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THEME

*The blessing
of Abraham*



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The blessing of Abraham

The call of Abraham in its context and later repetition (*Genesis 12:1-3*)
Tobias Krämer

Promise and blessing for Abraham's descendants. Abraham's 'seed': Israel or Jesus?
Kees de Vreugd

God blesses Gentiles who are a blessing to Israel
Rev. Cornelis Kant

Blessing Israel for All the Wrong Reasons
James E. Patrick

The blessing and the curse
Rev. Willem J.J. Glashouwer

God's blessed people
Rev. Jaap de Vreugd

Colophon

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INTRODUCTION



The blessing of Abraham

'And I will bless those who bless you' (*Genesis 12:3*).

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For many, those famous words are an inspiration to bless Israel. And that is what they mean. But sometimes, the meaning is turned upside down. Then it is no longer about blessing Israel, but about being blessed instantly. Can you bless Israel for the wrong reasons?

That is one of the topics we address in this volume, in which we explore the meaning of the words God spoke to Abraham and to whom they are addressed, the seed that inherits the promise. What does it mean for Gentiles to bless Israel? Instances from the Bible can tell us that. We also consider the wider implications of blessing and curse in Israel's contributions to human welfare and science, already implicit in many commandments given to Israel.

Blessing Abraham and being blessed is a wide topic, and by no means we intend to cover it exhaustively. But we hope to draw some lines for a better and deeper understanding of these important words. We hope you will be blessed by these articles, and are looking forward to your response.

The call of Abraham in its context and later repetition

Genesis 12:1-3



The importance of Abraham can hardly be overestimated. He is the figure from whom Israel, Judaism, Jesus and Christianity come. By this, I do not just mean that the people of Israel are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to which Jesus also belongs. The crucial point is that God chose Abraham and has great plans for him.

I will come back to this.

In Genesis 1-11, we can read about the history that leads up to the election of Abraham. The first chapters of the Book of Genesis speak of the whole world, of humanity at that time: Creation, the Flood and the building of the Tower of Babel are important themes. God reacted to the building of the tower in three ways: He confused the common language of the people, He scattered them and - He chose Abraham. With this one man, God started anew. In the midst of the worldwide history of the nations, God began to write salvation history. Hidden and inconspicuous. With one man: Abraham/Abram. Let us read Genesis 12:1-3:

'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; 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; 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.'

ABRAHAM'S CALLING AND PROMISES

It begins with God's Word. This is usually the case with spiritual things. God makes the decision to choose Abraham. He addresses him. His first word is an invitation, a command. In Hebrew, this command is reinforced by a doubling (go - lech lecha). 'Go! Go out of your fatherland!' God wants Abraham to leave everything so that something new can really begin.

The journey goes into the unknown, because the destination is unknown. Abraham only knows that he will get a land. A land that God will show him. The geographical destination is unknown, but the content is not. For God makes His plans transparent: 'I will make you a great nation.' It is not just about Abraham, but about the people that will come out of Abraham. Two aspects are striking here:

- God identifies Abraham with this people and vice versa ('I will make you a people'). Israel is Abraham, Abraham

becomes Israel. This means that Israel cannot be separated from Abraham.

- Abraham, as his name suggests, becomes the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4,5). But the people of the promise is only this one people, Israel ('I will make you a people').

People and land together make a nation. This modern, political term is quite appropriate here, for it corresponds roughly to the Hebrew *goy*. That is, Abraham is to become the nation of Israel.

With this project - the Israel project - God pursues a clear goal: Israel is to become a blessing for humanity: 'In you all generations on earth shall be blessed'. This refers to all families, clans, groups and peoples, i.e. all of humanity. This gives Abraham his unique meaning. The promise of a nation (people and land) are earthly in nature. What is meant are real people (the people of Israel) and a physical land (Canaan). The promise of blessing is on another level. Blessing is something spiritual. Blessing is the energy of God that causes life to flourish, growth to happen and prosperity to occur. That is the essence of blessing.

In God's promises to Abraham, two goals become visible: a nearer goal (the emergence of Israel) and a distant goal (the blessing of the whole world). Both Israel and the nations are close to God's heart: Israel as the bearer of blessing and the nations as the recipients of blessing. When this succeeds, all are blessed. But the origin lies in the blessing of Abraham. Abraham becomes the source of blessing for the world.

Where there is blessing, there is also curse, and so God addresses both: 'I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.' Whoever blesses Israel will reap blessings, but whoever curses Israel will face God's curse. The attitude of the people towards Israel thus determines God's attitude towards them. This means that people - every individual,

every family, every group, every congregation, every church, every country - are faced with the choice: to bless or to curse, to receive blessing or to reap curse. Will we be good to Israel and receive good from God, or will we be hostile to Israel and experience God's opposition?¹

At this point, a linguistic difference should be pointed out, because in Hebrew there are two different terms used for cursing. One is *qalal*, meaning: to speak ill of, to consider insignificant. The other is called *arar* and means to deliver someone to the wrath of God. This means that anyone who speaks ill of Israel or considers it insignificant is under the wrath of God. This happens every day in the world today, even in Christian communities. But it is a bad position for Christians to do that which arouses God's wrath. Christians should do everything to avoid this. With regard to Israel, this means that we should examine our attitude towards Israel and repent if necessary. We end the bad and meet Israel with good. Thinking good, speaking good and doing good. Those who get involved know that this is not so difficult. 'And do not neglect doing good' (Hebrews 13:16) - this of course also applies to Israel.²

As I said: Abraham's importance can hardly be overestimated. This is also reflected in the titles of honour given to him in the Bible. Abraham is the father of a great multitude or many nations (Genesis 17:5), the confidant of God (Genesis 18:17), prophet (Genesis 20:7), prince of God (Genesis 23:6), servant of God (Psalm 105:6) and even friend of God (2 Chronicles 20:7).

GENESIS 12:1-3 AS THE FOUNDATION OF JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

If salvation history begins with the calling of Abraham, then we are dealing here with the 'formative phase' of the Jewish (and subsequently the Christian) faith. In the following I speak (somewhat abbreviated) of the Jewish-Christian faith. By this I mean, on the

one hand, the Jewish faith, but on the other hand also the Christian faith, which, after all, emerged from the Jewish faith.

In Genesis 12:1-3, the cornerstones of the Jewish-Christian faith are laid down. The foundations are laid, the course is set. They give the faith its typical characteristics:

1. In the Judeo-Christian faith there is only one God, the Creator, and this God makes Himself the God of Israel. We owe the belief in only one God (monotheism) to Judaism. This makes it clear that all other gods are not gods. The fact that this God has bound Himself to Israel is too little perceived in Christianity and should be reconsidered. Nevertheless, Judaism is not a popular religion, just as in ancient times each people had its own god or gods. For God chooses Israel to bless the world! God binds Himself to a people, to Israel, but He does so in a global perspective. The Judeo-Christian faith thus has its roots in one people, but ultimately embraces all of humanity. This is unique in the history of religion.

2. The Judeo-Christian faith is based on promises that unfold in history until all God's promises will be fulfilled in the end. In this way, world history suddenly acquires meaning and purpose. Our faith is not constructed in a circular way like the natural religions, which move in an annual rhythm and aimlessly go on and on. In our faith, there is also no static idea of God, as is the case with the philosophers. Our God is not (at least not primarily) an 'unmoved mover', 'the ground of all being' and what all the formulas are. The God of the Bible is the living God who makes

history. Blaise Pascal got to the point when he said in his *Mémorial*: 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers.' Since Abraham, the Judeo-Christian faith has been a faith in promises. Jews and Chris-

tians are always looking ahead, waiting for God to do what he has promised. That too is unique.

