

2nd Sunday Lent C Reading I

Reading I

[Gn 15:5-12, 17-18](#)

The Lord God took Abram outside and said,
“Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can.
Just so,” he added, “shall your descendants be.”
Abram put his faith in the LORD,
who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.
He then said to him,
“I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans
to give you this land as a possession.”
“O Lord GOD,” he asked,
“how am I to know that I shall possess it?”
He answered him,
“Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat,
a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”
Abram brought him all these, split them in two,
and placed each half opposite the other;
but the birds he did not cut up.
Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses,
but Abram stayed with them.
As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram,
and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him.
When the sun had set and it was dark,
there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch,
which passed between those pieces.
It was on that occasion that the LORD made a covenant with Abram,
saying: “To your descendants I give this land,
from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates.”

Jerome Biblical Commentary

58 (E) Promises Renewed (15:1-20) (J, E?). The chapter contains two stories originally independent one (1-6) describing a prophetic vision in which Abram is promised a great posterity, and the other (7-20) centering on the promise of the land and the covenant ritual. Joined and placed here, they form a fitting introduction to the following stories of tension. Moreover, literary criticism has revealed, for many authors, the presence of a third tradition here, especially in the first story. It would be E's first appearance in Gn, but no satisfactory analysis has yet been proposed. (Kaiser, O., “Traditions geschichtliche Untersuchung von Genesis 15,” [ZAW](#) 70 [1958] 107-26. Snijders, L. A., “Genesis XV. The Covenant with Abram,” [OTS](#) 12 [1958] 261-79.)

(a) (15:1-6). **1.** We note the prophetic phrase “the word of the Lord came”; in 20:7 Abraham is called a prophet. The “reward,” God’s free gift, is associated with Abram’s faith (v. 6). **2.** No satisfactory explanation has been given for the *ben mešeq* and *dammešeq*; the text is corrupt. There is an allusion here to the custom, known from Nuzi, whereby an adopted slave could become an heir. If this verse is from E, it may parallel J’s 12:1-3 and refer to Abram’s call in his homeland. **3.** This verse repeats the idea of v. 2 and is probably from a different source. **4.** The Nuzi tablets stipulate that an adopted heir must yield to a true son born later. **5-6.** Abram’s trust in the realization of a promise that could not ordinarily be realized makes him agreeable to God. “To believe” (*’mn*) is to stand firm in, to accept with assurance, God’s plan. *Ṣ^edāqāh* is that conformity to the proper relationship between God and man that faith expresses.

59 (b) (15:7-20). **7-8.** The Lord’s identification of himself indicates an introduction to a separate narrative. The land of promise is contrasted, as frequently (cf. 12:1; 13:12; etc.), with other lands. Abram’s request for a sign here contrasts with his absolute faith mentioned previously. **9-12.** In answer to Abram’s request, God seals a covenant with him. The larger animals are cut in two and laid side by side. From Jer 34:18 we know that the contracting parties passed between the two halves, symbolizing their willingness to suffer the fate of the animals if they broke the covenant. The “birds of prey” are symbolic of the dangers that will threaten the covenant (they are, as it were, driven off by Abram’s faith). Verse 12 contains all the elements expressing the awesomeness of the supernatural intervention: the setting sun, the deep sleep (*tardēmāh*, as in 2:21), terror, and darkness. **13-16.** An insertion, breaking the continuity between vv. 12 and 17, explains the long delay in the fulfillment of the J promise. The redactor perhaps saw the later oppression, of the people and the “wickedness of the Amorites” as evidences of the “birds of prey,” which might explain the insertion. The author’s sense of salvation history is profound; even 400 years do not really interrupt the plan of God, who is seen to direct all history toward his appointed goal. **17.** God is frequently symbolized by fiery figures (cf. Ex 3:2; 13:21; 19:18). He alone passes through because the covenant is unilateral, unconditioned on Abram’s part. **18.** The concluded covenant assures later Israel of the possession of the land (the vb. is in the proph. pf.). The borders were traditional in Solomon’s time (1 Kgs 4:21). **19-20.** An explicative insertion presents the peoples “dispossessed” in favor of God’s people. Such lists are frequent; their variations show there was no attempt at historical accuracy. New here are the Kenites (gentile of Cain, cf. Jgs 1:16), the Kenizzites (seemingly Hurrians), and the Kadmonites (“Easterners,” from *qedem*).

[ZAW](#) *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

[OTS](#) *Oudtestamentische Studiën*

Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ

Haydock's Catholic Commenary

Notes & Commentary:

Ver. 1. *Fear not.* He might naturally be under some apprehensions, lest the four kings should attempt to be revenged upon him. --- *Reward*, since thou hast so generously despised earthly riches. (Haydock) --- Abram was not asleep, but saw a vision of exterior objects, ver. 5.

