

# The Abrahamic Call through Canonical Criticism: Genesis 12:1-9 and the Theological Reorientation of Scripture

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## ABSTRACT

*This study carries out an exegetical-theological analysis of Gen 12:1-9 through the canonical approach, highlighting the final form of the pericope as the locus of revelation and theological meaning. The canonical approach studies biblical passages within their canonical setting, taking into consideration the nature of their assigned authority. The study critiques the limitations of historical-critical approaches and proposes the canonical approach as a complementary hermeneutic that underscores theological coherence, intertextual resonance, and ecclesial relevance. The article argues that when Gen 12:1-9 is read from a canonical perspective, it manifests a coherent theological trajectory that links the Abrahamic promises to the wider scriptural narrative. Genesis 12:1-9 (the Abrahamic covenant promises; cf. Gen 12:1-3) is read as a theological hinge between divine judgment (Gen 11) and the universal blessing theme, underscoring key theological themes—progeny, land, blessing, election and universalism—as integral to the Abrahamic covenant narrative. The research, through canonical criticism, reaffirms the theological unity of the Old Testament and provides a model for faith-oriented exegesis that engages both the biblical text and its reception within the community of faith.*

**KEYWORDS:** Canonical approach, Historical-critical method, Abrahamic covenant, *Dativus ethicus*, Progeny, Blessing, Curse, Land, Election.

## A INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the canonical approach, which interprets biblical texts in their final canonical form as the locus of revelation and theological meaning. This method arose in response to the perceived inadequacies of the historical-critical method, which Childs argued failed to yield fruitful theological exegesis for the

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Submitted: 24/10/2024; peer-reviewed: 25/08/2025; accepted: 25/09/2025. Michael Seheri "The Abrahamic Call through Canonical Criticism: Genesis 12:1-9 and the Theological Reorientation of Scripture," *Old Testament Essays* 39 no. 1 (2026): 1–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2026/v39n1a2>.

faith community.<sup>1</sup> Childs, the principal proponent, emphasised that exegesis should move beyond historical reconstruction to explore the dialectic between individual passages and the whole canon, highlighting theological unity and intertextuality.<sup>2</sup> His approach views Scripture as a normative text for the faith community, not merely literature, and insists on reading texts within the horizon of the entire canon.

Childs' contributions include:

- Advocating a post-critical alternative that foregrounds theological coherence.<sup>3</sup>
- Stressing the organic relationships among biblical texts and the presence of inner-biblical exegesis.<sup>4</sup>
- Positioning the canon as the proper context for biblical theology, aiming at actualisation within the community of faith.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars, like Sanders, supported the canonical approach while valuing historical-critical insights.<sup>6</sup> However, critiques emerged:

- Barr argued Childs inadequately defined "canon," treated it too positively, and marginalised historical-critical concerns.<sup>7</sup>
- Critics noted the approach's tendency to ignore the dynamic process of canon formation and its historical contexts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, "Interpretation in Faith: The Theological Responsibility of an Old Testament Commentary," *Interpretation* 18 (1964): 432–449; Michael Fishbane, "Types of Biblical Intertextuality," *Vetus Testamentus Supplements* 80 (2000): 42; Chen Xun, *Theological Exegesis in the Canonical Context: Brevard Springs Childs's Methodology of Biblical Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For a systematic study of such, see Childs' monographic work: Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 127, 149–150.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Fishbane, "Revelation and Tradition: Aspects of Inner-Biblical Exegesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99/3 (1980): 343–361.

<sup>5</sup> Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," 438.

<sup>6</sup> James A. Sanders, "Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2/1 (1980): 173–197.

<sup>7</sup> James Barr, "Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1980): 12.

<sup>8</sup> For some other critiques of the *canonical approach*, see Sean E. McEvenue, "The Old Testament: Scripture and Theology," *Interpretation* 35/3 (1981): 236–237; Richard Topping, "The Canon and the Truth: Brevard Childs and James Barr on the Canon and the Historical-Critical Method," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8/2 (1992): 254; Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 52–59.

Despite criticisms, the canonical approach is not a replacement but a complement to the historical-critical method, enabling a theological reading that respects the text's final form and its ecclesial function. The hermeneutical approach in this study is not the only possible method of interpreting the biblical text. By proposing the canonical approach, the study does not present a distinct exegetical method but only demonstrates a necessary context for preferring to adhere to this method.

The canonical approach frames Gen 12:1–9 within the broader theological narrative, linking the primaeval history (Gen 1–11) to the patriarchal promises. Rather than treating the passage as an isolated historical unit, this method emphasises its role as a theological hinge between divine judgment and universal blessing.

Genesis 11:27–32 provides genealogical and geographical context, connecting Abraham to preceding events and highlighting Sarah's barrenness to create narrative tension. Abraham's call (Gen 12:1–3) follows the Babel episode, presenting his vocation as God's gift to humanity amid judgment. The pericope concludes at Gen 12:9, introducing Abraham's journey into Canaan and foreshadowing Israel's later experiences.

Structurally, Gen 12:1–9 comprises two sections:

- Abraham's Call (12:1–3) – *Commands* and *promises* form a pattern: "Go" followed by blessings (nationhood, personal blessing, great name) and the exhortation to "be a blessing," culminating in universal blessing (v.3).
- Journey (12:4–9) – Abraham obeys, travelling from Haran to Canaan, building altars at Shechem and Bethel, and moving toward the Negev. These acts signify worship and anticipate Israel's future possession of the land.

The passage introduces key theological motifs—progeny, blessing, land, and divine election—within a canonical arc that underscores God's universal purpose through Abraham. Thus, the divine promises of seed, land and blessing (encapsulated in Gn 12:1-3) are crucial to the proper understanding of the Abrahamic cycle.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Clines views the divine promises as the idea that explains the unity and structural development of the Pentateuch. (D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1978), 30, 48-93.

**B CANONICAL RE-READING OF GEN 12:1-9**

## 1a Abraham’s Call (Gen 12:1-3)

1. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָה׃
2. וְאָעֲשֶׂה לְךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְתִּיךָ וְהָיָה בְרַכְּךָ׃
3. וְאֶבְרַכְּךָ מִבְּרַכְיֶיךָ וּמִמְקוֹלְךָ אֶאֱרָא וְנִבְרַכְּוּ בְּךָ כָּל מְשֻׁפָּחַת הָאֲדָמָה׃

The narrative begins abruptly with God’s command “Go” (לֵךְ־לְךָ) in Gen 12:1. This imperative sets in motion a series of consequences/promises (Gen 12:2-3) that highlight specific nuances to consider.<sup>10</sup> This Hebrew construction (לֵךְ־לְךָ) is not easily translatable. Thus, the following translations have been rendered: “Go for yourself,” “Go to yourself,” “Leave by yourself,” “Walk for yourself,” “You must go,” and “Get yourself going.”<sup>11</sup> This Hebrew expression has been described as a *dativus ethicus* (ethical dative).<sup>12</sup> *Dativus ethicus* refers to the use of the preposition lamed (ל) with a second-person pronominal suffix ך. It generally comes after imperatives. In the text in question, the imperative לֵךְ is followed immediately by the lamedh preposition with a pronominal suffix ך, emphasising the subject of the imperative, “You leave.” Noting this grammatical form, Gesenius observes that the *dativus ethicus* “always gives emphasis to the significance of the occurrence in question for a particular subject.”<sup>13</sup>

Muraoka observes that the construction of verbs of motion, followed by the preposition ל with a pronominal suffix, creates a *centripetal in force*.<sup>14</sup> Grammatically, according to Muraoka, this construction creates a self-contained little universe around the subject, disconnected or separated from the surrounding environment—an effect of focusing on the subject.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The binomial expressions *order/command* (Gen 12:1) and *promise* (Gen 12:2-3) have main parallels in Gen 17:1-2; 26:3; 31:3 and 32:10; Jean Louis Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch: Exegetical Studies and Basic Questions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 47.

