

Who Is the Seed of Abraham?

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The question, “Who is the seed of Abraham?” is of great importance both to general biblical interpretation and to the interpretation of prophecy. The promise made to Abraham and his seed can rightly be viewed as the central theme of the Bible. Everything written prior to Genesis 12 (the first mention of the promise) simply serves as background, and everything written after Genesis 12 serves as explanation of the outworking of this promise (actually a set of promises). Even the coming Messiah and His redemptive work are, in part, the fulfillment of this promise. So, the question, “To whom does this promise pertain?” is of crucial importance to virtually all biblical interpretation. Differences on how this promise is to be understood, and to whom—if anyone—it will be fulfilled, are at the heart of the divide between the reformed (covenantal) faith and premillennialism. Reformed theologians have historically taken one of two positions regarding the promise. The first is that God did not make any promises to the physical seed of Abraham; rather he made promises to a “spiritual seed” which includes all people of faith. Thus according to this view, at the present time the Church is the inheritor of the promises made to Abraham’s seed. The second position is that God made promises to Abraham’s physical seed, but Israel’s rejection of the Messiah invalidated their claim to those promises; as such, the promises have been taken away from Israel. Covenantalists who hold this latter position differ as to whether or not the promises have been transferred to the Church. The historic position of covenant theology is that the promises were transferred (in a “spiritual” or allegorical sense), but a more recent trend in covenantal interpretation is to view the promises as having been completely invalidated—this eliminates the need to explain how they would apply “spiritually” to the Church. Both of these positions are forms of what is called “replacement theology,” in that they view the Church as having replaced Israel (whether the promises are transferred or not). Neither of these reformed views sees any future for national Israel. In contrast to the reformed view, is premillennialism. There are, at present, two varieties of premillennialism: dispensational premillennialism (here referred to simply as “premillennialism”), and covenant premillennialism. Dispensational premillennialism is essentially the premillennialism of the early Church,

which viewed “Israel” and “the Church” as distinct entities. Covenant premillennialism is a fusion of covenant theology (replacement theology) with historic premillennialism. Since replacement theology and premillennialism are completely incongruous, we will regard “covenant premillennialism” as a theological anomaly, and simply refer to “premillennialism”—meaning, of course, historic dispensational premillennialism. Premillennialists maintain that God did indeed make promises to Abraham’s physical seed through the chosen line of Isaac and Jacob, and that those promises have not been invalidated since they were made unconditionally. Premillennialists recognize the existence of a “spiritual seed” consisting of all true believers, both Jew and Gentile; however, they do not accept the covenantal conclusion that the spiritual seed replaces the physical seed. Premillennialists maintain that the promise will be fulfilled to the physical seed, that is to those who are also Abraham’s spiritual seed (*i.e.*, redeemed Jews), whereas those who are of the spiritual seed of Abraham but not his physical seed participate in the spiritual blessings of the promise (*cf.* Gen. 12: 1-3). In other words, historic premillennialists do not view the Church as a replacement for Israel; they believe God will raise up an elect generation of Jews—the physical seed of Abraham—who will be redeemed and enter into the blessedness (fulfillment) of the promises made to their forefathers. The basis of this belief is both the unconditional nature of the promises made to them and the Old and New Testament prophecies regarding Israel in the latter days.

What we have then are two basic views on whether promises were made to Abraham’s physical seed; and if it can be determined that promises were made to Abraham’s physical seed, we must determine whether or not those promises have been forfeited by Israel and transferred in some sense to the Church. This issue is of great importance, especially in the interpretation of biblical prophecy, since its proper interpretation requires that we know to whom the promises were made and to whom they will be fulfilled—if at all.

Did God Make Promises to Abraham’s Physical Seed?

Were promises were made to Abraham’s physical seed, or simply to those who might share Abraham’s faith, regardless of any physical connection to him? In order to determine which of these ideas is correct we will need

to survey the passages in which God delineated the terms of His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3, 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18).

(Genesis 12:1) Now the LORD said to Abram,
“Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;
(2) And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
(3) And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” [NASB]

This first statement of the covenant is that God would make a great nation of Abraham (v. 2). The promise was given to Abraham before he entered the promised land (v. 1). We can be quite certain that Abraham understood this promise in a physical sense, both because of the absence of any alternative construct, and because of his subsequent actions and statements.

(Genesis 13:14) The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward;
(15) for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. (16) I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. (17) Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.” [NASB]

Genesis 13:14-17 records the next occasion on which God spoke of His promise to Abraham. This revelation was given after Abraham’s separation from Lot. Three provisions are expanded: the scope of the land to be inherited (v. 14); the permanence of the promise (v. 15); and the extent to which Abraham’s physical line would be fruitful (v. 16).

(Genesis 15:1) After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." (2) Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (3) And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." (4) Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." (5) And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (6) Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (7) And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." (8) He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" (9) So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." (10) Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. (11) The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. (12) Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. (13) God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. (14) But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. (15) As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. (16) Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." (17) It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. (18) On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: (19) the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite (20) and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim (21) and the

Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”
[NASB]

The fact that Abraham understood God’s promises in a physical sense is confirmed in 15:1-21. After God reiterated Abraham’s blessing under the covenant, Abraham questioned how this could be, “...since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus.” Whether this statement is merely a reference to an ancient custom, or reflects a bit of despair over the fact that he is now in his mid-eighties and still childless is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Abraham viewed the promise as necessitating a physical lineage. If there were any doubt that Abraham had misunderstood the divine intent, God cleared that up in verses 4-5. Far from correcting any misimpression that Abraham might have been under concerning the nature of his seed, God assures Abraham that he will have a physical heir, “...one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” God took Abraham outside, and as Abraham looked toward the countless stars, God assured him that he would have innumerable descendants. It is ironic that the passage which formed the very foundation of the reformation (Genesis 15:6, quoted in Romans 4:1-5) has been so poorly understood by some reformed scholars. The faith that Abraham exercised was faith that God would keep His promise by raising up a physical seed through whom those promises could ultimately be realized.

