

The Blessing of Abraham (Gen 12:2-3): Its Mediatory Significance for the Goal of Universal Salvation

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Introduction

Blessing is a home word for contemporary Christians who understand it as the gracious activity of God. It is an important component of our present theological, liturgical and spiritual vocabulary. The greeting, “God bless you”, “I am blessed” or “You are blessed” is common among African Christians. African societies still revere the power of the word when spoken either in blessing or in curse. Liturgical and devotional music are also replete with the language of blessing. At liturgical and devotional sessions, the splashing of holy water especially or the imparting of blessing on the congregation draws more attention of the worshipping community and their greater participation than even the time of consecration. There is also this song about the blessing of Abraham, which many Christians consider as the epitome of all blessings.

Abraham’s blessings are mine. I am blessed in the morning; I am blessed in the evening. Abraham’s blessings are mine.

Of the many noteworthy biblical characters, Abraham is most associated with divine promise of material blessings which include land, great nationhood, uncountable offspring, protection from enemies and long life (Gen 12:2-3; 13:14-17; 22:15-18). This makes Abraham an attractive biblical figure. For contemporary Christians in Africa, God’s blessing is associated with material prosperity, position of honour, intelligent and successful children, state of wellbeing and good old age. African Christians pray for all these items of blessing and not because they cannot work for them.

The socio-economic situation of Africa has made it impossible for prosperity to depend only on a person’s intelligence, industry and employability. In many cases, a person’s good fortune might depend on

family name and background, connection to influential people and other similar factors. Some have worked to break a cycle of poverty for their families, but they simply do not get the opportunities even though they have the qualifications. Peoples' prayers for blessing and anchor of hopes on God are based mainly on this situation. Moreover, if Africans do not associate blessing with poverty, sickness and suffering, this is because no one does, except a few people who have the advantage of understanding the workings of God's mystery.

This research work intends to expose the meaning of the concept of blessing from the biblical tradition about Abraham in order to aid better understanding and use of it. Those who admire Abraham's blessings often fail to see a determinative connecting thread to the conferral of those blessings, that is, the fact that Abraham's blessing serves a higher divine project, which is the blessing of the nations (Gen 22:18). The essay begins with a terminology study. It goes on to expose the different traditions of blessing in the Bible in order better to highlight the context for and meaning of the blessing of Abraham.

Terminology Study

The word blessing derives from the Hebrew *brk*, which has these meanings: to bless, to kneel and also, by extension, water reservoir. The first meaning, to bless, appears in the *qal* (to bless, praise), *qal passive* (blessed - *barukh*), *niphal* (to be blessed, to bless oneself), *piel* (to bless, greet, praise) and the noun *berakhah* (blessing, praise). The proper names Baruch (Neh 3:20; 10:6; 11:5; Jer 32:12), Barachel (Job 32:2,6), Beracah (1 Chron 12:3), Berechiah and Jeberechiah (Isa 8:2) are formed from this root.¹ The other meanings 'to kneel' and 'water reservoir' might be metonymic derivations from the event of blessing.

The word includes concepts of greeting (Gen 47:7-10), congratulating, thanking and praising (2 Sam 8:10); and through blessing an entire family fortune is transferred in an objectively spiritual manner to the next generation (Gen 27:7). The theological import of these concepts is the understanding of blessing as the basis of solidarity with individuals or

¹ The relationship of the noun *berekhah* (pool, water reservoir or basin) to this root is debated.

groups in racial, social or religious relationships, or to whom one owes special thanks and appreciation.² Expressing congratulatory or appreciative remarks or commending someone to God demonstrates this solidarity.³

