

The Family of Abraham - Part 5—Cutting a Covenant

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the fifth of my series on the story of Abram and his family in the book of Genesis. We now come to Genesis chapter 15. The context of this chapter is set by the preceding chapter, where Abram defeated the kings and then encountered the king of Sodom at the end.

The king of Sodom offers him a reward to participate in his part of the plunder, but Abram refuses. I have lifted my hand to the Lord God Most High, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say I have made Abram rich.

So he refuses the reward at this point, and then God appears to him in a vision and declares, Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.

That God is going to give the reward that he refused from the hand of the king of Sodom. He was not going to be made rich by the king of Sodom, but God will make him rich. God will make him great. But Abraham has an immediate problem, and the problem that he has is that his heir, as it currently stands, is just a house-born servant, Eliezer of Damascus.

He has no natural heir. His nephew, Lot, who was taken into his house, who seemed to be a son for a while, has now departed. He's gone with the king of Sodom.

[1 : 21] And this is a crisis. Who is going to be the heir? And that's the problem for Abraham at this point. Is he going to have a natural heir, or is his house just going to pass into the hands of his servant?

And the Lord's response is that Eliezer will not be his heir. Rather, someone who comes from his own body will be his heir.

And this is a significant development, because we've not seen this promise yet. It's important to notice that throughout this story, the promises are developing and taking shape.

It's not just a repetition of the same thing over and over again. So we've seen already a promise that God would make his name great, that God would make him a great nation. Now, we do not have a promise that that nation would descend biologically from Abraham himself.

We presume at the outset that it's going to be Lot. It's going to be the son of his brother, his dead brother, who is brought with him. And yet, that's not the way things work out.

[2 : 28] Likewise, we're not sure yet, even still to this point, whether this child will be, or whether his descendants will come through Sarai. Sarai is barren, so there's no seeming hope there.

And on the other hand, we have a series of promises about the land that develop. Promises about God going to give them a land, then God will multiply them. Like the sand on the seashore, like the dust of the earth.

They will be, as they are the dust of the earth, they will cover the land. And the land gives them a place to be. And so, at each stage, there's a development of these promises. And within this chapter, we see a very significant series of developments.

And there are two sets of events that occur. So, the first one is this promise that he will have a descendant from his own body.

And then he brings him outside, and he looks outside, and he's told to number the stars, or to consider the stars, to account for the stars.

[3 : 33] What is he doing here? It's an elevation of the previous promises. He's already been told that his descendants will be numerous. They'll be numerous as the dust of the earth. But this takes things a step further.

That they are going to be numerous as the dust of the earth, but they will also be like the stars in heaven. So, they're going to be numerous. But the stars in heaven are not just a matter of filling the earth, this land that's been given.

As they are like the stars in heaven, they will be like the stars are given in Genesis chapter 1 to rule, to be those that are ruling in the heavens.

They are authorities. They are powers. They are represented as these ruling forces that measure out time. And in all probability, there is some, or fairly likely, that there is some reference to the zodiac here.

That there are 12 sons that will come, 12 tribes that will come from Israel eventually. And those 12 tribes are associated in places like Numbers and elsewhere in the symbolism with the 12 signs of the zodiac.

[4 : 37] Not explicitly, but there are very good reasons to draw those connections. There are 12 ordered around the camp, around the camp of the tabernacle in the centre, immediately surrounded by the Levites.

And then all around that, the 12 tribes arrayed according to the cardinal directions. Now, as you look at that series of the tribes, you'll see that there are symbols associated with them that are also associated with the signs of the zodiac.

So this suggests, and we also have it within various forms of iconography and other things like that, that we see within Judaism from the first century, times like that.

So there are these connections already drawn and already understood. That Israel are like the stars. They are multiplying. They are the ones that rule time. They're the ones that will give a sense of order in God's world.

They are set in the heavens. They are the heavenly nation. And as a result, the tabernacle is like the sun. And around that are arrayed all these different constellations of the people.

[5 : 46] And so Abraham is called to look outside, to see the stars and to see the stars as ruling, as numerous and as a significant number as well.

And so the stars are visibly manifested in an analogical form in Israel arrayed around the tabernacle.

This is a significant image that we find in various points of scripture. And he believes in the Lord and he accounted it to him for righteousness. This is an act of faith.

