

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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CHAPTER 8

Genesis 12:1–3: A Key to Interpreting the Old Testament?

It is perhaps unusual for a book within the Old Testament to have one particular text that can be regarded as a possible interpretative key to the book as a whole, and even to the Old Testament as a whole. Yet such a case has been made in relation to God’s call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed [or: by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves].”

The intrinsic significance of this passage is not in doubt. For its context makes it a bridge between God’s dealings with the world in general in Genesis 1–11 and his dealings with the patriarchs in particular in Genesis 12–50. These are also words on the lips of God, which clearly introduce and frame the story of Abraham that follows.

Enormous significance is attached to this passage by Paul, who cites part of it, together with Genesis 15:6, in Galatians 3:6–9:

Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” so, you see, those who believe are the descendants

of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

Paul’s reading of God’s promise as constituting, in effect, the gospel to the nations, and his correlative linkage of “blessing” with “justification” and “faith” in the light of Genesis 15:6, are perhaps bold, but “can justly claim to realize something of the semantic potential of a complex and polysemic text.”¹ It is unarguably a weighty reading of Genesis 12:3.

A CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO GENESIS 12:1–3

In the general history of Christian interpretation, my sense is that little special attention has been given to Genesis 12:1–3, though one finds, of course, the expected reaffirmations and reworkings of Paul’s construal.² In the twentieth century, however, the passage comes to have renewed significance, especially through the work of Gerhard von Rad, who takes it as a key to the theological work of the Yahwist. Von Rad gives great weight to its narrative context in Genesis 1–11:

The Yahwistic narrator has told the story of God and man from the time mankind began, and this story is characterized on the

¹ So claims Francis Watson in his important analysis of Paul’s reading of Genesis 12:3, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 183–93 (183).

² So, for example, the Fathers seem primarily to have been interested in Genesis 12:1–3 in terms of its implications for a moral and spiritual journey from sin toward virtue (Mark Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12–50*, ACCS:OT 2 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002], 1–4).

human side by an increase in sin to avalanche proportions. . . . This succession of narratives, therefore, points out a continually widening chasm between man and God. But God reacts to these outbreaks of human sin with severe judgments. . . . Thus at the end of the primeval history a difficult question is raised: God's future relationship to his rebellious humanity, which is now scattered in fragments. Is the catastrophe of ch. 11.1–9 final? . . . The Yahwistic narrator shows something else along with the consequences of divine judgment . . . in all the hardship of punishment, God's activity of succor and preservation was revealed. . . . We see, therefore (already in primeval history!), that each time, in and after the judgment, God's preserving, forgiving will to save is revealed, and "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). . . .

This consoling preservation, that revelation of God's hidden gracious will, is missing, however, at one place, namely, at the end of the primeval history. The story about the Tower of Babel concludes with God's judgment on mankind; there is no word of grace. The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in shrill dissonance, and the question we formulated above now arises even more urgently: Is God's relationship to the nations now finally broken; is God's gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever? . . .

Our narrator *does* give an answer, namely, at the point where sacred history begins. Here in the promise that is given concerning Abraham something is again said about God's saving will and indeed about a salvation extending far beyond the limits of the covenant people to "all the families of the earth" (ch. 12.3). . . .

From the multitude of nations God chooses a man, looses him from tribal ties, and makes him the beginner of a new nation and the recipient of great promises of salvation. What is promised to Abraham reaches far beyond Israel; indeed, it has universal meaning for all generations on earth. Thus that difficult question about God's relationship to the nations is answered, and precisely where one least expects it. At the beginning of the way into an emphatically exclusive covenant-relation there is already a word about the end of this way, namely, an allusion to a final, universal unchaining of the salvation promised to Abraham. Truly flesh and blood did not inspire this view beyond Israel and its saving relation to God! With this firm

linking of primeval history and sacred history the Yahwist indicates something of the final meaning and purpose of the saving relation that God has vouchsafed to Israel.³

