

THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM (GENESIS 15)
Spring Core Class: Faith Bible Church – 2026
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Introduction

The Purpose of this Course Section: To glorify God in equipping our people at FBC to better understand and learn from the Genesis text involving Abram as chapter 15 fits into the overall Abrahamic narrative and the broader metanarrative of Scripture as a whole. We will cover Genesis 15:1-21, including Abram's interaction with God in the ongoing fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant initiated by Him in chapter 12. Specifically, we seek to understand how God committed to blessing Abram with a multitude of descendants and to a land promised to him indefinitely and how the detailed Ancient Near Eastern ceremony of this covenant unfolded.

SOURCES:

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Matthews, Kenneth A. *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Genesis 11:27-50:26*. Vol. 1B. Brentwood, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2005.

Pritchard, James P., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

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NOTES FOR THIS SESSION

I. Overview/Context

A. Geography

Genesis 11:28, 31 & 15:7 all indicate that Abraham was from “Ur of the Chaldeans.” Traveling first to Haran (i.e., roughly halfway to Canaan) with his father Terah, wife Sarai and nephew Lot (Gen 11:31), he would next leave Haran for Canaan upon the Lord’s command (12:1). The initial move to Haran would likely have entailed a relatively large entourage of people who would settle there, making a move even further west (and south) without his father all the more difficult. This unquestioned obedience on the part of Abram revealed his continued strong faith (see Hebrews 11:8ff). Now he and Lot undoubtedly left the bulk of their family back in Haran as they were told by God to go out “from their kindred” (12:1) as they embarked upon yet another move to an unknown place. Nevertheless, the full circuit of these two moves followed the so-called “Fertile Crescent” which runs from Ur located east in Mesopotamia, upward (north) to Haran, and then down toward Canaan in the west near the Mediterranean Sea.

The remains of Ur have been located within the southern region of Mesopotamia previously known as Sumer where the earliest known civilization arose in the 4th millennium BC. Although some have suggested a more northerly location, scholars such as K. A. Kitchen fully recognize the southern location as being ultimately correct. The evidence agrees, as well, with the phrase

“of the Chaldeans” (from the Hb term ‘kas-deem’), whose tribal identity has been firmly established in the southern region. Tell el-Muqayyar remains the most likely candidate for the original site of Ur of the Chaldeans. Of course, much updating and renovation to this particular tell has been accomplished over the centuries in addition to the excavation itself, and so, provides a stark representation of that much earlier site. Interestingly, Ur is not only located within the same area of the much later and belligerent power Babylonia (i.e., roughly a millennium later) but also near the same area where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers connect, and perhaps, the original grounds of our primordial parents (2:8-14).

B. Timeline

The approximate dating of Abram’s life remains a subject of debate though most reputable scholars place him within a range somewhere in the 21st to 20th centuries BC. Moreover, the Genesis text provides the age of Abram at various points in the narrative including his move to Canaan at age 75 (12:4), the birth of Ishmael at age 86 (16:16), the sign and confirmation of the covenant at age 99 (17:1), the birth of Isaac at age 100 (21:5) and finally his death (25:7-8).

The above approximate timeline offers strong agreement with the archaeological record of the Third Ur Dynasty (c. 2113 – 1991 BC) within the Middle Bronze I period (see Kitchen references). In fact, Genesis 15:13 tells of how the LORD informed Abram of the future “four hundred years” of affliction that his descendants would endure – which fits well with the Early Exodus timeframe recognized by conservative scholars (i.e., mid 15th C BC). Note of course that those 400 years would almost certainly represent a “rounded off” figure as compared to the *four hundred thirty years* of the actual enslavement as reported in Exodus 12:40 (see p.5 below).

Note that as we put together the 430 years leading up to the Exodus (i.e., beginning, of course, toward the end of Genesis), we can further connect the full timeframe of this early Old Testament period as we add the timing *after* the Exodus and into the kingship(s) of David and Solomon and the building of the first temple. As recorded in I Kings 6:1, there were “four hundred eighty years” from the Exodus to the beginning of Solomon’s Temple – which further fits neatly into the “four hundred fifty years” referenced in Acts 13:20 in regard to a slightly different but roughly concurrent timeframe regarding the Judges.

Note: Reference to the genealogy of Exodus 6 must take into account the context from which the Ancient Near East viewed lineage. The listing therein is not in disagreement with the four century timeframe above as it is an incomplete list by the very nature of genealogical listings in this time and in this culture (See Kitchen “On the Reliability” p.356).