<sup>11</sup> In the Rabbinic tradition, much has been made of this expression; see Avivah G. Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 72–96; S. Bongiovanni, “Abramo: Il Padre dell’Esperienza Umana,” *Rassegna di Teologia* 54/1 (2013):39–40.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Brockelmann, *Grundriss der Verleichenenden Grammatik der Semitischen Sprachen* (Vol. 2; Hildsheim: Olms, 1961), 242–250; Ernst Jenni, *Die Hebräischen Präpositionen: Die Präposition lamed* (Band 3; Berlin: Kohlhammer, 2000), 48–53.

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm Gesenius and E. Kautzsch, eds., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §119s.

<sup>14</sup> Takamitsu Muraoka, *Emphatic Words and Structure in Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 122; see also Takamitsu Muraoka, “On the So-called *Dativus Ethicus* in Hebrew,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 29/2 (1978):497.

<sup>15</sup> Muraoka, “On the So-called *Dativus Ethicus*,” 497.

Correspondingly, it conveys the impression that the speaker or author creates their own identity by resolutely dissociating themselves from their familiar surroundings and finding their own place.<sup>16</sup> Based on these two hypotheses, what seems to be the case in this particular context is the idea of the dissociation or distancing of Abraham from the familiar homeland. The construction highlights the significance of the occurrence in question (the call), which involves a particular subject, namely, Abraham. It further underscores the notion that Abraham must completely and determinately detach himself from his familiar surroundings to follow a new divinely chosen path. As such, by leaving Haran, Abraham transfers the well-being and survival of his entire household to his new God.<sup>17</sup>

The divine imperative underscores personal involvement and radical separation for a new divine mission. Abraham was to separate from his background (his known and familiar surroundings): מְאַרְצְךָ (from your country) – מִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ<sup>18</sup> (from your kindred) – and אֶבְיֹתָ תִימָנָה<sup>19</sup> (from your father's house).<sup>20</sup> The specificity of what Abraham has to detach himself from is highlighted by the repetition, in each instance, of the preposition מִן; in that, the divine command could have been, "Go *from* your country and your kindred and your father's house." Instead, the command is intensified by an attachment of the preposition *from* to each of the three requests. Moreover, the divine command is made especially clear in the use of rhyming words (Gen 12:2-3) that end in ך (second person masculine suffix): וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ (and I will make you), וְאֶבְרַכְךָ (and I will bless you), וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ (and I will make your name great), וְאֶבְרַכְיֶה וְאֶבְרַכְיֶה (and I will bless those who bless you), וְיִמְקַלְלֶךָ (and the one who curses you). Furthermore, the *country* indicates a concrete reality that Abraham had to part from. This was not only a detachment from a physical environment, but also from a cultural one.

<sup>16</sup> Muraoka, "On the So-called *Dativus Ethicus*," 495–498; see also Muraoka, *Emphatic Words*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Gunkel notes the enormity of this decision: "The ancient lives at home in the secure protection of large and small units... Abroad, he is free as a bird. Expulsion is like death." Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer University, 1997), 163.

<sup>18</sup> The term מוֹלֶדֶת carries the following meanings: place of birth, home, fatherland, ancestry, relations, descendants; H. Haag, "מוֹלֶדֶת," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 8 (eds. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H.-J. Fabry; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-2006), 163.

<sup>19</sup> The expression אֶבְיֹתָ does not refer to a building, but rather to a patriarchal household; this is a normal designation in the Hebrew Bible for an extended family, headed by a senior male. The בַּיִת (house) was a sub-division of the מִשְׁפָּחָה (clan; family [in the extended sense]); Frank Moore Cross, *Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 4–5.

<sup>20</sup> John Hartley, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 132. Coote and Ord put it better by asserting that this threefold progression shows that Abraham is to leave "his secure place within the reproductive and kinship culture of his homeland." Robert B. Coote and David R. Ord, *The Bible's First History* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 102.

The fact of leaving his *kindred* (native place) also indicates a separation from the linguistic environment.

הָאֲרָצָה אֲשֶׁר אֶצְפֶּה: The land where Abraham is to go is described only as “the land that I will show you.” The idea of *sight/vision* (רָצָה) is a key motif in the Abrahamic covenant passages. The other passages in the Old Testament in which the verb, רָצָה, has God as its subject and land as the object are found only in Gen 26:2-3; Deut 34:1, 4 and Josh 5:6. It is interesting to note that in all these four instances, it is only one character, Isaac, who *sees* and enters the land of promise (Gen 26:2-3). Moses and Aaron are *shown* the land but do not enter it due to Moses’ disobedience (Num 20:7-12). In Joshua, those Israelites who had disobeyed God during the forty years in the wilderness would neither *see* nor enter the Promised Land (Josh 5:6; Num 14:20-34). Abraham, accompanied by his wife, Sarah, his nephew, Lot and the people they had gotten in Haran, leaves for his destination without knowing its whereabouts (Gen 12:4-5), blindly entering the unknown. He has no say in the decision of the land to which he must go. God chose this destination for him.

Two sets of three promises are observed. In Gen 12:1, the divine imperative is followed by the first set of three promises (Gen 12:2abc). There is a progression in how the divine promises are presented. In Gen 12:2a, the promise of a great nation is made to Abraham; in Gen 12:2b, God promises to bless him, and in Gen 12:2c, he is promised a great name. In the first promise, God expresses a commitment to Abraham. He promises him that he will make him into a great nation (Gen 12:2; cf. 17:20; 18:18; 46:3; Exod 1:7; Lev 26:27-39; Deut 1:8-11; 30:17-20). Generally, in the Old Testament, Israel is referred to as עַם (people) or בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (sons/children of Israel), and גּוֹי refers to the other nations. The term גּוֹי is the broadest Hebrew term referring to ethnicity in the Old Testament. The fact that גּוֹי is employed here is significant; גּוֹי גָּדוֹל (great nation) indicates that Abraham’s lineage would become so numerous that one day it would become a nation counted among those listed in the *table of the nations* (Gen 10).<sup>21</sup> God promises Abraham that his offspring will become a גּוֹי (Gen 12:2; cf. 17:5; 18:18). Their existence as a *nation* is inextricably linked to the land promise made to Abraham (Gen 12:7; cf. 13:15-17; 15:4-7, 13-18; 17:7-8; 18:18; 22:17; 24:7). In addition, גּוֹי denotes an עַם bound together to form a nation and it is distinguished by its emphasis on nationhood and its affinity to a

<sup>21</sup> Hartley, *Genesis*, 136. The term גּוֹי refers to a group of people viewed in either a political or racial context. It emphasises their connection to a specific territory and shared language. Additionally, the Hebrew usage of גּוֹי indicates a preference for describing a people based on their political and territorial ties, making it more aligned with our contemporary understanding of the term *nation*. On the other hand, עַם always “retains a strong emphasis on the element of consanguinity as the basis of union into a people.” R. E. Clements, “גּוֹי,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament 2* (eds. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H.-J. Fabry Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-2006), 426–427.

geographical location.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, from Abraham and Sarah, his barren wife, God will produce a great nation as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen 13:16) and as the stars in heaven (Gen 15:5).

