THE SEED OF PROMISE:
THE SUFFERINGS AND GLORY OF THE MESSIAH

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF

T. DESMOND ALEXANDER

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EDITORS
Paul R. Williamson         Rita F. Cefalu

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The Seed of Promise: The Sufferings and Glory of the Messiah
Essays in Honor of T. Desmond Alexander

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Edited by Paul R. Williamson and Rita F. Cefalu

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations used throughout this work follow the standard forms, established by and found in the SBL Handbook of Style, 2nd edition (2014). Those employed but not appearing in the Handbook are listed here (according to abbreviation):

BETS  Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society
BTCP  Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation
BTNT  Biblical Theology of the New Testament Series
IBS  Irish Biblical Studies
IVPNTC  IVP New Testament Commentary Series
JPS  Jewish Publication Society
NIV  New International Version (2011, unless indicated otherwise)
NIVAC  New International Version Application Commentary

**PillNTC**  Pillar New Testament Commentary

**SBJT**  *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*

**SGBC**  The Story of God Bible Commentary

**SSBT**  Short Studies in Biblical Theology

**THOTC**  Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary

**TSF**  Theological Students Fellowship

**ZECOT**  Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
THE SEED OF PROMISE:
SUFFERINGS AND GLORY OF THE MESSIAH

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF

T. DESMOND ALEXANDER

—Andreas J. Köstenberger

1. Introduction

The place of Gen 3:15 in Johannine theology is strategic and undeniable, yet widely overlooked in the scholarly literature. A study of the intentional grounding of Johannine theology in Gen 3:15 yields fascinating results and provides a compelling case study of the value and contribution of Biblical Theology. With its reference to the serpent’s and the woman’s seed or descendants, Gen 3:15 provides the initial passage which then segues into the messianic promise of the seed of Abraham and David. The five Johannine uses of seed (σπέρμα)—three in John’s Gospel and one each in 1 John and Revelation—each contribute significantly to the connection between Gen 3:15 and Johannine theology.¹ John’s Gospel features (indirect) references to Jesus as Abraham’s and David’s “seed” (chs. 7, 8) which are further developed in 1 John with reference to God’s “seed” in believers in a clear Gen 3–4 context and an unmistakable allusion to Gen 3:15 in the book of Revelation referring to the eschatological war between the dragon and the woman, symbolizing Satan and the new messianic community (Rev 12:17). In this way, Johannine theology makes a critical contribution to the biblical trajectory linking the protoevangelium in Gen 3:15 with the coming of the Messiah.²

¹ I believe a reasonable case can be made for the apostle John’s authorship of the Gospel, letters, and Revelation, but little in the argument below rests on this identification (though the theological unity among these writings should be evident in the trajectory related to Gen 3:15 demonstrated below).

² A full-fledged Christological reading of Gen 3:15 is first attested in Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 5.21.1 (c. AD 180); cf. 1.6.4: “elect seed.” Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15, WBC 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 80–81, also mentions Justin (c. AD 160), as well as the Septuagint and the Palestinian
2. The “Seed” of Gen 3:15

The temptation narrative in the book of Genesis depicts Satan’s struggle with humanity as a tale of deception, death, and doom. At the inception of the narrative, we find the serpent lying about dying:

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.” (Gen 3:2–4)³

God said that the man and the woman would die if they were to break the commandment; the serpent flatly contradicted God’s word, asserting they would “not surely die.” Following the fall, God pronounces the man’s judgment:

By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return. (3:19)

Later in the narrative we read, “Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died” (Gen 5:5; emphasis added). God spoke the truth, and the serpent lied; the man died. At the very heart, then, Genesis depicts Satan as a murderer of the human race, as well as a deceiver and a liar.

³ Scripture references in this essay are for the most part from the ESV, with occasional modifications which are indicated as appropriate below.
Even before God pronounces judgment on the woman and the man, however, he tells the serpent,

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring [אָדֹן; seed] and her offspring [seed]; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (3:15)

As John Sailhamer notes, the Hebrew pronoun “he” (אָדֹן) in the phrase “he shall bruise your head” initially could be read as “he” or “they.” Yet when one traces the identity of the promised “seed” in the remainder of Genesis, “he” turns out to refer “to the singular ‘seed of Abraham,’ who is the ‘king from the tribe of Judah’ (Gen 49:9–12) and the one who will reign over Israel and the nations ‘in the last days’ (Num 24; Deut 33).”