There's no evidence that he has immediately at this point. He's just taking God's word. And he's someone who's given up so much. He's let Lot go.

He's left his home country and all these other things. And now he takes God's word that he will fulfill all that he's promised. There's another sort of event that follows after this.

[6 : 50] This might be a separate event rather than the same time, but they're very much connected. Then he said to him, That's a familiar formation.

This is usually something that we see in the context of Israel being brought out of Egypt to inherit the promised land. And he says to Abram, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans.

So it's a similar formula and it connects the deliverance of Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans with the later deliverance from Egypt.

And we'll see a closer connection with a closer emergence of those themes in what follows. And then Abram asked the question, How do I know that I will inherit it?

Now, note the significance of the word inherit. We've not seen that word in the same way before. He's wondering about his inheritance. Will he have an heir to give his house to?

[7 : 55] Or will he just have to have Eliezer of Damascus? Will he be the heir? Just someone born in his house, but not a son. And God here talks about him inheriting the land.

Now, there are many ways that you can receive something. You can receive something as a gift. Someone can give you something as a possessor. Someone can sell something to you. And here we have something even more significant.

You can inherit something. And Abram has promised that he will inherit the land. That God will give this land over to him as an inheritance. And there's suggested in there a relationship that is stronger than just one associated with gift.

God is not just giving this land to Abram. He's giving Abram an inheritance. And Abram, as he enters into this, will have a seal, a promise of this.

And you have here a very peculiar ritual that he's called to perform. And there's a vision associated with it that follows. Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon.

[9 : 04] Then he brought all these to him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite each other. But he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Now, why these particular animals? Why divide them in this particular way? What is going on here? This is a weird passage. And it certainly is weird.

But what we can see within Genesis already is there are anticipations of the later sacrificial system. We see that in the story of Noah, where we have a division between clean and unclean animals. Already there's a recognition of these divisions between animals. And here there are five animals mentioned. What is it about these five animals that's significant? What's significant is that these are the five species of animal that are offered in the sacrifices of Israel.

And these sacrifices of Israel represent Israel itself. Various members of the household of Israel. So what is being presented here in these different halves is the house of Israel.

[10 : 14] It's the different offices, the different parts of this larger social body. All these animals brought together are associated with that then. Now, why particular types of animals?

These aren't just species of animals, but they're stipulated particular types. So you have a female cow.

A heifer has not had born a calf. You have a three-year-old female goat. Why female goat rather than male goat?

A three-year-old ram. A turtle dove and a young pigeon. Why those particular animals? It's interesting to consider this. The connection with the sacrifices is suggested for various reasons. I've already mentioned these are the five animals that are used for the sacrifices. But we also see within the context of Leviticus that there are common ways of handling these things.

[11 : 18] So in Leviticus 1.17 it describes dividing up all these different animals into parts. And these parts are treated differently. Some are associated with the man who's offering. And they are washed.

And the others are associated with God and they are taken up. And then the ones that are washed and then added later on. He shall kill the bull before the Lord.

And the priest Aaron's son shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around on the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle meeting. And he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. It's an animal that's cut into pieces. The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and lay the wood in order on the fire. Then the priest Aaron's son shall lay the parts the head and the fat in order on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar.

So Aaron's sons are responsible for the head and the fat. And then the person who offers shall wash its entrails and its legs with water.

[12 : 21] And the priest shall burn all on the altar as a burnt sacrifice and offering made by fire a sweet aroma to the Lord. So the animal is divided and then the animal is put back together again as it's burnt up and taken into the presence of the Lord.

And here we see also that the description of the sacrifice of the of the turtle doves or pigeons. It says the priest shall bring it to the altar, ring off its head and burn it on the altar.

Its blood shall be drained out at the side of the altar and he shall remove its crop with its feathers and cast it beside the altar on the east side into the place for ashes. Then he shall split it at its wings, but shall not divide it completely.

And the priest shall burn it on the altar on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt sacrifice, an aroma, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord. Now, this suggests that there is a connection between what Abraham is doing and the sacrifices of Israel, that Israel offers these sacrifices in particular ways by dividing different parts.

