CHAPTER SIX
GOD AND HIS PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

First century appropriations

In the processes of redaction of the various strata of the Pentateuch, the writers used the material speaking of the promise to Abraham to illuminate the contemporary situation of Israel. As a result, the Pentateuch in its final stage contained material reflecting various political and religious situations. This process of re-interpretation continued in inter-testamental Judaism, with the difference that the biblical tradition about Abraham was now fixed. This meant that there was in scripture a common stock of material to which interpreters in different periods and circumstances could go back.

We shall not try to establish a history of tradition by forcing Jewish material into Paul's "background". Instead we will point out various expressions of this process of re-interpretation in the first century A.D. as various groups and authors grappled with the question of what God's promise meant to them. In Alexandria in the first decades of the century, Philo used the Abraham-figure as a means of strengthening the identity of his fellow Jews. A few years later Paul made the promise a centre for his polemics against other Jews (Christian and non-Christian) when defending the legitimacy of his missionary communities. In the latter part of the century επαγγέλματα was a central term to Luke and to the author of Hebrews, but now apparently without Paul's strong polemics against other Jews. Finally, the fall of Jerusalem caused many Jews to turn to God's promise again—and to question his faithfulness to them. These questions were reflected in apocalyptic and early Rabbinic writings in the last decades of the first century or at the turn of the second century A.D.

In different ways, these various groups attempted to appropriate the Old Testament narratives of the promise to Abraham. And they were roughly contemporary and almost certainly independent applications of the same material. Nevertheless there is a striking similarity in motifs and in composition between many of these various interpretations. These similarities cannot be fully explained
by the fact that they could all draw upon the same passages from the Bible. There must have been a broad tradition of interpretation that could be appropriated in addition. By comparing the Abraham narrative in its various interpretations we hope to establish a firm ground to distinguish between traditional material and Paul's adaptation of it in Rom 4:13-22. Since we are concerned with this common tradition, it would be arbitrary to divide Jewish interpretations from Christian interpretations, and we shall therefore discuss them in one chapter. They are more or less contemporary enterprises; however, except for Philo, they are all later than Paul. They are included, therefore, because they contain traditions that are older than the writings themselves. It is only the picture of Abraham in 1 Clement which shows any influence from a Pauline theology.

A. Preparing the way:

The Old Testament and the earliest interpretations

In the Old Testament there is no Hebrew term equivalent to ἐπαγγελία.1 Thus, it is the context and the description of a situation more than a particular vocabulary that indicate that one particular text is what we would think of as a "promise". The Old Testament texts themselves frequently refer to God's word, דיבר, he speaks, המר.2 Another much used expression is the oath of God, שבעתו, he has sworn to do something, שבע.3 When we speak of "promise" it has only positive connotations, whereas בר and שבע are much more ambiguous: God's word and his oath could bring both salvation and punishment, e.g., Num 14:20-35. Consequently, when we use the term "promise" when speaking of the Old Testament, we must be aware that we to some extent impose upon this material a category, and thereby an interpretation, from a later period.

There can be no doubt that God's promise to the fore-fathers constituted one of the major themes of the Old Testament. It is not easy, however, to assess its relative importance compared to

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1 Schniewind and Friedrich, "ἐπαγγελία", TWNT 2 (1935) 575.
2 In passages ascribed to J, the promises are frequently introduced by אֶרֶץ הָיוָה ἡ πρωτασία, e.g. Gen 28:13; 12:1; 13:14; H. H. Schmidt, Der sogenannte Jahwist. Beobachtungen und Fragen zur Pentateuchforschung (Zürich, 1976) 146-47.
3 Niphal of שבע, e.g. Gen 22:16; 50:24; Exod 33:1; Num 11:12; Deut 7:8 etc., see H.-G. Link, "Schwören", Theologisches Begriffsslexicon zum NT 2/2 (1971) 1107.