The narrative strategy in Gen 11, for its part, depicts a battle to the death. As Sailhamer sketches the story, “With the entry of sin into the world, the whole of humanity was divided into two peoples (seed), each locked in mortal combat with the other in an intense struggle of good and evil.” Yet “[t]he battle will result in a decisive victory of one ‘seed’ over the other (Gen 3:15). God and the forces of good (the ‘seed’ of the woman) will mount a victorious campaign against the forces of evil and those aligned with them (the ‘seed’ of the serpent).”

In view of the above mentioned ambiguity regarding the identity of the “seed” (whether singular or plural), “the ‘seed’ is both a select individual and a line from

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5 *Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 587.
which that individual will come.” Standing in the line of Noah, Shem, and Abraham (cf. e.g., Gen 12:7), “the ‘seed’ is identified as a future king who will arise from the house of Judah (Gen 49:8-12).” Later in the Hebrew Scriptures, the “seed” will be identified further as the future king descended from David (Ps 72:17; Jer 4:2).

With this contextual understanding of the “seed” references in Gen 3:15 as a proper interpretive framework, the stage is set for our exploration of this vital and foundational salvation historical passage in Johannine theology.

3. John’s Writings and the “Seed”

3.1. John’s Gospel

The Fourth Evangelist presents the story of Jesus as a cosmic drama against a creation backdrop in which Jesus, the Son of God, is pitted against Satan, the “ruler of this world” (12:31; 16:11). While the other canonical Gospels focus on Jesus’ proclamation of the “kingdom of God,” John has transposed the Synoptic major tune from “kingdom” to “life,” at least in part in order to underscore the universal significance of Jesus’ coming which transcends ethnic boundaries. In his signature passage, the Fourth Evangelist writes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). Later, he

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6 Meaning of the Pentateuch, 587. Emphasis added.
7 Intriguingly, John features no demon exorcisms, in contrast to the Synoptics, most likely so as to focus attention on Satan as the chief antagonist. On John as a cosmic drama, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, A Theology of John’s Gospel: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God, BTNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), ch. 6, esp. 12.2: “The Cosmic Conflict between God and His Messiah vs. Satan and the World.” See also Köstenberger, “The Cosmic Trial Motif in John’s Letters,” in Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles, ECL 13; ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 157–78.
represents Jesus as saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (5:24). These representative passages demonstrate that John essentially depicts Jesus’ coming and the human condition as hanging in the balance between death and life, with God and Jesus as protagonists and Satan as chief antagonist.

Not only does the Fourth Evangelist present the story of Jesus as a struggle with Satan for humanity resulting in people receiving (eternal) life or remaining in death, he also, even more importantly for the purposes of this present essay, depicts Jesus’ coming and mission in terms of two competing, warring “seeds.” Already in the prologue, the Evangelist writes, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children [τέκνα] of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1:11–13). Later, Jesus is shown to impress the importance of a new, spiritual birth on Nicodemus, representing non-messianic Israel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [or: from above] he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3), which is shortly identified as a birth “of water and spirit” (i.e., as a spiritual birth involving cleansing and renewal; cf. Ezek 36:25–27).\(^ {10} \)

The three references to “seed” (σπέρμα) in the Fourth Gospel are all found in chapters 7–8, which recount Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. In a possible Johannine transposition of the Synoptics, Jesus is identified as both the “seed” of David and the “seed” of Abraham (John 7:42; 8:33, 37; cf. esp. Matt. 1:1, 2, 6, 17), though in both cases this is done indirectly by way of Johannine irony. In the first passage, featuring representative characters, the Fourth Evangelist narrates the supposition of some who say regarding Jesus, “This is the Christ,” while others are objecting, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring [seed] of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” (John 7:41–42; cf. 1 Sam 16:1, 4; Mic 5:2). John’s readers,

\(^ {10} \) Contra the ESV rendering, “born of water and the Spirit.”
of course, realize (possibly implying his expectation that they are familiar with the Matthean or Lukan birth narrative) that Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem and thus truly the “seed” of David (not to mention his adoptive father Joseph’s Davidic lineage, cf. Matt 1:20; see also Ps 132:11; Isa 11:1, 10; Jer 23:5).

The struggle pertaining to the “seed” comes to a head in Jesus’ interchange with the Jewish leaders in chapter 8. Ironically, the narrative starts with the statement, “As he was saying these things, many believed in him” (v. 30). Jesus, however, pointedly replies “to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (8:31–32; emphasis added). At this, those who had “believed” in Jesus take exception to his implicit claim that they have need to be set free: “We are offspring (σπέρμα) of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” (8:33).