(Genesis 17:15) Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. (16) I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” (17) Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (18) And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” (19) But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. (20) As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. (21) But My covenant

I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.” [NASB]

There are numerous references in this passage to Abraham’s physical seed (vv. 2,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,15,16,19,21), and it is clear that Abraham understood this promise as pertaining to a physical seed (vv. 17-18). The focus of God’s conversation with Abraham in verses 15-21 is that Abraham will have a son by Sarah (vv. 15-16), and that the covenant will be fulfilled to this son’s line—to the expressed exclusion of Ishmael’s line. In verses 17-18 we see Abraham’s reaction to the news. Abraham’s preference, at the time, was that Ishmael’s line be the chosen seed, but that was not God’s plan (v. 19). God told Abraham that Sarah would bear a son who was to be named “Isaac,” and that He would establish His covenant with Isaac and his descendants after him, forever (v. 19). Reasonably, Abraham could only have understood this to mean that the promises made to him and his descendants would be fulfilled to this chosen (physical) line. Abraham’s statement in verse 18 that the chosen one might be Ishmael can be seen as a request by the fact that God responds in verses 20-21, granting a blessings of a lesser nature to Ishmael. Nevertheless, God made it clear that the covenant would be established with Isaac—not Ishmael (v. 21). Much of the story from 17:1-21:8 concerns the giving of this promised son to Abraham and Sarah, and it is only in the light of the seed-promise of the covenant that the full significance of the offering of Isaac can be appreciated. Abraham knew that God had promised to bless him, and the world, through Isaac’s line, and therefore considered that God would raise Isaac from the dead, if necessary, to do so (Heb. 11:17-19); which, incidentally, is an excellent illustration of the literal interpretation of future prophecy on both Abraham’s part and on the part of the writer of Hebrews who made this observation. So far, we have seen nothing that would lead us to believe that the promised seed was not a physical seed, and much to confirm to us that it was. We will come to the concept of a “spiritual seed” in due course. For now, we are simply seeking to determine whether or not the promises, as originally spoken, were to a physical seed, and the evidence so far has been overwhelming that it was.

(Genesis 22:1) Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” (2) He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you

love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” (3) So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (4) On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. (5) Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.” (6) Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. (7) Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (8) Abraham said, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. (9) Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. (10) Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. (11) But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” (12) He said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (13) Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. (14) Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, “In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.” (15) Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, (16) and said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, (17) indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. (18) In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” [NASB]

As mentioned, it is only in light of the promise of a physical seed descending through Isaac that the significance of the offering of Isaac can be fully appreciated. According to the inspired (and literal) interpretation of this event by the writer of the Book of Hebrews, Abraham acted not only in obedience, but also in faith when he offered Isaac. He believed that because Isaac was the promised son through whom the blessings of the covenant would be fulfilled, God would raise him up from the dead—since that would be the only way the promises could be literally fulfilled. This illustrates an important point: Abraham took God at His word (literally) concerning the promise of the covenant, and God encouraged him to do so. In fact, while it is apparent that Abraham took the promise literally, God never said anything to correct any misimpression on Abraham's part; rather He repeatedly encouraged Abraham's belief in the literal fulfillment of the promise. Verse 2 of this passage contains an interesting expression. Isaac is referred to as Abraham's "only son," even though he wasn't even the firstborn son. Why? Because Isaac was the only son of the covenant born to Abraham. Verse 16 repeats this statement. Verses 17-18 form one of the key statements regarding the importance of the seed of Abraham in the Old Testament, and given the context there can be no doubt that the seed that will be as the sand of the sea shore, through whom all of the nations of the earth will be blessed, is a physical seed—the greatest representative of which is Christ (Gal. 3:16).

From the standpoint of the Old Testament, it is clear that God did make promises to Abraham's physical seed. In fact, it would be correct to say that the Old Testament knows no other concept of the seed of Abraham than that of a physical seed.

Covenantalists sometimes take the position that even if promises were made to the physical seed it would be impossible to determine if such a seed even exists today (due primarily to assimilation through intermarriage). While much is made over this, the response is quite simple. In spite of the covenantalist's doubts about whether there is any Jewish racial identity today, there are a great many people who think otherwise. If there are no Jews today, who were the six million people who died in the holocaust? Were they placed in the death camps for purely "spiritual" reasons, or were they there because both they and the society that put them there considered them to be racially Jewish? The fact is that Jews have experi-

enced a high degree of isolation and persecution all down through the middle ages and into the modern period. How ridiculous to think that these persecuted people were merely Gentiles who “converted” to Judaism? That many Jews have intermarried is not problematic. Few, if any covenantalists would argue that Jesus wasn’t a Jew, yet he had two ancestors in his genealogy who were not Jews—Rahab and Ruth (Lk. 3:32 *cf.* Matt. 1:5). Finally, the whole question of who qualifies under the covenant is an issue that will be decided not by man, but by God—who is well able to make the determination. With these facts in mind, it seems apparent that it is impossible for covenantalists to sustain the case that the promises made to Abraham’s seed were not to his physical descendants. [In a paper published in “Nature” (vol. 385, January 2, 1997), authors Michael F. Hammer of the Laboratory of Molecular Systematics and Evolution at the University of Arizona; and Karl Skorecki, Sara Selig, Shraga Blazer, and Bruce Rappaport, of the Faculty of Medicine & Research Institute, Rambam Medical Centre; and Robert Bradman, Neil Bradman, P.J. Waburton, and Monic Ismajlowicz of the Department of Biology University College of London, state that Y-chromosome haplotype differences confirm a distinct paternal genealogy for the subjects in their study making claims to Jewish priestly ancestry. They state: “This result is consistent with an origin for the Jewish priesthood antedating the division of world Jewry into Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities, and is of particular interest in view of the pronounced genetic diversity displayed between the two communities. This conclusion is further supported by the relative preponderance of the YAP-, DYS19B haplotype in both populations, suggesting that this may have been the founding modal haplotype of the Jewish priesthood.” Although the original research was criticized as being incomplete, further work has confirmed the original conclusions. As of this writing there is a considerable body of literature on the genetic analysis of Jewish origins. Unfortunately for covenantalists, their arguments did not anticipate modern forensic science.]

Have the Promises Been Forfeited by Israel?

We must now tackle the question of whether or not the right to the promises under the covenant has been forfeited by Israel. If we find that the promises to Israel have been invalidated, then we would have to answer the additional question of whether or not those promises have been transferred to the Church (the traditional Reformed view, and the view of

Calvin), or whether they were simply forfeited without transfer (a more recent paradigm in covenantal interpretation).

There are four principle reasons for believing that the promises made to Abraham and to his seed have not been invalidated. We will use the word “invalidated,” instead of “forfeited” because some of Abraham’s seed have forfeited their personal participation in the blessings of the covenant by unbelief; however, as will be demonstrated, that does not invalidate the promises to the nation. How do we know this? Consider the following four reasons.

1. The covenant made with Abraham, and subsequently confirmed to his descendants, was an unconditional covenant, and was never dependant on Israel for its continued validity.