The plot of the Abrahamic narrative is tied to the promise of a descendant. However, there is a tension between Sarah's barrenness (Gen 11:30) and the promise of a descendant (Gen 12:2, 7). Sarah's barrenness seems to thwart God's plan in the sense that it seems to impede the perpetuation of the Abrahamic line. This contrast between Sarah's infertility and the promise of progeny creates a backdrop for the tension that will pervade a significant portion of the unfolding Abrahamic narrative.

In the second promise, God promises to bless Abraham (Gen 12:2b). It is worth paying attention to the centrality of the blessing theme in Gen 12:2-3. There is a remarkable repetition of words derived from the root בָּרַךְ, which occurs five times, making it the keyword in the named verses. The verb *to bless* appears three times, and the noun *blessing* twice. The Hebrew term בָּרַךְ (to bless) has a multifaceted significance in its original context. It is used more frequently in Genesis and Deuteronomy than in any other part of the Old Testament. In Gen 1-11, the act of blessing signifies a divine action in which God bestows *vital power* onto both creation and humanity.<sup>23</sup> The concrete effects of blessing influenced both the physical and spiritual dimensions, resulting in abundance in life and health, as well as enhancing the fertility of the people, their livestock and their land.<sup>24</sup>

In biblical language, God's blessing is strictly connected to generation and fertility. To bless means to make one fertile, rich and numerous; it is the image of prosperity (Gen 24:35-36; Lev 26:4-13; Deut 28:3-15). Here, one inserts oneself into a cultural context in which a greater number of children is seen as a sign of blessing, namely, the presence of God who gives life. The theme of blessing interconnects the patriarchal narratives (Gen 24:1; 26:3; 35:9; 39:5).<sup>25</sup> It is also worth observing that the theme of blessing occurs five times in the *primaeval* history section (Gen 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2; 9:1). Perhaps this is a way of linking the *primaeval* history and the ancestral narratives. The promise of

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<sup>22</sup> Laurence Kutler, "A Structural Semantic Approach to Israelite Communal Terminology," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society* 14 (1982): 75.

<sup>23</sup> Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 18, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Mowinckel, *Religion und Kultus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 66. Kidner refers to divine blessing as "God turning full-face to the recipient ... in self-giving." D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1967), 52. This "supernatural essence of blessing has also been described as the imparting of one's soul into another." Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 275.

blessing in the verses in question creates a contrast to the threats of a curse expressed in the primaeval history (Gen 3:14, 17; 4:11; 8:21; 9:25). Perhaps the fact that the theme of cursing also appears five times in the primaeval history is not a coincidence.<sup>26</sup> The blessing that God will bestow on Abraham brings with it the capacity of Abraham to have a son (Gen 21:1-7), the possibility to find fertile pasture for his flock (Gen 13), protection during trying times (Gen 22:16-18) and the blessing to die "in a good old age, an old man full of years" (Gen 25:8). The divine promises of land, seed and blessing have their source in the first chapter of Genesis, at the climax of the creation narrative. Genesis 1:28-30 identifies God's words as a blessing. The blessing centres on *seed* (be fruitful and multiply) and on *land* (fill the earth and subdue it). When Adam and Eve sinned, the blessing was replaced with a curse (Gen 3:17). The content of the judgment focuses on seed (Gen 3:16) and land (Gen 3:17). The divine promises hang on the command regarding land and seed; Abraham is to leave his land and his family in order to receive God's blessing. The land promise is not given in the opening verses of Gen 12, but it is hinted at by God's promise to show Abraham this land (Gen 12:1); it is also implied in the promise to make Abraham a great nation (Gen 12:2c).

The third promise is that God will make Abraham's name great: גָּדוֹל שְׁמִי (Gen 12:2c). This phrase has echoes of royal ideology (2 Sam 7:9; Ps 72:17; cf. 2 Sam 8:13; 1 Kgs 1:47). In other words, it expresses a royal language, referring to the idea that Abraham is to be considered a regal figure.<sup>27</sup> The promise can be viewed as a deliberate juxtaposition to the failed attempt of the Babel generation to make a great name for itself through the building of the tower (Gen 11:4). Its attempt at nationhood was thwarted by the divine action (Gen 11:9). While the tower of Babel events (Gen 11:1-9) point to the power of a single dominant language and culture, the narrative in Gen 12 reflects no specific interest in the establishment of one particular ruling culture but rather a blessing that would extend to "all the families of the earth" (Gen 12:3).<sup>28</sup> The enterprise of the people of Babel to create a name for themselves could be described as arrogating to themselves a divine privilege. The repeated גָּדוֹל in Gen 12:2 echoes

<sup>26</sup> James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 2008), 74; André Wénin, *Da Adamo ad Abramo o L'errare dell'uomo: Lettura Narrativa e Antropologica. I. Gen 1,1-12,4* (Bologna: EDB, 2008), 171–175.

<sup>27</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 372–373; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 275–276. The phrase *great name* follows the court language from early second-millennium Mesopotamia; E. Ruprecht, "Der Traditionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund der Einzelnen Elemente von Gen 12:2-3," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 444–464.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald J. Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 15–16; see also Roy E. Ciampa, "Abraham and Empire in Galatians," in *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson* (ed., S. Hunt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 155.

the מגדל (tower) built at Babel. God grants Abraham greatness (Gen 12:2), whereas God impeded the undertaking of the מגדל of Babel (Gen 11:4, 8-9).

The first three verbs in Gen 12:2 are cohortative statements, all involving God's promised actions: וְאָנֹכִי אֶשְׂשֶׁךָ, וְאָבְרַכְךָ, and וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ (so that I may make you a great nation; so that I may bless you; and make your name great). Cohortative verbs following the imperative (in this case, לֵךְ [Gen 12:1]) express a nuance of either result or intention.<sup>29</sup> This verbal usage underscores the seriousness of Abraham's call—a call willed by God. The cohortative expresses the speaker's desire, intention, or determination to perform a certain action. In Gen 12:1-9, the speaker's (God's) intention, desire and determination are for Abraham to carry out the divine command.

