

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SEED OF THE WOMAN IN GENESIS 3:15

JONATHAN CHEEK\*

**Abstract:** *From the late nineteenth century through the 1980s, a lack of strong exegetical support for a messianic understanding of Genesis 3:15 (the “protevangeli-um”) led to a number of exegetical and theological treatments of the verse downplaying the messianic significance of the verse and favoring a collective view of the seed of the woman and often a naturalistic view of the serpent. Since the early 1990s, though, scholars have provided significant exegetical and theological arguments to support an understanding of the seed of the woman as an individual who will engage in warfare with the serpent. These developments have brought about something of a renaissance in the interpretation of Genesis 3:15 among evangelical scholars. This article will survey and evaluate the most significant issues and developments in the interpretation of the seed of the woman over the past thirty years.*

**Key words:** *Messiah, messianic prophecies, Genesis 3, protevangeli-um, seed, prophecy, Christ in the Old Testament, biblical theology, progressive revelation, Pentateuch*

Throughout the history of the church, Genesis 3:15 has generally been understood as a protevangeli-um to some extent, and many Christian interpreters have understood the verse as the first messianic prophecy. Others, not identifying the seed of the woman as an individual, still understand 3:15 as a protevangeli-um declaring the defeat of the serpent and its seed through the collective seed of the woman—the church. The historical-critical method, arising from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment rationalism, however, led interpreters to abandon the protevangeli-um view altogether and to adhere to a naturalistic view of the passage.<sup>1</sup> By the late twentieth century, the weight of scholarly opinion opposed the concept of 3:15 as protevangeli-um.

In 1984, Claus Westermann stated that “the explanation of 3:15 as a promise has been abandoned almost without exception.”<sup>2</sup> In support of this idea, Westermann asserted that the most recent “weighty exegesis of Gen 3:15 as Protevangeli-

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\* Jonathan Cheek, Ph.D., Bob Jones University, resides in Taylors, South Carolina. He may be contacted at [jcheek17@gmail.com](mailto:jcheek17@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough history of the interpretation of Genesis 3:15, see John L. Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics” (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 6–101.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 260. See also Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 8.

um” had been F. Delitzsch in 1890.<sup>3</sup> Westermann appears to have been correct at the time. Westermann’s comments, though, do not imply widespread rejection of the protevangelium view by evangelicals during this time period.<sup>4</sup> Through the 1980s, some scholars did understand Genesis 3:15 as a messianic prophecy either by virtue of progressive revelation or by a *sensus plenior* interpretation, whereby the full canon of Scripture reveals the previously hidden messianic significance of the verse.<sup>5</sup> The lack of strong exegetical argumentation for the protevangelium view, however, was noteworthy, particularly in light of the strong scholarly emphasis against the protevangelium view during this time period. J. Gordon McConville summarizes the problem: “Modern Old Testament scholarship has been largely informed by the belief that traditional Christian messianic interpretations of Old Testament passages have been exegetically indefensible.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1991, Jack P. Lewis provided a helpful survey of the history of interpretation of Genesis 3:15 up to that time.<sup>7</sup> The last thirty years, however, have provided something of a renaissance in the messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 among evangelical scholars. Rather than downplaying the significance of the verse, evangelical scholars have begun to see (1) an original messianic intent in 3:15 based on exegetical and contextual grounds and (2) the strategic role of 3:15 in the development of the redemptive plan of Scripture.

This evolution in scholarly understanding of the significance of Genesis 3:15 can be seen clearly in the work of Victor P. Hamilton. In his 1990 commentary on Genesis, Hamilton engages in a thorough analysis of 3:15 and hesitantly adheres to the concept of messianic protevangelium: “We may want to be cautious about calling this verse a messianic prophecy. At the same time we should be hesitant to surrender the time-honored expression for this verse—the *protevangelium*, ‘the first good news.’ The verse is good news whether we understand *zera*‘ singularly or collectively.”<sup>8</sup> Fifteen years later, Hamilton gives a much stronger affirmation to a messianic protevangelium: “I believe that any reflection on Gen. 3:15 that fails to underscore the messianic emphasis of the verse is guilty of a serious exegetical error.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 260. Westermann cites F. Delitzsch, *Messianische Weissagungen in geschichtlicher Folge* (Leipzig: Faber, 1890), 23–28.

<sup>4</sup> Some evangelical theologians still ascribed messianic significance to Genesis 3:15. For example, see H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 1:163–70; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 43; William S. LaSor, “Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*,” *TynBul* 29 (1978): 49–60; Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *WTJ* 48 (1986): 241–79; and Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 200.

<sup>5</sup> LaSor, “Prophecy,” 49–60; and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 80–81.

<sup>6</sup> J. Gordon McConville, “Messianic Interpretation in Modern Context,” in *The Lord’s Anointed*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham (1995; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Jack P. Lewis, “The Woman’s Seed (Gen 3:15),” *JETS* 34.3 (1991): 299–319.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 199–200.

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 46.

The primary area of development in the interpretation of Genesis 3:15 over the past thirty years is in the understanding of the identity of the seed of the woman. Since 1990, five noteworthy scholars have provided fresh arguments that decisively support a messianic reading of Genesis 3:15 based on (1) elements of literary composition in Genesis and the Pentateuch, (2) exegetical grounds, and (3) the canonical outworking of the key themes of the verse. Most critical for this discussion is the establishment of an exegetical foundation for understanding the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 as an individual male offspring. This paper will survey the contributions of five key scholars (Alexander, Sailhamer, Collins, J. Hamilton, Chen) in generally chronological order, based on date of publication, and will also address the most noteworthy recent opposition to the understanding of the seed of the woman as an individual (Walton, Johnston, Abernethy and Goswell).

### I. T. DESMOND ALEXANDER: THE ROYAL LINEAGE IN GENESIS

T. Desmond Alexander has written a number of essays and articles discussing the development of the seed theme in Genesis and its role in the expectation of a royal lineage. In “From Adam to Judah” (1989), Alexander argues that the book of Genesis “provides a very distinctive family lineage” and that “almost all the narrative material relates in one way or another to the family tree which underlies the entire book.”<sup>10</sup> Alexander surveys this theme in Genesis and notes the prominence of זרע (“seed”) in the book, beginning with the promise in Genesis 3:15. Alexander notes that זרע can be understood as a collective or a singular noun and that the grammar in 3:15 does not explicitly make clear which one is expected. Alexander suggests that “it is not inconceivable that זרע is deliberately used, because it can denote both singular and plural.”<sup>11</sup> Some instances of זרע in Genesis are clearly singular (e.g., 4:25) and others are clearly collective (e.g., 15:5). Alexander then concludes that because the book of Genesis focuses on one particular family line, זרע in 3:15 likely refers to an individual or a group rather than to humanity as a whole. Therefore, 3:15 is not “a general statement about the hostility which exists between men and snakes.”<sup>12</sup>

Alexander then follows Wifall’s suggestion that Genesis 3:15 provides a “Davidic or royal background” because of language in some royal psalms that seems to allude to 3:15.<sup>13</sup> Genesis also seems to anticipate that this family line of זרע is royal, concluding with the blessing given to Judah, who will hold a scepter and a ruler’s staff and will receive tribute and obedience from the peoples (49:8–12). Because of this and other related statements in Genesis, Alexander suggests that “the book of Genesis provides a very remarkable and distinctive record of the early ancestry of

<sup>10</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, “From Adam to Judah: The Significance of the Family Tree in Genesis,” *EQ* 61.1 (1989): 8.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, 16. See W. Wifall, “Gen 3:15—A Protevangelium?,” *CBQ* 36.3 (1974): 361–65.

the royal lines of David.”<sup>14</sup> Alexander’s concluding paragraph points out that this expectation of a royal seed line as a key theme of the narrative in Genesis helps explain why the expectation of an individual Messiah arose in Jewish interpretation and in the NT.

