

2014

Genesis: Declaration of God's Blessing - Chapter 2 from "Abrahamic Blessing: A Missiological Narrative of Revival in Papua New Guinea"

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Recommended Citation

Gallagher, Sarita, "Genesis: Declaration of God's Blessing - Chapter 2 from "Abrahamic Blessing: A Missiological Narrative of Revival in Papua New Guinea"" (2014). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. Paper 134.
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Genesis: Declaration of God's Blessing

IN RESEARCHING THE ABRAHAMIC blessing within Genesis, it is significant to observe that the theme of blessing does not originate with the Abrahamic narrative in Genesis 12:1–3. Instead, the motif of blessing is a strong thematic thread whose origin in Genesis 1 extends throughout the text. In order to gain an understanding of the Abrahamic blessing, it is first necessary to look at the origins and the development of this blessing motif within the primeval history of Genesis 1–11. In the subsequent section I present the purpose of Genesis 1–11 and the unfolding of the blessing motif as God blesses all creation, humankind and Noah and his family. I additionally mention the role of the flood and Tower of Babel events as precursors of the Abrahamic blessing.

Purpose of Genesis 1–11

While often simply dismissed as the “prologue” or “background” to the patriarchal history of chapters 12–50,¹ Genesis 1–11 holds great importance as it serves not only to introduce major themes but also to provide a rationale for the major developments that follow. Allen P. Ross notes that the principal purpose of the primeval events of Genesis 1:1—11:26 is to explain “why God called Abram and inaugurated a program of blessing through his covenant.”² He explains:

[Gen 1–11] demonstrates convincingly and graphically the need for God's blessing in the world; for ever since humankind

1. Whybray, *Introduction*, 35.
2. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 99.

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acquired the knowledge of good and evil, evil became the dominant force, bringing corruption and chaos into God's creation and incurring the divine curse.³

While Ross' argument does rightly acknowledge the need for human redemption, the fact that God's blessing antedates the Fall directly contradicts the core of Ross's hypothesis. According to the Genesis account, all of God's creation had already been blessed by God prior to the introduction of Abraham in Genesis 11; thus Abraham was not the first or only means of God's blessing. Gordon J. Wenham instead points to the continued sinfulness of humankind as the rationale behind the presentation of Abraham. He writes: "The succession of catastrophes that befell humanity prior to Abraham's call show just why the election of Abraham and in him, Israel, was necessary."⁴ It is thus the combination of this "succession of catastrophes" within Genesis 1-11 coupled with the general disobedience of humanity that leads to the climactic entrance of Abraham. While God had formerly blessed his creation at its conception, a new era had arrived where God's blessing to the nations would emerge through one chosen people.

In addition to setting the stage for the patriarchal narratives, Genesis 1-11 also introduces the primary motifs of the Genesis text. Of these key motifs, the themes of promise, blessing/cursing, order/chaos, obedience/sin, creation/destruction, life/death, and forgiveness/judgment are especially evident in the opening chapters. David J. A. Clines calls attention in particular to the theme of "promise" or "blessing" within Genesis. He argues in *The Theme of the Pentateuch* that the partial fulfillment of the promise/blessing of Israel is in fact the overarching theme of the entire Pentateuch.⁵ Clines demonstrates that the threefold promise of posterity, divine-human relationship and land are present within the Books of Genesis (posterity), Exodus and Leviticus (divine-human relationship), and Numbers and Deuteronomy (land).⁶ He further claims that Genesis 1-11, while not containing any reference to a patriarchal promise, contains distinct evidence of God's intentions to later bless humankind.⁷

3. Ibid.

4. Wenham, *Genesis*, xxii.

5. Clines, *Theme*, 29.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 78.

With this insight into the text we turn to the motif of blessing within Genesis 1–11.

Blessing Motif in Genesis 1–11

The Hebrew term “to bless” used in Genesis, *brk*, is complex in both its original meaning and application. Used more frequently within Genesis and Deuteronomy than anywhere else in the Old Testament, the act of blessing within Genesis 1–11 refers to a divine act wherein God imparts “vital power” to creation or human beings.⁸ The tangible results of blessing impacted both the material and spiritual realms leading to prosperity in life and health, and in the fertility of the people, their animals, and their land.⁹ Derek Kidner refers to divine blessing as “God turning full-face to the recipient . . . in self-giving.”¹⁰ This supernatural essence of blessing has also been described as the imparting of one’s soul into another.¹¹ It is this act of imparting power and life that so distinguishes the pronouncement of blessing from that of speaking mere words.

As the act of blessing is multileveled in nature, the blessing itself, *brk*, is likewise multifaceted. Blessings—“bestowed, transferred from one party to another in an almost palpable way”¹²—have multiple functions within the Genesis text. The divine blessings of God as expressed in Genesis 1–11, impart the power of fertility, dominion and resources. First, in Genesis 1:22, 28, and 9:1, 7, both the land and womb are promised abundant fruitfulness with expectations to “fill the earth” (1:28; 9:1)¹³ and to “abound on the earth and multiply in it” (9:7 NRSV). This divine blessing of fertility upon the land and humankind illustrates the core of the blessing of God. Not only does God’s blessing affect the phases of life, but it actually brings literal life.¹⁴ In addition to the promise of fruitfulness, the blessings of God to humankind are coupled with the promise of dominion over creation (1:28; 9:2) and the gift of natural resources (1:29; 9:3). These blessings of God in Genesis 1–11 are spoken upon creation

8. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 29, 18.

9. Mowinckel, *Religion and Kultus*, 66.

10. Kidner, *Genesis*, 52.

11. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 18.

12. Brueggemann, “Ministry Among,” 24.

13. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the NIV.

14. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 18.

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and humankind leading the reader to a deeper understanding of the blessings to come.

Within the narratives of Genesis 1–11, there are four specific divine acts of blessing.¹⁵ The creator God blesses: (1) every living creature (Gen 1:21–22); (2) humankind (1:27–29; 5:1b–2); (3) the seventh day (2:3); and (4) Noah and his sons (9:1–6). Interwoven between these four blessings are three major consequences of humankind's disobedience: the banishment from the garden of Eden (3:24), the flood (7:11–24), and the scattering of humanity due to the Tower of Babel (11:8–9). Although there is a temptation to identify all three punishments as divine curses, Genesis only records that one of them, the disobedience of Adam and Eve, involves individuals and creation being “cursed” (*qalal*). Giving exception to these passages, Claus Westermann concurs that

the Old Testament speaks frequently and in varied contexts of Yahweh's activity in bestowing blessing, but nowhere does it speak of the curse of Yahweh or of Yahweh's putting a curse on someone or something. Instead of speaking of Yahweh's curse, the Old Testament tells of his judgment and punishment. That is to say that in Israel the curse was never theologized the way blessing was.¹⁶

While the essential essence of “being cursed” is present within Genesis 1–11, Westermann is correct in his observation that besides Genesis 3:17 and 4:11 there are no references to God cursing creation in the primeval history. However, as expressed later in Genesis 12:3—“I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse” (NRSV)—the combination of blessing and cursing is not absent from the book of Genesis. Therefore for the purpose of this study, I make a distinction between God's punishment and God's cursing of humankind as it is distinguished in the narrative text.

In the following section, the most significant of the blessings of Genesis 1–11—the blessings of creation (Gen 1:21–22), humankind (1:27–29; 5:1b–2), and Noah and his sons (9:1–6)—is explored as they present insights into the later blessing of Abraham (12:1–3). In addition, the critical turning points of the flood (7:11–24) and the Tower of Babel (11:8–9) are also discussed in light of their preparatory position in the Genesis narrative.

15. See appendix B, Blessing of God in Genesis 1–11.

16. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 23–24.

BLESSING OF ALL CREATURES

The first act of divine blessing in Genesis is God's blessing of "the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves" in chapter 1:21-22 (NRSV). As expressed in Genesis 1 in regards to creation (vv. 21-22) and later humankind (vv. 27-29; 5:1b-2), there exists a pattern within the blessing passages, of God (1) creating, (2) blessing, and declaring (3) fruitfulness:

TABLE 2
GENESIS 1:21-22¹⁷

Recipient	Created	Blessed	Fruitfulness
Every living creature (1:21-22)	"So God <i>created</i> the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good" (1:21).	"God <i>blessed</i> them, saying . . ." (1:22a)	"Be <i>fruitful and multiply</i> and <i>fill the waters in the seas</i> , and let birds <i>multiply on the earth</i> " (1:22b).

Within this combination of the act of creation, the act of blessing and the declaration of fruitfulness, there is an important element of God's character and the nature of blessing that is expressed.