3. The central aspect of Jewish-Christian faith is trust. Jews and Christians trust God; they believe His Word. Behind this is a personal relationship with God based on certain foundations: the covenant, election,

filiation, grace, redemption, the presence of God, etc. All these are objects of trust! One can also place religions on other foundations: on rules, on religious texts, on certain practices (e.g. meditation) or various rites. But our God wants our trust first and foremost. That is what matters to Him. The other elements exist too, of course, but they are not the basis. Jews and Christians trust God and His Word, which He has given in the Bible. That is the point - and that changes their lives.

4. The Judeo-Christian faith has no founding figure like Muhammad or Buddha. Neither Abraham nor Jesus nor Paul wanted to found a religion and they did not. This is especially true of Abraham. Abraham took hold of God's Word and he set out for the new land that God promised. Abraham remained a nomad all his life, but in the second half of his life he carried God's words in his heart. Abraham did not develop a doctrine, formulate religious practices or produce a set of rules typical of founders of religions. What distinguished Abraham was his faith. Therefore, Abraham is the father of all who trust God (Romans 4:11-12). Abraham is not the origin of a religion, but of an attitude:

unconditional trust in God. This is the hallmark of the Judeo-Christian faith.

ABRAHAM'S PROMISES IN THE FURTHER HISTORY OF ISRAEL

There are other connections to be discovered in the Bible. Let us first look at how it continues in Genesis.

- In Genesis 18, God appears to Abraham in the form of three angels and discusses with him the destruction of Sodom. Abraham is a persistent debater, but the beginning of the conversation is interesting because God says: 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?' (vv. 17-18) God repeats His promise, then continues: 'For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him' (v. 19). Israel's obedience leads to the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, but disobedience stands in the way. The promises do not fulfil themselves. The bearers of the promises must make their contribution.
- In Genesis 22:16-18, the promise of blessing from God is repeated, but linked to Abraham's obedience. This occurs after Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Because Abraham obeyed, his descendants are to become a blessing to the world. Had Abraham not obeyed, a disagreement between God and Abraham would have come at this early stage and the Israel project might have failed. One is certainly not wrong to compare the obedience of Abraham with the obedience of Jesus. Both paid an enormous price for being obedient to God. However, Jesus sacrificed Himself, whereas Abraham would have 'only' given his son (cf. Genesis 22:8; Matthew 26:39,42). But one can also compare God the Father with Abraham, only God actually sacrificed His son, while Isaac was allowed to live on.
- In Genesis 30, Jacob has founded his family and now finally wants to leave his father-in-law Laban. But Laban does not want to let him go. The reason is striking: 'I have divined that the LORD has blessed me on your account' (v. 27). The blessing is material and it comes to Laban through Jacob. Laban has understood this and recognizes this connection. Here, it already 'works' that others are blessed through Jacob/Israel. Laban was a lot smarter than many contemporaries today. To put it bluntly: Those who really think of themselves should think of Israel or the Jews. Is that fair to say?³
- In Genesis 39, we find a similar story. Joseph serves in Potiphar's house. Joseph does so well that Potifar soon puts him over the whole house. The effects are amazing: 'It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field' (verse 5). The promise of blessing is fulfilled, first in this one house, and Potiphar takes advantage of it. Potiphar is not a Jew, he has no relationship with God. He lives in the Egyptian religion and is perhaps even what we call an atheist at

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heart today. But he sees where blessings lie and he promotes that. You don't have to be a believer to discover the mystery of Israel. You just have to be free of prejudice and look closely.

The promises of Abraham - people, land and blessing - are passed down through the generations. In slightly different words, the promises pass to Isaac (Genesis 26:2-5) and to Jacob (Genesis 27:29; 28:1-4, 14-15). The line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob leads to the twelve-tribe people of Israel. Because God has given His promises into this lineage (as into a channel), God is the God of Israel. God made Himself the God of Israel - consciously and of His own free will. This has not changed until today. Whoever wants to live with God must know that God is the God of Israel.

PAUL

As a trained rabbi, Paul knows the story of Abraham very well. However, he specifically hooks in at one point: 'Abraham trusted God and it was credited to him as righteousness' (Romans 4:3). God counts the one who trusts in Him as righteous. This was already the case with Abraham and this realisation also forms the core of the Gospel. Whoever trusts in Jesus is righteous. Paul finds this kind of righteousness, the so-called righteousness of faith, already in the Jewish Bible, in Abraham. Abraham was also one who trusted God, and God counted this to him as righteousness. From this, Paul concludes: 'Those who live by faith are Abraham's children' (Galatians 3:7). We know from Abraham that the path of faith can be extremely challenging. God demanded a lot from him.

In Galatians 3, Paul justifies this approach

You don't have to be a believer to discover the mystery of Israel

in more detail. Paul says that through Jesus Christ the blessing of Abraham came to the nations (Galatians 3:14). By this he means the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. Both are nothing other than the blessing of Abraham of Genesis 12:3.

That the blessing of Abraham came to the nations through Jesus is striking. For, actually, this was to be through Israel. That is why Paul searches the Scriptures. He wants to know how this is to be explained and comes across Genesis 22:18, where it says: 'In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.' This seed - and Paul emphasizes the singular - this one seed is Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16).⁴ Now the question is whether the promise that Israel would become a blessing to the world has been fulfilled or still applies.

Let us first put this question to Paul himself. In Romans 9-11, Paul laments that most Jews are distancing themselves from the Gospel. In Romans 11:11, however, he states that through this the Gospel came to the world of the nations. This was and is a blessing! In Romans 11:12 the development goes one step further. There Paul says: 'Now if the other nations were so richly blessed because the Jews rejected God's offer of salvation, how much greater a blessing will it be for the world when the Jews finally accept it!' (NLB) Here we are talking about a dimension of blessing that will only be reached when Israel and the Messiah Jesus come together. Then Israel will once again become a blessing to the world. It is therefore a mistake to think that all promises in Christ have already been fulfilled, as is often heard with regard to 2 Corinthians 1:20. Some promises have been fulfilled, others are yet to be fulfilled. But in both cases the fulfilment is through Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus is the one through whom God fulfilled, has fulfilled and will fulfil his promises.

END-TIME PERSPECTIVES

Finally, let us turn to the question of how Israel will once again become a blessing to the world. I can only hint at this here. In Zechariah 8:13, the promise that Israel will become a blessing to the world is taken up and applied to the end times. So it still applies. There God says to Israel: 'As you [...] have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, that you shall be a blessing.' This promise is yet to come. In Isaiah 2:24-25, there is an extraordinary promise. Israel will not become a blessing alone, but together with Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south: 'In that day Israel shall be third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth: for the LORD of hosts shall bless them, saying: Blessed are you, Egypt, my people; and you, Assyria, the work of my hands; and you, Israel, my inheritance!' Isaiah 2:2-4 gives another perspective. There it is said that one day the whole world will flock to Israel (to Zion). All nations will fetch God's Torah and bring it to their lands. On this way, the nations will find peace with each other. Then there will finally be peace worldwide.

