

Zach Lewald
ST300.C
9/10/24
Hermeneutics Paper

Genesis 15:1-21, commonly titled “God’s Covenant with Abram,” is a continuation of God’s relationship with Abram after calling him from his country and the beginning of God’s relationship with Israel. This passage culminates in God establishing a covenant with Abram to give him a land and a nation of offspring. “After these things” is the phrase that initiates Genesis chapter 15. Abram had just shown that the Lord is his reward by not taking anything from the King of Sodom (Gen. 14:22-23). God tells him to not fear, as His word appears to him in a vision. He tells him that He is his shield and that his reward is great. After Abram brings up his childlessness, God promises him a son. God shows Abram the created stars to signify the numerous descendants he will have. Abram had faith in God. God then promises Abram land and Abram asks for a sign. God makes Abram sacrifice different animals to initiate His covenant. Abram then went into a deep sleep and darkness fell upon him. God told Abram that his offspring would be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and that they will experience afflictions for four hundred years. However, He will bring judgment on their oppressors and Abram’s offspring will return from that land with great possessions. God tells him that they will return to the land in the fourth generation, and He set the land’s boundaries. A smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed through the torn sacrificial animals.

The central characters in this story are God and Abram. Moses’ focal points are Abram’s faith and God’s faithfulness. The pericope can be broken down into three sections. The plot begins in verses 1-6 (section 1) with Abram’s petition to God for a son

so that his heir is not Eliezer of Damascus, who is not of his household. Then in verses 7-11 (section 2), God tells Abram to make animal sacrifices to symbolize the covenant He is making with him. God reassures Abram that his reward is certain. Abram previously trusted in the Lord's promises to him at the end of chapter 14. Now, God is not only promising Abram a son, descendants as numerous as the stars, and land for his descendants, but also a formalized and eternal covenant to ratify the terms and conditions of these promises. In verses 12-21 (section 3), God reveals this future of his descendants and divides the boundaries of this promised land.

The climax of this pericope is in the 17th and 18th verses, where God raises the stakes of His promises by putting Himself on the line if He is to break the covenant. When the smoking fire pot and flaming torch passed through the pieces of the animals that were sacrificed, "God invokes a self-maledictory oath or curse upon Himself should He fail to keep His covenant" (Gen. 15:17)¹. This story shows how serious God takes Himself, and that His people should as well. He put Himself on the line as the ultimate assurance that His covenants will be upheld by Him.

In this pericope, Abram is both faithful and questioning. He has followed God's call thus far, but still yearns for a child. This is the great tension of the passage. When he asks for reasons to believe that God will provide Him these promises, He is asking for understanding and reassurance. Juxtaposed to Abram's inquiring and lack of understanding, God is fully in control and understands all. He gives Abram the ability to understand Him through the establishment of His covenant. God makes it happen; not anyone else. God initiates the covenant just as He initiated the call of Abram out of his

¹ *The Reformation Study Bible*, commentary on Gen. 15:17.

country. Not only does God reassure Abram, but He gives him the most assurance possible. He puts Himself under the covenant stipulations. Now the same God that Abram watched destroy Sodom and Gomorrah will uphold His covenantal promises. Moses' literary structure of this pericope highlights the faith of Abram and the faithfulness of God.

In the book of Genesis, this passage falls right between Abram's military victory over the four kings and blessing from Melchizedek and the birth of Isaac, his promised son. In the grand scheme of the inspired canon, chapter 15 initiates the covenant that will carry on into Exodus through the prophets, priests, kings, and ultimately Christ in His first coming and it will again carry on into His second coming.

This promised son that Abram will receive signifies a greater Son that was promised since the protoevangelium. The land that Abram is promised signifies the heavenly home that we are also promised as God's covenantal children. The covenant is not just connected to the end, but also to the beginning. Genesis introduces humanity, creation, and its distortion by sin. But God planned to redeem the world through the chosen family in which Abram (later named Abraham) will play a patriarchal role in. Genesis 15 shows God's initiation of this covenant. It will be developed more throughout the book of Genesis, such as in chapters 16 and 17, where the sign of circumcision is defined as the mark of the covenant.