Ver. 2. *I shall go.* To what purpose should I heap up riches, since I have no son to inherit them? Abram knew that God had promised him a numerous posterity; but he was not apprized how this was to be verified, and whether he was to adopt some other for his son and heir. Therefore, he asks modestly, how he out to understand the promise. --- *And the son, &c.* Hebrew is differently rendered, "and the steward of my house, this Eliezer of Damascus." We know not whether Eliezer or Damascus be the proper name. The Septuagint have "the son of Mesech, my handmaid, this Eliezer of Damascus." Most people suppose, that Damascus was the son of Eliezer, the steward. The sentence is left unfinished, and must be supplied from the following verse, *shall be my heir.* The son of the steward, *filius procurationis*, may mean the steward himself, as the son of perdition denotes the person lost. (Calmet)

Ver. 6. *Reputed by God*, who cannot judge wrong; so that Abram increased in justice by this act of faith, believing that his wife, now advanced in years, would have a child; from whom others should spring, more numerous than the stars of heaven. (Haydock) --- This faith was accompanied and followed by many other acts of virtue, St. James ii. 22. (Worthington)

Ver. 8. *Whereby, &c.* Thus the blessed Virgin asked, how shall this be done? Luke i. 34, without the smallest degree of unbelief. Abram wished to know, by what signs he should be declared the lawful owner of the land. (Haydock)

Ver. 9. *Three years*, when these animals have obtained a perfect age.

Ver. 12. *A deep sleep*, or ecstasy, like that of Adam, chap. ii. 21, wherein God revealed to him the oppression of his posterity in Egypt, which filled him with such *horror* (Menochius) as we experience when something frightful comes upon us suddenly in the dark. This *darkness* represents the dismal situation of Joseph, confined in a dungeon; and of the Hebrews condemned to hard labour, in making bricks, and obliged to hide their male children, for fear of their being discovered, and slain. Before these unhappy days commenced, the posterity of Abram were exposed to great oppression among the Chanaanites, nor could they in any sense be said to possess the land of promise, for above 400 years after this prophetic sleep. (Haydock)

Ver. 13. *Strangers, and under bondage, &c.* This prediction may be dated from the persecution of Isaac by Ismael, in the year 2112, till the Jews left Egypt, 2513. In Exodus xii., and St. Paul, 430 years are mentioned; but they probably began when Abram went first into Egypt, 2084. Nicholas Abram and Tournemine say, the Hebrews remained in Egypt full 430 years. from the captivity of Joseph; and reject the addition of the Septuagint which adds, "they and their fathers dwelt in Egypt, and in Chanaan." On these points, we may expect to find chronologists at variance.

Ver. 14. *Judge and punish the Egyptians*, overwhelming them in the Red sea, &c. (Haydock)

Ver. 16. *Fourth, &c.* after the 400 years are finished; during which period of time, God was pleased to bear with those wicked nations; whose iniquity chiefly consisted in idolatry, oppression of the poor and strangers, forbidden marriages of kindred, and abominable lusts. (Leviticus xviii; Deuteronomy vi. and xii.) (Menochius)

Ver. 17. *A lamp*, or symbol of the Divinity, passing, as Abram also did, between the divided beasts, to ratify the covenant. See Jeremias xxxiv. 18.

Ver. 18. *Of Egypt*, a branch of the Nile, not far from Pelusium. This was to be the southern limit, and the Euphrates the northern; the two other boundaries are given, Numbers xxxiv. --- Perhaps Solomon's empire extended so far. At least, the Jews would have enjoyed these territories, if they had been faithful. (Menochius)

Ver. 19. *Cineans*, in Arabia, of which nation was Jethro. They were permitted to dwell in the tribe of Juda, and served the Hebrews. --- *Cenezites*, who probably inhabited the mountains of Juda. --- *Cedmonites*, or *eastern* people, as their name shews. Cadmus was of this nation, of the race of the Heveans, dwelling in the environs of mount Hermon, whence his wife was called Hermione. He was, perhaps, one of those who fled at the approach of Josue; and was said to have sowed dragons' teeth, to people his city of Thebes in Beotia, from an allusion to the name of the Hevites, which signifies serpents. (Calmet) --- The eleven nations here mentioned were not all subdued; on account of the sins of the Hebrews. (Menochius)

Word Daily Bible Study Commentary (non-Catholic)

1 “After these things.” A similar formula occurs in 22:1, 20; 39:7; 40:1; 48:1. It indicates that some time has elapsed since the previous incident, and presupposes the existence of a cycle of Abraham narratives. The present context and the allusions to chap. 14 in this chapter—“deliver/shield” (15:1//14:20 ,**לגן**; “go out,” 14:17–18 // 15:4–5, 7, 14; “property,” 14:11–12, 16, 21 // 15:14; cf. **שלם** (“Salem”/“complete”), 14:18 // 15:16)—make it likely that “these things” means the events described in the previous chapter.