Jesus clarifies that he is referring to spiritual slavery to sin: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” while conceding, “I know that you are offspring (σπέρμα) of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you” (vv. 36–37). By referring to the plot to “kill” him Jesus shifts the interchange from the question of “seed” to the subject of murder, which moves the conversation toward the Genesis fall narrative. He adds, “I speak of what I have seen with my Father, yet you do what you have heard from your father” (v. 38). In this way, Jesus posits two distinct, opposite sides, one aligned with God’s purposes (Jesus’ “Father”), the other with an opposing force, which he will shortly identify more explicitly.

In response, the Jews reiterate, in exasperation and possibly incredulity that Jesus dared to question their Abrahamic lineage, “Abraham is our father” (v. 39). While Jesus has just conceded their physical Abrahamic descent, however, he now challenges their true spiritual Abrahamic lineage: “If you were Abraham’s children [τέκνα], you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a

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11 The Jews considered themselves “sons of the kingdom” (cf. Matt 8:12); Rabbi Akiba was credited with saying that all Israelites were sons of the king as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (m. Shab. 128a). Cited in D. A. Carson, The Gospel according to John, PilNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 349.

12 I have slightly emended the ESV translation here to reflect the adversative καί (“yet”) in v. 38.
man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did” (vv. 39–40; cf. v. 37). In this way, Jesus moved from Abraham’s nature to his works. Abraham was not a murderer; he killed no one. To the contrary, he was prepared even to sacrifice his “only” son, Isaac, an event the Fourth Evangelist likely alluded in 3:16 (“God … gave his one and only Son”). Jesus adds, “You are doing the works your father did,” moving even further to drive a wedge between the Jews’ overt identification as the “seed” of Abraham and their true spiritual lineage.

Now the gloves come off completely. The Jews reply, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father – even God” (v. 41; emphasis added), arguably implying: But we’re not so sure about you (likely alluding to the alleged scandal surrounding the virgin birth)! While Jesus’ paternity was in doubt (was Joseph his father or perhaps someone else?), theirs, they asserted confidently, was not. No DNA testing needed here! Absorbing the blow with ease, Jesus retorts, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God … he sent me” (v. 42). The Jews’ murderous designs on Jesus’ life, however, show that Jesus’ message does not resonate with them as it should. Rather, Jesus now draws the inexorable conclusion to which he has been building up all along: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning…. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (v. 44; emphasis added). Can it be that those who are the physical “seed” of Abraham are the spiritual seed of Satan? In this way, even Jews are subsumed under the power of sin and the effects of the fall on humanity, contrary to their own belief that only Gentile were “sinners.”

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13 In the way in which Jesus confronts the murderous plot of the Jewish leaders leading up to the crucifixion, the present interchange resembles the Synoptic parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19). John, however, features no parables; he rather recounts actual interchanges, noting various instances of misunderstanding and irony. On the absence of parables in John’s Gospel, see Köstenberger, Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters, 161.

14 I am following the NIV here. Cf. ESV: “he speaks out of his own character.”

15 Note that John, unlike the Synoptics, does not use the Jewish designation of Gentiles as “sinners.” See Adolf Schlatter, Der Evangelist Johannes: Wie er spricht, denkt und glaubt. Second edition (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948), 49.
Thus, the battle lines are clearly drawn. On the one side are Jesus and God the Father, and with them those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God and who therefore can become children of God (cf. 1:12). Jews, however, being sinners along with all of humanity, need to be reborn spiritually. What in the case of Nicodemus manifested itself in ignorance and incredulity has now degenerated into denial, hostility, and even outright hatred. Jesus’ Jewish opponents deny that they are sinners and thus reject their need for a Messiah to save them from their sin. All they want is a national champion who leads their troops into battle against the godless heathen. Yet John makes clear that, by denying their own sinfulness and need for salvation, Jesus’ Jewish opponents have forfeited their salvation historical privilege and are now subsumed under the hostile and sinful world that lies in darkness and under the dominion of the devil. They are neither better than the world nor are they worse; they must believe in Jesus in order to receive eternal life. Yet because they insist that they are better than the Gentiles and thus should be held to a different standard, they are under God’s judgment.

