GALATIANS 3:16:
WHAT KIND OF EXEGETE WAS PAUL?

C. JOHN COLLINS

Summary

This article aims to understand Paul's argument about 'seeds' and 'seed' in Galatians 3:16 — first, by discerning which text of Genesis lies behind it; and secondly, by using recent grammatical work on 'seed' in Hebrew to discern whether the Hebrew is collective or singular. The article concludes that Paul was using Genesis 22:18, which speaks of an individual offspring, and that he properly applied it to Jesus as a Messianic text.

Introduction

In Galatians 3:8 and 3:16 Paul claims that his mission and message to the Gentiles fulfill what Genesis had said about Abraham:

> [8] προϊδοῦσα δὲ ἡ γραφὴ ὅτι ἐκ πίστεως δικαιοῖ τὰ ἔθνη ὁ θεὸς προευηγγελίσατο τῷ Ἀβραὰμ ὅτι *ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν σοὶ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη* … [16] τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ. οὐ λέγει· *καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν*, ὡς ἐπὶ πολλῶν ἀλλ᾽ ὡς ἐφ᾽ ἑνός· *καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου*, ὅς ἐστιν Χριστός.
>
> [8] And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' … [16] Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ. (ESV)

The purpose of this study is to see if we can discern how Paul used these Old Testament passages. To do that, we will need first to discern just which text or texts he has alluded to; and then to consider what those passages mean in their context in Genesis. Then we will be able to see the relationship between their original meaning and Paul's application.

Paul's use of Genesis has provoked much discussion, because it is not immediately clear how he got his point from the texts he cited. For example, H.J. Schoeps declared Paul's argument to be 'both in

contradiction to the meaning of the word [*seed/offspring*] and to Biblical linguistic usage'; and one of Paul's defenders, Leonhard Goppelt, has still called Paul's approach 'clearly an artificial interpretation of the promise [in Genesis].' Others have sought to find parallels in Rabbinic exegesis, while still others have resorted to various other kinds of explanations.

I will begin by surveying how various writers have discussed Paul's hermeneutical approach here. It will not be necessary to offer extensive critique of them, however, because recent work on the Genesis 'offspring' texts opens the way to a more grammatically-oriented approach.

Survey of Interpretations of Paul's Hermeneutic

In this section I survey what authors have said about the way Paul handles the Genesis source, and how he found a Christological sense in it. Was Paul simply giving the 'true' reading of Genesis — and if so, could the original audience of that book have perceived this meaning? Or was Paul giving a kind of secondary sense, or re-interpretation, of the apparently collective noun in Genesis? And if so, was there a clear line from the historical sense of Genesis to the Christian meaning of the passages? Or was Paul just straining the grammar too far, yielding an artificial and invalid interpretation of the OT?

Traditionally, Christians have held that the way to understand Paul's hermeneutic in Galatians 3:16 is by supposing that Paul was giving the true meaning of Genesis. As Theodore of Mopsuestia put it,[1]

> The words *and to his offspring* are found to be strictly fulfilled in Christ in their straightforward sense, since he is Abraham's offspring by nature, as are all those who derive their stock from that source. … This promise is completely fulfilled in Christ in the light of the actual events.

Most of these writers do not say whether they think the original audience of Genesis could have seen what Paul did. Calvin, however, justifies the use of the 'seed' by noting that in Genesis 21:12 God

---

[1] Cited in M.J. Edwards, ed., *Galatians-Ephesians-Philippians* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1999), 44; see also Theophylact, *PG* 124, 344; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [original Latin 1548]); so, apparently, Chrysostom, *PG* 61, 654. B.M. Newman, 'Translating "seed" in Galatians 3.16, 19', *Bible Translator* 35:3 (July 1984) 334–37, argues that Paul's argument is that Christ is the sole heir to the Abrahamic promise.

makes a distinction between the offspring of Abraham, and that we find further narrowing as OT history proceeds.

In Lightfoot's 1865 commentary, however, we find a kind of typological approach — that is, Genesis had its historical meaning, regarding the descendants of Abraham, but this provides an analogy that enables us to understand Christ's place in God's plan. By this approach, Christ is the crystallization or supreme representative of Abraham's line. He wrote:[2]

> Doubtless by the seed of Abraham was meant in the first instance the Jewish people, as by the inheritance was meant the land of Canaan; but in accordance with the analogy of Old Testament types and symbols, the term involves two secondary meanings. *First*, … [in Christ] the race was summed up, as it were. … But *Secondly*; According to the analogy of interpretation of the Old Testament in the New, the spiritual takes the place of the natural.

