

WHAT I MEAN BY HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL INTERPRETATION AND HOW THAT DIFFERS FROM SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION

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THE subject of our dialogue focuses our attention on a fundamental difference between dispensational hermeneutics and other expressions of evangelical hermeneutics. While this is a fundamental difference, yet the difference is not at the level of principles. It is fundamental because it determines one's view of the structure of progressive revelation and consequently influences the interpretation of many passages and the role and value of Old Testament revelation for today and for the future. Yet the differences are not basically in principle. All agree on the necessity of grammatical interpretation and historical interpretation and most agree on the legitimacy of literal interpretation and interpretation by the analogy of faith. It is rather a difference in the appropriate application of these principles. My view of appropriate use of these principles begins with and is ultimately controlled by what I think is entailed in the fact that "the Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."

This presupposition in my view of hermeneutics entails that each book of the Bible expresses a unified message and the collection of books forms a unified canon of Scripture. That unity expresses itself in the coherence of the composition of each book consistent with the norms of the appropriate literary genre. In addition, that unity expresses itself in the compatibility of truth expressed in the progressive revelation of the whole canon. So while there are changes in the meaning in the progressive unfolding of the revelation of Old Testament truths, those changes do not include alterations of the original sense or contradictions with the first expression of the truth. An original expression of a historical truth may have a limited time of application (as with the truths about animal sacrifices) and thus be replaced by a subsequent historical truth resting on the completed work of Christ. But such a replacement of an original truth does not

alter, contradict, nor deny the original expression of truth. It merely reflects that God's dealing with man may change as the fulfillment of God's purposes progressively unfold.

This fundamental difference in the use of the principles became clarified in the ongoing debate between John F. Walvoord and George Eldon Ladd. The debate focused on the interpretation of Old Testament prophetic passages in their own context. In the terms of our discussion, a historical-grammatical interpretation of Old Testament is sufficient to discover God's introductory or initial word on a prophetic subject. Walvoord called for this consistent, contextual handling of an Old Testament text which he called literal.¹

Ladd objected to this approach. He concluded: "The 'literal hermeneutic' does not work . . . Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament to find their deeper meaning."² Such an application of the "analogy of faith" would result in his approach that "the Old Testament is *reinterpreted* in light of the Christ event."³ This approach then received a wide acceptance among other evangelical interpreters with different conclusions concerning a future millennium. Anthony A. Hoekema in an amillennial perspective writes: "I agree with him (Ladd) that the Old Testament *must be* interpreted in the light of the New Testament."⁴ In addition, Lorain Boettner who holds a postmillennial view of progressive revelation writes: "I am favorably impressed with Ladd's discussion of the manner in which Old Testament prophecy is interpreted and applied by the New Testament."⁵ This application of the analogy of faith results in a "spiritual reinterpretation" of various Old Testament prophecies but apparently without uniform control as evidenced by the difference in the conclusions held by the interpreters just quoted.

These two differences—a consistent, contextual interpretation of an Old Testament text and an interpretation of Old Testament texts based on the analogy of faith will form the crux of what I mean by historical-grammatical interpretation and how that differs from spiritual interpretation.

THE HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL INTERPRETATION

First, a historical-grammatical interpretation is a consistent, contextual understanding based upon the text seen in the immediate

¹John F. Walvoord, "The Theological Context of Premillennialism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 108:431 (1951), and *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959).

²George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 23.

³*Ibid.*, 21 (emphasis mine).

⁴*Ibid.*, Hoekema, 55 (emphasis mine).

⁵*Ibid.*, Boettner, 47.

context.⁶ This reading of a text in its immediate context is a natural reading of an Old and New Testament passage and is sufficient because the Old Testament text alone introduces what is necessary at that time in history and faithfully anticipates what will follow in the progress of revelation.

Such a contextual reading and understanding considers two controlling issues—the reading is limited to the grammatical senses of the text and is expressed within the historical occasion and *sitz im leben* of the text. Neither issue, however, mandates the sense or reference of the text. Grammatical forms and syntactical constructions merely signify a range of viable meanings from the language stock. Its contextual usage controls whether the meaning intended is narrow or general, a specified or ambiguous use of the grammatical construction. In addition to the textual development of the context, the historical features fashion the context in which the constructions are interpreted.