Alexander’s “Genealogies, Seed, and the Compositional Unity of Genesis” (1993) further advances the arguments made in “From Adam to Judah.” Alexander stresses the need to examine Genesis as a composite whole rather than as a collection of fragmentary pieces because of the unity in the themes of the narratives. The “seed” theme, the תולדות headings, and the development of a family lineage demonstrate the compositional unity in Genesis. Genesis highlights the “special relationship between God and individual members of the family line.”<sup>15</sup> The זרע is frequently referenced in the key covenantal promises throughout the narrative with each of the patriarchs: (1) the seed will inherit the land of Canaan, (2) the seed will be numerous, and (3) the blessing to all the nations of the earth will be administered through this seed. Alexander suggests that the seed who administers blessing, in particular, likely refers to an individual descendant (22:18).<sup>16</sup> Finally, Alexander again argues for the concept of the development of a royal lineage in Genesis (cf. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 36:31), hinting at the expectation of a future royal figure.<sup>17</sup>

In “Messianic Ideology in Genesis” (1995), Alexander expands on his previous articles and more explicitly identifies Genesis 3:15 as an inherently messianic text.<sup>18</sup> Alexander adds two important points about the concept of seed in Genesis, stemming from the idea that the members of the family line of seed in Genesis often follow the behavioral patterns of those from whom the seed came. First, the narrative of Genesis presents “two main types of human seed. On the one hand, there are those who enjoy a positive relationship with God and experience his blessing. On the other hand, there are those who distance themselves from God by their evil actions and, as a consequence, experience God’s displeasure.”<sup>19</sup> The account of Cain and Abel and the development of two distinctive seed lines in Genesis 4–11 demonstrate this distinction.<sup>20</sup> Second, Genesis draws attention to an on-

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, 18. For example, Abraham is identified as a “mighty prince” (23:6; cf. 21:22–34; 26:26–34). Kingship is prominent in the Joseph narrative (37:8; 41:40). These could be seen as fulfillments of the expectation to exercise dominion over creation (1:26, 28; 9:2). Additionally, Genesis 38 in several ways parallels concepts in the book of Ruth. David’s status as the youngest is consistent with the seed line proceeding through younger siblings in Genesis.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, “Genealogies, Seed, and the Compositional Unity of Genesis,” *TynBul* 44.2 (1993): 263.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, 266–67.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander, 267–69. Alexander concludes that “a thorough investigation reveals that there is hardly a passage in Genesis which does not relate in one way or another to the family line which lies at the heart of the book” (270).

<sup>18</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” in *The Lord’s Anointed*, 19–39. Alexander’s 1998 monograph *The Servant King: The Bible’s Portrait of the Messiah* (Vancouver: Regent, 1998), 18–33, includes essentially the same arguments as his “Messianic Ideology in Genesis.” Therefore, the arguments in *The Servant King* will not be discussed in this article.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander, “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” 24.

<sup>20</sup> So then, in Genesis 3:15, “if the serpent symbolizes the powers of evil, then the ‘seed of the serpent’ must denote not merely snakes but rather all who are evil. The corollary of this would be that the

going conflict between the righteous and unrighteous seeds. This conflict occurs first in the Cain and Abel narrative, and it continues throughout Genesis 4–11 and the patriarchal narratives, particularly between each set of brothers (Ishmael/Isaac, Jacob/Esau, Joseph/brothers).<sup>21</sup>

The conflict between the righteous and the unrighteous will be resolved in “the coming of a royal dynasty which will defeat its enemies and bring God’s blessing to all the nations of the earth.... Thus, 3:15 anticipates the creation of a royal line through which the terrible consequences of the disobedience of the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden will be reversed.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, certain royal psalms seem to use expressions closely related to the concepts in 3:15 (e.g., Psalms 8, 72, 89, 110). For Alexander, then, the individual and messianic understanding of 3:15 “depends largely upon methodological considerations.”<sup>23</sup> Alexander concludes, “Viewed solely in the context of ch. 3, it is virtually impossible to sustain a messianic interpretation of 3:15. Considered, however, in the light of Genesis as a whole, a messianic reading of this verse is not only possible but highly probable.”<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note at this stage that Alexander has not made an exegetical argument from Genesis 3:15 for the expectation of an individual seed. The identification of an individual as the fulfillment of 3:15 is based on (1) compositional keys in Genesis that indicate the development of a royal dynasty leading to a future king who will come and administer blessing to the nations and (2) later canonical reverberations of the concept of Genesis 3:15, particularly in the David narrative and certain royal psalms.

## II. JOHN H. SAILHAMER: THE POETRY OF THE PENTATEUCH

Of the five scholars discussed in this survey, John H. Sailhamer seems to receive the least attention in scholarly literature on Genesis 3:15. Sailhamer presents a unique argument in support of the individual/messianic view of the verse.<sup>25</sup> Like Alexander, Sailhamer sees 3:15 as a key component of the compositional development of the Pentateuch, though he uniquely focuses on key poetic portions of the Pentateuch rather than on the term “seed” in Genesis, as Alexander does. Sailhamer’s argument begins with the idea that an approach to 3:15 must be from

‘seed of the woman’ designates here those who are righteous” (Alexander, 31). To be clear, Alexander does *not* argue that the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 is collective or that it should be interpreted spiritually. Alexander merely points out that in the Cain and Abel scenario and in the account of the two contrasting seed lines in Genesis 1–11, there does seem to be an emphasis on the contrast between the behavioral patterns of the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, 24, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Sailhamer first presents these arguments in “Genesis,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:55–56, and in *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 107–8. Sailhamer presents this view most fully in *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). The latter work is the one from which the majority of this discussion will be drawn.

the perspective of how the human author of 3:15 (Moses) would have understood it—and particularly, how the human author presents the promise of 3:15 in light of the entirety of that human author's composition (the Pentateuch as a whole). Sailhamer argues that the Pentateuch “and its compositional strategy are strongly messianic.”<sup>26</sup> To illustrate this, Sailhamer compares Genesis 3:15 to a candle whose light “passes first through the Pentateuch and then the rest of the Tanak” until “it becomes a bright light that shines on and enlightens the NT. Unfortunately, we have become accustomed to holding only the candlelight (Gen 3:15) up to the NT instead of reading the NT in the light cast by the lens of the whole Tanak.”<sup>27</sup>

Prominent in Sailhamer's argument is the compositional role of poems first in Genesis 1–11 and then throughout the Pentateuch. The poems serve to “explain or clarify the sense of the narrative.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, since “the poetry has strategic importance, we should expect to find central themes in the Pentateuch explained within its poetry.”<sup>29</sup> In Genesis 3:15, which is a poem, the pronoun “he” is ambiguous, since it could be understood as “he” or “they” in relation to the seed. Though it is ambiguous, it is not vague (“since it cannot mean ‘you’ or ‘she’”).<sup>30</sup> Sailhamer believes that the author “surely knows his own understanding of the identity of the ‘seed’ as he writes Genesis 3:15,”<sup>31</sup> but he is “using the inherent ambiguity of the Hebrew pronoun ‘he’ to leave the intended referent unexplained until he has been properly identified in the remainder of the Pentateuch.”<sup>32</sup>

In reading the poetic sections in the rest of the Pentateuch, Sailhamer points out that “he” refers to the seed of Abraham, the king from Judah (Gen 49:8–12), and the one who will reign over Israel and the nations “in the last days” (Num 24:14; Deut 31:29). This future ruler will hold a scepter and will crush the forehead of his enemies (Num 24:17). Therefore, the ambiguity of the poem in 3:15 is “resolved by the author by means of the compositional strategy in the remainder of the Pentateuch.”<sup>33</sup> Instead of looking to the NT to find the messianic intent of Genesis 3:15, the reader should look at the development of the messianic theme in the poetry of the Pentateuch, which has already resolved the ambiguity of the identity of the seed.