First, it is inherent within the creation act (Gen 1:21) that God not only imparts life but also simultaneously blesses creation with the ability to reproduce. Therefore God's seemingly repetitive act of blessing creation and his additional command to "be fruitful and multiply" (1:22) begs our attention. In light of this apparent reiteration of blessing, the question must be asked: What is the distinction between the creation act, the blessing of God, and God's speaking forth of fertility? While a contemporary interpretation of this Genesis 1:21-22 passage would suggest a linear sequencing of these events, the ancient Hebrew worldview held by the original author(s) leads to a more holistic approach. As Laurence Turner explains, within Hebrew literature "repetition serves . . . to reinforce the important";¹⁸ thus although not an exact replication of each other, the three acts of God can be seen as overlapping in purpose and thus interrelated. This interdependence is observed by Westermann who explains: "Gen[esis] 1:22 shows . . . the blessing that confers the power

17. NRSV; italics in this table are added.

18. Turner, *Genesis*, 15.

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of fertility is inseparable from creation where the creator is the one who blesses and the created living being has the power to reproduce itself because of the blessing.”¹⁹ He continues that “blessing implies creation and is effective as the work of the creator. To speak of life and its dynamism is to speak of the effective action of the creator.”²⁰ As such, God’s creation of the animals and his blessing upon them are in some ways an expression of each other. Through the creation act itself the blessing of God is expressed.

Another noteworthy aspect of the blessing of Genesis 1:21–22 is that blessing is communicated through the spoken word of God. Just as light/dark (Gen 1:3–4), day/night (1:5), the “dome of heaven” (1:6–8 NRSV), land/sea (1:9–13), plants (1:11–13), stars (1:14–19), fish/birds (1:20–22), and land animals (1:24–31) were spoken into life, so the blessings of God are imparted through speech. Hermann Gunkel remarks that all of creation “comes into being through God’s word” as it is the very will of God which creates all things.²¹ God has just to proclaim the existence of something and it is. Likewise, just as the pronouncement of creation led to its existence, so God’s declaration of blessing made it come to pass. It is important to note again the supernatural nature of God’s blessing upon creation which “once uttered . . . carries its own life-giving power and cannot be revoked by man.”²² The blessing of God as it is spoken to creation and later to humankind guarantees its complete fulfillment within the life of the recipient.

In regards to the spoken nature of God’s blessing upon creation, the fact that for the first time God is speaking to an audience other than himself is also significant. Goldingay aptly notes: “For the first time God speaks in the imperative, overtly speaking to someone. Apparently the animal world is able to hear God speak and respond to it, as the cosmos and the plant world cannot.”²³ This communication between God and his creation, especially as expressed later within God’s communion with Adam and Eve, highlights the personal nature of God’s relationship with his creation. While this interaction with creation in Genesis 1:21–22 is

19. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 140.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 106.

22. Wenham, *Genesis*, 24.

23. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 55.

not elaborated upon, it does lay a foundation for the relational nature of the patriarchal blessings to come.

In addition to this verbal proclamation of divine blessing, the fruitfulness with which God blesses creation is also very significant to the nature of blessing. God's command to creation "to be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:22b NRSV) as discussed previously not only incorporates the ability for the blessed to have offspring but also the ability of the future generations to reproduce. Gerhard von Rad explains that "these [first] living creatures are the recipients of a life-giving divine power by virtue of which they themselves are capable of passing on the life they have received by means of their own procreation."²⁴ It is this ability to give life and multiply greatly which is the essence of God's blessing upon creation.

Furthermore, this ability to produce life and to pass on that capacity to one's offspring reaches beyond the immediate divine blessing given at the time. More specifically, as the animals in Genesis 1:21-22 passed on God's blessing to their offspring they in fact themselves became vehicles of God's blessing. God's blessing upon creation was not a onetime event but instead introduced an ongoing fulfillment that was passed from generation to generation.²⁵ The outplaying of blessing as expressed in Genesis 1:21-22 is an ongoing and continual transference of blessing from one party to another. This characteristic of divine blessings is later echoed in the patriarchal history of chapters 12-50. In such, God's blessing upon Abraham and his offspring is also essentially passed from father to son and from each patriarch to the surrounding nations.

BLESSING OF HUMANKIND

In God's blessing upon humankind (Gen 1:27-29; 5:1b-2), the pattern of "creating" and "blessing" continues. However, it is within these divine blessings upon Adam and Eve and their offspring that God also introduces not only the blessing of fruitfulness (1:28b), but also that of dominion over creatures (1:28c) and all plant life (1:29). Thus, the blessings of God to humankind are threefold:

1. Fruitfulness; multiplication; filling the earth Gen 1:28b
2. Dominion over creatures of the sea, air and land Gen 1:28b
3. Resources (plant life) Gen 1:29

24. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 54.

25. Turner, *Genesis*, 23.

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A distinction between God's blessing upon creation (1:21–22) and that of humankind (1:27–29; 5:1b–2) is God's gift of dominion over all creatures. Wenham states that "God's purpose in creating man was that he should rule over the animal world (Gen 1:26) . . . Because man is created in God's image, he is king over nature. He rules the world on God's behalf."²⁶ He continues that "unbridled exploitation" of nature is by no means implied in this command, but instead humankind is called to act as God's representative "therefore treating them in the same way as God who created them."²⁷ But there is a strong sense in the Genesis 1:28–29 that God's blessing of humankind "subduing" the earth and having "dominion" over the animals (1:28c NRSV) set humanity apart from the rest of creation. The implication extends that as human beings are set above creation they are also in some ways closer to God on the universe's hierarchal structure.

This implied connection with God expressed in the Genesis 1:28–29 blessing is emphasized more concretely in the author(s) declaration that humankind has been made "in the likeness of God" (Gen 5:1b). Possibly the most ambiguous terms in Genesis 1–11—the "image" (*tselem*) and "likeness" (*dēmut*) of God—have been interpreted in numerous ways throughout recent centuries. Thus as God stated, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (1:27 NRSV), a variety of definitions have been proposed. Although some scholars have attempted to distinguish the terms "image" and "likeness,"²⁸ it is more likely that they were commonly used interchangeably by the original Hebrew author(s).

TABLE 3
GENESIS 1:27–29; 5:1B–2²⁹

Humankind	Genesis 1:27–29	5:1b–2
Created	"So God <i>created</i> humankind in his image, in the image of God he <i>created</i> them; male and female he <i>created</i> them" (27).	"When God <i>created</i> humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he <i>created</i> them . . ." (1b–2a).
Blessed	"God <i>blessed</i> them and God said to them . . ." (28a).	". . . and <i>blessed</i> them . . ." (2b).

26. Wenham, *Genesis*, 33.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Wenham, *Genesis*, 30.

29. NRSV; italics in this table are added.

Named		"... and named them 'Humankind' when they were created" (2c).
Fruitfulness	"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth..." (28b).	
Dominion over animals	"... and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (28c).	
Resources	"God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food" (29).	

Wenham presents some of the more established explanations of the terms: (1) image refers to "the mental and spiritual faculties that man shares with his creator"; (2) image refers to "a physical resemblance"; (3) being made in the image of God places man as God's "representative on earth"; and finally, (4) being in God's image enables man to relate to God.³⁰ Although it is impossible to determine without doubt which definition is most accurate, the continued theme of relationship with God is notably present or implied within each option. It is the God-human relationship and the distinction of God making humankind into "God's image" that separates humankind from the rest of creation.

The naming of humankind by God (Gen 5:2c) additionally expresses another element of the Creator's relationship with human beings. When God spoke forth creation and blessings, God's action of naming humankind imparted a sense of divine destiny and distinctiveness. Although God's naming of human beings does also indicate God's sovereignty, it likewise "gives identity and an assurance of definitive existence."³¹ In ancient thought, names were not merely coincidental but were "an obvious expression of the thing itself: things [were] called what they [were]."³² In the case of human beings, God, through the uttering of their names in

30. Wenham, *Genesis*, 29–30.

31. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 55.

32. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 108.

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fact imparted upon them their identity and determined their relationship with one another, with all of creation, and with himself.

As God named humankind, who was under his authority, so man named the creatures under his authority.³³ As Genesis 2:19 records, God himself “brought [every animal of the field and every bird of the air] to the man to see what he would call them.” It is consistent in the narrative text, as Umberto Cassuto argues, that the naming of the animals is indicative of man’s authority over them.³⁴

TABLE 4
GENESIS 9:1–7³⁵

Noah/Sons	Genesis 9:1–7
Blessed	“God <i>blessed</i> Noah and his sons and said to them . . .” (1a).
Fruitfulness	“Be <i>fruitful</i> and <i>multiply</i> and <i>fill the earth</i> ” (1b). “And you, be <i>fruitful</i> and <i>multiply</i> , <i>abound on the earth</i> and <i>multiply in it</i> ” (7).
Dominion over animals	“The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground and on all the fish of the sea; <i>into your hand they are delivered</i> ” (2).
Resources	“Every moving thing that lives shall be <i>food</i> for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything” (3).
Curse	“Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God <i>made</i> humankind” (4–6).

