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Chapter 7

ABRAHAM IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Joshua W. Jipp

Within the canonical Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, the biblical patriarch Abraham plays a significant, if not primary, role in determining the identity of the people of God, establishing continuity between God's covenantal dealings with Israel and Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. This ensures a connection between the Abrahamic promise for seed and God's promise to David to raise up seed for him, and in setting forth a paradigm for the ethical behavior demanded by the God of Israel. In what follows, I will examine the role of Abraham within the canonical Gospels and the book of Acts. While I will attend on occasion to important traditions which may have influenced these writings, my primary interest and emphasis is on the literary nature of the compositions, and the role that Abraham plays within their broader narrative worlds.

The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew begins his Gospel by describing Jesus Christ with two titles: "son of David" and "son of Abraham" (Mt. 1:1). While Matthew's primary interest is in portraying Jesus as Israel's Davidic Messiah (e.g., 2:5-6; 21:9-15),¹ his royal-messianic identity only makes sense in light of the way in which Israel's Davidic traditions presuppose and expand upon the Abrahamic traditions (cf. Gal. 3:16). The seed of David is, then, the heir of the promises made to Abraham. This can be seen immediately in the way Matthew structures his genealogy as neatly moving from three periods of fourteen generations, moving from Abraham (1:2-6), to

1. The centrality of Jesus as Davidic Messiah for Matthew is argued for in a variety of important works. See, for example, N.G. Piotrowski, *Matthew's New David at the End of Exile: A Socio-Rhetorical Study of Scriptural Quotations* (NovTSup 170; Leiden: Brill, 2016); A. LeDonne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

David (1:6-11), to the Babylonian exile (1:12-16) and culminating with the birth of Jesus the Messiah (1:16-17). We will have to attend to Matthew's narrative to discern the precise meaning and significance of Jesus' identity as "son of Abraham," but already it would seem justifiable to claim that Matthew is presenting Jesus Christ as the goal of God's election of Israel. Matthew's reference to Jesus as "the son of Abraham" draws, then, the identity of Jesus together with God's election and origins of Israel as his people. Anders Runesson rightly notes that one cannot "understand Matthew's story and focus on Israel without also acknowledging the notion of Israel's election as implied."² Matthew's genealogy thereby demands that his Gospel be interpreted in such a way that there is deep continuity between Matthew's story and God's election of Israel.³

Matthew is adamant that Abrahamic descent does not provide a safeguard against divine judgment. John the Baptist, forerunner of Jesus' proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:2; 4:17), preaches that Abrahamic descent and election does not translate into salvation. John's call for repentance is situated within the warning directed toward "the Pharisees and Sadducees" (3:7) that only "fruit worthy of repentance" rather than confidence that one has "Abraham as our father" (3:8-9) will enable one to escape "the coming wrath" (3:7). God has the power, in fact, to create "children for Abraham" (τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ) out of the stones and rocks at the Jordan river (3:9). As Jon Levenson has noted, the election of Abraham and genealogical descent from his family is quite simply irrelevant as it pertains to salvation and the avoidance of God's wrath.⁴ Nothing that the Baptist states here is necessarily in conflict with the assertion of God's election of Abraham and his family in Matthew 1:1-17, nor *should* his statement be seen as implying God's rejection of his election of Israel. John's warning, however, does preview Matthew's ongoing polemic against Israel's religious leaders who, Matthew warns, must not presume that their descent from Abraham provides them with an excuse to refuse John's and Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of heaven and the need for repentance. This is the beginning of Matthew's narration of the conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees and the pronouncement of judgment for their refusal to repent.⁵ John's message previews Jesus' parable of the owner of the vineyard (Mt. 21:33-45), an owner who in response to the tenants' failure to procure fruit "takes away the kingdom of God [from Israel's authorities] and gives it to a people

2. A. Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 182.

3. R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 110.

4. J.D. Levenson, *Abraham Between Torah and Gospel* (The Pere Marquette Lecture in Theology; Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011), 34.

5. On this theme, and the way in which the warning is directed *primarily* to the authorities of Israel (rather than the people as a whole), see M. Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew* (trans. K. Ess; Baylor-Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 167-264.

(ἐθνει) producing its fruit" (21:43). That this is directed against Israel's authorities (rather than the people of Israel) is made explicit in 21:45 where the chief priests and Pharisees understand that Jesus directs the parable against them (21:45).⁶ John's demand that only the fruits of repentance will enable one to avoid God's wrath is consistent with the narrative's broader portrayal of entrance into the kingdom of God as contingent upon repentance, obedience, and doing what Jesus teaches (e.g., Matt. 7:13-23; 16:27).

Finally, Jesus declares that sharing in the eschatological banquet with Abraham and the patriarchs is contingent upon a faithful response to his person and teaching. In Jesus' encounter with the Roman centurion (8:5-13), Jesus responds to the man's understanding of and submission to Jesus' authority with the pronouncement: "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with so great a faith" (8:10). Jesus portrays this non-Jewish man as an exemplar of "the many" when he declares that "many will come from the east and west and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth" (8:11-12). God's election of Abraham and the patriarchs and his affirmation of the divinely created origins of Israel are upheld, and yet Jesus' pronouncement again engages in a surprising definition of who will experience the hospitality of the kingdom and who will be excluded. In Hays' words: "In the Matthean narrative context, this can only mean that the centurion exemplifies 'many' *non-Israelites* who will ultimately be included in salvation and the great final eschatological feast. . . ."⁷ Again, it would be too simplistic and wrong-headed to interpret this as a contrast between Gentiles who are welcomed and Jews who are excluded. Jesus' exaltation of the centurion's faith is spoken to those Jews "who are following" him (8:10), namely "the large crowds" (8:1; cf. 4:25) listening to his proclamation of the Sermon on the Mount. The commendation of the centurion's faith thereby functions as an exhortation to the crowds who are listening to his teaching (7:28-29). Entrance into the eschatological banquet with Abraham is mediated through one's response to Jesus, and therefore a faithless or hostile response will result in a situation where even "the sons of the kingdom" are excluded (8:11).