N.T. Wright offers a development of this approach, proposing that 'seed' derives its individual sense from its collective one as 'family'. He writes:[3]

> We might suggest that the singularity of the 'seed' in v. 16 is not the singularity of an individual person contrasted with the plurality of many human beings, but the singularity of one *family* contrasted with the plurality of families which would result if the Torah were to be regarded the way Paul's opponents apparently regarded it.
>
> … It is therefore clear that, under certain circumstance, זרע and its regular translation σπέρμα could have a new singular sense, deriving from the regular collective one, of 'family'.
>
> … Here, as elsewhere, we meet Paul's use of Χριστός in a representative or corporate sense …, carrying the significance of the one 'in whom' the people of God is summed up.

Another kind of typical interpretation invokes the idea of 'corporate solidarity', which in some cases leads to something quite similar to the first kind of typology. E.E. Ellis vigorously defended Paul's argument, and explained it thus:[4]

---

[2]   J.B. Lightfoot, *St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Lynn: Hendrickson, 1981 [orig. 1865]) 143. See also L. Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982 [orig. German 1939]), 138; H.N. Ridderbos, *Galatians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 134; D. Guthrie, *Galatians* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 102 (apparently); R.A. Pyne, 'The "Seed," the Spirit, and the Blessing of Abraham', *BibSac* 152 (1995) 211–22, at 214–15 (combining this with corporate solidarity, see below).

[3]   N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 162–68.

[4]   E.E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 70–73. See also R.N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19), 106–107; R.N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1990), 132; B.A. Demarest & C. Brown, 'Seed, Plant, Grass, Flower,

> Although the seed of Abraham meant the Jewish people, this concept had a peculiar significance for Pauline and NT thought. Israel was embodied in Messiah, and the Christian community formed the remnant of true Israel.
>   … To view Messiah in a corporate sense is not contrary to Paul or the OT. The ἐν Χριστῷ relationship and the Adam–Christ typology involve a solidarity concept that may well be present in this passage also.

Still a third kind of typical approach has been offered: namely that Paul has re-interpreted the Genesis text in the light of his Christian faith. As R.Y.K. Fung put it,[5]

> [Paul] is well aware of the collective sense of *sperma* (Greek) or *zeraʿ* (Hebrew) in the Genesis passages; his identification of the 'issue' spoken of in the promise as the Christ of history is not derived from a direct exegesis of the OT texts, but rather from an interpretation of them in the light of the Christ-event.

A fourth kind of typical approach — if we may call it that — is to suggest that Paul has taken a generic singular in Genesis and applied it to an individual, in a way that is represented in other Rabbinic sources. The best-known of these attempts is David Daube's essay, 'The interpretation of a generic singular,' in his *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*.[6] He appeals to places where Rabbis had seen in the Genesis land promises a specific seed, namely Isaac; and also to other places where Rabbis took Isaac as prefiguring the Messiah. Max Wilcox added to this the observation that in Rabbinic sources we find a similar phenomenon with the 'seed of David' — that is, a collective

---

Harvest', in C. Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 3:521–25; B. Byrne, *'Sons of God' — 'Seed of Abraham'* (Analecta Biblica 83; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979), 159 n. 91. The connection between this approach and the first kind of typology is seen in the fact that Pyne, 'The "Seed"', combines the two.

[5] R.Y.K. Fung, *Galatians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 155. See also E. De Witt Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921), 182; M.-J. LaGrange, *Épitre aux Galates* (Études Bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1950), 78; A. Viard, *Saint Paul, Épitre aux Galates* (Sources Bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1964), 73; H.D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), 157 (so it seems); D. Lührmann, *Galatians* (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis; Fortress, 1992 [original German 1988]), 69 (so it seems); F.J. Matera, *Galatians* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 126–27; J.L. Martyn, *Galatians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 340.

