



Barry Danylak

redeeming

How the storyline of Scripture affirms the single life

singleness

FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER

Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life

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Contents

List of Abbreviations	9
List of Figures and Tables	11
Foreword by John Piper	13
Introduction	15
1 Begetting from the Beginning: <i>Procreation, Marriage, and the Blessing of God to the World</i>	25
2 Living in the Land: <i>Why Every Israelite Man and Woman Married</i>	55
3 Prophetic Paradox: <i>How Failure of a Nation Brings Blessing to the World</i>	83
4 Good News for the Gentiles: <i>How Abraham's Offspring Come from Jesus Alone</i>	115
5 The King and the Kingdom: <i>Jesus' Surprising Statements on Singleness and Family</i>	143
6 A <i>Charisma</i> in Corinth: <i>Paul's Vision of Singleness for the Church</i>	173
Epilogue	213
Bibliography	217
Notes	225
Subject Index	245
Scripture Index	248

Foreword

by John Piper

The greatest, wisest, most fully human person who has ever lived never married—Jesus Christ. His greatest apostle never married and was thankful for his singleness. Jesus himself said that in the age to come we do not marry. And he added that the age to come had already broken into this world.

Therefore, the presence of single people in the church not only “attests the sufficiency of Christ for the reception of God’s covenantal blessings in the new covenant,” as Danylak has written, but also reminds us “that the spiritual age has already been inaugurated in Christ and awaits imminent consummation.”

When I met Barry Danylak at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England, in the summer of 2006, I was amazed at the research he was doing on a biblical theology of singleness. Not only was the scope of it unprecedented, but the theological and practical insights struck me as biblically compelling and practically urgent. I don’t know of anyone else who has ever provided the extent of biblical reflection on singleness that Barry has provided for us here.

Both marriage and singleness demand the most serious and solid biblical insight. These are realities that affect every area of our life and thought. We cannot settle for superficial pep talks. Our lives cry out for significance, and significance comes from seeing ourselves the way God sees us—including our singleness. My guess is that virtually every single who reads this book will finish with a sense of wonder at who they are and how little they knew about this gift and calling.

Barry is keenly aware of the progress of redemptive history and its stunning implications for the single life. Early in that history, marriage and physical children were fundamental to the blessings of the Mosaic covenant, but they are not fundamental to the new covenant the way

Foreword

they were then. And what is beautiful about the way Barry develops this historical flow is that the glory of Jesus Christ is exalted above all things.

Barry elevates but does not absolutize the calling of the single life. Its greatness lies, he says, in this: “It is a visible reminder that the kingdom of God points to a reality which stands beyond worldly preoccupations of marriage, family, and career.” Indeed. And that greater reality is the all-satisfying, everlasting friendship of Jesus himself in the new heavens and the new earth. Marriage and singleness will be transcended, and Christ himself will make those categories obsolete in the joy of his presence. A life of joyful singleness witnesses to this.

—John Piper
Pastor for Preaching and Vision
Bethlehem Baptist Church

Begetting from the Beginning

Procreation, Marriage, and the Blessing of God to the World

When I have occasion to speak before various church groups on questions of singleness and marriage, I often begin the discussion by asking, “Can anyone tell me what is the first commandment in the Bible?” After some momentary blank stares, generally one or two individuals are brave enough to assert themselves and faithfully quote Matthew 22:37, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

“Ah, yes,” I respond, “you have faithfully cited the *first and greatest* commandment. But I actually only asked for the *first* commandment in the Bible, as in the first one we would find if we began reading it from page 1.”

At this point I encounter more quizzical stares. After all, most Christians do not pay much attention to the order of biblical commandments, and even when we do, we struggle to agree on what constitutes a bona fide command.

If I were addressing a circle of Orthodox Jews, my audience would probably not have been tricked by the question. They would likely have known of the work of the twelfth-century Jewish sage Maimonides, who codified all 613 commandments of the Torah. The first of these 613 to appear chronologically in the Old Testament is the commandment, “Be fruitful and multiply,” in Genesis 1:28.

Once the answer is given, it seems painfully obvious. So I press the audience with a further question: “And to whom was this commandment

Redeeming Singleness

first given?” If there is silence a second time, it is because the question appears too obvious to answer. Once again the question is a bit of a trick, because the commission to “be fruitful and multiply” is first given in Genesis 1:22 on the fifth day of creation, to the sea creatures and the birds, when God says, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” The mandate is given again by God to human beings on the sixth day: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

In the Beginning . . .

The First Commandment

Reflecting upon this double occurrence in Genesis 1 of the mandate, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is instructive. It underscores that reproducing oneself is a fundamental and natural task, commissioned by God not only for human beings but for the whole created order. The procreative mandate is given even *before* human beings are created. It is woven into the very fabric of the created order that God fashioned before human beings were on the earth. What differentiates human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom is not found in the reproductive commission but in the distinctive that they were created in the *image of God* and have an additional mandate to subdue the earth and have dominion over it.

Jewish tradition, from the rabbinic interpreters of the New Testament era onward, has not questioned interpreting “be fruitful and multiply” as a divine command of the Torah. The Jewish Mishnah makes it explicit: “No man may abstain from keeping the law, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ unless he already has children.”¹ The rabbis were explicit that the duty of procreation falls on the man and not the woman.

Some of my Protestant friends, on the other hand, have questioned the presumption that “mandate” need be understood as a commandment at all. Is it not rather a divine blessing? Genesis 1:28 makes the association between *begetting* and *blessing* explicit:

God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the

Begetting from the Beginning

sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

The imperative to “be fruitful and multiply” expected of the first human beings goes hand-in-hand with the act of God’s blessing them. Procreation requires that a human act be carried out, but the results of the human act are efficacious only through divine provision. We already have perhaps a hint of the forthcoming drama found later in Genesis where the offspring of the covenantal blessing arises not simply through the human procreative act but as a result of God’s supernatural act of provision.

While the act of being fruitful and multiplying is thus a divine-human act, in actuality the Hebrew author sometimes stresses one aspect more than the other. By examining whether blessing is mentioned in the immediate context of the reference, and by looking at the subject and form of the verb, we can get a relatively good sense of where the dominant emphasis is being applied. Table 1.1 provides a list of all the occurrences of the couplet in the Old Testament (it never appears at all in the New Testament). Of the twelve Old Testament references to being fruitful and multiplying, only five are clear imperatives upon humans or creatures (bolded in the table). It is given as an imperative to human beings only in three instances: to the first human beings, Adam and Eve; to Noah and his family; and to Jacob. At first it might seem surprising that it was given to Jacob and not also to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob’s sons, or Israel as a nation. But it does make some sense when we consider that Adam was the progenitor of the human race, Noah was a second Adam, and Jacob was the immediate progenitor of the nation of Israel.² Each of the three was father to a human race of critical importance.

