

Genesis 15
May 2, 2021

1) Introduction to Chapter 15

- a) Walter Brueggemann emphasizes the importance of these verses when he writes, “This chapter is pivotal for the Abraham tradition. Theologically, it is probably the most important chapter of this entire collection.” Some scholars argue that portions of this chapter are the oldest biblical passages telling the story of Abraham. Verse 6 is central to the New Testament writers as seen in Paul’s writings of Romans and Galatians, as well as references by the authors of James and Hebrews. In each case Abraham is seen as the model of faith.
- b) So far in our study of Genesis we have dealt largely with 2 groups of writers. The J writers were centered in Jerusalem and used the term Yahweh as their name for God. The P writers, or priestly authors, wrote with special attention to issues of proper observance and temple ritual. Here in chapter 15:13-16 for the 1st time we encounter the Elohist or E source, which emanated from the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BC. The early prophets were already exerting their influence then and that is evident in the prophetic tone of these verses.
- c) The organization of this chapter, which would fascinate Henry Holland, is focused on a vision in verses 1-6 and on a dream in verses 7-21. The theme of the chapter is one of faith challenged by a deferred promise. The promise of God stands over against the advanced age of Abram and the barrenness of Sarah. This tension of faith is stated by Brueggemann in these words: “Why and how does one continue to trust solely in the promise when the evidence against the promise is all around? It is this scandal that is faced here. It is Abraham’s embrace of the scandal that makes him the father of faith.”

2) Genesis 15:1-6 – Abram As the Model of Faith

- a) In verse 1 God appears to Abram in a vision and re-ignites their conversation with the greeting, “fear not.” Abram had a great deal to fear, for nothing had happened that gave any evidence that God’s promise could ever be fulfilled

that Abram would have numerous descendants. He had grown older, and Sarah was still barren. Amid that despairing situation God announces, “your reward shall be very great.” The reward that God will announce pertains to land, but more than that, God insists that the promise of a son is somehow still possible.

- b) The term “reward” should not be understood as a prize or payment due an individual for services performed. It is not a quid pro quo transaction. Rather, the reward is a gift of grace. Brueggemann describes the reward not as a prize that Abram has earned but as “a special recognition given to a faithful servant of the king who has performed a bold or risky service.”
- c) In verses 2 and 3 Abraham raises the obvious objection to God’s promise of making him the father of a mighty nation. How can that be Abram asked, “for I continue childless.” My entire inheritance will go, not to a son, but to a slave, Abram argues. Evidently the Hebrew patriarch is planning to adopt a household slave as his surrogate heir. The reader of this passage understands Abram’s faith as something other than a peaceful and pious acceptance of God’s will. As Brueggemann describes it, “It is a hard fought and deeply argued conviction. Abram will not be a passive recipient of the promise.”
- d) In verses 4 and 5 God reaffirms the divine promise of a son without any substantiation of how such a thing will happen to the aged and barren couple. God doubles down on his previous promise by taking Abram outside and asking him to look at the star-studded sky. Then God reiterates the promise: “Look toward heaven and count the stars... Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’.”
- e) Verse 6 serves as a climax of these verses, if not of the entire Abraham saga. This verse certifies Abraham as a prime example of a person of faith and for that reason he becomes the focus of understanding the meaning of faith for the New Testament and Martin Luther. The central question to be asked is what happened between verses 2 and 3 when Abram argued against the possibility of God’s promise ever being fulfilled and verse 6 when we are told Abram “believed the Lord.” There is no new data offered in verses 4 and 5 that Abram did not know in verses 2 and 3. So why the difference? In verse 5 there is a clear sign of God’s power in the multitude of the stars.

Abram now has a clue that can lead him to believe in a new reality of faith. The change is a miracle of God's doing; it is what Soren Kierkegaard described as the "leap of faith." We see that same transition when Peter makes that leap in Matthew 16:15-17 and exclaims, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Brueggemann describes Abram's transformation as an act of repentance: "He has abandoned a reading of reality which is measured by what he can see and touch and manage.... The faith of Abraham is certain of one point. There is a future to be given which will be new and not derived from the present barrenness. He believes that God can cause a breakpoint between the exhausted present and the buoyant future."

3) Genesis 15:7-21 – God's Covenant with Abram

- a) The 2nd installment of God's promise to Abram is stated in verse 7: "to give you this land to possess." But as he did in in verses 2 and 3, here again Abram raises objections, saying in verse 8, "how am I to know that I shall possess it?" Sibley Towner suggests in his commentary that Abram is tired, frustrated, and despairing "after years of wandering from Haran to Shechem to Bethel to Hebron to Egypt then back to Bethel and Hebron again."
- b) In verses 9 and 10 God directs Abram to slaughter a 3-year-old heifer, goat, and ram as well as a turtledove and pigeon. We are not told where this offering was made or when it occurred. We have previously read of Abram building altars to his newfound God, but up to this point Abram has not presented an offering or sacrifice. In fact, there is no altar or sacrificial fire in this story so technically it is not like any other Old Testament sacrifice. The practice of animal sacrifice dates to the earliest evidence we have of Near Eastern cultures in the custom of a scapegoat, where the guilt of the people was transferred to an animal that was then killed. Verse 11 describes how Abram protected the offering from vultures.
- c) In verse 12 we are told that "a deep sleep fell upon Abram," reminding us of the deep sleep that fell upon Adam before the rib surgery that created Eve. Before the insertion of verses 13-16, the deep sleep prepared Abram to see the presence of God in the smoking fire pot and flaming torch mentioned in verse 17. As the text now stands the deep sleep prepares Abram to hear and

respond to the prophecy of God concerning his future and the extended time it will take to fulfill that prophecy.

