

# Abraham's Seed and Isaac as Promise: A Study of Hebrews 2,16 and 11,11 in the Context of Hebrews 11,18-19

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## *Introduction*

A previous article in this journal presented a case for interpreting the ultimate "seed" (*sperma*) of Abraham in Heb 11,18 as the risen Christ.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the physical Isaac whom Abraham received back as though risen from the dead was the symbolic foreshadowing of the actually risen Christ and as such was viewed by the author of Hebrews. Thus, only with the resurrection of Christ was fully realized the prophecy made to Abraham in Gen 21,12 (cited in Heb 11,18): "In Isaac will your seed be named"). The basic reason for this is that in Heb 11,19 Isaac is received back "as a symbol" in the context of Abraham's thinking about possible resurrection from the dead. Given the role of Christ's resurrection from the dead in Hebrews, the inference is that the author of Hebrews had the risen Jesus in mind. Thus Hebrews coincides with Paul's view in Gal 3,16 that the seed promised to Abraham is indeed Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The word *sperma* is used in two other places in Hebrews, 2,16 and 11,11, and in both places the context is of Abraham. The present article will attempt to sketch the implications of the fact that Christ is the ultimate seed of Abraham with regard to the use of *sperma* in Heb 2,16 and 11,11. In addition, the relevance of Galatians with regard to the *sperma* of Abraham will also be examined.

## *Sperma and the Seed of Abraham in Hebrews 2,16*

As is the case with everything else in the interpretation of Hebrews, determining

1. "Isaac as Promise: A Study of the Symbolism in Hebrews 11,19", *Melita Theologica* 55 (2004) 65-74. On p. 66, under Heb 7,6, it is of course Abraham who gives tithes to Melchizedek. (My gratitude to M. Williamson for having called this slip to my attention.)
2. On Galatians 3,16 and Abraham/Isaac cf. Now S.W. Hahn, "Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah. *Diathēkē Galatians 3:15-18*", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005) 79-100.

the structure is important for an understanding of Heb 2,16. The present writer has given his views on the structure of Heb 1,1 – 3,6, and it is on this structure that he would like to present his view of the much canvassed phrase *spermatos Abraam epilambanetai* in 2,16.<sup>3</sup> Briefly, the section in question, 1,1 – 3,6, can best be viewed as follows:

- 1,1-4, which is the exordium to the entire epistle;
- 1,5-14, which is an exposition on Jesus as Son of God;
- 2,1-4, which is paraenesis on the previous exposition;
- 2,5-18, which is exposition on Jesus as Son of Man;
- 3,1-6, which is paraenesis on the previous exposition.

Both 1,5-14 and 2,5-18 have their own substructure. It would seem best to view the latter section as being a commentary on Ps 8,5-7 introduced and cited at Heb 2,5-8a. The verses 8b-18 would seem to fit into the following pattern:

- 2,8b-11, which are summed up in v. 12;
- 2,13a, which refers both to what precedes and to what follows;
- 2,14-18, which is summed up in v. 13b.<sup>4</sup>

This construal of the text highlights 2,13a: "I shall be trusting in Him". That is to say, this citation of Is 8,17 / 2 Sam 22,3 gives the basic theme of 2,5-18: both what precedes and what follows concern trust in God.<sup>5</sup> The words of the text are viewed by the author of Hebrews as being spoken by the earthly Jesus "in the days of his flesh".<sup>6</sup> When placed in the context of 2,13a the meaning of Abraham's seed is clarified: they are those who, like Abraham, face death with trust.<sup>7</sup>

3. J. Swetnam, "The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6", *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992) 58-66. All assertions made in the present article are grounded in this 1992 article.
4. 2,8-11 probably refers to the risen priesthood of Christ; 2,14-18 probably refers to his earthly priesthood. Cf. J. Swetnam, "The Context of the Crux at Hebrews 5,7-8", *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 14 (2001) 115-117.
5. Something analogous occurs at Heb 10,30-31, where the author cites two successive verses from Deuteronomy 32,35-36, but divides them so that the first sums up what precedes and the second sums up what follows. Cf. J. Swetnam, "Hebrews 10,31-32: A Suggestion", *Biblica* 75 (1994) 388-394.
6. Cf. Swetnam, "The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6", 61, n. 18.
7. Cf. J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Akedah* Biblical Institute Press, Rome 1981, 136. There it is argued that the seed of Abraham was a "spiritual" reality, composed of all those who face death with trust.