Some parts are handled by the priests, the sons of Aaron, and other parts are handled by the sacrifice themselves. They have to be washed and then they are added to the pile. And so there is an association with the household servants of God, the priests, and then there are other parts that are associated with the offerer.

[13 : 41] And those associations then get played out also in the way that the birds are treated. The birds are not divided within the sacrifices. And likewise, in Genesis chapter 15, the birds are not

divided.

So I think there's a sacrificial theme underlying this. When we look through the accounts of Leviticus and Numbers, we'll often see the sex of sacrifices stipulated.

Generally, they are offered as male sacrifices. But if a commoner of the people is offering a sacrifice, it will often have to be a female goat or it will have to be a female animal that is offered. We don't see a heifer offered, except heifers being used. We don't typically see a heifer offered, but we see heifers being used for rituals like the ritual of the red heifer or the unsolved murder, these sorts of cases.

So what does the heifer represent? The heifer is associated with the corresponding animal to the heifer is the bull. And the bull is associated with the high priest.

[14:49] The corresponding animal to the female goat is the male goat, which is associated with the leader of the people. And the female goat is associated with the general member of the people.

What you have is husband-bride type symbolism here, that the husband of the people, the priestly husband of the people, or the whole congregation as the son of God, as this son that God has brought out, his firstborn son, is associated with the bull, this priestly animal.

And then the kings can be associated and the rulers of the people can be associated more with the male goats. Israel, at this point, does not have a priesthood, does not have a kingdom. And as a result, I think, you have the nation represented with a bridal identity that has yet to be, they've yet to have husbands in these sorts of offices, as priests and as kings.

When they will have those, you will have the sacrifices added for the bull and for the male goat. And those are associated with specific figures, with the leader of the people and with the priest.

These animals are three years of age. As three years of age, I think it's animals in their prime. But I think it might also be associated with the different generations that are mentioned here.

[16:11] That three, and then associated with the generations that Israel is going to be before they come out. Or the number of centuries that they'll be.

In the fourth century, after the fourth century, they'll be brought out. In the fourth generation, they'll come out. And those connections, I think, help us perhaps to understand what that number means. I'm not sure on that particular detail. That detail is an unusual one, because animals that are sacrificed are usually animals of the first year. And here we see that they are animals of the third year, presumably.

Well, it might not be referring to year. It might be referring to something different. Some have suggested these are three animals, or animals divided into three parts. I'm not sure. I don't think it's those things.

But in the third year, I'm not sure what to make of that. I suggest that this is related to Israel in Egypt. That Israel is in Egypt, without kings, without priests.

[17:10] They are this nation that's waiting to be delivered. The vultures, the carrion birds, are coming down upon them to pick them apart. And Abram chases away those birds.

And God here then appears in a visionary event. He falls into a deep sleep. And the deep sleep that comes upon Abram is interesting.

We have deep sleep mentioned at another point in Genesis. The deep sleep that comes upon Adam as the bride Eve is taken from his side.

The woman is taken from his side and then brought to him. It's a period of death followed by resurrection. It's not just a regular sleep. This is a death-like sleep. And he'll be raised up again at the other side.

But there is a profound event taking place here. This vision is something that explains so much of the history that succeeds afterwards. The sun goes down.

[18:09] And the sun doesn't really rise up again until the end of chapter 19. This is a period from here that occurs in a sort of symbolic darkness. We'll see the same thing in the story of Jacob.

Jacob goes to Bethel and he has a dream in Bethel. And then symbolically the rest of the time is in darkness until the sun rises again as he crosses the fort of Jabbok.

We're after meeting with the angel at Peniel. And so these are significant symbolic periods of time. A sort of period of darkness where something is happening. The darkness of the womb.

The darkness of night where God is working. The darkness of the time when he's counting the stars, whatever it is. And the vultures try and come down on the carcasses.

Abraham chases them away. And God then declares to Abraham that his descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. And they will serve them and will afflict them 400 years. [19:11] And also the nation whom they serve I will judge. Afterward they will come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried at a good old age.

But in the fourth generation they shall return here. For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. So this promise is a promise of God's dealings with the descendants of Abraham. That he will bring them back to the land. That there will be the exodus. There are interesting details here. 400 years in a land that is not their own. How do we understand that?

Especially when it talks about in the fourth generation. The 400 years refers from the birth of Isaac in all probability. That Isaac and all these descendants are in a land that's not their own.