[6] D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990 [originally 1956]), 438–44; this essay was first published in *JQR* 35 (1945). Daube (439) also mentions a Mishnaic text, Shabbat 9:2 (of uncertain date), which draws attention to a Bible passage, Isaiah 61:11, which uses 'seed*s*' not 'seed'. But, as Daube also notes, on further inspection the Mishnaic text does not provide a close parallel — among other things, its plural 'seeds' uses a different Hebrew word (*zērûaʿ*, 'what is sown') than does its singular 'seed' (*zeraʿ*).

use and a specific one (Solomon). Hence Messiah is another seed of Abraham, and another seed of David.[7]

The traditional approach — that Paul was giving the true sense of Genesis — and the four typological approaches outlined here all agree in trying to justify Paul's usage. They differ in how they think Paul got his argument: the traditional view sees Paul as giving the primary, or divinely intended, meaning, while the typological views see him as providing a secondary meaning.

Another approach, however, denies that Paul was justified at all in his argument. H.J. Schoeps is well-known for declaring that Paul's appeal to the singular in Galatians 3:16 is 'both in contradiction to the meaning of the word and to Biblical linguistic usage', and is 'naturally contrary to the sense of the [Genesis] text which refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, thus to Israel'.[8] This is not a new opinion: earlier Henry St John Thackeray had agreed with previous scholars that Paul's argument was 'untenable'. He did not want to discard Paul altogether, though; he wrote,[9]

> Though the form of argument used cannot be regarded as satisfactory, the truth conveyed by it that the promises to Abraham pointed to something beyond the possession of Canaan need not be disputed.

Many of the authors that have justified Paul in terms of typology express doubts that sound similar to Thackeray's observation.

---

[7]   M. Wilcox, 'The Promise of the "Seed" in the New Testament and the Targumim', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 5 (1979) 2–20. See also F. Mußner, *Der Galaterbrief* (HTK; Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 238–40; F.F. Bruce, *Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 172–73; J.D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 184–85. This approach also finds acceptance in the Hebrew New Testament with notes published by the Bible Society in Israel (1991); see p. 351 n. 16. Paul Billerbeck, *Die Briefe des Neuen Testaments und die Offenbarung Johannis* (Strack-Billerbeck, vol. 3; München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1926), 553, found no examples in the oldest Rabbinic literature.
[8]   H.J. Schoeps, *Paul: The theology of the Apostle in the light of Jewish religious history* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961 [German original 1959]), 181, 234. At 181 n. 3 he says, 'The exegesis is allegorical in the sense that it no longer takes into account the original meaning of the words and has overstepped the limits set to allegory in rabbinical hermeneutics.'
[9]   H. St John Thackeray, *The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought* (London & New York: Macmillan, 1900). The first quotation is from p. 70, citing Meyer's commentary; the second is from p. 71.

Paul's Sources in Genesis

The quotation in Galatians 3:8, at first glance, looks as if it is an adaptation of Genesis 12:3 (ESV '… in you all the families of the earth will be blessed'). Further consideration shows that the situation is more complicated than that. Let us start by making a table containing all the 'blessing' texts in Genesis — that is, the five places where the Hebrew 'bless' (ברך) is used in the niphal or hithpael. In each of these the LXX has ἐνευλογέω in the future passive.[10]

Verse	MT	LXX
Gn. 12:3	ואברכה מברכיך ומקללך אאר ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה	καὶ εὐλογήσω τοὺς εὐλογοῦντάς σε καὶ τοὺς καταρωμένους σε καταράσομαι καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν σοὶ πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς
Gn. 18:18	ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום ונברכו בו כל גויי הארץ	Ἀβραὰμ δὲ γινόμενος ἔσται εἰς ἔθνος μέγα καὶ πολὺ καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν αὐτῷ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς
Gn. 22:18	והתברכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ עקב אשר שמעת בקלי	καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς ἀνθ' ὧν ὑπήκουσας τῆς ἐμῆς φωνῆς
Gn. 26:4	והרביתי את־זרעך ככוכבי השמים ונתתי לזרעך את כל־הארצת האל והתברכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ	καὶ πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ δώσω τῷ σπέρματί σου πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν ταύτην καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς
Gn. 28:14	והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ ופרצת ימה וקדמה וצפנה ונגבה ונברכו בך כל־משפחת האדמה ובזרעך	καὶ ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς ἡ ἄμμος τῆς γῆς καὶ πλατυνθήσεται ἐπὶ θάλασσαν καὶ ἐπὶ λίβα καὶ ἐπὶ βορρᾶν καὶ ἐπ' ἀνατολάς καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν σοὶ πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου
Ps. 72:17[11]	יהי שמו לעולם לפני־שמש ינון שמו ויתברכו בו כל־גוים יאשרוהו	ἔστω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ εὐλογημένον εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας πρὸ τοῦ ἡλίου διαμενεῖ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ καὶ εὐλογηθήσονται ἐν αὐτῷ πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη μακαριοῦσιν αὐτόν

