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Israel and the Nations in God's Redemptive Plan

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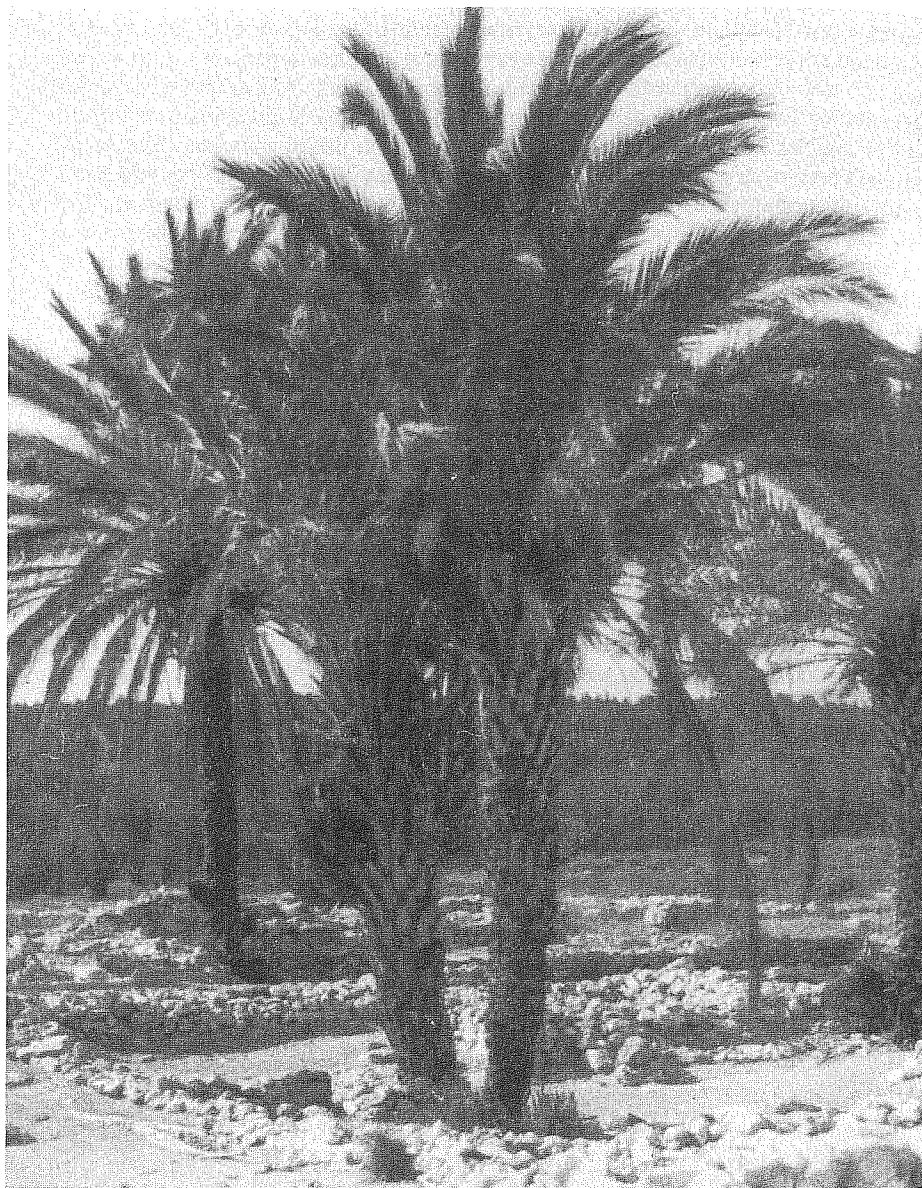
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The date palm tree, which Josephus reports was found in forests in Israel in the first century.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS IN GOD'S REDEMPITIVE PLAN

A. Boyd Luter

The waning years of the twentieth century have witnessed on-again, off-again efforts to mediate the ongoing tensions in the Middle East. From a political standpoint, though, Israel and the surrounding nations seem to have almost nothing in common except an intense desire to occupy and control the same historic real estate.

That would seem to be the sobering current reality. That is not the last word, however, on the relationship between Israel and the nations. That final, decisive word belongs to the Lord God as reflected in His overarching redemptive plan revealed in Scripture.

"Never the twain shall meet" is an inaccurate reflection of the historical phase in which Israel and the Arab nations came into being. The Bible portrays a profound interconnectedness between Israel and her neighbors at their infancy stage of growth as well as in their later history. Even more surprising to some, there is a clear biblical basis for understanding that a special aspect of blessing is readily available today for both those in Israel and the nations.

The following chapter will explore the nature of: (1) the foundational connection between Israel and the nations; (2) the unique election of Israel and her blessings and the significant national blessings available to other peoples (including the Arabs) through Israel, as seen in the Hebrew Scriptures; (3) the focal point of the blessings in the personal sense for both, seen in the New Testament; (4) the future chapters of the blessings to Israel and the nations, as seen in key eschatological passages; and (5) how the blessings are still readily available to be received today personally by those among both Israel and the nations.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NATIONS

The apostle Paul confronted the ethnically proud philosophers in Athens with this fact of biblical history: "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (Acts 17:26 NKJV).¹ Given the audience, Paul's proclamation of common ancestry and divinely designed historical² and geographical placement³ includes both Israel and the nations.

