

Gen 15:1-21 – The Abrahamic Covenant

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

The phrase “the word of the Lord came” is typical in the OT of introducing revelation to a prophet. In Genesis, the phrase is only found here and in v4, suggesting that Abraham was acting as a prophet. This is made explicit in Gen 20:7. We have already seen how Abraham is portrayed as a king (i.e., the blessings of the call with the covenant language and the specific promise to make your name great) and how Abraham therefore points to Jesus the true king. We see a similar thing here regarding the office of prophet.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q. 23: What offices does Christ execute as our Redeemer?

Christ, as our Redeemer, executes the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.

Q. 24: How doth Christ execute the office of a prophet?

Christ executes the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.

As a prophet Christ offers us the final word from God regarding our salvation. He is the Word and all promises, such as those given to Abraham, find their fulfillment in him.

So what kind of revelation does Abraham receive? First, it comes in the form of a “vision.” What is the difference between vision and dream? A vision stresses that a word from God is directly received whereas dreams require interpretation – think of Joseph. Visions commonly appear in the OT with reference to the prophets, who are then to relate that word to God’s people. The fact that Abraham receives a vision provides further evidence that he is acting in that capacity.

“Fear not” is a common formula in the OT when a prophetic spokesman offers encouragement not to be intimidated by an enemy who is shortly to be encountered. Abraham may be worried about retaliation from tribal kings he just conquered in chp 14 or the ‘enemy’ could be God himself who has just suddenly appeared. There is certainly reason to fear God due to his holiness and majesty, which we will discuss soon. But here it is likely that the “fear not” serves to encourage and comfort a man who has been promised land and offspring but is surrounded by pagan nations and remains childless. This is supported by the fact that the rewards/blessings that God will soon confirm are mentioned (i.e., “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great”).

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?” 3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”

Note the repetition in these verses for emphasis. This is highlighting the problem – Abraham has no descendants despite the promise.

“you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir” – Abraham is saying “will I have to concoct some kind of solution to get an heir,” which is ironic given his later actions with Hagar. This comment likely reflects common adoption practice in the ANE where a childless couple would adopt a son, sometimes a slave and in return for their service the adoptee becomes the heir unless a son is born later. But even then the adopted son would still share in the inheritance.

God answers in v4 “**This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.**” And then he reiterates the promise. **5 And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.**

“number the stars” builds upon the previous promise that Abraham’s offspring shall be like the dust of the earth. Remember how we said that Paul sees this as fulfilled in X:

Gal 3:29 “And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

“believed” or “put faith in” – This is the first time this word is used in Bible but clearly Abraham has exhibited faith or trust in God’s promises, i.e. by leaving Ur. The action of faith precedes the language of faith. Also the verbal form usually indicates repeated or continuing action.

His faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” This is a very significant theme for Paul and later for Luther and many of the Reformers. In Rom 3-4 Paul lays out the foundation for justification by faith in Christ. Just as there is a universal problem (all have sinned; 3:23) so there is a universal solution (all are saved by faith; 4:16).

Paul stresses that if Abraham had been justified by works, then he could boast (4:2). Paul then uses Abraham as an example that the Jews have no special privilege with regard to salvation. Faith for Abraham was believing in the promises – that he why his faith was counted for righteousness. And it is no different for us. It is faith in Christ that matters because he is the ultimate embodiment of the promises of God.

That is why Paul concludes with:

4:23 “But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

7 And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”

Here the theme switches from the promise of children to the promise of land.

There is similar vocabulary to Ex 20:2 “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Again the similarities serve to highlight the Abraham–Israel typology, there is a foreshadowing of what is to come. Also, v7 is one of only four times in Genesis where God

refers to himself as Yahweh, which helps to enhance the analogy between God's call of Abraham and his redemption of Israel from Egypt. In other words it is God who made the promise of land and it is God who will fulfill that promise.

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 turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

In v4 Abraham questioned God over the promise of a child – God assures him by showing him the stars and reiterating his promise. Here in v8, Abraham questions God over the promise of land. God's answer, his assurance, comes in the form of a covenant.