Sailhamer does seem to present several points worthy of consideration in a study of Genesis 3:15. His argument that the pronoun “he” is intentionally ambig-

<sup>26</sup> Sailhamer, *Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 246.

<sup>27</sup> Sailhamer, 247.

<sup>28</sup> Sailhamer compares this method to the songs of Hollywood musicals which “thematize the meaning that the author intends for the reader to draw from the narratives. The poems are like literary glosses that explain the author's understanding of the narratives” (322). Sailhamer identifies four major poems in the Pentateuch that serve this purpose: the blessing on Jacob's sons (Gen 49:1–27); the song of Miriam and Moses (Exod 15:1–21); the prophecies of Balaam (Num 23–24), and the song of Moses (Deut 32–33). See discussion on pages 323–48.

<sup>29</sup> Sailhamer, 321.

<sup>30</sup> Sailhamer, 321.

<sup>31</sup> Sailhamer, 322.

<sup>32</sup> Sailhamer, 321.

<sup>33</sup> Sailhamer, 321–22.

uous in 3:15, though, seems weak when viewed in light of the forthcoming exegetical arguments of Collins and Alexander.

### III. COLLINS AND ALEXANDER: THE EXEGETICAL ARGUMENT

C. John (“Jack”) Collins’s “Syntactical Note” on Genesis 3:15 has proved a critical turning point in the verse’s interpretation because it provides a strong foundation for an exegetical argument for identifying the seed of the woman as an individual.<sup>34</sup> Later in the same year, T. Desmond Alexander added to Collins’s discussion by arguing decisively for the individual view based on grammatical and syntactical exegetical factors.<sup>35</sup>

1. *Collins: Syntactical Analysis of זרע*. In his “Syntactical Note,” Collins analyzes how the Hebrew OT uses pronouns and verb inflections for number when used with זרע, “seed,” when it refers to “offspring,” concluding that “offspring” in 3:15 is an expressly singular rather than a collective reference.<sup>36</sup> The LXX supports this idea by its use of a masculine singular pronoun αὐτός to refer to its antecedent, σπέρμα.<sup>37</sup> Though the LXX translators may have understood 3:15 as an individual, scholars question whether this translation accurately reflects the Hebrew text. Genesis 3:15 does indeed use the singular pronoun הוּא as the subject of a singular verb יְשׁוּפֵד and as the antecedent of a singular pronominal suffix יְשׁוּפֵנּוּ. Generally, interpreters had argued that the singular form is used because the noun is collective and would therefore require a singular pronoun. Collins notes that no one had yet conducted an “empirical study of how the Hebrew language uses its pronouns and verb inflections when they are associated with *zera*’; in those cases where this word has the nuance ‘offspring.’”<sup>38</sup> Collins works to discover any distinctive patterns in the Hebrew pronouns and verb inflections when used in connection with זרע.

Collins’s analysis concludes with the following observations:

1. When זרע does refer to offspring in a clearly collective sense (“posterity”), it “commonly has a singular verb inflection” (e.g., Gen 13:16; 16:10; 21:12).<sup>39</sup> However, there are several instances in which the OT uses a plural verb with the collective sense of זרע (e.g., Gen 15:13–14; Exod 32:13; Jer 23:8).<sup>40</sup>
2. When זרע is collective and used with adjectives, the adjectives are consistently singular (e.g., Ps 37:25; Job 5:25).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Jack Collins, “A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman’s Seed Singular or Plural?,” *TynBul* 48.1 (1997): 139–48.

<sup>35</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *TynBul* 48.2 (1997): 363–67.

<sup>36</sup> Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 139.

<sup>37</sup> See R. A. Martin, “The Earliest Messianic Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *JBL* 84.4 (1965): 425–27.

<sup>38</sup> Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 141.

<sup>39</sup> Collins, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Collins, 142–43.

<sup>41</sup> Collins, 143.

3. When זָרַע is collective and used with pronouns (independent pronouns, object pronouns, and suffixes), the pronouns are always plural (e.g., Gen 17:9; Lev 21:17).<sup>42</sup>
4. When זָרַע does refer to a specific individual descendant, it always “appears with singular verb inflections, adjectives, and pronouns” (e.g., Gen 4:25; 21:13; 2 Sam 7:12–15; Isa 41:8).<sup>43</sup>

Points 1 and 2 above demonstrate that when זָרַע is used in a collective sense, the Hebrew text may use singular or plural verbs or adjectives. Point 4, however, demonstrates that when זָרַע represents an individual, then singular verb inflections, adjectives, and pronouns are always used. Collins also demonstrates in points 3 and 4 above that the Hebrew OT is particularly consistent in its patterns of usage of pronouns when they refer to זָרַע. Singular pronouns refer to an individual seed, and plural pronouns refer to a collective seed. Therefore, the use of the singular הוּא (“he”) in 3:15 “is quite consistent with the pattern where a singular individual is in view.”<sup>44</sup> Collins proceeds to argue that “since the subject pronouns are not normally necessary for the meaning, we might wonder if the singular הוּא in Genesis 3:15 is used precisely in order to make it plain that an individual is being promised.”<sup>45</sup> Collins then suggests that if a “bottom-up” reading of 3:15 is legitimate, then “it would be fair to read this as God’s threat to the snake, of an individual who will engage the snake in combat and win.”<sup>46</sup> It is evident that Eve expected Seth to be the promised זָרַע (Gen 4:25); since Abel was no longer alive, and Cain was evil and under banishment (4:16), perhaps Seth would be the individual זָרַע promised in 3:15. Collins agrees with Alexander that the development of the seed line in the book of Genesis makes clear that an individual descendant is in view.<sup>47</sup> Collins, however, concludes that the “question of whether this is a ‘Messianic promise’” is “outside the scope of a mere syntactical note.”<sup>48</sup>

2. *Alexander: Further Observations on זָרַע.* Alexander’s argument builds on the analysis performed by Collins. Alexander points out that, based on Collins’s argument, “the ‘seed of the woman’ must be understood as referring to a single individual and not numerous descendants.”<sup>49</sup> Alexander focuses on two texts that Collins had not addressed in detail: Genesis 22:17–18a and 24:60.<sup>50</sup> Collins identifies these

<sup>42</sup> Collins, 143–44.

<sup>43</sup> Collins, 144.

<sup>44</sup> Collins, 145.

<sup>45</sup> Collins, 145. Collins argues that it is “beyond question” that the LXX translators also “meant to convey that an individual was promised.”

<sup>46</sup> Collins, 146.

<sup>47</sup> Collins is here referring to Alexander, “From Adam to Judah,” 15–17.

<sup>48</sup> Collins, 146. Also, Collins expresses doubt about a collective interpretation of the seed of the woman based on Rom 16:20 and Rev 12:17 (148n24).

