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**Are God’s New Testament Promises
Assuring Final Redemption Ultimately
Contingent Upon Human Obedience?**

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Abstract

God does not ‘make it up as He goes along.’ Nor must he be viewed as a bumbling administrator who is so inept in His planning that His blueprint for redemption must be endlessly subject to revision according to the actions of men.²

My goal in this article is to support the view expressed by Sproul, and to argue that God’s New Testament promises of assuring final redemption are not ultimately contingent upon human obedience. Rather, it is an individual’s participation in these promises that sustains the individual’s obedience. “Participation is made possible by the grace of an empowering Spirit, sent by the risen Jesus, [and by] God’s forgiveness--a God whose mercy it is always to forgive those who repent.”³

Introduction

New Testament scholars observe that God’s promises of redemption in the New Testament are rooted in God’s promises to Abraham, promises that are fulfilled in Jesus, and now extended to include Gentiles. Paul Borgman, for example, states that, “According to Luke, God’s ultimate purpose for this earth is crystallized in events surrounding Jesus, most especially the redemption of Israel dramatized in Acts.”⁴ Borgman further states that, “According to Luke, the divine purpose will be fulfilled in a universal restoration, a global *shalom* whose ancient roots are to be found in God’s ancient promise to Abraham of blessing for all families (Acts 3:21, 25)”⁵ Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s oath to Abraham (Luke 1:68-73). The early Christian community recalled Jesus saying that, “Many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in

² R. C. Sproul, “The Blueprint of Redemption.” (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/blueprint-redemption>, Feb. 1, 2004). Accessed July 26, 2011.

³ Paul Borgman, *The Way According to Luke. Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), x.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11). In the work of Jesus, other people besides the Jews are called to inherit the promises made to Abraham. What is important here is that redemption, like the Israelites leaving Egypt, is entirely God’s idea. This idea of promise, oath, redemption, and the irrevocability of the promise is a strong argument in several New Testament texts. The interplay of the fragmentary insights from a few of these texts will put us on the way for discovering the truth of the certainty of redemption. For a brief discussion of the question, we will use the following outline:

A. God’s Original Promise to Abram

God’s original promise to Abram (later Abraham) is found in Genesis 12:2-3:

2. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. 3. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse: and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

In 12:1, God called Abram to leave his country and go to the land he would show him, which is followed by a three-part promise. Just as the tribal god of Abraham comes to be understood later as the God of nation of Israel, and finally as Lord God of the universe, so here, Genesis 12:2-3 describe a progressive buildup of the good things that will come out of Abram obeying God’s command. (1) Abram alone is blessed, (2) Abram’s blessers are blessed, and (3) all nations on earth find blessing in Abram. So that the ultimate goal of Abram leaving his country is that all nations on earth will be blessed through him. So the passage transitions from Abram as a man to Abram as a means of blessing, world-wide blessing.

In Genesis 26:1-6, the Lord appeared to Isaac and affirmed to him his continuity with his father Abraham, by telling Isaac about the oath that the Lord had sworn to Abraham. In 26:4, Abram as a man of blessing has become means of blessing (12:3b): “through your offspring [referring to Abram] all nations on earth will be blessed.” So that Isaac has become heir to the Abrahamic promises.

1. God’s Test of Abram, and the Confirmation of the Promise by an Oath.

The Akedah narrative is generally attributed to the E source, and the purpose of the story is stated at the very beginning of the narrative: God testing Abraham’s faith: “Take your son, your only

one, he whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice his there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” (22:2). The emotionally charged nature of the narrative is pointed out by Jon D. Levenson with the author’s increasing tension in the Hebrew—“your son, your only one, he whom you love, Isaac” (2:2).⁶ Then after three days of journeying, the tension came to a climax when Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son (22:10). At this critical moment God called out to Abraham from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” To which he replied “Here I am.” (22:11). [Heb. *hineni*] Again Levenson points out that:

There is no good English equivalent for the Hebrew “hinehi,” translated in the verse “Here I am. The term indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instruction.⁷

There is a maze of meanings to the Akedah narrative, but we can work through it if we take it exactly what the text says it is: a test from God. It beats anybody’s understanding why God would create such a test. God had already made a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15 and 17). Has God come to doubt Abraham’s faith? The test here places Abraham in a difficult paradoxical situation: If he does God’s will by killing his son, he becomes a murderer. If he does not do it, he fails to do God’s will. The text suggests that Abraham was disposed to doing God’s will—to kill his son—when God stayed his hand (22:12).

Abraham’s readiness to offer his only son to God convinced God about Abraham’s fear of God: “Now I know that you fear God.” (22:12). As Levenson explains,

In the Tanakh, the “fear of God” denotes an active obedience to the divine will. God is now able to call the last trial of Abraham off because Abraham has demonstrated that this obedience is uppermost for him, surpassing even his paternal love for Isaac. (22:13)⁸

⁶ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis. Introduction and Annotations,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 45.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 46.

It can be argued that it is on the basis of Abraham's profound fear of God that God confirmed the old promises⁹ to him by an oath.

2. Confirmation of the promise to Abraham by an oath.

An oath is an invocation to God to witness the truth of a statement, or a solemn promise. The seriousness of oaths is emphasized in the laws of Moses. For example: "Do not swear by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:12). Scripture also testifies that God bound himself by an oath: "Oh Lord, where is your former great love which in your faithfulness you swore to David?" (Ps 89:49). "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). Here in Genesis 22:19, having seen Abraham's demonstration of his fear of God, God swears an oath for the first time in the narrative, "in effect laying the divine life on the line, putting the very divine self behind the promise."¹⁰

B. New Testament Writers and the Abrahamic Promises: The Inclusion of Gentiles

New Testament authors appropriate the fulfillment of the covenant of universal blessing to Jesus as the offspring of Abraham through whom the promises are fulfilled. Luke, in the book of Acts, as Robert Wall observes, presents the people of God as "restored Israel in the last days of salvation's history."¹¹ Paul Borgman thinks that, "Here [in Acts] is the drama of the fulfillment to the ancient covenant established by God with Abraham."¹² Luke demonstrates this through the speeches in Acts.

1. Peter's Speech after the Healing of the Crippled Beggar: God's Fulfillment of the promise in Jesus Christ. (Acts 3:11-26)

After the healing of the Crippled Beggar, Peter spoke to the astonished onlookers. In 3:26, Peter made the following declaration: "And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made

⁹ See Genesis 12 for God's covenant with Abraham.

¹⁰ Terence Fretheim, "The book of Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) Vo. I, 498.

¹¹ Robert Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles." In the *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 305.

¹² Borgman. *The Way According to Luke*, p. 264.

with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’” Peter continued to explain that the fulfillment happened “when God raised up his servant and sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (3:26). So Peter’s speech concludes with reference to the covenant of Abraham to whose descendants in the first place the servant has been sent. Marion Soards points out that the thought here is related to God’s working out of the divine plan, and also draws attention to the crucial Christological dimension of the realization of God’s blessing the hearers.¹³

2. Peter’s Speech Concerning Gentiles: The inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-43)

Peter’s first speech to Gentiles resulted from a vision from God extending blessing to Gentiles. Accordingly, in Peter’s initial declaration, he emphasized the universal and impartial character of God’s salvation’s peace that God has offered in Jesus Christ, who was first introduced to Israel as the messenger of peace, but has universal appeal as “Lord of all.” (v36). The speech concentrates on the Jesus story and what God has done through Jesus (vv36-42).

While Peter was still speaking to Cornelius and his friends and family, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” (44). When Peter heard the audience “speaking in tongues and extolling God,” a sign that “the gift of the Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (45-46), he was convinced that there is now no distinction between Jew and Gentile. (cf. Acts 15:9). Gentiles are to be admitted into the new community of Israel. The Holy Spirit has admitted them into it. They received the sign and seal of belonging to the kingdom—the Holy Spirit.

Peter reappears at the Apostolic Council to address the issue of circumcision, and ended up defending the acceptance of Gentiles into the new community:

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. . . . We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. (Acts 15:8-11).

¹³ Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) pp. 43-44.

Even though the promise made to Abraham is not mentioned explicitly in Peter's address in the house of Cornelius,¹⁴ for Luke, the episode marks the inauguration of the mission to the Gentiles, and their inclusion in the promise as Peter had said in his address on Pentecost: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call (2:39).

3. Paul and the Abrahamic Promise: What made it possible for Gentiles to be saved? (Galatians 3:6-14, 16).

The citations in Galatians 3:6-14 that mention Abraham come from Genesis 15:6 and 12:3. The apostle Paul introduces the figure of the Abraham in Gal. 3:6 with reference to Genesis 15:6. "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." The NIV begins Gal. 3:6 as "Consider Abraham." This can also be rendered as "Just as Abraham," that is to say, "just as Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness," and the inference is drawn in verse 7, which becomes the basis for Paul for affirming that the true descendants of Abraham are those who like him act in faith. (Understand then that those who believe are children of Abraham." (v7). Moises Silva comments that,

By introducing the figure of the patriarch, Paul grounds his argument in redemptive History ...The apostle's point is not simply that we should believe as Abraham Believed... but that those who believe become recipients of the redemptive blessing associated with the patriarch.¹⁵

Paul's next reference to Abraham is in verse 8, a reference to Genesis 12:3, "In you shall all nations be blessed." The reference supports Paul's argument, that it is through faith that people become descendants of Abraham. Paul brings up the blessing of Abraham again in v 4, but first introducing Christ into the argument. In vv13 and 16, Paul understands the Christ event as designating him as the Abraham's promised offspring. So it is in Christ that God's promise

¹⁴ Carl R. Holladay points out that the essential message of Peter's address to the Gentiles is that "Jesus is God's story continued," which "admittedly has Jewish roots." See *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays Gen. Ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), p. 1093.

¹⁵ Moises Silva. "Galatians." In *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, ed. By G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) p. 793.

to Abraham, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you,” is fulfilled. Because of Christ, the promised offspring of Abraham, the Gentiles receive the blessing of Abraham: redemption (v13) and the Holy Spirit (v14).

C. The Certainty of God’s Promise of Eternal Redemption

Concerning the certainty of God’s promise of eternal redemption, the author of the letter to the Hebrews makes the strongest argument. The letter to the Hebrews is closely linked to Jewish traditions. J.R. Porter points out that, “The distinctive characteristic of Hebrews is that it seeks throughout to show that Jesus is the true fulfillment of Judaism’s history and faith.”¹⁶ In his summary of the letter, Porter writes: “The letter shows how Jesus represents the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel...Salvation comes through him and his works.”¹⁷

Several passages in the letter attempt to show the certainty of these promises, in a new covenant, to believers in Jesus Christ.

1. Hebrews 6:13-20

The Scripture basis for the argument for God’s sure promise is God’s promise to Abraham. Heb. 6:13-16 recall God’s response to Abraham’s faithfulness with an oath, swearing by himself, to confirm the promise to Abraham. God’s promise is an open and declared revelation of his will concerning Abraham and all nations on earth. (Gen. 22:18, 19). This declaration is secure because God pledged himself to perform it. The promise was bound up with the life of God. Marcus Dods has pointed out that, the promise was so implicated with God’s “purposes that God could as soon cease to be, as neglect the fulfillment of it.”¹⁸ Dods continues to say that: “Lying as it did at the root of all future development, and marking out as it did, the true end for which the world exists, it seems to be bound up with the very life of God.”¹⁹

¹⁶ J.R. Porter. *The Illustrated Guide to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 250.

¹⁷ Ibid., 271.

¹⁸ Marcus Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews.” In *Expositor’s Greek New Testament*. Ed. By W. Robertson Nicoll (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), vol. IV p. 302.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Philo once asked this question: “Why then did it seem well...to represent God as binding himself by an oath?” In answer to his own question, Philo thinks that, “It was to convince natural man of his weakness and to accompany conviction with help and comfort.”²⁰

Hebrews 6:13-16 develop two themes: (1) Abraham as a prototype of those who trust in God’s promises; and (2) God’s promise guaranteed by oath. Verse 14 restates the promise, “Surely I will bless you.” “Surely” here translates the Greek expression, “blessing, I will bless you.” This expression gives emphasis and certainty to the promise “I will bless you.” That is to say, whatever happens, God would redeem and bless Abraham and the world through him. The second theme as noted above is God’s promise guaranteed by an oath. Verse 16 explains the function of oaths in general. An oath functions in two ways: it puts an end to all argument, and it establishes and confirms the truth of statements. The author uses this understanding of the function of oath to explain the implication of God’s oath to “the heirs of promise” in Hebrews 6:17-18

2. Hebrews 6:17-18 (NIV)

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure

There are two things here that the author wants to explain about the unchangeable nature of God’s purpose. The two things are: God’s promise and God’s oath. God, wanting to demonstrate, exceedingly clearly, to the heirs of the promise,” the irrevocable nature, the inviolable truth of his promise, and God’s power to fulfill it, God swore an oath that is impossible for him to falsify. Again, Dods argues that,

God decided, as it were, from his own absolute exaltation in order, so to speak, to look up to himself after the manner of men and take himself to witness; and

²⁰ Ibid., quoted by Dods.

so by a gracious condescension confirm the promise for the sake of its inheritors.²¹

To the author of Hebrews, it is impossible for God to break his promise, and impossible for him to falsify his oath. With these two pillars underneath God's unchangeable purpose, the author makes his major point about the certainty of God's redemption, and strongly encourages Christians, who are represented here as refugees fleeing from some danger to lay hold on something that promises safety, which the author describes as "the hope set before us" (18b). The author does not elaborate on "hope," but likens it to an anchor, symbolizing something that is established and firm.