In the second set of the three promises, God exhorts Abraham to become a blessing: וְהָיָה בְרָכָה (Gen 12:2d). In Gen 12:3a, the promise of blessing goes further than Abraham to those with whom he comes into contact; and in Gen 12:3c, it reaches the entire humankind.<sup>30</sup> Since the Hebrew imperative form (הָיֵה) appears in Gen 12:2d, the translation that will be retained will have an imperative nuance. Therefore, the proposed rendering suggests that Abraham is *exhorted* to be a blessing – an embodiment of God's blessing. It has been observed that an imperative followed by a cohortative implies that the second clause expresses the purpose or result of the first; hence, the translation: "Be a blessing, so that I may bless those who bless you" (Gen 12:2b-3a).

God will bless those who bless Abraham and curse the one who curses him (Gen 12:3b; cf. 27:29; Num 24:9). In Gen 12:3, two different verbs are used for *curse*. The first verb, קָלַל, has a broader usage: "despicable, insignificant, curse, contemptible, disdain, to speak evil of, to treat lightly"<sup>31</sup> (cf. Gen 8:21; 16:4, 5; Exod 21:17; 22:28; Lev 19:14; 20:9; 24:11, 14, 15, 23; Deut 23:4). The second verb, אָרַר, has a much stronger and more focused usage. It means the

<sup>29</sup> In defence of this understanding of the sequence of the imperative plus cohortative, see Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study on Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context* (Berlin: Guyter, 2003), 143; Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), 199. Although it is correct that this order *can* express purpose or result, it does not follow that it *must*. Baden proffers that even though there are many instances in which overtones of purpose are unavoidable, "there are also passages in which this sequence expresses only simple succession ... This variety of possibilities for the imperative plus cohortative sequence makes clear that any nuance beyond the formal continued volitivity is determined not by the morpho-syntax but by context alone." J. S. Baden, "The Morpho-Syntax of Genesis 12:1-3: Translation and Interpretation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72/2 (2010): 225.

<sup>30</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985), 146, 149.

<sup>31</sup> C. A. Keller, "קָלַל," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 (eds., E. Jenni and C. Westermann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 1142–1143.

judicial curse of God. It expresses God's release of a harmful force, such as a plague, to punish those who obstruct the way of or mistreat any of Abraham's progeny. This concept has a sense of binding with a curse<sup>32</sup> (cf. Gen 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25; 27:29; 49:7; Exod 22:28; Lev 26; Num 5:18, 19, 22, 24, 27; 22:6, 12; 23:7; 24:9; Deut 27:15-26; 28:16-19). The latter term is prominent and dominates curse formulae such as those found in Deut 27:15-26. The threat of a curse assures Abraham that, being "an unprotected stranger in an alien land, he will have particular need of God's providential care, and whoever maltreats him will be punished with exceptional severity."<sup>33</sup> God's promise of divine protection of Abraham is reminiscent of his dealings with the cursed Cain (Gen 4:14-15). These two terms, קלל and אָרַר, convey that the threat of a curse is a necessary element of the divine promises. The connection here between blessings and curses seems incontrovertible.<sup>34</sup> The terms communicate the sense that God will protect Abraham and his offspring from all harm that might befall them; he will deal with those who oppose Abraham, just as he will reward those who bless him. Two features highlight this juxtaposition. First, the participle used to describe those who bless Abraham is in the plural (מְבָרְכֵי: "those who bless him"), which implies that there will be many people who will bless Abraham. Second, the participle used to describe the one who curses Abraham is in the singular (מְקַלֵּל: "the one who treats you lightly"), implying that there will be few of them.

In addition, the covenant passages in Deuteronomy juxtapose blessing and curse as two possible outcomes of a relationship with God (Deut 27-28; cf. Lev 26). While this is not elaborated here, the implication is that the potential for blessing also carries the potential for a curse. This comparison is interesting in that Deuteronomy deals with protecting the Mosaic covenant. In the context under discussion, the issue is the protection of Abraham (with and through whom God will establish his covenant). In the Old Testament, the connection between *blessing* and *curse* is typical of texts about the covenant. The lists outlining covenant blessings and curses are found in Lev 26 and Deut 27-28. Blessings and curses are directly associated with the covenant God made with the people of Israel, and thus, they should be interpreted within that context.

[הָאָדָמָה] וְנִבְרַכְוּ בָּהּ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחַת [הָאָדָמָה]: The following promise is that all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham or will obtain blessing through him (Gen 12:3c). It is interesting to note that this verse employs the term אָדָמָה to refer to the earth (cf. Gen 28:14), instead of אָרֶץ, which is used in other contexts where

<sup>32</sup> C. A. Keller, "אָרַר," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament 1*, eds., E. Jenni and C. Westermann (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 179–182.

<sup>33</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 89.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of *blessing* and *cursing* as important concepts in Genesis, see Desmond T. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 146–158.

the same promise is repeated (cf. Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). It is not certain why the word אֲדָמָה is chosen over אֲרָץ. The only plausible explanation is that the use of אֲדָמָה in Gen 12:3 could be the author's way of alluding to Adam (אָדָם) because through Adam's disobedience, humanity was alienated from God; but through Abraham, all the families of אֲדָמָה will be blessed.

Furthermore, the translation of the *niphal* form of the verb בָּרַךְ in Gen 12:3 presents some complications.<sup>35</sup> Its precise nuance is disputed. It has been argued that it could have a passive, middle (receptive) or reflexive sense. Those who argue for a passive meaning state that Gen 12:1-3 presents Abraham (and his descendants) as God's chosen instrument of blessing. They are to be mediators or conduits of the divine blessing to the rest of the world. This nuance indicates that the divine plan to bless the nations is the ultimate goal (cf. Ps 72:17b). It implies an outside agent – God being the source and Abraham, the channel: "All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you."<sup>36</sup>

Those who identify a middle nuance emphasise the nation's acquisition of blessings through some connection with Abraham. The implication here is that the action affects the subject in some way. It asserts that nations will discover their blessing through Abraham. The proponents of this line of thought render a translation along the following lines: "They will *acquire blessing for themselves*"; "procure for themselves a blessing"; "win for themselves a blessing" or "find for themselves a blessing."<sup>37</sup>

The advocates of a reflexive sense postulate that this nuance indicates that God's chosen people will be so blessed by Abraham that all would wish for a similar blessing and invoke it upon themselves. The nations will point to Abraham as their ideal. Abraham's name will be a formula of blessing or a proverbial expression of a desire for divine blessing (cf. Gen 48:20). Their

<sup>35</sup> The *niphal* of בָּרַךְ appears only three times in the Old Testament (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14). The *hithpael* is more common, occurring seven times and it carries the same meaning as the *niphal* in Gen 22:18 and 26:4. Its infrequent occurrence has occasioned uncertainty with regard to the exact sense of the verb here; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 277; see also McKeown, *Genesis*, 77; John H. Walton, *Genesis: From Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 393.

<sup>36</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 296; Chee-Chiew Lee, "Once Again: The Niphal and the Hithpael of בָּרַךְ in the Abrahamic Blessing for the Nations," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36/3 (2012): 286–288. It is worth noting that some ancient translations understood the Hebrew form in Gen 12:3 as a passive (cf. the Septuagint, Vulgate, Targums, Peshitta, Sir 44:21 and the New Testament [Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8]).