“The word of the Lord came.” This is a phrase typically introducing revelation to a prophet, e.g., 1 Sam 15:10; Hos 1:1; but in Genesis it is found only here and in v 4 of this chapter. Abraham is actually called a prophet in 20:7. It prepares the way for the prophecy of the Egyptian bondage in vv 13–16.

“Vision,” **מחזה**, is rare in Hebrew and used only of Baham (Num 24:4, 16) and contemporaries of Ezekiel (13:7). Second- and third-millennium Akkadian texts show that visions were a recognized and very ancient mode of revelation.

“Do not be afraid.” This is a very common phrase in the **OT**, frequently introducing an oracle of salvation (e.g., Isa 7:4; 10:24; there are other examples in Gen 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19, 21). Given its ubiquity in Scripture, it would appear dangerous to use this formula to date the oracle. Cazelles (**RB** 69 [1962] 321–49) and Lohfink

[*Landverheissung*] cite Mesopotamian and Egyptian parallels. Its use suggests that Abraham is viewed as a military warrior.

“I am your shield.” Here the military metaphor is unmistakable (cf. 2 Sam 22:3, 31; Ps 3:4 [3]; 115:9–11, etc.). In view of the frequency of the idea that God is the shield of his faithful people (cf. Ps 84:12–13 [11–12]; Prov 30:5), particularly the protector of the king, and the parallel to this expression in an Assyrian text (Kaiser, [ZAW](#) 70 [1958] 113), it is superfluous to reinterpret מגן as “present” (so Dahood, [JBL](#) 38 [1957] 62–73;

Kessler, [VT](#) 14 [1964] 494–97). More probably there is an allusion to 14:20, מגן “delivered.” Yahweh himself now confirms Melchizedek’s verdict.

“Your reward,” שכר: Kaiser (cf. Cazelles, Lohfink) suggests that this is the term for a mercenary’s pay. In Ezek 29:19 it refers specifically to a soldier’s booty, although it is a broad term meaning “wage” or “fee” (Gen 30:32; Exod 22:14 [15]; Num 18:31). Nevertheless martial overtones would be quite appropriate in this context following chap. 14.

2 “Sovereign Lord.” This formula occurs only here and in v 8 in Genesis. אדני “sovereign” is a characteristic mode of address to God in intercessory prayer; cf. 18:3, 27, 30–32; 19:18; 20:4. It is not found in Genesis outside the Abraham cycle. The traditional interpretation of אדני is “my Lord,” the 1 sg suffix ך being understood as a plural of majesty. However, Eissfeldt ([TDOT](#) 1:62–72; cf. E. Jenni, [THWAT](#) 1:31–38) argues on the basis of Ugaritic parallels that the suffix may serve to intensify the root meaning of the noun; hence “Lord of all, sovereign.” While Eissfeldt allows that the word may well be translated “my Lord” in this passage, Gispén (2:101) thinks that in the light of 14:22 “sovereign” may be preferable. G Δέσποτα may also support this interpretation. “What will you give me ... childless” gives the substance of Abram’s complaint. The barrenness of Sarah has already been mentioned and three times Abram has been promised a multitude of descendants (12:2, 7; 13:16), “Childless,” ערירי: the word also occurs in Lev 20:20–21 and Jer 22:30, where it is a divine judgment. Abram’s situation contradicts not only the general view of Genesis that divine blessing leads to a man being fruitful and multiplying (1:28; 9:1; 26:24; 35:11), but also the specific assurances already made to him.

“My heir is Damascus, Eliezer.” This phrase is very difficult and widely regarded as corrupt and impossible to correct. The major problem concerns the interpretation of

בן־משק ביתי “my heir.” The minor problem is the qualifying phrase (“he is

Damascus, Eliezer”) הוא דמשק אליעזר. משק is a *hapax legomenon* of uncertain meaning, and nowhere else is Abraham’s heir called Damascus or Eliezer.

The sentence puzzled the early translators: G, “The son of Masek my steward, this is Damascus Eliezer.” Vg Θ “the son of the manager of my house that is Damascus Eliezer,” Vg α; “the son of the cup-bearer of my house that is Damascus Eliezer.” S “Eliezer the Damascene, the son of my house will be my heir.” Tg. Onq. “This manager

who is in my house, he is Eliezer of Damascus.” *Gen. Ap.* equates Eliezer with “one of my household servants.”