Historical context includes both the expectations of the occasion in which the book is written and the subject matter about which the book speaks. However, if the understanding is based upon the text, the historical context neither dictates the meaning of a text nor does it determine meanings unexpressed in the text but rather fills in the exegete's knowledge of shared historical meanings expressed in the text. In order to test the adequacy of historical-grammatical interpretation, two Old Testament passages will be examined as illustrations in the application of the principle:

- Gen 3:1-5 Is the "serpent" Satan?
 Gen 12:7 Is the "seed" Christ?
 Gen 3:1-5 The Old Testament is adequate to *introduce* the enemy of God in the serpent.

While the text of Genesis introduces the serpent as an animal which walked upright and was more subtle than any animal (Gen 3:1, 14), the world of Moses knew the serpent as an animal shrouded in mystery. Nahum M. Sarna speaks of its mystical role in ancient life. "With its venomous bite, it can inflict sudden and unexpected death. It shows no limbs, yet it is gracefully and silently agile. Its glassy eyes—lidless, unblinking, strangely lustrous—have a fixed and penetrating stare. Its longevity and the regular, recurrent sloughing of its skin impart an aura of youthfulness, vitality, and rejuvenation. Small wonder that the snake simultaneously aroused fascination and revulsion, awe and dread. Throughout the ancient world, it was endowed

⁶It is understood that the immediate context includes conventions of the literary genre. The conventions influence both the expectations of one who reads a text and the exegesis of a text conforming to the literary clues expressed in the text.

with divine or semidivine qualities; it was venerated as an emblem of health, fertility, immortality, occult wisdom, and chaotic evil; and it was often worshiped. The serpent played a significant role in the mythology, the religious symbolism, and the cults of the ancient Near East.”⁷ So he proceeds to conclude that the Genesis narrative demythologizes the cultural concepts so that the text presents the serpent as simply as one of “the creatures that the Lord God has made.” In other words, the historical cultural environment does not inform the text.

Yet does the text treat the serpent as a mere animal? Bruce Waltke comments: “No sensitive reader can construe the story as an aetiology explaining the antagonism between humans and snakes, as the professor [Frank M. Cross] . . . insisted was the ‘plain sense’ of the passage.”⁸

Waltke’s introduction of the issue of plain interpretation raises the question of whether the text in context is adequate to demonstrate that the serpent was more than an animal? And there is sufficient textual basis since the serpent speaks. The decisive evidence is not that the animal simply speaks, for animals before the fall may well have had a greater capacity for verbal communication. The evidence is featured in what the serpent said. For the serpent did not speak from an animal’s position under man, nor an animal’s dissatisfaction with any features of creation within an animal’s experience. The serpent did not speak as an animal. Rather the serpent spoke as God’s enemy. He questioned God’s word. He denied God’s word. He raised doubt about whether God had man’s best interests in view. He proposed a strategy of rebellion by which man could establish himself as equal to God. And as such, the narrative of Genesis introduced the enemy of God in his essential character and strategy. So Waltke summarizes, “The serpent, a diabolical personality, more intelligent than human, filled with a spirit of unbelief, and venomously opposed to God and man, *obviously* originating outside of the creation described in Genesis 1–2.”⁹ Thus the text of Genesis, in the grammatical and historical sense establishes the presence of the enemy of God speaking in the words of the serpent. In addition, the original hearers (readers) had to imagine the world of the original creation in which to understand the serpent. As such the text is sufficient to introduce the enemy of God in a true schematic outline of what would be revealed later.

⁷Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 24.

⁸Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway) 266.

⁹*Ibid.*, Waltke, 267.

Gen 12:1-3 and 7 The Old Testament is sufficient to *anticipate* the descendant of Abraham who was yet to come and who will accomplish what God had promised.

The first mention of Abraham's seed appears in Gen 12:7 where God promised: "To your seed I will give this land." The identity of the seed in this first promise was not clear at this point to Abraham nor to the reader as he reads. This is due to the collective sense of the term "seed." If God were referring to Abraham's immediate offspring, He would mean *Isaac*. Or if He were referring to Abraham's offspring in general, He would mean his *many descendants*. Or it is also possible that God had some other descendant in mind. This lack of clarity has left confusion when the text is compared to Paul's comments in Gal 3:16: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed." The Scripture does not say "and to seeds" meaning many people, but "and to your seed" meaning one person, who is Christ. While it remains unspecified whether Paul was alluding to Gen 12:7, the fact that 12:7 includes the first mention of "seed" allows us to conclude that Paul would have had this passage in mind at least. But then the question becomes, does Gen 12:7 mean Christ or at least anticipate Christ?

CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF "SEED" IN GENESIS 12-22

The anticipation of a posterity for Abraham first emerged as God revealed His role and plan for Abram in history. The story begins with the divine call of Abram in which God made promises addressed to Abram. The final promise was staggering in scope and in significance for the history of mankind: "And all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you (or shall bless themselves by you)."¹⁰ The voice of the verb (whether middle or passive) specifies Abram's role to be mediator of blessing for the whole world. These promises imply three distinct stages of blessing: blessing on Abram, then on those who have direct interaction with him, and finally on the entire human race through him. Due to the scope of this promised blessing, one would reasonably anticipate that the role of mediation would entail other generations following Abram to accomplish the scope of blessing as stated.

This anticipation is then introduced as the blessing of land where Abram stood would be given "to your seed" (12:17). As already noted, the term "seed" includes some ambiguity in reference. As a collective noun, it is capable of referring to one descendant or many descendants.

¹⁰The niphil form of *b-r-k* is found only in Gen 12:3, 18:18, 28:14; the respective contexts do not show how it differs from the hithpael form in Gen 22:18, 16:4, so it may well be reflexive.

Abram's understanding of what God intended would be further clarified as the revelation progressed in the unfolding events that follow. Abram shares with the reader the same uncertainty about what God was exactly saying. Knowing this, God clarified the sense further.

After Abram had sacrificed his claim to the land to Lot, God repeated the promises to give the land but now clarified that it would be given to both Abram and to his seed (13:15). In addition, He promised for the first time that the seed would be made innumerable (13:16). In 15:1-5, God further specified that his heir would be a physical descendant and his descendants would become innumerable. Finally, in reference to this seed (15:18) God formed a covenant with Abram to grant what He promised to the seed. Nahum Sarna aptly describes it: "God contracts a solemn covenant with the patriarch, who becomes the passive beneficiary of His unilateral obligation, unconditionally assumed. It would seem that the form of this covenant is modeled after the royal land-grant treaty common in the ancient Near East."¹¹

When we reflect upon what God meant by "seed," we must first distinguish the different contexts in which the seed is promised. Then the sense of "seed" can be recognized in the context of each distinct promise. There are four distinct promises to Abram:

I will give you a seed,
I will multiply the number of your seed,
I will give the land to your seed and
I will bless all peoples through your seed.

One element is common to each promise which was specified in Gen 15:3, 4: the seed is a physical descendant from Abram. That is the basic sense to which may be added additional senses in various contexts. In that regard, there is a spiritual sense associated with each promise; in the first context it is a divinely called and provided seed, in the second a divinely multiplied seed, in the third the seed is a recipient of a divine gift and in the fourth the seed is an agent of divine blessing. In the first two, the seed is the divine gift and in the last two, the seed responds to God in some responsible way—both to receive what God gives and to mediate that to others. In addition, when the last two are compared, the promise of land is one instance of blessing while the mediation of blessing involves broader blessings.

The reader may well ask as Abraham certainly asked after Isaac was born, Is Isaac this seed? I think it is clear that in the sense of the first promise, Isaac is the God-provided ("in Isaac your seed shall be

¹¹Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 114.

called," 21:12) physical descendant ("I—Abraham—have borne a son in his old age," 21:17) in distinction to Ishmael. It is also clear that he is the first in the line of physical posterity. But he is not the seed to whom the land was given nor was he a willing mediator of blessing to Jacob. Moses takes pains to deliberately tell the story of Rebekah's pregnancy in which God's choice of Jacob, the younger, was made (Gen 25:19–34) and as a consequence Isaac's responsibility to bless according to God's choice (Gen 27:1–46). Isaac accomplished his responsibility ironically but did not meet it through his willing obedience. In these contexts, Isaac was clearly not the spiritual seed in the sense of meeting his responsibility.

So Isaac was Abraham's seed in a physical and in a God-given sense as were Jacob and his twelve sons. The text of Genesis also indicates that they are spiritually responsive in a limited but genuine sense. So the question whether Isaac or Jacob or Judah was Abraham's seed, we must answer with a qualified yes. To the extent that the answer is no, as illustrated in Isaac's case, to that extent an anticipation remained that, what God had promised, would come to pass in His provision.

THE ANALOGY OF FAITH INTERPRETATION

A spiritual interpretation is based upon a use of the analogy of faith. The interpretation of an Old Testament passage is only reached on the basis of a subsequent canonical context so that the original text features only the spiritual meanings or ideals. I will attempt to prove that this spiritual interpretation is neither a necessary nor a valid use of the analogy of faith in the interpretation of an Old Testament passage. Rather, the analogy of faith properly used enriches the reader's original understanding of the Old Testament passage from the perspective of fulfillment or more complete revelation in the New Testament.

