

ISRAEL AND THE GOSPEL OF PETER, PAUL, AND ABRAHAM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Romans 1:16 in order to establish first that Paul taught a continuing priority for the Jewish people in evangelism and missions. Both the context and the construction of the verse support such a priority. Second, attention shifts to “the promise of the fathers” in Genesis—in you all the families of the earth will be blessed—and its use in the New Testament. These texts suggest the need for a broader conception of the term “gospel” than is usually considered, for the priority of the Jewish people is intrinsic to the gospel itself.

THE ECONOMIST GEORGE GILDER begins his secular book *The Israel Test* with these words: “The central issue in international politics, dividing the world into two fractious armies, is the tiny state of Israel.”¹ Something similar might be said not only of nations and politicians, but also of theologians and church members—mention of Israel often sparks controversy. This is as true in practical theology as it is in doctrinal theology. Many, even among those who have a place for Israel in their eschatology are at a loss when it comes to the present responsibility of the church, vis-à-vis Israel, in evangelism and missions—what is the place of Israel in the outreach of the church?

The thesis presented here is a simple one: Scripture teaches not only that the Jewish people should be a priority in evangelism and missions, but that this priority is intrinsic to the gospel itself. It is not simply that this priority characterized the ministry of Paul, as recorded in the book of Acts; neither is it merely that this

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1. George Gilder, *The Israel Test: Why the World's Most Besieged State is a Beacon of Freedom and Hope for the World Economy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Encounter, 2012), 1.

priority is still valid today;² it is that this priority is intrinsic to the gospel itself. Ultimately, this is the case because it is rooted in the promise of the fathers, as recorded first in Genesis 12:3: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

JEWISH PRIORITY ACCORDING TO PAUL IN ROMANS 1:16

No passage is more commonly used to support the priority of the Jewish people in evangelism and missions than Romans 1:16.³ Even though Romans 1:16–17 is generally identified as expressing the central theme of the epistle,⁴ the priority of Israel that is expressed in verse 16 has not received the attention it is due.

Paul wrote, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The word translated “first” in this verse (πρῶτον) is in the neuter gender. The more common masculine form most often pertains “to being first in a sequence” or “to prominence.”⁵ However, although the neuter, πρῶτον, may also express priority of sequence or prominence, it provides the only way to express priority of degree, “in the first place, above all, especially.”⁶ The word is used in this sense also in Matthew 6:33, where

2. Some commentators completely ignore this priority. An example is Charles H. Talbert, *Romans*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), especially 35, 41, 81–82.

3. Stuart Dauerman, speaking at the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE), claimed, “A recent search of LCJE on-line resources located thirty-two documents quoting this text” (Stuart Dauerman, “To the Jew, of Counsel” [paper presented to the Ninth International LCJE Conference, High Leigh, England, August 7–12, 2011], 1). In contrast, A. F. Walls, writing on “The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement,” does not mention Romans 1:16 and thus apparently does not consider it relevant to “the modern missionary movement” (A. F. Walls, “The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin [Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1970], 346–57).

4. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 87; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 29; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 29.

5. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 892–93.

6. *Ibid.*, 893. Matthew 6:33, Romans 1:16; 2:9–10, and Acts 3:26 are also cited for this usage.

Jesus says, “But seek first [πρώτον] His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Evidence for this understanding of πρῶτον in Romans 1:16 may be found both in the context and in the grammatical structure of the verse. Attention first will be given to the contextual evidence for understanding the verse to express a continuing priority of decree for the Jewish people in missions and evangelism—i.e., “to the Jew especially.”

THE CONTEXT

The place of Israel in God’s economy is never far from Paul’s thought in Romans. In Romans 1:2–3, Paul wrote that the gospel was “promised beforehand through [God’s] prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh.” Michael G. Vanlaningham comments, “Rm 1:2–3 appears to show the special relevance of the gospel to the Jewish people because it has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.”⁷ Paul, in explaining his eagerness to preach the gospel in Rome (v. 15), gave a theological rationale in verse 16 that includes his understanding of the gospel and the priority of the Jewish people. Paul returned to this priority in Romans 2:9–10, using virtually the same phrase (ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήνων) two additional times. He explicated how righteousness can be imputed by faith to both Jews and Gentiles (ch. 4). In the climactic conclusion of the doctrinal section of the epistle (chs. 9–11),⁸ he dealt with this very issue of the Jewish people and their place in the plan and purposes of God. Then in chapter 15, in his appeal for unity in the church, Paul recapitulated, saying, “For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy” (vv. 8–9a). Finally, he added that Gentile believers should feel a sense of indebtedness to their Jewish brothers and sisters (v. 27).

