

January 1, 2017 – Gen. 15:1-21 – Abraham’s Horror of Great Darkness, Covenant

**Torah readings: Gen. 15:1-21 – Abraham’s Horror of Great Darkness, Covenant
Psalm 11**

Isaiah 1:1-8 + 2:2-3

Genesis 15:1 - Fear not, Abram: I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward.

“Fear not” and similar phrases are present in the bible about 365 times.

Isaiah 41:10 - “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”

‘Fear not’ is the characteristic word of divine revelation. It is of frequent occurrence from Abraham till John in Patmos. The revelation of God is the true antidote to fear.

I am your shield

His protection assures us, not of absolute exemption from troubles, but of His entire control of them, so that men and circumstances are His instruments, and His will only is powerful. All the bitterness and terror is taken out of evil. If any fiery dart pass through the shield, all its poison is wiped off in passage. So there remains no reason for fear, since all things work together for good. — MacLaren's Expositions

Psalm 28:7 - “The LORD is my strength and my shield; My heart trusts in Him, and I am helped; Therefore my heart exults, And with my song I shall thank Him.”

Ephesians 6:16 - “Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.”

Romans 8:28 - “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

I am your exceeding great reward

‘I am thy Reward,’ - not merely rewarder, but the reward itself.

Genesis 15:2-3 - “And Abram said, LORD God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me you have given no seed: and, see, one born in my house is my heir.”

Abram was still experiencing the sickness of hope deferred. God as “great reward” would be experienced through Abram as the Seed of promise, the Messiah. God as “reward” seems impossible without fulfillment of God’s promised heir.

Genesis 15:4 - “And, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, This shall not be your heir; but he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir.”

Genesis 15:5-6 - “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if you be able to number them: and he said to him, So shall your seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”

The immensity of the heavens, the regularity of the movements of the stars and planets, and the thought of the Creator behind it all, must have produced a humility in Abram. The story of the “gospel in the stars” - the meaning of the stories attached to the constellations since ancient times - was revealed to him. He somehow saw Messiah, the promised deliverer of Genesis 3:15.

Genesis 15:6 - “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted (reckoned, imputed) it to him for righteousness.”

Believed - The verb “aman,” to prop or stay, signifies “to build upon,” hence “to rest one's faith or confidence upon.”

The word “righteousness” (ṣedâqâh) occurs here for the first time in Scripture. He was now before God accepted and forgiven (so Luther and Calvin).

Compare reference to Phinehas in Psalm 106:31, “and that was counted unto him for righteousness.”

The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan say he believed “in the Word of the Lord.”

Who is the Word of God?

Revelation 19:12-13 - “He has eyes like blazing fire, and many royal crowns on His head. He has a name written on Him that only He Himself knows. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and His name is The Word of God.”

John 1:14 - “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”

Justification by Faith

Romans 4:1-5 - “What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”

Abram's works and actions always followed his faith.

Covenant Restated

Genesis 15:7-8 - “And he said to him, I am the LORD that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it. And he said, LORD God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?”

Abram desired a token or sign for the strengthening of his own faith, and for the ratifying of the promise to his posterity, that they also might believe it. (Gideon, Judges 6:36, and Hezekiah, 2 Kings 20:8, asked for a sign without being blamed for it; and Ahaz is blamed for *not* asking one, Isaiah 7:10.)

Genesis 15:10 - “And he took to him all these, and divided them in the middle, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.”

Compare **Jeremiah 34:18-20** - God predicts punishment of death for those who break his covenant, “the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof... and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf.” In other words, the severed animals represented a willingness that that would happen to whoever broke the covenant.

The slain animals represent the parties to the covenant, and the notion of a resulting unity of the closest order as between God and Abram is the very heart of the whole incident.

Genesis 15:11 - “And when the fowls came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.”

The Targum of Jonathan, “and the idolatrous nations descended, who were like to an unclean fowl, to spoil the goods of the Israelites;” and likewise the Targum of Jerusalem, “this unclean fowl are the idolatrous kingdoms of the earth” The Jews [Pirke Eliezer, ut supra. (c. 28)] also observe, that “Abram sat and waved over them with his napkin or handkerchief, that the birds might not have power over them until the evening.” with the effect that his posterity were protected, and the designs of their enemies frustrated.

“A watch must be kept upon our spiritual sacrifices. When vain thoughts, like these fowls, come down upon our “living sacrifice” to despoil it, we must drive them away, and seek to attend on God without distraction.” — Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary

The Deep Sleep

Genesis 15:12 - “And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and, see, an horror of great darkness fell on him.”

“Deep sleep” is the same word used of Adam in the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:21

Abram does nothing in the process of “cutting the covenant.” He is asleep, while God

takes action. God in effect takes responsibility for both parties keeping the covenant. When Israel fails, Christ had to die on the cross.

The Horror of Great Darkness

“An horror of great darkness” - An overwhelming dread occasioned by the dense gloom with which Abram was encircled. It represents the abyss of terror and hopelessness when we confront the judgment seat of God and our own sin, the darkness that precedes repentance and revelation, the “dark night of the soul” of the mystics.

The Jews saw a foreshadowing of the plague of “thick darkness that could be felt” just before their deliverance from Egypt. The Egyptian captivity is mentioned in the next verses.

Exodus 10:21 - “And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt.”

Genesis 15:17 - “And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.”

“A burning lamp” (Heb., a torch of flame) - Fire is the recognized symbol of the Deity, as in the burning bush, the pillar of fire, the lightnings on Mount Sinai.

The sign of the covenant is given in the appearance of a kiln, from which issued smoke and a blazing torch. The smoking furnace and the blazing torch are like the pillar of fire and cloud and represent the presence of God. Twin aspects of one entity - the Shechinah, or majesty of the presence of God.

“They proclaim the double aspect of all divine manifestations, the double element in the divine nature. He can never be completely known; He is never completely hid. Ever does the lamp flame; ever around it the smoke wreathes. In all His self-revelation is ‘the hiding of His power’; after all revelation He dwells ‘in the thick darkness.’ Only the smoke is itself fire, but not illumined to our vision. The darkness is light inaccessible. Much that was ‘smoke’ to Abram has caught fire, and is ‘light’ to us. But these two elements will ever remain; and throughout eternity God will be unknown, and yet well known, pouring Himself in ever-growing radiance on our eyes, and yet ‘the King invisible.’” — MacLaren's Expositions