It is important to recognize that the covenant made with Abraham and his seed, and subsequently reaffirmed to his descendants, was unconditional. This does not mean that there is no condition to be met for the promises to be fulfilled. There is a condition for fulfillment, and that condition is genuine faith. Rather, the unconditional nature of the promise refers to the fact that Israel’s disobedience, both past and present, cannot invalidate the promise made to them because the validity of the promise was never linked to Israel’s faithfulness—only the “enjoyment” (*i.e.*, fulfillment) was conditioned upon faith. It is important that the distinction between the “enjoyment of blessing” under the covenant, and the “validity” of the covenant be understood. On this issue covenantalists are confused because they assume that if the Jews are not now enjoying the fulfillment of the promises that is an indication of the invalidation of the covenant itself. We must keep in mind that the promise was to a seed super-generationally (*i.e.*, not to each and every individual or generation without respect to their spiritual circumstance, but to those generations that would, as a collective body, or nation, believe). If a particular generation, or many generations are unfaithful that does not invalidate the covenant to the seed, because there is yet seed to come, some of whom we know (via Old and New Testament prophecy), will believe and enter into the blessedness of the promises). Even though generations of Abraham’s descendants have rejected their Messiah, yet the promise remains valid, ready to be fulfilled to those future generations.

How can we know the promises under the covenant were made unconditionally? The form of the covenant given in Genesis 15:9-21 is that of an unconditional, or unilateral covenant in which all of the responsibility for the fulfillment rests solely with one party; in this case the only responsible party is God. The scene in Genesis 15:1-21, in which Abraham divided various animals, and God, depicted by a great smoking furnace, passed between the divided pieces, represents the sealing of the covenant. The fact that only God passed between the divided pieces is significant. Normally, in this type of covenant, known as a “suzerainty-vassal” treaty, both parties would pass between the pieces together, indicating their mutual obligation to keep the conditions of the covenant. That the text makes the point that God alone passed between the pieces is highly significant, and indicative that the covenant obligations rest solely with Him. In other words, it was not up to Abraham or his descendants to do anything to insure the continued validity of this covenant. Of course no individual, nor the nation as a whole, could enter into the blessings (*i.e.*, the fulfillment) of the covenant apart from faith (Gen. 17:13-14). Nevertheless, faithlessness on the part of an individual or an entire generation of individuals could not invalidate the covenant; it would only exclude that individual or generation from the fulfillment. The validity of the covenant, and its enjoyment are, as we have observed, two distinct issues. God rejects those who reject the covenant relationship, but He does not reject the covenant itself, since it is made to an elect people.

The Palestinian covenant, which is ancillary to the Abrahamic covenant, clearly illustrates the point just made. This covenant, made with Israel on the eve of their entrance into the land of promise, seems to have had two principle purposes. The first was to ensure that the people understood that their inheritance of the land was the direct result of the promises previously made to Abraham (29:12-13). The second purpose was to clarify the conditions under which they could expect to enter into the enjoyment of the promise—the condition being their continued obedience to God—as an evidence of faith (29:16-29). One of the most interesting features of this covenant is found in 30:1-10 where God indicates that the children of Israel would rebel, and their rebellion would cost them the enjoyment of the covenant blessings, such that they would be dispersed from the land, but the covenant itself would not be invalidated; rather, the blessing would be reserved for a generation who would call upon Him, and to whom God would respond by bringing them back into the land.

This was fulfilled in the Babylonian captivity and subsequent return to the land, and serves as a very clear historical example of the distinction between the “validity” of the covenant and its “enjoyment” (*i.e.*, fulfillment).

(Deut. 30:1-10) When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, (2) and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, (3) then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. (4) Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. (5) He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (6) The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. (7) The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. (8) You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. (9) Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, (10) if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. [NIV]

Concerning the unconditional nature of the Davidic covenant (also ancillary to the Abrahamic covenant) God, through the Psalmist, in Psalm 89 says:

(Psa. 89:28) “I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. (29) I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. (30) If his sons

forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, (31) if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, (32) I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; (33) but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. (34) I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. (35) Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness and I will not lie to David (36) that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; (37) it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.” [NIV]

The unconditional nature of the promises is very apparent. While the promises remain valid regardless of Israel’s spiritual state, they will only be fulfilled when Israel returns to the LORD. That, of course, is the purpose of the future “day of the LORD”—to bring Israel back to God (cf. Ez. 37:1-28; Zech. 13:7-9).

2. History proves that the promises were never forfeited.

Even though Abraham’s descendants were disobedient and fell into idolatry, subsequent statements made in Scripture indicate that their disobedience did not invalidate the covenant. For example, the Abrahamic covenant is invoked in 1 Chronicles 16:16-18, a thousand years after it was made with Abraham. During much of the intervening time between the giving of the covenant and the time the words in 1 Chronicles 16:16-18 were spoken, Israel lived in idolatry, moral degradation, and unfaithfulness, yet the covenant itself was not invalidated. The psalmist in Psalm 105:10-11 says,

(Psa. 105:10) He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: (11) “To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit.” [NIV]

If disobedience, or lack of faith could invalidate the promises of God under the covenant of promise, it surely would not have survived the first one thousand years of Israel’s history. On the eve of Israel’s expulsion from the land in 586 B.C. because of rampant idolatry, the prophet Jeremiah related this word from God:

(Jer. 33:20) This is what the LORD says: “If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, (21) then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. (22) I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore.” [NIV]

The Abrahamic covenant (and the subsequent ancillary covenants) and the biblical statements reflecting back on them indicate that they were made unconditionally and eternally. This means they cannot have been invalidated by Israel’s past unbelief, and that God will fulfill them through His sovereign election of a future generation of Abraham’s physical descendants (Jer. 31:31-37).

3. Romans 11:1-36 clearly states that God’s plan includes a future for national Israel when they return to Him in faith.

Any New Testament passages stating or implying an eschatological future for physical Israel are significant because they would have been written after Israel’s rejection of their Messiah, and would indicate that God did not view Israel’s rejection as final. While Romans 11:1-36 is not the only teaching of the New Testament on this subject, it is the most explicit statement to the effect that God still intends to fulfill His promises to Israel.