Modern commentators attempt to emend the text or reinterpret it. The simplest solution tentatively adopted in my translation is to understand **משק** to mean “property” (so

Gispen, 2:102, following [BDB](#), 606b). Then **בית־משק** would mean “possessor of my house,” i.e. “heir.” Another possibility suggested by Snijders ([OTS](#) 12 [1958]

261–79) is to derive **משק** from **שקק** “to rush, assault.” Hence **בית־משק** means “assaulter, usurper.” The sentence is then a complaint that a foreigner Eliezer from Damascus will usurp Abram’s house. A third possibility proposed by Cazelles (*RB* 69

[1962] 321–49) is that **בית־משק** is “cup-bearer,” from the root **שקה** “drink,” i.e., someone like the royal official mentioned in Gen 40:2. C. H. Gordon (“Damascus in

Assyrian Sources,” [IEJ](#) 2 [1952] 174–75) has argued that **הוא דמשק** “from

Damascus” is an Aramaic gloss explaining **בית־משק**, both phrases meaning “servant.” The sentence would then read “the servant of my house [i.e., *dammeseq* in Aramaic] is Eliezer.” Though this is a neat solution, the context suggests there should be more to Abram’s complaint than a reference to the name of his servant (cf. v 3). It seems more

probable that **הוא דמשק** is a gloss, but one that explains the name “Eliezer,” not “my heir.” There are several explanatory glosses in chap. 14 (e.g., vv 2, 7, 8), so it would not be surprising to find one here. Furthermore, theophoric names compounded with Ezer, e.g., Hadadezer, are well known among kings of Damascus, so it is quite likely that the text is explaining Eliezer’s background. Hence my suggested translation “My heir is Eliezer of Damascus.”

3 This verse is widely regarded as a gloss explaining the obscurities of the previous one. But the use of **הנה/הן** “look,” “so that” adds a note of exasperation to the complaint.

“One of my household will inherit from me.” Attempts have been made by W. F. Albright (“Abram the Hebrew,” [BASOR](#) 163 [1961] 47), Gordon, and Speiser to explain Eliezer’s right to Abram’s inheritance in terms of a Nuzi custom whereby a man could adopt a slave as his heir. However, Thompson (*History*, 203–30) demonstrates that there is no basis for this interpretation of the Nuzi text: those adopted were either minors or independent persons in their own right. But he goes too far in asserting that there is no parallel to this arrangement in non-biblical texts. Adoption was perfectly possible: the adopted person would be expected to look after the adopter in his old age, bury him, and could then expect the inheritance. If the adopter subsequently had children, the adopted “child” could not be totally disinherited, but would share the inheritance.

Thompson can affirm that Genesis is flouting oriental practice only by reading into these verses ideas they do not entail. First, Eliezer is not said to be a slave (the servant is unnamed in chap. 24), simply a member of the household. Second, the text does not say he has been adopted. Abram says he will inherit: this could mean that Abram will have to adopt him, if he has no son of his own.

Outside this chapter “inherit,” **יָרַשׁ**, is rare in Genesis (21:10; 22:17; 24:60; 28:4). It is ubiquitous in Deuteronomy, referring to Israel’s taking possession of the land.

4 Abram’s exasperation is answered by an emphatic affirmation that a real son will inherit from him. “Not this one ... but ...”; cf. *Notes*.

“Loins,” **מֵעָה**, refers to the lower belly; cf. Jon 2:2 [1]; Cant 5:14; to the seat of reproduction, Num 5:22; Ps 71:6. In other words, Abram will have a real son, not simply a legal heir. A similar formula is found in 2 Sam 7:12 in the promise to David (cf. Gen 25:23).

5 “Look” suggests a long look; cf. 1 Kgs 18:43; Exod 3:6.

“Stars.” For this comparison, cf. 22:17; 26:4; 37:9; Deut 1:10. On the numberlessness of Abram’s descendants, cf. 16:10; 32:13 [12].

6 The editorial comment with which the first scene closes (cf. 2:24) points out that Abram’s silence showed his faith in the promises just made to him (vv 4–5). Without this remark, an element of ambiguity would have surrounded Abram’s reaction: indeed, then his question in v 8 could have been taken as an expression of doubt. The verbal form

וַיֵּאמֵן (*waw* + perfect) “he believed” probably indicates repeated or continuing action. Faith was Abram’s normal response to the Lord’s words.

הֵאמֵן “he believed” can mean “he relied on someone, gave credence to a message or considered it to be true, trusted in someone” (Jepsen, *TDOT* 1:308). It occurs quite rarely in a positive context in the OT: much more often the texts speak of people not believing in God, or in someone, cf. 45:26; Exod 4:8; 14:31; Num 14:11; 20:12; Deut 1:32; 9:23. But *pace* Jepsen, this does not prove that faith is peripheral to OT theology. Rather faith is presupposed everywhere as the correct response of man to God’s revelation. It is in crisis situations that faith or the lack of it is revealed, and therefore commented on, e.g., Isa 7:9; Jon 3:5; Ps 78:22, 32.

There appear to be two reasons why Abram’s faith should be noted here: (1) because the word of promise had come to him in a crisis situation following the battle of chap. 14, and (2) it serves as a reminder of Abram’s attitude to God, which should be a model for all his descendants to follow.