Since the role of Israel in God’s redemptive plan for both Jews and Gentiles is found in the introduction, in the statement of the theme of the epistle, in a discussion of the final judgment, in the explanation of “the promise to Abraham or to his descendants” (4:13), in the climactic portion of the doctrinal section, as well as in

the practical instructions to the church, how could Israel not be of prime significance?

Scholars from different traditions, from both before and following E. P. Sanders and the New Perspective on Paul and who represent a variety of positions, have recognized the centrality of the issue of God’s dealings with Israel. Richard Hays claims that “Paul’s argument is primarily an argument about theodicy The driving question in Romans is . . . How can we trust this allegedly gracious God if he abandons his promises to Israel?”⁹ Approaching Romans from a slightly different perspective, J. R. Daniel Kirk claims to have sustained the same point. He says, “Romans functions as a defense of the faithfulness of the God of Israel to the promises contained in Scripture.”¹⁰

Nils Alstrup Dahl claims that Romans 1:16 is “the encompassing theme for the whole main body of the letter,” and that Romans 9–11 is an exposition of “to the Jew first” in 1:16.¹¹ Along this line, Thomas R. Schreiner, following Cranfield, Fitzmyer, Moo, and others, concludes: “The priority of the Jews was not merely a historical reality that had now lapsed for Paul. The place of the Jews in the outworking of salvation history was still crucial, and Paul attempts to work out this issue in chapters 9–11.”¹²

⁹ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 53.

¹⁰ J. R. Daniel Kirk, *Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 216. Kirk understands the resurrection to be the hermeneutical key to the epistle and he writes from a supersessionist perspective, both of which are debatable, but beyond the purview of this article.

¹¹ Nils Alstrup Dahl, “The Missionary Theology in the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977), 82.

¹² Schreiner, *Romans*, 62. See also Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 91; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 129, 257; H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), 15; Frank J. Matera, *Romans*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 35; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 69; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, vol. 1, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 28; Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 41; and Vanlaningham, “Romans,” 1745.

Godet dissents and claims that “Paul has in view the right of priority in time which belonged to Israel as the result of its whole history.” He continues, “While paying homage to the historical right of the Jewish people, Paul did not, however, intend to restore particularism” (P. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Classic Commentary Library, trans. A. Cusin, rev. and ed. Talbot W. Chambers [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956], 92–93). Witmer says, “Today evangelism of

⁷ Michael G. Vanlaningham, “Romans,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelink and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 1745.

⁸ See Brian J. Abasciano, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9.1–9: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (London: A & C Black, 2005), 34–36.

In light of these contextual observations concerning the role of Israel in God's purposes, a number of scholars agree that the use of $\pi\rho\acute{\omega}\tau\omicron\nu$ in Romans 1:16 expresses priority of degree¹³ rather than merely historical sequence. Bent Noack, for example, claims Romans was written to explain Paul's delay in visiting Rome.¹⁴ The reason that he, the apostle to the Gentiles, should postpone a visit to Rome, the center of the Gentile world, in order to go to Jerusalem required an extended theological treatment of the subject of the priority of Israel, not only in his mission, but in all Christian missions. Thus, for Noack, the issue of the Jewish people in God's plan is to be considered, structurally, the main channel (or "current") of the epistle.

Noack's reading of the context also informs his understanding of $\pi\rho\acute{\omega}\tau\omicron\nu$. He notes:

Firstly, Paul admittedly very often mentions Jew and Greek in juxtaposition. . . . But only here in Romans and only three times does he use the expression ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήνων 1:16; ii.9, 10, and by these three instances also the other two are determined where Jews and Greeks are mentioned together without any priority being given to the former, iii.9 and x.12. Secondly, a mere statistical survey will show that a πρῶτον is not just what we should expect: the very epistle to the Romans states and substantiates that there is no difference between Jew and Greek. But only Romans, of all the Pauline epistles, has the formula (ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήνων).¹⁵

Thus for Noack, Paul is not using "first" with reference to historical sequence, but with reference to priority of degree. If so, to some extent, Romans becomes a sustained commentary on Paul's declaration to the leaders of the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first [πρῶτον]"

the world must include the Jews, but the priority of the Jews has been fulfilled" (John A. Wimer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, vol. 2, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985], 441). For similar positions, see Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 40; Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 33; Ellis W. Deibler, Jr., *A Semantic and Structural Analysis of Romans*, Summer Institute of Linguistics Semantic and Structural Analysis Series (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998), 50; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1949), 73; and John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 61.