Thus, the entire discourse ultimately revolves around confronting the Jews’ erroneous assertion of ethnic privilege, insisting that they can come to the Messiah on different terms than non-Jews.16 No, Jesus asserts, they must recognize that they are in bondage to sin just like everyone else. Only if they do so can they be set free from their bondage to sin, and the only one who can set them free is Jesus, the very one in whom they refuse to believe and whom they are planning to kill. Thus, ironically and tragically, they are intent on killing the very one who is their sole potential source of salvation. In a further irony, of course, in God’s sovereignty, it is precisely Jesus’ cross-death that makes salvation possible.17 In this way, John masterfully explores the deep spiritual irony and misunderstanding underlying the cross in the context of Jewish obduracy. He will address this matter further in Isaianic terms at the conclusion of the “Book of Signs” (cf. John 12:38–41, citing both Isa 53:1 and 6:9–10).

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16 Cf. Carson, John, 349: “Jesus thus finds himself in the place where he must … disabuse his interlocutors of any sense of privilege that depends on merely physical lineage to Abraham.”
In sharp retaliation, the Jews proceed to accuse Jesus of demon possession. While John does not feature the Beelzebub controversy, including the question of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, the present passage is similar in nature. In the process, the Jews manage not only to accuse Jesus of demon possession but to offend Samaritans as well (to whom Jesus has ministered earlier in John’s Gospel): “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (v. 48; cf. 4:1–42) By alleging that Jesus is “a Samaritan,” they most likely are not literally implying he is ethnically a Samaritan; rather, they are again suggesting that he is a half-breed, not wholly a Jew, perhaps because the true identity of his father (echoes of the virgin birth?) is in doubt. Jesus coolly replies, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me” (v. 49).

At this, Jesus returns to the question of death and frames his coming as being a matter of life or death: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (v. 51). With heightened antagonism and glaring disrespect, the Jews respond, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you think you are?” (vv. 52–53). In response, Jesus makes plain that the Jews do not truly know God or else they would recognize him. Acknowledging their physical descent from Abraham for a second time, he states, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (v. 56). When the Jews object that Jesus is barely fifty years old, so how could he have seen Abraham, Jesus asserts his preexistence and preeminence over Abraham: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am,” using the divine name with reference to himself (v. 58). The Jews pick up stones, convinced that Jesus has just committed blasphemy, but he withdraws from the temple in an ominous sign of impending divine judgment (v. 59).

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19 Notice that the Jews here ignore Jesus’ earlier pronouncement that Abraham was not their real, spiritual father.
20 ESV translates the final sentence (italicized words) as: “Who do you make yourself out to be?”
In this seminal (pun intended) passage, then, Jesus asserts his descent from Abraham—and what is more, his superiority over Abraham and existence prior to Abraham—which extends not merely to his physical lineage but carries clear spiritual and messianic connotations. In this way, Jesus stakes an unmistakable claim to being the “seed” of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head in Gen 3:15. What is more, in a striking reversal, it pushes the Jews who deny his messianic claims into the “seed of the serpent” column rather than aligning them with the messianic line. What is implicit is that being Abraham’s “seed” is not merely a matter of biology, genetics, and ethnicity; it has an inevitable and overriding spiritual dimension as well. Consequently, those who are Abraham’s true “seed” will spiritually discern that Jesus is the “seed” of Abraham through whom God’s promise in Gen 3:15 is being fulfilled.

3.2. 1 John

Yet there is more. While Jesus’ remarks in John 7 and 8 form the basis for John’s further reflection, John takes the “seed” motif in relation to Gen 3:15 a decisive step further in his first letter in what is arguably the passage with the strongest connection to Gen 3:15 anywhere in the Johannine corpus. In 1 John 3:8–10, John writes,

Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed [σπέρμα] abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of

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God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

A close parallel is found in 1 Pet 1:23–25, where Peter writes,

since you have been born again, not of perishable seed [σπορᾶς] but of imperishable, though the living and abiding word of God; for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
But the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.22

Clearly, in this passage, Peter links the spiritual new birth (“born again”) with the “living and abiding word of God” as the agent of regeneration, citing Isa 40:6, 8. In 1 John 3:9, however, a reference to the Holy Spirit as “God’s seed” appears more likely due to structural, contextual, and theological factors.23 With regard to the structure of the passage, Colin Kruse presents the reference to “God’s seed” in verse 9 as the center of a chiasm as follows:

a No one born of God  
b makes a practice of sinning, 

c for God’s seed abides in him;  

b´ and he cannot keep on sinning,  

a´ because he has been born of God.24

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24 Kruse, Letters of John, 125.
Structurally and contextually, then, the reference to God’s seed abiding in believers is framed by references to being “born of God” enabling believers to overcome the bondage to sin which was introduced at the fall narrated in Gen 3. Theologically, in Johannine thought it is the Spirit who serves as the agent of the spiritual new birth (cf. 1:12–13; 3:3, 5). As Kruse rightly notes, “The author seems to be saying, within the wider context of a metaphor of God begetting, that the reason why those born of God cannot continue in sin is that God’s ‘sperm’ remains in them; a most daring metaphor indeed.” Canvassing the interpretive options as follows, Kruse makes a compelling case for the “seed of God” referred to in 1 John 3:9 being the Spirit:

Within 1 John believers are said to have remaining in them (be indwelt by) the gospel message they heard from the beginning (2:24), the anointing/Holy Spirit (2:27), and God himself (3:24; 4:12, 15, 16). Of these three, the Holy Spirit is the most satisfactory option, in the light of the fact that the new birth is effected by God through the Spirit, and it is the Spirit who in Johannine theology remains with and in believers. Thus, people can be grafted into the line of the “seed” of the woman culminating in Jesus the Messiah by receiving God’s “seed”, the Holy Spirit, in them. In case there

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25 Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 138, rightly notes that in the Parable of the Sower and the Soil the seed metaphorically refers to the word of God, with God being the sower (cf. Mark 4:3–20). However, in the present context “seed” more likely “evokes not grain but (human/male) generative power.” She adds, “Perhaps the most that can be said is that although the metaphor of birth is becoming stretched – properly, the seed implanted in the woman is the source of conception – the language serves to emphasize that God’s relationship to those born from God is not simply one of generation and origin but continues … to be effective. God’s seed is not to be identified with any particular agent of continuing energizing, but merely asserts its potency. Being born from God means to continue to be vivified by God’s creative power; such birth cannot be lost or abrogated.” However, there is no reason why “seed” within the purview of Johannine theology cannot or should not refer to God’s Spirit.


27 Kruse, *Letters of John*, 125. Kruse (n.122) further cites J. du Preez, “‘Sperma autouí in 1 John 3:9,” *Neot* 9 (1975): 105–6, who discusses six different interpretations: (1) children of God; (2) the proclaimed word of God; (3) Christ; (4) the Holy Spirit; (5) new life from God; and (6) the new nature, himself opting for (5).

28 This may represent yet another instance of Johannine transposition of a Synoptic pattern or
is any question whether John has the Genesis narrative in mind, the next verse removes all doubt. John continues,

> For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous…. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (vv. 11–15)

The answer to the world’s hatred is love: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (v. 16). In this way, John establishes a direct connection between the hatred and murder introduced by Satan, the quintessential “murderer from the beginning” who brought death to the human race, and the love of Jesus making salvation possible. Notably, Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, overcame Satan’s and the world’s hatred by dying on the cross for the sins of the world as God’s Passover lamb (cf. John 1:29, 36). Thus, the cosmic conflict motif is placed in the larger orbit of the Johannine love ethic.29

### 3.3. Revelation

We have seen that the references to Jesus as Abraham’s and David’s “seed” in John’s Gospel have established a direct connection between the promise of Gen 3:15 and Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. We have also seen that John, in his first letter, places believers’ new birth squarely within a Gen 3:15 context by aligning believers with the messianic “seed” of the woman by way of the Spirit as the agent of regeneration. This, indeed, is a striking further development of the messianic “seed” promise, extending it to the Spirit as the spiritual seed of God abiding in born-again believers.

motif, in the present case, the virgin birth. While the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in Mary’s womb, and thus he, the God-man, came to earth, all believers, likewise, need to be conceived spiritually by receiving the “seed” of the Holy Spirit within them. For the notion that the elect or those who are ‘spiritual’ are possessed of a divine “seed,” see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.6.1–2 (cited by Lieu, *I, II & III John*, 139 n.78).

But there is even more. In Rev 12:17, John directly alludes to Gen 3:15 in an eschatological context which depicts the struggle between Satan and the followers of the Messiah: “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring [or ‘seed’, σπέρμα], on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Here, John aligns believers with Jesus as the woman’s “seed” or offspring in clear allusion to Gen 3:15, depicting the climactic cosmic conflict between Jesus and God’s people on the one hand and Satan, “the dragon,” on the other. Ever since the fall, Satan’s deception and humanity’s fall have triggered a giant cosmic drama of spiritual warfare and redemption, fulfilled in Jesus’ first coming and consummated in his second coming, and effectually realized in the Spirit’s regenerating work in believers.

