

Comments on Genesis 15

While the Abrahamic Covenant was initially introduced in ch. 12, this chapter presents the formal declaration, institution, and adoption of that covenant. The chapter is divided into two sections, with v. 1-6 recounting the Lord's promise to Abram and v. 7-21 dealing with the covenant Abram cuts with the Lord as a token of the Lord's promise.

1 AFTER these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I [am] thy shield, [and] thy exceeding great reward. 2 And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house [is] this Eliezer of Damascus? 3 And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. 4 And, behold, the word of the LORD [came] unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. 5 And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. 6 And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

v1-6 Abram has a vision wherein the Lord gives him a promise of physical protection (v. 1). Abram's reply is "Without any children this promise has little meaning for me as the heir will be my steward's son" (v. 2-3). The Lord says, "No, you will have children" (v. 4). The Lord then shows Abram the vastness of the creation of space, and says "So shall the number of your children be" (v. 5) and Abram believes what the Lord tells him (v. 6).

v1 Regarding the Lord's promises to Abraham, Nahum Sarna in Understanding Genesis (page 121-122) comments:

The Hebrew word for "shield" (*magen* v. 1) is connected with Melchizedek's invocation of God who "delivered" (*miggen* 14:20) the patriarch's enemies into his hands. The assurance of "great reward" is clearly to be associated with Abraham's refusal to have any part of the spoils of war. The material reward so disdainfully spurned is to be vastly exceeded by a recompense of a different kind, even though the prospects were, as yet, only on the distant horizon. The very word designating the rejected possessions (*rekush*, 14:21) is employed by God to describe the

"great wealth" that Abraham's descendants would ultimately have (15:14).

v2 It was common at that time for childless couples to adopt a prominent and trustworthy male servant to act as heir after the demise of the husband. The heir would then be tasked with care of the widow. See page 122-123 of Sarna's Understanding Genesis for a more complete discussion.

v3 "one born in my house is mine heir", while literally a good translation is fails to convey the intended meaning. Abram is referring to the son of Eliezer, his steward, and not any child of his own.

v6 The JST on this verse is very different from the Biblical account, and shifts its subject from being connected with v. 1-5 to being connected with v. 7-21.

KJV

IV/JST

And Abram said,
Lord God how wilt thou
give me this land for
an everlasting inheritance?
And the Lord said,
Though thou wast dead,
yet am I not able
to give it thee?
And if thou shalt die,
yet thou shalt possess it,
for the day cometh,
that the Son of Man
shall live; but
how can he live
if he be not dead?
he must first be quickened.
And it came to pass,
that Abram looked forth and
saw the days of
the Son of Man,
and was glad,
and his soul found rest,

And he believed in the LORD;
and he counted it
to him for righteousness.

and he believed in the Lord;
and the Lord counted it
unto him for righteousness.

It suggests the ultimate fulfilment concerning the land will occur well after his death, and he will inherit it in the resurrection. It also necessarily implies Abram saw and perceived many things pertaining to the incarnation of the Lord and the Atonement and so forth.

With this reading v. 1-6 are cast in a more eternal context with a resurrected Abram where v. 7-21 are couched in a more temporal setting with the children of Abram displacing many nations.

Also note the phrasing in the IV/JST of "Abram looked for and saw the days of the Son of Man" is very similar to that of John 8:56.

7 And he said unto him, I [am] the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it. 8 And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? 9 And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. 10 And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. 11 And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12 And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. 13 And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land [that is] not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; 14 And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. 15 And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. 16 But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites [is] not yet full.

17 And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. 18 In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: 19 The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, 20 And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, 21 And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

v7-21 The land is promised to Abram (v. 7), and Abram asks another question of how this will be accomplished (v. 8). The Lord's tells Abram to prepare animals for a ritual covenant (v. 9), and he does it (v. 10-11). With the setting of the sun, Abram falls asleep and experiences something fearful (v. 12). The Lord then informs him as to the future events of his offspring inheriting the land (v. 13-16). Afterwards, Abram sets up a furnace and lights a torch, so that he may conclude the covenant by ritually walking between the cut pieces (v. 17). The following morning, the Lord informs Abram as to which lands his children will be inheriting, dispossessing nations as they go (v. 18-21).

v8 The IV/JST appends "yet he believed God" after Abram's question. This indicates Abram's question was not a matter of unbelief, but of curiosity.

v9-11 This verse presents some obscure symbolism. The ritual is that of "cutting a covenant". This is not a sacrifice, but a symbol and token of retribution in the covenant wherein if Abram fails to remain faithful to the Lord he will be cut up even as the animals were, cp. Jer. 34:17-20. Nahum Sarna states in page 126 of Understanding Genesis as follows:

The peculiar phrase "to cut a covenant" is derived from the practice of severing animals as the seal of a treaty. This custom is widely attested in ancient times and exists among primitive peoples to his day; particularly interesting are Hittite and Greek parallels. It is generally believed that when the contracting parties passed between the severed pieces they thereby accepted the covenant obligations and invoked upon themselves the fate of the animals if the terms of the pact were violated.

v9 "three years old", according to traditions of the time, a three year old animal was fit for service as a draft animal or whatever useful purpose it was set to. Thus, the symbolism is if one failed to be fit for the task laid before them they would be cut up even as the animals were. Compare this with the likening of Israel to draft animals in 1 Kings 7:25, Isa. 1:3, and Hosea 8:9.

v11 This passage ultimately becomes the source for one of the

classical covenant curses in the Law of Moses (cf. Deut. 28:26), thereby indicating the context of covenant making.

v12 The footnote in the 1979 LDS edition KJV on this verse suggests a cross reference with the JS-H where Smith is attacked by the adversary. While Abram may have had a similar experience to that of Joseph Smith, given the context it is more likely he had an experience similar to Nephi's. The subject of v. 13-16 is more akin to what Nephi experiences after seeing the future of his people upon the New World, than that of Joseph Smith's experience. In 1 Ne. 15:4-5 Nephi is extremely distraught by the vision, and here we have Abram seeing a similar revelation which presents an unpleasant picture of the next 400 years of his children's history.

v13-16 "four hundred years...fourth generation", in scriptural terms a "generation" is roughly equivalent to 100 years, cp. Hela. 13:10, 4 Ne. 1:22.

v16 "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full", when Israel took the promised land after the Exodus under Joshua they were informed they did not accomplish it because of their righteousness, but rather because of the wickedness of the current inhabitants, cf. Lev. 18:25-28, Deut 9:3-5. The Lord is a long-range planner and social engineer Who orchestrates men and things as He sees fit.

v17 Another very obscure passage with two possible readings. The first is developed by assuming the rather enigmatic references are to something divine and mystical and therefore equate God's presence to the likeness of a furnace and flaming torch using proof texts with similar imagery (cp. Exod. 3:2, Exod. 13:21, Exod. 19:18). Thus, the light from the furnace and torch, shining in the night, are symbolic of the Lord's presence and ratification of the covenant.

The second interpretation comes to light when comparing the text at hand with Jer. 34:18-19. Here it is made plain the one walking between the pieces is the covenant maker. Thus, this would be Abram who upon having the revelation of v. 13-16 wastes no time in concluding the covenant with the Lord. So, rather than waiting until daylight, he makes haste and builds a furnace, ignites a torch so he can see where he is walking and walks between all of the pieces he had cut up and arranged before the sun had set.

v18 "In the same day", as the Semitic day starts at sundown, it was in the same "day" as the events described in v. 12-17, or in other words, the following morning.

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