

The Concept of Remnant: A Biblical and Theological Review

Thomas S. Shetler, Ph.D.

Bethany Global University
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438 USA

Tom.Shetler@bethfel.org

Introduction

In 1972 Gerhard F. Hasel wrote *The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, which generated significant interest among Old Testament scholars. The book was the result of a very thorough study of the concept of the remnant as found in the Old Testament and literature from the Ancient Near East (ANE). A few scholarly articles have been written since, and most, true to the tenor of the times, focus on the meaning of words in Hebrew (and other ancient languages) and their usage in the historical context of the Old Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In other words, current scholarship sees the concept of a remnant as a matter of historical interest with little practical consequence. For Hasel and others, the topic is primarily of academic and scholarly interest. We will include some of this scholarship to give a sense of the historical context of the terms and their range of meaning as well as the current status of the biblical concept.

But the central purpose of this article is to examine the older, more conservative, belief that the Bible teaches of a small group of people in Israel who were faithful and obedient amid a largely faithless and disobedient majority (I Kings 19:18). This faithful remnant existed even in the world of the prologue (Genesis 1-11), gave rise to Abraham, and later existed in Israel when Israel was in apostasy and facing God's judgment. This remnant will continue on beyond the Old Testament era and play an important role in the events of the New Testament. From the Old Testament remnant will come John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Ana. In this way, the remnant will be instrumental in the incarnation of Christ. Ultimately the remnant will become the church, and as we will see, exist within the church.

Some might say that the eschatological remnant described by many modern scholars is this righteous remnant which will be saved at the end of the age. While this writer agrees that there is an eschatological remnant in Scripture, it is not the same thing as the righteous remnant. The concept in scripture is not just about who remains at the end of history, but about who is instrumental in the fulfillment of the Promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3), with all of its redemptive and eschatological implications. It is the intent of this paper to explore the biblical teaching of a righteous remnant and its implications for our lives and ministry today.

Gerhard Hasel: The Remnant

Hasel's book was published in 1972 and inspired an additional amount of scholarship. He was summarizing "the pioneering study of the remnant motif" authored by Johannes Meinhold in 1903.¹ Hasel surveyed the various scholarly interpretations of the remnant beginning with Meinhold who saw the remnant as those who survive a disaster because of their holiness or "piousness."² He next reviewed several scholars (Grossman, Mowinkel) who saw the remnant as those left after the great eschatological judgments.³ This view places the remnant outside of the current historical record and into the category of sacred history (*heilsgeschichte*) as an event that occurs at the end of time.

Other scholars contemporize this view as merely a description of the survivors of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions in the time of the Kings. Hasel also recognized the trend among earlier scholars toward equating Israel's understanding of the remnant with the beliefs of the surrounding cultures of the ANE (Ancient Near East). For example he described the thoughts of Werner E. Muller as, "Muller sees the origin of the concept from the practices of warfare in the ANE, and not from mythology."⁴ This implies that the remnant were the survivors of a battle, a war, or the captives taken after a battle, such as was the case after the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of Israel and Judah.

Hasel also acknowledged the connection between the teaching of the remnant and the election tradition in Israel. Through Abraham Israel was chosen to be in covenant relationship with the Living God and to receive and declare the Torah, as a result, they were God's chosen people to declare His excellency to the nations. The Jewish people often lost sight of this great calling and acted in contradiction to it, but the idea of election and its connection to the remnant is an important biblical principle. We will return to the question of election further on in the paper and put it in terms of the righteous remnant.

Hasel divided his book into four parts to explore the remnant motif in scripture. In part one he examined the existing literature, in part two he reviewed the historical and cultural context of the terms used in ancient Near Eastern literature. He refers to the Hebrew term for "third," *balat* and to *warsu*, which means "escape" to reflect the warfare motif⁵ as found in scripture. Other terms

¹ Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, (Andrews University, 1972), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 9-16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

reflect the same concept of a remainder, survivor, or small part of a larger whole⁶. In this, he is implying that remnant is a negative concept connected to the small number of survivors of a battle or an invasion. In part three he presented the concept in scripture as found from Genesis to Isaiah, and here he included the concept of a “righteous” remnant⁷ relying on the work of Von Rad who saw Noah’s family preserved through the flood as an example of the preservation of the faithful remnant. He did not, however, expand on this aspect of the concept as presented in scripture. The final section examined the key passages related to the remnant in Isaiah. Isaiah 1:9, in fact, is the main verse in Hasel’s understanding of the Old Testament remnant. For Hasel, this remnant is the promise of the few; what he calls, “the prophetic representation of the future remnant⁸. He, therefore, takes the remnant out of the realm of normal history and puts it into the eschatological category of *heilegeschichte*. With this conclusion, he stands in agreement with his academic contemporaries in Old Testament scholarship who have embraced a non-literal, ahistoric approach to biblical interpretation. As a result, the remnant becomes an ancient Near Eastern “motif,” and not a set of real and historical figures whose lives, faith, and relationship with God were significant in the unfolding of the plan of redemption revealed in the scriptures.

