

The Prophet and the Promise

Willis J Beecher

CHAPTER IX

THE PROMISE AS GIVEN TO THE PATRIARCHS

In the last chapter we examined the doctrine of Yahaweh*s promise to mankind through Israel, as that doctrine is formulated in the New Testament. The men of the New Testament say that Yahaweh, when he called Abraham, announced a promise given through him to the human race; that the history of Israel is the unfolding of this promise; that the promise was renewed with David, and preached by all the prophets; that it began to be fulfilled directly after it was made, and has been fulfilling ever since; that its greatest fulfilment is in the person and work of Jesus Christ; that it will never cease being in process of fulfilment; and that this promise-doctrine is the sum of what the prophets teach in the scriptures.

We are now to inquire whether the New Testament writers are correct in their exegesis of the Old Testament. An adequate answer would require an examination of all the teachings of the prophets, and would fill a series of volumes rather than a couple of chapters. All that can be here attempted is an informal study of the situation at four periods in the history; namely, the times of the patriarchs, of the exodus, of David, of the post-Davidic prophets. The present chapter deals with the patriarchal times.

The main line of the Old Testament record, for any purpose, is that which presents the history of Israel. Properly this begins with the account of the calling of

Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, as found in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, the contents of the preceding eleven chapters being preliminary.

But these preliminary sections are of prophetic authorship, and were written from prophetic points of view. It is therefore not surprising that interpreters have found in them abundant traces of the prophetic doctrine of the Messiah. Much stress has been laid on Yahaweh*s relations with Adam, including the protevangelium (Gen. iii. 15); on the sacrifice made by Abel (Gen. iv; Matt. xxiii. 35; Lc. xi. 51; Heb. xi. 4, xii. 24; I Jn. iii. 12; Jude II); on the experiences of Noah, especially the covenant (Gen. vi. 18, ix. 9, II, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17). The messianic subject-matter includes whatever indications there may be of God*s plan of redeeming blessing for mankind, as found in the accounts of the creation, the fall, or the flood. The instances are very fully treated in current works, but I do not purpose to discuss them here; not even to argue the question in case any one shall think that they belong to the main line of Old Testament messianic teaching, that line beginning with Adam rather than with Abraham. In any case, the record of these pre-Abrahamic events supplements the messianic teaching found elsewhere, especially in such important matters as sin and redemption, and God*s purpose for mankind.

Dismissing these preliminary chapters, we turn to the calling of Abraham, and there begin our search for the main line of messianic doctrine. Both at the beginning and afterward, we shall find it to be the principal thing in the Old Testament. Luthardt well says (*Bremen Lectures*, p. 195) that the whole history of Israel is prophetic of Christ. We will first examine the presentation of the case as made in Genesis, and will after ward

look at certain problems which arise from this presentation.

I. We have seen in the preceding chapter that the Old Testament passage more emphasized in the New than any other is the promise made to Abraham. Let us study this promise.

I. The earliest account of it is as follows : —

And Yahaweh said unto Abraham, Get thee out from thy land, and from thy native place, and from the house of thy father, unto the land that I shall cause thee to see; that I may make thee a great nation, and may bless thee, and may make thy name great; and be thou a blessing; and I will bless those who bless thee, and curse those who make light of thee, and in thee shall all the families of the ground be blessed” (Gen. xii, 1-3 J)

The promise is in two parts: first, a promise to Abraham that he shall have the land of Canaan, shall become a great nation, shall have a distinguished name, and shall have the divine favor for his friends and disfavor for his enemies; second, a promise to him and all mankind that he shall be the channel of Yahaweh*s blessing to the human race. The second part comes last, the order being apparently climacteric. Abraham is represented as chosen to be the recipient of peculiar favors, not for his own sake, but that through him all the families of the ground may receive blessing. This is the supreme thing in the promise as given, all the other specifications being subordinate to it.

The subordinate items reappear in many places in Genesis. A glance at them will help us in our understanding of the principal promise.

