established with them, then what hope is there for blessing those who are outside of that special relationship? Mission-oriented Christians can learn from this emphasis, as they sometimes forget the importance of righteousness preceding outreach. The Jewish traditions also emphasize that Israel's obedience, even without 'explicit' missionary activity, will draw the nations to God. Zechariah foretold of the time when Israel would live obediently: "In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech 8:23). Christians are prone to forget that their first missionary activity is to live obediently.

On the other hand, the Christian tradition emphasizes that God's people serve God by presenting him to all the nations as the one true God. Jews often limit their extent of blessing the nations to "showing how a community can live...[and] doing [material] things to benefit the species,"³⁹ or offering the gentiles "good advice."⁴⁰ Indeed, Goldenberg's analysis of the history of Jewish attitudes toward other religions reveals that there has always been ambivalence toward gentile paganism: "Jews...could openly combat such errors or simply ignore them as they chose; their own covenant demanded only that they avoid taking part in such activities themselves."⁴¹ The rabbinic attitude is probably better summarized by saying that gentiles are not encouraged to embrace Torah but *are* to be encouraged to follow the Noahide laws.⁴² In practice however, continually threatened Jewish minorities have usually focused more on struggling for self-identity than on propagating the worship of God. However, "God has called all Jews at all times to be

³⁸ Waltke, 51.

³⁹ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) 50.

⁴⁰ *Genesis Rabbah* 39:7 (Neusner, 2.73).

⁴¹ Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations that Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes toward Other Religions* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1998) 108.

a blessing, to live pure, noble and holy lives, and to teach the world, more by example and influence than by actual words, what it means to serve Him truly, and to live as He meant that all mankind should live.”⁴³

The Jewish and Christian traditions stress complementary aspects of Abraham’s call, and thus they inform one another. However, there are fundamental differences between the two that cannot be ignored. While acknowledging the destructiveness of triumphant Christian supercessionism, Christian theology sees the promises to Abraham and Israel fulfilled in Christ. Israel was entrusted with God’s revelation, yet Christians believe that Jesus is the one true Jew, who lived the fully obedient life and sacrificed himself in order to bring a blessing to all nations, to both Jews and gentiles. As God’s personal blessing was determined according to each person’s stance toward Abraham in Gen 12:3, Christian typology principally finds this promise to be fulfilled now in one’s stance toward Christ. Disagreeing with this, Jewish typology identifies Abraham with the nation of Israel. It is true that Jews and Christians can and should both celebrate their common worship of the God of Abraham and celebrate their common scriptures by reading together. However, our radically different beliefs concerning Jesus separate us and challenge us in our common desire to love both God and our neighbor.

⁴² Goldenberg, 87-8.

⁴³ Morgenstern, 98.

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The Torah offers no reason why Abraham was chosen for this particular honour so Midrash, Jewish interpretation and elucidation of the Biblical texts, has provided us with possible explanations. One Midrash on Genesis recorded in the second century CE, tells the story that Abraham's father was a manufacturer of idols, and that the child beheaded the idols and placed the hammer in the hand of the remaining idol, prompting his father to admonish him. Terah says that Abram must have done the damage since (he admits) the idols are only made of clay. "And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." the nations of the earth should be blessed. Instead of Isaac a ram caught in a thicket was sacrificed (ib. xxii. 1-18). Abraham returned to Beer-sheba, and was sojourning there when Sarah died at Kirjatharba (also called Hebron and Mamre), at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven (ib. xxiii. Abraham and Isaac. (From the Sarajevo Haggadah.) C. J. M. Prototype of the Jewish Race. "In Apocryphal and Rabbinical Literature" No sooner, however, did the Jewish people come into closer contact with nations of higher culture, especially with the Greeks in Alexandria, than the figure of Abraham became the prototype of a nation sent forth to proclaim the monotheistic faith to the world while wandering from land to land. Accordingly, the divine promise (Gen. xii. 3, xxii. Abraham (originally Abram) is the common patriarch of the Abrahamic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Judaism, he is the founding father of the covenant of the pieces, the special relationship between the Hebrews and God; in Christianity, he is the spiritual progenitor of all believers, Jewish or Gentile; and in Islam he is seen as a link in the chain of prophets that begins with Adam and culminates in Muhammad.