While many have seen here a reference to Israel's exclusion, it may make better sense to understand the warning to "the sons of the kingdom" as referring to those who have heard and responded to Jesus' teaching but are in need of further exhortations to follow. This makes good sense of the fact that the parallel phrase "sons of the kingdom" in Matthew 13:38 refers to "the good seed" in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (13:36-43) as well as the literary context of 8:5-13, which seems much more concerned with exhortations and warnings to followers of Jesus

6. For a further defense of interpreting this parable in a non-supersessionist manner, see Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew*, 173-93.

7. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 181.

to continue to listen and respond to his teaching (cf. 7:21-9).⁸ However, Jesus' note that "many will come from east and west" (8:11) almost certainly previews the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises that the nations will be blessed through the seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4; 15:1-6; et al.). Just as Isa. 25:6-8 envisioned a banquet that is for "all the peoples" and "all the nations," (Isa. 25:7), so Mt. 8:5-13 portrays participating in the eschatological banquet as for both Jews and Gentiles who respond positively to Jesus.

Thus, Matthew's initial statement that Jesus is "the son of Abraham" (1:1) would seem to have universalistic connotations, and this possibility may be further strengthened by the fact that, as is often noted, Matthew's genealogy includes four non-Jewish women in Jesus' family lineage (Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba).⁹ As the climax of God's dealings with his people Israel, the Messiah thereby opens up salvation to the nations; for this reason, one finds within Matthew a variety of texts speaking of the extension of salvation to Jews *and Gentiles* as fulfilling scriptural texts which signal God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham that *through him* he would bless the nations (e.g., Mt. 2:1-12 and Isa. 60:1-6; 4:15-16 and Isa. 9:1-2; 12:15-21 and Isa. 42:6-7; 28:16-20, and Dan. 7:13-14).¹⁰

The Gospel of Mark

Abraham is only mentioned by name in one place in the Gospel of Mark as part of Jesus's response in 12:18-27 (cf. Mt. 22:23-33; Lk. 20:27-38) to some Sadducees who challenge Jesus by asking him about a woman married (consecutively) to seven different men: "whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For the seven men had her as a wife" (12:23).¹¹ Their question is intended, it would seem, to trip up Jesus by mocking the belief in the resurrection from the dead. Jesus rebukes them, however, for failing to understand both "the Scriptures and the power of God" (12:24b). Jesus argues that their own Scriptures testify to the doctrine of the resurrection for the dead, and he appeals to Exod. 3:6: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the living, not the dead. You are greatly deceived"

8. More typical, however, are interpretations that follow Siker's conclusion that "Jews who do not demonstrate faith will be cut off from the kingdom, while the Gentiles who do exhibit faith will find themselves included in the kingdom and will sit at table with Abraham." See J.S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 84

9. See, for example, U. Luz, *Matthew 1—7: A Commentary* (trans. W.C. Linss; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 107–11; J.B. Hood, *The Messiah, His Brothers, and the Nations: Matthew 1.1—17* (LNTS 441; New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

10. Whether Matthew envisions the nations as saved *qua* the nations *or* as proselytes cannot be entered into here. See, for example, Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew*, 364–73.

11. Their question presumes the practice of levirate marriage (e.g., Gen. 38:8).

(12:26b-27; cf. Acts 3:13; 7:32). Joel Marcus notes that this is “hardly the sense that the formula ‘the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob’ had in the original . . . [and that it] means that just as he delivered those patriarchs from their distress, so will he now liberate and succor their enslaved descendants.”¹² And yet if God is the God of life who continues to demonstrate his power and covenant faithfulness to his people, then it is not too far removed to suggest that the recipients of his faithfulness “will ultimately be crowned by their liberation from the power of death itself.”¹³ Jesus’ response is congruent with Luke’s parable which will depict Abraham and those in his bosom as participants in some form of blessed postmortem existence (Luke 16:22-23).

The Gospel of Luke

In the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, the author draws upon Abraham in order to establish “a connection and continuity between the history of Abraham and the events of which he himself is writing.”¹⁴ Abraham is the father of Israel, the recipient of God’s promises, the father of the repentant, the outcasts, and marginalized within Israel, and the one through whom God will bless all the families of the earth.

Unlike Matthew, however, who draws a more obvious or explicit connection through his fulfillment citations, Luke accomplishes a similar end through subtle hints that his story is a continuation of God’s covenantal promises made to Abraham. The miraculous conceptions of John and Jesus resonate powerfully with the stories of the barren women in Israel’s Scriptures, not least that of Sarah (Genesis 12–21) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1–2). Joel Green has set forth an impressive list of the parallels between God’s powerful mercy to the barren Sarah and God’s opening of the wombs of Elizabeth and Mary in Luke 1–2.¹⁵ To give just a few examples: Sarai and Elizabeth are barren (Gen. 11:30; Luke 1:7); promises are made which share the common language of greatness, blessing, and seed (Gen. 12:2-7; 13:14-17; Luke 1:15, 32, 55, 73); the recipients of the promise are advanced in age (Gen. 17:1; Gen. 18:11-13; Luke 1:7, 11, 18); both are recipients of divine/angelic visitations (Gen. 17:22; Luke 1:38). Many more parallels could be adduced, but enough have been invoked to indicate Luke’s intention to portray to the reader that God’s merciful kindness to Abraham has not been forgotten, and

12. J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (AYBC 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 835.