וַיִּחְשְׁבֶהָ “It was counted to him.” Here the imperfect qal of **חָשַׁב** is used. Similar constructions using the niphal are found in Lev 7:18; 17:4; Num 18:27, 30; Prov 27:14. But the closest parallel is Ps 106:31: “that has been reckoned to him [niphal] as righteousness.” The legal texts quoted illustrate the meaning of “count”: when Levites pass on a tenth of the tithes they receive, that counts as though they had given a tithe from their own produce (Num 18:27, 30). Similarly, killing a sacrificial animal outside the tabernacle compound counts as murder: “he has shed blood” (Lev 17:4).

Von Rad (*Problem*, 125–30) has postulated that a cultic setting lies behind this statement that Abram’s faith counted as righteousness. Just as priests declared sacrifices acceptable (Lev 7:18), or men clean or unclean (Lev 13), so they could declare them righteous (Ezek 18:9). Here in Gen 15, von Rad says, there is a spiritualized idea of righteousness that is not dependent on cultic worship. His suggestion of cultic background for the term **חָשַׁב** has been widely endorsed by

commentators, but Lohfink (*Landverheissung*, 59–60) is right to question the supposed contrast between the usage of Gen 15:6 and the legal texts. More radically still, Oeming (ZAW 95 [1983] 182–97) doubts whether the rarer niph'al usage of **נִשְׁבַּח** should control our interpretation of the qal stem. He thinks it has no connection with cultic usage. Within the Pentateuch, though, the niph'al is twice as common as the qal, which weakens Oeming's case. It does seem likely that once again Abram's experiences are regarded as archetypal for later generations. Just as he exercised faith in God's revelation, so too must his offspring exercise faith in their situation by obediently carrying out God's will declared in the law; cf. Ps 119:66.

“Righteousness,” **צְדָקָה**. Within the Pentateuch **צְדָקָה** always applies to human activity. This makes Oeming's proposal to apply the term to God's act unlikely, the more so in that all early Jewish as well as Christian exegesis is against such a view. The root **צָדַק** is rich in meaning, though fairly rare in Genesis outside chap. 18, where the righteous are constantly contrasted with the wicked. Abraham's intercession for Sodom rests on the impossibility of God's destroying the righteous (18:23, 25, 26). Abimelech makes the same point in 20:4. Similarly, Noah was saved from destruction in the flood because he was righteous (6:9; 7:1). In legal contexts the righteous are those who should be acquitted (**הַצְדִּיק**) by the judges (e.g., Deut 25:1). Thus in the spiritual realm the righteous are those acquitted by God, those who are saved (Ps 1:6; 75:11, etc.).

Normally righteousness is defined in terms of moral conduct, for example, Ezek 18:5: “If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right.” There then follows a list of actions prohibited in the Pentateuch which a righteous man refrains from doing (vv 6–9). God himself is frequently called “righteous” (e.g., Deut 32:4; Ps 7:10 [9], 12 [11]) and righteousness might well be paraphrased as God-like, or at least God-pleasing, action. This sense of God-approved behavior is apparent in Gen 18:19; 30:33; 38:26. But here Abram is not described as doing righteousness. Rather faith is being counted for righteousness. Normally righteousness results in acquittal by the divine judge. Here faith, the right response to God's revelation, counts instead. As the rest of the story makes plain, this faith leads to righteous action (e.g., 18:19), but only here in the OT is it counted as righteousness.

7 The second scene, like the first, begins with a divine promise; cf. v 1: “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans.” An almost identical formula introduces the decalogue (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6), with the substitution of “land of Egypt” for “Ur of the Chaldeans.” On this term, see *Comment* on 11:28.

The continuation of the promise “to give you this land” parallels Lev 25:38, while its conclusion “to inherit it” is typically deuteronomic (e.g., Deut 3:18; 9:6; 21: 1; 19:14). But this is hardly enough to demonstrate that this episode is the work of the deuteronomist (cf. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 62).

This is one of only four passages in Genesis where God refers to himself as Yahweh (the Lord). Here the use of this name helps to enhance the analogy between God's call of Abram and his subsequent redemption of Israel from Egypt. This is expressly prefigured in vv 11–18.

8 Abram's request for a sign parallels his petition in v 2. Note the same opening formula, "Sovereign Lord." To ask for a sign does not imply unbelief or any conflict with v 6 (cf. Judg 6:36–40; 2 Kgs 20:8–11). On the contrary, to refuse a proffered sign can indeed demonstrate lack of faith (Isa 7:10–14). On signs, cf. Gen 9:12–13.

9 In response to Abram's request God gives him an enigmatic command: "Take." This very common word often introduces a ritual such as a sacrifice, e.g., Lev 9:2, 3. The list of animals that follows covers all those species that could be offered in sacrifice. There is some doubt about the identity of the last bird mentioned, "turtledove" (גוזל), as the only other example of its use is in Deut 32:11. However, it seems likely that it is

equivalent to the בן־יונה "young pigeon" of the sacrificial texts.