Blessing of Noah and Family

The blessing of Noah and his sons comes climactically after the destruction of the entire earth through the flood. The question of whether or not the blessing of God upon humankind can be undone was answered in the reinstatement of God’s blessing after the flood through the person and family of Noah. In such, the blessing of God upon Noah (Gen 9:1–7) mirrored the previous divine blessings upon humankind as God blessed Noah and his sons with (1) fruitfulness (vv. 1b, 7), (2) dominion (v. 1),

33. Cassuto, *Commentary* 1, 92.

34. *Ibid.*

35. NRSV; italics in this table are added.

and (3) resources (v. 2). The reinstatement of the same blessings given to humankind in Genesis 1:27-29 emphasizes God's obvious desire after the flood to reestablish his relationship of blessing with humankind once again.³⁶

A major difference, however, between the original blessing of God upon humankind (Gen 1:27-29; 5:1-2) and that given to Noah and his sons (9:1-7) was God's pronouncement that God was entering into a covenant relationship with Noah and his descendents. God's declarations that he "will establish [his] covenant with [Noah]" (6:18) and later that "I am establishing my covenant with you" (9:11) stand out as the first mention of what later is going to become (in Gen 12-50) a major theme in Israel's history. It is interesting to note that God's action of establishing a covenant with Noah, his sons, and every creature on earth (9:8-17) was preceded by God's blessing on Noah and his sons to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (9:1, 7). This sequence of events suggests that divine blessing was not restricted to a covenant relationship with God. If anything, this literary order implies that the covenantal relationship that ensued between creation and God was in fact a part of the overall blessing of God. Although the blessing of God upon humankind (1:27-29; 5:1-2) and creation (1:21-22) already implied a relationship with the creator, the establishment of the covenant now cemented this union.

It is important at this moment to pause to explain the nuances of the covenant treaty and its consequential impact upon the Creator-human-kind relationship. In ancient times, the act of "cutting" a covenant (*b'êrit*) initiated the establishment of a legal and binding treaty between two individuals or parties (god/man; man/man; man/group; group/group). Unlike the covenants of marriage of our contemporary age which can so easily be broken, the ancient covenant was considered permanent and practically unbreakable unless one party desired to receive the curses pronounced for breaking the covenant treaty. Covenants were additionally deemed viable through the partaking of covenant rituals. Some of the rituals that are recorded within the Old Testament include:

1. A holy meal Gen 31:54; Exod 24:9-11
2. Circumcision (as a sign of the covenant) Gen 17:10-11
3. Sprinkling of blood and salt Exod 24:3-8
4. Exchange of clothes and belongings 1 Sam 18:1-4

36. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 179.

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| 5. Cutting of animals | Gen 15:8–21; Jer 34:18 |
| 6. Verbal oaths | Gen 26:26–31 |
| 7. Blessing and curses | Gen 12:2–3 |

Through the participation of both parties in these covenant rituals, the covenant was officially established and the consequences of breaking the covenant were formally put into place.

In light of the nuances of the covenant treaty, the covenant initiated by God in Genesis 9 requires a second look. Unlike some of the later covenants between God and man (Gen 17:10–11), the covenant of Genesis 9:7–17 stands out as entirely one-sided in both its initiation and responsibilities.³⁷ Goldingay observes:

Here at the beginning the commitment is wholly God's. God "establishes" it without human cooperation . . . God simply "gives" the covenant (Gen. 9:12; cf. Gen. 17:2). Noah and the other recipients of God's pledge contribute absolutely nothing to the covenant relationship. They do not even have to believe in it. It will still be a reality. Out of God's own being comes the one-sided pledge that there will be no more world-denying catastrophes. It is a covenant that will stand forever (Gen. 9:16).³⁸

It is this one-sidedness within the covenant that further displays the persistent desire of God to preserve humanity despite its evident shortcomings. Westermann relates that

the unconditional approval that God gives to his creation is the basis of the history of nature and of humanity. It is the basis of all life which can be shaken neither by natural catastrophes of any sort . . . nor by the transgressions, corruption or revolt of human beings. God's assurance remains firm "as long as the earth lasts."³⁹

In the covenant between God and Noah there was a foreshadowing of the relationship between God and humankind to come. This foreshadowing of a future divine-human relationship is not only a reference to the patriarchal histories of chapters 12–50 but it is also an indication of the reconciliation of God and the world that will come through Christ. Within these passages God proved without a doubt that the preservation

37. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 182.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 473.

of the world was of great value to him and that regardless of the sins of his creation he would always attempt to reestablish his relationship with them.

As God initiated this covenant relationship, he made particular binding promises not only to Noah and his descendants, but also to every animal that came out of the ark. God stated: "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood and that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11 NRSV). God then declared the "sign of the covenant" (9:12), or the eternal proof of the establishment of this covenant, as being the "bow in the clouds" (9:13) which God would in turn see and thus remember his covenant (9:14-15). Through establishing this covenant with Noah, his offspring, and all the animals, God promised to preserve all of creation regardless of future actions of disobedience or neglect. Ross notes that God would "definitely judge sin, but he would also make a covenant of peace with the survivors" and as such his "covenant of peace would reign over the new era."⁴⁰ It is this "covenant of peace" that was now marked permanently in creation through the "sign of the covenant."

This "sign of the covenant" as created by God symbolized not only the establishment of the covenant but also the peaceful laying down of arms of God. Von Rad notes in his commentary on Genesis that the Hebrew term used in verse 13 for "bow" (*qesheth*) is actually the same term used for "bow of war."⁴¹ Goldingay elaborates on this image of a warrior's bow and explains how the "bow" being unsheathed represents God's laying down of arms in regards to creation.⁴² This powerful allusion to the warrior King undercuts any interpretation of the [rain]bow as simply being a "bright and comforting reminder that the race shall endure."⁴³ Instead it served to majestically counteract the very real devastation of creation with an equally powerful symbol of a warrior establishing peace after war. Once again, the wrongdoing and reprimand of humankind as expressed in Genesis 6-9 was counterbalanced by the gracious forgiveness of God.

40. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 207.

41. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 130.

42. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 182.

43. Speiser, "Genesis," 59.

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THE FLOOD AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

Although the Genesis narrative does not present the flood⁴⁴ or the scattering of nations as a “curse,” there is an unmistakable parallel between the expulsion of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:24), the flood (7:11–24), and later the Tower of Babel (11:8–9). Led by Westermann, various scholars have embraced the idea of a crime/punishment motif in order to explain the ensuing pattern of blessing and punishment in Genesis 1–11.⁴⁵ This ever-increasing crime and punishment pattern reached its climax with the story of the Tower of Babel (11:8–9). Repeatedly throughout the previous narratives, after the crimes of individuals and humanity, God restored life once again, first through the birth of Cain and Abel (4:1–2) and then with the preservation of Noah and his family (8–9). Thus, the arrogance of humankind, once more displayed through the building of the Tower of Babel, forces the reader to ask: What now? How can God redeem humanity yet again from another tragic proof of its sinfulness and disregard of God?

However, despite the overall negative portrayal of the Babel story, the narrative’s actual placement in the Genesis text also suggests a positive fulfillment of God’s blessing in its events. Sandwiched between the Table of the Nations in chapter 10 and the genealogy of Shem (Gen 11:10–32), Clines suggests that the Babel story is not only a judgment upon humankind but it is also a fulfillment of God’s original blessing of fruitfulness. Clines explains:

If the material of ch. 10 had followed the Babel story the whole Table of Nations would have to be read under the sign of the judgment; [however] where it stands it functions as the fulfillment of the divine command of 9:1, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” which looks back in its turn to 1:28.⁴⁶

Clines continues that the conjointly positive chapter 10 and negative chapter 11 outcomes of the “dispersal of the nations”⁴⁷ affects the future of humankind after Babel. Clines states that “since Babel, mankind stands under both the blessing and the curse of God; the division of the peoples and their languages is both a token of the divine judgment and . . . of man’s fulfillment of the divine command and so part of the divine

44. Rendtorff, “Genesis 8 21,” 70.

45. Westermann, *Promises*, 55.

46. Clines, *Theme*, 68.

47. *Ibid.*

'blessing' (Gen. 9:1).⁴⁸ Although this two dimensional view of the scattering of all peoples does have scriptural support, it is important to note that the credit of this positive fulfillment of the blessing should not go to humankind. Instead, it is simply once again an example of God's "secret increasing power of grace" upon human beings.⁴⁹ It is thus God, and not humanity, who brought the fulfillment of the blessing of fruitfulness through an otherwise tragic event.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most significant impact of the Babel story was its preparatory nature for the Abrahamic narrative to come. A "final parable of human sin and God's response,"⁵¹ the Babel narrative moves the reader from the universal to the particular. Bengt Sundkler explains that

the catastrophe of Babel's tower marks the end of the first chapter in the history of mankind. Its original universal purpose and its cosmopolitan scope became drastically reduced. The perspective of salvation became foreshortened and narrowed into a way of substitution. The blessing had to be concentrated upon one people—a people chosen by God for His very own.⁵²

Although there is no explanation for God's change of focus from all the nations to one individual (Abraham), it is clear that God deemed the switch necessary to preserve his covenantal relationship and blessing with mankind. The "hopeless flight of mankind [as seen] without the intervention of God"⁵³ at the end of Genesis 11:9 prepared the way climactically for the new chapter of God's blessing upon and through the patriarchs.