First, a “seed,” that is a posterity, is promised to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob (xiii. 14 if., xv, xvii. 6—7, i5—i6, etc., xxvi. 3, 4, xxviii. 3,4, xxxv. 11, 12, xlvi. 3, 4).

Second; this seed shall be or shall include persons countless as the stars, as the dust of the earth, as the sand on the seashore (*ib.*).

Third, it shall be or shall include a great nation (xviii. 18, xxxv. II, xlviii. 3).

Fourth, it shall be or shall include what is called “an assembly of nations,” “an assembly! of peoples” (xxviii. 3, xxxv. II, xlviii. 4). In xvii. 6, 16, the meaning is the same, though the phrase is simply “nations.” The nation intended is Israel, and the federated parts of Israel are the assembly of nations or of peoples, though confused translation has sometimes led to other conclusions.¹

Fifth, in these same passages it is promised that kings

1, It is a pity that the versions, in rendering these passages, have made them unlike, as they should not be, and have also confused them with other passages that are very unlike them. For example, the versions make it that Ephraim's seed (xlviii. 19) shall become “a multitude of nations”; its distinctive meaning is that his seed “shall fill the nations,” The meaning of Gen. xvii. 4—5 will be considered below. It is entirely different from that of the passages just cited. It is often assumed that the “nations” of Gen. xvii. 6 include the Ishmaelites and Edomites and other Abrahamic descendants; and it is true that Ishmael and Esau are elsewhere spoken of as nations, and as having promises through Abraham (xvii. 20, xxi, 13, 18, xxv, 23, etc.); but xvii, 6 is to be grouped with xvii. i6, as referring to Sarah's descendants only, and these two passages belong with the other three in which the “assembly of peoples” or of “nations” are derived from Jacob.

The Hebrew word in these three places is *qahal*, sometimes translated in the Septuagint by *iicicX*qo*ta*. Stephen (Acts vii. 38), alluding to this word as found in Deuteronomy (xviii. 16), says: “the church in the wilderness,” The word properly denotes the officially convened assembly of the twelve tribes, called to order for important business (*e.g.* Jud. xx, 2, xxi. 5—8). It appears scores of times in this use, and seldom, if ever, save in this use or some natural modification of it.

The meaning, therefore, is definite and clear, though much ignored, Abraham was to be the ancestor of a nation, Israel, which would exist in the form of an assembly of nations; namely, the federated tribes and families of Israel.

shall spring from Abraham, from Sarah, from Jacob (xvii. 6, 16, xxxv. ii). The kings that spring from Jacob can be no other than the line of the monarchs of Israel. Whether the promise to Abraham should be interpreted as also including the kings of the Ishmaelites, Edomites, Midianites, etc., may be a question.

Sixth, in many of the passages cited and in other passages it is promised that Abraham's posterity, in the line of Isaac and Jacob, shall inherit the land of Canaan, sometimes called "this land," or "these countries."

Seventh, there are other items. Abraham's name shall be made great; his friends are to be blessed, and those who contemn him are to be cursed (xii. 2—3). His seed shall take possession of the gates of their enemies (xxii. 17).

2. Among these various aspects of the promise, where does the emphasis lie? The answer is clear. The principal thing* is that all mankind shall be blessed in Abraham and his seed. In the narratives concerning the patriarchs this is emphasized beyond all else.

With slight variations in phraseology this statement is five times repeated in Genesis. Besides its first occurrence, already noticed, it is uttered by Five times Yahaweh to Abraham at the time of his inter- repeated cession for Sodom,¹ and at the time when he has been commanded to sacrifice Isaac.² After the death of

1 "Seeing Abraham shall surely become a great and strong nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (Gen. xviii. 18 JE*). Note how formally the two separate parts of the promise are here distinguished.

2 "I will greatly bless thee, and will greatly multiply thy seed, as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand that is upon the edge of the sea; and thy seed shall take possession of the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves" (Gen. xxii. 17—18 JE*).