<sup>49</sup> Alexander, “Further Observations,” 363.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, 363. It is worth noting that Alexander had previously argued that “seed” in 22:18 was probably a reference to a single descendant in “Genealogies, Seed, and Compositional Unity in Genesis,” 267–68. Collins’s analysis appears to have provided Alexander a stronger exegetical foundation for this argument.

texts as examples of the use of זָרַע with a collective meaning.<sup>51</sup> Genesis 22:17 obviously uses the collective sense of זָרַע, “I will surely multiply your offspring [זָרַע] as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.” Genesis 24:60 pronounces a blessing on Rebekah: “May you become thousands of ten thousands.” Both passages, therefore, refer to a multiplicity of descendants.

Both passages, though, are followed by similar phrases:

- Genesis 22:17–18 says, “And your offspring [זָרַע] shall possess the gate of his [sg. אֹיְבָיו] enemies, and in your offspring [זָרַע] shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”
- Genesis 24:60 says, “May your offspring [זָרַע] possess the gate of those who hate him [sg. שׂוֹנְאָיו]!”

Based on Collins’s analysis, because of the singular pronominal suffixes in the latter portion of both of these texts, זָרַע should be “understood as referring to a single individual and not many descendants.”<sup>52</sup> The majority of English versions, though, use a plural pronoun to speak of the זָרַע as collective in these cases (NASB, NIV, NRSV, NLT, NET, HCSB). Exceptions include the KJV, ESV, and LEB.

Alexander argues, therefore, that “either Collins’ approach is seriously flawed and it is not possible, using syntactic considerations, to distinguish clearly between the singular and collective uses of זָרַע, or his study requires that scholars re-evaluate the ways in which Genesis 22:17–18a and 24:60 have normally been understood.”<sup>53</sup> Alexander concludes that it is appropriate to “re-examine the usual interpretation of these two passages.”<sup>54</sup>

Alexander then points out that in Genesis 22:16–18, the latter statement regarding the seed is set apart from the former. The second clause begins not with a *waw*-consecutive but with “the imperfect יִרְשׁ preceded by a non-converting ו.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the syntax here allows for the possibility that the seed (which is numerous) in the first clause need not be identical to the seed in the last clause. Following Collins’s approach, the final clause of 22:17 refers to an individual offspring who will possess the gate of his enemies. Additionally, it is likely that the use of זָרַע in 22:18 also refers to an individual—not the collective group of Abraham’s descendants mentioned in 22:17a—as the agent of blessing to the nations.<sup>56</sup>

Genesis 24:60 works in a similar way and “has probably been influenced by the divine oath in Genesis 22:17–18.”<sup>57</sup> In this situation, Abraham’s servant is informing Rebekah and her family that she will have numerous descendants and that one of those descendants will defeat “those who hate him.” These passages, there-

<sup>51</sup> See Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 142.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander, “Further Observations,” 364.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander, 364.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander, 364.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander, 365.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann supports Alexander’s analysis and points out some additional difficulties in understanding “seed” in 22:17b and 22:18 collectively. “Jesus and Possessing the Enemies’ Gate (Genesis 22:17–18; 24:60),” *BSac* 174.693 (2017): 15–16.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander, “Further Observations,” 366.

fore, demonstrate “that a future member of this line will conquer his enemies and mediate God’s blessing to the nations of the earth.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the contributions of Collins, followed by Alexander’s “Further Observations,” have established a strong exegetical argument for the idea that the syntax of Genesis 3:15 provides the necessary framework for expecting an individual messianic figure.<sup>59</sup> Because Genesis 3:15 uses singular pronouns to refer to זָרַע, the reader should understand the seed of the woman to be individual, and an appeal to *sensus plenior* is no longer necessary for a messianic interpretation of 3:15.<sup>60</sup> The rest of the book of Genesis is unfolding the messianic significance of 3:15.

3. *First Rebuttal: Walton*. In over twenty years since the articles by Collins and Alexander were published, the small number of meaningful attempts at a rebuttal is surprising, given the continued rejection of the messianic view by a number of scholars. I have found only two scholarly works that have interacted with the exegetical arguments of Collins and Alexander and argued against their conclusions. The first rebuttal is from John H. Walton,<sup>61</sup> who argues that it is a “grammatical fact” that the Hebrew word for seed is collective and will, therefore, “typically take singular grammatical associations (pronouns, verbal forms).”<sup>62</sup>

a. *Contra Collins and Alexander*. Walton cites Collins’s “Syntactical Note” and disagrees with his conclusions: “Most of his [Collins’s] examples are in situations where the text is speaking of several people’s posterities, thus demanding a plural (cf. Gen 9:9).”<sup>63</sup> This argument, though, addresses only one of Collins’s conclusions (point 3 above) and cites only one verse (Gen 9:9), a verse that contains a use of זָרַע that does not endanger Collins’s argument.

It is important, then, to evaluate whether Walton’s claim is valid, that most of Collins’s examples are “in situations where the text is speaking of several people’s

<sup>58</sup> Alexander, 367.

<sup>59</sup> See also T. D. Alexander, “Seed,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander, B. S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and G. Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 769–73; Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 101–28; Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008), 106.

<sup>60</sup> C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 158. Collins here repeats the main arguments he established in his “Syntactical Note,” and he expresses appreciation for the “careful argument” Alexander provided in his “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis” (156n30). Collins concludes that “Genesis fosters a messianic expectation, of which this verse [3:15] is the headwaters” (157). Also, Collins cites Alexander’s grammatical arguments on Gen 22:17–18 to demonstrate that 22:17–18 is the source of Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:16. This helps solve an interpretive conundrum surrounding Paul’s treatment of “seed” as singular, referring specifically to Christ (Gal 3:16). C. John Collins, “Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete Was Paul?,” *TynBul* 54.1 (2003): 84–86.

<sup>61</sup> John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 230. Walton presents essentially the same arguments in *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 225–26, 233–39. Walton does commend Alexander’s “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” for its “balanced treatment defending a messianic interpretation.” *Genesis*, 234n15.

<sup>62</sup> Walton, *Old Testament Theology*, 230.

<sup>63</sup> Walton, 230n3.

posterities, thus demanding a plural.”<sup>64</sup> If Walton’s claim is true, then the following references would include (1) a plural pronoun referring to (2) the collective seed of (3) a plurality of people. An example of this in English would be, “The offspring of the families in our church have given all of their possessions away.” In this example, the plural pronoun “their” is used because it refers to the offspring of multiple families. Walton’s argument, then, is that the pronouns would be expected to be plural because they are speaking of the offspring of a plural group, thus diminishing the strength of this part of Collins’s argument.

Some of Collins’s examples do support Walton’s claim. For example, in Genesis 17:9 God says to Abraham, “You shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.” This verse uses a plural pronominal suffix for “their generations” (לְדֹרֹתָם). Walton argues that the plural pronominal suffix is used only because the plural “generations” represents “several people’s posterities,” namely, the plural descendants of the plural seed of Abraham. Walton is correct that Collins includes other examples like this, in which the offspring of a plurality of people is in view (e.g., Exod 30:21; Lev 21:17; Deut 10:15; 2 Kgs 17:20; Isa 61:9b; 65:23; Jer 23:8; 30:10; 33:26; Ezek 20:5; Ps 106:27).

Collins does provide examples, however, that do not fit in Walton’s classification of the seed “representing several people’s posterities.” For example, in Genesis 48:11–12, Jacob says to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also. Then Joseph removed them [pl. אֶתָּם] from his knees.” Jacob is referring to the two children of Joseph as offspring, not to “several people’s posterities.”