Related Articles and References

John Paul Heil, a Roman Catholic scholar, attempted to connect the refusal of the Jews of the time of Jesus to respond to the gospel to Paul’s explanation of the partial hardening of the Jews in Romans 9-11. Heil first sought to answer the question implied in God’s setting aside of the Jews as His unique people called to carry out His will in the earth and replacing them with the Gentile Church. In essence, he asked how the promise to Abraham of descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore will be realized if those descendants (the Jews) are set aside from salvation and from the advancement of God’s purposes in the world? He answered, “Rather than a limiting judgment on Israel, then, 9:27 expresses the hope that, based on God’s word of promise, a remnant of presently unbelieving Israel will come to believe and be saved.”⁹ Heil used a phrase to describe this hope throughout the essay, “surely at least a remnant will be saved.”¹⁰ In other words, Heil saw the promise of a remnant of Israel as an eschatological remnant. It is important to keep in mind that Paul in Romans is speaking to the Gentile Christian church about the current condition of Israel in order to help them understand their unbelief in the face of the great promises of the Old

⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁸ Ibid., 243

⁹ John Paul Heil, “From Remnant to Seed of Hope for Israel: Romans 9:27-29,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 64, 2002, 705.

¹⁰ Ibid., 705, 708, 712, 716, 717, 720.

Testament. Paul is in fact arguing that these Gentile believers have been “grafted in” to the great purposes of God, and stand by their faith, just as the majority of Israel have been rejected for their lack of faith (Romans 9:30-33 & 11:17-24). His argument is that God, in His mercy, will leave a remnant of Israel, in spite of their unbelief and even though they have acted like those worthy of judgment (Sodom and Gomorrah – Rom. 9:29). He does so, because of His faithfulness to the promise and His mercy.¹¹

Joel Willitts also discussed the remnant motif as found in the Isaiah scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). He concluded that “in the understanding of the DSS community, the remnant did not replace Israel but was the elect from among Israel with whom and through whom God will ultimately fulfill his covenant promises and restore the Davidic Kingdom.”¹² In other words, the DSS community saw the remnant in terms of the elect, those called and set apart by God for the fulfillment of His purposes in the earth. This, as we will show, is an important element in a biblical understanding of the term.

Hasel, Heil, and Willitt represent the understanding of the remnant within much of the academy. The term is used to depict the survivors of a war or a battle, the eschatological remnant left after the great judgment, or finally the elect, those chosen by God to be in covenant relationship with Him. There is a more traditional or conservative understanding of the term that we want to explore next.

The Remnant in Scripture

Throughout history God has had a remnant of humanity who loved and worshiped Him and whom He could call upon to act according to His purposes. The story of Cain and Abel and the resulting two groups of descendants (genealogies) are the first mention of this spiritual and moral separation of the human race into a disobedient majority and an obedient and faithful minority (Matthew 7:13-14). As we will show, out of this believing remnant arose Abraham and his descendants which is the nation of Israel. Israel was called to be a godly remnant within the human race and to act as “a royal priesthood, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Yet as we follow the history of Israel, as presented in scripture, we find that only a small minority truly lived up to their calling to be a holy people. However, through this minority within a minority, God did remarkable things, bringing Israel out of bondage in Egypt, entering and taking control of the Promised Land, establishing the kingdom in Israel, building the Temple, taking Israel through the captivities, and restoring a remnant back in the Land. This remnant prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah, were instrumental in His birth, and in the preparation for His ministry. The Church will arise from this remnant and take its place in history as the agents of the fulfillment of

¹¹ Ibid., 719.

¹² Joel Willitts, “The Remnant of Israel in 4Qs Isaiah (4Q161) and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Spring 2006, Vol. 57, Issue 1, p. 10-25.

God's purposes in the world. We will also see that within every church, there is a "righteous few" upon whom those churches depend for the majority of their ministry. As well, within the global church, there exist a small percentage who carry the burden of the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It will not be the purpose of this paper to ask "why?" this is the case, nor to criticize those who are not part of the remnant but simply to demonstrate that it is a fact, and to show what is entailed in becoming a member of this significant group within the world and the Church.