Abraham it is repeated to Isaac.¹ Finally, we are told that when Jacob started for Paddan-aram, Yahaweh repeated it to him at Bethel, where he saw the angels ascending and descending.² In these passages the difference between “nations of the earth” and “families of the ground” seems to be unimportant. The presence of the “ seed” in some of the passages, and its absence from the others, makes no real difference in the meaning. The difference between the variant phrases “be blessed” and “bless themselves” is not significant. What is significant is the fact that the promise is thus five times repeated, the clause concerning the nations being each time in the climacteric position. Irrespective of position, its more noble meaning would give it superiority to the other specifications, but it has the dignity of position also. As the whole promise to Abraham and his seed is the central fact in our record of the patriarchs, so the clause of blessing to mankind is set forth as central in the promise itself. That is the heart of the heart of the book of Genesis.

In a form quite different the promise to mankind emphasized in the transaction in which Abram*s name is changed to

Abraham, at the time when the covenant of circumcision was made : —

“Behold my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt become father of a multitude of nations. . . . And thy name shall be Abraham, because I have given thee to be father of a multitude of nations” (Gen.xvii. 4, 5 P).

1 “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee. . . ; because to thee and to thy seed I will give all these countries; and I will establish my oath which I swear to Abraham thy father; and will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves” (Gen. xxvi. 3—4 JE⁸).

2 “The earth upon which thou art lying, I will give it to thee and to thy seed. And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, . . . and in thee

The phrase, “multitude of nations,” here used, is entirely different from “assembly of nations,” “assembly of peoples,” used elsewhere to denote the federated tribes of Israel, springing from Abraham; and is analogous to “all the nations of the earth” in the form of the promise which we have been considering. Paul is correct when he cites this passage in proof that the Gentile Christians are children of Abraham (Rom. iv. 16-18, 11-12).¹

shall all the families of the ground be blessed, and in thy seed” (Gen. xxviii 13-14 J).

The old version does not distinguish the phrase here used from Ephraim’s filling the nations (Gen. xlvi. 19), or from the phrases concerning the federated Israel (xxviii. 3, xxxv. ii, xlvii. 4), but the word used is entirely different. “Assembly” is a limited word. Some populations have a right to be represented in any given assembly, and others have not. “Multitude” is an unlimited word.

It is through their failure to discriminate that some have here charged Paul with an accommodating interpretation. Paul is arguing to prove that Abraham is — “the father of all of them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision”

(Rom. iv. 11).

His argument is: — “To the end that the promise may be sure to all the seed; not to that

only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, A father of many nations have I made thee) before him whom he believed, even God, . . . Who in hope believed against hope to the end that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, So shall thy seed be” (Rom. iv. 16-18).

At first blush one might say that Abraham’s being made father of a multitude of nations must have the same meaning with the clause, “I will make nations of thee,” which occurs in the next verse in Genesis. But it is more reasonable to regard the latter as a specification under the former. As in the five passages in which the promise is verbally repeated, the statement of Abraham’s relation to the nations is accompanied by specifications subordinate to it. One of these is that nations will descend from him. But his being father of a multitude of nations is parallel with all the nations

The promise for the nations is further emphasized by what the narrative says concerning the seed of Abraham.

Among the subordinate items, those touching the seed are especially connected with the principal item, and are especially emphasized. The “seed” appears in a twofold character: it is associated with Abraham as the recipient of the promise, and is itself a crowning part of the promised blessing;¹ and in both these characters it is the indispensable link for the transmission of the promise. Abraham’s anxieties and trials are mostly concerning his seed, It is through his seed that the nations are to be blessed (xxii. 18, xxvi. 4, xxviii. 14).²

being blessed in him, and not with his being the progenitor of numerous descendants.

1. Paul in the New Testament keeps up this distinction. Sometimes he uses the term “the seed “ to denote the Christ, the great benefit promised, and sometimes to denote the beneficiaries, those whom he calls “the heirs of the promise,” whether Jews or believing gentiles.

2 .It may be assumed that Abraham at first thought of Lot as his heir, and thus as the seed that had been promised. From the time when Lot left him he is anxious concerning the seed. Directly after that, his seed is associated with him in the promise —

“All the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever” (xiii. 15).

