

Exegetical Brief: Galatians 3:16 Concerning His Seed

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The NIV translates Galatians 3:16 ;

The promises were spoken *to Abraham* and *to his seed*. The Scripture does not say "and *to seeds*," meaning many people, but "and *to your seed*," meaning one person, who is Christ.

The Greek text of verse 16 is:

τῷ δὲ Ἀβραὰμ ἐρρέθησαν αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ. οὐ λέγει· καὶ τοῖς σπέρμασιν, ὡς ἐπὶ πολλῶν ἀλλ' ὡς ἐφ' ἑνός· καὶ τῷ σπέρματι σου, ὃς ἐστὶν Χριστός.

Most translations (KJV, NASB, CEV, TEV, RSV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible, Living Bible, God's Word) read the same way as the NIV. The GWN New Testament translates differently: Now the promises were spoken *in reference* to Abraham and *in reference* to his Descendant. He does not say: "in descendants," as *referring to many*, but as *referring to one*, "in your Descendant," who is Christ. This exegetical brief will suggest that this latter translation is preferred for several reasons.

The first reason is the unclear meaning of the translation "The promises were spoken...to his seed." It makes good sense to say the promises were made to Abraham, but it makes little or no sense to say that the promises were "spoken to Christ." The "seed" referred to in this verse is Christ. The last part of verse 16 establishes this beyond any doubt. The promises referred to in this verse are the promises made to the patriarchs about the coming Savior. To say, then, that these promises which referred to Christ were made "*to his seed (Christ)*" is a *non sequitur*.

The second reason is that when v16b gives a commentary on v16a, the dative σπέρματι is replaced by the preposition ἐπὶ with the genitive (ἐπὶ πολλῶν). This combination of words λέγειν ἐπὶ means to "speak about" (cf. Bauer/Arndt/Gingrich/Danker under ἐπὶ I, 1, b, γ). Thus the commentary in 16b clearly indicates that the dative σπέρματι in 16a is not an indirect object (spoken to) but a dative of reference (spoken in reference to).

The third reason is the wording of the reference to verse 16 which occurs in verse 19. In verse 19 the NIV translates the words ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ τὸ σπέρμα ᾧ ἐπάγγελται "until the Seed *to whom the promise referred* had come." Note that the last two words in the Greek are picking up the thought of v16a. This time the NIV translates the dative as a dative of reference. In this case to translate "until the Seed [Christ] had come *to whom* [Christ] the promise was spoken" would make the *non sequitur* even more evident.

A fourth consideration is that if the dative σπέρματι is a dative of reference, then τῷ Ἀβραὰμ (which is joined to σπέρματι in a parallel construction by the conjunction καὶ) should normally also be a dative of reference. The context also suggests that this is the way τῷ Ἀβραὰμ should be translated. What does the context indicate the word "promises" means in this verse? The commentary in v16b says the "promises" are those promises that use the singular σπέρμα to refer to Christ. According to the NIV's footnote, the "promises" would be those made to Abraham in Genesis 12:7, 13:15, and 24:7. An examination of these references reveals that none of them speak directly about the promised Savior. Instead all of them speak about God's promise to give the land of Palestine to Abraham's descendants. The only passages that use σπέρμα to refer directly to the promised Savior are Genesis 22:18, 26:4, and 28:14. The first two have this promise: "Through your offspring [seed] all nations on earth will be blessed." The third one says: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring [seed]." It is significant that two of these three promises were not *spoken to* Abraham. The first one was, but the second was spoken to Isaac, and the third to Jacob. That the word "promises" in Galatians 3:16a includes promises made to Isaac and Jacob is also evident from the fact that in verse 17 the law is said to have been added 430 years after the promises. This time span would correspond to the time from Jacob to Sinai rather than from Abraham to Sinai. The fact that the context indicates that the "promises" include

those made to Isaac and Jacob tells us that the dative τῷ Ἀβραάμ in Galatians 3:16a should also be translated as a dative of reference.

Thus a better translation of Galatians 3:16 might be: When God gave the promises he spoke about Abraham and about his descendant, He did not say "descendants," referring to many, but he referred to one person, "your descendant," who is Christ.