In von Rad's reading, Genesis 12:3 becomes a key to both Genesis and the Old Testament as a whole. His choice of language ("truly flesh and blood did not inspire this view beyond Israel"), with its clear implication of the rightness of what is said as a result of divine inspiration (cf. Jesus' words to Peter in Matt 16:17), suggests that, for him, this sense of God's purposes extending beyond Israel could only have been articulated by Israel at some higher prompting that overcame instinctive human tendencies to appropriate the divine selfishly. His language about the universality of salvation envisioned in God's words to Abraham shows clearly that he is reading Genesis in the light of Paul. Indeed, part of the potency of von Rad's reading is that it can give one renewed appreciation for Paul's construal.

In his specific discussion of Genesis 12:3, von Rad naturally reaffirms this larger horizon of significance and offers detailed exegetical discussion of a possible difficulty: Is universal salvation really the meaning of the divine promise of blessing?

The question has been raised at vs. 2b and 3b whether the meaning is only that Abraham is to become a formula for blessing, that his blessing is to become far and wide proverbial (cf. Gen. 48:20). In favor of this conception (which reckons with a remnant of the magical-dynamic notion of blessing) one can refer to Zech. 8.13. It is, however, hermeneutically wrong to limit such a programmatic saying, circulating in such exalted style, to only *one* meaning (restrictively)... In Gen. 12.1–3 its effect is trivial in God's

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, rev. ed. OTL (London: SCM, 1972 [German 9th ed., 1972]), 152–54.

address which is solemnly augmented – completely so in the final strophe! The accepted interpretation must therefore remain. It is like a “command to history”. . . . Abraham is assigned the role of a mediator of blessing in God’s saving plan, for “all the families of the earth.” The extent of the promise now becomes equal to that of the unhappy international world . . . an idea that occurs more than once in the Old Testament. Both Isaiah (ch. 2.2–4) and Deutero-Isaiah have prophesied about this universal destiny of Israel. The unusual *nibr^{el}kū*, to which the Yahwist gives preference against the *hithpael* for this promise, can be translated reflexively (“bless oneself”); but the passive is also possible. . . .

This prophecy, which points to a fulfilment lying beyond the old covenant, was especially important to the retrospective glance of the New Testament witnesses. We find it cited in Acts 3.25f.; Rom. 4.13; Gal. 3.8,16.⁴

Although von Rad’s interpretation has not been without its critics, it has, unsurprisingly, been widely received as a model for Christian theological appropriation of the Old Testament.⁵

Claus Westermann, for example, differs from von Rad over various points of detail, but agrees about the general thrust of the text: “In any case, what 12:3b is saying is this: God’s action proclaimed in the promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth.”⁶ With regard to the classic crux of the verbal form in 12:3b, *nibrēkū*, the Niphal of *brk*, used here and also in other forms of the divine promise (Gen 18:18, 28:14), and its relation to those places

⁴ Ibid., 160–61.

⁵ Equally unsurprisingly, Jewish scholars have tended to be less impressed: most notably, in terms of general hermeneutics, Jon D. Levenson, “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” in his *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 33–61.

⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985 [German orig., 1981]), 152.

where the divine promise employs the Hithpael (Gen 22:18, 26:4) – hence, “be blessed” or “bless themselves”? – Westermann thinks that there is no real problem anyway:

In fact, the reflexive translation is saying no less than the passive.... When “the families of the earth bless” themselves “in Abraham,” i.e. call a blessing on themselves under the invocation of his name (as in Ps. 72:17, and even more clearly in Gen. 48:20), then the obvious presupposition is that they receive the blessing. Where one blesses oneself with the name of Abraham, blessing is actually bestowed and received.... There is then no opposition in content between the passive and reflexive translation.⁷