When Lot remained separate from Abraham, after he had been rescued from the four kings, we find the following record (Gen. xv. 2—6) —

“And Abraham said, O Lord Yahaweh, what dost thou give me, as long as I am going childless, while the son of possession of my house is Damascus Eliezer? And Abraham said, Behold to me thou hast not given seed, and behold the son of my house is my heir. And behold the word of Yahaweh was unto him, saying, This one will not be thine heir, but one who will come forth from thy bowels will be thine heir. And he made him go forth out of doors, and said, Look, pray, toward the heaven, and couot the stars, if thou art able to count them. And he said to him, So shall thy seed be. And he was wont to believe in Yahaweh, and he counted it righteousness to him.”

So the promise to Abraham becomes one that is to be fulfilled through his

The promise of the nations is emphasized in what is said concerning the covenants between Deity and Abraham. Two formal covenant transactions are described, — that in which Yahaweh*s symbol of fire passed between the parts of the sacrifice the(xv), and that when circumcision was instituted (xvii). In each the covenant is in confirmation of the promise, and with especial reference to the “seed.” The connection with the promise is implied in the narrative of the covenant of the parts; the covenant of circumcision is explicitly connected with Abraham*s change of name, and so with his relations to the multitude of the nations. Clearly the covenants are concerned with the larger purpose of Deity to bless mankind through Abraham, and not exclusively with his narrower and subordinate purposes.

The one especially condensed and comprehensive statement of the substance of the covenant, as the matter appears in the records of the later history, is that Israel is to be to Yahaweh for a people, and Yahaweh to Israel for God; in other words, that Israel is Yahaweh*s peculiar people. Perhaps it is not, though it ought to be, superfluous to say that the word “peculiar” in this familiar phrase denotes, not a people different from other peoples, but God*s own people. In the patriarchal times, when Israel had not yet become a people, this formula appears seldom, and only in part; but a part of it appears in connection

posterity, and here the faith of Abraham centres. In the subsequent record the birth of Ishmael, the promise of Isaac, his birth, the plan to offer him as a burnt-offering, all emphasize this idea of the seed of Abraham as connected with the promise. It is the seed that shall constitute the promised nation of federated nations. In a meaning considerably different, though not inconsistent, Paul argues that the believers from the “multitude of nations” are also Abraham*s seed, since they have him for father.

with the covenant of circumcision, and at the renewal of the covenant with Jacob.¹

The covenant is simply the promise in a different form. Yahaweh constitutes himself the God of Abraham and Israel, their God in a peculiar sense, not for their sakes alone, but for the sake of mankind. It is thus that the seed of Abraham is to be the channel of the divine blessing to all the nations.

3. We do not properly understand the bearings of the promise as thus emphasized, unless we note with care the fact that it is declared to be eternally operative. We have seen that the New Testament lays great stress on this. In so doing, it merely echoes the representations found in Genesis. According to both alike, the promise and the covenant and the seed are eternal.²

1 "That I may give my covenant between me and thee, and may multiply thee very exceedingly, . . . Behold my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be father of a multitude of nations, . . . And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee, to their generations, for an eternal covenant, to be to thee for God, and to thy seed after thee. . . , And I will be to them for God" (Gen. xvii. 2, 4, 7, 8). After this follows, with much reiteration of similar language, the establishing of circumcision, with the promise that Isaac shall be born, and that—"I will establish my covenant with him, for an eternal covenant to his seed after him" (xvii. 15).

See also Jacob's vow at Bethel : —

"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and Yahaweh will be to me for God, then this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house" (xxviii. 20—22).

2 "For all this land which thou art beholding, to thee I give it, and to thy seed, unto eternity" (Gen. xiii. 15).

"And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee, to their generations, for a covenant of eternity, to be to thee for God, and to thy seed after thee" (xvii. 7).