It doesn't become their own land until after they return from the exodus. What we have in the fourth generation is the movement from Levi to Moses.

[20:09] And in that Moses is the fourth generation of that line. So both of those details are correct. But they're referring to slightly different periods of time. The first refers to the whole period from Isaac to the return from Egypt.

And the second refers to the specific sojourn within Egypt itself. What else can we recognise here? There's a vision of a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between the pieces.

What's happening here? The smoking torch and the burning oven, or the smoking oven and the burning torch, I believe, are associated with God himself.

God passes between the pieces. Elsewhere in Jeremiah we read of the people performing an oath where they step between pieces of a sacrifice that are torn in two.

And as they walk between those sacrificial pieces, they are declaring a self-maledictory oath. Let this happen to me if I do not keep my vow.

[21:12] And so as they walk between the pieces, they are making that vow. And here we have God himself walking between the pieces. And this movement between the pieces is a movement that kind of brings those pieces together.

And the two pieces, what are the two pieces associated with? The pieces that are split. Is it both being associated with Israel? It might be. I think it might also be that one half of the pieces are associated with God, another half are associated with Israel.

And we can see that within the sacrificial system in part, that both parts of the animal are related to the person who's offering. But then there's also one half of the animal that particularly is associated with the sons of the priests, the servants, household servants of the temple, of God's palace.

And then the other half is associated with the offer of themselves. And they have to wash that and then present that. And that, I believe, might be part of what's going on here. One half of the sacrifice is associated with God, the other half with Abraham and the people that he represents.

And then God moves between the pieces, bringing them together by fire, like we see in the sacrificial system. And as they are brought together through this fire that passes between them, there's a sort of reunification, a wholeness.

[22:34] But there's a promise that occurs along with that, a self-maledictory oath on God's part, that God swears by himself that he will keep this promise. That if this does not come to pass, if he does not fulfill this promise, then let this tearing apart of the animals happen to God himself.

And that's a strong thing to declare. But it seems to be what's part of what's taking place here. What we see here that's different from the sacrifices, the animals don't seem to be burnt up into God's presence.

But implicitly, I think that's the logic of what's taking place, that God passes between these two parts. They're united together symbolically, and God is at the heart of them.

And then Israel is represented by these different parts that are then brought together by the passing of God between them. And every time the sacrifices are performed, there is a sort of performance of this oath that God has made, this covenant oath that lies at the very basis of the covenant, that God has promised that he will be with this people, that he will give them an inheritance, that he will bring them out of Egypt, that he will be with them, that they will be his people.

And God's passing between the animals is something that is performed in a sort of ritual every single time an ascension offering is brought. Every single time that we see the ritual, one of the rituals of Leviticus 1 played out, it's hearkening back to something that's taking place at Genesis 15.

[24 : 08] It's not all that's taking place, but I think it's part of what is taking place. And this is just the extension of the territory that will be given to Abraham and his seed when they return from Egypt.

So there's an anticipation of the Exodus. He has already undergone an Exodus-like experience himself. He went into Egypt and he came out with many great gifts. And there's this promise that the same will happen to his descendants.

And also the nation whom they serve, I will judge. Afterward, they shall come out with great possessions. So they'll come out with possessions and the nation will be judged. We see the same thing happen to Pharaoh earlier on.

Pharaoh is plagued with many great plagues. And then Abraham comes out of the land of Egypt with many great gifts and many great possessions. So the same thing that happens to Abraham will happen to his descendants.

Is God saying that this is something that he's going to bring upon the people? It doesn't actually say that. What it does say is that this will happen.

[25 : 30] It doesn't necessarily mean that this is what God has as the positive intention for them. Rather, it might be a result of certain things that they do wrong.

And we'll see some of these things later on. We'll see some of the ways in which the storm clouds, as it were, gather as Israel has made wrong decisions. And the consequences of those wrong decisions will be this period of slavery in Egypt.

Now, we'll get into some of that tomorrow. Thank you very much for listening. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. Questions on the story of Abraham and his descendants.

Or questions more generally on any issues related to theology or something else completely. If you would like to support this and other videos like it, particularly their transcription, please consider doing so using my Patreon account or my PayPal account.

Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. Thank you very much for listening. God bless.