GENESIS 12:1-3 ABRAHAMIC BLESSING

With the beginning of chapter 12, the Genesis text makes a dramatic turn from the primeval history of chapters 1-11 to the patriarchal world of chapters 12-50. In addition, the universal focus of the first section

48. Ibid., 68-69.

49. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 23.

50. This union of negative and positive outcomes is also evident in the coupling of the expulsion of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:24) and the immediate blessing of life upon them through the birth of Cain and Abel (4:1-2). The flood narrative (7:11-24) is also coupled with the salvation of Noah and his family and new life upon the earth (8-9).

51. Whybray, *Introduction*, 35.

52. Sundkler, *World*, 13-14.

53. Wenham, *Genesis*, ii.

is suddenly interrupted by the introduction of an unknown individual from the line of Shem: Abraham, son of Terah. The narrative that ensues introduces the reader to the new idea of God's blessing given to one person, one family, and one people group. To explore this universal blessing through Abraham, in the following section I discuss the person and choosing of Abraham in addition to the nuances of the Genesis 12:1-3 promise.

Person of Abraham

The introduction to the person of Abraham in Genesis 11:26 and following stands out for its absence of specific details about Abraham. The reader of Genesis 11-12 is given only a basic summary of Abraham's history to consider; the audience is informed that Abraham was from the line of Shem, son of Noah (Gen 11:10); was the son of Terah (11:26); the brother of Nahor and Haran (11:26); was the husband of Sarah,⁵⁴ who was barren (11:28-30); and was originally from Ur of the Chaldeans, but was now living in Hārān (11:31). Additional information is given regarding Abraham's relatives: Abraham's brother Haran had a son, Lot (11:31); Haran died in Ur (11:28); and Terah died in Hārān (11:32); and Lot accompanied his grandfather to Hārān (11:31). But, the information given remains general and distant.

Despite the lack of details in Genesis regarding Abraham's past, biblical scholars have used archeological evidence and ancient literary archives to surmise most of what we know about Abraham. Originally said to be from a group of nomadic tribes called the "Apiru," Abraham appears to have been a member of a group of traveling merchants who moved throughout Babylonia during the late third and early second millennium BC.⁵⁵ Although some scholars point to the term "Hebrew," which later was connected with Abraham and his descendants⁵⁶ as generating from the clan name "Apiru,"⁵⁷ it was most likely not a "national designation, but rather a frequent designation . . . for a lower class of society."⁵⁸ Von

54. For reasons of consistency the use of Sarai's name "Sarah" will be used throughout this book to refer to Abraham's wife both before and after her name change in Gen 17:15.

55. Albright, "From the Patriarchs," 7-15.

56. Gen 14:13; 39:14, 17; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32.

57. Albright, "From the Patriarchs," 7-15.

58. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 174.

Rad explains that in "the Old Testament the expression is used by non-Israelites or Israelites for foreigners."⁵⁹ Thus, Abraham entered into the narratives of Genesis as a nomadic foreigner following God into the land of Canaan.

Although there is no indication in the Genesis 11:26–32 text as to Abraham's religious history, there are later scriptural hints that indicate he had an idolatrous past. Joshua 24:2–3 is probably the most straightforward in its interpretation of Abraham's history: "Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan." This mention of Abraham "worship[ing] other gods" is further enforced by Abraham's continued use of some of the common religious forms of surrounding religions although he now followed Yahweh. David Burnett writes:

The conversion of Abram from his traditional religion to that of worshipping Yahweh did not mean a distinct break with his culture. In the majority of his ways Abram still lived according to the customs of his people. He set up shrines in a similar way to those erected by the people of Canaan. He established "sacred places" at Shechem (Gen. 12:6), Bethel (Gen. 12:8), Hebron (Gen. 13:18) and Beersheba (Gen. 21:33).⁶⁰

Despite this adherence to the religious forms of his time, Abraham made a clean break from his idolatrous past upon deciding to obey God in Genesis 12:4–9. The covenant relationship of Genesis 12:1–3 appears to dissolve any previous religious affiliations as worshipping idols was no longer mentioned in connection with Abraham in the biblical text.

Choosing of Abraham

Although Abraham was chosen by God in Genesis 11:26 and following, the text gives no indication as to why God would single out Abraham from all the peoples of the world. For a person who later rose to religious acclaim within the Jewish community, it is curious that no redeeming characteristic is mentioned, that no note of special talents is recorded, and particularly that no indication of Abraham's previous relationship with God is told. A clear contrast to this literary silence can be seen in

59. Ibid.

60. Burnett, *God's Mission*, 57.

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God's choosing of Noah in Genesis 6:8–9. In this narrative, the author(s) notably describe Noah as finding "favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen 6:8). Noah is moreover described as "walk[ing] with God" of being "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (6:9 NRSV). Thus, while there is still no indication as to whether these qualities determined Noah's election, there exists imbedded in the narrative a possible rationale for God's choice. This additional commentary, however, is not evident in the Abrahamic narrative. Abraham, unlike Noah, is simply presented as a man without distinction or mark. It is thus that Abraham begins his entrance into literary fame as an unknown with no recorded personal achievements, no remarkable character traits, and no glorious religious past.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of information in Genesis as to why the person of Abraham was chosen, there is little doubt as to what he was chosen for. In direct contrast with the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11:1–9, Genesis 11:26–32 ushers in a new era in which one single family is chosen to be a blessing to "all the families of the earth."⁶¹ Johannes Verkuyl explains that in God's subsequent choosing of Abraham and later Israel, God by no means losses sight of the nations. Instead, the "people of Abraham," although separated from the nations for a time, enable God to "achiev[e] his world-embracing goals. In choosing Israel as segment of all humanity, God never took his eye off the other nations; Israel was the *pars pro toto*, a minority called to serve the majority."⁶² It is for the purpose of blessing and preserving the nations that God chose Abraham and his descendants; not to bless a specific individual or nation but to bless all the nations of the world. Abraham was thus set apart "not only to be an example of blessing, but [to be] a channel, means and cause of blessing."⁶³

Genesis 12:1–3

The divine call of Abraham as recorded in Genesis 12:1–3, departs from the pattern of blessing displayed in the primeval history of chapters

61. Kidner, *Genesis*, 13.

62. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 91–92.

63. Van Engen, *Growth*, 142. Also see Blauw, *Missionary Nature*, 19; Calvin, *Genesis*; De Ridder, *Discipling*, 26, 32, 153; Driver, *Book of Genesis*, 145; Glasser and McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies*; Peters, *Biblical Theology*, 89; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 155–56.

1-11. Although the blessing of fruitfulness⁶⁴ and blessing in general⁶⁵ are picked up again in later chapters, 12:1-3 stands in marked contrast to the blessings that went before. Not only did God command Abraham to follow him (v. 1), but for the first time there was the promise of nationhood (v. 2a), blessing (vv. 2b-3b) and blessing the nations (v. 12:3c). I explore every section individually as each of these blessings/promises is repeated throughout the Genesis text.

TABLE 5
GENESIS 12:1-3⁶⁶

Recipient	God's Command /Commentary	Land/Nation	Blessing	Blessing to Nations
Abraham 12:1-3	"Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (12:1).	"I will make of you a great nation . . ." (2a).	"and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (2b-3b).	". . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (3c).

ABRAHAM'S CALL

The first facet of the Genesis 12:1-3 text is Abraham's call by God to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1). Just as the introductory sentence of the primeval history begins with God—"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . ." (1:1 NRSV)—so the beginning of patriarchal history also begins with God. The opening sentence of Genesis 12:1, "Now the LORD said to Abram . . ." (12:1a NRSV), indicates that God is both the instigator and first subject of these events "and thus the subject of the entire subsequent sacred history."⁶⁷ Von Rad writes:

64. See Gen 13:16; 15:4b-5; 16:10b; 17:2b, 4b, 5b-6, 16b, 16d, 19a, 20b; 18:18a; 22:17b-c; 24:60b; 26:4a, 24c; 28:3b, 14a; 35:11; 46:3; 47:27b; 48:16b; 49:22.

65. See Gen 14:19-20a; 17:16a, 16c, 20a; 22:17a; 24:1b, 34a, 60a; 25:11a; 26:3a, 12-13, 24b; 28:3a, 4a; 32:29b; 35:9b; 48:15-16a; 49:23-26.

66. NRSV.

67. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 154.