J. Hempel assumes that the concept of blessing originates from the practice of primitive magic where the efficacy of a word depends entirely on the control and bidding of the one who blesses.⁴ However, the concept is moved from this sphere and subordinated to a strictly religious understanding in which blessing has its origin and effect in the power and purpose of God. It became in the process, a restriction on creaturely power and a part of prayer. In this sense, blessing shares with magic an unconditional and inevitable efficacy.⁵ Hence, being deprived of its magical significance, the only kind of benedictory wishes which one could utter were those that God alone could bring to the person for whom the blessing is intended. Since blessing denotes solidarity, its effectiveness is contingent on the relationship between God and the person uttering the blessing, else the blessing has no effect.⁶

Traditions of Blessing in the Old Testament

In biblical tradition, blessing takes different forms where its three most obvious objects are creation, the patriarchs and the people of Israel. The three different traditions of blessing are found in three biblical contexts: the creation and flood narratives (Gen 1-11), patriarchal narratives (Gen 12-50), Deuteronomy and the Psalms. On the one hand, the creation, patriarchal and Mosaic traditions in Deuteronomy show that blessing is a divine prerogative, which means that only God imparts it; and on the other hand, in the patriarchal tradition also, the one who blesses is a family or clan head who gives the blessing to a son or sons. The root *brk* occurs more frequently in the book of Genesis (88x) than in any other part of the Old Testament (310x in all). Blessing is manifested most

² Cf. J. Scharbert, "*brk*", in G.J. Botterweck et. al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. II, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975), 303.

³Scharbert, "*brk*", p. 303.

⁴ Traces of this use are found in Gen 48:14-15; 1 Sam 14:24; Cf. 1 Cor 12:1-3; Gal 1:8.

⁵ Cf. J. Hempel, "Die israelischen Anschauungen vom Segen und Fluch im Lichte altorientalischer Parallelen", *ZDMG* 4 (1925), 20.

⁶ Cf. Scharbert, "*brk*", 303.

obviously in human prosperity and wellbeing, long life, state of peace, good harvest and children (cf. Gen 24:35-36; Lev 26:4-13; Deut 28:3-15). They are expressions of God's benevolence.

Blessing in the Yahwist Theology of History

It is important to distinguish different earlier conceptions of blessing which the Yahwist incorporated into the ancient Israelite theology of history in order to identify which conception is represented by the Abraham narrative and how the Yahwist presented it. The Yahwist, who composed Israel's history to support the kingdom of David and Solomon, combined three traditions of blessing that were formerly independent of each other: primeval history, patriarchal history and the history of the people.⁷

Westermann affirms that the Yahwist transformed earlier conceptions of blessing, giving them a new theological concept.⁸ Nevertheless, vestiges of the older conception still exist in the stories. The following ideas of blessing are at the background of the Yahwist's theology of history:⁹

- a) Blessing as irrevocable transfer of power, which is dependent on an action. An instance is the event of Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Gen 27). The bestowal of blessing follows a clearly identifiable ritual,¹⁰ in this case a meal. It required that the one bestowing the blessing be strengthened by eating special food. The Yahwist transformed this tradition of blessing when he made God the primary source of Isaac's blessing of Jacob. God's blessing is present only in its result because it is at work in the life of the individual or nation. The transformation of this concept of blessing as a transfer of power through a concrete action to blessing as an action ascribed to the invisible God and

⁷ Cf. Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 51.

⁸ Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 52-53.

⁹ Examples discussed in this paragraph are taken from Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 52-54.

¹⁰ This concept of blessing reaches back to a time which precedes Israelite theology of history and cult. It is significant that God is not mentioned in the blessing. Cf. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 56.

recognizable in its effects is one of the most innovations of the Yahwist.