(Romans 11:1-36) I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. (2) God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? (3) “LORD, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE.” (4) But what is the divine response to him? “I HAVE KEPT FOR MYSELF SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL.” (5) In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according

to God's gracious choice. (6) But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. (7) What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; (8) just as it is written, "GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR, EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT, DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY." (9) And David says, "LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP, AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM. (10) LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT, AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER." (11) I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. (12) Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! (13) But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, (14) if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. (15) For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (16) If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. (17) But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, (18) do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. (19) You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." (20) Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; (21) for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. (22) Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. (23) And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (24) For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? (25) For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be

wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; (26) and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB. (27) THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.” (28) From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; (29) for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (30) For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, (31) so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. (32) For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (33) Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (34) For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? (35) Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? (36) For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. [NASB]

Having written the most extensive treatise on salvation contained within the pages of the New Testament, and having established the fact that Jew and Gentile have equal access to God (10:11-13), Paul anticipates what would be a logical question in the minds of his readers: If it is so that the gospel has now gone to the world, and there is now, in the post-Cross (New Testament) era no distinction between Jew and Gentile, how does this truth fit with the promise made to Abraham and his physical seed? In other words: Is the gospel going to the world to be interpreted as an indication that God no longer intends to fulfill the promise made to Abraham and his descendants? (Of course the perceptive reader will no doubt realize that this question would have never been anticipated except for the fact that both the Apostle and his readers were very well aware of the fact that God did make a covenant with Abraham and his physical seed, and that the general expectation was for a literal fulfillment.) The question Paul poses is a logical one in light of the covenanted promises and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. One would think that Paul’s answer would have been understood by now; unfortunately, some interpreters

seem to be stricken with the same theological perplexity that Paul anticipated in his Roman readers. Paul's answer to the question is an unequivocal, "No!" No—what? "No,"—God has not rejected his people Israel. Some might suggest that Paul's answer is nothing more than a summation of what he had said previously (*i.e.*, that since there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile—Jews still have equal access to God). However, that is not at all what Paul is saying. Why would Paul argue passionately that individual Jews could be saved? No one in the early church questioned that individual Jews could be saved. In fact, the earliest church was composed exclusively of Jews. All of the Apostles, including Paul were Jews. To suggest that Paul is merely continuing his argument of equal access to the gospel is patently absurd. He is not talking about the possibility of individual Jews coming to salvation; he is talking about the disposition of the nation before God. It is interesting to note that Paul nowhere in this chapter refers to individual Jews (other than himself), but he does refer to "Israel" four times (vv. 1,2,7,26), to "the people" twice (vv. 1,2), and to "Jacob" ("Jacob" is synonymous with "Israel," *cf.* v. 26), all of which are references to the corporate body—that is, physical Israel. Now, let's get the question Paul anticipated, and its answer, straight. The question is not, "Do Jews still have access to God by faith in Christ"—a patently absurd question. The question is: Has God rejected His people *i.e.*, the ones whom He "foreknew" (*proegnō* is a reference to the covenant relationship, *cf.* Amos 3:2). The answer is "No" (v. 1), and it is restated in verse 2.

Having asked the anticipated question and given its answer, Paul in his characteristic style moves next to the explanation. His first argument is the same as our second argument above; that is, that history proves Israel's disobedience and lack of faith has not invalidated the covenant (vv. 2-6). As proof, Paul appeals to the Old Testament Scriptures. He quotes 1 Kings 19:10 in which Elijah complained to God that Israel in its spiritually degenerated state had forsaken the covenant, torn down God's alters, and killed His prophets. Nevertheless, in spite of all that, God did not abandon Israel. Why? Paul says it was because God had a "remnant" according to His grace. In other words, the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and his seed is not based upon works (*i.e.*, Israel's righteousness), but upon God's grace and His choice in election. Paul goes on to develop this point further in verses 6-9. In fact, he establishes from the Old Testament that God himself was the source of Israel's spiritual

stupor and blindness (vv. 7-10). How are we to understand this? Clearly Paul is indicating that God allowed Israel to stumble into spiritual darkness for a purpose—that He might manifest to them that their election as a nation was solely by grace.

Paul now repeats his original question in a different way. He asks: “Did they [Israel] stumble (*eptaisan* from *ptaiō* = “to stagger” or “stumble” —a recoverable misstep; metaphorically, “a blunder”) so as to fall (*pesōsin* from *piptō* = “to fall into ruin”— irrecoverably)? It was an acknowledged fact that Israel had stumbled; the question Paul addresses here is: Did this stumbling result in Israel’s complete and irrecoverable fall (*i.e.*, in this case, their disinheritance by God)? Paul’s answer is a definitive—“No!” (“May it never be” [*mē genoito*] is the Greek equivalent of the English expression, “absolutely not!”) Paul’s explanation of what happened, and why it happened, is that Israel’s transgression has resulted in the salvation of the Gentiles. (This, incidentally, illustrates a clear dispensational transition between the Old and New Testament economies.) Secondly, Paul informs us that God had a purpose in allowing Israel to stumble, and in the gospel being carried directly to the Gentiles; it was to provoke Israel to jealousy (*i.e.*, that they too as a people might desire to be in right relation to God). In verse 12 Paul reflects on the blessedness of Israel coming to God in the future. If God brought salvation to the world out of Israel’s spiritual failure, what will He bring out of their acceptance of Him? Paul develops this thought further in verse 15, where he says that Israel’s acceptance will result in “life from the dead”—possibly a reference to the physical resurrection promised to Israel in the last days (*cf.* Dan. 12:1-3, also Rev. 20:4). Interestingly, this resurrection is said to occur at the beginning of the millennium, shortly after Israel’s national conversion during the tribulation period, the literal interpretation of which is consistent only with premillennialism.

How is it that Israel could have failed so miserably and yet, as a nation, not have forfeited their right to the promises under the Abrahamic covenant? Paul’s answer is fourfold. First, because Israel’s calling is according to God’s grace. Just as individual sinners have no merit in which to boast of their own personal salvation, but are brought to God through His own divine election, so the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and to his descendants is on the same basis—how could it be otherwise? This point, Paul has already established in verses 2-10.

Secondly, we must expand our view of Israel to include the “root” from whence they came. Paul says in verse 16, “For if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too.” He now gives us an analogy. He says that Israel stands before God, with respect to the promises, with the same standing that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had. Obviously, he is not talking about personal salvation. Covenant relationship and salvation are two entirely distinct matters. Those who are the descendants of the chosen line (descending from Abraham through Jacob [Israel]) are the physically elect line. Whether or not individuals within that elect line exercise faith unto salvation and enter into the blessings of the covenant is a matter of spiritual election. In order for the covenant to be fulfilled, there must be both a physically and spiritually elect people, but the fact that Israel as a nation has not responded to God in faith does not abrogate their physical election, or the validity of the promises. It merely abates the fulfillment until the spiritual condition is met. This is the consistent teaching of both the Old and New Testaments.