Alternatively, Brevard S. Childs, when discussing the meaning of Israel’s election, more than once alludes to Genesis 12:1–3. He never lingers to analyze or discuss in detail, presumably because the interpretation is not considered controversial: “Israel was indeed chosen ‘from all the families of the earth’ (Amos 3.2), but with the explicit purpose that all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12.3)”; “the theme of Israel’s redemptive role to the nations, first sounded in Gen. 12.1ff...”;⁸ “this relationship was toward the purpose of shaping this people into a holy and righteous vehicle by which to reconcile himself to the world (Gen. 12.1ff)”; “When the apostle Paul extended the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12.1ff.) to include the inheritance of the world (Rom. 4.13), he was only exploiting an interpretative direction which had long been represented in the canonical construal of the tradition.”⁹

In recent years many Christians have made von Rad’s construal their own, especially in relation to mission. Richard Bauckham, in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 92, 239.

⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM, 1992), 139, 445.

his *Bible and Mission*, speaks of “the blessing of the nations as the ultimate purpose of God’s call of Abraham”¹⁰ and draws out the wider significance of God’s call of Abraham (in conjunction with the call of Israel and of David):

Abraham, Israel and David are not sent out to evangelize the world. But . . . [they] make the church’s mission intelligible as a necessary and coherent part of the whole biblical metanarrative. They establish the movement from the particular to the universal that the church is called in its mission to embody in a particular form. They establish the purpose of God for the world that, again, the church is called to serve in mission to the world.¹¹

Comparable is Christopher J. H. Wright in his substantial book *The Mission of God*. Wright prefaces an extended discussion of Genesis 12:1–3, in which he draws heavily on von Rad and Westermann, with a look at Paul and Galatians 3:6–9 from which he concludes the following:

So the Gentile mission, Paul argued, far from being a betrayal of the Scriptures, was rather the fulfilment of them. The ingathering of the nations was the very thing Israel existed for in the purpose of God; it was the fulfilment of the bottom line of God’s promise to Abraham. Since Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and since the Messiah embodied in his own person the identity and mission of Israel, then to belong to the Messiah through faith was to belong to Israel.¹²

Indeed, Wright strikingly contends that

[t]he words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18–20, the so-called Great Commission, could be seen as a christological

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MN: Baker Academic, 2003), 28.

¹¹ Ibid., 46–47.

¹² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 2006), 194.

mutation of the original Abraham commission – “Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all the nations on earth will be blessed through you.”¹³

AN ALTERNATIVE READING OF GENESIS 12:1–3

So congenial is this interpretation to a Christian appropriation of the Old Testament and to furthering that sense of mission that is in any case intrinsic to Christian self-understanding, and so impressive is the roster of scholars who advance it, that it may seem churlish to query it. Nonetheless, for reasons of integrity, it is important to ask whether this is the only, or indeed the best, construal of the Genesis text. The relationship between exegetical precision and canonical frame of reference is finely balanced here.

Von Rad, Westermann, and Wright do to some extent, to be sure, acknowledge possible alternative construals of the idioms of blessing that are used. But in their judgment, these alternatives do not amount to much of a challenge, and the time-honored crux concerning *nibrékû* in fact has nothing hanging on it. This is mainly because of their strong sense of the overall thrust of the text, which is God’s concern for the needy world of Genesis 1–11. If the purpose of God’s call of Abraham is to bless the nations, then the best construal of the idioms of blessing is that which most contributes to this overall tenor of the divine words.