- b) Blessing as a powerful word, which had immediate effect. This conception is a well-known phenomenon that was widespread in the history of religions - transfer of power through the words of an especially endowed or elderly person. We find this instance in the story of Balaam (Number 22-24) and partly in the story of Isaac (Genesis 27). The word of blessing has the power of fertility and prosperity, which affects not only the blessed but also his possession. The word of curse gives the opposite effect. The Yahwist transformed this conception by making blessing a promise directed to the future. In this way, blessing becomes a promise of blessing.
- c) In Genesis 32, the Yahwist incorporated a foreign idea of blessing that is mythological, and which belongs to a very early period. It carries the conception of blessing as a virtue won in combat. According to this conception, a god or divine being controls the power of blessing and can communicate it only in a bodily encounter. Even here, the Yahwist makes blessing something which only God can confer. Therefore, Jacob recognized God in the man he fought with through the night and asked for his blessing.
- d) Besides the blessing of a family, as we see in the patriarchal stories, there was also an ancient tradition of blessing of a tribe, that is, blessing given to a single tribe. Examples of this are found in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33, which were afterward ascribed to Jacob and Moses. Originally, the oracles in this passage have nothing to do with blessing.

These early conceptions of blessing obviously contained magical characteristics which the Yahwist transformed by his theology of history by making it an action ascribed to the invisible God and recognizable in its effects. He also gives blessing the character of promise. Its fulfilment extends beyond the lifetime of the original recipient to the time of the

descendants. In this way, the history of the people becomes a pilgrimage from promise of God to its fulfilment.¹¹

Blessing in the Priestly Creation and Flood Narratives

The theme of blessing appears in the creation story of Genesis 1, accompanied by other structural threads like the triple separations,¹² the triple giving of names,¹³ the triple creation of beings according to their species,¹⁴ and the triple blessings.¹⁵ These structural threads shape the creation account and reveal that each element is created for a specific divine purpose which confers mission. They also reveal that God's creative action goes beyond a mere process of causation or ordering of things into existence. Ultimately, these threads are representations of God's creative interventions in history to bring creatures to serve his purpose.¹⁶

In the creation and flood narratives of the primeval history, the convergence of the terminology of blessing and creation show that blessing continues God's creative act. Everything exists thanks to God's creative act (*bara* - Gen 1:1). After being created, creatures and mankind are recipients of God's blessing. God blesses animals (1:22), mankind (1:28), the Sabbath (2:3),¹⁷ Adam (5:2), Noah (9:1) [and the patriarchs (12:3; 17:16, 20)] and through these blessings God acts on the created order for his definitive purpose and gives creation ongoing significance. In Gen 1:22, 28; 2:3 a statement about God's blessing (*barak*) activates God's creative word (*bara*), implying that divine blessing continues God's creative act.¹⁸

¹¹ Cf. B.W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 172.

¹² Gen 1:4,6-7,14-18.

¹³ Gen 1:5,8,10.

¹⁴ Gen 1:11-12,20-21,24-25.

¹⁵ Gen 1:22,28; 2:3.

¹⁶ Cf. Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme and Justification by Faith* (Roma: Gregorian Press, 2002), 57-58.

¹⁷ See also Exod 20:11 for God's blessing on the Sabbath. This might mean that he mediates his blessing through it for those who observe it.

¹⁸ Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Texas: Word Books, 1987), 24-25.

The same words of blessing are used for animals and for human beings, “be fruitful and multiply...”, even though the blessing of human beings includes the gift of dominion (Gen 1:28). It is accompanied by the command to subdue and rule the earth. Therefore, blessing in Genesis 1-11 has performative effect, which means that it conveys the ability for fertility, abundant fruitfulness and dominion. The content of the blessing includes everything that makes for a successful life: fruitfulness in child bearing, long life, fruitful labour, nationhood, power and authority (24:35-36; Lev 26:4-13; Deut 28:3-15). The unity of *bara* and *barak* also show that human existence by God’s unique act (*bara*) and human fortune (*barak*) all depend on God’s act. Within the entire book of Genesis, the genealogies bear silent witness to the fulfilment of God’s blessing.¹⁹ This character of blessing is found especially in the Priestly Source.