From the table it seems surprising that the mandate is given twice to Noah, and in the second instance it is issued without the blessing. However, as Genesis 9:1–7 forms a single text unit, the command, as given in verse 7, may be nothing more than an emphatic reiteration of verse 1. Maimonides cites Genesis 1:28, 9:1, and 9:6–7 as proof-texts for including “be fruitful and multiply” among the commandments of the Torah.³ Whether Maimonides was correct to include it among the divine commands for *all* human beings is debatable. What we can conclude from the creation account is that procreation is part of the pattern of the

Redeeming Singleness

created order, it is associated with God's blessing, and it was an explicit divine commandment given to Adam, Noah, and Jacob.

Table 1.1: Occurrences of “Be Fruitful and Multiply”
in the Old Testament

Text	Referent	God's Blessing Stated in Context?	Subject of Verb	Verb Form	Emphasized Action
Gen. 1:22	sea creatures and birds	yes	Sea creatures and birds	imperative-plural	divine and animal
Gen. 1:28	the first humans (Adam and Eve)	yes	the first humans (Adam and Eve)	imperative-plural	divine and human
Gen. 8:17	animals	no	animals	indicative-plural	animal
Gen. 9:1	Noah	yes	Noah	imperative-plural	divine and human
Gen. 9:7	Noah	no	Noah	imperative-plural	human
Gen. 17:20	Ishmael	yes	God	causative-indicative-singular	divine
Gen. 28:3	Jacob	yes	God	causative-indicative-singular	divine
Gen. 35:11	Jacob	yes	Jacob	imperative-singular	divine and human
Gen. 48:4	Jacob	yes	God	causative-indicative-singular	divine
Lev. 26:9	Israel	no	God	causative-indicative-singular	divine
Jer. 23:3	remnant	no	remnant	indicative-plural	human
Ezek. 36:11	post-exilic Israel	no	God and Israel	indicative-plural	divine and human

The Provision of Marriage

While marriage is not explicitly mentioned early in the creation account, it is certainly implied in the concluding clauses of Genesis 1:27: “In the image of God he created him; *male* and *female* he created them.” The biblical etiology (an account of something's origin) of marriage as a divinely sanctioned human institution does not appear until the final scene of the creation account in Genesis 2:18–24. In this latter episode we find no mention at all of procreation as the basis for marriage; rather, here the motivation for the account is the initial observation by the Lord God that

Begetting from the Beginning

“it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18).

With this initial pronouncement God puts Adam to sleep, takes his rib from him, and creates Eve. The didactic function of the episode is made clear in the concluding pronouncement in 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” So while an implied purpose for marriage in the creation account is to enable fulfillment of the divine mandate to “be fruitful and multiply,” the explicit purpose the account gives is for companionship and assistance.

Here we see emerging a seminal theology of marriage. The wife serves both as relational companion and as provider of material assistance to the husband. The husband in turn functions in a complementary role for the wife. The separation of the two incidents perhaps serves to highlight the author’s point that marriage was intended to provide *more* than the mere need to procreate legitimate heirs; it was also the foundation of the new institution of relational support in the human family unit.

In Jesus’ discussion with the Pharisees about divorce, he cites as the basis for marriage Genesis 1:27, “*male and female* he created them,” which he conjoins with the conclusion in 2:24, “*Therefore* a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”⁴ In the context of Genesis 2, the “therefore” of verse 24 follows from the man’s condition of first being alone (v. 18) and subsequently receiving the woman as “flesh of my flesh” (v. 23). Jesus, however, links the conclusion not to the man’s need for companionship but rather to God’s ordained pattern of creation as constituting them “male and female.”

Maimonides also lists “taking a wife” through contractual arrangement among his 613 commandments of the Torah but cites a casuistic legal precept in Deuteronomy 22:13–15 rather than Genesis 2 as the basis of the commandment.⁵ Maimonides’ understanding of marriage as a commandment of the Torah would have resonated with the earlier rabbinic tradition, which presumed marriage to be a requirement as the means to fulfill one’s lifelong procreative duty to “be fruitful and multiply,” illustrated well in the second-century rabbinic tractate ‘Abot R. Nathan:

Redeeming Singleness

Marry a wife when you are young, and marry a wife when you are old, beget children when you are young, and beget children when you are old. Do not say, “I shall not get married,” but get married and produce sons and daughters and so increase procreation in the world. “*For you do not know which will prosper, the one or the other, or perhaps both of them will survive, and they shall both turn out well. In the morning sow your seed and in the evening keep it up*” (Eccles. 11:6).⁶

The presumed close tie between marriage and procreation was a common concept in the ancient world. Prescribing them as codified legal mandates was also common, beyond mere Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament. The idea of state-instituted laws requiring marriage was also common amongst Greco-Roman political theorists. In Plato’s later discussion of political theory, given in his *Laws*, for example, he recognizes that the foundational building block of any political state lies in the partnership of marriage. Thus, it follows that the state’s first legal enactment should be the institution of laws requiring a man to marry.⁷ Plato was not alone, for, as we shall see later, similar ideas were common to other ancient writers.

In exploring the close connection between marriage and procreation in the ancient world, we begin to see clearly the distinctive view of marriage given in the Genesis account. First, we are struck by the immediate prominence of God’s blessing on the whole created order through procreation. Marriage is acknowledged implicitly from the very beginning in God’s creation of humans as *male* and *female*. Marriage thus provides the means to accomplish God’s initial blessed mandate to human beings to “be fruitful and multiply.” But in providing a secondary account of the institution of marriage at the end of the creation story, the biblical author emphasizes that marriage has been ordained by God to be more than just a provision for procreation; it is also the means for companionship and support through a couple’s unity in forming a new family unit.

Offspring and the Fall

Having already seen the prominence of procreation within the creation account, it is not surprising to find that *offspring* emerges as a recurring theological motif through the development of biblical history. The

Begetting from the Beginning

Hebrew term used for *offspring* is the word *zera'*, which can be translated into English as “offspring” or “seed” or other words, depending on the context. Just as the English word *seed* can refer botanically to the *seed* sown by a farmer, the *semen* of a male animal, a single physical *offspring* of a human or animal, or the aggregate *descendants* of a human being, so too a similar range of usage applies in the Hebrew. Although the once ubiquitous King James Version nearly always translated *zera'* as “seed,” modern translations tend to translate the term into a range of contextually specific English equivalents such as “seed,” “semen,” “offspring,” “children,” “lineage,” or “descendants.”