Another interesting example is Genesis 15:13, in which God tells Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners [sg. גֵּר] in a land that does not belong to them [pl. בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם] and they will serve [pl. וַעֲבָדוּם] there, and they will be afflicted [pl. וַעֲנּוּ אֹתָם] for four hundred years” (my translation). It is noteworthy that the noun “sojourners” (גֵּר) is a singular form—it must be so grammatically to match the number of the noun it renames and its verb—but the subsequent verbs and pronouns in the sentence are all plural: a land that is not *theirs*, and *they* will serve there, and *they* will be afflicted. This is further evidence that the author is going out of his way to be sure that the pronouns and verb forms match with the actual number implied by וַעֲבָדוּם, though the noun גֵּר must match the actual grammatical number of its equivalent.

Walton’s assertion that וַעֲבָדוּם will “typically take singular grammatical associations (pronouns, verbal forms)” contradicts Gesenius, who states that “plural suffixes refer to collective singulars,” citing Genesis 15:13 as an example.<sup>65</sup> Walton provides no evidence for this contradiction. Collins’s point is that when וַעֲבָדוּם refers to posterity, the pronouns are always plural. It is unclear what Walton’s argument

<sup>64</sup> Walton, 230n3.

<sup>65</sup> GKC 135p. See discussion of this point in Kevin S. Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 72–73n8.

accomplishes because it does not actually refute Collins's point. Walton gives no response to Collins's examples that do not refer to "several people's posterities."

The greater problem with Walton's treatment is that he makes no mention of the more critical part of Collins's argument regarding Genesis 3:15, that when זָרַע "denotes a specific descendant, it appears with singular verb inflections, adjectives, and pronouns."<sup>66</sup> Collins provides several examples of this usage pattern:

- "God has appointed for me another [sg. אֶחָד] offspring instead of Abel" (Gen 4:25).
- "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come [sg. יָצָא] from your body, and I will establish his kingdom [sg. מַמְלָכְתּוֹ]. He [sg. הוּא] shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom [sg. מַמְלָכְתּוֹ] forever. I will be to him [sg. לוֹ] a father, and he shall be [sg. הוּא] to me a son.... but my steadfast love will not depart from him [sg. מִמֶּנּוּ]" (2 Sam 7:12–15).
- "I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he [sg. הוּא] is your offspring" (Gen 21:13).
- "Onan knew that the offspring would not be [sg. יִהְיֶה] his" (Gen 38:9).
- Hannah prays that if the Lord "will give to your servant a son [זָרַע], then I will give him [sg. יִנְתְּנֵנִי] to the LORD all the days of his life [sg. חַיָּיו], and no razor shall touch his head [sg. רָאשׁוֹ]" (1 Sam 1:11).

Walton does not address this argument or any of these examples. He does argue that there are two "examples in which singular pronouns are used even though 'seed' = posterity."<sup>67</sup> These examples are Genesis 22:17 and 24:60—the verses Alexander had addressed in "Further Observations." Without discussion of Alexander's arguments, Walton discounts Alexander's argument as "special pleading."<sup>68</sup> Because these are the only two potentially problematic examples for Collins's argument and because Alexander has proposed a very reasonable explanation for how to handle them, Alexander's argument is certainly worthy of closer examination. As Collins concludes regarding Walton's treatment: "This simple dismissal does no justice to the careful argument of Alexander."<sup>69</sup>

b. *Other Arguments against the Individual View.* In addition to his opposition to the exegetical argument of Collins and Alexander, Walton provides three other arguments against the idea that an individual messianic figure is in view in Genesis 3:15. First, Walton rejects the idea that 3:15 gives a hint of a victory for either side of the conflict. Since the actions of the seeds toward each other represent the same Hebrew word (שׁוּף), the verse does not declare a victory for either side; therefore, this cannot be a promise that the Messiah will defeat the serpent. Genesis 3:15,

<sup>66</sup> Collins, "Syntactical Note," 144.

<sup>67</sup> Walton, *Old Testament Theology*, 230n3.

<sup>68</sup> Walton, 230n3. Seth D. Postell, who does adhere to the messianic view of 3:15, also disagrees with Alexander's understanding of 22:17, noting a "possibility of circular reasoning." Postell, though, does not interact meaningfully with Alexander's arguments. "Genesis 3:15: The Promised Seed," in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 250n8.

<sup>69</sup> Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 156n30.

therefore, refers to “a continual, unresolved conflict between humans and the representatives of evil.”<sup>70</sup> Logically, this is unrelated to the question of whether the seed of the woman as singular or plural—it could refer to an unresolved enmity between two individuals—and it does not cause a problem for the messianic view.<sup>71</sup>

Second, Walton argues that Eve could not have understood 3:15 as messianic in her historical context. If the question is whether Genesis 3:15 *could* refer to a future individual who would come and defeat the serpent, Walton acknowledges that “certainly the door is left open for the possibility.”<sup>72</sup> Walton, however, does not believe the original audience would have understood 3:15 to refer to “the coming of a single person (seed) who would bring victory.”<sup>73</sup> How does Walton know what the initial audience would have understood? It appears that Eve, the original hearer of 3:15, is indeed expecting an individual seed when she says, “God has appointed for me another [sg.] offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him [sg.]” (4:25). Walton makes no comment on Eve’s (the original hearer of the promise) statement in either in his discussion of “seed” or in his discussion of Genesis 4:25–26.<sup>74</sup>

Third, Walton believes that “the rest of the Old Testament never makes further reference to Genesis 3:15 in the development of its messianic expectation.”<sup>75</sup> Actually, though the rest of the OT does not quote 3:15 exactly, the concept of a future seed and a coming king who will have enemies with whom he will engage in conflict is a theme that flows through Genesis and the entire OT. The contributions of other authors in this survey, particularly that of James M. Hamilton Jr., provide a strong answer to this objection from Walton.

4. *Second Rebuttal: Abernethy and Goswell.* In a recent monograph, Andrew T. Abernethy and Gregory Goswell engage seriously with the arguments of Collins, Alexander, and Sailhamer, and conclude that 3:15 and the expectation of “seed” in Genesis “primarily anticipate a collective offspring, not a particular Messiah.”<sup>76</sup>

a. *Contra Collins.* Abernethy and Goswell point out that singular pronouns can occur with a collective understanding of זָרַע, citing two seemingly clear references for support (Lev 11:37–38; 26:16) and “perhaps” one other reference (Deut 31:21).<sup>77</sup> The two clear references are examples of זָרַע in reference to seed in an agricultural sense (“planting seed”), not in relation to offspring. It is noteworthy, though, that Collins limits his analysis to examples in which זָרַע “has the nuance

<sup>70</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 226.

<sup>71</sup> The issue of whether 3:15 does declare victory for one side is one that has been discussed thoroughly in commentaries and studies on Genesis 3:15. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. For a helpful recent discussion of the views, see Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch*, 53–55.

<sup>72</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 234.

<sup>73</sup> Walton, 234.

<sup>74</sup> Walton, 278–79.

<sup>75</sup> Walton, 235.

<sup>76</sup> Andrew T. Abernethy and Gregory Goswell, *God’s Messiah in the Old Testament: Expectations of a Coming King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 15.

<sup>77</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 13n9, 15.

