

# Analysis

## THE GOSPEL SENTENCES

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THE GOSPEL message can be summed up in one saying: "In thee (Abraham) shall all nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). Paul says that this represents the gospel "preached before" to Abraham. But where did Paul find this cryptic gospel? The sentence is not to be found anywhere else in Scripture. "What about Genesis 12:3 or Genesis 22:18?", you may say; but look closely and you will find a significant difference between the passages. Genesis 12:3 reads: "In thee shall all *families of the earth be blessed*"; and though the meaning is closely similar, "families of the earth" and "nations" are not equal alternatives. In Hebrew there is another word for nations, and in Greek, "families of the earth" can be translated exactly, so the switch in Galatians 3:8 must be significant. The other record of God's gospel promise is in Genesis 22:18, which reads: "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed". This quotation has the phrase "all nations", but instead of "in thee" it has "in thy seed". So neither Genesis 12 nor Genesis 22 will do exactly as the source of Paul's words in Galatians 3:8.

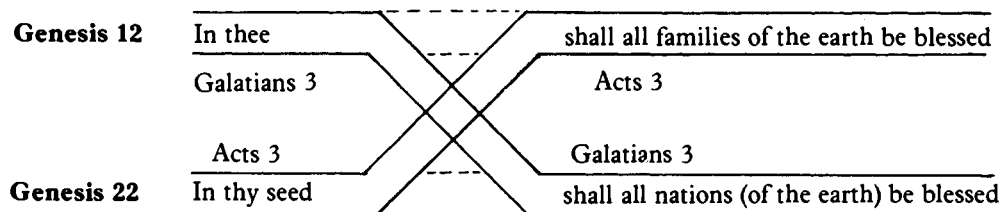
What Paul, through the Spirit, has done is to combine the two quotations. But before seeking an explanation for this, notice another remarkable aspect of these promises to Abraham. The words are quoted again in the New Testament, by Peter in Acts 3:25; and just as Paul combines the two so does Peter, but in the reverse way. This extraordinary use of Scripture by the Spirit-guided apostles can best be understood by the following illustration.

The parts of Genesis 12:3 and 22:18 which Peter does not use Paul uses; so that all the elements of both quotations appear in the New Testament, but in new combinations. Note, however, that Paul was perfectly correct to say that the words, "In thee shall all nations be blessed", were spoken to Abraham by God.

But what is the reason for the relatively complicated set of uses of Scripture? To answer this, look at each phrase in turn.

"**In thee**" refers to Abraham. There is a special point in looking at Abraham as distinct from his seed. Abraham is presented to us in Scripture as the pre-eminent example of the faithfulness which pleases God. So magnificent is this example that all who follow God's way are said to be "of the faith of Abraham", and Abraham therefore is described as "the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16). When Paul quotes the words "in thee" rather than "in thy seed" he is drawing attention to the way in which the promises of God are related to us: by the response of faith. (There is also of course the extended meaning: that because of Abraham's faith the saviour of the world would be one of his descendants.)

"**In thy seed**". Paul states that when God spoke of "Abraham's seed" he was speaking of one individual, Christ (Gal. 3:16). It was Abraham's seed the Lord Jesus who was first promised the land (Gen. 12:7) and not Abraham. Therefore, when Peter quotes "in thy seed", rather than "in thee", he is focusing on the one who is pre-eminent in God's purpose, the means whereby all the promises of God are confirmed (2 Cor. 1:20) and their fulfilment assured.



(The solid lines represent the combinations which appear in the New Testament)

**“All families of the earth”**. It may be argued that at the time of Genesis 12 there were no fully developed nations: in the few years since the great Flood only large family groups had developed. More specific than this suggestion, however, is the link with Genesis 10. There the emerging nations are outlined, and each genealogy is summarised in the words: “These are the sons of . . . after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, after their nations” (Gen. 10:31). Strong nations there soon were, as the events of Genesis 14 show, but they all began as “families of the sons of Noah” (Gen. 10:32). The word “earth”, in the phrase “families of the earth”, is the Hebrew word *adamah*, and refers to the ground out of which Adam was made. It is a different word from that used in “nations of the earth” (*erets*). What we have therefore in “families of the ground” is a term which embraces all peoples because of common ancestry, and it has associations with sin and the curse which all men inherit by virtue of being descendants of Adam.

**“Nations of the earth”**. The word “earth” here is the word for land rather than ground and refers to the political world and its geography. Just as “families of the earth” fits the immediate context of Genesis 12, which is the development of the families of Noah into nations, so “nations of the earth” fits the immediate context of Genesis 22. There Abraham was told to offer up his promised son, who was to be the beginning of a vast nation. Thus the blessing which came to Abraham because of his obedience reflected the hopes centred in Isaac: “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven”; and furthermore, the political aspect is emphasised when Abraham is told, “and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies”. Then follows the promise we are studying which expands the Hope of Israel internationally: “in thy seed shall *all the nations* of the earth be blessed”.