10 Abram's fulfillment of the command is expounded in more detail. Again in an action reminiscent of a sacrifice, he cuts up the large animals but does not split the bird; cf. Lev 1:6, 17. Were this a sacrifice, the pieces would now be placed on the altar and burned. Instead, they are put in two rows. This unique feature of this rite must have been included in the divine command (v 9). For stylistic variation, the command is briefer than the description of its fulfillment: it is common for the command to be more detailed than the record of its fulfillment.

11 Most commentators see the attacks of the birds of prey as an ominous sign, but a more precise interpretation depends on the significance of the rite as a whole.

12 "When the sun was about to set and a deep sleep ... Abram." Note the similar

structure of v 17, with a double temporal clause preceding וַהֲנֵה. It has often been argued that since Abram was told to look at the stars in v 5, it must already have been dark then, and this reference to the sun setting therefore indicates that vv 1–6 and 7–21 are from different sources. However, the structure of the second scene mirrors that of the first too closely for them to be regarded as independent. Either the author is postulating a lapse of time between vv 6 and 7, and vv 7–21 take place the day following vv 1–6, or the second scene is expressing the promises in a different way. Westermann holds that this verse marks the opening of an addition to the oath ritual. The majority opinion is that the expansion consists only of vv 13–16.

"The deep sleep," "fear" and "darkness" all suggest awe-inspiring divine activity (cf. Gen 2:21; Isa 29:10; Exod 10:21, 22; 14:20; 15:16; 23:27; Deut 4:11; Josh 2:9) and are closely associated with the exodus and conquest, appropriately introducing the prophecy in the next verses.

13–16 These verses prophesy the Egyptian bondage and the exodus after 400 years (v 13) in the fourth generation (v 16). Apparently the two periods are equated, so one generation equals 100 years. This suggests they are intended to be round numbers (cf. Exod 12:40). In this case the three-year-old animals (v 9) could well symbolize three generations of oppression in Egypt (so Keil, 215, following Theodoret).

14 "With much property": cf. Exod 12:35–39.

15 "In peace." This is the first occurrence of this word (שָׁלוֹם) in Scripture. The prophecy "You will be buffed in ripe old age" is fulfilled in Gen 25:8. The same phrase is used also of Gideon (Judg 8:32) and David (1 Chr 29:28).

16 Here the Amorites stand for all the inhabitants of Canaan. Divine judgment, in the form of Israel's conquest, must wait until they are sufficiently wicked to deserve this fate; cf. Lev 18:24–27; Deut 9:4–5; Amos 2:9.

17 “Smoking pot.” Since it is used for baking **תנור** may be translated “oven,” but modern ovens are so different that this is rather misleading. The term seems to have been used for a large earthenware jar. The dough stuck to the side and was then baked by putting charcoal inside the jar or putting the jar near the fire (cf. [NBD](#), 166). Smoke and fire are symbolic of the presence of God (cf. Exod 13:21; 19:18; 20:18).

The interpretation of this mysterious rite is much discussed; see Hasel ([JSOT](#) 19 [1981] 61–78) for a comprehensive survey. Most modern commentators take their cue from v 18, “The Lord made [literally, cut] a covenant with Abram,” and from Jer 34:18, which speaks of the people passing between a dismembered calf. This act is then interpreted as an enacted curse. “May God make me like this animal, if I do not fulfill the demands of the covenant.” A curse like this is actually attested in one of the eighth-century treaties ([ANESTP](#), 532). In Genesis, of course, it is God himself who walks between the pieces, and it is suggested that here God is invoking the curse on himself, if he fails to fulfill the promise.

While this interpretation could explain the phrase “to cut a covenant,” it leaves many features of this rite unexplained. It does not explain the choice of these particular animals. Why are only sacrificial types selected? Why must they be three years old? Why are the birds not cut up? Why does Abram drive off the birds of prey? Finally it must be asked whether a divine self-imprecation is really likely. Is it compatible with OT theology for *God* to say “May I die, if I do not keep my word”? Divine oaths generally take the form, “As I live, says the Lord” (cf. Num 14:21).

The use of sacrificial terminology in v 9 suggests that the rite should be interpreted using the categories underlying other OT rituals. It then becomes clear that the sacrificial animals must represent Israel or its priestly leaders (M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* [London: Routledge, 1966]; cf. Jacob). The birds of prey represent unclean nations, Gentiles, possibly Egypt (so Cazelles). Thus Abram's actions in driving away the birds represent his defending his descendants against foreign attackers. This may look back to his defeat of the kings in chap. 14, but more probably it looks forward to their deliverance from Egypt. The rest of the Pentateuch insists that it is the promise to Abram that is the ground for the exodus (Exod 2:24; Deut 9:5). This scene portrays a time-lapse between Abram's falling asleep (v 12; cf. v 15) and God's walking between the pieces (v 17). If the pieces represent Israel, this action would appear to portray God as walking with his people. Whether the reference is to the pillar of fire accompanying them through the wilderness or the theophany of Sinai, or whether it portrays the fulfillment of the covenant promise “I will walk among you and be your God” (Lev 26:12; cf. Deut 23:15 [14]) is difficult to decide: indeed the possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