---

10 The Hebrew verb forms rendered by the passive of ἐνευλογέω are niphal and hithpael, which have often been taken as reflexive; hence the RSV of Gn. 12:3, 'by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves'. But the NRSV has returned to the traditional passive; for a justification of the passive in these passages, see B. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §23.6.4. It is quite possible that there was a kind of reflexive nuance in the Hebrew, such as 'they shall find blessing for themselves' — but that is adequately represented by the passive.

11 Using Qere *yinnôn* instead of Ketiv *yānîn*.

The first three words of Paul's citation, ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν σοί ('they shall be blessed in you'), match Genesis 12:3 in the LXX (see also 28:14); but the next three, πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ('all the nations'), do not: Genesis 12:3 has πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαί ('all the tribes'). The 'blessing' passages from LXX Genesis vary in how they designate the Gentiles: πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαί (12:3; 28:14), and πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (18:18; 22:18; 26:4), in both cases followed by the genitive τῆς γῆς ('of the earth').[12] Hence it appears that Paul's source in Galatians 3:8 is a composite, mixing terms from both sets of these LXX passages.[13]

Galatians 3:16 may show us whether one member of the second set (18:18; 22:18; 26:4) is more in view than the others. There Paul refers to promises made to Abraham and *to his offspring* (τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ);[14] he 'quotes' a text with καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου 'and to your offspring'. Let us suppose for a moment that Paul was thinking of a passage in Genesis that had some of these words in them: either ἐπαγγελία ('promise') or the dative form τῷ σπέρματί σου ('to your offspring'), or both. We can eliminate ἐπαγγελία and the cognate verb ἐπαγγέλλω from our search, since these do not occur in the LXX of Genesis, nor are they used elsewhere in the LXX with respect to Abraham.

The dative of the noun σπέρμα ('seed, offspring') occurs 16 times in LXX Genesis, in 15 verses: 9:9; 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8, 19; 22:18; 24:7; 26:3, 4; 28:4, 13, 14; 35:12; 48:4. If we narrow this down to those that have a bearing on Abraham, we have 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8, 19; 22:18; 24:7. Of these, most deal with the giving of the land to Abraham's offspring: 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 24:7.

---

[12] These differences correspond to the Hebrew, *kol-mišpĕḥôt hāʾădāmâ* (12:3; 28:14) and *kōl gôyê hāʾāreṣ* (18:18; 22:18; 26:4). Note how the LXX of Ps. 72:17 has both expressions, adding πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαί to the 'blessing' phrase, even though MT has simply 'they' as subject of the verb.

[13] The composite nature of this citation is noted in the Göttingen Septuagint at Gn. 12:3, which has a note on πᾶσαι, directing the reader to Gal. 3:8 and Gn. 22:18. See J.W. Wevers, ed., *Genesis*, volume I of *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graeca* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 150.

[14] D. Kuske, 'Exegetical brief: Galatians 3:16 — Concerning his seed', *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 97:2 (Spring 2000), 127–28, suggests that the dative is a dative of reference: the promises were spoken 'in reference to Abraham and his offspring.' He objects to the idea of anything being spoken directly *to* the offspring (Christ), who was not there. His argument founders on the construction λέγειν + dative, which we expect to involve 'speaking *to*' someone — but he does helpfully warn us not to be unduly literalistic. Could not the promise have been spoken to the offspring *through* Abraham?

A number of authors — with Lightfoot and Daube supplying the main arguments — suppose that a passage like 13:15, which has καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου explicitly, must be the source of Paul's dative in Galatians 3:16. Lightfoot makes the following case:[15]

> A question has been raised as to the particular passage to which St. Paul refers. In answering this question it should be observed, (1) That the words must be spoken to Abraham himself, and not to one of the later patriarchs; (2) That καὶ must be part of the quotation. These considerations restrict the reference to Gen. xiii.15, xvii.8, either of which passages satisfies these conditions. It is true that in both alike the inheritance spoken of refers primarily to the possession of the land of Canaan, but the spiritual application here is only in accordance with the general analogy of New Testament interpretation.

Daube rejects the association of Galatians 3 with passages such as Genesis 22:18 (or any other in which blessing will come to the world through Abraham's offspring) and insists on Genesis 13:15 etc. as the source, since 'the expression used [in Gn. 22:18] is "in thy seed", not "to thy seed".'[16]

Those who favour Genesis 13:15 and 17:8 as the source follow these arguments.[17] Other authors have taken Genesis 22:18 as the source, but without much argument.[18] One author who provides an argument for Genesis 22:18 as Paul's source is A.M. Buscemi, who thinks we should find a connection between Galatians 3:8 and 16, and hence looks for a 'blessing text' (since Gn. 18:18 and 22:18 supplied some wording for Gal. 3:8).[19]

In my judgment, the land promise texts (such as Gn. 13:15; 17:8) are not an encouraging line for investigation, because (1) the local nature of the promised land would not easily serve Paul's argumentative purpose for the Gentiles; and (2) none of these is in the list of 'blessing' texts. The comment of F.F. Bruce is telling: 'The

---

[15] Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 142.

[16] Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 438.

[17] Compare Betz, *Galatians*, 156; Bruce, *Galatians*, 171–72; Burton, *Galatians*, 181, 507; Byrne, *'Sons of God'*, 159 n. 90, 160; Dunn, *Galatians*, 183; Fung, *Galatians*, 155; LaGrange, *Galates*, 76; Lührmann, *Galatians*, 69; Martyn, *Galatians*, 339; Matera, *Galatians*, 127; Mußner, *Der Galaterbrief*, 238; Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 133; Viard, *Galates*, 73. Interestingly enough, Mußner also points to the presence of κληρονομέω in Gn. 22:17 (which, connected with other factors, points strongly to Gn. 22:17–18 as the source).

[18] Compare Billerbeck, *Die Briefe*, 553 (listing 13:15; 17:8; 22:18); Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 152; Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 106 n. 57 (listing many texts); Schoeps, *Paul*, 181.

[19] A.M. Buscemi, 'Gal 3,8–14: La Genti benedette in Abramo per la fede', *Antonianum* 74:2 (1999) 195–225, at 207–208.

reference to the land, however, plays no part in the argument of Galatians.'[20] This means that we would be better off looking for another candidate; if we do not find one, then we can decide to endure these problems.[21]

Therefore the strongest candidates for Paul's allusion are Genesis 17:19 and 22:18. The Greek of 17:19 reads,

> εἶπεν δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῷ Ἀβραὰμ ναὶ ἰδοὺ Σαρρὰ ἡ γυνή σου τέξεταί σοι υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ στήσω τὴν διαθήκην μου πρὸς αὐτὸν εἰς διαθήκην αἰώνιον καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ μετ᾽ αὐτόν
> And God said to Abraham, 'Verily, behold! Sarah your wife will bear to you a son and you will call his name Isaac, and I will establish my covenant with him to [be] an eternal covenant, and for his offspring after him.'

This text, then, is actually about the offspring of Isaac, and we may remove it from our list if we can find one that more particularly pertains to Abraham.

The remaining possible source for Paul's dative is Genesis 22:18. It is true that the dative in 22:18 is part of a prepositional phrase, ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου ('*in* your offspring'), so the match is not perfect. But since this is an allusion — as evidenced by the use of ἐπαγγελία — we do not need a direct match.[22] The best criterion for whether this is Paul's source is whether it allows us to make sense of his argument.

---

[20] Bruce, *Galatians*, 172.

[21] If we decide we have to endure the problems, we might consider the Philonic allegory mentioned in E. Lucchesi, 'Nouveau parallèle entre Saint Paul (Gal. iii 16) et Philon d'Alexandrie (*Quaestiones in Genesim*)?' *NovT* 21 (1979) 150–55. Philo takes the 'land' as signifying virtue — in which case it can be of universal benefit.