Even before the narrative moves out of Eden, we encounter the importance of offspring in the account of the fall. The text of Genesis 3 portrays three separate culpable agents. The Serpent deceived Eve with a lie. Eve listened to the Serpent, disobeying God. Adam listened to Eve, disobeying God. In God’s pronouncement of judgment upon the Serpent, two references to offspring occur:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

The judgment upon the Serpent is that there will be constant enmity between his offspring and the woman’s offspring. At one level, we could have here a biblical etiology of why snakes bite men, and why men try to kill snakes. But as Gordon Wenham points out, this is a judgment against the Serpent, not the woman.⁸ The serpent is at a tactical disadvantage. Moreover, a wound to the head is more likely to be fatal than a wound to the heel. Likewise, a personified speaking serpent in the account suggests that it represents more than a suborder of reptiles but rather the personified power of evil hostile to the plans and purposes of God.

In short, the enmity between two sets of offspring points to the future continued struggle between human beings (the offspring of the woman) and the personified forces of evil in Satan and his cohorts. Whereas the forces of evil will inflict harm upon the offspring of Eve, the offspring of Eve will eventually fatally crush the forces of evil.

Patristic authors from Justin and Irenaeus onward have regarded

Redeeming Singleness

Genesis 3:15 as the *protoevangelium*, the first Old Testament prophecy of Christ.⁹ The patristic authors employ the ambiguity between the collective offspring and a singular offspring in making the assertion. Paul tells the Roman church, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20). If this is an allusion to Genesis 3:15, it suggests an image of God crushing Satan through his people, i.e., the church. So perhaps there is a sense in which both a particular and an aggregate sense of *seed* are simultaneously in view.

Another Offspring

The next reference to *offspring* in Genesis occurs in Genesis 4:25 as part of Eve’s response when she bears her third son, Seth. The dominant storyline of Genesis 4 concerns the contrast between Abel’s acceptable sacrifice and Cain’s unacceptable sacrifice, Cain’s accountability before God for his subsequent murder of Abel, and the portrayal of how Cain’s violent disposition is subsequently passed down through his progeny, as represented by the figure of Lamech. From the foundation of human history we can observe two distinct lines of progeny coming from Adam and Eve—one represented by Cain marked by violence, which was eventually destroyed in the flood, and the other represented by Abel and Seth, which was marked by obedience, sacrificial death, and new life.

While the traditional contrast of the chapter is between Cain and Abel with Seth only mentioned in the concluding two verses, when we look at the description of the birth accounts it is Cain and Seth that form the interesting parallel, while there is only passing mention of the birth of Abel. The births are described as follows:

. . . and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” (Gen. 4:1)

. . . and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.” (Gen. 4:25)

In each case Eve bears a son, names him, and makes a declaration to the Lord commemorating the occasion; but in two instances the subject, verb, and object are different. In the first instance the act of producing a

Begetting from the Beginning

child is Eve's. Eve "gets" for herself a "man" with the "help" of the Lord. To commemorate her act, she names her son Cain, meaning "possession," a wordplay on the Hebrew verb *qanah* meaning "get."

In the second instance God is the subject and Eve is the indirect object. This time Eve acknowledges that *God* appointed another offspring. She names this son Seth, meaning "substitute," which is also an apparent wordplay on the Hebrew verb *shith* for "placing" or "appointing." The contrast in the type of birth is expressed in the names of Eve's sons. Cain is the result of Eve's own act of getting a man, whereas Seth is God's provision of an appointed offspring. In her effort, Eve bears sinful progeny of violence and ultimate death. But God provides through her another offspring that ultimately brings life and hope.

The theme of offspring as a special provision of God is a recurring one throughout the book of Genesis. It is a theme that reinforces a fundamental difference between the God of the Old Testament and fertility deities popular among Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors.¹⁰ Unlike the gods of other Semitic traditions, the God of Israel has no female consort and is not worshiped by means of cultic prostitution. Most importantly, the God of Israel is not *manipulated* by human beings as in the case of other fertility-oriented religions, where, through the worship and sacrifices of human beings, the gods were stimulated to replenish the earth. But from the first generation of humankind, Genesis emphasizes by contrast that it is God *alone* who provides the appointed offspring.

The vocabulary distinction between Eve's bearing Cain as a "man" and God's providing Seth as "another offspring" also hints that, as in Genesis 3:15, messianic implications are in view. These messianic overtones in the provision of Seth were recognized within the Jewish interpretive tradition even prior to the New Testament era.¹¹ In the book of *Jubilees*, for example, it is Adam rather than Eve that names Seth and comments on his birth:

He [Adam] named him Seth because he said, "The LORD has raised up another seed for us upon the earth in place of Abel because Cain killed him." (*Jub.* 4:7)¹²

At least three changes in vocabulary underscore that messianic

Redeeming Singleness

overtones are in view. The child is not merely provided by the Lord but he is one “raised up” by the Lord. He is a child provided by God not just to Eve but “for us,” with Adam rather than Eve as prominent. The child is placed by the Lord “upon the earth,” ostensibly to complete a mission.

The other messianic hint is in the term “another offspring” or “another seed.” As in English the Hebrew word for “another” (*’akher*) used here can connote the sense of “subsequent” or “following,” but it can also carry the nuance of “other” or “different” (e.g., Lev. 27:20; Ps. 109:8). A later Jewish midrashic commentary thus concluded:

And what was that “other child” [that would arise from another source to which she made reference]? It was the king-messiah.¹³

Though the Jewish interpreters could see that the modifier “another” might imply something more significant than simply that God provided a “subsequent” offspring, the particular nature of the different offspring provided by God is here unspecified. The full nature of that special character is to be fully revealed only in the course of the developing storyline of the biblical text.

Abraham and His Offspring

We turn next to the substance and content of God’s covenant blessing to Abraham. Whereas the history of the human race begins with Adam, the history of God’s chosen people begins with the figure of Abraham. Abraham is thus a pivotal figure in the whole of biblical history and theology. The central drama of the book of Genesis is the narrative account of God establishing his covenant with Abraham and confirming it with his descendants. God’s covenant with Abraham is a unilateral promissory covenant—a commitment of how God *will* bless Abraham and his descendants. And, not surprisingly, the provision of offspring features prominently both in the narrative drama of the story of Abraham and in the substance of the covenantal promises. To see this effectively and to explore the implications requires a careful examination of the substance of covenantal promises that God gives to Abraham as they unfold in the narrative. This occurs not on a single occasion but through a series of

Begetting from the Beginning

episodes during the course of his sojourn in Canaan as God develops and tests his faith.