d) Verses 13-16 – God’s Prophecy for Abram and His Descendants

- i) These 5 verses are usually attributed to the Elohist or E source for 2 reasons: 1) These verses are an awkward fit in this narration of the Abram story in chapter 15. 2) The term “Amorites” used in verse 16 is a common usage for the E source for those people that are identified as Canaanites by the other writers of Genesis. Moreover, the prophecy speaks of a 400-year sojourn in Egyptian slavery, the defeat of the Egyptians during the exodus of the Hebrew slaves, and the return of Abram’s descendants to the land of Canaan. “This is the only reference to the exodus in the entire book of Genesis,” writes Sibley Towner. And no wonder, he says, “Clearly the writer knew the full Pentateuchal tradition very well. The prophecy was after-the-fact!”
- ii) Verse 16 tells us that the occupation of the promised land will not happen for a long time because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” Sibley Towner emphasizes the importance of that statement when he writes: “Think about that! Salvation history takes account of the behavior not only of the elect people, but also of the nonelected nations. The election of Abram is not to be understood so ethnocentricly that the other nations are, at the same moment, stamped ‘rejected’.”

e) Verses 17-18 – God’s Covenant with Abram

- i) The story of the dream now picks up from verse 12. The offering prepared by Abram was accepted by God. In a mysterious and moving scene the presence of the Lord, visible in a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, sweeps between the 2 halves of the offering prepared by Abram. Though it seems foreign and even repulsive to our modern minds, animal slaughter and blood sacrifice was an expected part of covenant making in the ancient Near East. The intertwined nature of sacrifice and covenant making is seen in the Hebrew terminology of verse 18 where “to make a covenant” is literally translated “to cut a covenant.”

- ii) The practice of animal sacrifice and covenant making is seen elsewhere in the Old Testament such as the covenant God makes with Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 24:1-8. The human parties to a covenant do to the animals what they agree should be done to them were they to break the covenant agreement. That is exactly what God threatens through his prophet in Jeremiah 34:17-20. A covenant is often defined as a bilateral agreement. That is not the case here, as stated by Towner: “Yahweh unilaterally promises land to the descendants of Abram. No strings are attached.”

- iii) The boundaries of the promised land as described in these verses are greater than previously mentioned. In Genesis 12:7 the promised land was the region around Shechem. In 13:14-17 it referred to all of Canaan that was visible to Abram. Now in chapter 15 it includes everything “from the river of Egypt to... the Euphrates.” That is a huge expanse of land! The Euphrates is clearly the river that is about 325 miles northeast of Jerusalem, in modern-day Iraq. The exact meaning of “the river of Egypt” is unclear since this is the only place that term is used. Most commentators agree this is not a reference to the Nile. Some commentators take this to mean the modern Wadi el-Arish, 50 miles southwest of Gaza. The Yahwist would have written this passage during the United monarchy of David and Solomon when the territory of Israel truly extended from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt. That was the greatest area of land ruled by ancient Israel.

- f) Verses 19-21 supplement the geographic description of the land promised to Abram with a listing of 10 ethnic groups that inhabited the land of Canaan. 4 of these groups are identifiable from the Old Testament and other Near Eastern texts – Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites, and Canaanites. Other tribes listed are unknown or known only to ancient legends. The list is provided to attest that every group in the land of Canaan will be ruled by the descendants of Abram.

Questions for Reflection

1. Are we to understand God's promise of land literally? If so, how does this divine promise of land influence contemporary world politics? Does this promise of land justify warfare, expulsion, or genocide? How would you explain this passage to the Palestinian citizens of Gaza?

2. Most scholars see Genesis 15:13-16 as a later addition to this book. Do you agree with that conclusion? Does it make any difference who the original authors were?

3. At several places the New Testament refers to Genesis 15 and looks to Abraham as the model of faith. For you, is Abraham a good example of a faithful believer? What was it in Abraham's experience that made him a believer in the Lord? For you, what biblical figures are your models of faith?

4. In chapter 15 Abraham is described as questioning God and doubting God's promise. Walter Brueggemann describes Abram's transformation as an act of repentance. Soren Kierkegaard speaks of Abraham's leap of faith. Do you agree with Brueggemann and Kierkegaard? How would you describe the faith of Abraham? What role does doubt play in the life of a believer?