"And I will give to thee and to thy seed . . . all the land of Canaan, for a possession of eternity, and I will be to them for God" (xvii. 8),

Observe that the promise does not mean precisely the same that it would if this idea of eternity were not connected with it. If Abraham's retainers and friends thought that this promise had been made to him, they thought that it was fulfilled when Isaac was born. But inasmuch as they were informed that the fulfilment was to be eternal and cosmopolitan, they must have regarded the birth of Isaac as only the beginning of it. They looked forward, far forward, to additional fulfilment. The promise would be operative in the future in a never ending line of descendants; it would be operative in ever widening limits till the blessing had reached all nations. The idea of a progressive fulfilment is inherent in the promise itself; it is not the afterthought of a later time, contrived for the obviating of difficulties. Whoever at the outset understood the promise at all must necessarily have understood it in this way.

It might occur to any one as significant that these passages employ the word "seed," a collective noun in the singular, to denote Abraham's descendants for the never ending time to come — never any plural noun, such as "sons," for example.* Presumably this is not

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"The one born in thy house or bought with thy money shall surely be circumcised, and my covenant shall be in your flesh for a covenant of eternity" (xvii. 13).

"And thou shalt call his name Isaac, and I will establish my covenant with him, for a covenant of eternity to his seed after him" (xvii. 19).

"And I will give this land to thy seed after thee, a holding of eternity" (xlviii. 4).

"And he called there on the name of Yahaweh, God Eternal" (xxi. 33).

1. In the Hebrew the word is never used in the plural in the sense of posterity. The Aramaic sometimes pluralizes it when used in this sense (e.g. *Targ.* of Gen. iv. so), but in the promise passages follows the Hebrew usage, and uses the singular only. Sometimes, however, in the Aram~an dialects, the word "son" is used instead of seed li~ translating these passages.

accidental. The word thus chosen designates the whole line of Abraham*s descendants as a unit, and marks their whole future history, without limit of time, as a single movement. The expression is elastic, and not rigid. It is flexible for denoting either one person or many persons and it represents Abraham*s posterity as a unit, whether the thought be concerning one or concerning many. If the record had used the phrase, “the sons” of Abraham, that phrase would not have been thus flexible.

As this view might naturally suggest itself to any one, so it actually suggested itself to the apostle Paul, His argument in Galatians is to the effect that the word used in Genesis contemplates the descendants of Abraham as a unit, the Christ being the dominant part of the unit. His reasoning is scholarly and correct, though it is not what a good many understand it to be.¹

1 “To Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed—which is Christ.” “What then is the law ? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made” (Gal. iii. 16,19).

These words are often cited as an instance of rabbinical misinterpretation by Paul. They would be so if his argument were that the word is in the singular number, and therefore refers to the one person Christ, to the exclusion of the descendants of Abraham in general. But, as we have seen, this is not the nature of Paul*s argument. He argues from the fact that the scriptural author uses a collective noun in the singular, instead of some plural noun which he might have used, to designate the descendants of Abraham, and thus indicates that the “seed,” from Isaac to the end, is to be thought of as a unit. Then Paul counts Jesus Christ as preeminently this unit, but not to the exclusion of the other members of it. And of course Paul is correct, provided his estimate of the greatness of Jesus is correct.

Note that Paul here presents the dual relation of the seed to the promise, as we have above alluded to it. In this passage, Christ the seed is the benefit promised; while the descendants of Abraham, both lineal and spiritual, are the seed to whom the benefit is promised. And

II. Two particularly important problems connect themselves with this presentation as made in Genesis. The first of these concerns the critical character of the presentation itself. The second concerns the contemporary understanding of it.

I. In the first place, whatever may be one's personal point of view in a matter like this, one needs to look at it from the different points of view held by others. And on any critical theory now held, the views just stated as to the presentation made of the promise in Genesis have in them at least an important residuum of truth.

The older view is, of course, that the accounts in Genesis are at least virtually of Mosaic authorship, and that whatever they affirm as historical fact is something that actually occurred. On this theory the statements in Genesis concerning the promise-doctrine have the simplicity and strength of pure fact. Certain critical theories now prevalent teach that Moses wrote nothing that has come down to us; that our book of Genesis is a conglomeration, produced in different centuries long after Moses; that the earliest parts of it were based on oral legends, and confuse fact with fiction; that the writers of the later parts deliberately imported into the narrative the ideas of their own times.