‘offspring.’”<sup>78</sup> The question, then, is whether the nature of metaphorical language (זרע is a metaphor when used for “offspring”) allows for a division in how the Hebrew syntax would be constructed with the literal and metaphorical senses.<sup>79</sup> Neither Collins nor Abernethy and Goswell discuss this point. Further research could possibly shed more light on this question.

b. *Contra Alexander.* Abernethy and Goswell present three arguments against Alexander’s explanation of a singular זרע in Genesis 22:17 and 24:60. First, as stated in their discussion of Collins, a singular pronoun may refer to a collective זרע, and a singular pronoun refers to a singular זרע only once in Genesis (21:13). This argument, though, depends on the literal sense of זרע as “seed,” and Collins points out other examples in which a singular pronoun refers to a singular זרע throughout the OT. Second, when זרע occurs with the verb ירש (“to possess”), “the noun is often collective and can occur with a singular (Num. 14:24; Ps. 25:13; Isa. 54:3).”<sup>80</sup> However, as noted earlier, Collins acknowledges that when זרע refers to a collective offspring, “it commonly has a singular verb inflection.”<sup>81</sup> The key to the arguments of Collins and Alexander is that when זרע is collective and used with pronouns (independent pronouns, object pronouns, and suffixes), the pronouns are always plural, but when זרע does refer to a specific individual descendant, it always “appears with singular verb inflections, adjectives, and pronouns.”<sup>82</sup> Third, the immediate context of Genesis 22:17 and 24:60 speaks of a collective זרע, so it could seem unusual to switch to a singular זרע.

Additionally, Abernethy and Goswell argue that Alexander goes “one step too far by making a king from Judah the center of all the Abrahamic promises.”<sup>83</sup> Instead, “Genesis’s primary focus is on God’s remarkable creation of and preservation of the corporate *zera*—Israel, who will bring blessing to the entire world.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, the focus in Genesis is the preservation of Jacob’s collective family and the blessings given to all of Jacob’s children rather than Judah alone.

c. *Contra Sailhamer.* Abernethy and Goswell present two problems with Sailhamer’s concept of an individual seed based on the poems of the Pentateuch. First, the final poem seems to lack a messianic reference, although Judah is mentioned in Deuteronomy 33:7. Abernethy questions whether “a few scattered poems really play such a dominant role in reframing the Pentateuch’s message around a coming ruler from the line of Judah.”<sup>85</sup> Second, it is difficult to argue that the linguistic parallels from the cross-references in the poems are “driven by ‘messianic

<sup>78</sup> Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 139.

<sup>79</sup> Abernethy mentioned this point in an e-mail message to me on December 9, 2020. Abernethy asserted that the idea that the division should exist is misguided.

<sup>80</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, *God’s Messiah in the Old Testament*, 15–16.

<sup>81</sup> Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 142.

<sup>82</sup> Collins, 144.

<sup>83</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, *God’s Messiah in the Old Testament*, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 20.

concerns.”<sup>86</sup> Abernethy and Goswell’s points give well-grounded reasons to exercise caution in fully embracing Sailhamer’s argument.

d. *Other Arguments against the Individual View.* In addition to these linguistic arguments, Abernethy and Goswell present several other reasons for supporting the collective view. First, since the other curses in Genesis 3:14–19 are “perpetual and long-term, it seems odd to think of verse 15 as pronouncing an isolated occasion of enmity between an individual seed of woman and an individual seed of the snake at a later date.”<sup>87</sup> To highlight this, Abernethy and Goswell point to the Cain/Abel incident in the following chapter as an outworking of 3:15, an example of “a battle for humans to obey God in spite of temptation.”<sup>88</sup> Second, within the scope of the Pentateuch, 3:15 introduces a perpetual enmity between humanity and evil that later “becomes centered on Abraham’s offspring, Israel,” which “carries the hope of humanity to overcome evil.”<sup>89</sup> In summary, Abernethy and Goswell carefully work through the arguments of Collins, Alexander, and Sailhamer, and argue that the offspring of the woman is collective, though that collective offspring will later be particularized through the line of kings who descend from Judah in God’s plan “to overcome evil and restore a world ruptured by sin.”<sup>90</sup>

5. *Other Rebuttals.* Only one other treatment since 1997 rejects the messianic protevangelium view and addresses the arguments of Collins. Robert B. Chisholm Jr. criticizes Collins’s discussion of 3:15 as a “so-called protevangelium.” Chisholm says that Collins is “going against the trend of modern scholarship” in his defense of what Chisholm calls a “quasi-allegorical” view.<sup>91</sup> It is evident, though, that going against the “the trend of modern scholarship,” is a not a deciding factor for Collins in his treatment of 3:15.

#### IV. JAMES HAMILTON: THE SKULL CRUSHING SEED AND THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM

The contributions of James Hamilton to the interpretation of Genesis 3:15 are probably the most significant since 2000. Hamilton writes “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman” to support “the hypothesis that from start to finish, the OT is a messianic document, written from a messianic perspective, to sustain a messianic hope.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, “the Messianism of the OT is introduced in Gen 3:15.”<sup>93</sup> Hamilton seeks to “highlight the theme of the head crushing seed of the woman in the Bible.”<sup>94</sup> Hamilton cites Collins’s “Syntactical Note” and Alexander’s “Further Ob-

<sup>86</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 13.

<sup>88</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Abernethy and Goswell, 21.

<sup>91</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Review of *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* by C. John Collins,” *BSac* 165 (2008): 372.

<sup>92</sup> James Hamilton, “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *SB/T* 10.2 (2006): 30.

<sup>93</sup> Hamilton, 31.

<sup>94</sup> Hamilton, 31.

servations” to defend the idea that an individual offspring is in view.<sup>95</sup> Hamilton argues, though, that the seed of the woman is also to be understood as “the group of descendants who hope for the victory of their seed.”<sup>96</sup> The seed of the woman, then, is both individual and collective.

Hamilton then traces the concept of “conflict between the seeds” throughout the OT beginning with the conflict between Cain and Abel. Cain’s line represents “those whose actions mirror the one who ‘was a murderer from the beginning’ (John 8:44).”<sup>97</sup> This “conflict between the seeds” continues in the conflict between Egypt and Israel and runs through the OT storyline through the attempt to wipe out the Jews in the time of Esther. Throughout the Bible, “those who are understood as opposing the purposes of God and his people appear to be regarded as the seed of the serpent” (cf. Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7; John 8:40–44).<sup>98</sup>

The main portion of Hamilton’s article makes the argument that the frequent OT references to the enemies of God—particularly their heads—being crushed supports the idea that the conflict with the enemies of God in the rest of the OT should be viewed as the outworking of Genesis 3:15. Hamilton presents numerous examples throughout the OT that allude to the curse on the serpent (and his seed) in Genesis 3:14–15, using terminology such as “broken heads,” “broken enemies,” “trampling underfoot,” “licking the dust,” and “stricken serpents.” The same themes continue in the NT as well. Whereas critics of the messianic view of 3:15 argue that the rest of the Bible does not give a place of significance to 3:15, Hamilton provides a cogent argument that the imagery of 3:15 can be found in many examples throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

In another article, “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” Hamilton adds a further contribution for an intertextual argument for a messianic view of 3:15. Hamilton argues that the promises to Abraham of land, seed, and blessing are “direct answers to the curses of Genesis 3:14–19.”<sup>99</sup> Genesis 3:15, therefore, serves as the foundation for the promise of seed to Abraham. Because the blessings for Abraham and his seed become a critical part of the storyline of the Bible, Genesis 3:15 also must serve a critical role in the storyline of the Bible. Hamilton demonstrates in three key OT examples how the blessings of Abraham are seen in connection with language that reflects the concepts in Genesis 3:15.<sup>100</sup> Hamilton then turns to the NT’s description of Jesus as the one through whom the promises of land, seed, and blessing are finally fulfilled and through whom the serpent is crushed (Rev 12). Hamilton’s arguments present a strong corrective to those who argue that Genesis 3:15 cannot be a protevangelium because the rest of the Bible does not specifically refer to Genesis 3:15.