Originally, the present author advanced the interpretation of Abraham's seed as a "spiritual" reality on the basis of a relation between Heb 2,16 and Heb 11,18. Since, in the latter text, the "seed" of Abraham is part of the eulogy to faith in all of Chapter 11, the "seed of Abraham" mentioned in 2,16 must also in some way involve faith, i.e., trust in God.<sup>8</sup> But it was also argued that the context of Heb 2,16 supports such an interpretation: The seed of Abraham is composed of those who had lived under the dominion of the devil and who had lived in slavery to the fear of death and, like Abraham, faced such fear of death with trusting faith.<sup>9</sup> And their faith was bolstered by the fact that Abraham's faith was rewarded with the last-minute reprieve given Isaac by God. But this last-minute reprieve was not the definitive solution to the problem of blind faith: only that which the last-minute reprieve symbolized, i.e., the resur-rection of Christ, was the definitive solution.

In the light of the interpretation given the arrangement of 2,6-18 as rehearsed above, the structure of these verses can also be adduced as a reason for holding that Abraham's "seed" means all those who, like Abraham, have faith in the face of death: Jesus' words in 2,13a seem to be thematic for both what precedes and what follows, and they show that the essential trait of Jesus under consideration was his trust. The summation of the section in v. 18 shows concretely where Jesus exercised this trust: at the moment of his death.<sup>10</sup> But he is not only an example of faith in face of death; he is also a motive for such faith, for his resurrection shows that his faith was vindicated and hence that the faith of those who believe as he did will also be vindicated.

The verb *epilambanomai* can be understood best by considering 2,16 in the light of 11,18. Jesus' "taking hold" of the "seed" of Abraham means that the effects of his saving resurrection are now being brought to bear on the original, spiritual "seed"

8. Cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 93-96, 132-133. In particular, note the discussion with regard to Isaac's faith on 93-94.
9. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 135. Cf. Heb 2,14-15. Note also the texts from *IV Maccabees*, 16,13 and 17,6 which, taken together, seem to point to a type of spiritual fatherhood for Abraham. At 17,6 the author of *IV Maccabees* remarks about the mother of the seven martyred sons, "... your childbearing was of our Father Abraham". Cf. the comment of M. Hadas: "In 16.[1]3 we are told that her bearing was of a spiritual order; hence in a mystic sense the begetter of her children is Father Abraham" *The Third and Fourth Books of Maccabees*. Edited and Translated by M. Hadas. Jewish Apocryphal Literature; Harper & Brothers, New York 1953, 233, note for 17.6. On possible influences of *IV Maccabees* on Hebrews cf. D.A. deSilva, *4 Maccabees* Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Sheffield Academic Press; Sheffield 1998, 146-148.
10. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 175-176. For a detailed development of this idea cf. now J. Swetnam, "The Cruc at Hebrews 5,7-8", *Biblica* 81 (2000) 347-361.

which was composed of those who had a trusting faith in God's power to save; now that that power has been manifested in the resurrection of Jesus. The ultimate, eschatological "seed" of Abraham, i.e., the unique, risen Christ, is now "taking hold" of the intermediate "seed" of Abraham, all those who had this trusting faith without having seen its answer in the unique, risen Christ.<sup>11</sup> The word *epilambanomai* is thus fully intelligible only in the light of the eschatological meaning of Abraham's "seed" as presented in 11,18-19.<sup>12</sup>

The context of 2,13a, on the supposition that it is thematic for what precedes, would seem to be useful for understanding the famous crux involving *henos* at 2,11: the word alludes to Abraham's spiritual seed which is composed of all those who trust in God as Abraham trusted in him.<sup>13</sup> It balances the explicit evocation of Abraham's "seed" in the parallel section 2,13b-18.

There are many other aspects, of course, in the densely packed text of 2,5-18 which have not been discussed above. But from what has been said it seems that the interpretation of Christ as the eschatological "seed" of Abraham can throw a unifying light on Heb 2,16 if Abraham's "seed" there is viewed as spiritual, i.e., as consisting of all those who, like Abraham, had a trusting faith in God in the face of death.<sup>14</sup> The risen Christ is the solution to the problem of blind faith in the face of death.<sup>15</sup>

11. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 134-136. This interpretation of *epilambanetai* in Heb 2,16 is not to be understood in the sense that faith in the resurrection replaces the faith of Abraham in the face of death, but that faith in the resurrection of Christ complements the faith of Abraham in the face of death. Abraham's remains the father in faith whom believers imitate, and Christ remains the eschatological Isaac in whom believers participate in a way which leads to their own resurrection.
12. The interpretation of *epilambanomai* given in the text above is a suggestion which, hopefully, will throw light on a centuries-old crux. Cf. P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New Testament Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids/Carlisle 1993, 176-178.
13. Cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 132-134. Cf. also P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 164-165.
14. It is worth noting that 2,14 seems to presuppose that, logically speaking, the "children" (*paidia*) whose flesh and blood Jesus came to share themselves are constituted as a group by something prior to the flesh and blood which they have in common. This in turn suggests that the "children" (*paidia*) of 2,13b are the spiritual children of Abraham given to Christ, whose action as eschatological seed in their regard is explained by the verb *epilambanetai* in 2,16.
15. This seems to be the underlying meaning of the description of Jesus as "the beginner of salvation" in 2,10.