The difference between these two views is not unimportant. It is especially to be considered because of the attitude of the men of the New Testament. No one doubts that they held essentially to what has just been described as the older view. I know of no sufficient reason for thinking that they were mistaken. Nevertheless

if any one finds in this a confusion of thought, at least the thought is intelligible when we recall Paul's habit of mystically identifying Christ with believers.

it is worth while to inquire what the promise-doctrine in Genesis becomes on the basis of the other view. The question is not, notice, what the scholars of the so-called Modern View teach concerning the promise, or whether they have taken enough interest in it to formulate a doctrine. We ask, rather: What is the logical bearing of the recent critical theories on the promise-doctrine as presented in Genesis?

Our conclusions as above reached do not depend entirely on any one view as to the inspiration or the critical or historical character of the Pentateuch. If one holds that this literature is ancient and is genuinely historical, these are propositions to be affirmed on their own merits; but we are not compelled to argue them as preliminary to our study of the messianic doctrine in Genesis. Our interpretation is not tied by any logical necessity to this view of the case. The most important elements in it stand unimpeached even if one goes far in accepting the opinion that the book of Genesis is of late origin and of doubtful historicity. On this basis the Genesis presentation of the promise becomes greatly emaciated, but that in it which is most essential survives.

It is obvious that the view we have taken of the promise depends not at all on the question of authorship, provided the recorded facts are correct. Supposing the record to be true, it is so whether made by Moses or by others. If any one holds that it was written after the exile, but that it is authentic history, we have no need, for our present purpose, to argue the matter with him. If the history of the promise given to Abraham and repeated to Isaac and Jacob be authentic, that is all we need. So far as our present use of it is concerned, it makes no difference when the history was

written, provided only it is true history. The argument depends on the facts, and not on the person who recorded them.

This point, however, is not very important, because most persons who deny the early origin of Genesis deny also its historical truthfulness. A more important thing is that we may in thought separate this theological doctrine concerning the promise from the external details which the narrative connects with it. I do not care to make the obvious point that one might find the doctrine to be theologically true, even though he regarded its literary setting as fiction. A different point is that the fact of this doctrine being known and taught in Israel in the earliest times does not necessarily depend on the historicity of the details. It follows that the most important parts of our position might remain intact, even if one held that there are such uncertainties concerning the authorship of Genesis as to cast doubt upon the facts there recorded. Suppose one should even go to the extreme in this, counting the narratives in Genesis as not history at all, but as fiction written for the purpose of theological teaching; at least, the theological doctrine is there — the doctrine that Yahaweh anciently chose Israel to himself for his own people, that Israel might be his channel of blessing to all the populations of the earth. Even those who question the historicity of the records cannot question the fact that this teaching concerning the promise is one of the ancient doctrines of the religion of Yahaweh, dating as far back as that religion can be traced.

The scholars who analyze the hexateuch into documents hold that a good deal of the matter in Genesis concerning the promise, including one or more of the

five repetitions of it, are from the writings which they designate J or E, that is, from the very earliest of the written sources of the Old Testament.¹ From their point of view it may not be a fact that the ancestor of the Israelitish nation actually received a divine call with this promise to mankind in it, but it is a fact that the earliest prophets whose teachings are now extant taught that he received such a call. That is, this idea of the matter was in existence in Israel from the earliest times concerning which we have information.

Other parts of the matter connected with the promise, these scholars attribute to the sections of Genesis which they regard as of later authorship. The logical inference from this is that when the alleged later writers in Genesis came to deal with the writings of their predecessors, they were so impressed with this promise-doctrine, as they found it there, that they enlarged upon it, and emphasized it by much repetition.