The canonical text of Genesis bears witness to a coherent combination of different conceptions of blessing from the time of creation. In the Priestly source, blessing continues the creative act while blessing in the Yahwistic source is brought into contact with history and is projected into the future as the goal of the history of God’s people.²⁰ In the final canonical text, therefore, blessing is God’s exclusive and creative act of pure grace which links different generations of people from the time of creation and projects Israel as a chosen people on a pilgrimage towards a future designed by God. This idea is incorporated into the patriarchal narratives in the canonical text.

Blessing in the Patriarchal Narratives

In the canonical book of Genesis, the major narrative characters in Genesis 1-11 are beneficiaries of God’s blessing. These are Adam and Eve (Gen 1:22,28; 5:2), the Sabbath day (Gen 2:3), Noah and his sons (Gen 9:1). The blessing of Noah and his sons is an echo of the blessing of Adam and Eve,

God blessed them [Adam and Eve], saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth” (Gen 1:22).

¹⁹ Gen 5; 9; 11; 25; 36; 46.

²⁰ Cf. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 49-50.

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1).

The literary resemblance of divine word of blessing for Adam and Noah shows that Noah is positioned to be a period of renewal, a new beginning for humankind. The vocabulary of blessing appears again in Gen 12:1-3 with a unique formulation:

...and I will bless you and make your name great. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 12:2-3).

Although formulated differently, this blessing also connects to the creation tradition in two ways. Firstly, Abraham, the protagonist of this narrative, is a descendant of Noah’s son, Shem. Even though Noah’s story represents a new beginning, it functions as transition into the narrative of Abraham. The connection to the creation tradition is also evidenced by the presence of the vocabulary of curse. “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3).²¹ Secondly, God’s blessing to individuals in creation and patriarchal narratives are related in their functionality. The blessing of Abraham serves a universal divine purpose just as that of Adam and Eve. In Gen 1:28-30, blessing is bestowal of the ability to subdue and dominate over every created thing in view of creation’s good. Abraham’s blessing also confers a level of influence on him over the entire human family. Some scholars infer that the blessing of Abraham is a reassertion of God’s original intentions for human beings.²²

The Blessing of Abraham in Genesis

The beginning of Abraham’s story in Gen 12:1-3 is inserted in-between two moments of history, the primeval era (Gen 1-11) and the patriarchal era (Gen 12-50), with Gen 12:1-3 serving as introduction to the patriarchal era. The content of the paragraph is the promise of blessing.

²¹ In Gen 3, human beings disobeyed God and blessing gave way to curse which disrupted human relationships and earth's productivity.

²² For instance, Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 275.

The centrality of this vocabulary is marked by its frequent occurrence (5x) in the three-verse paragraph.

The blessing of Abraham is very clearly expressed in two texts, 12:1-3 and 22:15-18, which correspond structurally to each other in the Abraham cycle. One opens the cycle and the other closes it.

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. I will make of you a great nation, 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; and in you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves (Gen 12:1-3).

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am”. He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you...” The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen 22:1-18)

In these texts, God's blessing of Abraham is a promise to be fulfilled at a future time determined only by God. Each of the two texts is preceded by God's command to Abraham to go to a place he would show him. Each text has God's promise of blessings; each has statement about God's favours for Abraham and his offspring, and each says something about Abraham's obedience. The two texts envelop two other texts that describe covenant events, Gen 15:1-21 and 17:1-27, each of which function to ratify God's promise.

The covenants in Gen 15 and 17 fulfil very central roles in the Abraham story. In fact, they would have been unnecessary had the divine promise to Abraham taken immediate effect. Rather, the postponement of the promise caused intense dramatic effects and brought tension and anxiety

to Abraham. The promise of material possessions mattered not so much to Abraham in the face of his ongoing childless state. An offspring was also the collar around which all the promises hung. Vexed by his childless state in spite of God's blessings and reassurances, Abraham wondered if either his servant, Eliezer (Gen 15:2) or his son Ishmael (Gen 17:18) would be his heir. The covenants were established to reassure Abraham and to ratify God's determination to fulfil his promise of blessing. In fact, the central importance of the promise of offspring is shown by its being a unifying thematic factor for the four texts in Genesis 12; 15; 17 and 22). This makes Gen 22 a climatic confirmation of Abraham's obedience and God's solemn confirmation of his determination to bless Abraham.

