**THE FIRST PROMISE - OFFSPRING**

**THE INDIVIDUAL OFFSPRING**

**THE INDIVIDUAL OFFSPRING IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS (Part 1)**

**PAUL’S CONCEPT OF THE OFFSPRING**

Paul identifies the Hebrew ‘*zera’* with Christ in Galatians 3:16. The word is a grammatical collective and refers most naturally to the descendants of Abraham in its occurrences in Genesis. But Paul also applied the concept corporately in Galatians 3:29: ‘*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed’* (c.f. Romans 4:13-18; 9:6-9). To Paul the concept of the seed allowed for one individual as well as many. The collective function of the Hebrew ‘*zera’* allows the writer to refer to the group or to a representative individual of that group.

Paul says in the Galatians 3 passage that there were two heirs of the promise – Abraham and Christ. Paul’s argument is that the promise reigns from Abraham to Christ. The Law did not nullify it (3:17). Christ is heir to the promise along with Abraham (3:16) and only those who are united to Christ by faith may share those blessings (3:29).

Since Paul attributed to Christ the role of principal heir, He is not only the promise’s recipient but also its mediator. In the progress of God’s redemptive activity, the terms of the promise were guaranteed to Christ as the offspring, and since the offspring is also the mediator of the promised blessings (Genesis 26:4), He was given the privilege of granting those blessings to all who share its benefits.

Was Paul in agreement with the broad range of Old Testament revelation in his understanding of the promise of the offspring? The answer lies in examining the references to that promise in the Old Testament, beginning with **the Davidic covenant** in 2 Samuel 7.

The background here was David’s desire to build a house for the Lord (7:1-3). The prophet Nathan approved at first (7:3) but later received a revelation from the Lord that David would not build this house; rather the Lord would build a house for David (7:11). The house of the Lord David wished to build was the temple. This work, he learnt, would be accomplished by his offspring (7:12,13). The house God would build for David would be a dynasty (7:16,19). The promise thus secured a line of kings who were descended from David and who would rule over the kingdom established by him.

The elements of the Davidic promise are very similar to those of the Abrahamic promise. Like Abraham, David is promised that:

* his name would be great (7:9)
* the nation is promised security in its own land (7:16)
* offspring (7:11,12)
* kings are to descend from him (7:7:12-16)
* God’s conscious blessing (7:29)
* God is the Israelites’ God and they are His people (7:7:24)
* the promise is eternal (7:13,16, 24,25,29)

While it appears the only element of the Abrahamic promise that seems to be lacking is the extension of God’s blessing to Gentiles, this concept may be found in *‘this is the law of* *mankind*’ in 7:19. The phrase is obscured in most translations.[[1]](#footnote-1) Taken in its simplest and most literal sense, the phrase is saying (slightly awkwardly) that the promise that David’s house would continue is the established body of teaching (Hebrew: *torah*)[[2]](#footnote-2) for mankind. There is only one body of teaching that relates the concept of the offspring to the destiny of mankind and that is the promise given to Abraham. This understanding emphasises the continuity between the offspring of the Abrahamic promise and the offspring of David. Both are viewed as mediating the divine blessing to all humanity (c.f. Genesis 22:18).

Not only is continuity maintained in this view but there is a sharpening of focus. In 2 Samuel 7 the emphasis is on the Davidic dynasty and not the descendants of Abraham as a whole. In some way the dynasty of David bears a relationship to humanity. This prepares us for the great prophetic announcements about the Messiah, the future Davidic King.

Two other Old Testament sources support the idea that David’s dynasty was to be of infinite duration. In Psalm 89 the psalmist affirms that David’s line will be established ‘*as long as the heavens endure’* (89:29) and his throne is to last ‘*forever … like the sun … established forever like the moon’* (89:36,37). The second source is the Prophets, who envisioned a messianic king whose kingdom was described in Davidic terms. Isaiah said there would be no end ‘*of the increase of his government and peace’* (9:6). Jeremiah said that David would never lack a man to sit on his throne (33:17-22). Ezekiel stated ‘*David my servant will be their prince forever’* (37:25). The prophets saw a continuing Davidic dynasty that found its expression in a king whose eternal reign would bring eternal peace and justice.

This restatement of the promise in 2 Samuel 7 affirmed that God was continuing to operate on the basis of His promise long after the time of Abraham. If 2 Samuel 7:19 is not understood to refer to the mediatorial function of the offspring, there exists no bridge between the patriarchal and prophetic expressions of the promise of offspring relative to the mediatorial function. There is no clear written revelational material upon which the prophets could have based the concept of the mediatorial function of the Messiah relative to the promise. There is much in 2 Samuel 7 to indicate that the Davidic offspring will receive the promises but there remains nothing to indicate that the offspring will mediate them. Yet there is a strong corpus of material in the prophets that assumes the mediatorial office of the Messiah.

In the promise given to Abraham, the concept of the offspring appeared to have only a national perspective, referring to the Hebrew people. The administration of the promise through a royal dynasty was only hinted at in the reference to kings who would descend from Abraham. But when God established the Davidic dynasty by His promise to him, the reference to kings among Abraham’s descendants was given clarity and meaning.