### ***Sperma and the Seed of Abraham in Hebrews 11,11***

The text at Heb 11,11 constitutes one of the classic cruxes of the epistle, indeed, of the entire New Testament. In the light of the foregoing considerations, the present writer would like to re-propose unmodified the solution which he offered over twenty years ago: the "seed" referred to is Abraham's spiritual "seed"<sup>16</sup>:

Abraham believes against all natural probability that God will be able to make good his promise of posterity in Isaac despite the order to have Isaac killed. God restores Isaac to Abraham. This faith of Abraham is the model for subsequent faith in the face of death, so that all who make such an act of faith can be said to be like Abraham or, in Semitic language, to be his "children". These spiritual children make up the spiritual "seed" as the author of Hebrews (not Abraham) understands Gn 21:12 as quoted in Heb 11:18. At the time Sarah received the promise of Isaac's birth she did not have the example of Abraham's faith at the sacrifice of Isaac to inspire her. Yet she, too, was called to make an act of faith in the face of death – *kai tauta nenekrōmenou* (v. 12). By faith Sarah succeeds in producing Abraham's "seed", i.e., she assumes the function of the male with regard to Abraham's spiritual offspring and thus assumes a certain parity with him: the use of the idiom *katabolē spermatos* proper to the male has profound implications.

### ***Sperma and the Seed of Abraham in Galatians***

The argumentation *sperma* in Heb 11,18 as meaning ultimately the risen Christ was abetted by a preliminary identification of the *sperma* of Gal 3,16 as Christ. While a detailed study of the passage Gal 3,15-20 is beyond the scope of the present article, some observations about the use of *sperma* in the light of Heb 11,18 are in order.<sup>18</sup>

16. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 586-588, does not even mention this interpretation as a possibility.
17. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 100-101. This interpretation has been accepted by J.J. Bailly in a detailed study of the crux: "La mention de Sara en Hébreux 11,11". Mémoire présenté par J.J. Bailly en vue de l'obtention du grade de licencié en philologie biblique (Université Catholique de Louvain, Faculté de Théologie, 1989) [unpublished]. Cf. 44-50, 101.
18. On the possible influence of Galatians on Hebrews see B. Witherington III, "The Influence of Galatians on Hebrews", *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991) 146-152, especially 148.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, "And to seeds", as though to many. But as though to one: "And to your seed", who is Christ (Gal 3,16).

The first point worth noting is that Paul is deliberately giving a Christological interpretation of the promise of God given to Abraham as expressed in Gen 17,8.<sup>19</sup> This is a bold move, for the context of Gen 17,8—the central text—indicates that the "seed", although in itself is grammatically singular, is semantically plural, i.e., it is a collective noun. Paul himself will eventually point out that his Christological interpretation ultimately involves the plural (cf. Gal 3,29). But his interpretation is made from the standpoint of his belief in Christ as the fulfilment of the promise which he takes as prophetic. And he attributes this Christological meaning to God.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the interpretation given to the original text in Genesis is exactly the interpretation given to it by the author of Hebrews: only with Christ does the ultimate meaning become known.

A second point to note is the possible relevance of the phrase *hōs eph' henos*, "as though to one". In a previous stage of argumentation the present writer simply drew attention to the superficial correspondence between the use of *henos* in Heb 2,11 and in Gal 3,16.<sup>21</sup> But now it is possible to point out a deeper parallelism. It was argued above and elsewhere that the phrase *ex henos* in Heb 2,11 refers to Abraham's immediate, spiritual seed based on his example, i.e., all those who have trust in God in the face of death as Abraham did. Now, in Gal 3,16, the strikingly similar phrase *eph' henos* is used of Abraham's eschatological seed, Christ. This is certainly a remarkable convergence. Of itself this convergence does not prove, of course, that *ex henos* in Heb 2,11 does refer to Abraham's spiritual seed. But it has a certain suasive force, given the real indications of a dependence of some kind of Hebrews on Galatians. It should be noted that Gal 3,7-9 also speaks about the true sons of Abraham as those who share Abraham's faith.<sup>22</sup> This is an implicit indication that Abraham's "seed" is composed of those who have faith in God as Abraham

19. Cf. Gen 12,7; 13,15; 17,7; 21,12; 22,17-18; 24,7.

20. "Paul hears in Gen 17,8 a messianic prophecy, showing that the point of departure for his exegesis is the advent of Christ. It follows, as Paul will say in vv. 26-29, that plural offspring of Abraham come into existence only when human beings are incorporated into Abraham's singular seed, Christ," J. L. Martyn, *Galatians*, The Anchor Bible; Doubleday, New York 1997, 340. On the relation of Gal 3,16 to Gal 26-29 cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 110.