¹³ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 893.

¹⁴ Bent Noack, "Current and Backwater in the Epistle to the Romans," *Studia Theologica* 19 (1965): 155–66. One need not agree with his proposal regarding the occasion of the letter to accept his observations regarding 1:16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

(Acts 13:46, italics added). For a similar usage, Matthew 6:33 records Jesus saying, "But seek first [πρῶτον] His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." In Romans 1:16, if $\pi\rho\acute{\omega}\tau\omicron\nu$ is to be understood as a continuing priority, it may very well be also chronologically the first thing that is done. But the focus is on "first" in reference to degree—"to the Jew especially." Though the gospel is for all (καὶ . . . καὶ; see also 3:29), it is especially (πρῶτον) for the Jewish people. Mark A. Seifrid adds, "This qualification of the gospel as 'for the Jew first,' by which Paul introduces his gospel, is integral to it and is not overturned or reversed by the surprising work of God among the Gentiles."¹⁶

THE GRAMMAR

Evidence for the continuing priority of the Jewish people in evangelism and missions may also be sought in the grammatical structure of Romans 1:16. Following Paul's denial that he was ashamed of the gospel, he cited the nature of the gospel as the reason for his boldness: "For it [the gospel] is (ἐστίν) the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

Since the controlling verb is ἐστίν, attention must be given to the use of the present tense and to the structure of the verse. Since Paul declared that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to all who believe," the present tense could be described as either a gnomic or a customary present. While some would make the case for one or the other, the differences are relatively insignificant, for he was stating timeless, universal truth.¹⁷

As the verb that governs the remainder of the verse, ἐστίν must have the same sense for all of the dependent phrases that follow. The datives also suggest a certain grammatical parallelism: The gospel is the power of God for salvation "to everyone who believes, to the Jew first." On the basis of the use of the present tense in this verse and this grammatical parallelism, Paul was also stating timeless, universal truth when he said that this gospel is "to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile." One way to emphasize the sig-

¹⁶ Mark A. Seifrid, "For the Jew First: Paul's *Nota Bene* for His Gentile Readers," in *To the Jew First: The Case for Jewish Evangelism in Scripture and History*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 24.

¹⁷ Verbal aspect in New Testament Greek has been a topic of significant debate in recent scholarship. Some claim that aspect is foreign to equative or stative verbs. Others claim that gnomic aspect only applies when the subject is divine. Some claim that ἐστίν carries a customary force in Romans 1:16, while others contend that it is gnomic. However, the larger point does not depend on a resolution of this issue.

nificance of both *πρόρον* and *ἔστυν* would be to paraphrase Romans 1:16 as saying, “As long as the gospel is the power of God for salvation, it is especially so to the Jewish people, and also to the Gentiles.”¹⁸ If this final phrase were understood only in a historical sense, then the preceding phrase (i.e., that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation) would also apply only to Paul’s day. Clearly, this is not the case!

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM

This creates some tension, however. How can the gospel be “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” and at the same time be for the Jew especially? The answer is found in Genesis 12:3: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” With this, John R. W. Stott says, “God made a promise to Abraham. And an understanding of that promise is indispensable to an understanding of the Bible and of the Christian mission.”¹⁹ Among many others, William J. Dumbrell agrees and says, “By way of Abraham and Israel, God enters into the world of the nations.”²⁰ In other words, the promises made to Abraham and to his descendants were for the ultimate purpose of reaching the nations. The tension between God’s universal aims and his election of Israel, however, has been interpreted poorly by many. As Christopher J. H. Wright says: “It is a tension that has generated many unsatisfactory attempts to resolve it in either direction—by drawing from it a kind of universalism that loses touch with the particularity of God’s redemptive work through Israel and Christ, or by accusing Israel of a chauvinistic exclusivism that neglected God’s wider concern for other nations.”²¹

¹⁸ See Noack, “Current and Backwater in the Epistle to the Romans.” See also Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 90–91; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 68–69; Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 21–40; and Schreiner, *Romans*, 62.

¹⁹ John R. W. Stott, “The Living God Is a Missionary God,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 11.

²⁰ William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), 78, cited by Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 41.

²¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 222.

The promises of Genesis 12:3, particularly the key phrase “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” are repeated to Abraham (Gen. 18:18; 22:18), to Isaac (26:4), and to Jacob (28:14). Though slightly different words may be used, this crucially important phrase may be divided into three concepts. In reverse order, they are:

- (1) “will / shall be blessed,”²²
- (2) “all the families / nations of the earth,” and
- (3) “in you / your seed”

The blessing spoken of here was not merely a material blessing, but harks back to the promised solution for the problem of mankind’s sin.²³ H. C. Leupold says, “A blessing so great that its effect shall extend to ‘all the families of the earth’ can be thought of only in connection with the promised Savior.”²⁴

This promise reverberates throughout the Old and New Testaments. Psalm 67, for example, says, “God be gracious to us [Israel] and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us—Selah. That Your way may be known on the earth [or, “in the land,” פָּרָא], Your salvation among all nations. . . . God blesses us, that all the ends of the earth may fear Him” (vv. 1–2, 7, italics added). Israel is blessed, so that the nations may be blessed.²⁵ Since this is based on Genesis

²² Some translations of Genesis 22:18 and 26:4 have “all the families of the earth will bless themselves.” The Septuagint and the New Testament, however, both understand this verb as a simple passive (Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8). Opinion now seems to favor understanding the Hebrew “reflexive” forms involved in a passive sense, possibly communicating an intensification of the action (i.e., all the families of the earth will pride themselves in participating in the blessing of Abraham or Isaac, etc.). See Josef Scharbert, [ברך ברכו] berak, [ברכה ברכה] berakah, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 296; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 374–76; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 114; and Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 116–18.

²³ Sailhamer points out that the “blessing” promised in Genesis 12:3 is tied to the original “blessing” of all people in 1:28 (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 139).

²⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 1:413. See also John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 183.

²⁵ John Piper’s book *Let the Nations Be Glad* is excellent regarding the doxological motive for missions, and it takes its cue from this psalm, though it does not recognize the central point—that the nations will be blessed through Israel. In fact, ref-

12:3, the blessing prayed for here is the blessing of salvation.²⁶ The psalmist prays for Israel's salvation so that God's salvation may be known "among all nations." If the desire is to see the nations come to the knowledge of salvation, attention must be given to prayer for, and witness to, the Jewish people. The last words of David, recorded by Solomon in Psalm 72, reflect this same idea. The blessings of the Son of David are to be extended to "all nations" (v. 17), so that "the whole earth [may] be filled with His glory" (v. 19).

Through Isaiah, God says of Israel,²⁷ "It is too small a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make you a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). Here, again, Israel is the channel through which salvation is taken to the nations of the world, in keeping with Genesis 12:3.²⁸ Again, notice carefully Isaiah 62:1–2: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning. The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will designate." Isaiah raised his voice for Zion's sake, for Jerusalem's sake, until she would receive salvation, so that the nations would see her righteousness, and presumably come to know that same salvation.

Returning to Genesis 12, this marvelous promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not completely fulfilled with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Instead, in a sense, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, along with the subsequent empowerment by the Holy Spirit, *make participation in the fulfillment of this promise possible*. With the new covenant, the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant is finally made available to the nations. It is not fulfilled until "all the families of the earth" are blessed with the message of salvation. In other words, *this promise provides the very rationale for the mission of the church*. Thomas Schirrmacher says, "The promise to the patriarchs, that all people will be blessed through their offspring, is again and again quoted and mentioned as proof for world mission."²⁹ Indeed, more than any other passage it pro-

erences to Israel are missing from the book's citations of Scripture.

²⁶ See Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 117–18.

²⁷ This second of the "servant songs" may also refer to the Messiah.

²⁸ The same concept may be found also in Isaiah 51:1–6.

²⁹ Thomas Schirrmacher, "Romans as a Charter for World Mission: A Lesson in the Relation of Systematic Theology and Missiology," *International Journal of Fron-*

vides the basis and the motive for Paul's missionary theology and method.

Yet much of the literature on the biblical basis of missions approaches the history of Israel in such a manner as to render it nothing more than a history of failure. There is little awareness that the promises to Abraham depend upon the faithfulness of God, not the faithfulness of Israel. Bryant Hicks, for example, says, "The sad reality is that Israel's understanding and response to this commission from Yahweh never rose to a very high level."³⁰ Therefore, he refers to the Jewish people as "the obstreperous, blaspheming Jews,"³¹ and as "this wicked nation."³² Israel, however, was never intended to serve as a foil for the "righteous" Gentiles, but instead, as a mirror in which the nations could see their own wickedness.