A covenant is a solemn binding contract. We live in a written culture and so we get a person to sign an invoice or contract – that's how we receive assurance about whether we will receive what has been promised otherwise, at least in America, we sue. In the ANE, it is a completely different picture.

It was an ANE custom that animals be slaughtered in covenant ceremonies. Two parties would walk between the pieces and in doing so place a curse on themselves if either party should break the covenant terms. In other words, animal slaughter is a dramatized curse - May this happen to me if the covenant is broken. There is an acting out of the consequences.

For example, in a 17th century BC treaty Abban has given a city to Yarimlim as a reward. To cement the transaction the text says that "Abban placed himself under oath and cut apart a sheep saying "Let me so die if I take back what I have given to you."

Also, Jer 34:18-19 reads "the men who transgressed my covenant I will make like the calf which they cut in two and then passed between the pieces." This response was prompted by the actions of King Zedekiah who cut a covenant promising to set the Hebrew slaves free only to later take them back.

There is also more Abraham-Christ typology here. We have seen previously how Abraham is portrayed as a King, and at the beginning of this passage as a prophet, well here his actions are reminiscent of a sacrifice. In the laws for burnt offerings in Lev 1 animals were to be cut in two but birds were not. So the parallels to the later sacrificial system suggest that Abraham is acting in the capacity of a priest. Here we see the final part of the three-fold office - Abraham is a prophet, priest and king and therefore points us to Jesus who is ultimate prophet, priest and king. Regarding Jesus being our ultimate High Priest see Hebrews 5.

"birds of prey" – often represent foreign nations in OT and based on the parallels with the later sacrificial system, the sacrificial animals represent Israel. So here Abraham is symbolically protecting his descendants and hence the promises of God from attack by outsiders. This fits in with the theme of chapter 14 where Abraham is battling the pagan nations.

What happens next is truly amazing.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.

Deep sleep reminiscent of what happened to Adam when God created Eve, the context there being the covenant of marriage.

“dreadful and great darkness” – this could be the fear of holiness, typically brought about by sinful behavior, e.g. Adam (Gen 3:10), Jacob (Gen 28:17), Moses (Ex 3:6), Isaiah (Isa 6). However, in these examples the person is usually awake. This could also indicate fear of God as other (i.e., Creator vs creature) and would serve to highlight God’s majesty.

13 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers 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.”

God reiterates that promise that Abraham’s descendants will inherit the land BUT only after an exile of 400 years. This is a clear reference to slavery in Egypt and the subsequent exodus where God will judge the Egyptians and Abraham’s descendants will leave with “great possessions.” Remember how we argued that this was foreshadowed in Abraham’s leaving the Promised land for Egypt during the famine and how he left with great wealth after Pharaoh and his people were inflicted with a plague.

But note that the return from slavery in Egypt is also predicated on the “iniquity of the Amorites,” which suggests that the possession of the land is conditioned on both faith and morality. This helps explain Israel’s later expulsion and exile from the land.

Now we are about to see the most amazing part of the text.

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring 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.”

“smoking firepot and flaming torch” reminds us of the smoke and fire that engulfed Mt Sinai. These images represent God himself and the same two words are used for God’s presence as he leads his people in the wilderness.

God cuts a covenant with Abraham. Remember we said that this is a dramatized curse - May this happen to me if the covenant is broken. But amazingly God himself passes between the pieces. This is a unilateral, one-sided covenant. If it were bilateral then Abraham would have passed

through also. The fact that it is unilateral means that even if Abraham breaks the covenant then God himself would bear the curse!

Let's be honest, I don't think any of us have a problem with God keeping up his end of the bargain. The problem is us. And this is the amazing thing that God essentially says "Don't worry, I will take the penalty even if you fail." "I will be cut up, I will die" and that is exactly what happens! Abraham had no idea.

This is why at Calvary another dreadful darkness comes down and blots out the sun at noon and we hear Jesus cry out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The answer to that question is the covenant. Isa 53:6 tells us that the messiah will be cut off from the land of the living. Note the covenant language. And Paul in Gal 3:14 writes "Jesus became a curse for us (i.e., he bore the curse of the covenant) so that in him the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."