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God is everywhere the real narrative subject, so to speak, of the saga—or, rather, its inner subject; men are never important for their own sakes, but always as objects of the divine activity, as those who both affirm and deny God and his command.⁶⁸

It is therefore within the opening passages of the patriarchal history that the reader once again hears the voice of God and is reminded of God's undeniable sovereignty and influence upon the present and future of his creation.

In addition, as with God's call to Noah (Gen 7:1), Abraham is called into action. In an increasingly narrowing circle of belonging, God called Abraham to leave his (1) homeland, (2) kindred, and (3) father's household (12:1). Von Rad explains that Abraham was called to "radically [abandon] all natural roots," systematically dismissing his general connection with the "land," his clan, his distance relatives, until finally his own immediate family is highlighted.⁶⁹ The author suggests, however, that the ever narrowing of terms as expressed in the text demonstrates "that God knows the difficulties of these separations."⁷⁰ Gunkel expands upon this understanding of separation and suggests that God's command to Abraham was indeed "the most difficult test of faith." Gunkel notes that "the ancient lives at home in the secure protection of large and small units . . . Abroad, he is free as a bird. Expulsion is like death."⁷¹ The author surmises that God's call to Abraham was not simply a command but instead was God's first test requiring monumental obedience.

A sheer departure from this understanding of great faith can be seen in Westermann's analysis of the Genesis 12:1 command. Westermann argues that from the perspective of nomadic Abraham and his contemporaries, God's call would be seen "as the offer of a saving hand," not as a devastating tearing away from family and land.⁷² The first audience, he continues, would see the situation as "the instruction of the God of the fathers in a crisis situation, ordering the group to set out for another territory."⁷³ They would understand, he comments further, that "it was aimed solely at rescuing the group from or preserving it in the

68. *Ibid.*, 35.

69. *Ibid.*, 154.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 163.

72. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 148.

73. *Ibid.*

crisis.⁷⁴ Westermann holds that the interpretation that Abraham found it painful to leave his homeland and family was introduced later by the author of the Jehovistic history book (J)⁷⁵ during an age when Israel had a homeland and sedentary lifestyle. The patriarchs themselves, Westermann argues, would not have had this sedentary perspective of the later redactors. Although there is potential truth within the author's argument, the Genesis text itself appears to provide little support for this theory. Although Westermann would argue that the text was fashioned by J and thus couldn't support an alternate explanation, the absence of a "crisis situation" before Abraham's call also seems to bring doubt upon the argument. Nevertheless, whether or not Abraham found God's calling to be his salvation or a troubling separation, Abraham's act of faith cannot be denied as he obeyed God's call "to the land that [God] will show [him]" (Gen 12:1).

The faith that Abraham exhibited in following God to a land yet untold foreshadows the great faith that continued to intermittently surface throughout his lifetime. In the context of the Genesis 12 narrative, R. W. L. Moberly notes that Abraham's obedience to God immediately extends into worship as the "first two things he does in the land of Canaan are to build altars to YHWH, thus indicating his responsive reverence to God's leading (12:7-8)." The author also notes that "the second time [Abram] builds an altar, it is also said that he 'called on the name of YHWH; that is, he prayed.'⁷⁶ Although the intermediary actions of Abraham and his family are unknown, the narrator structured the text in such a way as to point to the immediate obedience of Abraham, and Abraham's continued worship of and prayer to God. The structure of the opening passages of Genesis 12 presents Abraham as a man of great obedience, humility, and faith before God.

PROMISE OF NATIONHOOD

The second element of the Genesis 12:1-3 passage is God's declaration to Abraham that he will "make of [him] a great nation" (v. 2a NRSV). This

74. Ibid.

75. Westermann is referencing the theory first presented by Julius Wellhausen (*Prolegomena*, 6-9) that the Pentateuch was in fact a composite of four distinct sources: the Jehovistic history book (J), the Elohist document (E), the Priestly Code (P), and Deuteronomy (D); all differentiated by their diverse authorship and date of composition.

76. Moberly, *Genesis*, 22-23.

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promise of nationhood is repeated throughout the Genesis 12–50 narratives and is continued in the sequential book of Exodus. It is this early mention of the future nation of Israel which has historically identified Abraham as a type for Israel. Moberly notes that “although Abraham is an individual figure, he is also often a representative or embodiment of Israel as a people.”⁷⁷ It is this representation of Israel through the character of Abraham that gives the Abrahamic narratives multiple levels of significance. For example, as Abraham is described as following God’s call to the promised land (12:1) so the nation of Israel is also “being led on a special road whose plan and goal lay completely in Yahweh’s hand.”⁷⁸ The mention of the future nation of Israel within the Genesis text indicates that the original author(s) probably did not restrict their narratives to past events but instead included allusions to the continuing identity of the nation of Israel.⁷⁹ It is therefore this double identity of Abraham that gives greater importance to the narrative text as it served as a constant reminder to the Hebrew audience of what God had done and what God was doing at the time.

The particular promise of God to Abraham that he would make him a “great nation” (Gen 12:2) pledges a “blessing of abundant offspring in wondrous measure.”⁸⁰ As Abraham’s wife Sarah was still barren (11:30), this promise of nationhood would have indeed been a divine blessing. Wenham denotes the meaning of the term “nation” (*goy*) as used in Genesis 12:2. He states that

a “nation” is a political unit with a common land, language and government . . . A large population, a large territory and a spiritual character make a nation great . . . Thus this very first word to Abram encapsulates the full range of divine promises subsequently made to him.⁸¹

God’s promise to Abraham that he would “make of [him] a great nation” (12:2 NRSV) had personal significance for Abraham in providing a child in his old age as well as national significance for the future nation of Israel and its “greatness.”

77. Moberly, *Genesis*, 22.

78. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 154.

79. *Ibid.*

80. Cassuto, *Commentary*, 313.

81. Wenham, *Genesis*, 275.

God's command to Abraham to follow God to the land (*erets*) God would show him (Gen 12:1) and God's promise of nationhood (*goy*) (12:2) are closely linked to the later patriarchal promises of God to Abraham (12:7; 13:14-16, 17-18; 15:7-8, 17-21; 17:8), Isaac (26:2-5; 28:4), and Jacob (28:12-14; 35:12, 14).

God's promise to give the land (Canaan) to Abraham and his descendants, however, was not fulfilled during their lifetimes but was an enduring promise that continued throughout Israel's history until it reached fulfillment in the book of Joshua. The only land that Abraham indeed owned at the end of his lifetime was a Hittite field and cave facing Mamre (Hebron) where he buried his wife Sarah upon her death (Gen 23). Furthermore, the book of Genesis ends with the placement of the family of Israel in yet another foreign land, Egypt (45-50). Yet even in the closing chapters of Genesis the echoes of God's original promise to the patriarchs is recorded as Jacob remembers God's covenant to him in the land of Canaan: "I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding" (48:4 NRSV).

TABLE 6
PROMISE OF LAND IN GENESIS⁸²

Recipient	Land/Nation
Abraham 12:1-4	"I will make of you a great nation . . ." (2a).
12:7	"To your offspring I will give this land" (7b).
13:14-16	"for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever" (15).
13:17-18	". . . for I will give it to you" (17b).
15:7-8	". . . to give you this land to possess" (7b).
15:17-21	"To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites" (18b-21).
17:8	"And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God" (8).

82. Scriptures quoted in this table are from the NRSV.

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Isaac 26:2-3a	"The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you" (2).
26:3b-4a	". . . for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands . . ." (3b).
26:4b-5	". . . and will give to your offspring all these lands . . ." (4b).
28:4b	". . . so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien—land that God gave to Abraham" (4b).
Jacob 28:12-14	". . . the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring" (13b).
35:12, 14	"The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you" (12).

BLESSING OF ABRAHAM

The promises of God in Genesis 12:1-3 to Abraham are expressed as subordinate to and incorporated in the overarching blessing of God. The repetition of the blessing motif through the fourfold promises of "nationhood, a great name, divine protection and mediatorship of divine blessing"⁸³ suggests that the promises are in fact a part of the wider blessing of God upon Abraham. W. Zimmerli identifies the primary theme in Genesis 12:1-3 as blessing not promise. He writes that "[Genesis 12:1-3] indeed sounds the note of land and posterity as elements of promise, but it clearly places them in the shadow of the pledge of blessing (unmistakable in the fivefold use of the root *brk*)."⁸⁴ Consistent with God's blessing of creation (Gen 1:21-22), humanity (1:27-29; 5:1b-2) and Noah and his family (9:1-7), God's blessing was the overarching action of God that included his promises of fruitfulness and prosperity.