We will also need to examine what the Scriptures mean by the word "election." Does this term signify an arbitrary choice or is something deeper going on within the heart of the people chosen? One of the mysteries related to election is the fact that in the Old Testament, God's people historically often refused to believe and obey His commands, even though they were His chosen people. God rebuked them as an "obstinate and stiff-necked people" (Deuteronomy 31:27). We see issues related to the human will and choices in these narratives, and we must seek to incorporate this into our definition of the term. We turn now to exegesis of the first description of the remnant in scripture.

Genesis 4-5: The Two Streams of Humanity

The first expression of the division of the human race into two groups is the story of Cain and Abel. Jesus referred to Abel as the first of the persecuted prophets of history (Luke 11:51) and thus put Abel into that special category of the servants of God within history. He also, by implication, put Cain into the category of the first member of the world system (cosmos) that stood in opposition to God's purposes in the world. The New Testament specifically designates Cain as a servant of the Evil One (Jude 11; I John 3: 12). We also see this by closely examining the two genealogies in Genesis 4 & 5 that follow immediately after the story of the murder of Abel. In the two lists, Cain's line (Genesis 4:17-24) represents the larger human race held captive by the values of the world system which find their expression in the polygamy and violence (revenge) of the seventh son from Adam, Lamech. In the second genealogy, Seth's (Abel) line (Genesis 4:25- 5:32) represents the godly remnant who are a people of prayer and worship (Genesis 4:26) whose ultimate (seventh) expression is Enoch the man who "walked with God." (Genesis 5:24).

The existence of the two seeds (Genesis 3:15) is seen in the story of Cain and Abel and in their descendants. Cain and Abel are expressions of the two seeds: Abel on the side of faith and obedience and Cain on the side of disobedience and sin. When the two brothers present their offerings to the Lord, Cain is disturbed because his offering was unacceptable. God warns him at this point that, "sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:7). Sin is pictured as a powerful predator ready to pounce upon its prey (I Peter 5:8), and man must seek to master the terrible conflicting desires and compulsions that wage war in his soul. Sin is not to be conflated with Satan. He cannot make us sin; sin is self-originated. We face the responsibility, ultimately, for what we do. But we must also conclude that one of the main

battlefields of the spiritual conflict is the human heart, and that men serve Satan through sin. This, in fact, is the origin of the two seeds and the “enmity” (Genesis 3:15) that exists between them. The spiritual battle moves from a conflict within to the conflict between two companies of people whose life purposes stand in deep opposition to one another: One following the purposes of God to reconcile the world to Himself and the other following the purposes of the world (I John 3: 15-17; John 7:7).

It is important to add that Abel and those that follow in the godly line are not sinless (“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” - Romans 3:23), they are rather repentant and dependent upon the grace of God. Abel came with a sin offering, while Cain did not. A Hebrew, being familiar with the five sacrifices of Leviticus, would realize the difference between the sacrifices presented by the brothers. Abel came in pursuit of atonement, while Cain came in religious pride. One must always remember, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” I Peter 5:5. The remnant does not live in sinless perfection, but in ongoing repentance and faith (I John 1:8-10). Mankind was created to live in surrendered dependency upon God. In New Testament terms, we are called to abide in Christ (John 15:4), this is the first and most significant characteristic of the believing remnant.

The Ungodly Line

Man became separated from God at the Fall, as the Holy God who cannot co-exist with evil, expelled Adam and Eve from the garden (Genesis 3:22-24). Thus, we are introduced to the concept of the divine withdrawal (Isaiah 59:1-2). In the story of Cain and Abel, we see this separation exacerbated as man, in ongoing rebellion, moves away from the presence of the Lord (Genesis 4:14-16). So, the divine withdrawal has two aspects: man withdrawing from God through rebellion and sin and God withdrawing from mankind in righteous judgment and forbearance (II Peter 3:9). The ungodly line is an expression of the operation of sin in the human heart; it describes an exacerbated separation between God and man (Isaiah 59:1-2) and it produced a company of people who are enslaved to sin and in service to the devil (John 8:34; 44). We see hints of this in the story of the two sons of Adam. After Cain murdered Abel, God confronted him and sent him away from his presence (Genesis 4:14). In an act of divine mercy, God bestowed a mark of protection upon him as Cain was sent away from the presence of God. For the ungodly line, God is a distant abstraction, and they must find their way through life without His aid (Genesis 4:14). God is the source of life and to turn away from God is to turn toward chaos and death. As an expression of this, after Cain departs from God’s presence, the book of Genesis presents a genealogy of his descendants. It is carefully constructed to describe the direction that this group is taking at the dawn of human history. The genealogy is noteworthy in that the name of the third son from Adam (Enoch) is given with a short description, “and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son” (Gen. 4:17). Three is a significant biblical number, and in this instance appears to hint at the direction that this line is taking. The line is directed

toward the city, a self-reliant collection of humanity. The city will be an important motif in the prologue (Gen. 1-11), implying rebellion against God and the pursuit of human autonomy and pride (Gen. 11:4). Cities are concentrations of sinners and therefore, of sin. The rest of the descendants of Cain listed in the genealogy are only named, no descriptors are added, until the next person of a significant number appears. Cain's line of descendants reaches its climax with the seventh son from Adam: Lamech. He is the first polygamist in scripture; thus he is abolishing the institution of marriage as God had originally given it (Gen. 2:24-25). The text also describes him as a man of revenge and violence. These two qualities: the overthrow of marriage (and the unleashing of sexual immorality) and the justification of violence (war) will be his legacy (Gen. 6:5-12). He is the seventh son and the epitome of the line, and he represents unrestrained immorality and violence. By describing Lamech's three sons as the founders of agriculture, art, and industry (Genesis 4:20-22), Genesis is describing the birth of human civilization and its origin in this worldly line. From its beginning human civilization has been a world system (I John 2:14-15) built upon the ongoing rebellion of mankind and representing the attempt to live successfully apart from God.

The Godly Line

In contrast to the descendants of Cain who are on a path away from God, there is another company of people in the world who have chosen the opposite path. This is the "godly line," from whom will come Israel and the Church. At the end of chapter four of Genesis, we are introduced to this line of descendants from Adam. Just as in the previous genealogy of the line of Cain, something is said about the third son from Adam. His name is Enosh, and the comment that portrays the direction and inclination of this group is, "Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26). In other passages of the Old Testament this phrase is used to describe prayer and worship (e.g., I Chron. 16:8; Ps. 116:13,17; & Isa. 65:1). In other words, these are people of faith, prayer, and worship. Like all fallen human beings this group is subject to the Divine withdrawal, but unlike the other line, they seek to move toward God through prayer and other acts of faith and worship. Thus, they are given the moniker of the "godly line."

Just as with Cain's descendants, the seventh son of this line is a unique and special person about whom something significant is said in the text. In this case, it is written, "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:24). He was the ultimate expression (the seventh) of this line that lived by faith in the living God (Jude 14-15). These are the descendants of Adam and Eve who reject the moral and spiritual rebellion of their fellow human beings and choose to draw near to God and live in dependence upon His love and grace rather than seeking a selfish autonomy. It is their great privilege to know God and to hear His voice, in the midst of a world that is spiritually dark. This is the company of people in the world through whom God works to accomplish His great redemptive purposes and it is by means of this genealogy that we are first introduced to the believing remnant.

In the New Testament, the two lines are associated with the original two sons of Adam and Eve: Cain and Abel. Jesus refers to “righteous Abel” as one of the Old Testament martyrs (Matt. 23:35) and John in I John 3:11-12 attributes Cain’s crime of murder to the influence of “the evil one.” Thus, the two sons and the two lines are connected to the two “seeds” promised in Genesis 3:15; the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent and express the “enmity” (Gen. 3:15a) that defines their relationship.

If we extend the two lines to their end point in the prologue of Genesis (1-11), we see that Cain’s line ends with the development of human civilization. Lamech’s three sons are the originators of agriculture, the arts, and industry/technology. But we must also note that Cain’s line is antediluvian; none of these descendants will survive the flood. Their cultural innovations and influence will last, however, as will their spirit of rebellion, violence, and immorality.

The godly line extends to Noah, by whom God preserves humanity through the judgment of the Flood. Noah is a powerful example of an act of faith. He must believe what God is telling him about the coming judgment of the earth and do exactly what God instructs him to do in building the ark and collecting all the animals to fill the ark in order for he and his family to survive the flood. In other words, his faith was more than a profession of faith; it was the obedience of faith. This type of obedient faith is a second defining mark of the believing remnant.

By this act of faith, his entire family was preserved through the flood and became the forefathers of every person living on earth today. There was a consequence to this judgment; the human lifespan was dramatically reduced (Genesis 6:3). These survivors do not, however, end the contamination of human selfishness and sin. While Noah and his family were part of the godly remnant, his sons will be the fathers of the nations, and carry on the continuing rebellion that is a characteristic of human sin. Genesis 10 depicts this important fact by providing the genealogies of the three sons. If one is paying attention to the text, one notices that this genealogy gives a listing of the nations of the Ancient Near East (ANE).¹³ Moses refers to this act of the establishment of the nations in Deuteronomy 32:8 and Paul gives reference to it in Acts 17:26-27. The genealogy also makes a significant statement about Shem, as well as a prophecy about the Promised Land, Noah declares, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.” Many have noticed this blessing, and its implication that the descendants of Shem will have an important role in God’s plan for human history (as will the land of Canaan). We thus see the continuation of the two lines after the Flood; a godly line and a worldly line. To confirm, this, we need to examine the next genealogy in Genesis.

¹³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis 1-17*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 348.

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful

After the judgment at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, the genealogy of Shem is recorded. It is listed here as an important part of God's call of Abram. Remembering the blessing of Shem in Genesis 10, we recognize the link between Abram and the godly line. One of the important principles related to the faithful remnant is that these are the people that God works through to accomplish His purposes in human history. In other words, there is an unbroken succession of people who know God and walk according to His ways. And more importantly, are led and directed by His Spirit. They may be small in number (8 people in the Noah story), but they are the people that God uses for the accomplishment of His will on the earth. Abraham is the prototype of this company of people, as we pass from the mostly pre-historic period of the prologue to the advent of recorded history.

When we come to the Abram story, we must make an important distinction. Abram comes out of the godly line, which is the significance of the genealogy of Shem (Genesis 11:19-32). He is a son of Shem, the one blessed of the Lord, and he is a son of Noah and the others of the godly line as shown by his specific encounter with God, the conversation that ensued, and his response to that conversation in Genesis 12. Like many of his forefathers, God has his "eyes" upon him, "For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chronicles 16:9). The distinction is that Abram is called out of the world system after the scattering of the nations. Hamilton points out that the postdiluvian world continued the rebellion of the antediluvian world, but that God's approach now was to "place his hope in a covenant with Abraham as a powerful solution to humanity's sinfulness".¹⁴ He is living in Ur, one of the great cities of ancient Mesopotamia. His family makes the journey to the Northern reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates river basin and settles in a place called Haran. At Haran, Abram is called to leave home and family in an act of obedient faith, compelled by a series of promises. He does so in order that God would make him into a "great nation," that God would make his "name great," that God would make him a "blessing," and finally, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3) We know from reading the Old Testament that the childless Abram, will become the father of the nation of Israel. Israel will be the means (and the location) by which Christ enters the world. And through Christ's work on the cross, Israel will be connected to the spiritual descendants of Abram (Romans 9:6-8), which is the church, and become the means by which the Gospel goes forth to the very ends of the earth (Galatians 3:6-9). Through Abram, God is raising up a vast nation of people who will be the vehicle by which He is able to bring redemption to a fallen and broken world. These are God's chosen people. They are chosen to accomplish the saving and healing purposes of the Heavenly Father in the world, this is their great calling and privilege. This is the most important characteristic of the remnant, they are "a people for God's possession" (Exodus 19:5) through whom His purposes can be accomplished in

¹⁴ Ibid., 347-348.

the world.

Abram/Abraham became the spiritual father/mentor of this faithful remnant of humanity in demonstrating the importance of faith, “And Abram believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6/Romans 4:13-22). Faith is the central characteristic of the remnant, “The just shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). Abram’s faith has three important components. First, it sees beyond the present world to God’s great heavenly promises. Abram faithfully obeyed, living as a sojourner, separate from the world and its values, “for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). His hope and security were not in this world, he was rejecting the choice made by Cain and his descendants of an earthly city. Abram is anticipating Jesus’ great declaration, “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6:20). Our great treasure is God himself and our fellowship with Him.

Second, Abram’s faith was connected to the Promise, “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). His greatest act of faith was directly connected to the Promise and its anticipated fulfillment. God spoke to him after the miraculous birth of Isaac and called him to take his son to a specific place in the Promised Land and there offer him as a “burnt offering;” in other words, to kill his son and burn the body to ashes (Genesis 22:2). Countless commentary has been made about this command, and many have struggled with its logic and significance. The secret to the mystery of the story lies in the story itself. Central to the story is the fact that God led him to a specific high place in the “region of Moriah.” Notice, it was not Mt. Moriah (the temple mount, 2 Chronicles 3:1), but another mountain in the “region of” the temple mount. There are several “mounts” in Jerusalem; the Mount of Olives, the temple mount (Moriah), and mount calvary (Golgotha), to name the most famous of these hills. The solution to the mystery is that God is leading His servant Abraham to the place where Jesus will die on the cross for our sins, and He is using Abraham’s son, Isaac, as a prophetic symbol of Christ’s substitutionary atonement for the entire human race. The account tells us that, after the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from slaying his son at the place that God directed him to, Abraham offered a ram caught in the thicket in the place of his son and he named the place. It is the naming of the place that is the climactic event of the story, as well as the resolution of the mystery (Genesis 22:11-14). Why did God send Abraham to Moriah, to this specific high place? He did so that he would name it prophetically, *Jehovah-Jireh*, “The Lord will Provide.” What is more, the text reinforces this conclusion by adding, “as it is said to this day, ‘In the mount of the Lord it will be provided’” (Genesis 22:14). And what is the “it” that will be provided? Is it not rescue and redemption from sin and death that has plagued mankind from the Fall? That is why a sacrifice was involved, but it was substitutionary. It was not Isaac that was sacrificed, but the ram God “provided” as his substitute. Thus, the story is a prophetic description of Christ, God’s only Son, given as a substitute for us. Abraham’s purpose and the purpose of the entire faithful remnant, of which he is the

spiritual father, is to be used of God to help bring the plan of salvation into reality in human history. Abraham's faith-filled obedience in this case sealed the Promise ("in you all the families of the earth will be blessed") by an oath (Genesis 22:15-18; Hebrews 6:13-18), and prophetically designated the place where the sacrifice of the Son of God would be made to atone for the sins of the world.

In other words, the righteous remnant is all about the promise of redemption for all the peoples of the world. This remnant is essential and instrumental in the process leading up to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and in the fulfillment of the Great Commission that enables men (and women) of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation to surround the throne as those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (Revelations 7:9). A central feature of the righteous remnant is their awareness of their personal call and responsibility to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

The third aspect of Abraham's faith was that it was real. He did not just profess belief in God, his belief was demonstrated by his actions. He went where God told him to go, and he did what God told him to do; this was his great faith. In response, God declared, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Genesis 22:12). As James wrote, "faith, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17) True faith is expressed through our actions. That which we truly believe, that of which we are utterly convinced, shapes all the choices we make and the way we live our lives. The remnant are people of deep convictions about who God is and what His great plans are. As a result their lives reflect those convictions. They are also the "doers" of the church.

Martin Thornton, an Anglican theologian, describes three levels of membership in a local church, the smallest, but most significant being the "remnant." He writes, "These are ordinary people of extraordinary devotion, more proficient than spiritually gifted, whom it is vital for the parish priest to identify and nurture through spiritual direction, for they are the dependable, beating, praying heart of the parish. They truly live their Christianity and form the core not just of the parish but the universal 'Church Militant.'"¹⁵ Every church in the world depends on these "faithful" few, who follow in the footsteps of their father Abraham.

The Remnant After Abraham

While the Patriarchs after Abraham (Isaac and Jacob) are both expressions of the remnant, Isaac as a peacemaker (Genesis 26:12-30) and Jacob as a faithful servant (Genesis 31:36-42), the most profound expression of the remnant after Abraham is Joseph. The Joseph story is a fitting climax to the book of Genesis as he stands as a powerful example of the believing remnant and their instrumental use in advancing the purposes of God in human history. It is through Joseph that God brings about the fulfillment of His prophecy to Abram in Genesis 15, that his descendants

¹⁵ Ronald E. George, "The Faithful Remnant: Martin Thornton's Ecclesiological Middle Term." *Austin Presbyterian Seminary*, August 15, 2002.

would be sojourners in a foreign land for 400 years (Genesis 15:13-14). Moreover, it is through Joseph that the entire family is healed of the deep dysfunction that is revealed in the story of the birth of the sons of Jacob by his four wives, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Genesis 30:1-24) and expressed in the animosity toward Joseph as the favored son born of the beloved wife, Rachel (Genesis 37:1-11). God reveals His plan for Joseph through the two dreams he received as a teenager (Genesis 37:5-10), yet those dreams only exacerbate the hatred of his brothers toward him. They, in fact, plot to kill him to put an end to those dreams (Genesis 37:19-20). In an act of divine intervention (completely unknown to those inside the story, but visible to us who see the entire story), the brothers sell Joseph to a slave caravan headed to Egypt.

The circumstances Joseph encounters in Egypt are an opportunity for the revelation of his great faith and integrity. He refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife, not just once, but many times, finally being falsely accused of rape when he refused her attempt to force his embrace. He is a profound example of Paul's admonition to "flee immorality" (I Corinthians 6:18). His refusal is grounded in the great value he places upon his relationship with God, "How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9) As is often the case in this ruined world, his righteous choice is disregarded, and he ends up in prison for a crime he did not commit.

In spite of the terrible injustice, his integrity and faith were not weakened. God was with him, and the chief jailer put him in charge of the other prisoners. It was this opportunity to serve his fellow prisoners that enabled him to hear the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and Pharaoh's cup bearer. The favor of the jailer did not lead to self-focus or self-pity, he had genuine compassion for these fellow inmates, "Why are your faces so sad today?" (Genesis 40:7) His relationship with God was real and this enabled his supernatural gifting. He was able to accurately interpret their dreams yet was left languishing an additional two years in prison for his service to the cup bearer. This aspect of the story reveals the perseverance of faith and faithfulness that is reflected in this man's character. In all these trials and tribulations, he never yielded to cynicism or anger, and he was ready when the crucial moment of service to God and man arrived. One of the marks of the remnant is their ability to "see" God beyond their circumstances, and to continue in a life of faithfulness. We will also see these qualities in Moses and the prophets (Exodus 14:13; 2 Kings 6:15-17).

The Pharaoh of Egypt was the most powerful man in the world of his day, and he ruled the most prosperous nation of that time. In two dreams, God revealed to Pharaoh that Egypt and the world were going to face a truly devastating famine, that if unprepared for would have led to an unprecedented loss of life. God will use a member of the remnant, His servant Joseph, to reveal the import of the dreams that God gave to Pharaoh and to devise a plan for preventing the devastating loss of life that would be the result. This unique event of Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and being elevated to the position of Grand Vizier, essentially Prime Minister, over all of Egypt was an act of divine intervention intended to foreshadow the calling and ministry of the

remnant in the world. They are the unheralded, unrecognized servants of the most High God, whom He calls out of the shadows of history and public record and uses for His great redemptive purposes. Just as he demonstrated in prison, his elevation to a position of great power and privilege did not quench his desire to serve. He believed God and followed through faithfully on his plan of preserving and storing twenty percent of the yield of the seven years of abundance. Because of this, when the years of famine arrived, “all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph” (Genesis 41:57).

Included in those coming to buy grain were his own family, and this provided the opportunity for God to deal with the sin that had torn this family, who will eventually be the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, apart. First, the brothers were brought to confession and contrition for their sin, “truly we are guilty concerning our brother” (Genesis 42:21). Next, they must demonstrate their integrity by returning with their younger brother, while one of the brothers is held prisoner in Egypt. To make matters worse, they find their money bags in the sacks of grain, and their first response is to believe that God is against them because of their sin (Genesis 42:28).

In spite of these circumstances, and in contrast to their former behavior towards one another and their father, they press on towards doing the right thing. Judah, in fact, pledges his very life in order to keep their word to “the man” (Genesis 43:8-10). Because of the severity of the famine, Jacob relents and sends Benjamin along with the brothers and the necessary money to buy the grain they need to survive. As a mark of their integrity they return with “double the money” (Genesis 43:12) to cover for the money returned in their sacks. When they arrive back in Egypt, they discover the true nature of God’s heart toward them, “Be at ease, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks...” (Genesis 43:23). He is for them, not against them.

As a final test of their character and a revelation of the work that God has done in their hearts, the brothers are put in the same scenario they faced with the betrayal of Joseph. The favored younger brother, who is shown actual favoritism (Genesis 43:34), is charged with a serious crime that threatens to remove him from the family as a slave (Genesis 44:17). Will the brothers walk away from their brother due to resentment or will they act like brothers? In answer, Judah again stands in the gap for his brother and offers himself as a slave in Benjamin’s place. At this point one sees the transformation of the brothers and their love for one another and for their father. Joseph, seeing this transformation cannot restrain his emotions and he tearfully reveals himself to them. At this point, Joseph’s dreams are fulfilled, and he rules over his family for their good and the accomplishment of God’s plan for that generation.

Israel is brought to Egypt and under Joseph’s protection and supervision, the family of 70 becomes a great nation (Exodus 1:7). Joseph is a profound example of the obedience of faith. One

must assume that God directed him to do the many things he did with his brothers to bring about their transformation. Just as God was at work in the hearts of the brothers as they responded to the circumstances they faced in the time of testing. Joseph is a powerful expression of the principle that we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Joseph, as the believing remnant, stands as an example of the promise that, by His grace, God will restore mankind to the *Imago Dei*, and that one day, all men will reflect the nature and character of the God who made them as His image. Joseph and the remnant are the first fruits of that promise. One of the great promises of scripture is the promise of sanctifying grace (Romans 6:1-7; I Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:17) by which God makes us more like Christ (Colossians 3:10). Christlikeness is an important characteristic of the remnant. Further, in giving Joseph authority over the entire world of his day, and in seeing Joseph use that authority to serve and protect that world from death and terrible deprivation, we see the proper expression of dominion given to mankind at creation. Joseph is not the fulfillment of dominion, that will only come with Christ, but he is a promise and a down payment on its restoration in the world. Finally, in Joseph we see a Christlike man and if not a type of Christ, a foreshadowing of His humility, meekness, holiness, and grace. Like Christ, he faced rejection by his family, he will be a man acquainted with suffering and grief (Hebrews 2:18). Like Christ, he will overcome temptation and by his intervention save the physical lives of his entire family and much of the known world of his day, and to the end of his life, he will shepherd his family at the beginning of their sojourn in Egypt.

Joseph is also a foreshadow of the remnant itself, as God will, for all time, have a number of people “who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (I Kings 19:18). After Joseph, we see Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Deborah, Ruth, Boaz, Samuel, David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the prophets all operate as the means by which God’s promise of redemption is advanced through Old Testament history.

Many of the most important texts related to the remnant are given in the prophets. In Isaiah, we are introduced to the preserving capacity of the remnant, “Except the Lord had left us a remnant, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:9). This statement can be taken two ways, either God left us a few survivors as an act of mercy, or the faithful remnant, like the wheat in the parable of the wheat and the tares, prevents God’s judgment (Matthew 13:29-30). When one considers the example of Abraham’s prayer of intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:25-32), one recognizes the preserving capacity of the righteous remnant.

As the prophets will point out, this remnant is preserved *through* the times of judgment and purging. Isaiah is speaking to the remnant when he tells them to “wait” or “hope in” the Lord (Isaiah 40:27-31) in the midst of frightening circumstances. Isaiah himself is an expression of this remnant as he declares that “I will wait for the Lord who is hiding His face from the house of

Jacob...” (Isaiah 8:17). Further he named one of his sons, Shear-jashub, which means “a remnant shall return” (Isaiah 7:3). Habbakuk was called to be the prophet of the righteous remnant who will face the tragedy of the Babylonian captivity. He is called to “wait quietly” (Habbakuk 3:17) as circumstances cause him to “tremble” (Habbakuk 3:16), yet he will “rejoice in the God of my salvation” (Habbakuk 3:18). In other words, God will see the remnant through the trials and hardships of a world under judgment, and in the end show them His salvation.

But the primary role of the remnant is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth, and to see the fulfillment of the promise of Revelation 7:9, “And behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” This is the reason God called Abram out of Haran, that “in your seed, all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). It will be the members of the remnant, called out from the world system, like their father, Abraham, who will be used by God to bring about the fulfillment of this great Promise. We see it clearly in the story of the advance of the gospel and the remarkable growth of the global church in the past two hundred years. Men and women, “of whom the world is not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38) have spent and given their lives so that those who have not heard the good news of salvation through Christ, may hear and respond.

The final question related to the remnant is its membership. Who can be a member of the remnant? Going back to the beginning in Genesis, it is, first of all, those who recognize their need for rescue from sin, and like Abel come in an attitude of repentance and the pursuit of redemption. This is the starting point of a life of prayer, worship, and faith. In many ways, Enoch, the seventh son in the godly line is the prototype. “And Enoch walked with God” (Genesis 5:24), he lived his life in daily, even moment by moment communion with God. His choices and actions (“walk”) were made in dependence on God. In the New Testament, this is described as “walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16), allowing God to direct our path and empower us with His grace.

Works Cited

George, Ronald E. “The Faithful Remnant: Martin Thornton’s Ecclesiological Middle Term.” *Austin Presbyterian Seminary*. August 15, 2002.

Hamilton, Victor P. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis 1-17*. Wm. B. Eerdmans’ Pub. Co., 1990.

Hasel, Gerhard F. *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*. Andrews University, 1972

Heil, John Paul. “From Remnant to Seed of Hope for Israel: Romans 9:27-29.” *The Catholic*

Biblical Quarterly, 64, 2002.

Willitts, Joel. "The Remnant of Israel in 4Qs Isaiah (4Q161) and the Dead Sea Scrolls." *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Spring 2006, Vol. 57, Issue 1, p. 10-25.