One reason for the absence of any significant alternative reading must surely be not just the attractiveness of von Rad’s construal but also the influence of his rhetoric, which is dismissive of an alternative. In the passage already cited, von Rad depicts an alternative construal of blessing as “trivial,” with the clear implication that the only way to give the divine words the interpretative weight that

¹³ Ibid., 213.

their context demands is to follow what he regards as “the accepted interpretation” that “must therefore remain.” In this he develops the rhetoric in his famous essay, “The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch,” which first advanced this construal of the Yahwist.¹⁴ There, von Rad raises the issue that Genesis 12:3b might “imply no more than that the name of Abraham will become a token used by non-Israelites with which to bless themselves,” and he indeed considers the issue insoluble “on the grounds of linguistic consideration alone.” He appeals confidently, however, to the context: “The main objection to so limited an interpretation of this text arises from the fact that it breaks the continuity between the primeval history . . . and the promise of redemption. The entire primeval history would at once sink to the level of a purely decorative addition to the work.” Indeed, the alternative is a “pale, attenuated meaning” that “detract[s] . . . from the whole point of the work.”¹⁵

Despite von Rad’s rhetoric, there is a readily available alternative reading. The critical question is, May the real concern of the divine speech be not the benefit of the nations but rather the benefit of Abraham? May the nations constitute the backdrop *in spite of whom* Abraham will become a great nation, rather than *for the sake of whom* Abraham will become a great nation?

God initially summons Abraham to leave his existing home and the security and identity of his family and clan to go to a land that he does not yet know (Gen 12:1). This could sound like a venture into danger and oblivion. So, God immediately follows up with

¹⁴ Gerhard von Rad, “The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch,” recently edited and reprinted in von Rad, *From Genesis to Chronicles: Explorations in Old Testament Theology*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 1–58, 243–49.

¹⁵ Ibid., 248n101 (for the first English edition see von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken [London: SCM, 1984], 166n107).

promises that take the form of a reassurance that, far from oblivion, Abraham will become a great and recognized nation (12:2). This reassurance is further developed through the promise that God will be with Abraham, so that others will experience blessing and curse according to their response to Abraham (12:3a). Indeed, this divine favoring of Abraham will be so great that it will be acknowledged by everyone everywhere (12:3b). Thus, if Abraham will but trust God, he can leave current security and identity behind in the confidence that greater security and identity lie ahead; if Abraham will relinquish now (12:1), he will receive in the future more than he has relinquished (12:2–3).

If one reads the text not from the perspective of Christian faith seeking Old Testament warrant for Christian universalism or mission, but from the imagined perspective of Abraham, and implicitly of the nation that descends from him, then it looks different. Those who respond to the costly call of God to leave behind what they have, and whose subsequent way of living will set them apart from their neighbors and perhaps provoke antagonism, do not regard a divine reassurance that God will bless them and give them positive recognition as in any way trivial. Rather, it engenders a hope that will sustain them through difficult times.

The Idiomatic Meaning of “Blessing”

Various idiomatic features support this reading in which the concern is assurance to Abraham. In the first place, one should hear a classic Jewish construal of Genesis 12:3b from Rashi’s commentary:

There are many Agadoth *concerning this* but the plain sense of the text is as follows: A man says to his son, “Mayest thou become as Abraham.” This, too, is the meaning wherever the phrase *wenibreku beka* “And in thee shall be blessed” occurs in Scripture, and the following example proves this: (Gen. XLVIII.20) *beke yebarek* “By

thee shall Israel bless their children saying, ‘May God make thee as Ephraim and Manasseh.’”¹⁶

That is, Abraham will become an object of admiration for others, a model of how people will want those whom they favor to become.

The question of the “right” translation of the Niphal verb *nibrēkû* remains probably insoluble on philological grounds.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it remains likely that the Niphal and Hithpael forms of blessing in the various divine promises do have the same meaning, primarily because the varying contexts of promise do not sufficiently indicate a reason for finding a different meaning, but also because elsewhere in Genesis one can find verbs whose Niphal and Hithpael look to be interchangeable.¹⁸ If this is so, then some form of reflexive sense is indicated, probably “pronounce blessings upon one another.”