<sup>37</sup> Hartley, *Genesis*, 133, 136; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 277–278; Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis Übersetzt und Erklärt* (Leipzig: Diecherische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924), 96–97.

application of this semantic sense renders a translation that runs along the following lines: "By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."<sup>38</sup>

In all these cases, God mediates his blessing to all the families of the earth through Abraham. Westermann notes that, whatever the case may be, the message of the passage is clear: God's blessing "promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity but attains its objective only when it encompasses all the peoples of the earth."<sup>39</sup> Westermann concludes there is little difference between these nuances in the final analysis.<sup>40</sup> In the parallel passages (Gen 22:18; 26:4), the corresponding verb is in the *hithpael* and would generally be translated as a reflexive.

On the surface, the distinction may be slight, but it is of great consequence, theologically,<sup>41</sup> in the sense that such distinctions should never be taken for granted. Regarding the pericope in question, all three semantic nuances have one thing in common, namely, blessing mediation. Moreover, Gen 12:1-3 does not function *in medias res* but continues the primaeval historical narrative (Gen 1-11).<sup>42</sup> The primaeval history terminates with a divine judgement (Gen

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 120; Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12-50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979), 20. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 277–278, notes a progression of thought in the passage: a) Abraham receives a blessing [passive]; b) Abraham's name is used as a blessing [reflexive] and c) All the families will find blessing in Abraham [middle]; the voices in brackets are my insertions, introduced into Wenham's idea to explain the different voices or nuances in simple terms; see also Westermann, *Genesis: 12-36*, 146.

<sup>39</sup> Westermann, *Genesis: 12-36*, 152.

<sup>40</sup> "In fact, the reflexive translation is saying no less than the passive... When the *families of the earth* bless themselves *in Abraham*, that is, call a blessing on themselves under the invocation of his name (as in Psalm 72:17 and even more clearly in Genesis 48:20), then the obvious presupposition is that they will also 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." Westermann, *Genesis: 12-36*, 152. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations*, 179–180, avers that, in any case, the middle sense would be similar to the passive, since both state that all the families of the earth receive blessing.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 374; Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 19–20.

<sup>42</sup> Genesis 11, especially the Babel story (Gen 11:1-9), serves as a background for reading the promises contained in Gen 12:1-3. For instance, God's promise to Abraham that he will make him a great nation (Gen 12:2a) is placed almost immediately after a remark about Sarah's infertility (Gen 11:30). Abraham is asked to go to the land that God will show him (Gen 12:1b) – "an enigmatic statement which is only subsequently clarified, but which stands in suggestive relationship to the movement of the citizens of Babel who, like Abraham, migrated from the east and 'found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there'" (Gen 11:2). Abraham is promised that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him (Gen 12:3b) – the very same families of the earth

11:1-9). The narrative's integral phrase regarding the building of the tower,  $\text{לְנוֹנְעֵשָׂה}$ , "Let us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4), has its contrasting point in Gen 12:2,  $\text{אֶגְדָּלְךָ שֵׁם}$ , "I will make your name great." While the people in the tower of Babel incident endeavour to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4), in Gen 12:2, God promises to make Abraham's name great. This contrast elucidates the significance of Gen 12:3b. The primary objective of the promise is to establish a connection between God and humanity. The promise of blessing made to Abraham and his offspring is extended to those outside the Abrahamic line. It goes far beyond Abraham and his seed to the rest of humanity. Therefore, the *niphal* perfect *waw*-consecutive,<sup>43</sup> used in Gen 12:3c, demonstrates a logical sequence: That the divine promises in Gen 12:2-3 reach their climax in Gen 12:3c (the climactic phrase).<sup>44</sup> In Gen 12:2b, Abraham is already held up as an example and, particularly, as an offset to the tower builders who sought personal benefit in their own way. It would, therefore, be natural for the passage to move from Abraham, as an example of blessing, to Abraham, as "the focus of blessing, the mediator through whom blessing will reach the world, since in him, as the narrator has made clear, the Babel consequences are to be reversed."<sup>45</sup> Genesis 12:2d has already indicated that Abraham would be a blessing. The answer as to whom and for whom he will be a blessing is found in Gen 12:3c. He will be a blessing to and for "all the families of the earth." In all three semantic applications (the passive, middle and reflexive), the nations and the families of the earth have a co-operative and collaborative role in acquiring divine blessing. It should be observed that even if, for example, a reflexive sense, "bless

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(humans) were dispersed from Babel, trying to arrogate a great name for themselves (Gen 11:7-9). Furthermore, there is another juxtaposition between the tower-builders' utterance of making a name for themselves (Gen 11:4) and God's declaration that he will make Abraham's name great (Gen 12:2). Hence, the proposal that the call of Abraham recalls the Babel story. Therefore, when reading the Abrahamic events in light of Gen 12:1-3, it is essential to remember that the divine announcement is clarified and understood against the backdrop of the primaeval history, of which Gen 11 is the climax; Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 52–53.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2011), 368; Gesenius and Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 330.

<sup>44</sup> As Wolff puts it, Gen 12:3b "is set off as the sequel to the consequences (vss. 2-3a) of the departure of Abraham (vs. 1); it is the real result and is, therefore, confirmed definitively by the perfect. The abrupt change in the final clause is further clarified by the fact that in verse 3b the subject is no longer Yahweh but 'all the families of the earth.' In so doing, it is set down conclusively whom Yahweh's action, already manifoldly described, ultimately concerns and what this action is to accomplish for them." Hans Walter Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," in *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, (eds. W. Brueggemann and H. W. Wolff; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 47.

<sup>45</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 28.

themselves through invoking Abraham" is preferred here, it would carry the same implications of a middle or passive, for they all lead to an acquisition of blessing through some mediation.

Another fundamental issue that needs to be underscored with regard to Gen 12:1-3 is that the themes of *blessing* and *great name* contained therein use the language drawn from royal ideology. The promise of a great name anticipates God's promise to David (2 Sam 7:9), in which a reference to the deity giving the king a great name is found. In the royal Psalms, the king is both the object of blessing by God and the people and the means of blessing others. The most striking parallel is Ps 72:17, which presents the same close connection between the great name and blessing as well as the use of the name in blessing others, found in the pericope in question.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, the centrality of the promises in Gen 12:1-3 manifests in their function as a golden thread throughout Genesis. The promise of many descendants appear numerous times (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5; 17:5-6; 22:16-17; 26:4; 28:14; 35:11). Their number will be as great as the dust (cf. Gen 13:16; 28:14), the stars (cf. Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4) and the sand on the seashore (cf. Gen 22:17). On two occasions, God specifically promises that Sarah will bear a son (Gen 17:16; 18:10). The promise that nations will obtain blessing through Abraham's seed also occurs in Gen 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 27:29. In some cases, these promises are part of the narrative (cf. Gen 24:7; 48:3-4). The land promise is first given in Gen 12:7, then reiterated in Gen 13:14-15, 17; 15:18-21; 17:8; 26:3-4; 28:13-14; 35:12.<sup>47</sup>