What is the apostle to the Gentiles referring to when he says that God "has made from one blood every nation [$\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$ ἔθνος; *pan ethnos*] of men" (17:26)? At first, it seems that he has creation in mind and its aftermath (Genesis 1–5).⁴ However, the following phrase, "all the face of the earth" ($\pi\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\varsigma$ προσώπου τῆς γῆς; *pantos prosopou tes ges*) likely looks back to the repopulation of the earth after the Flood (Genesis 9–11). It echoes the divinely forced spread of the nations "over the face of all the earth" (11:8–9; $\pi\rho\acute{o}\sigma\omega\pi\omicron\nu$ πάσης τῆς γῆς; *prosopon pases tes ges* [LXX]) after the Tower of Babel.

Genesis 9–11 depicts the descent of the nations from one man, Noah, and his three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10:1). The genealogies in chapter 10 are from a point in time well before there was a nation of Israel.⁵ As repeated in 10:5, 20, 31–32, they deal with *families* (מִשְׁפָּחָה ; *mishpaha*) beginning to speak different *languages* (i.e., after the confusion of languages at Babel, 10:10) and occupying different *lands*, growing into *nations* (גוֹי ; *goy*).⁶ While these growing nations are growing apart, so to speak, their family trees are all, ultimately, interconnected by their roots in Noah's family.

Among these nations are many with whom Israel must deal at a later stage. The most obvious of these geographic neighbors (often enemies) are Mizraim (Egypt, 10:6), the Philistines (10:14), various Canaanite peoples (10:15–19), the Assyrians and Arameans (10:22), and inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula (10:27–30).⁷

THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

Even at this early historical vantage point, however, there have been indications of which emerging peoples/nations will be distinctively blessed by God. The oracle of Noah clearly placed the Shemites in the position of honor (and the Canaanite wing of the Hamites as the recipients of a curse; 9:25–27).⁸ Next, the line of Shem is emphasized in the Table of Nations (chapter 10) by mentioning his name first at the beginning of the chapter (10:1) but delaying the discussion of his descendants until last (10:21–31). Finally, the descendants of Eber are clearly spotlighted among the Shemites (10:21, 25).

After the crucial explanation of the scattering of the nations in 11:1–9, the genealogies of Shem (11:10–26) and Terah, the father of Abram (11:27ff.) set up the divine call to Abram.⁹ From among the nations, out of the honored Shemite line, "Abram the Hebrew" (14:13) is chosen by God as the channel for His sovereign plan.¹⁰

However, there is a problem in regard to Abram that Scripture recognizes from the beginning. Abram's wife Sarai "was barren; she had no child" (11:30). Given the foundational "begot" (יָלַד ; *yalad*; i.e., father and physical descent)¹¹ nature of the genealogies in Genesis 10 and 11, taking into account the eventual national and geographical aspects after generations of multiplication, the Lord's choice of Abram at this point in the narrative is intriguing to say the least.

But that does not stop God from making an astounding promise to the individual He had sovereignly selected. The striking initial statement¹² of what develops into the Abrahamic covenant is found in Genesis 12:1–3.¹³ Immediately after the Lord directs Abram to relocate "to a land that I will show you" (12:1), He declares, "I will make you a great nation" (12:2).

Abram was already seventy-five years old when he received this mind-boggling promise (12:4). It would be twenty-five stretching years (17:17; 21:5), however, before the Lord God miraculously fulfilled the first step of His promise to make Abram's descendants (13:16) into "a great nation" (12:2): the birth of Isaac, the child of promise (17:16, 19). The Lord's unwavering choice of yet-unborn Isaac over Ishmael, Abram's son by Sarai's handmaid, Hagar (17:18–19), secured the bloodline that would become His elect nation. God's later direction to Abraham to send away Ishmael and Hagar clearly indicates that same resolve (21:9–13).

THE BLESSINGS TO ISRAEL

After the birth of Isaac, the rapid growth of Abram's family began to take place. Isaac's son, Jacob, had twelve sons. By the time "the house of Jacob" went to Egypt under Joseph's protection to avoid the great famine, they were a large family of seventy (Gen. 46:27). At the time of the Exodus, over 400 years later (Gen. 15:13), the nation-to-be numbered two million or more (Exod. 12:37).¹⁴ God's promise to Abram of becoming a fully populated elect nation, Israel (Gen. 12:2), had come to fruition.

That was undoubtedly a significant part of what was meant by the Lord saying to Abram, "I will bless you" (12:2; cf. 22:17). Earlier in Genesis, both the creation account (1:28) and the beginning of the repopulation of the world after the Flood (9:1) closely connect God's blessing with mankind multiplying and filling the earth. Simply put, "In blessing man, God bestows good, at the time or later."¹⁵ In the case of Abram (and Sarai) this aspect of blessing was much later but certainly worth waiting for.

However, that is surely not all that is meant by God's blessing on Abram. Some years into that period, Abram's frustration with childlessness (i.e., failure to be "blessed" with children) came to the foreground (15:2–3). At that point, the Lord restated His promise to make Abram's descent "a great nation." He committed Himself to multiply Abram's descendants to be as numerous as the stars of the heavens (15:4–5).

Abram's response to this unlikely promise becomes the biblical prototype for proper response to God and His plan. Genesis 15:6 records the kind of faith (אָמַן; *aman*)¹⁶ that "justified" Abram before the Lord.¹⁷ It is also utilized in the NT by both Paul (Rom. 4:1ff.; Gal. 3:6ff.) and James (2:23)¹⁸ to make the same point in regard to any believer, Jew or Gentile (Rom. 1:16).

Though Genesis 15 does not say it in so many words, God's justification of Abram is also part of His blessing (Gen. 12:2), according to Galatians 3:9. Thus, not only would Abram's physical descendants be "blessed," based on the promise related to the initial statement of the Abrahamic Covenant. They could also participate in the blessing by individually following the spiritual example of Abram's faith. This aspect will be dealt with in more depth later in the chapter.

The rest of Genesis 15 describes the unilateral covenant (15:18) ceremony that the Lord chose to answer Abram's question about his inheritance of the land (15:8).¹⁹ God's promise to bless Abram, originally made in Genesis 12:2, had further been manifested in an unconditional "contract," guaranteed by God!

An apparent final aspect of God's blessing to Israel is found in the restatement of the covenant to Abraham in Genesis 22:17: "Your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies." Clearly, the imagery here is to defeat and displace an opposing force, in this case the enemies of the (later) nation of Israel.²⁰

However, it is much more difficult to know how far this *blessing* can be extended historically. Some restrict the meaning to being able to "dispossess the Canaanites" in order to occupy the promised land (cf. 15:19–21).²¹ That certainly is true, as far as it goes. Yet, it appears likely that this Abrahamic blessing refers generally to "the success of his descendents when they encounter enemies."²² Thus, it could be as far-reaching as "any enemy of any time."²³

This underplayed aspect of national blessing upon Israel may help explain why, even today, the Israeli military is phenomenally successful.²⁴ On the other hand, you need look no further than the spiritual dynamics behind Israel's devastating initial defeat at Ai (Joshua 7) to realize that this promise in Genesis 22:17 cannot be construed as completely ironclad.

THE BLESSINGS TO THE NATIONS THROUGH ISRAEL

As wondrous as the blessings were that Israel received through the Abrahamic covenant, they did not exhaust the Lord's blessings through Abram. In Genesis 12:3 God promised, "I will bless those who bless you"²⁵ and "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

There are numerous plausible examples of blessings being bestowed on those who blessed Abraham or his descendants in some fashion. For example, in very close proximity textually, Lot was blessed financially (13:5); then he later owed his very survival to Abraham's intercession on behalf of any righteous residents of Sodom (Genesis 18–19). Two generations later, Laban realized he had been blessed because of Jacob (30:27). After he had earlier stolen Esau's blessing from

Isaac (Genesis 27), Jacob chose to bestow a very generous financial "blessing" (בֵּרַכָּה; *beraka*; 33:11) on his twin brother, from whom he had been estranged. Then, after Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery, he initially became the stated vehicle of blessing for Potiphar's household in Egypt (39:1–6).²⁶

These examples may appear to be merely personal, not national, in their scope. However, it should be realized that Lot's national descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites (19:37–38), humanly owed their opportunity to exist to Abraham because of Lot's survival. Esau's growing family, having been blessed by Jacob, the heir of promise, became the nation of Edom (36). Even more striking, Joseph's leadership role in Egypt made possible the blessing of survival through the seven-year famine for the Egyptian nation as well as many other surrounding nations (likely at least several of the locales of peoples/nations found in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10) disastrously impacted by the famine (41:53–57).

The Arabs are a particularly interesting case in regard to the Abrahamic blessings to the nations. Some of the peoples that lived in the Arabian Peninsula (i.e., Arabs) were listed in the Table of Nations. However, many others are descended from Ishmael, Abram's son by Hagar, Sarai's handmaid (25:12–18). Still others come from the children of Abraham by Keturah, his later concubine (25:1–6).²⁷

Ishmael was, of course, the beloved older son of Abraham (21:11), for whom Abraham cared so much that he asked God to name Ishmael the child of promise: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" (17:18). That request was denied, and the Lord's choice of Isaac (17:19), who would be born the next year (17:21), was made clear.

However, Abraham's request on behalf of Ishmael (and his descendants) had been heard by the Lord. Even though "redemptive history does not proceed through him," Ishmael is still greatly blessed.²⁸ God immediately promises to multiply him into a great nation with twelve princes (17:20), a promise fulfilled within the span of the Book of Genesis (25:16).

Through his participation in the covenant sign of circumcision with Abraham (17:9–14, 23–27), Ishmael was also very much part of the covenant and blessed accordingly.

Relatedly, Ishmael had already been blessed with the promise of a multitude of descendants before he was even born, in the context of his mother, Hagar, fleeing from Sarai's wrath (16:6–10). Then, when Ishmael was a teenager, and he and Hagar were finally required to leave by God's direction to Abraham (21:9–12), the Lord again promised to make a nation of Ishmael's descent (21:13). The reason given is because Ishmael is Abraham's son.

Thus, while Ishmael is not *the* heir of the Abrahamic covenant, he is an honored son of Abraham and highly blessed as a result. Further, even though there was a divinely sanctioned geographical distance placed between Ishmael and Isaac (21:9–21), either to prevent friction or a claim to Abraham's "estate," the return of Ishmael for Abraham's burial indicates (25:9–10) that there could still be some

"family unity" between the stepbrothers.²⁹ Similar honorable treatment was accorded to Abraham's children by Keturah (25:1–6). Like Ishmael, they were purposefully distanced from Isaac (25:6). Also like Ishmael, they were each given gifts by their father (25:6; cf. 21:14) before leaving him.³⁰

These passages have implications for the place of the Arab nations in God's plan. As seen above, they have been recipients of God's gracious blessing in biblical history. And, despite the ongoing seething rage of the surrounding Arab states toward Israel, who may well be "reaping the whirlwind" of the Abrahamic curse (12:3) as a result, they still deserve great respect as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael or Keturah's children. This will be a focus of the concluding section of this chapter.

In later restatements of the covenant to Abraham (22:18) and Isaac (26:4), the wording is "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." Then, to Jacob (28:14) it becomes "in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." These passages strongly imply that blessings to the nations could flow through the generations of Israel after Jacob ("your seed").

In surveying the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, some classic instances of apparent Abrahamic blessing to the nations mediated through his descendants emerge. For example, Jeremiah 29:7 directs the Jews in exile to be a blessing to Babylon, including praying for its peace.³¹ Also, it seems that the presence of Daniel and his friends in Babylon proves to be a great blessing, especially during the times of King Nebuchadnezzar's incapacity to rule (Daniel 4).³² Ezra 6:10 records the Medo-Persian King Darius's desire for the prayers of the Jewish priests. In the book of Nehemiah, that a blessing accrued to the Medo-Persian Empire because of Nehemiah, King Artaxerxes' cupbearer (Neh. 1:11), is certainly implied by the king's generous response (2:1–8).³³

THE FOCUS OF PERSONAL BLESSINGS: JESUS CHRIST

Chris Wright is correct in asserting that Israel's election involved God's use of particular means for a universal goal.³⁴ In the Lord's grand redemptive plan, Abraham and Israel were chosen so that "all the nations" might be blessed. Paul goes so far as to say that there is an anticipation of the NT gospel being preached contained in Genesis 12:3 and 22:18 (Gal. 3:8).³⁵ He then ties the wider intent of the blessing of the Lord's covenant with Abraham to his ultimate "seed" (σπέρματι;³⁶ cf. Gen. 22:18, LXX) that the covenant looked forward to—Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16), particularly in regard to His redemptive work on the cross (3:13–14).

As explained above, the national physical blessings for both Israel and the nations under the Abrahamic covenant were indeed extraordinary. However, Abram's blessing in being justified before God (Gen. 15:6) was even more so, given that it was spiritual and eternal in scope. That same aspect of blessing is also readily available to any person who will, by faith, follow Abraham's lead

(Gal. 3:9). Paul even says it is legitimate to call such believers "sons of Abraham" (3:7), whether they are Jewish or not, since faith is the means of entry to this spiritual, eternal aspect of blessing (3:9).

This should not be taken as a blurring between the purposes of God in relation to Israel and the nations, though. Certainly, in the church that Jesus Christ is currently building (Matt. 16:18), Jews and Gentiles are together (Eph. 2:11–18) in God's redemptive plan. However, in the conclusion of the same letter to the Galatians, for example, Paul refers to "the Israel of God,"³⁷ most likely meaning the current remnant of believing Jews (Rom. 11:2, 7), who are both Abraham's physical and spiritual children (Gal. 3:6–9).³⁸

Significantly, it is the Lord Jesus' stated intent that the blessing of being justified by faith (Gal. 2:16) should be proclaimed to "all the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη; Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47), the same intended scope as the statements of the Abrahamic blessing in Genesis 22:18 and 26:4 (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, LXX).³⁹ This Great Commission for Christ's disciples is to continue unabated until "the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Paul expressed the scope of his apostolic evangelistic ministry as "all the nations" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26), though he clarified that it was to be preached to the Jew first, but also to the Greek (i.e., non-Jew; Rom. 1:16). At the end of his life, with the Great Commission (and likely the Abrahamic covenant) in mind, the apostle to the Gentiles indicated that his preaching had had a significant impact toward reaching "all the nations" (2 Tim. 4:17).

