

Genesis 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 15. 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. 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.

And Abram said, Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, This man shall not be your heir, your very own son shall be your heir. 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. And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. 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, but he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? 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. 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. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 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. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve. And afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go down to your fathers in peace, you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your offspring I give this land, from the river Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gergashites, and the Jebusites. Chapter 14 of Genesis ends with a question concerning reward. And in chapter 15, it opens with a statement about reward. God declares that he will be Abram's shield, an exceedingly great reward.

In the previous chapter, Abram had said, 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 rewards at that point, but then God appears to him and declares that he will be his reward. But Abram has an immediate problem. The problem is that he does not have an heir. Lot is no longer around. His only seeming heir is a house-born servant, Eliezer of Damascus. He has no natural heir. And the Lord's response is to confirm that Eliezer will not be his heir, but one who comes from his own body.

[3 : 25] God had promised that he would make Abram's name great and make him a great nation. And Abram already has many people around him, but there was no promise yet that the nation would descend biologically from Abram himself. We presume at the outset that it's going to be Lot, the son of his brother, his dead brother, who will be brought with him and become his heir. But yet Lot has gone off the scene, and now there doesn't seem to be anyone. Sarai is barren. So maybe it's just going to be the household around him, that God will multiply the sheepdom of Abram like the dust of the earth. But it does not seem yet that he has a promise of a biological heir, a son of his own.

And so there's development of the promises at this point. He's taken outside and he's told that he will have a descendant from his own body and brought to look up at the stars, to consider the stars, to account for the stars. It's an elevation of the previous promises. He's already been told that his

descendants will be numerous, like the dust of the earth. But now they're going to be numerous as the dust of the earth, but also be like the stars in heaven. They're numerous, but the stars in heaven are not just a matter of number. They're also forms of rule. In Genesis chapter 1, they rule over the heavens. They are the authorities and the powers. They are associated in some places with the angels.

And so Abram's descendants will be numerous, but they will also be like the ruling forces, the forces that measure out time. Israel will later be divided in 12 tribes, which can be associated with the 12 signs of the zodiac. Signs of rule, signs of authority, signs of power in the heavens.

And so their symbolic significance is not just that they are numerous, but that they are means of rule, that they are set above the nations, that they are collected around the tabernacle of God, which is connected with the sun. Abram believes in the Lord and he accounted it to him for righteousness.

It's an act of faith. Abram has no direct evidence at this point. He's just taking God's word for it. And he's someone who's given up so much. He's let Lot go. He's left his home country. He's left all these things behind. And all he is relying upon is God's word that he will fulfill what he has promised. In what might be a separate subsequent event, God says to Abram, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to inherit it.

[6:01] That's a familiar formation, most typically seen in the context of Israel being brought out of Egypt to inherit the promised land. It's a formula that we see elsewhere. But here, Abram asked the question, how do I know that I will inherit it? And the significance of the word inherit is important.

The word hasn't been used in quite the same way before. And he is wondering about his inheritance. Will he have an heir to give his house to? Or will he just have to accept Eliezer of Damascus, a house-born servant as his heir? God here talks about him inheriting the land. And there are many ways that you can receive something. You can receive something as a gift. You can maybe be given something as a possession. Someone can sell something to you. But there is a more significant way of accepting something, receiving something. It's to inherit. Abram has promised that he will inherit the land. That God will give him the land as an inheritance. It suggests a relationship that's stronger than one merely associated with gift. God is not just giving this land to Abram. He is giving Abram an inheritance that marks him out, not just as a recipient of a divine gift, but as an heir of God himself. Abram, as he enters into the land, is given a seal or a promise. I have a very peculiar act that he's called to perform. And there's a vision associated with it. He brings a three-year-old heifer, female goat, ram, turtle dove, and pigeon. He cuts them open down the middle and places one piece on each side. Why these particular animals? Why divide it in this particular way? Well, it's a weird passage. But I think this is an anticipation of the later sacrificial system. There's something of this already in the story of Noah. But the five animals mentioned here are the five animals that are connected with the sacrifices of Israel. There are five animals offered in Israel's sacrifices and these are the animals. These sacrifices represent Israel itself, various members of the household of the nation. And so what's being presented in these different halves is the house of Israel itself, its different offices, the different parts of the larger social body. And why these particular animals?

In not just the species, but the stipulated particular types. A female cow, a heifer that has not borne a calf, a three-year-old female goat. Why a female goat rather than a male goat? A three-year-old ram and a turtle dove and pigeon. Why those particular animals? And I think the connection with the sacrifice is important. But later on, when we see those sacrifices, it's a bull. It is a male ram.

