

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 15:1-21
“The Abrahamic Covenant”

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(This chapter contains the second covenant, or contract, made by God with His chosen servant. The first covenant was made with Noah after the flood (see Genesis 9:8-17). In this covenant, God gives Abram and his descendants the land of Israel as their land forever.)

Verses 1-6

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

***I am your shield,
your very great reward.”***

² But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

- Abram had a “vision.” The Hebrew word could correctly be translated “dream.” In this “vision,” YHWH spoke to Abram.
- YHWH’s words to Abram, “don’t be afraid,” indicate that Abram was afraid or worried about something. YHWH reminds Abram that He will protect Abram and that He will bless Abram.
- Then, Abram confesses the nature of his worry. He has amassed great wealth and is recognized as a “king” on earth (see Genesis 14). But he has no heir. Therefore, all that he has will pass to his chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus.

- YHWH tells Abram that his worry is without cause. Abram will have a son who will be his heir, and Abram will have so many sons that they will be as the stars, uncountable.
- Abram trusted God's promise and believed that it would be as God said. God counted Abram's faith as righteousness.

Verses 7-11

⁷ He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."

⁸ But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

⁹ So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."

¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

- YHWH then told Abram that He would give him the land upon which he stood.
- But this promise was harder for Abram to trust. There were others who believed the land belonged to them (see Genesis 14). They were powerful kings. So, Abram asked God to give him a sign that this promise would come true.
- YHWH instructs Abram to bring him a heifer, a goat, and a ram, each being three years old. Abram is also to bring a dove and a pigeon. Abram brings the requested animals to YHWH. He cuts the heifer, the goat, and the ram in half and lays them out on the ground in a line with the halves of each animal opposite the other. The birds were not divided in two but were laid out with the other animals. While this seems strange to us, in ancient times this was the procedure followed when land was transferred from one party to another. YHWH is following the custom of the time to formally give the land to Abram. It is God's right to give the land to anyone He chooses because He created it. The other "kings" claimed the land was theirs because their gods gave it to them. But their gods are false gods who do not exist. They worshiped the work of their hands for they fashioned the idols they worshiped. Therefore, their claim for the land was as false as their gods.
- When vultures came to get the carcasses, Abram drove them away until the ceremony was over.

Verses 12-16

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

- As night came, Abram, who had been protecting the carcasses, fell into a deep sleep.
- As he slept, YHWH spoke to him again. This time, YHWH told Abram of Israel’s history in Egypt. YHWH explained that Israel would be captive in Egypt for 400 years. But then they would return to the land God was giving to Abram. Abram, himself, would die before this 400-year captivity.
- In the fourth generation from Abram, his descendants would return to Canaan.

Verses 17-21

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites.

- In the darkness, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared. These objects passed between the divided carcasses and the birds. These objects represented YHWH. In ancient times, when parties were passing land from one party to another, the parties would stand between the divided carcasses like this and talk. In so doing, they were saying, “may I be divided as are these carcasses if I do not honor my word.” YHWH was making a solemn promise to give this land to Abram.

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