Abraham's Call: Genesis 12:1-9

The account of the Abraham narrative opens with God's call to Abraham to go to a new land, followed by a series of promissory statements:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:1-3)

Abraham's act of faith in following God's command to *go* is all the more significant when we consider a number of factors. First, in leaving his father's family in Haran, he relinquished his claim to his family inheritance—the move effectively severed him from his familial homestead in Haran. In Genesis 11:30 the text makes explicit that Sarah was barren and had no child. Thus, Abraham must follow God and go, devoid of both the security of his existing family and the future security of children. Moreover, he must go without having any indication as to where God is taking him—he must follow God to an unknown destination that God has yet to reveal.

It is on the occasion of God's initial command to Abraham to go that God gives some of the initial promises of the covenant, all of which, in one form or another, are dimensions of God's blessing to Abraham. Five promises are articulated in 12:2-3:

- 1) Abraham's progeny will become a great nation;
- 2) Abraham will be blessed;
- 3) Abraham will be blessed through having a great name;
- 4) Those who bless Abraham will be blessed; conversely those who curse him will be cursed; and
- 5) All the families of the earth will be blessed in Abraham.

Two elements are featured prominently in this list. The very first promise God gives to Abraham essentially concerns progeny. God does not just

Redeeming Singleness

promise a son to care for Abraham in his old age and inherit his estate, but he promises to make Abraham into a great nation. The second element that features prominently is blessing.

We see in the next four promises a concentric movement of blessing from Abraham himself, to his progeny, who will be the ones to remember his name and make it great, to his neighbors around whom he lives and interacts, to ultimately all the families of the earth. The implication of these two elements in tandem is that they relate to one another. Abraham will have progeny through which the world will be blessed by God. What this passage demonstrates so vividly is that from the very beginning of God's covenant with Abraham, progeny and blessing are at the core.

In 12:4–9 the narrative depicts Abraham's journey of obedience to God's command to go, and at the oak of Moreh we find an additional promise:

Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." (v. 7)

Here we have the first appearance of the key word *offspring* in the Abrahamic narrative. The noun *offspring* is singular—as is typical in its appearance in Genesis—with the implication that it refers to a collective plural. This promise in some sense serves to bracket the first promise God gave in verse 2. God *will* make Abraham's progeny into a nation, and here God *will* give his progeny the land. The consequence of this will be the pouring out of a concentric series of God's blessings, beginning with Abraham, through which the entire world *will* be blessed. Surprising is that in this initial promise of land, God grants it to Abraham's offspring rather than to Abraham himself—the emphasis is on a future rather than present fulfillment.¹⁴

Indeed, despite Abraham's faithful obedience in following God's command to go, to relocate to Canaan, there is little in the text to indicate that the land was particularly hospitable to Abraham's arrival. He immediately encounters Canaanites already dwelling in the land and is forced to maintain a nomadic lifestyle, ending up in the even less hospitable Negev. Abraham then encounters a famine in the land (v. 10) that forces him again to leave the land to go down to Egypt for food.

Begetting from the Beginning

The Granting of the Land: Genesis 13:14–18

After Abraham's sojourn in Egypt he again returns to Bethel with his livestock and household together with the livestock and household of Lot. After the limitations of the land force Abraham and Lot to move their households apart, the LORD again speaks to Abraham:

The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. (Gen. 13:14–17)

Genesis speaks of how both men acquire land, but there is an observable contrast in how they do so. Lot "lifts up his eyes" (v. 10) and sees the fertile Jordan valley in the east and chooses it for himself. With the same idiom, God commands Abraham to "lift up his eyes" and grants to him and his offspring the land in every direction.¹⁵ The tension in the lack of land provides a backdrop for another episode of the renewing of the covenant promises. The focus on this occasion is upon the magnitude of Abraham's offspring (as "dust of the earth") and the magnitude of the land ("all the land you see"). While this time the promised grant is given to both Abraham and his offspring, it is still yet a future grant—with the implication that it will be given to Abraham through his offspring.

The Covenant Established: Genesis 15:1–21

Claus Westermann rightly declared that Genesis 15 stands at the center of the external structure of the Abraham narratives and is regarded in the history of exegesis as the very heart of the Abraham story. It is here that God's covenant with Abraham and Abraham's faith appear in the kernel form of what the Bible says about him.¹⁶ And here again we find God's promises declared to Abraham center on the dual poles of offspring and land. As most commentators have observed, the structure of the chapter follows a repeated parallel pattern (15:1–6 and 15:7–21) of dialog

Redeeming Singleness

between God and Abraham that builds upon these two fundamental promises. A sketch of the parallels is outlined in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: The Parallel Structure of Genesis 15:1–6 and 15:7–2

The Lord's Declaration	15:1	"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."	15:7	"I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."
Abraham's Objection	15:2–3	"O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? . . . Behold, you have given me no offspring , and a member of my household will be my heir."	15:8	"O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"
The Lord's Act			15:9–18a	"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram."
The Lord's Promise	15:4–5	"This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir. . . . Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. . . . So shall your offspring be."	15:18b–21	"To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."
Abraham's Act	15:6	"He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."		

These two sections of Genesis 15 are instructive both in their parallel and nonparallel elements. At a basic level, we can observe three parallel elements in the dialogs: (1) each begins with God making a declaration about himself; (2) each is followed by an objection raised by Abraham; and (3) the objection is followed by a re-articulation of the fundamental promise in line with what God had given previously.

The first sub-episode concludes with Abraham's response of faith that has no parallel in the second sub-episode, while the second sub-episode includes an act of the Lord that finds no parallel in the first.

Begetting from the Beginning

The inclusion of these additional actions by Abraham and God are not incidental but will prove to be the climactic events of the whole Abrahamic narrative. It is with this episode that we get for the first time an inside glimpse of the drama of Abraham's struggle of faith in his response to God.

The first dialog arises in the context of Abraham's defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings aligned with him and Abraham's rejection of the subsequent offer of the battle plunder by the king of Sodom (Genesis 14). Genesis 15 opens with God's declaration to Abraham in a vision. Abraham need not fear possible reprisals by Chedorlaomer and his allies because God is his shield, and unlike the tarnished booty offered by the king of Sodom, God's reward to Abraham will be very great.