Scholars have wondered how such texts from different sources could appear in their final redaction with startling structural unity and coherence.²³ The documentary hypothesis had assigned them to different sources: Gen 12:1-9 (J and P); Gen 15:1-21 (E and J); Gen 17:1-27 (P) and Gen 22:1-19 (E and J). The coherence of the final canonical text bears witness to the scope and focus of the Priestly redaction of the Abraham narratives. Abraham's blessing is described in relation to the great nation that would descend from Abrahams (12:2b) and to all the families of the earth (12:3). This same content is found in the narrative that concludes Abraham's narrative in Gen 22:15-18.²⁴

The Blessing of Abraham and the Promise of Offspring

In Gen 12:1-3, the purpose for which God called Abraham to an unknown land is blessing: "Go ... and I will bless you..." (Gen 12:1-2). This blessing benefits all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). However, God's blessing has the character of promise, being expressed as a future reality to be realized at an indefinite future time.²⁵ Gen 22:15-18 is more explicit in explaining the sense of the future character of the blessing. It says that the one by whom all nations are blessed is not Abraham, but his

²³ See a discussion of the source and authorship of these texts in Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis. The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 160-168.

²⁴ Cf. T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land. An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch* (Michigan: 1995), 54.

²⁵ Cf. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*, 52.

offspring: “by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen 22:18). The two texts clearly state that Abraham serves as an important link to his descendants through his obedience to God. This is why the promise of offspring is central to the promise and to entire story of Abraham.

The promise of offspring, expressed as promise of a great nation in Gen 12:2, is connected closely with the promise of land (Gen 15:13-14) and that of offspring (Gen 22:17-18). If Abraham was to become a great nation, this divine promise should presuppose a promise of offspring, since at the beginning of this story, Abraham was still childless. For this reason, in Gen 22:15-18, the promise of blessing is directly related to the promise to multiply Abraham’s seed.²⁶

The technical word for offspring is *zera'*, a term which means seed or offspring.²⁷ Its meaning as offspring appears first in Gen 3:15 where it is woven into the history of curse and blessing of mankind. This promise is important because the theme of fertility and barrenness is prominent in the patriarchal narratives. The lack of fertility at the beginning of Israel’s history functions to emphasize the threat to its continual historical existence. This aids the understanding of God’s blessing as the reason for Israel’s survival. In Gen 12:2, therefore, blessing is expressed as promise because it becomes a vehicle that drives Israel’s history forward.

Blessing of Abraham and Blessing of the Nations

Structurally, in Gen 12:2 blessing is subordinated to the promise of a great nation: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2). This raises the question of why God’s blessing is not found at the beginning of the sentence in Gen 12:1. According to Westermann, this is so that blessing might be clearly understood to relate to Israel as a great nation.²⁸ In other words, the narrative of Abraham is shaped in such a way that blessing is the basis of the people’s greatness. In this way, blessing links

²⁶ The two themes of offspring and blessing are also combined in Gen 26:24 and 48:3-4 where the Lord reaffirms Abraham’s promise to Isaac and Jacob.

²⁷ This is a collective singular. Cf. BDB, 282.

²⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 149.

with history, and the story of the patriarchs links with the history of the people.²⁹

Gen 12:2-3 further explains the meaning of the promised blessing in relation to these other nations. With regard to other nations, Israel's situation is not described in terms of power or wealth but in terms of her miraculous origin and the position to which God raised Abraham and his seed: I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2). The final clause in 12:3b "all the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you" is the climax of the promised blessing and the end to which God makes Abraham a great nation.