[22] It is helpful to note that Greek commentators, such as Chrysostom and Theophylact following him, saw no difficulty here. As Chrysostom wrote on Gal. 3:16 (*PG* 61, 654), ἰδοὺ τοίνυν καὶ ὁ Θεὸς διέθετο τῷ Ἀβραάμ, διαλεγόμενος εἰς τὰ ἔθνη ἐν τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ ἥξειν τὰς εὐλογίας. ... Ἐπηγγείλατο τῷ Ἀβραὰμ διὰ τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτοῦ εὐλογεῖσθαι τὰ ἔθνη· σπέρμα δὲ αὐτοῦ κατὰ σάρκα ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός 'So see, God made a covenant with Abraham, saying that the blessings would come to the nations *in his offspring*. … It was promised to Abraham that *through his offspring* the nations would be blessed; and his offspring according to the flesh is Christ.' Theophylact wrote similarly on Gal. 3:16 (*PG* 124, 344), καὶ γὰρ ὁ Θεὸς διαθήκην ἐποίησε πρὸς τὸν Ἀβραὰμ ἵνα ἐν τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ εὐλογηθῶσι τὰ ἔθνη. Τὸ δὲ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ὁ Χριστός 'For God made a covenant with Abraham, in order that *in his offspring* the nations might be blessed. And his offspring is Christ.' This implies that these authors did not feel it unnatural to add prepositions for the OT allusions. If we follow this, then we conclude that the simple dative in Paul is the grammatical form that he needed for his sentence.

Genesis 22:17–18

The first thing to say about Genesis 22:18 is that it is in the list of 'blessing' texts from Genesis, and this certainly makes it a good candidate for the source. Then we notice that it has the wording πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ('all the nations'), and this strengthens its tie with Galatians 3:8.[23]

In Galatians 3:16, Paul draws attention to the singular 'offspring', and identifies this figure as Christ:

> It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ.

Most authors have supposed that the word 'offspring' is used in Genesis collectively — namely, designating all Abraham's descendants — and thus Paul's argument seems artificial, or at least in need of explanation.

However, if Genesis 22:18 really does lie behind this passage, then we have a different twist. This is because Desmond Alexander has offered grammatical reasons for taking the 'offspring' in this text as a specific descendant.[24] Genesis 22:17–18 represents the Lord saying to Abraham (Hebrew, ESV, LXX):

[17] כִּי־בָרֵךְ אֲבָרֶכְךָ וְהַרְבָּה אַרְבֶּה אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כְּכוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַחוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שְׂפַת הַיָּם וְיִרַשׁ זַרְעֲךָ אֵת שַׁעַר אֹיְבָיו [18] וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְזַרְעֲךָ כֹּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ עֵקֶב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקֹלִי

[17] I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your *offspring* as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your *offspring* shall possess the gate of his enemies, [18] and in your *offspring* shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.

[17] ἦ μὴν εὐλογῶν εὐλογήσω σε καὶ πληθύνων πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ὡς τὴν ἄμμον τὴν παρὰ τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ κληρονομήσει τὸ σπέρμα σου τὰς πόλεις τῶν ὑπεναντίων [18] καὶ ἐνευλογηθήσονται ἐν τῷ σπέρματί σου πάντα τὰ ἔθνη τῆς γῆς ἀνθ᾽ ὧν ὑπήκουσας τῆς ἐμῆς φωνῆς

Notice that the Hebrew word זֶרַע ('seed, offspring') appears three times in this passage — twice in verse 17 and once in verse 18. This word in the singular can refer to offspring, either in a collective sense or as a specific descendant (much as the English word 'offspring'). In the first instance it is certainly used collectively: the descendants of Abraham will be as numerous as the stars and the grains of sand.

---

[23] Another connection between Gal. 3 and Gn. 22:17–18 is the presence of the verb κληρονομέω in Gn. 22:18 (see Greek text below), and the noun κληρονομία in Gal. 3:18.

[24] T.D. Alexander, 'Further Observations on the Term "Seed" in Genesis', *TynB* 48:2 (1997) 363–67.