From the mere circumstances of the narrative Abraham's objection is surprising. God had just promised him protection and reward and had given him a marvelous victory in battle. It seems odd that Abraham takes the moment to raise a concern about being childless.

Abraham's objection shows so clearly that the provision of physical offspring was at the focal point of *everything* that mattered to him. The promises of the covenant—innumerable offspring, becoming a great nation, having a great name, being a blessing to the world, and the future acquisition of the land—all depended on Abraham's having physical progeny. But Abraham had no son and no progeny and a barren wife with no apparent prospects for children. All God's promises depended on the one thing God had not provided—a son and an heir. The means and method by which God would provide the offspring to Abraham is the central drama of the Abrahamic narrative.

It is also somewhat remarkable that when the Lord does respond in Genesis 15:4–5, he provides no greater assurance than his word. God simply states explicitly what Abraham desired evidence for materially—that God would indeed provide him his own son as his heir. It was divine affirmation of the fundamentally obvious truth—that everything depended on the provision of offspring that only God could provide.

God then reiterates to Abraham his promise that he shall have innumerable offspring, this time comparing his offspring to the stars of the sky. God was standing by his previous promise, and Abraham needed to respond in faith. In Romans 4:19 Paul describes the reality of human

Redeeming Singleness

doubts that directly confronted Abraham's faith at that moment—namely, that, being one hundred years old, his own body was as good as dead, and his wife had been barren her entire life. It is at this very moment in the Abrahamic narrative (Gen. 15:6) that Abraham's climactic act of faith occurs: "He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." And it is this particular moment that becomes the pivotal event that Paul refers to in Romans 4 as the evidence that Abraham himself was justified by faith and not by works.

Important to see in this text is that the specific object of Abraham's faith that is being commended is the promised *offspring*. The faith of Abraham that Paul commends in Romans 4 is not a vague sort of trust that God would provide for Abraham's personal well-being and general welfare. Rather, the issue of faith for Abraham is the promised offspring. So, while on one hand, in the Abraham narrative we find promises of innumerable offspring and progeny as a mark of God's bountiful blessing to Abraham, on the other hand we soon find the whole drama of the narrative focused upon the provision of a particular divinely promised offspring.

The second dialog, in Genesis 15:7–21, has elements of the same pattern. This time God gives Abraham tangible confirmation of the land promise in the formalization of the covenant. The original meaning of the Hebrew term *covenant* (*berith*) connotes the notion of "imposition," "liability," or "obligation."¹⁷ The term is used on a number of occasions in the Old and New Testaments to designate a binding commitment of some nature between God and human beings, chief among them being the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:9–16), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 15:18), the Sinaitic covenant with Israel (Ex. 19:5–6; Deut. 4:13), the Davidic covenant (2 Chron. 13:5), and the new covenant mentioned by Jeremiah and in the New Testament (Jer. 31:31–34; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).

Scholars have categorized these covenants into two different types: the obligatory type reflected in the covenant at Sinai that God made with the nation of Israel, and the promissory type reflected in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.¹⁸ These in turn resemble (respectively) in their forms two different types of judicial documents known in the Mesopotamian world from the middle of the second millennium BC—the political *treaty* constituting primarily an obligation of vassal

Begetting from the Beginning

to the suzerain or lord, and the *grant* constituting an obligation of the master to the servant. The former served mainly to protect the rights of the master, while the latter served mainly to protect the rights of the servant.¹⁹ The grant type of treaty was generally of the form of royal grants bestowed upon individuals who excelled in loyally serving their masters.²⁰ The proclamation of the grant of land in 15:18–21 is styled according to the prevalent pattern of judicial grants given by a lord to a faithful servant as a permanent endowment to an individual and his descendants.²¹

What appears to us to be a somewhat obscure pattern of events would have had profound and immediate significance to Abraham. His act of faith in trusting in God's word alone for the promised offspring in the first sub-dialog results, in turn, in the second sub-dialog with God's act of granting the covenant as a sign of his commendation of Abraham's act of faith. This granting of covenant formalizes the promises that God had previously given to Abraham through a ritualistic covenant oath whereby the precise terms of the grant are specified. In this case, the land of ten named nations is given to Abraham and his descendants for perpetuity.

The Covenant Confirmed: Genesis 16–18

With true dramatic irony, we find that immediately following the high point of the whole Abrahamic narrative, when Abraham expresses his unswerving faith to the word of God alone, the narrative gives the account of how Abraham and Sarah proceed with their own work-around plan to circumvent the apparent shortfall in divine initiative.

In these chapters we see the tension between human initiative and divine provision expressed in the contrast between the births of Abraham's two sons, in the midst of which the covenant is again expressed and confirmed with poignant clarity and power not yet seen in the Abrahamic narrative. The drama that unfolds between the births of Abraham's two sons centers on the nature of the respective births of the two boys and bears some direct similarities with the contrast we observed with Eve in the births of Cain and Seth. Just as for Eve the birth of Cain was a tribute to her own accomplishment, while Seth's birth was a testi-

Redeeming Singleness

mony to God's provision, so also Ishmael's birth comes as a consequence of human intervention, while the birth of Isaac comes strictly by means of God's supernatural intervention.

As the narrative unfolds in Genesis 16, we find Sarah initiating the action—directing Abraham to take her maidservant Hagar to bear children on her behalf, since “the LORD has prevented me from bearing children” (v. 2). The pattern of interaction suggests another parallel with Adam and Eve, this time with the account of the fall into sin in Genesis 3.²² In both cases the wife takes initiative to which the husband acquiesces. Abraham “listened to the voice of Sarai” (v. 2) in the same way that Adam “listened to the voice” of Eve and was judged because of it (3:17). And as Adam passively received and ate the fruit his wife gave him, so too Abraham willingly takes Hagar, whom Sarah gives him, and lies with her. Just as Adam and Eve chose to act on their human inclinations instead of fully trusting in God's word, so too here Abraham and Sarah take initiative based on their own judgment of the situation instead of completely trusting God to provide fully in accordance with his promise.

Sarah's action was a culturally appropriate option for a barren woman who wished to have children. Since servants were considered property, Sarah's maid could be used for, among other household services, bearing children as a surrogate mother on behalf of her mistress. The same right is later exercised by Rachel and Leah with their servants Bilhah and Zilpah, who similarly bear sons to Jacob on behalf of their mistresses (Gen. 30:3–13). The birth of Ishmael is thus the result of Sarah's taking her own initiative to produce a son when God did not otherwise provide. Just as Eve gets herself a man in producing Cain, so too Sarah gets a son for herself through using her maidservant. Thus, the primary sin in view here is Sarah and Abraham's attempt to usurp divine provision by means of human intervention.