The final point is Revelation 21: the promise of the New Jerusalem. The foundation of the New Jerusalem will be the twelve apostles, but the gates will bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Jews discover that their foundation is also the Messiah Jesus, while the Christians realise that they can only enter the eternal city together with Israel. Light shines out from the city to the nations, while the nations bring honour and glory into the city (vv. 24-26). All conflicts, tensions, quarrels and wars will come to an end.

NOTES

- ¹ The theme of Blessing and Curse is discussed in detail by Rev. Willem J.J. Glashouwer on pages 30-37.
- ² The question how Gentiles in the New Testament experienced the blessing of Israel, is discussed by Rev. Cornelis Kant on pages 18-23.
- ³ On pages 24-29, James Patrick discusses the justification and limitations of this interpretation.
- ⁴ On pages 12-17, Kees de Vreugd treats Galatians 3 and Abraham's seed.



KEES DE VREUGD

Promise and blessing for Abraham's descendants

*Abraham's 'seed':
Israel or Jesus?*

**Repeatedly in his life,
Abraham received promises
regarding his descendants.**

**The Hebrew word translated by descendants
actually means 'seed'.**

**That 'seed' is Christ, writes the apostle Paul.
But he writes even more.**

What does he say and what does he not say?





PROMISES

Let us first briefly list the various promises. First, there is the land promise: 'To your descendants I will give this land' (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8). Next, God established a covenant with Abraham, which would also continue to apply to his descendants 'for ever and ever' (Genesis 17:19). Moreover, that posterity would be numerous (Genesis 13:16; 16:10; 22:17; cf. 15:5). Abraham had two sons, both of whom were included in the covenant of circumcision, Ishmael and Isaac. Both would grow into great nations. But the line of Abraham's posterity would be through Isaac: 'for only the offspring of Isaac shall be called your offspring' (Genesis 21:12; Romans 9:7). Finally, God also promised Abraham that 'in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (Genesis 22:18).

TRUE ISRAEL

The apostle Paul spoke of Abraham's offspring in several letters, referring to the texts we quoted above. In Romans 9, Paul addresses the question of who or what Israel actually is. One might think: everyone descended from Abraham is Israel, including Ishmael and Esau. But in Rome, moreover, another thought seemed to emerge, namely that Israel forfeited its rights because it rejected Jesus as Messiah. The true Israel, or in other words, the true descendants of Abraham are now only the believers, whether originally Jew or Gentile. This view, at least later in church history, was firmly established among Christians and still exists.

'No!' says Paul. True, he does agree that Abraham is the father of all believers, Jew or Gentile (Romans 4:11), but that does not eliminate the difference between Jew and Gentile. This implies two things. First, it is a great grace that even uncircumcised people (Gentiles) can have a relationship with God in the faith of Abraham. Second, it is a call to the circumcised (the Jews) to walk in that faith of Abraham. But so there remains a special position for Israel, and that is because of the faithfulness of God (Romans 15:8). Again, which Israel are we talking about then? It is then about that Israel descended from Jacob, Isaac and Abra-

ham. That line does not go through Ishmael or Esau, but through Isaac: 'Through Isaac your descendants will be named' (Romans 9:7). And that continues in Isaac's son Jacob and then his twelve sons, from whom the twelve tribes of Israel emerged. That is all Israel, of which Paul expresses the firm expectation: 'So all Israel will be saved' (Romans 11:26). No church from Jews and Gentiles instead of Israel. But believers from the Gentiles who will be blessed with Israel, the concrete people Israel, to which Paul himself also belongs, is the offspring of Abraham, according to Romans 9.

THE MESSIAH

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul seems to be saying something quite different. In chapter 3, he first emphasises that all believers are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7). Believers share in the blessing of Abraham: 'So then those who are of faith are blessed [together] with Abraham, the believer' (verse 9). These are the children (actually: sons) of Abraham. But further on, he speaks again of Abraham's offspring: 'Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed' (Galatians 3:16). We have seen in the letter to Romans that that seed is Israel. And that, of course, is the meaning in the book of Genesis too. But now Paul does something curious. He looks at the Bible text and says: It doesn't say seeds in the plural, but seed in the singular. And that one seed is the Messiah. Is Paul now contradicting himself in his letters? One time the seed is Isaac and Israel, and the other time that same seed is Jesus the Messiah?

MIDRASH

Paul is doing something that is very common in classical Jewish Bible interpretation, the

midrash. He uses different levels of meaning in the text. In Jewish Bible interpretation - and, for that matter, also among the Greeks and Romans of his day - a text has several layers. The first is the simple, concrete meaning (Hebrew: *peshat*). This is what the text immediately means. But then you can apply that text to situations, which are sometimes quite different from what the original text is about, but where there is still a similarity. Jewish interpretation then has three subsequent levels: the *remez* (a reference to or application to another person or situation); the *derash* (a homiletical or moral application) and the *sod* (a mystical application). But unlike in Greek culture, where the allegorical meaning is considered the actual meaning, in the Jewish explanation the *peshat* always remains primary.

Is Paul now contradicting himself in his letters?

So what does Paul do? In Romans 9, he gives the *peshat*, the immediate, concrete meaning of the word seed: Israel. But in Galatians 3, he applies that to Christ (*remez*). We have to realise then that the *peshat*

in that always continues to resonate. When Paul says: the seed is Christ, that does not mean that it therefore no longer means Israel, but that it is an extension of the meaning, or a specific application. It is Christ, but it also remains Israel.

We often encounter such applications in the New Testament. Just think of the many fulfilment citations in e.g. the Gospel of Matthew, such as: 'Out of Egypt I have called My Son' (Matthew 2:15). That is a quotation from Hosea and it is clear that Hosea is referring to the people of Israel in the exodus. But Matthew applies that to Jesus. There is, I think, a deeper theological notion

attached to that for us, which we should also consider with Paul and which both Paul and Matthew also express: Jesus is fully Jew and can never be separated from His people Israel. Matthew shows how He is born as an Israelite in the lineage of Abraham and David (Matthew 1). Several times in his letters, Paul relays the fundamental confession of the first church that the Son, Christ, was born of the lineage of David (Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8). And he also writes that Christ became a servant of the circumcision (i.e. Israel, Romans 15:8).

FAITH

You could also say that with this application, Paul still remains within the framework of the pesher, because Jesus is also a physical descendant of Abraham. But in so doing, we must realise that he is not thereby excluding the rest of Israel, but that Israel remains fully included. Actually, Paul makes this application to make something else clear by doing so.

There were believers among the Galatians who believed that they themselves had to become completely Jewish in order to share in salvation. They had themselves circumcised and took on the whole Torah. But according to Paul, that was a misunderstanding of the work of the Messiah. For Jew and Gentile alike, partaking of salvation in the Messiah lies in the faith of which Abraham is the epitome. That is why Abraham is the father of all believers.

Faith actually means faithfulness and trust in Greek and Hebrew. The foundation is the faith of Christ (Galatians 3:22). He has acquired the promises by His faithfulness also for the Gen-

tiles. And they may accept those promises in faith. Of course, that does mean a substantial change in their lives. But that is the fruit, not the cause of salvation. The source is the faith of Christ.

BLESSING

Galatians 3 is all about promise and blessing. God promised to Abraham that in him He would bless all the nations. The blessing received by the nations in faith is the Holy Spirit, Paul says (Galatians 3:2,14). That, in short, is that God also wants to be with them and work in them. That blessing comes to the nations through Jesus Christ - 'in Christ Jesus', the Greek text actually says. That can mean that He mediates the blessing, but it can also mean that He is the blessing itself. And probably both of these are also true (cf. verses 26-27).