According to *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, and *Genesis: The Beginning of God's Plan of Salvation*, there are many cultural and contextual clues that can help us understand Genesis 15. In the modern age, the word covenant is not used regularly. In the second millennium BC, it

was known widely as the equivalent of a treaty or contract. Genesis 15 emulates the form of a suzerain-vassal treaty, which is a form of treaty between a superior (suzerain) and subordinate (vassal)². The suzerain would offer protections and blessings to the vassal if the vassal would provide services to the suzerain.

The covenantal rituals were also common in these times. The cutting of animals and walking between the carcass pieces was a common practice. This showed that the agreement was binding and that a curse would be invoked on the party who did not hold to it. This particular sign, however, shows what was known as a unilateral covenant. This means that God alone is gracious enough to hold Himself responsible to fulfill the promises and stipulations of His own covenant. In the initiation of an ancient Near Eastern covenant, the parties would call upon gods to witness the covenant, but the God of Abram goes into covenant with man Himself, making Himself His own witness.

Abram was a sojourner for much of his life. In that time, owning land showed security and identity. However, Abram left his country to follow the Lord's call. He moved around in Canaan from place to place as local rulers waged war and displaced him. God promised him the land that was inhabited by the Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites. This showed that God would fulfill this promise in the far future, after Abram's time.

Abram was worried about not having an heir for his estate. In ancient Near Eastern culture, this was a serious issue. Lineage and legacy played large roles in society as they were held as valuable. Abram's legacy would be left to someone outside

² *Genesis: The Beginning of God's Plan of Salvation*, edited by Sidney Greidanus (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 124.

of his line. This caused shame to any man in that time in history. God promises a son to Abram, and even more, a nation with people as numerous as the stars in the sky.

God's relationship with His covenantal people is at the center of the redemptive-historical context of Genesis 15:1-21³. Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, are beneficiaries of these covenantal promises. God initiates the covenant and does not make Abram uphold any part of it. Even though humanity sinned, distorting creation, God chose a people to save the world through. Redemption will come through the Israelite line through Jesus, a descendant of Abraham and the crusher portrayed in the protoevangelium. Abram's promised son will initiate the "seed of the woman." This great promise is not dependent on God's chosen people, but rather on God Himself. This is the nature of a unilateral covenant. This is the meaning of the smoking fire pot and flaming torch passing through the torn sacrificial animals.

Even as humanity turns against God, His promise to make Abram a great nation is kept. A great example of this is when the world mocked God, and Noah and his family were the only survivors from God's worldwide judgment flood. Noah is from the line of Abram and the seed of the woman was maintained in humanity. Another example can be seen in the Mosaic Covenant in, in which God gives the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai and establishes Israel as a covenant nation. This clearly builds on the Abrahamic Covenant (as initiated in chapter 15 when Abram was still his name), which uses the same themes and language to set apart the seed of the woman from the rest of

³ *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, edited by Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 62.

humanity⁴. In the Davidic Covenant, God takes the previous covenants further by promising that David's line (the same line from Abraham) will sit on the throne forever.

All of these covenants look forward to the Messiah. The Abrahamic Covenant promised a land and a seed for Abram. The land is the future place where we will be after this earth passes away and the seed is Jesus. Jesus is the seed that blesses all nations. He fulfills the role of Israel as a faithful Son. He obeyed the Father perfectly and fulfilled the Law. Under Jesus's New Covenant, the redemption of humanity through His sinless life, death on the cross, and resurrection provided and continues to provide the world the correction it has been groaning and waiting for since the Fall⁵. There will still be a day when all will be made right: there will be judgment and restoration to complete the reversal of the Fall and its effects.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1847), 1:308.

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 47.