

## **Abram's Animal Ceremony in Genesis 15**

### **An Exegesis of Genesis 15:7-21**

The ambiguous images of Genesis 15, when interpreted through the lens of the rest of Holy Scripture and other ancient Jewish documents, serve to point God's children toward the perfectly clear picture of the Father's unmerited grace. The "cutting" of the covenant between God and Abram in Genesis 15:7-21 communicates to us a God who initiates the relationship with his people. The God of this passage is the same caring One who sweeps the house clean searching for the lost coin, the same loving Father who runs down the road to throw his arms around the Prodigal, and the same compassionate Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the stray. It's God who reaches out to man. And God is the one who takes all the responsibility for fulfilling the covenant demands of the relationship.

This project is concerned mainly with the ratification of the covenant between God and Abram as demonstrated in the obscure animal ceremony. I recognize that the birds of prey in Genesis 15:11 and the prophesy of Egyptian slavery in Genesis 15:13-16 contain great theological significance. But the focus of this paper will be on the actual rite of the killing of the animals, the theophany that passed between the pieces and the truths this vision represented to Abram, to Israel, and continues to represent to God's people today.

Through the use of historical evidence and an ample number of related biblical images I will show that Genesis 15 was not always a vague or misunderstood passage. I will attest that the animal ritual was a common practice in the region, that each of the symbols cited was widely recognized and accepted as communicative, and that the original readers of the story clearly comprehended the message of God's mercy and grace.

The ceremony is presented in the context of a couple of "firsts" for Abram and for Scripture. Genesis 15:1 states that the "word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision," the first time the familiar "word of the Lord came..." is used in the Bible and the only time God communicates to Abram / Abraham in a vision.<sup>1</sup> It's clear in the first verse of this

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

passage that, just like in every instance preceding it, God is the one who calls to and seeks out Abram. Abram uses the occasion to question God regarding the promised heirs, the promised great nation, and possession of the promised land that was given in Genesis 12. And the Lord seeks to give Abram confidence in God's word through the animal ceremony.

Abram asks, "How can I know?" And God says, in essence, "I'll show you."

The Lord instructs Abram to bring five animals: a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon. He brings the animals to God and then "cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other" (v.10).

The Hebrew word used in v.18 to describe the ritual is *berit*, which literally means "cutting a covenant." It was a very common practice in the desert communities of the Middle East. And the author assumes it is certainly familiar to Abram and to the readers of the Torah. It's why most scholars speculate that Abram cut up and arranged the animals without the explicit direction from God.<sup>2</sup> Abram didn't need to be told what to do. He knew what was coming.

The ceremony is linked to the cutting up of animals as found in treaty ratification writings from ancient Mari and Alalakh. In these texts, the participants in the covenant walked through the blood of the animals that collected in the middle of the pieces in order to enact the treaty and curse the one who breaks the promises.<sup>3</sup> Second-millennium Hittite texts detail similar procedures for purification purposes, while some first-millennium Aramaic treaties use such a ritual for placing a curse on any violation of the terms.<sup>4</sup> The Sumerian "*Vulture Stela*" from the middle of the third millennium B.C. describes the use of doves in the cutting of a border agreement between two kings following an armed conflict.<sup>5</sup> John Calvin held that similar rites were performed when

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher T. Begg, "The Covenantal Dove in Psalm 74:19-20," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (January 1988): 79. Begg also contends in light of similar ritual practices that, although he didn't cut them in half, Abraham did kill the two birds.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 423.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Begg, 79.

entering into any military alliance or when mustering an army.<sup>6</sup> The point is that it was a clearly understood practice in that place at that time.

The animals were cut in two and placed opposite each other so that the blood formed a pool, a so-called blood path, in between the pieces as they drained. The two parties---the greater party who establishes the terms of the covenant first, and the lesser party who either accepts or rejects the terms second---then walked through the blood as a way of saying, “May what was done to these animals be done to me if I do not keep this covenant.”<sup>7</sup> The one who failed to keep the covenant paid for it with his life.

The other clear biblical example of this type of ritual is found in vivid and chilling language in Jeremiah 34:18-20, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces...all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf I will hand over to their enemies...their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.” Israel had broken a single stipulation of the covenant regarding the treatment of slaves, yet they were guilty of violating the entire covenant. Because of the oath of self-imprecation taken as part of the solemn covenant ceremony, God was holding them accountable.<sup>8</sup>

This blood path rite was also typical for arranging marriages in Middle East desert communities and is still practiced today in isolated parts of Egypt. Historian Dr. Ray Vander Laan describes in detail that the lesser party, the bride’s father in these cases, provides the animal and cuts it in half as Abram does in Genesis 15. The greater party, the groom’s father in these wedding rituals, walks through first, actually stomping barefoot through the blood, promising that his son will be an honorable husband. And if he’s not, he expects to be treated just like the animal. The young woman’s father then performs the same motions, promising that his daughter is a virgin and will make a proper wife. And if she doesn’t, if that part of the covenant is broken, “you may do this to me”---and he stomps through the blood. In some Bedouin cultures today, if a man turns

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Bible Commentary*, Genesis 15, available from “Classic Commentaries” at <http://www.eword.gospelcom.net/comments.html>; Internet.

<sup>7</sup> John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002), 28. Although there is no biblical evidence, Hicks assumes the pieces were eaten by Abram after the ceremony as part of a covenantal meal of joy and celebration.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew J. Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah / Lamentations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 311.

out to be a lousy husband, if he's abusive or dishonest or lazy, they don't find him dead; they find his father, at the bottom of a pit, with his throat slit and footprints in his blood.<sup>9</sup>

It's no wonder a "thick and dreadful darkness" comes over Abram (v.12). Abram has found himself in the middle of a blood path ceremony with Almighty God. As the sun sets, Abram is looking at all this blood, possibly still unsure as to what his terms are going to be in the covenant, and he's terrified. Maybe God has already told Abram what he expects from him. When the covenant is reaffirmed and circumcision added in Genesis 17, it's clear that God demands Abram to "walk before me and be blameless" (17:1). If that is Abram's responsibility in the agreement at this stage, it is evident why he is frightened. A horror of great darkness falls on him.<sup>10</sup>

And that's when the Lord takes all the responsibilities and the burden for fulfilling the covenant on himself.