Jew and Gentile in Christ Jesus now share together in the blessing promised to Abraham (verses 28-29). And then Paul again uses the word offspring/seed: 'And if you are Christ's, then

you are Abraham's offspring and according to the promise heirs' (verse 29). That is the conclusion, in which we discover another application of the word 'seed'. Paul now applies the primary meaning of offspring to all believers, Jew and Gentile. They are, as we saw, 'children of Abraham' and thus logically offspring.

REPLACEMENT?

Again the question: does this new application cancel out the older meaning? And does it therefore imply that the concrete promises to Abraham (a nation and a land for that nation) are now sublimated into the one promise of the Spirit?

God promised to Abraham that in him He would bless all the nations



We see that Paul freely uses the various meanings and applications at different times. From this we may already conclude that the different applications are true side by side and should not be played off against each other. Moreover, according to most scholars, Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians earlier than that to the Romans. And it is precisely in the latter letter that he uses the primary meaning of the word offspring: Israel.

In Romans 9, Paul pronounces that Israel possesses the promises (plural). Here we should think of the promises made to the fathers (cf. Romans 15:8), probably not only the patriarchs, but also the later generations in the Old Testament. I am thinking particularly of the promise of kingship to David. Paul speaks of these promises in the present tense. They apply to the 'seed', which is Israel.

In Galatians 3, he is talking about a specific promise (singular) that God made to Abraham, namely that promise which applies to the Gentile nations as well. That is also the context of the argument. That promise is fulfilled in Christ. Through Him, the Gentiles may share in the blessing of Abraham. But this therefore presupposes the continued existence and enduring significance of the concrete people Israel.

CONCLUSION

Paul uses the word offspring in several ways, which are juxtaposed but related. The primary meaning - the concrete people Israel - is not removed but remains valid. The specific promises for Israel also remain valid. The other uses imply that the nations in Christ may share in the blessing of Abraham.



THEME THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM

REV. CORNELIS KANT

*God blesses
Gentiles
who are a blessing
to Israel*

'I will bless those who bless you'
(Genesis 12:3)

**that is the promise of the Lord God
to Abraham and his descendants.**
How should we regard this text in our days?
**In the New Testament itself we can read some
striking examples of this old promise.**

THE CHIEF OF KAPERNAUM

In Luke 7, we read about a Roman centurion who is appointed over hundred soldiers. He has a servant who is seriously ill and on the verge of dying.

The chief is very fond of this man. He asks some of the elders among the Jews to go to Jesus with the request to heal his servant. When they come to Jesus, they even urge Him to do so. It is already quite remarkable that these Jewish elders do this for a gentile commander, who is in fact an occupier. But apparently, they have a reason: 'He is worthy for You to grant this for him; for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue' (verse 5). His love for the Jewish people and his financial contributions for the construction of a synagogue are the reasons for these elders. This makes this centurion worthy. And then it is written that Jesus started on His way with them. Jesus does not criticize their motive, but goes along with them. Can you conclude from this that this argument counts heavily for Jesus as well?

WORTHY

The centurion did not himself go to Jesus, but asked some Jewish elders to go. There are two possible reasons for this. He may have thought that a Jewish rabbi cannot enter the house of a Gentile, because he would be defiled by it. A Gentile does not keep the Jewish dietary laws and a Jew could come into contact with that. It may also be that he had such a high regard for Jesus that he did not consider himself worthy to receive Jesus in his home. The second reason seems to be the case. When Jesus is on His way, the centurion has some friends say to Jesus: 'Lord, do

not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word and my servant will be healed' (verse 6-7).

The centurion demonstrates here an amazing faith and trust in Jesus. Just one word from Jesus from a distance is enough to heal his servant. This centurion had a hundred soldiers under him, all of whom had respect for him. And the Jewish leaders in Capernaum also had respect for this man. Yet, in spite of his status, he apparently did not consider himself worthy of Jesus having to make an effort and come all the way to him. A spoken word would be enough, he believed.

LOVE FOR ISRAEL AND RESPECT FOR JESUS

What was actually happening here? Three points of interest characterized this centurion. He had love for the people of Israel. In Greek it even says 'agape'. This word is used in the New Testament to express Christian

love, in which someone, as it were, sacrifices himself for the sake of the other. In addition, he blessed Israel by making it possible to build a synagogue. And then, having only just heard of Jesus, he showed a deep respect for Jesus. Jesus was amazed at his faith and the servant was healed at that moment. An impressive example of how a Gentile is blessed after he himself had blessed the people of Israel.

In Matthew 8, we also read about this event. There, the Jewish elders and the love of this centurion for Israel are not mentioned. There all the emphasis is on his faith in Jesus. Mat-

thew clearly had a Jewish readership in mind and apparently did not find it useful to add these passages. Luke, on the other hand, set the example of this centurion's love for Israel for his predominantly gentile readership.

THE CENTURION CORNELIUS

In Acts 10, we read about another Roman centurion, in Caesarea: Cornelius. The suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead have taken place, as well as His ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This Cornelius, too, is a centurion over hundred Roman soldiers, the so-called

Italian Cohort. He, too, is in fact an occupier. But a special one: 'A devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually' (verse 2). He and his whole household worshipped the God of Israel. And he apparently gave love gifts to the Jewish people.

These 'alms' can also be understood as an act or gift of compassion. He also prayed a lot to the God of Israel. One day, Cornelius had an encounter with an angel of God who told him: 'Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God' (Acts 10:4). Cornelius' prayers, and thus his worship of the God of Israel, and his almsgiving to the people, were apparently the Lord God's reason for all that was to come in the days that followed. The angel instructed him to send men to Joppa to invite Simon Peter. Peter was in Joppa and the next day, while he was praying

on the roof, he came into a state of ecstasy. He saw a sheet with all kinds of unclean animals in it and he heard a voice calling him to eat. Peter refused, because the animals were unclean. This was repeated three times. Then the sheet disappeared. As soon as he met the men of Cornelius it became clear to him: he should not regard the Gentile Cornelius as unclean anymore. He must accept their invitation to come with them to Caesarea and enter Cornelius' house. When Cornelius told him about the encounter with the angel, Peter started telling him the Gospel of Jesus. Then the Holy Spirit fell on everyone present in the house. The Jews who accompanied Peter were amazed that the Holy Spirit was also poured out on non-Jews. Cornelius and his whole house were baptised and Peter stayed with them for a few days.

DOING GOOD TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE

For both centurions, their worship of God and their love for the Jewish people plays a central role in the whole event. However, there is also a difference. In the case of the Capernaum centurion, it was the Jewish elders who took the initiative to use the centurion's love for Israel as an argument in their request to Jesus. In Cornelius' case, it was God Himself who sent His angel to tell Cornelius that 'your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God' (Acts 10: 4).

That difference is of great importance for a correct exegesis of these texts. In the case of Cornelius we also see that this point is repeat-

The centurion demonstrates here an amazing faith and trust in Jesus

The Jews who accompanied Peter were amazed that the Holy Spirit was also poured out on non-Jews



ed several times as an apparently important fact. When Cornelius' men arrived at the house in Joppa, they told Peter: 'Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews' (Acts 10: 22). Cornelius worshipped the God of Israel and showed love for the Jewish people with his alms.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house a few days later, Cornelius immediately told him about the angel's statement: 'And behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God' (Acts 10:31). The worship of the God of Israel and love for the Jewish people play a decisive role in this whole event that leads to the conversion of the entire house of Cornelius.