21. Cf. Swetnam, "The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6", 60.

22. Cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 111-112 and 111, n. 127.

did. Thus, in both Hebrews and Galatians *sperma* is used in the sense of Abraham's immediate spiritual "seed" (in Galatians, implicitly) based on Abraham's example, and in the sense of Abraham's eschatological seed which is Christ. Hebrews would seem to use the phrase *ex henos* with regard to Abraham's immediate spiritual seed, while Galatians uses the phrase *eph' henos* with regard to Abraham's ultimate eschatological seed, Christ.

A third and final thing worthy of note in the context of the identification of Abraham's seed with Christ is the fact that the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed (i.e., to Christ). This is found in Gal 3,16 and is the introduction to the identification of the singular *sperma* with Christ. This means that Christ is the ultimate heir to the promises made to Abraham. And the emphasis given in the context to the singular implies that the promises made to Abraham are definitively realized only through Christ. This point of view is reiterated in Gal 3,29: "If you belong to Christ, then you are seed of Abraham, heirs according to promise".<sup>23</sup> Thus, for Paul in Galatians, only through Christ are the twin promises of spiritualized offspring and land realized.

### ***Summary and Conclusion***

The present paper is based on a previous study which pointed out that in Heb 11,18 Isaac as "seed" (*sperma*) is being viewed as a symbolic prefiguration of Christ. That is to say, Christ is the ultimate "seed" being given to Abraham as a result of his readiness to sacrifice Isaac in faith. This eschatological meaning of *sperma* is contrasted with the meaning given it in Heb 2,16. There it is viewed as Abraham's spiritual descendants, i.e., all those who, like Abraham, faced death with trust in God. When viewed in the context of a structure of Heb 2,5-18 suggested previously, these distinctions in the meaning of *sperma* as deliberately employed by the author of Hebrews permit two suggestions about perennial cruces in the section: 1) *epilambanetai* in 2,16 refers not to Christ "helping" the seed of Abraham (though this is implied), but as "taking hold of" the seed of Abraham, i.e., as the eschatological offspring of Abraham and thus, by implication, the definitive heir, he is an additional object of faith for all those who are Abraham's spiritual children. 2) *ex henos* in 2,11 refers to Abraham's immediate spiritual "seed", i.e., all those who believe in God's power to rescue from death as Abraham believed. Thus Chapter 2

23. There is no article with *epaggelia*, which would seem to indicate that the underlying contrast with *nomos* is still operative (cf. 3,18).

portrays the transition from the immediate spiritual “seed” of Abraham (2,11) to the ultimate spiritual “seed” of Abraham (2,16), using the key word *epilambanomai* to describe the process. In addition, Heb 11,11 speaks of Sarah as taking on the force to generate as does a male. This classic crux is best explained as referring to Sarah’s acquiring Abraham’s power of belief without the benefit of Abraham’s example.

Because Paul identifies Abraham’s *sperma* with Christ in Gal 3,16 that verse is also studied. Three points seem worth noting: 1) Paul is giving a Christological interpretation to the word *sperma* of Gen 17,8, and thereby making the promise there a prophecy as well. 2) The phrase *eph’ henos* is used with reference to Abraham’s eschatological spiritual seed, just as in Heb 2,11 the phrase *ex henos* is used of Abraham’s immediate spiritual seed. 3) The promises of God about offspring and land are made not only to Abraham but to Abraham’s eschatological seed as well, making Christ the ultimate heir and thereby, by implication, the source of the spiritualized blessings of membership in the offspring destined to eternal life.

In both Hebrews and Galatians the sharpened perspectives resulting from these conclusions could lead to sharpened perspectives elsewhere, especially with regard to Christ as being the definitive, eschatological channel for the spiritualized blessings promised to Abraham. In addition, the fact that the interpretations given Abraham’s *sperma* in both Hebrews and Galatians are so closely aligned would seem to indicate a common source of theological insight, or possibly even a common author.<sup>24</sup>

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24. On the Pauline authorship of Hebrews cf. D.A. Black, “On the Pauline Authorship of Hebrews (Part 1): Overlooked Affinities between Hebrews and Paul”, *Faith & Mission* 16 (1999) 32-51; “On the Pauline Authorship of Hebrews (Part 2): The External Evidence Reconsidered”, *Faith & Mission* 16 (1999) 78-86.