



Genesis - Chapter Fifteen

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

God appears in a vision to Abram, promising protection and reward. Abram shows that he has concerns for the promise because he does not have a child of his own from whom his descendants will come. God reassures Abram of the promises that he will be the patriarch of a great nation and establishes a covenant with Abram that it will be as he has promised.

II.a.vii Genesis 15:1-21 - God's Covenant with Abram

This chapter falls into two closely related sections: vv.1-6 address Abram's concern that he is still childless; vv.7-21 focus on Abram's desire to have a divine pledge that the land of Canaan will belong to his descendants. Both elements are essential components of nationhood. God's conditional promise in 12:2 that Abram will become a 'great nation' is now guaranteed by a covenant, although the fulfilment will not take place until several centuries after Abram's death.

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'

Genesis 15:1

After these things links this episode to the one immediately preceding. In Chapter Fourteen Abram rejected the offer from the king of Sodom for the victory spoils as a reward. In response, God now states that Abram's reward shall be very great. By rejecting the use of human wealth to achieve greatness (14:22-24), Abram demonstrates his willingness to wait for God to provide.

The word of the LORD came to people in the Bible in many different ways. It might come by a personal appearance of God, by an audible voice, by visions or dreams, by the ministry of angels, by the working of the Spirit of God upon the mind, by the making alive of a passage of Scripture to the heart, or by the ministry of a prophet or preacher. Examples can be found in 1 Samuel 15:10, 2 Samuel 7:4, 1 Kings 6:11 and 12:22, Jeremiah 1:13, Ezekiel 3:16 and Daniel 10:1.

In a vision. Although it is not certain, the initial vision may have taken place at night. In v.5 God brings Abram out of his tent to count the stars. Other examples of such visions can be found in Genesis 46:2, Numbers 12:6 and 24:4, and Job 33:15.

Do not be afraid. This is the first of many such statements by God, Jesus or their agents which indicate how God wishes to reassure his people that he is there to protect them and not harm them. For example: *<<And that very night the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake'>>* (Genesis 26:24), *<<But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine>>* (Isaiah 43:1), *<<Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear>>* (Haggai 2:4-5), *<<But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid'>>* (John 6:20). God told Abram this because he was afraid, and afraid for good reasons. Yet God also gave him a reason to put away his fear. God never tells people do not be afraid without giving them a reason to put away their fear.

Your shield, your reward. Abram needed a shield because he expected to be attacked. He needed reward because he had denied himself great reward offered from the king of Sodom. God told Abram that, although he had sacrificed for the Lord's sake, he would not be the loser for it. God would more than make up what Abram gave unto the Lord. This is a promise that extends to all those who place their faith in God, for example: *<<People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth'>>* (Psalm 58:11), and: *<<Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labours>>* (Isaiah 3:10).

² But Abram said, 'O LORD God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?'

Genesis 15:2

LORD God, what will you give me. Although it is certain that Abram appreciated the promise from God, at the same time there was perhaps a sense in which it may have sounded empty to Abram. It was as if Abram said, “What good is it that you are my shield and reward? The only thing I’ve ever wanted with any passion in my life is a son! Where are the descendants you promised me?”

The heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. This individual, whose name means ‘God is help,’ is not named elsewhere. The context suggests that he is a trusted member of Abram’s household, his trusted right-hand man though possibly still a slave (v.3), who came from Damascus. Yet the Hebrew text is somewhat obscure, and other interpretations are possible. Abram could have acquired him on the journey from Haran to Canaan.

³ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ ⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’

Genesis 15:3-4

You have given me no offspring. Abram’s bold honesty before the Lord is a wonderful example. Instead of holding in his frustration, he brought it before God with an honest heart. To some degree, this question doubted God. Yet the reader can discern the difference between a doubt that denies God’s promise and a doubt that desires God’s promise. Abram wanted to believe and looked to God to strengthen his faith.

This man shall not be your heir. God reminded Abram of the promise originally recorded in Genesis 12:2 and 13:15-16. God did this because he knows how much Abram and all believers need to be reminded.

