

The Christmas Promise

Christmas is a time of promises. As a child, when I wanted something special, my mother would say, “Why don’t you ask for it for Christmas?” Her invitation promised that I would receive what I asked.

A major Bible theme is God’s promise to send the Messiah. This promise is a central focus of the NT writers. Today we’ll focus our attention on this promise.¹

The NT Focus on The Single Promise

The noun “promise” (ἐπαγγελία *epangelia* G1860) in the NT is remarkable. Like other nouns, it can occur either with or without the article. But out of 52 instances, nearly ¾ have the article, compared with about half for nouns in general (Figure 1). It is not “a promise” or “some promise,” but “the promise.” When we do see “promises,” it is overwhelmingly “the promises,” a specific set.

Paul defines “the promise” twice, once at the start of his ministry and again toward the end.

Paul’s first recorded sermon is in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch (chart):

Act 13:32 And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that **the promise which was made unto the fathers**, 33 God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, **in that he hath raised up Jesus again**; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.

The point here is not the resurrection; that comes into focus in the next verse. Rather, it is the sending of God’s Son into the world.

He uses similar language toward the end of his recorded ministry, in his defense before Agrippa (chart). When Festus described the case to Agrippa, he summarized the Jews’ accusation:

Act 25:18 when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed:
19 But had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was **dead**, whom Paul affirmed to be **alive**.

The accusation shows that Festus grasped the two main elements of Paul’s gospel:

1Co 15:3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ **died** for our sins according to the scriptures; 4 ... and that he **rose again** the third day according to the scriptures:

How does Paul summarize this proclamation that Jesus came, died, and rose again?

¹ This meditation draws heavily on W.J. Beecher’s excellent study, *The Prophets and the Promise*, originally published in 1905 and available on-line at http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/23a-Prophets/Beecher-Prophets-Promise/Beecher-ProphetsPromise.htm .

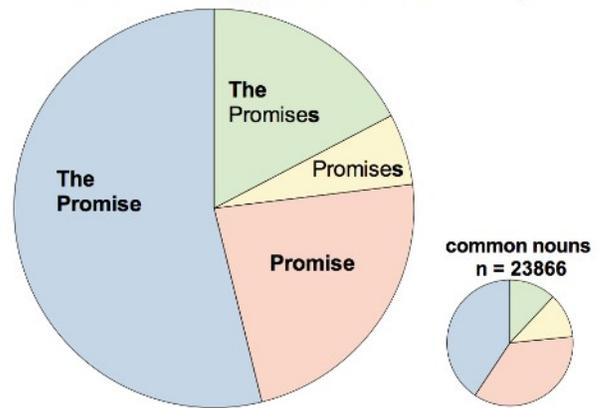


Figure 1: Usage of "promise" and of common nouns in the NT (see Notes for details)

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Act 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of **the promise made of God unto our fathers**: 7 Unto which *promise* our twelve tribes, instantly serving *God* day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews.

Paul considered **the Messiah** to be the fulfillment of **the promise** that God made to **the fathers**.

- Paul writes of **the promise**, not “prophecy.” The Greek term for “prophecy,” προλέγω (*prolegō*, G4302), is negative, always predicting judgment and sadness, not the Messiah.² “Promise” is positive.
- The focus is on the coming of the **Messiah**.
- This promise was originally made to **the fathers**, and specifically, to Abraham³ (no fewer than ten times in the NT⁴).

The central point of Christmas is that God has kept the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants, to send the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

The Multiple Promises

Though most references are to “the promise” (singular), there are tantalizing references to “the promises.” Compare the following pairs of references (chart):

Rom 4:13 For **the promise**, that he should be the heir of the world, *was* not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if they which are of the law *be* heirs, faith is made void, and **the promise** made of none effect:

Gal 3:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were **the promises** made.

“Abraham and his seed” received the promise, but also the promiseS.

Heb 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received **the promises**, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Heb 11:39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not **the promise**:

What they anticipated is described both as the promise and also as the promiseS.

Finally, consider the two verses by Paul with which we began:

Acts 13:32 And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that **the promise** which was made unto the **fathers**,

Acts 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of **the promise** made of God unto our **fathers**:

Romans 15:8 Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm **the promises made** unto the fathers:

2 Heb 10:15 is the one possible exception out of 15 instances, but with VanHoye’s parsing of the verse, even that can be viewed as a sober warning: “He prophesied that he would impose his covenant on you, but then he promised to write it on your hearts so you wouldn’t forget it, and also to forgive your sins.”