Before discussing Genesis 12:3b any further, however, I should first note the likely sense of Genesis 12:2b, which concludes with Abraham’s becoming “a blessing.” Wright, for example, assumes the kind of sense that characterizes the English idiom of someone “being a blessing,” in that others are benefitted by them: Blessing here is a “command,” a “task,” and “the object of this blessing is at first unspecified.”¹⁹ Yet such a sense is rarely, if at all, attested in

¹⁶ M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silberman, eds., *The Pentateuch with the Commentary of Rashi: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Silbermann, 1972), 49.

¹⁷ The most thorough recent study of Genesis 12:3, which also probes the meanings of both Niphal and Hithpael stems, is Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context*, BZAW 332 (New York: de Gruyter, 2003). Grüneberg makes the best possible case, I think, for finding a different meaning in the Niphal and Hithpael forms of the divine promise and for construing *nibrēkû* in 12:3 as passive (176–90).

¹⁸ A prime example is *hbʾ* (hide), whose Hithpael in Genesis 3:8 appears to be interchangeable with its Niphal in 3:10.

¹⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 211, 201.

the Old Testament.²⁰ Rather, the regular idiom is that someone is a blessing or curse if something happens to them such that when people formulate blessings and curses, their name is regularly used as an example of the desired outcome. A clear example is Jeremiah 29:21–23:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name: I am going to deliver them into the hand of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, and he shall kill them before your eyes. And on account of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: “The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire.”

Comparable is Jeremiah 24:8–9:

But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad that they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth – a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.

Here, “all the kingdoms of the earth” – which idiomatically has a force comparable to “all the families of the earth” in Genesis 12:3b – will regard Zedekiah and the Judahites as exemplifying the kind of proverbial extremity that may be invoked on enemies: “May you become like Zedekiah/be a Zedekiah,” the converse of “may you become like Abraham.” Moreover, although in Jeremiah 29:21–23 the Judahites are envisaged as invoking YHWH to enact the curse, because YHWH is their God, there is no implication in Jeremiah 24:8–9 that all the kingdoms of the earth would likewise invoke

²⁰ Grüneberg concludes a discussion of this issue: “Thus *brkh* is not used to describe a person as a source of blessings” (*Abraham, Blessing and the Nations*, 121).

YHWH, because the biblical writers are well aware that nations other than Israel have allegiances to other deities and so should be presumed to invoke those deities in their pronouncements. That is, even if these other nations might recognize the fate of Zedekiah and the Judahites as brought about by YHWH, the Judahite deity, who had been offended, this recognition would not extend to substantive acknowledgement of YHWH as the deity to whom they were accountable and in whose name they should make their own pronouncements.

The sense of blessing in Genesis 12:2b, therefore, is surely the opposite of curse as just outlined, a sense precisely captured by Zechariah 8:13: “Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.” Von Rad’s depiction of the conceptuality here as “reckon[ing] with a remnant of the magical-dynamic notion of blessing” seems designed tacitly to downplay the significance of the text in a way that surely misrepresents the sense of a common idiom.²¹ And even if one agrees that “it is . . . hermeneutically wrong to limit such a programmatic saying, circulating in such exalted style, to only *one* meaning (restrictively),” it remains important to try to set out the likely sense within the Genesis context and to hear it in its own right.

In the light of this idiomatic usage, one can see that Westermann (explicitly followed by Wright)²² surely overinterprets the

²¹ Von Rad’s “magical-dynamic notion of blessing,” even in remnant form, is unwarranted in the light of speech-act theory, which shows that recognized social convention is what makes blessings valid. See Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings,” *JTS* 25 (1974): 283–99; reprinted in Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 53–67.

²² Wright, *The Mission of God*, 217–18.

implications of people pronouncing blessings whose sense is “Mayest thou become as Abraham.” Westermann says,

When “the families of the earth bless” themselves “in Abraham,” i.e. call a blessing on themselves under the invocation of his name (as in Ps. 72:17, and even more clearly in Gen. 48:20), then the obvious presupposition is that they receive the blessing. Where one blesses oneself with the name of Abraham, blessing is actually bestowed and received.