The contrast with the expression of divine initiative in Genesis 17 could not be more dramatic despite the fact that it does not come until thirteen years after Ishmael's birth. God comes to Abraham as “God Almighty” or “El Shaddai,” an Old Testament name for God that first occurs here probably for the purpose of confirming God's power to produce supernatural offspring.²³ Gordon Wenham notes that although

Begetting from the Beginning

the etymology of the epithet *Shaddai* is obscure, it is always used in connection with promises of descendants: “Shaddai evokes the idea that God is able to make the barren fertile and to fulfill his promises.”²⁴ Moreover, if God’s name makes it patently clear that he alone is fully capable of giving Abraham offspring, the delay in God’s response until Abraham is nearly one hundred years old also serves to reinforce the reality that *only* divine intervention will accomplish the result.²⁵ God again appears, saying:

“I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” (Gen. 17:1b–8)

God begins by making it unmistakably clear that *he* (alone) is the one who both makes the covenant and provides Abraham his multitudinous offspring. The verb *multiply* (*ravah*) in 17:2 and “make fruitful” (*parah*) in 17:6 are the same verbs used earlier in Genesis in the command, “Be fruitful and multiply,” given to the birds and the fish (1:22), Adam and Eve (1:28), and Noah (9:1, 7). This might seem to imply that Abraham also inherits the Adamic mandate, in the same way that Noah did, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with his offspring. But the conspicuous lack of imperative here belies an important distinction between Abraham and Adam and Noah. Adam and Noah are given the mandate to fill the earth through their procreative efforts. Abraham, by contrast, is told that his multitudinous offspring will be the result of God’s covenantal provision. It occurs despite Abraham’s misguided human effort (i.e., in siring Ishmael) rather than through it.

Here again we have the two major covenant promises articulated,

Redeeming Singleness

the promise of many offspring and the promise of land for Abraham and his offspring. The offspring promise, however, is articulated with three points, a trifold repetition that emphasizes even more strongly that:

- 1) Abraham will be exceedingly fruitful (17:6)
- 2) Abraham will be the father of many nations (17:4, 6)
- 3) Abraham will be the father of kings (17:6).

Likewise the land promise is also reiterated here, this time explicitly as an “everlasting possession.” God also assures Abraham that he will be his God and the God of his offspring in the land. Here is where Abraham’s name is changed from Abram to Abraham. *Abram* means “exalted father,” and *Abraham* sounds like the Hebrew word for “father of a multitude.”²⁶ God’s changing Abram’s name at this moment of the covenant reaffirmation is another dramatic reinforcement of the main point. Just as God has full control over Abraham’s inner constitution to provide him with offspring, so too he exercises his full authority over Abraham’s outer constitution by renaming him in keeping with his divinely sanctioned mission.

After God gives the *sign* of the covenant in circumcision, the narration moves to two sequential episodes that announce, first to Abraham in 17:15–21 then to Sarah in 18:1–15, that Sarah will bear the appointed offspring. In hearing the news, both Abraham and Sarah react similarly—they laugh in disbelief. These passages add a final reinforcement to the dramatic irony in the difference between the births of Abraham’s two sons. Just as *both* Sarah and Abraham were complicit in preempting God’s plan with their own initiative, so *both* are incredulous in the act of God to provide a son through Sarah. Their response underscores the fundamental point: the appointed offspring comes strictly by divine provision; it comes not in any way through the effort of Abraham and Sarah, but despite their efforts. It comes rather through their unbelieving laughter, as reinforced in Isaac’s name, meaning “laughter.” Abraham even goes so far as to argue with God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” (17:18).

Thus despite Abraham’s commended expression of faith in Genesis 15:6, he himself can take no credit for the divinely provided offspring and readily betrays his ignorance concerning the plan of God in its provision. Sarah’s response of laughter followed by the response, “Shall I indeed

Begetting from the Beginning

bear a child, now that I am old?” prompts the response from the Lord, “Is *anything* too hard for the LORD?” (18:13–14). Yet again the fundamental difference in the two births is reinforced: Ishmael was the result of human initiative, but Isaac was the provision of divine initiative.

The Testing of Abraham: Genesis 22:1–19

A final confirmation of the covenant occurs in response to Abraham’s faithfulness in the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac. The sacrifice of Isaac meant for Abraham much more than just the loss of his son—it was the loss of everything he had been promised in the covenant. The event again underscores the recurring theme of divine provision throughout the Abrahamic narrative, and Abraham responds by sacrificing a trapped ram and calling the place, “The LORD will provide” (22:14). In the aftermath of the sacrifice, Abraham is again met by an angel who declares:

By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. (Gen. 22:16–18)

While this final confirmation of the covenant promises ties together the essential threads of promises given earlier, there is a degree of escalation in each of the four promises here (see Table 1.3).

In Genesis 12:2 God promises Abraham, “I will bless you,” but in Genesis 22:17 the first verb of the promise is repeated for emphasis, which, translated into English, reads, “I will surely bless you.”²⁷

In 17:2 God commands Abraham to walk before him and be blameless, that he “may multiply” Abraham greatly. The second promise in Genesis 22:17 is stated in response to Abraham’s obedience, and the verb is again emphatic: “I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.”²⁸ God previously used the metaphor of dust (in 13:16) and stars (15:5) for Abraham’s many offspring, but here he compares them to *both* the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, the latter of which appears here for the first time.

The third promise is slightly more cryptic: “Your offspring shall possess

Redeeming Singleness

the gate of [their] enemies.” To possess the gate of one’s enemies connotes having control over the city with the enemy having been subdued. Whereas the earlier promises only mention God giving land (Gen. 12:3; 13:5; 15:18–21; 17:8) without mention of what is to happen to the existing population resident on the land, the promise in 22:17 clarifies that God will give the land to Abraham’s offspring by means of giving them victory over their enemies.

Table 1.3: The Promises as Given in Chapter 22
Compared with Earlier Promises

Text	Promise	Text	Promise
Gen. 12:2	I will bless you.	Gen. 22:17	I will <i>surely</i> bless you.
Gen. 17:2	I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.	Gen. 22:17	I will <i>surely</i> multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.
Gen. 15:5	Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. . . . So shall your offspring be.		
Gen. 12:7	To your offspring I will give this land.	Gen. 22:17	Your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.
Gen. 12:3	In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.	Gen. 22:18	In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.
Gen. 12:3	In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.	Gen. 22:18	In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.