3 Thus also in the OT: Psa 105:42 For he remembered his holy **promise**, and **Abraham** his servant.

4 Acts 7:17; Rom. 4:13, 16; Gal. 3:14, 16, 18, 29; Heb. 6:13; 7:6; 11:17

The fathers received the promise, but also the promises. The single promise to Abraham contains multiple facets:⁵

- possession of the **land of Canaan**;
- his **seed**, or descendants;
- **blessing** in a special relation with God;
- **rule over other nations**, not descended from him.

The Promise to Abraham

The promise was first given to Abraham while he lived in Ur of the Chaldees (Acts 7:2-3, chart).

Gen 12:1 Now the LORD had said unto Abram,
Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a **land** that I will shew thee:
2 And I will make of thee a **great nation**, and **I will bless thee**, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing:
3 And **I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee**: and in thee shall **all families of the earth** be blessed.

When there was strife between Abram's herdsmen and those of Lot, Abram graciously gave Lot the choice of the land, but the Lord reassured him that he had not given away the promise. Given the context, it is understandable that this statement focuses on the land, But remarkably, God brings in a reference to the seed as well, chiasmatically sandwiched between two references to the land.

Gen 13:14 And the LORD said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward:
15 For **all the land which thou seest**, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.
16 And I will make **thy seed** as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, *then* shall **thy seed** also be numbered.
17 Arise, walk through **the land** in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.

In Gen 15, after the war with the Mesopotamian kings, Abram expressed discouragement about his lack of an heir. The Lord repeats the promise, not only of the seed, but of the blessing and the land:

Gen 15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: **I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward**. ... 5 And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall **thy seed** be. ... 18 In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given **this land**, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:

The four facets are also prominent when God institutes the sign of circumcision. Here, the emphasis is

⁵ In 2011, I explained the plural as different temporal revelations (Gen 3:15; Gen 12-22; 2 Sam 7; Isaiah and other prophets; upper room discourse; apostolic writings) and different topics about the Lord Jesus. More immediately, the plural refers to the facets within the Abrahamic promise, or to the repetition of promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

on the blessing, in the form of a personal covenant with God. But the promise of the seed is repeated throughout, interwoven with the other facets.

Gen 17:3 And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,
 4 As for me, behold, **my covenant is with thee**,
 and thou shalt be **a father of many nations.**⁶ 5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram,
 but thy name shall be Abraham; for **a father of many nations** have I made thee.
 6 And I will make thee **exceeding fruitful**, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come
 out of thee.
 7 And **I will establish my covenant** between me and thee and **thy seed** after thee in their
 generations for **an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee**, and to **thy seed** after thee.
 8 And I will give unto thee, and to **thy seed** after thee, **the land wherein thou art a stranger, all
 the land of Canaan**, for an everlasting possession; and **I will be their God**.

In ch. 18, the Lord and two angels visit Abraham, and emphasize only one of the four facets:

Gen 18:13 And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a
 surety bear a child, which am old?... 14 ... At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according
 to the time of life, and **Sarah shall have a son**.

God tests Abraham’s faith in ch. 22, and after Abraham demonstrates his faith by his works, God
 repeats all four aspects, again repeating the promise of the seed multiple times:

Gen 22:16 And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this
 thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son*: 17 That in **blessing I will bless thee**,
 and in multiplying I will multiply **thy seed** as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which *is* upon
 the sea shore;
 and **thy seed** shall possess the **gate of his enemies**;⁷
 18 And in **thy seed** shall **all the nations of the earth** be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my
 voice.

The same four facets recur across God’s statements to Abraham
 (Table 1, chart). The seed is in all six. Next is the land of Canaan,
 in five. The blessing appears in four, and other nations in three.

| Gen. Chapter | 12 | 13 | 15 | 17 | 18 | 22 |
|-----------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Land of Canaan | x | x | x | x | | x |
| Seed | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Blessing | x | | x | x | | x |
| Nations | x | | | x | | x |

The Seed in the Promise

At first, the Messiah is not prominent. The “seed” focuses on
 Abraham’s numerous progeny, not on a specific promised
 individual. But two lines of evidence from the OT show us the relation of the two ideas (chart).

Table 1: The Four Facets of the Promise

⁶ The phrase “father of many nations” is not talking about his progeny; that starts in v. 6. Rather, it emphasizes the
 deference that nations will owe to him. Compare Joseph’s use of the term in Egypt a few generations later, Gen 45:8:
 “God ... hath made me **a father to Pharaoh**, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.”

⁷ “Possess the gate of his enemies” refers to the land, and anticipates what happened in the conquest, when the nation took
 over not only the land, but also the cities and houses (gated structures) of their enemies (Deu 6:10). The usual practice in
 the ancient world is to burn a conquered city, but Jos 11:13 notes that the only city Israel burned was Hazor. God enabled
 them to conquer the cities without destroying them, so that they could “possess the gate of [their] enemies.”

