

WHO IS THE SEED OF ABRAHAM ACCORDING TO ROMANS 9?

*God himself made a **distinction** among the children of Abraham¹*

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Here the question as to the true nature of Abraham's seed and of God's election of his people comes up for discussion in a sharply defined manner when in Romans 9-11 Paul sees himself placed before the enigma of Israel unbelieving and therefore excluded from God's promises.

The point of departure for this profound argumentation in its entirety is again that in order rightly to understand the address of the promise given to Abraham and to his seed one is not to start from natural descent from Abraham. ***From the very outset God himself made a distinction among the children of Abraham. He did not without more ado reckon all the seed of Abraham as the children in whom he would bless all the nations, but he eliminated Ishmael and designated Isaac.***

Paul qualifies this further as follows — and here the criterion of this discriminating activity of God also becomes visible —

"... it is not the children of the flesh that are the children of God, *but the children of the promise are reckoned for the seed*" (Rom.9:8).

It is a question, therefore, of the manner in which Ishmael and Isaac were conceived and born. Whereas Ishmael was a "child of the flesh," that is to say, was begotten and received by Abraham as a son in the natural way, Isaac was a "child of the promise." With these last words Isaac's origin is pointed out. He was not only the bearer, but in the first place the fruit of the promise. For "the word of the promise is as follows: about this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son" (v. 9). We have to do here with the same thought and with the same idea of the promise as in Galatians 4:28, where Isaac, and believers, are spoken of as children of promise, i.e., children who have been born out of the strength of the promise and not by virtue of natural procreation ("after the flesh"); ***for this reason the expression "according to the Spirit" can be employed as a synonym for "children of promise"*** (Gal. 4:29).

The distinction God made from the beginning in the election and formation of his people is therefore very plain. In the birth of Isaac and with the elimination of Ishmael he indicated clearly that the ground for his election of Israel in no respect lay in any human quality, in the potentialities of human "flesh," or in natural descent, *but only in his own divine work*, in the quickening strength of his promise, in the power of his Spirit.

¹ Paul: An Outline of his theology, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975 (Originally published as Paulus: Ontwerp van zijn theologie, 1966, Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok N. V., Kampen, The Netherlands, p. 382-384. Opskrif en beklemtonings bygevoeg deur S. Le Cornu.

Paul points to this same principle in the birth of Jacob and Esau, even if it manifests itself there in another way. Here a "natural" birth does take place, but God once more intervenes by designating, not the elder, Esau, but the younger, Jacob, contrary to all custom and expectation, as the continuation of the holy line of the people of God.

Here again, however, there is no arbitrariness, but God acts according to the same motive and pattern as with Isaac and Ishmael: "... that ***the electing purpose of God*** might continue [in force]: not upon the strength of works, but of him who called..." (Rom. 9:12).

That the seed of Abraham as the people of God would be carried on in Jacob and not in Esau was not because of Jacob's excellence above that of Esau. For when they had not yet been born and had not yet done anything either good or evil (v. 11), this decision was already announced to Rebekah. In setting the younger above the elder it became manifest anew in what way and according to what standard God has formed his people: *to cause his electing purpose* to continue in force.