Every type of sacrificial animal is represented to underline the significance of the scene. All Israel is involved. Finally, there may be significance in the choice of three-year-old animals. Gideon sacrificed a seven-year-old bull to represent the seven years of Midianite oppression (Judg 6:1, 25). The use of three three-year-old animals makes it

likely that some significance is attached to their age and the certainty of the events predicted (cf. Gen 41:32). This interpretation of the ritual is confirmed by the prophecy of Israel's future in vv 13–16: the congruence of the actions with this interpretation makes it less likely that the prophecy in vv 13–16 is a later addition.

18 “Covenant” (ברית; cf. 6:18; 9:9–17). Throughout the Abraham stories there is an implicit comparison with the later experience of Israel, and it has therefore been supposed that the patriarchal and Sinaitic covenants were similar. But this is not so. The Sinaitic and Deuteronomic covenants were agreements imposing obligations on both God and Israel: their closest extrabiblical analogy is found in the ancient international treaties made by great powers with their vassals. This covenant with Abraham is different: it is a promissory oath made by God alone. Weinfeld ([JAOS](#) 90 [1970], 184–203; *TDOT* 2:270–72) says the nearest parallel to this form is the royal land grant made by kings to loyal servants. These grants of land were typically made to a man and his descendants in perpetuity. In form and content they thus run in parallel to the patriarchal promises. It is doubtful, though, whether the land-grant parallels explain the animal rite of Gen 15 (so Loewenstamm, *JAOS* 91 [1971] 509–10; van Seters, *Abraham*, 102–3).

“From the river of Egypt to the great river.” According to Weinfeld (*JAOS*, 90 [1970] 200): “Delineation of borders ... constitute an important part of the documents of grant.”

The more usual term for the southern border of the promised land is the brook (נחל) of Egypt, which is to be identified with Wadi el Arish in northeastern Sinai (Num 34:5). It is not clear whether “river of Egypt” is an alternative name for Wadi el Arish (so Simons, *GTOT*, 27) or means the eastern branch of the Nile delta (so Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 59). Assuming there is no corruption of the text and that usage is consistent, the latter would be more probable. In that case, there is an element of hyperbole here, for the land of promise is identified with Canaan, whose boundaries are more restricted (see Num 34:2–12). Only in Solomon's day did Israel's boundaries approach the limits specified here (1 Kgs 5:1 [4:21]), but it seems unlikely that they extended as far west as the Nile even then (A. Malamat, *JNES* 22 [1963] 1–17).

19–21 This is the longest list of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan found in the OT. Usually six or seven groups are mentioned: here there are ten. Lohfink argues that this must be an old part of the tradition, because it omits certain groups who settled in the land about the same time as Israel (e.g., Philistines, Moabites) and includes other groups who were subsequently incorporated into the nation (e.g., Kenites and Kenizzites; *Landesverheissung*, 65–72).

19 “Kenites” mostly dwelt in the south of the land in the Negeb (e.g., Num 24:21; 1 Sam 27:10) though some lived further north (Judg 4:11–17).

“Kenizzite.” Caleb is called a Kenizzite (Num 32:12) though it is not certain that he belonged to the same group as that mentioned here.

“Qadmonites” are mentioned only here.

20 “Hittites” are regularly mentioned in other lists of peoples. They lived near Hebron (23:10) and are probably to be distinguished from the people found in Asia Minor; cf. 10:15.

“Perizzite.” This is another regular member of the lists; see 13:7.

“Rephaim”: cf. 14:5.

21 “Amorite, Canaanite, Girgashite, Jebusite”: see *Comment* on 10:16, 18.

Explanation

The chapter opens on a high note. Abram, like a great prophet, receives a word from the Lord assuring him of divine protection and reward (v 1). The content of this promise evokes images of Abram as a great and successful warrior enjoying the spoils of battle and alludes to his triumph in chap. 14.

Abram’s reply is pitiful. Despite all his outward success and the repeated promises from God, he lacks a son and heir. Childlessness was viewed as an unmitigated disaster in the ancient world. Without children there was no one to carry on your family line or preserve the family inheritance, no one to look after you in old age, no one to carry out the funerary rites and secure your soul’s rest in the life to come. The tragedy of Abram’s situation was compounded by the fact that God had implicitly promised him children (12:2, 7; 13:16). If there is no change in his situation, Abram says, he will have to take action to preserve his interests (vv 2, 6 evidently presuppose that Abram is an old man): he will adopt Eliezer, one of his household, as his heir.