C. Literary Structure

a. Abrahamic Covenant 12, 15, and 17

From a broad standpoint, the establishment of the Abrahamic Covenant covers a number of chapters in Genesis beginning in chapter 12 and continuing to unfold through chapters 15 and 17. The “engagement” or “promise” of this crucial covenant within the overall metanarrative of Scripture is initiated by the LORD in 12:1-3 followed by the “ceremony” in chapter 15 and finally a sign and confirmation in chapter 17. *See the Gentry/Wellum text pp.230-245, 247-258, and 258ff.

b. Two Messages to Abram

Now, looking more specifically at the text of chapter 15, we find two separate occurrences where God interacts with Abram. First, the LORD presents himself in *a vision* to reassure him of the previous promise to “make [him] a great nation” (12:2) – in spite of the fact that his wife was still barren. The obvious reasoning herein looks to Abram to sire his own offspring to begin this future nation that God has promised. Secondly, the LORD presented Abram a common Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) covenantal “ceremony” that would assure Abram of His promise of “[being] a great nation.” In addition to needing descendants to become a great nation, one would most certainly need a land in which to live (see 13:14-18). Immediately following the instigation of this covenantal ceremony, the LORD communicates again with Abram in what appears to be *a dream* which includes a prophetic word involving the future of his descendants and a description of the territory to be given to him.

Note that verse 6 separates these two encounters with a statement of Abram’s faith condition. There it says that “he believed in the LORD and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Paul references this text in his epistle to the Romans (4:1ff) as he explains faith and works.

II. The Narrative

A) The First Encounter

The LORD approaches Abram in a vision to begin the text, saying “After these things,” which is a reference to the events of chapter 14. The warfare described in that text must have remained a clear concern for Abram as he himself had gotten involved with the rescue of Lot (14:16-18). Of course, the LORD immediately comforted Abram with not only the reassurance of being “your shield” as a protector but also of the promised “reward” that was to be fulfilled through His promise.

Abram’s response to God, unsurprisingly, appears utterly human. Though following the LORD in every way, he is conflicted in understanding “how” he could possibly be promised to be “a great nation” when he hadn’t even had a single child with his wife Sarai (15:2a). God, of course, is not only going to fulfill His promise (i.e., as He is perfectly reliable in His very character), but He did so in the most seemingly impossible way – using a couple who is both aged and infertile. Abram and Sarai have remained “childless.” Furthermore, Abram remains concerned that his inheritance will end up going to what appears to be one of the servants of his household, *Eliezer of Damascus* (15:2b). The matter becomes crystal clear in 15:3.

Now the situation described in this opening text fits well with the general customs of the Ancient Near East at this point in history. Kitchen (see “Ancient Orient” p.154) provides examples in cuneiform from both Ur and Nuzi – both Mesopotamian cities of the 4th-3rd Millennia – which describe the inheritance customs of the times. A “childless couple” may have, indeed, “adopted” a servant from their household as heir. These customs included the provision for personal servants to act as surrogates (to bear children). Note: Genesis 15:2 is the sole reference to Eliezer (of Damascus). Nothing else is known about him beyond his relationship with Abram.

Let us return now to the miraculous blessing that the LORD has promised to Abram in providing an heir from “[his] own body” (v.4). Though he and his wife Sarai are old and childless, God will not only provide a child against the odds but He will magnify this miracle into a trail of

descendants that will resemble “the stars” in sheer number (v.5). Why one might ask? The reason is obvious. Abram must completely and utterly trust in the LORD to provide the nation He has promised. No human or worldly explanation will do. God alone will receive the glory as He displays His provision to Abram. “And he believed in the LORD and He accounted it to him for righteousness (v.6). Note the change of Abram’s name to Abraham (17:5) which uses the Hebrew ending “im” (or “am” in this case) which is common to changing the noun from singular to plural – indicated the multitude of descendants that Abram would have in time.

B) The Second Encounter

In the following section of Genesis chapter 15 (vv.7-21) the LORD GOD portrays a number of fascinating yet revealing things to Abram. First, we might easily overlook the overarching providence of the hand of God over Abram in v.7 where God tells him that “[He] ... brought [Abram] out of Ur of the Chaldeans.” In juxtaposing the chapter 11 narrative, we find that Terah (i.e., Abram’s father) “took his son Abram and grandson Lot ... [and] went out with them from Ur” (11:31). In these passages we can see yet another example in Scripture where a man like Terah may have made a certain human decision and carried out the actual physical process of leading his family out of Ur all while God was orchestrating His sovereign will – leaving nothing outside of the overarching hand of the Living God. Therefore, the situation we find here of God willing an event that was done in the free will of an ordinary man demonstrates a compatible tension that must be understood by faith.