Third, the right to the promises has not been forfeited because Israel’s hardening is only partial and temporary (vv. 17-27). Paul warns the Roman Christians not to assume an attitude of “superiority” over the branches that were broken off (*i.e.*, Israel in its [then] present state of unbelief), after all, he says, they (the Gentile believers) are not the natural branches, they are engrafted “wild” branches from another, uncultivated tree; they may partake of the sap of the root, but they are not the natural branches and should never lose sight of the fact that the root supports them, not they the root. We could well say that those who deny the continued validity of God’s covenant with Israel undercut their own standing. Such is the nature of covenantalism; in its arrogance that the Church has now supplanted Israel, it does precisely what Paul here warns the Church not to do. Paul even anticipated such a response (v. 19), and again repeats his warning, “...you stand by faith. Do not be conceited [*mē hupsēla phronei* = “do not exalt yourselves in your own minds”], but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you.” This introduces an interesting concept: If God broke off Israel, He can certainly break off the church if it becomes faithless—referring, of course to the visible church, not the true body of Christ.) Indeed, God can re-engage Israel if they do not remain in unbelief (vv. 23-24). How would any of this discussion in Romans 11 make sense if “Israel” and “the Church” now

formed the same metaphysical entity as covenantalists maintain? What Paul has stated as a mere possibility in verses 17-24 (*i.e.*, that Israel could be grafted back into the tree), he now declares to be a future certainty (vv. 25-27). He reveals to his readers a mystery in order to keep their egos in check. The mystery, which it appears is still hidden from some, is that Israel's hardening is only partial (*apo merous* = "of [or from] a part") and temporary (until such time as the "fullness of the Gentiles comes in"), *cf.* v. 25. Once the fullness of the Gentiles comes in (*i.e.*, once God's purpose for the Church age is complete) "all Israel will be saved." (This seems to be a summation of truths derived from various portions of the Old Testament rather than a quotation as indicated in some translations.) Paul's assertion that Israel will undergo a national conversion in the future is consistent with many Old Testament passages (Isa. 44:1-5, 21-23; Jer. 3:15; 23:14-18; 31:1, 27-34; Ez. 11:19-20; 20:1-44; 36:25-32; 37:11-14, 21-28; 43:6-9; Hos. 6:1-3; 14:4-8; Joel 2:12-17, 38-32; Mic. 7:18-20; Zech. 13:7-9), and this truth forms a major part of the basis of premillennialism. The truth that Paul reveals here, that God has a future planned for Israel in which the nation will come to faith, and which will result in the covenant being fulfilled to them (verse 27 specifically mentions the covenant), evidences that promises were made to Abraham's physical seed, and that those promises have never been revoked or forfeited. Furthermore, the conception of the future given in this passage is precisely that of historic premillennialism—not covenantalism.

The fourth reason that the right to the promises has not been forfeited, is because God's gifts to and calling of Israel are irrevocable (vv. 28-29). Although at the time this letter was written, Israel was (and remains to this day) in rejection of the gospel (v. 28), they are nonetheless, according to God's choice (*eklogē* = "election"), beloved for the sake of the fathers to whom the promises were made. Let's stop and think about this for a moment. It is sometimes argued that this statement is simply referring to elect Jews within the Church, but Paul cannot be referring to elect Jews within the Church, since he states that from the standpoint of the gospel "they are enemies." Clearly, he was referring to a people [Israel] who at the time he wrote were not saved—who, in fact, had rejected the gospel; and he states that despite their current spiritual condition, they are still (according to God's election) "beloved," because of their fathers. Finally, Paul completes his thought in verse 29 with these words, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." The preposition (*gar* = "for") links

this clause as being a continuation of the previous thought. Where does this line of reasoning lead us? Simply to this: The gifts and the calling of God, once given, will not be rescinded. This doesn't mean that God may not discontinue temporary endowments as we see happen in the case of Saul in the Old Testament. Such endowments were not "gifts" and never intended as permanent works. What Paul's statement means is that God will never take back a "gift;" and there can be no doubt that God's promise to Abraham constituted an eternal gift, as Paul himself clearly implies here, and which is expressly stated by God in the giving of the promise (Gen. 13:15; 17:7,9,19). Paul concludes his line of argumentation by comparing the present disobedience of Israel to the former disobedience of the Gentiles, neither of which can be seen as a final disposition. God previously shut up the Gentiles in their disobedience in order to show them mercy (by bringing them to the end of themselves) and he is now doing the same with Israel (vv. 30-32). If this seems somewhat incredible, it seemed incredible to Paul too, for in vv. 33-36 he breaks out into a doxology of the unsearchable and inscrutable ways of God!

4. The post-rejection writings of the New Testament continue to picture a premillennial future kingdom consistent only with a literal fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham.

If Israel's rejection of Christ resulted in their forfeiture of the promises, that fact certainly ought to be reflected in the New Testament. However, what is clear is that the New Testament reaffirms a future for Israel in a literal earthly kingdom, with Christ personally present and reigning (precisely the position of premillennialism). Jesus, already having been rejected by the leaders of the nation and knowing that His time was very short, spoke prophetically of His return and the establishment of His earthly kingdom in Matthew 24-25. The Book of Revelation in chapters 19-20 gives a clear picture of the premillennial return of Christ, and of the resurrection of the dead and the ensuing millennial kingdom, precisely in accordance with the picture we have from Zechariah 14:1-21 and Matthew 24-25. In other words, the New Testament knows nothing of the disinheritance of Israel asserted by covenantalists. Revelation, the last book of the New Testament to be written, clearly pictures a place for the Israel as evidenced by the ministry of the 144,000 Jews that are sealed, twelve thousand from each tribe of Israel. [Covenantalists characteristically allegorize this. Let's indulge them for a moment to see how poor this line

of reasoning really is. So, what is the allegorical interpretation? The well-known Lutheran commentator, R.C.H. Lenski, says the 144,000 represent “the Church Militant” (The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation, pp.244-254). If so, what is the significance of the twelve tribes? Lenski says that the twelve tribes of Israel went out of existence; ten disappeared after the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the other two disappeared in the Roman invasion of A.D. 70, so on that basis they cannot be intended literally in this passage. This is certainly an overly simplistic view on Lenski’s part. Are we to assume that no Jews in the north fled to the south in the face of the impending Assyrian invasion? Are we to assume that after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 all Jews simply disappeared? Is Lenski really unaware that well before the A.D. 70 invasion there were significant Jewish settlements (some very old and influential) throughout the Roman Empire, Africa, Persia, and the Far East? While it would be ridiculous to think that every person today claiming to be Jewish is descended from Abraham, it is equally ridiculous to think that there are no descendants of Abraham living today. Covenantalists counter that it would be impossible to validate their racial claim after so long a period (see, Albertus Pieters, The Seed of Abraham, pp. 19-20). In so saying, they show the humanly rationalistic side of covenant theology, for in order to fulfill God’s promises, it is only necessary that God himself know who are Abraham’s seed. (See also the previous citation concerning modern genetic evidence of Jewish racial identity.) Nowhere is the bias of covenantal interpretation more evident than in its treatment of passages dealing with Israel—but then that is the very purpose of covenant theology, to replace Israel with the Church—precisely what Paul warned the Roman Church about. Suffice it to say that the New Testament nowhere indicates that Israel’s promises have been forfeited. Quite the opposite, New Testament eschatology is built squarely on the frame of the Old Testament promises and prophecies.