Thus, the spiritual and eternal blessing aspect of the Abrahamic covenant continues to flow to both individual Jews and Gentiles as the gospel of Christ's redemptive work on the cross has been preached in the carrying out of the Great Commission. But, what will happen at the "end of the age" (Matt. 28:20)?

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FUTURE OF THE BLESSING TO ISRAEL

At present, relatively few Jews are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, according to God's sovereign redemptive plan (Rom. 11:5).⁴⁰ That scarcity was so emotionally difficult for Paul that he was willing to give up his own salvation if, by doing so, his Jewish brethren, who possessed the Abrahamic national blessing (Rom. 9:2–5), might become believers as a result.⁴¹

Such an exchange was, of course, not possible. Paul's presentation of the Lord's grand redemptive scheme indicates that, until "the fulness of the Gentiles" (11:25)—the full complement from "all the nations" to be saved comes into the fold—the spiritual hardening (9:18) and blindness (11:7, 25) of the bulk of Israel toward the ultimate "seed" of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), Jesus Christ, will not end.⁴² Widespread rejection of the Messiah has been, is, and will continue to be the rule during "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) in God's plan.

However, that was not the case during the glorious initial chapter of the church's history, at Pentecost and immediately thereafter (Acts 2–6). Besides the fact that

thousands of Jews were saved (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:1), it is particularly striking where many of these new believers came from geographically and what happened. They were Jews of the Diaspora, coming to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost from "every nation [παντὸς ἔθνους] under heaven" (2:5). They came from countries of the New Testament era (2:9–11), which roughly parallel the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. Most astoundingly, they each heard the gospel in the language (γλῶσσα, 2:11) of the country in which they resided, a miraculous reversal of the Lord's confusion of the languages (γλῶσσα, Gen. 11:7, LXX) at Babel.

Perhaps these aspects of the beginning of the church at Pentecost (Acts 11:15) were meant to indicate that the Jews were intended to play a spotlighted role in taking the blessing of the gospel to "all the nations" (Matt. 28:19–20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) throughout the age. Unfortunately, beyond Paul (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) it appears that few other Jewish believers chose to accept this crucial evangelistic responsibility.

By God's grace, this situation will improve drastically at the end of the age. The 144,000 Jews described in Revelation 7:1–8 and 14:1–5 are apparently miraculously protected ("sealed") in order to spread the message of Christ's redemptive death (5:9).⁴³ There is, unfortunately, not enough information provided biblically to know whether any of this group were already believers or are converted at the same time they are sealed.

Nor is this the only large-scale conversion of Jews seen in the Apocalypse. After the death, resurrection, and ascension of the two witnesses in 11:7–12, there is a devastating earthquake in "the great city," Jerusalem (11:8),⁴⁴ which kills 7,000 people (11:13). The survivors, surely primarily Jews, fear and give glory to God, exactly the commanded (saving) response to the climactic preaching of "the everlasting gospel" in 14:6–7.

At the very least, it appears that a revival of epic proportion will have broken out in Jerusalem.⁴⁵ More likely, this is the location of what is meant by "all Israel will be saved" in Romans 11:26. Though it is highly doubtful that this passage depicts a complete national conversion, as some understand Romans 11, it could easily be speaking of a group of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Jews, gloriously brought into the fold of redemptive blessing.

These events take place after the conclusion of the two witnesses' three-and-a-half-year ministry (Rev. 11:3, 7), before the basically unrivaled reign of the Beast (11:7), also for three and a half years (13:7). Hence, this large group of new Jewish converts may well be the Jewish "woman" described in 12:6–17, who is miraculously protected from the Devil (12:9, 13–17) for that latter three-and-a-half-year period (12:14).

Suffice it to say that the eternal Abrahamic blessing of salvation by faith (Gen. 15:6) will be entered into by a great company of his descendants during the Tribulation period. Though there is no description of distinctively Jewish believers in Revelation ruling with Christ during the thousand years of the earthly messianic

kingdom following the Second Coming (19:11–20:6), they are included, given Jesus' promise of judgment over Israel to the apostles in Matthew 19:28.

The final biblical clue in regard to Israel has to do with eternal blessedness. The unbreakable (unconditional) nature of the Abrahamic covenant guarantees that redeemed Jews will have a key part in the new Jerusalem. That never-ending role is portrayed as the twelve gates to the city (Rev. 21:12–13). Thomas is certainly correct in understanding this description as "explicit notice of the distinct role of national Israel in this eternal city in fulfillment of their distinct role in history."⁴⁶ Thus, it is not farfetched to say that, through Jesus Christ, the ultimate "seed" of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), and the role of Israel in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:12), the Jews will continue to bestow an eternal blessing!