The interpretation of the Niphal verb *y^enibr^eku*- "they shall bless themselves" (v3b) is difficult. This difficulty is enhanced by the rarity of the Niphal form of the verb which appears only in two other places in Genesis (18:18 and 24:14),³⁰ leaving one with the choice to understand the form either as passive (they will be blessed) or reflexive (they will bless themselves). The *Hithpael* form, which is interchangeable with the *Niphal*, occurs more often, and considered as reflexive and not passive, could to be understood as reflexive in this context.³¹ The sentence is therefore better translated to mean "all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves according to their relationship with you" (if we read the *bekain* the sentence as relational). This implies that the destiny of the nations depends on their relationship with Abraham, the mediator of the blessing. For this to be possible, they have to recognize the status of Abraham as blessed by God.³²

²⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 149.

³⁰ Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 151.

³¹ Even though the LXX, Vg, Targ, Sir and the NT understand *nibreku* in a passive sense (*eneulonthesontai*).

³² T.E. McComisky has rightly noted the use of the *Niphal* in the passage where Abraham is cited (Gen 12:3) and *Hithpael* where the offspring is cited (Gen 22:18). According to him, if the *Niphal* functions as a true passive here, it points to Abraham's role as the direct mediator of the blessing, while the Gentiles appropriate the blessing in and with the offspring of Abraham. Cf. his *Covenant of Promise* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 57.

For a better understanding of the nature of the relationship of Abraham to all the families of the earth, one must refer to the etymology of the verb ‘to bless’, which includes an understanding of blessing as the basis of solidarity with individuals or groups in racial, social or religious relationships, or to whom one owes special thanks or appreciation. Blessing is shown to be the power that persists within the family and mediated from father to son. God alone is the basis of Israel’s existence and the source of her fortune. And since it is also shown that blessing has its origin and effect in the power and purpose of God, the blessing which one could utter must relate to the purpose of God for the one for whom the blessing is intended. The efficacy of blessing is contingent on the relationship between God and the person uttering the blessing, else the blessing is revoked. This relationship is described with a word, ‘obedience’.

Abraham’s relationship with God determined the fortune of his descendants. In spite of his evident material possessions, Abraham seemed cursed because he lacked a secured future since he had no offspring. This shows that material possessions are not determinants of his blessed status. The narratives emphasize that Abraham’s obedience to God enabled his ability to mediate blessing to others (Gen 22:18). For the exilic community, who understand themselves as God’s channel of blessing to the nations, Abraham is presented as a model to follow.

To strengthen its mediatorial characteristic, it is shown that blessing is not conferred on all the descendants of Abraham. It is a power reserved only for the first-born son to whom other sons are subordinate (Gen 9:27; 27:29). The role of first-born here is interpreted according to the royal ideology prevalent in the ANE by which blessing, fertility and prosperity flows from the king to his land and people. God bestows on the blessed the ability to multiply and subdue. Even in this case, the promise is renewed only for a few chosen patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, who took over the role of the first-born through God’s promise and election. This lays further emphasis on the gracious character of the promised blessing.³³

³³ Deut 9:4-6 emphasizes the gracious character of Israel’s election as of first-born. Deuteronomy stresses that the promised blessing is contingent on the people’s obedience

The fate of the nations and their connection to the blessing of Abraham through Abraham's seed must be seen against the background of the description of the mission of the exilic community by the Priestly redactor. In the book of Genesis, this redactor was responsible for linking several generations through the concept of blessing. This redactor also connected the Abraham tradition to the Primeval history by placing a new beginning of blessing against the history of curse running through Genesis 3-11. Human disobedience to God's command (Genesis 2) had given way to curses (Genesis 3) that signal the reversal of blessing in creation (Genesis 1). In the canonical form of Genesis, the blessing of Abraham is subservient to the major divine intention to bring blessing and not curse upon the families of the earth.³⁴ So Abraham and his seed play important mediatory role for the nations. In Abraham's blessing, therefore, a means is provided for salvaging the history of humanity destined for curse due to sin.