And that difference is maybe worth attending to. In Leviticus 1 verse 17, it describes dividing up all these different animals into parts and the parts are treated differently. Some are associated with the man who is offering and they're washed and the others are associated with God and they are taken up by the priests. And then the ones that are washed are added later. I think we see this in places like Leviticus 15 to 6. He shall kill the bull before the Lord and the priest Aaron's son shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of meeting and he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. And then the animal cut into pieces is divided and then brought back together again. And that burning up of the animal is a reunion.

The priest shall bring it to the altar, wring off its head, burn it on the altar, its blood shall be drained out on 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.

[9 : 54] It is a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord. And this is suggesting a connection between the way that the sacrificial system treats the birds and the way that Abraham is called to treat the birds. They're prepared in particular ways. The birds are not divided in Genesis chapter 15 in the same way as we see in Leviticus chapter 1. And the secrets of the sacrifices are stipulated in Leviticus and Numbers, generally male sacrifices. But if a commoner of the people is offering a sacrifice it will have to be a female goat or some other female creature that's offered. We don't usually see a female heifer offered but we do see heifers being used for particular rituals such as the ritual of the red heifer or for unsolved murders. What does the heifer represent? I think that it's associated with the corresponding animal to the bull which is associated with the high priest. The corresponding animal to the female goat is the male goat which is associated with the leader of the people. And here I think the female goat is associated with the general member of the people. There's a husband-bridge type symbolism here. And the priestly husband of the people and the whole congregation is the son of the herd. They're associated with the bull, the priestly animal. But the kings and rulers of the people are associated with the male goats.

Israel, however, does not yet have a priesthood, does not yet have a kingdom. And at this point they're associated more with a bridal identity that have yet to have husbands in those sorts of offices as priests and kings. And so at this point I think that is what those animals represent. They're three years of age. And I think this relates to animals in their prime but also with different generations perhaps that are mentioned in this chapter. There are three generations and it's the number of generations Israel is going to go through before they come out or the number of centuries that there will be. After the fourth century they will be brought out. In the fourth generation they will come out. I think these connections maybe help us to understand what those numbers mean. This is speculation but this is my guess. The details of the prophecy are also related to Israel's state in Egypt without kings and without priests. There are a nation waiting to be delivered and the vultures, the birds that come down picking them apart, are connected with the nations. Nations like Egypt. Abraham chases away the birds.

And God appears in this visionary event as Abraham is placed into a deep sleep. And this deep sleep connects I believe with the story of Genesis chapter 2. It's a deep sleep that comes upon Adam as the bride Eve is taken from his side. Israel is going to be taken out of the side of Abraham and he's going to be formed into a true people, a nation. It's a death-like sleep and he'll be raised up again at the other side.

But there is a profound event taking place here. The deep sleep is a period of darkness. It's the darkness of the womb, the darkness of night, the time when God is working, the darkness of the time when he's counted the stars and the vultures are trying to destroy the carcass at this point. But God is going to deal with the descendants of Abraham. He will come to bring them back to the land. There will be the exodus and God will deliver them from the nation that's seeking to destroy them.

[13 : 24] What else can we see here? There's a smoking pot that passes through the pieces, a smoking oven or burning torch. God is passing through the pieces. In the book of Jeremiah we read of the people performing an oath where they step between the pieces of a sacrifice that is torn in two. And as they walk between the sacrificial pieces, they are declaring a self-maledictory oath. This should happen to me if I do not keep my vow. And the pieces that are split represent Israel and maybe part of what's happening is that one half is associated with God, one half is associated with Israel. It's, as we see in the sacrificial system, that one half belongs to the priests, the household servants of the temple, of God's palace, and then the other half is associated with the offerer themselves. They have to wash it and then present it. One half the sacrifice associated with God, the other half with Abraham and the people he represents. And God moves between the pieces, bringing them together by fire, like we see in the sacrificial system. And as they're brought together by fire, there's a sort of reunification, a new wholeness, a promise that God makes an oath, he swears by himself, that if he does not keep his promise, that he will have the same thing that happens to the animals happen to him himself. Now, that is a strong thing to declare. That could never be. And yet, that's how strong God's promise to keep his word to Abraham is. The animals do not seem to be burnt up into God's presence. But I think that's part of the logic of what's taking place here.

Israel is represented by these different parts that are then brought together by God's passing between them. And every time a sacrifice is performed, it's replaying the story of this event to

Abraham. God has promised that he will be with his 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 by Israel. Every single time this ritual plays out in Leviticus, it is hearkening back to this event in Genesis 15. It's not all that's taking place, but I think this is really important background for the sacrificial system.

One question to think about. In Romans chapter 4, Paul refers to Genesis chapter 15 verse 6. Abraham believed God and he accounted it to him for righteousness. How can reflecting upon Genesis chapter 15 help us better to understand Paul's argument in the book of Romans?