Many approach the biblical basis of missions almost as if Israel were God's "Plan A" that utterly failed, and the church is his "Plan B" that is finally succeeding. The problem is in a failure to recognize the "divine passive" in Genesis 12:3. God promised, "In you, all the families of the earth *will be blessed*" (italics added). He did not say, "You are to bless all the families of the earth." It is not that Israel failed to obey God's commission, but that God has not yet completely fulfilled his promise. Kenneth Mathews says, "The verse in context indicates that the Lord, not Abram, is the dispenser of blessing for the nations. Abram has no exclusive claim on God's blessing; rather, God has exclusive claim on Abram and on all those who submit to his God."³³ It is a grave mistake to conceive of God's plan as contingent upon the obedience and faithfulness of his people, whether one is speaking of Israel or of the church.³⁴

tier Missions 10 (1993): 160.

³⁰ Bryant Hicks, "Old Testament Foundations for Missions," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³² *Ibid.*, 59.

³³ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 115.

³⁴ Some see contingency in Genesis 18:19 and therefore grounds for understanding the Abrahamic covenant as conditional (e.g., Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 269). It is possible, however, to take ירד as expressing purpose rather than contingency. Furthermore, the two clauses introduced by וירד may be taken as coordinate clauses, rather than as sequential. They are both directly related to the initial statement, "For I have chosen him." That is to say, God chose Abraham for two purposes given here: (1) so that he might instruct his descendants in the way of the Lord, and (2) so that God might fulfill his promises to Abraham (cf. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*

PETER AND PAUL ON THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM

If the Scriptures teach that the Jewish people are to be a continuing priority in evangelism, how can it be said that this priority is intrinsic to the gospel? For most Christians the gospel is all about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It is that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). In no way should the message of the gospel change. However, the gospel may include more than the message itself. Paul referred to this message of salvation as “the blessing of Abraham” (Gal. 3:14), and in Romans 10:8 it is “the word of faith.” For Peter and Paul, this message of salvation was certainly central and could be referred to as “the gospel which I preached” (1 Cor. 15:1), but the term “gospel” may encompass more than the message itself.

The “promise made to the fathers” (Acts 13:32; cf. 26:6) gives rise to the new covenant, the gospel, the church, and its mission. One of only two times this promise is cited in the New Testament is in Galatians 3:8. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had a burden for their salvation—so one might expect him to emphasize “all the nations/families of the earth” in this ancient promise. He strongly insisted that Gentiles did not need to become Jews in order to be saved. Perhaps unexpectedly, in Galatians 3:8, Paul referred to this promise from Genesis 12:3 as “the gospel!” Here, he wrote, “the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you.’” Paul emphasized that the message of salvation was for Gentiles as well as for the Jewish people. In fact, he went on to say, “Christ redeemed us . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Gal. 3:13–14). Yet in Galatians 3:8 Paul was not speaking of the “blessing” itself as the “gospel,” but the fact that “all the nations” would be blessed. In other words, Paul took the phrase “all the families of the earth” to make the point that salvation is for Gentiles as well as Jews, and he called it “the gospel.”³⁵

The only other New Testament citation of this promise to the

[London: Methuen, 1904], 195; John Gill, *An Exposition of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Newport Commentary Series [London: Matthews and Leigh, 1810; reprint, Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist, 2010], 319; J. G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis* [Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1868], 317; and Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., Old Testament Library [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961], 210).

³⁵ Italics in this paragraph and the following one are those of the author.

fathers was made by Peter. Speaking in the temple in Jerusalem, Peter emphasized “in you” to express Jewish priority. He said to a crowd that was entirely Jewish, “It is *you* who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ For you first [πρώτον, as in Rom. 1:16], God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:25–26). Peter quoted this key clause from Genesis 22:18. But he emphasized the third aspect of the gospel, “in your seed,” and “you first,” in order to establish the necessity of a Jewish priority that required that Jesus go to the Jews in the first place, or especially.³⁶ Both Peter and Paul were referring to the same promise in Genesis, although with different emphases. Yet they are not only in harmony with each other, but also with Abraham.³⁷

When a man returns from the mailbox, he might say, “We received a letter from Mom,” and his wife would probably have a mental image of an addressed envelope with a cancelled stamp and a message inside. Later, if she were to ask, “What did the letter say?” then reference would be to the message itself. The same elasticity is found in the term “gospel.” It could refer to the message of salvation itself, or it could refer to the tripartite promise repeated five times in Genesis, the “promise of the fathers” (see Acts 13:32; 26:6; and Rom. 15:8).

