

Genesis 14–15

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Context

Chapters 14–15 follow God’s promises to Abram in 12:1–3. The promises are a land (v. 1), a people (v.2a), and blessing (vv. 2b–3). These promises set up the rest of the narrative of the whole Pentateuch. The reader expects these words to be fulfilled, but they are only partially fulfilled in Genesis: they become a great nation but end up in Egypt under slavery.

Structure

- 1) War (14:1–24)
 - a) Conflict (1–12), conquest and rebellion.
 - b) Rescue (13–16)
 - c) Blessing (17–24), King of Sodom and Melchizedek.
- 2) Covenant (15:1–21)
 - a) Question Concerning the inheritance (1–6)
 - b) Question Concerning the land (7–21)
 - i. The Covenant Ceremony (7–16)
 - ii. The Covenant Establishment (17–21)

Notes

- 1) War (14:1–24)
 - Four kings against five (implicit in vv. 1–3), and then again, five kings against four (v. 9). The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah were more than Chedorlaomer and his allies. However, they were conquered (v. 4). Thirteen years later, they rebelled and were defeated again a year later (10–11).
 - “Abram the Hebrew” (descended from Eber; 10:21; 11:14, 26–27) (AKA Abraham) defeated the four kings overnight with only 318 men (vv. 14–15) and rescued Lot, his kinsman (“brother” or relative). Lot was Abraham’s nephew (Gen 11:27, 31; 12:5; 14:12).
 - The blessing is bracketed by the appearance of the King of Sodom (vv. 17, 21). Melchizedek is not mentioned earlier, and he is referenced again only in Psalm 110 and Hebrews 5–7. His name means King of Righteousness and is King of Salem, probably a reference to Jerusalem (cf. Ps 76:2; “His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion”).

2) Covenant (15:1–21)

a) *Question Concerning the Inheritance*

- The passage is structured by the dialogue between the Lord and Abram. God states a promise (vv. 1, 7), Abram expresses his fears with a question (vv. 2, 8), and God answers Abram (vv. 4–5, 9–21). The first question is about his inheritance, “for I continue childless.” The second is about the land, “how am I to know that I shall possess it?” This passage then reinforces the promise of 12:1–3.
- Note especially that faith was “counted” to him as righteousness. So, Abraham is in a sense “saved” through faith, 500 years before the law was given. A point Paul makes a few times in the NT (Rom 4; Gal 3). Salvation is by grace through faith even in the OT: “and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15).
- The term “counted” is a legal term (cf. Ps 106:31;
“Normally righteousness is defined in terms of moral conduct ... 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” (Wenham 1987, 330).

b) *Question Concerning the Land*

- The second (longer) scene addresses the promise of the land: “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” The Lord answers with a strange ceremony. This is a covenant-making ritual as practiced in the ancient Near East (ANE).

An eighth-century Assyrian text from North Syria includes the following clause: “This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’lu [his sons, officials and people]. If Mati’lu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, ... the head of Mati’lu be torn off, and his sons” (“Treaty Between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati’ilu of Arpad,” *ANET*, 532). Once the animal was killed, the one making the covenant could expect the same fate as the animal if he broke covenant. The sacrifice is thus an enactment of the oath (Waltke and Fredricks 2001, 245).

¹⁸ And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts— ¹⁹ the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf (Jer 34:18–19).

- God lays before Abram the next 500 years of Israel’s history. In response to his question, Abram must “know for certain” (*yāḏōa` tēḏa`*) what will happen: 400 years of slavery in another nation and then come to the promised land (vv. 12–16).

- Importantly, in this scene, only the Lord, represented by the smoke and fire, passes through the cut animals. Basically, God declares that the covenant curse will fall on him only if the statutes are broken.

Implications

- God's sovereignty and providence.
- Typology, figures, and foreshadowing. E.g.,
 - Melchizedek
 - Covenant
- Faith and Devotion