3. Hebrews 6:19-20

In verse 18, the author introduced the idea of the "hope set before us." In verse 19, the author likens the hope to an anchor of the soul, symbolizing something that is established, firm, and safe, and in the presence of God ("the inner sanctuary, behind the curtain.")²² Albert Vanhoye explains that,

For Christians, however, this does not refer to the Jerusalem. Here, the metaphorical expression is referring to Jesus entering into heaven itself in the presence of God (9:24). The entering is an act of priestly mediation which opens up the path to God for every believer.²³

In verse 20, Jesus has already entered the heavenly sanctuary where he performs the work of a high priest. The mention of Melchizedek here recalls Ps 110:4,

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind
You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek

Psalms 110:4 establishes the ground that having become a High Priest in the order of Melchizedek,²⁴ Jesus carries the hope of believers with

²¹ "Epistle to the Hebrew," p. 304.

²² The "inner sanctuary behind the curtain" refers to the Most Holy Place, the place of God's presence. Under the old covenant only the high priest could step behind the curtain in the temple, separating the outer area a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:2, 12, 15).

²³ Albert Vanhoye, "Hebrews." In the *International Bible Commentary*, p. 1777.

²⁴ Melchizedek was one of the Jebusite kings who ruled Jerusalem before its capture by David (Genesis 14).

him to the realities that lie behind the veil, because he is the High Priest who has made atonement for sin with his own blood. (9:11-14). By his death, he secured for believers the power follow where he has gone. The author recognized a prototype of priesthood of Jesus that is eternal (7:24, 28) and superior to that of Aaron. This Christological development begun here will dominate Chapters 8-10, where the author talks about the significance of Jesus' crucifixion. But by introducing it here in the context of the discussion of the certainty of God's redemptive promises, it establishes the work of Christ as the third pillar on which God's promise of eternal redemption stands securely.

D. The Warning Texts

We have attempted, up to this point, to argue that God's promises of eternal redemption are not contingent upon human obedience. However, throughout the doctrinal sections of the Letter, the author intersperses strong warnings against falling away from the faith (apostasy). (See for example, 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:20; 10:19-31; 12:5-17). In 3:7-4:13, the author uses an example from Israel's wilderness expedience to warn readers against falling away from the faith (3:8-11), using scripture from Psalms 95:7b-11. In 3:12, he concludes with this warning: "Take care therefore, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." So, based on Psalm 95, the author implies that the wilderness generation, because of its failure, could not enter God's rest (see also 1 Cor 10:18).

The parallel "today" is that the readers could fall away from the living God because of faithlessness. The author seems to be explaining what he means by apostasy and its severity in 4:6-8: It is impossible to restore to repentance those who have once been enlightened...and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit...if they then commit apostasy..." Hereby the question is raised as to whether the promise of redemption is contingent upon human obedience, holding fast to the end. We can also ask the question whether the situation in Numbers 14 that led to the Lord withdrawing the promise that he had made on oath to their ancestors in the same as falling away from the faith. In numbers 14, the people actually rebelled against the Lord, and wanted to return to Egypt. In Hebrews, Commentators think that the author is exhorting readers to persevere

in their Christian commitment against the pressures of their neighbors.²⁵ For any further discussion of the question, I will defer to Paul's view in 1 Corinthians 3:12-14:

In any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Conclusion

New Testament writers affirm the promises that God made to Abraham, and argue that through the work of Jesus Christ the promise has been fulfilled and now includes Gentiles as well. Regarding the eternal security of the promise, the New Testament writers argue that it is eternally secure, because it is established on three pillars that are unchangeable, and irrevocable, namely, God's promise, God's oath, and the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Believers are strongly encouraged not to fall away from faithfulness, but to hold fast to the end. I will support the view that if a person who has been redeemed falls away from faithfulness, that person will suffer some loss, but does not lose his or her redemption. That is to say, God's promises of eternal redemption are not contingent upon human obedience.



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²⁵ See for example David A. deSilver. *An Introduction to the New Testament. Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) p.785.