Does Matthew 21:43 Imply the Disinheritance of Israel?

Covenantalists object that Matthew 21:43 implies that Israel was disinherited because of the rejection of their Messiah.

(Matthew 21:43) “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.” [NASB]

If we came to this passage with no knowledge of either the predisposing Old Testament teaching on this subject, or subsequent New Testament teaching regarding God's plan and purpose for national Israel, we might misunderstand it to imply that Israel had been disinherited. However, given the biblical context, we realize that such a conclusion would be thoroughly inconsistent with the remainder of scriptural teaching. There are two well-established principles of hermeneutics that bear heavily on the proper interpretation of this passage. The first principle requires that interpreters understand unclear or ambiguous passages (passages for which there are more than one interpretive solution—as is the case here) in the light of the teaching of other, less ambiguous passages. The second principle requires that Scripture be interpreted within the broader context of the biblical teaching (*i.e.*, biblical theology). When we observe these principles, we see that the interpretation of this passage to mean that Israel has been disinherited is not tenable. Why? There are a couple of reasons. First, if this passage were taken to mean (hypothetically) that Israel has been disinherited, it would be the only passage in the Bible to that effect. While it is not impossible for a truth to be taught in only one place, we should be highly suspicious of the validity of such a conclusion, particularly if it has major theological implications. Second, the disinheritance of Israel is not the only interpretive option for the meaning of this passage. Since there is another option, we have to consider whether or not the other option best fits with the biblical context. In order to sort out the interpretive options, we need to explore two questions. 1) Does having the kingdom “taken from you (Israel)” necessitate Israel's disinheritance as a nation (*i.e.*, invalidation of the promises made under the Abrahamic covenant)? 2) To what aspect of the “kingdom” is Christ here referring—the physical (visible) kingdom, or the mystery (invisible) kingdom of God (which includes all redeemed people)? There is no question that Christ is saying that some aspect of the kingdom would be taken from Israel and given to another people (*ethnos* is characteristically used to denote Gentile nations). That this statement cannot reasonably be taken to refer to the disinheritance of Israel can be seen from the fact that, as we have already observed, the promises were made unconditionally, and the fact that God still intends to fulfill those promises to Israel was repeated in the New Testament after Christ made this statement (*cf.* Rom. 11:1-36). As to which aspect of the kingdom this passage refers, it seems apparent that it must be the “invisible” aspect of the kingdom (sometimes referred to as the “mystery kingdom,” or the “spiritual kingdom”). More often than not,

the phrase “kingdom of God” as used in the gospels is a reference to the invisible aspect of the kingdom—it is seldom used of the physical aspect (*cf.*, Matt. 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; Mk. 1:14-15; 4:11; 9:1,47; 12:34; Lk. 4:43; 6:20; 10:9; 11:20; 12:31; 17:20-21). [Covenantalists almost universally construe the invisible aspect of the kingdom as a redefining of the kingdom program (*i.e.*, a programmatic shift in which the physical kingdom promised to Israel is replaced by a spiritual conception of the kingdom fulfilled to the Church). However, Scripture is clear that the broader kingdom program includes both a physical aspect in relation to Israel, as well as a spiritual aspect.] Given what we know, it seems likely that Christ in this passage was saying that because Israel had rejected Him, the gospel (the key to the spiritual “kingdom of God”) would be taken from them (*i.e.*, from their exclusive domain) and given to the nations, where it would bear fruit (a pronounced dispensational transition, we should note). There is, of course, no implication that this condition is to be permanent. To suggest that this represents a disinheritance of Israel’s promises of a physical kingdom under the Abrahamic covenant is neither required by Christ’s statement, nor is it consistent with the broader biblical context (especially Romans 11:1-36). Since it is not the physical aspect of the kingdom that is given to “another people,” it is not the physical promise that was taken away from Israel—though the fulfillment will certainly have to await Israel’s spiritual regeneration in the future.

Is There a “Spiritual Seed” of Abraham?

What we have observed so far is that God did make promises to the physical seed of Abraham. Those promises are embodied in the Abrahamic covenant (and the ancillary Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants), and they have not been forfeited by Israel, though Israel has been in unbelief since before the present Church age began. Having established that the promise was to Abraham’s physical seed and that they have not been disinherited, we are now ready to explore the question of whether there exists a “spiritual seed” of Abraham, and if so, how it relates to the promise made under the covenant to Abraham and his descendants.

The New Testament is clear that just as there is a physical seed of Abraham, so there is also a “spiritual seed,” which includes all of the redeemed of this age. The spiritual seed is composed of those individuals who share Abraham’s faith, and who because of that come under the Abrahamic covenant. (Remember, the Abrahamic covenant includes distinct promises

to Abraham's physical posterity and to the Gentile nations—these are not mutually exclusive programs.) The question is: What is the relationship between the physical seed of Abraham and the spiritual seed? The concept of the spiritual seed is communicated in three key passages (though the term “spiritual seed” is not actually employed). Those passages are: Romans 4:16-25, Galatians 3:23-20, and 6:11-16. Let's briefly look at each of these passages.

(Romans 4:16-25) For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (17) (as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”) in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (18) In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.” (19) Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; (20) yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, (21) and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. (22) Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. (23) Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, (24) but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, (25) He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification. [NASB]

Verse 16 of this passage states that all who are of faith are considered to be Abraham's seed. While the term “spiritual seed” does not appear, we must understand Paul's statement as referring to a seed in a “spiritual” sense, because it cannot be true in any other sense. It is important to note that Paul does not spiritualize the physical seed—they are clearly distinguished from the spiritual seed. Notice how Paul indicates the unity of the spiritual seed (both saved Jews and Gentiles) while maintaining the distinctness between the physical seed and the spiritual seed. He says in

verse 16, “in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants [*panti tō spermati* = “all the seed,” *i.e.*, not just to the physical seed, but to the spiritual seed as well], not only to those who are of the Law (*i.e.*, not only to the Jews—*i.e.*, the physical seed), but also to [*alla kai*, signifying something additive] those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.” There is nothing in this statement to indicate that the spiritual seed displaces the physical seed.

