

## CHAPTER 15

**A**fter these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, <sup>1</sup> saying, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great.” And Abram said, “O my Master, LORD, what can You <sup>2</sup> give me when I am going to my end childless, and the steward of my household is Dammesek Eliezer?” And Abram said, “Look, to me you <sup>3</sup>

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1. *the word of the LORD came to Abram.* This is a formula for revelation characteristic of the Prophetic books, not of the Patriarchal Tales. It is noteworthy that in Genesis 20 God refers to Abraham as a “prophet.” The night-vision (*mahazeh*) invoked here is also a prophetic mode of experience.

2. *And Abram said.* Until this point, all of Abram’s responses to God have been silent obedience. His first actual dialogue with God—in this, too, Prophetic precedents may be relevant—expresses doubt that God’s promise can be realized: this first speech to God reveals a hitherto unglimped human dimension of Abram.

*I am going to my end.* The Hebrew says simply “I am going,” but elsewhere “to go” is sometimes used as a euphemism for dying, and, as several analysts have argued, the context here makes that a likely meaning.

*steward.* The translation follows a traditional conjecture about the anomalous Hebrew *mesheq*, but the meaning is uncertain. The word might be a scribal repetition of the last three consonants in “Dammesek,” or, alternately, it could be a deliberate play on words (Dammesek and *mesheq*, “household maintenance”). The enigma is compounded by the fact that only here is Abraham’s majordomo named as Eliezer—a West Semitic name, moreover, that would be surprising in someone from Damascus.

3. *And Abram said.* God remains impassively silent in the face of Abram’s brief initial complaint, forcing him to continue and spell out the reason for his skepticism about the divine promise.

have given no seed, and here a member of my household is to be my  
 4 heir." And now the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one  
 will not be your heir, but he who issues from your loins will be your  
 5 heir." And He took him outside and He said, "Look up to the heavens  
 and count the stars, if you can count them." And He said, "So shall be  
 6 your seed." And he trusted in the LORD, and He reckoned it to his  
 merit.

7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the  
 8 Chaldees to give you this land to inherit." And he said, "O my Master,

5. *count the stars*. This is a complementary image to that of the numberless dust in chapter 13 but, literally and figuratively, loftier, and presented to Abraham in the grand solemnity of a didactic display, not merely as a verbal trope to be explained.

6. *And he trusted*. After his initial skepticism, Abram is reassured by the imposing character of God's reiterated promise under the night sky, which for the first time stresses the concrete idea of Abram's biological propagation, "he who issues from your loins."

7–21. Since this covenant is sealed at sunset, it can scarcely be a direct continuation of the nocturnal scene just narrated. The two scenes are an orchestration of complementary covenantal themes. In the first, God grandly promises and Abram trusts; in the second, the two enter into a mutually binding pact, cast in terms of a legal ritual. In the first scene, progeny is promised; in the second, the possession of the land, together with the dark prospect of enslavement in Egypt before the full realization of the promise. The first scene highlights dialogue and the rhetorical power of the divine assurance; the second scene evokes mystery, magic, the troubling enigma of the future.

7. *I am the LORD who brought you out*. This formula—the initial words of self-identification are a commonplace of ancient Near Eastern royal decrees—used here for the first time, looks forward to "who brought you out of the land of Egypt" of the Decalogue and other texts. Compositionally, it also picks up "He took him outside" (the same verb in the Hebrew) at the end of the preceding scene.

LORD, how shall I know that I shall inherit it?” And He said to him, 9  
 “Take Me a three-year-old heifer and a three-year-old she-goat and a  
 three-year-old ram and a turtledove and a young pigeon.” And he took 10  
 all of these and clove them through the middle, and each set his part  
 opposite the other, but the birds he did not cleave. And carrion birds 11  
 came down on the carcasses and Abram drove them off. And as the sun 12  
 was about to set, a deep slumber fell upon Abram and now a great dark  
 dread came falling upon him. And He said to Abram, “Know well that 13  
 your seed shall be strangers in a land not theirs and they shall be  
 enslaved and afflicted four hundred years. But upon the nation for 14  
 whom they slave I will bring judgment, and afterward they shall come  
 forth with great substance. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in 15  
 peace, you shall be buried in ripe old age. And in the fourth generation 16  
 they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.”

8. *how shall I know that I shall inherit it?* In this instance, Abram’s doubt is to be assuaged by a formal pact. Covenants in which the two parties step between cloven animal parts are attested in various places in the ancient Near East as well as in Greece. The idea is that if either party violates the covenant, his fate will be like that of the cloven animals. The Hebrew idiom *karat berit*, literally “to cut a covenant” (as in verse 18), may derive from this legal ritual.

10. *each set his part.* Existing translations fudge the vivid anthropomorphism of the Hebrew here: *’ish*, literally, “man,” means “each” but is a word applied to animate beings, not to things, so it must refer to the two parties to the covenant facing each other, not to the animal parts.

11. *carrion birds.* Unaccountably, most English translators render this collective noun as “birds of prey,” though their action clearly indicates they belong to the category of vultures, not hawks and eagles.

12. *deep slumber.* This is the same Hebrew word, *tardemah*, used for Adam’s sleep when God fashions Eve.

16. *the fourth generation.* This would seem to be an obvious contradiction of the previously stated four hundred years. Some scholars have argued that the Hebrew *dor* does not invariably mean “generation” and may here refer to “life span” or “time span.”

17 And just as the sun had set, there was a thick gloom and, look, a smok-  
18 ing brazier with a flaming torch that passed between those parts. On  
that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your seed  
I have given this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river  
19,20 Euphrates: the Kenite and the Kenizite and the Kadmonite and the  
21 Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the  
Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”

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17. *a smoking brazier with a flaming torch.* All this is mystifying and is surely meant to be so, in keeping with the haunting mystery of the covenantal moment. It seems unwise to “translate” the images into any neat symbolism (and the same is true of the ominous carrion birds Abram drives off). There may be some general association of smoke and fire with the biblical deity (Nahmanides notes a link with the Sinai epiphany), and the pillars of fire and cloud in Exodus also come to mind, but the disembodied brazier (or furnace) and torch are wonderfully peculiar to this scene. The firelight in this preternatural after-sunset darkness is a piquant antithesis to the star-studded heavens of the previous scene.

18. *To your seed I have given.* Moshe Weinfeld shrewdly observes that for the first time the divine promise—compare 12:1–3, 12:7, 13:14–17, 15:4–5—is stated with a perfective, not an imperfective, verb—that is, as an action that can be considered already completed. This small grammatical maneuver catches up a large narrative pattern in the Abraham stories: the promise becomes more and more definite as it seems progressively more implausible to the aged patriarch, until Isaac is born.