But *why* is it an “obvious presupposition . . . that they receive the blessing”? The idiomatic analogy to Genesis 12:3b is Jeremiah 24:8–9, where the invoking of the name of Zedekiah and the Judahites as a curse says nothing about either the efficacy of that invocation or the relationship of those invoking their name to the deity responsible for their condition; the point is entirely the paradigmatic condition of the one whose name is invoked. Moreover, any acknowledgment of Zedekiah’s and Judah’s deity on the part of all the kingdoms of the earth could be limited to recognizing that, within Israel’s frame of reference, what has happened to them should be ascribed to their deity, with no necessary implication that others who invoke the fate of Zedekiah and the Judahites appropriate that frame of reference for themselves. Correspondingly, if all the families of the earth pronounce blessings by Abraham, then they recognize and invoke Abraham as a model of desirable existence. Insofar as the identity of the deity responsible for Abraham’s condition comes into view, which the use of the blessing need not imply, then it would remain fully possible that what in Israel’s frame of reference is ascribed to YHWH could be expressed otherwise in a different frame of reference (e.g., “May Chemosh make you like Abraham”). In any case, the point, when Jeremiah envisions all the kingdoms of the earth invoking Zedekiah and the Judahites, is that their fate is paradigmatically awful, and the focus is strongly on Zedekiah and

the Judahites in that fate rather than on theological implications concerning the deity responsible.

Thus the supposition that those who invoke Abraham in blessing actually receive the blessing invoked is a non sequitur that goes well beyond the meaning of the Genesis text. The textual concern is to assure Abraham that he really will be a great nation, and the measure of that greatness is that he will be invoked on the lips of others as a model of desirability. The condition of other nations in their own right is not in view, beyond their having reason not to be hostile to Abraham.

The Significance of the Proposed Reading

It must be acknowledged that much in this reading is not novel. The distinctive element, if such there be, lies in the attempt to enter imaginatively into the possible significance of the divine speech for Abraham himself within the text. A comparable interpretation of the Abrahamic blessing is succinctly formulated by (among others) Gunkel in the famous third edition of his Genesis commentary.²³ Gunkel, however, offers an overall reading only in terms of the narrator's supposed historical location as a time when that of which the text speaks was considered to have been realized – a reading that is tacitly reductive, with a pejorative evaluation:

In the narrator's opinion these promises [viz., Gen 12:2–3] are also fulfilled in the present: Israel is now a very great, widely famed people... Israel considers itself to be very numerous, blessed and protected by God, very famous and praised among the nations. Fame-loving Israel often overvalued its reputation among the nations.²⁴

²³ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997 [3rd German ed., 1910]), 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 164–65.

Moreover, the proposed reading would in no way diminish the biblical mandate for Christian mission, which remains clear even if Genesis 12:1–3 is not part of it. Rather, the role for Genesis 12:1–3 in contemporary Christian appropriation would surely relate to the church’s self-understanding in a post-Christian Western culture that has largely become either indifferent or hostile to the biblical vision of God and life with God. God’s call to a lifestyle and understanding that may often be sharply countercultural can be costly, and temptations and pressures to assimilate are considerable. So, assurance of God’s sustaining and enabling of what he calls people to be and do remains necessary; and faithfulness within such a vocation may become attractive and desirable to those outside the church. I suggest that the New Testament counterpart to Genesis 12:1–3 is not the Great Commission, but rather Jesus’ assuring promise to Peter whose recognition of Jesus as Messiah constitutes the basis for the church: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION AS A CONTINUING TASK

Exegesis and Theology

If the argument for this alternative reading of Genesis 12:1–3 carries any weight, then what follows? Is this an example of a “right” interpretation that should replace a “wrong” interpretation? Indeed, is this a possible paradigmatic example of the dominant concern of modern biblical interpretation in historical-critical mode – the separating out of philology and history from ecclesial concerns or canonical context, the need to free exegesis from predetermining theological preconceptions so that the voice of the text may be heard in its own right?