The term "blessing" (*brk*) within this context, as in Genesis 1-11, refers "to God's characteristically generous and abundant giving of all good to his creatures and his continual renewal of the abundance of created life."⁸⁵ But, blessing in the context of God's blessing upon humanity is not to be simply known as a vehicle of abundant provision, it is, more importantly, a relational agreement. To "be blessed by God is not only to know God's good gifts but to know God himself in his generous

83. Wenham, *Genesis*, 274.

84. Zimmerli, "Promise," 92.

85. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 34-35.

giving.⁸⁶ Those who receive the abundant provision of God also gain a deeper knowledge of God in the process. In addition, those blessed also enter into an ongoing relationship with their benefactor. As Westermann notes, "Blessing is realized in the succession of generations."⁸⁷ In such, the blessings of God poured upon his people guaranteed them that God's continual presence and help would be with them throughout the generations. The blessing of God upon Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 not only opened Abraham's eyes to God, but marked the beginning of his relationship with the Creator.

Of the particular promises of God incorporated into the Genesis 12:1-3 blessing, God's promise to Abraham to "make [his] name great" (v. 2b) clearly points to the wider purpose of God's selection of Abraham. J. Gerald Janzen notes the direct parallel between the Babel story of Genesis 11:1-9 and God's promises to make Abraham's name great (12:2b) and to make him a great nation (12:2a). He highlights that the desire of the people of Babel for a "name" (11:4) mirrors the promise that Abraham will receive a "name" and "that 'great' (Heb *gd̄l*) echoes the tower (*mgdl*, literally 'great structure') in 11:4, 5."⁸⁸ Janzen also explains that

there is a vivid contrast between God's opposition to human attempts to make a name for themselves and God's intention to give Abram a great name. This contrast matches the contrast between fearful human attempts to safeguard their unity in one place by building a walled city, "lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (erets), and Abram's willingness to follow God's call to leave his own place and people and go to a land (erets) he does not yet see. The separation from familiar place and faces, which the people in 11:4 see as filled with danger, is a separation that to Abram is filled with promise.⁸⁹

In addition to the literary parallels between the two passages there is also a theological significance in their alignment. More than God simply giving men the greatness they once desired,⁹⁰ the Abrahamic blessing of Genesis 12:1-3 "is designed to contend with and to overcome its opposite: God's curse."⁹¹ More specifically, the universal curse given during the

86. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 35.

87. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 30.

88. Janzen, *Abraham*, 15.

89. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

90. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 155.

91. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 34-35.

Babel story—"the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:9)—is followed by and counteracted by the blessing of God upon Abraham: "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3c NRSV).⁹² The blessing of Abraham then must be seen in the light of its universal significance. As discussed previously, God's choosing of Abraham did not display his particularistic preferences but instead marked his universal desire to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham.⁹³

Another important characteristic of the blessing of Genesis 12:1–3 is its foreshadowing of the covenant relationship between God and Abraham. Although Genesis 15 is often marked as the first reference to this covenantal relationship, there are elements within the Genesis 12:1–3 passage that suggest the establishment of a preliminary covenant between God and Abraham. First, God's command to Abraham to leave his land, clan, and family and follow God (Gen 12:1) suggests transference of loyalty and allegiance from Abraham's family to God. If not an official transfer of commitment, Abraham is asked to join an exclusive relationship between the divine Creator requiring obedience from him and offering divine protection in return, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (12:3a–b NRSV).

In addition this particular phrase, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3a–b NRSV), refers to the fact that "Yahweh thus stands on the side of his people and protects them while intervening against their enemies."⁹⁴ The phrase is repeated with slight variation in Genesis 27:29 when Isaac blesses Jacob ("Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!")⁹⁵ and Numbers 24:9 when the spirit of God comes upon Balaam and Balaam blesses Israel: "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you." In all three cases, the divine and supernatural protection of God is included as a vital component within the blessings of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3), Jacob (27:29), and Israel (Num 24:9). The presence of blessings and curses is also a common element within the covenant ritual of later chapters.⁹⁶ Therefore, although Genesis 12:1–3 does not use the term "covenant" (*berit*), the implications of the

92. Also see Wright, *Mission of God*, 202–3; Rendtorff, *Old Testament*, 134.

93. Also see Alexander, "Abraham," 13.

94. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 150.

95. NRSV.

96. Van Engen, *Growth*, 123.

text itself present an echo of the covenantal relationship to come as God is described as Abraham's benefactor, source of blessing, and protector.

BLESSING OF THE NATIONS

One of the unique elements within the Genesis 12:1–3 blessing is God's inclusion that he would make Abraham's name great "so that you [Abram] will be a blessing" (v. 2c NRSV). Christopher Wright argues that the literary structure of verses 1–3 identifies two imperatives of God to Abraham: "Go" (v. 1) and "be a blessing" (v. 2c):

And YHWH said to Abram,

*Get yourself up and go*⁹⁷

From the land, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

And I will make you into a great nation;

and I will bless you;

and I will make your name great.

And be a blessing.

And I will bless those who bless you;

whereas the one who belittles you, I will curse;

and in you will be blessed all kinship groups on the earth.

And Abram went just as YHWH said to him.⁹⁸

As highlighted by Wright, the Hebrew version of "so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2c) contains an imperative, and, as many scholars are now suggesting, can be translated "Be a blessing!" (12:2c).⁹⁹ If this is the case, "Abram is not simply being informed that he will become a blessing, but is commanded to be a blessing."¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, it is important to note that even with the divine command to "be a blessing" it is only God who had the power to enable Abraham to be a blessing to those around him.

This interpretation of the imperative of Genesis 12:2c implies a cause and effect relationship between the commands of God and the

97. Italics added.

98. Wright, *Mission*, 194.

99. Turner, *Genesis*, 64.

100. *Ibid.*

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response of Abraham. Turner, an advocate for the contemporary imperative translation, explains that

if the force of the imperative is retained then the following Hebrew clauses should be rendered as consequences of that imperative: "Be a blessing, so that I may bless those . . ." In other words, the promises of 12:3 depend upon Abram being a blessing. Just as clearly, the promises of 12:2a (great nation, blessing and great name), depend upon Abram obeying God's command in 12:1, "Go!"¹⁰¹

This concept of fulfillment through the obedience of Abraham, however, is not supported by all. While not denying the imperative form of the verse, Goldingay argues that "it would be misleading to emphasize that obedience to YHWH's charge is a precondition of receiving God's blessing."¹⁰² The author continues that while trust is present within their relationship it is "clear that fulfilling God's charge is not a condition of the promise coming true."¹⁰³ Similarly, in the study of the imperative "Be a blessing" (Gen 12:2c), it is clear from the nature of the command that the power of fulfillment has to come from God himself and not Abraham. It is outside of Abraham's control whether or not he is a blessing on any level other than material to those around him; it is God who is responsible to bring blessing and prosperity through the person and offspring of Abraham.

The second reference to Abraham as a blessing to others comes in Genesis 12:3c: "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (NRSV). The English reference to "families of the earth" in verse 3 has been translated from the Hebrew term *mishpachah*. Although the term is sometimes translated "families, . . . that is too narrow in its common English meaning. *Mishpachah* is a wider kinship grouping. In Israelite tribal structure it was the clan, the subgroup within the tribe. It can sometimes imply whole peoples, considered as related by kinship (as in Amos 3:1-2)."¹⁰⁴ This wider meaning incorporated within the term "clan" indicates that "not every individual is promised blessing in Abram but

101. Ibid.

102. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 198. See also Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 52-53.

103. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 198-99.

104. Wright, *Mission*, 200.

every major group in the world will be blessed."¹⁰⁵ This is evident within the previous specifications of God's blessing upon Abraham during his lifetime: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3a-b NRSV). Although God did promise that Abraham will be the vehicle of blessing to the primary groups of the earth, those individuals who opposed Abraham and his descendants were not guaranteed the blessing of God.¹⁰⁶

Within the Genesis 12:3 promise, no other section has been as dissected and discussed with such widely differing results as 12:3c. Various scholars have attempted to understand the relationship between Abraham and the nations in this verse and have thus translated the verb "to bless" (*brk*) in a variety of ways: as (1) a reflexive ("they will bless themselves"); (2) a receptive ("they will find blessing"); and as (3) a passive ("they will be blessed").¹⁰⁷ The three main translations advocated by scholars are thus as follows:

1. ". . . and that by you all the families of the earth may bless themselves."¹⁰⁸ Janzen bases his translation on the reflexive use of the verb and explains: "To bless oneself 'by' Abraham is to use Abraham's name when asking a blessing from God, as in saying 'O God, make us like Abram and his descendants.'"¹⁰⁹ Other scholars who support the reflexive translation of the verb include F. Delitzsch, A. Dillmann, H. Gunkel, H. Holzinger, G. Von Rad, J. Skinner, C. Westermann, and E. A. Speiser.
2. ". . . through you all the families of the earth will find blessing."¹¹⁰ In this case, the families of the earth are not presented as passive recipients or aggressive pursuers of blessing. Instead, they are portrayed as being in the "middle" as described by T. Desmond Alexander. This receptive translation of the Genesis 12:3c text is supported by Alexander, O. Procksch, C. A. Keller, J. Schreiner, H. W. Wolff, and Schmidt.
3. ". . . in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." This passive translation of the text emphasizes the future tense and implies that

105. Wenham, *Genesis*, 278.

106. *Ibid.*

107. Alexander, "Abraham," 13.

108. Janzen, *Abraham*, 15.

109. *Ibid.*

110. Alexander, "Abraham," 13.

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the future families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham and/or his descendants. This interpretation finds support from scholars such as E. König, Jacob, A. Cassuto, and W. H. Gispen.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite the critical support given to each varying translation, neither option can be supported with unswerving certainty. Instead, the lack of data within the Genesis text itself preserves the uncertainty as to which translation of Genesis 12:3 is correct.