A historical-grammatical interpretation is an interpretation of an Old Testament passage in the immediate context. The controversy between Walvoord and Ladd raised the question whether additional interpretation was needed. Ladd followed by Hoekema and Boettner affirmed that it was absolutely necessary. Waltke expresses the principle well, "the spiritual sense is to interpret the covenantal promises in the light of salvation history"¹² in which "the historical eggshells"¹³ are removed from the meanings of the Old Testament passage interpreted in context.

¹²Ibid., Waltke, 263.

¹³Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," *Tradition and the Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981) 16.

Such a spiritual interpretation of an Old Testament passage is not reached as an independent conclusion in hermeneutics. Rather its warrant is derived from the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. Waltke argues, "the classical rule *sacra scripture sui ipsius interpres* (the Bible interprets itself)—more specifically, the New interprets the Old—should be accepted by all Christian theologians. Is it not self-evident that the author of Scripture is the final exponent of his own thoughts?"¹⁴ He further supports the validity of his argument with the conclusions of S. Lewis Johnson, "The use of the Old Testament in the New is the key to the solution of the problem of hermeneutics. Unfortunately that has been overlooked, but surely, if the apostles are reliable teachers of biblical doctrine, then they are reliable instructors in the science of hermeneutics."¹⁵

The question that thus emerges is whether a spiritual interpretation is warranted by the use of the analogy of faith? Walter Kaiser would reject the approach as invalid. "In no case must . . . *later* teaching be used exegetically (or in any other way) to unpack the meaning or to enhance the usability of the individual text which is the object of study."¹⁶ Kaiser's objection needs to be heard as a warning to challenge this use of the analogy of faith as normative. Yet at the same time, the unity of canonical revelation admits the compatibility in meaning between a New Testament *interpretation* of an Old Testament passage. Following such an interpretation certainly is a valid use of the analogy of faith. The more specific question is whether the spiritual interpretation is the *valid* New Testament interpretation.

Ladd calls for a "reinterpretation" in light of the Christ event.¹⁷ Such a reinterpretation would certainly imply an alteration of the original meaning. Waltke objects to this: "The prophetic interpretation of these old texts is not a reinterpretation of them away from original, authorial meaning; rather it is a more precise interpretation of them in light of the historical realities."¹⁸ Yet as Waltke argues for a canonical interpretation of the Psalms, which win their full significance in Jesus Christ who fulfills these Psalms, he concludes, "Those elements in each psalm presenting the king as anything less than ideal, such as his confession of sins, are the historical eggshells"¹⁹ which must be peeled off in a more precise interpretation. But is such a peeling away of a

¹⁴Waltke, "Kingdom Promises," 264.

¹⁵S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *The Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 23.

¹⁶Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 140.

¹⁷Ladd, 21.

¹⁸Waltke, "A Canonical Process," 15.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 16.

historical husk *valid* in the interpretation of an Old Testament passage? Is it not a version of reinterpretation of the original text?

Anthony Hoekema is more forthright when he affirms that Amillennialists "believe that though many Old Testament prophecies are indeed to be interpreted literally, many others are to be interpreted in a nonliteral way."²⁰ He then approves of Martin J. Wyngaarden²¹ who shows how the New Testament spiritualizes many Old Testament concepts: Zion, Jerusalem, the seed of Abraham, Israel, the temple, sacrifices and so on. So the eggshells of geographical, national and historical aspects of the hope of a seed of Abraham or of Jerusalem must be peeled away. But is such a subtraction from a contextual historical-grammatical interpretation *valid*?

Someone may well respond that it is *valid* because it is *necessarily* entailed in the New Testament's interpretation of the Old Testament. I would like to argue that such a spiritual interpretation is *not necessary* because the meaning understood in the New Testament *corresponds* to the meaning *expressed* in the Old Testament.²² It is not a meaning reduced to an egg with the shell peeled away but a corresponding flower in the New Testament of an earlier expressed bud in the Old Testament or a building in the process of completion in the New Testament of a foundation laid earlier. The New Testament interpretation is the comprehension of the completed meaning intended as introduced but left undeveloped in the Old Testament. As such, the final shape of the flower or building may not be fully anticipated in the bud or the foundation, but the essentials of content and form are revealed in the introduction. This thesis will be demonstrated in the New Testament's use of the serpent in Gen 3:15 and the seed of Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 and 7.

Genesis 3:1-5 and Revelation 12:9 The New Testament interpretation merely *fills in* what is left unexpressed in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament introduces an evil one who tempts Eve and Adam with a strategy of rebellion against God. He is introduced in position as the first enemy and in strategy as a rebel against God's will.

²⁰Hoekema, 172.

²¹Martin J. Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1934).

²²The degree of correspondence varies dependent upon the kind of Old Testament expression and the stage that the statement appears in the progress of revelation. Two helpful attempts have been made to classify the degree of correspondence of Old Testament prophecy but more work is needed. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), and Franz Delitsch, *Psalms*, Vol. I. A discussion of such a classification is beyond the scope of this paper.

In the progress of revelation, this introductory foundation does not change. Rather the creature is an angel who is alluded to in his prior history under the figure of a dragon. His names are given to be satan and devil as well as Lucifer. The revelation which is added does not change the identity of the enemy introduced but answers questions of early existence and creaturely character.

Gen 12:1-3 and 7 and Gal 3:16 The New Testament interpretation *unfolds* the intended meaning of the Old Testament promise although that meaning may not be fully evident when the promise was first expressed.

In reading the Old Testament promise, we recognized four distinct promises concerning the seed as it was originally stated in different contexts. I would like simply to trace one of the promises as it unfolds in the Old Testament revelation. The focus in Gal 3:16 and again in 3:19 is upon the *giving* of the promises to Abraham and *to his seed*. That focus corresponds in particular to the promise as stated:

I will give the land to the seed.

We noted in context that neither Isaac nor his immediate posterity were the ones to whom the promise of land was given. In fact, God announced that Abraham's descendants would remain in another land, as exiles 400 years (15:13). Yet the land was still given "to your seed" as God said "I give this land from the river Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (15:18, 19). Thus the question emerges: To what generation or to what individual was the land given?

As a context for the pursuit of an answer, one additional revelation is given to Abraham. After he had in obedience offered Isaac, the angel of YHWH said, "I swear by myself . . . that *because* you have done this . . . I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies and through your seed all nations on earth will be blessed *because* you have obeyed me" (22:15-18). For the first time, Abraham is identified as the effectual mediator through whom aspects of the promise are repeated. In other words, blessings will be received by Abraham's descendants even if the promise may not be received by those descendants. The one aspect of particular interest to us in our search is the gift of possession of the cities of their enemies. The cities will be possessed because of Abraham even if the gift of the land as a whole were not received.

As Moses addressed the people poised on the shores of the Jordan river, he made two relevant comments. First, the good land had been given to Israel's forefathers—Abraham and the patriarchs (Deut 1:35). Second, he quoted YHWH's word that He would give the land to the new generation and they would take possession of it (Deut 1:39). Then

YHWH spoke to Joshua after Moses' death. He promised, "I will give you every place where you set your foot as I promised Moses" (Josh 1:3). God will give Joshua and his generation whatever portion of the land he walks into. Clearly this contingency of walking into the land is not *sufficient* to earn the land or even to *merit* the promise. Rather God chose obedience as the avenue of receiving the gift of the land. It is the explicit identification of the *necessary* responsibility of the seed to be blessed with the gift of the land. The seed to whom the land is given would be the one who receives what is given.

As we read the record of Joshua's journey into the land, the period of conquest is concluded by summaries: "So Joshua took this entire land" (Josh 11:16) and "the land had rest from war" (Josh 11:23). Yet as an introduction to the occupation of the land, the text summarizes "when Joshua was old . . . there are still very large areas of the land to be taken over" (Josh 13:1 and Judg 2:1-3). So while the conquest was complete, the occupation left much land to yet be received. While they had been given the land, they had only "taken possession of the cities of their enemies." As God had promised to Abraham the gift of taking the cities (Gen 22:15-18), so the promise had been fulfilled (Josh 21:43-45). So like Isaac, Joshua and his generation did not receive the promise of the land but only what God had promised because of Abraham. So Joshua and his generation were Abraham's seed but not his seed to whom the land as a whole was entered and received. The anticipation of the complete reception of the gift of the land awaited the next generation as recorded in Judges (1).

The history of the nation in the land repeated the experiences of their forefathers. They were natural descendants with a limited though real spiritual claim on God's blessing gained because of Abraham. Even David, who prospered more than any seed of Abraham to gain a political control of all the land (2 Samuel 8-10), faltered in obedience before God and after Bathsheba his kingdom festered from within and finally was reduced from without.