In this way, the “seed” motif spans from Gen 3:15 to the development of the messianic promise in the OT and the depiction of its fulfilment in the NT. This NT depiction is found in the Synoptic Gospels as well as the NT letters (esp. Galatians) and finds a more central and strategic expression in John’s writings—his Gospel, letters, and the Apocalypse.

4. Johannine Theology and the “Seed” of Gen 3:15

In the interchange between Jesus and the Jews in chapter 8 of his Gospel, not to mention the sequel in 1 John 3, John teases out the implications of Gen 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring [lit., “seed”] and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.

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30 See the discussion and interpretive options given in Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 484–86, esp. 485, who notes the allusion to Gen 3:15, also citing J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 153, note on 12:17; and David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 708. See also G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 279, who says Rev 12:17 depicts “a partial fulfillment of the promise in Gen. 3:15, where God prophesies that the individual (messianic) and corporate seed of the woman will bruise fatally the head of the serpent.”
Shockingly, however, John shows that while Jesus, the Messiah, is the woman’s “seed” who (in the singular) will bruise Satan’s head through his cross-death followed by the resurrection, Jesus’ Jewish opponents have aligned themselves with Satan. Spiritually speaking, they are Satan’s “seed,” his spiritual offspring. Like Satan, who was a murderer, liar, and deceiver from the beginning, so the Jewish leaders are bent on death—the death of the Messiah, the one who has life in himself (1:4) and is the Giver of life (5:26). Tragically, therefore, their opposition to Jesus will keep them in spiritual death and prevent them from receiving eternal life, which is now open to “whoever” believes that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God (cf. 3:16).

In this way, the Fourth Evangelist, in his Gospel as well as in his first letter and in the Apocalypse, conceives of Jesus’ coming as part of a cosmic drama which represents a spiritual struggle between Jesus the Messiah and Satan, the ruler of this world. Shockingly, the Jewish leaders have chosen to align themselves with Satan while opposing and even rejecting the God-sent Messiah, the seed of Abraham and David. In this way, John draws a straight line from the protoevangelium in Gen 3:15 to Jesus’ coming and shows that Jesus is the seed who stands in the lineage of Abraham and his royal offspring, as the remainder of the book of Genesis develops. What is more, descent from Abraham is redefined not merely in ethnic but spiritual terms. In this, Jesus is shown in many ways to anticipate Paul’s treatment in Gal 3 (or, conversely, Paul is shown to ground his theology in Gal 3 in Jesus’ teaching).

Thematically, the Genesis backdrop of John’s dramatic presentation of the story of Jesus signifies several things. First, John presents Jesus’ coming within the

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33 See the introduction above.
matrix of a polarity between life and death, light and darkness. These cosmic, universal categories flow directly from the Genesis creation narrative, which John invokes in the very first verse of his Gospel (“In the beginning,” 1:1) and continues to develop in the following verses in the prologue. This is part of John’s distinctive worldview which sets him apart from the Synoptics. Second, at the same time, starting with the prologue, John, in his Gospel, puts front and center the question of the identity of the true children of God as heirs of the promised messianic “seed”. R. Alan Culpepper is likely correct when he identifies the pivot of the Johannine prologue as John’s statement in 1:12 that “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

As shown above, this theme that is strategically sounded in the prologue is developed further in Jesus’ interchange with Nicodemus, the “teacher of Israel,” and reaches a climax in Jesus’ interaction with the Jews in chapter 8. In this way, John presents a penetrating discussion and analysis of why it is that the Jewish people rejected Jesus as Messiah, as part of the “Book of Signs” that ends on a note of Jewish obduracy and rejection (12:38–41). Translated into Synoptic parlance, John, in effect, tells his readers, “Someone greater than Abraham is here” (cf. 8:58), and, “Someone greater than David is here” (cf. 7:41–42). In this way, John provides a spiritual analysis of the nature of Jewish opposition to Jesus, which, he shows, is rooted ultimately in the Jews’ sinfulness and their alignment with Satan’s rather than God’s “seed” through the woman, Jesus the Messiah.

What is more, in this way the Fourth Evangelist also provides a profound analysis of the spiritual dynamics underlying the cross. Humanly speaking, the cross would never have occurred, had not the Jews aligned themselves with the “seed” of

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34 On John’s worldview, see Köstenberger, Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters, chap. 6.
Satan. And yet, in God’s sovereign providence, as mentioned, it was that very cross that became the source of salvation for everyone who believes.