This brings us to **the writings of the Prophets**. The redemption of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees is a part of Isaiah’s affirmation of hope for Israel: ‘*Therefore this is what the Lord who redeemed Abraham says to the house of Jacob: ‘No longer will Jacob be ashamed* …’ ‘ In Isaiah 41:8-10, Isaiah appealed to Israel’s relationship with Abraham to affirm that the Lord had not rejected His people: ‘*But you, O Israel, my servant Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend … do not fear, for I am with you*.’ ‘And in 51:2,3 Isaiah uses God having made of Abraham a great nation, the basis of assurance that He would continue to bless the nation: ‘*Look to Abraham, your father … When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many. The Lord will surely comfort Zion.’* Hosea said that ‘*the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted’* (1:10), reflecting the language of the Abrahamic promise (Genesis 22:17). Micah gave the assurance that God would again ‘*show mercy to Abraham’* (7:20) and fulfil His oath to the fathers.

A number of prophets who proclaimed that the promise would never be nullified also fore-saw the demise of the kingdom of Judah (inferring and including the collapse of the Davidic monarchy). But the prophets still affirmed that the Davidic dynasty would not fail, that a descendant of David would mediate the eternal promise for God’s people. It is this prophetic concept that Paul picks up in Galatians 3:16.

Isaiah spoke of a child to be born, whose government would have no end. His association with the Davidic line was in the alignment of his kingdom with the throne of David (9:7). His mediatorial function with regard to the promise is seen in His restoration of the land (9:1) and the security He gives His people (9:7).

The prophet Jeremiah saw the fulfilment of the Davidic promise in a ‘*righteous Branch’* raised up by the Lord ‘*to David’* (23:5). The ‘Branch’ is connected with the Davidic dynasty in Jeremiah 33:20,21, where the prophet says that if God’s covenant with the day and night can be broken, ‘*then my covenant with David my servant … can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne’* (33:21). Jeremiah soundly linked the continuity between the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants: ‘*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’* (33:22). The enduring nature of the Davidic dynasty is expressed in 33:17 ‘*David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel’* as well as in the guarantee that the Davidic covenant will never be broken (33:20-22).

Amos fore-saw the restoration of David’s dynasty, resulting in the return of Israel to their land, ‘*never again to be uprooted’* (9:11-15).

Micah spoke of a ruler from David’s birthplace in Bethlehem whose ‘*origins are from of old from ancient times’* (5:2).

Ezekiel affirmed the close association of the Messiah with the Davidic dynasty by applying the name ‘David’ directly to the Messiah (37:24,25).

Zechariah applied the Davidic theme of the Branch to the Messiah in 3:5 and 6:12.

There are two lines of thought in these passages. First, there is the enduring nature of the Davidic dynasty. By stressing this, the prophets established a vital connection between the Abrahamic promise and their own messianic expectation. This preserved hope and nurtured faith in the emergency posed by the impending demise of the monarchy. The second line of thought is the relationship of the Messiah to the terms of the promise. This was in Paul’s mind in his use of the Greek word *sperma* (seed, offspring) to Christ in Galatians 3:16.

In the writings of the Prophets, the Messiah is pictured as both the recipient of the promise and mediator of the promises, just as Abraham was. Each element of the promise finds some kind of expression in royal time-period of the Messiah.

In Isaiah 9, the promise of the offspring applies to the Messiah in the relationship He sustains with David’s line. He belongs to David’s dynasty (9:7). He is a shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1). The use of the term ‘Branch’ by Jeremiah speaks of one who will emerge from David’s line (23:5) as the offspring of David.

The promise of the land is inherent in the assurance of national security under the rule of the Davidic king (Isaiah 11:12-16; Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16; Amos 9:14,15; Micah 5:4)

The royal aspect of the offspring, a concept that figured in both the Abrahamic and Davidic statements of the promise, is found in the themes that relate Him to David’s royal line (Isaiah 9:7; 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15,17,21).

The extent of the rule of the Davidic king to Gentiles as well as Jews is found in Isaiah 11:10; Amos 9:12 (c.f. Acts 15:15-21) and possibly Micah 5:2,3.

The concept of a good name found in both the Abrahamic and Davidic expressions of the promise was made only to the immediate recipients – Abraham and David – and not to their descendants. Because Jesus Christ is the heir of the promise, we find references to the renown of the Messiah. Isaiah described the Davidic king as *Wonderful Counselor*, *Mighty* *God*, *Everlasting Father* and *Prince of Peace* (9:6). The prophet Micah spoke of the greatness of the figure born in Bethlehem – greatness that will reach ‘*to the ends of the earth’* (5:4). Zechariah said of ‘the Branch’ that he will ‘*bear royal honor’* (8:13 RSV).

The promise that the Lord will be God to His people finds fulfilment in the role of the Messiah. Ezekiel 37:27 says God will be their God and they will be His people. The promise is realised when the everlasting covenant is established by God with His people (37:26) under the rule of the Davidic king who will rule forever (37:24).

This expression of Davidic theology in the Prophets is the culmination of the development of the promise of offspring in the Old Testament. Without it, 2 Samuel 7 would be little more than a promise that David’s dynasty would continue – a promise seemingly unfulfilled by the ensuing history. The major contribution of the prophetic theology to the concept of the offspring is in its exposition of the role of the individual offspring in the history of salvation.

When Paul affirmed in Galatians 3:16 that Christ along with Abraham was a participant in the promise, he knew Christ was the Davidic king who shared and mediated the blessings of the promise.

This study is a summary of ‘*The Covenants of Promise’* by T. E. McComiskey, (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1988, pp.19-30)

1. NIV ‘*usual way of dealing with man’*; NASB ‘*the custom of man’*; KJV ‘*the manner of man’*; ESV ‘*instruction for mankind’*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word ‘torah’ (law) is best understood as an established body of teaching [↑](#footnote-ref-2)