For better or worse, life is not so simple. First and foremost, it is not so simple because it is fundamentally unhelpful to polarize philology/exegesis/the text in itself over against theology/presuppositions/ecclesial priorities, because all substantive interpretation involves an interplay between the biblical text and the questions one brings to it, questions that necessarily reflect the interpreter's own preconceptions and frame of reference.²⁵ On any reckoning it can often be a fine line between anachronistically imposing a mistaken sense on a biblical text in the light of later developments and being enabled by later developments to discern nuances and incipient tendencies in biblical texts that otherwise might have gone unnoticed.

Second, Paul's construal of Genesis 12:3, although informed by many factors, follows the Septuagint. Here, the Niphal verb *nibrēkû* is rendered by a passive *eneulogēthēsontai* ("they shall be blessed"), as are the other Niphal and Hithpael formulations of God's promise of blessing in Genesis. The precise sense of "in/by you" is unclear, but appears to be instrumental. So, Francis Watson comments, "For the [LXX] translator [of Gen 12:3], the calling and destiny of Israel is to bring blessing to the entire world, and his rendering seeks to bring this out as clearly as possible."²⁶ If Paul's biblical text already depicted Abraham as a *source* rather than a *model* of blessing, then the decisive move in terms of seeing Abraham's vocation as being for the sake of the nations had probably already been made prior to Paul. Since the Old Testament is read by the writers of the New Testament and by the Fathers for the most part in Greek, the Septuagint's rendering must be taken seriously by subsequent theology; and the relative merits of the Hebrew and

²⁵ See the discussion in Chapter 1.

²⁶ Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 184–85.

the Greek, where they differ, becomes an interesting and difficult question that is probably best approached on a case-by-case basis.

On Evaluating Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation

Third, even if I am unpersuaded by von Rad, this does not deny value to his work. Von Rad's original formulation of the significance of the Yahwist and Genesis 12:1–3 was in the context of 1930s Nazi Germany, and his specific situation was as a member of the Confessing Church working at the University of Jena, where National Socialist policies were strongly promoted.²⁷ In such a context, where the authorities degraded the Old Testament and denied any positive enduring significance to it, von Rad's work was a profound and imaginatively serious contribution; his argument for strong continuity between the Old and New Testaments is an argument that is intrinsic to Christian faith and was particularly timely as a Christian Old Testament scholar's response to Nazi ideology. By contrast, Gunkel's reading of God's call and promises as an example of Israel's rather inflated sense of self-importance would in no way have made any (would-be) Nazi or anti-Semite think twice. Good theological interpretation of the Old Testament is not

²⁷ See the eye-opening essay of Bernard M. Levinson and Douglas Dance, "The Metamorphosis of Law into Gospel: Gerhard von Rad's Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church," in *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament: Beiträge des Symposiums "Das Alte Testament und die Kultur der Moderne" anlässlich des 100. Geburtstags Gerhard von Rads (1901–1971)* Heidelberg, 18.–21. Oktober 2001, ed. Bernard M. Levinson and Eckart Otto, ATM 13 (Münster, Ger.: Lit Verlag, 2004), 83–110. Although Levinson and Dance focus on von Rad's work on Deuteronomy and do not discuss his work on the Yahwist and Genesis 12:1–3, their comment on the one may apply also to the other: "His analysis says less about Deuteronomy than it says about the situation in which he wrote" (85). See also Bernard M. Levinson "Reading the Bible in Nazi Germany: Gerhard von Rad's Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church," *Int* 62 (2008): 238–54.

necessarily that which might aspire to be recognized as correct in any time or any place; rather, part of its rightness may be *specific and contextual*, in its ability to articulate biblical priorities in relation to particular situations of need. To say this is not to prioritize relevance over accuracy, but rather to recognize, with the sociology of knowledge, that human understanding and insight depend on many factors other than pure reason and do not achieve finality in any one situation.