The final promise in Genesis 22:18 differs from the earlier rendition in 12:3 in two respects. Whereas in 12:3 it is all the “families” or “clans” in the world who are blessed, the language in 22:18 elevates the designation to all the “nations” of the world who are blessed. And whereas Abraham mediates blessing to all the families of the earth, it is Abraham’s singular “offspring” that mediates blessing to all the nations of the earth. These verses once again are examples in which the grammar is ambiguous regarding whether the term *offspring* is to be read as a collective noun or as referencing a single individual (e.g., “Your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies”). The possibility that these verses are intended to foreshadow messianic fulfillment cannot be ruled out.

Begetting from the Beginning

The Contexts of the Covenant: Summary and Observations

The covenant that God made with Abraham was not a one-time event. Rather, it developed through a series of encounters that Abraham had with God as he walked the journey of faith and trust in God. Through a series of five successive episodes, God progressively revealed his covenantal promises to Abraham, and we can summarize their significance with a few observations.

Table 1.4: God's Promises in His Covenant to Abraham

Episode	Text	Promise	Recipient
Abraham's call	Gen. 12:2	Progeny to become a great nation	Abraham
	Gen. 12:2	Blessing	Abraham
	Gen. 12:2	A great and blessed name	Abraham
	Gen. 12:3	Blessing	Abraham's allies
	Gen. 12:3	Blessing	The families of the earth
	Gen. 12:7	Land	Abraham's offspring
The granting of the land	Gen. 13:15	Land	Abraham and Abraham's offspring
	Gen. 13:16	Offspring as dust of the earth	Abraham
	Gen. 13:17	Land	Abraham
The covenant established	Gen. 15:5	Offspring as stars of the sky	Abraham
	Gen. 15:18–21	Land	Abraham's offspring
The covenant confirmed	Gen. 17:4	Father of a multitude of nations	Abraham
	Gen. 17:6	Exceeding fruitfulness	Abraham
	Gen. 17:6	Kings shall come from descendants	Abraham
	Gen. 17:8	Land as everlasting possession	Abraham and Abraham's offspring
	Gen. 17:8	The Lord as their God	Abraham's offspring
The testing of Abraham	Gen. 22:17	Great blessing	Abraham
	Gen. 22:17	Offspring as stars of sky and sand of seashore	Abraham
	Gen. 22:17	Possessing the gate of one's enemies	Abraham's offspring
	Gen. 22:18	Blessing	All the nations of the earth

1) *There is progression in the content of what God reveals to Abraham*

Redeeming Singleness

through the course of the episodes (see Table 1.4). In the first episode God promises Abraham progeny and that Abraham will be a blessing to the world. In the second God gives Abraham the land. In the third God gives Abraham his covenant. In the fourth God confirms the covenant with the sign of circumcision. And in the final episode the promises are escalated in response to Abraham's obedience. Despite the progression in degree of content and formalization, there is a striking commonality across the five episodes in the fundamental content of what God promises to Abraham. Each of the five sections mentions in some form the same two fundamental items: *offspring* and *land*. These are understood in the temporal-physical sense: physical progeny and a physical land grant.

2) *All the promises in the covenant ultimately depend on the single promise of abundant offspring.* While the land is given to Abraham in the second episode, it is only to Abraham's offspring that God promises the conquest of the land with the eradication of the existing residents (Gen. 22:17). The promise of a "great name" (12:2) in Semitic cultures comes through being remembered and venerated by one's descendants. Likewise, the other promises of nations and kings and the means by which Abraham is to be a blessing to the world also depend on offspring. Over the course of five episodes offspring are promised twelve different times (12:7; 13:15, 16 (2x); 15:5, 18; 17:7 (2x), 8; 22:17 (2x), 18), and the innumerability of Abraham's offspring is compared with three different metaphors: dust (13:16), stars (15:5; 22:17), and sand (22:17).

3) *The promise of innumerable offspring depends, in turn, completely on the provision of God's singular offspring to Abraham.* The narrative emphasizes in dramatic irony that this offspring comes not through human will or initiative but only through God's supernatural, gracious provision. It is this offspring that is the object of Abraham's faith in 15:6.

4) *The promise of blessing both initiates and concludes the promises of the covenant.* Beyond the general promise of blessing, three things are essentially promised to Abraham in the covenant: offspring, an inheritance of land, and a great name or lasting reputation. Each is given as an eternal or everlasting endowment. The covenant is everlasting—hence Abraham's offspring are eternal and the promise of land is an everlasting possession given to them (13:15; 17:7–8).

The Accounts of Isaac and Jacob

The covenant that God gives to Abraham is subsequently confirmed by God with Isaac and Jacob. The striking similarities in these confirmations speak to a pattern of divine intent within the whole narrative that serves to accentuate the fundamental theological message of the book of Genesis: God intends to bless the patriarchs through the provision of offspring. Sometimes the emphasis is on the multitude of offspring, and other times the emphasis is on a particular divinely provided offspring.

Isaac

There are two recorded occasions where God confirms his covenant with Isaac. The first occurs when Isaac goes to Gerar, apparently because of a famine in the land. Apparently he had also contemplated going to Egypt for further relief. It is on this occasion that the Lord appears to him and says:

Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your *offspring* I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your *offspring* as the stars of heaven and will give to your *offspring* all these lands. And in your *offspring* all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Gen. 26:2b–5)

On a second occasion in Beersheba the Lord again appeared to him and said:

I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your *offspring* for my servant Abraham's sake. (Gen. 26:24)

The content of the covenantal promises to Isaac echo the same emphases of those God gives to Abraham. On both occasions the promises begin with a *blessing* to Isaac and reaffirm that in Isaac's offspring all the nations of the world will also be blessed. The word *offspring* appears in five different instances, with God's promise to multiply offspring

Redeeming Singleness

appearing twice. As with Abraham, Isaac is not given the command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Rather, God will multiply Isaac’s offspring, and he will do it through one appointed twin son and not the other.

Likewise, the promise of land to Isaac’s offspring is stated twice. The only notable shift is the change of language from God “cutting a covenant” with Abraham to his “establishing an oath” that “he swore” to Abraham with Isaac. The language confirms our earlier observation that this is a promissory grant covenant in which primary obligation rests with the one who is the *master* in the relationship.