Of course, there is a possibility to extend the alms of these two centurions to charity in general. That is what Peter seemed to do in verse 34 when he said: 'but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him'. Yet, in doing so, we too quickly overlook the special phenomenon of these two centurions: namely, that they worshipped the God of Israel in combination with offerings of love to the Jewish people. In our time, Christianity has spread worldwide and billions of Christians worship the God of Israel. But in the time of these two centurions, it was a unique phenomenon for a non-Jew to worship the God of Israel and even show love for the Jewish people. The Jewish people were not exactly highly regarded in the Roman Empire anyway. Giving alms to the poor among the people of Israel was already an essential part of God's commandments in the Torah.

It was also called 'doing righteousness'.

Jesus extensively spoke about this in, for example, Matthew 5:20: 'For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven'. Sometimes the evangelists use the word 'righteousness', at other times the word 'alms'. This is a commandment from the Torah, according to which Israelites are obliged to protect their fellow citizens from poverty. In this, Judaism was unique at the time.

It is abundantly clear that the connection between the worship of the God of Israel and an attitude of love and mercy towards His Jewish people is essential and decisive in both stories. That is why this connection is repeated again and again by Luke in his gospel and in the book of Acts.

HE WHO BLESSES ISRAEL WILL BE BLESSED

The Lord God already promised Abraham: 'I will bless those who bless you' (Genesis 1:3). This is repeated later in Genesis 27 when Isaac gave the blessing to his son Jacob. Later, Bileam was instructed by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel. But the Holy Spirit came upon Bileam and he actually blessed the people of Israel instead of cursing them. He then concluded his blessing to Israel with the words: 'Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you' (Numbers 24:9).

In the New Testament, Jesus spoke of a judgment of the nations at the end of times. He Himself will execute that judgment. The criterion for this judgment will then be: 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). Although a passage like this can be extended to charity in general, it is clear that Jesus was primarily referring to His own Jewish brothers and sisters according to the flesh.

The commandment for the world, and especially for the Christian Church, to bless the people of Israel is of great importance. Not as a selfish instrument to be blessed oneself. But as a commission to bless the Jewish people out of love. Just as it is said of both centurions that they showed love to the people. Israel deserves not only our recognition, but also our love. It is impressive to see how this Old Testament command for the world became topical in the lives of these centurions. This makes it abundantly clear that this command and promise is still valid. And especially in these times, when hatred of Jews is on the rise and Israel is increasingly criticized and threatened in its existence. This is an enormous mission and responsibility for Christians and churches worldwide.

JAMES E. PATRICK

Blessing Israel for all the Wrong Reasons

There is an unusual expression in Hebrew that describes how Gentiles will act badly towards God, His Messiah, and His Jewish people. 'How awesome are Your works! Because of the greatness of Your power, Your enemies will deceive You' (Psalm 66:3).

'Foreigners came deceiving me; as soon as they heard, they obeyed me' (2 Samuel 22:45). 'Your enemies [O Israel] will deceive you, and you will tread upon their backs' (Deuteronomy 33:29). Your Bible version will translate this word differently – 'cringe' / 'submit' / 'be powerless' – but the primary meaning is 'deceive', so the idea seems to be 'pretend to honour'. How often are we Christians actually supporting Israel with unworthy motives?

Three examples of wrong motives will be considered in this article. First, blessing Israel out of magical superstition; second, blessing Israel out of selfish desire for prosperity; and third, blessing Israel out of mystical veneration of the land.



1. BLESSING ISRAEL OUT OF MAGICAL SUPERSTITION

Abram was promised in Genesis 12:1-3 that, if he left his family to settle in a land God would show him, he would be multiplied and blessed and honoured by God to become a blessing to all the families of the ground. ‘And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who reviles you I will curse.’ God would identify with Abram personally, and treat others according to how they treated His friend. This principle extended to the chosen heirs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, in Numbers 24:9, the non-Jewish prophet Balaam repeated this with regard to the whole nation of Israel: ‘Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you.’ The passive expression here might give the incorrect impression that the blessing or curse is automatic, a simple cause-and-effect rather than a direct reward or punishment by God.

There are Christians who approach the Jewish people with a superstitious fear of offending them, even without intending to, in case it causes something terrible to happen. This can be even more concerning because often Jewish people look and act just like anyone else, so it is hard to know if speaking badly about anyone might be bringing down divine judgement on your head. As with breaking a mirror, the assumption is that certain actions are very unlucky, whereas opposite actions might bring you good luck. Do a favour for a Jewish person, or defend their reputation (whether they deserve it or not), and the sun will shine upon you.

Related to this is the idea of magical manipulation of our circumstances, or even forcing God to be favourable towards us. Magic is based on the idea of using our own powers to control the world around us, particularly in the supernatural or spiritual environment. Even though true Christians avoid magic,

many might take this approach with regard to blessing Israel. ‘I am going through a difficult time in my marriage or my business, so I will join a prayer group for the Jewish people or go on another trip to Israel, and God will have to be nicer to me.’

The problem with magical or superstitious understandings of blessing or cursing Israel is their incorrect view of God. King Saul had the same misunderstanding when he tried to defend his decision to spare King Agag and some of the Amalekite sheep and oxen. He thought that if he just used them as sacrifices, God would be happy again. But the prophet Samuel told him, ‘Does the LORD have as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? ... For rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft...’ (1 Samuel 15:22-23). Our actions are not nearly as important to God as our heart. He wants our motivation to be to please Him and care about what He cares about, rather than just avoiding pain or seeking pleasure.

2. BLESSING ISRAEL OUT OF SELFISH DESIRE FOR PROSPERITY

This leads us into the next wrong motive for blessing the Jewish people, the love of wealth. God is the one who gives us the ability to make wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18), and hard work is important so that we earn enough to be generous to outsiders and not be in need ourselves (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). But we are warned not to seek wealth or put our trust in it, because of how easily it vanishes (Proverbs 23:4-5), and also because of what desiring it does to our hearts (1 Timothy 6:9-10, 17-19). Many people interpret the principle of God blessing those who bless Israel as if it were just wise guidance from their financial adviser about a reliable place to invest one’s savings and make a significant profit.

The attraction of this idea relates to the ‘prosperity gospel’ preaching, which is popular in some of the big churches in America, as well as all over the Majority World where pover-

ty is widespread. Preachers tell those hearing them, who barely have enough to live on, that if they give generously to their ministry, they will receive abundantly from God in health and money. But as John Piper has said, ‘Prosperity cannot be proof of God’s favour, for this is what the devil promises to those who worship him.’ On the contrary, Jesus directs us to expect the reward for our generosity in the age to come, which is why we should give to the poor and ‘build up treasure in heaven’ rather than on earth.