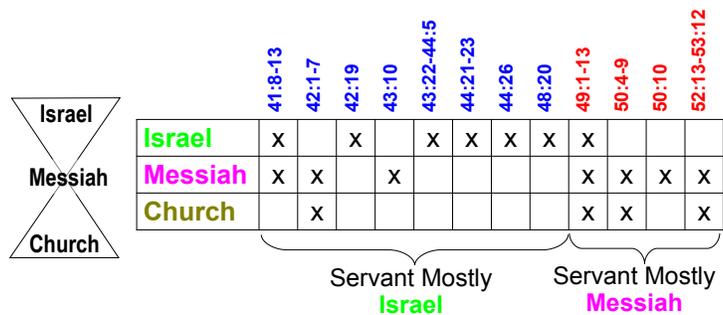
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The first is God’s promise to David of a royal dynasty:

2Sa 7:12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, **I will set up thy seed after thee**, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son.

The offspring of Abraham have finally reached the point where they are numerous and powerful enough to form a nation, and at that point God promises to raise up one of them to rule over them forever, one who will bear the title “God’s son.”

The second is the hourglass pattern seen repeatedly in Isaiah’s servant songs (Figure 2). The promise of the **seed as multitude** transforms subtly into the picture of the **seed as Messiah**. Then it widens back out to encompass that organism that the NT calls the body of the Messiah, the church.



So the focal point of the promise that we saw in Acts 13 and 26, the Messiah, is the

realization of the one facet of the promise that *Figure 2: The Servant Hourglass in Isaiah* is present in all six of the statements to Abraham (chart). The transition from seed = people to seed = Messiah has deep roots in the Old Testament, and summarized by Paul:

Gal 3:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but **as of one, And to thy seed**, which is Christ.

Once we see the Messiah as the seed, we realize how he also dominates the other facets of the promise:

- He is the king who will rule from his capital in Jerusalem, in the land of promise.

Jer 33:15 In those days, and at that time, will I cause the **Branch of righteousness** to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness **in the land**. 16 In those days **shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely**: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The LORD our righteousness.

- He is the one who mediates God’s blessing to his people; in focus in the NT references to “the promise of the Holy Spirit.”

Act 2:32 This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. 33 Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father **the promise of the Holy Ghost**, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

- He is the one who will rule over all the nations of the earth, Jew and Gentile.

Psa 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. 8 Ask of me, and I shall **give thee the heathen for thine inheritance**, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. 9 Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

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Paul may have this in mind when he writes to the Corinthians,

2Co 1:20 For all the promises of God in him *are* yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.

The Morals of the Story

This meditation has two main lines of application for us today.

First, God keeps his promises. We have evidence of this in the two facets of the promise that have been fulfilled: the seed and the blessing. We can count on the Lord to fulfill the others as well, the land and the dominion over all nations.

The second is illustrated in another memory of my mother. The day after Christmas, she would sit us down at the table after breakfast, bring out a stack of note paper, and ask each of us to write thank-you notes to everyone who had given us a gift. So we should be careful to give thanks to the Lord for the great gifts he has given us in connection with the Christmas promise.

Notes

Distribution of επαγγελια

Per Beecher, the dominant construction is the articular singular.

| | | Number | |
|----------|----------|--|--|
| | | Singular: 40x | Plural: 12x |
| Article? | Yes: 37x | 28x: Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 39; 7:17; 13:32; 26:6 ; Rom. 4:13, 14, 16, 20; 9:8; Gal. 3:14, 17, 22; Eph. 1:13; 2:12; 3:6; Heb. 6:15, 17; 9:15; 10:36; 11:9, 9, 39; 2 Pet. 3:4, 9; 1 Jn. 2:25 | 9x: Rom 9:4; 15:8 ; 2 Cor 7:1; Gal 3:16, 21; Heb 6:12; 7:6 ; 11:3, 17 |
| | No: 15x | 6x with preposition: Acts 13:23; Gal 3:18b, 29; 4:23; Eph 6:2; 2 Tim 1:1 6x other: Other: Acts 23:21; Rom. 9:9; Gal. 3:18a; 4:28; 1 Tim. 4:8; Heb. 4:1 | 3x: 2 Co. 1:20; Heb. 8:6; 11:33 |

By comparison, ανθρωπος singular articular 161, singular anarthrous 188, articular plural 18, anarthrous pl 183,

All common nouns, art sing 9702, an si 8577, art pl 2852, an pl 2735

Alternation of Singular and Plural

To Abraham

Psa 105:42 For he remembered his holy **promise**, and Abraham his servant.

Act 7:17 But when the time of **the promise** drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,

Rom 4:13-16 For **the promise**, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and **the promise** made of none effect: 15 Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression. 16 Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

Gal 3:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were **the promises** made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.