What is surprising in the relatively short narrative of the life of Isaac is his relationship to offspring, the land, and material blessing. After God dramatically intervenes in the life of Sarah to provide Abraham a son, we might expect that Isaac’s offspring would come automatically. Instead we find that Rebekah also was barren, Isaac prayed for her, and the Lord responded by providing a fruitful womb (Gen. 25:21). Nor was the land any more hospitable to Isaac than it had been to Abraham. Famine drives Isaac to Gerar, and the implication of the text is that he would have gone down to Egypt had he not been warned by God otherwise (Gen. 26:1–2). Isaac also faced contention with the indigenous population over the use of land resources (26:17–22). While the twin promises of offspring and land required eyes of faith for Isaac, the text is unequivocal regarding God’s tangible blessing upon Isaac’s livelihood and material well-being. He reaped a hundredfold of what he sowed and became very wealthy, invoking the consternation of the Philistines who lived around him (Gen. 26:12–16).

Jacob

The account of Jacob likewise gives two occasions in which God confirms his covenant. The first occurs while Jacob is fleeing his brother Esau to live with his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram. Jacob falls asleep and sees the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder up to heaven. Above it stood the Lord, who said to him:

I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your *offspring*. Your *offspring* shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad

Begetting from the Beginning

to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your *offspring* shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (Gen. 28:13b–15)

Twenty years later Jacob returns from Paddan-aram to Canaan, and God tells him to return to Bethel and dwell there (Gen. 35:1). There God again appears to Jacob and blesses him, and on this occasion God says to him:

Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name. . . . I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your *offspring* after you.” (Gen. 35:10b–12)

The emphasis on offspring is also prominent in the promises given to Jacob (with the word *offspring* appearing four times in the two passages), although there is also a conspicuous difference. As in the case of Abraham, God not only promises to give Jacob many offspring and land for that offspring, but he also reaffirms the statement given to Abraham that “nations” and “kings” will come from Jacob. But unlike Abraham and Isaac, God also gives to Jacob the Adam/Noah mandate: “Be fruitful and multiply.” While for Abraham and Isaac the divinely appointed offspring was only *one* son at the exclusion of other sons, Jacob is the seminal father of the whole nation, and all twelve of his sons conceived via four different women are included within the covenantal blessing. Thus Jacob is commissioned to “be fruitful and multiply” in a parallel physical way to Adam and Noah, in which all his sons become a chosen nation blessed by God through the Abrahamic promises.

Jacob, however, like his father Isaac, though immeasurably blessed materially also faces hardship both in procreation of offspring and with dwelling in the land. Rachel, like Rebekah and Sarah before her, was also barren apart from God’s provision. Jacob, like Isaac, also faces trouble with the local inhabitants of the land over the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34), and, of course, it is the famine in the land that ultimately brings Jacob’s

Redeeming Singleness

reunification with his son Joseph at the close of the Genesis story (Gen. 41:57–42:2).

God's confirmation of his covenant with Isaac and Jacob further reinforces the fundamental pattern of his covenant with Abraham. The promise of offspring is the central promise upon which God's blessing and the promise of land also rest. The promise of offspring depends entirely on God's provision, as is made clearly evident in the pattern of barrenness among the patriarchs' wives. In Jacob God is beginning to build a nation; hence he is renamed "Israel" and is commanded to "be fruitful and multiply."

Wrapping Up

By now some readers may be wondering what this discussion in Genesis and the patriarchs has to do with a theology of singleness. After all, from creation through the narrative of the patriarchs the text emphasizes the association of God's blessing with marriage and procreation. Apart from Genesis 2:18, singleness is not appreciably mentioned at all. Thus it is necessary to wrap up a few loose ends and offer a few observations on how the Genesis story relates to the larger picture.

1) Procreation is associated with God's blessing from the very beginning of creation. It is implied in the creation of man as *male* and *female* and with the first mandate to them to "be fruitful and multiply." It is the provision of God within the created order to maintain all life forms in a world subject to physical death (Luke 20:35–36).

2) Marriage, according to the Genesis creation account, has two fundamental purposes. The first is companionship, which has two dimensions: intimacy ("It is not good that the man should be alone," 2:18), and assistance ("a helper fit for him," 2:18). The other purpose for marriage is that it is the means and context for procreation of humankind ("they shall become one flesh," 2:24).

3) The importance of the term *offspring* emerges early and prominently in Genesis. Already in the garden of Eden we have prophetic foreshadowing of the importance of the *offspring* of Eve who will "strike" (RSV) the Serpent's head (Gen. 3:15), and later Eve speaks of God's appointing "another offspring" in Seth (4:25). The importance of offspring also

Begetting from the Beginning

serves as the central drama within the major storyline of the account of all the patriarchs in Genesis. Not only is it the most prominent of the covenant promises to Abraham, but it is the critical linchpin upon which all covenant promises depend. Moreover, God's blessing comes to the patriarchs through the provision of offspring; and through the provision of offspring, God's blessing comes to the world.

4) The prominence of offspring as a central motif of God's blessing in Genesis might seem to emphasize the importance of human beings marrying and having children as the essential means to realize and effect God's blessing upon the world. Instead, the emphasis is that the *offspring* of the covenant that ultimately mediates God's blessing to the world is ultimately a provision of God himself *rather* than of human initiative. It serves to underscore the theological reality of our full dependence upon God for the provision of all the blessings he wishes to bestow.

“Finally! I’ve been hoping and praying for a book like *Redeeming Singleness* for years. With insight and clarity, Danylak has presented profound, biblical, and theological truth that can revolutionize the church’s understanding and affirmation of singleness. This book is a gift to God’s people, and the impact could be nothing less than incredible.”

STEVE BROWN, *Emeritus Professor of Preaching, Reformed Theological Seminary; radio-broadcaster, Key Life Network*

“Barry Danylak’s work has been a great help to me in understanding the distinctive role of singleness in God’s new-covenant people. There is much that the church as a whole, and not just single people, can learn from this.”

LYDIA JAEGER, *Academic Dean, Institut Biblique de Nogent-sur-Marne*

“Far from being a book just for single people, *Redeeming Singleness* demonstrates how marriage and the single life give a complementary witness to the gospel in the modern world. This is a hugely important and timely book for all Christians.”

DANIEL KEATING, *Associate Professor of Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

“Immensely helpful! Amidst extremes of celibacy versus marriage in Christian traditions on the one hand, and today’s proliferation of sexual non-commitment on the other, Danylak gives us a thorough-going biblical theology of singleness.”

J. SCOTT HORRELL, *Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary*

Barry Danylak, a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, holds graduate degrees in mathematics, Christian thought, and biblical exegesis, and is the author of several reviews and articles. He has a passion for ministry to single adults and regularly speaks and teaches on biblical singleness.