<sup>95</sup> Hamilton, 32.

<sup>96</sup> Hamilton, 32.

<sup>97</sup> Hamilton, 33. This is consistent with Alexander’s argument that the members of the seed line often follow the behavioral patterns of the seed from whom they came. “Messianic Ideology,” 24.

<sup>98</sup> Hamilton, 33.

<sup>99</sup> “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *TynBul* 58.2 (2007): 254.

<sup>100</sup> Hamilton discusses the prophecy of Balaam (Num 22–24), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7), and Psalm 72. “Seed of the Woman,” 263–70.

## V. GORDON JOHNSTON: THE PROGRESS OF REVELATION

Up to this point, each of the significant developments supports the idea that a messianic intent is inherent in Genesis 3:15. Gordon Johnston rejects this idea, though he eventually argues for a messianic significance of 3:15 based on progressive revelation.<sup>101</sup> Johnston discusses six levels of complementary interpretive contexts. In the immediate context of Adam and Eve, Johnston gives several reasons that Eve could not have understood 3:15 in a messianic sense. Johnston assumes that the first couple knew no more about God and his plan than what is written in Genesis 2–3.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, Johnston argues that the rest of the Pentateuch reveals “not even the most vague allusion to 3:15.”<sup>103</sup>

Johnston argues that the grammar of 3:15 necessitates a collective understanding of the seed of the woman.<sup>104</sup> In support of this, he refers to Aramaic targums that interpret different references to seed as collective.<sup>105</sup> It is disappointing, though, that Johnston does not interact at all with the arguments of Collins and Alexander.<sup>106</sup> Johnston cites Alexander and Sailhamer only one time each in the entire paper—merely to identify them as proponents of the messianic view—and he does not cite Collins or James Hamilton at all. Given the fact that these four have provided the most significant scholarly contributions to the interpretation of Genesis 3:15 in the past thirty years, this absence certainly diminishes the strength of Johnston’s argument against the messianic view. Johnston concludes that on a “purely syntactical, grammatical, lexical surface level” of 3:15, it is difficult to see an individual Messiah “if we limited ourselves to 3:15 alone.”<sup>107</sup>

Thus, in its historical context, the curse on the serpent indicates that “just as humans would inflict fatal wounds by striking the heads of vipers, poisonous snakes would inflict fatal wounds by striking the heels of humans.”<sup>108</sup> When viewed in the light of the entire canon, Genesis 3:15 “reflects the spiritual battle of Satan versus those who believe in Jesus Christ” rather than as a messianic prophecy.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Gordon Johnston, “From Perpetual Conflict of Humanity to Eschatological Triumph of Messiah: Unpacking the Complementary Hermeneutical Trajectories in Genesis 3:15” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 11, 2016), [https://www.academia.edu/39925499/Unpacking\\_the\\_Complementary\\_Hermeneutical\\_Trajectories\\_in\\_Genesis\\_3\\_15](https://www.academia.edu/39925499/Unpacking_the_Complementary_Hermeneutical_Trajectories_in_Genesis_3_15). Johnston notes that this paper is a revision of his previously published essay, “Appendix: Messiah and Genesis 3:15,” in Herbert W. Bateman IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston, *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel’s King* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 459–72.

<sup>102</sup> Johnston, “Perpetual Conflict,” 4–5. Johnston assumes that the events of 2:4–3:26 transpired in one day, so Adam and Eve “had little time to learn anything” (4).

<sup>103</sup> Johnston, 6.

<sup>104</sup> Johnston, 7.

<sup>105</sup> Johnston, 7n10.

<sup>106</sup> This is true in both “Perpetual Conflict of Humanity,” and in Johnston’s essay, “Appendix: Messiah and Genesis 3:15.” In “Perpetual Conflict,” Johnston cites Alexander only one time in order to identify Alexander as a proponent of the messianic view of 3:15. Johnston does not cite Collins or Hamilton at all.

<sup>107</sup> Johnston, “Perpetual Conflict,” 15.

<sup>108</sup> Johnston, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Johnston, 11.

Johnston concludes, though, that Genesis 3:15 “ultimately points to Jesus, albeit not as literal fulfillment of direct prophecy, but as ultimate fulfillment of an implicit prophecy that is teased out by the progress of revelation.”<sup>110</sup> Though the original readers would not have understood a messianic import, “God ultimately had the Messiah . . . in mind all along.”<sup>111</sup>

## VI. KEVIN CHEN: FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Kevin S. Chen, a former student of Sailhamer, works to expand Sailhamer’s argument in his recent (2019) monograph, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch*. Chen argues that Genesis 3:15 presents five key themes that concern the Messiah: (1) enmity, (2) seed, (3) woman, (4) crushing the head, and (5) crushing the heel.<sup>112</sup> Throughout the monograph, Chen argues that these key themes in Genesis 3:15 recur in other key portions of the Pentateuch and, particularly, in four key poetic sections.<sup>113</sup>

Chen’s most significant original contribution relating to the exegesis of Genesis 3:15 is his analysis of how the OT uses independent personal pronouns with **אָרֶע**. Collins touches on this point briefly in his “Syntactical Note,”<sup>114</sup> but Chen makes a strong point that Collins does not make. Chen examines how the Hebrew text uses independent personal pronouns when they refer to “seed.”<sup>115</sup> The OT includes a total of 9 different passages that use an independent personal pronoun to refer to “seed,” including Genesis 3:15. In four examples, a singular pronoun is used to refer to a singular sense of “seed” (Gen 15:3–4; 21:13; 2 Sam 7:12–14; 1 Chr 17:11–13), and in three examples a plural pronoun is used to refer to a plural sense of seed (Isa 57:3–4; 61:9; 65:23). Thus, seven out of the eight other passages (not including Gen 3:15) ensure that the number of the independent personal pronoun matches the number implied by “seed.” The only exception is Isaiah 41:8, which appears to use a singular pronoun to refer to a plural (collective) referent. In this example, though, it is likely that the singular “you” refers to “Israel” rather than “seed.”<sup>116</sup> This analysis strongly favors an interpretation of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 as an individual.

Chen further observes that the examples that do use the singular independent personal pronoun **אָהוּא** in reference to “seed” are part of a coordinated network of OT texts that are conceptually linked to Genesis 3:15 and the development of the seed promise in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants (cf. Gen 15:3–4; 21:13; 2

<sup>110</sup> Johnston, 14.

<sup>111</sup> Johnston, 15.

<sup>112</sup> Chen, *Messianic Vision*, 5–10, 50–55.

<sup>113</sup> Chen, 5–10, 50–55.

<sup>114</sup> Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 143n11.

<sup>115</sup> Chen’s methodology is to analyze “every passage with *seed* and an independent personal pronoun within a one-verse radius.” He removed false positives. He also excluded references to seed as “plant seeds” (Chen, 43n15).

<sup>116</sup> Chen discusses Isaiah 41:8 thoroughly (pp. 42–43). See also Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 143n11.

Sam 7:12–14; 1 Chr 17:11–13).<sup>117</sup> Chen also points out an additional intertextual connection to 3:15 in Genesis 22:17 and 24:60, which speak of the seed “possessing the gate of his ‘enemies’” (אֹיְבֵי in Gen 22:17) and “of those who hate him” (Gen 24:60). The references to the “enemies” (אֹיְבֵי) of the seed in 22:17 and to “those who hate him” in 24:60 provide clear intertextual and conceptual connections with the “enmity” (אִיְבָה) between the seeds in 3:15.