13. *Ibid.*, 835. See further the argument of J.D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

14. N.A. Dahl, “The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts”, in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds. L.E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1966), 139–58, here, 140.

15. J.B. Green, “The Problem of a Beginning: Israel’s Scriptures in Luke 1–2”, *BBR* 4 (1994): 61–86, here, 68–71.

that in the event Luke is narrating in his Gospel (and the second volume as well), God is continuing the story and promises he had initiated with Abraham in Genesis. Both the speeches of Mary and Zechariah interpret God's act to open the wombs of Mary and Elizabeth in relationship to the promises made to Abraham. Thus, Mary: "[God] has helped his servant Israel, to remember mercy (μνησθῆναι ἐλέους), just as he spoke to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his seed forever" (Luke 1:54-55). Similarly, Zechariah declares that God has "shown mercy (ἐλεος) with our fathers and remembered (μνησθῆναι) his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to Abraham our father" (Luke 1:72-73). For Luke, then, Abraham functions as the initial and primary recipient of God's promises, and thus God's opening of the wombs of Elizabeth and Mary function as the concrete display of God's merciful remembrance of these promises.¹⁶ Despite lacking the literary adornment of Matthew, Luke's genealogy does not surprise the reader when it lists Abraham and the patriarchs as the ancestors of Jesus (3:34).

Yet, even within Luke's infancy narrative, the reader is alerted to the expectation that God's merciful remembrance of his promises to Abraham will not take place without conflict and division. Thus, Simeon prophesies to Mary that her son has been "appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and a sign to be spoken against and that even a sword will pierce your soul" (2:34b-35a). Mary's hymn has interpreted God's actions to be good news for the poor, the hungry, and humiliated and judgment for the proud, powerful, and rich (1:51-53). John the Baptist's primary task is to lead Israel to turn back to God so that there will be a "people made ready, prepared for the Lord" (1:17, 76; 3:1-6). Not unlike what we have seen in Matthew's Gospel, the Baptist functions as a sign that God's election of Abraham does not translate into salvation *apart* from a believing response to John and Jesus.¹⁷ Thus, just as in Matthew's Gospel, John warns them that their descent from Abraham is irrelevant apart from producing fruit that is worthy of repentance (3:8a). Non-fruit bearing trees will be "cut off and cast into the fire" (3:9). John describes this repentant, fruit-bearing response in embodied and tangible terms of sharing one's possessions and refusing to engage in exploitation of the vulnerable (3:10-14).¹⁸

Luke's remaining explicit references to Abraham serve to highlight the surprising recipients of God's merciful kindness and the response of right behavior or the fruits of repentance. Thus, in Jesus' healing of the woman "bent over," who is "unable to stand up straight," and is plagued by an unclean spirit for fourteen years (13:11, 16), Jesus heals her and publicly declares her to be "a daughter of Abraham"

16. Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts", 142.

17. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 108: "Luke rules out completely the notion that mere physical descent from Abraham gives one a special claim on God's mercy. Only repentance and ethical behavior that demonstrates this repentance counts before God."

18. Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts", 140 may overstate the point when he denies that Luke portrays Abraham as a model or prototype for behavior.

(13:16a).¹⁹ Luke describes her as coming to the synagogue on the Sabbath (13:10) and responding by “giving glory to God” in response for her healing. She is one of Israel’s poor but pious worshippers of the God of Israel described by Mary in Luke 1:51–53. Her identity as a daughter of Abraham reveals that she and others like her, those considered to be excluded from or on the margins of the society of Israel, are in fact the target of Jesus’ mercy (e.g., Luke 4:18–29).²⁰ Jesus’ healing releases her from the bondage of Satan and vindicates her as Abraham’s daughter (13:16), and functions as a surprising literary fulfillment of Zechariah’s hymn, which linked God’s remembrance of his covenant to Abraham with the promise of deliverance from God’s enemies.²¹ A similar designation of Zacchaeus, the rich but short-in-stature tax collector (19:1–3), occurs in Luke 19:9 when Jesus declares him to be “a son of Abraham.” As Zacchaeus engages his quest to *see Jesus* (19:3a), Jesus makes eye contact with the tax-collector in the tree (19:5) and demands that Zacchaeus receive Jesus hospitably in his own home: “Hurry up and come down, for I must receive welcome in your home today” (19:5).²² The shared hospitality between Jesus and Zacchaeus creates the context whereby Zacchaeus is able to engage in repentant practices of sharing possessions and making restitution for his former exploitative practices.²³ As a result of the shared hospitality and Zacchaeus’ repentance, Jesus grants salvation to the former outcast and refers to him as a son of Abraham (19:9, 10). Just as Abraham was remembered as hosting the divine strangers in his dwelling and thereby received the promise of Isaac as a gift in return, so Zacchaeus welcomes the travelling Lord in his home and receives salvation. His sharing of his possessions for the poor demonstrates that he is one who will do the deeds of the hospitable Abraham (cf. Gen. 18:14).²⁴

There are two further significant texts from Luke’s Gospel which portray Abraham as granting, or alternatively excluding, individuals from eschatological fellowship/hospitality. We have already examined the parallel pericope of Luke

19. On Jesus’s overturning the prevalent and negative stereotyping based upon bodily attributes and appearance, see M. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke-Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

20. See further, J.B. Green, “Jesus and a Daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:10–17): Test Case for a Lucan Perspective on Jesus’ Miracles”, *CBQ* 51 (1989): 643–54, esp., 651–3.