No one but your very own issue shall be your heir. God often states a promise with such certainty that we believe it will be fulfilled right away, but the fulfilment of this promise was still 15 years away. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews says: *<<And we want each one of you to show the same diligence, so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises>>* (Hebrews 6:11-12).

From your own body. God explained exactly what he meant in his promise to Abram. He meant that it was not a spiritual descendant such as Eliezer who would inherit the promise, but an actual flesh and blood descendant. This was necessary because God’s promises are so often misunderstood.

⁵ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’

Genesis 15:5

Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. God not only told Abram the promise again, but he confirmed it with an illustration, for the stars in the sky showed how vast the number of Abram’s descendants would be. One of those descendants - the greatest of his descendants - would be <<*the bright morning star*>> (Revelation 22:16b).

⁶ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:6

This key verse in Genesis is quoted four times in the NT (Romans 4:3 and 4:22, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23). Faith in God is something that everyone in the Bible was expected to exercise. It entails trust in or confident reliance on God, refer to the comments on John 1:12-13 and Hebrews 11:1, based on the truthfulness of his words, and it will lead to obeying his commands. A person’s faith or lack of it is most apparent in crises such as Abram was facing. He believed God would give him a son despite many years of childlessness.

When Abram put his trust in God, specifically in God’s promise to him of descendants leading to the Messiah, God credited this belief to Abram’s account as righteousness. There are essentially two types of righteousness: righteousness accomplished by human effort, and righteousness accounted by the work of God to those who believe. Since no one can be good enough to accomplish perfect righteousness, God’s righteousness has to be accounted or reckoned to a believer by doing just what Abram did: he believed the LORD. God’s accounting is not pretence. God does not account a pretended righteousness, but a real one in and through Jesus Christ, the only one who is truly righteous.

Reckoned it to him as righteousness. Righteousness is the fundamental OT virtue characterised by a godly life lived in conformity with the law. It is the righteous who enjoy God’s favour. Here the narrator underlines the significance of faith, in that before Abram has proved himself righteous by his deeds, he is reckoned, that is, regarded, as righteous because of his faith: <<*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going*>> (Hebrews 11:8).

Introduction to Genesis 15:7-17

The ritual described here is possibly a type of oath that involves a self-curse if not fulfilled; God will become like the dead animals if he does not keep his word: <<*And those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts: the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf shall be handed over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives. Their corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth*>> (Jeremiah 34:18-20).

Another interpretation, however, is that the ritual is an acted sign in which the sacrificial animals symbolise Abram's descendants, i.e. all of Israel; the 'birds of prey' (v.11) signify their enemies, i.e. unclean nations; and the 'fire-pot' and 'torch' (v.17) represent God's presence. The promises of vv.13-16 look forward to God's being in the midst of the Israelites after they come out of Egypt.

⁷ Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.'⁸ But he said, 'O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'⁹ He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.'¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Genesis 15:7-11

Then he said to him. It is not certain that v.7 flows immediately from vv.1-6 or came some time later but most scholars assume the continuation in the vision that Abram had of God.

I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess. This was a dramatic, clear promise from God. The power and clarity of it may make the reader somewhat surprised by the answer of Abram: 'O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' Abram boldly asked God for proof of the promise. Although God had just reckoned Abram as righteous, Abram could still demonstrate some degree of doubt, as indicated by this question. Abram experienced what many of those who are accounted as righteous do. It was as if he said, "I believe when I hear God say it, but five minutes later, I'm not sure - please prove it to me." It should be remembered that Abram had no title deed to the land, nothing to make anyone else believe he actually owned the land. All he had was the promise of God.

Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon. This may read more like a shopping list for a witch doctor than something the Lord would ask for. Yet Abram understood instinctively and perfectly what God asked him to prepare for.

Cut them in two, laying each half over against the other. Abram knew exactly what to do with these animals; he understood that according to the custom of his day, God told him to get a contract ready for signing.