In verse 8 we find that Abram is once more challenged in understanding how these promises of God could actually take place. The honest, human confusion portrayed by Abram sounds completely understandable and even expected. How could these things be? To be sure, this text shows how God used ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

a) Cutting the Covenant

The LORD God had promised Abram a number of blessings (chapter 12). Now it was time to “cut” the covenant, which is indicated by the Hebrew term “berith” – which does not explicitly mean “cut or cutting” but a “cutting of a covenant.” Other Hebrew words are used for “cutting” when not associated with a covenant. Also, it is worth noting here that the Greek term for covenant is “diatheke,” which translates more broadly to a “covenant” or “contract.” Perhaps even more revealing is the Latin translation used in the Vulgate. The Latin term “testamentum” is where we get the English word “testament.” Therefore, it is clear that the Latin and English have lost much of the intent of the original Hebrew.

Nevertheless, as God instructed Abram to bring out a number of sacrificial animals, He was setting up an Ancient Near Eastern “ceremony” or *ritual* that was commonly performed at that time in the ANE (v.9). Pritchard provides several similar examples between leaders including:

An example Mari Letter (c. 18th c BC)

Treaty between Ktk and Arpad (c. 750 BC)

Treaty between Ashur-Nirari V of Assyria and Mati’ilu of Apad (c. 754 BC)

(Note: See Pritchard references: pp.482, 532-33, and 659-60).

This cutting – in half – of several animals (i.e., not the birds) came from a customary, mutual understanding that if either participant failed to honor the agreement that they themselves would

endure that which the animal sacrifices experienced – to be cut in half/destroyed! Note: This oath usually extended to the leader’s family & officials as well. Interestingly, how did Abram know what to specifically do with the animals? Did God simply instruct him and it’s just not recorded in the text? Or, was Abram simply aware of the custom in advance? Note: See Leviticus beginning in chapter one regarding the various offerings and laws pertaining to each.

b) Dream/Vision

Nonetheless, God engaged Abram once more in providing a prophetic vision (or dream) that would reveal the future of Israel’s eventual plight in Egypt for roughly four hundred years. Of course, this revelation accords perfectly with the Exodus account including the timeframe (See Exodus 12:40, Acts 7:6 and Galatians 3:17), though each of the texts bears differing time periods and verbiage. The comparison between Genesis 15:13 and 16, for example, says the affliction will be “four hundred years,” whereas the latter account uses a different term: “in the fourth *generation*.” The first verse yields a rounding off of the years to an even four “hundred.” The second uses the Hebrew word ‘dor’ which translates to an “age, cycle or amount of time, or generation.” Thus, the amount of time here is a century, which would indicate “four centuries.” Note: Again, the references above from Exodus, Acts and Galatians must be evaluated closely to the exact times in which each pertains (i.e., Acts relating to the time of bondage, while Galatians speaks of the time from Abraham to the Law).

Meanwhile, the narrative returns to the cutting of the covenant. Most importantly, notice what or who moves through the path between the slain animal sacrifices. Rather than both participants of the covenant passing between the carcasses, the text reveals that only a “smoking oven and a burning torch” passes through. Only the LORD God Himself passed through in a *theophany* similar to the instances where God manifested Himself as a pillar of fire or cloud (e.g., Exodus 13:21-22, 14:24). What does that mean? It means that God alone took on the responsibility to uphold the covenant. That is, it is a “promise;” a one-way, unconditional covenant of sorts. Note further that this covenant would be *everlasting* as well (Gen 17: 7, 13, 19).

c) The Promised Land

Genesis 15:18 describes, in general, the land promised to Abram and his descendants. In a brief description, the text indicates a land running from the “river of Egypt” to the “great river, the Euphrates.” The text neither describes the southern boundary nor most of the northern boundary. Recall, however, that this is a description given from an ANE perspective and not via a 21st century survey. Boundaries were often given using major landmarks and not through the sophisticated instruments used today. Regardless, the desert probably describes at some point the general boundary to the south, while the Euphrates depicts most of the north and east. Now the western boundary is much more debated but likely points to either the eastern most branch of the Nile (Pelusiac Branch or Shilor River) OR Wadi el-Arish (mid Sinai Peninsula), wherein the latter appears most likely. Finally, we find the tribes that will be displaced (vv. 19-21) as ten groups are mentioned. Given that Abram lived in the Middle Bronze I era, he was between the times of well erected cities. These times were heavily nomadic. Nevertheless, this era was well before Philistia, Moab or Ammon as all three arose in the Late Bronze to Iron Age timeframe – much later – which is why they were not included.