This prompts God to assure Abram that he will indeed have a child of his own, and that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars (vv 4–5). “And he believed in the Lord.” The verbal form implies continued repeated acts of faith. The significance of the phrase does not lie here, though, nor in the existence of his faith as such, for the OT everywhere presupposes that men ought to exercise faith in God; faith means believing his promises or obeying his commands as the situation dictates. What is unusual is that the writer saw fit to draw attention to Abram’s faith: if all men of the old covenant were expected to be men of faith, why mention it here? Possibly it was because of the staggering nature of the promise made to an old man, though in the light of the earlier somewhat vaguer promises along the same lines, this does not seem an entirely adequate explanation. More likely, there is an element of paradigm here. Abram is a model for all his descendants to imitate: whatever their circumstances, they must have faith in God. The importance of faith is underlined by the following clause, “it was counted to him as righteousness” (v 6). Righteousness is a guarantee of salvation, of acquittal in the day of judgment. It involves conformity to God’s will set forth in the law. Here, however, faith counts for righteousness: it is the response of believing obedience to the word of God, not righteous deeds, that counted for righteousness. To be sure, such faith, when genuine, issues in righteous deeds, but that it is not what the text says: faith counts for (instead of) righteousness.

It is therefore natural and right for the [NT](#) writers to refer to this text in describing how salvation is available in Christ. Paul stresses that faith for Abram meant believing in God’s promise of a child, an attitude to God that preceded his acts of obedience (Rom 4). While Genesis implies that the sons of Abram must be men of faith, Paul turns the words around and explains, “it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (Gal 3:7). In the OT, faith involves both believing promises and obeying commands: it is the latter aspect that both Heb. 11:8–19 and James 2:18–24 emphasize in their comments on the life of Abraham; “By faith Abraham obeyed” (Heb 11:8); “Faith was completed by works” (Jas 2:22). That the two sides of faith—belief and obedience—are not incompatible is recognized by Hebrews, which repeatedly links faith with receiving the promises.

Gen 15:7 continues with the divine reminder that the Lord had brought Abram out of Ur to inherit the land. The parallel with the exodus from Egypt emphasizes once again how the life of Abraham foreshadows the history of Israel, a theme that is explicit in the subsequent dialogue. Abram's question "How am I to know?" is a request for a sign to confirm the promise, not the expression of doubt.

The answer takes the form of a ritual and accompanying message. The action underlines the prophecy with great emphasis and is a guarantee of its fulfillment. The rite pictures Abram's descendants, in the form of sacrificial animals, protected by the Abrahamic promises from attacks by foreigners, the birds of prey. After Abram's death, his "falling asleep," the Lord (the smoking pot and torch of fire) will walk among them. The prophecy in vv 13–16 is more specific foretelling of 400 years' oppression in Egypt and their exodus in the fourth generation. They will then return to Canaan and expel the ten nations that inhabit it (vv 19–21). With this promissory oath or covenant, the scene reaches its climax, and Abram's questions are answered.

In these scenes Abram is portrayed not merely as the archetypal Israelite who has faith in God, but as a conquering king who has been promised victory over his foes and a great territory. As often noted, there are many resemblances in the form and content between the covenant with Abram and that with David (2 Sam 7). However, the paradigmatic character of the father of the nation is also seen in the way he is viewed as a prophet enjoying a vision (v 1) of God and insight into the future (vv 13–16). Finally Abram appears as a sort of priest: the description of the bird-rite suggests it, and the mention of his sacrifices and altar-building points in the same direction. Within the OT these same features reappear in the figure of Moses, and the NT sees our Lord as prophet, priest, and king. In exercising faith, the people of the new covenant both imitate Christ and also walk in the footsteps of our forefather Abram.

[OT](#) Old Testament

[RB](#) *Revue biblique*

[ZAW](#) *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

[JBL](#) *Journal of Biblical Literature*

[VT](#) *Vetus Testamentum*

[sg](#) singular or under

[TDOT](#) *Theological Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. E. Jenni and C.

Westermann or G. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.)

[THWAT](#) *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. E. Jenni and C.

Westermann (Munich: Kaiser, 1971)

[G](#) Greek translation: as published in *Septuaginta*, LXX ed. A. Rahlfs, 1935. In Daniel, G includes both OG and Th, as published in J. Ziegler's ed., 1954.

[Vg](#) Latin Vulgate (as published in Weber's edition)

[S](#) Syriac

[Tg. Onq.](#) *Targum Onqelos*

[BDB](#) F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs (eds.), *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford/New York: Clarendon/OUP, 1907; reprints with corrections, 1955; corrected ed., 1962)

[OTS](#) Oudtestamentische Studiën

[IEJ](#) *Israel Exploration Journal*

[BASOR](#) *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*

[NBD](#) *The New Biblical Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (London: IVF, 1962)

[JSOT](#) *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* Biblical Studies

[ANESTP](#) J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near East Supplementary Texts and Pictures*

[JAOS](#) *Journal of the American Oriental Society*

[GTOT](#) J. Simmons, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the OT*

[JNES](#) *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*

[NT](#) New Testament

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