A Jewish–Christian Dimension

Fourth, one facet of the contemporary theological context that was not equally a facet of von Rad's context is the renewal of Jewish–Christian dialogue, together with a far more substantive presence of Jewish scholars within academic biblical study than was the case in von Rad's time. This should, at the very least, make for a greater sensitivity on the part of Christian interpreters to Jewish readings of Israel's scriptures. To be sure, the question of precisely how such sensitivity should operate, and what difference it should make, is still a matter of lively debate. Nonetheless, even if one wishes, as I do, to resist a neat bifurcation between the historical meaning of the ancient Israelite text in its own right and its theological appropriation in differing ways by differing contemporary Jewish and Christian communities – for the dialectics of understanding are more complex than such a model implies – it remains important that Christians should not inappropriately impose their preferred meanings on these ancient texts.

Interestingly, however, a concern to read Abraham's call by God as being for the sake of the nations is not simply a peculiarity of Christian Old Testament interpretation, courtesy of Paul, from which Jews simply disengage. A construal of Abraham as mediator of divine blessing to the nations is in fact also attested in Jewish

interpretation down the ages, as is Abraham as a model.²⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, in the Jewish Publication Society Torah commentary on Genesis, comments on the NJPSV translation of Genesis 12:3b (“and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you”) as follows:

This rendering understands Hebrew *ve-nivrekhu* as reflexive. People will take your own good fortune as the desired measure when invoking a blessing on themselves. A more likely translation of the verb is as a passive: “shall be blessed through – because of – you.” God’s promises to Abram would then proceed in three stages from the particular to the universal: a blessing on Abram personally, a blessing (or curse) on those with whom he interacts, a blessing on the entire human race.²⁹

Von Rad would hardly disagree! Prior to Sarna, the other two major twentieth-century Jewish commentators on Genesis, Benno Jacob and Umberto Cassuto, come out with not dissimilar renderings, which seems to be because each explicitly reads the text as anticipating the “universalism” of the Hebrew prophets.

Jacob, for example, construes the verb in 12:3b as reflexive, not passive, but still considers the text to depict a divine concern for the whole world:

It is a second world, which with Abraham is called into existence: the world of the blessing through people for people. Therein the most magnificent religious universalism comes to expression, which no prophet was able to exceed and which one (for example, Holzing-

²⁸ See Moshe Greenberg, “To Whom and for What Should a Biblical Commentator Be Responsible?” in Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 235–43, esp. 240.

²⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 89.

Gunkel) seeks in vain to diminish. Standing at the beginning of the history of Israel the Torah is completely aware of the end towards which it should proceed.³⁰

The idea that the culminating promise to Abraham is restricted in its concern to Abraham is, apparently, uncongenial. This appears to be so because of the wider context of scripture and Jewish tradition within which these commentators are operating. For even if Judaism has not characteristically understood itself in the kind of missionary terms that are intrinsic to Christianity, it has nonetheless regularly wanted to affirm that God's call of Israel not only is an end in itself that needs no further justification than the love of a parent for a child, but also is of potential moral and spiritual benefit to other nations. As Christians can feel constrained to reread Genesis 12:3 in the light of Christ and Christian faith, so Jews can feel a similar constraint in the light of full-orbed Jewish faith. Both in the dynamics of biblical interpretation, and in an understanding of their faith as being for the benefit of others, Jews and Christians can find that, for all their real differences, they have more common ground than has sometimes been supposed in the past.

³⁰ Benno Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (repr., New York: Ktav, 1974; orig., Berlin: Schocken, 1934), 339 (my translation). An English translation of Jacob's work was recently released: Benno Jacob, *Genesis: The First Book of the Bible*, trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: Ktav, 2007). For Umberto Cassuto's construal, see his *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964 [Hebrew orig., 1949]), 2:315.