(Galatians 3:23) But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. (24) Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. (25) But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (26) For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (27) For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise. [NASB]

Our focus is on verses 26-29. Here Paul refers to all believers (whether Jew or Greek, male or female) as one in Christ; and if we are one in Christ, then we are all Abraham’s “offspring” (*sperma* = “seed”—here used metaphorically). This statement is no different than what we have already observed. In the post-Law economy in which we are living, all believers are, metaphorically speaking, “Abraham’s seed.” That, however, should not obscure the fact that some (*i.e.*, Israelites according to the flesh) are also Abraham’s physical seed. Again, covenantalists take these two truths as mutually exclusive, even though there is no support in this passage—or any others—that the spiritual seed replaces the physical seed. Rather, Paul makes it clear that both seeds participate in the promise respectively—the physical seed, in the physical aspects of the promise, and the spiritual seed in the spiritual aspects of the promise. Of course some (*i.e.*, saved Jews) participate in both aspects and are referred to according to a special designation as, “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

(Galatians 6:11) See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. (12) Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that

they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. (13) For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. (14) But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (15) For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (16) And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. [NASB]

The letter to the Galatian Church was occasioned by the teaching of some Judaists to the effect that believers were still under obligation to the Law, including the obligation of circumcision (vv. 12-13). It is within this context that Paul asserts neither circumcision nor uncircumcision conveys any benefit with respect to salvation (*i.e.*, becoming a “new creation” in Christ). However, to argue that Paul’s statement here implies that the promise made to the physical seed is null and void is to completely ignore the context in which he is speaking. Paul is not discussing the future of Israel, or the validity of God’s promises to them. He is only saying that salvation is a matter of faith, not works—regardless of whether one happens to be a Jew or a Gentile. In fact, we could well say that being a Jew conveys little, if any, benefit in this present dispensation, since Jews saved in this age are accounted as part of the Church rather than national Israel. However, there will come a time in the future when God fulfills His promise to Israel, and Jewish identity will take on great significance as it relates to the fulfillment of those promises. [The reference to “the Israel of God” refers to saved Jews within the Church; this is the most reasonable understanding of the expression since the Church is nowhere else referred to as “Israel,” nor would it seem reasonable to apply this designation to the Church given Paul’s repeated contrast of the two entities, *cf.* Rom. 11:1-36.]

The Relationship Between Abraham’s Physical Seed and His “Spiritual Seed”

We have seen that God did make promises to Abraham’s physical seed, and that those promises have not been rescinded. We have also seen that there is a “spiritual seed” of Abraham, of which all the redeemed of this age are part. The question remains as to the nature of the relationship between these two “seeds,” one physical, the other spiritual. However,

before we can answer this question we need to make one additional observation regarding Abraham's physical non-elect seed (*i.e.*, those descendants of Abraham who are not part of the elect physical line).

Just as there is an elect physical line descending from Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, so there is a non-elect physical line that descended from Abraham. This fact is clear from both the Old and New Testaments. Consider the following Old Testament passages.

(Genesis 17:15) Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. (16) I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." (17) Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (18) And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" (19) But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. (20) As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. (21) But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year." [NASB]

(Genesis 21:9) Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. (10) Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." (11) The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. (12) But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. (13) And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant." [NASB]

These passages unmistakably evidence the election of a particular Abrahamic line through Isaac, with Ishmael's line being excluded from

the covenant, though God did make a separate, extra-covenantal promise concerning Ishmael's line (*cf.* 21:13). Abraham also had other sons and daughters, but they too were separated from the designated (elect) physical line (25:1-6). Note especially 22:2, where Isaac is referred to by God as Abraham's "only son." This is not to be understood simply as Abraham's only "remaining" son; Ishmael at that time apparently still maintained some connection (25:8-10). Isaac was, rather, Abraham's only son of the covenant, and God confirmed the covenant to him and to his descendants (26:24). We see this division between an elect physical line and a non-elect physical line again in the case of Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau. (Gen. 25:19-34; 27:1-40). This is the last subdivision of Abraham's line. All of the covenanted people from Jacob forward bear his name, which God changed to "Israel" (Gen. 32:28, 35:10). As God had done with Isaac, so He confirmed His covenant with Jacob (28:10-15; 35:9-12). Paul elucidates on the subdivision of Abraham's line by divine election in Romans 9:1-15.

(Romans. 9:1) I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, (2) that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. (3) For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, (4) who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, (5) whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (6) But it is not as though the word of God has failed For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; (7) nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." (8) That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. (9) For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." (10) And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; (11) for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, (12) it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." (13) Just

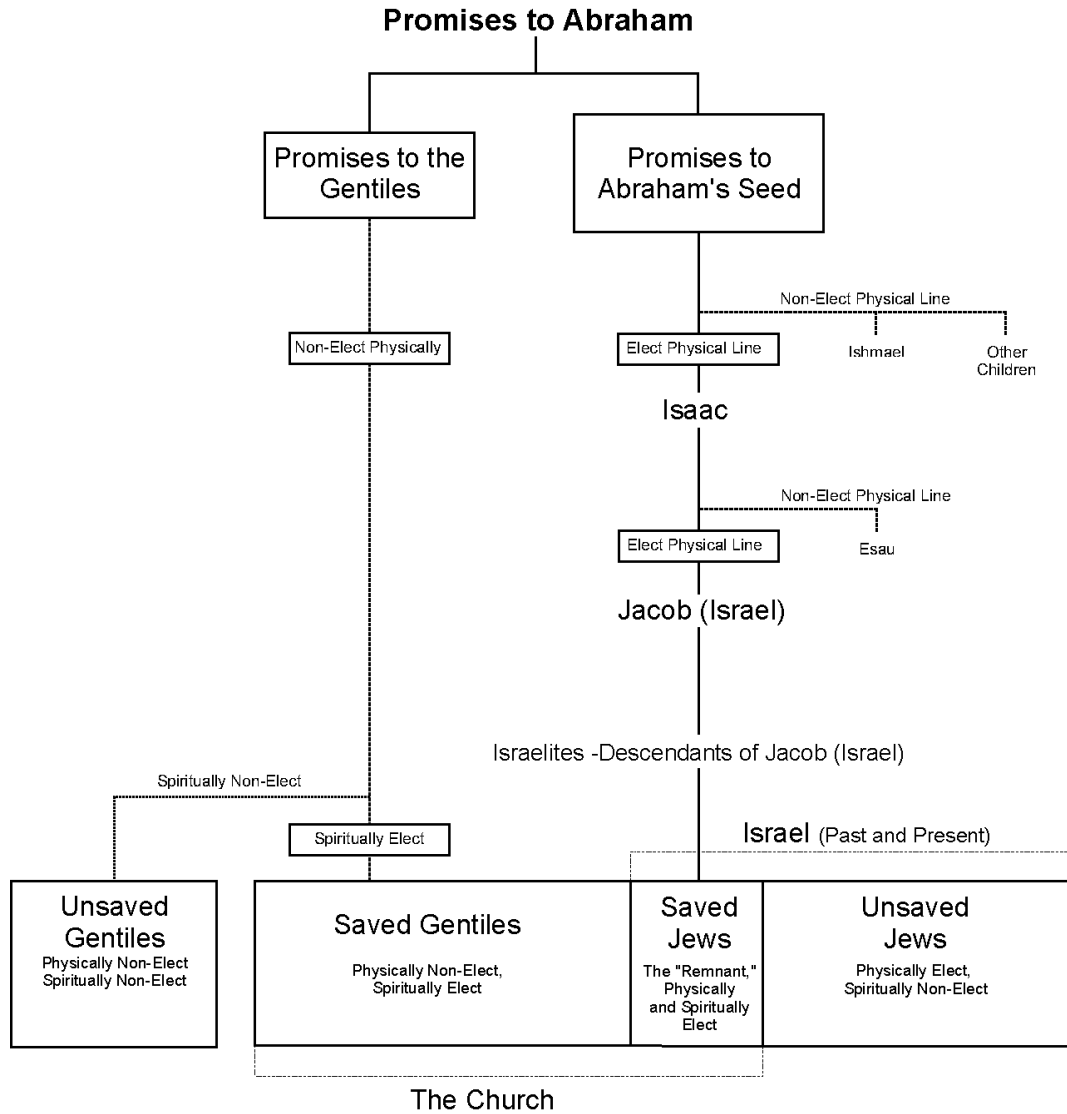
as it is written, “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.” (14) What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! (15) For He says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.”