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FUTURE OF THE BLESSINGS TO THE NATIONS

There is a bright ray of light in the midst of Matthew's dark description of the Tribulation period at the end of the age: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come" (24:14).⁴⁷ This means that the Lord is *promising* that "all the nations," the same group that the Abrahamic covenant promises to bless, will have the opportunity to hear the gospel before Christ comes to judge! We see just how serious the Lord Jesus is about the worldwide preaching of the gospel in His Great Commission statements in Matthew 28:19–20 and Luke 24:47.⁴⁸ In both, the scope of the commission, like Matthew 24:14, is "all the nations." In Luke 24, the commission begins in Jerusalem (progressing to the ends of the earth, Acts 1:8). In Matthew 28, the commission continues until the end of the age, as does the eschatological promise of 24:14.

We see the outworking of Jesus' promise of offering the redemptive message to "all the nations" in two important passages describing events at "the end of the age" in the Apocalypse. The first is the appearance before the heavenly throne of an innumerable redeemed multitude from "all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues" in Revelation 7:9.⁴⁹ But, not only does this description seem to at least partly fulfill the promise of Christ in Matthew 24:14 and the Great Commission, it also echoes the wording of the Table of Nations in Genesis 10.⁵⁰ Thus, it seems that the salvation of this great multi-ethnic multitude (like Pentecost; see above) at least partly reverses the forced spread of the nations after the arrogant, united disobedience of mankind at Babel, before the Lord's intervention through the Abrahamic Covenant and its promised blessing to all the nations.

There is a second great wave of salvation from among all the nations in Revelation 14:6–7, 14–16, and 15:2ff.⁵¹ The 144,000 redeemed and sealed Jews (cf. 7:1–8) are said to be "firstfruits" (14:4), implying that a much larger harvest would follow.⁵² The climactic preaching of the eternal "gospel" in 14:6–7⁵³ (perhaps by the 144,000 or others) leads to the reaping of the grain harvest, a figure for evangelistic

ingathering and the image of many saved martyrs in heaven (15:2). Thus, between Revelation 7:9–17 and the “harvest” in 14, we see the blessed salvation of an amazingly vast throng from the nations at the end of the age.

Passages in the Hebrew Scriptures like Isaiah 25 prophesy a glorious future for the nations in which death will be swallowed up and all tears will be wiped away (25:8), and they will rejoice in the Lord’s salvation (25:9). This description clearly foresees the eternal blessedness described in Revelation 21:1–4. In that radically new creation (21:1, 5), the nations (who are saved eternally) will “bring their glory and honor” (21:24, 26) alongside that of the redeemed Jews (21:12–13). They are still distinct but very closely related in the eternal outworking of God’s redemptive plan.

CONCLUSION: ONGOING BLESSINGS TO ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS

In Acts 17:26–27, Paul told the Athenian philosophers that the Lord God’s purpose for creating “from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth” was “so that they should seek the Lord.” While both Israel and the nations could claim ignorance to an extent (17:30), with the divinely ordained death and resurrection of Jesus, the promised “seed” of Abraham, came the necessity of repentance (and faith) for all men (17:30–31).⁵⁴

In effect, what the Lord now expects is for every individual Jew or Gentile to follow the example of Abraham’s faith and justification in Genesis 15:6. This crucial applicational point is underlined by an artistic chiasmic (i.e., inverted parallel) arrangement of the blessing element of four of the Abrahamic covenant passages (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).⁵⁵

As seen below, the two outer passages (A, A’) in the chiasm (12:3; 28:14) emphasize the foundational unconditional nature of God’s covenant with Abraham. This aspect is only available to the Jews, God’s sovereignly chosen people.

The emphasis of such mirroring structures is, however, in the middle layer (B, B’).⁵⁶ There is seen the secondary conditional aspect of the covenant, in both cases emphasizing Abraham’s obedience (22:18; 26:4). In both cases (i.e., God’s commands to sacrifice Isaac and to not leave the promised land in spite of a severe famine), trust in the Lord in challenging situations was required, even as it had been in 15:6 when a divine promise to Abraham that came in the face of hopeless childlessness.

- A (12:3) In you all the families (משפחות) of the earth shall be blessed (*Promise/Unconditional*)
- B (22:18) In your seed all the nations (גוֹיִם) shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice (*Faith Needed/Conditional*)
- B’ (26:4) In your seed all the nations shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice . . . (*Faith Needed/Conditional*)
- A’ (28:14) In you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed (*Promise/Unconditional*)

In addition, the change from the use of “families” in 12:3 and 28:14 to “nations” in 22:18 and 26:4 is not merely stylistic. It points to the likely presence of such an inverted structure. In addition, the use of *families* recalls the divine choice of Abraham and Israel from among “the families of the sons of Noah” (10:32).