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At the same time, it is important to recognise that the Bible does encourage faith and financial giving – the widow giving two small copper coins in the Temple, God loves a cheerful giver, he who sows generously will reap generously, and God will give back to us ‘pressed down, shaken together and running over’. Even the poor are encouraged to give, because as John the Baptist said, if we own anything more than we need, we should share our second coat or extra food with someone poorer than ourselves (Luke 3:11). Although we may rightly despise the greed of the wealthy prosperity preachers, we can only honour the faith and courage of those who give out of ‘their deep poverty’ (2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

This last quote links us back to the specific encouragement in the scriptures to bless the Jewish people financially. Paul was raising a collection among all his gentile churches to serve ‘the poor among the holy ones in Jerusalem’ (Romans 15:26), who were at that time some of the poorest of believers (Acts 11:27-30;

2 Corinthians 8:14). In this case, it was more than simply giving to those in need, though that is a good enough reason. Paul taught that we Gentiles have a moral duty to give material blessings to the Jewish nation who have shared their spiritual blessings with our nations (Romans 15:27). And when we do give to them, we can trust that God will repay us in due course, because He is personally related to them, as He is to the poor more generally (Proverbs 19:17; Matthew 25:31-40).

For example, we read that both Potiphar and Pharaoh prospered abundantly when they blessed the Israelite slave Joseph, who carried the promise God had made to his great-grandfather Abraham back in Genesis 12:3. Even Jesus Himself personally rewarded non-Jews who had given generously to His Jewish people by building their synagogues or by giving to their poor (Luke 7:4-6; Acts 10:4, 31).

So, if it is good to give money to the Jewish people, and if God blesses those who bless

Israel, can we not expect financial reward for blessing Israel? Again, the important principle here is the motive from which we give. Rather than for selfish reasons of financial reward, Jesus tells us that ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’ (Matthew 6:21). We will discover that our hearts follow where we put our money, so if we want to care more about something, we should invest more of our finances there. Psalm 122:6 also associates prosperity with our hearts – ‘Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you!”’ God is willing to reward our actions with material blessings because He wants to train our hearts to love what He loves.

Another positive motivation for giving to Israel is our love for God Himself. If the Jewish people represent God's choice of leader nation, then it honours God to honour them. When the Hebrew Bible describes nations who have come to know and love Israel's God, it illustrates this by how they bring their wealth into Israel. When the island city-state of Tyre is restored by God, the proof that her heart has changed is that she no longer stores up or hoards the profit from her renewed trade with all nations, but it is 'set apart to the LORD' instead, turned into sufficient food and beautiful clothing for those who dwell in God's presence (Isaiah 23:17-18). Likewise in Isaiah 60, the nations and their kings who have been attracted by God's glory rising upon Israel don't come before Him empty-handed. They bring with them 'the wealth of the nations' (60:5, 11; 61:6), each nation offering its own unique resources. For example, those from the eastern and southern deserts bring gold and frankincense on camels, a prophecy that began to be fulfilled by the wise men at Jesus' birth (Matthew 2). The right motivation in this case is not the prosperity that nations receive in return, but simply wanting to bless whatever God values and make it more glorious.

3. BLESSING ISRAEL OUT OF MYSTICAL VENERATION OF THE LAND

One specific way of blessing Israel is by purchasing their goods, whether as a tourist in the land or at wholesale or retail shops outside the land. However, this too can be associated with unhealthy motives. Sometimes there can be an extreme emphasis placed on 'blessed' products that have come from Israel, such as consecrated water from the Jordan River, or sacred anointing oil made from Israeli olives, or palm crosses made from the fronds of Israeli date palms, and so on. This all sounds faintly ridiculous to a rational Western Christian, until they visit the land and catch the 'Holy Land fever' (similar to the 'Jerusalem syndrome').

In fact, one could argue that some of this is justified by the scriptures. When Naaman the Aramean general who had leprosy came to Elisha the prophet and was told to dip seven times in the River Jordan to be healed, he was initially angry. On objective natural grounds, there was nothing special about the River Jordan; in fact, its water quality was far worse than the rivers of Damascus where he came from (as it still is today!). But when he humbled himself and agreed to follow the prescribed ritual washing, he was healed as promised. He then asked the prophet if he could take home two mules' load of earth (2 Kings 5:12, 17), so that he might worship the God of Israel on Israeli soil, even back in Damascus.

Some geographical places do have something special about them for us personally, as David expressed when he unwisely wished out loud for a drink from the well by the gate of his hometown of Bethlehem (2 Samuel 23:15). But could it be more than just personal preference and sen-

timental value? Was there a deeper spiritual reason that Jesus sent the blind man to wash his eyes specifically in the pool of Siloam at the bottom of the city of Jerusalem (John 9:7)? And why does Jesus have to return to earth specifically at the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem, rather than to any other territory on earth (Zechariah 14:3-5; Acts 1:11-12)?

There is still something unique about the land of Israel, the land that God has chosen specifically for His own 'inheritance', in which to reveal His glory to the world (Exodus 15:17; Leviticus 25:23; 1 Samuel 26:19; etc.). 'For the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. 'This is My resting place for ever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her needy with bread' (Psalm 132:13-15).

Places can be special to God, but also objects can carry a divine blessing. For example, it was believed in both the Old and New Testament times that an object brought from a holy person to an invalid could bring healing to them, in the case of both the prophet Elisha and the apostle Paul (2 Kings 4:29-31; Acts 19:11-12). In that case, it might be theoretically reasonable to expect blessing to be transmitted through physical objects from the good land for which the LORD cares (Deuteronomy 8:7-10; 11:10-12). Even so, there is no evidence from the Bible that products from the land carry any special blessing outside it (e.g. Genesis 43:11; 1 Kings 5:11; 2 Chronicles 2:10; Ezekiel 27:17). The only exception is the fruit and leaves of the Tree of Life, but that will be in the age to come

(Ezekiel 47:12; Revelation 22:2).

Equally, we must not slip into the error of thinking that the Lord's blessing cannot be found outside Israel, because 'The earth is the LORD's and all it contains' (Psalm 24:1). Throughout history and for nations all over the earth, He 'did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness' (Acts 14:17). There is nothing inherently 'blessed' about products of the land of Israel, but their value lies in our personal respect for the God who has chosen that land.

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In conclusion, we can expect to receive a blessing, even in material things, in return for blessing the Jewish people. But to focus on the blessing we might receive is perhaps the poorest motivation for blessing Israel. The divine blessing for those who bless them is partly to off-set the greater spiritual attack by the enemy of our souls against any who choose to stand with God and His people. Reward cannot be detached from persecution in this age, so it is only

in the age to come when our rewards will be fully received (Mark 10:28-30). The blessing for those who bless Israel is never automatic, nor can it be manipulated for our own benefit, because it cannot be disconnected from the personal Source of all blessing. God Himself chooses to bless us and give us every good thing and every perfect gift, because He is our good Father (James 1:16-17). May we learn to bless what God has blessed (Numbers 23:20), honouring rather than 'deceiving' the Blessed One who has loved us through Israel.

REV. WILLEM J.J. GLASHOUWER

The blessing and the curse

'If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all His commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.

All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock - the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.'

Deuteronomy 28:1-7



The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land He is giving you. The LORD will establish you as His holy people, as He promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you.

The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity - in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground - in the land He swore to your forefathers to give you. The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of His bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none.

The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all His commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you' (Deuteronomy 28:8-15).

Salvation was from the Jews, is from the Jews, and will be from the Jews

life. They describe recent scientific discoveries in the field of contagious diseases, and

SALVATION FROM THE TORAH

God spoke His Words to Israel. The Bible originated in Israel, to bless the whole world with it. The Word has become flesh in Israel. Jesus, the Saviour of the world is Jewish. And soon salvation for the whole world will again be from the Jews, when Jesus comes in glory and His Shalom will be established worldwide from Jerusalem. Salvation was from the Jews, and is from the Jews and will be from the Jews.