21. This point is made clearly by Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 111–12.

22. I have discussed the relationship of Lk. 19:1–10 to the broader theme of hospitality in Luke-Acts in my *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1–10* (NovTSup 153; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 228–9.

23. I remain convinced of the traditional interpretation of this episode as a story of salvation. See, for example, the important parallels with Lk. 5:27–32. For further defense, see D. Hamm, “Luke 19:8 Once Again: Does Zacchaeus Defend or Resolve?”, *JBL* 107 (1988): 431–7.

24. Some of these parallels are set forth by A.E. Arterbury, “Zacchaeus: ‘A Son of Abraham’?”, in *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels*, Vol. 3, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. T. Hatina (LNTS 376; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 18–31, here, 26–7.

13:23-30 in our discussion of Matthew's Gospel (8:5-13). In response to someone's question whether only a few will be saved (Luke 13:23), Jesus declares that some will seek entrance to the eschatological banquet and will demand "Open up for us" (13:25) and even declare to him "we ate and drank together with you" (13:26). But Jesus will respond: "I never knew you, depart from me all of you workers of injustice" (13:27; cf. LXX Ps. 6:9). Jesus warns that they will experience torment "when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you are cast outside and they will come from east and west and from north and south and will recline in the kingdom of God" (13:29). The parable contributes to Luke's reversal motif, for Jesus concludes the parable with the words: "behold, the last will be first and the first will be last" (13:30; cf. 14:11). This warning of impending eschatological inhospitality within the context of Luke's reversal motif is directed precisely against those who, within Luke's narrative, grumble and complain about Jesus extending salvation and welcome to those "sinners" and outcasts on the margins of society. They are warned not to presume their election will act as a safeguard for them, all the while continuing to act as "workers of injustice" (13:27; cf. 3:8). Just as John had stated, Jesus declares that they will be cut down like trees and cast into the fire if they remain unrepentant (13:6-9). More precisely, Jesus' parabolic warning is directed to those Pharisees who, in the very next chapter, eat and drink with Jesus but as a means of testing him (14:1; cf. 7:36-39; 11:37-44) and who refuse to receive the invitation to the master's "great feast" (14:16-24). Their grumbling at Jesus' extension of hospitality and table-fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (15:1-2) shows them to be like the elder brother who, in the parable of the prodigal son (15:1-32), refuses to join in with the joyous celebration of the father who has received back his son (15:28-29). Thus, Luke portrays eschatological salvation through the imagery of food, hospitality, and fellowship with Abraham and the patriarchs.²⁵

A similar image of feasting or reclining with Abraham can be found in Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19-31. The parable functions as a critique of the greed of the wealthy who fail to show hospitality and perform acts of mercy to the poor.²⁶ The Rich Man "clothed in purple and fine linen joyously-feasts in luxury every day" (16:19b) while Lazarus suffers "having been tossed outside his [i.e., the rich man's] gate" (16:20). At the very least, the Rich Man was obligated to show hospitality to the stranger "lying at his gate", an obligation that is obvious to those familiar with Torah (e.g., Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 15:1-8). Poor Lazarus, covered in sores, longs "to be filled with some food falling from the table

25. There are a variety of Jewish and early Christian texts which speak of eschatological salvation in relationship to Abraham and the patriarchs. See, for example, P-B. Smit, *Fellowship and Food in the Kingdom: Eschatological Meals and Scenes of Utopian Abundance in the New Testament* (WUNT 2.234; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2008), 151-2.

26. I have written in more detail about this episode in my *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

of the rich man" (16:21; cf. 15:16), but even table-scrap are denied him. When the two men die, Lazarus is accompanied "by the angels" (16:22; cf. 15:10) into "Abraham's bosom," while the rich man descends to Hades (16:22b-23) where "he sees Abraham at a distance and Lazarus in his bosom" (16:23b). Contributing to the ironic reversal throughout the parable is the likelihood that "Abraham's bosom" (16:22-23) functions as the heavenly and eschatological counterpart to the earthly banqueting of the rich man. The reason for the rich man's punishment is obvious; his punishment is not the result of his wealth but is in his luxurious consumption and refusal to share with the poor stranger at his gate. Not unlike Jesus' warning to "workers of injustice" in 13:27, so here the man's unjust use of possessions and lack of deeds of mercy result in his being barred from fellowship with Abraham in paradise.