Alexander argues that the second and third instances of 'offspring' are used for a specific offspring. His argument is partly grammatical and partly in view of the way Psalm 72:17 seems to refer to this text. Grammatically, he notes that its clause is not closely joined to the previous one: the verb, וְיִרַשׁ ('and he shall possess'), is not a consecutive tense. He also draws on my essay on Genesis 3:15, which argued that the criterion for discerning whether an instance of Hebrew זֶרַע is singular or collective is in the number of the pronouns that refer to the term: a singular pronoun indicates a specific 'offspring', while a plural one indicates that 'offspring' is collective.[25] Alexander applies that criterion to this text (which I had not treated), and notes that the pronoun that refers to the second instance of זֶרַע is singular: 'And your offspring shall possess the gate of *his* enemies' (Hebrew אֹיְבָיו).

Alexander further argues that Psalm 72:17, which has *wĕyitbārĕkû bô kol-haggôyîm* ('and may all nations be blessed in him')[26] — wording similar to that found in Genesis 22:18 — further supports a reference in Genesis 22:17b–18 to a 'Messianic' individual. He says of Psalm 72,[27]

> While the psalm's title associates it with Solomon, its contents clearly envisages a king whose reign surpasses by far that of Solomon. Indeed, this future monarch is described as ruling the entire earth, bringing deliverance to the oppressed by defeating their enemies.

Alexander concludes his essay with these tantalizing words:

> From the preceding discussion it is apparent that Collins' observations regarding the use of the term זֶרַע in Genesis 3:15 have implications also for the interpretation of Genesis 22:17–18 and 24:60. Of significance is the fact that these passages form part of a much larger picture in Genesis which centres around a unique line of descendants. The book of Genesis not only intimates that this lineage will eventually give rise to a royal dynasty, but also anticipates that a future member of this line will conquer his enemies and mediate God's blessing to the nations of the earth. Such expectations are clearly important for appreciating how the book of Genesis contributes to the NT understanding of Jesus Christ.

---

[25] Jack Collins, 'A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman's Seed Singular or Plural?', *TynB* 48:1 (1997) 139–48.

[26] In the psalm text, the accents associate 'all nations' with the clause that follows, which means that it is the subject of the next verb. On the other hand, we could also argue that this phrase is the subject of *both* verbs, with the subject of the first being delayed until the second line for poetic effect. Hence Alexander's argument can still stand.

[27] Alexander, 'Further observations', 365.

In other words, it is proper to take Genesis 22:18 as referring to a specific offspring, and to call that offspring 'Messianic' (because of the connection with Psalm 72:17).

Conclusion: What Kind of Exegete Was Paul?

Now let us come back to Galatians 3:16. Genesis 22:18 seems to be the best candidate for Paul's source here, because, of the Genesis 'blessing' texts that might lie behind the composite quotation of Galatians 3:8, it is the one that has the dative of σπέρμα. This, then, allows us to make sense of Paul's argument in Galatians 3:16.

If Paul really was alluding to Genesis 22:18, then his point was that the 'offspring' there was a single individual, not a group of descendants.[28] He further tells us that this single offspring was Christ (that is, Messiah). And Alexander has shown that this is just the way to read Genesis 22:18. This would mean that Paul, in alluding to this text, was drawing out the meaning that was already there in the Hebrew of Genesis.[29]

This is a startling result. I do not have a 'theory' of how Paul (or other NT writers) used the OT; but it does seem that we should give more room to the possibility that he saw things that are really there — things that we have not yet found.

---

[28] Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 142, offers an explanation of how we might understand Paul: 'Avoiding the technical terms of grammar, he could not express his meaning more simply than by the opposition "not to thy *seeds*, but to thy *seed*."'

[29] At the grammatical level, one would need to be familiar with the Hebrew in order to see this point. This is because nothing in the LXX of Gn. 22:17b indicates that the offspring is singular: it reads, καὶ κληρονομήσει τὸ σπέρμα σου τὰς πόλεις τῶν ὑπεναντίων. ('and your offspring will possess/inherit the cities of the enemies'). In Gn. 3:15, on the other hand, the LXX indicates that an individual is in view by using a masculine pronoun to refer to the neuter noun σπέρμα. (See Collins, 'A Syntactical Note', for the grammatical discussion — and especially at 140–41 for the LXX of Gn. 3:15.) Further, the LXX of Ps. 72:17 [71:17] is not as close to the LXX of Gn. 22:18 as the two are in Hebrew. In view of NT testimony about Paul's upbringing (e.g. Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5; Acts 22:3), there is no difficulty in attributing such familiarity to Paul.