NONE OF THESE DISEASES

The Torah (the Pentateuch, i.e. the five books of Moses) contains numerous directions that God gave to Israel to be able to live a healthy life for mind, soul and body, and to be able to build a righteous society.

Exodus 15:26: 'He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His eyes, if you pay

attention to His commands and keep all His decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you."

In their book *None of these diseases*, S.I. McMillen, MD and David E. Stern, MD, who are both Christian doctors, based on their medical practice and Christian faith, make clear that the Bible and God's commandments in the Torah not only are a guide for our faith and spiritual development, but also point the way to a physically and emotionally healthy

how Moses wrote down God's guidelines to protect Israel against a variety of microorganisms, such as bacteria and viruses, long before causes of these contagious diseases had been discovered. In the following, I would like to share some of their findings.

MOSES STARTS ALL OVER AGAIN

In Leviticus 18:1-5, Moses warns the Israelites to not follow the wisdom of the Egyptians nor that of the inhabitants of Canaan! There we read: 'The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: I am the LORD your God. You must NOT do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must NOT do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do NOT follow their practices. You must obey My laws and be careful to follow My decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep My decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.' And in Exodus 23:25: 'Worship the LORD your God, and His blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you.'

To lead the nation of Israel out and bring them to the Promised Land of Israel, Moses had to lay aside all Egyptian wisdom and knowledge he had learned at Pharaoh's palace. Only through the teaching of the Most High Himself did Moses come to true knowledge. So the five books of Moses, the Torah, came into existence.

MOSES' OTHER SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Moses wrote that the LORD said to him, Exodus 15:26: 'If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His eyes, if you pay attention to His commands and keep all His decrees, I will NOT bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.'

The strict hygiene laws of Moses appear to have an astonishing scientific perfection'

Moses describes in the Torah that the Israelites should wash their hands, should go into quarantine, circumcise the boys on the eighth day after birth (which will prevent penile cancer, and in women who are married to a circumcised man, cervical cancer), the correct way to deal with corpses, dead bodies (with decomposition a source of micro-organisms and thus pathogens), and that you have to bury your excrements, and wash your clothes and your body (for example Numbers 19, Leviticus 13:46, Genesis 17:12, Deuteronomy 23:12-13). And wash your knives and spoons and forks and the plates, cups and saucers. Be as hygienic as possible!

God had the spiritual and physical well-being of man in mind when He ordained these (spiritual and social) laws. These laws were ahead of their time however. How could the Israelites have been convinced of the importance of the principle of a toilet?

'As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the



LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that He will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you' (Deuteronomy 23:13-14).

If it were a piece of good advice, it would have been disregarded by the people. What did they know about typhoid fever, cholera and dysentery at the time? By making it a religious law and sanctioning its obedience, the Israelites could be incited to obedience and by doing this, the way was shown out of all kinds of deadly diseases and epidemics.

HYGIENE, QUARANTINE AND CIRCUMCISION

The strict hygiene laws of Moses appear to 'have an astonishing scientific perfection'. The hygiene laws can be best described as an integrated system of measures to promote public health.

The biblical measures to prevent the spread of leprosy (in Hebrew called 'tsara'at', 'skin disease'), were progressive. Lepers had to be isolated from society to prevent further spread of the disease (Numbers 5:2; Leviticus 13:46). They had to go into quarantine. Nowadays we find this normal, but it hasn't always been like that. Leprosy is mainly transmitted through inhalation of bacteria, by breathing them in or swallowing them. With this knowledge in mind, we understand the command in Leviticus 13:45, about what the leper should do if he encountered a healthy person: 'The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'

By tearing his clothes, people can see from a distance that he is a leper and by covering his mouth and nose, there can be no transferring of bacteria. So they had to wear a mask over their nose and over their mouth. It is because of this progressive measure that a professor of medical history praises Leviticus 13 and

14: 'The 13th and 14th chapter of Leviticus are momentous official documents, who deserve to be written in letters of shining gold, because they form the seed of the modern prophylaxis (protection) against contagious diseases!'

Outside of the Bible nowhere will you find such effective measures to prevent or combat all kinds of diseases. The quarantine measure – that is a period of isolation for a person suspected of contracting a contagious disease – is taken from Leviticus 13:4-7.

In addition, we find measures in the Bible regarding good personal hygiene. Besides the principle of a toilet, we can think of regularly washing the body, especially after touching a corpse or after having been in contact with blood or an open wound, and also the washing of clothes and of eating utensils. All these kinds of measures are considered very important nowadays as preventive measures to prevent contagious diseases, or to keep these diseases under control.

THE BLACK DEATH

One example from history. In the fourteenth century Europe lost a third of its population to the plague. The disease started in Italy and climbed from the toe of the boot of Italy up to the densely populated areas in the north. Millions of people became infected.

Remarkably, there was one population group

that was hardly hit by the plague, namely the Jews. Therefore, the Jews were thought to have a pact with the devil, and the blame for the plague in cities with large Jewish communities was often placed on them. After all, they were responsible for Christ's death and undoubtedly caused God's anger as well, people and churches said. Nobody understood that because the Jews kept the purity laws of Moses, of washing eating utensils, washing clothes, maintaining personal hygiene and keeping distance from the population and from the people around, contamination hardly got any chance.

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got any
chance**

In Frankfurt, the entire Jewish quarter was massacred by the flagellants (Crosiers, crutched friars or Brethren of the Cross in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries). Six hundred Jews were killed in Brussels. During the plague epidemic that raged between 1347 and 1349 in Dutch cities like Arnhem, Nijmegen and Utrecht, all Jews living there were burned alive. By 1351 the number of deaths from the plague was declining, although Europe would be intermittently besieged by

this disease until the early eighteenth century. It would still take until the early 1600s for the population to return to the number of 1300 AD. In less than five years, one third of the population – between twenty five and fifty million inhabitants – had disappeared. It almost makes you think of Revelation 6:7-8 where, among other things, the 'wild animals' kill a quarter of the world's population.

SEXUAL RULES

Violating God's guidelines for sexuality as written in, for example, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 by practices such as incest and adultery lead to all kinds of neurotic behavior and sexual transmitted diseases. They explain how violating God's loving directions has direct consequences not only for the persons involved, but also for society as a whole.

FAITH AND PSYCHICAL HEALTH

Faith plays a major and sometimes a decisive role in this. Psychic balance, how to deal with stress and outbursts of anger: faith has everything to do with it, Proverbs 29:11, Ephesians 4:26. Numerous forms of psychological disorders and deviant behavior are partly the consequence of not 'walking by faith'. The power of confession, forgiveness and prayer as healing power for a frustrated inner state, shaken nerves and broken relationships, is invaluable.

The Bible provides important guidelines in how to cope with the loss of a loved one (Psalm 23, Philippians 4:6-7), how to live daily as a redeemed person, joyful and happy and full of positive energy (Galatians 5:24; Romans 6:5-6) and how to die in peace (Numbers 23:10, Luke 16:22 and 23:42-43, Philippians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:14). It is living without self-imposed perfectionism or extreme self-assertion or ambition. The consequence of that is fatigue, frustration, anxiety and fear – and serious physical and emotional disorders.

Perhaps the most important of this is to emphasize the fact that God gave all these instructions for our spiritual, psychical and physical health long before we realised what we needed to defend ourselves against all that lay in wait

to threaten us. If we only had taken to heart all the biblical commandments and prohibitions, all the guidelines and loving directions that God has given us in His Word, our society would look very different and we as Christians would be more like Christ Himself.