Although the correct interpretation of Genesis 12:3c cannot be proven, each of the proposed translations share one important factor in common: their universal focus. Regardless of whether or not the passive, receptive, or reflexive verb is used, each translation distinctly points to the fact that God's blessing upon Abraham was not meant for him alone. Westermann remarks that regardless of which version is used, Genesis 12:3 says that "God's action proclaimed in the promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth."¹¹¹ Wright also notes that

[Genesis 12:1–3] is the climax of God's promise to Abraham. It is also a pivotal text not only in the book of Genesis but indeed in the whole Bible. So important is it in Genesis that it occurs five times altogether, with minor variations of phraseology (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4–5; 28:14). Clearly, therefore, it is not just an afterthought tacked on to the end of God's promise to Abraham but a key element of it. Blessing for the nations is the bottom line, textually and theologically, of God's promise to Abraham.¹¹²

It is within the Abrahamic blessing of Genesis 12:1–3 that God changes the entire future of human history. Placed directly after the tragic failings of humanity at Babel, the promise of God to Abraham—"in [Abram] all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3c NRSV)—marks the beginning of God's salvation plan in which Abraham is to be the mediator of God's blessing.¹¹³ Thus, as Wright originally highlighted, the promise of God that Abraham would bring blessing to the nations is not a side note added without thought, but is instead a foundational truth

111. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 152.

112. Wright, *Mission*, 194.

113. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 156.

upon which God established his universal salvation plan which reached its greatest fulfillment through Christ.

This universal focus of Genesis 12:1-3 is often expressed in terms of universalism versus particularism. The term "universalism" in reference to the Old Testament means that the Scriptures have "the whole world in view" and have "validity for the whole world."¹¹⁴ A particularistic perspective on the other hand, implies that within the Old Testament, Abraham and the people of Israel were the only ones in God's view and thus God cared for their well-being alone. However, as argued previously in regards to Genesis 12:1-3, although "particularistic in method" God's choosing of Abraham is "universalistic in promise, design and effect."¹¹⁵ This truth, as George Peters enforces, "needs to be seen clearly and grasped firmly, or else the God of the Old Testament Himself becomes a particularist . . . [and as] a particularist He would cease to be Elohim the God of creation and the God of the nations."¹¹⁶ Charles Van Engen affirms the universal purposes within the Old Testament:

Yahweh's universal intention is a conviction which underlies all of the Church's missionary theology . . . The first and last word of any Old Testament theology of Israel must take into account that Israel very uniquely understood her God as the sovereign not only of Israel, but of all nations. All God's covenants are to be understood as assuming YHWH's lordship over all peoples.¹¹⁷

The calling of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 thus becomes a turning point within the greater narrative of Genesis; moving the reader from the universal focus of God in Genesis 1-11 to the universal focus of God in Genesis 12-50 as it is held within the narrative of a particular people group.

This understanding of the universal focus of Genesis 12:1-3 is confirmed in the New Testament as Paul related God's salvation plan foretold in Genesis to the Gentiles. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul stated:

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to

114. Blauw, *Missionary Nature*, 17.

115. Peters, *Biblical Theology*, 89.

116. *Ibid.*

117. Van Engen, *Growth*, 136.

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Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. (Gal 3:6–9 NRSV)

As Paul related to the Galatians, the Old Testament Scripture itself records God's desire for all peoples to be reconciled to him. The apostle noted that as believers in Christ, one becomes a part of the family of Abraham and thus becomes a recipient of the blessings of God given to Abraham and his descendants. It is evident from both Paul's interpretation of Genesis 12:3 and the Genesis text itself that "Abraham has an important role in God's redemptive plan for all mankind."¹¹⁸ The introduction of Abraham did not signal the termination of God's concern for the nations but instead marked the beginning of God's sacred protection of his blessing that "stretches from Abraham to the Messiah."¹¹⁹

GENESIS 12–50: ABRAHAMIC BLESSING TO THE NATIONS

The Abrahamic blessing to the nations in Genesis 12:3c is a continued theme throughout the Book of Genesis. Not only is the blessing to the nations repeated to each patriarch—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—but it is also partly fulfilled during the lifetimes of the patriarchs. The following section highlights the development of the Abrahamic blessing concept in Genesis and the extension of the Abrahamic blessing to the patriarchs and to the nations in Genesis 12–50.

Abrahamic Blessing

Even though the phrase "blessing of Abraham" is only mentioned once in the book of Genesis (28:4), the concept of the Abrahamic blessing is evident throughout the text. In the case of Isaac's pronouncement of the "blessing of Abraham" upon Jacob when given the firstborn's blessing (Gen 28:4), it is evident from the context that "Abraham is the real recipient of the blessing . . . [and] Jacob is its heir."¹²⁰ This understanding of individuals as "heirs" to the blessing of Abraham is emphasized by God himself. In speaking to Isaac, God says:

Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and

118. De Ridder, *Discipling*, 22.

119. Sundkler, *World*, 17.

120. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 448.

will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Gen 26:2-5 NRSV, italics added)

It is clear that while God renewed his initial promises to Isaac, the blessings given were a continuation of the original blessings and covenantal oaths given to Abraham. This concept is repeated once again in Genesis 26:24-25 when God reappeared to Isaac and stated: "I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake" (Gen 26:24-25 NRSV). This continued reference to God's original blessings given to Abraham (12:1-3ff.) establishes the concept that the Abrahamic blessing is foundational to all the blessings that follow. Furthermore, the new benefactors of the renewed Abrahamic blessing joined as heirs of the promise and thus heirs of Abraham.¹²¹

An additional distinction of the Abrahamic blessing is its relationship with the covenant treaties which God established with the patriarchs. Often seen as a by-product of God's covenant with the patriarchs, the blessing of God is in fact the umbrella under which the covenant falls. More specifically, God's blessing preceded humankind's sin thus covenant was first introduced in Genesis 9:9-17 as God's response to this sin. Furthermore, covenant was later reintroduced in Genesis 15:1-21 as God's response to human doubt. The covenantal relationship of God with Abraham established in Genesis 15:1-21 and Genesis 17 is therefore evidence of God's continued blessing upon Abraham, not the first example of this blessing. Ronald Clements states that "the original basis of the oracle [in Genesis 15] would seem to have been a divine assurance that Abraham's inheritance would pass to his direct descendants, and not to those who were regarded as born from a slave wife."¹²² Genesis 15:7-21 "does not present the concluding of a covenant between God and Abraham . . . but rather God's assurance or promise to Abraham solemnized by a rite."¹²³ God's first invitation to a covenantal relationship in Genesis

121. Also see Gal 3:6-9.

122. Clements, *Abraham and David*, 19.

123. Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, 205.

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15:7–21 does not in any way change the former blessings of God given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 but instead it establishes a ritual agreement which declares that the blessings will come to pass.

This firm confirmation of God's blessing through the covenant ritual also brings God's greatest gift to Abraham and his descendants, an intimate covenantal relationship with himself.¹²⁴ Although Abraham is the only patriarch to be invited into a covenantal relationship by God (Gen 15:1–21; 17:1–14, 19–27), the Abrahamic covenant is both affirmed and given to Isaac (26:2–6, 23–25) and Jacob (28:12–19; 39:9–15; 46:2–4). While not establishing new covenants with God, Isaac and Jacob clearly joined and remained within the same covenantal relationship of Abraham. It was within this covenant relationship that God promised Abraham and his descendants: "I will be with you" (26:3 NRSV) and that "I . . . will keep you wherever you go . . . for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (28:15 NRSV). It is through the patriarchs' covenantal treaty with God that they receive the greatest blessing of all: a personal relationship with their Creator.

Abrahamic Blessing Extended to the Patriarchs

The promise of Genesis 12:1–3 stands as a thematic foundation for all the patriarchal stories that follow. Within the wider patriarchal narrative "we find that the theme of God's promise to Abraham of descendants, land and blessing is of central importance in Genesis 12–25."¹²⁵ Renewed for every patriarch, "God's promise to Abraham in verses 1–3 extends through the patriarchal stories like a red thread."¹²⁶ However, the benefits of the extension of the Abrahamic blessing to the patriarchs are not theirs alone. Instead, they are threefold as God's blessing fell upon the patriarchs, was preserved for the nation of Israel, and was then released to the nations.

The significance of this extension upon the concept of blessing is profound. In contrast to the possibility of immediate fulfillment, God's blessing as given to Abraham was not fulfilled at once but instead unfolded as it was renewed with each generation. Within the book of Genesis, the promise of blessing extended from its initial proclamation in Genesis 12:1–3 to its partial fulfillment through the coming of Israel to

124. Clines, *Theme*, 32.

125. Moberly, *Old Testament*, 140.

126. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 160–61.

the Promised Land in the book of Joshua. Westermann remarks upon this future-focused characteristic of God's blessing. He explains:

The cycle of Abraham stories does not begin with Abraham receiving God's blessing and then this blessing coming to pass in what befalls Abraham. Rather, Abraham at the outset receives the command to go forth, and the blessing that is connected with this is not simply there, but it is seen in prospect, so that it comes to pass in the history that begins with Abraham and continues not just throughout his lifetime but on after his death.¹²⁷

Westermann expands his observations by noting that God's blessing upon the patriarchs is thus "incorporated into history" as it did not invite immediate fulfillment but instead extended throughout the ages.¹²⁸ In light of this understanding of divine blessing, the role of the patriarchs as "bearers of Israel's hope"¹²⁹ and bearers of the world's hope is enforced. The patriarchs were not allowed to revel in the blessing of God alone but instead the very delay of the complete fulfillment of the blessings during their lifetimes points to the fact that the blessings have a longer lifespan. Therefore, the promised blessings of God upon Abraham and his offspring were clearly pronounced as promises held for future generations.

Within the history of the patriarchs, the Abrahamic blessing is seen to be renewed again and again among Abraham's descendants. As first expressed to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, God blessed Abraham and his descendants with land (v. 1), blessing (vv. 2-3), greatness (v. 2), abundant offspring (v. 2), protection (v. 3), and the promise of being a blessing to the nations (v. 3).¹³⁰ This blessing to Abraham was enforced throughout his lifetime and extended to his offspring: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (see table 7). With each extension of the Abrahamic blessing to Abraham's offspring, small variations of expression did exist. However, the motifs of fruitfulness, blessing, promised land, covenantal relationship, and blessing to the nations were consistent within the patriarchal blessings. It is interesting to note the parallel between the blessings of Genesis 1-11 (blessing, fruitfulness, dominion and resources) and those of Genesis 12-50. Although Abraham and his offspring did receive additional blessings

127. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 52.

128. *Ibid.*

129. Childs, *Introduction*, 151.

130. See appendix C for a detailed account of the extension of the Abrahamic blessing to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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from God as expressed in Genesis 12–25, Abraham served functionally as a continuation of a line of universal blessing which began in Genesis.

TABLE 7
PATRIARCHAL BLESSING IN GENESIS

Recipient	Land	Blessing	Fruitfulness	Blessing to Nations	Dominion/Greatness	Covenantal Relationship/Protection
Abraham	12:2a; 12:7; 13:15; 13:17; 15:7; 15:18–21; 17:8	12:2b–3b; 14:18–20; 15:1; 17:16–19; 22:17; 24:1	12:2; 13:16; 15:4–5; 17:2; 17:4–6; 17:16, 19; 20; 22:17	12:3c; 18:18; 22:18	12:2; 18:18; 22:17	12:3; 15:17–21; 17:2–14
Isaac	26:2, 3; 26:4	25:11; 26:3; 26:12–13 26:24	26:4a; 26:14	26:4	26:14	17:19–22; 26:3
Jacob	28:4; 28:13, 15; 35:12	28:3; 28:4a; 32:29; 35:9	28:3b; 28:14; 35:11; 46:3; 47:27	28:14	35:11; 46:3	28:15; 46:4
Joseph		48:15–16; 49:23–26	48:16; 49:22			

Although the patriarchs were probably not “preoccupied with blessing” as some suggest,¹³¹ it was a very important element in their lives. In accordance with the customs of the time, fathers blessed their sons (Gen 27:28–29, 39; 28:1–4; 49:1–28; 48:13–20), superiors blessed inferior (14:17–20), blessings were used in parting (24:60) and sometimes even as prizes won in combat.¹³² During patriarchal times, people believed that blessings contained a nearly magical, primitive power that was released through the spoken word. When given from one human being to another, as from a father to a son, only one blessing could be given which in turn could not be annulled or changed.

The fervent belief in the power of blessing held by the patriarchs can be seen in Esau’s severe despair upon losing the blessing of the firstborn to his brother Jacob (Gen 27). As Isaac explained Jacob’s deceit to Esau, Esau expressed his sheer agony at hearing the loss of his blessing:

131. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 227.

132. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 54–55.

When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" But he [Isaac] said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." . . . Then he [Esau] said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Isaac answered Esau, "I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" Esau said to his father, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. (Gen 27:34-38 NRSV)

Although the supernatural power of blessing is a foreign concept in contemporary Western society, the holistic provisions of blessing were not lost on the patriarchs. Esau's intense sorrow, expressed upon hearing about the theft of his blessing, and his entreaty to his father to bless him as well, displays in no uncertain terms an example of the people's firm belief in the power of spoken blessings.

Therefore, in light of this traditional understanding of the power of blessing, God's blessings given to the patriarchs take on greater significance. As the Abrahamic blessing was renewed with each patriarch, the divine blessings were understood as "manifestation[s] of a power-filled word" which would certainly come to pass.¹³³ The declaration of the blessings by God spurred the patriarchs to great acts of obedience (Gen 12:4; 22:18), worship (12:7; 13:18; 17:3; 26:25; 28:16-20; 35:14), belief (15:6), and to the pronouncement of vows to the Lord (28:16-20). It is evident from their reverent responses that they believed the word of the Lord and held God's words as irrevocable promises that would become reality.

This firm belief is apparent in Genesis 32:9-12 when Jacob heard of Esau's approach toward his family with two hundred men. It was then that Jacob reminded God of his irreversible blessing upon his life:

And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau,

133. *Ibid.*, 51.

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for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'" (Gen 32:9–12 NRSV, italics added)

In the midst of the possible annihilation of his family, Jacob turned to God and fervently reminded God of the divine promise that he had received that could not be broken (Gen 28:12–14). Jacob cried out to God declaring the dangerous situation he was in and proclaimed, "For I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. *Yet you have said*" (32:11b–12 NRSV, italics added). For in the midst of his fear, Jacob knew that God's words could not be undone. God had foretold and promised Jacob and the patriarchs his blessings; therefore they knew the blessing would come to fruition.

An additional factor in the outplaying of the Abrahamic blessing was the fact that not all received God's covenantal blessing. The passing over of Ishmael (Gen 17) and Esau (Gen 27) stand out in particular; the first was the firstborn son of Abraham and the second the rightful heir of Isaac. George W. Coats notes in regard to Ishmael's dismissal that "it is somewhat surprising that Ishmael receives circumcision, the sign of the covenant and is heir to a similar promise. The promise of the covenant nonetheless passes over Ishmael, the firstborn and resides in Isaac."¹³⁴ Although at Abraham's insistence God did bless Ishmael, Isaac was still declared the child of the promise and thus became the recipient of God's greater covenantal blessings (17:20–22). This counterbalance between the two brothers resides within the Genesis text in the parallel narratives of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau. Walter Brueggemann remarks upon the narrative of Jacob and Esau and states:

The narrative becomes aware that somebody is destined to lesser blessing. One son cannot have the full blessing, for there is only one such blessing . . . The whole family knows that without the power of the blessing, life has no fresh possibility handed with only pragmatic forms of power, mechanistic ways of speech and futures only they can shape.¹³⁵

Although the author adds that "nobody wants a life without the special words and gestures that bind that life to a precious past and a

134. Coats, *Genesis*, 31.

135. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 228.

promised future,"¹³⁶ the actualization of these words was evident within the life of Esau. In spite of these distinctions, both Ishmael and Esau were remarkably blessed by God despite their eventual position outside of the official Abrahamic line of descent.

Abrahamic Blessing Extended to the Nations

Although the Abrahamic blessing was extended and passed to each patriarch, the blessing of God also fell upon the peoples surrounding Abraham and his descendants. This "overspill of blessing beyond the Abrahamic family"¹³⁷ can be seen not only in the establishment of covenantal relationships between the patriarchs and their neighbors, but also in the unwitting extension of God's blessing upon unprepared recipients. While the spoken declaration of God that he would bless the nations through Abraham is repeated five times through Genesis (Gen 12:1-4; 18:17-18; 22:15-18; 26:2-5; 28:12-14), it was the partial fulfillment of these words during the lifetime of the patriarchs that generate the most interest. Chosen to be "bearers of a blessing . . . for the sake of all,"¹³⁸ Genesis records that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph each participated, albeit sometimes unknowingly, in God's blessing to the nations.¹³⁹

136. Ibid.

137. Clines, *Theme*, 78-79.

138. Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 32.

139. See appendix D.