Whatever critical view we take, therefore, we are confronted with this immensely important fact, — that at the very beginning of the recorded history of the religion of Israel the prophets were teaching this promise-doctrine, the doctrine that Yahaweh was in communication with mankind through Abraham and his seed, and that through them he had promised distinguished blessing to all nations. They were teaching that this had been the supreme fact in Israel from the

¹ These scholars differ much as to matters of detail, The *Hexateuch* attributes Gen. xii. 3 and xxviii. 14 to J; and xxii. 18, xxvi. 4 to a supplementer of JE; and xviii. 8 to a J supplementer later than JE. Driver everywhere assigns more to J and E without qualification than do the critics who analyze more minutely than he. Ball, in the Polychrome Bible, shows a tendency to assign the promise passages to late supplementer.

time when Israel had his beginning in Abraham. They were teaching that this was what the seed of Abraham was for, that it was for this that Yahaweh had made them his own people.

2. In the second place, we ask the question: What was the contemporary understanding of this doctrine?

We have gone over the record of the patriarchal times. It is the record of an eternal covenant, made by an eternal God with Abraham and his seed to eternity, signalized by the change of name from Abram to Abraham, having the nature of a promise, and having its principal force in the statement that in the seed of Abraham all mankind is to be blessed. The passages that give this record are not one or a few, but many. The book of Genesis so persists in repeating declarations of this sort as to make it evident that they are regarded as the utterance of a political and religious doctrine of the highest importance. This doctrine is reiterated at every turn of the narrative. It is brought into connection with each stage of the lives of the patriarchs. It is treated as the key to all the historical and biographical statements that are made.

This is the record of that which, in the New Testament and in Christian tradition, is referred to as messianic prediction, or, to speak more correctly, as messianic doctrine. How was this doctrine understood by the men to whom it first came? As the knowledge of it existed in their minds, what did it mean?

Assuming that the history is authentic, what did the contemporaries of Abraham understand to be the meaning of the promise? Or, assuming the standpoint of the so-called Modern View, what did the Israelites of the century before Hosea understand to be the meaning of the promise?

We do not ask, observe, how Abraham or Jacob or others who may have had prophetic gifts understood the matter; whether they saw all that we think we see in the revelation that was made through them. As men commonly estimate the prophets, we have no means of knowing to what extent their knowledge may have been modified by special inspiration. It has been generally believed that Deity may have given them a far-reaching foresight of the future. It was not beyond the power of the divine Spirit to enable Abraham to look forward and see every incident in the personal life of Jesus. But we have no information as to how far such inspiration was granted to the patriarchs and prophets, and it is better not to let such an uncertain element enter into our study. And on the other hand it would be of no account to ask how the promise seemed to unsympathetic persons, who took no interest in it. The proper question to ask is how it seemed (or, if you hold the other view, how the prophets who first taught it thought it seemed) to uninspired but devout and intelligent persons of the patriarchal times. How did it seem, for example, to Eliezer of Damascus, or to some other circumcised servant of Abraham, who had received just such information as we now find in Genesis and no more?

Necessarily, he found in it an element of prediction. In the uttering of it something was foretold. Every promise is a prediction. This promise was the foretelling of something that should happen to the posterity of Abraham and to mankind for ages to come, to time unlimited. From the time when it was first given it was doubtless thought of as something by which future ages would

be able to test God's ability to reveal coming events. Those who first heard it might reflect that in no long time men would begin to verify this miracle of fulfilled prediction, and that the verifications would thereafter continue to be made, eternally. This would make the promise the greater in their estimation. In this aspect of it, it would stir their imaginations, and set them to looking forward..

The fulfilment of the promise hitherto, if it has had one, has been accomplished in the history of Israel; and, according to the claim of the men of the New Testament, that which is greatest in the history is that which has entered in and through Jesus Christ. Apart from miraculous inspiration, however, there is no reason to think that a contemporary of Abraham would form in his mind a distinct picture of the details that have entered into the history. He would have no detailed expectation, for example, of a person living and dying. in Palestine, many centuries in the future, and doing there the things that Jesus did. His thought would contain no materials for constructing beforehand personal biographies of Moses or David or Jesus, or for constructing accounts of . Israel's ancient conquests, or of the dispersion among the nations, or of Israel's modern glories won in finance and art and learning and statesmanship. If this is what you mean by prediction, or by messianic prediction, then there is none of it in Genesis.