In this context, it is necessary to touch briefly upon the alleged “anti-Semitism” of John’s Gospel. Contrary to any such notion, and the surface plausibility of such a charge, John does not in fact present all Jews as “children of the devil” in a negative light, reflecting ethnic prejudice. Jesus himself is a Jew (4:9). He tells the Samaritan woman, “Salvation is from the Jews” (4:22). The twelve are all Jews, including the Fourth Evangelist himself. Nicodemus is shown to progress as a character, defending Jesus at the Sanhedrin (7:50–51) and burying Jesus along with Joseph of Arimathea, another Sanhedrin member (19:38–42). Other Jews are presented in a positive or neutral light (e.g., in the Lazarus narrative: 11:1–44). What John opposes, rather, is Jewish opposition to Jesus the Messiah that is grounded in Satanic lies, deception, and even hateful murder. This, John opposes, because it runs counter to God’s salvation purposes.

Thus, John argues that Jewishness does not necessarily entail or require rejection of Jesus as Messiah. To the contrary, those who truly love God and claim physical descent from Abraham, those who read what Moses wrote about the Messiah, should be open to Jesus’ claims and embrace him as the one whom God sent (cf. 5:45–47). In this way, John deals squarely with the nature and roots of Jewish opposition to Jesus’ messianic claims and shows that any such opposition is ultimately unfounded, and even sinful. What is more, by opposing Jesus, the Jews in fact align themselves with Satan. This, to be sure, is an explosive charge, but for John, it is also an inexorable reality. There is ultimately no middle ground. People—including Jews—must decide and declare if they are for Jesus or against him. What is more, opposition to Jesus is ultimately rejection of God and tantamount to rejection of his salvation-historical purposes. If Jesus is the only way to the Father, for Jews as well as non-Jews, and no one comes to the Father except through him (14:6), then there is no other way. Tragically, they chose to reject Jesus and put him on the cross.\footnote{Interestingly, Jesus’ death is also described in terms of a “seed” falling into the ground and dying, and thus producing “many seeds”, as part of an agricultural metaphor, though a different word for “seed” is used there (ὄ κόκκος τοῦ σιτου … πολὺν καρπίν [12:24]).}
Yet the story does not end there. In the second act of John’s cosmic drama, “The Book of Exaltation” (chs. 13–21), Jesus is shown to equip his new messianic community—a Jewish remnant—for their mission subsequent to his exaltation with God the Father. He celebrates the Passover with the twelve, exposes Judas the betrayer, and talks to the eleven about the coming παρακλήτος—the “Spirit of truth”, the Holy Spirit—who will be in them just as he was with them (14:18). They will be his representatives, sent on a Trinitarian mission: “As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you… Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:21–22). Thus, the twelve are now Jesus’ “own” (13:1; cf. 1:11). They are in the messianic vine—Jesus, the true Israel (15:1–10). They worship the true temple, Jesus (2:19–22; cf. 4:21–24). They are in the trajectory of the “seed” of the woman through their faith in Jesus the Messiah and Son of God, commissioned to represent him and his message of the forgiveness of sins.

This message, importantly, still goes out to Jews as well as non-Jews. Even their rejection of Jesus the Messiah is not the unpardonable sin. As can be seen in the book of Acts, the mission of the twelve takes its point of departure in Jerusalem, and even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, still abides by the maxim, “To the Jew first, and then also to the Greeks” (Rom 1:16; cf. Acts, passim). In presenting the story of Jesus in the trajectory of the “seed” of the woman in Gen 3:15, John truly projects Jesus’ coming onto a broad canvass of universal, cosmic, and global proportions. The playing field has been leveled. Jesus came for all, and all must receive him on identical terms. A half-century after Jesus’ coming, and close to a half-century after the launch of the Gentile mission, John presents a compelling account of Jesus’ messianic identity and mission that is both historically faithful and yet characteristically reflects theological hindsight in teasing out the deeper spiritual implications of Jesus’ coming for Jews.


Indeed, John’s is the “spiritual gospel,” and in many ways the New Testament equivalent of the book of Genesis, the book of origins and creation realities. As a result, in vintage Johannine fashion, the Fourth Evangelist moves from a physical to a spiritual understanding of the word “seed” and what the term implies. The (implicit) grounding of John’s presentation of Jesus as the “seed of Abraham” and the “seed of David,” the alignment of believers in him with the woman’s “seed,” and the alignment of the Jewish leaders who oppose him with the “seed” of Satan provide a compelling framework for conceiving of Jesus’ messianic mission, including the rejection of Jesus resulting in his saving death on the cross.