However, in the overall biblical usage, “all the nations” is picked up as the chord that is replayed over and over in the NT in the offering of the blessing/redemptive aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant to all who would believe in Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt. 28:19–20; Luke 24:47; Gal. 3:6–9; Rev. 14:6–7). So, not only is there a past historic interconnectedness between Israel and the nations dating back to Noah’s family, well before the national aspects of the Abrahamic covenant; it is also the intention of the Lord’s redemptive plan that the Abrahamic blessing provide the basis for a present and future connection through faith (Gen. 15:6) in Christ (Gal. 3:6–9). It is a blessing that can, one by one, person by person, overcome even the tensions between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is Paul probably referring to when he states that God “has made from one blood every nation of men” (Acts 17:26)?
2. What is the relationship between God’s promised blessings to Abram (Gen. 12:2–3) and Abram’s example of faith (Gen. 15:6) as Paul applies them in Galatians 3:6–9?
3. Is there an ongoing significance to the promise to Abraham that his “descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Gen. 22:17)?
4. List blessings to the nations, especially the Arab peoples, that occurred because of the Abrahamic covenant.
5. Is there biblical evidence that many Jews and Gentiles will come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, the ultimate “seed” of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), at the end of the age?

ENDNOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from the New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible.
2. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 337–38, observes that “the times of the Gentiles” (καίροι ἐθνῶν; *kairoi ethnon*) in Luke 21:24 may be an example of such “preappointed times” (Acts 17:26).
3. I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 288. Bruce, *Acts*, 338, cites Deut. 32:8 as the *locus classicus* in regard to divine geographical allocation.

4. E.g., Marshall, 287.
5. The emphasized initial placement of Eber (from which is derived the name "Hebrew" in Gen. 10:21) among the Shemite line (10:21–31) looks ahead to God's election of "Abram the Hebrew" (14:13) in chapter 12.
6. A. P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 227, helpfully describes "families" as "physically related clans, normally a national subdivision."
7. H. G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 121–28, takes great care in making the identification of each name/nation.
8. See, e.g., Ross, 218–19, for a helpful discussion.
9. Ross, 250–52, makes a likely case for parallelism between the genealogies in Gen. 5 and Gen. 11, developing their linkage in the line of promise and blessing.
10. This is the wording of V. P. Hamilton, "Genesis," *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 19.
11. D. J. Wiseman, "Genesis 10: Some Archaeological Considerations," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 87 (1955), 17.
12. Restatement or progressive clarification of various key aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis are found in 13:14–18; 15 and 17, 18:1–18, 22:1–19, 26:3–5, 26:24 and 35:9–15. For a helpful visualization and explanation of how most of these passages develop as the Abrahamic Covenant, see the *Nelson Study Bible*, gen. ed. E. D. Radmacher (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 35–36.
13. For varying evangelical discussions of the Abrahamic Covenant, see G. L. Archer, "Covenant," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 277; C. C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 453–57; and T. M. McComiskey, "Covenant," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: 1988), 1:532–33. See also the somewhat older major contribution to this discussion by D. J. McCarthy, *The Form and History of the Abrahamic Covenant Traditions* (Amsterdam: Vandevelder, 1967).
14. The figure of "600,000 men" in Exod. 12:37 must be expanded by the number of women and children that accompanied the men out of Egypt, making for a conservative estimate of two million, but perhaps as many as three million or more.
15. W. J. Cameron and G. W. Knight, III, "Bless, Blessed, Blessing," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 162.
16. It should be noted that Heb. 11:8 states, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance." That means Abram was already a man of faith before Gen. 15. However, his faith is apparently focused on in Gen. 15 because of its proximity to the solemnizing of the covenant in that chapter (Ross, 309–10).
17. For compact discussions of the doctrine of justification by faith from different evangelical perspectives, see, e.g., Ryrie, 298–300; and J. I. Packer, "Justification," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 593–97.
18. Since James 2:14–26 is a notoriously thorny passage, consult, e.g., D. W. Burdick, "James," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:185; or D. J. Moo, "James," *Evangelical Commentary*, 1157.
19. E.g., Ross, 308; McCarthy, 300; C. L. Rogers, Jr., "The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Setting," *BibSac* 127 (1970): 241–56.
20. Stigers, 190–91.
21. Ross, 400.
22. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975 ed.), 2:635.
23. Stigers, 191.

24. See the excellent compact discussion of the modern State of Israel's remarkable military exploits in D. L. Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles and the Church: A New Perspective on History and Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Vision House, 1995), 199–213.
25. The reverse was also true: "... and I will curse those who curse you" (12:3), with the initial example being Pharaoh and the Egyptians in 12:17–20.
26. Ross, 625.
27. See, e.g., F. V. Winnett, "The Arabian Genealogies in Genesis," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, eds. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 171–96; and R. H. Smith, "Arabia," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, gen. ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 327.
28. Stigers, 167.
29. The conclusion by Stigers, 185, that Ishmael is here "disinherited," as well as expelled, seems to be overstated.
30. It defies belief that the only "gifts" given to Ishmael, his beloved older son, by Abraham were "bread and a skin of water" (Gen. 21:14a). Undoubtedly, these were mentioned because of the focus on survival in that passage (21:14b–20).
31. Indeed, it was possible for Israel to "be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2) to another nation while being "cursed" by exile herself (Deut. 28:15ff., esp. 28:64ff.; 30:1). See also the helpful related discussion of C. L. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," *EBC*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 553–54.
32. J. D. Pentecost, "Daniel," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1985), 1343; for a parallel view by the present writer, see A. B. Luter, "Daniel," *The Complete Who's Who of the Bible*, ed. P. Gardner (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 124.
33. See the related discussions in A. B. Luter and B. C. Davis, *God's Good Hand: Expositions of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Expositor's Guide to the Historical Books; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).
34. C. Wright, "A Christian Approach to Old Testament Prophecy concerning Israel," in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, ed. P. W. L. Walker (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1992), 1.
35. Consult the careful treatment of R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 138–40. From a different, more theological perspective, see J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Book of Galatians*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
36. In an interpretation that has frequently been contested because of its subtlety, Paul takes the implication of the use of the singular "seed" in Genesis and focuses on the individual descendant who would fulfill the Abrahamic promise: the Lord Jesus Christ. For a helpful discussion, see Fung, 155–56.
37. The classic scholarly discussion of this generation is P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 74–84.
38. W. S. Campbell, "Israel," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* eds. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin and D. G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 441–42. See also the conclusion of the present writer in *NSB*, 1980.
39. For in-depth discussions by the present writer of the various Great Commission statements at the conclusions of the Gospels, see A. B. Luter, *A New Testament Theology of Discipling* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary/Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1985); Luter, "Great Commission," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2:1090–91; Luter, "Women Disciples and the Great Commission," *Trinity Journal* 16NS (1995): 171–85; Luter and Kathy McReynolds, *Disciplined Living: What the New Testament Teaches*

- about *Recovery and Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); and Luter and McReynolds, *Women as Christ's Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
40. See the significant treatment of Rom. 11 in regard to the salvific future of the Jewish nation elsewhere in this volume by H. W. Hoehner.
 41. R. G. Gruenler, "Romans," *Evangelical Commentary*, 943, presents a balanced discussion of this difficult passage.
 42. Gruenler, 948–49; see also Hoehner's discussion.
 43. Larsen, 291–92; R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 474–75.
 44. The wording "where also our Lord was crucified" (Rev. 11:8) cinches the identification of "the great city" here as Jerusalem.
 45. R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 99. See also Thomas's related discussion in "The Mission of Israel and the Messiah in the Plan of God," in the present volume, as well as Hoehner's treatment of Rom. 11:25–26.
 46. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 463.
 47. The significance of this passage, as well as Rev. 7, 14, for the blessed conversion of the nations, is developed by the present writer in A. B. Luter, "End Times and Mission," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, gen. ed. S. Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).
 48. Luter, "Great Commission," 1090–91; Luter and McReynolds, *Women*, 16–21, esp. the chart on page 19.
 49. For an up-to-date, scholarly discussion of this passage by the present writer, see A. B. Luter, "Martyrdom," in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, eds. P. H. Davids and R. P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).
 50. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 401, believes "the origin of the expression is the prophecy of Daniel." However, the similar usage in Daniel 3, 5, 6, and 7 contains three elements, while Gen. 10 has four, as do the passages in Revelation.
 51. R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 95–98, argues at some length for a positive grain harvest in Rev. 14:14–16 and a negative grape harvest in 14:17–20. See also the more developed treatment in chapter 9 ("The Conversion of the Nations") of R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992). C. H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 67, also concludes 14:14–16 describes a grain harvest and 14:17–20 a grape harvest, as Thomas does cautiously, *Revelation 8–22*, 218–24.
 52. Some understand "firstfruits" here (14:4) to refer only to the quality of the offering. With "harvest" imagery following within just a few verses (14:14ff.), that conclusion is rendered highly unlikely.
 53. Surely it is highly significant that the term "gospel" is found only here in the Apocalypse. A very plausible explanation for its inclusion is that it echoes Matt. 24:14, esp. since "every nation . . ." is also found in 14:6, likely echoing "all the nations" in Matt. 24:14; 28:19.
 54. The NT usage of "repent" in regard to unbelievers implies/includes faith. See the present writer's discussion in A. B. Luter, "Repentance (NT)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5:672–74. See also the brief, but helpful, discussion of Marshall, 289–90.
 55. An example of a chiastic pattern spread throughout an entire biblical book (in this case, Rev. 1 to 22), with significant theological ramifications is found in Bauckham,

- Revelation*, 57–58. Examples of standard chiasmus in Genesis are presented in Ross, 436, 446, 474, 498, 631, 649.
56. For in-depth development of the potential significance of chiastic structures for the interpretation of extended passages or entire books of Scripture, see A. B. Luter and B. C. Davis, *God Behind the Seen: Expositions of the Books of Ruth and Esther* (Expositor's Guide to the Historical Books; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).