As Abram looks on in a petrified trance of terror, God appears in the darkness as a smoking firepot. Abram knows it is God and the author of Genesis assumes his readers know it's God because the greater party always walks through the blood first and because smoke always represents the presence of the Lord. When God came to Mt. Sinai it was covered in smoke (Ex.19:18). Each time God came to the tabernacle or the temple it filled with smoke (Isaiah 6:4). God led his people through the wilderness by a cloud of smoke. Isaiah says the Lord comes in dense clouds of smoke (Isaiah 30:27). The prophet Joel (Joel 2:30) and the apostle Peter (Acts 2:19) speak of God coming with billows of smoke. The temple is filled with smoke "from the glory of God and his power" (Rev.15:8).

The picture is crystal clear to God's people. The Lord loves Abram so much he promises to give him a son, descendants, land, and eventually through him the Messiah to save the world. And he symbolically tramples barefoot through the blood to give Abram assurance and confidence that he can trust the word of the Lord. God doesn't rebuke or otherwise chastise Abram for questioning him or asking for a sign. He just gives Abram what he needs in the form of a common, yet deadly serious, ritual.

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Ray Vander Laan, "Blood Path" and "Cutting a Covenant," available from <http://www.followtherabbi.com.html>; Internet.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry, *Concise Commentary on the Bible*, Genesis 15, available from "Classic Commentaries" at <http://eword.gospelcom.net/comments.html>; Internet.

And then the Lord does something that maybe Abram wasn't expecting. At the point in the ceremony in which the lesser party, Abram, would step into the blood and vow to be treated like the eviscerated animals if he were to violate the terms, God intervenes. The Lord steps in. Figuratively. Literally.

A blazing torch appears---a flaming torch, a lamp of fire---and it also represents God. Fire always represents God. From the burning bush to the pillar of fire God uses to guide his people in the desert. Elijah was carried away to God by a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11). The glory of the Lord looks like a consuming fire (Ex. 24:17). The prophets write that God's tongue is a fire (Isaiah 30:27) and the word of God is like fire (Jer. 23:29). It was tongues of fire that represented God's Spirit in Acts 2. And Hebrews 12:29 declares that "our God is a consuming fire."

And the Lord, symbolized by the blazing torch, passes through the pieces in Abram's place. He stands in, actually walks in, for Abram. If the Genesis 17 condition applies here, God is telling Abram, "If you sin, if you're not perfect, if your descendents are not blameless, if you break the covenant in any way, you may do this to me." And it's at that point that God sentences himself, his Son, to die.

There was no doubt that Abram and his descendents were going to sin. And so God stood in for him. God walked the path of blood in Abram's place. The promise from the Lord, in addition to the son, the descendents, and the land is that God is going to pay for his people's sins. God pays the price whether he or Abram or his descendents violates the covenant. Either way, it's on God.

The animal ceremony in Genesis 15 and the significance of God passing twice between the pieces cannot be overstated as his people reflect on what the Creator has done for his creation. The first century *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo quotes God as telling Abram at the end of the ritual "this night will be a witness between us that I will not go against my words."<sup>11</sup> Yes, what God has promised he will certainly perform. In the scheme of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, this story goes a long way in reminding us that God overcomes seemingly insurmountable obstacles---continuous threats to the

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher T. Begg, "Rereading of the 'Animal Rite' of Genesis 15 in Early Jewish Narratives," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (January 1988): 41.

bearing of children, to the taking of the land---to keep his word. But it's so much more than that.

First, God's perfect promises are free gifts to his people. God is the one who initiates the relationship with us and provides what is needed to maintain it. And we bring nothing to the table. The Father desires to bond eternally with people who consistently reject him. And he's willing to prove his devotion to the relationship by offering his own life. Not only that, but the Lord is willing to pay the price himself for the covenant failures of man. John Darby summarizes by saying "man only receives from God; we have nothing to give to God."<sup>12</sup> Warren Wiersbe notes "it was God who made promises to Abram, not Abram who made promises to God. The covenant of grace came from the generous heart of God."<sup>13</sup>

Second, God's promise to Abram was unconditional. It was not dependent on Abram at all. The covenant stands no matter what the people believe or what they practice. The fulfillment does not depend on man's faith or faithfulness. Again, Wiersbe says God's "I AM" is perfectly adequate for man's "I am not."<sup>14</sup> We can't perfectly keep the terms of our covenant with God. It's impossible. We are completely unable to walk before the Lord and be blameless. But, praise God, that's not the end of the matter. Our Father made the provision for us long ago. His walking through the blood symbolizes his willingness to stand in for us, to do what is necessary to cover for us, when we violate the terms of the covenant.

At the end of the day, Abram was assured that his own future, the future of his children, and the future of his descendants were firmly in the hands of the covenant God. "On that day," verse 18 reads, "the Lord made a covenant with Abram." The point remains the same for Christians under the renewed covenant: God's word is dependable. It's perfect. The Lord keeps his promises. Our Father is faithful; and very, very good.

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<sup>12</sup> John Darby, *Synopsis of the Bible*, Genesis 15, available from "Classic Commentaries" on <http://www.eword.gospelcom.net/comments.html>; Internet.

<sup>13</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1, Pentateuch (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2001), 82.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 80.