Heb 7:6 But he whose descent is not counted from them received tithes of Abraham, and blessed him that had **the promises**.

Heb 11, Unfulfilled

Heb 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received **the promises**, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Heb 11:39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not **the promise**:

Promise and the Fathers

Acts 13:32 And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that **the promise** which was made unto the fathers,

Acts 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of **the promise** made of God unto our fathers:

Romans 15:8 Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm **the promises** *made* unto the fathers:

Arthrous singulars and Verbs, grouped by topic:

Covenant = Blessing

Galatians 3:19 Wherefore then *serveth* the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the **promise** was **made**; *and it was* ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.

Holy Spirit

Luke 24:49 And, behold, I send **the promise of my Father** upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high. = **HS**

Acts 1:4 And, being assembled together with *them*, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for **the promise of the Father**, which, *saith he*, ye have heard of me. = **HS**

Acts 2:33 Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father **the promise of the Holy Ghost**, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

Acts 2:39 For **the promise** is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Galatians 3:14 That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive **the promise of the Spirit** through faith.

Ephesians 1:13 In whom ye also *trusted*, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of **the promise**, *The purpose of the Spirit is to incorporate us into the body of Christ; the promise of the Spirit is thus part of the mechanism of the promise of the seed.*

The Land

Acts 7:5, 17 And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not *so much as* to set his foot on: yet he **promised** that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when *as yet* he had no child. ... 17 But when the time of **the promise** drew nigh, **which God had sworn to Abraham**, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt, ...

Romans 4:13-16 For **the promise**, that he should be the **heir of the world**, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if they which are of the law *be* heirs, faith is made void, and **the promise** made of none effect: ... 16 Therefore *it is* of faith, that *it might be* by grace; to the end **the promise** might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

Hebrews 11:9-10 By faith he sojourned in the land of **the promise**, as *in* a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of **the same promise**: 10 For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.

Hebrews 11:39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not **the promise**:

James 2:5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath **promised** to them that love him?

The Seed and the Messiah

Isaac

Romans 4:20-21 He staggered not at **the promise of God** through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; 21 And being fully persuaded that, what he had **promised**, he was able also to perform.

Hebrews 6:13-17 For when God **made promise** to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, ... 15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained **the promise**. ... 17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of **the promise** the immutability of his counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath: *reference to oath shows that this is Gen 22. Contrast 11:13, 39, which talks about the fathers NOT receiving the promise, though with different verbs. Possible meanings:*

- *he obtains a reaffirmation of the original promise, not the object of the promise*
- *the focus is on Isaac, whom he received from the dead 11:19, and in him the renewed promise of the seed*

Hebrews 11:11 Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had **promised**.

The Personal Jesus

Acts 13:32 And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that **the promise** which was made unto the fathers, 33 God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; (cf. 13:23 Of this man's seed hath God according to *his* **promise** raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus:)

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Acts 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of **the promise** made of God unto our fathers: (cf. 25:18-19 when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed: 19 But had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was **dead**, whom Paul affirmed to be **alive**.)

Compare: Gal 3:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.

Believers; salvation by faith

Romans 9:8 That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God: but the children of **the promise** are counted for the seed.

Galatians 3:17 And this I say, *that* the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make **the promise** of none effect.

Galatians 3:22 But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that **the promise** by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

Ephesians 2:12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of **the promise**, having no hope, and without God in the world:

Ephesians 3:6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of **his promise** in Christ by the gospel:

Titus 1:2 In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, **promised** before the world began;

Hebrews 9:15 And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions *that were* under the first testament, they which are called might receive **the promise of eternal inheritance**.

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that **promised**;))

Hebrews 10:36 For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive **the promise**.

James 1:12 Blessed *is* the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath **promised** to them that love him.

1 John 2:25 And this is **the promise** that he hath **promised** us, *even* eternal life.

The Lord's Return (re. The Land)

Hebrews 12:26 Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath **promised**, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.

2 Peter 3:4-9 And saying, Where is **the promise of his coming**? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of the creation. ... 9 The Lord is not slack concerning **his promise**, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should

perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Feminine suffixes on זרע

BW shows 121 hits on זרע + pronominal suffix. Here are the only cases beside Gen 3:15 where the suffix is feminine:

Hagar: Gen 16:10 And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply **thy seed** exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.

Rebekah: Gen 24:60 And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou *art* our sister, be thou *the mother* of thousands of millions, and let **thy seed** possess the gate of those which hate them.

Ephraim: Isa 17:11 In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make **thy seed** to flourish: *but* the harvest *shall be* a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow. (agricultural sense)

Mother Zion: Isa 54:3 For thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left; and **thy seed** shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited.