

## The Christmas Promise<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

God's gift of his Son was the result of a long-standing promise. In Eden, God promised the woman that she would bear children, and foretold a fearful conflict between her seed and the serpent (chart):

Gen 3:14 And the LORD God said unto the serpent, ... 15 ... I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; **it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.** 16 Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and **thy conception**; in sorrow **thou shalt bring forth children**; and thy desire [shall be] to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

We recognize this promise as fulfilled in the Lord Jesus.

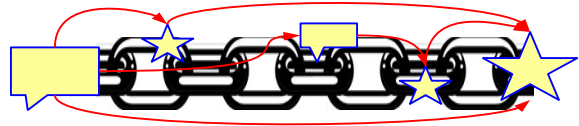
Lk 1:30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. 31 And, behold, thou shalt **conceive** in thy womb, and **bring forth a son**, and shalt **call his name JESUS**. 32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

He was born of a woman and entered into a combat with Satan in which he suffered greatly, but broke Satan's power.

Heb 2:14 Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise **took part of the same** [born of a woman]; that **through death** [his heel was bruised] he might **destroy him** that had the power of death, that is, the devil [he crushed the Serpent's head];

When we studied Isaiah, and again the early chapters of Matthew, we learned that God often repeats important promises through time, both by words and by events (chart, Illustration 1). We called this pattern "Manifold Fulfillment,"<sup>2</sup> and defined it as "repetition of an initial prophecy through history, sometimes in **words** and sometimes in **events** that **foreshadow** or **partially realize** the promise, until the time of the actual fulfillment." An important example of this pattern is the promise that Abraham's seed will rule over the Gentiles (chart, Illustration 2, see notes on Isaiah 60).

Today we trace the same pattern in the promise of the seed of the woman. The repetition is particularly clear in a series of



*Illustration 1: Manifold Fulfillment: a chain of words (balloons) and events (stars) joining an initial promise to the ultimate fulfillment.*

<sup>1</sup> Originally presented at WIBC on Dec 21, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> The term is due to Willis Judson Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise*. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1905. The definition is my own, based on his discussion.

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miraculous births, often described in very similar language (chart, Illustration 3).

Today, we trace these successive promises. Each promised son is a reminder of the promise in Gen. 3. Each one points to the ultimate fulfillment, God's gift of his own Son in the Lord Jesus. In each case we see the bruising of the Serpent's head and the son's heel.

### Gen. 4:1, Cain

From the very first, Eve looked forward to the fulfillment of this promised son, and thought her firstborn might be the answer:

Gen 4:1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she **conceived**, and **bare Cain**, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

We see here three elements that will mark many of the later reports: conception, birth, and a significant name ("Cain" is from the verb "gotten," as Eve explains).

Eve's statement shows that though Adam is Cain's father, she recognizes God as the ultimate source of the child. For the seed of the woman to bruise the Serpent's head, the woman must be able to have seed, and Cain's birth shows the beginning of this process. At the same time, the Serpent grievously bruised Cain, whose carnality led to a careless sacrifice, the murder of his brother Abel, and Cain's own exile.

### Gen 16:11, Ishmael

Hagar is Sarah's slave from Egypt. She conceives by Abraham when Sarah, frustrated by her own barrenness, gives her to Abraham according to the custom of the time, but then Sarah becomes angry and drives Hagar away. The Lord meets Hagar in the wilderness:

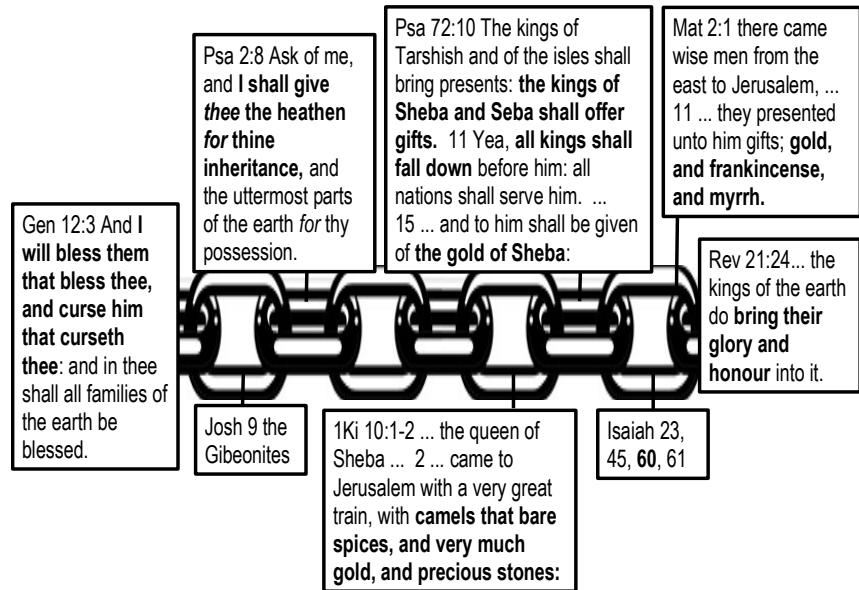


Illustration 2: Manifold Fulfillment of the subjection of the nations

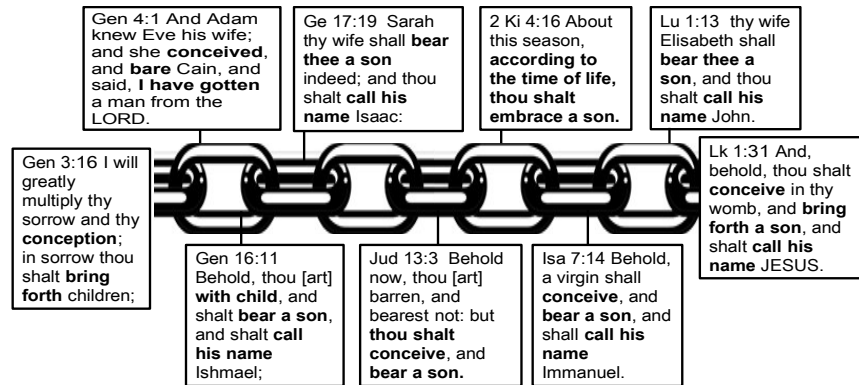


Illustration 3: Manifold Fulfillment of the promise of the woman's seed

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Gen 16:11 And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou *art* with child, and shalt **bear a son**, and **shalt call his name Ishmael**; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction.

How does God deliver Hagar through her son Ishmael? She is “in the way to Shur,” heading back to Egypt, her home “after the flesh.” She is ignorant of the true God and his grace, which at this moment is focused on Abraham. Through the promise of this son God reveals himself to her. She realizes that he is not only Abraham's God, but that he sees and cares for her as well. Through her son, God cares for her and brings her to the knowledge of himself through a promised son.

Yet the Serpent bruises Ishmael. His fallen nature leads to continual strife (16:12).

### **Gen 17:19, Isaac**

God promised Abraham a son. Abraham is content with Ishmael, but this child, as we have seen, was born in the strength of the flesh. God promises him his own son:

Ge 17:19 And God said, Sarah thy wife shall **bear thee a son** indeed; and thou shalt **call his name** Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, [and] with his seed after him.

Isaac bruises the serpent's head: God has promised (Gen. 12:1,2) that the savior will come through Abraham's seed, but at the age of 99 Abraham is still childless. Not as serious in later generations, when there will be many collateral lines, but here there is only one, and it is barren. Isaac's birth leads directly to the redeemer.

The serpent bruises his heel. He is a weak head of the family, dominated by his wife and deceived by his son Jacob. He repeats the sins of his father, denying his wife and almost compromising her (Gen. 26, cf. ch. 12, 20).

### **Judg 13:3, Samson**

Manoah and his wife are barren, but the Lord promises them a son, Samson.

Jud 13:3 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou [art] barren, and bearest not: but **thou shalt conceive**, and **bear a son**.

Samson crushes the serpent's head by defeating the Philistines.

Yet his own sinful nature, in his pagan wives (a gentile in ch. 14; a harlot in ch. 16), shows the Serpent's effect.

### **2 Kings 4:16, the Son of the Shunammite**

A wealthy woman of Shunem, a town in the Jezreel valley, extended regular hospitality to Elisha. She is barren, with no child to care for her and her husband in their old age. Elisha promises her a son:

2Ki 4:14 And he [Elisha] said, What then *is* to be done for her? And Gehazi answered, Verily she hath no child, and her husband is old. 15 And he said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the door. 16 And he said,

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About this season, **according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son.**<sup>3</sup> And she said, Nay, my lord, *thou* man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid. 17 And the woman **conceived**, and **bare a son** at that season that Elisha had said unto her, **according to the time of life**.

Though the promise is phrased differently than most of the others, it strongly echoes the Lord's second promise to Sarah in Deut 18 [chart].

Gen 18:10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee **according to the time of life**; and, lo, **Sarah thy wife shall have a son**. And Sarah heard *it* in the tent door, which *was* behind him. ... 12 Therefore **Sarah laughed** within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? 13 And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? 14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, **according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son**.

As with Hagar, the gift of this son shows God's blessing on this woman, relieving her concerns for old age.

The serpent bruises his heel when the boy dies unexpectedly while laboring with his father in the field. This is the first time the bruised heel takes the form of physical death, rather than moral perversion. But Satan's attack is frustrated when Elisha raises him from the dead. These events provide further symbolic anticipations of our Savior's work: the promised Son, slain by Satan as he labored for his Father, but raised from the dead, crowning his victory over Satan.

### Isa 7:14, Isaiah's Word to Ahaz

This link does not describe an intermediate event, but reaches all the way to the final fulfillment. It is Isaiah's word to Israel after Ahaz has refused God's encouragement to trust him in a geopolitical crisis with Syria and the northern kingdom, and it highlights the words that most typically mark the other examples.

Isa 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall **conceive**, and **bear a son**, and shall **call his name** Immanuel.

This is the promise that Matthew cites to explain the virgin birth.

### Luke 1:13, John the Baptist

Shortly before the angel appeared to Mary, he came to Zacharias, a elderly priest whose wife Elizabeth was barren, and announced the birth of John the Baptist

Lu 1:13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall **bear thee a son**, and thou shalt **call his name** John.

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3 Though this promise does not include references to conception, bearing, or naming, it clearly echoes the Lord's second promise to Sarah in Genesis 18, even to the doubt expressed by the woman. The fulfillment of the promise in v. 17 does recall two of those key terms.

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John bruises the serpent's head by fearlessly proclaiming God's word. He calls both the religious hierarchy and the civil government (Herod) to God's standard. But he is bruised when Herodias demands his murder. The son of the Shunammite died through physical frailty, but John dies because of his ministry, and is faithful unto death.

### Luke 1:31, the Lord Jesus

Finally the Son arrives to whom all the others point, the Lord Jesus. Gabriel announces his birth in words that echo the entire chain:

Lk 1:30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. 31 And, behold, thou shalt **conceive** in thy womb, and **bring forth a son**, and shalt **call his name JESUS**. 32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

He crushes the serpent's head by destroying the power of Satan. John 12:31, "Now is the judgment of this world." The most complete and comprehensive victory over the wicked one.

Heel bruised in his crucifixion; more suffering than the Baptist, because he bore our sins and suffered for them.

Surveying all of the bruises [chart, Table 1], we see that in each case Satan brings increasing pain on the promised son, yet suffers increasing damage, until he is finally defeated.

Gen 3:15	Her seed ... shall bruise thy head	Thou shalt bruise his heel
Gen 4:1, Cain	Shows that the woman would have seed	Shows the sin nature in slaying Abel
Gen 16:11, Ishmael	Reveals the Lord to Hagar	Shows the sin nature in strife and revenge
Gen 17:19, Isaac	Makes possible the promised seed through Abraham	Weak husband and father; repeats Abram's sins
Judg 13:3, Samson	Delivers Israel from Philistines	Shows sin nature in pagan lovers
2 Kings 4:16, son of the Shunammite	Rises from the dead, showing that death can be overcome	Dies while working with his father
Luke 1:13, John	Rebukes temple and palace, announces the Messiah	Slain by Herod
Luke 1:31, our Lord	Redeems God's flock by dying and rising again	Rejected and crucified

*Table 1: Summary of the Bruises*

There is yet one more echo of the promise, in Romans 16. We as the body of Christ are involved in carrying out the victory he has won, and we can expect both to be bruised, and to bruise [chart]:

[We are bruised:] Rom 16:17 Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. 18 For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ,

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but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.

[We bruise Satan:] 19 For your obedience is come abroad unto all *men*. I am glad therefore on your behalf: but yet I would have you wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil. 20 And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.

[Our resource in the struggle:] The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.

We should not expect a pleasant conflict. As in every other case, Satan will bruise our heel. But the certainty of the past promise shows that we can look forward to final victory, crushing his head at the return of Christ (Rev 19).

## Notes

### Study questions

The birth of our Lord is the fulfillment of promises that God made in Eden (Gen 3:15, 16). God announced this fulfillment to Mary in Luke 1:31.

1. Use the Treasury (or Hint a) to find where this promise was repeated.
2. What other instances can you find between Gen 3 and Luke 1 when God made similar promises to women concerning the conception, birth, and naming of a son? Use your memory, a concordance or Bible software, or Hint b.
3. Coupled with the promise to Eve in 3:16 was a promise to the serpent in 3:15.
  - (a) What did the Lord say that the Serpent and the Seed would do to each other?
  - (b) See if you can trace these two actions through each of the promised births you found in question 2.
  - (c) How is this promise ultimately be fulfilled, according to Rom 16?
4. We saw a similar phenomenon with the promise of Zion's exaltation in Isaiah 60. You might want to review the notes on that study (<http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/isaiah/notes/Isaiah60.pdf>, pp. 7-8) for another example of the principle of "manifold fulfillment."
5. Hints (for those without Treasury, concordance, or Bible software)
  - (a) Isa 7.
  - (b) Gen 16, 17, Judges 3, 1 Sam 1<sup>4</sup>, 2 Kings 4, Luke 1

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4 Hannah is not like the others because her son is not the subject of a promise.