While Paul’s thrust in this chapter is personal election, he illustrates it by way of analogy with the election of a particular line from among Abraham’s seed—the elect physical line through Isaac and Jacob. While the details of election are not within the scope of our present topic, it is apparent that Paul confirms what we have already observed from the Old Testament passages above—that there is both an elect physical line and a non-elect physical line that descended from Abraham. The important thing to notice is that not all of Abraham’s descendants inherit the promises—only those of the elect physical line. This concept is a building block in our understanding of how the promise will ultimately be realized because it prepares our thinking for the fact that not all of Abraham’s seed will inherit the promise.

Having seen that there is an elect physical seed within the line of Abraham, we are now ready to add an additional concept: There is also a spiritually elect seed within Abraham’s line; that is, within the elect physical line descending through Jacob (Israel), there are spiritually elect and spiritually non-elect individuals. (There are also spiritually elect individuals who are not of Abraham’s physical seed, and we will bring them into the discussion in a moment.) While Paul’s statement in 9:6 that “...they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” primarily concerns election within the physical line, he makes a spiritual application to this in verse 27 (*cf.* v. 32) where he refers to the salvation of the remnant (*i.e.*, those of faith within the larger physically elect body of Israel). Of course, we know from our previous observations that spiritually elect individuals (both Jews and non-Jews) form the “spiritual seed” of Abraham (Rom. 4:16-25; Gal. 3:23-29; 6:15-16). With this information we are now ready to delineate the relationship between physical and spiritual election, and how these truths relate to the question of who is Abraham’s seed, and to whom the promises of the covenant will be fulfilled. (Refer to the illustration below.)

Abraham produced several lines of people. The promises under the covenant that God made with Abraham passed only to one branch of Abraham's immediate descendants, those born through Isaac. Ishmael's line did not inherit the promises under the covenant (we may refer to them as non-elect physically). This does not mean that Ishmael and his descendants (or for that matter any other physically non-elect individuals) were not, or could not be in right relation to God. We are only tracing the line of inheritance with respect to the blessings of the covenant. The promise passed from Isaac to Jacob, but not to Esau, Jacob's brother. This was, according to the Apostle Paul's interpretation, a matter of divine election. Again, one line (Jacob's) becomes the elect line and Esau's line is seen to be another non-elect line with respect to the inheritance of the covenant blessings. There is no further subdivision of the physical line beyond Jacob (Israel), and it is no mere coincidence that the people of the covenant are henceforth referred to as "Israelites." As regards the inheritance of the promises specified to Abraham's seed, the inheritance is limited to that seed which has descended from Abraham, through Isaac, to Jacob, and through Jacob to his descendants (the children of Israel). This does not mean that all of those descendants who are in this line will experience the fulfillment of the promises; for as both Old and New Testaments teach, the promises, while passed through a physical line, can only be accessed by faith. This means, as Paul says in Roman 9:6 and 27 "...they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." There is then, within Israel, a remnant (Rom. 9:27) which are also Abraham's seed by faith (*i.e.*, his spiritual as well as physical children). It is this remnant that is qualified to receive the promises under the covenant. They are the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). Those who are of the elect physical line, but who have rejected Israel's hope (embodied the person of Christ, their Messiah) are disqualified under the covenant (since it is a covenant of faith, *cf.* Gal. 3:6-9). Of course, the spiritual seed is not limited to members of Abraham's elect physical line, but is composed of all who share in his faith. Nevertheless, while all the spiritual seed of Abraham are blessed, there is no basis for believing that the promises specific to the physical seed have somehow been mystically transferred to the spiritual seed as is the usual position of Covenant Theology. Each receives its own blessing. The spiritual seed receive salvation and all of its attendant blessings; in addition, those of the spiritual seed who are also of the elect physical seed are entitled to the specific national and physical blessings promised to them under the covenant. In other words, the covenant contains two sets of

blessings, one to those who are of Abraham's elect physical line (who also share his faith), and one to those who are not of Abraham's elect physical line (yet share his faith). To participate in either, one must be Abraham's "spiritual seed." In the final analysis there are four streams of humanity. Unserved Jews (who are elect physically, but non-elect spiritually), unserved Gentiles (who are non-elect, both physically and spiritually), saved Gentiles (who are non-elect physically, yet elect spiritually), and saved Jews (who are elect both physically and spiritually). Of these four groups, only the spiritually elect share in the spiritual blessings, and only the spiritually and physically elect share in the national (physical) blessings. As can be seen, this paradigm has tremendous implications not only for understanding future prophecy, but for the interpretation of Scripture in general, and disagreement over the nature of Abraham's seed and their relationship to the covenant is at the heart of the disagreement between premillennialists and covenantalists, and their fundamentally divergent interpretations of the Scripture.



Conclusions

From our study, we have seen that God did indeed make a covenant with Abraham and his elect physical seed. That covenant was unconditional, and Israel has not, in fact cannot be disinherited from the gift of God. As is the case with personal redemption, so the fulfillment of Israel's bless-

ings under the covenant will be the product of divine election. Israel's present condition as a spiritual "outcast" is not the result of disinheritance, but rather a temporary condition imposed by God for the purpose of bringing the nation to repentance and faith, in the future, when God will conclude the present "time of the Gentiles," and re-graft Israel into its place of promised blessing. Of course, this leads to a premillennial conception of the return of Christ and establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

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