The theological implication of the introduction of the language of blessing at the very moment of Israel's election becomes meaningful when considered in its context, and more precisely, in its link with the Primeval history. In relation to other nations, Gen 12:2 presents Israel not simply as one of the nations emerging from Noah's genealogy, but as a nation whose beginning is fruit of a special divine election and blessing of her great ancestor, Abraham.³⁵ Its importance in this context is therefore to give precision to the character of the great nation that will

to the law (Deut 7; 28:1-14). However, the scanty instances of blessing compared to the curses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 has led to the assumption that Israel's history of sin gave way to the curses required by the treaty. Blessing is a later insertion to the legal sanctions. Cf. Scharbert, "brk", 305.

³⁴ Cf. T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 51. For Israel and her history, P sees a unique history at work, in competition with the curse of Leviticus 26 which depends on fidelity to the law. The final redactor of the Pentateuch harmonized the different views of blessing and curses for all humanity and for Israel as powers emanating from God and put in force by human behavior in relationship to the divine law. In this way, the destiny of all mankind, nations and individuals is given a definite orientation. Cf. Scharbert, "brk", 279-307.

³⁵ This promise echoes the tradition of the election of Israel as God's people out of all the nations of the earth. Cf. Deut 32:8-9.

issue from Abraham in political and territorial terms, rather than a consanguineous group of people drawn together by kinship terms.³⁶

Conclusion

This study of the biblical tradition of blessing in the patriarchal narratives has revealed that God is the exclusive giver of blessing, which is manifested in human prosperity and wellbeing, long life, wealth, peace, good harvest and children. Connected to creation and Israel's history, blessing is shown to be vehicle of ongoing creation and means by which God achieves his purposes in creation. God's purpose in this case is to mediate blessing to all the families of the earth through Abraham and his seed.

In the Bible, mediation is God's way of dispensing grace from one to many. This idea permeates the entire Bible. In blessing Adam, Noah and Abraham, God introduces human agency to the accomplishment of his salvific design in creation. The history of salvation traces the trajectory of human agency in salvation from Abraham to Jesus Christ. Since God is the exclusive giver of blessing, the efficacy of human agency depends entirely on the relationship of the recipient of blessing to God. Obedience to God gives the recipient of blessing the power of mediation of which Abraham is model. One can clearly understand why the blessing of Abraham is a reassertion of God's original intentions for human beings. Through a relationship of obedience to God, Abraham revoked a history of curse on creation, which Adam transmitted through disobedience. Of Abraham, Sir 44:19 says, he "was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory".

This interpretation has shown that Abraham's blessing does not consist in long life, wellbeing and his possession of material things. It consisted rather in the power of faith which helped him to remain steadfast in God in the face of the many trials that confronted him. For the Israelites that

³⁶ The term *goy* refers to a nation with social solidarity, common descent, social past, tradition, religion and political entity. Only a few passages in the Bible correlate this term with its synonym *'am*, but a clear distinction between the two is evidenced in other texts where *'am* designates Israel as God's people. In contrast, *goy* is used prevalently for other nations. Cf. J. Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations", 387-388; E.A. Speiser, "People and Nation of Israel", 157-162.

understood their vocation within the exilic context as God's elected people in view of universal salvation, the identity of Abraham's offspring was vital to that vocation. This Israel defines itself as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). Abraham's progeny must be one who treads the path of obedience that their great ancestor trod. The NT texts reinterpret Abraham's offspring to relate to those who believe in Christ and who are therefore mediators of God's blessing to the nations.

You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Act 3:25).

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you". For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed (Gal 3:8-9).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" --in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:13-14).

The mediatorial role of blessing continues through those who believe in Christ. As the Abraham narratives have shown obedience to God gives the recipient of blessing the power of mediation of which Abraham is a model.