The challenge for all of us is to develop the lifestyle in our daily life for which God gives us directions. As a result we will also experience the promise ourselves: 'None of these diseases.'

PROHIBITION OF INTEREST

The wisdom of the Torah was way ahead of its time! It contains directions and guidelines that could be of great significance for modern society. Also in other areas than in the medical field, like economics. For example, God forbids interest, but He knows that people violate His commandments. The sabbatical

year and the year of Jubilee are a correction mechanism intending to avoid debt relations. In his dissertation², my late friend Arie van der Rijst wrote: 'Borrowing without interest has great social significance. An interest-free loan can be an opportunity to break the circle of poverty. To the wealthy an interest-free loan can be a form of help to bridge a period of excessive liquidity shortage, so

that bankruptcy can be prevented, for example. The interest-free loan is seen as a deed of righteousness and as the highest form of Jewish charity.'

SALVATION FROM THE JEWS

Salvation was from the Jews. The Covenant of the Law, of the Torah, of the Sinai, of Moses, had been made with Israel. The wisdom of the Torah was way ahead of its time! The health regulations in the Torah preserved

the people throughout the ages, for example, against all kinds of contagious diseases. That is, if they followed those regulations. Thus they were an example and blessing for the nations. That is, if those nations bothered to learn these things from Israel.

Salvation is from the Jews. For the Saviour is of the Jews. Salvation goes out into the world from Israel. It is the Jewish apostles whom the Lord Jesus Himself has chosen to spread the Gospel of the Kingdom among the nations.

And salvation will be from the Jews, when He will sit on the throne of His father David in Jerusalem, and will reign in the midst of Jacob = the twelve tribes of Israel, and from Jerusalem peace will cover all the earth, as prophesied in Luke 1:30-33 and Isaiah 2:2-4.

But even in our days 'Salvation' still is from the Jews. For two thousand years the proclamation of the 'salvation' brought into the world by the 'Saviour', has been going on. The

liberating Gospel of the Kingdom is spread among the nations that are non-Jewish, but called 'Gentiles'. Christianity increased worldwide. Often, however, it was not real-

ised that the Saviour of the world is Jewish. That this worldwide salvation has come from the Jews. That Jesus is of Jewish descent.

We saw that in the Torah salvation was from the Jews. And that its beneficent effect still spreads throughout the world. We saw that salvation is from the Jews, because the Saviour is from the Jews and the precious 'Gospel of the Kingdom' has been spreading throughout the world for two thousand years already. And we shall see that salvation in the future

will be from the Jews when peace will spread throughout the world from Israel and Jerusalem, and the nations will walk in the Light of the Torah under the leadership of the Messiah of Israel.

Rev. Willem J.J. Glashouwer is President of Christians for Israel International

NOTES

¹ S.I. McMillen, MD and David E. Stern, MD, *None of these diseases. The Bible's Health Secrets for the 21st Century*. Grand Rapids 2000, revised edition.

² A.A. van der Rijst, *Other Entrepreneurship*. Diss. University of Groningen, 2004. Dr. Arie van der Rijst was a member of the board of Christians for Israel (Netherlands and International).

THEME THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM

SERMON OUTLINE

REV. JAAP DE VREUGD

God's blessed people

**'You may not curse that people
for they are blessed';
'that people dwell apart,
among the heathen nations
they do not count themselves.'**

Numbers 22:1-12, 23:7-10

1. The scripture reading is part of the story of Bileam, that remarkable pagan prophet. He is hired to curse Israel - but he cannot help but bless.

There is a Moabite king, Balak, who is terrified of Israel and most of all of Israel's God. He has heard the stories of all that the God of that people had done in Egypt. His pagan brain designs a wonderful idea: he will enlist a well-known occult prophet to curse Israel - to use his magical incantations to disconnect Israel from its God, so that it will be weak and powerless. For that is the intention. Bileam is to use his magical power to force the God of that people Israel to stop giving His help to His people.

2. 'Thou shalt not curse that people, for they are blessed!' Word of God Himself! Doesn't that stand like an arch above the

whole history of Israel? God spoke those familiar words to Abram when He called him: I will make thee a great nation, and bless thee, and make thy name great, and be a blessing! And I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and in you all the generations of the earth shall be blessed.

Therefore, even Bileam cannot help but bless whatever his patrons say and do. It is almost entertaining if it were not so serious to see how all attempts to curse go awry! Israel, God's blessed people.

3. How totally different the history of Christian Europe would have looked, had church leaders, theologians and ordinary Christians allowed themselves to be swayed by the pagan prophet Bileam! Alas - cursing and cursing, that is what Israel has had to face all too often on the

part of many Christians throughout the centuries.

It remains an indigestible mystery how it was possible that in Christian Europe, the demonic power of darkness could so surround itself as to set an entire world ablaze and, in particular, aim to exterminate the Jewish people. We need to realise that history and humble ourselves, because we are part of that Christian history.

4. But even through that awesome depth, it proved true: God did not curse His people; the LORD did not curse them. For when it was impossible in human terms, Israel still turned out to be alive and kicking; it developed unprecedented new vitality, it built a state and a society in the midst of enmity and threat, it received hundreds of thousands of new immigrants from all over the world, it survived several wars - for: 'who will curse what God does not curse; who will curse what the LORD does not curse?' Yes, even today there are those curses. Israel is engaged in a difficult peace process - but the curses uttered by the peace partners leave nothing to be desired in terms of clarity. Anti-Israel education, anti-Semitic propaganda in the media etc. etc.
5. Could it have to do with what we read in the sequel: 'Behold, a people who dwell alone and do not count themselves among the nations'? A striking expression, used by Bileam. A unique people. A people with a special position. The distinct place of Israel among the peoples of this world is thus indicated. It is precisely this distinct place that could well be the cause of the reactions of cursing from its surroundings! The nations, and in the background the power of darkness cannot stomach the fact that God has given this people a unique position. Antisemitism as a reaction of the Gentile
6. God has chosen Israel. Why? Election always serves a specific purpose. With you all the generations of the earth will be blessed! This separated and holy people will be a blessing for all generations. Israel receives the knowledge of the one living God of heaven and earth - and is a sign and witness of it in the midst of the peoples of this world. People of the Torah, people of the priests and prophets, people of the Messiah, people of the apostles - people of the one God! Meant, then, to shine the light of God and of His service and His holy commandments and promises in this world. That is the calling of Israel.
7. Of this calling we believe that it condenses and concentrates in Him, whom we know as the One Sent of the Father, Jesus our Lord, who fulfills this calling - and who, for this very reason, is so closely associated with His people. And so it cannot be otherwise: whoever is joined to Jesus is joined to His people. If there are people in this world who stand in solidarity with Israel - surely it will have to be Christians in particular! For God has also linked our salvation to this people, dwelling alone, and the Messiah born of that people. Whoever as a church or as a Christian gives up the unfailing bond with Israel falls back into paganism.
8. What a rich and deep and blessed truth it is: who shall curse what God does not curse? Balak and the prince of darkness did not make it. Hitler did not make it. If even the pagan, occult prophet Bileam has to bless Israel against his will - then we may firmly believe, the Lord is achieving His purpose.

nations' world to God's election of Israel is, in fact, hatred of the God of Israel and His choice.

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