## VII. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENESIS 3:15

The influence of these developments of Genesis 3:15 in evangelical scholarship over the past thirty years is significant. Many scholars during this time have embraced the arguments of Collins and Alexander and adhere to the idea that a messianic expectation is embedded in Genesis 3:15 based on the grammar and syntax of the verse and on its thematic role in the book of Genesis. Several recent evangelical commentaries and studies on Genesis and the Pentateuch support an originally messianic understanding of Genesis 3:15.<sup>118</sup> A number of studies on the Messiah in the OT support the idea that Genesis 3:15 represents the first messianic prophecy.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, many authors are recognizing the critical role of 3:15 in the storyline of Scripture that is ultimately anticipating the coming of the promised Messiah. Therefore, numerous works on biblical theology demonstrate the crucial role of 3:15 in the story of Scripture.<sup>120</sup> The prominence of Genesis 3:15 in recent theological discussion has also been reflected in systematic theology studies.<sup>121</sup> The

<sup>117</sup> Chen, 43–47.

<sup>118</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1:1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 245–47; V. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 46; Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 133, 143–45; James McKeown, *Genesis*, THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 38–39; Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 31–33; Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 93.

<sup>119</sup> See Jared M. August, “The Messianic Hope of Genesis: The *Protoevangelium* and Patriarchal Promises,” *Themelios* 42.1 (2017): 46–62; Walter C. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Studies in OT Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 39–40; Todd Patterson, “The Righteousness and Survival of the Seed: The Role of Plot in the Exegesis and Theology of Genesis” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University, 2012), 155–69; Postell, “Genesis 3:15: The Promised Seed,” 241–50; and Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 135–45.

<sup>120</sup> Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 68–72, 81, 152–53, 156, 200; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical Theology of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 58n61, 62, 591–652; James Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 76–77, 82–84; Walter Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 43, 56–57; Andrew David Naselli, *The Serpent and the Serpent Slayer*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 40–41; Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent,” 105–6; Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 10; and Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 62, 238, 281.

<sup>121</sup> In soteriology, see Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 81, 167; Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 416. In Christology, see Graham A.

messianic understanding of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 now has a much stronger exegetical foundation, and recent scholars are increasingly seeing it as a significant element in biblical and systematic theology.

This increasingly prominent concept of Genesis 3:15 as *messianic protevangelium* is still, however, rejected by a number of scholars, who avoid acknowledging the possibility of a messianic concept in Genesis altogether in their discussions of Genesis 3:15. In his *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, R. W. L. Moberly references 3:15 one time (according to the Scripture index) and only in relation to the “conflict between humans and snakes.”<sup>122</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer argues that a messianic sense was read back into the text in the patristic writings—not in the OT or the NT.<sup>123</sup> W. D. Reayburn and Euan McGregor Fry believe that the hostility mentioned is “not just between the snake and the woman in the garden, but applies to all snakes and human beings not yet born.”<sup>124</sup> They also advise translators to use the collective term for descendants: “All her descendants and all your descendants will always be bad friends.”<sup>125</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp sees 3:15 as representing an “abrupt alienation between humans and other animals” as a parallel to *Gilgamesh*.<sup>126</sup> Some recent commentaries on Genesis do not discuss 3:15 at all.<sup>127</sup> None of these treatments interacts with the arguments of Collins, Alexander, Sailhamer, Hamilton, or Chen.

Also, some evangelical scholars still adhere to the collective view of the seed of the woman. As already noted, Walton, Abernethy and Goswell, and Johnston argue against the individual view. John E. Hartley argues for a metaphorical sense of 3:15, in which “humans could rise above natural disasters and forces of evil to fulfill God’s commands.”<sup>128</sup> Michael S. Heiser and Tremper Longman III argue for

Cole, *The God Who Became Human: A Biblical Theology of the Incarnation*, NSBT 30 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 42–43; Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 122–23. In spiritual warfare, see Gregory Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 242; William F. Cook III and Chuck Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Approach* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 12. In angelology, see Graham A. Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 143. In hermeneutics, see Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 51, 211, 280, 371, 403, 458.

<sup>122</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, OT Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79–80.

<sup>123</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 70. Fitzmyer also upholds Westermann’s form-critical argument: “Since the word forms part of the divine curse of the serpent, there cannot be a promise of a future offspring with such a connotation” (70).

<sup>124</sup> W. D. Reayburn and Euan McGregor Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, UBS (New York: UBS, 1998), 91.

<sup>125</sup> Reayburn and Fry, 92.

<sup>126</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 145.

<sup>127</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 26; and R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 92–95.

<sup>128</sup> John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 69.

the collective view.<sup>129</sup> Of these, Walton, along with Abernethy and Goswell, are the only ones who interact at all with the arguments of Collins and Alexander. Other evangelicals do acknowledge a messianic import for Genesis 3:15, though based only on further revelation and not the immediate context of 3:15.<sup>130</sup>

### VIII. CONCLUSION

This survey has examined the key scholarly contributions to the development of the interpretation of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15. The exegetical arguments of Collins and Alexander (and later Chen) represent the most significant contributions to the discussion, since the messianic view had previously lacked any serious exegetical argument that the seed of the woman is definitively singular in 3:15. John Walton, along with Andrew Abernethy and Gregory Goswell, are the only scholars who have attempted to refute the arguments of Collins and Alexander. Alexander, Sailhamer, and Chen present arguments from compositional elements in both Genesis (Alexander) and the entire Pentateuch (Sailhamer and, later, Chen) that establish the idea that the original author of the Pentateuch was anticipating a future ruler from the seed of the woman. James Hamilton demonstrates that the key ideas of Genesis 3:15 are prominent throughout the rest of the OT and NT. Hamilton also demonstrates that the elements of the Abrahamic Covenant—a key to the development of the redemptive plan of Scripture—are direct responses to the curses in Genesis 3:14–19. The accumulation of these arguments provides a solid defense of the idea that Genesis 3:15 anticipates the coming of an individual messianic figure. Finally, Gordon Johnston provides an alternative view, disagreeing with the idea that the original intent of 3:15 anticipates an individual Messiah, though he allows for a messianic understanding of 3:15 based on progressive revelation. Several of these scholarly contributions have established a strong basis for understanding the offspring of the woman as an individual.

Alan Jacobs tells of the economist John Maynard Keynes, who was accused of changing his opinion on a policy issue. When questioned on this, Keynes responded, “When the facts change, sir, I change my mind.”<sup>131</sup> With the research of Collins and Alexander, it may be said that “the facts have changed” regarding the exegesis of Genesis 3:15. However, the manner in which scholars who oppose the messianic view of Genesis 3:15 have handled the text in recent years is generally disappointing. With a few notable exceptions mentioned in this article, such scholars are either (1) unaware of scholarship on Genesis 3:15 over the past thirty years or (2) unwilling to acknowledge any credibility in the arguments of a growing number of distinguished scholars. As time passes, this neglect of these key scholarly

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<sup>129</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 242–43; Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, SOGBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 67.

<sup>130</sup> See John Goldingay, *Key Questions about Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament Answers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 279, and Ben Witherington III, *Torah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 51.

<sup>131</sup> Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017), 125.

contributions becomes more inexcusable. It is worth wondering if the concern among scholars today is the concern that Chisholm uses to criticize Collins's discussion of 3:15 as a "so-called protevangelium." Are these scholars unwilling to go "against the trend of modern scholarship"<sup>132</sup> in order to support the messianic view? The arguments supporting the individual view of the seed of the woman have changed, and these arguments are worthy of serious consideration in every treatment of the passage.

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<sup>132</sup> Chisholm, "Review of *Genesis 1-4*," 372.