In this way, John penetrates to the very heart of the matter, providing a powerful, compelling explanation to the question, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” Not only this, he also provides a cogent answer to the question, “Why should Jews (and non-Jews) believe in a crucified Messiah?”

5. The Fulfillment of Gen 3:15 in Jesus and Believers in Johannine Theology

The above discussion provides strong evidence that Jesus thought of himself as fulfilling Gen 3:15 as the “seed” of the woman (Eve) and as the “seed” and rightful heir of Abraham and David. The above discussion also provides strong evidence that John considered Jesus to have fulfilled Gen 3:15 and that he expressed this conviction in all three of his writings: (1) his Gospel (see esp. ch. 8); (2) his first letter (3:8–10); and (3) the book of Revelation (12:17). Not only does the trajectory of the woman’s “seed” culminate and find fulfilment in Jesus, the son of Abraham and David, the trajectory of the serpent’s (Satan’s) “seed” is fulfilled in the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus and ultimately put him on the cross.

In this matter of life and death, the Jewish leaders acted out the designs of their spiritual “father,” Satan, who was a murderer from the beginning and introduced death into humanity. The trajectory of the woman’s seed is also fulfilled in believers in the Messiah who have God’s “seed,” the Holy Spirit, in them, as the agent of the new birth. While Satan sowed the seeds of discord, doom, and destruction, God implanted
his Spirit in believers’ hearts, reversing the effects of the fall in them.

In this way, we see that Genesis was exceedingly important and foundational for Johannine theology, not only the creation (cf. John 1:1–11) but also the fall narrative (see esp. John 8:44; 1 John 3:8–12). Not only does John espouse a new creation theology, he also places Jesus’ cosmic conflict with Satan within the framework of the Genesis fall narrative, and here particularly Gen 3:15. In this context, Jesus’ breathing on his new messianic community at the final commissioning in allusion to Gen 2:7 signifies the commissioning of the twelve as representatives of a new humanity who have God’s Spirit in them as they serve as Jesus’ representatives and proclaim forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the Messiah.

What is more, in extending the “seed” trajectory from the messianic line spanning from Gen 3:15 over Abraham and David to Jesus to the Holy Spirit indwelling believers (1 John 3:8–10), John, remarkably, in his first letter extends the trajectory even beyond the Gospel. It is by the Spirit that believers are set free from their bondage to sin and the stranglehold of Satan is broken in their lives. The new messianic community is therefore a community of believers who have been set free from Satan and the effects of the fall, believers who are sent by Jesus on a mission to proclaim that in Jesus, the “seed of the woman”, Satan’s head has been crushed. Nevertheless, Satan has bruised the Messiah’s heel. Now, his followers bear the brunt of Satan’s rage which will last only for a limited time until Jesus crushes the old serpent once and for all at his return and the final judgment.

6. Conclusion

It is not that with the fulfilment of Gen 3:15 in Jesus, the Messiah, the application of the protoevangelium has been concluded. Rather, believers today continue to operate within the matrix of the two warring “seeds”—the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman. This is the clear implication from the reference to Gen 3:15 in both 1 John 3:9 and Rev 12:17. Believers are incorporated into the messianic seed by having received the “seed of God” in them—the indwelling Holy Spirit—and as members of the new messianic community are part of the cosmic drama and conflict
pitting God, Jesus the Messiah, and the believing community against Satan and his minions. In this way, our biblical theological exploration of the trajectory taking its point of departure in Gen 3:15 and, in Johannine theology, spanning to John’s Gospel, letters, and Apocalypse has proven to be extremely relevant for the church and believers today as it helps them grasp their identity and understand the nature of their God-given mission within this messianic trajectory that does not come to an end in the crucifixion and Jesus’ first coming but continues throughout the church age with a view toward its culmination at Jesus’ second coming.

This has been a fascinating case study in biblical theology, in the context of the entire present volume. There are many other strands of motifs I could have teased out, such as John’s reference to Isa 53:1 at the end of the “Book of Signs,” where Jesus is cast implicitly as the suffering servant of Isaiah (cf. 52:13–53:12). Yet for now, I must conclude. What I hope to have provided is a suggestive study of the connection between Johannine theology and Gen 3:15, in honor of one of the foremost biblical theologians of our day, T. Desmond Alexander, to whom I respectfully dedicate this essay. Soli Deo gloria.