Jesus' use of "Abraham" as character and "Abraham's bosom" as image of the messianic feast is not accidental given Abraham's reputation as a paragon of hospitality. Had the rich man been a son of Abraham he would have bestowed hospitality upon the stranger at his gate. It is fitting, then, that the inhospitable rich man is denied access to the feast with the hospitable Abraham, for the rich man is not of the same lineage or heritage (cf. Luke 3:8; 13:26-29). Those who do not extend hospitality to those to whom the Messiah bestows welcome will not share in the Messiah's feast.²⁷ Further, in response to the rich man's request to send Lazarus back to warn his household, Abraham twice tells him "they have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them" (16:29; cf. 16:31). According to Jesus, the rich man is a Torah-breaker and Prophet-rejecter, for these Scriptures teach hospitality to the poor, love of neighbor, and the extension of one's possessions to those in need (cf. 11:37-54).²⁸

The Acts of the Apostles

In the Acts of the Apostles, Abraham is invoked in the speeches of Peter (Acts 3:13, 25), Stephen (7:2-8, 16-17, 32) and Paul (13:26) primarily to demonstrate continuity between God's election of Israel *and* the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. After the healing of the lame man at the temple (3:1-10), Peter engages in a lengthy speech which has the primary purpose of arguing that this healing has taken place as an example of the restoration blessings proceeding from the resurrected and enthroned Jesus of Nazareth (3:11-26). Robert Brawley rightly

27. On the conceptual blending and background of the image of "Abraham's bosom," see A. Somov and V. Voinov, "'Abraham's Bosom' (Luke 16:22-23) as a Key Metaphor in the Overall Composition of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus," *CBQ* 79 (2017): 615-33.

28. E.g., Isa. 61:1 and 58:6 in Lk. 4:18-19; Lev. 19:16-18, 33-34 in Lk. 10:26-29; Deut. 15:7-11 in Acts 4:32-35.

notes that the “healing of the lame man at the Temple gate is a concrete case of God’s bestowal of Abrahamic blessings. . . .”²⁹ The man functions as an instance of how God’s Abrahamic blessings are reaching all peoples.

The theme of continuity between God’s election of Israel and his resurrection of Jesus is set forth clearly in 3:13: “the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus (ἐδόξαsen τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν).” The rhetorical force of this statement is brought forth in Peter’s depiction of Jesus as one that Israel’s leaders handed over to Pilate to be crucified but “God raised him from the dead” (3:15b). God has ironically used their ignorance and rejection of the Messiah as a means of fulfilling his scriptural promises (3:17-18). But God has resurrected Jesus from the dead, and thus Peter exhorts the people to repent so that they might experience “times of refreshment from the face of the Lord” (3:19-20). The God of Abraham who has resurrected Jesus from the dead enables the glorified Messiah to send forth times of refreshment (3:21). Therefore, Peter exhorts them to turn to God and to pay attention to what God has done. They are “the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God established with your fathers *saying to Abraham*, ‘In your seed (ἐν τῷ σπέρματι) all the peoples of the earth will be blessed’” (3:25). Peter quotes the Abrahamic promise from Genesis (here Gen. 12:3; 22:18) that Abraham would be the means whereby God would bless all the peoples of the earth.³⁰ But here the emphasis is upon Peter’s call to Israel to embrace their Messiah, for “to you first, God has raised up his servant and has sent him to you *in order to bless you* (εὐλογοῦντα ὑμᾶς) in order that each one of you might turn away from your evil deeds” (3:26). Luke creates a connection here between God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth “in his seed” (3:25b) and Jesus who blesses Israel (3:26).³¹ God’s fulfillment of his promises to Abraham is universal in scope and will reach to all the nations, but Peter is emphatic that the order is first Israel *and then* the nations (cf. Luke 2:30-32).

In Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41), he too seeks to establish continuity between God’s election of Israel (13:16-23) and God’s resurrection of Jesus the Davidic Messiah (13:23-37). Though Abraham is not invoked directly, Paul’s beginning statement that “the God of this people Israel has chosen our father and the people” is a simple affirmation of God’s election of Abraham and Israel as his covenant people. Paul’s selective retelling of Israel’s history is quite clearly geared toward David as the historical retelling of Israel’s history drives toward

29. R.E. Brawley, “Abrahamic Covenant Traditions and the Characterization of God in Luke-Acts”, in *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, ed. J. Verheyden (BETL 142; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), 109–32, here, 125.

30. On the inclusion of the Gentiles through the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, see J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1972), 58–61.

31. A good case can be made for understanding “seed” in Acts 3:26 as referring to both Israel and the Messiah from the line of David. See further the helpful comments by S. Wendel, *Scriptural Interpretation and Community Self-Definition in Luke-Acts and the Writings of Justin Martyr* (NovTSup 139; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 223–4.

God's fulfillment of promises made to David in 2 Sam. 7:12-14: "God has, from [David's] seed, and according to his promise, brought forth for Israel the Savior Jesus" (Acts 13:23). Just as in Peter's speech, so here Paul situates the basic Christological kerygma within Israel's history and then exhorts his contemporary audience: "Men, brothers, children of the people of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, this word of salvation has been sent to us" (13:26). Just as Peter exhorts his audience as "the sons of the covenant" to pay attention to what the God of Abraham and the patriarchs (3:13) have done in raising Jesus for their benefit (3:25-26), so Paul now exhorts the audience to recognize that the meaning of Israel's history and the election of Abraham are now discerned only in God's act of raising Jesus from the dead (13:30-37). Both Peter and Paul's speeches are more directly concerned with God's promises to David, but Nils Dahl is right that Luke understands that "all messianic prophecies reiterate and unfold the one promise to the fathers, first given to Abraham."³²

Stephen engages in some sustained reflection upon the patriarch Abraham in his lengthy defense speech (7:2-53). Stephen's emphasis upon Abraham centers upon his relation to the land and minimizes the covenant of circumcision.³³ Unsurprisingly, Stephen begins his speech with God's calling and election of Abraham in Mesopotamia (7:2). Thus, Stephen's argument, like Peter's in Acts 3 and Paul's in Acts 13, situates God's actions in Jesus of Nazareth (albeit here in an analogous or typological rather than kerygmatic form) within the context of God's election of Abraham and the people of Israel. This is all rather typical to the form of Luke-Acts, but Stephen surprisingly emphasizes Abraham as an immigrant and sojourner who encounters God outside of the land of Israel.³⁴ Thus, "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia" (7:2); God called him to leave his land and his family to a new place (7:3); Abraham dwelt in Haran (7:4); God brought him into Canaan but gave him none of the land as his own possession (7:5).³⁵ David Moessner rightly notes that "movement to the 'land' is the dynamic pivot of the plot" in Stephen's speech.³⁶ Later, Stephen makes the surprising comment that Jacob and his sons were buried "in the tomb

32. Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts", 148. On the relationship between God's promises to Abraham and David, see Brawley, "Abrahamic Covenant Traditions", 111-15.