#### 1b Journey (Gen 12:4-9)

וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כְּאִשְׁרֵי דְבַר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בְּנֵי-חַמְשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ מִחָרָן:

וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת-שָׂרִי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-לוֹט בְּנֵי-אָחִיו וְאֶת-כָּל-רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת-הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אַרְצָה כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אַרְצָה כְּנָעַן:

וַיַּעֲבֹר אַבְרָם בְּאַרְץ עַד-מְקוֹם שְׂכָם עַד אֵלֹן מוֹרָה וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאַרְץ:

וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לְזִרְעֲךָ אֲמֵן אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וַיְבִין שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה הַנִּבְרָאָה אֵלָיו:

וַיַּעֲמֵק מִשָּׁם הַהָרָה מִקְדָּם לְבֵית-אֵל וַיֵּט אֶהְלֵה בֵּית-אֵל מִיָּם וְהָעֵי מִקְדָּם וַיְבִין שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה:

וַיִּסַּע אַבְרָם הַלּוֹךְ וַנְּסוּעַ הַנִּגְבָּה:

<sup>46</sup> John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 253; see also Ruprecht, "Der Traditionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund," 444–464, who draws on texts such as 2 Sam 2:7; 8:13; 1 Kgs 1:47 and numerous extra-biblical parallels; see also Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch*, 62–63.

<sup>47</sup> Hartley, *Genesis*, 133–134.

After God's command to Abraham, לָךְ-לֵךְ, "Abram went (וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם) as the Lord had told him" (Gen 12:4), thereby fulfilling the divine imperative. Genesis 12:4 underscores Abraham's obedience to the divine command (cf. Gen 6:22; 7:5; 17:23; 24:51).<sup>48</sup> For his journey to the Promised Land, Abraham takes with him his wife, Sarah, his brother's son, Lot and all their possessions (רְכוּשׁ)<sup>49</sup> which they had gathered and the people (נַפְשׁ)<sup>50</sup> that they had acquired in Haran (Gen 12:5). When they arrived in the land of Canaan, Abraham "passed through the land to the place at Shechem (מְקוֹם שֵׁכֶם), to the oak/terebinth of Moreh (מִזְרְהָה) (אֵלֶּיךָ)" (Gen 12:6). In this context, מְקוֹם refers to a sacred/cultic site.<sup>51</sup> Shechem,<sup>52</sup> in later Israelite tradition, played a significant role. As a sacred place, it had a particular importance for covenant making (Judg 8:3; 9:4).<sup>53</sup> As regards the oak/terebinth of Moreh, מִזְרְהָה (Moreh) means "(the) righteous teacher; one who casts oracles [oracle giver],"<sup>54</sup> which may suggest that it was a location where divine prophecies could be received (Judg 4:5; cf. Gen 35:4; Josh 24:26; Judg 9:6). The phrase אֵלֶּיךָ מִזְרְהָה could be described as the tree of the oracle-giver. As a sacred tree, it was the focus of a Canaanite cultic centre and remained important in Israelite times (Gen 35:4; Deut 11:30; Josh 24:26; Judg 9:37).<sup>55</sup> The aura of

<sup>48</sup> Abraham obeys blindly and without objection. According to Von Rad, the one word וַיֵּלֶךְ "(and he set out) is more effective than any psychological description could be," and in its Olympian simplicity does greater justice to the significance of this event. Genesis 12:4 is one of the texts in which Abraham is presented as an example to emulate. Throughout the entire Abrahamic narrative, one must not forget that the idea of departing from one's land, thereby breaking ancestral bonds, was unthinkable, unexpected and almost impossible for ancient men. Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: John Knox, 1972), 161.

<sup>49</sup> The term רְכוּשׁ refers to movable property, including herds (Gen 14:11, 12; 31:18; Num 35:3). The significance is probably to be taken as "that which is acquired, something acquired ... possession, such as furniture, equipment, utensils [Gen 12:5]." Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 1236.

<sup>50</sup> Depending on the context, נַפְשׁ can have the following meanings: soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite and emotion. In Gen 12:5, it means people; it refers to the family's dependents, those for whom the head of the family was responsible: H. Seebass, "נַפְשׁ," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 9 (eds. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H. Fabry; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-2006), 515.

<sup>51</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 627; see also Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 153.

<sup>52</sup> Shechem (שֵׁכֶם) was a vital centre in the second-millennium B.C. and is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament (Gen 33:18; 35:4; 37:12-13; Josh 24:1; Judg 9:6; 1 Kgs 12:1); Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 279.

<sup>53</sup> Arthur S. Herbert, *Genesis 12-50. Abraham and His Heirs* (London: SCM, 1962), 27.

<sup>54</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 560-561.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert, *Genesis 12-50*, 27; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 162; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 153.

sacredness, introduced into the scene by the mentioning of Shechem and the sacred tree of Moreh, needs to be taken into account, in that not only should Abraham be linked to these sacred sites but also be shown to have taken ownership of them for Israel, since at both Shechem and Bethel, he “built an altar there to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.”<sup>56</sup> Abraham’s journey is documented as a travelogue consisting of three locations—Shechem (oak of Moreh, Gen 12:6-7), Bethel/Ai (Gen 12:8) and the Negev (Gen 12:9; cf. Gen 23). Throughout his journey, Abraham is depicted as crossing the entirety of the land of promise. Remarkably, Jacob retraces this path upon his return from Haran, visiting the same three sites (Gen 33:18-20; 35:14-27). Both patriarchs erected altars of worship at Shechem and Bethel. This pattern of traversing these three areas is repeated in the conquest narratives of Joshua, which include Ai/Bethel (Josh 7:2; 8:9), the construction of an altar at Shechem (Josh 8:30) and movements toward the Negev south of Ai/Bethel (Josh 10), followed by journeys north of Shechem (Josh 11). These parallels demonstrate that the deeds of the patriarchs foreshadow those of their descendants and that the encounters of Abraham were mirrored in those of Jacob and subsequently in their progeny.<sup>57</sup>

Genesis 12:7a presents the first recorded appearance of God to Abraham: *וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶבְרָם-אֶל* (and the Lord appeared to Abram) [cf. Gen 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9; 48:3]. The verb *וַיֵּרָא* in Gen 12:1 is used in the sense of *showing something to someone*; in Gen 12:7, it is used in the sense of *appearance/God’s manifestation*.<sup>58</sup> An argument could be made with regard to Gen 12:7 that the appearance of God to Abraham (that is, the theophany) sustained him in the land of Canaan (at Shechem). Abraham receives a direct divine revelation when God succinctly declares that his progeny will occupy the land (cf. Exod 6:2-8; Deut 1:6-8; Josh 1:1-6; Ps 105:7-13, 42-45). In other words, the promise of land to Abraham’s descendants, implied in Gen 12:1-2, is spelt out and made explicit in Gen 12:7 (cf. Gen 13:14-15, 17; 15:7, 13, 16, 18; 17:8; 26:2-3). One could perhaps assume that Abraham built an altar at Shechem as a response to the theophany, an event of great significance (Gen 12:7b). Following the first altar, he moves and builds a second one and, at the same time, calls upon the name of God (Gen 12:8). In two instances, building an altar is associated with invoking God’s name (Gen 12:8; 26:25). In both instances, an altar is built after God manifests himself. Invoking God’s name (*וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה*) is an expression or gesture of worshipping God through prayer and sacrifice (cf. Gen 4:26; 13:8; 21:33). Abraham then continues his journey into the Negev (Gen 12:9), the

<sup>56</sup> Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 178.

<sup>57</sup> Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 303–306, 334–337; Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 35–44, 140–141.

<sup>58</sup> For various meanings evoked by the verb *וַיֵּרָא* in different contexts, see D. Vetter, “*וַיֵּרָא*,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament 3* (eds. E. Jenni and C. Westermann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 1176–1183.

southern border of Canaan. In Gen 13:3-4, he returns to the first locus, where God asks him to survey the land north, south, east and west. This location is roughly in the middle of the Promised Land, where, in Gen 13:18, a southern altar is built at Hebron (Oaks of Mamre). In other words, Abraham's journey in Gen 12:5-9 has taken him from the north to the south of the Promised Land. Moreover, he builds altars in the north (Gen 12:7), in the middle (Gen 12:8) and, later, in the south (Gen 13:18). This virtually signifies the possession of the land.<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that in Gen 12:5-7, the word אָרָץ occurs five times, and in Gen 12:8-9, the recurrence of geographical locations indicates that land is a major theme in Gen 12:5-7. These verses reveal Abraham's entrance into the land and his travels through it, from top to bottom, surveying it.

In addition to building an altar, Abraham also pitches a tent (Gen 12:8). This is a strange detail to include here. Abraham has travelled hundreds of miles from Haran, and on that journey, he would have pitched his tent many times, but that is never mentioned. Wenham suggests that the mention of erecting a tent means that Abraham spent a long time in that place, near Bethel (Gen 26:25; 33:19; 35:21; Judg 4:11).<sup>60</sup> The first reference to setting up a tent in Gen 12:8 has some significance because it is mentioned again in Gen 13:3. Wiseman, on the other hand, proposes that in Gen 12:8, this first allusion to pitching a tent does not refer to Abraham's mode of living but to the erection of a *tent-shrine* as an expression of his acceptance of the divine land-grant, the land of promise.<sup>61</sup> Both views, though different, share a commonality—the fact that the patriarchs erect their tents only in Canaan, thereby underscoring the significance of the location where a tent had once been pitched.

## C CANONICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THEOLOGICAL THEMES

### 1 Progeny (Great Nation-Name and Kingship)

The promise of a *great nation* (Gen 12:2a; cf. 15:5; 17:5-6, 20; 18:18; 22:16-17; 26:4; 28:14; 35:11; 46:3; Exod 1:7; Lev 26:27-39; Deut 30:17-20) is inseparable from the assurance of a *great name* (Gen 12:2c). Abraham's descendants will be innumerable—"as the dust of the earth" and "stars of heaven" (Gen 13:16; 15:5)—and will include kings (Gen 17:6, 16; cf. 35:11; 2 Sam 8:13; 1 Kgs 1:47; Ps 72:17). This royal dimension anticipates the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:9),

<sup>59</sup> Abraham Kuruvilla, *Genesis: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 163. These altars were ways of commemorating special events or appearances (Gen 8:20; 13:18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:7; Exod 17:15; 24:4; Josh 8:30; Judg 6:24; 21:4; 1 Sam 7:17; 14:35; 2 Sam 24:25).

<sup>60</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 280; see also Walton, *Genesis*, 395.

<sup>61</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, "They Lived in Tents," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor* (ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 195–200.

where similar language of *great name* and dynastic succession appears.<sup>62</sup> It is through the Davidic covenant that the kingship aspect of the Abrahamic covenant is particularised.<sup>63</sup> Sarah shares this royal status as progenitrix of nations and kings, underscoring that kingship is integral to the Abrahamic covenant.

## 2 Blessing: National and Universal Dimensions

The biblical concept of blessing originates from God, who may use human agents to transmit it. Abraham is central to this theme: God promises to bless him and make him a blessing to others (Gen 12:2–3). This blessing is not confined to Abraham but extends universally through him and his descendants (cf. Gen

<sup>62</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 372–373; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 275–276; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 150. The phrase, *great name*, follows the court language from early second-millennium Mesopotamia; Ruprecht, "Der Traditionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund," 444–464; Claus Westermann, "Weisheit im Sprichwort," *Theologische Bücherei* 55 (1974): 291–308.

<sup>63</sup> Remarkable similarities/parallels between the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are outlined below:

### ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

**Great name:** "I will make your name great" (Gen 12:2c)

**Nationhood:** "I will make you a great nation" (Gen 12:2a)

**Land:** "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12:7)

**Victory over enemies:** "I will curse him who curses you" (Gen 12:3b)

### DAVIDIC COVENANT

**Great name:** "I will make for you a great name" (2 Sam 7:9)

**Dynastic succession:** "I will raise up your offspring after you ... and I will establish his kingdom" (2 Sam 7:12)

**Land:** "I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place" (2 Sam 7:10)

**Rest from enemies:** "Violent men shall afflict them no more ... I will give you rest from all your enemies" (2 Sam 7:10-11).

In addition, as far as Abraham and David are concerned, there are also allusions to a special divine-human relationship (Gen 17:7-8; 2 Sam 7:24; cf. Ps 89:27) and a unique line of *seed* through which their names would be perpetuated (Gen 21:12; 2 Sam 7:12-16). Further, their descendants are required to maintain God's precepts (Gen 18:19; 2 Sam 7:14; cf. Ps 89:31-33; 132:12) and a special descendant of both would mediate universal blessing (Gen 22:18; Ps 72:17).

22:18; 26:4; 28:14). The covenant confirms this promise, establishing a relationship between God and Abraham that underscores divine initiative and fidelity.

Blessing in the biblical tradition signifies fertility, prosperity, and protection (cf. Gen 24:35-36; Lev 26:4-13; Deut 28:3-15). Abraham's obedience to God ensures these blessings for his descendants, while disobedience interrupts them (cf. Deut 28). The Abrahamic blessing has two dimensions:

- National (Gen 12:1–2c): Abraham will become a great nation with a great name, linked to territorial possession and status.
- International (Gen 12:2d–3): Through Abraham, all families of the earth will be blessed, highlighting a universal, non-political scope.

The text contrasts Abraham's promised *great name* with the failed ambitions of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) and parallels David's international status (2 Sam 7:9). The universal promise reunites dispersed families of the earth, previously cursed (Gen 3:17–19), through Abraham's mediation.

Finally, the blessing promise anticipates two related prospects: Abraham as recipient and mediator. His role as mediator depends on his reception of blessing, emphasising his free consent in God's plan. The ultimate divine intention is universal blessing, not a curse, through Abraham.<sup>64</sup>

### 3 Land: Central to Covenant Identity

The land promise, initially implicit (Gen 12:1), becomes explicit in Gen 12:7 and is reaffirmed throughout Genesis (13:14–17; 15:18–21; 17:8). Abraham understood this as the literal land of Canaan, confirmed by his journey and covenant ratification (Gen 15). The land motif dominates Israel's hopes and prophetic literature (Isa 11, 14, 43, 60, 66; Jer 30–33; Ezek 11, 20, 34, 37, 39; cf. Hos 3; Joel 3; Amos 9; Obad; Mic 4; Zech 8, 10), signifying divine gift rather than historical accident. Israel's existence as a nation is inseparable from this territorial promise, which is consistently linked to progeny and blessing (Gen 12:7; cf. 13:15-17; 15:13-18-21; 17:7-8; 22:17; 24:7; 26:3-4; 28:13-14; 35:12; 48:4; Exod 6:2-8; Deut 1:6-8; 34:1-4; Josh 1:1-16; Ps 105:7-13, 42-45).

### 4 Divine Election and Universalism

Abraham's call (Gen 12:1–3) was a sovereign, unmerited choice by God, forming the foundation for Israel's identity as God's chosen people. Let us explore the following key points:

- Election and Covenant: God's promises to Abraham, later formalised in covenants (Gen 15; 17), underpin Israel's election. This choice was not

<sup>64</sup> Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promise Land*, 146.

based on Abraham’s merit but on God’s grace and purpose. The notion that Israel is God’s unique nation is confirmed throughout the Old Testament (cf. Deut 7:6-8; 14:2; 26:17-19; 2 Sam 7:23-24; 1 Kgs 10:9; 1 Chr 17:20-21; Pss 105:8-15; 135:4; Isa 43:1-3; Jer 31:1-4, 9-11; 46:27-28; Ezek 36:24-28; 37:21-25; Joel 3:1-2; Amos 3:1-2).

- Terminology: The technical Hebrew term for *choose/elect* is בָּחַר. It expresses the idea of deliberately selecting someone for a particular purpose or role.<sup>65</sup> Even though this term does not appear in the call of Abraham, it is implicit therein. The notion expressing Abraham’s election is denoted by יָדַע (Gen 18:19).<sup>66</sup>
- Biblical Evidence: References from Nehemiah (Neh 9:7), Isaiah (Isa 41:8–9; 51:1–2), and other texts affirm Abraham’s unique role and Israel’s election. Abraham is depicted as God’s *friend* and *redeemed*, emphasising divine initiative.
- Purpose of Election: Election is not arbitrary; it serves a universal purpose—Israel is chosen to be a conduit of blessing for all nations (Gen

<sup>65</sup> H. Seebass, “בָּחַר,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 2, 75–87; H. Wildberger, in “בָּחַר,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 1, 209–226; Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 119–120.

<sup>66</sup> The verb יָדַע denotes a relationship based on covenant making and the Lord’s unique relations with specific individuals. Although the verb בָּחַר expresses the technical concept of election, there are other terms used to convey the notion that Israel was set apart as God’s chosen people. The vocabulary of election incorporates the terms, בָּחַר (to choose/elect), קָרָא (to call), יָדַע (to know) and בָּדַל (to separate). The Hebrew verb, יָדַע, has a wide range of meanings. It may indicate mental knowledge, in the sense that someone *understands* or *has knowledge* of something; W. Schottroff, “יָדַע,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 2, 508–511. However, the concept of *knowing* has a specialised meaning in Semitic languages, a meaning that has to do with relationship and primarily a relationship that is based on covenant making. It has also been noted from some ancient Near Eastern literature that the Semitic root, יָדַע, was used in this covenant sense. For instance, in a Hittite treaty between the Great King Suppiluliumas (who refers to himself as *the Sun*) and a Vassal king, Hugganas, whom he is installing to serve him, it is noted: “And you, Hugganas, know only the Sun regarding lordship: also my son of whom I, the Sun, say, ‘This one everyone should know...,’ you, Hugganas, know him! Moreover, those who are my sons, his brothers, or my brothers... know as brother and associate. Moreover, another lord... do not know. The Sun alone know! Moreover, any other do not know.” For further study on this Hittite treaty, see H. B. Huffman, “The Treaty Background of Hebrew יָדַע,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 181 (1966): 31–37. Furthermore, יָדַע in the Old Testament describes God’s unique relationship with certain individuals (Gen 18:19; Exod 33:12, 17; Deut 34:10; Jer 1:5; cf. 2 Sam 7:20; 1 Chr 17:18); Schottroff, “יָדַע,” 516. This brief survey suggests that Abraham had a special relationship with God. The term implies intimacy in relationship (cf. Am 3:2; Exod 33:12, 17; Deut 34:10; 2 Sam 7:20; Hos 13:5); John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 304. The verb, in the patriarchal narratives, occurs only in Gen 18:19 with this meaning.

12:3). This introduces a universalist dimension within the Abrahamic covenant.

- Pedagogy of God: Instead of overwhelming humanity with divine power, God chose a relational approach through Abraham, fostering freedom and dialogue.
- Implications for Israel: Israel's mission is to witness God's salvation to the nations (Isa 49:6), embodying righteousness and justice.
- Election in Abraham's Descendants: The choice of Isaac over Ishmael illustrates divine sovereignty and covenant continuity.

## 5 Canonical Significance

These themes—progeny, blessing, land, and election—form a theological hinge between Babel's judgment and the promise of global blessing. They affirm covenantal unity, intertextual resonance, and ecclesial relevance, situating Abraham's call within God's overarching plan for universal salvation.

## D CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that when Gen 12:1-9 is approached through the canonical approach, it manifests a rich theological material that goes beyond its immediate historical context. By underscoring the final form of the pericope as the locus of revelation, the canonical approach affirms the theological cohesion and intertextual resonance of the Abrahamic call narrative within the wider biblical canon. The themes of offspring, land, blessing, divine election and universalism are not isolated theological concepts but are ingrained within the covenant structure that shapes Israel's identity and mission. Genesis 12:1-9 acts as a theological hinge, which bridges the judgment of Babel with the promise of global blessing, ushering in a narrative trajectory that culminates in the global scope of divine grace. The canonical approach, therefore, provides a hermeneutical model that complements historical-critical methods by foregrounding the theological intentionality and ecclesial relevance of the biblical text. In declaring the unity and authority of the Bible, this study contributes to the ongoing discussions in biblical studies. It furnishes a framework for faith-oriented exegesis that is both contextually grounded and theologically generative.

The study identifies the following contributions to biblical scholarship and theological discussions:

Firstly, methodological lacuna: It consolidates the significance of the canonical approach as a complement to the historical-critical approach, proving a theological reading that takes into consideration the text's final form and its function within the community of faith.

Secondly, theological insights: By identifying motifs such as progeny, blessing, land, election and universalism, the article highlights how Gen 12:1-9

acts as a theological hinge between the judgment of Babel and the hope of universal blessing through Abraham.

Thirdly, intertextuality: The study underscores the interdependence of biblical texts, demonstrating that Gen 12:1-9 resonates with earlier and later passages, thereby enhancing our comprehension of divine purpose and covenant.

Fourthly, contribution to faith communities: The research provides a framework for reading biblical texts that is both 'faithful' to their theological intention and pertinent to modern faith communities, especially in debates about identity, mission and divine-human relationship.

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