Given these distinct ideas associated with the phrases in the two quotations, Genesis 12 and 22, we may appreciate why they are combined in new ways by Peter and Paul.

### Galatians 3

The context of this verse is the dispute between Paul and the Judaisers about the place of the Law of Moses in the New Covenant. The Judaisers, although professing to be followers of Christ, taught that the believers must be circumcised and keep the law. But the truth was this: “a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ” (2:16). To

prove his point Paul refers to the salvation of Abraham before the law was instituted: “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (3:6-8). The point was that all nations, Jew and Gentile, were to be blessed by the same means. They would be blessed by faith and not by works of the law: “So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham”.

Paul in this passage through the Spirit has chosen “In thee” because it pinpoints the role of faith in the fulfilment of the promises, and “all nations” because the argument was between Jew and Gentile, and the phrase proved that both could be included through faith.

### Acts 3:25

The context of Peter’s speech in Acts 3 shows why the alternative combination of quotations is used. In this chapter there is no dispute about Jew and Gentile since at that time the gospel had not been extended to the Gentiles. The central dispute was the position of the Lord Jesus Christ in the hope of Israel. The position of Abraham in that scheme was not questioned by the Jews. Rather, they had to be shown that Abraham’s seed was the key to the promises. Thus, Peter, through the Spirit, argues: “*The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified His Son Jesus*” (Acts 3:13). For this reason Peter quotes “And in thy seed” rather than “In thee”.

There is also a pertinent reason why Peter chose “kindreds (families) of the earth” and not “nations”. The concept of a blessing coming on the families of Adam was important in Peter’s teaching. Peter was expounding the gospel of salvation, and in the context of Acts 3 it was particularly in relation to the things concerning the name of Jesus. These things centred on the sacrifice of the Lord because of which their sins could be blotted out (3:19). The phrase “families of the earth”, representing the descendants of Adam bound together by a common inheritance of human nature, fits with the emphasis of Acts 3. In contrast, when Paul was writing to the Galatians no one disputed the position of the Lord Jesus and his saving work. The dispute was how that sacrifice was made effective for the disciple.

The fact that the elements of the quotations in

Genesis 12 and 22 could be interchanged without violating the claim that the new arrangements were true statements of God's promises to Abraham shows that the two original promises, though not identical in nuances, overlap in the scope of their meaning. This is illustrated in the following paraphrases in accordance with the above discussion:

**Gen. 12:3.** Through the faith shown by Abraham men and women sharing Adam's nature will be blessed by the forgiveness of sins.

**Gen. 22:18.** Through the Lord Jesus Christ all nations shall be blessed by the establishment of the rule of Christ in the gate of his enemies (the seat of political and judicial power).

*But it is equally true to say the following:*

**Gal. 3:8.** Through the faith shown by Abraham, believers of all nations will inherit the blessings of the rule of Christ in the Kingdom of God.

*and,*

**Acts 3:25.** Through the Lord Jesus Christ men and women from all the families descended from Adam will be blessed by the forgiveness of sins.

The new combinations are possible because the faith of Abraham was in the promised seed, and the blessing on the believers is both the forgiveness of sins and an inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

### GUESTS OF QADDAFI

THOUSANDS of delegates, journalists and photographers were flown to Libya recently for an international conference on Colonel Qaddafi's "Third Universal Theory" — set out in *The Green Book* — in the plush setting of Garyounis University, just outside Benghazi. So many people arrived, from Iranian mullahs to Yugoslav separatists, that Benghazi's three hotels spilled over into two large cruise lines docked in the harbour, the site of immense construction work.

The eight-day symposium saw delegates, mostly from movements opposed to conservative governments all over the world, describe political conditions in their countries. Qaddafi made a three-hour speech, and spent much of his time listening to the continuous translations on earphones in the back row of the vast auditorium. "It is an honour for the Libyan people to accommodate such people who have come to the international platform of the struggle against imperialism, Zionism, fascism and racism", Qaddafi said.

"This meeting is quite different from other international political gatherings because this is a meeting of all dynamic forces throughout the world . . . Those who acquire the atomic weapon and other destructive arms, in fact, possess the means to destroy civilisation, while those who possess the word, argument and intellectual abilities hold the key to culture, civilisation, progress and advancement".

Qaddafi took the opportunity to challenge the U.S.: "This conference gives great moral support in the Libyan people's confrontation with the imperialist U.S.'s repeated provocations in the Gulf of Sirte, which is an integral part of Libyan territorial waters. The Gulf of Sirte is crucial for the security and the unity of the Libyan soil. The reactionary and U.S. imperialist blockade is ineffective because of the real support of the peoples of the world for the Libyans."

Various heads of state — among them Flight Lieutenant Rawlings of Ghana and Colonel Desi Bouterse of Surinam — added their voices to those praising Qaddafi. Most of the speeches concentrated on his "material support for the oppressed in the era of the masses", rather than the theoretical content of his revolutionary manifesto.

God has said: "I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen" (Hag. 2:22).

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