Nevertheless the promise is essentially and necessarily predictive. Its devout though uninspired contemporary could not help seeing it to be so. As it was for eternity, he would expect that the events included under it would still be in progress, whatever their nature, hundreds of years in the future. If he happened to fix his mind on the date that we now designate as 28 A.D., he would be

certain that the descendants of Abraham would then be living, would be in relations with the land of promise, would be in some form carrying forward God's plan of blessing for men. There would be nothing to exclude from his conception such facts as those concerning Jesus. We need not take the trouble to say how far the first promulgators of the promise understood the contents of the messianic doctrine that was revealed through them; how far they had foresight of the future, or knew the ways in which Yahaweh's plan for the nations was to be carried out. At least they regarded themselves as cognizant of the fact in general; they understood enough to make them see that Yahaweh's choice of Israel brought responsibilities upon themselves and their generation.

It is worth while to note, at this point, that the men of the New Testament, in all that they say concerning the promise to Abraham, do not claim that it was predictive in any other sense than that just indicated.

Probably, however, the predictive aspect of the promise-doctrine was not greatly emphasized by the earliest But rather as teachers and recipients of it. In the main, the promise was to them of the nature of doctrine religious doctrine. The book of Genesis presents it as a matter of practical preaching, rather than as prediction. The ostensible purpose is to give information bearing on conduct, rather than to make known things to come. As the teachings of the New Testament give the promise a central position, so it is in Genesis the central and commanding article of theological dogma. Its earliest student found in it a great religious fact, holding the same place in his theology that the fact of Christ holds in ours, something to be believed and taught and practised for purposes of current

living; a doctrine that could be preached, and made pivotal in all attempts at religious persuasion.

The thought of sin and of redemption is basal in all religions. In both the New Testament and the Old it underlies messianic doctrine at every point. It characterizes the narratives in Genesis, and it connects itself with the promise; though perhaps by implication rather than by direct statement. The men to whom it first came were conscious of being sinners. However crude their ideas of sin may or may not have been, they had this consciousness. To them the promise was something that looked forward into the future, and was for eternity; but it was also for the present. They themselves were of the tribe of Abraham, and they were entitled to their present share in that which had been promised. In short, the promise constituted for them just such a basis for faith and for moral and spiritual character as the Christian of to-day claims that he possesses in Christ.

As thus explained, the promise was to these earliest recipients and teachers of it something immeasurably more than mere prediction, though its predictive value is not thereby diminished. It was spiritual bread for them to feed upon. Accepting the promise for just what lies in its terms, irrespective of the contents with which future history might fill it, it would serve the purposes of practical faith and spiritual nourishment. A person who had some idea of the infinite personality of God; who held that God had purposes of blessing to the whole human race, and had laid upon himself and the family to which he belonged both the honor and the responsibility of guarding and transmitting this grace, had a theology that would serve the purposes of an evangelical faith. Independently of the question

how minutely he understood the details of God's plan, he had a good intellectual basis for moral and spiritual character.

How could one better influence Abraham's tribe and their descendants than by indoctrinating them with this truth? by making them feel that they were God's chosen people, chosen for the benefit of all the nations? by awakening within them the religious experiences which this truth ought to awaken? They might thus be led to faith and repentance and hope and love and obedience; might be so brought under the power of these gracious truths that they should thereby be comforted in sorrow, restrained from yielding to temptation, nerved to fidelity in times of testing.

What is said in the book of Genesis concerning the blessing of Abraham certainly includes prediction; but it is essentially not prediction but instruction. The very core of the book is the affirmation that Abraham and his posterity are eternally God's peculiar people, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the nations. This teaching is ethically lofty, but it is not recondite nor obscure. It is level to the comprehension of even a barbarous intellect. Any man who wanted to do right could understand what it meant, and could feel the persuasive power of it. It was the heart of the theology of Israel from the time of the earliest recorded doings of the prophets. The New Testament writers are correct in finding it in the old record, and correct in identifying it with the gospel which they themselves preached. Paul made no mistake when he spoke of the gospel "given beforehand to Abraham."