So in the context of this Old Testament record of Abraham's descendants, Paul identified "Abraham's seed to whom the promises were given." Only one descendant of Abraham met the responsibility of obedience *necessary* to receive all that God had promised. And so Paul identified that only One descendant of Abraham was intended in the promise, "I will give the land to the seed."

When the two other promises of seed in Genesis are combined with this promise, the intended sense of the seed in Genesis becomes:

- (1) a physical descendant of Abram,
- (2) divinely provided,
- (3) bearing the God-given responsibility to receive what God gave so that He could mediate God's blessing.

Paul's understanding of this meaning is enriched and completed in the knowledge of each component but without altering any of the three original components:

- (1) a distant physical descendant of Abraham named Jesus (Matt 1:1, 2),
- (2) divinely provided in the virgin conception and birth from Mary (Matt 1:18-25),
- (3) fully bearing the obligation and responsibility of the law ultimately expressed in His death on the cross (Matt 16:21-23), after which He received the gift of the Father which He mediated on Pentecost (Acts 2:33, Phil 2:5-11).

The use of the analogy of faith, concerning Abraham's seed introduced in the three promises of Genesis, shows a correspondence in the three essential components of meaning in the interpretation of the New Testament. The corresponding relationship resembles the bud and the flower rather than the egg with the eggshell peeled off. Isaac or Joshua and his generation were partial fulfillments of the promise of a seed and Jesus Christ was the complete fulfillment.

One final promise remains to be considered which was not considered by Paul in Gal 3:16, 19:

"I will multiply your seed."

Has the sense of seed been altered in the New Testament from the sense understood in the Old Testament context? This promise is found in two texts:

"I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth" (13:16)
and

"Look at the heavens and count the stars . . . so shall your offspring be . . ." (15:5).

The context of the promise would lead to the expectation that the offspring would be a physical posterity as well as a God-provided posterity. For God had just promised: "a son coming from your own body will be your heir" (15:4).

In Rom 4:18-21, Paul refers to this promise in Gen 15:5. It is part of Paul's interpretation of Abraham's faith in God in the birth of Isaac. Isaac's birth is the first offspring in the promise of a great posterity.

On the other hand, in the preceding context of Rom 4:9-17, Paul does not refer to Gen 15:5 when he concluded that Abraham is the father of all believers. Rather Paul related the relationship of both Jews and Gentiles to Abraham with the general interpretation of his new name, Abraham—"I *have made* you a father of many nations"

found in Gen 17:5. Paul's argument is as follows: Abraham believed God before he was circumcised and as such received God's life as all others who believe without circumcision receive God's life. In addition, Abraham received the "sign of righteousness" in circumcision which he passed on to his physical offspring. All of these who believe based on this "sign of righteousness" from God also share his life from God. So "He is the father of us all" (Rom 4:16) both of those who believe as uncircumcised and those who believe with the sign of circumcision. That compares to what God said when he named him Abraham (Gen 17:5).

Thus Paul acknowledges two senses in which Abraham is father. He is father of all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile based on his name. He is also father of all natural and spiritual offspring based on the promise of a "multiplied seed." These two senses preserve the sense of seed in the promise as always including a physical relationship.

CONCLUSION

Thus in Gal 3:16, Paul is not understanding the promise of a seed as a semantic consideration. Unlike a midrashic commentary, which might comment on a collective noun and see it have a singular sense in view some contemporary fact, he has pursued a historic investigation. The distinction between "seeds" and "seed" is a historical distinction evident in the progressive revelation in the Old Testament. As such, Paul does interpret the Old Testament in light of the Christ event but this is not a reinterpretation. That is, it is not a textually altered spiritual sense nor a historically unrelated spiritual ideal. It is a historic sense understood within the grammatical range of a collective term. And this historic sense can be understood at each progressive stage, as God continued to work out what He promised until the climax was reached in Christ.

There is a continuity of meanings so that the Christ event *fills in* with clarity the divinely intended sense. While this is the meaning of "seed" in Gen 12:7, that meaning is not completely evident in the original context. Enough is known to anticipate what God would do but not enough is evident to specify what God did in particular until God acted in Christ. This pattern of interpretation is the basis for my anticipation that the gift of the land will be received by Christ in the history of our earth rather than in a new earth. Then and only then will the promise of Gen 12:7 be completely fulfilled.