For Peter and Paul, the gospel apparently included:

- (1) the blessing of salvation (as promised in Genesis), but it also included the other two parts of this promise from Genesis, namely,
- (2) “all the nations,” that is, it included both Jew and Gentile, and
- (3) “in you,” that is, in Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish people.

Paul brought these ideas together in Romans 1:16, even though he

³⁶ In Acts 3:26, the case for taking πρώτον as expressing priority of degree is not as clear, but it can still be made on the basis of Peter’s quotation of Genesis 22:18 in the previous verse.

³⁷ The promised “seed” (“in your seed”) ultimately has reference to Jesus, as God’s “servant” (Acts 3:26), but this does not negate the broader referent, “you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers,” i.e., the Jewish people. How else can Peter derive Jewish priority from this quotation from Genesis?

did not quote this key phrase in the Abrahamic covenant. Here again the same three elements are present: (1) “the power of God unto salvation” (the promised blessing); (2) “to everyone who believes” (“all the families / nations of the earth”); and (3) “to the Jew first” (“in you / your descendants”).

Furthermore, Romans 1:16 is not speaking of missionary strategy, per se, but of the very nature of the gospel. Paul was answering the implied question, “What is the gospel?” He said, The gospel “is,” and the phrases that follow speak to the nature of the gospel itself. Far from being a temporary methodology in missions, or a method that was unique to Paul, he was revealing something foundational about the gospel itself. He was saying that the gospel is (1) God’s power unto salvation, that it is (2) for “all who believe,” and (3) that it is “to the Jew especially.” J. Lanier Burns writes, “In Romans, Paul emphasizes ‘to the Jew first’ in accordance with a biblical priority that had endured from Abraham’s commission to bless the world through the chosen fathers Isaac and Jacob.”³⁸ Seifrid puts it this way: “Gentile faith rests on a gospel that belongs first to Jews.”³⁹

If the New Testament includes the universality of the gospel (as in Gal. 3:8) and the priority of the Jewish people (as in Rom. 1:16), any view of the gospel that ignores these emphases reflects a deficient understanding of the gospel. Therefore, one would be justified in concluding that if a message does not offer “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16) through faith alone in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3–4), it is not the gospel. Likewise, if this salvation is not for Gentiles as well as for the Jewish people, it is not the gospel (Gal. 3:8). Finally, neither is this salvation to be considered the gospel if it is not for the Jewish people especially.

In other words, believers have a universal mission because the gospel is especially for the Jewish people. The church is now sharing in the blessings of Israel, and one of the greatest blessings is having the opportunity to bless “all the families of the earth.” Yet the gospel itself requires particular concern for the Jewish people, for if the gospel is not especially for the Jewish people, can it really be for anyone else in particular? This priority should have an im-

³⁸ J. Lanier Burns, “The Chosen People and Jewish Evangelism,” in *To the Jew First: The Case for Jewish Evangelism in Scripture and History*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 156. See also Michael Rydelnik, “Did God Really Say That the Gospel Is to the Jew First?” *The Chosen People*, January 1991, 8–11.

³⁹ Seifrid, “For the Jew First,” 31.

port on the church’s strategies of missions and evangelism, as well as its prayer life.

Of course, this raises some practical questions. Some Christians live in areas with no Jewish population. How can this priority be expressed in such circumstances? Since it is not “first” sequentially but in degree, this priority can be expressed in prayers for the salvation of the Jewish people (see Rom. 10:1) or in financial support (see 15:26–27).

For Peter, the blessing of salvation was to run on two tracks: Jewish priority and (he would later learn) Gentile inclusion. For Paul, the blessing of salvation was to run on two tracks: Jewish priority and Gentile inclusion. In this, they were in perfect harmony with Abraham, who saw the blessing of salvation running on two tracks: Jewish priority and Gentile inclusion, and that’s the gospel! Understanding the importance of Jewish priority in missions and evangelism and implementing that priority in the witness of the church will restore a biblical emphasis, bring God’s blessing (Gen. 12:3), and may result in a stronger remnant of Jewish people who know their Messiah.