In those days, contracts were made by the sacrificial cutting of animals, with the split carcasses of the animals lying on the ground. Then both parties to the covenant walked through the animal parts together, repeating the terms of the covenant. The Lord made a covenant in v.18 is literally, ‘the Lord cut a covenant.’ Jeremiah 34:18-20 makes reference to this same practice of a covenant made by cutting animals and repeating the oath of the covenant as one walks through the animal parts. The symbolism was plain. Firstly, this is a covenant so serious it is sealed with blood. Secondly, if this covenant is then broken, let this same bloodshed be poured out on the covenant breaker and his animals. When Abram had his doubts and wanted assurance from the Lord, God said to him plainly, ‘Let us sign a contract and settle this once for all.’

And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Abram waited for the Lord to appear and walk through the carcasses with him in order to sign the covenant, but God did not come right away. Abram had to wait and fight off the vultures until God did something with this covenant ceremony. Abram had reason to expect that God would come down and walk through the animal parts with him, because God had previously appeared to him (12:7).

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴ but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’

Genesis 15:12-16

As the sun was going down. At the end of the day, God had not yet come to walk through the animal parts with Abram. Instead, God caused a deep sleep to fall

upon Abram. Apparently, at least part of what followed came to Abram in a dream while he was under this deep sleep.

Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there. Abram wanted concrete proof from God, and God would soon sign the covenant. Yet, Abram needed to know he would have land and descendants, but all would not go well with them in the future. This was a dreadful aspect to an amazing promise. After God told him some of the hardship that would befall his descendants, Abram might have said something like, “If that is what is going to happen to them, then I do not want any children.” This was a complicated blessing.

Four hundred years is probably to be understood as a round figure and was also referred to by Stephen: <<*And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and maltreat them for four hundred years*>> (Acts 7:6). This anticipates the length of the Israelites’ oppression by the Egyptians before the exodus.

And afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. This promise, given by the Lord to Abram, who is soon to be called Abraham (17:5), was fulfilled 600 to 800 years later at the time of the exodus: <<*The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewellery of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the LORD had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians*>> (Exodus 12:35-36), in addition to all their herds and flocks.

For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. The Amorites are one of the main population groups in Canaan and are frequently listed alongside the Canaanites and others, refer also to vv.19-21 and to the comments made on Genesis Chapter Ten, where the Amorites are included among the descendants of Ham. God’s comment implies that the Amorites will be dispossessed of their land as an act of divine punishment. At that time, their accumulated iniquity will be so great that God will no longer tolerate their presence in the land. The destruction of the Canaanites is referred to in the Introduction to Joshua.

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Genesis 15:17

When the sun had gone down. The final part of the ritual occurs after sunset. Since vv.1-6 assume a night-time setting, Abram may have spent much of the day preparing the animals.

A smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch are taken to be symbolic of God’s presence, which is often associated with fire, e.g. <<*The LORD went in front of*

them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people>> (Exodus 13:21-22).

¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.’

Genesis 15:18-21

These verses provide a brief summary, affirming the significance of what has taken place, by stating: On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram. This covenant, which differs from the covenant described in Chapter Seventeen, is introduced using a Hebrew idiom that literally means ‘to cut a covenant.’ For a description of a covenant, refer to the comment made on 9:9-11.

To your descendants I give this land. God unconditionally pledges that Abram’s offspring will possess this land. The reference to both descendants and land links this covenant with the earlier conditional promise that Abram would become a great nation (12:2).

From the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. While the location of the northern boundary is clear, the designation the river of Egypt is somewhat ambiguous. It could refer to the Wadi el Arish, which is midway between Israel and the Nile; <<*the boundary shall turn from Azmon to the Wadi of Egypt, and its termination shall be at the Sea*>> (Numbers 34:5), however, uses a slightly different expression for this. Alternatively, river could refer to the eastern branch of the Nile, but the distinctive Hebrew term for the Nile is not used here. While others occupied the land when the divine covenant was given, this promise was probably fulfilled for a time in the reign of Solomon: <<*Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life*>> (1 Kings 4:21).