33. See further J. Jeska, *Die Geschichte Israels in der Sicht des Lukas: Apg 7,2b-53 und 13,17-25 im Kontext antic-jüdischer Summarien der Geschichte Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001), 155-61.

34. See throughout C.S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1351-62.

35. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 121: "Luke highlights in particular the relationship between Abraham and the land, but he does so in such a way that he actually undercuts the significance of the promise of the land per se."

36. D.P. Moessner, "'The Christ Must Suffer': New Light on the Jesus—Peter, Stephen, Paul Parallels in Luke-Acts", in *Luke the Historian of Israel's Legacy, Theologian of Israel's 'Christ': A New Reading of the 'Gospel Acts' of Luke* (BZNW 182; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 246.

that Abraham purchased for some silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem" (7:15-16). This is in tension with the LXX which indicates that Jacob was buried in Hebron (LXX Genesis 49:29-32). However, to explain the incongruity, Stephen notes that Jacob and his sons were buried outside of Judea, which fits the portrait of Abraham who encountered God outside the land of Israel and who spent his life as a sojourner without a homeland. This fits with one important theme of Stephen's speech, namely, the common theme that Israel's patriarchs and heroes encountered the God of Israel outside of the land of Israel and beyond the Jerusalem Temple.³⁷

Worthy of note is Stephen's quotation of Genesis 15:13-14 in Acts 7:6-7, to the effect that God had foretold that Abraham's offspring would be sojourners in a strange land, would be enslaved for 400 years, and after these things would then "worship me in this place" (7:7b). Luke here has actually conflated Genesis 15:13-14 and Exodus 3:12. Whereas the former indicates that after God's judgment upon Egypt, "they shall come out with great possessions" (Gen. 15:14), the latter text notes that "you will serve God upon this mountain" (Exod. 3:12). As numerous commentators have noted, the effect of this change or conflation is to center the promise to Abraham upon worshipping God in the land. And this aspect of Stephen's speech makes an important connection with Zechariah's hymn in Luke 1:68-79, which linked God's covenantal mercies to Abraham with the promise of deliverance from one's enemies and worshipping God (1:72-75).³⁸ One of the effects of Stephen's linkage of the land with worship, then, is to declare that those who commit idolatry and do not worship the God of Abraham cut themselves off from the Abrahamic promises and blessings (cf. 3:22-26).³⁹

The majority of the rest of Stephen's speech expands upon the events predicted in Acts 7:2-8. Thus, the Joseph story shows how Abraham's offspring find their way to Egypt (7:9-16) and the Moses story depicts how God leads them out of slavery and judges the Egyptians (7:18-36). Stephen portrays God as one who fulfills the promises made to Abraham as he had described them in Acts 7:2-8. Perhaps this is seen most clearly when Stephen portrays the initial fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in 7:17, which hearkens back to God's prediction in 7:6, namely, the events of the Exodus.⁴⁰ Sadly, however, the fulfillment of 7:17 is frustrated by means of the rejection of God's chosen deliverers (Moses) and through worshipping false gods (esp. 7:39-43). Instead of securing the Abrahamic promises and blessings

37. See here the very helpful and illuminating essay by G.E. Sterling, "'Opening the Scriptures': The Legitimation of the Jewish Diaspora and the Early Christian Mission", in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim upon Israel's Legacy*, ed. D.P. Moessner (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 199-217.

38. Helpful here is R.L. Brawley, *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation* (SBLDS 33; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 118-32.

39. Wendel, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 218.

40. See further, Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts", 144.

through worshipping God in the land, the people's idolatry blocks the longed-for and promised fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessings.⁴¹

The Gospel of John

Abraham only appears in the Fourth Gospel in one passage, and yet the entire back-and-forth dialogue between Jesus and his conversation partners centers upon the meaning of Abrahamic paternity (Jn 8:31-59), initiated by Jesus' audience retort to his teaching that "we are the seed of Abraham" (8:33a). This stretch of text is notoriously difficult and it, in particular the reference to "your father the devil" (8:44), has had a deplorable reception history.⁴² I intend here, however, to primarily focus upon the major themes and exegetical questions raised by the references to Abraham in John 8.

First, I suggest that Jesus' audience should not be understood as "the Jewish people" but rather that Jesus is addressing "those Jews who had believed in him" (τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίους, 8:31). I suggest that the perfect participle should be taken as a reference to those Jews who had professed belief in Jesus but who were no longer following him (cf. also Jn 11:44).⁴³ This group is distinguished, then, from the group referred to in 8:30: "the many who believed in him." This is further justified by means of contextual observations. For example, it is difficult to imagine that within the span of a few verses a group comes to believe in Jesus and then seeks to stone him, referring to him as a Samaritan with a demon (8:48). The audience is, after all, referred to as *not believing* Jesus twice in 8:45-46. Further, given that Jn 7:1-8:30 focused upon Jesus' discourses articulating the meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles, it is likely that 8:31-59 should be connected with the immediately preceding discourse in 6:60-71. Here, John describes many of Jesus' disciples who chafe and grumble at Jesus' difficult bread of life discourse (6:60-61). These disciples are "scandalized" by Jesus' teaching (6:61b), and as a result, many "of his disciples" stopped following Jesus (6:66). This fits more broadly within

41. Wendel, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 221.

42. There is a host of literature devoted to John and Judaism. Good starting points both broadly and with respect to John 8 are, respectively: C.W. Skinner, *Reading John* (Cascade Companions; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 47-67; A. Reinhartz, "John 8:31-59 From a Jewish Perspective", in *Remembering for the Future 2000: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocides*, 2 vols, eds. J.K. Roth and E. Maxwell-Meynard (London: Palgrave, 2001), 787-97.

43. On the perfect participle as having the possibility of indicating a state that no longer holds for the action of the main verb, see especially T. Griffith, "'The Jews who had Believed in Him' (John 8:31) and the Motif of Apostasy in the Gospel of John", in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, eds. R. Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 183-92, here, 183-4. See further J. Swetnam, "The Meaning of πεπιστευκότας in John 8,31", *Biblica* 61 (1980): 106-9.

John's anthropological pessimism and his depiction of faith in Jesus as often lacking or insufficient (see especially Jn 2:23-25).⁴⁴

Second, it is important to note that within this context, and within the broader narrative of John's Gospel, the devil functions as one who motivates people to commit apostasy. Thus, within the context of disciples who had once believed but are now turning away from Jesus, Jesus refers to Judas as a "devil" (6:70). Later John notes that "the devil" had put it into Judas' heart to betray Jesus (13:2; cf. 13:27).⁴⁵ Thus, Jesus' statement in 8:44 that "you are of the father your devil" should not be taken to refer to polemic against the Jewish people *in toto* but is, rather, a still remarkably harsh reference to those fellow Jews who had at one time believed in Jesus but now, having committed apostasy, are seeking to murder Jesus. Griffith notes, then, that "it would be wrong to conclude from 8:44 that John regarded all Jews as children of the devil. The language of *diabolization* is restricted to those who had once been followers of Jesus and is appropriate to them alone."⁴⁶

Third, the debate between Jesus and his audience as to who belongs to their father Abraham, centers not upon biological genealogical descent but, rather, upon who does "the deeds of Abraham" (8:39). Jesus shifts the conversation from "seed/offspring" of Abraham to "children of Abraham" and "seems to define Abrahamic 'paternity [as] strictly a matter of behavior' so that Abraham's children are those who do what Abraham did."⁴⁷ Abraham is held up as a model for emulation.⁴⁸ I think a strong case can be made here that Jesus' reference to "the deeds of Abraham" (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ, 8:39b) should be understood as a reference to Abraham's extension of hospitality to the divine visitors in Genesis 18. It is well known that Abraham was understood within Jewish tradition as an exemplar of hospitality to strangers, and this portrait of hospitable Abraham was also carried on by early Christian texts as well, for example in James (Jas 2:20-26) who also refers to Abraham's deeds.⁴⁹

44. See E. Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 338, who notes that this discourse is addressed to "the Jews who believed when they saw His miracles, and to whom Jesus did not trust Himself (ii.23, 24, cf. vii. 31, xi. 45, xii. 11, 42, 43."

45. Griffith, "The Jews who had Believed in Him", 186-7.

46. Ibid, 186-91 (emphasis original). Griffith further notes that this conclusion fits well with 1 Jn 3:14-15. See T. Griffith, *Keep Yourself from Idols: A New Look at 1 John* (JSNTSup 233; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

47. Levenson, *Abraham between Torah and Gospel*, 36.

48. C.H. Williams, "Patriarchs and Prophets Remembered: Framing Israel's Past in the Gospel of John", in *Abiding Words: The Use of Scripture in the Gospel of John*, eds. A.D. Myers et al. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 187-212, here, 202.

49. There are a host of texts one could set forth here. I have examined them in more detail in my *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts*, 131-55. On Abraham's deeds in James 2 as inclusive of his mercy and hospitality to strangers, see R. Bowen Ward, "The Works of Abraham: James 2:14-26", *HTR* 61 (1968): 283-90.

But hospitality and inhospitality to Jesus and his word also plays a significant theological role within John's Gospel as well. Thus, the prologue notes: "he came to his own and his own did not receive (οὐ παρέλαβον) him, but to as many as did receive him (ἔλαβον αὐτόν), he gave them the right to become children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ), to those who believe (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν) in his name" (Jn 1:11-12). John's prologue thus characterizes divine paternity in terms of whether or not one provides a welcoming or believing response to Jesus, the divine Word. I have argued that hospitality has a significant theological role in terms of humans welcoming the stranger from heaven who himself extends "redemptive hospitality" (bread, water, wine, foot washing, and entrance into his Father's home).⁵⁰ Steven Hunt has also noted that the language of hospitality is "a major motif in the narrative, as the author uses a cluster of words to talk about reception, favoring the word λαμβάνω which gets employed mostly with the sense of receiving Jesus (Jn 1:12; 5:43; 6:21; 13:20) or his word (see, e.g., 3:11, 32-33; 17:8)."⁵¹ But instead of doing Abraham's deeds and receiving Jesus the divine stranger with hospitality, they persist in inhospitality to Jesus and his teaching. Thus, they do not continue in Jesus' word (8:31); they seek to kill Jesus because their word does not remain in them (8:37, 45, 46); they have heard divine truth but are trying to kill him (8:40); they do not accept Jesus' word (8:43). They extend inhospitality to Jesus and his word, and thereby they demonstrate that God is not their father (8:42, 47). One belongs to Abraham, then, if one provides a hospitable response to the heavenly messenger Jesus and his word who, for the author of the Fourth Gospel, has been sent by God. It would seem, then, that for John's Gospel, Jesus' audience is the "offspring of Abraham" (8:33, 37) but not "children of Abraham" (8:39).⁵² Both Isaac and Ishmael are the offspring of Abraham, but only Isaac is construed as one of Abraham's children; those who receive Jesus are construed as Abraham's free children who remain in his house forever (8:34-36). Hunt nicely re-paraphrases Jesus' argument: "If you were Abraham's children, you would be showing the hospitality that Abraham showed when he welcomed me and received my word. In trying to kill me, you are doing the opposite of what Abraham did."⁵³

Fourth, Abraham was understood in a variety of Jewish traditions as one who saw the glory of God in visions (e.g., Genesis 15; *Testament of Abraham*; 4 Ezra 3.14).⁵⁴ But Jesus makes the audacious assertion that "Your father Abraham rejoiced

50. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, ch. 3.

51. S.A. Hunt, "And the Word Became Flesh—Again? Jesus and Abraham in John 8:31-59", in *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*, ed. S.A. Hunt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 81-109, here, 88. Similarly, see Williams, "Patriarchs and Prophets Remembered," 202-5.

52. Hunt, "And the Word Became Flesh—Again?," 94.

53. *Ibid.*, 97.

54. See here, J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (2nd edn.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 300-1.

that *he saw my day*, and he saw it and rejoiced" (8:56). In response to the audience's outrage, Jesus declares "before Abraham came into being, I am" (8:58), and they seek to stone him for blasphemy (8:59). Jesus' claim declares that Abraham is subordinate to him and that he is divine alongside God the Father. If "the works of Abraham" in John 8:39 refer to Abraham's hospitality to the divine visitors in Genesis 18, then the mutual seeing of Jesus and Abraham may further allude to Abraham's seeing the pre-incarnate Word as the divine visitor and extending hospitality to him in his tent. Thus, Abraham is made to conform to John's larger theological vision of Jesus as the focal point of Israel's Scriptures, institutions, and visionary experiences of Israel's heroes.⁵⁵

Conclusion

My study of Abraham demonstrates that each composition draws upon the figure of Abraham for diverse purposes. Surprisingly, Mark's Gospel shows no serious interest at all in Abraham, as even the singular pericope which refers to Abraham does not actually center upon him in any meaningful way. While it is difficult to make an argument from silence, it may be that Mark's Gospel, as an apocalyptic drama, is simply less interested in making the kinds of salvation-historical claims for continuity between Israel and Jesus as are other NT compositions. Unlike Mark's Gospel, Abraham rises to a consistent theme and even a character within the narrative world of Luke-Acts. Further, the Gospel of Luke is the only text which takes up Abraham into its broader theme of 'reversal' in order to show that outcasts, the sick, and the poor are not excluded from the people of God. The Gospel of Matthew draws upon Abraham to make claims of salvation-historical continuity, but the narrative shows little, if any, interest in the moral character of Abraham, whereas in Luke and John one finds allusions to Abraham's hospitality to strangers, his believing response to God, and forefather of the repentant. And John's Gospel seems to be the only text examined which holds up Abraham as one who saw the glory of the pre-incarnate Christ. It is surprising, at least to me, that Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (the *Akedah*) in Genesis 22, does not play a more direct role (at least beyond echoes and allusions) in the NT texts examined above, as it does, for example, in Jas 2:20-26.⁵⁶

There are, however, significant commonalities across the NT compositions in the way in which they draw upon Abraham. Let me conclude by simply noting four of them. First, except for the Gospel of Mark, every text draws upon Abraham to establish continuity between God's election of Israel *and* the person of Jesus and those believing in him as Israel's Messiah. And this claim of continuity is one that would appear to be deeply contested as Jewish believers in Jesus are defining

55. See Williams, "Patriarchs and Prophets Remembered", 205-6.

56. See, however, L.A. Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew* (NovTSup 131; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Abrahamic descent through Jesus of Nazareth. This is most obvious in Luke-Acts where, within Luke, the births of John and Jesus are interpreted within the framework of the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and in Acts where the basic kerygma is situated within God's election of Abraham and Israel. But one sees a similar dynamic in John 8 where "children of Abraham" are defined not *only* by genealogical descent but also through doing the deeds of Abraham.

For these texts, while God may be doing something surprising in the person of Jesus, these events are to be understood within the framework of God's prior promises to, and election of, Israel as his people. But the continuity is also readily apparent in Matthew's genealogy, which refers to Jesus as within the line of Abraham and as Abraham's son. Second, God's covenant with Abraham and his later covenantal promises to David are inextricably bound together in both Matthew's Gospel and Luke-Acts. Thus, they portray the seed of David as the only one who can inherit and bring to fulfillment God's promises to Abraham. Third, Abraham is a model for appropriate behavior. Children of Abraham demonstrate their identity through repentance, hospitality, and the sharing of possessions in Matthew, Luke, and John. Finally, both Mark and Luke portray Abraham as one who already experiences a blessed afterlife and who receives his children into this eschatological fellowship and banquet.